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SALT IN THE WOUND

A Visual Exploration of Societal and Experiential Aspects of Female Reproduction and Abortion

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**Documentation and commentary on the body of practical work
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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Few situations in modern life continue to bear a relationship to what the ancients understood as tragedy. One of them lies in a woman's having to decide whether or not to have an abortion. Such a decision is something from which one wants to flee, and is always reached in fear and trembling. Tragedy resides not in the woeful event that takes us by surprise, but in watching the inexorable realisation of what we would have wanted to avoid.

Eva Pattis-Zoja: 1997



ABSTRACT

Salt in the Wound comprises a body of creative work supported by a theoretical discussion that critiques a patriarchally informed and imposed process of control over female reproduction and abortion. It also endeavours to explore social and psychological complexities and paradoxes attendant on the choice to abort a pregnancy.

I survey contemporary effects of a western ideology developed in the 18th century, which proposed that the sole purpose of heterosexual sex should be procreation and that it should take place within marriage. In essence however, it is the corollary of this ideology that is my particular concern, this being the persistent inclination of western societies to perceive abortion in terms of a feminine defiance against a societal norm of maternal self-sacrifice.

The mindset that underlies this ideology and its corollary can be understood to rest on specific assumptions that through dogged repetition and the entrenchment of desired behaviour have attained the status of 'absolute truths' in western culture. Firstly that motherhood is the essence of womanhood - a concept rendering feelings of female ambivalence with respect to maternity inconceivable; secondly, that whilst men have a 'mandate' to kill in certain circumstances - in defence of the group for example - women are not able to excuse themselves on the basis of a culturally acceptable form of killing.

Salt in the Wound explores the interconnectedness of society and the individual, and the effects on identity when the personal becomes politicised. The choice to abort a pregnancy is inevitably affected by myriad factors: socio-political opinion and concomitant legal restraints, religious dogma, practical considerations and personal belief. All impact on the conscious and unconscious life of the pregnant woman. I avoid the representation of the body in my work, preferring instead to use a language of metaphors and symbols, and through the strategies of collating and ordering of visual fragments, I attempt to explore the ambiguity of my chosen topic.



INTRODUCTION



The focus of *Salt in the Wound* is two-fold. It is a critique of a patriarchally informed and imposed control of female reproduction, specifically abortion, and it is an exploration of possible effects on female identity when that which ought to reside in the realm of the personal becomes politicised.

It is not my intention to tackle the ‘pro-life/pro-choice’ debate but rather the western¹ ideology which found its origin in the Enlightenment and which still plays a significant role in our sexual choices today: a woman’s primary function should be that of producer and nurturer of human life and the sole purpose of heterosexual sex ought to be reproduction which should take place within marriage. Accordingly, abortion in the event of an unplanned conception is a negation of the ideology. A western woman censured for having an abortion is censured in terms of her perceived deviation from a patriarchal expectation of maternal self-sacrifice and for her supposed transgression of the boundaries of ‘normal’ society.

It can be argued that the western world has had a long tradition of assigning to men the roles of law-makers and engineers of society. It is therefore not unreasonable to interpret limited access to abortion, whether through restrictive legislation, social disapproval and stigmatisation, or socio-economic disadvantage, as a form of patriarchal control of women.

It is my intention that my work should investigate the tremendously complex topic of abortion from the point of view of societal expectations on the pregnant woman, but more importantly, *Salt in the Wound* is a subjective and individualised exploration of an event fraught with feelings of ambivalence, guilt and secretiveness. It could be said therefore that the work encompasses both a socio-political and an autobiographical agenda.

It is by no means easy to isolate individual temperament from the ideologies and societal expectations that mould our behaviour and beliefs. As a result it has been necessary for me to provide a brief overview of our religious and secular history,

¹ For the purposes of this dissertation ‘The West’ and ‘western’ are intended to refer to the United Kingdom, Western Europe and North America. I will regard South Africa as a westernised country since the laws and societal expectations of this country were based on the models developed by our European colonisers.

focussing on periods which I believe have played a significant role in the way western society tends to perceive abortion.

In the first chapter I trace the religious progression from Mother Goddess to Virgin Mary in an effort to describe changing perceptions of the status and role of women as reflected through female deities. The Mother Goddess of the Palaeolithic era and her similarities and differences to the Goddesses of Babylonian mythology – from whence the Judaeo-Christian religions inherited their paradigm images is referred to (Baring 1993:xii). The role of women in the Christian religion is then compared and contrasted to that which had gone before. Departing from religion, aspects of 19th century western culture that played a part in moulding the feminine role are explored. Perceptions of sexuality in the Victorian era are then briefly examined before outlining the effect that Sigmund Freud had, not only on his own society, but also on later generations.

The following chapter deals with some reflections on the structure of Western society. The western urge to dichotomise human existence, especially with respect to the notion of ‘self’ and ‘other’ and the woman/nature paradigm is explored. I then refer to the use of the body as a symbol or metaphor for society.

Euripedes’ play, *Medea*, represents the mythical figure of Medea as a symbol of the dark side of the Mother archetype: that mother, who rather than performing the role of the nurturer of her children, is capable of infanticide. Aspects of the character of Euripedes’ Medea are examined in order to introduce the topic of abortion. Certain societal perceptions of abortion are then traced, leading to a brief overview of the recent history of abortion in South Africa.

Aspects of the western tradition of representation of the female body in art are discussed, describing what in essence was an artistic endeavour to arrange the female body in an image of unity and coherence deemed necessary in order to abate a perceived threat emanating from it. This western artistic tradition is then contrasted to a feminist artistic view of the female body looking at artists such as Judy Chicago and Mary Kelly, amongst others, in order to illustrate my argument.

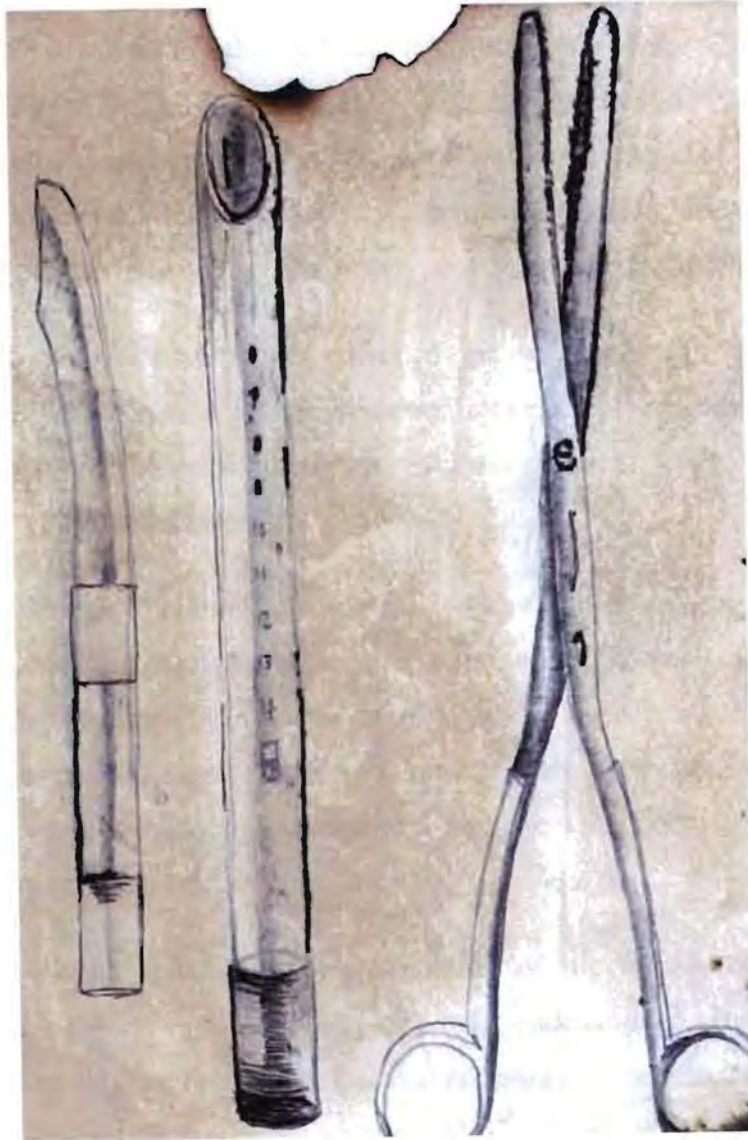
In conclusion, I discuss my own body of work within a contemporary sculptural framework attempting to provide insight into my use of the metaphor of battery-hen cages to describe the way in which a woman’s reproductive function is directly and

externally controlled by the norms and laws of a patriarchal society. I also explain how the collecting and ordering of visual fragments underlies my exploration of possible psychological effects relating to the choice to abort a pregnancy.

I refer to specific works by Mona Hatoum, Eva Hesse and Anselm Kiefer in an attempt to provide insight into my artistic processes and my decision to use salt and lead as the major materials in my work. In this way I hope to clarify the themes and concepts of my theoretical research as reflected in my body of visual work.

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ESTABLISHING AN HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT



The changing roles of women in religion and society

Since the first sculpted figures of the Palaeolithic era in 20,000 BC, woman has been symbolic of that without which all life would vanish: fertility. Fertility was symbolised as the 'Mother Goddess' and was represented in highly schematic forms on the walls of caves, as well as in carvings of wood and bone, as a downward-pointing triangle split by a vertical line. The representation of the Goddess evolved to include the over-developed female characteristics of enormous breasts, huge bellies and vulvas - sometimes open all the way to the navel - and have been found from the Pyrenees to Lake Baikal in Siberia (Fontan 2003:70). Whether these engravings and sculptures were objects of worship remains unclear, but it seems highly probable that the female body was perceived as a sacred symbol and was revered as the sole source of life.

Anne Baring investigates the surprising similarities and parallels that exist between the many mother goddess myths of apparently unrelated cultures and concludes that there must have been a continuous transmission of images of the Mother Goddess throughout early history - all of which envisioned life as a living unity:

The Mother Goddess, wherever she is found, is an image that inspires and focuses a perception of the universe as an organic, alive and sacred whole, in which humanity, the Earth and all life on Earth participate as 'her children'. Everything is woven together in one cosmic web, where all orders of manifest and unmanifest life are related, because all share in the sanctity of the original source (Baring 1993:xi).

Arlette Fontan (2003:70) speculates that the time of the Mother Goddess could be described as the 'triumphal era' for the female sex. But in view of the fact that statues depicting the Mother Goddess focus explicitly on the mystery of birth (exaggerated breasts, buttocks and pregnant bellies which completely overwhelm the barely indicated and in no way personalised heads) it can be argued that the 'glorification' of femaleness during this period centred not on a woman's status as an equitable and individual human being, but on her function as a producer of life.

Baring (1993:xii) writes that a change in attitude towards the Mother Goddess occurred from the time of Babylonian mythology onwards (circa 2000 BC). The Goddess was almost exclusively associated with 'nature' as a chaotic force to be mastered, and this

idea was coupled with that of a masculine God who assumed the role of conquering or ordering nature. Such a change in thinking obviously required new contexts with which to view the world, which Baring speculates may have come in the form of a progressive human independence from natural phenomena. This could mark the point at which humanity and nature became polarised. She explains further that the Judaeo-Christian religion inherited the paradigm images of Babylonian mythology, particularly the opposition between creative spirit and chaotic nature, and also the habit of thinking in oppositions generally. Examples of this are found in the common assumption that the spiritual and physical worlds are fundamentally different, an assumption that separates mind from matter, soul from body, thinking from feeling, intellect from intuition and reason from instinct. Fontan (2003:70) confirms Baring's view, writing that with the subsequent development of the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the Mother Goddess was replaced by 'God the Father': a paternal God believed to have complete power over the creation and the government of the world.

During this period in history the central position of the feminine in religion was relegated to a secondary and largely redundant one. Baring reminds us however that even though the Virgin Mary plays an undeniably subordinate role to her Son in the New Testament texts, she actually remains the unrecognised Mother Goddess of the Christian tradition². Like the Goddesses that had gone before her - Cybele, Aphrodite, Demeter, Isis and Ishtar - Mary is both virgin and mother, and like many of them, she gives birth to a half-human, half-divine child, who dies and is reborn. Jesus, like Attis, Adonis, Persephone and Osiris before him, descends into the underworld or hell, where regeneration has always taken place, and his ascent and resurrection is understood to redeem all incarnate beings from the limitation of mortality and time. The mystery of the virgin birth and the child-redeemer therefore follows the symbolic pattern of earlier deities: Jesus represents *bios*, the Son who is the archetype of incarnate being, and *bios* is born of *Zoe*, the Mother and archetype of the source of being (Baring 1993:548).

² Doctrinally this would be considered heresy, but the disjuncture occurs between orthodox text and image. In complete contradiction to the New Testament texts, the poetic vision of Mary in icon, painting and hymn brings her to life in the old images of the past. She is visually represented as the Great Mother of life and death, she is the queen of heaven, earth and the underworld, she is Goddess of animals and plants, and she is Goddess of the wisdom of the soul (Baring 1993:547).

The mortal Christian woman was not so fortunate as to have her role and status survive in a different guise, as did the Mother Goddess. Instead, she was excluded from many institutions and was not entitled to play a part in the interpretation or teaching of the religion. The histories of the monotheistic religions indicate that rather than remaining true to their stated ideals of equality for all, they fell in line with society, often adopting its prejudices and sometimes even anticipating and inducing them. The doctrine of the Christian religion did not change significantly from the time of its inception until the Enlightenment, and the Church's influence on secular society was considerable.

The Enlightenment heralded scientific advances, economic developments and a cultural environment that conjoined to create a unique set of intellectual conditions that were to have a fundamental influence on societal norms, industry, and most importantly for the topic under discussion, on gender relations. European culture in the latter half of the 19th century can be seen to have played a significant role in the narrative of the subordination of women. Françoise Gaillard (2003:88) writes that the question of woman and her 'place' was omnipresent, she was represented in paintings, literature, medical tomes, essays of scientific psychology and treatises of moral philosophy. Women were thought to be psychologically different and were perceived to be a unique 'species' having nothing to do with men. This generic conception of women came from the idea, commonly held by the scientists and writers at the time, that in spite of all the cultural appearances able to mask the 'call of the womb', women were motivated by their instinct for procreation alone. It appears therefore that even after millennia of experience and progress, the male concept of the female had not changed significantly since 'prehistory': a woman's creative function and her identity were still interpreted in terms of her reproductive capacity.

