

***A SEMIOTIC READING OF GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH
AFRICAN ART AND FEMINIST WRITING***

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that "A semiotic reading of gendered subjectivity in contemporary South African art and feminist writing", is my own work and that all sources I have consulted or quoted have been fully acknowledged.



Mathilde De Gabriele

.....22.....day of.....November.....2002.

SUMMARY

This dissertation investigates the correlation between semiotic theory and the way that gendered subjectivity is represented in contemporary South African art. The phenomenon of signification is central to the semiotic theories of the Bulgarian semiotician and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. Semiotics can be described as the science of the sign that considers the way in which artists express their personal experiences in art making.

In this investigation I refer mainly to women's artworks, although the concept of gendered subjectivity in the work of male artists is also discussed. This particular research investigates the symbolic relations of culture in gender terms, that explores the apparent contradictions of subjectivity inherent in capitalist patriarchal society.

Key Terms:

Femininity; Difference; Negativity; Rejection; Drives; Transference; The Thetic; Enunciation; Abjection; Desire; Jouissance; Transcendence.

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PREFACE

A semiotic approach is capable of interpreting specific sign systems, like artists' gestures in performance art, for instance. In this research I have applied semiotic theory to analyse the concept of gendered subjectivity in recent developments in South African art, which draw on particular experiences of *femininity*. For the purposes of this dissertation, I chose to investigate semiotic theory because it offers an alternative means of interpretation in art criticism. A semiotic reading deconstructs the production of an ever-continuing process of signification in a text. Furthermore, I have decided to explore a semiotic psychoanalysis of gendered subjectivity because of the relevance to my own art making

At the age of forty, I began my art training at the University of South Africa after a designing career in the fashion industry. However, after the accidental death of my son, I realised that I could do better than immerse myself in the trivial world of fashion. It was during my transition from dress designer to conceptual artist that I became actively involved with representation, most especially with feminist issues. The late 1980s were also times of political unrest in South Africa with bloodshed in the townships and invasion of Angola by the South African defence force, when artists started to defy Apartheid and other issues most vigorously. These events in South African history and personal history significantly altered my personal expectations and subjective consciousness about the issue of sexual oppression. As a result, I experienced a

transformation from dress designer to a career in art when I realised that I needed to explore various aspects of my creativity.

Likewise, the act of role-playing during my performances allows me to recreate myself anew in artworks. Moreover, this process permits me to explore different identities that draw on particular experiences of *femininity* in patriarchal society. Most especially, this research was influenced by my visit to an exhibition entitled *Bringing up Baby* that was held at the Standard Bank Art Gallery, Johannesburg during December 1998. In particular, I was fascinated by the fact that artists on this exhibition challenged the concept of misogyny in art making. Above all, this exhibition encouraged me to investigate the way that hostility towards women is represented in contemporary local art.

The artists that I have selected for dissertation include Penny Siopis and Veronique Malherbe among others, who dispute various forms of discrimination between the genders, as well as cultural and religious prejudice in art making. Moreover, **I intend to focus on the way that artists' experiences of the outside world are inscribed in a work of art.** This study is informed by a poststructuralist approach, which explores a plural, inclusive, and contextualised aesthetics. This concept is premised on the role of artist in contemporary South African art as social transformer.

The artworks examined in this project are expressions of corporeal subjectivity that serve a dual political function. First of all, the works of art denounce oppressive power structures attributed to gender, and other forms of discrimination. Artists' description of personal experiences in the outer world brings to language the hurts and harms of oppressive structures. Alternatively, story telling offers a possibility for resistance, in the way that artists' experiences of oppression in art making **name power structures within**

contemporary South African society. In particular, such a description exposes cultural oppression in patriarchal society.

This investigation of South African art focuses on a semiotic psychoanalysis of gendered subjectivity. Semiotics is mainly a productive process that interprets social and historical conditions out of which the art works emerged. Various publications by Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud substantiate this theory that is used as a basis for this research. I am specifically interested the way in which Kristeva applies her semiotic theory to a reading of *femininity* in a text. Several feminist scholars like Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous have also applied semiotic perspectives in their articles on the problems of authorship, context and reception of an artwork; as well as the issue of sexual *difference* in relation to verbal and visual signs in a text.

Furthermore, this research project also consists of my own interpretation of selected artworks that encourages a subjective rather than a speculative viewpoint. In my writing this features as a trace: like an ironic reference, a displacement or transference. In my art making, I express my own particular subjective experiences of *femininity* in artworks in order to get a public hearing. In my interpretation of contemporary art, I present my reading as an ever-continuing process of the artists' experiences in the outside world, as psychoanalysis of myself. Artists' expression in art making is culturally significant because the signification incorporated in habit, feeling and perception orientation of individuals, are usually non-discursive.

I am particularly interested in the way that women are both revered and despised in contemporary society. The artworks that I chose for this project explores artists' personal experiences of *femininity* in art making. Most particularly, aspects in the art of Siopis and

other prominent artists also confirm how deeply power structures are internalised in contemporary South African society. Each chapter investigates a specific area of research that varies in each chapter, although there are some areas of overlap in the chapters.

Chapter 1 reconsiders how the Catholic Church's doctrines pertain to women's emotional censorship that is perpetuated by puritan ideals of European pietism; Chapter 2 reconstructs a postmodernist identity out of Otherness and *difference*. Moreover, it explores how the workings of viewers' subjective unconscious processes are involved in the interpretation of a narrative. Chapter 3 re-examines the notion that *femininity* is related to the female body. The emphasis in this section is on the conceptual process in art making, and the introduction of new techniques used by contemporary South African artists like video recording, for instance. The conclusion is the final phase of the dissertation and a type of summary that investigates the transient nature of contemporary art. It is argued that the launch of an artwork at an exhibition is a singular event, which nevertheless refers to a plurality of contexts. Furthermore, it confirms that onlookers are subjected to a process of semiosis, which confirms that the semiotic activity is present in the permanent oscillation between the subject and object -- between signifier and signified.

I would furthermore like to acknowledge my indebtedness to the University of South Africa for granting me a postgraduate bursary, as well as the Robin Aldwinckle merit scholarship. I would also like to acknowledge my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. E. Dreyer, and the late Mrs. V. Bester, as well as Prof. S. H. van Deventer who provided assistance and advice in an informal capacity, and to my family for their unlimited patience.

ABBREVIATIONS

Fig. *Figure*

O.D. *Oxford Dictionary*

s.v. *sub verbo*

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary process of mythmaking mainly involves the myth of woman as Holy Mother and Goddess but also the transformation of Goddess to Phallic Mother.¹ This research project concerns the potential mythic dimensions of imagery in the work of South African artists. Furthermore, it concerns the articulation of new myths in art making that express a shared crisis and rebellion against forms of oppression like sexual discrimination in patriarchal² society (Lauter 1984: 8-20).

The semiotic approach is central to my own art making and to the concept of subjectivity in Julia Kristeva's writing, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984).³ In my initial investigation of semiotic theory in *Revolution*, I discovered that a semiotic approach seemed an antithesis to traditional art criticism. Yet, a journal article by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson (1991: 199-235) also revealed that semiotics is one of many different signifying processes. The fundamental component of semiotics is the aspect of ongoing semiosis, which is located in the movement of one signifier to the next, but it also highlights the impossibility of its closure. However, this particular investigation reveals that the contextual determinants are subjected to a similar process of semiosis. Most especially, the purpose of this project is to apply a psychoanalytically informed semiotics to an interpretation of contemporary South African artworks.

¹ The concept of Phallic Mother is discussed extensively in Chapter 1.

² The term 'patriarchy' or 'phallogocentric', refers to a system in which the father is the head of the family. The word 'patriarchal' is associated with a system in Western society that is ruled by men.

³ Hereafter referred to as *Revolution*.

In my artworks, I adopt the character of the daughter of the archaic mother in performance art that empowers me to use the mother tongue and permits me to travel in foreign lands. It allows me to take on the appearance of an extra-terrestrial body that floats in space, which is similar to cyborgs portrayed in contemporary science fiction movies. This furthermore accounts for the strangeness of my appearance, of a character that is half-human, half-machine -- a hybrid of both, biological organism and machine. My narrative involves the development of female strength to the point that I take on the cultural responsibility of guardian to defend others and myself against prejudice in phallogentric society. Moreover, in my mythmaking I appropriate the myth of daughter of the matriarchal figure, to reveal something essential and necessary about femaleness, such as the myth of imagining a new way of being, that is practised in contemporary mythmaking. While my art making is rooted in my experiences of *femininity* and relationships with other people, the imagery also refers to new insights like hyper-reality that reach beyond the realm of the human.

I briefly outline keywords that apply to a reading of gendered subjectivity in this dissertation. Furthermore, my discussion of these keywords provides primary dimensions of a semiotic psychoanalysis. I present a semiotic approach, not in choosing a single meaning but by indulging in wordplay that results in a multiple reading of terms in this introduction, that forms the basis of the dissertation.

FEMININITY

I follow Kristeva's theories because her semiotic psychoanalysis provides a coherent theory of subjectivity. Kristeva (1984: 46) describes that in Western culture, female bodies are dramatically overcoded with resonance of motherhood that is presumed to be a natural function of women in society. Kristeva also claims in *Revolution* that women's individual identity is limited by this particular categorisation. In literal terms, Kristeva believes that men may not become mothers, even though

femininity is an attribute of **both** men and women (Kristeva 1984: 46).⁴ In other words, feminine characteristics are not necessarily restricted to women but are evident in some men as well.

Kristeva (in Oliver 1993: 112) believes that conventional beliefs of motherhood censors subjectivity and the relationship between women in general – but also the kinship between daughters and their mothers, and vice versa. Moreover, her theory on *femininity* and maternal language has significant implications for feminist theory and women's art practice, as it dismantles fantasies about motherhood and subverts conventional discourse of women as biological objects.⁵ Kristeva says that the feminine and maternal is an "unspoken" language which is similar to a statement made by Foucault⁶ that is:

...not first of all a social protest, although it is also that. It is a protest which consists in demanding that attention be paid to the **subjective** particularly which the individual represents, in the social order, of course, but also and above all to what essentially **differentiates** that individual, which is the individual's sexual **difference** (Kristeva in Oliver 1993: 112).

In other words, Kristeva claims that women, like men, have social needs of their own, such as the need for intellectual stimulation. Likewise, Foucault also asserts that women need to play an active role within society. In my opinion, to be feminised means that women's role in society is not restricted to mothering. Particularly, contemporary artists play an active role in society by collectively building effective theories of women's cultural oppression in art making and art critical writing. Notwithstanding, South African artists frequently use a secular discourse of motherhood in art making to make a distinction between maternity and women's *femininity*.

⁴ The concept of *femininity* by both men and women is further discussed under the keyword, '*difference*'.

⁵ In *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 1983, French theorist Michel Foucault's analysis of the disciplinary body opens important new ways about women's oppression.

⁶ Foucault (in Oliver 1993: 187), writes that: "people struggling for emancipation assert the right to be **different** and undermine everything which make individuals truly individual" 1993: 187, my emphasis in bold).

While Kristeva suggests that women must find a love for herself and their mothers, in *Ego and the Id*, German psychologist Sigmund Freud (1961: 29-31), maintains that women should not take their mothers as love objects if they wish to function normally. In other words, Freud discourages close relationships between women. Nevertheless, in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, French writer Irigaray (1985: 58), claims that the girl's relation with her mother is established during the phallic (masculine) phase of a girl's life. This is also known as the negative Oedipus stage, when the female child wishes to physically take possession of her mother (Irigaray 1985: 58). In my opinion, Irigaray suggests that it is natural that a mother has a close relationship with her daughter.

French feminist Cixous generated numerous publications in an attempt to describe *femininity*. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous (1976: 882) creates feminine myths by rereading mythological characters, such as Medusa and Cleopatra. She creates new myths of *femininity*, hereby discarding metaphors that are traditionally associated with the female body (Cixous 1976: 882). Cixous' mythic characters provide an alternative model of the sexual and nurturing witch, in which women characters empower themselves with different strategies as a means for their survival in a hostile world. In this dissertation, I explore the way artists develop a radical feminism to raise an awareness of cultural oppression, such as the social construction of women.

DIFFERENCE

Contemporary feminist theory and art practice deal with various stages of identity and *difference*. Kristeva (1984: 26) uses maternity, for example, to explain the relationship between subject and Other. Kristeva is concerned with developing a theory that addresses *difference* within personal identities. Within her terms, "subjectivity" begins with the

maternal body inside the mother's body, which she terms as the "chora" (Kristeva 1984: 26).⁷ Kristeva, describes the "chora" as follows:

...the **chora** is a womb or a nurse in which the elements are without identity and without reason. The chora is a **place of chaos** which is and becomes, preliminary to the constitution of the first measurable body... the chora plays with the body of the mother---of woman, but in the signifying process (Kristeva in Oliver 1993: 46).

Kristeva (in Oliver 1993: 46), also claims that the Other is always within the body that is established in the mother's uterus. In her model of maternity, the developing foetus is subjected to different, pleasurable emotions during pregnancy when the child cannot differentiate between its own body and the maternal body (Kristeva in Oliver 1993: 46).⁸ In other words, Kristeva believes that a person's ability to love other people begins before birth when a foetus is in close communication with their mother, which generates a loving relationship.

French existential phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, also makes a fundamental assumption about the infant's perception inside the mother's womb. In his publication *The Primary of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (1963: 119) demonstrates the psychical registration of external and internal stimuli on the child's body receptors during pregnancy as well as, the first year of an infant's life. In this way, Merleau-Ponty shows how corporeal subjectivity of individuals are initiated during pregnancy when an infant responds to emotional stimuli inside their mother's womb. In this dissertation, I discuss the way in which contemporary artists respond to pleasurable or painful experiences in the outer world that are expressed by their gestures in art making.

⁷ In *Revolution*, Kristeva (1984: 26), describes the term "chora" as a subjective space inside a mother's womb. Kristeva borrowed the term "chora" from the Greek philosopher Plato, who uses the term "chora" within the context of a receptacle like a vase, for example (Kristeva 1984: 26).

⁸ In her writing *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva (1993: 149), suggests that: "...[t]he subject can understand the other, sympathise with the other because the subject is the other" (Kristeva in Oliver 1993: 149, my emphasis in bold).

NEGATIVITY

Negativity is of central concern to the theories of Kristeva (1986: 33), who claims that *negativity* stimulates the movement of semiotic and symbolic elements within language. Kristeva's discourse on *negativity* is not an abstract thesis but a force, like the strong influence of subjects' experience in the outer world which ultimately defines personal identity (Kristeva 1986: 33). Consequently, one of her guiding principles is psychoanalysis, which analyses individuals' unconscious thought processes.

In *Revolution* Kristeva, (1984: 131) argues that while *negativity* initiates the subjectivity of a person, it subsequently also describes a subject's behaviour.⁹ Kristeva wants to conceive an ethics that includes *negativity*, which promotes rather than inhibits personal subjectivity. Kristeva's chief concern in semiotics is the development of the silent Other, to promote the expression of personal subjectivity in literature and art making (Kristeva 1984: 131). In this study, I apply a psychoanalytic approach in which I relate my own experiences of oppression in contemporary society, to artists' expressions of cultural oppression in South African art.

In *Powers of Horror*,¹⁰ Kristeva (1982: 143 -144) criticises Hegel's writing that women should play a submissive role in society because of women's biological function.¹¹ In other words, Hegel implies that women's role should be restricted to mothering and that women should not be allowed to participate in social transformation. In *Desire in*

⁹ Kristeva (1984: 131), argues that the theory on *negativity* by German phenomenologist G. W. F. Hegel is a totalitarian approach which inhibits personal subjectivity (Kristeva 1984: 131).

¹⁰ Hereafter referred to as *Powers*.

¹¹ American writer Marion Young (1990: 100-101), also comments on the social scheme expressed by Hegel in her publication *Throwing Like a Girl*. Young maintains that according to Hegel "...women must be excluded from the public life... (because they are the moral guardians of the body's *desire*...)" (Young 1990: 100-101, my emphasis in italics). By contrast, Kristeva appears to affirm a distinct and valued public place for female intellectuals in her writing.

Language,¹² Kristeva also suggests that a nation's moral "ethics ... may be gauged in proportion to the poetry that it presupposes" (Kristeva 1980: 25). The promotion of poetical expression, such as poetry and art within a society demonstrates a country's commitment towards social transformation. In *Revolution*, for example, Kristeva (1984: 29-30) refers to a *thetic*¹³ consciousness in the writing by 19th century French poet Stephane Mallarmé that facilitates viewers' interaction with his poetry. Kristeva explains that Mallarmé's transgressive writing is founded on dramatic new forms in the representation of absolute woman and fascinating mother (Kristeva 1984: 29-30). This project also examines viewers' interaction with dramatic forms, like the representations of Phallic Mother and Holy Mother in contemporary South African art.

REJECTION

Symbolic power is frequently associated with the law of the Father, which assumes that women are excluded from the use of symbolic language. Contemporary artists frequently raise an awareness of women's consciousness of non-existence, in contemporary art making. In particular, the expression of women's cultural oppression in contemporary society, is the driving force behind women's storytelling in South African art.

In *Revolution*, Kristeva (1984: 170-172) refers to the way subjects respond to intense stimuli in the outside world. Kristen (1984: 46), also maintains that women's authorial voice is suppressed by the Symbolic order. Kristeva (1984: 81), further points out that feminine empowerment is threatening the unity of the Symbolic system and this is why

¹² Hereafter referred to as *Desire*.

¹³ The term, *thetic* shall be discussed under the keyword, *The thetic* in this introduction.

women's authorial voice is suppressed by the Symbolic order.¹⁴ Moreover Kristeva (1984: 46), argues that the power of the feminine is found outside the Symbolic order, that is, outside the margins of culture (Kristeva 1984: 170-172; 46; 81). In this study, I explore the way in which contemporary artists explore empowerment outside the Symbolic system, by adopting virtual identities in performance art.

Furthermore Kristeva (1984: 157-158) borrows the notion of *negativity* from Hegel's (1979: 19) writing on *negativity* in *Phenomenology of Spirit* and adapts Hegel's theory to her theory on subjectivity (Kristeva 1984: 157-158; Hegel 1979: 19). This dissertation explores the way artists' experiences of oppression in the outer world are interiorised within their unconscious mind. In turn, this study also explores the way in which artists express their experiences of cultural oppression in art making.

DRIVE

Kristeva (1984: 151) describes the term "*drive*" as an unnameable, non-representable driving force that is infinitely in process, which is capable of initiating constant renewal in language. Most especially, the *drive* charge is found in the subjectivity of a person. Kristeva (1984: 167), also claims that a person's experience of oppression in the outer world leaves traces on the body in the form of neural imprints which is a type of psychical scarring (Kristeva 1984: 151; 167). This dissertation investigates the way in which artists use the skin as a writing surface to record painful experiences in the outside world.

¹⁴ I use the upper case for the term, Symbolic order and the lower case for the general use of the term, symbolic.

Moreover Kristeva (1984: 152), claims that the first expression of subjectivity *is* located in the mirror-stage before the Oedipal phase of a child's life. An infant's subjectivity is rooted in the infantile period before language acquisition when a child interacts with its parents and other family members. In particular, the drive charge relates to sensations of pleasure and pain experienced in the oral and anal regions of an infant's body. When an infant first recognises itself as a separate body from their mother, the child experiences this loss, and translates this loss through a game that is expressed in a primitive binary language (Kristeva 1984: 152). This phase of an infant's life is marked by a game in which a child, for example, incessantly throws their toys out of the cot to get a response from their mother. Yet Kristeva (1980: 195), further notes that a child is only able to distinguish between its own voice and their mother's voice after the mirror stage. In other words, Kristeva explains the way in which the mirror stage marks a phase in an infant's life when the child can make a distinction between harsh and gentle tones in their mother's voice.

Moreover, the mirror stage marks also marks a stage in a young girl's life when she realises that women exist within a particular relationship to the Symbolic order. Inter alia, this phase marks a moment when a young girl realises that she is sexually oppressed because of her prescribed biological role in society. Most especially, contemporary artists raise an awareness of the suppression of women's authorial voice. The quest for women's authorial voice is the driving force behind women's storytelling in contemporary art making.

TRANSFERENCE

New Zealand linguist Anna Smith (1996: 129), defines the term "*transference*" as "[s]peaking through the register of one body to that of another". This can be related to the

way writers identify themselves, with a character in a narrative. Kristeva (1984: 131), for example, writes herself into the text of *Revolution*, that describes her intention to transfer her own desires on to the text, which Kristeva describes as "the register of the text's formal structures [which] is another voice, another position" (Kristeva 1984: 131). The act of writing transposes Kristeva's feminine *desire* that is inscribed through the speech of a female intellectual, unto a text.¹⁵ This is similar to the way artists write themselves into a script by acting out the part of a leading character like a hero or heroine in performance art, for example.

In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy*,¹⁶ Kristeva (1989: 42) maintains that the earliest experience of primary *transference* can be traced to the first years of a child's life. She defines the phase immediately before the Oedipal stage, as an abject phase that is similar to Irigaray's phallic phase described above under the keyword, *femininity*. Kristeva suggests that at the abject phase, an infant can fantasise about an imaginary reunion with its mother, whereby the child is able to fantasise about the physical circumstances of its conception which enables a child to replace itself back inside the mother's womb (Kristeva 1989: 42).¹⁷ In this study, I examine a mimetic displacement of artists as Phallic Mother in performance art, that is likely an attempt by artists to reunite with the primary maternal mother -- through a fantasy of an imaginary reunion with their mother.

¹⁵ The notion of transference is described under the keywords, *transcendence* and *negativity*. Kristeva (in Smith 1996: 121) introduced the concept of *transference* in her work *Tales of Love* as a safeguard against unlimited *negativity* and ongoing semiosis in a text (Kristeva in Smith 1996: 121). Hereafter, *Tales of Love* is referred to as *Tales*.

¹⁶ Hereafter *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy* is referred to as *Black Sun*.

¹⁷ Kristeva derives this discourse from Freud's writing *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Vol. 18. (Freud 1973: 72).

THE THETIC¹⁸

In *Revolution* Kristeva (1984: 171-172), defines the term "*the thetic*" as the phase in which a subject takes up their position within the Symbolic order.¹⁹ It is initiated at the mirror-stage of a child's life, when he or she moves from its pre-symbolic connection with their mother, to identification with another in the mirror. At this point, infants begin to assimilate their own subjectivity into the system of language (Kristeva 1984: 171-172). In other words, at this phase children can relate to their position in the Symbolic system. Kristeva explains that "*the thetic*" phase:

... marks a threshold between the two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic. The second includes part of the first and the scission is thereafter marked by the break between the signifier and the signified. **Symbolic** would seem an appropriate term for this always split unification that is produced as a rupture ... [that] is impossible without it (Kristeva 1984: 48-49).

The first separation of an infant from the mother occurs at birth and hereafter the next break takes place at the mirror-stage. In *Powers*, Kristeva (1982: 158) explains that a male child feels rejected at the mirror-stage, when he realises that his body is separate from his mother's body, which compromises his identity. How can he now be a man when he was once a woman. He also feels angry because he now considers himself as a waste product that was once violently expelled from his mother's womb at birth. The *desire* for the Other is only reinstated once the male subject has entered language, which is after symbolic castration.²⁰ Thereafter, he is able to replace the *desire* for his mother with a mother-substitute in a heterosexual relationship (Kristeva 1982: 158). In this dissertation, I explore the way that the maternal mother is accessible through the process of *transference* -- that is, through a subject's re-union with the primal mother in language. I explain that Siopis' and my artworks are a search for a re-union with the primal mother.

¹⁸ The keyword, *the thetic* describes a noun. According to Lacan, the noun "the phallus", for example, is symbolic of "lack" (Lacan 1977: 286).

¹⁹ The Symbolic order refers to conformity within patriarchal society that expects subjects to behave in a specific manner.

²⁰ According to French psychologist Jacques Lacan (1977: 286), the castration complex operates on a different level. In *Feminine Sexuality* Lacan claims, that the woman is a symbol of castration because she does not possess the phallus, which therefore becomes both the symbol of lack and gratification (Lacan 1977: 286).

In *Revolution*, Kristeva (1984: 49) furthermore claims that a female child feels a powerful *desire* to fuse with her mother at the mirror-stage. Kristeva (1984: 182-183) also says that a young girl imitates her mother's speaking voice that echoes her aphorisms and turns of phrase, while mimicking her mother's facial expressions in the reflection of the acoustic mirror. She adds that a little girl derives her sense of identity from her mother, as she adopts her mother's dress sense and social manners (Kristeva 1984: 49; 182-183). However, entrance into language marks a young girl's division from her mother and transition to the Symbolic order.²¹ In *The Kristeva Reader*, Kristeva (in Moi 1986: 204) confirms this theory and explains that a girl has a "greater difficulty than the boy in detaching herself from the mother in order to accede to the order of signs as invested by the absence and separation is constitutive of the paternal function" (Kristeva in Moi 1986: 204). In my opinion, there is a natural affinity between mother and daughter, yet the Symbolic order does not permit a young girl to have an intimate relationship with her mother. At this stage of her life a young girl is likely to experience feelings of *rejection* when she is separated from her mother for the second time in her life.

In *Desire*, Kristeva (1980: 159-209) also notes that a woman can only restore this maternal relationship, either by becoming a mother herself or by having a homosexual relationship with another woman (Kristeva 1980: 159-209). Furthermore, Kristeva (1980: 182-183) argues that a woman can never fully recover from the original separation from her mother.²² This project investigates the positioning of artists as Phallic Mother in art making that describes the forbidden pleasure of a reunion with the primal mother. In this dissertation, my reading of Siopis' position as Phallic Mother,

²¹ According to the law of the Symbolic order, the girl's *desire* for her mother can never be anything but a contradiction of her normative *desire* for her father (Kristeva 1984: 30).

²² In *Black Sun*, Kristeva (1989: 83) writes that her psychotherapy sessions, provide therapeutic fantasies for her women patients to help them cope with the symbolic loss of their mothers, and alleviate the symptoms of their depression.

serves as a psychotherapy session in which I come to terms with my separation from the primal mother.

ENUNCIATION

The term '*enunciation*' refers both to the subjectivity of the speaker, and to the identity that is assigned to the pronoun used in the act of speech, such as the word, he or she. In speech an utterance relates to the manner adopted by a speaker during the speech act. In *Desire*, Kristeva (1980: 108-109) claims that the process of "*enunciation*" always refers to a speaker's position in the Symbolic order.²³ In other words, an artist always retains something paternal or maternal that is gestured towards in their performance.

Moreover Kristeva (1980: 124-147), argues that no utterance is without a dualistic logic of opposition between self and Other (Kristeva 1980: 124-147). Most especially, Kristeva's theories defend a subject on two levels. First, she names an awareness of sexual oppression within Symbolic culture and secondly, her writing denotes a starting point of resistance by a subject. The description of an artist's experience in contemporary art making, resists oppositional structures in Symbolic culture, particularly the way the retelling of experiences in the outer world cannot be categorised by oppressive structures in society. A female artist, for example, may describe the power play between genders by using her own body in performance art -- to subvert the structure of women's bodies as objects of *desire*.

