

Universidade do Minho
Instituto de Letras e Ciências Humanas

Maria Luísa de Sousa Coelho **The Feminine in Contemporary Art: Representation and Contamination
in the Work of Helen Chadwick, Michèle Roberts and Helena Almeida**

Maria Luísa de Sousa Coelho

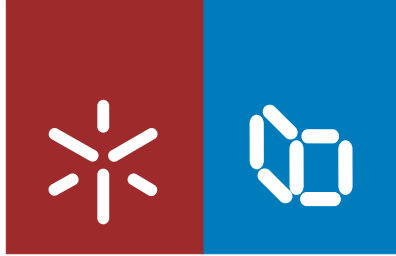
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Tese de Doutoramento em Ciências da Literatura
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Janeiro de 2012

É AUTORIZADA A REPRODUÇÃO PARCIAL DESTA TESE APENAS PARA EFEITOS DE INVESTIGAÇÃO, MEDIANTE DECLARAÇÃO ESCRITA DO INTERESSADO, QUE A TAL SE COMPROMETE;

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The Feminine in Contemporary Art: Representation and Contamination in the Work of Helen Chadwick, Michèle Roberts and Helena Almeida

Abstract

Taking contamination and liminality as central methodological and theoretical metaphors, this thesis investigates the strategies through which contemporary women artists, in particular Helen Chadwick, Michèle Roberts and Helena Almeida, represent the female body and subjective female experiences, and place their work vis-à-vis the art and literary tradition. The intention has been to discuss these women's work within their cultural and historical context and, therefore, to explore the interaction existing between the social, the subjective and the aesthetic through specific instances of visual and literary representation.

The research has followed an interartistic or intermedial approach and contaminated such methodology with the insights provided by feminist criticism, specifically on the literary and visual representation of the feminine and on gender politics. Through this methodology the thesis discusses how Helen Chadwick, Michèle Roberts and Helena Almeida have articulated similar responses to a set of issues raised by phallocentrism and its representation of the feminine. Furthermore, it argues that such similarities are the result of their subject position as women (and women artists), who not only have negotiated with the problems arising from the inscription of sexual difference in the socio-cultural domain in general and the literary and visual fields in particular, but also experienced the profound impact generated by the feminist engagement with and revision of that same sexual difference.

The main conclusions are that Chadwick, Roberts and Almeida participate in 'another' literary and visual tradition, created by women, and one that has subverted the dominant norms and hierarchies regarding female subjectivity and its representation. In the work under consideration, such subversion is visible both at the thematic level (through their engagement with topics such as self-representation, maternity, the domestic sphere and the abject body) and in formal ways (by embracing hybrid formats and innovative media). In addition, it manifests an interest in dialogism and contamination processes (sacred/ profane, abject/ beautiful, private/ public, self/ other), in clear opposition to phallogentric binarism.

On the one hand, by bringing together Chadwick, Roberts and Almeida, this thesis ultimately intends to debate the sexual difference implicated in their work and, consequently, draw attention to the parallelism that is possible to be established between women artists and writers who began exhibiting and publishing in the late 1960s and in the 1970s, both in Portugal and in England. On the other hand, given that a politics of location is an important notion for this doctorate project, this also aims to produce a situational analysis of the women and the work in question. Indeed, Chadwick and Roberts (who were born in culturally hybrid families) and Almeida (whose work is placed between a dictatorial and deeply patriarchal past and a democratic present) lead us to engage with a politics of location and with the concomitant juxtaposition of the terms ‘identity’ and ‘difference’.

O Feminino na Arte Contemporânea: Representação e Contaminação em Helen Chadwick, Michèle Roberts e Helena Almeida

Resumo

Assumindo a contaminação e a liminaridade como metáforas metodológicas e teóricas centrais deste projecto de doutoramento, pretende-se investigar as estratégias de que se servem artistas contemporâneas, em particular Helen Chadwick, Michèle Roberts e Helena Almeida, na representação do corpo feminino e de experiências femininas subjectivas, bem como no seu relacionamento com a tradição artística e literária. Pretende-se ainda analisar o trabalho destas mulheres no seu contexto histórico e cultural, de forma a explorar a interacção existente entre o social, o subjectivo e o estético através de instâncias de representação visual e literária específicas.

A investigação assumiu uma abordagem interartística ou intermedial e contaminou tal metodologia com as teorias desenvolvidas pela crítica feminista, especificamente aquelas relativas à representação literária e visual do feminino, bem como à política de género. Através desta metodologia, procura-se debater a forma como Helen Chadwick, Michèle Roberts e Helena Almeida articulam respostas semelhantes a uma série de questões motivadas por uma cultura falocêntrica e a sua representação do feminino. Adicionalmente, defende-se que essa semelhança resulta da sua posição enquanto mulheres (e mulheres-artistas), que não só reflectem os problemas resultantes da inscrição da diferença sexual no domínio socio-cultural em geral e nas artes visuais e literatura em particular, mas também o profundo impacto gerado pela discussão e revisão feministas dessa mesma diferença sexual.

As conclusões centrais desta tese são que Chadwick, Roberts e Almeida participam em uma ‘outra’ tradição literária e visual feita a partir do feminino, que tem subvertido normas e hierarquias dominantes, referentes ao sujeito feminino e sua representação. No caso do trabalho das artistas em questão, essa subversão verifica-se quer a nível temático (com a exploração de temas como a auto-representação, a maternidade, a esfera do doméstico e o corpo objecto), quer a nível formal (no favorecimento de formas híbridas e media inovadores), e frequentemente evidencia um interesse no dialógico e em processos de contaminação (sagrado/ profano, objecto/ belo, privado/ público, eu/ outro), em clara oposição ao binarismo falocêntrico.

Por um lado, ao relacionar Chadwick, Roberts e Almeida, esta tese pretende debater a diferença sexual inerente ao trabalho destas mulheres e, conseqüentemente, chamar a atenção para o paralelismo passível de ser estabelecido entre escritoras e artistas plásticas que começaram a publicar e a exibir nos finais da década de 60 e nos anos 70 do século XX, tanto em Portugal como em Inglaterra. Por outro lado, dado que a política de localização é uma noção cara a este projecto de doutoramento, este também segue uma análise situacional das três artistas, bem como do seu trabalho. De facto, Chadwick e Roberts (que descendem de famílias culturalmente híbridas) e Almeida (cujo trabalho se situa entre um passado ditatorial e profundamente patriarcal e um presente democrático) obrigam-nos a pensar em uma política de localização e na concomitante justaposição dos termos ‘identidade’ e ‘diferença’.

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Introduction

This study is the result of an adventure across borders
Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt* (1991: xiii).

In the late 1980s, British artist Helen Chadwick created a series of works in which photographic shots of the rough Pembrokeshire coast were contaminated by the artist's own bodily fluids. A notebook from that period confirms Chadwick's intensive research for the series, named *Viral Landscapes*, as well as her fascination with the notion of the viral: for Chadwick, viruses exist on the borderline between living and nonliving matter; they are only partly self-sufficient; their process is an act of deterritorialising to set in being other possibilities and, as such, they are dissident elements, cultivating dissensus as the possibility of change and new solidarities (Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 8). Chadwick's contaminated coastal landscapes, in which bodily fluids coexist with the harshness and solidity of the landscape, offer a positive account of a body and a world without borders, in a state of perpetual openness, flux and liminality. As suggested by the artist, such hybrid position is inherently subversive, for it defies the normative binaries and the exclusionary laws governing Western culture.

