

Genital Sensation: Abrasive Bodies in Feminist Performance

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University of Leicester**

By

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To my friends; thank you for always being there and for accepting me for who I am.

ABSTRACT

Rachel Duncan

“Genital Sensation: Abrasive bodies in feminist performance”

Genital Sensation sets out to review the practice of “cunt art” as a diverse range of feminist performative works that represent the female genitalia and questions whether vulvar works can disrupt the phallogocentric models of exclusion, absence and lack. Working from a poststructuralist perspective and drawing on notions of the feminist nomad and transdisciplinarity as a related methodology (Braidotti, 1994), this project assembles the criticisms and politics involved in this explicit display of the female body. Bringing some of the most potent and commonly disputed issues in feminist debate to the forefront, this study tackles the controversies which surround the use of the female body in performance art. Using a framework of performativity and embodied interpretative exchange, via Schneider (1996; also Grosz, 1994), to refuse the distance of disembodied viewing, via Jones (1998; 1999), this project investigates the performance of sex, difference, cultural assumptions and iconoclasm through feminist employment of this explicitly marked body.

This text, divided into investigations of the disruptive body, considers the cultural iconoclasm of cunt art and phallogocentric exclusion of women via the work of Irigaray (1996) and Braidotti; the artistic iconoclasm and pornographic alignment of cunt art through Nead (1997) and McNair (1996); and the feminist iconoclasm of cunt art, in addition to the abrasive and subversive possibilities constituent within a practice that challenges the invisibility of the vulva and notions of the forbidden. This project proposes the female body as “political fiction” that reflects particular cultural values and considers ideas of feminist re-reading and feminist writing through Irigaray and Cixous (1983). Ultimately the recurrent focuses of this study are difference and female subjectivity that revolve around disrupting notions of lack or absence through the personal and political agency affected by these works.

Word count: 93,486

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INTRODUCTION:
ABRASIVE BODIES

For much of the feminist art that has been labelled 'erotic' because it depicts or alludes to genital images is nothing of the sort. It is designed to arouse women, but not sexually... What is interesting about [the works]... is the manner in which they worshipfully allude to female genitalia as icons – as strong, clean, well made, and whole as the masculine totems to which we are accustomed... By depicting female genitals, women artists attack one of the most fundamental ideas of male supremacy – that a penis, because it is visible, is superior (Rose, 2001, p.575).

There's lots of vaginas in our work, but it is not about vaginas... they are about being a human body in the world... which knows, thinks, pains, remembers, works, imagines, dreams, yearns, aspires, and which may not be violated... (Faith Wilding, cited in Jones, 1996, p.13).

A summary of Valie Export's *Man & Woman & Animal*, 1973

Black and white. Focus on a tap over a bath. Mixer termination valve. It drips.

"Problems with your plumbing, love?" unspoken but immediately comes to mind.

The event of running a tap and achieving the correct temperature. Scalding at first because you can see the steam rising; add a little cold. A hand reaches from beyond the frame to get it just right. The shower head unscrews so this hand slowly removes the rose to produce a stream of running water.

Next clip. A torso in a bath. Anonymous: We only see her from the ribcage down to the shin. She positions the shower hose so that the stream of water pours on to her vulva and directly on to her clitoris. Moaning. First orgasm; a second; a third. The camera zooms in and out. Close-ups of her vulva and a wider view to see her thighs shaking as she comes.

This narrative is halted by:



Move to film in colour. The waist, vulva and tops of the thighs are in frame. The vulva is foaming "at the mouth" ... growling. Vaginal and vulvar muscles contract and make the vulva a moving animalistic entity. Rabid dog? Now the same vulva with blood. Still growling although moving less. Perhaps wounded.

Again

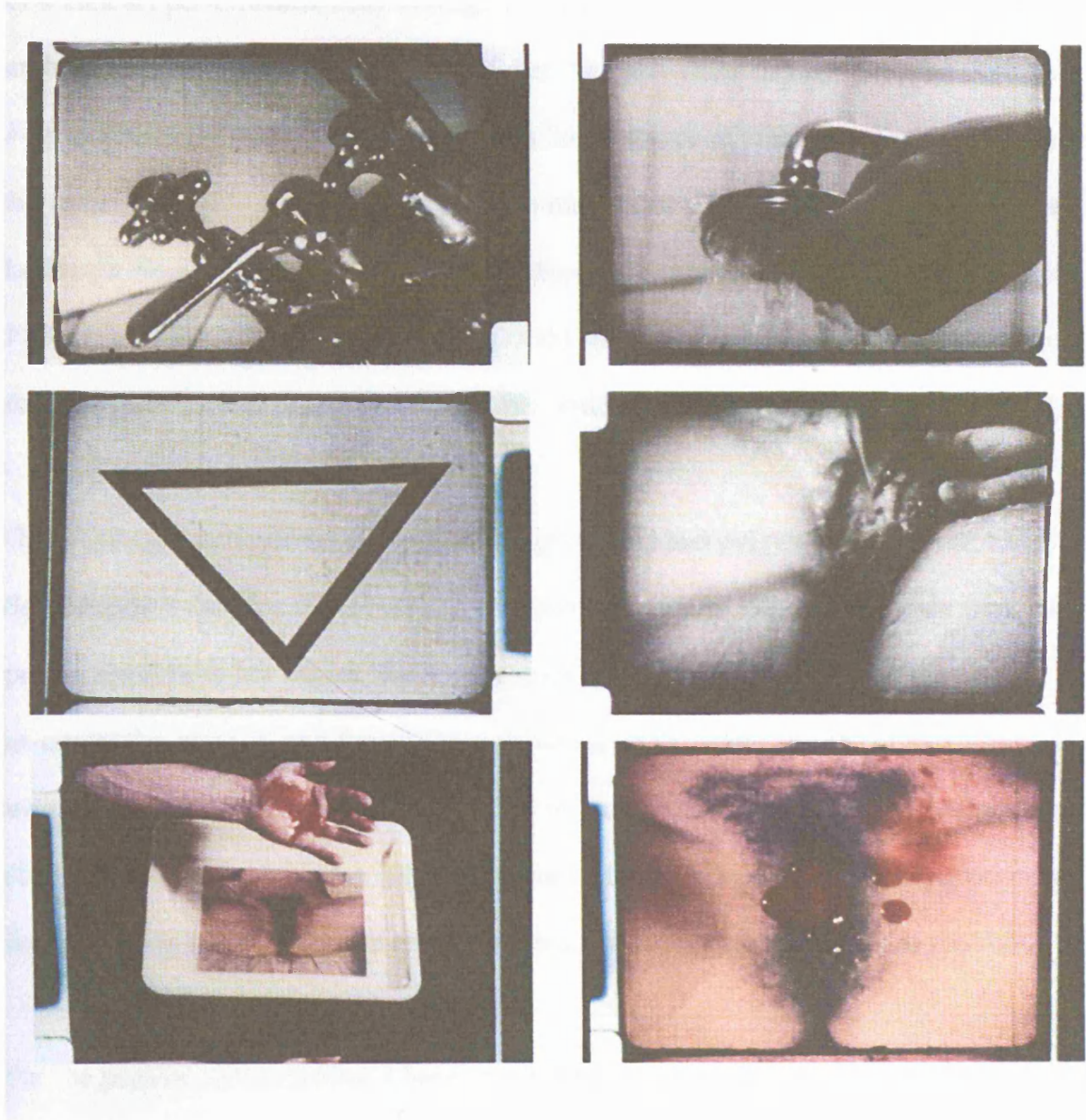


Next clip. The vulva is now clean. As the camera pans out it is revealed that this is now a static vulva, captured in a photo. The colour photo of the same vulva, clean, foamless and bloodless, is sitting in a developing tray. As the frame widens, a hand comes into view, held above the developing tray. It is cut and blood drips from it on to the clean image below. The vulva is once again bloody.

White screen.

(See Fig. i)

Figure i:



Stills from Valie Export, *Man & Woman & Animal*, 1973

Source: Camden Arts Centre exhibition catalogue, 2004, p.127

The Performing Vulva:

Valie Export's *Man & Woman & Animal* (1973) (Fig. i) is a particularly explicit version of a cunt art performance. Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1979) similarly, although more ambiguously, focuses on the vulvae of her "guests" from history. Shigeko Kubota's *Vagina Painting* (1965) uses the vagina as a literal source of creativity. Tee A. Corinne's *Isis* series (1984-86) and Judie Bamber's *Untitled* series (1994) focus on the vulva. Karen LeCocq's *Feather Cunt* (1971), Shawna Dempsey's vulva costume in *We're Talking Vulva* (1986) and Mira Schor's "*Cunt*" (1993) all, as you would expect from their titles, focus on the vulva, on the marker of sex. We certainly are talking vulva.

Other examples that will be explored in this project are less overtly vulva centred. Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975), for example, utilises the naked female body and pulls a scroll from her vagina, the female voice quintessentially *marked*; Valie Export, in an alternative piece *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969), challenges the objectification of women in practice by exposing her genitals in crotch-less trousers; Lauren Lesko's *Lips* (1993) allude to the labia but draw on notions of female voice and the expectations of femininity, such as containment and vanity through the employment of fur as medium.

For the purpose of this project, I have grouped these works together under the heading of "cunt art" as works that explore female sexuality, subjectivity, agency and attitudes towards the female body through the vulva and/or vagina. As exemplified above, the works that this thesis will consider are varied in style, technique, presentation, texture and detail, but they all share one running theme; they all portray images of, actions revolving around, and allusions to female genitalia. This project will survey what has become

known as “cunt art,” the political activity and intention involved and critical readings of these actions.

Cunt art is work, whether visual art, performance art, or classified as live art, that represents female genitalia in a celebratory or reclamatory way. While the works are categorised by their employment of the vulva, as image or action, this body of work also shares others elements. The genre employs a number of media brought together by performativity. The intentions and motivations behind the work and the media they employ are diverse. Media utilised include photography, painting, ceramics, textiles and the performance of the body within the space but each piece performs meaning and relies on the performativity of that which is exposed to implicate the body of the spectator in the interpretative exchange. Performativity is necessarily entangled within this idea of exchange.

What ties the disparate methodologies of these works together is the performativity involved in the pieces. For the spectator, these events involve engagement, negotiation, reaction, perception and spaces for personal recollection, of personal experience and personal creativity. The body of the viewer is engaged in the act of viewing. It is an embodied viewing, and involves embodied reaction. But with this engagement in mind, the spectator becomes more than just a viewer as the terms “spectator” or “viewer” imply distance and isolation. They are, rather, a participant in the interpretative process. They participate in meanings and in cultural readings and associations.

The majority of works that are included in this research project are by American artists and performers. The works under consideration span from 1965 to 2003 (see Fig. ii).¹ During this time, the feminisms from which the works arose have changed and the political momentum in which these works have been a main part has mutated. This project, while considering these contexts and diverse impetus, will approach these feminisms from a distinctly poststructuralist feminist perspective and I will argue that these works disrupt the dominant value system of phallocentrism. In order to help the reader travel more smoothly between the sites and locations that I will engage with, I will now introduce the main works examined in this thesis to introduce the terrain and to begin to familiarise the reader with the works that will be explored.²

Shigeko Kubota's performance *Vagina Painting* (1965) is the earliest cunt art work featured in this thesis. Kubota was born in 1937 in Japan and moved to New York in 1964 where she was influenced by the work of John Cage and Marcel Duchamp and became involved with the Fluxus movement. In *Vagina Painting*, Kubota crouched and



Painted the white paper on the floor with a brush that was attached to the gusset of her underwear. In a movement that controversially placed the marker of her sex as the locus of her creativity, Kubota challenged the traditional categories of male/subject/artist and female/object.

¹ Figure ii presents a timeline of cunt art contributions which provides the reader with a chronological and geographical summary of the work that will be considered in this project.

² I have included thumbnails of the main works to help this process of familiarisation. The thesis contains larger illustrations of these works throughout the chapters for further clarification. For sources, please see larger images.

In contrast Eve Ensler provides the most recent contribution to works that can be brought together under the heading “cunt art.” *The Vagina Monologues* (1998), having been translated into more than thirty-five languages has appeared in theatres across the world and this is the widespread support and infamy contrasts dramatically with many other cunt art works that have been viewed by a relatively small number of people. *The Vagina Monologues* are a set of monologues based on Ensler’s interviews with women that have been performed by a variety of celebrities as well as solo performance by Ensler. The monologues perform different aspects of female experience and the vulva; these include frivolous and humorous explications of the vulva such as what would it wear and what would it say, but also tackles more serious and disturbing tales of rape and abuse.

The mainstream appeal of this work links to the previous popularity of Judy Chicago’s piece *The Dinner Party* in 1979, in which Chicago presented the plates and place settings for thirty-nine women from history on an open triangular table. The plates were ambiguously vulvar in formation and this piece also included the names of an additional



nine hundred and ninety-nine women on the tiled floor below the table. The impact of *The Vagina Monologues* can be seen to mirror *The Dinner Party* to some degree but has also included similar

notions of community support and co-operation that were a feature of *The Dinner Party*. *The Vagina Monologues* has been performed by a variety of celebrities including Jerry Hall, Maureen Lipman, Meera Syal, Miriam Margoyles, Rhona Cameron and Honor Blackman, and has also been a catalyst for V-Day, “a global movement to stop violence against women and girls” (<http://www.vday.org/main.html>) founded and directed by Ensler. Thus far V-Day has raised more than twenty-five million dollars for grassroots groups around the world. *The Vagina Monologues* has also spawned amateur productions

of the play and activities that are based on women raising money to benefit other women.³ Similarly, *The Dinner Party* inspired reproduction of the work and its motif of celebrating women in women's groups and schools in across the world.⁴

While *The Vagina Monologues* brought women together for the performance of the play in various countries, *The Dinner Party* by Chicago alternatively brought women together to create the piece and the work was created collaboratively with Chicago directing the process. The work, having been shown in America and Europe during the 1980s, also received widespread support from women in attendance and women who raised funds to exhibit the piece in their community.

Judy Chicago, born in 1939 in Chicago, has been a major contributor to the genre of cunt art. Proposing a “central core” imagery that she has likened to a female language, Chicago has created several pieces, including *Red Flag* (1971)



showing a bloody tampon being drawn from the



vagina; *Cock and Cunt Play* (1972) with Wilding

and Lester performing the sex stereotypes; *Through the Flower* (1973)

showing folds like labial petals radiating from a central



circle, *Female Rejection Drawing* (1974) with rippled layers peeling



back from the folds of a labial centre; and *The Dinner*

Party (1979) which incorporates a table with places set up for historical

women described above. These are the main works by Chicago that this

³ I was involved in one such event in Corby, Northamptonshire, to raise money for women's shelters in the area.

⁴ For a discussion of the activities and events inspired by *The Dinner Party*, see Kubitz, 1996, pp.150-155; pp.162-166; and p173.

project will examine. These pieces utilise a variety of techniques such as photography, drawing, ceramic work and textiles, and script writing which characterises cunt art as a multi-media genre.

Chicago has played a major part in the development of West Coast feminism as a leading artist involved in co-operatives such as the Womanhouse project during the 1970s which included works such as *Nurturant Kitchen* (by Frazier, Hodgetts and Weltsch, 1972) and *Menstruation Bathroom* (by Chicago, 1971) and pioneering the Feminist Art Program at the California State University (CalArts) in Fresno. The context of Chicago's work is, however, very different to that of Valie Export, another artist who has contributed to cunt art. While Chicago played an important part of West Coast feminism in America, and bringing women together through *The Dinner Party* in Britain and in Germany particularly, Export's European background provided a less supportive environment that typically separated feminism and art. Chicago was part of a co-operative approach, not only in terms of community, but also in terms of *The Dinner Party* as a collaborative project. This community support and the amalgamation of women's movements and art-making, was very different to the feminisms surrounding Export.

Born in 1940 in Austria, Valie Export is the main European contributor to the genre of cunt art and is the only European artist to feature in this project. Creating drawings, photographs and films, Export has like many of the other performers in this thesis, has used her body as the medium in most of her works, to challenge the scopophilic structures that allow for the consumption and objectification of women. As cases in point, and as examples of her Expanded Cinema works, in *Touch Cinema* (1968), Export took to the streets



with a mini cinema-like booth attached to her chest and invited people passing by to put



their hands through the curtains and feel her breasts, and in *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) she walked through a cinema with the crotch of her trousers cut out. Both pieces confronted the objectification and anonymous consumption of women's bodies in cinema. Other work relevant to this research include the

photographic pieces *body sign action* and *body sign action 2*



(1970), which show a tattoo of a suspender clasp and stocking top on



Export's thigh, and the film *Man & Woman & Animal* (1973) (see

Fig. i) in which the vulva takes on an animalistic life of its own through orgasm, white foam and blood.

Karen LeCocq, who contributed to the Womanhouse project with Chicago in 1972, is a mixed media sculptor living and working in California. She featured in the UCLA



exhibition at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art in 1996 with the piece *Feather Cunt* (1971) which consists of velveteen red fabrics and vibrant pink feathers, round with labia folds in the centre.

American artist Lauren Lesko, has alternatively contributed to the new WomEnhouse co-operative project of 1995, inspired by Womanhouse of the 1970s

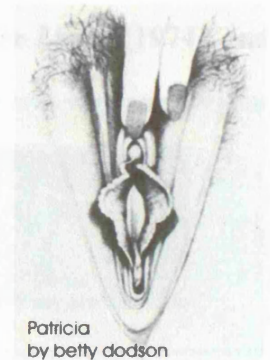
that investigates "the ways in which domestic environments are constructed, perceived, and occupied within gendered power systems" (<http://cmp1.ucr.edu/womenhouse/>). Working with different media, Lesko has created film pieces such as *Babette's Mouth* (1995), sound piece *Thirst* (1995) and the textile based work *Lips* (1993), a set of vertical fur lips,



which is featured in this thesis. Both LeCocq's *Feather Cunt* and Lesko's *Lips* highlight the interrogation of gender roles and the assumptions within cunt art. They both point to cultural meanings attached to the marker of sex and highlight associations of femininity.

There is also a strong educational impetus that can be recognised in cunt art. Betty Dodson, an artist, author, and sex educator, worked as an artist during the 1960s and 1970s before becoming a feminist activist and devoting her career to advocating women's sexual liberation. As her biography states, she began running sexual consciousness raising groups for women in 1973: "In those groups, women learned to appreciate the beauty of their genitals as well as to explore the varied experience of orgasm through practicing masturbation skills" (<http://www.bettydodson.com/betbio1.htm>).

Dodson has published widely on women's pleasure and women's appreciation of their own bodies. Included in this project are a series of untitled drawings of different vulvae. By naming each one, Dodson encourages the replacement of traditional notions of shame and disgust attached to the vulva with pride.



Annie Sprinkle also focuses on sexual education and the exploration of female pleasure. Born in Philadelphia in 1954, she is one of the most well-known and infamous cunt art contributors. In a career that has become centred on sexual liberation and education, Annie Sprinkle started her career in pornography and after starring in over one hundred films, she created her own porn film in 1982. Sprinkle has continued to make work that



focuses on explicit sex but has developed her work educationally and aesthetically. She appeared in *The Prometheus Project* (1985), directed by Richard Schechner,



and has created controversial works such as *Post-Porn Modernist* and *Post-Post Porn Modernist* (1990-95) and within these works, *Public Cervix Announcement*, in which members of the audience are invited to view her cervix through a speculum.



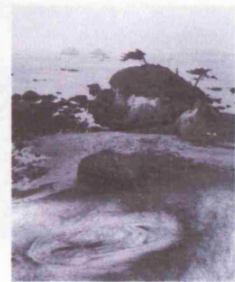
Carolee Schneemann, born in 1939 and living and working in New York, has had a massive impact on feminist performance art. As an artist and performer incorporating painting, photography, performance art and installation work in her career, Schneemann has consistently used her body as the primary terrain of her work. Most influential works include *Eye/Body* (1963), *Meat Joy* (1964), *Up To and Including Her Limits* (1974), and *Interior Scroll* (1975) where Schneemann painted the contours of her body and read from a scroll that she pulled from her vagina, which is of particular importance to this project. More recently, pieces include *Vulva's Morphia* (2001), what Schneemann classes as a performative/lecture (see <http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/lectures.html>) performed at the Powerhouse Gallery at Nottingham Trent University, and numerous lectures and screenings of her work throughout America and Europe.



Tee A. Corinne, who is also included in this project, is a photographer and writer who has been working in America for the past thirty years producing lesbian art, poetry and fiction. She has, during the course of her career, written for journals, taught and become involved in sex education. Born in 1943 in Florida, Corinne has become one of the most visible lesbian artists and her work includes the infamous *Cunt Coloring Book* (1975),



which presents drawings of vulvae, the *Isis* series (1984-86), which incorporates the montage of photographic landscapes and female genitalia, and her portfolio of *femalia* photographs (1993), a



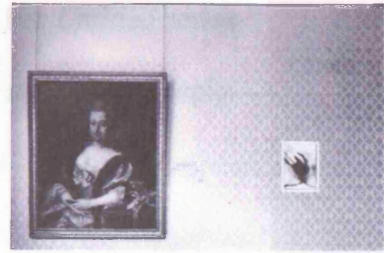
series of colour photographs of a range of vulvae. Other influential works include the *Yantras of Womanlove*, the first book of lesbian photography in 1982 and the book *Dreams of the Woman Who Loved Sex* which was originally published in 1987 and republished as an expanded edition in 1999.

Canadian multimedia artists Shawna Dempsey and Lori Millan have been working together on performance projects since the 1980s that, like Corinne, centre on feminist and lesbian issues and explore the recurring theme of lesbian experience. Working with film and performance mainly, and focusing on costume within their pieces, they have toured extensively while their film works have been screened in venues across the world. In their work *We're Talking Vulva* (first performance 1986, film dated 1990), Dempsey, dressed in a large vulva suit raps about the female genitalia, the pleasures and the idiosyncrasies of “down there.” While challenging structures of lack, they paradoxically present that which is to be critiqued but this lack is humorously larger than life.

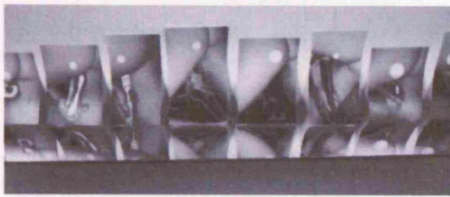


Other multimedia artists included in this project are Zoe Leonard and Aimée Beaubien. Born in 1961 in New York, Zoe Leonard has used sculpture, film, photography and installation in her work. Focusing on issues of gender, beauty and “the crude unveiled” (Debord, 1999), Leonard first received recognition from her untitled installation at

Documenta IX in 1992 in Kassel where she juxtaposed eighteenth century portraits of women with black and white images of female genitals and it is this piece that I will discuss during the course of this project. In this



installation, Leonard placed images of the genitals in masturbation alongside the portraits of women. Masturbatory images are also included in the work of Chicago-based artist



Aimée Beaubien who frequently combines the techniques of photography and montage in her work. This activity of masturbation is seen in her

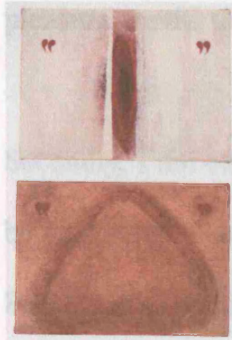
Stimulating Objects, Mounting Objects and Penetrating Objects (1993) which shows photographs of a portion of a woman masturbating with household implements. *Stimulating Objects...* and two pieces from her *Reel* series, *Reel No 4.1* (2001) and *Reel No. 6* (2001), are included in this project. While the two *Reel* pieces included here do not specifically depict the female genitalia, they are included in this thesis as explicating the notions of female lack that resonate through cunt art.

Another artist who will be featured in this project is Judie Bamber, born in Detroit in 1961, who has been exhibiting regularly in New York and Los Angeles since 1989. Her paintings have incorporated water colour and acrylic techniques, and she has worked with themes of autobiography and on unusual still life compositions including sex toys commenting on sexual stereotypes. Bamber's piece *Tunnel of Love* (1993) in contrast to Leonard's installation in a museum, a traditional art space which was to expose unconventional visual elements, was exhibited in a shop window and incorporated a plastic laughing vagina on a pedestal. Bamber has also used the technique of painting to juxtapose traditional and skilful use of medium with unconventional and explicit subject

matter. Her focus on unconventional still life continues in her *Untitled* series (1994) of acrylic works on small rectangular wood blocks, realistically depict vulvae that vary in colour and formation.



Mira Schor, a painter and writer living in New York, best known for her paintings that include words, has focused on writing as a visual image and the development from adolescent rehearsals of identity to a stabilised system of self representation (<http://www.plexus.org/newobs/113/pg12.html>). Schor's work has also commented on the construction of gender identity as seen in *Small Ear* (1989) and



Implant (1992), and this impetus can be seen in her “Cunt” and “Penis” works of 1993 which represent the vulva and the penis in inverted commas. Here she points to the linguistic and social categories of male and female, and highlights the connotations of the representations of woman in her use of the term “cunt.”

On each occasion, these representations and performances are disruptive and challenging to patriarchal tenets. The works that will be explored in this project are feminist, motivated by a desire to challenge traditionally derogatory visions and associations of this part of the female body. I will explore this body of work: the soft flesh of all that is beautiful within it and the stark biting reality that is the female body. This body is abrasive to the context which it inhabits. It “rubs” the viewer “the wrong way” and does not allow a smooth transaction of components. Such work is coarse, in that it exposes what is traditionally unacceptable. It is abrasive to the cultural and artistic systems that regulate exposure and representation. It is uncompromising in its quest for female expression.

In my title, that highlights these bodies as *abrasive*, I am alluding to the disruption instigated by these works - disruption of artistic, cultural and even feminist discourses – and I point to the possibility of subversion of traditional systems of artistic and cultural appreciation. In addition, I have chosen a title of “Genital Sensation” to communicate different meanings that summarise some of the issues that have arisen during the course of my research. Firstly, I want to highlight the basic notion of sensations experienced by women and bring the quest for female sexual pleasure to the forefront. Many of the examples of cunt art that will be explored in this thesis focus on female experience and pleasure, motifs that are implied by the title and discussed in content of this project.

Secondly, I am emphasising the sensationalism that has accompanied this genre. As will be explored (particularly in Chapter 3, Disruptive Bodies Part Two and Chapter 4, Pornographic Bodies) a great deal of cunt art has been met with condemnation and has been deemed controversial by critics and audiences throughout the world. The sensationalism of cunt art also spans to include the evocation of intense feelings or emotional experiences. Rather than appealing to shock tactics, which I consider to be an oversimplification of cunt art, I am reinforcing the ability of this genre to provoke intense and powerful responses in the spectator whether reactions of awe or disgust.

Thirdly, in a philosophical sense, I am calling attention to the importance of knowledge as an analysis of experience. Throughout the course of this thesis (particularly important in Chapter 2, Homeless Bodies and Chapter 6, Mythical Bodies) I am drawn to the Irigarayan notions of male parameters and male-dominated knowledge, to theories of female exclusion and logics that categorise women as “the other,” “other than” or

“outside of” (see Chapter 2, Homeless Bodies), hence positions that base knowledge on experience are important for feminist re-visions. Certainly, if we align knowledge with experience and highlight embodied experience, then we refute Cartesian claims based on the dualisms of mind and matter, male and female. Ann Cvetkovich suggests that “...the use of the term ‘sensation’...refer[s] to perceptions originat[ing] in the 1660s as part of the ideology of empiricism...” (1992, p.13). In referring to perceptions *Genital Sensation* therefore becomes synonymous with both cultural perceptions of female genitalia and of the personal perceptions and experiences of women.

Lastly, I would like to emphasise the link to Victorian sensation novels. Loosely founded on a similar link to experience, it was suggested that the sensation novel, popular in the 1860s, “...is usually a tale of our own times” (Manse, 2004).⁵ The sensation novel, play or drama focused on subjects of sensation or dramatic, thrilling events most commonly associated with mysteries, secrets, crime and conspiracies, which could include instances of murder, bigamy, adultery and accident. As Michael Diamond suggests, “...many sensational subjects were taboo...” (2003, p.1). Diamond goes on to maintain that,

[t]he texture of the novels cannot be communicated by merely listing the sensational elements, which were subservient to the aim of *instilling in the reader the ‘sensations’ of excitement, surprise, fear, dismay* and so on. The authors understood that the best way to achieve this was not to pile up external ‘sensations’ but to use them selectively *within an everyday setting that the reader would recognise and identify with* (2003, p.190; my emphases).

Cunt art, in some ways, is similar to the appearance of Victorian sensation novels. While I wish to steer away from notions of triviality and entertainment, the elements of taboo, social reflection and identification seem pertinent to this project. Diamond’s recognition

⁵ This source, attributed to H. L. Manse, is taken from <http://gaslight.mtroyal.ca/sensnovl.htm>. Its origin is not entirely clear due to conflicting information, but is suggested to have been written circa 1863. Guy Peters, however, cites the same text and attributes it to Hughes, 1980 (<http://guypetersreviews.com/sensation.php>), which I consider to be a possible case of incorrect referencing.

of instilling sensations and the context of the plots used in sensation novels is a feature of cunt art. Cunt art aims to produce a reaction in the spectator and produce an effect on the lives of women.

Cvetkovich suggests that,

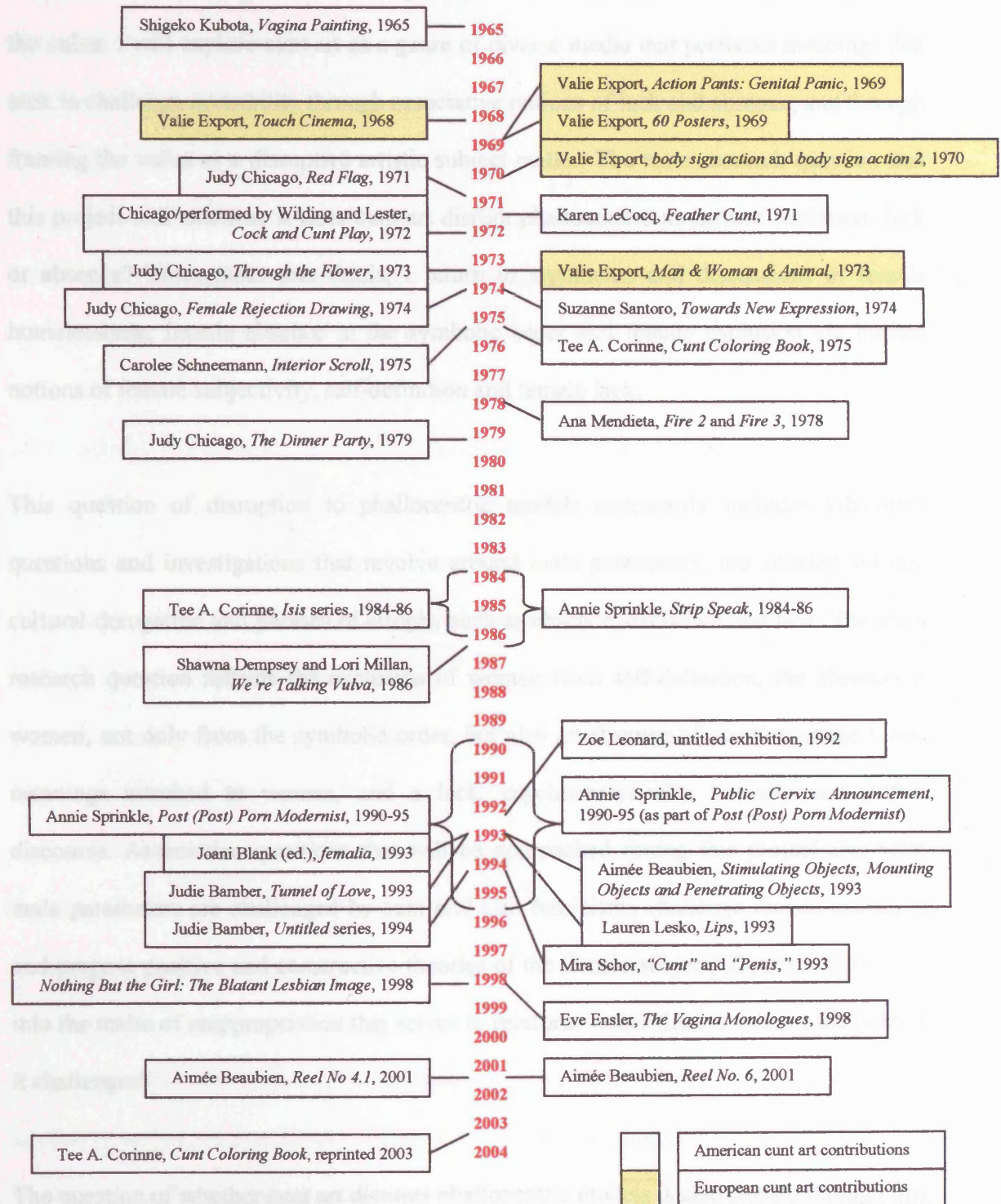
[t]he appearance of the Victorian sensation novel in the 1860s marks the moment at which sensations became sensational...The 'sensational' became an aesthetically, morally and politically loaded term used to dismiss both particular kinds of representations and the affective responses they produce (1992, p.13).

The politicisation of the term “sensation” reflects the use of the term in the title of this thesis but does so purposely to point to the notion that female sensations are sensational and hence vulvar works, through taboo, are dismissed for being “particular kinds of representations” and for the “affective responses” they solicit. In using the title of *Genital Sensation*, I hope to point to the aesthetic, moral and political context of the works explored and that within these contexts, cunt art is loaded with disruptive possibilities.

Cunt art is a “tale of our own times” that, while spanning thirty years, reflects the key debates in feminist theory and practice. It involves issues of subjectivity, debates on essentialism and heated deliberations on the employment of the female body for feminist communication and exploration. It also reflects the experiences of women in the derogatory associations attached to the vulva, which are encountered in real lives through real situations.

Figure ii:

Timeline of main cunt art contributions:



Introductions:

This thesis will investigate and interrogate the invisibility, shame and disgust attached to the vulva. I will explore cunt art as a genre of diverse media that performs meanings that seek to challenge invisibility through associative notions of lack and absence, and through framing the vulva as a disruptive artistic subject matter. The main research question that this project will examine is does cunt art disrupt phallogentric models of exclusion, lack or absence? Throughout this thesis, I return to arguments and discussions of female homelessness, female absence in the symbolic order and female exclusion via limited notions of female subjectivity, self-definition and female lack.

This question of disruption to phallogentric models necessarily includes subsidiary questions and investigations that revolve around male parameters, the situated subject, cultural derogation and phrases of atrophy such as absence, exclusion and lack. The main research question reflects the exclusion of women from self-definition, the absence of women, not only from the symbolic order, but also an absence of positive imagery and meanings attached to women, and a lack, psychoanalytically, socially and within discourse. Associative questions that will be approached during this project are; what male parameters are challenged by cunt art? Can feminisms challenge female exclusion and propose positive and constructive theories of the female subject? Does cunt art settle into the realm of reappropriation that serves to reinforce rather than to subvert the politics it challenges?

The question of whether cunt art disrupts phallogentric models is also carried through this thesis by three chapters that focus on the marked female body as disruptive and

iconoclastic. But the structure of returning to disruptive bodies throughout the thesis also purposely performs a movement of folding in on itself. I am drawn to the descriptively textural and tactile qualities evoked by this process of folding in. This directly relates to Schneider's notion of the feminist intention of "unfolding" bodily signification (1997, p.2) in the labial qualities that these metaphors provoke. This folding process stylistically recalls labial folds but also seeks to put the feminist motif of repetition into practice. Recommended by Irigaray for its potential to jam theoretical structures (1996, p.78), I specifically use repetition through this thesis in order to locate myself as surrounded by *and intervening within* the phallogentric regimes that will be interrogated in this project.

In classifying my feminist approach, and in locating myself within various bodies of theory, I have approached theoretical frameworks and the body of work as a poststructural feminist. I have concentrated on many poststructuralist concerns such as an exploration of social structures through discourse, a focus on formulating the female subject, the postmodern concentration on difference and on situated knowledge, the structures and workings of patriarchy and in identifying strategies for change. I have also been influenced by many categorically poststructuralist approaches such as interpretative exchange via Jones (1998; 1999), Irigaray's analysis of phallogentrism (1996), Grosz and her focus on the embodied subject (1994) and the notion of the nomadic subject in feminism courtesy of Braidotti (1994).

This project has kept returning to discourse as a structure of oppression, a structure of exclusion and absence/presence, and as a structure or strategy for change. I have been drawn recurrently to notions of female writing and female language and as such this project retains feminist poststructuralist concerns. I have endeavoured to keep the work of

cunt art in this frame of language and as a result of this questioning of discourse and exclusionary cultural language the intervention of cunt art is contextualised in this project. In its explication of difference, of the marker of sex and of its investigation of notions of absence and lack, the amalgamation of cunt art and discourse theory work towards a similar goal; that of inclusive and embracing cultural strategies and of female writing.

In locating myself as a poststructuralist, I have become uneasy of the stasis that categorisation implies. Although this placement within feminisms allows for an acceptance of plurality and diversity, labels can serve to define boundaries and to exclude as much as they include. In this sense, I have been inspired by different formulations of identity and methodology and have been particularly influenced by Braidotti's writings on the nomad and the idea of transdisciplinarity. These two notions have been intrinsic to the development of this project and to the development of my conception of myself as a nomad travelling through various terrains.

This is also influenced by my Performance Studies background. The notion of interdisciplinarity, popular to Performance Studies, has informed my weariness of static and exclusive investigation and reinforced, for me, the wealth and productivity involved in movements between theoretical sites and disciplines. My background in Performance Studies is one reason for my keen adherence to Braidotti's methodology of bringing ideas together, but it has also allowed me to view favourably Schneider's proposition of a "double gesture" in performance, which will be discussed further in Chapter 2, Homeless Bodies. Schneider suggests that there is a trend that has developed within feminism of constructivism and essentialism in one manoeuvre; the idea of a "both/and" gesture that

replaces the “either/or” intrinsic to phallogentric systems. The notion of “both/and” has been one that I have welcomed as inclusive rather than limited categorisation.

This research is a transdisciplinary project. I choose the term “transdisciplinary” as opposed to term “interdisciplinary,” that is frequently used in Performance Studies, for specific reasons. As a personal choice of terminology, “transdisciplinary” implies the idea of travelling as opposed to the location of within attached to “interdisciplinary.” The term “interdisciplinary,” while allowing the academic to borrow concepts from different places, also locates the theorist in one place more than another. The transdisciplinary academic, however, can travel through different sites without the implied restraint of belonging and with my reluctance to categorise myself as a poststructuralist in mind it has provided an approach that has been more easily applied to my practice.

This idea of travelling through sites has been influential in this research. For Braidotti, transdisciplinarity is an effective academic tool that allows the feminist subject to be likened to the nomad. In formulating a feminist strategy, Braidotti recommends the notion of nomadism as a pro-active approach that allows formulations of the female subject to avoid the limitations of the fixed and inherently phallogentric male subject. Rather than finding herself homeless, the female subject can emerge as a fluid and diverse set of identifications that rejects the economy of one sex or the “economy of the Same” (Irigaray, 1996, p.74). I have found this strategy to be a relevant addition to the expansion of binaries and the performativity of gender that have become important to poststructuralist feminism and hence, my own approach. In using the metaphor of the nomad, I am also challenging the phallogentric models of exclusion and absence because,

by implication, I am locating myself in numerous places. In the formulation of the nomad, metaphorically I am refusing absence in favour of multiple presences.

I have found it beneficial to carry this metaphor with me during the journey of this project. In situating myself within the theoretical frameworks relevant to this research, I have found it helpful to invent myself as the nomad. It has allowed me to travel between sites; to traverse individual sites of cunt art works, and to navigate through temporally and spatially different approaches. As the nomad, I have been able to view this thesis as a journey through the temporal geography of cunt art and through political geography that is the explicitly female body including issues of territory and self-definition, the locus of lack, the situation of absence and sites of potential subversion.

This nomadic approach has also allowed me to integrate the theoretical and practical approach of the metaphor recommended by Irigaray in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1996). The poststructural concern of interrogating the structures of patriarchy is realised within the poetics of writing: My strategic use of metaphor, in addition to repetition as stated earlier, situates my own intervention within the phallogentric regimes that will be interrogated in this project. Hence when Braidotti highlights how female academics aspire to a male-dominant writing style in order to be respected as theoreticians and identifies the exclusionary model of this practice (1994, pp.29-30; p.33; p.37), while fulfilling these aspirations to some degree, I am using feminist theories of intervention from Irigaray and Braidotti to attempt to disrupt these exclusionary frameworks.

My approach as a nomadic poststructuralist and the research questions embedded in this project means that there are terms and concepts employed in this thesis that need further

explication. My use of the terms “patriarchy” and “phallocentrism” are specific like my use of “transdisciplinary.” Phallocentrism as a concept relates to the poststructuralist preoccupation with the identification of frameworks and particular models that value certain things. When I use the term “phallocentrism,” I am referring to the structures that maintain the political and gendered power systems within culture, for example the primacy of the phallus, female exclusion and the absence that woman represents within that system. In using the term “patriarchy,” a blunt instrument that has frequently been used without clear meaning, I am referring to the cultural issues that are identifiable in real terms, for example the derogation of women’s bodies that is played out within culture and the tradition of the male heir. These notions are socially visible but reflect the phallocentric models that underpin them.

My use of “phallocentrism” as a term is specific in relation to bodies of workable theory as well. Drawing on poststructural feminism, “phallocentrism” leads me to analyse cunt art in particular ways. I am drawn to the notions of discourse, marked bodies and marked writing, of language and of the situated subject and these preoccupations remain a motif throughout this project. This emphasis has also allowed me to keep the theory and the performance work together. My engagement with discourse, my questioning of structures and my interrogation of notions of a female writing/feminist re-writing reflects the movements and the motivations in the cunt art works themselves.

The folds of thesis, mentioned earlier, are important as a metaphor that suggests a journey that interweaves interrogations and undulates through the “real life” of patriarchy and the complex theoretical models of phallocentrism, rather than focusing on a purely linear, one-dimensional and singular discipline project. In my position as a nomad and in

utilising the transdisciplinary approach recommended by Braidotti, the folds of this journey are essential to convey this position and to convey the movement from investigation of the patriarchal to the interrogation of phallocentrism.

As Braidotti maintains:

This figuration [of the nomad] expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity (Braidotti, 1994, p.22).

The movement implied in the “transitions,” “the successive shifts” and the “coordinated changes” will be employed in the course of this project as I travel from one site to the next. After all, to wander aimlessly would neither be nomadic in the tradition sense of the term nor nomadic in the structures that Braidotti sets out. For Braidotti, such aimless journeys would embody the homeless that she so firmly rejects and so I will now provide a map of this thesis and the locations I will visit.

This thesis is drawn together by three chapters that are based on the disruptive nature of cunt art. These chapters fundamentally divide this project into three main areas of exploration; i) the cultural illegitimacy of female genitalia and of cunt art, ii) the artistic illegitimacy of cunt art and iii) the illegitimacy of cunt art as a feminist methodology within a phallogentric system and within feminism as a diverse movement. Each is based on allegations of obscenity and indecency, which reflect the cultural unacceptability and artistic illegitimacy of cunt art. These chapters while dividing the thesis into areas of exploration and the terrain to be considered fundamentally and simultaneously draw them together as well. There is a double movement of division for clarity and the continuation of the theme of disruption. The thesis then provides the movement of the folds structurally and thematically.

I will consider the cultural iconoclasm of cunt art in Chapter 1, Disruptive Bodies Part One and will explore the condemnation of cunt art as a reflection of the negative cultural values and attitudes towards the female genitalia. Chapter 2, Homeless Bodies will then extend this discussion with an exploration of feminist notions of female exclusion and homelessness within the phallocentric system. Here, I will draw on the work of Luce Irigaray and Rosi Braidotti in investigating and developing models of female subjectivity and agency.

I will then move on to exploring the artistic iconoclasm of cunt art in Chapter 3, Disruptive Bodies Part Two looking at the challenge posed by cunt art to traditional art practice and viewing ideals. This will be developed in Chapter 4, Pornographic Bodies where I will consider allegations of pornography attached to cunt art as an extension of accusations of obscenity and within a framework that places art and the pornographic at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum. Exploring notions of the forbidden, context and intentionality, I intend to discuss the similarities and differences that exist between cunt art and pornography focusing, in particular, on the work of Brian McNair (1996) and Lynda Nead (1997), and ending with a case study of the performance work of Annie Sprinkle.

Chapter 5, Disruptive Bodies Part Three will consider the iconoclasm of feminism within a phallocentric system, the iconoclasm of cunt art within a diverse range of feminist approaches and whether seeking legitimisation defuses the political agenda of cunt art. I will also explore the potential effects and complexities of promoting the vulva as a feminist icon and I will examine the limitations of feminist criticisms of cunt art that

revolve around the body and the objectification of the female body. Chapter 6, *Mythical Bodies* will consider patriarchy and the phallogentric system as a set of cultural fictions with particular regulations and attitudes. Within this system I will look at the female body as political fiction, as a text, that holds the possibility of re-reading and re-writing. I will explore mythical examples of the female body and look at myths as a reflection and reinforcement of the values within the patriarchal system. I will also take the feminist debate of Chapter 5 further and will consider the notion of a feminine or feminist aesthetic primarily through the writings of Irigaray (1996) and Cixous (1983).

Within this journey my contributions to Performance Studies and feminist theory are multiple. Firstly this project is the most substantial work on the topic of cunt art. I define the scope of the genre and define the issues that are most potent and relevant to cunt art. I will extend and develop the issues presented by other cunt art critics - most notably Chicago and Schapiro, 1973; Chicago, 1977; Tickner, 1987; Parker and Pollock, 1987; Wilding, 1994; Jones, 1996a and 1996b; Kandel, 1996 and Rose, 2001 (originally published in 1974) – but importantly, I will assess cunt art as a genre that primarily seeks to disrupt phallogentrism through its emphasis on difference. This analysis of cunt art has not been done and similarly this project, dedicated to the sole investigation of this artistic practice, is the first of its kind.

Within this topic, I am also examining specific feminist strategies that tackle the notions of absence and lack and aligning them with vulvar works. The theories tackled in this thesis have not been applied to cunt art and so this project contributes in examining how the employment of the marker of sex can be theorised in terms of feminist analyses of models of exclusion and lack. In this way, this thesis develops a theory of the

performance of the explicitly marked body. While both Schneider (1997) and Jones (1998) have approached the issues surrounding the presentation of the explicit body in performance art, this thesis refines the subject and explores not only the explicit body but the explicitly marked body. Rebecca Schneider recognises the “socially demarcated margins separating artist/woman, high/low, subject/object” (1997, p.31) and while these are issues that will be prominent in this project, I contribute to the field of study by examining and analysing the structures that construct these categories.

This thesis applies the performative metaphor of the nomad to Performance Studies and performativity which is a valid and progressive contribution to feminist methodology in Performance Studies. Implying the movement between sites, that characterises this project, it develops the notion of interdisciplinarity into a valid feminist strategy of transdisciplinarity that can be employed in feminist performance theory. This thesis also contributes by putting into practice feminist tactics of metaphor and repetition within writing. The performativity of these strategies allows an easier transition from the language of the works and the language of their analysis.

I would now like to trace some particular lines of enquiry that underlie the terrain of this project. In the remainder of this introduction I will introduce the use of the term “cunt art” as a gesture of reclamation and celebration but also highlighting the misrepresentation and confusions that exist in anatomical terminology. I will also define the categorisation of performance works and notions of performativity intrinsic to these categories and locate the works explored here within these disciplines. Finally, I will conclude this chapter with an overview of relevant theory and practices, and of the key literary works

that have influenced this project providing context to this project and to the cunt art works that will be explored.

The C-word/V-word:

The term “cunt art” was provocatively first used by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in 1973 and has since been used informally by commentators (Greer, 1999, p.38) while others prefer terms such as “vaginal iconology” (Tickner, 1987, p.268; Rose, (1974) 2001, p.575). I intend to use the term “cunt art” as an official title, as intentionally as Chicago and Schapiro, for semantic reasons that will become clear during the course of the thesis. Judy Chicago admits, “[b]ecause I had a cunt, I was despised by society...I was trying to affirm my own femaleness and my own power and thus implicitly challenge male superiority” (cited in Hunt, 2001) and as Faith Wilding proposes: “... ‘cunt’ signified to us an awakened consciousness about our bodies and our sexual selves” (ibid.).

I also use the term “cunt art” to discuss a range of performances in light of disagreements about terminology concerning different focuses in the works. As Amelia Jones points out, the term “vaginal” is not appropriate for some examples due to anatomical accuracy. She writes,

[t]he issue of how most accurately to label the diverse imagery that falls under the broad category of “central core” is a complex one. While Laura Cottingham emphasises the political importance of avoiding the anatomically incorrect label “vaginal” for these images, which generally represent the outer, labial or vulvar forms of the female body (conversation with the author, 12 July 1994), it is just as problematic to assume that such imagery refers only to the external female genitalia. Many feminist have explicitly referenced the powerful musculature of the vaginal canal in their work... (1996, p.112).

Being anatomically correct is an important consideration when discussing cunt art, as it is a genre that appeals for, in part, the demystification of the female body for positive female effect.

Lisa Tickner also acknowledges her own “rather loose and general application of ‘vagina’...” (1987, p.338). Following Barbara Rose’s lead in her utilisation of “vaginal iconology,” Tickner recognises the anatomical non-specificity of the term she uses, pointing out the confusion and blurring of the internal vagina and the external vulva in non-medical literature (ibid.). Similarly, Faith Wilding notes the common teaching in America for women to call their external sexual organs “vagina” as opposed to “vulva” (2001). She explains:

The vagina is not the homologous organ to the penis, and the incorrect nomenclature perpetuates the invisibility and unmentionability of the female sexual (orgasmic) organ – the vulva and the clitoris. The subversive 70s feminist use of the term “cunt” (as in “cunt art”) was a direct response to this problem of naming (ibid.).

While “cunt art” seems to solve incorrect terminology, there is the disadvantage that it serves to continue the mystification that surrounds the female genitalia. For this reason, while I will use the term “cunt art” as a title for the genre of body art being explored, I will also employ terms such as “vulvar works” and “vaginal imagery,” where appropriate, dependent on the work. In this way I hope to alleviate some of the confusion and disorientation that is imposed by utilising the word “cunt.”

It is also worth bearing in mind that the term “central-core” can be seen as equally problematic. Coined by Judy Chicago, central-core insinuates that the vagina is the centre or core of the female, which could warrant criticisms of essentialism. Some of these issues inform discussions throughout this project, but for clarification I shall employ terminology as anatomically correct as style allows. I intend to use the term “vaginal” to imply cunt art works where various elements are included, internal and external, in the range of examples such as representations of the vaginal canal, alongside representations of the labia and the vulva. Where works under consideration are specifically concerned

with the external genitalia (literally but can be explicating the internal metaphorically), I shall use the terms “vulvar” or “labial.”⁶

As indicated by Wilding, the use of the word “cunt” as opposed to other alternatives such as “vaginal” or “genital” has been used, by those responsible for the informal name, to indicate the celebratory nature and purpose of reclamation both bodily and linguistically. Inga Muscio (1998) joins academics such as Muriel Schulz (1975), Deborah Cameron (1992), Barbara G. Walker (1996), and Dale Spender (1998) in recognising the derogation of words that were once positively associated with women.

The label of cunt art itself must be recognised within the discourse of linguistics. It is the movement of feminist linguistics and the recognition of the “semantic derogation,” in Schulz’s words (1975), of “Womanwords” (as Jane Mills (1989) titles her book that explores the vocabulary of patriarchal society) or words associated with women that have informally but effectively encouraged or paralleled cunt art. An attempted rehabilitation of the word “cunt” and a concerted move towards female representation (process and product) has resulted in the use of female genitalia as a communicative site. It is also the work of Hélène Cixous and the negative backdrop of Freudian genital ranking that has spurred on the use of female genitalia as a feminist icon as opposed to a female lack, and cunt art as a feminist tool of communication. And like feminist linguistics, the meanings associated with the word “cunt” or female genitalia in general, have resulted in projects that centre on redefinition and reclamation.

⁶ For the purpose of clarification, the anatomical definitions are thus: the vulva is made up of several female organs, which are external including the labia, clitoris and prepuce; the vagina is the muscular passage which forms a part of the female sex organs and which connects the neck of the uterus (or cervix) with the external genitals. A clear and simple definitive source can be found by visiting <http://www.innerbody.com/htm/body.html>. Tortora also provides a clear anatomical breakdown for reference (1988, pp.477-478).

The word “cunt” means vagina and vulva, but also has specifically derogatory tones. Since the nineteenth-century, as Mills points out, the word “cunt” has signified “a woman regarded as a sex object, a dysphemism for sexual intercourse, and to describe a particularly unpleasant, stupid or disliked person of either sex” (1991, p.59). Similarly, it can mean “a very despicable person” (Olli, cited in Hunt, 2001) and has been considered “the most controversial word of all” (Goldman, cited in Hunt, 2001). In research that was undertaken in 2000, it was established that the most severe word was “cunt,” a position that had not changed since 1997 (Millwood-Hargrave, 2000, p.9; see Fig. iii). Of the one thousand and thirty-three adult respondents that were involved in the research, 83% believed “cunt” to be very severe (Millwood-Hargrave, 2000, p.52; see Fig. iv).⁷

The history of the word “cunt” is a long and changeable one and there are many suggestions as to the origin of the word. In etymological terms there are links between “cunt” and Welsh, Old English, Mediterranean, Old French and even prehistoric Indo-European languages. Many linguists (particularly feminist linguists) agree that cunt is a derivative of previously respectful words. Barbara G. Walker suggests, “[i]n ancient writings the word for ‘cunt’ was synonymous with ‘woman,’ though not in the insulting modern sense” (1983, p.197). As Muscio points out, “... ‘Cunt’ is related to words from India, China, Ireland, Rome and Egypt. Such words were either titles of respect for women, priestesses and witches, or derivatives of the names of various goddesses...” (1998, p.17).

⁷ This research, *Delete Expletives?*, was carried out jointly by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC) and the Independent Television Commission (ITC).

There is also evidence that during the fourteenth century, the word “cunt” was the term used to denote the external genitalia of the female in Standard English (Mills, 1991, p.59) and so it is easy to see why the “cunt” of cunt art is so aptly used. The explicit and purposive employment of “cunt” draws on meanings from the past and summons reclamation of positive meanings for the female word while refusing the insults and shame that have followed the word more recently. In this movement, we can recognise an attempt to question the derogation of “female” words and the challenge of social definitions of these concepts.

Eve Ensler, who has written and performed *The Vagina Monologues* (see Fig. v), admits to being “converted” to the word “cunt” by an audience member (1998, p.84). Ensler uses the word “vagina” most commonly throughout the monologues (and has been attacked for her use of the word “vagina”⁸) but articulates that this choice is “because we haven’t come up with a word that’s more inclusive, that really describes the entire area and all its parts” (1998, p.xx). She continues, “...‘Vulva’ is a good word; it speaks more specifically, but I don’t think most of us are clear what the vulva includes” (ibid.). And this is a typical example of the problematic terminology that surrounds the vagina. Many women cannot name the various components of their own genital anatomy or put their finger on it. This demystification of the vagina and the vulva is one of the most practical recommendations of cunt art.

The terminology of cunt art could, however, be considered by some to be anachronistic in its application. Cunt art, most precisely, is considered to be emblematic of a certain type of work created by a certain group of artists, chronologically and geographically specific.

⁸ For an example of this criticism see Dodson, <http://www.bettydodson.com/subbetyty.htm>.

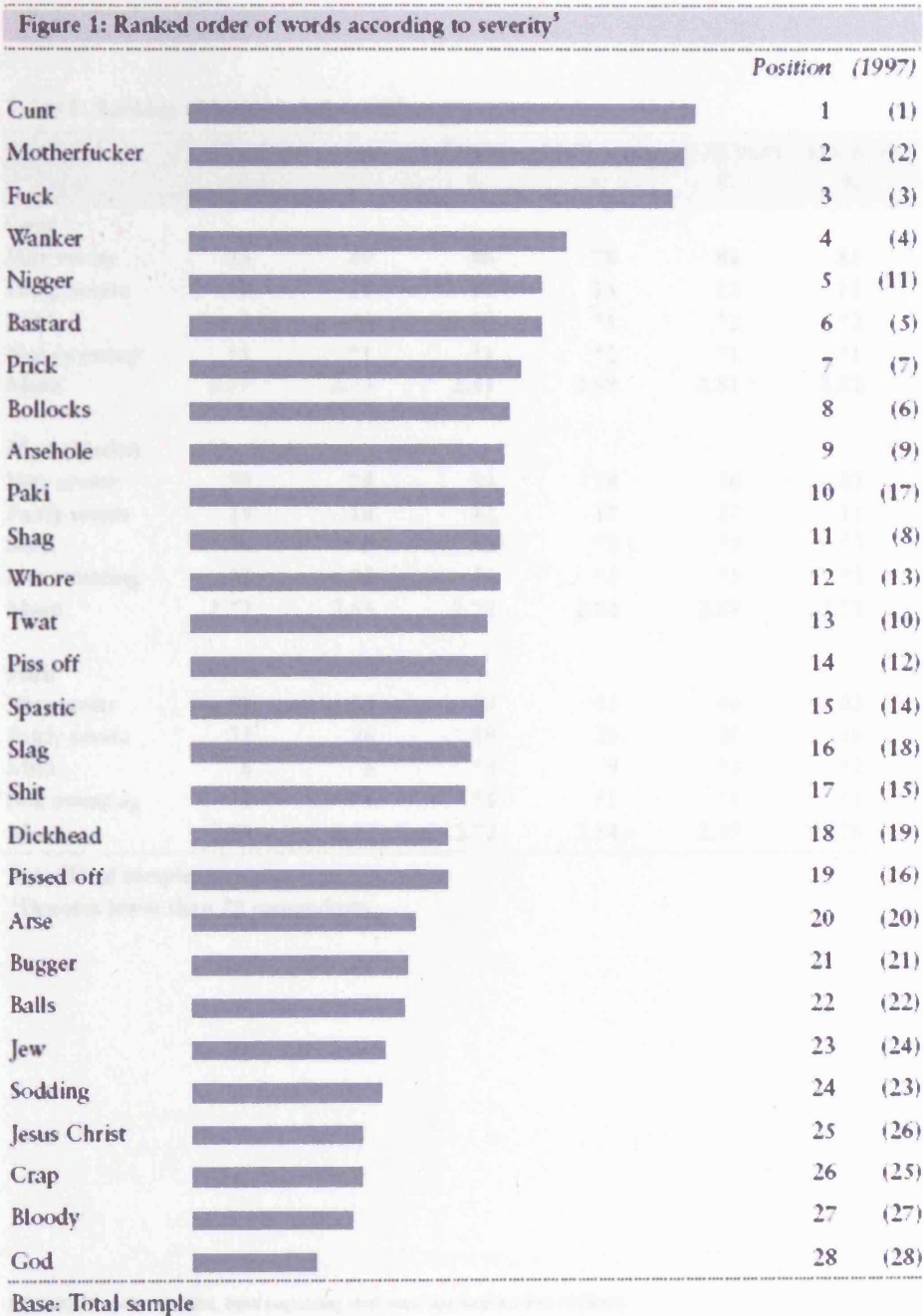
Due to its coinage by Chicago and Schapiro, the term “cunt art” is most commonly associated with West coast, American, feminist work of the late 1960s and 1970s. In addition, these contributions are most frequently associated with a feminist essentialist impulse popular at the time. My own utilisation of the term, in some respects, breaks this mold and the project as a whole refuses classification of works in terms of country and era. I will pull together performance and performative works from Europe and America in a chronological range that spans thirty years, making links and differentiating works thematically as opposed to division on purely temporal and geographical location.

With the resurgence of focus on the female genitalia courtesy of Eve Ensler and her *Vagina Monologues* (1998) that has been touring worldwide for several years, notions of demystification, education, reclamation and celebration once again become pertinent issues to feminism as political intervention and for women more widely. While sternly criticised by feminists such as Dodson, Paglia and Bright on Dodson’s Sexual Politics website forum, *The Vagina Monologues* have, similarly to *The Dinner Party* by Chicago, brought female genitalia to the fore in the public domain.⁹ While criticised by “experts,” *The Vagina Monologues* has received widespread support from women across the world mirroring the reactions across America and Europe in response to *The Dinner Party* during the 1980s.¹⁰ In these terms, while feminism mutates and evolves, not everything changes. Works in the 1990s such as Bamber’s *Untitled* series and Lesko’s *Lips* also attest to the notion that feminists are not quite finished with representations of the vulva.

⁹ See <http://www.bettydodson.com/vaginaon.htm>, <http://www.bettydodson.com/vdaysuziemono.htm> and <http://dir.salon.com/people/col/pag1/2001/02/28/bush/index.html>, page 3, for criticism of *The Vagina Monologues*.

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion of *The Dinner Party* installation, movements, problems and reactions, see Kubitza, 1996, pp.150-176.

Figure iii:



[5] Based on mean where 'very severe' = 3 and 'not swearing' = 0.

Table of most severe swear words,

Millwood-Hargrave, 2000, p.9

Figure iv:

Table 1: Ranking of 'very severe' words^a

	Total	Male	Female	18-34 years	35-54 years	55+ years
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Cunt						
Very severe	83	80	86	78	84	85
Fairly severe	13	15	11	15	13	11
Mild	3	*4	*2	*5	*2	*2
Not swearing	*1	*1	*1	*2	*1	*1
Mean	2.77	2.73	2.81	2.69	2.81	2.82
Motherfucker						
Very severe	79	74	84	78	76	83
Fairly severe	15	18	12	17	17	11
Mild	4	5	*2	*3	*5	*3
Not swearing	*2	*2	*2	*1	*1	*3
Mean	2.72	2.65	2.78	2.72	2.69	2.73
Fuck						
Very severe	71	65	76	65	66	82
Fairly severe	22	26	19	25	27	16
Mild	6	8	*3	9	*5	*2
Not swearing	*1	*1	*1	*1	*1	*1
Mean	2.64	2.55	2.72	2.54	2.59	2.78

Base: Total sample

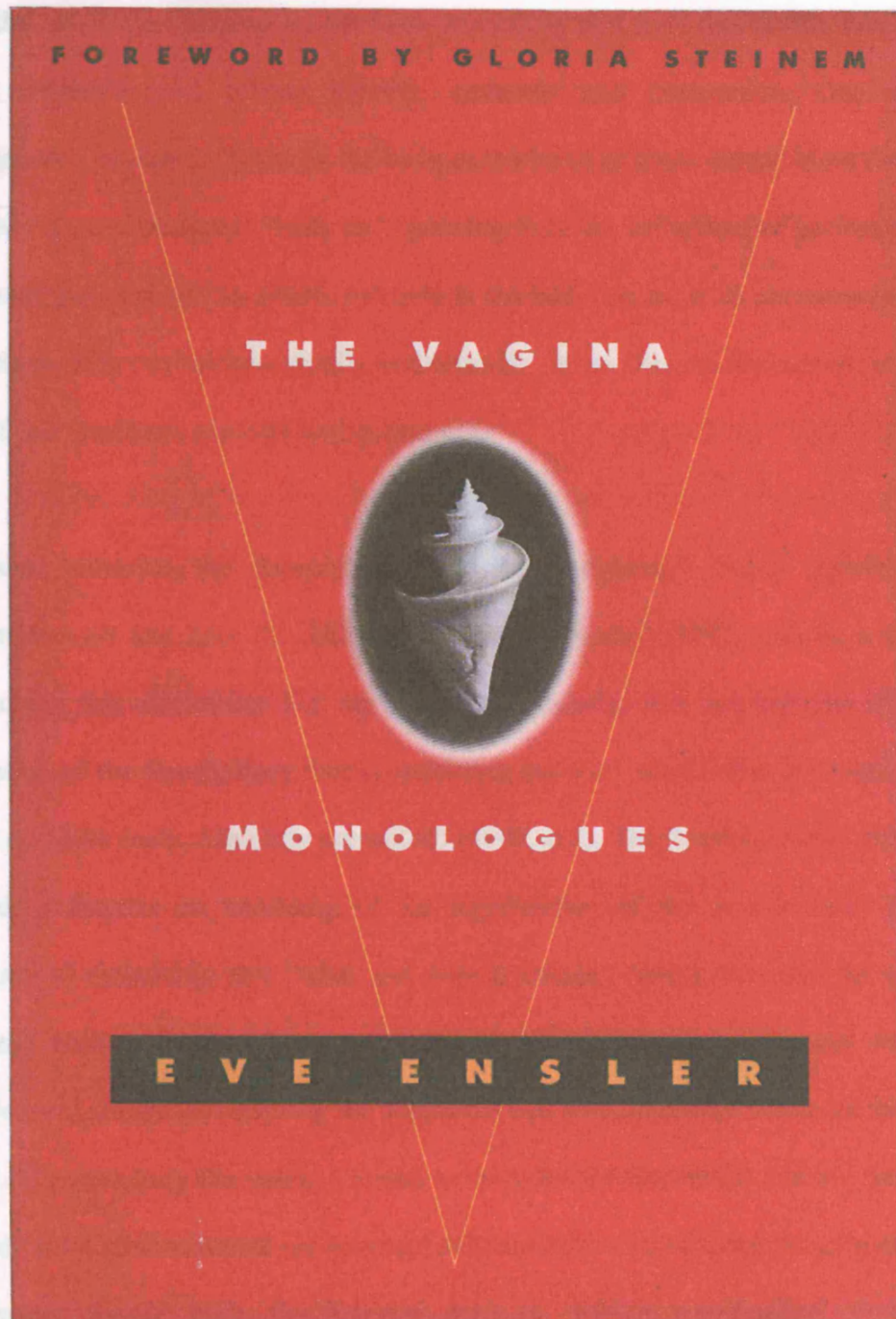
^aDenotes fewer than 25 respondents.

[6] Unless otherwise specified, those responding 'don't know' are excluded from all Tables.

Percentage opinions on swear words,

Millwood-Hargrave, 2000, p.10

Figure v:



Front cover of *The Vagina Monologues*, 1998

Source: Ensler, 1998, front cover

Body Genres:

Since the 1960s, performance art has been developing as a form that throws into question issues of public and private identity, authority and perspective. One of these developments has been a focus on the body as the locus of these issues. More than this, a separately termed category, “body art” (growing from the influences of performance and visual art), has emerged in which, not only is the body the locus of pertinent issues, but the body itself is central thematically and formally. It has become the canvas or stage on which these issues are explored and questioned.

Schneider addresses the feminist intention of “unfolding” bodily signification in performance art and uses the idea of the “explicit body” (1997, p.2) as a means of approaching this motivation. For my project particularly, it is not only the ideological explication of the female body that is important, but also what Schneider implies in her phrase as “[t]he body, explicitly presented” (1997, p.3). The “explicit body” is therefore twofold: it implies an unfolding of the signification of the female body including questions of authorship and “what and *how* it means” (ibid.), but also the explicitly presented body including the questioning of “shock value” tactics and women as primitive and sexual. In analysing the fragments that constitute expressions of the explicit body, and particularly the vulva, I intend to consider the theoretical and physical use of the body but also the tactical employment and consequences of using the genitalia of the fragmentary female body for feminist projects. Within signification, there is an implication that the body is *present*. Notions of the absence of the female in the symbolic order (see pp.107-169 and 290-347 below) or their exclusion from making meaning is challenged through the presence of the female body in these spaces within feminist

projects. The body becomes more than a sign. It becomes a tool (a *politicised* tool) for feminist appropriation and employment.

In analysing body works I have also followed Amelia Jones' focus (1998) on the body as the locus of sexualised, gendered, embodied subjectivity. I have also been influenced by Judith Butler's gender performativity (1990). Jones' approach places the body (or the "body/self"; Jones, 1998, p.13) as the main method of communication in these body works. A similar approach can be identified in Schneider's exploration of the body in feminist performance art (1997). Her advocacy of an "explicit body" that "explicate[s] bodies in social relation" (1997, p.2) focuses on the body as the tool of exploration and confrontation.

In discussing body art, following Jones' lead (1998), I must acknowledge the "enormous amount of genre mixing in intellectual life" (Geertz, 1983, p.19). Geertz not only points out the difficulty in being able to label theorists according to discipline because of the "jumbling of varieties of discourse" (1983, p.20) but also posits the difficulty in classifying works. He sees them as surrounding us, as ordered only by practical and relational qualities, and "as our purposes prompt us" (1983, p.21). My own definitions are similarly exploratory. I present a taxonomy which is more purpose bound than definitive.