The 19th century also heralded a revival of the myths and legends warning of the 'risks' posed by women, and the fantastical fear of the feminine became conflated with the very real fear of syphilis considered to originate with women and to be transmitted from women to men. In the words of Gaillard (2003:88):

Never has an epoch known such an obsession with the feminine. Rather than an obsession it would be preferable to speak of a "nightmare of the feminine." For what we find is a Sabbath's dance of diabolical figures, Salome, Herodias, Judith, Delila, Messalina, Medea, ... all of whom use their malevolent powers of seduction to destroy men.

Moving away from fin de siècle fantasies of feminine danger to a consideration of women and economics, Bram Dijkstra (1986:3) asserts that in the capitalist, bourgeois society (that had been evolving in Europe since the middle of the 17th century) a previously prevailing attitude that had allowed women a meaningful involvement in the day-to-day decisions of the family-business and home began to change. By the late 19th century a trend of ever increasing disenfranchisement of middle-class women from the intellectual and social domains had more or less been achieved. These women became virtual prisoners in their own homes, placed on pedestals of virtuousness. The apparent elevation of these women was not motivated by reverence however, instead it was indicative of a male fantasy for power and control. It is hardly surprising therefore that it was around this time too that groups of Victorian women began to stand up in conscious opposition to such aspects of patriarchal control.

In addition, much of the British middle-class of the earlier 18th century had their moral roots in Puritan theology and were firmly convinced, in accordance with the Protestant doctrine of John Wesley, that it was a direct tribute to God for all Christians to use their talents and opportunities in order to make a success of their businesses, and by implication, become rich. They were however aware of the pitfalls for their mortal souls in such pursuits of prosperity, and the notion of the nuclear family as a 'soul unit' therefore gained popularity. A man's wife, it was thought, could, by staying at home - a place unblemished by sin and unsullied by labour - protect her husband's virtue.

With all the emphasis on the redemptive function and the nun-like purity of the wife, it was somewhat inevitable that she should come to be conflated with Mary, Mother of God, who was simultaneously virgin, mother and wife. This theme began to manifest itself in the Salon Exhibitions of England and Europe, one example being Thomas C. Gotch's *Holy Motherhood*³ (1902). Gotch's woman sits cradling a child on her lap in a scene which could easily be mistaken for the real 'Madonna and child' if it were not for the 18th century style of dress and interior in the painting. The 'Madonna with child' image, as representative of the married woman's role in life, was deemed especially appropriate because women and children were thought to form an inevitable continuity:

³ Thomas C. Gotch, *Holy Motherhood* (ca 1902). Oil on canvas. (Illustration and data: Dijkstra 1986:21.)

the truly virtuous woman was perceived to be as innocent as a child, and moreover, what woman could deny her desire for maternity?

The epitome of the delusion of wifely, virginal purity must surely be the implicit suggestion of Auguste Comte in his fourth volume of the *System of Positive Polity*. Comte actually goes so far as to suggest artificial insemination as a means of keeping women as close to the Madonna ideal as possible while still allowing them to fulfil their function as mothers: “A daring hypothesis...[which may be]...destined to become a reality in the course of our advance.” He was enthralled by the thought that women, whom he referred to as “the highest species of production”, would no longer need to be at the mercy of a “capricious and unruly instinct, the proper restraint of which has hitherto been the chief stumbling block in the way of human discipline” (in Dijkstra 1986:19).

The management of sexuality

Michel Foucault reports that at the beginning of the 17th century, frankness about sexual matters was still common. Sexual practices took place without too much restriction or need for concealment, and codes of conduct with respect to the indecent, the coarse, and the obscene were relatively lenient. Direct gestures and unabashed discourse was tolerated, and it was a period when bodies were openly displayed. This attitude was soon to change; sexuality was carefully restricted and was transferred to the confines of the home. “The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction” (1976:3).

Ludmilla Jordanova (1989:13) writes that many practices relating to the control of sexuality operated in the form of attempts to regulate physiological processes such as masturbation, birth control, abortion, sex-specific diseases, childbirth and so on. Foucault (1976:37) contributes to the argument writing that from the 17th to the end of the 18th century, three major explicit codes governed sexual practices in western society: canonical law, the Christian pastoral, and civil law. Each determined in its own way the division between the licit and the illicit, and all centred on matrimonial relations: the

marital obligation, the ability to fulfil it, the manner in which one complied with it and various other issues pertaining to child-bearing and rearing. He goes on to say that the marital relation became the most intense focus of constraint, it was spoken of more than any other relation and was required to give a detailed accounting of itself. All of this, in Foucault's opinion, constituted the grand project aimed at ensuring population, reproducing labour capacity, and perpetuating the form of social relations. In short: an attempt to constitute a sexuality that was economically useful and politically conservative.

Foucault speculates that the age of sexual repression that began in the 17th century can probably be linked to the development of capitalism:

The minor chronicle of sex and its trials is transposed into the ceremonious history of the modes of production, ...if sex is so rigorously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative. At a time when labour capacity was being systematically exploited, how could this capacity be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits, except in those - reduced to a minimum - that enabled it to reproduce itself (1976:6).

With respect to Victorian middle-class sexuality on the other hand, one cannot ignore the role played by the eminent psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Freud, it is generally agreed, was a highly perceptive and accurate observer of problems of the human personality, but it is also now recognised that in his interpretation of those problems he was a prisoner of his culture. Even as he was creating a new framework for our contemporary culture, he was unable to escape the framework of his own. Much of what Freud believed to be biological, instinctual and changeless has subsequently been shown to be the result of specific societal conditions and attitudes, and much of what he described as characteristic of universal human nature was in fact only characteristic of middle-class European men and woman at the end of the 19th century.

Most of Freud's theories rested on his penetrating, unending psychoanalysis of himself, with sexuality as his primary focus. He believed neurosis or hysteria to be caused by sexual repression, and attempted to translate all psychological phenomena into sexual terms and to see all the problems of the adult personality as the effect of childhood sexual fixations. Arguably his best-known concepts are those of the 'castration complex' and 'penis envy'. The castration complex, according to Freud, manifests when the boy child first gains sight of the female genitals and realises that the sexual organ that he prizes so highly is not a necessary part of a woman's body. From then onwards

he becomes influenced by castration anxiety. Penis envy, similarly, begins with a girl's first sighting of the male genitals and the realisation that she lacks a penis. This lack was considered by Freud to cause a female to feel depreciated not only in the eyes of the male but in her own eyes too. He believed that penis envy would lead in normal femininity to the desire to possess the penis of her husband: a wish that is not fulfilled until she possesses a penis through giving birth to a son (Freud 1933:170-173).

Psychoanalyst Clara Thompson expresses her understanding of Freud's mindset in the following way:

Freud never became free from the Victorian attitude towards women. He accepted as an inevitable part of the fate of being a woman the limitation of outlook and life of the Victorian era. ... The castration complex and penis envy concepts, two of the most basic ideas in his whole thinking, are postulated on the assumption that women are biologically inferior to men (in Friedan 1963:102).

Chief Freudian biographer, Ernest Jones, confirms Thompson's understanding, attesting that to Freud, women were of a strange, inferior, less-than-human species. He saw them as child-like dolls, existing in terms only of a man's love – to love a man and serve his needs. Many of his scientific theories were overlaid with a Victorian mixture of chivalry and condescension. Freud did not see his attitudes as discriminatory or problematic, he believed it was woman's nature to be ruled by man, and her sickness to envy him (Jones 1953:138). The limitless subservience of women taken for granted by Freud's culture, and her lack of opportunity for independent action or personal identity were so deeply interwoven in his theories as to make his claims for biological determinism, instinct and the universality of human nature frankly absurd to modern-day thinking.

Kinder, Küche, Kirche⁴

Freud's theories were characteristic of the medico-scientific approach of his time. He was reluctant to deal with psychological phenomena on their own terms and preferred to relate psychology to the more tangible fields of anatomy and physiology. In addition, the whole superstructure of Freudian theory rests on the strict determinism that characterised the thinking of the Victorian era. Determinism - the belief that human drives, such as reproduction, are not cognitive but are driven by 'instinct' - has been replaced today by a more complex view of cause and effect with respect to physical as well as psychological processes and phenomena. An appraisal of Freudian theory should therefore not be made outside of the context and time frame in which it was postulated.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) explores, among other things, the dubious consequences of taking Freud's theories out of their time context and applying them to post-Second World War American society. In so doing, she endeavours to present her understanding as to why American women of the late 1940s, who had fought so hard and so recently for emancipation from male domination, would have turned their backs on that emancipation, and in spite of good college educations, were prepared to revert to the roles of full-time mothering and house-wifery.

America in the early 20th century was a country of relative sexual equality. Women had won the rights to equal education, they had legal status, and with the amendment of the Constitution in 1920 they could, for the first time, influence political decisions through their vote. In addition, the Depression and World Wars had forced men to accept women in the workplace. The post-depression, post-war environment was also responsible for a scarcity of jobs and a reduction in the population however. It seems suspiciously convenient therefore that the old prejudices - women are different, unable

⁴ Children, kitchen, church - a Nazi slogan intended to persuade German women to return to their 'biological' role, which was understood to be that of wife and mother .

to think like men, and born merely to breed and serve men - could reappear at this crucial moment in American history, only this time in Freudian disguise.

Freud's concept of penis envy, defined in psychoanalytic terms as feminine jealousy of male privilege, was transposed to America in the 1940s and was used as the literal explanation of all that was wrong with American women (Friedan 1963:93). It is unfortunate that the agents of this disinformation were the sociologists, educators, magazine writers, ministers and marriage counsellors rather than the psychoanalysts, since psychoanalysts would probably not have misinterpreted Freud's theories to such an extent, nor would they have had such ease of access to the general public.

Magazines and educational courses were full of instructions on ways to catch and keep a man, how to breastfeed and rear babies, how to cook and bake, and how to look beautiful and act in a more feminine manner. Concurrently, women were taught to pity the 'neurotic', 'unfeminine', 'unhappy' women who wanted more. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights and the independence and opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists had fought for. Repeatedly in the 'expert' advice written about women for women, the message appeared that women could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity.

This phenomenon, referred to by Friedan as the 'feminine mystique', resulted in at least a generation of American women whose sole purpose in life appeared to revolve around the activities associated with marriage, having babies, and serving husband and children in the home.

I have included this short section because it is my experience that many of the attitudes highlighted by Friedan still prevailed, at least until the 1980s, in South African teaching institutions and society. One of these, the notion and imposition of a societal norm of maternal self-sacrifice, is a central theme in my body of work. *Salt in the Wound* is complex and paradoxical however. It reflects both a feminine struggle to maintain an equality and identity unaffected by a presumed biological imperative to reproduce, and also reflects the intense sense of loss inevitably caused by the choice to abort a pregnancy.

SOCIETAL STRUCTURE AND THE FEMININE BODY



From nature to culture

English anthropologist Carol MacCormack (1980:2) attests that European ideas about nature and culture are fundamentally about our origins and evolution. In order to exist as a species, human beings must eat, sleep, copulate and meet other basic animal needs. This can be referred to as 'natural' since it is necessary for all animals, but our capacity to make distinctions, such as between 'us' and 'other' as kin categories, and our ability to know rules of incest avoidance and marriage exogamy, allows us a social existence in which we give up a state of nature (incest and the social isolation of small kin groups), for reciprocating kin ties and social contracts with others. In other words, in our evolutionary history we have improved and constrained ourselves by creating our own rule-bound order.

Procreative sex blurs the boundaries between nature and culture however: it is not necessary to maintain the life of the individual, but is necessary for the continuation of society, and the need obviously cannot be met individually but requires paired opposites: male and female. Therefore sex is natural but becomes cultural with incest prohibition and rules of marriage exogamy.

Furthermore, human minds are capable of constructing myth, and in a 'feedback loop' myth instructs our perceptions of the universe. *Zoe* as Mother and archetype of the source of being to whom *bios*, archetype of incarnate being is born, is one such myth, but not all are of such an abstract nature. Consider for instance the 'myths' of the Enlightenment: honour and prestige were allocated to people of science and industry who excelled in controlling the powerful domain of nature. Honour was also bestowed upon people who overcame 'animal urges', curbing these urges in accordance with moral codes. By extension therefore, since women were defined as 'natural', a high prestige or even moral goodness was attached to men's domination over women (MacCormack 1980:6).

The perplexing question of course is why the subordination of nature, and by extension women, in religion and society was originally considered necessary. Definite answers are not forthcoming, but according to Fontan (2003:77) Aristotle wrote as early as the

4th century BC “in all species the male always prevails over the female. The human race is no exception.” This could be one of the first written assertions that male superiority was a ‘natural’ phenomenon. In addition, men, having seized power in monotheistic religious institutions, excluded women because they were considered to be associated with Eve’s ‘original sin’ relating to the sexual desire that a woman could awake in a man. This desire, it was presumed, would let the body gain ascendancy over the mind and would thus hinder man’s spirituality. St John of Chrysostome described women in the following terms at the beginning of the 4th century AD: “Woman is ... ineluctable grief, natural temptation, desirable calamity, delectable scourge, natural evil brightly painted” (Fontan 2003:81).

Ludmilla Jordanova (1989:19) confirms that a distinction between women as natural and men as cultural has a long history based on the idea of the biological foundation of womanhood. This dichotomous association existed as a representation rather than as a description and contained numerous elements, including the claims that women were more emotional, credulous, superstitious and less analytical than men. Assigning such attributes to women gave rise to the idea that women were the carriers of a new morality through which the artificiality of civilisation could be transcended, and similarly, by viewing men as representative of culture, the progressive light of masculine reason could be implied.

Women were considered the repositories of ‘natural laws’ and ‘natural morality’, they were also considered sensitive and passionate, and in need of constraint within social boundaries. The opposed categories of nature and culture arose as a particular ideological polemic in 18th century Europe which succeeded in creating further contradictions by defining women as natural but superior (by virtue of reproductive capability), but simultaneously as instruments of a society of men, and therefore subordinate.