In *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (1992), a book published around the same period as *Viral Landscapes*, Linda Nead corroborates Chadwick's view of the hybrid, contaminated body as culturally subversive, for she argues that the obscene body is the body without borders. By opposition, the female nude, whose representation has been sanctioned and canonised in the history of Western art, is a sealed body, that is, a body whose unruly power has been controlled, in an image that systematically excludes holes, gaps and leaks. Nead's influential study also establishes that the female nude disguises and sublimates the radical threat posed by the female body, whose fluid processes, as Luce Irigaray had already suggested in "The 'Mechanics' of Fluids" (1974), clash with dominant masculine paradigms and categories. Irigaray's understanding of women and their bodies is similar to Chadwick's on viruses, for she argues that a woman "makes the distinction between the one and the other problematical" (1974: 111). Hybridism, liminality and contamination seem therefore to be contained *in* the female body but these are elements also contained *by* the culturally ratified representations of that same female body.

Crossing borders and taking contamination and liminality as central methodological and theoretical metaphors for this doctorate thesis, my aim has been to investigate the

strategies through which contemporary women artists, creating their work in different geopolitical and cultural locations and/or in diverse media, represent the female body and subjective female experiences, and place their work vis-à-vis the art tradition. Assuming, like Ana Gabriela Macedo does, “the need to rethink the politics of representation and redraw the limits or borders of the body, thus implying the discovery of new cartographies of the feminine and, as such, new identitary forms anchored in the social” (2003: 20, my translation), my intention has also been to analyse these women’s work within their cultural and historical context and, therefore, to explore the interaction existing between the social, the subjective and the aesthetic through specific instances of visual and literary representation.

In order to achieve these objectives, I have followed an interartistic or intermedial approach capable of fostering a transdisciplinary analysis and I have contaminated such methodology with the insights provided by feminist criticism, specifically on the representation of the feminine and gender politics¹. As I hope to highlight in the chapters that follow, words and images are cultural signs that reflect, as much as produce, ratified but also ideologically subversive gender representations. In regards to the previously mentioned theoretical and methodological context, I would like, first of all, to briefly discuss some of the central issues of an interartistic approach, given that they are particularly pertinent to the analysis undertaken in this thesis.

In *Walter Sickert: A Conversation* (first published in 1934), Virginia Woolf not only argues for Sickert’s pre-eminence among the living painters of the day, but also for a close connection between the visual arts and literature. The essay follows the conversation at a dinner party, shared between literary friends who have just attended Sickert’s exhibition. At some point:

[T]he speakers fell silent. Perhaps they were thinking that there is a vast distance between any poem and any picture: and that to compare them stretches words too far. At last, said one of them, we have reached the edge where painting breaks off and takes her way into the silent land But since we love words let us dally for a little on the verge, said the other.

¹ For a very good introduction to interarts an intermedia studies see Claus Clüver, a pioneer in the field, particularly his essay “Interarts Studies: An Introduction” (2009).

Let us hold painting by the hand a moment longer, for though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other; they have much in common. (1934: 21-22)

Woolf's imaginary dinner party already suggests how deeply twentieth-century artists and writers are interested in *ut pictura poesis* and in what different media have "to tell each other", particularly in the context of a modernist avant-garde, which is also the context from and about which Woolf writes her essay. In the 1960s, with the postmodern critique of grand-narratives and self-enclosed systems of thought and the concomitant emphasis on the notions of plurality and intertextuality, Woolf's belief in the dialogue between the arts reaches the academia, through newly created disciplines like cultural studies and a new input in comparative literature. This interartistic approach, in turn, and paraphrasing Claus Clüver, has increasingly shown an impetus toward transdisciplinarity, through which disciplinary boundaries have been disregarded and even denied, fostering the creation of institutional sites where different arts, sign systems and media are studied collectively, in various combinations and with differing interests, approaches and objectives (2009: 522). Another important consequence of the development of hybrid research is the recognition that "the objects of investigation are defined by the questions we ask about them" (Clüver, 2009: 502).

These are also central conclusions to Mieke Bal's academic practice, which lies at the junction between word and image. In her study of "Rembrandt" (1991) Bal takes the work of the seventeenth-century Dutch painter as a way of exploring the relationship between word and image, visual art and literature, painting and text. Her approach to "Rembrandt" is always in inverted commas because, according to Bal, she is looking less at the man and more at how his work has been read, discussed and spread and, as a result, her critical position offers greater possibilities of relying on several methodological processes, such as semiotics, iconology, psychoanalysis and gender studies.

Bal's approach exemplifies what Clüver suggests as some of the main characteristics of transdisciplinary research, namely, the disregard for disciplinary boundaries, in conjugation with the acknowledgement of the active role played by those who have read, seen and interpreted the work. Furthermore, her analysis, often placed at the threshold between the visual and the literary, is interested in "[s]hifting attention from the study of the medium-bond, allegedly intrinsic properties of each domain" (Bal, 1991: 4), to the cultural role played by the arts. For Bal, then, the juxtaposition of visual and verbal texts can

generate insight into the strategies of representation and interpretation, as well as a broader perspective on other cultural issues, for art is “not separated from the ideological constructions that determine the social decisions made by people every day” (Bal, 1991: 5). Bal calls this “integrative discipline where the study of words and images is no longer separate” (1991: 26) visual poetics, a field in which the artwork is studied not only as part of the social but also as constitutive of it (1991: 93). Despite the differences in nomenclature, her belief that there are neither pure words nor pure images (1991: 38) is shared by Clüver (2009: 524). Moreover, like Bal, Clüver has stressed the importance of contemporary discourses on representation as a way of emphasising the inherently cultural and social nature of visual and verbal signs (2009: 519-20).

The transgressive potential of trans or interdisciplinary forms of research and critical practice is also addressed by W. J. T. Mitchell. In an online interview published in 2006, Mitchell discusses interdisciplinarity in terms that suggest the need to think of hybrid fields of knowledge and research as boundless areas and, as such, as spaces open to uncertainty and even failure:

From the standpoint of disciplinarity, this means something more than the familiar invocation of “Interdisciplinarity,” which in my view is a bit too safe and predictable I prefer a notion of image science and visual culture as sites of what I want to call “indisciplinarity,” moments of breakage, failure, or deconstruction of existing disciplinary structures accompanied by the emergence of new formations. (*apud* Grønstad and Vågnes, 2006: n. pag.)

Mitchell’s approach emphasises the subversive dimension of studies placed in-between disciplines, fields or media, precisely due to their hybrid nature, which is capable of defying clear, normative and often binary oppositions².

² The differences between Clüver’s, Bal’s and Mitchell’s studies could be summarised as a question of emphasis: Clüver has mainly worked within the frame provided by comparative literature and his analyses explore the interrelation between word and image in specific literary instances; as for Bal, she is more interested in highlighting how we use reading skills and literature both in the production and reception/ interpretation of artworks, particularly in the context of the art historical canon, whereas Mitchell has emphasised the visual realm as a structuring process, a pattern and a feature in literature and language. Despite these differences, the overall approach of these three scholars, referential names in the context of interartistic research, to the possibilities and advantages of transdisciplinary and inter-semiotic critical practice still has much in common.

In conclusion, against the normative emphasis on the inherent difference between visual and verbal forms of expression, first broached by Plato in *Cratylus* and famously codified by G. E. Lessing in his 1766 essay *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, and against the belief on the purity of the art object defended by modernist art historians, postmodernist scholars such as Mitchell, Bal and Clüver propose, through related research methods offered by comparative literature, visual poetics, interarts, or transmedia studies, a transversal, inter-semiotic and hybrid reflection on verbal and visual representation. It is such a reflection that forms the basis of my own research project³.