Geertz's recognition of the blurring of forms is exemplified by the genres of performance art or live art where we can identify the merging of artistic disciplines. What was termed "performance art" gained acceptance as a medium of artistic expression (rather than a demonstration of conceptual art) in the 1970s (Goldberg, 1995, p.7) and is thought to have developed from traditions of cabaret and early twentieth-century art movements that

theatricalised the art event. Performance art, which gained momentum through civil rights movements characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s particularly in America and Europe, and its various denominations, such as body art, has now been subsumed into the title of “live art,” an inclusive term used by the Arts Council of Great Britain to include hybrid forms (Spackman, 2000, p.10). Amelia Jones categorises body art as emerging in the 1960s and climaxing in the 1970s (1998, p.13). However, I believe this to be a narrow and particularly Americanist way of approaching the genre. It advocates the perspective that body art, as a category or genre, was specific to particular artists working in a specific country during an exact time span.

This opinion, evidenced in the work of contemporary critics who labelled the work of artists such as Schneemann as body art, misrepresents body art practices. In suggesting the climax of body art occurred during the 1970s, Jones does not deny the continuation of body art but implies that the most influential body art was created during this decade. I would not deny that provocative work between 1960 and 1980 has had a massive impact on work made since but would propose that successful body art has been created in the last twenty years. In addition, Jones’ position gives us an exact tradition and specific history (albeit American) on which to base and develop our concepts of body art.

Evidence of ongoing body art practices was supplied by the *South Bank Show* (1999). Melvin Bragg introduced artists Ron Athey, Fakir Musafar, Franko B. and Orlan in an episode dedicated to body art. While this programme centred on the somewhat limited idea that body art is about body mutilation and modification or fluids, it supported the idea that body art is still very much a working genre in the twenty-first century. Indeed, Robert Ayers points to a resurgence of body-centred works referring to them as

“contemporary body art” (2001, p.32).

Body art, as a denomination or category of live art can therefore be understood as work that uses the body as its main means of communication. It can, as suggested above, involve actual modification of the body, but can also be characterised as work that uses the body as a canvas for the explication of opinions, beliefs and questions.¹¹ This may suggest that ideology (the mind) is expressed corporeally (the body) and so the body is legitimised by the mind. This division exemplifying the mind/body dichotomy, however, (tackled in Chapter 5, Disruptive Bodies Part Three: Feminist Iconoclasm) though a discussion of Descartes and Merleau-Ponty) is tempered by the approach that is advocated by, inter alia Amelia Jones (1998) and Judith Butler (1993), on the embodied subject. I approach body art fundamentally as the communication of an embodied experience of the world so that when we identify body works as expressing ideology, this ideology is necessarily corporeally grounded.

Also relevant are body art as a documented art practice and the documentation process as an artistic phenomenon in itself. As Jones (1998) points out, the category of performance art at once provides an all too wide *and* narrow conception. The writers who first used the term “body art” were distinguishing these works from the theatricalisation of art inherent in broad definitions of performance art (Jones, 1998, p.13) and Jones avoids the *restrictive* description of performance art that implicitly characterises a body of spectators as a fundamental requirement of the piece (ibid.). Like Jones, I class body works as performance art that does not necessarily require an audience, but can also be viewed through images and documentation.

¹¹ The body as a canvas includes the notions that the body is not only the source of ideas expressed but it is also the medium by which these ideas are realised.

This is particularly appropriate given the limitation of this study to the here and now. Many of the works I approach were performed before deciding to undertake this study (in some cases, as many as thirty years previously) but are still open to interpretation owing to the documentation of those who were present. I must acknowledge, however, the drawbacks of this approach. It is easy to be influenced by the descriptions and responses of others who have written about the pieces I shall include (where the pieces are not specifically documented by the artists themselves). In addition, it is easy to be influenced by the intentions of the artist (where there is direct documentation, preceding or proceeding from the creative process) and to assume the artist has been successful.

These limitations are not easily laid to rest but while I rely on my own perspective to inform my interpretation of a live event or image, I must rely to a certain extent on my own reading of the validity of text written about a body art work or photographic documentation of the piece. This is a point raised by Jones in her consideration of art works in relation to Kantian universal and disinterested judgements (1999, p. 51) and is reinforced by the idea of “interpretation-as-exchange” advocated by Jones in her earlier work (1998, p.9). Interestingly, Laurie Anderson (in her foreword to Goldberg’s *Performance*) proposes that because of the ephemerality of live art, “representing this work as text and images becomes an act of imagination” (1998, p.6) suggesting an active and involved role in the interpretation of documentation. I also view the category of “body art” as subsuming those works that, like photographic documentation, photography and painting, represent the body for the purpose of communicating specifically feminist ideas and issues.

And while these categories define the respect and “legitimacy” applied to the work within these categories, theoretical tendencies over the last two decades have questioned any easy classification of genres or types of discourse. As performance art has witnessed a merging of forms (for example, performance and visual art) and even the collision of terms (such as the performative interpretation of visual art and the body as the canvas in performance art), so cunt art is a “category” of body art which encompasses different media and forms.

I will approach cunt art as a genre of body art that uses the body as locus thematically and formally but within this summary I am drawn to the complication of the actual body and the body represented. The issue of the variety of media employed necessarily is implicated within this. I will explore the works within the genre of cunt art as a combination of the employment of the body as medium and theme; in some examples as the literal medium of communication and in other examples, as representing the body through sculpture, painting or photography. With this combination of types of body focus and the variety of media employed in mind, it is essential to consider the performativity of these works which is where I will travel to next.

Performing Meaning:

During the process of this research I have been aware of the shift that still exists between discussions of visual art works and performance-based works, even in the context of the more inclusive “live art” categorisation. In linking cunt art works under consideration in this project, I have drawn on explorations of performativity as a framework for making meaning and active interpretation. This is relevant not only in terms of performing meaning but also in figurations of spectatorial engagement. The performative, essentially, is that which performs meaning and actively communicates *to* and *through* the viewer. Performativity refuses a disinterested, effectively disembodied, perspective to viewing but does to some degree insists on the metonymical and polysemic nature of any work. If the performative allows for the interpretation of the artistic production by an actively engaged spectator, then a degree of negotiation becomes available in the interpretative process.

Theorisations of performativity vary greatly as pointed out by Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1995, pp.2-3) and Richard Schechner (2002, p.110). According to poststructuralist developments of Austin’s “performative” theory of language, all cultural presentations and social practices are performative: all systems of power and enactments of identity are performative. Judith Butler proposes that gender is “performed” and while formats of masculinity and femininity are derived from set patterns, each man and woman (the social constructions based on biological formations) performs their gender role with some individual interpretation while still operating within the realms of “acceptable” variations (see Schechner, 2002, p.131; Butler, 1990, p.25).

These constructed norms maintain the stability of the phallogentric system and deviations from conventional constructions create alienation and refusal. Schechner upholds that such “deviations” result in the personal as political, owing to their disruption of systems (2002, p.132). And so the impact of a poststructuralist decentring of the hegemony of the phallogentric system allows for the questioning of the fixity and stability of current notions, not only of gender roles but also of the construction of social practices more widely.

According to Derrida’s notion of *différance*, meanings are not fixed or eternal. As Schechner points out, for Derrida, “[m]eaning is always performed: always in rehearsal, its finality forever deferred, its actuality only provisional, played out in specific circumstances” (2002, p.127). This leads to two avenues of investigation. Firstly, I need to consider the impact of provisionality of works that are to be analysed in this project. Secondly, I would also like to consider the performance of meaning with reference to the interpretative process via Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (1999).

In the previous section, I visited the problems involved in studying performances from documentation alone. While the benefits of viewing work first-hand are obvious, there is still value in approaching early work from a more distanced position otherwise performance becomes so transitory and transient that no scholar could claim to reflect upon a performance; indeed no work could be said to have affect beyond its first “original” happening. Also, unless the position of the researcher is recognised, the futility of any historical account becomes evident. This difficulty adds to the partial incongruence of performance theory and practice. The passage of time involved in viewing and writing poses boundaries that some find problematic.

Geraldine Harris highlights the problems between theory and practice and the dislocation between writing about a performance and the performance itself, commenting on the “translation from one sort of ‘language’ or set of codes to another” (1999, p.4). She continues to explicate the difficulties of such performative boundaries:

...any interpretation will always be mediated both through the subjectivity of the spectator and the form the record takes. It is not possible therefore to produce an objective or definitive reflection of the event, since ultimately all such accounts are selective, partial and impure (1999, pp.4-5).

The activity of my criticism is therefore complicated. Not only are many of the works distant from my current position, and were played on stages prior to this project, but I also have to recognise the subjectivity and partiality of the accounts that I base my reflections on.

This situation is further problematised by the Derridean sense of meaning as a rehearsal, as never fixed. Meanings performed thirty years ago may not be the exact meanings that I interact with now. So while I was absent from the event, I was also absent from the context of that event. Both my reading of the piece and the contextual creation and reception of the piece have to be guided, to a certain extent, consequently by documentation. And where there are alternative meanings derived from my position, are these meanings valid or relevant? Where are the boundaries? Are there any?

That works can continue to make meaning is not disputed, particularly in the realm of visual art, but live art can consist of elements that are temporally and spatially specific. Am I entitled to view the documentation and make my own interpretation in the contemporary climate? The answer has to lie in a reliance on accounts and reviews of the time of production and reception, but I must also rely on the performativity of any

secondary source. Any account or image performs meaning and it seems only logical that any author of an account or image (even if done so purely for posterity) must recognise the consistency of their “artifact” to do so, ten, twenty or thirty years after the event. Any account or image has in a sense *become* the event that performs in its own right, with its own context. This brings with it its own problems.

The issue these questions raise is the legitimacy of the historical aspect of this investigation. While it is essential to consider the works in this project in the context in which they were made, it is important to recognise that cunt art as a genre spans forty years and that a particular mode of viewing positions the researcher as a surveyor of this rich and intriguing history. For example, my individual perspective not only includes my position as a white, female, feminist academic in her twenties, but also my historical position at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In considering the spectatorial role in more detail, I am interested in the developments that have been proposed by Jones and Stephenson in terms of the viewer’s engagement with artistic products and an interpretative process that challenges classification of the artistic *product*. Jones and Stephenson suggest that visual art as a category has extended to incorporate a variety of media and hence, argue that a reassessment of ways of constructing meaning is essential in order to recognise different modes of reading work.

They promote interpretation as a performative process, rather than a disinterested, universal act, that involves embodied engagement with the processes of artistic production (1999, pp.1-2). Interpretation, for Jones and Stephenson, becomes an exchange or negotiation (1999, p.3). Thus they introduce performative engagement:

As classed, raced, sexed and gender (fully socialized and embodied) subjects, both artist and interpreter are imbricated within any potential determinations of meaning. The notion of the performative highlights the open-endedness of interpretation, which must thus be understood as a *process* rather than an act with a final goal... (1994, p.1).

There is an inherent interaction between the creator and the work, and the viewer and the viewed. This works not only because of the “fully socialized and embodied” performativity of the artist/spectator but also because of the polysemic exchange of meaning from, through and to the work in question; to, through and from the interpreter. Hence, the spaces that exist between considering visual art and performance-based works can be narrowed if the investigation focuses on the performance of meaning and the interactive engagement involved in live art. What follows accordingly considers how and why cunt art performs meanings and the cause and effect of these meanings in a wider social, cultural and historical context.

Contributions and Influences/Theory and Practice:

The late 1980s and 1990s brought with them a trend of analysing performance with “-ologies,” for example, sociology, psychology and semiology (Aston and Savona, 1991; Fischer-Lichte, 1992; Read, 1995; and Carlson, 1996). Emphasis has also been placed on discussions of identity, gender and sexuality in performance along with a growth in theory discussing the politics of resistance and postmodernism (see, inter alia, Birringer, 1991; Senelick, 1992; Kaye, 1994; Campbell, 1996; and Phelan, 2001). This trend has followed an increase in “new” disciplines such as gender and queer studies. Performance has been aligned with various other academic discourses and has benefited from these explorations.

An important development in performance theory has been a focus on the body (Steinman (1986), Schneider (1997) and Jones (1998) and notably in other disciplines, Butler (1993) and Grosz (1994)), rectifying the lack of body-based social and cultural theory in earlier works as is necessary in an art-form that bases much of its work on the body. All of these works have had a tremendous impact on this project. In addition, during the 1990s there has been a great deal of reflection on body art from the 1970s onwards exemplified by Jones (1998) and Goldberg (1998). We have seen a process of academic legitimization for such performance works that have previously been considered radical, extreme or egocentric, eccentric and frivolous, or alternatively, pornographic.

While many feminist theorists have commented on the lack of body focus by philosophers and sociologists alike (Brook, 1999; Grosz, 1994), from the 1990s onwards we have witnessed a surge in interest concerning the body as the site of experience, subjectivity,

sexual difference and desire. This return to the body signifies a refusal of previous feminist avoidance. As Elizabeth Grosz writes, “feminists have tended to remain wary of any attempts to link women’s subjectivities and social positions to the specificities of their bodies” (1994, p.x). Reflected in this statement is a feminist mistrust of the body or a denial of anything corporeally grounded. It is easy to explain this wariness of the body due to the traditional alignments that have justified the subordination of women.

But it is not only in feminist theory that we see an emphasis on the body developing in the 1990s. As Robert Ayers points out in his article titled “The Eloquent Body” (2001, pp.30-35), the past four years have seen a resurgence of body-centred practice in performance art. What Ayers calls “contemporary body art” or “new body art” (2001, p.32) brings with it an interest in the body as the terrain but while some of the strategies of the late 1960s and 1970s remain, there is the assumption that things have changed. The recurring theme of female genitalia, however, still remains as a disruptive reminder of the persistence of some feminist strategies.

Steinman (*The Knowing Body*, 1986) has focused on the performing body as the key to self-knowledge, while Schneider (*The Explicit Body in Performance*, 1997) approaches depictions of the body in feminist performance art and the cultural issues and critical theories that these works face and purposefully employ. Schneider, Butler (*Bodies That Matter*, 1993) and Grosz (*Volatile Bodies*, 1994) have been influential in the formation of this project and have promoted an academic perspective not least of all recommending theories of embodied subjectivity (stressing the body as fundamental and a re-writing of Cartesian dualism) but also in inspiring a multi-disciplined approach to writing about the

body which I utilise in this project and have highlighted already in my discussions of transdisciplinarity.

Throughout this project, I have found myself returning frequently to the work of Luce Irigaray (*This Sex Which Is Not One*, 1996) and the work of Rosi Braidotti (*Nomadic Subjects*, 1994). Both have influentially informed my thinking through notions of patriarchal systems and possibilities for theoretical departure. Irigaray's writings on the economy of the Same and women's exclusion from the symbolic order have aided my understanding, in particular, with regard to why artists and performers have been so persistent in their motivation to express difference. Braidotti, similarly, has enabled me to think through what she refers to as the "political fiction" inherent in theoretical frameworks and within regulatory phallogentric systems. Equally, both have shown me the possibilities or spaces that feminism can utilise for political effect.

Another influential text has been Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson's *Performing the Subject: Performing the Text* (1999) whose editorial intention is to provide an anthology of different approaches to the performativity of the art object and the critical subject, and to explore how meaning takes place through the performativity of visual art. It explores different models of reading and regards interpretation as a process as opposed to an act. This performativity of interpretation forms a two-pronged approach to the material alongside the performativity of the body in representation.

Jones' article "Art History/Art Criticism: Performing Meaning" (1999, pp.39-55) in this anthology presents the reader with a coherent analysis of the embodied object, spectatorial engagement with the art/performance work, and the involvement of

spectatorial desire in opposition to the Kantian framework of disinterestedness. In addition, Jones promotes the body, not only as the canvas for artists, but also as the site of reading a work of art. Through Jones' acknowledgement of the model of "othering" that Kantian philosophy produces, we could suggest that body art, in particular, disrupts the Kantian model and traditional art criticism in the interpretative (and performative) structures it encourages. While Jones points to the body as the spectatorial site of interpretation, she also writes about the "coextensiveness of the carnal and the cognitive" (1999, p.50) and the intersubjective engagement involved in approaching a work of art. She writes, "[w]hy would it be a bad...thing to admit that we engage actively with this flesh of the world through our own embodied perceptual apparatus?" (1999, p.48). In emphasizing the body/self as a unitary concept throughout her article, Jones goes some way to remedying the mind/body dichotomy that plagues the body and feminist discourse.

For others, the duality that is debated and invoked by a body-based practice is considered less and emphasis, instead, is placed on the physical state and themes that arise from body art. Ayers claims that new body art is concerned with the "physical vulnerability" of the artist (2001, p.32) in contrast to a defiantly strong body or a decisively fragmented body witnessed in some feminist body art of the 1960s and 1970s. While I would assert that some of the most infamous new body works centre on the apparent fragility of the body, for example Franko B's leaking body, Orlan's modified body and Ron Athey's quasi-religious body, many works seem to be concentrating on bringing the inside out. In Grosz's terms (1994), the metaphor being drawn on is perhaps best expressed interior as exterior or interiority as external. In this light we can draw parallels between the 1990s resurgence of the body in theory and recent live art practices.

As Susan Kandel points out, feminist artistic production includes many artists who “choose to dissolve the fetishized surface of the female body in order to reveal the traces of its interior” (1996, p.196). She points to Judie Bamber and Zoe Leonard as examples of this approach. However, I would suggest that this evocation of the interior was a ploy of earlier feminist body art such as Judy Chicago’s *Red Flag* (1971) and Carolee Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* (1975). While Ayers’ focus on physical vulnerability may be an apt example of changing motifs in body art, there are themes that appear in new body art that were common in the 1960s and 1970s.

In terms of this project, the most influential text that I have encountered has been *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, edited by Amelia Jones. *Sexual Politics...* is a catalogue (in association with the exhibition of the same name, organised by UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, Los Angeles, California in 1996) that contextualises feminist art and discusses the historical and cultural background of the works included, alongside the theoretical influences on and intentions of the production and reception of the feminist art exhibited and included in the catalogue.¹²

The book itself realises (makes real) the necessary trend of theorising art. The exhibition itself is not the end. It becomes a means to an end. This format of exhibition-and-theorisation simultaneously coheres to provide context and assessment but also serves to emphasise that feminist art must be theorised in both production and interpretation. This format exemplifies the fine line that exists between feminist live art and the motivations

¹² Many of the pieces in the exhibition can be categorised as examples of cunt art, and those that are not cunt art works question gender identity, construction and role, and female experience, issues common to vulvar and vaginal images and actions.

and intentions of the work. In feminist art there is a necessary relationship between the product and the political; between art and theory.

Jones outlines the meanings of *The Dinner Party* in terms of criticism and praise applied to the work.¹³ While the main criticisms of the piece claim the work as pornographic, essentialist, reductionist, and guilty of marginalising race and sexual orientation - criticisms common to many cunt art works - positive responses include readings that the piece is celebratory, challenging and aims at the reclamation of women's experiences, achievements and pleasures. Jones proposes that we find alternative readings to essentialist criticisms not only in application to Chicago's work but also in the light of numerous other pieces by other artists that use vaginal and vulvar imagery to communicate feminist intentions (1996a, p.25).

Sexual Politics serves to discuss the issues involved in cunt images (among other feminist art techniques) such as Chicago's use of "central-core imagery" (a term coined and used by Chicago) with the intention of what it is like "to be organized around a central core, my vagina, that which made me a woman" (Chicago, 1977, p.55). Susan Kandel translates this as "the labile mechanism by which the truth of the feminine can be located" (1996, p.187).¹⁴ In addition, Jones and other contributors (1996) discuss the approaches characterising developments in feminist art practice. In evaluating the successes and

¹³ The monumentality of the project and resulting marginalisation of other works has been problematic for many feminists (see Jones, 1996a, p.24). As perhaps the most infamous example of cunt art, *The Dinner Party* can also be seen as marginalizing other labial works or blinding critics to other pieces due to this notoriety. In defence of the exhibition and catalogue against feminist allegations of monumentalising Chicago's *Dinner Party* further, Jones makes clear that the exhibition was about a re-evaluation of the piece within the context of feminist art, emphasising that *The Dinner Party* was not an isolated event and is inextricably linked to work that had been created before, during and after the fact (1996a, pp.20-38).

¹⁴ This can be construed as an essentialist position, which can be seen as problematic. Issues of essentialising femininity and female experience will be discussed later in this project, particularly in Chapter 2 Homeless Bodies but also in Chapter 6 Mythical Bodies.

shortcomings of vulvar and vaginal images and actions, characteristics and trends of feminist work must be considered in order to judge the works in context and in order to consider contemporary works that employ similar tactics.

The goal of re-writing history has been influential for many feminist artists (Jones, 1996a, p.33). What Jones calls the “revisionary impulse of the 1970s” (1996a, p.34) meant that work created revolved around remedying the exclusion of women from patriarchal history by foregrounding female experience, eroticism and subjecthood. The lack of recognition of female experience and desire in androcentrism has been a central concern within feminism since the 1960s and while female sexuality and pleasure, and their reclamation, were of principal interest to feminist artists of the 1970s, and re-emerged in the 1990s challenging the male “wisdom” in constructions of female eroticism (Jones, 1996a, p.33), the trend of 1980s feminism was rather to critique male pleasure and the “male gaze” (Jones, 1996a, p.28 and p.32).

In addition, while feminist art of the 1960s and 1970s offered alternative images of women that sought to replace misogynistic and objectifying representations with positive and celebratory readings (Jones, 1996a, p.27), the 1980s brought with it a rejection of this approach by many feminists artists in favour of direct critique of the (male) tools by which this objectification worked (Jones, 1996a, p.28). With this rejection of earlier approaches came the criticism and re-invention of the unified woman; the collective concentration became an individual concern. This system of critiquing the male gaze, common to the 1980s, could also be a reflection of the wariness of the female body that Grosz identifies (1994, p.x) as the approach characterised is one of focusing on deconstructing the universal male perspective but not on developing a female alternative.

Although there is much disparity between approaches, we can identify key concerns at different periods of feminist development reflected in the performances produced. The exploration of the erotic and female eroticism, however, has remained a key motivation for feminists throughout (Jones, 1996a, p.32). In addition to the characteristic concern of contesting male constructions of female pleasure, feminists in the 1990s have “expanded eroticism beyond the dualistic struggles of conventionally viewed subject-object relationships” (Jones, 1996a, p.33). In the new millennium this concentration remains, as exemplified by MacGregor’s *Scarlett’s Story: Part 1* (2001) (see Fig. vi), but further to this, the explosion of binaries and promotion of alternative ways of seeing continue to develop the “dualistic struggles” of many conventional assumptions.

This idea is most evident as a development popular in the 1990s. Expanding on corporeal feminism, Grosz (1994) works towards finding alternatives to the dualistic approach to subject/object and mind/body. The feminist inquiry relevant here is Grosz’s examination of a corporeal-based subjectivity. A more recent exploration of this poststructuralist tendency is Jones’ adherence, in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998), to an embodied subjectivity and further (and more recently) still, Jones (1999) promotes the re-reading of Kant through an embodied and individual engagement of the spectator with the artistic product. We can identify recognition of embodied subjectivity as performer/artist and spectator.

In addition to the feminist motif of the erotic, common to work from the 1960s to 2000 onwards, the use of vulvar and vaginal images in feminist art began as early as 1960 (Jones, 1996a, p.25) and we can identify a more general utilisation of female fragments in

feminist artistic practice. When the iconic female fragment is the vulva, however, this fragmentation incurs criticism from numerous sources. Among the most notable feminist critics to acknowledge the dangers of cunt art is Griselda Pollock. She writes:

The appropriation of woman as body in all forms of representation has spawned within the women's movement a consistent attempt to decolonise the female body, a tendency which walks a tightrope between subversion and reappropriation, and often serves rather to consolidate the potency of the signification rather than actually to rupture it (1987, p.135).

She continues, “[m]uch of this attempt has focused on a kind of body imagery and an affirmative exposure of female sexuality through a celebratory imagery of female genitals” (ibid.). Here, the assessment is that genital imagery is motivated by the desire to decolonise the female body.

While Pollock points out the risks inherent in cunt artists' attempts to successfully contest the colonisation of the female body, Lisa Tickner, viewing the female body as “occupied territory in both culture and nature” (1987, p.266), sees genital imagery as parallel to the reclamation of female sexual identity (1987, p.270). In discussing what she terms as vaginal iconology, she suggests that vulvar and vaginal imagery can only be successful where the tactic of omitting the vulva has been a tool to de-sexualise women and a means of fetishisation. This suggests that cunt art is a disruptive tool that challenges the structures that maintain the fetish that displaces the foreclosure of the female lack.

Roswitha Mueller (1994), in discussing Valie Export's Expanded Cinema pieces (including her 1969 work *Action Pants: Genital Panic*), notes that “the spectator's interest is locked in through the promise of disclosure of the forbidden... [which] revolves around the body of the woman, more specifically her breasts and genitals” (1994, p.15). Similarly, Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975) presents “an erotically charged narrative

of pleasure that challenges the fetishistic and scopophilic “male gaze”...” (Jones, 1998, p.3). In these terms, Tickner’s “ultimatum” of success places cunt art as achieving the intentions that motivated their creation.

According to Rebecca Schneider, Carolee Schneemann was one of the first artists to use her own body “as primary visual and visceral terrain” (1997, p.33) and as a politicised expression of a private self. This initial focus on Schneemann is important to this project for four reasons. Firstly, Schneemann’s idea of “flesh as material” (ibid.) and secondly her use of what Schneider calls the “physical entry” (ibid.) of the body into art for feminist communication are ideas that are relevant to the topic of cunt art. Thirdly, Schneemann’s work also involves the complex set of ideas that surround all body art, such as the dichotomies of subject/object and mind/body, which are pertinent to this thesis. Lastly, her work exemplifies the blurring of categories, performance art, visual art and live art, which merge to form the practice of body art and which will, when discussed, continue to define the terms involved in this project.

These ideas are particular to body art and pervade cunt art as a genre that similarly uses the literal, metaphoric and symbolic body to convey political messages.¹⁵ By using the flesh as an artistic medium, the artists involved purposefully abandon the representational body for a real, thinking, feeling, but importantly questioning and rewriteable body that cannot be ignored by the spectator. Involved in this reading, the viewers find themselves engaging with another body. The viewer’s own body becomes entwined with their interpretation of the piece. In cunt art, the taboo subject matter reinforces the private-made-public into a startling package that forces the viewer to be involved in reading the

¹⁵ Here, I am referring to the inclusion of the artist’s body in many of the works discussed, the inclusion of abstractions and implications of the female body in some cunt art works, and the semiotic signification of the representations on offer in terms of making meaning and challenging traditional associations.

work. Even in those pieces where a real “live” body is not present, the strength of cunt art is in the strength of response that this part of the body can receive.¹⁶

In performance forms, specifically, we can identify artists’ analysis of the body and increased focus on the body in their work. From the 1960s onwards many feminist performance artists began using their bodies (and representations of women’s bodies) as the canvas for their work and as a site for the disruption of social assumptions, for example, Carolee Schneemann in *Eye/Body* (1963) and *Interior Scroll* (1975), Judy Chicago’s *Red Flag* (1971), and more recently, Orlan in *Omnipresence* (1993), Cathy MacGregor in *Catholic Sex* in (2000) and *Scarlett’s Story: Part 1* (2001).

But the intentions from the 1960s onwards were not only that the body be the scene for critique, but also that the body be seen and made visible. In employing the body as a canvas, the body is made present. In *The Dinner Party* (1979), Judy Chicago highlighted the lives, stories and experiences of women from primordial goddess to Sappho to Georgia O’Keeffe.¹⁷ Many artists’ concentrated on making visible the bodily construction, bodily functions and role assignments of women, for example, Lynn Hershman and Roberta Brightmore’s *Construction Chart* (1973) (see Fig. 1i) that highlighted the almost surgical making up of the female face, Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (1974-79) that focused on the woman’s role as mother and its validity as a subject matter, and the Womanhouse projects including the installations *Menstruation*

¹⁶ The term “live” here denotes a body that is “alive” in the bio-medical sense of the word. However, it is worth pointing out that the “live” body, as a body that if performed there and then, is present in all examples of body art in some senses by way of interactive interpretation. Here, the body is represented, actual or facsimile, performs live for the viewer (performatively) and the body of the spectator is implicated in the process of viewing.

¹⁷ It is worth noting, however, that criticisms of the implicitly white and heterosexual emphasis of *The Dinner Party* have been made, claiming the exclusion or ignorant portrayal of issues race and sexuality within the piece (see Jones, 1996b, pp.100-103 for a fuller exploration of these objections).

Bathroom (1972, recreated in 1995) by Chicago and *Nurturant Kitchen* (1972) by Susan Frazier, Vicki Hodgetts and Robin Weltsh. All of these works focus in some way on the body and point towards the feminist unrest with the cultural assumptions and limitations of the male dominated and patriarchally defined female body. These examples also provide the backdrop for cunt art.

While the context of cunt art is important, I have chosen for the most part to discuss works as they are related thematically or aesthetically. In this project, the works are not grouped according to chronological positioning or geographical location. While the choice to group according to notions related to the work as opposed to eras or countries of origin may be queried, my decision is based on my prioritization of exploring the genre as a spectator of the twenty-first century. Reactions and intentions in context have been important during the course of this project and have been taken into account throughout my research, but I have also found that the objections that existed to a 1979 exhibition of Chicago's *Dinner Party* or the availability of Annie Sprinkle's recorded work are not vastly different today than on first viewing. In terms of feminist critique, many of the views expressed by Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker in the 1980s, for example, of the inadequacy of such imagery, have not changed. The reason for this stasis is perhaps that the subject has become buried, the motifs less common, the scandal re-diverted.

As a strategy of feminist movements, cunt art can be seen within a diverse range of approaches. It is possible, however, to trace the development of common motifs that differ dependent on cultural contexts. While Kubitza points out the parallels between American and European feminist art movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, citing the British and German women's movements embracing of gender differences, both

European feminist practices deviate from American developments after this era. As Kubitza identifies, the women's art movement in Great Britain developed a focus on socialist politics and an interest in psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theory, while German feminism progressed from the influence of American and French feminism to a split between a rejection of patriarchal systems and a position that judged the interventions of the former group as recuperable to patriarchy.

While the integration of feminist movements with feminist art in America can be identified, for European feminism the division between feminist and artist is, according to Kubitza, more pronounced. As Kubitza writes, "[t]he notion that an interest in art would be read as a depoliticization of the feminist movement still prevails in Europe today" (1996, p.152). Although noting British feminism as an anomaly to this rule, art has not become the integral part of feminism that it holds in its American counterpart.

Kubitza also recognizes the resistance of European feminists and feminist artists to categorise themselves. Ironically, Kubitza summarises Valie Export's manifesto concerning European feminists as "...those who 'do' politics and those who 'do' art..." (1996, p.151). While effectively supporting her own analysis of lack of artistic and feminism integration in Europe, this "profound split" (ibid.) that Kubitza claims is rife in European feminism is not exemplified in Export's practice. However, as part of Export's manifesto, it does attest to Export's own anomalous activities within the context of European feminism and is clearly highlighted by Kubitza as "a boldness that was, and still is, an exception" (1996, p.152).

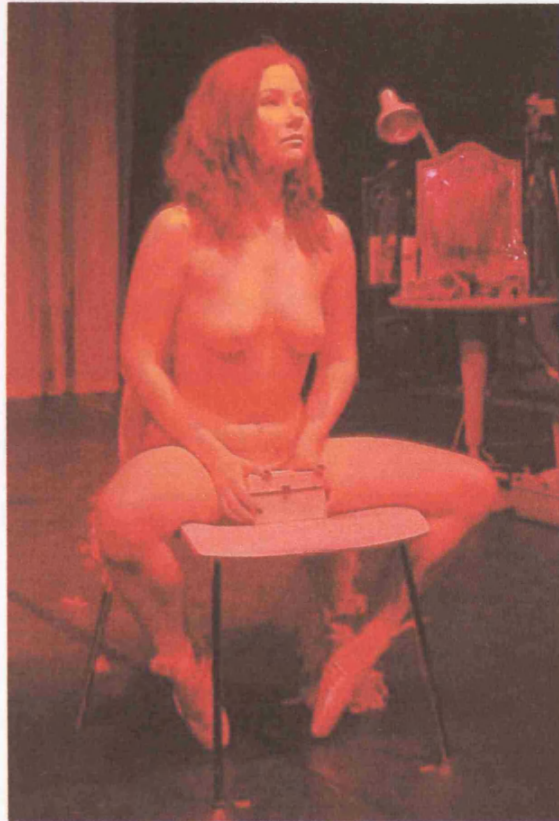
Most of the works that will be explored in this thesis are American in origin. The reasons

could well be the contextual currents that have allowed cunt art to flourish, such as tight feminist and artistic communities, a small but well-recognised sexual education and workshop initiative and a solid background of relatively well-known feminist artists such as Chicago and Schneemann who have been explicit in their intent and political motivation. I have, however, attempted to analyse a nearly-all-American project with European feminist theory and performance theory as well as theory from the United States.

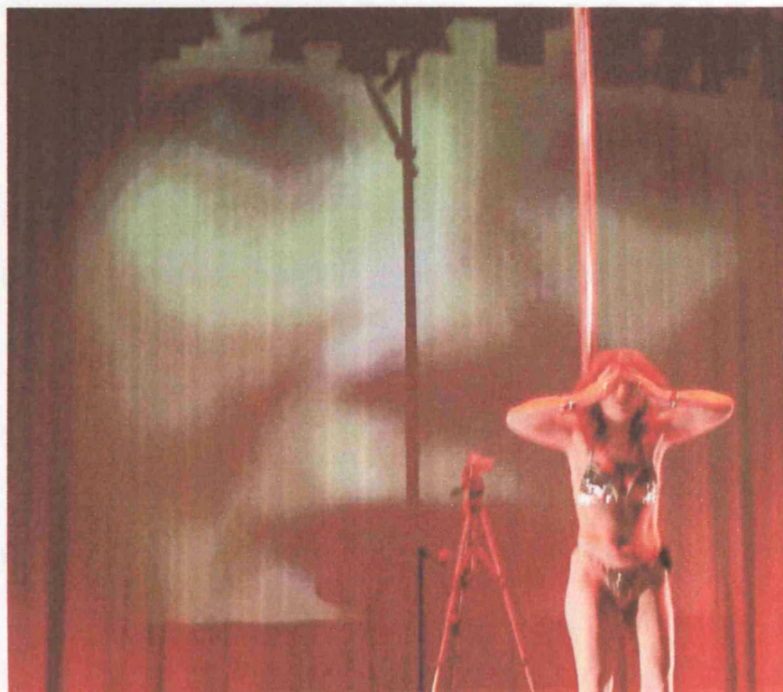
Export is the main European contributor in this thesis. Far from embodying European feminist movements of the time, Export provides a rare deviation from this context. As emblematic of a typically 1980s brand of feminist critique of male viewing mechanisms - strangely anachronistic and ironically centred on the body that later would be avoided – Export's Expanded Cinema pieces, in particular, break the mold of European feminism but also show impressive forward thinking in her comments on the male gaze.

The collection of works that I have brought together for this project may seem to be diverse in methods and approaches employed but, as indicated at the start of this thesis, fall into the category of cunt art. This fundamental amalgamation into one category can, like most individual projects, be questioned and challenged. In justification of my choices, I have grouped a diverse range of works according to their employment of the female genitalia and representations of this part of the female body. I have taken the decision to group these works together under the heading of “cunt art” to explicitly refer to a motif, a recurrent emblem, that through diverse methodologies these examples work towards a common political goal; that of feminist intervention and patriarchal disruption.

Figure vi:



Source:
<<http://www.catherinemacgregor.com/sstory-astr1.html>>



Cathy MacGregor, *Scarlett's Story: Part 1*, 2001

Source: <<http://www.catherinemacgregor.com/sstory-astr2.html>>

CHAPTER 1:
DISRUPTIVE BODIES
PART I
CULTURAL ICONOCLASM

The works explored in this thesis have more than a recurrent emblem or political goal in common. They are all iconoclastic in that they challenge patriarchal rules of what can and should be represented. This chapter is Part One of three that will deal with the iconoclasm of cunt art. All three chapters deal with cunt art as legally “obscene,” “indecent” or inappropriate; as disruptive of the phallocentric system. Rather than claiming disruption to patriarchy, I am intentionally focusing on the phallocentric regime as one that prioritises and upholds the primacy of the phallus and the Laws of the Father that this implies. This model of control performs an exclusion of the female and of the vocalisation of female experience, and minimises exposure of the marker of the female sex. Through systems of fetishisation and direct prohibition of the vulva via legal reasoning, the phallocentricity of Western culture protects the hegemony of this system from disruption and danger.

Due to accusations of obscenity, it can be surmised that cunt art has been regarded as inappropriate and indecent. As such, cunt art is seen by many critics as illegitimate. Disruptive Bodies Parts One, Two and Three will explore this illegitimacy through i) cultural, ii) artistic and iii) feminist perspectives. In these sections I will explore cunt art as diverging from conventional representations and as iconoclastic to the codes that dictate the representation of women’s bodies in cultural, artistic and feminist domains. This chapter will explore the cultural iconoclasm of cunt art and how these representations contravene cultural notions of women’s genitalia by their exposure. I will explore the cultural illegitimacy of cunt art as a reflection of the cultural view and devaluation of the female body.

The second part of Disruptive Bodies will consider the artistic iconoclasm inherent in cunt art in a quest to identify the traditional concepts that these works challenge and disrupt. Part Two will consider the artistic iconoclasm of cunt art in terms of subject matter, traditional viewing ideals and high art/craft distinctions, and will also approach the notion of male mastery and traditional subject/object positions as they relate to cunt art.

I will then, in Part Three, discuss feminism as an iconoclastic practice in a patriarchal system, whether cunt art is iconoclastic in terms of feminist debate, and whether calling for the legitimization or validation of vaginal performances presents a neutralisation of the politics involved. Part Three will also consider the extent to which female genitalia can be promoted as a feminist icon, whether such a suggestion can be too all-inclusive, or whether we can see the vulva or vagina as a symbol of unfolding complexities, from iconoclast to new icon.

This chapter, therefore, is concerned with the legitimacy or illegitimacy of cunt art, dealing with the cultural validity of works and their subject matter. By “illegitimacy” I am primarily emphasising the very public condemnation of examples of cunt art by the establishment, through institutional denunciation, and “privileged” authorial criticism. Such objections raise the issue of the unacceptability of this genre similarly “enjoyed” by other forms that break cultural boundaries and explode taboos and defensive values.

I will begin this chapter by visiting some examples of the censorship of cunt art. I will then briefly consider the legal clauses behind allegations of obscenity. In the next part of the chapter I will explore particular cultural readings of the female body, such as the attitudes

evidenced in the development of gynaecology, the notions of female reproductive and genital formation and slang terminology for the genitals, which reflect the values attached to women's genitalia. I will articulate the challenge posed by cunt art to cultural traditions and attitudes and thus consider the social conventions that have allowed cunt art to be classified as obscene.

I will argue that cunt art attempts to disrupt the conventional readings of female genitalia and the demystification and misrepresentation of these parts. I will also argue that accusations of obscenity, in fact, attempt to reinforce dominant codes of acceptability and are examples of manipulation of power with regards to accessibility and knowledge. Conventionally beyond what should be represented, the vulva is kept at the outskirts of cultural value and visibility. Cunt art denies this position of invisibility by representing that which patriarchy dictates should remain hidden.

Further to the condemnation of cunt art by various parties, I would like to stress the implication of the forbidden within concepts of illegitimacy. Hence this section will be concerned with the notion of iconoclasm as an action that challenges established and traditional concepts. In the case of vulvar and vaginal images/performances, the principles being attacked are those of acceptable presentation, propriety, decency and shame according to phallogentric regimes. Strictly reinforcing traditional concepts of invisibility and illegitimacy, the disapproval of cunt art by critics reflects the defiance of the genre.

As a result of the condemnation and censorship that examples of cunt art have provoked, it can be surmised that feminist representations of the vulva or vagina are considered at the least indecent and generally obscene. Obscenity is popularly defined as items, acts or utterances that are considered to contravene public standards of morality, but particularly sexual morality. And so, obscenity as a concept is intrinsically related to public standards and social morality.

The illegitimacy of some forms of artistic expression, such as cunt art, is reflected not only by specific criticisms of the work but also by the action of authorities and the inaction of institutions that could partially validate the work by supporting it. In America, Suzanne Santoro's *Towards New Expression* (Fig. 1a), a booklet containing vulvar imagery published in 1974, was withdrawn from the American Arts Council's exhibition of artists' books (Tickner, 1987, p.269; Pollock, 1987, p.135). In 1990, Judy Chicago began negotiations with the University of the District of Columbia to donate *The Dinner Party* to the institution (see Fig. 3g). In response, some members of Congress threatened to cut the University's federal funding should it accept the work (Meyer, 1996, p.72).

In the foreword to Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, Gloria Steinem claims that "[o]ne publisher paid an advance for it [the book], then, on sober second thought, allowed Eve Ensler to keep the money if she would take the book and its v-word elsewhere" (1998, p.xiv). Owing to the many objections to cunt art that have been voiced over the last few decades, the question that must be posed is whether such pieces can be, or indeed should be, legitimised.

In attempting to purchase a copy of *Nothing but the Girl: The Blatant Lesbian Image* (1998, ed. Bright and Posener) from marketplace@superbookdeals.co.uk through Amazon.co.uk Marketplace I was informed that this order would not be shipped from America due to inappropriate content. Having realised their “error” in including this book in their catalogue, they informed me that it would be de-listed as soon as possible. Their decision, according to responses to my enquiries, was based on a moral decision in accordance with Superbookdeals’ policies.

With regards to the content of this book, *Nothing but the Girl* presents beautiful, touching and startling lesbian erotic photography (Fig. 1b). Some images are abrasive and shocking, while some are touching and emotionally charged. Superbookdeals’ reasons for citing inappropriate content could be many. Perhaps the representation of lesbian eroticism was inappropriate or perhaps the exposure of genitalia was the problem. Perhaps the section titles “Cunt,” “Sex” or “Dyke” alerted their moral sensibilities. But as I stated in my communications to them, I was offended, but not surprised, that they deemed my personal choice to be inappropriate.

I am immediately drawn to the struggles Patrick Campbell has documented in his attempt to obtain a copy of Annie Sprinkle’s video *The Sluts and Goddesses Video Workshop: Or How to Be a Sex Goddess in 101 Easy Steps* (1992). In 1995, Campbell attempted to obtain a copy of this Sprinkle video for a piece he was writing on pornography and performance. The video, although sent unlabelled and marked as a gift, was seized by customs as “Indecent and Obscene Material” (2000, p.53). Despite Campbell’s protestation of its relevance to serious

academic study and the ensuing “negotiation” between Campbell and Customs and Excise representatives including possible endorsement from a “responsible academic” (2000, p.54), his attempt to obtain a copy of Sprinkle’s work resulted in a court hearing which ruled that the material was “indecent and obscene” (2000, p.55). Campbell therefore lost the case and lost the right to keep the copy of the video.

Outrage continues within the American Family Association regarding the work of Annie Sprinkle. The AFA have branded her performances obscene and cited them as specific examples of anti-Christian bigotry and pornography. In 1993 in Hollywood, city officials objected to an exhibition in a shop window. The objectionable exhibit by Judie Bamber, selected by Lauren Lesko and titled *Tunnel of Love*, consisted of a laughing plastic vulva, spotlighted and placed on a pedestal. The installation had to be altered or closed due to its close proximity to a visitors’ centre. The offending elements were concealed, including the plastic vulva, which was covered with a paper bag.

The objection to genital imagery is not avoided in academic circles either. In 1993, as a graduate student, Aimée Beaubien, at the Art Institute of Chicago was asked to remove her work from public hallway space for fear of causing offence. Beaubien’s controversial work comprised of photographic details of a woman masturbating with household implements (*Stimulating Objects, Mounting Objects and Penetrating Objects*) (see Fig. 4b). Her work consisted of photographs with holes punched where the objects made contact with the woman and the disruption of the photographic surface was intended to jar the projected fantasy. After considering her options, Beaubien complied with requests to remove the work.

In terms of texts, the publication of Lisa Tickner's "Body Politic" article published in June 1978 in *Art History* "provoked widespread protest from senior art critics and academics...[and] the derision and anger of some of *Art History*'s readers" (Nead, 1997, pp.64-65). The appearance of illustrative examples of vaginal and vulvar iconography is alleged to be the offending element of the work (Nead, 1997, p.65). As Tickner, a British feminist art historian, suggests, "whilst the image of woman as fetishized, repository for male sexual fantasies and fears, is 'acceptable' in our society, the image of the vulva itself which the fetish seeks to displace, is 'obscene'..." (1987, p.269). These are some of the ideas I will draw on in this section.

What Tickner is referring to in the statement above is the American Arts Council censorship of Susanne Santoro's book *Towards New Expression* (1974) and the Council's inclusion of Allen Jones' *Projects* (Fig. 1c).¹ She considers this manoeuvre an example, proposed by both Santoro and Laura Mulvey, of the acceptance of male dominated images of woman as object, and the rejection of feminist critiques of this manipulative tool. In her article "You don't know what is happening, do you, Mr Jones?" Laura Mulvey writes, "[t]he achievement of Allen Jones is to throw an unusually vivid spotlight on the contradiction between woman's fantasy presence and real absence from the male unconscious world" (1987, p.128). So while the American Arts Council rejected a feminist gesture presenting the female body, Jones' *Projects* containing demeaning and eroticised images of women was deemed acceptable.

¹ According to Mulvey, Jones' work includes painted and sculptured images of the female form within scenarios and dress reminiscent of bondage scenarios and subordinate roles. Works include caricatures of women with whips and pool cues, and figures of women as chairs and hat-stands in *Women as Furniture* (1969; exhibited in London in 1970).

The allegations of obscenity and indecency have been recited as statements in critiques, as legal action and expressions of public outrage. These criticisms have often had direct consequences on the works themselves and on the status of the artists in question, affecting funding, liberty to exhibit and perform, and artistic and academic freedom. In order to analyse the accusation that cunt art works are obscene, we must identify where such pieces have been criticised and fallen foul of the law.

In Britain, the Obscene Publications Act of 1959 asserts that obscenity can be identified by its degeneracy or corrupting influences. Section 1 (1) states that “[a]n article shall be deemed to be obscene if its effect...is...such as to tend to deprave and corrupt” (cited in Hunter et al, 1993, p.145). Section 4 continues:

(1) A person shall not be convicted of an offence...if it is proved that publication of the article in question is *justified as being for the public good* on the ground that it is *in the interests of science, literature, art or learning*, or of other objects of general concern. (2) It is hereby declared that *the opinion of experts as to the literary, artistic, scientific or other merits of an article may be admitted* in any proceedings under this Act either to establish or to negative the said ground (ibid.; my emphases).

And so, not only is there the difficult and vaguely defined task of distinguishing material that is likely to corrupt people but there is also the equally problematic task of identifying the value of the work. As Campbell points out the Act defines material both “inclusively and inconclusively” (2000, p.55).

Since 1959, various amendments have been made. In the UK there are two systems of regulation to account for differing definitions of obscenity. Firstly, there are statutory offences of obscenity leading to criminal liability and, secondly, indecent items that may

encroach on certain codes of practice (Hungate, 1999). In accordance with the Indecent Displays (Control) Act of 1981, it is an offence to publicly display indecent material with liability attributed to the person making the display and the person permitting the display (ibid.). While this legal premise seeks to curtail artist and promoter, it is still vague in its definition of obscene and indecent material.

In America, the distinction between “obscene” and “indecent” can be tested by a three-part test, developed through the 1957 *Roth v. United States* case and the 1973 decision in the case of *Miller v. California*. These definitions relate to speech under the law but are useful in negotiating a way to view cunt art in a social context. According to the case of *Miller v. California*, a work is obscene i) if the average person would find it of prurient interest, ii) if the work depicts or describes sexual conduct in an offensive way or iii) if the work lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value (McNair, 1996, p.54). Again, amendments have been made, the most notable of which resulted from the 1987 *Pope v. Illinois* case where the Supreme Court decision substituted the standard of “reasonable person” in place of “community standard” in judgements of obscenity (ibid.).²

In many ways the substitution of “community standard” for “reasonable person” is just as problematic. As Lynda Nead points out,

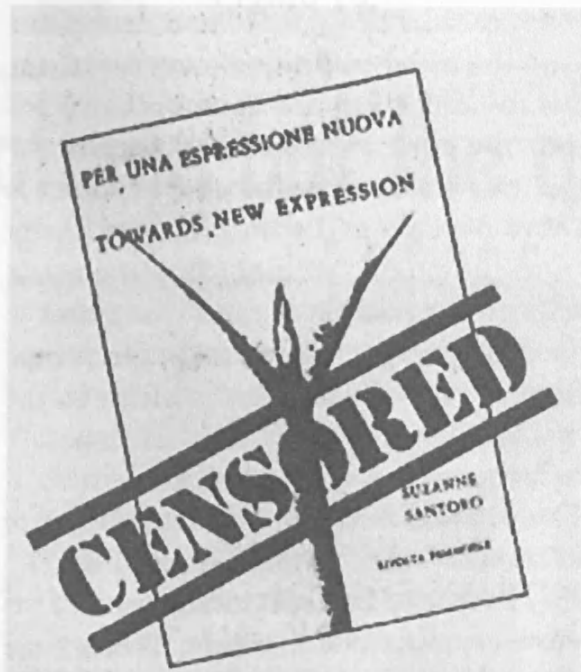
the prioritizing of community standards and the assumption of moral consensus has encouraged a normalizing of certain sexualities and an outlawing of those sexual identities and desires that are seen to deviate from the accepted norms (1997, p.95).

² There is assumption here that the category of “reasonable person” is more explicit than judging by all-purpose “community standards,” which is problematic not least because it ignores personal value systems but also is immeasurable and hence vague.

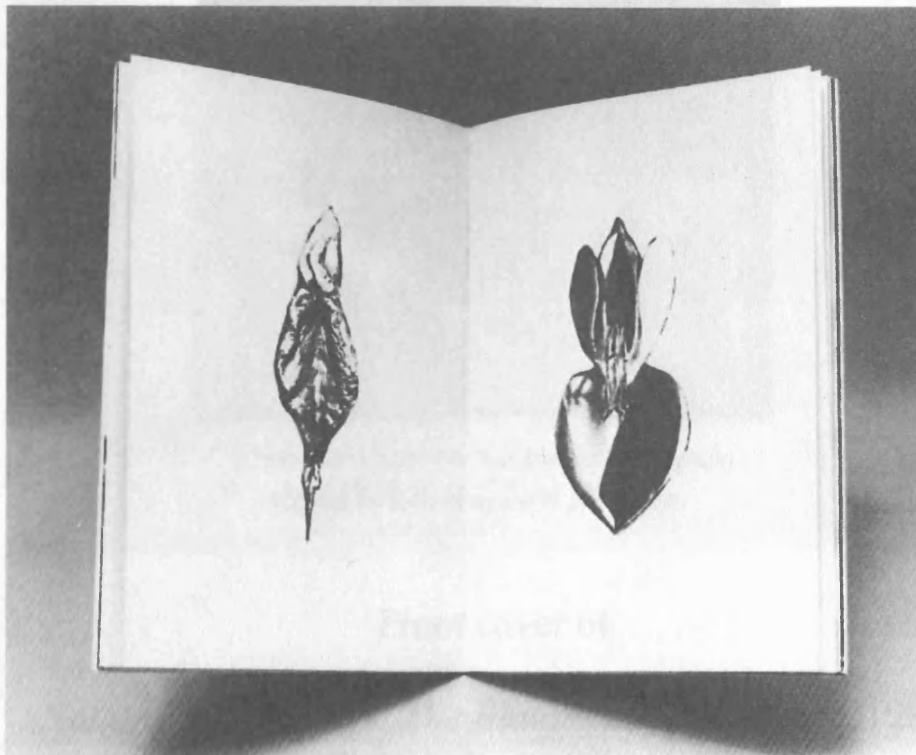
As a result, we can identify a self-perpetuating circle of obscenity: that which is considered obscene continues to be so under the current system. Those items that are seen as obscene are marginalised and hence less readily visible. The less “offending” items are exposed, the less likely they are to become part of standard vocabulary of cultural experience.

While it is important to consider the legal restrictions on obscene works, it is essential that the implications of the censorship of cunt art be analysed. The next section will consider the social conventions that allow vulvar and vaginal imagery to be classified as obscene utilising the ideas of permissibility, or as Nead suggests “art and obscenity, the permissible and the forbidden” (1997, p.107), but this section will also articulate the challenge posed by cunt art to cultural traditions and attitudes.

Figure 1a:



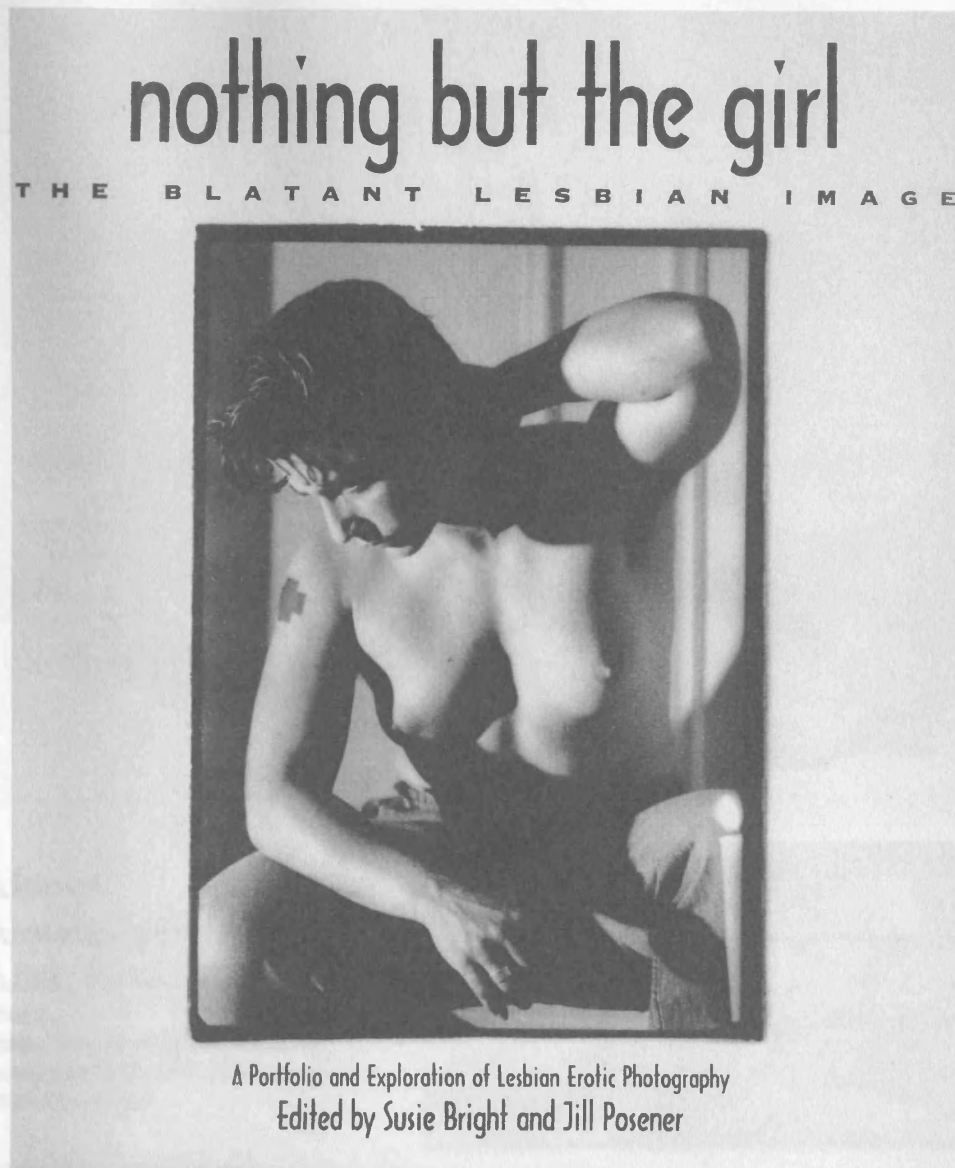
Source:
Tickner, 1987, p.135



Suzanne Santoro, *Towards New Expression*, 1974

Source: Kubitza, 1996, p.161

Figure 1b:



Front cover of

Nothing But the Girl: The Blatant Lesbian Image, 1998

Source: Bright and Posener, eds. 1998, front cover

Figure 1c:



Above:
Assorted pieces by
Allen Jones, 1969

Source:
<[http://www.homemdesacocheio.
theblog.com.br/20031226-
20040101.html](http://www.homemdesacocheio.theblog.com.br/20031226-20040101.html)>



Above:
Allen Jones, *Table*, 1969

Source:
<<http://www.jahsonic.com/AllenJones.html>>



Left:
Allen Jones, *Chair*, 1969

Source:
<[http://www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/
kelley/rm7.htm](http://www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/kelley/rm7.htm)>

Cultural Reflections:

The illegitimacy that surrounds cunt art must be seen in social context and we must surmise that the illegitimacy of such works reflects a cultural view of the subject matter. The remainder of this chapter will consider specific cultural readings of the vulva and I will propose that cunt art, in response to these meanings, while attempting to educate and demystify, attempts to destabilise these cultural readings. What is relevant to this project are, not only the meanings attached to women's genitalia, but the more general social construction of the female body. Essentially speaking, the offensiveness of the vulva can be traced to a more general devaluation of that which is female, particularly the body, which has been imbued with associations of shame, disgust and weakness.

In the light of the long history attached to the consistent devaluation and mistrust of the female genitalia the proposals embodied by cunt art present an attempt to radically change the associations in operation around the vulva. To merely suggest that the vulva be re-inscribed with positive connotations is in itself in opposition to the cultural and misogynist constructions that have plagued women's bodies. But to depict women's genitalia in detail, other than for scientific or medical reasons, partially releases the vulva from a sphere where male authority dictates normality and appropriateness. While we could surmise that the vulva then only moves into the wider male-dominated society, one of projected desire and sexuality, there is the possibility that in the hands of feminist artists, women can begin to accept their own bodies that have been forbidden to them for so long.

The body, having been separated from and subordinated to the mind throughout Western history, has always been seen as unpredictable and it is by no means a surprise to find that women have been associated with instability and the body, and men associated with reason and the mind. A clear reflection of this tradition can be seen in the very slow evolution of the educational system, where economic privilege was only upstaged by gender prejudice.

In this blatantly misogynist system including both philosophical and medical discourses (Martin, 1987; Laqueur, 1987; Cameron, 1992; Lloyd, 1998; King, 1998), male dominance has asserted itself through literature, art and medicine. It is not unexpected, then, that we should find a consistently “rationalised” philosophical and scientific derogation of women. In medicine, particularly, we can see the regularity of biological inferiority used as validation of the social subordination of women. Through Hippocrates and Aristotle, we can identify the misinterpretation of biology that has developed to reassert time and again, through the works of influential thinkers such as Freud, the inferiority of women in Western culture.

Both Hippocrates and Aristotle posited one sex or version defined only by heat. Hippocrates used heat, activity and strength as the defining qualities of the male and Aristotle believed that the man was hot and therefore ideal. Women in these hierarchical models were cold, passive and weak and therefore unable to attain perfection (Allen, 1985, p.96 and King, 1998, pp.8-10). As an extension on these ideas, Galen’s writings on female sex organs indicate a continuation of the colder woman and her inferiority to the male form while also reinforcing the notion of one sex with two versions. Galen proposed that male and female sex organs were identical with the exception that the lack of heat in the female prevented the external

exposure of the genitals as they appeared in the hot male (Laqueur, 1987, p.5). In this way, the prioritising of heat in antiquity directly influenced the assumptions made about women's genitalia. Helen King points out the gender hierarchy implicit in these formulations and notes that this process of hierarchising sex according to male parameters did not change until the late nineteenth century (1998, p.11).³

King indicates that as recently as the Victorian era, physicians and surgeons were justifying the medical subordination and control of women by reference to the Hippocratic corpus (1998, p.19). Gynaecology today is the descendant of this "special," and often painfully cruel, Victorian practice. During this era, Hippocrates' name was used to give authority to any number of procedures used on women, even being used to condone clitoridectomies (ibid.). Hippocratic gynaecology advocated specific treatments for women's maladies and viewed them as being different from the illnesses of men. The meaning of gynaecology as referred to by Hippocrates and other classical writers must not be assumed to have direct parity with the contemporary speciality, with classical *gynaikeia* being much broader in its discussion (King, 1998, p.23). We must bear in mind, however, that the more general approach of classical gynaecology does not excuse the concept from misogyny. It merely promotes more generally the assumption that women are unstable and weak.

Gynaecology, as a treatment of women and their reproductive organs, developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was a clear declaration of the difference of women from men, implying that women needed "specialised" care (King, 1998, p.7). What is

³ We are, however, left with the remnants of this notion in the continuation of female derogation. So while medical knowledge reasserted the "facts" about women's bodies, the actual experience of women still attested to that of inferiority both genitally and culturally.

implicit in this assumption, considering that all physicians at the time were male, is that women needed to be cared for by men and perhaps more harmfully, that those men knew what was best for women. Even today, most practitioners are male and so we are confronted with the situation where men decide and promote what is normal for female processes. Here, we have a clear example of the history of male power over the female body and even today we can recognise male dominance in a field that defines the health, meaning and value of women's genitalia. Ironically, the fullest existing gynaecological text from antiquity by Soranos minimised the need for gynaecology at all (King, 1998, p.39).

Here, we become witness to the paradox that surrounds the female anatomy. The presence of gynaecology indicates that women's bodies need specialised and "special" care but we consistently find that women's sexual organs are devalued, both through the hierarchy of reproductive and genital formation and more widely in attitudes towards the female body. This paradox hides the disruption that the female body presents. Women's bodies are subversive within patriarchal medical systems and have to be controlled and therefore contained through gynaecology. The existence of gynaecology itself reflects the significance of women's genitalia and attests to the necessity for patriarchal intervention, and therefore safeguarding, against this potential disruption to the power structures that exist.

Virginia Braun points out that even within the gynaecological consultation, the word "vagina" is rarely used (2001, pages unnumbered). As Braun points out in her analysis of Female Genital Terms/Slang (FGTs), there are many negative slang terms applied to women's genitalia and this is representative of the cultural values and attitudes expressed

towards this part of the female body, but also designates the cultural knowledge that exists of these parts. She writes:

...the prevalence of terms for women's genitalia that can be classified as derogatory or dismissive, or terms which are non-specific and vague, continues, reflecting and perpetuating a cultural context in which women's genitalia are either conceptually absent or perceived negatively (ibid.).

Study One, "Semantic Categories in Genital Slang," involved one hundred and fifty-six women and one hundred and twenty-five men completing questionnaires, which aimed to collate information regarding Male and Female Genital Terms (MGTs and FGTs). Study Two, "Nonspecificity of Female Genital Slang," involving one hundred and eighty-four women, forty men and twenty-seven other candidates (who did not indicate their sex), centred on the imprecision of slang words for women's genitalia in terms of anatomical structure, so much so that an average of 3.9 different meanings was attributed to each slang term. Options for the exact meaning of the slang terms were given, such as "vulva," "vagina," "inner labia," "outer labia" and "clitoris," and these terms were used in conjunction with an annotated anatomical "map" for each respondent to refer to. Braun established that while slang often seeks to linguistically represent that which is taboo, these terms actually serve to continue the mystification of the women's genitals.

Cunt art offers a very different version of the women's genitalia in opposition to clinical representations and the derogation and mystification proposed by slang terminology, but recognises the disruptions possible in the exposure of these parts. Some works such as LeCocq's *Feather Cunt* (1971) (see Fig. 3f) and Lesko's *Lips* (1993) (see Fig. 2b) are texturally vivid while others such as the *femalia* portfolios (1993) (see Fig. 4a) and Bamber's *Untitled* series (1994) (see Fig. 2a), depend on stark reality that is not tainted by the sterility

of medical etiquette. They include within them, an honest account filled with the vibrancy and drama of the layers that combine to positively and (unusually, for Western representation) truthfully display the vulva.

While these representations continue to be read in the context of a traditionally misogynist culture, they present an alternative rendering of women's genitals. Bamber's acrylic compositions expose the contours, the flesh and the hair that makes up what tradition has insisted needs medical attention only by trained individuals. Cunt art exposes these parts to public contemplation shattering the illusion that viewing should be restricted. Bamber chooses not to camouflage the vulva in abstraction or implication but offers a variety of shapes and colours without shame, without embarrassment.

While the *Untitled* series, owing to its stark and realistic representative style, could be said to perform some of the clinicalness standardised by bio-medical discourses, these pieces deny the sterility of such representations by the vibrancy performed in the depth of the colours used. These colours are not fantastical, but Bamber chooses subjects that are contrasted dramatically within the series. This series performs a variety unseen by the bio-medical diagrams enabling the viewer to avoid, or challenge, the standardisation of clinical representations. The vulva, according to such works, is not simply the object of study for trained (male) professionals, nor is it a place for mutilation in the name of "curing" hysteria or general malady. It is, for that moment, open to non-abusive exploration however the interpreter cares to respond.

Tee A. Corinne's *Cunt Coloring Book* (originally published in 1975; 2003) more explicitly deals with sex education (Fig. 1d). The drawings within the book originated as informative and positive images for use in sex education groups. At the beginning of the book, a map of the female genitalia indicates the impetus to educate readers about the parts of women's genital anatomy (Fig. 1e), and demystification continues throughout the book via varying drawings of different women's genitalia (see also Fig. 4i).⁴

Similarly, Annie Sprinkle offers an exploratory viewing in her wittily titled *Public Cervix Announcement* (Fig. 1f) within *Post Porn Modernist* and *Post-Post Porn Modernist* (1990-1995).⁵ Sprinkle even employs tools of the gynaecological trade in her quest to peel back the mystical and fearful layers of the female anatomy. She invites the "lay" person to use the speculum provided to explore the hidden depths of her body and offers each spectator opportunity to become involved in their own performance of exploring boundaries and curiosities. By doing so, Sprinkle destabilises the tradition of gynaecological mastery in the field of women's genitalia and reproduction.

By combining the speculum with the vibrator she allows the audience to view her as the subject of previous exclusive study now honestly and erotically displayed, private now public, but also as the subject of self-fulfilling desire. The vagina, once a treatable nuisance, is now a source of enrichment. The sterility and distance provoked by medical

⁴ Interestingly, Corinne points out in her foreword that the book has appeared in different guises. She writes, "[t]he *Cunt Coloring Book*, published in 1975, was immediately and wildly popular, although many people complained about the 'awful' title. Three printings later, in 1981, the title was changed to *Labiaflowers* and the book virtually died. So much for euphemisms" (2003, pages unnumbered).

⁵ For further discussion and details of Sprinkle's works, see Chapter 4, Pornographic Bodies.

representations are replaced by subjective excitement and an encouraging individual account of a woman's pride in and enjoyment of her own body.

But how far can this be taken? Sprinkle runs the risk of overriding her ownership and access with a more public access that could be seen to verge upon appropriation. There is a fine line between redressing traditional notions of the female genitalia and male diagnostic power, and relinquishing women's ownership of this part of the body (if they have made ground in owning it in the first place). These choices of exclusive exposure and over-exposure are limiting. The dichotomous options here must be expanded to include the possibility that cunt art can be a catalyst for women to begin to understand their own bodies and for men and women alike to understand the degradation the female body has suffered.

Ultimately, by representing the vulva or vagina, feminists present the opportunity for individual women to begin to understand their bodies. Cunt art can demystify the vulva and present it as something to celebrate. In direct contrast to the attitudes of shame set up to demoralise and subordinate women, cunt art presents the genitalia and the vagina as parts of the body that can be considered beautiful and precious, an idea that is culturally iconoclastic, and disruptive if not subversive.

While Bamber, Sprinkle and Corinne shatter the illusion of misrepresentation and mystification of the vulva, they approach these disruptive movements in different ways. Attempts at clarification and exploration focus on different performative engagements and levels of intimacy. While there is the implicit element of interaction within the interpretative

process within these examples, Bamber, Sprinkle and Corinne's works approach the format of this interaction in different ways. Bamber draws on the juxtaposition of traditional spectatorship/connoisseurship and the iconoclastic subject matter to provide an art object that disrupts conventional notions of art appreciation.

This implicit play on distance contrasts directly with Sprinkle's explicit employment of the refusal of distance. The physical action of taking part in Sprinkle's performance relies on a closeness that is contrary to the traditions that Bamber exploits. Corinne's use of distance alternatively is non-existent. *Cunt Coloring Book* requires private interaction with the work and requests, like Sprinkle, physical interaction to complete the process that Corinne intends. The spectator's relationship with the meanings generated is changed by issues of distance, intimacy and physicality, and their understanding of the assumptions behind these representations can therefore potentially be queried. Traditional presentation of the female body is hence challenged by all three contributors even if they do so in different ways.