The oppositions between women as nature and men as culture were further socially reinforced by means of various distinctions between men and women’s work. Men’s work was often determined according to perceptions of greater analytical capability (in upper and middle classes) and superior muscular strength (in the working classes). Working class women, due to their presumed intellectual inferiority, were put to work

on menial tasks in the factories whilst middle class women were generally thought to be weaker and more vulnerable, especially with respect to their 'nervous dispositions'.

The woman/nature paradigm

According to Jordanova (1989:23) western society has an historic tendency to view human experience in terms of dichotomies, where two opposed terms define one another. The dichotomous relations that form the basis for the theoretical grounding of *Salt in the Wound* are of course nature/culture and female/male. Sets of dichotomies are susceptible to transformations of meaning, and to changes within the dichotomy itself as well as in relation to other dichotomies. MacCormack (1980:9) adds that although it may be tempting to view a dichotomy as a 'black and white' explanation for a system, this would be to forget that what is being compared is invariably a complex set of concepts, and furthermore, that it is different and specific characteristics of these concepts that are selected for comparison. For these reasons a dichotomy cannot be viewed as a fixed entity, nor should it be viewed in isolation. Having made these observations however, experience has shown that the dichotomies that characterise human existence are remarkably persistent, leading one to suspect that they must be founded on powerful imperatives.

One such imperative could be the success of a dichotomy to provide coherence in the face of threatened social disorganisation. Or, in other words, a dichotomy very often has the function of erasing ambiguity, which is perceived as a threat both to the individual and to social structures.

Western dichotomies are invariably characterised by a hierarchical structure, and just as nature is regulated and controlled by culture, women are subject to men, and furthermore, perceived in relation to them. Man is understood to be the central term or norm against which women, as the deviations or the variations, are assessed. It is due to

this asymmetry that the idea of ‘otherness’⁵ has seemed especially apt in relation to women.

The conflation of woman with nature became a popular theme in Salon paintings of the late 19th century. Otto Greiner’s etching *Earth Goddess (Gaea)*, fig 1) was completed in 1911 and depicts a primal mother hugely exaggerated in size reclining in a cave-like place upon the earth. She is surrounded by mortal beings, one of which, a man, holds a child up to the breast that this Mother Nature proffers.



Figure 1. Otto Greiner, *Earth Goddess (Gaea)* (1911).

Gustave Courbet’s recently rediscovered painting *The Origin of the World* (1866, fig 2) also refers to the woman/nature paradigm although it is perhaps less obvious than Greiner’s work. Michael Fried (1990:210) compares *The Origin of the World* to a drawing of a landscape with cave drawn by Courbet in his sketchbook in the early 1840s that he called the “Dame verte”. Fried believes that the explicitly revealed female genitalia of *Origin of the World* almost certainly relate to this drawing:



Figure 2. Gustave Courbet, *The Origin of the World* (1866).

What again and again draws Courbet’s eye into caves, crevices, and grottoes is the fascination that emanates from the hidden... . What is behind this is a panerotic mode of experience that perceives in nature a female creature and consequently projects the experience of cave and grotto into the female body (Fried 1990:210).

⁵ The dichotomising notion of ‘othering’ helps us to conceptualise the ways in which groups and individuals distance themselves from one another (very often by unconscious means). Such separating strategies tend to be needed only when the two parties involved are also deeply bound together and therefore implicated in one another’s characteristics. ‘Otherness’ thus conveys the kinship, the fascination and the repulsion between distinct yet related categories of persons (Jordanova 1989:25).

The body as metaphor for society

The structure of society, although an abstract concept, is powerful and is potent in its own right to control or to stir humanity to action. It has form - external boundaries, margins and an internal structure - and its outlines are understood to contain the power to reward conformity and to repulse attack. Similarly, the complex structure of the human body, with its structures, margins and boundaries, provides a source of symbols for other complex structures. Hence, when a symbol to describe society is sought, the human body seems particularly apt. The body becomes a model for the bounded system of society where the threatened or precarious edges of society are mirrored by the vulnerability of the body's surface.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1966) is a treatise on the way in which human beings are inclined to use the body as a metaphor for society. Societies develop rituals, also known as 'pollution beliefs', that relate to the body and its functions. These rituals are intended to counter ambiguity in moral behaviour and societal structure and therefore provide many of the symbols upon which the body/society metaphor is built⁶. Pollution beliefs are deemed necessary because ambiguity - a transitional state, a state that is neither one nor the next - is recognised to be disruptive to both individual and society.

This point has fundamental relevance for *Salt in the Wound* since the two states of human experience considered undefined, marginal, and therefore ambiguous, are the pregnant mother and the unborn child (Douglas 1966:95). In terms of this explication, I would like to hypothesize that the concept of aborting an unborn foetus must surely also be comprehended as disruptive, even 'subversive'. Not in the usual sense of the word,

⁶ Societies will tend to develop their own specific concepts of what constitutes polluting substances, some examples being faeces, blood and spittle. These substances are then considered taboo, that is to say, they are thought to be imbued with some 'other-worldly' power. Pollutants must be avoided, or if contact with them is inevitable, dealt with in a certain way if the society in question is to function optimally. It is important to note that pollutants are always of the body, but their taboo function is aimed at society as a whole. Again this relates to the notion of the body as the symbol of society (Douglas 1966:123).

but as an act that disrespects boundaries, both of the body and of society, something that is in-between, ambiguous and taboo.

In order to clarify the abstract concepts being dealt with in this section, I will briefly refer to an essay by South African art historian Brenda Schmahmann where she analyses certain aspects of a sculptural work by South African artist Wilma Cruise entitled *Hysteria Suspended* (2001, fig 3). Schmahmann, considering both Douglas' (1966) and Julia Kristeva's (1982) theories pertaining to pollution beliefs, asserts that bodily emissions (fluids such as sweat, saliva and urine) are considered taboo not by virtue of their lack of cleanliness but due to their 'subversiveness' - by which Douglas means 'matter out of place', and Kristeva, expanding on Douglas' concept, means 'the abject' - that which has gone beyond the bounds of acceptable behaviour, that which is 'beyond the pale'.

Both Douglas and Kristeva link the threat imposed by bodily emissions on the body's boundaries, to the threat imposed upon the self or the identity and, by virtue of the body/society metaphor, upon societal structures. Schmahmann summarises it thus:



Figure 3. Wilma Cruise, *Hysteria Suspended* (2001).

[W]hat is instead at stake is a threat to a concept of the 'self' as something logically integrated - an entity that is somehow self-contained, self-defined, self-managed... . Furthermore, a dread of substances expelled from the body is bound up with their threat to social structures for which the body is a metaphor (2002:7).

When related to the body, bodily emissions threaten borders, positions and rules, but when the body acts as the metaphor for society, the metaphorical equivalent of the bodily emission is understood to be that which is in-between or ambiguous, whilst the body is understood to be the identity, the system, and the order of society.

Cruise's *Hysteria Suspended* (2001) includes three female torsos crafted in clay. The torsos comprise body casts but the front and back aspects come from different sitters –

the backs from body casts of a young woman, the fronts from a middle-aged woman. Through the resulting lack of coherence, the torsos “convey a sense that these are bodies in states of disunity, disjuncture and unease” (Schmahmann 2002:7). It is the scored, irregular surfaces of the torsos that are of greater interest for the purposes of *Salt in the Wound* however since I have chosen to treat the cast-salt blocks, which form an important component of my body of work, in a similar fashion. This is a theme that I will elaborate on in a later chapter of this dissertation.

Such a treatment of the sculptural surface defies an understanding of the skin as a “definitive boundary for the body. What appear to be slashes or wounds to the skin and flesh of Cruise’s work creates a sense that the figure is ruptured, and that the depicted body is in fact ‘seeping’ and inchoate”. Schmahmann furthermore argues that Cruise’s figures are ‘abject’, not only in the sense that they are debased, humiliated or suffering, but also in a Kristevian sense of the word, in that they seem to defy the imposition of a system of order and containment on the body and, by extension, on society (2002:7). Similarly, my salt blocks, representative of the vessel-like nature of the pregnant woman, could be understood to allude to a defiance or subversion of societal expectations for the pregnant woman.

Douglas suggests in conclusion that the ritualised dealing with pollutants is not necessary when the action that has put the society in jeopardy can be dealt with directly with some form of preordained punishment. Ritual is only necessary when there is uncertainty or ambiguity about the culpability of the action, as tends to happen when moral judgement evoked in one situation is likely to be contradicted in another. When moral rules are obscure or contradictory, there is a tendency for pollution beliefs to simplify or clarify the point at issue (Douglas 1966:125). This point has special relevance with respect to the issue of abortion. The right of a woman to exercise her freedom of choice with respect to whether she wishes to have the baby she is pregnant with is in direct conflict with the ‘right’ of the foetus to life. Jungian analyst Eva Patis-Zoja (1997:141) explains that in view of the sense of ambiguity surrounding the culpability of abortion, abortion has, throughout history, generally been associated with ritual. She goes on to add that ritual is largely suppressed in contemporary western culture however because it relates to an instinctual rather than a scientific attitude. This line of reasoning could cast light on the ongoing sense of confusion and animosity that tends to surround the issue of abortion regardless of changes in abortion laws making such a choice more permissible.

MEDEA'S INFANTICIDE AND THE DISRUPTION OF SOCIAL ORDER

The larger idea that lurks behind the paradigm of the reproductive demon is that she who is able to give life is also understood to have the power to truncate that life before it can come to fruition.

Sarah Iles-Johnson: 1997



Euripides' play *Medea* relates the tale of Medea, a princess of Colchis, who betrays her father and kills her brother in order to help her lover Jason capture the Golden Fleece. She then follows Jason to Corinth. On the couple's arrival there, Jason abandons Medea and their two children in favour of the Corinthian king's daughter, viewing this as a sound political move on his part. Medea, overcome with jealousy and rage, vows to seek revenge. She plots to poison the Corinthian princess (and inadvertently kills the king as well), but it is her decision to kill her own children in an act of extreme revenge against their father Jason that provides the crux of the play (Podlecki 1991:79).

Although Medea is a mythical figure, she is portrayed in Euripides play as a mortal woman. This is an important point since a mythical figure is considered to exist beyond the realm of normal human life and beyond the bounds of human ethics as well. Emily McDermott (1989:51) contends that such a Medea would tend to appeal only to our intellects and to that part of our literary sensibility that seeks out and thrives on metaphors and allegories, and it appears that this effect was not Euripides intention.

By setting Medea within societal confines, Euripides achieves a blatant contrast between Medea's adoption of the common woman's plight and her standard mythic characterisation as an aggressive, dangerous woman. A further anomaly exists: even as Medea laments the harm she has suffered at the hands of Jason, with whom she had a passive, wifely relationship, she herself adopts the language and posture of the active (and properly masculine) heroic code. These contrasts serve to implant in the audience an uneasy sense that all may not be as it seems (McDermott 1989:48).

In the early scenes of the play the audience's sympathies lie firmly on the side of Medea, a woman wronged by her husband. But when the heinous nature of Medea's proposed revenge is announced later in the play, a radical readjustment of sympathies and expectations is imposed upon the audience. Medea, by asserting her identification with the 'everyday Athenian woman' and, concomitantly, downplaying her mythical qualities (which would have allowed her to transcend the boundaries imposed by a given societal configuration, as a purely mortal woman might not), has manipulated the audience into a false sense of both sympathy and empathy. The communality of 'all women' has been employed in order to deceive these women into a false identification of Medea with 'Everywoman'. But Medea's embarkation upon the crime of infanticide,

although recognised to be a tragic act, utterly belies their empathy, leaving them feeling duped.

McDermott (1989:50) makes the observation that the enduring significance of this play can be attributed in part to the fact that although the initial conflict is between a man and a woman, sympathies and empathies are soon disrupted, and the conflict is then transferred to the distinct societal roles allotted to the two sexes. McDermott analyses Euripides' supposed intentions in the following way: indignation at Medea's duplicitous appeal to empathy is a response that would negatively affect both male and female personalities, but the exact nature of the disillusionment of the two sexes would differ. Both would feel a primary sense of having been deceived, but the male reaction would include a secondary queasy impulse to take the identification of Medea and 'Everywoman' one step further. The reasoning behind this impulse being that if Medea is (as she asserts) like all women, then perhaps all women are capable of the same abominations as Medea. "The male sequence of thought...will turn from an initial reaction of sympathy (perhaps qualified) to a terrifying glimpse of the nether regions of the woman's 'true' soul: *Maybe all women are not so different from Medea after all*" (McDermott 1989:50).

The human character tends to define itself in terms of 'self' and 'other', and as has been previously noted, one of the most enduring manifestations of the notion of self and other is male and female. When self is opposed to other and particularly when that other is meant to be censured, there usually are no 'in-betweens'. Such absolute divisions can have a reassuring effect, both because they impose firm rules and boundaries upon the world and because they imply that other is safely and permanently separated from self. Furthermore, the dichotomising of self and other serves as an important means both of organising the world and of enforcing behavioural desiderata (Iles-Johnson 1997:7-8).

It is unusual to find the self/other dichotomy encapsulated within a single character, as is the case with Medea. She raises the disturbing possibility of otherness lurking within self or the possibility that the 'normal' carry within themselves the potential for abnormal behaviour and that the boundaries expected to keep our world safe are not impenetrable. It is not surprising then, that of all the images of Medea, the one that has most fascinated authors and artists is that of the murderous mother. The fascination also owes much to the fact that a mother's deliberate slaughter of her children undermines

one of the basic assumptions upon which society is constructed: mothers nurture their children. Once this assumption breaks down, all others are open to reconsideration. Or as Iles-Johnson (1997:4) poses the question: "Is anything that we assumed about the world or the human soul really unassailable?"

Pattis-Zoja (1997:133) takes this line of thought further and relates it directly to the question of abortion. She points out that western men, under certain conditions, are societally sanctioned, and indeed, sometimes expected to kill. But these men will usually find it intolerable to imagine that women could do the same. The idea that a mother could kill (especially her own child) has the ability to trigger an irrational anxiety in a man, it questions his existence, and makes him feel totally at her mercy. This sequence of feelings is brought about less as a result of a man's actual fear of a woman who kills than by the fact that western culture provides him with no concept of such an occurrence and no cultural presuppositions in which to contain it.

Western women, unlike men, have never been able to excuse themselves on the basis of a culturally accepted form of killing. But abortion inverts the 'natural order', it undermines the notion of men as heroes to whom killing is entrusted as an honourable necessity and it reduces men to the status of passive accomplices or spectators: here it is the women who choose to kill, assuming a role which men can only see as abnormal, dangerous and immoral.