What I also hope is to bring new perspectives to this old debate by introducing in it the issue of gender and, more specifically, of female representation (in the sense of representation *of* women and *by* women). With that purpose in mind, I wish to interpret and discuss the writing of Michèle Roberts in articulation with artwork produced by Helen Chadwick and Helena Almeida. My own interartistic approach is, therefore, deeply contaminated by the insights provided by feminist criticism, both in relation to literature and the visual arts, for I believe only this critical framework allows me to highlight the thematic connections, the shared structural devices and the conscious or unconscious values held in common (Clüver, 2009: 508) by the three mentioned women and their work. In fact, given that, as feminist Rosi Braidotti has mentioned, the quintessential shuttle between cultures and languages, *la polyglotte*, is a woman (*apud* Susan R. Suleiman, 1994: 176), a study of how three contemporary women have represented female experience, body and identity should already and intrinsically invite an intersecting and dialogic approach such as the one offered by interartistic and interdisciplinary encounters. Going back to Braidotti, I am also assuming her position on the nomadic feminist critic, who is an active, transdisciplinary being, creating connections that cross disciplinary boundaries (Braidotti, 1994: 36) and combining features usually perceived as opposing (1994: 31).

One of the emphasis of contemporary feminist criticism is that every reading, like every aesthetic object, is politically engaged, even if unconsciously. My reading will thus be engaged in a feminist politics, particularly the one springing from the 1970s Feminist

³ Other relevant names in a hybrid approach to word and image are Susan R. Suleiman (1990; 1994), Mary Ann Caws (1989) and Linda Hutcheon (1985; 1990). As Macedo suggests in her brief introduction to visual poetics, the notions of intertextuality, polyphony and dialogism are also particularly useful in the context of the interarts, which explains why the work undertaken by Julia Kristeva (on intertextuality) and Mikhail Bakhtin (on dialogism and polyphony) has been so influential (Macedo, 2005: 37-38). See Kristeva (1980b) and Bakhtin (1981). See also Alexandra K. Wettlaufer's introductory chapter to her study of the visual impulse in Diderot, Baudelaire and Ruskin, which traces and documents the history of the word and image debate (2003).

Movement, which not only took the form of political activism, but also decisively contributed to opening academic research and disciplines to the discussion of sexual and gender difference.

Whereas nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century feminism focused on equal rights (voting rights, property rights, the right to education), the Feminist Second Wave, which should also be understood in the context of the revolutionary spirit that defined the 1960s-1970s (two decades that witnessed the rise of several social movements contesting the status quo), was much more about sexuality and the body, subjectivity and (self)-representation (Macedo and Amaral, 2005: 27). Referential feminist books of the period, such as *Sexual Politics*, by Kate Millett, *The Female Eunuch*, by Germaine Greer, and *The Dialectic of Sex*, by Shulamith Firestone (all published in 1970), return to the questions already discussed, some twenty years earlier, by Simone de Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, picking up from de Beauvoir's challenge, contained in her famous declaration: "[o]n ne naît pas femme; on le devient" (1949: 13). De Beauvoir's belief that, in the symbolic order, sexual difference is contingent and not intrinsic to the individual will open the way for more contemporary notions of sexual difference as performative (Butler, 1990), that is, as constructed through the encounter of the individual with the social, and ultimately suggests that cultural representations are implicated in the processes of identity formation.

With the power of the Women's Liberation Movement and given that many women who were part of the movement had higher education (some were even academics), feminism enters the academia as an unavoidable form of criticism. Described by Elaine Showalter as "the feminist critical revolution" (1985), it eventually led to the creation of feminist, women or gender studies, which have claimed the need to revise and deconstruct the dominant knowledges and discourses and the supposedly neutrality of the same⁴. In addition, feminist criticism was incorporated into other fields of knowledge, such as sociology, cultural studies, history, psychology and literature. Of particular importance and impact have been feminist literary studies; these have established the feminine space (in literary production and reception) as a fundamental category in the study of literature and have focused on the representation of the feminine and sexual difference in and through language, given that language is seen as a privileged site for the construction of identity and

⁴ Showalter's expression gives title to one of her essays included in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (1985).

its representation (Macedo and Amaral, 2005: 58). As Macedo concludes, feminist literary studies have also been particularly implicated in a process of revision of the canon (in this case literary) (2008a: 34), offering an alternative politics of representation. My analysis of Michèle Roberts's writing is implicated in this gendered and feminist reading of literature and the literary tradition.

Feminism eventually reached art criticism and art history, although that happened later than literature, firstly, because there was not in this area the groundbreaking work established in literature by first wave feminists like Virginia Woolf and, secondly, due to the particularly conservative nature of the discipline⁵. The first feminist art programme was created in California, in 1970-71, by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro and in the same decade Linda Nochlin wrote "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971). This is generally regarded a pioneering essay, for it opened the discipline of art history to the discussion of sexual difference. Trying to answer the question that gives title to her essay, Nochlin analyses the contexts in which art is produced and consumed and sees the artwork as a place where a patriarchal ideology, gender hierarchies and issues of power are present. Such approach leads her to question dominant notions in the history of art, namely, the androgynous and atemporal nature of 'great art' and the geniality of the artist, and to conclude that:

[A]rt is not a free, autonomous activity of a super-endowed individual . . . but rather, that the total situation of art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions. (1971: 158)

In another seminal text in the history of feminist art history– *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art*, from 1988– Griselda Pollock also suggests a re-interpretation and a re-vision of the painting tradition and ultimately refuses the universal truths held by the discipline (once again the genius of the artist and the a-historicity of the artwork), exposing them as the product of a modernist discourse and as sexist. The analysis

⁵ In an informal conversation I held with Griselda Pollock, some years ago, this art historian mentioned how the literary field had been more receptive to feminist criticism whereas the visual arts expressed a more evident resistance, not to mention indifference to it. In this sense, Pollock considered that a comparative approach between literary texts and visual works from a feminist perspective could prove, indeed, to be very productive.

of sexism in art also leads Pollock to refer to the concept of woman as sign, that is, as a signifier that points towards a meaning that has nothing to do with woman as a physical entity (1988: 100-01). Therefore, and not unlike Nochlin's, Pollock's feminist approach to art history and to the position occupied by women in that history can only be achieved through the analysis of the production and reception of the artwork, which is perceived as a social event.

These and other similarly relevant texts and scholars form part of a still vibrant feminist assault on the dominant modes of representation and the dogmas of art history, in a transgressive critical movement that my own doctorate project wishes to be a part of.

The 1970s saw not only the first feminist interventions in the discipline of art history, but also an explosion of work, mainly by women artists, who consciously inserted women's personal experiences in the art context. Emblematic works of the period, such as Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974-79) or Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79) are attempts to inscribe a female genealogy and counter-tradition in the art canon (in the case of Chicago's collaborative installation) and address situations experienced by women that had been hitherto neglected or even rejected from the visual realm (such as motherhood and the mother-child relationship in *Post-Partum Document*). Women artists were also inclined to explore their themes through innovative, sometimes hybrid media (performance, installation, video, textual document) and/or through materials and formats socially associated with a domestic, private and feminine sphere (textiles, ceramic, letter writing). But, most of all, what is acutely evident in the works from this period, and which seems symptomatic of a feminist problematic in the visual arts, is the emphasis on the female body, with all the paradoxes and difficulties that such a project entailed and, to some extent, still entails for the woman artist.

The politics of the body and its representation are, in fact, central to feminist discussion, intervention and art practice. Going back to those two emblematic art projects from the 1970s, body imagery is fundamental to *The Dinner Party*, for in this pantheon-table of remarkable mythological or historical women, they are celebrated through what came to be known, and often denigrated, as 'vaginal iconology', or 'vulvic imagery', that is, the explicit representation of female genitalia as a way of exalting the female body and

sexuality⁶. Body imagery is also central, even if less immediately visible, to Kelly's project, which, critically embedded in psychoanalytical and post-structuralist discourses, proposed to analyse and interpret the relationship between mother and child through the mother's prism and through their bodily interaction, whilst replacing the direct representation of the female body by metonymies of the same.

