

## Shame and the aesthetics of intimacy : three contemporary artworks

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**SHAME AND THE AESTHETICS OF INTIMACY**

**THREE CONTEMPORARY ARTWORKS**

**ELLA DREYFUS**

# **Shame and the Aesthetics of Intimacy**

## **Three Contemporary Artworks**

**Ella Dreyfus**

This thesis is submitted in support of three contemporary artworks

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

School of Art, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales

**2012**

### ORIGINALITY STATEMENT

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Signed.....

Ella Gabrielle Dreyfus

Date.....



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# ABSTRACT

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This research project explores contemporary visual arts that are located within a field I identify as the ‘aesthetics of intimacy’. Within this field I explore the emotional state of shame, including feelings about the body, and the capacity of art to build relationships between the artist, artwork and audience.

This research project shows how affects can be foregrounded within contemporary artworks, to provide intimate, aesthetic encounters that impact on individuals and groups. The thesis specifically articulates an expansion of my art practice which led to the creation of new conceptual approaches to exploring the relationships between artists, subject/models and spectators. It also examines the way that art galleries, exhibition spaces or public places can provide a forum for intimate experiences for viewers

Three bodies of artworks were created for this research project — *Weight and Sea*, *Scumbag* and *To see beyond what seems to be*. The first artwork, *Weight and Sea*, is an interactive sculpture that invites audiences to shift in their traditional position from objective spectator to embodied subject by spontaneously performing within the work. This artwork is located in a public environment and reveals personal and private information about bodies, activating shame responses when confronted by a large audience. In the second artwork, *Scumbag*, the physical body is absent, yet its presence is conveyed by emotive language inserted into specific domestic sites, then photographed in order to confront shameful issues about domestic and familial traumas. In the final artwork, *To see beyond what seems to be*, the emphasis shifts to a more abstract representation of emotion, where shame is transformed and spectators encounter the possibility of new and transformative personal meanings.

The first and second artworks identify different aspects of how private shame is disclosed in public spaces, whilst the third artwork moves towards a possible emotional and visual resolution for the viewer. These three works map significant shifts in my practice and the movement from conventional representational modes of seeing and representing the body, demonstrating the potential for difficult feelings to reside within the ‘aesthetics of intimacy’.

The affect of shame is critically analysed from the perspective of how shame can be transformed from being a negative affect into a productive and creative force. I describe this creative force as a ‘gateway to intimacy’. My thesis is supported by key theorists on the ‘aesthetics of shame’, such as Tomkins, Sedgwick, Probyn and Munt and comparisons are drawn with the works of contemporary artists such as Bourgeois, Goldin, Spence, Emin and Moffatt, who are located within the field of intimacy by their critical explorations of subjectivity.

This research project provides a new model for contemporary art practice through the exploration of shame and the experience of intimacy. The findings of this research have implications for artists as an exploration of how an aesthetic work and its environment, might embrace positive and negative affect as relational encounters for audiences. This knowledge permits levels of both increased subtlety and playfulness to emerge without compromising either the seriousness of emotions such as shame or the importance of intimacy.

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## PROLOGUE

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Picture this—a photograph of Ella Dreyfus in 1973

In this photograph taken by my father Richard, I am seen as a pubescent girl sitting with my siblings on the edge of our backyard swimming pool; the four children are lined up next to each other for the ubiquitous family photograph. We are looking vaguely in the direction of the photographer, our father, who is calling us to attention. The youngest, a girl, looks like a boy and wears a bikini bottom but no bra-top to cover her flat 10-year-old's chest; she sits casually and comfortably in her child's body. The eldest, a son, is a scrawny 17-year-old with shaggy hair who stares into the camera laconically, with a slight air of frustration about him. The 15-year-old daughter is drop-dead gorgeous, nubile and buxom, and wears a fashionable bikini; her body is held in a naturally seductive manner, showing off her figure. And I, the 13-year-old middle daughter, wearing a hand-me-down, one-piece swimming costume, am sitting slumped over; my hands pressed tightly over my small, round female belly, as this is the part of my body that I hate the most and that causes me discomfort. I try to flatten my stomach, cover it up as best as I can, to hide the tell-tale signs of shame, housed within my body.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

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This research project explores visual arts practice located within a field I identify as the ‘aesthetics of intimacy’. Within this field I explore the emotional state of shame, including feelings about the body, and the capacity of art to build relationships between the artist, artwork and audience.

This thesis is concerned with how anxiety about the body has shaped my identity, formed the basis of my life-long creative investigation through art-making and led to this research project. Such anxiety situated the body as the central theme in my artwork and as a contested site of meaning: of personal, political, philosophical, sexual and social meaning. My work lies within a contemporary art framework and has built on some of the changing feminist debates about how the body is seen and read. Representation of the body has been one of the grounding topics of feminist art theory and practice, which has engendered many alternate accounts of subjectivity, objectivity, gender and visibility. This project is both a continuance and culmination of how the body may be represented.

My artistic practice is driven by a desire to find ways that bodily responses could be used to offer affective, aesthetic encounters. This thesis explores the impact on viewers as they confront their emotions, in particular, the feeling of shame, and how these can be experienced as an audience, thus engendering commonality, humour and affective encounters in public places. This aspect of representation is an important part of contemporary art practice and there is a growing body of research around the effect of intimacy on audiences as they encounter somatic experiences in relation to themselves and to others.

For this doctoral research project three series of artworks: *Weight and Sea*, *Scumbag* and *To see beyond what seems to be*, were created to show how affect, shame and intimacy can be conveyed effectively within contemporary art. They demonstrate the ways I explored these emotions by transforming and understanding how the phenomenon of intimacy can emerge when artworks trigger disclosure of aspects of the private self in public. Each of these interconnected exhibitions and installations evoked strong sensations of shame and feelings of intimacy in different ways. These aesthetic experiences forged connections between the artist and the artworks, and were shared by the audiences.

In order to experience any shared intimacy with others, I had to deal with my own sense of shame, which was deeply embedded as negative affect that had permeated my sense of self. The emotion of shame is linked to embarrassment and humiliation (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995) and is not only felt in the body, but can be about the body. In my case, it was where I felt the failure of not attaining a body that conformed to the culturally determined standards of beauty. Shame can also spill out beyond the individual's physical and emotional parameters, and circulate amongst groups and nations (Probyn, 2005). My memories of being overwhelmed by shameful feelings have influenced my desire to explore shame in my artwork, I have come to the understanding that shame is not a feeling to be ashamed of, rather to be met head on, and, through embracing shame, find a new pathway to intimacy.

An examination of intimacy was conducted by Luis-Manuel Garcia, who proposed the concept of a sonic or sensuous aesthetics of intimacy, in which the relationships and interactions between friends and strangers on the dance floor, and the role of sound, bodies and spaces at Electronic Dance Music events, created sensations of intimacy (Garcia, 2007). Garcia traced the origins of the word *intimate* from the Latin term *intimus* or “inward and

proximal”, and to other languages, where its meaning circulates around related concepts such as depth and secrecy (French), familiarity and knowledge (Spanish), proximity and intensity (Italian), and inwardness, heartfelt and sincere (German) (2007). In trying to elucidate the various connotations of intimacy, Garcia stated it can be about “closeness, connection, interiority, things in common, communication, disclosure, touching surfaces, long pasts, desired futures, togetherness, warmth and intensity” and the most obvious kind, sexual intimacy (2007:4).

Many of these forms of intimacy had been important in my earlier work in the relationships I formed with models in the studio and were present in the artworks. However there were certain aspects of the intimate images visible in the photographs which were unsettling, for me. I was troubled by issues about the representation of the body, especially the nude body, which was the dominant subject matter of my previous photographic work. As the body became increasingly objectified, overused and exploited in mass media, and the photographic medium assumed more power, I grew more uncomfortable as an artist continuing to produce images of nudes. In the struggle with these dilemmas, strong conceptual shifts emerged within my practice, each of which contributed to the development of the three series of artworks that lie at the heart of this thesis. This research articulates a relationship between embodiment and feeling in art, which I call an *aesthetic of intimacy*. This concept was applied in each artwork to reveal aspects of bodily shame, communal shame and family shame; exploring the ways in which the artist, art work and audience inter-relate within aesthetic encounters of shared intimacy. These works were presented in various spaces – a public beach, a suburban landscape and three different art galleries, to research how affect may be experienced in the context of surrounding spaces.



The thesis is structured in the following way: in Chapter Two, I consider those aspects of my earlier work that provided the impetus to undertake this project; how this early work raised ethical questions pertinent to this research and how my photographs revealed the body as a site that was both flawed and forbidden, making me aware of the power of shame. This is framed by feminist art theory where the personal narrative and embodied subjectivity in contemporary art was validated.

Chapter Three researches in depth the phenomena of shame and the impact it can have on the body, as a physical manifestation or feeling. I explore how internalized shame can be shared within groups and can infiltrate attitudes and perceptions, which are often experienced as negative affect, but, I argue, can also be a productive force. I discuss the work of key theorists in the ‘aesthetics of shame’, from Silvan Tomkins to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Sally Munt, and provide related arguments about shame as an important affect.

In Chapter Four, I analyse the practice of three recent artists who engage with the field of shame and intimacy. I discuss how they locate themselves as active participants in their art making, to highlight how important a factor this is in understanding the role of the artist in developing an intimate relationship with their audience. My art practice is placed in the thesis alongside these and other artists’ oeuvres as a contribution to the field of the aesthetics of intimacy.

Chapter Five asserts that the art experience may provide an intimate encounter derived from the exposure of spectators to artworks in a specific space. The purpose of this chapter is to show the effects of the space on the viewers’ experiences as affective encounters. I discuss how the art gallery is considered to be a place where new ideas can be thought and felt, and

by extension, may provide a space where intimacy might develop. This chapter describes the methods used in the creation of a three way relationship between artist, artwork and audience is configured as a set of inter-relating elements that constitute a full aesthetic experience.

Each of the final three chapters has as their content the analysis of each of the three series of artworks this research produced. These are *Weight and Sea* (Chapter Six), *Scumbag* (Chapter Seven) and *To see beyond what seems to be* (Chapter Eight). These are conceptually related but visually and materially distinct art installations. They result from the shift in my photographic practice to installation art, activated by my concerns about the representation of the body and the affective relations within such an art practice. Importantly, each art installation illuminates different aspects of shame and intimacy.

The thesis concludes with a distillation of these experiences and the significant implications of these artworks for the exploration of shame as a subject within the field of the aesthetics of intimacy in contemporary visual arts.

Appendix 1 comprises a CD (inserted into the back cover of the thesis) that shows a visual documentation of the artworks, exhibitions and installations created for this research project. Appendix 2 lists professional activities undertaken throughout the research project including the papers given at conferences and symposiums where I presented the findings of this research. Appendix 3 lists additional professional activities undertaken during the period of candidature. Appendix 4 was added following the examination of all of the research work and shows examples of the final exhibition *I forgive you every day*.

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## CHAPTER TWO: PUTTING MYSELF IN THE PICTURE

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Contemporary feminism is a coalition of various conflicting feminisms that are neither co-extensive nor independent, but which act collectively to inform contemporary art practice (McDonald, 2001:4).

The purpose of this chapter is to locate my artworks within their historical context, which emerged from a feminist framework pertaining to issues of the body and representation in the medium of photography. In order to articulate the phenomenon of shame and intimacy, and the affective responses that they can engender in artworks, it is necessary to trace the trajectory of my previous art experience to reveal the concerns and motives underpinning this research project. The seeds of my photographic work were framed by ideas pertaining to embodied subjectivity, gendered relationships and representational strategies about the body. This inherently feminist position provided a theoretical framework that explored embodied subjectivity, probed cultural taboos and exposed the body in various states of abjection. The images reflected upon what it means to inhabit a human body and to be the object of representation of subjects that are often rendered invisible, considered shameful, and hidden from view, yet retain a sense of beauty. The exhibitions relating to the body were *Pregnancy Series* (1992), *The Body Pregnant*, (1993), *Fat and Ugly: written on my body* (1995), *ReMember* (1996), *Covenant* (1997), *Age and Consent* (1999), *Transman* (2001), *Under Twelves* (2005) and *Under Twelve Under Twenty* (2012)<sup>1</sup>.

In an essay where she proposed the idea of a Virtual Feminist Museum, the renowned art historian Griselda Pollock discussed my photographic series of ageing women, *Age and*

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of these artworks can be found in Chapter One and further examples can be seen on the website [www.elladreyfus.com](http://www.elladreyfus.com).

*Consent*, observing they were a tender and unusual representation of ageing women, removed from the far more pervasive imagery of youthful femininity:

Situated within an earnestly responsible feminist realism...as photographs of bodies whose extraordinary presence is presented through the shock of something never seen, yet here so carefully pursued, such images, I suggest, induce a feeling of tenderness and memory, along with curiosity and the possibility of identification with a female body that registers time through its skin. The softly creasing skin of these headless but not depersonalized bodies is the furthest I can theoretically travel in my virtual museum from the frozen perpetual fixation of the Graces' eternally youthful faces (2004:196).

It was important, as Pollock recognized, that these artworks focused on the body as a place of profound intimacy, which drew awareness to the complexities of women's relationships to their bodies, as sites of privacy, taboo and affects, including both positive and negative feelings. Philosopher Judith Butler asserts (in Copeland, 2005) that the main goal of art is to produce sensations in the viewer. This idea resonates deeply with the fundamental premise of this research—that affective intimate encounters that evoke feelings of shame, could well be represented by contemporary art. Indeed it is the simultaneous experience of intimacy and shame that feature are integral features of my artworks.



Figure 1: Ella Dreyfus, *Age and Consent*, 1999, 100x100cm, gelatin silver photograph.

This research is framed by the representation of the self and the body as one of the grounding topics of feminist art theory and practice. Feminist art historians and theorists, for example Pollock (2003), Marsha Meskimmon (2003) and Rosemary Betterton (2004) have restated the importance of ongoing feminist interventions in art practice and these have also been maintained in other disciplines such as sociology, for example, Anthony Giddens (2006), post-colonial studies, for example, Nicholas Harrison (2003) and critical theory, for example, Butler (2004). My practice-based research developed from some of the key feminist debates about how the body is seen and read from the perspective of embodied subjectivity. Many feminist artists engage with intensely personal subjects and transform them into art experiences, in public places. In addition, this research foregrounds embodiment, place and relationships as sites through which artists, subjects and audiences create meaning from visual forms.

As an artist, I had followed the feminist mantra which claimed the personal as political, and spent over two decades actively working towards empowering women by creating meaningful works about women's identity, by photographing 'real' bodies, breaking taboos on uncovering, looking and making the invisible visible. I was inspired by Lucy Lippard's (1994) affirmation of the potential of art making to be an effective medium for societal change:

A developed feminist consciousness brings with it an altered concept of reality and morality that is crucial to the art being made and to how life is lived with that art. We take for granted that making art is not simply 'expressing oneself' but is a far broader and more important task – expressing oneself as a member of a larger unity, or community, so that in speaking for oneself one is also speaking for those who cannot speak (Cottingham, 1994:276).



Figure 2: Ella Dreyfus, *The Body Pregnant*, 1993, 100 x 150 cm, gelatin silver photograph.

Feminism and feminist theory gave me permission to explore my own feelings about the body through artmaking, allowing me to process these feelings, talk to other women about

their attitudes towards their bodies and furthermore, to make images about the deeply personal which were celebratory and empowering.

After twenty-five rewarding years of producing intimate, innovative photographic representations of the body, my work had been commended by art critics, reviewers and the general public as having influence and agency in the public realm (Faust 1992, Losche, 1992, McGregor, 1993). For example, feminist writer Naomi Wolf (1993) wrote (for the cover) of *The Body Pregnant*, that it was “a dazzling new look at a state that is often denigrated as a disability. The richer the images we have of our bodies, the better it is for our minds”.

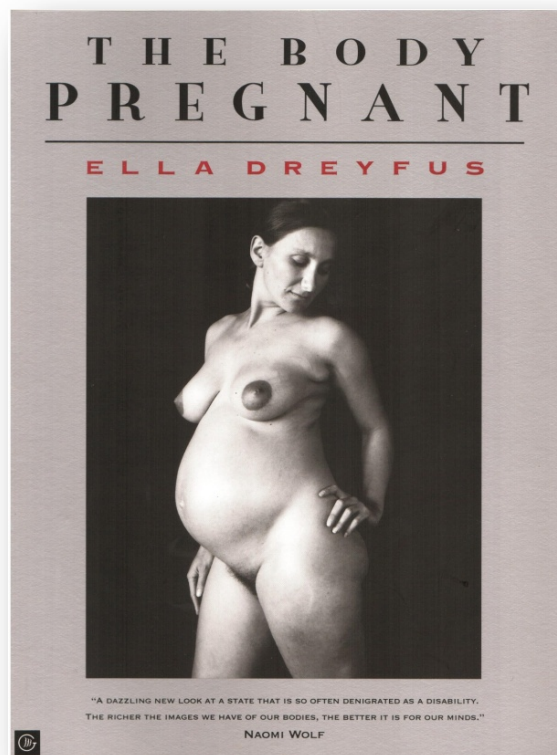


Figure 3: Ella Dreyfus, *The Body Pregnant*, 1993, published by McPhee Gribble/Penguin.

Even in these early works, the body was revealed as a site that appeared beautiful, yet flawed and forbidden, and a site that was troubling territory for artists to enter. These ‘classic’ photographic images, while celebrating womanhood also reflected upon the frailty and physicality of the human body; what it meant to inhabit a body and be the object of representation of a taboo subject. In Diane Losche’s review of my *Pregnancy Series*, she took the view that:

Dreyfus’s images are in the genre of the beautiful photograph. Indeed, they conjure an illustrious heritage . . . *Pregnancy Series* attracts and holds the viewer with its evocation of classic, formal beauty while at the same time rendering the truth of the bodies’ size and ‘blemishes’. . . to subvert the sign of the nude (1992:48).

In her forward to my monograph *The Body Pregnant*, psychotherapist and author Kim Chernin observed that:

*The Body Pregnant* offers itself as a bible of images for contemporary women, who will certainly find in its pages a message of long-forgotten sacred truths about female being and the mystery of the female body. These resonant images of mother-women lure me, as if to the forbidden. But why forbidden? This mothering body, once so freely given, later shut away behind locked doors, return to us through these pages, in celebration of its own being (1993:4).

In a similar vein, Judith Butler noted when writing about the Diane Arbus’ compelling and confronting photographs: “we are not supposed to make into visual spectacles human bodies that are stigmatized within public life or to treat them as objects available for visual consumption” (2004). This was exactly what the *Pregnancy Series* and *The Body Pregnant*, did.



Building upon these strong foundations, my research project ventures further into the terrain of taboos about the body; exploring the affects of shame and feelings of intimacy that could be experienced through the creation of new artworks.

## 2.1 Feminist representation

By un-covering and envisioning the unspeakable, feminist artists have been able to re-imagine the body. Early artists such as Carolee Schneeman, Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta and Eva Hesse worked from within feminist cultural practice to un-earth and re-claim the repressed female body as a place of desire, pleasure and pain. Since then, numerous artists, both male and female, have expanded upon these concepts of gendered subjectivity, and upon feminist theoretical, critical and social perspectives, in order to influence the broader understanding of culture, race, sex, age and class. They have conducted an increasingly sophisticated analysis of the body. Rebecca Fortnum makes the point that:

The triumph of feminism – within the visual arts at least – has been its ability to integrate the real issues affecting women into the language of contemporary art. Feminism is a fundamental tool in our understanding of the world – informing debates around ethics, power, representation, knowledge, memory and narrative (2006).

For later artists such as Jo Spence, Nan Goldin and Tracey Emin, issues relating to the personal, the body, the domestic and the confessional were legitimized as a consequence of the impact of feminist consciousness and they each developed new and influential approaches to art. Similarly, my own work has arisen out of and been shaped by the trajectory of feminist art practices. Similarly, my own work has arisen out of and been shaped by the trajectory of feminist art practices in the formation of creative spaces where women might feel, experience, share and rebel against patriarchal discourses, as Lauren Berlant expressed “feminism aims to create such a vital space of communal political consciousness – a female-centred public sphere” (1988:238).

Notwithstanding the current explosion of social and mainstream media that thrive on making the private public, there always remain some constraints to censor or limit our representations of that which is imperceptible or hidden from view. However, the constant urge towards seeking out and visualizing dis-ease and the uncomfortable, “a certain solicitation to see what one should not see” (Butler et al., 2004) was a core aspect of my work and a key motivation for me. I had been circling this territory for decades making pictures that reflected the hidden experiences of being a woman; about beauty, sexuality, identity and the abject. I was also responding to the devastating effect of negative body image that continued in Western culture (Grogan, 2008). An obsessive pursuit of beauty and the belief in its powers for the attainment of success and happiness has led to a culture fuelled by competitiveness, self-loathing and multiple psychological disorders (McFarland, 1990).

I argue that my work acts as a counterpoint to the culture of negativity surrounding the body, drawing attention to the obsession with beauty by providing a visual alternative to what was offered by mainstream imagery. Indeed, Dale Spender, in launching the exhibition *Pregnancy Series*, commented on the contribution the work made to improve women’s position socially and symbolically, saying that “the sheer power and beauty of these images is a revelation. They’ve altered my perceptions and understandings of women’s bodies” (1992).



Figure 4: Ella Dreyfus, *Pregnancy Series*, 1992, 100 x 100 cm, gelatin silver photograph.

While not claiming that my artworks could bring about the political and social change required to combat the entrenched destructive attitudes towards the body, there is nevertheless a need for art to contest such attitudes. As Beatrice Faust stated, “these images of beauty and eroticism in pregnancy are powerful enough to counter the ugliness and hostility of truckie porn”(1992).

A consequence of this contest of representation, which saw the body as a site for the exploration of cultural, sexual and political values, was the question of gendered subjectivity. I asked myself, what did it still mean to inhabit the female body? And “why do questions of representation and symbolization of the female body by women matter?” (Betterton, 1996a) It was because of the relationship between self, aesthetics and politics that women needed to investigate their own image. Two divergent strands of feminist thought had emerged that positioned representation as, on the one hand, an embodied, physical notion of identity and

subjectivity, and, on the other, as a function of linguistic and cultural signs. Miwon Kwon (1996) explained that:

At the crux of this distinction is the status of the body *in* representation and *as* representation. That is, the body as a transparent signifier of identity and self versus the body as nexus of arbitrary conventions of meaning, the body as signature or sign (1996:166).

Nonetheless, when the body is silenced or shut away out of sight, is the signifier not absent, or at the very least rendered *non*-represented and thus negated and shamed?

As a way of addressing this lack of visibility, I was driven to find ways to depict the bodily manifestations of women and to challenge these positions. In the next chapter I discuss how my focus shifted to concerns about the pervasiveness of shameful feelings that negatively impact the everyday lives of women.

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## CHAPTER THREE: IN THE SHADOW OF SHAME

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### 3.1 Speaking shame

Shame is a force that acts upon the self, constituting social subjects who are marked and shaped by its interpellating propensities of recognition, misrecognition and refusal of recognition (Munt, 2008:203).

If I wish to look at you but you do not wish me to, I may feel ashamed. If I wish you to look at me but you do not, I may feel ashamed. If I wish to look at you and at the same time wish that you look at me, I can be shamed. If I wish to be close to you but you move away, I am ashamed (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995:152).

The emotion of shame through the impact it can have on the body is profound and may be damaging to the self. According to psychotherapist and author Susie Orbach (2003) an epidemic of personal shame has been experienced by many people across the Western world. This epidemic has seen women's bodies subjected to intensive "commodification, objectification and alienation" (Szekely, 1988:18) and the phenomenon of women who suffer from the relentless pursuit of physical thinness, control and perfection has been acknowledged by clinical, feminist and theoretical experts for many decades (Szekely, 1988, Orbach, 2003, Grogan, 2008). In a recent study of the cultural politics of shame, Sally R Munt (2008) proffered an aesthetics of shame, which plays a large role in forming our identities, transforming, as Noreen Giffney explained, our "feelings of vulnerability and fear into disgust and hate... and simply abjecting them onto those marked out as Other" (2008:x). Lauren Berlant, another leader in re-thinking the politics of shame, argues that when one is marked by the laws of normative behaviours as a member of a shamed community, it not only shaming, but produces a shamed subjectivity (Berlant, 1988).

As a woman, I was also influenced by strong pressures to try and mould my body to conform to idealized notions of femininity and consequently suffered from negative self-image. This led to participation in self-help groups that provided support for problems with body image, food and eating behaviours<sup>2</sup>. These organizations were safe, confidential environments for personal testimonies to be spoken of and discussed amongst members. Groups such as these do not provide in-depth therapy, rather “they offer a cognitive framework for understanding symptoms that may be secondary complications of trauma, such as substance abuse, eating disorders, and other self-destructive behaviours” (Herman, 1997:220).