The traditional presentation of the female body in patriarchal culture – which makes invisible unacceptable aspects of women and “contains and regulates the body” as Nead suggests (1997, p.25) - can be seen to revolve around the objectification of, and accessibility to, this body; accessibility in patriarchal currency and definition. As Braun points out in her analysis of genital slang, terms used to denote women's genitalia can include references to money (such as “thrupenny bit” and “fur purse”). She proposes that these slang words suggest that the female genitalia has “common transactional status” and suggest that women have value “as objects to be purchased” (2001). Within a patriarchal system, women have value as

objects of fantasy and exchange. While danger slang terms were more common for the male genitalia, Braun points out that those in use for women's genitalia, such as "squirrel trap" or "the Bermuda triangle," "invoked the vagina dentata motif (the vagina equipped with teeth and dangerous or deadly to penises)" (ibid.). Danger terms such as "the black hole" and "growler" suggest the threat posed by the female genitals, whereas terms of abjection such as "black cat with its throat cut," "slushing fuck pit," "gash" and "stench trench" all imply the culturally specific horror of women's genitalia.⁶

From the classical to Renaissance period, the uterus was often drawn with horns aligning the female anatomy with the devil (Creed, 1997, p.43) and as Margaret Miles points out, the womb was often used to represent hell in Christian art which embodied the idea of the woman as evil (1989, p.147). Freud's toothed, castrating vagina from "Fetishism" (1927, pp.152-159) and the horror of the vulva in "Medusa's Head" (1950, pp.105-106) reinforce the horror exposed and threat posed by the female genitalia. The acceptability of the female body relies on displacing and camouflaging those aspects that are considered inappropriate or threatening. The established propriety, therefore, is a process of fetishisation that, on a basic level, substitutes male-constructed fantasy for fear of castration evoked by the female body. The woman's body as objectified, contained and controlled by male fantasies relegates this fear to an unexposed and unthreatening position due to the concealment of women's genitalia from unauthorised discourses.⁷

⁶ These are all slang terms that arose in Braun's research. Having never come across terms such as "black cat with its throat cut" and "slushing fuck pit," I quizzed a male friend who has, unfortunately, heard these phrases before in all-male conversations.

⁷ In using the word "unauthorised," I am drawing on various ideas including the authorship and authority of patriarchal institutions such as the medical profession that are "authorised" to study and represent the female genitals and reproductive system.

In cunt art, this fear is exposed and confronted directly. The vulva in these terms is obscene because it exposes male fear and is the means of exploding the fantasies that maintain patriarchal stability. The classification of “obscene” summarises that which is taboo, which in turn represents that which is feared by a particular society. And so, the censorship of cunt art and the allegations of obscenity attached to vulvar imagery can be seen as tools that displace the fear of being confronted by the vulva or the vagina. Condemnation by way of the accusations of obscenity is a phallogentric device and as part of the socialisation of the individual, the cultural “obscenity” of female genitalia is cultivated to maintain the power relations within that system.⁸

Valie Export’s *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969)⁹ critiques this head on (Fig. 1g). The performance took place in an art cinema in Munich. Export, dressed in trousers with the crotch cut out, walked through each row of the cinema in order to challenge the fetishisation of women’s bodies on the cinema screen. In *Genital Panic*, Export exposed the object of horror and threat without displacement; the woman’s body as contained and controlled by

⁸ The claim that cunt art is obscene due to its sexual content would appear at this point redundant. There is the implicit contradiction between the hypotheses of fear attached to the female genitals and the vulva as essentially sexual. If vulvar imagery is considered intrinsically sexual, even pornographic, then there is a rather large leap of faith that needs to be taken by the reader if they are to believe that what is feared is of sexual appeal. But this is the paradox of the female that has been noted by many cultural commentators. Braun cites Kapsalis (1997) and the dual notion of the “sacred” and “profane,” Ussher calls it a conundrum “simultaneously fascinating and frustrating” (1997, p.3), while Schneider suggests that the paradox revolves around the female body as possessable but inaccessible, and visible but that which “slips beyond vision” (1997, p.71).

⁹ Some sources suggest that *Genital Panic* took place in 1969; see Mueller, 1994. Other critics place the performance in 1968 (such as Stiles, 2002). Also there are varying statements concerning the location of this action. While Stiles maintains that an art cinema in Munich was the site of the action (2002), Kubitzka maintains that this action took place in Vienna (1996, p.174). Of note is the location of Export’s *Touch Cinema* (1968) which premiered in Vienna, from which Kubitzka’s statements may derive and have become entangled.

male fantasies is shattered by the lack of secure mechanisms by which to circumvent the threat posed by the vulva.

Following the performance, Export produced a poster of the event and included a gun in her composition “further dramatizing the confrontational nature of this work” (Stiles, 2002). In 1969, this poster was reproduced as *60 Posters*, which comprised of sixty of these images covering a wall at the Galleries at Moore in Philadelphia, increasing the confrontation posed by the piece and attempting to further undermine the static nature of cinematic representations of objectified women that *Genital Panic* was critiquing in the first place (Fig. 1h).¹⁰ According to Kristine Stiles, Export confronted “the pornographic reduction of women to static representations, thereby posing a direct, political challenge to the abstract objectification of the female body as a fetish” (2002). While Export herself presented static images in the development of the initial work to motionless posters, these static images disrupt the notion of fetishisation.

It is possible, however, to recognise a shifting momentum in *Genital Panic* in transferring to the new medium. While the cinema performance directly commented upon the scopophilic representation of the female, the moving “live” body offered a direct challenge to the women’s bodies on the screen, exposing that female part that the fetish replaces. However, in transforming this into a number of static images, the piece exhibits a phallic replacement and displacement of lack in the form of the gun included, which could be seen to neutralise the political challenge set up in the performance. In utilising an object “with phallic significance”

¹⁰ Exhibitions of Export’s work continue and many of these exhibitions include posters of the *Genital Panic* pose with a gun. For example, posters were displayed in Berlin in 1994 and 1995 and at the Camden Arts Centre in December 2004.

(Mulvey, 1987, p.128), Export could be seen to undermine the challenge to traditional representations that she sets up in the art cinema performance of *Genital Panic*.

Although *60 Posters* includes the phallic extension of a gun, it also includes the lack that it represents in the same space. The key to the power of the image lies in the contradiction existing in this composition. As Mulvey suggests, there are three main methods of placing women in the subordinate role, or three aspects of the fetishised image of woman. First, there is the image of the woman plus phallus, secondly the woman minus phallus being punished by a fetishistic object, and lastly woman as phallus (1987, p.128). In these terms, Export's creative choice of the inclusion of a gun could propose the inefficiency of the phallic extension in relation to direct exposure of the female genitals placing the female performer in a powerful position, unpunished, irrevocable. The fear of the lack of phallus, traditionally avoided through the fetish and the objectification of the woman, is challenged in Export's performance.

The threat posed by cunt art and the condemnations that follow can be seen as a direct result of the challenge posed by works such as Export's *Genital Panic* to existing power structures that safeguard against the exposure of the female genitals. The fear that is provoked can be taken as an expression of power relations, and therefore as inherently sub-structural and phallogocentric. As Nead attests, accusations of obscenity revolve around power and dominance. She writes, "...obscenity is that which, at any given moment, a particular dominant group does not wish to see in the hands of another, less dominant group" (1997, pp.91-92). She stresses that the policing of boundaries involved in legal and social censorship

is not simply about monitoring the material that can be accessed, but also about *who* has the access and *where*. Therefore, accusations of obscenity and censorship are not only attempts to maintain dominant codes of propriety and acceptability, but also examples of manipulation of power with regard to accessibility and knowledge. What is reinforced is a judgement of who has the right to access such information or representation and, therefore, regulates power through knowledge.

Those items, images or actions that challenge these relations of power are forced to the outskirts of culture through allegations of obscenity. Nead acknowledges the disputes that surround the origins of the word “obscene” but suggests that “the etymology of ‘obscene’ ...may be a modification of the Latin ‘scena,’ so meaning literally what is off, or to one side of the stage, beyond presentation” (1997, p.25). And so, we must not only make the association between cunt art and what is traditionally excluded or “put to one side” through moral justification but we must also connect cunt art with what is conventionally beyond presentation, or “offstage,” in patriarchal society. Being classed as obscene, in the legal and moral senses of the word, implies that the vulva is conventionally beyond presentation, as Linda Nead suggests and is thus kept at the outskirts of cultural value and visibility.

As Susanne Kappeler points out, “[t]he concern with obscenity is a concern with the self-image of a society” (1986, p.22) and so, within this concern for “self-image” there is the implication that to condemn cunt art is to maintain a “safe” and respectable moral code. To accept such representations and limit accusations of obscenity is to sanction such projects, which then pervade social values and would reflect the acceptability of women’s body parts

within the social self-image. The refusal to do so maintains the patriarchal structures that enforce power relations through the primacy of the phallus.

In the hands of women artists, cunt art threatens the power systems intrinsic to phallocentrism, exposing that which is manipulatively kept invisible. Similarly, censorship of feminist representations denies access to heterogeneous and alternative visions of sociality and identity, which threaten the stability of male-dominated culture. As Nead proposes, art may be considered “a reasonable gauge of social visibility” (1997, p.60). And as such, by maintaining the boundaries of what can be seen and by whom, censorship attempts to ensure that female-generated images of the vulva are as unseen as possible. Nead links the omission of certain images or aspects of the female body with the omission and absence experienced by women and notes that feminist interventions have sought to compensate for these omissions and to create new definitions.

Tackling these omissions, the quest to rewrite the devaluation of women’s genitalia can be seen to provide a challenge to the status quo. The monstrosity that is the female body and particularly the female genitals can be recognised at the heart of the issues challenged by cunt art. As Barbara Creed points out, “[a]ll human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (1997, p.1). She highlights Freudian formulations of the horror of the vulva; of the vagina dentata and the castration complex. Due to the patriarchal mythology that surrounds women’s genitalia, feminists have acknowledged the negativity of readings of the vulva, and set about questioning and rewriting the misogyny implicit in these contemporary assumptions.

The iconoclastic purpose of cunt art intentionally challenges negative associations linked to women's bodies. In what can be likened to an impetus common to many feminist discourses, cunt art seeks to challenge the cultural degradation of the female body and the misogyny that lies behind these perceptions. In particular, cunt art questions the negativity and taboo that surrounds the vulva, controversially tackling issues of sexual difference and the effect of the cultural derogation of female genitalia on women's lived experiences.

We can also suggest that the taboo reflects a threat and that the dominant within culture protects itself from that which threatens, from that which it fears. Taboo represents fear or perhaps more specifically, a fear of the unknown. Certainly, the unknown as threatening reflects the taboo of the vulva and the mysticism that surrounds this part of the woman's body. The cultivated disgust and offence generated by cunt art works questions the origins, maintenance and justification of these responses. In doing so, artists are challenging the social system that reinforces these assumptions and questions the purpose they serve.

This tactic is used more widely in feminist artistic production, such as in Lynn Hershman's piece titled *Roberta Breitmore's Construction Chart* (1973) (Fig. 1i). The irony implicit in this work is that in annotating the woman, instructing her in how to apply makeup and make herself more beautiful, she becomes more monstrous. The assumption that women need to make themselves up in order to be beautiful is turned on its head. In Judie Bamber's *Untitled* series, we are presented with particularly honest depictions of women's genitalia and left to question notions of disgust and horror.

Within cunt art, as an artistic and performative genre, there is the proposal that women's genitalia can be and are a valid subject matter for artistic representation. Behind this proposition is the refusal of the taboos that surround the vulva, the aim to challenge concepts of the monstrous female body, and, further to this, the suggestion that women's genitalia be considered beautiful and worthy of celebration. To represent the vulva could be seen in the classical (pre-modern) artistic tradition that sought to embody the beautiful, the ideal and the sublime. Hence, in its taboo-breaking, the genre of cunt art questions the traditionally monstrous, evil and shameful vulva. Judie Bamber's series is shocking in its honesty but sheds its monstrous associations in the skill of the work itself. LeCocq's *Feather Cunt*, as alternative strategy, is playful, fun and cheeky; far from the evil vulva built into patriarchal thought.

The perception of the female body as monstrous is dependent on the continuing mystification of women's bodies and particularly of female genitalia. The taboos surrounding the vulva do not only limit those who have a vulva but also serve to keep the vulva as unknown territory. Shame breeds ignorance, and reciprocally, ignorance breeds shame. Cunt art, on a basic level, opens women's genitalia to the public in an educational and demystifying effort. Many pieces show the vulva as a "normal," if not succinctly special, body part. It does not threaten; it is not something to be ashamed of.

Betty Dodson has worked for many years in the field of educating women about their bodies and about their own pleasure. She has created a series of vulvae of individual women

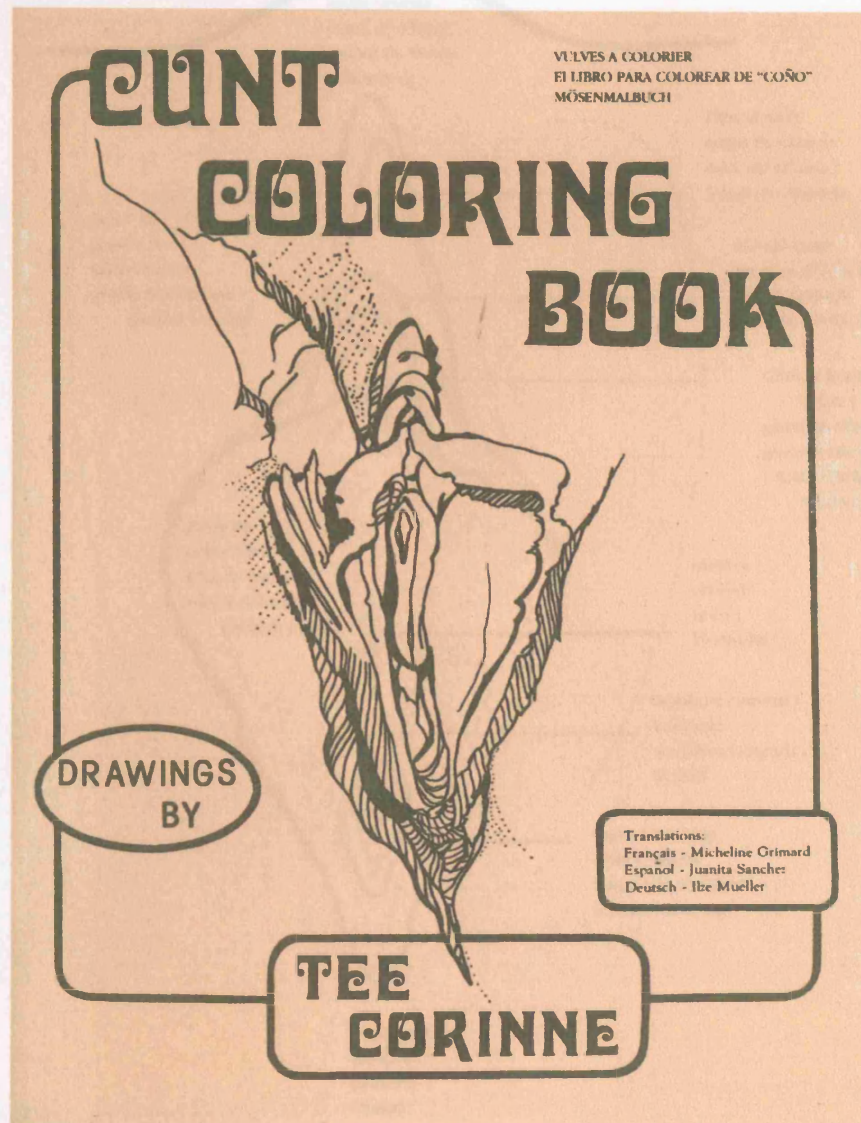
(showing the inner and outer lips spread by the fingers of the subjects of each of the studies) through gentle rendition in charcoal greys, and names the women in a gesture of pride and identification (see Fig. 4i). Through this she symbolically seeks to avoid their anonymity. We could surmise that these women are branded and defined purely by their genitalia, as many Japanese courtesans were in the late eighteenth century (Tickner, 1987, see p.276), but they also attest to an affirmation of pride for each of the women involved.

In addition, cunt art encourages the acknowledgement of the facts surrounding the female genitalia as more than sterile biological and medical statistics; they become part of a celebration of women's bodies. The woman is no longer just being treated as a medical patient but as a person who has every right to know about and understand their bodies as something other than troublesome (socially) or ailing (medically).

The problem, however, has to be the suggested obscenity and subsequent censoring of cunt art. Seen as obscene, it is removed from visibility, perpetuating the mystery and disapproval that surrounds women's genitalia. If the mystery of the female genitals is perpetuated then it seems impossible to challenge the perceived negativity of these parts. By accepting the view of the vulva as monstrous and mysterious there is no way to challenge the negative social constructs that inhabit women's bodies. And so, cunt art attempts to make women's genitals visible to dispel fallacies, or perhaps more appropriately, *phallacies*, about the vulva and vagina and to provide a starting point to begin a useful process of demystification. The "phallacies," that are patriarchal constructions, of shame, disgust and revulsion associated with the vulva can begin to be questioned and, only then, rewritten and re-valued.

In Braun's research on genital slang terms, she highlights those words such as "cave," "hole," "gap" and "love canal" that are coded as space referent terms, as expressions that indicate material absences, absences of land. She suggests, "[s]uch terms implicitly constitute the female body as a landscape, with attendant suggestions of exploration, colonisation, and ownership" (2001). In the next chapter, "Homeless Bodies," I will consider the notion of the female body as territory, as a landscape that can be disputed and re-formulated. While I have argued that cunt art attempts to disrupt patriarchal readings of the vulva, I would now like to explore the phallogentric structures that underlie these patriarchal meanings.

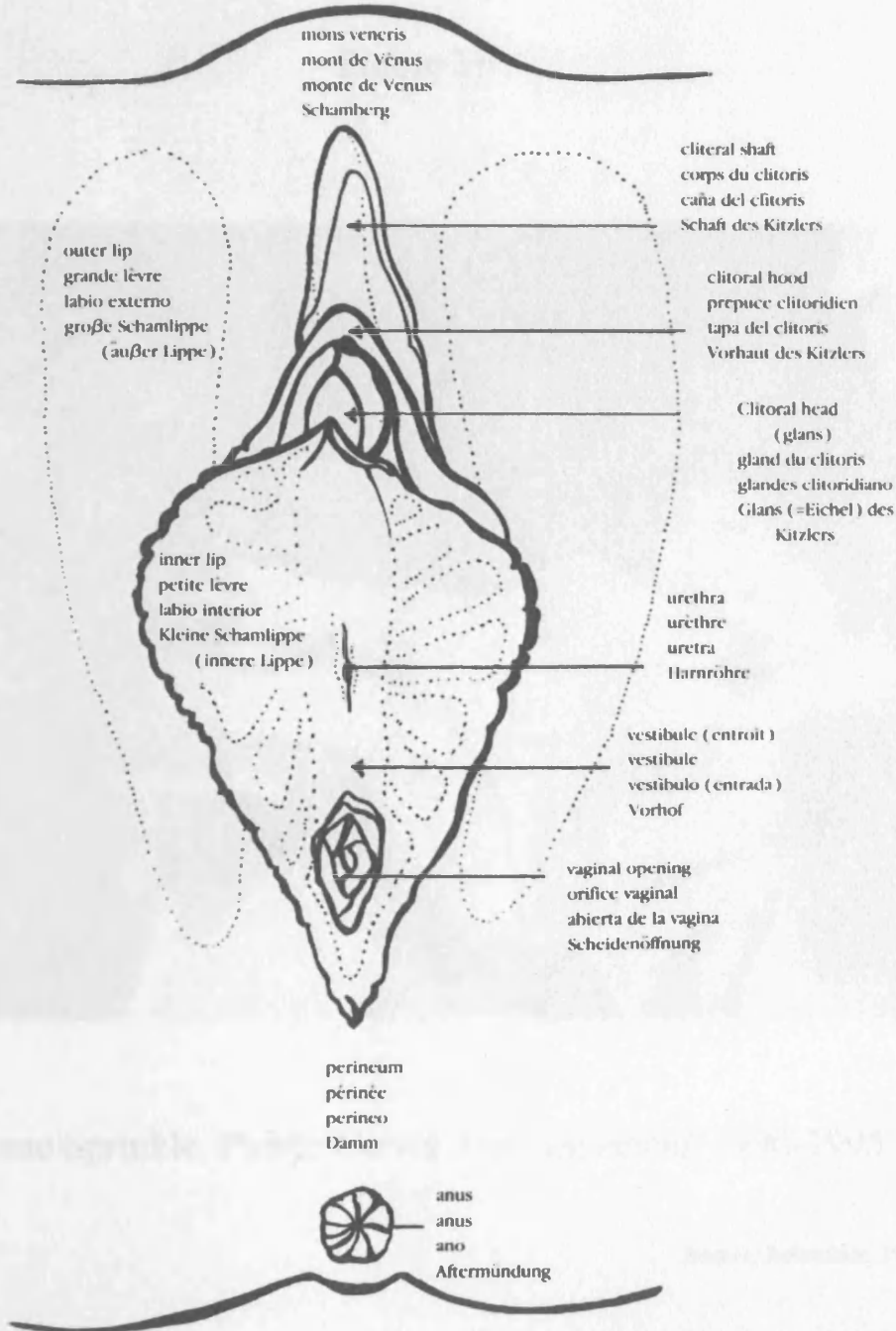
Figure 1d:



Tee A. Corinne, *Cunt Coloring Book*, 1975 (2003)

Source: Corinne, 2003, front cover

Figure 1e:



Tee A. Corinne, detail from *Cunt Coloring Book*, 1975 (2003)

Source: Corinne, 2003, pages unnumbered

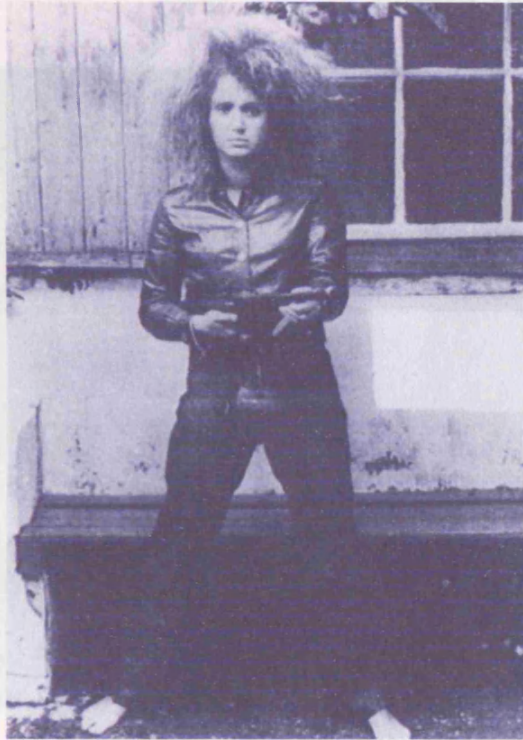
Figure 1f:



Annie Sprinkle, *Public Cervix Announcement*, 1990-1995

Source: Schneider, 1997, p.61

Figure 1g:



Valie Export,
Action Pants:
Genital Panic,
1969

Source: Mueller, 1994, p.18

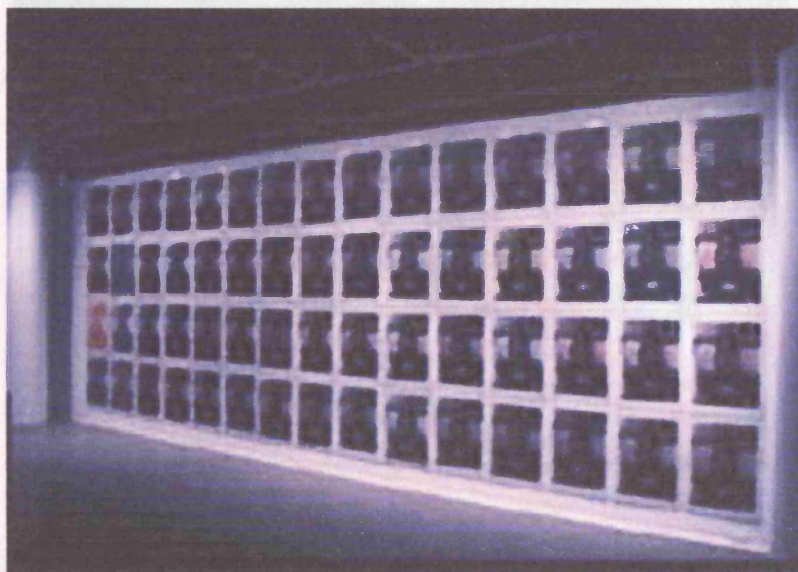


Source: Kubitza, 1996, p.151

Figure 1h:



Source: <<http://thegalleriesatmoore.org/publications/valie/panic.html>>



Source: <<http://thegalleriesatmoore.org/publications/valie/valietour5.shtml>>

Valie Export, *60 Posters*, 1969

Figure 1i:



Lynn Hershman, *Roberta Breitmore's Construction Chart*, 1973

Source: Jones, ed. 1996, p.78

CHAPTER 2:
HOMELESS BODIES

That negative cultural readings of women's bodies are prominent and rife is not a new discovery for feminism. As explored in the last chapter, cunt art can be seen as culturally iconoclastic in terms of the images and actions portrayed within the genre. While I have looked at the cultural meanings attached to cunt art, I would now like to consider *how* these meanings are formulated and Woman's place in this specifically phallogentric framework. The cultural derogation and consequent feminist manoeuvre to challenge these values can be seen as a direct result or related effect of women's exclusion from the symbolic order. While the last chapter has discussed the cultural context and assumptions that result in the cultural iconoclasm of cunt art, this section will take the analysis further into the frameworks that allow, maintain and reinforce women's derogation.

I will consider the development of arguments of female subjectivity and women's exclusion from phallogentrism in relation to cunt art. In doing so, I will argue that cunt art serves to illustrate an aspect of this exclusion, through the promotion of difference, and by including female experience, seeks to challenge and question the male parameters that leave women effectively homeless and excluded from the symbolic order. To this end, this chapter will primarily focus on the intersection of notions of territory, home/lessness and identity as they relate to the performance of the female body and I will also examine examples of cunt art that question notions of essentialism and objectification as issues that relate to the representation of difference.

I will focus on the work of Rosi Braidotti and Luce Irigaray who propose ways forward in conceiving female subjectivity and identity in relation to the female body and the notion of territory. I will consider Irigaray's notion of female homelessness within the economy of the Same, and the female body as a commodity within a sexual economy and I will

focus on Braidotti's proposition of a nomadic model of female subjectivity. In thinking of women as objects for consumption or displayed for consumption, we also have to look at ways to reconfigure female subjectivity and this is where I have found the combination of Irigaray and Braidotti most rewarding.

While I am aware that Irigaray's text could be considered dated, originally published in French in 1977, and although it has been frequently used in feminist analysis, I have chosen to focus on this work for several reasons. Firstly, Irigaray's analysis of the masculine parameters within phallocentrism has been of substantial influence to this project. In combination with Braidotti's notion of the nomadic feminist subject this thesis has been influenced by an exploration of exclusionary practices and discourses. Secondly, there are similarities between Irigaray's use of metaphor and focus on phallocentric discourse and a female language and imaginary, and the employment of these elements in cunt art, which will be discussed in this thesis.

Braidotti (1994) and Irigaray (1996) are not entirely consistent with each other. To summarise, Irigaray presents an essentialist position, while Braidotti works from a framework of deconstruction. For Irigaray, women are separated from their body and their essence, effectively homeless, and she attempts to find a way to reunite women with their essence, letting their bodies speak. For Braidotti, female subjectivity is made up of disparate elements and the priority of home that is potent for Irigaray is replaced with notions of motion and the fluidity of identity. Irigaray's attempts to remedy female homelessness contain fixity whereas Braidotti suggests the model of nomadism that questions conventional hierarchies of identity. I will also focus on notions of intersection between the two theorists, and what this means to concepts of essentialism that surround

cunt art, which will inform the concluding section of this chapter. However, while Braidotti and Irigaray present an oppositional dialectic concerning notions of the homeless, I have found this tension most productive.

Both have allowed me to focus on issues of territory and identity and, within notions of female value and exchange, exclusionary practices and home, I have been able to explore concepts of essence and the emphasis of “woman-as-body” within cunt art. Irigaray’s female as a commodity within a sexual economy (1996, p.31) intensifies the idea of display and objectification in cunt art but also involves notions of essentialism where the marker for consumption could be seen to promote biological determinism. The focus on the explicit female body in cunt art could be seen as a performance of “woman-as-body” which has traditionally led to perceived female inferiority.

This chapter is divided into six areas of investigation. This section will begin the journey by considering the problems in proposing the colonisation of the female body, whether cunt art can be accused of essentialism and I will discuss in detail two works that highlight the construction of gender roles as built on political fiction as opposed to essence. In the second section, I will consider the work of Irigaray who has contributed to feminist analyses of power structures and models of exclusion, and Irigaray’s notion that women are made effectively homeless within the symbolic order. I will examine the male parameters dictated by a phallogentric system and argue that cunt art disrupts and attempts to challenge these parameters of exclusion and lack.

The third section of this chapter will focus on one particular method of manipulation and disempowerment within the patriarchal system, that Irigaray identifies, which is the

notion of woman as commodity in an economy where the female is the product for exchange. I will argue that cunt art could be seen to rebel against the rules of this economy in its emphasis on difference. The fourth section will focus on the visibility of the vulva and I will argue that cunt art does not seek inclusion within the exclusionary structures of phallocentrism primarily but rather attempts disruption of the sexual indifference within it.

In the fifth section, I will then visit and explore feminist theories of the female subject and argue that cunt art, while disrupting the economy of the Same, communicates individual female experiences and stories which further challenge the parameter of female exclusion. I will conclude the chapter with a comparison of Braidotti and Irigaray and examine the particular methodologies employed by these theorists in disrupting and attempting to resist the structures that they identify.

Throughout this chapter there is an emphasis on difference for where there are allegations of essentialism, the complexities of using the marker of sex are being emphasised. Difference is necessarily entangled in analyses of the economy of the Same and exclusion, for it is difference that is being excluded. As a result of the presentation of the marker of sexual difference in cunt art, investigations into the analyses of Irigaray and Braidotti have recommended a methodology that tackles the power structures that maintain patriarchal meanings and phallocentric notions of sex defined by masculine parameters.

Faith Wilding appeals to the potentially resistant qualities of cunt art in terms of the colonisation of the female body and by extension, she suggests that vulvar works challenge the notion of territory, commodity and exchange aligned with the female body:

As women artists we are presenting an image of woman's body and spirit as that which cannot and must not be colonized either sexually, economically, or politically (Faith Wilding, cited in Jones, 1996, p.13).

Tied in with ideas of territory and homelessness, the notion of patriarchal colonisation of the female body has been noted and developed by many feminists. Feminists such as Pollock (1987), Adair (1994) and Morgan (1998) have identified the patriarchal colonisation of the female body and have acknowledged this colonisation and domination as a method of control and manipulation. The female body, like land and territory, has been seen as colonised. If we look at a dictionary definition of territory, we can draw links with the female body as territory that is occupied and territory that could be reclaimed.

Territory *n., pl. -tories.* ...2. the geographical domain *under the jurisdiction of a political unit*...4. an area *inhabited* by an individual animal or a breeding pair of animals. 5. an area of *knowledge*...6. the area *defended* by a team. 7....a region of a country, esp. of a federal state, that *enjoys less autonomy and a lower status* that most constituent parts of the state... (Collins English Dictionary, 1995, p.1592, my emphases).

Consider: "under the jurisdiction of a political unit," "an area inhabited," "the area defended" and "enjoys less autonomy and a lower status." Now consider these words in relation to the female body.

This chapter, in its initial conception, revolved around the colonisation of the female body and the feminist task of decolonising and hence reclaiming the female body. These ideas centred on how the female body was culturally inhabited and theories of the construction of female identity. While I have become uneasy of notions that surround colonisation

because of the implications that such theories inspire revolving around female manipulation, the notion of territory as knowledge has inspired some interesting ideas. If we consider territory as knowledge, then immediately we can make links with Luce Irigaray and Rosi Braidotti who will play a major part of the investigations in this chapter.

Irigaray points to an economy of the Same where female identity is excluded from a male dominated framework. Braidotti warns of the dangers inherent in the theoretical framework, calling it “political fiction” (1994, p.4). For Braidotti and Irigaray, intellectual frameworks are exclusionary, static and built on (male) privilege. While Braidotti tackles this through the nomadic subject, Irigaray challenges such stasis through language. As a result, the notion of colonisation and the possibility of decolonisation have seemed appealing in terms of re-negotiating meanings and knowledge in which the female body is implicitly bound.

The idea of colonisation equates the body as territory and feminist intervention upholds this territory to be one that is under dispute. Colonisation of the female body is balanced on uneven ground, however, that poses problems including quasi-Cartesian emphasis, constructionism and essentialism. Colonisation implies that the female body, as territory, finds a home as opposed to other the models of subjectivity such as that proposed by Rosi Braidotti of the nomadic subject. In some ways, colonisation implies that the female is present within the symbolic order as something that can make meaning and can be built upon, opposed to the homeless and excluded female found in Irigaray but it also implies that a richness of experience is somehow minimised, dulled or exhausted by an overpowering coloniser. Finally, colonisation of the female body reinforces the notion of “woman-as-body” because it suggests a fundamental (corporeal) basis or foundation that

has been “taken over.” Griselda Pollock suggests that decolonisation, as a project, is based on the prerequisite of affirming woman-as-body (1987, p.135). The fundamental corporeal basis implied suggests an original location of belonging, which as a nomad, I am uncomfortable with.

In cunt art, there is similarly the danger of reading the female reduced to biological concerns and essentialism, that within the colonisation of this territory – or beneath colonisation – is an explicitly female essence on which facets of patriarchy have been built. This statement, although not intended by all contributors of cunt art but often applied without prejudice by critics, can be seen as an interpretation of the works by Judy Chicago. Judy Chicago cites her own work with Miriam Schapiro in her text *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*:

...[T]he visual symbollogy [*sic*]...must not be seen in a simplistic sense as ‘vaginal art.’ Rather...women artists have used the central cavity which defines them as women as the framework for an imagery which allows for the complete reversal of the way in which women are seen in culture. That is: to be a woman is to be an object of contempt and the vagina, stamp of femaleness, is despised. The woman artist, seeing herself as loathed, takes that very mark of her otherness and by asserting it as the hallmark of her iconography, *establishes a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity* (1977, pp.143-144, my emphasis).

Chicago’s indication that cunt art can be a vehicle through which a woman artist can state some kind of truth about her identity suggests the existence of a female essence as a prerequisite. There is far more potency in the claim that cunt art presents a reversal or alternative of how women are perceived in culture and of presenting the mark of her otherness.

Chicago walks a fine line between essentialism and using the marker of sex to challenge the exclusionary practices of a hegemonic culture. It is possible to translate Chicago’s statement as an emphasis on each woman establishing a vehicle of communication for her

own identity through a vocalisation of her own experiences. Most critics, however, would say that she falls on the side of an essentialist position and with good cause. If cunt art is a vehicle to “establish the truth...of her identity” as an individual task, then the outcome is very different to establishing a universal truth of female identity. Judie Bamber, by contrast, makes this distinction very clear in her *Untitled* series (1994) (Fig.2a). By representing female difference she confronts female exclusion as an individual experience as each vulva is different. There is only a shallow unity built on disparate forms.

Joani Blank (1993) draws the comparison between female genitals and faces: “There is... variation in style, color, size and proportion [but]... [l]ike faces, these genitals all have the same parts in essentially the same arrangement” (Introduction, 1993). Cunt artists provide images of the vulva that, far from revolving around biological representations or male fantasy ideals (the two main or only sources of comparison for women), expose the differences that exist from woman to woman honestly and without concealed motivation or ulterior motive. This is seen most effectively in pieces such as Bamber’s *Untitled* series (1994) (Fig. 2a), Corinne’s *Cunt Coloring Book* (1975) (see Fig. 1d and 1e) and Santoro’s *Towards New Expression* (1974) (see Fig. 1a) where we are presented with a diverse and equally regarded range of vulvae. There is no hierarchy of desirability or acceptability.

In discussing the subject of “women” as a united category, a process of what she calls “saming,” Sheila Levrant de Bretteville suggests that “[w]hen you focus on what is the same, not allowing time to find out how we’re different, similarities can become exaggerated” (cited in Jones, 1996, p.249). Work such as that of Bamber, Corinne and Santoro, however, can be seen to refute this exaggeration. But Levrant de Bretteville’s statement is a problem that must be kept at bay in cunt art. A debatable success of cunt art

is that it is not afraid of emphasising difference (be that between the sexes or between women).

By insisting on difference between women, there is the implication that there is not an essence and it is easier to argue that cunt art does not reinforce essentialism. Diana Fuss writes,

...essentialism is typically defined in opposition to difference... it reminds us that a complex set of cultural, social, psychical, and historical differences, and not a set of pre-existent human essences, position and constitute the subject" (1990, p. xii).¹

Bamber undermines any notion of sameness by showing the particularities of each set of genitals in her 1994 series. Lauren Lesko and Karen LeCocq approach the "complex set of cultural, social, psychical, and historical differences" specified by Fuss, through detail of the solitary vulva as opposed to difference in numbers. The iridescent pink colouring and feather textured "hair" of LeCocq's *Feather Cunt* (1971) (see Fig. 3f) screams luxury and places this female feature as fun and, owing to associations of feather boas, suggests sensuality and softness to touch. Overall, LeCocq's piece contains playfulness, humour and a luxurious experience of the vulva but plays on conventions of cultural differences. Lauren Lesko's *Lips* (1993) (Fig. 2b), using the association of fur with "high-class" femininity, performs the disturbing juxtaposition between luxury and restraint; indulgence and shame; vanity and humility. Berger considers the traditions of European oil painting and the convention of painting women devoid of their body hair. He surmises:

Hair is associated with sexual power, with passion. The woman's sexual passion needs to be minimized so that the spectator may feel that he has the monopoly of such passion (1977, p.55).

¹ It is also important to note that Fuss highlights that this binarism can obscure the differences that exist within essentialism itself.

Following Berger's notion that hair symbolises sexual power and passion, Lesko exposes the contradiction between the passivity of high-class femininity, controlled and contained, and female sexual potency and desire.

Cunt art focuses on the marker of difference but within this central theme, contributors emphasise individuals rather than collective identity or essence. As soon as the work is labelled essentialist, there is the assumption that a female essence is the most potent constructing force of identity. I am now going to argue that examples of cunt art actually deny this and reinforce the role of culture in the formation of identity.

I would like to concentrate on several cunt art works that expose the ideas involved in the cultural manipulation of difference. Firstly, I will consider *body sign action* and *body sign action 2* (1970) by Valie Export (Fig. 2c) with issues of bodily inscription and genital signification; and secondly, I will discuss "*Cunt*" (and, to a lesser degree, "*Penis*") by Mira Schor (1993) (Fig. 2d) along with notions of the female body as a physical and cultural marker assigning role and function. These examples of cunt art explore notions of the marked male and female body, and emphasise the construction of gender roles as built on political fiction as opposed to essence.

Valie Export's *body sign action* and *body sign action 2* are composed of a coloured photograph and a black-and-white photographic rendering (respectively) of a portion of the female body from the thigh to pubic bone, with a "tattoo" of a suspender belt clasp and stocking top imprinted on the thigh. Within the frame, we are encouraged to view the biological and cultural mark of the female. In the text that accompanies the piece, Export writes,

[t]he photograph shows a tattooed garter on my thigh. The garter is used as a sign of past enslavement, as a symbol of belonging to a class that demands conditioned behavior becomes a reminiscence [*sic*] that keeps awake the problem of self-determination by others of femininity (cited in Mueller, 1994, p.33).

Export draws attention to bodily signification and brings a very literal reading of bodily inscription to bear. Export emphasises the extra layers of bodily meaning available beneath the clothing, beneath the movement of that body and yet above and beyond the marker of sex. She offers for our consideration the cultural labelling, conditioning and enforcement of gender roles.

As Export's text points out, the garter signals the enslavement of women. This is portrayed not only as a manipulation of the female body, communicated by the overtly sexual tattoo or marking, but also as infecting the skin of the female, painfully, in a manner difficult to shift. We can read the culturalisation of the female body as an issue of possessing the "primitive." In the *body sign action* pieces, the female body is "branded" like an animal, like a slave or like a prisoner of war. The sign of ownership denotes its exploitation; as a sexual object that is to be used for the satisfaction of others.

As Christy Adair points out in her extrapolation of the issues surrounding women and dance, the dancing body is presented for the pleasure of the audience (1992, p.71). The body is highlighted as an object not subject. Laura Mulvey suggests that pleasure in looking has been divided as active/male and passive/female (1989, p.19) with the woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness" (1989, p.25) indicating her object status on which male fantasies are projected. Mulvey also advocates that the male is not objectified in the same way stating that "[m]an is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like" (1989, p.20). While Mulvey's analysis of cinema is heterosexually-based, and so does not seek to point out anomalies of cinematic representation, its reasoning lies in the exposure of the patriarchal

(hence heterosexual) production and reception of male and female depictions and functions.

In *body sign action*, we can read the female body as a culturally sexualised body. Interestingly this point is made most strongly, not by the eroticism of the female pubic area displayed, but by the very skin of the female.² She is marked with a symbol that signals a controlled and structured sexual allure. The garter performs as a signification of the sexualisation of women *through manipulation*, by drawing a connection with the sexual eroticism of the suspender belt and stockings, a role to wear, a costume or guise that is “put on.” The female body, in *body sign action*, effectively embodies the manufacture of the woman as sexual object.

Additionally, Export exposes the construction behind these readings of the female body challenging the attempted naturalisation of woman as sexual object in patriarchal culture. The skin marking or tattoo signifies patriarchal inscription of the body. This inscription is shown through the process of imprinting the skin; of imprinting the female body or, rather, imprinting the ways of reading the female body. The tattoo, at once synonymous with “primitive” decoration and stereotypically with Western machismo, points to the construction of bodies.

Body sign action indicates that the pubic area is as much a sign as the tattoo and also that the vulva’s meanings are as “man-made” or as superficial as the tattoo itself.³ However,

² However, the female genitalia (or the pubic area, as the actual genitals are not exposed) within the frame in *body sign action* must also equally be read as a sign, not only because as a piece of art the framing suggests we do so but also, due to the emphasis that this piece places on signification.

³ The vulva can be posited in this work as a sign of passivity in accordance with the signification of the construction of woman or the female body as a sexual object that is traditionally inactive and able to be

we could argue that Export is suggesting that the female genitalia, while indicative of the female, becomes the secondary marker of that sex because of the weight of patriarchal constructions, exemplified by the garter, surrounding the entire female body. More than this, Export can be seen to expose the construct that the female body denotes sexual objecthood and that the vulva/vagina is the marker of the lack of subjecthood. Just as the skin in the piece is marked, literally, the female body is marked too.

Similarly, Mira Schor offers a critique of the marked male and female bodies in "*Cunt*" and "*Penis*." In considering the titles of the pieces, Schor suggests the construction and normalisation of gender roles by her inclusion of inverted commas around the terms she uses. This motif is carried through to the works themselves with two-dimensional representations of the head of a penis and the vulva framed by inverted commas.

The titles also imply that these designations are the correct labelling of the parts represented. In this case, by relating the two pieces, Schor is asserting that the vulva's name is "cunt." This also has further implications if we consider the derogatory connotations of the word "cunt." If we consider the title and image "*Cunt*," then we could assume that Schor is also pointing to the derogation of women through alignment with the vulva and the negative version of the word.

"*Cunt*" signals the construction and conditioned role that is attached to the sexual marker of the vulva. The vulva is situated between inverted commas revealing the female genitals as a category that is created and maintained both linguistically and socially. This construction is built and perceived within a patriarchal system, and therefore, we can

manipulated. *Body sign action* exposes the fictions that surround the vulva despite its taboo nature. The piece exposes the taboo itself as a constructed reaction to the female genitals.

surmise that "*Cunt*" signals that the marker of sex is as much of a cultural category as the social and highly visible female body. By extension, "*Cunt*" conveys the socialised notions of what a woman should be, appear and behave. The female is thus emphasised as a social and cultural category.

Although we could surmise that, similarly, the male is highlighted as a social and cultural category in "*Penis*," the label of "cunt" suggests that Schor is promoting the self-determination and self-definition of women. Rather than naming the piece "Vulva," Schor chooses a title that has implicitly revisionist motivations. As this project and other feminist ventures attest, the word "cunt" signals the notions of linguistic and corporeal reclamation from patriarchal derogation and definition.

Both Schor and Export's works point to a writing *of* the body and a writing *on* the body. *Body sign action* implicitly highlights the patriarchal inscription of the female body and tells the narrative of the identification of the body (*body*), the signification of that body (*sign*) and the consequent enactment of that body (*action*) according to the rules attached to that body. In addition, the literal and metaphorical inscription of the body emphasises the degree of manipulation involved and the way in which these codes are written *on* the body.

Similarly, Schor's "*Cunt*" visually writes the body as a body written on. The "speech marks" signal a culturally understood categorisation of sex. In naming the piece as she does, Schor attempts to expose and re-write those implications and limitations placed on the female body. Roswitha Mueller suggests that works such as *body sign action* play with analogies between the body and books: "Just as the first books were inscribed on

animal skins, the skin of the person is inscribed...and becomes a medium for communication” (1994, p.33). Akin to literature, Export’s body becomes the source of knowledge as well.

In this sense, the body becomes a text that is imminently readable. It is written on culturally but it is also becomes something from which the performer and the viewer can learn. It can challenge ideas and provides evidence as a text can. Both *body sign action* and “*Cunt*” can be seen to make connections between language and discourse, and the body as the site of communication. The body is seen, in these pieces, to be written on in the same way that language is open to interpretation. In this way, Export, in particular, suggests that these bodies can be re-written.

Export can be seen to offer the possibility of redefinition. If, like the tattoo, the vulva or vagina is a sign, programmed and interpreted, then like the tattoo, it can be altered by equally purposive intervention. Schor similarly provides the possibility of redefinition. In her use of inverted commas, she emphasises the construction of notions of gender and therefore points to the transitory nature of current meanings and definitions. If these examples of the female body are transitory, it suggests that they are temporary and changeable.

In highlighting a writing *of* the body and a writing *on* the body these works reinforce the role of culture in defining meanings attached to the female body. The experience of these meanings situated in patriarchal culture, however, can be theorised as supported by the phallogentric structures that dictate value and significance. As a vital part of these meanings, the system of phallogentrism must be investigated and its discourses analysed

in order to identify the underlying reasons for the negative conceptions attached to the female body. For me, these revolve around notions of lack and absence, so I will now explore the work of Irigaray who has contributed to feminist analyses of power structures, models of exclusion and Irigaray's notion that women are made effectively homeless within the symbolic order. I will examine the male parameters dictated by a phallocentric system and argue that cunt art disrupts and attempts to challenge these parameters of exclusion and lack.

Figure 2b:

Figure 2a:



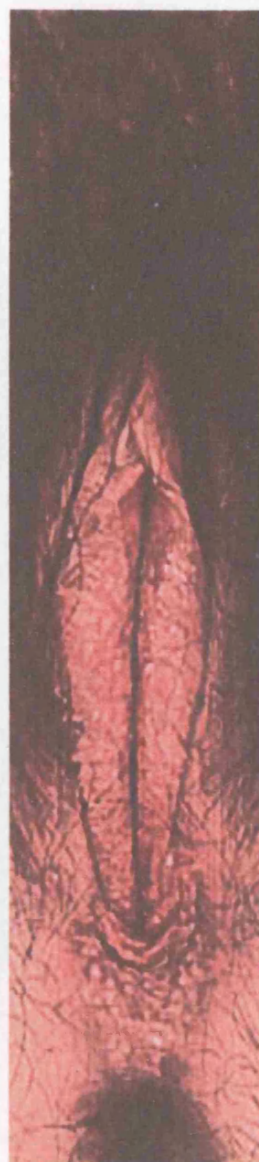
Untitled (#1)

1994



Untitled (#2)

1994



Untitled (#3)

1994

Judie Bamber, *Untitled* series, 1994

Sources from left to right:

Kandel, 1996, p.189

<<http://www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/l/j/ljj4/imagepages/image02.html>>

<http://arts.ucsc.edu/sesnon/exhibitions/outinside/bambe_untitled.gif>

Figure 2b:



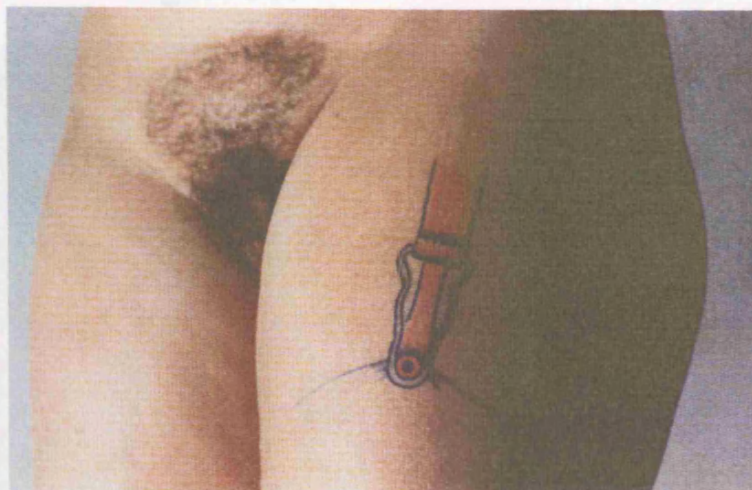
Lauren Lesko, *Lips*, 1993

Source: Jones, 1996a, p.26

Figure 2c:

(Right)
Valie Export,
body sign
action,
1970

Source: Camden Arts Centre
exhibition catalogue, 2004, p.17



(Right and below)
Valie Export,
body sign
action 2,
1970

Source (right):
<<http://www.paris-art.com/modules-modload-images-unoeil-6945.html>>

Source (below): Mueller, 1994,
p.33

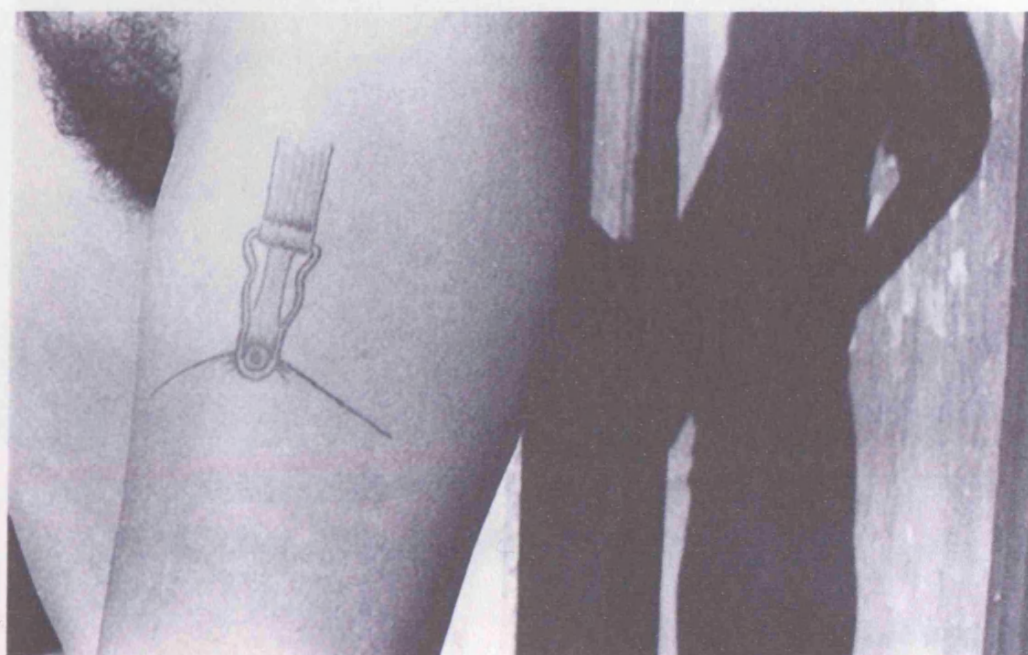
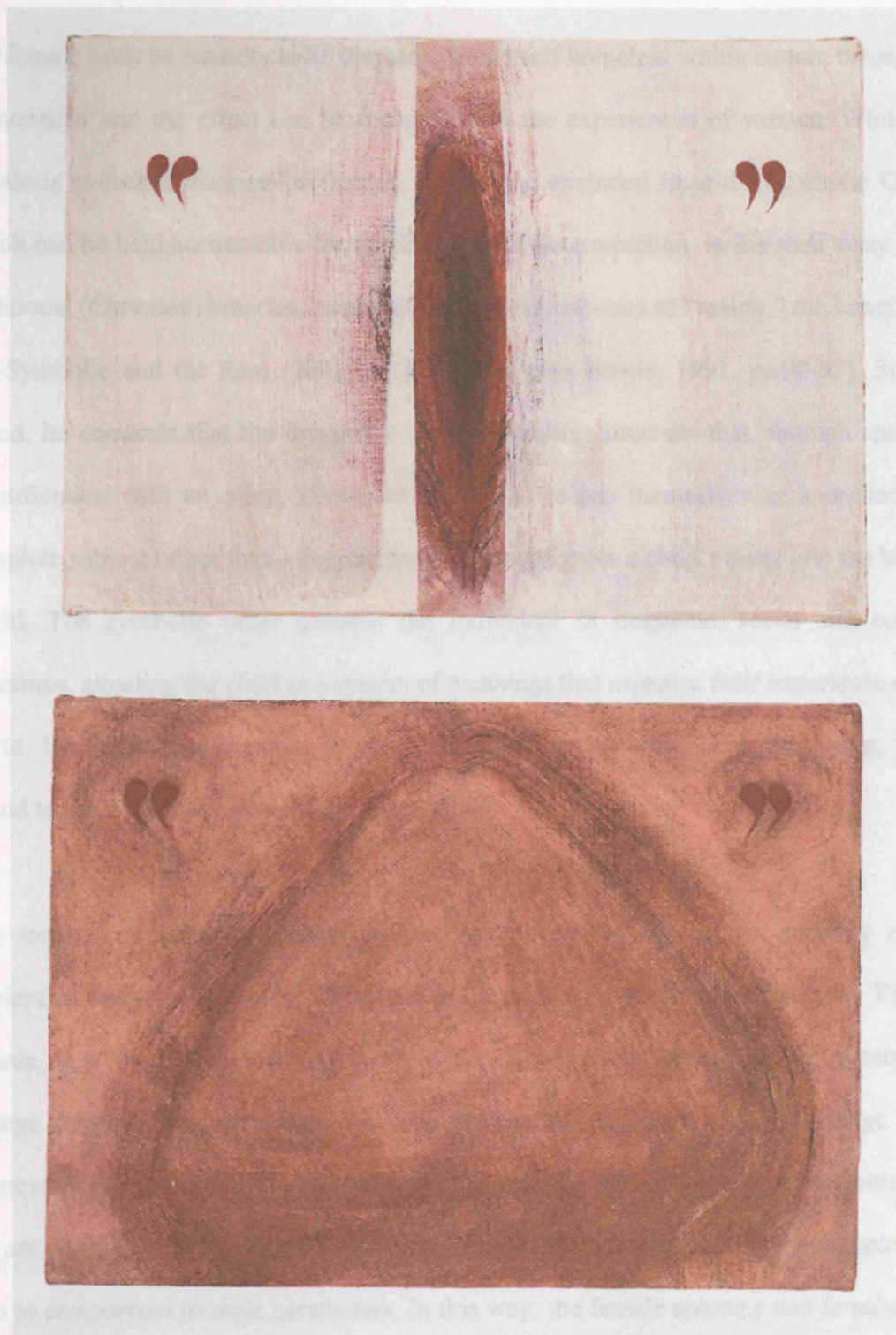


Figure 2d:



Mira Schor, "*Cunt*" 1993 and "*Penis*" 1993

Source: Jones, ed. 1996, p.16

Male Parameters and Female Homelessness:

The female body as territory to be disputed finds itself homeless within certain theoretical frameworks and the effect can be recognised in the experiences of women. While the female is excluded from self-definition, she is also excluded from the Symbolic Order, which can be held accountable for this lack of self-determination. In his shift away from traditional (Cartesian) binaries, Lacan proposed three registers of “reality;” the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real (2001, pp.70-72; see also Bowie, 1991, pp.90-95). Simply stated, he contends that the imaginary is the alienating structure that, through specular identification with an other, allows an individual to see themselves as a unified and complete subject rather than a fragmented body and signals a child’s entry into the human world. The symbolic order grounds the individual in linguistic, social and cultural structures, situating the child in a system of meanings that organise their experience of the world. Symbolic identification precedes the child’s relationship with the image, being bound to the visual by linguistic representations.

The importance of the symbolic register as a precursor lies in the primacy of the patriarchal framework within which the child begins to make identifications. For the female, it is the phallogentric symbolic order in which she must identify, constructed always through the parameters of male dominated discourse and knowledge. This framework reinforces her position as subordinate to the role of male as all definitions of her are constructed not only *within* male parameters and according to male parameters but also *in comparison to* male parameters. In this way, the female anatomy and female roles and experiences are viewed through male parameters that will consistently place her as inferior. Her body is compared to the powerful male appendage and found wanting, and

she is viewed within a framework that values phallic significance and hence always suffers in comparison. I will argue that cunt art attempts to expand these parameters to re-view the female genitalia as beautiful, to be unashamed of.

For Luce Irigaray, a feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst, the imaginary is redefined, grounding itself in Lacanian discourse but distinguished from psychoanalysis by its influence from the phenomenological tradition (Whitford, 1991, p.54). As Margaret Whitford writes,

...sometimes the imaginary is an unconscious (invisible) structure and sometimes a structure of the symbolic which can be viewed in its external and visible manifestations in myth, or works of the imagination (ibid.).

This is particularly important for an understanding of Irigaray's work, in part due to her interest in a female imaginary but also due to her work on female writing. Female writing is an important part of any feminist project such as cunt art. Within cunt art, we can trace feminist attempts at writing experience and the body while simultaneously attempting to rewrite the assumptions attached to these bodies.

In Mira Schor's "*Cunt*" and "*Penis*" works (1993) the inverted commas beg the viewer to consider the linguistic connotations of Schor's choices but in addition, as speech marks, we are also encouraged to ask who is speaking. It is possible to identify or suggest two very different voices carrying with them two very different meanings. If we interpret the voice as a patriarchal voice, we are immediately struck by the derogatory overtones being used due to the degradation of this word that has occurred. However, if we translate this voice as a feminist voice, then we are within the territory of reclamation. Similar to the use of "cunt" by Eve Ensler in *The Vagina Monologues* (1998), where she uses the

term to encourage pride and affirmation, we are called to see a re-inscription of the word to provide positive meanings associated with women and their genitalia.

As a post-Lacanian thinker, Luce Irigaray argues that the fate of psychoanalytic theory has sealed itself around the notion of one sex; that is, that female roles, desire and experience are constructed in masculine terms; that the symbolic and imaginary registers allow no room for female subjectivity. In these terms, women are “homeless” in the symbolic order (Whitford, 1991, p.69; Gatens, 1996, p.ix). For Irigaray, “[f]emale sexuality has always been conceptualised on the basis of masculine parameters” (1996, p.23) and, as such, the registers of reality laid out by Lacan and the Freudian analysis of the psyche are compromised by the notion of female lack and atrophy.

Without a separable identity, woman in the symbolic order is not represented. Rather, she is consistently other, foreign, undesignated other than via her relation to a masculine system. More precisely, she is reduced to “the economy of the Same” (Irigaray, 1996, p.74) and therefore dominated, because in this reduction her otherness is controlled and neutralised into the hierarchy of phallogocentric structures. As Irigaray points out, “to speak *of* or *about* woman may always [...] be understood as, a recuperation of the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition” (1996, p.78).⁴

It is this “nonrecognition” that can be otherwise termed “homelessness.” In particular, Irigaray refers to the nonrecognition or formation of female sexuality and claims that psychoanalysis upholds the tradition of the phallic model in terms of the sexual. She writes:

⁴ Quotations cited from Irigaray’s texts include brackets, [...], to denote editing that I have performed. Those without brackets, ..., signal a direct citation of Irigaray’s stylistic choices.

Psychoanalytic discourse on female sexuality is the discourse of truth. A discourse that tells the truth about the logic of discourse: namely that *the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects*. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one [...]. This model, a *phallic* one, shares the values promulgated by patriarchal society and culture, values inscribed in the philosophical corpus: property, production, order, form, unity, visibility...and erection (1996, p.86).

Here, Irigaray highlights the values of the phallic model that is patriarchy: in particular, property which women *are*, as opposed to *have*; production, as opposed to female reproduction; form of which the female sexual organ lacks its own; visibility, as opposed to female invisibility, culturally and genitally; and erection where no competition is posed by the incomplete *little man* of Freudianism.⁵

The phallic reference of the penis plus the idea of lack equates to the model that is male-determined plus absence of the female. Thus, the phallic modelling of the symbolic order is not simply a register wherein the symbolisation of male dominance is key but one that necessarily includes the lack or the absence of female self-determination or autonomy. In cunt art, the absence or lack of the woman is thrust into the spotlight, literally, in the case of Bamber's laughing vulva in *Tunnel of Love* (1993). Here it is exposed on a plinth, raised on a pedestal, lit and visible in its own beam of light. Schor similarly refuses the lack associated with the female, but she also challenges the "economy of the Same" by emphasising difference through comparative composition. Partnering "*Cunt*" (1993) with "*Penis*" (1993), Schor refutes the notion of one sex.

The structures of the symbolic order, therefore, have constructed the female body as negative – lacking and atrophic – according to male "ideals," and female sexuality is geared towards the fulfilment of the male. As Irigaray argues, "[w]oman, in this sexual

⁵ Danielle Bergeron maintains that for Freud, "[e]very woman was first a little man...an incomplete being" (1992, pp.92-93).

imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies" (1996, p.25), an issue directly confronted by Export's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) (see Fig. 1g). Resulting from the rejection or exclusion of a female imaginary, Irigaray maintains that "woman [is placed] in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) 'subject' [...]" (Irigaray, 1996, p.30). As Irigaray makes clear, "the role of 'femininity' is prescribed by this masculine specula(riza)tion and corresponds scarcely at all to woman's desire" (ibid.).

This waste or excess, is what Whitford, through Irigaray, also refers to as "residue" (1991, pp.66-67). The problem, according to Irigaray, is that the female in symbolic processes has the function of representing that which is outside of discourse (Whitford, 1991, p.66). Whitford elucidates this point; "For our culture, identity, logic and rationality are symbolically male, and the female is either outside, the hole, or the unsymbolizable residue" (1991, p.69). The economy of the Same necessarily excludes those who do not fulfil those categories.

The question arises, however, of how we can verify the existence of an autonomous (but individual) female sexuality, given that the conception of such self-determination is necessarily grounded in the phallic and patriarchal models of the imaginary and the symbolic. This is a paradox that surrounds any feminist intervention. The possibility of creating an alternative to phallogentricity seems difficult from within the system itself.

From Irigaray's perspective, however, women are excluded from this system, which may present blank spaces from which to create more positive imagery and associations. It is

not, perhaps, about alternatives that attention should be directed. More positive and progressive approaches could be to disrupt the smooth operations from within a system that excludes the female as a process of power and control. And so, any aim to question the system could be seen as a positive step forward in any long-term change.

A further question must be, how can a female find herself unitary in the imaginary, in Lacanian terms? That the imaginary, for Lacan, can help the individual conceive of himself or herself as whole through identification with an other, as opposed to a fragmentary self, allows for a whole view. But in identification, for the female, there must be a *hole* view rather than a whole view. The imaginary then serves to unify the male body, but consistently fragments the female body. The reflection on which she bases the constitution of the ego either omits and rejects her sexual organs or offers her only meaning and possible unity in a male fantastical economy. And what of the fragment that is focused on in cunt art? Does this serve to reinforce the female as fragmented? While the female is fragmented, there are fragments that are excluded and derogated. The vulva is such a fragment. In exposing this piece of the female anatomy, cunt art could be seen to refuse its exclusion.

Irigaray is not concerned with the question “What is woman?” but seeks to interrogate and challenge the structures that leave women homeless. And so her quest is to explore the possibility of a female discourse and imaginary in order to further her investigation into this exclusion. One method of manipulation and disempowerment within the patriarchal system, as identified by Irigaray, is the notion of woman as a commodity amongst men. This necessitates the interpretation of the economy of Same as an economy where the female is the product for exchange. I will argue that cunt art could be seen to

rebel against the rules of this economy: It provides emphasis on difference and refuses the manipulative and concealing rules of this exchange.

It is this emphasis on difference that permeates this chapter and the remainder of this chapter in particular, for where there are allegations of essentialism, the complexities of using the marker of sex are being emphasised. Difference is necessarily entangled in analyses of the economy of the Same and exclusion, for it is difference that is being excluded. I will argue, however, that the focus on difference in cunt art and in the texts of Irigaray is not essentialist or not singularly essentialist but rather is concerned with disrupting these economies. As a result, I will now explore the female body as commodity within phallogentric exclusionary economies arguing that cunt art disrupts these specific parameters. I will also argue that vulvar works, rather than employing an alignment of the vulva with nature, purposely seek to use nature as a metaphor to challenge the dominant concept of woman as cultural commodity and the hierarchical dualism of nature and culture that phallogentrism has set up.

Transaction and Territorialism:

For woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity (Irigaray, 1996, p.31).

Having considered the lack of female location within phallocentrism - the “geography” of women’s subordination - earlier in this chapter, it becomes clear that we must also speak of the manipulation of difference as a tool of the “dominant sexual economy” (Whitford, 1991, p.62) associated with exchange, transaction and commodity within dominant culture. Luce Irigaray maintains that the female is an “object of transaction” (1996, p.32). This is a male parameter that I will argue is challenged by cunt art.

If cunt art can be associated with the project of interrogating cultural fictions, we have to ask whether it can reclaim female territory and refuse being an emblem of transaction amongst men. Taken on a basic level, as Export has explored in her Expanded Cinema pieces, the female as commodity works within specific and codified boundaries. These boundaries that contain and commodify women are purposively challenged and questioned by cunt art.

As Irigaray continues, “[t]he law that orders our society is the exclusive valorization of men’s needs/desires, of exchanges among men” (1996, p.171). Order is apparently bound to the exchange of women among men; “Without the exchange of women, we are told, we would fall back into the anarchy (?) [*sic*] of the natural world...” (Irigaray, 1996, p.170). This, of course, is a particularly threatening concept for the phallocentric system and as Susan Griffin proposes, the collective patriarchal mind has developed strategies that protect itself from this anarchical state of the “natural.” She writes, “...this mind, which is

so terrified of woman and nature... must separate itself from what it fears. Now it will call itself “culture” and oppose itself to woman and nature” (1982, p.13). She continues:

For now culture shall become an instrument of revenge against the power of nature embodied in the image of a woman. And so now, within this mind which has become “culture,” woman will either be excluded, and her presence made absence...or she shall be humiliated, so that the images we come to know of woman will be degraded images (1982, pp.13-14).

The equation of woman with nature and the association of man and culture show a further level to Irigaray’s proposal that the anarchy of the natural world will reappear without the exchange of women. Effectively this hypothesis protects the phallogentric system from the “anarchy” of women and perpetuates the notion of woman as a commodity to be exchanged, through warning of patriarchal disruption and, implicitly, the disruption of male dominance and the manipulation of women. If women are excluded or made absent through their alignment with nature within the “opposite” of culture then it would be a potent manoeuvre to highlight this power configuration for disruptive effect. With this notion in mind, I am going to argue that cunt artists use the metaphor of nature as a tool of disruption.

The “anarchy” of women in this Irigarayan description finds full sway in Corinne’s *Isis* series (1984 - 1986) (Fig. 2e, 2f and 2g). *Isis in the Sand* aligns the explicit female body with nature and the powerful and dangerous, yet beautiful landscape. In *Isis in the Sky*, we encounter the calmness and serenity of her vulvar landscapes. The piece combines this serenity with a sense of foreboding as the labial folds create darkness and shadows that suggest the threat of storms. The dead wood and fallen tree in the foreground reinforce these undertones, emphasising the inevitable and unapologetic force of nature with which the female genitalia is being aligned. We are given a sense of endurance through these

works that can be translated to the female body. The female body is that which has endured exchanges and, yet, remains defiant through these manipulations.

