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**DISCOURSE
AND
CONFIGURATIONS OF
GENDER**

by

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Printmedia

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Statement

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Summary of Work Presented for Examination

a) Description of Studio Work

The three major works examine the power and operations of the discourse of gender on bodies and how marginal discourses subvert these constructions. My works in paper, printmedia and metal, in two dimensions and three, reflect the effects through forms that seek to question limitations and extend our conception of male and female bodies. The wall piece, *Out of Order*, re-configures symbols and signs from the discourse of gender as a means of disrupting notions that gender is immutable. A swirling red line is woven through a densely layered mass of horizontal broken lines. The addition of symbols, X and Y chromosomes, numbers and other tokens of gender, appear at various points in this marginal discourse on conception of 'bodies.' *Mammaphone*, which accompanies *Out of Order* and *Bullrushes*, consists of an enlarged breast LP playing on a turntable. The 'tracks' are a litany of terms for the breast from slang and maternal discourses. The turntable that 'hosts' the LP sits on top of a stylised 'flight recorder's black box,' which suggests the hidden discourse on gender. *Bullrushes*, is an arrangement of 20 phallic-like forms each on a flexible metal rod that sways with the passage of air around the work. The work presents male bodies as durable, delicate and vulnerable despite the norms of the masculine discourse. The intention is to put into process an interrogation of the effects of gender on bodies and the possibilities for re-thinking the discourse of gender.

b) Abstract of Research Paper/Dissertation

My research paper is an investigation of the discourse of gender in relation to the work of Michel Foucault, Susan Bordo, Judith Butler and the artists Louise Bourgeois, Fiona Hall, Jo Spence and Neil Emmerson. I have applied Foucault's notion of the formation, necessity and operations of discourses as the basis from which ideas can be articulated, and the context within which notions of gender are formulated and challenged. I examine the processes in discourses, such as the imposition of disciplines to control the subject, which in turn are inscribed in the body of the subject by the subject, as they begin to

perceive and define themselves in terms of the disciplines. I use this theory on the relationship between discourse-power-knowledge to analyse my work and that of the artists mentioned. The work of each artist is discussed in terms of the discourse of gender and the basis from which they critique its power, its effects on bodies and forms of representation through a marginal discourse.

For the purposes of my work, the conclusion reached is that to disrupt the discourse of gender entails a continual questioning and awareness of its 'truths,' processes and effects.

Introduction

Discourse and Configurations of Gender

What continues to concern me most is the following kinds of questions: what will and will not constitute an intelligible life, and how do presumptions about normative gender and sexuality determine in advance what will qualify as the “human” and the “livable”? In other words, how do normative gender presumptions work to delimit the very field of description that we have for the human? What is the means by which we come to see this delimiting power, and what are the means by which we transform it?¹

You're born naked the rest is drag - Ru Paul²

These two quotes challenge and offer an alternate view to the discourse of gender in which bodies are either masculine or feminine and heterosexual, and gender roles and their effects considered 'natural' and immutable. Judith Butler perceives gender as a discourse in which human potential is intrinsically limited by the presumptions of normative gender and sexuality. She is concerned with understanding the means necessary for recognising the power of discourse as a limiting force on the meaning of gender and what mechanisms or strategies might be considered in order to circumvent or expand on such cultural forces. Ru Paul suggests bodies are a certainty, but from birth onwards life is a 'drag' act; a negotiation between a self-conscious appropriation of gendered 'identities,' which are subject to change depending on which identity 'fits' at a particular moment.

The power of discourses and our investment in them became very clear to me when I had children. That experience formed the basis for this paper and clarified the concerns of my work and use of media. The three main ideas that emerged were: an awareness of the

¹ Judith Butler, Gender Trouble-Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, New York and London: Routledge, 1999, Preface p. xxii

² An Australian male drag artist

operations of discourses, the importance of marginal discourses and that these effects of power were not particular to motherhood.

Prior to undertaking the Masters Degree I had reached a point at which I was questioning the relevance of my visual and conceptual approach to bodies and issues around the constraints of the discourse of gender. These ideas compelled a shift in my choice of media and working methods. As a consequence I began incorporating into my work images from popular culture as well as drawings and impressions taken from the body. This seemed necessary for my commentary on issues relating to gender, like the private/public body and representations of bodies. As an extension to this work and my exhibition *Time Measured* in 2000, I began reading Michel Foucault's work which gave clarity to ideas in my own work and the experiences underpinning it. This in turn led to my research into discourses as the basis from which the bodies of women and men are gendered and constrained through the practices of the discourse. In one sense it is ironic, that as I have better understood the ways in which power is exercised, and the systems that control us, and myself as part of it, I have also felt a greater liberation in my work.

For many years I created work by drawing onto metal plates, predominantly through the processes of etching and lithography, from which to print onto paper. In printmedia, a plate or matrix is created and an impression taken from the surface of the plate, the impression is usually considered more important than the plate. I accepted this convention until it struck me that my energies and concepts were foremost embedded in the plate. I began cutting them into shapes and creating objects that had an integrity, distinct from the impression, and a relationship with the impression that was not necessarily secondary. This period of change brought with it a move to working with a greater range of media, for example, metal, latex and paper to make three dimensional objects, wearable pieces and installations. These echo the notion of discourses and the way knowledge operates on objects to give them particular meaning.

Like Butler, I view the constructs of gender as a limiting force for being human, although not solely because the practices that emanate from them carry normative presumptions. Rather, they are a set of criteria, applied to behaviour, appearance and language, that accord to the boundaries within the discourse, as apposed to being tailored to the subject, by the subject. During my research it has become evident that my work, as Foucault would describe it, has become increasingly concerned with notions of a marginal discourse and as Butler would have it, the means necessary to circumvent the forces of the discourse of gender in culture. The themes in this paper that underpin analysis of my work and that of other artists are predicated on the nexus between bodies and the Power/Knowledge/Truth of the discourse of gender. My studio work undertaken over the past three years has sought to critique the construction of bodies through the discourse of gender and the structure and operations of discourses themselves.

In Chapter One, Power and the Necessity of Discourse, Foucault's analysis of Knowledge, Power and Truth as the mechanisms of discourses is set out. This is particularly relevant for examining the discourse of gender with a degree of critical distance, and for comprehending how gender functions as a discourse. It also explains why discourse invariably generates systems that in the first instance externally control and dictate behaviour and thought but which over time become inscribed in bodies by the subject themselves. My work based on motherhood, exhibited at the Birth Centre at KGV Hospital, is discussed as an example of the power invested in the discourse of gender and the repercussions that followed when it was made clear that my ideas and visual language ran counter to those underpinning motherhood and breastfeeding.

Chapter Two, Relations of Power, Sex and Gender, refers to Foucault's work in his book *History of Sexuality Vol 1*³ and the repressive hypothesis, as an introduction to the work of Fiona Hall and Louise Bourgeois. Their representations of bodies operate within a

³ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality Vol 1, Translated by Robert Hurley, London: Penguin Books, 1990

heterosexual discourse in which they perceive the operations of power between men and women as sexual, and in Bourgeois's work its destructive potential.

Chapter Three, *Bodies and Marginal Discourse*, applies the feminist theories of Bordo and Butler to the discourse of gender. Bordo's work focuses on how we conceive of identity through gender and absorb the practices of our identified gender. Butler's work questions the normative practices and notions of gender as heterosexual and fixed. Butler understands gender and its connection to the body as a process; that we may be born with the signs of a particular sex, for example breasts or a penis, but we learn through the discourse that governs our 'gender,' how to become either male or female. The particular relevance of Butler's work is her re-thinking the body beyond these concepts.

Chapter Four, *New Objects of Knowledge*, presents a critique of work by Jo Anna Isaak, a feminist theorist, in terms of her claim that some forms of female representation in Russia herald an equality with men. In my view, Isaak confuses a 'stereotypical' image of 'the female Russian Worker' with a genuine shift in the dominant discourse of gender. In contrast to Isaak's normative analysis, the work of Jo Spence and Neil Emmerson is discussed. I argue these are two artists who have developed marginal discourses which challenge and invert the normative presumptions of gender, sexuality, age and illness.

Chapter One

Power and the Necessity of Discourse

*'What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourses.'*⁴

In his work Foucault explores concepts of Truth, Power and Knowledge as the constitutive elements of discourses for making meaning in life. He conceived of the relationship between power and knowledge as the means for the 'subject' (people) to attain a set of cultural skills and knowledges, through disciplines, rules, social practices and systems of social organisation that work on the body. 'The Truth' which is produced from discourses simultaneously refers back to various bodies of knowledge and this in turn reinforces the authoritative power of the discourse, as a regulatory and controlling force over the body.