As Lisa Tickner concluded in her 1978 essay "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists since 1970", many contemporary women artists were then, as now, taking the female body as their starting point due to the pervasive presence of the same in Western art tradition⁷. This tradition has systematically portrayed female bodies as either monstrous, grotesque, evil, or, conversely, as fetishised, desirable objects, but ultimately, as unreal, fantasised bodies. According to Tickner, the reaction to this tradition from women artists has been "an attack on the patterns of dominance and submission within it, a rejection or parody of the standards by which women are judged sexually desirable, a repossession of our own use of the 'colonized' and alienated female body" (1978: 275).

Through their approach to the body, feminist art criticism and women artists are partaking of a wider feminist interest in the experiences of embodied female subjects and of the feminist effort to produce alternative concepts and representations of the same. As I hope it will become clear in the course of this thesis, this is an effort that defines Michèle Roberts's writing, which is deeply imbued with a feminist agenda, and is also implicit in Helen Chadwick's and Helena Almeida's artwork.

The body is, in fact, one of the defining characteristics of contemporary feminist debates, as confirmed by Macedo in "Re-presentações do Corpo" (2003: 15). In her essay Macedo briefly untangles the web of arguments implicated in the feminist discourse on the female body and its politics of representation, in addition to charting the danger zones such discourse has touched upon, such as the risk of falling into an essentialist and, thus, an abstract and dematerialised model of bodily definition (2003: 13). Nevertheless, the body offers particularly complex problems in the context of the visual arts, given that its visual representation is inescapably linked to woman as object-image offered to the male

⁶ See J. Rose (1986: 575-77), Tickner (1978) and Robinson (2001: 534-39). See Chicago and Schapiro's own account of 'vaginal-womb art' (1973: 40-43). See also W. Chadwick (1990: 358-59) and Betterton (1996) for a more contemporary and nuanced view of the issue.

⁷ Not only art tradition, but the whole of Western thought is deeply permeated by images and discourses that associate femininity with the corporeal, the bodily, the earthly and the profane, as opposed to masculinity, which partakes of the spiritual realm, the soul and the sacred. See in this context Battersby (1998), Irigaray (1981) and Kristeva (1980a).

artist/gaze⁸. As feminist art criticism has repeatedly stated, such binary (op)position sanctions and reinforces the asymmetrical sexual difference in the visual field and confronts the woman artist, who already contradicts her traditional position as object, muse and model, with a dilemma: how to represent female bodily experience without the danger of that representation being re-inscribed in the dominant network of visual encounters mastered by the power of the masculine gaze? I believe this is a question Helen Chadwick and Helena Almeida have had to face and that their work addresses, particularly in terms of self-representation, given that both artists have mainly worked with their own bodies. Hence, I am particularly indebted to feminist readings of the representation of the female body in the visual field and I will recurrently mention them throughout the course of this thesis.

The issue of bodily representation has also led me, as, indeed, it has led feminist criticism in general, to the writings of Michel Foucault on disciplinary technologies of the body and to his understanding of power and how this operates in the modern era. Foucault discusses the modern body as subject to forms of biopower, that is, methods, institutions and discourses “which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed on them a relation of docility-utility” (Foucault, 1975: 181); these disciplines (as Foucault also calls them) have been created to control and shape the body into normative and socially acceptable forms: “discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (1975: 182).

Nancy Fraser’s discussion of Foucault’s account of modern power emphasises the way in which power differently constitutes particular kinds of body and empowers them to perform particular kinds of tasks, thus constructing particular kinds of subjects (Fraser: 1990). In a similar way, Susan Bordo (1993a) engages with Foucault’s notion of technologies of the body in order to stress how modern myths and ideals of beauty, tied to the slender and fit body, are especially enforced on women. Furthermore, her gendered reading of Foucault asserts the need to recognise the importance of feminist criticism in the current understanding of (political) bodies and power, as well as in the reconceptualisation of the body from a purely biological form to an historical construction and medium of social control, despite these being concepts generally attributed to Foucault. Such is also Lois McNay’s take on Foucault and his account of power (1992; 1994). As a feminist critic,

⁸ See Betterton (1996), Ecker (1985) and Pollock (1988). See also Laura Mulvey (1975), who in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” influentially discusses the issue of the male gaze and the objectification of women and their bodies in mainstream, Hollywood cinema.

McNay is particularly sympathetic toward Foucault's later work, due to its emphasis on resistance and dynamism in the context of power relations, a critical position corroborated by Bordo: "Foucault also emphasised, later in his life, that power relations are never seamless, but always spawning new forms of culture and subjectivity, new openings for potential resistance to emerge. Where there is power, he came to see, there is also resistance" (1993a:192).

Foucault's productive account of power, allowing for resistance, or indeed subversion, became crucial to feminism in its approach to the politics of the body in the 1990s, when power is no longer seen as simply coercive and unidirectional, but as something also residing in the subject and her body. Such capillary and disseminated understanding of power allowed feminist criticism to move beyond a simplistic account of women as passive victims of patriarchy and encouraged a more dynamic, if not positive, view of their social participation. In addition, and mainly due to the impact of Judith Butler's re-figuration of the categories of sex, gender and sexuality and the fertile dialogue she establishes with Foucault's theories on regulatory discourses and disciplinary technologies (Butler, 1990), women's experiences are also regarded in terms of the performative nature of their bodies and gendered identity. I am particularly indebted to these feminist readings, as in the course of this thesis I will seek to show not only that Chadwick, Almeida and Roberts reclaim a position of power in a tradition (literary or visual) that has persistently depicted women as subordinated subjects (when not as mere objects), but also how their inversion of power structures and traditional gender frameworks is deeply associated with their culturally transgressive representation, or performance, of the female body.

When engaging with a phallogocentric and dominant tradition, even if in order to subvert it, Chadwick, Roberts and Almeida are also operating within the prolific dialogue established between feminism and postmodernism, particularly since the 1990s, and to which my own reading of their work is also indebted. For Craig Owens feminist criticism shares with postmodernist criticism the need to discuss what can and cannot be represented (1983: 70) and the desire to challenge or even destroy grand-narratives (Lyotard, 1979), whose legitimizing power is hence questioned. In addition, the two movements exhibit a mutual emphasis on notions of difference, the other and decentred knowledge (Owens, 1983; Hutcheon, 1988: 61-71). On the one hand, feminism's contribution to postmodernism lies in the re-addressing of these same topics within the issue of sexual difference, as well as

in the emphasis of a political dimension that counteracts the supposedly postmodernist danger of falling into unethical relativism and abstract a-historicism (Hutcheon, 1988: 16)⁹. On the other hand, postmodernism has offered to feminism not only the critical tools necessary to a permanent self-questioning exercise, capable of refusing dogmatic and fossilized tenets, but also the means to see that, in terms of representation, any process of subversion is first and foremost an act of re-vision.

As Adrienne Rich famously put it: “[r]e-vision– the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction– is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (1972: 11). The process of re-vision, as understood by Rich, implies, then, a dialogue, even if ironic and hence subversive, between the woman artist/writer and a tradition that has persistently excluded or downplayed her relevance and misrepresented her experiences. In this context, Linda Hutcheon’s analysis of postmodernist poetics (1988) and politics (1989), which the critic rejects as a-historical, seeing them, instead, as “resolutely historical”, not in the sense of a “nostalgic return”, but as “a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society” (1988: 4), and, more specifically, her notion of parody as imitation with a difference, or with a critical and ironical distance (1985: 37), has been useful to my own analysis of contemporary women’s art and fiction. This is especially the case given that Hutcheon’s understanding of postmodernism emphasises its refusal of binary oppositions and exclusionary processes, embracing instead the liminal, the plural and the hybrid; in other words, postmodernist art and culture implies a dialogic process and results from the relationship between the marginal (the peripheral or the ex-centric) and the centre¹⁰.

