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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.

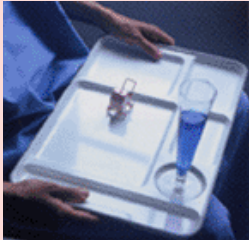
Travel a few kilometres west along the south coast to Conquest Hospital in Hastings and strangely, in the main corridor by a gift shop and a waiting room, an almost identical pair of images can be found. In this second space there is an impression that time and space co-ordinates are subtly altered but 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.¹ 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.² 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.'³ 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.'⁴ 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.⁵ 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',⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.'⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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)¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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'.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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.²² 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.'²³

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.

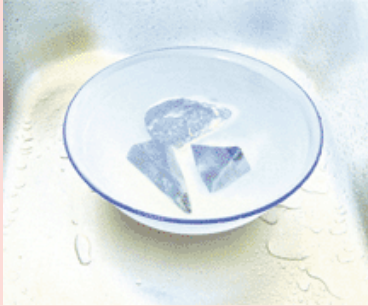
This disruption of capital through a libidinal economy is present in Frain's earlier work. In *Sissy Graffiti* (1989) a series of neo-expressionist paintings, the artist used very expensive materials, vermillion and rose madder, which she could ill afford but their materialisation of desire spoke of an excess of expenditure issuing from the instinctual drives of the body.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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 disinfection 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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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Canan Senol: Once Upon a Time...

Danièle Perrier

The artist Canan Senol addresses in her work the question of structures in society and their effects on the individual life. State, politics and religion are the three pillars of every society. Suspended in between these pillars is a close meshed net of laws, rites and customs which tightly encloses - and conditions - the private sphere. Thus individuals become the malleable toys of society. They perceive their rights and duties as coercion; they see themselves robbed of freedom and look for it instead in the realms of what is secret or imaginary where they can exercise power and practice violence unpunished.

In her recent work made and shown at Schloss Balmoral in Germany (2003), Canan Senol has deployed the toys of her daughter Nisa. With Nisa's Barbie dolls she has staged, photographed and filmed sequences of events which tell stories of such hidden acts of violence. Significantly, the catalogue is entitled *Once Upon a Time...*, thus



hoisting the representations from the anecdotal onto the level of narration and suggesting universal applicability: the toys reflect the mechanics of society.

In her work *Tales for Grown-Ups*, for instance (images left and two below), Senol scrutinises the smallest cell of society, the family. The life of a “dream couple” starts out romantically. Their first encounter is soon followed by a grand wedding party and

passionate erotic nights, underpinned by the desire to have children. But the monotony of everyday life ruptures the idyll. Within the seclusion of the family home develop a variety of forms of violence: the husband beats his wife, she takes it out on her own children. Comic-strip thought bubbles revealing the most intimate thoughts of the partners paint a tell-tale picture of the divergence between reality and expectation for the spectator.

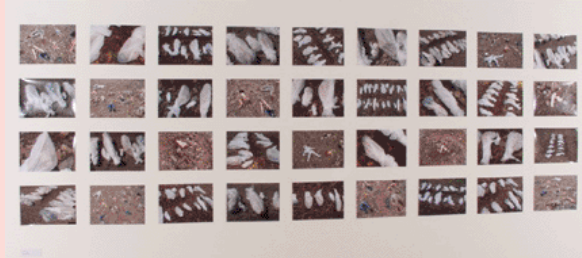
The idyll becomes a nightmare, and it is hardly surprising that the wife dreams of taking the life of her man handling macho in order to escape the unjust role game. And yet, her sexual fantasies



show that her desires are identical to those of her husband, only she dreams of two men while he dreams of women. With this, Senol makes an important statement: in saying that there is no difference between male and female needs, she establishes an equilibrium between the genders. Both partners are trying to escape from the all too cramped conditions of everyday life. On account of the different roles allocated to them they merely develop different strategies to fulfil their need for freedom. In the petty-bourgeois society represented here, a woman cannot vent her frustration in any way other than in her imagination, or by taking her anger out on her children. Yet, despite the mainly subordinate position a woman occupies in society, she emanates strength and decisiveness: whether she acts aggressively towards her children or imagines murdering her husband, she appears as an emotionally troubled, furious person who, even when affected greatly by events, will act consciously and purposefully. It is the intensity of her rebellion, not her role as a victim, which ensures her the sympathy amongst spectators.

Woman's social role is a central theme in Senol's work. *With Fountain*, for example, she paraphrases Duchamp and inverts his statement. A lifeless ceramic bowl (which becomes a fountain only through its male spurt) is juxtaposed by Senol with a pair of plump, generously lactating breasts. The heavy breasts, hanging down like two udders, indicate woman's ambivalent double role as fertility goddess and mother, weighed down by the heavy burden of bringing up children.





How brute and without nuances appears the male protagonist in *Action Man* by contrast. As a father, he abuses his own little daughter, observed by his little son who imitates his father's violence and finally becomes a perpetrator himself. Senol expresses the improvidence of the action by directing the camera onto the impassive faces and by showing close-up shots of the joints. She thereby underlines the mechanical element of the sequence of events as well as the thoughtlessness of the deed which is carelessly copied by the son in the manner of repeating a tasteless joke. The irresponsibility with which the crime is passed on from one generation to the next is shocking. *With the title Not Seen, Not Heard, Don't Know* (image above) the artist comments decidedly on this complacency, accusing not only the protagonists of it but also the neighbours who endure - or actually quietly enjoy - even the greatest crimes next door. It is not the facts alone which shock us so, but the double moral standards which ignore all facts.

Sexual abuse is only one form of violence represented in Senol's work; she also looks into the issues of persecution, torture and mass murder. Her work *here and there* (image left) is dedicated to the innumerable victims of political and religious fanaticism, wars and revolutions. Wrapped in plastic bags, naked Barbie dolls lie next to each other, dreadfully alone and abandoned. The unsettling factor here is not the cruelty of the representation - which after all is only hinted at - but the absolute indifference of the collective consciousness in the face of evident cruelties. Senol's work appeals to society to rediscover the shock of mechanized horror, even if under the influence of a flood of TV images it has long since forgotten how to feel personally affected.

Translation from German: Christina Thomson

Danièle Perrier is Director at Kunstlerhaus Schloss Balmoral, Bad Ems, Germany.

Note

When Canon Senol's work was shown at Bad Ems, attempts were made to censor the exhibition and the case placed before the public prosecutor. The charge was not upheld. The exhibition nevertheless provoked a major public debate and was the subject of much controversy.

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American Woman and Bad Girl: an interview with Kathe Burkhart

Mariah Corrigan

Mariah Corrigan: You've been a feminist conceptual artist for a long time. When viewing your work, it's clearly rich in stylistic and intellectual reference to a wide spectrum of artists and writers. Where did it all begin for you, and who has influenced your development?

Kathe Burkhart: Even as a teenager I kept journals, wrote poems and plays that I directed, and made drawings and paintings, taking classes and joining collectives, so it is difficult to locate the precise moment when I became an artist, since the performative process of the work has been in development for a long time. But in professional terms, much of the work originated through my time at CalArts, from 1979 to 1984 - although I was something of an oddball there. The people I worked with there who were great role models included Barbara Kruger, Catherine Lord, Jane Weinstock, Connie Hatch, Sherrie Levine and Kathy Bigelow. Of course, most of these women were part time faculty, so I also worked a lot with John Baldessari, Doug Huebler and Jon Borofsky. Borofsky's interdisciplinary approach to both materials/mediums and mining one's own autobiography as the subject of art were very important for me. The foundation was on conceptual art and appropriation strategies. Nobody was painting. I also worked on my writing with Richard Howard during this time, as well as attending some workshops. In video, I worked with Dara Birnbaum and Sande McKendrick in the film school. Outside of school, the work I love comes from literature as much as art: the work of Clarice Lispector, Helene Cixous, Ingeborg Bachmann,

Elfried Jelinek, and the work of artists such as Valie Export, Claude Cahun, Rosalyn Drexler and Hans Bellmer, the films of Lars van Trier...and then there's pop culture, which I am both fascinated and repulsed by.