Truth, Power and Knowledge do not exist independently of one another, nor should they be conceived of as negative or fixed, or that power is the source of repressive forces. According to Foucault, the Power/Knowledge/Truth nexus comes about through the relationship between objects of Knowledge which underpin the discourse, which through the operations of the discourse develop as arenas of Truth that assume ever greater Power as they continue to reinforce the Knowledge and Truth of the discourse. As Foucault pointed out, 'if power were never anything but repressive,...do you really think one would be brought to obey it?'⁵ Rather, it is a process put into play by 'relations of power, domains of knowledge, games of truth, forms of subjectivity, techniques of the self and orders of discourse,'⁶ and shaped by the particular context and the operations of rules and

⁴ Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977, Ed Colin Gordon, Trans Colin Gordon, Leon Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper: London: Pantheon Books, 1981, p.119

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Geoff Danaher, Understanding Foucault, St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2000, p. 32

techniques of the time. Power and knowledge enable us to conceptualise ourselves within culture.

Foucault was not interested in studying who was in power but rather the mechanisms of power and its effects. For example, in the eighteenth century pupils in secondary education were openly ranked in relation to other students in terms of their knowledge and ability to perform tasks and only upon succeeding in that task were they then able to move on to the next level.⁷ This is a system still operating today at a Primary level in Public Education in which students learn to read according to an ascending difficulty of literature which is colour coded. All students and parents are cognisant of the system and the reading level of the child in relation to other children in the class. So called 'successful' students are rewarded for their achievement and embrace the power attached to reaching the next level, as distinct from the pedagogical process of learning to read. According to Foucault, such examples 'make visible the constant articulation...of power on knowledge and of knowledge on power,'...and...'that the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information.'⁸

In his book, *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of the Prison*,⁹ Foucault focused on the development of a regulatory and new economy of power which allowed the effects of power to circulate in a manner at once continuous, uninterrupted, adapted and individualised throughout the entire social body.¹⁰ Foucault examined a shift in power by documenting changes in the penal system, and other disciplinary institutions, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this period the role of God, as the ultimate Power and controlling apparatus over peoples lives, was replaced by Humanism and its institutions.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison*, Translated by Alan Sheridan, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 146-147

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* p. 51

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison*

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* p. 119

From the late 1700's the inflicting of physical pain on the body of the criminal, through public executions, was gradually phased out, to be replaced by different and 'better' forms of punishment which sought 'to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body.'¹¹ Crimes were still being judged but increasingly in terms of 'knowledge' of the criminal: what was known about him, his past, his crime and the expectations of him in the future.¹² Within the framework of penal judgement was lodged a discourse for meting out punishment predicated on a 'truth' about the criminal and his intended rehabilitation, that would be used to discipline him into becoming a socially useful 'docile' body, amenable to social 'rules.' That is, there was a shift from punishment of the action to therapeutic rehabilitation of the subject which was considered more 'humane' and 'scientific.'

Within disciplinary institutions such as the prison, workhouse and school 'the body is... directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.'¹³ For example, in prisons today there are rules for behaviour and time-tables to adhere to. If prisoners resist these controls and disciplines, 'privileges' are removed. On the other hand, if they are self-disciplined and 'emit signs' of compliance they are entitled to 'extra rewards' for their adherence to the prison system. Through these practices that regulate behaviour by the imposition of time-tables, rituals and tasks for the acquisition of habits, the subject is enveloped in a discourse that, over time, is inscribed into how they see themselves. It fosters a dependence on the discourse for defining who they are in terms of what they know and the skills they have attained which is then internalised as the 'self.' The power of such a discourse becomes particularly apparent when prisoners complete their sentence and are unable to function outside the institution and its discourse.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison, p. 82

¹² Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison, p. 18

¹³ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison, p. 25

Foucault believed that the body was disciplined as 'both a productive body and subjected body,'¹⁴ for the cultural and economic needs of the time and, as economic needs change, so, too, will the discourses that discipline the body to meet these cultural and economic demands. For example, with the advent of a new legal status of property, the popular practices such as pilfering and smuggling, that had hitherto been tolerated as part of the everyday, were reduced by force to an illegality,¹⁵ to protect those with property and create a division between the 'criminal' and the Propertied.

As the methods and theories for disciplining and controlling the subject developed, new regimes of thought that extended these ideas emerged, one in particular concerned the notion of Panopticism, (meaning, seeing all in one view). In 1791, Bentham, an architect, drew up plans for a 'Penitentiary Panopticon,' a model for prison architecture that would enable observation from a central tower, of everything surrounding it including prisoners. Those under surveillance, that is the prisoners, were not able to observe those watching them. This meant that the prisoner never knew whether they were being observed or not. The consequence was that the prisoner developed a permanent state of self-surveillance, that is the criminal was self-policing and therefore did not require objective surveillance.

Bentham's design came to prominence during the period in which many disciplinary institutions realised that one could punish and control the body without the need to actually touch the body. Foucault wrote about this design as 'creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it;...that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.'¹⁶

Even though the Panopticon was never built, the effects of such a discourse seem fully realised in contemporary culture, particularly in regard to the effects of power within the

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison, p. 26

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison, p. 86-87

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison, p. 201

discourse of gender. For example, in the process of the subject taking on the power invested in normative body types and appearance through designer clothing, a slim body size and 'beauty,' they become an object. That is, they begin to watch themselves and hence self-discipline in terms of the regimes of fitness, clothing styles and cosmetics. In doing so, they become the object of their own surveillance, a body that they observe as well as inhabit. To the extent that it has become inscribed into the social body that if one applies the necessary disciplines, related to such practices, (which support the capitalist economy), the subject/object becomes a 'success' and, by dint, a normalised subject. Only upon succeeding in these terms does the subject believe that they are then 'entitled' to further 'rewards' in the discourse of such things as higher status, greater power, employment opportunities and social approval.

At any one time there are multiple discourses operating in culture for conceptualising oneself within culture. However, within discourses there is also the possibility for 'reutilizations of identical formulas for contrary objectives,¹⁷ and the effects of power to operate as a point of resistance,¹⁸ in other words, to develop a marginal discourse that disrupts the dominant discourse.

For example, in the eighteenth century when sodomy was considered an 'act,' it was rarely punished. As the discourse on 'homosexuality' developed, with the rise of psychodynamics, it became a perversion of the 'subject' and medicalised as something that needed treatment with therapeutic 'knowledge' that distinguished it as abnormal, an object of the discourse. However, with the rise of discourses on 'other' sexualities in, for example, feminism, 'homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy...be acknowledged,¹⁹ as a marginal discourse.

Homosexuality continues to demand its legitimacy through, for instance, the entitlement of legal protection from discrimination on the basis of being homosexual. This in turn

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality Vol 1, p.100

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality Vol 1, p.101

¹⁹ *ibid*

has expanded on the major discourse of gender and its constitutive elements, as being more than heterosexual and in some social structures, that homosexuality does not preclude notions of masculinity, or femininity. It is still the case, however, that the changes largely remain a re-distribution of economic power, rather than any radical overhaul of social relations as when, for example, the gay male community was legitimised through the spending power of the 'pink dollar.'

From my own point of view, it was my reaction to the cloistered and tradition-bound world of Motherhood that gave clarity to some of the key issues in my current area of research. My understanding of the power of a major discourse came about when I exhibited work on breast-feeding, in a Public Hospital venue. This was a deliberate strategy to exhibit outside the gallery system, which is a discursive regime in itself. According to Foucault, it was precisely because I came up against a 'major narrative,' that is, the discourse of pregnancy and childbirth, and found it constraining, that I was able to understand the power invested in such a 'natural' event, and the difficulties in acting against it. In effect the more 'natural' something is considered the more discourse is generated to establish its authority, power and immutability.

Adrift, (figure 1), a monoprint, was the first work I made in a series of four images. The image of many overlaid breasts is about my visceral reaction to the experience of breast-feeding and parenthood and my need to put those experiences into another form. The presentation of this image, from ceiling to floor, is a river-like continuum of breasts, breast pain and breast-feeding, into which I had fallen or jumped.

Suspended, (figure 2), an etching and drypoint print, depicts an enlarged breast suspended in a matrix of 24 lines signifying the hours of day and night in which I was working.

For me, my breasts had a job to do and I had to maintain them, to protect my body from infection for my child, as they were her only form of sustenance.