Rather than aligning the vulva with nature, cunt art uses nature as a metaphor that seeks to challenge the “order” and “logic” that are inherent in phallogentric structures. The ideas of order and logic are dichotomised against the chaos and randomness of nature within phallogentrism, and the female, through her equation with nature, is culturally controlled to stabilise these notions of chaos. This is the anarchy that Irigaray, in some respects, refers to. But Irigaray is also using the metaphor of nature to highlight the dualisms inherent within the singular economy. Through repetition of the dualistic structures of culture/nature and man/woman and the female lack of situation within the economy of the Same, Irigaray and cunt artists are highlighting the phallogentric models of exclusion and categorisation to disrupt these parameters. The metaphor itself stands for the manipulation inherent within this system and is used to emphasise these structures as opposed to replacing them. While the binary of this metaphor in its emphasis on culture/nature could be seen as problematic because it falls into the terrain of oppositions which are inherently phallogentric, the alignment of nature, rather, uses Irigaray’s notions of mimesis and repetition as a tool of subversion.⁶

Using Marxist analysis of value, Irigaray points out that as commodities, women are two things simultaneously: reproductive, “*utilitarian objects*” and “*bearers of value*” in exchange (1996, p.175);⁷ or rather, at the same time, fall into “categories of usefulness and exchange value” (1996, p.176). However, as Irigaray points out, “[t]he value of a

⁶ These strategies of mimesis and repetition will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 6, Mythical Bodies.

⁷ I have reproduced Irigaray’s italics as a way of imitating Irigaray’s own emphasis as appropriate.

woman always escapes: black continent, hole in the symbolic, breach in discourse...[...] *Woman thus has value only in that she can be exchanged*" (ibid.). Value from this point on is only relative to an external party. She cannot be grasped; therefore her value as a commodity does not lie in her, as the object, but in her comparison, by others (men), to other objects (women) (ibid.).

In these Irigarayan terms, that "woman" can only find value in comparison to other commodities proves the "black continent" that she is. She is mysterious and unknowable, not only to those who would "colonise" her, but even to herself under patriarchal rule for there is no place for her. She is "presence made absence" as Susan Griffin has stated (1982, p.14), or else she is represented only as humiliated or degraded (ibid.), an appropriate patriarchal commodity. As Griffin dramatically summarises: "She must be silenced. She must be mastered, for the dark forces which she ignorantly holds within her body are as perilous as the forces of nature" (1982, p.13).

And it is this darkness that appears to be a recurring metaphor in phallogentric formulations of the female body as witnessed in texts by Griffin and Irigaray. While nature is subordinated to the male/culture dictum, so the female body is as threatening to male security as the anarchy of nature is to the hierarchical devices of cultural control. In order to neutralise the peril posed by the female, she is mastered and manipulated and made into a suitably "safe" commodity. She remains a dark continent (undiscovered terrain, uncomprehended land?), threatening but controlled by exclusion from the symbolic order and made profitable for others (men) but not herself.

This “safe” commodification is shattered by cunt art. So too is this so-called threat exposed and confronted. While Corinne can be seen to link the female body with the perilous forces of nature (in Griffin’s words), Export engages the cultural safety measures set up and confronts the audience with the locus of the female as dark continent, that is avoided so purposively in cinematic tradition.

As Irigaray points out “the patriarchal order is indeed the one that functions as the *organization and monopolization of private property to the benefit of the head of the family*” (1996, p.83). As property to be owned, or as a commodity to be exchanged, there is no profit for women themselves. In some ways, these ideas of property and commodity are metaphorical, but there are some examples of the conversion of these notions in the real experiences of women. That patriarchy is based on the definitive quality of the male heir and the male head of the family cannot be disputed and while social systems of property and civil rights have changed a great deal over the past fifty years, the common motif that can best exemplify any notion of women as property is the tradition of the allocation of the male surname to both members of a married couple and their offspring.

As Irigaray writes,

Absent from ourselves: we’ll be spoken machines, speaking machines. Enveloped in proper skins, but not our own. Withdrawn into proper names, violated by them. Not yours, not mine. We don’t have any. We change names as men exchange us, as they use us, use us up (1996, p.205).

There is the increasing trend that some couples, if choosing to marry, resist the conventional name change in favour of keeping both family names intact, but the existence of such a tradition speaks volumes about cultural perceptions of marriage and women, when the roots of such a convention are considered. While traditionally denoting the exchange of a woman from her father (and her father’s name) to her husband (and her

husband's name), this conventional system invokes the notion of woman as property to be exchanged between men.

As mentioned earlier, the woman's value as an object of transaction lies in her comparison, by an external party, to other commodities. But her own comparison of herself to others, in seeking identification away from her own fragmentary experience of herself, is perhaps less effective in gauging her worth. By exclusion from the symbolic order and by denial of a female imaginary, women, as mentioned earlier, are left to seek imaginary identification with other dark continents, with other similarly "lacking" individuals, with other women, with the Other. She finds herself affirming her otherness in an attempt to conjure up her own wholeness. We can provisionally say that the comparison of her fragmentary self with other women reveals her as incomplete. There is no façade of unity. And any comparison with men reveals to her, in phallogentric terms, her lack. The drive for wholeness exposes the hole constructed in her.

Cunt art exposes the parameters that allow women to be perceived as lack by highlighting difference and therefore critiquing the phallogentric economies that produce female as commodity and sexual monism. I have argued that the specific boundaries that allow for the commodification of women are disrupted by cunt art in the visibility of the vulva. I am now going to focus on the visibility of the vulva within this context of male parameters and examine the potential for the disruption of sexual indifference within phallogentric structures of absence and lack.

Figure 2e:



Tee A. Corinne, *Isis in the Sand*, 1986

Source: Bright and Posener, eds. 1998, p.109

Figure 2g:

Figure 2f:



Tee A. Corinne, *Isis in the Sky*, 1986

Source: Bright and Posener, eds. 1998, p.45

Figure 2g:



Tee A. Corinne, *Redwood Isis*, 1984

Source: Bright and Posener, eds. 1998, p.108

Genital Vagrancy:

There is no place for the female in the symbolic order. Similarly and relationally, the female genitals are excluded from phallogentric systems of acceptance and visibility:

[...] [H]er entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies [...] her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation. While her body finds itself thus eroticised, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat [...] her sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see* [...]. [T]his nothing-to-see has to be excluded, rejected, from such a scene of representation. Women's genitals are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their "crack" (Irigaray, 1996, p.26).

Reminding us of Susan Griffin's formulation of "presence made absence," the invisibility of the female genitalia follows the predicament of the female generally; exclusion from the symbolic order and manipulated visual economy that works toward the least threatening presentation for the male. In this section I will consider the effect of the visibility of the vulva in cunt art works, with a discussion of Zoe Leonard's untitled installation presented at the ninth *Documenta* exhibition, and whether vulvar pieces work towards rectifying the absence of women's genitalia in the symbolic. I will argue, via Kandel and the metaphor of the veil she presents, that cunt art does not seek inclusion within the exclusionary structures of phallogentrism primarily but rather attempts disruption of the sexual indifference within it.

Susan Kandel, in her article "Beneath the Green Veil: The Body in/of New Feminist Art," suggests a theory of the body in the metaphor of the veil. Introducing her metaphorical site of the veil, she refers to the Muslim veil that signifies "female containment" and symbolic "invisibility" in terms of culture as a male sphere (1996, pp.194-195). Similarly, via Lyotard, she highlights the "unpresentability" of the female genitalia (1996, p.196) and proposes the ethos of feminist artists working in the 1990s: "it is impossible," she

writes “to construct an image of the female body in the absence of the veil, in the absence of some kind of mediation, however metaphorical” (1996, p.195).

My interpretation of her theory of the veil is one that may not sit easily alongside her own explanations. Unnecessarily vague and ambiguous, Kandel does not provide a scheme of metaphoricity that is easily applicable due to the unclear proposition contained within her work. But for my purposes, the theory of the veil as a protective mechanism is useful reading. That the veil contains the female and obscures her as symbolically invisible, not only links to the notion of the fetishised object and the phallic object but is also transferable to the exclusion of female genitalia that Luce Irigaray conveys.

Kandel discusses Zoe Leonard’s untitled installation piece, submitted as part of the ninth *Documenta* exhibition in Kassel (1992), as an example of lifting the veil on the female body. Leonard’s installation (Fig. 2h) consisted of eighteenth-century portraits of women juxtaposed with black and white photographs of female genitalia being intimately touched, in what can be seen to be an alluring commentary on the disappearance of the explicitly female body in the conventions of culture.⁸ The veiled body, veiled by traditional perceptions of femininity, is concealed to ensure female containment and invisibility.

The horror and fear, which, according to psychoanalysis, accompanies the sight of the female genitals (see Freud, 1950, pp.105-106), must be excluded by concealing this part and in the process, allows the female body to remain an object for possession and contemplation without threat. Leonard disrupts the viewing imperative associated with

⁸ The hand touching the genitalia is, by implication, the hand of the woman photographed. By virtue of the position of the hand, there is the implication of masturbation or of the woman exploring her own anatomy.

such examples of high art by rejecting the concealment that permits the unfettered gaze. She continues her disruption of perspectives by highlighting the female body as the locus of art while emphasising the omission in most conceptions of this body.

There are further implications in Leonard's work. I would suggest that there are serious connotations involved in the inclusion of the female genitals being touched. Reminiscent of masturbation and self-examination/stimulation, as opposed to being touched by an external party, the topic of female pleasure and desire seems to arise from the presence of the hand, which sits uncomfortably with the modest and restrained women it accompanies. The "uncomfortable" mix, for myself as a viewer, is an exciting and amusing one rather than creating a feeling of uneasiness.

The juxtaposition proffers a defiance against conventionally formulated notions of femininity; defying the restraint and containment that the disappearance of the female genitals attempts to create. Impressively, the exposure of explicit imagery performs the subjectivity of the respectable and proper women transporting her from the object to be seen to the subject of her own pleasures and desires. The spectatorial position of fantasy and desire is undermined and disrupted by the traditionally secret but now empowering statement of female sexuality.

The presence of female genitalia almost undresses the women where they sit, but the fantasy aspect of peeling away the layers of clothing is denied to the desiring and furtive male gaze and is, instead, decisively replaced with the part that is consistently camouflaged by male fantasy narratives. Images of women consistently work to hide the female genitals. Psychoanalytically speaking, the male fetish allows the repression of the

fear produced by the sight of the female genitals and they are consistently made consumable by the narrative and context of (male) fantasies. Again, images of women also work to hide female desire within male fantasy.

So, while in many examples of cunt art, the genitalia are visible, they are not actually present in terms of the phallogentric system that insists on presence-made-absence. The vulva is present in a material sense but is absent in cultural inventories of representation. That the metaphorical veil may be lifted does not mean that it can be removed culturally. Such representations will, after all, always be within a culture that refuses to acknowledge that which risks destabilising the status quo.

The phallogentric notion of “the horror of nothing to see” means that while female genitalia must be covered and concealed, when it is seen there is still a level of invisibility; in part, denial and in part, the lack of penis. In Irigaray’s terms, the phallogentric system is one of sameness and hierarchically models valuation on a system of male genital perfection; the female is homeless and does not have a sexual organ. She is lacking the male appendage. Genitally speaking, her position is that of beggar, waiting to be endowed by that of a male counterpart. But for Irigaray, the feminist response is far more defiant: “So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is *plural*” (1996, p.28).

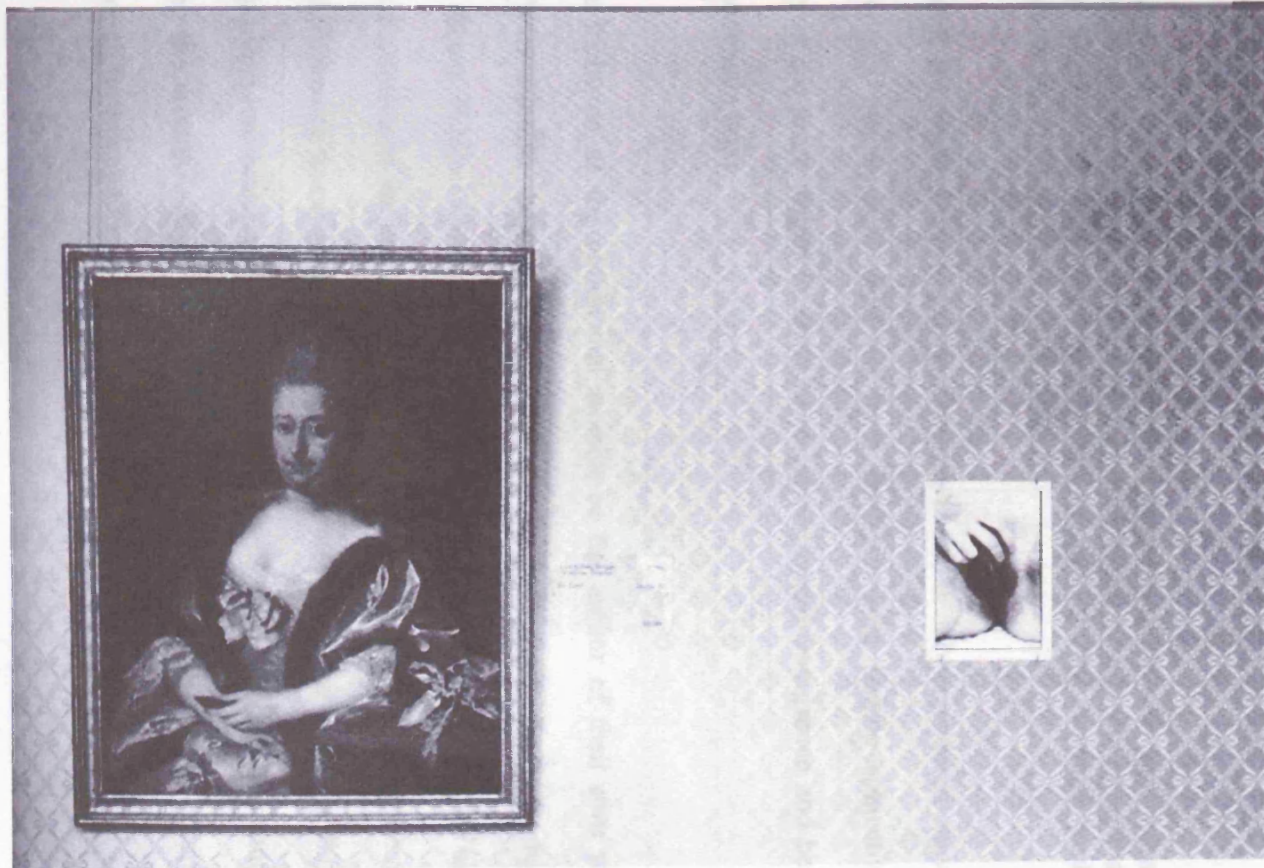
In arguing that cunt art seeks to disrupt this economy of the Same we can maintain that such performances of differences are not essentially about a collective female identity provided in lieu of having a vulva, but about disruptions to this cultural economy:

They should not put it, then, in the form “What is woman?” but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side [*sic*] (Irigaray, 1996, p.78).

Zoe Leonard’s 1992 *Documenta* offering does just this. She disrupts standard viewing processes and critiques the disappearance of female genitalia, and female pleasure and subjectivity in patriarchal modes of containment.

Rather than suggesting that Leonard’s work successfully replaces notions of sexual monism with female inclusion in the symbolic order, I am arguing that Leonard achieves an interpretation of this phallogentric structure as Irigaray suggests. By including lack in terms of the female genitals and in subject status (in presenting the vulva, phallogentrically defined as lack, and lack of subjectivity in terms of the women/art objects in the traditional portraits) and proposing the woman as author of her own pleasure (in the vulva images), Leonard disrupts the simple accommodation of the installation into phallogentric structures of nonrecognition. Leonard critiques the lack that she presents. In this sense, I am arguing that cunt art does not seek immediate inclusion within the exclusionary structures of phallogentrism but rather attempts the disruption of the sexual indifference within it.

Figure 2h:



Zoe Leonard, Untitled exhibition, 1992

Source: Kandel, 1996, p.191

Nomadism and Subjectivity:

Even if we refrain from invoking the hystericization of her entire body, the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined – in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness (Irigaray, 1996, p.28).

Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? (Hartsock, cited in Brook, 1999, p.9).

If the female is homeless within the symbolic order and is only considered object and not subject within this system, then the need for theorising female subjectivity more positively is the more urgent in order to recognise female experience and begin to re-define the female body.

With the inclusion of the notion that women be the author of their own pleasure in Leonard's installation, there is the important idea of the female speaking subject within feminist theory. While I have argued that the most important contribution of cunt art has been the disruption of the male parameters of absence and exclusion, the communication of sexual difference has engaged situated female voices in these works. In this section I am going to explore feminist theories of the female subject and argue that cunt art, while disrupting the economy of the Same, communicates individual female experiences and stories which further challenge female exclusion.

The idea of subjectivity has been the point of conjecture and debate since the age of antiquity. Throughout philosophical inquiry, women have consistently been perceived as

the object of male consideration, the object against which the male casts his reason, and the opposite of male activity and strength. Genevieve Lloyd writes:

In the Pythagorean table of opposites, formulated in the sixth century BC, femaleness was explicitly linked with the unbounded – the vague, the indeterminate – as against the bounded – the precise and clearly determined. The Pythagoreans saw the world as a mixture of principles associated with determinate form, seen as good, and others associated with formlessness... which were seen as bad or inferior. There were ten such contrasts in the table: limit/unlimited, odd/even, one/many, right/left, male/female, rest/motion, straight/curved, light/dark, good/bad, square/oblong. Thus “male” and “female”, like the other contrasted terms, did not function as straightforwardly descriptive classifications. “Male”, like the other terms on its side of the table, was construed as superior to its opposite... (1998, p.3).

And so, woman as formless/passive/object/inferior has permeated western thought “...in ways that both exploit and reinforce long-standing associations” of form and matter: reason and the remainder (Lloyd, 1998, p.5). As Lloyd states, “...the feminine has been associated with what rational knowledge transcends, dominates or simply leaves behind” (1998, p.2). In the past century, the focus on women’s position in society and feminist concerns have reinforced the quest to establish the subject and, in particular, it has been a feminist task to verify female subjecthood as a conceptual companion to the male subject.

Cunt art has been a similar project. While women have been cast in the role of the sexual object of projected male fantasies, many cunt art contributions have attempted to disrupt this and propose the female as a speaking subject. Such works have aimed at communicating female experience, re-telling stories and re-educating women. While this has most obviously and commonly focused around the reclamation of the female body it has also revolved around shared experiences, including opinions and desires, and women expressing their identities and their personal beliefs.

Any debate about subjectivity must come down to the politics of identity. In part this is due to the allocation of subject/object categorisation and the tradition of male mastery and a universal male philosophical approach. Thinkers are the subjects of their thoughts and so, with little surprise, the subject has been traditionally the position of the male with the female occupying a station of object towards which those thoughts are directed. Hence, women have been the object of desire, to be controlled, but seldom the subject of such affects. Simone de Beauvoir details some of these features in *The Second Sex* (1969). She writes:

Woman...is...required by society to make herself an erotic object. The purpose of the fashions to which she is enslaved is not to reveal her as an independent individual, but rather to offer her as prey to male desires (1969, p.263).

Beauvoir later states:

She is not familiar with the use of masculine logic...masculine reasoning is quite inadequate to the reality with which she deals...for she has been taught to accept masculine authority. So she gives up criticizing, investigating, judging for herself, and leaves all this to the superior caste (1969, p.331).

The notion of the subject can be unfolded in two interdependent ways. We can consider the subject of discourse, of knowledge, of power and of empowerment. But we can also speak of subjectivity as identity-related facets, as perspective, as bearer of economic, socio-political and cultural signs of privilege. It is not surprising to find that the privileged subjects have also been the subjects of discourse and power.⁹ According to Irigaray, language and the discourse through which it is regulated and empowered has been phallo(go)centrically dominated, and Rosi Braidotti refers to “a one-way pattern” or “the law of the One” that also allows for the subordination of the feminine (1994, p.81).

⁹ The privileged subject has traditionally been the white, heterosexual, middle class male.

According to the logic of “other-than” (Braidotti, 1994, p.78), the female is other-than the accepted male norm and hence has become “a figure of devalued difference” (Braidotti, 1994, p.80). In this scheme, we can identify the reasoning behind traditional accounts of male as subject and female as other or object. For feminism, a major task has been to uncover female subjectivity and redefine the formulations of subjectivity, in order to achieve new and positive ways of establishing and conceiving of the female subject.

Rosi Braidotti writes of the numerous feminist redefinitions of subjectivity and the quest for an alternative view of the female subject as a main issue at stake in recent feminist practice (1994, pp.3-4). Braidotti chooses the *nomadic* subject for this purpose. Nomadism poses subjectivity as a process that rejects the fixity of traditional binary hierarchies that have posited the male subject as normative comparison for non-male or non-white or non-heterosexual identities. She describes her own conceptualisation of subjectivity as nomadism, writing, “[t]he nomad is my own figuration of a situated, postmodern, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject in general and of the feminist subject in particular” (1994, p.4). She continues: “[i]n so far as axes of differentiation such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and others intersect and interact with each other in the constitution of subjectivity, the notion of the nomad refers to the simultaneous occurrence of many of these at once” (ibid.).

So this notion of nomadic subjectivity is based on the point where the individualistic elements meet. Differing from notions of migration or exile (common to the work of Virginia Woolf, 1938; Hélène Cixous, 1983; Luce Irigaray, 1996; and Seyla Benhabib, 1992), Braidotti favours the metaphor of the nomad as a model of subjectivity and consciousness that signals a move away from exclusionary modes and privileged sites

involved in identity formation (1994, p.23). For Braidotti, the aim is to seek a way to “move beyond the dualistic conceptual constraints and the perversely monological mental habits of phallocentrism” (1994, p.2). Her route to finding ways out of the phallocentric model of subjectivity is through the notion of myth, of imagination, as a “way out of political and intellectual stasis” (1994, p.4).

Within Braidotti’s scheme, the nomadic subject is a mythic figure, that is a figure of the imagination (not imaginary but imagined), and any theoretical framework is similarly a political fiction (ibid.). She chooses the term “fiction” as an alternate option to the “theoretical” because she views the theoretical as specifically philosophical which is a condition of the static postmodern.¹⁰ In classifying the political fiction of the subject and of the theoretical framework, she highlights the historical and specifically perspectival aspect of phallocentric formulations of subjectivity. The nomad, according to Braidotti, is an iconoclastic figure that unsettles these traditional modes of philosophical thought (ibid.). The nomadic subject is defined by their subversion of conventions (1994, p.5).

She writes;

[T]he nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour... (ibid.).

The strength of her concept of the nomadic subject lies in the intersections of the elements that constitute subjectivity. This understanding of the subject provides a fragmentary but individually unified model of the subject that challenges the monosemious white, heterosexual, male subject of a phallo(go)centric system. In addition, this subject could be

¹⁰ Does she not fulfil the theoretical stasis she speaks of or tries to deny or avoid? By using the by-words and language of the system she condemns, she becomes the bearer and reinforces the maintenance of that system. She claims, “my work at this time focuses on the intersection of identity, subjectivity, and epistemology from a poststructuralist angle of sexual difference” (1994, p.31). To use the term “poststructuralist,” she ensures the theoretical framework is understood. Indeed, to focus on issues of identity, subjectivity and epistemology she relies on cultural understanding of these words that in turn depend on the theoretical background that each brings with it.

seen to constitute a position of resistance. Braidotti writes that “a radical feminist postmodernist practice requires attention to be paid both to identity as a set of identifications [her nomadic subject] and to political subjectivity as the quest for sites of resistance” (1994, p.22).

Her intention in promoting political subjectivity as a point of divergent alternatives relies on two factors. Firstly she views the political subject as the “iconoclastic, mythic figure” (1994, p.4) that allows distance from, or subverts, the conventions of subjectivity and hence the place to consider alternatives. Secondly, she refers to a critical consciousness that resists the normative modes of behaviour. The nomadic subject is the site of resistance in conceiving subjectivity. In this way we can recognise the disparate elements that define subjecthood which, in turn, resist the hierarchy implicit in traditional models of subjectivity.

In thinking of the female as homeless in the symbolic order, or perhaps more specifically, the female subject as homeless, nomadism gives a more positive attitude to the process of having to belong somewhere; of creating a base for the formation of identity and identification among individual but equally homeless women. But this is not necessarily the view that Braidotti promotes. While we may be able to draw links between Irigaray’s premise of the female as excluded from the symbolic order, as homeless, and Braidotti’s model of nomadism, Braidotti herself rebukes the notion of the homeless. She writes,

The nomad does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity (1994, p.22, my emphasis).

For Braidotti, nomadism is not essentially about being homeless but in having the ability, or lack of fixity, to recreate your home everywhere (1994, p.16). It is a “performative metaphor” (1994, p.6) that allows for resistance to hegemony and room for imaginative configurations.

While links between Irigaray and Braidotti may seem tenuous, there are similarities in terms of approach to discourse and the phallogocentrism of dominant “knowledge.” Braidotti refuses metaphors of exile and homelessness as evasive attempts to unite women that are not productive (1994, p.21). However, Braidotti refers to nomadism as “an invitation to dis-identify ourselves from the sedentary phallogocentric monologism of philosophical thinking” (1994, p.30) and a point at which “to start cultivating the art of disloyalty to civilization” (ibid.). The triggers are similar for both Irigaray and Braidotti, the partiality of language and discourse. As Schor highlights in her works “*Cunt*” and “*Penis*,” (1993) (Fig. 2d), these words are so much more than the categories, or titles, or terms they appear to be on paper.

For Braidotti, however, the issue at stake is the confinement of male identification in what she terms “high theory” (1994, p.33). She points out how female academics aspire to a male-dominant writing style in order to be respected as theoreticians and she highlights the exclusionary model of discourse upon which philosophical thinking takes place (1994, pp.29-30; p.33; p.37): “Philosophy creates itself through what it excludes as much as through what it asserts” (1994, p.33). My own avoidance of male-dominant writing styles has involved the employment of repetition, the figuration of the nomad that I have embraced and the labial metaphor of folding in that has influenced the choice of structure for this thesis. While the success of my approach has been diluted by the restrictions

placed on my writing in lieu of the assessment process involved in doctorate research, Braidotti's strategies are more wide ranging. Braidotti seeks to find a format of consciousness and subjectivity that resists such exclusionary practice and embraces inclusiveness.¹¹

This formulation is one that conceives of the subject not as defined by binaries or hierarchies or exclusions but defined by identity matrices that have many alternative and varying elements. This multiplicity of the nomadic subject allows for the recognition of sexual difference but is not solely based on notions of the economy and valuation system of the Same. In this way, she denies that any project that focuses on sexual difference is essentialist. She writes,

The starting point for most feminist redefinitions of subjectivity is a new form of materialism, one that develops the notion of corporeal materiality by emphasizing the embodied and therefore sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject... The body, or the embodiment, of the subject is to be understood neither as a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological (1994, pp.3-4).

As Braidotti points out, to speak *as a woman* is not to speak with a particular essence, but rather to express the nuances and complexities that are derived from a variety of experiences (1994, p.4). And so, a nomadic figuration of female subjectivity is not about asserting a female essence but rather seeks to expose a variety of subjects, a variety of experiences and a variety of voices as legitimate and unmediated by concepts of subjectivity dependent on comparison. Similarly, we could assert that cunt art works individually to communicate an expression of the performer and artist. To amalgamate all vulvar works as essentialist or to group them and condemn them as a whole, denies each

¹¹ It is possible to say that Irigaray also challenges "high theory" and male-dominated academic styles in her own writing style. While it is clear that she must include "high theory" in order to challenge it, she clearly attempts to find a voice that is different to traditional academic writing techniques.

feminist attempt unfairly and refuses the variety of experiences and stories that they convey.

For Braidotti, the mode of nomadism is transdisciplinary in theoretical style and as such, it allows for the crossing of boundaries, the practice of borrowing concepts and the employment of different speaking voices (1994, pp.36-37). These stylistic features enable a feminist position that dismisses the absolute authority of the (male) theorist/speaker and allows for a multiplicity of links to be drawn between disciplines and voices. This is not to undermine the authority of the feminist speaker, but instead refuses the isolated genius of masculine subjects. For feminism, this signals a rebellion against the universal truths inspired by the phallogocentric philosophical tradition and emphasises the discussion, negotiation and contradictions implicit in any position. This is emblematic of nomadic subjectivity as a process and as a multi-faceted concept.

The notion of borrowing concepts, of taking them from their context and using them within other work, is what Braidotti refers to as a similar process to the Deleuzian technique of “deterritorialization” (1994, p.37). The features of nomadism such as the reappropriation of ideas and of using different voices not only opens up feminist writing but expands our view of writing artistically on the body and through the body.

In this section I have explored feminist theories of the female subject through the work of Braidotti and I have commented on the communication in cunt art of individual female experiences and stories which challenge the parameter of female exclusion. I will conclude this chapter by comparing the ideas of Braidotti and Irigaray that have been discussed. While I have argued that cunt art disrupts the phallogocentric notion of one sex, I

will now return to notions of essentialism that this representation of difference has been accused of, previously introduced earlier in this chapter, and consider the complexities that surround cunt art in the light of “double gestures” (Schneider, 1997, p.36) that have been identified in feminist work. I will argue that cunt art uses Irigaray’s notions of “playful repetition” and unveiling (Irigaray, 1985, p.76) to critique the male parameters that have led to women’s exclusion within phallocentrism and the negativity of the vulva.

Homing in:

The traditional choice within feminism seems to be on the one hand to overcome gender dualism toward a neutralization of differences, or on the other hand to push the difference to the extreme, oversexualizing it in a strategic manner. In my own version of sexual difference as a nomadic strategy, I have opted for the extreme affiliation of sexed identity as a way of reversing the attribution of differences in a hierarchical mode (Braidotti, 1994, p.169).

For Irigaray, women are separated from their essence, homeless within the Symbolic Order. In reaction to this state, Irigaray attempts to see ways to reunite women with their female essence.¹² To do this, she homes in on the body. For Irigaray speaking of and through the female body is the first course of action to remedy female homelessness, therefore we can surmise the equation of body and home. The economy of the Same can be subverted through the marker of difference.

But further than actioning the marker of sex, Irigaray champions a female essence which is the danger of this position. For Braidotti, the danger would be the fixity of the model suggested by Irigaray. Braidotti refuses the idea of establishing identity on any notion of home. Along with the fixity attached to home, home also implies a level of domesticity, a notion that collides with Braidotti's position. With the notion of locating and building on home, the idea of identity as fluid and in motion rejects static roles such as that of homemaker as it has been conceived traditionally. Asserting pre-determination, which an essence fundamentally does, suggests a stability of female nature that could be translated as fixity.

¹² However, Braidotti proposes that Irigaray's essentialism is strategic, that her mimesis is tactical and intends to produce difference (see Braidotti, 1994, p.184).

While positions such as Irigaray's put forth the notion that women have been separated from their essence and their bodies and hence, unwittingly, forced into a social model that undermines and derogates women, these same positions enforce a universalism that could equally curtail and limit the development of notions of female identity. The allusion to domesticity and traditional binaries of home and culture falls into the trap that Braidotti warns about. Braidotti's insistence on the avoidance of "dualistic conceptual constraints" (1994, p.2) can be translated to Irigaray's belief in the reunion of the female with her body providing a home.

Braidotti, in the opening statement, is referring to the pejorative conceptualisation of difference in phallogocentrism. For Braidotti, however, such accounts should not act as a deterrent to formulating feminist theories of sexual difference. She writes:

One is both born and constructed as a *Woman*/'woman'; the fact of being a woman is neither merely biological nor solely historical, and the polemic edge of the debate should not, in my opinion, go on being polarized in either of these ways... What is at stake in the debate is...the positive project of turning difference into a strength, of affirming its positivity (1994, p.187).

The framework that Braidotti employs is one of prioritising sexual difference, similar in some ways to Irigaray's invocation of the female body, which clearly situates the binaries that she suggests it is time to move on from. Although clarifying that nomadic feminism is the start of providing alternatives to dualistic constraints, Braidotti importantly points out the importance of thinking through sexual difference (often conceived as a binary system), as a type of essentialism that is not wholly essentialist.

There is nothing deterministic about the assertion of a feminist subject as a sexed subject of enunciation ('I,' woman, think and therefore I say that I, woman, am). Being-a-woman is not the prediction of a prescriptive essence, it is not a causal proposition capable of predetermining the outcome of the becoming of each individual identity. It pertains rather to the facticity of my being, it is a fact, it is like that: 'I' am sexed... My 'being-a-woman'...is one of the constitutive elements of my subjectivity. Sexual difference is ontological, not accidental, peripheral, or contingent upon socioeconomic conditions; that one be socially

constructed as a female is evident, that the recognition of the fact may take place in language is clear, but that the process of construction of femininity fastens and builds upon anatomical realities is equally true (1994, p.186-187).

It must be noted that the simple process of drawing commonalities together does not produce an essentialist position. As Braidotti points out, the politics of location is of immense importance: “Attention to the *situated* as opposed to the universalistic nature of statements is the key idea” (1994, p.163).

For theorists such as Diana Fuss, Braidotti’s model is not essentialist in so much as she does not provide the foundation of “...the invariable and fixed...” (Fuss, 1990, p.xi). Her nomadic subject thrives on disparity and fluidity. But, for Braidotti this distinction is less clear. In a section entitled “Essentialism with a Difference” Braidotti, like Fuss, considers hasty anti-essentialist positions to be unproductive and “conceptually short-sighted” (1994, p.185).

As Braidotti proposes, configuring subjectivity and identity in binary oppositions is an innately essentialist project, which is where her project diverges from essentialist models. Identity and subjectivity, for Braidotti, are multi-faceted. While Braidotti is not working from an essentialist position, she also rejects anti-essentialism to some degree:

The starting point for the project of sexual difference...remains the political will to assert the specificity of the lived, female bodily experience; the refusal to disembody sexual difference into a new allegedly ‘postmodern’ and ‘anti-essentialist’ subject, and the will to reconnect the whole debate on difference to the bodily existence and experience of women (1994, p.160).

For Braidotti then, anti-essentialism is a disembodiment of the subject.¹³

¹³ There is a contradiction in terms that is implied by this extension. The implication is that embodied subjectivity is first step towards re-conceiving the dualistic modes of phallogocentrism. By comparison, therefore, we could suggest the alignment of anti-essentialist positions with the stasis of dualism, which sits in direct contrast with the dualities that Braidotti insists are inherent in essentialism.

The dualistic constraints and binary oppositions that Braidotti is cautious of, however, find full sway in my own polarisation of some elements of Irigaray and Braidotti, and essentialist and anti-essentialist summaries define this chapter. I am not the nomadic thinker that Braidotti exalts. However, neither is she. Braidotti is sympathetic about the restrictions placed upon and categorisations that divide feminist thought. Importantly, Braidotti's nomadic feminism allows for these different approaches to coexist as a forum for discussion and progression. She encourages room for contradictions internally and by implication, suggests that contradictions in feminist positions can also be productive.¹⁴

In direct contrast to the dominance, hierarchy and negation implicit in hegemonic phallocentrism, Braidotti openly supports and benefits from a variety of feminist positions. Instead of judging contributions as incorrect, Braidotti uses the notion of identifiable topos, that there is an underlying theme presented in different guises. For example, woman can be a construct, a masquerade, a positive essence or an ideological trap dependent on whether you concentrate on De Lauretis, Butler, Irigaray or Wittig respectively (1994, p.164). Hence Braidotti draws on a range of disparate feminists.

Through Beauvoir, *over-embodiment* is a problem in that it results in a loss of subjectivity. In this respect, there is a dissymmetry between the male and female subject. Whereas Braidotti sees the dissymmetry in terms of second sex/other or loss of embodiment/containment of the body, Irigaray, rather, focuses on sexual difference and dissymmetry, care of the economy of the Same where the female is not represented in terms of subjectivity. For Irigaray, ways to reunite essence with the body are fundamental

¹⁴ It is worth noting that for Braidotti, the nomadic subject and approach allows for multiplicity. The nomadic subject is not just in (binary) opposition to a fixed subject. The nomadic subject is multiple, including multiple elements, multiple spaces, and multiple subjects rather than a universal, fixed and traditionally male subject.

– let your body speak. The same starting point of sexual difference reveals itself in different ways for Braidotti and Irigaray. In cunt art, performers and artists have actively and literally let their bodies speak but classifications or labels of essentialist and non-essentialist are less straightforward.

Irigaray concentrates on the asymmetry of the universal subject (male) and the excess or residue (female), what could be referred to as subjectivity by negation in Braidotti's scheme. This asymmetry of subject/object according to Irigaray is recognisable in Schor's "*Cunt*" and "*Penis*," in the linguistic performance that takes place. With mainstream and contemporary readings of the word "cunt" in mind, the pejorative nuances exposed provide the excess or remainder of the universal male subject with its privileged position of phallic power. With recent disclosures in mind about binary gender systems, the binarism involved in Schor's two works could be read as essentialist in impetus.

However, how strong is this argument? It could also be suggested that by avoiding the traditional male/female, therefore vagina (biologically misrepresented)/penis, and instead offering a cunt/penis comparison, Schor is opening up the debate for the nomadic female subject. She provides an alternative to a traditional male/female hierarchy. "*Cunt*" and "*Penis*" could also be seen to be highlighting the hierarchy involved in this duality by providing a term (cunt) that while incorporating reclamatory undertones deploys the slang and derogatory terminology that appeals to and questions the traditional inferiority attached to the female. There is an ironic performance that revolves around the insincere presentation of biological fact. "*Cunt*" and "*Penis*" provide a double meaning of sex, as biological *and* intrinsically social, cultural and linguistic.

Braidotti, in contrast to Irigaray, employs a similar double stance in the historical and deeper time or conscious and unconscious – the teleological and the particular. And this is important in classifying some examples of cunt art as clearly not essentialist. For Braidotti, the difference between Woman and women is *Woman* as the dichotomous opposition to male as universal subject, and female identity on a personal level involving individual experiences. Following Teresa De Lauretis, Braidotti suggests distance between woman (woman as representation/cultural imago) and women (woman as experience/real women as agents of change).

In some senses Braidotti performs the “double gesture” in Irigarayan terms that Rebecca Schneider proposes as an increasingly common trend in developments in feminism (1997, p.36). Braidotti suggests that it is “...the essence of femininity as an historical construct that needs to be worked upon” (1994, p.164). This is an example of a cross-pollination that Schneider insists is performed in Schneemann’s work *Eye/Body* (1963) and indeed in a common philosophical positioning, that of “paradoxically essentialist and constructivist at once” (1997, p.36). Harris notes that feminists who employ double gestures,

...explore ‘woman’ as both a discursive construct and an embodied, historically located object and therefore as an identity category which cannot simply be transcended in one fell swoop but which is not an ‘absolute’ either (1999, p.19).

In performance terms, Schneider reveals the double impetus through Schneemann in her realisation of the goddess and her revelation of personal agency. For Harris, this double position allows a way of slipping between theory and practice.

While Schneider highlights this double gesture in Schneemann’s *Eye/Body*, I would propose that Schneemann uses this tool to full effect in *Interior Scroll* (1975; also performed in 1977) (see Fig. 3d). In *Interior Scroll*, Schneemann undresses, applies paint

to the contours of her body, and reads text first from a book while she assumes life model poses and, after dropping the book, continues to read from a scroll that she pulls from her vagina. By pulling script from within her, she clearly draws on a speaking female essence but the contradictory nature of the personal text clearly depicts her individual experience as a woman. The “personal clutter” which she purposely seeks to undermine deploys the contemporary dualisms that plague gender stereotypes and artistic conventions but this is overridden by the agency that she performs through her artistic choices (Schneemann, cited in Jones, 1998, p.3).

Looking at different examples of work by Corinne, such as *Redwood Isis* (1984) (Fig. 2g), *Isis in the Sand* (1986) (Fig. 2e) and *Isis in the Sky* (1986) (Fig. 2f), personal agency is often overridden by themes of nature and mythical wisdom, which purposely use the metaphor of nature to disrupt the order of phallogocentric structures, as mentioned previously in this chapter. Other works by Corinne, however, champion individuality through variety. Corinne’s contributions to *femalia* (1993) (see Fig. 3a) revel in contrasting tones, shapes and sizes. As collections they attest to a personal identity in the particularities that they perform. Different labia unfold.

My main point here is how to define an essentialist position within cunt art production and, more widely, in feminist theory. Due to “double gestures,” there appears to be some difficulty and discrepancy in defining what a position within the assumptive and broad categorisation of essentialism might include and in how to define the school of thought that theorists are placed in. With double gestures in mind, it is becoming impossible to label an essentialist approach due to blurring distinctions and to those who advocate representing essentialist and non-essence orientated positions simultaneously or, rather, in

(nomadic) coexistence. As a result, “criticisms” of cunt art that focus on essentialism have performed a disservice for two reasons. Such categorisations present, firstly, a denunciation of the possibility of coexistence and discussion between differing feminist strategies and secondly, provide an over-simplification of the works themselves. Any criticism of essentialism generalises the political performance of meanings within the works and therefore simplifies the complexities that exist within them.

Braidotti comments on the shifts of location and the “nomadic engagement with historical essences” that are performed in Cindy Sherman’s *History Portraits* (1991) as a case in point for the transdisciplinary approach that she proposes (1994, p.165; p.169). As Braidotti suggests, “[t]he quest for points of exit requires the mimetic repetition and consumption of the old...” (1994, p.169). But these portraits could be Chicago’s *Dinner Party* guests (see Fig. 3g). Braidotti seems to have taken influence from Irigaray in this sense. Irigaray’s strategy of mimesis carries through from an essentialist position intentionally to produce mixed effect in Braidotti’s work.

Irigaray’s strategy is thus, “[...] to make ‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible [...] ‘to unveil’ the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function” (1985, p.76; my emphasis). For Braidotti, “[a]s a political and theoretical practice...feminism can be described as *unveiling* and consuming the different layers of representation of ‘Woman’ (1994, p.168; my emphases). With these statements in mind, it seems that unveiling is a potent aim for some feminist practice. Kandel, as mentioned earlier, suggests the impossibility of constructing an image of the female without mediation, or “in the

absence of the veil” (1996, p.195) and hence, any advancement towards diluting “the veil,” that which limits and excludes, seems a positive and progressive strategy.

On a fundamental level, Braidotti writes;

...because of a history of domination and because of the way in which phallogocentric language structures our speaking positions as subjects, I think that before feminists relinquish the signifier *woman* we need to repossess it and to revisit its multi-faceted complexities... (1994, p.170)

And this is what cunt art does. Prior to moving forward, feminists have set about exploring the multiple signifiers of “woman,” and of more recent works, retraced omitted steps of avoiding the female body. I have argued that cunt art works seeks to disrupt the phallogocentric economy that has led to the diminished position of women and the negativity of meanings attached to their genitalia in patriarchy. They have sought to use the marker of sexual difference to revisit the complexities that such a symbol represents. In some ways cunt art revisits that which has been dominated to re-tell experiences and meanings that have been missed within phallogentrism. These attempts to repossess meanings of the vulva are about voicing experiences but these experiences are primarily told as disruptions to the dominant economy as opposed to ambitiously re-writing the values attached to the vulva.

This chapter and the thesis itself in some respects has followed Braidotti’s notion of unveiling and consuming. I have concentrated on the structures of phallogentrism and I have retraced movements and journeys within feminist adventure, in order to identify and analyse that which has been much maligned before further progress can be made. As I have argued, cunt art similarly presents recognition of the frameworks within which the female finds herself defined by male parameters. Rather than claiming that cunt art seeks

to radically alter this framework, I would argue that the primary success of these works is the disruption of the male parameters that they achieve.

CHAPTER 3:
DISRUPTIVE BODIES
PART II

ARTISTIC ICONOCLASM

A person shall not be convicted of an offence...if it is proved that publication of the article in question is justified as being for the public good on the ground that it is *in the interests of science, literature, art or learning*, or of other objects of general concern (Section 4, Obscene Publications Act of 1959; my emphasis).

The female body – natural, *unstructured* – represents something that is outside the proper field of art and aesthetic judgement; but artistic style, pictorial form, contains and regulates the body and renders it an object of beauty, suitable for art and aesthetic judgement (Nead, 1997, p.25).

As we have seen, cunt art is iconoclastic in cultural terms and the themes involved in this genre challenge the phallogentric models of acceptability, of subject/object and also challenge exclusionary practices. In the previous chapter I have argued that the main success of cunt art has been its potential to disrupt and query male parameters of exclusion and lack. Within the cultural illegitimacy of feminist representations of women's genitalia, there is the matter of artistic iconoclasm that incorporates the issues of the subject matter exposed in cunt art, the disruption of viewing ideals and the variety of art practices employed questioning high art and low art distinctions and attributions of mastery. There are also issues that link back to the ideas discussed in the last two chapters: notions of women as speaking subjects and of *women* speaking of sexuality and desire.

Regarding the withdrawal of Santoro's book containing vulvar imagery, *Towards New Expression* (1974) (see Fig. 1a), from the Arts Council's exhibition of artists' books in America, the Arts Council stated that, "[w]e are willing to defend obscenity on the grounds of artistic excellence but considered that in this case the avowed intention of the book was

primarily a plea for sexual self expression” (cited in Nead, 1997, p.66). This statement implies, as Lynda Nead points out, that the obscenity of Santoro’s work lies in the expression of female sexuality. Nead continues,

...‘artistic excellence’ and ‘sexual self expression’ are, in this case, apparently antithetical; and yet, conventionally, some of the greatest masterpieces have been seen to be the result of the bringing together of artistic genius and sexual self expression... The problem, it seems, is not so much sexual self-expression but female sexual self expression and it is this that, in 1976, is defined as obscene, as unsuitable for an Arts Council exhibition and thus placed beyond the boundaries of art (1997, p.66).

The Art Council’s statement has further implications. While not only implying that female sexual self expression is beyond the boundaries of art, it also highlights that absence of artistic intention and accomplishment are criteria for defining obscenity.

While I have travelled through the cultural illegitimacy of cunt art and women’s homelessness within phallocentric models, I will now explore the artistic iconoclasm of cunt art. This section will consider the artistic illegitimacy of cunt art based on allegations of obscenity that have been discussed in the previous chapters. In this chapter, I will argue that cunt art challenges traditional notions of concealment in art, where artistic representation has conventionally dictated the representation of the beautiful and sealed exterior, and that cunt art challenges notions of male mastery in artistic practice. Linked to notions of concealment, I will also propose that cunt art challenges the invisibility of the vulva which, as I have discussed in the last two chapters, purposely disrupts the phallocentric notion of one sex.

The illegitimacy of cunt art raises questions of artistic merit and cultural morality. In terms of legal definitions of obscenity, the accusations against cunt art suggest that, according to the

Obscene Publications Act of 1959, it is deemed not to be legitimate art. And so, allegations of obscenity and legal actions reinforce views of cunt art as illegitimate based on lack of artistic value. This chapter will attempt to show the popular conception of illegitimacy that accompanies cunt art. In order to do this we must explore traditional concepts of art, in terms of aesthetic value and subject matter. The illegitimate status must then, at least in part, be the result of the subject matter and the social unacceptability of the representation. In recognising the illegitimacy of cunt art, we can further assume that feminist representations of the vulva or vagina are considered artistically iconoclastic. This means that cunt art does not satisfy the principles that underlie acceptable artistic expression. The idea of legitimisation in itself provides the underlying assumption that what is to be validated is in some way not legitimate. The title of “fine” art in itself implies the authority that is less often applied to performance.

While objections, criticism and legal action attest to the illegitimacy of cunt art, there is the issue of the academic legitimacy of cunt art. As this project and previous feminist commentaries suggest, cunt art is a serious academic field. As I have attempted to show throughout this thesis, the subject of cunt art involves many of the issues that are most hotly debated in feminist academic circles. It is, however, worth noting that art critics, while taking time to critique the work and therefore implying that cunt art falls within their “expert” jurisdiction, have passed works off as “kitsch” (Auffermann, cited in Kubitza, 1996, p.151; Muchnic, cited in Jones, 1996b, p.88), epitomising a loss of “artistic standards” (Kramer, cited in Jones, 1996b, p.84) or “mainly cliché” (Hughes, cited in Jones, 1996b, p.88) which suggests that these particular vulvar works are less serious or less valid as Art.

Amongst allegations of pornographic content from Dornan and Rohrbacher in 1991 (see Jones, 1996b, p.93) and accusations of biological determinism from Nemser (1972) and Weyergraf (1981) (see Jones, 1996b, p.90 and p.93), reviews from art critics such as Larson (1979), Fischer (1979), Kramer (1980), Hughes (1980) and Mullarkey (1981) have disapproved of examples of cunt art (see Jones, 1996b, pp.84-90). These objections, however, are based on the aesthetic qualities of the piece but in direct contrast to objections, *The Dinner Party* (Fig. 3g) by Chicago received overwhelmingly positive reviews from the general public who visited the piece and added their thoughts and reactions to the guest books at the various venues, and from non-professional critics such as Wonder (1979) and Wachtel (1981) (see Jones, 1996b, p.89). As Jones points out, the elitism of art criticism dismissed these “lay” opinions and, in the case of Kramer and Hughes, the popularity of *The Dinner Party* provided evidence for its lack of artistic merit (1996b, p.89). *The Dinner Party*’s performance of openness and accessibility was immediately met with the politics of exclusivity and restriction.

Based on accepted definitions of what is legitimate, we are using a system of acceptability and authorisation. The legitimate is that which has conformed to established standards or has been sanctioned by, or is in accordance with, the law (*Collins English Dictionary*, 1995, p.889). There are interesting terms to consider: correct, acceptable, authorised, sanctioned, conformed, established standards. The last two chapters have been concerned with the illegitimacy of cunt art within the economy of the Same. I have suggested that cunt art is unacceptable and that it does not conform to the phallogentric structures that uphold

invisibility and exclusion. While I have visited the patriarchal meanings and phallogentric frameworks that are relevant to an exploration of cunt art, I will now consider the artistic traditions within which cunt art operates and the conventions that cunt art challenges in terms of traditional viewing ideals, artistic techniques and media employed, the blurring corporeal boundaries and making the vulva visible. I will argue that cunt art challenges the notion of male subject as artist and disrupts the conventions of subject/object. I will also argue that cunt art challenges the convention of the disinterested spectator and questions traditional systems of validity and authority within artistic practice.

Artistic Traditions:

The controversy that surrounds cunt art has to be examined in the context of the institutionalism but also must be explored in light of the artistic traditions and the rules by which art is accessed. The concept of institutionalism is as applicable to art as to any other area of culture. Society depends on institutionalism, setting up the boundaries and conventions by which we live. Mary Anne Staniszewski comments on the way “a pedestal demarks a particular object as sculpture” (1995, p.28). She notes,

[w]hen an artist creates a work of Art it has no intrinsic use or value; but when this artwork circulates within the systems of Art (galleries, art histories, art publications, museums, and so on) it acquires a depth of meaning, a breadth of importance, and an increase in value that is greater proportionately than perhaps anything else in the modern world (ibid.).

Staniszewski points out the institutional validation of Art and hence promotes the view that artistic institutions construct the rules to which Art must conform in order to be accepted or legitimate. After the artist creates art, it gains the title of a *work of Art* through validation. Its legitimacy is estimated by established institutional regulations. Most commonly, it is galleries, government and law enforcement that are the instruments by which these standards are practically upheld.

Some cunt art works challenge the regulations of legitimate Art and Theatre. Just as performance art examples have before and since, many feminists working in the field of cunt art have challenged the rules that define form, framing and traditional spectator boundaries. For example, Valie Export's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) (see Fig. 1g) removed her performance from the theatre or art space and placed it in a cinema (albeit an art cinema), a

space that limits the viewing of bodies to the screen rather than within the space itself. Here, Export transformed a location that commonly relegates storytelling to the screen and brought the performance into the audience.

Tee A. Corinne has produced works in series that combine photography of landscapes with vulvar imagery. Corinne blends vulvae into the wild landscapes that she captures (see Fig. 2e, 2f and 2g). So while she uses a legitimate form in her work, she weaves controversial content into these pieces rejecting the regulations of traditional art practice. In *Tunnel of Love* (1993), Bamber exploited the common elevation of Works of Art by placing a spotlighted vulva on a pedestal. While the reverence bestowed on a Work of Art was reminiscent of galleries and museums, its appearance in a shop window and the work of art the pedestal supported purposively undermined its presentation.

If we consider Staniszewski's proposal that when "artwork circulates within the systems of Art...it acquires a depth of meaning, a breadth of importance, and an increase in value..." we could surmise that these cunt performances are making female anatomy important or making it an issue of importance. These representations immediately provide that "depth of meaning." Immediately we are struck by *questions* of meaning, hence questioning the performatives and their motivation. The systems of Art that Staniszewski refers to are often where cunt art can be excluded from but the conventions of "art space" are challenged by works such as *Tunnel of Love* and *Genital Panic*, and genital representation confronts the quiet contemplation of the gallery directly in Zoe Leonard's installation at the Neue Galerie in Kassel (1992) (see Fig. 2h).

While most cunt art works are widely considered illegitimate, many artists responsible for such works play on this issue by the context in which they place their work and the juxtapositions they use within their compositions. These works challenge the classification of legitimacy by emphasising aspects that refute traditional styles, aesthetics and content. As we have seen, Corinne combines the polemic forms of landscapes (common to traditional art work) and the inclusion of female genitalia, while Export takes the performance away from the cinema screen and into the cinema itself. Performance art has frequently challenged the tenets of legitimate theatre by using context and space as an integral part of process and product and cunt art is no different in its attempt to move the existing regulations and move the viewer in the process.

Art has traditionally represented that which is beautiful and perfect although this notion has been challenged by various artists, seen as early as Rembrandt who shows the female body as imperfect and real.¹ While he presents the 1630-1 *Female Nude Seated* as a traditional and alluring erotic pose, the fantasy is interrupted by the inclusion of a garter indentation and a protruding stomach that alludes to the real-time of the “object” and situation (see Fig. 3a). Other versions (1654-6 and 1660-1) deny the traditional eroticism applied to the female nude by positioning the woman as unwilling to be displayed.² This was considered to be widely unacceptable at the time.

¹ See various examples of *Female Nude Seated* (1630-1, 1654-6, 1660-1) as cases in point.

² See Mieke Bal (1991, pp.144-147) for a fuller discussion of Rembrandt’s disruption of traditional conventions of representation.

The focus of art from the age of antiquity and through the Renaissance was the representation of beauty, ideals and taste, and a degree of “artistic licence” was allowed for those forms that were not so ideal or perfect, particularly if the piece was to represent the person patronising the work. And this is why the work of Rembrandt was perhaps so shocking. In the examples listed above, he seems to refuse that element of concealment that had been taken for granted and instead sought disclosure, using a “warts-and-all” approach to his subject matter.

Cunt art has ambivalent relations with the ideas of disclosure and concealment. To represent the vulva, considering the negative associations applied to female genitalia, is to represent that which is not considered beautiful, that which is not thought to be “worthy” of artistic interpretation. By choosing the subject matter of female genitalia, these works, as forms of creative expression, seek artistic appreciation that is not readily given due to the taboos that they project. Cunt art rejects the tradition of concealment or rather the representation of what is culturally considered to be beautiful and presents that which is deemed frightening or a threat.

Cunt art also refuses the idea of concealment in the unfolding, and what can often be considered the demystification, of female genitalia. While there are doubts that vulvar or vaginal representations, in traditional terms, can consistently encourage the viewer to see the beauty of the subject matter, cunt art encourages the spectator to direct extended consideration to the female genitalia. The redevelopment of associations cannot take place, after all, if the matter is not contemplated. The cultural and artistic invisibility and avoidance of the vulva and vagina is therefore challenged by cunt art.

As a prelude to the aspiration of feminist revaluation, cunt art presents female genitalia as a valid subject of contemplation and appreciation. By artistically representing the vulva or vagina there is the implication that what is framed is offered as food for thought (but not to be consumed without the subject's consent), even if the invitation to see it as beautiful is refused. By anticipating the controversial reception and the accusation of obscenity, artists emphasise the culturally constructed view of the vulva, bringing the viewer to question their own reactions and the origins of these responses.

From a traditional artistic perspective, the artists could be seen to place female genitalia in the frame of aesthetic pleasure and appreciation, and it is the framing that is important to consider. While we can suggest the pseudo-educational implications of cunt art, these representations are not framed as biological illustrations but rather as “works of art.” In framing the vulva within the traditions of artistic appraisal, cunt art can be seen as culturally iconoclastic both in terms of artistic endeavour and concepts of the body. The works can be seen to call for celebration and admiration of the vulva. They place female genitalia “in the frame,” “on a pedestal” (literally in the case of *The Tunnel of Love*), suggesting the status implications of traditionally high art works. Aside from the taboos that surround the female genitals, it is this challenge to high art and to the monstrosity of the female body that can be considered responsible for some of the objections to cunt art. The subject matter is considered inappropriate in terms of morality, public display and as an artistic creation. And so, cunt art encourages public contemplation of and contact with the vulva, however reluctant the viewer or short-lived the experience.

As Staniszewski's premise maintains artwork, within systems of art, gains meaning and importance, even in its simplest translation, therefore cunt art petitions the viewer to recognise the creator's appreciation (or pre-occupation in terms of political beliefs and feminist motivation) for the subject matter. While shocking the spectator, in many cases, cunt art achieves this reaction from the infrequency the vulva is seen and from the unacceptability of its parts. The infrequency and unacceptability, while being intrinsically related, demarcate the potency of cunt art. Suddenly and oddly with a vulvar work, the female genitalia are visible, and further to this, the vulva's appearance is in the form of art (even if it is not Art) which has been traditionally reserved to represent beauty ideals.

The use of the female genitals as artistic communication is certainly an iconoclastic approach but there are further challenges to conventions and expectations within the genre of cunt art. The display of the vulva crosses cultural boundaries of social acceptability and taboo, but it is also an iconoclastic practice in terms of the creative and aesthetic choices made by individual artists. While I have discussed the use of context and juxtaposition by artists such as Corinne, within these choices, notions of mastery associated with technique are also questioned and challenged. With the artistic conventions of male artist/subject, female/art object, notions of the disinterested spectator and appropriate techniques in mind, I will now argue that cunt art challenges traditions of male mastery and traditional strategies of representation in artistic practice.

Figure 3a:



Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn,

Female Nude Seated, 1630-1

Source: Bal, 1991, p.145

Masterly Gestures:

In 1965, Fluxus artist Shigeko Kubota performed her *Vagina Painting* in which she attached a paintbrush to the crotch of her underwear, crouched and painted red strokes on the paper on which she stood (Fig. 3b). This “menstrual gestural creation” (Jones, 1998, p.98) challenged the notion of male mastery in artistic production. According to Jones, Kubota subverted the use of the female body in male artistic genius, exemplified (and ironised, as Jones notes) in Yves Klein’s *Anthropometries of the Blue Period* (1960) (Fig. 3c). Kubota defiantly uses her own body, emphasising the marker of her sex, as the source of artistic production (Jones, 1998, pp.98-99).

As Jones suggests,

Kubota activates the site of the vagina itself – the paradoxical locus of “lack” that supposedly dooms women forever to an alienated state of objecthood – as the originary point of meaningful painterly gesture (1998, p.99).

While Klein highlighted the objecthood of women using them as the tools of the male artist, in a very literal sense in *Anthropometries*, Kubota refuted the object status of the female in schemes of traditional art not only by her own status as the creator/artist/choreographer/performer/director of her own work, but also in emphasising the fundamental site of her classification as a female. If women are traditionally excluded from artistic practice, Kubota challenged this exclusion by artistically mobilising the marker of omission.

It is also the mastery of the art product that Kubota questioned. Traditional views of artistic practice limit viewing to the final product. While modernist painters such as Jackson Pollock involved the moving body with the final product, essentially, the product

was the most important for viewing and the generation of that product, while being well-known, was secondary and kept to the studio. Jones points out that Kubota's work also challenges the masculinist authority of the "Pollockian performative" (1998, p.86), shifting "Pollock's heroic ejaculatory, flinging gesture...into a specifically feminist 'stroke' ..." (1998, p.97).

Kubota intertwined the interpretative process of this viewing with the creative process, and in doing so, challenged the male authority in the technique of painting. This is because of the viewer's inclusion in the process of production and the vagina's own painting prowess. And so, *Vagina Painting* is iconoclastic in terms of traditional artistic practices not only because of its concentration on a taboo part of the body but also in its subversion of the male subject as artist.

This is also a feature of other examples of vulvar/vaginal performances. In *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) (see Fig. 1g), Export challenges the male director as the traditional subject of authorship and challenges the metaphorical male director that protects his male viewers from the threat of the vulva. Export's agency ensures that her self-direction is recognised. In Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975) (Fig. 3d), the performer challenges the mastery of male literary tradition by bringing her words into the performance space through her own body. Ownership of her text is critical and performs the irony that she reads the words from male criticisms of her previous works. The mastery of these criticisms is absorbed and Schneemann becomes the judge and executioner of her own creations.

Interior Scroll also interrogates the notion of the convention of the silenced female body as object in art. As Jones states, “[t]he female subject is not simply a ‘picture’ in Schneemann’s scenario...” (1998, p.3). Jones insists that Schneemann is a fully embodied subject and a “deeply constituted (and never fully coherent) subjectivity” (ibid.). During the performance, Schneemann daubed paint on her body and face, accentuating the contours of her body. Her own strokes defined her body and the areas of prominence; face, hips, stomach, limbs, and pubic area. But importantly she paints herself; she writes the text of her body, from her body. Relinquishing control of this object from the normative male master transforms her from the object to the author of her own form.

The agency within *Interior Scroll* and *Genital Panic* contradicts the traditional position of the male artistic master and his object being represented, but this necessarily includes a disruption of viewing ideals in the blurred distinctions between subject and object. While both Schneemann and Export are the objects to be viewed in the performance of traditional viewing contexts, they both promote the independent action of the director or artist. They are the authors of their narratives. These works not only challenge the traditional male position of mastery, but also contest the traditional categories of artist/artwork and subject/object in terms of the female body/traditional object and of the viewer/subject.

In her discussion of the female nude, Lynda Nead surmises that,

[t]he Enlightenment ideal of the contemplative viewing of an art object works to reinforce *unity and integrity* of the viewing subject and sets up an opposition between the perfection of art and the *disruption and incompleteness* of non-art, or obscenity. The obscene body is the body without borders or containment and obscenity is representation that *moves and arouses* the viewer rather than bringing *stillness and wholeness*. (Nead, 1997, p.2; my emphases).

By branding cunt art as obscene the notion of arousal is attached to these images. By arousal, in the context of Nead's claims, I mean that vulvar and vaginal works provoke a response in the viewer contradicting the traditional position of "stillness" that is considered an appropriate reaction to art. As a performative process, interpretation could be considered to necessarily move the viewer, as I have suggested previously through propositions by Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (1999). The body can be seen to be intrinsically involved in the reading of a work as opposed to a (traditionally) psychical engagement only.

And so, live art must be seen to challenge the "unity and integrity" of the spectator for while the viewing body may achieve spatial stillness, it is necessarily implicated in the process therefore challenging this integrity and wholeness. This wholeness is reflected in the traditional (Kantian) disinterested and separate viewing position that does not consider the spectator as implicated in the interpretative process. The performativity of live art refuses this separation, this "integrity," maintaining the interpretative exchange of the event – whether a performance of human actions or purely a performance of meanings – and in this sense, stillness is refused in favour of activity; either the activity of the interpretative process or the activity of approaching a work and the physical responses provoked by the work.

Cunt art disrupts the viewing ideal of unity by providing a challenge to dominant images of women. The incompleteness of the images proposed in cunt art, and therefore the obscenity of the images offered according to Nead, could be seen to revolve around the omission of conventional fetishising properties mentioned earlier. This provocation

contained within the work can challenge the disinterested indifference that seems to be suggested by standardised theories of the reception of art.

According to the Enlightenment viewing ideal, cunt art, in its classification as obscene, disrupts the spectatorial position of unity. That the viewer is moved – provoked, disgusted, aroused – disallows and challenges traditional spectator relations and is perhaps one of the most potent aspects of cunt art. Such actions and images successfully achieve the disruption of artistic conventions regarding the involvement and reaction of the viewer. In this way, the spectator is forced to consider their responses rather than settling for an unmoved position. Cunt art not only challenges the cultural associations with the vulva and the taboos that surround this part of the body, its invisibility and its unacceptability, but it also questions conventional modes of reception and artistic practice.

In Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (Fig. 3g), the spectator is moved, in the most literal sense, in order to view the entire piece. The sheer size of the installation requires the viewer to shift position. However, viewing the piece also engages the body on a different level. Male or female, the spectator's body is implicated in the vulvar ambiguity of the plates and in the "sit-down-dinner" formation of the table. Although not invited to participate in "the meal," the spectator is made aware of the physical affirmation involved in participating in the dinner party. While not being seated at the table, the spectator becomes more aware of standing aside from it, perhaps even in a manner of servitude.

While we can identify the disruption of conventional regulations of spectatorship within cunt art, it is also important to consider the body "without borders or containment" in

Nead's statement. Nead surmises that art, as opposed to non-art, has been defined as the containment of form within limits but that obscenity breaches these limits and regulations (1997, p.20). The regulated object-body in art becomes obscene by the presentation of a body that surpasses these traditional strategies of representation.

Feminist body art works such as Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* and Chicago's *Red Flag* (Fig. 3e) "deliberately push the boundaries of artistic propriety to their limits by challenging the aesthetic ideal of the sealed and finished female body" (Nead, 1997, p.66). It is corporeal boundaries that are blurred in addition to the cultural boundaries that are pushed to their limits. Nead suggests that the tradition of the female nude focuses on the surface and the exteriority of these bodies. In opposition, feminist body art exposes the interiority of the female body, "the terrifying secret that is hidden within this idealized exterior" (Nead, 1997, p.66). Of the feminist art of the 1960s and 1970s, Nead writes that "[t]he images and performances frequently shattered the accepted conventions of art and propriety and made visible aspects of the female body that could not easily be accommodated within existing protocols of connoisseurship" (1997, p.63).

Judy Chicago's *Red Flag* (1971) (Fig. 3e) signals the interiority of the body but also confronts the spectator's disgust with the female body. The hazy black and flesh photograph, starkly contrasted with the blood red tampon being drawn from the woman's body, challenges the propriety of conventional art. If we read Judy Chicago's use of the red tampon in contrast to the less stark surround of the female anatomy in *Red Flag*, we can see the obvious representation of menstrual blood in the vivid colour used which challenges the conventional notions of female visibility.

With the title of the piece and the highlighted bloody tampon, we are drawn to read this flag as a sign of territory, suggesting that the artist owns this terrain. If we compare the idea of a red flag to a white flag, there are connotations opposing that of surrender but there is also the notion that the piece takes the form of a subversive announcement, one that challenges the status quo. We can interpret the piece as akin to “a red flag to a bull,” a movement to incite the viewer to respond, a movement to provoke. Corinne’s *Cunt Coloring Book* (1975) makes the female anatomy, in all its variety, visible and invites the viewer to participate in the performance of actively (and lovingly?) colouring the vulvae as they see fit (see Fig. 1d and 1e). The “protocols of connoisseurship” are shattered by the invitation to actively engage in the piece.

LeCocq’s *Feather Cunt* (1971) (Fig. 3f) provides an iridescent and strikingly vibrant representative of the female genitalia. Going against protocols of traditional spectatorship, what is exposed is tantalisingly textured; almost tempting the viewer to touch and caress these forbidden but luxuriously portrayed parts. These “protocols of connoisseurship” are similarly challenged in Carolee Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* (1975). The conventional propriety expected of a theatrical performance or “Work of Art” is shattered by the autobiography, interiority and physical exposure present in this piece.

Similarly iconoclastic pieces include the choices of feminist artists in terms of the materials they select in their cunt art works. Common to many feminist projects, cunt art and other endeavours, the techniques and approaches used have sought to challenge male-dominated techniques as “high art” and the binarism of women’s “craft” versus male artistic expertise. As Goldberg points out, while focusing on American feminist art practice of the 1970s,

[t]heir incorporation of all kinds of material – ceramics, embroidery, knitting, weaving – and forms such as pattern painting, previously thought of as “merely decorative,” blurred the edges between art and craft, between “high” art and “low”... (1998, p.129).

This shift in artistic practice offered an iconoclastic impulse to reinvent the phallogentric notions of artistic value.

Such impulses are exemplified in cunt art by works such as Karen LeCocq’s *Feather Cunt* (1971), Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* (1979), and more recently, Lauren Lesko’s *Lips* (1993). The juxtaposed textures offered by LeCocq in the title *Feather Cunt*, the softness of “feather” shattered by the oral and rebellious implications/annunciations of “cunt,” are revealed in the piece itself through various contradictions that are set up. In what is essentially a fairly simple representation, LeCocq communicates a certain honesty in the labial folds at the core along with the gloriously extravagant and superficial feather surround. She combines the bright shocking pink with the deeper blood red of the base signalling an audacity mixed with restraint, a superficiality combined with an honest flesh-like representation with menstrual undertones. The piece overflows with frivolity and fun while also incorporating a very real or life-like labial image at the centre.