²³ Although especially influenced by structuralism, Kristeva remains critical of the theories of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. In *Desire*, Kristeva claims (1980: 128-129) that Saussure does not acknowledge the speaking subject. In *The End of Art Theory*, American theorist Victor Burgin (1986: 73) relates structuralism to a production of meaning in a language object. He describes structuralism as a text that is "...conceived as a self-contained entity, ...whose capacity to **mean** is dependent on underlying formal structures common to all such works". Current forms of structuralist semiology include textual semiotics, deconstructive analysis and poststructuralist criticism. Burgin defines poststructuralism as the "...constantly changing 'flesh' of meaning..." in a language object (Burgin 1986: 73). In other words, poststructuralist criticism refers to the ever-changing meaning of a text.

ABJECTION

Abjection is present in the symbolic system of every culture, specifically in those activities that differentiate between borderline states, such as clean and unclean, proper and improper, as well as inside and outside. In a published interview Kristeva, (in Baruh and Serrano 1988: 135-136) describes that "*abjection*":

...is an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from the inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so... (Kristeva in Baruh and Serrano 1988: 135-136).

In my view, *abjection* describes a condition of alienation in contemporary society, in which an individual cannot share their thoughts with other persons in the fear that these ideas might be rejected. Yet the term, *abjection* also represents an attitude that people may have towards certain stereotypes in society.

In *Powers*, Kristeva (1982: 158) maintains that the maternal mother is represented in Western society both as a sublime and abject object, which obscures the distinction between these two images of motherhood. Kristeva also believes that current representation of women as profane sex object, for instance, as depicted in the mass media, is responsible for the *abjection* of women, as well as self-hatred on the part of women themselves (Kristeva 1982: 158). In this study I explore this form of *abjection* in my explorations of the aspect of women's bodies as seductive flesh in consumer advertising. Furthermore, I examine the way some women aspire towards the image of super models that is promoted by the mass media which consequently may lead to feelings of inadequacy if women do not meet these unrealistic expectations.

In *Tales*, Kristeva (1987: 146) furthermore argues that changes in Western society have eroded the boundaries and ideals of religion and romance. While Kristeva invites her readers to explore the founding myths of their own religious faith, she also suggests that modern culture needs a secular discourse of motherhood, like the mythological figure of the Virgin Mary (Kristeva 1987: 146). Kristeva (1987: 374) refers to role of the "Virgin" as:

...[t]he image of the Virgin—the woman whose entire body is an emptiness through which the paternal word is conveyed—had remarkably subsumed the maternal “abject”, which is so necessarily intra-psychic (Kristeva 1987: 374).

Hence Kristeva does not endorse the myth of the Virgin yet she points out that it is the only discourse on motherhood that is available, even though this discourse is inadequate. In particular, Kristeva suggests that feminists should use a discourse of motherhood, except that a distinction needs to be made in feminist discourse, between maternity and women's *femininity*. In my view, Kristeva argues that the myth of the "Virgin" in religious texts reinforce the Western myth of motherhood. Kristeva further suggests that women need to develop a subtle understanding of pleasures and experiences associated with motherhood and that mothers should not suppress their sexuality. In this dissertation, I explore the representation of the myth of the Holy Mother in contemporary art. I argue that artists exploit the ambiguity of the sacred image of motherhood to recognise the need for women's secular discourse on motherhood.

DESIRE

Psychoanalysis aims to reveal the connection between the conscious and unconscious processes of a subject.²⁴ It also demonstrates how symptoms are carefully guarded by the

²⁴ From a psychoanalytical point of view, the viewing of objects in the material world is experienced through the mental representation of objects in viewers' minds. The viewing experience demonstrates the inelible dependence of the inside and outside, mind and matter (Burgin 1986: 53). Viewers therefore play an important role in interpreting the given signs in art, which are examined in Chapter 2.

consciousness of an individual, as a subject's speech frequently expresses their inner desires. On the other hand, in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, French anthropologist Jean Laplanche (1968: 17) describes that *desire* may also be associated with fantasy objects. Laplanche explains that fantasy "... is not the object of *desire* but its setting... the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: he [sic] appears caught up himself in the sequence of images" (Laplanche 1968: 17, my emphasis in italics). In other words, Laplanche's use of the word "fantasy" speaks of subject's inner *desire* to express their feelings in a narrative. This dissertation explores "fantasy" in the story-telling by contemporary South African artists.

This scenario is similar to Lacan's account of *desire*, that is governed by subjects' physical needs and demands. In his publication, Lacan (1977: 69) provides an example of a baby's call for nourishment that is satisfied when milk is provided. In this case, however, a child's *desire* is directed neither to the milk nor to the mother, but towards a fantasy – of fulfilment (Lacan 1977: 69). Lacan's use of the word "*desire*" aspires to the early stage of children's libido. Notably the origins of fantasy here are inseparable from the outset of sexuality as described by Freud. In his writing *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, that Freud (1973: 204-205) describes "*desire*" as follows:

Sexual excitation, which arises as a concomitant effect as soon as the intensity of those processes passes beyond certain quantitative limits. What we have called the component drives of sexuality are either derived directly from these internal sources or are composed of elements both from those sources and from the erotogenic zones (Freud 1973: 204-205).

In the above words, Freud claims that the (sexual) libido of a child is present from birth, which is induced by the suckling at their mother's breast. Freud, nevertheless, believes that an infant's sexuality can be activated through the biological drives. According to Freud's theory of sexuality as described in the above publication, a metonymic shift occurs when a basic biological function of the oral drive – that the intake of breast milk – is associated by the baby's sensual enjoyment of sucking.

In my view, Freud's theory suggests that infants' libido can be stimulated during breast-feeding.

Kristeva's semiotic theories provide another interpretation of primary identification of *desire*, based on the oral stage of a child's life that introduces the baby to a loving relationship. According to Kristeva, the complexities of motherhood have been overlooked in the discourse of both Lacan and Freud. In *Revolution*, Kristeva (1984: 27) explains that a child identifies themselves in relation to their mother's breast. Breast-feeding provides a child with oral gratification and hence, with the potential of making a metaphorical connection between receiving food from the mother, as well as, being able to receive her words. Kristeva also maintains that an attempt by an infant to wean itself from the mother's breast signifies a child's separation from the mother for the inauguration into the Symbolic order (Kristeva 1984: 27). In my discussion of local art, for example, explores the way in which Penny Siopis and Veronique Malherbe equate mother food with sustenance in language that is provided by a mother's loving relationship with her child.

JOUISSANCE

It is not possible to provide a single exclusive definition of the term *jouissance*, as it escapes accurate description. Total sexual ecstasy is its most common translation, but in contemporary feminist writing the word *jouissance* is often used to make an association between a person's subjectivity and their sexual characteristics.

In *Revolution* Kristeva (1984: 478), claims that experimental writing of modernity like the concepts of *jouissance* and social transgression, are at their most developed in the poetry of Mallarmé. She acknowledges the impressive rhetoric of Mallarmé and describes his writing as a struggle against conventional norms in bourgeois society that prohibits the expression of *jouissance*. Kristeva (1984: 153-154), also explains that

Mallarmé's work appropriates the maternal language, thus highlighting the construction of subjectivity in a text (Kristeva 1984: 478; 153-154).²⁵ In this study, I discuss the transgression of power structures by both male and female artists in contemporary art making that illuminate discrepancies in local society. I explore the way that South African artists Minnette Vari and Penny Siopis express maternal *jouissance* in contemporary art making, in an attempt to subvert conservative attitudes towards maternal sexuality.

The above publications are all indications that there is an attempt to interpret corporeal subjectivity in contemporary literature. Kristeva proposes the assimilation of subjects' shared pre-oedipal experiences, which are based on a *desire* to love and be loved by other individuals. This dissertation investigates suppression of their person-hood by power structures in contemporary patriarchal society.

TRANSCENDENCE

Transcendence can be described as raising above, or existing apart from the world. This state of a priori was originally derived from the theories of German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In *Being and Time* Heidegger (1962: 74), reveals that a myth of *transcendence*, is particular to subjects' position in time and place (Heidegger 1962: 74).²⁶ However, Kristeva (1984: 128) also notes that a transcendent entity, like religion and art – is founded on an interruption of time, which is capable of lifting a subject out of their current situation. These theorists explain how a transcendent entity

²⁵ In *Revolution* Kristeva (1984: 195), associates poetic language with the sex drive. She notes that Mallarmé's writing releases particular forms of social identifications which are specifically concerned with esoteric imagery, like the castrated woman, for instance, as well as the figure of the Father who represents the Law, power of the State, and religious images, such as God (Kristeva 1984: 195).

²⁶ This is explained further in Chapter 1.

like art and religion offers a person a 'space' in which an individual can escape and withdraw from the world.

In *Desire* Kristeva (1980: 164), also considers mimetic displacement to be an indispensable precondition for the stimulation of a person's subjectivity. My art making investigates the positioning of myself as Phallic Mother that is based on both a virtual and a real construct in cyberspace. The character of Phallic Mother reveals the myth of *transcendence* that enables a subject to transcend from their current situation in the real world to another reality. Moreover, the Phallic Mother appears to have considerable descriptive and metaphorical status in Kristeva's work.

Furthermore Kristeva (1980: 191-242), claims its phantasmatic presence is no less apparent in the most grotesque and fully developed cultural stereotype of *femininity* itself. Most especially, Kristeva's map charts the process of a desiring, enunciating subject in a text. In this text, the female voyager is the Phallic Mother, who is in possession of the desired object, but the woman cannot symbolise the phallus and is thus exiled to the edge of language.²⁷ The traveller cannot herself be the Phallic Mother, but is nevertheless obliged to position herself in the Symbolic order, even though this anchorage is less certain than it is for a man (Kristeva 1980: 191-242). Women artists explore new myths like the Phallic Mother in contemporary art making to find feminine empowerment outside the Symbolic system. Kristeva (1980: 164) also argues that women are imagined as equal to men in the Symbolic system, although women's identification with "*femininity*" remains distinctive. Kristeva (1980: 164) explains that:

²⁷ The nature of fetishism in Symbolic culture denies that the Phallic Mother is castrated (Smith 1996: 180). This fetish object has a powerful effect on language, aesthetics and social practice. For it releases dramatically new forms of representations through figures of absolute woman; fascinating mother but also absent father. In this investigation, these particular aspects of femininity are manifested in my own art making and is investigated in the art of Penny Siopis and other prominent artists.

...I think that for a woman, generally speaking, the loss of identity in *jouissance* demands of her that she experience the phallus that she simply is; but this phallus must immediately be established somewhere; in narcissism, for instance, in children, in a denial/or hypostasis of the other woman, in a narrow-minded mastery, or in fetishism of one's "work" [such as writing, painting, knitting for example] (Kristeva 1980: 164, my emphasis in italics).

In my opinion, Kristeva refers to the way that women are constantly assessed in relation to men, especially in discussions of equality and *difference*. Moreover, Kristeva explains that women's *jouissance* is redirected to the satisfaction women get from acquiring skills like art making, for instance. This dissertation analyses the way in which artists explore women's subjective potential in art making to prove that women are indeed sentient subjects who are in touch with their feelings.

Moreover in *Tales*, Kristeva's (1987: 37) discourse expresses a concern about the female body and repression of *femininity* in language. Kristeva is not particularly concerned with sexual *difference* and does not specifically privilege women in her research, while she affirms **particular** experiences, in both men and women in her text. Whereas Kristeva's semiotic theory analyses the primary drama of subjects' separation from the primary mother at birth, and at the mirror stage, it also considers interpersonal relationships.

As an alternative to abjection, the expression of artists' experiences in the outer world can also be understood as signifying **particular** experiences of *femininity* that relate to particular to conditions in the South African society. Most particularly, this dissertation investigates how experiences of cultural oppression in South African society, are reflected in a work of art. In the first chapter, I apply Kristeva's semiotic theories to a reading of contemporary South African art to analyse artists' experiences of oppression in capitalist patriarchal society as psychoanalysis of myself; and furthermore compare South African artworks to a Renaissance work by Leonardo da Vinci (1432-1519).

CHAPTER 1

ARTISTS AS SOCIAL TRANSFORMERS

This chapter applies Kristeva's semiotic theory to corporeal subjectivity in contemporary art practice. It demonstrates that female artists always retain something maternal in their speech, which is never explicitly formulated -- even when that something is gestured towards in a text. Yet a semiotic approach also considers recent developments in contemporary South African art making, such as **the role of artists as social transformers.**

In this section, I have researched the work of local artists who reconsider the representation of the mythical character of Holy Mother. I explain how Penny Siopis negates this projection, while Veronica Malherbe mocks this concept. Nevertheless, I also investigate how Siopis' and Malherbe's art contrasts with the work of Leonardo da Vinci during the Renaissance who appropriates the role of the Virgin Mary as mother. In this chapter, South African artists address the issue of women's oppression by doctrines of the Catholic Church. I apply a reading of Siopis' and Malherbe's artworks to my experiences of religious oppression that are perpetuated by puritan ideals of European pietism.¹

Artworks can raise certain issues in contemporary society like religious oppression, for example, that reveals the reality of women's emotional censorship through the Catholic

¹ European puritan pietism refers to a censorship that is applicable to South African women of Caucasian descent. Puritan pietism concerns a fear of a domineering male God that is inherent in their upbringing which results in women's submissive role in society. Most especially, Afrikaner women are exposed to the effects of Calvinism that effects women's image of themselves and their sexuality. These issues were discussed at a conference of the South African Council of Churches in 1996, as well as, current trends of local religious feminism (Landman 1997: 14-16).

Church's indoctrination. In *Revolution*, Kristeva (1984: 148) claims that viewers are exposed to certain ideas, mainly through the interweaving and intersecting of two threads, which she argues is a "consciousness" that "*drives*" a person to act in a certain manner (Kristeva 1984: 148).² Kristeva's word "consciousness" relates to awareness that religious women, for example, like a fear of punishment from a domineering male God, should they deviate from leading virtuous lives. In particular, the Catholic Church advocates the purity of the Holy Mother in the Church's gospels and statues of the Virgin Mary to inspire women to lead a chaste life. Kristeva's term, "*drives*", for instance, relates to the way women artists resist the doctrines of the Catholic Church. I myself was raised as a staunch Catholic and I consider my own criticism of the Catholic Church's doctrines quite risqué. At times I felt that I should not criticise the Church's doctrines or dare to mention maternal sexuality in this dissertation, for instance. In other words, I had to relinquish my inhibitions of a Catholic upbringing before I could interpret the artworks in this dissertation.

In particular, Kristeva's linguistic and psychoanalytical work expose the subjectivity of a speaker, which Kristeva (1986: 35) describes as a text "in which the elaboration of poetic meaning emerges" (Kristeva 1986: 35). In this context, she refers to the word "poetic" language as something that is implied in the speech of a speaker, which is not apparent in ordinary language. Kristeva (1980: 25) defines the term "poetic" language as an activity "in which the dialect of a subject is inscribed" (Kristeva 1980: 25). Her remark relates to a form of deconstruction in semiotics, which discloses an irreducible, tangible element in a narrative.³ In my opinion, Kristeva refers to an underlying truth that is

² As stated by Freud (1961: 128), the interpretation of visual images can be activated by dreams which arise in the body's perceptual system, that are responsible for translating a perception into a series of recognisable ideas linked with certain affects (Freud 1961: 128). This reading is central to the theory of Kristeva (1980: 175) on "estrangement". Kristeva explains that "estrangement" is not that which is alien but something that is well-known (Kristeva 1980: 175). These aspects shall be further discussed in Chapter 2.

³ The theory on personal "dialogue" by Kristeva (1980: 64) is informed by the writing of Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin (Kristeva 1980: 64).

revealed through semiotic psychoanalysis. In this chapter, a semiotic reading is applied to an interpretation of South African art to disclose a form of emotional censorship in patriarchal society. Kristeva (1980: 135-136) also explains that a semiotic activity introduces a "fuzziness in language [which is] a feature that a univocal, rational, scientific discourse tends to **hide**". Kristeva's reference to an unspoken discourse describes something that is prohibited in contemporary society. This chapter, for example, explores women's expression of maternal sexuality in art making that is considered taboo in patriarchal society.

Several contemporary South African women artists like Siopis and Malherbe, refer to an expression of maternal *femininity* in art making. In the first part of this chapter, Siopis' and Malherbe's enactment of motherhood is compared to Leonardo da Vinci's depiction of the Holy Mother during the Renaissance. Most especially, the metaphorical and metonymic relationships between given signs in art making are investigated. In the second part of the chapter, a semiotic reading is applied to contemporary South African art works to explore the role of artists as social transformers.

1.1 SUBJECTIVITY

Works of art are both products of artists' *enunciation* and products of continuous production. It can be argued, therefore, that artworks function as a mediator between artists and viewers. This concept is premised on the possibility that viewers can enter into conversation with artists during the viewing process when spectators' questions intersect with the thought processes of artists. For example, viewers may ask themselves what *drives* women artists to make the artworks. Moreover, spectators may also interpret artists' expression of maternal *jouissance* in art making as a rebellious act against women's emotional suppression in patriarchal society.

Intent on explaining how a subject comes to language, Kristeva (1986: 83) takes up Derrida's theories on the deconstruction of meaning and applies these to her own reading of subjectivity (Kristeva 1986: 83). According to Derrida, discourse is only brought into being once it is framed, as he believes that it cannot define a discussion without a "frame".⁴ Once the frame is in place, a text can also describe the exterior circumstances of an artwork. Moreover, Derrida (1987: 81) argues that: "[t]here is a frame, but the frame does not exist" and he explains that in order:

...to distinguish between the internal or proper meaning and the circumstances of the object in question... it presupposes a discourse on the boundry between the inside and outside of an art object, in this case a discourse on a frame (Derrida 1987: 81).

In other words, Derrida refers to a "discourse on a frame" as an extension of artist's dialogue to a frame in an artwork. This implies conceptual framing, in the way that artists' experiences in the outside world are reflected in an artwork. In my art making, for instance, I place objects within hollow frames that contextualises the image inside the artwork.

According to Kristeva (1984: 82-83), subjects' experiences in the outside world are interiorised and expressed, for example, by artists' gestures in art making. Kristeva's theory on subjectivity recognises different constructs of reality explored in the writing of Derrida on the *parergon*,⁵ Lacan on the mirror-stage⁶ and Freud on dream thoughts.⁷ Kristeva also recognises Lacan's and Freud's theories on *desire*, yet Kristeva makes a metaphorical connection between subjects' *desire* and experiences in the outside world that is prompted by Derrida's discourse on the *parergon* (Kristeva 1984: 82-83). In other

⁴ Derrida (1987: 4-6), suggests that art is founded on truth. This concept of truth shall be further discussed in Chapter 2.

⁵ Derrida's writing introduced discontinuity within the structures of philosophy through his introduction of the *parergon*. While, the fundamental concepts of philosophy assume that a permanent separation exists between the inside and outside, Derrida called for dissolution of the inside and outside. Derrida's theories explain that subjects can achieve mastery of themselves and objects in the outside world, only through reflection, provided the dissolution between these entities is maintained (Smith 1996: 90).

⁶ Lacan's mirror-stage marks the phase when infants first recognise in the acoustic mirror that they are separate entities.

words, Kristeva applies Derrida's theory on the *parergon* to the way texts evoke memories from viewers' social history. In this chapter, I discuss the way that Siopis' and Malherbe's artworks express personal experiences in the outside world that, nevertheless, also reflects upon the viewers' social histories.

Likewise, artworks evoke memories from spectators' personal experiences in the outer world. In a sense, spectators become subjects-in-process when they interact with the images in artworks, which in turn is influenced by their social history.⁸ The semiotic theory of Kristeva (1980: 38) gives rise to "intertextuality"⁹ between viewers and visual texts that are considered in this chapter. Within this context, Kristeva's reference to "intertextuality" relates to an open-play between artworks and onlookers. In particular, I apply my interpretation of Penny Siopis and Veronique Malherbe's artworks to a reading of my own experiences in South African society, as psychoanalysis of myself.

1.1.1 EXPERIENCE

A semiotic psychoanalysis of Penny Siopis' artwork entitled *Breasts: Feeding* (1998), (Fig. 1),¹⁰ describes a story from her own life history that is based on the representation of a religious myth. In this process an artist does not simply repeat the mythic tale. On the contrary, Siopis allegedly recontextualises the narrative by altering information in the

⁷ Freud's theory of the unconscious reveals the connection between *desire* and fantasy.

⁸ Spectators can also relate to artworks on universal, social, moral or intellectual levels. Chapter 2 explores these issues further.

⁹ According to Kristeva (1980: 38), the concept of "intertextuality" emerged in Greek drama, the adventure novel during the Renaissance and within the epic of medieval carnival (Kristeva 1980: 38). Kristeva (1980: 48-49) refers to the Medieval fable of *Song of Roland and Round Table Cycles*, as a dramatic banter in which the character is portrayed both as hero and traitor of the epic, that intended to convey a moral message to an audience. Moreover, Kristeva describes this particular drama as an ambiguous epic in carnivalesque writing that is based on a moral tale - a fictitious story that is usually well known. In particular, Kristeva argues that the term "carnival" acquires a derogatory meaning in society that is mainly attributed to the subversive discourse of the text (Kristeva 1980: 48-49).

¹⁰ Penny Siopis, *Breasts: Feeding* (1998). Still from video installation, 8 minutes. Travelling exhibition, *Bringing Up Baby*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg. Dimensions variable. Photograph by unknown press photographer, *Mail & Guardian*. The artist's collection. Hereafter referred to as *Feeding*.

original text, to subvert fixed concepts of motherhood in phallogentric society. Siopis investigates the way Catholic Church's doctrines repress women's self-esteem and sexuality.

Siopis superimposes the video presentation with a text across the imagery, namely written in the third person that discloses a narrative script based on a real event. This particular presentation¹¹ emphasises the artist's autonomy in art making. Most especially, *Feeding* refers to the controversial issue in patriarchal society of a repression of a mother's eroticism with her child.¹² The self-pleasuring references made by Siopis to her own body, acknowledges that breast-feeding is a pleasurable experience between mother and her child. In particular, contemporary society insists on the suppression of this relationship, in order to maintain a specified connection between the child's mother and father. I consider this gesture of Siopis a rebellious act against the prescribed code of behaviour for women in patriarchal society that does not allow mothers to derive pleasure from the experience of breast-feeding. I can relate to Siopis' experience from my own experience of breast-feeding, that breast-feeding is an intimate experience between mother and child.

Feeding also reveals Siopis' search for a relationship with the maternal mother, namely in the image of the Madonna and Child,¹³ except for one important *difference*. While Siopis seems to exemplify mother-love and the love of a child for its' mother that is the same as a sexual relationship, in this performance she redefines a mother's sexuality and with it

¹¹ The process of presentation is discussed further in Chapter 3. Particularly, the way in which artworks are presented in a gallery or public place that effects the reading of artworks.

¹² Siopis apparently makes a statement that the separation of women's sexuality from motherhood instantiates a repression and censorship of female sexual *desire* in contemporary South African society.

¹³ This myth has been represented in art since antiquity. Kristeva (1980: 255; 258) illustrates examples of fifteenth century Renaissance artworks by Giovanni Bellini, like *Madonna and Child and Saint Jerome* (1460-1464) and, *The Presentation in the Temple* (1460-1464) respectively (Kristeva 1980: 255; 258).

her own **particular** experience of *jouissance*. *Feeding* is an attempt to redefine maternal sexuality, which is repressed in phallogentric society. In this way, Siopis deals with a subversive discourse like certain aspects of *femininity* that are considered taboo, depised and marginalized in patriarchal culture. *Feeding* explores the way that religious women are particularly prone to religious oppression in South African society because of the restrictions that the Catholic Church's imposes on the expression of women's sexuality. I share Siopis' view that the Catholic Church prescribes a moral code for women that determines women's behaviour in society.

In fact, Siopis' performance in *Feeding* can be considered a displacement¹⁴ of her identity as she explores aesthetic and religious issues in art making. Nevertheless, an inquiry into the iconography of this artwork leads to other questions. English theorist Jonathan Culler (1982: 68), in this regard, argues that a context is determined by interpretative strategies used by readers. In particular, a semiotic reading of art depends on the manner in which viewers approach works of art. In the following interpretation, I adopt a comparative approach, which juxtaposes Siopis' work *Feeding*, with Veronique Malherbe's work entitled *Preserving Purity*, 1998, (Fig.2).¹⁵

Despite subtle differences in style, and the fact that these works were shown on the same travelling exhibition, *Bringing Up Baby* during 1998, both artworks combine biography and autobiography to render an account of social prejudice against women in patriarchal society. Similar to Siopis' work, Malherbe's exhibit also compares motherhood with maternal sexuality. Like Siopis' art video, Malherbe's work expresses her autonomy. Notwithstanding, art critic Lloyd Pollock (1998: 7) refers to Malherbe's work as essentially narcissistic. Pollock argues that Malherbe suffers from: "self-infatuation, rather than analysing the experience of motherhood other artists so incisively addressed

¹⁴ Displacement describes a hidden truth, while condensation can be defined as two different events in a narrative (Bal and Bryson 1991: 197).

¹⁵ Veronique Malherbe, *Preserving Purity* (1998). Travelling exhibition, *Bringing Up Baby*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg. Suspended installation of bottles, photographs. Photograph by unknown press photographer, *Elle* magazine. Dimensions variable. The artist's collection.

[in this group exhibition]" (Pollock 1998: 7). In my opinion, Pollock's criticism furthers his own interests, by systematically trivialising women's language in Malherbe's art making, that hereby makes Pollock appear linguistically more powerful than Malherbe. Pollock deliberately focuses on the use of Malherbe's figurative image in the photographs but ignores the fact that Malherbe records her maternal experience like the artists in the same exhibition.

Pollock fails to recognise that Malherbe's work aligns the female body in a problematic way that identifies her body with conventional prescriptions for motherhood like the terms, pure and good. Malherbe subverts the presumption of a mother's propriety by including nude photographs of herself and her baby, simultaneously with photographs of her impersonation as the Virgin Mary and child in the same installation. In this way, she defies the limitations imposed by patriarchal society on acceptable standards of behaviour for mothers. Hereby, Malherbe brings traditional concepts of the sacredness of motherhood into question but also challenges the most inviolable concept of motherhood in Western society -- namely the religious imagery of Holy Mother. Moreover, Malherbe's central position throughout the installation places Malherbe in a position of power that has hitherto been preserved for men in patriarchal society.

Pollock's response to Malherbe's work is in all likelihood, a demonstration of the battle for linguistic supremacy. It refers to a long masculine tradition that confuses female autonomy with inferiorizing ways in which women are perceived to speak, like woman's garrulousness that describes female speech as mouthy, babbling and, long-windedness. In my opinion, Malherbe's *desire* for empowerment is particularly fluid, for it reveals a hunger to express herself in her own words -- and her personal experience of cultural oppression in the outside world. Malherbe (1999: 1-2) displayed documentation of her maternal experience next to her exhibit on the wall that reads as follows:

Necessity is more often the mother of convention, but you must attempt the impossible or face the inevitable. Stubbornness being your most sterling quality, you still insist on being an artist. **YOU COLLECT FREE MOMENTS LIKE PENNIES IN A JAR.** And you collect empty jars. You feed Ariel 300 jars of baby food. You are no cook, but you become a bottle washer of note. The photobooth becomes your art studio and you cart Ariel off to the station with you every two weeks. By the third of June you will have clocked up 300 portraits. If a picture equals a thousand words, well... that's 300 000 words, **messages** in bottles, two years of your life suspended from the ceiling in a ferris wheel of light... preserving for posterity both that which you would like to remember and that which you would like to forget (Malherbe 1999: 1-2, my emphasis in bold).