Breasts have been put to work for thousands of years, their meaning revolving around two main paradoxical constructions: the maternal nurturing breast and the erotic sexualised breast, also thought of, as the 'good' breast and the 'bad' breast, respectively.²⁰ Some excerpts from my Artist's Statement at the time illustrate my state of mind and inculcation into the discourse of motherhood and breast-feeding.

The work was a response to the experience of having a child and learning how to breastfeed...It was an introduction to an entirely foreign world that had its own immutable rules and restrictions...I needed to create work to express and displace what was happening to me rather than just living it day to day.

Religious iconography of the 'good' breast - nursing Madonnas with the baby Jesus - were produced for the first time in the fourteenth century, a period in which 'her breast had value only because it nourished the future Christ. Her significance always depended on a male more powerful than herself.'²¹ Her breast was seen as a unifying symbol for all Christians since they had all suckled at some motherly bosom.²²

The breasts of breast-feeding women are seen as 'good,' such is the association between nurturing one's child and, 'allegorically an entire religious or political community.'²³ For example, 'two hundred years ago in bare-breasted images of Liberty, Equality, and the new French Republic.'²⁴

From this time on, with the increasing secularisation of society and emphasis on the decorative value of women, the depiction of breasts became sexual, as objects to be admired and depicted openly for the male gaze. As their 'qualities' and effects on men were extolled, so increased the conflicting roles for women and how they were perceived.

²⁰ Marilyn Yalom, [A History of the Breast](#), London: Pandora, 1998, p. 4

²¹ Marilyn Yalom, [A History of the Breast](#), p. 48

²² Ibid

²³ Marilyn Yalom, [A History of the Breast](#), p.4

²⁴ Ibid

Today, the practice of breast-feeding is to remain in the home, away from the public gaze in which the eroticized 'bad' breast has prominence. The 'bad' breast is associated with sex, violence and pornography and we are surrounded by images of them as a contemporary norm in advertising. This terrain reflects our conflicting perceptions of women and their breasts as objects of erotic potential and maternal function, and our inability to reconcile these different qualities that emanates from a discourse that is imposed on and then inscribed by women and men in paradoxical ways. My work is an attempt to construct a different discourse on breasts; as aspects of a body that belongs to women and what they make of their experience of gender, not simply a reflection of the dominant discourse of gender.

In the early phase of motherhood, I noted the particular expectations and rules in society that were made available and visible to me, once I had passed over the threshold of giving birth, and into my new role as a mother. It became apparent, however, that along with a new set of rules were accompanying conditions, which I found reactionary and stultifying, and which I resisted. This was a world not of my making and more powerful than I could have imagined.

The forms of power exerted over new mothers, stem from a variety of sources. For example, women are generally acknowledged as the primary carers of children in our society and a degree of respect is accorded to them, within the framework of women's work. It is considered 'natural,' and 'right' that women will care for their young (like animals) until the child turns five and starts school. There are those who find this construct a reassuring acknowledgment of how they see themselves. However, it needs to be considered that it suits society economically and culturally for women to remain at home, and therefore narratives are developed to support such a construct, to make it appear as something women do, or should do, 'naturally.' It is the 'truth' of their being, as 'women.'

From my experience it also became clear that if a mother moves outside the proscribed model, she becomes a destabilising force that needs to be reigned in, in case she disrupts the discursive system. An instance of this can be seen in the initial rejection of my work as part of lactation week, on the basis of 'lack of space.' I was later informed, after securing another venue, that the Head of Lactation and the Head Nurse at the hospital, did not want my work alongside the idealised photographic images of mothers blissfully feeding their babies. I believe the rejection was the result of discomfort with my interpretation and representation of motherhood and the visual media I used to construct an alternative discourse.

The experience of motherhood has also been instructive for understanding the importance of analysis to counter what I felt instinctively but had not been able to effectively articulate. The result of this work on the discourse of motherhood, breasts and breast-feeding and the exhibition at the Hospital, was an understanding that power was being exercised and constraints imposed upon me because what I proposed challenged the discourse that governed the relationship between the hospital and the patient. I was putting forward my experience and knowledge of birth and breast-feeding in a form that was unfamiliar to them and that did not support their view. It potentially subverted the relationship between Truth, Knowledge and Power.

Although a different Head Nurse did ultimately permit me to exhibit, after I had garnered support from the Head Midwife of the Birth centre, she remained closed to the notion that I could offer the Hospital something of value as a former patient, mother and artist and neither attended the Opening nor the Exhibition. At one stage she even suggested I should pay to show my work.

Most illuminating for my work was my understanding that these effects are not particular to motherhood, rather that my experience was an example of the operations of power embedded in discursive regimes.

Chapter Two

Relations of Power, Sex and Gender

What sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights.²⁵

This chapter examines the work of Louise Bourgeois, Fiona Hall and my own, in terms of Foucault's notion of the ordering of knowledge for the discourse on bodies, sex and sexuality. In his book, *The History of Sexuality Vol 1*, Foucault charts the changing attitudes toward sex from the seventeenth century, when sexuality was understood as actions specific to sex, to the repressive Victorian regime, which arguably we continue to be dominated by, today.²⁶ In the Victorian regime it was the function of reproduction within the family, between husband and wife, that was considered legitimate. At the same time, a repressive silence was demanded of those sexualities that 'did not exist.' For example, 'Everyone knew,...that children had no sex, which was why they were forbidden to talk about it.'²⁷ There were concessions, however, for illegitimate sexualities which were permitted to operate in the circuits of profit of the brothel and 'scientific' mental hospital.

According to Foucault, liberation from such a repressive regime has not taken place with any real change to the discourse, so invested is the power that sustains it in the discourse of confession about sex. That is, sex continues to be spoken of as a relationship between sex and power in terms of repression, because that is how 'sex' has been constructed in

²⁵ Foucault Michel, The History of Sexuality Volume 1, p. 7

²⁶ Foucault Michel, The History of Sexuality Volume 1, p. 3

²⁷ Foucault Michel, The History of Sexuality Volume 1, p. 4

the discourse. And the more it is 'repressed,' the more the discourses generated to explain, control and absolve the 'deviant.'

Although Foucault discusses the history of repression and its cultural effects he is not asking why are we repressed, 'but rather why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?'²⁸ The object of his analysis became 'to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world,...and to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak.'²⁹ His essential aim was not the 'truth' or falsehoods about sex, but rather to bring out the 'will to knowledge' that serves as both a support and instrument in its discourse and its effects.³⁰ That is, sex became understood via the discourse which created how it was to be understood, as something secret and repressed. To then speak of it entailed performing a transgression against the norm and the taboos that defined it.

A number of Foucault's ideas described in his thesis on sexuality are exemplified in the work of Louise Bourgeois and Fiona Hall. In the work of both, the discourse on sexuality is presented as having operated as a force in culture, and between the bodies of men and women, for hundreds of years. In Bourgeois's work it is through 'the great primordial myths'³¹ of power, sex and gender, and the discourse of repression in human relations that manifests in self-defining and destructive behaviour between the sexes. In Hall's work the repressive regime and science of sexuality are explored in reference to Bosch's painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, and the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, as procreative and heterosexual effects of the discourse on sexuality.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, [The History of Sexuality Volume 1](#), p. 8

²⁹ Michel Foucault, [The History of Sexuality Volume 1](#), p. 11

³⁰ Michel Foucault, [The History of Sexuality Volume 1](#), p. 12

³¹ Marie-Laure Bernadac, [Louise Bourgeois](#), Paris & New York: Flammarion, 1996, p. 9

*In normalising the sexual behaviour of the body, in creating a norm against which the body will measure itself, sex interjects within the body the residue of power. Sexual instinct, thereby, becomes a power opposed to power; hence a force that must be forbidden and repressed.*³²

This quote succinctly outlines Bourgeois's philosophy and her conception of gender and bodies. Her work delineates a construction of bodies, sex and sexuality that is strictly interpreted against norms and taboos of these norms. The norm is defined as heterosexual, gendered and patriarchal. The effects of each subject's sexuality measured against this norm are presented as a consequence of repression, which in turn define the subject as repressed. In my view, her work and analysis of it cannot do without concepts of the norm, taboos and repression.

Her methodology utilises the discourse of the unconscious as a 'system of knowledge.' This 'knowledge' is defined in terms of the psychodynamics of the subject. To 'understand' the subject's psyche and personality, Bourgeois uses gender to order bodies, and the subject's position of power in the cultural construct of the 'family.' The effects of this binary between male and female are then attributed to one's sex, and the exercising of sex as power. Bourgeois's examination of the effects of control and power is manifest in her own family and the dynamic its structure produced. Within the 'family' structure, Bourgeois was particularly interested in the power of the Oedipus complex, although, for Bourgeois, there was a confusion between male and female roles in her family and her duties toward her mother and father. She was protective of her mother but also acknowledged that she learnt from her father. These feelings were further complicated by her father's preference for a son and a subsequent ridiculing of her, for her lack of a penis, yet, it was also clear to Bourgeois that he took pride in her abilities and achievements.

