

[mute articulations

representing the body when the self isn't what it used to be

Adala Michelle Prévost Verwey

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fig. 2

Signed by candidate

University of Cape Town

It is a

form of

hiding

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fig. 4
Michelle Verwey
Wayfinder (detail)
2005

the exercising
of the choice

to remain silent

is a wilful act
of retention or
withholding

One of the key elements of self-portraiture,

as traditionally understood, is its claim to a particular authenticity. This claim provides an opportunity to question hegemonic discourses which structure our understanding of the body, gender and broader identity, discourses which have also functioned to constitute the parameters of portraiture historically. Seemingly necessary links between the self and the body and between the body and determinate signification have become frayed. When we cease to believe in the self-transparent self, it becomes difficult to regard the body represented in art as the stable visual manifestation or embodiment of it, or as an independent domain of intrinsic value, truth or authenticity. My work, which can be broadly situated within the field of self-portraiture, uses various strategies to question, ironise and to some extent undermine the genre's supposedly constitutive claim to be a space for the revelation of the self.

The topic of my research is an exploration of the concept of the 'mute' body. The mute body is the body which stages a certain indeterminacy and distance from the viewer. It is a form of hiding, but also a form of play with narcissistic implications and perhaps even seductive intent. The mute body is a response to the fear of power and what power has done to bodies in history. Conversely, it is also the location of power – the exercising of the choice to remain silent is a *wilful* act of retention or withholding. The mute body is not the vacant body. It is the body of which we are unable to say with certainty whether it is *unable* to signify or *unwilling* to signify. The staging of the mute body is the staging of the body that polices its own barriers, that remains inscrutable in order to remain inviolate. The mute body is arguably the fulfilment of the breakdown or extreme problematisation of the body's signifiatory function. The mute body yields questions but provides no answers; it reflects but does not assert. Meaning, when conveyed at all, may be conveyed ambiguously or erroneously, and we are left undecided as to whether the body has spoken or we have merely been confronted with our own desires as viewers.



“The human body **is a methodological** field, one that has to be revisited, revised, memorialised for the new millennium”
(Kauffman 1998:37).

Self-portraiture is a representation of selfhood characterised by the confluence of sitter and artist in one person. It has always been tempting to regard the genre as a unique means of self-exploration and self-revelation. My work, which can be broadly situated within the field of self-portraiture, uses various strategies to question, ironise and to some extent undermine its supposedly constitutive claim to be a space for the revelation of the self. Underlying my work is an implicit series of questions: What happens to self-representation when the self is increasingly perceived as a construct which shifts with history? How do we represent the body when the body has been battered by history, disavowed from the self, and transformed through surgical and technological mediation? How do we regard the relationship between self and body when neither is what it once was?

Within this broad series of questions, the topic of my research is the exploration of the concept of the ‘mute’ body. Muteness is not equivalent to silence: the mute body is the body which is unable or unwilling to yield its meaning, which stages a certain indeterminacy and distance from the viewer. It is a form of hiding, perhaps even a form of fear, but also a form of play with narcissistic implications and perhaps even seductive intent.

This dissertation sets out to identify and articulate the theme of the mute body as an explication of my practical work. In chapter one, I provide an overview of the fields of portraiture and self-portraiture, locating my interests in terms of some of the more significant trends in the representation of the body. I look at contemporary artists working within this genre, explore the way they use their own bodies in their art, and introduce the concept of the mute body. Chapter two elucidates the formal properties of my work and how they contribute to my thematic concerns; a discussion on new media situates my practical work within the medium of its origin and processes. Chapter three provides an examination of the theoretical context which informs my work and develops the underlying concepts.

(Illustration on previous page)

fig. 5
Michelle Verwey
Paper II (detail) (from *Rock, Paper, Scissors*)
2005

(Illustration on next page)

fig. 6
Michelle Verwey
Wish You Well (detail)
2005



fig. 6

positioning the portrait

trends in the representation
of the body and the
self]

Most broadly, though not unproblematically, my work is situated within the field of self-portraiture. It therefore seems useful to ask, at the start of this chapter, what the constitutive aims and unique characteristics of this genre can be said to be, bearing in mind that we should remain suspicious of any ahistorical sense of the meaning and purpose of self-portraiture. What is equally worth mentioning at the outset is that a confusing array of intersections and divergences exist between 'self-portraiture' and 'body art': indeed, these terms point quite clearly towards a contested terrain where gender, representation and identity intersect and are constructed and re-constructed. In my brief overview of portraiture and self-portraiture I shall, however, be less interested in presenting an objectively and historically accurate account, than in articulating those historical and conceptual aspects of the genre which bear most closely on my own interests.

an introduction to portraiture

“All portraits involve a series of **negotiations”**
(West 2004:21).

Shearer West, in her work on portraiture, argues that all portraits are marked by a ‘body’ and ‘soul’ duality inasmuch as, to differing degrees, “all portraits represent something about the body and face, on the one hand, and the soul, character or virtues of the sitter, on the other” (West 2004:21). The portrait is situated at the shifting juncture of internal and external discourses. Not surprisingly, therefore, different historical periods have tended to come to the portrait with different expectations about its purpose and meaning, as well as differing senses of the relative importance of the internal and external dimensions to understanding the work’s meaning.

The cult of personality and genius associated with nineteenth century Romanticism, for example, generated an increased interest in portraits as unified and carefully arranged collections of signs pointing to a rich inner being, hidden from the visual artist’s means of direct representation. Popular subjects for portraiture were writers, philosophers, artists and politicians, chosen for their status and reputation for intellect. The notion of genius was often associated with the imperfect body, where the mental faculties of the subject overshadowed his or



fig. 7
Michele Gordigiani
Elizabeth Barrett Browning
1858

her physical state. This is evidenced in the portrait of Elizabeth Barrett Browning by Italian portrait painter Michele Gordigiani (*fig. 7*), where, in the last years of her life, Barrett’s prolonged nervous disorder and opium addiction are apparent in the lines of her tired face. The identification of portraiture with biography can also be regarded as a consequence of the increased interest in the individual, albeit

especially the *exceptional* individual in the case of Romanticism. Within this trend, there has generally been an optimism regarding the ability of portraiture to convey accurate and understandable information regarding the salient aspects of an individual.

Portraiture has, in other periods, and in the hands of other practitioners, tended to situate the sitter in a signficatory environment saturated with external, that is to say social, clues to the sitter's identity, such as dress, gesture and location. Indeed, much of the early history of the genre consisted of sitters virtually marginalized by the array of contextual clues their painters surrounded them with. These sitters seem socialized to the core: knowing and understanding the objects that surround them, in other words knowing the external, entails, it is implied, knowing what there is to know about *them*. The portrait of English aristocrat George Gordon (fig. 8), by Italian eighteenth-century artist Pompeo Batoni, typical of the style of portraiture by the artist, displays Gordon against a backdrop of Classical antiquity, suggestive of greatness. The hunting dog at his feet points to the subject's social status, "[a]s only landed men of a certain income could hunt or participate in the Grand Tour, [Gordon]'s 'front' is represented as that of a high-born gentleman" (West 2004:31).

Though it ultimately risks being an over-simplification, it is tempting to provide a quasi-taxonomy of the history of portraiture according to the primacy of either individualist (internal) considerations or social (external) ones in the conception as well as interpretation of works. As I discuss later, however,

such an account would also have to address the insertion of highly ironic and self-reflexive modes in postmodern portraiture and self-portraiture.

fig. 8
Pompeo Batoni
George Gordon, Lord Haddo
1775



the

long

procession

of mute women

that history has

left

in its wake

the gendered portrait

“**[T]**he image is exclusively masculine.

Nothing comes from the other side, the other camp, no information allowing us to reconstruct a sort of self-portrait of the women of former times, the vision which they had of themselves” (Duby in Duby & Perrot 1992:18).

Before a discussion of the depiction of the mute female body can take place, it is necessary to look back at the long procession of mute women that history has left in its wake. Female self-portraiture has had a tentative history: within the traditionally male Western¹ art world, women artists have long been relegated to the sidelines in the representation of themselves; the plentiful array of portraits of women from different periods are, largely, authored by men. The silenced woman is a motif that can clearly be traced along the timelines of art history. In visual art, the portrayal of women has often been formulated to illustrate a particular quality of the greatness of men. They shoulder responsibility for the adversities of humankind, remind their viewer

about their role in society and provide pleasure to their male onlookers.