Pattis-Zoja writes that in archaic cultures abortion went hand in hand with ritual, that is to say, it was subject to taboo, and although the modern western concept of taboo is infinitely more difficult to pin down, abortion is undoubtedly still an event that has certain features of taboo. That which is taboo stands at a certain limit and at the edge of a certain threshold. One does not speak openly of things that belong to this sphere, and taboo is generally not concerned with prohibitions and authorisations. Taboo, in the indigenous societies for which it was (and in some cases continues to be) fundamental, signals the point at which the ordinary world comes to an end and is replaced by a more powerful and invisible realm where every action has the potential to determine a set of consequences more dire than the kind that could normally be foreseen (1997:141).

In the modern context, when faced with an event that could be considered taboo, society tends to be afflicted by a common sense of insecurity. It is as if we cannot tell right

from wrong, and we have no idea how we ought to behave. Abortion brings us face to face with an event that ranges well beyond the capacities for understanding offered by our current systems of thought and moral sensibility, or even our stock of ordinary feelings. There is no mourning as there would be for the death of a loved one, and the rites and ceremonies that surround other important events such as birth and death are absent. Instead we are confronted with questions of choice and will and sensations of guilt and shame. Public opinion only exacerbates the situation by splitting us into those 'for' versus those 'against'.

Pattis-Zoja posits the possibility that the vehemence and animosity of public opinion that surrounds the question of abortion could be directly attributed to the level of anxiety that the phenomenon awakens in each one of us, and as previously mentioned, that it was this sort of anxiety that used to be managed through the rules of ritual behaviour (pollution beliefs) that attended taboo events in indigenous societies. She describes the symbolic nature of the ritual behaviour associated with taboo events and the potential value of dealing with the contemporary scenario of abortion in a similar symbolic way: "Symbolic values cannot be voiced in any direct way, and they refuse to translate into concepts or precisely defined principles" (1997:7).

A societal perception of abortion

But what she's done has set her apart. It belongs to the submerged landscape of the things that are never said, which lies beneath ordinary speech like hills under water. Everyone my age knows about it. Nobody discusses it. Rumours are down there, kitchen tables, money exchanged in secret; evil old women, illegal doctors, disgrace and butchery. Down there is terror (Atwood 1989:341).

To deal with the subject of abortion is to deal as much with the individual woman, with her emotional, psychological and cultural attributes, as with society, with its attendant norms and perceptions. What this in effect means is that to deal with the subject of abortion is to deal with pre-conceived notions, inherent guilt, contradictory perceptions and ambivalence.

Pattis-Zoja (1997:3) asserts that extrapolations from published statistics from western countries make it possible to estimate that one in every four women has aborted a pregnancy one or more times. And whilst some of these abortions are rapidly decided and appear to be problem free, others are charged with severe and debilitating conflicts. The statistics cited here beg the question: if abortion occurs this frequently, why, even in countries where abortion is legal, is this particular event so spurned and so shrouded in secrecy. Pattis-Zoja describes the scenario as follows:

There is a total blackout. Addresses and practical information get passed along by word of mouth; the sources of advice then withdraw into anonymity. The written word seems yet to be invented with respect to this event, as though the event itself had no real existence outside of the moments in which it takes place, and could never be the subject of a narrative. Its very protagonists – the women who have had an abortion – attempt to leave it behind them as quickly as possible, erasing all its traces and banning it from thought. Abortion seems to be a phenomenon devoid of all locale, time and memory (1997:6).

The experience of ‘unwanted pregnancy’ is a universal occurrence, but the issues resulting in a pregnancy being considered unwanted are wholly individualised. These issues are mediated not only by the woman’s psychological and personal context but also by the social and cultural organisation of the community in which she lives. Thus women’s responses to abortion are assumed to be a function of interacting individual and socio-cultural variables such as the woman’s psychological state, the nature and meaning of the pregnancy to her, the nature of support she receives and the social and physical environment in which the abortion occurs. As a result, issues such as socio-economic class, access to abortion and the legal status of abortion all play an important role (McCulloch 1996:1).

Abortion excites a host of negative responses from our western society. A woman who chooses to abort her foetus may face accusations of selfishness and irresponsibility, and may be labelled as one who indulges her own convenience at the expense of society. Myths such as ‘abortion leads to promiscuity’ and the notion that abortion will inevitably cause guilt and regret to the would-be mother abound. The moralists are disturbed not only by the imagined effects of uncontrolled sexuality on family values and society as a whole, but also about what abortion implies about the right of women to enjoy sex free of procreative consequences (Hadley 1996:185). This together with the aforementioned assumption that motherhood is the essence of womanhood and that it is therefore ‘harmful’ for women not to fulfil this role, provides a restrictive, pre-ordained

environment in which a western woman must attempt to define her sexual and reproductive individuality.

South African artist Terry Kurgan believes that representations of motherhood in the western world tend to be built around a symbolic societal construct of mother and child as an insular, mutually fulfilled and fulfilling couple. The converse of this mythology, in which ambivalence and the critical representation of the actual experience of the maternal is acknowledged, is a taboo domain. The co-existence of such experiences as joy and rage, desire and loss, pleasure and frustration, malaise and happiness are screened from us by culture's stereotyped and popularised images. And also by women who, at great cost to themselves and their gender, try to live up to the impossible expectations of these cultural fantasies and hide or obscure their failure to do so (Kurgan 1998:1).

The only country where abortion is completely prohibited, and where the law is said to be observed, is the Republic of Ireland. Most other countries concede a limited right to destroy those fetuses conceived through crimes such as rape and incest, or fetuses suffering severe handicap (Gardner 1972:34). A societal mindset of this nature seems to imply that abortion can be tolerated and foetal rights over-ridden, as long as the woman is somehow not responsible. But if a fertile woman has chosen to have sexual intercourse, even if using contraception (which she knows has a failure risk, no matter how miniscule) she knowingly runs the risk of pregnancy. Therefore, the unwanted pregnancy is a kind of 'punishment' for her having desires of her own. Janet Hadley, an English campaigner for women's abortion rights, believes this kind of attitude to be discriminatory since it proscribes all thoughts of sex for pleasure, and takes no heed of the fact that for many women in heterosexual relationships, penetrative intercourse is more or less 'compulsory' (1996:73).

Aspects of the South African experience

Modern South Africa inherited from its European antecedents a sex-based division of labour, of gender relations, of property, and of authority, together comprising a system

of sexual domination. The system has two components: various measures of formal sexual discrimination serving to maintain women in a position of dependence, and a sexist ideology that legitimises this dependence. One could conceptualise this system of discrimination as a number of 'sex bars' which form a structure of constraint effectively limiting women at the levels of legal rights, employment, reproduction and education (Cock 1984:241).

In pre-colonial, pre-capitalist, African customary law, African women belonging to the self-sufficient households of peasant communities were denied legal capacity. They could not own property in their own right, enter into contracts without the aid of their male guardian, or act as the guardians of their children. Women were perpetual minors in that, irrespective of their age or marital status, they were always subject to the authority of men. African customary law must be seen in its social context however. Common law notions such as ownership, contract and status are saturated with an individualism that was foreign to indigenous African culture in which the rights of both men and women were submerged in the group. Thus the family, rather than any single individual, had full legal capacity. Within this unit each member had a clearly defined position with recognised rights and obligations. Patriarchal rule, male primogeniture, polygyny, arranged marriages, the sororate and levirate all provided women with some protection and secured their rights when they belonged to self-sufficient households in peasant communities (Cock 1984: 245).

As the foothold of Dutch and English settlers strengthened in South Africa, African customary law was progressively replaced by the Roman Dutch tradition of law. This process was notionally defended on the grounds that it would liberate black women from what the white settlers perceived to be the patriarchal tyranny of black men. The reality however was a new legal system that subjected black women to even greater disabilities. These disabilities cannot be assessed from a legal perspective alone but must be seen in the light of the complex socio-political and economic conditions that impacted on black South Africans in what was to become known as the era of Apartheid.

With regards to the implementation of the laws and facilities dealing with human reproduction: from the time of the advent of Apartheid in 1948, there was increasing opposition to abortion, not only on moral and religious grounds, but also on racial-

political grounds. The relatively easy access with which white women were able to seek abortions became an issue for the Nationalist Government whose concern was the perceived reduction in the white birth rate with respect to the notion of an ever-increasing birth rate of the black population. In South Africa in 1974 an exclusively white and male commission was set up to provide the guidelines for the *Abortion and Sterilisation Act No.2* of 1975. This law criminalised a woman's choice to terminate an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy unless the pregnancy was the result of rape or incest, or if it endangered the life of the mother or the foetus, or if the mother was an 'imbecile'. The law therefore eliminated women's capacity for personal decision-making about an intensely private matter. (McCulloch 1996:12).

Contraception was also made available and free to all women, but as with the case of abortion, since state-run clinics tended to be concentrated in the urban areas, women in remote or rural areas (areas inhabited predominantly by the black families of migrant workers) were at a severe disadvantage. In addition, a socio-political structure that kept black people confined to rural areas, the homelands and the townships, where primary health care facilities were lacking, had the effect of denying free and fair access to reproductive choices for black women. In addition there was no paid pregnancy leave in South Africa at that time, nor was there any obligation on an employer to retain the services of a new mother. All of which made the situation of South African women in general, but more specifically, economically and politically disadvantaged black woman, even more precarious (Cock 1984:260).

It can be argued that a system of sexual domination cannot operate on a structural level alone, but must also operate on a psychological level. The notion of female inferiority and dependence has been deeply internalised, not only by men but also by women themselves. The 'sex bars' under which South African women lived were social facts which had not only an external, institutionalised existence, but were internalised in men's – and women's – minds in a patriarchal ideology. Such a sexist ideology defining women as secondary, inferior and dependent is again a deterministic system of belief: incapacities and inequalities are attributed to innate genetic differences and a dual ascriptive basis - biological science and theology – is used as justification. The ideology is elaborated and inculcated in such institutions as the church, educational establishments, the media, art, and especially the family – that site of the primary socialisation of children and the stabilisation of adult personalities. It is also important

to recognise that definitions of femininity are class-bound, and in the South African context, inevitably also race-bound.

Abortion is by no means a modern procedure and a woman not wishing to bear the child she is pregnant with will often astound herself and those who know her in her determination to terminate it. South African statistics reporting on the removal of residues of a pregnancy due to 'incomplete miscarriage' for the year 1989 show 31 554 cases (Report of the Director-General in McCulloch 1996:5). Since this is a common method of completing an illegal abortion, we can conclude that restrictive abortion legislation does not reduce the number of abortions performed, it simply increases the number of illegal 'back-street' abortions. For this reason societal control over abortion can be interpreted as frankly harmful to women.

The *Abortion and Sterilisation Act* of 1975 was repealed and replaced by the *Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act* in 1996. The new law recognised the constitutional right of a woman to make her own choice about whether or not to bear the child she was pregnant with, and therefore appeared to facilitate access for all South African women to abortion. It was envisaged that women would now be entitled to a first trimester abortion irrespective of anyone else's wishes, and in fact, the new South African law is probably one of the most liberal of all the laws governing the termination of pregnancy in the world. And yet, eight years later, the public debate still continues while the personal impact and implications of a woman's choice to terminate are generally disregarded and not infrequently reviled.

At the centre of the furore is the pregnant woman. How she came to be pregnant, whether through rape, incest, spousal abuse, ignorance or just plain bad luck is almost always disregarded in the public and political debate. She ceases to be an individual with a specific set of circumstances and needs and becomes instead a statistic used to further the opinions and aims of the persons supporting or undermining her case.

**WESTERN AESTHETICS AND THE REGULATION OF
THE FEMININE BODY**



Aspects of the representation of women by men

Salt in the Wound deliberately avoids the portrayal of the human body itself. In spite of this, I include this section, and the next - dealing with the representation of women by women themselves, since they provide important insights into the myriad issues inherent in the representation of the female body. Many of these issues, such as voyeurism and the objectification of the represented subject, are not dissimilar to the issues of sensationalism or exhibitionism that would inevitably be attendant on the portrayal of the foetus or pregnant woman who chooses to abort.

Kenneth Clark in his seminal study *The Nude* (1956) is of the opinion that female bodies necessarily arouse desire, and as a result, when the subject of an artwork, might introduce the risk of “upsetting the unity of responses from which a work of art should derive its independent life” (Clark 1956:6). He believed furthermore that the style of Classical Greek sculpture offered a mechanism for managing the female body in art and also believed classicism capable of harnessing unrestrained lust into an ordered form of scrutiny and for fusing erotic enjoyment with aesthetic appreciation. Schmahmann, quoting Lynda Nead, writes that Clark was also of the opinion that an idealised, classicised representation of the female body served not only to regulate the female subject, but also to discipline the ‘wandering eye’ of the potentially errant (male) viewer (1997:4).

Visible pregnancy has never been a particularly popular subject in western art unless it has been couched in religious significance, such as the expectant Virgin Mary. Even then, the fact of the Virgin’s pregnancy tended to be presented more as a concept than as a physical reality⁷. Where pregnancy has been represented, the imperative to regulate the female form has been considered of even greater importance than in the non-pregnant subject.

Any rendition of the condition of pregnancy defies, in essence, an endeavour to portray a contained image of the body. The visible swell of pregnancy is a marker of the breakdown of boundaries between inner and outer body, and one that reveals the biological aspect of the female body as well as stressing the mutability of that body.

⁷ One example being Piero della Francesca’s *Virgin Mary* Circa 1440-1460, 260x203cm, chapel of the cemetery, Monterchy (Schmahmann 1997:4).

In order to demonstrate this point Schmahmann (1997:4) compares George Segal's *Pregnant Woman* (1966, fig 4) to the Venus of Willendorf (c 20 000 BC) and then contrasts it to Clark's ideal for the female nude. She notes how western aesthetics, most particularly classical conventions, have provided a basis for the ordering of the female body into an image of unity and coherence, thereby obviating a perceived threat posed by the female body which is understood to be dangerously wayward and inchoate.



Figure 4. George Segal, *Pregnant Woman* (1966).