In addition to Hutcheon’s notion of parody, the related concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia and polyphony, which enter postmodernist critical discourse through the work of Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, have also been a fundamental theoretical background to my research. According to Bakhtin, word, text, language, discourse have a dialogic quality, which means that they are permanently framed by previous words, texts, languages and discourses, at the same time that they frame (in other words, answer, silence, correct or

⁹ See also Macedo (2008a) for an account of postmodernism and its relation with feminist criticism.

¹⁰ See also Lyotard’s account of postmodernism in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (from 1979), in which the French critic explains that postmodernism is the transgressive element in modernism and, as such, it cannot be seen as a rupture with the past (that would be, according to Lyotard, the modernist way of looking at postmodernism, which ultimately reinforces the very modernist notion of progress). Instead, postmodernism establishes a much more ambivalent and complex dialogue with the past and tradition.

extend) them. Like in an actual dialogue, they exist through this “combined context made up of one’s words and the words of another without losing its sense and tone” (Bakhtin, 1981a: 284). The dialogic process makes language inherently polyphonic and, therefore, continually existing in an interactive, social (and hence ideological) context, as well as grounded in heteroglossia, that is, in the coexistence, or even conflicting existence, of different speeches within the same linguistic code:

Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. (Bakhtin, 1981a: 291)¹¹

Despite the problematic misogyny of Bakhtin’s texts (Ginsburg, 1993), his work has been widely discussed and often appropriated by feminist critics, since his emphasis on the dialogic nature of every utterance and the literary text is also subjacent to the feminist revision of the patriarchal canon and phallogocentric culture, as well as to its refusal of the gendered subject as an atomic self, seeing it instead as a social and ideological construct that speaks polyphonically¹².

Bakhtin’s studies have also intersected with feminist criticism through his notion of the carnivalesque-grotesque, which has played a central place in my own discussion of the work of Chadwick, Roberts and Almeida. In *Rabelais and his World* Bakhtin analyses Rabelais’s text in articulation with a medieval folk culture and its “carnival idiom” (1965:11), that is, a carnivalesque spirit, connected to folk laughter and culture, that creates a second world, a grotesque reversal of the extra-carnivalesque life. According to the Russian critic, this carnivalesque-grotesque is centred on the ‘bodily lower stratum’ (images

¹¹ Bakhtin begins his essay “Discourse in the Novel” precisely by emphasising the socio-cultural and, hence, ideological nature of language and literature: “[t]he principal idea of this essay is that the study of verbal art can and must overcome the divorce between an ‘abstract’ formal approach and an equally abstract ‘ideological’ approach. Form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon- social throughout’ its entire range and in each and every of its factors” (1981a: 259). As Macedo suggests (2008a: 29-30), Bakhtin’s dialogic understanding of the word, language and literature had a massive effect in 1960s French thought and is particularly visible in Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality, a concept that, in turn, is crucial not only to contemporary literary criticism, but also to a whole range of disciplines and studies.

¹² See *Critical Studies* (1993, vols. 3 and 4), which contains a whole section on the intersection of Bakhtinian studies and feminist criticism (163-258). See also Booth (1982) for an earlier comment on that critical dialogue.

of food, drink, defecation and the body's sexual life), an inside-out logic that parodies the extra-carnavalesque world, and a principle of ambivalence found in the body's unfinished, creative and regenerative dimensions. It, therefore, has a revolutionary potential, even if temporary and mediated by the extra-ordinary presence of carnival in the social (Ginsburg, 1993: 165), for it inverts, destabilises and questions the dominant rules and hierarchies, as well as enforced oppositions.

Bakhtin also identifies in this popular tradition a powerful connection between woman and the subversive potential of the carnivalesque-grotesque, for: "she is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously. She is ambivalent. She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys; but, first of all, she is the principle that gives birth. She is the womb" (1965: 240). As already suggested by Bakhtin's citation, the association of woman with the carnivalesque-grotesque is mainly due to the characteristics of the pregnant body and, hence, is closely linked to the maternal principle.

It is also the grotesque and disruptive implications of pregnancy and motherhood that justify Julia Kristeva's indebtedness to Bakhtin's study of the carnivalesque in her analysis of the abject (Kristeva, 1980a). Bakhtin's emphasis on the pregnant body as a powerful image with transgressive potential relies on his description of that body as suggestive of a world without binary oppositions. Kristeva also perceives the maternal body as an archetypal generator of the feeling of abjection because it represents a liminal, leaking body that, due to its borderless state—situated between self and other, inside and outside—threatens the self with the loss of identity and the social with the dissolution of the exclusionary laws in which it is based¹³.

Even if some contemporary feminist critics have felt uncomfortable with Bakhtin's dematerialisation of woman, whose body is turned into an abstract maternal principle that further serves the needs of a masculine writer/reader (often presented as a false universal) (Booth, Sep. 1982) and excludes from the text the actual experiences of women (Ginsburg, 1993), others were quick to grasp the feminist possibilities of his understanding of carnival and the grotesque body. For example, in her essay "The Revolutionary Power of Women's

¹³ See also in the context of Bakhtin's discussion of a female/ maternal grotesque and the feminist discussion of the maternal body Bassin, Honey and Kaplan (1994), Battersby (1998), Betterton (1996; 2006), Ettinger (1996), Irigaray (1981), Kristeva (1975; 1977a), Pollock (1996; 2004), Russo (1995) and Warner (1976). Some of these studies will be further discussed in the following chapters.

Laughter”, Jo Anna Isaak takes Bakhtin’s study to the feminist arena and concludes that the carnivalesque-grotesque and the concomitant deployment of laughter have become productive strategies in a feminist-oriented art (1996a: 20) that celebrates female corporeality and interacts with as well as subverts patriarchal representations of the female body.

As I will argue in this thesis, the work produced by Chadwick, Roberts and Almeida also engages with the female body as carnivalesque-grotesque (although to different extents), at the same time that, through the postmodernist strategies of irony, parody and the rejection of binary oppositions, it transgresses dominant modes of representation and embraces the coexistence of opposites in the female body (profane *and* sacred, earthly *and* spiritual, grotesque *and* beautiful). Moreover, by dialoguing with tradition and rejecting a dichotomised perspective, thus once again celebrating hybridism and processes of contamination, these three women (though Chadwick and Roberts more explicitly than Almeida) incorporate and celebrate the maternal body in their work. Given that this is also a significant strategy in contemporary feminism, which has made motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship two of its most insistently discussed topics, I will, therefore, further try to prove that Chadwick, Roberts and Almeida can be said to participate in a feminist visual and literary counter-tradition that subverts established and dominant social norms and hierarchies regarding women, their bodies and the representation of their subjectivity.

Thus, in this study I will be actively engaging with feminist theories, first of all, in order to investigate to what extent Chadwick, Roberts and Almeida have operated within social conditions dominated by the androcentric ideology that still permeates contemporary Western culture and have produced similar responses to a set of issues raised by phallogentrism and its representation of the feminine; secondly, to discuss if such similarities are the result of their subject position as women (and women artists) who not only have negotiated with the problems arising from the inscription of sexual difference in the socio-cultural domain in general and the literary and visual fields in particular, but also experienced the profound impact generated by the feminist engagement with and revision of that same sexual difference. If this is the case, then these three women’s work can be inscribed in the history of feminist art practices, even though, as we will see, the artists themselves have not always accepted that inscription. In this context, it is important to remember Mary Kelly’s suggestion that, instead of “is this feminist art?”, a more pertinent question would be “what is a feminist problematic in art?” (1980: 303), as the latter

necessarily draws attention to issues of sociality, materiality and sexuality. This thesis implicitly tries to answer Kelly's question, by exploring in the work of the afore-mentioned artists what Pollock identifies as "feminine inscriptions", that is, "the traces of a subjectivity formed in the feminine within and in conflict with a phallogocentric system" (1996: 74)¹⁴.