The first woman in this line of unfortunates is Eve, who is regarded as the “original cause of all evil, whose disgrace has come down to all other women” (St. Bernard in Broude & Garrard 1982:80). Medieval representations show her embracing the Devil in serpent form (fig. 9), alongside comparable depictions of women flirting with their lover, the Devil, and listening attentively to his counsel (fig. 10). She is a popular figure in the art of a time when sin was a dominant theme, as she is regarded as its originator. The portrayal of Eve enacts the preordained weakness of all women, accordingly supplanting her identity and voice with the mark of her crime. By contrast the Madonna connotes innocence and



fig. 9
Eve showing her Fondness
for Serpent
Reims Cathedral
13th century



fig. 10
Potiphar's wife listening to the Devil's advice
Chartres Cathedral, North Portal
13th century

¹ Though the term “Western” is problematic in a number of significant respects, I employ it with the understanding that it denotes a broad, shifting and always contested cluster of texts, institutions, attitudes and values which nevertheless exhibit certain commonalities, much in the way that Wittgenstein wrote of a “concept with blurred edges” as one characterised by “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail” (Wittgenstein 1958:66,71).

chastity; pointedly depicted with eyes downcast and a diminutive mouth, she is a prevalent subject in Renaissance art (fig. 11). Within Catholicism, the Virgin Mary is identified as the sanctioned sympathetic ear to which the distressed believer can appeal for assistance. According to this doctrine, she does not respond personally, but faithfully relays the message to her son, who handles the matter. Mary represents the virtuously silent woman who recognizes her station and dutifully complies.

The theme of the virgin is returned to yet again by the Pre-Raphaelites, where she functions as a counterpoint to the femme-fatale, or temptress. Founding member John Everett Millais' faithful reproduction of Shakespeare's Ophelia (fig. 12)



fig. 11
Raphael
Madonna with the Goldfinch
1506



fig. 12
John Everett Millais
Ophelia
1852

remains an archetypal representation of Romantic beauty and innocence. Virginal Ophelia, who in her madness and sorrow drowns, is depicted by Millais, suspended in emerald waters, where her ethereal beauty is accentuated by her eternal stillness. On the other hand, the 'fallen woman' in the pose of prostitute and barmaid is typically illustrated as loud-mouthed and vulgar. She is, however, not excepted from the possibility of redemption, a favourite subject of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who captures her in the posture of repentance, kneeling at the feet of a virtuous man, silenced by her shame (fig. 13). This imparts little about the unique circumstances of this woman but, needless to say, speaks volumes about her merciful redeemer.

fig. 13

Dante Gabriel Rossetti
Found
1854



The female nude, ornamenting the timeline of art history with her loveliness, was depicted in abundance by the Fauves, Expressionists and Romantic artists of the nineteenth century (fig. 14). At worst, she is a vacant shell to be occupied by the passions of her male eyewitness; at best, she is rendered speechless by the enthusiasm of the male artist in his exaltation of her beauty and fecundity.

In brief, the woman in the portraits of the past spoke either about her male counterpart or did not speak at all; her passivity allowed her male viewer to edit her speech in order to privilege his own message. Throughout this shadowy gallery of female representations, the most audible voice that can be heard is that of her silence.



fig. 14
Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres
Interior of a Harem with an Odalisque (detail)
1842

the most
audible voice
that can be
heard is that of
her silence

self-portraiture

“Every artist has to
invent his
own myth,

and it seems inevitable that he or she should feature prominently as a personage within it” (Lucie-Smith in Kelly & Lucie-Smith 1987:24).



fig. 15
Albrecht Dürer
Self-Portrait
1500

What distinguishes the *self-portrait* from the *portrait* is the fact that the dual functions of sitter and maker are located in one person. The implication has generally been (at least prior to the ontological scepticism of the postmodern) that the artist, in representing him- or herself, is faced with the problem of engaging with his or her own sense of self and undergoes, to a greater or lesser extent, a journey towards self-recognition. We, as viewers, join this process after its private culmination and contribute to its validation by rendering it public. What hangs on the gallery wall, according to this reading, is a trustworthy record of the process of introspection and self-analysis.

So one of the key elements of self-portraiture, as traditionally understood, is its claim to a particular authenticity; arguably not until the works of the current era would viewers have had to recognise, and incorporate into their interpretation of the work, the possibility of a systematic subversion of their genre-expectations being inflicted on them by the artist. This does not mean, however, that the work could not be based on a false sense of self: presumably self-delusion was not invented in the twentieth century. And certainly the self-portrait has been used, at least since Dürer's *Self-Portrait* (1500) which has everything of Christ but the cross (fig. 15), for self-aggrandisement and what we, in our commercial era, might be tempted to call *self-marketing*. But the implication is that the viewer would be the agent who, in measuring the story of the work against other stories of the artist's life and personality, would ultimately be able to decide on the veracity of the

work. In other words, authenticity in this context means that the work could be presumed to not be the product of a successful attempt to deceive the viewer and his expectations systematically.

If a degree of erotic charge potentially traverses the sitter-artist relationship - an eroticism distributed through the gaze of the artist and the inability of the sitter to move from it, necessarily grounded in an asymmetry of power - then surely a degree of *narcissism* potentially characterises the self-portrait. Perhaps, even further, the appeal of the self-portrait is the symmetry of power it evokes, and the closed, seemingly insulated circuits along which it runs. Narcissism, or the representation of narcissism, which is not quite the same thing, must clearly be considered in works exhibiting a loving attention to every detail of flattering self-rendering. This is not necessarily as straightforward as being permitted to peek past the curtains into the cosy cottage of the artist's self-love. Lyle Ashton Harris, in discussion of her own practice of self-portraiture (fig. 16), states that: "[one] cannot speak of narcissistic disturbance without its most crucial variable: Redemptive narcissism, or self-love as a form of resistance from the tyranny of mediocrity and as a site of solace" (in Straus et al. 1995:46). In other words, the self can potentially be redeemed by means of its rediscovery via narcissistic tactics. And where there's narcissism, voyeurism is sure to follow.

The allure of this, for the viewer, is akin to that of paging through a diary someone else has left unguarded on a desk. But, as an author is not

necessarily honest with him- or herself in diaries, especially if he or she suspects someone else may glance at them one day, so too, the self-portrait is not really a record of ourselves, but of ourselves as we are to ourselves when we are not being observed, but know we will be observed shortly.

fig. 16

Lyle Ashton Harris
Queen, Alias and I

If My Friends Could See Me Now
1994



the self in the portrait

“Under the best

of circumstances, revelations about oneself are a very tricky business” (Maxwell in Straus et al. 1995:5).

Theoretically, modernism's emphasis on the centrality of the formal aspects of works relegated portraiture and self-portraiture to the margins². This preoccupation of modernism inevitably biased it against a genre traditionally so wrapped up with mimesis. It is precisely those elements which made portraiture problematic for modernist artists which have tended to make it appealing for postmodern artists. Clearly the distinctive postmodern suspicion of so-called meta-narratives³, including those which would seek to ground a unitary, immutable self, would yield a strongly *critical* stance towards the traditional claims of the portrait to reveal either externally represented meaning or pointers to the subject's rich, coherent inner life. Yet it is equally the case that portraiture and self-portraiture, by their very claim to represent selfhood and identity, provide an opportunity to question hegemonic discourses of the body, gender and broader identity, because such discourses have functioned to constitute the parameters of portraiture historically. In other words, the genre lends itself to a postmodern re-writing and questioning from the margins, because

it does appear to be so complicit with a certain understanding of meaning and identity which precedes our current de-centred sensibility. To the extent that the project of 'deconstruction' is distinctive of the postmodern, artists working with this genre have generally been informed by an inclination towards radical questioning of received notions of selfhood and identity, if not a radical challenge to, and extension of, our sense of what it might mean to be human. Clearly it is more difficult now to regard the self-portrait as a *self*-portrait: in fact, we could argue that there never was nor could be such a thing as a self-portrait, if by this we mean a valid attempt to fix the meaning of a stable self visually and communicate some sort of essence of selfhood to the viewer. In much the same way that the heroes and heroines of nineteenth century novels strike one as somewhat preposterous with their endless introspective syllogisms and analysis, we suspect that the traditional self-portrait does nothing so much as pull the wool over our eyes when it pretends to reveal something about its subject.