In these groups I listened to women reveal their innermost thoughts and feelings about their relationship to their bodies. This had a profound impact on my art practice, by encouraging me to further explore visually the intimate relationships of body to self. As people spoke of their physical and emotional pain, their attitudes toward their bodies and their feelings about their bodies were revealed. The speaking of pain is reflected on by Melissa Brown’s writings on torture:

In our day-to-day lives, we rarely experience a division between our sense of self, and our bodies – it is our sense of self which inhabits the body, and which we project beyond our physical confines through our meaningful speech. It is through language that we humanise the world, and construct a common world with others (2009:4).

I was disconcerted to hear the extent to which the affect of shame had penetrated the body as group members verbalized how their bodies had become shameful objects. There was an overwhelming outpouring of buried pain and anguish expressed by participants, who were mostly women. Their body never matched up to their ideal standards of measurement or acceptability and they seemed to be living under a shadow of shame. In a study of the

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<sup>2</sup> The groups I belonged to were Overeaters Anonymous and Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous.

cultural, ethical and psychological implications of emotions, Elspeth Probyn asserted that, “shame and other affects can seem to get into our bodies, altering our understanding of ourselves and our relation to the past” (2005:155). Shame was certainly non-represented and negated by the women in my groups, yet it had a palpable presence.



### **3.2 The double bind of shame**

For those affected by eating disorders there is a ‘dual shame bind’ which Barbara McFarland and Tyee Baker-Baumann identify as “the shame of the inner self and the shame of the body.” (1990:x) They argued that the foundations of Western culture are shame based, with an overemphasis on competition, whereby:

The body has become the object which tells the world whether or not a person is strong enough, controlled enough or powerful enough. The body, as an object of shame, becomes a mask, for no matter how thin or fit the body is, it can never eradicate the deeper shame within (1990:xi).

When the group members expressed a shame-driven self-hatred for a body that could not meet their expectations or standards of beauty, this seemed to cripple them emotionally. The objectification of the body produced an acute self-consciousness, and comparisons with others deepened and entrenched the feelings of shame, a process which has been poetically described, as being in the “shadow of shame,” for it is “within that shadow that the human takes shape” (Munt, 2008:x).

The groups bore witness to the testimonials, often being spoken out loud for the first time, and shameful feelings were released which affected the group as a whole. In this context, the speaking became a ‘confessional narrative’ that broke through the pain and secrecy surrounding the shame, for, as Melissa Brown pointed out:

“Pain is isolating, it isolates by resisting description and expression in language, its resistance to language is linked to the fact that it is an utterly ‘interior’ experience (2009:3).

Whilst there might have been a sense of relief in exposing shameful thoughts in such a supportive network, there was also some distress about ‘naming the shame’, which perhaps increased the shame affect in the mind and body. This double bind of shame is explained by McFarland and Baker-Baumann (1990), who assert that there are two factors common to the inner experience of shame and these are exposure and defectiveness. Exposure refers to the fact that shame brings about feelings of painful self-consciousness and self-awareness, whilst defectiveness refers to the fundamental feelings of inferiority and ‘not good enough’ that accompany this experience.

The effect of shame can also be seen on the body, specifically on the face, which wears the ‘sign of shame’ – the blush, exemplifying for all to see, that makes us ashamed (Probyn, 2005, Sedgwick and Frank, 1995). As the body displays this visible sign of shame, the sense of having failed oneself, of being unable to live up to the physical standards of beauty, is compounded by the exposure of self to others. Psychoanalyst Leon Wurmser calls this a bipolar experience, where, “the object pole is the person in front of whom we are ashamed while the subject pole is that aspect of ourselves of which we feel ashamed” (McFarland, 1990:4).

Shame can have powerful consequences. The effect of shame has been studied by a number of theorists<sup>3</sup>. Silvan Tomkins, in his landmark publication *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* (1962) delineated seven key affective states which are culturally, physiologically and psychologically determined. They were: interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, anger-rage, fear-terror and shame-humiliation. According to Tomkins (1990), the interest-excitement affect is the most frequently experienced human emotion as it

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<sup>3</sup> Along with Silvan Tomkins the theory of affects has been elucidated by philosophers and theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sally Munt, Jill Bennett and Sarah Ahmed.

provides the motivation for learning, creativity and the acquisition of skills. Interest-excitement and shame-humiliation are the motivations for this research project and are the central concepts underlying the form of the artworks, which arguably offered audiences insightful, affective, aesthetic experiences.

It is important to understand how the phenomenon of feelings operates at different levels of embodiment. In their studies of human affect, and in their extensive writings on shame, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995) have offered a new reading of Tomkins. They argue that the notion of shame as an experience of the self by the self, can have both positive and negative affects and are closely linked to self-consciousness, shyness and humiliation:

Shame turns the attention of the self and others away from other objects to this most visible residence of self, increases its visibility, and thereby generates the torment of self-consciousness (1995:136).

My experience in self-help groups showed that by revealing shameful thoughts and feelings, additional shame could be activated within an individual's body, causing further inhibitions through more shame, which is imparted to the audience. This circulation of affects such as shame and envy are called an affective economy (Ahmed, 2004), where affects are relational and emotions that "align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed, 2004:119).

In the intimate, private and emotionally-charged group environment, members shared the shame of the suffering and indignity experienced by their fellow members, as a "trade in feelings" (Probyn, 2005:7), as it were. As sentient beings, humans are affected by what happens to others and are capable of showing empathy and identification, which makes them vulnerable to an experience of projected shame. As Sedgwick and Frank comment:

“to the extent to which the individual invests his affect in other human beings, in institutions, and in the world around him, he is vulnerable to the vicarious experience of shame” (1995:159).

This dual exposure of one’s own shame and others’ shame was experienced by group members, when they admitted their own lack of acceptance and inability to meet cultural expectations of physical beauty. Thus they were being shamed, self-consciously, as well as feeling ashamed in front of the group. Sedgwick and Frank contend that “one may feel shame because the other feels shame, but also under circumstances in which the self would feel shame, even if the other does not” (1995:160). This added further complexity by producing more shame, which spread to the other group members as they witnessed the private struggles which incorporate “the mass experience of intimate female identification central to feminist politics”(Berlant, 1988:238). Berlant notes Sedgwick’s contribution to our understanding of how oppressive shame can be when experienced by subjects who are organized by shame (1988, Gregg and Seigworth, 2010).

The multi-dimensionality of shame responses activated my interest on two counts. Firstly, I identified long-held, internalized feelings of shame residing in my own body, which made me ashamed in front of myself and the others, as well as ashamed of the others’ shame. Secondly, as a photographer of people, portraits and the body, I was enlivened and inspired by the fascinating and complicated *web of shame*, as it reverberated around the room, wrapping itself on the body, and I relished the challenge of visualizing these intimate, shame-filled moments in my art. Like some other artists, I had harnessed the photographic gaze to explore ideas of looking at shame and being looked at by shame.

### **3.3 Photography and proximity**

The camera is the quintessential device for voyeurism and often causes dis-ease in people who are about to be photographed (Martin, 2001), particularly when involving the naked body. The potent combination of photography, nudity, intimacy and privacy is bound to cause anxiety, given our cultures relationship to the body, and the likelihood of strong personal emotions being revealed is a distinct possibility. This can also release a strong feelings of shame, including, at certain times, subtle overtones of sexual provocation, as “intimacy necessarily involves the sharing of affect, though it may also involve more, as in the sharing of sexual pleasure” (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995:144).

My art practice had made me sensitive to the proximity of the camera in relation to the bodies of the subjects or models. While I did not engage in sexual relations with models, I often experienced a degree of discomfort about the feelings that arose in me during the sessions. This discomfort was around my recognition of the responsibility I had for activating the model’s shame response, which can sometimes be detected on their faces in the photographs.

Through my work with models, I searched for the kind of intimacy that included intellectual rapport, emotional closeness and the courage of self-disclosure. By asking the models to reveal their naked bodies to me and to a potential audience, a relationship was formed which included a complex set of power relations. The photographer’s role as the controller or manipulator of the work can sometimes lead to problems of exploitation and ethical issues. I tried to maintain an open dialogue with my models, yet this did not prevent the breakdown of

communication and misunderstandings from time to time. This closeness was apparent to visitors as some remarked in the exhibition comments books.<sup>4</sup>

When photographing in the studio sessions, I often moved the camera closer to the model's body, which reduced the normal boundaries of personal space. At these moments of intimacy, photography "can be a kind of reciprocal touching" of physical and spatial nature where "the camera probes darkness, negotiates proximity and distance" (Durant, 2011).



Figure 5: Ella Dreyfus, *Transman*, 2001, 50 x 50 cm, gelatin silver photograph.

Sedgwick and Frank (1995) comment on the complex and disturbing nature of the relationships between taboos about intimacy and affect. In the relative privacy of a home-based studio, a bond was created between photographer and model, yet conversely that bond

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<sup>4</sup> A visitor commented at the *Transman* exhibition "I see a cooperative dialogue between the photographer and the subject, the person." (Peter Wurst)

was also unsettled by the proximity of the camera to the model's body, causing negative affect as shame arises and collides in the body (Probyn, 2005). Although this may have caused feelings of discomfort, the models nevertheless trusted me and permitted my invasion of their personal space.



Figure 6: Ella Dreyfus, *Under Twelve, Under Twenty*, 2012, 60 x 100 cm, archival inkjet print.

Regarding my own response, I was conflicted since I at once experienced feelings of being ashamed for causing my models discomfort and a mixture of guilt and pleasure about the exciting new images I was making. A further level of complication ensued when I showed the photographs to the models as I had previously promised. Their reactions upon viewing themselves in the contact sheet prints was, at times, painful to witness, as waves of shame engulfed them, producing visceral sensations in their bodies. Their embarrassment in seeing their own image re-ignited the self-conscious, negative affect of abject shame. It was evident

that some deep emotions had been triggered in the models, both in the photographic sessions and when viewing the photographs afterwards.

I always offered the models a selection of prints of any images they chose, and also gave them the power to veto the use of any images for exhibition purposes, although I preferred not to take the latter position, as it may have limited my use of the most confronting, revealing (and perhaps most shameful) photographs. To my surprise, the models rarely requested prints, even simply as a record of the experience, as they could not face their own bodies as I had represented them, but nor did they veto any of the photographs from any further use.



### **3.4 Phototherapy: transforming shame**

In their ground-breaking work of Phototherapy (1986), artists Rosy Martin and Jo Spence devised simple methodologies using photographic means to interpret and investigate complex emotions, social constructs, sexuality and familial traumatic relationships. According to Martin, Phototherapy concerns transformations and change by challenging the nature of the photographic image to reveal an ideal self (1986:174). Martin and Spence set up a mutually supportive environment and used basic photography cameras and cheap forms of printing to work through their raw emotions, as a form of therapy. Here they explored the painful emotion of shame and the extent of the negative effects caused by external and internal pressures. They stressed that:

It has become clear to us during the production of our large body of work, with each other and with individual clients, that we are often dealing with internalized shame...this becomes a form of internalized self-oppression which blinds us and prohibits us. This shame is experienced either because it has been impossible to match up to the ideal offered as models, or because, in a hierarchical society which needs “inferiority” in order to flourish, we recognize ourselves as one of the many Others (1995:177).



Figure 7: Ella Dreyfus, *Fat and Ugly: Written on my body*, 1996, gelatin silver photograph.

As a photographic artist, the concept of body shame had been a constant presence, hovering beneath the surface, as a feeling, un-named, un-acknowledged and never articulated. Shame had already emerged as a theme in one of my early photographic artworks: *Fat and Ugly: Written on my body* (1996), where I used intimate self-portraits overlaid with texts to scrutinize my feelings about my body shame and body image. The work comprised three photographic texts printed on Perspex, which were individually wrapped in tissue paper and presented in hand-made slim white boxes, alluding to the packaging of women's lingerie and the promise of sexual allure. This self-reflective work measured my body shape against the ideals of perfection, performing my embodied subjectivity in an exposé which questioned the gaze and used negative thoughts to cover my shame. However as Martin and Spence pointed out:

Shame work is not simply reversed by the enactment of ‘positive images’, but often entails the working through and going beyond the idealized parents or family histories which have been produced by our defence system (1995:177).



Figure 8: Rosy Martin and Kay Goodridge *Outrageous Aged* 2003, gelatin silver photograph.

Another series of artworks that dealt with female shame was that of Martin and Kay Goodridge's *Outrageous Aged*, a photographic series which focussed on the invisibility, decline and silence surrounding post-menopausal women. They subverted the representation of the body using the surface of ageing women's bodies as a 'textual/bodily interface'. Selected phrases from writers such as Butler, Freud, Plath and Irigaray were projected onto their own bodies, writing the skin with different voices, discourses and polemics. The words would describe and "inscribe the sensual surface of a woman's skin, literally and letterally,

they materialise female desire and subjectivity as embodied, sentient knowledge” (Meskimmon, 2003).

Similarly my early interests had also been concerned with skin, surfaces and embodiment, as I explored the human body in transition, focussing on particular stages of the life-cycle, where normative social and cultural boundaries were disrupted. I depicted the body in various states of change and possible abjection by documenting states of illness, ageing, dying, adolescence, overweight, pregnancy and gender transitioning. Through the intimacy of the photographic medium I tried *to see beyond what seems to be*, to explore taboos about the body and identity, to show things that we were not allowed to look at, and to empower people to examine their attitudes to themselves and thus reduce their sense of shame. Examples of viewers’ comments relating to feelings and identity included:

This is an exhibition that stimulated a lot of questions for me—what does it mean to “feel” like a woman? I’m a woman but I don’t notice that I feel like one, and also a lot of feelings (Tricia Dearborn).

and

Very moving images, an inspiring representing of realising an identity. I feel longing for the body I was never born with and am given hope that I will one day feel truth myself (Anonymous).

In addition, exposure to other people’s bodies brought me closer to understanding my own shame surrounding my own body. As a way to overcome this shame I also used self portraiture, as this example shows. As the nude, pregnant photographer I felt empowered in the company of other pregnant women and published this self-portrait in *The Body Pregnant*. Furthermore, these works subverted the common, pervasive culture of thinness and gave

women permission to feel comfortable in their own bodies, whatever the shape, weight or size.



Figure 9: Henry Barrkman, *Ella Dreyfus and model*, from *The Body Pregnant*, 1993, Published by McPhee Gribble/Penguin

Unlike Phototherapy, where the photographer/therapist and sitter/client use the framework of the therapeutic relationship to work through emotions and affect, there was no formal structure to help my model/subjects. This lack of structure resulted in some awkward and embarrassing moments, or led to what appeared to be a feigned indifference from both parties.

A further aspect of the shame experience related to the differences in how we looked at or understood the photographs. I hid my own interest and excitement, as our feelings about the photographs were so distinct. I viewed them with the artist's eye, utilising sophisticated visual language such as framing and composition, as well as my own interest in the subject and affective responses to judge the works, whilst the model/subjects viewed the images from their subjective standpoint. Understandably they often recoiled in shame and humiliation, unable to witness the reality of their bodies represented. Their reactions produced discomfort and feelings of guilt in me and I was forced to confront my culpability for having used, or perhaps abused, the subjects' willingness to expose themselves. In a discussion of shame and guilt, Probyn (2005) distinguishes the two emotions, stating that shame goes further than guilt because it can't be smoothed away by an act of reparation, as guilt can. Shame relates deeply to both how others think of us and how we think of ourselves, and Probyn argues, it demands "a global [re]evaluation of the self" (2005:45).

I was thus forced to re-evaluate my motives, my inner self and my practice. The very admission of intense personal feelings of shame acknowledged within these pages still has the power to activate even more shame responses for me. Yet, this degree of self-reflection also took me to the core of the research. Here, Probyn's comments on shame are apposite:

There is something pure about shame as a feeling, even as it publicly twists the very sense of self. And yet, shame always plays on that doubleness. It is the most intimate of feelings; it makes our selves *intimate to ourselves* (2005:41) (my italics).

Shame gradually became a means to the development of new approach to my art practice. I wanted to harness these particular affective responses, not only as the inspiration for artworks, but the essence of the aesthetic experience embodied by the viewer, to create an

aesthetic of intimacy. This impetus to use shame as a transformative and positive affect for the creation of art was supported by the belief that shame could generate good emotional work. As Probyn argues:

Shame is always productive. In this sense it produces effects – more shame, more interest – which may be felt at a physiological, social or cultural level (Probyn, 2005:14).

As an artist working in multiple dimensions, it was also critical to understand how shame could occupy space as both an object and a feeling. Shame is enacted upon in the space of shared intimacy and my artworks attempted to find a common point of spatial contact for speaking about this shame. I imagined a space where spectators might experience their private expression of shame and articulate their feelings with each other. These experiences might show the very subtle emotions that emerge as a result of seeing the artworks. McFarland describes the different facets and nuances of the shame experience as:

...uncomfortable feelings that tug and pull at one's very soul, although we have all experienced shame, it is very difficult to assign words to the actual feelings because language is inadequate to communicate so complex a human experience (1990:2).

This research project asserts that contemporary art has the capacity to articulate complex feelings and emotions through visual immediacy and imaginative formulations. The following chapter analyses the approaches of several key artists who have endeavoured to find ways to communicate experiences of intimacy and shame.

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## CHAPTER FOUR: INTIMATE UNTO OURSELVES

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The relationship between artist and artwork is one of intimacy with the self, and intimacy is truly terrifying and can never be fully achieved. The closer one comes to something really intimate (which may seem really foreign), the faster one springs back, and thereby fails (Schor, 1997:124).

This terrain of subjectivity has been negotiated by many artists in order to investigate the body as a site for the exploration of intimacy and shame, to make themselves intimate to themselves, and in different ways, to get under the surface of the visible. This chapter explores the practice of four such artists, Nan Goldin, Jo Spence, Rosy Martin and Tracey Emin.

### 4.1 Private passion: the search for intimacy

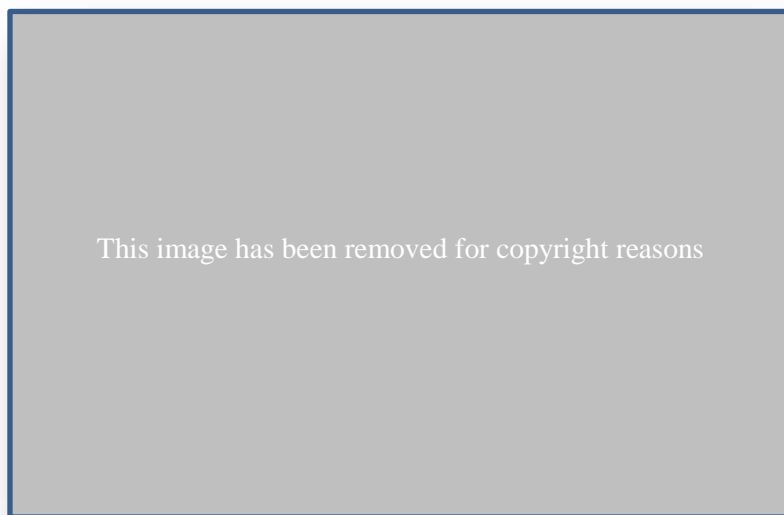


Figure 10: Nan Goldin, *Nan and Brian*, 1983, type C photograph.



Nan Goldin's photographic work is significant as new heights of intimacy were revealed, that ruptured normal conventions of privacy and lead to a marked change in ways of seeing (Heiferman, 1996:279). Goldin broke the taboos of representation with her portrayals of fluid gender identities, sexual relationships and transgressive behaviour, which constituted a confronting experience for viewers. Artists such as Goldin came to prominence in the age of celebrity culture and self-revelation industry where money and fame was available to risk-takers who were willing to reveal their private selves in public (Merck and Townsend, 2002) and where contemporary art collided and intersected with mass consumption (Betterton, 2002). As Daryl Pinckney noted, "it helped that she came of age in an exhibitionist milieu, with people whose investigations of perception included intimate display for public record" (1996:204).

The political aspects of Goldin's work were informed by the gay rights movement, in which disclosure of one's sexual identity was a form of empowerment, especially within the newly forming queer cultural milieu (Weinberg, 2005). Her revealing photographs subverted the conventions of mainstream heterosexual society by disrupting hitherto stereotypes, categorizations and the restrictive rules of mainstream behaviour (Weinberg, 2005).

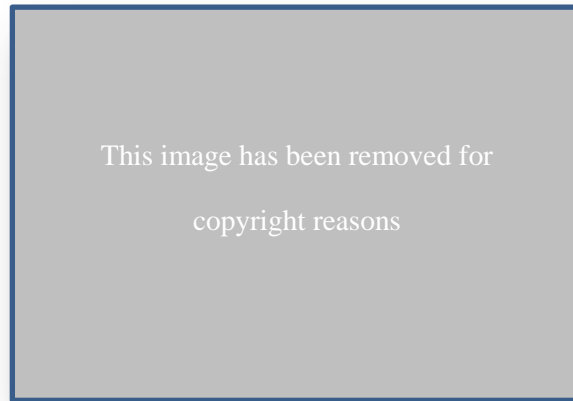


Figure 11: Nan Goldin, *Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a taxi, NYC*, 1991, type C photograph.

Goldin's position as an active participant in her own art-making blurred the lines between the fixed points of author, subject and viewer. She located herself as the central point of subjectivity and she explicitly used photography to work through and find relief from emotionally disturbing events, addiction and abusive relationships. She clearly articulated the importance of therapeutic outcomes in her practice, claiming that in order to survive trauma, she had to take pictures (Reid, 2004:63). Furthermore, Weinberg (2005) argues, that for Goldin, the act of photographing in itself, became a form of dependency and an addiction.

Goldin searched for intimacy where it was enacted: in bedrooms, bathrooms and night clubs, which resulted in a matter-of-fact sensationalism (Hoberman, 1996). This methodology provided viewers with a vicarious pleasure, a visual entree and insider's view into hitherto unseen and hidden lives of various sub-cultures, revealing scenes of transgressive behaviour in private and public locations (Grant, 2002).

The power of Goldin's work lies in the uncovering of privacy and intimacy and their exposure in the public realm, which coincided with an increase in interpenetration from

reality television (Weinberg, 2005). The intensity of her relationships with her subjects enabled her to experience the deep connectedness that she craved, a connectedness both with herself and to others, and which she received, by touching people through her photographs (Reid, 2004) This intense inter-relatedness was pivotal in the development of Goldin's visual language, which she articulates as follows:

If it were possible, I'd want no mechanism between me and the moment of photographing...the instant of photographing, instead of creating distance, is a moment of clarity and emotional connection for me (Goldin et al., 1986:6).

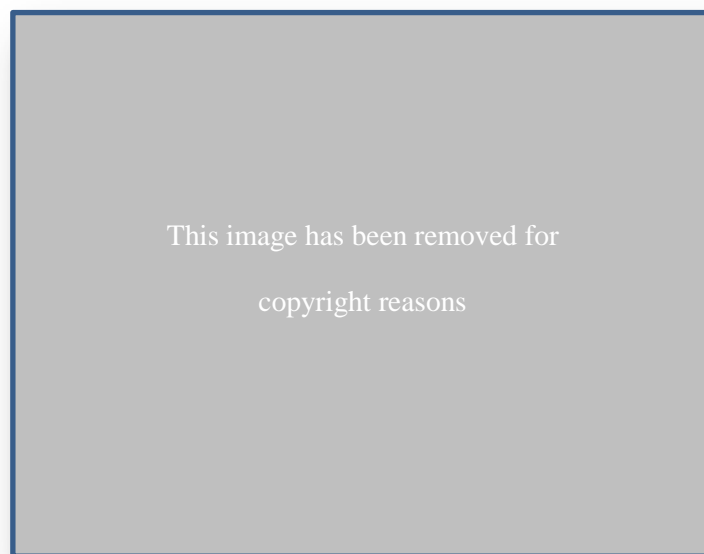


Figure 12: Nan Goldin, *Rise and Monty on the lounge chair, NYC*, 1988, type C photograph.

This can be seen in the photograph *Rise and Monty on the lounge chair, NYC*, 1988 [Fig. 8] where the presence of the photographer does not appear to register with the couple, indeed, they seem oblivious to Goldin's presence. In other words, they trust her, yet are also likely to be conscious of her intentions to disclose their private passion in public, performing

shamelessly for her camera.<sup>5</sup> Goldin's witnessing and recording of this sexual encounter illustrates her desire to capture a raw intimacy and emotional truth, to which she is not an outsider looking in, but is an inside accomplice and witness to the intimacy. Goldin defines this in the following terms:

There is a popular notion that the photographer is by nature a voyeur, the last one invited to the party. But I'm not crashing; this is my party. This is my family, my history (Goldin, 1996:281).