In this documentation, Malherbe elaborates on her experience of motherhood and triumphs as an artist by creating an artwork that consists of a discourse and word-play, not by capturing conceited images of herself and her baby, but in the conceptual presentation of the memorabilia in the gallery space. Hereby, the suspended installation resembles a Ferris wheel that functions metaphorically as a mode of transport, which conveys Malherbe and her son, Ariel on their journey down memory lane.¹⁶ The chandelier-like installation is composed of Purity jars suspended from the ceiling of the gallery, that intersects the gallery space, while the spiral form of this construction takes viewers on a tour, that is similar to a circuit. Spectators read the story of Malherbe's experience depicted in the photographs inside the bottles, from the outer edge of the installation till the centre is reached, which then leads viewers back to the beginning of the excursion.

I believe that Malherbe's artwork *Preserving Purity*, makes a statement about the imposition of motherhood on a woman's social life. This is, furthermore, explained in the typed testimony by Malherbe (1999: 1-2) that accompanies the artwork which reads as follows: "Once you have a child, you have no time for diarising OR living, let alone making art, and your life can be divided into B.B. (before baby) and A.B. (after baby). Ask any woman who has one" (Malherbe 1999: 1-2). In my view, Malherbe created this artwork not only to verify that bringing up a baby is very time consuming but also to declare the stigma and hatred against reproductive, pregnant women in South African society.

¹⁶ The play on the word, preserving in the title relates to the preservation of memories, yet the term, purity is also a trade name for bottles of baby food.

Malherbe's work parodies male chauvinism in contemporary society.¹⁷ In particular, the testimony that accompanies the artwork which explains how Malherbe was "immaculately deceived" by her boyfriend, and deserted her after she fell pregnant. Likewise, the title *Preserving Purity*, refers also to a play of words, such as the preservation of innocence, but also to a puritan who claims to be innocent and free of any guilt. In particular, Malherbe challenges the prejudiced religious beliefs of her Roman Catholic boyfriend who refuses to practice birth control because of the Church's doctrines to promote life. Yet, when Malherbe fell pregnant her Roman Catholic boyfriend urged her to have an abortion to destroy life. Above all, Malherbe's work reveals a play of words on the preservation of purity, like the preservation of morals that in turn refers to a puritan as a person of scrupulous behaviour in religion or morals. In this play of words, the irony in Malherbe's narrative becomes apparent. Indeed, a semiotic reading of Malherbe's artwork reveals that the definition of the word, purity is endlessly deferred.¹⁸

Nonetheless, the work *Preserving Purity* is also aggressive in the way that the suspended installation cuts across the gallery space that demands the viewers' attention. Moreover, Malherbe reshapes the visual images of herself so that the imagery works in favour of women, rather than against women. Yet, Malherbe empowers the woman figured in the installation through the explicit centring of gender, but also in her role-playing of the Holy Mother. In my opinion, Malherbe makes a contribution in *Preserving Purity* towards building effective theories of women's experience in contemporary society, by naming oppressive structures like sexual oppression in her art making.

¹⁷ Malherbe (1999: 1-2), explains that she was "immaculately deceived" when she fell pregnant because her Roman Catholic boyfriend would not use condoms, claiming that it is against his religious beliefs. Ironically, when she became pregnant he urged her to have an abortion that is against the practice of the Roman Catholic faith. Moreover, the baby's father leaves her to fend for herself and only sees Ariel, nine months after he was born. Furthermore, the first attempt by the baby's father of taking care of Ariel, ends in near disaster when his son drinks beetle poison (Malherbe 1999: 1-2).

¹⁸ The title *Preserving Purity* also suggests that the Roman Catholic Church advocates the Immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, which preserves the purity of the Holy Mother.

Moreover, a favourite South African expression reinforces this phenomenon namely that "a woman's place belongs in the kitchen, barefoot and pregnant". Malherbe's work addresses a derogatory statement that is a cause of common aggravation to many women namely, that a mother plays a subservient role within the household. *Preserving Purity* reflects the dehumanisation of reproductive, pregnant women that is exemplified by Pollock's criticism of Malherbe's work. In my opinion, Malherbe's work contributes towards the process of socio-political transformation in which she request that South African women take control of their gendered bodies. In this regard, South African theologian Christina Landman (1997: 20) writes that women need "... to integrate their bodily and societal experiences with their mental activities". Landman adds that women can "discover the liberative aspects of religious culture [which enables] religious women to heal society, the land and their memories" (Landman 1997: 20). Landman mainly relates to a reading of the Holy Scriptures, while I believe that Siopis' and Malherbe's artworks promote liberating aspects in art making which subverts religious oppression in contemporary South African society.

Siopis and Malherbe both pertain to women's cultural oppression and censorship that is perpetuated by puritan ideals of European pietism, which insists on women's passive role in society. In my view, both *Feeding* and *Preserving Purity* reflect on theological circumstances in contemporary South African society. Particularly, Siopis and Malherbe call on women to use their bodies as a tool to express painful and pleasurable experiences, while these gestures empower women to relinquish their inhibitions in art making.

1.1.2 EXPRESSION

Siopis' work is an expression of her experiences of cultural oppression in contemporary South African society. Moreover, the liberative aspects in Siopis' work, *Feeding*, also

refer to an expression of *jouissance*. Yet, the deliberate narcissistic emphasis on herself, the self-pleasuring reference to her own body and her apparent autobiography, also speaks of her *desire* to express maternal eroticism in art making.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the viewers' imagination also plays an important part in the interpretation of *Feeding*.²⁰ On account of this transmutation, I was able to interpret the artwork as a text by the clues provided in the work. A special reference is made to the body,²¹ that relates to Siopis' expression of *femininity* in a text. Within this discourse, Siopis places herself within a specific relationship in which she is relegated to a different position within the Symbolic order. It is almost as if she asks spectators to make a choice between the mother figure as a profane sex object or an autonomous woman who is in possession of her own feelings. I believe that it describes the way Siopis gives expression to intrasubjective and corporeal experiences in her art making.²² I originally chose to view this artwork because I could relate to Siopis' feelings of sexual oppression, which I investigate further in this dissertation.

Siopis examines the specificity of female psychology and its symbolic realisations in an exploration of the sign-system within the Symbolic order. From this position, Siopis is at ease with the signs used to represent her body in *Feeding*. Above all, Siopis exemplifies

¹⁹ According to French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1981: 198), "discourse is always about something. It refers to a world it claims to describe, to express, and to represent [for] it is in discourse that all messages are exchanged". This implies that a verbal or written discourse has a hidden agenda.

²⁰ Kristeva (in Smith 1996: 91-92), claims that the registration of mental images on people's minds are gestures of imaginary miming, that recalls the movements of the drives and primary processes -- from the inside (Kristeva in Smith 1996: 91-92). Imaginary language can be described as a space that is occupied in the viewers' minds, in which readers' most ancient and vulnerable memories, can be revived, so that spectators momentarily take these projections for real. The concept of reality is explained in Chapter 2.

²¹ A semiotic reading of an artwork often refers to key concepts of psychoanalytic theory like imaginary, and visual concepts, such as, the breast or the phallus. Psychoanalytical revision of artworks include, a semiotic reading by T.J. Clark (1985: Plate VI) of Manet's *Olympia*, in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the art of Manet and his Followers* (Clark 1985: Plate VI). Psychoanalytic interpretation is discussed further in Chapter 2.

²² In Symbolic language, the place of women appears structured as the semiotic, apparently through the symbolic activity of differentiation and separation; both as revered subjects and despised objects. Freud (1961: 252) considers women's different position in language, as the *difference* between being and having the phallus.

a **redefinition** of a Mother's relationship with her child, in her representation of the myth of the Virgin Mother and Child -- that is reinforced by a *transcendent* entity in the work. Ricoeur (1974: 29) describes "myth" as, an "arrangement in narrative form, the relation to rite and to a determined social function". In my opinion, Ricoeur's words Siopis' "narrative form" in *Feeding* describes the myth of Phallic Mother,²³ yet it is left up to viewers to review this myth as a social text. In other words, spectators decide whether to accept Siopis' portrayal of motherhood in *Feeding* as a mother or autonomous woman that consequently leads to a consideration of the viewers' own position within the Symbolic order. My viewing experience of *Feeding*, led to extensive research into gender relations and consideration of my own identity in contemporary patriarchal society.

Furthermore Kristeva (1984: 58-59) explains that a narrative is constantly subjected to "mimetic discourse" in which viewers choose their position within the Symbolic order. Kristeva further argues that "mimesis":

...involves an altering of **the thetic** position ...the destruction of the old position and the formation of a new one. The new signifying system may be produced with the same signifying material; in language, for example, the passage may be made from narrative to text (Kristeva 1984: 58-59, my emphasis in bold).

In other words, Kristeva refers to the way contemporary viewers reconsider their identity within the Symbolic system. In my view, the retelling stories about women's experiences in art making are narratives that name power structures in patriarchal society. In this way, role-playing considers a mimetic displacement of an artist in performance art that raises awareness of sexual oppression in contemporary society. For example, artists adopt stereotypical of female roles like the Virgin Mother and Child in their mythmaking that deconstructs the notion that motherhood is a cultural ready-made.

²³ The concept of Phallic Mother is discussed in Chapter 2.

Siopis uses an existing myth of Holy Mother and Child in *Feeding*, which refers to existing works in Renaissance art. In this way Siopis appropriates the imagery of an artwork that is well-known and already coded, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Madonna Litta* (1490), (Fig.3),²⁴ which portrays the goodness of the Virgin Mother. Both artworks *Feeding* and *Madonna Litta*, consider historical narratives and similar religious themes. Yet, *Feeding* explores the expression of maternal *jouissance* in art making, while *Madonna Litta* expresses European puritan piety in da Vinci's representation of the Virgin Mother. In my opinion, it is possible to view da Vinci's work as a precursor of romantic expressionism, in which the artist portrays the emotional expression of the Virgin Mary in this painting.

da Vinci worked in a mimetic tradition in which he painted directly from models, but his art went beyond the Renaissance tradition that include the expression of human emotions which enabled him to describe their facial expressions and body language in *Madonna Litta*. In my opinion, *Madonna Litta* expresses a mother's pietism that is captured in the serene expression on the face of the Holy Mother as she looks at her child but also in the way that she holds her Child. The countenance of the Holy Mother speaks of her devotion to the Godchild whom she desperately wants to please. In particular, the Virgin Mary holds her left hand under the child's right buttocks, which turns the infant's lower body towards the viewers of this painting. Moreover, the baby is completely naked which exposes the boy's genitalia to the spectators -- that, consequently proves his manhood. Furthermore, the boy-child possessively holds unto his mother's right breast, as He suckles his mother's right breast, while He looks directly at the onlookers. In my view, it is almost as if the Virgin Mary is completely absorbed in her task, whereas the Child's gaze challenges the viewers' religious faith.

²⁴ Leonardo da Vinci, *Madonna Litta* (1490), Oil on canvas. Source: *Leonardo da Vinci*. London: The Artisan Press. Issue 2, page 12. Photographer unknown. Dimensions unknown. Hermitage Gallery, Leningrad.

Whereas, *Madonna Litta* describes a fictitious story based on a myth, Siopis' Romantic post-modern work is a mythic tale that is based on a lived experience.²⁵ Yet in *Feeding*, Siopis retells an original story on video that relates to emotional censorship in contemporary South African society. However, in *Madonna Litta*, da Vinci paints his subject directly from a model in which the artist conforms to conventions of Renaissance art. Nonetheless, both works *Feeding* and *Madonna Litta*, refer to European puritan pietism. It can be argued that *Madonna Litta* refers to the religious devotion of the Holy Mother, yet this Renaissance work also highlights the domination of female gender roles by a powerful male culture at that time.

Nevertheless, Siopis appropriates the imagery of da Vinci's work not to highlight religious servitude, but to reconsider emotional censorship in contemporary South African society. *Feeding* raises an awareness of a form of oppression in contemporary South African society that women of Caucasian descent, for example, are victims of European pietism, which effect women's self-image. It is possible therefore, to claim that Siopis does not conform to European puritan ideals, but empowers female viewers to relinquish their inhibitions to regain their sense of self-worth and esteem. Nevertheless, I also come from a European background and I am consequently trying to come to terms with my own inhibitions in art making.

1.2 REPRESENTING THE SEMIOTIC

So far, I considered the contextual determinants that influence viewers' reception of artworks. In the next section, I discuss the details in artworks like, the Siopis' shawl in

²⁵ Romantic postmodern art portrays the artist 's self-expression. In the artwork *Feeding*, Siopis expresses the repression of maternal sexuality in patriarchal society. The artist is implicated both as mother and woman, who becomes an ambivalent figure in phallogentric language, mainly in the image of the Phallic Mother. In this social discourse, Siopis functions both as locus and metaphor for all that patriarchal society prohibits, like the expression of maternal eroticism in art making.

Feeding, refers to a headdress worn by the Virgin Mary in bible illustrations. I also discuss the way that the metaphor, mother is implied by the shawl worn by the religious figure of the Virgin, that is irrelevant in the reading of *Feeding*, as well as, Siopis' own story of motherhood.²⁶ Therefore two stories are represented at once like the religious myth of Holy Mother and Child, as well as, Siopis' personal narrative which are mutually unrelated and even inconsistent.

1.2.1 IDENTIFICATION

In *Feeding*, Siopis describes a moral tale that is based on a religious myth. Yet her performance retains something maternal in her speech that relates to the virtuous disposition of the Virgin Mother. Moreover, the depiction of the shawl also alludes to a plurality of meaning – namely that of veiling but also of unveiling and revealing. The change of state from the early precedent of *Madonna Litta*, to a contemporary artwork involves a change of context and interpretation of the work.

In particular, Siopis appropriates the maternal image from the biblical myth to subvert the construct of motherhood. Yet, as previously mentioned, a description of Siopis' maternal eroticism in *Feeding* is an expression of Siopis' subject hood that also empowers other women to retell stories of sexual oppression. Moreover, the central place of Siopis during her performance also enhances her vulnerability that both emphasises her presence and places Siopis in a position of power. In my opinion, Siopis argues that phallogentric society usually reserves a central position for men. I believe that Siopis challenges this key position in the way that she challenges power structures in contemporary patriarchal society. Consequently, South African viewers with knowledge of the Apartheid regime are therefore more likely to identify with the social issues raised

²⁶ Catholicism provides a fantasy of Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, which is an illusion. The association of purity of the Virgin Mary purity by the Church reinforces the Virgin Mother's goodness (Kristeva 1980: 156).

in *Feeding*, then a person that is from another social background. *Feeding*, exploits *difference* and Otherness in the way that the ambiguous imagery in this artwork forces viewers to come to term with their identity. While onlookers are actively engaged in the interpretation of their sexual identity, *Feeding* also relates to other *differences*, that is, the subjective potential of people from different race groups.

1.2.2 DIFFERENCE

South African artists often use personal material to question the notion of *difference* and Otherness in post-apartheid society²⁷ and particularly, several contemporary artworks deal with the complicated issue of identity. Siopis, claims that it is important is that artists are addressing "complex" issues that relate to "*gendered* as well as racialised *subjectivities*" in art discourse (Siopis 1997: 58, my emphasis in italics). Gendered subjectivity relates to the way various groups of people experience difference from other groups of people in contemporary society. Specifically, the issue of identity refers to sexual *difference*, cultural *difference*, religious *difference* and racial *difference*.

Yet, the word "*difference*" also relates to the definition of the term by Derrida that is structured on a movement of infinite deferral in a text (Derrida 1976 : 70).²⁸

²⁷ South Africa has been faced with drastic changes in art making recently, especially from 1994 onwards which coincides with a change in government in this country. Siopis (1997: 58) points out the shift in focus: "...questions of specifically *gendered subjectivities* were not really a priority in the struggle for national liberation. Now in the democratisation process, questions of gender are becoming increasingly visible in the public domain" (Siopis 1997: 58, my emphasis in italics).

²⁸ Kristeva (1984: 40-41) claims that Derrida's writing in *Grammatology*, ignores the subjectivity, social practice and *jouissance* of subjects' discourse. Her analysis of subjectivity is specifically related to the problems in linguistics and psychoanalysis. Intent on exploring "semiotic functioning" Kristeva (1984: 81), adds an additional term, the "unconscious", to the linear relationship between subjects and objects (Kristeva 1984: 40-41; 81).

Specifically, Derrida's definition of indefinite deferral, refers to the way that meaning cannot be fixed which results in many different meanings of the same text. In my reading of *Feeding*, I indulge in a wordplay that results in a multiple reading of identity and *difference*.

Sexual *difference*, for example, is based on a distinction between male and female.

Kristeva (1981: 21) defines "sexual *difference*" as something:

... which is at once biological, physiological, and relative to production -- [that] is translated by and translates a *difference* in the relationship of subjects to the symbolic contract; a *difference* then, in the relationship to power, language and meaning (Kristeva 1981: 21, my emphasis in italics).

In the above quotation, Kristeva refers to oppositional structures in phallogentric society. Whereas Kristeva's quote relates to domination and power play between the genders, *Feeding* deconstructs power relations in patriarchal society. In my view, Siopis' art making is a radical response to outside stimuli, specifically the way she experiences *difference* and Otherness in South African society. I can relate to Siopis' experience of *difference* and Otherness, as I am also extremely sensitive to any form of sexual prejudice in contemporary society.

1.2.3 DOUBLING

In *Feeding*, Siopis explores liberating aspects in her art making that resist emotional oppression in contemporary society. Yet, the text discloses an interiority and self-examination -- that says something about Siopis' subjectivity. Siopis (1997: 58), claims that identity politics shares a kind of doubling within language, that "involves coming to terms with complex social and psychic configuration" in art making. Siopis further adds that it examines "a shift ...away from the fixity and exteriority of identity politics of the apartheid past, towards an introspective complexity which begins to unravel the hitherto tightly knit binaries or oppositions between self and Other" (Siopis 1997: 58). Siopis

refers to a change from racial politics in contemporary South African art, towards the building effective theories of identity and *difference* Otherness -- to address the issue of identity in post-apartheid South Africa.

Notwithstanding, Kristeva (1986: 302-320) also maintains that the need for recognition arises because a subject in contemporary society needs to come to terms with their experience of Otherness in the outside world. Kristeva (1984: 135) further argues that "identity" politics creates a hope for conscious coalition -- a new affinity between self and Other. According to Kristeva the:

'I' is divided and doubled only to become reunited within the unity of self-consciousness. This is the ambiguousness of the idealist dialect: it posits division, movement, and process, but in the same move dismisses them in the name of a higher metaphysical and repressive truth...²⁹
(Kristeva 1984: 135).

In other words, a narrative has the potential for social interaction but also as an instrument to implement social change. I believe that Kristeva's reference to "repressive truth" relates to the way that both Siopis' and Malherbe's art making reveal that women are collectively building an epistemology of women's experience of oppression in contemporary society.

My reading of artists' experiences also involves interpretation of various codes³⁰ in a single narrative, which leads to a multiple reading of work of art.³¹ This seems to

²⁹ Repressive truth re-emerges from the biological drives and primary processes of the conscious in the real, which is expressed either in a spoken, written text or artwork. This is discussed further in Chapter 2.

³⁰ Chapter 2 deals with a description of codes in a narrative.

³¹ Kristeva (1986: 216-217) argues that linguistics as well as, the social structure are regulated by laws which is a "rational system installed by the classical age and marked out before it by ancient philosophy. She adds that the Freudian discovery of the unconscious destroyed traditional absolutes. For Freud's theories demonstrated that the unconscious is linked to the functioning of the human body, which is exposed in a slip of the tongue in people's speech and other involuntary acts (Kristeva 1986: 216-217). In classical antiquity (4-3th century B.C.), art making was considered a manual activity that could be taught and which did not include the intellectual activities governed by instinct or intuition. In earliest Greek thought, no attempt was made to demonstrate that the psyche was linked to the functioning of the human body. During the Renaissance (14-16th century A.D), artists had to have a knowledge of geometry, anatomy and literature in order to work with perspective and historical narratives (Burgin 1986: 143-144). During the Renaissance French physiologist Rene Descartes (1596-1650) discovered that people's behaviour could be observed through a study of bodily mechanisms. At that time, any deviations from normal behaviour, was considered irregular and even equated with madness (Jordaan 1992: 11).

echo the views of Ricoeur (1974: 64) who claims that: "For the interpreter, it is the text which has multiple meaning; the problem of **multiple** meaning is posed for him [sic] only if what is being considered is a whole in which events, persons, institutions, and natural or historical realities are articulated" (Ricoeur 1974: 64, my emphasis in bold). In other words, Ricoeur explains that a "multiple" reading relates to a play of words.³² For example, in *Feeding* Siopis positions the female body with different cultural values to empower women in contemporary South African society. Moreover, in this social discourse Siopis' character functions **both** as locus and metaphor for all that patriarchal society prohibits -- which is the realisation that the mother-figure in society plays a double role³³ of caregiver to her children and as a mistress to her partner. In her role playing Siopis is implicated both as mother **and** woman, who becomes an ambivalent figure in phallogentric language -- mainly in the image of a phantasm of the Phallic Mother.

1.2.4 TRANSPOSITION

In my reading of *Feeding* I have made allusions to the way Siopis has encoded herself in the text of the artwork. However, the question remains whether the signifiers that I have associated with my interpretation of her artwork are indeed relevant to the argument.³⁴ In particular, without *transference* of one process to another, like the viewing process -- art would not exist. Undoubtedly, the answer lies in the leading role played by Siopis during the performance of the art video. However, art criticism in whatever form, can never be

³² Postmodernist works of art look beyond the self-defined boundaries of modernism, to cross-disciplinary studies that include psychoanalysis and semiotics, for instance.

³³ Semantically, a wordplay exists between the term, double that can be interpreted as the double-role which Siopis plays in *Feeding*, both as mother and Virgin Mary; and the word doubling -- which means turning inside out that occurs in self-examination, so that the inner side becomes the outer side.

³⁴ Postmodern discourse questions discursive structures in art criticism that differs from traditional (formal) criticism. Formal criticism can be defined as an operation performed by an art critic who is distanced from the artwork.

free of any doubt that an artwork may have been misinterpreted. Roland Barthes (in Young 1981: 35) refers to "metalanguage" as follows:

It is part of the theory of the text to plunge any *enunciation*, including its own, into crisis. The theory of the text is directly critical of any metalanguage: revising the discourse of scientificity, it demands mutation in science itself, since the human sciences have hitherto never called into question their own language, which they have considered as a mere instrument (Barthes in Young 1981: 35; my emphasis in italics).

In the above words, Barthes refers to the way that "language" is used as an "instrument" in the interpretation of a text. Barthes' term "*enunciation*" refers to the subjectivity of a speaker. In *Feeding*, Siopis speaks of a woman's *desire* to represent *jouissance* in her art making and most especially it refers to the way that Siopis' subjectivity is embodied in her artwork. After all, the inscription of personal *desire* in the work is directed towards Siopis' description of her experience as a mother. Herein lies the paradox, as *Feeding* refers both to the suppression of maternal sexuality and rebellion against restrictions placed upon her subjectivity.³⁵ In the following interpretation, I explore the underlying formal structures of Siopis' work -- which explains how the artist has encoded herself in *Feeding*. My interpretation examines particular relationships in this work that are transpositions of primary processes in semiotic language, which can be found in the sequence of metaphors and metonyms described in *Feeding*.³⁶

In my view, onlookers are asked whose mother Siopis as artist is talking about in *Feeding*; either the viewers' mother or the artist's mother or the Virgin Mother? Moreover, does the interpreter expect to find their memories of maternal care reproduced

³⁵ In other words, women are prescribed a set code of conduct for motherhood, which is reinforced by the Church. Especially Catholicism, that uses the Virgin Mother as a role model for mothers. For the Church provides the religious image of the Virgin Mary with a fantasy of Immaculate Conception, which associates the Virgin Mother with purity that reinforces her goodness. Furthermore the Church's doctrines insists that women must not participate in social reform and advocates women's passive role in society.

³⁶ The sign in de Saussure's theory, is a fixed and static entity. Yet, according to poststructuralist theory, this theory is elaborated in the movement of one signifier to another (Bal and Bryson 1991: 192). Whereas, Derrida argues (1987: 81) for the movement between signs (Derrida 1987: 81). The focus of semiotic analysis is an examination of the underlying formal structures of artworks.

in the artwork? It may bring back memories of the spectators' personal history. Alternatively, viewers can accept the artist's discourse on motherhood in its singularity and hereby turn a blind eye to different meanings described in *Feeding*. On the other hand, the interpretant can also look for another social discourse, like the aspect of a conservative South African audience that is usually opposed to the introduction of new ideas by an artist. In this case, Siopis promotes empowerment through the writing of a woman's testimony of her experience of motherhood in art making.

1.2.5 *DESIRE* FOR WHOLENESS

In *Feeding*, it appears that Siopis is concerned with the assertion of her person-hood. The need for social stimulation and creativity has traditionally been a male's prerogative as well as, a source of supposed male superiority. This study explores new kinds of subjectivity for both men and women alike. In the following interpretation I explore Kristeva's and Lacan's theories on interpersonal relationships as follows. While the work of Kristeva (1987: 263) on semiotics and psychoanalysis is concerned with the constitution of a loving subject, Lacan's rhetoric is based on an erotic fantasy. Lacan (1977: 69; 286-287) argues that women's sexuality is biologically given (based on a lack of the phallus) which results in women's permanent binary relationship with men (and *desire* of the phallus). However, both theorists agree that lack is a necessary condition for *desire* in personal relationships (Lacan 1977: 69; 286-287).³⁷

In Lacanian discourse, lack is intrinsic to subjectivity because it is built on a gap between the signifier and the signified. However, lack is replaced by wholeness, that is, through a subject's fantasies of sexual gratification. Lacan furthermore believes that a *desire* for wholeness is founded on the first physical separation from the maternal body at birth and that the primal mother is subsequently irretrievably lost to a subject. Lacan (1977: 286-287) also maintains that this experience at birth, instils a sense of lack in both men

³⁷ Burgin (1986: 98) describes "*desire*" as the "trace of a lost satisfaction" of the fusion with the primal mother during pregnancy.

and women alike, which effects the subsequent behaviour of the person throughout their entire life in an attempt to recover from this loss (Lacan 1977: 286). So far, I have applied my reading of Siopis' and Malherbe's *desire* for a "lost satisfaction" in art making, that also reveals a search for the primal mother in my art making.

1.1.6 TRANSFERENCE

On the other hand, Kristeva (1987: 263) defines object-relations, as a theory of *transference* -- through a metaphorical registration by the subject's identification with non-objects, such as words on a psychic level. Kristeva differs in her writing from Lacan, in that the object libido is displaced for the purpose of a non-sexual aim. In my opinion, Kristeva's reading confronts the reader with memories of a subject's original fusion with their mother during pregnancy that hereby recalls this primitive state of subjectivity.