When we cease to believe in the self-transparent self, it becomes difficult to regard the body represented in art as the stable visual manifestation or embodiment of it, or as an independent domain of intrinsic value, truth or authenticity. The meaning of the body has

² I say theoretically, because artists like Picasso nevertheless produced many portraits, albeit with the foregrounding of their formal aspects.

³ cf. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.

become indeterminate now that it no longer functions as the shell of selfhood. As the meaning of a text no longer derives in a privileged fashion from the intentions of its author⁴ once the self is de-centred, so the meaning and 'ownership' of the represented body no longer exclusively reside with the artist. Conversely, this de-centring of the self has generated an increased interest in the body: many of the postmodern artists of the portrait are perhaps more accurately described as artists of the *body* in their extension of portraiture away from a narrow pre-occupation with likeness. To some extent this shift has freed body art from necessarily having to engage with issues of selfhood and identity. On the other hand, the exploration of the shifting, often indeterminate relationship between body and self remains a powerful and rich theme. According to feminist art historian and critic Linda Nochlin, "[t]he postmodern body, from the vantage point of [postmodern] artists, is conceived of uniquely as the 'body in pieces': the very notion of a unified, unambiguously gendered subject is rendered suspect by their work" (1994:55). A prudent interpretative approach when engaging with current representations of the body and self would be to acknowledge that every artist, at least implicitly, fashions their own sense of the relationship between the two.

⁴ cf. Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*.

fig. 17
Michelle Verwey
Threadbare
2005



Instead of the
certainty of the
given body, we
now have the
malleable body
of postmodernism

the shifting body of the artist

"I believe the body is not
as sacred as religion
taught us, it is just a costume that can be changed"
(Orlan in *Synthetic Bodies* 1998:3).

The necessary links between the self and the body and between the body and determinate signification have become frayed. Consequently, the repertoire of accepted signifiers which the body has employed and which have, within shifting Western interpretative paradigms, seemed clear in their meaning (or have at least hinted at a clear meaning which is recoverable in principle) have now fractured into contradictions and indeterminacies. Instead of the certainty of the *given* body, we now have the *malleable* body of postmodernism, with all the perspectivism this implies, both for the artist and the viewer⁵.

These phenomena pertaining to our sense of the self and the body are depicted by contemporary artists in terms often verging on the apocalyptic or utopian, "as if they will lead to either salvation or doom" (Kauffman 1998:1). The re-delineation or remapping of the body as a response to the problem of the self's indeterminate status is evidenced in themes such as the disappearing body of Francesca Woodman⁶, the transformed body of Orlan⁷, the technologically enhanced body of Stelarc⁸, the damaged body of Gina Pane⁹, and the 'surface' body of Robert Mapplethorpe¹⁰. These artists share a preoccupation with and a contemporary ambivalence about the status of the body. They "stage the material body" (Kauffman 1998:15) at different degrees of dissociation from its conventionally accepted standing as predetermined, permanent and the material aspect of an inner reality.

⁵ This dynamic is, of course, further heightened by the increasing scope of technological intrusion in the body, which extends the possibilities of the body beyond its natural boundaries.

⁶ American feminist artist Francesca Woodman's photographs depict self-portraits in various, often disintegrating, spaces, which she seems to internalize and respond to with her body.

⁷ A fictional name used by this French performance artist and history professor: "[A] synthetic name for a synthetic identity in process" (Kauffman 1998:69). Orlan uses her body as a site for debate around issues of representation, identity and the self.

⁸ Australian performance artist Stelarc explores the frontier where technology meets the natural body and revises it.

⁹ French feminist artist Gina Pane's performance art pieces involve the physical mutilation and scarification of her own body.

¹⁰ American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe primarily photographs the male nude; his self-proclaimed interest in the photograph lies in its potential as an object.

fig. 18
Francesca Woodman
Untitled (from the *Angel* series, Rome)
1977-78

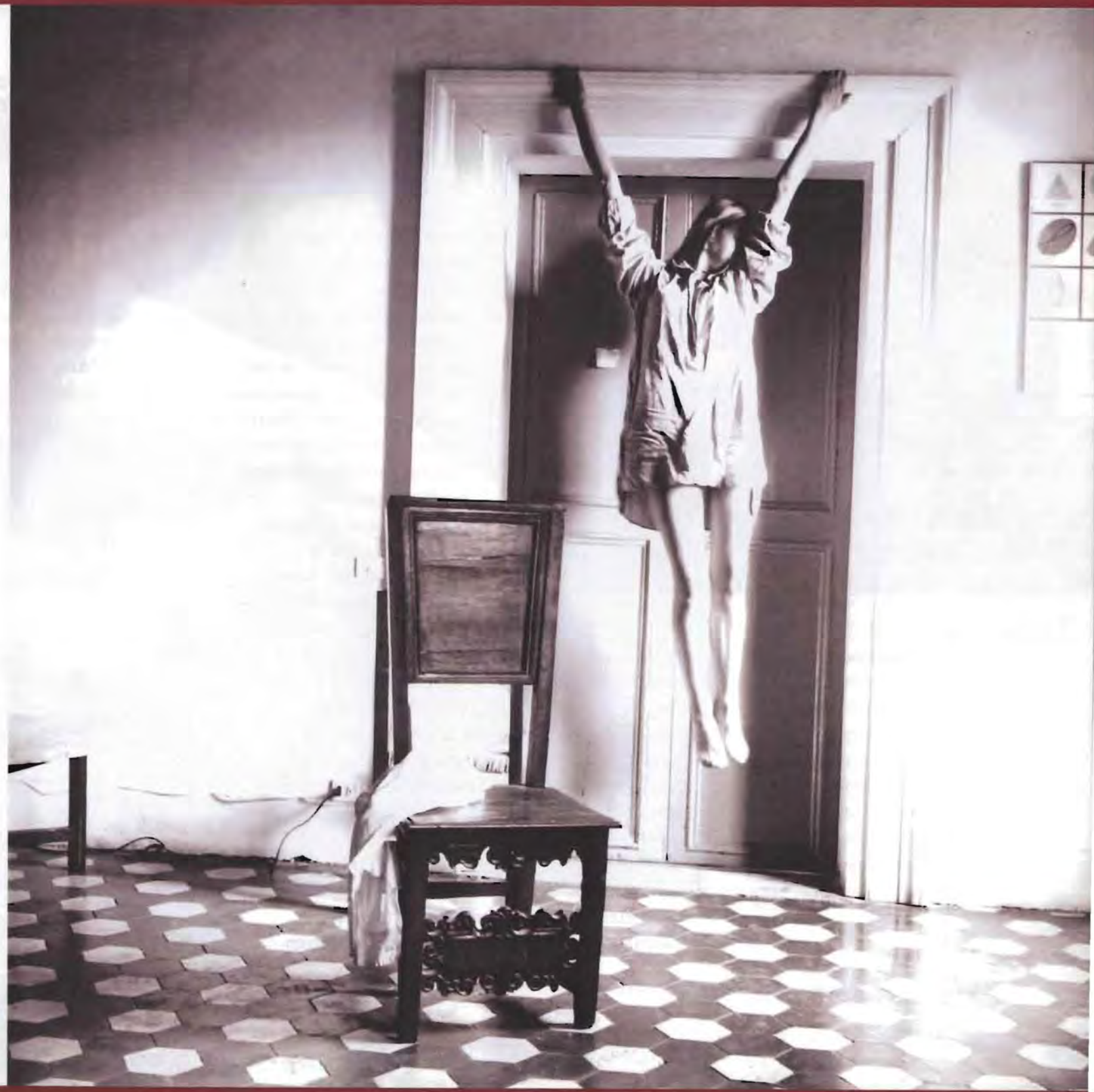




fig. 19
Francesca Woodman
House No. 4, Providence, Rhode Island
1975-76

(dis)appear from and into the decaying interior of an abandoned house. She “appears as a phantom presence, blurring into the chipped wall and window frame of her shabby surroundings” (Posner in Chadwick 1998:169). Through her consistent treatment of body and background as similar substances, evanescent and fragmentary, she renders the two synonymous. The deterioration of the structure translates into the deterioration of the body. The body’s permanence is challenged: “Woodman’s often

