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Editor: [ktpress@ktpress.co.uk](mailto:ktpress@ktpress.co.uk)  
International Editorial Board: Hilary Robinson, Renee Baert,  
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## Cleaning up the Picture: Rose Frain's What I brought with me (2003)

**Amna Malik**

In the waiting room of the Outpatients department at Eastbourne District General Hospital (UK) visitors, patients and staff will find two light-boxes that depart radically from the usual posters issuing health warnings. The larger one reveals a white-coated figure in the sewing room of the hospital laundry. She stands between a sewing machine and shelves of hospital sheets, gowns and scrubs with her arms outstretched, a stethoscope in one hand. On a more intimate scale, a seated figure in nurse's scrubs appears in the smaller image. She holds an airline tray but her offering is far from the usual culinary fare: in its place, are a blue liquid in an old-fashioned glass phial and a pink toy pram.

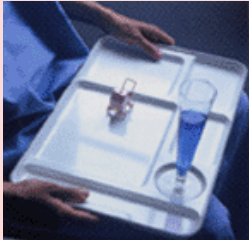
Travel a few kilometres west along the south coast to Conquest Hospital in Hastings and strangely, in the main corridor by a gift shop and a waiting room, an almost identical pair of images can be found. In this second space there is an impression that time and space co-ordinates are subtly altered but how? An attentive observer will note the change in gesture of the white-coated figures. In the smaller photograph it is the camera's position that has moved slightly to the right. With this shift in perspective there is a corresponding change of objects on offer: lapis



All Images © Rose Frain

lazuli appears in place of the toy pram. An accompanying leaflet featuring both sets of images and a brief text presents the opportunity to consider these differences.

These two parts form the installation by Rose Frain entitled *What I brought with me*. They were displayed as part of *strangers to ourselves*, a series of exhibitions curated by Judith Stewart, Maud Belléguic and Mario Rossi (10 October-19 December 2003) that addressed the presence of migrants and asylum seekers in the UK. The choice of location, at several venues on the south coast of England and in Kent, reflects the particularly intense conflict of interests that the migration of significant numbers of foreigners has provoked in that area. The aim of these exhibitions was to confront these conflicts and the debate within Britain about immigration but their title, referencing Kristeva's seminal text, signals a concern to move away from identity politics and towards an interrogation of subjectivity.



Given this reference to a psychoanalytic model it is not surprising that the register of these photographs is neither didactic nor advisory but subtly surreal and visually seductive. These figures are not actual staff in the hospital but models staged as if they were metaphors of gift-giving, creating a strange suspension of time and space, parallel to that which occurs when people and objects are displaced from habitual settings and functions. Hands that might dispense medication or fill forms are staged in gestures and poses alerting us to Frain's metaphorical approach in recognition of the contributions of migrant staff in the United Kingdom's National Health Service (NHS). The brief text in the accompanying leaflet explains her intention to make visible the invisible knowledge, skilled labour and, crucially, the transmission of care that they bring with them. The leaflet includes reproductions of three additional photographs and clips from a video-film that form part of this project but were not on display in the temporary exhibition. The different languages spoken by staff are registered in the title on the front cover and available translations of the text in English, Portuguese, Filipino and Arabic (Baghdad).

In this article, I would like to examine Frain's approach to this commission and particularly her concern with the visceral and corporeal possibilities of visual practice. Central to this project and her practice as a whole is an interest in materialising a feminine unconscious, particularly its libidinal and ethical potential, famously explored by Luce Irigaray whose radical linguistic and psychoanalytic theories counter a social order in which women are symbolically castrated. Frain's intention is to alter perceptions and it is rooted in a belief in the subversive and

transformative potential of the feminine unconscious to effect social change. One wonders how Frain might convey this subversion of the symbolic order through jouissance, given that What I brought with me was installed initially in a non-art location and where it was viewed primarily by a non-art audience. This potential problem is compounded by the diversity of her spectators including migrants whose perspectives may not be determined by a Western cultural tradition.

