

In The Space Of Play.

Memory

I am small. A new dress is being made. Green gingham. Standing on the table, impatient, irritable, having to stand and turn, and raise my arms, and stand and turn, and being pricked with pins and feeling intensely the cold edge of big scissors snipping next to my flesh, round my neck, under my arms, so very very close to my flesh.

How proud she was of always "getting the dress out" with less than the pattern instructions said. (What legacies lie there?) But on the other hand this is custom made. This is my body. This is my mother as she snips and shapes around my form for perfect fit. I have the same skin now, the same arm, neck. And how I loved those dresses.

Mother, cloth and body. I seem to know the boundaries of each. The difficulties began, I suppose, later.

Walking, relishing this knowledge, not just a truce, more a mutual appreciation; rolling the satisfactory moment round and round. This curious sense of not simply putting myself at the centre, but defining the boundaries of self; being at the boundaries and seeing, feeling what the boundaries are like, and therefore paradoxically feeling the sense of self and other simultaneously. Is this what Merleau-Ponty wants to access with his image of flesh? Although I cannot agree with his privileging of vision I find bodily resonances in his words.

We understand then why we see the things themselves, in their places, where they are, according to their being which is indeed more than their being-perceived—and why at the same time we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and of the body; it is that this distance is not the contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it. *It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity: it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 135, my emphasis).

And a new and powerful image presents. The scissors are being handed to me. Allowing me my separation, my independence, my difference, handing me the scissors to get on and cut my own cloth? It seems a momentous arrival, even though I know it to be a temporary resting place. (Winnicott says of such experience - that's it's a resting place from the continual human struggle of trying to keep inner and outer realities separate

yet interrelated?). Perversely, even now, there is the most momentary resistance as I question the validity of my experience and the meaning that I make. Like a question of carnivale and the relations of power at play, I wonder if it matters whether my m/other gave me the scissors or I took them? But this is the question that must not be asked. This is the space where precisely that ambivalence is allowed. Just as one never demands of the child, as it takes possession of it's first transitional object, whether it did in fact discover it or was "allowed"? Ambivalence? Or "the process of becoming able to accept similarity and difference"(Winnicott, 1971, 6)?

It is not me and part of me; it is neither subject nor object; it is neither inner psychic reality nor external reality; it is the union of the baby and the mother and the point at which their separation occurs. The transitional object enables the baby to do without the mother yet recalls her. It is adopted, not created *ab initio*. It is not a symbol because it is a real literal object, but it can stand in for the mother's breast.

The transitional object is the primal experience of culture, the beginnings of representation and its phantasmic mobility and resourcefulness (Armstrong, 1993, 183).

Mother coats (and the renegotiation of boundaries)

In the beginning, I worked to form a cloth by printing collected images of my mother. Each attempt to materialise a coat, however, produced so much pain that the imaginary garment became unwearable. A whole series evolved; too heavy, too hairy, too scratchy, too tight, until I finally acknowledged there was no going back in this way. Perhaps I am the coat, I tell Margaret, and I can only remake myself? I do want still to make a coat, and I see now that it's images will have to be of my making and choosing, but I don't seem able to locate them or even describe them. Somehow it doesn't want to be materialised and it doesn't want to come to words either. Margaret thinks it is that part of me abjecting the body, that I always want to leave it in the semiotic, don't want to let it come into the symbolic.

In fact, I have been a hoarder of fabric for years, falling in love with possibility, but so often unwilling to commit and 'cut into'. There are bags of loved clothes I cannot bear to throw away, and gifts that, although well made and lovely fabric, are just "not me". I've often imagined recycling them, somewhat vaguely, into clothing as unbounded, eccentric, "arty" as I could let them be, really letting myself go, but they have so far remain unmaterialised.

Is this a potential coat? Reforming, allowing, loving an assemblage of my past selves? Could I bring it into materiality? That hugely pleasurable urge to make begins to move, that sense of possibility. Excitedly I wash dusty fabric and start to unpick two tailored dresses - pin tucks and little darts and seams, plackets and collars and cuffs. But somehow it fizzles out. The old demon is there, with doubt and indecision. What style, what cut, what form would it take?

I go to Bachelard. Is my problem of materialising the coat from it's image akin to Bachelard saying -if one wants to ask questions of the poetic image one has to live it? "One must be receptive to the image at the moment it appears". What does that entail? Understanding the creative phenomenon," the sudden image, the flare up of being in the imagination" requires "a study of the phenomenon of the poetic image when it emerges into the consciousness as a direct product of the heart, soul and being of man, apprehended in his actuality" (Bachelard, 1964, xiv).

I want that state of connection between images and words, any material expression, feel so frustrated, (thinking of migraine and it's pivotal, thetic experience—the intensity of being at the threshold, energy, image and expression almost superimposed on each other). Needing to make my way back to that desire, that energy, to find the moment again, I return to my pile of discarded fabric - run in fact, and fingering again it's soft ribbed surface, feeling the pleasure of it colours and patterns, there seems no reason why it should not become that coat, that image. With a sense of urgency, before I lose it again, I rip and cut and tear, not finding good scissors any ones will have to do. And suddenly slashing through the seams and shapes I 'know' both what it might become and why.

How counterproductive and limiting of that driving energy it was to unpick and confine myself to the previous shapes and functions of the pieces. Cutting through/slashing roughly over and around boundaries cuts me loose from the symbolic (names, shapes and categories, all the laws) to feel the depths of formlessness (the maternal). It is only when I have done that, that I can begin to see what future shape it might take, only by returning to the freedom, the formlessness, feeling its limitless possibilities (of colour, shape and sound? of even words perhaps, but not patriarchal words, sounds from the maternal semiotic sea?).

If I let the fabric 'speak' in this way, - my problems of crippling choice are overcome. With their deep blues and underlying geometry, their scale of pattern, their life of their own, they reverberate and echo through the pathways of my body - tracing out, awakening, creating, - inscriptions, memories, desires, and knowing myself to be the other in this dialogue, I only have to listen and allow.

Talking Mothers (and the Space of Play)

Winnicott believes that the infant's use of transitional phenomena, as an intermediate area of experience, is not only a critical step in the development of cognitive thought but also, as play, forms the grounding pattern for most of our life as social creatures, retained, he says, "in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work" (1971,14).

If play is an intra-subjective space in which meanings are renegotiated, what does such a space look like for the women in our conversations? As subjects, what constitutes the boundaries and what do they look like? What is available to them and how do they negotiate it? How do they define, shape, change the limitations of their options - defining the possibilities of their selves in terms of *centre*?

No matter what the subject, ultimately we come back to talking about our children! Its as if its some kind of life-raft that keeps us afloat. The only place where we can feel important to ourselves - of being unique. We seem to feel more comfortable with this subject, less threatened by it, than personal thoughts about our bodies and our minds. Somewhere in the process of marriage and bearing children we have lost contact with the most important thing in our lives - Ourselves.

I have had trouble fully understanding this note. I realise now how negatively I have been reading it; how easily, in the space of 'analysis', I took up the notion of absence, of "lost contact with our selves", rather than the critical message that this space is also and foremost the space of mothers and children. Far from an absence of selves I see how much can be said of and with such selves, (*what can be "got" out of the relational selves that society prescribes; how can those selves be re-shaped, put to work, what possible ways of being?*) and it becomes not disappointing, but amazing that the space that they are familiar with, the space of mothers and children, can open onto *any* life problem.

Play and Talk

While the Tamworth group clearly saw this as a pleasurable risk taking play, the Coonabarabran women made reference to a whispering game.

Shirley: Do you think that perhaps there *are* people who do think in clear cut, one-off ideas and don't question them?

Norma: They'd have very little to say then, wouldn't they?

Shirley: Not necessarily. They might have a lot to say but never come back to wonder. They think what they've said is absolutely right. Well, things don't have to be absolutely right, do they? That's the whole thing.

Norma: Your interpretation - cos if you got up and made a speech and there were six people in the room they might all interpret a different way.

Laura: right

Shirley: It's like that whispering game where someone starts off with a sentence and it ends up as something quite different at the other end.

I had been commenting on the separation and hierarchy between public rationality and private intersubjectivity and the value of women's interactive talk.

Norma: It all boils down to sharing. If we go to an art show we like to come back and discuss it and all have our views and it's part of sharing.

