

Challenging invisibility - Outrageous Agers

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In this chapter I explore my own reflections upon my ageing process and offer some examples of how ageing is represented within popular culture. My response to these issues was to embark upon a process based art project, using photography, video and phototherapeutic methods, resulting in a body of work which seeks to challenge and subvert simplistic and stereotypical representations of the ageing woman. Audience responses to the art works have included recognition, celebration and a re-evaluation of how it might be to envision the ageing process differently. This work has been extended by developing workshops in which groups of older women share their experiences and discover ways of articulating their stories. In this approach, I have started from a personal issue, explored it as a route to creating art-work collaboratively with Kay Goodridge and then used these experiences as a basis for developing therapeutic workshops, which mirror the experience of creativity and the exploration of complex issues for the participants.

A shifting self-identity

When my hair started to grow white streaks when my father died, in 1990, I decided to keep it like that, as a mark of mourning. As the bright red colour of my hair fades slowly, imperceptibly day-by-day to white, my familiar reflection in the mirror becomes that of someone I suddenly do not readily recognise: an older woman. Not merely a question of image, this prompts a time for inner reflection, as Sylvia Plath(1961) explores in her poem:-

'Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.'¹

What marks this transition? Perhaps it was my fiftieth birthday. Perhaps it was the 'change of life', this non-negotiable change, as the flow ebbs away. Perhaps it was the realisation, as I completed my therapy studies, that I was projected as 'mother' in that role, in the transference relationship. Do I want to mother, when I never chose to mother a child? Empathy and good mirroring are nurturing qualities that I bring to my therapy work, and I aim to enable the client to identify, develop and use their own inner nurturer. Within the transference relationship I may not only need to offer a sense of 'the good enough mother'², but also be required to be the 'not good enough' mother figure in order that the client can be angry, whilst I survive that anger without retaliation.

An extract from my diary, on turning fifty. 'To party or not?'

It happens, it happens all the time, continuously, without us looking for it or requesting it. It is the only guarantee - you will get older.

'Let me die before I get old'
(Pete Townsend 'My Generation' the Who 1964).

Did my generation, who so happily sang along, so long ago, really agree? Do they now? As grey and white overwrite black, blonde and red, first dancing at the temples, then advancing, gaining ground. To dye or not to dye? It shouldn't matter of course. Just like it shouldn't matter what you wear or whether you are beautiful or not. But it does. How much do you prejudge on the basis of what you see? How does that change? What a frivolous concern, appearance is. Yet we live in an age of appearances, surface, immediacy - where disguise at a premium, because, in haste, what can I know but what is in front of me. What you see is what you get.

'Forever young, forever young, may you stay forever young'
(Bob Dylan 'Forever young' 1973)

So who will take the time to discover the richness, or even the bitterness that lies behind grey?

Grey skies, men in grey suits, it was a grey day - grey does not inspire much joy. Yet, grey is such a versatile colour, almost chameleon, changes so subtly, according to which colour is beside it, flexible and open to interpretation.

Re-invention, yes, it's the task of my generation to re-invent what ageing can be. Take back the power of knowledge, the tolerance of having seen it all, the forgiveness of practice.

But, a voice in my head moans, but. It is a miserable, panicked voice - the voice that realises that there is an ending, only finite time left, and instead of issuing a pass to freedom screams the fear of lost opportunities. Is that then the tragedy of ageing? The mountains I will never climb, the lakes I will never swim in, the people I will never meet again.

When young I saw it all as limitless possibility and potential. Now with the heavy feet of clay of middle-age, is the progression of loss, of letting go and learning the skills of good-byes hard to celebrate? How can each of us sit with these inevitable changes, having argued a need for inclusion and the acceptance and welcoming of difference all our lives, now to find ourselves in the one group that is so despised, overlooked and feared. What is so terrifying? Is it the sudden flash of recognition of the reflection of my mother, my father, in the mirror - all that I thought I had left behind, grown away from in the search for my singular identity, now reasserting itself in the all too familiar. Is this return to roots a cause for celebration?

Since we belonged to the generation who said 'Don't trust anyone over 30'³ how do we cope with being the people we fought against? A generation, who by force of numbers and self-assurance pushed their agenda all the way, first youth culture, then feminism, then the concerns of middle-age, now the issues of an ageing population - ourselves.

Since the 'Other' is always the repository of negative projections, the old person becomes the ultimate 'Other' that we each fear the most, since this is the 'Other' that perforce we will each become...

The cultural construction of the ageing woman.

To write, as a woman in her fifties, of experiencing ageing may seem a little premature, living in a Western society in which life expectancy for women is approaching eighty and my own mother is in her ninety-first year. Yet this is an experience of the internalisation of Western culture's denial of and distaste for ageing, which is characterised in terms of decline, not in terms of growth and change.

It is not the ageing process itself which prompts these anxieties, but the cultural attitudes that accompany it. For women these pejorative attitudes towards ageing cast their shadows earlier than for men. The rhetoric may be found within medical discourses upon the post-menopausal woman. Dr. Reuben here describes a medical model of sexual degeneration, (which he characterises as 'tragic') once the reproductive function is lost:-

'The vagina begins to shrivel, the breasts atrophy, sexual desire disappears ... Increased facial hair, deepening voice, obesity ... coarsened features, enlargement of the clitoris, and gradual baldness complete the tragic picture. Not really a man but no longer a functional woman, these individuals live in the world of intersex'.⁴

For Freud a woman of fifty was 'elderly'⁵, dysfunctional in sexual reproductive terms and therefore sexually invisible.