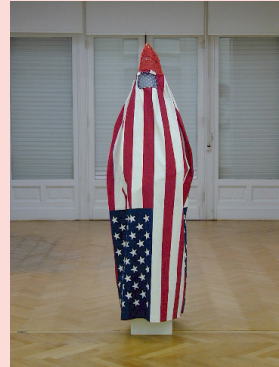
Mariah Corrigan: You live a diasporic life - half the year in a strange nether zone in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and the other half the year in de Dapperstraat, in multi-cultural Amsterdam. You're an artist and a writer, a painter, performance and video installation artist and teacher. You live multiple lives, multiple identities simultaneously. Since your work is very personal, how has this manifested itself in your work?



Kathe Burkhart: It is true that I do live a multiphasic kind of life, permanently in a state of temporary exile from one thing or another, in a constantly shifting state of heightened alterity, although that is more clearly seen by someone on the outside. Travel became very important for me about ten years ago, and remains so. The transnational experience has given me a global perspective I would never have had if I hadn't migrated to the Netherlands. I live in two rapidly gentrifying ethnic neighborhoods in two cities on two continents, and it is easy to see both parallels and differences. Switching between these modes keeps one on one's toes in terms of evaluating experiences and events with compassion, and allows for flashes of insight or new ideas that you might not have otherwise. Certainly this distillation led to the performance, video and burqa piece I made in response to 9/11, called American Woman and Scarecrow. In terms of my work, this kind of interdisciplinary practice, that is linked to performativity and intentionality has been a hallmark of my work from the beginning. I ask myself: What medium will suit this idea best? and go from there. Nevertheless, formal devices such as seriality, the documentary, and the diary are quite important. Since research plays a vital role in my work, as a reader, and in terms of source materials, teaching is a natural extension of these practices. The dialogue is also important to me, and I take very seriously the responsibility to introduce the works of artists and writers to my students who are important, yet somewhat obscure, work they may not otherwise be exposed to.

Mariah Corrigan: Do you feel that these complexities, these multiple locations and identities thwart a visibility as a cultural producer? And does being the original "bad girl" help?

Kathe Burkhart: Well, I think complexity, multiplicity, is sometimes unfortunately seen as threatening, especially in America. Perhaps it signifies power in some way. People seem to want everything branded and prepackaged, and when cultural production moves against this grain toward the multivocal, it risks marginality in a market driven economy. Women are certainly more visible today as cultural producers, we do not have parity, sexually, racially, or in terms of class, the great unspoken. We see an awful lot of work that looks like a man's idea of what a woman's art would be: it seems to me that not a few women artists have internalized these parameters, and reproduced objects conforming to what I would regard as dated, essentialist notions about the body. It's disturbing because it's a throwback, profiting on a culture of victimology. On the other hand, they're making a lot of money. But you wonder how far that will go-when the work comes under the hammer a hundred years from now. The market's appetite for novelty is voracious and all consuming. It has been strange to watch the "bad girl aesthetic" take off and leave me, its invisible progenitor, behind in a haze of titties and beer. Where this idea went and how it was marketed had absolutely nothing to do with the kind of work I was doing, or what I or Helena Kontova had in mind when she coined the term in a Flash Art article in 1990.¹



Mariah Corrigan:When it comes to bad girlness you take it beyond merely, simply, transgression for transgression's sake. You deploy it as a stylistic metaphor parallel to your choice of subject matter and make it manifest in your choice of language and in the expletives used in the *Liz Taylor* series, for example. You've recently topped yourself in your new, powerful and very funny works *Kiss My Ass*, *King Dong*, and *Suck My Dick*. Could you explain, in your own words, what this badness means to you, and what it might be a reflection of-for your work is highly self-reflexive.

Kathe Burkhart: No doubt. Transgression does not immediately imply abjection, and humor is an important component, to permit visual pleasure, to provoke recognition, and to provide relief from the intensity. Two of the works mentioned above are part of a subsection of command phrases. (Others are *Sit on It*, *Go to Hell*, etc.) *King Dong* offers a reversal, a play on the essential animality of both ourselves and the Other. *Suck My Dick* represents the phallic woman, and the lips and round shape of *Kiss My Ass* suggest the anus.

Mariah Corrigan:Regarding the answer to a previous question: where do



you think this wave of essentialist art, with regard to the female subject, is coming from? What cultural mechanisms do you think are at work forming the impetus for it?

Kathe Burkhart: We're still in a period of backlash. Regressive ideas are ones we've been exposed to before; they're familiar and somehow comforting, and mythic. So there is a kind of allegorical identification. The problem is, this kind of identification is usually not critical, but simply emotional. I believe difference is much more diverse than victimhood or exhibitionism. The body can be a simplistic vehicle, or a complex one. The surface of the gendered body has been touched on, but the internal rhythm of the body much less. For me, that's better achieved through writing and not visual art.

Mariah Corrigan: I sense that the term "postfeminism" is a word you find prematurely popular.

Kathe Burkhart: It's a misnomer. "Post" always semantically implies something that's over. A look at the polarized statistics in 'The State of Women' in *The World Atlas* will put that hopeful idea to rest. Even in the West, we have not achieved parity, and this is key. This term reveals the arrogance and cultural hegemony of the West, that is cracking open as we speak. Oppression is variable - yet pervasive.

Mariah Corrigan: The 'F-word' is particularly resisted by many female artists today, and as we've both seen in the art departments many, many female art students recoil at the label. Why do you think this is so?

Kathe Burkhart: I think feminism is a hard sell, for one. Also I think that we can think of feminism as alternative, and despite fashion, there is a rush towards the mainstream, like lemmings to the sea. I think the depersonalization and alienation of what Deleuze and Guattari called the schizoculture have led to a generation who desperately wants to connect - outward, rather than inward...through the mainstream.

Sooner or later, they will find those walls are pretty narrow. I think young women want to be liked, and accepted, and don't want the stigmatizing label of "difficult". We are still socialized to please others. There is some conception of a feminist as an ugly, angry, bitter woman who can't get a man. On the other end of the spectrum, we have the valorization of porn stars. These models are inadequate by themselves. Young women know, strategically, that they have a better chance of getting ahead by steering clear of the rhetoric and marketing all their female assets. I think, for better or worse, they are embracing the exploitation of their own sexuality to advance their careers, which is something my generation refused to do. (Although Madonna is the best example of this, and we're the same age.) Or perhaps they're just rebelling against their mothers.



Mariah Corrigan: Many aspects of language are an important component of your visual work—the use of the expletive, the narrative, the double meaning, and obviously writing-as in your recent book *The Double Standard*, published in French translation by Hachette Litteratures this year. You've also recently turned to numbers-as another form of codings-as in the *Authorized* and *Unauthorized Portraits* series where you make portraits simply using a subject's numbers: date of birth, social security, telephone data, and mixing these public sources of identification with single predetermined formula for size and shape in order to arrive at each work. I know these are two questions in one...

Kathe Burkhart: As for the *Authorized* and *Unauthorized Portraits*, I'm attempting to remain as far outside the subject's subjectivity as possible. It is matrix of indexical relationships. I remain in Nietzschean alienation. As a writer I am a lover of the music of language. I am very interested in emotional compression. There are some points of crossover into the visual work - the layered double meanings in the *Liz Taylor* series, the chocolate letter wall works, the naming in the *Torture* series, the coding derived from data and preferences in the *Authorized* and *Unauthorized Portraits*. I have always considered the writing as important as the visual work, but there has been something of an amputation in its visibility because it has been difficult to get it published in America. The French don't have any trouble with it, but the Americans don't get it.

Mariah Corrigan: They understand our novel to be about the East Village in New York? I suppose we Americans are a somewhat unsubtle people. You use language as

a mode for self-analysis in your work. Why do you feel that this is so important?