In Judith Stewart's introduction to the catalogue of strangers to ourselves, the fragility of this belief in the potential of visual practice is explored at length. Explaining the origins of the project in the communal sense of impotence and despair in the aftermath of September 11th, she addresses the dilemma of how artists can respond in any significant way to such crises through cultural forms. Citing Terry Eagleton's concern that the dominance of cultural politics now is the consequence of a failure in the political culture of the 1960s, Stewart's sceptical note is salutary here. My concern is that the situation is complicated by the fraught relationship that sometimes exists between feminist and post-colonial notions of the speaking subject.<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray's emphasis on sexed difference through psychoanalysis and her theoretical dependency on a specifically Western model of the subject with its reliance on anatomical metaphors has been criticised for essentialising female experience, removing it from social and collective responsibility.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the reference to Kristeva's seminal text in the series of exhibitions suggests a need to think beyond narrow political constructions of identity and to build 'an awareness of the limitations of our practice' which Stewart argues 'allows us to move forward.'<sup>3</sup> As for Frain she is aware of the dangers of espousing universality with its connotations of a regressive and masculine humanism. However, she is strongly committed to exploring the spiritual, material and psychic aspects of the feminine unconscious in her practice as a process of transubstantiation. This concept refers to the Catholic ritual of communion: the swallowing of bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ, based on the belief that this food will transfer Christ's physical presence to the worshipper. In Frain's wider practice this transference of the spiritual and psychic through the material, emerges in the distillation of jouissance into visual and visceral forms that parallels the writings of Irigaray, Kristeva and others as a form of cultural and personal enquiry. Frain cites this transubstantiation as a distillation of theory and practice, an act of 'making something where before there was nothing, straddling areas of difference, of intellect and affect, forging new meanings which communicate outwards changing the rules of the discourse.'<sup>4</sup> I want to explore this process of transubstantiation further in relation to What I brought with me and in the process evaluate Frain's attempt to transform perceptions of migration in the UK. However, I will begin with a brief commentary on the significance of the NHS which is relevant to this subject.

The National Health Service was established in the post-war era with the

founding of the welfare state and is one of the most cherished, controversial and contested of public institutions in contemporary Britain. Like many health institutions across the world it is governmentally administered; made up of hospital boards directly accountable to the Department of Health. Each board is regionally organised in a vast network that runs throughout the country and manages local general practitioners and dentists, family planning clinics and hospitals. Like other public services in the UK, the NHS is currently experiencing upheaval as the pressures of a global market-based economy place its promise of free and high quality health care at the point of delivery under question.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, these same economic factors have produced a more educated workforce attracted by new, technologically driven industries, encouraging skilled labour away from under-funded public sectors into private corporations, who often offer their employees private health insurance schemes. The NHS which invited foreign workers to apply for work especially from former colonies which had become independent post-1945, is currently again trying to recruit from abroad. Under the current Labour government, the creator and traditional guardian of the welfare state, the NHS is at the centre of public debates over its future funding from taxation or private sponsorship.

One might argue that the condition of the NHS reflects that of Britain's 'imagined community',<sup>6</sup> forged in the post-war era on the promise of inclusiveness that transcended otherwise entrenched class divisions. Its fortunes, for some, are an index of the nation's conflicted sense of identity. In *The State to Come* Will Hutton advocates a stakeholder society that does not relinquish economic growth to social welfare but balances individual responsibility with the demands of market forces.<sup>7</sup> This benign vision of an inclusive society is clearly the bedrock of our contemporary Labour government but overlooks certain underlying tensions. As many writers have pointed out New Labour's promotion of "Cool Britannia" is an attempt to mask the inevitable decline of England's loss of global prestige that reduces Englishness to an ethnicity like any other, and reveals its neutrality as an attempt to absorb differences of race and gender that marked its imperial past.<sup>8</sup> Arguably that neutrality has taken other forms, most notably in Labour's contradictory approach to the notion of inclusiveness that Hutton promoted as the keystone to a stakeholder society.

In his critique of diversity under New Labour Paul Gilroy points to the wider contradictions within this notion of inclusiveness: 'Our rulers appear to be caught' he writes, 'between one world where the idea that nurturing relatively peaceful encounters with difference is a minor political asset, and another more important one where being tough on immigrants of all types affords real political advantages.'<sup>9</sup> Can it be a coincidence that conflicts over immigration and asylum are fought out in places where the host community itself has limited economic

resources? Power relations between centre and margin proliferate on many levels when the “host” is impoverished and has nothing to give, reinforcing divisions that only benefit a small ruling elite. Race, or foreign-ness becomes the signifier of an unwelcome difference that allows the local host community to express a wider social alienation within the geographical boundaries of an imagined nationhood. Hence, the appropriateness of the NHS as the site of Rose Frain’s project, signifying the diminishing ideal of public service and collective welfare and one of the key institutions that advocates of a liberal democracy like Will Hutton regard as the site of a future inclusiveness.