One last word is due regarding my choice of contemporary women artists. On the one hand, by bringing together Chadwick, Roberts and Almeida, I intend to debate the sexual difference implicated in their work and, consequently, draw attention to the parallelism possible to be established between women artists and writers who began exhibiting and publishing in the late 1960s and in the 1970s, both in Portugal and in England. On the other hand, given that a politics of location is an important notion for contemporary feminism as, indeed, it is for my own research project, this will also aim to produce a situational analysis of the oeuvres in question. Such approach certainly demands an awareness of the sexual implications of these women's practice, but also of how their work intersects sexual difference with the cultural, the historical and the geographical and, therefore, should be discussed in the context of what Susan Stanford Friedman describes as a "geopolitics of identity within differing communal spaces of being and becoming" (1998: 3). Only a politics of location, or a geopolitics of identity, is thus capable of moving beyond both an essentialist notion of 'woman' and pure difference, in order to recognise that a multiplicity of elements (gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion and national origin), or "axes of difference constitute multiplex identities and challenge binarist ways of thinking" (1998: 4), whilst still rendering visible "the symbiotic, syncretist, interactive formations in the borderlands in between difference" (1998: 4). Chadwick and Roberts (who have Greek and French maternal heritages, respectively), as well as Almeida (whose work is situated between a dictatorial and deeply patriarchal Portuguese past and a democratic

¹⁴ For Pollock, the discussion of a feminist problematic in art necessarily brings forward the notion of ideology in articulation with psychoanalysis, for there is no ideology without a subject (1996: 72). Pollock's discussion is, therefore, deeply framed by the critical discourse of psychoanalysis, given that for her "[a]rt practice, in addition to the meanings that the artist actively calculates and manufactures, registers traces of the processes of subjectivity that are always both conscious and unconscious at the level of a productive semiosis" (1996: 73). In fact, the link between psychoanalysis and art is historical, since psychoanalysis and art history were born in the same period and place and their relationship was also fostered by Freud himself, who was interested in analysing the creative process and its relation with the unconscious. In addition, there is a wide feminist interest in psychoanalytical theory, given that this field is the first to bring forward the issue of sexual difference. However, as mentioned by Tickner, the relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis has always been difficult and tense, because the 'story' Freud has to tell about the subject's formation is very damaging for women and their (embodied) experiences (1988: 111). In this thesis I will often engage with psychoanalytical theory, which, as a clinical practice, also intersects word and image, the narrative and the visual, through the notion of the (speaking) subject and the interpretation of dreams. Nevertheless, my discussion of psychoanalysis will be framed by the feminist re-configuration of this field. See J. Mitchell (1974) J. Rose (1986) and Pollock (2006) for an introduction to the relationship between psychoanalysis, feminism and the image.

present, as between a traditional artistic milieu and an avant-garde context) offer the opportunity to reflect on a politics of location, given that the juxtaposition of identity and difference and the resulting emphasis on hybridism and dialogism are such fundamental elements of their art practice¹⁵.

The viral is, perhaps, one of Chadwick's favourite images and she used it when reflecting about her culturally mixed identity. It is my contention in this thesis, which recurrently explores processes of contamination in methodological, theoretical and political terms, that Roberts and Almeida, like indeed many other women, given what is at stake for them, would also embrace the viral as an appropriate symbol for their sense of identity, their experience and their work.

¹⁵ My reading of Chadwick, Roberts and Almeida participates in the sort of feminism defined by Friedman as: "a singular feminism that incorporates myriad and often conflicting cultural and political formations in a global context" (1998: 4). See also Friedman's concept of "locational feminism" in "Locational Feminism: Gender, Cultural Geographies, and Geopolitical Literacy" (2000).

1 Collapsing Boundaries: Helen Chadwick

There are two islands/ at least, they do not exclude each other
Margaret Atwood, *You Are Happy* (69: 1974).

1.1 The female body, feminist art and Chadwick's early work

1.1.1 Feminism and the body

The 1960s and the 1970s were two crucial decades for the development of a feminist-oriented art, which, in its interest in the lives and needs of women, including those of women as artists, established the female body as central to the artwork. During that period, Second Wave feminists stressed how 'the private is political' and the body a battlefield, thus suggesting that the female body should be seen as a specific political site, a place where power relations and social structures are reinforced and where the effects of a patriarchal system are visible.

In "Re-presentações do Corpo, Questões de Identidade e a 'Política de Localização': Uma Introdução", Macedo affirms that "since at least the 1960s one of feminism's most important objectives has been the re-conceptualization of the female body, focusing on it through a variety of themes and discussions, from the early fight for contraception, to sexuality, self-image, self-esteem, pornography, the position regarding the law, etc." (2003: 15, my translation). Macedo further adds that, "[i]n the seventies feminists in France reclaimed the body as the place of difference and a crucial site of struggle and resistance", but she also mentions that "already in the twenties, in England, Virginia Woolf spoke to the first women admitted to university about the need to 'inscribe the female body in writing' and, furthermore, placed the issue within the discussion of the feminine identity" (2003: 15, my translation).

Since the 1980s postmodernism and postcolonialism redefined the female body by emphasising the articulation between notions of identity and difference. It is that new theoretical context that underlines Elizabeth Grosz's concept of the body, put forward in the 1990s:

By 'body' I understand a concrete, material, animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves, and skeletal structure, which are given a unity, cohesiveness, and form through the psychical

and social inscription of the body's surface. The body is, so to speak, organically, biologically 'incomplete'; it is indeterminate, amorphous, a series of uncoordinated potentialities that require social triggering, ordering, and long-term 'administration'. The body becomes a human body, a body that coincides with the 'shape' and space of a psyche, a body that defines the limits of experience and subjectivity only through the intervention of the (m)other and ultimately, the Other (the language- and rule-governed social order). Among the key structuring principles of this produced body is . . . its inscription by a set of socially coded meanings and significances (both for the subject and for others), making the body a meaningful, 'readable', depth entity. (1995: 104)

Grosz's definition of the body rejects the notion of a whole, self-enclosed and purely biological unity, reconceiving it instead as a socio-cultural artefact, a site where several elements, individuals and relations come into play. Underlying Grosz's attempt to overcome the binary oppositions by which the body has been understood— between mind and body, inside and outside, biology and culture, subject and object, self and other, female and male (Grosz, 1995: 103)— is her concept of the body as participating in all these dimensions. From Woolf to Grosz, feminist discourse has remained, despite the theoretical changes, profoundly interested in the female body throughout the twentieth-century.

Helen Chadwick's work is certainly influenced by feminist discourses on the female body, which is one of the central topoi of an oeuvre that spans across three decades (1970s-1990s)¹⁶. Throughout Chadwick's career the body is perceived and represented in different ways, accompanying her artistic development and a continuous process of inquiry, as well as the inflections taken by feminist criticism. Nevertheless, and since her first projects as an art student, Chadwick's approach to the body is complex and provocative, resulting in work rich in disseminated meaning.

