

**IN SEARCH OF A LANGUAGE
TEXTILE AND TEXT IN CONTEMPORARY
WOMEN'S ART**

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Dedication

***Dedicated to the honoured memory of Sarah Walsh, Grandmother, and Ellen Gormley, Mother, creative textile artists, my gracious 'St. Anne' role models, who taught me to knit and to read and who envisioned for women and the work of their hands and hearts, an eloquent speaking part; for 'no-woman'/everywoman, of all races, who, through the generations, in the most adverse of circumstances, kept the possibility of creative expression and futures alive for their daughters.
I re-member thee.***

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ABSTRACT

IN SEARCH OF A LANGUAGE: TEXTILE AND TEXT IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S ART

This research uses the textile/text axis concept as a conceptual tool to investigate the role of textile and text in contemporary women's art practice and theorizing, investigating textile as a largely hitherto unacknowledged element in women's art practice of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Textile and text share a common etymological root, from the Latin *textere* to weave, *textus* a fabric. The thesis illuminates the pathways whereby textile and text played an important role in women reclaiming a speaking voice as creators of culture and signification during a revolutionary period of renewal in women's cultural contribution and positioning. The methodological approach used in the research consisted of a comprehensive literature review, the compilation of an inventory of relevant women artists, developing a classificatory system differentiating types of approaches, concerns and concepts underpinning women's art practice *vis a vis* the textile/text axis and a series of three in-depth case studies of artists Tracey Emin, Louise Bourgeois and Faith Ringgold. The thesis points to the fact that contemporary women artists and theorists have grounded their art practice and aesthetic discourse in textile as prime visual metaphor and signifier, turning towards the ancient language of textile not merely to reclaim a speaking voice but to occupy a ground breaking locus of signification and representation in contemporary culture. The textile/text axis facilitated women artists in powerfully countering a culturally inscribed status of Lacanian 'no-woman' (a position of abjection, absence and lack in the phallogocentric symbolic). Turning towards a language of aeons, textile as fertile wellspring, the thesis identifies the methodologies and strategies whereby women artists have inserted their webs of subjectivities and deepest concerns into the records and discourses of contemporary culture. Presenting an anatomy of the textile/text axis, the thesis identifies nine component elements manifesting in contemporary women's aesthetic practice and discourse. In this cultural renaissance, the textile/text axis, the thesis suggests, served as a complex lexicon, a system of labyrinthine references and signification, a site of layered meanings and ambiguities, a body proxy and a corporeal cartography, facilitating a revolution in women's aesthetic praxis.

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Swatches and Swaithes: Introduction

The focus of my research for this thesis is textile and text as major components (although largely unacknowledged) in women's art making in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The central proposition of the research is that the textile/text axis acted as fertile wellspring, fuelling the creativity, inventiveness and aesthetic discourse of women artists, during an unprecedented period of renewal and development in women's cultural contribution.

My initial interest in the topic arose no doubt from my own background as a weaver and practicing artist with strong familial associations with craft and textile traditions in both my maternal and paternal lines. As an undergraduate student of Art and Design, with a strong interest in feminist art, the use of textile in innovative ways to express women's deepest concerns struck me forcefully. I became intrigued by the turning towards women's ancient textile crafts of weaving and patchwork as part of the lexicon of contemporary women artists such as Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Mary Kelly, Hannah Wilke, Faith Ringgold, Tracey Emin, Louise Bourgeois. In addition, many of the artists who used textile in their aesthetic practice also used text. A seminal moment occurred when I happened upon the etymological roots of the words, *textile* and *text*, from the Latin *textere*, to weave, *textus*, a fabric. This led to the formulation of the idea of the textile/text axis as a conceptual tool to investigate the role of textile and text in contemporary women's art making and in the collective reawakening of a feminist consciousness from the 1970s onwards.

As noted above, in art historical discourse, the role of textile is barely referred to. Textile as important signifier, materiality and carrier of meaning is frequently not noted, the recipient of a taken for grantedness, a blindness, an unconsciousness. In effect, a materiality, a language is thereby consigned to forgetfulness. As the

modernist treated women's bodies as ground for the projection of their existential concerns, oblivious to the subjectivity of its ground objects, similarly the language and meanings of textile has been overlooked, perhaps for the very reason that textile has deep and long associations with women's work and aeons of women's creative expression. In what are otherwise insightful critiques of contemporary women artists' oeuvre, the metaphor and aesthetic practices of textile as powerful signifier are not adverted to. The ongoing significance of textile and text in womens art practice is ignored in contemporary critical discourse. The contribution of this research effort is that it begins a process of redress of the oversights of an art historical discourse that fails to advert to the deeper meanings of textile and text in contemporary women's art practice. As this thesis will demonstrate, in the art of the 20th and 21st centuries, textile and text have combined as powerful signifiers in women's discourse and cultural contribution. The thesis points to the age old role of textile as women's signification and language, a role denied by gender biased cultural discourses. The thesis suggests that textile and text are deeply implicated in the great process of women's collective reawakening from the 1970s onwards which has led to the creation of systems of signification and representation, webs/cats cradles spun by and from their embodied minds and hands, edifices of critique reweaving the symbolic. The looms of culture were thereby rethreaded inserting woman's presence and deepest concerns into contemporary discourse. This thesis posits that textile and text were deeply involved in this process.

The thesis is a many-layered tapestry, a story cloth tracing the threads of textile and text in contemporary women's journey as creators of representation and culture at the end of the 20th century and the beginnings of a new millennium. The thesis weaves a web of contemporary artwork and meta discourses, ancient myths and yarns, drawing the threads back and forth, up, down, from the Minoans of antiquity to a brownstone house in 21st century New York, from 1960s Margate in the South-East of England to the seminar rooms of L'Ecole Freudienne in Paris of the 1970s. Piecing the story of the textile/text axis and its

role in women's awakening demanded an eclectic methodological approach, a process akin to wool gathering (where women and children of poor families in all cultures collected snagged pieces of wool left by passing sheep on hedges and fences to be spun into thread or used as batting for quilt making). In the case of this thesis, the process involved an eclectic assemblage of stray pieces of insight from the hedges and thickets of art historical discourse, critical theory, feminist thought, post structural philosophy, mythology and linguistics. As Gladys-Marie Fry, Professor Emeritus of Folklore at the University of Maryland states in relation to her work on the slave quilts of the antebellum southern states of America "The process of constructing an actual quilt provides a metaphor for my work" (Fry 2002 p.3). Similarly, a process and methodology of piecing together resulted in this thesis.

Research Focus, Definition of Key Terms, Objectives and Methods

As stated above, my research focuses on what I describe as the textile/text axis and its role as fertile source in women's art making and discourse in the last three decades of the 20th and early 21st centuries. Roland Barthes, defines text as multiple writings drawn from many cultures. Textile encompasses a wide range of materials and techniques, the product of string technology, netting, knitting, knotting, weaving, etc., methodologies of cloth/fabric production and embellishment. The *textile/text axis* may be defined as the interplay between textile and text in contemporary women's art or to use Paul Muldoon's (Oxford Professor of Poetry) term, the 'slippage' between textile and text. This is the core concept of the thesis.

The aims and objectives of the research are as follows:

- The articulation and exploration of the role of the textile/text axis in the emergence and subsequent development of women's art practice and discourse from 1970 onwards.

- The investigation of the subtle interplay and connectivity between textile and text.
- To provide a description of the mechanisms whereby the textile/text axis impacted on women's aesthetic concerns, art practice and theorizing.

The methodological approach used consisted of a comprehensive literature review; the compilation of an inventory of relevant women artists; developing a classificatory system differentiating types of approaches and concepts underpinning women's art practice *vis a vis* the textile/text axis; and a series of three in-depth case studies of selected artists – Tracey Emin, Louise Bourgeois, Faith Ringgold.

Outline of Thesis

The thesis is set out in six sections and contains twelve chapters. The six sections are as follows:

Section One:	A Double Weave: Textile and Text Chapters One, Two and Three
Section Two:	Rethreading the Loom: Feminist Challenges to the Dominant Discourse Chapters Four and Five
Section Three:	The Textile/Text Axis: A Weave of Theory and Practice Chapters Six and Seven
Section Four:	Four Ply Praxis Chapter Eight
Section Five:	The Voice of the Shuttle: Arachne Reborn <i>Three Case Studies</i> Chapters Nine, Ten and Eleven
Section Six:	Spin-Off: Outcomes and Conclusions Chapter Twelve

Section One consists of three chapters. Chapter One of Section One entitled, *Myth, Meaning and the Voice of the Shuttle*, sets out and develops the concept of the textile/text axis. It examines the metaphorical, mythological and meaning connotations of textile. This chapter suggests that an age-old textile culture has shaped the human psyche and language as is evidenced by the saturation of our everyday language with textile images and reference¹. The chapter also examines the role of textile as myth, metaphor and carrier of cultural meaning, referencing some of the foundational myths of western society. Chapter One points to the implication of textile in rites of passage from birth to death, sacred rituals involving funerary wrappings/cloths, christening shawls, shrouds, vestments, garments/robes of academia, state and other institutional investitures. Textile can also be read as symbol of displacement, transitions, dislocations, journeys – the wrapping/bundles of migrant and homeless peoples. Textile also has a role in modern mythmaking as banners for suffragette resistance and workers' rights, wrapping the Greenham Common fence and in quilts honouring the victims of Aids. Chapter One thus points to the primary role of textile as signifier in the construction of knowledge, culture and meaning.

Chapter Two of Section One entitled *Word Webs and Etymologies* seeks to unravel the complex interconnectivities of textile and text. The common etymological origins of textile and text have already been referred to.² Historically, textile played a significant role in the complex structures and systems humans developed to record, display and carry cultural meaning. This chapter also examines the current linguistic status of text. The chapter examines the textile/text axis as part of a complexity of communication systems and attempts to set out the relationship between textile/text and speech/language/writing as components of a web of multiple literacies. Chapter Three entitled *Rending the Web: The Status of Text in Postmodern Theory* examines the status of text in contemporary western European

¹ We formulate string theory, weave webs of deceit, spin yarns, network to further our careers, needle our partners, tie the knot when we find our true love, etc. – all examples of the influence of textile language.

² Textile and text share a common root in the Latin *texere*, to weave, *textus*, a fabric.

philosophy and discusses the ways in which textile has acted as transgressive text challenging and reshaping epistemologies and canons and seeking to reframe phallogocentric morphologies of the female body.

Section Two, *Rethreading the Loom: Feminist Challenges to the Dominant Phallogocentric Discourse*, consists of two chapters which provide the theoretical foundation of this research effort. Chapter Four entitled *Lacan and the Dominant Discourse* focuses on the work of Jacques Lacan which combines the insights and methodologies of structural linguistics and Freudian psychoanalysis, and is set out as a significant point of departure for feminist discourse. The chapter suggests that the work of French feminist philosophers, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva may be construed as a dialogue with and dis-apologia for the teachings of Lacan as it pertains to women's existential status and cultural positioning in the patriarchal symbolic. This body of work served as an important point of departure for women artists and theorists in the last decades of the 20th century and in the early years of the new millennium. Chapter Four sets out the feminist response to Lacan and follows Elizabeth Grosz in suggesting that a threefold set of positionings *vis a vis* Lacanian theory can be discerned in feminist discourse (Grosz 1990).

Chapter Five entitled *Rethreading the Loom: An Alternative Symbolic in the Work of Luce Irigaray* presents Irigaray's alternative symbolic, an edifice of scholarship spanning half a century and drawing from the disciplines of linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis and feminist scholarship. In a project which goes to the roots of western philosophy and which has been hugely influential in offering a structure of enabling conceptual tools to women artists, Irigaray's stated objective has been to establish the validity of a subjectivity in the feminine and to render possible a culture of two subjects through a deconstruction of dominant phallogocentric discourses and affirmation of feminine experience and desires (Irigaray 2004). The work of Irigaray has given voice to and provided analysis and concepts which underpin many of women artists' deepest concerns

regarding the role and status of woman in western culture identified in Section Three and set out as *Five Main Concerns of Women's Art Praxis* in Chapter Eight³.

Section Three entitled *The Textile/Text Axis: A Weave of Theory and Practice*, consisting of two chapters, examines the role of textile and text in the praxis, the combination of women's theorizing and art practice, that contributed to the transformation of woman's role and status as creators of culture and meaning. Chapter Six, *A Weave of Gender, Feminism and Language*, examines ideas of 'feminism' and 'gender' which converge in the discourse and agendas of women's art practice and also traces the imprint of the textile/text axis concept through the weave and theory of women's art practice and setting out its role in the revolution in woman's role as creator of culture and meaning in the last decades of the 20th century. Chapter Seven entitled *A New Web of Meaning: Ecriture Feminine* presents an account of women's theorizing in relation to their search for an authentic voice, a key concern for women theorists and artists in the last decades of the 20th century.

Section Four entitled *Four Ply Praxis* consists of Chapter Eight which traces the thread of the textile/text axis through more than thirty years of women's art making and theorizing, identifying a core set of five key concerns. The chapter links theoretical concerns and art practice illuminating a praxis in which the textile/text axis, it is suggested, is an important component.

In Section Five, *The Voice of the Shuttle, Arachne Reborn: Three Case Studies*, three in-depth case studies of the role of textile and text in the work of Tracy Emin, Louise Bourgeois and Faith Ringgold are presented in Chapters Nine, Ten and Eleven. Chapter Nine, entitled, *Philomela's Comfort Blanket: Tracing a Pattern*, focuses on the textile oeuvre of British artist, Tracey Emin and suggests that for Emin the textile/text axis as artistic strategy provided a fluid, articulate

³ See Diagram 1, Chapter Eight

and embodied language, a vehicle for autobiographical statement and a site of powerful resistance to the silence, trauma and abjection of the despised feminine experienced by British working class young women of the 1960s. Emin's use of textile and text enables her to transgress art historical canons by inserting the experiences and voice of the socially marginalized, the sacred and the despised feminine tradition of textiles into the domain of high art. Chapter Ten, *Arachnologies and Yarns: The Textile Work of Louise Bourgeois*, considers the role of the textile/text axis in the significant body of work created by Bourgeois from 1990 onwards. The chapter suggests that Bourgeois' use of textile and text allowed her in her senior years to develop a complex aesthetic practice, a site of innovative enunciation and ground breaking cultural creation. This aesthetic practice can be read, the chapter suggests, as an act of survival, an attending to familial memory, gestures of repair, mending the wounded web of her history. In her sewing, which Bourgeois states she undertakes to *make God understand*, Bourgeois enacts gestures of archetypal reparation, waymarks on her journey of mourning without end (Morris 2008). The primal grid of textile provides Bourgeois with refuge, nurturance, metaphor, gesture and salvation. *Saved by her needle/no pins/no stapler/no glue.*⁴ Chapter Eleven, entitled *Nine Patch Magic: Faith Ringgold's French Collection* considers the role of the textile/text axis in a series of twelve story quilts, *The French Collection*, completed by Ringgold in the 1990s, described by Meskimmon as a meditation on the modernist period through the eyes of a black woman (Meskimmon 2003). Ringgold, who was eighty years old in 2010, is an accomplished multimedia artist, teacher and arts activist. Her *French Collection* story quilt narrative series uses textile and text to enunciate key issues of race, gender and sexuality and woman's subjectivity in African American cultural realities and the complex interfaces between race and gender. The twelve story quilts seek to reinstate black women as creators of culture rather than as the negated objects of cultural production. In a confrontation with the high priests of modernism (Picasso, Matisse, Van Gogh), using the methodologies of textile and the metaphor of the quilt, Ringgold inserts

⁴ Louise Bourgeois Diary Extract in Herkenhoff (2008), p.187.

leading African-American creators of culture such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Zora Neal Hurston as well as members of her own family into a revisioning of cultural histories. In her oeuvre, using literal facts and magical histories, Ringgold establishes black female subjects as creators and participators in culture, in cultural sites from which they would historically have been violently ejected. Textile and text enable Ringgold to intervene in history in a mode of corporeal cartography which re-conceives western knowledge systems and allows for the possibility of multiple histories and the inscription of black female bodies and subjectivities into culture.

The final section of the thesis entitled *Spin-off*, considers the outcomes and conclusions of the research. The thesis identifies nine component elements of the textile/text axis in the aesthetic practice of contemporary women artists. An anatomy of the lexicon of textile and text as a materiality, a set of gestures, methodologies, techniques providing contemporary women artists with complex webs of meaning and labyrinthine referrant systems is presented in Chapter Twelve. It is suggested that the textile/text axis as wellspring of women's cultural renaissance, is implicated in a language of feminist poetics used by women theorists and art practitioners to critique patriarchal metadiscourses; in women's innovative aesthetic art praxis; as signifier for reinscribing the female body, implicated in an aesthetic of trauma, resistance and women's survival strategies of aeons; as transgressive text challenging existing epistemologies and revisioning histories; as methodology for reclaiming fractured maternal genealogies; and as innovative autobiographical statement. The lexicon of the textile/text axis, the thesis suggests, thereby contributed powerful methodologies and signifiers to women's late 20th century cultural renaissance. The thesis concludes by pointing to possible areas of future research that will further illuminate the intriguing and on going narrative of textile and text and its special relationship with women's culture and creative expression.

Appendix One contains the images referred to in the thesis.

SECTION ONE

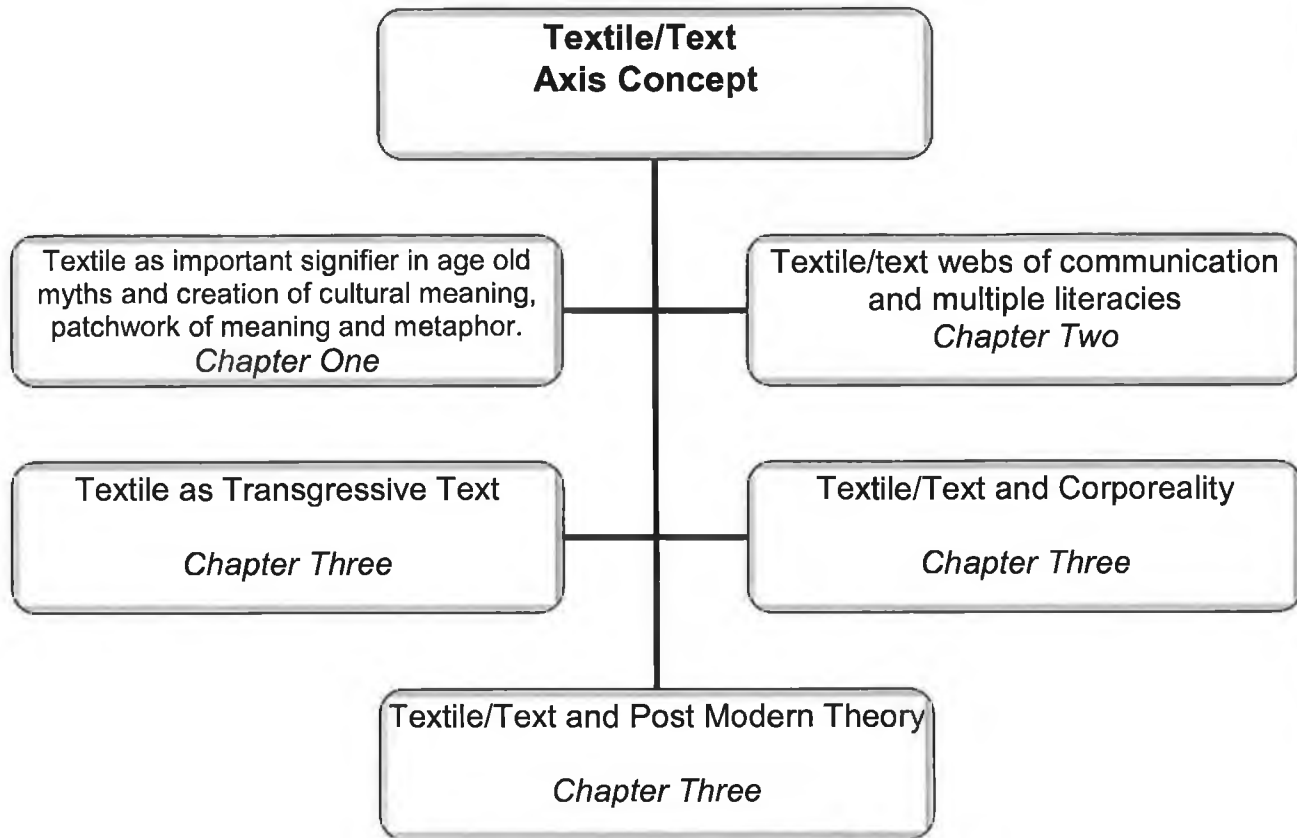
A Double Weave: Textile and Text

Section One develops the textile/text axis concept. It consists of three chapters and Figure One below sets out an overview of the concept indicating its main component elements. Chapter One points to the importance of textile as an age old signifier embedded in the foundational myths of culture and constituting a patchwork of universal meaning and metaphor. It was to this rich repertoire of signification that women artists of the late 20th and early 21st centuries had recourse as they sought to inscribe their presence and voice into the domain of contemporary culture. Chapter One points to the primary role of textile as signifier in the construction of knowledge, culture and meaning.

Chapter Two traces the complex interconnectivity of textile and text from their common etymological origins (from the Latin *texere* to weave, *textus* a fabric), to their historical roles in the complex systems developed by humans to record and preserve cultural records and meaning. The chapter examines the status of text in contemporary linguistic scholarship and argues that the textile/text axis may be defined as a complex lexicon, a valid part of a web of multiple literacies. As the thesis will show, it was to this lexicon that women artists turned in their efforts to articulate and comment upon their experiences in phallogentric, misogynistic culture of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Chapter Three examines the status of text in postmodern theory and draws attention to the ways in which textile and text acted as transgressive texts for contemporary women artists challenging and reshaping epistemologies and canons and reframing phallogentric morphologies of the female body.

Figure 1: Overview of Textile/Text Axis Concept



Chapter One

Textile/ Text: Myth, Meaning and The Voice of the Shuttle

On the 13th December 1870 John Ruskin, Oxford Professor of Art History, retold the Greek myth of the Athene /Arachne weaving contest at a prize giving ceremony of the Department of Art and Science in London (Ruskin 1905 ps.371-80). The essence of the story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book VI is that Arachne, a Lydian woman, renowned for her weaving skills, challenges Athena, the goddess of arts and crafts to a contest. Athena is the daughter of Olympian Zeus, born from his head after he murders her mother Hera. Zeus removes the fetal Athena from the dismembered body of her mother and places her in his own head until she is ready for birth. In present day psychological terminology, Athena is a daughter of the father's imagination.

The contest between Arachne and Athena results in Arachne weaving a web, which Athena has to admit, is flawless. Ruskin describes what follows, "She (Athena) loses her temper, tears her rival's tapestry to pieces, strikes her four times across the forehead with her boxwood shuttle. Arachne, mad with anger attempts to hang herself: Athena changes her into a venomous spider" (Ruskin 1905 p.371). Sarat Maharaj, in a commentary on Ruskin's lecture, states that he, Ruskin, uses the Athena/Arachne myth as a "...norm for textile making and womanhood, for proper textile work and proper sexual identity". Sarat Maharaj goes on to comment "Athena (the myth) serves as the device through which this feminine/textile norm is constructed and dramatized" (Maharaj 1991 p.75). Ruskin, in the lecture goes on to justify Athena's wrath by presenting her as a corrective sobering force exercised in the name of the law, the norm. Ruskin, Maharaj states, avoids the implications of Athena's methods of law enforcement. By a slight of hand, goddess aggression and an act of murder are overlooked. Ruskin justifies this by reference to the imagery of the webs the two weavers create. Athena weaves an image of the council of the gods, the locus of the law of the father, with four corner panels showing the dire consequence of breaking

the law. As a final flourish Athena weaves an olive branch of peace into her web signaling for Ruskin "A sense of poise, restraint, control" (Maharaj 1991 p.75). Arachne in her tapestry depicted the rape of Europa as the central image with smaller border images referring to twenty other episodes involving the god's abduction and violation of women. Her final flourish was rampant ivy leaves woven into her web. For Ruskin the ivy leaves "In their wonton running about everywhere" suggested Bacchanalian forces of wild abandon outside the law. In Kristevan terms Arachne wove a transgressive text, which held up a mirror of their disgraceful behavior to the gods and challenged their self-righteousness. (Maharaj 1991). Commenting on the Athena/Arachne myth, Professor Nancy Millar states:

"Against the typical theocentric balance of Athena's tapestry, Arachne constructs a feminocentric protest. Europa, Leda, Antiope are the more familiar names of women carried off against their will by the heavenly crimes of divine desire whose stories she (Arachne) weaves... Athena thus outwomanded and in phallic identification with Olympian authority... destroys (Arachne's) countercultural account" (Millar 1988 ps.81-82).

Athena's idiom and imagery reflect the established order and for Ruskin her tapestry conjoins ideas of needlework within the bounds of good taste with that of 'the decent respectable woman'! (Maharaj 1991 ps.75-76). Ruskin privileges Athena's genre of textile work, supportive as it is of the established order. Arachne's work on the other hand is seen as resistance, challenging the law of the father. Maharaj makes the point that Ruskin is advocating the ordered voice of the academy and all other questioning destabilizing forces must be outlawed. (Maharaj 1991). Maharaj sets out the implications of this and other myths for contemporary textile practice.

"These [myths] may serve as signposts in mapping textiles today. We may see Arachne's space as a metaphor for avant-garde textile practice in which handed down notions of art practice/genre/gender can be cited and overturned, displaced and played out (Maharaj 1991 p.77).

Both Millar and Maharaj note that myths from diverse cultures of the ancient world give textiles the role of important signifiers. (Maharaj 1991; Millar 1988).

For example, Millar discusses Aristotle's recording of the phrase "*The voice of the shuttle*" from a lost Greek play by Sophocles. The topic of the play was the violent rape by Tereus of Philomela, his wife's sister. Tereus cut out Philomela's tongue thus preventing her from naming her aggressor. But Philomela was a weaver of great skill and she wove a robe containing images identifying Tereus, thus Sophocles' phrase "*The voice of the shuttle*" (Millar 1988 p.90). As the thesis will demonstrate, for women artists of the 20th and 21st centuries, textile also acts as a voice, *the voice of the shuttle*, challenging patriarchal self-representation and inserting a feminine counter cultural account into the discourse.

Again in Homer's epic of the Trojan war, *The Odyssey*, Penelope is represented, on the one hand as a patient, loyal and prudent wife of Odysseus weaving at her loom as the years pass and using her weaving skills as a way of keeping the unruly suitors at bay. (Penelope does this by unpicking the web of Laerte's shroud having declared that she will not make her choice of suitor until the shroud for Odysseus' elderly father is complete). In the final book of *The Odyssey* Homer speaking in the voice of the suitors presents an alternative portrait of Penelope. The suitors accuse her of being devious because she buys time through her textile work. This Homer says is devious double dealing, "A guileful weak woman, an example of feminine craftyness" (Maharaj 1991 p.79). As Maharaj comments "thus two sides of the same male/order coin feminine images" are presented. (Maharaj 1991 p.79.)

In an Indian myth, *The Mahabharata*, a husband gambles and loses his wife (whom he shares with his brothers incidentally!) in a game of dice. She is immediately dragged from her quarters by the male winners of the dice game "trembling like a platoon in the storm" the epic states (Maharaj 1991). The drunken men attempt to disrobe her in public but her assailants do not succeed as they become ensnared in the tangle of cloth that is her voluminous sari. Another female voice in *The Mahabharata*, an old woman named Amba, whose

name means 'womb', is described by Maharaj as a haunting presence who enunciates a long list of ancient feminine wounds at male hands. Maharaj comments: "Both voices counterpoint through the epic a complaint that is never silenced against male-order and its power" (Maharaj 1991 p.80). Thus the textile metaphor expresses a timeless sense of feminine resistance to the law of the father. Throughout history, textile has acted as a vehicle for women's never ending complaint against a misogynistic order and its power structures, and, as the thesis will show, the textile/text axis is deeply implicated in similar agendas of contemporary women artists.

Textile: Patchwork of Meaning

For Jefferies, the term 'textiles' "commonly seems to signify certain ideas, values and traditions... identified with domesticity [and] women's creativity... Textile work is perceived as labour intensive, slow and painstaking and yet... devalued as invisible women's work, non-work or non-productive labour" (Jefferies 1994 p.164). On the other hand textiles are valuable multi-national corporate products, sweatshop/oriental/ third world based where nimble fingered women produce endless, cheap garments for consumption in occidental shopping malls. Textiles are always "ethnic, class and gender indexed", Jefferies states. (Jefferies 1994 p.164, parenthesis mine).

In a seminal article "*Textile Art – Who are you?*" Maharaj links textiles with ideas of center and margin, place and identity, body and representation, gender and exploited labour, displacement and diaspora, pointing to a web of ambivalent textile connotations (Maharaj 1991). As Jefferies states "We are implicated as witnesses to the stories of textile transitions in journeys that do not return to some mythical dreams of lost homelands or ambivalent site of production and fixed cultural identities" (Jefferies 2001 p.2). Textile serves as a container of cultural memory and meaning. For example Jefferies sees echoes of nomadic journeys, metaphorical and actual, in the *Bottari* wrapping cloths of Korea, the

bundles of migrant peoples. "Through their odour, stains and smell clothes carry traces of another life" (Jefferies 2001 p.4). Textiles become imbued with cultural and historical significance, personal identities and life and ancestral journeys. In other words, cloth is inscribed with a range of human universal meaning. Textile is clearly implicated in: rites of passage from birth to death, sacred rituals, funerary wrappings / cloths, christening shawls, shrouds, vestments, garments/robes of academic, state and other institutional investitures; as symbols of displacement, transitions, dislocations, journeys – the wrapping/bundles of migrant and homeless peoples; in modern mythmaking as banners for suffragette resistance and workers rights, wrapping the Greenham common fence and honouring victims of Aids; as a signifier of contemporary fantasies of lost innocence, rural idylls and safe havens in the dangerous and chaotic world of international terrorism, climate change and widespread war and famine. A whole range of wholesome/homely/domestic values of another age are invoked by textile conjuring a heritage of bygone samplers and endless hours of knitting and stitching that circumscribed female lives within the patriarchal order. All this suggests the primary role of textile as signifier in the construction of knowledge, culture and meaning and it was this facet of textile which (as we shall see as the thesis unfolds) offered contemporary women artists a rich lexicon with which to insert their aesthetic contribution into the cultural record.

Chapter Two

Textile/Text: Words Webs and Etymologies

Chapter Two focuses on *text* attempting to unravel the complex interconnectivities of textile and text. At the beginning of *Plato's Pharmacy*, an article published by Jacques Derrida in 1968 in *Tel Quel*, he comments on the nature of text thus:

"A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer... the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible" (Derrida 1997 p.63).

Laden with textile metaphor and masterfully playing upon the etymological connections between textile and text (from the Latin *textere* to weave *textus* a fabric), Derrida goes on to draw out the multiple layers of that relationship.

"The dissimulation of the woven texture can in any case take centuries to undo its web: a web that envelops a web, undoing the web for centuries; reconstituting it too as an organism, indefinitely regenerating its own tissue behind the cutting trace, the decision of each reading. There is always a surprise in store for the anatomy or physiology of any criticism that might think it had mastered the game, surveyed all the threads at once, deluding itself, too, in wanting to look at the text without touching it, without laying a hand on the "object," without risking – which is the only chance of entering into the game, by getting a few fingers caught – the addition of some new thread ... One must manage to think this out: that is not a question of embroidering upon a text, unless one considers that to know how to embroider still means to have the ability to follow a given thread. That is, if you follow me, the hidden thread" (Derrida 1997 p.63).

In what follows, I will attempt to follow the "hidden thread" of the relationship between textile and text.

Textile and Text: Web of Communication

Authors have pointed to the role of textile in the complex structures which human culture has evolved to record, carry and display meaning (Mitchell 2005; Albers 2000). Cultural historian, Jasleen Dhamija, states "textile can be a language, but a non-verbal language" (Dhamija 2003 p.51). She makes the point that textile,

one of the oldest technologies developed by humans, has lent its vocabulary to some of the “most esoteric philosophical concepts of India” (Dhamija 2003 p.51). She points out that a large part of the vocabulary and imagery of Indian philosophical and religious thought is derived from textile terminology. For example, *yantra*, the Sanskrit word for loom is the word used for a diagram thought to promote meditative states of mind in the Hindu tradition. *Sutra* which means “to string together” is the name given to Buddhist sacred texts. *Trantra* is derived from the Sanskrit word *tantu* which means the warp, the vertical foundation threads of weaving. Again, in Sanskrit the warp beam of the loom which holds the unwoven threads is known as *stamba* and this is the word used for the philosophical concept, the *axis mundi* (Dhamija 2003).

Dhamija tells us that a traditional textile can be “read” in much the same way as a book can. By its very nature such a textile embodies a substantial amount of information. The material used to fabricate and dye the cloth imparts geo-climatic knowledge about the area of origin. Woven motifs and colour impart information concerning cultural meaning, belief systems and history. Textile also contains information about the socio-economic status of the wearer in the case of ritual and burial garments. Fine fabrics signify wealth and status and in some cultures certain woven motifs and colours were the prerogative of the aristocracy as in the case of royal purple (Dhamija 2003).

In addition to this primary knowledge derivable from textile by its nature, Dhamija explains that fabric is capable of carrying and communicating complex psychological concepts and indeed is used in this manner in the Vedic tradition of Southern India. For example, *triguna*, the three aspects of human personality are expressed through the colour and weave structure of sacred textiles. Yellow signifies *satvic* (introversions, asceticism), red, *rajas* (essence of life, power, passion) and indigo denotes *tamsic* (intensity/brooding) (Dhamija 2003). Similarly, the puja saree worn for prayer and woven from red and yellow threads in a check/plaid pattern is, Dhamija says, a signifier of *the mandala*, the sacred

grid whose focal point contains the seed of all life. In Vedic ritual, nine squares woven in the check/plaid fabric represent the constellations as it also does in ceremonies and rites of passage in S.E. Asia and Africa (Dhamija 2003).

Dhamija also reminds us that in traditional cultures, "the act of creation of a cloth is itself a ritual" (Dhamija 2003).

"The original loom which was the backstrap loom, was the primary tool used by women to weave. In effect their body became the yantra or loom. Their biorhythms were woven into the fabric and the art of weaving became a form of yoga, and the creation of cloth an act of giving birth" (Dhamija 2003 p.52).

In Uttar Pradesh, the lexicon associated with birth is also that of weaving cloth. Words for winding the bobbins of weft threads translates as "giving birth to the cloth" and the separation of the finished cloth from the loom translates as "cutting the umbilical cord" (Dhamija, 2003). Dhamija summarises the role of textile as a nonverbal language carrier of deep cultural meaning and information thus:

"The shuttle that they threw sang. The creating of the pattern was LIKHAI, the written word, which was always sacred. Amongst the weavers there was an entire hierarchy of cloth woven for the use of the family and its rites of passage – cloth for birth, for puberty ceremonies, for marriages and finally for the shroud. Weaving was not only a profession, it was a way of life ..." (Dhamija 2003 p.53).

As we have seen, Dhamija has categorised textile as a nonverbal language and by so doing has raised many questions and issues that need to be addressed if we are to deepen our understanding of the textile/text axis concept (Dhamija 2003). In what sense can we validly claim textile as a language? In Western linguistic traditions, Hill Boone noted that there is a tendency to equate language with speech and to regard speech and writing as similar entities (Hill Boone 1994). In other words, speech and text are viewed as the same (Derrida 1997). What implications has this view for the relationship between textile and text?

In the next section I will attempt to unravel at least a few strands of the complex linguistic and philosophical web of intrigue in which the relationship between textile and text is mired.

Textile and Text: Speech/Language/Writing: A Web of Intrigue

Georges Jean, Professor of Linguistics and Semiology at the University of Maine, makes the point that more than 20,000 years ago late Paleolithic Europe produced the oldest known cave paintings at Lascaux, France and that from then on, over tens of thousands of years, there were many means developed of conveying messages using drawings, signs or images. However, he continues, "writing ... in the true sense of the word, cannot be said to exist until there is an agreed repertoire of formal signs or symbols that can be used to reproduce clearly the thoughts and feelings the writer wishes to express" (Jean 2004 p.12). The history of writing is elongated over long time periods, and is a complex web that linguistics is very far from having successfully unravelled (Jean 2004) However, it is generally agreed that from pictograms, ideograms and phonograms of Sumer around 3500 BCE, found inscribed on clay tablets, through the extensive Egyptian hieroglyphic system and onwards to the creation of alphabetic writing, humans have created systems to record information and express ideas.

What linguists refer to as the 'Alphabet Revolution' is thought to have been accomplished by the Phoenicians living on the Western shores of the Mediterranean sea. The Phoenicians were a race of traders who travelled widely from North Africa to Cyprus, Sardinia, Greece, Italy, bringing their alphabet based writing system with them. According to Herodotus, and confirmed by present day research, it was the Phoenicians who transmitted the art of writing to the peoples of the Mediterranean. Phoenician alphabetic writing was adopted by the Greeks and by 5th century BCE the Greek alphabet as we know it was in existence consisting of 24 letters, 17 consonants and 7 vowels and comprising

upper case and lower case letters. The Greek alphabet is the source of the Latin alphabet (Jean 2004 p.64). By the 3rd century BCE the Latin alphabet was established consisting of 19 letters – X and Y were added later in Cicero's time, 1st century BCE. Upper case letters were used for Roman stone inscriptions and lower case for papyrus, wax tablets and ceramic text. Latin script is the source of our present day scripts. Fischer compares the letters of the alphabets of Phoenicians, Archaic Greek, Classical Greek and Latin and identifies remarkable similarities between them (Fischer 1999). Fischer proposes a threefold classification of the scripts discussed above:

- Logographic script – a glyph or pictogram represents a single morpheme (the smallest linguistic unit) or an entire word – Clay Tablets of Sumer;
- A syllabic script comprising of phonetic syllables – Egyptian Hieroglyphics;
- An alphabetic script consisting of glyphs/letters representing individual vowels and consonants of the language concerned – Phoenician Alphabetic Writing, Archaic Greek, Classical Greek and Latin (Fischer 1999).

Linguists tend to either regard these script types as an evolutionary model of the development of writing, for example, in the case of Jean (2004) or De Francis (1989) or not as in Fischer's case who states: "The three classes are not quality grades, nor are they stages in a model of writing evolution: they are simply different forms of writing..." (Fischer 1999 p.88). However, both Jean, Fischer, De Francis and many other linguists regard the connection of writing with speech as the crucial factor (Jean 2004; Fischer 1999; De Francis 1989). De Francis makes this clear when he writes: "... all full systems of communication are based on speech, further no full system is possible unless so grounded" (De Francis 1989). Fischer quotes from a clay tablet from Sumer written 4000 years ago and which, he comments, captures "the very essence of writing ... a graphic expression of human speech" (Fischer 1999 p.86). The tablet states "a scribe whose hand matches the mouth, he is indeed a scribe" (Fischer 1999 p.86), This connection between speech and script is a crucial one and I will return to it in

Chapter Three below but, firstly, I will attempt to explore what is cast off/erased/outlawed by this definition of writing.

Literacies: A Web of Multiple Threads

Linguists have identified 3000 languages in use throughout the world about one in ten of which has writing (Jean 2004 p.69). Language and literacy are not one and the same phenomenon. Fischer makes the point that “scores of writing systems have come and gone in human history” (Fischer 2005 p.88). The complexity of this scenario seems to suggest that there may be more to the story of text than the notion of ‘true writing’ as espoused by mainstream linguistics. Boone and Mignolo challenge such narrow definitions of text (Boone and Mignolo 1994). They cite pre-Columbian American systems of record keeping, some based on pictorial and glyph systems as in the case of the Maya, and others based on textile as in the Andean region of South America. In pre-Columbian South America, Stone Millar states that textiles acted “as a foundation for the entire aesthetic system to a degree unparalleled in other cultures of the world” (Stone Millar 1992 p.13). In her work she traces a system of textile primacy that “played a seminal role” in the development of all aspects of civilization, including notation, record-keeping and the transmission of meaning and history. Professor Hill Boone acknowledges that “the visual systems of recording and/or communicating information in pre-Columbian America have always been difficult to categorise” (Hill Boone 1994 p.3). Hill Boone states that linguistic scholarship is of the view that pre-Columbian cultures did not develop “true writing”. Common terms used in anthropological and linguistic literature, Hill Boone tells us, include references to illiterate, non-literate and preliterate peoples of Amerindian cultures. Hill Boone states that writing specialists have constructed the history of writing to result in modern alphabetic systems. In these histories indigenous Amerindian systems lie either at the beginning of or outside the development sequence (Hill Boone 1994). Hill Boone suggests that there is a European cultural bias at work here that privileges writing systems defined as spoken

language “that is recorded or referenced phonetically as visible marks” (Hill Boone 1994 p.5). Writing systems such as those of pre-Columbian America are dismissed as “partial/limited/pseudo/non writing (De Francis 1989 p.42). Hill Boone and Mignola challenge these limited definitions of literacy (Hill Boone and Mignola 1994). Hill Boone states:

“What I wanted to convey is that art and writing in pre-Columbian America are largely the same thing ... They compose a graphic system that keeps and conveys knowledge, or, to put it another way, that presents ideas. And it is this view of Amerindian record keeping systems that should replace the old, limited notions that have previously been advanced” (Hill Boone 1994 p.3)

Heckman emphasises that Andean cultures have communicated for millennia through woven textiles, knotted cords, painted ceramics in a system of meaningful geometric symbols, abstract designs, composite mythological figures (Heckman 2003). She goes on to pose the question:

“Why was writing not developed? From a research point of view we are asking the wrong question ... Consider the breakthrough made by Mayan epigraphers in the last twenty years in the comprehension of Mayan codices and glyphs as historical records. This indicates a more significant question concerning the use of forms, perhaps linked more to mathematics and visual symbolism, instead of writing to record events, persons and epic or cataclysmic change” (Heckman 2003 p.35).

Hill Boone points out that in linguistic scholarship there is a fundamental difficulty in speaking about writing without tying it into language. This has led, Hill Boone suggests, to “an insidious pejorative tone” in scholarly works dealing with pre-Columbian pictographic writing (Hill Boone 1994 p.7). She goes on to argue for an expanded epistemological view which would “allow all notational systems to be encompassed” (Hill Boone 1994 p.9). Hill Boone outlines the flawed thinking which supports these limited definitions of writing. Speech, she states, is not the only human system developed to convey ideas. The limitations of speech in describing complex aspects of reality led to the development of mathematics, structured diagrams and three-dimensional modeling in the sciences and music and choreographic notation systems for dance, to adequately convey information concerning sound and movement. Hill Boone comments “Mathematics and

modern physics are now comprehended only through mastery of their own notational languages” (Hill Boone 1994 p.9). She goes on to state that complex structured diagrams and three-dimensional models were required in the solution of the double-helix structures of DNA. Drake states:

“The pictures we form in science may be ordinary grammatical statements or they may be special notation systems or they may be quite literally pictures drawn to represent structural relations among external objects frequently perceptible at a glance when they would be very cumbersome in words, and might not be as efficiently conveyed by equational or other mathematical notations” (Drake 1986 p.47 quoted in Hill Boone and Mignolo 1994).

Drake goes on to point out that pictorial notations are particularly useful in chemistry, for example in crystallography. Even in the everyday world of consumer goods, diagrams are the method of choice from instructions for using a new washing machine to assembly of flat pack furniture. The diagram, Hill Boone points out, is an efficient and precise method of communicating information. Edward Tufte has put forward the concept of *envision* to describe these diagrammatic systems of communication. He states: “we envision information in order to reason about, communicate, document and preserve knowledge” (Tufte 1990 p.33). By envisioning information instead of recording it in alphabetic writing we clearly recognise that spoken language “is not always the best medium for communicating thought” (Hill Boone 1994 p.10) Jacques Derrida states “It is a peculiarity of our epoch that, at the moment when the phoneticization of writing ... begins to lay hold on world culture, science in its advancements, can no longer be satisfied with it” (Derrida 1997 p.4).

Derrida also challenges the notion that alphabetic writing and speech are one and the same entity. Derrida’s deconstruction of Western European language systems makes clear that written language is never an exact transcription of spoken language. Derrida states: “*phonetic writing does not exist*”. Similarly, studies of writing and speech in the US have shown that written prose is almost always different from spoken prose (Hill Boone 1994). While the listening ear

hears the music of the voice, pitch, amplitude, tone, timbre, the pauses and silences, these are tuned out by the spelling hand that transcribes. The written word fails to convey the fullness of speech (Hill Boone 1994). Hill Boone concludes that "*writing and speech are two distinct discourses*" (Hill Boone 1994 p.12). She goes on to call for an inclusive definition of writing and Hill Boone uses Geoffrey Sampson's classification of writing systems as the basis for this (Sampson 1985, in Hill Boone, 1994).

Sampson distinguishes two basic kinds of writing: glottographic writing which represents speech, i.e., the traditional definition of writing and semasiographic writing derived from the Greek *semasia* 'meaning' and graphic. Semasiographic systems of communication convey ideas independently of speech and are on the same logical level as spoken languages rather than being parasitic on them as ordinary scripts are. "They [semasiographic systems] are supra linguistic because they can function outside of language" (Hill Boone 1994 p.15). Semasiographic systems have their own internal structures and conventions to convey meaning. Sampson further categorises semasiographic writing systems into two types. The first type is conventional, where meaning is indicated by the interrelationship of symbols that are arbitrarily codified (Hill Boone 1994 p.16). Scientific, mathematical and musical notations are examples of this category of semasiographic writing. In these systems, numerals, letters, symbols, signs as well as their relative placement convey meaning. The second category of semasiographic writing occurs where there is "a natural relationship between the image and its referent, such as a human shown shovelling to signal a construction zone" (Hill Boone 1994 p.16). Road signs are also an example of this type of writing. While it is possible to frame the meaning of iconic writing in speech, it is usually possible to understand the meaning at a glance. Iconic semasiographic writing is not dependent on any one language rather it can be understood outside of specific language as, for example, in international road signs and signage systems at airports. "One does not have to go through spoken language to comprehend the message" (Hill Boone 1999 p.17). Such systems

are intelligible to those who share a general cultural system although they may speak different dialects or languages.

In summary, Hill Boone and others argue for a concept of multiple literacies to embrace what has been cast off by the theories of the supremacy of Western linguistic traditions. Such a scheme would embrace the diversity of human ingenuity in all its recording methodologies, including *textile as text*. The concept of semasiographic writing has profound implications for the status of pre-Columbian textiles and indeed contemporary women artists use of the textile/text axis in their aesthetic discourse. Dhamija asserts that textile is a language. She views textile/text as a web of communication. Textile, she states, can be read as a book: the materiality of textile can indicate geo-climatic information, motifs and colour convey cultural meaning, historical narrative and philosophical concepts and belief systems (Dhamija 1994). Hill Boone and Mignolo and others within linguistic scholarship have challenged the narrow definition of what constitutes text/writing prevalent within mainstream linguistics. Such scholarship has invariably identified literacies based on speech/language and phonetic/alphabetic scripts as 'true writing'. Writing systems defined as spoken language recorded or referenced phonetically in visual marks and signs are thus privileged. This limited definition of literacy excludes other literacies such as those of Andean, Mesoamerican and Amerindian cultures. These cultures have communicated for millennia through woven textiles, knotted cords, painted ceramics in a complex system of geometric symbols and abstract designs more akin to the notational and diagrammatic languages of chemistry, mathematics, physics, music and transglobal capitalism (*viz.*, diagrammatic instructions for assembling its ubiquitous flat-pack products!). Tufte uses the concept of *envision* to describe such diagrammatic systems of communication (Tufte 1990, Hill Boone and Mignolo 1994).

Sampson proposes a twofold classification of writing systems: *glottographic* writing representing speech, the 'true writing' of mainstream linguistics and

semasiographic writing conveying ideas and information independently of language in logically coherent and internally structured systems. Such a classification allows for the admission of the validity of the notion of multiple literacies embracing the diversity of human creativity in all its recording methodologies including the textile/text axis used by contemporary artists. Dhamija's claim that textile can act as a language thus gains credence in the light of a deeper understanding and more extensive definition of literacy. Drawing from the field of linguistic scholarship, in technical terms, the textile/text axis may be understood as *a valid envisioning system of communication within the category of semasiographic writing systems* (Hill Boone 1994). Figure Two below summarises the status of the textile/text axis in the light of contemporary scholarship.

Figure 2: Attributes of Textile as Text

- Logical system of communication akin to other notational systems
- Part of a complexity of multiple literacies
- Defined by linguists as an envisioning, semasiographic communication system

Chapter Three

Rending the Web: The Status of Text in Postmodern Theory

The work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida has been referred to briefly above. However, no discussion of the status of text could be considered adequate without a more careful consideration of his immense contribution. Derrida's work is crucially important to an understanding of the philosophical status of *text* in contemporary thought. Kearney describes Derrida's contribution as one of the most revolutionary of the 20th century – "no sacred concept has been spared the prod of his dissenting scalpel. He has danced on the graves of all our hallowed certainties" (Kearney 1993 p.113). In what follows, I will attempt to examine a number of Derridian concepts that shed light on the metaphysical and philosophical status of text within contemporary European philosophy.

Derrida, born in Algeria in 1931, was educated in France, a student of Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur. He taught at Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris and at John Hopkins University in the U.S.A. Derrida's oeuvre consists of a complex deconstruction of Husserl and Heidegger and of the phenomenological tradition and, also, Plato, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Freud and Saussure. Kearney summarises the fruits of Derrida's scholarship thus:

"Derrida labours to show how Western thinking has been dominated by a metaphysics of presence which exercises a hierarchical preference for the one over many, identity over difference, spirit over matter, eternity over time, immediacy over deferment, the same over the other and, perhaps, most significant for Derrida's analytical purposes, speech over writing" (Kearney 1993 p.124).

Drawing from Husserl, Heidegger, and Saussurian linguistics, Derrida emphasises the impossibility of establishing the validity of ideas, of presence/origin upon what he terms *logocentrism*. Kearney states that, for Derrida, *logocentrism* refers to the practice in western metaphysics of basing its understanding on the cornerstone idea of presence, i.e., logos. Derrida states

that in Western metaphysics all the names relating to fundamental principles point to a presence. He sets out the examples of *eidos* (idea), *arche* (origin), *telos* (goal), *energeia* and *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject), *aletheria* (transcendentality/God), metaphysical concepts conveying the idea of presence which are fundamental to Western philosophy from Plato onwards (Derrida 2007). Kearney states that Derrida undermines all notions of original presence in his ambitious project of deconstruction and in the process of deconstructing the concept of presence/origin *he also deconstructs the traditional concept of signification itself* (Kearney 1993).

For Derrida, language is a free play of endless differences of meaning and writing is a kind of mimesis (remembering), a textual play of endless reference whose origins are lost in an endless chain of signification. Derrida, Kearney says, reveals signification to be a process of *dissemination*, an endless shifting from sign to sign in an eternal chain, an interminable play of signs. Derrida, Kearney states, adopts the position that there is no 'hors texte', that is nothing outside of language. For Derrida, Husserl's phenomena are merely signs, metaphors. The only legitimate hermeneutics is one which interprets interpretations (Kearney 1993).

Derrida's Phone and Gramme

In *Dissemination*, Derrida traces the Western metaphysical bias of privileging speech (phone) over writing (gramme) back to the Greek philosopher, Plato (Derrida, 1997). Plato identified truth as a silent dialogue of the soul with itself. Plato's own teaching style valorised the method of his own teacher, i.e., the Socratic dialogue, a method which consisted of a spoken discourse between disciples and teacher. Plato denounced writing as poison, a *pharmakon*, a *supplement* for the origin, an inadequate or shadow representation of the transcendental idea of phenomena. In his essay, "*Plato's Pharmacy*", Derrida points to the paradox within Western metaphysics whereby the transcendental

idea of presence is only intelligible to humans if remembered and remembering over time requires "a generalised mimesis of writing". But, as has been pointed out, repetition/writing is a supplement, a pseudo truth, not the original. Kearney explains Plato's opposition to writing as grounded in the fact that writing severs or eliminates the link of self to self or self to other immediately present to self. He states:

"... Writing exposes us to the alienation of meaning from itself... It sets meaning at a distance from its original self presence. It introduces the possibility of other interpretations, quite different to those originally intended" (Kearney 1993 p.118).

Plato regarded writing as the illegitimate offspring of language. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates warns that once speech is written down the original meaning is thrown to the four winds among those who may or may not understand, without the protection of the author/parent to defend it. Socrates contrasts the status of phone (speech) as an intelligent word inscribed on the soul, a living word of knowledge of which the written word is no more than an image (Kearney, 1993).

Derrida draws out the etymological ambiguities of the term *Pharmakon*, which in Greek means both 'a cure' and 'a poison' (Derrida 1997). For Plato, writing is an evil disease because it displaces meaning, alienating meaning from its author. But the paradox is that only with writing is a remembering possible because it ensures a durability beyond the temporal and spatial loss of the original utterance. Without Plato's recording the speech of Socrates through writing, the history of philosophy would never have known of this discourse. As Kearney points out, Platonic metaphysics requires writing to preserve speech "to represent its original presence in its very absence". In Kearney's words,

"A 'pharmakon' writing is therefore a play of irreconcilable opposites. For it alienates the invisible interiority of the soul-in-dialogue-with-itself by embodying it in visual markings and written signs outside of the soul and at the same time functions as a salvatory power which can reawaken the soul to forgotten truths" (Kearney 1993 p.119).

In *Dissemination*, Derrida writes:

"If the Pharmakon is ambivalent it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement of the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing ... The Pharmakon is the production of difference..." (Kearney 1993 p.119).

Thus Derrida deconstructs Western/Platonic metaphysics by demonstrating that its fundamental core concepts such as *eidos* and *logos* are based on ambivalence and contradiction. Central to Derrida's critique is the concept of *difference*. Kearney explains this concept: "Derrida often uses this neologism, *difference*, to denote the dual functioning of writing as both a *differing* (each sign differs from the other) and a *deferring* (the endless chain of signs postpones any termination of the chain in some original signified). The French term, *differer* carries both these senses. The metaphysical prestige of the *logos* – as centre and centring self-identity – is subverted by the operation of *difference* ... and that, as such, presence is always deferred. It becomes a goal (*telos*) rather than an origin (*arche*). The goal of speech as the presence of soul to itself depends on writing to cross boundaries of time and space and this dependence undermines self-presence "deferring it ad infinitum" (Kearney 1993 ps.119-120). Derrida's argument is based on the premise that speech can only remain identical with its origins to the extent that it is reproduced exactly at different times. Derrida makes the point that presence sustains itself by deferring. Derrida, drawing from Saussure's linguistic analysis, points out that difference is an inherent component of speech. Kearney summarises Derrida's position thus:

"... the play of difference is internal to speech itself. Speech is in fact already inhabited by difference to the extent that each word or spoken sign is divided from the outset into a phonic signifier and a conceptual signified" (Kearney 1993 p.120).

Saussurian linguistics define speech as spoken signs premised on differentiating structures because sign cannot signify anything by itself but only by indicating a difference from other signs. This function of difference within speech, Derrida terms *archi-writing*. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida explains that while *archi-writing*

cannot be objectively defined, neither is it to be reduced to a form of essence/presence posited by Platonic logocentric metaphysics. Rather "it calls for a non logocentric linguistics which Derrida terms 'grammatology' "(Kearney 1993 p.121).

The methodology of Derrida's grammatology demands a vigilant and deconstructive reading of texts and an unrelenting scepticism permanently mindful of Nietzsche's dictate that truth is an illusion that has forgotten that it is an illusion. Grammatology demands that logocentrism deconstruct itself and its discourse (Kearney 1993). Derrida's theoretical edifice, his grammatology, Kearney says, shows that there is nothing that can be apprehended before or after language; our concepts of reality and rationality are unmasked and logocentric metaphysics and notions of scientific objectivity collapsed into a "carnival of figurative conceits" (Kearney 1993 p.121). Derrida's deconstruction of authoritative truth and original authorship signals the birth of the 'text' as a free play of signifiers open to an infinite number of readings and re-readings. Text contains multiple meanings and no single correct reading. In Derrida's all embracing theory of textuality, one text refers to another *ad infinitum*. This raises the possibility that in a vast edifice of intertextuality, textiles and other literacies can rightfully claim a valid place in this vast edifice of intertextuality as envisioned by Derrida.

Textile/Text as Transgression

As will be set out in detail in the chapters to follow in Section Two, women's position in western patriarchal society is apprehended by French feminist philosophers, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, as a state of abjection, deprived as women are, in the phallogocentric symbolic, of a valid self-image or a language of their own. The second wave of feminism from the 1970s onwards witnessed a whole generation of women awakening to a deeper understanding of the social and institutional structures that defined their

experience and they began to name and analyse the cultural frameworks which excluded their contribution. Irigaray set the agenda for women artists and theoreticians in the 1970s and 1980s. For her, the primary task was the cultural recovery of the feminine and this requires the deconstruction of dominant phallogentric discourse and the construction of a language in the feminine/and *écriture de la femme* which would allow woman to make her unique cultural contribution. This agenda underpins much of the artwork and discourse of women in the late 20th and early 21st centuries and this thesis suggests that the textile/text axis played an important role as complex lexicon facilitating this project. What is termed the *dominant discourse* is enshrined in Western European philosophy and its attendant institutional structures and edifices of scholarship which largely excluded women until relatively recent times. This discourse became the focus of women's scholarship and critique from the 1960s onwards. Derrida's deconstructivist project, undermining as it did, the authority of a logocentric stance which excluded women's cultural contribution consigning her to a position of muteness offered hope to women (Nye 1988). In his enterprise of intertextuality, Derrida identified a role for women in displacing and destabilizing phallogentric canons and epistemologies. Derrida's grammatological agenda appeared to offer women a pathway out of muteness and inarticulacy and Derrida became an important mentor for French feminism and women artists in the last decades of the 20th century (Nye 1988). The thesis argues that, in their agendas of critique and deconstruction of phallogentrism, feminist scholars and artists employed the textile/text axis as transgressive text. Such efforts by women resulted in a remodeling of cultural meaning.

Kristevan concepts such as *intertextuality*, (whereby signifiers are transposed into other systems of signs resulting in the emergence of new enunciative positions) and *transgressive texts* (the work of the *avant-garde* which challenge the dominant *symbolic*) are useful in examining the role of textile in remolding cultural meaning. Textile and text have combined as methods of challenging knowledge bases in art history, as means of rewriting women's cultural

contribution into contemporary discourse. For example, Judy Chicago's seminal artwork *The Dinner Party* acted as a transgressive text fracturing the dominant canon and inserting a matrilineal heritage into art history. Responding to Linda Nochlin's question "*Why have there been no great women artists?*", textiles became transgressive text.

In answer to the question – '*Textile Art- Who Are You?*', Maharaj invokes Derrida's concept of *an undecidable*. (Maharaj 2001 ps.175-176). An '*undecidable*' in Derrida's terms is something that seems to belong to one genre but overshoots its borders and seems no less at home in another. Maharaj asks whether "We should comprehend 'Textile Art' under the chameleon figure of an '*undecidable*'? (Maharaj 2001 p.7). To illustrate the point Maharaj uses Marcel Duchamp's art work '*Genre Allegory*' which consists of an assemblage of cloth, nails, iodine and gilt stars set in a canvas frame. Maharaj states "We are called to look on it as a painting, but without paint or pigment. Cloth stages the syntax of its own forms and textures. We are struck by its sheer painterliness. Against this pure formalism, the piece reads as 'history painting'. Duchamp stretches and shapes the cloth so that it suggests a profile portrait of George Washington, a star spangled flag or a blood drenched bandage, the idea of war and conflict..." (Maharaj 2001 p.8). In other words textile acts as a symbolic system representing something other than cloth "an excess of signs" (Maharaj 2001 p.8). Maharaj states:

"In the Duchamp piece therefore, cloth is all even as it is nothing, bare stuff and fabric that set off a visual dynamic for formalist ends. At the same time it is nothing as it effaces itself to serve as a figure or cipher for some idea or concept..." (Maharaj 2001 p.8).

Maharaj also discusses the position of the quilt to further examine textile as '*undecidable*' in contemporary cultural meaning. Maharaj makes the point that however much the quilt aspires to the status of 'artwork' it does not fully shed other connotations of reference to the domain of making and producing, the realm of the ancient crafts of the hands (Maharaj, 2001). Hung upon a wall,

framed, put on display it catches our attention as statement of form, colour, texture. "We soar away with its allusive narrative force" (Maharaj 2001 p.8).

But for Maharaj we never quite manage to erase the quilt's ties with use and function "with the notion of wrapping up, keeping warm, sleep and comfort..." (Maharaj 2001 p.8). Maharaj names the ambiguities of the quilt – everyday object, artwork, domestic commodity, conceptual device, speculative object, mundane thing, - in a word '*undecidable*'.

Textile is thus context dependant, straddling "a double-coded space, an ambivalent site" (Maharaj 2001 p.9). The quilt stands deeply contrasted to Greensberg's modernist vision of clearcut, contained genre and pared down discrete medium, thereby challenging cultural definitions and categories.

In its role of 'undecidable' in Derrida's sense, textile occupies an ambivalent site capable of rich nuances of representation, thereby challenging cultural definitions and categories. Acting as transgressive text and Kristevan systems of intertextuality, textile in women's artwork has fractured the dominant canon of art history and inserted women's cultural contribution into contemporary discourse.⁵

The textile/text axis has acted as a mechanism of intervention in the vast network of signification appended to the female body in western culture. This has allowed women artists to effectively intervene in contradictory sites of female embodiment thereby challenging the dominant discourse and reinscribing through the surrogate use of textile an alternative sexed identity and subjectivity. Janis Jeffries in *New Feminist Art Criticism* makes the point that the eurocentric male gaze and textile are inextricably linked. Textile/fashion/costume act as a means of the construction of otherness, femininity as masquerade "encompassing a signifying chain of fractured multiple precarious identities" (Jeffries 1994 p. 164). Wilson's important work on dress and identity proposes that "dress/textile is the

⁵ This point is discussed more fully in Chapters Five and Six.

frontier between the self and the social and its mediation of the body" (Maharaj 1991 p.3). Renee Baert argues that textile/clothing is "... the very tissue between self and the social, the psychic and social boundaries (Jefferies 2001 p.3). Jefferies also refers to the fact that cloth masks skin and is also a means of hiding a wound, "a wound that speaks of mortality and the cycle of loss that is central to experiences of subjectivity" (Jefferies 2001 p.3). Professor Baert uses the insights of the philosopher Moira Gatens who has in her work outlined the unconscious ways we interpret the body and infer values and qualities to it (Baert 2001). Gatens suggests that humans construct a morphology of the body, i.e., an imaginary body that has nothing to do with physical anatomy. "The female body in our culture is seen and no doubt often lived as *an envelope, vessel or receptacle*, the post oedipal female body, to paraphrase Freud, is first a home for a penis and later for a baby" (Gatens 1996 p.41). Gatens argument is that the social construction of women as partial, incomplete "serves to undermine their status as ethical and political subjects" (Baert 2001 p.11). Drawing on Gatens' work, Baert states that women are not seen to have integrity because they are not thought of in *the symbolic* as whole beings.

"The resonance of imaginary understandings of the partiality of the female body relative to the imagined wholeness and integrity of the masculine body extends metamorphically into the realm of ethics. It is further reproduced in the cultural imaginary... where the masculine figure remains the privileged designator of the human" (Baert 2001 p.11).

Gatens emphasizes that the imaginary body is not merely a subjective fantasy or product of the individual's imagination. Rather it is socially and culturally constructed with a plurality of connotations and meanings. Gatens' concept of the imaginary body expands our way of thinking about the body beyond biology and anatomy. Gatens draws heavily on Irigaray's analysis of the dominance of phallogentrism in the creation of culture in its own image to the exclusion of the feminine (Baert 2001). Jane Gallop states that phallogentric logic is not based on anatomy but "on the contrary, reconstructs anatomy in its own image" (Gallop, 1994, p.94). Baert is of the opinion that this phallogentric morphology of the body is constructed through psychic investments, symbolic renderings and

representational supports (Baert 2001). Elizabeth Grosz echoes Baert's conception of this when she states that the body "is an open ended pliable set of significations, capable of being rewritten, reconstituted in quite other terms than those which mark it, and consequently capable of reinscribing ... sexed identity and psychical subjectivity" (Baert 2001 p.12). Baert sets out the mechanisms whereby textiles are used to distort the morphology of the female form. The Western fashion industry "constantly changes, indeed fabricates through dramatic transformations and fluctuating ideals how we 'see' and thus 'live' that body (Baert 2001 p.13). The female body, Baert points out, is "caught in a vast network of signification" (Baert 2001 p.13). This signification located within the fashion and art canon is the deep concern for many contemporary artists who use textile and their agenda is "one of negotiating some form of retrieval" (Baert 2001 p.30). Clothing/textile "because of its juncture between the body and the social, its linking of corporeality and culture, can be utilized as a medium through which to speak to the contradictory sites of femininity" (Baert 2001 p.13). Examples of this discourse can be found in Christine Lofaso's *SHIFT*, a dress made of paper 7feet tall, with text from Freud's infamous account of Dora's psychoanalysis. Beverley Semmes' larger than life dress sculptures are another example. Artists are thus using textiles as a surrogate for the body "...to intervene in the congealed residues of the cultural image of women" (Baert, 2001, p.12). Professor Baert describes the outcomes of such artistic endeavours thus "... *subjectifying the absent body that is yet referred to through the delegate of clothing, these works may have an effectivity in abating the power of the unconscious cultural images of sexual difference...*" (Baert 2001 p.20). In summary, these artists in their work challenge the dominant discourse of the feminine through the use of textile and text and present an alternative multidimensional statement of female embodiment.