'After women have lost their genital function their character often undergoes a peculiar alteration. They become quarrelsome, vexatious and overbearing, petty and stingy; that is to say that they exhibit typically sadistic and anal-erotic traits which they did not possess earlier, during their period of womanliness. Writers of comedy and satirists have in all ages directed their invectives against the 'old dragon' into which the charming girl, the loving wife and tender mother have been transformed'.⁶

The representations of ageing women within most popular cultural forms amplify such distaste and dread. I chose to research the collection of comic sea-side postcards published by Bamforths, which are held at the Huddersfield library, as a vivid example. The stereotypes of the rolling pin wielding, middle aged, formidable, monstrous harridan and her half-pint sized, meek, hen-pecked husband are re-played down the years.

'Does the climate here disagree with your wife, sir?'
'No Mister, it wouldn't dare'

'That's the mother in law - if she lived in India she'd be sacred!'

'Grannie - tell granddad his fire's gone out'
'Yes - I know dear - it went out ten years ago'

Stereotypes of older women include formidable sea-side landladies that are not to be argued with, ugly and pathetic 'old maids' searching in vain for men under their beds and older women trying on new looks and failing miserably.

Under a sign stating 'Any old bird stuffed and mounted' the male assistant asks of the ugly older woman
'And what can I do for you, Madam?'

'Have I got past the fare stage, conductor?'
'You sure have, Missus!'

Alongside these, there are many examples of female camaraderie and a celebration of the carnivalesque in the representation of large, laughing women having a good time on holiday, escaping everyday pressures, refusing the judgments of others.

A large woman in stretched bathing suit with the number 13 emblazed, behind her is a sign 'Beauty competition' and the two male judges raise their eyebrows in horror. She beams at us
'I'm having a go at everything this week -while there's life there's hope!'

A visit to the cosmetics counter at any department store, or even Boots and Sainsbury's, quickly demonstrates the advertisers' and marketers' capacity to play to the fears of ageing that are foregrounded in our youth centred culture. For women, ageing is presented as a pitched battle to be fought in an attempt to retain youthful firmness, elasticity and beauty, target marketed to all women over the age of 25. The discourses of science, war, cosmetic surgery and magic are evoked as intoxicating lures to prompt the purchase of 'youthfulness in a jar'.

'NoAge Essentiel. Age-defense renewal serum.
Revolutionary formula. Optitelomerase + 2 anti-oxidants = the Ageproof complex.
"Magical" effects. Specifically designed by Dior Laboratories, this magical texture, the 'New Skin System' becomes one with the skin to "Plump up" retexturise and smooth it on application.'

'Say no to ageing' NoAge leaflet Christian Dior Paris 2001

'After a certain age, facial tissues weaken, wrinkles increase and the skin loses its firmness. A major innovation from the L'Oreal Laboratories, new 'Revitalift' with Nanosomes of Pro-Retinoal A and with Par-Elastyl has been developed to effectively combat the skin's signs of ageing ... Your face looks visibly younger.'

L'Oreal packaging 2001

'At the cutting edge of skin care technology, Face Sculptor with pro-phosphor has been called 'a face-lift in a jar' as the skin is instantly firmed and lifted and fine lines are smoothed away.'

Vision spring 2001 Helena Rubinstein

The fashion department offers little solace, there is barely room for manoeuvre amongst the dominance of highly sexualised skimpy club scene youth styles, all else is marginalised. If our places in the hierarchies of consumer culture are established and contested around our consumer choices, then the few options offered to mature women preclude finding a variety of styles with which to present ways of being powerful women. The demand for constant change which fuels the fashion cycle itself holds implicit messages of redundancy and obsolescence, through which we are taught to despise and cast off the styles of previous years. Gullette (1999) has analysed consumer culture and the 'life cycle' of clothes, in which 'dissatisfaction is our most important product'⁷, as an arena in which each of us is taught to discard once loved garments with which we identified and by so doing, learns unconsciously to accept a lesser identification with an ageing and declining self, long before any physical debility is experienced.

'The fashion cycle suggests that as we master a technology of remaining fashionable, within the current economic and discursive climate, we practice identity stripping and learn decline unconsciously. ... It's not the past that is shameful, it is we who incur shame if we ally ourselves with the past, the unwanted, the "old". ... Once we recognise our location in a cultural war centred on age, we need to experience ourselves consciously as both targets and resisters.'⁸

The deeper fear is of oneself being passed over, passé, past it. No, not yet, just give me some more time ... The awesome archetype is the crone, too long characterised as the hag/witch of fairy stories and folk lore, as a cultural disavowal of the once respected role of wise-woman and matriarch. Everyday language is full of derision for the old: 'Old bag', 'old hag', 'old maid', 'sagalouts', 'grumpy old', 'silly old moo', 'boring old', 'dirty old', 'stupid old', 'foolish old'. My mother's voice echoes in my mind, her litany of attempts to displace societal scorn: 'keep on smiling', 'mustn't grumble', 'keep your chin up'. My mother's extreme frailty now focuses me upon the source of these projected fears, the fear of death itself.