But this certain distance and detachment belies an extraordinary passion that is often present, and the extensive use that is made of the play space to examine issues of obvious import to individuals. Sometimes this is seen in the persistent reviewing of very specific issues and positions recurring throughout the series of conversations. Just as often, however, it is marked by contradictions. It is not only that the communal space allows for contradictory ideas to circulate and mingle (and a certain fruitful sort of antagonism seems to play as much a part as bridge-building and collaboration!), but that individual women can and do turn their own claims, ideas and positions on their head, from moment to moment, from the beginning of a 'session' to the end, from week to week.

Spilling guts

A striking example, combining all the passion, complexity and contradiction is a story which concerns Norma. Only a week after her supportive comments above, she is exploring the public/private discourse more thoroughly, but vehemently repudiating her earlier position.

Norma; Oh pooh! That's like standing in front of a piece of art and saying, I could stand in front of that painting and say

[voice - hammed, whining]

"It means *this* to me and it means *that* to me".

It's just a whole lot of crap, that's what it is!

Her story runs through an entire taping session but emerges from a conversation which was already underway in their painting time. The women have been discussing Hazel Hawke's biography and a recent interview, and Norma expresses disgust at every aspect of Hazel Hawke's "sharing" and especially the subject of her abortion.

Neen: I think she has to say what she feels.

Norma: I don't know. I don't know why, I don't want to know Shirley's most intimate thoughts or things she's done through her life and she shouldn't want to know mine! I don't know, it's just money.

Norma:(very animatedly) I don't care if she had 20 or 50 abortions but why spill her guts in public! that's what

Neen: But she did it for Bob.

Norma:(high pitched/angry) But why does she have to tell the whole bloomin' world? It makes me sick!

There is a good deal of laughter mingled with Norma's angry outbursts and the "play/performance" is certainly visible in various layers. Jokes and comments directed at Norma and even her own wry comments seem to indicate that something beyond the professed 'butt' has upset her. There's an existing awareness of Norma's distinctive passionate style. "Doing a Norma" alludes to her expressing her emotions flamboyantly in the art group and I couldn't help asking her what side of the bed she got out of that morning.

Norma: I just don't agree with people spilling their guts in public!

Neen: But that's, that's what autobiographies are about - pure entertainment

Norma: Yes it might be, but still - I don't like it!

Sandi: When did you say you were publishing your works, Norma?

(laughter)

?: A very short edition. A very thin volume!

And when someone asks what the 'topic' for the day is, our various agendas are woven together with humour.

Norma: We're going to discuss you, are we?

Laura: No, but as usual

Sandi: She 's probably going to ask us to discuss our personal sex lives!

(laughter)

Laura: But I do want to start with my usual long winded bit about me because it's about, it gives a way in, as it were, to some of the things I wanted to talk about today.

Norma: She's going to spill her guts!

(laughter)

Mavis: I think this might be a therapeutic exercise for Laura too!

Interest in what is appropriate expression for a woman, in either the private or public world, is continued in various guises as we discuss women at the doctors, how their symptoms are presented and read and whether women can be said to 'have' different symptoms from men. (Norma stubbornly argues against this and other propositions, only

to later reiterate and support them). How do *we* understand our own "expressions", how do we read ourselves, physically, mentally, *literally*, as women talk of their letter writing at length, their art.

Norma's own temper tantrums (her term) and the desirability of speaking one's feelings, of catharsis, become a topic and here, it transpires by degrees, is her parallel and personal investment, intimately and subtly intertwined.

Norma: I think if you do let your emotions go you're healthier. They say that's why women live longer than men. That it's because they're more emotional and let it out instead of bottling it in. I don't know whether it's true or not.

Shirley: I don't know about how women let it out? We're more inclined to rationalise things.

Norma: But you don't see men cry as much as women

Shirley: How often do you see a woman cry?

Norma: I cry frequently

Neen: it's worse when you want to cry and you can't.

(*general assent*)

Norma: oh yes, you have to hold it in for some reason. I've just been through that.

She talks of putting aside her own needs, being 'strong' for someone else, and wonders, citing "if you had a death in the family", if men don't do this too. But Norma's tone continues to settle quietly into a not knowing one way or the other, despite clamorous opposition to this notion and although she later claims a kind of resolution - (her visitors have left that morning, she's "had a weight lifted off" her mind) - it seems as if we hang at the point of more questions rather than answers.

Resonating powerfully throughout this story of shifting meanings and understandings is Norma's play with abject body imagery—spilling guts, crap, sick and tears. I think immediately of the traitor's fate, hanging, drawing, and quartering, —of vulnerability and vital organs, the inner body's need for protection.

Kristeva's abjection, according to Grosz, is the subject's reaction to the failure of the subject/object opposition to express adequately the subject's corporeality and its tenuous bodily boundaries.

it is the body's acknowledgment that its boundaries and limits are the effects of desire, not nature (Grosz, 1989, 74).

I understand both from my own pleasure (and even excitement at times) in the abject and from the women's talk in these conversations at least, that we might understand and use the abject in quite a different way; that while undoing *a certain kind* of subjectivity

might be the effect of the play, it is an undoing that allows the proliferation of other possibilities and breathes new life into old.

One day we have a conversation in which I invite everyone to talk about their bodies in any way they choose. The stories are startling; the questioning of boundaries and categories from the space of mother child, reconfirming, rearranging, unsettling, becomes extraordinarily vivid.

Shirley: All right! I'll say! I'll say. That my body has been reasonably good. I got rid of what I didn't like and that was a great - success.

laughter

Shirley: It's more or less. I've always had a fair believing in mind over matter, that if I didn't think that I was sick I wasn't sick, and if I was sick, I could browbeat it into behaving itself. And that's worked reasonably well. Apart from that it just trundles on. Some day it won't.

laughter

Laura: How do you feel about mind over matter in that sense that one day mind won't control matter?

Shirley: Ah, well, to a certain extent I've lost it. Seven years ago Ralph lost his first child and that, well naturally it rocked everyone. And I found after that I wasn't nearly as good at mind over matter - like being able to go to the dentist and say "oh well you know this is all right". After that I found that if the dentist gave me a prod I went "OOh!"

laughter

The poor man couldn't understand what the trouble was because it wasn't doing anything very dreadful. So that slipped a bit.

That Shirley chooses to locate her thinking about her own body in relation to her son and the death of his child is remarkable enough, but when she talks of losing "a certain amount of self control" she moves into questioning the binary relationship between mind and body and sparks an immediate response. Norma and Mary question her closely about her sensory pain (at the dentist) and it's relationship to her grief pain, and seem particularly interested in establishing the link to a specific mother/child space, since, in a sense, the loss of the child is not directly Shirley's 'own'.

Mary: Do you think it was because it was the loss of someone's, something, someone you loved - or their loss?

Norma: more than your own loss?

Shirley: Well it was more or less the whole episode. What they suffered and the reasons that I thought the child was lost.

It is then Mary can tell her story of the death, thirty or forty years ago, of her five day old Rh negative baby, and of being told she could have no more children because they would all die, and Norma can relate her experience of a son with a hole in the heart. But

it is not a question of 'sharing' death stories. Mary's identification with this nexus of maternal, abject and body is such she can hardly contain herself and what Mary "really wants to get stuck into" is how the body relates to questions of self. Her enthusiasm for the opportunity to make and remake meaning out of and with this experience, in terms of how she can understand her "self", is unquestionably vital and positive, and even, as she tells, at times mischievously provocative.

Mary: Here we go!

It was my body, I felt, that had done this to my child.

But I didn't, I didn't, hate my body or blame my body. I knew it was my body but it was myself that I felt this guilt and I felt very responsible for that child's death. I actually said not very long ago to little Smithy and his hair stood up on end, er, - that's our doctor. I said, we were just talking and I said, "Yes, I killed my second child", and I think he started to twitch all over, you know.

"You know you are not just a body" Mary says, and with the body in bits and pieces there is much discussion of how it all fits together. For Shirley the desire to reconstruct her "lost equilibrium" is still very much there but the old means of doing it, through subordination of her body as brute matter, seem now not so clear. She reflects on the relationship between a "determination" of the self, "preserving your own identity", and a determination, that in language use, becomes negatively attached to "selfishness". Perhaps a third term, she suggests, something nearer to spirit, beyond the binaries of mind and matter, is required for such a "personal being".

What about spit, Mary asks? Clearly the women "know" the story of abjection, but they seem to refute the threatening, negative meaning Kristeva constructs with it.

Mary: the other day, I kissed my mother-in-law, who's ninety-four, goodbye, and she, she sits like this (hunched demonstration) and she dribbles a lot. So that we somehow collided and I got, I got a good half-mouthful of dribble (*shrieks/laughter from others*) and I — swallowed it! (*noises, half laughs*) What could I do with it? (*loud laughter*) I couldn't spit.