Francesca Woodman’s series of photographic works primarily portray her body in different indistinct environments, which both act as backdrops to her ephemeral form and serve to destabilize it (fig. 18). Stich (in Chadwick 1998:168) claims that Woodman “radically depart[s] from the representation of the body as a whole (complete), natural and stable... [and] instead convey[s] the body in a fragmented, emerging/decaying, deformed, uncertain, and changing state”. In *House #4, Providence, Rhode Island* (fig. 19), Woodman’s body seems to

fleeting images of the body point to its transient nature and instability” (Sundell in Warr & Jones 2000:275). Woodman is heralding the decay or departure of the body through the presentation of its remains, and invites or compels the viewer to the familiar role of the voyeur. The walled interior constructs the confines of Woodman’s private space, putting the viewer in the privileged position of the unseen surveyor. Woodman’s bare-leggedness, her suggestive flaring skirt, her childlike shoes and posture create a provocative tension between the brazen and the innocent. The viewer is unwittingly rendered witness, however, not to the emergence of womanhood, but rather to its vanishing, creating a portentous space where the body once was.

Orlan, in her own words, fights against “God and DNA” (in Kauffman 1998:42). In *Omnipresence* (fig. 20), a series of performances from the early



fig. 20
Orlan
The Face of the Twentieth Century
1990



fig. 21
Orlan
Omni-présence
(Close-up of Laughter during the Operation)
1993

nineties, she presented an exploration of the chronicles of feminine beauty as historically established in discourse and representation. Through the medium of plastic surgery, she set out to transform herself into a synthesis of the accepted icons of feminine beauty¹¹. Orlan “test[ed] the integrity of the embodied self by literally slicing through its boundaries” (Warr & Jones 2000:32). During her performance pieces, Orlan read excerpts from Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva and Antonin Artaud from the operating table whilst undergoing plastic surgery under local anaesthetic (fig. 21). According to Kauffman, “[t]heir work serve[d] as a kind of annotation of her ‘ordeal art’” (1998:13). Her fixation with her own image, integral to her work, can be related to Lacan’s ‘mirror stage’¹², during which the formation of the child’s ego is initiated through the discovery of the reflected image of the self: “The image which the

¹¹ Including the chin of Botticelli’s Venus, the mouth of Boucher’s Europa, the nose of Diana, the forehead of the Mona Lisa and the eyes of Gérôme’s Psyche.

¹² This being the first phase of his two-stage theory of the self.

small child sees in the mirror is an 'alienated' one: the child 'misrecognises' itself in it, finds in the image a pleasing unity which it does not actually experience in its own body" (Eagleton 1989: 164). The reflected self could possibly find a parallel in Orlan's post-operative body, where the artist creates – and subsequently encounters - her double through the work. Orlan also plays with conceptions of gender, describing herself as the first woman-to-woman transsexual. She re-creates herself, subverting the natural order and deconstructing Cartesian models by assimilating the body into processes of thought and becoming the self-conscious canvas of an extended conversation with the margins of the internal and the external, the male and the female, culture and nature, the human and the *posthuman*¹³.

fig. 22
Stelarc
Event for Stretched Skin
1976



The work of Australian performance artist, Stelarc (fig. 22), confronts the limitations of the body in a technologised present and future. He uses mechanised body extensions to draw attention to the inadequacies of the natural body. In his 1976-1980 piece, *The Third Hand* (fig. 23), Stelarc had a robotic hand created for him by Japanese engineers. Controlled and activated by electrical signals

triggered by his thigh and abdominal muscles, this hand extended his ability to engage in separate activities simultaneously. Contrasted with this highly



fig. 23
Stelarc
The Third Hand
1976-80

developed device, Stelarc's own body appears ageing and inadequate. According to the artist: "We're at the time now where we have to start redesigning

¹³ The theme of *posthumanism* will not be handled in this paper, as my B Tech dissertation "*Last and Found: The Body in Posthuman Self-Representation*" dealt exclusively with this topic.



fig. 24
Gina Pane
Warm Milk
1972

the human body to match the technology we've created... [We] are confronted by the end of the human form as we know it" (in Badmington 2000:99). Stelarc appears not unlike a modern-day Captain Hook with this mechanised hand suspended from his arm. Unlike Hook, however, whose replacement hand was, at best, clumsy and unwieldy, Stelarc's is extremely refined and precise, arguably superior to its human equivalent. Nonetheless, the misgivings such an accessory arouses in the public mind are not lessened by its proficiency. It could be argued that the 'wholeness' of the human body is traditionally desirable for the reason that it usually corresponds to greater functionality. When a 'corruption' of its wholeness occurs, the body is perceived to be defective. However, when this corruption translates into an advantageous development, notions of the body as a whole need to be re-evaluated. This development necessarily demands a reworking of ideas around the embodied self and its sphere of influence. According to Descartes, "though the mind or soul of man is really distinct from the body, it is nevertheless so tightly bound up and united with it that it forms with it what is almost a single entity" (in Danto 1999:194). Consequently, when the body extends beyond its boundaries, and those boundaries become fluid and expandable, perceptions of the self are unavoidably stretched and distorted alongside it.

Gina Pane's early 1970 performances are characterised by Pane inflicting on herself various injuries such as cutting and burning her skin, as well as engaging in activities that occasion physical illness and discomfort (fig. 24). In Pane's 1971 performance piece *Escalade non-anesthésiée* (*Non-anaesthetised*



fig. 25
Gina Pane
Non-anaesthetized Climb
1971

climb) (fig. 25), the artist slowly climbed a ladder of her own construction. The footholds of this ladder were lined with razor-sharp protrusions, which cut through the surfaces of her hands and feet, making her journey a painful, lacerative one. These actions evoke a disassociation from, if not a rejection of, the physical body. The value attributed to the intact body is questioned and compromised by the act of cutting into it. The passage from the safety of the known body to the relative threat of the unknown is a hesitant and potentially harrowing one, leaving the 'natural' body behind when the first step is taken, with the element of pain marking this as a rite of passage. However, though typically the physical and psychological pain of rites of passage establish a qualitative differentiation between the pre- and post-rite body and mind, it is uncertain to what extent Pane's work offers the artist and/or the viewer the true possibility of transformation and to what extent it remains ensnared in a masochistic circuit of self-referentiality: one suspects Pane will eternally be climbing that ladder with the viewer no more than spectator to her self-flagellations.

In the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, we see an instance of the development of an aesthetic of the body which is both celebratory and detached, even clinical in its insistence on attributing no meaning beyond that which lies on

the surface. In two self-portraits of 1980 (fig. 26) and 1988 (fig. 27), Mapplethorpe adopts different costumes for different parties. He does not try or pretend to produce any insight into what lies beneath the surface of the body. It is as though surfaces were enough for our understanding: "Mapplethorpe portraits are aesthetically pleasing studies of blank