Section One, Textile/Text, A Double Weave: Conclusion

The three chapters of Section One explore and develop the concept of the textile/text axis, the pivotal idea underpinning this thesis. This exercise leads to the point where the textile/text axis may be described as *a complex lexicon, a collection of referential connotations of signification, transgressive text, representation and layered meanings, a site of ambiguity as a proxy of body, a corporeal cartography*. It is to this richly complex lexicon that women artists and theorists from the 1970s onwards, as they awakened to the *braid of horror*⁶ that constitutes patriarchy and its histories, had recourse in their attempts to articulate their position in phallogentric misogynistic culture and to unravel and comment upon issues of subjectivities, gender, race, difference, the creation of signification and culture. Section Two, which follows, details the feminist critique of the dominant discourse which determined women's positioning in 20th century Western societies. In the next section, the thesis will engage with theoretical and conceptual components of feminist discourse during the last three decades of the 20th century. It is within the locus of the feminist dialogue with the dominant discourse that the major impetus of women's art making in late 20th and early 21st centuries arises.

⁶ A term used by Julia Kristeva to describe the patriarchal era

SECTION TWO

Rethreading the Loom: Feminist Challenges to the Dominant Discourse

As stated above women's position in western patriarchal society is described by French feminist philosophers, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, as a state of abjection, deprived as women are, in the phallogentric symbolic, of a valid self-image or a language of their own. The second wave of feminism from the 1970s onwards witnessed a whole generation of women awakening to a deeper understanding of the social and institutional structures that defined their experience and they began to name and analyse the cultural frameworks which excluded their contribution.⁷ Irigaray set the agenda for women artists and theoreticians in the 1970s and 1980s. For her, the primary task was the cultural recovery of the feminine and this requires the deconstruction of dominant phallogentric discourse and the construction of a language in the feminine/*and ecriture de la femme* which would allow woman to make her unique cultural contribution. This agenda underpins much of the artwork and discourse of women in the late 20th and early 21st centuries and this thesis suggests that the textile/text axis played an important role as complex lexicon facilitating this project. What is termed the *dominant discourse* is enshrined in Western European philosophy and its attendant institutional structures and edifices of scholarship which largely excluded women until relatively recent times. This discourse became the focus of women's scholarship and critique from the 1960s onwards. Section Two consists of two chapters. Chapter Four focuses on the work of Jacques Lacan which served as a key point of departure for feminist scholarship. Chapter Five presents the feminist response to Lacan's theories and deals with Irigaray's articulation of an alternative symbolic, a body of feminist scholarship which has been hugely influential in providing women artists with the conceptual tools to express their deepest concerns during the last decades of the 20th century.

⁷ For a fuller discussion of women's awakening, see Chapters Six and Seven.

Chapter Four

Lacan and the Dominant Discourse

Lacan, Psychoanalysis and Structural Linguistics

Lacan, a medical psychiatrist, was born in Paris in 1901. His oeuvre combines the insights of Freudian psychoanalysis with Saussurian linguistic theory. Lacan's reformulation of Freud's theory of the unconscious has wielded a wide influence in contemporary culture and has served as a touchstone for many of the strands of postmodern thought that followed. Lacan died in 1981 after having dissolved his own Institute (L'Ecole Freudienne de Paris), declaring that he wished to have no followers for he considered himself merely a follower of the master Freud (Kearney 1993).

The structuralist approach of Saussurian linguistics focused on the covert meanings of language and its codes. Meaning, Saussure, the founder of semiology (the science of signs), stated in his *Course in General Linguistics*, published in 1916, is hidden, masked, oblique. Images, gestures, objects, symbols, signs are all interrogated for meaning. The multiplicity of approaches grouped within the structuralist tradition all share the aim of decoding deep structures of meaning and examining codes of language which condition meaning, i.e., the linguistic origins of meaning (Kearney 1993).

Lacan also drew on Freud's theories of the unconscious in the production of the subjectivity of the individual. Freud posits from his work as a practising analyst that unconscious processes are essentially discursive in nature and that psychic life is both individual and collective. Freud's work pointed to the importance of unconscious processes with their own rationale and hidden logic of desire and fantasy. Lacan welded these insights to the methodologies of structural linguistics and extended and deepened Freud's initial work that pointed to the language-like ways in which the unconscious is structured. Lacan was drawn to

Saussurian structural linguistic analysis as developed by Levi-Strauss in the field of anthropology as a method of achieving a broad integration of psychoanalysis and the general humanities. Lacan was deeply critical of the narrow agendas of the Anglo-American schools of psychology which reduced Freud's theories to a narrow concern of ego adjustment to the demands of society, a social engineering project which in Lacan's view reduced Freud's ground breaking insights to a medicalised, mechanical behaviourism with the pseudo trappings of positivism in imitation of the physical sciences. Lacan's oeuvre represents a broadly based conjectural investigation of the structured language of the unconscious eschewing the objectifying empirical data of psychiatry and the influence of biology and the human and natural sciences. Psychology, Lacan maintained, should be 'a liberal art' in the medieval sense (Kearney 1993 p.270) embracing a wide cultural agenda and drawing from the disciplines of philosophy, mathematics, anthropology, literature, grammar, music "in order to maintain in the foreground what might be called a fundamental relation to human proportions", Lacan stated (Lacan in Kearney 1993. p.270). Lacan's work draws from his own practice as a psychiatrist and analyst, from Rimbaud, Levi-Stauss, Saussure, Joyce, Catherine of Sienna, Hegel, Heidegger and the Hindu Upanishads in a wide ranging discourse. His work was largely presented in the form of seminars at his Paris Institute and his publications at a later date were transcriptions from these events. Kearney concludes that Lacan succeeded in establishing psychoanalysis as an important force in continental intellectual life and also promoted structuralism as a fruitful methodology of enquiry.

Key Lacanian Concepts: A Narrative of Psychic Differentiation

Freud declared that the royal road to the unconscious was through dreams, somatic symptoms and riddles/paradox. He compared the structure of these nocturnal dramas to the language of the rebus, an enigmatic Victorian parlour game where words are represented by pictures suggesting syllables. Freud argues that dreams are not random, meaningless, psychic events. Rather they

contain hidden structures and meanings which challenge the perceived sovereignty of our everyday consciousness. This is Lacan's starting point. In *Ecrits* he states: "The trade route of truth no longer passes through thought ...rebus it is through you that I communicate" (Lacan 1966). Fundamental to Freud and Lacan's thinking is the concept of *Dividua*, the divided ones, which refers to the human person as a subject whose consciously held image of self identity is constantly being challenged and opposed by powerful unconscious desires. The sense of a stable coherent self or ego is an *imago*, imaginary in the Freudian canon, and its construction can be traced back to the *mirror phase* of human psychic development. This phase begins when the infant is 6-18 months old and continues through the Oedipus conflict phase to be resolved more or less by the time the child is five or six years old. Freudian theory states that in the early stages the infant experiences its body as being fragmented and, in order to compensate for this, the child constructs an imaginary ideal image of a unified self, made up not only of its own desires but also those of its mother in respect of the child. This *imago* is the basis of the human infant's *narcissism*, a passionately held belief in a stable unified conscious ego, 'I'. To a greater or lesser degree *narcissism* continues into adulthood and produces what Lacan terms the unconscious world of *l'imaginaire*, the *imaginary*, which is the ultimate source of the illusions and deceits of the ego (Kearney 1993). The process of psychic differentiation continues through the Oedipal phase when a brutal psychic drama described by the Greek playwright Sophocles in the archetypal Oedipus Rex unfolds in the child's psyche. The psychic drama experienced by the child centres on the desire for and ultimate loss of the mother through the intervention of the symbolic father, the *Law of the Father* in Lacanian terms. The child's experience of loss, separation, alienation and fear of death is, according to psychoanalytic theory, suppressed from consciousness and further serves to strengthen the ego's defences and its sense of self as an autonomous separate entity.

In psychoanalytic theory the discourse between analyst and client provides an opportunity to bring the Oedipal conflict to consciousness thereby dissolving the imaginary ego and, through the psychoanalytic process, shifting the individual's primary identity with a narrow self deluded ego to allow a *symbolising subject* to emerge who is capable of accepting and engaging with the complexities of dynamic interrelationships with others and the arising diversities of meaning. In so doing, the individual enters into a more adequate relationship to the human condition. In Lacanian terms the subject is thus enabled to allow the logic of the rebus to speak and be heard revealing, behind an apparent unity of meaning, a diversity of meanings. This is the chief attribute of the *symbolising subject* for Lacan. Kearney concludes:

This decentring of the self allows the self to return to the suppressed language of the unconscious. It permits the subject to rediscover that absence at the heart of itself, that lack which is the desire of the other. This is what Lacan means when he declares that "the unconscious is the discourse of the other". It is a discourse which dispossesses us of our imaginary sense of self completeness (Kearney 1993 p.276).

Lacan, Langue and Parole

As stated above, a key component of Lacanian psychology is his innovative equation of the Id/unconscious of Freud with the Saussurian concepts of *Langue* and of ego consciousness with *Parole*. *Langue* is the structuralist concept of an unconscious level of discourse/communication both personal and collective. It consists of codes which, when apprehended, give access to deeper levels of meaning. *Langue* is not apparent at the conscious level of everyday narratives and discourse which structuralists such as Levi-Strauss refer to as *Parole*. Rather *Langue* is a series of clues to the deeper meanings of our communications and purposes and is composed of phenomena such as parapraxis (slips of the tongue), silences, equivocations, omissions, misrememberings, body language, somatic symptoms, illnesses, fantasy and dreams. These form the raw data for Lacan's analysis of the unconscious and lay bare the real nature of our deepest desires and purposes which are frequently at

odds with our conscious goals and objectives (the *Dividua*). Our *Parole* is merely a disguise for the wishes and desires of the unconscious, Lacan believes. Lacan further goes on to state that *Langue* precedes *Parole* and that it is not individual consciousness which is the origin and creator of language but unconscious *Langue* which speaks through individuals' narrative. In other words, Lacan asserts the primacy of *Langue* which he equates with the language of the unconscious. Fantasies and dreams are for Lacan signifiers that can only be understood within the context of this unconscious language system. He states "The dream... has the structure of a form of writing which ...reproduces the simultaneously phonetic and symbolic use of signifying elements" (Kearney 1993 p. 237). To apprehend *Langue* for Lacan is the revelation of *the symbolic order*. Kearney concludes that Lacan's structuralist analysis of *Langue*/the unconscious reveals that the order of unconscious desire unfolds according to a language code which is even more sophisticated and structured than the discourse of our conscious intelligence (Kearney 1993). Lacan's contribution to the analysis of the structure of this unconscious language uses Freud's concept of the ego's defence mechanisms whereby the ego defends itself against the intrusion of unconscious content into consciousness. He postulates that such linguistic phenomena as periphrasis, elipsis, litotes, that characterise the syntax of speech are fundamental components of the codes of *Langue* and perform a similar function to the ego defences. He also, as did Freud, used literary terms such as metaphor and metonymy to elucidate *Langue*. "The symptom is a metaphor... as desire is a metonymy", Lacan's famous aphorism states in *Ecrites*.

Lacan in his practice as an analyst (and in his discourse in *Les Seminaires* which form the basis of his writings) developed a language of free association, multiple meanings, pun, paradoxes, witticism, jokes, metaphors, metonymy as a mechanism to bring the language of *Langue* into the realm of everyday narratives and to subvert the ego's need to tie down signifiers to a single meaning. Examples giving a flavour of Lacan's discourse include amour (to love)/ame (soul); Ca, French for the Freudian Id, pronounced 'Sa/Capital S,

linguists shorthand for the Signifier; *poubellication* (to publish in French)/*poubelle* (to put rubbish in a bin); *lettre* (letter)/*l'etre* (being)/*l'autre* (other). Thus Lacan communicated to his students his teachings concerning the never-ending play of substitution of signifiers which form the basic structure of *Langue*.

Lacan's equation

SIGNIFIER S

signified s

radically replaces the primacy of the conscious signifier (lower case). *Langue* (equated with capital S) is the creator of the symbolic order. As the unconscious S is forever lacking its ultimate signified, it is expressed as unrequited desire for other and thus we are permanently estranged, divided against ourselves, haunted by an absence that by the nature of things we can never make present, by an ideal we can never possess.

Lacan's fusion of Freudian concepts with a radical linguistic structuralism, while not without its critics, represents in Kearney's words a "provocative contribution to European thought" (Kearney 1993 p. 282). The next section will sketch out the broad terms of feminist scholarship's engagement with Lacan's thought, in particular, his account of the process of psychic differentiation and the creation of *the symbolic order*, key concepts elucidating women's positioning in Western societies at the end of the 20th century and ground of Lacan's ideas concerning the existential position of the female subject which served as a significant point of departure for feminist deconstruction of the dominant discourse.

Unpicking Lacan: The Feminist Discourse

Brennan states that the problem for feminist scholarship is that, while Lacan's theories "count for a lot", his theories of psychic differentiation make patriarchy (the rule of the father) seem the natural order of reality deeply embedded in human psychic development (Brennan 1989 p.3). Lacan's theories rest on his idea of the primary role of the symbolic father whose interventions in *the imaginary* sever the ties between the human infant and mother creating the Oedipal drama which results in the establishment of the *Law of the Father* in the child's psyche and, subsequently, in the broader social sphere. Lacanians insist that the symbolic is patriarchal (of the father) in nature because woman is the primary care giver of the child and the man (the father) the intervening third party who, as such, "occupies a position co-incident with language" (Brennan 1989 p.3). For Lacanians, the patriarchal *symbolic* is linked to the *phallus* (the symbolic masculine principle) and *phallus* is allied with *logos* (word). The recognition of difference is a necessary prerequisite for logical thought and language. It is the condition of logic and language alike. Thinking demands a capacity to differentiate. It is at this juncture, Brennan explains, that in Lacanian thought the symbolic father and the *phallus* converge. The former (intervening father) breaks up the unity (of child with mother) and the *phallus* (masculine principle) represents the break. Brennan points to the fundamental Lacanian claim "that sexual difference is the crucial one in being able to speak ...and *mutates mutandis* that speaking is critical to sexual difference" (Brennan 1989 p.4). For Lacanians the *phallus* stands for the lack that propels the human person into speaking. But the problem for feminist scholarship arises in relation to the position of the feminine represented as lack.⁸ Passivity and lack for Lacanians characterise the feminine which Brennan states is for Lacan "nothing more than difference from the masculine" (1989 p.4). Brennan summarises Lacanian

⁸ Lack refers to absence of a penis which by some biological essentialist slight of hand becomes equated with the *phallus*!!

phallogocentric theory as it relates to understanding of the feminine principle as follows:

"In the Lacanian account two distinct processes are merged. On the one hand there is recognising difference, the rudiments of logical differentiation. On the other there is the subject's psychical differentiation. Not only do the father and language alike figure as third terms in the subject's psychical differentiation, but the phallus figures in the recognition and use of the differential structure of language and logic ... it should be stressed that Lacan draws both forms of differentiation together under the same phallic name" (Brennan 1989 p.4).

There is a further problem for feminists in Lacan's position that *the symbolic* is the condition of sanity. To default on the Lacanian phallogocentric *symbolic* is to be in a state of psychosis (out of touch with *The Real*) for both sexes. Some Lacanians have argued that men have greater powers of differentiation and that women are more likely to remain inadequately differentiated in their psychic development and, therefore, more prone to psychosis (Brennan 1989). Brennan and Whitworth suggest that much of the French feminist debate is concerned with a critique of the centrality of the *phallus* in psychoanalytic theories of psychic development and sanity (Brennan 1989; Whitworth 1989). Irigaray's work, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, can be read not as a celebration of the female body but as a psychoanalytically informed argument (by Irigaray, herself an analyst) intended to counter the centrality of *the phallus* in psychic differentiation, thereby challenging patriarchal language and modes of thought. (Irigaray 1977).

As Brennan points out, Lacan's ideas are a fundamental point of reference in contemporary feminist discourse. (Brennan 1989). Grosz lists Lacan's contribution (Grosz 1990):

- His work, she states, acts as a counterbalance to biological essentialism and humanism, twin intellectual forces which dominated European thinking and it thereby finally displaces the rational 'cogito', '*I Think*' as the locus of human subjectivity. (Grosz 1990).

- Lacan's critique of the illusion of subjective unity and his concept of '*the Dividua*' the constant betrayal of consciousness by the unconscious, are a formidable contribution to understanding of the human predicament.
- Lacan, Grosz states, rescues Freud's work from the social engineering agenda of individual adaptation which is the focus of much of ego-psychology.
- The integration of linguistic structuralist theories and Freud's theories of the unconscious have extended and deepened the discourse in a wide variety of disciplines.
- Lacan's theory of the socio-linguistic genesis of subjectivity created a fruitful discourse which fuelled feminist scholarship.
- Lacan's deconstruction of the process whereby masculine identity is formed has, Grosz suggests, been an agency for change in so much as it has held up a mirror of self criticism for men in the 20th century thus "undermining male pretensions to an identity with the Phallus" (Grosz 1990 p.145).
- Lacan's work served to legitimate issues of sexuality and gender in academic and political discourse.

Whilst acknowledging Lacan's contribution, Brennan (1989) and Grosz (1990) note a diversity of responses within feminist scholarship to Lacan's theories. Brennan notes an Anglo-French divide in feminist scholarship with French feminist insistence that women are essentially *different* and the consequent challenge to phallogocentric epistemology and patriarchal language structures. Anglo-American feminist theorists meanwhile are concerned with supporting the premise that men and women are equal and the consequent implication of this for social reality (Brennan 1989). Yet Brennan acknowledges "that this division is occludent. It hides substantial differences between the 'Anglo' and the 'American' as well as the French on the question of the Lacanian symbolic" (Brennan 1989 p. 2). Grosz identifies three kinds of responses to Lacanian theories within the

feminist discourse.

- Those committed to Lacan's ideas and his underlying theoretical position. She includes Juliette Mitchell, Elle Ragland-Sullivan and Julie Kristeva in this category;
- Those who reject Lacan's theories. Grosz cites Germaine Greer as an example of this grouping. The main objection to Lacanian theories of this group is from the point of view of a rejection of the validity of psychoanalytic theories *per se* (Greer 1971);
- Grosz identifies a third grouping who "occupy neither category" (Grosz 1990 p.142). She includes Luce Irigaray, Jacqueline Rose and Jane Gallop here. Of this group, Grosz states, "All... seem to have an impressive familiarity with Lacan's work while maintaining a critical distance from it" (Grosz 1990 p.142). These authors have developed critiques of Lacanian theory or have used it as a point of reference for developing other positions which may or may not be compatible with Lacanian ideas.

Grosz suggests that the feminist response to Lacan may be usefully grouped under two headings, the work of his 'dutiful and undutiful daughters' (Grosz 1990).⁹ Juliette Mitchell and Julia Kristeva are termed 'dutiful daughters' who either support or build upon Lacan's ideas and Luce Irigaray the 'undutiful daughter' who remains at a critical distance while using Lacanian ideas and concepts to construct differing or alternative views of *the symbolic*. (Irigaray's alternative symbolic is outlined in Chapter Five, to follow).

Networks: Lacan's Dutiful Daughters

Juliette Mitchell was born in New Zealand in 1940 but has lived in the UK most of her life. She is a Fellow of the Jesus College, Cambridge and Yale University as

⁹ Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray attended Le Maitre Lacan's seminars at L'Ecole Freudienne in Paris.

well as being a practising psychoanalyst. Her major work, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, published in 1974 uses Freudian psychoanalytical theory to analyse the position of women in late 20th century society. Grosz states that in this and her subsequent work, *Feminine Sexuality* (1982), Mitchell remains a defender of Freudian and Lacanian ideas against feminist accusations of phallogentrism (Grosz 1990). Mitchell claims the feminist critique of Lacan's work is invalid because feminist scholars have failed to adequately understand Freudian and Lacanian theories of the psyche and the social construction of the human person (Mitchell 2000). This, she acknowledges, is related to the obscurity and difficult format deliberately used by Lacan in communicating his ideas. Lacan himself stated: "I prefer there be only one way in, and for that to be difficult" (Lacan in Grosz 1990). Grosz makes the point that it is only by temporarily suspending critical judgement and by espousing a belief in the fundamental coherence of Lacan's intellectual edifice that one has any possibility of understanding it. Here, Grosz allows that there may be some validity in Mitchell's point (Grosz 1990). Mitchell further claims that what Freud and Lacan are actually doing is providing a detailed deconstruction of the roots of patriarchal power relations. This, for Mitchell, is a profound contribution to feminist aspirations for social change because it is only by understanding and naming hidden processes that cultural transformation can be achieved (Grosz 1990).

Mitchell makes a further point in support of Lacan's theoretical position when she states that feminist scholarship has been in fundamental error by explaining patriarchy in terms of the relations between men and women (Grosz 1990). For Mitchell the crucial factor emphasised by Freud and Lacan is that it is the relation of both sexes to the Phallus that is the main determinant in the transmission of patriarchal values. The phallus for Mitchell is a neutral signifier which plays a crucial role in the social production of both men and women. In Freudian and Lacanian terms, accepting the *Law of the Father* gives the child a place in the socio-symbolic order, a name and a speaking position. Mitchell states that the phallus subjects both sexes equally to the experience of *the symbolic* and to the

first realisation of loss/lack and *the law*. For Mitchell, these Lacanian concepts are neutral terms merely describing the process whereby human subjects find their location in the socio-cultural-linguistic orders. Lacan, Mitchell says, is merely describing, not advocating, the processes that result in a patriarchal order.

Mitchell is supported by Jacqueline Rose and Ellie Ragland Sullivan in rebutting the critique of Lacan by feminist authors who regard the Lacanian view of woman as lack, other, passive, as deeply flawed (Mitchell and Rose 1983). Mitchell and Rose accuse Irigaray and Cixous of a biologism and an essentialism in their critique of Lacan. The French writers, they say, ground their literalisation of the masculine principle, the phallus, in the male physical body/penis (Mitchell and Rose 1983). Ragland-Sullivan, writing of Irigaray's work, makes a similar point:

"Irigaray...reads him [Lacan] substantively rather than structurally and thus sees him as prescriptive rather than descriptive and analytic. By equating Lacan's phallic signifier with patriarchy she substantivizes the concept biologically so that phallus = penis = male... by failing to accept the structural effect and symbolic nature of the Lacanian phallic signifier – neutral in its own right. Irigaray's assessment of Lacan as a phallocrat is wrong" (Ragland-Sullivan 1986 p.273).

Julia Kristeva, born in 1941 in Bulgaria, is considered one of the most influential contemporary French thinkers. Her oeuvre spans 30 years of research and teaching in both France and the USA (Becker Leckrone 2005). Since 1979 she has also been a practising psychoanalyst. Her work has been translated into 10 languages. Kristeva is indeed a compelling presence. She was educated by French Dominican nuns in Sofia and in 1966 immigrated to France. There Roland Barthes became her mentor and his work on structuralist semiology had a profound influence on her thinking (Kearney 1993). Kristeva joined the left wing Tel Quel Group in 1967 and has maintained a connection with "left wing dissident stances" (Kearney 1993 p. 339). Kearney broadly classifies Kristeva's work as post structuralist and places her in the company of Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard and Lyotard. He is profoundly aware of her unique intellectual achievements. Kristeva, he says, is "...a mind apart irreducible to any movement or doctrine. No school could claim her as its own. She always set her own seal on arguments

challenging the authority of conventional wisdoms and subverting dogmatism in every form. To use one of her own favourite terms, she cultivated the art of singularity” (Kearney 1993 p.332).

Through the methodology of *semanalysis* (an approach developed by Kristeva) she has achieved her own type of linguistic analysis. Dissolving the sign through critical analysis which stresses the heterogeneity and *intertextuality* of language is a hallmark of Kristeva’s approach. *Intertextuality* is a Kristevian concept whereby signifiers are transposed into other systems of signs, resulting in the emergence of new enunciative and denotive positions (Kearney 1993). Kristeva’s *semanalysis* suggests “that no belief in a total theory is feasible once we acknowledge the complexity of the signifying process We renounce the illusory absolutes of technical rationality in favour of a more modest quest... “ (Kearney 1993 p.333). Kearney tells us that Kristeva’s post-structuralist quest is to bring us back to the origin of signs themselves “... to those liminal points where language as a signifying process emerges into being...” (Kearney 1993 p.334). Kristeva shares with others a multi-disciplinary approach which embraces philosophy, literature, art, sociology, psychoanalysis, politics. Kristeva is a semiologist and literary theorist whose major interest lies in what Grosz terms “transgressive texts” (Grosz 1990 p.149). These are the works of the avant-garde artists and Kristeva focuses on the analysis of literature/texts/ visual art which illuminates subjective development and the interplay of the discursive realm as it challenges the illusion of the unity of the individual person (Grosz 1990). Grosz makes the point that while Kristeva proposes adjustments and modifications to Lacan’s theories, her work remains firmly within a Lacanian framework (Grosz 1990). Kristeva’s methodology is based on Freudian analysis and structural linguistics’ conceptual tools. An examination of three of Kristeva’s key concepts, *the semiotic*, *the symbolic* and *chora* provides an insight into her thought and highlights its convergence or otherwise with Lacanian theories.

Kristeva's concept of *the semiotic* is based on the distinction Freud drew between pre-oedipal and oedipal psychic development phases. As Kristeva elaborates the concept, she departs from the Saussurian understanding in order to excavate the etymological references of the word 'semiotic' which, she states, are "... distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof, engraved or written sign, imprint, figuration" (Kristeva 1984 p.24). Grosz says that for Kristeva the semiotic is correlated with the anarchic infantile pre-oedipal drives of the human infant. "In the terminology of metapsychology it consists in the facilitations and neural pathways traversed by pre-oedipal wishes – that is the psychological primary processes" (Grosz 1990 p,150). For Kristeva the semiotic is the source of the material, the impetus and the subversive potential of all signifiers. Grosz paraphrases Kristeva thus: "It is the raw material of signification, the corporeal libidinal matter that must be harnessed and appropriately channelled for social cohesion and regulation" (Grosz 1990 p.151).

Following Freud, Kristeva designates *the semiotic* as feminine, a locus dominated by the mother's body. She terms this space *the semiotic chora*. The concept of *chora* is taken from Plato's *Timaeus* and it represents an enveloping womblike space where the subject is both produced and threatened with annihilation. From this maternal space all human drives emerge and are for Kristeva differentiated through *the mirror stage* described by Lacan as resulting in the *imaginary order*. Here Kristeva's and Lacan's thought converge. Kristeva also follows Lacan in her conception of the *symbolic order* which emerges through the oedipal drama and results in the establishment of the Law of the Father and the emerging of a speaking subject (Grosz 1990). Kristeva regards *the symbolic* as "the condition of the ordered regulated and rule governed signification" (Grosz 190 p.151). It is the domain of social institutions, rules, positions and propositions. The symbolic for Kristeva ensures a cohesive unified speaking subject and "a coherent meaningful text" (Grosz 1990 p.152). For Kristeva, *the symbolic* is underpinned by the chaotic *semiotic*. Kristeva explains their interrelationship thus:

"We shall call symbolic the logical and syntactic functioning of language and everything which in translinguistic practices is assimilable to the system of language proper. The term semiotic on the other hand will be used to mean: in the first place what can be hypothetically posited as preceding the imposition of language, in other words, the already given arrangement of the drives in the form of facilitations or pathways, and secondly the return of these facilitations in the form of rhythms, intonations and lexical, syntactic and rhetorical transformations. If the symbolic established the limits and unity of a signifying practice, the semiotic registers in that practice the effect of that which cannot be pinned down as sign whether signifier or signified" (Kristeva 1976 p.68).

The semiotic can return as unbidden interruptions within the symbolic in a similar manner to Freudian/Lacanian repressed unconscious material. In Grosz's words, "the semiotic is thus both the precondition of symbolic functioning and its uncontrollable excess " (Grosz 1990 p.155).

For Kristeva, the main access to *the semiotic* is through the transgressive texts of the *avant-garde*, be they literature, drama, visual arts, music. The 'texts' (works) of Mallarme, Joyce, Schoenberg, Cage and Stockhausen provide for Kristeva a direct, if incomplete, expression of *the semiotic*. This explains the often times disturbing nature of these texts (Grosz 1990). *The symbolic* is an order imposed on *the semiotic* and it harnesses the raw energies of *the semiotic* to form signifying elements, systems, discourses. But *the symbolic's* control of *the semiotic* is tenuous and liable to disruption. *The semiotic* then flows into *the symbolic* through Kristeva's triad of subversive modes – "madness, holiness and poetry" (Kristeva 1976 p.64). The result is the symbolisation of previously unspoken, irrational phenomena on the borders of meaning and reason (Grosz 1990). *Kristeva is in effect pointing to the semiotic as deep feminine source of transgressive borderline avant-garde texts of the 20th century.*

Kristeva's model of cultural production is one of a dialectical process, the Hegelian/Marxist concept of thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Kristeva postulates "a setting in place" drive whereby regulated systems are established in *the symbolic order*. Subverting this there is an energy of "cutting through" (Kristeva 1976 p. 69). Subversive dispersing energies transgress the limits of *the symbolic* and

“rupture, renovation and revolution” result at both personal and societal levels (Kristeva 1976 p.69). Kristeva identifies the historical emergence of avant-garde texts with these disruptions of *the semiotic* (Grosz 1990). *The semiotic* wells up to challenge the established *symbolic* through the work of the avant-garde. This in dialectical fashion results in a reformulation of *the symbolic* thereby absorbing and neutralising the potentially subversive elements of *the semiotic* and negating for a time the challenges from the feminine *semiotic* to the paternal order of *the symbolic*. Grosz makes the point that for Kristeva the substance of the avant-garde text draws attention to its own repressed feminine in ways unavailable to symbolic significations and thereby constitutes a fundamental threat to the *Law of the Father* (Grosz 1990). Grosz draws attention to Kristeva’s belief that it is only men who can access and present the borderlands of *the semiotic*. For Kristeva, “the artist, poet, avant-garde transgressor is always male” (Grosz 1990 p.164). He is the artist who from a position of speaking subject within *the symbolic order* can transgress its limits and challenge and subvert its excesses. Kristeva believes that it is only from a guaranteed position within the patriarchal *symbolic order*, a position that is not privileged to woman as spoken-for object (as opposed to speaking subject), that subversion and challenge can occur.

Grosz summarises Kristeva’s position thus: “Although exclusively male in Kristeva’s terms the avant-garde is the best representative of the repressed, feminine semiotic order... Kristeva seems to regard only men as writers or producers of the avant-garde” (Grosz 1990 p.165). Transgression, it would appear, can only have its origin in male signification. Following the Freudian/Lacanian view, *Kristeva seems to categorise woman’s cultural contribution as either passive, compensatory or of hysterical origins*. In Grosz’s view, for Kristeva “women are relegated to providers of the maternal chora in which case they remain the silent underside of patriarchal functioning”. (Grosz 1990 p.166). Kristeva’s discussion of women’s writing suggests that they either produce texts that are compensatory substitutes for a family structure or else write as hysterical subjects trapped within suffering bodies (Grosz 1990).

"Estranged from language", Kristeva says, "women are visionaries, dancers who suffer as they speak ..." (Grosz 1990 p.166). In order to get a flavour of Kristeva's thinking in relation to woman's cultural contribution, it is worth quoting her more fully:

- (i) *"Virginia Woolf describes suspended states, subtle sensations and above all colours...but she does not dissect language as Joyce does..."*
- (ii) *"In women's writing language seems to be from a foreign land: it is seen from the point of view of an asymbolic, spastic body"*
(Kristeva Interview 1981 in Grosz 1990 p.166).

Supplementary Wefts: Problematics of the Lacanian Feminist Stance

In *Unpicking Lacan* above, reference has been made to the difficulties feminist scholars have highlighted with the Lacanians' understanding of the feminine. The full and somewhat shocking impact of Lacan's symbolic construction of the female subject can be appreciated from a quotation from Lacan's *Encore* seminar.

There is no woman except as excluded by the nature of things, which is the nature of words, and it has to be said that if there is one thing women themselves are complaining about quite enough, it is certainly that – only they don't know what they are saying: that is all the difference between them and me. It is none the less the case that if she is excluded by the nature of things, it follows precisely from that that in being not-all (pas toute) she has a supplementary jouissance in relation to what the phallic function designates of jouissance.

You notice that I said supplementary. Had I said complementary, where would we be! We'd fall right back into the all. Women content themselves with this [phallic] jouissance we're talking about (don't il s'agit) – not that any of them content themselves with being not-all – and my God, it would be a mistake not to recognize in general that (contrary to what is said) it is women, nonetheless, who possess men.

There is a jouissance proper to her, to this 'her' which does not exist and which signifies nothing. There is a jouissance proper to her and of which she herself perhaps knows nothing, except that she feels it – that much she does know. She knows it, of course, when it happens. It does not happen to all of them ... (Lacan Encore Seminar Jardine 1981 ps.63-64).

Irigaray provides a critique of the Lacanian characterisation of the feminine subject as loss/lack/other/no woman in her work, *The Sex Which Is Not One* and thereby set out a discourse which claimed the female body as an alternative site for *the symbolic* (Irigaray 1977). She staked a claim for a female *imaginary* “a peculiarly female consciousness, silenced and mute under the terms of phallogocentric discourse” (Jardine 1989 p.66). Irigaray accused Lacan and his followers of refusing to set the discussion on the nature of *the symbolic* within the context of its historical co-ordinants. Irigaray draws attention to a socio-political context that privileges the masculine and points to the fallacy of claiming a universality for a flawed and gendered theoretical interpretation of psychic differentiation. Earlier, in 1971, Helene Cixous in her seminal article, *The Laugh of The Medusa*, had also questioned the validity of a Lacanian exposition of *the symbolic*. She equated Lacan’s *symbolic* with power. “Their ‘symbolic’ exists and it holds power”, Cixous stated (Cixous 1971). Moray Shiach in her analysis of *The Laugh of the Medusa* draws attention to the fact that by putting quotation marks around *symbolic* Cixous is questioning its ontological and epistemological status (Shiach 1989)¹⁰. Cixous also describes it as *their* “symbolic” creating the possibility of another *symbolic* (Shiach 1989). Grosz concludes that Lacan’s great contribution of establishing the reality of the *symbolic order* as the locus of human experience is negated for women if the *symbolic order* is conceived of as a system where the phallus and the *Law of the Father* are the only possible signifiers and linguistic norms. She concludes that if such is the case, “feminism is no better off with Lacan than without him” (Grosz 1990 p.145).

¹⁰ This will be investigated further in Chapter Five where the work of Irigaray and Cixous as it pertains to an alternative *symbolic* will be considered in more detail.

As previously noted, Kristeva locates a male avant-garde's agenda as the sole signifier of the feminine semiotic. Grosz states that by so doing Kristeva by a slight of hand is discounting woman's contribution to new modes of signification (Grosz 1990). Grosz also makes the point that Kristeva privileges men as the only valid representatives of the feminine principle. Thus, Grosz states, "She [Kristeva] disembodies femininity for women, and claims that the avant-garde explores femininity without noticing that femininity as expressed in men cannot adequately represent woman's femininity" (Grosz 1990 p.166). Kristeva also appears to view feminist discourse in a negative light. In 1980 she stated "A feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists..." (Marks and Courtivron 1980 p.137). Grosz, however, points out that because women do not occupy a speaking position within the *symbolic order*, their habitual no-saying is the only possible political gesture.¹¹ Grosz further points out that Kristeva, like Lacan, appears to disregard cross-cultural and historical dimensions in her analysis of *the symbolic* and *the semiotic*. Grosz raises the question that, even if it is accepted that women are at this point in time in a position of silence and exclusion as non-speaking subjects in the *symbolic order*, is this a necessary given in perpetuity (Grosz 1990). Grosz considers Kristeva "...the dutiful daughter of Freud and Lacan in so far as she enacts for herself and reproduces for other women the roles of passivity and subordination dictated to women by patriarchal culture and affirmed by psychoanalysis" Grosz 1990 p. 167). Kristeva has refused the advice of Cixous who in *The Laugh of the Medusa* advises women that "we are in no way obliged to deposit our lives in their banks of lack" (Cixous 1971).

¹¹ Although Kristeva's work provides many fascinating insights and concepts for feminists, as Kearney pointed out, she cannot be categorised exclusively as any one school of thought, least of all the feminist discourse (Kearney 1993).

Summary

Chapter Four suggests that much of feminist discourse engages with the work of Jacques Lacan who combined structural linguistic theory with the insights of Freudian theories of the unconscious. Lacan's theories have been a key point of reference in contemporary feminist analysis, in particular for the French theorists, Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous. Lacan's insight regarding psychic differentiation lays bare the fundamental structures of a phallogentric edifice of culture which configures women as absence or lack, 'no woman excluded by the nature of things, which is the nature of words...this her which does not exist and signifies nothing', as stated by Lacan in the Encore Seminar (Brennan 1981 ps.63-64). For the feminist theorists, this is the fundamental premise of western culture that leaves woman in a state of abjection. Feminist scholars have responded in different ways to Lacanian theories. His 'dutiful daughters' either support or build upon his ideas as in the case of Mitchell and Kristeva or by deconstructing and rejecting his view of the female subject and positing an alternative symbolic order as in Irigaray's oeuvre. It is this alternative symbolic which is the focus of Chapter Five.

Chapter Five

Rethreading the Loom: An Alternative Symbolic in the Work of Luce Irigaray

Irigaray was born in Belgium and received her Master's Degree from the University of Louvain in 1955. She moved to France and in 1961 obtained a second Master's Degree in Psychology from the University of Paris. From 1964 she worked at the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris where she carried out linguistic research and eventually became Director of Research. In 1968 Irigaray completed her Doctorate in Linguistics. In the 1960s, also, she participated in Lacan's seminars, trained as a psychoanalyst and was a member of Ecole Freudienne de Paris. Irigaray's academic career also included periods of teaching at the University of Vincennes and in 1982 she held the Chair in Philosophy at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. From this brief biographical note it can be seen that Irigaray's oeuvre spans almost half a century and is located in the disciplines of linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis and feminist scholarship.

Problems of Accessibility in Irigaray's Ouvre

A number of obstacles or challenges face the English-speaking student who attempts to gain an understanding of Irigaray's thought. These are summarised by Martin as follows:

"Barriers to comprehension include the lack of available translations for Anglophone readers... the question of different intellectual traditions as well as categorising the status of her thought... not least is the question of her writing style which, particularly in her early texts, defies the stylistic conventions of intellectual discourse" (Martin 2000 p.7).

The availability of Irigaray's seminal texts in English did not follow the sequence of their publication in French. For some key texts, such as her critique of psychoanalysis as a patriarchal knowledge system, *Speculum de l'autre femme*,

published in French in 1974, did not appear in English until 1985. A decade intervened before adequate translation became available. Until then selections were translated by individual academics in isolation from the full text and this led to misinterpretation of Irigaray's position and made it difficult for academics who undertook commentaries on her work to present a full picture of the development of her thought processes (Martin 2000; Chanter 1995).

Irigaray's style of discourse also presents problems in terms of accessibility to her thought. Martin describes it as "an allusive style [which] has been particularly susceptible to being misunderstood" (Martin 2000 p.9). Irigaray's work is embedded in philosophy, psychoanalysis and feminism informed by the context of a contemporary continental philosophical tradition which looks to the German thinkers such as Hegel, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud for its master discourse. This differs from the Anglo-American academic context which privileges pragmatism and empiricism and specialism in its humanities. This gap in intellectual context between the two approaches, which was perhaps more evident when Irigaray's work first emerged in the 1970s and 1980s than it is today, contributed to unfair misrepresentation of Irigaray's work (Martin 2000). Whitford elucidated the extent to which Irigaray's work is embedded in the discipline of philosophy (Whitford 1991). Yet her texts are concerned with the status of the feminine and, in Martin's words, "philosophy had always viewed the question of gender and the conditions of women as at best a social question, one irrelevant to philosophy's concerns of reason and universality" (Martin 2000 p.8). Again, Irigaray's style of writing, with its emphasis on plays with language, syntax and grammar in order to enact the meaning of its content, Martin suggests, has led to distortion in comprehension by Anglo-American scholars. A parallel problem of adequately accessing Irigaray's work has arisen within feminist scholarship. Irigaray's incorporation of psychoanalysis has been looked upon with suspicion by some Anglo-American feminist scholars who regard Freud as a patriarchal misogynist. Irigaray's insistence on the concept of sexual difference between man and woman has been interpreted as a form of biological

essentialism which works against agendas of equality between the sexes which preoccupies much of the Anglo-American feminist discourse (Brennan 1989, Martin 2000). Again Martin and others regard this as a distortion of Irigaray's true position (Martin 2000)¹².

A Culture of Two Subjects: Irigaray Sets Her Own Agenda

In the Preface to her book, *Luce Irigaray Key Writings*, published in 2004, Irigaray states:

"My project has been how to render possible a philosophy and more generally a culture of two subjects. My criticism of Western philosophy ... has concerned the forgetting of the existence of a subjectivity which is different from masculine subjectivity: a subjectivity in the feminine. And this oblivion goes hand in hand with the oblivion of the importance of nature, outside or inside humanity and of the Goddess(es)" (Irigaray 2004 p.vii).

The origins of this forgetting, Irigaray traces back to pre-Socratic thinkers such as Parmenides, Heraclitus, Empedocles which laid the foundations for western systems of logic whose starting point was "oblivion of her", woman, nature, Goddess (Irigaray 2004 p.vii). From that point on Irigaray says, these tenets of patriarchy "as necessities of a masculine subjectivity, have become the main parameters in the elaboration of Western cultures and societies" (Irigaray 2004 p.vii).

The challenge, Irigaray states, is to reach a culture of two subjects and this involves the metadiscourses of philosophy, linguistics, art, spirituality/religion and also the social and political domain. Merely critiquing patriarchal culture is not sufficient in Irigaray's view. What is called for, she says, is "another way of thinking and of acting" which truly discovers the other and accepts difference (Irigaray 2004). Difference for Irigaray is a "source of fecundity not only physical

¹²For these reasons, Irigaray's work has provoked controversy and heated debate which do not make accessing her thought an easy task. I can only concur with Martin when she states "Irigaray may be considered a difficult thinker..."! (Martin 1990 p.7).

but also cultural, spiritual” (Irigaray 2004 p.ix). As will be set out below , Irigaray claims that a sexuate difference exists between men and women. She states that claiming to be equal to man, woman runs the risk of doubling the traditional exclusion from society and from culture. For Irigaray it is not a question of woman achieving high status roles in patriarchal institutions “but of bringing out her own values in a human world” (Irigaray 2004 p.ix). Whitford points out that Irigaray’s project is a highly ambitious one “... she is attempting to dismantle [western patriarchal culture] from within the foundations of western metaphysics” (Whitford in Brennan 1989 p.100).

Sexuate Difference: A Key Irigarayan Concept

Irigaray postulates a sexuate difference between man and woman in terms of the Saussurian concept of ‘pure difference’ as distinct from patriarchal difference as in woman as man’s opposite/alter ego. Irigaray uses the concept of sexuate difference to explain the genesis of patriarchy. She states:

“Sexuate difference is what Western culture has abolished. Western man has constructed his subjectivity against his natural origin. He did not work out his maternal beginnings but put it into the unthought background of his story and history. To escape a return to such a substratum he has elaborated a culture of men and between men, a culture of the same as he is: father, brother or son who share the same necessities, the same values the same world” (Irigaray 2004 p.ix).

This monolithic Western culture based on man to the exclusion of woman is for Irigaray a cultural error resulting in the deep despair and all too real threat of planetary destruction which hangs over our world. For Irigaray, a culture based on the oblivion of the maternal origins leads only to destruction. When man scorns his natural origins, mother and nature are denied and threatened with annihilation. Irigaray’s linguistic research into human discourse provides examples of the day to day working out of sexuate differences. She has studied the discourse of boys and girls, women and men and from her observations she concludes that men and women differ in respect of relational identities. Girls and

women favour relationship between subject-subject (i.e. between people) while boys and men display subject-object relations and when they do invoke a relationship between people it will involve a group of the same gender, other boys and men. Irigaray also found that boys and men privilege hierarchical relations while girls favour equality of status in relationships. (Irigaray 2004).

These patterns, Irigaray suggests, are translated into cultural manifestations and for Irigaray the problem is that contemporary Western culture and institutions are constructed on a foundation of masculine values and therein is the challenge. "But we must change that to reach a more just and fulfilled culture. We cannot remain in a world in which woman represents nature and man culture, in which woman as nature can be submitted to the needs or desires of man. Such a world corresponds only to a man's necessities", Irigaray states (Irigaray 2004 p.xi). For Irigaray sexual difference means that man and woman do not belong to one and the same subjectivity and cannot meet together unless one of them renounces their own subjectivity at great personal and cultural cost.

Irigaray's Concept of Phallogentrism

A key concept in Irigaray's thought is Phallogentrism, i.e., the exclusive emphasis on male sexual attributes as the main metaphor of the dominant discourse in psychoanalytic theory. Within the confines of a phallogentric discourse woman's existence and autonomy is submerged in the norms, ideals and models of representation created by man in his own image. "Woman has only been able to speak or to be heard as an undertone, a murmur, a rupture within the discourse or else she finds expression in a hysterical fury when the body 'speaks' a discourse that cannot be verbalised by her" (Grosz 1990 p.174). In Irigaray's terms, within phallogentric patriarchal systems of knowledge and representation, what are two discourses, two speaking positions are collapsed into one. The patriarchal *symbolic order* leaves no room for women's autonomy. Irigaray believes that phallogentrism serves as the tool whereby woman's earliest

formative bond with her mother is interrupted and severed at the Oedipal stage when *The Law of the Father* intervenes to establish language. This leaves woman without the rootedness in the maternal matrix that is her birthright and deprives her of strong positive identification models. In Irigaray's view, the *symbolic order* of a phallogentric patriarchal order, through intimidation, threats, violence and the resulting fear women are routinely subjected to, drive many women to a self-destructive hysteria. For Irigaray women are contained within a phallogentric *symbolic order* whose logic renders them mute or hysterical (Grosz 1990). Women are relegated by the dominant culture as objects and commodities.

"And there you have it Gentlemen, that is why your daughters are dumb. Even if their chatter proliferate psychically in works that only signify their asphasia, or the mimetic underside of your desire. And interpreting them where they exhibit only their muteness means subjecting them to a language that exiles them at an ever increasing distance from what perhaps they would have said to you, were already whispering to you. If only your ears were not so formless, so clogged with meanings, that they are closed to what does not in some way echo the already heard" (Irigaray 1985 ps.112-113).

Irigaray and Psychoanalytic Theory

Irigaray, herself a pupil of Lacan, an analyst and one-time member of Ecole Freudienne de Paris, is strongly influenced by psychoanalytic thought. However, as Grosz points out, Irigaray is no loyal daughter of Freud and Lacan. Rather, she makes use of the explanatory power of psychoanalytic theory to illuminate the construction and reproduction of patriarchal forms of subjectivity (Grosz 1990). Irigaray also uses psychoanalytic theory and concepts to critique the power relations and masculine vested interests in all forms of phallogentric knowledges of Western culture. Irigaray's most comprehensive study of psychoanalysis is contained in her book, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, published in French in 1974 and in English in 1985. In this work she challenges the phallogentricism of psychanalysis and she attempts to do this by "insinuating the question of sexual specificity into its most central assumptions and

propositions" (Grosz 1990 p. 169). Irigaray explains the explanatory power of psychoanalysis thus:

"It is not a matter of naively accusing Freud as if he were a 'Bastard'. Freud's discourses represent the symptoms of a particular social and cultural economy which has been maintained in the West at least since the Greeks ... what Freud demonstrates is quite useful When he argues, for example, that woman's sex is a 'lack' that castration for her amounts to perceiving that she has no sex, he describes rigorously the consequences of our socio-cultural system. Lacan, using a linguistic schema, concludes likewise and repeats the same process, when he writes that woman is a lack in the discourse, that she cannot articulate herself ... In some sense this is not false" (Irigaray in Grosz 1990 ps.169-170).

Psychoanalysis for Irigaray lays bare dominant phallogentric discourses which otherwise remain hidden and unacknowledged. This explanatory power of psychoanalysis is of use in feminist inquiry as a methodology for deciphering and interrogating patriarchal knowledge systems. The latter, Irigaray asserts, pose as neutral, disinterested and universal while in reality they are the product of man's self-representation (Grosz 1990). Grosz states that Irigaray uses the concept and methodologies of psychoanalysis as 'critical tools' or 'a double edged knife' to pose questions of sexual differences conceived in terms other than those dictated by patriarchy. Irigaray adopts Freudian concepts of pre-Oedipal and Oedipal and Lacanian descriptions of *the imaginary* and *the symbolic* but she describes the different formats these assume for a female as well as for a male child. Irigaray's position is that the work of Freud and Lacan and others who adhere unquestioningly to this school of thought can only represent the *imaginary* and the *symbolic* from a male perspective. Irigaray challenges the Freudian concept of a gender neutral *pre-symbolic* being. Instead she sets out the hitherto unrepresented mother-daughter relationship and a feminine *imaginary* (Grosz 1990).

Irigaray also challenges the Freudian/Lacanian concept of the unconscious.

"...to say that woman's sexuality is naturally subject to processes of repression, sublimation etc., that's very doubtful. I would rather frame the

following question: are women not, partly the unconscious. That is, is there not in what has been historically constituted as the unconscious, some censored repressed element of the feminine.” (Irigaray 1997 p.70).

Grosz comments: “Thus Irigaray uses the Freudian concept of the unconscious, “its economy, logic and products as an evocative metaphor of femininity itself, for what is repressed and intolerable to the social order” (Grosz 1990 p.171). Grosz sums up Irigaray’s position *vis a vis* psychoanalysis as making use of its concepts and frameworks to construct a position from which she can analyse other knowledges and representations, including those of psychoanalysis itself: “Examining their silences – examining them from the point of view of the repression of femininity, psychoanalysis becomes a critical and deconstructive tool rather than a truthful or descriptive model” (Grosz 1990 p.172).

Irigaray’s crucial differences from psychoanalytical theory can be summarised as follows:

- Irigaray attempts to define woman’s subjectivity in terms of the realm of the feminine whereas Freud and Lacan describe woman’s subjectivity in terms of lack of male attributes. Irigaray, using Freudian and Lacanian concepts, attempts to represent the female body as a source of knowledge in its own right as distinct from conventional psychoanalytic theory which privileges the male body as the dominant signifier in the creation of language, symbolic representation and knowledge systems.
- Freudian and Lacanian theory claims a universality and scientific neutrality which Irigaray attempts to refute. Rather she regards psychoanalysis as arising from a historical and social context which privileges male representation, i.e., man explaining social realities in terms only of his own subjectivity.

- Irigaray uses the language and concepts of psychoanalysis to deconstruct Western patriarchal culture.
- Irigaray questions the validity of Freudian and Lacanian interpretations of the *symbolic* and the *imaginary*, stating that they do not adequately represent female subjectivity. She seems to accept the validity of the concepts in themselves but points to absence of the feminine in their articulation by the psychoanalytic theorists.
- Irigaray attempts to deconstruct psychoanalytic theory and Grosz suggests that here she is strongly influenced by Derrida's deconstructivist strategies (Grosz 1990). For example, Irigaray uses Lacan's understanding of metaphor *literally*. Grosz comments: "... her writing position is that of a femininity posited by Freud and Lacan ... the textual enactment of hysteria" (Grosz 1990 p.172).

Irigaray and Language

Irigaray is deeply concerned with language and its implications for the subjectivity of woman and her place in culture. In the *Sex Which Is Not One*, she states: "A language that presents itself as universal and which is in fact maintained by men only, is this not what maintains the alienation and exploitation of women in and by society" (Irigaray 1985). Grosz makes the point that Irigaray poses questions of enunciation: Who Speaks? For Whom? In Whose Interest? (Grosz 1990). For Irigaray, patriarchal language and systems of knowledge are produced and maintained according to male interests. Women are thereby denied positions as enunciating subjects. For Irigaray patriarchal language is a tool of domination. Men - philosophers, psychoanalysts, scientists, writers – have spoken for women for far too long (Grosz 1990). For Irigaray "Women remain objects of speculation, the source of metaphors and images necessary for the

production of discourse *but disavowed of its pronouncements ...*" (Grosz 1990 p. 177 *Italics mine*). The insistence on a distant stance, objectification, stratification of knowledge into hierarchies of discourse and the development of metadiscourse and metalanguage characteristic of Western patriarchal knowledge systems is challenged by Irigaray's analysis (Grosz 1990).

Such a language, she states, denies its gender based, coded, enunciative position. In claiming that there are other forms of language and modes of representation, Irigaray makes clear the violent appropriation by masculine representation systems of "a field that is heterogeneous and capable of rich plurality" (Grosz 1990 p. 179). Grosz comments that for Irigaray male language systems with their emphasis on logical axiom, deduction and theory, which limit the play of multiple meanings reflect "oedipal male sexuality (which puts in place of the pleasures of the whole body/language system the primacy of one organ/meaning). In effacing the play of materiality and corporeality, of [multiple] significations, such a language is 'reduced' and 'purified' (Grosz 1990 p.178).

A Language of One's Own: Parler Femme/ Ecriture Feminine

Whitford emphasises the importance Irigaray attributes to women's need for "a religio, a language and a currency of exchange or a non-market economy of their own" (Whitford in Brennan 1989 p.117). Irigaray's own words set out what is involved in this:

"Thus as a woman I ought to discover and cultivate a language of my own, and to create bridges between this language and my body. I do not believe that passively receiving the word(s) of the other will suffice to incarnate myself ... I have to speak a language or discourse in the feminine becoming active in the expression of my I-She. This requires a faithfulness to the girl in myself and not a subjection to a culture in the masculine. I also have to be attentive not to submit other women to this culture ... I must keep alive a feminine language or discourse in relation with all the stages of feminine becoming ... maintain a relation of dialogue with our own gender" (Irigaray 2004 ps.145-146).

As already stated, Irigaray's empirical linguistic studies carried out in the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique de Paris suggest that the existing language of women reveals itself to be different from that of men. She states: "...the whole universe of relations - to oneself, to the other gender, to others, to the world - is expressed in various ways by woman and man. *She* lives much more in the interweaving of relations with other subjects or with nature; *he*, in contrast, builds himself his own world: with tools, objects, laws, gods, and he bends over to an order created by him. *She* makes use of language to communicate, *he* uses it as an instrument to conquer, acquire, manufacture, exchange goods, information" (Irigaray 2004 p.151).

Irigaray sets out what *Parler Femme* and *Ecriture Feminine* would achieve "a feminine language would undo the unique meaning, the proper meaning of words, of nouns: which still regulate all discourse. In order for there to be a proper meaning there must be a unity somewhere. But if feminine language cannot be brought back to any unity, it cannot be simply described or defined: there is no feminine metalanguage ... [under patriarchal language systems] the feminine cannot describe itself, except by identifying with the masculine and thus by losing itself" (Irigaray 1985 p.65). Irigaray's own writing, and those of other French feminists, especially Helene Cixous, attempt to embody a feminine language, a *parler femme*, an *écriture feminine*. Irigaray's development of concepts in *The Sex Which is not One*, such as 'an economy of fluids', a feminine syntax and images based on the female body such as the 'two lips' image is described by Martin as "a kind of writing the body, its libido, jouissance and rhythm ... writing which ostensibly emanates from the materiality of the feminine body. It was understood as a practice of writing that is written in defiance of the patriarchal logos ... which suppress these material energies for its conceptual and theoretical purposes" (Martin 2000 p.13).

Irigaray's notion of *parler femme* evokes a female speaking subject who speaks in a way that confounds the appropriating metalinguistic logic of a patriarchal language. Irigaray formulates the challenge of building a *parler femme* thus:

"The issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject of the object, but of jamming the theoretical framework itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal which presupposes that women do not aspire simply to be man's equal in knowledge ... but rather repeating/interpreting the way in which within discourse the feminine finds itself defined as lack, as imitation and negative image of the subject ... [a feminine language] should signify that with respect to this topic a disruptive excess is possible on the feminine side " (Irigaray 1985 ps. 77-78).

Grosz makes the point that, while Irigaray does not provide extensive formulations of what a feminine language should be, she does state what it should not be: "...it cannot be based on phallogentrism, singular meanings and hierarchical organisation, polar oppositions, the division into subject-predicate forms" (Grosz 1990 p.179). These formats represent the privileged position and self distancing of masculinity. "They are correlative with the elevation of male sexuality at the expense of the feminine" (Grosz 1990 p.179). Irigaray's own words sets out the agenda for a feminine language:

"Nothing is ever to be posited that is not also reversed and caught up again in the supplementarity of this reversal ... we need to proceed in such a way that linear reading is no longer possible: that is the retrospective impact at the end of each word, utterance or sentence upon its beginning must be taken into consideration in order to undo the power of its teleological [final] effect, including its deferred action. That would hold good also for the opposition between structures of horizontality and verticality that are at work in language" (Irigaray 1985 ps.79-80).

Conclusion: Critique of Irigaray's Symbolic

Grosz describes Irigaray's oeuvre thus: Irigaray, she says, focuses on key texts both in psychoanalysis and philosophy with the objective of "showing their repressions, paradoxes and unspoken assumptions. These assumptions, the blind spots within patriarchal knowledge are invariably associated with the way in

which masculinity and femininity are conceived. Discourses [which] to acknowledge that their own partiality, their own perspectivity, their own interests and values implicitly rely on conceptions of women and femininity in order to maintain their 'objectivity', scientificity or truth – that is their veiled masculinity" (Grosz 1990 p.180). Irigaray's achievement is that she attempts to develop an alternative symbolic, a space where women may speak for themselves in their own language grounded in the feminine. She presents a powerful critique of the hitherto ignored sexual nature of discourse positions that is profoundly freeing for women long relegated to non-speaking positions in Western societies. It has been noted earlier that Irigaray's work has produced heated critical debate within feminist scholarship and contemptuous dismissal outside of it. Her work appears to engender extremes of response, perhaps not surprisingly, given the nature of her challenge to the dominant discourse of psychoanalysis, epistemology and feminism.

Chanter comments that Irigaray is both applauded for her radicality and denounced as being reactionary! (Chanter 1995). These miscomprehensions and controversies are at least in part to be explained, as previously cited, by translation difficulties and inadequate comprehension of European philosophical traditions. These coupled with her *parler femme* writing style constitute very real difficulties in accessing her work at an adequate level of understanding. Chanter states: "The image Irigaray presents to those who champion her ... as explicitly repudiating essentialism, is hardly recognisable by those who are convinced that French feminism is implicated in biological determinism" (Chanter 1995 p.3). Martin comments that the reception of Irigaray's work has been indelibly marked by the question of whether she espouses essentialism or not. The question of essentialism has been a key focal point for feminist debate which entails the sex/gender distinction. In mainstream Anglo-American feminism sex (male or female) is taken as a biological given of little explanatory power *vis a vis* the economic and social status of woman in Western advanced industrial societies. Gender roles on the other hand are regarded as highly significant. Femininity and

masculinity are held to be culturally determined constructs that are historically specific. Chanter points out that Irigaray's questioning of sexual differences was perceived with alarm by feminists such as Lynn Segal and Mary Poovey (Chanter 1995). Poovey states: "Luce Irigaray ... authorises the return to biology and essentialism in her creation of a myth of female desire and in basing 'feminine' language on the physical properties of female genitalia" (Poovey 1998 p.55). Feminists feared that if woman's inferior status in society is predetermined by their biology, there would be little hope for the substantial changes envisioned by the equality agendas of Anglo-American feminists (Chanter 1995).

Irigaray's return to the language of a sexed body was seen by those feminists as constituting an explanation of woman's exploitation in terms that feminists have ruled out of court. Irigaray is deemed to be endorsing patriarchal constructions of gender through her focus on the female body and the material. Whitford defends Irigaray's work against the charge of essentialism (Whitford 1991). She accuses her critics of misunderstanding the philosophical context of Irigaray's work. Her emphasis on the feminine essence stems from a metaphysical discourse on being in the tradition of Heidegger and Nietzsche, i.e., the truth of a being in its eternal (and possibly immutable) reality. Irigaray is attempting to name the essence that constitutes the ground or foundation of woman. Feminists' emphasis on the physical female body as a representation in Irigaray's work is too literal, Whitford says. Rather, Irigaray is invoking a more complex concept, a morphology of the body (Whitford 1991, Martin 2000). Yet Whitford and Martin acknowledge that Irigaray's project *is* the development of a feminine identity which in some sense can be construed as an essentialist endeavour. Martin admits that the debate is 'confusing' and complex and, perhaps, is beyond the scope of the purposes of this thesis. Chanter concludes that the charge of essentialism has interfered with a responsible reading of Irigaray's work and has functioned as an excuse for a general dismissal of the edifice of her thought on grounds that turn out to be misrepresentations or misunderstandings of the complexities of her ideas. (Chanter 1995 p.254).

Irigaray's oeuvre, spanning 50 years of sustained intellectual endeavour, represents a fascinating critique of the dominant discourse. Her thought is not easily accessible but the rich tapestry of her ideas, breadth of knowledge, the sheer creativity and courage of her thought speaks to the five concerns of women artists of the late 20th century as identified in Chapter Six which follows, dealing with women's awakening and their construction in their aesthetic practice of deeply innovative systems of signification and representation expressed in the complex lexicon of textile and text.

Summary

For Irigaray, Lacanian theory lays bare the dominant phallogocentric stance on women's existential position. She makes use of this explanatory power of psychoanalytic discourse as a methodology for deciphering and interrogating phallogocentric epistemologies. Irigaray points to the gendered (and, therefore, one-sided) accounts of the symbolic leaving woman in a position of abjection without a valid self-image or language of her own. She attempts to correct this by defining women's subjectivity in terms of the feminine and thereby in her terms enabling a 'culture of two'. Irigaray sets a three point agenda to facilitate this cultural renewal for western civilization: the cultural recovery of the feminine; a language of the feminine/*écriture de la femme*; and an enabling of women's unique cultural contribution. This in effect served as the agenda for women artists and theoreticians in the 1970s and 1980s. For Irigaray, the primary task was the cultural recovery of the feminine and this requires that women engage in the creation of *a language of their own*. Only then could the abject cultural negation of women be addressed and woman allowed to make her own unique cultural contribution. This agenda underpins much of the artwork and discourse of women artists and serves as the intellectual backdrop for an understanding of the role of textile and text and its place in contemporary women's aesthetic practices.

From the 1960s onwards, feminist scholars and artists undertook a close scrutiny of the social, institutional and ideological frameworks which circumscribed their lives in western patriarchal societies. These frameworks undermined, denigrated and ignored women's cultural contribution and marginalized them from all significant public societal institutions. As women awakened to their positioning, an innovative praxis was developed by feminist theorists and artists which has contributed significantly to the deconstruction of western epistemologies and resulted in a rethreading of the loom of culture and in revolutionary innovations in signification and representation as will be outlined in the chapters to follow.

SECTION THREE

A Weave of Theory and Practice: The Textile/Text Axis

Section Three, consisting of two chapters, examines the line of connectivity between textile and text and its role in the praxis, the combination of theorising and practice that allowed/facilitated the revolution in woman's role and status as maker/creator of culture and meaning in the last decades of the 20th and in the early 21st centuries. Chapter Six examines ideas of 'gender', 'feminism' and 'language' converging in the discourse and agendas of women's art practice. Chapter Six seeks to consider important concepts which second wave feminist theorists developed in their analysis of women's positioning in patriarchal societies and which informed the practice of the artists whose work is considered in Section Four to follow. Chapter Seven sets out women's theorizing on the subject of finding their own authentic voice, a key agenda for women artists of the last three decades of the 20th century.