Norma: Well those kind of things don't really repulse me, even though they should..

Mary: and I didn't mention this until But I mean I was very aware of the fact that I had swallowed (*eyuch from others*) a fair whack, (*yyuch*) but it was clean spit, er, spittle. It was clean. Just clean - dribble.

Shirley: But it doesn't make any sense

Mary: But I sat in the car for about ten miles before I could bring myself to tell David what had happened and he didn't say a single word about it.

half laughs

Shirley H: I think women can take more than men. If that happened to a man he'd probably be sick straight away!

Mary: I don't know

multiple voices

Shirley H: I think women get used to it because they change dirty nappies; er, you get up vomit; er, I clean up the dog's poo every day. So I think you, you, you will take it.

Mary: But it didn't make me feel ill, you know. I didn't, wasn't repulsed by it.

Cultural taboos and justifications are certainly acknowledged, but at something of a distance?

Norma: I think it would be normal, wouldn't it, to be, to be repulsed by it. I'm sure it would be normal?

Nobody, apparently, likes kissing on the mouth, with the mouth "the worst place for germs"!

Mary: yeh I, yeh I don't like kissing on the mouth, and I've never kissed any of my children on the mouth, and I don't like to see anybody **else** kiss a child on the mouth.

And yet

Mary: when I sort of collided with Nan's really sloppy kiss - it was quite different

Kristeva suggests oral disgust is the refusal of the limits of the self, and I understand her to be describing a horror at one's own materiality, mortality, fear of death. I believe limits are being refused here in quite a different sense from Kristeva—a refusal to accept a self that denies corporeality, intersubjectivity and interdependence as also being a part of individuation? Going beyond the "clean and proper body", these women seem to acknowledge and certainly wonder at, without fear, the life enhancing/creating potential of that which is "in excess" of that body, including the space between self and other, "in excess" of the self?

Sandi is also passionate and has clear strong ideas, yet seems to put them up for possible revision in quite a different way. The strength and enthusiasm of her involvement in some issues, and the way she returns to them repeatedly over the series might seem at first like insistence, but *her* "firm beliefs" are always at the same time an invitation to hear another possibility. "Don't you think?" she adds, and throws the issue open.

Sandi: Can I say something to really stir the pot?

Shirley: That's what we're here for!

Sandi: But I really rather feel sorry for men.
Because I really know, I really think - deep down I really believe that women are going to take over the world.

Whatever different styles women adopt in taking up a subject speaking position, there is no doubt about the commonality of primary discourses that interest these women, nor the space from which they speak. The swiftness with which we move from defining ourselves at the centre to actually elaborating what the boundaries look like now seems amazingly fast and seamless and Sandi's 'pot stirring' marks the beginning of an exploration and use of discourses of 'Mother' that permeate almost every angle of our conversations.

Grosz describes Irigaray's view of the constraints of dominant phallogentric discourses thus

As mother, her material and economic possibilities are severely limited. Cut off from social and sexual recognition, she becomes either the mother who gives *too much* of herself (the suffocating mother, represented in Woody Allen's film *Interiors*); or the mother who gives *too little* (the selfish mother represented in Ingar Bergman's *Autumn Sonata*). These represent the two extremes of maternity in a culture which refuses to acknowledge the woman who is (and is more than) the mother (Grosz, 1989,121).

Mavis had marked the scope of the dominant discourse earlier

Mavis: Well I think it's a very awesome experience because you've got this little new life in your hands and *you are responsible for it* and actually if you're a *good* mother you are responsible for the rest of it's life as motherhood doesn't cut off at any particular point

And the extremes of maternity that Irigaray alerts us to are very directly spoken at times, marking the boundaries and limits with, for example, the mother who is *always* there and the mother who is *never* there.

Sandi: I think you've got to look back at your own childhood and I would assume all of us here would have had a mother at home until they got to a reasonable age, and you think back - they probably never really thought about it, and it was very stable because you always knew when you got home from school - *where are you baby* - and humming a tune and

Norma: My children, the minute they got within the front gate was *MUM*.

Are you there, Mum

Neen: Well, I didn't! I used to come home

Sandi: that must mean a lot?

Neen: and I can tell you the desolation that makes you feel, to come home and no-one is there and

But the relationship gets much more complex as the different stories that can be made about mothering, depending on the specificities of material and economic circumstances, emerge and the oppositional and hierarchical positioning of woman in relation to man becomes highly visible.

Sandi's thought that women might be going to take over the world provocatively takes a change in women's status to extremes, but the debate very quickly becomes grounded.

While Shirley understands the problem in economic terms, that "men are part of the public world and it's only the poor silly woman who works for nothing in the home", it's recognised that the social recognition she asks is impossibly futuristic or fantastic. Who would pay, they ask.

Shirley: It should be some great big sugar daddy, who would

Sandi: Oh ho! Pie in the sky, Shirley!

Laughter

Current economic realities, power, and a spelling out of the way in which the mother/woman boundaries, whether these go by the name of good, selfish, greedy, selfless or absent mother, are so thoroughly and materially designated in terms of other's needs, are woven together in the talk.

While it can be agreed that men have control of economics, and that money means power, is part of a power struggle, Neen, for example, is still upset to see a man taking washing off the line. She sees it as demeaning to the man, "losing his manhood"/"something "that I thought he had". Like Sandi, she has a strong sense that the boundaries are significantly marked by men's needs, their perceived "loss of recognition", but it becomes apparent that children, teenagers, indeed any 'other', function in the same way. Any attempt by women to claim autonomy or equality is marked by a concomitant perception of unreasonable "loss" for other(s).

Sandi: I think one of the bothers is, one of the bothers, these days, is that more and more women are wanting to be, to have the best of both worlds? They want to be ? by working, by going out to work, but they also want to have the kids. Now I've no objection if a woman wants to go out and she wants to work and she wants to become more famous or better than her husband and earn more money but I don't think you can do the two jobs.

Neen: I agree wholeheartedly

Sandi: completely successfully and I think that's what's wrong with all the poor young kids. I really do. Now, for instance, you've got where we used to have ninety say, even more than ninety percent, but say ninety percent of households with mostly the male working and the woman stuck, working, but she was in the home, right, but she was unpaid. Now you've got a big

percentage, I don't know what the percentage would be but in the cities it must be pretty high, of both working, and all these teenagers who will never get a job in their lives and I find that rather sad. Now, don't you think that one of the reasons for this is that all these women have gone back into the work force?

When the available discourses are ones of such dualisms, slippages and elisions abound. Women wanting to have the best of *both* worlds, go out to work and have kids, slides into an assumption that to go out to work is to want to be *more* famous, *more* rich and *better* than husband and ultimately deprive teenagers of jobs for life. The woman in the public world is frighteningly easily subsumed into the discourse of selfish and depriving mother.

The selfish depriving mother might be seeking entirely material satisfaction, a victim of simple greed, according to Norma.

Norma: A lot of it is greed, Shirley, a lot of it is greed. Because my younger son's sister in law that lives in an absolute beautiful home - she is working full time, she's having another child any day but it's farmed straight out - but that home isn't good enough for her. She's still wanting something better, you know, and she is going to work for the rest of her life just to get these material things.

And again it's children who "suffer".

Norma: I don't know, but I said to my son, I said - "Look we made sacrifices when we were having children, we went without". I said we went without a lot of things to have a family and I said I don't begrudge it, I am happy with my kids and I wouldn't part with any one of them and I wanted to love them but we made sacrifices.

What then Paul said, and I never could stop to think of these things, "There's sacrifices still made, Mum, but the children are making them". He said - the children are making the sacrifices.

But the reduction of a concept of materiality to a single unelaborated and unquestionable one of 'greed' (or even sacrificial selflessness) is not overlooked. Quite the opposite, the very complexity of materiality, and its importance in the meaning making that takes place in this space between mothers and children, is what the women go on to try and elaborate. Within the cracks and disjunctions of the dominant discourses 'things' take on a critical importance. It's not only that the women tell *that* mothering stories are different, according to what size and kind of space/environment one has; how much room, money and support and so on, but that there is a struggle, I believe, to speak of enormously difficult *how* and *whys*.

The women go on to locate discrepancies/disjunctions in their own theses, using both personal and communal experiences, and each in their distinctive style. Sandi's facility and confidence in 'trying on a discourse/coat for fit' often successfully invites others to do the same.