Nonetheless, Kristeva also makes it clear that the maternal mother is accessible through the process of *transference* -- that is, through the subject's re-union with the primal mother in language. Kristeva's theory of *transference* adds new meaning to the figure of the Phallic Mother -- in an apparent fusion of flesh and words. Kristeva (1987: 263) explains that a subject is "... able to receive the other's words, to assimilate, repeat, and reproduce them... [t]hrough psychic osmosis/identification. Through love". Kristeva adds that, along with incorporating food from the mother's breast, "the subject is also sustained by language itself" (Kristeva 1987: 263).³⁸ In other words, a mother sustains this loving relationship after breast-feeding by nourishing her child with words through language. Most specifically, in Siopis' performance video *Feeding*, I was brought face to face with the figure of the Virgin Mary as mother, together with the realisation -- that what I most desired was lost to me forever -- that is a physical union with the primal

³⁸Kristeva refers mainly to academic language in a text, which helps to sustain the intellectual reader.

mother. *Feeding* goes beyond those boundaries offered by the religious myth of the Virgin Mother in which Siopis vividly embroiders on the myth of the biblical Eve in the Old Testament, that recreates and re-unites subjects with their primal mother. This loving relationship harks back to a theory of the pre-Oedipal experience by Kristeva (1987: 263), that is established during pregnancy through the process of *transference*, whereby a developing foetus is subjected to pleasurable emotions inside the womb. In other words, Siopis' portrayal as Holy Mother supports a metaphorical registration of my identification and fusion with the primal mother through a process of *transference*. In the act of looking at Siopis' artwork, I was able to transcend from the material world to a transformative space³⁹ where I was reunited with the pre-Oedipal body of the Phallic Mother.⁴⁰ However, the reason for my fascination with Siopis' work was only revealed to me at a later stage, after I had studied Kristeva's theory on *transference*.

According to Kristeva (1987: 26), the links between subject and Other can be re-established in semiotic language (Kristeva 1987: 26). Kristeva furthermore (1989: 206-207) claims that artworks are not rationally apprehended by viewers, since reasoning: "...is an eminently transferential gesture that causes a third party to exist for and through the other.... It has the effect of an acting out, a doing, a poesis...." (Kristeva 1989: 206-207). In other words, Kristeva explains that viewers can interpret artworks by engaging with the imagery on a psychic level. Spectators can interpret artworks by making metaphorical connections between images in an artwork. For example, a semiotic psychoanalysis of *Feeding* reveals that Siopis' depiction of the Holy Mother, in fact, portrays the Phallic Mother that discloses the truth of the artists' (Siopis, Malherbe and myself) physical separation from the primal mother. The reason that I was drawn to this

³⁹ The concept of space is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

⁴⁰ Likewise, Siopis points out that the contemporary South African public is especially susceptible to an exploration of "subjectivity" and the production of "new subjects" (Siopis 1997: 69).

artwork in the first place was that I was captivated by the imagery in Siopis' artwork, which led to a realisation that I wanted to explore the reason for this fascination in a research project.

A semiotic psychoanalysis of *Feeding* revealed that Siopis is incorporated both as analyst, and intermediary between the artist-as-narrator and viewer-as-narratee. The insertion of herself in the artwork is, hereby, a metaphoric gesture by the artist that also discloses her *desire* to play the character of a fictitious heroine which is seemingly a compensation for the social restrictions imposed on Siopis as a woman and mother living in a patriarchal society. Yet, this artwork also describes Siopis' experience as a desiring subject -- through the forbidden pleasure of her re-union with the maternal body, by drawing from representational structures of the pre-Oedipal experience.⁴¹ Moreover, the disclosure of the figure of the Phallic Mother in *Feeding* as the primary mother -- reveals the myth of *transcendence* that is analogous to unveiling in semiotic language through the process of *transference* as the text emerges through the advent of semiotics.

It can also be said that *Feeding* draws viewers out of the enclosure of their narcissistic world into a transformative space supported by the feminine language of a loving Other, represented by the Phallic Mother. In this way, viewers become involved both narcissism and its' critique -- through the process of *transference* in a mimetic displacement of the observer in the artwork. Alternatively, Siopis' video can also overwhelm an individual and produce an *abject* response in an audience. Spectators may find Siopis' performance socially unacceptable.⁴² When a person looks at Siopis' artwork, for example, onlookers

⁴¹ This concept shall be discussed further in Chapter 2, when I explain my own art making process.

⁴² Traditionally men have defined women according to their biological and emotional needs. As such, men consider women as playmate and muse for men's sexual fantasies, rather than women as individuals who have their own social and intellectual needs.

are instantly struck by the life-sized figure, the blatant nudity of the woman's figure and, the ironic play of words and implied pretentiousness. One finds oneself asking -- or rather thinking, as the words have not yet been arranged into questions -- about what it is that *drives* this artist to make this artwork. What is going on with this baby? Is the artist crazy? Perhaps menacing!⁴³ Despite, one's understanding of the meaning of the imagery, viewers are intrigued by the imagery.⁴⁴ In my opinion, Siopis' work *Feeding* signifies her *jouissance* in art making and speaks of her *desire* to tell of her experience of motherhood in art making. Moreover, *Feeding* describes the way Siopis utilises her body to express a pleasurable experience in contemporary art making.

Chapter 1 investigated the artists' experiences in the outer world as an event in an ever-continuing process of signification. I explained that a conclusive reading of an artwork is impossible, as the relationship of metaphors and metonyms in semiotic language alludes to many different readings. I investigated the application of Kristeva's theory to corporeal subjectivity. While it investigated emotional expression in da Vinci's painting *Madonna Litta*, it specifically explored liberative aspects in the video *Feeding*, by Siopis and the installation, *Preserving Purity*, by Malherbe discussed the discursive position of artists. It

⁴³ Likewise, Burgin (1986: 54) summarises the sequence of a semiotic reading as follows: "[w]e may find ourselves making connections between things, on the basis of images, which takes us unawares, we may not be conscious of a wilful process by which one image led to another, the connection seems to be made gratuitously and instantaneously" (Burgin 1986: 54). In other words, Burgin explains how visual imagery is interpreted as a text.

⁴⁴ This phenomenon is further explained in the writing of Barthes (1981: 43-53) about a photograph of an American family by James Van der Zee, *Family Portrait: The Strapped Pumps* (1926). Barthes claims that the detail, which touches him in this photograph, is the ankle-strap of one of the women. As such, Barthes notes that this particular "punctum" raised a great sympathy in him. Barthes notes that it is not the shoes which moved him, but the necklace worn by the woman that reminded him of "a slender ribbon of braided gold" worn by his deceased maiden aunt. Barthes' maiden aunt had not been allowed to marry as she was forced to look after her elderly parents. The necklace **signified** a metaphorical displacement of the woman's ankle-strap to the maiden aunt's necklace. Since the death of Barthes' aunt, this necklace was locked away 'in a family box of old jewellery', that saddened [Barthes] when [he] thought of her dreary life" (Barthes 1981: 43-53), my emphasis in bold). In other words, the necklace of Barthes' maiden aunt symbolises a metonymical displacement from the figure in the photograph to the memories of Barthes' aunt's dreary existence. Barthes' maiden aunt had not been allowed to marry, as she was forced to look after her parents.

was indicated that both artist and viewer are interpretants -- involved in the interpretation of narratives. The first section investigated how South African artists collectively retell original stories, to build effective theories of women's experience of *femininity* in the outside world. In this way, I considered recent developments in South African art like the role of artists as social transformers.

I discussed the work of Siopis and Malherbe, who develop a self-consciously constructed space in contemporary South African art, that were compared with a Renaissance work by Leonardo da Vinci. Moreover, this section also considered women's experience of *difference* and Otherness in contemporary art. It also determined that women write testimonies of their life experiences in art making. I argued that images of motherhood, *femininity* and empowerment raise important issues within contemporary South African society. My discussion also considered the way that European puritan pietism inhibits artistic expression in South African art making. Furthermore, I debated that both Siopis and Malherbe call on women to relinquish their inhibitions in art and critical art writing. In this way, it confirmed that women resist power structures in patriarchal society.

In this chapter, I applied a psychoanalytic reading of the artists' experiences to my own experiences of oppression in contemporary society. Artists deliberately use the psychic route in the process of self-analysis to bring unsolicited interruptions of the unconscious to the fore -- so that these mental images can be described in art making. In order to gain a clearer understanding of psychoanalytical informed semiotics, the signification process is further examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

THE LANGUAGE OBJECT

In the preceding chapter, Kristeva's semiotic theory was applied to investigate European puritan piety in contemporary South African art. It was established that religious oppression could be analyzed through an investigation of various signifying processes in works of art. It was also indicated that the female body is used in contemporary performance art to celebrate maternal *jouissance*. This chapter explores the way South African artists utilize the body not only to express pleasurable but also painful experiences in contemporary art making.

This section explores the process self-transformation in contemporary performance art. Contemporary performance artists use the body to write original stories, unto the corporeal surface of the body. In particular, women artists' reclamation of their bodies in performance art is especially poignant as such acts resist the fetishistic use of the women's bodies in contemporary consumer society.

The writing of Roland Barthes is mainly be debated, as well as, the work of Kristeva and other theorists, in support of the argument in the previous chapter that discusses the manifestation of artists' subjectivity, social practice and *jouissance* in art making. Moreover, a psychoanalytically informed semiotics in South African artworks indicates that psychoanalysis is a language system used by analysts to interpret corporeal subjectivity in works of art.

Barthes' theory on dialectical semantics examines the underlying structure in artworks, like the codes that operate beneath the surface of works of art¹ which I shall apply to a reading of the proaretic code, hermeneutic code, semic code, symbolic code and, referential code. However, in my reading of artists' works these codes are mostly mixed due to the many overlaps, hence I choose to demonstrate the above codes one by one.

The first part discusses the way artists' experiences in the outer world are expressed in contemporary art making, which demands a semiotic interpretation. The next part explores the influence of Freud on Barthes' theory on dialectical semantics, which investigates a psychoanalytic reading of contemporary South African art. I apply my reading of contemporary South African artworks to personal experiences in South African society, as psychoanalysis of myself.

2.1 PSYCHOANALYTIC SEMIOTICS

Psychoanalytic theory namely involves subjects' inner responses and fantasies. Yet, this chapter investigates Freud's (1976: 381) observation that subjects' experiences in the outer world have an impact on personal dream thoughts (Freud 1976: 381). American theorist Victor Burgin also writes that psychoanalytical informed semiotics is "a theory of the internalization of the social as subjective - which has a profound implications for any theory of ideology" (Burgin 1986: 113).² In other words, Freud and Burgin describe the way subjects' experiences in the outer world are internalized in persons' unconscious

¹ The discursive image is precedents in history painting, which dominated Western art from mid-sixteenth to mid-eighteenth century. Eighteenth-century French critic Dennis Diderot, compared painting with theatre and, recommended that painting should capture in a single visual statement, the essence of an event. The human body was considered the privileged vehicle for the descriptions of historical events (Burgin 1986: 114-115). These concepts are still with us today, although the psychoanalytic theory developed by Freud in the late nineteenth-century, explained that unconscious fantasy structures play an important role in viewers' imagination.

² In a sense, art often questions the underlying truth.

minds and expressed in art making, for example. I argue that role-playing in performance art, is a representation of artists' unconscious fantasies and desires.

Role-playing in performance art is often symptomatic of a crisis of identity, religious faith as well as modern social structure in contemporary society and such acts in art making help those crises. Transgressive acts in performance art are positive forms of expression that recognizes the shortcomings of society and signify an attempt by artists to overcome these weaknesses. Essentially, contemporary performance artists operate with a certainty of vision that is also affirmative and no longer anguished like the voices of the feminist artists in the 1970s and 1980s.³ In particular, contemporary South African art making is a symbolic practice that is directly involved in social relations.

2.1.1 INTERTEXTUALITY, SOCIAL AND PSYCHIC CONFIGURATIONS

Kristeva (1984: 59-60) verifies that art, explores the concept of intertextuality, social and psychic configurations. According to Kristeva (1984: 62), social relations are co-extensively bound within the symbolic practices that represent them like art, literature, dance and music. She adds that "transgressions of dominant codes," frequently reveal contradictions inherent in the formation of the text -- which necessarily illuminates "discrepancies" in society, like social construction of the female body, for instance (Kristeva 1984: 59-60; 62). Kristeva's reference to "transgressions of dominant codes" can be related to the way women artists use their bodies in performance art to deconstruct the female body as object of *desire* in contemporary patriarchal society. In this way, women artists use their bodies, as personal possessions that can not be taken away from them. Furthermore, Kristeva's use of the word "discrepancies" refers to a struggle.

³ The feminist movement in 1968, for instance, urged men to get in touch with their feminine side. However, males who display feminine traits sometimes become victims of social sanctions. This shall be further discussed towards the end of this section, in the work of Stephen Cohen.

In a sense, women artists empower themselves with different strategies in storytelling, for instance, as a means of survival in a hostile environment. In this discussion I explore the way artists parody the delectable, consumable and desirable body in contemporary art making. Although viewers may consider such acts transgressions of social norms, such actions provide alternatives to accepted social norms. Above all, these exhibitionist acts are performed in a social sphere, which need to be witnessed.

Performance works play an important part in the expression of artists' identity. South African performance art does not only refuse to standardize, or repress the human body, it also challenges ideas of artistic propriety by addressing issues that violate body boundary delineation in contemporary art making which, in turn, reveals corporeal experiences undergone by South African artists. Positioned outside normative structures, performance art retains the ability to critique power structures, respond to social conflict and transgress acceptable social norms.⁴ This chapter, for example, explores the way Stephen Cohen challenges the assumption that the macho⁵ image is the cultural ideal of an integrated identity for males in contemporary South African society.

2.1.2 FRAGMENTATION

Artists may consciously choose images for an artwork but sometimes imagery is accidentally evoked in artists' imagination. In my art making, I often use images from the mass media that is usually a conscious process. But sometimes, the selection of images is instantaneous -- a process that takes me unaware, in which a single image leads to the selection of another image, for this connection between the imagery is intuitive and spontaneous.

⁴ The expression of artists' personal experiences in art making is a romantic concept. However, a description of subjects' experiences is external to works of art, which is what differentiates postmodernist from modernist works of art.

⁵ Hawkins (1996: 264) defines the term, "macho" as "showing off masculine strength".

Likewise, artworks may recall memories stored in spectators' minds. The term, fragmentation refers to the way elements in an artwork, evoke memories in the viewers' social history. Kristeva (1984: 248), explains that translations are not accomplished through a literal reading of the imagery, but through "reproduction of the trajectory of enunciation" (Kristeva 1984: 248). In my reading of contemporary South African art, imagery sometimes evoked memories of comparable events in my personal history. This led to different translations from the original interpretation. Siopis' work *Feeding*, for example, confronted me with an image of the Virgin Mother yet this imagery also evoked memories of the original fusion with the primary mother during pregnancy. The image of the Holy Mother made me realize that what I most desired was lost to me forever, that is, a physical relationship with the primal mother.

Barthes also refers to redirection of personal material towards an audience. Barthes claims that writing "is always rooted in something beyond language, it develops like a seed, not like a line, it manifests an essence and holds the thread of a secret" (Barthes 1968: 20). In my view, Barthes' reference to a "seed" relates to the planting of ideas into people's heads that is a similar process to sowing seeds. Specific imagery in artworks may convey certain ideas to an audience. Moreover, the reference to a "secret" by Barthes refers to a disclosure of a "secret" in language that can be related to an underlying truth in a narrative. For example, contemporary performance artists may tell distressing stories in an attempt to overcome unpleasant experiences. The body is used in performance art as a gesture and visual communication of stories that need to be witnessed by an audience. Such acts also outline the potency of inscribing personal stories upon the surface of the contemporary body.

So far, the influence of Barthes' work on dialectical semantics⁶ was investigated to examine how artists interpret personal experiences in the outer world. Moreover, it was established that some artists explore their identity through self-marking in contemporary South African art. The next section explores the manner in which artists, express their experiences in the outer world.

2.2 NARRATIVE SEMIOTICS

Narrating is primarily a matter of discourse that involves a discussion between an author and viewer. This section explores prejudice in contemporary South African society. Implicitly, it challenges the hostility towards women also known as misogyny, but it also addresses religious bigotry. Several theorists like the American theorist Alice Jardine, among other theorists debate the theme of "woman".

According to Jardine, the overall concern with the concept of "woman ... [is a] search for that which has been left out, de-emphasized, hidden, or denied articulation within the Western systems of knowledge" (Jardine 1985: 36).⁷ Jardine adds that the fascination with what has been "left out" of Western thinking and writing, "may lead to new discursive and social contract, indeed, a new historicity" (Jardine 1985: 36). In my opinion, Jardine's use of the term "woman" operates on two levels. Firstly, it refers metaphorically to the use of the term "woman" in discourse; and finally, it relates to the

⁶ The reference to Freud is not elaborated in Barthes' work, but Kristeva (1980: 122) debates that Barthes' writing deals with dialectical semantics "which controls the notion of writing, and its explicit relationship with the speaking subject" which arguably places Barthes' thinking with Freud's interpretation of dream-thoughts (Kristeva 1980: 122).

⁷ This approach is extensively discussed by French poststructuralist Jean-Francois Lyotard in his writing *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard 1984: 31-51).

way theorists and artists address new concepts like the need of women's autonomy in contemporary society.⁸

Nonetheless, theorists like Lacan, Derrida, and Deleuze also deal with the term "woman" explicitly. Notably, Jardine (1985: 61) writes that the work of Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze acknowledges "a *desire* to increase the signifiable; an explicit problematization of gender; and, a pronounced ambivalence towards the mother's body" (Jardine 1985: 61, my emphasis in italics). Jardine's writing acknowledges that several theorists, such as Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze address the problem of "sexual *difference*" in their work. Yet, Jardine highlights that the theories of Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze do not address the issue of women's autonomy. Nevertheless, the above publications are all indications that there is an attempt to investigate the position of "woman" in literature theory. These publications by Jardine, Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze are obviously important, but it must be established how these texts compare with the articles written by local art critics, art historians.⁹ I follow the theories of Jardine because her writing questions the way women are silenced by oppressive structures within phallogentric society. My interpretation challenges the way women's behaviour and speech is conditioned by power structures in contemporary South African society.

In the next section, Barthes' narrative semiotics is mainly be applied to an interpretation of storytelling that explores how women artists empower themselves in South African art

⁸ British theorist Victor Burgin (1986: 41), for instance, argues that there "is no essential self which preceded the social construction of the self though the agency of representation". He also claims that a women's feminine characteristics are not biologically given, but essentially acquired in then process of "growing up" (Burgin 1986: 41). However, American writer Iris Young (1990: 153) argues that women are conditioned by sexual oppression in society. "Women in sexiast society are physically handicapped, insofar as [they] learn to live out [their] existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal assigns to [them. In this way they] are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified" (Young 1990: 153).

⁹ This is further discussed in Chapter 3.

making. Barthes' best-known theory on narrative semiotics is set out in his book, *S/Z* (1975) in which he develops an interpretation of Balzac's short story *Sarrasine*. In this narrative Barthes promotes an analyses of five codes namely the proaretic code, the hermeneutic code, the semic code, the symbolic code and, the referential code in a visual text. Although I apply my reading of particular codes to contemporary South African art, in some areas I highlight the sections in which certain codes overlap.

Furthermore, I use Barthes' theory on narrative semiotics to demonstrate that narrating in contemporary art making is a mystification of the workings of culture and history, in which historical facts, contemporary contexts and images of existing stereo-types are re-interpreted. According to Barthes (1998: 261), narration is indeed a product of cultural construction, because these narratives describe real events in the world (Barthes 1998: 261). My discussion of artworks in this study can subsequently, be considered a revision of historical narratives, because the artworks refer to real events that have taken place in the artists' social history.

2.2.1 THE PROARETIC CODE

The proaretic code is described by Culler (1983: 33-84), as a construct that is based on pre-existing knowledge about stereotypes in society (Culler 1983: 33-84). My work *Mathilde's fantasy of the Phallic Mother*, of 1999, (Fig. 4)¹⁰ addresses a construct of the "Phallic Mother" that Kristeva describes as the: "archetype of the infinitely interchangeable object of the desiring quest" (Kristeva 1980: 195). In other words, Kristeva describes the way the female figure is considered both as mother and

¹⁰ Tilly De Gabriele, *Mathilde's fantasy of the Phallic Mother* (1999). Mixed media, 22 x 22,5 x 15 cm. Photograph by Petri de Klerk. The collection of the artist. Hereafter referred to as *Phallic Mother*.

fetish object in contemporary society. In my artwork *Phallic Mother*, this mythical figure is portrayed both as mother and profane sex object. In particular, *Phallic Mother* describes a constant state of becoming, which resists the definition of women's roles in contemporary society.

The restrictive clothing worn in *Phallic Mother* adds to the transgressive fantasy as it draws attention to the sexual aspects of the body, while it simultaneously restricts access to the body. *Phallic Mother*, represents my ideal alter ego in a complex kind of textual doubling -- a personification of fetish object and cultural feminine stereotype. In this regard, I have chosen to wear armour¹¹ to explore interpretations associated with sheathing as restrictive and protective covering, but also to investigate the transformative spaces inside the armour. The armour also acts as a protective layer like a second skin that metaphorically refers to a shield and fetish garment. Nonetheless, the rigidity of the armour also restricts my bodily movement; yet it also lends itself to a transgressive fantasy by making me feel literally and physically defined and bounded. The armour is molded unto the form of my body, hereby protecting the most fragile parts of my body, but it also exalts a different kind of nakedness of the female form. The armour takes on a new significance and becomes a vehicle for the expression of corporeality.

Moreover, the armour is composed of separate metallic shields, hereby, segmenting my body into different pieces -- which is a distinctly fetishistic process according to psychoanalytic theory.¹² In addition to the shields that protect my limbs, another shield is

¹¹ An armour commonly relates to defensive covering formerly worn in fighting (OD. 1986, s.v. "armour").

¹² The process of fetishism sets up a substitute figure in the form of the Phallic Mother, who is in possession of the phallus. According to Freud (1976: 446-447), the function of fetishism is to deny that women have been castrated (Freud 1976: 446-447). Likewise, the female is presented as a beautiful object in mass culture, which is founded on fetishism -- to help absorb the full impact of the castration threat. In commercial photography, the female body is captured as the fully developed stereotype of *femininity* -- as absolute woman. Fetishism is further reinforced in the mass media, by the glossy paper used for the illustrations in books and magazines, that make these publications more appealing to the consumer.

added to shelter the lower part of my abdomen. It creates the impression that this particular shield is meant to protect the most fragile part of my body -- namely in the phantasmatic presence of the phallus.¹³ Herein lies the paradox, for *Phallic Mother* represents women's position in patriarchal society both as profane sex object and mother figure. In a sense, the transgressive dress code in *Phallic Woman* challenges the dress code for women in patriarchal society, especially way women are often portrayed as profane sex objects in contemporary consumer advertising.

Moreover, *Phallic Mother* appropriates the existing myth of the mother figure¹⁴ in order to reconsider the social construction of women in contemporary South African society. Most especially, the narcissistic positioning of myself is also based on a need to write myself into the script as an act of reclaiming the female body. My position, hereby, speaks my *desire* to be re-united with the primal maternal mother through the process of *transference*. Through a mimic displacement of myself as daughter of the *Phallic Mother*, I am able to receive the words of the Phallic Mother in a fusion of flesh and words.¹⁵ In

¹³ The truth represented by this fetishetic image is nevertheless, under stress by the semiotic repressed by it. Semiotic language, for instance, reveals the simultaneous presence of both, the symbolic and semiotic, which Kristeva terms as "signifiante" (Kristeva 1984: 17).

¹⁴ This model releases a dramatic form of representation through the figure of absolute woman and fascinating mother. In modern society, photographic imagery permeates the everyday environment in film and television almost at the level of myth -- reinforced by key themes and figures in society.

¹⁵ In the mass media, female's bodies are overdetermined as objects of *desire* and are subsequently exploited as sexual objects to promote the film industry or utilised in consumer advertising to sell certain products. Women's bodies are largely reduced to their reproductive function in patriarchal society, and women are both, valued and devalued as a result of that identification. Notwithstanding, medical science frequently treats women's bodies with indifference but, sometimes even with hostility in gynaecological procedures such as, invitro-fertilisation. Several contemporary artists like Diane Victor, Stephen Cohen, Penny Siopis and myself currently deal with these aspects with their descriptions of lived experiences in pregnancy, sexuality and even bodily movement in their art making. Siopis' work is discussed in Chapters 1 and 3. The works of the aforementioned artists are examined in this chapter, with the exception of Penny Siopis.

this way, I equate the food given to me by the *Phallic Mother* with the way a mother provides her daughter with nourishment. I relate the words received from the *Phallic Mother* to academic language. Thus, food from the *Phallic Mother* can be equated with words received from Kristeva's writing that has given me the strength to survive in a hostile environment.

In *Phallic Mother* a mirror is used as a device for the purpose of both illusion and repetition. Moreover, this reflective surface also converts the actual figure into a virtual image.¹⁶ My photograph¹⁷ is positioned on the floor of the 'stage', yet my image is also reflected in the mirror as hovering in an upright position. Nonetheless, the mirror panel inside the box frame, is rotated back forty-five degrees from the vertical position, away from the horizontal plane so as to deflect my image unto the mirror. Hereby, the floating image of the *Phallic Mother* above the 'stage' floor is presented as a figment in the viewers' imagination existing as a phantasmatic presence -- through the process of *transcendence*.

Within this context, the phantasmatic presence of the *Phallic Mother* is a transcendent entity, that explores the viewer-as-narratee -- which is capable of lifting a viewing subject out of their current situation. In turn, the *Phallic Mother* is incorporated as narrator, who explores feminine empowerment outside the Symbolic system. In particular, *Phallic*

¹⁶ The mirror panel was originally used in theatre productions during the 17th century, to project certain images as floating above the stage floor, for the creation of specific apparitions such as, ghosts, phantoms and disembodied spirits.

¹⁷ The main reason of the use of photography in my art making is that this medium essentially enables me to record my performances. These photographs can furthermore, be reproduced and manipulated through the use of photographic technology, unlike the handcrafted object that refers to the single, original copy. Yet, the authorial signature in my work as guarantee of the artist's hand, can be traced in the art making process itself -- in the way that I portray myself as the main character, but also in the transformation of the imagery. I also feature myself in my artwork to refute the author as genius.

Mother resists a characteristic way of thinking -- of the construct of woman as mother figure and profane sex object in South African society. I appropriate¹⁸ the feminine stereotype of the *Phallic Mother*, to subvert the social construction of women in patriarchal society.¹⁹

2.2.2 THE HERMENEUTIC CODE

The hermeneutic code of Barthes (in Bal and Bryson 1991: 203) comes into operation when viewers are intrigued by mysterious details in narratives. The significance of artworks may elude the viewers, particularly when narratives are hard to decipher (Barthes in Bal and Bryson 1991: 203).²⁰ In other words, it is up to the onlookers to deconstruct various codes in a narrative. Within this, I use the term, hermeneutic coding as a linguistic space in which I explore my corporeal existence in contemporary South African society.²¹ The mythical interpretation of my work *Mathilde's Vision of a Maiden in Phallic Armour*,²² of 1999, (Fig.5) evokes a narrative that explores women's existence in patriarchal society.

¹⁸ An appropriation can be described as taking possession of an image for the purpose of creating an artwork.

¹⁹ Communal strictures in South African society, for example, prevent women from completing their studies due to a lack of money. Often these women want to take part in decision making in education, business and government, but they lack the necessary qualifications that prevents them from furthering their careers. A publication by Sapa (2001: 2) of a study in the *Sunday Times*, Business Times on April 1, 2001, conducted by the Human Research Council and commissioned by the Netherlands Embassy, revealed that: "African women were least likely to have achieved their educational goals, with 14% saying they had not studied as much as they would have liked to. Most common reasons respondents gave for not completing studies were lack of money (40%) and pregnancy (10%)" (Sapa 2001: 2). In other words, this empirical research reveals that women are disadvantaged because their low incomes cannot fulfil their personal needs of a tertiary qualification. It also discloses that lack of funding overrides the incidence of pregnancy, that prevents these women from not completing their goals.