LeCocq’s piece suggests that these two elements need not be divided, that the vulva need not be a serious (bio-medical *or* shameful) topic but can be glorious and extravagant without losing sight of the pride involved in realistic representations. *Feather Cunt* can be seen to challenge the “serious business” of art and the traditional techniques associated with this practice. Many cunt art works humorously challenge phallogentric notions of the normative, whether that is the norms of visibility, acceptability or artistic production.

Here LeCocq employs velvet, soft fabric and feathers as a valid performative gesture. Not only is the viewer drawn into the plush and tactile world of the piece, but we are also reminded of women's craft skills such as sewing and textile work. We are pulled into the interpretative process that creates flashes of the extravagance and eroticism of the feather boa and the inconsequence, domesticity and tameness of the seamstress.

Lesko's *Lips* similarly evoke a soft but potently witty and political agenda with fabric (see Fig. 2b). Lesko's vertical lips of fur, a material traditionally associated with women, provokes a connection between the feminine mode of discretion and the exposure of the most private of parts. Similarly, Amelia Jones suggests that the "playful fur lips... 'speak' a woman's sexuality through the sensually pleasurable material of upper-class feminine vanity..." (1996a, p.25). Propriety is underscored by female pleasure and desire.

Lesko's piece plays on the idea of communication; lips that talk, which voice opinions. The oral connotations of meanings to be told are simultaneously returned to the labial imagery, expanding Staniszewski's proposal of the "depth of meaning" of artwork and in some ways we can read the depth of female experience and the physical depths of the female body. Lesko's *Lips* are at once luxurious and playful but also speak volumes towards reclaiming the female body.

Perhaps the most infamous example of iconoclastic approaches to artistic technique is *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago (Fig. 3g). Classed as becoming a "central icon" in feminist art history (Jones, 1996b, p.84), *The Dinner Party* made an impact not only for the vulvar imagery involved, not simply for the sheer scale of the piece, but also due to the techniques employed by Chicago and her colleagues. The work itself consists of "an

open, equilateral triangular format” table (Meyer, 1996, p.66), which has thirteen place settings on each side of the triangle. Each place is set for a key woman in history – a total of thirty-nine places, with a further nine hundred and ninety-nine names written on the floor beneath – and each of these thirty-nine settings consist of an embroidered runner, a goblet, knife, fork, spoon, napkin and, importantly, a plate for/representing the woman concerned. Each plate is ambivalently vulgar and the more recent the woman depicted, the fleshier the representation appears.

This celebration of women throughout history, who have achieved great things despite overwhelming pressure and oppression, also communicates its reverence through the employment of traditional female “crafts.” Chicago used ceramics, china painting and embroidery showing the ability of these “crafts” to be successful parts of a monumental and large-scale installation. In some senses, Chicago suggests that these techniques have authority and value in the professional creative circuit. The use of these crafts also points to the hypocrisy of traditional phallocentric art practice that posits these skills as “low” art. When used by men, the products are deemed to be “high” art or historical treasures, such as ceramic works by Kenneth Price (Meyer, 1996, p.61) and even the Bayeux Tapestry. So Meyer asks the question: “Are ceramics “art” in the hands of men and “crafts” in hands of women?” (ibid.). While choice of technique used by feminists may be iconoclastic, this question implies that women making art is similarly contrary to convention.

There are numerous other examples of iconoclasm related to cunt art works. Zoe Leonard juxtaposes eighteenth-century paintings with black-and-white photos of female genitalia, while Tee A. Corinne invites the reader to create their own piece of art in *Cunt Coloring*

Book (1975). Judie Bamber utilises oil paints with expertise but combines conventionality with unconventional subject matter. Similarly, in several ways, Valie Export uses her body as that object familiar to the representation of the female in cinema but exposes that which should not be according to those conventions of film.

While all examples of cunt art are culturally iconoclastic in that they expose a taboo and cross the boundaries of social codes of decency and acceptability, feminists who have worked within this genre have broken many other codes. These aspects are often forgotten in the condemnations of obscenity, which adds to their complexity but also adds to their rejection by institutions and critics. The variety of pieces within the genre exemplifies the many feminist tactics that seek to question conventional systems of validity and authority within artistic production.

In suggesting that cunt art is illegitimate and artistically iconoclastic we then have to ask the question by what standards, powers or terms do we – if we deem it appropriate – “legitimise” artistic expression? If validation is called for and desired, then we must consider what is at stake and how much of the potency of these works is at risk in attempting to legitimise cunt art. This, in part, will be the subject discussed in Chapter 5, *Disruptive Bodies Part Three* which will explore the dangers of legitimisation and the proposition that the vulva be seen as a feminist icon. A further risk that cunt art has been associated with is the alignment of these works with pornography. While allegations of obscenity attached to cunt art flourish, there is a fine line between works cited as obscene and those accused of being pornographic. This will be the topic of the following chapter.

Figure 3b:



Shigeko Kubota, *Vagina Painting*, 1965

Yves Klein, *Anthropometries of the Blue Period*, 1960

Source: Goldberg, 1998, p.128

Source: Goldberg, 1998, p.54

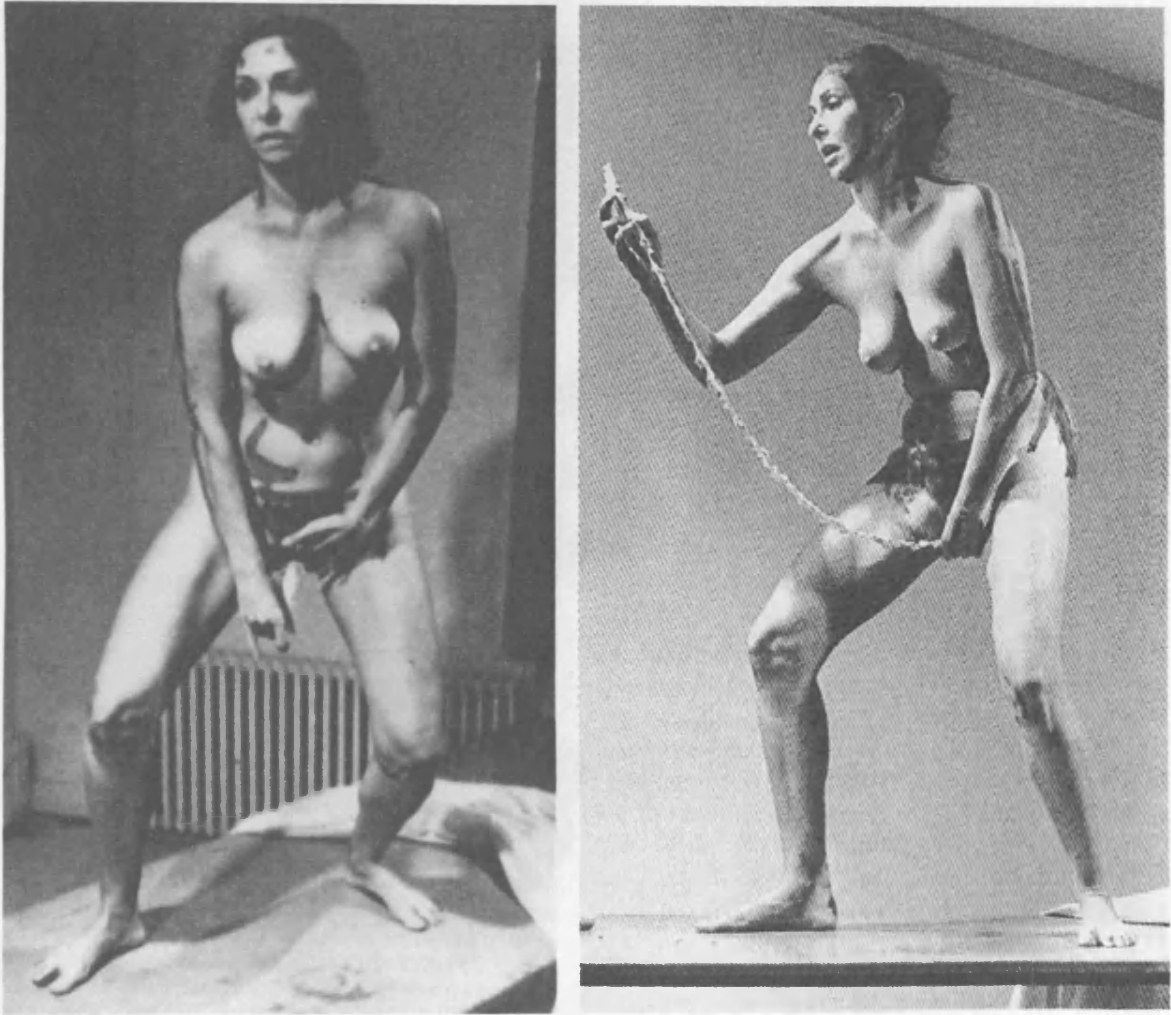
Figure 3c:



Yves Klein, *Anthropometries of the Blue Period*, 1960

Source: Goldberg, 1998, p.94

Figure 3d:



Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 1975

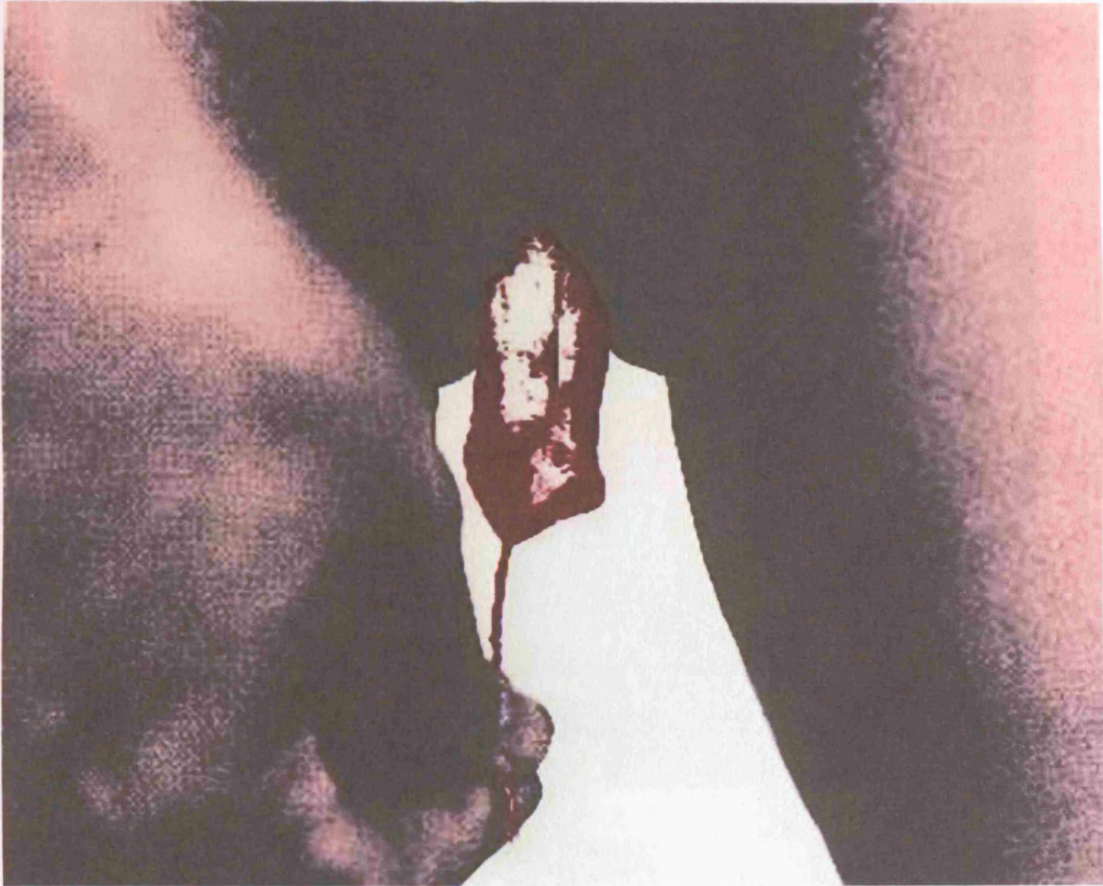
Sources from left to right:

Schneider, 1997, p.133

Jones, 1998, p.4

Figure 3f

Figure 3e:



Judy Chicago, *Red Flag*, 1971

Source: <<http://www.mum.org/armenjc.htm>>

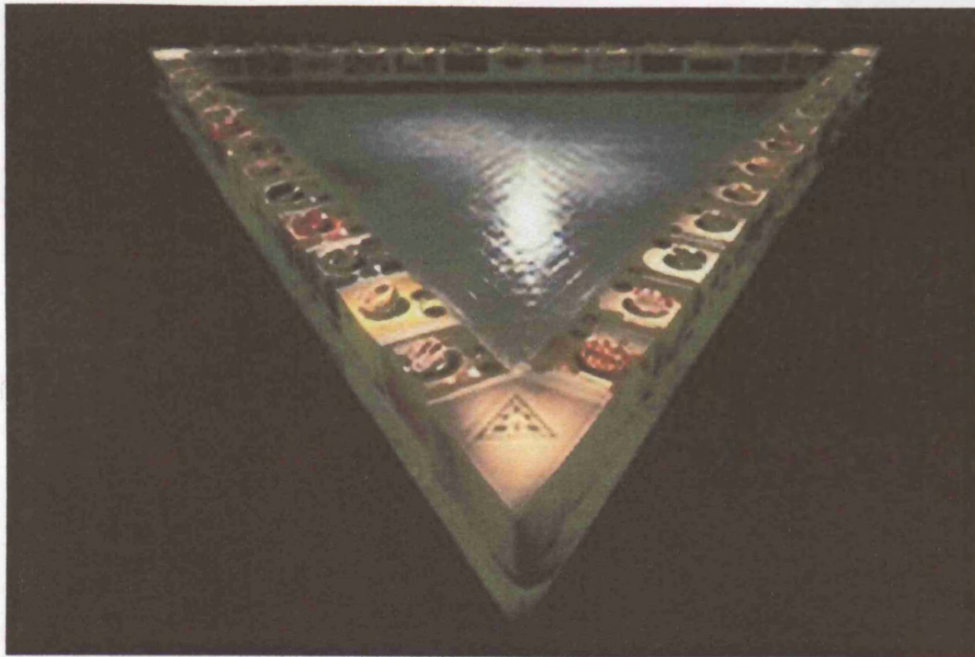
Figure 3f:



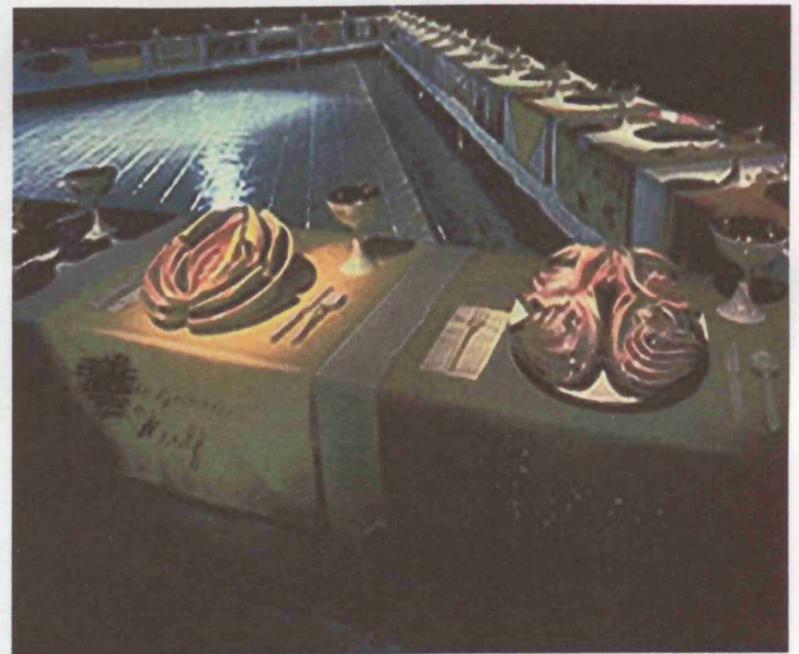
Karen LeCocq, *Feather Cunt*, 1971

Source: Jones, 1996b, p.91

Figure 3g:



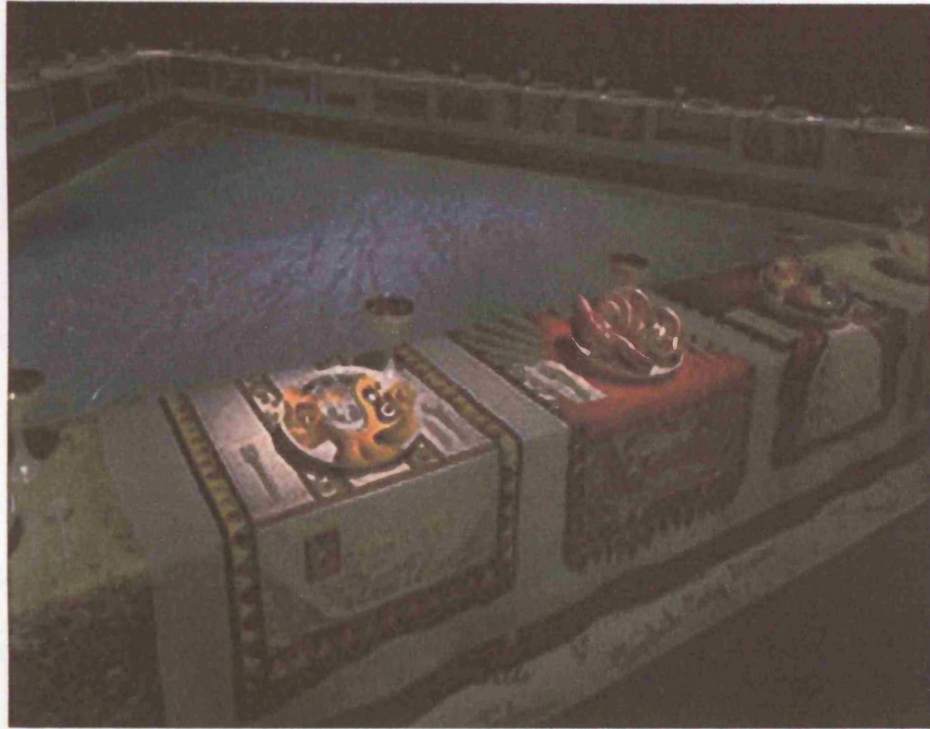
Source: <http://www.judychicago.com/gdinner/frameset_dinner.html>



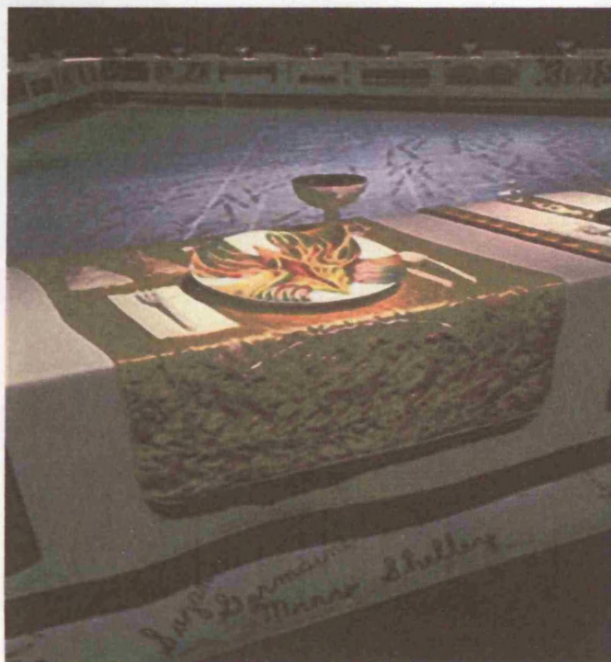
Source: Jones, 1996b, p.91

Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1979

Figure 3g (continued):



Source (above and below): <http://www.judychicago.com/gdinner/frameset_dinner.html>



Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1979

CHAPTER 4:
PORNOGRAPHIC BODIES

In response to *femalia* (1993), a compilation of vulva photography by Corinne, Perry, Posener and Rosen, and edited by Joani Blank (see Fig. 4a), the following customer review was submitted to the Amazon website (www.amazon.co.uk):

Save yourself the money and go pick up a men's magazine. The pictures there will be a lot better, and you will get more for your money (submitted 11/1/99).¹

"...The pictures there will be a lot better..."

"...[A] lot better..." in this context could mean a variety of things; better focused, better lighting, better framing, *better vulvae*?

The customer's alignment of *femalia* with pornographic material is indicative of the boundaries crossed and subversions caused by cunt art, but also points to clear differences between the two that centre on notions of authorship, framing and intention. It also raises the issue that no matter how explicit the performance of meanings, in the consuming public arena these performances can be appropriated.

In discussing the artistic iconoclasm of cunt art I have been drawn to the polarisation of art and pornography as pointed out by Schneider (1997) and Nead (1997). If cunt art is illegitimate according to many elements of conventional artistic practice then its illegitimacy through obscenity, in particular, warrants an investigation of the pornographic implications of the work. Due to this explicit nature of the content of cunt art, I will explore the claims that cunt art is pornographic, how it is placed in this category and the implications for women's bodies and feminist artistic practice.

¹ The author of the review seems to have missed the point of the collection. As Blank herself states, "...outside of 'men's' magazines, where the women's genitals were often powdered and half-hidden, and the images often modified and airbrushed, women had no resource for photographic representations of vulvas" (Introduction, 1993).

As both Nead and Schneider have pointed out, art and pornography have endured a process of polarisation, instituted by the legal introduction of the “merits” of a work in section 4 of the 1959 Obscene Publications Act. In the “interests of science, literature, art or learning” (cited in Hunter et al, 1993, p.145), Nead points out that “[a]rtistic value was defined as a justification or amelioration of obscene material” (1997, p.90). In this way, obscene material became partially judged by the absence of artistic merit (ibid.). Art and pornography become opposites in cultural value, artistic merit and in authority. Nead continues, “[i]f the pleasures of pornography are defined in terms of motivation, promiscuity and commodification, then the pleasures of art are seen to lie in their opposing values, in contemplation, discrimination and transcendent values” (1997, p.89).

However, in order to be oppositional forms, they must to some degree inhabit the same realm. They can be seen to be polarised ends of the same spectrum of representation. As Nead proposes, “art and pornography cannot be seen as isolated regimes of representation, but should be recognized as elements within a cultural continuum” (1997, p.103). In addition, she suggests that the dichotomous terms that distance art and pornography are related to “distinguish[ing] good and bad representations of the female body, allowable and forbidden forms of cultural consumption” (ibid.), a continuum “that defines what can or cannot be seen” (ibid.). As we have seen, such dichotomies allow the economy of the Same to be regulated and the dominance of male parameters. Here the exclusion is made real in the alignment of cunt art with pornography (bad, forbidden) rather than with art (good, allowable) alone.

As an artistic venture that has been labelled pornographic, cunt art draws the two ends of this continuum together somewhat uncomfortably. If we follow the continuum described

by Nead, as art, vulvar images and actions should propose “good” representations of the female body, or rather, *acceptable* images of the female body. Their censorship, and categorisation as pornographic, alludes to the assumption that the unacceptability or “badness” of what they represent far outweighs their artistic merit. The implication is that lack of artistic credibility is defined or reinforced by alignment with pornography.

This chapter will begin by introducing some of the main issues surrounding cunt art in terms of the disruption of the pornographic through specific works and will focus on elements that constitute a pornographic performance. In the second section of this chapter, “Forbidden Spheres,” I will explore the idea of the forbidden and argue that it is this exposure of the culturally shameful on which the accusations of pornography attached to cunt art are based. In the third section, “Contextuality and Intentionality,” I will argue that the use of the vulva in pornography is contextual in that it uses narrative and character to reach its goal of stimulation which separates it from cunt art. The fourth section, “The Pornography of the Female Fragment,” will then focus on the visibility of the vulva and the threat that this poses within traditional viewing structures. I will argue that by classifying “what can and cannot be seen,” as the accusations of pornography applied to cunt art attempt, the cultural establishment reinforces and perpetuates certain beliefs about the female body. I will explore the equation of the vulva with sex and the vulva as a sexual object and I will argue that in employing the vulva, cunt artists seek to redress its omission in culture other than in medical and pornographic contexts. In the last section, “Performing Porn,” I will end the journey with a case study of the work of Annie Sprinkle who actively questions the boundaries between performance art and the performance of “porn.”

We must look at pornography as a performance of meanings and in doing so we can begin to understand more fully the differences between cunt art and pornography and the implications of the fine lines between them. In particular, we must ask what body, in what action and location, is intrinsic to pornographic performance, and how does the pornographic body perform and make pornographic meaning? What meanings are being performed? This latter question is what feminist debates on the subject have centred on, but little has been said on the subject of feminist live art labelled pornographic other than discussions of Annie Sprinkle, whose work purposefully blurs the boundaries of performance art and pornography. Notable and influential contributions on Sprinkle include Patrick Campbell (2000), Geraldine Harris (1999) and Rebecca Schneider (1997). In addition, contributions by Phelan (2001) and Jones (1998), while not specifically tackling the issues surrounding the work of Sprinkle, have elucidated some of the complexities surrounding body artists working in the field such as Schor, Schneemann and Export.

In following ideas and definitions of the pornographic, I will explore notions supplied by Brian McNair and Lynda Nead. By utilising the work of McNair, I hope to consider the mainstream representation of the pornographic in comparison to feminist analyses of pornography, and through Nead I will align discussions of the pornographic with art and, in particular, the female body. This performance of sex exhibited in the female nude, and explored by Nead, is essential to the performance of sex within examples of cunt art and the boundaries that they cross in terms of the pornographic. Within this chapter I will also include the ideas of Susan Griffin, Diana Russell, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. While the texts that I will draw on from these feminist critics are fairly dated, Dworkin and MacKinnon, for example, have promoted radical views on the topic

of pornography and so are worthy of discussion in the tension they produce in conflict with my own views.

The explicit body performed, as Schneider points out, "...trips across embattled boundaries between art and pornography..." (1997, p.3). The explicit body therefore, as a body that unfolds social and corporeal layers, leads me to the following question: what body, explicitly, is pornographic and what codes of explicitness denote the pornographic body? While there are undoubtedly "embattled boundaries" between art and pornography, there are also the implications for the performance of the explicit female body in terms of feminist criticism.

The body in cunt art is an explicit body; it is frequently a fragmented body. It performs sex in its most explicit and biologically defined sense. The representation of the vulva in these performances, through their graphic portrayal of intimate areas of the female body, can be seen to overlap the category of the pornographic.

Watching a woman (*the sex that takes place*) on a bed... (Schneider, 1997, p.71; my emphasis).

Here Schneider points to the enactment of sex, the performativity of sex (as both separate from, and related to, the performance of gender). The biological body speaks. The spectator is drawn in through assumption and association and the biological body makes meaning prior to any movement or action. Cunt art performs sex in this biological sense and it is the alignment of performing sex in a taxonomical sense that provides a link to performing sex as an action.

To introduce cunt art, then, and its transgressions from the pornographic, Aimée Beaubien's *Stimulating Objects, Mounting Objects and Penetrating Objects* (1993),

explores the collision of the traditionally pornographic image with the disruption of pornographic viewing ideals (see Fig. 4b). She presents photographs that segment the female body, from hip to thigh showing the woman's buttocks with legs parted, in the process of masturbation with various objects from coat hanger, hammer to high-heeled shoe. These images are grounded by reflections of these actions, implying reflection in a mirror but refusing full exposure through inverted images rather than a perspective from below the actions. These images offer the enticement of the pornographic image but this is disrupted by the refusal of disclosure.

The promise of disclosure leads the viewer on a journey of anticipation but fulfilment, orgasmic closure, is subverted through the interruption of the pornographic surface. The inversion of images and the holes punched where the objects make contact with and penetrate the woman jar the narrative. There is a literal penetration, a breach in the viewing process, where the viewer desires to see the penetration of the woman satisfied. These actions, part-presented, are off limits, beyond the canvas, off stage. The effects of actions are for the women alone. As a viewer, there is a dislocation of the pornographic position that dictates fulfilment. As a viewer, I do not experience the stimulation and excitement associated with the climax. There is the implication that the subject of the photographs knows and feels more than the spectator.

Similarly, *Reel No. 6* and *Reel No. 4.1* (2001) (Fig. 4c and 4d) of Beaubien's photographic montage series subverts the spectator's voyeurism through refusal to disclose the female genitalia. She presents two montages of legs spread. In recognising the segmentation of the female body, Beaubien literally divides the female body. Following the legs from foot to upper thigh leads the viewer to a point of disappointment,

of nothing to see. She not only shatters the promise of disclosure but also literally represents the lack. The combination of these interpretations questions cultural commentaries on the exposure of the vulva, more specifically the collision of Freud's analysis of penis envy and contemporary notions of pornography. The woman in Beaubien's pieces represents the paradox of the female position:

"She" is thus figured both as that which is traversable, the object possessable, and the inaccessible, the vanishing point of knowledge – that which infinitely recesses, endlessly escaping the boundaries of phallocratic ordering...that which is rendered visible as well as that which slips beyond vision... (Schneider, 1997, p.71).

The pornographic, then, can be associated with possession, and attempts to possess and control that which is ultimately uncontrollable.

Alternatively, Andrea Dworkin's main argument concerning pornography revolves around the destruction of women. She writes, "[t]he pornographers...put forth one consistent proposition: erotic pleasure for men is derived from and predicated on the savage destruction of women" (2000, p.41). In Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1999), the issue of possession arises but for Dworkin pornography *is* possession and revolves around the female body belonging to men, rather than attempted possession. While Dworkin's prognosis of the pornographic is focused on violence and destruction, I believe that Schneider's notion of the possessable and inaccessible, exemplified by Beaubien's ...*Objects*, provides a more coherent theory of pornographic performance. Cunt art can then be seen to attempt to re-possess and make knowable that which "infinitely recesses." And because of the continuous recession of knowing and possessing the female body, cunt art becomes a transgressive movement in comparison to pornography that relies on the quest for possession.

As stated earlier in this thesis, Beaubien complied with requests to remove her work, ... *Objects* (1993), from the hallway at the Art Institute of Chicago and while allegations of pornography were not explicitly brought against this piece, its performance of sex and the actions performed within it were clearly deemed unsuitable. The implications of the overlap between the “pornographic” and feminist work have a massive impact on feminist live art. It has an impact on the female body whether it is seen performing in the quotidian or liminally in a space or on a canvas and it has a huge impact on any performance of sex.

By definition, pornography is material designed to stimulate sexual excitement.² This means images, film sequences, plots, literature and narratives that are purposely created and circulated to arouse or stimulate. Brian McNair exposes the view of pornography as “human beings...engaged in sexual behaviour” (1996, p.45), but as he indicates, other views can include looser definitions.

For others, the mere display of a vagina, penis, or breasts (regardless of whether or not they are ‘in a condition of stimulation’) can be pornographic to some people in certain conditions...Pornography, in other words, can refer to representations in which sexual penetration is connoted, as well as denoted; in which sexual activity is merely implied, rather than shown (1996, pp.45-46).

And so, definitions of pornography depend on context, perspective and culture. The performance of sex, as engagement in sexual behaviour and as biological icon can be seen to constitute the pornographic.

McNair suggests a threefold definition that, “the label ‘pornography’ signifies: a) a particular *content* with b) an *intention* to produce c) a particular kind of *effect*” (1996, p.45). With regard to Lynda Nead’s suggestions in *The Female Nude* (1997), we can add

² For some, such as Dworkin (1999; 2000), MacKinnon (2000a; 2000b), Russell (1993) and Griffin (1982), pornography is material designed to stimulate men in which women are primarily depicted in demeaning roles as sexual objects. However, I find this extension of definition limiting in terms of what pornography is and could be.

further clarity to the pornographic work. Nead argues, “the pornographic is a designation that is made not only in relation to the form and content of an image but also in terms of its modes and sites of consumption” (1997, p.101). In this scheme, we must consider content, intention, effect and consumption, and consider these “defining” characteristics of performance with particular reference to cunt art and its association to pornography.

With regards to possible definitions of pornography, we must recognise the difficulties involved, the differences of opinion available and the vagueness and variables of the perspectives on offer. It may be obvious, but necessary, to indicate the nature of the pornographic before beginning to discuss content, intention, effect and consumption. The pornographic is a cultural and legal category that, as McNair points out, varies from culture to culture, stage to stage and era to era (1996, p.46 and p.54). Pornography is a category that can be applied to representations and can indicate the nature of the presentation, but the representation itself is not intrinsically pornographic. It relies on the cultural classification of pornography to *mean* pornography.³

This may appear obvious and is common to the entire cultural processes of semiology, interpretation, and making meaning of and in the world, but its importance rests in the fact that the application of such a term relies on the context and reading of the work rather than purely a specific content. The concept of the pornographic and the workings of this classification will be of particular interest in the discussion of intentionality, but are also relevant to the discourse surrounding the content of the pornographic. What we must

³ Framing is an important aspect of the performance of meanings but the consequences of this argument could repeal notions of a subversive cunt art ethos. If pornography relies on the classification “pornography” to reveal culturally specific pornographic content then disputes surrounding cunt art, its consumption and reception, could be rendered irrelevant in favour of a culturally and therefore contextually forbidden icon.

recognise is that cunt art can be seen to employ some of the traditional elements of what we class as pornographic but that this idea of content alone should be superseded by the consideration of the issues that surround content and consumption as intersecting notions.

Within this discussion, we must also note that the concept of pornography is a variable one. While the emphasis I wish to place on the concept of the pornographic is one of questioning the intrinsic characteristics of pornography, it must also be emphasised that definitions of pornography are blurred due to the volume of suggestions and opinions. With this in mind it is essential to consider possible definitions with a view to analysing what they mean in relation to cunt art and the implications for feminist representations of female genitalia.

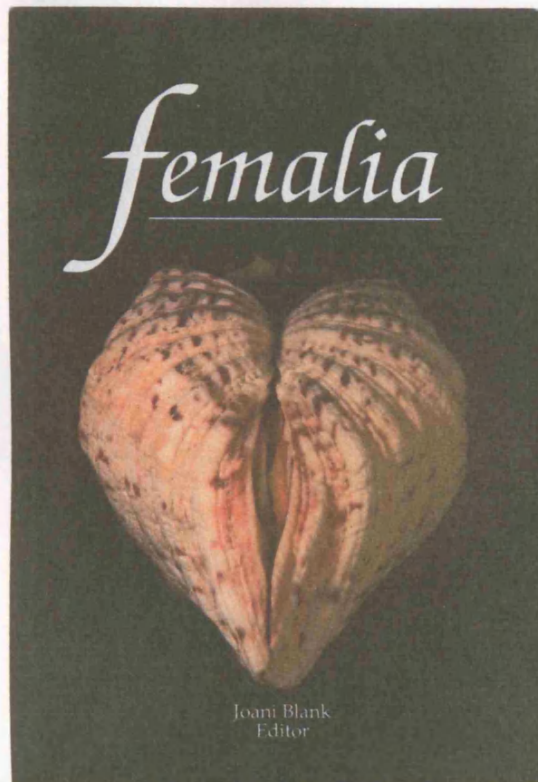


Figure 4a:

Source: Blank, ed. 1993, pages unnumbered

From left to right:

1st row: cover page; from Portfolio I by Corinne



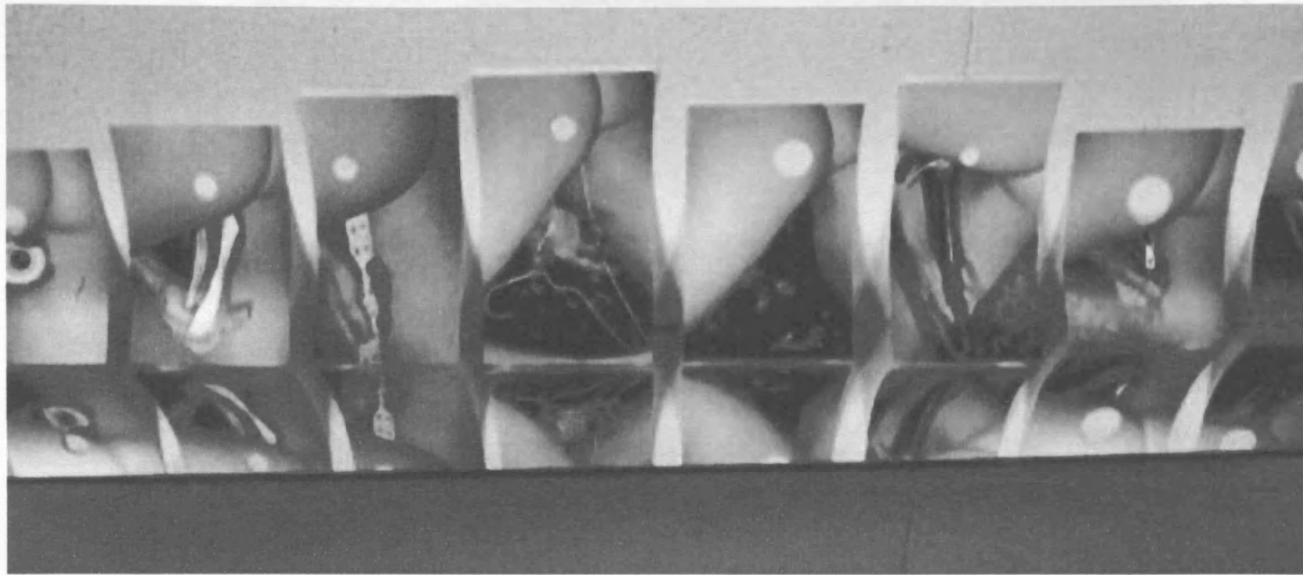
2nd row: from Portfolio IV by Perry; from Portfolio I by Corinne; from Portfolio III by Posener

3rd row: from Portfolio III by Posener; from Portfolio IV by Perry; from Portfolio II by Rosen.



Portfolios I – IV, *femalia*, edited by Joani Blank, 1993

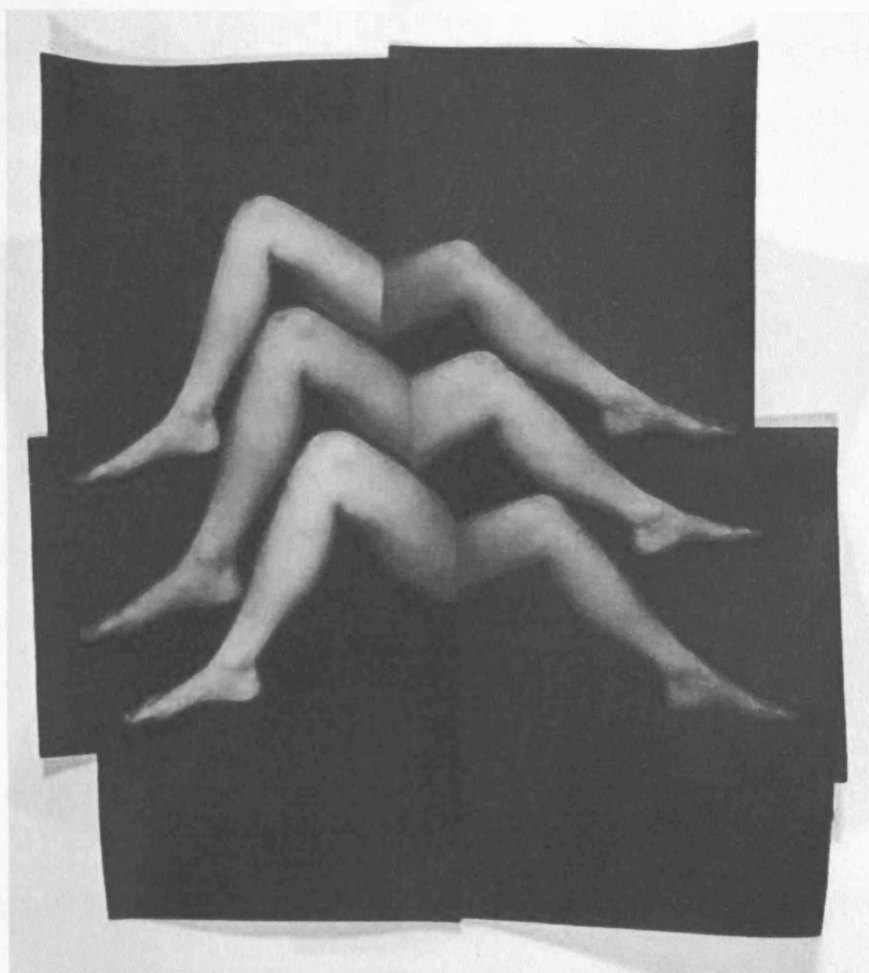
Figure 4b:



Aimée Beaubien, *Stimulating Objects, Mounting Objects and Penetrating Objects*, 1993

Source: <<http://www.thefileroom.org/documents/dyn/DisplayCase.cfm/id/20>>

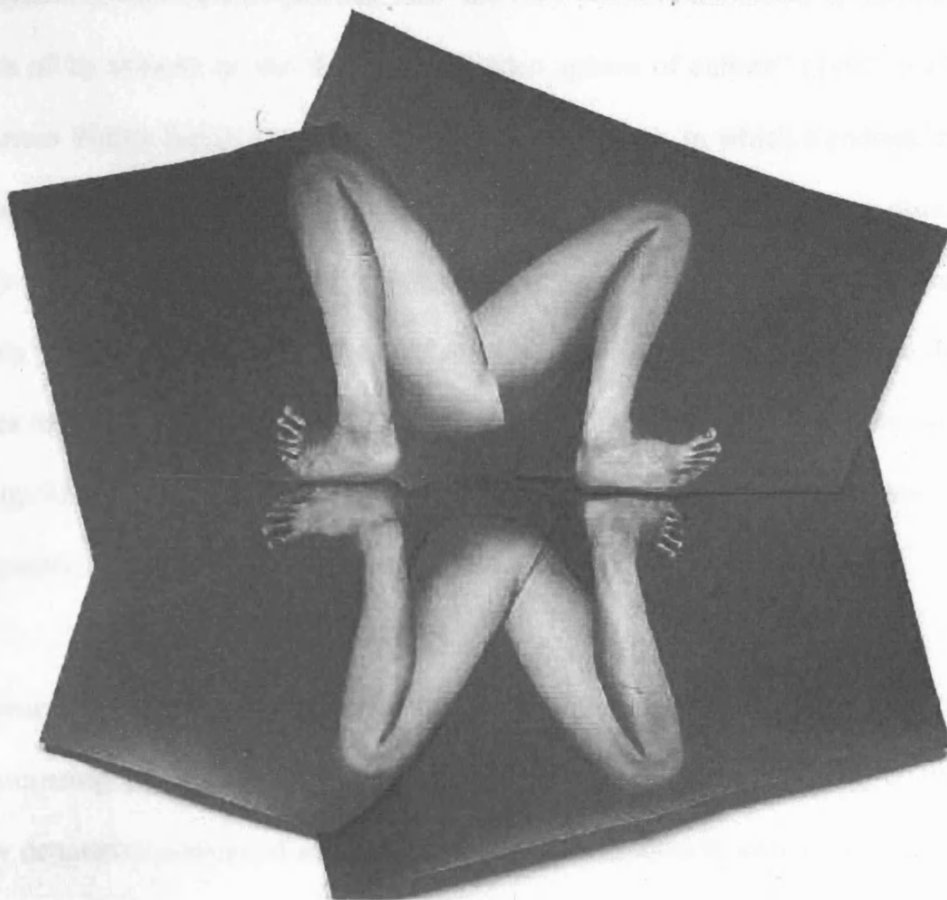
Figure 4c:



Aimée Beaubien, Reel No. 6, 2001

Source: <http://www.hammergallery.com/Artists/Beaubien/Beaubien_images.htm>

Figure 4d:



Aimée Beaubien, Reel No 4.1, 2001

Source: <http://www.hammergallery.com/Artists/Beaubien/Beaubien_images.htm>

Forbidden Spheres:

There are two views that seem to coincide in their analysis of pornography. “Pornography,” according to McNair, “denotes the sexually explicit, but it connotes the forbidden, the shameful, the that-which-should-remain-hidden” (1996, p.52), while Nead summarises the Kendrickian position that “the only possible definition of pornography is in terms of its identity as the illicit or forbidden sphere of culture” (1997, p.92). Nead summarises Walter Kendrick’s *The Secret Museum* (1996), in which Kendrick discusses the modern emergence of pornography stemming from eighteenth-century discovery of sexually explicit Roman artefacts. These artefacts were housed in The Secret Museum so that only those educated and deemed morally sound could view them. So Kendrick surmises that the notion of censorship is intrinsic to concepts of pornography (see Nead, 1997, pp.92-94). The performance of the forbidden takes the classification of the pornographic a step further than disputes about sexual activity and explicitness.

What becomes apparent is the readiness of critics to use (or misuse) the concept without also discussing the cultural codes reflected by the employment of such a term. The shallow denotative content of sex and arousal in pornography is exploded by its potential connotative identity as a rebellious and antithetical force: a sign of difference challenging cultural conformity. In these terms, allegations of cunt art as pornographic would appear to be justified. In this sense and by this definition of exposing the forbidden elements of society, cunt art *is* pornographic. Its content revolves around the exposure of that seen within pornography but, importantly, challenges the context within which this material is traditionally seen.

Vulvar and vaginal works seek to perform and reclaim a taboo – or forbidden – area of the female body. Further than what is at stake in literal terms, the intention to communicate female sexuality can be seen to be illicit in the sense that female libido has, throughout the ages, been taboo, forbidden and commonly demonised. Cunt art attempts to expose female sexual subjectivity and in doing so rendering, in McNair's words, the culturally "shameful" or "the that-which-should-remain-hidden" visible.

Content, in this classification, becomes an issue of the *reception* of content as opposed to a purely literal interpretation of pornography as being a particular subject matter. In this sense, we must consider the idea of context as a component of pornography as it is of other types of performance. While the idea of context has links to the consumption of pornography, it is worth considering the notions of the framing of pornography in relation to cunt art and the ideological framework within which both are received and commonly condemned by both conservative and cultural feminist viewpoints.

For Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, pornography's content is "the sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or in words" (cited in McNair, p.48). Their radical feminist position includes the following additional specifications of the pornographic:

- i) women are presented as dehumanised sexual objects, things or commodities; or
- ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or
- iii) women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or
- iv) women are presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or
- v) women are presented in postures of sexual submission; or
- vi) women's body parts – including but not limited to vaginas, breasts and buttocks – are exhibited, such that women are reduced to those parts; or
- vii) women are presented as whores by nature; or
- viii) women are presented as being penetrated by objects or animals; or
- ix) women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, abasement, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual (ibid.).

It is clear to see that the frame of reference that they draw on as being most influential is that of patriarchy and the consequent exploitation and oppression of women. However, they are also drawing on a very specific context to inspire their opinion of content and how meaning is performed. In particular, we can identify the school of thought in relation to point “vi” that is common to some feminist criticisms of cunt art; that of reducing women and/or feminist concerns to a part of the body. This has relevance for two reasons. Firstly, cunt art could be seen to be critiquing the patriarchal form of definition that excludes female experience in quotidian taxonomy, and secondly, the framing of pornography as a provocative narrative rather than the representation of a body part.

In terms of content and context, Dworkin and MacKinnon’s summation of the display of women’s body parts and reduction to these body parts could be easily transferred to a discussion of medical diagrams. These representations are also one-dimensional in that they do not include the female experience of these parts. To claim that pornography alone can be defined, as the graphically depicted and sexually explicit subordination of women, with the further possibility of the reduction of women to their body parts, is to claim, as Dworkin does, that patriarchy and pornography are synonymous.

Those structures that define and regulate our experience of the world rely on a reduction, not only as dichotomising forces but also as a mode of oppression more generally. The reductive qualities employed in medical classification produce negativity attached to the female body, the importance of successful conception as a female trait or the continuation of misogynistic “walking womb” ideology, to name a few issues relevant to this project. The system of definition that Dworkin and MacKinnon present is one that is summarised by Susan Griffin when she surmises that pornography is the “mythology...[of]...the

chauvinist mind” (1982, p.2). She continues, in her problematically Cartesian analysis, “[b]ut the pornographic mind is a mind in which we all participate. It is *the mind which dominates our culture*” (1982, pp.2-3; my emphasis). According to Griffin, we are all complicit in the continuation of this “mind” without exception.

What the ideas of Griffin, Dworkin and MacKinnon incorporate and reinforce is a definition of the male (pornographer’s) mind and the woman’s (exploited) body. The mistrust of female corporeality reinforces the objecthood that the feminist position wishes to criticise and the dichotomies that present limited options. What these ideas promote is an avoidance of the female body rather than a remedy to the notion of the female body as necessarily objectified. How can an idea be challenged if we are unwilling to even consider it?

Furthermore, the complicity involved in the maintenance of female subordination is upheld even within the Dworkin/MacKinnon and Griffin perspective because what results from these perspectives is an equally debilitating lack of female control over the female body. The body becomes shunned and evaded for what it might mean. To use cunt art reappropriates these sources of oppression. It can be seen to attempt to replace the reductivism of the pornographic or patriarchal mind by insisting on the iconic nature of what it represents. I am arguing that cunt art refuses the evasion of the body employed by other positions.

The assumption behind the Dworkin/MacKinnon statement on what constitutes pornography, expressed in the sixth clause, is that a representation of a body part reduces women to that body part. This disallows feminist reappropriation of the female body, but

also denies the reframing of pornography as a differently provocative narrative rather than patriarchal presentation of a body part. This is a discussion that can help us begin to differentiate between pornography and cunt art and gives a starting point to argue against claims that the latter be categorised as the former. As noted earlier, we must consider the framing of pornography in relation to cunt art both in terms of the context and type of pornography and the frame of reference it employs and so the next section will consider context and intention in relation to pornography and cunt art. I will argue that pornography depends on narrative and the development of character and scenario in order to achieve its primary aim of stimulation and I will argue that cunt art refuses this fantasy context and dislocates the private viewing ideals of pornography.

Contextuality and Intentionality:

If we consider pornographic performance, we find that the most common tools employed are those revolving around sexual fantasy, fetishisation and allusion. In some cases where allusion is shattered by a drive for explicit representation, the imagery performed involves a narrative, however loosely constructed or implicit. All pornographic works involve a subtext of desire; of sexual gratification or sexual subservience. And so, a pornographic text (visual or otherwise) will, as a basic requirement, include a compulsion for pleasure whether welcomed or uninvited, and can include the subtext, for example, of reticence, enticement, aggression, violation and/or denial.

The use of the vulva in pornography is contextual, using narratives on either an explicit or implicit level. To this end we are unlikely to find an isolated image of the vulva within a pornographic magazine. In an exploration to this end, we are often confronted with contextualised images of the female genitals. While the image in Figure 4e is visually similar to Bamber's *Untitled (#1)* (1994) (see Fig. 4f), the magazine image is from a scenario embedded with the meanings attached to a young ballet-dancing woman (see full image from *Men Only* (1999) Fig. 4g). There are allusions to her youth, innocence and suppleness.

Another image however, Figure 4h, has not been edited. This image from *Whitehouse* magazine (2003) presents the vulva separately from the rest of the woman's body. Even taken as a single image without the entire pictorial spread (see Fig. 4h), the photograph tells the viewer a story revolving around character and disclosure. The taloned fingers spreading the labia, which are clearly not hers, propose that there is another woman

involved. This is not to deny that there are meanings tied up within examples of cunt art, but the meanings within pornographic images revolve around the construction of fantasy and character.

If we compare cunt art works that include fingers spreading the labia, all examples use very specific positioning. The fingers belong to the subject. In specific examples from all four portfolios in *femalia* (1993), fingers are used spread the labia and to frame the vulva (see Fig. 4i). In Tee A. Corinne's oval trimmed photograph *Jeanne* (1975), in *Cunt Coloring Book* (originally published in 1975; 2003) and in Betty Dodson's labia drawings (see Fig. 4i), the lips are drawn apart with fingers that reach from above the vulva. The perspective implies ownership, and an open and willing participation and exposure.

In many cases of pornography, such as Figure 4j and 4k, the narrative is contained within a "monologue," rather than in the sense of having many players, and in other cases the narrative can involve more than one participant where the emphasis is placed on the construction of a desirable scenario. In this sense, scenes are set up that contextualise the exposure of the female genitalia. Even in the trend of solo female representation, the model plays a role through their demeanour and attire, and this is often portrayed as a development of "plot." I use the term "plot" here in its simplest form, as the narrative context is always uncomplicated to avoid shattering the fantasy of the scenario presented.

An example of this narrative taken from a magazine published in 1999 is a woman washing a car (Fig. 4j). A soapy car, bucket, sponge and hose set the scene that leads to the woman washing herself. Another image from the same publication shows a woman in a garage holding a petrol hose amongst other implements utilised (see Fig. 4k). Character

and role are also evoked in many pornographic magazines. An image from *Rustler* (2003) provides the characters of medical personnel, which are denoted by costume and props (see Fig. 4l). In Figure 4m, from *Pulsate* magazine (2003), the scene is set for two female friends to have a night in while their boyfriends, we are told, have gone out for the night. Interestingly, it is made clear through the text that these women *have* boyfriends, avoiding the threat that these women may not be attainable to the male viewer.

Throughout these magazines, a variety of costumes, settings and scenarios are employed. The variety of contexts constructed, however, would not be necessary if representation of body parts alone produced the level of titillation that these cultural texts are aiming at. This suggests that context, by which I am explicating the scenarios created and maintained through costume, props and the body language purposively utilised, is intrinsic to the pornographic material created and circulated within Western culture.

This idea of context is a common motif within pornographic films and literature. The construction of the fantasy is imperative to films and texts. As a teenager, the group of friends I was close to frequently joked about Hank. We had viewed one pornographic film in which the actor playing the main character, Hank, portrayed a Texan man with a Stetson and cowboy boots (very memorable when there were various shots of his trousers around his ankles).⁴ Hank was the character that moved the plot forward and tied the storyline together. Without Hank, the film would have appeared to be random sex scenes.

Skintight (1999) (see Fig. 4n) revolves loosely around the premise of an artist who has “writer’s block” and is uninspired to produce work. This then produces situations of

⁴ Unfortunately I do not remember the title of this film or its release date.

painting on the model's body, orgasm being the way to inspiration and life drawing sessions. *A Witch's Tail* (2000) (see Fig. 4o) provides a similarly creative theme when the main character, a novelist, finds that her stories come to life in a supernatural dwelling. Many pornographic films similarly use shallow links to carry a plot. The fact that these characters or themes are set in place vouch for the commonplace feature that pornography provides context to its images whether they are static, in a magazine, or in sequence, as seen in films.

This context of the fantasy and, often, the forbidden is intrinsic to the pornographic work. The forbidden, however, as we have discussed earlier is a quality shared with cunt art, but in the context of the truly pornographic image or sequence or action, the forbidden is not exposed to challenge the taboo status but is shown to thrill. Potentially, the exposure of the forbidden within the pornographic sphere enables it remain socially taboo.

Within the cultural realm of pornography, it is that which is outwardly disapproved of in terms of social morality and the desire to cross these boundaries privately that primarily constitutes this realm. While there is the argument that pornography could be seen as a “liberating” force, an attempt to liberalise sexuality and sexual preference and therefore challenge what is acceptable, there are two main reasons that a majority of pornographic material fails in this assumption. Firstly, pornography remains a largely private and hidden source of entertainment, a “forbidden” element of society, and hence cannot affect change on a larger scale. These examples become items for the personal gratification of desires rather than for exposure of sexualities and choices. Secondly, much “mainstream” pornography is based around heterosexual scenarios with the exception of hetero-centred

lesbian material.⁵ As a result, summarising this mainstream type of pornography as aimed at a heterosexual audience could be seen as simplifying the category. But I am drawn to ask the questions: Does “mainstream” hetero-porn appeal to the heterosexual woman or is it for heterosexual male appeal? And who does the author/producer create the work for?

To answer the latter question first, we must assume that pornography is created for the consumer. As a highly lucrative commercial market, the pornography industry is producing commercially viable merchandise. But who is the consumer and who is the commodity being sold? Feminists such as Dworkin (1999; 2000), MacKinnon (2000a; 2000b) and Griffin (1982) would say that the marketplace is male and it is the female body that is the commodity:

She is meat in his marketplace; he is the butcher who wields the knife to get the right cut; and he communicates through the cutting, then the display of the body parts (Dworkin, 2000, p.164).

The commodification of the female body is certainly not unknown to feminist debate, but to categorically assert this specifically gendered consumer/commodity dichotomy denies individual women’s experience of pornography.

To assume that every woman in mainstream pornography is exploited as a commodity undermines women’s rights to choose for themselves. Annie Sprinkle exemplifies this clearly in her *Pornstistics*, computer slides used in *Post Porn Modernist* (1990 – 1995), which present facts about her career including “AMOUNT OF COCK SUCKED,” income, hours worked and the reasons behind her career choices categorised into

⁵ I use the term “mainstream” to denote the most easily available material and indeed the type of material that floods the pornographic market. Satellite television, x-rated channels available to subscription or pay-per-view largely focus on pornography that is aimed towards the heterosexual viewer who is keen to watch sexual intercourse, oral sex and light bondage, while in adult shops the largest range of material is again aimed at heterosexual audiences, whether specialist or general demand.

advantages and disadvantages. She does not try to hide the negative aspects and experiences she has had within the sex industry but reaches the decision that “...the pros did seem to outweigh the cons, so I did it” (1998, p.97). To assume she is naïve, or uninformed, “brainwashed” or simply wrong is to seriously undermine her and her right to choose.

In addition, to suggest that mainstream pornography only appeals to men undermines women’s right to enjoy the same sexually provocative material. To assume that only men “consume” pornography undermines women’s right to enjoy and explore it. To follow Dworkin and MacKinnon’s argument is to be made to feel abnormal or unbalanced or sick for being stimulated by it. In 1982, Susan Griffin wrote:

A woman’s mind ought to be surprised by pornography, for most women do not read pornography. We do not even enter those places or neighborhoods where it is sold (1982, p.3).

Even given the years since this statement was made, I am disturbed by these words: “...ought to be...most women do not...[w]e do not even enter....” Such statements bind women’s freedom, limit their choices and create roles as much as any tenets or values that they may hope to oppose. Whereas women have been trained and controlled in appropriate behaviour and demeanour in the past, it seems that this training has taken a new form. As a minority, according to Griffin, I am inappropriate.

In terms of the intentionality of pornography, I would argue that the biggest chasm separating the performances exhibited in cunt art and pornography is the notion of the forbidden and the ways in which these forms respectively challenge what is taboo. The issue of forbidden pleasure, and the maintenance of forbidden pleasure, is a strong element of pornography. In cunt art, the framing of the work as a statement as opposed to

a fantastical narrative is a question not only of the context of the image and the content of a questionable piece, but it is also an issue of the intentions within the piece.

The author determines the narrative stance, but more than this, the author is responsible for the intention behind the material. Remembering McNair's three-point definition that the category of pornography indicates an "*intention*" to produce a "particular kind of *effect*" (1996, p.45), the intention to cause the effect of sexual stimulation, excitement, arousal or gratification is an issue that, while being questionable to some parties, is worth consideration in the discussion of the pornographic nature of cunt art.

As Nead points out, "[f]or some writers on the subject, the sole aim of the pornographic representation is to bring about a sexual catharsis in the viewer and it is the singularity of this purpose that sets it apart from all other kinds of representations" (1997, p.88). McNair similarly identifies one opinion that defines pornography from other sexually explicit material is its singular designation for "recreation" rather than education (1996, p.47). He writes:

What makes the relatively less explicit (or indeed implicit) representation of sexual activity nonetheless pornographic is its intention to arouse. The image of a topless woman in a television documentary about breast cancer is not pornographic, if there is no intention on the part of the producer to induce sexual arousal in his or her audience (1996, p.46).

In this example, McNair suggests that the informative function of the documentary defies the singular purpose of "recreation" inspired by pornographic material. Intention and purpose, in this sense are defining features of pornography.

What must be remembered is that pornography is a cultural category. As a concept or a label, certain works can be classified as pornography. This, however, does not prevent

non-pornographic cultural texts from being appropriated as arousing or sexually exciting. It has been suggested that the intention of a work is irrelevant due to the reception and employment that it may receive in any given circumstances. It is possible, however, to claim that without the intention to arouse the work is not pornographic, but that the non-pornographic could involuntarily support pornographic exploitation that could stimulate sexual excitement. The paedophilic reappropriation of an image of a youth playing naked on a beach is not pornography. The image could be exploited for paedophilic stimulation, but is not in itself a pornographic image.⁶ In this scheme cunt art, while being open to the possibility of reappropriation, is not pornographic in intention.

To classify pornographic works by their intention to stimulate, however, could be seen as problematic. There are many variables. Without knowing the intention of the author/producer, many works are hard to define. Issues of intention, however, could be taken back to the notion of context. That cunt art refuses the privacy of pornographic consumption is an issue of intentional context. Many vulvar works present a very public viewing of women's genitalia. One cannot hide in the privacy of the home, darkened cinema or private shop. There is a dislocation of viewing ideals and the scene of consumption. Alternatively when Corinne encourages the private interaction with the *Cunt Coloring Book*, the format of the vulvae in drawings and the incitement to colour in these outlines disrupts the pornography of the depictions. The viewer/participant is drawn into the activity typical of childhood. Encouragement to add colour to these illustrations also amusingly persuades the viewer to use their hands in the achievement of artistic and educational satisfaction rather than alternative sources of fulfilment.

⁶ This is perhaps a useful guideline that could be employed more widely to avoid unnecessary allegations of pornography in artistic production.

The Guerrilla Girls poster “*Do Women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?*” eloquently poses a potent question (Guerrilla Girls, poster mid-1980s; see Fig. 4p). This poster presented the statement that while a majority of nudes in the museum were female, less than 5% of works exhibited were by female artists. Representations of the female body rely on questions of intention and authorship to validate them and while most of the works housed at the museum in question were undoubtedly less explicit than most cunt art examples, their status as respectable and valid expression separate them from the pornographic.

Due to the assumption of the status of works of art like those highlighted by the Guerrilla Girls - that they encompass a certain level of integrity, authority and purpose - artistic endeavour is commonly and contemporaneously considered to be antithetical to pornography, which lacks the quality and distinction found in art. The debate surrounding the alignment of cunt art with pornography is potent because of the fact that cunt art subsumes the categories of allowable and the forbidden into a complex web of contradictions. Pornography and art, as opposite ends of the same cultural representational spectrum, employ these simplified categories of the acceptable and the forbidden.

This continuum of representation closely links to earlier discussions of the forbidden qualities found in pornography, the illicit sphere of representation. That this continuum defines “what can or cannot be seen” shows the contradictory nature of cunt art and the challenge that these female artists exert on the cultural spectrum in general. The artistic qualities of cunt art, in these conditions, particularly the skill and precision of works such as Bamber’s *Untitled* series (1994) and Chicago’s *Dinner Party* (1979), should justify the

subject matter they portray. However, these works combine artistic excellence with a content that is so far out of the bounds of patriarchal acceptability that these qualifications are deemed null and void.

So, cunt art is art. But it has also been labelled pornographic. Cunt art could be seen to cross the cultural boundaries of decency too far to allow for artistic reprieve. But what is it about the subject matter, about representing the vulva, which allows this double standard of categorisation? It seems that feminist representations of female genitalia are one of the relatively few genres that excite such a dramatic response. What must be recognised and emphasised is that these “offensive items” are not only considered indecent but are actually accused of being pornographic. We have to question the intrinsically sexual allusions associated with representations of the vulva, and question, within their changing contexts, whether these works are condemned due to a lack of male authority to proclaim their “innocence.”

In the next section I will explore the vulva as a sexual object, focusing on the visibility of the vulva and the employment of the vulva as a tool to redress its omission in culture other than in medical and pornographic contexts. I will argue that the accusations of pornography applied to cunt art attempt to classify “what can and cannot be seen” and by its censorship, the cultural establishment maintains certain beliefs about the female body.

Figure 4e:



Excerpt of image from *Men Only* magazine,
Summer Special, 1999

Source: As stated

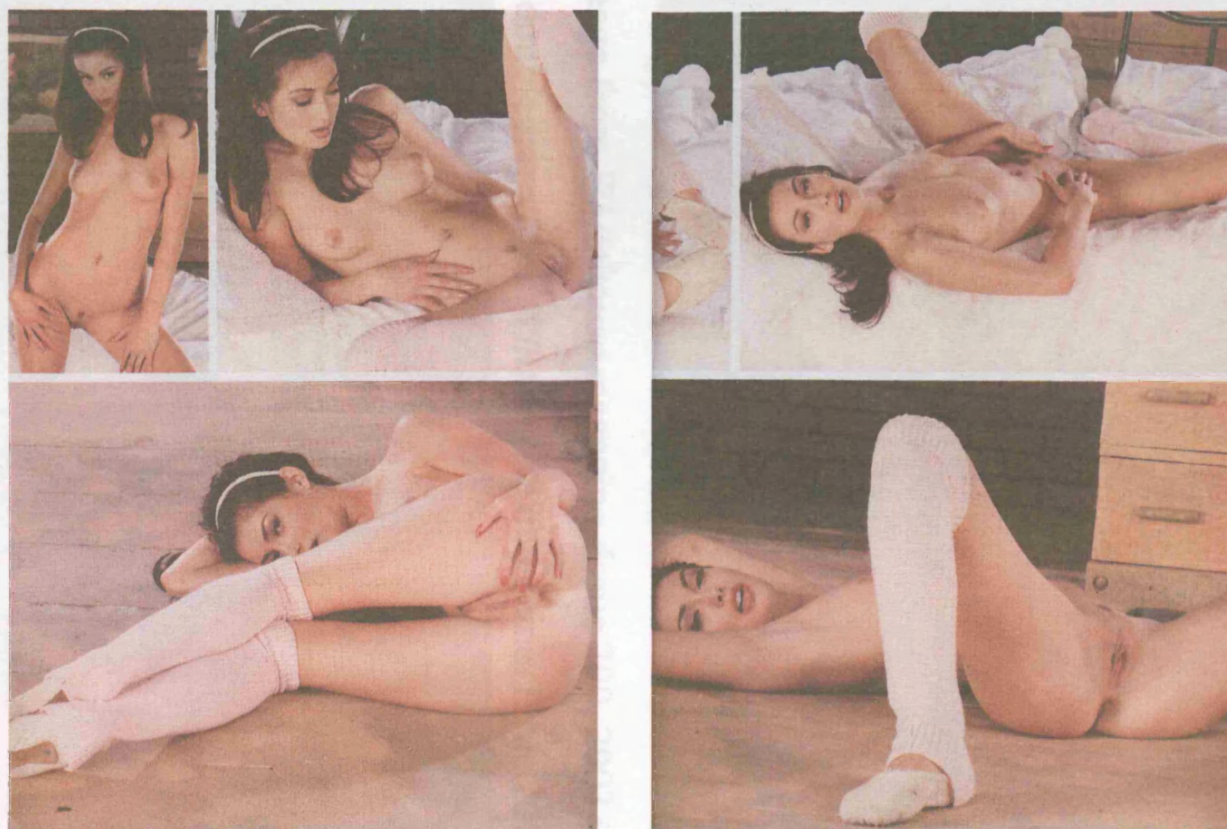
Figure 4f:



Judie Bamber, *Untitled* (#1), 1994

Source: Kandel, 1996, p.189

Figure 4g:



Images from *Men Only* magazine, Summer Special, 1999

Source: As stated

Figure 4h:



Image from *Whitehouse* magazine, Issue 290, 2003 (above)

Full double page from *Whitehouse* magazine, Issue 290 (below)



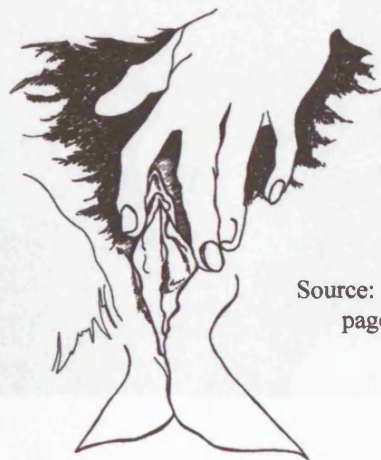
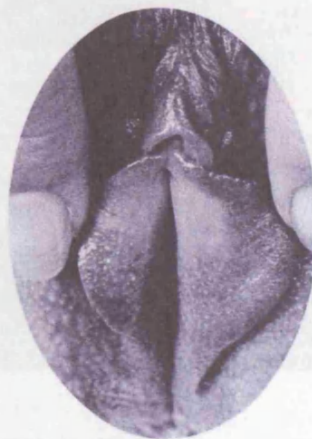
Source: As stated

Figure 4i:



Selected images from *femalia*, photographs by Perry & Corinne

Source: Blank, ed. 1993, pages unnumbered



Source: Corinne, 2003, pages unnumbered

Corinne, Jeanne, 1975; Excerpt *The Cunt Coloring Book*, 1975

Source: <http://rcswww.urz.tu-dresden.de/~english1/photo/images/corinne_jeanne.htm>



Sherri
by betty dodson



Dorothy
by betty dodson



Michelle
by betty dodson



Dottie
by betty dodson

Selected works by Dodson, dates unknown

Source: <<http://www.bettydodson.com/subsex41genart.htm>>

Figure 4j:



Two images from *Men Only* magazine, Summer Special, 1999

Figure 4k:



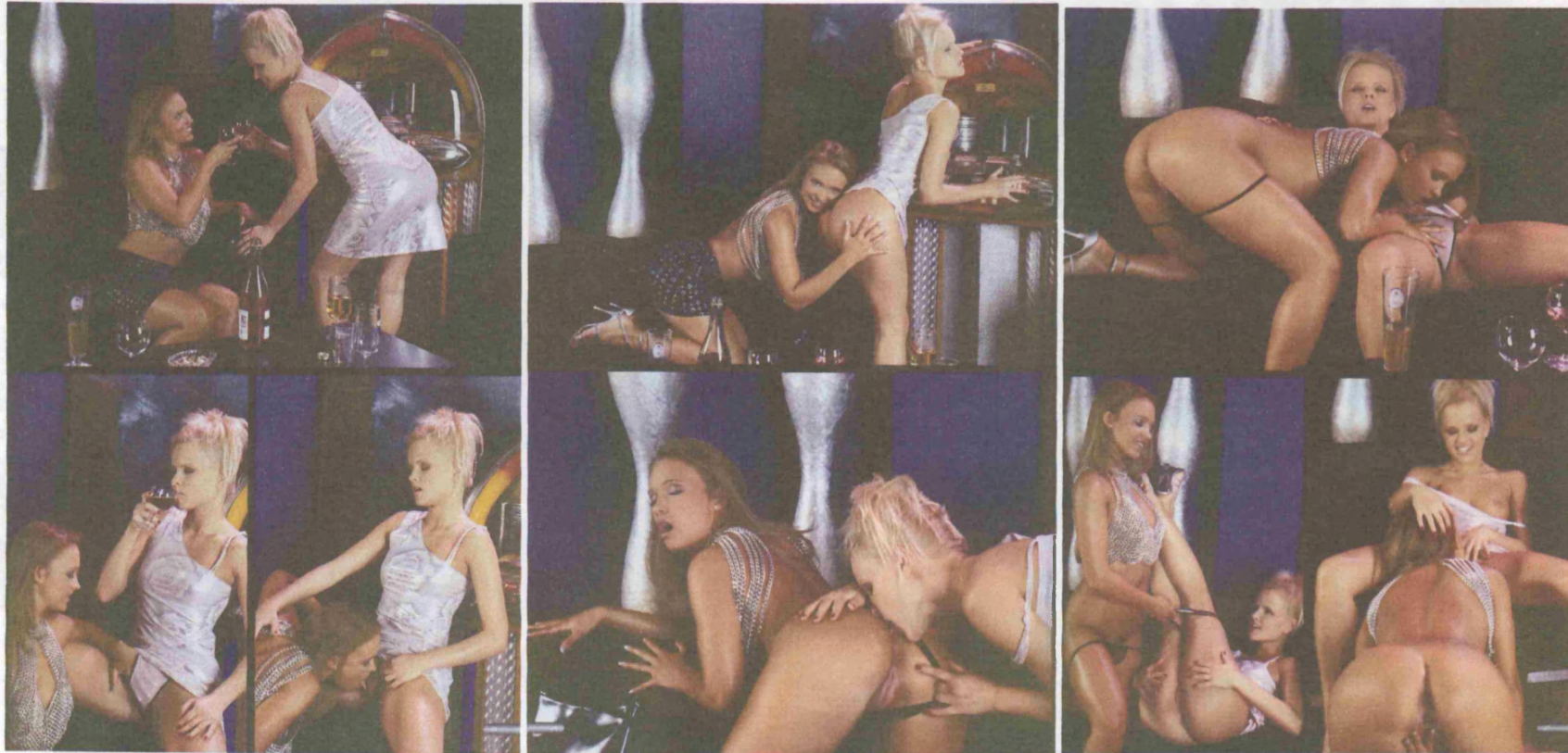
Figure 4l:



Image from *Rustler*, Issue 340, 2003

Sources: As stated

Figure 4m:



Images from *Pulsate* magazine, 2003

Source: As stated

Figure 4n:



Cover of *Skintight*, 1999

Source: As stated

Figure 4o:



Cover of *A Witch's Tail*, 2000

Source: As stated

Figure 4p:



Guerilla Girls, *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* Poster mid-1980s

Source: Goldberg, 1998, p.24

The Pornography of the Female Fragment:

She is worth more in pieces that she ever was whole (Dworkin, 2000, p.164).