Norma: You did without your new lounge suite and

Sandi: And OK, it was pretty ludicrous, because if you worked it out ninety percent of the people worked like slaves and they had these little houses. It wasn't big enough for their family and then when their family moved away and they retired they could afford their great big house. Now that's rather stupid, but, is it any more stupid than these young chil - young kids, who want the huge big house with the swimming pool and everything else that opens and shuts and they can't afford it?

Although her terms are apparently general, often appealing to facts, figures and rationality, it's a sense of maternal care and concern which underpins, and is revealed here as she constitutes today's young parents as children, "kids". Norma defines her operational space very directly - bringing in not only her children's stories and merging them with her own, but their very words.

Norma: My son lived in a unit and he said there should be a law against children, er, people having families in units. He said those kids were in day and night and I'm sure they were being abused but he said is there any wonder and I said no, I'm sure if I was locked in those four walls I would go bonkers too.

Speaking different material realities uncovers unrealistic and deceptive expectations about motherhood which implicate both individual and community.

Shirley: Course there are a lot of women who have no idea what it's like to be in a house with a couple of toddlers

Neen: not having the parents available, you know, the grandparents; because we tend to in Australia, you don't have that close relationship, that other cultures have. And I think in other cultures, you know, if you want to work or if you wanted to work you could work so long as grandma was around

Mavis: an extended family

Sandy: Oh it's sad. You just admitted that nobody knows what it's going to be like a mother until they are a mother. Some mothers become mothers thinking they're going to, thinking it's marvellous

Neen: well even if you enjoy ninety percent of it, ten percent of it's horrendous!

Dominant discourses about single mothers come up for airing on a number of occasions, complete with notions of greed, irresponsibility and immorality. Yet here, as in the

questions about working mothers, what women seem to be trying to understand and speak is what exactly subject choice might mean for a woman? There seems to be a movement towards articulating something that is deeply linked with, yet not entirely or only about, materiality.

There is a general perception that there are many more single unmarried mothers *by choice* these days. What exactly is it these women get out of being in a state support system, seems to be the question, when sometimes, as Barbara suggests "they don't really want a baby, and they don't want the man around"?

Neen: It's like in 1974 when family law came in and made divorce a lot easier and simpler to come through, the divorce rate of people that had been married for thirty or more years was absolutely astronomical. People had put up with, women had put up with men for so long and then as soon as it was freedom they just - men couldn't believe it - there were many women, they had no idea, she just walked out. She just walked out.

Barbara: I wish some one would give me money and support me

Within a hegemonic discourse that demands working mothers justify their actions, the women find cracks and inconsistencies to explore. Led by Sandi, they ask why some mothers say they are forced to work, when it's evidently not true. Notions of "excuses" leads to "guilt" and onto feeling a way differently around discourses of self denial. Is this what Neen tries to articulate when she polarises duty and desire?

Neen: A lot of women see that as an escape, you know, I'll do my duty and I'll have the kids and I'm married to him but I want this - you know - these are the things that I want.

I believe it's not simply material desire she is referring to.

Neen: I think today there are a lot of women that say I **have** to work, but really what they're saying is I really **need** to

Norma: I **want** to work

Neen: They tend to go from me, from my personal feelings, to finalising, having to make a stand?

Carolyn Steedman, writing in *Landscape for a Good Woman*, describes how

Under particular social circumstances, people may come to understand that while they do not possess anything, they possess themselves, and may possibly be able to exchange themselves for something else (Steedman, 1986, 8).

For women who have a choice over reproduction, the object(s) of exchange can extend to and include their children, further supporting their understanding of themselves as "both bargain and bargainer".

Her rights in her children derived also from the choice she was able to make, specific to time and class, about the disposal of her body. Her production of children and the wishes and desires that the production embodied were a manifestation of a process that has become much more widespread and certainly more discussed over the last ten years, of a bargain struck between working class women and the state, the traffic being a baby and the bargain itself freedom, autonomy, state benefits and a council house: the means of subsistence (Steedman, 1986, 70).

Whilst almost any material possession, as the women have noted, might form 'wishes and desires', Steedman puts one particular image to work very powerfully.

I was born in the year of the New Look, and understood by 1951 and the birth of my sister, that dresses needing twenty yards for a skirt were items as expensive as children – more expensive really, because after 1948 babies came relatively cheap, on tides of free milk and orange juice, but good cloth in any quantity was hard to find for a very long time (Steedman, 1986, 29).

The *new mode* coat of her mother's desire weaves together personal, historical, and class specificities, and as such Steedman sees it functioning much like Winnicott's transitional objects, an adult continuation of practices "by which we come to step into the landscape, and see ourselves".

The transitional object, he wrote, "must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of it's own". Like clothes: that we may see ourselves better as we stand there and watch: and for our protection (Steedman, 1986, 24).

In the absence of any obvious concrete 'things' as objects of desire, perhaps desire itself become more visible, and being a woman's desire, highly problematic to mother daughter relations that are cast in a phallogentric mode. It seems that the desire simply "to work" functions in this way.

Neen tells of her own daughter "who desperately wanted a child and waited eight years for it", and who now, with an eighteen months old daughter, wants to go back to work. While Neen is clearly unhappy about her daughter's desire, what she is alert to and questions is the intensity of her own feelings, and her urge to impose or reproduce her own desires and needs through her daughter and granddaughter.

Neen: Well I think she is being selfish. But what I mean is, am I being selfish expecting her to be home with a child, or is she being selfish? I mean should I judge her? I shouldn't judge her.

The move to put mother *or* daughter at the centre, as desiring, creates a potentially unsettling review of existing mother/daughter relations. Carolyn Steedman's 'materiality' and particularly the image of her mother's coat is used to exactly this effect. The point about the New Mode coat for Steedman is that it not only functioned for her mother as a means of seeing herself in the world, but that it served the same purpose for the daughter, if with different effect, and as such can be seen as the means of transmission, or otherwise, of notions of mothering, of identification between mother and daughter, of femininity and female desire.

To the 'child' Steedman it was made clear she represented a hindrance to her mother, a diversion of funds away from coats, dresses and skirts which were, at their most basic level, necessary for a woman to go out and work in the world, and which, as part of her mother's longing for upward mobility, could cost more than a child's keep. The coat, far from being a vehicle for moving in and being accepted by the world, as it was for the mother, represents for the child a space of ambivalence and undecidability, evidence of the contradiction that the child is both loved and a hindrance, that although the child is there, perhaps it would have been better had she not been.

In this space of undecidability, clothing belongs to the abject—not lending itself to a definitive reproduction, repetition, sameness, nor able to support total difference. But it also marks or overlaps a potential space of play, a space where, by virtue of being unchallenged, all possibilities can theoretically exist without hierarchy; an intermediate space which is an essential prerequisite for any transformation of categories? The adult Steedman, returning to this image and to this space can remake understandings of her mother and of her self, refiguring where and how to see herself in the landscape. Robyn, a continent away, finds herself in the same borderlands of childhood and abjection.

Robyn's story

Robyn: When I was about 12 or 13 my mother said I could have a new dress and a friend of hers owned a dress shop and my mother went down and chose a couple of dresses and brought them home for me to try on. I wasn't allowed to go to the shop - I wasn't even asked! One of them was quite a pretty dress - I think it was a bit white and a bit embroidered and the other one was shades of pink and may have a little bit of pale blue in there somewhere - it was a check and was dead boring and dull and it wasn't womanly or feminine in any way whatsoever and I chose that one. She said "why don't you want the other one -that's a prettier dress?". But I felt that I wasn't really allowed to be a girl and

Jan: You thought it was your role to wear the
Robyn: My role was not to be anything, really. That was the sort of house it was and I thought I really had to choose the check one. I can remember being absolutely torn - I thought that the other one is nice but it's not me and I couldn't cope with wearing it because I'm not feminine, I'm not a girl person, I don't think I'm a boy person but I think I have to choose one that would draw the least attention and this ghastly pink and blue check one. My mother got really huffy about it and took the other one back and I thought "Well I won that one!" I can remember thinking "Well I won!"

The circumstances of a rural Australian existence in the 50's may be very different in their detail from the post war British childhood of Steedman, yet Robyn's *use* of the dress bears striking similarity.

In the space of the dress story Robyn can tell of her sense of constraint, of limited possibilities and their dualistic nature. Not only was she not asked or allowed to go to the dress shop, she was brought an either/or choice, which turns out to be no real choice at all. While the dresses are both made palpably present to us as real objects, one marks conventional notions of femininity in its prettiness and the other a 'non- dress', a marker for non-femininity whatever that might be.