Eastbourne District General and Conquest Hospital in Hastings are located on the south coast of England and therefore on the geographical boundary that defines a certain form of “Englishness”. Writing from the viewpoint of the migrant, Gabriel Gbadamosi suggests that a fissure is created by the need for each stranger to identify their origin, motives and presence prompted partly by the recognition that one is seen as an alien and therefore a potential infiltrator.<sup>10</sup> Hence the evocative space of the laundry department in *What I brought with me* that assumes the interiority of an imagined nation occupied by the migrant worker. In this space the white-coated figure allows us to see otherwise invisible hands that wash, clean, repair and store laundry; metaphorically disabling social hierarchies between people and transforming it into the site of the “imaginary”.

Fundamental to this “imaginary” is the visualisation of an unconscious through a semiotic register realised in the medium of photography. In Freud’s analysis of the dream work he identifies displacement and condensation as key mechanisms that have come to assume semiotic value: the first acting as a substitution of one element for another is metaphoric, the second referencing several elements in the single object or person is metonymic. Both terms are significant to the uncanny register of the photographs in this installation. Their emphasis on doubling as a repetition of the same but different references the time-space of the unconscious as always located in the present. Historically, psychoanalytic theories of visual forms, particularly photography and film, have been used to expose the seduction of the spectator by the dominant capitalist order. Christian Metz’s writings, particularly ‘Photography and Fetish’ (1984)<sup>11</sup> are important here and of course Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’(1975) that identifies beauty as a subcategory of visual pleasure and locates it in scopophilia.<sup>12</sup> Mulvey’s and Metz’s Lacanian theorisations are dependent on “lack”, the disavowal of the world cropped out of the frame that structures the image as a semantic constituent in, and of, the symbolic order. In these interpretations the spectator is placed in a position of voyeurism that corresponds to psychic processes of fetishism in which the threat of symbolic loss is allayed by displacement. In Frain’s images, this occurs through the sublimation and regulation of libidinal energy into aesthetic pleasure.

Frain’s photographs are subtle attempts to wrest the visual realm away from the



phallogocentric structuring of representation in the image, as identified by Mulvey and Metz, through her use of saturated blues as metonyms for medical staff, the hospital and NHS. Central to this feminine semiotic is a subtle frisson, a tension created by the metonymic signification of the photograph and the arguably more



disruptive potential of colour. The photograph as a framed re-presentation declares its status as part of the quotidian but Frain's creation of expansive surfaces of pure colour shed the utilitarian function of these nurses' scrubs. They become visual and visceral spaces that break apart its representational associations. In contrast to the Lacanian model, one might argue that the photographs in *What I brought with me* do not rely on disavowal. The materiality of light, captured mechanically in a fraction of a second in chemical processes on light sensitive paper, produce its spatial

realisation as a rupture in consciousness. A momentary but dramatic breach in the flow of real time, caught in the flicker of an eyelid. Though their staged appearance belies the speed and immediacy of their mechanical source, their materiality is pronounced in its excessive colour and enhanced luminosity which together render the passage of light through space more material, coagulating to assume a thickness in the field of vision. It is as though the mechanical eye is located in the materiality of lapis lazuli.

Frain's earlier work frequently employs the visceral qualities of light and colour. These celestial blues, for example, can be found in a temporary fresco in Rome, forming part of an installation entitled *Radio Vaticana* (this time in history) (2000). *Assisi, Suture* (meanwhile) also shown in Rome, is a cluster of small seemingly abstract canvases and a metal text: RUPTURE/ SUTURE in which colour again, is used with both social and 'excessive' references to the quotidian blue pigment used on the exterior of dwellings in Assisi, and an artist's oil colour. 'This is an attempt' writes Frain to "suture" the time discrepancy, after the earthquakes of 1997, between the restoration of the houses in Assisi and that of the frescos attributed to Giotto in the Basilica of S Francis.<sup>13</sup> Her exploration of colour continued in an installation *Brighter than the stars* shown at Swansea Museum in 2000 in which cabinets ranged around the walls of a large gallery were illuminated with a deep pink glow. The voice of Italian opera singer Adelina Patti filled the space, alternating with that of a Male Voice Choir. A small photograph of an Italian family acted as trigger for associations with the maternal and cultural differences or similarities between Wales and Italy. In *What I Brought with me* this evocation of the referent but refusal of the representational counters the symbolic system of signification, dependent on the

phallus as the determinant of meaning, in which pleasure is regulated by the threat of castration or the law of the father. The visceral appeal of these saturated blues and warm flesh tones convey a flow of libidinal energy that are placed in symbiosis with the metonymic meaning of the photograph as part of a wider social realm.