²⁰ Unconscious thinking processes are closely tied to the narrative that is examined more closely in the discussion of the hermeneutic code. This subjective experience in literature or art, which is unpredictable and personal, is what Barthes (1982: 43) terms as the "punctum", that was defined in Chapter 1. Notwithstanding, a connection between images and an associative image can be made in the viewers' unconscious mind (Barthes 1982: 43).

²¹ The concept of hermeneutic space is further discussed on page 62.

²² Tilly De Gabriele, *Mathilde's Vision of a Maiden in Phallic Armour* (1999). Mixed media, 27 x 36,5 x 15 cm. Photograph by Petri de Klerk. The artist's collection. Hereafter referred to as *Maiden in Phallic Armour*.

I consider my transformation in *Maiden in Phallic Armour*, an autonomous act in which I claim the body as prime material to create and express my identity. The recreation of myself as *Maiden in Phallic Armour*, is not a search for an isolated identity. In particular, the re-creation of myself resists definition. The body is utilized in this way to challenge the myth that culture is associated with women's nature but also to disrupt the notion that nature is connected with masculine identity. I represent a hybrid character that is depicted both as a unicorn and daughter of the archaic mother.

Within this context, my costume creates an obvious artificial appearance. The fetish garment dramatizes the exterior boundary aspects. In this sense, the wearing of a corset during the performance adds to a transgressive fantasy, which makes me feel that I am physically defined and bounded. In turn, the conical breasts also parody the seductiveness of women's breasts²³ to make a mockery of men's (sic) fascination with women's breasts, that also explores the way women's breasts are exploited in consumer advertising to promote certain products, such as underwear, for example.²⁴

²³ The theme of woman as profane sex object is often used in commercial advertising. However, the reversal of a woman's seductiveness is also at work in contemporary advertising, which dextrously switches stereotypes unto male models, in a commercial advertisement for Levi Jeans, for example, that appears on page 2 in the *Sunday Times* newspaper, *S'canto Print*, on 11 March 2001, Issue 9. In another commercial advertisement for *Bear International* published in the *Edgars Club Magazine*, August 2000, Issue 8, appears with a slogan on page 70 "don't go Bear [bare] wear it. In a double page spread on pages 38 and 39 of the same magazine, it states that this merchandise in "the most desirable to Have" (Edgars Club Magazine 2000: 70; 38-39) The aforementioned advertisement exploits male models as sex objects in the advertising of male underwear. In another advertising campaign for men's jeans switches stereotypes and instead of featuring a young woman in denim jeans, the sponsors added the figure of a young woman who blatantly ogles at the bare chested model.

²⁴ This artwork confronts a specific form of bodily comportment that is considered typical of feminine existence. It suggests that women concede differences amongst themselves such as race and culture, but also acknowledge similarities in their situation. At a specific level, it depicts the evaluating gaze, which reduces women to objectification in phallogentric society. Most especially, the narrative explores the way female bodies are overdetermined as objects of *desire* in the mass media. Women are subsequently exploited as sexual objects to promote certain products. Women's bodies are both valued and devalued, as a result of that identification. It recognises a cause of common concern amongst women, and represents the collective consciousness, in denunciation of oppressive structures in patriarchal society.

Correlative herewith, is Kristeva's notion of "heterogeneous subjectivity" (Kristeva 1987: 300).²⁵ In this dissertation, my art making refers to "heterogeneous subjectivity" in the way that I redefine and displace the same character in a sequence of artworks. My artworks can be regarded as different interpretations of the same narrative. Within this context, the conical brassiere of my costume in *Maiden in Phallic Armour* is an ironical reference to women's breasts. Moreover, the transgressive code is also represented in the form of a single horn that relates to masculine strength on my forehead, which metonymically refers to the phantasmatic presence of the phallus. Herein lies the paradox, for this artwork parodies the way women are portrayed as profane sex objects in contemporary consumer advertising, yet this artwork also challenges the preoccupation that women are self-effacing and unassertive by adopting an aggressive and androgynous approach.

Maiden in Phallic Armour could further be considered another version of Derrida's concept of hermeneutic "space" that places spatial figures in a different relationship to one another. Derrida (1974: 86) associates writing with a form of spacing as follows:

Let us space. The art of this text is the air it causes to circulate between screens. The chainings are invisible, everything seems improvised or juxtaposed. This text induces by agglutination rather than by demonstrating, by coupling and by decoupling, by glueing and unglueing (*en accolant en decollant*), rather than by exhibiting, the continuous, and analogical, instructive, suffocating necessity of a discursive rhetoric (Derrida 1974: 86).

In the above words, Derrida refers to a "text" as a self-consciously constructed space that is used in storytelling. Within this context, I examine narratives through an exploration of the space between the partitions to establish invisible links by placing words side by side or by prying the terms apart. Thus, in *Maiden in Phallic Armour* I have created a feminine space, in which I explore a space between the partitions. In my performance it appears that I am about to take off in flight to distant lands. In this way, I recreate myself

²⁵ Kristeva (1987: 300), refers to the term, heterogeneity as different interpretations of a single myth by the same person, which relates to a subject's thinking process. This underlying text is indicative of the genotext in the writing of Kristeva (1986: 28; 120-123), that she uses to describe the infinite plurality of signifiers in a semiotic text (Kristeva 1987: 300; 1986: 28; 120-123).

as a bird-woman to make my crossing over ideological borders to distant lands. In *Maiden in Phallic Armour*, making a crossing refers to a change of state that demarcates a change in self-awareness and alteration of the concept of myself.²⁶

In *Desire*, Kristeva (1984: 26) has analyzed hermeneutic space as "nourishing and maternal" which finds its most insistent denotations in the fantasy of the *Phallic Mother*. Kristeva (1980: 238) also considers the maternal body as a "filter" to question this space, by imagining "that there is *someone* in that filter" (Kristeva 1980: 238).²⁷ Kristeva confirms that this linguistic hermeneutic space is undoubtedly maternal but I argue that this desperate search for hermeneutic space is a quest to redefine the notion of women's autonomy in contemporary art making.

According to Kristeva, the "woman-subject" is furthermore "a thoroughfare, a threshold where "nature" confronts "culture".²⁸ I believe that Kristeva's theory relates to an expression of women's experiences in storytelling that is threatening to the Symbolic system. Moreover, Jardine (1985: 100-102) also confronts the maternal in her critical writing as "obligatory connotations" that are assigned to the maternal body, yet, she places these "connotations" in a discursive position, in the hope that this leads to a rethinking of dualistic oppositions (Jardine 1985: 100-102).²⁹ Jardine redefines binary oppositions in terms of *difference* and identity. In my opinion, Derrida's writing on

²⁶ Indeed, Western theorists have also confronted the question of subject and Other in this hermeneutic space. Contemporary writers have associated this new space, for instance, with such connotations as "integral emptiness" (G.W.F. Hegel), "Other" (Jacques Lacan), "text" (Jacques Derrida) and "body-without-organs" (Gilles De-Leuze) (Jardine 1985: 89). I have analysed the theories of Hegel, Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze one by one, in my interpretation of artworks.

²⁷ Derrida (1981: 75; 106), on the other hand has criticised the term, "chora" for its ontological essence (Derrida 1981: 75; 106).

²⁸ By this Kristeva probably means that the mystification produced by imagining that the maternal body is in this space, is problematic. The questioning of this acutely interior space, can be related to an incestuous exploration of the maternal body.

²⁹ Examples of these binary oppositions in Western logocentrism are "culture and nature, *difference* and identity" (Jardine 1985: 138).

"spacing" has generated a new debate in literature theory about binary opposites in gender that in turn, has been taken up by artists in contemporary art making. The concept of hermeneutic space in the writing of Derrida, is a new kind of philosophy that considers the rewriting, re-spacing and re-marking of spatial figures, to displace the notion that space is associated with women's nature and that culture is connected with masculine identity.

This gynesis has attracted the attention of contemporary artists and writers alike who have found new discursive spaces to redefine the myth of nature and culture. Within this framework American theorist Iris Young, claims that:

... the woman lives her body as object **as well as subject**. The source of this is that patriarchal society defines woman as mere body ... [and that an] essential part of ... being a woman [living in a sexist society] is ... the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon ... as the potential object of another's subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as **a living manifestation of action and intention** (Young 1990: 155, my emphasis in bold).

In the above words, Young refers to men's constitution and appropriation of women as sexual objects in patriarchal society. I believe that Young also relates to women's corporeal existence in sexist society, as well as, the commercialization of the female body in consumer advertising. My initial intention when I began *Maiden in Phallic Armour*, was to work with hermeneutic spacing. I wanted to explore the extension of my body in space, like an antenna, so that I could get in touch with whatever was happening in my immediate surroundings. Hereby, the protraction's, such as the horn on my head, conical breasts, tail, extended fingernails, and toe nails, became extensions of body parts used in an exploration of the narrative³⁰ as well as, an investigation of technological space. The writing of French theorist Simone de Beauvoir (1988: 175-176) also demonstrates how broadly social and symbolic structures are expressed in the lived body (de Beauvoir

³⁰ In this regard, the imagery evokes the knowledge of well-read narratives written in children's storybooks by Christian Hans Anderson, for example.

1988: 175-176). de Beauvoir claims that an objectified bodily existence³¹ accounts for the self-consciousness of women in relation to their bodies. I believe that performance art has introduced new attitudes towards the female body, regarding the need for women to become independent, autonomous individuals.

Young also makes a statement that relates to women's phenomenal experiences of comportment in patriarchal society. Young, claims that: "women frequently tend not to move openly, keeping their limbs closed around themselves" (Young 1990: 155). In other words, Young cites a typical feminine stance of bodily comportment that demonstrates the conditioning of women's behaviour in contemporary society. While a tendency exists amongst women to have a closed gait, it is also customary for women not to bring the entire body into play but also not to underestimate their physical ability, as this is generally associated with masculine strength. Correlative herewith is the assumption of women's physical frailty and the notion that women's comportment is timid, rather than proactive.³² In other words, it is generally assumed that women's stance should not be assertive which demonstrates how women's comportment is conditioned by oppositional structures in contemporary society.

Within this context, my work *Maiden in Phallic Armour* can be considered similar to a marionette performance, in which the puppet's body is brought into active movement by pulling the strings. In this performance my body is, furthermore extended in free, active open movement and outward directives that repudiates the preconception of women's

³¹ Merleau-Ponty also emphasises the ontological status of the subject in his writing *Phenomenology of Perception*, especially in his essay entitled *The body as expression and speech* (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 174-199).

³² This comportment is usually not related to biological incapacity, nor can it be fully explained by lack of physical training. It can only be understood in reference to bodily objectification in context with de Beauvoir's writing in the above text (de Beauvoir 1988: 175-176).

timid comportment, and defies perceptions of the standardized, contained female body in phallogentric society.

2.2.3 THE SEMIC CODE

The semic code draws upon cultural stereotypes in a narrative that South African psychologist Wilhelm Jordaan, defines as different characteristics which are ascribed to certain "ethnic groups" under a specific "label" (Jordaan 1992: 433). I shall analyze the extremity of Stephen Cohen's approach in his artwork entitled *Crawling*, 1999, (Fig.6),³³ that explores his identity in contemporary performance art.

Cohen confronts viewers with many different pieces of information in *Crawling*, to create a stereotypical model of a Jewish woman by a male artist.³⁴ Yet, Cohen's work also alludes to many different issues like gender, religion, South African culture and homosexuality. Hereby, Cohen explores the extremity within specifics like sexual *difference*, gender *difference*, cultural *difference* and different religious denominations. *Crawling* is a postmodernist work that pertains to *difference* and identity.³⁵ In *Crawling*, Cohen plays the role of a 'kugel' in society that portrays a rich, Jewish woman that is usually overdressed in the latest fashions. In this way, Cohen uses self-alteration as a form of play and adornment in which the artist assumes a character Other than himself. It appears that the well-known imagery used by Cohen in this performance is overcoded like the dark spotted leopard skin stockings; heavy make-up; exaggerated hair-do; gold costume jewelry inlaid with semi-precious stones; high-heeled sequenced shoes and

³³ Stephen Cohen, *Crawling* (1999). Photograph of the performance for an exhibition at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, 28 February to 20 March, 1999. Photograph by John Hodgkiss, published in *de arte*, Volume 59, page 56. Dimensions unknown. The artist's collection.

³⁴ Kristeva claims that artists often provide viewers with certain "background information" to reflect on current situations in a specific community. She also points out that "there is an obvious analogy between [displayed] objects and the state" of a particular society (Kristeva 1995: 25).

³⁵ A specific stereotype, for instance, is expected to perform a particular function within society, which may achieve the consensus of a particular community (Jordaan 1992: 433).

prima-donna costume -- that calls up a variety of cultural contexts associated with a specific stereotype in South African society.

Cohen's act is a struggle for autonomy and identity. In particular, Cohen explores a specific stereotype is expected to perform a particular function within society. In a sense, gentiles like myself often envy the wealth of Jewish women that is represented by the jewelry and references to designer clothes in Cohen's work which is the also reason why the Jewish race is despised by some citizens in South African society. Cohen's performance is an act of rebellion but also for recognition of sexual *difference*, particularly in recognition of homosexuality. However, this kind of performance is certainly useful when Cohen's humour is used to unmask signs of prejudices towards Jewish women. Above all, my reading of Cohen's work reveals that he addresses the perceived failures of society and his performance is an act that helps to resolve the differences between gender, but within different customs as well, like differences between Jewish culture and Christian cultures.

A narrative can also be suggested by an artist's gesture³⁶ in art that is captured in a photograph taken of Cohen's performance, *Crawling*. Cohen's posture in *Crawling*, for example, is an extreme position within a typical model's pose for a motor car advertisement, in which the women's figure is often draped on the bonnet of a motor vehicle. Moreover, a word play exists between the term, model -- which means mannequin that also describes a person who poses for a commercial photograph. The word, poser can be interpreted as a brainteaser. Cohen is also sitting on his behind

³⁶ Viewers can become part of art through their participation in a performance. Cohen (1999: 57) himself states that: "[p]eople from the outside step right into the work. They ... can change the plot (yell and shout, hit, call the police). It's amazing. The work is constructed at that moment by whoever chooses to become part of it" (Cohen 1999: 57).

and is furthermore not crawling, as is suggested by the title of this artwork. Cohen's gesture brings to mind numerous references associated with the word, crawling, such as creeping and groveling -- that alludes to the way that a stereotypical model sucks up to another individual, in exchange for a favour that usually involves money.

I regard *Crawling* an attempt to integrate the personal into the collective; to concede differences within various cultures, like bigotry against the Jewish race, female, as well as, male, that asserts his democratic right for freedom of speech but also to highlight prejudice against gender, such as homosexuals and lesbians. While *Crawling*, represents a highly elaborated expression of the artist's experience as a Jewish homosexual living in South African society, this particular discourse reveals the actor's hidden fantasy of an unconscious *desire* -- to dress in drag.³⁷ Cohen's performance engages in a social discourse, which is directed towards society at large. Cohen himself declared in a statement that he endeavors to seek "self acceptance through national and religious identity" in his performances (Cohen 2000: 13).³⁸ In other words, Cohen is asking the South African audience to accept him as a white male, who is a Jew but further, a homosexual. Most especially, Cohen's work accentuates ideological structures of power in patriarchal society that deliberately ignores the dimension of the Other's experience. In *Crawling* Cohen seeks to establish himself in relation to his Jewish culture, but also in response to cultural pressures placed upon his homosexual identity. I can relate to Cohen's search for autonomy, in the way that my art making is also a reaction to cultural messages about the female body and gender roles, in search of a social identity.

³⁷ The fact that Cohen likes to dress in drag refers to a hidden significance of the work that falls under the hermeneutic code, in which an underlying interpretation is implied in a text.

³⁸ Patriarchal society specifies norms that are considered desirable within a community. For example, males who display manly traits are favourably evaluated and judged psychologically healthy than those who do not. In his performances, Cohen is seeking acceptance in South African society both as a Jewish person and as a homosexual.

2.2.4 THE SYMBOLIC CODE

Bal and Bryson refer to Barthes' symbolic code as, as a code that guides viewers in reading specific elements in a narrative, as standing in for that which is unrepresentable, such as the terms "loneliness"; "theatricality; or "self-referentially" (Bal and Bryson 1991: 203). In the following interpretation I point out subtle similarities and differences in style and subject matter between two female artists from disparate backgrounds who nevertheless share the same objective. Both works, that is, my work *Generic Woman*³⁹ (Fig.7) of 2000, and Diane Victor's work *Strip* (Fig.8) of 1999,⁴⁰ combine autobiography and biography to render an account of social injustice in South African society. I apply my own expression of sexual oppression in *Generic Woman* to a reading of Victor's work *Strip*. Both Victor and myself, utilize the body in storytelling that describe painful experiences in the outside world.

The figuration of the woman alluded to in *Generic Woman* could also be mistaken as a man dressed as a woman. Yet, in another interpretation of this work, the woman's shadow takes on the fantasy of a man's figure dressed in a suit. The person is also alone and the term, alone in conjunction with the entire mood of the work, describes the word, loneliness. Yet, it also questions whether this person is in fact, alone or relates to another interpretation of loneliness, such as estrangement. It questions whether the shadow of the figure is a man's shadow.

Furthermore, a reading of *Generic Woman* also suggests disclosure. Especially, the suppressed word lovely highlights the material absence of the veil of hair that is

³⁹ Tilly De Gabriele, *Generic Woman* (2000). Mixed media, 72 x 61 x 17 cm. Photograph by Petri de Klerk. The artist's collection.

⁴⁰ Diane Victor, *Strip* (1999). Pastel and charcoal on paper, detail. Dimensions unknown. Source: Invitation card of exhibition. The artist's collection.

conventionally associated with woman's loveliness and *femininity*.⁴¹ In Western society the concealment of hair or body, is considered a form of resistance to the male gaze. However, certain progressive Arab women in Islamic society voluntarily wear the veil, as an affirmation of cultural identity and strident feminist statement, to assert their allegiance to a rich tradition, and at the same time preserves their sexual identity.

Not only does veiling embraced by many Arab women communicate exclusivity of rank and nuances in social status, but it also provides telling insights how Arab culture is constituted. Arabian writer Fadwa El Guindi (1999: 224) notes that especially in Arabian culture veiling is intimately connected with the cultural construction of identity, privacy and space. Not only does veiling de-marginalize women in Arab society, but it challenges the assumption that the veil is largely about modesty and seclusion, honour and shame. I believe that some Arab women wear the veil as an expression of liberation from colonial legacies and affirmation of their cultural identity as Arab women.

Alternatively, *Generic Woman* can be considered a post-colonial work that resists the social construction of women's *femininity* in phallocentric society, in which my scalp is revealed, while my body is concealed. The baldness of my head relates to an ideological

⁴¹ The concept of veiling has been used by several artists in the past like, the Spanish artist Francisco Goya in a diptych in which he painted the model in the nude in *The Nude Maja* (1800), and the same model appears completely clothed in a twin canvas entitled *The Clothed Maja* (1800-1805). In essence, the translucent material is moulded unto the Maja's figure that accentuates her nakedness, which contrasts sharply with the translucent quality of the model's skin in the naked Maja. Goya portrayed the model "as a woman who offers herself [in an idealised scene of seduction], with a hint of irony in her pretended modesty". In other words, the transparent clothes forms a veil, that suggests the woman's feminine figure beyond the translucent material, which makes this painting more erotic than its' counterpart. Goya obeyed the convention of portraying the loveliness of a woman's beauty "that disguises the beautiful woman from other members of her sex" (Venturi 1973: 5).

condensation of the work, which is further overdetermined in the knowledge of an existing stereotype as profane sex object, as it signifies nudity and is particularly vociferous in decrying the veil of hair. Therefore, the exposure of my scalp alludes to the metonymical displacement from the term hairless to unveiling. By this strategy, the verbal fragment confronts a revelation that is manifested in the latent contents of the imagery. Indeed, I speak through the register of one body to another - through the process of *transference*. I write myself into the narrative, which transfers my *desire* on to the text, through the register of the text's formal structures to act out feelings of estrangement in contemporary local society.

Within this context, a barcode is tattooed to the back of my neck in *Generic Woman*, as a confirmation of a specific archetype. Yet, my bold head also lends itself to uniformity and a lack of characteristic features between men and women. It addresses the definition of women and the way that women, are constructed differently to men in patriarchal society, that is recognizable in the dress code. The only difference in the dress code between men and women, are the skirt and the high-heeled shoes. However, cross-dressing is also practiced in contemporary society and some men, albeit within fashion circles, wear long skirts and high heeled shoes. Nevertheless, hairy legs that can be a distinguishing feature between men and women, but it is also possible for women to grow hair on their legs, or for men to wax their legs. Nonetheless, the androgynous dress worn by myself in *Generic Woman* can be considered a transgressive code against the acceptable dress code for women. Within this framework, the recreation of myself allows me to rebel against acceptable dress code. In this way, body modification is especially poignant as it is performed contrary to social approval that resists the social construction of women in patriarchal society.

2.2.5 THE REFERENTIAL CODE

Barthes describes the referential code as "the social status [in which] the figures [are] represented" in a narrative (Bal and Bryson 1991: 203). While it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the referential code and the semic code because of the overlaps, there are parts in this study where the different codes can be distinguished.

Strip is an autobiographical work, in which Victor develops a consciousness of non-existence in patriarchal society that is a referential code. Most particularly, *Strip* is an imaginative apprehension of women's oppression in contemporary South African society. Victor names acts of violence, such as physical abuse against women, that is a semic code, which alludes to a violation of the body boundary delineation. Yet, Victor also invites viewers to reconsider notions of *femininity* that are not specifically related to the reproductive body.

While it appears that *Strip* appeals to a physical inspection of the female body, I argue that Victor's work also relates to a self-consciously constructed space. Victor's drawing creates an illusion that a woman's torso is dissected down the middle from her chest to her abdomen, which may disturb sensitive viewers. Furthermore, Victor's own hands are also used as retractors to pull back the flaps of skin that facilitates a visual exploration of the internal spaces her body. In particular, the representation of a female body refers metonymically to a correspondence between inside and outside, but also to a correlation between identity and nature. Moreover, Victor uses storytelling as a tool⁴² in *Strip*, to express painful experiences in a sexist society. It is almost as if Victor is trying to escape from social constriction by literally 'stepping out of her skin'. This is similar to the way I recreate myself in *Generic Woman*, in a quest for independence and autonomy. This self-transformation illuminates a struggle for independence in a secularized society that

⁴² A section on tools shall be discussed at length in Chapter 3.

demands autonomy and material proof of success. Self-alteration, hereby, confirms both my ego and a search to establish my identity in relation to South African society.

Within this context, Victor uses storytelling to mark the world that labeled her as Other. Victor explores the notion of domination and power play between the genders, which is implied in a whole series of metaphors and metonymies in *Strip*.⁴³ Victor alters her physical appearance by mutilating her own body. In particular, the sight of a laceration and display of bodily fluids like blood⁴⁴ is notably associated with the enigma of menstruation and childbirth, but furthermore associated with pain and injury as well. Moreover, *Strip* rekindled painful memories in my personal history of physical assault. In particular, physical assault is an act, which violate the body boundary delineation. My art making can also be considered a diversion of repressed rage in which personal memories of physical assault are reworked in my art making that address the issue of misogyny and subsequent acts of violence committed against women as a consequence of this hostility. In particular, the incessant recreation of myself in art making, results in a change of status, hereby, abolishing my old self for the creation of a new self -- that is also a coping mechanism that helps me to overcome distressing experiences.

Body alteration is also a form of self-definition in Victor's art making. Victor has inscribed the word, forever unto the abdominal wall that hereby, incorporates a text within the body. Furthermore, the laceration of her torso and abdomen also reads as physical injury, which in turn operates as a physical violation of the body. Moreover, the wound resembles the physical anatomy of female genitalia, which points metonymically towards a postmodern identity out of *difference* and Otherness. The metaphorical

⁴³ Kristeva (1984: 131) claims that the speech-act speaks of the subject's *desire* to give expression to an repressed ideal: "*Desire* will be seen as an always already accomplished subjugation of the subject to lack: it will serve to demonstrate ... the development of the signifier.... From these reflections a certain kind of subject emerges: a subject, precisely, of *desire*..." (Kristeva 1984: 131, my emphasis in italics). The metaphorical references in Victor's artwork *Strip* furthermore reveal a correlation between, mind and nature and culture.

references in Victor's work reveals a correspondence between self and Other -- that is implied in my reading of *Strip*. Displacements from two separate elements, along separate associative paths reveal a point of intersection that is certainly revealing. The lacerated wound in *Strip*, doubles as injury and female genitalia that points metonymically, towards the issue of sexual violence, which is a semic code.

Yet, the woman is speaking directly to viewers that may remain unnoticed, while this revelation makes a contribution towards my interpretation of Victor's artwork. *Strip* offers Victor a transcendent space between self and Other -- through the process of *transference*. This enables Victor to speak to an observer through the register of her body during her performance, in which she appeals against acts of violence, such as rape and assault committed against women in contemporary South African society. Both Victor and myself address the issue of misogyny in art making. Another interesting comparison between *Generic Woman* and *Strip*, is that the title of *Strip*, denotes an act of unveiling while disclosure is implied in a semiotic reading of *Generic Woman*.

2.3 PSYCHOANALYTIC SEMIOTICS AND NARRATION

In this section, a psychoanalytical informed semiotics was applied to a reading of contemporary South African art. Barthes' approach on narrative semiotics revealed that different viewers have different interpretations of the same artwork, which resulted in many different interpretations of a single artwork. Bal and Bryson (1991: 203), claim that the intertwining of various codes in a narrative results in a "heteroglossia". An image thus, presents a visual "heteroglossia" namely in "the cacophony of incongruous strands of cultural discourses" (Bal and Bryson 1991: 203). While Bal and Bryson's term "heteroglossia" refers to different textual interpretations, the words, "incongruous strands of cultural discourse" relate to a multiple reading of a specific artwork.

⁴⁴ Moreover the fear of, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is further also related to blood and other bodily fluids, as the source of possible contamination like AIDS, that is endemic in contemporary South African society.

Most especially, I applied my reading of artists' struggle for autonomy and identity in South African art to my own search for social identity. A semiotic psychoanalytic reading confirmed an ever-continuing process of signification that rules out a conclusive reading of a work of art. It substantiated that a poststructuralist reading lends itself to many different interpretations a single artwork, unlike formal art criticism that renders a decisive reading of a work of art.

While *Phallic Mother* reconsidered the way that the female body is socially constructed, *Maiden in Phallic Armour* defied perceptions of the standardized female body and, Cohen recreates himself in *Crawling* that unmasked prejudice against his Jewish culture and his homosexual identity. By the same token, both works *Generic Woman* and *Strip* are transgressive works that addressed acts of violence committed women. Contemporary art making asserted the validity of self-expression in contemporary performance art, but also how these artworks make a valuable contribution towards the formulation of a general feminist aesthetics and global feminism.