Chapter Six

A Weave of Gender, Feminism and Language

Ideas of 'gender', 'feminism' and 'language' are the warp and weft of the analysis which follows: these are the key concepts which underpin and converge in the discourse which shapes women's art practice. The inseparability of the two concepts 'gender' and 'feminism' is apparent in Reckitt and Phelan's definition. "Feminism", they state, "is the conviction that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organisation of culture. Moreover the patterns of that organisation usually favour men over women" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.18). From the early 20th century movements to achieve political and civil rights for women through the writings of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, women theorists have located the causes of their social and personal ills within the contexts of cultural structures and production (Robinson 2001). De Beauvoir's seminal insight of the mid 1950s that the representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men and that they show it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth, is a key point of departure (Robinson 2001). This position asserts that culturally 'woman' is a construct of 'otherness' where man is the norm, the measure of all that is. Culture is mediated through gendered lens. In her somewhat polemically framed statement on cultural production, Valerie Solanas (art worker in Warhol's factory) questioned gender roles in relation to art making in her *Scum Manifesto* of 1968 (Solanas 1968 in Robinson 2001 ps.12-13). 'Great Art', she states, is used as a strategy to prove that men are superior to women. As defined by the canons of art history, 'Great Art' is created solely by men. The male artist, supported by generations of art historians and academics "PhD knows best", Solanas says, assumes a position of dominance in cultural production as the one possessing superior insights and aesthetic judgements which serve to undermine "the faith of insecure women in the value and validity of their own feelings, perceptions, insights and judgements" (Solanas 1968 in Robinson 2001 p.13). Responding directly to de Beauvoir's statement, Shula Smith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex*

(first published in 1970) makes the point that if women are to enter the domain of art making, they have to do so *as men* because western culture consists of standards and structures that constitute a 'male game' created by and for men with little respect or tolerance of women's voices or viewpoints (Firestone 1970 in Robinson 2001). Culture, Firestone argues, is not universal, rather it excludes the female half of the human race. Firestone goes on to delineate the dynamics of the role allocated to women as muse and female model, object of male desire. "the relation of woman to culture has been indirect ... psychological organisation of the two sexes dictates that most women spend their emotional energy on men, whereas men 'sublimate' theirs into work. In this way women's love becomes raw fuel for the cultural machine (not to mention the Great Ideas born rather more directly from early-morning boudoir sessions...)" (Firestone 1970 in Robinson 2001 ps.13-14). In Firestone's view, women were intrinsic to the very content of culture. Sherry Orthner, an anthropologist, in her 1972 article, states that the secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact. "The universality of female subordination, the fact that it exists within every type of social and economic arrangement, and in societies of every degree of complexity, indicates to me that we are up against something very profound, very stubborn, something that cannot be remedied merely by rearranging a few tasks and roles in the social system, nor even by rearranging the whole economic structure" (Orthner 1972 in Robinson 2001 p.17). Orthner's thesis is that the root of this issue is that women are perceived at one end of the nature-culture spectrum and men at the other and that women are allocated roles and power in society accordingly. Orthner identifies a universal, culturally attributed second class status to women, a universal devaluation of women, although she notes wide variation between cultures in the degree of institutionalised misogyny and discrimination against women; the degree of cultural statements that devalue women, the degree of symbolic devices such as the attribution of defilement and taboo attributing inferior value to women and the existence of socially enshrined rules that prohibit women from participation in rituals and higher power roles in their society. Orthner states that: "each culture, in its own way and in its own

terms, makes this evaluation" (Orthner 1970 in Robinson 2001 p.18). Orthner goes on to make the point that 'nature' and 'culture' are merely categories of human thought, not universal imperatives.

Monique Wittig also addresses the nature/culture duality theory in *The Straight Mind*, published in 1980. Wittig agrees with Orthner that the culture/nature explanatory variable is indeed a cultural construct and she emphasises the importance of language in the constellation and mediation of the culture/nature hypothesis. Language is not a neutral tool, rather it is deeply implicated in the role of ideology in supporting the existing power positions of hegemonies. Wittig's point is that neither power structures or institutional arrangements will change until the deeper structures of language are addressed (Wittig 1980 in Robinson 2001).

Isabelle Bernier in her 1986 article *In the Shadow of Contemporary Art* made the point that low status in the western art canon is ascribed to art forms associated with "women, the working class or non-Western cultures" (Bernier 1986 in Robinson 2001). Bernier comments that the construction of the art hierarchy of genre is gender based. For example, many of the lesser arts, she points out, do not have feminine connotations: most forms of carpentry, furniture making, iron foundry, smithery, etc., conjure extremely virile connotations. Griselda Polloch and Rozseka Parker's *Subversive Stitch* has shown that ascriptions of status/value are neither fixed or universal as in the case of embroidery whose status declined and changed over the centuries from being the work of men to that of women. Flower painting is another example of this phenomenon. Berrier sums this up: "As many authors have observed, whenever an art form is practised by both men and women, its supposedly superior mode is usually reserved for men while its 'banal' mode falls to women. Such is the case of the culinary arts, sewing and tapestry. All of these have feminine connotations because they have often been practised by women, yet on the most 'sophisticated' level they have been controlled by men, and, therefore, in their

artistic mode conjure masculine association" (Robinson 2001 p.42). Couture clearly has far reaching feminine connotation not only because of its clientele but because women practise *couturiere* (dressmaking) at a domestic as well as professional level but *haute couture* has been the domain of male designers. Likewise the 'great' tapestry designers in the French and Flemish factories of Gobliens, Aubusson and Dovecot Edinburgh Tapestry Studio were Jan Van Eyck, Poussin, Rubins, Henry Moore, Picasso and Henri Matisse. Women may have actually executed the designs but man was the designer!

Freud's observation that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization, had crucial effects in shaping the dominant canons of cultural histories. In what Bernier terms a ludicrous passage, Freud attributes the invention of weaving (the only cultural innovation he attributes to women) as the product of penis envy. Freud states:

"Shame [at lack of male genitalia] ...has as its purpose, we believe, concealment of genital deficiency [female]It seems that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilisation: There is however one technique which they may have invented – that of plaiting and weaving. If this is so we should be tempted to guess the unconscious motive for the achievement. Nature herself would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing the growth at maturity of pubic hair that conceals the genitals. The step that remained to be taken lay in making the threads adhere to one another, while on the body they stick into the skin and are only matted together" (Freud 1965 quoted in Robinson 2001 p.42 - parenthesis mine).

Bernier's final point is telling indeed. She points out the fact that the representation of the human body is the most prestigious subject of high art dominating throughout the canon of art history the hierarchy of subjects suitable for 'art'. Nevertheless, Bernier states:

"... The arts which come into contact with the body have a significantly lower status; and as chance would have it, the greater part of them have feminine connotations (weaving, lacework, embroidery, sewing, jewellery, etc.). Several art forms associated with the body, having feminine and/or non-'western' connotations barely merit the title of art: for example, knitting and make up [body decoration] ... Since the body, a natural element, is frequently perceived in the western world in opposition to the intellect and to culture, it is not surprising that contact with the body is often linked with

a devaluation of an art form. Moreover the modern bourgeoisie ideology has attempted to limit the majority of women to a supposedly 'corporeal' or 'biological' role in society (sexuality and procreation, care of children, daily preparation of food, etc.)" (Bernier 1986 in Robinson 2001 p.43).

The social connotations of gender/culture/class interrelationships are a deeply complex phenomenon to untangle. Historical, sociological, psychological, linguistic issues are embedded in this convergence of factors which circumscribed the terrain of women's art practice as the 1970s decade began. An art work/installation created by Bernier in 1983 entitled *Suzanna and the Elders* sets out some of the parameters implicit in the dualism inherent in Western thought. The installation consisted of two columns of words written onto the walls of the gallery powerfully juxtaposing the dualistic concepts of Western thought:

Feeling	Thought
Body	Mind
Nature	Culture
Woman	Man
Domestic	Public
Craft	Art
Primitive	Civilized
Manual	Intellectual
Anonymous	Renown
Repetitive	Creative
Functional	Art for arts sake
Decorative art	Fine art
Low	High

The result of this dualism for women artists was that, as Laura Cottingham pointed out, from the canon of art history to the economy of the art market, to the blind spots of curators who seemed inherently disposed to ignore art made by women, all these factors combined to institutionalise a dismissal of woman as

artist (Reckitt and Phelan 2001). As Broude and Garrard point out, "although women had increasingly swelled the enrolments of art schools in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, very few had been able to make the crucial transitions from amateur to professional status" (Broude and Garrard 1996, ps. 12-13).

The 1960s Civil Rights Movement in the US, student protest in Europe and anti-war movements in both the US and Europe provided a role model for a growing feminist awareness. Fuelled by de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, women began through consciousness raising to weave their personal stories into a broader understanding of institutional and cultural patterns of discrimination. Women artists thus found within the feminist movement much inspiration and impetus to create a new art practice. Art became a methodology and a process for examining and commenting upon the personal and the political experiences of women in patriarchal societies. The activism of the 1970s sought to alter the canons of art history which had excluded women as well as seeking to reclaim and valorise the materials, techniques and practices used in traditional women's art making but rejected by academies which privileged painting and bronze sculpture.

But this story is far from being a simple narrative. Reckitt and Phelan see the history of feminist art as "full of strange overlays and shadows ... framed by simultaneously occurring art movements and by the discourses that surround it. Pop and conceptual art, minimalism, happenings, body art, photography, experimental film... and postmodern philosophy" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.19). All those influences combine in the amazingly challenging melting pot of women's art of the last three decades of the 20th century. Griselda Pollock sets out a complex positioning for feminism at the end of the 20th century:

" ... feminism signifies a set of positions, not an essence; a critical practice, not a dogma, a dynamic and self critical response and intervention, not a platform. It is the precarious product of a paradox.

Seeming to speak in the name of women feminist analysis perpetually deconstructs the very terms around which it is politically organised” (Chadwick 2007 p.11).

Cornelia Butler, in her catalogue essay for the major U.S. touring retrospective review exhibition of woman’s art and the feminist revolution *WACK!* held 2007-2009 in Los Angeles, Washington D.C., New York and Vancouver, Canada, asserts that feminism consists of an ideology of shifting criteria influenced by many factors. Butler suggests following bell hook’s proposal “to resignify the term ‘feminist movement’ to deliver it from its nomenclatorial fixity and reconnect it to the verb ‘to move’ – with all the restless possibility that word connotes” (Butler 2007, p.15). Butler revisions feminism as a relatively open-ended system containing divergent ideologies and practices and engaging in “an unprecedented degree of internal critique”. Butler revisions the canon of feminist art as a proliferatration of practices that occurred globally and “that while individual practices may have initially occurred in a condition of relative isolation, they often coalesced through discourse, affinity and relationship” (Butler 2007 p.16). This is the *Movement* of bell hooks and Butler’s narrative, rather than the colonial concept of master discourses emanating from the U.S. and Britain and spreading by the ripple effect through the published work of feminist art critics such as Nochlin, Lippard, Parker, Pollock, Mulvey. This concept creates a site where women’s work undertaken in isolation in geographies on the periphery can be included within the narratives of feminist art history where language also became an important consideration.

Chapter Seven

A New Web of Meaning: Ecriture Feminine

Chapter Seven sets out women's efforts to develop a syntax of their own, an *écriture féminine* which would powerfully assist them in the authentic articulation of their deepest concerns. Informed by feminist theorizing, *écriture féminine* became an enabling conceptual tool and model of art practice which, as we shall see in the chapters to follow, gave women artists the encouragement to develop highly innovative aesthetic strategies in their art making and the thesis suggests that the text/textile axis played a significant role in this endeavour.

Lacan, as we have seen in Section Two, saw women's existential and ontological position as one of inferiority and exclusion.

"There is only woman as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words... simply they don't know what they say, that is all the difference between them and me" (Nye 1988 p.172).

According to Lacan, women are at a significant disadvantage when using a borrowed language (i.e., a language originating in the dominant patriarchal order and encoding the Law of the Father). From the 1970s onwards, linguistics produced empirical studies which noted differences in the manner in which the sexes use language. Quoting the results of twelve studies carried out by linguists in the 1970s, Nye summarises their findings thus:

"Women speak less often than men, women are more careful than men to use correct grammar, are more conservative when it comes to stylistic innovations, use adjectives of emotion rather than pace, form conflicting and ambivalent, rather than stereotypic, metaphors. Women also show a preference for modal 'might have been', indicating uncertainty and indecision. Other, less well established but observed, differences are women's use of 'empty' adjectives such as 'charming' or 'lovely' ... to dull assertive force, in addition to be more polite and more responsive. In some cultures the 'abnormality' of female speech is institutionalised or built into phonological structure. Women may use different dialects than men, or write in a vernacular while men write a more formal language" (Nye 1988 ps.172-173).

While these observations appear *prima facie* to support Lacan's assertions of woman's silence and lack of articulacy, sociologists and sociolinguists introduce variables other than the lack of a phallus to shed light on this phenomenon. The disciplines of sociology and sociolinguistics attribute women's linguistic disabilities to women's lack of power in society (Nye 1988, Kramarae 1981). Kramarae, in a review of the literature relating to differences in women's and men's speech to different power strategies, is of the opinion that these studies show that the gender difference in speech is related to male dominance (Kramarae 1981). Such studies point to the fact that language and its use are not isolated realities outside of society but rather are embedded in social structural power relations. Nye summarises the argument thus:

"Sociologists located this 'disability' not in a woman's symbolic identity but in her situation as powerless. If the topics that women introduce fail, it is not because their symbolic ability is impaired, but because men do not bother to work reciprocally to respond to what they say ... Men control conversations not only by veto but also by lack of interest ... Wherever one conversant is more powerful than similar restraints on the powerless will result" (Nye 1988 p.173).

The history of women's struggle to achieve a voice in the institutions of western societies has been a hard road indeed and the right to speak a hard won right. Simone de Beauvoir noted that to speak is to take power and her prescription was for women to assert their right to speak and to be heard by challenging linguistic devices designed to silence them (de Beauvoir 1974). But, as Nye points out, claiming speaking rights and privileges and linguistic assertiveness on women's part was not sufficient to substantially alter the power relations between the sexes. Lakoff states that "language uses us as much as we use language (Lakoff 1975 p.3). Language grounded in patriarchal values, Lakoff goes on to suggest, is not adequate for woman's expression. Lacan's assertion (that the inequalities of gender difference are indeed grounded in language) supports this view as indeed did the research of linguists studying the vocabularies of English and other languages. Nye summarises these research findings:

"...Encoding of feminine inferiority... Gender differences ... were written

into lexicons inherent in the very discriminations that make linguistic meaning possible ... power and femininity being contradictory, the semantic component of dominance is masculinised and women's inferiority coded into the language ..." (Nye 1988 p.174).

Feminist linguists concluded that, while gender inequalities remain encoded in available vocabularies, language as it currently exists could not be adequate to the task of communicating women's experience. Filtering women's experience through patriarchal constructs and languages would never suffice. The 1970s and 1980s saw concerted effort by feminists to institute linguistic changes. Linguistic sexism in the generic use of the male pronoun (seen as valorising all that is male), use of 'mankind' for all humanity, 'the ascent of man', 'chairman', etc., were all campaigned against by feminists. Such examples of blatantly sexist language conventions were gradually weeded out of official communication as a mark of deference to feminist pressure.

For other radical feminists, such as Mary Daly, this is a superficial cosmetic exercise that in no way confronted the basic gender inequalities in legal and economic institutions of western societies. Her strategy was to challenge the very construction of meaning in misogynist societies by tracing etymologies of words to recover original meanings from historical eras prior to patriarchy. In her *Wickedary of the English Language*, Daly sought to recover ancient meanings of words "thus dis-covering and releasing the Archimagical power of Words" (Daly and Caputi 1988 p.15). Words such as 'witch', 'hag', 'crone', 'spinner' (spinster), 'webster' are reclaimed to their original meaning of wise skilful women as opposed to the derogatory connotations of sexist languages. Such strategies had only limited success, in inserting women's experience into language. While recovering a rich heritage of women's cultural contribution, Daly's efforts to transform language remained on the margins.¹³ Indeed, Nye suggests that it may even have resulted in a regression by an elite group of feminists who adopted the

¹³ In her etymological recovering of original meanings of words and 'word-webs' such as 'spinster', 'webster', etc., Daly draws attention to women's textile heritage and the contribution to language of textile terms.

"novel prefixes ... creative etymologies, split words ... in a regression towards Lacan's 'no language' ... a refusal to participate in any publicly constituted meaning" (Nye 1988 p.178). Other feminist scholars such as Kramarae draw the conclusion that masculinist ideology is embedded in language (Kramarae, 1981). The lexicon is a "structure organised to glorify maleness and ignore, trivialize or derogate femaleness" (Kramarae 1981 p.42). Nye comments that the male presence in language is the master-presence against which a female lack is defined. "It is not surprising that a woman would have trouble finding her voice in such a language. No coining of new words or editing out of old can give her eloquence ... Masculine bias goes further than even vocabulary or grammar ..." (Nye 1988 ps.184-185). This bias, Nye goes on to state, extends into a primary opposition of male/female that excludes woman as speaker. This opposition results in a culture where woman's natural sphere is the domain of *no-language*, female inarticulacy. This is the prescribed locus of *no woman*. (Oppositional categories in Western thought are discussed more fully below). Nye concludes that: "Hierarchical oppositions do form the semantic matrix of thought and cannot simply be removed or refined" (Nye 1988 p.187).

Derrida: A Thread of Hope, A Map of Frayings

As stated above, for Lacan, woman must either adopt/mimic the male language order or lapse into '*no language*', a domain of feminine inarticulacy. Derrida, who became a significant mentor for French feminism, challenged Lacan's stance (Nye 1988). Derrida accepted Lacan's premise that the unconscious is a language but he asserted in *The Purveyor of Truth* that the unconscious is not constellated around the dominant phallic *symbolic*. Rather, for Derrida, "language is instead a kind of writing, a series of graphic differences or traces" (Nye 1988 p.186). Psychic content/memory is like a writing surface upon which are etched a tracery of experiences: a non-hierarchical composition of "repetitions, differences, deferrals in time" (Nye 1988 p.187). Derrida defines language as 'a topography of traces', 'a map of frayings', linking a privileged phallic presence

which is supposed to exist outside of language/culture to “the self-present voice/logos” embodying absolute presence and absolute truth (Nye 1988 p.187). As outlined in Chapter Three of this thesis, Derrida deconstructs this authoritarian view of speech/logos pointing out that linguists, grammarians and psychoanalysts play a major role in maintaining such a conceptual order. Derrida’s grammatology disorders, rearranges and subverts this old order (Nye 1988 p.187). Rather than the superior phallic signification which allocates the absence of presence or lack to Lacan’s ‘*no woman*’, Derrida’s project is to explore an infinite chain of textual differences devoid of hierarchy, canonical order, truth or, indeed, author. In this process new meanings emerge and different logics not based on ‘I’ and ‘is not’ but subject to ambiguity and paradox (Nye 1988 p.188). The role Derrida laid out for women in this enterprise of intertextuality was that of displacing/subverting patriarchal, phallogocentric claims of privilege for the Law of the Father, playing with symbolic structures, cleverly subverting the hierarchical order of *the symbolic*, amusing herself in the process (Nye 1988). In Nye’s words, “Derrida agreed with Lacan that femininity and masculinity are embedded in the meaning of words...he agreed with Lacan that there is no escape from the signifying chain, but showed how a feminine operator could interrupt the order of that chain to create new ‘folds’ of meaning and new relations ... women could take heart. Derrida seemed to offer an alternative to feminine inarticulateness and Lacan’s phallogocentric language in a new kind of feminist textual practice” (Nye 1988 p.190). Derrida is not advocating a feminist stance or agenda. Neither is he claiming any essentialist feminine essence or maternal authority position for the feminine. To do so would be simply to fall into a reversal of Lacan’s phallogocentric privileging of the phallogocentric. Derrida has no “naïve feminist expectation either, that the token inclusion of women could bring about significant conceptual change or that legislative language reform could ensure social reform” (Nye 1988 p.191). Rather feminine scholarship (in which men such as Derrida as well as women could engage in) would attempt to derange the syntactical and semantic structures which generate and support the

patriarchal order thereby undermining the centrality of the Law of the Father and the logocentric *symbolic*.

Weaving Her Own Web: Ecriture Feminine and the Work of Helene Cixous

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida deconstructed the primacy of speech in the western logocentric philosophical tradition (Derrida 1997). Nye summarises Derrida's observation:

"When the philosophy of presence was deconstructed, speech was revealed as itself only writing – a series of graphic phonemic traces, repetitions and deferrals which only have meaning intertextually" (Nye 1988 p. 191).

Following Derrida, Irigaray and Cixous in their oeuvre saw writing as the privileged locus from which to analyse and confront the Law of the Father and enunciate feminine experience. Both Cixous and Irigaray advocate and practice an *écriture freminine*. Cixous, in *The Laugh of the Medusa* suggests that women need to free themselves from masculine language governed by phallogocentric thinking. For Cixous this was woman's only pathway to challenging the limiting role assigned to her in Lacan's symbolic. Nye sums up Cixous's position: "In writing a woman can defy the role assigned to her in the *symbolic* and think 'between' the words not bound by the plus and minus of oppositional categories". (Nye 1988 p.191). Cixous adopted the premise that logocentric language of patriarchy is founded on symbolic meanings structured around primary oppositional pairs of concepts. Cixous names the oppositions (Cixous 1971).

Male	Female
Active	Passive
Culture	Nature
Day	Night
Father	Mother
Head	Heart
Logos	Pathos
Intelligible	Sensible

The male attributes are construed as positive and the female as negative, thus providing a linguistic and philosophical support or mask for male dominance. Given this basis in language, as Nye comments, "all relations whether religious, familial, political or linguistic can be 'thought' in the same way" (Nye 1988 p.193). Cixous's methodology was not to create an *écriture féminine* by a name reversal of these oppositional categories. Rather Cixous engaged in a deconstruction of the concepts that underpin paternal authority. In order to recover the erased feminine presence, *écriture féminine* attempts to re-appropriate a language that would allow woman to relate to herself and others in a new way. A feminine Alice must break through the Lacanian *symbolic* and "proceed through the looking glass of language" (Nye 1988, p. 196). Cixous attempts to restore an expressible feminine presence. In *Angst*, she describes the pain of woman whose existence is circumscribed by phallogentric culture.

"... caught in the old book where it is said to each woman....you will not live . You will give life and you will pour out love, and they will be given back to you a hundredfold in hate and in folly. You will give body and it will be given back to you as absence" (Cixous 1977 p.281).

The woman portrayed in *Angst* survives through all her self hatred and hysterical sufferings and another kind of woman emerges. The old book is closed and this new woman is committed to the affirmation of life, decisive, "a thought without model, without peers, without master ... capable of thwarting the work of death, of returning the negative to its impasse ... not a fantasy, not a 'littre' but a real, always present in the present, always at the same time three lives in advance" (Cixous 1977 p.283).

The pathway of the navigation of phallogentric culture for woman is to become a 'searching woman' at first in the position of grieving Demeter who searches for her lost daughter, Persephone, abducted by Hades to the underworld. At a later stage the 'searching woman' goes beyond opposition of heaven and hell and into "a language that speaks before speech... an index of truth on the other side of

words" (Cixous quoted in Nye 1988 p.198). The truth on the other side of words can only at first be apprehended faintly and 'searching woman' will find herself lost amidst veils of Derridean signification but some "faint melody leads the woman on past the 'cortege of thought' ... to invent for herself a language she can get inside of" (Nye 1988 p.198). Such a language in Cixous' terms is outside the text of patriarchy. For Cixous, the locus of this language is the female body not the tricks of representation presented in a play of endless categories. Nye summarises thus:

"The discovery of the feminine is a discovery of the female body, and a discovery of the body's relation to other bodies. One must write the body, Cixous urged, echoing Rousseau's yearning for a sensuous language" (Nye 1988 p. 189).

Cixous stated in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' :

"In writing herself the woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the acting or dead figure, which so often turns out to be a nasty companion, the cause and locus of inhibitions" (Cixous 1971).

Ecriture feminine will be shaped, birthed, embodied by woman's own material body. Female organs, long denigrated, will be reclaimed into language as powerful metaphor and symbol into an endless overflowing open ended system of expression. In her writings Cixous seeks to go beyond a mastery of the material world through categorization. Rather her language seeks to listen and look at the external world with childlike eyes. To speak a rational analytical language is "to kill the things, to refuse to hear them or look at them " (Nye 1988 p.199). Cixous's own words give a flavour of *écriture feminine*:

"To enjoy a walk from the high trails to the earth of the Jardain d'Essais, to make one's way with fidelity according to life and the body, we must leave gently, give the slip to all recommendations, and now live, beginning as it begins, letting come things which arrive according to their fashion, let the rose make itself felt in the order rose, descend to the garden, drawn, led by the appeal of its freshness, to go down, before knowing the names of the streets, but the senses know the way, before proper names and common names, through the perfumes, walking with sandaled feet, in the heavy odours, in the movement of the market" (Cixous 1980 p.137).

Nye comments: "So Cixous describes the experience of the pure child who has not yet learned the categories of thought, but who takes in colours, tastes and smells in an ecstatic communion between physical thing and physical body" (Nye 1988 p.200). Through her *écriture féminine*, Cixous enunciates a feminine speaking voice weaving a web of voices and associations. The cries, pains and joys of the body are expressed through a 'singing flesh', Cixous states, in a way that existed before patriarchy, before the Law of the Father, "before the breath was cut by the symbolic" (Nye 1988 p.203). Cixous insists that through *écriture féminine* woman will find her voice. Cixous's aim is "a Rousseauian celebration of a language of the south, born of love and song, passionate, warm, not yet solidified in the logic of the ...masculine north" (Nye 1988 p.203). Words themselves give substance to this language. For Cixous, words are living things which have flavour, resonance, tactility, a music, a poetic sensuous play, whereby Cixous attempts to evoke "another feminine world" (Nye 1988). *Écriture féminine* is not a servant of the Ego, the isolated individual artist. Instead, it is a hand that is open to other voices. In Cixous's own metaphor it is a weaving in which the weaver is as much guided by chance threads which come to hand randomly as by an imposed (and so suspect) design.

"Then with no plan, no design, no ending in mind... the important thing is to keep the writing going, not to stop the loom or the weaving" (Cixous in Nye 1988 p.204).

Cixous is aware of the price that has to be paid for such a definitive break with the Language of the Father. A marginality results from a withdrawal from a conceptual universe dominated by the male *symbolic*. Cixous recommends that practitioners of *écriture féminine* whose work will be shunned or compromised in the conventional academic departments or commercial publishing should engage in a 'parler-entre elles' and set up alternative opportunities for writers of *écriture féminine*. Editions de Femme, a publishing house and bookshop in Paris, where Cixous's work is published is an example of such a feminist endeavour.

In summary then, Cixous may be said to pursue the female voice in her *écriture féminine*, "a female speaking, singing, chanting that has been silenced by male language and that makes no sense according to male reason. It is a voice "...to express the anguish of the captured female body... As well as the desperation of the woman freed but surrounded by male thought and institutions" (Nye, 1988, p.202). Cixous is essentially a practitioner of *écriture féminine*, not a theoretician. She has not produced theoretical works. Rather her *écriture féminine* is contained within itself, a body of work wherein the body speaks itself in an almost mystical embodied language of speaking woman.

Irigaray: Weaving A Self in L'Écriture de la Femme

Irigaray's call for an *écriture féminine*, *l'écriture de la femme*, envisaged that it would take the format of an excess or derangement of logocentric language/logic. Like Cixous, Irigaray identified the oppositional master categories of western philosophy masculine presence/ feminine absence as the very foundation of western culture. All thought, discourse and language reflect the great divide. For Irigaray the histories of all metadiscourses, including science, religion, politics all reflect "the masculine subject becoming the Sun around which the feminine Earth revolves" (Nye 1988 p.193). In *Speculum*, Irigaray deconstructs Plato's myth of the sun and the cave (Irigaray, 1974). She raises the question as to what would be the consequence if the Earth moved on its own axis, came to know itself not only as an inert object but as a self moving subject turning on its own axis, no more dependent reflection of the masculine sun. Hierarchical opposition of subject/object collapse in such a scenario. Irigaray's methodology of a close re-reading and deconstruction of the core texts of patriarchy allows her to turn submissive object into self-affirmative subject. Her reading of Freudian and Lacanian master texts is an example of her method. In *Speculum* she does not engage with Freudian concepts at a theoretical/critical level. Rather she, in the Derridean style, "traces the course of Freudian thought in all its heterogeneity, complexity, diversity ... exposed the tangles, reading

between the lines, listening to tone, nuance" (Nye 1988 p.192). In so doing, she exposes the functioning of grammar and syntax to support the subject/object divide of logocentric discourse.

Irigaray adopted a feminine symbolism as the basis of *écriture de la femme*. In *The Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray uses the female genitals (as Derrida did the hymen) as her major concept and symbol, producing, she argues, a very different economy of meaning from the phallic language of patriarchy. By using feminine symbolism, new meanings would be constellated that would have profound impact on culture in all its manifestations, Irigaray believed (Nye, 1988). The dominant 'one' of phallic language would become the 'two' of the vaginal lips implying relationship/interaction/meaning rather than individualistic separation and power over and forming the basis for "its imaginary constructs, its metaphoric networks and also its silences" (Nye 1988 p.192).

Irigaray expresses the belief that 'écriture de la femme' should adopt a fluid style, an 'economy of fluids', never allowing itself to be simplistically defined or to assume a fixed/restricted position. Such a feminine based language, however, would demand a deep listening:

"One must listen to her differently in order to hear an 'other meaning' which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed immobilised" (Irigaray 1977 in Nye 1988 p.194).

Nye comments: "The law of contradiction does not rule.... Asked for clarification a woman cannot answer: she has already moved on, or turned her back on her own thought, in a kind of vaginal fold within herself" (Nye 1988 p.195). *Écriture de la Femme* will result in a radical decentring of meaning, Irigaray believes. Again, like Cixous, a sensuous pleasure, a textual *jouissance* is displayed in Irigaray's *écriture de la femme*. The painful recognition of women's abject oppression within patriarchy would to some extent be relieved by a textual play and joy in deconstructing logocentric-dogma, Irigaray believed. But this was not the main goal for Irigaray. A woman's language would embrace nature rather

than adopt a distancing stance of being outside and superior to an alien world that can only be related to by scientific observation and classification and which, in the final analysis, results in a linguistic discourse which is a mirror image of itself. Rather women's language would flow and embrace without boundary, resembling the language of dreams and the unconscious. In dreams, imagery and symbolism are not ordered by phallogocentric logic. Dream language for Irigaray portrays the kinds of expressiveness that most resembles *écriture de la femme*, a woman speaking in her own tongue. Nye outlines Irigaray's position:

"A feminine language would offer no 'discourse', adopt no coherent strategy of argumentation. It would offer no theories, no new methods of research. It would not contribute a 'pratique' or a 'politique'; any political praxis would be 'masculine' through and through. The woman speaker would not propose a political theory or any canonical agenda for feminist revolution. This would be impossible without theorising and establishing conceptual objectives. No feminist 'theory' can be articulated in a woman's language: to think so would be to risk the danger of an unconscious importation of the masculine into feminine thought" (Nye 1988 p.20).

Irigaray's own words are worth quoting on this point:

"The 'position' [of not developing a politique] is explained by the difficulties that women encounter in making themselves understood in situations already determined in and by a society which at one time uses them and excludes them, and which continues especially to ignore the specificity of their 'revendications' while at the same time adopting certain of their themes, indeed their slogans" (Irigaray 1977 p.125).

Women's civil and economic rights may reluctantly be enshrined in Western democracies but "the theorising male subject is always present constructing the logic of his politics" (Nye 1988 p. 202). For Irigaray *écriture de la femme* will allow woman to speak with her own syntax in her own voice outside of the political locus.

In summary, then, for Cixous and Irigaray, any critique of patriarchal society must involve a deconstruction of patriarchal language and a deconstruction of patriarchal language demanded a deep textual analysis of the roots of western philosophy and science. No longer should the goal of feminist theory be the right

of women to participate politically and economically. This stance by Irigaray was not accepted by all feminist theorists. Some theorists, for example, Clement, considered that *écriture féminine* was a dangerous strategy to adopt as it marginalised women, isolating them from the locus of power and influence (Clement and Cixous 1975). Clement further argues that *écriture féminine* is Utopian, a hopeless attempt to dream up an alternative reality. For Clement, mastery of the *symbolic* is fundamental to knowledge. Discourse and the ability to theorise depend on a capacity to express a set of coherent statements that do not depend on a singular fantasy point of view. This stance undermines feminist theory building capacity in Clement's opinion. *Écriture féminine*, for Clement, returns woman to their old roles as mystics, sybils and witches. Historian, Christine Faure, also criticised *écriture féminine* and Irigaray for devaluing the historical economic and political presence of women valorising only their inner world. Such a position, Faure says, does not allow for critique of woman's current social, economic and political status and neither does Irigaray's approach allow for future agendas of social change (Nye 1988). Kristeva has also expressed grave doubts about the project of *écriture féminine*. Rejection of the paternal world of concepts and facts for her would lead to an inability to engage in representation. *Écriture féminine* for Kristeva would merely lead to a psychosis at worst or a self-indulgent privitism that withdraws from the locus of linguistic power in society. For Kristeva, women's relation to the maternal disadvantages them as *avant garde* revolutionaries (Nye 1988). Either they reject the *symbolic* and become psychotic or engage in a compensatory embracing of traditional, conservative roles allotted to them as guardians of family and home. For Kristeva, *écriture féminine* advocates the creation of a "sacred and secret society of women with its own private language" (Nye 1988 p.207). Kristeva's strategy on the other hand is a mastery of patriarchal language by women so that it can be "exposed, reconstituted only to be shattered again", the feminine an eternal outsider (Nye 1988 p.207).

SECTION FOUR

Four Ply Praxis

Section Four is concerned with examining the linkages between feminist theory and women artists' aesthetic practices. Chapter Eight sets out the four stages in the development of women's art making and theorising from 1970 onwards and follows the thread of the textile/text axis through more than 30 years of women's art making practice and theorizing as women strived to find an authentic voice and positioning as creators of culture. It seeks to link theoretical concerns with practice describing a praxis in which the textile/text axis is an important element.

Chapter Eight

Four Ply Praxis: Linking Theory and Women's Aesthetic Practice

What has been set out in Chapters Six and Seven outlines in broad brush strokes the theoretical backdrop to second wave feminism. This section examines the linkages between feminist theory and women's aesthetic practice. However, at the outset it must be stated that there is much material relating to this dynamic, challenging and revisioning period of art history that is not researched, not fully understood, not definitively described (Reckitt and Phelan 2001). Many more years of scholarship and analysis is required. Whatever formats and structures are suggested here must be seen in this light as tentative, exploratory, working methodologies attempting to organise and order the multiplicity of acts of cultural revisioning, creation and theorising undertaken by women in the period in question.

Reckitt and Phelan suggest that it is possible to identify "significant stages in the conjunction between feminism and art" during the period 1970 –1990 (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.19). They set out four stages along the pathway from the 1970s second wave feminist thought and art practice to the complexities of postmodern discourses and women's art making at the end of the 20th and early 21st centuries with 'feminist' as a term often being rejected by artists whose work seems sympathetic to the feminist project. In their seminal review, *Art and Feminism*, they have shown that many major innovations in contemporary art have been indebted to feminism and likewise feminism's most important political achievements have depended on feminist artists who have created new pathways of understanding of both private and political issues. "Both critical of the art world and central to it feminist artists have revised the possibilities of art as a political and aesthetic practice " (Reckitt and Phelan 2001, front page). Reckitt and Phelan in their survey of women's art from the 1960s to the end of the 20th century identify a diversity of concerns and complexities in women's art discourse and practice. They discover in effect "a feminist art that is not one....

The promise of feminist art is the performative creation of new realities. Successful feminist art beckons us towards possibilities in thought and in practice still to be created, still to be lived” (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.12; p. 20).

As stated, Reckitt and Phelan postulate four distinct stages in the development of women’s art practice. The first phase of feminist art began in the late 1960s as women artists took up and shaped the agenda of the women’s liberation movement. In broad brush stroke terms, the art of the 1970s, complex and diverse in its manifestation, gave rise to an aesthetic form which expressed political imperatives such as challenging cultural canons, retrieval and insertion of women’s cultural contributions and expressing demands for political change in the institutions of patriarchy. As Reckitt and Phelan state, women’s art became an arena for both personal and political revisioning of individual and dominant cultural mores and institutions. “Art was both extraordinarily responsive to political illumination and productive of it “ (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.21). The 1970s is described by art historians as one of passionate activism where cultural history was rewritten, art history canons fractured to include woman’s cultural contribution, the languages of the work of women’s hands from the decorative and craft traditions reclaimed and canonical ideas of suitable art materials and subject matter disrupted (Reckitt and Phelan 2001, Butler 2007, Broude and Garrard 1997). The feminist art programme established in 1970 by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro at California Institute of Arts was the first formal educational course dedicated to the making of art by and about women. The 24 students on this course led by Schapiro, Chicago, Faith Wilding and Mira Schor created the *Womanhouse* Exhibition in 1972, an art event which radically challenged and changed assumptions concerning suitable subject matter and materials/media for art. The line between private/domestic and public spheres dissolved and everyday objects, the mundane minutiae of women’s lives (cosmetics, underwear, linen, shower caps, tampons) became the currency of high art. A seminal moment indeed! Linda Nochlin’s 1971 essay *‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’* questioned the values and practices institutionalised

in the discipline of art history which displayed marked gender, ethnic and class inequalities. This essay marked the beginnings of feminist art criticism and theorising and influenced Chicago's iconic *Dinner Party* aimed at inserting woman's cultural contribution into a revised and broader art historical discourse. Within feminism itself *The Dinner Party* provoked controversy. The vulgar imagery used caused bitter debate and Chicago was also accused of adopting masculinist strategies in her methodologies of creating the art work. 100 artists contributed but only the 'master's' name was attributed to the work.

By the mid 1970s feminist art was gradually moving into a second phase largely sited in the U.K. The preoccupation with the history of woman's art making was replaced with an engagement with dominant intellectual discourses such as Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and neo-Marxist theory. This phase of feminist art work is theoretically grounded in the metadiscourses of 20th century patriarchal societies. Theory and practice became intertwined, as women artists sought to interrogate the dominant theoretical positions of western culture. Laura Mulvey and Mary Kelly are eminent examples of artists who from the mid-1970s onwards are both theoreticians and practising visual artists. Mulvey, a filmmaker, is the author of a ground breaking article written in 1973 entitled 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. In the article Mulvey uses psychoanalytic theory to expose the deep and unconscious structures of patriarchal culture that characterises woman as lack, outside of the symbolic order, without a language, a silent image "tied to her place as bearer, not maker of meaning" (Mulvey 1973 in Reckitt and Phelan 201 p.209). Mulvey states that she is using psychoanalytical theory "as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (Mulvey 1973 in Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.209). Her purpose is to get "nearer to the roots of our oppressions... an articulation of the problem ... faces us with the ultimate challenge, how to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the moment of the arrival of language) while still caught within the language of patriarchy" (Mulvey 1973 in Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.209). Mulvey

concludes that, although psychoanalytic theory has little or nothing to say about the structure of woman's unconscious or the subjectivity of the female infant and her relationship to the symbolic, it does "advance our understanding of the status quo of the patriarchal order in which we are caught" (Mulvey 1973 in Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.209). Mulvey went on to make a series of film pieces, notably '*Riddles of the Sphinx*' (1976) which sought to construct an alternative cinema challenging the basic assumptions of mainstream narrative film, in her own words, "transcending outworn or oppressive forms, and daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire..." (Mulvey 1973 in Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.209).

Mary Kelly, also a theoretician and practising artist, in *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979) created an installation of 6 sections and 135 individual units using her son's nappies and text from her diary to explore the mother-child relationship in the light of Lacanian theory and her own lived day to day experience. Kelly's work is read as a rigorous interrogation of motherhood which succeeded in inserting the voice of feminine subjectivity of women's lives and art practice into the realms of high art, a transgressive act intervening in dominant discourses (Reckitt and Phelan 2001; Chadwick 2007).

The Third Phase of women's intervention in culture in the 1980s relied on French psychoanalytic feminist theorising and feminist literary criticism. In this phase, in Reckitt and Phelan's words, theory and practice became intertwined "producing the third phase of the emergence of feminist art" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001, p.22). The growing complexity of women's theorising led to a re-evaluation of art work made by women in the previous periods especially during the 1970s. In their important work, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, published in 1981, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock were critical of the failure of women artists of the 1970s period to adequately think through the implications of claiming a unique domain of imagery, viz., Chicago's vulvar imagery in the *Dinner Party*. Such work was termed 'essentialist', 'naïve' and was seen as representing a

failure to adequately decode the complexities of representation of the female body in patriarchy (Reckitt and Phelan 2001). This revisioning of women's art together with the harsh political conservatism of the Thatcherite and Reagan eras seriously undermined public and private sector funding policies for art venues and publishing presses which provided a public context for feminist debate and discourse. Such opportunities disappeared and under pressures within and without feminism as a movement fractured into a multiplicity of stances and discourses ranging along the political spectrum from conservative to radical. The white heterosexual hegemony within feminism was challenged by artists such as Ana Mendieta's definitive statement "American feminism is basically a white, middle-class movement" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.23). Deep fractures within the feminist movement resulted from the debates focusing on issues of sexual identity, where some of the most divisive discourses were centred. Such issues were sidestepped as the agendas of liberal feminism pushed on to the goals of legislative changes to enshrine equal rights for women legally and institutionally. As the 1980s decade went on issues of the converging forces of racism and sexism became a significant strand of concern. Artists and theorists began to develop complex methods of discussing and representing the intersection of race/sex/gender as a powerful overarching social force in the construction of woman's experience. Returning to a theme which had emerged in the 1970s on the fringes of feminism in the work of Faith Ringgold, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, artists such as Mona Hatoum represented this convergence of race/gender/class variables and their role in maintaining the status quo¹⁴. Such work laid the foundations for the rigorous intellectual and aesthetic critique of the fourth phase of feminism which followed in the 1990s (Reckitt and Phelan 2001; Chadwick 2007).

Reckitt and Phelan state that a combination of feminist concerns with other theoretical approaches is the hallmark of the fourth phase of feminist art. They

¹⁴ The convergence of issues of race and gender is discussed in the indepth case study of Ringgold's *French Collection* Story Quilt series in Chapter Ten of the thesis.

say "In the early 1990s, feminism... Began to be repositioned as something to be 'combined with' other political and theoretical projects... collaborations were forged between white feminists and people of colour who were articulating a theory of post-colonialism and hybridity. Common to these collaborative projects was a focus on the abjected body, the human body as a site of waste, abuse, absence, trauma" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.24). The 1990s heralded a return to the body in both theorising and visual art practice. A new generation of women artists set out to combine the theoretical insights of the 1980s with a concern for the issue of embodiment, a primary concern of feminist art of the earlier decade of the 1970s. In Reckitt and Phelan's words: "Risking replicating the structures of victimization and disease that haunt women in patriarchy, these works also offer an important rejoinder to the assumption that abjection produces only passivity and silence" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001, p.24). This concern with embodiment, the body as site of abjection and suffering must be set within the global genocidal history of the late 20th century, when women and children "became enfleshed weapons" of military rape in wars organised and executed by men, resulting in countless millions of nameless victims of ethnic conflicts (Reckitt and Phelan 2001). Reckitt and Phelan make the point that the most profound works of theorising and representation of the 1990s are in fact ethical concerns of witnessing and testimony to the "traumatic force of twentieth century genocidal history" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p. 25). Woman's position of 'otherness' persisted as an issue of deep concern for women. The psychoanalytic writings of Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva have posed the question of woman's 'otherness' from differing perspectives and their work has been influential in shaping agendas in women's art making. Post structural texts which have deconstructed the role of text as endlessly deferred signification of meaning and put forward the concept of a negotiated subjectivity have had important influences on women's theorising and art practice. A radical rethinking of the societal and unconscious forces which operate to exclude difference has resulted in a combining of theory and practice into new visual languages which "rupture disciplinary boundaries, decenter authority and develop strategies that reassert the relationship between

agency, power and struggle ... within feminism there are now multiple approaches" (Chadwick 2007 p.14).

What follows explores how visual artists responded to the call for a women's language and the role the textile/text axis played in this project and in the stages of development in women's art practice and theorizing.

Follow a Thread, Trace a Line

- (I) *"Cloth. Rolls and rolls of mill cloth piling up in warehouses all over the world. Miles and miles of camel trains bearing silk from the East to the West. Endless cloth binding the feet of endless Chinese women. Yards and yards of linen swaddling the Egyptian dead. Societies where the face of every woman is hidden behind a veil. Meanings expanded, metaphor upon metaphor. These are the inspirations underpinning the work of these artists intent upon creating modern myths and symbols from the substance of cloth"* (Constantine and Reuter 1997 p.6).

- (II) *"Whole cloth", wrote John Ruskin, is "wool of sheep, thread of flax, bark of tree – there exists no matrix. It can be shaped beyond the boundaries of origin. It shifts from the potential to an actuality that has a myriad of shapes and a myriad of ways of moving, responding to the action of the individual who manipulates it. It possesses the mysterious sense of unaccountable life in things themselves."*
Whole cloth is planar and pliable; it can be given volume. One can animate cloth: drape, crumple, and fold it; compress, pleat, and tuck it; festoon, swag, and swaddle it; burn it and cut it; tear, sew, and furl it; appliqué, quilt, and fabricate it. Cloth is ductile; it expands and contracts. Cloth can be embellished with stitches, dyes, or print. Cloth can be burned or scored. It is for each generation to expand the vocabulary of approaches to cloth.
Whole cloth is a fabricated product obtained by a basic immutable process: yarns are divided into at least two elements, warp and weft, and then interwoven at right angles.
Whole cloth has different widths, weights, surfaces, textures, dimensions, and densities and varying degrees of opacity or transparency.
Whole cloth demands total design knowledge in its creation. The designer must understand the limitations and capabilities of the production process.
Whole cloth is a fabrication or fictitious statement or forgery.

Cloth. What an elegant substance it is, at play with the breeze, in combat with the wind, protecting and wrapping and shielding and comforting. Like a seductive woman, sometimes it is bold and sometimes it is barely there. Cloth is the stuff of mystery for making costumes and stage sets, wedding veils and death shrouds. Even children use lengths of cloth when they first begin to play dress-up. Cloth, that old silent companion of the human race, has always kept very special company with artists
(Constantine and Reuter 1997 p.9)

This section follows the trace of the textile/text axis through the *praxis* of selected women artists and suggests underlying concerns which pervaded their art making and theorising and which have resulted in a *praxis* that is a powerful representation of woman's deepest ontological, social, personal and aesthetic concerns as the new millennium unfolded. Robinson has written of the need to rethink a feminist cultural criticism adequate to building an understanding of the profound implications for culture of the work of women artists. She states:

"Clearly ... The articulation of gendered identity and experience is a major part of the work; clearly also this is manifested not simply through the content of the work, but also through the selection, manipulation and deployment of the materials to make that work... present art critical discourse being theoretically and structurally wanting it is necessary to build feminist analyses and terminology ... [which] facilitate the legibility of artworks by women in ways that have been rare to date. What has become politically interesting about the work of artists such as Spero, Bourgeois, Hatoum, Emin, as well as many others, is that it makes visible 'the meeting point of the properties of physical matter and an elaboration of sexualised subjective identity', to use Irigaray's thrilling and challenging phrase. At once with this statement we could be in a woman artist's studio. We could be contemplating her practices. We could be at a site.... which is the site of her enunciation through those practices" (Robinson 2006 p.3).

Robinson goes on to suggest that the psychoanalytic theory of gesture as revised by Irigaray in her essay *Gesture in Psychoanalysis* is a useful framework within which to deepen our analysis and understanding of contemporary women's art practice. Robinson explains:

"This comes from her [Irigaray's] attention to gesture as a way of thinking about the psychic subject, the sexed subject and a practice ... [this] produces new possibilities for understanding gesture as it is embodied in

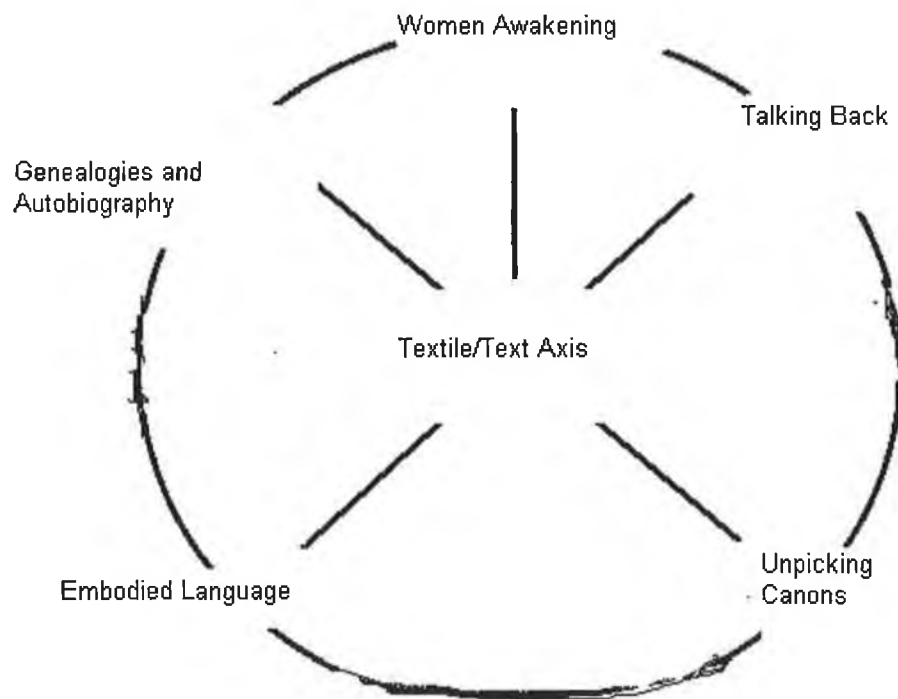
the artwork, remaining as a trace of the artist's engagement with materials in the process of making the work" (Robinson 2006 p.125).

What follows attempts to trace the imprint of the textile/text axis through women's art practice as it was used to manifest complex and powerful representations and statements of five key concerns of women artists from the 1970s onwards.

Diagram 1 sets out the 5 main areas of concern, the continuous back and forth repetitive weave of preoccupations which, it is suggested, imbued women's thinking and art practice as they struggled to analyse and represent their positions and female experiences in misogynistic patriarchal societies.¹⁵ As stated previously, the narratives are not simple. As time went on and the edifice of scholarship and representation expanded, issues were revisioned. Adrienne Rich defined revisioning and its purposes: "Revision – the art of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction, an act of survival" (Rich in Gilbert and Gubar 1979 p.45).

¹⁵ For purposes of analysis here I have treated the 5 areas of concern under separate headings. The reality is more interwoven, less clear cut, less clearly defined, yet it is important to create categories in order to grasp and come to terms with realities of great complexity. At the end of the day there is nothing hard and fast about such categories and no doubt they in their turn will be revisioned and boundaries redrawn informed by new thinking and scholarship of the future.

**Diagram 1: Textile/Text Axis and 5 Main Concerns of Women's Art Praxis
1970 Onwards.**



The five concerns identified are:

- Women Awakening
- Talking Back
- Unpicking Canons
- Embodied Language
- Genealogies and Autobiographies

Figure 3 below sets out the role of the textile/text axis in articulating and representing the five concerns, providing examples of women artists' aesthetic practice which made use of the lexicon and syntax of textile and text.

Figure 3: Textile/Text Axis and 5 Concerns of Women's Art Practice 1970 onwards.

<i>Concern</i>	<i>Praxis</i>	<i>Artist</i>
1. Women Awakening	<i>Dream Mapping</i> <i>Slumber</i> <i>Balkan Baroque</i> <i>Abakan</i> <i>Backs</i>	Susan Hiller Janine Antoni Marina Abramovic Magdalene Abakanowicz Magdalene Abakanowicz
2. Talking Back	<i>Interior Scrolls</i> <i>In Mourning and In Rage</i> <i>The Liberation of Aunt Jemina</i> <i>Waiting</i> <i>Nurturant Kitchen</i> <i>Semiotics of the Kitchen</i> <i>Post-partum Document</i>	Carolee Schneeman Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz Bettye Saar Faith Wilding Susan Frazier, Vickie Hodgetts, Robin Weltsch Martha Rosier Mary Kelly
3. Unpicking Canons	<i>The Dinner Party</i> <i>Collaboration Series</i> <i>The Anatomy of a Kimono</i>	Judy Chicago Miriam Schapiro Miriam Schapiro
4. Embodied Language	<i>Mirror Mirror</i> <i>Back</i> <i>Intirm Project</i> <i>Histoire des Robes</i> <i>Measures of Distance</i> <i>Converging Territories</i> <i>Inis t'Oirr Aran Dance</i>	Carrie May Weems Lorna Simpson Mary Kelly Annette Messager Mona Hatoum Lalla Essaydi Pauline Cummins
5. Genealogies and Autobiographies	<i>lineament</i> <i>Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss</i> <i>Performance Story Quilt</i> <i>So Help Me Hannah Series;</i> <i>Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother Selma Butter</i> <i>Intra-Venus Series</i> <i>St. Anne Teaching Mary to Read</i> <i>Turas</i> <i>Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995</i>	Ann Hamilton Faith Ringgold Hannah Wilke Hannah Wilke Unknown Artist Frances Hegarty Tracey Emin

Women Awakening

As referred to earlier in the thesis, in the 1960s and early 70s women awakened to a growing awareness of what has come to be termed misogyny, that is, they began to identify and analyse the cultural frameworks in which their labour was devalued, their art largely ignored and their bodies overly idealised, systematically abjected and/or subjected to intense policing. A whole generation of women awakened to a deeper understanding of the social and institutional structures that defined their experiences. Reckitt and Phelan make the point that “feminist awakening was something fundamentally personal and social at once; it was a kind of mutual understanding of what it meant to feel oneself alone, and a declaration of a new collectivity ... and this changed, among other things, the history and theory of contemporary art” (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.33). Reckitt and Phelan suggest that woman’s awakening to the ‘braid of horror’ that constitutes patriarchy and its histories, might best be described as “an experience of collective trauma” (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p. 33). Reckitt and Phelan make the point that women saw art as a politically useful response and also perhaps as a way of coping with the deep trauma of the recognition of misogyny after centuries of repression and masking of its deeply embedded societal structures. Textile and text, as we shall see, played an important role in expressing this trauma of recognition.

Consciousness raising was an important response of early feminism in the analysis of women’s position under patriarchy and in talking back to a culture which relegated woman to the position of silence and ‘otherness’. Consciousness raising offered a methodology to revise life stories whereby personal trauma could be located in the larger societal arena. Personal experience was revisioned and art making became a crucial part of this process. Reckitt and Phelan comment: “Underlying this belief in revision was a faith in the possibility of change – indeed a belief in changing the world... [which required] going over the past rather than abandoning it ...this attitude also encouraged a sense of

solidarity among women, especially in relation to suffering and abuse “(Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.30). Art making and the textile/text axis played a key role in this.

In 1974 Susan Hiller in her *Dream Mapping* performance piece invited ten participants to learn a graphic method of writing their dreams which occurred while they slept outdoors for three consecutive nights. Employing the graphic method, they recounted their dreams on awakening and attempted to decode meanings, commonalities and repetitions. The participants slept directly on the earth appearing (from the photographic images of the performances) as textile enwrapped mummie bundles decoding the hieroglyphics of sleep. (**Image 1**).¹⁶

Twenty years later, Janine Antoni's *Slumber* work takes up the thread of woman's awakening and remembering. Reckitt and Phelan comment that this piece “meditates on the frame between private and public consciousness and unconsciousness, between historical forgetting and contemporary remembering” (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.33). Janine performed this piece in several galleries during 1994-1996. She slept in the galleries at night attached to a medical device for recording REM (rapid eye movement) brain patterns (the period of sleep when dreaming occurs) and to her loom by a long piece of white woven textile like a blanket. Each day she wove the patterns recorded by the REM device using threads and narrow strips from her nightgown. The graphic text being woven into her textile web grew increasingly complex as her nightgown became more threadbare and fragile; a comment perhaps on the trauma and the personal cost of an expanding feminist consciousness of the increasingly complex narratives of women's readings of patriarchal culture. Reckitt and Phelan comment: “*Slumber* reframes the awakening of feminism as something still to be interpreted as a dream that is still being woven ...” (Reckitt and Phelan 2001, p.33). (**Image 2**). Acknowledging the trauma and wounds of feminism's awakening facilitates a recognition of the violence and vilification that is woven

¹⁶ This and following images are located in Appendix One of the thesis

into the history of this second wave of feminist awakening. Celebratory or denunciatory narratives that smooth over the psychic and cultural trauma that resulted from the transgressive act of a collective feminist awakening are not adequate to admitting the ambiguities, trauma and ambivalence inherent in this event.

Through the 1980s and 1990s feminist art has continued to be preoccupied with the pain and trauma of women's awakening and ongoing 20th and 21st centuries global catastrophies. An emerging field of theory in trauma studies traces the profound impact of trauma in psyche and culture. Trauma theory draws from psychoanalytic theory and clinical practice and powerful statements by women artists continue to give expression to these insights (Caruth 1995). The textile/text axis has been implicated in this representation, from Yoko Ono's 'Cut Piece' to Gina Pane and Marina Abramovic's 'ordeal art'. Gina Pane, whose work involves inflicting wounds on her body with razor blades, knives, broken glass in public performance, powerfully articulates the reality of the presence of trauma, real or potential, in women's lives.

"We live in continuous danger always, so [my body art investigates] a radical moment... the [moment] of the wound" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.44).

Marina Abramovic's 1997 performance at the Venice Biennale, *Balkan Baroque*, deals with traumatic memories of genocide and mass slaughter. For four days the artist sat blood stained in a long white robe cleaning 1,500 cattle bones and singing songs from her childhood. Three video projectors showed images of her parents and three copper vats of boiling water. Textile and song text enunciate a requiem for the Balkan trauma where women and children were used as weapons of war (Crosenick 2003). (**Image 3**).

The textile/text axis has played a central role in the work of Magdalene Abakanowicz's oeuvre over a thirty-year period. Abakanowicz was born in war torn Poland in 1939. As a statement of rejection of the devastation and trauma of

Poland's history and the alienation and brutality which characterised the industrial age, she turned to the use of textile in her art work and has continued to use natural fibres woven and constructed into powerful images of suffering and pain. Her 'Abakans', large scale woven structures, reference at once garment, shelters, absence, the protection afforded by the tents/yuhurts of nomadic peoples; temporary refuge from the atrocities of 20th century trauma which has displaced, destroyed and fractured bonds of consanguinity, disrupting relationships with place and the lives of countless peoples. **(Image 4).**

Her 1987 series of *Backs*, burlap bundles suggesting life size human backs, is a powerful comment on the denial and "turning of backs" by the affluent first world countries on its own shadow and failure to engage with pain and trauma of war, poverty and misogyny on a global scale. The *Back* pieces also poignantly convey the idea of pain and brutality and our human universality. They appear to huddle foetal like, against the impact of inexorable trauma and pain. Abakanowicz uses the intrinsic power of textile as powerful signifier of the agony of trauma both in its capacity to enunciate but also in its ability to reference what is beyond the range of language to articulate the intensely personal and private site of pain and fear. The bundled, mute inarticulateness of the *Backs* convey generations of trauma borne in silence and isolation. Abakanowicz, through her use of textile witnesses/remembers and in that remembering reminds us that creativity is central to any theory of survival (Rose 1994, Reckitt and Phelan 2001). **(Image 5).**

Talking Back

In 1975 Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scrolls* performance piece countered the patriarchal assumption that women are "those who must be read, interpreted, understood" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.30). This piece consisted of a naked woman drawing a scroll from her vagina and reading the emerging text. This powerful performance, recorded as a series of photographs, encoded the desire

of woman to reclaim her own voice grounded in her deepest experiences and to enunciate and insert that voice into the public sphere of culture. (**Image 6**).

In talking back to a misogynist culture, naming and protesting against institutionalised violence and abuse of women and children become important concerns of women artists from 1970 onwards. A sense of solidarity grew as private trauma of rape and domestic violence were recognised and enunciated as endemic in the social and institutional fabric. Public performances by women artists, such as Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz's 1977 *In Mourning and In Rage* were key components in talking back to a culture that allowed rape and sexual violence towards women to go unchallenged.

A series of performances/protests by artists were powerful statements against "rape and other sanctioned forms of sexual terrorism" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.30). Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz's *In Mourning and in Rage* not only became an iconic statement of women's outrage but is also deeply linked to the global movement of 'take back the night' marches and other political protests against rape in the 1980s (Reckitt and Phelan 2001). (**Image 7**). Again textile/text played an important role as signifier and carrier of meaning in this concern. The performance piece, *In Mourning and In Rage*, was both a memorial to five women who lost their lives in a series of rape/murders which occurred in Los Angeles in 1977 and also an effective political protest and intervention by women artists. The performance consisted of woman participants wearing a black draped mourning gown that contained a cut out silhouette, 7 feet tall, with black stockinged feet, an effigy of the dead woman carried /worn by the performers. Each figure was draped in a bright red satin cloak/shawl. The black of the mourning gowns articulated grief, the red satin echoing the colour of fresh blood and women's anger. The sense of imposing presence created by the tall forms combined with the red shawls create a visceral and dignified statement of mourning, anger and pain. Behind the five figures two banners of white cloth were carried by 4 women in long black coats bearing the words "In Memory of Our Sisters" and "Women Fight Back". Labowitz and Lacy were the founder

members of *Ariadne*, a social network which in co-operation with women's groups and local city council officials organised *Three Weeks in May*, a city wide series of events addressing issues of abuse of women and media sensationalism and exploitation of women's fears for monetary gain. The performance of *In Mourning and In Rage* took place on the steps of Los Angeles City Hall in May 1977 and reclaimed women's position as actor/enunciator in a situation of disempowerment, fear and victimisation. The textile/text axis was a central element in the powerful impact of this statement and act of empowerment by women. The power of textile to evoke a mood of mourning, a visceral presence of grief, anger and pain is communicated even in the photograph of this performance piece. How much more powerful the actual event must have been. This piece sent reverberations across the world (Reckitt and Phelan 2001).

Women's ascribed gendered cultural roles centred on the domestic sphere were also a concern that was addressed by women artists. De Beauvoir's insight that what was taken as biologically based (i.e., ascribed gender roles) was in fact a social construct. This insight instigated much feminist theorising and art making. Bernier (1986) comments on the role of modern bourgeoisie ideology which has attempted to limit the majority of women to 'corporeal' or 'biological' roles in society – sexuality, procreation, nurturing roles such as the care of children and dependants, daily preparation of food and household cleaning etc., (Bernier 1986). Reckitt and Phelan comment on the deeply witty and satirical art that emerged from women as comments on the roles assigned to them by an oppressive culture as mothers, prostitutes/whores or asexual elders. Art forms previously assigned as low status craft work became powerful methodologies. Reckitt and Phelan comment "... weaving, quilting and embroidery, were reclaimed as fluent and accessible languages for seriously pointed art making" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.32). Miriam Schapiro, Faith Wilding, Joyce Kozloff, Betye Saar, Faith Ringgold were among the artists who used the fluent languages of textile and text to create powerful representations of their concerns. Betye Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemina* (1972) combines in a mixed media

art piece a very traditional image of an elderly black woman with a sweeping broom in her hand and a colourful fabric tied as a turban on her head. An apron image of a younger black woman with a baby on her hip in front of washing draped on a fence, with icons of black power, a closed black fist and a rifle completes the image. Behind the *Aunt Jemina* image, Aunt Jemina's smiling face is repeatedly reproduced in small squares referencing patchwork quilts and Andy Warhol's screen prints of Marilyn Monroe. Saar and Faith Ringold were early advocates of racial equality in the art world and in an act of transgression inserted images of black American life into a white dominated art world. (Image 8).

Textile and text was drawn upon to create installation and performance pieces which contributed to a society wide debate on women's roles. In 1972 Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro with their students at the California Institute of the Arts occupied an abandoned building in Los Angeles and during a six week period created seventeen room installations articulating women's perspectives on their prescribed roles in patriarchal societies. Faith Wilding's performance of *Waiting* took place as part of the *Womanhouse* project. This piece which arose from the group consciousness raising methodologies used to create *Womanhouse*, consisted of a seated woman with downcast eyes rocking back and forth with her hands folded in her lap as she recited a Litany of the endless waitings from birth to death that are inscribed in women's passive circumscribed lives. "Waiting, waiting...for someone to come", the woman is dressed in a plain white shirt with black scarf at her neck tucked into a horizontal striped black skirt. The horizontality of the stripes in the skirt and the constriction of the neck scarf are powerful signifiers of restriction, confinement, severe limitation and text reinforces the sense of abjection and loss involved in lives not fully lived. (Image 9).

"Waiting ...waiting...waiting/Waiting for someone to come/Waiting for someone to pick me up/Waiting for someone to hold me/Waiting for someone to feed me/Waiting for someone to change my diaper....Waiting/... Waiting to be a big girl/...Waiting to wear a bra/

Waiting to menstruate/ Waiting to read forbidden books/...Waiting to have a boyfriend/Waiting to go to a party, to be asked to dance, to dance close/Waiting to be beautiful/Waiting for the secret/waiting for life to begin ...Waiting...Waiting to be a somebody/...Waiting for my pimples to go away/waiting to wear lipstick, to wear high heels and stockings/Waiting to get dressed up, to shave my legs/Waiting to be pretty...Waiting.../Waiting for him to notice me, to call me/Waiting for him to ask me out.../Waiting for him to fall in love with me...