Dull, dead boring, not womanly or feminine in any way, this latter dress is quickly aligned with Robyn's ambiguous gender sense, of non identification, the fact that she understands herself not as a girl person, nor as a boy person. Refusal of the pretty dress and of a conventional femininity is also a very specific refusal of her mother, a refusal to identify with her mother's wishes and desire.

This constitution of herself in the space of the undecidable is unquestionably linked to her relationship with her mother and a sense of abandonment, a refusal on her mother's part to 'mother'.

Laura: So you might have been getting double messages?

Robyn: Yes but she also didn't really - I mean I really hadn't been brought up as a girl. It sounds ridiculous to say that but..

Jan: It's interesting, I imagined you must have got this feeling from your father, but your mother sort of

Robyn: Well it came from my father but my mother always reinforced him - I mean if he said "Jump!" she'd say "How high?"

Jan: But she didn't have the instincts there to want you to be a little girl?

Robyn: No, well see they sent me away when I was five. I was sent to live with my aunt so that I could, my aunt and grandmother, so that I could go to school and it's very hard for me to talk about it without having emotional feelings because this rage starts to well up and it's really kind of

That Robyn's aunt and grandmother take over "mothering" is mirrored in the very strong sense of actual place in which Robyn sees her child self, their home, and it seems that

there, food, its place and accoutrements, begins to function as positively as the pretty dress failed to function.

I went in on Mondays I think and I went home at weekends and I remember I was in town. When I say "sent away" it was only about eleven miles in to town - but for a five year old child it was a completely different world and I just didn't see my family through the week and my aunt, (who's still a single lady of ninety-four or ninety-five or something like that!), I remember bonding with her quite well. I didn't realise at the time, but she ran a boarding house and she only had the best types of people. She had only school teachers and bank employees and it was always very gracious living - there was a great big and really fine dining table in the dining room - a big long oval shaped one. There were always starched damask linen cloths and serviettes and my little job every night was to - she had a little dustpan with a little broom that you used to get crumbs off - I used to love that job. She only gave it to me because I liked doing it and I was allowed to ring the bell to tell them dinner was served.

Jan comments on what Robyn would have "got out of that", how that would have moulded aspects of her, "*as far as presenting foods and things like that - I mean it's all?*"

Robyn: Oh yes, yes. She was a wonderful cook and she was about forty then, early forties, and her mother lived in the house too - about eight bedrooms, a big house in the main street of Parkes and she worked like a slave from daylight to dusk to do this. She gave them breakfast and dinner at night but they took care of their own lunch and she must have been always tired but I never remember her being irritable. I remember my grandmother getting cranky with me a few times but she'd always bath me every night and she looked after me as if I was her own beloved child.

Steedman says quite simply that she would be a very different person now "if orange juice and milk and dinners at school hadn't told me, in a covert way, that I had a right to exist, was worth something" (1986, 122). Here, the rituals and particulars of care and nourishment that Robyn's aunt provides reflect back to Robyn not only a self who has a right to exist, but one who is loved and has a capacity to participate herself in valued transformative practices. More than merely milk and orange juice from a disembodied state welfare, Robyn speaks of rich intimacy - all the details and textures from large to small, permanent to transitory, the "really fine" furniture to the crumbs of food. And it is at the point of "the meal" itself, as her aunt had once made possible, that Robyn now actively constructs herself into the story, ringing the dinner bell, sweeping the crumbs, encircling the meal itself, joining a circle/cycle of production?

In Coonabarabran we do eventually talk of both the pleasure and the urge to create, to participate in production.

Barbara: Yeh. And I only want a pretty picture out of it. I don't want a statement. I don't want to cure the world's ills or anything like that. I just, it's a sensual feeling - the brush and the paint, and the feel of - it's sensual.

Shirley H: there you are!

Yeh!

Multiple voices

Barbara: Sensuous! Sensuous!

Neen: There are times when I can actually taste it, I want it so badly. Just - to put it on paper, just to paint. Not even knowing what I'm going to do. I just want to paint.

Naming it, speaking it, however, seems impossible without the slippage, the merging of categories; we talk of tasting paint, devouring books and babies bottoms.

Neen: eating a baby. You could almost eat a baby.

Laura: Did I tell you that bit about National Velvet? You know National Velvet? and her little brother was born and his bottom was like two hard-boiled eggs - two peeled, hard-boiled eggs

laughter

you know those glistening mounds, when you're just going to aaah chomp.
laughter

Barbara: The first time I cut up a skinned rabbit I couldn't put the knife in because I thought it was a real live baby.

laughter

It just looked like my kids looked skinned rabbits when they were born

laughter

And I had this skinned rabbit there and I put the knife and I was gentle

Laughter

Sandi: You're just gentle

I think of Neen, of her relationship to me in the many conversations we have outside the group. How she says her children are eating her alive, consuming her, how she talks of nurturing herself, her inner core: cooking casseroles to feed her soul, feeding herself twice, she says. And I think of how I use her life material, how she gives it too me as a conscious gift, like the slices of thigh spread out¹, and how that is somehow suffocating for me.

*You have made me something to eat. You bring me something to eat.
But you give yourself too much, as if you wanted to fill me all up with*

¹"This image comes from Gautier quoted in Trinh Minh-Ha (1991, 136) in a discussion of body-writing that goes beyond the subject/object identification.

"This is not a moment of my life. It's a piece of my thigh. I've cut it into slices, between which I've spread out a few faded rugs"

what you bring me. You put yourself into my mouth and I suffocate. Put less of yourself in me and let me look at you. I'd like to see you while you are feeding me. Not to lose my/your sight when I open my mouth to you. And that you should still remain close to me while I am drinking you. But continue to be on the outside, as well. Keep yourself, and keep me just as outside, too. Do not swallow yourself up, do not swallow me down in that which flows from you to me. I'd like it so much if we could be there, both of us. So that one does not disappear into the other, or the other into the one (Irigaray in Grosz, 1989, 122).

With the materiality of food Irigaray explores the transmission and speaking of women's desire, so that both desire and language can begin to function for women in an economy of their own making. Acknowledging suffocation and starvation, too much and too little, also means acknowledging the contradictions of living both, experiencing giving *and* taking away and equally the contradictions inherent in any "good enough" mothering - the processes of illusion and disillusion, and of play, which allow us to experience not only a related self and a separate self, but a self capable of being unproblematically in the company of another, "subject to subject".

My dreaming is filled with bloodied birds. Neen - a bleeding pelican, feeding her young with strips of flesh torn from her own breast. My mother, sister too, who drift in red streaked white. I want something in my hand, something to hold. It is their nursing badges, which lie side by side in my sisters jewellery case, and one of which is the Pelican herself, exclusive, coveted property of only Edinburgh Royal Sick Children nurses.

Mother rabbits eat their babies and snatches of stories and conversations.

My sister tells me that on admission to her ward, sick babies would have sellotape stuck to their bottoms, the simplest way of establishing whether they had worms; the adults coming out each night to lay their eggs are secured for the morning rounds.

Inside and outside and the space between. Is this what Mary's exchange of "clean spit" signifies, an ambiguity at the heart of experience?

I think of my mother's 'gift' of the abject, of worms, human and garden, and poo and soil and food, and the geography of the women's talk, flagging me to the question of boundaries with curiosity, excitement and delight. A gift not of patriarchal words, but the grounds, the resource, of another way of speaking? A wild extension of teddy bears, blankets and sucked thumbs.

Armstrong speaks of girls' more circuitous entry into language, into the symbolic.

Language's affinity with the pivotal and transitional object would be foregrounded for them as the site of paradox and dissolve. I wonder if those

who do learn to speak are made more aware both of the uncertainty and the possibilities, through metaphor and metonymy, of language's connection with those vital cognitive shifts and the transformation of categories which I have called a central component of the aesthetic and the prerequisite of all revisionary thought, all cultural transmission which is capable of redefinition as well as assimilation (Armstrong, 1993, 185).