'Are we not dealing with a myth of old age - an accumulated deposit of everyone's fears of the uncertainty of life, which all of society has pushed ahead each year until it is compressed into the farthest end of our lives - and we, who are old, are expected to live out everyone's fear - not of old age - but everyone's fear of the uncertainty of life itself'⁹

The process of developing the art work.

As I enter another difference, as I take up my position amongst the (middle) ageing population, it became imperative to me to consider this new positioning through my art work, through my photography. What might it mean to be 'older' - the process of becoming is so gradual and yet for a woman loaded with cultural meanings few would readily embrace.

I chose to work collaboratively, with Kay Goodridge, who is also a photographer and has many years of experience as a co-counsellor and as a community artist. Kay has a daughter, who has recently left home to go to University. Kay brought to our explorations this experience of mothering a daughter, and what it means to offer support as her child becomes a woman and the difficult transition of separation, which brings with it new found freedoms. For so many middle-aged women these years represent an opportunity to move on from the day-to-day responsibilities of full time mothering to re-discovering a sense of autonomy.

We spent many hours together, using therapy techniques, to uncover our own fears and prejudices about our own ageing processes. We offered each other the therapeutic space to explore our contradictory feelings and through this connection we created for ourselves a safe space in which to work. We used many of the techniques I had developed within phototherapy¹⁰.

We were seeking to use photography to intervene in cultural debates about the constructions of identities, as I had, for example in my explorations of my lesbian identity.¹¹

'Re-enactment phototherapy moves way beyond the always already impossible notion of finding any "ideal", "real," or "positive" image, an idea which ignores how meanings are constructed or subjectivities are produced. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialist past, identities are subject to the continuous interactions of history, culture, and power. The subject as the site of the articulation of representations, inscriptions, and meanings can be explored in the freedom of the potential offered by re-enacting, playing with, and subverting identities, rather than seemingly being fixed, defined, and contained by them. Phototherapy enables clients themselves to make visible what it is to be subjected to and subject of the discourses within society.'¹²

Our intention in our work was to confront stereotypes of the ageing woman, which currently leave little space for negotiation and suggest decline, loss of sexuality and redundancy. Consequently, ageing is seen as a problem to be overcome, hidden or denied. We wanted to challenge and contest these stereotypes. This work is about the unruly, carnivalesque even grotesque body, which refuses to be ignored. We chose to use irony, humour and transgression to subvert clichés for example 'mutton dressed as lamb'. We asked ourselves the question what does it mean to inhabit an ageing, unstable body:- as a woman? as artists/photographers using our own bodies as a medium for exploring social and psychic realities?

"To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself simply to be reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself - inasmuch as she is on the side of "perceptible," of "matter" - to "ideas," on

particular ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means to "unveil" the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply reabsorbed into this function.¹³

We started by making a series of portraits of one another, taking turns to be in front of the camera, with the other as supporter, confronter, phototherapist. We needed to get used to how we now looked in photographs. We then went on to explore a series of portraits that were multiple exposures, of multiple selves. As the trust within the working relationship between us grew, we took more risks. We were thus able to let go of the images we held in our heads, of how we used to look and take a more objective gaze at our own self representations. Yet still the 'body beautiful' message haunts... what of the body I now have?

Exploring the body as a site of inscriptions

'The body must be regarded as a site of social, political, cultural and geographical inscriptions, production or constitution. The body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; it is itself a cultural, the cultural product'.¹⁴

As one of our strategies we decided to concentrate on parts of our bodies which may be characterised for many women as sites of bodily anxieties, for example flabby bellies, crêpey bosoms, cellulite pitted buttocks and thighs, love handles and triple chins, and sought to find ways to re-present them. We photographed each other's bodies, accentuating the 'ugly' bits. We then experimented with double exposures, to intensify the notion of becoming, and overlapped the images, for example photographing the effect of breathing out and relaxing muscles with breathing in and tensing muscles on our flabby bellies. We cropped in very close to the body, seeking out sites of displeasure to make these images transgress the boundaries of the frame. We discovered that when we made selections from the photographs we had produced and placed images together as a continuous frieze of colour photographic prints, in which one image appeared to merge with the next, they became aesthetically gorgeous bodyscapes. It became possible to look at these fragmented parts of our bodies, which we had previously viewed 'as if' through the judgmental eyes of others, in startling new ways, no longer 'ugly', they rather bore the traces of lives lived, inscribed by time. The response to these images, when they were exhibited as a huge frieze at Lighthouse in Wolverhampton included

'The act of looking at the undulating folds and contours of the skin becomes pleasurable and manifold, as though the artists are playfully interrogating our assumptions of how the ageing body should appear. By juxtaposing a visual exploration of how it feels and looks to inhabit an ageing body with a sense of liberation (corporeal, aesthetic and political) Martin and Goodridge question the stigma of growing old, which so often becomes a process of de-eroticisation under the gaze of contemporary society. Furthermore, by engaging with the dynamics of representing the old(er) female nude, the absence of the older woman in visual art is challenged. Within a patriarchal frame, only the smooth, healthy body is considered an appropriate body type for art: anything other than this is out of bounds/monstrous.'¹⁵

We also chose to examine the sense of having an unstable body, foregrounded by our own experiences, for example of feeling one day fit and healthy, the next crippled by rheumatism and straining knee joints when running. By overlapping images of movement to represent instability with images frozen by flash light, we used multiple exposures to confront notions of the unstable body, containing echoes of its history, projections towards its future, within itself.