'Waiting to get married/...Waiting for my wedding night/...Waiting for him to come home, to fill my time.../Waiting for my baby to come/Waiting for my belly to swell/Waiting for my breasts to fill with milk/Waiting to feel my baby move/Waiting for my legs to stop swelling/Waiting for the first contractions/Waiting for the contractions to end/Waiting for the head to emerge/Waiting for the first scream, the afterbirth/Waiting for my baby to suck my milk/Waiting for my baby to stop crying ...Waiting for him to tell me something interesting, to ask me how I feel/Waiting for him to stop being crabby, to reach out for my hand, to kiss me good morning/Waiting for fulfilment ...

'Waiting for my body to break down, to get ugly/Waiting for my flesh to sag/Waiting for a visit from my children, for letters/Waiting for my friends to die /Waiting for the pain to go away/Waiting for the struggle to end /Waiting (Faith Wilding 1971 in Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.86)

The *Womanhouse* project also contained a piece entitled *Nurturant Kitchen* created by Susan Frazier, Vickie Hodgetts and Robin Weltsch. This room installation was made of found and fabricated objects which were painted red. Miriam Schapiro has explained the genesis of this art work. (**Image 10**).

"Out of our consciousness-raising techniques came the motif for the kitchen. As we expressed our real underlying feelings about the room, it became obvious that the kitchen was a battleground where women fought with their mothers for their appropriate share of comfort and love. It was an arena where ostensibly the horn of plenty overflowed, but where in actuality the mother was acting out her bitterness over being imprisoned in a situation from which she could not bring herself to escape. Three women collaborated on the kitchen.... the reality of women's condition that was epitomised by this kitchen, made the experience of walking into our nurturing centre breathtaking ..." (Schapiro 1973 quoted in Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.86).

Womanhouse was an influential project that was replicated in several sites internationally, including Karen Walker's *Woman's Place*. In London in 1974 seven women artists created installations in a dilapidated building using found

objects and assemblages of textile and text to comment on women's circumscribed domestic lives. Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, a video piece in black and white similarly articulates women's discontent with being confined solely to the domestic sphere. Rosier is both theoretician and practising artist and in this 6-minute long video she eloquently references textile and text in her statement of frustration at women's cultural confinement. In the video, wrapped in a large apron she stands in front of a table with kitchen utensils while she recites the alphabet holding up a domestic item to illustrate each letter. *A* is for Apron, *B* is for Bowl and so on. As the piece progresses, she becomes increasingly frantic and inarticulate in her recitation, recklessly brandishing knives and utensils in a threatening manner! She stabs the air with her kitchen knives and throws the contents of her soup ladle in the direction of the camera. Language fails her as she expresses in gesture her repressed rage and the rage of all women at centuries of unpaid and unacknowledged domestic servitude and oppression. (Image 11).

Mary Kelly, a theorist and practising artist, used textile and text in her *Post Partum Document*, a series of works made during 1973-1979, reflecting on the mother/child relationship in the light of neo-Freudian theory and her own day to day experience of mothering. She states:

"In 1973 Post-Partum Document was conceived as an ongoing process of analysis and visualisation of the mother/child relationship. It was born as an installation in six consecutive sections comprising in all 135 small units. It grew up as an exhibition, adapted to a wide variety of genres (some realising my desire for it to be what I wanted it to be, others resisting, transgressing) and finally reproduced itself in the form of a book" (Kelly 1983 quoted in Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.90).

Kelly used nappy liners of gauzy textile fabric stained with faecal matter onto which she printed details from her diary of her baby's feeding routines. These were mounted and hung under perspex. Kelly's work is a seminal example of a transgression of the dominant canon's suitability criteria for high art. *Post Partum Document* inserted woman's lived experience and subjectivity into the discourse

of conceptual art and claims a new domain for women's art practice. Underpinning this series is Kelly's dialogue with the dogma of Lacanian psychoanalysis where woman's relationship to her child is characterised as a psychic strategy of compensation for the lack of a penis according to Freudian Oedipal theory. Women artists through the use of textile and text, talked back to the dominant discourse. In Reckitt and Phelan's words, "Framed by Lacanian theory... *Post Partum document* emphasised the importance of interpretation and mediation as the key to transforming the symbolic" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.39). (Image 12). The agenda of 'talking back' to the dominant culture continued into the 1980s and 90s framed by different theoretical discourses. Text based works by Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer follow in this tradition.

Unpicking Canons

Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists*, credited as marking the beginnings of a feminist art history, certainly was seminal in demonstrating the importance of art in the politics of culture (Reckitt and Phelan 2001). In this essay, Nochlin states "the fact of the matter is that there have been no supremely great women artists, as far as we know, although there have been many interesting and very good ones who remain insufficiently investigated or appreciated" (Nochlin 1971 in Reckitt and Phelan 2001 ps.204-205). Nochlin's position is that the barriers to women's full participation in culture are institutional, embedded within the societal structure. Lack of access to art education, patronage, curatorial interest made it impossible for women to achieve a full flowering as artists and creators of culture generally. Nochlin concludes: "The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles or our empty internal spaces but in our institutions and our educations – education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter head first into this world of meaningful symbols, signs and signals" (Nochlin 1971 ps.204-205). While Nochlin's essay has been criticised for a certain naivety in the light of a later growing complexity in feminist thought, it certainly was instrumental in

fuelling important work by artists who wished to reclaim and revision the work of their foremothers (Reckitt and Phelan 2001). The work of Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and Joyce Kozloff sought an alternative art historical tradition where women's work could be valorised and acknowledged and in this enterprise the textile/text axis played an important role.

Between 1974 and 1979 Judy Chicago created *The Dinner Party*, a triangular shaped dinner table with 39 place settings. The honoured guests were women historical and mythological recovered during Chicago's researches for the programme she delivered on women's art making at the California Institute of the Arts. Over a hundred women collaborated on this monumental work. The 39 women are each commemorated with a hand painted plate, a cup/chalice and an embroidered place setting. On the base of the table the names of 999 other women excluded from mainstream academic histories and narratives are inscribed. Chicago designed the structure and content of the exhibition and she organised an array of women embroiderers, weavers and ceramists to execute the work. *The Dinner Party* toured as an exhibition and broke attendance records at the museums where it was shown. It marked an important intervention in academic art history. As women were accepted in postgraduate and Doctoral programmes in academic institutions, art history was rewritten to include women's contribution.

As alluded to earlier, *The Dinner Party*, however, became the subject of much controversy within feminism. Debates raged concerning the validity of claiming distinguishing symbols and themes exclusive to women's art making, the reliance on vulvar imagery as signifier of woman and lastly the methodology of creating the work. Although one hundred women collaborated in creating *The Dinner Party*, Chicago's name is primarily associated with it. Feminist commentators felt that this mirrored the traditional patriarchal unacknowledged use of women's work.

Chicago appeared to assert that there was a female core imagery as did theorist Lucy Lippard. This is the essentialist debate, referred to earlier, centred on the relationship of female subjectivity and the body and the complex overarching contribution of language. For the purposes of tracing the role of the textile/text axis it is perhaps sufficient to recognise that as feminist scholarship and art making developed through the next two decades after *The Dinner Party* was created, narratives and theorising became more complex and built up layers of understanding not accessible to artists in the 1970s. The important point here is that these artists drew upon the capabilities of the textile/text axis to articulate and valorise forgotten foremothers in art making thus ensuring a revisioning of academic art histories. In addition, women artists of the 1970s consolidated and legitimised their own position as artists by reference to individual artists of the past. Also, they fuelled a veritable revolution in art making by using textiles traditionally considered inappropriate, again intervening and rewriting canons. The power of women's past was used to rewrite the future of art making. (Image 13).

Miriam Schapiro in her *femme* works reclaimed textile as materia prima as well as important signifier of woman's experience and representation. She turned to neglected traditions of patchwork and other textile arts to create collages of breathtaking colour on a grand scale. Through her '*femmes*' she referenced the history of painting including the female Impressionists Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt. In her collaboration series 1975-76 she directly referenced her artist foremothers emphasising art as a dialogue with the past from the stance of the present, a position which disrupts the emphasis in canonical art history on originality and individual genius. (Image 14).

In the '*femmes*', some of which were executed on a very large scale (for example, *The Anatomy of a Kimono* 1976 – 50 feet high) Schapiro combined paint with patchwork like collaged fabric pieces to create striking statements revisioning and valorising woman's contribution to visual language (Gouma-

Peterson 1999). (**Image 15**). Her students at California Arts adopted the technique and *femmage* was defined as art work. The activities of saving and recycling scraps were an important element and drawing or handwriting sewn into the work, a narrative sequence and pattern were other important elements (Reckitt and Phelan 2001). Reclaiming the decorative was for Schapiro an important objective. Gouma-Peterson states that by the mid-1970s decoration had become an integral part of the structure of Schapiro's art (Gouma-Peterson 1999). Gouma-Peterson quotes Schapiro's description of what was the primary underlying motivation in her '*femmagés*'. Schapiro states:

"...the wish to have the art speak as a woman speaks... to be sensitive to the material used as though there were a responsibility to history to repair the sense of omission and to have each substance in the collage be a reminder of a woman's dreams" (Gouma-Peterson 1999 p.32).

Schapiro's art of *femmage*, incorporating textile, ornament and text, was intended as a critique of a hegemony of male representation as well as a method of reclaiming women's traditional art making long excluded from recognition as art. In Schapiro's hands textile and text became powerful tools for expressing a culture of two in art making. The colour, soft sensuousness and decorative beauty of her work challenge the heroic in art and its overtones of mastery and power. The textile/text axis became central to her concern to "make a place for ourselves as thinking, dreaming, yearning people" (Gouma-Peterson 1999 p.97). Schapiro as a woman artist sought to legitimate her artistic ancestry. Textile and text facilitated her in doing so.

Embodied Language

*I see fiber as the basic element constructing the
organic world of our planet,
as the greatest mystery of our environment.
It is from fiber that all living organisms are built –
The tissues of plants, and ourselves.
Our nerves, our generic code,
the canals of our veins, our muscles.
We are fibrous structures,*

*Our heart is surrounded by the coronary plexus,
the plexus of most vital threads.
Handling fiber, we handle mystery.
A dry leaf has a network reminiscent of a dry mummy.
What can become of fiber guided by the artist's hand and by his intuition?
What is fabric?
We weave it, we sew it, we shape it into forms.
When the biology of our body breaks down
the skin has to be cut so as to give access to the inside,
Later it has to be sewn like fabric.
Fabric is our covering and our attire. Made with our hands,
it is a record of our souls.
(Magdalena Abkanowicz in Constantine and Reuter 1997 p.116)*

The 1980s in women's art and theorising is characterised by a deep concern with the question of the female body and its relationship to subjectivity and language. "At the heart of the language of feminism is a complicated attempt to address embodiment, politically, aesthetically, historically, psychoanalytically " (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.37). In this discourse, concern with woman's history as creator of representation and meaning was replaced with theoretical discourse. Women's scholarship became more complex drawing on metadiscourses of philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, sociology. A critical theory stance became de rigueur in art criticism and discourse. Reckitt and Phelan and Chadwick agree that the 1980s saw a fundamental reorientation of women's theorising and representation (Reckitt and Phelan 2001, Chadwick 2007).

As already stated, the work of women artists and theorists in the 1970s and early 1980s drew attention to the role of gender in determining women's negative status vis a vis high art and culture creation. Masculinist narratives of high art as male domain and woman's representation in that narrative as object to be possessed and consumed were named and challenged (Chadwick 2007). To counter the male gaze as the predominant creator of signifiers in relation to woman's representation, 1970s women artists, particularly in the US "expressed a generally celebratory attitude towards the female body and female experience" (Chadwick 2007 p.9). However, as the decade progressed, artists and feminists

became increasingly aware of the problems, contradictions and limitations inherent in this stance. As the influences of post structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, semiology, Saussuraian linguistics, the sociology of Althusser and Foucault and Derrida's critique of metaphysics infused academic scholarship, woman's cultural theorising and art practice was transformed into a state of hybridity. Griselda Pollock advocated a more complex position from which women could theorise and make art. Feminism, she states, should signify a critical practice that should continually deconstruct itself (Chadwick 2007).

Post structuralist narratives deconstruct and challenge the notion of a unified, rational autonomous subject. The essential tenet is that neither essences of male or female can be enunciated and that what we are dealing with are linguistic and social constructs which structure representation and which coalesce into ideological systems of dominance and difference. This discourse fractures any notion of a universalised category of 'woman' which in the old discourse was seen as being far from inclusive of the diversity inherent in the signifier 'woman'. As mentioned previously, the discourse of 1970s feminism was centred on white, heterosexual middle class realities. In addition, feminist scholars and artists of that period did not adequately critique and deconstruct the discourses that took place in the museums, art galleries and University History of Art Departments, into which they laboured so hard to insert the history of woman as creator of meaning and culture. Postmodern theories offered new avenues of epistemology to feminist scholars and this had profound influences on women's art practice of the 1980s and 1990s. As suggested in Section Two, European thought, especially the work of Lacan, has been read by feminist theorists and practitioners as deconstructing the place of woman in postmodern culture. In Lacan's revisioning of Freud's theories, woman is characterised by lack/absence, in a negative position *vis a vis* cultural construction. Woman is seen as "signifier of male power and privilege" (Chadwick 2007 p.13). As stated previously, Lacan stresses the linguistic-like structure of the unconscious and the role of this linguistic process in the construction of the symbolic order, i.e., the languages,

laws, social institutions encrypted in our construction of meaning and representation. Chadwick summarises woman's position *vis a vis* the acquisition of a language position from which to enunciate meaning thus: "Lacking a penis, which signifies phallic power in patriarchal society and provides a speaking position for the male child, woman lacks access to the symbolic order ... In Lacan's view, she is destined 'to be spoken' rather than to speak" (Chadwick 2007 p.13). Deconstruction of the status of Lacanian epistemologies by writers such as Derrida, Irigaray and Cixous has produced fertile sources for women's art practice and theorising where a radical rethinking of the construction of difference, domination and power hegemonies have created new languages and representations seeking to "rupture disciplinary boundaries, decenter authority, and develop strategies that reassert the relationship between agency, power and struggle" (Chadwick 2007 p.14). The range of women's activities as theoreticians and practitioners is multiple and diverse and an embodied language has been an important concern. Reckitt and Phelan state:

"Influenced by Lacan's theory of the symbolic – the network of myths, linguistic, visual and ideological codes through which we experience reality – feminist art and theory in the 1980s set about critiquing how the symbolic systematically deformed the psychic and political realities of women. At the heart of this deformation was a fundamental lack between the affective force of experience and the capacity of language (verbal, visual, mythic, somatic) to express, or to comprehend fully, that experience" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p. 37).

In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous commands women thus: "Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes" (Cixous 1971 in Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.200). Writing in 1976, Sauzeau-Boetti states that woman has been excluded from history:

"... because she has never given MEANINGS OF HER OWN through a LANGUAGE OF HER OWN to culture (and to herself as part of it). The new language cannot be conveyed through an 'old' language but what is of greater importance is that these new meanings CANNOT BE AFFIRMED AT ALL through any alternative positive management of the artistic language... The actual creative project of woman as a subject involves BETRAYING the expressive mechanisms of culture in order to

express herself through the break, within the gaps between the systematic spaces of artistic language, This is a matter of transgression. The cuts and waves in the braided transparent material ... the waiting needles around the curled void knitting... the absent and broken body ... the quivering hands that embroider their own shape with calligraphy and attempt to save themselves from metaphor and unreality, are examples of such a language in the 'negative'. This kind of project offers the only means of objectivizing feminine existence: not a positive avant-garde subversion but a process of differentiation, not a project of fixing" (Sauzeau-Boetti 1976 in Reckitt and Phelan 2001 ps.213-214).

Elizabeth Grosz's words (quoted by Baert) held deep resonance for women artists troubled by the layers of meaning in representation of the female body. The body, she states, is "an open ended pliable set of significations, capable of being rewritten, reconstituted in quite other terms than those which mark it and consequently capable of re-ascribing ... sexed identity and psychical subjectivity" (Baert 2001 p.12). Regina Baert also points to the female body being "caught in a vast network of signification" (Baert 2001 p.13). In the 1980s the agenda for women artists was one of intervention in this signification and effecting some form of retrieval of female imagery. Textile and text became a key aspect of this agenda. Baert explains that clothing/textile, "because of its juncture between the body and the social, its linking of corporeality and culture, can be utilised as a medium through which to speak to the contradicting sites of femininity" (Baert 2001 p.13). Women artists used textile as surrogate for the body in order to intervene in dominant cultural inscriptions of woman and in so doing succeeded in "... subjectifying the absent body that is yet referred to through the delegate of clothing, these [art] works may have an effectivity in abating the power of the unconscious images of sexual difference ..." (Baert 2001 p.20 - parenthesis mine). As previously stated, for Cixous, the deconstruction of phallogocentric culture demands that the artist becomes a "searching woman" who journeys to create a "language that speaks before speech ... an index of truth on the other side of words" past the labyrinth of Derridean endlessly referred signification and intertextuality" (Nye 1988 p.198). For Cixous the locus of this language is the

female body. As Nye states, "The discovery of the feminine is a discovery of the female body ...one must write the body Cixous urged ..." (Nye 1988 p. 189).

In her attempt "to render possible a culture of two", Irigaray emphasises women's need for "a religion, a language and a currency of exchange or a non-market economy of their own" (Irigaray 2004 p.vii; Irigaray 1993). Irigaray's *Parler Femme* agenda suggested that women "ought to discover and cultivate a language of my own, and to create bridges between this language and my body ..." (Irigaray 2004 p.145). The agenda of an embodied language created much debate and soul searching within women's creative endeavours and theorising. Accusations surfaced of reverting to the old biological essentialism inherent in the 1970s effort to create a system of female imagery, based on womb and vulvar representations.¹⁷ Suffice it to say here that the rich tapestry of ideas and the debate generated fuelled women's art making and creativity and that the textile/text axis combined with this discourse to revolutionise women's art making, rupture discourses, transgress ideas of appropriate subject matter and revolutionise methodologies of art making and representation.

Embodied Language – Praxis

Carrie May Weems used the body, textile and text in her 1987 photographic tableau, thereby holding up mirrors to the dominant culture. Weems uses cultural myth to explore prejudice based on skin colour. In *Mirror Mirror*, a black woman holds up a mirror and asks 'Who's the finest of them all?' The mirror image white woman enveiled in a nun like wimple of transparent fabric holding a silver star in her hand replies 'Snow white you black bitch and don't you forget it!!!!' Text, textile, narrative and humour combine to identify "dilemmas of identification for black and white women inviting each to question the notions of beauty in which they situate themselves" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.137). (**Image 16**). Lorna Simpson in her 1991 piece *Back* suggests a sense of danger, wariness and

¹⁷ This debate is addressed in Section Two of the thesis.

fragmentation. The image consists of two separated fields, a woman's upper back and a head and a text enframed in plaited wool/hair. The message in the text "eyes in the back of your head" and the fragmented body image disrupts and denies the integrity of the woman's body and references the possibility of negation or hostility, gender and colour combined, may elicit. **(Image 17)**.

Mary Kelly's *Interim Project* is a series of 30 silk-screened plexiglas pieces. It is based on surrogate body representations of twisted and knotted textile/clothing accompanied by handwritten text of women's accounts of ageing. The textile images reference Charcot's (the 19th century psychiatrist with whom Freud studied) photographs and texts compiled in his studies of hysteria in his women patients.¹⁸ Kelly arranges her textile surrogates of the female body to mimic the hysterical poses Charcot identified from his research. Kelly, using textile and text, challenges and disrupts misogynistic explanations of hysteria as a physical illness inherent in woman's biology and places it in "the domain of discourse and language as a cultural construct" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p. 140). **(Image 18)**.

Annette Messenger's 1990 *Dress Shrines* consist of life size dresses in pastel colours placed in glass cases. Texts, drawings, photographs are appended to the dresses creating images of an absent body. The dresses serve as metamorphical presences embodying women's experience. The body of woman is absent but the dresses and appendages provide a trace, a record of lived female experience. **(Image 19)**.

Islamic woman artists have created powerful representations of women's embodied language. In Mona Hatoum's 1998 video piece, *Measures of Distance*, Arabic text from her mother's sorrowful letters from Beirut to her exiled daughter living in the UK stream across her mother's body in waves of desolation and loss at lives caught up in inexorable separations and wars. The bond of mother and daughter is valorised and enunciated in language and their joint subversion of

¹⁸ An account of Freud's and Charcot's studies of hysteria in women at the Salpetriere and in Vienna can be found in Appignamesi (2009) and in Appignamesi and Forrester (1992).

patriarchal law is poignantly conjured when the mother writes “don't mention a thing about it to your father” (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.166). (Image 21).

Moroccan artist, Lalla Essaydi has also created evocative images of women's lives in her body text/textile images. In her photographic work, *Converging Territories*, Essaydi is referencing both Hatoum's and Shirin Neshat's earlier work. In Essaydi's image, 4 females, perhaps a mother and her three daughters (we are not told) face the camera squarely, standing in their all textile environment of cream hand woven fabric which is used to create their enveloping traditional dress as well as the background and floor. Three of the figures are to varying degrees veiled; the 'mother' figure's face is totally obscured by the drape of her veil. Arabic calligraphic text is inscribed by Essaydi across the entire image creating a powerful site of ambiguity, mystery and longing. Relationships between domestic/private and public, between revealed and veiled and the body as site of public meaning are encrypted in this work. Essaydi's poetic text written in the classical Arabic reserved for the sacred texts of Islam is used to re-imagine women's lives as free and woman's identity as transnational subject (Chadwick 2007). (Image 20).

Inis t'Oirr Aran Dance is a work consisting of a series of slide images accompanied by a voice on tape. The images consist of Aran knitting patterns superimposed on a male body/torso. The work was created by artist Pauline Cummins in 1985. Marshall states that this tape/slide installation interrogates notions of male/female, domestic/public, nature/culture, creator/receiver “while at the same time forcing a fresh appraisal of the relationship between craft and fine art” (Marshall 2002, p.87). *Inis t'Oirr Aran Dance* uses images of knitting, denigrated by the Academy to reclaim recognition for women as artists. The tape voice meditates on knitting as “drawing with wool”, as design spun from a woman's head, women finger weaving their dreams and fantasies. Cummins insists on knitting being considered as serious art practice. In this daring 1980s piece, Cummins also challenges the dominance of the male gaze in Western art.

The body onto which the Aran patterns are projected is male, the voice on the tape is female. Marshall comments:

"In Inis t'Oirr the relationship between the male subject and the owner of the gaze is made explicit and active by the woman's voice on the tape. Thus both partners are represented openly without voyeuristic connotations... The link between knitting and nurture grounds it in a loving and erotic relationship based on mutual care and trust rather than an exploitative pornographic one ... the male body is not objectified in Inis t'Oirr as the female had been for centuries in Western art. Cummins shows that it is possible to represent the sexualised body without reducing it to commodity..." (Marshall 2002 ps.88-89).

Those important enunciations were made by Pauline Cummins in 1980s Ireland using drawings of knitting patterns that resemble preliterate text from Neolithic Dowth or Newgrange reaching back into a pre-patriarchal past to reclaim and invoke, in Irigaray's terms, a balanced culture of two. (**Image 22**).

Inis t'Oirr Aran Dance

*Begin at the beginning,
In a sense knitting is like drawing with a long piece of wool.
It's finger weaving,
From the fleece to a warm pullover.
A jumper, a jacket, a coat.
And where do the patterns come from?
From the woman's head. Did you make that out of your own head now?
And if knitting is like drawing with a long piece of wool then women have
been drawing with wool for quite some time.
Weaving their dreams and fantasies into garments.
For their children, for themselves and for their menfolk.
I'll spin you a yarn. I'll weave you a tale and as the lines weave in and out
of each other they produce a pattern.
And where did the patterns come from?
From the woman's head?
Ploughed fields.
Waving sand.
Weaving water.
And what are the berries?
They look like nipples to me.
But they're like berries too.
Or little houses set in wall fields with the sea on the other side.
Aran.*

*The hidden male body.
Buried.
Suppressed.
Touch the hip.
Into the waist.
Squeeze.
Rub up.
The back.
The movement in.
The spine bending,
Extending.
Joining.
The shoulders, Broad, wide, thick ...*

Pauline Cummins

(Cummins 1985 in Marshall 2002, centre page/not numbered)

Genealogies and Biographies

As we have seen in the *Unpicking Canons* section, women were keen to recover their female artistic ancestry and art making traditions. Similarly, a significant concern was the recovering and revisioning of personal biographies and genealogies. Chadwick makes the point that in the 1980s and 1990s women artists used narrative strategies comprised of multiple personalities and voices "... the fusing of fact and fiction, and re-tellings of history and biography to deconstruct patriarchally based cultural forms" (Chadwick 2007 p. 415). Women artists choose autobiography and narrative structures as methodologies for investigating female experience and subjectivity.

In 1994, US artist, Ann Hamilton, created an installation/performance in Ruth Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica, California to which she gave the title *lineament* . In this project she created 'bookballs' reminiscent of large balls of wound textured wool. Hamilton's 'bookballs' were created from carefully sliced narrow strips of printed text which she then in the performance wound up into large spherical balls. A printed thread/narrative was created and endlessly wound into texts, 'bookballs' that, in Meskimmon's words, "deconstructed the conventions of

disembodied gender-neutral reading remaking the very matter of text and textile” (Meskimmon 2003 p.155). In *lineament* textile and text become interchangeable. Hamilton uses this interchangeability to reference her genealogy, her line, her ‘lineage’. Hamilton studied textiles at the University of Kansas and then went on to postgraduate studies at Yale where “she felt an implicit pressure to reject her long association with domestic or craft activity. “Everyone is making big steel stuff so you don’t really feel like knitting. It’s all very unspoken” Hamilton tells us. (Meskimmon 2003 p.157). Hamilton felt her textile work negated in the presence of an academic environment which not only privileged steel over textile but also insisted on a divide between theory and practice and which valorised theory as a purely abstract way of knowing. In the environment Hamilton found herself in “...Books, as symbolic containers of masculine transcendent knowledge, are empowered over knitted textiles, or any other product of women’s traditional craftwork” (Meskimmon 2003 p.157). Hamilton created her ‘bookballs’ on a monumental scale and the very act of creating them, the endless winding of the thread/narrative, became an aesthetic practice which reclaimed the connections between textile and text, a way of knowing grounded in the materiality of her spinning/knitting/weaving heritage. **(Image 23)**. Meskimmon states that Hamilton:

“reconnects books with their corporeal genealogies ... She revisits the effacement of the feminine by the masculine, matter by form and counters its monolithic logic. Hamilton’s own career was caught up in the gendered languages of art practice and her negotiation of these parameters demonstrated her ability to connect text and text-based theory with materiality and ‘women’s work’” (Meskimmon 2003 ps.156-157).

The performance placed the woman artist reading and winding the text/thread as the central gesture of the installation. Women are portrayed as representing and remaking old paradigms thereby establishing legitimacy for their own maternal genealogies of art making.

In 1986, Faith Ringgold, African American artist, created a story quilt and performance entitled: *Change: Faith Ringgold’s 100 Pound Weight Loss*

*Performance Story Quilt.*¹⁹ This textile and text art piece was made of silk and cotton with autobiographical photo-etched images and text. A border of printed and pieced fabric surround the photo-images and text and the entire work is quilted in diamond shapes, in the manner of traditional patchwork quilts. The quilt records Ringgold's weight gains and losses in the context of her childhood, growing up, marriage, motherhood and career as artist/teacher. The text consists of extracts from her autobiographical writings. Ringgold explains her story quilt performance piece thus:

"In 1986 I lost a hundred pounds over the span of a year. To celebrate this I created a performance piece, Change: Faith Ringgold's 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt. I was using my art as a way of making a public commitment not only to lose the weight but to keep it off. This was the first performance in which – significantly – I appeared without a mask. The story I told had to do with eating patterns that had led me to gain weight. I began by making a photomontage of pictures of me beginning with the 1930s through to the 1980s. A plate was made of them and I had these etched on canvas ... During the performance I wore a quilted coat that had the same photo etchings and written text that appeared on the quilt... this precious documentation of my life. The performance was divided into six acts, one for each decade and for each I recited anecdotes that related to my eating habits over the years" (Ringgold 2005 ps.241-242).

Ringgold used textile and text to create a precious documentation of her life.

(Image 24).

The disruption of mother/daughter genealogies in patriarchal culture and their representation and retrieval has also been a concern of women artists. Irigaray states:

"Patriarchy has disrupted mother-daughter relationships through an act of matricide... One sees this matricide at the beginning of our culture: our culture has been founded on it. When the fathers took power, they had already annihilated the mother. This can be seen in mythology, in Greek tragedy" (Irigaray in Robinson 2006 p.177).

¹⁹ Ringgold's *French Collection* series of story quilts is considered in depth in Chapter Ten of this thesis.

For Irigaray, introducing representation of the mother/daughter relationship in the public domain is a key component to intervening in the symbolic order to create a culture of two.

"I suggest putting posters in all public places with beautiful pictures (belle images) representing the mother daughter couple ... such representations are missing from all civil and religious sites. This is a cultural injustice that is easy to remedy. There will be no wars, no dead, no wounded. This can be done before any reform of language, which will be a much longer process. This cultural restitution will begin to redress women's individual and collective loss of identity. It will cure them of some ills, including distress, but also rivalry... It will help move them from the private sphere to the public... The point of these representations is to give girls a valid representation of their genealogy, an essential condition for the constitution of their identity" (Irigaray 1989 in Robinson 2006 ps. 179-80).

Hannah Wilke's homage to her mother in *So Help Me Hannah Series: Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother Selma Butter*, made in 1978-81 and Wilke's series of work made leading up to her own death from cancer 11 years later in 1992, *The Intra-Venus Series*, can be read in conjunction with each other as a deep meditation on the mother/daughter relationship. Wilke created the *Intra-Venus* series of life size colour photographs, watercolour self portraits, medical object sculptures and collages in the period of her illness leading up to her death from lymphoma. The photographs of Wilke, scarred and bruised from the ravages of the disease and its invasive treatments present poignant images of the artist in her death bed enwrapped in blue and pinks and green crochet and knitted blankets/shrouds as her mother surely had swaddled her as a baby at the commencement of her life on earth. In the earlier work, Wilke presents a portrait of her mother, Selma, in black and white photographs showing her frail and mastectomy scarred body facing the camera. In the image of Selma, her daughter Hannah is pictured beside her in a separate frame. The beauty of Hannah's breasts is disrupted by tumour like growths of chewing gum; an act of empathy with her mother's suffering and dis-ease. Wilke's work meditates on the empathy, shared suffering of mourning and loss inherent in the mother/daughter relationship but also represents the bonds of love that infused the relationship

with her own mother and which in the metaphor of the crochet blankets of her own deathbed comforted Hannah Wilke in her last moments of life.

(Image 25 and Image 26).

Irigaray describes a profound personal encounter with a mother/daughter image experienced by her in 1984.

"In May 1984 after a conference at the Venice-Mestre Women's Center entitled Divine Women, I went to visit the Island of Torcello. In the museum there was a statue of a woman in the position of Mary, Jesus's mother sitting presenting the child who sits on her knee, facing those who look at them. I was admiring this beautiful wooden sculpture when I noticed that this Jesus was a girl! That had an effect on me, which was perceptual, mentally significant, and of jubilation. I felt freed from the tensions of that cultural truth imperative which is also practised in art: a virgin-mother woman and her son depicted as models of redemption we should believe in. Standing before this statue representing Mary and her mother Anne, I felt returned calmly and joyously into my body, my affections, and my woman's history. I was facing an aesthetic and ethical figure that I need to be able to live without contempt for my incarnation, for that of my mother and other women" (Irigaray 1990 in Robinson 2006 p.181).

Robinson goes on to say that the sculpture which so moved Irigaray on that May day is a fifteenth century wooden, wall mounted statue of a mother and daughter couple. A gesture of affection passes between them, Robinson states, yet the mother's presence does not envelop the daughter's. With similar faces and posture they are separate beings "looking out on the world together with pleasure" (Robinson 2006 p.181). Other similar images from the same period show St. Anne teaching Mary to read. Images of a woman teaching are rare in the iconography of Western art. Such images of a woman teaching are indeed subversive in light of the sentence of silence imposed on them by Paul, the apostle "Let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church" (1 Corinthians 14:35) and John Chrysostom's 4th century A.D. confirmation, "The woman taught once, and ruined all. On this account ...let her not teach" (Robinson 2006, p.183). In teaching her daughter Mary to read, Anne was empowering her to access knowledge. Robinson comments "It is

then doubly subversive to have an image of a woman teaching and another woman learning, it represents a genealogy of women's knowledge being passed through the generations, actively taught and learned, beyond the control of the church and of husbands (and fathers) within families" (Robinson 2006 p. 181). **(Image 27).**

Frances Hegarty, in her 1995 *Turas* video shows a slow-motion sequence of two women, her mother and herself "engaged in a series of wordless gestural exchanges, indicating an attempt to locate and reaffirm a forgotten language associated with the corporeality of the mother" (Hegarty in Deepwell 2005, p.62). In an interview with art critic, Kathy Deepwell, Hegarty explains the origin of this work in reawakened desire to relearn the Irish language, her mother tongue of her native Donegal. Hegarty's mother was a native Irish speaker. Stills from the video piece show a mother's hand touch her daughter's mouth perhaps shaping her lips to ease pronunciations of the forgotten language. In other photographic stills the mother and daughter sit side by side, Anne and Mary like, with the daughter reading from a book in her lap watched encouragingly by the mother. Hegarty goes onto explain to Deepwell that "my relationship to the mother tongue was not only gendered, but predicated on a genealogical link to the maternal body" (Hegarty in Deepwell 2005 p.62). Sadly, Hegarty's mother died shortly after the *Turas* work was completed and with her death Hegarty's desire to reclaim Irish waned, her longing to access original texts in the Irish language forever unfulfilled. **(Image 28).**

Feminist theories of biography have found that women have a complex relationship to memory which is very different from a male tradition of self authored autobiography as master narrative (Merck and Townsend 2002). Women's writing/representation of their lives, Merck and Townsend suggest, can be seen as narrative genre within the category of biography. Writing/representing from a position of marginality, from the borderlands of patriarchy, women's autobiographies in text and image entail recreating subjectivities, dealing with

collective memory, confession, tracing/refashioning subjectivity and restructuring past lives. Visual artists such as Tracy Emin have reworked the concept of biography into new and challenging forms.²⁰ Emin has skilfully used textile and text to engage in a form of 'self-life- drawing' a staging of memory that shapes Emin's performative oeuvre (Merck and Townsend 2002 p.33). While Emin appears to present herself and her lived experiences as the text of her artwork, it would be inadequate to simply read her work as ego representation or pity pleas as some critics have done. Rather, Emin employs a sophisticated range of different artistic strategies to mediate and intervene in her lived subjectivity and its expression. Her 1995 tent piece, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*, has, according to Merck and Townsend, been read by most critics as 'an in-yer-face' assertion of female sexuality. They go on to suggest a deeper reading of the work that locates it in a more complex site of interpretation. The piece, they state,

" ...is about the intimacy of sleep, and relies upon the painstaking inscription of the names of all Emin's sleeping partners in an appliquéd litany of lovers, friends and family members, including her twin brother, Paul and two aborted fetuses, on the inside of a small tent ... The work ... can only be seen fully by peering or crawling into the interior. The slow and considered process of embroidering each name on the tent's inside invites however a more considered viewing that reflects on the labour involved, not only in the making of the work itself, but in the making of relationships, traditionally a feminine task ... The use of a domestic aesthetic, a personal life story and craft techniques ... clearly connects Emin to earlier practices of feminist artists ..." (Merck and Townsend 2002 ps. 33-34).

Reckitt and Phelan suggest that Emin's recollections of the past function "as an exorcism of the emotional trauma" and that this mirrors the earlier activities of feminist consciousness raising strategies" (Reckitt and Phelan 2001 p.174). Textile and text are ever present in her work of revisioning her own biography and representing it as a statement of lived feminine subjectivity. (**Image 29**).

²⁰ The textile oeuvre of Emin is considered in Chapter Nine of this thesis.

Summary

Making inventive use of the grid of Ruskin's 'whole cloth', women artists of the end of the 20th century have created a complex edifice of representation giving expression to their deepest concerns; the deep trauma of an awakening realisation of the constraints which circumscribed their life in phallogentric societies; a desire to talk back to institutionalised oppression; an unpicking of the canons of metadiscourses which marginalized them as creators of meaning and culture; the desire to retrieve an authentic voice, an embodied language of woman's representation; and a retrieval of disrupted maternal genealogies and biographies. The thesis suggests that the textile and text axis played a central role in the unfolding of this revolutionary period of women's signification and culture:

- As articulate and unique lexicon of women's representation and meanings
- As fertile wellspring and receptive materiality of signification
- As site of ambiguity, location of layered meanings and complex discourses
- As embodiment of visual and representational languages, conceptual and corporeal

Section Five, which follows, will consider these in greater detail as the role of the textile/text axis in the oeuvre of three important contemporary artists – Tracey Emin, Louise Bourgeois and Faith Ringgold is presented in a series of in-depth case studies.

SECTION FIVE

The Voice of the Shuttle: Arachne Reborn

Section Five traces *The Voice of the Shuttle* in the work of three contemporary women artists, Tracey Emin, Louise Bourgeois and Faith Ringgold in order to deepen our understanding of the role of the textile/text axis in contemporary aesthetic practice. The three case studies presented in Section Five provide an opportunity for in-depth soundings of the praxis of three significant creators of culture in the 21st century. Chapter Nine considers the textile work of the British artist, Tracey Emin. Chapter Ten deals with the late textile oeuvre of Louise Bourgeois and Faith Ringgold's epic series of story quilts, *The French Collection*, are investigated in Chapter Eleven. The three artists who are the subject of the in-depth case studies are at the forefront of contemporary art making practice. Between them, they have achieved at least 130 years of art making and all are recognized as significant contributors to cultural creation and innovation. In all three cases, textile and text has played a significant role in their aesthetic practice. As we shall see in Chapter Nine to follow, Tracey Emin has used textile and text as a fluid language for autobiographical statement and insightful social commentary, embroidering her persona as 'Mad Tracey from Margate' as mechanism for negotiating a pathway in a highly competitive art world. Louise Bourgeois has used textile and text as a rich signifier in the last decade of her aesthetic practice continuing her enunciation of the deepest levels of human suffering and ambivalence. Her gestures of prayer/repair/stitch are, as we shall see in Chapter Ten, deeply enmeshed in the materiality, language and techniques of the textile and text axis. For Faith Ringgold, the subject of the third case study presented in Chapter Eleven, textile and text become the language and syntax whereby histories are re-envisioned, issues of gender, race, slavery, corporeality and lost genealogies are repositioned in a lucid and elegant representation. The five concerns of women artists in the last decades of the 20th century presented in Chapter Eight above – women's awakening, talking back, unpicking canons, embodied language and genealogies and autobiographies –

are deeply interwoven in the work of the three artists. In the oeuvre of these three artists the textile/text axis acted as prime visual metaphor in the great task of Arachne reclaiming a speaking voice.

Chapter Nine

Philomela's Comfort Blanket: Tracing a Pattern

- (i) *"White linen is the paper of [housewives] which must be on hand in great well-ordered layers, and therein they write their entire philosophy of life, their woes and their joys" (Keller 1864 in Wayland Barber 1995).*
- (ii) *"In truth, cloth for thousands of years was the notebook that recorded the woes, joys, hopes, visions and aspirations of women" (Wayland Barber 1995 ps.255-256).*

Chapter Nine engages with the work of Tracey Emin and explores the role of textile and text in her oeuvre. Tracey Emin, Member of the Royal Academy, First Class Honours Degree, Maidstone College, Master of Fine Art, Royal College of Art, London, Honorary Doctor of Philosophy, University of Canterbury, British representative at the Venice Biennale 2007, television/tabloids/Sunday Magazine celebrity, YBA phenomenon, 'High Art Lite'; an apparent accessibility, autobiographical/soap opera content in her work; an extraordinary naivete in presenting her bed, unmade, soiled, as subject matter of post modern art discourse (My Bed, Turner Prize Exhibit 1998). (**Image 30**). Such apparently contradicting stances vis a vis Emin's work range along a continuum of dismissal and denigration to endowment with iconic status. In 1999, Julian Stallabrass published *High Art Lite*, a study of young British artists (YBAs) of the 1990s. The work of Tracey Emin occupies a predictably prominent position in Stallabrass's review of 1990s British art. Emin's oeuvre is characterised by Stallabrass in terms of "a combination of pop-cultural consumability and knowingly progressive expressionism...understood to promulgate the ... romantic myth of the artist as creative primitive, while none the less, in the more sophisticated context of the art world, cunningly exploiting the incongruity of its own naivete for conceptual effect. It thus manages to achieve the marketing coup of being simultaneously popular and elitist..." (Stallabrass in Osborne 2002, p.40). Osborne raises many perceptive questions concerning Emin's and YBA's art practice and its deeper meanings and its critical (or lack of it) reception. The public success of YBA, he

says, has been in inverse proportion to its critical reception. Of Stallabrass's critique, Osborne comments:

"...It has been in such a hurry to reach its destination (condemnation) that it seems barely to have paused for reflection upon its objects, let alone to have considered the possibility that they might pose genuine problems for... established critical terms [of art discourse]" (Osborne 2002 p.40, parenthesis mine).

Stallabrass finds little content, complexity or ambivalence in Emin's work. For him, Emin's and the other YBAs' art has the appearance of art but really is a substitute for art that has at its core media representations of everyday life as art. Osborne perceptively asks: "But is Emin's art really no more than a symptom of a commodified fusion of cultural forms, peddling regressive stereotypes of the artist ... interpretively barren because 'not quite art' in the critically proper sense? Or does it *address* this condition within which it is located artistically, and, in the process tell us something about it, and, with that, something about the conditions of contemporary art?" (Osborne 2002 p.41).

Osborne is raising a crucial question, *Does Emin's art reflect and deliberately mirror the cultural context within which it is embedded?* Is Emin through her artwork attempting to talk back to the cultural milieu within which she finds herself, holding up a mirror for all to see of her journey from working class Margate of the 1960s to honoured/vilified art celebrity of the 21st century? Osborne critiques Stallabrass's stance vis a vis Emin's art as an art critical discourse grounded in a network of conceptual relationships between art, culture and criticism whose origins can be traced back to the position of the German romantics when art was viewed as the site of a metaphysical, secular religious type experience while this 'philosophical inflation' of art discourse has been continuously questioned by modern and post modern critique such as Duchampian art practices, feminist challenges to art canons and Saussurian linguistics. Nevertheless, as Osborne points out, a coherent credible account/theory of "arts specificity as a cultural form" has not emerged and in this lacunae art criticism tends to default to "some version of the philosophical

presuppositions of Romanticism ... [that] remains the implicit basis upon which both the specificity and cultural authority of contemporary art depend as a distinct sphere or 'subsystem' of the social" (Osborne 2002 ps. 41-42, parenthesis mine). Osborne contends that this is the root of Stallabrass's reaction to Emin. "Emin's is a body of work that poses ... troublesome questions in a particularly acute form", Osborne states (Osborne 2002 p.42). These questions relate to what we define as 'art' and what kind of claims we can legitimately make about it.

Osborne states that Emin's art work has become

"entangled in the question of criticism ... it reflects the culturally problematic character of contemporary art and art criticism, as inextricably linked, mutually determining aspects of a single cultural complex ... but which Stallabrass is unable to see" (Osborne 2002 p.44).

In other words, as Robinson suggests, art critical discourse has not developed a vocabulary or referent context within which to locate woman's cultural contribution (Robinson 2006). Townsend and Merck suggest that such critiques (as Stallabrass) of Emin's work are both "credulous and superficial" (Townsend and Merck 2002 p.2). Townsend and Merck's thesis is that Emin's art work is carefully meditated upon, layered and made with a complexity of multiple meanings. Emin, in their eyes, may have "gone with the grain" of mass media and celebrity status in her use of video, advertisements, press interviews etc. but for them her work is apprehended as sophisticated and with an enduring quality (Townsend and Merck 2002). The British media and critical characterisation of Emin as 'Mad Tracey from Margate', "the erratic, overwrought, oversexed, impulsive woman, rising from her soiled, unmade bed to grab time on a talk show" is a gross travesty of an artist of whose oeuvre, Townsend and Merck suggest, 'introvert', 'intelligence' as more appropriate readings. The essence of Emin's work for Townsend and Merck is an immediacy of expression used as a strategy to facilitate yet mask a deeply 'ethical engagement' both with her own personal history, social context and the history of art (Townsend and Merck 2002). Townsend and Merck suggest Osborne's reading of Emin's work as eclectic mix of contemporary culture, an iconic and ambivalent gesture,

portraying a fundamental "... structuring principle of female existence through its symbolic condensation into the representational history of her own body"

(Townsend and Merck 2002 p.13). For Townsend and Merck, Emin's work is

" ... a shimmering multiple portrait – simultaneously signifier of self, reflective representation of the social whole, and exemplar of the reflectivity of the art work" (Townsend and Merck 2002 p.13)

In summary, Emin's work may be constructed on a dual axis of a world of commodity and artist identity and, however flawed, it is a deeply serious, courageous and ethically engaged enterprise. What follows attempts to set out the role of textile and text as fluid language and signifier in the work of Tracey Emin. Chapter Nine of the thesis is divided into four parts:

- (i) Philomela's Story Blanket: Emin and Trauma
- (ii) Gesturing Towards Foremothers: Reclaiming Genealogies, Subverting Canons
- (iii) Patchwork Philosophy: Tracing Deeper Meanings
- (iv) Mending a Life: The Role of Textile and Text

Philomela's Story Blanket

- (i) *"I want society to hear what I'm saying. I'm not only talking to galleries, museums and collectors. For me being an artist isn't just about making nice things or people patting you on the back; it's some kind of communication, a message"* (Tracey Emin in Brown 2006 p.53)
- (ii) *"The fact that I'm not Anglo-Saxon, I'm half Cypriot. The fact that my Dad came here in 1948. The fact that my father never went to school. The fact that I'm the first woman in my family to have an education. The fact that I'm the first woman in my family to have a degree. The fact that I left school at thirteen. The fact that I went to a secondary modern school. The fact that I'm not middle class. The fact that I had to work really hard to get through things"* (Tracey Emin in Brown 2006 ps. 15-16).

Mandy Merck sums up Emin's biography in a short stark paragraph. Born in 1963, Emin grew up with her twin brother Paul in Margate, SE England, a typical British seaside town. Her Turkish-Cypriot father divided his time between his two families. Her English mother ran a somewhat ramshackle hotel in Margate. Emin was sexually abused at the age of eight, raped at thirteen, promiscuous in her early teens, a figure of mockery as the town 'slag', attempted suicide and was traumatised by the death of her uncle, her mother's beloved brother, in a car crash where he was decapitated (Merck 2002).

Emin situates her representation within a discourse of creativity and trauma. Emin's work can be seen as a revisioning, a reconfiguring of the past. She uses her own life narrative to deal with childhood and adolescent trauma, precocious sexuality, rape, abortion. Emin's own life events are reworked as a set of narratives/memories, "a discourse constructed from but not identical with, the experience it recalls ... much of her material was derived from the period before she became an artist: her childhood, adolescence and early adult sexuality" (Betterton 2002 p. 27; Merck and Townsend 2002). Emin's work traces the real, presents vestiges of memory, material fragments and imprints of life experience. An aesthetic of loss, abjection, shame and resistance permeate her work. Betterton states that Emin gives to that earlier self the opportunity to speak back through her art, a means of resistance against her former silencing, and thus gives form and narrative to an experience that was at the time unspeakable.

Contemporary Philomela

"Aeschylus and Ovid both recount the story of Philomela, an Athenian princess of antiquity. Her sister, Princess Prokne, married the Thracian King Tereus. While on a visit to her sister, Philomela was abducted, imprisoned and raped by Tereus who cut out Philomela's tongue to prevent her from naming her assailant. Philomela, however, was an expert weaver (as were many upper class Athenian women of antiquity) and she wove an account of her ordeal into a tapestry which a servant smuggled to her sister. Prokne immediately understood the message of Philomela's plight and she ordered her release. In grief and rage Prokne killed her own

and Tereus's son Itys. The sisters then fled pursued by Tereus intent on killing them. The myth goes on to relate that the gods turned the two women into birds, Philomela into a swallow which twitters unintelligibly and Prokne into the nightingale whose night song of 'Itys, Itys' eternally mourns her dead son (Wayland Barber 1995).

As contemporary Philomela, Emin speaks of her young self's trauma and shame in Margate where she was taunted during a dancing competition as a 'slag', her underage, insecure self, a minor in law taken advantage of sexually, by a series of men in their middle and late twenties. Emin articulates in the 1990s events that traumatised her in 1980s Margate, victim of a widespread cultural abjection of the feminine as expressed through casual sex, alcohol and drug experimentation. In so doing, Emin "exposes the inadequacy of the classless and value-free nature of much of contemporary art by giving space to the marginalised experiences of working class femininity ... her own body as the signifier of 'Mad Tracey from Margate' who operated as a transgressive figure within the conventions of the art world" (Betterton 2002 p.30). Exclusion, not fitting in, emotional pain and suffering, extreme sexual abuse and abjection; a childhood of illness, asthma, frequent absences from school and days alone in bed recovering, a delicate, spindly, mixed race child made to feel the difference from early on in her life, such is the ground of Emin's art, the *raison d'être* of her art practice. Like Philomela of antiquity, Emin is reading personal trauma into the collective consciousness. In her own words,

"... my drawings are for me, and it's me coming to terms with those things in my life ... The fact that I want people to look at the drawings is that I want people to confront what I've had to confront – what other people have. (Tracey Emin in Brown 2006 p.29).

Tracing Trauma

Emin's father, Envar Emin, owned Hotel International in Margate and Emin spent an important and comfortable early part of her life there. The hotel had eighty bedrooms and five lounges. In her book, *Exploration of the Soul*, (1994), Emin says that as a child she experienced it as a vast terrain, a place of transience, a warren of rooms to explore with her twin brother Paul. When her father's business went bankrupt the hotel was sold and the Emin family squatted in a staff cottage in the grounds of the hotel. *Hotel International*, a fabric blanket work, was made by Emin in 1993. (Image 31). This is a large appliquéd work, 101 inches by 94 inches, and this piece was the first in a major series of fabric works. The text is appliquéd and embroidered onto a pink background recording her own name, her mother's name, Pam Cashin, as well as that of her grandmother, May Dodge, and her twin brother Paul. Part of the blanket is made from the comfort blanket Emin had as a child. A piece of fabric from an old family sofa is also used as are bits of fabric associated with family and friends. In *Hotel International*, Emin gathers her family, friends and lovers together across geographical space invoking not just Margate but Cyprus, Istanbul, London. Fifteen texts handwritten on fabric invoke these relationships, the visual and the textual interwoven signifiers as Emin places the texts describing the relationships on her precious archival fabric pieces. *Hotel International* celebrates its less than perfect 'hand-madedness' as hand sewn cut-out letters list dates, places, events, Brown comments: "Emin's ... imperfections and technical and emotional raggedness are elevated to become a creative principle ... [*Hotel International*] draws together, in one work, the self-reflexive, multiple voices of the monoprints" (Brown 2006, p.44/Parenthesis mine). In the piece, using hand written text on fabric scraps, Emin describes her first words in 1965 as a child held in her father's arms in the garden of Hotel International. The location moves to Turkey in 1987 when Emin alludes to an affair with a fisherman 18 years older than her. She also tells us that her mother and grandmother have made their home in a hated flat over the Kentucky Fried Chicken fast food outlet in Margate for 14

years. This apartment was accessible only by 72 steps, a fact which renders her elderly grandmother housebound. Emin concludes; "Whenever I see the sign KFC and Colonel Saunders, I always think of home" (Tracey Emin in Brown 2006 p.44). Brown sums up the importance of *Hotel International* in Emin's oeuvre:

"The work establishes a presentational style that Emin has continued in many other works ... It combines the design style of an infant school: the merit badges for sewing, art, religion, that Emin stitched on her Girl guide blouses ... schoolgirl samples and Victorian needlework, the retro-antiquitarianism of 1970s U.K. punk graphics (owing something to Sex Pistols designer James Reid) and the meandering design of teenage satchel or plimsoll decoration – the whole effect a controlled explosion of visual and textual bricolage. This drama is given a unifying counterbalance along the bottom of the work, where the title is cut from a paisley pattern. [Hotel International]. Below that is the bittersweet summary 'The Perfect Place to Grow' (Brown 2006 p.44, parenthesis mine).

In *Mad Tracey from Margate: Everyone's Been There*, an appliquéd blanket made in 1997, Emin references her years of teenage promiscuity seen perhaps from the context of a 1990s abusive relationship Emin found herself in. (**Image 32**). 'Leave Him Trace', one appliquéd panel advises. The presentational format is similar to *Hotel International* – blue fabric background, fragments of texts, references to mundane life, "Every time I pass Dunkin Donuts I think of you", a colourful magical roundabout tour through preoccupations, hurt feelings, anger "and I said fuck off back to your week (sic) world that you came from" (Spelling errors proudly displayed!). The result is a sound bite portrait of British working class culture as experienced by a young woman.

In *Pure Evil*, a textile work made in 2002, consisting of embroidery and text, Emin recounts an experience of oral rape at the age of 13. (**Image 33**). The sparse black stitched line portrays the act of rape and the red embroidered text "You fucked my mouth – smashed my head against the wall I was 13 and you were nothing but pure evil" comments on the violation, locating it in the domain not only of criminality (at 13 Emin was a minor protected in theory if not in practice by British law) but also of ethics and personal moral responsibility. This work is

executed on a dark cream and yellow ochre background and consists of stitched line drawing in black and embroidered text in red. *Pure Evil* (a textile piece) is presented in the format of Emin's monoprints.

Emin's work recites a litany of romantic and sexual disaster, sexual encounters are reported as aggressive, "loaded with fear and humiliation", abject experiences (Doyle 2002 p.110). Her work reads as a visual diary of traumatic sexual desire and encounter. Emin's *Love Poem* an appliquéd blanket, frames such an encounter, real or fantasy, as an experience of trauma. (Image 34).

YOU PUT YOUR HAND ACROSS MY MOUTH EVERY PART OF MY
BODY IS SCREAMING I'M LOST ABOUT TO BE SMASHED INTO A
THOUSAND MILLION PIECES EACH PART FOR EVER BELONGING
TO YOU
(Love Poem 1996)

Merck suggests that this piece should be read with reference to trauma theory (Merck 2002). *Love Poem* is a large appliquéd blanket, 96x96 inches, consisting of multicoloured appliquéd text stitched onto a two toned (violet and blue) fabric background. "*Tracey Emin's Love Poem*" in larger font inhabits the smaller violet field. Discussing the text of *Love Poem*, Merck suggests that for Emin sexual encounters have been psychologically and physically experienced as deeply traumatic and violent encounters which have threatened her very subjectivity (Merck 2002). Psychoanalytic theory since Freud has linked sex with violence. But popular culture "grants the sufferer the authority of witness, testifier, survivor (Merck 2002 p.125). Merck suggests that Emin's work is pivoted on the cusp of this, a paradox of victim and survivor who testifies and triumphs in her power to find languages to enunciate the reality of her own experiences and subjectivity (Merck 2002). Emin's oeuvre is in essence an aesthetic of trauma and resistance. Emin's aesthetic of trauma is for Merck a considered artistic strategy and this is particularly evident in *My Bed*, the 1999 work submitted as part of Emin's nomination for the Turner prize. (Image 30). Merck states that it was with *My Bed* that Emin became an iconic figure of personal and sexual suffering. *My*

Bed is an installation consisting of a slept in bed with stained sheets and discarded underwear, empty vodka bottles, cigarette ends, condoms, etc., all the detritus of a messy life. On the walls Emin hung a large textile blanket, *No Chance*, with appliquéd text as well as framed monoprints and drawings. (Image 35). Merck suggests that Emin's language of fluids/stains on her bed linen evoke the body's fluid residues – sweat, menstrual blood, vomit, semen – which act as proxies for the abject body and serve “to connect the artist's body with the artwork” (Merck 2002 p.125). Emin traces her corporeal trauma through this language of stains and marks on textile. The stained linen of *My Bed*, Merck says, can be read as signifier of the very real dangers of precocious sexual adventures present for young women in contemporary culture – “virginity undone, reputation lost, desire supplanted by disgust” or unwanted pregnancy and the trauma of abortion (Merck 2002 p.128).

The bed symbol references an ontological aloneness, a solitude. “From crib to coffin we lie, for much of our existence alone ...”, Emin's bloodied bed suggests for Merck a battlefield, “the *Amor Militis* celebrated in the Renaissance” (Merck 2002 p.128). Critical and public reaction to this installation was polemical from outrage to disdain. Matthew Collings, whom Merck describes as “the Ruskin of the YBAs” argues that “a little culture of ‘Tracey Emin’ that she worked on over the years and this is what makes it possible for her bed to make the leap from lifestyle into art” (Collings in Merck 2002 p.123). In Merck's words, Collings identifies an “economy of expression” in Emin's artwork that consists of “motional maximilism”, cheap shock content, torture and anguish (Merck 2002). Criticism of Emin's work, according to Deborah Cherry, has rested on a suspicion of media exhibitionism, a “trading on stereotypes of dysfunctional femininity” (Cherry 2003 p.143). But Emin's use of her own abjection as ground for her art can also be viewed as echoing earlier feminist practices and representations as will be discussed in the next section.

Gesturing Towards Foremothers: Subverting Canons

In the previous section it was suggested that amidst multiple possible readings of Emin's work, one might be that of a contemporary Philomela, indicting through her textile and text artwork, a social order that abjects and denigrates the feminine at the level of the collective unconscious which in turn manifests in the personal and sexual abuse that appears to be common currency in the world of adolescent working class strata of British society. The question was posed: Is 'Mad Tracey from Margate' naming and shaming the patriarchal macho culture that meted out abuse and shame to her child and adolescent self? Rather than locating Emin's work in an apolitical vacuum of libertarian agendas, Rosemary Betterton posits a deep relationship between Emin's work and feminist art of previous generations (Betterton 2002). The textile work, Emin's choice of media, the stitching, sewing, the craft work of her hands evident in her blanket pieces links her work to other agendas. Her gesture towards textile can be read as reference to feminist work of the 1970s and while Emin shuns any reference to herself as a feminist, her agenda may have much more in common with feminist foremothers than she will acknowledge and indeed "historical circumstances [for women] may have changed less than we imagine" (Townsend and Merck 2002 p.12). Townsend and Merck suggest that Emin's representation should be seen in the context of an ongoing and unresolved discourse on the position of the feminine in the real as it is being revisioned and represented anew (Townsend and Merck 2002). Osborne is of the opinion that Emin's work is in its essence an ironic and ambivalent gesture towards the deep realities of female experience (Osborne 2002). Neal Brown states that Emin has emphatically distanced herself from feminism, "rejecting discussion of it in her many interviews – other than to acknowledge the endeavours of 1970s feminists" (Brown 2006 p.40). Brown sets out an explanation for Emin's aversion to feminism thus:

"As much as she has resisted it ... [feminism] returns again and again in commentaries on her work, the critical will to consider Emin within feminism's historical or social tendencies seemingly an irresistible force. Originating in the 1970s at a time when women artists placed the body

and their personal and political interests at the centre of their practice, and strongly defined being marginalised, feminist art was often autobiographical – women artists often addressed the feminist motto, 'the personal is political' within their work. For many female artists working today, feminism is no longer an issue, and there seems to be no such thing as an identifiably 'feminist aesthetic'. Where their work does deal with gender, it is not completely predicated on social negotiations of a gendered self. Artists distancing themselves from feminist discourses may be doing so as a strategy to avoid its very heavy baggage, since there is now common, negative stereotyping of feminist art ... as humourlessly driven by censorious, ideologically dogma. Emin's femalehood – like that of a significant number of artists of her generation – is certainly a more anarchic one than that of the 1970s and 1980s being more autonomous and resistant to control, including, paradoxically, from that of female defined positions such as feminism" (Brown 2006 ps.40-44).

While Brown's musings on Emin's relationship to feminism offer a prima facie explanation for her wish to distance herself from feminist discourse, it also betrays, in the terms and language in which it is framed, Brown's own phallogocentric stance. A dismissal of three decades of feminist scholarship and art practice as "humourless, ideological dogma" and an insistence on "control" of "anarchic femalehood" suggests that the agenda of the feminist discourse is very much a live issue in contemporary culture. This indeed may well be Emin's fundamental message as her art illuminates the dark and disturbing sites of the abjection of female subjectivity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Betterton points out that Emin is not the first artist of working class origins to use autobiographical data to interrogate their lived experience and the cultural mores that shaped their identity. For example, Joe Spence and Annette Kuhn did so a decade before Emin (Betterton 2002). Both artists, like Emin, used art making to investigate the gendered social context in which their subjectivity was formed. Betterton terms this a 'counter aesthetic' by means of which female identity is reclaimed by the deliberate use of selective autobiography. The work appears to convey an intimacy, an access to the artist's life but one must not confuse this autobiographic strategy with 'truth'. Emin recycles her life experiences in a narrative that the artist/author constructs and is fully in command of by using "a

range of different artistic strategies to frame her experiences" (Betterton 2002 p.33). Clare McDonald suggests that women artists using the text of their life experiences in their art work is a strategy whereby women grapple with the realities of woman as object of artistic representation and woman as agent and author of her own work (Betterton 2002). Betterton points out that Emin's use of a "domestic aesthetic, a personal life story and craft techniques" connects her to earlier feminist art of 1970s and 1980s (Betterton 2002 p.34). Betterton lists the convergences and continuities between Emin's oeuvre and that of previous generations of feminist artists (Betterton 2002):

- The use of autobiography, trauma and personal narrative as an aesthetic strategy
- Use of her own body as a key image
- Use of techniques and genre such as embroidery, patchwork, hand written text, textile, materials and methodologies of female creative expression
- Use of domestic and personal objects in her installations and assemblages in a similar manner as, for example, in 1970s feminist works such as *Womanhouse* and other influential feminist work referred to earlier in this thesis
- Bringing the personal private sphere into the public domain

But while Betterton suggests comparison with earlier feminist art work, she also identifies competing influences in Emin's oeuvre such as media driven cults of subjectivity and celebrity, a cultivation of self and its public identities (Betterton 2002). Deepwell suggests that Emin's work can be seen to arise from a Libertarian individualism rather than it having a liberationist politics as its source. As Deepwell points out, the assertion of individual artistic identity by a woman takes on a very different cultural significance at the end of the 20th century than it did in the 1970s (Deepwell 1997). Betterton concludes that "the personal is not always political, and the autobiographical voice in women's art does not

guarantee a feminist politics” (Betterton 2002 p.38). Betterton argues that, while many artists of Emin’s generation have grown up with the artistic legacy of feminist practice, their relation to it is highly ambiguous.

“The ambiguities and contradictions in Emin’s work, I suggest, lie precisely in this ambivalence and tension between feminine and post-feminist identities and positionings” (Betterton 2002 p.38).

Betterton suggests that Emin’s appliquéd blanket, *Helter Fucking Skelter* indicates her awareness of what Betterton terms her “dual genealogies” of a feminist heritage and post-modern positioning. (**Image 36**). Emin’s choice of the patchwork format is significant with its reference to the domestic feminine on the one hand and its historical connotations on the other hand when appliquéd text and images were used in suffrage banners at the beginning of the 20th century and again in the 1970s and 1980s as public and political statements of women’s rights. *Helter Fucking Skelter* has a pink and white ground onto which patches of pattern and text are appliquéd. Betterton notes that the decorative feminine text is overlaid with “texts which radiate an aggressive, tense and somewhat hostile energy” (Betterton 2002 p.38). Emin’s texts, ‘*Burn in Hell You Bitch*’, ‘*Total Paranoia*’, ‘*Everything You Steel Will Turn to Ash*’, all invoke an ancient tradition of cursing, often the only form of retribution available to powerless victims wounded by others. Betterton comments:

“The iconoclasm of the texts is at odds with the painstaking and detailed procedure of sewing each letter one by one onto the ground, just as the violent expression of the words belies the warmth and security implied by the blanket. Emin has developed her own language for dealing with sexual inequalities, which is neither traditionally feminine nor feminist, but articulates a new kind of independent and iconoclastic femininity in all its complexity and contradictions” (Betterton 2002 p.38).

Textile and text have combined to create for Emin a powerfully expressive language within which, as woman, she enunciates the deepest concerns of her postmodern subjectivity.

Emin Unpicks the Canon

As has been discussed in a previous section of this thesis, second wave feminist scholarship and art practice was deeply concerned to intervene in the metadiscourses of art history and criticism in order to question the notion of the individual male artist/genius and assert a female aesthetic lineage. A number of authors have suggested a parallel agenda in Emin's work. Brown states "... her [Emin's] disenfranchisement of feminist theory is as total and complete as it is of traditional, male defined art connoisseurship. Her rejection of both have been similarly absolute" (Brown 2006 p.44). In 1996 Emin was interviewed by Jean Wainwright (Wainwright 2002). In the interview, Emin says that in 1996 in response to curator, Carl Freedman's suggestion, "Paint what you would like to own", she painted a Picasso and three versions of *The Scream* [Edvard Munch] (Wainwright 2002 p.196). Emin comments on this experience thus:

"When I did the Picasso though ... I realised how much I resented and didn't like Picasso. It was only after I had done that I realised that. I thought that Picasso was this great genius, this great artist and great man, yet he treated women disgustingly. And I realised how easy it is to get somewhere in life if you decide just to dismiss half of humankind. You just dismiss women and treat them like objects and use them at your disposal, like a Mormon polygamist ... you have a sixteen-year-old-girl, you sit her down, you paint her, you shag her, then on with the next one. Its fodder, fodder" (Tracey Emin in Wainwright 2002 ps.196-197).