fig. 26
Robert Mapplethorpe
Self-Portrait
1980

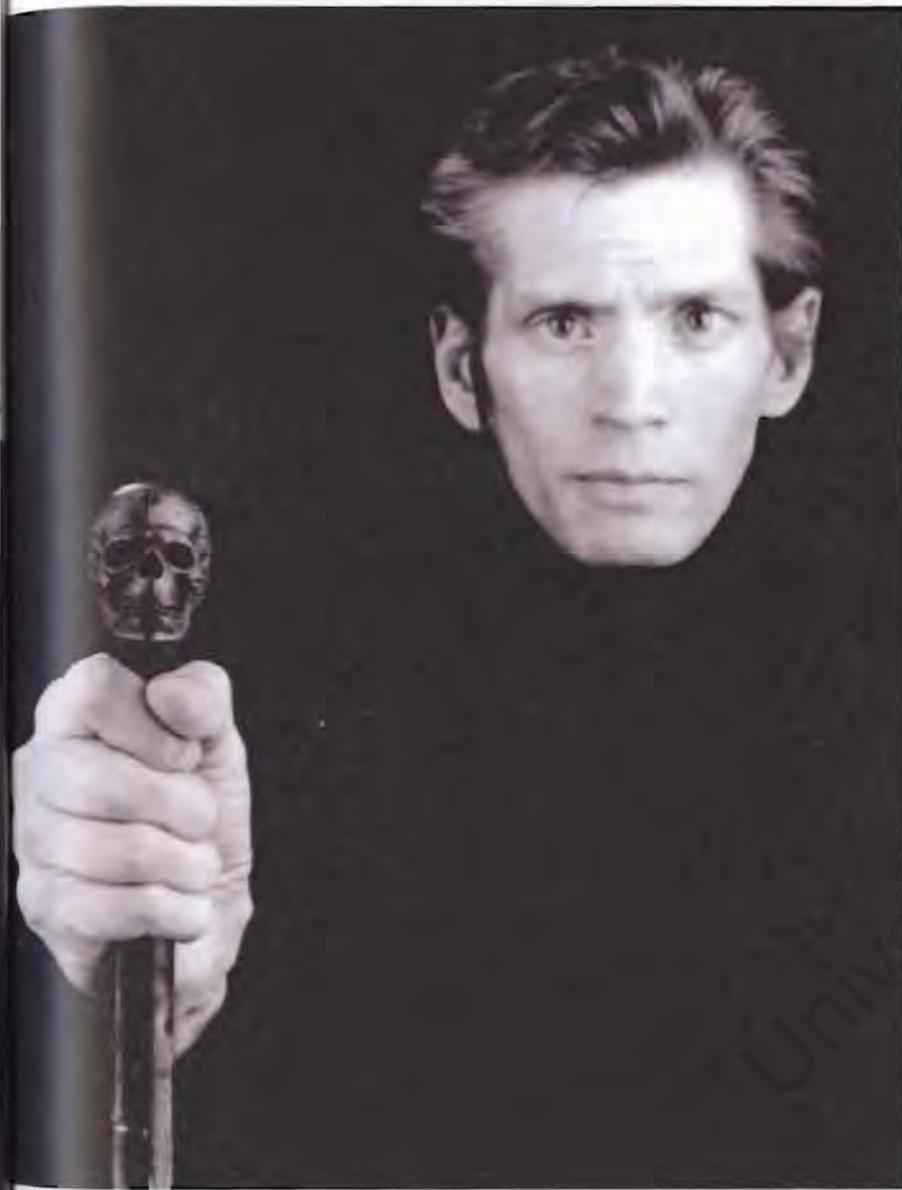


fig. 27
Robert Mapplethorpe
Self-Portrait
1988

identity, the body is not a natural, changeless resource but a malleable tool, which responds to individual desires for self-fashioning" (1995:28).

faces and smooth bodies that stress the cosmetic aspects of their sitter's appearances, without delving into character, status or personality. Mapplethorpe was interested in the way his sitters looked, rather than who they were" (West 2004:207). This work proposes a vacuity to the body: pleasing to look at, perhaps, but ultimately referring to nothing more than its own surfaces. As a complement to this analysis, one can approach Mapplethorpe's work as a contemplation of the flesh-like masks worn by people in a 'post-everything' society, as has been articulated, though not specifically in reference to Mapplethorpe's work, by Nicholas Mirzoeff: "The face itself became a mask, no guide to what might transpire. In this performative sense of

These artists present a variety of reflections on the status of the self and the body in postmodern art, and their work implicitly and often explicitly engages with the conventions of the genre that precedes them. A discussion of my own work can be situated roughly within the framework of the preoccupations discussed above, specifically in the ability and *reliability* of representation of the body as both a means of artistic communication and a means of alluding to and commenting on the self.

“The face
itself became
a mask, no
guide to
what might
transpire”



University of Cape Town

fig. 28
Michelle Verwey
Supplication I
2005

fig. 29
Michelle Verwey
Supplication II
2005

fig. 30
Michelle Verwey
Supplication III
2005

silencing the body

formal
and
technical
aspects
of my
work

Having provided, in the previous chapter, an overview of aspects of self-portraiture relevant to my work, as well as a brief introduction to the concepts I am interested in, I present in this chapter an explication and analysis of my work in terms of its formal elements, the signifiatory strategies I employ, the intended visual effect and the significance of the digital origin of the work. The emphasis throughout is not only on providing the means to enable an understanding of what is meant by the mute body and how technical and signifiatory elements contribute to it, but also on how these signifiatory strategies relativise the muteness by hinting at a playful or seductive dimension.

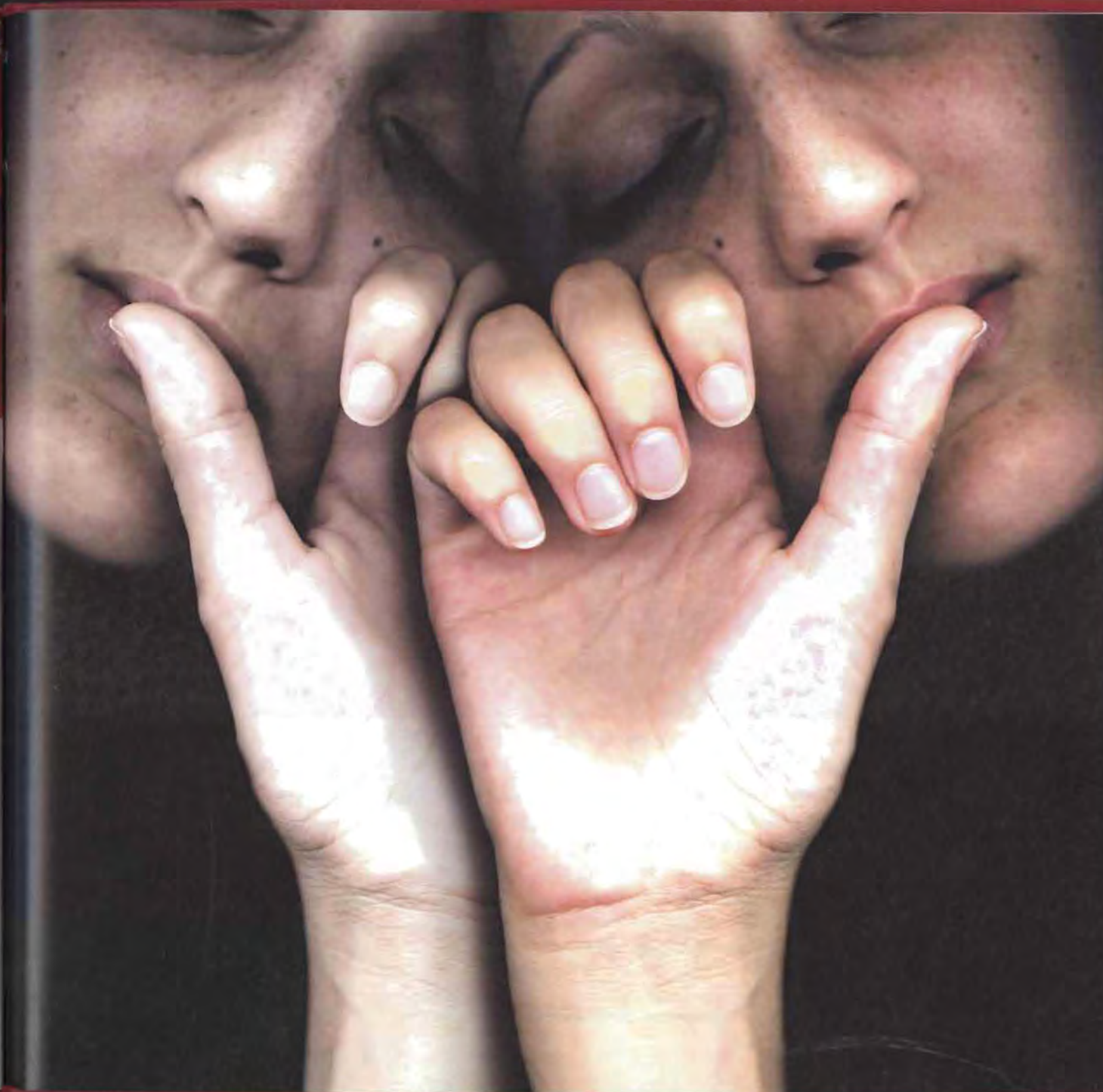


fig. 31
Michelle Verwey
Only When Spoken To
2005

materials and processes

fig. 32
Michelle Verwey
Wish You Well (detail)
2005

My

work consists of a series
of large-format prints¹⁴.

and each surface is carefully 'edited' to correct
tiny imperfections and remove specks of dust or
interference. It is then inserted into a new image



two

point

one

These depict arrangements of my own face and
hands set against uninterrupted black environments.
They are composite arrangements for which subject
matter is sourced though high resolution digital
scanning and then extracted from its surrounding
image. Its boundaries are meticulously smoothed

where the parts are integrated. The works do not
pre-exist their digital amalgamation in any meaningful
sense. Once the image has been completed, it is
printed in the form of glossy, larger-than-life prints
(the body is on average about five times larger than
actual size).