'On the inner screen of ageing, these shadows - memories of younger selves, anticipations of older selves - meet, conflict, interact. ... Incorporating previous states we become the sum of what we have been. It is, paradoxically a permanent inchoate process. As a rule loss and mourning accompany the discourse of ageing. Yet loss's travel companion is accumulation - of imaginary selves, of psychic objects, of all the "baggage" of the past.'¹⁶

We also used these multiple exposure ideas to make portraits of each other, combining movement and stasis to make visible ideas of change and instability. We created traces of both the past and the future within the images, for example in one image of Rosy, the movement gave back the bright auburn- red colour to the hair, in another the loose movement of the jaw offered up an image of a premonition of old age.

Trying it on: the performative body

'Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts. ... If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal.'¹⁷

Ignoring the implicit notice 'no woman over 30 need enter' we re-visited Top Shop to engage with and perform the stereotype of 'mutton dressed as lamb' by trying on a range of trendy clubwear, lycra-stretched sequins, leopard-skin print and PVC. Squeezed into the frame, our bodies mirror the desire and discontent of the loss of the anyway already impossible 'perfect' body. Trying on youth in a changing room, the flesh of the body reasserts itself through the stretched fabric, it cannot be contained or forced to fit within fashions parameters. But alongside this unease, we were celebrating the carnivalesque fun and ambiguity of the images, as tendrils of hair fall upon plunging necklines and bums most definitely do look big in this. The mirrors of the changing room reflected back the performative aspects of the work and reinforced the act of looking, both of the viewer as voyeur inside the changing room and the artists as both fashion model and photographer. When we exhibited this work, we made large (60" x 40") light-boxes, montaging together series of images, to cite, challenge and create a parody of fashion and advertising photography. Chris Arnot (2000)¹⁸ reviewing the show had a mixed response:

'A large bottom stretches tight leopard-skin to comic postcard parody. A big, bare thigh, pitted with cellulite, protrudes from a short skirt below a bare bulging midriff. The unsightly lumps are juxtaposed with lovely feminine shoulders and hints of cleavage.'

What d'ya think you're looking at?

In an exhibition that focused so much upon the female nude and the subversion of popular cultural forms, we then decided that we could not ignore the striptease, but needed to make it 'outrageous'. Our performative approach was intentionally carnivalesque and transgressive, drawing its inspiration from engagement with Bakhtin's (1965) work on Rabelais and his notions of 'grotesque realism'. The grotesque body he addresses is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change, in opposition to the Classical body, which may be characterised as monumental, static, closed and sleek, the idealised body that haunts the psyche of desire, the always impossible to physically embody ideal.

'In the famous Kerch terracotta collection we find figurines of senile pregnant hags. Moreover, the old hags are laughing. This is a typical and very strongly expressed

grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm or stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness... it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits.¹⁹

This image of the pregnant hag is highly ambivalent, from a feminist reading, but it does allow for exuberance and a celebration of the transgressive aspects of the monstrous feminine, which counters idealisations of certain kinds of female beauty. It offers a space, for play and for a broader notion of self expression and self acceptance than the entrapment of forever seeking the impossible Classical perfection.

We moved to using video, and worked in Kay's all white studio in Cambridge, which mirrored the white cube of the typical gallery space and we dressed in the obligatory, ubiquitous black of the private view. In 'what d'ya think you are looking at?' our gestures and poses mirror and subvert the striptease act, as we teasingly removed layer upon layer of black clothing, whilst humming and singing 'The stripper'. Underneath the multiple layers of black lie another visual twist, inspired by my experience of a sprained ankle, tubi-grip²⁰ covered our arms and legs. Although this is usually connected to notions of the damaged unhealthy body, we used it as a second skin, tubi-grip as the new lycra, also making a visual reference to Victorian silk stockings, and peeled it off seductively, whilst laughing.

'Several key words spring immediately to mind: riotous, positive, powerful and, of course, outrageous. ... Martin hums and sings 'The Stripper' throughout, bawdy at first and then slowing down to a rhythmic gasp which evokes an excited heartbeat.... Most significantly, they are both laughing which firmly roots this performance in the tradition of the carnivalesque with its associations of risk and excess as the artists reveal themselves, literally, to the audience. What is most appealing is that they look and sound as if they are enjoying themselves, as though they are revelling in peeling off the stigma of old age.'²¹

The second part of this piece was more confrontational, engaging with the dangers of exposure, in the style of a flasher, and also in terms of exposing the ageing 'othered' body. We took turns to advance towards the camera, removing a full length black coat to reveal our naked bodies, asking 'what d'ya think you're looking at' of the viewer. Our intonation became more angry and challenging as we walked towards the camera, until only our mouths appeared pressed against the lens, disembodied and distorted.