Goldin's desire to merge with her subjects' sexual and emotional terrain amalgamated or fused the psychological space between subject and photographer. Her habitation of this space thus formed an aesthetic strategy through which to expose the strictly private acts, which were destined for general consumption, where "everything is being performed for the camera and, therefore, for the public" (Weinberg, 2005). Similarly it is this fusing of the psychological space between artist and viewer that offered a strategy for rethinking my art practice. Indeed, this fusion of the psychological space between the viewer and the artist emerged as an increasingly important theme in my artworks.

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<sup>5</sup> Goldin's circle of friends and acquaintances became quite famous through the notorious slide shows *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, thus bringing a self-consciousness, competitiveness and performance to them when photographed by her. For her subjects, there was a compulsion and imperative to disclose their unhappy and dysfunctional lives (Weinberg, 2005).

## 4.2 Re-enacting, visualizing and witnessing

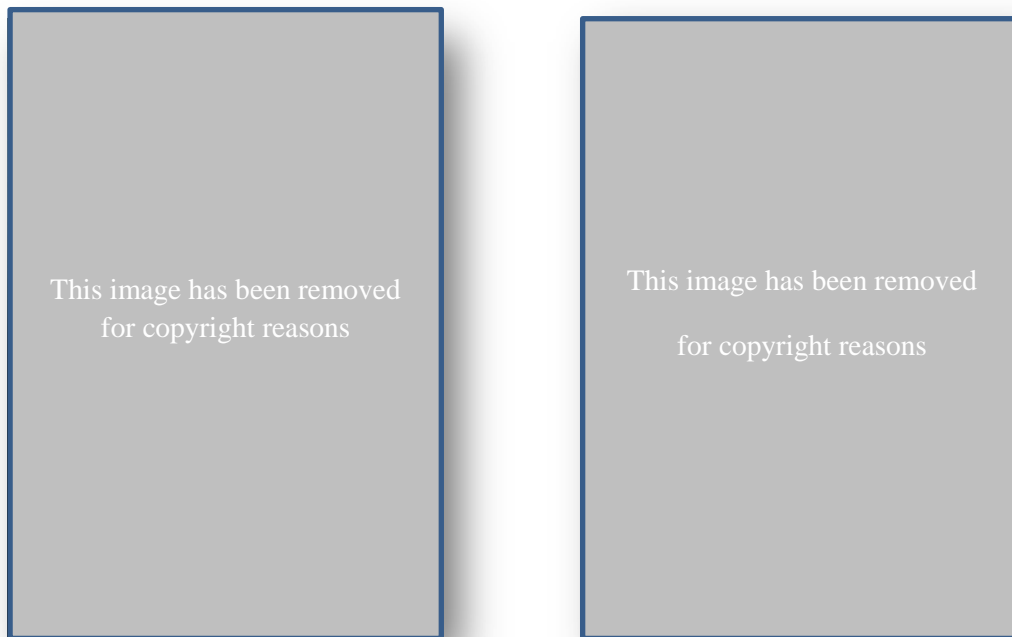


Figure 13 and Figure 14: Jo Spence and Rosy Martin, *Cross-Class Perspectives*, 1988, type C photographs.

Jo Spence and Rosy Martin's seminal re-enactment work *Phototherapy* (Martin, 2001, Spence, 1986), was a collaborative, explorative and transformational process of visualizing the conscious and unconscious self with photography. By symbolically representing the multiplicity of identities and stories that dwell within the confines of everyday life, they produced photographic images through play, acting and cathartic methods that bridged private-public discourses. Beginning in 1983, they utilised skills learnt in Co-counselling training, to facilitate a new style of therapeutic work that involved an exchange of emotions, thoughts and feelings that were buried within the psyche. This powerful and experimental methodology required a confidential, contained environment for the safe disclosure of emotionally risky and potentially subversive behaviours to be worked through.

The aim of their photographic sessions was to promote self-awareness and even though distress was sometimes involved, their intention was “to make visible the effects of institutional gazes and societal frames through their impact upon the individual” (Martin, 2001:17), in particular, exploring feelings of shame. In 1982, when Spence was a middle-aged, overweight, working-class woman and also a feminist, photographer and student, she was diagnosed with cancer, which launched her into Phototherapy as way of trying to examine personal and theoretical debates about modes of identity and the way subjectivity is constructed. Spence strongly argued that she “became the subject of my own enquiry rather than the object of someone else’s, where I act rather than being acted upon” (Spence, 1995:163).

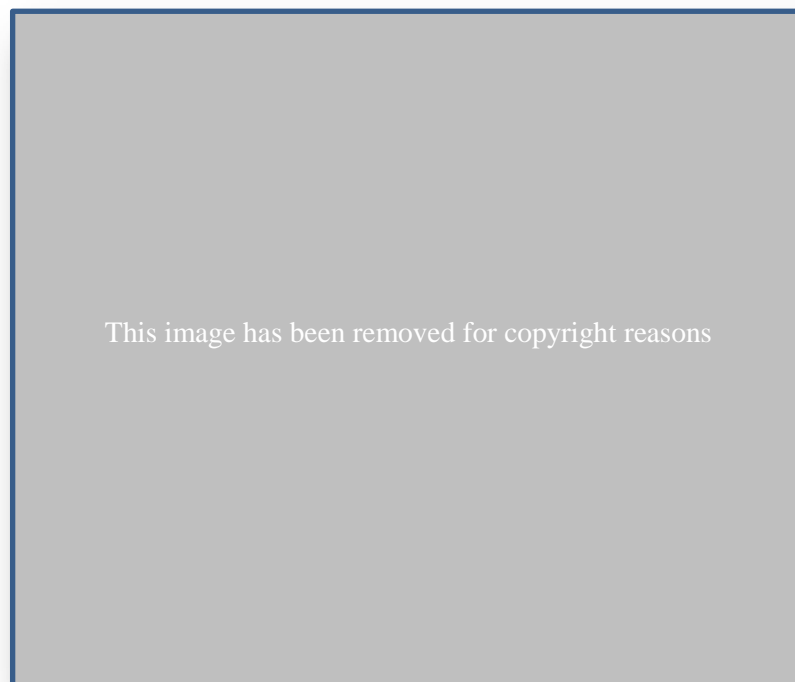


Figure 15: Jo Spence, *Mother and Daughter Shame Work: Crossing Class Boundaries*, 1988, type C photographs.

Spence laboured with this complex agenda, endeavouring to find meaningful ways to represent her inner world by connecting it to the struggles and inequalities of ideologies, politics, economics and class. Using the pen and the camera as her means of enquiry, she was unable to tackle what she perceived as the dominant culture's colonizing and destructive history (Spence, 1995), until she faced her own fears, shortcomings, guilt and the painful emotion of shame. Spence said of this important point that:

I cannot fully engage with these struggles until I fully understand what I am still trying to work through and make visible – i.e. the shame of who I was told I was/what I lacked (1995:163).

Through Phototherapy, Spence uncovered layers of psychological shame embedded within the deepest parts of her selfhood, where it had served as a defensive strategy for most of her life. She described feeling ashamed of “my ugliness, of my deformed and injured body, of my inability to carry on ‘being successful’, shame of my inability to perform while I was ill...” (1995:158). Moreover, she felt unable to match up to the models of idealization demanded by what she called “a hierarchical society which needs inferiority in order to flourish” (1995:177).

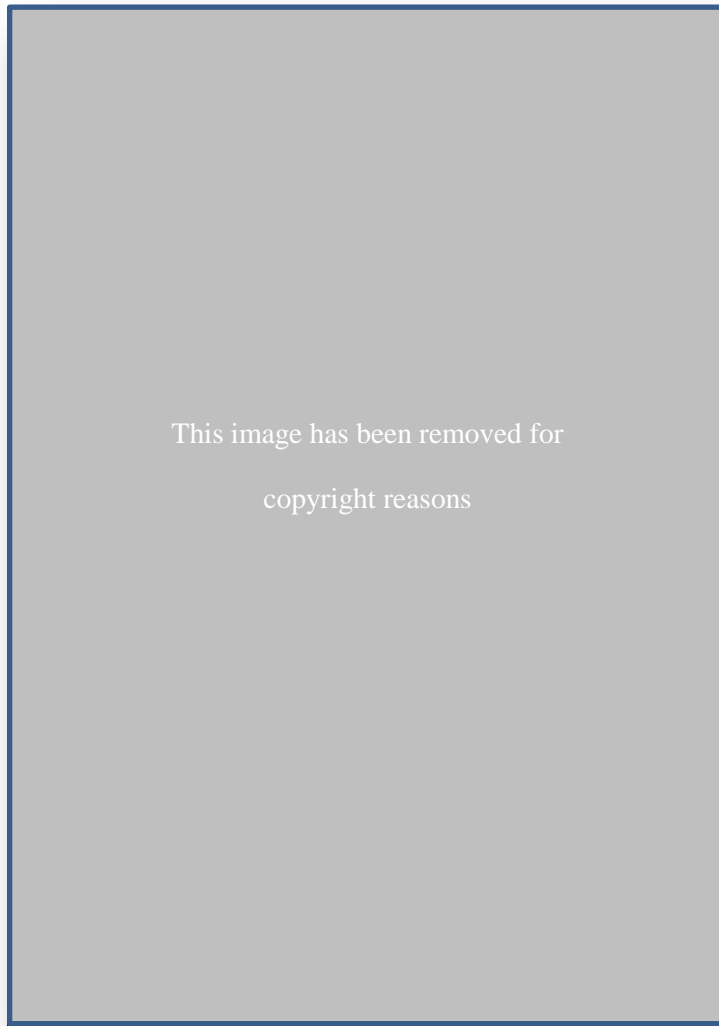


Figure 16: Jo Spence, *Transformations*, 1985, type C photographs.

Calling herself an educational photographer, Spence's efforts to generate new representational spaces for the investigation of personal and political identity, manifested as powerful, feminist acts, which she claimed were about:

... saying the unsayable, seeing the unseeable, facing the un-faceable, confronting shame and by so doing releasing and letting go of the power those "secrets" held (2001:17).





Figure 17: Jo Spence and Tim Sheard *Angerwork* 1988, type C photographs.

Her passion and commitment to the deeply cathartic work of photographic re-enactment with Martin and others<sup>6</sup> enabled her to fully scrutinize her emotional and clinical history of cancer as it unfolded. Spence found the experience of being a hospital patient an incredibly disempowering experience, yet she was determined not to become “merely the object of their medical discourse but to be the active subject of my own investigation” (1986:153). As a way to maintain her dignity in this devastating situation she continued photographing herself throughout the treatments, which not only gave her back some sense of control, but also exposed the usually hidden processes of medical procedures to public scrutiny. Throughout her sometimes terrifying and humiliating hospital experiences, Spence stated that she was:

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<sup>6</sup> Spence’s Phototherapy partners included Terry Dennett, David Roberts and Tim Sheard.

Trying to represent to myself what was happening to me by using my camera. But how to represent myself to myself, through my own visual point of view, and how to find out what I needed and to articulate it and make sure I got it – ultimately wanting to make this visible to others? How to deal with my feelings about myself and give them visual form? (Spence, 1986:155)

This inspired way of dealing with her experiences and feelings in a visual medium served to underpin the creation of a new photographic methodology that bridged the separation between private and public discourses. In the hospital documentation images, as in most of the Phototherapy works, the photographs functioned to perform acts of disclosure, through which, as Martin maintained, repressive, shameful secrets were not only verbalised, but embodied, re-enacted, witnessed and recorded by the camera. Moreover, once the photographs were printed and viewed on paper, they could be analysed at a distance, once removed, and an objective stance taken. This collaborative and therapeutic mode of contained exposure functioned to defuse the power of the shame, and offered participants the potential for greater understanding of the public and private selves, creating the potential for change.

Martin and Spence also foregrounded the crucial role of trust and intimacy in their development of Phototherapy. They alternated between the roles of sitter/director/client and photographer/therapist (Martin, 2001:18). Martin stressed the importance of them both inhabiting all the roles, in front of and behind the camera, as subjects “to and of the gaze”, where there is “both joy and fear in being thus seen: the pleasure in being the focus, the centre of attention, the fear of being exposed” (2001:18).

Similarly, the use of shifting roles in the development of artwork became a significant part of my enquiry, as the question of identity and ownership shifted from the body being simply an object of another’s scrutiny to that of subjective empowerment and psychic reality. Put

another way, when language speaks over the surface of the body, it shifts the meaning of the words, destabilizing its authority; or as Martin states (2001:19), when “flesh overpowers word, the body answers back”.

### 4.3 The art of shame

Self-exposure and representations of the shameful, unspeakable and personal has been an important motivation for artist Tracey Emin. Over the last twenty years she has used intimacy in autobiographical, emotional works that are “hard-hitting, romantic, desperate, angry, funny and full of longing” (Luckett, 2011:2) and her ‘eminence’ in this practice earned her the honorary title of ‘Professor of Confessional Art’<sup>7</sup>. Her audiences have been sometimes welcoming and adulatory, and at other times horrified and disgusted with her aesthetic of shame (Munt, 2008:220). Art critic Jennifer Doyle and others have no doubt that her feminist forebears in academia, art and community in the field of intimacy (Munt, 2008, Doyle, 2002, Betterton, 2002), paved the way for the emergence of this powerful outpouring of subjectivity, which saw the anguish, pain and torment of a tragic early life become the raw material for her art and representations of the self.

While artists such as Cindy Sherman, Judy Dater and Jo Spence each inhabited the subject/object positions in decidedly feminist paradigms, revealing the variety of different roles played and experienced by women in society and culture, for Tracey Emin, the personal became more than political, as it introduced an autobiographical voice “not previously heard or witnessed with such intensity” (Smith, 2001:1). Additionally, as Dawson (2011) commented, Emin’s work is so utterly affecting because she gives willingly of herself, to others. Emin achieved levels of poignancy and emotion that drew audiences into the most intimate of encounters, as they became privy to the shameful and often melodramatic narratives of her life.

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<sup>7</sup> This title was awarded to Emin by the European Graduate School in Switzerland.

Specifically, Emin uncovered hidden childhood and family traumas, revealing pain and desire as a conscious and reflective engagement with selfhood; embracing shame as both a profoundly private and visibly public discourse. For Emin, shame was a productive driving force that shaped her creativity of critical engagement enacted upon the self. Shame is written on her female body, visually, textually, emotionally and affectively.

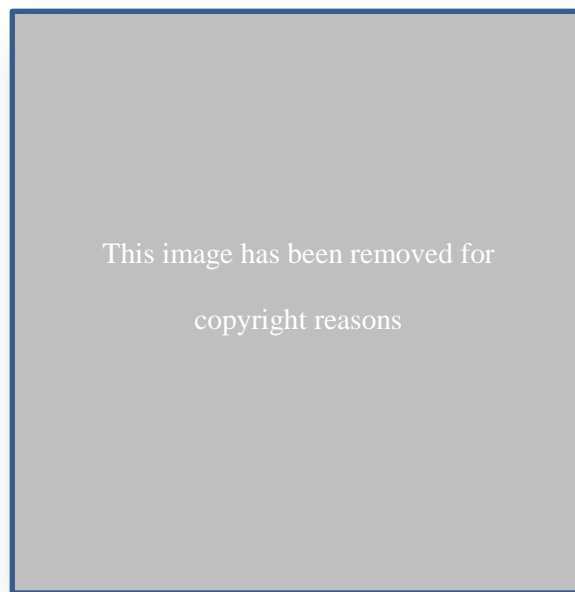


Figure 18: Tracey Emin, *I've got it all*, 2000, type C photograph.

As Munt stated, “shame is the most embodied of emotions” (2008) and for Emin, her imagery was built on the associations of her body with the sexual abuse it endured, and with its functions, expulsions and primal, shameful abjectness. Munt also commented that “shame has a plasticity that lends itself to creative and critical exploration” (2008:203), which Emin certainly did by taking the worst aspects of her private life and made them into public works of art. As Jeanette Winterson claimed when referring to Emin’s self-disclosures:

By refusing all her own separations, she questions ours. By refusing to disentangle art and life, by fusing her autobiography with her artistry, Emin creates a world where personal truth-telling moves beyond the me-culture and into collective catharsis (2006:6).

Her work often created a visceral response in viewers who were subjected to explicit sexual themes including rape, anal sex and masturbation; excessive behaviour such as drunkenness and hangovers; and the emotional messiness of abortion and self-hatred. Emin deliberately made it difficult for audiences to differentiate between the artist, her reality, her sexuality, her feelings and her artworks (Betterton, 2006).

Fortnum described the effect on viewers of Emin's intimate works, as being able to "reach out to a common experience to which the audience can relate, surely everyone has had these feelings, sitting in rooms, indulging certain emotions?" (Fortnum, 2004:160) Her work reached out and touched vast numbers of fans, many of whom were young women, who were moved by Emin's work because it resonated so deeply with their own experiences (Doyle, 2002).<sup>8</sup>

However critics of Emin's work accuse her of revealing too much of herself and "shameful baggage" (Munt, 2008). Given the current ubiquity of personal revelation and public confession as evidenced by the dominant contemporary culture of reality television and social networking (Munt, 2008) where audiences indulge in vicarious pleasure as they witness the titillating tragedies of other people's lives, it is surprising that visual art work could be so provocative and engender such distaste. Yet it is precisely because of the shamelessness of Emin's shame that viewers and commentators alike are repelled by her flagrancy. Emin's shame is projected onto the larger community, as argued by Munt:

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<sup>8</sup> In the exhibition *Love is What You Want* audiences were invited to contact Emin through the Hayward Gallery website, in the section called *Write to Tracy/Write a message to Tracey Emin*

Shame circulates in an acute form throughout our public cultures, in shame scenarios or moments that punctuate social spurning, or more diffusely in veiled strings of shame that worm themselves through the social imaginary, attaching to groups or individuals like wet spaghetti, puncturing wormholes in the social fabric as they go. Insidiously, shame can cling, mildew-like, to certain bodies, detectable on them like a clammy smell (2008:201).

Regarding the modes of practice in Emin's work, language and performance are important elements, as are irony, satire and humour. These are expressed in a wide array of artistic styles and mediums including drawings, photography, sculptures, fabric works and videos in which she scratches away at the surface of the social boundaries of decency, to uncover unspoken narratives which are 'close to the bone'. In the film *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995) Emin recounts the shaming she experienced when performing in a disco-dancing competition, when a group of men cruelly shouted "slag, slag, slag" (Emin, 1995) at her. These were men who had rough sex with her when she was underage and their hypocrisy and humiliation of her was again shattering. In the film she uses a double shaming as she speaks their names out loud, shaming them in return, in a public context.<sup>9</sup>

Her public persona has both an attractive and repellent quality, creating both intimacy and distance as she gives voice to unspeakable narratives that are "completely scripted and absolutely personal" (Doyle, 2002:109). In her appliquéd blanket artworks, the written texts are hand-stitched, and words also feature in her neon signs and as captions in her drawings. The sources of the texts are varied, as Emin said, "Some of these things are what I say to other people, some of these things are what I say to myself and some are what people say to me" (Hayward, 2011). Emin's art is fundamentally based on the spoken word and she is a captivating and affective performer when seen in the flesh, as I found when listening to her speak at the National Art School, Sydney in 2004. Here she gave an opinionated, intense and

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<sup>9</sup> This film was shown at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale in 2007 and at many other art institutions worldwide.

humorous talk, argued with an audience member, and held court afterwards with a pack of ‘hungry’ male art students who gathered around her to soak up the aura of sexuality she emitted.



Figure 19: Tracey Emin, *But I never stopped loving you*, 2002, Appliquéd fabrics.

Emin’s embodiment of the personal narrative reframes art as a “site of lived experience” which, perhaps, in its extremity, makes an honest attempt to deal with the dilemma of the personal in public. For as Spence argues:

We still need forms of realism which bring together the psychic with the social, the unconscious with the material, the construction of desire with the experience of fear (1995:160).

Emin’s work thus resonates with my own in the way she exposes the intimate, shameful and emotional subjectivities, fabricating powerful artworks to engage audiences in affective encounters.



The three artists discussed in this chapter have each performed and enacted the body in different ways, in private and public spaces, with different intentions and outcomes. Tracey Emin established her agency as an artist by asserting an unmediated intimacy and deliberately parading her private grief for mass consumption, conducting her own therapy in the public eye. When Jo Spence put herself into her own pictures, it was generally witnessed by one person in a private therapeutic space, and the photographs were not made for exhibition. Nan Goldin's photographs were of close friends who performed intimate encounters in front of her camera. These images were shown as slide shows for select groups of people in private places and only much later in art galleries.

Emin's work continues that of Goldin, Spence and Martin's and, by embracing previous traumas, these artists accepted "the pain of our failure to live out the reality of the images we desire to become or repossess" (Spence, 1995:154). My studio research may be placed within the same genre as I endeavoured to engage with shame from within the lived experience of embodied subjectivity. To do this I experimented with new modes of representation, establishing a tension between the artist, artworks and models, connecting pain, shame and pleasure in a series of intimate encounters that included creating meaning from private knowledge and emotion for audiences. This is explored in the following four chapters.

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## CHAPTER FIVE: A GATEWAY TO INTIMACY

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Affect, properly conjured up, produces a real-time somatic experience, no longer framed as representation” (Bennett, 2005:23).

This chapter analyses one of the principal aims of the research; the testing of experimental approaches, shifting away from traditional exhibition modalities of showing photographs to spectators who usually observed the artworks from a distance and remained relatively passive. The research explores new ways to envisage, suggest and enact meanings of the body, subjectivity and the self, without representing it in a familiar way; harnessing art making as a *gateway to intimacy*, a coalescence of artwork, affect and audience.

After many years of dealing with the body and portraiture I felt a mounting dissatisfaction with conventional forms of photographic representation which led to the research for this project. I felt I was somehow contributing to the objectification of the body, and the exploitation in mass media communications. I struggled with the fact that, despite all good intentions and relative success, my photographs continued to perpetuate the objectification of women’s, children’s and old peoples’ bodies. It was perturbing to discover my artworks being posted on pornographic websites and blogs<sup>10</sup>. Notwithstanding my commitment to maintaining a feminist agenda of imaging the body, my reliance on classical representations of the nude, where figures were often headless and de-contextualised, were no longer satisfying and required further inspection. This dilemma of photographic representation has also been problematic for other practitioners, because as Mark Durant argues:

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<sup>10</sup>Some examples of disturbing blogs and websites included <http://pinkneptune.milkboys.org> and <http://www.pageinsider.com/elladreyfus.com> Conversely, the internet has also provided many positive contexts for my work, such as these websites, [http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/2009summer/2009summer\\_Bader.php](http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/2009summer/2009summer_Bader.php) and <http://leflaneurblog.blogspot.com.au/2008/07/shock-horror-special-nude-family.html>

It's a good thing for artists, particularly photographic artists, to be aware of photography's historic complicity in the construction of stereotypes and other representations. Because representations matter, because they are obvious and insidious, powerful and seductive, the practice and analysis of representation becomes the arena of conflict, as individuals and communities attempt to reassess and re-present identity and to question the authority of the canon (1996).

The powerful masculine gaze, so clearly defined and critiqued by Mulvey, Pollock and others<sup>11</sup> had not only failed to be subverted by feminism, it had entrenched itself even further as the dominant paradigm of seeing.<sup>12</sup> Thus, images of female bodies, and often that of young children's, continue to be subjected to negative, shameful objectification and sexual exploitation. Furthermore, I felt ashamed of my own failure to resolve these issues, at least at the level of visual representation.

This realisation opened up a new domain whereby the role of spectator, as mediated by the artist, became implicated in a complex interactive and affective experience. Other artists such as Mona Hatoum also dealt with this 'crisis' which was a shift from "representing political and social reality" to "questioning of the act of seeing the exchange between artist and viewer" (Brett, 1997:56). This was exemplified in her video *Measures of Distance* where the viewer's sense of intimacy is activated by the intense proximity of Hatoum's mother's body to the camera, creating an uncomfortable and emotive space.

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<sup>11</sup>By John Berger (1972), Laura Mulvey (1975), Rosemary Betterton (1987), Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (1987)

<sup>12</sup> In her work on the feminine gaze, in relation to the daughter/mother relationship of "blaming, shaming, renaming and letting go", Jo Spence elaborated on the shifts in how feminist theories had shattered the views of subjectivity and identity. Especially in their impact on the regular photographic tropes, where they, "seem to have rendered obsolete any idea of a single unitary self made visible by an interpretation of surface appearances and the capturing of 'essence'". Furthermore, she concluded that the very idea of conventional portrait was 'in tatters'.



Figure Mona Hatoum *Measures of Distance* 1988, video installation.