1.1.2 Installations, performances and feminist-oriented art

As Chadwick admitted in an interview given in 1994: "that issue of representing the body was there way, way back" (*apud* Chalmers, 1996: n. pag.). In the 1970s, while still a

¹⁶ Chadwick's first works were created in the early 1970s, while still a graduate student at Brighton Polytechnic. Her prolific career was unexpectedly drawn to an end in 1996, after Chadwick contracting a fatal viral infection.

student at Brighton Polytechnic, in Sussex, Chadwick produced a set of soft sculptures; these were embroidered, sewn or knitted objects representing female body parts– *Sofa and Body Cushions*, from around 1975– or related to feminine bodily functions– *Knitted Disposal Bag* and *Knitted Tampons*, also from around 1975 [Fig. 1]¹⁷. These objects, used as props in photographic compositions and pieced together as part of *Domestic Sanitation*, an installation presented by the artist at her graduation show, inaugurate the crucial importance of the female body for this artist and the influence of feminist art and criticism in her work. Indeed, Chadwick’s early works also dialogue with those created by emerging American feminist artists, such as Judy Chicago, who, together with Miriam Schapiro, organised in 1972 a woman-only installation and performance called *Womanhouse*. This project, which emphasised the collaborative nature of much of the feminist art of the period, explored the domestic limitations imposed on women and female bodily experience.



Figure 1 - Helen Chadwick, *Sofa and Body Cushions*, *Knitted Disposal Bag* and *Knitted Tampons* (c. 1975).

In Chadwick’s *Domestic Sanitation* the audience was led through different parts of the house mapped by the artist in her studio. Chadwick’s attention to the domestic environment was focused on the lounge area, which exhibited exquisitely embroidered

¹⁷ It is difficult to date with precision these early works, since they were produced during the years Chadwick was a graduate student and gathered for an exhibition at the end of the course, in 1976. I wish to thank Victoria Worsley, from the Henry Moore Institute, for granting me access to the Helen Chadwick archive and for precious information on Chadwick, her life and work.

'body cushions', the toilet area, where several elements connected with female personal hygiene, such as knitted tampons and a knitted disposal bag, as well as a wash-basin with signs of melted wax, were displayed, and a boudoir, where visitors were free to try latex costumes created directly from women's bodies and exhibiting protruding hips, bottoms, breasts and pubic hair. These latex costumes were also used in two performances put up by the artist for her graduation show– *The Latex Glamour Rodeo* and *Bargain Bed Bonanza*¹⁸.

In *The Latex Glamour Rodeo* (1976) [Fig. 2] several women, including the artist, engage with each other in theatrical and parodic ways¹⁹. They are seen performing a gynaecological examination, moving along the room like alluring cats and exhibiting an over-determined sexuality that matches the grotesque markers of sexual difference they display. According to Niclas Östlind, "[t]here is something almost sado-masochistic about the whole thing, both in the relations between the people acting and in their extreme and fetishist clothing. The breast, bottoms and, not least the pubic hair . . . are emphasized and their nudity is both real and staged by means of the costumes" (2005: 9). So, not only does *The Latex Glamour Rodeo* embrace the body as its main subject and material, but it also represents it as a locus where inter-relations and questions of power converge. Moreover, it explores the tension between nudity and nakedness, a tension that is mentioned by Chadwick in one of her notebooks of the period: "Nudity– conventionalised, controlled sexuality, Nakedness– individual real self" (Notebook 2003.19/E/2: 62).

¹⁸ See Niclas Östlind (2005: 9) for more details of Chadwick's performances. Östlind's analysis is based on the documents held at the Helen Chadwick archive, which the critic examined in preparation for an exhibition of Chadwick's work in Stockholm, in 2005.

¹⁹ I am using the notion of parody in Hutcheon's sense, that is, in terms of a dialogue with tradition, through which there is a process of imitation but with a difference (1985).



Figure 2 - Helen Chadwick, *The Latex Glamour Rodeo* (1976).

The difference between nudity and nakedness is particularly relevant in the context of visual representation, for the Great Masters tradition is based on the framing gaze of the male painter at the female body and sustained by the overwhelming presence of the female nude as the subject in the canvas. Feminist art criticism has had a major role in the analysis of the gender and power relations underlying the meaning of the female nude in art tradition and its conclusions have had an impact in the History of Art discourse. Feminist art critics have emphasised the objectified and erotic role attributed to women by the Great Masters (Nead, 1992), as well as the effects of the modernist ideology to women: “the early Modernist myth . . . concerns the extent to which the major paintings– and sometimes sculptures– associated with the development of modern art wrest their formal and stylistic innovations from an erotically based assault on female form” (W. Chadwick, 1990: 279).

Helen Chadwick’s comment in her notebook is in line with the feminist deconstruction of the traditional role attributed to women in art and art criticism and is also reflected in the approach undertaken by the artist in *The Latex Glamour Rodeo*, a performance in which the female body, reconceived as a latex costume, is staged and thus presented as nude more than naked. The performative dimension of this project therefore has a gendered nature, as concluded by Eva Martischinig, for whom: “[i]n her latex costumes the artist creates one skin to cover another, and suggests that the projection of an idealized concept of femininity onto the female body imposes a culturally conditioned notion of the self upon the true ego” (2004a: 48). In other words, Chadwick’s interest in female bodies

and idealized concepts of femininity draws attention to the role-playing implicit in the social and cultural performance of so-called feminine roles and, consequently, highlights the feminist perspective dominant in the artist's early work.

Feminist art criticism has been fiercely determined to question traditional notions of the female body, sexuality and identity and traditional visual representations of the same. It has also produced a critical discourse capable of promoting new interactions with that female body. Chadwick's textile sculptures and latex costumes explore how the body lives and interacts and aim to reach a different understanding of the female body by encouraging the audience to substitute touch for the gaze of phallogentric art tradition. Being performative or sculptural, these artworks demand direct participation from the audience, which is invited to touch the cushions or to try the latex costumes. Touch is then raised as a feminist issue.

In *This Sex Which Is Not One* Irigaray opens up a new path of investigation not only for feminist criticism but also for philosophy. She offers a critique of western philosophy as based upon vision and demands a study of touch, for touch is linked to female pleasure: "[w]oman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking" (1977: 26). Her analysis of female morphology leads her to speak of female genitalia as a metaphor for a feminine mode of being that, more than the masculine, relies on touch. Chadwick's cushions and latex costumes can be read in connection with Irigaray's economy of touch in that they disrupt the patriarchal gaze at the female body and, otherwise, seek to be touched.

Moreover, Chadwick's approach to the female body through textile objects is found in other contemporary women artists, such as Niki de Saint Phalle, whose work from the 1960s, particularly her monstrous women, made of chicken-wire and fabric, simultaneously threatening and funny, grotesque figures and toys, is seen by Whitney Chadwick as a "precursor to feminist art concerns of the 1970s" (1990: 337). In 1966 Saint Phalle created *Hon*, an eighty-two feet long woman that could be entered through the vagina and that the visitors were free to touch. The woman's inside included a milk-bar installed in one breast. According to W. Chadwick:

Saint Phalle's *Hon* reclaimed woman's body as a site of tactile pleasure rather than an object of voyeuristic viewing; the figure was both a playful and colorful homage to woman as nurturer and a potent demythologizer of male romantic notions of the female body as a 'dark continent' and unknowable reality. (1990: 337-38)

W. Chadwick's comments about *Hon* are also pertinent to Chadwick's early work, since, not unlike Saint Phalle, her depiction of the female body refuses the conforming power of the gaze and rejects, through an economy of touch, the male fear of the mystery of the female body. Such similarities confirm Chadwick as part of a wider movement of women artists, developed in the aftermath of high modernist art, particularly between 1960 and 1970, and that, in its determination to challenge established ways of female representation, created a feminist-oriented art.