³² Michel Foucault, Michel Foucault Social Theory and Transgression, Lemart, Charles C, Gillan, Garth, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 81-82

Typical of the normative family, each member of her family was defined by their designated role: parent, child, male, female, woman and man, and this 'role' created a mode of behaviour that impacted in a 'sexual' way on other family members. As an extension of her work about the 'family,' Bourgeois incorporated the Other, (Sadie, the nanny/tutor and mistress of the father). This Other element disrupted the family structure both as a positive and negative force. The positives were that Sadie, during the ten years she lived with the family, taught her English and favoured Bourgeois over her siblings. The negatives were Sadie's betrayal of Bourgeois in conducting a relationship with her father, against the explicit norms of the day. The effects of this betrayal were made worse, however, because the affair was conducted within the family circuit in view of the mother and children, but never acknowledged. Bourgeois's observations of her family dynamic, and her experiences within it, form the basis from which her knowledge, emotions and, thus, work emanates.

In her work the subject's gender is an integral part of identity and is a factor in modes of behaviour between men and women. Bourgeois sees the effects of these constraining 'identities' as contingent upon a patriarchal social order, that positions the male as 'psychic destroyer' of others. She acknowledges, however, that all beings, herself included, have the potential to 'destroy' others at a psychic level.

An important difference between Bourgeois's interest in gender and my own, is that she does not seek to question the effects of gender as a construction that constrains all beings into gendered modes of behaviour as well as bodies, and so challenge the discourse as much as its effects. In Bourgeois's work, gender, and concomitant sexual organs such as breast and penis, come to signify the terms of the power relations between the sexes, as both cultural and psychic forces. Whereas, in my own work, they are an element in the discourse in which their meaning is fixed by our belief in it and can therefore be reconstructed to have different meanings. In Bourgeois's work gender is presented as a set of fixed and oppositional characteristics, emanating from psychic foundations; as

opposed to my belief that gender and the unconscious have been constructed in a discourse, in terms of heterosexuality and patriarchy.

Given the importance of the unconscious and sexuality for Bourgeois, there are those who have sought to place Bourgeois's work amongst the surrealists, and their particular interest in the unconscious and dreams as a methodology. This is despite the difference in her working methods to that of the Surrealists. Unlike the Surrealists who claim the unconscious determines the individual, for Bourgeois the unconscious is a place which absorbs experiences from the past, that are then explored in 'real life'³³ and art. 'People misunderstand my work, I am not a surrealist, I am an existentialist,'³⁴ proclaimed Bourgeois, who adheres to its notions of 'free' will and the self-determining 'individual.'

Bourgeois presents the psychological and emotional duress she observed in others, and experienced herself, through representations of the body. 'As a child she felt manipulated, so as an adult she wanted to manipulate,'³⁵ and to confront her emotions and make her present position understood.³⁶ She contorts the human form according to the emotions that accompany the remembered experience. Her choice of media - marble, wood, latex, bronze, rubber - is governed by its appropriateness to the subject matter. Her work involves a resolution of form, but is also a vehicle that will help 'exorcise' the effect of her painful memories on her present life. For Bourgeois, being 'an artist, ... is a guarantee of sanity,' and proof that you are able to take 'torment.'³⁷ It also became the means for her to transcend the 'norms' of the repressed, betrayed and dominated woman, that she recognised in her mother.

Her work *Mamelles*, 1991, (figure 3) made out of rubber, is a wall relief and is claimed by Jason Smith to, 'Subvert the masculine history of the architectural frieze and the conventions of its heroic narrative, to assert the privilege and fecundity of women's

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Marie-Laure Bernadac, Louise Bourgeois, p. 8

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Jason Smith, Louise Bourgeois National Gallery of Victoria Catalogue, 1995, pp.10

³⁷ Jason Smith, Louise Bourgeois, pp. 8

experience.³⁸ In Smith's catalogue essay on her work he cites Bourgeois who describes the work as portraying, 'a man who lives off the women he courts...Feeding from them but returning nothing, he loves only in a consumptive and selfish manner.'³⁹

My reading of *Mamelles* is that Bourgeois has re-contextualised the female breast as a metaphor for gender relations, that is, how men perceive women and their bodies. In these relations men respond to women primarily in terms of their sexuality and as pleasure zones to be used for their satisfaction. The breast becomes a multiple form, with each breast morphing into another, displacing the notion of breasts as specific to the different bodies of women. Breasts, instead, appear as if emanating from a mould or perhaps a seam within the cultural sediment, in which all breasts, and thus women, are indistinguishable from one another.

In another work she made costumes for a performance entitled ' *A Fashion Show of Body Parts*,' which she directed and included in *Confrontations*, an installation from 1978. Among the models were well known male art historians who paraded half naked in latex wrap-arounds with rows of latex teats down the front. As the writer Robert Storr points out, she had dispatched a phalanx of father figures whom she had seduced into self satire.⁴⁰ ' *A Fashion Show of Body Parts*' was an attempt to challenge gender norms by coopting men to dress as the opposite sex, in its 'sex.' Part of the success of this work is that she had the authority to convince her volunteers that they would not be diminished by participating in the performance.

Even though Bourgeois's work does not challenge notions of gender as a discourse, it does transgress the taboos of the effects of this discourse and its destructive potential between 'men' and 'women' and within 'families.' The effects are manifest in visceral and confronting 'bodies' or elements thereof. Bodies are often twisted to represent suffering. For example, a small hand is trapped in a lump of hard white marble, or legs and a torso

³⁸ Jason, Smith, *Louise Bourgeois*, pp.10

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Robert Storr, *Louise Bourgeois National Gallery of Victoria Catalogue*,1995, pp.14

are encased in a shiny bronze spiral. The 'body' is thus imbued with the qualities of the material which is a metaphor for the psychic struggle within the 'body' which the 'body' tries to flee from, and, yet, also emanates from.

Like Bourgeois, Fiona Hall depicts bodies bound by the heterosexual discourse and the taboos of sexuality, however, unlike Bourgeois, Hall also refers to the formation and processes of discourse. Kate Davidson said of Fiona Hall's work that the focus 'is the point where humankind and nature meet - our place, and our plight, within the world as they have been represented through mythologies and histories.'⁴¹ Hall's work clearly elucidates the mechanism by which discourses are developed through naming, classifying and organising the material around which discourse operates. The uniformity of the pieces and presentation of *Paradisus Terrestris* (1989-90), from the exhibition *Garden of Earthly Delights/The Work of Fiona Hall*, 1992, references the notion that 'authoritative' knowledge emanates from ordering. The title, *Paradisus Terrestris*, comes from the first comprehensive British gardening book (1629) and refers to a botanical garden, where nature is classified, arranged and labelled. The 'truth' created from such knowledge becomes a discourse imposed on nature and bodies in order to understand them. As a consequence, the established 'knowledge' of the discourse takes on greater authority and power as a defining system.

The title, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, is also the title of a work by Hieronymus Bosch, (c. 1470, or later), a triptych. In Laurinda Dixon's view, this painting seems to 'present a straightforward Biblical account. Adam and Eve appear in the left panel, their many children in the centre, and a monstrous scene of hellfire and damnation in the right.'⁴² However, as Dixon points out, this interpretation is not supported by what is evident in the images themselves. That is, instead of thorns and thistles, which were said to be the food for Adam and Eve's children who, Biblically, were consigned to lives filled with

⁴¹ Kate Davidson, citation in, Canberra Projects Fiona Hall, The National Gallery of Australia Garden Project, 1997

⁴² Laurinda Dixon, Bosch Art and Ideas, London & New York: Phaidon Press, 2003, p. 227

pain and work, Bosch's handsome young people feast on berries and frolic naked among giant birds, like children at play rather than those in fear of danger and evil. Even with this interpretation, however, it is clear from Bosch's life and work that he was not a heretic rather his intention was to depict humans, animals and plants engaged in the repeated circuit of birth, life, death and rebirth.⁴³

In the fifteenth century, the developments in science used allegory as an imitation of the creation, destruction and rebirth of the world and its inhabitants. Chemical theory viewed the world and all its elements as engaged in a continuous sexual reproduction. In this discourse plants, animals, humans and even stones riotously copulated throughout creation. It is this 'knowledge' that Dixon proposes as having informed Bosch's painting, *Garden of Earthly Delights*.⁴⁴