This tension between semiotics of a dominant order and a playful jouissance is particularly productive in Frain's use of airline trays as metonyms of the migrant, of flight, of a physical movement in space, the crossing of time zones, geographical areas and nationalities. In this sense they hover in an impossible space. The saturated blues are signifiers of sea and sky, those amorphous sites of passage, not permanence and they conjure a pleasurable state of floating. In the opening paragraphs of Salman Rushdie's infamous *Satanic Verses* his principle protagonists Ghabriel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha are introduced to the narrative as they fly through the air after their plane explodes. This suspended state is the moment of death and rebirth in the migrant's identity and the occasion for a playful polyglot voice to erupt. This is the first of Rushdie's novels in which the literary invention of a free floating word-play between his mother tongue of Hindi and father tongue of English is fully indulged. They land eventually, softly, mysteriously on the English shore, where their identities are fixed into angelic and devilish personas representing the dualistic image of the migrant and his double vision.<sup>14</sup> Frain's figures do not represent this type of incarnation, but they do evoke a state of being in their temporal suspension. In the shift from institutional associations of nurses scrubs to a celestial transcendence, there is an attempt to unravel the fixity of identity by language and the law that designates "the same" against "foreigner" or "other". It signals the excess of the body, the pleasure in corporeality in the undifferentiated space of the imagination and the realm of possibilities. In this respect they indirectly resist the fetishism of hybridity celebrated by some post-colonial theorists for whom the migrant's schizophrenic condition, of existing "in-between" cultures is a transgression of cultural purity. Arguably such an analysis is in danger of overlooking the class privilege afforded an elite that permits such mobility.<sup>15</sup>



The movement of goods and people is perhaps the most potent signifier of our global economy where mobility is an index of social, economic and political freedom. Yet, the fantasy of unfettered movement as the pleasure and promise of globalisation is all too often painfully exposed by the rootlessness and subsequent mental instability of the migrant worker; or rudely shattered by the refugee whose displacement is the consequence of brutal violence; or the sex worker who becomes a commodity, forced to cross time zones illegally.

Frain's commitment to countering the atomised relations that constitute the social fabric is arguably necessary in these conditions. In her work this is played out through the transformative potential of lapis seen in its raw state and as a blue liquid in the glass phial used for dyeing cloth. This is a reference to the alchemy of knowledge migrants bring with them: identifying them as precious stones with the potential to transform and be transformed by their environment like the valuable mineral resources from their countries of origin. This is in keeping with her earlier work in which precious materials are used in a manner which is intrinsic to their cultural/social value. Frain requested the purchase of the lapis from someone who was travelling to Pakistan who bought it for her in a market from an Afghan refugee. The circulation of these minerals as commodities of exchange are therefore fundamental to their presence in these images of the migrant flying between time zones. The inscription of the glass phial 'GR/E11R' also marks the historical interface between two reigning monarchs, George V and Elizabeth II, in 1951 at a time when the first wave of immigration in the post-war era was happening and when the issue of post-colonial hospitality emerges.<sup>16</sup> The transubstantiation implied in the displacement of minerals for nourishment becomes metaphysical and with the gesture of offering up Frain attempts to reverse the symbolic order by emphasising migrant workers' contribution to British society. In place of a negative image that condemns them as scroungers or parasites abusing the limited resources of the welfare state, they become the healers of these splits in the social fabric, giving more than they receive, contributing more to that Common-wealth than the monetary exchange of commodities acknowledges. The toy pram, a found object made of a single piece of metal, referencing again an earlier model of production, becomes a metonym of the depletion of skilled labour from the poorest to the richest countries and particularly their invaluable role in maternity care.