Referring back to the view that the simple display of a vulva, penis, or breasts can be considered pornographic, or referring to what McNair also describes as “representations in which sexual penetration is connoted” (1996, p.46), we must acknowledge that for some, any representation of the vulva or vagina (and indeed any sexual organ) is pornographic. Without the implication of stimulation (1996, p.45), it must be assumed that there is something intrinsically sexual about the female genitals; that without reference or context, the vulva connotes sexual behaviour/meaning.

But if we accept this we also have to accept that any attempt to desexualise or de-objectify the female body is doomed to fail if the assumption of the vulva as a sexual object is not challenged and re-defined. The complexities of the vulva as a sexual object will be discussed later in this section and it will become clear that we need a system of re-education. Bearing in mind the classification that pornography involves representations for “recreation” as opposed to education, the educational aspect of cunt art needs to be highlighted if i) allegations of pornography attached to vulvar works are to be challenged, and ii) if we are to begin or suggest a re-definition of women’s genitalia.

What needs to be acknowledged is the key part that the dominant culture plays not only in controlling but also in generating illicit forms or areas of social consumption. It has been suggested by Nead that the homogenising force of censorship refuses sexual heterogeneity;

...the prioritising of community standards and the assumption of moral consensus has encouraged a normalizing of certain sexualities and an outlawing of those

sexual identities and desires that are seen to deviate from the accepted norms (1997, p.95).

Hence, through censorship and trials of obscenity, heterogeneous material is maintained as unacceptable, indecent and immoral. General cultural attitudes, then, generate “forbidden” pleasures by condemning aspects of behaviour and desire. Those apparently culturally unacceptable facets of sexuality and desire are never disposed of but rather driven to the opposite end (theoretically and institutionally invisible) of the cultural continuum or, to put it in Nead’s terms, as a “zone of disorder and irregularity with the standards and rules of moral society” (1997, p.93).

Zoe Leonard’s installation brings female libido to the forefront, the “zone of disorder” tackled directly, with understated clarity (see Fig. 2i). The masturbatory images perform a detailed but wonderfully underplayed disruption of the desexualised, static and solemn representation of high-class society and reveal hidden female desire within these sterile portraits. The women portrayed, being denied the liberty of sexual exploration and gratification, are at once revealed as empowered. Unspoken desire and pleasure are powerfully exposed in Leonard’s work and thus she challenges the forbidden, that is to say, female sexual gratification.

We are also drawn to consider issues of creativity and activity by the installation. We are not reminded of the master’s strokes that created such works but rather female expression is highlighted through the activity of the female hands and fingers within the masturbation images. While the portraits alone emphasise female passivity and frigidity through respectful solemnity, the mastery of the traditional male artist, and his mastery over form and content, is overtaken by the mastery of the masturbating female. She is expert and genius over her own body and pleasure. The female hands that are familiar with the

terrain and know the body inside and out, the layers and folds, the secrets and excitement supersede the male hands that applied the paint and stroked the image.

While challenging notions of the passive female and disrupting the traditional male mastery of artwork, this installation also critiques the standards and rules of society. It can be seen not only to exalt the traditionally suppressed female libido but also draws attention to the expectations of the contained and chaste woman. These ideals are shattered by the idea that she may wish for and, more dangerously, may know how to provide her own pleasure and sexual satisfaction.

Is this piece pornographic? We are confronted by images of female masturbation, but we are also witness to the culturally glazed, frigid exterior of the female. There are no scenarios immediately exposed. There are no pouting, half-open mouths. There are no heads thrown back in ecstasy. There are no wanton looks to the viewer with hair falling provocatively over one eye. There are no looks, no heads, and no mouths of this kind at all. There is no contextualisation of female pleasure hence, there is only female pleasure itself. Leonard's piece is the "irregularity" Nead discusses. We are not provided with any fantasy context to provoke male desire. In fact, the installation does not suggest any male involvement in female pleasure at all, and critiques the male mastery involved in and responsible for passifying the female role.

Claims that cunt art is pornographic imply that cultural standards view the vulva as pornographic, hence obscene. By classifying "what can and cannot be seen," the cultural establishment reinforces and perpetuates certain beliefs about the female body. We have to question the purposes behind this manoeuvre. By denying, or omitting to recognise the

educational qualities of cunt art, and alleging its pornographic incentive, male authoritative perspectives are left untouchable. The non-pornographic medical and scientific representations of female genitalia, on the whole authored by male medical representatives, remain the only morally acceptable imaging of women's parts. This is particularly true in cases that blur the boundaries between performance art and sex education by performers such as Annie Sprinkle.

There are two avenues here that need investigation. Firstly, we must consider the possible routes to destabilising the assumption that the vulva connotes sex and whether cunt art, surrounded by criticism and allegation, can challenge the meanings attached to this female body part. Secondly, we must investigate the efforts made by feminist artists/educationalists, as a double intention, and question both the methods utilised and the objections to their practice. The equation of the vulva with sex will be the focus of this section. The latter, I will discuss through an examination of the work of Annie Sprinkle, in the next section.

The notion of the vulva as an intrinsically sexual object is a complex one. We have the contradictory ideas of the monstrosity of these female parts and their processes contained within myth and popular culture, and the idea, while similarly culturally unacceptable/forbidden/unseen (pornographic), that the vulva is a sexual sign which arouses and stimulates. The crux of this uneasy relationship lies in the contradiction of appeal and allure, and of shame and dirtiness.

There are ways, however, to think through these contradictions and complexities. We can assume that notions of monstrosity surrounding the vulva have conceptual and actual

effect. In maintaining the inferiority and monstrosity of women's genitalia, patriarchy has asserted a phallogentric hierarchy built on power and knowledge. By inferring the cultural distaste for the vulva, social structures maintain the subordinate role of women by way of promoting the imperfection of the female body and therefore encouraging the impossible task of attaining perfection.

Through social conveyance of the monstrous female body as true and unchangeable knowledge, women are socialised to perceive their own bodies as monstrous. The actual effect on women is an attitude of shame towards their own bodies, specifically the vulva, and a mindset of self-loathing and disgust that impacts upon their use of their body and their status in society. Perhaps the main cultural contradiction that exists is the traditional prioritising of mind over body, where the male is associated with the mind, and the actual command of the body in society, where the female is retained in a subservient position by allegations of corporeal monstrosity, proving the body to be a powerful social determinant. This is particularly well exemplified in Leonard's installation as previously discussed. The frigid portraits on their own, which are commented on through Leonard's composition of portraits and small details, tell of a controlled and subservient role for women. The apathetic and apologetic role, given to women as monstrously embodied, is the least empowered and effectual position.

However, in contrast to this effect, patriarchy harbours the appeal of the vulva as a "secret" facet. Just as the socially acceptable position of women is that of inferior to the status of men, there is the stereotypical male fantasy of the dominatrix, reflecting the sexual allure of the forbidden, or in this case, the appeal of the culturally unacceptable, socially and sexually powerful woman. Just as the vulva is a culturally distasteful notion,

and while a reality in the lives of women, so it becomes the object of illicit attraction in pornography.

There are two of examples from recent mainstream entertainment that I would like to draw on to demonstrate this social process. In the first series of the successful television series *The Sopranos*, based on the activities of “made” man Tony Soprano in his blood family and his mob “family,” Tony has a conversation with his aging Mafioso uncle during a game of golf.⁷ The uncle tells Tony that he performs oral sex on his mistress, but informs Tony that this information is confidential and threatens that this revelation could undermine his position of power. What follows, along with Tony’s jovial, but soon hesitant, ridicule of the uncle’s activities, in the form of a rendition of “South of the border, where the tuna fish play,” is the release of this information by his mistress during a light-hearted conversation with other mob wives. This results in her punishment when he ends his relationship with her for letting this information become public knowledge.

In the film *The Believer* (2001), directed by Henry Bean, one reason the neo-Nazi main character Danny gives for his hatred of Jews is the proliferation of oral sex in their sex lives. Danny claims that the Jewish man’s desire to receive fellatio feminises the male and that the activity of cunnilingus spoils the female because she should be satisfied by the “non-Jewish” and fully masculine ideal of penetration, which is jeopardised by her experience of oral sex. What is reflected in both *The Sopranos* and *The Believer* is a dominant view that rejects cunnilingus and reinforces the masculinity associated with penetration as a forceful and powerful sexual role.

⁷ Episode 9, titled “Boca”, aired 7th March 1999.

Both the highly masculinised roles of mob member or fascist reflect a need to maintain the traditionally masculine and powerful position of active/“doer” and “penetrator” in relation to the notion of the passive woman who is there to give pleasure to the male. This, in addition to the denial of female pleasure, leads to the unacceptability of cunnilingus, and the power and integrity that is assumed to be lost by the male should he choose to perform such an activity. As illustrations of patriarchal methods and values, in terms of the Machiavellian and strong-arm/narrow-minded approaches exemplified in their principles and actions, the Mafia and neo-Fascist movements shown in these dramas summarise the “secret” facet of patriarchal culture. Within the framework of the appeal of the forbidden, these cultural productions exemplify the mainstream objection to female genitalia, and particularly to female sexual pleasure and fulfilment, and in the case of *The Sopranos*, points to the illicit attraction of female genitalia.

The cultural unacceptability of the vulva allows for the conceptually “underground” or “black market” trade in the representation of these parts. The cultural unacceptability of the vulva could be seen to breed this appeal. This is not to imply that the sexual element of the vulva is a minority “perversion.” By using the black market metaphor, I am indicating the antithetical nature of the appeal of the vulva in the context of patriarchal “moral” society. The appeal of female genitalia has the possibility (however unrealised) of being dangerous, and of destabilising the notions constructed to maintain a patriarchal culture, akin to the dangers that underground movements pose to dominant political structures.

And this is the threat that cunt art performs in its exposure of the female body. Works such as Corinne’s *Isis* series (1986) and Bamber’s *Untitled* series (1994), and even less

explicit pieces such as LeCocq's *Feather Cunt* (1971) and Lesko's *Lips* (1993), offer open contemplation of the female genitalia; and in the latter two, we can even see the proposal that the female part and such contemplation be fun. These artists approach the vulva with humour that directly and purposively undermines the danger that such representations present to patriarchal "moral" society. The "black market" in vulvar representations also undermines the quasi-juridical tenets of patriarchal society in some senses. Viewing female genitalia as arousing and pleasing (attributed above to pornography) is, in some ways, a subversive challenge to mainstream morality and phallocentric power structures.

However, there are problems or incongruities that arise from such an idea. I am not suggesting that cunt art be subsumed into any "black market" categories as such classification implies the continued *trade* in and commodification of the female body. We could also surmise that this attitude of "acceptance" of the female genitalia is not as subversive as suggested. The vulva as a sexual object, and appreciated in this sense, fits into the tenets of phallocentric society as it maintains the systems of power that allow women to be perceived as inferior and objectified rather than as "subjectified." The denial of women as subject or as the author (and reader) of their own body and image can be seen to be a common denominator of all female representations within patriarchal culture.

The truly "underground" movement, then, is cunt art because it attempts to subvert the silencing of female experience, seeks to disrupt the economy of the Same and tries to make positive the meanings attached to the vulva by querying notions of disgust, all of which defy the tenets of patriarchal society. If cunt art is pornographic then the implication is that any reference to or representation of the vulva, which is not for

medical purposes, is intrinsically sexual. This fragment of the female body therefore is seen as a sexual object without exception because it implies sexual activity. If cunt art is to challenge this perception, it has to include revocation of this assumption without undermining female desire and pleasure.

The mainstream consensus of the pornography of this female fragment revolves around and proves the objectification of female body. The female body and, particularly, representations of the naked female body have traditionally been authored by a male perspective socially, artistically and medically. The naked female body has thus traditionally been subordinated and exploited to suit patriarchal schemes. Radical or cultural feminist positions on pornography similarly consider that pornography is based on the exploitation and objectification of women and that it continues the traditional perspective of woman as object for male gain and gratification. It could be suggested then, that cunt art is in danger of reinforcing the objectification of women because these works could be used for titillation like exploitative pornography. I believe, however, that the danger of vulvar and vaginal works does not lie primarily in the appropriation of the work for sexual consumption but, rather, in the politics of objectification prior to this possible reappropriation. Can cunt art successfully question the objectification of the vulva? The workings of traditional patriarchal representations and the male gaze, as a system of disempowerment for women, would suggest that this is possible.

The deployment of the vulva in cunt art is deemed unacceptable so it is possible to deduce that very different methods are used in its vulvar iconology than in traditional representations. Cunt art does not fulfil the same criteria that traditional female representations maintain therefore revealing the possibility that the systems of reception

and appropriation do not or cannot work in the same way. Cunt art, then, defies traditional and patriarchal approaches to the female body. But does this mean that the politics of objectification differ?

Of feminist art of the 1960s and 1970s, Nead maintains that work of the period made visible “aspects of the female body that could not easily be accommodated within existing protocols of connoisseurship” (1997, p.63). And so, it follows that if these works could not be easily accommodated, then they are also difficult to reappropriate. The allegation that cunt art is pornographic seems to be a manoeuvre that reduces the legitimacy of feminist work, branding it non-art in the scheme of polarisation that pornography/art inhabits. In terms of the “protocols of connoisseurship” that Nead discusses, the accusation of pornographic content purposively attempts to illegitimise and derogate cunt art so that traditional tenets of art practice become null and void due to its status as non-art.

We need to consider this as a tactic that reduces the efficacy of cunt art. I am arguing that the alleged illegitimacy of cunt art is a tool that, by degrading the work, leads to minimised contemplation of the effects that such works may have on traditional art appreciation and the systems of the reception of the female body. I would suggest that cunt art defies the “reappropriation into the voyeuristic structures of the tradition of the female nude” (Nead, 1997, p.61), an argument that cannot be made unless we classify vulvar works *as art* and not just merely “thrown away” as pornography. I would argue that it is because of the inability to voyeuristically reappropriate cunt art into acceptable reading structures that produces the condemnation of such pieces as obscene, indecent and pornographic.

The expanded cinema work of Valie Export utilises methods that expose these systems of traditional reception. In *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) (see Fig. 1g), and also in the non-vulvar piece *Touch Cinema* (1968) (Fig. 4q),⁸ Export challenges social, sexual and cultural taboos in order to “prevent the commercial exploitation of the taboos” (Mueller, 1994, p.15). As Laura Mulvey has suggested, “women in representation can signify castration, and activate voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent this threat” (1989, p.25). In these terms, and in terms of the maintenance of the spectator’s interest through “the *promise of disclosure* of the forbidden...[which] revolves around the body of the woman, more specifically her breasts and genitals” (Mueller, 1994, p.15; my emphasis), Export’s *Genital Panic* promotes an accessibility to the “forbidden,” exposing a part of herself that cannot be subsumed into voyeuristic or fetishistic scopophilia, which in turn posits her role as the position of power.

The promise of disclosure acts as a driving force in the viewing of the female “object” but is displaced by the fetish object to avoid castration fear (Mulvey, 1987; 1989). Export takes this process to its extreme, confronting the audience with her objecthood that no longer follows the rules of displacement and display, but rather proves the threat and danger that can be played by the object, relinquishing or at least questioning the inferiority of the female/object role and the power relationships that place her there. Export rejects the manoeuvre from male anxiety into reassurance through the fetish or the position of voyeur.

⁸ In *Touch Cinema*, Export went on to the streets with a “mini-movie theater” (Mueller, 1994, p.18) covering her bare breasts and invited people passing to put their hands through the curtains and touch her. She denied her audience the dark and anonymous spectatorship ideals provided in dark cinemas and made their voyeurism public and explicit.

In terms of the voyeur's position of power, Export relinquishes "his" control by facing the voyeur. The "object" looks back. In *Touch Cinema*, this defiance is stated even more clearly. In the disclosure of the female breasts, the viewer can no longer consume anonymously and privately but instead is forced to publicly consume if consumption is to take place. The spectator participates in the narrative of disclosure in full view of other audience members and similarly gazed at by the object of his "affections."

Given that pornographic images of the vulva maintain a cultural position at the outskirts of patriarchal acceptability, cunt art redresses the omission and the invisibility of the vulva in moral society. Within the contradictions that exist in the reception and perception of female genitalia, cunt art may also be seen to highlight "the contradiction between woman's fantasy presence and real absence from the male conscious world" (Mulvey, 1987, p.128) as suggested of the work of Allen Jones. Where female genitalia has been absent in dominant cultural representations (bar medical depictions), cunt art attempts to give the vulva a place in moral society making it visible, unlike the hidden, illicit part of culture that is pornography, but as an artistic, and therefore legitimate, representation.

The attempted legitimacy of these works separates them, in some senses, from pornographic material. Cunt art refuses the exclusivity and concealment that is associated with pornography, replacing the thrill of the forbidden with stark honesty and direct social confrontation. While they have been accused of obscenity, these works enjoy exposure prior to legal intervention, which is a task not attempted by pornography as it gains its momentum from the sidelines of cultural "taste." An exception to this rule would seem to be the pornography/performance of Annie Sprinkle.

Figure 4q:



Valie Export, *Touch Cinema*, 1968

Source: Mueller, 1994, p.17

Performing Porn:

Annie Sprinkle is an interesting example/exception to the pornography debate. Perhaps she is overused as a case in point, but this discussion cannot be complete without visiting her work and methods as porn star/artist/sex educationalist. Of her work, she writes,

I felt it was important for people to look at genitalia in order to get over the shame and disgust so many of us felt about our own bodies. I also felt it was important to help satisfy people's curiosity about how other people looked when they had sex, and what other people's genitals looked like (1998, p.34).

While there are other motivations in her work, I would like to focus on this educationalist approach.

Annie Sprinkle began her career in pornography at the age of eighteen, after a brief spell of serving popcorn at an adult cinema. When the cinema was closed down for showing *Deep Throat*, and after working as a masseuse/prostitute, Sprinkle became an apprentice at Kirt Studios (that created low-budget, hard-core pornographic films), working behind the scenes, until she was offered work in front of the camera. After starring in about one hundred films, Sprinkle decided that she wanted to create her own film, "something more from a woman's point of view" (1998, p.33). *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle* (1981) was her first writing/directorial and performing role (Fig. 4r). Of this project, she writes:

In the early '70s, sex in our society was quite a bit different than it is today. Women were expected to be "good girls" and not to like sex all that much. Seventies porn reflected some of that. The woman was generally pursued by the man and often had to be manipulated into the sex. But in my movie, I was the sexual aggressor, I was the one who wanted it... Most male directors never gave us actresses the time to have real orgasms. It wasn't "important". Lots of people at that time didn't even believe that women actually had orgasms. People barely knew where the clit was, if they knew there was a clit at all. Scenes in most porn movies climaxed with the male cum shot. But in my film I featured the female orgasm... I did a very intense masturbation scene, while looking into the camera, and had a long multiple orgasm during which I ejaculated (although at the time we didn't know what it was)... (1998, pp.33-34).

Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle was the second highest grossing sex film of 1982 and signalled what Sprinkle considers to be a new era of pornography. This new era included pornographic films made by women and, from Sprinkle's perspective, included a more sexually aggressive female role that had not been so visible before. From Annie Sprinkle's own testimony and experience, her film was, in a sense, an educational adventure. From the focus on female pleasure and the disclosure of the existence of the clitoris and female ejaculation, Annie Sprinkle's debut authorial role could be seen to have been a determining move in terms of redefining pornography but also in terms of the educationalist qualities of cunt art.

Surrounding the work of Annie Sprinkle are debates as to the integrity of her work as artistic products. Other than the clear basis of her work in the pornography industry, there is also her own statement of "porno pride" (1998, p.34) that accompanies her work. It is unlikely that one can label her a porn star turned performance artist due to her own point of view concerning pornography and her status as a continuing porn celebrity, but it is also interesting that she can accept the term "artist," although initially with hesitancy, for the work that she creates.

Sprinkle met Linda Montano in 1988 at Montano's Summer Saint Camp. She writes:

At Summer Saint Camp, Linda insisted on calling me an artist. True, I had a deep dark secret fantasy of being an artist, but I was far too insecure to ever actually consider myself one. Loving friends, especially Willem, had repeatedly told me I was an artist, but I just couldn't believe it. I told Linda I was uncomfortable with the title. She wasted no time in setting up a "performance ritual" in which she baptized both me and Veronica Vera as official artists (1998, p.87).

It is perhaps clearer and most appropriate to see her as a performer and, exemplified by her "discovery" by Richard Schechner in 1985, view pornography as a performance form

through which she embraces the stimulation, entertainment and education of her audience alike.

An example of the incorporation of stimulation and interaction in her work is the premier of her film *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle* in 1981 at a drive-in movie theatre in Ohio. When invited to make a personal appearance, she initiated an event that would emerge in later performances through interaction with her audience:

By using a microphone in the control booth, I could be heard through the little speakers in every car. At intermission I told a very erotic story about having sex at the drive-in. Then I gave the people in the cars various instructions: "Blink your headlights three times if you're horny," "Honk your horn twice if you like sex," "Blink your left blinker if you're straight, your right blinker if you're gay," "Switch back and forth if you're bi," "Turn on your emergency lights if you're single," "Rev your engine if you're kinky." This created a wonderful concert of sound and light. Then I told the men that if they brought a pair of women's panties to me at the snack bar they would get a prize. A dozen showed up. Next, I told the women to bring men's underwear for a prize, and close to fifty women showed up (1998, p.35).

Her work in the 1980s, *Deep Inside* included, shows her to be an innovative force in pornography and stripping, as well as forming more distinct bonds with the category of performance art. Her burlesque/stripping career, which lasted from 1984 to 1986, exemplifies this innovation, even being advertised as "avant-garde burlesque" (Fig. 4s).

As she herself states,

I invented my own form of burlesque, called "Strip Speak." It evolved from storytelling skills I had learned...I would improvise seductive stories and encourage the audience to participate and masturbate. The act was erotic, playful, and humorous. No one had done anything like it before or has since (1998, p.79).

Another new manoeuvre as a stripper was her unwillingness to hide the biological processes of her body. In a move that signals a rejection of the shame attached to menstruation and the female body, Sprinkle would perform her "Strip Speak" with her Tampon string on view rather than the traditional method of hiding it inside the vaginal

passage (Fig. 4t). Sprinkle could be seen to be promoting the sexual capability and desirability of the female body inclusive of its processes and fluids, challenging the taboos that surround the female body, but also the taboos that surround sexual behaviour and menstruation. In these Strip Speak performances it could also be surmised that she was promoting herself as speaking subject, one that is sexually stimulating, but one that also challenges the sexual objectification of pornography. The manipulated and traditionally voiceless object of male gratification not only gazes back but also speaks.

Her policy of honesty and clarity about and appreciation of the body has signalled self-education as well as the aim of educating her audience. Speaking of her scandalous debut as a centrefold for *Cheri* magazine (Fig. 4u) she reveals the opportunity she had to become familiar with her own genitalia:

At that time there were no other newsstand magazines that contained big spread pussy shots. So when I first saw the spread I was really shocked at how graphic it was. Hundreds of thousands of copies hit the stands – my pink, open pussy was there to see on every city street corner, and there was no going back. I remember thinking that it was the first time I could really take a long look at my pussy and anus (1998, p.37).

She comments on this tendency, “[s]o many women go through their entire lives without getting a good look at what’s between their legs. It seems to me an important thing to do. After all, it’s your body” (ibid.). And so, while some of her work may lack (the questionable) credibility of *Post-Porn Modernist*, the educational quality of her pieces, her feminist position and her concern with aesthetics make her earlier performances relevant components of the development of cunt art. *Post-Porn Modernist* (1990) (Fig. 4v) and subsequent pieces are grounded in her earlier work in terms of their aesthetic, in substance, motivation and attitude.

Sprinkle's infamous performance work/sex show/sexually educational piece, and first one-woman show, *Post-Porn Modernist*, takes on a fully deconstructionist attitude to her sex work, and while pieces like *Deep Inside* sought to offer more pro-active female sexual roles, and revealed the fantastical narrative of traditional porn (reflected in Sprinkle's action directed at the camera, and in her utilisation of interrupted visual narrative by oral storytelling and commentary in her Strip Speak pieces), their efficacy in challenging political ideals revolving around sexuality, pornography and performance was diminished in part due to a lack of credibility.

According to Sprinkle's own documentation of *The Prometheus Project* (1985) (Fig. 4w) directed by Schechner, and *Post-Porn Modernist* (1990), projected slides used in the former were recycled for the latter project (1998, p.95). These visuals centred on the deconstruction of her sex work career, an extension of more primary attempts at postmodernism in earlier works such as the inclusion of previous filmed footage contained within and initiating action in *Deep Inside*. It is perhaps the utilisation of such purposively political methods that have given her the (limited) legitimacy as a performance artist that she has.

Her move, in the 1980s, into circles of performance⁹ was, according to Sprinkle, inspired in part by the monotony of the commercial sex industry at the time - which she describes as "too formulaic and limited...routine and predictable" (1998, p.86) – and by her enthusiasm for the work of various live artists. She writes about those artists that made an

⁹ Friends of Sprinkle describe Sprinkle Salon thus: "...The Sprinkle Salon is a 1990s version of Warhol's factory, an outrageous creative powerhouse, blending art and sexuality. In this case with hugs and without booze and drugs." (Crotty and Lane, cited in Sprinkle, 1998, p.64). Guests to Sprinkle Salon include Karen Finley, and Ron Athey amongst others such as photographers, experimental filmmakers, musicians, WAP member, writers and actors.

impact on her and her introduction to artists through her ex-lover and friend Willem de Ridder, a Dutch avant-garde artist;

Charlotte Morman played classical cello topless in a concert hall (and got arrested). Shigeko Kubota made vagina prints with black ink, which were then signed by George Maciunas... Cosi Fani Tuti exhibited a Plexiglas box full of her used Tampax in an English art gallery (ibid.).

She also mentions the work of Yoko Ono, Barbara T. Smith and Schneemann and concludes by expressing the excitement she felt about all of these works.

In order to be involved in and create work that she was excited by, Sprinkle did not abandon her pornography but can be seen to “aestheticise” her work and experiment not only with the elements of pornography but also with popular conceptions of the female body and female desire and gratification. Influenced by the credible status of the artists above that inspired her, Sprinkle emphasises the politics at stake in her work (which is mirrored simultaneously by the more visible cultural censorship of her work) and highlights her refusal to consider sex and the female body a matter for private contemplation. Although this attitude is common to all of her work, it becomes more political when the public/private debate of pornography finds a more municipally mainstream habitat in front of art audiences and critics.

The increasing politicisation of her attitudes and work can be seen in her photograph of a “Muff of the Month” *War is Menstrual Envy* (date unspecified) (Fig. 4x), which was made into a postcard by Art Unlimited, and in her statement to the U.S. Attorney General Commission on Pornography, dated 1986, which can be seen as an alternative to the Dworkin/MacKinnon stance on the exploitation of women. In this statement she wrote:

Over the years I’ve seen pornography help a lot of people, and on occasion I’ve seen it hurt people...

Some people say porn makes people want to go out and rape. I suppose it's possible that pornography may have somehow inspired some already very sick person to commit a rape, but millions of people have watched porn movies and never raped anyone. If a tree falls down and kills someone, do we cut down the whole forest? If people get hurt in car accidents, do we get rid of all cars? (Cars are far, far more dangerous than porn could ever be.)...

On occasion I have questioned if some of my work in pornography might have somehow hurt the women's movement, and if it did I would be very sad. But I honestly feel like a freedom fighter who is contributing something wonderful to women's liberation and sexual education, and that makes me very happy... (1998, p.83).

For Sprinkle the "accusations" of pornography are expected and obvious, but seen less as accusations than descriptions of her work. What appears to be in question for Annie Sprinkle, however, are the definitions of pornography that society holds and the resulting negative opinions of the genre. Sprinkle seems to be calling for a re-evaluation of pornography, as a medium of sexual behaviour and stimulation that should not be censored or inaccessible. In a performance created for Jennifer Blowdryer's third "Smut Fest" (1989), Sprinkle and colleague Mike Anderson read the first chapter of Genesis (backed by a sculpture of a vulva-on-a-crucifix) to share her "discovery" that, with intonation, any text could be read to sound as if it was hard-core pornography (Fig. 4y).

As she describes,

[w]e cuddled up, and we read... acting as if we found it to be the hottest erotica in the world. "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth..." We put extra emphasis on words like "firmament," "void," "waters," and "meat," and phrases like "Be fruitful and multiply, bearing seed" and our favorite, "it was goooooood."... (1998, p.98).

She maintains that as they became more heated, she took her clothes off and began masturbating.

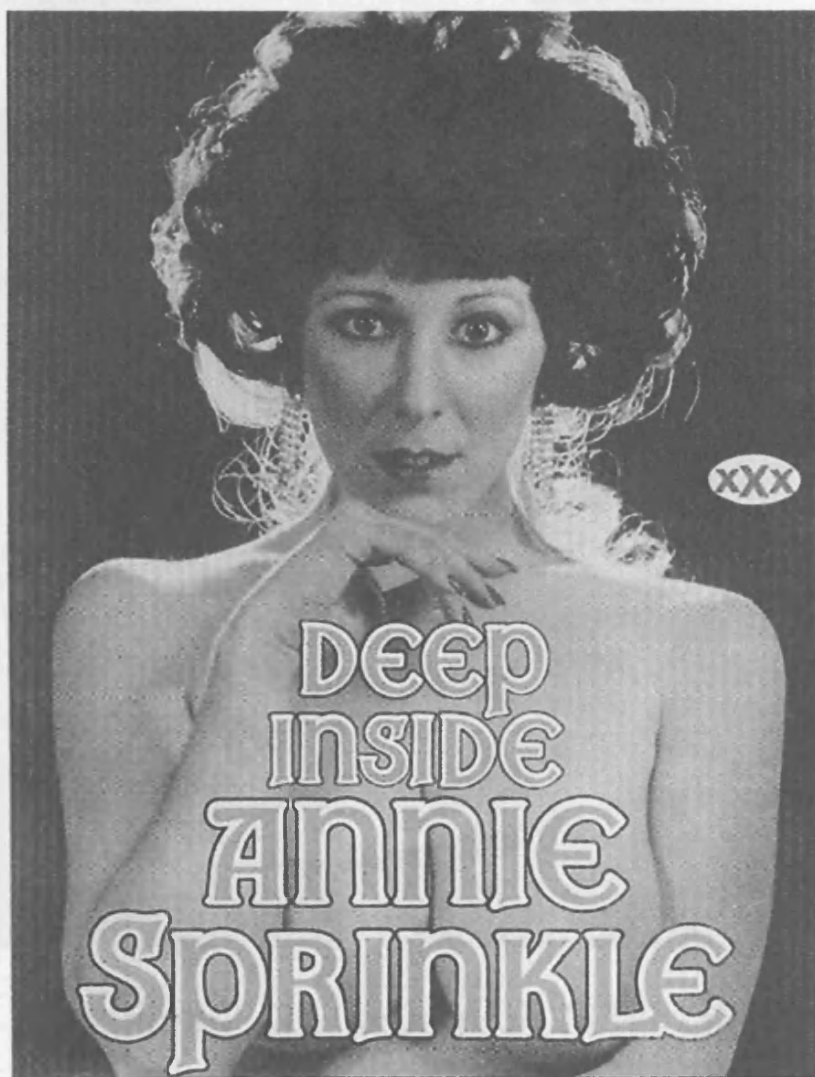
The sequence ended with Mike lighting a cigarette and the statement from Sprinkle; "The Holy Bible is so erotic. I sure hope they don't ban it" (ibid.). As Sprinkle comments, her objective was not to be heretical or blasphemous but, rather, to question our classification

and definition of pornography. This is an issue of intent, as has been discussed earlier. The Bible was made erotic due to Sprinkle and Anderson's intentions to make such a point. Sprinkle's deduction is that the individual's perception of what constitutes the erotic varies from person to person and therefore, one person's mundane is another's pornography; "pornography is indeed in the eye of the beholder" (ibid.).

And so, Sprinkle's work, some of which can be classified as cunt art, does not attempt to avoid allegations of pornography but rather question the cultural attitudes towards porn as sex and the vulva as a part of that equation. What separates Annie Sprinkle's work from other pornography and from being categorised as purely and reductively pornographic is its concern for aesthetics, its politics and its educational incentive. In opposition to views such as those of Susan Griffin, that "[t]he pornographer reduces a woman to a mere thing, to an entirely material object without a soul" (1982, p.3), Sprinkle refuses the simplistic objectification of the female erotic body and posits a sexually aggressive and a speaking subjectivity to the work she creates. She also questions the over-simplification of the "woman is the known, whereas man is the knower" attitude (ibid.), promoting herself in the role of instructor and encouraging self-discovery and self-determination for women.

Instead of challenging the notion of the objectified sexual object that is woman, the eroticism of the vulva needs – so cunt art argues - to be reclaimed, acknowledging female pride, female libido and female empowerment that stems from such a movement. The quest should be not to desexualise the female genitals but to destabilise the frame of reference that allows potential pride and sexuality to be substituted by negativity and shame.

Figure 4r:



Cover of *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle*, 1981

Source: Sprinkle, 1998, p.34

Figure 4s:



Figure 4t:



Annie Sprinkle, *Strip Speak*, 1984 - 1986

Sources from left to right:

Sprinkle, 1998, p.81

Sprinkle, 1998, p.82

Annie Sprinkle, *Cheri* magazine, date unknown

Sprinkle, 1998, p.86

Figure 4u:



Annie Sprinkle, *Cheri* magazine, date unknown

Source: Sprinkle, 1998, p.36

Figure 4v:



Annie Sprinkle, *Images of Post Porn Modernist*
and *Post-Post Porn Modernist*, 1990 - 1995

Sources: Sprinkle, 1998, pp.161-168

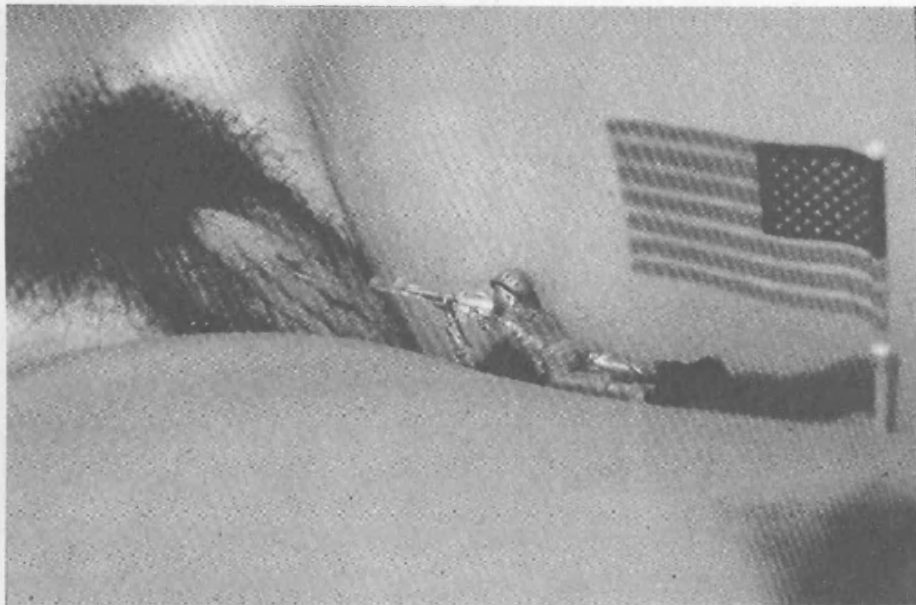
Figure 4w:



Annie Sprinkle in *The Prometheus Project*,
directed by Richard Schechner, 1985

Source: Sprinkle, 1998, p.95

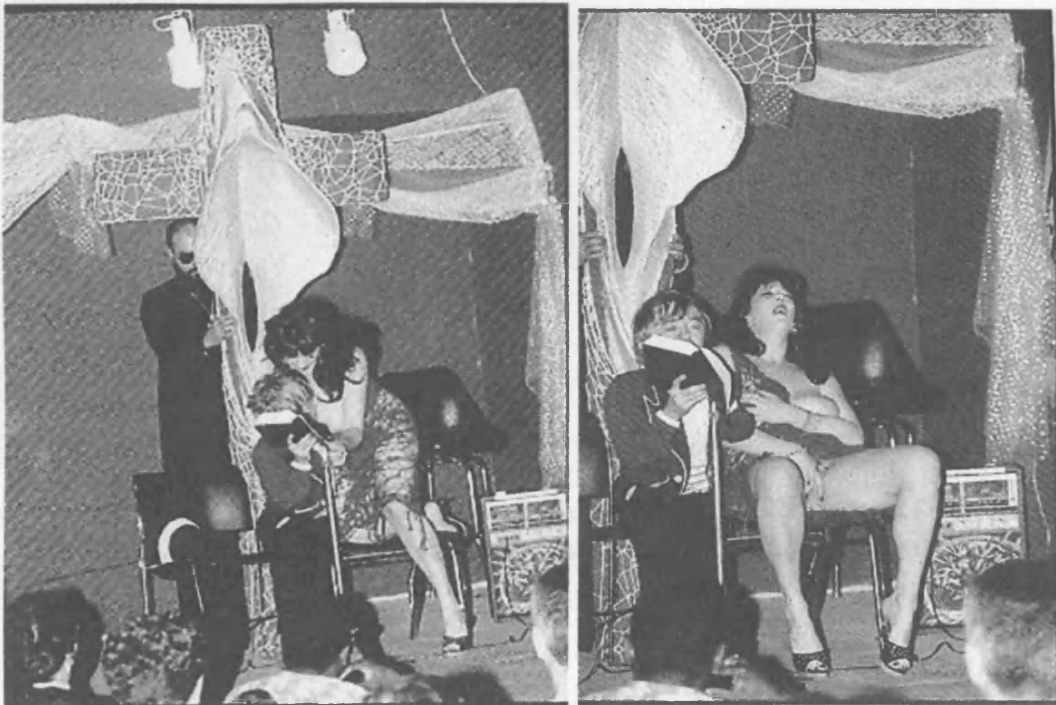
Figure 4x:



Annie Sprinkle, *War is Menstrual Envy, a Muff of the Month*
photograph, date unknown

Source: Sprinkle, 1998, p.113

Figure 4y:



Annie Sprinkle in a performance for *Smut Fest*, circa 1989

Sources: Sprinkle, 1998, p.98

CHAPTER 5:
DISRUPTIVE BODIES
PART III
FEMINIST ICON(OCLASMS)

While Part One and Two of *Disruptive Bodies* has focused on the illegitimacy of cunt art in cultural and artistic terms, this chapter will look at cunt art as a disruptive feminist intervention within phallocentrism but also as disruptive to feminism. I will argue that the illegitimacy of vulvar and vaginal works goes hand-in-hand with the iconoclasm of feminism within a phallocentric system, but I will also propose that cunt art is iconoclastic to some “brands” of feminism. I have, during the course of the project, explored cunt art as disruptive to the phallocentric models of exclusion and lack, and the relationship between pornography and art as parameters that reflect good/allowable and bad/forbidden representations of the female.

Each of these chapters has dealt with phallocentric models that dictate the nature of the presentations that are acceptable and that uphold the exclusion of the female, from the invisibility of the vulva, her presence-made-absence, to her lack of subject status. This is the framework within which feminism intervenes. In attempting to disrupt and question phallocentric systems, feminism is iconoclastic within these structures that maintain the subordination of women.

Disruptive Bodies has been concerned with the illegitimacy of cunt art. But, as I stated at the end of Part Two, if validation is the aim of such projects, then we must consider what is at stake and how much of the potency of these works is at risk in attempting to legitimise cunt art. In the next section, I will argue that the illegitimacy of cunt art is not necessarily a judgement that should be changed, but that in its iconoclasm we highlight the disruption that cunt art seeks to achieve. The focus on illegitimacy then throughout journey of this thesis has been concerned with exploring the disruptive potential of these works. The illegitimacy of these works recommends it as political intervention; as a

feminist movement that is not easily accommodated or recoupable into the phallogentric system.

In the next section I will also propose, in opposition to the idea that cunt art is reductive, that the vulva or vagina in these works be read as an icon; that far from essentialising female experience, cunt art allows a part to stand for a whole. I will suggest that cunt art does not promote an essence of what it is to be female, but by making a taboo visible, artists are refusing Cartesianism and the subordination that that has gone hand in hand with male association to the mind and female alignment with the body. Instead, they are redefining negative attitudes towards the female body and using a part of that body to promote a strong and empowered (and integrated) individual female experience.

Alongside the illegitimacy of cunt art, there are pressing issues raised by feminist critics about the use of vulvar and vaginal imagery.¹ Objections are that cunt art reinforces views of biological determinism, that the work is essentialist and that it reduces feminist concerns to one part of the body. In the concluding section of this chapter I will argue, however, that these criticisms only gain credence in a Cartesian theoretical framework that has frequently been criticised itself by feminists over the last ten years. In order to uphold essentialist and reductive accusations, then, the commentator must commit to a Cartesian dualism of mind and body,² which has been fiercely contested by feminists such as Grosz (1994) and Jones (1998; 1999). This last section will also explore the differences between the Cartesian body and the performative body as seen in cunt art.

¹ Jones discusses the reactions of Cindy Nemser and Griselda Pollock. Nemser's objections revolve around biological formula inherent in cunt art (Jones, 1996b, p.93), and Pollock's model suggests that feminist artists need to implement "distanciation" in order to refuse spectatorial engagement, which cunt art does not (Jones, 1996b, p.90).

² This extends on Grosz's claims of the Cartesianism implicit within feminist "rethinking" of social construction (1994, pp.9-10).

Iconic Actions:

If we are seeking validation from a male-orientated system, we will receive it in the coinage of that system and not in our own terms (Arlene Raven, cited in Jones, 1996, p.119).

In seeking validation or challenging the illegitimacy of cunt art, we have to acknowledge the risks to feminist motivation involved and the conditions by which legitimisation might take place. In establishing the responses to these acknowledgements, I am drawn to the question of whether legitimisation is necessary and whether the artists and practitioners involved actually seek this validation. And so, there are two main issues that need addressing: At what cost to feminist intention does validation come, and at what price to feminist principles does cunt art come?

We must consider whether feminist work needs or seeks legitimisation and the effect that such a hypothetical process might have. To legitimise would be to effect acceptance of works. In the cultural climate indicated earlier, and in light of the objections to the subject matter, acceptance could only take the form of a revised attitude towards the vulva. However, this is not as simple as it might seem. To revalue women's genitalia means a great and complex shift of attitude. The negativity attached to the female anatomy is deeply rooted within patriarchal ideology and phallocentric structures, and would necessitate either a feminist acceptance of a patriarchally formulated re-inscription of the vulva or, less likely, an overhaul of the complete social system. As Raven wrote, validation in a "male-oriented system" would, necessarily, come in the currency of that system.

Practically speaking, the legitimisation of cunt art would have to mean conforming to established *patriarchal* standards and this is counteractive to the intentions of the work. Many feminist performance pieces work towards exposing the misogyny apparent in representations of women. If feminist art movements are used as a tool to question cultural norms, then any move to legitimise these activities would be counterproductive and would neutralise the challenge that they pose.

With this in mind, cunt art does not require validation or legitimisation. And in trying to do so I would neutralise the potential within it. Rather than seeking to legitimise cunt art, what must be recognised is the disruption that cunt art seeks to achieve. Its illegitimacy is purposive in the sense that it primarily seeks to challenge and question rather than be accepted. Acceptance of these images and actions would be ideal in that this would mean the regulatory systems of value had changed but these artists are working from within phallogentric models of exclusion and, therefore, the most potent methodology is the disruption of these models. The illegitimacy of these works recommends the genre as political intervention that is not easily accommodated or recoupable into the phallogentric system as discussed in the previous chapter with reference to allegations of pornography. The disruptive potential of cunt art is situated in its unacceptability.

In order for cunt art to be legitimate, the current artistic system of appreciation would need to change and ultimately this is only possible in a post-patriarchal society. While there are claims that we have reached such a cultural shift, I disagree that patriarchy has changed adequately to accept these representations. This is proven by the numerous cases of censorship involving cunt art. The categories of art and culture can be subsumed into one mode, where art/performance can be seen to reflect culture - the conformity and

disruption within it - and culture can be seen to influence art/performance - in that what is contained in that culture and the experience of that culture is represented in what is produced from it. Therefore in order to revolutionise artistic concepts and reception, and legitimise cunt art, cultural changes would have to take place in order for validation to take place “in our own terms”, as Raven points out.

With this in mind, feminism (as a range of diverse and disparate approaches), challenging the oppression of women, is iconoclastic within a patriarchal system. As Greer notes,

...courses of action are adopted that neutralize or pre-empt possible consequences of feminist awareness. There is no longer any free space where individuals might develop alternative cultural and social systems (1999, p.8).

I would question that there ever were “free spaces” (making legitimisation impossible) and perhaps this is the biggest fallacy of all.

Within this male dominated system then, we must see feminist depiction of the vulva as a symbol of iconoclasm. The unacceptability and rejection of representations of female genitalia can be seen as demonstrating the subordination of women and their bodies. Greer suggests that the traditional view of femininity offers two options: “If femaleness is not to be interpreted as inferiority, it is not to signify anything at all” (1999, p.2) which leaves us with an equally unproductive either/or situation. Women can resign themselves to inferiority or relinquish any visibility at all.

In using vulvar and vaginal images and actions, however, cunt art can be seen to refuse either choice. While the celebration and reclamation of female genitalia in cunt art is condemned and considered illegitimate, the authors of these pieces are rejecting and challenging the notion of inferiority, genitally and more generally. Cunt art also denies

the other option of lack of signification where exposure betrays the invisibility of the vulva. Feminist artists who use female genitalia in their work, decline inferiority and invisibility, and attempt to change existing signification.

This “symbol” embodies a more general feminist philosophy or struggle so it is not unreasonable to promote the vulva as a feminist icon. This can be justified, primarily, in two ways; firstly that the motivation behind cunt art, specifically, is representative of many concerns within feminism and secondly, that the vulva as a part of the female body can represent the whole body and therefore address the associations that follow. In this way vulvar imagery fulfils the iconic role of unfolding the fragment to present the whole both in feminist theory and practice.

This is problematic in many ways. I am not promoting a unified feminist “message” or suggesting a collective representational strategy to replace an individualist approach. What I intend to convey is that the vulva as an icon in cunt art shares some of the same aims as other feminist methods and so, in one image we have a polysemic carrier that can communicate a range of concerns. However, there are feminist criticisms of cunt art that question the success of this proposal.

Some feminists, such as Nemser (1972; see Jones, 1996b, p.90 and p.93), remain uneasy with the employment of female genitalia claiming that it reinforces the notions of biological determination and woman as body, supports essentialism and is guilty of being reductive. But rather than accepting vulvar and vaginal representations as essentialising female experience, I wish to show that by using female genitalia as an artistic icon, the artists involved are promoting a culturally positive iconic shift. In presenting the vulva

and by suggesting female genitalia as an empowering symbol, the artists responsible advocate a new definition and cultural value for the vulva.

The success of this is debatable, as Pollock points out;

I would argue the absolute insufficiency of the notion current in the women's movement which suggests that women artists can create an alternative imagery outside existing ideological forms for not only is vaginal imagery recuperable but in that process the more sinister implications of sexual difference in ideological representations are exposed (1987, p.136).

Certainly this statement is dated but the main criticism remains the same in a contemporary approach. While I agree to an extent with both Pollock and Greer in the "insufficiency" or even impossibility of an alternative external ideology, feminism cannot abandon the possibility of redefining aspects of existing ideology. I would also argue similarly that cunt art does not succeed in creating an "alternative imagery" but I disagree with Pollock's statement that this work is recoupable. As I have pointed out previously and as its illegitimacy attests, while presenting that part of the female that is presented in pornography, for example, cunt art uses different representational strategies that are not easily accommodated into phallogocentric modes of viewing and consuming.

I would also query Pollock's fear of the "more sinister implications of sexual difference." The complexities inherent in presenting sexual difference have been discussed in Chapter 2 and will be developed in the next chapter, but in summary, I would argue that simply avoiding sexual difference is inadequate within an existing ideology that bases its subordination of some on their sex. If we do not draw attention to sexual difference in order to reinstate these categories with more positive notions, how can these existing ideologies develop and change? While I acknowledge the importance of critiquing the structures that allow for the subordination of women, and while I acknowledge the

dangers inherent in challenging female sexual imagery, that cunt art can be seen to reduce women to the locus and cause of their cultural position, if we leave these associations unchallenged, they will not change.

Cunt art presents the vulva as an icon of difference. In highlighting difference these vulvar works emphasise the exclusion of women from the symbolic order and critique the phallogentric structures that maintain this absence. Far from reinforcing the biological determinism that claims justification for the subordination of women, cunt art relies on the acknowledgement of difference. Many feminists have concentrated on cultural constructions of femininity, following Beauvoir (1969), while “a great deal of feminist energy has gone into trying to minimise or even erase this particular marker [reproductive capability] of women’s bodily difference” (Brook, 1999, p.6).

In order to unhinge notions of biological determinism, biological difference must be approached. To disrupt and challenge notions of one sex that permeate phallogentrism, difference must be highlighted. Similarly, to distance women from the equation of woman-as-body, we *cannot* avoid the female body. For decades feminists avoided the body, wary of its associations, but in essence the idea to be contested remained constant; women are perceived as inferior. By extension and in its simplest form, the female is inferior and she is oppressed because she is recognisably female; she is recognised as female because of her clothes/hair/makeup/mannerisms/conduct; she is taught that her clothes/hair/makeup/mannerisms/conduct are appropriate because she has a vulva and a vagina. The cultural shaping that a child receives is dependant on his/her genitalia identified at birth.

This is exemplified in Mira Schor's "*Cunt*" and "*Penis*" (1993) (see Fig. 2d). While the linguistic connotations of the speech marks are pertinent, there is the idea that these genitals are emblematic of a more detailed division or classification. These images of genitalia speak beyond their canvas as the presence of male and female anatomy speaks beyond the body to the world at large through appropriate appearance, roles and behaviour. Lesko's *Lips* (1993) (see Fig. 2b) similarly speak beyond the association of the feminine and fur. What is being communicated plays on the assumptions that are made concerning female propriety but also expresses a desire to say more; *that there is more*.

What need to be challenged are the cultural associations applied to each sex, and because they do not disappear through avoidance, they need to be questioned and redefined. As discussed earlier, the vulva and the vagina are negatively perceived in society and it is this view that is questioned by cunt art by disrupting the structural basis of these meanings in phallocentrism. By representing the vulva or vagina, artists are challenging cultural taboos and assumptions as well as artistic concepts. The shame that is aligned with the female genitalia is denied. The female genitals in this light become an icon of pride, celebration and empowerment.

The claim that cunt art reduces feminist concerns to a part of the body can similarly be accused of shrouding itself in the avoidance of the body. We can identify the potency of semiotics in culture and to promote the vulva as an icon or a sign reveals more than just a body part. In presenting the vulva as a fragment, I am arguing that feminists are attempting to disrupt the meanings attached. And if disruption is successful, then reclamation of those appropriated fragments for re-inscription might also be possible.

By suggesting the potential for the meanings of an intimate part of the female body to be re-written, hope is offered that feminism can approach an embodied subjectivity and reintegrate the body-less female experience of anti-corporealists with the physical. The quest is to find the balance between the traditional derogatory notion of woman as body and reactionary ideas of avoiding the body to refute such claims. Of course, to label such latter approaches as anti-corporealist is to simplify the arguments and also, in part, to misjudge their roots and intentions. However, in an attempt to understand the different feminist approaches that concern (or indeed, ignore) the female body it is necessary to locate the framework that allows for an avoidance of the body. And this is what I will explore in the next section.

Many of the objections to cunt art (and the movement to promote the vulva as a feminist icon) that have been raised base their accusations in a Cartesian theoretical framework. A dualistic approach of mind/body is the only stance that allows the allegations of reduction and essentialism to be valid. Also, the criticism that cunt art reinforces the notion of biological determinism could be seen to be Cartesian in impetus as well.

If vulvar employment is reductive, then we base our estimation on the judgement that a part of the body cannot represent more than that which it is. In this sense the body, partial or whole, is deemed incapable of truthfully expressing ideas and concepts. Inherent in this assumption is the rejection of the idea that the body is part of the formulation of these ideas and concepts and the denial that the vagina or vulva has anything to do with female experience or being female. If female experience (preceded by role and value in society) has been regulated by the simple fact of being a woman, having a vagina, this source of oppression, for these particular reasons, needs to be addressed. Being female is a different

experience from being male and in this way, having a vagina is part of what defines my experience of the world. While feminine experience is not necessarily or exclusively confined to those who have female genitalia, the cultural treatment and the social expectations associated with males and females are different, according to genital formation. And so the lived body experience is dependent on your sex (irrelevant of gender).³

Equally, to protest that cunt art essentialises femaleness or female experience is to deny that the body is part of that experience of the world. Here we can recognise a characteristically disembodied version of a feminist Cartesian trend (see Grosz, 1994, pp.9-10). And while the suspicion of the body reinforces a dualism of perception, the similarly Cartesian association of woman with the body continues to prevail. The feminist mistrust of the body (that results in a dualist stance of mind/body) ironically perpetuates the notion (female/body and male/mind) that it seeks to avoid.

³ This also applies to transsexuals and transvestites due to cultural taboos and stigma regarding social roles and what is perceived to be an issue of sexuality.

Body Matters:

What has often been referred to as a dualistic approach to the body or a separation of elements of being has increasingly become a point of contention and reference for authors in all areas of academia. Amelia Jones translates this dualism; “Rene Descartes’ Enlightenment dictum “I think therefore I am” poses the mind, in its pure, disinterested judgments, as transcending the loathsome, uncontrollable desires of the body” (1999, p.51) while Judith Butler summarises the journey and result of this division:

In the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and continues through Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre, the ontological distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy (1990, p.12).

Like many cultural dichotomies that inform status, the mind/body problem poses a hierarchical measure and, as I will go on to explore, reinforces the binarism of masculine and feminine according to association.

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out, “the choice of particular binary oppositions...is no mere intellectual strategy. It is, in each case, the condition of the possibility for centralization (with appropriate apologies) and, correspondingly, marginalization” (cited in Butler, 1990, p.153). Rebecca Schneider (1997) recognises the explosion of these binaries, mentioning what Patraha calls “binary terror” (cited in Schneider, 1997, p.13; Patraha 1992, p.163). Dualism itself is closely related to the binary approach that views the world as opposites. While accusations of biological determinism and essentialism are potent feminist critiques of cunt art, the extension could be made that cunt art, by focusing not only on the body but on the explicitly female body, reinforces the duality that is associated with the hierarchy that continuously subordinates women.

While the Platonic doctrine that distinguishes the body and soul has inspired debates throughout history, it is Descartes who is considered the founder of the modern mind-body problem. In his search for self-verifying truths, or “the permanent foundation for his knowledge” (Markie, 1992, p.140), the famous statement “Cogito ergo sum” or “I think therefore I am” became the ultimate certainty for Descartes or, as he corrected the phrase, “I am, I exist.” The premise for this statement was self-evident; simply that he could not *think* such an idea unless it was true (Scruton, 1998, p.29).

By way of extension, Descartes wrote, “he [deceiver of supreme power and cunning] will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something” (cited in Markie 1992, p.140). His certainty of his own existence following these methods of deduction operates in conjunction with his uncertainty about his body that is a basic justification of his distinction between mind and body. This belief was further compounded when Descartes wrote:

...this ‘I’ - that is, the soul by which I am what I am - is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist (cited in Markie, 1992, p.143).

While compounding the mind/body division, this statement also makes the body redundant.⁴ The body becomes superfluous in the process of knowing yourself but also denies the prospect of i) the body affecting that “by which I am what I am” and ii) corporeal communication. If you only know that you exist because you think, how can you verify the existence of others with any certainty? ⁵

⁴ Reason is established as more quantitatively measurable than matter for while the body can be seen, its experience is qualified by the mind that dictates authority over being.

⁵ The question cannot be answered simply. Scruton makes the point that Descartes’ work exemplifies the limitations of the “first person case” (1998, p.31), but insists that this approach was necessary for further philosophising. Although it may have offered a starting point for Descartes, it promotes a very narrow view of how we not only conceptualise ourselves but also how we perceive others. Scruton suggests the

The Cartesian body and performance/performative body differ greatly. In the Cartesian school of thought, the body is viewed as an object and not the subject. In performance terms this is very important. Indeed, the body in cunt art (and body art more widely) can be seen as the canvas or the vehicle of performance, but more than that, it is the lived body. It is a communicative site where experience of being a body informs and constructs what we communicate. The idea of subjectivity seems detailed by the mind but we have to consider the subjectivity of embodied experience if we are to achieve female subjectivity in an art form that primarily uses the body as its means of communication.

Traditionally, we could surmise that the male artist most commonly depicted the female body as the object to be viewed. In this scheme, the viewer is the subject and their body redundant in their subject status (so long as it is male). The body of the female and the absence of her mind in the equation, or rather an absence of the integration of body and mind in theorisation, signal her inferior status of object for contemplation by the male subject. Even in male artists' self-portraits, the physical is validated by the male mind that created the object hence, no loss if subjectivity is performed. In any display of the female body, tradition dictates that she is the object of the conventionally male gaze.

In opposing the location of subjectivity as confined to the thinking "I" or first person, many examples of feminist body art refute the claim that the female body on display cannot communicate subjectivity. Many cunt art works seek to expose female experience and desire, and in proposing these aspects of identity they promote female subjectivity.

problematic of being and seeming, and that the knowledge from the first person situation is confined to the subjective (ibid.).

For this reason, investment in embodied subjectivity is an important aspect for many feminists.

RoseLee Goldberg suggests that “live work by artists unites the psychological with the perceptual, the conceptual with the practical, thought with action” (1998, p.9), which I deem relevant to both the creation and reception of work, while Amelia Jones emphasises the embodiment of interpretation (1999, p.2). The essential embodiment of the artistic process and reception directly conflicts with Cartesian dualism. Body art and cunt art, thus, are antithetical to the conventional modes of artistic representation and reception.

Going back to the idea of the event mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, that cunt art events involve engagement, negotiation, reaction and perception and that the body of the viewer is engaged in the act of viewing as opposed to the distance and isolation implied in the terms “spectator” or “viewer,” we must also recognise the value of the viewer’s engagement with the performance of meanings. They are a participant in the interpretative process. As an interpretative exchange, the embodiment of this process is important in recognising the lack of distance or disinterestedness in viewing. The viewer’s engagement with performance art is not reduced to an activity of the mind but rather, an embodied experience. The spectator’s interpretation relies on their experiences as an embodied subject.

The ideas of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty are perhaps more positive in terms of exploring the body and also in application to cunt art. Merleau-Ponty has been classified as an opponent to Cartesian rationalism and summarised as developing a philosophy of the lived body or the “body-subject” (Matthews, 1996, p.92). Merleau-

Ponty's main argument, explored in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), posited the lived body as the original knowing subject as opposed to the Cartesian object distinct from the thinking mind. Merleau-Ponty promotes the body as the person's point of view on the world; the perspective and situation of perception; hence the importance of the primacy of perception in his system. It is from the body that all other modes of knowledge and functions originate, development being dependent on the subject's bodily existence. Hence feminist employment of the body has the potential to create alternative modes of knowledge/experience through the bodily existence of perception and the spectator's body is equally implicated in live art for the spectator's interpretative engagement is based on their perception which is formulated by an embodied and particular situation.

The anti-Cartesian stance is easy to substantiate. Where Descartes focuses on the thinking being (he knows he exists because he thinks) and can exist without his body (he can imagine himself without his body because his essence is the thinking being), it becomes problematic to convincingly demonstrate the existence of others through this structure. There is no way of knowing that they think in the same manner as the subject posing this question. As Scheler pointed out, we recognise the existence of others through their actions (cited in Schutz, 1973, p.155). So why then should this not apply to our own being? Perception is grounded in corporeal existence and here our reasoning runs into that of Merleau-Ponty who believed that perception had never been properly theorised in philosophical inquiry.

We can surmise then that the Cartesian model of mind/body directly conflicts with the performing or performative body. The emphasis on action, that is implicit within the performative, challenges the notion of an effectively disembodied perception and

communication. Performativity relies on communication to and through the viewer and refuses a disinterested and disembodied viewing experience, while the performance of meaning through action provides an anti-Cartesian framework for the performer. The performing body, therefore, whether in action as seen in *Interior Scroll* and *Vagina Painting*, for example, or whether static, as in *body sign action* or *Red Flag*, re-writes the distrust of the body in Cartesian formulations.

Grosz (1994) proposes alternative renderings of the mind/body, subject/object dichotomies. While refusing the benefits of adopting a monistic approach, Grosz embraces the Lacanian subject model of the Möbius strip as a tool for rethinking the traditionally dualistic relationship between mind and body, seeking to “invert the primacy of a psychical interiority by demonstrating its necessary dependence on a corporeal exteriority” (1994, p.xii).

As Grosz points out, the legacy of Cartesianism “participates in the social devaluing of the body that goes hand in hand with the oppression of women” (1994, p.10). According to this premise, feminist critics of cunt art, by avoiding the body, reinforce the devaluation of the female body. In trying to avoid the association of woman as body, many feminists are leaving the notion unchallenged and, in the process, they leave the Cartesian ideal uncontested. In defending cunt art from criticisms, we can recognise that these criticisms pose wider problems for the critics that use them. In addition, any critique based on the notion of woman-as-body or biological determinism directed towards any feminist body-based practice assumes a patriarchal basis for its objections.

In considering the female performing body, the issues are more complex. Positioned as necessarily bound to the body, Descartes' theories transform the Woman into matter towards which thought is directed. Due to the hierarchy implicit in the mind/body dichotomy, and the impossibility of verifying the existence of others through Descartes' dictum, women are equivalent to the non-existent and unidentifiable. Here Descartes implicitly reinforces and exemplifies women's exclusion from the symbolic order discussed earlier in Chapter 2. Her absence or unidentifiable form reflects the lack which she represents. She is "the unsymbolizable residue" (Whitford, 1991, p.69) and this is the status that is challenged by the performative, explicitly marked, female body in cunt art and in all performance involving women's bodies. Cartesianism, then, can be seen to maintain the male parameters by which women are defined and therefore the female performing body is a valuable challenge to this system. More risky than reinforcing notions of woman-as-body, then, is to *not* question the Cartesian framework that refers to the invisibility of women. Through the performativity of the female body, feminists can radically disrupt such dualisms and the hierarchy implicit within them.

If the body is purposively overlooked then what is left is a hierarchy that not only leaves the body at the mercy of the mind, but by association, woman-as-body as underdog to the logical male. The lived body and our experience of the world do not separate the formation of the physical from the psychological. The psychological is intrinsically linked to the body; its development is dependant on the physical experience of the world. They are not distinct; hence any attempt to redefine female experience must include the body as a pre-requisite. Cunt art tackles this directly.

According to Grosz (1994) in promoting the body as a vehicle for communication, pertinent in body art and cunt art, the emphasis on a dualist approach to the body is reinforced. She claims that by viewing the body as a medium for expression, the mind assumes the position of a “trapped” aspect of the human experience that needs corporeal translation. This effectively separates the mental from the physical. She writes that “[the body] is a vehicle for the expression of an otherwise sealed and self-contained, incommunicable psyche” (1994, p.9).

She continues, with this perspective in mind, that;

[i]t is through the body that the subject can express his or her interiority, and it is through the body that he or she can receive, code, and translate the inputs of the “external” world. Underlying this view too is a belief in the fundamental passivity and transparency of the body (ibid.).

While it is true that interiority is made evident by action and expression through the exteriority of the subject, the underlying belief that Grosz identifies denies the possibility that what is to be communicated is an essentially embodied experience of the “external world.” If we follow the path set by poststructuralists, such as Braidotti (1994) and Jones (1998 and 1999), then we are persuaded of the position that promotes an embodied subjectivity; a lived body that combines interiority and exteriority, making them interdependent. That we read the body of others can mean that we read their embodied experience even if initial interpretation has to be based on their physical action.