Dixon argues that contemporary interpretations of Bosch's work have relied too much on a 'post-Victorian morality and post-Freudian psychology,' with the view that the painting depicts a 'rampant sexual immorality.'⁴⁵ In fact, in Bosch's time, allusions to sex and the appearance of genitalia were not expunged from contemporary life as they are today, as Foucault discussed in *The History of Sexuality Vol 1*.⁴⁶ Archaeological objects of 'material culture' have been uncovered to support this claim. In one Dutch town hundreds of tin badges were found, retrieved from cesspits and rubbish dumps. Some of these badges explicitly reference genitalia, such as the one in the form of a mollusc shell enclosing a vulva, and another shaped like a large winged and crowned phallus with legs. It is thought that they were sold inexpensively as mementos to pilgrims during festivals and at religious and secular performances and worn pinned to hats and cloaks, in full view.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Laurinda Dixon, *Bosch*, p. 233-234

⁴⁵ Laurinda Dixon, *Bosch*, p. 228

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol 1*

⁴⁷ Laurinda Dixon, *Bosch*, p. 230

Both *Paradisus Terrestris* (1629) and *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c1470) are referenced in Hall's work, *Parradisus Terrestris* (1989-90) which consists of a series of 23 sculptures crafted from sardine tins and soft drink cans, one of which is *Tree Fern*, (figure 4). Depicted are interlocked human forms and genitalia beautifully cut out of aluminium, each couple partially revealed under the peeled-back sardine tin lids. Common and rare plant species grow out of the top of the tin defined in a discourse of rare botanical specimens. This work, in particular, has informed my practice conceptually and broadened my choice of media and working methods. The act of intercourse and Hall's accurate delineation of male and female genitalia is not apparent until quite close to the work which serves as a tactic for drawing the viewer into the work and so confront them with their own repression. I applied this method in *Madeover*, in which the eucalyptus bud's similarity to a penis is not evident until close up.

Like-wise, the analysis of Bosch's painting and the times and discourses which informed his methodology, can be said to reference similar discourses in Hall's work. With a contemporary twist, she elevates sardine tins to represent the containment of the taboos of contemporary sexuality. As in Bosch's work, Hall depicts gender as heterosexual and procreative. Hall has constructed bodies as gendered biological specimens by focussing specifically on sexual intercourse and genitalia.

As Dixon made clear, in the fifteenth century it was accepted that nudity and sexuality were integrated with nature and, thus, culture. Hall also accepts eroticism as an integrated aspect of 'bodies' and constitutive of the relationship between bodies, 'nature' and culture. Hall succeeds in combining the elements of bodies, sex, sardine tins and botanical specimens by using aluminium for each element, coupled with the conceptual linkage between the 'exposed' bodies inside the sardine tins and the botanical specimens as an outgrowth of the contents of the tin.

Hall's use of aluminium, her delicate cutting, and her depiction of the body as bound by systems of knowledge in discourses, has influenced my pieces in metal, as can be seen in

Badges of Honour, 2001, (figure 5). The intention informing the badges was to honour women's work, particularly in the hidden maternal sphere, and the experience of labour and breast-feeding. The image in each badge is an extrapolation from the female breast, reinterpreted as a cut-away pattern in the metal. The translation of the breast into a badge came from a desire to coopt the bodies of others into publicly displaying the breast, as a badge of honour, akin to a war medal, for women and their 'business.' This strategy is also similar to that of Bourgeois who coopted the bodies of men in the work '*A Fashion Show of Body Parts*.'

Badges of Honour, extended the series in *Time Measured*, (2000) by suspending the four badges on authentic war ribbon, as a specific reference to the war medal and the hallowed discourse of male heroism and the honour system. They were made to accompany a work called *Roll of Honour*, 2000-2001, (figure 6), made for the group exhibition, *No Muttering*,⁴⁸ the premise of which was to extend the boundaries of traditional print practice. The surface of *Roll of Honour* is a mass of parallel lines which represent anonymous women's names. It is dotted with small red breast impressions that have been individually shaped and swing freely out from the surface. The reference for this work draws upon the Memorial Brass plaques and the red poppies that cover their surfaces at the Canberra War Memorial.

Breast Badges, 2003, (figure 7), are a further development on those in *Badges of Honour* in that the badges have been coloured through an anodising process as a means of appealing to a broader market. I am in the process of exploring avenues for mass production to raise awareness and funds for the treatment of breast cancer.

⁴⁸ No Muttering, 4 October - 3 November 2001, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA, UNSW

Chapter Three

Bodies and Marginal Discourse

In short, it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge.⁴⁹

Issues around gender have historically focused on the female body, as oppressed by the language of patriarchy; the primary language that structures notions of gender in a binary of masculine or feminine. Within this binary woman is secondary to man and subordinated by men because it is argued for example, 'of their fear of women, and...women's capacity to bear children.'⁵⁰ Feminism has, over time, developed numerous arguments that seek to challenge this thinking. For the concerns of my work and approach to these issues around gender, the theories of Bordo and Butler are particularly relevant. They provide an alternative to the feminist paradigm of the 1960's and 1970's, with its political categories of oppressed and oppressor.⁵¹ They have used Foucault's notion, 'that instead of power being seen as possessed by one group and leveled against another; we must...think of the network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination in a particular domain.'⁵²

Bordo challenges the discourse on gender through an examination of social structures and how they constrain women's bodies and thus their opportunities in culture.

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 28

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Wright, (Editor) Feminism and Psychoanalysis A Critical Dictionary, Oxford & Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 1998, p. 99

⁵¹ Susan Bordo, Unbearable Weight Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 167

⁵² Ibid

Butler focuses on expanding the discourse of gender and its heterosexual assumptions. She uses queer theory as a method of analysis and the notion of 'performativity' for how we develop bodies that are defined as 'feminine' or 'masculine.'

Bordo's work examines how gender functions within culture and suggests possible strategies for expanding on our conception of gender. As she says, there was the 'instinctual' body as understood by Plato, Augustine and Freud, but now there is the 'docile body,' according to Foucault, regulated by the norms of cultural life. *In Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault posited his view of 'practice over belief.' That through the organisation of time, space and movements of our daily lives, our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity.⁵³

Consistent with Foucault, Bordo perceives the 'Body' as a medium of culture, via what we eat, how we dress and our daily rituals, and that women, (I would include men as well), spend increasing amounts of time on the management of their bodies in an effort to improve it. The question is, to what end? Bordo speaks of 'forms of social control,' that seek to constrain women in a circuit in which an 'ideal' body will determine access to becoming a subject. It is the case, however, that the bodies of men are also caught up in 'ideals' of the body, as a 'necessary' correlative to the female body. That is, language is constructed in terms of the codes of masculinity and femininity and a distinction between male and female in order for gender to be clearly distinguished.

One method of resistance Bordo puts forward is the Foucauldian notion that the place of daily rituals and practices of self constraint, are also the site for resisting the effects of power in discourses by inverting their constructed meaning systems.

With respect to this strategy, put forward by Foucault and Bordo, that the place of daily rituals and self constraint is a parallel site for resisting the effects of power, is a work of

⁵³ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p.165-166

mine, *Girls on Sticks*, 2002-2004, (figure 8 & 9). For this piece I appropriated a representation from the canon of stereotypical femininity in which bodies are overloaded with an array of associations from a gender discourse. A silhouette of a woman is cut out of a thin aluminium sheet, it has a thin waist, large breasts, small nose, flowing hair, long legs and petite feet: there is also a heart and brain, cut out of the metal, like motifs from a decorative screen. The 12 cut-outs are placed in an **X** formation, to denote the female chromosome as well as the symbol for sex shops and the warning on explicit sexual material. When light is shone onto the forms, which are suspended at a distance from a wall, a shadow is cast of the outline of each shape in its **X** formation, with a fleeting, and recurring shadow of the form. In this work my intention was to activate a frozen symbol from popular culture, an unattainable ideal that still has currency in the general community, and use the recurring shadows as a metaphor for the means to transcend, even fleetingly, the confines of the 'disciplined' body. This alternate 'self' emerges from within the dominant discourse and its narrow definitions of femininity.