"The real threat posed by older women in a patriarchal society may be the "evil eye" of sharp judgement honed by disillusioning experience, which pierces male myths and scrutinises male motives in the hard, unflattering light of critical appraisal. It may be that the witch's evil eye was only an eye from which the scales had fallen.'²²

***Bodies that Matter*²³**

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 world."²⁴ 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 could.²⁵ 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 knowledge.'²⁶

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 whole.'²⁷

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 vanity²⁸. 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*²⁹, 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 function.'³⁰

'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 mean.'³¹

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.

Workshops on ageing using phototherapy techniques and digital manipulations.

When this work was exhibited at the Lighthouse Gallery, Wolverhampton (2000), Kay and I ran workshops with older women to encourage them to engage practically with some of the concepts we had worked upon, using the exhibition as a catalyst for their own ideas. We introduced them to collaborative phototherapy methods, which they used to create self-portraits with digital cameras. The participants then used Photoshop³² to manipulate their self-portraits, to create composite, layered images that reflected upon their notions of self, and the complexity of their identities. We shared the images produced, within the group. Each participant spoke about the aspects of self identity and ageing they were working through, within the supportive and experimental environment we had created.

Workshops using photography and video with the 'Freudian Slips'

As our work became more performative, we decided to run a series of workshops with a women's theatre group, 'The Freudian Slips'³³, on issues of ageing. We wanted to share our experiences based upon the re-enactment phototherapy approach of using photography and video performatively. 'The Freudian Slips' have been working together for a number of years, devising, writing, directing and producing their performances. These workshops offered the opportunity to work with the improvisational and physical theatre skills of actors. Kay and I planned and ran these workshops, using phototherapy techniques and incorporating feedback and responses from the 'Freudians'. We circulated our plans amongst the group, well ahead of each workshop, to enable participants to prepare and collect ideas, props and clothes for each session. Throughout the workshops, we built in time for emotional processing, feedback, support and reflection. We recorded the workshops, using video and photography. This allowed the participants to re-view the work, after the workshops and work through the issues raised. Every participant worked on the themes during the time between our meetings, it was a very intense experience. We used the workshops as a spring-board, to explore issues within a safe group and also as a route to allowing creative ideas to develop over the course of the four workshops.

In the first workshop, after a warm-up we brainstormed ideas on our fears and joys of ageing³⁴. We then took it in turns to take one of these aspects, and improvised scenarios, which were halted at the director's call of 'freeze', whereupon one left, and another took her place, beginning a new scenario. This exercise enabled us to begin to enter into our fears and to begin to challenge these through exploring aspects that the group had identified as joys. By using role-play we were able to create some distance and objectivity. We then used 'found photographs' (a phototherapy technique) to open up ideas of story-telling and photographs as fictions. A selection of old, found family album photographs was laid out and participants asked to choose one³⁵. Counselling in pairs, the one who is speaking uses the photograph to tell a story. The one who is listening can ask some key questions to help their partner focus. Participants are asked to study the photo. Why did you choose it? What drew you to this photo? They are invited to freely associate around the image, and assured that there is no right or wrong perception and asked to choose someone in the photo to identify with, to tell their story. They are requested to speak from the first person, as

if it were you. e.g. I am standing beside, I am at a studio having my photo taken, I feel...

After counselling in pairs, each participant was invited to tell their story to the whole group, entering into the imagined history of the person within the image that they had chosen. A further exercise, in which participants stayed within the roles they had developed, explored attitudes to difference. The feelings that this aroused were processed within the group. For the final exercise of the day, participants were invited to stand on a plinth and become a powerful middle-aged woman. Each explored what that represented for them, using the props and clothes they had brought with them if they so choose, how it felt and what it was like to become this powerful embodiment. This exercise was both celebratory and cathartic.

We started the second workshop with a warm up. Then each participant introduced themselves to the group by means of an object, which they had chosen. This offered the opportunity to explore aspects of the self through association and metaphor. It was a very powerful exercise, which moved into aspects of personal histories. We then used mime to explore the fears and joys, allocating one of each, randomly from the list. Everyone brought dressing up clothes to share, and we played with these, entering into different roles. Once we had all decided upon an outfit, we then entered into the characters evoked, through guided exercises. We then worked with the joys and fears, allocating them randomly. We emphasised the importance of being with the feelings evoked, a certain stillness and intentionality that allowed the body to communicate powerfully, without language.

We then worked with the idea of afflictions. Each participant had brought props which helped to focus and make their chosen affliction visible, and presented their performative piece to the group. Again, personal stories were very resonant, with some real insights and passion, whilst the permission giving of the group dynamics which we had created enabled everyone to take risks. A closing circle and feedback ended the day.

In the third workshop we built upon the personal pieces, and the ideas that each individual wanted to pursue in more depth out of the previous workshops. After a warm up, we introduced ourselves through a very personal object. Each participant offered a performative piece to the group, developed from whichever exercise had produced the most resonance.

The group offered feedback and containment. We used the dressing up clothes and props again, in free improvisation, allowing ideas to spark from one another. In the final session of the day, we set up the video camera, and did a free improvisation to camera, in which we took turns to speak and step into the performative space. At times riotous, at times playful, at times so poignant, we each dug deep into our feelings about ageing and our life experiences.