This association between migrant and healer is evident in the larger light-boxes. Displacing the image of healer/surgeon from the operating theatre or ward to the sewing room in the hospital laundry, Frain also evokes the primary condition of the migrant as being metaphorically out of place, either through accent, appearance or gesture. Subsequently her experience of dislocation is seen as uncanny by the native citizen and from this the stranger emerges as similar but different. Displacement also occurs in her work through repetition: the location of these images in different spaces if experienced by the same spectator in different time zones suggests *deja-vu*, the already seen. The subtle changes evident in the images' content reference the implicit change in the viewer's position separated by real time. Placed symmetrically these life-size figures play on the ambiguity of doubling as reflected image. They become mirrors that throw our sense of self back to us in a manner that is estranged. They act as prompts for us to reflect upon the problem of sameness and difference and the wider problem of self/other, native/foreign which remain confused by the authority we

automatically confer on the white-coated figure. The healer's gesture is deliberately posed to imply an imminent transformation of the migrant's sense of being out of place and consequently make whole the dissonance that results in the alienation of self as other that constitutes the foreigner. Arms outstretched in invitation, supplication or perhaps a state of grace with a divine light falling from above all suggest a moment before a miraculous occurrence. The gesture evokes the priest's before the altar when conferring the divine properties of Christ's physical presence onto bread and wine for Holy Communion. Transubstantiation is once again vital here, in the metaphysical transformation of materials that signals a change in the spiritual and psychic realms. It is referenced in the sewing machine as the means of suturing, stitching together the schizophrenic condition that is not only the fate of the migrant but, as Frederic Jameson argues, has become the nature of modernity under late capitalism. In her text 'Some thoughts meanwhile', Frain speculates on the possibility that the dissonance made present by the uncanny can potentially be transcended 'perhaps a healer's healing of splits (ruptures) between material and psychic domains'(17). Visceral effects of light, gestures of invitation and the dominant colours of blue and emerald create a soothing visual whole. This is enhanced by the subtle glow of the light-box that illuminates the exterior space around it whilst remaining somewhat enigmatic. The act of making whole that the healer's presence suggests through straddling the material and the psychic, the spiritual and the quotidian is central to transubstantiation and by implication to art practice. It may not come as a surprise to know that for Frain the healer is also the woman artist employing psychoanalysis as a powerful instrument in the task of repairing splits in the psychic realm, the separation between 'who we are and what we know'.<sup>18</sup>

The need for migrant workers within the NHS and elsewhere marks a fundamental shift from the earlier wave of immigration in the immediate post-war period when scarcity of manual labour was created by increased industrialisation. Changes in the market economy toward knowledge production as the new source of labour power fuelling Internet and communication technologies have prompted a revision of Marxist theory for the global age. Hardt and Negri have coined the term 'informatization' to describe the production and exchange of data and knowledge as the commodity that now drives the global economy. These new migrant workers are not needed to fill our factories but our offices, school rooms and hospital wards, as the move towards 'informatization' creates a scarcity of highly educated and skilled labour in the public services sector. This shift allows subversion to occur. If knowledge production drives this economy it can equally be challenged by the social production of truth, the wider implications of their Marxist evaluation is that the world of ideas and of cultural exchange can hold some power to transform the economic realm and by extension the symbolic order.<sup>19</sup>

Turning to Frain's installation at Conquest, we can see the potential for this on a number of levels. These images are placed in a corridor adjacent to a gift shop that sells tabloid newspapers. In his seminal study Benedict Anderson points to the daily newspaper as one of the key vehicles of nationalism created by print-capitalism that forged a secular sense of an 'imagined community'. Most British citizens are familiar with the contemporary role of the tabloid press in feeding nationalist anxieties over immigration and asylum with a daily diet of sensationalist rhetoric. Frain's images contest the colonisation of knowledge in their close proximity to the commodities of informatization that prey on the fragile corpse of nationhood. Seducing the spectator through the saturated blues that suffuse these images and signalling an excess, a surplus of energy, they seep into the material of the photograph, of light on photochemical paper transgressing the boundaries of representing while making visible the contributions of migrant staff. The dyed blue cloth of the nurses' scrubs speaks of our need for decoration and adornment that capitalism has appropriated but could not, with its narrow concern with economic value, have anticipated. Desire thus creates new objects that are subsequently pursued by capital but not created by it. The raw condition of the lapis - a precious resource - implies *caritas*: the exchange of a gift that does not rely on its reciprocity and gratitude but on the pleasure of bestowing, of conferring love in its widest sense upon the other and by implication placing it into circulation.<sup>20</sup>