This work raises a continuing issue for me which is concerned with wanting to use the 'body' as subject matter to comment on the discourse on gender, but not to reinforce the binary of female/male in doing so. Through my pieces I want to evoke the idea that the body we inhabit is culturally inscribed and often presented as a fixed entity because we accept and confirm it as such. To what degree, then, is a recognised form that utilises, for example, an impression of the breast or penis act as a limitation for critiquing the discourse and expanding on it? My approach has been first to acknowledge that my strategies for expanding on and critiquing representations of gender, to present a marginal discourse, themselves emanate from the major discourse on gender. Second, that the forms and symbols I use in my pieces rely on the viewer recognising, to a degree, the elements that are taken from this discourse.

After completing *Girls on Sticks* the limitations of working with stereotypes to produce new meanings for bodies became apparent. This was particularly so if my intention was to emphasise the notion of discourses and the mechanisms with which they operate

whilst still using bodies from the discourse. As a consequence, I began to incorporate the signs of male and female from anatomy and biology into my research on notions of feminine and masculine configurations of gender. These symbols from the discourses of biology and medicine along with my own 'invented' tokens for gender form a language that creates new forms of 'knowledge' and domains of 'truth.'

Whereas Bordo argues that resistance to the constraints of gender reside in awareness of social controls and attempts to invert them, Butler, like Foucault, argues that gender is a continuing performance of interactions between bodies and discourse. She uses the performance of drag to elucidate her ideas because it is a *conscious* 'performativity' and demonstrates the way in which everyone performs gender, becoming more and more adept ('natural') with practice. She defines the notion of the 'performativity' of gender, 'not as a singular or deliberate "act," but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.'⁵⁴ In her book *Gender Trouble*,⁵⁵ she speculates that drag artists, through parody, can be considered to go beyond the fixed 'binary frame,' of male/female. She says, 'In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency.'⁵⁶

Butler also uses Queer theory or queering as a method of analysis of the discourse of gender in the construction of identity. The intent of the theory is to disrupt the assumption that heterosexuality is 'natural' and, therefore, acceptable and that anything to the contrary is 'unnatural' and, hence, unacceptable. She queers the belief that specific anatomical body parts are the origins of sexual desire and of 'natural' gender by asserting 'that there is no body that pre-exists discourse and, therefore, no sexuality that is 'natural' to bodies.'⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Barbara Brook, *Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, London and New York: Longman, 1999, p.113-114

⁵⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

⁵⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 175

⁵⁷ Barbara Brook, *Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, p. 117

In the article, *Doing Justice To Someone Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality*,⁵⁸ Butler uses a case study about sexual reassignment as an allegory for understanding the construction of gender; in particular that it is a process during which we come to identify ourselves, and be identified by others, as either male or female. It documents the experiences of John/Joan who at 8 months of age had a major part of his penis burnt away by an incompetent doctor attempting to perform a minor operation on his foreskin. What follows in the pursuit of a 'suitable' identity for John/Joan is a story that combines many of the ideas in this paper.

The crux of it is that attaining an identity is a process in which biology and the construction of gender both play a part and that for John/Joan neither of these could, in fact, provide him with a complete model that he felt defined him as he saw himself. His desire was to be valued for 'things' other than what was between his legs. He does not explicitly articulate what this is but he is clear that his phallus was a necessary part of the means toward subjecthood, but it was not the key component of his subjecthood.

One of the important elements in the story that resonates with Foucault's ideas about discourses, and the methods that underpin our investment in them, is the continual imposition of discourses from the medical world, through interrogative methods, of one sort or another. For example, John/Joan reported that the 'Doctor... said, it's gonna be tough, you're going to be picked on, you're gonna be very alone, you're not gonna find anybody unless you have vaginal surgery and live as a female.'⁵⁹

Another element is an example of resistance to the methods employed to impose the discourse, and a re-defining of what the discourse could offer him. As John/Joan said in the face of one such interrogation, 'I thought to myself,...these people gotta be pretty shallow if that's the only thing they think I've got going for me;...that they justify my worth by what I have between my legs.'⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Judith Butler, *Doing Justice to Someone Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality*, Duke University Press: 2001, pp. 632-633

⁵⁹ Judith Butler, *Doing Justice to Someone*, pp. 632-633

⁶⁰ Judith Butler, *Doing Justice to Someone*, pp. 633

Another aspect of genitalia, for a discourse on gender, is in the area of Intersexuality, which 'refers to a group of conditions where people have sexually ambiguous sex organs, chromosomes and/or hormone levels.'⁶¹ Cheryl Chase, founder and director of the Intersex Society of North America, made the point that there is no reason to make a sex reassignment at all, that society should make room for the intersexed as they are.⁶² That is, genitalia should not be the determining factor for integrating those who fall outside what has been defined as the norm. Rather, culture needs to expand on the discourse of gender. This notion particularly informs the approach I have adopted for my ideas on constructions of gender, their limitations and strategies for change through a marginal discourse.

As part of a project to evoke alternative conceptions from the norm, for the prints in *Time Measured* I took impressions from a plate etched with an enlarged impression from the female breast. The metal, embedded with the specific skin imprint and nipple, set up a dichotomy between the more familiar associations of warmth, softness and comfort of the female breast and the cold, imposing strength of the metal. In the work *Mammaphone*, (figure10) this metal plate became a breast 'LP,' its size necessitating a modified turntable and thus evidence that culture can change and accommodate difference. The track titles are a list of slang terms for breasts drawn from familiar songs, films and literature, but also the less familiar language of the maternal breast. The track list and public statement made by the President of the Australian Society of Plastic Surgery are a critique of the discourse that constructs an association between large breasts as representative of notions of femininity and belong in the public domain, unlike the penis which 'belongs' in the private domain of masculinity.

The mixing of erotic and maternal allusions in the track list reflects the cultural contradictions evident in everyday life. For example, it is not considered 'appropriate' for

⁶¹ Rachel Deacon, 'Gender-Bending-Good for All?', *express*, Vol 6, issue 4, Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association: 2002, pp. 014 - 015

⁶² Judith Butler, *Doing Justice to Someone*, pp. 626

women to breast-feed their children in public⁶³ regardless of how discreet a woman is when breast-feeding, yet it is acceptable for breasts to be publicly exposed and enjoyed when depicted as sexual objects.

⁶³ As was the case in the television program *The Panel* & Federal Parliament

Chapter Four

New Objects of Knowledge

One would be concerned with the 'body politic', as a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge.⁶⁴

This chapter examines three marginal discourses and the relations in which power operates on bodies as objects of knowledge. The first by Jo Anna Isaak is a feminist critique of representations of gender in Russia. The second is an exploration of the politics of sexuality, gender, medicine and illness in the work of Jo Spence, and the third, the politics of gender and sexuality in the work of Neil Emmerson.

Isaak selected one image from a series of photographic self-portraits from the Soviet Union taken in 1976, in a project by the American photographer David Attie. Attie took part in an American-Soviet cultural exchange in Kiev. He engineered the project as a collaboration to engage the interest of the Russians and said of the project that he hoped 'people of both our countries may see each other a little more clearly.'⁶⁵

He set up a working photo studio, open on one side to the visiting public, who participated in the project by taking a photo of themselves, a copy of which they were entitled to keep. He installed a large mirror in the 'studio' so that participants could check their appearance before taking a photo of their mirror-image. Such a process of judging oneself as an object, can only operate against a criteria and against norms within a discourse.

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 28

⁶⁵ David Attie, Russian Self Portraits, London: Thames and Hudson, 1978

As time passed, Attie eventually installed four cameras capturing representations simultaneously from four different angles. A process of documentation that, considering the numbers of people participating, (Attie documented visitor numbers at 359, 726), became a cultural snap shot, as much as it represented the individual. At one point Attie began to compile a list of peoples names and professions of his photo-subjects until the Kiev mayor was informed and he was told to desist and reminded to remain within the boundaries designated for him as the foreign 'other.' At this point Attie began to appreciate that he was infringing on Russian forms of control, (effects of power practised under Communism).

In the book, *Russian Self Portraits*, that he subsequently produced he included images of 73 males and 94 females. Many of the women and men dressed and posed like people in the West, whilst others were in traditional costume. There were old men with war medals and children and adults wearing badges with communist symbols. Nevertheless, the majority were generally identifiable as people from Eastern Europe.