In the half way space of our conversations what is revealed is the variety of levels at which our cultural experience, our worlds and our selves, continues to be shaped and interpreted in this highly specific and grounded way. Some of us, given the prevailing constraints of being in the public world, and of the inadequacies of a patriarchally defined symbolic, limit or attempt to bypass such communication in favour of a direct dealing with transitional objects and phenomena. Others, 'learning to speak', may mirror the process in rich metaphor, in the way Norma colours her contradictions with abject images. Clothes, dresses and coats (and later perfume, lipstick etc.) that are very real literal objects in their own right, but which also stand for the body and the self, function as the medium by, and with, which women can question, reconfirm or alter the way they see themselves and the world. Houses, rooms and furniture; food, from casseroles to crumbs - all can work, it seems, to the same effect. The objects, occupying real time and space, can exist and have meaning in the present, past and future. Robyn's dress does 'work' for her as much today as it did forty years ago, it's *potential* and *flexible* meanings guaranteed by virtue of always returning her to the site of paradox and her relation to the maternal.

While this maternal relation underpins our talk, informing and supporting the worlds and selves that the women bring into being, it is also made audible, visible, tangible through the talk. Many specific mother child relations are referred to, but some actually speak of the space between separateness and connectedness, as Mary does in the death of her child, and, as in the exchange of 'clean spit' between two bodies, materialise it completely. It is out of this talk/space that women can conceive of themselves as *productive* beings.

Food For Thought

I have been feeling the need lately for some layer that will wrap up into a round all the pieces of the thesis and what comes to mind are the 'lamb parcels' and my one-time restaurant. It was one of those recipes I just wanted to do, a different slant on the old meat and two veg, and since the restaurant offered a legitimate excuse to play with food, my only difficulty was to seek out the one unknown ingredient, caul. Caul, the dictionary said, a membrane from the intestines of some animals, used to make sausage skins. Surrounds the stomach, said the curious butcher, procuring a fine lacy web that seemed unlikely to net together the disparate pieces of meat and tiny julienned vegetables. A creamy white tissue that in the cooking melts almost to invisibility whilst keeping the bundle intact.

*But babies are sometimes born with it, too, and it's supposed to be lucky. That hero of the impossible floating glass church in Oscar and Lucinda¹ kept his caul in a box. Caul, the inner membrane enclosing a foetus, part of which is occasionally found on a baby's head at birth. And, here a significant, if belated morsel. Not just bringing good fortune in the general sense, another dictionary tells me, but said to be **infallible against drowning**.*

Despite our desperate, eternal
attempt to separate, contain, and
mend, categories always leak
(Trinh. T. Minh-Ha, 1989, 94).

In 1992 I approached passing pathologists and lawyers, wanting to make sausages from my own blood for a dinner centred around the body, our bodies. I would prove my blood to be safe, freeze it over the period needed to make about three litres, then personally make the sausages. Our blood has similar properties to pig's blood, so as "food" I knew they would be palatable.

Poaching them would seal the safety factor. Offering them (the consumers would have full knowledge of the blood's provenance and so be able to refuse) would be the ultimate symbolic gesture of generosity.

¹Peter Carey, 1988.

Having put the idea to a crucial group of cooks and servers (even though in one sense, I was not involving them) I found a gut resistance on the most part which seemed, at the time, insurmountable.

Last year, in London, artist Mark Quinn carved a bust of his head from four litres of his own frozen blood (this is the amount contained by the human body).

Was he allowed his dealings with the "unacceptable" because his blood became sculpted material, not food? Because for all of art's political and social implications it is never as participatory as the gastronomical arts *must* be? (Bilson, 1994, 68).

Performing this act of self-giving in the public world Gay Bilson would make tangible, visible, real, an indebtedness to the maternal body that is otherwise culturally unspeakable. This is not the metaphor of the communion wafer, nor even the act of faith in the transubstantive wafer of Catholic belief. Sausages made from Bilson's own blood, to be consciously given as food, are material expressions that go beyond metaphor or only linguistic play. Merging the categories of food and female body so undeniably, and physically, what she makes visible is the "impossible"(?)(for a woman?) relationship between embodiedness and the conceptual, the material and the cognitive, self and other, her own being performed *in* the world?

Bilson compares her performance with Quinn's expression in that legitimised site of private/public intersection, art, implying that that particular "dealing" with self is acceptable because it remains largely self contained and silent on self's paradoxical connection with other. I think of how the women in our conversations occupy this site—their intimate performances, productions of self, and of other, and of art.

For women to make visible in the landscape, or in their stories, what would normally be invisible, is already a performance (Somerville, 1995, 170).

It's a very material production and *use* of self and body that takes place - women living bodies "as the very 'stuff' of subjectivity" (Grosz, 1995, viii).

Bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable. Bodies are centers of perspective, insight, reflection, desire, agency (Grosz, 1995, xi).

There are so many different expressions. I think of Sandi 'knowing herself' through her excessive urine production in times of stress. "This is what happens to me. I've known it ever since. I'm a stressful person". Turning the context of labour and

childbirth on its head, Sandi's production far exceeds baby and 'other'. Her own body and self are both produced and produce, in the "bursting" bladder, the overflowing bucket. And almost all the women's various bodily flows seem to be made use of in this way.

Sandi: if I get emotional I get diarrhoea and pains

Norma: me too, goes straight to my stomach

Neen: yeh but it really ends up a physical

Sandi: yes definitely, turns itself into a physical complaint - starts off as

Norma: can't eat anything, runs into the toilet

Shirley: As soon as I get into that state, I get, em, not lumbago - its just ticks in your back

Norma: sciatica, probably

All the women who took part in the conversations were adamant about the positive function of crying. Isobel Armstrong talks about crying as both the production and material evidence of pain.

The precipitation of mental anguish runs down the face as a fluid, pain's material form secreted from the body. A tear is expelled as an expression of the body but it is not mere salt water because it is grief, and without the tear grief could not find expression, nor could grief begin to understand itself (Armstrong, 1993, 181).

It's a very powerful "doing" thing for all the women, a sensible "need", they say, referring many times to the desirability, healthiness attached to women being able to express their emotions.

Norma: All crying is good for you, isn't it, all a safety valve?

They say this is why women live a lot longer than men because they're not frightened to show their emotions. Men bottle it up and hold it in.

While hegemonic terms of reference available to speak "emotion", "feelings" are couched in a privileging of the interior and the psyche that usually manages to elide the body as a site of production, I ask if we cannot read the abject "stuff" of tears, vomit, blood and spit as a powerful vehicle for negotiating those constraints, instances of the body as a point of mediation

a point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable, a point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and other, and all the other binary pairs associated with the mind/body opposition (Grosz, 1995, 20).

Norma makes full use of blood and guts, the aborted foetus, and the desire to vomit in her story negotiating and understanding public expressions of the "private" and the possibilities of speaking her own "private" experience. The material exchange of spit and dribble in Mary's story seems to bring us to the very point of torsion or twist, to use Grosz's model, that marks an alterity, an irreducible difference that yet allows an interrelationship, a seeping of one into the other. Parallelling Bilson's sausages, the 'dribble' produced by one body and ingested by another provides material expression for an otherwise unspeakable contradiction. Neither denying separation nor connection the exchange traces a space, a possibility that exceeds both, without disintegration or damage to either 'other', indeed that simultaneously constructs self and other.

Haemorrhages, miscarriages, babies dead and alive, mothers dead and alive, children young and grown,—the mother/child, child/mother spaces with their inhabitants and objects are rich sites of such paradox and productions. Barbara imagines lying beneath her mirror in the act of giving birth, seeing herself give birth, giving birth to see herself and I think of the work of my mother coat image in allowing me to reconstruct my sense of self. In the production of such doubled images, indeed tripled images through the act of imagination and speech, the spaces of art, imagination and desire become embodied and multiple questions and connections arise. What can we say of these relations between body, self and image?

Elspeth Probyn says that "particular images allow us to raise questions", "to analyse facts" that an image has itself brought forward, and it is in this sense that she advocates the use of the self *as* image (Probyn, 1993). Even as the self arises out of a situation, it can comment on its own production.

it produces things, in the sense that it is quite an art, and an act, to make something apparent, to produce an object that will be considered as a document, to bring out of the shadows and to put forward "facts" that, in the final instance, are never given (Le Doeuff: Probyn, 1993, 98).

In both Tamworth and Coonabarabran women express their use of hair "do's", buying dresses, lipsticks, dressing up the home or garden, and the self, in remarkably similar terms - not only for nurturing and making visible, coherent, a self in bits and pieces but a self that could also go forward productively, *doing*, in the world.

"It's something that men just don't seem to comprehend that buying a new dress can be a really fantastic experience - an uplifting experience" Marg V says, and when dresses are out of the question, a new lipstick or a haircut can often be affordable. Strategies for making the self feel "better" can mean buying some plants for the garden, baking cakes to give away, "getting stuck into a constructive project like making curtains for the lounge room or something".