The Venus of Willendorf appears to be a celebration of fecundity in that the figure combines huge breasts, belly and buttocks with a disproportionately small head and limbs. Clearly her body does not evoke a sense of containment. In addition, the belly, breasts and thighs appear to be swollen and hang downwards implying that the body is subject to the pull of gravity. Similarly, *Pregnant Woman* focuses attention, by means of a clinging garment on breasts, belly and buttocks, on the woman's body, and any sense of containment is undermined by Segal's choice of pose. The slightly parted legs and sideway slump of her body bear no resemblance to the excessively controlled forms we have come to expect from Classical sculpture. In addition, Segal's sculpture, although depicting a far greater degree of realism and proportion than the Venus of Willendorf, also appears to be affected by the natural force of gravity.

In comparing Hellenistic examples of the female nude to the Willendorf Venus and *Pregnant Woman*, it becomes clear that the former were contoured according to an idealised aesthetic system. Schmahmann (1997:4) observes that the smooth surface of the sculpted body seems to act as a kind of metaphorical 'shield' that holds the body in check, and the body is generally rendered as a contained unit. Clark (1956:16) postulates, in spite of his knowledge that

no verifiable evidence exists, that a system of proportion must have existed in order to achieve the superbly schematised bodies of Greek sculpture. Classical nudes appear to defy any real sense of the body as a biological entity or as being acted upon by the atmosphere.

Women representing women

The previous section referred to a western tradition of portrayal of the female nude based on an idealised aesthetic of wholeness and containment. Women, whose bodies did not conform to the ideal, tended to be rendered invisible within these defining boundaries of art. The dominant aesthetic posited the white, healthy, middle-class and youthful body as the ideal of femininity and, as Nead notes, since art may be taken as a reasonable gauge of social visibility in general, the images of the female body that have been omitted from the visual arts echo the lived experiences of women living within a dominant society with a culture of physical perfection (1992:60).

The containment of the female nude in Hellenistic sculpture, so revered by Renaissance artists and still praised by Clark in the 20th century, has been strangely parodied by Dutch artist Inez van Lamsweerde. Van Lamsweerde, born in Amsterdam in 1963, uses idealised feminine images (culled from the mass media) to critique the discriminatory yet persistent vision of what constitutes the 'ideal woman'. In *Thank you Thighmaster* (1993, fig 5) van Lamsweerde digitally manipulates the photograph of a nude woman to achieve a quasi-synthetic female body that is young, smooth, hygienic, hairless, sexless, without areolas, and without blemishes or irregularities. The work operates on multiple levels however: in addition to her critique of the 'ideal



Figure 5. Inez van Lamsweerde, *Thank you Thighmaster* (1993).

woman' myth there is an implicit warning of the effects that eugenics and medically assisted procreation could have on female identity. Furthermore, the work alludes to the potential risk of granting to man even greater power in his quest to master nature. The modification of genes, artificial sexual selection, the production of embryos using the ovaries of the deceased, cloning and exogenesis may not only dispossess a woman of her sexual autonomy and free will concerning procreation, but could impose upon the human race a certain social concept of normality which relies on the elimination of every moral and physical defect (Besse 2003:65).

Female artists began to challenge the dominant style of representation of the female body from the 1970s onwards and although much of this art has collectively been termed 'feminist art', it is important to note that this appellation should not imply a stylistic label. Nead (1987:93) believes that to speak of feminist art is to speak of visual representation that engages with and challenges historically constituted audiences and ideologies. Whilst according to Griselda Pollock (1987:54), a work can be defined as feminist depending on the way it acts upon, makes demands of, and produces positions for its viewers.

A 'feminist agenda' is not necessarily a consciously determined ingredient of an artwork but a product of the relation between the work and the representations of a dominant culture, a particular audience, and the uses to which it is put. It has been argued that there is no feminist art, only art that can be read as feminist. In certain circumstances it may not be the intention of the producer but the eye of the beholder and the context in which the work appears that encourages a political reading. By way of example, Georgia O'Keeffe's flower paintings were, to her dismay, perceived by feminists to be celebratory sexual images (*Grove's Dictionary of Art* 1996: Sv "feminism"). Bram Dijkstra expands on this point of view: "Art rarely shapes the world, but by inevitably stepping in to celebrate the reigning cult of the day, plays a vital role in the consolidation and entrenchment of prevailing cultural prejudices" (1986:29).

A distinct shift can be identified in feminist cultural practice and the representation of the female body from the 1970s through to the 1990s. The objective of women's art in the earlier period of feminist art (1970s – early 1980s) was to prioritise issues of control and identity and to transform woman from passive represented object to empowered subject. Feminist art, for the first time, negotiated the right of women to represent their

own bodies and sexual identities, and this was achieved through the strategies of vaginal imagery⁸, vaginal iconography⁹, performance work, and the representation of previously taboo subjects. Feminist art of this time disrupted the boundaries of the patriarchal regime of representation and revealed woman's body as matter and process as opposed to form and stasis.

Feminist theory characteristic of this earlier period focused on the shared and common aspects of women's physical and psychic lives, which, it was claimed, could form the basis for a female aesthetic. Not surprisingly, this tendency was criticised for expressing an essentialist view of femininity. In addition, the abundant use of vaginal imagery and iconography came under criticism: it was felt that if artists were claiming that vaginal and vulvic forms were an innate and natural language for female artistic expression, as opposed to a political claim to visibility where traditionally this had been denied, then the work could reproduce the patriarchal definition of women as biologically determined, which was being contested elsewhere in the movement. Furthermore, vaginal imagery and iconography, by reducing the complexity of women's experience to the single sign of the female genitalia, reinforced a universal notion of 'woman' whilst masking the real differences that resided within that category (Nead 1992:65).

Having mentioned these criticisms that were levelled at feminist art, it must nevertheless be borne in mind that radical intervention was required in order to draw attention to the issues for women making art at this time. Works such as Judy Chicago's *Red Flag* (1971, fig 6) showing the removal of a bloodied tampon, deliberately pushed the boundaries of what was considered acceptable art. The work invaded the hallowed domain of the taboo and challenged the aesthetic ideal of the sealed and undamaged female body. Where the patriarchal tradition of the female nude had emphasised the exterior of the body and the completion of its surfaces, Chicago, and feminist artists in general, began to reveal the interior. Laura Mulvey describes the male perception of the

⁸ Vaginal imagery refers to the prominent depiction of the female genitalia (vulva) in the artwork.

⁹ Lisa Tickner seems to have been the author who coined the phrase 'vaginal iconography' in an article entitled *The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists since 1970* (1978). 'Vaginal iconography' referred to the drawn or sculpted symbol of the female genitalia - a pea-pod shape or even just a slash - that was often used as the 'visual substitute' for the woman (or women in general) represented in an artwork. One of the better known examples of the use of vaginal iconography would probably be Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (Nead 1992:65).

female body in metaphoric terms dividing surface allure from concealed decay. The cosmetically finished surface of the body is expected to remain intact and must conceal the abject matter of the interior of the female body. In psychoanalytic terms, this cosmetic surface “conceals the wound or void left in the male psyche when it perceives sexual difference” (1991:146).

In successive stages of feminism, artists moved away from the singularity and inclusiveness implied in the term ‘woman’ towards greater representation of the multiplicity and plurality of positions for women in



Figure 6. Judy Chicago, *Red Flag* (1971).

society. The fundamental role played by class, race and sexual preference on identity was acknowledged. Feminist artists drew on a wide range of sources in order to explore the relationship between representation and the body, and performance art became a particularly potent form of expression. This style of art making was not without its own set of risks and criticisms however, as can be verified by this warning by Lucy Lippard:

A woman using her own face and body has a right to do what she will with them, but it is a subtle abyss that separates men’s use of women for sexual titillation from women’s use of women to expose that insult (1976:125).

When using the female body in performance art, the danger exists that interpretation is not solely in the hands of the performer, and the female body could be re-appropriated for meanings quite different to those originally intended.

Kiki Smith, although not a performance artist herself, made the observation that to use her own body – even if only as the life-model for her art, could result in it reverting to the particularity of its material being (Lampert 1995:18). In other words, the female body is so rigidly encoded that it is extremely difficult to provoke any reading other than narcissism - if the body happens to match the current bodily ideal, or ridicule if it

does not. Furthermore, when the female body being represented does not conform to the ideal there is invariably an expectation that the work should address this variation¹⁰.

Performance art, like vaginal iconography, is not a perfect strategy, but both have the power to break with conventional viewing structures and disrupt patriarchally determined aesthetics and voyeuristic ideals for the female body. Advocates of performance art claim an additional function for the genre: since the 'object' to be viewed is not merely represented but is in fact present, the viewer is no longer able to "relish the object at his chosen speed, to carry out repeated examinations and to select viewing positions" (Nead 1992:68). The (male) spectator is exposed to the proximity of the performer and the implications of his desires and his spectatorship therefore become issues within the work. In these terms then, the mobility of the performance artist has the potential to subvert the male gaze and prevent the fetishisation or colonisation of the female body. The female artist has a greater ability to determine the way she is experienced by her audience, and in this way, she can take greater control of her own image.

An important understanding to emerge from the feminist endeavour of the 1970s to early 1980s was that the female body was densely imbued with meaning in patriarchal culture and that these connotations could not be shaken off entirely. Some voices from within the feminist movement believed that under patriarchy the female body could not be represented at all for fear that it would be appropriated for the dominant ideologies of gender and sexual difference. Artist Mary Kelly, born in the United States in 1941, felt that to use the female body was not impossible although she acknowledged that it could be problematic. Kelly chose to circumvent the problem by using clothing as representative of the absent woman's body in her work entitled *Interim, Part I: "Corpus"*¹¹ (1984-85). In this manner Kelly was able to explore desire and identity without colluding in the objectification of women, and although the female body remains the constant referent, in remains free of the patriarchal structuring of voyeurism and exhibitionism. "I have tried to cut across the predominant representation of women

¹⁰ Artist Lorraine O'Grady gave up using her own body in her performance art because as she herself aged so developed the expectation that her performance should be about aging (Lampert 1995:21).

¹¹ Mary Kelly, *Interim, Part I: "Corpus"* (1984-85). Photolaminate, silkscreen, and acrylic on plexiglass, 30 panels, 48 x 36 ins each. (Illustration & data: Kelly 1996:ix.)

as the object of the look in order to question the notion of femininity as a pre-given entity and to foreground instead its social construction as a representation of sexual difference within specific discourses”(Kelly 1999:xxi).

Such a tactic demonstrates Kelly’s understanding that to remove the female body from art might remove the problem of patriarchal appropriation, but could lead to the far greater danger of repressing the discourse of the body and sexuality altogether (Wolfe 1990:122).

Although it is not the female nude that I wish to remove from *Salt in the Wound*, I have employed a similar strategy to Kelly’s. I have avoided the portrayal of the unborn child, preferring instead to create ‘traces’ in the form of lead dresses and the imprints of these dresses in cast salt. It is my hope that I am thereby able to convey a sense both of the societal and the psychological impact of abortion whilst avoiding any charges of sensationalism.

CONTEMPORARY VISIONS OF WOMEN'S MATERNAL ROLE

Menstruation and childbirth are an affront to beauty and form. In aesthetic terms they are spectacles of frightful squalor. Modern life with its hospitals and paper products has distanced and sanitised these primitive mysteries, just as it has done with death, which used to be a gruelling at-home affair. An awful lot is being swept under the rug... .

Camille Paglia: 1990



Female artists were the first to communicate the alienation and pain of women's physical experience in their art and as a result, the category of 'legitimate sexual subject-matter' expanded to include the previously taboo topics of menstruation, rape¹² and abortion. It has been my experience in the course of my research however that very few artists have in fact dealt with the topic of abortion. Patis-Zoja's quote cited previously: "[t]he written word seems yet to be invented with respect to this event, as though the event itself had no real existence outside of the moments in which it takes place... ." seems equally to apply to the sphere of the visual arts.

Ironically, it is a male artist - Ed Kienholz - whose work *The Illegal Operation* (1962, fig 7) most explicitly deals with abortion.

Kienholz created a tableau including a domestic lamp with a naked light bulb, a modified shopping trolley on top of which lies a bag with hardened cement oozing from a hole at the bottom, and a hospital bedpan cluttered with rusty medical instruments. The work relates a violent and horrifying account of the realities of 'back-street abortion'. "It looks like the after-image of a body that has been violated both by the 'doctor' and by the politics of a society that can reduce a woman's body and its living organisms to such waste" (Hopps 1996:104).



Figure 7. Ed Kienholz, *The Illegal Operation* (1962).

More recently, Tracey Emin created a video where she recounts her personal experience of an abortion she had in 1990. Emin made the 'docudrama' entitled *How It Feels*¹³ (1996) in order to explain the impact the procedure had on her life and her art. It was filmed at the sites where the events unfolded: the doctor's surgery, the park where she

¹² The subject of rape in art is of course not confined to contemporary feminist art, for example *Rape of the Sabine Women* by Nicholas Poussin (1594? – 1665). But contemporary feminist artists tend to take a subjective view on the issue of rape rather than the more objective renderings of male artists of the past.

¹³ Tracey Emin, *How it Feels* (1996). 30 min video. Collection unknown (Illustration & data: Arning 1999:101.)

spoke to her boyfriend, and outside the hospital (Pierini 1997:102). While the details of the video are harrowing, Emin manages to relate her rage and anguish in a candid manner which falls somewhere between sordid public confession and art-styled ironical autobiography. The use of the medium of video in *How it Feels* has the disconcerting effect of placing in the public realm something that is most often concealed, and perhaps it is this aspect that supplies the impact of Emin's work.

In the wake of the anti-feminist, anti-abortion backlash in America in the late 1980s, Kathe Burkhart and Chrysanne Stathacos staged *Abortion Project*¹⁴ (1991) where 686 signatures of women who had had abortions were enlarged, coloured red, and installed on the gallery walls (Lieberman 1991:133). The gallery, empty but for the signatures, seems to read as an inventory to loss and is all about absence: of individual identity, personal responsibility, and the body as private property. A tension is created in the installation by the 'personal' signatures and the overall de-individualising effect of a list of names.

It would appear that *The Illegal Operation* and *Abortion Project* are concerned with reporting certain socio-political facts about abortion, whereas Emin's work takes a more autobiographical approach and explores the psychological impact that the abortion had on her. It is my intention through *Salt in the Wound* to focus not so much upon the tangible realities associated with abortion - the political debates, the moral disputes and questions of legal and medical accessibility - but rather to communicate my perception of the psychological effects that could result when a society constrains, by means of its politics, laws and expectations, that which ought to be a personal and private choice.