¹⁴These are produced in an RGB inkjet process with lightfast pigment inks on gloss finish fibre paper.

Because of their size and the crispness of the digital image, every crease, hair follicle and pore becomes more visible than it is ordinarily to the human eye (fig. 32). Turning up the visual volume like this may be thought to have the effect of enhancing the interaction between the work and the viewer, even of being an attempt to bestow on the work a formal grandiosity which could sway the viewer in its favour. But in fact, I believe, the cumulative effect is an alienating one: the level of detail presented and the size of the work, when combined with reinforcing thematic elements which I discuss below, serve to *defamiliarise* the work¹⁵. It is difficult for the viewer to distinguish crucial interpretative clues from mere detail. The relative significance of sectors of the work is not discernible. Everything is simultaneously significant and therefore insignificant. Larger than life barely becomes life at all.

Dark backgrounds comprise the greater part of the images. At a basic visual level, the dominance of black compels the attention of the viewer to the areas of the work which are illuminated; it intensifies the focus on these areas so that the tiniest detail assumes a heightened, but uncertain, significance. This aspect of the work evokes, amongst other things, the space of the stage: lighting, gestures, props and movements may strive to mimic reality but are always already, by their very attempt at mimesis, far removed from it. The experience lies somewhere between what is 'real' and what is 'fantastical' and, as with the size of the works, the aim is to preclude any easy assimilation of the meaning of the work.

Unlike most theatrical stages, however, this environment provides very few contextual clues in the way of props to assist the viewer in the extraction of meaning. The figure is without milieu, which is to say that it plays at standing outside history and discourse. The glossy surface of the print furthermore lends an oil-slick appearance to the black areas, suggesting a slipperiness and elusiveness. The viewer finds himself reflected in these areas, incapable of penetrating the surface, looking into the work but being bounced back out of it.

Captured in the ahistorical darkness of its enclosure, stripped of all supporting elements, the work might appear to evoke some dark hole of existentialism, if not for the relentless, almost obsessive interest in the systems and conventions of signification. A combination and interplay of gestures and signs evoke a meaning which seems imminent but never transpires. It is as though, despite or because of the alienating formal elements, there remains an incessant need to communicate, or to reproduce the outward embodiment of communicative intent, but to do so in a self-mocking, half-hearted, ultimately even resentful manner.

Visual signifiers are embedded in a parasitic relationship where the conventional meaning of each is eroded by the presence of the other. The face appears devoid of emotional content, even of a humanising animation, which would potentially establish a personal connection with the viewer.

¹⁵ This is comparable to the experience of the super-realistic blown-up figures of sculptor Ron Mueck.

The eyes are invariably closed, further denying the possibility of confrontation and recognition. Viewers would naturally look to the prominently framed gestures of the hands, as well as their interaction with the face, as a means to discern the implication of the work. Leonardo da Vinci, who saw in the language of the dumb an indispensable clue to artists in their representation of gesture generally, knew that reliance on such gestural signification would be necessary to create an intelligible story. He accordingly recommended that artists look closely at the motions of the dumb, who "speak with movements of their hands and eyes and eyebrows and their whole person, in their desire to express that which is in their minds" (in Mirzoeff 1995:22). As Mirzoeff comments on this passage: "It requires [...] an assembly of various fragments of bodily attributes to create one functioning bodyscape" (1995:22). We can trace in this passage and commentary an acknowledgement of the *fragmented* body, as the body which is a loose assemblage of signs, an intersection of discursive strategies, a site contested by techniques of control and the disruptions of desire. But there is also, certainly in the da Vinci quote, the belief that the 'correct' organisation and interaction of body-signs will yield a recoverable meaning the viewer needs and seeks. My own use of gesture, however, tries to make it more, rather than less, difficult for the viewer. Recognisable hand gestures are used alongside those that are unfamiliar. Some of the unfamiliar hand gestures may *appear* to draw on a quasi-sign language and may evoke particular moods or appear to convey particular instructions. Others are likely to remain wholly opaque to the viewer.

fig. 33
Michelle Verwey
Wayfinder
2005





fig. 34
Michelle Verwey
Sien Jy? (Turn a Blind Eye) (detail)
2005

I have also experimented with the use of text in the images; I have isolated words to form part of the construction of the work itself (fig. 34). Here, too, I am not interested in using text to illustrate or

comment on the work, nor am I primarily interested in the visual properties of the text, but instead I use text to further reinforce the promise and simultaneous deferral of meaning. The titles of the works similarly tend to foreground the playful and ambiguous aspects of language. To some extent I have regarded the titles of my works as deliberate red herrings which send the viewer down interpretative routes which promise closure but are, in fact, difficult to align successfully with all the elements of the work.

My preference for the series derives from the promise it holds for the viewer that visual *narrative* will reveal what isolated works do not. Despite ourselves, we sometimes expect that the patterns of visual and thematic interaction established by the arrangement of a number of related works together will tell us what an individual work withholds.

The general effect these strategies aim to achieve may be clarified by contrasting them with the strategies used by an artist like Tracey Emin. I am thinking particularly of her work *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (fig. 35). Emin's work is interesting not least because it provides an indication of how broadly the term 'self-portraiture' can and should be stretched in the contemporary context: her works involve attempts, serious, semi-serious or entirely playful, to provide the viewer with details of herself which make public the intimate, but without the presence of a physical body. For the purposes of this discussion, what is particularly relevant is that Emin's work stages the possibility of art as revealing. Of course, the work is as much a deconstruction of intimacy as an instance of it: the point is that the inaugurating mode is that of self-revealing. In my own work, by contrast, the inaugurating mode is one of distancing.

fig. 35
Tracey Emin
Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995
1995



to further

reinforce the

promise and

simultaneous

deferral of

meaning.



fig. 36
Michelle Verwey
Finder, Keeper
2005

the role of new media



fig. 37
Michelle Verwey
Rock, Paper, Scissors
2005

Given its digital production,

my work would tend to fall under the descriptive term 'new media'¹⁶. The term remains contested and, not surprisingly, difficult to define rigorously. I shall not dwell too much on current debates in this regard but employ a broad definition as a point of departure in addressing the question of the extent to which the digital aspect of my work is central to its concerns. This question could also be phrased as: would these works be equally resonant and effective (or perhaps even more) as, for example, oil paintings? My thinking in this regard is apt to be highly interpretative, even speculative, as it entails imbuing a choice of medium with various conceptual and thematic associations.