The meaning and impact of these photographs rely on contiguity in their forms and their location, the latter chosen to extend the possibilities of the former. The nearby gift shop also sells a wide variety of stuffed toys and confectionary; contrasted with Frain's images they could prompt the spectator to reflect on the form and value of objects of exchange. They may even be prompted to note the strange appearance of the glass phial - possibly a pharmaceutical object in use in countries where disposables are not a cheaper option. Like the toy pram at Eastbourne, the phial evokes an earlier stage of industrialisation, as outmoded objects their fossilised forms powerfully evoke the existence of the past in the present.<sup>21</sup> Frain's use of them can be interpreted on a number of levels but to our western eyes they appear curiously old-fashioned. Evidence of their contemporary usage disrupts that sense of the past as being located in time rather than space. They create a contiguity in meaning in the suspended time of the photograph that forces a re-consideration of its status as metonymic, as part of the real. In the process they question the mode of simultaneity we unconsciously inhabit in our everyday world, conditioned both by modernity and discourses of nationhood. Anderson's analysis of this simultaneity suggests a time and space that is imagined but not known, a collective consciousness shared by members of a nation.<sup>22</sup> These objects might be seen as a contemporary form of transubstantiation implied in the transcendence of the hovering figure and the gesture offering a tray in a manner that resembles the act of performing the sacrament of communion. In our contemporary consumer culture this

transubstantiation of minerals and dye as nourishment might lie in the kinship relations established by gift giving.

Counter to the traditional Marxist evaluation of consumerism James Carrier, an anthropologist, offers a view that chimes more closely with Frain's interest in *caritas*. In *Gifts and Commodities, Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700* Carrier identifies 'inalienable' gifts as distinct in nature from commodities in the relationship they establish between the giver and the receiver. The latter, he argues, are neutral and impersonal tokens of abstract value whilst gifts bear the identity of the giver and the relationship between giver and recipient 'Those who transact and the objects transacted in pure gift relations are viewed in terms of their basic, inalienable identities and relationships, so that they are uniquely specified and linked to each other.'<sup>23</sup>

That labour can also be a form of gift giving might be problematic if it were not associated with the site of the hospital where work becomes service. The care of strangers returns us to the historical origins of the modern European hospital in religious institutions, often run by nuns and monks of a particular order. Historically the hospital was also a site of sanctuary for pilgrims, soldiers on their way to the crusades and travelers, who were usually only admitted if their race, religion or sex conformed with the members of that community. Refusal of the foreigner then, presents a paradox to her status as the benefactor of hospitality now. As the accompanying leaflet reveals, in a number of images these same figures cradle their hands to suggest the power of healing and care. The gesture of protection, nurturing and offering up can also be one of holding on. Hence, the ambiguity in the images of airline trays offered or received, simultaneously reference food, the richness of hospitality, the oral pleasures of devouring, and perhaps allude to erotic love. The ambiguity references the space between me and you, native and foreigner and affords the possibility of bridging it through the giving and receiving of love, allowing the foreigner to exceed the limits placed upon her.

I want to turn now to a consideration of the subversion of capitalist time, dictated by clock and calendar, by a feminine time in the video-film *The Folding Room* that appears in the leaflet as a series of clips. In this work Frain subtly records the pleasure in being of service, not in servitude. The image captures the movement of hands caressing, smoothing, straightening, folding and piling a stack of emerald green sheets. The level of care that goes into this repetitive and otherwise dull process suggests an investment in the value of labour. In conceptual art practices of the 1960s repetition was frequently adopted as a mechanistic metaphor reiterating the destructive effects of alienated labour, the worker's condition of wage slavery and subsequent lack of leisure time. Taylorism as it became known became a point of interest for these artists. Introduced to the Ford motor company in the 1920s it was widely taken up in industrial production in the post-war era. Charles Taylor devised a time and motion study to improve efficiency in factories by creating assembly

lines that distributed different tasks to different workers, the repetition of a single action becoming a faster and therefore a more cost-efficient procedure. We find it in the hospital laundry, divided into washing, folding and repairing rooms but Frain brings something else to this rationalisation of time. The linear march of progress driving this repetition of labour is transformed into a cyclical process that slows it down and makes it attend to its own visceral rhythms.