The societal expectation that a woman is biologically determined to produce and nurture offspring is obviously bound up in the same set of ideologies that concludes that the choice to abort is a denial of a woman's true identity. For this reason I believe the psychological and emotional responses in both cases to be closely related. This, coupled with a circumstance of limited examples of art dealing with abortion, has necessitated an investigation of artworks dealing with maternity as a whole, rather than with abortion, in order to position my own work. I would like to begin with a brief

¹⁴ Kathe Burkhart & Chrysanne Strathacos, *Abortion Project* (1991). Installation and text, dimensions variable. Collection unknown. (Illustration & data: Lieberman 1991:33.)

investigation of some of Kiki Smith's predominant themes, even though her art does not deal directly with the maternal role. Her art endeavours to deal with the way in which human beings experience their bodies and how they respond to other beings and things that surround them.

Kiki Smith, born in Nuremburg, Germany in 1954 and now resident in New York, has made art since the early 1980s which focuses on the body. Smith's work, by combining the two apparently diametrically opposed poles of art in the 20th century - figuration and abstraction - blurs customary boundaries of art. This she carries through to her choice of subject matter. Much of her early work displays what was then considered to be shocking views of the human body, especially the female body, focussing specifically on bodily phenomena that are usually suppressed. Bodily fluids - blood, bile, saliva and sperm - together with internal organs were used to create 'figures' which told about the vital energies of the inner body and also referred to the idea of human vulnerability. The defencelessness of the body, its wounds, scars and lacerations became her metaphors for the fragile nature of our consciousness (Ahrens 1998:12).

In a manner that is conceptually similar to Cruise's *Hysteria Suspended* (2001, fig 3), Smith's work also plays with the breakdown of the body's boundaries and sets up a delicate balance between 'inside' and 'outside'. Not unlike the dissections of the human body carried out by Renaissance artists, Smith explores the significance of the body as a complete system. She fragments it and makes models of its different parts in order to understand them better and to lead to an authentic perception of the whole. Smith says of her own work:

Our bodies have been broken apart bit by bit and need a lot of healing; our whole society is very fragmented. ... Everything is split, and presented as dichotomies - male/female, body/mind - and those splits need mending (Ahrens 1998:16).

In a further effort to remove bodily and culturally imposed boundaries, Smith presented an 'altar' of bodily fluids in pharmacological receptacles. She placed sweat, sperm, blood, mother's milk, saliva, urine, pus, lymph and tears next to each other in a way that afforded both life-giving fluids and waste products equal status, irrespective of the positive and negative connotations we attribute to them in daily life. Her intention was to draw attention to the extent to which scientific 'facts' obscure the central and holistic elements of human existence, and to prompt her viewer to recognise that each part of the human body has its own equal value ascribed to it (Ahrens 1998:34).

Rineke Dijkstra's photographic series *New Mothers* (1994) approaches the topic of childbirth in a way that relates to Smith's concerns for an unrestricted expression of the 'real' human body. Dijkstra, born in Amsterdam in 1959, takes photographs that capture moments of obvious transition and also deal with the blurring of the body's boundaries. In *Tecla, Amsterdam, Netherlands, May 16, 1994*¹⁵ (1994) a young mother is photographed naked, awkwardly holding a baby of only a few minutes old. A thin trickle of blood runs down the inside of her leg, possibly referring to the relative trauma of the birthing process. In *Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29, 1994* (1994, fig 8) we see another young mother holding her newborn. She wears a pair of hospital issue underpants through which a sanitary towel is clearly visible. Her expression is at once proud and a little imperious and she seems completely unperturbed that she is exhibiting her body in a way that accentuates bodily functions that are normally hidden from the public eye. Photographs in the *New Mothers* series are virtually life-size. This has the effect of presenting the subject on a one-to-one basis with the viewer thereby heightening the sense of involvement in all the real aspects of this birth. Instead of the more usually depicted unambiguous emotional state of elation, we are afforded a peek into the fascinating mixture of contradictory emotions and bodily vulnerability associated with new motherhood (Grosenick 2001:107).



Figure 8. Rineke Dijkstra, *Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29, 1994* (1994).

Terry Kurgan's *Maternal Exposures* (1998)¹⁶ is on a similar theme to Dijkstra's work. Kurgan's installation, including photographs and sound, depicts childbirth as it occurs

¹⁵ Rineke Dijkstra, *Tecla, Amsterdam, Netherlands, May 16, 1994* (1994). C-Print, 153x129cm. Collection unknown. (Illustration: Morgan 2001:91; data: Grosenick 2001:103.)

¹⁶ Terry Kurgan, *Maternal Exposures* (1998). Photographic installation with sound. Dimensions variable. Collection of the artist. (Illustration & data: Kurgan 1998:22.)

in ordinary life - neither blood, nor soiled sanitary towels, nor the postpartum distension of the abdomen are concealed. Her work is concerned with the pleasures, complexity, sexuality, power and ambivalence of childhood and maternal experience, but also with taboos and prohibitions associated with the representation of these experiences. In *Maternal Exposures* Kurgan explores the reality of procreation as opposed to the social myths and idealisation that permeate this topic in art. She states that it is her hope that the work will strip the experiences of pregnancy and birth of their 'baggage'; that it will place in the public realm aspects of these experiences which are not generally shown or celebrated (Kurgan 1998:23).

Mary Kelly, like Kurgan, is also both mother and artist. She produced an extensive installation entitled *Post-Partum Document* in the mid 1970s shortly after the birth of her son (figs 9 & 10). The ability to bear children and the emotional relationship that ensues had traditionally been held up as the reason for women's lack of artistic creativity, and hence the term 'mother as artist' was considered an oxymoron both within the patriarchy and within the feminist movements that sought to challenge it. Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* put an end to that fallacy: as an artist she forced into view the previously undesirable model of mother/artist, and as a feminist she focussed on the contradictory emotions that necessarily come with motherhood, a taboo subject for art in a male-dominated domain (Mulvey 1976:201).



Figure 9. Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document: Introduction* (1973).

A painting of a mother changing her baby's nappy could easily have been overlooked as kitsch¹⁷. On the other hand, dirty nappy-liners, framed, annotated and placed within a gallery environment forced a discourse that required intellectual work in order to unravel. In *Post-Partum Document* Kelly used the psycho-dynamics of the relationship between herself and her child as her raw material and created a conceptual work investigating the effect on the individual of a social order that enforces the role of maternal self-sacrifice upon women.

Kelly's work centres on the notion that 'femininity' should be understood not as a natural trait but as a complex human construct which the patriarchy manipulates in order to give 'masculinity' meaning and strength. According to Freud, the little girl enters society 'negatively' in that her lack of a penis is understood to give the phallus significance. The traditional hierarchy is however temporarily disrupted during the ante-partum and early post-partum period for a mother because during this time the mother's 'negative' place in the patriarchal order is temporarily elevated due to her irreplaceable role in the procreation of the species (Mulvey 1976:202).



Figure 10. Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document: Documentation V* (1977).

Kelly's work appears to demonstrate that she accepts the 'natural order' spoken of in the previous paragraph. Her work acknowledges her understanding that when she releases her young child into the world she will be obliged to return to her secondary place in the social hierarchy. This is the inevitable course of events in terms of the patriarchal order in which she lives. Her work as an artist presents her with another choice however: it

¹⁷ In fact when *Post-Partum Document* first went on show in 1976, there was no shortage of public scandal about 'dirty nappies' finding their way into the hallowed halls of the traditional art gallery (Kelly 1983: np)

provides her with the opportunity to rebel against the order. The fascination of *Post-Partum Document* is that the installation, in all its obsessive detail, fetishises¹⁸ the relationship between mother and child, but in this case the mother has reconciled her 'natural capacity' (motherhood) with her work as an artist and hence the art object as fetish replaces the mother/child relationship as potential fetish (Mulvey 1976:202). It could be said therefore that she manages to 'have it both ways': she lets the child go, but retains the trace of the mother/child relationship through the creation of the artwork.

Kelly evokes the impact that producing a child has on women whose unconscious desires are formed within the collective consciousness of a patriarchal society. One could take this line of thought further: not only is procreation and motherhood the expectation of the patriarchal order, but it is also presented as the 'consolation prize' in that, for a brief interval, the mother's 'negative' place in the patriarchal order is elevated.

I believe that a significant overlap exists between the theoretical concepts informing my own work and the work of Dijkstra, Kurgan and Kelly. We all deal with aspects of, and implications for, women producing children in a patriarchal society. Although it may seem contradictory that my focus is on a woman's choice to terminate her pregnancy, the constraints and condemnation that affect her are merely extrapolations of those imposed on women seen to be doing 'their duty for the species'.

¹⁸ 'Fetishisation' in this psychoanalytical context implies the substitution of the absent phallus with the new-born child (Mulvey 1976:202).

SITUATING SALT IN THE WOUND

Words may get entangled in semantics but an image speaks directly to the emotions.

López-Pedersa: 1996



South African artist and writer Marion Arnold believes in the importance of avoiding an 'either/or' or 'yes/no' approach to the interpretation of society and art. Arnold slates such diametrical oppositions as "bullying tactics that impose simplifications": a statement indicating her criticism for the western patriarchal tradition of rationalisation and domination (1997-98:2). It has been my intention that *Salt in the Wound* should provide the viewer with visual signs that provoke many and personal interpretations. In addition, I have attempted to avoid essentialising thought processes in preference of a more intuitive, all-embracing portrayal of the dilemma that is abortion.

Sculptural Context

I believe that my topic is best articulated within a contained, sculptural environment where the aspects of space, light, texture and perhaps even the smell of certain of the materials, most specifically the salt, can be put to use as sensitising agents. *Salt in the Wound* is characterised by a sense of collating and ordering in the work. The inclusion of mementos reflects the idea that mothers tend to collect personal effects of their growing children as keepsakes, but in my work, the mementos collected are metaphors for the loss of the unborn. Medical records and ultra-sound scans document the abortion procedure while lead dresses act as the permanent reminders of the absent child. My process of collating could therefore be understood to refer to an attempt to come to terms with the loss of a pregnancy, whilst the ordering of components of the work could be an attempt to restore order to a physical and emotional environment beset with confusion, ambiguity and ambivalence. The topic, although of significant political and social import, is intrinsically intimate and heavily laden with individualised notions of loss, shame, guilt and secretiveness.

The positioning and symmetry of the objects could be related to the concerns of Minimalist artists working in the 1960s. But an art that aspires to a state of radical abstraction, as Minimalist art does, does not speak directly to the world, but on the contrary, refuses to speak, so it is here that any similarity between *Salt in the Wound* and Minimalism ends. Many artists have rejected Minimalism on the grounds that it is

an art that refuses to signify and subsequent generations have made strenuous efforts to infuse the vocabulary of Minimalism with the most explicit subject matter, thereby forcing it to signify. The work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-), Mona Hatoum (1952-) and many others has transformed the art of the Minimalists of the sixties into modes of political address (Meyer 2001:185).

In Hatoum's deceptively simple installations, many of which employ an economy of line and form, defiance cannot easily be separated from vulnerability, order from chaos, beauty from revulsion, and the self from the other. I feel an affinity for *Light Sentence*

(1992, fig 11) especially with respect to my own piece entitled *Battery I (Hung Up)* (2004, plate 1). *Light Sentence* comprises standardised wire mesh lockers, ordered from a catalogue, running in two parallel rows down the centre of a large room. A single, naked bulb, with all its



Figure 11. Mona Hatoum, *Light Sentence* (1992).

associations of dinginess and deprivation, moves slowly up and down, throwing a liquid, rippling, cage-like tracery on the surrounding walls. The essence of the spectator's dilemma is confusion between the beneficent and malevolent aspects of the work. The structure is both abstract and associative enough to work instantly on several planes, reminiscent perhaps of bureaucratic filing cabinets, the cages of animal experiments, drab mass housing, the fences of internment camps, or the lockers of itinerant workers. These analogies are all of an oppressive variety, but Guy Brett (1997:68) argues that a sense of 'psycho-physical' expansion also exists in *Light Sentence*. When the light bulb moves downwards the shadow of the lockers shifts upwards and grows larger, and when the bulb touches the floor the shadow quivers and vibrates. The wire structures and their reflection affect the viewer both optically and

corporeally, often in contradiction to, and interacting with, their associative meanings, thereby forcing them to waver constantly between a sense of beauty and anxiety.

Eva Hesse (1936-1970) although artistically active during an earlier period of minimalist influence than Hatoum, also created sculptures that appeared to vacillate between literalness and illusion, order and chaos, chance and control. Unlike the hard-edged, prefabricated plinths, tiles, cubes and labyrinths of other minimalists, Hesse's objects maintain a spontaneous quality; their seductiveness hinging on their ability to arouse desire, to engender a selfhood rooted in sexuality. In other words, her sculptures elicit desire not by depicting sexual forms but by inserting themselves into the viewer's tactile and visual field as contradictory, demanding, abstract objects (Berger 1992:123).

Hesse, although considerably influenced by such 'minimalist purists' as Donald Judd and Carl Andre, began to create sculpture in the last few years before her death in 1970. In these works she hoped to engender a "strong, virtually visceral identification" with the viewer's body (Berger 1992:120). Lucy Lippard, referring to this aesthetic phenomenon as 'body ego', observed that the humour and



Figure 12. Eva Hesse, *Repetition Nineteen III* (1968).

eroticism in Hesse's art emerged not so much from the form itself but from the combination of shape and highly sensuous textures. In other words, from the way in which her forms swell or sag, lie or lean and the ways in which one can feel one's own body assuming those same positions or relating to those shapes as to another body (Berger 1992:120). Hesse's forms are neither a metaphor for the human body nor an abstract reduction from reality. She described her sculpture as nothing more than a 'dumb' or 'absurd' presence thrust directly into the spectator's sensory field. The viewer was free to relate to these forms on a number of levels, a relationship established

not by a passive contemplation of sacred aesthetic objects but by a complex process of perception and discovery. The issue of art as a vehicle through which the 'self' could be realised or understood was important to Hesse both in relation to the viewer and to herself; a private and liberatory search for the "self that ultimately extended to the solipsistic relationship between object and viewer as well" (Berger 1992:122). Hesse's hopes for her art might be understood as a refusal to give the artwork an illusionistic centre or interior. By denying her work a pre-ordained organic meaning, she was attempting to re-evaluate the logic of a particular source of meaning rather than denying meaning to the aesthetic object altogether. In other words, she hoped that meaning would arise from a public rather than a private space, from a distinct temporal relationship between the viewer and the sculptural object or installation (Berger 1992:122).