This reading demonstrated the way that autobiographical artworks by South African artists exhibited a strong element of social critique -- as an indictment of cultural oppression in contemporary patriarchal society. Since performance art is positioned outside the Symbolic system, this study established that contemporary South African performance artists critique formal social structures; responded to social conflict and transgressed social norms. Self-alteration by performance artists confirmed a disaffiliation with the mainstream and a visible proclamation of a sense of camaraderie with other performance artists. It substantiated that contemporary South African artists affirm a political character by asserting a commonality and collective perspective in art making.

The first chapter explored religious oppression, while this chapter discussed sexual oppression in contemporary South African society. The next chapter reconsiders oppressive structures in phallogentric society and the notion that women's *femininity* is related to the reproductive body, while applying a reading of corporeal subjectivity in contemporary South African art.

CHAPTER 3

THE SPEAKING SUBJECT

In the former chapter, I explore artists' quest for autonomy and identity. The previous chapter also applied Barthes' theory of psychoanalytic informed semiotics to a reading of contemporary South African art. In particular, this chapter considers subjects' inner responses to outside stimuli in recognition of women's sexual oppression in patriarchal society. This section argues that motherhood is no longer a cultural readymade and source of female identity. Moreover, the practical problems are also examined, such as the choice of imagery and use of materials by artists, as well as, the presentation of artworks in a gallery or public space, which has an impact on viewers' interpretations of artworks.

Contemporary discourse explores power structures in patriarchal society. This chapter, for example, argues that South African men have been brought up with old mental habits that they have privilege and power over women. Power structures are deeply entrenched in South African society, by Calvinism,¹ for instance. In addition, other forms of bias shall be examined in contemporary art making by South African artists, such as prejudice against race, class, and ethnicity, for instance.²

¹ Calvinism was introduced by German and Dutch immigrants, who make up the majority of the Caucasian population in South Africa.

² Drastic change in contemporary South African art coincides with the change to a democratic Government in 1994 that promotes freedom of speech.

Kristeva's theory on gendered subjectivity is debated, as well as, the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and other theorists in support of the previous chapter that discussed artists' struggle for autonomy and identity. Furthermore, new boundaries are explored in the theories of Donna Haraway amongst other theorists, who explore gendered subjectivity in contemporary art practice. Moreover, I apply a reading of artists' artworks to my own experiences of *femininity* in South African society, as psychoanalysis of myself.

3.1 THE DEMOCRATIC VOICE

Most especially, the democratization process promotes an awareness of rights, such as human rights and constitutional measures taken against discrimination. Moreover, language rights, have obviously promoted the freedom of speech in contemporary South African art, as well as other forms of communication. This is reflected in the way South African artists deal, for example, with a **social construction of the contemporary body**, that is especially concerned with the **female** body. Indeed, the body and corporeality itself - become the best vehicle for an interrogation of states of subjectivity in contemporary South African art making.

Although South African artists have made several valuable contributions, it seems that South African art critics do not acknowledge their work. In an article published by Siopis, South African critic Hazel Friedman criticizes that the work *Useful Objects* (1996) by South African artist Kaolin Thompson, perpetuates the "racial and sexual oppression of the past" (Siopis 1997: 58). In my view, Kaolin's work which consists of a black ceramic ashtray in the form of women's external genitalia and a lighted cigarette, does not repeat racial oppression but highlights the relentless sexual discrimination against African women in South African society.

Siopis (1997: 60) furthermore, points out that "discursive work is only relevant to those practices conforming to international discourse" which results in a virtual absence of discourse on contemporary South African art. Siopis argues that the issue of gendered subjectivity is "avoided" by South African critics on two levels. First, the concept of *difference* is related to sexual *difference* in art criticism, but also to other differences, such as race and secondly, that the notion of *difference* is sometimes confused in art criticism with the diversity in art making.³ In other words, while South African critics avoid a discussion of sensitive issues in contemporary artworks, some art critics are not familiar with current debates raised in South African art.

Moreover, I believe that the absence of discursive writing reflects a biased opinion by South African art critics as follows: first, the way South African art critics do not acknowledge sexual oppression in contemporary South African society. Lastly, a disregard of discursive work by South African artists in contemporary critical art writing, a transgression of artists' human rights under the new constitution of South Africa. The artists that I have researched for this project resist oppressive structures in patriarchal society and the notion that women's *femininity* is related to the reproductive body. Within this context, the objective of this project is to minimize biological *difference* and to provide the female body with **different** cultural values. The performance artists that I have investigated consider the contemporary body a material surface that is used as a writing surface, to transmit and/or receive messages of lived experiences in the outside world.

³ The term, diversity is frequently (incorrectly) used in art critical writing to make a distinction between oppositions' like urban/rural, art/craft, and local/international et cetera. Art critics sometimes differentiate between untrained artists who work in traditional media like clay or wood to make various traditional drinking vessels and pots, for example, and trained artists whose works are informed by traditional methods of art making to make clay sculptures. In this sense, artists' various cultural backgrounds determine the accreditation of different functional or non-functional objects as artworks.

Kristeva (1984: 48-49), claims that subjects can "come to language" where their *desire* becomes their own. The radical promises offered by Kristeva's theories are an attempt to invent new kinds of subjectivity for both men and women alike. Yet this further echoes the writing of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (in Jardine 1985: 215) who also maintain that "becoming woman":

...has very little to do with *women*, at least not with women ... caught up within a Western binary machine [It] is less a metaphor for describing a certain social or textual process than a true metamorphosis.... In becoming, it ... means becoming caught up in a process of osmosis (not metaphor) with de-anthropologized entities -- for example women, infants, animals, foreigners, the insane -- in order to resist the dominant mode of representation presented by any majority (Deleuze and Guattari in Jardine 1985: 215).

The above words by Deleuze and Guattari mainly refer to the way discursive language is not necessarily restricted to women writers. Yet, both theorists admit that a coalition exists amongst women writers to defend their biological status. My use of the term, coalition relates to a sense of camaraderie that exists between feminist (male and/or female) writers to build a strategy of survival in their writing that resists sexual oppression in the outside world. In this way, South African artists collectively build effective theories of personal experiences in the outside world. The retelling of personal experiences in contemporary performance art by women artists, for example, defend women's biological status.

Notwithstanding, feminist writers remain sceptical of Deleuze and Guattari's theories and few have made use of their work. American theorist Elizabeth Grosz, for instance (1994: 177) believes that "becoming-woman [involves] a series of processes and movements beyond a fixity of *subjectivity* and the structure of stable unities. It is an escape from the system of binary polarization of unities that privilege men at the expense of women" (Grosz 1994: 177, my emphasis in italics). In other words, Grosz explains that contemporary literature theory systematically, deconstructs binary opposites in contemporary society, such as nature versus culture as well as, *difference* and Other, for example.

I believe that the artists mentioned in this chapter reconsider original myths in Western culture. Particularly, contemporary myth making reconfigures the construction of women as objects of *desire*. In a sense, contemporary art making is a systematic rewriting of new myths of *femininity*, that discards metaphors which are traditionally associated with the female body. Most especially, women artists empower themselves with different strategies to deconstruct power structures in contemporary patriarchal society. Writers like Jardine, Irigaray, Deleuze and Guattari also reconsider the construction of women as objects of *desire* in contemporary literature theory.

English writer Alice Jardine (1985: 223), argues that the question of *desire* in the work of Deleuze and Guattari "has not been allowed even to appear" (Jardine 1985: 223). However, Luce Irigaray (1985: 212-213) also argues that the use of the metaphor "desiring machine" in the writing of Deleuze and Guattari, resembles an obvious link to the female body (Irigaray 1985: 212-213). Yet, Deleuze and Guattari claim that a "desiring machine" has to do with production to "... carry out real operations of *desire* in the material world" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 41). In my opinion, a direct reference can be made between Deleuze and Guattari's use of the terms "production" and "desiring machine" relates to women's biological role in society and does not promote an expression of *femininity* in women's writing. I believe that the writing of Deleuze and Guattari present a new coalition in contemporary discourse, yet it fails to **acknowledge the need for women's autonomy and recognition of sexual *difference*.**

Nevertheless, Jardine (1985: 213) argues that there is a connection between the "desiring machine" and a "Body-without-Organs" (BwO)⁴ in the writing of Deleuze and

⁴ Deleuze and Guattari (in Jardine 1985: 212) define the "Body-without-Organs [as that] what remains when everything has been removed" and all that is left is an empty shell (Deleuze and Guattari in Jardine 1985: 212). Deleuze and Guattari (1983: 329) also claim that it is possible "to re-activate the organs, to reanimate them with local movements". Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari (1983: 68) write that "the narrator is a body without organs, like a spider in its web, observing nothing, but responding to the slightest vibration by springing on its prey" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 329; 68). It refers to the way that writers 'feed' on information.

Guattari and asks: "...does one not risk, once again, taking back from woman those/her as yet territorialized spaces where her *desire* could come into its own?... to occupy the place of their own schize?" (Jardine 1985: 213, my emphasis in italics).⁵ Jardine and Irigaray both claim that the writing on women's experiences of *femininity* is **unique** to women. I believe that unlike stories narrated by men, women's stories reconsider personal experiences of *femininity* in contemporary phallogentric society that is **particular** to women. In my view, women's stories have the task of subverting the structure of *desire* in patriarchal society in art making, music, dance and literature, for example.

Likewise, the theories of Derrida (1987: 191) also refer to a "*desire*" in writing to conceive a truth about something, like the truth of painting, for example. Derrida postulates that various forms of writing, such as painting, composing, and architecture -- pursue a concept of ephemerality (Derrida 1987: 191). The illusive aspect of artworks, for instance, is a transient element in art making that depends upon endless signification. In my view, Derrida deals with a philosophy of essence that relates to a mode of being in the world, which Heidegger (1962: 28) refers to as an "inquiry" into the state of the world. The aim of most contemporary artists is not a search for an isolated identity, but to establish themselves to their social identity.

Self-transformation by performance artists, for instance, is often in response to cultural pressures placed on women, that is reflected in cultural attitudes towards women's bodies and regarding women's autonomy in patriarchal society. Essentially, as artists resist communal strictures, they are stuck in a constant state of becoming by adopting different characters in the process of art making. In this way, artists resist definition as they incessantly recreate themselves by acting out different characters in performance art, for

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari (1983: 39) describe the term "schize" as a word coined in French, that is "based on the Greek verb *schizein*, "to split," "to cleave," "to divide".

example. Artists create an autonomous world for themselves, in which they continually transforms their identity. Performance art also involves role-playing in which artists change their characters or invent new identities.

In my previous work, for instance, I play the roles of different types of women in society that explore relationships between fantasy, gender and sexual stereotyping. These portrayals are not self-portraits but impersonations of female types that I have absorbed over the years since my childhood like the role of *femme fatale* in *Daatje at the siege of port Le Rochelle, toys with the idea of dancing with Claude Gellee*, 1997, (Fig.9).⁶ Moreover, I present myself as a leading character in a stage setting and transform myself into different roles, such as a dumb blonde in *Mrs De 's delusion of her escape to the animal world, going to extremes to bring the beast out in women*, 1997 (Fig.10).⁷ These explorations investigate a mode of being in the world like the role of vamp played in my work *Gabriele contemplates her self image, in the wake of the discovery of her own image*, 1997, (Fig.11).⁸

Heidegger, (1962: 24) "[e]very inquiry is a seeking ... about something" that relates conditions in society or the state of the world. He furthermore adds that: "[i]n the question of the meaning of Being there is ... a remarkable relatedness backward ... or forward..." (Heidegger 1962: 24; 28). My art making can be considered a reflection of

⁶ Tilly De Gabriele, *Daatje at the seige of port Le Rochelle, toys with the idea of dancing with Claude Gellee* (1997). Mixed media, 40 x 52 cm. Photograph by the artist. The artist's collection.

⁷ Tilly De Gabriele, *Mrs De 's delusion of her escape to the animal world, going to extremes to bring the beast out in women* (1997). Mixed media, 32 x 32 x 20 cm. Photograph by the artist. The artist's collection.

⁸ Tilly De Gabriele, *Gabriele contemplates her self image, in the wake of the discovery of her own image*, (1997). Mixed media, 27 x 31 x 25 cm. Photograph by the artist. The artist's collection.

past experiences, but also an inquiry about the present and future state of the world. It is a continual process in which I repeatedly re-invent myself that explores new limits and boundaries. In my performances, I make critical allusions to the way women are labeled in society, in an attempt to break through these stereotypes. I explore feminine stereotypes in this way, as a celebration of women's liberation and as statements of women's *difference*.

Moreover, American theorist Michael Heim (1990: 42-43) also refers to the way our imagination can transcend "the limits of our bodily reality ... [to] a virtual world ... only if ... [fiction transforms] the existential features of reality ... beyond immediate recognition [which includes] the built-in carryover of events from the past into the future...". Heim furthermore, recommends that fiction should create alternate worlds "to evoke ... alternate thoughts and alternate feelings" (Heim 1990: 42-43). In other words, Heim's theory deals with the concepts of temporality and fragility of life that makes us human. This theory by Heim can also be related to the way artists construct alternate layers of reality in a single artwork. Yet, my performance is also based on reclaiming the female body that makes a statement about women's autonomy in contemporary society that commemorates women's *difference*.

3.2 PROCESS OF PRODUCTION

The act of making oneself a work of art, is an especially powerful act for women. The body is utilized in this way, as a potent medium of flesh and blood. The irony is that women are using their bodies to transform themselves through a physical and metamorphic reconstruction of their bodies. The theory of Deleuze and Guattari (in Grosz 1994: 167-168) provide a link between artists and the tools, which can be described as follows: "They are the consequence of a practice, whether it be that ... of a

subject making something using tools or implements.... They are the conditions as well as the effect of any making, any producing" (Deleuze and Guattari in Grosz 1994: 167-168). In my opinion, the words, "tools or implements" by Deleuze and Guattari, can be applied to the way performance artists use their bodies in art making, to make statements about women's sexual oppression in contemporary society. In particular, performance artists use self-transformation -- to symbolize a control over and pride in the physical self. While, my impersonations of '*femme fatale*' and 'vamp' explore impersonations of female types, such acts resist the social construction of the female body in patriarchal society. My art making resists the embodiment of dominant cultural values, like a display of the female body as seductive flesh in consumer advertising.

Furthermore, American biologist Donna Haraway (1985: 94-100) also claims that new boundaries are constructed in contemporary art practice through the "[i]ntimate experience" of story telling, for instance, "to mark the world that marked [the artists] ... as other". Haraway refers to the way that contemporary storytelling, name acts that violate the body boundary delineation. What follows is a description of personal experiences in art making that explore awareness amongst artists in contemporary art practice. My art making describes the way personal experiences of sexual oppression in the outside world, leave marks on the surface of my skin in the form of impressions, lacerations, bruises and scars. In this way, my art rebels against violent acts that violate body boundary delineation.

3.3 TOOLS

Performance artists often use story telling to write a testimony of their experiences in the outer world. One of Merleau-Ponty's theories complements the observation of Heidegger

(1962: 98) that tools, instruments and equipment⁹ are placed around us, and readily available for "manipulation", and "ready-to-hand". In this sense, Heidegger utilizes the verb "hammering" to explain how a hammer is used as an instrument that describes the "manipulation" of a hammer by a person (Heidegger 1962: 98). Moreover, Heidegger also reminds us that alongside this process of manipulation, a spatial process of incorporation occurs, which is born out of the use of tools, instruments and equipment on a daily basis. In a sense, South African artists use "tools" which are readily available around them for their art making. In performance art, for example, such instruments include the artists' body as well as recording equipment, such as video camera or photographic camera, television monitors, and monitors used in multimedia presentations.

Heidegger (1962: 101) claims that tools and instruments make up the equipment in our "working" environment. Heidegger further explains that the use of equipment in our working environment is closely related to a process of "discovery", of the "environment Nature" of these instruments and tools show:

...our concerned absorption in whatever work-world lies closest to us, has a function of discovering; and it is essential to this function that depending upon the way in which we are absorbed, [in] those entities within-the-world which are brought along ...with it (that is to say, ...the references [to these entities] which are constitutive [of the use of particular equipment in our work] (Heidegger 1962: 101).

Heidegger demonstrates that there is a parallel between the equipment used during the working process and the immediate environment in which these tools and instruments are found that confirms the semiotic activity between these various entities. Up to 1997, my work was involved in conceptual explorations that measured a relationship between illusion and reality. However, in 1997 I began to use photomontages within a frame for the first time, an approach that led to a completely new range of possibilities.

⁹ In *Being and Time* (1962: 97), an explanatory note clarifies that Heidegger uses the term, "equipment" as part of a collective noun, but that he sometimes uses it with an indefinite article to refer to a particular tool or instrument.

My conceptual explorations in art making developed into layering colour transparencies with the photomontages inside three-dimensional box constructions. My mixed-media constructions subsequently led to installation works and projection installations. In turn, the introduction of movement in one of the artworks led to the use of video recording and monitor projections. My video presentations deal with the way we are perceived by others and how cultural constructs and stereotypes control our feelings about ourselves. In turn, my projection installations also relate to the way we perceive ourselves in relation to our social identity.

In a sense, a direct connection exists between the material world and the tools used by artists to express their experiences in art making. American theorist Drew Leder (1990: 33) also observes that learning the use of a tool or instrument is accomplished through a temporal process which settle into habits. The equipment tends to disappear from our attention, if it is used on a daily basis (as long as the instruments do not malfunction). This can be related to the way that artists become so absorbed in the art making process itself that these artists disregard their surroundings.

Moreover, Leder (1990: 33) also maintains that organs (provided these are in good health) and appendages of our body tend to elude our specific attention when an explicit action is contemplated and carried out repeatedly. In other words, artists may use a hammer, for instance, in art making and become totally absorbed in this activity so that artists forget that he or she is holding the hammer. In this way, an instrument becomes an extension of artists' hand along side the temporal process, also known as a process of incorporation¹⁰ that is accomplished in a spatial sense. It can be argued therefore, that an association exists between the presence of sensory-motor organs and tools; that describes a connection between a temporal process and process of production.

¹⁰ Leder (1990: 31) informs the reader that the etymology of the term "incorporation" is based on Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception, from the Latin meaning "corpus" which signifies "to bring within the body".

My artwork, *Mathilde's Fantasy of the Phallic Woman* (2001), (Fig.12),¹¹ for example, questions a form of integration of the way specific ideologies are incorporated in society. I have applied this concept to explore the power of the glamour girl in the mass society and the way this construct is accepted unconditionally by consumers. *Phallic Woman* asks questions about the power of the mass media that creates false consciousness in contemporary society, and the relationship between the material world and the use of tools in my art making. I use my body as a tool to make a statement about sexual oppression in contemporary society. Even an autonomous artist like myself submits to the ritual of naked self-display, in order to subvert the representation of women as seductive flesh. Yet, nakedness conveys strength and my confrontational glance challenge and threaten the appropriation of the glamour girl image. In particular, my interest lies in censoring the display of women's bodies in the mass media and the creation of an artwork that cannot be consumed as a commodity.

The creation of an obviously artificial appearance in my self-portraits, like *Phallic Mother*, *Maiden in Phallic Armour* and *Generic Woman*; *Phallic Woman* can be regarded as a defiant act against socially constructed *femininity*, beauty, gender, sexual roles and eroticization of the female body.¹² My performances can, in this sense, be considered an art activity that addresses the notion of displacement in which I physically write myself into the script of a narrative. In my view, this demonstrates the ways that experiences of sexual oppression are stored in my subconscious mind are expressed through my gestures in art making which describes a temporal process.

¹¹ Tilly De Gabriele, *Mathilde's Fantasy of the Phallic Woman* (2001). Mixed media, 30 x 33 x 18 cm. Photograph by Petri de Klerk. The artist's collection. Hereafter referred to as *Phallic Woman*.

¹² Most especially, women in modern society face the dilemma of being constantly visible and subjected to prevailing fashion. Acts of transformation by a woman may also be interpreted as a form of initiating herself into a socially acceptable being, of an individual who is accepted as a sexually mature adult. These rituals include tweezing, delipilation, starvation diets; hair cutting, perming and straightening; facial scrubs, lipo suction, and plastic surgery like breast and/or buttock-enhancing implants.

In the art of contemporary South African artist Helen Sebidi, viewers can sense that her subjective consciousness is not denied and that she is determined to find a voice to express her emotional experiences. The strength of Sebidi's imagery in her work, *The Child's Mother Holds the Sharp Side of the Knife* (1888-1889), (Fig.13)¹³ lies in the way she captures the conflict and tension of South African city life that is also historically relevant. Yet, the presence of women is overdetermined and what is striking about Sebidi's images is her depiction of the essential element of women's subjectivity in art.

Another aspect of Sebidi's art is the redefinition of space, which is reinforced by the compression of the picture plane. The confusion figures and animals across the picture plane furthermore, relate metaphorically to overcrowded conditions in the urban townships. Furthermore, Sebidi's representation of township life is a symbolic depiction of traditions and concern with gender roles. Her mythmaking functions as a social text, in which the narrative is continually subjected to discourse. Sebidi describes her narratives from her own life history, based on the representation of social issues, which acknowledge that women bear the brunt of social responsibilities.¹⁴ Sebidi's work refers to the way a grandmother often brings up her grandchildren as both parents are forced to work in the cities due to the migrant labour system. Yet, it also reveals the power structures in capitalist society that reinforces the separation of children's parents but also enforces parents to be separated from their children, which results in the disruption of African communities. In my view, capitalism redefines the traditional roles of men and women living in South African society.

¹³ Helen Sebidi, *The Child's Mother Holds the Sharp of the Knife* (1988-1989). Pastel on paper. Source: (Arnold 1996: plate 73). Photographer unknown. Dimensions unknown. The artist's collection.

¹⁴ In African culture, the sources of security and economic independence are represented within the domestic sphere that is a major realm whereby the African community is held together. Precisely the separation of domestic from economic life is peculiar to capitalism, as both parents are forced to work in the cities within the South African migrant labour system, and African children are traditionally brought up by their grandmother in the rural areas.

While the title of Sebidi's work, *The Child's Mother Holds the Sharp Side of the Knife* does not refer to a literal explanation, it describes the traditional role of African women living in South African society. Sebidi (in Arnold 1996: 140), comments on this scenario as follows:

In our language they always say -- yours is yours. *You've* got to handle it, *you've* got to be, don't let go ... In African tradition they say that it is the woman who holds the sharp side of the knife. Here [a] woman is holding the knife in this way and is saying -- this is what I have to do, and it's my way (Sebidi in Arnold 1996: 140).

On a semiotic level, Sebidi's words refer to the manner that African women hold the community together. The imagery in Sebidi's work also represents the depiction of a woman in chains that is loaded with meaning. Within a South African context, chains signify imprisonment, slavery and bondage but in Sebidi's representation the chains also symbolize the way that African women are bound to their tradition of holding the community together. Yet, Sebidi's drawings also depict both men and women, as distorted and dehumanized figures that refers to disfiguring pressures and conflicts of a racist society which discriminates against people from different cultures. She translates the literalness of her imagery into a visual language by using expressive mark making. I believe that Sebidi's artwork serves as a transparent surface or simulacrum in which viewers need to penetrate the picture surface in order to interpret her narrative.

The imagery is already well known, yet viewers need to examine the underlying codes that operate beneath the surface of the artwork. The picture surface of Sebidi's work functions as a transparent layer, which hides the real identities of the characters in the text. In this regard, French theorist Jean Baudrillard (1996: 73) claims that the identities of characters are "reduced to a tiny ironic glimmer, a nuance of play ... beneath artifacts". Baudrillard (1996: 122-123) furthermore adds that "otherness ... is not opposed to identity: it plays with it, just as illusion is not opposed to the real, but plays with it, and as the simulacrum is not opposed to truth, but plays with truth ..." Baudrillard (1996: 73),

further explains that beneath the artifact "is a hidden someone poking his [sic] nose at us" (Baudrillard 1996: 73; 122-123). In other words, Sebidi manipulates the imagery on the picture surface to "play ... with the truth" and reveal power structures in contemporary South African society. In this way, Sebidi makes an ironic statement about the conflict between different race groups as well as, telling her personal story of her experience as an African woman who lives in a patriarchal society.

Sebidi's narrative metonymically translates beyond a personalized experience to assert a certain commonality amongst women living in South African society. Her drawing also refers to the way that African women are tied to their traditions in keeping African communities together. I believe that the antagonistic principle is reduced to a mere *difference* and play of opposition -- in order to negotiate the concept of Otherness. She expresses the difficulties experienced by African women that can be seen in the expression of anguish in the women's faces. Sebidi's work symbolizes the forces that pull families apart as a result of the migrant labour system. The woman in the center of Sebidi's work also has a chain anchored to her left breast, which metonymically refers to the way that African women are bound by social responsibilities to hold communities together despite the breakdown of traditional value systems, like matriarchy within African culture.

Moreover, African males are also exposed to the vices of other cultures when these men live in urban areas. Consequently, these men are influenced by other cultures and in many instances often assert power over their girlfriends or wives that is directed at these women through acts of verbal or physical abuse. Furthermore, my reading of Sebidi's work highlights the enforced separation of children from their parents due to the migration system. In particular, it made me realize that the power structures introduced during the Apartheid era are still firmly in place. This realization led to subsequent feelings of guilt as I have a domestic woman servant from a rural area, in my own

employment. It also made me aware that capitalism is firmly in place, which defines the roles of African women as domestic servants in contemporary South African society.

Likewise, Sue Williamson also addresses an incoherence of South African society. Williamson addresses social contributions made by women of colour. In effect, Williamson's work highlights a disregard of the contributions made by African women to South Africa's social history that convincingly obliterated women's achievements from its narratives. Curiously, Williamson's work *A Few South Africans* (1982-1988), (Fig. 14)¹⁵ discusses racial discrimination that deals with women's oppression and does not deal with women's resistance to patriarchy. Instead, I believe that Williamson attempts to assert the humanity and person hood of African women. Moreover Williamson also highlights racial oppression, in the way that historical documents were manipulated by power structures that erased the achievements of African women from South African history. Above all, Williamson emphasizes that power structures were firmly in place during the Apartheid era, which failed to recognize women's achievements in society.

In *A Few South Africans*, Williamson creates a portrait of Charlotte Maxeke, who was born in 1874 and became the first African woman to obtain a university degree. In this artwork Maxeke is in the center of a series of five photographic prints, which shows her as a young woman on the far left, to what she became -- a college graduate on the far right. Moreover, the work is mounted on wall paper and outlined by a double line that is hand drawn, which draws attention to the fact that Williamson creates a window on reality -- also known in Western art as illusionism. This compositional device emphasises the time span of about one-century between the end of the nineteenth and twentieth century that highlights the changes which have occurred in society since this period of

¹⁵ Sue Williamson, *A Few South Africans* (1982-1988). Photograph (Hassan 1997: 67) by unknown photographer, screen print collage, 17 x 52 cm. The artist's collection.

time. Moreover, it demonstrates Williamson's overriding concern with history, particularly with Maxeke's personal history but also South African and Western art history.

Another reference to conventions in Renaissance art in Williamson's work, is the way in which the figures dominate the pictorial space that emphasizes the way these figures asserts their humanity. Renaissance art, commemorates a time in history when many scientific discoveries were made by human civilization that were reflected in art making in the way the figure predominated the composition. Likewise, Williamson's work questions her own social history during Apartheid (1948-1996) when; African women were discriminated against by the political system. Williamson presents viewers with cold facts that are based on the truth. Furthermore, formal references can also be made to Maxeke's personal history, which includes a family photograph in the series, and, to a South African context. Security police make an arrest in another photograph that pertains to power structures within the South African society.