The objectification of woman as muse and model, as ground of phallogentric art practice is clearly disavowed by Emin not only in her statement but in her image *Picasso*, an embroidery on a used sheet made in 2001. (**Image 37**).

Vara delineates some of the strategies adopted by Emin in her art practice to intervene in canons and discourses. After an abortion in 1992 Emin destroyed all the work that she had made in the Royal College of Art. Explaining this action, Emin stated "*I couldn't go on doing art unless it meant something to me emotionally ... So I began making things out of bits of me*" (Tracey Emin in Vara 2002 p.90). Emin thereby rejected the male dominated intellectual tradition of

painting, choosing instead to gesture towards her feminist foremothers and ancient traditions of women's creative expression.

Vara reads Emin's 1999 Exhibition/Installation at Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York, *Every Part of Me's Bleeding*, as a resounding statement by Emin locating her own unique aesthetic expression within her embodied visceral life experience (Vara 2002). *Every Part of Me's Bleeding* installation, consists of *My Bed* (of Turner Prize/Tate infamy) as its central focus accompanied by videos, neon-text, appliquéd blankets, monoprints and other assemblages. (Image 30 and Image 38). Furthermore, Vara states that "within this Installation, Emin not only reclaimed procreative power of the male modernist artist, she also relocated its discourse ... defined by Munch's male literary circle to the female psychic circle of Theosophy" (Vara 2002 p.192). For Munch and his male esoteric circle, blood was a key mystical symbol (Munch frequently used the colour red and images of death in his paintings). In *The History of Painting*, a tableau shown as part of the Installation consisting of 3 pregnancy test kits, morning after pills and blood stained tampons in 5 plexiglass cases, Emin also uses blood as symbol. (Image 39). This use of her own blood is an important statement in Emin's stance vis a vis a male modernist aesthetic which

"... allowed Emin to reassert her own ability to create an art more authentic than Munch's painting ... her own blood replaces Munch's pigment, and endows it with reality rather than symbolic value. Emin trumps the ideals of modern aesthetics defined by the male artist" (Vara 2002 p. 192).

Vara goes on to explain that blood also held mystical properties for Madam Blatvasky's Theosophy. Blood for Theosophists was a cosmic fluid containing all the secrets of existence. By using her own blood, Emin, Vara states, was reclaiming a female psychic heritage and discourse (Vara 2002).

While Emin resists any suggestion of her art as part of the feminist project, there are, perhaps, unacknowledged similarities in the roads travelled. In *My Bed* and *The History of Painting*, Emin references early feminist work in the use of detritus

and blood. For example, in Chicago's *Red Flag* and *Menstrual Bathroom*, menstrual blood was used as a signifier of female cultural presence. The detritus of Emin's bed echoes/references these earlier transgressive acts.

Emin's role as contemporary clairvoyant in *Tacimin - Can You Hear Me* (1997) (to be discussed in the next section), echoes Victorian women's participation as spiritualists and leaders of spiritualist movements which resisted and transgressed dominant Victorian restrictions of women's lives. (Image 40). Vara comments:

"A similar strategy of resistance consistently manifests itself in Emin's work from her early career to the present, finding its expression in a wide variety of media with Emin's rearticulating of the visual and rhetorical techniques of Edvard Munch through her own soul and body, his avant garde spiritual works and principles that were representative of modernist intellectual thought are recast. Art history is Emin's portal to aesthetic power ... by bringing into her possession this modernist idiom, Emin reclaims the voice of Victorian parlour culture, largely articulated by the female mystic for her own exploration, and thereby elevates it to the centre of post modern aesthetics" (Vara 2002 p.194).

Townsend apprehends in Emin's self portraiture a dialogue with Egon Schiele, a shared motif of the self in abjection - mise-en-abyme – but also a comment on Schiele and an act of appropriation of Schiele's self portraiture where he represents himself in hysterical/feminine stances appropriating the feminine for male purposes. Emin, in her self-portraits resembling Schiele's portraits of very young Viennese prostitutes, takes authority over her own feminine self-representation of the abject feminine (Townsend 2002). Townsend and Merck comment:

"Emin uses ... an en-abyme strategy to give voice to the muted model, her sexuality appropriated, her emotiveness denigrated ... Inverting the appropriation of femininity by male artists ... Emin steals the role of the artist and reverses the relations of authorial power which Schiele manifests in his work" (Townsend and Merck 2002 p.15).

Betterton makes a further point concerning Emin's interventions in canons. She suggests that Emin's art practice and discourse also insert despised and ignored

categories of cultural production into the feminist canon itself (Betterton 2002). Betterton makes the point that the 'outrageous' behaviour and transgressive acts is regarded by the YBAs as a considered strategy for inserting aesthetically despised categories of language and pop culture into the art canon, moving the domain of academic critique onto the streets. Betterton contrasts Mary Kelly's critical/theoretical practice of the 1980s, a practice shaped by metadiscourses exploring middle class dilemmas, with Emin's differently gendered site of adolescent working class female experience in Margate of the 1980s. Kelly, Betterton suggests, by the cool affect of her work, distances herself and us from her lived experience while Emin insists we engage deeply in her emotional abjection (Betterton 2002). Betterton concludes: " I suggest ... that Emin is consciously engaged in sexual politics, albeit of an individualised kind, and that her use of genres and techniques historically gendered as feminine would be impossible without the histories of feminist debate and practice that preceded it" (Betterton in Merck and Townsend 2002 p.26).

A Tangled Web: Emin and the Critics

As we have seen, Emin inhabits a location of cultural complexity. Her narrative forms reminiscent of pop culture – a complex mix of video pieces, patchwork quilt, story telling, TV soap confessional, celebrity superstar on a par with other forms of mass cultural production – are combined with references to feminist agendas and dialogues and art historical canons of romanticism and expressionism. The 1990s was a decade of women artists engaging with trauma, an era of an aesthetics of trauma and abjection, a period "in which personal suffering often seemed the only route to public entitlement" (Townsend and Merck 2002 p.16). Betterton notes in Emin's oeuvre an obsessive registering of self through painting, photography, monoprints, sculpture, appliqued blankets, text, stitch, neon, video, film, performance and installation. Betterton suggests the concept of 'self-life-drawing' to describe Emin's oeuvre (Betterton 2002). Betterton makes the point that Emin as a child of the 1960s was shaped by an

ever increasing exposure to popular culture as manifested in cinema, print media, television, video, and that hers is an artistic identity influenced by consumer culture.

"This blurring of lines between forms of artistic production and mass consumption is partly what underpins practices such as those of Tracey Emin which draw on a variety of feminine confessional modes while assuming the status of uniquely authored art-works" (Betterton 2002 p.24).

It is perhaps at the intersection of artistic enunciation and popular mass consumer culture that Emin's entanglement in the webs of art criticism is located. Doyle addresses Emin's critical reception and its ambiguities. Neal Brown (Tate Curator), in a catalogue essay, opens his critique of her work with the sentence, *'Tracey Emin has big tits'* before *"launching into an effusive explanation of why he loves her work"* (Doyle 2002 p.112, Italics mine). Matthew Collings, contemporary British art historian, begins a Catalogue essay with, *'Tracey Emin is very striking, Jay Jopling once said she was all woman'* (Doyle 2002 p.112, Italics mine). In an everyday work environment anywhere in the UK, these comments would no doubt count as sexual harassment. Doyle offers an explanation as to why this level of discourse is presented as an acceptable critique of Emin's work by leading male art historians.

"Her [Emin's] reception is littered with come ons. Everyone is trying to 'pick up' Emin, as if her use of props from her everyday life (like her bed) and personal experiences (like pregnancy and abortion) constitutes an invitation to think about Emin the artist as an always-already available sexual object, as if those objects worked as metonyms for Emin the (injured) woman more powerfully than they do as metonyms for Emin the artist" (Doyle 2002 p.112).

Doyle refers to the "intersubjective affect" invoked by Emin's work. She says that reviews of Emin's exhibitions invariably describe weeping young women who obviously identify with Emin's narratives of abuse and humiliation. "These spectators are so moved because they feel the work is not so much about 'Trace' as it is about them" (Doyle 2002 p.112). While Doyle reads reference in Emin's works to earlier feminist contexts (she cites Chicago, Schneeman, Sherman, Wilke), Doyle is emphatic that Emin's work registers with her audience in a

different way. Emin's work seems to offer itself up as an unedited incorporation of the remains of a messy sex life, as a fantasy of a (nearly) unmediated encounter with the artist herself – again, less precisely as an 'artist' than as a woman. In doing so, it sets the stage for a fantasy encounter – between her and you and me” (Doyle 2002 P.114). While Emin's work appears to seduce male art critics into fantasies of sexual encounters with Emin, feminist critics such as Doyle are equally ill at ease in the presence of her work. Doyle describes her visceral reactions to Emin's monoprint, '*Terribly Wrong*'. (Image 41). Doyle read this work as a record of sexual damage. Doyle found herself experiencing an intense personal identification with the piece – “I found myself interpolated by the work” (Doyle 2002 p.114). Doyle as art critic and academic classifies this as failure on her part – emotions have been allowed to override intellect. Doyle describes her dilemma thus:

“I am compelled ... by Emin's work insofar as it enacts a series of immediately recognizable, clichéd performances of feminine sexual abjection. I recognise myself in those clichés. And, worse, I find myself caught up in the cliché of a woman's response to a woman's work – in which I identify with it, in which I refuse emotional distance and linger in affective proximity” (Doyle 2002 p.117).

Emin's artistic strategy of emotionality is, Doyle suggests, what makes art criticism seemingly incapable of dealing with her work in an adequate way. Doyle sums up the position of art criticism vis a vis Emin's oeuvre:

“It seems almost impossible to speak of the encounter with Emin's work as an 'aesthetic experience' unless we do so negatively, in as much as Emin's oeuvre is grounded firmly in all things that the aesthetic traditionally cannot accommodate, such as semen and tears”. (Doyle 2002 p.116).

Emin's work with its transgressive emotionality challenges art criticism to develop sensitivities and languages to acknowledge, to express and to make visible “... the odd place of women in art – walking wounded, *vagina dentata* sex pots valuable only insofar as their bodies have no intrinsic significance” (Doyle 2002 p.118). For Doyle, Emin's essential gesture is that of lampooning conservative notions of artistic genius and her work references the denials of the deep

libidinal, economic, affective and emotional currents that underpin the production of art and its consumption.

Patchwork Philosophy: Tracing Deeper Meanings

"In the domain of the unknown, the uncertain, 'the great ball of doubt' ... the only light to follow is faith – faith in that other thing, that something else dimly felt behind the veil of daily life. The late Mircea Eliade, extraordinary scholar of world religions, described the socio-historic roots of this feeling ... It is difficult to imagine how the human mind could function without the conviction that there is something irreducibly real in the world, and it is impossible to imagine how consciousness could appear without a meaning on man's impulses and experiences. Consciousness of a real and meaningful world is intimately connected with the discovery of the sacred ... In short, the sacred is an element in the structure of consciousness and not a stage in the history of consciousness. This was such a significant discovery for me – 'the sacred as an element in the structure of consciousness'. It is within us all. The intuitive awareness and unwavering belief in this other world interwoven with our own, this other place, 'the separate reality' ... has been the fuel for the fire of almost every artist who has left his or her mark on the earth (Bill Viola 1995 p.176).

Renee Vara suggests that a search for deeper meanings is also evident in Emin's work. Emin's family were involved in spiritualism (a belief in the paranormal and the possibility of contacting the dead through a medium), something Emin shares with Munch (Vara 2002). Townsend and Merck also maintain that Emin is concerned with repositioning woman's ambiguous role as psychic and medium "as a correspondence to the equally problematic one [role] of the female artist ..." (Townsend and Merck 2002 p.18). Vara states that "even as she utilises the highly personal and private voice of a contemporary artist in much of her work, Emin elsewhere appropriates the decidedly feminine performance strategies of the Victorian clairvoyant, who was permitted to transgress the gendered and class-structured boundaries of English society" (Vara 2002 p. 172). Vara suggests that Emin performs the role of 'channelling' the female voice long silenced in phallogocentric culture. In Vara's words, Emin thereby

"create[s] a unified oeuvre using her interests in late nineteenth and early twentieth century manifestations of the paranormal to define a universal, and genderless soul ... mysticism informs Emin's aesthetic, signifying a strategy of resistance whether intentional or not, to the canon of the spiritual in modern art that has been predominantly defined by male artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian (Vara 2002 ps.172-173).

Vara makes the point that Emin's art is composed of diverse elements, failing to adhere to modernist expectations of a uniform style, ranging as it does from appliquéd blankets to neon text, to monoprint drawings, to video; stylistically shape shifting from minimalist conventions, post modern idioms, and second wave feminist art. For Vara, the binding element of Emin's oeuvre is a spiritual concern to ensoul contemporary art. Modern capitalistic culture has reduced art to yet another saleable commodity. Emin's work, Vara suggests, seeks to return the spiritual to art (Vara 2002). Vara tells us that Emin's family of origin, particularly her mother, grandmother and her Uncle Colin (maternal uncle killed in a car accident when Emin was a teenager) were psychics and practised clairvoyant mediumship. Emin as a child attended séances conducted by her mother and the otherworld became a part of everyday life (Vara 2002). In 1997, Emin stated:

"The only thing I am really well read in ... is mysticism; moving into other dimensions through the understanding of time and space, whether its levitation or astral projection. It's the only thing I have ever studied with any interest" (Tracey Emin in Vara 2002).

In 1992, Emin also studied Philosophy at Birbeck College, London University and became interested in the philosophical treatises of Spinoza, the Dutch philosopher. Spinoza's ideas influenced romanticism's and symbolists' pantheistic beliefs of the immanence of the Divine in all creation. In an interview with Mark Gisborne, Emin explains her spirituality thus: "I am not religious in terms of being christened or whatever: I don't believe in that kind of thing ... I like the idea of all things connecting ... so when you think about the world and its structure and everything all things connect" (Tracey Emin in Vara 2002 p.179). (As we shall see in what follows, this idea of interconnection is also central to Munch's personal philosophy).

Vara traces the influences of mysticism and Spinoza's ideas in Emin's text and textile piece, *Exploration of the Soul* (1994), and the accompanying photographic series in collaboration with the curator, Carl Freedman, *Journey Across America* (1994). *Journey of the Soul* is a text narrating Emin's own journey from birth as a twin. (Image 42). In her *Journey* performance, Emin read from this text seated in her Grandmother's chair appliquéd with her beloved Grandmother's sayings. (Image 43). The readings were held at seven locations in the U.S. and Freedman made a photographic record of the journey. Vara makes the point that the number seven is of special significance in the teachings of Theosophy, spiritualism and numerology (an esoteric system of numbers) representing the seven stages of the soul's journey to union with the source of enlightenment. Vara comments: "in the role of itinerant clairvoyant, Emin 'caravanned' across the country ... with her 'psychometric' chair – a performance that symbolise an endeavour to save the lost soul of the art world" (Vara 2002 p.181). In 1997, Emin's use of a card table given to her by her grandmother in *Tacimin – Can You Hear Me?*, a work consisting of a Ouija Board table and two chairs, one with appliquéd text and the other with a hat bearing the letters MIN placed on its seat and a woman's knitted jacket (made from knitted squares) draped across the chair suggesting a female presence. Vara suggests the *Tacimin* piece invokes a notion that psychic ability is often a gift or talent passed on through a matriarchal genealogy of clairvoyance.

But for Emin, her psychic inheritance is mediated through her deep interest in the work of Munch. Spiritualism, theosophy and anthroposophy were deeply influential in the emergence of a modernist aesthetic in early 20th century Europe, especially in Germany and Vienna. The writings of Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant were key texts in influencing the formulation of a modern aesthetic (Vara 2002). Vara and others have suggested that Emin has been influenced by Edward Munch and that this fact has shaped her "adoption of the guise of the symbolist artist" (Vara 2002 p.185). Munch espoused a pantheistic

belief which he frequently expressed in his diaries. *"Everything is movement and light. God is in us and we are in God. God is everything. In us are whole worlds"* (Munch in Vara 2002 p.186). Emin's own statement, quoted earlier, expresses a similar world view. Vara lists the similarities between Emin and Munch and the ways her oeuvre and her life history mirrors his. Vara suggests that Emin fashions herself and her work in the tradition of male modernist artists. Vara notes that Munch and Emin share:

- An oeuvre of personal confession situated in their own life events. Munch's art work, life experiences, diaries and literary notebooks are deeply connected as source of his aesthetic representation. Munch believed that "all art, literature and music must be brought forth with your heart's blood. Art is your heart's blood" (Munch in Vara 2002 p.190). After an abortion in 1992, Emin destroyed all the work she had made in the Royal College of Art. Explaining this action, Emin states, "I couldn't go on doing art unless it meant something to me emotionally ... so I began making things out of bits of me" (Tracey Emin in Vara 2002 p.190);
- A development of unique symbolism to represent their own personal life traumas;
- A cultivation of an outsider 'mad' persona. In his diaries, Munch links the cultivation of a wayward social image with his creativity. Emin entitled herself 'Mad Tracey from Margate';
- A shared deep attachment to family members, in Munch's case, his teenage sister and mother, in Emin's, her twin brother and grandmother;
- A shared experience of childhood sickness and trauma, Munch in his diaries states; "I who came into the world sick/into a sick environment/whose youth was a hospital room" (Vara 2002 p.187). Emin recalls her life as formed by ongoing childhood sickness. In *Journey of the Soul* she states, "When I was born they thought I was dead ... as a baby I wanted to die..." (Tracey Emin *Journey of the Soul* 1994).

But Emin's is not an unreflected identification with Munch, as Vara states, "Where Emin carefully manipulates Munch's art of personal confession is in her inversion of its gender. For the life of the male genius she substitutes the experience of a woman ... a first person female voice " (Vara 2002 p.188). In her search for deeper meanings, Emin developed a unique text and textile based language and symbolism that fuelled and shaped expression of her female subjectivity at its deepest level. In the section which follows, Emin's relationship to the textile/text axis will be brought into a sharper focus.

Mending a Life: Textile and Text in the Work of Tracey Emin

In the early 1990s, Emin turned to textiles, a medium reworked by feminist artists since the 1970s (Merck 2002). In her ground breaking study, *Women's Work. The First 20,000 Years*, Elizabeth Wayland Barber traces an unbroken heritage of women's work in textile for 20,000 years from the early Neolithic to modern times. (Wayland Barber 1995). Wayland Barber's two decades of research demonstrate how deeply bound up with women's lives the making of textiles has been. She comments on the great importance of textiles in the lives of women not only for functional reasons but for women's myth making also. Referring to the literature of classical antiquity, Wayland Barber states:

"All these stories and many more tucked away throughout early literature contain references to women's work – to spinning, to weaving, and to the clothes the women made. Most of the myths and legends about women, in fact, hover around the craft that was of such central importance to their lives ... In truth, cloth for thousands of years was the notebook that recorded the woes, joys, hopes, visions and aspirations of women " (Wayland Barber 1995 ps. 255-256).

Women turned to textiles to record their own stories and those of their families, viz., in the myth of the Nibelungen, Brunhilde depicts Siegfried's deeds in her weaving, ripping the cloth in despair when he betrays her. In Classical times, Homer implies that both Helen and Penelope recorded the events of their times in their woven webs. In Athens of the Bronze Age, the daughters of upper class

families annually wove a story cloth with images and text to wrap the great statue of Athena, patron Goddess of Athens. This was a central part of the annual festival in the city. Two fragments of such story cloths have been found from Classical Greece tombs (Wayland Barber 1995). (**Image 44**).

In her choice of textile as aesthetic medium, in her purposes of telling her own story as contemporary Philomela and commenting on the abjection of the feminine widespread in late 20th century culture, Emin can be firmly located within this venerable tradition of women's work. Emin is gesturing not only to her personal lineage but to an age old heritage which Wayland Barber traces back to prehistory. Emin's textile work began in 1993 with *Hotel International*, the first of a series of more than 20 blankets. (**Image 31**). Emin has explained that after an abortion and her less than positive experience of studying art at the Royal College, where she felt her authentic voice was perhaps not acceptable, she destroyed all her art work and for a period of time did not make art. She refers to this time as a period of "emotional suicide" (Merck and Townsend 2002; Brown 2006). Emin's recovery as an artist is associated with the creation of her blankets, her story cloths. Locating her work in the ground of an ancient tradition of women's work, Emin has constructed a unique language with which to speak to the late 20th and early 21st centuries and at the same time perhaps mend the rended web of her personal life history. Emin's aesthetic choice of *Blanket* as signifier contains endless reverberations and references: precious saved fabric scraps often passed from mother to daughter, patchworked into bed coverings and domestic furnishings signifying the circumscribed world of woman and domesticity; bed as site of matrimonial bliss, child birth, illness and death; a focus of matrilineal heritage, its very fabrication implying a connection with *herstory*. *Blanket* in contemporary life connotes Red Cross relief efforts to poorly nourished African children, refugee camps, impoverished, displaced and homeless peoples. In our affluent first world societies, the urban homeless and marginalised huddle in blankets and their equivalent duvets and sleeping bags, protection from the elements, a universally important human possession, *Blanket*

in the guise of banners and flags, textile embellished with symbol and text – trade union, cathedral, suffrage and protest banners.

While Emin may not be consciously referencing all of the above connotations, some at least find an echo in the circumstance of her life story. As Brown states, "...women were unlikely to feature among the heroes depicted ... on banners unless winged as angels or as symbols of virtue; Emin's cultural placement of herself on her blankets carries a wry humour in this respect" (Brown 2006 p.40).

Hotel International is made from the comfort blanket Emin had as a child. (**Image 31**). A piece of an old family sofa covering is also used. Emin uses bits of fabrics which she associates with family and friends. Neal Brown comments on Emin's use of fabric and its underlying resonances:

"Fabric pieces (what Emin has called 'high altar fabric') associated with family, friends, lovers, events. Implicit in the preservation and conservation of these fragments is a correspondence with memory and remembrance, the fabric pieces having both public and private talismanic meanings for Emin, and containing or 'transmitting' presence, not just representing it. Brimming with remembrance, the association of persons with fabric, and their use by Emin in a work of art, covers a spectrum that includes loving and positive events, as well as ordeals of spiritual and psychological crisis" (Brown 2006 p.37).

In summary, Chapter Nine suggests that Emin has used textile and text:

- As fluid articulate language, vehicle for autobiographical statement as well as social comment in the guise of contemporary Philomela enunciating a deep engagement with her personal history and social context;
- As powerful representation in the development of a poetics of resistance to the silence, trauma and abjection imposed on her vulnerable child and adolescent self;
- As an act of transgression illuminating the dark shadows of contemporary culture thereby bringing the abjection of the feminine to collective consciousness;

- As a mechanism for the introduction of the demotic (the voice, language, experiences of the socially marginalised) into the domain of high art;
- As a unique discourse enabling her to express the deep complexities and ambiguities of her dual genealogies as inheritor of an age old tradition of textile as female creative expression and her position as woman artist within post modern culture obsessed with the cult of self and celebrity;
- To create an embodied language embroidering her persona as 'Mad Tracey from Margate' as a locus from which to successfully negotiate her pathway to high levels of achievement in the contemporary art world while retaining her unique voice;
- To challenge modernist art historical canons and criticism in order to expand its intellectual and rational vocabulary to include woman's cultural contribution in all its differences and to acknowledge the subliminal forces of libidinal and emotional energies and the sacred that underpin art as human endeavour.

Chapter Ten
Archnologies and Yarns:
The Textile Work of Louise Bourgeois

Introduction

- (i) *"I wanted to construct a poetics that could account for the problem of signature posed by the 'underread' works excluded from the library of general culture ... To talk about this I had taken as a possible trope of feminist literary agency examples from antiquity of women's weaving. I was not really interested so much in weaving however, as in the representation of writing as instances of a textuality hopelessly entangled with questions of its material. Weaving ... provides me with an irresistible metaphoric: it allowed me to figure a writing identity as grounded and located in a scene of work, thus holding together representation and cultural production"* (Millar 1988 p.27).
- (ii) *Text means Tissue; but whereas hitherto we have taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth) ... in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving: lost in this tissue – this texture - the subject unmakes himself, [herself] like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of [her] web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as a hyphology (hyphose is the tissue and the spider's web)* (Barthes in Millar 1988 p.77, parenthesis mine).

This chapter considers the textile oeuvre of Louise Bourgeois – a significant body of work created from the 1990s onwards until her death, aged 98 years on May 31st 2010. In her senior years, images of Bourgeois' diminutive, frail body and deeply etched face appear beside her striking sculptures (such as her gigantic spider created for Tate Modern in 2000) in art journals and popular media, signalling yet another Bourgeois exhibition opening in museums from New York to Dublin, Tokyo, Sao Paulo, Venice and London. (**Image 45**). Bourgeois is indeed the 'Granddame' of contemporary art, an art celebrity of global stature, a doyenne of the art world (Storr 2003). Yet Bourgeois attended few of her openings, lived a reclusive life in her Chelsea Brownstone house/art studio in New York and

rarely granted interviews. Marie-Laure Bernadac has stated that Bourgeois' "place in art history is now so special that the legend around her occasionally tends to eclipse the aesthetic import of her oeuvre" (Bernadac in Coxon 2008 p.88). Bourgeois, Coxon suggests, is caught up in a web of her own making (Coxon 2008).

Robert Storr, Senior Curator at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), describes Bourgeois' oeuvre as "an astonishingly rich, nuanced, sometime alarming, often funny and almost always startling fusion of classical personifications of human passions and terrors, symbolist variations on them, Freudian reinterpretations of both, and direct or indirect transcription of her own unblinking glimpses into the murkiest waters of the psyche ... the shifting accents of her analysis ... reflect a hard earned imaginative freedom ..." (Storr 2003 p.36). Bourgeois has stated that all her works have found their inspiration in her childhood. Storr writes of Bourgeois embroidering her myths of origin creating "a fundamentally true but richly ornamented" validating explanation of her own work (Storr 2003). Storr's presentation of Bourgeois is that of 'yarn-spinner' creating narratives for modern, traumatised sensibilities. Kuspit goes one step further and poses the question of whether Bourgeois is a poseur, whether her accounts of her life experience and its relationship to her artwork challenge our credulity? (Kuspit 2008). "... can we play along with Bourgeois and share her illusions?", Kuspit asks. (Kuspit 2008 p.302). He suggests that we are drawn into her world because what Bourgeois is mediating for us are universal dilemmas. For Kuspit, what Bourgeois is articulating is the primal site of the anxiety aroused by the child's separation from the mother (Kuspit 2008). Storr makes the point that the power of her work lies in the fact that it is not "primarily autobiographical, but archetypal" (Storr 2003 p.33).

Chapter Ten examines the role of textile and text in Bourgeois' late oeuvre and is presented under five headings:

- (i) Piecing a Life: Bourgeois' Trauma of Origin

- (ii) Knots and Bindings: Challenges to Women Artists
- (iii) Spliced: Louise Bourgeois and the Agendas of Feminism
- (iv) Spinning Towards the Mother: Creating a Woman's Syntax
- (v) Prayer, Repair and Grotesque Handiwork

Piecing a Life

"My name is Louise Josephine Bourgeois. I was born 24 December 1911 in Paris. All my work in the past fifty years, all my subjects have found their inspiration in my childhood.

My childhood has never lost its magic, it has never lost its drama" Louise Bourgeois (Bernadac and Obrist 2000 p.277).

As stated, Louise Bourgeois was born in Paris in 1911 and raised in a well to do middle class French family. Her maternal grandmother and her mother, Josephine Fairiaux were proprietors of an antique tapestry restoration business first based in Aubusson and later on the banks of the River Bievre at Choisy-le-Roi. Bourgeois' father Louis joined the business when he married Josephine. Louise Bourgeois underwent a classical French education and initially studied mathematics before being drawn into early Modernism in Paris. Bourgeois studied in Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts with Filippo Colarossi and at the Grande-Chaumière and Académie Julian. She also studied with André Lhote and Léger. In addition, Bourgeois spent time in the family tapestry atelier working on the restoration of ancient textiles. In 1938, she married Robert Goldwater, an American art historian, and left France to live in New York as war engulfed Europe. Goldwater's social and cultural contacts gave her access to the art world of New York. Franz Klein and Robert Motherwell were friends of the family.

Bourgeois produced prints, painting and sculpture within the surrealist and modernist frameworks through the 1940s and 1950s. In the late 1940s Bourgeois began to make and exhibit prints working at William Stanley Hayter's Atelier 17 in

New York where she met Joan Miro and other modernists. She also began to carve in wood and between 1949 and 1953 Bourgeois had three solo shows and her work appeared in many group shows with leading abstract expressionists.

In 1953, the MOMA acquired *Sleeping Figure* (1950) for its collection. Storr comments: "To the extent that any woman in the male-dominated art world of the day had a first-rank position, Bourgeois did. And then she pulled back" (Storr 2003 p.45). From 1953 to 1966 Bourgeois' artwork was not seen in public. Storr suggests that one reason for this withdrawal was "chronic anguish, self doubt and paralyzing melancholia" and that, while her work resurfaced in 1966 when she was included in the Eccentric Abstraction Exhibition, the "two steps forward one step back pattern continued until the 1970s, when, after Goldwater's death, she was freed from a conflicted part of her identity" (Storr 2003 p.48). Francis Morris, Senior Tate Modern Curator, tells us that in the 1950s and 1960s Bourgeois withdrew from the art world. She visited Europe on extended visits with her children and undertook a number of University courses during that period. Morris reads this time in Bourgeois' life as an incubation period for her new work of the late 1960s when Bourgeois re-invented herself as an artist. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Bourgeois extended her range of material to include plaster, plastic rubber, latex, resin, hemp, cloth, wood, wax, everyday objects such as pins and needles were introduced into her oeuvre (Morris 2008).

Trauma of Origin

"We suffered from a terrible split in the family unit, caused by my father bringing his mistresses into the house – that was the trauma we went through ... art is the experience of a trauma" (Louise Bourgeois in Lebovici 2008 p.134).

Bourgeois' trauma of origin is a trauma of childhood betrayal. As the definition of whole cloth means a lie or a deception (referring to the underhand business practices of clothiers who passed off shorter lengths of cloth as intact whole

pieces cut from the loom), so Louise Bourgeois lived a lie in her childhood. The lie centred on Bourgeois' father's infidelities with his live-in mistress, an English woman named Sadie who acted as the children's tutor. Storr comments:

"Forced to ignore his obvious infidelity, obliged to be courteous to the intruder [Sadie] and called upon to play go-between for her mother who had acquiesced to the arrangement in order to keep her wandering husband from wandering off, Louise effectively lived a lie, which none of the considerable comforts of her existence ... could counterbalance" (Storr 2003 p.387)

From the early 1980s onwards, Bourgeois has brought the wounds of her childhood into the public domain referencing the everyday casual cruelty of her charming, philandering father and the resulting psychic wounds inflicted on her and her mother (and the family unit generally), as a daimon fuelling her creativity and representation. Bourgeois' diaries give intimate glimpses into the lifelong pain she has experienced (Kuspit 2008). Kuspit states:

"Reading through Louise Bourgeois's diaries, I was struck by the proliferation of words naming feelings ... The feelings are mostly negative, aggression, fear, guilt, regret, resentment, envy, jealousy, hysteria, shame, helplessness, rage, anxiety, panic, vulnerability, self-defeat. It is a Pandora's Box – a virtual compendium of every bad feeling one can experience. But her diaries are not a self-pitying lament, a litany of complaints: they are a straightforward account of powerful emotions ... described in detail and analytically dissected. She knows they cannot be expunged but by gaining insight into them she hopes to make them less menacing" (Kuspit 2008 p.296).

In her diaries and notebooks, Bourgeois refers to her daily fears, her feelings of depression and of torment, her "suffering heart", her fear of rejection and abandonment and her profound sense of aloneness. In her 1994 Spiral Notebook, Bourgeois writes that she has "horrible dreams", that "she staggers with fear, that she is sometimes dazed, shattered ... speechless, confused" (Kuspit 2008 p.296).

The work of D.W. Winnicott, psychoanalyst, offers some insight into the aetiology of the psychic torment Bourgeois appears to describe in her diaries. Winnicott

describes the mechanisms whereby the psyche recovers from childhood trauma in his theory of transitional objects (Winnicott 1981). Winnicott suggests that the child internalises an object as symbol for the mother in order to cope with the psychic threat of separation anxiety, as a consolation to fall back on in the mother's absence. An object becomes a symbol/substitute for the mother. Freudian psychoanalytic traditions appear to implicate the entire edifice of human art making within the theory of transitional objects. Bourgeois herself was interested in the work of Melanie Klein and may have undergone a Kleinian analysis. She was however, suspicious of the bona fides of both Freud and Lacan (Nixon 2005).

"Lacan was a guerrisseur [healer], through charm and through the verbal. He was not a scientist. He was a con man. Freud and Lacan did nothing for the artist. They were barking up the wrong tree. They don't help any. I simply cant use them" (Louise Bourgeois in Nixon 2005 p.229, parenthesis mine).

To read Bourgeois' oeuvre solely as transitional object would be reductionist and would minimise or ignore other strands of influence. Yet there is little doubt that Bourgeois herself experiences her art making as implicated in an act of survival on her part. Klein has stated: "... the artist's work is new and yet arises from an urge to recreate or restore. [Art making] is reparative reconstruction" (Klein in Kuspit 2008 footnote 76 p.30).

In her diaries and notebooks and in her art works, Bourgeois' exhortations to herself are to 'keep calm', 'keep her chin up', 'be shrewd' (Kuspit 2008). **(Image 46)**. Kuspit states that in her life and in her deliberate choice of solitude and restricted social contact, Bourgeois is attempting to protect herself from anxiety and fear, thus creating a space of emotional safety (Kuspit 2008). For Bourgeois, art is clearly implicated in her survival strategies. 'Art is a Guarantee of Sanity', one art work states. On embroidered sheets on the bed in *Cell 1* (1991), Bourgeois stitched 'Art is the guarantee of sanity'. In *Cell*, *Precious Liquids* (1992), the text 'Art is a Guarantee of Sanity' appears on the exterior. Kuspit

concludes, "If writing documents the emotions that distort her sense of self then her art restores it ... writing then is the purgatory that prepares the way for art making. Art makes good what was bad. It is the activity through which Bourgeois repairs and sanctifies the members of her close-knit family – mother, father, husband, children" (Kuspit 2008 p. 297; p. 299). As we shall see from what follows, textile and text plays a hugely significant role in Bourgeois's aesthetic concerns and representation, in her acts of reparation and survival.

Storr offers us an insight into Bourgeois's lifelong journey to piece together a language, a vocabulary commensurate with the expressions of her deepest concerns.

"Born into an emotionally fraught but in many ways straight-laced world, Bourgeois instinctively understood the violence inherent in Cubism and used its tropes to express her own awareness of the combined rigidity and instability of the old patriarchal order, and the anxiety this knowledge inspired. In Surrealism, meanwhile she discovered not so much a vocabulary of symbols or a poetic stance, as a world of formal relationships in which continuity could be maintained under the most disorienting circumstances and against the most destructive forces" (Storr 2003 p.92).

In other words, Storr is suggesting that Cubism and Surrealism provided Bourgeois with a set of concepts and a language and praxis that allows her to construct her own edifice of meaning and representation. Storr continues, invoking textile metaphors to make his point.

"In sum, the weave of her work – mimicking the flux of her mind and her emotions – holds seemingly incommensurable realities together like the elaborate design of the Baroque tapestries she grew up refurbishing. At any moment the overall coherence of her art and the fabric of her explanations for how one thing is intrinsically connected to another may seem to be skewed by some unforeseen factor, some added twist. Nevertheless, like the first textile, the threads do not pull apart but rather absorb this added test of strength. Where minor mends are called for, new images enter the overall picture, not only repairing but altering and more fully articulating what has been there before. In this way, Bourgeois' recovery and recreation of her past represents an ongoing work in progress [which] ... is artistically more forward-looking than retrospective ... Bourgeois has in a thoroughly modernist, or ... post-modernist way,

'sampled' the techniques of collage, assemblage and the readymade while doubling back to traditional modelling, casting and carving [and textile work] and bound them all to an astonishingly flexible structure of metaphors and associative procedures ... The extraordinary nature of Bourgeois' work resides not only in the multiple and interchangeable ways of viewing the enigmas and contradictions of existence that it affords us, but the fact that it, almost miraculously, is ultimately all of a piece" (Storr 2003 ps. 92-93, parenthesis mine).

As Kuspit and Storr state, Bourgeois' life's work and aesthetic practices guarantee her and us a kind of transcendental sanity amidst the chaos and pain of human existence (Kuspit 2008; Storr 2003).

Knots and Bindings: The Challenges to Women Artists

- (i) *I once dreaded
knots, Gordian knots,
greyish knots in
rain-soaked shoelaces,
sour knots in my
nervous stomach.
Knitting creates beauty
from knots*

(Knitting, Chris Carusi in Skoklink and MacDaniels 2005).

- (ii) *"A spiral is completely predictable. A knot is unpredictable" (Louise Bourgeois in Storr, Herkenhoff and Schwartzman 2003 p.142).*

Storr discusses the delayed recognition accorded to women artists in the 20th century and points to the sustained effort recognition for women artists demands.

"In their case it is not enough to be new once. Rather they have been constantly forced to revise and reinforce that claim in the face of rising stars, without, at the same time being able to rely on the critical, institutional and commercial powers that buttressed the reputation of so many of their male counterparts during the creative transitions and professional pauses that punctuate the lives of all serious artists of either sex. At 91, Louise Bourgeois enters this series [Phaidos Contemporary Artists Series]" (Storr 2003 ps.28-29, parenthesis mine).

Storr refers to Bourgeois' 'fitful ascent' of the art ladder marred by intervals of retreat and obscurity and traces this fitful pattern in Bourgeois' journey as an artist (Storr 2003). In the 1940s, 1960s and early 1970s and "dramatically in the 1990s" Louise Bourgeois put forward bodies of innovative distinctive work each time launching herself from different sites of representation in what Storr terms 'metamorphic reappearances' (Storr 2003 p.31). Coxon notes that feminist critics, some of whom have been drawn to Bourgeois' practice since the 1960s and '70s – have pointed out the challenges for women artists who work for years without much recognition, then become celebrated as significant artists only in their old age (Coxon 2008). Storr states: "Compared to those artists who marshal their ideas, work and supporters and the wind of art history at their back, Bourgeois has in essence pursued a guerrilla strategy. Advancing, regrouping and advancing again she has won the day by stamina, guile, vision and sheer artistic audacity" (Storr 2003 p.31). Schwartzman notes the ambivalent stance of art critics and curators to Bourgeois' oeuvre. Schwartzman muses: "Do the conceptually oriented resent her exquisite craft? ... are the traditionalists confounded by her fluidity of materials, her ability to allow the carved and the found, the sewn and the manufactured to cohabit... Do they find off-putting the emotional exposure at the core of the work? Or is it the presence of her rage...? perhaps it is the poetry with which all this anger has been visualised that confuses them ..." (Schwartzman 2003 p.96). Schwartzman points out that, despite Bourgeois' early involvement with the Surrealists, her work is rarely displayed in a major museum collection alongside Dali, Magritte or Oppenheim. Similarly, her abstract stick figures of the 1950s related to those of Giacometti and Barnett Newman's abstractions "are hardly ever found in such company" (Schwartzman 2003 p.101). Schwartzman makes the point that when Bourgeois' early work is displayed, it is "inevitably boxed off in its own personal space" located as a 'maverick' 'outsider' of the mainstream. Schwartzman goes on to assert:

"Bourgeois' work is important to mainstream art history precisely because it makes a shift in focus from form to content (the examination of the place and identity of the individual). This shift – from an art that is simply about art to an art concentrating on something beyond this – is nothing less than the shift from Modernism to Postmodernism ... Bourgeois ... is critical in this respect, for taking art out of the frame and placing the self front and centre, for making the exploration of issues of identity the purpose of art" (Schwartzman 2003 p.10).

Hilary Robinson refers to Richard Serra's perplexity when faced with Bourgeois' *Cells* as aesthetic statement, as an example of the ambivalence with which art criticism views Bourgeois' representation.

"The meaning of the work evades me: discursive analysis, conceptual terms fail. All tracking leads to dead ends. Imposition of formal logic and conjectures of academic language do not resolve the content" (Serra in Robinson 2006 p.133).

Robinson names the fundamental challenge to women, and especially women artists, in a culture which negates their very existence in the symbolic relegating them to the position of Lacan's 'no woman'. Robinson asks: "How can women (including women artists) begin to articulate their experience – for example, through political, collective, strategic activity *and through the making of art* – if the symbolic means available and comprehensible to them are not fully appropriate" (Robinson 2006 p.57, Italics mine). Using Irigaray's concept and discussions of mimesis in relation to women's adaptations to phallogentric societies, Robinson draws out a deeper reading of the fundamental challenges faced by women in their creation of culture and representation (Robinson 2006). Mimesis, Robinson says, and its related concepts of masquerade and hysteria are crucial ideas in understanding "how we learn to behave in a manner appropriate to our social structures and how we create art" (Robinson 2006 p.8). The strategic adaptation of mimesis, i.e., mimicry, mime, masquerade, have served to maintain patriarchal structures down through the generations through "the practice of femininity as constructed by patriarchy", thereby maintaining the phallogentric symbolic and social order where 'woman is other of man's same' (Robinson 2008 p.8). This is the concept of maintenance mimesis. Hysteria, as described by Irigaray on the

other hand, is defined as a site of resistance to the 'culture of one' that is patriarchy. However, hysteria is unproductive or failed resistance as it ultimately leads to such an extreme acting out of the masquerade of femininity as a strategy for achieving the power of self-determination to the extremes of paralysis, self starvation, muteness and death. Using the concept of mimesis as developed by Irigaray, Robinson powerfully articulates the challenges women artists such as Bourgeois face in claiming a site of authentic representation in order to give expression to their deepest experiences.

"As a subsection in 'Fine Art' we have the seemingly mutable languages of representation within the art world (including the art schools, the journals etc.) of modernity. But as the slightest examination reveals, these structures, while feigning a liberating openness and multiplicity are unforgivingly patriarchal at all levels – from their structural organisation through to the visible and material symbols of the works they trade. They are riven with father-son power struggles dressed in the clothes of the market's desire for novelty (the avant-garde) which masks the fundamental maintenance of mimesis through which continuity is ensured. The sons are taught; stars validated; markets guaranteed. The position of women attempting to make meaning – develop an appropriate syntax – comprehensible within those structures is compromised to an extent hard to underestimate. The art world requires that its artists produce work that can be accounted for within the structures of maintenance mimesis, and at the same time be seen as developing the visual language unique to the individual artist. It is the surface appearance of symbolic openness that appears both seductive and terrifying to the young women who are the majority of art students; it is the structure of maintenance mimesis that ensures that their restricted success, whether in real terms (recognition) or in producing an appropriate syntax: As Irigaray says "she borrows signifiers but cannot make her mark, or re-mark upon them" (Robinson 2006 p.60).

Thus Robinson eloquently describes the challenges a woman artist must somehow negotiate in her journey as an artist. A conflicted site of art making indeed which Irigaray describes as *"... an exile and extradition, an expatriation, from this/her economy of desire"* (Irigaray 1974 p. 47, *italics mine*). Without a syntax in the Symbolic and with a total disruption of her genealogies, the woman artist faces a state of dereliction, her art work construed as hysterical babbling, incomprehensible to the present symbolic order (as in the case of Serra's

response to Bourgeois' *Cells*: "incomprehensible as it has no syntax appropriate to it" (Robinson 2006). In addition to her trauma of origin, such challenges may well be implicated in Bourgeois' ongoing mental suffering, her lifelong anxieties and despair.

Irigaray has suggested a strategy for women artists faced with these formidable obstacles within phallogocentric systems of representation which Robinson includes under the term 'productive mimesis' (Robinson 2006). Robinson goes on to define productive mimesis as sites of resistance or 'reserve', strategies/stances to be used in order to (using Irigaray's terms) 'disconcert', 'disrupt', 'modify' exclusively masculine parameters of cultural production thereby insisting on a culture of two (Robinson 2006). For Irigaray, culture, ways of seeing and art production are structures built on 'a culture of one', 'sameness' privileging phallogocentrism to the exclusion/negation of the feminine. Only in a culture of difference would representation avoid "the site of this partial sight and its blind spots" (Robinson 2006 p.9). Until then women are configured "... not as subjects, but as representations, with no access to appropriate signifiatory systems – a disaster for the legible articulation of subjectivity through art" (Robinson 2006 p.9).

Robinson suggests that Paul Ricoeur's work on mimesis enables us to understand productive mimesis as an aesthetic strategy and praxis in women's art theorising and art making. In his paper 'Mimesis and Representation', Ricoeur adopts the position of extending the definition of mimesis to indicate possibilities for an 'extended horizon' within which the reader is implicated/included (Robinson 2006). Ricoeur rejects Platonic mimesis with works of art being given the status of mere copies of the 'Ideal'. Rather, Ricoeur adopts Aristotle's concept of productive mimesis found in the *Poetics* termed 'poiesis' with connotations of mimesis as an "augmentation of meaning in the field of action" (Ricoeur 1981 p.16). Productive mimesis only takes place within the framework of human action/production (Robinson 2006). Ricoeur locates mimesis within a

hermeneutics which situates art making within concrete processes, within “the practices of a life” (Robinson 2006 p.46).

Bourgeois’ art, Robinson suggests, can be read at a more adequate level by viewing her aesthetic practice as deeply engaged in a process of productive mimesis. Robinson states that in order to (re)gain the site of their subjectivity (‘which in a phallogocentric economy can only yet be hypothesised’), women have to ‘retraverse’ the site of their exploitation knowingly and strategically (Robinson 2006). This, Bourgeois has consistently engaged in for six decades contributing significantly to the reading of woman’s deepest experiences into the cultural record, insisting on the validity and authenticity of her own syntax and representation. It is at this complex site of cultural production that Bourgeois’ textile oeuvre must be located. Textile and text have provided Bourgeois, as we shall see in what follows, with powerful metaphor and materiality in the last decades of her life.

Spliced: Louise Bourgeois and the Agendas of Feminism

- (i) *Otte*
Un Canape a l’hotel des Ventes
A sofa at the auction house
Il est un diseur, elle calembourgette
He has a way with words, she plays with them
Il parle, elle parlotte
He talks, she prattles
Il joue a la bourse, elle boursicote
He plays the stock-market, she has a flutter
Il cuisine mais elle popotte
He does cuisine, she tosses something together
Il decouvre
He discovers
Un vaccine
A vaccination
Elle degotte
She turns up
(Song by Louise Bourgeoise)

- (ii) *I was called Louise because mother was a feminist and a socialist; her ideal was Louise Michel, the French Rosa Luxemburg.*
(Louise Bourgeois in Nixon 2005 p.268).

In the song 'Otte', written by Bourgeois, she lays bare the alienation and vulnerability of women circumscribed by language systems which presents them as amateurs, lacking serious engagement or purpose. Mignon Nixon reads deeper complexities into Bourgeois' explanation that she was named after Louise Michel. Nixon states that Bourgeois was named after her father Louis, an act of appeasement on her mother's part for having given birth to yet another girl when her husband hoped for a son.

"... Louise Bourgeois's story begins with an act of naming that places her on the fault line ... between her mother's feminist socialist politics and the patriarchal order of sexual difference that Jacques Lacan would famously describe ... as the NAME OF THE FATHER [the patronym]" (Nixon 2005 p.269, parenthesis mine).

As stated above, Bourgeois was born in France in 1911 where she lived until 1938 when aged 27 she emigrated to the US after her marriage to Robert Goldwater. Louise Bourgeois never voted in France as women did not gain the right to vote until 1945 and neither could she have given evidence in a court of law until 1935. Lebovici states that women's lives were structured by the 1804 Code Napoleon which placed them under male guardianship and denied them autonomy well into the 20th century (Lebovici 2008). Bourgeois was one of the privileged few women of her generation who went on to higher education. It is important to contextualise Bourgeois' life path from dependent woman of the early 20th century to powerfully autonomous enunciating artist of the 21st century. Her life span encompasses key moments in 20th century feminist struggles, including her mother Josephine's campaigning for women's suffrage in France. There is no doubt that Bourgeois was deeply aware of the politics and power relations in the art establishment and in society in general which worked to disadvantage women whenever they tried to negotiate access to the public sphere whether in the arts or other societal institutions (Lebovici 2008). As early

as the late 1940s Bourgeois in her print series *Femme Maison* addressed these issues. (Image 47). Schwartzman regards Bourgeois' work of the 1950s and 1960s as prescient of second wave feminism, her aesthetic concerns and art practice predating the beginning of the women's movement (Schwartzman 2003). Bourgeois' investigations into woman's psychic identity from the 1960s onwards certainly became a pivotal concern for feminist artists in the 1970s (Schwartzman 2003). Bourgeois' journey as artist through "... autobiography, the small scale, soft materials, narrative, ambiguity, otherness – so much that has become essential to the fabric of art to-day would have been unacceptable had the phallogocentric modernist canon been able to continue unchallenged" (Schwartzman 2003 p.96). Schwartzman is highlighting an interdependence between Bourgeois' journey as an artist and feminist agendas. He is suggesting that Bourgeois' aesthetic development to some degree at least depended upon the climate of rupture created by feminist scholars and artists in order to find an appropriate context and discourse within which it could flourish. Storr notes that it was in the 1970s through Bourgeois' 'bonding' with feminism that her work developed and received curatorial and critical interest in addition to support and adulation from feminist artists and theorists (Storr 2003). "She bonded with and became a heroine to the feminist movement", Storr states (Storr 2003 p.48).

However, Bourgeois' stated stance vis a vis feminism appears like much else in her life to be a site of ambiguity and ambivalence, leading Lebovici in 2008 to pose the question: "Is she or isn't she?" [a feminist] (Lebovici 2008). In 2003, Bourgeois stated:

"I don't consider myself a feminist. My husband, Robert Goldwater, was a feminist, he organised feminist demonstrations ... my mother was a socialist and a feminist" (Louise Bourgeois in Lebovici 2008).

For generations of women artists since the 1970s, Bourgeois holds an iconic status of ground breaking "Great Woman Artist" and in the 1970s Bourgeois is

said to have attended women's consciousness raising meetings in New York (Storr 2003). But this adulation clearly causes Bourgeois some disquiet.

"The feminists took me as a role model, as a mother. It bothers me. I am not interested in being a mother. I am still trying to understand myself"
(Louise Bourgeois in Morris 2008 p.130).

In 1995 in a discussion with Robert Storr, Bourgeois stated that "... there is no feminist aesthetic ... women got together not because they had things in common but because of the things they lacked" (Lebovici 2008 p.131). However Bourgeois construes her position vis a vis feminism, there is no doubt but that she was involved in second wave feminist activism, including women's protest exhibitions held in New York challenging male hegemonies in the New York art world. Deborah Wye lists 18 key exhibitions of women's art in the 1970s to which Bourgeois contributed work. These included *13 Women Artists* organised by New York Women's Ad Hoc Committee, the *Festival of Women in the Arts* at Cornell University, 1972 and the *East Coast Women's Invitation Exhibition* at the Philadelphia Museum in 1974 (Wye 1982). In the extensive catalogue publication for Bourgeois' Tate Modern Exhibition, Morris includes a 1979 photograph of a New York feminist dinner party held in March 1979 in honour of Louise Bourgeois. In the photograph Bourgeois is to be seen in the company of Mary Beth Edelson, Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta, Joyce Kozloff, Barbara Zuker (Morris 2008 p.87).

In 1976, a Bourgeois drawing of *Femme Maison* (1947) was chosen by Lucy Lippard for the cover of her book, *From the Centre: Feminist Essays in Women's Art*. In 1982, Deborah Wye curated a Retrospective of Louise Bourgeois's work at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Bourgeois was 71 years old at the time and some critics have claimed that this heralded the most important phase of her work witnessing ever more ambitious works by Bourgeois over the 25 years that followed. Morris notes it as significant that Bourgeois' powerful encounter with the male dominated traditions of bronze and carving as aesthetic

practice came after she encountered an emerging second wave feminism in the 1970s (Morris 2008).

Reviewing Bourgeois' position vis a vis feminism, Lebovici suggests that its influence seems to come and go in waves of empathy and antipathy (Lebovici 2008). Lebovici goes on to state: "Bourgeois has created her oeuvre under the auspices of contradictory impulses, creative and destructive" (Lebovici 2008 p.132). Bourgeois is aware of the role of ambivalence in her creative practice. "So you accept both sides of the ambivalence. Monday you want to kill it, Tuesday you want to resuscitate it, Wednesday you want to be pardoned, Thursday you want to pardon yourself, Friday you never want to hear about it again, and on Sunday you rest..." (Louise Bourgeois in Lebovici 2008 p.132). Lebovici suggests that this ambivalence is also at the core of Bourgeois's stance vis a vis gender and its histories.

Whatever the fluctuations of Bourgeois' attitudes to her own position vis a vis feminism, she certainly mirrored the deepest concerns of feminist agendas in her artistic practice. It is possible to trace in Bourgeois' oeuvre the five key concerns that imbued women's theorising and art practice in the last decades of the 20th and early 21st centuries. These five concerns were set out in a previous section (see Diagram 1 in Chapter 7). The five concerns identified were: Women Awakening; Talking Back; Unpicking Canons; Embodied Language; Genealogies and Autobiographies. All these concerns were running through Bourgeois' work, for example in the 1945-47 series *Femme Maison* enunciating women's entrapment in the domestic sphere and it was this that the Women's Liberation Movement lionised in the 1970s 'discovery' of Bourgeois as iconic foremother of women's art. (**Image 47**). Misogynistic violence against women is enunciated in more recent works such as *Femme Couteau* (2002) which Nochlin reads as the embodiment of "threat, mutilation and violence". (**Image 48**). In this piece, a knife blade is embedded in a headless, armless female torso with one leg reduced to a stump. The piece is made in dense bandage-like fabric, body lying prone,

evocative of a crime scene. The steel handle of the knife is embedded in the chest of the figure with a blade parallel to the recumbent torso. The body is stitched with carefully folded seams and is anatomically convincing. For Nochlin, this piece conveys “outrages wrought on the vulnerable, cloth embodied female subject itself” (Nochlin 2008 p.194).

Another fabric sculpture referencing the Venus figurines of the Neolithic is *Fragile Goddess* (2002), a small terracotta pink fabric work. This is a headless, armless, long necked torso textile piece with breasts and pregnant belly. This work could be read as a statement concerning the status of the feminine in a phallogocentric symbolic, goddess' potential severely curtailed. (**Image 49**).

The 1998 work, *Three Horizontals*, is powerfully evocative of the ever present threat of violence in women's lives. (**Image 50**). *Three Horizontals* consists of three fabric sculptures displayed on a three tier steel bier reminiscent of the site of a post mortem. The three female figures of different sizes (perhaps a mother and two daughters) are displayed prone and mutilated without arms in the case of two of the figures and with only a stump where the legs should be in the case of the third and smallest figure. The figures are clearly signified as female with well defined breasts. They are made of a stuffed pink fabric with seams roughly sutured together suggesting scars. Nochlin comments: “Together they evoke the victims of some mass misogynist atrocity of our time: Darfur or Serbia immediately spring to mind ...” (Nochlin 2008 ps. 190-191).

Bourgeois' work is also deeply implicated in challenging metadiscourses and canons of patriarchy, a key feminist goal. Nixon suggests a deep connection between the work of psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein, and the genesis of Bourgeois' work (Nixon 2005). Nixon states that, while Klein challenged Freud by theoretical re-conceptualising of the unconscious, Bourgeois mirrored this in her artistic expression thereby deconstructing the centrality of the Oedipus complex as explanation of both male and female psychic development within the master

discourses. Between them, Nixon suggests, Klein and Bourgeois read alternative, expanded explanations of woman's psychic development into the cultural record. Nixon also suggests that Bourgeois' work, using Kleinian concepts of maternal ambivalence, contributes significantly to challenging 'cultural prohibition on women's and especially mothers' ambivalence. Nixon states:

"Portraying this ambivalence through the maternal body, but also through its objects, Bourgeois suggests that the mother who carries, bears, and tends her child expecting to lodge it in "the realm of love" suffers phantasies of failure, abandonment, and destruction that may in turn rebound upon the child. In defence of them both she nurtures her own ambivalence and that of her child" (Nixon 2005 p.276).

In this context, Nixon discusses Bourgeois' *Spider* (1997), a cage contained within the spindly legs and body of the spider. (**Image 51**). The cage contains 'artefacts of the past', old tapestry remnants, fabric, scent bottles, animal bones, an old chair. *Spider* (1997), Nixon says, is a representation of the maternal imago, the phantasy figure of the mother apprehended in the child's psychic as "at once protective and menacing, magnificent and monstrous" (Nixon 2005 p.224). The *Spider*, however, Nixon states, is also a symbol of maternal ambivalence and of maternal anxiety. "Threaded with ambiguity the *Spider's* nest holds the anxiety of aggression while holding it back" (Nixon 2005 p.276).

Bourgeois, in her artistic practice and gesture, has also challenged canons of fine art and has made a significant contribution to extending the vocabulary of woman's aesthetic language and contemporary art practice. Coxon states that Bourgeois' interest in the psychological significance and possibilities for signification of domestic everyday objects combined with the confessional, autobiographical obsessive voice of her diaries, notebooks and drawings have had a profound affect on contemporary women artists' language (Coxon 2008). Coxon goes on to note that Bourgeois has had an important influence on contemporary art practice evidenced in the work of Annette Messager, Cornelia Parker, Rachel Whiteread, Mona Hatoum, Tracey Emin. The self revealing voice

in Bourgeois' diaries, notebooks and texts obsessively recurring in her aesthetic practice is echoed in the work of Sophie Calle and Jenny Holzer (Coxon 2008). Bourgeois, Coxon states, is "no longer seen as a loner within a tradition of women artists..." (Coxon 2008). Bourgeois has given a younger generation of artists the empowering permission to pursue whatever subject matter, style or medium is considered appropriate to their creative purposes. Old canons of fine art have been successfully displaced.

In summary, Bourgeois' life and work appear inextricably linked with the agendas of feminism however ambivalent her own feelings are in being linked to its histories.

Spinning Towards the Mother: Woman's Syntax

"Woman always speaks WITH the mother ... not to remain in an indissociable fusion, with the women involved together ... mother and daughter turn around each other, they go up, they go down while encircling themselves. But they also delineate the two entities that they are: in the lips, the hands, the eyes ..." (Irigaray 1987 ps.113-114).

In the 1990s, Bourgeois began using textile in her oeuvre. Herkenhoff tells us that in Bourgeois' studio she keeps books on the science of tailoring. Old books, such as *The New Dressmaker*, *Manuel Methodique et Practique de Couture et de Coupe* are arranged by size on Bourgeois' studio bookshelves (Herkenhoff 1997). Herkenhoff states "what Louise Bourgeois sculpts is the sewing of clothes, cushions over breasts and derrieres, clothing in embraces, clothes skeletons and violence, a vast interiority ... the clothing leaves the closet, the place where memory rests, and come back to life as substantive presence. The garments appear to be shown inside out since they are so revealing ... fashion is a metaphor of the continuous and daily changes of life ... related to the conquest of forgetfulness. *Therefore, it is through the needle, the wearing, the guardianship and the sculpture that these clothes find again ... their folds of the soul*" (Herkenhoff 1997 p.5, Italics mine).

During the 1990s and early 21st century years, Bourgeois has created a significant and innovative body of work in fabric which Nochlin analyses as Bourgeois' 'late style'.

"Regression ... abjectness, these are the terms that immediately spring to mind when confronting the soft figures of Bourgeois's old age. Hanging, lying, sprawling, alone or intertwined – these often small scale figures are after all more akin to children's beloved toys, especially their hug-worn, shabby yet comforting stuffed animals, than to the pristine solidity of bronze or marble sculpture, or even Bourgeois's more malleable and formless productions in latex" (Nochlin 2008 p. 190).

Yet, however comforting the stuffed textile work may appear on the surface, Nochlin reads deeper undertones of 'horror', 'something uncanny' emanating from their disturbing presences (Nochlin 2008). *Untitled* (1996) is a work consisting of pieces of clothing hung on rods projecting from steel armature. **(Image 52)**. Nochlin describes this as a *momento mori* cast in the language of fashion, 'a memorial' to Bourgeois' own lost youth (Nochlin 2008). *Untitled* has as its components pieces of silk and satin underclothes, a beaded dress. Nochlin quotes Bourgeois as stating that "clothing is a metaphor for the years that pass" (Louise Bourgeois in Nochlin 2008 p.189). The subject is absent yet strongly present, a presence reinforced by the bone hangers upon which the items of clothing are suspended, referencing skeletal structures. Herkenhoff states that for Bourgeois, clothes are impregnated with 'meaning', located in memory, a second skin, perhaps even 'the body itself' (Herkenhoff 1997 p.5). But Bourgeois emphasises that her work is no retrograde obsession with the past. "This is not mere 'parole antique'. I work with the present, eternal, universal and ever-present emotions" (Louise Bourgeois in Herkenhoff 1997 p.5). In her textile oeuvre, Bourgeois is dealing with ever present life struggles, "a constant confrontation between the instincts of death, anguish, fear and the instincts of life" (Herkenhoff 1997 p.2).

Storr discusses the patchwork terrycloth figures of bodies in various sexually explicit poses entitled *Seven in Bed*. **(Image 53)**. Their pink pieced surfaces

suggest sutured wounds with scars criss-crossing their bodies in what Storr refers to as “a modern sexual comedy of manners and glimpses of unmitigated psychic pain” (Storr 2003 p.88). Bourgeois, for Storr, is commenting on modern sexual mores.

Storr goes on to make an insightful point in relation to Bourgeois' use of textile. The fabric sculptures, 'these dolls', he states and the soft, fabric versions of her stacked wooden pieces of the 1950s and 1980s, allow Bourgeois an opportunity for combining symbols and 'the imaginative declension of old motifs into new ones' as well as exploring the possibilities of new materials (textile and stitch) (Storr 2008 p.85). Textile in effect, Storr is saying, has extended Bourgeois' aesthetic vocabulary and allowed her to imbue old themes with new references and deeper meanings. Storr comments that Bourgeois' use of textiles places her in a 'remarkable position' at an age “when most of her surviving contemporaries ... have exhausted their creative reserves ...” (Storr 2003 p.88). Textile as metaphor, material and technique, Storr seems to be saying, has extended in time and expanded into new sites of investigation Bourgeois' creative journey.

While Nochlin, Herkenhoff and Storr have offered useful insights into reading Bourgeois' late work, art criticism in general as referred to in the previous section, has found itself somewhat perplexed (Robinson 2006). Robinson states that Bourgeois' *Cell* series does not fit neatly into any art classificatory system. **(Image 54)**. In her words, they “resist terms of figuration or abstraction, modernism or post-modernism” (Robinson 2006 p.133). Bourgeois first showed her *Cells* when she represented the United States at the 45th Venice Biennale installing four large works entitled *Cells* in the US pavilion. Throughout the 1990s Bourgeois continued the *Cell series* creating 15 in total as well as a related series of large spiders. The *Cells* consisted of enclosed spaces framing ambivalent sites, referencing inner worlds of ambiguity. The *Cells* were made of salvage material. Recycled windows, door frames, scrap wood, steel grilles, metal frames enclose surreal architectural spaces. Alongside her own family heirlooms

(antique tapestries, bits of furniture and linen) and sculpted objects made by Bourgeois herself, in stone, bronze and marble, she placed found objects. Clothing hung ghostlike, spectres haunting the theatrical sites of the *Cells*. The viewer may enter some *Cells*, access is denied in others, one must peer through the grilles at Bourgeois' tableau.

Robinson makes the point that the *Cells*, and the textile figurative sculptures by Bourgeois, disconcerted art criticism and cannot be adequately apprehended within the terms of 'phallogocentric art discourse' (Robinson 2006). The *Cells*, Robinson states, "are not easily containable 'art objects' and neither are the 'objects' comprising them clear in their object status ..." (Robinson 2006 p.136). Critical disquiet with Bourgeois' work, Robinson states, "starts with the turn towards fabric and stitching by hand" (Robinson 2006 p.144). While the museum settings in which Bourgeois' work is presented and some of its presentational methods reference fine art and its visual codes ... *the gestures and methods of these fabric figures are at the furthest remove from those high art practices*" (Robinson 2006 p.144 –Italics mine). Rather, Robinson states, they allude to a 'particular position in the hierarchy of creative endeavour'. These works display strong overtones of the domestic realms of dressmaking, patchwork, 'make-do-and-mend', skills and activities passed through the generations from mothers to daughters. The methods and gestures of Bourgeois' aesthetic practice are sited in a position in the creative hierarchy which is unmistakably gendered (Robinson 2006). Robinson goes on to suggest that the skills Bourgeois uses in making her fabric figures are the same skills daughters learned from their mothers making rag dolls for them which act as transitional object, 'quasi subjects', as set out earlier. Psychoanalytic theory suggests that such transitional objects are implicated in the psychic processes whereby girls separate their identities from that of the mother by "creating fantasies for caring and the projection of subjectivity onto objects" (Robinson 2006 p.144). Herein, Robinson suggests, lies the ability of Bourgeois' stitched figures to disturb and disconcert. Robinson

states "...they cannot be distanced as objects: they only gain legibility as vital and present mediations of an insistent subjectivity" (Robinson 2006 p.144).