In the fourth workshop, after a warm up, we each introduced ourselves to the group through an object which represented a pivotal time in our lives. We spoke in the first person about the object as if we were living in the time it symbolised. Again each took the performative space to work up a piece, and received feedback and support from the group. We then did a group improvisation, using the video-camera as the audience, on the theme of teaching each other what you have to do to be an old person. In retrospect, this exercise did not work as well as the previous group improvisation, perhaps because we found a wheelchair, and acted into projections, rather than drawing upon our own experiences.

In the closing circle, we took time to evaluate the whole process and what each individual had learnt from it. I observed that the work that had touched upon personal histories was the most powerful. Feedback from the Freudian Slips was that

these workshops were much more personal than their usual workshops, because we were using phototherapy and dramatherapy techniques.

Kay and I decided to develop some individual pieces, as video performances, with the intention of exhibiting them. We set aside 4 days for this filming, and invited those participants who wanted to take their work further to take part. The pieces evolved during the process of filming, through feedback, support, and the therapeutic gaze³⁶ which we offered, to become the final art works.

***'Time will Tell'*³⁷**

Sue Knight brought her poem to the third workshop. Reading it standing, naked, the power of the text resonated. We cheered, in support and in recognition. The poem held both celebration and loss, anxiety as well as joy in inhabiting an ageing body:

'Ode to My Post-Menopausal Body

O post-menopausal body,
Shall I tell thee how I love thee?
I shall begin here at thy feet
O feet so nimble and shapely
Art thou alone untouched?
O legs, once sturdy,
How fast canst thou run?
What are these veins that cluster about thee
Like the vine that entwines the pergola?
O Fanny - art thou dry?
Who used to run with lusty juice
Where is thy unfettered passion,
Insistent that all should bow to thy desire?
And Grecian waist so sweetly curved
Lost beneath mounds of sub-cutaneous-ness
Thickened out of recognition
Art thou faire?
These breasts now ample, once were small
As ripening plums upon the tree
Now falling heavy with a swinging gait
Dost thou recall the sweetness that was thee?
But ah, to thee oh neck I must recite:
As time hast drawn and stretched
Thy loosening skin,
Shall I compare thee to a feathered friend?
Or to a roasting fowl with all thy feathers plucked!
Head perched aloft, that aches too oft
The fount of wisdom stares
From eyes still blue behind the double lens
And canst thou say thou never shalt forget
When memory plays tricks at ev'ry turn?
O post-menopausal body so divine
I love thee still
If thou wilt still be mine!³⁸

I wanted to find a way of making the image as powerful as the text. Given that the poem highlights the ageing process, I decided that it would be confrontational to site the speaking subject, the post-menopausal woman on a plinth, next to the Classical ideal, within a museum. This strategy is to highlight an absence, a body that is not represented within the canon. I went to the Victoria and Albert Museum, to find a suitable location and chose the sculpture court and the 'Three Graces'³⁹ as the foil. We gained permission to video there, and filmed an establishing pan, and the 'Three

Graces' themselves, both in long shot and close up. We then filmed both long shot and close up of Sue Knight's performance of her poem, whilst she stood on an improvised plinth, against a Chroma blue screen⁴⁰. This enabled the performance itself to take place within a 'safe' space, over which we had control. Combining the shots from the two locations in the editing process, the animated, enfolded, lived-in body of the speaking subject directs her address to the cold, white marble of sculptural perfection, challenging the object of the look, and highlighting the transitory aspect of youth as the ideal.

'Mouthpiece'⁴¹

During the workshops, Kay Goodridge had explored the themes of silencing and speaking out. In the powerful middle-aged woman exercise, Kay had spoken of how she had felt silenced, and had found her voice and her creativity through her photography. In the afflictions exercise, Kay had wound bandages around her mouth, and painfully struggled to speak through them, until she pulled them off with a wrenching movement. We talked this through in depth, and it became clear to Kay that she was touching upon issues of abuse. She had a mouth shape sculpture, formed of tiny red lights, that a friend had given to her which she chose to use as a prop to explore this silencing in experiencing childhood sexual abuse in the third workshop. Kay had previously written very powerful texts⁴², in the voice of herself as a child, trying to make sense of these experiences, which she worked with in the fourth workshop, again using the mouth of lights. We worked together, one-to-one, to find a form to give power to her performance, when we were making the video. We came up with the idea of illuminating just her mouth, with red light, speaking her powerful text, of her childhood experiences of sexual abuse, and her anger.

'Excerpts from Mouthpiece'

Writing this - it feels like a statement, a confessional, as if I am the guilty one. Let's get this straight. I AM GUILTY OF NOTHING.

You say you have a camera and want to take some pictures of me with no clothes on. I enjoy stripping off and you take photos but there comes a point when it has all gone too far. I am very scared and start to cry. I want to leave and feel very guilty in case my parents find out. But I cannot leave. You have hidden my clothes and I am naked. Did you touch me then?

I was so frightened after that. Frightened that other people might find out. You stole my innocence. You destroyed a side of me which could trust people.

I must have held on to so much, hidden so much. I could talk to nobody about anything that had happened. I had to keep silent.

At other times it seems like all this happened to someone else, someone who was not me. The school photo - a group of innocent children playing out the best years of their life. I think not.

