

Bodies that Matter¹ *Rosy Martin*

In a series of 10 scripto-visual works, theoretical texts by Reuben, Freud, Bakhtin, Plath, Irigaray, Gullette, Butler, Grosz, Macdonald, and Walker (included within this article) carefully chosen as exemplars of defining or defiant texts, were projected onto our fragmented naked ageing bodies to challenge, subvert and make visible the inscriptions of medical, psychoanalytic and cultural discourses upon the body. The aim was to shift the territory across the positions taken by Reuben to Walker, through the theoretical strategies of Bakhtin (ambivalent), Irigaray (the chosen quote sets out the questions to be addressed), Grosz and Butler (who offer routes through positioning by discourse). The intention is to stress the multiplicity of texts and images and the shifting ground, the destabilised body. Meskimmon's (2002) critique explores this relationship between text and body:

"The texts neither construct a singular nor wholly negative discursive field which must be rejected for the body to be liberated. On the contrary, the multiple exchanges between the voices in these texts and the bodies they materialise, make it clear that inside and outside are not adequate terminology by which to think this textual/bodily interface or, echoing Elizabeth Meese, that "language is like a skin, both on the side of the body and out-side the body, between the body and the world, but also of the body, in the world²." The series enacts this skin in particularly visual, aesthetic formulations, materialising the bodies and the texts as the effect of light and shadow. The skin's surface is the very premise of visibility for the text and the bodies emerge in the works through their scription. Each is interpellated, indeed, made to matter, at their point and process of contact. Moreover, their materialisation is particular to the photographic process itself which draws/writes with light. These photographs are not of objects, but are the condition by which this text/body exchange can take place. As viewers, we are invited to engage actively with this materialisation, working to read the bodies, envisage the texts and make their interface meaningful. For example, the seventh photograph of the series casts a text by Elizabeth Grosz across the undulating surface of a woman's torso - we see/read each as a function of the other. I would argue that this powerful aesthetic performance of the text makes its meaning more fully material and sensually viable than any printed version could³. As the words describe and inscribe the sensual surface of a woman's skin, literally and letterally, they materialise female desire and subjectivity as embodied, sentient knowledge⁴."

The authority of the normative and clinical prescriptions of Reuben (1969) and Freud (1913) is undermined by the exuberance and presence of the vitality of the living, breathing body. Not all of the text is easily visible, and is distorted by the disruptive and excessive body upon which it is projected. Flesh overpowers word. The body answers back.

"The confrontation between real flesh and a text such as David Reuben's diatribe on the rapid decline of the older woman is a particularly challenging image as the body effectively swallows the words whole⁵."

The poses were carefully chosen with reference to key well known art historical sources and to comment upon the texts projected upon them. For example, the word 'play' in the Irigaray (1985) quote from 'This sex which is not one' is caught in a mirror, raising issues of mimesis, visibility, reflection and the mirror's use by artists as a symbol of vanity⁶. By so emphasising the word 'play', we both give form to the ideas within the quote, and our own artistic processes. In the image using the quote from Butler (1990) on the performativity of gender, the pose is that of the *Venus Pudica*⁷, covering the pubis with the hands, performing the Classical pose of femininity, with the excessive, transgressive body of middle age. The *Venus Pudica* pose is challenged in the image using the quote from Freud (1913). The image is taken from a low angle, which gives a sense of power to the figure, defying the quote. The

hand does not cover, but rather, in the form of a fist, resists and contests any 'loss of genital function⁸.'

'The third photograph of the series voices alterity as a critical dislocation between visual citation and text. ... It is also the body of an older woman, strong, beautiful and sensuous. The changes wrought over time have not placed this body beyond what the text describes as women's 'period of womanliness', but begin a challenging process of re-defining what 'womanliness' can mean⁹.'

In using the quote from Walker (1983), the word 'eye' is caught and enlarged by a magnifying glass, to emphasise the notions of detailed, penetrating, insightful looking and to reference the associations of the magnifying glass with old age. We chose to use black and white prints for this series to formally echo the idea of the authority of the printed word, which we subverted. We exhibited the chosen texts as a separate art work, in a different part of the gallery.

1. Butler, Judith (1993) 'Critically Queer' in 'Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive limits of 'Sex'' London and New York Routledge
2. Meese, Elizabeth (Sem) 'Erotics: Theorizing Lesbian Writing' p3
3. Grosz, Elizabeth (1994) op.cit. see earlier in article
4. Meskimmon, Marsha (2002) Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics London and New York: Routledge.
5. Gear, Rachel (2000) op. cit.
6. Nead, Lynda (1992) 'The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality' London and New York: Routledge
7. 'Pudica' - means shameful or modest 'Female nudes fashioned as covering their pubises were and continue to be the most favoured subject/pose/gesture in the art of the western world. The subject/pose/gesture was first mainstreamed into western culture by the fourth-century Greek sculptor Praxiteles.'
For a discussion on the meanings of this pose see Salomon, Nanette (1996) 'Uncovering art history's 'hidden agendas'' in 'Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts' Edited by Griselda Pollock, London and New York Routledge p69-88
8. Freud (1913) op.cit.
9. Meskimmon, Marsha (2002) op. cit.