Bolstering the binary of male/female and masculine/feminine, the problematic mind/body division has clearly associated the masculine with the mind and the feminine with the corporeal. In addition, the association of man with reason and woman with unreason is a development of this Cartesian model where the mind (and therefore the man) is pure and true, and the body (and woman) is unstable, unpredictable and follows no reason. If

subjectivity is regarded as corporeally-based then all subjects are reduced to the level of “unreason” i.e. to the status of an “unpredictable” and “unstable” woman. Ultimately, any objection to Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the body-subject could be translated as undermining the superiority of the male mind basis and “male only” reason and truth.

The association of woman with the body, in light of discussions the divisions and binaries that have informed society, carries drastic implications for live art and, in particular, cunt art. Rebecca Schneider expands on Vivian Patraka’s “binary terror” by saying that;

[t]he terror that accompanies the dissolution of a binary habit of sense-making and self-fashioning is directly proportionate to the social safety insured in the maintenance of such apparatus of sense (1997, p.13).

She argues that these binaries or systems of opposition comprise “our Western cultural ways of knowing” (ibid.).

The binary structure on which we depend is a system that maintains a social hierarchy based on oppositional values. In addition, it proposes an “either/or” situation where to be accepted as part of that cultural classification you must adhere to the characteristics of that category. And this is where feminist work becomes socially problematic. As Schneider points out,

[t]he danger inherent in binary explosion – the fear unleashed in close interrogation of our distinctions – is manipulated with political purpose in contemporary feminist performative interrogations of social symbolic constructs made explicit across literal bodies (1997, p.14).

This is where, arguably (according to social critique), feminist work can be successful. In challenging binary distinctions we may find the way to challenge traditional assumptions. While women’s use of their bodies in the performance space could suggest a reinforcement of the dualities of mind/body and male/female, vulvar works could

alternatively be seen to reflect the lived body in the emphasis of the marked body. These bodies performatively suggest the experience of particular (sexed) bodies and can be seen to rectify the lived experience of women's exclusion and the cultural invisibility of their experience and desires.

In using "literal bodies" do we reinforce the binary structures of phallocentrism? This question shares the same ground as the common debate: Can work that is created within patriarchy actually defy phallocentric models? Can the work offer a realistic alternative when patriarchy is the very backdrop for re-formulation? These are questions, however, that are beyond the scope of this thesis. Many may agree that social structures and assumptions can be explored and questioned through performance art, but to say that it can change society is a more serious and complex suggestion. It may be possible to question social taboos, values and ideologies, in which case, cunt art can be a tool to put these ideas in the limelight; by highlighting issues, awareness and analysis can follow. However, to claim that performance reforms society is a different matter. Throughout this thesis I have argued that cunt art disrupts the phallocentric models of exclusion, absence and lack. But to suggest disruption is different to suggesting re-invention or reform.

Just as bodies cannot be classified as blank media without social signification, these bodies cannot leave their cultural "baggage" at the door. Bodies have meaning and the vulva is no exception. What feminists creating cunt art need to bear in mind is that the female genitalia cannot simply be redefined and exalted as a feminist icon. However, cunt art can, in its least capacity, encourage the viewer to consider their own responses to vulvar and vaginal representation. Only with this contemplation can we realise the unnecessary negativity that culturally adheres to the vulva and vagina and only by

exposure can we become accustomed to thinking positively about “the anatomical jewel” (Muscio, 1998, p.6).

In this chapter I have argued that the continued illegitimacy of cunt art enables its disruptive potential with phallocentrism. I have also proposed the vulva as an icon of difference that challenges male parameters of exclusion and I have defended cunt art against accusations that have revolved around the feminist reluctance to address difference. While I have attempted to discredit the Cartesian frameworks, it is also possible to see the phallogentric structures that underlie Cartesian dualisms.

As I have argued in this chapter, Descartes implicitly reinforces and exemplifies women’s exclusion from the symbolic order. The hierarchy implicit in the mind/body dichotomy and the impossibility of verifying the existence of others through Descartes’ dictum means that women are equivalent to the non-existent and unidentifiable. Her absence or unidentifiable form reflects the lack which she represents. I have argued then that the Cartesian framework can be seen to maintain the male parameters by which women are defined.

In the next chapter I will re-frame these parameters as cultural fictions or myths and explore the possibility of re-writing the associations that these phallogentric structures dictate. This chapter has seen the re-development of the Cartesian body and my own applications of the embodied subject to the performative body. This will now be extended to examine the cultural myths that surround the presentation of the vulva in cunt art and I will ask if a female language is possible in this phallogentric system.

CHAPTER 6:
MYTHICAL BODIES

Having discussed the cultural and artistic illegitimacy of cunt art, women's exclusion from phallogentric models of discourse and representation, and exclusionary practices of thinking through the female body, I would now like to visit this same framework as a set of myths, as opposed to inevitable and unchangeable truths. The patriarchal myths that I will examine in this chapter reflect the phallogentric structures that dictate certain parameters, as I have discussed previously. I will look at patriarchal texts from Greek mythology to the Bible, and examine the negative meanings for women and the vulva within them. The derogations of the female body that will be explored are emblematic of and directly related to phallogentric structures and models of lack and exclusion.

In this chapter, I would like to approach "the patriarchal," in its degrees and forms - as a regulatory system of making meaning and as a form of domination and manipulation - as "political fiction" that as Braidotti suggests connotes a set of values, a framework within which particular value-systems operate and regulations dictate (1994, p.4). Within such a system the female body can be seen as a set of fictions that are equally political. The body as "political fiction" can then be seen as a mythical text that is based upon and reflects cultural values dominant in a particular framework.

The performance and interpretation of this mythical body is entirely situated. It is not static but developmental in accordance with the movement and shifts of cultural hierarchies and values. The body speaks as a text that can be read but can author certain semblances to be seen. There is a certain autonomy belonging to this mythical body; there is a certain regulated independence, and self-direction to a point. There is the notion of independence but this is valid only in so much as freedom to choose between a restricted number of "narratives" is concerned. The limitations are the lack of self-government and

self-regulation in a larger context. To make meaning the mythical body is dependent on the framework in which it is understood.

During the course of this chapter I will draw on different notions of myth: I will focus on traditional myths in a restricted sense common to analyses by Robert Graves (1985) but I will consider the cultural reflections of these myths common to approaches by Mills (1991), Caputi (1993), Tess Cosslett (1996) and Barbara G. Walker (1996): I will explore the purposeful fiction inherent in patriarchal notions of the female body and the female subject such as the castration complex and penis envy via Freud (1950), Bergeron (1992) and Bronfen (1992) and I will consider the meanings of the body (as a necessary part of the embodied subject) as a relationally fictive or mythic set of regulatory and manipulative strategies that can be explored as a project for feminist re-visions.

Lizbeth Goodman, in *Mythic Women/Real Women* (2000), focuses on the mythic figure in relation to women's theatre. She writes:

[W]hen the concept of myth is applied generally to female figures in drama and everyday life, some intriguing power dynamics emerge. Feminist critics have, over the years, looked for new ways of putting women centre stage (2000, p.xii).

The mythic women that Goodman collects in this selection of plays and performances all share the common theme of the fine line between mythic characters and real women:

In many dictionaries and guides to language usage, the male is taken for granted as the norm from which the female 'deviates' in language and in representation. So too has the language of plays tended to put women – through their representation in female characters – in a secondary position (2000, p.xvii).

And so, the mythic women brought together in Goodman's selection challenge the cultural assumptions of patriarchal society by "offer[ing] performance pieces which begin with a female point of view" (2000, p.xvi). As Goodman points out,

[t]he point is not to bring myth to life, nor to kill the stories, but to highlight the uneasy distinction between the two, and to show how many erroneous assumptions and gendered uses of language have traditionally defined and carried meaning from one text, culture and generation to the next (2000, p.xvii).

Just as Braidotti (1994) highlights the political fiction of patriarchy and Cosslett (1996) suggests the reinforcement of patriarchal expectations through fairy tales (which I will discuss later in this chapter), so Goodman emphasises the complicity with which the myth and the cultural context works.

But developing on the idea of myth, I would also like to appeal to the imagination and the imaginary within the topic of the mythic. As a fiction, a myth can be re-written with imagination and so we see that the nomadic subject proposed by Braidotti and discussed in Chapter 2, as a mythic figure, that is, according to Braidotti, a figure of the imagination (not imaginary but imagined) (1994, p.4). This has important consequences for enabling feminists to use the notion of myth as a forward thinking term rather than one that is simply retrospective, that applies to the past. Goodman, in *Feminist Stages* (1996), tellingly uses the phrase “[m]aybe one day in the *mythical but entirely possible future...*” (1996, p.2; my emphasis), which recommends the notion of myth as reflective of cultural attitudes and context but also, importantly, a term to summarise imagining new cultural visions and a tool for potential re-visions. Imagination is vital for feminism as a way of seeing through (and beyond) existing cultural structures. Without seeing myth as a forward thinking methodology, we become stuck in the notion of myth as a form of re-telling stories from the past.

Past recollections are important for analysis too. As Margaret Whitford suggests in relation to Lacan,

...sometimes the imaginary is an unconscious (invisible) structure and sometimes a structure of the symbolic which can be viewed in its external and visible manifestations in myth, or works of the imagination (1991, p.54).

In exploring past myths and fictions, it is possible to begin the process of analysis that can allow new visions to be developed. As we have already seen in Chapter 2, Irigaray also points out the narrowness of current frameworks;

...the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is *commonly imagined* – *in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness* (1996, p.28; my emphases).

The focus on myths then is concerned with imagination; those visions that are “commonly imagined” and those that have yet to be thought of.

If we consider the notion of stories and their analysis for cultural relevance, we can begin to see these myths as played out on the performing female body culturally and literally. Like the textual myth or cultural story or fairytale, the female body as myth is reliant on the cultural framework to make (intentional) meaning and it is the product of this system. However, as “political fiction” the female body speaks in a “double gesture” as Schneider maintains (1997, p.36), in that as a female body it speaks of the cultural values built upon biological details, but that this body through political intervention and personal agency can challenge the values that are attached.

While each example of cunt art that I have explored is a result of a particular chronological and geographical condition, I will base explorations on the Western cultural system that has provided particular myths attached to the female body as explored throughout this project thus far. The mythical body represented in cunt art focuses on re-writing the body and subverting static and degrading fictions that exist.

This chapter, as the title would suggest, is concerned with mythical examples of women and the female body. My focus on myths is not only related to i) the notion of the mythical body as a set of cultural fictions, and ii) the narratives that form the basis of beliefs and values relevant to contemporary Western society, but also involves iii) the notion of patriarchal fiction as a fundamental contributor to the subordination of women and the derogation of their bodies. In concentrating on the ideas of narrative and fiction as ways of expressing the phallogentric system, I will expose the perspective of these myths, and discuss the possibility of alternative (feminist) myth making, writing and communication of experiences. To write about that which is mythical can also be defined as writing about that which is imaginary, so I shall conclude this chapter with reference to the work of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, and whether a female/feminine/feminist aesthetic or language is possible.

This is important to the analysis of cunt art. Within the genre there are many examples of works that are motivated by a desire to try to express female experience. There are also many cases where the motivations include the drive to not only disrupt patriarchal meanings but also to redefine the female body. These attempts to redefine the female genitalia are centred upon identifying the patriarchal myths that surround the female body and aim to challenge and subvert these myths through disruption of the systems that uphold them.

My emphasis in this section lies in the modern interpretations of myths, including that of Medusa, as a contrivance to implement and maintain the subordination of women. In the footsteps of Cixous (1983) and Caputi (1993), although creating a separate path, I will explore and re-develop the subversion of misogynist myths. The myth of Medusa is

perhaps the most important topic to focus on due to the nature of the body art I am investigating and the continuation of theory that revolves around Freudian devaluation of female genitalia.

Reading - Misogynist Myths:

Just as women have been aligned with the body and nature so have women been alienated from the fragmented female body. The most famous alignment of a female figure with foreclosure on a female fragment is the myth of Medusa and her connections with castration and decapitation. Hence this section, while considering the psychoanalytic and phallogocentric devaluation of the female body (and in particular the subordination of female genitalia) will centre on re-readings of Medusa and other patriarchal myths including feminist critique and re-evaluation. This chapter will explore the inferiority attached to female genitalia through the myths that support this negativity and while it is important to mention the psychoanalytical expression of this inferiority, this section is not primarily a psychoanalytical exploration.

With the traditional psychoanalytic trend of subordinating women through reasons of inferior genitalia, the female body is divided and classified through structures of lack, incompleteness and replacement (even inversion in some biological terms). The political fiction of the female body unfolds to reveal myths that fall in line with the theories of feminists such as Irigaray (1996) and Beauvoir (1969) that are encountered earlier in this project; she is excluded; she is other; she is lack. These patriarchal fictions present a mythical body that is consistently devalued. The meanings reflected in the female body are fictions of exclusion, inferiority and horror, which are particularly relevant to the female genitalia.

Cunt art, while exposing a fragment of the female body, provides in its impetus the view of the fragment as a complete fragment, exploding myths that have allowed women's

genitalia to be categorised as lacking and as incomplete. While cultural taboos have allowed such notions to continue, cunt art challenges these views, not least by making these parts visible, but by doing so, attempting to annul the myths that have damaged the way women relate to their own bodies. Such damaging myths have been reinforced through “educated” writings, such as those of Freud, that are themselves based on and the result of the systems they uphold.

Freud undermines femininity by assuming a theory of lack. In upholding the dominance of men as an explainable and justifiable phenomenon, he presumes a prerequisite of inferiority on the woman. As classic feminist writers such as Beauvoir (1969) and Schulz (1975) make clear, the woman is always considered the “Other” or the “outsider” (Beauvoir, 1969, p.9). Within Freudian theory the woman is viewed as an “incomplete being” anatomically, symbolically and socially (Bergeron, 1992, p.93).¹

Freud promotes the view of the girl as a little man in her development to “normal” femininity (Bergeron, 1992, p.92).² In seeing femininity as inextricably linked to masculinity in her evolution, Freud was posing the male model as the norm (and the woman as the one who has to separate herself from that standard). Here, Freud is guilty of androgenising or rather androcentrising the female promoting the age-old equation of the

¹ Through the castration complex, Freud concluded that the process of “narcissistic self-validation” (Bergeron, 1992, p.92) is formulated and measured by the presence or absence of the penis and that children believe that everybody has a penis. According to this set of rules, the female infant has been castrated and poses the threat of impending and punishing castration on the male, serving as a constant reminder. Within this classification, the female is genitally inferior and more than this, she represents one that has already been punished, of which transference of social status is reciprocated.

² However, refusal to desert masculinity would lead to problems in “healthy” development.

male as ideal. For Freud, as for past male theorists, there is a clear hierarchy involving the sexes and the female is the imperfect version.³

Elisabeth Bronfen brings our attention to a fundamental point that is important to the consideration of Freudian theory; that “castration serves to transmit culture” (1992, p.42). She translates this as the boy subjecting himself to patriarchal law, of which he is the heir apparent, and the restraints that this entails. I would suggest that castration serves to transmit patriarchal culture, but, that it is the belief in the complex that seeks to justify and validate the hegemonic system that it embodies.

In addition, the idea of castration by way of the vagina dentata ultimately reinforces the fear of the female genitals placing the female body as a hazardous site. The castration complex signals a male masquerade of power which seeks to disguise male insecurity that is then projected on to the woman for the threat she poses. Freud exposes this fear and inferiority, within his genital hierarchy, attached to the vagina in *Medusa's Head* (1950, pp.105-6), in which he proposes the devil's flight at the sight of the vulva. In this lecture, the mythical figure of Medusa signifies castration, “[t]o decapitate = to castrate” (1950, p.105).

The Gorgon, as a symbol of the social misogyny that expresses the threat and fear surrounding the female body, has a long and unfortunate history. Translated, since the sixteenth-century, as “an ugly, repulsive or terrifying woman” (Caputi, 1993, p.161; Mills, 1991, p.107), the gorgon is rooted in mythology and reflects for us today the

³ This hierarchy relates not only to the dichotomy of the sexes but also is reflected in social roles attached to male and female. The mother is the punished figure. The mother, with her lack of penis and hence phallic power, is a threat to her son as she symbolises or presents what he fears he may become. It is the mother who is blamed by the daughter for not giving her a penis. The daughter feels robbed through the mother, which incites her to turn to the father for compensation.

androcentric interpretation and repetitive naturalisation and depreciation of female strength and female bodily processes. By demonising female figures that could be translated as positive images, patriarchal myth-making reinforces the subordination of women by reason of example, reinforces the male parameters of phallocentrism and in these accounts the male figure assumes and retains a heroic status commonly associated with masculinity.

Tess Cosslett points out that fairy tales reinforce patriarchal messages about expected gender roles and appropriate behaviour and insists on the highly influential role of fairy tales on culture (1996, p.82). Cosslett not only highlights the feature of domesticity equated with the heroine of traditional stories such as Cinderella, but also describes the passivity of this central role (1996, pp.81-82). Cinderella's life is in the hands of the handsome and charming prince. Snow White, in her glass coffin, is only awoken by the kiss of her beloved prince. In this system, the heroine is passive while the hero takes an active role.

Another equation that Cosslett emphasises is the seemingly dichotomous relationship between the female roles on offer (1996, p.81). She posits that "[f]emale activity, resourcefulness, energy, anger, are equated with evil; female passivity with goodness" (ibid.). And these two female roles are the typical alternatives in patriarchal narrative. The virgin and whore, or princess and witch, are exemplary of the polemic female figures in misogynist myths. As Cosslett points out, straying from this traditionally "good" passivity, domesticity or servitude is perceived as "demonic, abnormal, monstrous" (1996, p.82).

What we also find repeatedly in storytelling are the equations of beauty with goodness and ugliness with evil. The beauty of the good and just, however, is a culturally defined scale and hence, the evaluative model is based on phallocentric constructions. But these stories are based primarily on constructions of femininity that serve patriarchal domination and as a result, when we encounter fairy tales and bedtime stories as children, being shaped into acceptable adults, these equations involving passivity, activity, goodness and evil become the basis (and examples) of appropriate behaviour and assumptions. Hence, fairy tales and myths serve and transmit the culture in which they were designed and function.

Mira Schor, in *"Cunt"* and *"Penis"* (1993) (see Fig. 2d), highlights the linguistic and therefore cultural basis of our understanding and definition of the sexes. While we are reminded of the biological differences responsible for the dichotomous categories of male and female, Schor also emphasises the cultural aspect of how these roles are formed. Just as fairytales are cultural myths that reinforce and condemn particular qualities of gender behaviour, *"Cunt"* and *"Penis"* expose the cultural myths of role formation more widely. To be labelled is to assume an appropriate role with behavioural norms.

In addition, we can read Schor's label of "cunt" as a positive and critical comment or revision resulting from the context in which its interpretation is performed. We can assume a reclamatory motivation within Schor's choice. She uses the word in a pseudo-anatomical sense; the male genitalia, the penis and the female genitalia, the cunt. She does not use the word "cunt" in a colloquial or informal fashion. There is no comparison to other male nicknames for genitalia such as "cock" or "dick," unlike in *Cock and Cunt Play* (1972), a Womanhouse performance by Chicago, performed by Faith Wilding and

Janice Lester. Schor weaves the alleged legitimacy of these terms into the work through the comparative terminology she uses. In *Cock and Cunt Play* (Fig. 6a) the informality of such labelling served to insolently challenge the stereotypes of gender roles in order to expose their illegitimacy.

Cock and Cunt Play revolves around the gender stereotypes, roles and behavioural expectations attached to sexual difference. It places “He,” with a plastic phallus strapped to his crotch, and “She,” with a plastic vulva strapped to her, in a scene involving a kitchen and a bed. The “cunt” has a “...pussy/gash/hole...round like a dish...” therefore she should wash the dishes and it is not essential that she is satisfied sexually as she is designated “to receive.” The “cock” however, by virtue of his “long and hard and straight” penis, should shoot guns and needs to achieve ejaculation (Chicago, 1977, p.209-211). The cultural dichotomy offered is one of “I have a cunt. I must receive” and “I have a cock. I must shoot.” We can see the performance of active/passive and male/female in the imperatives set up. *Cock and Cunt Play*, therefore, uses patriarchal myths in their extreme to imply the construction of these positions and to question them. The excessive and absurd scenario ridicules the basis of these myths.

The most prominent example from Greek mythology of a patriarchal fiction that has derogated the female is Medusa, her decapitation by Perseus and his consequent slaying of the dragon, “winning” the beautiful and, interestingly, naked Andromeda as his bride. Medusa was said to be one of three gorgon sisters, or “monster sisters,” who had the power to turn men to stone (Caputi, 1993, p.161). According to Greek myth, Perseus sets out to claim the head of Medusa as a gift for Polydectes, king of Seriphos, to encourage the King’s marriage to Hippodameia having protected his mother, Danaë, from

Polydectes' attempts to marry her against her will. Aided by Hermes, who provides him with a sickle with which to sever Medusa's head, by Medusa's sworn enemy Athene who gives him a polished shield to avoid looking directly at Medusa, and by the theft of the eye of the Graeae (a trinity of Crones), Perseus decapitates Medusa.

After escaping Medusa's sisters with the help of winged sandals and a helmet of invisibility, Perseus sees the naked Andromeda chained to a cliff and falls in love with her. Perseus averts her sacrifice to a female sea monster, which is to appease Poseidon, by beheading the monster and claims Andromeda as his wife. Returning to Seriphos, Perseus finds his mother, Danaë, hiding in a temple to avoid Polydectes' threats of violence and in retaliation to insult, Perseus turns Polydectes to stone. He then returns Medusa's head to Athene who attaches it to her shield or aegis.⁴

Goodman points to the misogyny of the myth of Medusa and describes her as "the ultimate dangerous women" (2000, p.xv). Citing Brewer's summary of the myth where Medusa is raped by Neptune and her consequent and punitive transformation into the serpent-haired figure, Goodman writes;

Medusa is first raped and then punished for being raped. But even more striking than this mythic example of 'blaming the victim for the crime' is the way in which the story is conveyed [by Brewer]. The language...is passive: it does not imply that Medusa had the power to transform, nor that she had any choice in the matter. This account of Medusa as mythomorphic image takes all of the power of metamorphosis away from her, and grants her instead the responsibility for wreaking havoc in what defined as an otherwise reasonable and 'real' world... (ibid.).

In terms of the mythic figures contained within the myth of Medusa, there are two main female roles, similar to the dichotomous roles noted by Cosslett in fairy tales, which offer political fictions to choose between. There is the helpless (and frequently naked) female

⁴ For a full version of this myth see Graves, 1985, pp.80-82.

exemplified by Danaë and Andromeda. These characters are dependent on the hero and, as seen by Andromeda's plight, are given to be seen and taken openly. In contrast, we are presented with Medusa who has no dependence on male figures and, rather, has allegiance to her sisters, who is decapitated. Medusa is a harmful creature while Andromeda or Danaë are harmless but helpless.

According to Barbara G. Walker, the Greek myth of Medusa's decapitation by Perseus was created in order to explain the appearance of Medusa's head on representations of Athene's aegis (1996, p.629). Patricia Monaghan similarly claims that the classic myth seems to be based on an earlier goddess, and that,

[t]he fierce snake-haired head of late legend probably was originally the mask worn by priestesses when they impersonated the [earlier] goddess; later peoples, not remembering the old rites, explained the image as a decapitated woman (1981, p.198).

Caputi relates the myth of Medusa to the recurring theme of hero-versus-dragon in patriarchal narratives. She analyses Perseus' ensuing slaughter of the sea monster that threatens Andromeda. She points out that serpents and dragon are inextricably linked to female spirituality and that the ritual and recurrent slaying of female representative strength by male heroism is symbolic and purposive in the containment and subsumption of female power. Caputi theorises that the sea monster, to whom Andromeda is to be sacrificed, is her protector or, to take this further, that the sea monster is a part of Andromeda herself; the forbidden, assertive and monstrous part of Andromeda. Caputi concludes: "Perseus has therefore killed off the woman's "monstrous" self and married the "beautiful" controlled remnant" (1993, p.162) similar to the hereditary disapproval and subsequent "punishment" of the archetypal active female character in fairytales.

To relinquish control to the hero in the scenarios means that fictionally, these female characters submit to the patriarchal regime and surrender the aspects of themselves that are deemed uncontrollable and therefore feared. Cunt art refuses to relinquish control over the presentations involved. This is the disruption that such images and actions afford. Cunt art contributors present the female body without appropriate containment, substitution or shame and in doing so they reject the notions of disgust that such myths attempt to maintain.

We can recognise the dichotomy of female figures in not only relation to Greek mythology and fairy tales but also in Christian doctrine and we can trace the development of biblical stories to earlier myths and beliefs of ancient patriarchs, themselves given rise from non-patriarchal cultures. The infamy of Medusa's status as "[a]ll that has been, that is, and will be" was appropriated by Christianity as the omnipotence of Jehovah in Revelations 1:8 (Walker, 1996, p.629) and the blood of Christ, "given" in services of holy communion, can be seen to have relations to Gnosticism's *agape* ("love-feast" or "spiritual marriage"),⁵ involving the consumption of menstrual blood (Walker, 1996, p.640). Even the (all male) Holy Trinity at the centre of Christian belief can be seen to have developed from the common mythic tradition of trinities (three goddesses) that can be found in non-patriarchal and ancient patriarchal societies.

Where Christian doctrine and scholars have rejected such traditions as sacrilegious and horrifying there seems to be a basic hypocrisy in their condemnation. The duplicity lies in the disapproval of what can be deduced to be the basis of Christian beliefs through the lineage of pre-Hellenic and Greco-Roman traditions. In order to guard against such

⁵ This was also known as *synesaktism* in Tantric yoni-worship.

“heretical” foundations, passages in the Bible such as Timothy (1:2:11-12), where St. Paul rules “[l]et a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent,” initiated after the disappearance of the *agape*, appear to ensure that belief and values of the past are squarely denied and condemned.⁶

While biblical meanings regarding the female body and the role of women in society can be interpreted and defended by the explanation that they are of their time and must be put in their temporal context, Christian “lessons” such as that of St. Paul can still be recognised as the basis for most traditionally Western values and assumptions. The legally enforced concept of monogamy can be seen in comparison to the traditions of bigamy and polygamy common to other cultures,⁷ and the influence of the Ten Commandments on the cultural formation of Western society is immeasurable. What we must recognise in the Bible stories encountered is their basis in uncanonical scriptures and the myths and legends of ancient patriarchs and non-patriarchal civilisations. In this way, we can see the patriarchal devaluation of the female body in order to maintain control over women through definition.

Just as Medusa’s decapitation thought to be a patriarchal rewrite to account for representations that showed Medusa’s head on Athene’s shield, so, many elements of the Bible derive from earlier beliefs and stories. In much the same way as Medusa’s phallogentric construct with which we are so familiar, so previously positive female

⁶ The threat of menstrual blood and menstruous women can be conjectured to be the cause and source of the misogyny that is rife in Christianity.

⁷ It is worth mentioning that the treatment of women in these systems equally involves feminist concerns. That the wife cannot take more than one husband is one of the less serious contentions. Other feminist concerns include the mistreatment and overall oppression of the women in these systems.

elements of non-patriarchal society were re-devised as either attributes accorded to the now-male heirs of favour or made to be the downfall of female figures with a patriarchal system and context.

The story of Adam and Eve is perhaps one of the best examples of patriarchal and Christian adaptation. The figure of Eve in the Bible can be related to any number of myths involving the same character from different cultures and belief-systems⁸ and is thought to be a derivative of many earlier goddesses of the ancient eastern Mediterranean, particularly the birth-and-death goddesses that are recognisable in nearly every culture (Monaghan, 1981, pp.103-104).⁹ Walker offers alternative renderings of the story of Adam and Eve to the familiar version from the Bible, and points out that the biblical version and other accounts (particularly Persian and Jewish) on which the Bible story is based are reversals of earlier myths (1996, p.289).¹⁰

⁸ In Hebrew she is known as *Hawwah*, which means "Mother of All Living." Other names include *Jiva* or *Jeva* in India, Mother-Womb or Creatress of Destiny in Assyria, Kali Ma's title *Jaganmata*, *Ishah*, *Ishtar*, *Tlazolteotl*, and these names are given as the basis of biblical Eve.

⁹ The position of Eve as a biblical character is based in Hebrew mythology. Her name itself is the Latin script translation (E-V-E) of the Hebrew root HWH meaning "woman" and "life" (Walker, 1996, p.288). Interestingly enough, Walker points out that the secret Hebrew name of God, YHWH (*yod-he-vau-he*), was three quarters Eve (compare HWH with YHWH) and so this "Name of Power" surmounted to Eve's own name as the "Word of creation" (ibid.). This holds fast with the ideas of other ancient cultures where the Goddess figure was the Creatress of all forms or, as we translate the name Eve itself, the Mother of All Living.

¹⁰ Older, pre-Christian creation myths insist that the Goddess/Eve (or a more complex version of Eve, according to Monaghan (1981, p.103)) created men and women, hence brought birth, and also brought death (Walker, 1996, pp.288-289). She was regarded more highly than God and it was even said, in Gnostic scriptures, that she created God and gave him some of her creative power (Walker, 1996, p.288). When God ignorantly announced himself as the Sole Creator, some Gnostic myths insisted that he was punished for his arrogance (ibid.). Other versions of the Eve myth include the Gnostic ideas that it was Eve's word and not God's word that created Adam, that she obtained Adam's admission to heaven and even, that Eve provided Adam's soul (Walker, 1996, pp.288-290). Early Mesopotamian beliefs held that Adam was produced from one of Eve's ribs rather than the later reversal found in the Bible (Walker, 1996, p.289), while Slavic folklore maintains that Adam and Eve came into being at the same time and improves the apple-eating situation by positively proposing that it cured the blindness with which Adam and Eve were created (Monaghan, 1981, p.103).

The Book of Genesis instructs that God created Adam then created Eve from one of Adam's ribs. The Bible then imparts that God forbade Adam and Eve to eat the fruit from the Tree of Life, but Eve, persuaded by the serpent, takes a bite from an apple from the tree and offers some to Adam, resulting in the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Within this sequence of events, Eve brings death and sin on humankind for which she and other women are eternally held to account. Walker points out that the church in the fifth-century believed so strongly that death was caused by Eve's sin that to say otherwise was considered heresy (1996, p.290). She continues, "[t]his was the real origin of the church fathers' fear and hatred of women, which expanded into a sexist attitude that permeated all of western society: Woman was identified with Death" (ibid.). With this in mind, women's inferiority within society has been instituted and secured by the specific shaping of influential myths.

Destructive fear of the female body and its processes can be seen as a patriarchal construct developed from the previously reverential fear and worship directed towards female spirituality, biology and the power of female figures in myths and in the quotidian. The negative constructions set around the female body in male-dominated thought are successfully purposive in their effect. The gorgon Medusa is perhaps the best example of this persistent and decisive derogation as we can see from the colonisation of Amazon legend by the Greeks. If this was not punishment enough, Freud reduced Medusa to a "symbol of horror" (1950, p.106), representing castration and embodying the threat and revulsion evoked by the vulva.

Both Ana Mendieta and Tee A. Corinne combine allusions to this fear of the female body with a reverential respect of the power of the female genitalia in their work. Mendieta's

Fire 2 from her *Sileuta* series (1978) (Fig. 6b) presents a woman of fire. In a yoni shape, the vibrant flames dance in the relative darkness and indicate the shape of a woman that resembles a vulva of fire. The female figure is identified through *Fire 3* (Fig. 6b) from the series where she appears to be shaking her fist as the fire curls upon itself in the wind. The two pieces speak of passion and ferocity.

While the assumption is that *Fire 2* represents an alternative view of *Fire 3* and hence conjures up the female figure in the imagination, *Fire 2* performs a visual trigger and plays on yoni semblance to play a further meaning. After the fire of the female figure has been subdued, a vulvar representation remains most prominent. Further than this, fire seems to be produced from this being. There is a reproduction of a smaller, less well formed figure of fire from the vagina of our vulva of fire. The mythical female represented by Mendieta is a vibrant and enduring figure. Fear is replaced by wonder and although these works present a certain danger – the fire burns and scorches – it glows and blazes indicating a determination and resilience to the negativity imposed by cultural systems. This mythical figure has fortitude despite the darkness surrounding it.

Corinne's *Isis in the Sand* (see Fig. 2e) similarly critiques the fear attached to the female body by aligning the perilous forces of nature with the vulva. The unrelenting torrential qualities of the coastal scene are juxtaposed with an image of a vulva. This vulva is inscribed in the sand, part of the scenery, defiantly exposed. While utilising the metaphor of nature, described in Chapter 2, as a disruption to the phallogentric construction of culture as an ordered and inherently male association, the mythical bodies in these pieces are represented as inexorable and unavoidable. To traverse the windswept beach is to walk across/into the vulva. We must recognise the essentialism readable in these

representations. However, due to the fear that they comment on, we can see these works as re-reading this fear or power into a positive position rather than a negative subordinating myth.

Set against these works that exhibit the force of nature and play on the fear attached to the female body, Export plays on the force of culture as subsuming “nature” to write these bodies as a threat. In *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) (see Fig. 1g), Export plays with Freud’s “symbol of horror” and challenges the phallic replacement as a security measure. Lack and phallic extension come crashing into the same scene (in *Genital Panic*) and frame (in *60 Posters* (1969) (see Fig. 1h)). Interestingly, there is an element of horror involved but the horror is not intrinsically related to the female genitals but more to do with the taboos that are broken by this exposure. Export highlights the cultural determination of these meanings.

Fear is also critiqued by the playfulness of *Feather Cunt* by LeCocq (1971) (see Fig. 3f) and *Lips* by Lesko (1993) (see Fig. 2b). Employing humour and frivolity, these pieces challenge notions of fear attached to the vulva. In *Feather Cunt*, LeCocq combines sumptuous fabrics with vibrant shades to startling effect. These colours and textures titillate but not in the traditional “female = object” sense. They titillate through vibrancy and vivacity. They are defiant and mischievous. In this sense *Feather Cunt* is disrespectful to the viewing and representational codes that are expected of a traditional piece of artwork, let alone art that represents the horrific or fearful. Lesko’s *Lips* provides a similar challenge to patriarchal attributions of horror. She composes the softness and luxury of these lips in contradiction to the supposed threat and fear of these parts. That these lips can speak reveals the potential that this mythical body can re-write itself. And

what could be more threatening than that? Lesko's *Lips* offer the implication however that these definitions could be questioned, re-spoken, the mythical text re-written, which I will move on to in the next section.

It is vital to understand the importance of alternative myths.¹¹ It must be recognised that each myth is one possible rendering of a story that has many guises. We must recognise that the story of Adam and Eve, for example, in its biblical context is purposive in its account and therefore that common beliefs about women within a Christian-based social system can also have alternative versions. As Walker points out, "[h]ad one of the other versions of the Eve myth prevailed over the canonical version, sexual behavior patterns in western civilization almost certainly would have evolved along very different lines" (1996, p.291). Not only must we consider the impact that recognition of alternative accounts can have, but we must also realise the impact that biblical myths can have on the regulation of patriarchal society. In order to analyse and challenge existing beliefs we must be aware of the foundations that create and reinforce them. As Germaine Greer has pointed out,

[t]he stripping of all sacredness and mystery from the female genitalia has taken as long as civilization itself. The mandorla of Christian iconography, in which saints on a visit from heaven are enclosed as if in a pod of paradisaal bliss, is a womb emblem. The Garden of Eden is usually represented as a *hortus conclusus*, an enclosed garden, another womb analogue (1999, p.41).

So, we can establish that while all female figures and bodies have been degraded, we can identify the positive roots from which they originated. Also, we can recognise that cultural myths surrounding female figures and female body parts that consistently subordinate women as weak, sinful and monstrous are constructions that ensure the

¹¹ It is not the case that the earlier myths are more correct or true. They are, after all, *myths* and should be taken as such, however reflective and influential they are. What is important is that all versions are seen for what they are. They are reflections of the cultural systems in which they operate.

continuation of such beliefs. Only in exploding these myths can feminists expose these constructions for the limitations they place on women and their bodies. And only by offering more positive alternatives to misogynist myths can feminists begin to reclaim and reconstruct positive meanings for women.

Figure 6a:



Judy Chicago, *Cock and Cunt Play*, 1972,
performed by Faith Wilding and Janice Lester

Source: Meyer, 1996, p.60

Figure 6b:



Ana
Mendieta

Above:
Fire 2

Right:
Fire 3

From the
Sileuta
series,
1978



Source:
<http://www.replica21.com/archivo/m_n/37_mosquera_mendieta.html>

Writing - The Feminine Tense:

This chapter has been concerned with re-reading. I would now like to turn to the project of re-writing and re-interpreting. With the notions of re-writing and re-interpretation in mind we must not only focus on cultural interpretations of the myth of Medusa, as exemplified in the previous section, but also focus on that which has been expressed by feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray and explore the idea of feminist or feminine interpretation and communication. Therefore it is imperative to investigate the possibility and effectivity of a feminine language/experience/aesthetic. This means considering the “feminine aesthetic” as it is prominently called in German discourse (Ecker, 1985, p.15) and will include an exploration of Irigaray’s female imaginary, and Cixous’ *écriture féminine*.

This chapter will also consider the idea of a feminine or feminist aesthetic working within cunt art. The work of Judy Chicago has focused on the development of a female language and has utilised what has been termed centralised or “central-core imagery,” exemplified in works such as *Through the Flower* (1973) (Fig 6c), *Female Rejection Drawing* (1974) (Fig. 6e) and *The Dinner Party* (1979) (see Fig. 3g). This imagery includes specifically vulvar shapes but also takes the form of illustrations that gravitate around a central point reminiscent of the vaginal passage or womb.

The task of identifying a feminine aesthetic in artistic practice other than literature has been labelled as exciting by Giselda Ecker who brings to the foreground the biological determinism inherent in positions such as that of Cixous (1985, p.19). Ecker, inciting a reason to consider the issue of a female aesthetic, questions whether this avenue should be

abandoned.¹² She postulates the impossibility of gauging femininity as genuine or imposed in different works and considers the mainstream interpretation of these pieces as irrevocably patriarchal. The female will remain the object and spectacle for viewing (1985, p.19).

The most important issue, however, is not about recognising the differences between the genuine and imposed female aesthetic – where Ecker rhetorically suggests abandonment – instead it is a question of establishing subjectivity, respect and authority in the work of the female artist. If you are to say, “these are the differences” then “from masculine/male art” must follow. This means a classification of female art in terms of male art. It means judging female art “as opposed to male” art, in “masculine” terms, within masculine parameters; male currency as norm. This will also become clearer later in this section with reference to the parameters described by Luce Irigaray.

Fundamentally, this must also be a discussion about discourse; discourse in terms of text and knowledge but also the discourse of the body, speaking the body and writing the body. Any exploration of a female writing or of a feminine aesthetic must necessarily consider the context into which it is hypothesised. In this sense, the idea of an artistic female aesthetic is a question of language, of a visual language that stems from the same impetus as female writing. What must be considered is the possibility of whether such an aim can come to fruition in a phallogentric system and the suggestions made to combat, challenge or at least question this system. I see this as a disruptive attempt as opposed to an aim to radically alter the system. Ultimately, this project must also be informed by the

¹² Though obviously she thinks not and sees the reward in continuing to explore the topic due to her position as editor on a book considering the very same.

feminist desire to study the status of women and question their place in the patriarchal hierarchy that subordinates them.

The relevance of this quest is exemplified by the claims made by various cunt artists that “central-core” imagery, as suggested by artists such as Judy Chicago and Faith Wilding,¹³ was a way of attempting to invent a female language, and a method of vocalising female experiences. Criticisms made of this approach are common to the objections raised to the work of Luce Irigaray. And so, I would like to start by elucidating some of the issues surrounding her work that are shared with cunt art and consider how her aims and suggestions relate to vulvar works. This chapter will extend on Irigaray’s work presented in Chapter 2. Here I will focus on her investigations into discourse, a female imaginary and a female language. Irigaray calls for the disruption of philosophical discourse (1996, p.74). In attempting a similar manoeuvre I argue that cunt art disrupts phallogentric models of exclusion.

Irigaray, in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, points out the sexual indifference produced and sustained in the phallogentric system. She comments on “the self-reflecting (stratifiable) organization of the subject in that discourse” (1996, p.80) and holds discourse as a culpable agent of the maintenance of “the submission, subordination and exploitation of the “feminine” [...]” (ibid.).¹⁴ For Irigaray, the female is not only left a place of negativity, deficiency and atrophy, but by implication, she is also defined by male parameters to the extent that she has no sex. The female is only seen as the “inverse, indeed the underside, of the masculine” (Irigaray, 1996, p.159) and as such there are not

¹³ Return to the opening page of this project for Wilding’s claim about “inventing a new form of language radiating female power” (cited in Jones, 1996, p.13).

¹⁴ As in the Chapter 2, quotations from Irigaray’s texts include brackets, [...], to denote editing I have performed. Again, without brackets, ..., signals Irigaray own use of pauses within the text.

two sexes but only one, the male. Cunt art seeks to disrupt this indifference. Mira Schor, for example, emphasises two different cultural and physical categories in "*Cunt*" and "*Penis*," (see Fig. 2d) undermining the myth of one sex.

Irigaray also highlights that female pleasure is similarly not represented. As a result, a key feature of Irigaray's work, similar to motivations behind cunt art, is her focus on sexual difference and finding ways to critique these omissions in the symbolic order. She writes:

[...] [W]hat I want, in fact, is not to create a theory of woman, but to secure a place for the feminine within sexual difference. That difference – masculine/feminine – has always operated "within" systems that are representative, self-representative, of the (masculine) subject (1996, p.159).

Similarly, Chicago's *Dinner Party* (see Fig. 3g) attempts to recover the absence of the female in patriarchal versions of history where female achievements and experiences have been excluded. As Margaret Whitford summarises, Irigaray's work consistently returns to the same problem in different formulations; that of women's absence and exclusion in the symbolic order (1991, p.170).

Within this project, with different approaches and from different angles, Irigaray focuses on the idea of female imaginary and a female language through her prioritising of discourse in the psychoanalytic formulation of the Imaginary and in particular, of sexuality and the repression of the feminine. She reviews, for example, the (Lacanian) conceptualisation of the "flat" mirror as an image of representation and production of subjectivity (Whitford, 1991, p.65), and she critiques the basis of Freudian suppositions that neglect the "sexualized determination" of that "scene of representation," or what she also refers to, in this case, as "the sexualization of discourse" (1996, p.73). In expanding this idea, Irigaray calls for the disruption of philosophical discourse, the basis of social

law, the “position of mastery,” the “discourse on discourse” (1996, p.74). This impetus, I have argued, is similar to the potential for disruption that cunt art presents.

In order to further her project, Irigaray insists on an interrogation of dominant (male) discourse and while she can be seen to advocate the development of a female language, she suggests ways of “jamming the theoretical machinery itself” (1996, p.78) as the way forward. The question is not then, “What is woman?” which is implied in any formal attempt to develop a female language, “but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject [...]” (ibid.).

This is not to say that she does not approach and utilise methods of challenging or questioning phallomorphism through her use of language. In addition to elemental exploration, considered a constructive aspect of Irigaray’s work by Whitford (1991, pp.60-62), Irigaray suggests a “double syntax (masculine-feminine)” (1996, p.132) rather than an alternative or replacement discourse based on sexual indifference that would always, eventually, revert back to patriarchy and hierarchy or, “to sameness: to phallocratism” (Whitford, 1991, p.181).¹⁵ As Whitford maintains, Irigaray’s double syntax promotes “the relationship between *two* economies” (ibid.) rather than replacing the existing economy with an alternative, swapping one discourse for another. While this falls into the phallocentric mode of dualism, I would argue that Irigaray seeks to undermine and disrupt the economy of the Same by proposing, as an initial development, the recognition of two economies.

¹⁵ Hierarchy can be related to Irigaray’s concept of the economy of the Same. Hierarchy is a structure based on one and relative comparison to that one. Value and status is then accorded, consistent with matching criteria.

According to Irigaray, the double syntax refers to the Freudian ranking, hierarchising or prioritising of conscious and unconscious and the suggestion that they could have been articulated as different syntaxes. She refers again to the masculine mastery of discourse and holds the masculine production and maintenance of syntax responsible for this mastery (1996, p.132). She writes:

What we would want to put into play, then, is a syntax that would make women's "self-affection" possible. A "self-affection" that would certainly not be reducible to the economy of sameness of the One, and for which the syntax and the meaning remain to be found (ibid.).

This "self-affection" is the possibility of female activity in redefinitions; the ability or motivation to affect yourself. This "self-affection" can be translated as a play on words that, interpreted at a basic level, can mean a positive (and affectionate) redefinition of how women perceive and consider themselves. Irigaray goes on to say that "the feminine is never affected except by and for the masculine [...] woman does not affect herself [...]" (1996, pp.132-133). This signals the idea of putting the feminine into effect, through and of female parameters or at least a critique of male parameters, of self-change, of self-inclusion.

While Irigaray notes the emergence of "another writing" by women and her own endeavours, specifically in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985) and "When Our Lips Speak Together" (1996), the strength of her concept of double syntax is in the condemnation of the approach that seeks to replace existing phallographic discourse and the suggestion that a masculine-feminine combination could be the most stable objective for feminist projects.¹⁶ In addition, her ideas on discourse and syntax are not exclusively

¹⁶ Here, I use "discourse" as an expression of sociality – that it reflects the dominant ideology of culture and can therefore encompass ideology other than just textual products, similar to the Derridean meaning of "text."

related to text and the development of a female (written) language and feminist linguistics. Her work on the double syntax also has its uses that may seem even more relevant to this project on the employment of the female body in performance.

In "Questions" (*This Sex Which Is Not One*, 1996), Irigaray relates her conceptualisation of this double syntax to the body. In being cut off from their "self-affection," women exist in an economy "where they are completely unable to find themselves" (1996, p.133). She refers to the "masquerade of femininity," whereby the female becomes a normal woman who can "[...] 'appear' and circulate only when enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely, men" (1996, p.134). This is the female's submission to the dominant economy.

In representing the vulva, cunt art attempts to present the female genitalia removed from male dominated fantasy or medical contexts. This does not mean that these representations are devoid of the associations aligned with these spheres, but they offer a re-evaluation of the vulva without some of the connotations and necessary contextual traits.¹⁷ Irigaray proposes that the most obvious placement of the double syntax is the female body, which we can see in use in cunt art, and, in particular the gestural code of the female body (ibid.). As Irigaray suggests, "[o]ur gestures, our bodies. Strictly speaking, we cast no shadow" ("When Our Lips Speak Together," 1996, p.217).

Due to the significance of masquerades intrinsic to the phallocratic concept of the female, any attempt made to question or destabilise these conventions of masquerade has to be valuable. Hence, the performativity of the female body is reassessed. "When Our Lips

¹⁷ For example, the sterility of medical images and comparative uniformity of the labia is shattered by cunt art.

Speak Together” attempts to invoke the body in the text and performs meaning that works on a double level, or a double syntax if you like, of literal and metaphorical evocation. Within this text, there is the implication that some masquerades of femininity are being exposed. That which is invisible is exposed, speaking, momentarily visible. Purposively dual, Irigaray attempts to express difference linguistically and anatomically, similar to the reclamatory processes at work in cunt art.¹⁸

Irigaray proposes one route to visibility that includes the techniques of repetition, metaphor and mimicry. To return momentarily to a quotation in-part raised earlier in Chapter 2, she states:

There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one “path,” the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it [...]. To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to locate the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it [...] to make “visible” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible [...]. It also means “to unveil” the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere* (1996, p.76).

Many examples of cunt art use mimicry in this way. Cunt art assumes the feminine role and deliberately exposes the marker of this role. Sexual difference has worked on an exclusionary basis and as such, cunt art works to subvert the notion that the female sex only works within male parameters where she has no sex. The location of her exploitation, then, is uncovered and exposed.

For Irigaray, there is no successful stance that avoids the modes of oppression and there is nothing to be gained from ignoring and refusing those “tools” of reinforcement and maintenance that consistently subordinate and derogate women. Irigaray suggests that in

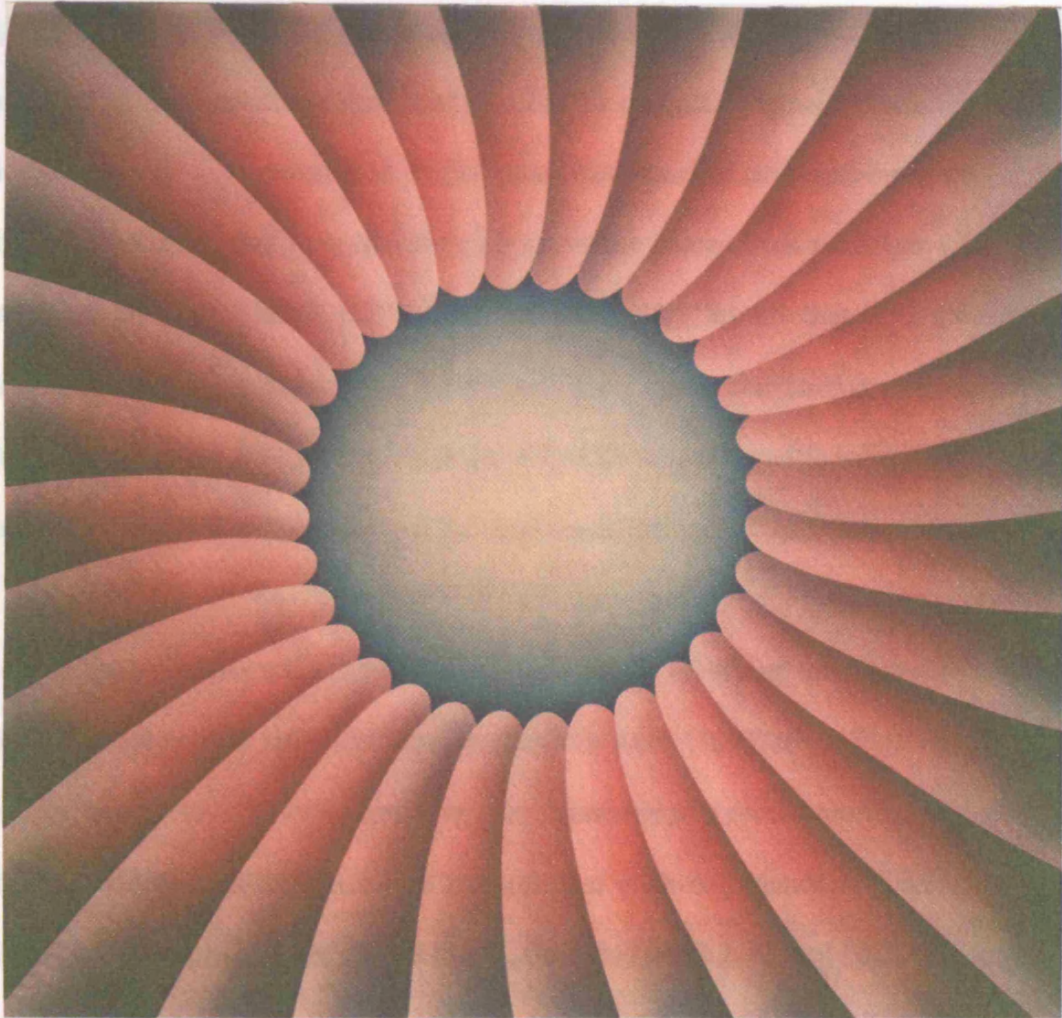
¹⁸ As raised earlier in Chapter 2, many critics have been suspicious of the apparently essentialist approach identified in Irigaray’s work. This will be explored in this context a little later.

directly challenging female construction within a phallographic system, the challenger is demanding to be a speaking subject, which in patriarchal currency amounts to being a “masculine” subject as there is no place for the speaking female subject (ibid.).

This does not mean that challenging cultural norms is a degenerative task, but Irigaray is highlighting the danger of female self-determination in a language/discourse/system that is inherently prescriptive of female definition. Rather than replacing existing images and expectations with alternatives that are recoupable into the patriarchal system, Irigaray proposes a path that seeks to avoid the phallographic imaging of women that is reductive to male dominated hierarchy and the notion of the female as a blank space that is similarly remunerative to masculine definition (Whitford, 1991, p.71). According to Elizabeth Berg, Irigaray’s metaphors are merely ways to retain these blank spaces, not to inhabit them with alternatives (Whitford, 1991, p.71). In holding open these blank spaces, Irigaray seeks to use them disruptively in order to question the phallographic system in which they are found.

While I have explored the similarities between Irigaray’s expression of linguistic and anatomical difference and the icon of difference presented in cunt art, I am now going to consider the metaphors used by Irigaray, in particular the metaphor of lips, and the idea of presenting female experience as an aim of this metaphor. I will also examine the proposal of a “vulvomorphologic logic” suggested and identified in the work of Irigaray by Jane Gallop (1988, p.94) as a disruptive reversal of phallographic devices and I will introduce the work of Cixous and her notion of marked writing.

Figure 6c:



Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 1973

Source: Meyer, 1996, p.62

Female Expressions:

The most relevant Irigarayan metaphor to this project, amongst her use of images such as caves and fluids, is the function of the “two lips,” most prominent in the text “When Our Lips Speak Together” (1996). In many of Irigaray’s chapters, however, she refers to an autoeroticism and positivity that is of two lips in contact, a female touching of lips, at once seemingly anatomical and labial, *and* metaphorical and self-empowering. She writes, “[t]he unity, the truth, the propriety of words comes from their lack of lips, their forgetting of lips” (1996, p.208). The phallogocentric “truth” that she speaks of is maintained, according to Irigaray, not by the literal interpretation that men do not have labia, but metaphorically by the omission of female voices, experiences and desires, in a system that is based on the male and the value (equilibrium) of the Same.

Judy Chicago is perhaps the most obvious exponent of rectifying this omission and of the drive to remedy this situation. Lauren Lesko’s *Lips* (1993) (see Fig. 2b), however, similarly relates to Irigaray’s venture in title, formation and motivation. But the motive to introduce voices into the traditional exclusion of such experience is a common theme within cunt art. Sprinkle (see Fig. 4r to 4y), Corinne (see Fig. 1d and 1e) and Dodson (see Fig. 4i) all work towards identifying and communicating female desire and pleasure, while Leonard empowers her subjects with the gift of self-fulfilment previously denied and critiques the male parameters that have allowed women to become sexually passive individuals. All of these examples seek to revise the political fictions and myths that have lead to women’s derogation and subordination.

As Whitford points out, Irigaray's use of metaphor is not without its critics or dangers. Nor are the problems unacknowledged by Irigaray herself. Whitford writes, "since metaphoricity itself, according to Irigaray, is male, there are problems about using metaphors of the female" (1991, p.71). The critiques of Margaret Whitford (1991), Diana Fuss (1989) and Jane Gallop (1988), concerning Irigaray's use of metaphoricity, all reflect supportively on this approach. In arguing the poetics of the body, Gallop warns of interpreting the Irigarayan body too literally (1988, p.94). In place of a translation that condemns Irigaray for basing the exploration of female sexuality and language on female genitalia, Gallop suggests that if phallomorphic logic is based on a conceptual unity of the male genitalia rather than literal anatomy, then "Irigaray's vulvomorphic logic is not predestined by anatomy but is already a symbolic interpretation of that anatomy" (ibid.). Revolving around a similar condemnation of Freudian (and essentialist) "[a]natomy is destiny" (see Gallop, 1988, p.94), Diana Fuss alternatively suggests that Irigaray's "vulvomorphism," to adapt Gallop's terminology, seeks to challenge the phallomorphic structures that she identifies; "Irigaray's production of an apparently essentializing notion of female sexuality functions strategically as a reversal and a displacement of Lacan's phallomorphism" (1990, p.59).

The suggested language of essentialism within Irigaray's texts has been the source of much criticism. I would suggest that Irigaray, herself, does not claim that there is a female essence in the labial metaphor. She writes, "we have so many voices to invent in order to express all of us everywhere [...] And don't worry about the 'right' word. There isn't any. No truth between our lips. There is room enough for everything to exist" (1996, p.213).

In linking the labial metaphor to cunt art, even in its most essentialist roots according to critical judgements, vulvar and vaginal works have shared the drive to clarify and expose the omission of female experiences and desire. While this claim could be seen to invite further accusations of essentialism - that representing the vulva alone could in some way represent the experience of “woman” - a common thread between cunt art and Irigarayan metaphor is the issue of (in)visibility. Neither form suggests that labial representation can explode with new formulations of female pleasure but both revolve around a desire to render the exclusion of female voices as a dominant trademark responsible for the subordination of women. Similarly, the labial metaphor for Irigaray and in cunt art - like metaphor of nature that is employed - is disruptive in that it attempts to make visible that which is invisible and to include that which has been excluded.

In approaching female genitalia as a metaphor for female or feminist intervention, Irigaray and artists such as Bamber, Lesko and Schor are challenging the primacy and legitimacy of the phallus. If the validity of the phallomorphic model rests on the economy of the Same then it is possible that images of difference can unsettle if not disrupt the equilibrium of that system. Akin to Fuss’ reading of Irigaray’s lips as a strategic reversal and displacement of phallomorphism, these disruptions could be seen to offer a challenge to the stability of the economy of the Same. At the degree of least efficacy, cunt artists could be seen as mutineers unsettling the status quo, “jamming the [...] machinery” (Irigaray, 1996, p.78), disobediently making the “unacceptable” or unseen visible, rebelling against the system that maintains indifference.

But, in addition, these feminists provide a clear metonymy that corresponds to several fundamental feminist motivations: the drive to challenge misogyny, non-representation or

misrepresentation; the aim to theorise and realise female subjectivity; and to redefine negative female association, amongst others. The failure in reading cunt art works, then, could be interpreted as a problem of over-simplification. Similar to proposals that Irigarayan anatomy can be translated in too literal a manner, I would suggest that cunt art is not interpretatively reducible to a body part. While most examples of cunt art do not cover the range of ideas exemplified in the work of Irigaray, each piece is referential and contextual. Most, if not all, can be traced back to a desire to make visible.

At a fundamental level this desire to make visible is a project to represent that which has been traditionally hidden or negatively represented. But it is also a manoeuvre that implicitly seeks to challenge and question the myths within the system that maintain this imbalance. The implication that also arises from this fundamental motivation is a redressing of what is visible, by exposure of what is traditionally hidden - an exploration or evaluation of what is missing - and in doing so, not only identifying the terrain of patriarchal omission and phallocentric exclusion but also offering or suggesting a space for the contemplation of alternative definitions.¹⁹

Irigaray's focus on the absence of women and the exclusion of female desire in phallocentric culture can also be seen to be the motivational strength of cunt art. But similarly to Irigaray's work, any attempt to claim that cunt art employs a feminine aesthetic, or a female language in the case of the former, brings several problems. Not least of these are the issue of essentialism and the question, articulated by Silvia Bovenschen, "[f]rom where does a "feminine" art get its identity?" (1985, p.30). As a

¹⁹ In using the terms "space" and "alternative definitions," I am drawn back to the dangers of alternative spaces or discourses voiced by Irigaray. However, in choosing to these words, I am referring to the opportunity to propose more positive definitions of women, the re-education of women about their bodies and new myths rather than an alternative or replacement system.

prominent feminist voice in the subject of female language, Cixous' notions of sexual difference and female writing offer some avenues for an exploration of the feminine aesthetic.

Cixous' main contribution has been to the subject of sexual difference and its relationship to literature. Cixous has questioned the nature and presentation of gender and biologically-based experience. She claims that the term "feminine" refers to a particular type of response to the laws that govern patriarchy. So in this framework we could suggest that femininity is reactionary and therefore constantly in flux due to an ever-changing social structure. In "Conversations" (Sellers, 1988, pp.141-154), Cixous posits that the biological differences between the sexes result in different bodily experiences and therefore provide different sources of knowledge.

Under these circumstances we could agree that *écriture féminine* seems possible due to the differing experiences and knowledge of the world experienced by women. However, if femininity is complicated by theory that gender is a response, constantly changing, then a feminine art cannot be defined effectively because the artistic response to be classified would also be constantly changing and shifting.

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous maintains that it is essential for women to write themselves, to write of female experience and to author "female-sexed texts" (1983, p.281). As Cixous explains, "Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" (1983, p.279). She continues by stating her belief in the existence of "*marked* writing; that...has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy" (1983, p.283) and has thus repressed women.

Cixous' identification of marked writing can be related to Irigaray's recognition of phallogentric discourse, and her notions of the links between history of writing and the history of reason appear to have some relation to Irigaray's work on gendered rationality and discourse. In her appeal for women to express their experiences in written and oral language, she suggests that in female speaking a double bind arises. While the female may embark on what Cixous considers to be the daring feat of speaking, "her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears language only that which speaks in the masculine" (Cixous, 1983, pp.284-285).

And so, the task of a female language, or, in written terms, an *écriture féminine*, is a massive and questionable undertaking and one that, as Cixous acknowledges, has trouble existing in the currency and economy of a phallogentric culture. Most attempts will "fall upon the deaf male ear." While Cixous highlights the existence of a marked writing and champions the possibility of a female marked writing, we must also acknowledge the idea of a marked reading also. The reception of any attempt at a female writing or a female aesthetic is always contextual and is, as such, at risk of re-appropriation into a masculine economy.

While any attempt at a female language is in danger of falling back into the context in which it is received, it is also questionable as to whether any feminine aesthetic can erupt, however creative and inventive the woman, from a universally phallogentric culture. Can such an aesthetic spring from some unmediated internal source? However, unless we acknowledge the progress that can be made towards a cultural shift, any feminist project could be doomed to such questioning and finally condemnation.

Cixous offers the incentive to continue the struggle for the emancipation of women from a misogynistic culture by indicating the forward-looking nature of the oppressed. As such she recommends that “[t]hanks to their history, women today know (how to do and want) what men will be able to conceive of only much later” (1983, p.292), and thus the “desires of grandeur” (ibid.) can be conceptualised even if their realisation may take longer.

Judy Chicago’s proposition of central-core imagery could be seen to be proposing a feminine aesthetic. In Chicago’s terms we could loosely advance the idea that within her scheme of centralising imagery, cunt art fulfils her ideal of a feminine art. Some critics (for example, Nemser, Mainardi, and Barratt; see Jones, 1996b, p.93, 100 and 112) have commented on the biological reductivism inherent in central images, as we have seen earlier in this project. But there is also the implication, as Amelia Jones points out, that “women were biologically driven to produce imagery that mimicked the structure of their own sexual anatomy” (1996b, p.93). Both notions, however, are simplifications of the methods proposed by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro.

Although most of her pieces employ a certain ambiguity in form, not shared with many cunt art examples, Chicago’s suggestion of centralised imagery is a method of reclaiming the female body from patriarchal derogation rather than a simple statement that women naturally gravitate towards vulvar expression. Jones points out the recognition by Schapiro and Chicago of the tendency to over-simplify their central-core methodology stating that these representations were explicitly addressing the way in which women were culturally perceived (1996b, p.96).

While problematically suggesting that other female artists had used central imagery, when the artists in question, such as O’Keeffe, had ardently defended their work against such claims (Fig. 6d), Chicago and Schapiro point to the strategic reversal of cultural norms of viewing women and perceptions of the female body (see Jones, 1996b, p.96). We must, with this intent, keep in mind the Irigarayan warning of simply replacing existing discourse with an alternative. Chicago and Schapiro indicate an approach that fundamentally proposes an avenue of revoking negative images and attitudes towards female bodies. They claim that centralised imagery provides a “complete reversal” of patriarchal values (ibid.). This is at best an ambition but, importantly, at its most basic reduction it is an attempt at suggesting a way forward for questioning those patriarchal assumptions and an attempt to disrupt phallomorphism.

Similarly, cunt art is not a simple biological formula but proposes the female as a desiring and sexually *active* subject as opposed to a sexually passive object of traditionally male fantasy.²⁰ Chicago’s development of an “active vaginal form” (Jones, 1996b, p.97), a direct subversion of patriarchal phallic fixation according to Jones (ibid.), is exhibited by the voluptuousness and the muscularity of the *Dinner Party* plates but also in the vibrancy of pieces such as *Female Rejection Drawing* (1974) (Fig. 6e). These pieces show the female genitalia as powerful rather than passively objectified.

The autobiographical text that accompanies *Female Rejection Drawing*, or *Peeling Back* as it has also been referred to, is revealing of Chicago’s attitude towards her own use of vaginal forms (Fig. 6f). While she makes the claim that her desire to communicate aspects

²⁰ “Sexually active subject” is used here in terms of women defining their own pleasure.

of identity (that have been banished to the sphere of the feminine and then derogated) found vaginal form, she also posits her hesitancy in how to effectively communicate as a female without re-appropriation, without condemnation and without patriarchal denial. In this piece she candidly writes, “I don’t know how to do that. Neither does anyone else” (*Female Rejection Drawing*, 1974). Chicago acknowledges her attempt to “forge a new language” but recognises the difficulty of such an aim (ibid.).

Hence Chicago’s central-core forms are politically motivated rather than innately or inherently female forms. Forging a new language is different from a notion of a female language derived from a biologically determined predisposition. In terms of cunt art, the idea of a feminine aesthetic means representing a metaphor of the feminine that challenges negative patriarchal assumptions about female identity and the female body. As Amelia Jones points out, “[t]he subtleties and complexities of the feminist debates of the 1970s are generally lost in accounts that regard feminist art of the period as simply and reductively essentialist” (1996b, p.97).

In addition, any avoidance of sexual difference has its own risks and dilemmas. As Bovenschen proposes:

The new motto – “Women are not really different from men” – overlooks the thousands of years of patriarchal history and the disparate socialisation processes. And coming at a time when women have begun to discover their own capabilities and needs, to set their own goals, and to reappropriate their uniqueness, it comes as a strategy to undermine these efforts (1985, p.29).

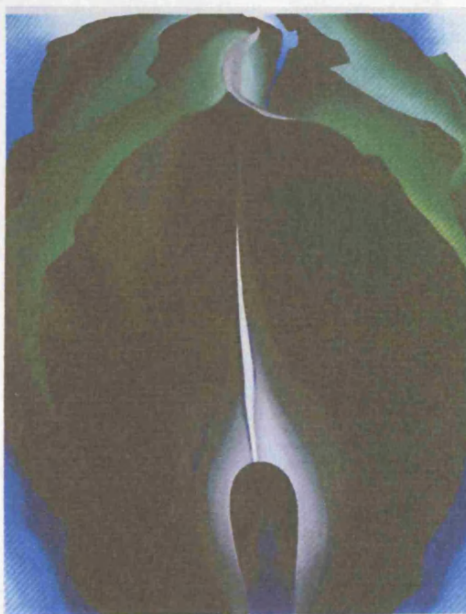
Bovenschen’s “new motto” is referring to the fact that she wrote this work in 1980s, therefore an anti-essentialist approach and avoidance of sexual difference were, at the time, new notions to combat biological determinism that was assumed to be the basis of “essentialist” approaches of 1960s and 1970s. Ignoring the contextuality and the potential

of so-called essentialist works, many feminist critics have not only misinterpreted or oversimplified these performances but, as implied by Bovenschen, these criticisms undermine the complexity present in works that can be seen to revolve around a female language, the female body or both.

I am going to end this chapter with a discussion of the possibility of a feminine aesthetic and the proposition by Marilyn French of a feminist aesthetic (1993). I will argue that focusing on the idea of a feminine or a feminist aesthetic is to move backwards from the advances made by female artists in disrupting traditional viewing ideals and challenging traditional accounts of artistic criticism and appreciation. To place these works in the category of a feminist aesthetic ultimately places them in a position where they can be “excused” by patriarchal culture and their interventions diluted.

With the notion of a female language or aesthetic in mind, I will also consider Wray’s identification of an aesthetics of lack (1999 and 2000) that critiques the exclusion of women and their object status. While I consider Wray’s suggestion, of presenting that which is to be critiqued, to be particularly relevant to vulvar works I will argue that all of these propositions, while advancing the analysis of feminist work, are superseded in cunt art by the ability of vulvar works to disrupt conventions of representation within patriarchy and to disrupt the phallogocentric models of exclusion and lack.