Thus in my art practice a relocation occurred. This relocation was from seeing art as a representational modality towards experiencing art as a feeling in the body, which effectively removes the viewer's safety net when encountering art as merely representation. Meskimmon (1998) defines this as a deference of meaning from art as object to art as encounter. My intention was to bring viewers into an encounter of sudden consciousness about the physical body, the mind and emotional states.

Art can stimulate thinking via an “embodiment of sensation” brought about by an affective experience. As Bennett argued, sensation is not an end in itself, rather it must engage us through our senses, and lead to a deeper level of thought (2005). She followed Deleuze's proposition of the “encountered sign”, which signifies something felt, as opposed to something understood through cognition. Bennett argues that affect causes an involuntary response and this is a more effective trigger for stimulating the audience (Bennett, 2005).

My intention was to bring about “multiple forms of bodily knowing” (Meskimmon, 1998:3), originating in the artwork, to be communicated through the sensations of viewing and feeling. Such artwork where, “affect is felt and flows between bodies, between subjects” (Munt, 2008:xii) and where the artist acts as mediator, invites audiences to inhabit their bodily manifestations and thus see themselves anew. As a methodology of art-making, it went well beyond the display of artworks on walls, and continued to materialize within “the inter-subjective event” that happens in the exhibition space when bodies engage with each other (Betterton, 1996b:6).

The recognition of the possibilities of a new aesthetic experience were not merely for the audiences’ participation, but also for my own. Just as Douglas Gordon quipped “I make art so that I can go to the bar and talk about it” (Bishop 2006), I might also proclaim that I make art so that I can go to the gallery to talk, feel and connect with others about my artworks, in a space of shared intimacy. As is the case of artist Gillian Wearing’s practice of engaging with strangers in public, the primary product and endpoint of her practice is “the collusive relationship she forms with her collaborators” (Slyce, 1999:83). Likewise the shifts in my practice and research made intimacy and relational encounters the primary goal of my art.

## 5.1 An initial shift

Throughout all of my art practice, disruption had been one of the key themes I have worked with. Firstly, in the manner in which the body was disrupted by the photographs which simultaneously exposed it as a figure of abjection and one of subversion; secondly, when the exhibition space was disrupted by the insertion of the artist, myself, acting as a liaison or link, between the artwork and audience.

Art in galleries present an opportunity to have an “exotic, dangerous, cynical, whimsical or naughty visual experiences” in the safe environment as the gallery (Durant, 1996). This is not to say that all audiences are equally as engaged in the artwork, or have the same responses. As in most exhibitions, some spectators appear un-affected or bored and leave the gallery quickly, whereas others seem to engage deeply and remain for longer periods, identifying with the artist and their work. Although audiences respond in different ways in the exhibitions, they often assume a quiet form of surveillance in front of the artworks, Brett (1997) describes this as “having power and control over what is viewed while remaining physically uninvolved” (1997:57). However, there are sometimes imperceptible, and sometimes more obvious reactions of a more intimate nature, involving the expression of subtle emotions and feelings.

In my previous exhibitions, I began to attend the gallery during the exhibitions and paid particular attention to how viewers became aware of themselves when looking at the work, through their own embodiment, the proximity to the artwork and the gallery space. I was interested in how their emotional responses were influenced by the environment, and how their feelings were both physiologically and socially expressed (Gerhardt, 2004). Further, I

was alerted to the depth of people's reactions, and learnt that the body communicates emotion not only in the brain, as was previously thought, but also in the blood, lymph system, nerves and all interconnecting lines of body communications, which explains why we feel emotions "down the spine and in our gut" (Gerhardt, 2004:100). In other words, we perceive the world through our sensate bodies.

My artwork was located from within my own bodily experience, the body of the subject/models in the photographs and in the bodies of the audience members. I wanted to further investigate ways to place viewers directly within their own bodily experience; forming an affective encounter which would allow them "to become conscious, perhaps in a deeper, more internal way, of the experience of others" (Brett, 1997:35) and of themselves. Thus the body might be the unifying site of relationships between the artist, artworks and audiences.

This relationship between the artist, artwork and audience can be configured as a triangle, with each element positioned at one of the three points, as can be seen in Figure 20 below. This allows the relationship between the elements to be depicted, showing each linked separately to the other but with the body at the centre, linking them all together. The artist is located at the top of the triangle because she/he conceives of and makes the artworks. She is also actively connected to the models whose bodies appear in the artworks, as well as to the audiences as they view the bodies of the models in the artworks.

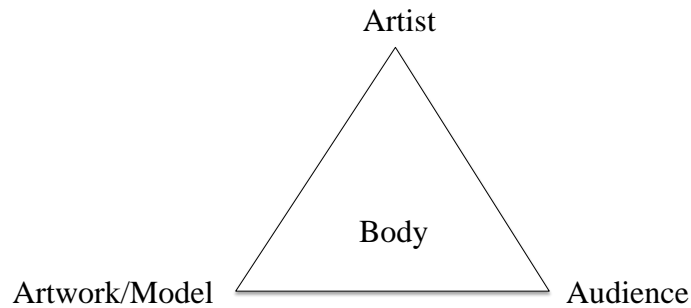


Figure 20: Relationship between Artist, Artwork/Model, Audience and Body

In my case the relationships I developed with models through our proximity to each other in the studio was one of intensity. As I outlined in Chapter Three, the models experienced strong feelings about their nude bodies during the photographic sessions, including shame, and were also concerned about how their bodies would be seen by audiences. I was implicated with the models' experiences and also participated in the experience of the audience as they, the audience, participated in witnessing the bodies of the models in the galleries. The audience's embodied responses also included a range of feelings from strong identification, to pleasure, distaste and indifference. The body was the focal point for all the intimate encounters between artist, artwork, model and audiences.



## 5.2 Risky viewing

Adopting such an approach presents both a risk to artist and viewer, as well as a responsibility of artist to viewer. At a general level, I had been a creator of intimacy through my choice of subjects and relationships to them, and had generated the possibility of the development of closeness between myself and my subjects, as well as creating the possibility for both artist and viewer “of being a spectator of one’s own feelings” (Bennett, 2005:23).

For an artist working in such a personal sphere there is a certain degree of risk-taking involved, as the interactions with the subjects rely not only on building relationships of trust but also on personal disclosures. Bayliss and Orland identified the need of some artists for intimacy, explaining that:

Some people who make art are driven by inspiration, others by provocation, still others by desperation. Artmaking grants access to worlds that may be dangerous, sacred, forbidden, seductive, or all of the above. It grants access to worlds you may otherwise never fully engage. It may in fact be the engagement – not the art – that you seek (1993:108).

It is important to acknowledge the part the camera had played as a strategic device in the creation of intimate engagement with oneself and others.<sup>13</sup> For photographers such as Diane Arbus, Nan Goldin and Robert Mapplethorpe, there was a strong element of thrill and excitement about the possibility of intimate encounters between the artist and their subject/models, even if it included, or was dependent upon, certain risk-taking behaviours.<sup>14</sup> Going out on a limb by breaking taboos can be both exciting and fearful, as artist Jemima Stehli put it:

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<sup>13</sup> This has been widely identified by writers such as Susan Sontag (1979) Roland Barthes (1984) John Pultz (1995) and Deborah Bright (1998).

<sup>14</sup> Personal disclaimer, I only needed to offer my models cups of tea.

I think when you're making work you have to take the risk that you're fucking everything up – you can't play safe (Fortnum, 2007:77).

Driven by a desire for emotional intensity and feelings of connectedness, these photographic artists not only sought to expose others, but in doing so, they committed a form of self-exposure. They often put themselves in the picture through various forms of veiled or visible self-portraiture where their subjectivity revealed feelings and emotions, and often exposed them to an even greater degree than their subjects.

The artist's self-exposure can be at once both cathartic and shame-inducing. In a similar way to Goldin, William Yang's theatrical productions such as *I am a Camera*<sup>15</sup> (which operated within the genre of an old-fashioned, family slide show) combined sexual politics, history and intimate relationships with revealing, personal stories. Yang admitted this was a potentially shameful experience, when he said, "I'm not an extroverted person, but it is the role of artist to expose themselves" (Probyn, 2005:108). I have been a member of Yang's audience and been carried away with emotion, finding myself in tears of sympathy, but also embarrassed and unsettled, as he revealed his poignant, private narratives.

Doyle (2008) proposed that a certain type of emotional aesthetic has emerged for contemporary artists whose works traverse the borders between the intimate, the abject and the beautiful. In such a situation, Doyle claims that:

The artist offers him or herself up to the audience, and invites us to experience the work as not only autobiographical in terms of the artist, but relational – soliciting a personal, emotional, and narcissistic investment from the spectator (2008:5).

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<sup>15</sup> This performance was shown at the Seymour Centre, Sydney in January 2012.

Some artists have gone to what seem like extremes in order to create intense emotions for audiences. One example is performance artist Franko B, who took the concept of risk and exposure to new levels when he used his bleeding body to paint canvases in highly ritualised public acts of intimacy, which generated a high degree of tension between the abject and affective feelings in audiences. His stated intention was “to make the unbearable bearable and to provoke the viewer to reconsider our collective understandings of beauty and suffering” (B, 2001). He also inscribed his body with layers of texts, tattooed with symbols of love and slogans that referred to his intimate relationships.

The intensity of emotion, materiality and theatrics that Franko B employed communicated an evocative corporeality, which audiences found irresistible. As David Thorp (2011) commented, Franko B has the ability to “transcend the personal to embrace the universal through the emblematic language he has created” (2011:9).

This form of radical intimacy is described as the “aesthetics of risk” and has been debated by scholars and art critics who question the way extreme performance artists such as Franko B, Stelarc and Ron Athey deliberately provoke their audiences into “spectator anxiety”, exposing their discomfort in public (Doyle, 2008). As Bennett (2005:23) has pointed out, live performance art has a long history of engaging with intimacy and affect as “fundamental components of a dynamic between the artwork and the spectator”. She explains that when viewers see sensation, it induces feelings and audiences are:

... experiencing a tension between an affective encounter with a real body in pain and an encounter with the body as image or ground of representation (Bennett, 2005:38).

In performance art of this nature, the immediate experience is prioritised as an affective encounter that represents both the emotional state of the performer and crosses a boundary by shifting that emotion onto the audience.

I also took risks in my relationships with models by revealing myself to them and allowing the possibility of a shared space of intimacy to form. It was a private exchange between us, through a series of carefully negotiated steps which involved trust and consent. Artist Janine Antoni also had a similar attitude when working intimately with others,

I think what's important about that is that we were very intimate with each other. And my hope is that you as a viewer can feel that intimacy. That's what a portrait is — a way of getting close to the person that it's depicting (2007).

These kinds of artworks (including my own) are not difficult to watch, but they carry with them a certain emotional demand on the audience, through their subject matter and affective presentations, which make them risky viewing. They are not simply art made for passive or pleasurable viewing; rather they ask of the viewers that they enter into an “interrogative relationship with the self and the processes through which one interacts with others” (Munt, 2008). This sort of challenge may evoke spectator anxiety but, from my perspective at least, it is offered with respect for my audiences and the real hope they will embrace, at some level of cognition, feeling (and humour) and the opportunity for authentic intimacy.

### 5.3 Art galleries as intimate spaces



Figure 21: Ella Dreyfus, *Scumbag* exhibition at Stills Gallery, 2008

Doyle (2008) points out that in contemporary art the presence of the viewer has assumed more importance, and there has been an increasing focus on the emotions that are likely to be experienced by “the moody presence of the spectator” in museums and galleries. This has been examined by social semiotician Maree Stenglin, in a semiotic reading of the spaces we live in. She described the way meaning is constructed by the organization of space, and was concerned with how emotions change depending on whether the feeling of the space is one of security or insecurity. She identified spaces that ‘close in on’ or ‘open up around’ us, as being two spatial extremes, *Too Bound* or *Too Unbound* (Stenglin, 2009a) and she introduces the concepts of binding and bonding. Binding is concerned with the relationship between

emotions and spaces; bonding is about how space helps interaction, specifically, solidarity and affiliation between people (2009b).

Stenglin explains the ways three dimensional spaces are divided into “the intimate, the social and the public”<sup>16</sup> and how interpersonal relationships shift within these spaces. She then applies this to the way audiences experience art galleries.

In a gallery or museum, visitors need to feel welcomed by not only the architectural environment, but also by their passage into the social, communal and emotional spaces that are required for successful viewing experiences. The considered use of design, furniture, lighting, seating, sound, temperature and colour in art galleries can play a great part in how an artwork is experienced by audiences. As a shared experience, these factors will affect the way feelings emerge amongst groups of viewers as they move through the space. Incidentally, viewers at exhibitions can sometimes be so confronted by art that they suffer from overwhelming sensations which may leave them feeling shocked and shamefully exposed. This experience has often been referred to as Stendhal’s Syndrome (Bamforth, 2010) following the experiences of a French writer Marie-Henri Boyle (known as Stendhal) in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century who observed his own overwhelming bodily sensations, palpitations and emotional agitation after prolonged exposure to Italian artworks and monuments.

Revealing strong emotions in public is more acceptable today than in previous generations (Gerhardt, 2004). But when a person experiences waves of any form of emotion passing through the body, it may cause discomfort and self-consciousness, especially if witnessed by others, and particularly by strangers. Thus when a viewer is brought into contact with their

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<sup>16</sup> Following Hall’s theory of Proxemics (1966)

feelings in an art gallery it shapes the dynamics of the communication between the artist's intentions, the artworks and the audience. As Bennett also attested:

Seeing sensation for an audience surely entails feeling or, at the very least, experiencing a tension between an affective encounter with a real body in pain and an encounter with the body as image or ground of representation (2005:38).

Viewers have a range of responses, for example, as Bennett noted, a woman she knows has a physical condition that affects her ability to feel sensations on her skin. The woman commented on her own experience of viewing art exhibitions, that:

You need to feel to see images...and in particular you need to feel to know that what is visibly occurring before you is not actually happening to your own body (Bennett, 2005:42).

Another example of a visitor expressing strong feelings was made at my exhibition *Age and Consent*. She wrote that:

I was captivated by the strength, sensuality and dignity of the older body, something I couldn't have anticipated, and particularly saddened by the contrasting images of 'weakness' or stereotypical 'old'. The moving, vibrancy and spirit of these generous women leapt from the video. I am humbled to be able to view the images (Burrell, 1999).

Galleries are conscious of their responsibility to provide a sense of place, of comfort and ease of access for viewers' pleasure, but they are not usually places that allow for the expression of strong emotions, and visitors can often feel intimidated by the authoritative tone of an art institution (Woltman, 1993), Galleries can even lift people out of their everyday lives, as Mark Alice Durant comments:

It was one of those *rare encounters* in a gallery setting in which I had the overwhelming experience of total immersion, of leaving the everydayness of my world and giving myself over... (Durant, 1996) (my italics).

On the other hand, the often staid, silent formality of the museum or art gallery may suppress people's affective reactions and spectators can find it difficult to cope with their feelings in public. Yet, according to Stenglin, museums are perfectly placed to offer "safe spaces for exploring unsafe ideas" (2009b:277) and are thus a possibly unique and protected environment for challenging audiences.

At the art galleries where I held my exhibitions, I was moved by witnessing audiences in emotional states of excitement, disgust, joy, grief and even tears. I wanted to acknowledge their public expression of emotion by sharing, listening and empathizing. This kind of understanding is described by Gerhardt as:

... the essence of emotional regulation: someone responding to what is actually happening in the moment, processing feelings with you. it involves a recognition of the psychological self, the thinking and feeling self (2004:197).

My artwork produced intense affect in audiences. I was not only responsible for activating the feelings as I had made the artwork, but I had also facilitated and encouraged the expression of emotion by providing the space for it to be enacted. This might well place me in the role of the "the witness, who enables the subject to articulate his or her own experience" (Bennett, 2005:31). Just as Spence and Martin had provided each other with permission to release deep feelings in private places, my artwork offered viewers a different, but nevertheless, affective experience of intimate engagement with themselves, exemplified by one viewer's comment that, "... one can't view these images without being very much aware of oneself" (Carter, 1999).



Some theorists have articulated an aesthetic strategy of contemporary art whereby artists deliberately provoke audiences into troubled affective and embodied states. Jennifer Doyle for example, identified this as an “effect of intimacy” when writing about the art of Tracy Emin, after finding herself “interpolated by the work” and utterly affected as a spectator, feeling both “uncomfortable and exhilarated” (2002:114).

However, Doyle finds this kind of work inappropriate for the museum environment as it demands too much emotional investment from the audience (2002). I disagree with this view, as I have found the gallery space to be an especially useful environment for the exploration of the personal interplay between artist, art and audience, and the creation of an intimate aesthetic. Within the confines of a formal exhibition space the recognition of the arousal of strong feelings could be unsettling, productive and affective, for any viewer.

In art galleries, just as at the theatre or dance events, intimacy can have a number of different applications. As Stenglin (2009b) notes, these can be influenced in an art gallery by the formation of space in the room, and whether it is welcoming or alienating; the interpersonal space that attends to the way people behave and interact with others; and the theoretical or cognitive space that can be induced by artworks. A further interpretation proposed by Garcia is that intimacy can be “an expansion of one’s internal sphere to include the external world” (2007:7), to which Stenglin added, that, when experienced in a secure environment, such as an art gallery, intimacy can build “solidarity and affiliation” (2009b:278).

## 5.4 Social and relational encounters

As I have described above, there is a strong participatory aspect to my exhibitions, which enables the provision of a convivial social environment and affiliation in the gallery setting. This relational behaviour bears some similarities to an art form known as participatory art, which refers to art that is concerned with the discursive and social nature of both the making and the viewing of art (Foster in Bishop, 2006). In this art form, the social dimension is prioritised, as people affiliate momentarily, governed by such aspects as the kind of artworks being viewed, the degree of participation required of the audience and the frameworks of sociability that is proposed (Bourriaud, 2002).

The contemporary artworks identified by Nicholas Bourriaud's relational aesthetic (2002) and Lars Bang Larsen's social aesthetic (1999) were motivated by three main points of interest "activation; authorship; community" (Bishop 2006), which were drawn from the writings of Guy Debord, co-founder of the Situationist International in the 1960s. The call for spectators to participate as active 'interpreters' was a postmodern rupture, one of 'blurring the border that separated high art from the forms of popular culture' and was a critical form of art which "plays on the union and tension of different aesthetic politics" (Rancière, 2004:85).

In such forms, unpredictability and risk-taking are likely, as artists working in this genre use live situations and the general public as their raw materials. The trajectory of participatory art has been well-critiqued by Bishop, Foster and others, and in some respects, my work employed similar rationales, yet the differences are marked by the intensely emotional,

physical and subjective dimensions embedded in my work, where an alternative aesthetic emerged.

This aesthetic developed through my intuitive and enthusiastic practice of engaging in stimulating conversations with spectators. I assumed this position during the exhibitions, as an ‘artist-in-residence’, where I was available for discussions with the audience through these authentic encounters of intimacy. I encouraged viewers to express their feelings and thoughts by writing in the visitors’ comments books. These books were useful as primary source material for the research and have also shown the powerful and affective emotional, social and political impact my work had on viewers. Meeting people at the exhibitions for informal communication was a high point of my practice, not only for the purposes of gaining feedback about the work, but as an integral part of creating an intimate connection in the semi-public, semi-private gallery settings. This bears some similarity to the experience of intimacy and solidarity felt by dancers (Garcia, 2007). These exhibitions were therefore places of socialization, connection and discovery, and conform to Huyghe’s (2006) idea that the discussions about an exhibition can become an important part of a project.

While the verbal and social exchanges between myself and the viewers were fundamental to the formation of the collective bonds, of even greater significance was the recognition of affective encounters which brought audiences into a deeper sense of themselves, their bodies and their emotions. These deeper levels of engagement engendered moments of intimacy that could be non-verbal and self-reflective, or promote communication with others. My practice thus developed towards this new mode of working where audiences would encounter art as not only a relational, participatory or social aesthetic, but more importantly, as an embodied and intimate aesthetic.

## 5.5 The embodied spectator

When an artist successfully overrides the self-consciousness and the inhibitions that settle on us in places like galleries and classrooms, it comes as a shock – finding ourselves overwhelmed with actual emotion—finding ourselves crying, laughing, afraid, disgusted, aroused, outraged—can leave us feeling a bit naked (Doyle, 2008).

My earlier knowledge and understanding of embodied audience subjectivity broadened to encompass how the viewer felt, through the artist's mediation, about the activation of their emotional states through direct engagement with the artwork. This concords with what Spence noted about how “strong emotions are involved because the photographs allow viewers to have access to ‘private’ information about their own subjectivity” (1995:168). The artworks might activate emotion and cause the viewer to think about themselves and then experience feelings in their body. This process is explained by Gerhardt:

Cognitive processes elaborate emotional processes, but could not exist without them. The brain constructs representations of internal bodily states, links them to other stored representations, and then signals back to the body in a process of internal feedback, which may then trigger off further bodily feelings in a cyclical process (2004:6).

As viewers encountered the work, it seemed that the site of activity and anxiety could shift from the artwork to the viewer, through their act of looking, understanding and feeling. This is a kind of transaction which is finely balanced between being both active and passive (Fortnum, 2004) between artwork and spectator. This not only implies that the cognitive and emotional state of the viewer gets disturbed, but it would also seem to suggest that art encounters can merge the artist's perception of the subject and the subject's own sense of self-image with the viewer's.

The importance of the rhythmic motion from artwork to the viewer's mind, emotions and body, further expands upon the three-way relationship between the artist, subject and audiences as described earlier in Figure 20 (page 67). This additional shift became the key that unlocked the development, for me, of a new visual language to speak about the body. It generated an aesthetic through which the interplay of affective encounters between the artist, artwork and audience might result in new aesthetic experiences.

These affective encounters between the artist, artwork and audience can also be configured as a triangle, with the artist, artwork and audience each occupying the three points, as can be seen in Figure 22 below. Similarly to Figure 20 the artist is positioned at the upper point of the triangle to represent the artist's importance as initiator of the encounter between the artwork and audience. Also, like Figure 20, the two bottom points are occupied by artwork and audience, representing the transactional nature of the exchange between all three. What is different about Figure 22 is that the 'affective encounter' is positioned in the centre of the triangle, to highlight its central role in the transaction between artist, artwork and audience.

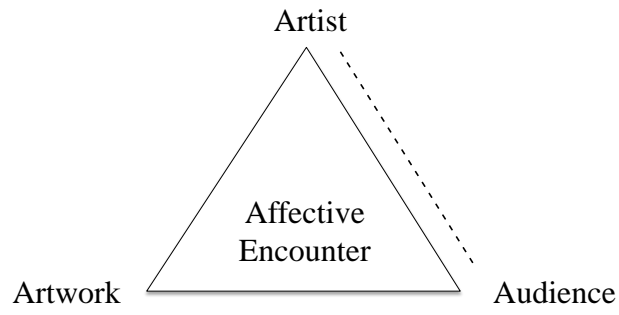


Figure 22: Artist, Artwork, Audience and Affective Encounters

The triangle also hints at the inseparable nature of the experience or transaction, one which Meskimmon (1998) notes makes the ‘knowledge’ and ‘the ‘knower’ become inseparable in the performative act of the artwork.

With this inseparable transaction in mind, I set out to devise an art encounter in which my relationships would change from private encounters with individuals in the studio or gallery to operate in outdoor space and manifest in real time. My first artwork *Weight and Sea* would be experienced by an anonymous audience of up to half a million members of the general public, and take place in a vast outdoor arena.

The next chapter focuses on this exhibition and analyses how the transaction of the affective encounter was expanded in my artwork.

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## CHAPTER SIX: *WEIGHT AND SEA*

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In the peculiar mutations of shame we can begin to understand that shame as an affect can be alternately hypersensitive, semiotically embodied, and yet also seep invisibly like a gas, sucked into a hospitable host's unconscious often without his awareness, experienced merely as a vague psycho-somatic discomfort, hunched deportment, or sickly habitus (Munt, 2008:203).

How much do you weigh? Does it really matter? People come in all shapes and sizes, so don't worry too much, it is only a number (Dreyfus, 2005:22).<sup>17</sup>



Figure 23: Ella Dreyfus, *Weight and Sea*, 2005, exhibition invitation.

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<sup>17</sup> This statement was printed in the children's catalogue for the outdoor exhibition *Sculpture by the Sea*, Bondi where *Weight and Sea* was shown. An additional statement about this artwork appeared in the adult's catalogue which said, "This interactive sculpture is designed to highlight and challenge people's perceptions and obsessions about body image and weight."

*Weight and Sea* took the form of an interactive, performative sculpture that operated in real time and was exhibited at Tamarama Beach, Sydney, in 2005, during Australia's largest outdoor art exhibition *Sculpture by the Sea*.<sup>18</sup> This event was a perfect location for my artwork and a great opportunity to test out this confrontational work, which was designed to give the audience an enjoyable, thought-provoking and intimate experience around the issue of body weight.