Interestingly enough, at the opening of her first series in 1984, Williamson asked political activist Helen Joseph to open the exhibition. Joseph herself (1996: 135), says in her opening speech that Williamson had managed to reclaim an epoch in South African history by taking it "out of the cupboard" and placing "it on the wall" of the gallery -- which also explains the motivation of Williamson's work (Joseph in Arnold 1996: 135).¹⁶ On a semiotic level, a correlation can also be made between 'old skeletons' in the cupboard that refers to a disclosure of family secrets. In my opinion, 'old skeletons' metonymically refers to political crimes committed during the Apartheid era.

Williamson's narrative relates to a personalized history of an assertive woman like

¹⁶ In her recent work, Williamson focuses on the misconceptions, preconceptions, biases and stereotypes associated with the Hottentot communities that feature the representation of male subjects, such as *The Hottentot* (1992) and *Contemplation* (1992).

Maxeke, that subverts South African history and the dominant ideology by making an example out of the fact that Maxeke's achievement had been left out of South African history. The reason that I originally chose to interpret this work of Williamson was that I could relate to Maxeke's struggle to achieve her educational goal. This study proved that power structures are deeply embedded in patriarchal society, that demands that women put their biological role before intellectual needs.

In contemporary art women artists often express a need for creative satisfaction, and to have a choice to put these needs before mothering. I believe that contemporary South African artists concern themselves with the representation of women as vulnerable, mortal human beings who have the same social needs as men of reaching their intellectual potential. In particular, the narratives depicted in contemporary South African art analyzes artists' corporeal experiences in the outer world. The theories of French existential phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (in Leder 1990: 33) are particularly relevant in this regard. Merleau-Ponty equates a "blind man's stick" with an extension of the body like an additional appendage or organ that functions as an antenna. Merleau-Ponty writes that the "point [of a] blind man's stick" operates like a antenna:

The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, **extending the scope and active radius of touch** (Merleau-Ponty in Leder 1990: 33, my emphasis in bold).

Merleau-Ponty's words relate a "blind man's stick" to a sensitive "area" which acts as an extension of the body. I believe that several artists develop an extra-sense-perception whereby he or she receives information received by sensory organs like eyes, ears et cetera and that is passed on to the pro-encaphalus of the brain. In this way, sensory organs become "an extension" of the body and act as an "active radius of touch" like a "blind man's stick". In turn, this information stored in the artists' unconscious mind is brought to the fore through artistic gestures in art making. What follows is an explanation

of Merleau-Ponty's theory on phenomenology and how this process is manifested in my own art making.

I employ a photographic camera as a sensitive instrument to record my performances that document how I perceive myself in relation to my social identity. In particular, photography and video recording are used to make a series of 'self-portraits' that stand for universal surrogates other than myself. On a semiotic level, these self-transformations lead to a dislocation of my identity in the obliteration of recognizable imagery. My 'self-portraits' are part of a larger body of work that includes installation projections and performance videos, which explore personal experiences in the outer world. In particular, these impersonations refer to the way women are both revered and despised as sex objects in the media. While the imagery in my art making is transgressive in the way it relates to this dichotomy, my work *Skin-Surfacings I* (2000), (Fig. 15),¹⁷ bears witness to acts of violence committed against women as a consequence of this hostility.

Skin-Surfacings I explores the way personal experiences in the outer world are represented in artistic gestures in art making and left as scars on the skin's surface itself. Self-stigmatization is an activity that demonstrates the way memories stored in my subconscious mind are expressed through my gestures in art making.¹⁸ Moreover, I use close-up photography to reconstruct the spectacle of marked, gendered bodies in the mass media that investigates the material values of flesh in my work, which may remain desiring and erotic. However, it is votive as well -- as I deliberately choose to mark my

¹⁷ Tilly De Gabriele *Skin-Surfacings I* (2000). Mixed media, 22,5 x 21,5 x 11 cm. Photograph by Petri de Klerk. The artist's collection.

¹⁸ The South African community is exposed to symptoms of aggression that is a reaction to acts of crime and violence committed in contemporary society like car hijacking, assault and rape as well as housebreaking and armed robbery. Aggressive behaviour is furthermore evident in road rage, air rage, physical assault and rape. Frequently women are targets for these attacks that are aggravated by man's presumed power over women. Incidences of road rage, for example, are often an excuse by male drivers to abuse their power over women drivers.

skin that is motivated by my own creative will. Moreover, self-marking also confirms my autonomous nature, in which I can express my own viewpoint that I find liberating.¹⁹

A psychoanalytic reading of my working process in *Skin-Surfacings I* reveals that blood is used as a writing fluid to write my story upon the corporeal surface in which partial images of my own body are projected unto eleven screens. The gender element is present on these screens -- that is embodied in the word 'her', in the written text. Corporeality itself becomes the vehicle of subjectivity in my art making. How can one interpret this artistic act of calculated mutilation?²⁰ The sight of blood reminds viewers of a painful wound, or injury, but metaphorically it also relates to violence and especially with acts of brutality committed against women, such as rape and assault. Yet, acts of violence against women are a violation of the body that is associated with sexual *difference* and hatred of women. In my work, I raise this issue in the words: *hate her, love her*, engraved on the frame which in turn, relate to the words attached to the frame: *pain, pleasure*, as well as, a reference of personal attachments and interpersonal relationships. This artwork demonstrates how deeply hostility towards women is entrenched in Symbolic society. In my view, I believe that misogyny is also the reason for the high incidence of rape and physical assault committed against women in contemporary South African society.

Why do I use self-mutilation to alter my appearance, an act that is associated with initiation rites in African societies that abolishes the old self for the creation of a new

¹⁹ Self-markings often demarcate a change in self-awareness. Body markings are positive signs of identification and inclusion in many African societies. This contrasts sharply with the Western use of the marks as signs of degradation and marginalization, such as prison tattoos, the branding of slaves et cetera.

²⁰ Feminine masochism is a form of masochism in which individuals inflict injury on themselves. Usually, it signifies an attempt by persons to free themselves from feelings of guilt that are suppressed in the subconscious mind. Freud (1961: 159-170) explains that feminine masochism is based on the primary, erotogenic masochism, that is, on pleasure in pain. In my case I do not want to speculate on the reasons for this sense of guilt, as the real reason behind this sense of guilt is deeply suppressed in my unconsciousness. On the other hand, the gesture of self-stigmatisation has an erotic component, as the act of self-mutilation creates a sense of libidinal satisfaction.

self? I use self-alteration to explore my identity through the modification of my body by self-marking -- that explores a postmodern identity out of Otherness and *difference*. It is about knowing the *difference* and what it is like to live an existence as a sexual object. Sexual objectification is the consequence of domination and power play between the genders. My role-playing allows me to recreate myself anew within a sub-cultural milieu and, hereby, to rebel against the construction of the female body in patriarchal society. Moreover, how does the gesture of self-alteration constitute a feminist critique or empowering feminist art? Self-alteration is an autonomous act that is loaded with cultural significance²¹ and yet, in *Skin-Surfacings I*, I do not use mutilation as a symbolic ritual, but it is used to carve a testimony of my personal experience of sexual oppression upon the surface of my skin.

Furthermore, photographs of the performance are presented behind glass to create an illusion that it discloses my 'real' identity. The picture surface acts as a simulacrum that plays with the truth. The space inside the frame also consists of found objects that also form part of the conceptual framework of the artwork. My work considers viewers' response to unexplored spaces within the frame as some areas are densely packed while other spaces are packed loosely with images. In this way, colour is overlaid in layers of suspended transparent film, in which different colour transparencies are juxtaposed together with text and various objects. The outer surface of the frame in my art making also relates to the skin or an envelope of flesh that encapsulates the body. Paradoxically, the reference to skin also brings to mind other metaphors, such as the skin as boundary; the skin as interface of pain and pleasure; different skin colour; and skin as a means of communication of an identity that is born out of Otherness and *difference*. The surface of the frame also refers to the way a person's skin is marked by experiences in the outside world that leave traces in the form of scars on the skin's surface.

Moreover, the outer surfaces of the frame surface are heavily textured to obscure the images behind these patches. In some instances, the colour overlays act as veils to blur the images behind them to create a sense of mystery; whilst in other areas textured surfaces disguise the imagery which refer to the process of veiling, unveiling and revealing the truth. My art making process suggests disclosure that is suggested by openings made into the framework. Essentially, openings in the frame refer to penetration metaphors and the way that these perforations lead to a revelation of my true identity.

Likewise, the work of South African artist Motlhabane Mashiangwako is a gendered vision of the female experience by a male artist that relates to the broad dynamics of social and racial relations in South African history. Mashiangwako's drawing, *Soul of a Dying Black Man* (1979), (Fig.16)²² brings to the fore the social construction of women's bodies, in which the African female features predominantly yet it also, refers to the authenticity of female imagery. This work further relates to a masculine consciousness that fears the rootedness of feminine nature, like the association of women's bodies with birth and death which is represented in the imagery.

Mashiangwako explicitly depicts a mother's womb in the central female figure and the surrounding flow of blood furthermore symbolizes birth but also the human sacrifice of political activist, Solomon Mahlangu, who was tried and executed in 1979. Most especially, in this work Mashiangwako pays tribute to the African women who played an important part during the 1980s. In my opinion, Mashiangwako's work refers to the way that African women, traditionally have significant power because they take part in the decision making in their families and provide a strong support system within South African communities (Hill 1998: 25).

²¹ Personal transformation alludes to a change of attitude. Likewise, onlookers can be subjected to a process of self-critique and sense of guilt that may change the spectators' attitude towards women, for example.

²² Motlhabane Mashiangwako, *Soul of a Dying Black Man* (1979). Pencil and charcoal on paper, 148 x 110 cm. Photograph by Izelle Jacobs. Collection: A.P. Malakalala. I have included this work as a precedent to my discussion of contemporary South African art, as it concerns the concept of gendered subjectivity.

Furthermore, Mashiangwako empowers African women in his art making and empathizes with them in his work -- most particularly with the mothers of the sons who were killed in the Liberation Struggle. Mashiangwako achieves this through a monumental rendering of the central figure of Mother Earth, who is portrayed with large pendulous breasts that represents the mother figure as a nurturer of a nation. Moreover, the figure of Mother Earth is physically supported by a woman on either side of her to symbolize a sense of camaraderie amongst women. Solidarity is also represented by a repetition of hands on the left but also in the grasping gesture of the victim's hands that emerge from the womb of Mother Earth. In my view, Mashiangwako's drawing is a personal expression of his own experiences that effectively represents a collective consciousness, which denounces political oppression attributed to racial discrimination. My reading of Mashiangwako's work reveals that the artist presents a radical critique of power structures in South African society. Like wise, my art works also express my experiences of sexual oppression in patriarchal society and the way that I resist oppressive power structures in patriarchal society.

Most particularly, Mashiangwako recognizes the African female experience and contributions made by African women within the community through positive imagery in his artwork. His art making relates to the female figure as a mythical character of Goddess and Holy Mother, but unlike the representation of the glamour girl image in my art making, Mashiangwako's work rejects man's identification with women as a profane sex object. His drawing takes up the responsibility of cross-gender representation but also the documentation of political events in South African history. Although Mashiangwako's art making makes allusions to a disclosure in his artwork, his mythmaking also plays with spectators' imagination. I believe that Mashiangwako proposes a utopian alternative model for gender roles in South African society. Mashiangwako's work presents a radical critique of power structures, while he offers viewers hope of a new social identity in South African society.

3.4 THE MUTANT AND TECHNOLOGY

Contemporary artists also play with viewers' perception of reality through the use of inter-communication technology in art making like, video recording and computer animation that project images on to a gallery wall, television or computer screen. Leder explains that multimedia technology functions "like a second sort of body, incorporated into and extending [artists'] corporal powers" (Leder 1990: 179). Multimedia equipment becomes an extension of the artists' hand in a spatial sense. Artists can, hereby explore complex themes through the use of multimedia technology.

An art video can be projected unto a number of screens accompanied by voice and/or music. In *Alien* (1999), (Fig.17), ²³ for example, South African artist Minette Vari reconfigures the female body into a virtual character. In particular, the amoebic form in *Alien* is similar to a biological organism that becomes a hybrid of both, a biotic and a technical system like a communication device which Haraway (1991: 176) labels as a "cyborg model".

3.4.1 THE CYBORG MODEL

Haraway (1991: 163) investigates communication technology and most especially, how dichotomies other than that of human and machine can be called into question in modern culture - like "animal and human, organism and machine, ... nature and culture, ... primitive and civilized", for example (Haraway 1991: 163). Haraway also (1991: 176-177), claims that "high-tech culture challenges":

²³ Minette Vari, *Alien* (1999). Still from video recording, dimensions variable. Photograph by unknown photographer in exhibition catalogue, *F. N. B. Art Vita* (1999). The artist's collection.

... dualisms in intriguing ways.²⁴ It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what is body in machines that dissolve into coding practices. In so far we know ourselves in both formal discourse (for example biology) and in daily practice (for example, the homework economy in the integrated circuit), we find ourselves to be **cyborgs**, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras. Biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others. There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic (Haraway 1991: 176-177, my emphasis in bold).

In the above words, Haraway views a cyborg as a hybrid of organism and machine -- a creature that exploits conventional discourse on a computer interface, gallery wall or television screen to expose conflicts in contemporary society. In a sense, virtual identities are artificial characters, like Vari's alien character, for example, play the role of under cover agent in the real world. I believe that contemporary artists use virtual discourse in cyberspace, for instance, to question how deeply power structures are entrenched in South African society.

Likewise, contemporary theorists debate the issue of virtual identity in cyberspace. American theorist Daniel Punday (2000: 204), for instance, claims that the representation of virtual identities in cyberspace in William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984) is "especially effective in describing ... the relation between cyberspace and narrative forms". In other words, Punday comments on virtual characters in cyberspace that nevertheless, also makes a statement about conditions in the real world. Punday (2000: 205) furthermore discusses the argument of American theorist Katherine Hayles that "Gibson's characterization emphasizes not the traditional metaphysical opposition between presence and absence, but instead the tension developed in contemporary information theory between pattern and randomness" (Punday 2000: 204- 205).

²⁴ German critic Andreas Huyssen (1995: 89) states that: "[s]trange binarism indeed coming from thinkers whose major strategies include the deconstruction of binarisms of all kinds... perpetuated in the name of rationality, democracy, and freedom, would be the poststructuralist critique of utopia...". Contemporary artists explore a post-modern identity in art making that refers to a change of attitude between self and Other.

In my opinion, Hayles highlights the fact that viewers can read Gibson's narrative in different ways, either by accepting "Gibson's characters" in which spectators resolutely accept the cultural construct and stereotypes in narratives without question. Alternatively, impersonations of virtual characters in Gibson's narrative raise questions about the viewers' own identity. In this way, spectators recognize that the cultural constructs of the stereotypes portrayed in Gibson's narrative control the viewers' own feelings and actions. In my view, Hayles reference to "Gibson's characterization" creates a possibility for social change in which viewers do not seek an isolated identity but seek a social identity in which individuals establish themselves in relation to their culture.

Vari's incessant recreation of herself in art making is a search for social identity that reconsiders cultural messages about the female body and gender roles in South African society. In particular, Vari adopts a virtual identity to negotiate both constructs of the real and virtual in her art making. While Vari's character of an alien, fits into the mold of an autonomous, humanist subject, she explores the relation between cyberspace and narrative form. In this way, Vari creates a consciously constructed space that is also inhabited by other characters. Moreover, her shaven-headed figure and naked body²⁵ is placed against a backdrop of figures represents oppressed people²⁶ in South African society.

Within this setting, the security police inspect the dompas or identity documents of African women during the Apartheid regime. It follows that Vari has superimposed her own image against original footage²⁷ of events in South African history. Furthermore, each scene like an inspection by the police of African women is followed by another event in South African history. The depiction of events in South African history includes, for example, a praise singer at Nelson Mandela's presidential inauguration who appraises

²⁵While Vari's nakedness in her video performance does not read as seductive flesh instead it is meant to raise awareness of the viewer's social identity.

²⁶ During the Apartheid regime, non-white South African citizens were required to carry identity documents on their persons at all times. Individuals faced persecution if they failed to comply to these regulations.

²⁷ This includes the patrol of army helicopters during a declared state of emergency in South African history that is depicted in the background of *Alien*.

the President of South Africa's first democratic Government. Moreover, it depicts a South African delegate invited to speak at a United Nations conference after the change of Government in South Africa in 1994, and a Sangoma who performs a ritual of throwing bones to depict South Africa's future. In my view, Vari's art video displays the identity of her characters in a fundamentally new way that negotiates the power structures in South African society.

Essentially, Vari's portrayal as alien, is symptomatic of a virtual identity. In my view, Vari's recreation of herself explores feminine empowerment outside the Symbolic system, that is embodied in her portrayal as daughter of the archaic mother.²⁸ Vari's art video sheds light on conditions in contemporary South African society that suppresses the need for women's autonomy. Nonetheless, Vari does not speak during her performance, but mimes the voices of political figures like Eugene Terreblanche of the Afrikaanse Weerstand Beweging and Thabo Mbeki of the African National Congress. Moreover, Vari's miming of these voices is also not synchronized, because the voices on the soundtrack are longer than the video loop. The miss alignment of the movement of Vari's mouth to the voice on the soundtrack adds to a distortion of the original soundtrack. The fact that Vari does not speak with her own voice refers to the silencing of women by power structures in patriarchal society.

²⁸ This is symbolised by the sound of Vari's heartbeat in *Alien* as if Vari is carried in the uterus of the archaic mother. Similarities can also be made between Vari's video performance *Alien* (1999) and Ridley Scott's horror film *Alien* (1979). Ripley plays the central female character in Scott's film, who defends herself against an alien. Kane is the unwilling host-body of this foreign parasite in the film until its' birth, when it bursts through his chest wall. In Vari's art video, the artist plays the main role of alien that allows her to travel in foreign territory. In another artwork of Vari, *Vari in Decoy: Horizon 1997*, exhibited at the exhibition *Zone*, December, 2000, Vari suspends a realistic landscape painting across the gallery space at the Generator Art Space Gallery. In its entirety, the work serves to advertise a foreign territory that a stranger can visit. The exhibit leads to an airport gateway that is also accompanied by the sound of incoherent airport noise.

Kristeva (1980: 164) explains that in patriarchal culture, order is ruled by the law of the Father, which assumes that women are excluded from the use of (symbolic) language. Nevertheless, women who do command Symbolic language in phallogentric culture, are considered abnormal, and are subsequently considered a threat to patriarchal culture (Kristeva 1980: 164). *Alien* is a feminist search for Vari's position in relation to patriarchal culture, that is **not** a position of silence. In particular, Vari's virtual identity allows her to position herself outside normative structures in cyberspace that enables her to critique power structures in the contemporary world. In my opinion, in *Alien* Vari reconsiders cultural attitudes towards women's independence and autonomy. The recreation of Vari in her art making is a response to cultural pressures placed on herself which include historical attitudes towards women's autonomy and identity.

In another video recording, *Oracle* (1999), (Fig.18)²⁹ Vari reconsiders the myth of a murderous one-eyed Cyclops who greedily devours Odysseus' companions. Moreover, Vari's representation of this Greek myth also focuses on the act of eating itself. In this particular scene, the artist gorges on a chunk of food and almost chokes on the meal as she forces it into her mouth. I believe that Vari attempts to express her loathing for the self-inflated on the spot news reportage that is fed to television viewers who are continually bombarded and exposed to international news coverage which profess to know all the facts. It is almost as if television viewers are forced to accept the reporters' point of view without criticism, as opposed to many different interpretations of the same event by South African television presenters, writers and artists. I believe that the video camera focuses in on Vari's mouth, to empathize the fact that the mouth is not only associated with the digestive tract but that it are also the site of speech.

²⁹ Minnette Vari, *Oracle* (1999). Video Installation, Dimensions Variable. Photograph by unknown photographer in exhibition catalogue, *F. N. B. Art Vita* (1999). The artist's collection.

Vari uses her body as a tool to develop a theory of consciousness that enforces what counts as women's experience -- anything that names oppressive power structures in society. How does this gesture by Vari constitute a feminist critique or empowering feminist art? I believe that Vari's art making is grounded both on fiction and lived experience, which rests on viewers' imagination to construct a coherent identity that is defined by Vari's role of special agent in a narrative to negotiate social reform in the contemporary world. In my opinion, Vari's work *Oracle* is grounded on a *desire* to decode inherent power structures in the contemporary world. My reading of Vari's artwork reveals how information is distorted in the media to heighten the power of television networks, for instance. Vari's motivation in art making is a quest for women's authorial voice that also forms the basis for my storytelling.

3.4.2 GENDERED VISIONS

Similarly, Penny Siopis' work also challenges inherent power structures within phallogentric society and cultural attitudes towards women's bodies, most especially toward women's autonomy -- and women's expression of sexuality.³⁰ This is apparent in her video projection, *Breasts: Brains not Breasts* (1998), (Fig. 19),³¹ which pertains to the subjective freedom of Siopis. Her narrative is an incorporation of the ways she resists, redraws and reconstitutes the boundaries placed on her subjectivity. What follows is an explanation of the way Siopis articulates a transient consciousness that a colonial viewer still laden with twentieth-century categories of race and gender, finds difficult to tolerate. Siopis' work deals with the deconstruction of Otherness and *difference*, which viewers with biased opinions may not accept. I believe that in *Breasts* Siopis explores aspects of

³⁰ Siopis feels strongly about women treated as sex objects for men, as possessions, rather than people. Likewise she is opposed to the way women are treated as inferior to men, but she also rejects racial discrimination or prejudice against people of other cultures and religious beliefs.

³¹ Penny Siopis, *Breasts: Brains not Breasts* (1998). Still from video projection, 8 minutes. Photograph by Fatima Medonka displayed at the travelling exhibition, *Bringing Up Baby*, Standard Bank Art Gallery, Johannesburg. Dimensions variable. The artist's collection. Hereafter referred to as *Breasts*.

the social construction of women's bodies, in particular the cultural construction of women's breasts. Siopis apparently seeks a positive voice for the breasted experience in patriarchal culture.

In addition, Siopis investigates how deeply the power of the glamour girl image is incorporated in contemporary South African society, but also as an exploitation of women's bodies in girlie magazines that represent women as seductive flesh. Siopis first shows a faded picture during her video performance that is possibly an old family photograph of herself as a young girl, that is followed by her own nude torso, which she subsequently conceals by covering her breasts with a pair of brains.³² Notwithstanding, South African art critic Cobus Van Bosch (1998: 5) remarks in a review on Siopis' work that: "Penny Siopis se video-installasie... is waarskynlik die moeilikste verteerbaar... vir veral manlike kykers (that men would find Siopis' video uncomfortable to watch)" (Van Bosch 1998: 5, my own translation from Afrikaans). In my view, an audience is given an opportunity to look at the facts objectively, namely of how breasts might be experienced from a woman's point of view, in the absence of the male gaze.

Van Bosch refers to the way Siopis' blatant nudity made him feel uncomfortable, while Van Bosch in fact, ignores women's subjective experience of breasts. In fact, Siopis (1998: 1) displays a typed documentation on the wall that she used for her video projection on women's breasted experience that reads as follows:

Breasts! Girls grow them. People call it 'blossoming'. Mosquito bites become tips of fleshy cones. You have no idea how big they will get, or how small they will stay. No more playing around with oranges in your shirt. No more concerns about schoolgirls grabbing at your back in search of the bra strap that will say you are 'developing'. No more training bras. No more embarrassing experiences in change-rooms, like the girl whose cotton-filled bra was wickedly displayed by her classmates like a trophy. False breasts elicit wild derision amongst convent girls.

³² Siopis uses a set of brains that is similar to demonstration model used for teaching purposes in medical science. Wordplay exists between the word, model and having a brain that is generally accepted as being clever and intellectual. The word, model also refers the word, mannequin or glamour girl image in consumer advertising, but also to the exploitation of women in South African publications like *SL Magazine*, *Playboy Magazine* et cetera, since the censorship of pornography was lifted in 1996.

So many other things about breasts. Gynecologists, anthropologists, nipple caps and black stars, Barbie's no-nipple breasts and men's no breast nipples, Roy Campbell's "Clay Cattle" and Tintoretto's "Milky Way", erotogenic zones and burn the bra, cherries and mountains, black breasts and white breasts, pregnant breasts and feeding bras, good breasts and bad breasts, cabbage leaves on engorged breasts and suckling in public, milk, teats, pumps, lumps.

Breasts have probably always been on our mind in one way or another. Long ago, many people thought that mother's milk was vaginal blood, transformed as it passed from the womb to the breasts. Some also believed that the Virgin Mary spurted milk from her breasts, wetting the lips of St. Bernard, in her 'Miracle of Lactation'. Today some say that infected women can spread AIDS to their babies through mother's milk. What about breasts? Ah, yes, what about breast envy? (Siopis 1998: 1).

It is during this kind of play on words above, that irony in this narrative becomes apparent. Indeed, it reveals that a definition of the word, breasts is endlessly deferred in Siopis' documentation. It demonstrates that Siopis created this art video in retaliation to all this silence about the subject of female breasts, motherhood and maternal eroticism. It is not a display of female breasts but about a denial of the expression of women's *femininity* in contemporary South African culture. Moreover, Siopis offers her nude body as empirical evidence to prove to viewers that she is, indeed, a woman with a subjective consciousness -- who has opinions and a mind of her, own. Siopis addresses the difficulty that most women have, of making onlookers understand that she is indeed a **subject**, and not merely an object in this world. I believe that Siopis bares her breasts in public because she feels it necessary to do so, in order that spectators can see -- that she is, a woman by **seeing** her breasts and experience her subjective potential.³³

Siopis uses her body not as a non-sentient object to be studied as a specimen in a medical experiment,³⁴ but as an exploration of her woman's subjective experience.

³³ Siopis draws attention to the fact of women's subjective experience of breasts that refers to the way a woman's breasts bounce up and down and change shape when she moves around or the manner in which women's breasts are restricted by wearing brassieres.

³⁴ During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a specific system was used by German physician Johan Elsholtz to measure human bodies under scientific observation. These experiments involved the use of photometric methods, which measured the respective proportions of naked subjects by placing a marked measuring scale next to the persons in the photograph. In this way, the observed subject in the "scientific photograph" was subjected to the scrutiny of a laboratory technician (Hassan 1997: 28-30).

When observers look at Siopis' work *Breasts*, onlookers sees a woman who is of Caucasian descent that may influence how Siopis' nudity is understood, as well as the potential relationship of a woman's whiteness to her nakedness. In my opinion, this probably explains the reaction of disbelief by Van Bosch and subsequently in his response to Siopis' nakedness and vulnerable disposition. Notwithstanding, *Breasts* refers to a time in South Africa's social history during the Apartheid regime when it was considered morally illegal for African men to look at nude bodies of Caucasian women. Most specifically, pornography of any kind was strictly forbidden during the Seventies and the Eighties, and films that were shown at South African cinemas were rigorously censored at that time.