Isaak selected one female image, as the basis for an analysis regarding the objectification of women in representation (figure 11)⁶⁶ out of the 94. Her analysis is set against the economic and social changes taking place in the Soviet Union from the 1980's.⁶⁷ In my view, she seeks to make a connection between a gender discourse which claims 'equality' for Russian women in the workplace, and 'freedom' from objectification. According to Isaak, it appeared that under communism these women, (she does not mention the men), were unaware participants in a system of representation. She claims, in this system, women were depicted as heroic workers and as a consequence had not thought of themselves as objects to be looked at as women are in Western discourse. At the same time Isaak noted that Soviet women clearly understood the power of a discourse to 'colonize a workforce' by stereotyping Soviet women as all-capable and resilient. One

⁶⁶ See appendix for a selection of other images from Attie's series

⁶⁷ Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 93-99

Russian woman commented that 'Emancipation is dreadful, I am a victim of emancipation...In the Soviet Union it is us women who are obliged to do everything.'⁶⁸

Comparing the image she selected with many of the others in Attie's book, I would suggest that Isaak constructed her discourse on 'Russian' women by finding an image that accorded with a Russian stereotype. Many of the others depict women in much the same way as they are depicted in the West. Her analysis would seem to connect capitalism with self-conscious representation, a form of western oppression of women, and communism as a system that liberated women from systems of representation. Isaak argues this is so even if, as she acknowledges, the effects of this 'productive' and 'liberating' discourse were still felt to be oppressive by Russian women. In other words visual representations of women reflect the role and function of women in culture and because Russian women were portrayed as workers their oppression was preferable to Western forms of oppression and objectification.

Spence, on the other hand, firmly believed that bodies were constructed and objectified by discourse. Through her work she sets out to re-claim the body as 'subject.' She was a photographer/educator and used bodies, particularly hers, as a site for social commentary. She sought to challenge the power of discourses on class, gender, family and memory, and their immutable 'truths.' My interest in her work stems from a similar concern for disrupting the accepted tenets of discourses.

Spence was particularly interested in the notion of knowing oneself. That, 'long before we try to look for techniques to represent others...we need to begin to think seriously about the question of how to represent ourselves.'⁶⁹ Only then is it possible to begin to understand the roots of self-censorship learnt by the child in the regimes of family, schooling, peer groups, doctors, the various forms of media and the state.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Jo Anna Isaak citing Ira Zatulovskaya in her book, Feminism & Contemporary Art, p. 95

⁶⁹ Jo Spence, Cultural Sniping The Art Of Transgression, editor Jo Stanley, London & New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 104

⁷⁰ Ibid

In my own practice it was through work I produced about breast-feeding, and its exhibition at KGV, that alerted me to the 'problems' (for some), of representation, within the discourse of medicine and gender. As a consequence I began to 'know myself,' through an understanding of discourses and my place in them. This led me to consider more critically the ways in which representation can act as a disruptive force within discourses.

This was similar to Spence's perception of the medical establishment, and her efforts to assert the experience of the individual as a legitimate element within the various 'scientific' systems. In the series, *Narratives of Dis-ease* (figure 12), Spence depicts herself with the scars of a lumpectomy, a consequence of breast cancer. In this work she set out to contravene acceptable standards for depicting women, illness, the body and age. The images confront the viewer with no embellishments to the body or the face. In one image she stands naked, with the word 'Monster' scrawled across her chest. She poses as if to say, if we are uncomfortable, what is it that makes us uncomfortable? It is that which is normally hidden from view: the reality of disease, its effect on the body and the spectre of death.

In another image she holds aloft a 'Booby Prize,' next to her scarred breast. Her point that a booby prize - a 'prize' for the least successful competitor in any contest that consists of two mocking healthy breasts, is all that she is entitled to for her imperfect, damaged body.

The ideas that informed Spence's work are illustrative of the ways in which systems and conventions can be challenged. Spence's depiction of her own diseased body specifically addressed the discourse of medicine, and the medical approach to treating breast cancer. She inserted her own body and lived experience into a discourse that turned the subject into an object. Spence's photographs were an acknowledged means of therapy for herself, but they can also be seen as wresting control of her rights back from the power/knowledge discourse of medicine. The usual practice in hospitals is that the patient is powerless and dependent on the 'knowledge' of the profession. Spence,

however, by insisting on photographing herself, as she saw herself, maintained a level of control and awareness of what was happening to her. She turned herself back into a subject and in doing so created a marginal discourse in which the experience of the individual is validated as part of illness and its treatment. Her revolutionary work was eventually taken up by the medical establishment when it recognised that the experience of the patient was an important part of the treatment of cancer.

Another work called, *Things My Father Never Taught Me*, (figure 13), in the series, *a Dialogue between Lovers* Jo Spence in collaboration with David Roberts 1988, depicts four photographs of a man from the waist down. In the first image he is undoing the zipper on his trousers. In the second he lies prostrate with cream applied to his genital area and in the third he is wearing a nappy secured with a safety pin. In the fourth image he resumes a standing position, once more in trousers, with his hands resting on a walking stick.

This series of images challenged me to question my response and, thus, expectations of representations of the male body. My initial reaction was an association with paedophilia, because it is an adult male who is pictured naked in an infantilised pose. What I realised was that it is the unfamiliarity of seeing a naked male body in such a pose that informed my response. Male nudity often operates in a very narrow sphere in which notions of masculinity are the subject of power, rarely are they exposed as vulnerable or associated with infancy, as in this series.

Spence said of this work that it was about role playing between herself and Roberts, in which they took on the alternating roles of parent, child and adult. In discussion about their parents they had come to realise that it was their fathers they knew least about, in terms of their working, domestic and sexual lives.⁷¹ For this series Spence was interested in the idea of 'the female voyeur who was transformed into a non-critical, non-controlling

⁷¹ Jo Spence, *Jo Spence Collaborative Works*, Australian Tour 1990, Sydney: Tin Sheds Gallery, University of Sydney, 1990, p. 8

and unafraid female gaze, through role reversal.⁷² Is it possible, however, for Spence to be non-critical and non-controlling? It would seem to be an attempt to stand outside the discourse that produced her and Roberts. Nevertheless, it is also what enabled them to understand and critique the effects of masculinity and femininity in human relations and representation. In my view, this work succeeds in broadening the scope for representing the naked male body as accessible to different notions of masculinity.

Contrary to Spence however, I do not use the 'real' body, believing that some of the qualities associated with realism are a distraction from efforts to question how the discourse of gender operates, such as, preoccupations with the identity and age of the subject, the naked body, colour of skin, complexion and body shape.

My work explores the construction of gender through established 'signs' of gender, for example, the X and Y chromosomes, and the breast and the penis. My aim is to represent bodies as inextricable from discourse, and that it is our adherence to discourses that creates 'bodies,' as we think of them. Yet as discourses change so, too, can our constructions of the 'body' and gender.

Another artist who creates a marginal discourse on bodies and the politics of sexuality and gender is Neil Emmerson. In much of Neil Emmerson's work there is a focus on an historical and contemporary portrayal of representations of the male body as sexual and codified. The subtext to these works is that the subjects are often homosexual; for example, Aubrey Beardsley and George Michael, but are not necessarily recognisable as such without de-coding the elements he brings together in his work. He creates tableaux against which the subject is contextualised amidst cultural symbols and signs which allude to the marginal discourse of homosexuality, within the dominant discourse of heterosexuality.

His work reflects the tenets of a Queer discourse, which asserts homosexuality as a legitimate construction of gender along with heterosexuality through the operation and

⁷² Ibid

effects of the 'body,' as a gendered sexual subject. For example, his work (*IWYS*), (figure 14), depicts a building with palm trees and other foliage in a range of overlaid festive colours, printed in woodblock and photo-lithography. On initial viewing it suggests nothing more than a suburban building. However, the title is an acronym for *I Want Your Sex*, lyrics from one of George Michael's songs, the building is the public toilet block in Los Angeles where George Michael was arrested for an 'indecent act' (soliciting).

The political intent of Emmerson's work depends, however, on knowledge of his subject matter and the theoretical concerns that underpin his work, generally. It is instructive for the ways in which the marginal discourse of homosexuality is embedded in the surrounding culture which, translated through the dominant heterosexual culture, depicts homosexuality as 'other,' deviant, external and discomfiting. Ross Moore said of Emmerson's work, that there is 'a shadow underbelly of un-civic (because unspeakable) uses he alludes to...and yet...the very possibility that difference resides in the very spot where...even sexualized materials, are ontologically grounded as appropriately mute.'⁷³

Emmerson balances oblique references, like the image of the public toilet in *IWYS*, with formality of production and presentation. His accomplished colour printing, using overlays and multiples, reflects the traditions and conventions of the medium. These characteristic elements of his practice coupled with the framing of his works for exhibition in galleries effectively cuts against the cultural 'distaste' and unease with homosexuality, and its sexual practices, by situating the marginal discourse within the familiarity and conventions of the dominant gallery/exhibition discourse.