Kathe Burkhart: That's the set and setting only: the subject of the book is really the repetition compulsion, framed within a dialogic, parallel narrative structure using two voices of the same character at different periods in their lives - as a teenager and in their early thirties. The teenage entries are taken, unabridged from my actual teenage diaries, and given that the personal is political, it is a radical tool of empowerment. Doubling is used to evoke an Identity that is constantly shifting, a reality that is fleeting. As someone who tries to stay in the present, I need to catch it before it disappears. We can know the Other, but we can never know ourselves. I see autobiography then as a kind of fiction.

Mariah Corrigan: Gina Bellafante asserts that 'if feminism of the 1960s and 1970s was steeped in research and obsessed in social change, feminism today is wed to the culture of celebrity and self-obsession.' Where your work opens out to the latter it moves beyond the regressive tendencies of these forces through a critical self-reflexivity.

Kathe Burkhart: Because of my placement in time, I believe my work draws on both of these issues. The entertainment field has been one in which women are prominent albeit with a price - a punishingly short shelf life for a career. Hollywood's image factory is still the source of the American dream. Stars provide role models: women who are beautiful, rich and powerful, leading exciting, glamorous lives playing themselves, doing, (it seems) what they love to do. These are the ultimate symbols of fantasy and freedom for the rest of us, for whom these options are as impossible as a weekend on the moon. In the *Liz Taylor* series, I have engaged in a social critique of this apparatus, as well as investigating the subject position of the dominant woman through the Liz's persona. The *Liz Taylor* series has been ongoing since 1982, and consists now of about 150 paintings and numerous drawings and prints.

Mariah Corrigan: The *Liz Taylor* series constitutes a substantial oeuvre, and a series you keep retuning to, no matter where else you artistically roam. When and where will it end and why? Or will it?

Kathe Burkhart: Theoretically, when I run out of images and cuss words, which is no time soon! I have a huge archive of images that I continue to identify with. Liz, of course provides a identificatory structure for me to talk about my own subjectivity, while retaining a more fluid, universal alternative or a resistant container for a radical female subjectivity. Partly, too, it depends on if Liz lives a long life and I am able to continue collecting images of her. Or, of course, if she should sue me to stop making images of her. Of course, it's also me. As I age myself, the aging Liz comes

into the work bit by bit. But I don't know how I will feel when she dies, or when my own mother dies. No doubt that will affect the work, but I have no idea how. About five years ago, I was faced with a shortage of words. I solved this by creating a subseries in Dutch, as well as several works in Italian. I resolved to use only native languages where I made the work. This also allows me to reduce the effects of the work appearing to be exotically American, to relate the work to the culture it will be visible in. Language is always the most apparent way a culture manifests itself.

Mariah Corrigan: Still, you have this new series going as well - the Authorized and Unauthorized Portraits - the series I mentioned earlier that uses numbers to evoke a portrait of a material body, and a social condition. Explain how you arrived at this body of work, why it is important, and what you discovered along the way with regard to the power of numbers as identity mechanisms.

Kathe Burkhart: I was trying to make a contemporary portrait. In many ways, all the work in painting - the *Liz Taylor* series, the *Torture* series, and this work has been riffing on the genre of portraiture. This work is in response to concerns I had about the depersonalization technology has rendered to social relations, and concerns about privacy and state control of the private. Our identities have been reduced to sets of identifying numbers and a few preferences. I was fascinated by how available this kind of private information was online. Cyberspace is a very seductive place invented by the US Department of Defense and the long arm of the law. Many people forget this, and willingly offer the most private of information online. All the while, Big Brother's definitely watching, and Big Brother's state control is maintained with everyone's complicity. These works are made with oil paint on linen. They are "proper portraits", installed in clusters of subjects: friends, family, enemies, etc.



Mariah Corrigan: Do you think it is possible that feminist ideas/ideals can be perpetuated without explicit discussion and explicit representation?

Kathe Burkhart: As an imagemaker, I think it is essential to avoid explicit bodily representation, falling as it does into the scopoc or fetishistic. Instead, it's far better to remain instead in a mimetic divergence that may refer to the seductive

or the specular without lapsing into a reductive essentialism, or the simple reproduction of stereotypes. Discussion is another matter, we can never have enough of that.

Mariah Corrigan: And finally, in the years to come, and in the face of the formidable globalized mechanisms for popular repression and homogenization that are clicking into place as we speak, will feminism will be rejected or rejuvenated?

Kathe Burkhart: Undoubtedly, we have to believe that feminism, which it is often forgotten is a branch of evolutionary humanism, will be rejuvenated, though its progress may be slow or backlogged, especially because of struggles in the second or third worlds. The subaltern subject is on the rise and is the subject of many liberation struggles today. And, in the West, despite the current state of stasis or even stagnation, as we continue to struggle towards parity, and achieve economic independence, we, as women and consumers will want to see, and, as cultural producers, to insert images of ourselves into the culture, rather than simply receiving them. And so we continue to struggle for a radical female visibility, one that represents us, embraces the diversity of humanity, and is critical of the mechanisms of power.

Note

1) Helena Kontova 'Bad Girl Made Good' *Flash Art* (1990) pp.108-111

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Diary of an Ageing Art Slut from London, the Montmartre of the Millennium

Sometime in June

I am well and truly buggered from exhaustion. Bet's birthday party was a day's drinking - mostly champagne and a train journey. We met at Paddington Station under a sign, which I couldn't find, but I spotted H. with his dog so I followed him. And lo and behold everyone else was there.

Bet had the tickets and we all piled on the appropriate train out to the country for a slap up lunch. Once on the way the champagne came out along with hor d'oeuvres and other tasty bits. All quickly scoffed down while the countryside sped by. Once in Tidly-Pomp-upon-The-Thames or whatever the place is called (English place names are really something else at times) we all got out. Half caught a taxi, while the other half decided to sober up and walk. D., an old friend who is a right queen laid on the most spectacular meal. His garden is wonderful and the day decided not to rain so we had a grand time. He very coyly had got hold of photos of Bet from when she was a little girl and photocopied them, then laminated the result for place mats. Très clever. One got to look at Bet as a pretentious teenager while you got drunk.

I wore my 1960s purple thigh high boots which caused a bit of concern on G's part. She was most annoyed that I still had legs and a figure good enough to wear them. She, poor dear, has legs that are best left under something long and good at concealing everything.

I don't know what happened to the time between the end of March and June. I did my usual trek around the student shows and have decided that next year I will give them all a miss. I have come to the conclusion that as a society we are having real trouble dealing with the next millennium. All the students are doing is re-staging

the same ideas and sometimes I think actual work from 20, 30, 40, even 50 years ago. One piece of work in particular looked so familiar that I tried to find the student to ask where he/she had copied it. While I was being redirected around badly dressed drunks and their parents I realised that the piece that I thought had been copied actually had been made 30 years ago in another country and continent! I stopped for a moment and had a think about it. The probability that there was any link between the two was remote. However, several days later when I was meeting G. at the tube station before we started on the Slade private view I mentioned to her my predicament.

'Umm. You could be right. The same thing has been happening to me. Last year I saw a piece at a student show that had an uncanny feel about it. Like I had seen it done before.'

'Yea, but only better.'

'Umm, maybe it's just the Zeitgeist.'

'How can that be? You mean we just re-cycle everything don't you?'

'Well we do live in ecological times!'

I had to think on that one for a while. But the show we were at turned out to be just as boring as the others, so we left early not even bothering to network. G. was getting a bit twitchy, as this was her sixth student show and she had not found anything that she liked. There had not been one student/ artist that she felt she could give her card to. Not even one male student artist that she thought she might fancy enough to give her card to as a chat up line. So things were pretty dire indeed.

'Perhaps it's the fashion at the moment. Everyone is "borrowing" from the past,' I said as we slumped at a table outside a trendy café and drank our white wine spritzers.

'Umm, but fashion improves on the originals and brings them up to date. Most of what I have been seeing is just recycling. But the really sad part is there wasn't a male student I fancied. They all looked so young and pimply and trying too hard.'

Well what can one say to that? So we just ordered another drink and watched humanity walk by.