Janet Murray asserts that the definitive aspect of 'new media' is its digitalness. She acknowledges that new media currently seems particularly diverse and heterogeneous due to its myriad forms, but argues that what is really under consideration here is a "single new medium of representation, the digital medium, formed by the braided interplay of technical invention and cultural expression at the end of the twentieth century" (in Wardrip-Friun & Montfort 2003:3). The advantages of such a definition are, in my opinion, its simplicity and inclusivity. Lev Manovich concurs in stressing that "[a]ll new media objects, whether created from scratch on computers or converted from analog media sources, are composed of digital code" (2001:27). Manovich distinguishes two primary consequences from this,

¹⁶ Manovich (2001:19) distinguishes a 'popular understanding' of new media which identifies it with the use of a computer for distribution and exhibition rather than production, but argues that this definition is too narrow if we seek to understand the "effects of computerization on culture as a whole" and, furthermore, that the use of the computer as a tool for media production or as a media storage device "[has] the same potential to change existing cultural languages".



fig. 38
Michelle Verwey
Sometimes You Can See It Coming
2005

namely that "the new media object can be described formally", that is to say mathematically and, resulting from this, that "[a] new media object is subject to algorithmic manipulation" (Manovich 2001:27). Production on a computer, in other words, entails the manipulation of completely specified discrete information; clearly, in the world of new media, what cannot be specified quantitatively cannot be manipulated and, conversely, the further the reach of quantitative specification possibilities extend, the greater the potential of digital manipulation.

A first, somewhat contrary, insight stemming from this is that digital works are likely to be perceived as *less* rather than more real in the mimetic sense, precisely due to the perfection of their representation. This is akin to the recording of music: the transformation of sound to digital information eliminates all noise, that is to say that which cannot be specified quantitatively, and in so doing reproduces sound which is certainly cleaner but not mimetically a more accurate reproduction of the way performed music sounds to the listener. In my own work, having converted my body to digital information through scanning, I enhance rather than diminish this effect by editing out on the computer (Manovich's algorithmic manipulation) any blemishes which remain. The effect of this precision is to distance the viewer from the work's impersonal 'perfection' which seems to stand inviolable and aloof from the reality of living. The fact that the work has not been *made* in the material sense, and bears no mark of the passage of the artist's

body on or through it¹⁷, along with its glossy surface, strengthen this impersonality. The viewer is implicitly at risk of becoming a superfluous appendage to a narcissistic circuit of self-perfecting.

I attempt to generate a museum-like silence within the work (as though the animating aspect of the body had fled), which is distancing and estranging and, as with the viewing of corpses, calls into question the viewer's involvement in the event. The work represents an ambivalence between a desire to *control* the self and the meanings it elicits, and the desire to yield to the allure of signification, the desire to reveal all and (potentially) receive absolution for it. The theme of control stems from a horror of the messy body which spills over its boundaries and leads to the consequent dispersion of the self. The possibility of control is maintained by the small visual universe the work draws from, a universe whose permutations are finite and can therefore be predicted and controlled.

¹⁷ Consequently there is also no evidence of mastery (or lack thereof) in this process.



fig. 39



fig. 40



fig. 41



fig. 42



fig. 43
Michelle Verwey
Scissors (from *Rock, Paper, Scissors*)
2005

(Illustrations on previous pages)

fig. 39
Michelle Verwey
Rock I (from *Rock, Paper, Scissors*)
2005

fig. 41
Michelle Verwey
Paper I (from *Rock, Paper, Scissors*)
2005

fig. 40
Michelle Verwey
Rock II (from *Rock, Paper, Scissors*)
2005

fig. 42
Michelle Verwey
Paper II (from *Rock, Paper, Scissors*)
2005

history does damage to

bodies

muteness and seduction

as a response
to the {tension}
between

power and play

In the preceding chapters, I have situated my work within the context of self-portraiture and presented an overview of the signficatory aspects of the work which establish or contribute to its range of conceptual preoccupations. In this chapter, I provide a more detailed discussion of the theoretical context for my work, specifically in terms of changing conceptions of identity, signification and meaning which characterise the postmodern sensibility, as well as the previously mentioned tension between a reading of postmodernism which foregrounds the workings of power and one which foregrounds the space postmodernism opens up for radical play.

the mind *imposes*

its **order** on

nature



conceptions of selfhood

“The postmodern human
exists in a universe whose
significance is at once utterly **open** and
without warrantable foundation” (Tarnas 1991:398).

It may be argued that Western thinking has, at least since Plato and most emphatically since Descartes, been concerned with, even obsessed with, the nature of the self. Western philosophy is arguably inaugurated by the attempt to delineate selfhood in such a way that it provides a stable centre for claims to knowledge. This, certainly, is how Descartes regarded his own attempt to secure certainty for the sciences through a process of radical introspective questioning which ends up by grounding being in the thinking self¹⁸. Western philosophy has assumed, at least prior to Romanticism's elevation of feeling and the Twentieth century's technicist objectivity, that a clear, secure philosophical understanding of the rationality of the self is required for reason itself to be secured. This is a significant aspect of the way in which Immanuel Kant and other philosophers of the Enlightenment understood their work. Kant took Descartes' insistence on grounding knowledge in the self even further, and initiated a Copernican revolution of the mind by insisting that the a priori structures of the mind actively determine the nature and meaning of experience as such, rather than that experience shapes the mind. As Solomon expresses it: “The primary change is a shift from the passive to

the active mode, a rejection of the traditional idea of the human mind as a receptacle or receiver, to the insistence that the mind *imposes* its order on nature, an order which is fixed and immutable in all of us” (1988:27). The centring of the self in philosophy has had cultural and historical repercussions which have permeated far more broadly than only academic institutions. Solomon's *Continental Philosophy Since 1750*, for example, is sub-titled ‘The Rise and Fall of the Self’ and traces much of the unfolding of European history as the ebb and flow of various conceptions of selfhood. Conceptions of the self have both influenced representations of art and been influenced by the results of art's own journey of questioning and exploration.

The current ‘crisis’ of self-understanding in Western culture stems broadly from the breakdown of discourses which have structured and legitimated our understanding of the self, discourses which have historically functioned by imbuing selfhood with a seemingly essential, immutable meaning. Intellectually, it can be traced back to the sceptical thinking of, especially, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, whose work in each case represents the ‘unearthing’ of a formerly hidden or unconscious structure of relations which determines that which is accessible to direct enquiry and understanding. Nietzsche traced the complicity of claims to knowledge with claims to power, and in so doing established the primacy of the ‘philosophical unconscious’; Marx saw society's relations as a

¹⁸ This *centring* of the self as the locus of knowledge and meaning has also risked solipsism: the insistence on the importance of the self can easily become the inability to conceive that anything but the self exists.



fig. 44
Michelle Verwey
Wish You Well
2005

function of the concealed modes of production, rooted in class conflict, and established the primacy of the 'political unconscious'; and of course Freud regarded consciousness as being largely determined by the workings of the personal unconscious. Tarnas, in typifying the postmodern, writes of an "appreciation of the plasticity and constant change of reality and knowledge, a stress on the priority of concrete experience over fixed abstract principles, and a conviction that no single a priori thought system should govern belief or investigation... [H]uman knowledge is subjectively determined by a multitude of factors... [T]he critical search for truth is constrained to be tolerant of ambiguity and pluralism, and its outcome will necessarily be a knowledge that is relative and fallible rather than absolute or certain" (Tarnas 1991:395-396). A central aspect of this more pervasive contemporary scepticism has been a recognition of the constituting role played by a broadly conceived language in how we come to understand self and world: the very notion of the 'self' has come to be regarded as an effect rather than a cause of structure. Meaning, it follows in the influential structuralist and post-structuralist trends which have dominated much of theory since Ferdinand de Saussure, is a function of differences in structural units rather than an essential property residing in things themselves. Meaning does not reside within a sign as an essence, nor is meaning located in a self who stands at the centre of a system and controls it. Both essential meaning and the subject are de-centred in favour of this 'language' which "is not something we each bring with us into the world at birth, but an institution into which we are gradually initiated in childhood as the most fundamental element of all in our socialization.

Language can thus be described as impersonal, it exceeds us as individuals" (Sturrock 1979:12).

The scepticism which traverses much of postmodern thinking has both an empowering and disempowering aspect. Its empowering characteristic takes the form of a 'playful' sense of the postmodern, which sees in the breakdown of meta-narratives which structure the self, social meaning and history¹⁹ the opening of a signficatory and interpretative space which welcomes the transitional and provisional. Here, indeterminacy makes perpetual re-invention possible, and a new celebration of the persona and the mask becomes permitted, a celebration which neither misses nor asks after the fascination of previous eras with the depths that surfaces hide. This sense of the postmodern has also been most receptive to new syntheses and appropriations and has largely jettisoned the purist aesthetics of high modernism. It has been perceived as enabling, precisely because of the unique space it has opened up, unique in its pluralism and the permeability of its barriers. Tarnas writes in this regard of an "almost unprecedented intellectual flexibility and cross-fertilization, reflected in the widespread call for, and practice of, open "conversation" between different understandings, different vocabularies, different cultural paradigms" (Tarnas 1991:402). The breakdown of the narratives of the Enlightenment provide, in this reading, an opportunity to *reconfigure*, at a more localised and provisional level, the meaning of our selves, our bodies, our relations with each other.