This artwork comprised of a structure that could weigh people and display their weight in public. Given that one usually weighs oneself privately, I deliberately set out to disrupt the borders between private and public behaviours. This was compounded by conflating the role of the subject and the spectator, minimizing the proximity between them and soliciting a dialogue of intimate exchange with the audience. The artwork presented a forum to try out the re-contextualisation of an everyday occurrence in a new conceptual framework. Spectators were invited to participate in a communal encounter, and such encounters have been described by Rancière as “a space of reception to engage the passer-by in an unexpected relationship” (2004:90).

## **6.1 Shameful exposures in public places**

The strategy of challenging audiences by conducting private matters in public spaces has been employed by various contemporary artists engaged with treading the fine line between shame, intimacy and representation, through deliberate exposure of audiences to their work. For example in Patrick Killoran's *Glass Outhouse* (2003), a portable toilet was placed in

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<sup>18</sup> *Sculpture by the Sea* is an annual event held at Bondi and Tamarama Beaches in Sydney, Australia. This outdoor exhibition attracts around half a million people over three weeks. *Weight and Sea* was one of the artworks exhibited from 3-20 November 2005.



different locations around the city. The toilets were moulded from one-way reflective Plexiglas, allowing brave participants to enter and use the toilet while looking out through the one-way glass, although passers-by could not see in. This contradictory and confronting work revealed a private act in public and the potential for a shame response, as even though passers-by couldn't see in, it felt like they could.



Figure 24: Patrick Killoran, *Glass Outhouse*, 2003, mixed media.

Annetta Kapon is another example of an artist who invites audiences to participate in artworks where aesthetic proximity to the artwork is symbolically acted to “re-socialize the object and transform it into a means of communication” (Kenrick, 2007:21). Kapon’s *Floor Scale* (1991) was a minimalist work, which used the common bathroom scale in large numbers, in a gallery environment and, in a similar vein to *Weight and Sea*, used wry humour to confront the prevalent obsession with body weight.

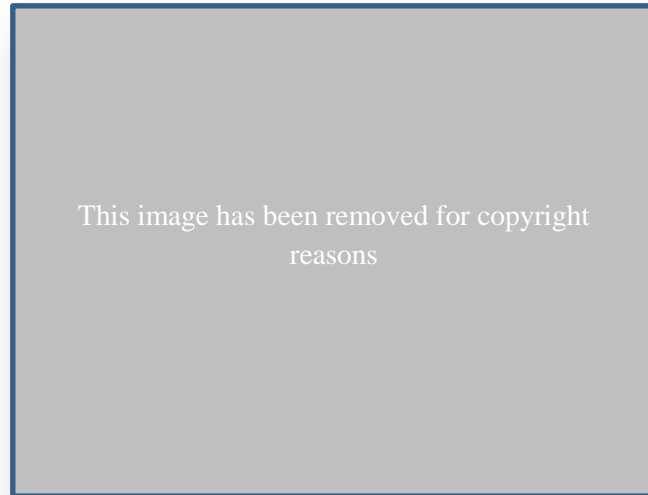


Figure 25: Annetta Kapon, *Floor Scale*, 1991, mixed media

In Kapon's work the scales were laid out in a checkerboard fashion, covering the entire gallery floor, thus forcing the viewers to be weighed, but only if they walked into the gallery. This set up an unavoidable tension between the object, audience and the representation of their weight. Kapon also took her lead from feminism and the embodied experience of private, domestic experiences which brought audiences into direct proximity with the three-way relationship between the viewers' body, the found object and representation.

The involuntary exposure of people's weight can generate strong emotions. For example, an advertisement for a Fitness First gym in the Netherlands in 2009, concealed a scale in a bus stop seat. When people sat on it their weight was broadcast on a large display screen, in the hope that publicly shaming them would make them join the gym. The advertisement caused an outcry of negative responses as it was seen to violate people's privacy, as well as humiliate them in public.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The website *The F Word*, published comments such as by *Melissa at Shakesville*, who wrote that the advertisement was "...not only fat-hating/shaming, but deeply hostile to the physically disabled, who have to exchange their privacy and dignity for their basic comfort just to wait for a bus" (McCabe 2009).



Figure 26: Fitness First Bus Stop Advertisement, The Netherlands, 2009

A third artist, who challenges audiences with difficult emotions including shame, is Stuart Ringholt. In his recent work, titled *Preceded by a tour of the show by artist Stuart Ringholt 6-8pm (The artist will be naked. Those who wish to join the tour must also be naked. Adults only)*<sup>20</sup> spectators were offered a rare opportunity to participate in a group bonding experience of nudity whilst viewing artworks. This unusual and humorous situation was devised by Ringholt following his workshops on embarrassment and anger at the Sydney Biennale (2008), where he attempted to gain insight into how fear manifests in the body and how debilitating it can be.

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<sup>20</sup> This art event took place at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney from 27-29 April 2012.



Figure 27: Stuart Ringholt, *Preceded by a tour of the show by artist Stuart Ringholt 6-8pm*  
(*The artist will be naked. Those who wish to join the tour must also be naked. Adults only.* 2012)

In this recent performative piece the revelation of the nude body in a public space functions as an affective and intimate encounter, designed to reduce the distancing that normally occurs in formal institutional art spaces, and soften the barriers existing between the triangular relationship of artist, artwork and audience. It was through this kind of triangular relationship that my artwork *Weight and Sea* was able to explore ways to allow the body to become visible and no longer silenced.

## 6.2 Seeing shame

As mentioned, *Weight and Sea* took a private indoor task – weighing the body on the bathroom scales – and inserted it into an outdoor public arena. The activity of weighing remained the same, but with the displacement or transfer from a private to a very public environment, a new set of responses and reactions arose. Something very intimate was revealed. The placement of the scales at a popular beach broke through the often secret, ritualistic behaviour that surrounds the act of weighing one's self and of having this weight known to others and exposed audiences to a range of potential feelings and thoughts about their relationships to their bodies.



Figure 28: Ella Dreyfus, *Weight and Sea*, 2005, wood, rubber, electronic scale, computer, screen.

Superficially, the work addressed the wide-spread obsession with personal body weight and the anxiety caused by the pressure to reach unattainable archetypes of physical perfection, that can affect many people's lives. But more deeply, it emphasised shame as both a tangible affect and as a process for working through the very experience of shame. This is supported by Gaffney who has argued that the affect of shame could be a catalyst *beyond* shame, as well as "a mechanism for thinking about identity, desire, embodiment, relationships and social inclusion/exclusion" (2008:xi).

Moreover, *Weight and Sea* set out to confront the taboo of looking at others, especially their body size and shape. Generally, looking is not a taboo, as bodies, through body language, clothes, hairstyles and other fashions point to the desire to be seen, noticed and approved. People may or may not dress to avoid or attract attention to varying degrees, and according to culturally determined identifications. Indeed we:

... wear our identity as both a costume and a body, the former varied as systems of presentation and the far more secret body thereby cloaked to protect us from shame (Nathanson in Munt, 2008:xiv).

It is commonly considered shameful to peer at others and we are taught from an early age that it is 'rude to stare', in fact, we are often shamed by our parents for doing so (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995). Therefore one looks, but not for too long and thus develops furtive ways of seeing without being seen, without causing shame to others, or bringing shame upon ourselves (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995).

Sedgwick and Frank maintain that we are unaware of the extremes this taboo is taken to, as we quite naturally look at others every day. But, as they suggest, individuals are good at short bursts of looking, but generally cannot hold eye contact for long periods without turning

away in discomfort, breaching the shame/intimacy barrier. They claim that “the taboo on mutual looking is more stringent even than the taboo on sexuality” (1995:147). In *Weight and Sea*, I invited audiences to become implicated in a subtle exchange of shame-based looking. Here they were not only caught between the shame of looking, but also in the shame of being ashamed to do so. Further, when they were standing on the scales, they experienced the shame of being looked at by strangers. In this artwork, the taboo on intimate looking was reinforced by the mutuality of the experience for audiences. Fortnum summarises this in the following way:

The artist seeks to set in place a number of possible viewing experiences, through which the viewer will not passively uncover meaning, but will actively construct interpretations. ...the artist sets out to ‘court’, if not control the viewer, placing her at the centre of the work, attempting to enact meaning through her experience of the work (2004:142).



Figure 29: Ella Dreyfus, *Weight and Sea*, Tamarama Beach, 2005.

### 6.3 From spectator to ‘spectated’

By focussing on the embodied experience, *Weight and Sea* placed content over form as a conceptually based, multi-dimensional work of art. As a minimalist structure it combined a roughly built, wooden platform, in which was hidden an industrial-strength scale, linked via wireless technology to a hidden computer. The computer was located in a nearby council worker’s office and was fitted with extension cables which were attached to a large light emitting diode (LED) display board on the rooftop of the office, which also housed the Tamarama beach cafe. The red wooden platform was deliberately constructed in an under-finished way, which left a psychological space in which the viewer could assert their subjectivity and, by inhabiting the work, creates their own meaning. It engaged their sensory perceptions and emphasized the transformative possibilities for a participatory experience of art.

When viewers stood on the platform, they had to *wait and see*, for the display of their numerical weight to appear on the digital screen, situated approximately 20 metres away. The bright red digital numerals were easily visible for 150 metres across Tamarama beach, from headland to headland down to the ocean’s shore. The work included the role of the landscape, seascape, and weather, and as a social and political performance, it was carried out publicly.





Figure 30: Ella Dreyfus, *Weight and Sea*, Tamarama Beach, 2005.

In *Weight and Sea*, the spectators' bodies and emotions were the essential raw material that activated the work. Initially, the audience needed an intellectual understanding of the task, for, as Oakley argues "cognition is part of emotion" (1993:21). Once the mental understanding took place, it was quickly followed by a set of possible emotional responses that could give viewers feelings both in and about their bodies. Then a number of choices opened up before them. These choices appeared to be based on highly individual, personal reactions to the artwork, including a range of affective responses such as shyness, embarrassment, interest, disinterest, enjoyment or a combination of these feelings. After they made a decision, they would either walk past the artwork without engaging with it, pause to watch others using it, or join in and be weighed themselves.

The artwork was situated on a cement boardwalk which acted as a border between the sand, grass and the pathways leading down to the beach, in a transitional zone where people moved from clothed to the semi-naked environment of the beach itself. It was a border that demarcated the line between dressed and undressed, covered and uncovered, body hidden and body seen.

The platform was also strategically placed near the Tamarama Beach café, where people purchased and consumed food and drinks, which provided a further level of conceptualization linking shame to food choices and body weight. The café tables were separated from the artwork on a higher level, enabling people to see others being weighed in public, whilst they sat, watched, ate and drank.

As an ephemeral piece, it came into existence only when someone stepped up to the platform where the numbers came and went, and did not last long. It was ‘all over’ the minute someone got off the scales and the numerals returned to zero. The computer program was designed to play with people’s expectations and emotions, as the numbers fluctuated up and down in different formations before it rested on the subject’s actual real weight. Numbers on scales often assume a disproportionate power which can affect a person’s mood, self-esteem, and set a positive or negative tone to their day, or in some cases, to their life.

Numbers would change quickly or very slowly, bouncing or climbing from highs to lows before settling on the correct weight and flashing brightly. Following this, the screen went blank, indicating to the participant that the weighing was complete. At this point they left the platform, making way for the next person to have a go. At peak periods, such as weekends and early afternoons, queues formed as viewers waited to take their turn on the scales.



Figure 31: Ella Dreyfus, *Weight and Sea*, Tamarama Beach, 2005

As each person stepped onto the platform they became the centre of attention and the meaning of the work was activated by them and upon their body. By spontaneously participating, they moved from spectator to the pivotal site of *spectated*, and simultaneously occupied the positions of both subject and object, in a performative role. Consequently the axis of power and control shifted, and the conventional roles of subject/viewer were conflated and fused into one, as the viewer became the object, subject and observer *of themselves*. *Weight and Sea* enacted emotional affectivity as it was felt in the mind as well as in the body of the subject/viewer.

Examples of body changes experienced by the subject/viewer might include palpitations, quickened breath, blushing, or ‘butterflies’ in the stomach. Indeed, these are typical of responses to feelings such as shame and embarrassment, which according to Oakley (1993) may seem similar, but are not the same emotion.

In *Weight and Sea*, shame could be felt by the subject/viewer when their body weight was revealed to themselves and seen as ‘wanting’. Any strong emotions could be seen by other viewers in the vicinity, which often numbered tens, hundreds or even thousands of people. Nothing was hidden, the body was fully seen, and if they felt inadequate, their shame was palpable.

How safe was it for viewers to participate in this work? Without the relative anonymity and comfort of the artist’s studio or the formal containment of an art gallery, the viewer was left *Unbound* (Stenglin, 2009a), face-to-face with any defensive strategies that might normally be triggered to cover up any overwhelming feelings. In some cases, this artwork had the power to propel the viewer into a shame reaction, to be reminded of their failure to achieve the

'perfect' body, of not looking good enough to be at the beach, of being too fat, too thin, too short, too tall; the shame of one's identity being exposed and contested in public. However, not everyone felt inadequate: some saw it as another form of gratifying public exposure, some were amused and others were totally indifferent. People's experiences and sensitivities to shame are bound to be different and subject to their own individual histories, attitudes and affective reactions. As Sedgwick and Frank argue:

... whether one experiences shame or distress or fear or enjoyment in a given situation is in part a function of the relative weights and probabilities assigned to different kinds of in-put information (1995:165).

This admission of intense personal shame, which Spence and Martin (1995) suggest is internalized as a form of negative self-image, is not something most people find comfortable or are willing to admit, especially in front of strangers. *Weight and Sea* also proffered a therapeutic space, created by the *artist/therapist*, from which the *spectator/patient*, might play and perform aspects of their own subjectivity. Phototherapy, a method which was discussed in Chapter 4, was conducted in an environment of the utmost privacy as collaboration between two people, one acting as the patient, the other as the therapist needed strict privacy and confidentiality for emotions from unconscious to conscious memories to surface. *Weight and Sea* was deliberately conceived to operate in the most non-private space possible; the setting thus conveyed a sense of insecurity and emotional danger, yet, also constructing a social place where communication and other relational exchanges between spectators could occur.



Figure 32: Ella Dreyfus, *Weight and Sea*, Tamarama Beach, 2005.

Because of this aspect of performativity involving the audience as both subject and viewer, in *Weight and Sea* the artist no longer controlled the outcome. Whilst I was responsible for the concept and construction of the work, I relinquished my usual central function as director and responsibility for completing the work shifted to the subject. I was responsible for offering audiences the possibility of activating the work by choosing to participate of their own volition. Furthermore, this new dynamic removed my earlier problematic of objectifying the photographic models and my feelings of shame about ‘using’ them. Putting the onus on the viewer to make the decision to expose themselves was a liberating solution to what had become a persistent problem in my photographic work.





Figure 33.and Figure 34: Ella Dreyfus, *Weight and Sea*, Tamarama Beach, 2005.

## 6.4 Voyeurs of shame

As viewers gathered around the platform to watch the subject/viewer's weight displayed, they became voyeurs; conversely, they may have experienced a shame-humiliation affect of looking at, then looking away from, the person on the scale, who was experiencing their own reactions of shame, pleasure, contempt or indifference in this display of their body. Sedgwick and Adam succinctly described this dynamic, whereby:

The humiliated one under these conditions still wishes to look at the other with interest or enjoyment, and to be looked upon with interest or enjoyment in a relationship of mutuality. It is just this tension between the positive affect and the heightened negative awareness of the face of the self that gives the experience of humiliation its peculiar poignancy. In this case the residual positive wish is not only to look at the other rather than to look down, but to have the other look with interest or enjoyment rather than with derision (1995:138).

As passing spectators paused to watch others interacting with *Weight and Sea*, it was possible to see waves of emotion pass through them; with faces flushed, they stared, whispered, giggled or looked embarrassed, and seemed to move quickly away. Some bowed their heads in shame as though they had secrets to hide, compounding their expression of shame by expressing it through both their facial expression and their bodily movement (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995).

For the spectator, the work called attention to something that may have been a source of great shame, or perhaps indifference, pride or joy, but in any case, would have normally remained a secret. And, as Probyn (2005) argues shame makes people want to cover themselves, hide or disappear, even though there may be no place to hide.



One feeling that stood out was that manifested as a ‘squirm’. Bennett argues that the squirm is evidence of both feeling and knowing (2005). This kind of affective encounter, as an aesthetic experience, cannot be reduced to a form of representation, yet it “... serves to register subjective processes that exceed our capacity to represent them” (Bennett, 2005:23).

## 6.5 Surveillance of the self

Feelings of inadequacy in failing to attain physical perfection are fuelled by anxieties generated within contemporary society. The desire to control body weight is driven by a fear of exclusion from normal life, as I discussed in Chapter Three. In Western culture, we fear fat people and see them as ugly (McDonald, 2001). Ownership of a thin and fit body bestows credibility and represents self-discipline, and a self-righteous morality which gets converted into “a passport to social and cultural power” (McDonald, 2001:2). However, to maintain this position requires a great degree of control and self-discipline from the individual. Exerting control over the body can bring rewards, approval and success, including, as was apparent at Tamarama Beach, an opportunity to show off the ‘finished product’ in front of an audience. This is one of the reasons that this particular beach in Sydney’s Eastern Suburbs was a suitable location for *Weight and Sea*. Known to locals as *Glam-arama* beach it represents the quintessential Australian beach culture; home to a fierce competition that takes place every summer when the beach is transformed into a theatre, and a fashionable market place for the parade of the ‘perfect (and imperfect) bodies’.

The beach is a place of leisure, yet as *Weight and Sea* intended to reveal, the beach is also a place of tension, where acute performance anxiety about the body can be experienced and felt. *Weight and Sea* tapped into the various ‘gazes’ and ‘voices’ which control and define our identities, thereby construing a process of ‘unconsciousness-raising’ (Spence, 1995:166). Theorists Donald Winnicott and Michel Foucault each argued that gazes can be loving or benevolent, but are also often intrusive and surveilling (Spence, 1995:167). Foucault (1977) recognized the state-imposed practices that force our “docile bodies” to conform to rigid standards of discipline, including the high degree of self-examination and self-reproach.

He argued that institutional rules condemn us to become the ruthless guardians of our own identities and we apply strict surveillance techniques to our physical selves, monitoring our behaviour, appearance and movements. *Weight and Sea* tapped into this self-surveillance.

Earlier feminist writers Susan Bartky (1988) and Susan Bordo (1995) expanded upon Foucault's observations, concluding that these disciplinary practices exert extraordinary pressure on women to conform to and perform the aesthetic regimes of womanhood and beauty. Bordo (1995) reinterpreted the slogan 'the tyranny of slenderness' (Chernin, 1981) as alluding to the sense of failure that occurs when women are shamed or humiliated for their lack of success in meeting society's standards of physical conformity. While Bordo and Bartky argue the case for woman, Elizabeth Grosz (1994) maintains that men are not exempt from the self-production, observation and surveillance that women undergo.



Figure 35: Ella Dreyfus, *Weight and Sea*, Tamarama Beach, 2005.

The focus on weight and body image betrays a fundamental fear of exclusion, of not fitting in, of being either too big or too small to pass in normative social conditions. It runs the risk of verging too close to the territory of abjection, where the body becomes repulsive, filling one with horror and shame. In other words, it is intimately tied up with our sense of self and our individual subjectivity (O'Flynn, 2004). Not surprisingly, body weight becomes a secret, often known only to oneself, a doctor or personal trainer.



Figure 36: Ella Dreyfus, *Weight and Sea*, Tamarama Beach, 2005.

In *Weight and Sea*, active participants confronted their own subjectivity about the size and weight of their bodies which played on fears of being “outed”, because their weight would be revealed to themselves and strangers. The artwork did not just provide this information in order to humiliate, rather, it was a “deliberate provocation” to encourage audiences in recognizing their own resistances, as Spence and Martin also did in Phototherapy. Although many viewers appeared to experience negative affect as they stood on the scale, others seemed pleased with themselves when the numbers appeared on the screen, taking great pleasure in being looked at and being seen to be in control of their bodies.

The double concept of *viewer as performer* and *artist as performer* constituted one of the main objectives of this artwork. *Weight and Sea* not only functioned to deliberately disrupt

the borders between private and public behaviours for spectators, it also challenged my own feelings about control of the body and challenged me to reveal hidden aspects of myself.

## 6.6 Performativity and play

Whilst addressing issues of visibility and the un-seen in others through photography, I had for the most part, buried my own shame. Consequently this artwork allowed my body image anxiety and discomfort to emerge, exposing and enacting a cathartic breakdown of a very personal taboo. As part of the methodology of *Weight and Sea*, I was weighed on the scales hundreds of times. With each weigh-in, my shame response and embarrassment decreased, and at the conclusion of the exhibition I had completely overcome any need to hide my weight (which is not to say I was satisfied or accepted it, although I lost 2 kilos over the duration of the exhibition). When I engaged as subject/viewer in the artwork, I also let the audience see into a very intimate part of myself. I committed an act of self-revelation, performing my subjectivity, sharing private knowledge in public, and engaging and empathizing with the audience. Within the work, I executed a multitude of roles including artist, hostess, photographer, subject and onlooker, and performing all these roles gave rise to a range of emotions, including shame.



Figure 37: Ella Dreyfus, Ella on the scales, *Weight and Sea*, Tamarama Beach, 2005.

At various intervals throughout the exhibition, I entered the work in a performative role by inserting myself in the guise of a game show hostess. Dressed in an outfit that matched the colour of the platform, I chatted, connected and inveigled audience members to participate in the artwork, in a performance that became a pleasurable, humorous component of the artwork. The performative element was not pre-meditated or part of the original design; rather, it evolved spontaneously during the making of the work. In some respects, it was a continuation of my earlier practice of holding ‘residence’ in the gallery, but in this case I took the idea further by appearing as a costumed character and public persona.



Figure 38: Ella Dreyfus, Ella as hostess, *Weight and Sea*, Tamarama Beach, 2005.

At other times I reverted to an anonymous position as observer and photographer, where I watched and recorded the audience's responses to the works. The participants exhibited a range of responses as they moved through the space, performing with artwork, in an improvised manner.

Humour played an intended and equally important part. As audiences faced their shame, insecurities and embarrassment in front of others, laughter became a release valve, a strategic device to "bring spectators into an unfamiliar territory and enable them to communicate across cultural differences," (Meskimmon, 2003:47) or, to "laugh off" their discomfort (Knight, 2012). In the case of *Weight and Sea*, audiences communicated across the range of their physical differences.

There was a deliberate sense of playfulness in the appearance and actions of the hostess, where humour was used not only to diffuse tension but to delight and entertain audiences. As individuals understood the fun inherent in these activities, they wanted to play the game. Importantly, the work made a claim for personal empowerment of the participants if they were willing to reveal their weight and thus free themselves, if only momentarily, from the grip of body obsession. This interplay of play as satisfying and risky is articulated by Rosy Martin (2001). In writing of the performative body in Phototherapy, Martin notes the importance of play to re-enact troubling scenes, try different roles, and explore desires and fears. She refers to Winnicott's theory of play as essentially being about the trust between, in the first instance, a mother and baby, and later as a form of intense creativity. The photographic documentation of *Weight and Sea* shows adults and children as they played with the artwork and invested their energies by linking with each other to create exciting and meaningful experiences – managing both pleasurable/playful and uncomfortable affect.



In *Weight and Sea*, the boundaries between object and representation coalesced in the bodily presence of the viewers, transforming them into living sculptures. This experience created a tension between the proximity of the intimate, private, domestic activity and the open, public, performance space.

## 6.7 A personal interface

*Weight and Sea* was an interactive art work that provided a *personal interface*. The display screen changed according to the individual's weight and thus functioned to create personal meaning, as it was actually about the subject/viewer themselves. From the many thousands of people who comprised the audience, to the particular individual, being weighed became highly personalised in one swift act of revealing an intimate, private piece of information.

*Weight and Sea* constructed a live social element that positioned the viewer, self-consciously, in the work so that they became implicated in “a complex and mobile spatial interaction” (Meskimmon, 2003:3). The artwork was in a constant state of change as new people arrived, took part in the work and others left; thus completing it momentarily. This has been called ‘ambient affiliation’ and refers to the way people come together in a fleeting, affective encounter (Zappavigna, 2011). While the work operated in real time, it was never fixed in time, shifting with the weather conditions, crowds and audiences’ interest and involvement. Their physical participation activated the work, *while they became the work*.



Figure 39 and Figure 40: Ella Dreyfus, *Weight and Sea*, Tamarama Beach, 2005.