Pins, Needles and Panache

- (i) *"When I was growing up, all the women in my house were using needles. I have always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power in the needle. The needle is used to repair the damage. It's a claim to forgiveness"*
(Louise Bourgeois in McKeith 2003).

- (ii) *"... her body, her sexuality, her ontology being unseen and unspoken ... being literally unspeakable, lacking an appropriate syntax ... what is missed then is that the mother of the woman is central to her morphologic and her self-representation"* (Robinson 2006 p.60; p. 145)

Within the symbolic constructed through phallogentrism woman's genealogies and relation to her origins are "utterly disrupted", according to Irigaray. We have seen that women artists and theorists have viewed it as imperative that woman develops an authentic signification, a language of her own. Only then can a culture of two replace the dominant syntax which construes woman as 'other of the same'. There is little doubt that Bourgeois' textile oeuvre is underpinned by a diligent and courageous search for a signification system located in the deepest roots of her origins, her morphology and her being as a woman. This has led her into realms outside of patriarchal art discourse, even for critics such as Storr who has engaged extensively over time with Bourgeois' oeuvre and who has undoubtedly contributed many valuable insights concerning her work but always within the limits of the patriarchal symbolic (Robinson 2006). Robinson makes the point that this has led to Bourgeois' work being in Millar's terms 'underread' (Robinson 2006, Millar 1988). Central connotations of 'yarn spinning', and hysteria, already referred to, which adhere to Bourgeois' late oeuvre may arise because of the absence of adequate conceptual tools to apprehend Bourgeois' signification. For example, Robinson states that Storr ignores any account of Bourgeois' relationship with her mother while he focuses extensively on the role

of her relationship with her father and his mistress in tracing the genesis of her work. Robinson comments: "His discourse around Bourgeois is struggling with the limits of phallogomorphic logic and its syntax, and therefore his comments are unable to make that imaginative leap into reading, across difference, the syntax appropriate to women ... what is missed then is that *the mother of the woman is central to her morphologic and her self-representation*" (Robinson 2006 p.145, italics mine). Robinson emphasises the primary importance of the mother-daughter relationship in developing adequate readings of Bourgeois' art work, particularly in the work of the 1990s and early 21st century. *She in fact suggests that in her late oeuvre Bourgeois has turned towards the mother in a search for signification, metaphor and a materiality to express her deepest concerns.*

In *Endless Pursuit*, a fabric piece made in 2000 of blue pieced material with patched roughly stitched seams displayed on the surface defining the bulbous spherical contours, Bourgeois is almost certainly referencing the Neolithic Venus sculptures of the Goddess. (**Image 55**). This work defines the realm of the powerful fertile feminine. Blue, Robinson points out, is the colour of Our Lady's cloak, sky, water, (nature) in Western iconography. A head with open, enunciating mouth, shoulders and breasts emerge from the patched blue sphere, breasts lying atop flattened as in position for a breast scan. For Robinson the woman is "not being swallowed by it [the sphere] so much as defining this space" (Robinson 2006 p.145).

In her late textile work, Robinson suggests, Bourgeois is articulating an authentic and powerful site of woman's cultural syntax. Drawing extensively on the research of Irigaray into woman's psychic development and Irigaray's theory of gesture, Robinson presents an analysis of Bourgeois' textile oeuvre which goes beyond the primacy of the father in Freudian Oedipal narratives. Other critics have also referenced the importance of Bourgeois' relationship with her mother. Kuspit, for example, states that in her fabric sculptures, Bourgeois "clings to her mother ... they are intimate explorations of the mother's body" (Kuspit 2008).

What Robinson is proposing is a deeper examination of the gestures and methods of making the work informed by Irigaray's essay, *Gesture in Psychoanalysis*. Robinson states:

"If the loss of the mother leads girls to a distinct relation with the thing that signifies the mother in her absence, covering or displacing the fear of her loss: if it leads them to particular delineation and definition of space – space which is both a defensive space which speaks of the experience of loss and a display at the same time; and if this is articulated through gestures which are gendered ... an enunciation which invests in process rather than object through which to construct its syntax – then I think we have a set of concepts which can facilitate a developing analysis of aspects of Louise Bourgeois's practice. We have to return to Bourgeois's relation to the mother" (Robinson 2006 ps.132-133).

Without in any way closing down the work by excessive interpretation, Robinson develops intriguing arguments emphasising the crucial role her relationship with the mother in the real and phantasy level has for Bourgeois' creative oeuvre. In her analysis of Bourgeois' work, Robinson summarises Irigaray's research into woman's psychic development. Irigaray states that an essential challenge to a girl developing her own separate identity is separation from the mother. In classical and neo- Freudian accounts, this psychic process of separation is constructed around the Oedipal/son/mother/father axis, what Robinson terms the 'Freudian Family Romance' (Robinson 2006). Irigaray's research has questioned the validity of this model for the psychic development of women. Irigaray indicates that when a young girl is separated from her mother her way of addressing the sense of loss caused by the separation is to "organise a symbolic space around herself. She produces a territory through gestures of spinning ... circular movements ... the little girl also plays with objects" (Robinson 2006 p.138). These spinning and play gestures/actions serve, Robinson states, to protect the child from her sense of abandonment and resulting depression (Robinson 2006). For Robinson these are the processes/gestures which Bourgeois has engaged in to produce the *Cell* works. Robinson makes the point that in the *Cells* Bourgeois delineates an architectural space which serves to signify the artist's own inner psychic space. The inclusion of objects of

ambivalent status (clothes, old furniture, found and made objects) in the *Cells* create a visual narrative “protecting the artist from her childhood abandonment and loss of self ...” (Robinson 2006 p.138). In the *Cells*, Bourgeois controls access to her signifying spaces. Sometimes we can only peer into these structures, at other times, we are allowed to enter. Drawing on Irigaray’s work, Robinson suggests that these signifying gestures are deeply rooted in a discourse and site of difference appropriate to articulating woman’s experience. As an example of this, Robinson discusses the dimensions of the *Cells* in terms of Irigaray’s concept of ‘gestural territory and its limits’ (Robinson 2006 p.140) Robinson comments:

“One can almost imagine her [Bourgeois] performing the dance that Irigaray has identified, circling or spinning around, arms outstretched, to find the dimensions that are appropriate for each piece – dimensions which will thus vary from piece to piece ... The artist-subject reaches, turns, steps and twists to establish the appropriate space/object relation, delimitation and articulation through a material signifying practice ... Bourgeois marks out her imaginative space through her working practices and processes ... she does indeed produce in these works ‘a space, a path, a river, a dance and rhythm, a song’” (Robinson 2006 p.140).

The *Cells*, Robinson suggests, can be read as a meditation on the process of difference/separation between the girl and her mother. Robinson reads a close correspondence between Bourgeois’ own statement and her creation of the *Cell* series and the textile work.

“The material was there taking all that room and bothering me, bothering me by its aggressive presence. And somehow the idea of the mother came to me, this is the way my mother impressed me, as very powerful, very silent, very judging and controlling the whole studio and naturally this piece became my mother. At that point I had my subject. I was going to express what I felt towards her ... First I cut off her head, and I slit her throat ... and after weeks and weeks of work, I thought, if this is the way I saw my mother, then she did not like me. How could she possibly like me if I treat her that way? At that point something turned around. I could not stand the idea that she wouldn’t like me. The fact that I had pushed her around, cut off her head had nothing to do with it. What you do to a person has nothing to do with what you expect that person to feel towards you ... now at the end I became very, very depressed, terribly depressed” (Louise Bourgeois in Robinson 2006 p.136).

In the terms of Irigaray's theories of woman's psychic development and gestural territories, Bourgeois is spinning out her art work in a vast arachnological gesture, 'a space, a path, a river, a dance and rhythm, a song'. The subject 'spiral/spinning woman' is a recurring theme in Bourgeois' oeuvre occurring in the 1950s and 1980s in bronze and other materials, for example, in *Spiral Woman* (1984), a small bronze female form hanging spinning on a wire over a slate disc placed on the floor. (**Image 56**). *Spiral Woman* (2003) is a suspended stuffed fabric piece with legs and belly with the lower part of the legs transforming into a literal blue fabric spiral. (**Image 57**). Robinson suggests that through the gesture of the manipulation of fabric Bourgeois re-enacts the primal spinning of separation from her mother (Robinson 2006). In Irigaray's terms, Bourgeois is speaking with the mother, "mother and daughter turn around each other ... encircling themselves" in a spiral spinning without end thereby delineating a language outside phallogocentric discourse. Through a material practice, in a complex linkage of materiality and subjectivity Bourgeois' textile work occupies a groundbreaking site of an elaboration of 'sexualised subjective identity' (Robinson 2006 p.3).

Prayer, Repair and Grotesque Handiwork: Textile and Text in Louise Bourgeois' Aesthetic Practice

(i) The Prayer of Louise Bourgeois

Lord, there is no limit to my gratitude. Look at my drawing [my stitching] ... like heartbeats, they move infinitely. Like the sea waves, they pump infinitely, forever ... like my gratitude towards you. I am trying to make you understand how you cannot abandon me. The infinite matter – entropy or in the number of dishes that I have to wash in the infinite dust of the workshop – like the freezing mornings, like the endless crowd in the subway, like all the germs carried by infinite breath, like all the eternal phenomena, my thanks for your kindness cover my body like scales, or feathers, or hair. I kill myself trying to make you understand it is my responsibility to make you understand. The burden of proof is on me. I know it and I am taking care of it. (Louise Bourgeois 1990 in Morris 2008 p. 153, parenthesis mine).

- (ii) *"Hair is simply protection women are wrapped in. Hair is like a caterpillar in a cocoon. But hair is more friendly in that the cocoon eliminates the subject. Silk hair wool are everywhere. Skeins are put together in a methodical fashion, whereas hair is unruly and free. It has to be restrained or braided"* (Louise Bourgeois in Bernadac and Obrist 2000 p.216).
- (iii) *"The 'female spider' has a bad reputation – a stinger, a killer. I rehabilitate her. If I have to rehabilitate her it is because I feel criticised"* (Louise Bourgeois in Bernadac and Obrist 2000 p. 217).

This section considers textile/text in relation to Bourgeois' aesthetic practice as expression of her deepest concerns. It suggests that her use of textile and text allowed Bourgeois in her late years to develop a complex aesthetic practice, a site of innovative enunciation and ground breaking cultural creation. In her prayer, Bourgeois states that she draws/sews to make God understand. This is the Jungian idea of the ontological purpose of life itself as a struggle towards consciousness, a work of co-creation between God and humans. Bourgeois in her advanced old age continued her lifelong effort to hold the complexities and ambiguities of the human condition within her representation. Bourgeois in her use of textile and text has developed a complex aesthetic praxis, a weave of materiality, metaphor, symbol: aesthetic endeavour as act of survival, an attending to familial memory, innovative autobiographical/narrative gestures, final acts of repair/mending the etheric web of her life. Within the ambit of the textile grid, Bourgeois conjures the equilibrium of mind, the strength of body to continue her mourning without end, her archetypal acts of reparation. Bourgeois speaks of her need for peace and calm. The grid, Bourgeois tells us, "is a very peaceful thing, because nothing can go wrong ... everything is complete. There is no room for anxiety ... everything is welcome. Implicit in the grid is repetition which to Bourgeois can also produce calm: The repetitive motion of line ... the back and forth of a shuttle, the endless repetition of waves ..." (Louise Bourgeois in Morris 2008 p.65). Storr proposes that Bourgeois' art rests on a foundation of Cubist fracturing of the classical plane and Surrealism's distortions of shapes and

spaces. In Classicism, the grid is 'a fixed and immovable template' (Storr 2003). Cubism sought to disrupt this static order. For the Surrealists, "the grid is elastic: tug it, bind it, do anything but tear it, and it will remain intact, even though the distance from one place on the grid to another has been expanded or contracted, and given that entire areas may have taken on new dimensions" (Storr 2003 p.92). The hyphose, primal grid of textile, provides Bourgeois with refuge, nurturance, metaphor, gesture. Hair, silk and wool are, as we have seen in the quotation above, equated with protection by Bourgeois.

Reparation

Bourgeois tells us "my mother would sit out in the sun and repair a tapestry or petit point. She really loved it. This sense of reparation is very deep within me" (Louise Bourgeois in Morris 2008 p.242). Bourgeois has spoken of her memories of tapestry in her family home in France where tapestry wall hangings, tablecloths and bed covers formed key elements of the décor. In the late 1990s Bourgeois made a series of abstract slender columns composed of fabric units of varying size and materials stacked on stainless armatures, some of the fabric units contain embroidered texts, others are made of tapestry remnants. Storr views these *Fabric Towers* as evoking Bourgeois' 1940s and 1950s *Personages*, works she made in remembrance of those she had left behind in war torn France. (Image 58). The *Fabric Towers*, made in the late period of her life, are also perhaps invocations of absent loved ones (Storr 2003; Herkenhoff 2008). Bourgeois states: "When I was growing up, all the women in my house used needles. The needle is used to repair the damage. It's a claim to forgiveness" (Louise Bourgeois in Morris 2008 p.187). As stated previously, Bourgeois's mother Josephine, the proprietor of a tapestry repair workshop, sewed daily and the needle can also be viewed as a symbolic link for Bourgeois with her mother's life. Herkenhoff states that "The needle has diverse and at times contradictory meanings in Bourgeois's symbolic life. It represents an instrument of labour, but it is also a therapeutic device, a cure for guilt and a tool for craft" (Herkenhoff 2008

p. 186). The needle can also be read as a symbol of female exploitation by industrial capitalism. The area around the Bievre river where Bourgeois's family lived was an area of textile mills and no doubt Bourgeois witnessed the outcomes of female worker exploitation in her childhood. Gaston Bachelard, the French philosopher, writes of the material will or desire towards the physicality of the world. 'The material reality instructs us', he states (Herkenhoff 200 p. 187). Bourgeois has devoted a lifetime to materials and the process of making. Herkenhoff makes the point that "the needle ... represents Bourgeois' phenomenological urge to join things together tightly and to form from within a diagram of her own existential condition ..." (Herkenhoff 2008 p.187). From a Kleinian/Freudian psychoanalytic perspective the needle is associated with ideas of reparation/repair. As stated earlier, Bourgeois studied Klein's writings and in her book, *Love, Guilt and Reparation* published in 1964, Melanie Klein describes the psychological mechanisms for repairing dislocations in the relationship with the primary love object (the mother). Bourgeois' 'I do, I undo, I redo' seems to mirror the Kleinian model of psychic repair. In a text written in 2000 for Tate Modern Commissioned Unilever Series, Bourgeois explains:

"I DO is an active state. It is a positive affirmation. I am in control, and I move forward, towards a goal or a wish or a desire ... I am the good mother. The UNDO is the unravelling. The torment that things are not right and the anxiety of not knowing what to do. There can be total destruction in the attempt to find an answer, and there can be terrific violence that descends into depression ... It is the view from the bottom of the well ... total rejection and destruction ... I smash things, relations are broken. I am the bad mother ... the guilt leads to a deep despair and passivity. One returns into one's lair to strategize, recover and regroup. The REDO means that a solution is found. It may not be the final answer, but there is an attempt to go forward ... you are active again. You have confidence again ... reparation and reconciliation have been achieved. Things are back to normal. There is hope and love again" (Louise Bourgeois in Bernadac and Obrist 2000 p.368).

Bourgeois's tools – needle and thread – as well as the fabric itself, return her to the formative years of her childhood, where in her mother's tapestry workshop on the banks of the River Bievre she observed and learned the art of *repair*. Morris writes of "scavenging, collecting and mending ... trunks overflowing with

household linen and clothing she had retained from her family ... habits of economy central to her parents' professional lives" are now central to Bourgeois' own aesthetic practice (Morris 2008 p.15). In a world, where no closure appears possible, Bourgeois creates her textile oeuvre, patches together her iconography of personal meaning, memory and witness, re-modelling/repairing the past. There can be no simple chronology to her art, Morris states, because Bourgeois "Lives with her memories, treasures them and at the same time, all the time, is traumatised by them ..." (Morris 2008 p.17). Her aesthetic practice is in effect, as her grandmother and mother had done before her, acts of attending to and repairing the past.

Saved by her needle

No pins

No stapler

No tape

No glue

(Louis Bourgeois Diary Entry in Herkenhoff 2008 p.187).

Textile/Text As Act of Survival

In his 1917 essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud set out his theory of human grief and mourning, the process whereby a survivor grieves for a beloved lost forever. Mignon Nixon points to the significance of this process as the impetus to much of Bourgeois's oeuvre, particularly her early sculptural phase in the US and in her latter textile pieces. "Separated from her family in France and gripped by the guilt shared by so many émigrés of wartime – longing anxiously for those 'left behind – she began to fashion figures as substitutes for the missing" (Nixon 2008 p.228). Freud describes mourning as a 'work', a process whereby the ego must sever its bonds with what is lost and this process is achieved by a 'painstaking reconstruction of the past', a calling to consciousness of a detailed catalogue of memories as a precursor to closure. Closure implies that the intra psychic bond between the person and what she has lost is forever transformed. For Freud, the mark of a successful mourning

process is the internalisation of a distilled essence of the lost object, to be preserved forever in the psyche (Nixon 2008). Freud also adverts to the ambivalence inherent in the best of human relationships because love is always tainted with its opposite. Freud states: "Those loved ones are on the one hand an inner possession, components of our own ego; but on the other hand they are partly strangers, even enemies" (Freud in Nixon 2008). Herein lies the excruciatingly painful work of mourning "the effort of ambivalence that is mourning's pre-eminent demand" (Nixon 2008 p.231). The psychoanalyst Melanie Klein points out that similar psychic suffering arises not only in the case of death of a loved one but also in any painful experience of loss, separation, unrequited longing or guilt. The work of mourning can become sited in a state of mind Klein terms 'the depressive position' (Nixon 2008). Freud suggests memories are reviewed and sorted bit by bit in the mourning process and Nixon makes the point that this may well be a useful insight for understanding the impulses underpinning Bourgeois' late textile oeuvre. For Klein, mourning is a work without end, the very ground of living (Nixon 2008).

We have already referred to the role of the transitional object in psychoanalytic theory as psychic coping mechanism in situations of separation or the threat of loss. Kuspit states that Winnicott explains that when a word is used for a transitional object such as 'a bundle of wool or the corner of a blanket' it takes on the quality of that object in the infant's imagination (Kuspit 2008 p.301). Kuspit goes on to hypothesise that Bourgeois' text in her diaries and in her art work act as transitional objects protecting her from the primary loss of her mother. In her acts of weaving words (texts) as in her acts of textile repair, Kuspit portrays Bourgeois as arachnologist "weaving as her mother wove every day ... the way a spider weaves a web" (Kuspit 2008 p.301). For Kuspit, the ancient spider symbol, represented so many times by Bourgeois, as primordial weaving symbol *is* Bourgeois herself as well as her mother, both unconsciously joined in a psychic symbiosis (Kuspit 2008). Kuspit goes on to state: "Bourgeois's diaries suggest that she unconsciously thinks of herself as Penelope and Ariadne as well as

Arachne. They also narrated and navigated life through intricate, spell-binding webs. Like Penelope, Bourgeois weaves and unweaves the tapestry of her diary [life], leaving loose threads that are nonetheless a reliable guide through the labyrinth of her inner life, like Ariadne's thread" (Kuspit 2008 p.302, parenthesis mine). Bourgeois' textile and text oeuvre may then be read as an act of survival, located in a complex site of representation where gesture, materiality, metaphor, symbol and art practice are intermeshed and implicated in Bourgeois' deepest purposes.

Arch of Hysteria (2000) is a hanging female form made from stuffed textured pink fabric (Bourgeois had earlier treated this subject in bronze and marble using the male form displayed on the ground). (Image 59). Nochlin makes the point that, while Bourgeois' textile work is linked with her mother's tapestry restoration, Bourgeois's own needlework expression is the antithesis of the fine tradition of craftwork involved in tapestry restoration. Nochlin describes Bourgeois's textile work as "*grotesque handiwork ... the deliberate ferocity of bad sewing ... the large clumsy stitching both suggesting old age ... or regression to childhood ...*" (Nochlin 2008 p.191, italics mine). Nochlin's description of the intermeshing of material, technique and subject matter in *Arch of Hysteria* gives a powerful insight into Bourgeois' aesthetic practice. "The deliberateness of this effect of crudeness becomes even more apparent when, on closer inspection, you see that in certain areas the big stitches are quite deliberately even and controlled, while in others, the torn-off bits of thread tremble in the ambient air as though bitten off by an unskilled sewer" (Nochlin 2008 p.191). *Arch of Hysteria*, suspended in mid air 'helpless, awkward, lumpy', Nochlin states, like a falling figure from a medieval Day of Judgement altar screen, half way between heaven and hell (Nochlin 2008).

Bourgeois tells us that insomnia has regulated her life and its work patterns (Morris 2008). Morris states that insomnia has been a recurrent issue in Bourgeois' life. During 1994 -1995 she made 200 mixed media night drawings,

the *Insomnia* series (Morris 2008). In 2002, Bourgeois also made a series of night sewing works, which she presented as fabric books, *Ode a la Bievre* (2002) and *Ode a l'oubli* (2004). (Image 60 and Image 61). These works provide further insights into the role of textile and text in Bourgeois' practice, bearing witness to the creative possibilities Bourgeois has found in the distressing condition of insomnia. Unable to sleep, Bourgeois transforms herself into a nocturnal Penelope interweaving textile and text, 'rolling and unrolling the long skeins of her childhood memories' (Morris 208). Marie-Laure Bernadac, chief curator of the Musee d'Art Contemporain de Bourdeaux, describes Bourgeois' artistic process. "During long sleepless nights when senses are doubly sharp, Louise Bourgeois calms her anxiety by feverishly drawing, writing and scribbling ..." (Harper 2007 p.75). The books are made of linen with blue text printed by lithographic process describing the Bievre River and the gardens of the Bourgeois family home in Antony which bordered the river, a watercourse deeply implanted in Louise Bourgeois' being. Harper describes the *Insomnia* books as a "series of fabric compositions ... [of] formal stripes, woven, printed and pieced with neat buttonholes at the edge ... constrained, demure ... they operate a minimalist use of the 'language of cloth'" (Harper 2007 p. 76). In the initial leaves of *Ode a la Bievre*, Bourgeois describes an idyl of domestic happiness imaged in the planting of fruit and flower beds 'hopeful symbols of fecundity and goodness' (Harper 2007). The neatness of the stitching conveys, Harper tells us, that the "seamstress [Josephine, Bourgeois' mother] did everything in her power to keep everything all right and good" (Harper 2007 p.77). But as the fabric book unfolds, the idyl is disrupted, red dye bleeds from indigo wounds, the formality of the black and white checks are disrupted, "repeat patterns go wildly mad, grids and blocks form prisons with no exits, seams interfere with counter-linearity ... and a tiny embroidered label whispers 'demain' (tomorrow)" Harper 2007 p.77). Yet again Bourgeois in the *Insomniac* series powerfully enunciates her wound of origin, her re-enactment of her childhood trauma. Harper concludes: "Forgetting is impossible. Repetition, without escape becomes the only possible ..." (Harper 2007 p.77). Once again textile and text provide Bourgeois with a subtle language

of representation ensuring her psychic survival, gifting us with deeply moving creative acts of soulful courage.

Herstory: Autobiography in Clothes

As has been suggested in a previous section, women artists in the last decades of the twentieth century engaged extensively with personal and matrilineal autobiography as structures within which to investigate and express female experience and subjectivity. One possible reading of Bourgeois' entire oeuvre could legitimately be that of biography. Storr suggests that Bourgeois has made innovative and unique contributions to autobiography as cultural format and that textile and text has played a hugely significant role in her autobiographical methodologies (Storr 2003). Bourgeois, he suggests has developed "an autobiography in clothes" (Storr 2003 p.85). He suggests that Bourgeois' *Cells* be read as such. "... Bourgeois has filled her 'cells' with closet hangers and seamstresses' dummies dressed in her old dresses and undergarments, whose sizes and period styles from dainty 1920s lace to hot 1960s geometric prints constitute an *autobiography in clothes*. Some she has stuffed, leading to a series of grotesque dolls – small ones as well as others which are ominously larger than life ..." (Storr 2003 p.85, Italics mine). *Cells (Clothes)* 1996 is a self-contained space occupied by objects (some found and some made by the artist) that refer to elements of her personal history, salvaged wooden doors some with panes of glass and handles removed denying entry but allowing voyeuristic access. An oppressive melancholia is created, Morris suggests, by the clothes hung on extending wire hangers or attached with clothes pegs (Morris 2008). The black and white clothes, we are told, were all worn by the artist sometime during her long life – dresses, stockings, skirts, some padded suggesting presence (Morris 2008). Bourgeois embroidered in red thread on the back of a white coat the text, *The cold of anxiety is very real*. A suspended dark coloured female torso and the stuffed soft sculpture placed in an arched position on a chair perhaps reference

hysterical poses identified by Charcot in his aetiology of female hysteria.²¹ Bourgeois has spoken and written of clothing as memory invoking the past. "Clothing is also an exercise of memory. It makes me explore the past: how did I feel when I wore that. They are like signposts in the search for the past" (Louise Bourgeois in Morris 2008 p.76). In the 1990s textile as clothes became an important signifier in Bourgeois' artistic practice referencing her earliest experiences of her parents competing for her love through the purchase of expensive outfits and items of clothing. Schwartzman suggests that the sculptural works based on her old clothing as important signifier allows Bourgeois "to explore yet more kinds of self portraiture" (Schwartzman 2003 p.103). Textile and text are deeply implicated in Bourgeois' autobiographical strategies.

The head, ideal type bust of classical antiquity and portrait of important personage of the canons of high art into the 20th century has become a major theme in Bourgeois' late work. Bourgeois' head series are constructed of padded/stuffed fabrics, fragments, tapestry, bandaging, each piece unique, of differing facial structure/expression. Heads "... pieced together grimace and howl in isolation boxes", Storr tells us (Storr 2003 p.88). The frontal heads are presented in glass vitrines like Victorian museum exhibits. The heads are anatomically convincing and proportionately in scale. Morris sees the works as 'hugely skilled', 'a patchwork of meagre scraps' transformed into anatomically convincing forms (Morris 2008 ps. 16-17). For Morris, these works are "amongst the artist's most bleak and disturbing representations of humanity, isolated in their vitrines, with gaping mouths and blindly staring eyes" (Morris 2008 ps. 16-17). Morris reads in the head suffering, vulnerability, even horrific victims of accidents, surgical reconstruction apparent in bandaged surfaces, suffering in extremis (Morris 2008). Morris writes of the eloquence of the stitches "crude looping, knotted lines of cotton ... so that even the thread itself carries an emotional charge" (Morris 2008 ps.16-17). Bourgeois' fabric heads are indeed

²¹ Charcot's 19th century work on female hysteria is described in Appignamesi (2009) and in Appignamesi and Forrester (1992).

powerful portraits – material (textile) and methodology (stitch/sewing) transformed into innovative representation, articulate signification. *Reflection* 2001 is made of fabric, steel and lead and has a ghostly off white appearance, a disembodied head with a cry of pain suggested by the open mouth. (Image 62).

McKeith, in a review article in CIRCA concerned with the Bourgeois 2003 Exhibition in the Irish Museum of Modern Art, 'Stitches in Time' (an exhibition curated by Frances Morris, Senior Tate Modern Curator), states:

"The life-size heads ... are trapped by the cases in which they are placed and the fabric materials used give ghostly hints of features. A powerful reinterpretation of classical busts, these works show nothing of the composure depicted in marble representations of famous figures, rather the effect is to give an impression of the inner recesses of the mind, and the pain, doubt and humanity of existence" (McKeith 2004 p.6).

These works perhaps could also have an extended reading as representation of woman's existential pain trapped within the feminine negating patriarchal order and the traumatic struggles and personal cost involved in developing a language adequate to the signification of woman's subjectivity. Bourgeois in her ground breaking fabric head series is innovatively developing the cultural formats of autobiography and self-portraiture.

Summary

In a sustained and deeply engaged aesthetic practice since the 1990s until three weeks before her death, Louise Bourgeois used textile and text as powerful gesture, rich signifier and articulate and complex lexicon in her ground breaking acts of cultural creation building an unparalleled edifice of representation of female subjectivity. Bourgeois' praxis enunciates the deepest of human existential ambivalence and suffering, reading into the culture the voice of woman's experience. Her gestures of repair/prayer, stitch are enmeshed in the materiality, language and techniques of textile. Her use of textile/text extended and enriched her already wide ranging aesthetic vocabulary and allowed her to

powerfully explore new domains of aesthetic concern as well as revisiting and resetting old symbols thereby reading expanded explanations of woman's experience and subjectivities into the cultural record. In so doing, Bourgeois, as arachnologist, weaves a compelling web, a network, a shelter, '*a path, a river, a space, a dance, a song*', for future generations of women artists.

Chapter Eleven

Nine Patch Magic: Faith Ringgold's French Collection

- (i) *When he drew up his will in 1850 the owner of First Lady Michelle Obama's great-great-great grandmother Melvinia valued the six-year-old slave girl at \$475 (Lara Marlow, Irish Times, October 9th 2009).*

- (ii) *Celestial Timepiece
Can you read it? Do you understand?
By squares, by inches you are drawn in.
Your fingers read it like Braille.
History, their days, the quick deft fingers.
Their lives recorded in cloth.
A Universe here, stitched to perfection
You must be the child witness, you are the only survivor.
(Joyce Carol Oates)*

Introduction

The subject of the final case study in the exploration of textile and text and its role in contemporary women's art practice is the African-American artist, Faith Ringgold. Ringgold was born in Harlem, New York on October 5th 1930. In 2010 she was 80 years old and in David C. Driskell's words is "a giant figure in American art ... whose artistry has soared beyond race and gender in an often hostile and racist environment" (Farrington 2004 p.iv). Ringgold is indeed an accomplished painter, sculptor, printmaker, textile and performance artist and author. She is also an esteemed teacher and arts activist who has diligently sought, against the grain, to embed art within its cultural milieu. In 1985, Ringgold was appointed tenured Professor of Art at the University of California, San Diego. Ringgold has exhibited and performed her artwork since the 1960s, taught art in the New York public school system, lectured nationwide in the 1970s and 1980s and has received numerous honorary Doctorates for her sterling contribution to the Arts. In 1984, The Studio Museum in Harlem held a 20 year retrospective of her work. In 1990, a thirteen museum nationwide touring

exhibition, *Faith Ringgold: A Twenty-Five Year Survey*, was opened at the Long Island Fine Arts Museum. In 1996, her *American Collection* series was exhibited in a solo show at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. In 1998, Dan Cameron of the New Museum of Contemporary Art curated a travelling show, *Dancing at the Louvre Faith Ringgold's French Collection and Other Story Quilts*. Ringgold is indeed a senior artist.

Ringgold comments on her art journey thus:

"In 1948 I went to City College. There I copied Greek busts and got a sound background in Western art, Greek sculpture, compositions after Degas ... but I didn't know how to get from Degas and Greek busts ... to Faith. That would take me considerable time" (Faith Ringgold in Gouma-Peterson 1998 p.39).

In 1959, Ringgold gained a Master's in Fine Art degree from City University in New York. Gouma-Peterson traces Ringgold's journey as an artist, 'the lengthy journey that took her from Greek bust to herself' through her traditional landscapes and cubist-style paintings to her large political canvases of the 1960s, her *Black Light* paintings of 1969, her *Slave Rape* series of 1972, and her masks, soft sculptures and performances of the 1970s, (*Witch Masks, Family of Women Masks* series), to reach the seminal point of her story quilts in the 1980s (Gouma-Peterson 1998).

Marcia Tucker describes Ringgold's work as a "stunning visual history of histories – her own, her family's, that of the African American artist in the United States and abroad, of social activism and feminism in the New York art world of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the history of historical omission by virtue of race and gender..." (Tucker 1998 p.ix). Tucker identifies a number of key features of Ringgold's work:

- A sense of play, satire, irony.
- A commitment to collaboration as artistic methodology – Ringgold has collaborated with her mother, her daughters, other artists, for example,

the 'Art Without Walls' project which ran workshops for the womens' prison on Reikers Island.

- Use of vernacular, demotic experiences "transformed so that most folks can find something wonderful with the art that she makes" (Tucker 1998 p.ix).
- A tendency to transgress canons and hierarchies – Ringgold's quilts, masks, dolls, costumes, drawings flout the texts of modernism which advocates the artist as a narrow specialist and privileges painting over other media. Ringgold's use of women's craft and textile as media challenges/dismantles such hierarchies.
- Ringgold challenges elitism in art making by asserting that "culture belongs to each and every one of us" in her story quilt, *Dancing at The Louvre* 1990 (Tucker 1998).

Moira Roth makes the point that Ringgold came of age politically within the context of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and after that she vigorously engaged with the women's movement of the 1970s (Roth 1998). Ringgold was the parent of two daughters and a public school art teacher during the Civil Rights Movement. Ringgold explains how those momentous times influenced her art.

"All over this country and the world people were listening to those black men [James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr.]. I felt called upon to create my own vision of the black experience we were witnessing ... but I had something to add – the visual depiction of the way we are and look. I wanted my painting to express this moment I knew was history. I wanted to give my woman's point of view to this period." (Ringgold 2005 p.146).

In the 1970s, Ringgold became involved in the feminist movement. She states: "1970 was an extraordinary year. It hit me like a tidal wave ... women students and artists for Black Art Liberation's art actions against the New York superstar male artists to liberate the "liberated" Biennale with our demands for open shows and for fifty percent women; the Whitney Museum of American Art demonstrations; and the People's Flag show at the Judson Church. All of this

took place in my first year of becoming a feminist" (Ringgold 2005 p.173). In November 1968, the Whitney Museum of American Art staged a Review Exhibition entitled 'The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America'. No black artist was included. Ringgold was on the organising committee which demonstrated at the Whitney in protest. Ringgold in fact suggested the demonstration and made posters and placards stating 'Left out in the 30s and Left out in the 60s'; 'Black Art Is Beautiful'; - the latter carried in the protest march by Romare Bearden.²² From 1960 to 1970 Ringgold was also actively involved with the Artworker's Coalition (AWC) in staging protests against MOMA's exclusion of black artists. The AWC demanded a study centre and new gallery space to facilitate critical studies and public exhibitions of black artists work. But this never came to fruition. Ringgold comments "and to-day, some 25 years later, nothing much has changed at the Modern except which white man gets the next show" (Ringgold 2005 p.172).

Ringgold has continued to address social issues in her artwork. Indeed, her work contains incisive social commentary on the destruction of communities by drug culture and the blatant racism embedded in American society. In 1981, she created what Gouma-Peterson terms "... one of Ringgold's most agonised and impassioned pieces", *Atlanta Children* (Gouma-Peterson 1998). This piece was made in response to the 1981 random killings of black children in Atlanta. It consists of 20 small doll figures with upturned faces wrapped in black satin and wire against a white ground. The twenty small figures (the number of children senselessly murdered in the Atlanta atrocity) huddle together (each bearing a tag with a name and photograph) in front of two larger figures, a male and female who wear badges with the text 'Save Our Children'. Textile and text combine as powerful protest and commemoration of yet another abject racist outrage. The piece is now in the permanent collection of the Studio Museum, Harlem.

²² Romare Bearden is an important African American painter who influenced Ringgold's early work.

Patricia Turner points out that “the story of Faith Ringgold – quilt maker, artist ... reveals much about the obstacles faced and achievements reached by members of the African American middle class” (Turner 2009). Ringgold had the good fortune to be born into a relatively comfortably off family, and to have received a good education and exposure to African Americans who had a record of strong intellectual, artistic and cultural achievements. Her mother’s father was Dr. Bunyon B. Posey, an early 20th century black educator and her mother Willi Posey was a successful fashion designer who, in Turner’s words, “bequeathed both artistic sensibilities and unflagging stamina” to her daughter (Tucker 2009 p.142). In the 1930s Posey moved her family from a working-class Harlem area to Sugar Hill, a middle class neighbourhood, home to musicians Paul Robeson and Duke Ellington, the author W.E. de Bois and Marion Anderson, among other noteworthy African Americans. This was the springboard that enabled Ringgold to engage in an artistic trajectory that culminated with her textile artwork in the permanent collections of such prestigious first-tier museums and galleries as the Solomon Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the National Museum of American Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

What follows explores the role of textile and text in Ringgold’s oeuvre and aesthetic strategies. The discussion focuses on a series of 12 story quilts, *The French Collection* completed by Ringgold in the 1990s and is set out under a series of six headings:

- (i) Textile Stories: *The French Collection*
- (ii) Appliqued! A Corporeal Cartography
- (iii) Stitched Up! A Critique of Modernism
- (iv) Backstitching into the Future: Ringgold’s Aesthetic Practices
- (v) Maternal Genealogies: Everlasting Web of Courage and Creativity
- (vi) Textile/Text as Survival Strategy

Textile Stories: The French Collection

"I wanted my daughters to know about art, music, literature: to know about other people's culture and history ... most of all I wanted my daughters to have choices. Obviously high on the 'to do' list in Paris was the Louvre. Mona Lisa here we come -- mother, Barbara, Michele and I, three generations of blackness from Harlem USA" (Faith Ringgold 2005 p.133).

The *French Collection* comprises of twelve story quilts which Meskimmon views as a meditation on the modernist period mediated through the experiences and voice of a black woman (Meskimmon 2003). Cameron sees in Ringgold's work "a self contained narrative summarising one artist's relationship with the main artistic developments associated with Paris from 1895 to 1925" (Cameron 1998 p.9). He goes on to describe *The French Collection* as one of the most imaginative efforts in American art dealing with revisionist approaches to history. The following list identifies the twelve individual story quilts which make up *The French Collection* in the order in which Ringgold created them:

- (i) *Dancing at The Louvre*
- (ii) *Wedding on the Seine*
- (iii) *The Picnic at Giverny*
- (iv) *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*
- (v) *On the Beach of St. Tropez*
- (vi) *Le Café des Artistes*
- (vii) *Jo Baker's Birthday*
- (viii) *Dinner at Gertrude Stein's*
- (ix) *Matisse's Model*
- (x) *Matisse's Chapel*
- (xi) *Picasso's Studio*
- (xii) *Moroccan Holiday*

Cameron describes *The French Collection* as a "narrative of epic dimensions" which functions as a meditation on the individual's relation to history, granting as

much importance to what may have happened as to what surely did or did not" (Cameron 1998 p.9). Cameron goes on to state that "one senses that Ringgold's ambitions for the project [*The French Collection*] grew while she worked on it" (Cameron 1998 p.9). Art historian, Moira Roth states that at the start of Ringgold's art career, it was European art, in particular French art, that inspired her to create a place for herself as an artist within European modernism. This, Roth says, was the major impetus for *The French Collection*:

"In this series African Americans make their mark literally and metaphorically on the sacred European sites of art, especially those of modernism, as they dance, quilt and talk in Dancing at the Louvre, The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles and Matisse's Chapel; take over the conversation (as does Zora Neal Hurston) in Dinner at Gertrude Stein's; and pose with independence and dignity, in the studios of Picasso and Matisse (as does the heroine of the series)" (Roth 1998 p.50).

Roth tells us that *The French Collection* concept occurred to Ringgold in the early 1990s. In the Autumn of 1990, Ringgold visited France for an extended visit of 5 months that included a residency at La Napoule artist centre in the South of France, from where she made trips to Nice and Vence where the Matisse Chapel is located. During that period, Ringgold developed the designs for *The Sunflower Quilting Bee* and *Picasso's Studio*. Art Historian, Dr. Michele Wallace, Ringgold's daughter, suggests that in *The French Collection* Ringgold raises three key cultural concerns (Wallace 1998 p.15).

- The 'hybridic' relationship between African American and European-American culture
- The cloaking and embedding of issues of race, gender and sexuality within modernism
- The survival and development of black women's subjectivity in the face of many obstacles

At the same time, Wallace views *The French Collection* as biographically revealing. Wallace describes *The French Collection* as "...chock full of historical,

philosophical and aesthetic references" (Wallace 1998 p.15). She also suggests that the twelve story quilts that make up the series can usefully be divided into three groups. *Dancing at the Louvre*, *Wedding on the Seine* and *Matisse's Chapel* focus on Ringgold's own family. A second group consists, Wallace suggests, of a discourse on the female nude and its position in modernist aesthetics – *Matisse's Model*, *Picasso's Studio*, *On The Beach of St. Tropez* and *Jo Baker's Birthday*. A third group – *The Picnic at Giverny*, *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*, *Dinner at Gertrude Stein's*, *Le Café des Artistes* and *Moroccan Holiday* are concerned with a resistance to dominant discourses relating to gender and race.

Each of Ringgold's twelve story quilts in *The French Collection* presents a tableau of the journey of a 20 year old African American woman, Willia Marie Simone²³, who emigrates to France in the 1920s in an effort to pursue a career as an artist in the modernist milieu of early 20th century Europe. The series is personal in so much as it represents Ringgold's reflections on her own and her mother's encounters with modernist influences. As stated earlier, Ringgold's mother, Willi Posey, was a fashion designer and skilled textile artist who was inspired by French haute couture. She had a successful, and indeed glamorous career, as a Harlem fashion designer for upper class African Americans in what Wallace describes as "an entirely black world of fashion made up of black designers, black models and black photographers" (Wallace 1998 p.16). Josephine Baker, the African American dancer, who in the 1920s had a successful career in Paris, was a heroine for Madam Posey and Jo Baker's story is told in *Jo Baker's Birthday*, the seventh story quilt of *The French Collection*. Wallace believes that Posey is represented by Jo Baker in Ringgold's work. Posey, Wallace states, aspired to be a dancer in her youth (Wallace 1998). Wallace also states that Willia Marie and her search for an authentic voice in the

²³ Willia Marie Simone is a fictional character developed by Ringgold but no doubt grounded in her mother's and her own encounters with French Modernism.

art world mirrors at least some of Ringgold's own dilemmas and Ringgold, like Willia Marie in 1920, went to Paris in 1961 in pursuit of her art.

Meskimmon, however, warns of the dangers of making simplistic connections between actual biographical detail and readings of Ringgold's work. Meskimmon states: "We should, however, be wary of reducing the extraordinary historical intervention of *The French Collection* to mere psychobiography ... this is a common tactic used to nullify the work of women artists by casting it as purely personal, intuitive or emotional while venerating art which is public, universal..." (Meskimmon 2003 p.39). Meskimmon emphasises that the work of black women artists has been marginalised by discourses which focus on the individuality of the artist to the exclusion of any serious discussion on the implications of the cultural concerns expressed by the artist. While Ringgold and her mother, accompanied by Ringgold's two daughters, did traverse the sites of Europe's museums and galleries in 1961 and in that sense Ringgold's *French Collection* is personal, yet it also builds bridges with the historical and the world of the imagination, thereby forging complex understandings of both the personal and the historical (Meskimmon 2003).

Applied! Ringgold's Corporeal Cartography

"It is important, when redressing history as I am doing here, not to be too literal or historical. It will spoil the magic ... This is the real power of being an artist. We can make it come true, or look true"
(Faith Ringgold in Meskimmon 2003 p.35).

It is important to address the complex interfaces between personal, racial and gender histories with which Faith Ringgold is concerned in her oeuvre. Meskimmon argues that Ringgold's work " ... is a mode of corporeal cartography, an art which examines the process by which histories are formed at the interstices of bodies and geographies" (Meskimmon 2003 p.36). Feminist scholarship has deconstructed Western master discourses demonstrating convincingly the privileged position of the masculine subject. Meskimmon points

to the beleaguered situation of women doubly inscribed by sexist and racial in addition to gender difference (Meskimmon 2003). Feminist theorists have pointed to the crucial importance for women artists of racial difference to engage critically with the canons of Western art history and its discourses. Lubina Himid states that art history is particularly culpable of the oppression of black women's creativity. "European/American art history has at best done us a great disservice at worst we are stifled and smothered ... " (Himid 1990 p. 63). Adrian Piper identifies a 'triple' negation of black women artists on grounds of race, gender and denigration of their artistic practices and traditions (Meskimmon 2003). Wallace locates the essence of black feminist art in its power to critique and create histories simultaneously (Meskimmon 2003). Wallace states "... gaps in the dominant discourse become a kind of road map of where the bodies – the bodies of those who have been ignored or negated – are buried" (Meskimmon 2003 p.37). Meskimmon reads Ringgold's *French Collection* as "... exacerbating the tropes and gaps of modernist art history to reinstate embodied black women as culture makers, rather than the negated bodies on which culture is made" (Meskimmon 2003 p.37). In the *French Collection* story quilt series, Ringgold's central subject Willia Marie Simone encounters the iconic figures of modernist Western high art, Picasso, Matisse, Van Gogh. In the *French Collection*, Ringgold also creates meetings between Willia Marie and leading African-American creators of culture such as Harriet Tubman, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, contemporary feminist art historians, Moira Roth and Johnetta Cole, as well as members of Ringgold's own family. For Meskimmon, this reconfiguring of history through the aesthetic strategy of artistic licence echoes Audre Lorde's dictum 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Meskimmon 2003). Meskimmon states "Ringgold re-maps the master's house, defying the principles, and recycling the very materials, of a history which would violently excise black women from its midst" (Meskimmon 2003 p.37). Black female subjects are inserted in participatory modes in cultural sites which historically have excluded them. Meskimmon describes Ringgold as "quilting the narratives of modernism to include African-American women who speak, dance

and make art" (Meskimmon 2003 p.39). Literal facts and 'magical' truths are included in *The French Collection* to redress histories. Meskimmon describes *The French Collection* thus:

"... a fictional/factual dialogue between an African-American woman artist and the histories of early 20th century European and American art, culture and colonial fragmentation. This is corporeal cartography and it is lyrical and uplifting even as it is deadly serious ... This work invites us to join in their stories and moves us to rework the histories they invoke"
(Meskimmon 2003 p. 39).

Meskimmon sees Ringgold's work as demonstrating the power of art to actually intervene in history and to disrupt historical canons. Such interventions are not "just 'literal' or a 'straight view'; histories are made, performed, imagined, 'twisted' and 'redressed' such that the multiplicity of black female subjectivity and African diasporan geography can be materialised ... [the] work is a mode of corporeal cartography, an art which examines the processes by which histories are formed at the interstices of bodies and geographies. And, while these bodies/geographies are never fixed or homogenous, nor are they merely dispersed, absent or phantasmatic" (Meskimmon 2003 ps. 35-36).

Meskimmon illuminates this point by referring to Stuart Hall's concept of 'cultural positioning' (Hall 2000). Hall states that "cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture which are made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*" (Hall 2000 p.14). A shift from essence to positioning, from object to process has been a key strategy adopted by feminist theorists in reconstituting female subjectivity and challenging the privileging of the masculine subject within the master discourses of Western epistemologies and canons (Meskimmon 2003).

Meskimmon suggests that Ringgold as black woman artist inscribed with gender and racial difference facing the challenges of finding a language to name and address the complexities of realities which beset her, approached this momentous task by using a strategy of "positioning embodied female black subjects against the grain of historical and theoretical marginalisation in an act of

corporeal cartography which reconceives Western knowledge systems as it rewrites monolithic historical formations” (Meskimmon 2003 p.36). In the *French Collection*, the combination of texts, images and textile through quilting, enables black female subjectivity “to emerge in new and startling ways” (Meskimmon 2003 p.37).

Faith Ringgold's *Dancing at the Louvre*, a story quilt made in 1991, the first of her series, *The French Collection*, addresses the exclusionism of European high art. (**Image 63**). In the quilt, Ringgold portrays her fictional character, Willia Marie Simone, together with her friend and her friend's three little African American girls in the gallery of the Louvre in Paris which houses the *Mona Lisa*. In celebration of having successfully negotiated the cavernous Louvre, arriving in front of the highest icon of western art, Leonardo's Renaissance masterpiece, *Mona Lisa*, in the hushed silence of the gallery, to the dismay of the high art worshippers present, the children break into a spontaneous dance of joy, thereby reinscribing the canons of western fine art, a subversive gesture claiming the universality of culture, celebrating art as belonging to everyone (Meskimmon 2003).

Meskimmon states: “but the culture represented by European fine art has not always belonged to everyone. Ringgold's work is a retort to this history, a history which violently excluded people of the African diaspora, and especially black women” (Meskimmon 2003 p.35). Meskimmon sees the *French Collection* as a highly sophisticated, politically radical and historically informed cartographic practice which acts, as Moira Roth put it, in the service of reinterpreting cultural histories where class and racial issues were implicated in access to the high art of Western civilization. The story quilt, *Matisse's Model*, addresses the problematic relationship between women, high culture, beauty, desire and subjectivity (Meskimmon 2003). (**Image 64**). This quilt consists of an image of Matisse's *La Dance*, centrally placed behind Willia Marie as she poses nude on the model's couch. The horizontal text panels at the top and bottom of the quilt contain Willia Marie's reflections on the nature of beauty as defined in Western culture. “Dark skinned girls at school knew we were not the top priority ... cause

most boys favoured peaches-and-cream over smoke ... I realised that the Negro man would like me a lot better if I looked more like the master's woman", the text states (Text, Faith Ringgold). Willia Marie as narrator goes on to try to puzzle out the relationship between men and women: *"I wonder what men think when they are thinking of women. How can they betray them ...?",* Willia Marie asks (Text, Faith Ringgold). As Matisse's model, on his couch, posed nude, Willia Marie heals some of the wounds to her self-esteem inflicted on her in the beauty stakes because of her black skin. *"I have always wanted to be beautiful, not like an anonymous beautiful woman but like une belle peinture beautiful painting. Something that pleases not only the eye but the soul. Here in Matisse's studio I am that beauty"* (Text, Faith Ringgold). But Willia Marie also identifies the conflicted site she occupies as Matisse's nude model. While she loves *"playing the beautiful woman knowing that I am steeped in painting history"*, yet this is also an *"extremely thought-provoking position to be in"*, the text tells us. *"Why am I here posing like this ... evoking all kinds of illusions ... what would HE [Matisse] think if I took out my glasses and started to read a first edition of Tolstoy's War and Peace or Richard Wright's Black Boy"* (Text, Faith Ringgold). Ringgold is deeply aware of the ambivalent status of the *Odalisques*, Matisse's series of nude 'Moroccan' women (in reality white French female models posed by Matisse in his studios in Nice surrounded by objects and fabrics he had collected in his travels in North Africa). Of Matisse's many paintings of reclining nudes, Willia Marie comments: *"I think men see these things with dreamy eyes, they see beauty in la vulnerabilite, la passivite, et la soumission. It would'nt inspire fantasy to see a woman tired ..."* (Text, Faith Ringgold).

In *Matisse's Model*, the traditions of western fine art are portrayed as desirable, a high goal for Willia Marie to aspire to. Yet she is uneasy with some of the undertones of the role assigned to nude female models by the male modernist masters. Meskimmon points out that Ringgold is referencing the "critical link between the female body, masculine creative/sexual energy and so called 'primitivism' in the histories of European modernism ..." (Meskimmon 2003 p.41).

This is addressed in *Jo Baker's Birthday*, a quilt celebrating Willia Marie's heroine and mentor (and that of Ringgold's mother also), the dancer Josephine Baker, an African American woman who carved out a successful career for herself and her art in 1920s Paris and Berlin. (Image 65). Meskimmon discusses Ringgold's choice of dance as a trope to interrogate histories (Ringgold 2003). With the exception of classical ballet, Meskimmon points out that dance has been "allied with the primitive ... the low, the corporeal, the feminine and the culturally marginal" (Meskimmon 2003 p.37). But dance has been reclaimed by African American feminist artists in multi-sensory performance art and multidisciplinary forms which have the potential to disrupt fixed categories of knowledge and articulate embodied black female subjectivity. The text of *Jo Baker's Birthday Party* is in the format of a letter to Willia Marie's Aunt Melissa inscribed in horizontal strips at the top and bottom of the story quilt. The narrator tells her aunt that she has begun painting a portrait of Jo Baker posed bare breasted, hands above her head, reclining on a Matisse-like chaise longue with a bunch of Matisse-like white flowers at her side. In another room, a maid arranges a table for guests, a party to celebrate Jo's birthday perhaps. The maid is located in a red room referencing Matisse's *Harmony in Red* painting as Jo Baker's pose references Matisse's *Odalisque with Magnolias*. The text tells us: "... it is natural to hear the shuffle of the maid's feet preparing her party. But my mind's eye sees Matisse's *Harmony in Red* ... Josephine would love it. She should own this great painting" (Text, Faith Ringgold). But interspersed with Willia Marie's portrait of Jo Baker as '*Une Danseuse Parisienne*', the text reminds us of the harsh realities of Jo Baker's background: "... she was born in poverty thousands of miles away ... the reality is Josephine is coloured, a Negro ... Josephine Freda from Gratiot Street in St. Louis, Missouri" (Text, Faith Ringgold). The realities of Josephine's dance career are also narrated by Willia Marie's letter to her aunt. She tells her aunt "I saw Josephine for the first time at the Folies Bergere. She came onstage carried by a big black giant of a man. She wore no clothes, only a huge feather. The audience was speechless. The giant was tremendous and very black. Est-elle un oiseau ou une femme? Is she a bird or a woman? Est-il un human ou une

bete? Is he a human or a beast? ... There are only a few black women in Europe. So Europe wants to see Josephine nude ... In America ... no one wants to see them nude. Toutes les homes aiment Josephine. The men love her ... but the men's love is fickle ... like beauty love rarely keeps. Will they love her when she is no longer rich and beautiful. When her body is stooped and her waist no longer tiny and her voice no longer sweet" (Text, Faith Ringgold). The narrator deeply empathises with Jo Baker's existential position. Willia Marie comments to Aunt Melissa *"And they would never have let her seek fame and fortune in the States. There her talent would be no talent at all. Her voice would be no voice at all. Her greatness would be no greatness at all. Sa vie ne serait pas une vie sans beaute. Her life would be no life – no beauty ... what will be the result of the racism Josephine suffered? Can she ever feel completely loved?"*, the narrator asks (Text, Faith Ringgold). Ringgold, through Willia Marie and Josephine Baker, articulates the core negation of black women's subjectivity and talents and the deep intergenerational wounds of rejection inscribed in the female psyche. But Ringgold's work also articulates a resistance and Ringgold's story quilt *Jo Baker's Birthday* may be read as an act of recovery and reinscription of the female body as signifier. In *Jo Baker's Birthday*, the female body is reframed as a mythic collaboration between two empowered African-American female subjects, negotiating and commenting on vast arrays of images of female nudes central to the oeuvre of male modernist painters and sculptors. Meskimmon comments:

"Jo Baker's Birthday ... is an especially apt signifier for this act of corporeal cartography. Baker's body is acknowledged in both text and quotation, visual as the site of the conflicting desires which mapped her ... at the same time the beauty, power and presence of her body are the prerequisites for the narrator's [Willia Marie's] reinscription of the negation/objectification of the black female subject ... " (Meskimmon 2003 p.41 - parenthesis mine)

Ringgold's work of corporeal cartography is a powerful act of cultural rupture and redress forever reinscribing monolithic historical canons. In her great series of story quilts, Ringgold appliqués a black feminine subjectivity in all its glory and complexity into cultural history.

Stitched Up! Ringgold Critiques Modernism

Eleven of the twelve story quilts of *The French Collection* are set in France. The final quilt, *Moroccan Holiday*, is sited in Morocco, a country which has strong connections with French artistic histories and had been visited by many French artists from Delacroix to Matisse. The narrator of *The French Collection*, Willia Marie, seeks models and mentors amongst artists of the past for her journey as an artist in terms of artistic training and studio practice and indeed to supply design motifs and settings for *The French Collection* series. Matisse and his art work appear in three of the story quilts, *Matisse's Model*, *Matisse's Chapel* and *Jo Baker's Birthday*. Picasso is represented as artist in *Picasso's Studio* and as artist's model in *The Picnic at Giverny* and his work is referenced in *Dinner at Gertrude Steins*. The work of Manet, *Le Petit Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* is referenced in *The Picnic at Giverny*. Leonardo's works are represented in *Dancing at the Louvre*; and Van Gogh appears in person in *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*. Other white European members of the canons of high art such as Paul Gauguin, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Vincent Van Gogh and Maurice Utrillo are also given walk on parts by Ringgold in *The French Collection*. Black African American artists, such as William H. Johnson, Ed Clark, Sargent Johnson, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas, Henry O. Tanner, Elizabeth Catlett, Augusta Savage, Lois Mailou Jones, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller and Edmonia Lewis (who appear in *Le Café des Artistes*), in a powerful aesthetic strategy, are set alongside the masters of high modernism. As Roth comments, "European and American artists, white and black, and their art play roles in the series" (Roth 1998, p.54). Such masterful strategies allow Ringgold to present a strident critique of modernism. Farrington concludes: "Perhaps the most valuable aspect of Ringgold's quilted paintings and other fabric art is the challenge that these works present to the hegemony of modernism, subverting assumptions regarding the traditionally separate realms of craft and fine art" (Farrington 2004 p.70).

Ann Gibson's essay on Ringgold's eleventh quilt in *The French Collection, Picasso's Studio*, presents an analysis of the terms 'avant-garde' and 'post-modern' in relation to Ringgold's work. (Image 66). Gibson raises the question: "What is it in Ringgold's work that places her both inside and outside each of these categories?" (Gibson 1998 p.64). Gibson suggests that, while Ringgold's *French Collection* series displays "an intellectual iconoclasm and playfulness usually associated with the anarchic spirit of the avant-garde, it does not mirror its sense of universal negation" (Gibson 1998 p.64). Gibson views Ringgold's relationship to modernism as a conflicted one (Gibson 1998). Gibson reads *Picasso's Studio* as centering on notions of the avant-garde and its position in modern art and she views Ringgold's reference to Picasso as extending the premises of the avant-garde into the late twentieth century by affirming some of its characteristics while critiquing others" (Gibson 1998 p. 65).

Picasso's Studio is painted on pieced, quilted and padded fabric. It is in fact a quilt. Willia Marie holds a central space, posed nude on a sofa draped in patterned fabric which spills onto a teal blue patterned carpet. Willia Marie's intelligent eyes gaze at a diminutive Picasso who stands to the side, brush in hand, before his easel. Directly behind the Picasso figure are two African masks and on the walls behind Willia Marie hangs Picasso's painting of *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, painted in 1907. Two of the women in Ringgold's version of the painting wear African masks referencing modernism's original source of inspiration. Text strips are pieced into the patchwork border, again in the format of a letter from Willia Marie to Aunt Melissa. The letter begins with Willia Marie's reflections on the role of the model: "*I really think modelling is boring ... what do you do with your mind, with your misplaced or mistaken identite?*" she asks (Text, Faith Ringgold). She then tells Aunt Melissa that during the modelling session, the African masks which Picasso has in his studio begin to speak to her, one of them assuming the voice of Aunt Melissa. The masks tell her that she was an artist's model before she was born, in Africa, where everybody was an artist and where there were no distinctions between artist and model: "*It was natural*

that your beauty would be reproduced on walls and plates and sculptures made of your beautiful black face and body", the masks tell Willia Marie. The masks go on to explain that: *"Europeans discovered your image [Willia Marie's and black women by inference] as at the same time they discovered Africa's potential for slavery and colonisation. They dug up centuries of our civilization, and then called us savages and made us slaves. First they take the body, then the soul ..."* (Text, Faith Ringgold). Willia Marie then goes on to respond to Aunt Melissa's question of why she wished to become an artist. Willia Marie responds: *"It is because it's the only way I know of feeling free. My art is my freedom to say what I please. N'importe what colour you are , you can do what you want avec ton art. They may not like it, or buy it or even let you show it; but they can't stop you from doing it"*. Willia Marie tells Aunt Melissa that when she looks at a Picasso painting, *"It's the African mask straight from African faces"* that she sees represented, and in the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* she sees *"tortured twisted faces Europeanised in Picasso's brothel theme, a contre-attaque on the wisdom of the African masks"* (Text, Faith Ringgold). Yet, despite the fact that she is critical of Picasso's unacknowledged appropriation of African morphology, for Willia Marie his use of 'Africana' in his work has led her back to a sense of pride and self-esteem in her own racial origins (Gibson 1998).

In *Picasso's Studio* story quilt, the objectified status of women and society's derogatory attitude towards any ethnic group other than white Caucasian is highlighted as is women's marginalisation from the mainstream of the art world. *"And if they throw your art back at you, te fais pas debile. Don't worry 'cause you got something else you can sell. You was born with it, just in case ... some women will ask a high price and some men will pay it, all depends on the deal ... that's been going on since Adam and Eve"*, the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* whisper to Willia Marie from the walls of *Picasso's Studio*. (Text, Faith Ringgold). Gibson sees in *Picasso's Studio* an *"antipatriarchal parody, one that aims to transgress the ideology of the transgressive"* (Gibson 1998 p.65). Willia Marie Simone, as Ringgold's alter ego, Gibson suggests, takes charge of the narrative asserting

the subjectivity of early modernism's object, i.e., the female model, while also asserting the role of the art of colonised peoples in the creation of modernism (Gibson 1998). Gibson lays out the anatomy of women's objectification in modernist agendas which Ringgold is seeking to redress in *The French Collection*.

"From the late nineteenth century on, for avant-garde artists like Paul Gauguin and Edvard Munch through Picasso and Matisse, including fauves like Andre Derain and Maurice Vlaminck, Bruche artists Ernst Kirchner ... Dadas and surrealists like Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters, Max Ernst and Alberto Giacometti, to abstract expressionists Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, women were the vehicle, not the drivers, of art that examined what were understood as the central problems of existence in terms of middle-class European or European American male's struggles against the economic and psychological structures of modern bourgeois society" (Gibson 1998 p.70).

Woman is represented in modernism as object rather than active agent. This is doubly so for women artists of colour. Wallace writes of the 'avant-garde's apartheid' whereby artists of colour were excluded from canons and histories as makers of important art work. She points out that African art is valued merely as source not as significant art work in its own right. Wallace also claims that post modernists' failure to grant significant cultural status to any art work other than that produced within white, male European traditions has continued an artistic apartheid into the 21st century (Wallace 1990). Willia Marie asserts "*N'importe what colour you are ...*", thereby challenging hegemonies and exclusion (Text, Faith Ringgold).

In *Picasso's Studio*, Ringgold also questions modernism's relationship with primitivism. In their desire to create art work outside conventional definitions, the masters of early modernism drew inspiration from African tribal masks. Ringgold in *Picasso's Studio* juxtaposes masks and their human source, Willia Marie the model, with Picasso's paintings collaged together with Picasso's cubist versions of African masks. Ringgold in her methodologies references the strategies whereby early modernist artists, such as Picasso and Matisse, through

appropriations of the art of colonised nations challenged the dominant hegemony of the academy. Ringgold's text in *Picasso's Studio* raises uncomfortable questions about appropriation. "In the attempt to break away from the status quo, whose reversals are acceptable, who benefits, who decides?" the text asks (Text, Faith Ringgold).

Ringgold in *The French Collection* also challenges tenets of the original, the new, the unique, keynote themes in modernism's enterprise of claiming an elite position for inspired male genius. Ringgold in her quilts juxtaposes copies of the work of early modern masters, such as Picasso and Matisse, with her own work in what Gibson suggests is a deconstruction of Picasso's work (Gibson 1998). In *Picasso's Studio* she includes a copy of *Les Femmes d'Alger*, accompanied not only by preparatory drawings but also by representations of the African masks, Picasso's original source of inspiration. Crucially, Ringgold also places Willia Marie, the black artist/model in a central position representing the black face from which the tribal masks were originally constructed. All these signifiers push Picasso's 'masterpiece' into the background. Gibson suggests that the presence of the masks, Willia Marie and representations of Picasso's preparatory sketches for *Les Femmes d'Alger* in Ringgold's story quilt, *Picasso's Studio*, question the myth of spontaneous originality in the artmaking process. By clearly indicating original sources and Picasso's preparatory drawings and emphasising the hard work that went into the creation of the painting, Ringgold is invalidating modernist myths of culture creation and the modern concept of originality (Gibson 1998). Gibson concludes:

"Ringgold questions not only the status that Picasso's presumed originality granted to him as representative of the avant-garde, but also the supporting role the art of colonised nations and its primitivized feminine objects played in the avant-garde's modernist enterprises" (Gibson 1998 p.70).