When I got home Dearest had dinner ready - another one of his great Italian specials. So we had it out in the garden and watched the neighbourhood cats leap around from fence to fence and on and off the back extensions. Our little monster was silhouetted against the street lamp well aware that he has a great profile. Then dearest dropped the bombshell:

'Your sister in-law telephoned.'

'She's yours as well.'

He ignored me and repeated 'Your elder brother's wife telephoned this evening just before you got back.'

He stopped. He does that. Just makes announcements of facts and leaves you suspended waiting for him to finish but he never does.

‘WELLLLL!! What did she want?’

‘It’s your parents. She is worried about them and wants you to telephone her.’

‘Didn’t you talk to her at all? Weren’t you curious?’

‘Oh yeah! We had a good chat about her garden.’

After consulting my watch I figured that they were 7-8 hours behind us so we could stay out in the garden for another hour before I telephoned her. She should be back from work by then.

The Next Day

My parent’s mental health, in particular my mother’s, is giving everyone cause for concern. Dad just gets more forgetful by the day like he sometimes gets a whole decade behind. But he doesn’t mind and he still is quite capable of driving the car and shopping and is generally very pleasant to everyone. Now you have to understand that my dear old mum is two bricks short of a full load at the best of times and has been for years. Even her doctor calls her a “socio-path” to her face. But she just tells him he doesn’t know what he is talking about and if he won’t give her the drugs she thinks she needs for her condition she will complain to the medical council. They have a healthy relationship as he has had her as a client for 25 years. Like my father who ignores her and just takes out his hearing aids, he also does what she wants. She changes her doctor from time to time and then after a while comes back because she thinks all the others are too rude to her.

My sister-in-law informs me that she contacted the family doctor after Mum said that Dad had throat cancer during the last telephone call she made to them. This state of affairs has caused mother to go even more do-lally. Her anxiety level has reached higher than usual levels and she began to really not make any sense. As my father is her principle carer, it is rather serious.

Sister-in-law says she is going to visit them next week and try to sort out home help etc. I reminded her that they have had such services for years and that nobody lasts more than a week because my mother is so rude to them. They probably should look into going into some sort of care situation. But she reminded me that my father wants to die in the house he built. It is the one thing he refuses to give way on with my mother. We have impasse.

The last week of June

I have had my interim exam for this year at college and have been asked to write a paper for the fall to be re-examined. I am not surprised as I got really annoyed at the lot of them over the standard of tutoring I had been given this year. The atmosphere was “frigid” to say the least. My sweet but highly ambitious tutor never had time for me being too busy teaching everywhere and anywhere. I accused the other tutor of reaching beyond her ability. She blanched and gripped the table. One’s hair was on end by the end of the session. I was truly wired.

The whole of this year has continued to be a cock-up since the Head of Department

left us high and dry the year before. I should really demand my money back. The trouble is that I am so much older than my tutors are and I can't take them seriously at all.

End of July

Thank goodness for decent weddings! I am really fed up with modern ones that try to be original and fail in the process. Give me a decent well managed wedding any day with all the proper ritual. One where you don't have the children of the couple acting as bridesmaids or everyone is in casual wear throwing flowers. I cringe with embarrassment thinking about some of the weddings I went to in the 1960s. One of my mature students from several years back has always kept in contact and often would come for private lesson at the studio. He finally asked his sweetie to marry him after we had long discussions six months ago about commitment and just getting on with life.

He has married into the Scottish aristocracy by marrying a Laird's daughter. Needless to say the hats at the wedding were absolutely spectacular. I wore my 1950s cocktail dress and matching coat with the big black outrageous hat I made for Em's wedding. Of course I had to go to Edinburgh for the event which was a hoot in itself. The wedding was held in the restored library at the Scottish parliament on the Royal Mile and the reception was upstairs. But oh the hats!

After the Event

Well that's what I call a great wedding. Most women's heads had at least £300 worth of hat on them. But the second in command of the Scottish Episcopalian church made a beeline to me at the cake cutting after the ceremony to rant on about my hat. What a flirt!! I vaguely remembering fluttering a gloved hand at somebody across the room when I first came in. I thought it was the groom but then I didn't have my glasses on so maybe the bishop thought it was himself that I waved to???? But what I pondered later on the train journey home what does that say about me - being able to attract a middle-aged Bishop? Talk about a glamorous setting and ALL the men were in kilts. I had one conversation with two brothers who had to toss a coin as to which one wore the hunting plaid or the dress plaid to the wedding. Unfortunately I didn't manage to lose any weight in time for this event. But I did compliment a chap on his outrageous tie (net and sequins) and he turned out to be the head of a very important art establishment so I slipped him my card - which one has to carry at all times! You just never know !?!

The reception was on the floor above. Just after the cake cutting and between the dinner we were allowed to enter the Great Hall of the Scottish Parliament. This is where Government receptions are now held. It had three huge fireplaces in which a small ox could be comfortably roasted plus several enormous marble statues and many epic paintings of the Great and the Good in Scottish history. I was duly

impressed. But even though it was a splendid late summer's day I had the feeling it could get a wee bit damp and very penetratingly cold here, making me understand why whisky and sheep had been invented and why the fireplaces were so large.

The gesture was done as a favour to the bride. The member of the parliament who had the authority to do so thought it might be nice for the wedding guests to see it as he had known the bride since 'She was a wee lass!' What does one say? I shuddered at the thought of the fate of some of the people I had known since I was a "wee lass" and just what they could do for me.

When it came time to go up to the reception in the rooms above as we ascended the Georgian staircase lined with marble busts done in the Grecian manner (all male one must add) the ladies took off their splendid hats and placed them upon the noble lords. Which did improve their countenance most admirably. The contrast between their austere appearances and the sheer frivolity of the splendid head coverings had a poetic elegance all its own. And with so many of them gazing back and forth at each other as one ascended it revealed a sense of the absurd about the otherwise dour northern building.

I shocked them all by being able to dance all and every country reel they played. The Bishop did ask where I learnt to dance and know all the esoteric steps of any of the Scottish country reels. I had to confess that in my dim and distant past I went to square dancing and Scottish country dancing every Friday night from the age of 8 to 13. Ahhhh !! One's past eventually catches up with one, doesn't it. But then again refugees from The Highland clearances did settle in the area where I came from.

On the way back to London as I dosed on the train I thought of the last time I was in Scotland and in Edinburgh for a wedding. That one was so manufactured by comparison to this one. Then, it was a rich American who was trying to gain some heritage by renting a castle. All the men wore the wrong tartans and had rented kilts while this one was the real McCoy. I smiled to myself and slipped off into the land of nod dreaming of those gorgeous hats on such stern male heads on the stairs to the reception.

I have almost finished the essay for the fall but it needs some re-writing. Must find Bet to have a look at it. That's if I can track her down with her life so full with her new beau.

September - the last week

Life can not be made up. No one has THAT great an imagination. I think most soap opera writers must just borrow the plots from family troubles and gossip they hear about other people's relations. They probably just ride the Circle Line tube endlessly listening to mobile phone conversations or have permanent bookings at tables at Maison Bertoux or Valerie Patisserie in Soho tirelessly listening and taking notes. Reality is much more traumatic and riveting than fantasy.

Events with my parents have turned from what are usually tiring and annoying

phone conversations into the operatic. My father's sore throat and hoarse voice is throat cancer after all. He has had one biopsy but they can't quite find the tumour though they know it's there, somewhere. So he has to have another one. Mother meanwhile has finally committed herself after realising she didn't know which pills to take or how many she has taken, if any at all. In the end she just phoned up emergency as she always does. She normally calls emergency at least five times a month endlessly seeking attention and the perfect pill for them give her. Immortality meanwhile is on her mind, one that is slowly turning into Swiss cheese. She fights growing old with such a vengeance that it borders on entertainment. Though her doctors would not agree. They know her voice well on the local hospital emergency line.