I am angry now. I am a ball of rage. Your face is bleached out by my anger. Bleached out, burnt, distorted. You become part of the background. My background. The effects are in my unconscious, disturb my dreams.

My rage is at YOU - who seem to have escaped the humiliation, the fear, the guilt, the absolute terror of being found out. And rage at any abuse of power, of people using their strength over others.⁴³

All the emotions are focused in, as the tightly framed close-up of the disembodied mouth confronts the audience with the necessity of speaking out, of saying what could not be heard at the time.

'A Donkey's Tale'

A figure that had haunted me for many years, the bag lady, found form in the second workshop. The idea of being a re-incarnation of a donkey was an old joke I'd made to describe how it feels to transport things if you are not a car owner. My shopping trolley is my solution, but I found it acts as a symbol for middle-age. I used it as my prop, for the afflictions exercise. In the dressing up session, I found the role through which I could express these ideas, the voice of a working class woman (which is the background from which I come). The text from the performance developed as improvisation in the workshops and was refined in the process of the filming:

'I think I must have been a donkey in a previous life. You see - I've always got too much to carry. Now, when it comes to carrying too much, this comes in handy. Now, I tell you, people laugh at me, people scorn me, people jeer, but, this represents liberation. Now, this, I tell you, is a liberating object. When you've got too much to carry. Now the thing about carrying stuff is, you've got to feel the weight, got to really feel it, you know, in the shoulders, in the back, when you're carrying stuff. Always carrying stuff. And there's another thing, if I haven't got enough weight, what I do is, I pick up other people's; other people's distress, other people's pain, other people's grief. You see, it's very important to keep worrying. Just got to keep on worrying about other people, other people's concerns. Got to keep up the excess baggage, 'cause it stops you thinking about other things. You see, the thing about all this excess baggage is - it stops you - having your own life.'⁴⁴

The simple and direct use of language emphasises the absurdity of the all too familiar position. In the performance, I am laden with bags, yet go round collecting even more, as a metaphor for the stereotypical woman's role as carer. I walk around and around within a confined space, pulling the shopping trolley, in long shot, turning to the camera/audience to deliver the text, in close up. Finally I let all the bags fall, walking out of the frame, unburdened.

Conclusion

So the body 'speaks': the work is about embodying feelings and is in dialogue with the constructions within culture and discourse that surround the ageing woman. Exploring issues of ageing, using both photography and video, within a therapeutic framework of containment, safety and support enabled both Kay and myself, and subsequently the participants within our workshops, to take risks to counter cultural stereotypes and confront our own fears. Although at times very personally challenging, by using strategies which embraced the carnivalesque and celebrated the complexities of the ageing process, we created a powerful body of art-work and a methodology that may be shared in workshops.

I would like to dedicate this chapter to my mother, Olive Maude Martin, now aged 91.

¹ Plath, Sylvia (1961) 'Mirror' in 'Collected Poems.' (1981) London: Faber and Faber

² Winnicott D. W. (1971) 'Playing and Reality.' London: Tavistock

³ Slogan from May 1968, Paris.

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- ⁴ Reuben, David (1969) 'Everything you always wanted to know about sex but were afraid to ask', New York: McKay
- ⁵ Freud, Sigmund (1900) 'The interpretation of dreams'
- ⁶ Freud, Sigmund (1913) 'The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis'
- ⁷ Fashion marketer quoted in Gullette, Margaret Morganroth (1999) 'The other end of the fashion cycle: practicing loss, learning decline' in Kathleen Woodward (Ed) *'Figuring Age'* Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- ⁸ Gullette, Margaret Morganroth (1999) op cit.
- ⁹ Macdonald, Barbara (1987) Speech at conference *'By and for old lesbians'* California State University
- ¹⁰ Martin, Rosy (1997). 'Looking and reflecting: returning the gaze, re-enacting memories and imagining the future through phototherapy' in Susan Hogan (Ed) *'Feminist approaches to art therapy'*. London and New York: Routledge.
See also :- Martin, Rosy (1993) 'Home Truths? Phototherapy, memory and identity' in *Artpaper*. March 1993
Martin, Rosy (1991) 'Unwind the ties that bind' in Jo Spence, Pat Holland(Editors). *'Family snaps'*. London Virago.
Martin, Rosy (1991) 'Dirty linen' *Ten8*, Vol.2 No.1
Martin, Rosy and Spence, Jo (1988) 'Phototherapy - psychic realism as a healing art?' in *Ten8*, No.30.
- ¹¹ Martin, Rosy. (1991). 'Don't say cheese, say lesbian' in Jean Fraser, Tessa Boffin (eds) *'Stolen glances'*. London: Pandora.
- ¹² Martin, Rosy. (1996) 'You (never) can tell: Phototherapy, memory and subjectivity.' *Blackflash* 14.3. Fall pp4-8
- ¹³ Irigaray, Luce (1985) *'The Sex Which is Not One'* trans C. Porter. Cornell: Cornell University Press
- ¹⁴ Grosz, Elizabeth (1994) *'Volatile Bodies'*. Indiana: Indiana University Press
- ¹⁵ Gear, Rachel (2000) 'The old hags are laughing: a response to Outrageous Agers' *Make* No. 87 March - May
- ¹⁶ Cristofovici, Anca (1999) 'Touching surfaces' in Kathleen Woodward (ed) *'Figuring Age'* Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- ¹⁷ Butler, Judith (1990) *'Gender Trouble'*. London and New York: Routledge.
- ¹⁸ Arnot, Chris (2000) 'Cellulite for sore eyes' in *The Guardian* 3 February p12
- ¹⁹ Bakhtin, Mikhail (1965) *'Rabelais and his world'*, trans H. Iswolsky 1968. Cambridge USA and London UK: MIT Press
- ²⁰ 'Tubi-grip' is an elasticated tubular support bandage, designed to provide firm, effective support for sprains, strains and weak joints. When I sprained my ankle, my mother sent me some of her stock of tubi-grip, which she uses to protect and support her severely arthritic knees.
- ²¹ Gear, Rachel (2000) op cit