In her dialogue with modernism and its histories, Ringgold claims an equal cultural status and respect for her story quilts as is accorded to Picasso's

Demoiselles d'Avignon. As Gibson points out, both are unique objects made by an individual termed 'an artist'. Ringgold demands that the transgressive quilts be placed within an institutional and theoretical context that traditionally excluded the decorative arts and crafts. Gibson points out that *Picasso's Studio* really is a quilt made from traditional materials of printed and pieced fabrics. As Gibson states,

"Ringgold ratcheted up the pejorative ante with which the avant-garde's ... viewed 'craft' by making it [textile craft] synonymous with the ground [painting] whose materiality that same avant-garde championed. Rather than being – as it is in Matisse – merely a represented element, or as it often is in Picasso, Braque and Schwitters, only an element that brings reality into the picture metonymically rather than mimetically or metaphorically, Ringgold's crafty ground of printed fabrics forms a part of the very base on which her figures are painted. It not only refers to, but is, the material from which, quilts are traditionally made" (Gibson 1998 p.68, parenthesis mine).

In *Picasso's Studio*, Ringgold questions the validity of ascribing inferior status to textile crafts by inserting the 'decorative' and the functional domestic quilt into Picasso's studio space, the very site of modernism's origins. In a tour de force of iconoclasm and a sense of irony and spirited playfulness, which as Gibson notes is so very characteristic of the avant garde, Ringgold and her quilt transgresses and transcends the tenets of modernism. Gibson states that Ringgold in her innovative aesthetic methodologies, her transgressive craft processes combined with narrative text in the strips at the top and bottom of *Picasso's Studio* "exceeds the revolutionary quality [of early modernism]" (Gibson 1998 p.98, parenthesis mine). There is also a sense in which, as Gibson and Farrington have noted, Ringgold also participates in the canons of modernism at the same time as her oeuvre reveals the paradoxes and incongruities at the heart of modernism and the avant-garde. Gibson states that whilst modernism scorned the ruling bourgeoisie elite, yet, as Clement Greenberg has pointed out, they were "attached by an umbilical cord of gold!" (Gibson 1998). Gibson states that Ringgold's quilts take their place as luxury, saleable commodity in art galleries, while at the same moment asserting their position as nominally usable objects, albeit inscribed with the sign of fine art (i.e., pigment and paint) (Gibson 1998).

The complexities of Ringgold's position are such that while so doing she is representing a group of black women artists, for whom eligibility for membership of elite modernist circles, would not have been even a remote possibility. Gibson states:

"For an artist in Ringgold's position to refuse to accept the roles assigned to her by the traditional avant-garde, by elevating quilting to painting's status and then by selling it at painting's prices, was to put herself outside definitions of the avant-garde" (Gibson 1998 p.72).

Gibson goes on to assert that through her breathtaking aesthetic strategies of feminist critique and post-colonial deconstruction, Ringgold moves beyond the limits of the avant-garde and, while she references avant-garde practices in her work, she presents a complex deconstruction of its racist and gender based ideologies. Ringgold's textile and text methodologies in effect stitches up the modernists!

Backstitching into the Future: Ringgold's Aesthetic Strategies

So intimately are African textiles associated with speech that "soy", the word for cloth among the Dogon of Mali, means "It is the spoken word" (Ungar Grudin 1990 p.15).

This section focuses on Ringgold's aesthetic practices in more detail and seeks to examine in depth Ringgold's use of story and the quilt and her distortion of time and histories as combined cultural formats which in her oeuvre have coalesced into a powerful art practice based on textile and text. This allows Ringgold to effectively deconstruct issues of gender, race and cultural hegemonies at the end of the 20th and early 21st centuries. Since the 1980s, Ringgold has devoted her energies to the creation of her story quilts, complex aesthetic statements based on two folk arts – storytelling and quilt making. The story quilts offer Ringgold a methodology for telling her own story as well as intervening in historical narratives of the dominant culture. Gouma-Peterson states: "Through storytelling and the manipulation of racial iconography, she has

created a narrative that transforms our perceptions of black people" (Gouma-Peterson 1998 p.43). Ringgold's story quilts are contemporary and untraditional and yet they clearly reference a traditionally female genre. Ringgold's choice of the story quilt as format allows her, in Gouma-Peterson's words, to produce "a meaning of her own that subverts hegemonic language and questions male dominance and power" (Gouma-Peterson 1998 p.47). Ringgold's story quilts are an aesthetic strategy which combines the quilt format, stitch, paint, text and photoetching into a powerful retelling of myth and story, thereby inscribing black women's voice into the culture. Her work honours woman as authoritative voice and narrator. Gouma-Peterson makes insightful points in relation to Ringgold's storytelling:

"Ringgold claims the story tellers power to run the world ... By describing and asserting the full humanity of black people and presenting the complexities of their lives through the double and sometimes triple narrative voice of black women, she has avoided the objectification, their loss of full human identity ... framed by the black female voice ... they reflect back on themselves and question the stereotyped and gendered definitions of women and blacks in white hegemonic texts and images" (Gouma-Peterson 1998 p. 48).

As we have seen, Ringgold's work interrogates issues of race and gender. Patrick Hill writes of Ringgold's work being the product of "an expressive intellect, in which the black vernacular tradition operates as a guiding aesthetic/epistemological principle blurring clear distinctions between real and inner worlds" (Hill 1998 p.33). Marcia Tanner describes Ringgold's methodologies as "... appropriation, pattern, painting, portraiture, sewing, history, personal narrative, African-American and European-American artistic and cultural forms, rich textiles, gorgeous colours and complex design – a transgressive hybrid if there ever was one" (Farrington 2004 p.1). In a honed and focused aesthetic practice, Ringgold, informed by her political and feminist concerns, "chronicles her search for human dignity and empowerment in a valiant activism against racial and gender inequalities and blatant discriminations" (Farrington 2004 p.101). Moira Roth comments on the effectiveness and subtleties of

Ringgold's aesthetic strategies and methodologies, comparing these to the artifice of the Trojan Horse.

"Ringgold's dispatches are now entering the mainstream in the manner of the Trojan Horse. In the ancient story the Trojans accepted the gift of the apparently harmless wooden horse and brought it within Troy's city walls; only too late did they discover the Greek soldiers hidden in the horse's bowels. Can this analogy help [our understanding of] Ringgold's unique, sometimes unsettling place in the art world to-day? ... Ringgold's deliberate and highly sophisticated use of naivete in ... her manner of representation has enchanted a wide range of viewers. If these viewers [were] presented with Ringgold's underlying message more starkly, they might be less drawn to her work" (Roth 1990 p.49 - parenthesis mine).

Farrington also comments that Ringgold's "method cleverly enables the viewer to absorb the image – and the lesson – without becoming unnerved by the subject matter", the very opposite of the modernist trope of shock (Farrington 2004 p.55).

Ringgold's aesthetic methodologies have been honed over long years of art practice and teaching. Beginning in 1973, Ringgold began using innovative materials in her art work, Ringgold produced masks, soft sculptures and wall pieces which integrated an extensive array of materials including canvas, beading, raffia, yarn, sequins, lace and fabrics. *Mrs Jones and Family: The Family of Women Series* (1973) is an example of this work created in collaboration with her mother Willi Posey. (**Image 67**). In the 1970s, Ringgold visited West Africa studying African art and performance and participating in the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture held in Nigeria in 1977 (Farrington 2004). This enhanced Ringgold's understanding of her African heritage. African sculpture, masks, costumes and textiles, which she saw in abundance in her travels, became a source of affirmation and inspiration. Farrington states that encouraged by her mother, Ringgold "embraced craft-inspired work as her main aesthetic focus" (Farrington 2004 p.66). Ringgold's decision to embrace the methodologies of textile in the early 1970s in New York was paralleled by the Pattern and Decoration movement led by Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago, Betye Saar and Joyce Kozoff. These artists began using fabric

and sewing and age old skills of weaving and embroidery to create an art movement which engaged actively in deconstructing the modernist and minimalist traditions that had effectively marginalised and denigrated women's cultural forms and methodologies. Feminist art critic, Cassandra Langer, has argued that the patriarchal art world system validates male definitions of art and establishes such aesthetic preferences as universals. This hegemony is reinforced by art dealers, curators and museums (Farrington 2004). Such was the risk Ringgold took when in the 1970s she stopped painting on stretched canvas in favour of a textile art and multi media practice. In the 1970s, as Farrington states, those artists who did not conform to the prevailing aesthetic norms were "punished with obscurity or marginalisation ... professional oblivion" (Farrington 2004 p.67).

In 1980, Ringgold and Willi Posey collaborated on a quilt piece, *Echoes of Harlem*. (Image 68). This was Faith Ringgold's first quilt consisting of a series of portraits painted by Ringgold on fabric of Harlem residents with a pieced fabric border made by Posey. Farrington sums up the reason for Ringgold's choice of the quilt as format for her aesthetic expressions from that point on, stating that for Ringgold the medium of the painted quilt provided a superior means of self-expression. During the 1980s, Ringgold began including lengthy discursive texts in her performance work which were spoken by Ringgold and others with Ringgold's quilts serving as a backdrop. From 1983 onwards, she included text in her story quilts. By 1990, Ringgold had developed her methodologies to a high level which enabled her to complete *The French Collection* over a relatively short six year period. Roth gives us a fascinating glimpse into Ringgold's New York studio as she worked on the 12 story quilts of *The French Collection*.

"Seven of the eight nearly-completed story quilts of The French Collection were hung on Ringgold's studio walls. Draped over a sofa was the San Tropez Beach scene, whose roughly sketched images and quilting stitches reminded of the under-painting of a fresco and layouts in a seamstress's workshop. On the walls, Ringgold had pinned up pencil and water colour sketches she had made in Paris, Giverny, Vence, Antibes, Arles and Nice, with photographs – some recent, others old – of her

relatives. Interspersed with these were images of Picasso and Matisse along with their art, Leonardo's paintings in the Louvre, as well as cheap postcards and garish magazine reproductions of famous tourist sites. Shelves were crammed with books on European history, biographies of artists and large numbers of African American history texts" (Roth 1998 p.52).

Roth goes on to describe Ringgold's aesthetic strategies in *The French Collection* as like those of a director/playwright or skilled novelist who musters a series of tableau involving renowned European sites of high culture and their dramatis personae, together with black and white Americans and invented visits to Europe by black women, members of her own family and historical Americans, such as Sojourner Truth, to weave a compelling narrative. Ringgold's material and metaphorical practice could be described as 'piecing'. Showalter poses the question of whether American women's "traditions of piecing, patchwork and quilting has consequences for the structures, genres, themes and meanings of American women's writing ..." (Showalter 1986 p.223). She defines 'piecing' as sewing together of small fragments of fabric to form a block or patch. Patchwork is the joining of these design units into an overall design. The assembled patches are then attached to a backing fabric with either simple or elaborate stitches in the process called quilting (Showalter 1986). Piecing and patchwork have a long tradition in Europe as well as being a significant art form for women in America of the 19th and 20th centuries. Quilting was an economical and survival necessity where bedding was not available in winter climates as severe as those of New England and the Mid-West. Showalter states that in the Mid-West, severely low temperatures demanded that each family member have five quilts for protection against the cold (Showalter 1986). Showalter makes the point that: "Quilting was an art that crossed racial, regional and class boundaries, produced by slave women in the South as well as by pioneer housewives on the trek west and by New England matrons in their homes" (Showalter 1986 p. 224). Alice Walker suggests that piecing, patchwork and quilting were major forms of creative expression for generations of enslaved and exploited women. In her choice of quilt format, Ringgold was referencing and honouring a venerable, (albeit

despised in the domains of high art), tradition of art making of her ancestors. Walker describes her personal response to encountering this tradition of quilt/art making for the first time.

"In the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. there hangs a quilt unlike another in the world. In fanciful, inspired, and yet simple and identifiable figures, it portrays the story of the Crucifixion ... Though it follows no known pattern of quilt-making and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by 'an anonymous black woman in Alabama a hundred years ago'" (Walker 1983 p.239).

The African American quilting tradition was clearly a rich signifier for Ringgold's aesthetic purposes. It is a tradition that is centuries old, dating back to pre-colonial times. Ungar Grudin points out that Africans abducted into slavery in the US came with age-old sewing skills. Although the people abducted from West and Central Africa were unfamiliar with the three-layered bed quilt European Americans knew, they were familiar with the textile techniques of piecing, appliqué and embroidery. In fact, some Africans even brought a quilting tradition of their own to the United States. Ungar Grudin says that the Hausa, who made up a large number of the slaves brought to the United States from Nigeria before the early 19th century, pieced and quilted to produce armour that protected horses and riders in battle in their homelands (Ungar Grudin 1990 p.7).

Ungar Grudin and Benberry have noted that storytelling, using appliquéd quilts, is unique to African American quilts of the 19th century, although Euro American quilters used appliqué methods on their quilts for decorative purpose (Benberry 1989). Ungar Grudin distinguishes different categories of narrative in the story quilt tradition of African Americans. These include stories of home, bible stories, histories, family and fictional stories (Ungar Grudin 1990). In Africa and America, the recitation of stories has been the primary way family and political histories were passed down through the generations. Ungar Grudin emphasises the importance of storytelling in black American culture as a seminal factor in the

genesis of the narrative quilt. Ungar Grudin also points to the fact that African Americans are also heirs to an African visual tradition in which ancestral stories were told through the medium of textile, for example, in the case of the Benin people of Dahomey and the Ashanti peoples. In the Kente Cloths of the Ghanaian people, different proverbs are associated with each woven pattern. The practice in West Africa of using textile for narrative purposes is "longstanding and widespread", Ungar Grudin concludes. In fact, so intimately are African texts associated with speech that 'soy', the word for cloth among the Dogon of Mali, means "It is the spoken word" (Ungar Grudin 1990 p.15). Ringgold's story quilts, through a complex aesthetic practice, become an elegant spoken word that traverses histories and inscribes and honours the cultural contribution that black women made despite the most abject and adverse situations in which they found themselves. Showalter makes the seminal point that metaphors of pen and needle have been fundamental in feminist poetics. She states: "The repertoire of the Victorian lady who could knit, net, knot and tat has become that of the feminist critic, in whose theoretical writing metaphor of text and textile, thread, weaver and web abound. The spinster who spins stories, Ariadne and her labyrinthine thread, Penelope who weaves and unweaves her theoretical tapestry in the halls of Ithaca or New Haven are the feminist cultural heroines of the critical age" (Showalter 1986 p.224). The theoretical webs woven by feminist scholars are mirrored by a wide ranging aesthetic exploration by women artists such as Ringgold, themselves contributing a seamless praxis (a theoretically based aesthetic practice) in a late twentieth century renewal of women's culture. Showalter explains how despised women's crafts were used during student protests when female 1960s students "knitted as well as noted in lecture after lecture on the male literary classics" where no works by women were on the curriculum (Showalter 1986). Showalter comments: "we were protesting against patriarchal culture in a secret women's language we used even if we did not fully understand it" (Showalter 1986 p.225). This tactic of transgression was also adopted by Germaine Greer, feminist Oxford scholar, whom Showalter reports as making a majestic entrance into a conference held in honour of the George Eliot

Centennial in 1980. Greer proceeded to take a large roll of knitting from her briefcase "with her needles clicking loudly as the men read their papers ... Madame Defarge ... her presence signalled a return of the repressed ..." (Showalter 1986 p.225). Greer was knitting women back into scholarship by her transgressive act! Lucy Lippard points out that the quilt became one of the most central images of the new feminist lexicon. Lippard states:

"Since the new wave of feminist art began around 1970, the quilt has become the prime visual metaphor of women's lives, for women's culture. In properly prim grids or rebelliously 'crazy' fields it incorporates spider woman's webs, political networking and the collage aesthetic" (Lippard 1983 p.32).

Ringgold takes her place, as much as Greer and a host of women artists/activists/scholars, as feminist cultural heroine who, through her joyous transgressive act of quilting and dancing at the Louvre, inserted black women's experience and contribution firmly into the domain of cultural production.

A Tremor in The Web: Ringgold's Use of Time As Aesthetic Strategy

Cameron notes that in Ringgold's *French Collection* the viewer's relationship to the work's subject matter is constantly changing in a blur between fiction and historical narrative (Cameron 1998). Cameron points out that the 1980s generally are characterised by a challenging of the homogenisation of cultures as portrayed in academic unipositional history. A pluralistic notion of multiple histories and varieties of viewpoints and an agenda of cultural revisioning has emerged in aesthetic practice and theorising since the 1980s. Cameron comments that among artists of previously under recognised or oppressed communities, an urgent desire to open up the past to artistic investigation has been a significant impetus influencing aesthetic agendas in the last decades of the 20th century. Certainly, this was so in Ringgold's case. The philosopher, Moira Gatens states: "It's not as if one says 'here is the future, a blueprint', but rather by questioning past practices and by revealing present practices, one causes a shift or tremor in the web" (Gatens 1995 p.53). Meskimmon makes the

point that by working in a manner of retrospective personal and political historical interventions, as Ringgold does, an 'open ended futurity' is constructed which is neither a function of magical or wishful thinking or Utopian dreams. Rather it is a practice which "questions the place of time in history and subjectivity, seeing their interaction as located, material and aesthetic, rather than pre-determined and simply representative" (Meskimmon 2003 p.168). Meskimmon develops a concept she terms 'the place of time' to describe 'the reconceived space-time nexus' which occurs as a result of Ringgold's aesthetic strategies in *The French Collection*. The 'place of time' references difference, embodiment and the connections between time and situation. The 'place of time' concept allows for the possibilities of making aesthetic interventions into history. Meskimmon states:

"The ontology of chronos reduces time to a function of space, rather than proposing the spatio-temporal axis as a dynamic interface, a process or an event. In a model of time reduced to space, time is seen as ... measurable, quantifiable ... chronos underpins linear narrative histories... Moreover this assimilative logic defeats genuine newness or futurity. The emergent future, pre-determined as the mere consequence of the known past and present is rendered impotent. This structure is dramatically envisaged in the Myth of Chronos, where Time/Chronos devours his own son ... However, this conception of time is not a truth ... It is a construction of knowledge, an episteme, derived from a convergence of historical events and material practices which can be challenged and recast" (Meskimmon 2003 p.168-169).

This is what Ringgold achieves in her powerful aesthetic interventions which revision and recast histories as they challenge and comment upon issues of race, gender inequalities, cultural access and canons of art historical knowledge bases. Challenging the limits of mechanistic time, Ringgold in her construction of an aesthetic practice grounded in textile and text "relocates our temporal maps so that difference can emerge" (Meskimmon 2003 p.169). The resulting 'tremor in the web' opens up possibilities of a locus/site beyond history where subjects can effect profound changes. Monolithic time is distorted in Ringgold's aesthetic practices to relocate black women's subjectivities and deepest concerns and to

envision and create futures imbued with creative possibilities for their daughters' futures and becomings.

Meskimmon makes the point that Gatens's work on ethology, the concept of subject in terms of its capabilities and capacities (what a human person can accomplish in the unfolding of her being) illuminates aesthetic interventions into history such as those Ringgold engages in (Meskimmon 2003). In order to rethink female subjectivities against the grain of history, Gatens emphasises articulation and becoming rather than representation and being. Meskimmon states that Gatens in her analysis "posits the time of *kairos* – opportunity, crisis point, moment of change ... praxis – to think the modulation which permits an acknowledgement of corporeal specificity and yet the potential for the new to emerge ... moreover *kairos* ... invites aesthetics and creative agency into historical process ... a set of strategic practices designed to engage with historical processes as open-ended and creatively enacted in the present" (Meskimmon 2003 p.170). It is into the site of *kairos* that Ringgold inserts her *French Collection* opening up new possibilities for histories, backstitching into the future.

The Kristevan concept of '*woman's time*' also offers insights for exploring Ringgold's aesthetic strategies. In her 1979 essay, 'Women's Time', Kristeva, in reviewing the history of intellectual and political struggle reinterprets this through what Pollock terms an 'allegory of generations' (Pollock 1996). Women in the patriarchal order inherit *linear time*, the time of history, nations, the phallogentric symbolic order. First generation feminism sought to enter the public domain as equal citizens and to improve women's social and economic situation. The struggle for women to fully enter *linear time* still continues. In art history, the efforts to rewrite ignored and forgotten women artists into the cultural record is a case in point. Pollock states "we try to endow women artists with the canonized artistic subjecthood enjoyed by some men, using a logic of identification to try and remember women artists, if not the same as men, at least equal in terms of

recognition and respect" (Pollock 1996 p.8). This certainly forms part of Ringgold's agendas as she rewrites African American artists and little known cultural heroines into the sites of modernism in *The French Collection*. Kristeva's second category of time, she terms '*monumental time*', a concept of time associated with the body, cycles, and women's relation to reproduction, " a temporality more closely associated with what might be deemed specific to women ..." (Pollock 1996 p.8). This concept of time leads to concern with the imaginary and symbolic representations of the corporeality of women in phallogentric discourse. A feminist practice which engages with '*monumental time*', Kristeva suggests, will be concerned "to give a language to the intersubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past" (Pollock 1996 p.8). Again, Ringgold in her comments on the female nude and modernism, and Willia Marie's enunciations in *Picasso's Studio* and *Jo Baker's Birthday* of the viewpoint of the female model, is intervening at the level of Kristevan '*monumental time*'.

Ringgold's aesthetic practice also engages at the level of Kristeva's *generational time* and this perhaps is the great integrative achievement of *The French Collection*. In a dialectical resolution to the dichotomies of *linear* and *monumental time* perspectives, Kristeva recast both concepts in terms of *signifying space*. Kristeva states:

"My usage of the word 'generation' implies less a chronology than a signifying space, a both corporeal and desiring mental space. So it can be argued that as of now a third attitude is possible, thus a third generation, which does not exclude – quite to the contrary – the parallel existence of all three in the same historical time, or even that they may be interwoven one with another" (Kristeva in Pollock 1996 p.9).

It is at this point of interweaving that Ringgold's aesthetic practice in *The French Collection* is most adequately located. Pollock goes on to expand on Kristeva's concept of *generational time* as signifying space. This space, she states, is semiotic, that is, it is inscribed with meanings and is also the site of the production of meanings which challenge and transgress the existing social and

symbolic orders (Pollock 1996). Ringgold's *French Collection* series can be conceived as a signifying space through which Ringgold challenges existing orders of phallogocentric meanings and generates new critical meanings. Pollock states: "As women we are derelict, or in exile, in a symbolic order that does not dignify us except as a sign of its own, phallogocentric meanings ... the battle for meaning is also a struggle for ... subjectivity" (Pollock 1996 p.9). This is the valiant work that Ringgold's heroine Willia Marie embarks upon in order "to articulate the crucial relationship between subjectivity and sociality which is a critical axis of contemporary power" (Pollock 1996 p.9). Ringgold's aesthetic strategies in *The French Collection* does indeed cause 'a tremor in the web' of a patriarchal symbolic.

Maternal Genealogies: Everlasting Web of Courage and Creativity

The serpent lifted up by Moses and women bringing their children to look upon it to be healed. "Go down, Moses way down in Egypt land. Tell ol' Pharaoh let my people go". (Harriet Powers 1885).

In 1898 the retiring president of Atlanta University, Rev. Charles Cuthbert Hall, was presented with the gift of a story quilt made by Harriet Powers, a black emancipated slave brought up in slavery in Athens, Georgia, in the antebellum period. This quilt, now in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, is one of the most famous and important narrative quilts in the U.S. (Ungar Grudin 1990). The quilt measures 65x105 inches and consists of local events interspersed with Bible stories from her childhood. (**Image 69**). It is made up of 15 large pieced squares onto which figures of humans and animals, celestial images of sun and stars are applied in cotton fabrics and embellished with embroidered plain and metallic yarns and threads. Another quilt by Harriet Powers has also found its way into the collection of a venerable institution of American culture – the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. Harriet Powers was born on October 29th 1837. As a slave child in Clark County near its capital town of Athens, Georgia, Harriet probably learned to sew. Lyons comments; "Slave women were always involved

in the making of textiles ... Harriet grew up watching older women card cotton, spin thread, weave and dye cloth and sew clothes and bedding ... since many black women were expert needle workers, Harriet surely learned to sew from her own mother" (Lyons 1993 p.2). On New Year's Day 1863, Harriet Powers aged 26 years became a freewoman according to The Emancipation Proclamation. In 1886, a cotton fair was held in Athens and Harriet exhibited her story quilt made of 299 separate pieces of fabric, each block framed with strips of cloth like a picture frame. The quilt was seen by a local white art teacher, Oneita Virginia (Jenny) Smith, who was greatly taken by the quilt's artistry. Powers, however, refused to sell her story quilt initially but later in a period of dire poverty, she arrived in an oxcart to Jenny Smith's house at 129 Washington Street, Athens, saying that she would sell the quilt. In the hard times of the postbellum South, Jenny Smith could only pay her \$5 half the price of the \$10 requested by Harriet. Jenny Smith recorded Harriet Powers' explanations of her story quilt scenes. Powers' words are preserved in the Smithsonian in Washington. Of one image in the quilt, Harriet explained: 'The serpent lifted up by Moses and women bringing their children to look upon it to be healed'. Then she quoted the words of a slave religious song 'Go down, Moses way down in Egypt and tell ol' Pharaoh let my people go'.

Art historian, Leslie King-Hammond, views the quilts created by enslaved women as "the first vital material records from the hearts, minds and spirits of [African American] women ... These women began to transform traditional media to create new visual languages through the medium of fibre ..." (King-Hammond in Farrington 2004 p.70). Ringgold, in her choice of the story quilt format is honouring the traditions of her cultural foremothers. Ringgold herself has written in her statement to the Archives of American Art "... the women who made quilts were the original artists" (Faith Ringgold in Farrington 2004 p.70). Farrington views Ringgold as aligning herself with "the global family of women" across time and barriers of race or class, who practice "a universal female art" (Farrington 2004). Ringgold's story quilts link her to her own mother as well as to a long line

of matrilineal ancestors. As mentioned earlier, Ringgold collaborated with her mother in a number of creative ventures. Their last collaboration was a quilt for a 1983 exhibition and book, *The Artist and the Quilt*, curated by Charlotte Robinson and the National Endowment for the Arts (Robinson 1983). (Image 68). The painted quilt created by Ringgold and Posey, *Echoes of Harlem*, consisted of a series of portraits of Harlem residents surrounded by a pieced fabric border. This was their last collaboration. Willi Posey died of a heart attack in her sleep in October 1981. Ringgold eloquently expressed her profound sense of loss for her mother and creative partner in *Mothers Quilt*, an asymmetrical and appliquéd design referencing quilts of the antebellum era. In this quilt, the eight doll figures, representing mothers and daughters, wear dresses designed and made by Posey before her death. (Image 70). Ringgold's story quilts link her to a long line of maternal ancestors. Her great-great grandmother, Susie Shannon (who was enslaved in nineteenth century Florida) and Shannon's daughter, Betsy Bingham, were also quilt makers. "Each woman passed on their knowledge of quilting to their daughters, and that knowledge eventually found its way into Ringgold's work" (Farrington 2004 p.67). Ringgold's use of the quilt format can be read as a methodology for reclaiming her creative heritage.

Meskimmon has drawn attention to Ringgold's strategies of displacing the canonical founding fathers of modernism by inserting key historical women into the sites of European modernism. *The French Collection*, Meskimmon states, "... further displaces the founding fathers of modernism by bringing forth its mother figures such as Gertrude Stein, Zora Neale Hurston and Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, and by having contemporary women artists and critics renegotiate its most privileged spaces ..." (Meskimmon 2003 p.42). In the *Picnic at Giverny*, Emma Amos, Michele Wallace, Moira Roth and Lowery Stokes Sims are among a group of contemporary women who sit on the grass fully clothed in a new *Le Petit Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* with Picasso as the nude model. (Image 71). The mothers of modernism are joined in a network of women who appear in *The French Collection*, including Ringgold's own family members. Willia Marie's family and

friends, female figures from African American history, and artists and writers together form what Meskimmon terms “a matrilineal support system through which black female subjectivity comes into view” (Meskimmon 2003 p.42). Roth draws attention to the central role played by women in supporting Willia Marie in living her life as an artist (Roth 2008). The foundation stone of Willia Marie’s support system is Aunt Melissa to whom she addresses her deepest thoughts and who enables her to pursue the life of an artist in Paris by acting as a surrogate parent to her two children in the U.S. The heroic women of the African American struggle for freedom in *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles* are models of courage and endurance for Willia Marie. (**Image 72**). In *The Picnic* at Giverny, Willia Marie is placed by Ringgold in the midst of American women - Ringgold’s own supporters and friends such as Ellie Flomenhaft, Lowery Sims, Judith Lieber, Thalia Gouma-Peterson, Emma Amos, Bernice Steinbaum, Michele Wallace (Ringgold’s daughter), Ofelia Garcia, Johnetta Cole and Moira Roth. (**Image 71**). In *Matisse’s Chapel*, the voices of Ringgold’s maternal lineage are heard through Susie Shannon and Betsy Bingham, her great- great and great grandmothers. Ringgold’s maternal genealogy, her support network of relatives, women friends and colleagues in art are the ground of Ringgold’s life sustaining and empowering her in her journey as an artist. (**Image73**). This is the community that enables Ringgold to have a speaking voice in a misogynist and racist society. This is the great goal identified by Willia Marie in *Le Café des Artistes* when she enunciates the task for herself and other women of colour. (**Image 74**). “We must speak, or our ideas and ourselves will remain unheard and unknown”, Willia Marie states in the text of *Le Café des Artistes* (Text, Faith Ringgold). Willia Marie’s daughter appears in the last quilt of *The French Collection* series, *Moroccan Holiday*. (**Image 75**). Marlena ends the story quilt’s text by thanking her mother: “You have not only shown me how to be a woman but an artist as well”. Marlena also suggests to her mother that Aunt Melissa in her less public role is also a heroine: “She is our courage too, Mama”. Ringgold’s *French Collection* signifies a long lineage of women’s creativity, courage and support for each other, a key to survival in the abject circumstances – enslaved,

disenfranchised and marginalised – in which women found themselves in the not so remote histories of patriarchy.

The reclamation of maternal genealogies and creative foremothers has, as has already been noted in an earlier section of the thesis, been a strong imperative for contemporary feminist artists and theorists. For women of African American descent where slavery negated the mother/child bond, this is even more emphatically imperative. African American women's histories and genealogies are deeply fractured through abduction, displacement, dislocation of family groups through the slave market, rape and racism. The barbaric system of chattel slavery which destroyed family histories and replaced them with bills of sale caused suffering and trauma on a vast scale "which allowed no development of person, family or ethnic group" (Meskimmon 2003 p.42). Toni Morrison graphically emphasised the implications of the slave system for women when she states; "*Slave women are not mothers; they are 'natally dead' with no obligations to their offspring or their own parents*" (Meskimmon 2003 p.43, Italics mine). The recently highlighted genealogy of First Lady, Michele Obama, contained details of the life of her great-great-great grandmother Melvinia. At age 6 years old, Melvinia was valued at \$475 as a chattel in the last will and testament of a plantation owner in the Southern States. He bequeathed to his daughter who lived in another State the little slave girl, thereby separating the child and her mother irrevocably. Ringgold's *French Collection* addresses this core issue of fractured genealogies through a variety of strategies:

- Aunt Melissa, who is addressed in 10 of the story quilts is an example of the unbreakable intergenerational bonds of assistance and mutual support which served to counteract in some way the brutality of the slave system. Aunt Melissa is looking after Willia Marie's children in the U.S. and is Willia Marie's close confidant and support, as is evidenced in the intimate tone of the story quilt letters.

- Alice Walker has also suggested in her shining text, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, that intergenerational bonds between women and their children did survive against all the odds. Women through their creativity and co-operation managed to counter "this fundamental logic of racism" (Walker 1985). Ringgold is honouring these histories in *The French Collection*.
- Ringgold's use of the symbol of quilting is deeply associated with African American women's histories and directly linked to Ringgold's own family history. As stated, her great-great grandmother, Susie Shannon, and her mother Willi Posey Jones were skilled quilters. Quilting serves, as Meskimmon states, as "a testament to black female subjectivity and agency in history" (Meskimmon 2003 p.43).

Ringgold, in *The French Collection* sets out to re-member her personal and creative genealogies in a corporeal presence of a family of consanguinity and affinity originating in slavery yet surviving to flourish in Ringgold's and our experiences. This is described by Meskimmon as a powerful intervention in master discourses, giving women a voice, a site from which to 'talk back' (Meskimmon 2003). Two story quilts in particular address these issues, *Matisse's Chapel* and *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*. (**Images 73, 72**). In *Matisse's Chapel*, Willia Marie writes to Aunt Melissa of an extraordinary dream she had where she attended a reunion with all her dead ancestors in La Capelle da la Rosarie (Matisse's chapel at Vence). (**Image 73**). Her great-great grandmother (in reality Ringgold's also), Susie Shannon, her grandmother Betsy Bingham and her mother Willi Posey as well as her grandfathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, constitute a visual family tree in the story quilt. In the text borders, Susie Shannon, Ringgold's and Willia Marie's great-great grandmother and her daughter Betsy Bingham tell a story of slavery. The ancestral figures are formally dressed in black and white, making a striking contrast to Matisse's blue, yellow, green and white interior. The formal pristine dress of the ancestors also serves as a stark contrast to the story of slavery being told by Mama Susie Shannon

through her daughter Betsy Bingham whose voice *"filled the chapel like music bouncing off the windows and walls to our ears"*. Willia Marie tells Aunt Melissa, *"a white man asked Mama Susie how she feel 'bout being descendant from slaves"* (Text, Faith Ringgold). Mama Susie, Willia Marie writes, was a confident woman. *'Mama Susie knew just what she thought about everything and everybody'*. Her forthright reply of *'How you feel descendant from slavers?'* disconcerted the white man to the extent that *'he turn beet red and he tells her this story ...'* (Text, Faith Ringgold). The white man's grandparents who were slavers in South Carolina were on an ocean liner which approached another ship which had signalled for help. The ship in distress was carrying African women, children and men abducted as slaves. The ship was on fire in its hold and its slave cargo of women, children and men were shackled in chains crowded on to the filthy decks. Mama Susie's story continues: *" The prissy white ladies on the ocean liner; with they white clothes and faces and they little children all scrubbed clean and perfect, stood on the deck glaring at the human cargo from Africa"* (Text, Faith Ringgold). As the ocean liner drew alongside the slave ship, *"a sudden strong wind swept the filth and stench from the overcrowded slave decks spraying the white people and sending them throwing up all over they fine clothes and stampeding each other to get away from the stench ..."* (Text, Faith Ringgold). *'Well, there is a God somewhere'*, Mama Susie comments! The white man tells Mama Susie that whenever he thinks of the slave ship his grandparent saw, he sees *"... shit on my own hands and all over my body too. And I have to go change my clothes and wash myself, but I just never come clean, no matter how much I bathe, I still smell. That is what being the descendant of slave owners did to me"*, he states (Text, Faith Ringgold). But Mama Susie isn't caught up in putting salve on the white man's bad conscience. She asks him what he expects her *"to say 'bout that story? No they can't wash away the shit smell of slavery ... God don't love ugly. That white man got to live his own story and we got to live ours"* (Text, Faith Ringgold). Mama Susie's daughter Betsy comments that a lot of bad smells are introduced into Matisse's sublime chapel!

In the *Sunflower Quilting Bee*, another aspect of Ringgold's maternal genealogy is invoked. (Image 72). In this story quilt, Aunt Melissa asks Willia Marie to arrange a quilting bee in France for the members of the National Sunflower Quilters Society of America. Ringgold locates the quilting bee organised by Willia Marie in Arles, site of Van Gogh's iconic *Sunflowers* painting. In the story quilt, Willia Marie brings the group of historical African American women to make their sunflower quilt in a field of sunflowers, a sunflower quilt '*dedicated to change in the world*', a narrow strip of text tells us. The group consists of eight quilters – Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Mary Mcleod Bethune, Ella Baker, Madame C.J. Walker. These activists sit on chairs around their quilting table proudly displaying the magnificent work of their hands, a strip of text tells us, in addition to naming each quilt artist. Behind them, rather awkwardly holding his vase of sunflowers, stands Vincent Van Gogh. The women are on a journey, the narrator tells us, symbolically making quilts in sunflower fields around the world "*to spread the cause of freedom*" (Text, Faith Ringgold). This group of eight women are precious to Ringgold as the text of the quilt clearly indicates. Willia Marie states that Aunt Melissa has charged her to "*... take good care of them in that foreign country ... These women are our freedom*" (Text, Faith Ringgold). Willia Marie herself describes them as "*a fortress of African American women's courage, with enough energy to transform a nation piece by piece*" (Text, Faith Ringgold). Their historical record is indeed impeccable. Sojourner Truth, who could neither read nor write, was a powerful advocate of women's rights during the era of slavery. Ida Wells worked to expose the atrocities of lynching in the Southern states of America. Fannie Lou Hamer registered thousands of black voters despite intimidation and institutional violence directed against her. Harriet Tubman led 300 enslaved African Americans to freedom from the South to the abolitionist Northern states. Risking her life and liberty each time, she made 19 trips on the Underground Railway of safe houses over journeys of thousands of miles. Rosa Parks is a founding mother of the Civil Rights Movement by reason of her courageous journey on a segregated bus in the 1960s. Ella Baker was a social reformer who worked to

improve health and housing conditions of poor families. Mary McLeod Bethune founded Bethune Cookman College and provided an education for black students. In the 1940s, she was a special adviser to Presidents Truman and Roosevelt.

As the quilters display their sunflower quilt, symbol of their "*dedication to change the world*", Vincent Van Gogh comes into the sunflower field. Willia Marie tells us that the women asked '*who is this strange looking man?*' Willia Marie responds he is "*un grand peintre... though he is greatly troubled in his mind*" (Text, Faith Ringgold). Harriet Tubman (of the Underground Railway) became upset and said; "*He's the image of the man hit me in the head with a rock when I was a girl ... make him leave. He reminds me of slavers*". The narrator tells us that at this point, Sojourner Truth, black women's rights activist, "*began weeping into her stitches for the loss of her thirteen children mostly all sold into slavery. One of Sojourner's children, a girl, was sold to a Dutch slaver in the West Indies who then took her to Holland*". Sojourner asks "*was this something this Dutchman might know something about? He should pay for all the pain his people have given us*" (Text, Faith Ringgold). Willia Marie goes on to say that when the women leave the field, Van Gogh is still there "*... the tormented little man just settled inside himself and took on the look of the sunflowers in the field*", the text tells us. Before Willia Marie parts company with the women of the Sunflower Quilting Bee, she promises them that her work as an artist, while "*... it will never change anything the way you have ... it can make a picture so everyone can see and know our true history and culture ... some day I will make you women proud of me ...*". With this sacred promise, Ringgold uses the metaphor, methodologies and aesthetic practices of textile to place herself within a heroic female lineage of freedom fighters. Bodies, geographies and textile practices combine to insert black women's subjectivities into the realms of historical and aesthetic epistemologies and practices. In *The French Collection*, Ringgold re-members and validates her maternal genealogies as everlasting web of courage and creativity.

Textile and Text as Survival Strategy

"We are all artists. Piecing is our art ... That was what we did after a hard day's work in the field to keep our sanity and our beds warm and to bring beauty into our lives ..." (Sojourner Truth in *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles* – Text, Faith Ringgold).

Alice Walker, in her book, *'In Search of Our Mother's Gardens'*, poses a seminal question: "How was the creativity of the black women kept alive year after year, century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write?" (Walker 1994 p.234). This prohibition at one fell swoop severely limited the possibility of African Americans participating in the life and culture of the United States of America. Walker continues:

"And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist. Consider if you can bear to imagine it, what might have been the result if singing, too, had been forbidden by law. Listen to the voices of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone ... and imagine those voices muzzled for life. Then you may begin to comprehend the lives of our "crazy", "sainted" mothers and grandmothers. The agony of the lives of women who might have been poets, novelists, essayists and short-story writers ... who died with their real gifts stifled within them ..." (Walker 1994 p.234).

Munro, Meskimmon, Ringgold and others have suggested that textile was implicated in the survival of the spirit of generations of African American women, allowing them to maintain their creativity against all odds and to pass this on to their children as survival mechanism (Meskimmon 2003). Munro hints at the deep psychic process involved in the making of scrap quilts by women such as Harriet Powers and Susie Shannon, Ringgold's great-great grandmother.

"The sad thing about a lost life is that its constituent experiences have been left unassembled by the mind that lived them. With the accumulation of fragments of cloth, those fragmented events were given some permanence" (Munro 1983 p. 45).

In the words Ringgold puts into Sojourner Truth's mouth in *The Sunflower Quilting Bee* story quilt, "... *Piecing is our art ... That was what we did after a hard day's work ... to keep our sanity and our beds warm and to bring beauty into our lives ...*" (Text, Faith Ringgold). As Alice Walker writes in addressing her own mother and her line of female ancestors:

"It was not so much what you sang, as that you kept alive ... the notion of song" (Walker 1983 p.237).

The enslaved women quilters kept alive a sense of hope of the possibility of expression of subjectivity, colour and beauty in their textile works. Walker gives us an insight into what this meant for their children. Writing of her own mother, she says:

"Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms – sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spiraea, delphiniums, verbena ... it is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities and the will to grasp them. For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist had still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways is work black women have done for a very long time... Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength – in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (Walker 1983 ps.241-243).

Guided by her textile heritage, Ringgold's journey as an artist has been similarly cathartic. Farrington sees catharsis as a major underlying theme in Ringgold's story quilts (Farrington 2004). Ringgold herself has stated that purging the pain and rage of the past is "about things we can do nothing about. It is an obsession we cannot escape. So we isolate it, picture it, and then we are free to let it go" (Ringgold 1982 p.18). Gouma-Peterson writes of Ringgold's ironic wit: "One might describe this wit as her ability to laugh through tears, an ability which becomes a means of survival" (Gouma-Peterson 1998). Cameron points to an important if submerged message that the eight quilters convey in *The Sunflower Quilting Bee*. Cameron states that the essence of the message is "that the American quilt tradition may have played as seminal a role in the growth of a

characteristically American late-twentieth century sensibility as Van Gogh's mythic sunflowers within the development of modern European painting" (Cameron 1998 p.10). The quilt, Ringgold is stating, is culturally of equal significance as Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, deeply implicated in the survival strategies of African American women.

But the struggle for the survival of black women's subjectivity continues into the contemporary moment. Wallace writes of the challenges her mother faced in her own artistic and personal journey, of "... the landmines placed in her path by institutional patriarchy, white supremacy, American provincialism, anti-intellectualism, Xenophobia" (Wallace 1998 p.15). The *Picnic at Giverny* is a scene of Willia Marie painting, en plein air, in Claude Monet's garden at Giverny, a group portrait of ten of Ringgold's most supportive colleagues and friends, including Moira Roth, Thalia Gouma-Peterson, Emma Amos and Michele Wallace, Ringgold's daughter. (Image 71). Posed nude, except for his hat, Picasso sits to the extreme left of the artist Willia Marie who stands at her easel brush poised. In a reversal of modernist conventions, the male model Picasso is the object of the female gaze, the subject of *her* painting but the artist Willia Marie assures us that she is "*not interested in having power over anyone ...*" whereas the male modernist painters were "*expressing their power over women*" (Text, Faith Ringgold). This introduces us to the dilemmas women artists faced and of which Ringgold was acutely aware of in the 1970s as she attempted to find a place for herself in the world of art. The text of *The Picnic at Giverny* tells us the women are speaking of "*la liberation et la liberte for women*". "*Can a woman artist assume the rights of men in art?*" Willia Marie asks. She is also deeply concerned to find a context for her art "*That must be wonderful to have your work in the Musee de l'Orangerie in the Tuileres so approved and revered by people to have it hanging in a space specially made for it [a reference to the work of Claude Monet]. What does that amount of respect feel like? Can a woman of colour ever achieve that amount of eminence?*", Willia Marie asks

(Text, Faith Ringgold, parenthesis mine). Then Willia Marie goes on to issue a cry from the soul of all struggling artists:

“One has to get the attention one needs to feed the magic. There is no magic in the dark. It is only when we see it that we know a transformation has taken place, a wonderful idea has been created into art. If we never see it we never know and it didn’t happen Isn’t that why I and so many other Negro artists have come to Paris – to get a chance to make magic, and find an audience for our art” (Text, Faith Ringgold).

The spectre of oblivion or rejection hovers over Willia Marie’s shoulders as she wonders: *“What will people think of my work? Will they just ignore it or will they give it some consideration. Maybe tear it apart and say that it is the worst ever and this artist should have her brushes burned and her hands too. And isolate me as a woman artist ...”* (Text, Faith Ringgold). But Willia Marie identifies a way forward inspired by the conversation of the women in Monet’s Garden. She decides she wants to paint something that will inspire and liberate her from these anxieties: *“I want to do some of this WOMAN ART MAGNIFIQUE! ... They have given me something new to ponder, a challenge to confront in my art, a new direction, And pride in being a Negro woman”* (Text, Faith Ringgold).

In *Le Café des Artistes*, Willia Marie’s confidence has grown. Inspired by her feminist friends she announces her *Coloured Woman’s Manifesto of Art and Politics*. (**Image 74**). In this story quilt, she proclaims her African and European art heritage. *“I am an international coloured woman. My African ancestry dates back to the beginnings of human origins, 9 million years ago in Ethiopia. The art and culture of Africa has been stolen by Western Europeans and my people have been colonized, enslaved and forgotten”*, Willia Marie states (Text, Faith Ringgold). The assembled guests who are present to hear Willia Marie’s declaration include African American artists who did in fact live in Paris, including Romare Bearden as well as male and female historical figures such as Jacob Lawrence, W.H. Johnson, Aaron Douglas, Elizabeth Catlett, Lois Mailou Jones, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Maurice Utrillo, Vincent

Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, are also present as is Faith Ringgold herself, last figure in a line of women on the right, seated at a table. Unidentified voices from the gathering interrupt Willia Marie as she enunciates her manifesto. The misogynistic voices insistently interrupt Willia Marie, stating *'Women should stay home and make children not art', 'You should go home', 'You are a primitive but very pretty', 'You should learn French cooking. It will help you blend your couleurs', 'No she is a natural with couleur. Very primitive'* (Text, Faith Ringgold). Willia Marie persists in her declaration: *"I will call a Congress of African American women artists in Paris to propose that two issues be discussed: What is the image of the colored woman in art? And what is our purpose as modern artists? ... Today I became a woman with ideas of my own. Ideas are my freedom. And freedom is why I became an artist. The important thing for the colored woman to remember is we must speak, or our own ideas and ourselves will remain unheard and unknown"* (Text, Faith Ringgold). But the Declaration falls on deaf ears at least for some of the assembled gathering. *"You will come to my studio Madame Willia Marie. I will show you how to make a rich palette of couleurs and teach you to paint like a master. But first you will model for me my African maiden! Earth mama! Queen of the Nile!"* (Text, Faith Ringgold). The last word comes from Willia Marie, a resigned comment to Aunt Melissa – *"c'est la vie Auntie. The price I pay for being an artist"*.

Summary

In *The French Collection*, the deep embeddedness of textile, maternal lineage, creative heritage and histories is forged by Ringgold into a powerful and innovative language, a lexicon capable of articulating the deepest concerns of a very reflective artist of the 21st century. As Farrington states, Ringgold's has indeed been "a singularly valiant effort" (Farrington 2004 p.101). In the 1970s Ringgold became disillusioned with the potential of large stretched canvas to adequately express her ideas and gain an entry into the male-dominated art world of New York modernism (Gouma-Peterson 1998). Ringgold turned towards

the domain and materials of her maternal lineage and, in collaboration with her mother Willi Posey, created paintings on lengths of cloth with fabric frames/borders created by Posey using piecing techniques which referenced the creativity of generations of black quilters. The *Slave Rape* series, reflects Ringgold's preoccupation with women's suffering during the abject atrocities of the era of slavery. (**Image 76**). From that point onwards, Ringgold adhered to her decision to create paintings that focused on women's experience (Gouma-Peterson 1998 p.40). Textile and text became increasingly implicated in Ringgold's aesthetic strategies, culminating in the powerful site of signification and innovative methodologies that is *The French Collection*. Mythic, private and public histories and concerns of African American women are invoked in these 12 story quilts. Here histories are re-envisioned, issues of gender and race, corporeality, cartography and lost genealogies are explored and the metadiscourses of Modernism are deconstructed and repositioned in a singularly lucid and elegant representation.

The use of textile and text in *The French Collection* has assisted Ringgold greatly in this challenging undertaking as it has provided her with a methodology and set of references with which to state, in Farrington's words, "... the truth and beauty of her identity. Ringgold's [work] is the result of a black woman artist reclaiming that which Western culture has usurped from her – control over her own body and a lexicon with which to speak about it" (Farrington 2004 p.56). *The French Collection*, Cameron says, traces Willia Marie's journey from passive object of beauty to becoming a subject who directs her own narrative forever moving "away from the need to place one's body at the disposal of powerful men's desires and towards the shaping of a world in one's own image..." (Cameron 1998 p.11). In *The French Collection*, Ringgold demonstrates that she has indeed mastered her own narrative and set out the possibility that other artists may also do so. Broude and Gerrard state that without the political activism and aesthetic innovations of artists such as Ringgold, present day artists would not be empowered in their choice of subject matter nor would they have the critical

support or high level recognition that is now possible (Broude and Gerrard 1994). Farrington concludes: "Although the path for female artists continues to be a difficult one (and the road for women artists of color even more so) it is now at least a navigable path due to the pioneers like Ringgold" (Farrington 2004 p.101).

In the 1980s, Charlotte Robinson and a team of women created two quilts of women's handprints (*Signature Quilts No. 1 and No. 2*). (**Image 77**). Of this work, Eleanor Munro comments: "There is a feminist message in this ghost-cloth of hand prints ... that women lost in time and anonymity are called back into being in the work of their daughters. But there is a more ancient and universal message here too. For these hands are raised in the gesture that printed itself in paleolithic caves and prints itself to-day on house walls in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. The gesture has several meanings. It says save me, pain and evil pass me by, Lord God protect my children. But it also says simply, Remember me" (Munro 1983 p.47). Faith Ringgold's French Collection will be remembered.

SECTION SIX

Spin-off: Outcome and Conclusions

The final section of the thesis consists of Chapter Twelve which summarises the research findings, presenting an anatomy of the textile/text axis setting out its component attributes implicated in contemporary womens highly innovative art praxis.

Chapter Twelve

Spin-off: Outcomes and Conclusions of Thesis

- (i) *We must speak or our ideas and ourselves will remain unknown*

(Willia Maria Simone in Faith Ringgold's 6th Story Quilt *Le Café des Artistes*).

- (ii) *None saw the whole of her, none but herself ... none could tell the whole of her, none but herself.*

(Laura Riding)

Ferrero points out that in "a reversal that might startle" some of 19th century women's rights activists who saw textile work as symbols of women's unpaid labour and economic exploitation, contemporary feminist theorists and artists have grounded their art making practice in textile as prime visual metaphor and signifier (Ferrero 1987). This thesis points to the fact that contemporary artists such as Miriam Schapiro, Betye Saar, Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacey, Joyce Kozloff, Hannah Wilke, Mary Kelly, Faith Ringgold, Louise Bourgeois, Tracey Emin and many more (picking up the threads at the point of violent disruption of Arachne's discourse, which signified in a woven story cloth, the transgressions of the Law of the Father against women of antiquity), have turned to the ancient language of textile to reclaim a speaking voice. The formidable challenges faced by women artists in the 1970s at the outset of this period of renewal of women's culture is graphically described by Gilbert and Gubar thus:

"The woman writer [artist] – and we shall see women doing this over and over again – searches for a female model ... because she must legitimize her own rebellious endeavours. At the same time, like most women in patriarchal society, the woman writer [artist] does experience her gender as a painful obstacle, or even a debilitating inadequacy; like most patriarchal conditioned women, in other words, she is victimized by what Mitchell calls the inferiorized and ... (second sex) psychology of women under patriarchy. Thus the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female

invention – all these phenomena of “inferiorization” mark the woman writer’s [artist’s] struggle for artistic self-definition ... “ (Gilbert and Gubar 2000 p.50, parenthesis mine).

This scenario describes a very different site from that inhabited by the artists and theorists whose work I have considered in this thesis. Artists such as Emin, Bourgeois, Ringgold occupy a powerful, groundbreaking locus of enunciation and representation in contemporary culture. Where Athena banished Arachne into the domain of a silent arachnology, as spider spinning endless, barely visible gossamer webs, so the site of Emin’s, Bourgeois’ and Ringgold’s aesthetic praxis is located at the restoration of Arachne’s speaking voice thereby powerfully counteracting a culturally inscribed status of Lacanian ‘no-woman’. This thesis draws attention to the role played by textile and text as complex lexicon in this great work of cultural renewal. Turning to a language of aeons, textile as fertile wellspring, women artists have inserted their webs of subjectivities and deepest concerns into the record and discourses of contemporary culture. Audre Lardinois and Laura McClure point to the fact that in antiquity weaving “was woman’s primary sign-making activity” (Lardinois and McClure 2001 p.5). The central proposition of this thesis is that for contemporary women artists the textile/text axis became *a complex lexicon, a collection of labyrinthine referential connotations of signification and representation, a site of layered meaning and ambiguity, a body proxy and a corporeal cartography* which facilitated a veritable revolution in women’s aesthetic praxis resulting in what must be recognized as a cultural and aesthetic renaissance.

Figure Four presents an anatomy of the lexicon of textile and text setting out its component attributes, identified in the course of this research – a materiality, a set of gestures, methodologies and techniques, a complex web of meaning, a labyrinthine referent system. In a word, it presents textile and text as a wellspring of women’s cultural renaissance implicated in:

- A language of feminist poetics and in critiques of the metadiscourses of patriarchy

- A spinning spiral, 'a path, a river, a space, a dance, a song' of women's innovative aesthetic praxis
- Reinscription of the female body, as a corporeal cartography addressing issues of gender, class, race
- Challenges to canons of art historical discourse and as a mechanism for negotiating pathways in the art world, claiming recognition as creators of culture and meaning
- Revisioning of histories and reframing concepts of time
- Woman's survival strategies of aeons and acts of personal and collective prayer/repair
- An expressive aesthetics of trauma
- A methodology for reclaiming fractured maternal genealogies and innovative autobiographical statement
- An aesthetic of resistance, from antiquity to the 21st century

Figure Four is in essence a grid, a matrix mirroring the warp and weft of woven fabric, *textus/a fabric, textere/to weave*, setting out the complex attributes of the textile/text axis as lexicon, web of meaning, referant system and wellspring of contemporary women's art. The grid presented in Figure Four offers a methodology for structuring and organizing the findings of this research. The thesis identifies nine component elements of the textile/text axis as manifested in the aesthetic practice of the women artists whose work has been considered and these are set out below.

Figure 4: Textile/Text Axis As Complex Lexicon of Women's Aesthetic Practice

<i>Nine Attributes of Textile/text Implicated In</i>	<i>A materiality, a set of gestures, methodologies, techniques</i>	<i>Complex web of meaning Labyrinthine referrant system</i>	<i>Wellspring of women's cultural Renaissance</i>
1. A language of feminist poetics to critique metadiscourses	Textile as medium and methodology became one of the central images of the feminist lexicon used to challenge canons and rewrite epistemologies.	The multi-layered complex connotations of textile and its role in myth, metaphor and as carrier of meaning became a resource for women's signification and syntax.	Textile/text axis, a Lexicon of sufficient complexity and ambiguity facilitating rich signification supporting late 20 th century renaissance in women's culture.
2. A spinning spiral of women's innovative praxis	Women's aesthetic praxis creating 'a space, a path, a river, a dance, a song' marking out her life space through her working practices and gestures.	The primal grid of textile provides metaphor, trope, gesture, Bachelardian 'instruction', underpinning some of the most innovative aesthetic practice of the late 20 th century.	Textile/text axis facilitating the resetting of old images and formats and the creation of innovative genre in women's complex aesthetic praxis.
3. Reinscribing the female body: Corporeal cartography	Textile acted as a proxy for the female body in the deep concern of feminist artists and theorists to reclaim and reinscribe the female body.	Textile provided ambiguous metaphor framing an analysis of the position of the feminine in postmodern and postcolonial culture.	Facilitating challenges to misogynistic cultural perceptions of the feminine.
4. Transgressive text challenging canons; Women's pathway in the art world claiming recognition as creators of culture	Textile/text acted as a materiality, a set of gestures with which to challenge the hegemonies of paint and bronze in high art.	The deep mythic and metaphorical resonance of needle/thread/loom/web emerged from antiquity to be reset in innovative aesthetic practices.	Canons of modernism, male genius, art discourses and hierarchies in the art world were challenged in a struggle for recognition of woman's voice as creator of culture.
5. Revisioning histories	As methodologies for invoking presences, reframing the past, reclaiming histories, textile/text offered women artists a fluid articulate language.	In complex signifying practices black faces and subjectivities were inserted into the discourse of High Art	Unipositional ideas of history were challenged as were linear conceptions of time, thereby creating possibilities of multiple histories.

6. Act of prayer/repair survival	Textile/text as prayer/repair, as gesture and technique of retraversing wounds of origin, a productive mimeses in order to regain the site of authentic female subjectivity.	Age old formats of web and quilt, patching together an iconography of meaning, memory and witness in acts of endless reparation.	Women artists developed complex aesthetic practices, ways of being, enacting gestures of repair/prayer as innovative cultural practices in which textile and text are deeply implicated.
7. An expressive aesthetic of trauma	Textile/text axis provided a range of aesthetic strategies to express the trauma of women's 1970s awakening to the realities of their positioning within phallogentric societies.	The Greek myths offer examples of textile as expressive strategy used by women; ancestral encouragement and mentoring for contemporary women artists claiming the right to 'talk back'.	In powerful aesthetic statements, the personal became political as women's discourse named the multi-layered dimensions of their ongoing trauma.
8. Reclaiming genealogies	The adaptation by women artists of textile in their aesthetic practice gestured towards a maternal heritage, women's work of aeons.	Women artists and theorists created a praxis, which excavated past generations of female creative endeavour; in text and textile past lives and subjectivities were retraced.	Women artists and theorists made substantial efforts to recover their female artistic ancestry and art making traditions as tropes for investigating female experience and subjectivities.
9. An aesthetic of resistance	As powerful methodology for reclaiming a speaking voice, as strategy of resistance to a dominant phallogentric culture; the 'voice of the shuttle' silenced in antiquity is a cultural force again.	Quilt format is used as complex signifier of women's resistance and endless complaint against the abjection of the feminine and as strategy for envisioning alternative possibilities.	Since the 1970s, women artists have read powerful statements of resistance against gender discrimination and the degradation of the feminine in western societies and globally into the cultural record.

A Language of Feminist Poetics: Intervening in Metadiscourses

My research concludes that in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, textile became implicated in a feminist poetics used to critique dominant metadiscourses. Textile as materiality, metaphor and methodology became one of the central images of a feminist discourse challenging canons and rewriting epistemologies as women awoke to a realization of the Kristevan 'braid of horror' which circumscribed their lives and subjectivities. The textile/text axis gave women a voice to 'talk back' to the dominant discourse. The multi-layered, complex connotations of textile and its role in the foundational myths of Western society became a resource for women's signification and syntax. The textile/text axis, I suggest, provided a lexicon of sufficient complexity and ambiguity to facilitate rich signification, supporting cultural and creative innovation, a veritable late 20th century renaissance in women's cultural contribution.

A Spinning Spiral of Women's Aesthetic Praxis

My research points to the role of textile and text in women's aesthetic practice, enabling women to create their own unique signification and an embodied art praxis marking out their own subjectivity and deepest concerns through an innovative set of working practices and gestures creating in Irigaray's words, 'a space, a path, a river, a dance, a song' – a spinning spiral of woman's creativity. The primal grid of textile provides metaphor, trope, gesture, Bachelardian 'instruction' underpinning some of the most innovative aesthetic practice of the late 20th century, viz., in the work of Emin, Bourgeois and Ringgold. The textile/text axis facilitated this resetting of old images and formats and the creation of an innovative genre in a complex aesthetic praxis: a transformative cultural contribution creating possibilities of 'a culture of two' and reinscribing woman's voice and autonomy into the cultural and public domain.

Reinscribing the Female Body: Corporeal Cartography

My research points to the ways in which women artists used textile and text to reclaim and reinscribe the female body and to address the converging issues of gender, race and class. Textile acted as a proxy for the female body, e.g., in the work of Messenger, Kelly, Lacey, while Ringgold's patchwork narratives enunciate the complex intersections of bodies and geographies, inscribing the experiences of women of non-white racial origins into the discourses of high art. Textile as indicator of aeons of women's servitude and economic exploitation, provided sources of ambiguous metaphor within which to frame an analysis of the position of the feminine in postmodern and post colonial culture. The textile/text axis facilitates challenges to cultural perceptions of the feminine as women artists and theorists claimed the right to publicly comment on, through their aesthetic praxis, issues of race, gender and class, thereby reading their dissent into the cultural record.

As Transgressive Text

My research suggests that the textile/text axis acted as transgressive text in challenging canons of art historical discourse and critical theory and as a mechanism for negotiating a pathway into the world of art for women, thereby claiming recognition as creators of culture. Textile and text combined to act as a materiality, a set of gestures with which to challenge the hegemonies of high art. The textile/text axis offered women artists' alternative methodologies and artistic techniques. The deep mythic and metaphorical resonance of needle/thread/loom/web emerged from antiquity to be reset in innovative, contemporary aesthetic practices and discourses which facilitated artists such as Emin in negotiating a pathway as 'celebrity artist', a fractured cultural positioning between the academy and the tabloids. Canons of modernism, male genius, art discourse and hierarchies in the art world were challenged in a struggle for recognition of woman's voice and as creators of culture and meaning. This process fuelled innovation in aesthetic strategies and practices as women artists

such as Emin struggled to name the conflicted site of woman as artist in postmodern positionings.

Revisioning Histories

My research points to the ways in which the textile/text axis was implicated in the revisioning of histories by contemporary women artists whereby time was reframed and women's experiences read into the cultural record. Complex understandings of histories, both personal and cultural were built. As a methodology for invoking presences and reclaiming the past, the textile/text axis offered women a fluid, articulate language. Textile and its mythic histories were woven into personal histories in complex signifying practices, viz., Ringgold's *French Collection* series where black faces and subjectivities are inserted into the discourses of high art. This complex aesthetic practice created challenges to definitions of 'history' and 'time' and created possibilities of multiple histories and of reframing the past in highly innovative aesthetic practices and conceptualizations.

Act of Prayer/Repair/Survival

My research points to the role played by textile as women's survival strategy of aeons. In contemporary women's art practice, the textile/text axis became a gesture of prayer/repair, a technique for retraversing wounds of origin, a productive mimesis to regain the site of authentic female subjectivity. The textile/text axis is implicated in innovative strategies of mourning and reparation as aesthetic practice, e.g., in the works of Bourgeois. Turning to age-old formats of web and quilt, patching together an iconography of meaning, memory and witness in acts of endless reparation, artists such as Bourgeois and Ringgold attend their familial wounds, thereby referencing the profound ways in which textile was implicated in ancestral survival strategies from the women of antiquity to Ringgold's enslaved great grandmother and Bourgeois' 20th century French middle-class mother. The thesis points to the fact that women artists of the 20th and early 21st centuries developed complex aesthetic strategies enacting

gestures of prayer/repair as innovative cultural practices in which textile and text are deeply implicated.

An Expressive Aesthetic of Trauma

My research suggests that textile and text is implicated in a range of aesthetic strategies to express the trauma of women's 1970s awakening to the realities of their positioning within phallogocentric societies and as expressive aesthetic of ongoing trauma of 20th century global warfare, revelations of deep cultural misogyny and sexual abuse of women and children, the 'braid of horror' that is patriarchy, for example, in Abramovic's *Balkan Baroque* and Emin's work. The Greek myths offer examples of textile as expressive strategy used by women in antiquity, e.g., Philomela who named her assailant through her tapestry weaving and Arachne who denounced the transgressions of the gods against women. The thesis suggests that contemporary women artists used the textile/text axis as a mechanism for reclaiming ancestral encouragement and mentoring, as women artists claimed the right to 'talk back'. In powerful aesthetic statements, the personal became political as women's discourse named the multi-layered dimensions of their ongoing trauma, viz., in the work of Hiller, Lacy, Antoni, Labowitz, Emin, Bourgeois and Ringgold, illuminating disturbing sites of female abjection in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Reclaiming Fractured Maternal Genealogies

My research points to the role played by the textile/text axis in reclaiming fractured maternal genealogies. The adaptation by contemporary women artists of textile in their aesthetic practice gestured towards a matrilineal heritage, textile as women's work of aeons, and is implicated in reclaiming lost genealogies and foremothers. This gave rise to striking aesthetic innovations in autobiography and self-portraiture, viz., in the work of Hamilton, Ringgold, Wilke, Hegarty, Emin, Bourgeois. Speaking/writing from a position of marginality, from the borderland of patriarchy, women artists and theorists created a praxis which excavated past generations of female creative endeavour. With textile and text as complex

lexicon, they recreated past lives, traced subjectivities, dealt with collective memory, reworking the format of biography into new and challenging genre. Fusing fact and fiction, reframing history and biography to deconstruct phallogentric cultural formats, women artists and theorists made substantial efforts to recover their female artistic ancestry and art making traditions as tropes for investigating female experience and subjectivities, thereby disrupting male traditions of self-authored autobiography as master narratives.