After we got a call from the neighbour to say that our mother had called the fire department out at 8am one morning because she the smoke alarm went off when it was only the battery gone flat she thought we needed to come over to Canada and help sort things out. Nearest and I decided on the spot to book a flight. We'd rather renovate the kitchen with the money but things look bad. The kitchen has waited 16 years, so what's another two or three? A week later a cousin telephones to say mother is in the Hospital and is barking mad and she does mean barking.

A telephone conference with my three brothers confirms my worst fears..... They are inept when it comes to an emotional crisis. It's always women who deal with family crises in the end. My oldest sister-in-law and I plan a routine of care and visits. Then tell the brothers when and for how long they must stay at the family home while father has his radiation treatment and while we try to sort out what needs to be done with our mother.

'Don't worry honey. I'll be there for you.' Dearest says, as he packs his golf clubs and checks the long range weather forecast for the area on the internet. It must be genetic with men.

Half way through October

I could not have made up events up if I tried. My father is in a real state. Very depressed and dispirited, refusing to eat, trying very hard for death by starvation and alcohol which we are trying to reverse. I am in the midst of battling with the health system. Most of my problems so far seem to stem from dealing with social workers, health workers and doctors under 30. They have no experience with life!!! One wonders why they pick the profession that they do?

We arrived late at night on the day my father had his biopsy. We found the back door locked. After ringing the bell several times he came down and opened it.

'Who are you?' he asked.

I looked at him and my first thought was 'Oh No! Alzheimers!'

Then I remembered, I had changed my hair colour from the last time he saw me.

Meanwhile mother has become a Hollywood stereotype of a mental patient. When we first went to see her she was curled up on her bed in a foetal position. The poor

dear is a scarecrow of her former self. The whole conversation revolved around not going too close to the elevator or one would be caught. After 10 minutes we were told to go or we would never get out. She is so dead earnest about it that one could almost believe it! I had a disturbing conversation with the doctor and head nurse about my mother coming home. The health system here revolves around budget sheets and getting patients home as soon as possible so that those budget sheets balance. I am locked in battle with the health authorities over this issue explaining to them that my father has confirmed cancer and he will start radiation treatment very soon. Under these circumstances there is no way a woman in her condition should come home. She would stop taking the medication and he is in no state to supervise her. The health visitors do not give 24 hours assistance and nurses have never lasted more than two nights with my mother. We are not permanent fixtures and will go away in two week's time.

Meanwhile I have begun harassing the Veterans' Hospital to get her "panelled" so she can be transferred to their psycho-geriatric ward for treatment and assessment. It has only 15 people and they treat veterans wonderfully. It's state of the art so-to-speak for such treatment. Since my mother gave five years or more of her life overseas in the intelligence corps of the army in WWII, she is more than qualified for a transfer there. BUT meanwhile I had another major row with the hospital authorities over the telephone about my mother's condition and care. I had to insist that her medicine be checked as to how efficient it was. I am not convinced her dosage is high enough to get her back on balance. I had to point out to them that it takes three weeks to kick in so that coming home before that time and before her mental state is properly assessed is not an option. If they insisted then we would be looking at the probability of two dead old people and they would be responsible for medical negligence. I really didn't think I had such fury in me. Dearest was applauding me along with my father in the background who was raising his beer bottles in praise.

Spurred on, I insisted that she have a scan of her head to see what its physical condition really was. She had been having heart problems for years and they had no idea what damage that had done to the brain. The information could give the family finally an explanation as to certain of her behavioural problems or at least put other worries to rest.

I was so furious when I got off the telephone that I immediately phoned up the company that delivers the Oxygen tanks that my mother uses to insist that they take them away. Dearest had become rather alarmed when we first came as to the sheer numbers and sizes of the various tanks of oxygen that he kept discovering all over the house. Especially since he also was finding large grocery bags of matches in the same bathroom as two such large oxygen tanks as well as in other hiding places around the house. When I questioned my father about why there were so many matches about. He said that mother had read somewhere that lighting a match

dispelled a smell as efficiently as a vent fan and that in doing this she saved money by not using electricity. Besides she couldn't always get the air extractor fan to work.

Dearest looked at me with incredulity when this explanation was given.

'You do realise.' He said later 'That they could have gone up like one of the space rockets at any time and that all that would be left is a big hole. And I mean a BIG HOLE.'

But life goes on and there is a healthy art community in my old hometown. We have gone to a few openings but stopped as Dearest got too embarrassed when people began to tell us tales about my mother's behaviour in the past. She loved private views and the literati community and never missed an opening or book launch.

'Do you think they made it up?' he asked after one such private view and new revelations about his mother-in-law.

'No!' I shot back, 'Knowing her. No way!'

They were some pretty incredulous stories floating about. Obviously she entertained a lot of people.

I have managed however to give two lectures at my alma mater. Art is art no matter where you are in the world and artists are the same the world over. There is never enough money and never enough people who appreciate them. What a miserable bunch we are.

Last week of October

I am on my own having agreed with Dearest to stay an extra week to finish sorting things out. He has gone back and I miss him very much. He was useful in the way that he usually is with that very efficient designer brain of his. He discovered that the chest freezer had food in it that would make an archaeologist pale since it had not been cleaned in years. Meanwhile my mum had just kept piling more food into it. He also discovered in a bag of groceries near the bottom of it my mother's wallet, all her social security cards, drivers' licence and various other important documents that had gone missing. We have a consultation with my brothers and agreed that I will come back in December after the last of them leaves but cross over a few day's care with my sister-in-law. By then Dad's radiation should be in full swing and Mum will have been transferred into the Veterans' Hospital. The general state of play as far as the health system goes is to get the family i.e. the women of the family to do as much as possible. Or to put it another way to get the health system to do as little as possible even though they have the facilities, expert training and resources. Younger brother has been most helpful in suggesting what language to use but he himself approaches the whole situation most guardedly as does brother no 2. What is it with men? I have found out from various acquaintances and friends that the men in my family are not unique. Whose fault is it? Us women's?

There are days when all I do is hang on the telephone harrassing various authorities to try and bring father's radiation treatment forward, or to get mother's

transfer brought to the top of the queue, or to get the oxygen tanks removed before I go, or to get pension payments that should have been paid years ago sorted out. Or whatever one does to bring order to lives which have gone very much out of control. The oxygen tanks have become a real battle between the hospital authorities and me. If they are here, they feel they can send her home anytime BUT if the tanks are not here then she is dependent on the hospital and can't come home. With a constant flow of people staying for only a week or so at a time, dependent on how much time they can get off work to look after my father, having her home is not an option. I won in the end and the company that supplies them finally came and got all the tanks. We discovered that she had twice the recommended allowance!

So I battle to keep her in an environment that is supportive to her and can meet her needs. I also have discovered from the psychiatrist that my dear mum is borderline psychotic. Nice to have it confirmed after all these years! Also the brain scan I asked for has confirmed that part of her brain is like a piece of Swiss cheese but with a light rotating in the centre. One day it shines out of one hole, the next day another. Which means one day you get a thought about a conversation from two weeks ago and the next day one from yesterday and possibly only half of it at that. Coupled with her personality disorder, this makes life very exciting indeed!

My sketchbook lies in the same place it was put when I first came. Only a few drawings of my father sleeping fill several pages. I am just too drained physically and mentally to do anything. The great part of being here has been my friend who I have known since I was five. We reconnected at the high school reunion and have kept in touch since. It's nice having somebody who you don't have to explain any of the background to the situation, as she has known my folks since she was almost born. She lives out of town now so the last weekend that Dearest was here we went to stay with her for four days.

The Four Day Break

Unfortunately a blizzard suddenly swept in from the Arctic so we drove the 200 miles in a snowstorm. We stopped for an hour in a truck stop on our way there and earwigged in on all the farmers and truckers discussing last year's drought, most enjoyable and enlightening. Finally we got to her place which is in a tiny village near the National Park and found the house key where she stated. It was under a flowerpot at the back door. So we let ourselves in, unwrapped the dog from Dearest where it had placed two huge paws around his neck and licked his glasses off. Then made a strong pot of coffee and turned the heat up.