Rose Frain *The Folding Room* videostills

The video camera dwells on the subtle play of movements reflected in the smooth shining surface of the table, its colour echoing the coat and contrasting dramatically with dark skin and the emerald green of sheets to create an arresting whole. The consequence is a visual pleasure in this repeated action that returns us to earlier, more ritualised forms of behaviour in child's play for example, the satisfaction in throwing a ball and catching it over and over. Central to its visceral, rhythmic register is the sound of touch, dissonant beats echoing in the space of the room from contact between skin and cloth, caressing, smoothing and folding triggering associations with cyclical time, it subtly echoes the glorious movement of cloth flowing towards us and gliding back, like the waves of the ocean flowing in and out with the movement of the tides. This slowing down of time to motions of touch and rhythm seen through feminine eyes is suggestive of a libidinal economy directed by a different sense of temporality implied in the daily rituals of washing, cleaning repairing so often associated with female labour in the home, paid or unpaid. Or its identification with the condition of maternity experienced through the feminine subject, suspending temporarily the ongoing march of rationalisation so fundamental to the capitalist economy. The title of Frain's text for the catalogue to *strangers to ourselves* 'Some Thoughts Meanwhile' implies both narrative and the temporary suspension of its flow into an indefinite present.

This disruption of capital through a libidinal economy is present in Frain's earlier work. In *Sissy Graffiti* (1989) a series of neo-expressionist paintings, the artist used very expensive materials, vermillion and rose madder, which she could ill afford but their materialisation of desire spoke of an excess of expenditure issuing from the instinctual drives of the body.<sup>24</sup> The artist's interest in Italian Renaissance painting is pertinent here. The use of precious substances like lapis or gold is entirely in keeping with this commitment to tensions between the pleasure and reality principles that define the dilemmas and perilous conditions of art making. This is explored further in a letter published as an intervention in AN magazine: 'Aesthetic

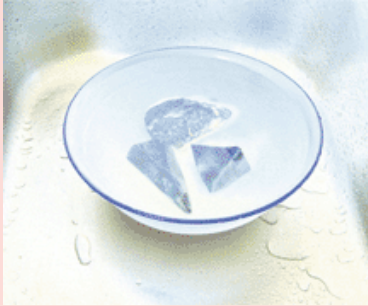
Excess Tax' was a response to the introduction of Self Assessment and parodied the Inland Revenue, informing the artist of her overpayment of twenty aesthetic units.<sup>25</sup> The "pleasure" of making an art that far exceeds its status as commodity is tempered here by an awareness of the financial risks attached to it as a form of non-alienated labour that is nonetheless compromised by economics determining its formal realisation. Ambiguity between a monetary exchange and a libidinal economy also materialises the law of the father and its regulation of jouissance.

In the context of *What I brought with me* the flows of global exchange that have cast these migrants onto British shores are countered by the flows of jouissance that seep through the emerald green of these sheets and the deep blue of nurses scrubs, transforming their clinical surroundings as they circulate throughout the hospital: through wards, operating theatres and back again to be washed, repaired and stored away only to be distributed once more. They become a vital form of contact between staff and patients that relies on the elimination of bacteria, the dis-infection of cloth that so easily transmits disease. Caritas lies in this transmission of care evident in the hands that caress, smooth and fold and the sheets as points of contact, a curious intimacy that brings skin together with skin as they pass from hand to hand. It cannot be seen as it makes its way through these institutions but its effect is evident with every departure of a patient recovered to good health. The act of making whole and repairing damage brings us back to the image of the healer in the laundry room and by extension the role of maternal jouissance in transforming the symbolic pact.

The problem outlined earlier in this article, of cultural forms becoming substitutes for belief in the political process to effect a change in social relations, is not particular to our contemporary moment. Arguably, the masculinist avant-gardes of the 19th and 20th centuries emerged in similar conditions becoming embroiled in the cultural politics of the left in the inter-war period and the cold war politics of the post-war era. If one is to believe the proponents of l'écriture féminine the feminist revolution is in its early stages, its second phase led by artists and writers is only just beginning to make its influence felt. By harnessing underlying psychic energies these artists and writers can "change the dynamics of signs" and hence the dominant order.<sup>26</sup> Fundamental to that shift is the challenge of forging a notion of universality that can be rooted in the feminine but allows productive connections with other political movements. Kristeva views it as a third wave of feminism, a corporeal and mental space rather than a generation or group.<sup>27</sup> Though this terrain is only just being explored, for example in Kaja Silverman's writings, Frain's concerns with the liberating potential of jouissance in *What I brought with me* signals an important step in this direction. Though at times the Catholic specificity of transubstantiation in her photographs may themselves appear "foreign" to spectators removed from Christian ritual, the metaphoric transformation of properties, be they mental, physical, spiritual or psychic are effectively carried through in this project. Frain's



subtle seduction and brilliant economy of means brings with it an ethical sensitivity to the human subject that might more effectively disseminate what the academy unwittingly excludes. If the image is increasingly the lingua franca of our global world, then the woman artist may indeed be the propagator of the revolutionary possibilities of a feminine semiotics.