An Aesthetic of Resistance

Finally, my research points to the fact that the textile/text axis is implicated in an aesthetic of resistance developed by contemporary women artists in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The textile/text axis as complex lexicon provided a powerful methodology for reclaiming a speaking voice, as strategy of resistance to a dominant phallogentric culture which deprives woman of voice, autonomy, authority. In the work of the artists considered in this thesis, Arachne is reborn into the late 20th century and the 'voice of the shuttle' silenced in antiquity is a cultural force once again. In Ringgold's subversive corporeal cartography and Emin's praxis of resistance, the quilt is used as complex signifier of women's resistance and endless complaint against the abjection of the feminine and as strategy for envisioning alternative possibilities for women and their daughters. Since the 1970s, women artists have read powerful statements of resistance against gendered discrimination, slavery, rape, domestic abuse of themselves and their children, war and the degradation of the feminine in western societies and globally, into the cultural record, *viz.*, in the work of Abranovic, Lacy, Labowitz, Emin, Ringgold, Saar.

Spin-off: Conclusion

In an eclectic methodological approach, an exercise in piecing, refractant of patchwork techniques, in this thesis I attempt to illuminate the role of textile and text in contemporary women's art praxis in a period of cultural renewal which has

resulted in women reclaiming a public speaking voice. In Nye's words, 'a female speaking, singing, chanting' long silenced is a cultural force again and the thesis draws attention to the role of textile and text in this renaissance. Figure Four provides a methodology for envisioning the complex interrelationships between the individual attributes of the textile/text axis concept as identified in this research. Consisting of twenty-seven cells, Figure Four is in essence a grid, a matrix, mirroring the intricate warp and weft of woven fabric. The intersections of horizontal and vertical reference the complex role as lexicon played by textile and text in the nine attributes identified by my research. No doubt the picture is far from complete. Future research will uncover many more dimensions to this narrative. For example, the whole rich area of the materiality of textile, its textures and structures, its relationship with the almost lost senses of touch and smell in our historical era (which privileges sight above all other senses) has not been referred to here. The malleability of textile, its possibilities for animation – draping, crumpling, pleating, folding, wrapping, tucking, swaddling, festooning, swathing, burn, tear, sew, furl, appliqué, quilt, stuff, embellish, embroider, dye, stain – textile that varies from gossamer linens to diaphanous voiles, from heavy felts to quilted cottons. These also are aspects of the textile/text axis as lexicon in contemporary women's artwork that have not been dealt with in this thesis. Neither has the role of textile in shaping the built environment where ancient string technology has been the springboard of 21st century architectural and engineering flights of fancy. There is also the crucial issue of developing adequate critical concepts and languages with which to interact with the work of women artists in their aesthetic practices at the forefront of cultural creation. As textile has always kept special company with artists, so the role of textile and text will, no doubt, continue as intriguing 'undecidable' without end for both theorists and artist practitioners of the future.

Textere, to weave. Textus, a fabric... no-woman I re-member thee.

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APPENDIX ONE

APPENDIX ONE

List of Images

1. *Dream Mapping*, 1974, Susan Hiller, performance.
2. *Slumber*, 1994, Janine Antoni, performance, various galleries 1994-1996.
3. *Balkan Baroque*, 1997, Marina Abramovic, performance XLVII Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, La Biennale di Venezia.
4. *Abakan*, 1969, Magdalene Abakanowicz, woven fibres, installation.
5. *Backs*, 1987, Magdalene Abakanowicz, resin and burlap, installation, life size.
6. *Interior Scrolls*, 1975, Carolee Schneemann, performance.
7. *In Mourning and in Rage*, 1977, Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, performance, Los Angeles City Hall.
8. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemina*, Betye Saar, mixed media, 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ "x8"x2 $\frac{3}{4}$ ".
9. *Waiting*, 1972, Faith Wilding, *Womanhouse*, performance, Los Angeles.
10. *Nurturant Kitchen*, 1972, Susan Frazier, Vickie Hodgetts, Robin Weltsch, installation in *Womanhouse*, Los Angeles.
11. *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975, Martha Rosier, video, 6 minutes.
12. *Post Partum Document*, 1973-1979, Mary Kelly, Documentation 1, faecal stains and feed charts, perspex, diaper lining, ink.
13. *The Dinner Party*, 1979, Judy Chicago, installation.
14. *Me and Mary Cassatt*, 1976, Miriam Schapiro, *Collaboration Series*, acrylic, fabric, collage, print, 30"x24".
15. *The Anatomy of a Kimono*, 1976, Miriam Schapiro, acrylic and fabric on canvas, ten panels, installation, Andre Emmerich Gallery, Zurich, 6' 8"x 52' 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".
16. *Mirror Mirror*, 1987, Carrie Mae Weems, gelatin silver print, 20"x16".

17. *Back*, 1991, Lorna Simpson, two colour polaroids, plastic plaques, 25"x41.5".
18. *Interim Project*, 1984-1985, Mary Kelly, two of thirty panels, laminated photo positive, silkscreen, acrylic on flexiglas, 40"x35.5" each.
19. *Dress Shrines*, 1990, Annette Messenger, life-size dress in glass case, photographs.
20. *Measures of Distance*, 1988, Mona Hatoum, video, 15 minutes.
21. *Converging Territories*, 2004, Lalla Essaydi, colour print.
22. *Inis t'Oirr Aran Dance*, 1985, Pauline Cummins, tape/slide installation.
23. *lineament*, 1994, Ann Hamilton, bookballs of wound text.
24. *Change: Faith Ringgold's 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, 1986, Faith Ringgold, silk, cotton, photoetching, text, 50"x70".
25. *So Help Me Hannah: Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother Selma Butter 1978-1981*, Hannah Wilke, photographic series.
26. *Intra-Venus Series*, 1992, Hannah Wilke, life size colour photograph.
27. *St. Anne Teaching Mary to Read*, statue bequeathed in the 1950s to the author Sarah Ann O'Mahony by her maternal grandmother, Sarah Josephine Walsh-Gormley, Artist Unknown.
28. *Turas*, 1996, Frances Hegarty, video/audio installation.
29. *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*, 1995, Tracey Emin, appliqued text.
30. *My Bed*, 1998, Tracey Emin, Turner Prize Exhibit 1999, installation, Tate Gallery, London.
31. *Hotel International*, 1993, Tracey Emin, Textile, appliqued quilt 101½"x94½".
32. *Mad Tracey from Margate: Everyone's Been There*, 1997, Tracey Emin, textile, appliqued blanket, 105^{1/8}"x94½".
33. *Pure Evil*, 2002, Tracey Emin, textile, embroidered text on blanket, 231cmx197cm.

34. *Love Poem*, 1996, Tracey Emin, textile, appliqued blanket, 96"x96"
35. *No Chance*, 1999, Tracey Emin, textile, appliqued blanket, 85"x 89¼".
36. *Helter Fucking Skelter*, 2001, Tracey Emin, textile, appliqued blanket, 253cmx 220cm.
37. *Picasso*, 2001, Tracey Emin, embroidery on used sheets, 55"x 61".
38. *Every Part of Me's Bleeding* 1999, Tracey Emin, neon text.
39. *The History of Painting*, 1999, mixed media installation, Galerie Gebauer, Berlin.
40. *Tacimin – Can You Hear Me?* 1997, Tracey Emin, ouiga board, table, chair, textile, text.
41. *Terribly Wrong*, 1997, Tracey Emin, monoprint on paper, 22^{7/8}"x 31^{7/8}".
42. *Journey of the Soul*, 1994, Tracey Emin, artist book.
43. *There's a Lot of Money in Chairs*, 1994, Tracey Emin, appliqued armchair.
44. *Classical Greek Story Cloths*, fragments, 4th century BCE tapestry weave, from Wayland Barber 1995.
45. *Mamon*, 1999, Louise Bourgeois, steel and marble, 927.1 x891.5cmx 1023.6cm.
46. *Be Calm*, 2005, Louise Bourgeois, drypoint on paper, 19.1cmX12.7cm.
47. *Femme Maison*, 1947, Louise Bourgeois, ink on linen, 23.2cmx 9.2cm.
48. *Femme Couteau*, 2002, Louise Bourgeois, fabric, steel, wood, 9"x27½"x6".
49. *Fragile Goddess*, 2002, Louise Bourgeois, fabric, 31.8cmx12.7cmx15.2cm.
50. *Three Horizontals*, 1998, Louise Bourgeois, fabric and steel, 20"x65"x30½".
51. *Spider*, 1997, Louise Bourgeois, steel, tapestry, wood, fabric, silver, gold, bone, 175"x262"x204".

52. *Untitled*, 1996, Louise Bourgeois, cloth, bone, rubber, steel, 300.3cmx208.2cmx195.5cm.
53. *Seven in Bed*, 2001, Louise Bourgeois, fabric, stainless steel, 29.2cmx53.3cmx53.3cm.
54. *Cell VII*, 1998, Louise Bourgeois, mixed media, 207cmx220.9cmx210.8cm.
55. *Endless Pursuit*, 2000, Louise Bourgeois, blue fabric, thread, 45.7cmx30.4cmx30.4cm.
56. *Spiral Woman*, 1984, Louise Bourgeois, bronze with slate disc, bronze spiral figure, 48.3cmx10.2cmx14cm; slate disc, 3.2cmx86.3cmx86.3cm.
57. *Spiral Woman*, 2003, Louise Bourgeois, blue fabric.
58. *Untitled*, 2001, Louise Bourgeois, fabric tower, tapestry, stainless steel, 189.2cmx31.7cmx22.8cm.
59. *Arch of Hysteria*, 2000, Louise Bourgeois, pink fabric, 14cmx44.5cmx27.9cm.
60. *Ode A La Bievre*, 2002, Louis Bourgeois, fabric and colour lithograph book, 28cmx39cmx5cm.
61. *Ode a l'oubli*, 2004, Louise Bourgeois, fabric and colour lithograph book, 27cmx33cmx5cm.
62. *Reflection*, 2001, Louise Bourgeois, fabric, steel, lead, 63.5cmx33cmx30.5cm.
63. *Dancing at the Louvre*, 1991, *The French Collection*, Faith Ringgold, acrylic on canvas, printed, dyed and pieced fabrics, 73½"x80½".
64. *Matisse's Model*, 1991, *The French Collection*, Faith Ringgold, acrylic on canvas, tie-dyed and pieced fabrics, 73 ½"x79 ½".
65. *Jo Baker's Birthday*, 1991, *The French Collection*, Faith Ringgold, acrylic on canvas, printed, tie-dyed and pieced fabrics, 74"x79".
66. *Picasso's Studio*, 1991, *The French Collection*, Faith Ringgold, printed, tie-dyed and pieced fabrics.

67. *Mrs. Jones and Family: The Family of Woman Mask Series*, 1973, Faith Ringgold and Willi Posey, acrylic, canvas, embroidered and pieced fabrics, 60"x12"x16".
68. *Echoes of Harlem*, 1980, Faith Ringgold and Willi Posey, acrylic on canvas, dyed, painted and pieced fabric, 96"x84".
69. *Second Story Quilt*, 1880s circa, Harriet Powers, cotton, appliqued fabrics.
70. *Mother's Quilt*, 1983, Faith Ringgold and Willi Posey, painted, appliqued fabrics with sequins, 58"x43½".
71. *Picnic at Giverny*, 1991, *The French Collection*, Faith Ringgold, acrylic on canvas, printed, tie-dyed and pieced fabrics, 73½"x90 ½".
72. *Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*, 1991, *The French Collection*, Faith Ringgold, acrylic on canvas, printed, tie-dyed and pieced fabrics, 74"x80".
73. *Matisse's Chapel*, 1991, *The French Collection*, Faith Ringgold, acrylic on canvas, printed, tie-dyed and pieced fabric, 74"x79".
74. *Les Café des Artistes*, 1994, *The French Collection*, Faith Ringgold, acrylic on canvas, printed, tie-dyed and pieced fabrics, 79½"x 90".
75. *Moroccan Holiday*, 1997, *The French Collection*, acrylic on canvas, printed, tie-dyed and pieced fabric, 74¾"x92".
76. *Fight to Save Your Life: The Slave Rape Series*, 1972, Faith Ringgold, oil on canvas, printed and pieced fabrics, 86"x 48".
77. *Signature Quilt No. 1*, 1982, Charlotte Robinson/Quilt Research Staff, raw silk and cotton, 96"x79".



IMAGE 1



IMAGE 2



IMAGE 3



Magdalena Abakanowicz
Abakan Red, 1967

IMAGE 4



IMAGE 5



IMAGE 6

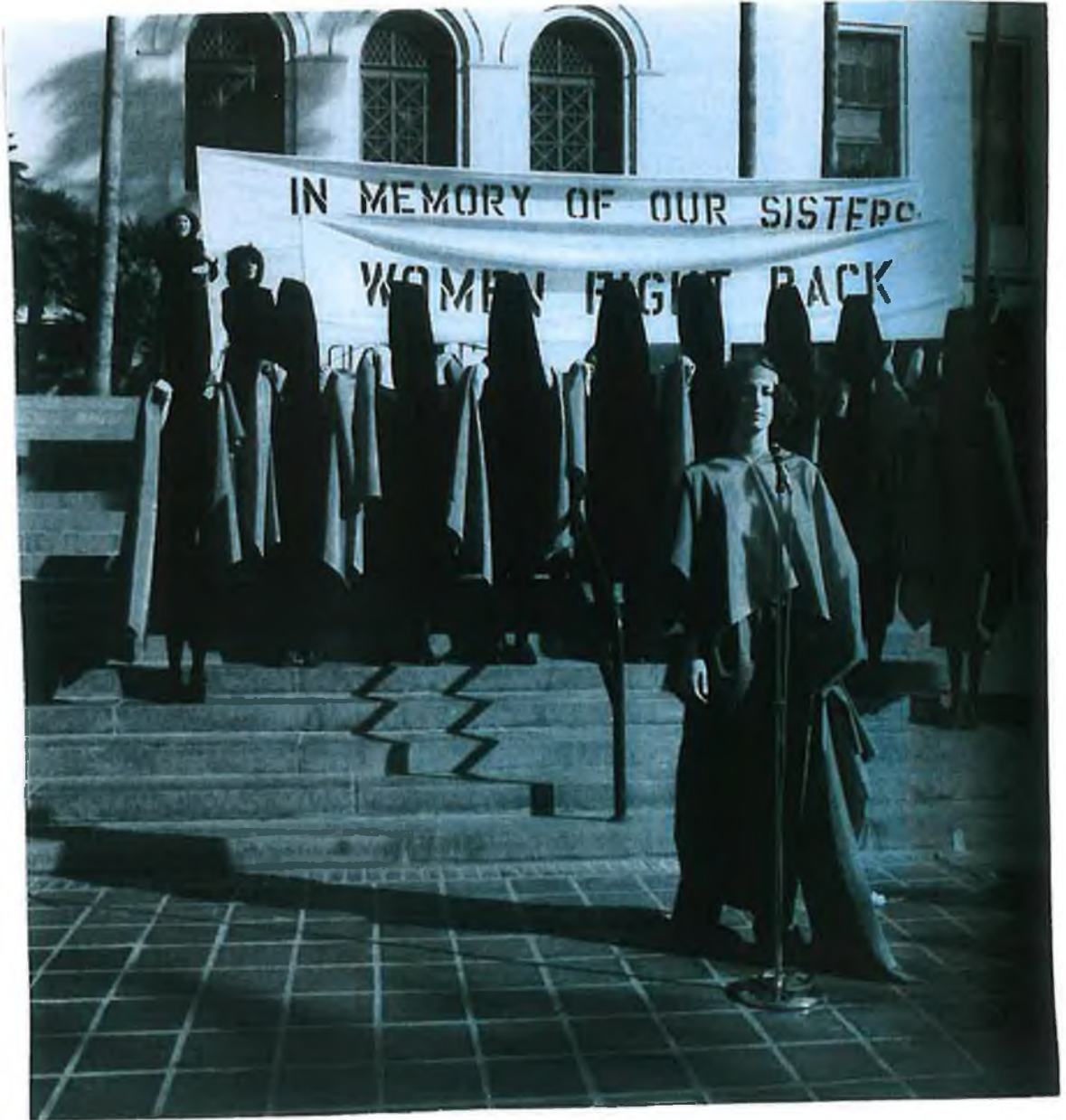


IMAGE 7



IMAGE 8



IMAGE 9



IMAGE 10



IMAGE 11



IMAGE 12



IMAGE 13

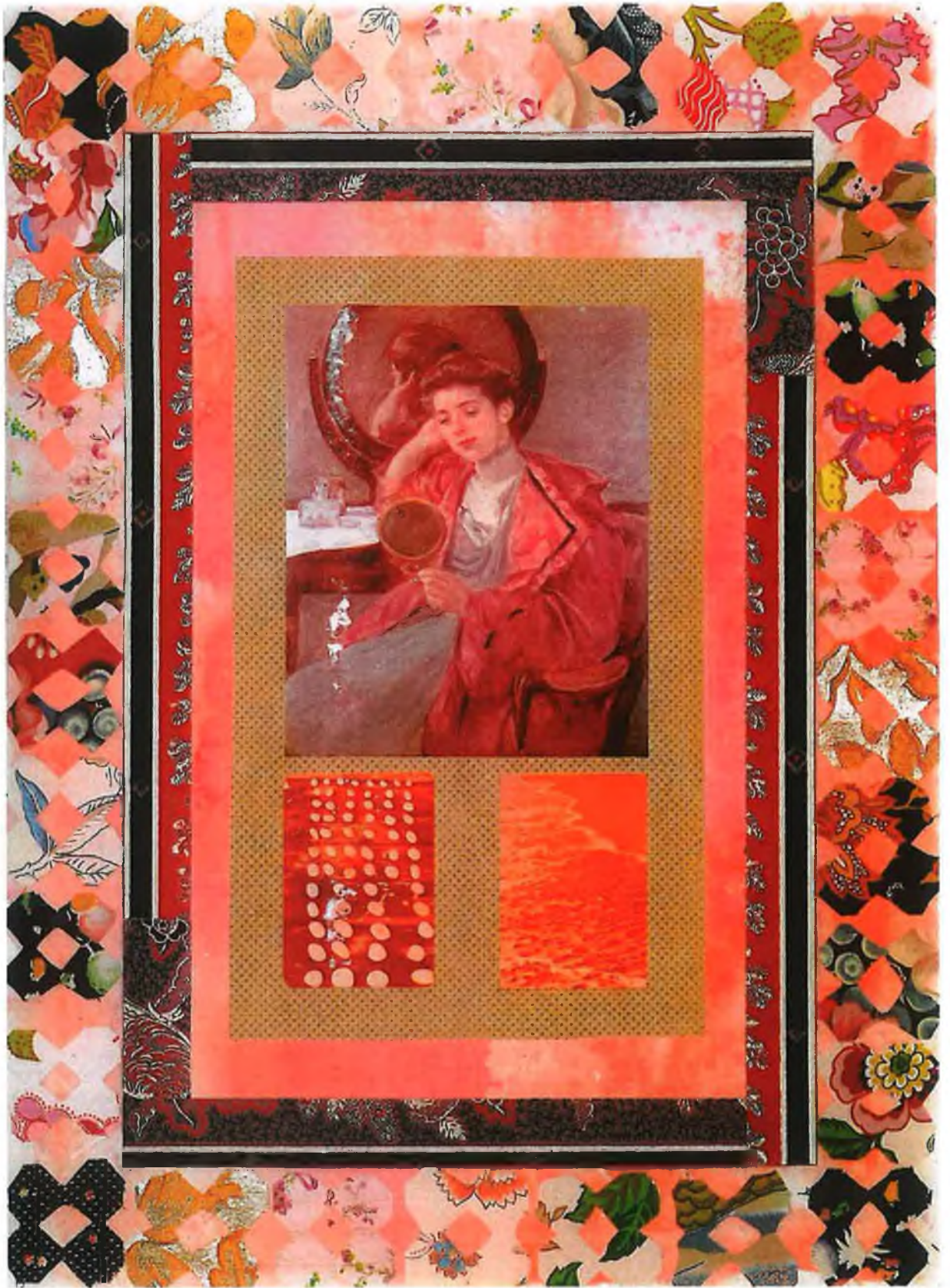


IMAGE 14



IMAGE 15



**LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR, THE BLACK WOMAN ASKED,
“MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO’S THE FINEST OF THEM ALL?”
THE MIRROR SAYS, “SNOW WHITE, YOU BLACK BITCH,
AND DON’T YOU FORGET IT!!!”**

IMAGE 17

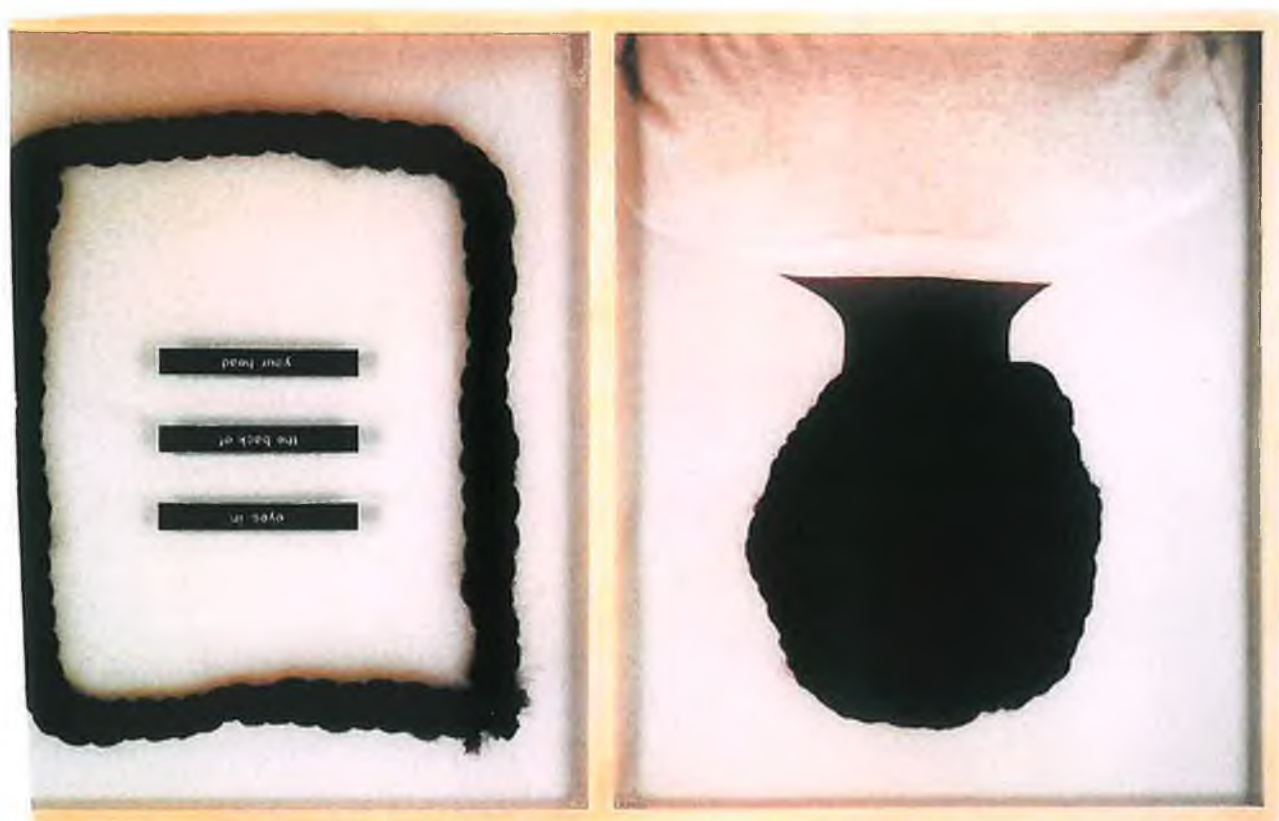




IMAGE 18



IMAGE 19



IMAGE 20



IMAGE 21



IMAGE 22



IMAGE 23

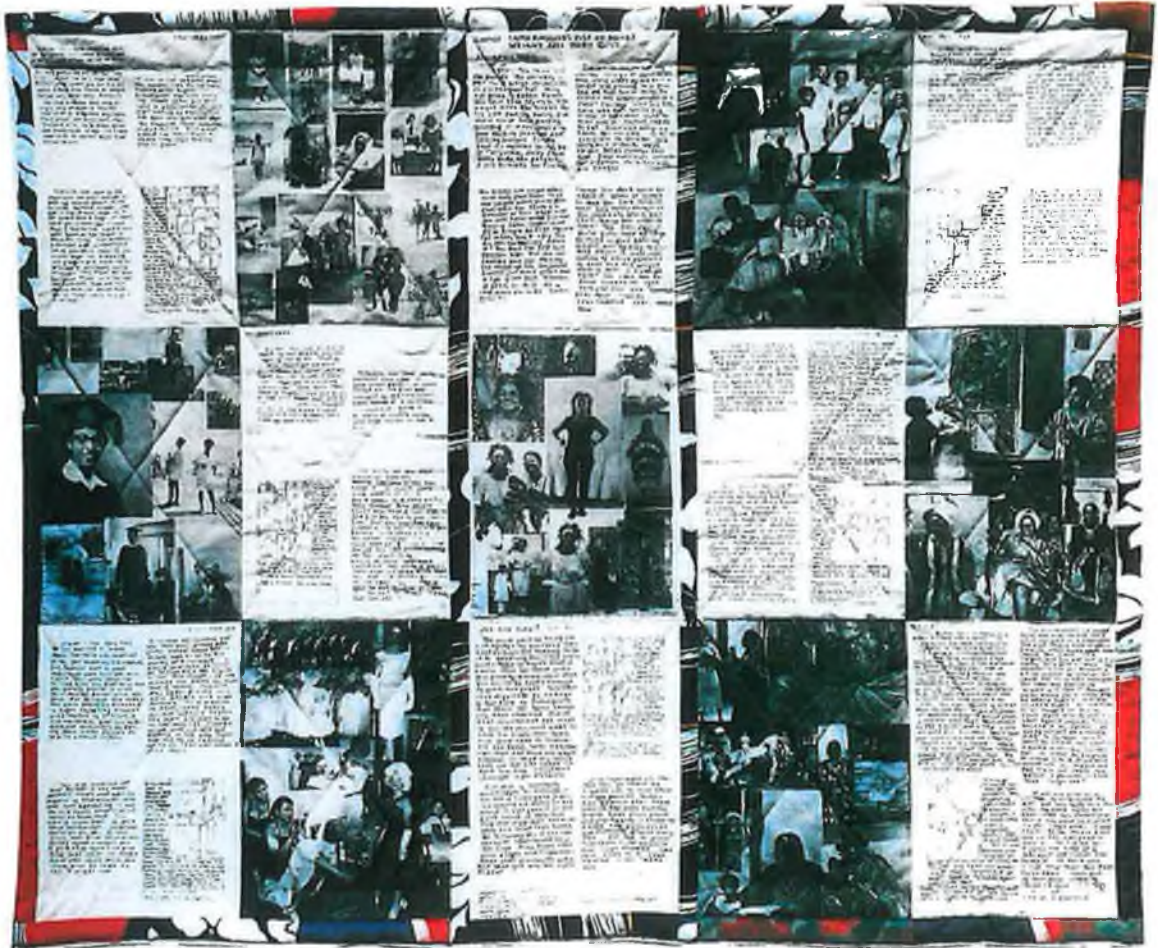


IMAGE 24



IMAGE 25



IMAGE 26



IMAGE 27



IMAGE 28



IMAGE 29



IMAGE 30

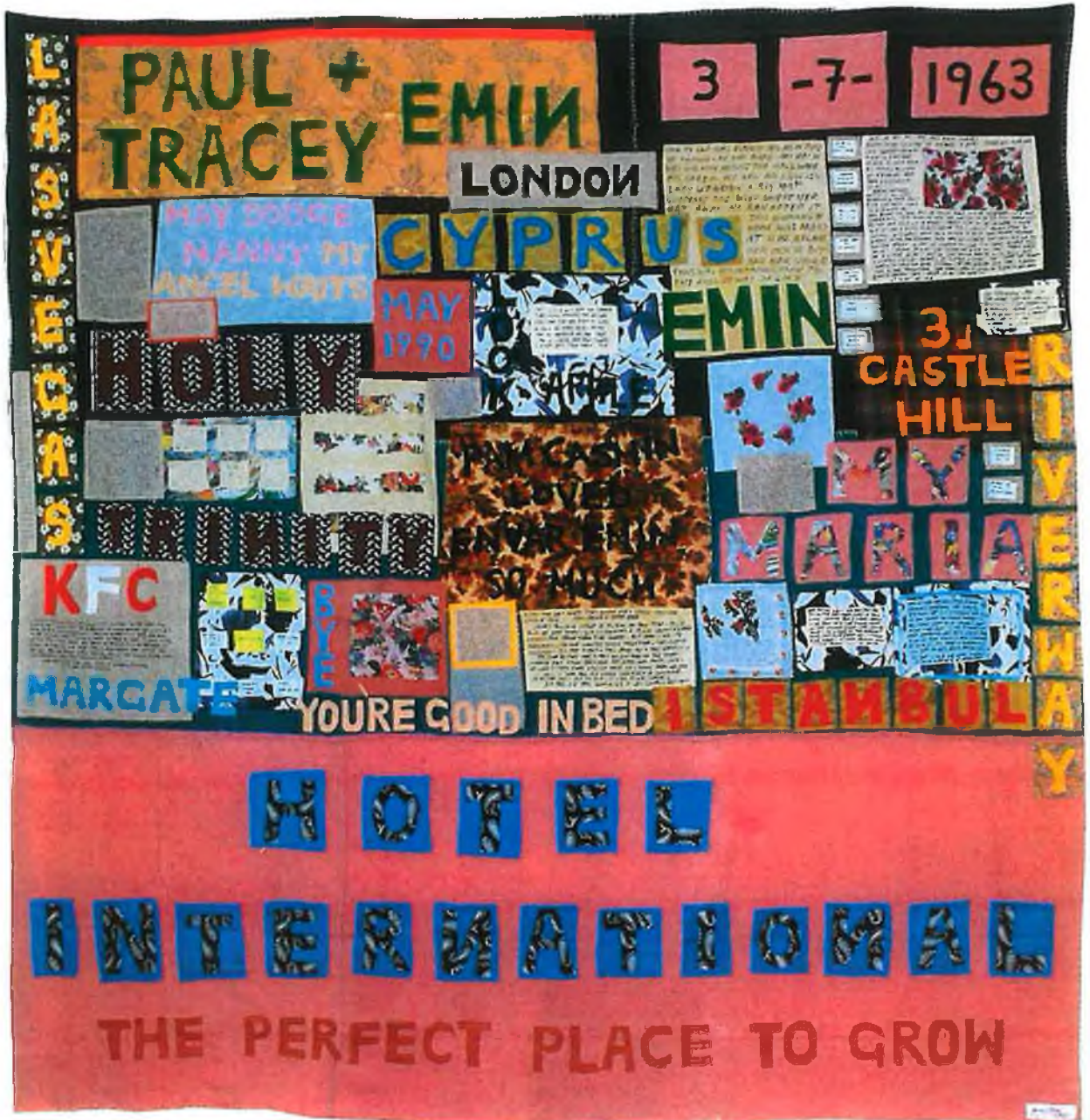


IMAGE 31



IMAGE 32



You Fucked my mouth - Smashed
my head against the wall
I was 13 - And you were NOTHING
BUT PURE EVIL

IMAGE 33

TRACEY EMIN
LOVE POEM

YOU PUT YOUR HAND
ACROSS MY MOUTH STILL
THE NOISE CONTINUES
EVERY PART OF MY BODY IS
SCREAMING IM LOST
ABOUT TO BE SMASHED
INTO A THOUSAND MILLION
PIECES EACH PART FOR
EVER BELONGING TO YOU



IMAGE 35



IMAGE 36



IMAGE 37

Every Part of
Me's Bleeding

IMAGE 38

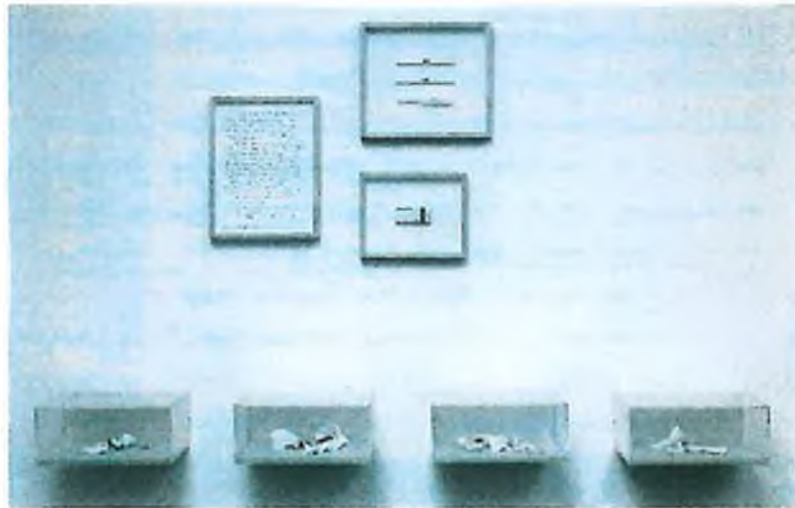


IMAGE 39



IMAGE 40

found about
SOMETHING?



WORMS

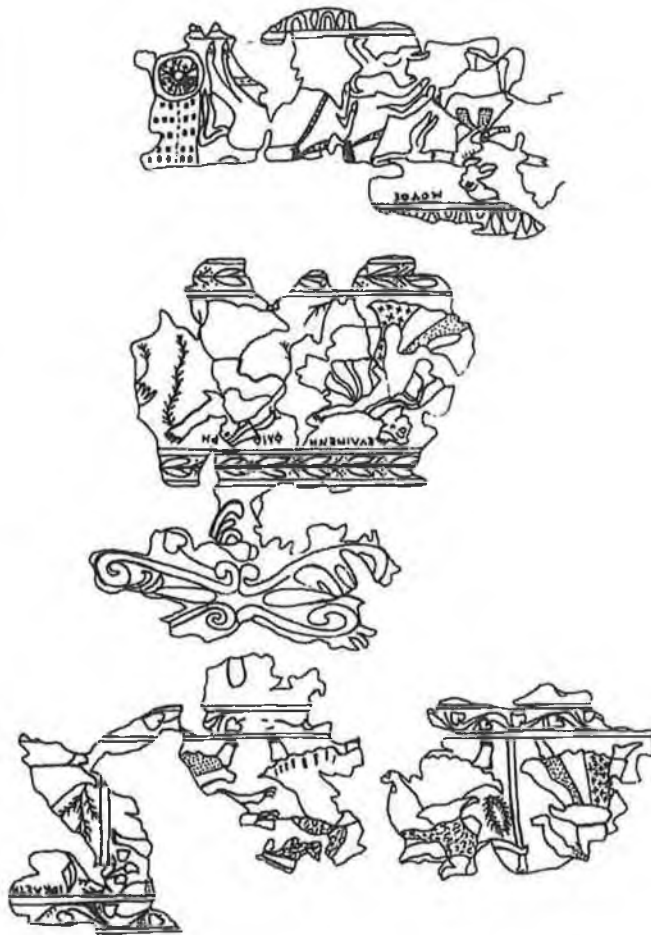


IMAGE 42



IMAGE 43

IMAGE 44



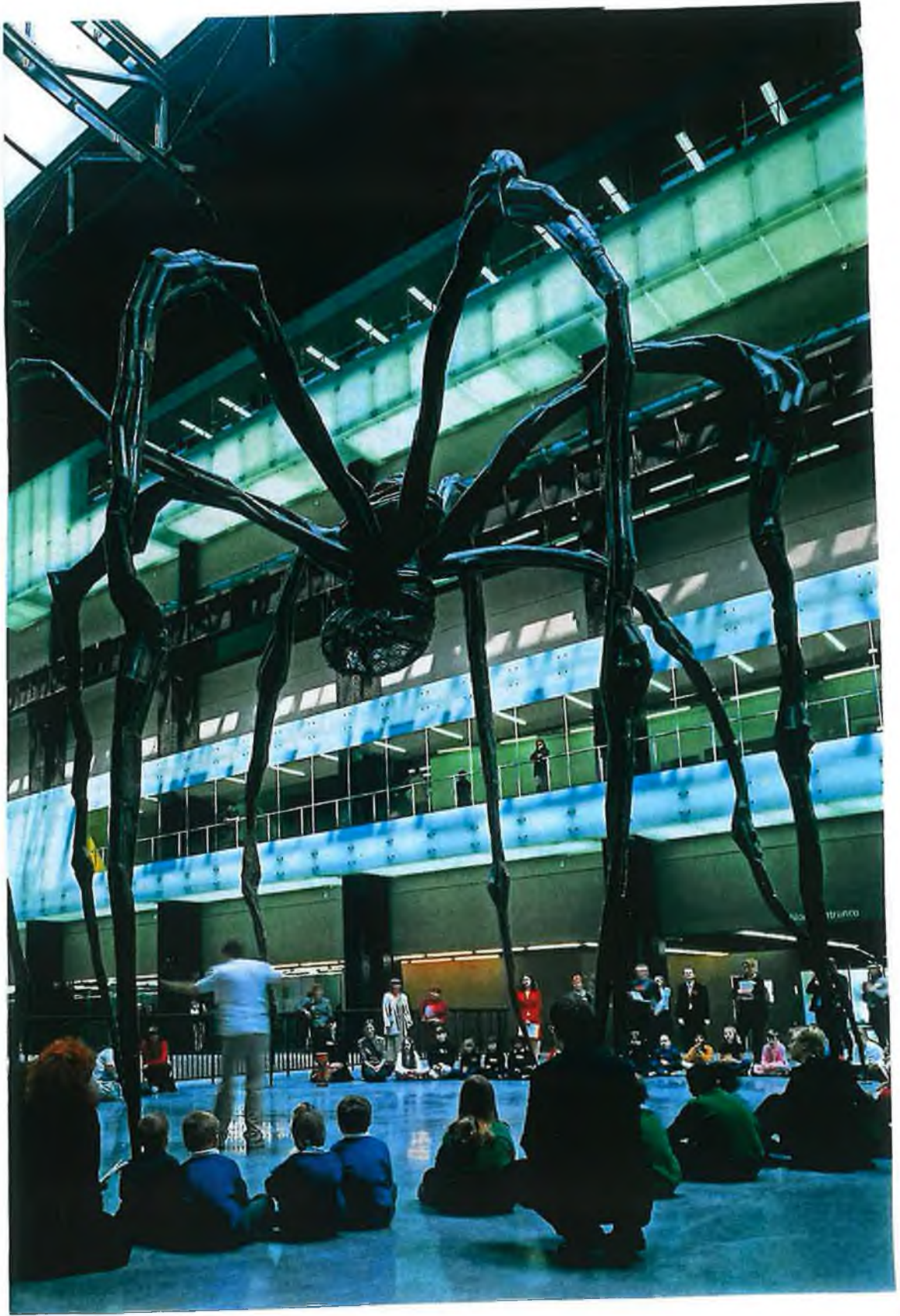


IMAGE 45

IMAGE 46



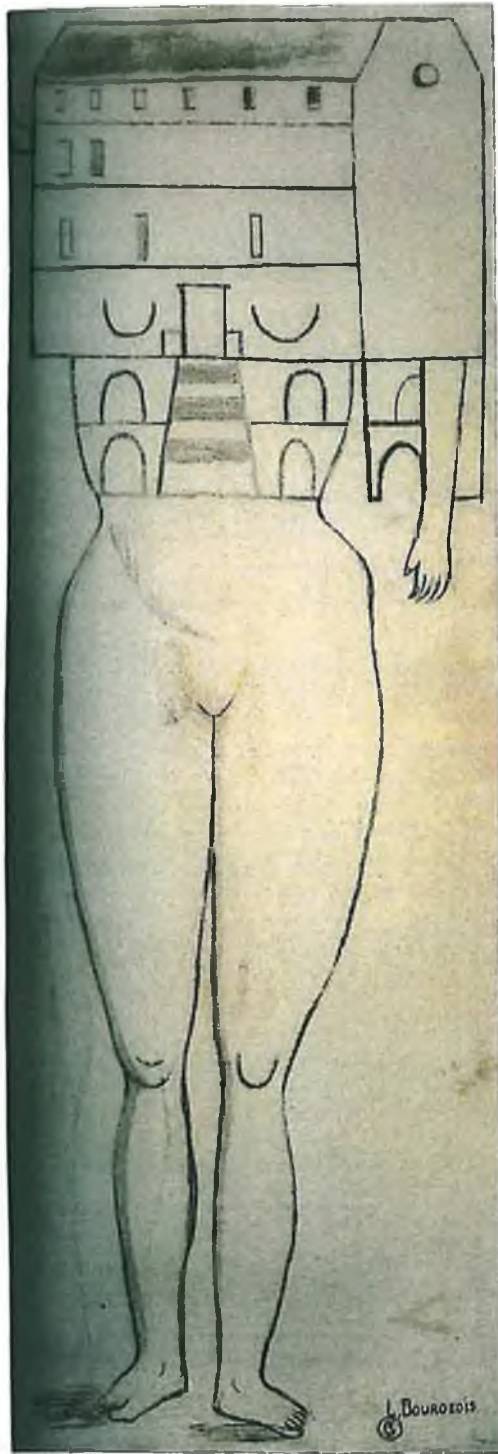


IMAGE 47

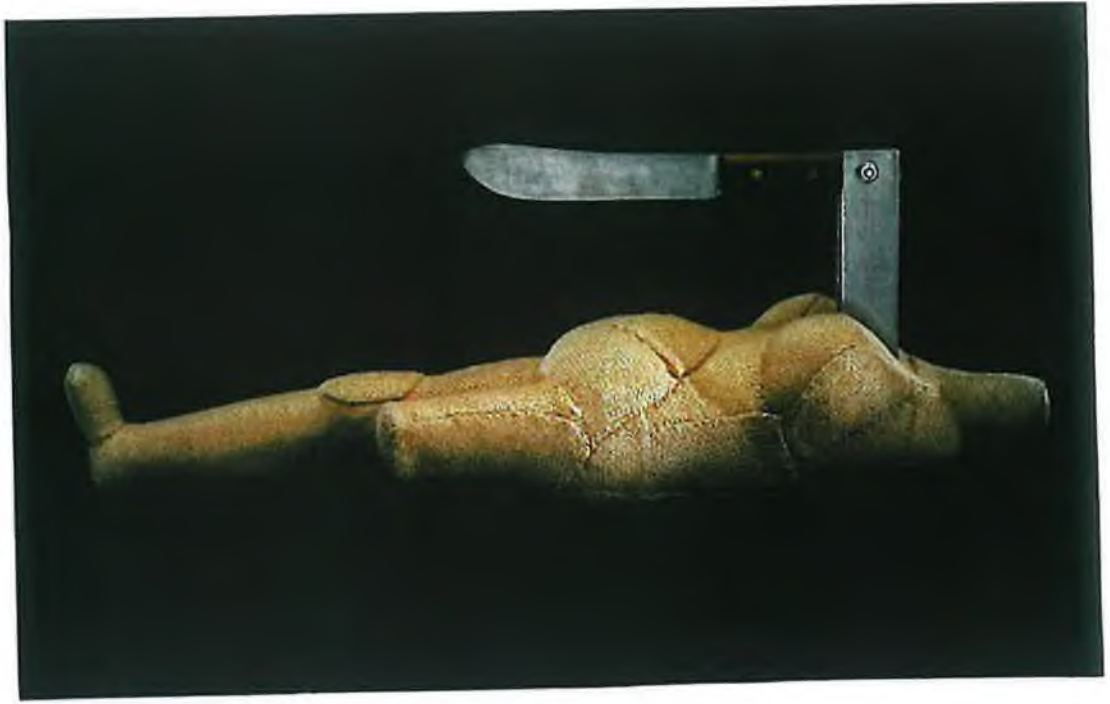


IMAGE 48



IMAGE 49



IMAGE 50



IMAGE 51



IMAGE 52



IMAGE 53



IMAGE 54



IMAGE 55



IMAGE 56



IMAGE 57



IMAGE 58



IMAGE 59

The Bièvre River.
It was because of that river that we bought the house in Antony. The Bièvre cut across the garden in a straight line. With the soil from that river we planted geraniums, tufts of peonies, and beds of asparagus. There were hawthorns, pink and white, and purple tamarisk, and trees of cherries. Pears and apples grew on espaliers on the stone wall. There were boxwoods. And honeysuckle that smelled so sweet in the rain.



IMAGE 60

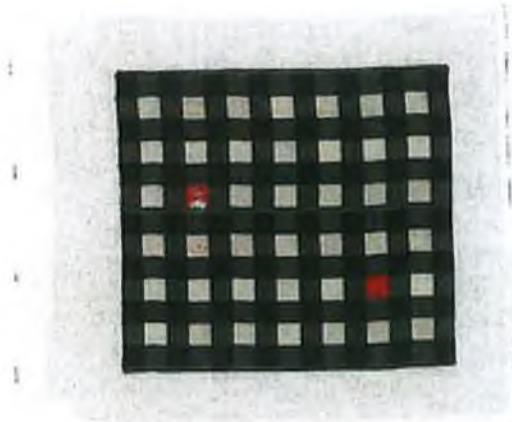
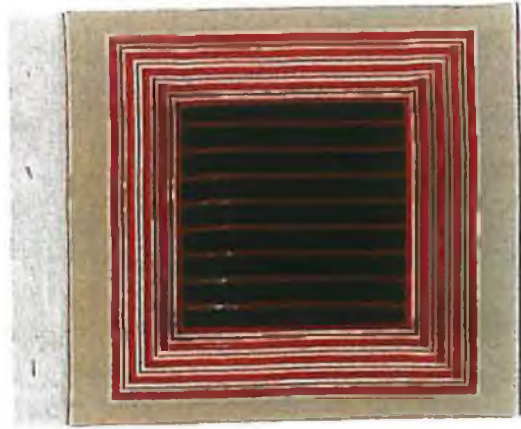


IMAGE 61

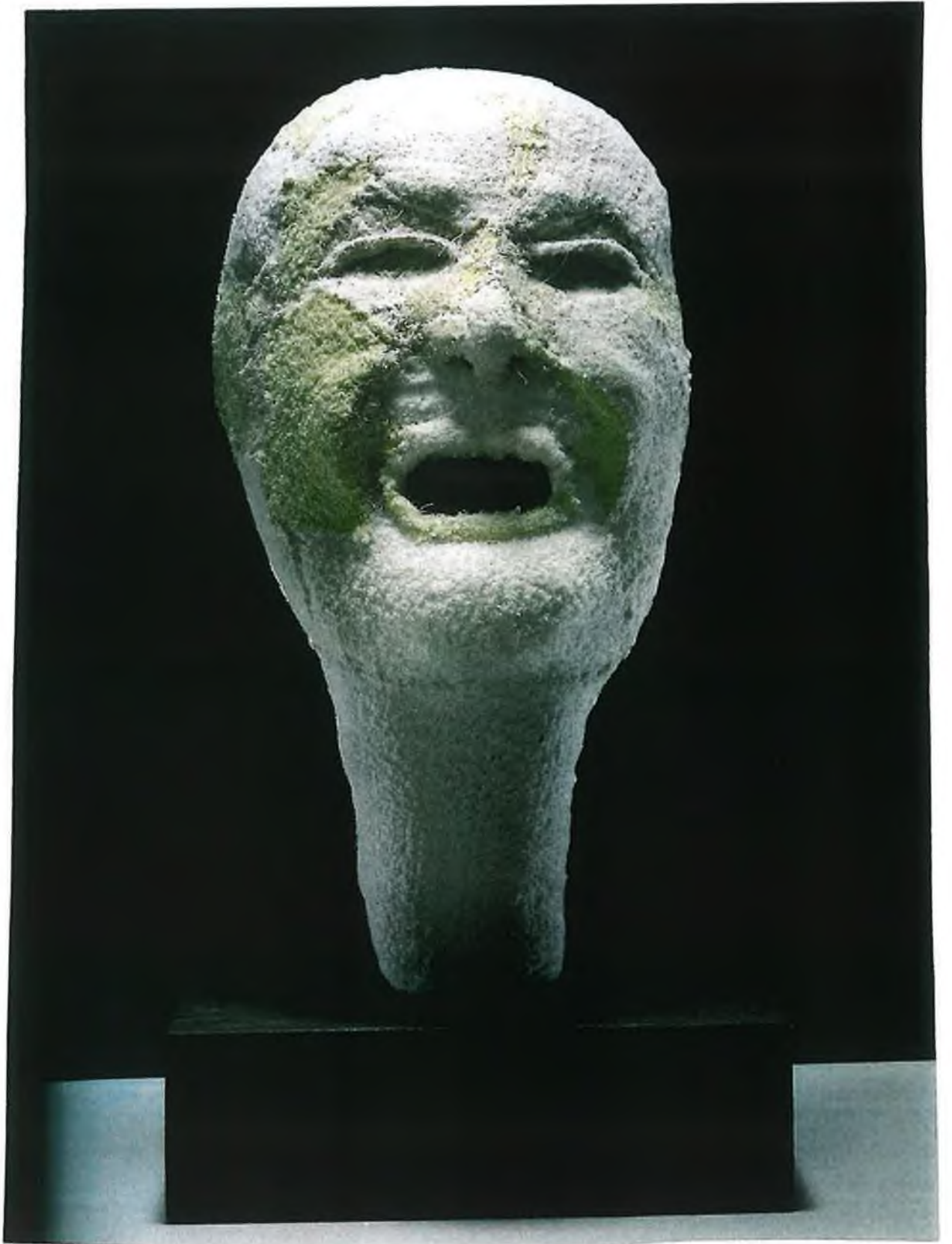


IMAGE 62



IMAGE 63



IMAGE 64

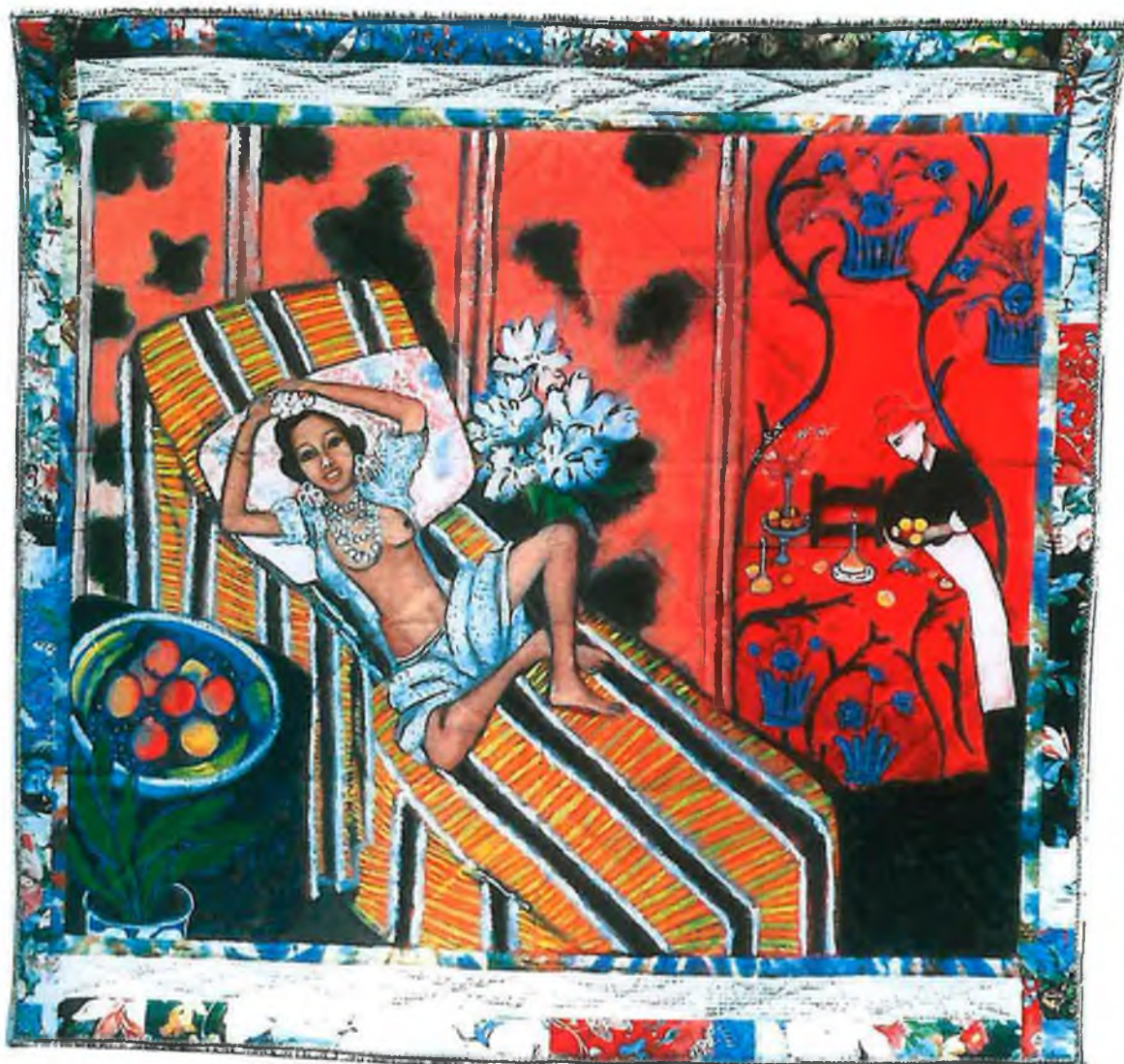


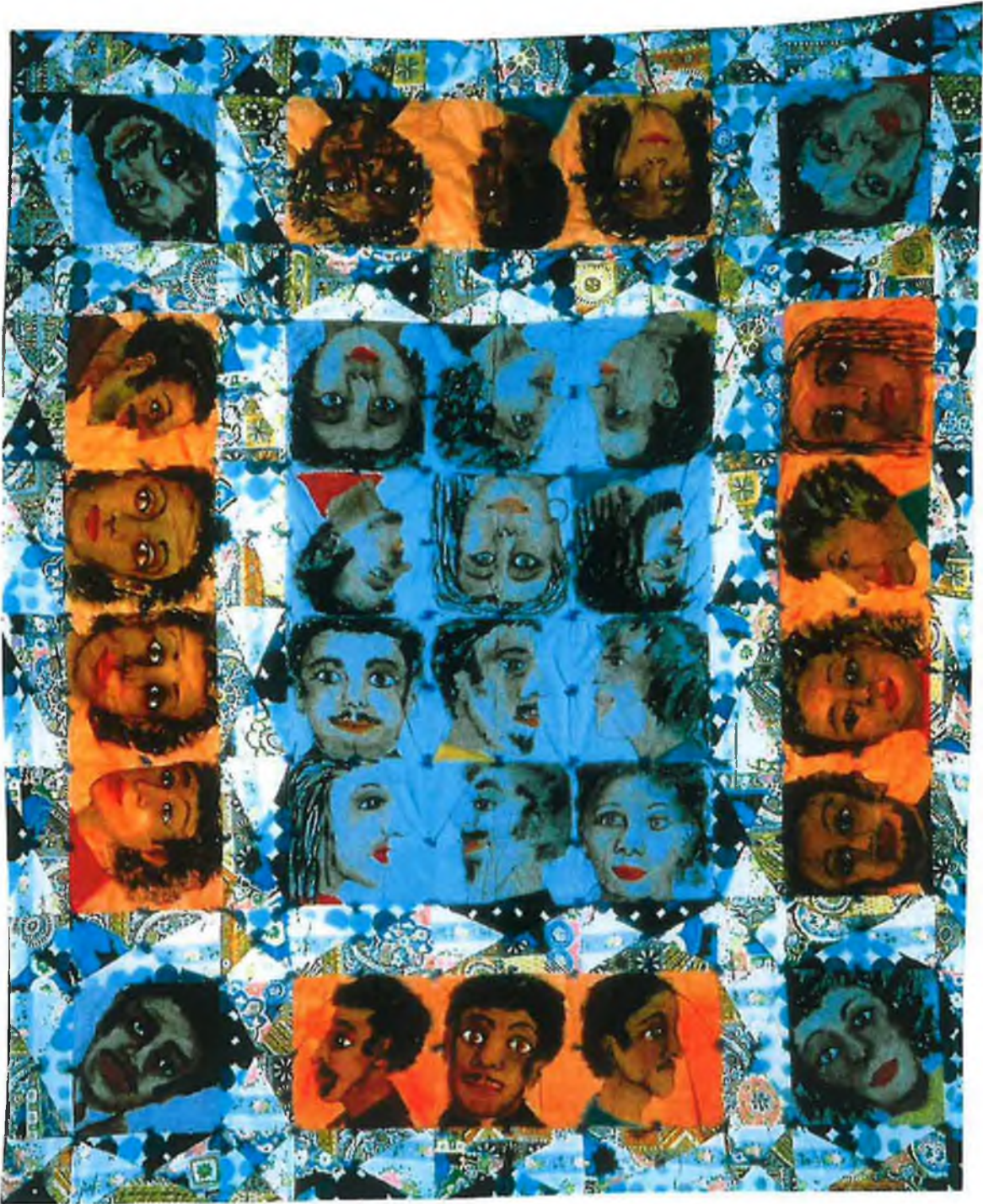
IMAGE 65



IMAGE 66



IMAGE 67





Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land.
Tell ol' Pharaoh,
Let my people go.



IMAGE 69

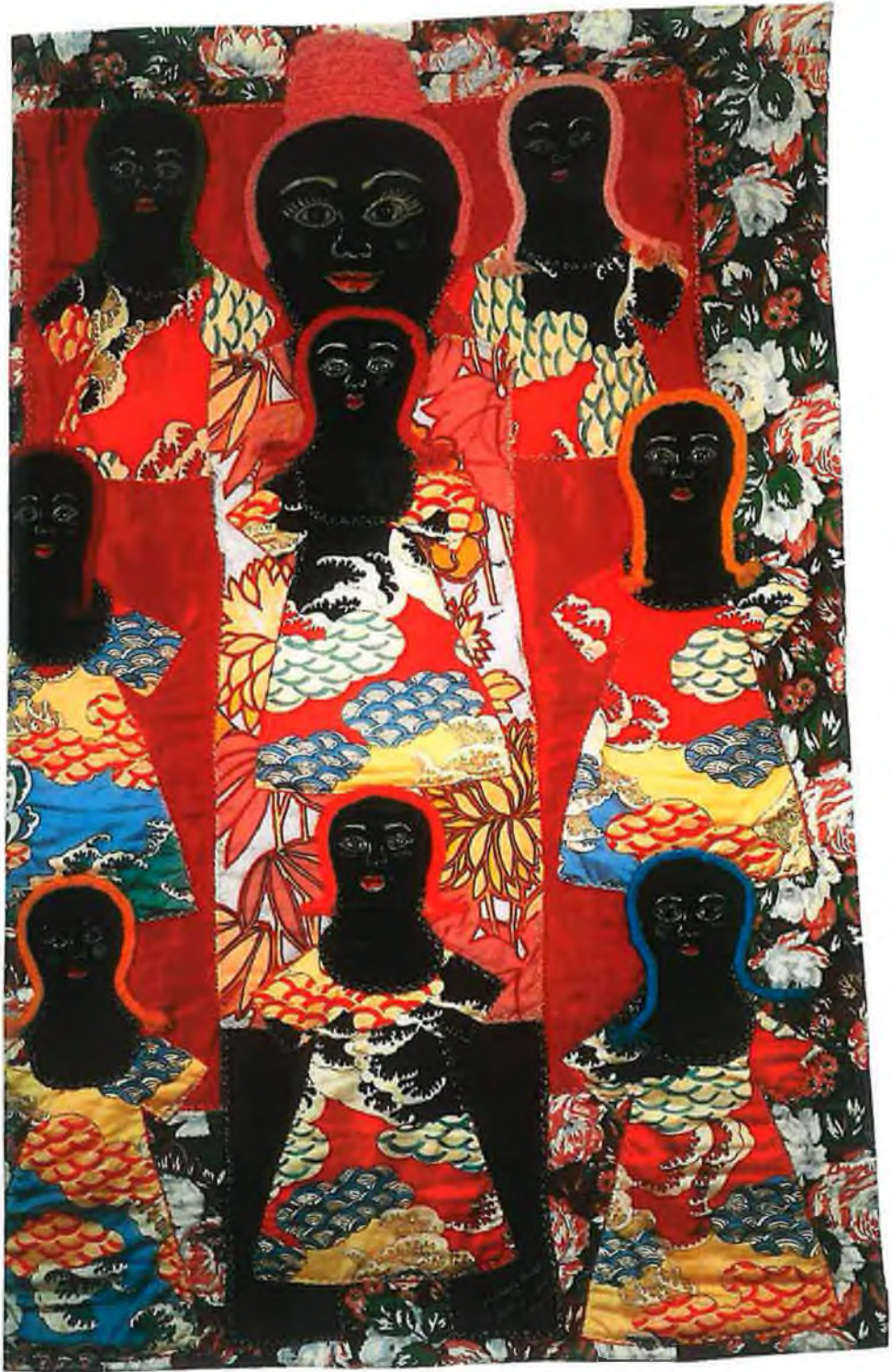


IMAGE 70



IMAGE 71



IMAGE 72

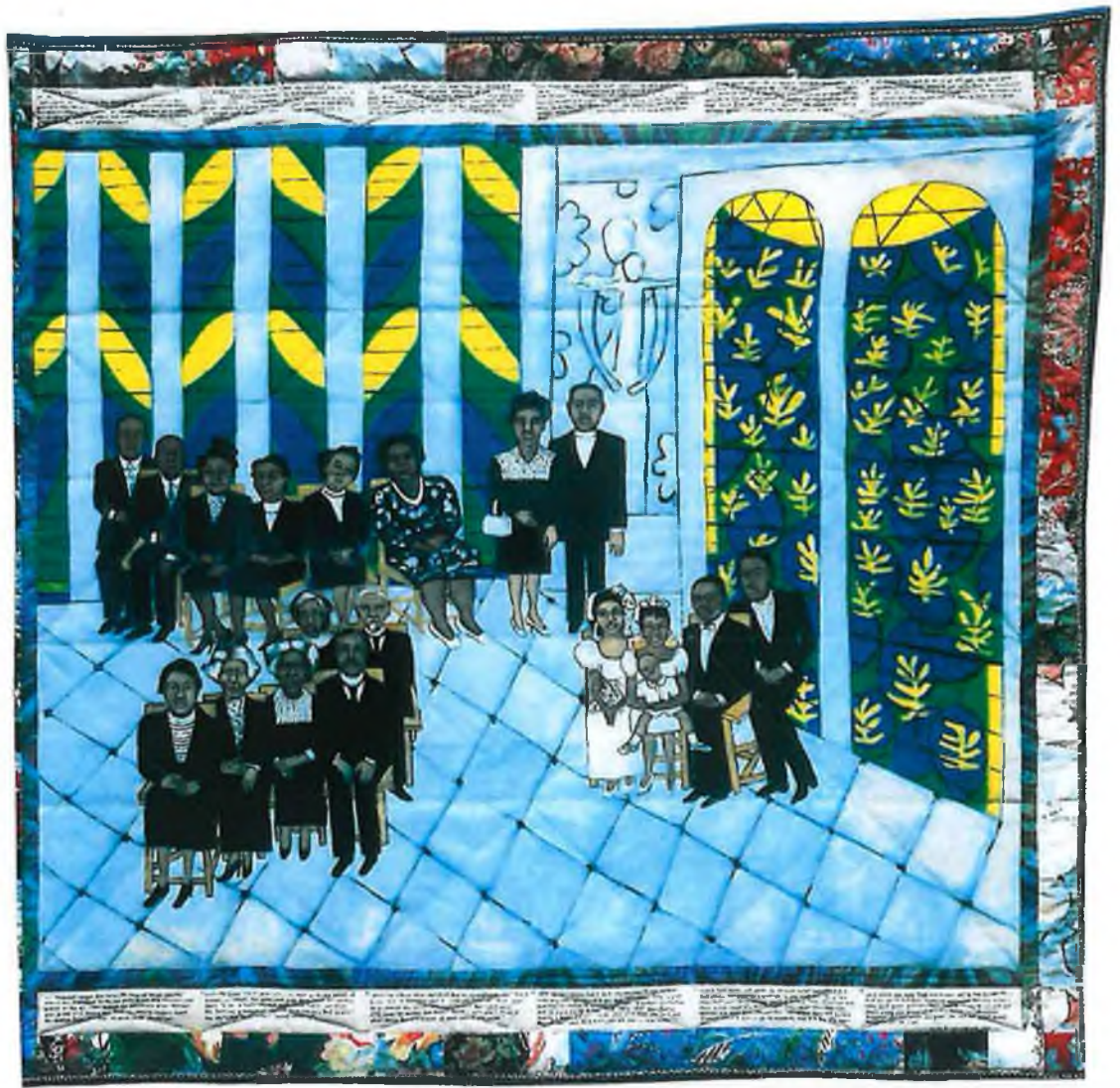


IMAGE 73



IMAGE 74



IMAGE 75



IMAGE 76



IMAGE 77