Later when she came home from being Principal at the local high school we planned our weekend, starting with a local farm auction that was being held in the town's ice hockey rink. It was billed as the social event of the month and not to be missed. Well, it turned out to be the only thing we went to as not only was it so interesting but I was too exhausted to go anywhere else. I have eczema on my

forehead from the stress.

But Dearest was in his element. He walked around all day bidding for antique chests of drawers, vintage china and drinking huge mugs of coffee or just grinning slowly, rocking on his heels, watching people. He loves to watch people. It's what he does wherever we go in the world, sit down with a beer or coffee and watch people.

Late January

I cannot believe what I have just been through over the past two months. I know, I keep saying it. But the whole experience has been so amazing and wild.

After Dearest left, I continued hassling the medical authorities over arrangements for my mother and palliative care for my father right up to two hours before I left. At that point I was so concerned that no palliative medical staff had actually checked out my Dad to see what his needs were that I insisted they come before I left. Lo and behold, a nurse turned up half an hour later and apologised. I also got his radiation brought forward by several weeks by insisting that if they didn't start it immediately they would be radiating a corpse.

Then my Ex put me on the plane and I drank all the way back to London. In fact the cabin crew found me a row of seats to stretch out on and kept bringing me more half bottles of wine, completely unasked for. I paid for it for a week afterwards but I got the first undisturbed sleep in a month. Sheer bliss!

My eczema just got worse. Nothing the doctor gave me cleared it up so I went back to the homeopathic pharmacy. It sort of helped.

At this point in the story my brothers began to take over but came away from looking after Dad feeling that he had only a short time to live and that Mum was soon to follow. Gloom and doom were not too strong words for the situation. Dad continued to try and starve and/or drink himself to death no matter how hard one tried to persuade him otherwise.

I decide to go back at the beginning of December and take care of things for their last few weeks on earth as we had planned earlier.... How wrong I was. My sister-in-law was there so her visit could overlap mine by four days. At this point Mum had been moved into the Vet's Hospital for about two weeks. Dad meanwhile had collapsed and stopped breathing in the car when my sister in-law had taken him to his radiation treatment. The hospital said enough is enough and he stayed in. He was re-hydrated, no booze, and drip-fed and put on oxygen and given physiotherapy to get him moving again. So, my sister in-law and I had the house to ourselves for a few days. Unfortunately she confessed that Mum had gone from being on the road to recovery to being her old self again i.e. bloody miserable and mean.

'I think she has stopped taking her anti-psychotic pills.'

'How can you tell?'

'She has gone real mean again.'

The next day I telephoned her psychiatrist to inquire what the situation was.

Sure enough, my mother had said she wanted to go off them as there was nothing wrong with her. I paused and asked if he thought that was a good idea. He assured me he had his long term relationship to think of with my mother. I paused again. Then I assured him that in the long term he would make her take them again as she would drive him nuts. My sister-in-law just shook her head when I told her his explanation.

'I pity him,' was her reply.

'Me too. But what can you tell someone under thirty.'

So we poured ourselves another cup of tea and opened another packet of shortbread biscuits and sat silently munching away. Each of us lost in our thoughts about the situation that was about to be unleashed on the poor unsuspecting staff at the care home because of a smug-know-it-all young psychiatrist.

'Do you think,' she added, 'that perhaps that old adage from the 1960s, which was such a part of our youth ought to change?'

'What adage was that?'

'The one about not trusting anyone over thirty should be re-paraphrased to not trusting anyone under thirty?'

I didn't even blink before agreeing whole-heartedly.

'Without a doubt!'

We had our revenge. They had to put her back on the pills again because they couldn't cope and basically he had no relationship with her. Then I found out she would just flush them down the toilet. She took great delight in telling me so and handing me her days' take. When I told him this he got very annoyed at me. So I just handed him the latest bunch she had slipped into my coat pocket and walked away. But I was right about it in the end. The day I left six weeks after our first talk, he said through very terse lips.

'Your mother is the most wilful person I have ever met.'

'Yeah! Me too!' And smiled at him. 'But it's good of you to admit it.'

In between the end of October and December

I returned for 8 weeks across the pond, I tried to set my life in order and to recuperate. The bad case of eczema right across my forehead was stubborn and spreading. I tried everything and nothing seemed to budge it. Then I started reflexology and homeopathy. It started to budge. But flying back to the folks in Canada I foolishly put on a moisture cream and by the time I landed I had what looked like a brilliant red birth mark across my forehead. When my sister in law picked me up at the airport she said I looked like the alien.

She suggested I went to an allergy specialist, who took one look at me, heard my story and said 'Clean out your liver'. Thus began the great liver cleanse, along with some pills that did something to support my liver, and in two weeks I began to look normal. Apparently I easily have a distressed liver so he also suggested I give up

alcohol. Now I don't drink that much but I do like my wine with a meal and a few glasses with Bet and G and a few at private views. Under the circumstances I was in, at present the gin and tonics were helping me from going round the bend. Especially after a day of negotiating my mother and her Swiss cheese of a brain, my father with his death wish and radiation treatment and a health service that was filled with seemingly younger and younger social workers and doctors. BUT it had to be done....so I took to chocolate and put on a stone. Such is life. I now have a healthy liver that is not under stress and no eczema any more.

Christmas

I shall never forget Christmas. There has never been one like it. Both my father and I agreed on that at the end of the day as I tucked him into bed. The plan was for me to take Dad from his hospital, which was across town to Mum's to have the Christmas meal and then take them both back home for presents. BUT my Mum had not been playing the game. As she was off her medicine or shall I say kept flushing it all down the toilet. She was quite cantankerous and refused to use her cane or a wheelchair. As a result she couldn't walk very far or very well without being out of breath. She put her heart under such a strain that she was put on oxygen and they refused to allow her out for Christmas day. Her liver was very swollen because her heart was not pumping properly from the strain and her system was backing up. (Just think one has all this to look forward to!). She was furious but not at herself.

When I went to see Dad after dropping off her Christmas stocking on Christmas Eve, he was dressed and in his wheelchair waiting for me to take him home. I checked with the doctor if it was okay and that was it, so off we went back home. At the house a few neighbours who had seen the car come home with him in it came around. I telephoned Mum's nurse and there was no way they were going to let her come home that night or the next day. So we relaxed and had a lovely little party.

The shit hit the fan, Christmas morning. My aunt phoned early. The one with one arm who is affectionately known in the family as the one armed bandit, to see if I could pick her up. I declined the offer as Dad would not get out of bed and it looked like we weren't going to make the arranged time with Mum for the Xmas dinner at the hospital. So could she go and let Mum know and we would meet them for dessert? AND under no circumstances was she to tell Mum that Dad was at home. Of course my Mum didn't know Dad was at home. If she did, she would have hit the roof with jealousy. But my aunt true to form told her and within a nano-second of doing so the telephone became red hot with mother wanting to know how come he was at home and she wasn't. When I explained that she could not come out of hospital as she was on oxygen and that it was as much as a surprise to me as her that Dad could come home she went off into the stratosphere. I hung up. After the fifth phone call I pulled the phone plug out.

Dad was still refusing to get out of bed. So I started to pull his pyjama bottoms

off and he suddenly leapt out. An hour later we had progressed to me actually shaving him and wheeling him to the front door to get into his heavy winter outdoor clothes. Then I loaded all the presents into shopping bags, put them into the back of the car. Then I put my father into the front seat, strapped him in and put the white chocolate Yule log I had queued for an hour at the patisserie on his lap with the explicit instruction 'DO NOT DROP IT'. He just grinned. Then I drove to the hospital with dread to see Mum and the aunt.