The concept of the three-way relationship between the artist, artwork and audience underwent further development in *Weight and Sea*. This development concerns the affective encounter that occurred when the experience of intimacy between the artist, artwork and audience were co-joined through the revelation of body shame in public. As can be seen in Figure 41 below, this progression is configured by another triangle which helps to depict how the emotion of shame was shared by the artist with the audience and particularly with viewers who put themselves into the artwork by becoming the subject. Similarly to the triangles in Figure 20 (page 67) and Figure 22 (page 81), the triangle in Figure 41 has the artist at the top, with the audience at the bottom right. While the artwork is still at the bottom left, it is not conflated with the subject, as in *Weight and Sea*, these merged to become intertwined as the subject entered and engaged with the artwork. In the centre of the triangle is the emotion shame, which is what is seen to unite the artist with the audience and the subject/artwork. But as can be seen in Figure 41, the vehicle is intimacy — that is, intimacy enables the mutuality between audience, subject/artwork and artist.

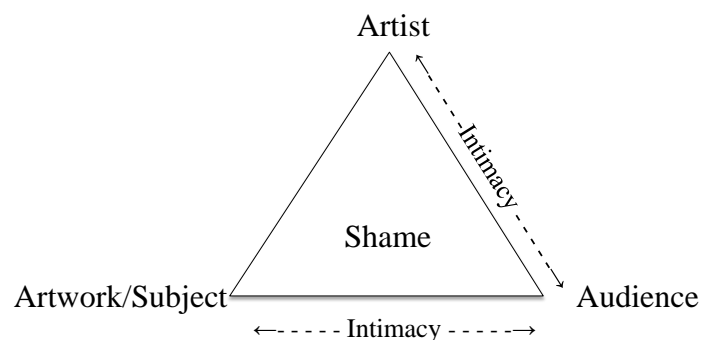


Figure 41: Artist, Artwork/Subject, Audience, Shame and Intimacy

Thus, by experiencing the artwork, intimacy could become a conduit for an affective aesthetic of embodiment, where the affect of shame would be felt. Such a somatic encounter produced thought, emotion and feeling in the audience. Importantly, the activation of affect is not, as Bennett (2005) points out, an end in itself, but preferably it is a process for inspiring new thoughts about the issue being raised by the artwork. In this case, the artwork brings about the disruption of private acts in public spaces, the questioning of cultural norms and ideals and the feeling of shame brought about by being subjected to these norms, whilst engendering an aesthetic of intimacy.



Figure 42: Ella Dreyfus, *Weight and Sea*, Tamarama Beach, 2005.

*Weight and Sea* used many different elements and modalities of knowing, from the textual or numerical, to the physical, the cognitive and the emotional, all operating to create a co-existing dialogue between them. In the rich interplay of intimacy between the participants, their bodies and emotional reactions, the numbers on the screen were rendered strangely disembodied, and this merged into an abstract form of representation, thus, in some sense, removing the presence of the individualized, personal body. The screen's numerical texts took the place of the camera, representing an alternative portrait of the participants.

My awareness of the body's displacement grew more interesting as the exhibition period continued, and led to a further conceptual shift in my designs for future artworks. It served to constitute a new form of affective resonance whereby language and text, rather than bodies, would be foregrounded as the primary tool of collaboration, communication, cognition and intimacy. This was a passageway to an innovative, expanded methodology for the second artwork of my PhD research, *Scumbag*, involving a deeper level of enquiry into shame, intimacy and the unspoken language of emotional trauma, as experienced in privacy of domestic spaces. This artwork is described and analysed in the following chapter.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN: *SCUMBAG*<sup>21</sup>

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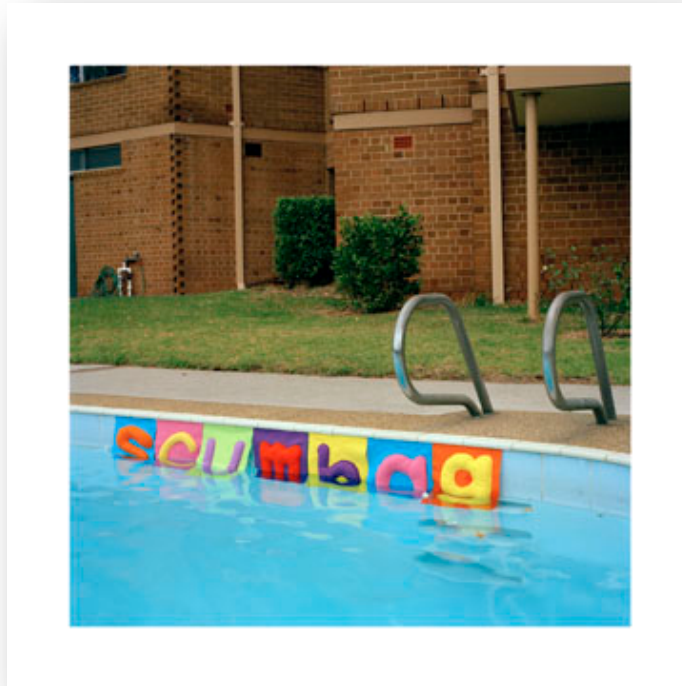


Figure 43: Ella Dreyfus, *Scumbag*, 2008, Chromogenic print.

Pain effectively becomes visible through the structuring of proximal relationships between bodies within a designated space... The spectator must make sense of the space... who are the people that occupy this space on terms that make it appear this way? – to whom does space *feel* this way? (Kennedy and Bennett, 2003:177)

Personal testimony as a source for art is an important legacy of the feminist movement, enabling an exploration of strong emotional content (Lippard, 1976). In the second series of artworks which are the focus of this chapter, my concerns are on emotional trauma and domestic violations and the way they linger in the atmosphere, embodying and inhabiting the

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<sup>21</sup> Sections of this chapter were presented at the Inter-Disciplinary.Net 8<sup>th</sup> Global Conference: *Violence and the Contexts of Hostility*, Budapest, Hungary, 2009.

specific locations in which they occur. In particular, *Scumbag* explores and articulates the often unspoken, unacknowledged and painful feelings that occur in familial relationships, and it is my attempt to articulate the unspeakable – the feelings, language and shame of domestic conflicts. This constitutes a further shift in my art practice where disembodiment comes to the fore of the work.

The notion of revealing or uncovering the hidden is of paramount importance to my art practice and my understanding of how an artwork reveals and reflects upon intimate and hidden aspects of human physical, social and emotional conditions. In *Scumbag*, the borders between the public and private spheres are deliberately disrupted, using language, specific locations and text as tools of mediation.

The source of inspiration for the artwork *Scumbag* came from some highly-charged personal experiences and the desire to break the silence and shame that surrounded them. In 2003 my immediate family experienced a traumatic rupture when my marriage dissolved and the family separated. I was estranged from my home and children and suffered intense feelings of isolation, shame and despair. In 2005 my family fortunately reconciled and reunited which started the long healing process of returning to a place of emotional well-being and shared intimacy.

## 7.1 Representing trauma in art

Art has been an effective medium through which to give voice to the complex emotions and memories that relate to the real or perceived experience of family traumas and the shame these may engender. Further, the act of unveiling the intimate and hidden has a tradition within contemporary artwork (Bradley et al., 2001).

There exist certain monitored boundaries of representation, such as the sexual and emotional abuse of children and domestic violations, and artists who challenge them may invoke social penalties and a sense of unease for audiences.<sup>22</sup> However, in the representation of traumatic memories or events contemporary art is an appropriate a medium for society to engage with, think about, represent and communicate the experience of trauma and shame (Bradley et al., 2001).

Transgressive art that questions the assumptions and standards of society places the viewers in an uncomfortable position, as they are caught between the voyeuristic pleasures of being privy to another's personal pain, and the possible sense of repulsion that this knowledge may bring. When an audience is surrounded with visual imagery that evokes the 'unmentionable', even if nothing explicit is seen, strong affective responses may be triggered (Fortnum, 2004).

Some artists, who have foregrounded the deeply personal in their work, have engendered their own unique visual language with which to convey intimate, private experiences as well

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<sup>22</sup> I encountered certain difficulties in the exhibition of my series of photographs of young boys *Under Twelves*, which led to some images being censored and removed from circulation. This incident took place prior to the furore over Bill Henson's photographs of young people resulting in his exhibition being closed by police and artworks removed in 2008. This resulted in widespread debate on censorship, pornography and obscenity (Marr 2008). Since then new protocols regarding the appropriate use of children in artworks were proposed by the Australia Council for the Arts and the National Association for the Visual Arts.



as more universal themes of trauma. Artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Tracey Moffat and Jane Orleman have each endeavoured to find their own language with which to communicate affect and sensation, which has expanded our capacity for engaging with representation, attempting to register the impact of traumatic memory (Bennett, 2005:2), or shame memory, which is a memory that can evoke a physical imprint of a traumatic experience (Delbo, 1995:xiv). These artists' engagement with psychic and bodily memories that reveal intimate aspects of the self embed them in the framework of an aesthetic of intimacy.

Bourgeois, Moffat and Orleman reference the body in emotionally charged ways, creating an affective encounter that grants agency to the experience of the audience. When the visual language of the artwork cohabits with affective sensations on the body of the viewer they are implicated as witnesses. For example, in the group exhibition *Trauma*<sup>23</sup> a range of contemporary artists offered representations of traumatic events using a combination of verbal and visual means to describe the impact of different types of trauma, at both the individual and the collective levels. The curators of the exhibition stressed the importance of the ways artists respond to traumatic events through “the provision of a space in which to think about the events they describe, an image within which meaning may begin to collect” (Bradley et al., 2001). This exploration of the juncture of bodily and emotional communication between the spectator and the artwork is also one of the key components of the exhibition *Scumbag*.

Janet Marstine has argued that the boundaries of emotionally explosive subjects such as the sexual abuse of children are difficult terrain. She asks “how can childhood sexual assault be represented? Can it be represented at all? Is the art of trauma an oxymoron?” (Marstine,

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<sup>23</sup> The exhibition *Trauma* was exhibited at the Hayward Gallery, London in 2001.

2002:631) Marstine refers to the post-Holocaust problematic of the aestheticization of traumatic events through Theodor Adorno's often quoted pronouncement that it was impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz (Arato and Gebhardt, 1982). Yet there is no doubt that artists still want to find ways to represent the traumatic and unspeakable horrors of human experience. The taboos that surrounded the depiction of war atrocities have now been broken, as the last two decades have shown. One example is the landmark exhibition and publication *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, held at the Jewish Museum in New York in 2001. In this exhibition thirteen contemporary artists, most of whom were descendants from families of both Nazi victims and perpetrators, showed art "that challenged the very idea of the Holocaust monument" and asked the viewer to "look deeply into human behaviour" (Kleeblatt 2001).

Artists such as Pam Skelton, a Jewish woman of the post-World War Two generation, found "the pressure to reveal undisclosed or suppressed histories" motivated her as she was living with unspoken or ignored family traumas (Betterton, 2004). Her need to remember her family's hidden painful experiences of the Holocaust was a powerful motivation for her art. For painter Lubaina Himid, whose works are engaged with revealing or uncovering a history that is sometimes hidden or neglected (Himid, 2004), the connections between the visual and the remembered were critical. Her question that asks how people escape from danger that occurs in a safe place (2004) became most pertinent when applied to the perceived safety of children in domestic situations where abuse is present. This informed the methodology of my artworks in *Scumbag* where my aim was to create imagery that did not merely reproduce personal or historical narratives, nor was my aim to be overtly sensational; rather, I aimed to

evoke and suggest the physical, psychological and emotional experience of shameful family traumas.<sup>24</sup>

The re-imagining or re-working of personal traumas by artists can have a therapeutic value which may enable an artist to perform a catharsis of their own situation. The artists discussed here are concerned with the representation of the private, unspoken and unseen in childhood traumas, and use powerful visual languages of art to affectively embody emotion, intimacy and shame.

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<sup>24</sup> A personal example of living with the silence of unspoken traumas included the loss of my family members who were murdered by the Nazis in the gas chambers. I grew up with a father and grandmother who were unable to speak of their experiences as a Jewish family in Germany who survived the Holocaust.

## 7.2 Raw Emotion and Catharsis

Louise Bourgeois is a key example in the visual arts of discourse surrounding shame and intimacy as she used the narrative of psycho-biography to communicate effectively with audiences. Her brilliant application of visually embodied strategies in sculptures, installations and drawings has contributed significantly to the development of feminist theory and an aesthetic of intimacy. She states that art helped her to resolve her own personal feelings and conflicts, as she endeavoured to give form to her emotions (Matt, 2005). She was also conscious of how her audiences responded to her art, stating that:

My work disturbs people and nobody wants to be disturbed. They are not fully aware of the effect my work has on them, but they know it is disturbing (Crone and Schaesberg, 1998:11).

Bourgeois' notion of *femme maison*<sup>25</sup> or 'woman house', enabled her to create dynamic visual representations of shameful traumas. Further, she recognised that the body could be a site where aggression and pain are located. Her sculptural work has been described as emotionally cathartic and as a "geometry of feelings; a new equation between nakedness and raw emotion" (Meyer-Thoss and Bourgeois, 1992:61).

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<sup>25</sup> As a concept, *femme maison* is one of Bourgeois' greatest contributions to modernist art, as she has given the history of modern art 'a theory of the maternal subject' in which her sculptures and installations have embodied what Bourgeois herself terms the 'fantastic reality' of her art.

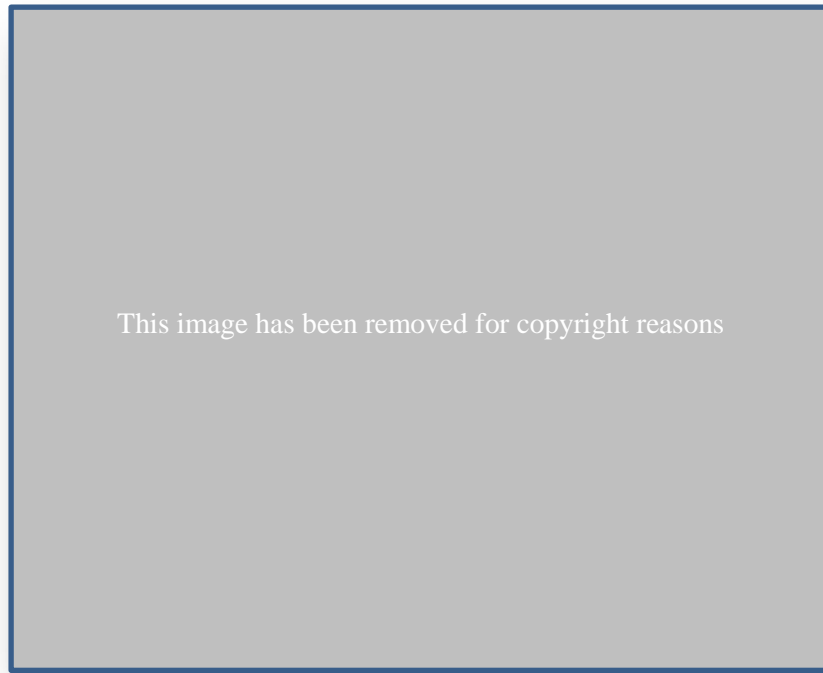


Figure 44: Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 2005, felted fabric.

Bourgeois' oeuvre represents a combination of domestic, autobiographical and psychoanalytical spaces which interrogated her anxieties and exposed them in public (Bal, 2002). The collection of works known as the *Cells* created a sense of claustrophobia in a confined environment, reminiscent of traumatic domestic disturbances. They alluded to the scenes of her family history and her attempt to come to terms with her troubled past (Keller, 2004). The *Cells* made allusions to women's bodies and their relationship to the home, and were constructed in such a way as to invite voyeuristic readings by viewers that evoked a sense of being privy to the artists' own memories and dreams. This led Bal to refer to Bourgeois as a builder and to argue that "figuratively, the *Cells* are houses of the mind, through the childhood memories they obviously house" (2002:184). The viewers are thus witnesses and invited to enter into a space of intimacy, where an affective and relational encounter between the artist, viewer and artwork becomes possible, an example can be seen

in the Cell *Red Room (Parents)* Figure 45 in which a large double bed is surrounded by a series of closed doors, creating a claustrophobic and intimate matrimonial environment.

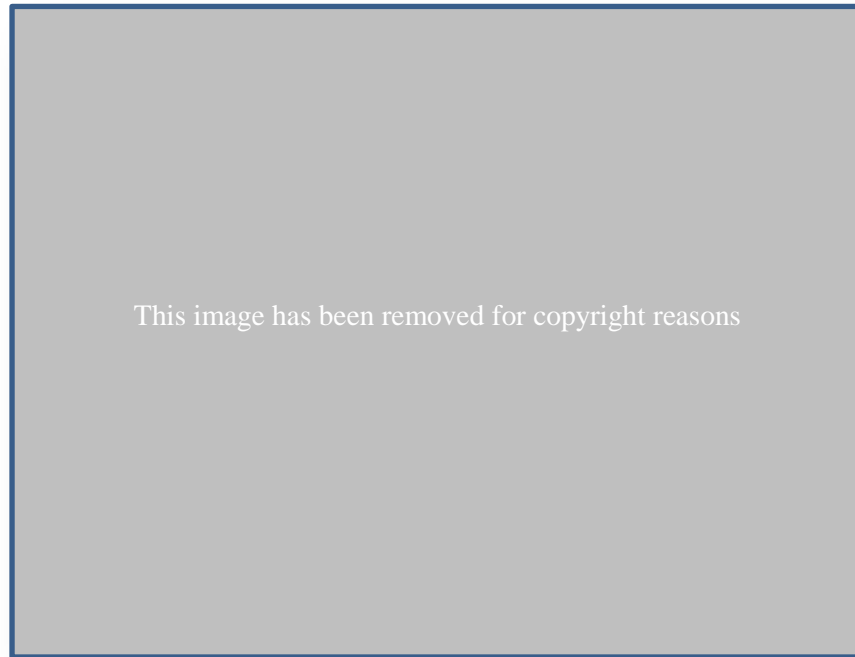


Figure 45: Louise Bourgeois *Red Room (Parents)*, 1994, wood, fabric, objects.

Her text-based fabric works, such as *Untitled (I have been to hell and back)* (1995) and *Seven in Bed* (2001) employed emotionally powerful language to express traumas,<sup>26</sup> Her use of gendered techniques of weaving and sewing contributed to the uncovering of unconscious layers of shame and trauma, as Pollock notes:

These materials carry into an image hitherto unthought or unspoken possibilities of other organizations of meaning and subjectivity that also

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<sup>26</sup> Prior to Bourgeois' death in 2010 she collaborated with Tracey Emin to produce a series of prints and drawings called *Do Not Abandon Me*. Emin was quoted in the Art Newspaper, saying that "I feel Louise was literally holding a baton that I should take."

allow for other pleasures and other conduits of trauma into memory and representation (1999:100).

Likewise, *Scumbag* juxtaposed gendered techniques of hand-stitched texts placed in site specific, domestic environments, where they performed as confronting agencies to explore notions of shame, intimacy and trauma.

### 7.3 Behind closed doors

The artworks *Weight and Sea* and *Scumbag* deal with the hidden histories of everyday life in comparable ways to some of Tracey Moffatt's photographs. Like my work, Moffatt's artwork established a tension between the raw, painful experiences that can trigger affects of shame and humiliation, by exposing harrowing narratives that placed viewers in close proximity to their own emotions. For example, Moffatt successfully activated these kinds of stories in the series *Scarred for Life I* (1994) and its sequel *Scarred for Life II* (1999) which are set in suburban Australia. Moffatt made works that expose traditionally unmentionable subjects such as alcoholism, sexual abuse and family dysfunction. In these situations, children are often forced to grow up prematurely (Hall, 2001). Moffatt's works are an enactment of these kinds of childhood traumas, which are often inaccessible because children lack the words to speak of their formative experiences.

Moffatt's photographs comprise a series of constructed tableaux in which actors perform scenes which draw on the uneasy feelings of the metamorphosis of adolescence and the disquieting affects of the complex inter-relationships between parents, siblings and friends. They are not overly explicit, in that they do not depict violent or horrific imagery. Neither are they the conduits for further traumatising in themselves, which as Bennett suggests, can sometimes cause further degrees of trauma if the artist 're-subjects' the viewer to their own post-traumatic memory<sup>27</sup> (2002). She uses fleeting fragments of imagery, by staging everyday kinds of domestic violations, casting an atmosphere of intense emotionality that is "thick with mood, memory, atmosphere, association" (Martin, 1998:15). At times, these stories are told with a dry sense of humour. Her methodology encompasses close-ups and tight camera

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angles which invite the viewer to enter into intimate private spaces, to see beyond the myths of happy childhood, where the home operates as a safe haven. Audiences become witnesses to private, forbidden and shameful encounters that are usually hidden from view. As Moffat replicates these everyday 'tragic' mise-en-scenes, she is well aware of the irony implied by the reduction of such a serious subject matter to a universalized and dramatic sameness (McDonald, 1995b).



This image has been removed for copyright reasons

Figure 46: Tracy Moffatt, *Heart Attack*, 1970, 1994, offset print.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

The interplay of such provocative imagery with shame can be seen in the photograph *Heart Attack*, 1979, where viewers witness a troubling scene in a bedroom: Moffatt's camera takes the position of the voyeur, stealing a glance at a man who is physically abusing a young girl, as she tries to resist him. The caption reads "She glimpsed her father belting the girl from down the street. That day he died of a heart attack." (1994)

In this unsettling photograph, Moffat establishes an overwhelming sense of danger, in which the father's nude body is suggestive of an impending sexual act combined with violence. As Hall concluded, "we know something very wrong has happened here" (2001:46). Moffatt's dramatic narratives highlight the insidious way a secretive, shameful event can turn into a trauma by exposing audiences to glimpses of the events in intimate and voyeuristic ways.

*Scarred for Life I* and *II* are sinister and disturbing depictions of domestic dramas from 'behind closed doors' that need not be read as a process of 'expressive' or cathartic representations of the artist's personal experience of trauma. The matter-of-fact language used in each image "evokes the worst aspects of suburbia but establishes a tragicomic poignancy" (McDonald, 1995a). Moffatt's aim is to provide spectators with images, supported by the narrative texts of her explicit titles, from which to view "the essentially voyeuristic business of peeking into private places" (Abramovic, 1997:13).

Likewise, in *Scumbag*, I too create artworks that deal with everyday traumas that occur in ordinary suburban lives and places, however my narratives are drawn from dialogues, thoughts and words that evoke the trauma of shameful episodes, presented in the form of children's colourful educational toys.

## 7.4 Traumatic Realism

The third artist I review here is Jane Orleman, who actively engenders narratives that portray the bodily and psychic experience of being a survivor of incest, rape and sexual abuse. Her works explicitly refer to violence and terror and incite recognition by viewers of the haunting familiarity of these types of events, which have often been suppressed by both the victims and the society in which they live. In Orleman's case, the genre of the self-portrait is the testimonial platform with which she seeks to show how trauma is unable to be resolved (Marstine, 2002). The direct, ironic and sometimes humorous approach exhibited in these paintings use a traumatic realism to confront the everyday, hidden aspects of child sexual abuse.

Regarding the nature of trauma, Caruth (1995) argues that traumatic events have impacts precisely because they cannot be simply located at the time it occurs, and often appears belatedly. She stressed the importance of exploring the 'truth' of the trauma, not merely as a 'straight' narrative, but also in the space of the therapeutic session, where more complex layers of telling can help resolve the 'irresolvable'.<sup>29</sup> Orleman's work has elicited strong responses from some art institutions, labelling her "that child-abuse artist" in addition to her work being marginalised by the larger world of feminist practice (Marstine, 2002).

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<sup>29</sup> Orleman embraced this theory by devising an affective methodology of painting the shameful and traumatic childhood experiences, which included analysing the paintings with her doctor in their private therapy sessions. Further, she took a personal risk by exposing the intimate works to a wider audience, which her doctor encouraged as a way of assisting others to recover from emotional traumas and reinforced the therapeutic dimensions of the work.



Figure 47: Jane Orleman *The Pain Tells Her She's Alive*, 1998, acrylic on canvas.

In writing about one of her paintings, *The Pain Tells Her She's Alive*, Orleman says, “I reaffirm the promise I made to speak for the child I was and for the children who are now suffering” (1998). Similarly in my series *Scumbag* there is an overriding concern or sense of responsibility to act as a mediator, using the language of art to speak the unspoken feelings of the traumatised child or adult.

Collectively, the three artists discussed here have mined their familial and psychological archives to create visceral, seductive and sometimes shocking works, treading a fine line between the public and the private spaces of domestic spheres. This difficult terrain is also negotiated in *Scumbag* by two distinct series of artworks; first, as a site-specific installation made in a real suburban environment and secondly, as an exhibition in a contemporary art gallery. Each of these is now discussed in turn.