Siopis' vision in *Breasts* is persistent, even though her scenarios change constantly from one scene to another scene during her video performance. Above all, Siopis seems to imply that she is every woman who has nothing to hide and furthermore, that nobody or anything stands in her way. Essentially, Siopis' art making is purposefully directed at the Other, to ascribe her gender but also to highlight other differences, such as race. In my view, Siopis' work *Breasts* has social transformative possibilities, in that viewers being addressed have the potential to become subjects, but also to imagine that not only a Caucasian body but also to consider that a coloured body has the potential of a subjective consciousness. In *Breasts*, Siopis explores cultural attitudes towards women's bodies, women's autonomy and women's sexuality. Likewise, I can relate Siopis' exploration of subjective experience in art making, to my own experience of *femininity* in contemporary South African society as psychoanalysis of myself. Both Siopis and myself use our bodies in art making as a potent medium of flesh and blood. In particular, Siopis and myself reclaim the body as an ally in self-expression but also as a visual communication that needs to be witnessed by an audience.

This chapter revealed that gender and all the implications thereof, are relevant topics in contemporary art making. Several artists discussed in this section, use photographs as their source material for their artworks that are reworked into an assemblage. Chapter 3 also explores the way artists use a traditional medium like drawing in art making, that rework existing narratives into new myths. Whereas some artists challenge the representation of women as supreme Other that is reinforced by the mass media. Most specifically, I believe that the works of art discussed in this section articulate a subtle, yet burning question of how the concept of freedom is linked to a person's subjectivity.

This chapter explains that various artworks reveal vulnerable and mortal human qualities, which are concerned with women's quest for independence and autonomy. In some instances, several artworks also profess a new realism that is refreshing. While some artworks recognize women as authentic individuals who play a significant part within the African community. Most especially, the artworks mentioned in this chapter, challenge cultural attitudes towards women's bodies, and women's expression of sexuality.

The following conclusion draws on a semiotic stance, which explores the problematic of becoming a subject-in-process. It investigates the transient nature of contemporary imagery in South African art, which effects the interpretation of artworks.

CONCLUSION

The previous chapter discussed the way South African artists question boundary aspects of the body, especially the way power structures in patriarchal society restricts the expression of gendered subjectivity in contemporary art making. I described the way contemporary artworks explored artists' personal experience of cultural oppression in the outside world. I demonstrated that a connection consists between artists' immediate environment and the expression of artists' experiences in contemporary art making. Moreover, I explored the way South African artists portray cultural stereotypes in contemporary art making that question how deeply power structures are entrenched in patriarchal society. In this conclusion, I relate the concept of corporeal subjectivity in contemporary South African art making to reality television, in particular the reality show *Big Brother* shown on South African television. I explain the way viewers can either accept or question the representation of cultural stereotypes in contemporary South African art and reality television. Clearly, newspaper articles written by television viewers often reflect conservative attitudes of South African citizens.

In a sense, contemporary viewers are attracted to reality shows that offer spectators a form of popular entertainment. Reality shows become 'peep' shows in the way that viewers spy on the *Big Brother* housemates. It can be so compelling that some television viewers watch this program incessantly. Similarly, an art gallery can also be considered a

performance site that functions as a consciously constructed space in which interaction between the public and art takes place. Yet, contrary to reality television shows, **artists do not literally repeat stories from their life experiences** but explore systems of myth in art making. Artists construct different layers of reality within a single artwork and it is left up to an audience to reconstruct symbolic elements of artworks into a mental vision.

Some spectators become so completely involved in the viewing process that they hardly notice that he or she has been hijacked to another plane of being in the world. In other words, viewers become so intrigued by the imagery in artworks that this process takes control of their imagination, which lifts subjects out of their current situation. Onlookers, for example, may identify themselves with one of inmates of the *Big Brother* house, which allows subjects to imagine that they have filtered through the picture window of the television screen. This viewing experience enables television viewers to escape (from everyday life) to conditions on the other side of the television screen inside the *Big Brother* house.

A similar process takes place in the viewing of artworks at art exhibitions, which frequently discuss domination and power play between genders, for instance. Observers may identify themselves with one of the main characters portrayed in an artwork. Moreover, spectators are sometimes so intrigued by stories depicted in art that they may find themselves thinking about what it is that drives artists to make these artworks. In this study, for instance, I investigated the way local artists adopt an attitude of self-critique in which they question their position within contemporary South African society. I discussed the way contemporary artists like Siopis, Malherbe and myself position ourselves in art works by using our bodies in performance art, for example, to establish ourselves in relation to our social identity.

In particular, it revealed that South African artists refer to underlying meanings in art making. Siopis and Malherbe deal with the social construction of the contemporary body, most especially the female body in an impersonation of the Holy Mother. In this regard, I examined the subjective potential of these artists through their explorations of maternal sexuality in art making. Furthermore, artists' expression of maternal *jouissance* in contemporary performance art was compared with the Holy Mother's expression of *jouissance* in da Vinci's art. Clearly Siopis provides the female body with different cultural values, in order to subvert the clean image of motherhood as prescribed by doctrines of the Catholic Church. Specifically, Siopis constructs alternate layers of reality in the same artwork, firstly through an appropriation of a feminine stereotype and secondly, in an investigation of reality in the contemporary world like theological indoctrination.

Likewise, in her representation of the Holy Mother, Malherbe alludes to more than one reality in a single work. Firstly, Malherbe rebels against the banalisation of the image of motherhood in consumer advertising and lastly, her artwork discloses the reality of the stigma and hatred by some people of pregnant women in contemporary society. In my own mythmaking, moreover, I also investigated the myth of Phallic Mother in which I appropriated both the image of mother figure and sex object within the same artwork that addressed the portrayal of women as profane sex objects and mother figure in consumer advertising. I explored the concept of women as personification of a fetish object and feminine stereotype in contemporary society in art making. Moreover, my work also challenges the dichotomy in phallogentric society, that women are both idealized and depreciated at the same time.

In particular, I investigated the way in which artists express loss and trauma in art making. Most especially, this dissertation explored a relationship between subjectivity and speech, that investigated power relations in contemporary society. It is no surprise that Victor and myself, for example, express violence in art making in the form of a lacerated wound. Viewers can reconstruct symbolic elements of artworks into a mental vision when he or she looks at abject imagery. In my lacerations of the skin I explored the way my experiences of sexual oppression in the outer world are left as traces on the skin surface in the form of marks and scars. While my art making refers to physical injury of the body, it refers metonymically to painful feelings. I specifically explored the way that I was treated with respect as a younger woman but now this attitude towards myself has changed, although I still feel that I am the same person inside an older body. In particular, I have noticed a dramatic increase in verbal abuse directed at me. It is almost as if women beyond childbearing age have fulfilled a purpose in society whereupon they are discarded like 'trash' in dustbins.

Moreover, Victor's laceration of the skin also refers to a violation of the body boundary delineation. Victor's artworks refer to an infraction of the self, which name acts of physical abuse that alludes to domination and power play between genders. An audience can react to abject imagery in two ways: either refuses to recognize that a laceration refers to physical injury to the body in which case individuals are likely to find this particular artwork disgusting. Alternatively, viewers may recognize that depictions of a lacerated wound refer to violation of the body, such as acts of physical abuse, which violates the body boundary delineation. In this case, fusion relates to a state of consciousness when observers recognize their own state of *abjection* in which case viewers assume a transient consciousness, whereby a veritable communion with artworks takes place.

Moreover, the work of Cohen and my own work also revealed a multiple reading, in which more than one meaning exists simultaneously in a single narrative. Whereas, Cohen uses cross-dressing to play the role of a Jewish woman dressed up as a 'kugel' to question society's attitude not only against women but also against bisexuals, homosexuals, lesbians and Jewish people living in South African society. Clearly, Cohen's work is a statement of conscious and unconscious wants in which Cohen explores an intolerance of gay people and the Jewish race in a single work, while it also exposes another reality of Cohen's unconscious *desire* to dress in drag.

Throughout this dissertation I explored a postmodern identity that is constructed out of Otherness and *difference*. A mane of hair is stereotypically associated with women's *femininity*, yet in my role playing, the woman's head is shaven. While my gesture can be read as a transgression of a dress code for women, it refers to a specific situation in patriarchal society in which women's *femininity* is constantly challenged in relation to men, especially on issues of equality and *difference*. My performances defy perceptions of the standardized female body in art making. Furthermore this work illuminates my struggle to become an independent individual within a secularized society that demands autonomy and material proof of success.

Furthermore, I examined the way in which this intense questioning and interrogation of being in the world is intricately bound up with artists' working process. This dissertation explored the way in which artists' experiences in the outer world are expressed in art making that alternatively may evoke vulnerable memories in spectators' social history. In particular, Sebidi translates the literalness of her imagery into a visual language by using expressive marks in her art making process. Moreover, Sebidi depicts both men and women as distorted and dehumanized figures that relate to the disfiguring pressures

and conflicts in a racist society, which discriminates against people from different cultures. Yet, Sebidi apparently manipulates the imagery on the picture surface that alludes to other realities, about oppressive structures in contemporary South African society.

Both Williamson and Mashiangwako's work also address racial oppression within the South African community. While Williamson's work highlights women's oppression, in the way documentation in South African history, obliterated achievements of African women. In particular, Williamson uses personal photographs of a woman's life history, which relates to another reality specifically that women's social and intellectual needs are hampered by power structures in patriarchal society. Yet, the monumental rendering of the central female figure as Goddess in Mashiangwako's drawing is also a tribute to African women who played an important role during the Liberation struggle, that effectively accentuates another reality of political oppression attributed to racial oppression. Mashiangwako's mythmaking plays with spectators' imagination in the way that he offers viewers hope of an alternative reality, that is to say of a new essential unity in South African society.

The female body is a motif throughout this dissertation and specifically the way it constitutes itself into a speech act. I investigated the layering of different meanings in Vari's and my own art making. My study revealed that Vari's art is a mythic tale that is structured around postcolonial discourse of gender and race. Whereas, the subject matter of Vari's work is based on real events in South African history which are re-interpreted in a mythic tale, Vari utilizes her body to act as special agent to expose the power structures inherent in the real world. In my own mythmaking I exploit various stereotypes that stand for universal surrogates other than myself. I explore the reality of the way that the

glamour girl is exploited in consumer advertising. Clearly, the creation of an obvious artificial appearance in my mythmaking examines the reality of women as profane sex objects in contemporary patriarchal society. Moreover, I argued how deeply power structures are imbedded in contemporary South African society. Most specifically, in my series of self-portraits I repudiate the projection of women in society as absolute supreme Other.

An art gallery can be regarded as a site and testing ground for self-reflection in which an audience can reflect upon issues like sexual, racial and cultural *difference* in contemporary society. In a sense, the function of art exhibitions is to recover a mode of contemplation outside the universe of fast-speed information and instant entertainment like the reality show *Big Brother* screened on television, for example. While artworks have the power to create an illusion of the real world, this dissertation demonstrated that several contemporary artists address relevant issues in art making to discuss their experiences in South African society.

Finally, this study explored the work of several contemporary artists who construct a hyper-reality in South African art making in which artists adopt virtual identities in performance art, for example, to reflect on situations in the outside world, specifically oppressive power structures in South African society. In this conclusion I also compared contemporary South African art with reality television to create a fresh perspective. I argued that television viewers respond to reality television shows like *Big Brother*, for example, that reveals the entertainment aspect of television. Furthermore, I discussed the way that reality television is a form of story telling that repeats events in people's lives. Like reality television, this study also revealed that contemporary artworks have transformative possibilities in the way that artworks generate discourse. Unlike reality

television, this dissertation clearly described the way that **artists construct alternate layers of reality in the same artwork to deconstruct existing narratives in the real world**, which question power structures in contemporary South African society. Most especially, gender and all the implications thereof, are relevant topics for debate that may never be resolved and a theme that is open to an ever-continuing process of interpretation.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig.1. Penny Siopis. *Breasts: Feeding* (1998). Still from video performance. 8 minutes, dimensions variable. Photograph by unknown photographer, displayed at traveling exhibition, *Bringing Up Baby*. Poor quality of photograph is due to the copy made from a newspaper photograph. The artists's collection.

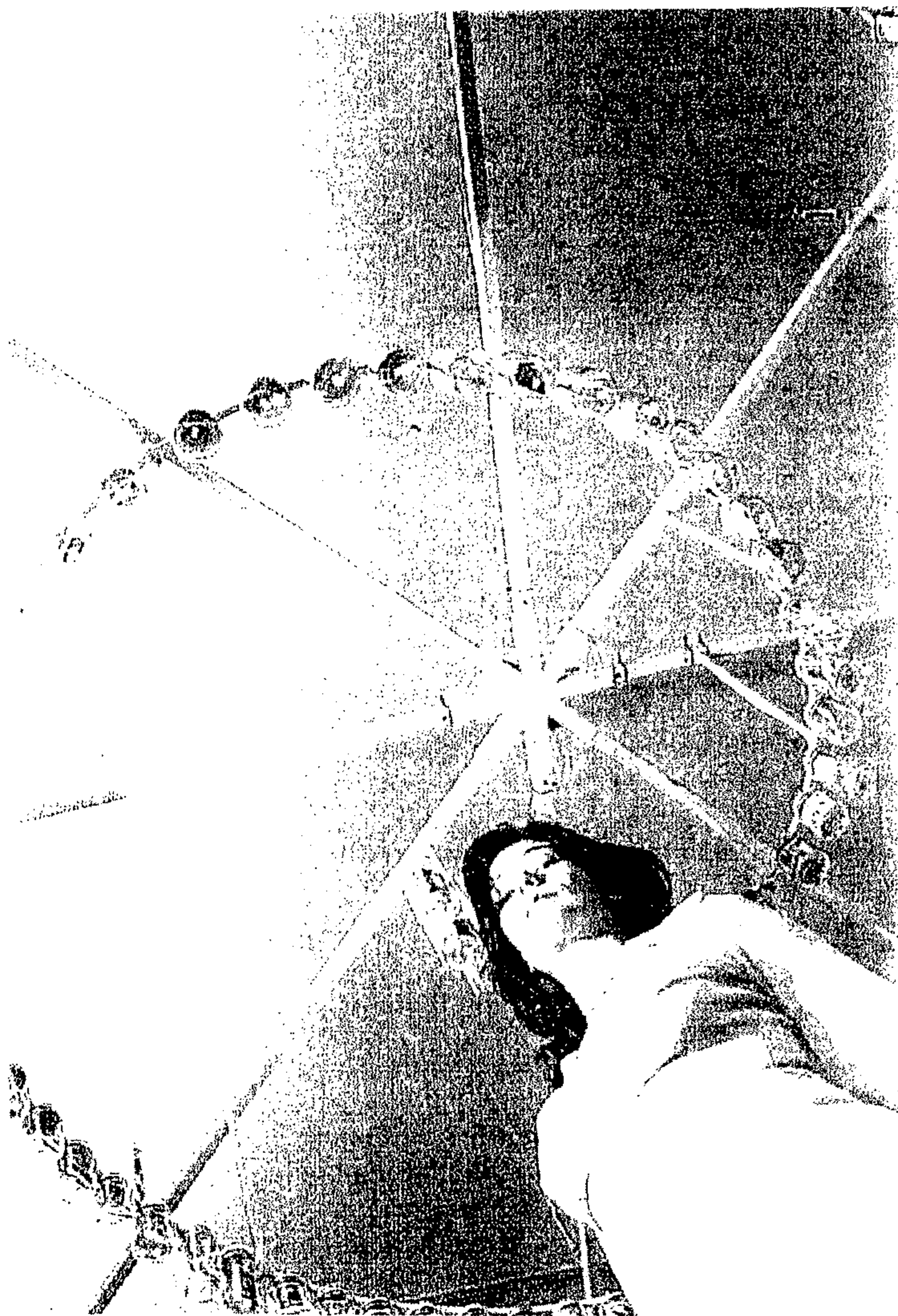


Fig.2. Veronique Malherbe, *Preserving Purity* (1998).
Suspended installation of glass bottles, photographs,
spiral shelving, lights, dimensions unknown.
Photograph by unknown press photographer
(Lammoral & Geller 1998 : 21)
Poor quality of photograph is due to the copy made
from magazine photograph. The artist's collection.



Fig 3. Leonardo da Vinci, *The Madonna Litta* (1490). Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown. Illustration by unknown photographer (Gruppo 1991:12). Poor quality of photograph is due to copy made from catalogue. Collection : Hermitage Gallery.



Fig 4. Tilly De Gabriele, *Mathilde's Fantasy of the Phallic Mother* (1999).
Mixed media, 22 x 22,5 x 15cm.
Photograph by Petri de Klerk. The artist's collection.



Fig 5. Tilly De Gabriele, *Mathilde's Vision of a Maiden in Phallic Armour* (1999). Mixed media, 27 x 36,5 x 15 cm. Photograph by Petri de Klerk. The artist's collection.



ILL.5.

Fig 6. Stephen Cohen, *Crawling* (1999). Photograph of Cohen's performance, dimensions variable. Photograph by John Hodgkins (Cohen 1999 : 56). Poor quality of photograph is due to a copy made from journal photograph. The artist's collection.



Fig.7. Tilly De Gabriele. *Generic Woman* (2000).
Mixed Media, 72 x 61 x 17cm.
Photograph by Petri de Klerk.
The artist's collection.



Fig 8. Diane Victor, *Strip* (1999). Pastel and charcoal on paper, detail of exhibition invitation, dimensions unknown. Poor quality of photograph is due to a copy made from exhibition invitation. The artist's collection.



Fig.9. Tilly De Gabriele. *Daatje at the Siege of Port Le Rochelle, Toys with the Idea of Dancing with Claude Gellee* (1997). Mixed media, 40 x 52 cm.
Photograph by the artist. The artist's collection.



Fig. 10. Tilly De Gabriele,
*Mrs. De's Delusion of her Escape to the Animal World,
Going to Extremes to Bring the Beast out in Women*
(1997). Mixed Media. 32 x 32 x 20cm.
Photograph by the artist. The artist's collection.



Fig 11. Tilly De Gabriele, *Gabriele Contemplates her Self-image, in the Wake of the Discovery of her Own Image* (1997). Mixed Media, 27 x 31 x 25 cm. Photograph by the artist. The artist's collection.

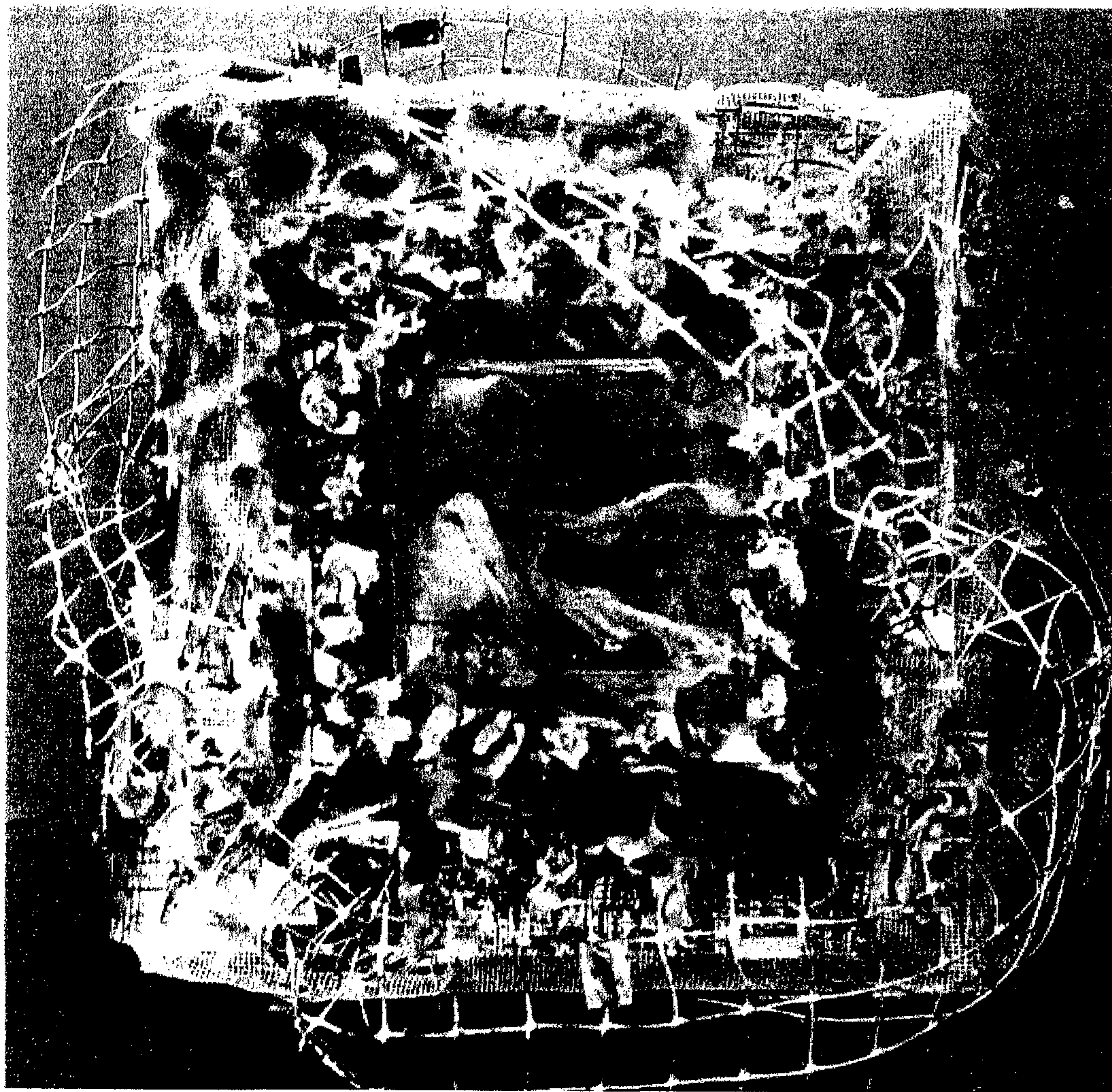


Fig 12. Tilly De Gabriele, *Mathilde's Fantasy of the Phallic Woman* (2001).
Mixed media, 30 x 33 x 18cm.
Photograph by Petri de Klerk. The artist's collection.



Fig.13.Helen Sebidi. *The Child's Mother Holds the Sharp Side of the knife* (1988-1989). Pastel on paper, dimensions unknown. Photograph by unknown photographer (Arnold 1996 : Plate 73). The artist's collection.



Fig.14. Sue Williamson, *A few South Africans* (1982-1988). Photo etching, screen print collage. 17 x 52 cm. Photograph by unknown photographer (Hassan 1997 : 67) The artist's collection.



Fig 15. Tilly De Gabriele, *Skin- Surfaces 1* (2000),
Mixed media, 22,5 x 21,5 x 11 cm.
Photograph by Petri de Klerk. The artist's collection.



Fig16. Mothabane Masiangwako, *Soul of a Dying Black Man* (1979). Pencil and charcoal on paper, 148x 110cm. Photograph by Izelle Jacobs (Hill 1998 : 24). Collection: A.P. Malakala.



Fig 17. Minette Vari, *Alien* (1999). Still from video recording, dimensions variable. Photograph by unknown photographer in exhibition catalogue, *F.N.B Art Vita* (1999). Poor quality of photograph is due to a still photograph taken from video recording. The artist's collection.

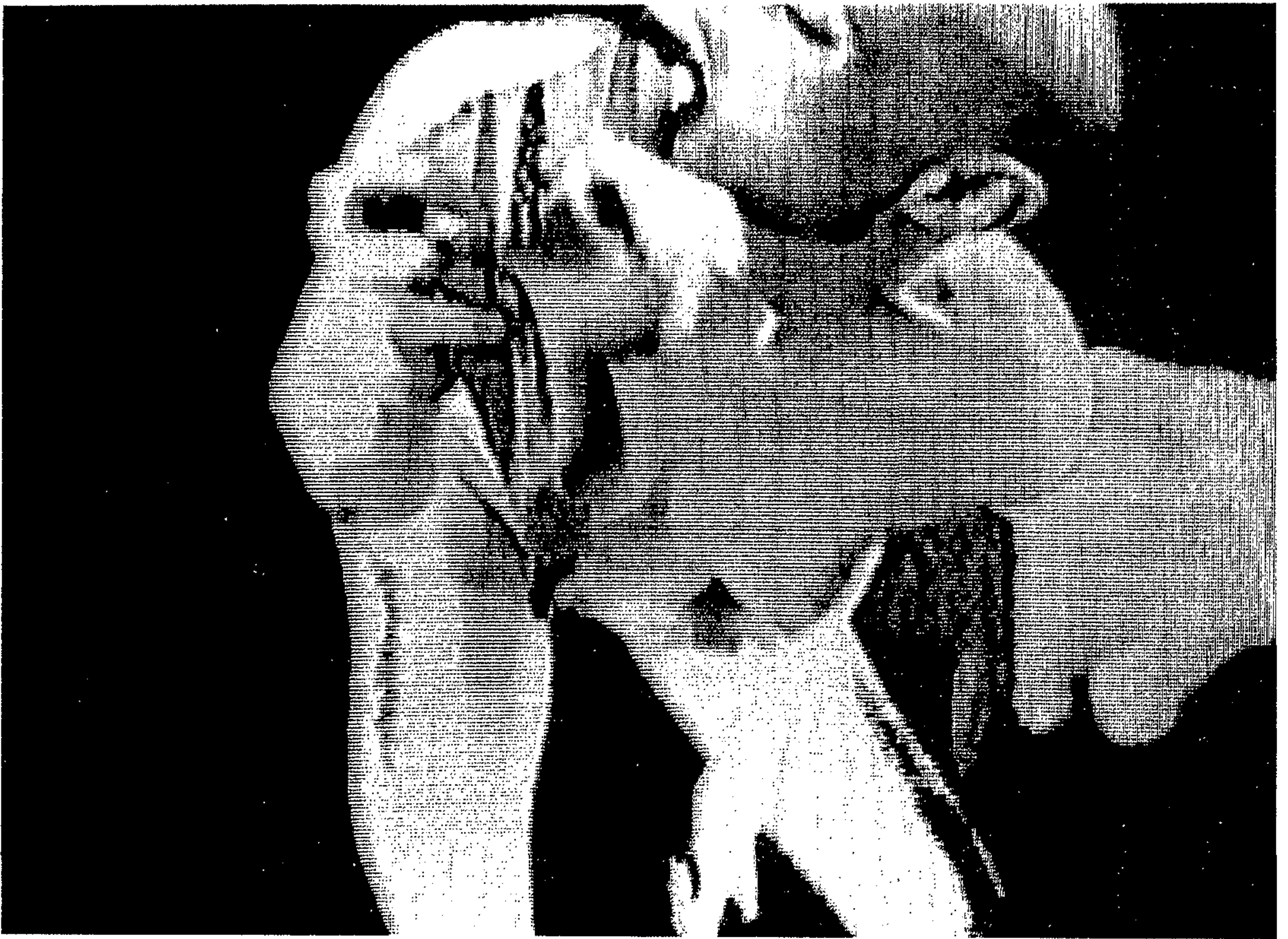


Fig. 18. Minette Vari, *Oracle* (1999). Still from video recording, dimensions variable. Photograph by unknown photographer in exhibition catalogue, F.N.B. *Art Vita* (1999). Poor quality of photograph is due to a still photograph taken from video recording. The artist's collection.



Fig 19. Penny Siopis. *Breasts : Brains not breasts* (1998). Still from video recording, 8 minutes, dimensions variable. Photograph by Fatima Medonku displayed at the traveling exhibition, *Bringing up Baby*. Poor quality of photograph is due to a still photograph taken from video recording. The artist's collection.