In the same way Emmerson creates a marginal discourse about 'deviant' male practices within the formal conventions of printmedia, is my work *Madeover*, 2004, (figure 15 & 16). This work grapples with representation of the male 'body' through exploring the possibility of changeable genitalia and poses a question: would a man take on a sign of

⁷³ Ross Moore, [Neil Emmerson's habit@t](#) *The Garden as Mode of Post-Modern Intercourse*, Melbourne: Imprint, Vol 37, No 4, 2002, pp. 3

gender that runs contrary to the norm? It has become an accepted norm to change bodies through plastic surgery and cosmetic means, for example breast augmentation and wrinkle removal, but it is implicitly understood that what guides these changes is a template of desirable size and appearance for a new body part.

Madeover features a red outline of a male figure against a busy mass of broken horizontal lines in yellows and browns. Where the pubic hair would be expected is a swirling red pattern. In place of a 'real' penis and testicles is a red silhouette of penis and testicles that fortuitously looks like Mickey Mouse ears. The silhouette provides a 'blank slate' for a range of penises in a marginal discourse. A set of stainless steel testicles and penis are presented alongside the image ready for attachment. The 'penis' protruding from the stainless sheet is an *Operculum*, (a modified petal from a eucalyptus species, in which the petals and the sepals have fused). A miniature penis like the *Operculum* 'penis,' clearly out of proportion to the human body intentionally contradicts 'nature,' albeit using nature, and the mythology surrounding notions of masculinity embodied in penis size. That is, a small and 'unnatural looking' penis would never be considered in the range of choices because the 'truth' and power of a large and flesh-like penis is the norm of discourse on the masculine.

Conclusion

*'The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.'*⁷⁴

In Chapter One, I discussed Foucault's theory that Power and Knowledge enable us to conceptualise ourselves within culture; that the 'Truths' and 'Knowledge' in discourses makes us who we are. In the quote above Foucault outlines the process of analysing oneself within culture and history, as an attitude that encompasses the limits imposed upon us and how we might move beyond them. He speaks of this critical ontology not as a permanent body of knowledge but rather as an attitude, a philosophical life that one is perpetually engaged in.

In my work the subject-matter of bodies and the discourse of gender have remained a constant, but the way I conceive them and translate them into visual media changes with my understanding of the discourses in which they operate. What is clear is that bodies can only be conceived of through discourse and discourses impose limitations that are not always visible or easy to challenge. As Foucault said, the more 'natural' something is considered the more discourse is applied to affirm its 'truth.' This was made clear to me in my experience of the discourse of motherhood and subsequent exhibition of work about breasts, breast-feeding and an altered conception of my body. To loosen and counter such notions, therefore, requires an oblique approach, which asks what is the purpose of such a discourse and how are knowledge and 'truths' organised in the meaning system that supports the operations and power of the discourse.

⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', in Paul Rabinow (ed), The Foucault Reader, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986, p. 50

My research has equipped me with a 'body' of knowledge concerning the discourse of gender and the importance of a critical approach for questioning why and how it has taken on its 'truths.' It is the manifestations of these power relations and how they are invested in bodies, in the major discourse of gender, that is of consequence for the development of my work. It is only through the dominant discourse that a marginal discourse can be constructed and so critique the meanings embedded within the former. Bodies continually operate in a political field and, as such, a marginal discourse will also develop its 'truths,' although in my work I present these 'truths' as ongoing accumulations of knowledge in a continual state of flux.

To understand my work, and that of the other artists I have discussed as operating in a marginal discourse, relies on a knowledge of the 'truths' of the major discourse, its power and effects. During my research it became evident that just as discourses invoke limitations through their constituent elements, these limitations also provide the knowledge and, thus, material through which artists can question and disrupt the discourse on gender and its power. My own work presents an account of the effects of the discourse of gender as defining and constraining male and female bodies. I also explore the construction of the notion of discourses and their operations. These works incorporate the processes of ordering and structuring information but leaves the discourse I have created open-ended and ambiguous. This is intended as an analysis of the limits we impose on bodies through gender and the possibility of going beyond them.

In Chapter Two, Foucault's research into the repressive regime of sexuality that we are still bound by, today, provides a framework for discussing the work of Bourgeois and Hall. The work of both these artists reinforces his argument, that the repressive regime still operates, so invested is the power that sustains it in the discourse of confession about sex. In Bourgeois's work the focus was the norms for gender and behaviour and the transgression of these within her family. She created a grotesque parody of the effects of gender roles and their destructive potential, and yet did not question the construction of the discourse of gender, itself, but rather affirmed it. In Hall's work it was the ordering

and constraining of bodies in terms of heterosexuality and the anticipation of intercourse, juxtaposed with botanical specimens and their Latin names. This 'knowledge' about plants and bodies, through the processes of ordering and naming reinforces the power of knowledge in discourses .

In Chapter Three, Bordo applied Foucault's notion that bodies are continually engaged in a set of normative practices, rituals and ceremonies that are aimed at 'liberating' the body from 'constraints.' Her argument is we need to recognise that it is through such practices that bodies become caught in a nexus of constraint and control and the need to resist acquiescing to the notions of 'freedom' promulgated in the discourse.

Butler on the other hand, perceives bodies in a continual 'performativity' within the discourse of gender. That is, through our continual observance and practising of the rules of our gender we become men or women and heterosexual. In her article about John/Joan she puts forward the notion that the discourse of gender still relies on the signs of gender, the penis, vagina and breasts, for an identity to be formed. However, even if John/Joan ultimately identified as a male he perceived his identity as more than that defined by his penis and was able to articulate this despite the power of the medical and psychological discourse.

In Chapter Four, I discussed Isaak's feminist critique of the public representation of women in Russia as workers, as evidence that they were 'equal' to men and free from objectification. However, from my research, Isaak's interpretation was grounded in an inability to recognise Russian objectification and her application of the effects of a feminist discourse which relied on a Western model.

Spence applied a feminist discourse to her work but recognised that men were also constrained by the discourse of gender and its 'masculine' effects. She was particularly interested in uncovering the operations and power of discourses of gender and bodies and used photography and 'real' bodies to disrupt acceptable notions for portraying women, men, illness, aging and naked bodies. She disrupted the medical discourse in which

bodies become objects by inserting her subjective experience into the dominant discourse.

Emmerson focuses on male bodies in contexts that refer to the discourse of sexual repression and cultural discomfort with homosexual bodies and gay male sexuality.

To close the paper is not to have reached a definitive position on how to approach the subject of bodies, either conceptually or visually. In regard to issues around the discourse of gender and bodies I have become cognisant of the need to strategically target the effects of the discourse for the purposes of challenging 'truths' and their power. My intent is to make clear that it is our acquiescence to the underpinning ideologies and their prevalence in culture that mitigates against the notion of changing the discourse of gender, and how we might re-translate notions of gender. In other words, that what we are is not necessarily all that we could be.

Appendix

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Catalogue of Work presented for Examination

Master of Visual Arts by Research

Sydney College of the Arts The University of Sydney

Research paper/Dissertation: *Discourse and Configurations of Gender*

Pia Larsen

Printmedia

December 2004

1.

Title *Out of Order*
Media drypoint printmedia, aluminium, red paper and steel
Dimensions 76 x 350 x 1.5 cm
Date 2004

2.

Title *Mammaphone*
Media zinc, graphite, plinth and modified turntable
Dimensions 71 x 81 x 81 cm
Date 2000-2004

3.

Title *Bullrushes*
Media zinc, stainless steel and steel
Dimensions (sample piece 120 x 4) x (floor area 250 x 150 cm)
Date 2004

List of images on CD

- 1.** Installation view, *Out of Order, Bullrushes and Mammaphone*, 2004
- 2.** Installation side view, *Out of Order, Bullrushes and Mammaphone*, 2004
- 3.** Detail, *Out of Order*, 76 x 113 cm, drypoint printmedia, aluminium, red paper and steel, 2004
- 4.** Detail, *Out of Order*, 76 x 113 cm, drypoint printmedia, aluminium, red paper and steel, 2004
- 5.** Installation view, *Bullrushes*, (sample size 120 x 4) x (floor area 250 x 150 cm), zinc, stainless steel and steel, 2004
- 6.** Detail, *Bullrushes*, (sample size 120 x 4 cm), zinc, stainless steel and steel, 2004
- 7.** Installation view, *Mammaphone*, 71 x 81 x 81 cm, zinc, graphite, plinth and modified turntable, 2000-2004
- 8.** Front view, *Mammaphone*, 71 x 81 x 81 cm, zinc, graphite, plinth and modified turntable, 2000-2004
- 9.** Front view, *Mammaphone* playing, 71 x 81 x 81 cm, zinc, graphite, plinth and modified turntable, 2000-2004