Although I cannot argue for a strong formal correlation between Hesse's work and my own, I nevertheless identify with her desire to affect the environment inhabited by the viewer, and the ability of her work to pose paradoxical questions. Like Hesse, I use materials that lend sensuous textures to my forms hoping to engage the viewer in a visual as well as tactile experience. It is my intention that the slightly over-crowded and oppressive aspects of *Salt in the Wound* should incline the viewer to interact not only with the physical space but also with the psychological space. In addition, it could be argued that parallels exist between Hesse's and my own transformatory attitudes towards our materials. She permitted heretofore repressive industrial materials such as wire, fibreglass, galvanised steel, plastic tubing, latex and plaster to suggest conditions of softness and fragility. I use sheets of lead as the fabric of children's garments, rendering the intrinsic coldness and hardness of the metal in such a way that it folds and falls in the manner of heavy velvet.

Material as metaphor

The principal materials in my body of work are lead, salt and iron and many of my art-making processes are of an alchemical nature in that I allow the effects of time, weather

and chance to transform and degrade the materials. Lead is not without its own historical significance: in medieval alchemy lead was symbolically understood to be a base metal with a potential for transformation to gold - where this transformation was a metaphor for the spiritual transcendence of man. Furthermore lead was associated both with the planet and the god Saturn, which in turn was mythically understood to govern the domain of melancholy¹⁹ (Arasse 2002: 233).

Anselm Kiefer says of his use of lead, straw and ashes that he is following in the footsteps of the alchemists: "I simply accelerate the transformation which is already inherent in things" (Arasse 2002:237). He goes on to assert that lead affects him more than any other metal because it has an 'aura' suggesting something hidden behind it. He has always seen lead as a material for ideas so that lead is found in Kiefer's work as both a medium and a metaphor for a whole range of processes and ideas: material, physical, mental and spiritual (ibid).

When lead and iron are exposed to salt they acquire an irregular texture and a range of evocative colours - greys, yellows, ochres and greens - which seem to change the appearance and nature of the elements from their original metallic qualities to something infinitely richer and softer, almost velvet-like. I find lead to be a powerfully evocative material. Its presence conveys and actualises the memory of past events and it juxtaposes these with its own material weight. Lead tends to preserve the transformations it has undergone - bends, tears and discolourations, and in so doing, marks the passage of time and events.



Figure13. Anselm Kiefer, *The Unborn* (2001).

¹⁹ Melancholia and artistic endeavour are often conflated and artists are therefore often referred to as 'the children of Saturn' (Arasse 2002:233).

These qualities of lead are especially evident in Kiefer's monumental *Zweistromland – The High Priestess* (1985-89, fig 14), an installation comprising a library of nearly two hundred lead volumes. The use of lead changed the nature and the function of the 'book' in Kiefer's art. They are still books with pages that can be turned, and they can still be 'read', but their weight makes it impossible for them to be moved about, whilst their presentation on steel shelving offers them not so much for reading as for contemplation. *Zweistromland – The High Priestess* renders visible the idea of what a book symbolises rather than what it literally narrates.



Figure 14. Anselm Kiefer, *Zweistromland – The High Priestess* (1985-89).

Kiefer uses the metaphor of the book together with the indestructibility of lead in order to communicate the idea of a subject that is usually carefully stored in a kind of 'collective forgetfulness'. The psychological message of *Zweistromland – The High Priestess* appears to be the artist's need to construct an everlasting memory of the horror and infamy of humankind, where we do not learn from our experience, but "merely automatically repeat the same stupid behaviour" (López-Pedraza 1996:77). The work memorises that which by its nature cannot be memorised.

López-Pedraza, comparing Kiefer's lead books to his earlier paper books, writes: "The paper he used is pulpy and low-quality, providing the book with a sense of its own mortality. The binding is poor and the paper is thin and fragile so that each person who handles it hastens its end, just as when one touches a delicate flower" (1996:31). The comparison between lead and paper books is reminiscent of the disparity that exists between the lead and cotton dresses of *Salt in the Wound*. The cotton dresses have clearly been worn and washed many times and are now aged, fragile and delicate, these can be contrasted with the lead dresses, which although torn and fragmented, have an incontrovertible durability.

The juxtaposition of the fragility, unpredictability and ephemerality of salt with the material weight of lead and its inability to be corroded is also a fundamental element in my work. I have chosen to use salt both for its immense capacity for metaphoric implication and for its transformative effects on most materials other than lead.

Salt has played an integral role in the civilising process of the human race at least since 6000 BC²⁰. It was essential for the preservation of foodstuffs and was used extensively in early remedies. Salt is an essential part of the human metabolism, it regulates fluid balance and is necessary for movement, nerve impulses, digestion and the healing of wounds. Since 1949 many governments mandated the addition of iodine to salt, a deficiency of which is known to cause a number of disorders such as preventable mental retardation, brain damage and goitre. Iodised salt also reduces child mortality, promotes growth, and reduces the risk of miscarriage.

Salt should have been accessible to all who needed it, but ironically, it was its many beneficial properties and easy availability that made salt such an attractive target for exploitation. The Chinese government started using salt as a source of state revenue as early as the 20th century BC in order to finance the expansion of the Chinese Empire (Kurlanski 2002:5). And Roy Moxham describes in *The great Hedge of India* (2001) how salt played an integral part in the colonisation of India by the British, and how the salt trade and salt taxes were responsible, in significant part, for enriching Britain and impoverishing India. In addition, Mahatma Gandhi's *Satyagraha* campaign - the organised march to Dandi in 1930 in order to protest the salt laws - will always be a reminder of the role of salt in Gandhi's non-violent reprisal against the social injustice of the colonial process (2001:1).

Consequently, the connotations of salt can never be neutral, and it becomes a potent metaphor for the equivocality of abortion: even as salt heals, it stings in the open wound, and even as it preserves, so too does it corrode and destroy.

²⁰ Chinese historians are certain that by 6000 BC, each year when the waters of Lake Yuncheng evaporated in the summer months, people harvested the square crystals on the surface of the water; a system the Chinese referred to as 'dragging and gathering' (Kurlanski 2002:1).

Creative method and the production of meaning

Hanri De La Harpe talks about the notion of a balanced state where dualities and binary opposites are transcended in what could be viewed as an unconscious desire to find a visual metaphor for an idealised world “free from the unbalanced yoke of gender domination, human exploitation of the earth and the chaotic disorder that marks the twentieth century” (2000:21).

Salt in the Wound is intended to reveal a series of equally weighted compositions and component parts, in addition to this intentional balance there is a conscious tendency towards repetition of forms; perhaps even a certain obsessiveness. A grid formation has been used to arrange the rows of cages in *Battery I (Hung up)* (plate 1) where nine cages are wall-mounted in a square. *Battery II (Laid)* (plate 2) comprises another nine cages arranged on the floor, three columns adjacent to one another, and each column three cages high. The grid formation could be viewed as an attempt to categorise and compartmentalise conflicting aspects of my thoughts and work: perhaps a way of ordering turmoil, uncertainty and ambiguity. The hanging rows and standing columns of cages convey a claustrophobic feeling, accentuated by the cerebral associations of the battery cages themselves. The size of the cages - forty-five cubic centimetres - equates to the average size of real battery cages. (Six hens to a cage, and the battery farms are immense, row upon row of sheds on vast stretches of land.)²¹

An awareness of structures capable of enclosing and holding objects prevails in the body of work. It is my intention that *Battery I* and *II* should refer manifestly to incarceration and external control but the salt blocks comprising *Blocked In* (plate 3) are

²¹ From a distance one gets an eerie sense of the overwhelming number of birds living and laying day after day in the rows of cages in long windowless sheds. Chicks are raised in darkened sheds to keep them quiet since they are less likely to attack one another in a darkened environment, but once they reach egg-laying maturity, the lighting in the battery shed is controlled in order to artificially manipulate the hens to become reproductive. The lights are kept on for a half-hour longer each week until they are on for sixteen hours per day, in addition, plentiful food is made available. Such conditions simulate full summer and the hens start laying. Hens will lay one egg per day for seven to ten days consecutively. They will then rest for a few days before the laying cycle starts again, this pattern will continue for a whole year in this controlled environment.

both visually and associatively more opaque. Embedded leather straps or steel bands and chains protrude from some of the blocks, whilst others are carved out to reveal confined spaces. The carved and cast salt blocks are reminiscent of alabaster or unpolished marble, and as such could allude to vessels. Baring (1991:58) writes that in the Neolithic era the breaking of the waters of the womb that heralds the birth of a child was symbolised by rain and the welling up of springs, and that the vase or vessel became the image of the womb of the Mother Goddess from which the life-giving waters flowed. The actual vessel holding water or milk therefore became a paramount image of the Goddess herself.

In contemporary terms however the image of the womb as vessel has lost its mythical charm. Advances in medical technology such as ultrasound scanning and laparoscopy have lent to the foetus a newfound autonomy with the result that concepts such as 'foetal rights' and 'foetal subjectivity versus maternal subjectivity' have entered the debate. Such factors tend to reinforce a 'vessel-like' perception of the pregnant woman as the carrier of precious foetal cargo. The perception is becoming so entrenched in fact that in medical journals doctors are describing pregnant women as 'the maternal environment'²² - more or less passive participants in their own pregnancies (Hadley 1996: 65).

But while *Blocked In* could be read as a number of vessels, the surfaces of the pieces are scored, cracked and crumbly, relating on some level to the notion of the breaking down of form and boundaries. As previously mentioned, a correlation exists between my treatment of *Blocked In* and Cruise's *Hysteria Suspended* (2001, fig 3) in that the surfaces of her clay torsos are irregular, slashed and broken-down, seeming to defy the imposition of a system of order and containment on the body. "The figures [Cruise] depicts are in a condition of rebellion, and they work to challenge not merely norms concerning proper bodily management, but the social structures and belief systems that underpin those norms" (Schmahmann 2002:7). At this point I would like to reiterate the

²² Hadley (1996:65) writes that in the United States an increasing number of cases of 'prenatal neglect' are being reported where the pregnant mother has smoked, consumed alcohol, or taken drugs during pregnancy. These cases allude to a societal mindset of the pregnant woman as mere temporary custodian. Although a certain degree of responsibility on the part of the pregnant mother can and ought to be expected, such a notion tends to demote the subjectivity of the mother below that of her unborn child.

possibility, also suggested earlier, that the act of aborting a foetus approaches a Kristevian definition of the 'subversive': that which disrespects the boundaries of both body and society, that which is in-between, ambiguous and taboo.

This theme extends to the stitched lead and lace garments comprising part of *Salt in the Wound*. Some are presented as complete dresses, some are torn fragments, and some exist as no more than imprints in the cast salt of the baking trays. All are intended to represent traces of the absent child, but implicit references are equally important: the stitched 'fabric' (lead) might evoke the impression of a surgical procedure that invades the interior of the body, but stitching can also conceal, or it could repair.

At first glance the dresses appear complete, or at least as comprehensive fragments of the whole, but a closer inspection reveals unfinished and unravelled stitching, tears and frayed edges. The garments can be perceived to be standing in for the skin: they cover and protect, they are vulnerable to incision and repair, and they provide a metaphoric boundary to the body. The 'wounds' to this metaphorical skin again create the impression that the body's borders have been violated. Norms of society, symbolised by the body, are rendered precarious and painfully vulnerable.

The dresses have another reference: mothers often collect mementos of their growing children such as clothes, shoes, photographs and locks of hair. According to Freudian psychoanalysis, a mother performs this act of 'fetishisation' in order to delay or disavow the separation between herself and her child, which she knows to be inevitable when the child reaches maturity (Kelly 1983:xx). As previously mentioned, the imperative to come to terms with and ward off my own loss underlies the inclusion of medical records, ultra-sound scans and child's garments in my body of work.

Hatoum's work *Recollection* (1995, fig 15) touches on a similar theme. Her installation comprises numerous hand-rolled balls of her own hair strewn across the floor of the gallery, together with strands of hair hanging from the ceiling, and a table on top of which is a small loom where a cloud of wild and unruly hair has been drawn into the extreme, ordered construct of the woven fabric. Like Victorian mourning jewellery containing a lock of hair, *Recollection* refers to the lasting sense of separation from a loved one and reminds the viewer of the integral role of personal relics in sustaining memory. By making isolated parts of her own body - her hair - the object of

displacement, Hatoum substitutes the missing subject with 'mnemonic traces' in a process that has been referred to as fetishisation (Archer, Brett & de Zegher 1997:96).

Referential meaning in *For Her* (plate 4) - an intricately stitched lead christening dress draped over the back of a wooden chair/commode - extends beyond the mere collection of mementos or traces. The selection of beautiful, rich lace together with delicate stitching, marks this garment as a ceremonial object. The christening of a child symbolises the recognition of that child as a 'named individual'. But the ceremony



Figure 15. Mona Hatoum, *Recollection* (1995).

alluded to in this work is subverted both by the chair that has become 'commode' and the disconcerting stains and tears in the dress. All seem to hint at unfinished and violent events. This theme is repeated in *Stretched* (plate 5), a wooden bed frame covered with lead sheeting into which a shallow basin has been inserted. Again there is a sense of sinister and shameful procedures, perhaps reminiscent of those referred to in Kienholz' *The Illegal Operation* (1962, fig 7).

The crafts of sewing and stitching tend to be relegated to the feminine domain, and point to restoration and healing. Louise Bourgeois used the symbol of the needle in some of her more recent work. *Needle (Fuseau)*²³, (1992) is part of a series of sculptures created to commemorate "the healing power of this instrument". Bourgeois explains her position as follows: "When I was growing up, all the women in my house used needles. I've always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The

²³ Louise Bourgeois, *Needle (Fuseau)* (1992). Steel, flax, mirror and wood, 276.8x256.5x142.2cm. Collection of the artist; courtesy Galerie Karsten Greve, Paris. (Illustration & data: Ekman 1994:25.)

needle is used to repair the damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it's not a pin" (Kotik 1994:25).