Once at the hospital I reloaded him and presents and Yule log into his wheel chair, up an icy ramp into the building and up to the third floor. We could hear my mother and her sister defaming my name from the end of the hall. She was in full paranoia and it was being fuelled further by my aunt. The nursing staff were looking very grim. She had been screaming at them all day, had taken herself off her oxygen and it was now four o'clock. I left my Dad with my Mum and aunt to put the tea on to have with the cake. When it was all ready I carried the tray with teacups and cake over to them and placed the tray on the table. I picked up the cake, which was on a rather lovely plate I had found and was about to wish all Happy Christmas or anything to get the conversation to change when my aunt in her true form let rip a particularly vindictive accusation. I paused. Then bit my tongue before saying

'Shut up you silly old moo!'

Upon which she whacked me with her cane in the ribs. It threw me off balance and the cake slid off the plate did a double somersault in the air and landed on the floor.

There was at last silence.

'Happy Christmas everyone!' I said and walked away.

Once down the hall I spied the chaplain's office and went in. He was having a cup of tea and just putting his feet up after a long day when I burst into tears. Before he could say anything almost immediately a nurse came in and told me to take my father back to his hospital, as he needed to get back on oxygen. I refused until my aunt had left and continued to wipe my dribbling nose and feel about five years old.

With great effort, it took everyone on staff an hour to get my aunt out of there. When I did go to get him, Dad was hooked up to an oxygen tank. We began to unhook him and wheel him down the hall when my mother suddenly began to literally rant and rave and cling to his neck. She was wailing how I had plans to incarcerate her forever and sell all their belongings. The nurse began to push the wheelchair faster and faster while I ran and tried to un-peel my mother from my father's neck. We arrived at the elevators at break neck speed. The nurse was now pulling Mum from the wheel chair while she was still wailing accusations about ... I don't remember but when the elevator door opened I shoved Dad in. As the door closed my mother hand came thrusting in like something out of a Hammer horror film and still firing accusations about me. Everyone looked at me. Their huge eyes getting bigger as her voice followed us down the levels echoing in the elevator shaft.

'And she also wants to ...'

When we finally got back to his hospital and I tucked him into bed he came out with the line of how it was a Christmas he would never forget. I looked at him wearily.

He smiled back and said. 'But the best part was the look on their faces when the cake hit the floor!'

I have learnt many things about lying in these two months that I have dealt with the ageing parents. Or shall I say I learnt a great deal about being economical about the truth. The problem was remembering exactly what I said to which social worker and which parent. In the end I got both my parents in the same Veteran's hospital/ care home and my mother back on her proper medication.

The nurses email me regularly and reading between the lines my mother is carrying on, still trying to flush her pills down the toilet and my Dad still refuses to wear his hearing aids but they are together and love having everything done for them.

I am looking forward to meeting Bet next week at the Tate Triennial and having cocktails at a great party afterwards.

All I can say folks is that old age is not for sissies!

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Diary of an Ageing Art Slut from London, the Montmartre of the Millennium

March 04

It's amazing isn't it - how times flies. I had given up my diary for some time then like a memory of an old friend when one suddenly remembers and says, 'Gosh! I haven't seen so and so for ages.' Only it was 'I haven't written my diary for ages.... I wonder why?'

It's not that I haven't been plodding on as usual but just that I got slowed and weighed down with various ailments. Is the word, ennui? How's that for multiculturalism! Well, I think, *ennui* was it. Partly it's that mid-life crisis with the aged parents and dealing with 'the reluctant to get involved' brothers and lousy career crap that is so prevalent at this stage of a woman artist's life. It wore me out and I came down with sorts of unspecified skin rashes and weak hair i.e. I began to molt.

AND of course none of my dear friends want to know about it because 'Hey! it is not going to happen to them is it?' NOT.

Worst of all was my entire word program became corrupted and I had to find a new server and install a better program and generally have a nervous breakdown over my computer. How did a machine come to dominate my life so much and in ways I would never let any man?

So I went to ground, sought out a nutritionist and a homeopathic doctor having given up on my regular one who just supplied more creams that got rid of my skin problems for a while but then they came right back as soon as I stopped using them.

Then I discovered an Anglican NUN who does Reiki.... Yes, it's true and I go to a convent right in the midst of the East End. You step inside their walled gates and enter another world - even though instead of hearing just the birds in the walled garden, you

get to listen to the police sirens mingling with the babbling water from the fountain. I don't know if it helps but apparently according to her I have some really heavily blocked Charkas and each week she cleans them out. I have come to like these women who vary in age from 25-72. They are not a closed order but go out into the community and what a tough bunch of ladies they are! I stayed for supper one night and the cook makes a delicious baked custard pudding. No one said anything about me having three servings as did their cat called Domenic so they have now earned a soft spot in my affections.

Bet with all her high powered life style has still been chasing after and hoping that her latest who now has lasted an amazing two years (a record!) is going to settle into some sort of commitment...

'Some sort,' I say.

He has now bought a house nearer to London so they can spend more time together or so she says. Em just raised her eyebrows at this information when it was aired as she tucked her baby into the pram. G. meanwhile choked on her cappuccino. The casually dropped statement was inserted into the conversation as we all sat in Victoria Park by the tea pavilion in the winter sun one weekend. We were visiting Em and going for walkies with her new sprog. If you say something enough times you get to believe it, we all thought. But he has bought a house and moved closer to her! Now she only has travel for 1½ hours to see him compared with the 3 hours before. Em being a tease threw her bun crumbs at the pond for Canadian geese to swim and gobble them up then. As she observed them she said in an off hand manner.

'Geese mate for life, you know. If one of them dies the other never takes up another mate.'

'How boring!' Bet blurted out without thinking. Then just sort of sniffed her nose at the birds as they bumped each other for the floating crumbs.

'Imagine,' she sighed and then without a beat 'We saw this great Georgian pile with five bedrooms last weekend just outside that small town west of Brighton. Great for house parties. Can you imagine Christmas down there?'

Nobody said anything. But there were mild choking sounds all round as everyone tried to drink their coffee and not giggle at the same time. Later as I walked back to my house for some rearrangement of my wardrobe by G. who suggested in regards to the move by Bet's man that:

'I think he has a new job or is trying for one at University of Sussex. I know Bet wants a house in the country with a man attached but it's sort of like Marie Antoinette playing milk maid.'

I couldn't disagree with her so kept my mouth shut. Beside I needed to focus my mind on what clothes of mine she wants to "borrow." After all Bet had taken me out to lunch at the Tate Modern the week before as the next installment of her 'be nice to artist's campaign.' AND it was a nice lunch. We could hardly contain ourselves snickering at the seduction over lunch that was happening at the next table. I mean it's so hard NOT to earwig when you are almost elbow-to-elbow with the next table.

The tables are so close that people comment on what you ordered when the meal arrives asking you how it is and maybe they will have the same. Hardly the spot for a private chat up but he sure was having a go and she was not immune to it. The difficulty was trying not to be seen to be actually listening. We managed somehow. But it was hard work. We tried to discuss the pre-Raphaelite landscape show going up but we faltered half way through a sentence due to the interesting development at the next table. So we had a go at discussing G.'s sex life which caused them to stop mid-sentence.

That same afternoon I met a colleague from work at the National Portrait Gallery. Yes, I now have some work teaching Contextual Studies to suburban 16-18 year olds at a College of Further Education for one day a week! Well, in reality, we had decided to haul one group off to the Cecil Beaton portrait show at my fav. old gallery off Trafalgar Square as part of their project. All those wonderful Mitford girls' portraits were there. What women!!!! After that we then marched them off to a small gallery behind Oxford Street and then when they left for home, he and I found an Italian deli that had wonderful coffee and cakes over which to discuss important art issues! Namely, the clothes everyone was wearing in the Beaton portraits. Cecil sure can take a good portrait. And why were all the society women in the 1920s and 1930s so thin. There was one of Wallis Simpson in a Shaperelli lobster dress to die forlife is not at all fair at times.

Art wise, well things have been a bit slow with my health not being so great. I really did myself in worrying about my parent's health and their general dented demure all last year. This was not helped by my brothers who because they are men somehow never get around to doing what they promised to do or see the importance in chasing up or returning calls to the health worker over her concerns - after all, is it important that my mother does not take my father's medicine as well as her own! This was all ironed out when I suggested we get a pill enforcer i.e. the district nurse to give them their medicine twice a day when she has to go to give my mother her injection of insulin as well. All very simple really but somehow beyond the male brain.