²² Walker, Barbara (1983) *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* Harper & Row

²³ Butler, Judith (1993) 'Critically Queer' in 'Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive limits of "Sex"' London and New York Routledge

²⁴ Meese, Elizabeth (*Sem*) *Erotics: Theorizing Lesbian Writing* p3

²⁵ Grosz, Elizabeth (1994) op.cit. see earlier in article

²⁶ Meskimmon, Marsha (2002) *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics* London and New York: Routledge.

²⁷ Gear, Rachel (2000) op cit

²⁸ Nead, Lynda (1992) *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* London and New York: Routledge

²⁹ '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

³⁰ Freud (1913) op.cit.

³¹ Meskimmon, Marsha (2002) op.cit.

³² Adobe Photoshop is the industry standard software for the digital manipulation of photographs and images.

³³ The 'Freudian Slips' are a Women's Theatre Group, based in Cambridge, who have been working together for a number of years. The members are:

Sue Ifould, Sue Knight, Cathy Dunbar, Kay Blayney, Veronica Thornton, Allie Spicer, Gill McLeod, Helen Patterson

34 FEARS

Missing out, False teeth, Deafness, Growing a beard, Memory loss, Madness, Going senile, Speech impediment, Running out of time, Unfulfilled, Secret sex (doing it quietly), Loss of independence, Incontinence, Libido?, Becoming your mother, House-bound, Repulsive knickers, Unable to breathe, Unattractiveness, Loss of temperature control, Not trusting your body any more, Poverty, Not acceptable to snog everyone in the pub any more, Loneliness, Loose skin, Rotting insides, Panic attacks, Self-consciousness, Gravity wins, Complacency, Farting, No energy or low energy, Wrinkly sex, Dry fanny, Regrets, Being type-cast, Jealousy, Resentment, Losing your hair, Death round the corner, how long do you have left?, Illness, Blindness, Invisibility, Chicken tonight neck, Being patronised.

JOYS

Fine not to put up your own shelves, Vibrancy, Wisdom, Excitement of the unknown, Okay to ask for help, Passion, Knowing what you like, Hungry for life, Discriminating, Able to be degenerate, Liberation, Authority, Self-acceptance, Independence, Not caring as much what people think, Letting go, Can stop therapy, Time, Assertive, Knowledge, Focusing precious energy, Leave and walk out, Can be lazy, Being lewd loudly, Having a voice, 'Reflection' with a double 'edge', Not being a slave to fashion, Not buying into stereotyped ideals of how you're supposed to be, look, feel and behave, Awareness, Outraged, More time for me, You have a past, a herstory, Not feeling guilty, Comfortable friendships, Eccentric, Sexuality, Can do what you want - proactive.

35 It is important that these are found photographs, rather than from the individual's personal family album. This allows for a much freer interpretation, since there are then no aspects of personal loyalty, nor silencing evoked. An insight that I have gained by using this exercise in many workshops is that participants do address key personal issues, and do draw upon their own histories in this story-telling. Often this exercise acts as an opening up to key themes for an individual, which reoccur during a series of workshops.

36 See Martin, Rosy (1997) op. cit. p158

37 'Time will Tell' performance by Sue Knight, video conceived and filmed by Rosy Martin and Kay Goodridge in 'Outrageous Agers' Exhibition at Focal Point Gallery, Southend 2001.

38 Knight, Sue (2001) 'Ode to my Post-menopausal Body'

39 Antonio Canova's sculpture 'The Three Graces' (the hand-maidens of Aphrodite), depicts three adolescent young female bodies, as in the perfection of white marble in a Neo-Classical style. This sculpture is also very well known, having been saved for the Nation by donations. Close by this sculpture is 'The Sleeping Nymph' by Canova, which we used as the opening shot.

40 Using a Chroma blue screen enables the combination of two video takes. During the editing process, the blue background was erased, replaced by the filming in the museum.

41 Goodridge, Kay (2001) 'Mouthpiece' text from performance in 'Outrageous Agers' Exhibition at Focal Point Gallery, Southend 2001.

42 Kay Goodridge had an exhibition 'Our silence is your comfort' in 'Revealing' at Focal Point Gallery (1997), using images connected (?) to the abuse but did not use the text then. It was a group show on the theme of secrets with Charlie Murphy and Roz Mortimer.

43 Goodridge Kay (2001) op.cit.

44 Martin Rosy (2001) 'A Donkey's Tale' text from performance in 'Outrageous Agers' Exhibition at Focal Point Gallery, Southend 2001.