The act of stitching in my work is related, in part, to a desire to repair and heal but where plain stitching would have sufficed as metaphor, I have chosen a meticulous and labour-intensive style. I believe that this may convey an urge to create a beautiful object in order to memorialise a loss. Hand stitched dresses express a sense of the 'labour of love' that mothers so often perform for their children.

Salt in the Wound attempts to simultaneously evoke a sense of women's struggle against a socio-political impact on female reproductive choices, and yet it is equally about mourning the loss of a child.

Six metal trays containing cast salt extend many of the themes mentioned above. *Drip Trays I - VI* (plate 6) are mounted horizontally against the wall in a manner that allows them to evoke the 'drip-trays' used in ovens. This reference is emphasised not only by the fact that the trays come originally from a commercial baking stand, but also through the discolouration in the salt and the faint traces of old baking grease still clinging to the trays.

Drip-tray: Vest (plate 10) contains the vest of a newborn placed on a wooden hanger, embedded in the discoloured salt. Through the processes of oxidation and corrosion the metal tray has stained the salt to a colour reminiscent of iodine stains on a used bandage. The vest seems at first glance to be made of normal cotton fabric but then reveals itself to be sewn from many squares of surgical gauze - it acts not only as a garment but as a bandage - a wrapping for a tiny chest. The folds of cloth embedded in the salt of the work *Drip-tray: Coat-hanger* (plate 11) are also sewn from surgical gauze.

Both works make use of medical iconography and could be seen to further elucidate the themes of healing and repair. Furthermore, medical iconography in *Salt in the Wound* is intended to refer to the role that the medical sciences, especially medical illustration, have played in the social construction of the body. Fritha Langerman (1995:12) points out that feminist theory has drawn a parallel between medicine and the nature/culture paradigm where the medical sciences have sought to impose order and control on the natural body. Nead confirms this, writing that the coupling of art and medicine was no

accident since both were seen as repressive mechanisms that worked to regulate and contain women's power and rights to self-definition (1992:64). And Kiki Smith, who herself formerly trained as an emergency medical technician, writes of the importance of reclaiming one's personal identity from a social construction of the public and private body, in which medical illustration plays a significant role (Schleifer 1991:86).

I have used an indelible pencil to draw or write onto the salt in some of the drip-trays, as in *Drip-tray: Caged* (plate 8) and *Drip-tray: Traced* (plate 9). The resulting discolouration of the salt is reminiscent of contusions and bruising. I have also used small amounts of iodine and Friars balsam in many of these trays. These substances both stain the salt to a tone that can be associated with medical waste, and permeate the work with the faintly sulphurous smell of a hospital²⁴.

Abortion and the medical sciences are obviously related, not least by the observation that the regulation of abortion is often implicitly enforced by the denial or inaccessibility of medical services to the pregnant woman. It is my experience that, even when abortion is legally acceptable and available, an almost palpable mood of condemnation seems to hang over every stage of the procedure. Certain aspects of my installation make reference to a hypothetical medical 'case study'. One of the cages of *Battery II (Laid)* contains clean and neatly folded cloths, and surgical drapes are piled on the top shelf of *Fountain* (plate 14), both convey the idea of impersonal statistical records of the many cases of abortion dealt with day after day. The presence of the woven lead washing basket in *For Her* augments this thought, perhaps referring to the soiled linen remaining after the procedure. The frequency of the event is acknowledged by the amount of linen, both clean and soiled, and all this linen contrasts with the stitched lead and cotton dresses because it is so impersonal. It speaks of the social impact of abortion - of anonymity, guilt and shame.

Rack (plate 13) is a steel frame with trays that can be pulled out to reveal hand-embroidered tunics, dresses and booties for a newborn baby preserved under sheets of glass. These items, unlike the surgical drapes, are personal, and seem to hark back to the

²⁴ It is interesting to note that the medieval alchemical imagination considered hell to be evoked through the smell of sulphur.

function that the stitched lead dresses play as mementos, fetishising the lost child. The garments preserved under glass in *Rack* seem also to refer to display cases evoking the notion of relics on show. They preserve a memory and become an epitaph to loss. *Rack*, by virtue of its 'found object' status also explicitly alludes to the action of pushing something into a large, commercial oven, perhaps an oblique reference to hospital furnaces and the disposal of human waste.

Fountain (plate 14) comprises a wire locker divided into three sections horizontally. The top section contains neatly folded surgical garb and a lead bowl containing brine. The middle section acts as a hanging space for baby garments on wire hooks, and the bottom section contains a larger lead bowl collecting brine dripping from the top bowl. The brine that has slowly dripped onto the lead dress over the past months has completely encrusted the lace and stitching, and has deposited salt crystals where it has collected.

Certain aspects of *Fountain*, most noticeably the lead bowls and the reference to medical procedures suggested by the surgical garb, are again reminiscent of Ed Kienholz' *The Illegal Operation*, but where Kienholz' work functions as a socio-political comment on the horror of illegal back-street abortion, I perceive *Fountain* to be more multifaceted – perhaps even a kind of synopsis for *Salt in the Wound*. Pattis-Zoja (1997:7) writes that symbols hold a great deal more than single, specific meanings and that they can stand simultaneously in the service of positions that oppose and contrast with one another. The deposition of salt on the lead dress seems to symbolise an everlasting memory of a tragic event in a way that cannot be precisely defined.

Conclusion

Kiki Smith speaks of her artistic need to bridge the gap between the inside and the outside of the body and “about the uncontainable nature of the body. It won’t obey. ... A lot of times I make things that are spilling off, or falling down” (Schliefer 1991:86). *Salt in the Wound* encompasses many of Smith’s concerns: lead dresses and salt blocks, by virtue of their un-wholeness, may be seen to defy the notion of the body as contained and under control, and by way of the body/society metaphor, suggest the folly of attempting to regulate personal identity through the imposition of social or political control. The cages of *Battery I & II* are extensions of this critique. *For Her* and *Stretched* are ordinary objects that have been transformed in a way that subverts their everyday function, thereby suggesting a disjunction of the normal sequence of events. This theme can be seen to continue in *Rack*, although a stronger referential meaning for *Rack* would be the collection of mementos in order to memorialise a loss.

Our western history of dichotomies: nature/culture, woman/man and body/mind have been used to justify many forms of oppression. In addition they have erased the ambiguities of human existence because these have been perceived to pose threats to both individual and societal structure. I have used a number of symbols in my body of work in my attempt to encompass the ambivalent points of view that live within us. *Salt in the Wound* is about complexity and paradox. It critiques mechanisms of societal control, it is also about women’s ongoing struggles to discover new and equitable identities for themselves: to be acknowledged in terms of all their creative attributes rather than just those relating to procreation. Paradoxically, it is also about the inevitable sense of loss when the passage to motherhood is terminated.

I have tried through *Salt in the Wound* to subvert our western imperative for order and our patriarchal tradition of rationalisation and domination. My work is an attempt to reflect the ambiguity and the equivocal nature of the deeply personal female dilemma of abortion.

Perhaps it is the interminable dripping of the brine onto the lead dress and then into the lead bowl below that signifies the essence of *Fountain*, or maybe even the essence of

Salt in the Wound. The seepage and the deposition of salt on the lead surfaces marks the passage of time - alluding both to the decisions made by countless women to abort their unborn children, and also to my own personal process of recovery.



CATALOGUE

A documentation of *Salt in the Wound* including installation views and selected details

Plate 1

Battery I (Hung up)

2003

Nine wire cages containing lead objects or fragments

Dimensions: 195 x 195 x 45cm



Detail of *Battery I (Hung Up)*

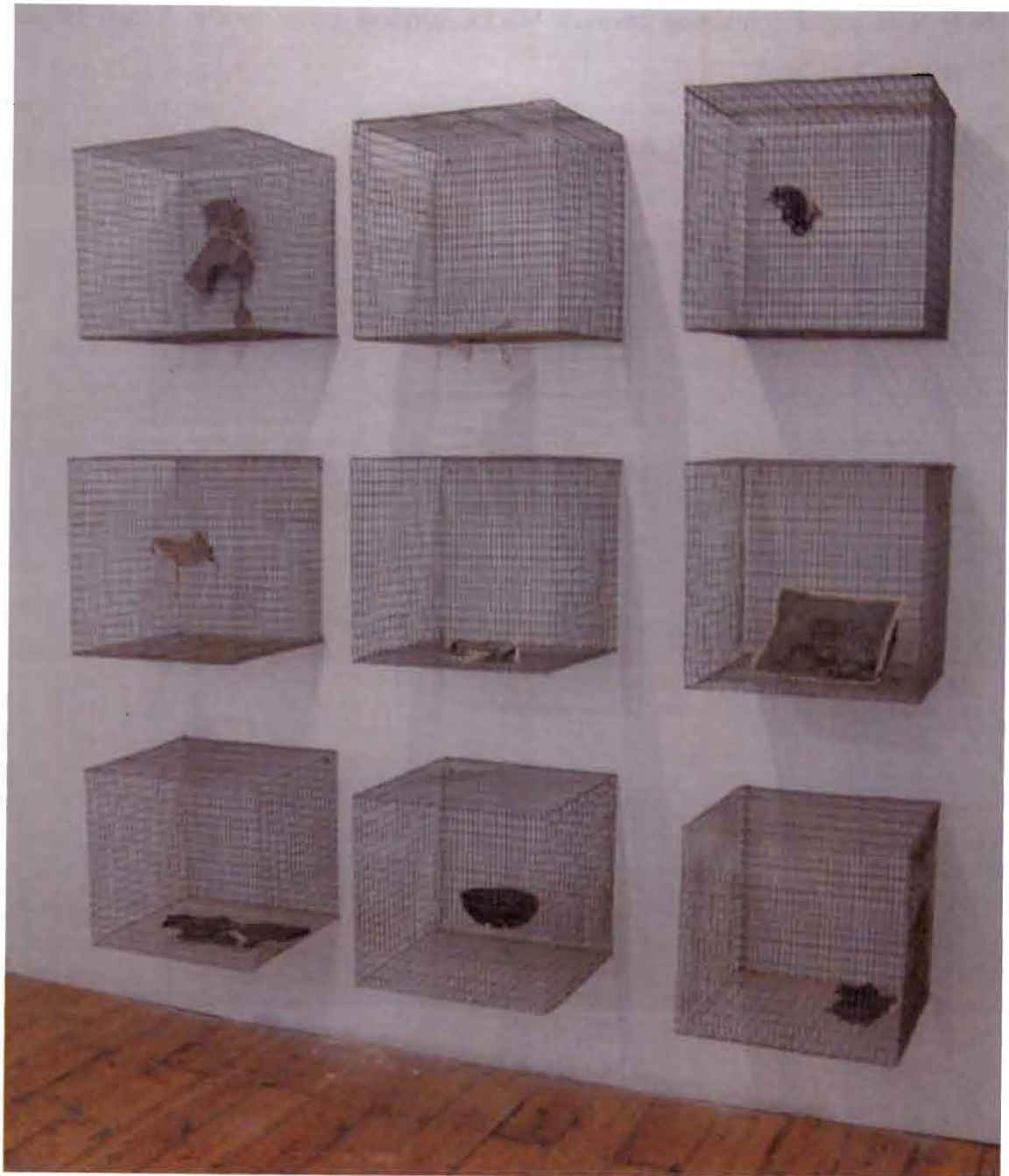


Plate 2

Battery II (Laid)

2003

Nine wire cages containing cast-salt blocks, surgical gauze swabs, folded surgical towels and lead bowl

Dimensions: 140 x 141 x 45cm



Detail of *Battery II (Laid)*



Plate 3

Blocked In

2003

Cast-salt blocks, embedded leather straps, steel bar, steel chain, lead, wire mesh

Dimensions variable



Detail of *Blocked In*

Plate 4

For Her

2003

Lead and lace dress, lead bowl, lead washing basket, found wooden chair

Dimensions variable



Detail of *For Her*



Plate 5

Stretched

2003

Wooden bed frame and lead sheeting

Dimensions: 40 x 184 x 90cm



Detail of *Stretched*



Plate 6

Drip Trays I – VI

2003

Found object - steel baking trays, cast salt, surgical gauze, lead fragments, pigment

Dimensions variable



Plate 7

Drip Tray – Shed

2003

Steel tray containing cast salt mounted to the wall at a height of 75cm on steel brackets,
indelible pencil, pigment

Dimensions: 78 x 57.5cm



Plate 8

Drip Tray – Caged

2003

Steel tray containing cast salt mounted to the wall at a height of 75cm on steel brackets,
leather straps, pigment

Dimensions: 78 x 57.5cm



Plate 9

Drip Tray - Traced

2003

Steel tray containing cast salt mounted to the wall at a height of 75cm on steel brackets,
pigment

Dimensions: 78 x 57.5cm

IT WAS AN UNEXPECTED AND
UNWANTED CROSSING OF BOUNDARIES
THE PROCEDURE EXTENDED
BEYOND THE PRIVATE — A PLACE
ONLY KNOWN BY LOVERS,
PHYSICIANS AND HER OWN HAND.
SHE DID NOT WANT TO BE AWAKE
SHE WANTED TO CLOSE HER
EYES, HAVE IT DONE WAKE UP
AND HAVE IT OVER WITH

Plate 10

Drip Tray – Vest

2003

Steel tray containing cast salt mounted to the wall at a height of 75cm on steel brackets,
vest sewn from surgical gauze on wooden coat hanger

Dimensions: 78 x 57.5cm



Plate 11

Drip Tray - Coat Hanger

2003

Steel tray containing cast salt mounted to the wall at a height of 75cm on steel brackets,
dress fragment sewn from surgical gauze, distorted steel coat hanger

Dimensions: 78 x 57.5cm



Plate 12

Drip Tray – Fragmented

2003

Steel tray containing cast salt mounted to the wall at a height of 75cm on steel brackets, fragment of a dress sewn from lead and lace embedded in the cast salt

Dimensions: 78 x 57.5cm



Plate 13

Rack

2003

Found object - steel baking stand, found baby dresses, coarse salt

Dimensions: 148 x 79.5 x 64.5cm



Detail of *Rack*



Plate 14

Fountain

2003

A found wire locker, stitched lead dresses, lead bowls, found dresses, surgical garb

Dimensions: 175 x 97 x 47cm



Detail of *Fountain*



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