Norma: get out and do something, and well of course you do rationalise, you say, oh well get out and do some gardening or clean the cupboards out or go out. Put your hat on and go out!

For women many of the daily practices might go largely unnoticed; we talk of catching glimpses of ourselves and (m)others as desiring subjects through the most simple images and traces; a favourite towel, the "right" coffee cup, soap or socks, lavender drying in a linen cupboard.

Robyn: Yes, all the time, every day - every minute of the day and it's so subtle and you've been doing it all your life and you don't really stop to think about it any more.

Jan puts on and off her perfume according to multiple possibilities—"good" or "nice", "around the house", sometimes "dutiful", sometimes "special", while for Robyn the practice of 'perfume' is highly conscious and singular.

Robyn: I wear the same one because I want an identity, it's part of my security blanket.

What these women are talking about, I understand, is transforming and making productive use of the everyday, the "local", the familiar,—body, home, relationships, in constructing self. Letter writing provides a rich context for constructing the self intersubjectively:

Shirley H: You know what I would do? I sit down and write letters! If something's worrying me, I'm upset or something, I just get my pen and pad and I write to my girlfriends. I'll say that I'm worried and upset, I just jot down what I've been doing or what's going on - just as if I'm talking to you. I must have written thousands of letters in my time. I do like letter writing.

Norma: My husband's mother used to write to me, when she was down and she was depressed. Long letters.

Sandi: I think my friends find my letters very interesting because they don't live in the same sort of situation that I do. And I write and tell them about pulling a calf or I just tell them everyday mundane, what I think are ordinary things, and they think they are fantastic. And one of them has written back and said "I really think you should sit down and write all this like the Billabong books when we were kids!" She said, "you have such terrific stories", but they're just stories of what we are. And all my letters would be about, well, five pages long - a bit longer

I couldn't ever write things like she says. I like to write because I like to keep in contact, it's not because I
They're just ordinary letters really.

Neen wonders "if it's just because we're all artistic - that we do this" and I ask about "putting the self in the picture". Does the language of art and art education, even of imagination, allow these women a way in? If the use of the self as image is so embodied, material and "local", how does this translate into their art production?

Rita: We have been told that to do a good painting you had to put some of yourself in it. How many times have we been told that! This is always what I've found difficult really. They tell you, put some of yourself in it, but they don't tell you what or how to go about it, except that you've got to work hard at it!

Despite the difficulties of a language of opposition - mind/hands, thinking/feeling, "what you are wanting to paint"/"how you are going to paint it"—

Shirley: I remember Merrilyn saying you've got a concept, er, er a concept or theme, and then you've got the - can't remember the word she used, but for how you presented it. I can't remember all of that

—the women are nevertheless clear about what they do put in of themselves: mood, feeling, especially "emotion", along with "experience" and "determination". Mary describes the materialising of a reality out of these fragmented pieces.

Mary: I'm sure a lot of people operate under different, not methods, but threads of activity and creativity and so on, but for me, I've got to think about it and I've got to realise what I'm doing. A lot of it is intuition, and that intuitive thing is very often the final bit that makes the thing successful. But behind things that I do, that are successful, to me is this thread of thinking and, and the emotional thing I think. Somebody called me a Romantic once, years ago, and I said "like fun! I'm not a Romantic! I'm a realist!" But, Elaine Worrel insisted I was a Romantic painter and she even got a dictionary out and found there, in black and white, there I was. But it wasn't me at all. I translated my thinking and my emotional to the situation around me into marks and whatever—so that was the reality, the painting is reality, really. The marks and the painting whatever became the reality. Does that make sense?

And Sandi, in the story of her blue paint, demonstrates a use of the embodied self as image in a way that all our attempted analytic talk of texture, movement, colour - and it's difficult to articulate relationship to "emotion", fails to do.

When Sandi's art teacher 'reveals' to her how much she uses the colour blue she becomes very self conscious, not only of her paint running out "all the time", but of the possible terms in which she might express herself. Blue's qualities are seen as linked both to an external and an inner world—it's to do with the season, someone

suggests, and then someone else offers "mood". But Sandi wants to explore the sense of change, or possible change to her self representation.

Sandi: See it's funny isn't it, but now I'm sort of semi- feeling I shouldn't put blue in. It's got to me that I shouldn't.

Laura: But that's really interesting. Why is that ? Why do you think that is?

Sandi: Well as soon as she told me I became really conscious and I tried not to put blue in everything because I didn't want to be stereotyped with *you have a thing with blue*. Can you understand that? I did try. But then I'll forget about it again and it'll come back. I don't know, because that is really quite funny, because this blue business, it does keep coming back in, but And ok, there must be something in me that does like blue, but another part of me likes what Mavis has done, which is autumn colours. I *love* paintings of autumn colours, and if I went out to buy a painting I wouldn't buy a blue painting! I would buy an autumn colour painting and yet I have the most terrible difficulty trying to paint them and it all goes blue.

So that's weird, isn't it? I think probably other people must notice too in their, in their colours, in their paints thing, on their palettes. One colour that runs down a lot quicker than others? My blues run out all the time!
laughter

Sandi's new awareness is marked by a desire for change and she is moved to name other desires, other colour schemes which she would really "love" to work in. It's not easy to make the change she tells, as she describes and wonders about reverting back to blue, but she concludes she would like the potential to be different things - retaining her capacity to enjoy her blueness but at the same time not to be limited by it.

We talk of painting to music, to the sounds of birds and frogs, and I hear women opening selves onto the world.

Shirley: Isabel Jack had a tape of frogs croaking - they'd been down to the creek, and yes, it was really beautiful.

Norma: The tapes of birds, you can nearly draw a picture of the trees

Sandi: you just feel as if you've opened the window.

In a similar expansion of the self, Marg V in Tamworth talks about materialising a relationship between the known and the unknown, the intimate and the immense, the self and the universe.

I was looking up at the sky one night and I thought - yeah I spend a lot of time looking at the sky, I suppose, because it always fascinated me. You are talking about the universe and the feeling of immensity that you can't even conceive of but you can sort of get on the edge of conceiving of how

much more there is than you can actually know. You think in terms of what you know and you know it's immense but the actual concept of stars being so far away that even if travelling at high speed would take lifetimes to get there. Right then I thought how would one weave the sky? You know, the night time sky?

yeah about concepts of aura, it looks chaotic, see all these little speckles spattered randomly around the sky but actually there is so much order and so much pattern contained in the mat and yet there's ever expansion, there's an air of mystery, the unknown of what goes with it, what the pinpoint of light represent- what's there. It's this sort of mystery and yet there's rhythm and order and things going round in regular patterns and - so there's all these elements.

I designed an evening coat in my head of strips that would be together - over the shoulders, together - but just really strips of fabric and was, you know, you get this expansion effect from swinging it. I don't want to talk about it any more because I want to do it one day.

Bachelard believes that images of immensity in particular could give us access to the "pure being of pure imagination". If we could analyse such images, he suggests, we would find that immensity is within ourselves and could participate in "the purest sort of phenomenology—a phenomenology that in order to know the productive flow of images, need not wait for the phenomena to take form and become stabilised in completed images" (Bachelard, 1964, 184).

Is this the very thing that Marg nurtures, protects? Why will talking about her image at this stage spoil it? I am intrigued at the presence of this image, the way it seems to sit suspended, full of immanent meaning. When and how will it do its work? What is it's work, exactly?

Marg O describes working her images out in her head to the last detail of production, but clearly this is as counterproductive for Marg V as "talking it out" too much before she is fully committed to the project.

Marg V: If I did it like that I wouldn't do it. You know what I mean? Because I feel really disappointed when it's *all* inside. I feel just let down. All the t's are crossed and the i's dotted - that's it, that's the end of it then. It's finished - no point in it anymore. I don't like to have that completed form in my head before I start, because if something happens it's the unexpected - I want to be able to respond to that, and be free to respond to that. And if it's too far - if I can get to the end of the product inside my head I don't like to because in effect it's been done when it's in there and I can see it all, so in effect it's a waste of time.

Wanting to do it when it's fresh, not wanting to have gone "too far" with it either inside or out, in the imagination or in words, Marg wants to be in a position to access its generative, transformative energy. "It's got to maintain its power of expression and I've got to retain my flexibility towards it ... *using what happens and sort of feeling your way and responding to what's happening*".

It's the expression, having done it is what I want to say. Doing it. I don't really care what happens to it after that. It's the doing it.