## 7.5 Bearing witness

The site-specific installation *Scumbag* evokes the experiences of children who live in situations where emotional, verbal and physical abuse usually occurs, in the family home. Under ideal conditions, the family home is a place of comfort and security. As Maree Stenglin<sup>30</sup> noted:

The phrase 'at home' has a deeply metaphorical meaning; one that evokes a deep and abiding sense of sanctity and inner peace alongside personal wellbeing and strong feelings of security (2009a:280).

When children are exposed to domestic violence, the home can lose its power to protect and can change into a place of instability or danger. *Scumbag* seeks to ask the following question: when the sanctuary of the family home erupts into violence, who is there to testify and bear witness to the physical and emotional pain that replaces the safety of home?

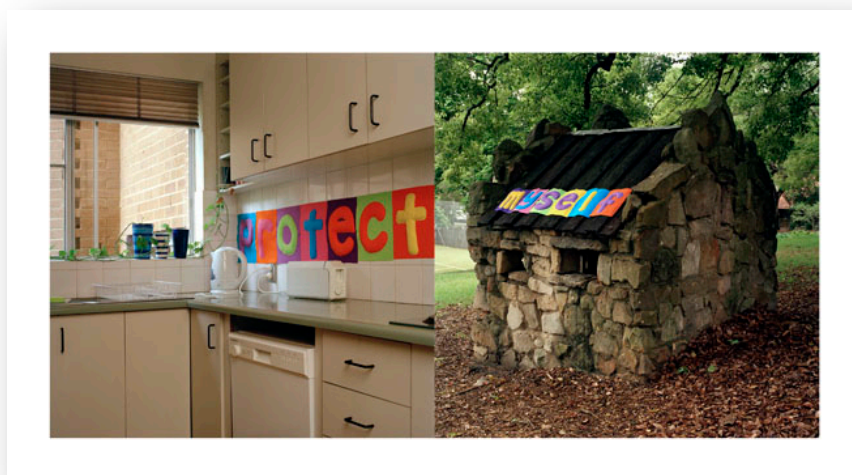


Figure 48: Ella Dreyfus, *Scumbag, Protect Myself*, 2008, chromogenic print.

<sup>30</sup> Maree Stenglin wrote an excellent semiotic analysis of the *Scumbag* exhibition in the chapter Space and Communication in Exhibitions: Unravelling the Nexus, in the Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis, 2009

*Scumbag* explores the sense of loss a child might feel when his or her fundamental trust in the security of the home vanishes. As Judith Butler has said, when responding to the art of Bracha Ettinger, there is often an absence or loss of words for children who experience trauma, and she wonders how this loss can be represented (Butler, 2001). Yet words have the power to illuminate our past and present experiences, and the singular image of home can shape our thoughts and memories from childhood through to adulthood. *Scumbag* addresses Butler's questioning of the representation of childhood loss in that it evokes a dialogue between trauma and domesticity, by presenting words and thoughts of domestic violence writ large, for all to see.

Whereas Moffatt used friends and acquaintances to re-enact shameful scenes of family traumas, in *Scumbag*, humans remained absent and were deliberately left out of the frame, however they are represented by their thoughts and words, in phrases that remain in the spaces long after the departure of the people who spoke them. The artworks in *Scumbag* had the potential to propel viewers into their own lost fragments of childhood, stirring up long-forgotten memories, snatches of conversations heard in the night, images of secret places and even physical sensations in the body.



Figure 49: Ella Dreyfus, *Scumbag, Immense Pain*, 2008, chromogenic print.

My intention was to create the affect of intimacy by building a narrative through feelings and language that appeared in both the present and the past, in an undefined place and time.

*Scumbag* attempted to negotiate the disjunction between public and private personas, as realised by the interior spaces of emotions and the exterior places of habitation. In this process of negotiating a sense of self through place, the body, both as presence and absence, remained central.



## 7.6 Inhabiting the landscape

*Scumbag* consists of a series of brightly coloured, felt letters resembling soft toys, and when placed together, form textual sequences and phrases that inscribe both linguistic and visual aspects of domestic violations, emotional abuse and the silence of shame. The quilted, hand-stitched letters evoke the delicate flesh of young limbs and the presence of a child at play, closely accompanied by the labour of a mother's delicate needlework.

The letters became a site-specific artwork when they were placed in actual environments, where they operated as interventions in both indoor and private, and outdoor and public landscapes; as ephemeral installations in real time and space.



Figure 50: Ella Dreyfus, *Scumbag, Mean and Selfish*, 2008, chromogenic print.

The words and phrases were placed in the landscape of an anonymous suburban housing estate and I photographed them at each site. The presence of a photographer and the camera's “insistent gaze of absence, of testimony” (Buci-Glucksmann, 1996:281) provided the

evidence, acting as a witness to the real or imagined events . After positioning the words, phrase by phrase, I photographed them over a period of 12 months. I waited for weeks at a time for the right photographic conditions. They required flat, overcast days to spread the light evenly and saturate the colours. Occasionally a passer-by would pause and watch the events. They asked simple questions such as – “what kind of camera are you using?” Or, at other times they ventured further in their questioning, for example the photograph titled *I have no choice* - was made on a national federal election day and elicited a comment about the democratic choices we have to elect a new government. I usually worked alone when the neighbourhood was quiet and when it was unlikely I would be seen. My methodological practice mirrored the often invisible state of domestic violence and the vulnerability I felt at this time of my life.

The photographs combine the private world of domestic violence as it erupted into public places, disturbing and inhabiting the landscape, exposing the shameful acts. Seeping into the mortar between the brick walls, hiding behind the furniture, and hanging out the window and violating a major taboo by entering the most intimate place of all, the child’s bed; the aim was to have the language and feelings of dread penetrate and enter the psychic space of the viewers.

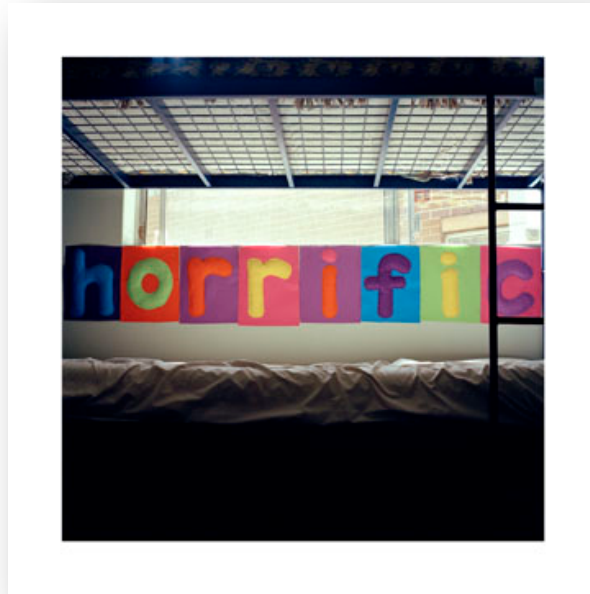


Figure 51: Ella Dreyfus, *Scumbag, Horrific*, 2008, chromogenic print.

The photographing of *Scumbag* in the ubiquitous family home – pictured in the hushed landscape of an anonymous apartment block surrounded by suburban parklands – juxtaposed the disturbances of abuse with the banality of suburbia, the main site of western family life.

A 1970s block of flats represents an achingly banal place in so many lives, contrasting with the daily battering of verbal and emotional abuse that is experienced in too many family homes.



Figure 52: Ella Dreyfus, *Scumbag, Punishing Silence*, 2008, chromogenic print.

These photographs are deliberately devoid of any human beings, yet the presence of people is evident through their words, belongings and abodes. The imagined characters that might inhabit these environments are sensed, rather than seen. An audience is free to project their own version of different personas, relationships and meaning into these places. As one viewer observed, “these images trigger memories of my childhood associated dislocation and emptiness”. Another viewer commented that, “the juxtaposition of words with everyday items strikes a universal chord with anyone who has experienced trauma or hard memories” (Anonymous, 2008).

## 7.7 Punishing Silence



Figure 53: Ella Dreyfus, *Scumbag*, private exhibition, 2008, chromogenic print.

In a private exhibition to which no one was invited, the *Scumbag* letters and phrases were positioned around the walls of an empty apartment, where they could not be seen. The only viewers, apart from me, were two or three neighbours who happened upon the scene, becoming witnesses to the site/sight of trauma. This secret art installation was a concentrated mass of traumatic expression; when seen as a whole it seemed to inhabit the space with silent affect.

Later, a public exhibition took place when the photographs and felt letters that comprised the entire *Scumbag* series were exhibited at Stills Gallery<sup>31</sup>. The aim was to create an environment which would stimulate people's thoughts and feelings about their family

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<sup>31</sup> *Scumbag* was exhibited at Stills Gallery, Sydney from 9 April-10 May, 2008 and will be exhibited with a new title; *I forgive you every day*, at the University Gallery, University of Newcastle from 3-20 October, 2012.

histories and the language of shame-based memories. This was an intimate encounter that had the capacity to bring viewers into conscious contact with their sense of self, both physically and emotionally.

The cool white walls of the contemporary art gallery helped create a particular type of reflective space, where a viewer could immerse themselves in the artwork, whilst standing in a bound space that provided a feeling of relative safety (Stenglin, 2009b), where the relationships between physical and emotional spaces were paramount. As Stenglin noted when writing about this exhibition:

The material scale of the space and the firmness of its enclosure thus evoke a sense of being 'at home'. It is therefore not surprising that one visitor's comment refers to it as a 'little house'. At a literal level, it feels like home (Stenglin, 2009a).

While a quiet stillness pervaded the space, the familiar noises associated with domestic life were noticeably absent. The stark silence of the gallery echoed symbolically the silence of those who suffer domestic traumas.



Figure 54: Ella Dreyfus, *Scumbag*, entrance to Stills Gallery, 2008.

The first artwork in this exhibition was a large photograph of a pile of fabric letters. It was positioned at the entry of the art gallery to entice viewers into the colourful world of childhood language. The rest of this series covered the walls of Stills Gallery which were filled from floor to ceiling with the brightly coloured letters, from low-down at a child's level to the height of an adult's eye line and above. When first glimpsed from a distance, they aimed to lift one's spirits by the sheer vibrancy of the colour combinations, luring the viewer into the space. But upon closer inspection, as the words representing trauma formulated in the viewer's mind, the destabilizing effect of the work began.

In this exhibition, the viewer feels pierced in a very intimate way, in the artwork's evocation of the playful, happy feelings of childhood, coupled by the unexpectedly chilling phrases where someone's innermost thoughts were laid bare (figure 10). What appeared at first to be soft and soothing, was instead suggestive of hidden shameful memories of pain reminiscent of what Barthes (1984) called the 'punctum'. As one spectator noted:

The silence of the unspeakable and un-processable burst through each word and image with a life and voice of its own (Anonymous, 2008).



Figure 55: Ella Dreyfus, *Scumbag*, Stills Gallery, 2008.

Following the texts up, down and around the gallery walls, towards the photographs, the children's alphabet letters were built into words derived primarily from an adult's terminology, words associated with emotional, psychological and physical abuse. The complete series of the *Scumbag* phrases are:

*despicable scumbag*

*mean and selfish*

*your malicious ways*

*punishing silence*

*it's horrific*



*grow up*

*I exist*

*no visible wounds*

*I forgive you every day*

*total dismembering*

*protect myself; immense pain*

*you never believe me*

*assume supremacy*

*I have no choice*

The words can be categorised into groupings that relate to particular types of abuse (Stenglin, 2009a). There are examples of verbal abuse, e.g. ‘no visible wounds’, physical abuse, eg. ‘total dismembering’, sexual abuse, e.g. ‘it’s horrific’ and passive aggressive abuse, eg. ‘punishing silence’. Other words are suggestive of survival such as ‘I exist’ and of redemption, such as ‘I forgive you every day’.

Whilst moving through the exhibition, the words and photographs catapulted audiences into feelings of both positive and negative affect. Their own internal database of language conjured up long-forgotten phrases spoken by parents in heated moments, by neighbours and teachers or themselves. Viewers were encouraged to enter into dialogue with me, for as is my usual practice, I made myself available throughout the duration of the exhibition to speak to visitors. They were also invited to leave their written responses in a blank-paged book. The following poignant example of one visitor’s comment testifies to the affective qualities of the exhibition:

These images trigger memories of my childhood associated dislocation and emptiness. Experiencing these feelings in my gut and acknowledging them I feel to be a very healing experience (Anonymous, 2008).

There were many other sensitive and moving comments written in the visitor's comments book at the *Scumbag* exhibition such as:

We came at a quiet time of day, but yet the words shouted and we were surrounded by resonance of past pain and redemption.

Powerful and confronting; it evoked many injustices both personal and 'the silent sufferers'; may they find a voice!

This work hits you unexpectantly and despite its initial simplicity makes deep and raw statements about trauma secrets and power.

*Scumbag* gave the opportunity and the permission for many voices to speak, or shout, the shame and trauma of repressed and forbidden family stories, including my own. In commenting on this potentially transformative experience, Stenglin stated that:

This experience no doubt gives victims a sense of collective belonging – they are no longer alone with their pain – they are now bonded into a community whose shared experience has been the experience of abuse, whether domestic or institutional or racial; verbal, physical, sexual or passive aggressive. It is not surprising that many visitors to *Scumbag* were moved to tears and found the experience of the exhibition compelling – emotional, healing and cathartic (Stenglin, 2009a).

The making of *Scumbag* undoubtedly had some therapeutic and self-transformative benefits for me. The tactile physicality of handling the fabrics, combined with the repetitive bodily actions was meditative, calming and had a distinctly feminine quality. I found solace and meaning in writing and stitching such difficult words. I delighted in the joyful celebration of childhood colours.

Although at a certain level the content of the artwork was informed by personal experience, it moved beyond the mere referencing or describing of personal events. The artwork was a combination of the following elements: my empathy with the subject, my technical skills and aesthetic decisions, the physical experience of how the artwork inhabited real locations, and how the viewer inhabited the exhibition space, the affective sensations evoked in viewers, and most importantly, the way in which the utter silence of domestic violence was broken within the safety of a semi-private, semi-public gallery space. For Stenglin, the experience of the silence in the exhibition of *Scumbag* constituted a:

profound silence marred by shame typifies a victim's response to abuse and such a visceral evocation is an important part of the meanings being made in this space (2009b:280).

As a contribution of women's intimate aesthetics to the lexicon of contemporary art practice, *Scumbag* forged a new language of representation for me, by registering the experience of emotionally-charged memories of violation and by mediating trauma as an "embodied perception" (Bennett 2002). This exhibition demonstrated the capacity of visual art to engage the viewer in affective encounters that tread a fine line between the verbal and the visceral, the intimate and the mutual, the public and the private.

## 7.8 *I forgive you every day*



Figure 56: Ella Dreyfus, *Scumbag, I forgive you every day*, 2012, felt fabrics.

After the making of *Scumbag*, my life underwent significant change. The personal traumas that were the genesis for this artwork shifted and resolved, and I look back at the work I began eight years ago with different understandings. Something strong emerged in the process of stitching words and creating the installations that broke through layers of silence and shame, and played with the way emotional language pervades everyday lives and ordinary landscapes. The final exhibition for this research degree will show the *Scumbag* series with the new title, *I forgive you every day*.



Figure 57: Ella Dreyfus, *Scumbag, Grow up*, 2008, chromogenic print.

The *Scumbag* artworks intermittently appear on websites and personal blogs, such as this example on the website blog *Hello, I'm Rachel*, where these comments were made about the artwork *Grow Up*:

I am also crazy about Ella's work today—she takes puffy kindergarten letters and tosses them up in banal public places to create charged phrases ("immense pain, I exist, protect myself"); snapping the contrast between our Sesame Street associations and what the words really say. Emin's patchwork tent, 2.0. Anyway, I like this one. Grow up. Grow up. Say that on repeat (Rachel, 2009).

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## CHAPTER EIGHT: *TO SEE BEYOND WHAT SEEMS TO BE*

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Figure 58: Ella Dreyfus, *To see beyond what seems to be*, 2011, archival inkjet print.

## 8.1 Tracing the numinous

You take a risk if you open yourself to the work of art, either as the one who works it or as the one who lets it look at you. Before you know it, and without being personally imprinted by the wound, you are effected, affected by traces of the trauma of the other and of the world... that is if you do not turn away (Ettinger in Horsefield, 2001:52).

This chapter is about the final of the three artworks created within this research project, *To see beyond what seems to be*. It is a series of printed works on paper that reflect upon the way language shifts through space and transcends meaning. The works on paper contain remnants of the *Scumbag* letters which are overlaid on top of each other and reduced to gently opaque images using Photoshop techniques. The stitched sculptures merged and softened into muted tones, folding into abstract formations of conflated interiority. As the letters hovered and shimmered in front of and behind each other, they became disembodied, no longer forming recognizable words. I no longer needed to utter any words, as language gave way to vision. Within the gallery, between the spatial and the temporal, a numinous world was revealed, as John MacDonald noted, in these works there is a “sense of light coming out of the shifting veil-like forms” (McDonald, 2011)<sup>32</sup>.

The artworks comprising *To see beyond what seems to be* emerged from the visceral encounters of embodied shame in *Weight and Sea* and transitioned out of the emotional intensity of domestic violations in *Scumbag*. They became something altogether different, appearing disembodied and mysterious with their playful variations and repetitive coloured

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<sup>32</sup> One print from *To see beyond what seems to be* was selected as a finalist in the Blake Prize for Religious Art Exhibition at the National Art School Gallery, 15 September-16 October, 2011. In a radio interview, the art critic John McDonald said of this work, “I think amongst the abstracts there's a very pale shimmering work by Ella Dreyfus which, if I were going to put an abstract work in the show, really I think Ella's work is probably the pick of them for me by a long way because it actually does have some sense of the numinous, some sense of light coming out of this shifting veil-like form”.

imagery. They resembled, for me, a related group, an extended family perhaps, reformed after a period of rupture, recompensed for the disturbances of relationships, the failure of the body and the inability to speak.

This final component of this studio lead research marks a visual and symbolic conclusion, a distillation of the silence and separation which befell my own family. It also offered a return to a more benign vision of childhood, no longer consigned to silence, where any words could be imagined and new possibilities for visual experiences emerged. The movement out of trauma is well described by Butler,<sup>33</sup> as she states:

The past is not past, but is not present, in which the present emerges, but from the scattered and animated remains of a continuing, though not continuous trauma (Butler, 2001:32).

This exhibition illuminated past and present experiences within the architectural frame of a quiet, interior space. The long gallery in which the works were exhibited resembled a psychic border from which to cross over into the intimate realm of one's own private reverie. Stenglin's theories of *Binding* and *Bonding* (2004) are worthwhile as an aid to understanding the way a viewer might feel in this space, allowing them to respond affectively to the artworks. As mentioned, *binding* is the relationship between the space and those who occupy it whilst *bonding* refers to the way the occupants and spaces interact, to building a sense of solidarity and affiliation (Stenglin, 2009b). The gallery provided a comfortable bound space, which determined the viewer's sense of security within the space, as it had a good balance of open and closed spaces, determined by the height of the ceiling and the length of the room. The carefully considered lighting angles also contributed to viewers' feelings of being emotionally held or *bonded*, thus supported in the space, as the artworks became illuminated



by the spotlights. From the dim tunnel-like space on one side of the gallery, the lights drew viewers towards the artworks and provided a passageway for moving in and out of proximity to the works.



Figure 59: Ella Dreyfus, *To see beyond what seems to be*, Articulate Project Space, 2011.

When gazing at the prints, new formations of words could be envisioned by the viewer; haunting words, loving words and enveloping words that restored a personal, contemplative mood. They could enter another place, a more settled selfhood, embodying both absence and presence, a space of feelings and boundlessness.

While my earlier artworks were about trauma and painful emotions, such as shame, *To see beyond what seems to be* represents a shift away from shame, and therefore moves all – the

artwork, artist and viewer, beyond shame into a place of intimacy within the self. As Munt wrote (1978) the self is “not a private interiority to be explored/discovered”. Rather it is:

... an attempt to realize oneself by cultivating a kind of transcendence of something that is achieved relationally through multiple interventions with the present and imagined futures (2008:182).

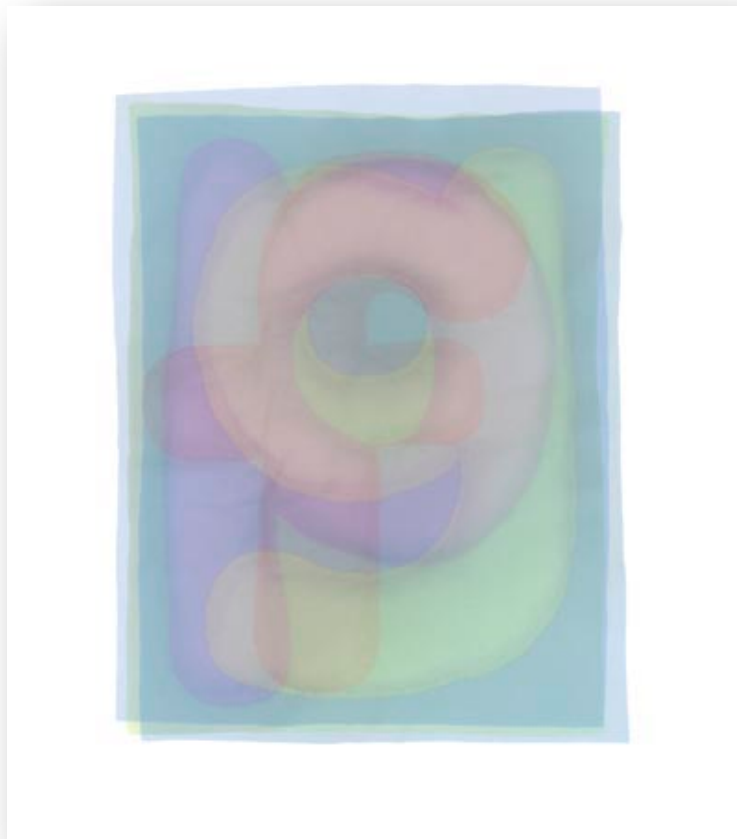


Figure 60: Ella Dreyfus, *To see beyond what seems to be*, 2011, archival inkjet print.

It is from this transcendental perspective that *To see beyond what seems to be* intervenes and converses with the viewer’s internal processes and affective experiences. For me, the ambiguous yet critical, aesthetic encounter is the interaction between the artwork and the

space it resides in, and the audience's active participation. For within an art encounter can be found "something that you couldn't anticipate in advance, though feeling longing you will be left wondering and wandering" (Ettinger in Horsefield, 2001:47).

## 8.2 Resolving Trauma

This research has focussed on shame and intimacy, but towards the end of the project I became aware of the close relationship between shame and trauma. I began to reflect upon the way *Scumbag* entered this domain and considered a re-working of the material, which would move the artist and viewer to a place of resolve. This manifested in a reconfiguration of the images, texts and title for a final examination exhibition *I forgive you every day* (see Appendix 4).

During this final period of research I drew upon the work of artist, analyst and theorist Bracha Ettinger, in order to further explore how art invites ways of entering the imaginative and internal places within the self. As an artist Ettinger combined her practice with a new psychoanalytical theory<sup>34</sup> which materialized in part, by actually making artworks within the space of private, one-to-one, therapeutic sessions. During conversations and encounters between herself and her patients, Ettinger listened, made notes and painted; her imagery was evoked by and arose from the voicing of their personal traumas and feelings, although her artworks are not specific to particular patients' stories. This pioneering methodological practice struck a chord with my own practice, whereby the three-way relationship she engendered between herself as artist/therapist, the client as model/subject and the constructed artwork was one of profound intimacy. This mode of working forged connections between telling, listening, drawing and painting to combine artistic practice with theoretical knowledge, from which emerged a new visual language to help resolve trauma (de Zegher and Pollock, 2011). As Ettinger commented:

... what came from my art allowed me to understand what goes on with my patients, but something also began to work the other way around (2001:43).

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<sup>34</sup> See Ettinger's theory on the Matrixial Gaze in *The Matrixial Borderspace* (2006)

This dual project comprising ‘artwork’ and ‘theory work’ was unusual and innovative in its investigation of the ‘visible/invisible’ relations between present times and past, lost generations (Pollock, 2006). Her works were like palimpsests, traces of loss, which were imprinted through listening and layering marks intuitively as her clients spoke, revealing themselves. Of this practice, Ettinger stated that:

When I am working my paintings and drawings in series, materials come from outside and inside, and when I am working with my patients, the flow between inside and outside is also continuous (2001:37).



Figure 61: Bracha Ettinger *Eurydice Series* 1992-1996, acrylic on canvas.