Figure 6d:



Georgia O'Keeffe

Top left: *Inside Red Canna*, 1919; Top right: *Red Canna*, c.1924

Bottom left: *Black Iris II*, 1936; Bottom right: *Jack-in-the-Pulpit*

No. 4, 1930

Source: Callaway, ed. 1998, pages unnumbered

Figure 6e:



In trying to "give back" the structure of male power, my work became a gift that I had to make. In the end, I found myself stuck in a vaginal form. I was not so interested in drawing it, and but there is a big gap between my feelings for a woman and the visual language of the male culture. However, I want to deal with the issue of vulnerability, emotional openness, the feminine principle, the only image I can think of in a vagina, feminine beauty. Our culture of the human experience can be related to the issue of the vagina. And then I realized. My struggle has been and is to find a way to tell the female experience as represented in male culture. It is the struggle for these areas of human experience that male society denies, thus challenging the masculine values. I don't know how to do that yet. Whether this experience is to be a major problem choice of our race who are trying to find a new language, one that is relevant to women's experience. Finally, I have cut myself for the gap that exists between my "visions" and my work. In one sense, the criticism was justified, and helped me begin to "find back" the structure that I had imposed upon my real content in order to make an identity as an artist in the world. But, in another way, the criticism makes me angry because it implies that it is my failure as an artist that creates the gap, and that is deeply not true. Whatever gap exists grows out of the fact that I have been trying to bridge a gap that exists in the world - the gap between feminist consciousness and sophisticated art language. In the process of cross-developing a discourse, I was consistently rejected as a woman and even more violently rejected if my womanhood was reflected in my art. How anyone really understands what it means to have to suppress your femininity in order to be able to express your artfulness - or what it does to you? I was not willing to be an artist in a closet and now I am not willing to be a woman in a closet. I've chosen to live on the struggle, to be myself in the face of society's rejection and the hope that by so doing, my work will help change society. As now you feel down because I haven't got it all together, then my husband, who loves me and understands my work and my struggle, rejects the cause of my hidden femininity in this drawing. How many people in this world have stood up to the constant rejection male culture subjects women to? How many husbands are willing to struggle with their feelings like my husband did, in order to embrace this drawing? How many women are willing to face rejection and rejection and rejection and rejection and rejection and rejection and rejection and still insist on keeping their femininity?

Female Rejection Drawing

Judy Chicago 1974

Judy Chicago, *Female Rejection Drawing*,
from the Rejection Quintet, 1974

Source: Jones, 1996b, p.98

Figure 6f:

In trying to "pull back" the structure I have used in my work because I feel that I had to "hide" the real content, I found myself making a vaginal form. I was not so interested in drawing a cunt but there is a big gap between my feelings as a woman and the visual language of the male culture. Whenever I want to deal with the issue of vulnerability, emotional exposure, or primitive feelings, the only image I can think of is a vagina, probably because those aspects of the human experience have been relegated to the sphere of the "feminine" and then rejected. My struggle has been and is to find a way to let the female experience be represented in such a way that it can stand for those areas of human experience that male society denies, thus challenging the prevailing values. I don't know how to do that yet. Neither does anyone else. It is one major problem those of us face who are trying to forge a new language, one that is relevant to women's experience. Recently, I was outraged for the gap that exists between my "rhetoric" and my work. On one level, the criticism was justified and helped me begin to "pull back" the structure that I had imposed upon my real content in order to make an identity as an artist in the world. But, in another way, the criticism makes me angry because it implies that it is my failure as an artist that creates the gap, and that is simply not true. Whatever gap exists grows out of the fact that I have been trying to bridge a gap that exists in the world - the gap between feminist consciousness and sophisticated art language. In the years I was developing as an artist, I was consistently rejected as a woman and even more violently rejected if my womanliness was reflected in my art. Does anyone really understand what it means to have to suppress your femaleness in order to be able to express your artfulness - or what it does to you? I was not willing to be an artist in a closet and now I am not willing to be a woman in a closet. I've chosen to take on the struggle to be myself in the face of society's rejection in the hope that by so doing, my work will help change society. So now I'm put down because I haven't got it all together. Even my husband, who loves me and understands my work and my struggle, rejected the image of my hidden femaleness in this drawing. How many people in this world can stand up to the consistent rejection male culture subjects women to? How many husbands are willing to struggle with their feelings like my husband did, in order to embrace this drawing? How many women are willing to face rejection and rejection and rejection and rejection and rejection and rejection and rejection and rejection and still insist on exposing their femaleness?

Female Rejection Drawing

Judy Chicago 1974

Judy Chicago, detail from *Female Rejection Drawing*, 1974

Source: Jones, 1996b, p.94

A *Feminist Aesthetic*?:

While Silvia Bovenschen (1985) considers the possibility of a *feminine* aesthetic, Marilyn French (1993) poses the question of what form a *feminist* aesthetic might take. The notions of vocalising the oppression of women, of clarifying the repression of female experience and desire, and of seeking ways to liberate women from the subordinate social roles on offer in a patriarchal society, suggest that the feminine aesthetic that is being questioned could also be called or even, more appropriately labelled, a feminist aesthetic. Marilyn French promotes two basic elements that are characteristic of feminist art. She suggests, “first, it approaches reality from a feminist perspective; second, it endorses female experience” (1993, p.69). She further refines her definition by proposing that a feminist perspective is one that “...penetrates, demystifies, or challenges patriarchal ideologies” (ibid.).

The idea of a “feminist aesthetic” could also be preferable given the volatile nature of notions of “femininity.”²¹ As Arlene Raven proposes, “... “[f]eminine” characteristics change according to the political, economic and social needs of a world which demands a woman to display them” (cited in Jones, 1996b, pp.96-97). The notion of femininity is a fluid term and so Raven concludes that “[f]emale forms are not stationary in art unless the forms we know to be “female” at this time are fixed into symbolic conventions, or signs” (cited in Jones, 1996b, p.97). Similarly, although less explicitly, Giselda Ecker posits that what is genuinely feminine in art is “transitory” (1985, p.16) and Bovenschen questions the validity of “feminine” as an ontological category (1985, p.30). We could promote that

²¹ This is not to deny the volatile nature of feminism as well but while feminist beliefs and values are varied and immensely diverse, there are common denominators to most feminist positions, such as critical and revisionist impulses.

a feminist aesthetic would be more easily identifiable and interpretable than a feminine aesthetic.

However, it would be misleading to recommend a feminist aesthetic as a unitary language or aim. Just as there are criticisms of an essentialising approach to women that collectively asserts what it is to be woman, so, any attempt to promote one universal feminist voice is equally flawed. Perhaps, instead, there is a case for feminist aesthetics as a multi-faceted, individualistic and diverse set of ideals expressed through a range of works by women of all nationalities, classes, colour and persuasions; a nomadic aesthetic.

But how then can we identify such a diverse aesthetic?

Seeking to identify the presence of feminist or feminine aesthetics could also be problematic as a limiting agent to the artist's work. That women's art can be comfortably compartmentalised carries with it the implication of being "excused" and stored away, re-subjected to patriarchal exclusion. We are driven back to the uneasy categorisation of female creativity in comparison to the male counterpart. While a great deal of feminist art finds its success in the communication of ideas, of its referentiality, its success must also be evaluated in terms of aesthetics, composition, the performance of meanings and the choices made as a work of art and not just within a category of feminine or feminist aesthetics.

However, in the realm of aesthetics, according to French, it has been argued that political intent infringes on aesthetic values and hence any work that carries a feminist perspective is not art (1993, p.68). French herself articulates the tendency of feminist art (in this case she refers to literary works) to "startle, distracting attention from *what* is being shown to

the fact that it is shown” (1993, p.70). She concludes that it is a particular risk that feminist work takes: “A work’s political impact obliterates its other features” (ibid.). However, given that art criticism and traditional aesthetic standards have been dominated by male authority, we must ask whether such rules of aestheticism are useful to feminist deliberations on the matter.

This has been an area of discussion in this project; the idea that live art by women has suffered at the hands of a male dominated art world that necessarily includes masculine economy of art criticism. While it has been established that any attempt to legitimise feminist live art could neutralise the politically-motivated content of the work, it could be surmised that the idea of a feminine or feminist aesthetic could be driven by the exclusion of female art from patriarchal systems of appreciation. It is possible to argue that women’s art has been ignored within traditional categories therefore valuing work on scale of feminist or feminine aesthetic could be alternative to these patriarchal omissions.

However, in discussing “aesthetics” we must consider what the aesthetics of feminist work can do within the phallogentric culture. In keeping with traditional aesthetic considerations, the determination of aesthetic value originates from a disinterested position. Modernist criticism, according to Amelia Jones, excludes content and the personal/political from the valuation of art which cunt art clearly rejects (1996b, p.97). As Jones points out, cunt art challenges various (male) modernist and Western aesthetic beliefs including the privileged phallus as the source of creativity and the female body as fetishised for male pleasure (1996b, p.92). In the latter case, exposing the hidden and prohibited female genitalia shatters traditional methods of representing women. As Jones writes, “by overtly representing the female sex, the artist endangers the system of

aesthetic judgment, since the clearly “obscene” female body is that which must remain outside the realm of high art” (1996b, p.92).

And so, as highlighted in Chapters 3 and 4, an important aspect of cunt art is its disruption of traditional viewing ideals and the challenging of traditional accounts of criticism and appreciation. Hence by focusing on the idea of a feminine or a feminist aesthetic, I would argue that we are taking a step back from the advances made by female artists in shifting notions of the Work of Art and the legitimacy and authority of Western (male) modernist criticism.

In exploring the feminist work *We're Talking Vulva* (first performance 1986/film 1990) (Fig. 6f) by Shawna Dempsey and Lori Millan, B. J. Wray discusses what she terms an “aesthetics of lack” involved in lesbian (and feminist) representational strategies (1999, p.189; 2000, p.188). Primarily using the term in the preparatory article “Performing clits and other lesbian tricks...” (1999), discussing Hughes’ *Clit Notes* (1994), Wray suggests that an aesthetics of lack relies on the paradox of presenting that which is to be critiqued (1999, p.189; 2000, p.187). As Wray writes in “Structure, Size and Play: The Case of the Talking Vulva” (2000), “[t]his logic of substitutions (visibility for invisibility, etc.) is, of course, necessarily predicated on the very system of representation that it seeks to undermine” (ibid.). As she points out, performances of lack necessarily inhabit and exploit the female lack in order to bring the notion into question:

An aesthetics of lack, then, requires that certain conventions not only be present as a component of transgressive narratives, but that these narratives be foregrounded as the territories under contestation (2000, p.190).

In *We're Talking Vulva*, created by Dempsey and Millan, Dempsey, wearing a large vulva suit and accompanied by The Vulva Band, raps about “the pleasures and powers of the

female genitalia” (Wray, 2000, p.188). The film sees the walking, talking vulva in front of the band and in everyday situations such as at the supermarket, at the beauty salon, demonstrating for equal rights and even sledging down a hill. Drawing on the cultural genres of rap and rock music videos, Dempsey provides a recognisable and mainstream context for her display of “non-normative” visual and oral representation. Tackling the castration complex head-on and making clear the boundaries crossed by her exposure of female genitalia visually and lyrically, she humorously presents her audience with that which is feared and “unacceptable.”

For Wray, while there are dangers involved in such presentations (such as claims of essence and of collective (dis)appearing identities), an aesthetics of lack successfully utilises “the performative power of anatomy” (1999, p.189) in asserting female subjectivity and desire. Rather than reinforcing the view that such works *only* communicate the primacy of sexual difference, a “tired polemic” in her opinion (2000, p.190), Wray suggests that pieces like *We’re Talking Vulva* also promote the impossibility of classifying this body on essence alone due to the disruption of conventional significations. Wray discusses the destabilisation of notions of naturalness and of the authority of psychoanalytic models, and argues that Dempsey and Millan’s performance succeeds in these disruptive functions due to the juxtapositions created between the hyperbolic vulva and the quotidian situations they inhabit throughout the film (2000, p.191).

While Wray admits to not fully defining her “aesthetics of lack” (2000, p.196), we can begin perhaps to draw conclusions about such aesthetics and whether they are relational to motifs common to cunt art or if they are comparable to a female language. According

to those defining qualities provided by Wray, an aesthetics of lack revolves around (and necessarily exposes?) the site of the female lack in order to critique psychoanalytic models that prescribe normative female social and sexual development. Wray explains:

As one of the primary structures that has determined how female identification and desire are constituted, “lack” has consistently haunted women’s attempt to enter a representational economy in which our only mandated positions are either invisibility or being the object rather than the subject of the gaze (2000, p.187).

In addressing the female lack directly, Dempsey and Millan are critiquing or at least exposing the basis for women’s exclusion and their object status in a phallogentric visual economy.

An aesthetics of lack is also a particularly interesting example of feminist methodology in terms of its “mixed” approach to exposure and critique.²² *We’re Talking Vulva* seems to combine both the celebratory and educational qualities reminiscent of cunt art examples from the 1970s, while also incorporating the preference of critiquing dominant viewing structures prevalent in 1980s feminism.

Indeed, within Dempsey and Millan’s film, Wray also highlights the educational imperative that lies alongside addressing the notion of lack. But these ideas are closely related although many feminists seem to have ignored their relationship to each other. While it is considered that any celebratory and/or educational performance is “different” to the impulses involved in critiquing dominant ideology, it is the precursor of the dominant system that knowledge is denied to the subordinate in that system.

²² This is perhaps problematic. Wray is discussing performance of lack as feminist but particularly as a lesbian representational strategy.

By exposing and critiquing the notion of lack associated with women it is also beneficial to elucidate the everyday consequences of patriarchal investment in female lack. As Wray points out, *We're Talking Vulva* approaches the “undereducation” of its audience in matters concerning female genitalia and therefore seeks to challenge the invisibility and disgust that is associated with the vulva (2000, p.188). And so, education and critical assessment of the system (that perpetuates this lack of education) concurrently inhabit this example of an aesthetics of lack.

But can Wray's term be compared to a female language or a feminine or a feminist aesthetic? Certainly there are some grounds for classifying an aesthetics of lack as a feminist aesthetic but I question the categorisation of methods as feminist aesthetics and seem more comfortable classifying the purpose or function as feminist. By critiquing the idea of the female lack, such works necessarily include the phallogentric frameworks that they seek to destabilise or expose. In these terms, the currency of communication is based on phallogentric systems of knowing and understanding in order for these notions to be read and then disrupted. With this in mind, it is hard to consider Wray's aesthetics of lack to constitute an example of a female aesthetic or language in the terms suggested by Cixous or even Irigaray.

All of these proposals of a female language, feminine or feminist aesthetic or an aesthetics of lack, while advancing the analysis of feminist work and exposing the male parameters which encourage feminist formulations of an alternative language, are surpassed in cunt art by the ability of vulvar works to disrupt conventions of representation within patriarchy and to disrupt the phallogentric models of exclusion and lack. I would argue that while it is possible to bring theories and discussions of a feminist

aesthetic or female writing to cunt art, the potential of vulvar works exists in their disruptive force rather than in any attempt to generate a female language.

But as Cixous herself has claimed, *écriture féminine* is “the Loch Ness monster of feminism.”²³ Cixous’ comparison of female writing to the Loch Ness monster indicates the constant search for an entity that, at the back of the mind, we know may not exist. The dubious claims of sightings of a mysterious and mythical entity do not impinge upon the magical status and fantastical nature of the beast. And the cynicism that faces those who ardently continue to search for it does not impair their desire to find it. Such is the quest for the “beast” of a female language.²⁴

The problems surrounding the search for a feminine aesthetic and the improbability of successfully asserting such an aesthetic does not affect the fundamental desire motivating such projects. And indeed, such seemingly impossible tasks do have their advantages and rewards for feminist projects in many fields. In advancing the benefits and needs for a female language, feminists find themselves located in the tools of their repression. Innovators such as Irigaray and Cixous, expose the terrain of phallogentric discourse that enables the subordination of women, and set about critiquing if not disrupting the supportive structures that allow the feminine aesthetic to be dismissed. After all, it is impossible to even think of changing that which we do not fully understand.

It is certainly worth bearing in mind the advantages of considering *écriture féminine* or a female language or aesthetic. What the discussion of this aesthetic is based on is

²³ This is from a personal communication with Franc Chamberlain. Statement made by Cixous at a Women’s Theatre Conference at the ICA, London, on Saturday 5th December 1992.

²⁴ I use the word “beast” here to indicate frightening and uninvited nature of such a suggestion in and to a patriarchal culture.

recognition and disclosure of sexual difference. To ignore or avoid or be afraid of sexual difference is to fall into the trap that Irigaray warns of; sexual indifference is sexual monism. To steer clear of sexual difference allows a single (male) currency and system to be maintained. Silvia Bovenschen summarises her own perception of feminist art. She writes:

I believe that feminine artistic production takes place by means of a complicated process involving conquering and reclaiming, appropriating and formulating, as well as forgetting and subverting (1985, p.47).

Progress may well lie in forgetting as well as formulating, not as an action that dismisses female oppression, but one that concentrates on disruption and subversion as primary aims.

Figure 6f:



Source (above): Wray, 2000, p.189

Source (below): Wray, 2000, p.191



Shawna Dempsey and Lori Millan, *We're Talking Vulva*, 1986

CONCLUSION:
SUBVERSIVE BODIES

The entire woman belongs to our side (Bovenschen, 1985, p.37).

The main research question of this thesis was whether cunt art disrupts phallogocentric models of exclusion, lack or absence. I have argued, and emphasised by repetition of chapters devoted to disruptive bodies, that cunt art disrupts phallogocentric structures and is iconoclastic to cultural values. In Chapter 1, I explored the cultural meanings of the vulva and the iconoclasm of cunt art within patriarchy. I argued that cunt art is iconoclastic to patriarchal traditions and attitudes. I proposed that cunt art disrupts the conventional readings of female genitalia, and the demystification and misrepresentation of these parts, and that it denies the invisibility of the vulva by representing that which patriarchy dictates should remain hidden. I also argued that accusations of obscenity attempt to reinforce dominant codes of acceptability and are examples of manipulation of power with regards to accessibility and knowledge.

In Chapter 2, I explored theories of the exclusion and absence of women in phallo(go)centrism, the economy of the Same and alternative notions of female subjectivity and I argued that cunt art challenges phallogocentric systems of exclusion through its emphasis on difference. I explored the notion of woman as commodity in an economy where the female is the product for exchange, a method of manipulation and disempowerment within the patriarchal system, and argued that cunt art could be seen to rebel against the rules of this economy in highlighting difference. I also argued that by including female experience, cunt art challenges and questions the male parameters that leave women effectively homeless and excluded from the symbolic order.

In Chapter 3, I considered patriarchal artistic traditions and I argued that cunt art is artistically iconoclastic to these conventions and regulations. I argued that cunt art challenges traditional notions of concealment in art, where artistic representation has conventionally dictated the representation of the beautiful and sealed exterior, and I proposed that cunt art challenges the invisibility of the vulva which purposely disrupts the phallocentric notion of one sex. I argued that cunt art challenges notions of male mastery in artistic practice and disrupts the conventions of subject/object in art while also challenging the convention of the disinterested spectator and questioning traditional systems of validity and authority within artistic practice.

In Chapter 4, I explored the claims that cunt art is pornographic, the differences between art and pornography and I argued that while both art and pornography revolve around notions of the forbidden, that the use of narrative and character separate the two representational systems. I also argued that while I consider accusations of pornography to be a tool to effectively exclude cunt art works and to maintain the mystification of the vulva, the alignment of cunt with pornography and with obscenity revolves around its inability to fit into the protocols of patriarchal representation. In this sense, I have argued that vulvar works are not easily reappropriated by the dominant culture.

In Chapter 5, I examined cunt art as a disruptive feminist intervention within phallocentrism but also as disruptive to feminism. I argued that the illegitimacy of vulvar works is closely linked to the iconoclasm of feminism within a phallocentric system and that the illegitimacy of cunt art is not necessarily a judgement that should be changed, but that in its iconoclasm we highlight the disruption that cunt art seeks to achieve. I highlighted that the journey through sites of illegitimacy throughout this thesis has been

concerned with exploring the disruptive potential of these works. I also argued that while cunt art is iconoclastic to some schools of feminism, feminist objections to cunt art only gain credence in a Cartesian theoretical framework that limit feminist criticism to analysis within a dualistic and therefore inherently phallogentric structure.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I explored myth making and re-writing, feminist investigations into discourse, female imaginary and a female language, and the potential for a feminine or feminist aesthetic. I argued that rather than presenting a female language, cunt art fulfils an aesthetics of lack that purposely disrupts phallogentric notions of female lack and sexual monism through the emphasis on difference. I also argued that in trying to establish a feminine or a feminist aesthetic and categorise works as examples of these aesthetics the focus on their disruptive potential is diverted. I have argued that to place these works in the category of a feminist aesthetic ultimately places them in a position where they can be “excused” by patriarchal culture and their interventions diluted. Ultimately, I have argued that all suggestions of a female language or feminine/feminist aesthetic are less progressive than the recognition of the ability of vulvar works to disrupt the phallogentric models of exclusion and lack.

To answer my main research question in summary, I have argued that cunt art disrupts the phallogentric models of exclusion, absence and lack by emphasising difference and in representing that which has been excluded visually, symbolically and culturally. In addition to disrupting the structures of exclusion, absence and lack, cunt art also disrupts patriarchy. While cunt art challenges the structures identified by feminists as sources of oppression and manipulation, cunt art also has effect on the experiences of real women in “real life.” The process of re-education that cunt art promotes has included positive

changes for women that have come about through clear and honest representations of vulvae, performances and workshops that promote sexual fulfilment, and the encouragement to explore and talk about the intimate parts their bodies.

The associative questions that follow from this main investigation into the phallogentric models of exclusion, absence and lack are all implicated in this main concern. I asked what male parameters are challenged by cunt art and whether cunt art settles into the realm of reappropriation that serves to reinforce rather than to subvert the politics that the genre seeks to challenge. I also asked whether feminisms can challenge female exclusion and propose positive and constructive theories of the female subject.

The male parameters identified that cunt art challenges are all linked to the main phallogentric structure of definition according to one sex. Cunt art questions the maintenance of the economy of the Same by explicitly representing something which is *not* the same and not easily accommodated into sexual monism. Sexual monism results in the exclusion of women from the symbolic order, their absence from within phallogentric formulation of the subject and the categorisation of woman as locus of lack. Within this particular model of monism, cunt art not only proposes difference in a biological sense and confronts the invisibility of the vulva that upholds the economy of the Same, but also tackles the exclusion of women through the inclusion of female voices.

Cunt art highlights the negative meanings attached to the vulva such as lack and atrophy, which are reflected in the patriarchal attitude towards women's genitals and in doing so attempts to start a process of re-valuing the vulva. I have not argued that cunt art positively redefines the vulva because I do not believe that these works can effect such a

dramatic change and I have not argued that cunt art develops an alternative female language or a feminine aesthetic because I do not believe that it does. The success of cunt art lies in the disruption of the structures of phallocentrism. While vulvar works can suggest redefinition and can begin to re-educate on a simple level, for example in terms of anatomical naming and structure, the individuality of genital formation and the recognition of female libido and pleasure, it cannot rewrite an entire system of meanings and the structures that maintain them.

But in a system that maintains the hierarchy of sex - through continued exclusion and absence and continued derogation of the vulva - and exchanges images of women in an economy that defines the woman as object – excluded from formulations of the subject - does cunt art reinforce the parameters that have led to women's diminished position through the reappropriation by the dominant culture or does it subvert these structures? I have argued that cunt art differs so vastly from the conventional system of representation that it is not easily reappropriated into the economy of the dominant culture. In psychoanalytic terms, cunt art does not include the protective, fetishistic mechanisms that allow for safe consumption. In pornographic terms, cunt art does not satisfy the construction of fantasy, through narrative and character, on which pornography depends. In artistic terms, cunt art challenges the traditional representation of the female as object because it disobeys the notion of the controlled and idealised female body and challenges the polarisation of art and the culturally obscene.

In returning to the final question implicated in this research of whether feminism can challenge female exclusion and propose positive and constructive theories of the female subject, I would suggest that it can. This is not the same as suggesting that feminism can

succeed in achieving the female subject in practice, within the phallogentric structures that deny her the role of subject, but rather a question of theorising how this female subject might be perceived. This thesis has revolved round the analysis of female exclusion and has argued that cunt art disrupts the structures that maintain it. As a result, I believe that feminisms *can* challenge female exclusion as evidenced in my analysis of the success of cunt art as political invention.

Bovenschen's statement at the start of this chapter leads me to my concluding question; a question that reflects my initial aims stated at the start of this project; can the *entire* woman be utilised for feminist intervention? This question, for me, reflects the purpose of this project in terms of questioning the success of cunt art as a disruptive phenomenon. While, in a sense, Bovenschen appeals to the reader to recognise the difficulties of dissecting the "entire woman," there is also the encouragement to see all parts of the woman as ways to achieve political intervention. I would argue with cunt art in mind that the vulva can be used to disrupt phallogentrism and the content of this thesis proposes that the reinforcement of difference can challenge the models of sexual monism within it.

Unfolding Folds:

Where Rebecca Schneider seeks to unfold the meanings of the “explicit body” (1997), we have to consider the implications of unfolding the body. It appears to me that “unfolding” the female body should be a feminist task given the effect that the female body has had on the position of women in society. In unravelling the cultural history of the female body, it seems that enough damage has been done already by male-dominated schemes of “clarification.” The woman as “dark continent” (Cixous, 1983, p.281) is exposed as a patriarchal tool and a symptom of ignorance. The labyrinth of the female genital is mapped. It retains its complication, an element of wonder, but becomes less mysterious, dangerous and shameful.

By unfolding the meanings that remain unspoken, the artists present with precision that which is powerfully and overtly female, challenging the patriarchal conventions that have sought to keep the vulva hidden. Cunt art challenges this invisibility and not only provides its audience with female versions of female genitalia, but also works towards the demystification of these parts. That these works are “female versions,” alludes to the nature of the representations: cunt art shatters the context and narrative, whether medical or pornographic, of conventional and idealised images of women. We are presented with actions and images that rebel against notions of the mysterious and/or monstrous female body and refute the authority of masculine parameters.

These performances make the vulva and vagina visible and in addition, they deny its classification as unknown. Similarly, they deny the idealisation of these parts. The individualities of genitalia, the female biological processes, and male-imposed fantasies

and fears are laid bare and examined openly for consideration. The vulva is further unfolded by the invocation of the female interior alongside its exteriority. The female body is opened out and many of the artists are seeking to show that there is no void, no lack, and no atrophy commonly assigned to the female body.

This opening up can be seen in different ways. Cunt art opens up the female genitalia and reveals the political potential of the body. It also opens up the social manipulation of the female body and all of its constituent parts. Further to this, however, according to Irigaray it offers the chance to open up spaces and gaps within the symbolic order, which presents the possibility of conceiving of and beginning to realise alternatives to current notions of femininity. On paper, it seems easy to make these sweeping statements, but in practice there are questions of whether these spaces exist and if alternative notions are possible within the dominant system.¹ At this point it is at least possible to insist that any project that questions the formation of gender identities and traditional gender roles is a valuable start to realising spaces for redefinition. Possibilities are opened up.

Cunt art unfolds the female body from the shroud of mystery, lifting the veil. Kandel's metaphor of the green veil (1996, p.190; see pp.186-200) aligned with cultural traditions of the invisibility of the female politically and physically, is brought to life and literalised to some extent. The restrictions placed on Moslem women are depicted by Kandel as an extremity on the same spectrum of control and oppression faced by women throughout the world. Within Western society, this tool of control is replaced by the commodification

¹ These ideas will be discussed in the section "The Subtle Abyss," which follows, but for the moment it is worth suggesting that it is certainly possible to open up the cultural constructions of the female body without suggesting that these constructions can be altered.

of the female body. The hidden and veiled female form is exposed but manipulated into a product that is saleable, harnessed rather than hidden.

The female body becomes a commodity that fulfils and maintains the power relations within that culture. The vulva is harnessed and manipulated into a product that is visible only to those qualified to look or as a product of illicit consumption. Cunt art reveals and questions this veiling of the female body. That this veil is opaque attests to the (in)visibility of the female body. It can be seen only from the viewing perspective in which the screen is set up. The female body can be seen but only through the regulations that are maintained to which it must conform. There is a haze attached to this veiled body and hence only an implication, an obstructed view, of what lies behind, beneath, beyond.

Traditional viewing ideals and cultural definitions have built this “veil” into representations of the female body. The assumptions and expectations of the harnessed body are played out on the curtained stage that is the female body. Some fragments are displayed for the audience while other parts are offstage to maintain the illusion that accompanies the patriarchal fiction being performed. The fetishised female body seen in patriarchal representations, such as examples of film and photography, reinforces the female body as the object of the male gaze and displaces the anxiety caused by the female body and the threat posed to the stability of patriarchal relations. This displacement is the veil realised.

The expectations placed on the female body and the associations attached to the vulva reveal a manipulative glaze that maintains the subordination of women. The veil that is enforced on women, relying on female disgust with their own bodies, finds full force in

popular culture where products for sale and services available attest to their imperfection and repugnance. Most pornographic magazines implement a literal veil in “perfecting” images of female genitalia before going to print.

Cunt art aims at a dislocation of these notions and effectively a dislocation of the veil that allows an obscured view of disgust and imperfection. Forcing a dislocation of patriarchal values, the condemnation of cunt art reveals a painful detachment from the safety of the veil set in place. This dislocation also implies a desire for sensibilities and definitions to be located elsewhere. Feminists contributing to the cunt art phenomenon provide a vision of the female body beyond the veil and challenge the harnessed employment of this body causing disruption to the veiled viewing ideals of conventional representations. Vulvar and vaginal works provide a dislocation of the safety mechanisms that protect the power structures maintaining patriarchal stability and hence are subversive in the context of these mechanisms.

Even in promoting that the meanings attached to the vulva are not fixed, cunt art begins a process of peeling back the layers of the patriarchal myths constructed around these parts. In unfolding folds, and while directly involving the demystification of the female genitalia through the realistic presentation of these parts, feminist work revolving around the vulva tackles the associations by offering pieces that go against the tenets of invisibility and disgust. This is not to say that cunt art redefines the patriarchal values aligned with the female genitals, but rather, cunt art begins to question these modes of knowing and peels back the mythology attached in favour of suggesting a re-evaluation of ways of seeing.

The process of unfolding can also be seen to relate to the notion of the vulva as a feminist icon, a part that stands for the whole. This has been seen as problematic by feminist critics of cunt art. Kubitza points to the differing feminist views towards cunt art expressed by Michèle Barrett revolving around women's experiences being reduced to their genitalia and the views of Parker and Pollock in the continuation of women's identification with their biology, nature and as sexual objects (1996, p.159). In these terms the suggestion of the use of the vulva as a feminist icon can be disputed by questioning what it stands for. Metonymically, for Barrett, Parker and Pollock, the vulva is an inadequate metaphor for female achievement and stands for the oppression and manipulation of women.

What is most damaging about these criticisms is the lack of recognition that these notions of female experience and women's oppression are some of the issues that are challenged by cunt art. To leave assumptions unquestioned effectively fragments the female body into areas that can be utilised with political purpose and parts that should be left for fear of what they mean which I find particularly unprogressive, if not regressive, and full of limitations. Here the vulva is a metonym for areas of cultural analysis that are off limits to feminist intervention.

This cautious approach also denies the wealth of links that exist between cunt art and feminist theory more widely as explored in this project. To delimit what feminists can represent and how they choose to represent it imposes similar strictures to those that feminists seek to challenge within the phallocentric regime itself. Such criticisms exemplify exclusion akin to the phallocentrism implicit in the taboos that limit the redefinition of female genitalia in the first place. As Kubitza also quite rightly points out,

in reducing examples of cunt art (in her case, a discussion of *The Dinner Party*, 1979) to debates and criticisms of essentialism, many critics are “falling victim to their own universalist fantasies by advocating one ‘correct’ feminism for all...” (1996, p.173). While offering images that are at risk of reappropriation is a major feminist concern, without risk there is no possibility of disruption, for feminist disruption of the patriarchal system can only occur when what is introduced challenges the system. This can take the form of the antithetical or it can be purposeful mimesis or metaphor.

Mimesis and metaphor, as we have seen, are feminist tools recommended by Irigaray that entail locating exploitation and making visible through repetition those elements that have been invisible. In many ways cunt art fulfils these approaches. The mimetic qualities of feminist vulvar representations are varied. We can see the realistic representations of Bamber in her *Untitled* series (1994), and the portfolios of *femalia* (1993), alongside Corinne’s allusions to nature and different vulvae in her *Isis* series, showing a variety of vulvae. This mimesis disrupts patriarchal exploitation of women’s feelings of abnormality, in comparison to bio-medical and pornographic representations that manipulate women by offering a standardisation of genitalia, by challenging the act of exclusion for those women who do not match these models. Verisimilitude and disruption here work on the instability of the realistic and traditionally invisible. Cunt art therefore unfolds to expose not only educational qualities but also disruptive potential and the possibility of subversion of phallogentric definitions and attitudes.

Mimesis is further utilised by other cunt art contributors. Schor’s “*Cunt*” and “*Penis*” (1993) point to the linguistic reality of phallogentrism and by doing so highlights the construction of gender roles. Chicago’s *Red Flag* (1971) represents a tampon being pulled

from the vagina, showing something that is avoided by cultural representations of menstruation such as medical illustrations and commercial product depictions. Even Valie Export employs mimesis to some degree by visually representing the threat of the vulva to the male viewing public in *Action pants: Genital Panic* (1969). Her intent, of course, is to expose these psychoanalytic defence mechanisms but through her literal translation of the castration complex, she reflects the phallogentric devices that ensure male security and by doing so disrupts these strategies.

Metaphor is also frequently used in cunt art. The vulva itself acts as a metaphor not for essence necessarily but rather as a metaphor of the cultural derogation of the female body more widely. While for some, the reduction of feminist concerns is a metaphor for an essentialist approach, the allusion to sexual difference has wider connotations. It expands to challenge the manipulation and exploitation of women based on biology: It disrupts the hierarchy of cultural definitions based on genital formation by promoting the vulva and the vagina as more than incomplete, as more than a hole or inversion: It poses the individualism of being female and of female experience through highlighting variety rather than promoting universalism according to genital formation; and it suggests the beauty, playfulness and humour with which this topic can be approached as opposed to notions of horror and monstrosity.

As I have tried to show during the course of this project, cunt art itself, is a metaphor for feminist concerns, debate and differences more widely. It raises the potent issues that have been debated by feminists and continues to encourage diverse responses and attitudes. One feminist tool, however, that can be seen clearly in cunt art is the motif of repetition, even of “playful repetition” that Irigaray suggests (1996, p.76). For example,

LeCocq's *Feather Cunt* of 1971 can be linked to Lesko's *Lips* of 1993 in the continued use of humour, luxurious material and metaphor. The *femalia* portfolios of Corinne, Perry, Posener and Rosen (1993), and Bamber's *Untitled* series (1994) continue the honesty and openness of Corinne's oval framed vulvae such as *Jeanne* (1975) and even of the impetus behind the *Cunt Coloring Book* (1975). While some of the intentions and motivations involved have changed, many of the politics involved in these works remain the same. Notions of cultural disruption and educational value still permeate through more recent examples of cunt art.

Bodies of Knowledge:

Write yourself. Your body must be heard (Cixous, 1983, p.284).

Throughout this project, I have been brought back to knowledge: phallogentric knowledge, male dominated knowledge, false knowledge. These ways of knowing have been reflected in the bio-medical, artistic, psychoanalytic, social and historical perspectives that have been explored. But these categories of knowledge are not the only ones present in this project. Female versions, female theories and feminist concerns flood the stage. As Hélène Cixous would maintain, the bodies in question in this project attest to the expression of female experience and the quest for redefinitions of the female body.

The body in cunt art can be seen as a medium of communication that not only speaks, as only lips can, but also writes itself and attempts to re-write that which oppresses and subordinates it through the form of associations attached to that same body. The feminist artists and performers included in this thesis show that it is possible to utilise the body that has been derogated in order to rethink this body. The tool of subordination and depreciation becomes the same tool for re-evaluation.

It is particularly poignant to recognise the extent to which feminist artists write on and of the body through their work. The body becomes the text that, while eminently readable, is a project for rewriting as well. Cunt art emphasises the inscription associated with this surface and the cultural signification of difference as a way of critiquing unequal social value and cultural assumptions. Many of these examples also attempt to re-invest the female body with alternative or more positive associations to phallogentric negativity.

These bodies bring with them and communicate knowledge of their own. What is often expressed through vulvar and vaginal works is the experience of women as contextual individuals, which means that these works often convey reactions to social injustices suffered as a result of biology. While refusing the notion that they are biologically determined to remain subordinate, many feminist artists have used the marker of their sex to highlight the social construction of gender roles and challenge the assumptions aligned with their bodies.

In this way, by communicating female experience and emphasising the patriarchal manipulation of roles, cunt art seeks to promote the notion of an embodied female subjectivity. Traditionally the object of contemplation, the female artist or performer attempts to disrupt the mechanisms of objectivism, and impart her own desires, experiences and perspective in the process. The tradition that the male spectator is in control is fervently refused and the knowledge that the traditionally male spectator is in control of that body is questioned and challenged.

Implicit in many examples of cunt art is the desire to perform the explication of anatomical details and cultural taboos. Cunt art has often been motivated by a desire to educate people about the female genitalia, educate women about their own bodies and, in some cases, re-educate their audience to combat the negative connotations implicit in cultural understandings of the female body. At various points throughout this project I have noted the confusion and misunderstanding attached to female genitalia in terms of naming, organs and function.

While this educationalist impulse has its benefits for a more general understanding of the vulva, the main contributions to this approach have been a very public focus on female desire, pleasure and self-satisfaction, the mitigation of female beliefs of their own abnormality, and an understanding that the vulva is not the disgusting and shameful part that it has been constructed to be. Cunt art may have some distance to travel in reclaiming and redefining the female body but, on an individual scale, it succeeds in promoting some level of education, not least that there are political issues at stake in these representations.

And so the politicisation of the female body provides another source of knowledge, not only through the interpretative process but the artist's body itself. Is this really *another* knowledge? The successful transfer of this knowledge is questionable for what it attempts to challenge necessarily contains the patriarchal construction of the body that it seeks to reclaim. Through censorship and condemnation, cunt art exposes the danger it is perceived to pose, but in this censorship, moral society ensures its safety from the anatomy and issues involved.

The politicised female body, however, is an alternative knowledge in that it communicates female experience that has been consistently undermined and rejected where it has sought to be heard. And the censorship of cunt art is another example of this silencing of women's voices and experiences. This project brings together some of these voices. In politicising the female body, many of the feminist involved in cunt art are offering a different source of knowledge, suggesting revisions and challenging the meanings rooted in phallocentric knowledge that have consistently derogated the female physically and hence within all actions and roles.

In acknowledging and identifying the voices of other women in feminist theory writing, Rosi Braidotti discusses the feature of “transdisciplinarity” (1996, p.36), common to structuralist positions (as “bricolage”), or what Braidotti translates as crossing disciplinary boundaries and borrowing notions and concepts. The importance of “transdisciplinarity,” as opposed to “interdisciplinarity” or “multidisciplinarity,” is, for me, the focus on travelling from one notion or concept to the next. Rather than simply implying the state of being in more than one place or having many, appropriate to Braidotti and her nomadic subject, transdisciplinarity implies multiplicity but emphasises the idea of crossing boundaries as opposed to being placed within them. Crossing (“trans”) as opposed to being within them (“inter”), performatively allows for a certain critical distance from what is borrowed.

While cunt art emphasises female experiences, the analysis of these works also allows the opportunity for these voices to be heard in conjunction with the critiques and theories of other feminists. And transdisciplinarity is also a feature of the forms employed in cunt art as a disparate range of approaches brought together by content. Not only do these transdisciplinary methods exemplify a comfort with using a variety of forms but they also attest to the drive to explore the format of communication and the possibilities that differing approaches can open up. In choosing ceramics and embroidery (in *The Dinner Party*, 1979), Judy Chicago intertwines traditionally female forms to show their legitimacy and effect. Lauren Lesko (*Lips*, 1993) and Karen LeCocq (*Feather Cunt*, 1971) similarly employ fabrics, and colours in LeCocq’s case, that are associated with femininity. Judie Bamber, on the other hand, (in the *Untitled* series, 1994) uses acrylics that, seemingly a traditional material of the male master, depict antithetical content to the form chosen. Zoe Leonard (in her untitled exhibition at the Neue Galerie, 1992) also

chooses to juxtapose the “proper” portraiture with masturbatory shots, which combines different materials with differing aspects of the female figure. Carolee Schneemann (*Interior Scroll*, 1975) and Shigeko Kubota (*Vagina Painting*, 1965) choose to use the vagina as a tool or locus of creativity, Schneemann pulling prose from her interior both creatively and literally, and Kubota using her vagina to direct her painting.

Many of the feminists included in this project have also attempted to communicate the notion of different voices and a range of women within their works. Bamber and Corinne have both produced a series including a variety of female genital formation and Chicago has represented a variety of historical female figures at her dinner party. Lesko provides a direct reference to the female voice through her playful labial and orally implicit *Lips*, while Mira Schor (“*Cunt*” 1993) points to the linguistic category of gender and asks the viewer to question their assumptions of who is speaking and the meanings they convey.

It is important to recognise that transdisciplinarity is a key feature of any Performance Studies and live art related enquiry. Performance Studies and live art categories are interdisciplinary fields that intertwine a range of practices in both practical and theoretical terms. While developing as a field in which there are dedicated performance theorists, Performance Studies has evolved from the application of disciplinary fields directed towards specific ends. This includes the use of ideas from cultural and critical studies that have been borrowed for the purpose of exploring practices and notions relevant to the field of Performance Studies. The category of live art similarly relies on grouping that subsumes a disparate range of forms and approaches.

Braidotti's insistence on transdisciplinarity also appears to be a common factor to feminist theory and feminist live art works. By nature feminism explores a range of disparate topics in order to explore women's place culturally, socially, economically, historically and symbolically. In order to critique the imbalance of the hegemonic political and cultural systems that surround any inquiry, there must be an acknowledgment of the textual and contextual basis of the system being questioned. Hence any feminist project that takes criticism or re-vision as its concern, which summarises feminist ventures from the 1960s to the present day, must use existing schemes if only as a starting point for alternative bodies of knowledge.

But such reference to phallogentric modes of knowledge must not be taken for granted. Elizabeth Grosz's position on the deficiencies of feminist thought on notions such as social constructionism based on Cartesian duality (where the body is perceived as passive and transparent), for example, allows for the transdisciplinarity of the feminist projects discussed, but recognises that the basis for criticism frequently leaves damaging notions uncontested. There is a line to be drawn between work that uses existing theory as a starting point and those that leave these concepts unchallenged: "Insofar as feminist theory uncritically takes over these common assumptions, it participates in the social devaluing of the body that goes hand in hand with the oppression of women" (Grosz, 1994, p.10). Silvia Bovenschen reinforces this point by suggesting, "[t]here is only a fine line between committed criticism and academic conformism" (1985, p.36). Transdisciplinarity has to be a process of borrowing and *not* assuming the truth or accuracy of that which is borrowed. Hence any project has to approach its premise critically and question the material that it uses.

In analysing my own research, I recognise that I have had difficulty in amalgamating such developments and rectifying previous feminist shortcomings within the body of this text. The focus on the female body has allowed me at times to fall into the trap of considering this intangible theoretical body as that which can be inhabited and occupied, constructed and re-constructed, something to be written about on the page so distant from the real lived bodies that some cunt art contributions seek to represent.

However, this project has been about laying the groundwork of cunt art, as a genre, and identifying the terrain that this category covers. It has primarily been a journey that analyses cunt art works and explores the issues and bodies of knowledge that are relevant to a genre of this nature. I have also endeavoured to write about the body as a lived body; as the embodied subject; as individual bodies; and as implicit in the meanings that body artists convey. In writing of the body, any theorist must acknowledge the divisions they set in place by the very focus of their project.

The Subtle Abyss:

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

What I am referring to in this section is the fine line that exists between employing the female body as a tool and locus of critique and reclamation, and reinforcing the sexualised object status of women. The idea of exploring the "subtle abyss" comes from Lucy Lippard where she warns of the danger of use of the female body for feminist purposes. Linda Hutcheon (1989) frames the question as one that is about striking the balance between complicity and critique.

As much as, according to Bovenschen, there is a fine line between committed criticism and conformism, we must acknowledge the tightrope that Lippard and Pollock refer to when the female body is set up to attempt to critique existing corporeal notions. According to Pollock, we must beware the reappropriation of feminist work into the hegemony that is phallocentrism and the possible absorption of these works into the patriarchal currency of that system (1987, p.135).

I have discussed the tradition of the female as object and the dangers of reinforcing this element of the male/female hierarchy. If the female is not only seen as an object, but also a sexual object for employment within male fantasy, and the woman is seen as body, as passive, for consumption, then any form that focuses on the female body and in particular, on a sexual motif of the female body must seriously consider the implications and risks that revolve around the work. But the abyss that these cunt art works seek to challenge is

the false gaping hole inside each woman according to cultural readings. By this I mean not only the biological misinterpretations of the female body but also abyss that is female experience and feminine subjecthood and self-determination.

I have spent a great deal of time in this project exploring the traditional ways of viewing the female body and the ways in which the female body has been written about and written on. It becomes clear that efforts made to avoid the female body in the 1980s in favour of critiquing masculinist mechanisms of viewing, while having massive effect in academic schemes of work, have been relatively unsuccessful in curtailing the negativity attached to the female body.

That is not to say that cunt art works, involving feminist approaches from the 1960s up to the present day, have been shatteringly successful themselves. We could surmise that after thirty years of vulvar representations, things have not dramatically changed. We have not witnessed a female revolution or a redefinition of values and assumptions. But there is no dramatic backlash either. In some ways, this could be seen to class cunt art as ineffective. But, all of the criticisms that have claimed that cunt art treads a dangerous ground and could be damaging to feminist causes have not come to fruition. I have seen nothing to indicate significant impairment to feminist movements resulting from vulvar works. In fact, I have gone one step further and argued that vulvar works are not easily reappropriated or accommodated in phallocentrism.

Confusion, for me, lies in warnings of reappropriation. While I can appreciate the expanded risks that revolve around representations of female genitalia, I would question that such caution could extend to involve any utilisation of the female body for feminist

purposes. The dangers of using the fragment of female genitalia are of course greater for the part they represent is that which could be regarded as reinforcing passivity and closest to the pornographic exploitation of women. However, in terms of reinforcing women as sexual objects, the most common cultural representation does not revolve around the genitalia but revolves around the fragmented female body.

As Jonathan Bignell has pointed out, the ways in which men and women are represented in mainstream Western film are very different (1997, p.195). The most common convention of the female represented is the objectification of the woman's body and particularly the fragmented female body, which works to offer the woman as a sexual object and halts the narrative. As Bignell has pointed out, it is rare for the male body to be treated or presented in the same way (ibid.).

The mechanisms in place that defend against the threat posed by the vulva involve the manipulation of the female body as a whole, in parts and with phallic or constraining objects. Here, I refer to Mulvey's work (1987) on the phallic woman or rather the woman with phallic replacement which circumvents the threat of castration. Bignell's recognition of fragmentation and Mulvey's identification of phallic replacement attest to the fact that the vulva is conventionally disguised in representations other than pornography, a category which poses more complex contradictions as has been explored earlier in this project.

Therefore, the appropriation of vulvar imagery and actions, according to film theory and psychoanalytic theory, could be hypothesised to be far *less* easily reappropriated than less explicit performances of the female body. For example, Cathy MacGregor's *Scarlett's*

Story: Part 1 (2001), based on practical research of the sex industry in America, presents the traditional object herself; that of the stripper. This reappropriation, of course, is challenged by MacGregor's own communication of her experiences; her sensuality in her pole dancing routine is undercut by her vocalisation of her desire for a cup of tea, and by her ability that is made clear to look poignantly back at the audience who become synonymous with the voyeur. We see the façade of this sexual object as we are privy to the creation of this character; the makeup put on, the clothes adorned and MacGregor's ungraceful struggle to don the ridiculously high-heeled shoes that are part of the costume of this seductress.

While MacGregor undercuts the safe and easy transference of the female object into the phallogentric discourse of female as commodity, she presents the female body as that object in order to challenge it. This disruption cannot occur unless the traditions are first tackled head on. While cunt art contributors present that which according to Barrett, Lippard, Parker and Pollock could be subsumed into the same phallogentric system of commodity, disruption of this system cannot occur without indicating the assumptions that cunt art wishes to challenge. In addition, vulvar actions are also presenting that which is not easily subsumed into cultural context; it presents the female genitals which the fetish seeks to displace.

There are clearly different approaches to the performance of the female body. Grosz indicates that we can recognise a division in feminist schools of thought regarding those who view the body as a source of knowledge and experience, and those who consider the body to limit the female according to traditional associations of passivity and nature. In dividing feminist notions of the body into three distinct categories of egalitarian

feminism, social constructionism and feminists who focus on sexual difference, Grosz identifies the two conflicting views within egalitarian feminism. She writes;

...the specificities of the female body, its particular nature and bodily cycles... are in one case regarded as a limitation on women's access to the rights and privileges patriarchal culture accords to men; in the other...the body is seen as a unique means of access to knowledge and ways of living (1994, p.15).

Part of the social constructionist view, according to Grosz, is retention of the mind/body dualism and as a result, "[p]olitical struggles are thus directed towards neutralization of the sexually specific body" (1994, p.17) while the third group of feminist thought identified considers the body vital to understanding women's position as a culturally specific lived body. Grosz summarises this position writing, "[f]or them, the body is neither brute nor passive but is interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meanings, signification, and representation" (1994, p.18).

In performance terms, the conflicting views can also be seen as a division between feminists that view the utilisation of the female body as vital to the disruption of negative and hierarchical values attached to the female body, and feminists who would uphold the view that use of the female body in performance reinforces the female as object through the display of the body and reinforces the traditions of the male/mind and female/body dualisms.

Grosz points out the assumption inherent in an avoidance of the body in feminist theory, as in egalitarian feminism, as a body which is "...passive and reproductive but largely unproductive, an object over which struggles between its 'inhabitant' and others/exploiters may be possible" (1994, p.9). Similarly, feminist social constructionist theories rely on notions of the malleability and passivity of the body which can be translated to a reinforcement of the mind/body dualism.

In these cases, cunt art is easily the dangerous and risk-laden adventure that feminist critics warn about. Only in viewing the body as unproductive, a passive object, can feminists be wary of utilising the female body in performance. If it is passive, then the body can only reflect cultural assumptions that exist. If, however, we uphold the notion of the lived body, then the performance of the body communicates individual experience. Any notion of the success or shortcomings of cunt art is hence based on an individual feminist approach to the body.

The “subtle abyss” between success and reappropriation is equivalent to the subtle and not so subtle differences that exist between feminist positions. This does not deny the risks that cunt art takes and certainly does not make criticisms of cunt art less valid, but as the diversity of feminist schools of thought shows there is no conclusive judgement that can either fully reject or validate cunt art as a feminist approach. It has to be assessed according to the specific attitude of the spectator viewing the work or the genre. This, however, is not a weakness of cunt art. It is a feature of all feminist endeavours and is the most exciting element of political intervention and in particular, of feminism as a movement. The sheer volume of feminist critique and diversity of contributions highlights the wealth of possibilities that available for feminists and indicates the subversive potential still to come.

Re-visions:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction... (Rich, 1992, p.369).

While cunt art indicates new ways of *seeing* the female body and an exposure of female experience, this project and the genre itself is about revising the frameworks that have allowed for and maintained derogatory notions of the female body and women's oppression. I have considered the analysis and revision of exclusionary models of phallocentrism. In highlighting Irigaray's analysis of the economy of the Same (1994, p.4) and Braidotti's investigation of a "one-way pattern" and "the Law of the One" (1994, p.81), I have argued that cunt art rebels against the process of "saming" identified by Levrant de Bretteville (cited in Jones, 1996, p.249). In reference to woman as a "figure of devalued difference" (Braidotti, 1994, p.80), cunt art can be seen as part of a feminist movement that attempts to re-value difference from its roots in phallocentric hierarchy.

It is not only the notions of exclusion in their various forms that are part of the phallocentric system of other than/different to/outside whether it is identified as an economy or law, but it is also the standard of representations and theorisations where markers of difference do appear that need to be challenged. For example, I have discussed notions of the vulva prominent in patriarchal readings; the vulva as a horror to be fled from, as fearful to be protected from, as unacceptable to be hidden from and as shameful to divert attention from.

These notions need to be addressed. Many cunt art contributions have developed from the tradition of sex education and self-exploration in women's groups. These movements

have focused on exploring female anatomy and women's sexual desires and sensations. Dodson and Corinne, in particular, have focused on women's education about their own bodies. While some examples, such as Corinne and Dodson, exemplify a practical approach to re-education, many vulvar works take this exploratory and educational impetus further by making their work publicly available. Private experiences are communicated and made publicly accessible.

We can identify the local level of effect in terms of education but there is also the issue of the effects that cunt art has had in feminist theory of pushing discussions of difference and use of female body. This also attests to the dual purpose of cunt art as a feminist movement that accesses and challenges phallogentric systems of manipulation and subordination, encouraging debate on methodology, but one that is also accessible to women irrespective of academic or non-academic background.

This process of re-education or re-vision revolves around ways of seeing on an individual level and in terms of cultural definitions and frameworks that hold these definitions in place. Nead suggests that, "...if we accept the view that the female body is a socio-historical subject, then it is also possible to see the spaces for oppositional definitions of women's bodies..." (1997, p.71). By using women's genitalia as a motif, cunt art contributors work on a twofold activity; a double gesture. We can recognise the disruption caused by vulvar works because they reject notions of shame, horror and invisibility but simultaneously through representing this aspect of women's experience, they suggest re-definition and a renewed and somewhat refreshed (and refreshing) look at the vulva.

As a feminist focus, double gestures are of immense importance. As suggested by Schneider, the philosophical location of “both at once” (1997, p.36) – “feminists who bear an Irigarayan ‘double gesture,’ [both]...essentialist and constructivist...” (ibid.) – provides, for me, the space for oppositional definitions that Nead would suggest is possible. Schneider continues that this positioning “...makes room for critical inquiry, political agency, and discursive mobility” (ibid.). In relation to Nead’s statement and double gestures, Braidotti labels “the essence of femininity” as an historical construct (1994, p.164), which exemplifies this double gesture that Schneider refers to. It is possible to link Braidotti’s nomadic feminist model to the notion of double gesture, although for her I would suggest that the gesture would be multiple. It is possible to embrace the notion of double gestures as a process whereby multiple categorisations can accumulate.

Bovenschen’s warning of the fine line between committed criticism and academic conformism for me highlights the dangers of singular classification. In the context of Braidotti’s writings on the risky reliance on phallogentric frameworks – frameworks that she terms fiction as opposed to theoretical - and Irigaray’s exploration of male-dominated discourse provides ample reason to find new ways of defining feminist contributions. While focusing on the confinements of “high theory,” Braidotti suggests that feminism needs to resist exclusionary practices and embrace inclusiveness (1994, pp.29-30; p.33; p.37).

In the realm of hierarchical dualisms, “either/or,” that have consistently placed the female in a subordinate role, revising double gestures and the possibility of “both/and” (Schneider, 1997, p.36) is a potent move. In relation to the notions of saming, the

Economy of the Same, Other, other than and second sex, definition by exclusion has been prolific and hence the revision of inclusive categorisations is an important step. But where does the reassertion of difference, as seen in cunt art, come into this remodelling or revision? The irony, of course, is that by asserting difference, there is the possibility of further exclusion and othering and, by extension, the possibility that established regimes of exclusion could be replaced by equally exclusionary definitions and practices.

Reasserting difference, however, is relevant as a governing force of our experience but also must be seen in conjunction with the personal agency exhibited by many performers within their work, such as Schneemann and Export. The focus on the marker of sex as a cultural category that denotes exclusion pre-empts any attempt to revise such exclusion. Fundamentally, unless difference is highlighted, and challenged as the set definitions by which they are known culturally, then saming and resulting exclusion cannot be challenged.

As long as difference is asserted as a double gesture of the marker of sex *and* of personal agency and individualism then it may be possible to avoid exclusive categories. In addition, a success of cunt art is an ability to represent difference on a biological and cultural level *and* on an individual level. Some of the most potent cunt art works that do just this are those examples that provide a multiplicity of representations. Works such as Bamber's *Untitled* series, Corinne's *Cunt Coloring Book*, Dodson's drawings, Blank's *femalia* and even, to some extent, Chicago's ambivalent vulvae in *The Dinner Party* expose sex difference but also expose the differences within this cultural and explicitly biological category.

To expose the marker of sex is, for the woman, to expose the lack that she represents. She is the lack in cultural terms – an absence – but in psychoanalytic terms she is also lacking genitally. If cunt art can be seen as relative to feminist projects of questioning or revising women's exclusion from the symbolic order, then cunt art is also about redressing the notion of lack. The primacy of the phallus is rejected and thus the double stance of actual effect and symbolic effect becomes a focal point once again. While cunt art questions the phallogentric model of genital hierarchy, it also tackles the everyday experience of women as a reflection of these homogenising frameworks. As Gloria Steinem suggests, cunt art is "in celebration of the discovery that not all sexual symbols are phallic" (1983, p.154).

Mulvey posits the "reverse side of the phallic woman" (1987, p.131) where the lack is not disguised. Summarising the use of the fetish object as a displacement of woman's imaginary castration, which revolves around "the narcissistic wound she represents for man" (ibid.), Mulvey suggests that there is a reverse side to the phallic imagery or phallic woman or woman plus phallic substitute. Cunt art could be seen to represent the reverse side of the phallic woman in its refusal of fetish and safety mechanisms. However, she continues,

[Women] are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked and gazed at and stared at by men. Yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man. The true exhibit is always the phallus (1987, p.131).

As far as Mulvey is concerned, cunt art could thus be guilty of reinforcing women as objects of display. Extending this notion, their display or presence is made absence in Irigaray's terms because they are excluded, but relationally they are absent because their display, whether with phallic substitute or lack exposed, makes meaning in so far as it is received by men. To take this into a wider and less simplistic forum, women are presence

made absence because their display makes meaning in line with phallogentric systems of representation and discourse. As ideologies stand, representations of women, however progressive they appear to be, make meaning according to these regimes.

But it has to be reinforced that unless feminists challenge and revise these systems, no progress can be made. As Wray point outs in Dempsey and Millan's *We're Talking Vulva* (1986),

[t]he talking vulva, in its spectacular appearance, plays on the object-producing gaze of her audience and, through a hyperbolic miming of female disappearance within a phallic representational system, deconstructs the power of that gaze even as it relies on the same visual logic for its effects. *Dempsey must risk re-inscribing woman as the object of the gaze in order to manipulate the trajectory of that very gaze* (2000 p.194; my emphasis).

She continues:

[T]he entire system of seeing is the problem, *if not to be solved, then at least to be re-marked upon and potentially queered* by the terrorism of an excessive lack. This oxymoron radically alters the proper function of lack as the stabilizer of male identity and potency by overstepping the boundaries of what lack is and does in the realm of representation (ibid.; my emphasis).

As Wray is fully aware here, the problems that exist for feminist representations of women and their bodies may not solve exclusionary practices and discourses of phallogentrism but through emphasis, manipulation and repetition, feminists can begin to highlight such cultural indifference. By questioning "the boundaries of what the lack is and what the lack does" cunt art works to disrupt and challenge the system that seeks to displace the vulva.

In terms of masculine and feminine, as qualities aligned with the sexes, Butler suggests that "[t]he feminine is never a mark of the subject...Rather, the feminine is the signification of lack..." (1990, p.27). Translated to the female, we could suggest the

development of Butler's notion as *woman* cannot be the subject because she signifies lack. With this possibility in mind, revising meanings of lack could be seen to be a precursor to investigations of woman as subject.

Discussions of female subjectivity have been a recurring motif within this project. It has consistently reappeared in this guise of the knowing and knowable subject. Within a genre such as cunt art, it is important to be aware of the notion of woman as object (to-be-looked-at, for consumption, voiceless) in conjunction with ideas of agency and identity. As one of the main risks and criticisms has been that cunt art objectifies the female body then notions and questions of subjectivity necessarily arise.

Alongside the risks of reinforcing the female as an object, there are the risks that the method of fragmentation pose as recuperable to the process of fetishisation that can be identified as a protective mechanism against the threat posed to the phallogentric system. Like the restraints imposed on women such as chokers and high heels, which replace the phallus to curtail the castration complex (Mulvey, 1987, p.130), these mechanisms serve to restrict female activity and limit any challenge to the power matrices of phallogentrism. There is also the risk of exposing the marker of sex and of particular roles that are attributed to the female along with the roles that are attached to the choker and high heels as restrictive and fragmentary devices.

The fragmentation frequently encountered in cunt art treads on dangerous ground of being recuperable to existing systems (as pointed out by Pollock) and reinforcing sex object status. Therefore, with the notions of female experience, agency and subjectivity as key motifs within cunt art, the categories and theories of object and subject have been

important to this thesis. Grosz summarises the problems that have existed in formulating the female subject:

Given the coupling of mind with maleness and the body with femaleness and given philosophy's own self-understanding as a conceptual enterprise, it follows that women and femininity are problematized as knowing philosophical subjects and as knowable epistemic objects. Woman (upper case and in the singular) remains philosophy's eternal enigma, its mysterious and inscrutable object – this may be a product of the rather mysterious and highly restrained and contained status of the body in general, and of women's bodies in particular, in the construction of philosophy as a mode of knowledge (1994, pp.4-5).

In her notes, she continues:

... 'Woman' is represented as an impossible and unattainable truth, for examples in the work of Nietzsche, one of the few philosophers exploring the body's positivity; 'Woman's' pleasure is represented as unknowable and unspeakable by Lacan..." (1994, p.212).

And so, in attempting to re-configure the woman as subject there are a number of falsehoods that need to be addressed: The coupling of the body with femaleness, the construction of philosophy as a mode of knowing based exclusively on conceptual enterprise, woman as unknowable and unspeakable, and the mystery and enigma attached to the female body. As I have stated previously in this thesis, challenging women's alignment with the body needs to begin with a focus on the body. Also, the prominence of philosophy as excluding the body only serves to reinforce women's subordination in light of their association with the body. However, by presenting notions of embodied (necessarily sexed but individual) experiences, cunt art challenges woman as unknowable and mysterious and rejects Lacan's dictum that women's pleasure is unspeakable.

Woman as mysterious, an enigma or unknowable is challenged by cunt art through the impetus of education; Corinne's *Cunt Coloring Book* (1975) unabashedly presents a variety of genitalia; Bamber's *Untitled* series (1994) uses stark honesty to represent her vulvae. Cunt art refuses the reinforcement of woman as object. Schneemann presents

herself with personal agency in *Interior Scroll* (1975); Lesko's *Lips* (1993) are not silenced and mute in the volumes they speak; Kubota throws into question categorisations of object by being the creative source and master of her work in *Vagina Painting* (1965); Export exposes the dangers behind woman as object and conveys her agency to astonishing effect in *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969). In each of these instances, there is a shattering of expectations and assumptions, not least in the subject matter they portray but also in the positions of consumption that they question and present. The traditions of art object, master artist and viewing subject are challenged.

It is this disruption of viewing ideals that recurs in vulvar works. As Amelia Jones writes, "[b]ody art practices solicit rather than distance the spectator..." (1998, p.31). Cunt art invokes the body in the process of communication by representing a specific part of that body but it also invites the spectator to become involved in the piece, to react to the piece, to stay and contempt the ethics that have lead to it or to reject it and walk away. Cunt art shatters the conventions of the disinterested viewer because what is represented is taboo and produces an affect in the spectator. In many examples of cunt art the spectator is forced to motivate and manoeuvre their body in order to experience the work. *The Dinner Party* has to be travelled around; the *Cunt Coloring Book* encourages a privately active spectator; *Post Porn Modernist* requires a publicly active audience to engage in the *Public Cervix Announcement*. The gap between body object and subject mind is narrowed. Certainly this is an element of body art more widely. Cunt art uses the body to destabilise the negative assumptions aligned with this body and encourages the viewer's body to become implicated in what is communicated.

The title of this thesis, *Abrasive Bodies*, is intended to implicate the contradictions and challenges to current notions of the body that are set up by cunt art. This includes the body within the work and the bodies that are brought to the work; the body of the spectator, theories of the body and bodies of theory. *Abrasive Bodies* also alludes to the title of Grosz's influential work *Volatile Bodies* (1994). Many of the key points for Grosz have recurred in this project; the focus on subjectivity; attempts to review woman as lack or absence; a focus on female exclusion and othering; the body as a text; and the body as marked and sexually different; a focus on the dissolution of binaries and feminist critique of male dominated discourse.

The clear translation of Grosz's work is that *bodies are volatile*. They resist static meaning. Their volatility is exhibited in changing contexts. They are not stable notions or stable experiences. It also refers to the volatile debates that surround the body and in particular, the volatility within feminism of theorising and using the female body. And it is this volatility of the female body and critique of the employment of the female body that is exposed in cunt art and in this project. Cunt art is abrasive, in most occasions *on purpose*.² While I do not subscribe to simplistic shock tactic theories, they are purposely abrasive in their approach. Their abrasiveness results from the fact that what these works seek to undermine, challenge, disrupt and subvert are notions of the unacceptability of this part of the body and female experiences.

Contributions from feminists from the past fifteen years (exemplified by Butler (1990, 1993), Grosz (1994), Schneider (1997) and Jones (1998)) are re-evaluating the body and

² I say "most" here and not *all* works for the reason that examples such as Dodson's drawings and Corinne's *Cunt Coloring Book*, have been primarily to do with education, and in particular, about developing women's understanding and appreciation of their own bodies. While these educational pieces are abrasive in terms of their iconoclasm, they do not seek to disrupt in the way that other cunt art works do.

are employing double gestures that refuse the simplicity and over-criticism of essentialist positions. The focus on feminist philosophy that accepts a transdisciplinary and less static approach is ever growing. And this provides a unique location from which to re-assess the issues within and potential of cunt art. While the employment of female genitalia can still be criticised and challenged, a more body-friendly feminism which recognises the urgency of establishing female subjectivity and re-visions of notions of lack/absence/exclusion alongside this, provides a more lucrative and less judgemental context in which to explore the genre of cunt art.

This project, as an overview of past adventures and future possibilities, has provided me with an ideal location from which to explore the issues involved in cunt art. It has enabled me to view these works with safe distance, to avoid the panic of immediacy that has been involved in criticisms of these works. I can survey what I consider to be the lack of damage caused by these interventions that feminist critics feared at the time of production. I can assess that there are more potent dangers to feminism than representations of female genitalia.

The shortcoming of feminist discourse, for me, is its elitism. While feminists such as Braidotti, Irigaray and Grosz highlight the exclusionary nature of male dominated discourse, feminism is in danger of formulating an equally exclusive practice. This project is just one example of such restrictively written documents. This is not to say that feminism should not approach high theory, and challenge the doctrines that implicitly subordinate women, but that what results from such endeavours excludes women who are not academically-centred. It is my opinion that to affect change socially, feminism must employ a double gesture that challenges established theory but that also makes such

progress accessible to the public. This does not mean a “dumb-ing down” of information but rather accessibility here is linked to the relevance of contributions to the real lives of women.

This is where live art plays its most important role. Due to its place in the public arena, feminist performative interventions are a lucrative source of accessible communication of significant ideas. Feminist performances and events therefore must be accessible, not simplified, uncomplicated or undemanding, but relevant and significant to women’s experiences. *The Dinner Party* (1979), for example, may have received strong criticism from feminists and art critics alike, but its effect on thousands of women (many of whom were not academics or frequent gallery visitors or performance spectators) is undeniable. *The Vagina Monologues* (1998), similarly, has had a wide ranging influence. Due to the many criticisms of cunt art, vulvar works could be said to have misrepresented feminism in the public arena, but it is perhaps in its oversimplification that such objections have arisen and it is the expansion of these complexities that I have attempted to explore in this project.

I could, perhaps, be branded an idealist. I become absorbed in the moment; I become excited by the prospect of what might be; I believe that positive change is just over the next horizon; I give ample opportunity prior to judgement to any feminist endeavour by virtue of the fact that they are attempting to affect change. I am also passionate about the melodrama of words. While I have tried to suppress this, as I am to believe it is inappropriate in a text such as this, I am enamoured by the poetry of feminist writings such as Irigaray and Cixous. Writing is a creative and performative source that can make a political statement and make a difference to feminism.

The performance of the text is one way that writing can re-enact the public success of feminist live art. It also poses an internal challenge to the formality and sterility of traditional academic discourse. The performance of the text is, therefore, an important tool for reclamation of male dominated writing. To challenge texts, and the methodology inherent within them, is to implicitly challenge the hegemony of discourse embedded in these works. Only in identifying the layers of misogyny, and the potential for the disruption and subversion of these traditions, can the subordination of women be challenged. Feminist re-visions are therefore two-fold: Re-visions need to tackle discourse as an academically specific goal and as a practice that is accessible and relevant to women's lives.

The impetus to revise women's status in phallocentric systems has a long history. As Adrienne Rich wrote in 1971, "[r]e-vision...is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (Rich, 1992, p.369). And while re-visions have been the agenda for feminist movements for several decades, as exemplified in this thesis, it is perhaps a process of becoming; becoming the subject for women; becoming revisionists of our own bodies; becoming the right time for unquestionable progress. Laura Mulvey called for action against women simply being the "the scenery on which men project their narcissistic fantasies" (1987, p.131). She concluded that "[t]he time has come to for us to take over the show and exhibit our own fears and desires" (ibid.). With the developments in feminist inquiry that have taken place over the last ten years, perhaps that time is sooner than we think.

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