Bachelard says it becomes clear "that works of art are the by-products of this existentialism of the imaginary being", "the real *product* is the consciousness of enlargement" (1964,184). Is this the work of all images? Armstrong claims that while "the aesthetic is not the political, it may make the political possible" (1993,186).

And if women do have a particular access to this space of paradox and transformation, what "vital cognitive shifts" can be spoken, what categories re - thought? Can we speak of "the extent to which our conscious involvement influences the unfolding of material reality and, in turn the surrounding material world leaves it mark on the unfolding of our own (Zohar, 1991, 185)? Can we speak of an embodied subjectivity that re thinks the categories of sexual difference itself, of a subject that has neither too much sense of the other lying outside, "maintaining the subject's oneness only because it is so thoroughly separate, has been so thoroughly expelled", nor is immersed in indivisible fusion (Armstrong, 1993)?

I believe we can. I believe like Nancy Mairs that the "roots of the function of inhabiting" are entwined inextricably with my gender, which shapes my relationship to both the space I occupy and the language in which I meditate on those spaces (Mairs, 1993, 110).

The whole description of our landscape and the lines of the universe, and of our inner monologue, needs to be redone. Colors, sounds and things - like Van Gogh Stars - are the focal points and radiance of being (Merleau-Ponty in Mairs, 1993, 110).

I dream strangely of a large black parrot. It rises up, spreading its wings in pre flight display, revealing a myriad of tiny white spots in its underfeathers, and although I send it off to its wildness, to join its others flying high, it insists on returning to me and I know it as somehow mine. A kind of remembering floods in. I had forgotten, and in my dream I rush to recover the parrot from its forgotten place. It is wrapped up in tin foil, inside my clear domed plastic lettuce bowl. I have to see if it is still alive, although because of my forgetfulness, putting it aside, it should be dead. As I open the lid, it pokes its rather naked and new born head out of the foil. It will not be food. It is alive.

REFERENCES

- Armstrong, Isobel. 1993. So what's all this about the mother's body?: The aesthetic, gender and the polis. *Women: a cultural review*, 4, 2.
- Bachelard, Gaston, 1964. *The Poetics of Space*. (Trans. by Maria Jolas). Beacon Press, Boston.
- Benjamin, Jessica. 1986. A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space. In de Lauretis, Teresa (ed). *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Bigwood, Carol. 1991. Renaturalizing the Body (with the Help of Merleau-Ponty). *Hypatia*, 6, 3.
- Bilson, Gay. 1994. The Blood of Others. In *The Good Weekend*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 14th.
- Brodribb, Somer. 1992. *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*. Spinifex Press, Melbourne.
- Bruner, Edward. 1986. Experience and Its Expressions. In Turner, V.W. & Bruner, E. M. *The Anthropology of Experience*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana & Chicago.
- Bucci, W., Creelman, M.L. and Severino, S.K. 1991. The Effects of Menstrual Cycle Hormones on Dreams. *Dreaming*, 1, 4.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter*. Routledge, London and New York.
- Carey, Peter. 1988. *Oscar and Lucinda*. University Of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Queensland.
- Carter, Paul. 1992. *The Sound in Between: Voice, Space and Performance*. New South Wales University Press & New Endeavour Press, Sydney.
- Chatwin, Bruce. 1987. *Songlines*. J. Cape, London.

Chi-Kwang. 1994. Unpublished presentation at The First Australian Women and Spirituality Conference, Tyalgum, New South Wales.

Christian, Barbara. 1988. The Race for Theory. *Feminist Studies*, 14, 1.

Copjec, Joan. 1989. Cutting up. In Brennan, Teresa (ed.). *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, London and New York.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. 1990. *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*. Routledge, London and New York.

Flanagan, Sabina. 1989. *Hildegard of Bingen. A Visionary Life*. Routledge, London.

Gagnon, Madeleine. 1981. From "Corps1" [Body 1] in *La venue à l'écriture* [Coming to writing]. In Marks and de Courtrivon (eds). *New French Feminisms*. Schochonbooks, New York.

Gaia, Thea. 1994. Unpublished presentation at The First Australian Women and Spirituality Conference, Tyalgum, New South Wales.

Griffin, Susan. 1982. *Made from this Earth: Selections from her Writing 1967-1982*. The Women's Press, London.

Grosz, Elizabeth. 1989. *Sexual Subversions*. Allen and Unwin, Australia.

Grosz, Elizabeth. 1990. A note on essentialism and difference. In Sneja Gunew (ed). *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*. Routledge, London.

Grosz, Elizabeth. 1991. Introduction. *Hypatia*, 6, 3.

Grosz, Elizabeth. 1994. *Volatile Bodies*. Allen and Unwin, Australia.

Grosz, Elizabeth and Probyn, Elspeth (eds). 1995. *Sexy Bodies*. Routledge, London and New York.

Halperin, David. 1993. *The Queer Politics of Michael Foucault*. Lecture given at The University of New England.

Irigaray, Luce. 1981. This sex which is not one. In Marks and de Courtrivon (eds). *New French Feminisms*. Schochonbooks, New York.

Irigaray, Luce. 1981b. And One Doesn't Stir Without the Other. *Signs*, 7, 1.

Kaplan, Janet A. 1988. *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo*. Virago, London.

Kirby, Vicki. 1991. Corporeal Habits: Addressing Essentialism Differently. *Hypatia*, 6, 3.

Kirby, Vicki. 1993. 'Feminisms, reading, postmodernisms': Rethinking complicity. In Gunew, Sneja & Yeatman, Anna (eds). 1993. *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*. Allen & Unwin, Australia.

Leder, Drew. 1990. *The Absent Body*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London.

Llewellyn, Kate. 1987. *The Waterlily: A Blue Mountains Journal*. Hudson, Victoria.

Mairs, Nancy. 1993. *On Becoming a (Woman) Writer*. Beacon Press, Boston.

Malouf, David. 1978. *An Imaginary Life*. Picador, Pan, Australia.

Martin, Emily. 1987. *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*. Beacon Press, Boston.

McPherson, Bernice. 1991. Common Ground in a Victorian Context. *Conserve: Women's Conservation and Environment Network*. October, 10.

Miller, Nancy K. 1991. *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. Routledge, New York.

Modjeska, Drusilla. 1994. *The Orchard*. Macmillan, Australia.

Moore, Catriona. 1994. *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970-1990*. Allen & Unwin in association with Artspace, Australia.

Newman, Amy. 1990. Aestheticism, Feminism, and the Dynamics of Reversal. *Hypatia*, 5, 2.

Oliver, Kelly. 1991. Book Review. *Hypatia*, 6, 3.

Probyn, Elspeth. 1993. *Sexing the Self*. Routledge, London and New York.

Probyn, Elspeth. 1990. Travels in the Postmodern: Making Sense of the Local. In Nicholson, Linda J. (ed). *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Routledge, New York and London.

Richardson, Laurel. 1990. Narrative and Sociology. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 19, 1, April.

Rushdie, Salman. 1981. *Midnight's Children*. J. Cape, London.

Russo, Mary. 1986. Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory. In Teresa de Lauretis (ed). *Feminist Studies / Critical Studies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Sacks, Oliver. 1985. *Migraine: Understanding the Common Disorder*. Pan Books Ltd., London.

Sharp, Rachel. 1992. Pers. com.

Somerville, Margaret. 1995. The Body/Landscape Journals: A Politics and Practice of Space. Unpublished PhD, University of New England.

Spivak, Gayatri. 1989. Feminism and deconstruction, again: negotiating with unacknowledged masculinism. In Brennan, Teresa (ed). *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, London and New York.

Steedman, Carolyn. 1986. *Landscape for a Good Woman*. Virago, London.

Stern, Daniel. 1983. The Early Development of Schemas of Self, Other, and "Self with Other". In Lichtenberg, J. & Kaplan, S.(eds). *Reflections on Self Psychology*. Analytic Press, Hillsdale, N.J.

Trinh, T. Minh-Ha. 1989. *Woman Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis.

Trinh, T. Minh-Ha. 1991. *When The Moon Waxes Red*. Routledge, New York.

Walker, Linda Marie (ed). 1992. *...but never by chance...* Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide.

Warland, Betsy. 1990. *Proper Deafinitions*. Press Gang Publishers, Vancouver.

Winnicott, D. W. 1971. *Playing and Reality*. Routledge, Great Britain.

Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis.

Zohar, Danah. 1991. *The Quantum Self*. Flamingo, Harper Collins, London.