Last week at 12:30 am in the morning the 'phone went. I woke up thinking Bet has gotten married and was phoning from her honeymoon or my parents have actually overdosed on each other pills or probably some nutter who has got the wrong number. But it was the ex just checking to see if I was okay as he hadn't heard from me in a while. How nice. It almost didn't matter it was so late because he always has such good gossip. He really was concerned.

'Especially the bit about you going bald' he said very earnestly.

'Well, it's all the effects of stress and candida or yeast infection from stress. Anyway you look at it, it's stress. Stress from not enough money, stress from the computer going on the blink, stress from dearest and nearest going off sex, stress from not enough money again, stress from no work - all very legitimate situations on their own but all at the same time is really heavy work. AND I can't drink!!!'

One reason in fact was a rather raunchy Xmas party at the Ivy where I was given an award for my 20 years of fighting for artist's rights which all got a bit too out of hand on Champagne and vintage white wine. It tipped my yeast infection into overdrive. Well what's a girl going to do when she is given 500 smackers to spend at Harvey Nichols? A store that I had created a self-imposed exile from since the 1980s. Believe me, it was necessary! But the culture shock as I entered the door on the first day of the Christmas sale was all too, too much. I managed some how to find my way to the shoe department and then onto Donna Karen concession. In the end after four hours of debating and lunch I decided on a pair of Jimmy Choe shoes and a Donna Karan leather jacket from her signature line. Not much for £500 but what can you expect from Harvey Nichols - hence a new self-imposed exile.

My own work has been slow due to lack of materials, but I have also been working in different materials. For one thing I gave up the M.Phil lark or it gave me up. It was all too much with the parents so ill and me going back and forth to the motherland and trying to hold down a job and get into exhibitions. Something had to give so my brain went dead just shut down. I couldn't string a sentence together if I tried and believe me I tried! In the midst of my re-examination I realised the woman leading it hadn't read what I wrote and the two others there had each only read one essay. No one had talked to each other about my writing until just before they came in, which is why the examination was running one hour behind. I was sweating it out as I had a train to catch for a job interview up north, which I didn't get, but at the time I was hopeful. So in the midst of this academic catfight, I had my usual out-of-body experience and just couldn't see the point of being there. Slowly as they were haranguing me and I them, I was collecting up my things and began to walk to the door. The moderator suddenly began to follow me flapping about and wringing her hands. I just smiled at her and left. An air of unreality took over my life and I felt euphoric to be leaving the place never to go back.

January was quite exciting really as I started on a new series of work involving old ladies hankies. I have collected these for years. Then Bet had invited me to an opening, which we got lost trying to find it. Eventually we did but it was an opening for a furniture and design store not an art exhibition at the next door art gallery that I thought it was. After a good look at all the things we couldn't afford, we went out for coffee in a late night opening bookshop. Both G. and Bet belong to a book club that for all I can make out exists as a reason to eat cake and network. They keep setting these books to read but I don't think anyone reads them. Dee Dee also belongs to one and when I was at an opening of a mutual friend of ours in a little avantgarde gallery in the East End she was switching off in mid-conversation to talk to all sorts of women who were not artists. They had the distinct air of art administrators about them. After a while, this habit of hers got really irritating.

'Who are these people?' I asked 'What people?'

'Those people who you keep talking to when you are talking to me.'

‘Oh! They are members of my book club.’

‘What book club?’

‘The one that took me 3 years on a waiting list to join and I have gotten a show out of it within the first two meetings.’

I thought a bit on Bet’s latest revelations about her club and asked, ‘Do you by chance actually read any books?’

‘Well!!!! at first I did, but then I realized I was the only one who did so I just bake my tart de pomme and take it.’

Lesson to be learned here I thought. I have since begun a campaign to find a book club that will even put me on their waiting list. However better than a book club is a series of soirees that has been instigated by two artists. Once a month they have them and I have put my name down to host one in two month’s time. At the last one we were all sitting in the midst of an installation in one of their houses eating cake. This art piece had sort of taken over the house. Every spare bit of room was a walkway that was raised above the floor. Interspersed were chairs, tables and life’s clutter. I was thinking that this last year there haven’t been that many good exhibitions. Then I thought well it’s just me. But conversation from several colleagues seemed to confirm this observation of mine. So as you sat down the walk way and it became this sort of elongated table that we were sliding wonderful cakes she had baked back and forth debating this subject. One acquaintance and I had this great cake in front of us that we divided up into equal pieces and handed it around. But there was already several other cakes doing this same so we it just sat in front of us. Gradually we cut each piece in half and shared it. This we did for the whole cake and a pot of tea. It was along discussion I must add. The discussions going on were very stimulating and I greatly enjoyed myself but the cake was utterly divine. As far as I am concerned I have come to the conclusion that cake and art combined with women artists’ theoretical discourse on the subject all go too well together. Some of my best insights and debates have been in such situations. I don’t know how one would go about integrating this into general use and practice. Perhaps it is best kept where it is a one of those wonderful idiosyncrasies that are gender specific. In saying so I am perhaps calling the wrath of certain art gods upon myself. But I don’t care; so pass the cake and tea my dear.

February

I am doing this diary for this one time only by going backwards. Mainly because I have been so physically out of it and lacking in its upkeep. But it is interesting to note events in retrospect. As you might have gathered Em has had her baby and it’s a little girl. G. has volunteered to be a fairy godmother as has Bet. In fact they each have gone a little gaga in their own off-hand way about such issues. I had at first thought G. might be a little jealous but in her own way she is quite philosophical about her hunt for the sperm donor of her choice. When she scans the room at

openings or art events, we have landed on calling all potential victims as spermers as in, 'Is he a spermer? nudge nudge, wink wink?' She has definitely met a different class or shall I say genre of men.

Artwise late December proved to be of most interest. As I have previously let on I received an award for all my ranting and raving on the artists copyright front. How did they know what my tastes and desires where? Even dearest and nearest took the day off for a lunch at the Ivy where it was held. Well who wouldn't for a free lunch and champers? But more interestingly artwise was my annoyance at an exhibition called Group of Seven launched by seven ex-pat Canadian artists who didn't include Moi. As the issue involved was identity, which just happened to be a subject I was working on for the last few years I felt I should have been informed. But after I cooled down I realized I didn't know any of them personally and they obviously didn't know me. So I just sent the galleryowner a pack of my work then I phoned up and personally made contact and an appointment at the gallery to show what it was I was so enthused about. AND low and behold she gave me a show in June. Just like that! So maybe I should get annoyed and worked up a bit more. Who knows I might get a few more shows. Dee Dee who has been working her tart de pomme off her but at her book club went green with congratulations. G. just giggled and Bet said 'Nice one girl!' which is high praise indeed.

I did manage to get to a show at the Tate Modern but got sidetracked as I was going up the escalator by someone I knew going down it. An hour, two cappuccinos and one cake shared later I made it to the exhibition. But it was so riveting I only remember it was a German who makes prints but he calls them mechanized paintings. No wonder I don't remember who he is.

January

In January I went out to Cambridge one more time to work with my publisher on some editioned prints to be sold as a special edition as part of the possible show. Well, was it cold! Cambridge has winds straight from the Urals blowing through it. He said this with great pride. I might have survived dressed as I was in my coat and all the clothes I had come in, except for the night before I had stayed overnight with the mother of my friend whose house had heating problems. I have never been so cold in my life. When I inally got home at the end of the second day at night I put the heating right up and sat in my coat until dearest came home. He took one look at me and said. 'That bad Huh?' Then he just poured a scotch walked over and opened my mouth and it flowed down. Warmth spread and life came back after the second one was emptied into me. The work I did was well worth it but what I suffer for my art is truly awesome especially since what I thought was his best scotch at the time turned out to be the crap cooking sherry. But the show will be great. So now I need to get publicity organized and perhaps get G. to help me on a few things.

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