An image reproduced at the back of the accompanying leaflet beautifully conveys this metaphor of the potentiality of transforming the social, psychic and spiritual. Lapis placed in a humble enamel bowl filled to the brim with water casts a luminescent light across the harsh silver of a stainless steel sink, transforming these dull metals into iridescent sheets of pearly blue. Taking on the hard light of their matter, the lapis becomes almost crystal-like, losing its habitual opacity and

obdurate texture and sparkling with a delicacy more familiar to the diamond. Small droplets of water surrounding the bowl lend a sense of dynamic transformation, of water turning to gas and evaporating into the air or hardening to become ice. These subtle details suggest a transformative potential suspended somewhere between the material and immaterial. It in this space of possibilities that the wider significance of *What I brought with me* to changing perceptions of migration and national identity can perhaps be assessed.

## Notes

1. Gayatri Spivak is perhaps best known for voicing such concerns, cf Elizabeth Gross 'Criticism, Feminism and the Institution: an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak' *Thesis/Eleven 10/11* pp.175-87
2. These criticisms have often come from debates amongst feminists in the US. For an account of its complicated history and responses to Irigaray's writings cf Tina Chanter *Ethics of Eros, Irigaray's rewriting of the philosophers* (New York and London, Routledge, 1995) pp.21-46
3. Judith Stewart 'Thinking is my fighting' in Stewart, Rogoff et. al *strangers to ourselves* (Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, 2003) pp12-15
4. Rose Frain 'The tic-toc and the infinite mmmmmmm' *Women's Art Magazine* no.62 Jan/Feb 1995 p25
5. The rising cost of increasingly sophisticated medical technology is beyond the means of existing allocated funds from public taxation. Unlike other European states, no insurance premium is paid for healthcare, money is taken from directly from a general tax on wages of 7%. Access to healthcare is underpinned by citizenship and different regulations and costs apply to migrant workers, refugees,

asylum seekers or those with residency rights in the UK.

6. This is a term coined by Benedict Anderson in his seminal study of nationalism as an 'imagined' entity that transcends the specifics of geographical boundaries or actual location. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, Verso, 1983 revised and extended edition 1991)
7. Will Hutton *The State to Come* (Vintage, Random House, London 1997)
8. Stuart Hall 'The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity' in Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti & Ella Shohat (eds.) *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation & Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1997) pp.173-187
9. Paul Gilroy 'Joined-up Politics and Postcolonial Melancholia' (London, ICA Diversity Lecture, 1999) p. 2
10. 'On Becoming strangers' Ghabriel Gbadamosi in *strangers to ourselves* (2003) ibid pp. 78-81
11. delivered as a conference paper at the University of California, Santa Barbara May 1984 reproduced in Liz Wells (ed) *The Photography Reader* (Routledge, 2003) pp.138-145
12. originally published in *Screen* 16.3 Autumn 1975 pp. 6-18
13. Email to author, November 2003
14. Salman Rushdie *The Satanic Verses* (London and New York: Viking Press, 1989) pp. 1-3
15. cf Homi Bhabha's interpretation of *The Satanic Verses* through hybridity in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 223-226
16. In conversation with the artist
17. cf 'Some thoughts meanwhile' Rose Frain in *strangers to Ourselves* ibid p. 89
18. 'The tic-toc and the infinite mmmmmmm' ibid p. 25
19. *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2000)
20. Cf Julia Kristeva (translated by Leon Roudiez) *strangers to ourselves* (Columbia University Press, 1991) pp. 84-85. Leaflets accompanying these installations make this explicit
21. This is a term used by Walter Benjamin in his notes on the arcades project, cf translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge Mass. and London: Belknap Press, 1991)
22. Anderson *Imagined Communities* (1991) p. 24
23. Carrier, James G *Gifts and Commodities, Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700* (London and New York: Routledge) pp.30-31.
24. Hilary Robinson 'Sissy Graftiti and Sappho Fragments new works by Rose Frain' *Women Artists Slide Library Journal* March 1990 p. 24
25. Rose Frain *AN magazine for artists* August 1998
26. cf Kristeva 'Women's Time' (1977) reproduced in Kelly Oliver (ed) *The Portable Kristeva* (Columbia University Press, 1997) p. 355
27. ibid pp. 366-368

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