The disempowering aspect of the postmodern positions the de-centred self within the workings of an insidious power which questions the potential of emancipatory narratives (be they socio-economic, as in Marxism, or gendered, as in Feminism) to lift us out of our socialisation and our perspectivistic limitations. This more pessimistic reading stems to a significant extent from the works of Michel Foucault.

Foucault begins *Discipline and Punish* with the harrowing description of the protracted torture and execution of regicide Damien. For Foucault, such a direct, mechanical exercise of power on the body is an originating, primitive means of instilling discipline in the populace for the purposes of control. His text traces the transformation of power towards more subtle, internalised techniques of control such as the *panopticon*, whose principle permeates the construction of modern subjects through socialisation processes in the family, school, workplace and, most fundamentally, language. Here, in other words, the de-centring of the self does not provide the possibility of more local reconfiguration, but a recognition of the extent to which structure controls and disciplines. The history of power exercised on, and through, the body moves from power exercised directly on the body to power dispersed throughout the systems of relations within which the self attempts to constitute itself and within which it is always already constituted.

¹⁹The seminal expression of this meaning of the postmodern arguably remains Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*.



fig. 45
Michelle Verwey
Sien Jy? (Turn a Blind Eye)
2005



fig. 46
Michelle Verwey
Hoor Jy? (Hush)
2005

Muteness

may

be a

survival
strategy

this is not a place of words

“But ^{this is} **not**
^a *place of words.*
Each syllable, as
it comes out,
is caught and filled with water and diffused.
This is a place where **bodies**
are their own signs”

(Coetzee 1986:157).

The mute body is not the vacant body. It is the body of which we are unable to say with certainty whether it is *unable* to signify or *unwilling* to signify. Foucault's account of evolving conceptions of power in modernity towards more insidious, decentralised forms does not imply a denial of the fact that history has done and continues to do terrible things to bodies. Muteness may be a survival strategy. In J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, for example, his Friday retains, throughout the entire text, a silence which is both enforced and, possibly, self-imposed. Friday's 'master', Cruso, alleges that his mute manservant was captured by slavers as a child and had his tongue cut out; however, the reader does not know whether this is true or not, and why this may have happened:

“Perhaps the slavers, who are Moors, hold the tongue to be a delicacy,’ he said. ‘Or perhaps they grew weary of listening to Friday’s wails of grief, that went on day and night. Perhaps they wanted to prevent him from ever telling his story: who he was, where his home lay, how it came about that he was taken. Perhaps they cut out the tongue of every cannibal they took, as a punishment”
(Coetzee 1986:23).

Because Friday can't or won't constitute himself publicly, others do it for him. And yet the enigma of Friday remains and we are left with the questions Friday evokes. We are, in fact, left largely with our own projections reflected back at us. Is it the case, then, that it is Friday who has been diminished, rather than us, who seek and fail to achieve a final interpretation of his meaning and significance? And who is to say, if this is the case, that Friday is not wise to stage his own muteness?



fig. 47
Michelle Verwey
I Spy
2005

narcissism and play

Any work which
so resolutely
foregrounds its own
glossiness, its
love of detailed rendering

of the face and hands, its disregard for any accompanying visual context and the resultant focusing of attention on itself, raises the spectre of narcissism. Narcissism is a rejection of the social in favour of an unbroken self-identical circuit of lover and loved. But the very structure which enables the self, and therefore self-love, already precedes and points beyond the self.

My work uses various strategies to convey an imminent meaning which is not resolved. I have argued that this strategy can ultimately be tied to the desire of the body to become mute and safe from power, and that its inward turn may be a form of narcissism. But is all of this not essentially, then, a form of *play* with the viewer, who becomes alternately and finally indistinguishably the voyeur, the torturer, the validation of the work? Is self-love not perhaps always accompanied by seductive intent? Isn't narcissism necessarily seductive if only because it asserts an unbroken circuit of lover and loved which challenges those that stand outside it?

The *coquette* is the seductive type, according to Robert Greene in *The Art of Seduction*, who uses the dynamics of promise and deferral to become irresistible. In Greene's somewhat stilted prose: "The ability to delay satisfaction is the ultimate art of seduction - while waiting, the victim is held in thrall. Coquettes are the grand masters of this game, orchestrating a back-and-forth movement between hope and frustration. They bait with the promise of reward [...] all of which, however, proves elusive[.] Coquettes seem totally self-sufficient: they do not need you, they seem to say, and their narcissism proves devilishly attractive" (Greene 2001:67). I would regard this as the more playful aspect of my work which always waits in the wings in case the mute body runs out of things to say.

My obsessive return to gestures made by the hands and their interactions with expressions of the face can, in this reading, be regarded as mere play and delight in the exploration of possibility. Play, in this sense, can be situated in the broader context of a more frivolous sense of the postmodern, which sees in the breakdown of monolithic meaning the potential for endless re-invention: this is the postmodern as carnival, re-cycled endlessly, where identities are fluid and the burden of history and selfhood is a matter of the morning hours.

(Illustration on next page)

fig. 48

Michelle Verwey

Scissors (from *Rock, Paper, Scissors*) (detail)

2005



In my work, the staging of the mute

body is the staging of the body that polices its own barriers, that remains inscrutable in order to remain inviolate.

Inscrutability can take the form of muteness (non-communication in Friday's sense), but it can also take the form of the employment of gesture and sign to seemingly convey messages which are decoys that send the viewer down false or confusing interpretive trails. The size and careful attention to detail employed in my work invites the viewer to participate in an interpretive game, but the very meticulousness, blown up to extra-human proportions, renders every detail potentially significant and provides no clues as to which matter and which don't, thus foiling any attempt to wring meaning out of the work. A similar dynamic prevails in the signs that the hands make, for example: they may mean something exceedingly significant and tantalisingly close to being revealed, or perhaps nothing at all, or yet again, they may function only to deflect us from what we actually yearn to know.

There is, of course, an undeniably paradoxical aspect to the idea of communicating muteness. I regard this as a productive paradox, interlaced with irony, which establishes in my work a central ambivalence between muteness and play, the desire to hide (the proliferation of signs being the best form of hiding)

and the desire to reveal all. The mute body in my work stands in a continuous tension with the playful-body, whose significations, though unclear or indeterminate, may be cumulatively seductive. My work seeks to explore the space between, or perhaps more accurately the tension between, the poles of the mute body and the playful or seductive body. This tension is ultimately rooted in what I regard as a fundamental tension concerning the meaning and significance of the postmodern.

The mute body is arguably the fulfilment of the breakdown or extreme problematisation of the body's signifiatory function. The mute body yields questions but provides no answers; it reflects but does not assert. The gestural and other signifiers it employs seem to deflect understanding as much as encourage it. Meaning, when conveyed at all, may be conveyed ambiguously or erroneously, and we are left undecided as to whether the body has spoken or we have merely been confronted with our own desires as viewers. The mute body is a response to the fear of power and what power has done to bodies in history. Conversely, it is also the location of power – the exercising of the choice to remain silent is a wilful act of retention or withholding.

Resisting interpretation by providing selections from the accepted and well-documented tool kit of visual signs, enigmatic and flaunting its own remove from the construction of meaning by the viewer, the mute body represents, in essence, a desire for the enclosed, centred self; the self that is impermeable.



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Paper I (from Rock, Paper, Scissors)
2005

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Paper II (from Rock, Paper, Scissors)
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- fig. 43 Michelle Verwey
Scissors (from Rock, Paper, Scissors)
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- fig. 44 Michelle Verwey
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Sien Jy? (Turn a Blind Eye)
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Scissors (from Rock, Paper, Scissors) (detail)
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fig. 50
Michelle Verwey
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fig. 51
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