Ettinger’s artworks comprised soft layers of imagery using pigment, colour and ash, overlaid with smears and photocopied dust (Ettinger’s term) spread to create imprints of memories and traces of historical events, uncovering deeply hidden stories of loss. Butler explained that for Ettinger, her paintings are signs of loss, and attempts to find the “nearly impossible

connection between trauma and beauty itself.” (2001:34) The correlation with my practice is the way Ettinger probes into emotional and traumatic spaces, whereby the artwork is part of a ‘working through’ the feelings experienced by her patients. As she explained:

I elaborate traces of their trauma via “conversations-with-painting,” digesting these traces for them, in a way, getting involved with what they cannot digest alone, mixing their traces with mine and giving them back their own traces transformed (2001:43).

Griselda Pollock explained that for Ettinger, subjectivity is an encounter, which occurs at “shared borderspaces between several co-affecting partial-subjectivities” (2006:2). This refers to the blurring of the boundaries between the artworks and audiences when engaged in aesthetic encounters. This domain is reminiscent of my earlier encounters with models in the photographic studio; with spectators in art galleries and with audiences in public environments. In these spaces of affective resonance, mutual intimacy is relational and embodied by artist, artwork and art audience.

Ettinger’s combined artistic and therapeutic practice reflects certain aspects of my own art practice, in that it is a space where intimate feelings can be revealed and meaningful encounters occur. This allows for personal expression by the artist to co-exist with the feelings of the viewers, which opens up a space where positive and negative affect may arise, revealing a pathway not only into themselves, but into relationships with others.

Likewise, in the context of my exhibitions, I have permitted audiences to work through their feelings in the space of art in order to find a place of resolution and peace; giving viewers a space to take risks by acknowledging their feelings. The artworks thus function as “affective carriers of traumatic renewal” (De Zegher, 2001:6). *To see beyond what seems to be*

represents a distillation and resolution of traumatic memories and emotions, moving beyond shame to a place of intimate encounters.

As the soft blurry letters hovered in space, the artwork invited audiences to immerse themselves in a gentler relationship to language; in an art form where aesthetics meet feelings, where there is a sharing of oneself with another, and where there was a mutual, intimate, relational and perhaps healing experience. For, as Ettinger proposed, art may be the best method of articulation for these encounters, because “words are not yet so fit” and it is important that we, as artists, strive to:

Formulate the precise lines that make it possible for something to emerge from the other, looking to be in that sense heard... So maybe a beginning of an answer to what constitutes a conversation is: it is about transformation and the desire to know *with* the other *in* an encounter (2001:40).

In *To see beyond what seems to be* no more needed to be said.

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## CONCLUSION

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So let us bring “forth into public culture an ethical challenge to think otherwise about shame, inciting us to risk entering shame and make insanely joyful, dancing (artists) of us all’ (Giffney in Munt, 2008:x).

In this research I have searched for new ways of art making that might open up an aesthetic space for speaking about the relationship of shame, intimacy and the experience of emotion in contemporary art practice. This method of artmaking is not dependant on traumatic experiences nor on their denial, rather, this kind of work is “a way of opening up and learning to accept the pain of our failure, to live out the reality of the images we desire to become” (Spence, 1995:154). My practice reflects that of artist Janine Antoni, who commented on her own work saying:

I begin with the idea of an experience I want to give myself. The meaning reveals itself to me through the experience, through the process (Ayerza, 2007).

Throughout the period of my candidature, from 2003–2012, my life experience were closely linked to each of the artworks; from the anxieties of body image as expressed in *Weight and Sea*, to the emotional disturbances of my family life which resonated in *Scumbag*, to a place of resolve and softening in *To see beyond what seems to be*.

As an artist, it was important for me to capture the processes that lead to the shifts in my art practice, shifts that allowed the development of an aesthetic space, where positive and negative affect could arise as relational encounters. The meaning, significance and trajectory of my practice-based research which lead to *Weight and Sea*, *Scumbag* and *To see beyond*



*what seems to be* can be explained in terms of a shift towards an aesthetics of intimacy. As a way of identifying these shifts I will refer back to the three triangles diagrams on pages 67, 81 and 110 and revisit them below. In these triangles the relationships between the artist, artworks and audiences are each depicted by the different phases of the development of this research, which lead to this new synthesis. These shifts exposed relationships between embodiment and feeling through the medium of shame and intimacy thus revealing our aesthetic of intimacy.

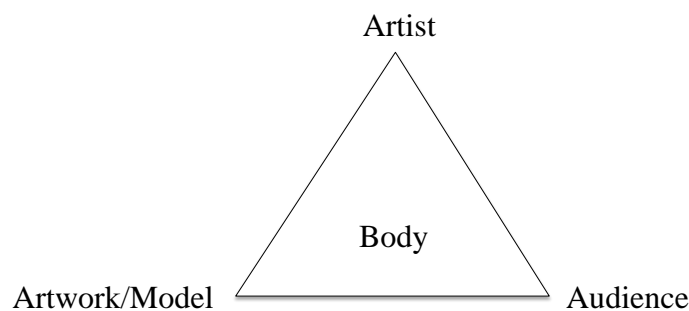


Figure 62: Relationship between Artist, Artwork/Model, Audience and Body.

In Figure 62 the triangle depicts the conceptualization of the relationships between artist, subject/artwork and audience, a relationship where the body is the central focus of the aesthetic experience. This also refers to the problematic nature of the body as an object of photographic representation and the vicarious pleasure where audiences observed the models' bodies from a distance, in two dimensional forms. My concerns about these issues led to the

first major shift in thinking about how to resolve these matters, which is depicted in the next triangle.

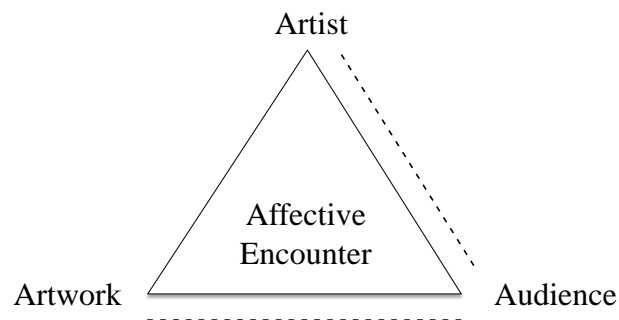


Figure 63: Artist, Artwork, Audience and Affective Encounters.

In Figure 63 the triangle shows the way the artist, artwork and audience were linked closely by an affective encounter, each dependent on the other. This depicts the realization of how audiences were reacting physically, emotionally and cognitively to the artworks, as well as to me, the artist, (within the exhibition space), who engaged with them whilst they were experiencing their feelings about the artworks. These shifts led this research project and the conscious decision to foreground affect and feelings as the primary encounter of the artwork, beginning with the first experimental artwork, *Weight and Sea*.

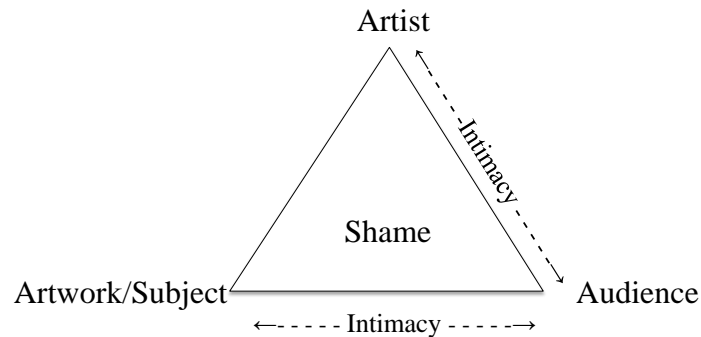


Figure 64: Artist, Artwork/Subject, Audience, Shame and Intimacy.

In the third shift in my art practice as represented by the third configuration in Figure 64, the emotion of shame is central to the intimate experiences created by the artist through the artwork, with the audience participating as the subject of the artwork, by their own choice. This three way relationship, which foregrounds intimacy and shame, was enacted in the artwork *Weight and Sea*.

Following *Weight and Sea*, another important shift occurred whereby the bodily presence disappeared from the artwork, as can be seen in *Scumbag*. The noticeable absence of the body was replaced and represented by the texts describing the language of shame in domestic spaces. The final series *To see beyond what seems to be* carried this notion even further as words were conflated and replaced by a subtle presence of colour, affect and feeling. The relationship variables across these artworks can also be understood by using a matrix of relationships.

All the artworks discussed in this thesis show the movement from the feelings and affects of shame and intimacy to resolution. They display a progression from an artwork that is confronting, visually, physically, emotionally and linguistically to artwork that is soft and gentle and non-confrontational; a progression from highly embodied artwork to disembodied artwork that constitutes soft overlays and a blur of letters; a progression from highly explicit artwork that positions and confronts the viewer to more implicit artwork where the viewer is free to find their own meaning. This can be configured as a matrix with two axes; the vertical axis represents embodiment, and the horizontal axis represents a continuum from explicitness to implicitness, as seen in Figure 65 below:

The matrix produces four quadrants, each with a dimension of more or less embodiment and more or less explicitness. Thus all the photographic series (*The Body Pregnant, Age and Consent, Fat and Ugly, Transman* and *Under Twelve Under Twenty*) which are highly explicit and highly embodied, occupy the top left corner. *Weight and Sea*, which was still highly embodied, but less explicit in that the body was not in the work but had to be inserted by the viewer, who was simultaneously the subject of the artwork (if they so chose) and a spectator of the artwork, occupies the top right corner of the matrix. *Scumbag*, while explicit because the artwork comprised of explicitly negative and traumatic words realized by hand-stitched felt letters in real spaces, was disembodied because there was an absence of bodies even though there remained a presence of feelings experienced by people, thus occupying the bottom left quarter of the matrix. Finally, *To see beyond what seems to be*, is both highly implicit and disembodied because there is not only an absence of bodies, but now an absence of words.

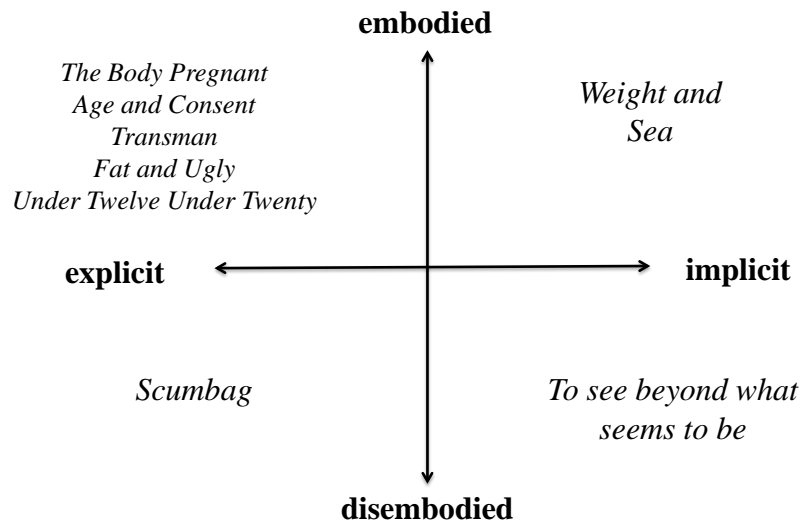


Figure 65: A Matrix of Relationships.

More importantly the continuum of embodied and disembodied, explicit and implicit, charts my experiments and capacity to vary the artwork within public and private environments to demonstrate the potential of using an aesthetic of intimacy in contemporary art practice. This knowledge has permitted levels of both increased subtlety and playfulness to emerge without compromising either the seriousness of shame or the importance of intimacy.

This research has helped me identify and define the field in which my art practice is located, which I have termed the aesthetics of intimacy. I have argued that the oeuvre of such artists as Louise Bourgeois, Jo Spence, Rosy Martin, Tracey Emin, Nan Goldin, Jane Orleman, Tracey Moffat and Bracha Ettinger whose works correlate to the objectives of this research may also be placed within this field. I found the process of articulating the affect of shame and the aesthetics intimacy to be extremely useful, of great value and satisfaction toward the development and understanding of my art practice. I acknowledge and re-state the importance

of feminism as a framework from which I explore the deeply personal, as each of my three artworks attest. Throughout the period of the research my life experiences were closely linked to each of the artworks; from the anxieties of body images and expressed in *Weight and Sea*, to the emotional disturbances of my family life which resonated in *Scumbag*, and finally to a place of resolve and softening in *To see beyond what seems to be*.

The findings of the research project have implications for the future directions of my work and I am planning a number of exhibitions which will expand upon my research and practice. For example in the artwork, *Nana Ackerman: A Trauma in Tel Aviv*, there will be a mixed-media installation which examines notions of secrecy in the childhood friendships of two Israeli women and a series of photographic installations to be made in France and Germany, that will utilise the same letters and words from the *Scumbag* series, re-locating them to sites of trauma which occurred during the Holocaust.

More importantly there are implications for the work of other artists as this project provides a new model for art practice. There are many other emotional states open for examination by artists, for example anger, anxiety and fear, which might reveal new aspects of trauma, pain or compulsion. The exploration of shame and intimacy in my research project can provide a model for further inquiry into affective encounters through contemporary art practice.

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## EPILOGUE

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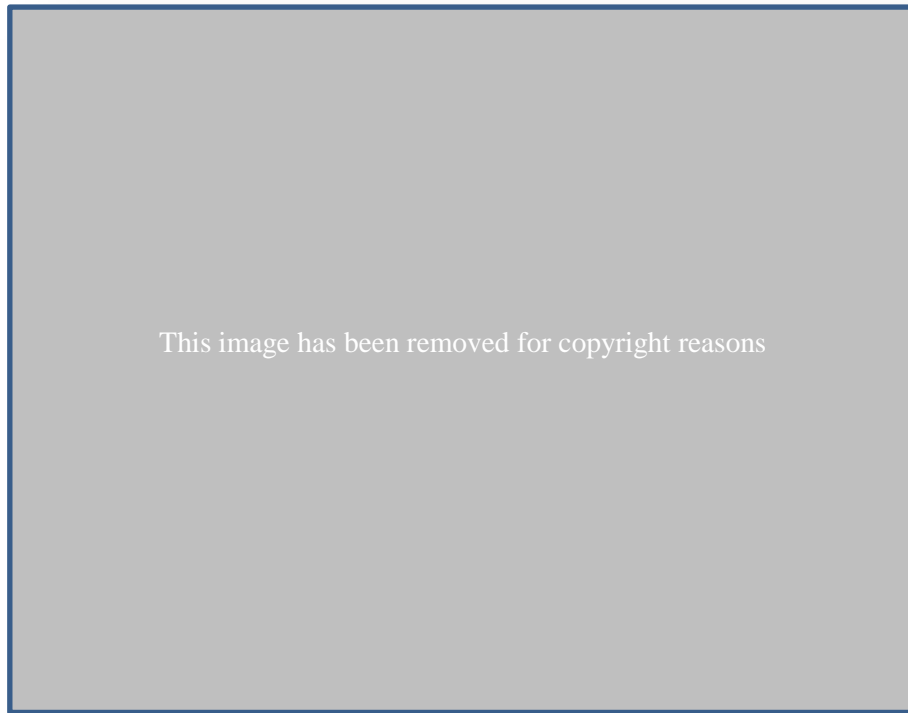


Figure 66: Spencer Tunick, *Sydney, Australia*, 2010, Inkjet print.

Picture this—a photograph of Ella Dreyfus in 2010

This photograph was taken against a backdrop of the iconic Sydney Harbour Bridge and Opera House. At first glance it looks like a million prawns have landed on the famous steps, waiting to be barbequed. On further inspection it reveals something quite different — bodies. Hundreds and thousands of naked bodies lying on their backs closely packed together with upturned faces. This unusual and rare display of mass nudity is a Spencer Tunick photographic extravaganza, where the general public are invited to strip off in public places, be photographed and exhibited in Tunick's international exhibitions. These performative and participatory art experiences draw large numbers of people and on a cool summer's morning in Sydney, I stripped off for Tunick's camera. If you look very carefully, you might see me in the bottom left hand corner of the photograph, where I lie naked amongst a multitude of bodies, held by the warm flesh of almost 5000 other pulsating humans. It is hard to describe the intense feelings of closeness, exhilaration joy and belonging, along with some anticipation and fear; and despite the ever-present, familiar pull of my old shame trying to emerge; it remained in

the background while I relaxed into this unexpected and truly intimate (public) experience.



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# APPENDICIES

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## Appendix 1

Appendix 1 is a CD of photographic documentation of the three contemporary artworks for the research project.

## Appendix 2

Throughout the period of my doctoral candidature I have undertaken professional activities to present the findings of the research in exhibitions, conferences and publications. A comprehensive list of these activities is below. Selected works can be viewed on the website [www.elladreyfus.com](http://www.elladreyfus.com)

## Awards and grants

Australian Postgraduate Award, University of NSW, 2003

Postgraduate Research Student Support (PRSS) Grant, University of NSW, 2009

College of Fine Arts Travel Grant, University of NSW, 2009

## Exhibitions

*Scumbag* (2005) selected works, *States of Transformation*, COFA Exhibition Space,  
University of NSW, 2–6 May

*Weight and Sea, Sculpture by the Sea* (2005), Tamarama Beach, 3–20 November

*Scumbag* (2008), Stills Gallery, Paddington, 9 April –10 May

*To see beyond what seems to be* (2011), Articulate Project Space, Head On Photography  
Festival, Leichhardt, 1–5 June

*To see beyond what seems to be* (2011), selected work, 60<sup>th</sup> Blake Prize Exhibition, National Art School Gallery, Darlinghurst, 16 September–15 October

*To see beyond what seems to be* (2011–2012), selected work, *Blake Prize on Tour Exhibition*, Queensland University of Technology Museum, Brisbane; Delmar Gallery Sydney; Schoolhouse Gallery, Rosny Farm; Burrinja Arts Centre, Victoria; Manning Regional Art Gallery, Taree

*I forgive you every day* (2012), The University Gallery, University of Newcastle, 3–20 October

### **Conference papers and presentations**

Seminar presentation “Weight and Sea” (2007), *Postgraduate Research Week Seminars*, College of Fine Arts, University of NSW

Conference paper “Punishing Silence: A contemporary art exhibition reflecting on emotional trauma and domestic violence” (2009), 8<sup>th</sup> *Global Conference on Violence and the Contexts of Hostility*, Interdisciplinary.Net, Budapest, Hungary, 4–7 May

Seminar presentation “Scumbag” (2010), *Postgraduate Research Week Seminars*, College of Fine Arts, University of NSW

Seminar paper “Under Twelves”, *Child Photographer or Child Pornographer? The ethics, practices and current debates about photographing, exhibiting and publishing images of nude children* (2010), *Head On Photography Festival Seminar*, National Art School, Darlinghurst, 8 May

Conference paper “Presence, Silence and Absence: A contemporary art exhibition reflecting on maternal trauma and domestic violence” (2010), *Amplifying the voices of (M)others: Mothers in the Arts, Literature, Media and Popular Culture*, Mamapalooza Annual Conference, New York City, 20–22 May

Conference paper, “Weight and Sea” (2010), *Art and Health Symposium*, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, 8 October

Conference paper, “Behind closed doors: giving space to the world of silence” (2010), joint presentation with Dr Maree Stenglin, *Fifth International Conference on Multimodality* (5ICOM), University of Technology, Sydney, 1–3 December

### **Publications and citations**

Fortescue, Elizabeth. (2005), “Mapping our beach treasures”, *Daily Telegraph*, November 3

Tovey, Josephine. (2008), “Reminders of the Silenced Ones”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, April

22

Gall, Naomi. “Scumbag” (2008), *Incubus*, College of Fine Arts Magazine, University of NSW, Sydney, June issue, pp.49

Stenglin, Maree. (2009), “Space and Communication in Museums: exploring the nexus”, *Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*, Routledge, Oxford/New York, pp. 272-283

Suzanne Joshua (2010) “Interview with Ella Dreyfus, Artist in New York”

[http://www.metacafe.com/watch/4616775/ella\\_dreyfus\\_visual\\_artist/](http://www.metacafe.com/watch/4616775/ella_dreyfus_visual_artist/)

### **Appendix 3**

Throughout the period of my doctoral candidature additional activities were undertaken in art exhibitions, conferences and publications. A list of these activities is below.

### **Awards**

*The Lads: Nadz and Dax* Olive Cotton Award for Photographic Portraiture, 2005

Artist in Residence, Recipient of the National Art School Storrier Onslow Studio, Cite Internationale des Art, Paris, France

## **Exhibitions**

*There's no place like home* (2003), *Women and Documentary Photography*, Photo Technica Exhibition Space, Chippendale

*Age and Consent* and *Transman* (2004), Broken Hill Regional Gallery, Broken Hill

*Untitled (Portrait of Rachel Fairfax)* (2005), *Australian Portrait Photographic Prize*, Art Gallery New South Wales

*Under Twelves* (2005), Ground Floor Gallery, Balmain, 1–13 November

*The Lads: Nadz and Dax* (2005) Winner of the inaugural *Olive Cotton Award for Photographic Portraiture*, Tweed River Regional Gallery, Murwillumbah

*Covenant, Sculpture Inside* (2005), Maunsell Wickes at Barry Stern Gallery

Finalist, *Olive Cotton Award for Photographic Portraiture* (2006, 2007, 2009, 2011), Tweed River Regional Gallery, Murwillumbah

Finalist, *Head On Alternative Portrait Award* (2006), Australian Photographer's Gallery,

Finalist, *Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography Award* (2007, 2012, 2013), Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Surfers Paradise

Finalist, *William and Winifred Bowness Photography Prize* (2008), Monash Gallery of Art, Wheeler's Hill

*Transman* (2009) selected works, *Translives*, University of Montana, Missoula, USA

*Ella Dreyfus New Work*, (2009) Tashmadada, [www.tashmadada.com](http://www.tashmadada.com)

*The end of the bloody reds* (2010), The Red Rattler Theatre, Marrickville, 20 April

*Willing Tenants* (2011-2012) selected work, *Healing: space and place*, Pod Space Gallery, Newcastle; *No People*, At the Vanishing Point (ATVP), Head On Photography

Festival, Newtown; *Articulate Turns One*, Articulate Project Space, Leichhardt and  
*Artwords and Artworks* at the National Art School, Darlinghurst

Finalist (slide show), *Head On Portrait Prize* (2011), Australian Centre for Photography,  
 Paddington

*Self Portrait in Red* (selected work, 2011), *Kitsch & Cliché*, NG Gallery, Chippendale, 7  
 February-25 February

*Eat your art out* (group exhibition) Articulate Project Space, 21 December

*Under Twelve Under Twenty* (2012), Stills Gallery, Paddington, 29 August–29 September

*Transman* (2012-2013) selected work, *Cheveux Chéris: Frivolités et trophées*, Musée du quai  
 Branly, Paris, 18 September–14 July 2013

### **Conference papers and presentations**

Conference paper, “Age and Consent” (2007) *Bliss Blasphemy and Belief*, Blake Prize for  
 Religious Art Symposium, National Art School, Darlinghurst

Artist’s Floor talk, “August Sander Photographer” (2008), *Extraordinary images of ordinary  
 people: the photographs of August Sander*, Art Gallery of NSW, January

Conference paper, “Under Twelves” (2008), *Photography: New Histories, New Practices*,  
 School of Art, Australian National University, Canberra

Artist’s Floor talk, “Alfred Stieglitz Photographer” (2010), *Alfred Stieglitz: the Lake George  
 Years*, Art Gallery of NSW, 21 July

Artist’s Floor talk, “Cecil Bostock Photographer” (2011), *Cecil Bostock: Sydney*, Manly  
 Gallery and Museum, 13 February

Conference paper, “Voyeurs of Shame: *Weight and Sea*, a contemporary public artwork  
 (2013), Time, Space and the Body/Body Horror, 1<sup>st</sup> Global Conference, Inter-  
 Disciplinary.Net, Sydney, 12 February

Colloquium presentation “Visual Embodiment: Feminism, photography and failure” (2013),  
Australian College of Applied Psychology, 14 March

Art Forum Lecture “Eat Weigh Art” (2013), National Art School, 20 March

Art Forum Lecture “The Paris Studio Experience” (2013) National Art School 14 August

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## Appendix 4

*I forgive you every day* was the final exhibition presented for examination of this research project. It comprised a re-working of *Scumbag* and utilised the original felt letters and photographs from the series. The exhibition was given a new title *I forgive you every day* and was exhibited at The University Gallery, University of Newcastle, NSW from 3-20 October, 2012.



Figure 67 Ella Dreyfus, *I forgive you every day*, The University Gallery, 2012



Figure 68 Ella Dreyfus, *I forgive you every day*, The University Gallery, 2012





Figure 69 Ella Dreyfus, *I forgive you every day*, The University Gallery, 2012



Figure 70 Ella Dreyfus, *I forgive you every day*, The University Gallery, 2012



**Figure 71** Ella Dreyfus, *I forgive you every day*, The University Gallery, 2012

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