In *Bargain Bed Bonanza* (1976) [Fig. 3], another of Helen Chadwick's graduate projects, female bodies again occupy the centre of a performance. The bodies cry out their nudity (in the sense the term is understood by Chadwick, that is, of conventionalised and controlled sexuality [Notebook 2003.19/E/2: 62]) through grotesque pubic hair and breasts and they expose their sexual availability by looking like bed mattresses (a suggestion already hinted at in the title given to this work). However, nudity is denounced as deceptive since the bodies that seem to reveal themselves actually conceal their physical presence behind carnivalesque costumes, which include the grotesque signs of sexual difference. If these costumes have an allegorical dimension, then the women who wear them are more representative than represented, a situation further conveyed by their symbolic names: "Supermum Housewife", "Virgin Scandinavian", "Tart Costume" and "Rape Mattress"²⁰. Names and costumes fuel stereotypical notions of femininity clustered around the binary oppositions virgin/whore and purity/abjection. Chadwick's allegorical characters are therefore signs, that is, representations of some of the discursive paradigms imposed on women by the phallogentric order and art modus. However, Chadwick's approach offers a critical look at normative concepts of femininity by the excessive and grotesque nature of the costumes and the bodies they represent; excess destabilises the fixed meanings attached to the female body and the grotesque threatens to overthrow the discursive and social structure in which those meanings are grounded. By focusing on the relation between the gendered individual, the social and discourse, *Bargain Bed Bonanza* takes a political stance and, consequently, is inscribed in a feminist-oriented art practice.

²⁰ According to Östlind, these women also "perform absurdist scenes that reflect their particular character: cleaning, swinging, cruising and being rapped" (2005: 12), thus highlighting their allegorical dimension.



Figure 3 – Helen Chadwick, *Bargain Bed Bonanza* (1976).

The previous examples demonstrate that back in the 1970s Chadwick was already placing the body, particularly the female body, at the centre of her work, as she was exploring the way bodies reflect and engage with the social and the cultural. As a result, Chadwick’s projects while an art student evidence not only the “poetics of the body” that emerged with the Feminist Movement of the 1970s (W. Chadwick, 1990: 311), but also a politics of the body, for it constitutes an aesthetic critique to the socio-cultural constraints imposed to female bodies and sexuality.

In an interview from 1994, Chadwick discussed her ambivalent relation with feminism, particularly in the 1980s when her work was being attacked for offering the female body to the male gaze:

I was aware of the wing of feminism which I have perhaps unkindly called Stalinist, that was advocating absolutely no representation of the female body was possible . . . although I could sympathize with the theoretical position, again it just didn’t square with my own needs, the choices that I wanted to make. I felt it might just be possible, admittedly a tight-rope act, to make images of the body that would somehow circumnavigate that so-called male gaze.
(apud Chalmers, 1996: n. pag.)

Despite the artist’s reticence to be labelled feminist and her need to distance herself and her work from a feminist-oriented art production, Chadwick’s approach in the 1970s is in line with the changes advocated at the time by the Feminist Movement in general and feminist art criticism in particular, both of which encouraged women to question and reject the traditional space granted to them, their bodies and their work by male-oriented institutions,

practices and discourses, in the joint effort to liberate the female body and create work more faithful to the needs and aspirations of a self-conscious woman.

Nevertheless, I believe in moments like *Bargain Bed Bonanza* and *The Latex Glamour Rodeo* Chadwick's approach to the body goes even further than what feminism was aiming at in that decade and almost as far as Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender and the constructed quality of the body, notions which this critic forcefully exposed in 1990, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler's theory is the result of a wider postmodern approach to the notion of a true self. This notion is disembowelled by poststructuralism, particularly French theory, psychoanalysis and feminism, all of which question the concept of a stable, original self lying behind the layers of cultural, social and historical clothing, suggesting instead that the idea of a true ego is also the product of those very same cultural, social and historical contexts. Butler takes the deconstruction of the stable self one step further by questioning the fixity of that which seems most natural– the body and the correlated notions of sexual difference and heterosexual desire. *Gender Trouble*, and later *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), focus on the body and sexuality, deconstructing the binary oppositions between nature and culture, sex and gender. Butler's review of these oppositions brings her to the conclusion that these are not expressive but performative, which means that "there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured . . . and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction" (1990: 180). Consequently, "[t]he view that gendered is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (1990: xv).

In Chadwick's early works, the use of latex costumes, with their overhung breasts, bottoms and pubic hair, as well as the medium chosen by the artist– the performance highlighting the theatrical roleplay in which the participants engage– already hint at the way not only gender, but also sexual characteristics are determined by socio-cultural discourses and undermine the possibility of a natural and essential body. These projects, therefore, foresee postmodernist and feminist debates of the 1990s and their anti-essentialist standpoint. Although Chadwick's comments on her notebooks are still framed by the distinction between culturally constructed gender differences and naturally established sexual ones (hence the artist's distinction between nakedness and nudity), she is more interested in exploring and exposing the ways female bodies are shaped by their socio-

cultural contexts rather than looking for a utopian representation of the body through which women would come face to face with their own true selves, an approach that characterised some of the most emblematic feminist work of the period, such as Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*. In other words, what seems to have driven Chadwick is not so much the search for a different, stable and intrinsic definition of femininity but precisely its opposite, the destruction of such logocentric truths. Consequently, her interest in the female body aims to explore the body as a site where the social, the cultural, the political and the subjective interplay and where contradictions, paradoxes and the betrayal of a unitary meaning are present. Chadwick's early work also destabilises preconceived views of feminist-oriented art of the 1970s, which tend to over-emphasise the essentialist characteristics of the period, since it brings forward the performative (in the formal and in the theoretical sense of the word) dimension of the female body.

1.1.3 Art books and the conventions of femininity

While still a student, Chadwick produced a set of small art books that attest her intense productivity and experimentation and expand her recurrent interest in the female body and its performative nature. In her graduation show, the artist presented a flick book that registered the menstrual cycle through a series of blood-stained tampons. She also created the *Satin Fanny Book*, a pink art book with a front cover depicting a carefully embroidered vagina and luxuriant pubic hair. Its title recovers the female body from the abject by combining the reference to a sensuous, erotically-charged fabric with the casualness of the term *fanny*, a slang word for female genitals. Once again, these books should be seen in relation to much of the feminist-oriented art of the 1970s, such as Chicago's *Red Flag* (1971) or Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975), both of which focused on the bodily signs of female sexual difference and unashamedly represented female bodily processes²¹.

²¹ Not all body art from the 1970s was produced by feminist artists. The concern with the body and bodily processes should be seen as part of a wider aesthetic movement that was born out of the social, political, philosophical and cultural changes of the 1960s and that created a new interest in the body and its materiality. Nevertheless, Chadwick's flick book is gendered and, as such, it focuses on a body sexed as female. Therefore, her work can be placed in a feminist art tradition that clearly influenced the way the artist addresses the body.



Figure 4 - Helen Chadwick, Artist Book (c. 1975).

Chadwick also created other books, all of which defy conventional representations of the female body, although through art forms traditionally associated with femininity [Fig. 4]; these have patterns made from small embroidered penises or include several comic, ironic and inherently subversive photographs in which Chadwick, despite wearing the fetishist elements of an overtly sexualized female body— kinky underwear, leather boots, net gloves— and posing for the camera like a pin-up, undermines her performance of the submissive and eroticized woman by defiantly adding to her legs and arms small, penis-shaped cushions covered with pins. The depicted woman thus rejects the role of victim by exhibiting a ‘prickly’ and phallic nature that may defend her from harassment and grant her the power to mine the objectified and sexualised position she has traditionally occupied.

Chadwick’s art books draw on female sexuality and bodily pleasure, subverting as much as exposing the role played by socio-cultural conditions in the representation and perception of the female body. A similar approach is subjacent to the mask she created around 1973, a beautifully made object, delicately sewn in bright colours [Fig. 5]. The mask brings to mind *Bargain Bed Bonanza* and *Domestic Sanitation*, for it too suggests a “culturally conditioned notion of the self” (Martischnig, 2004a: 48). In addition, it explores what Joan Riviere defined as female masquerading.

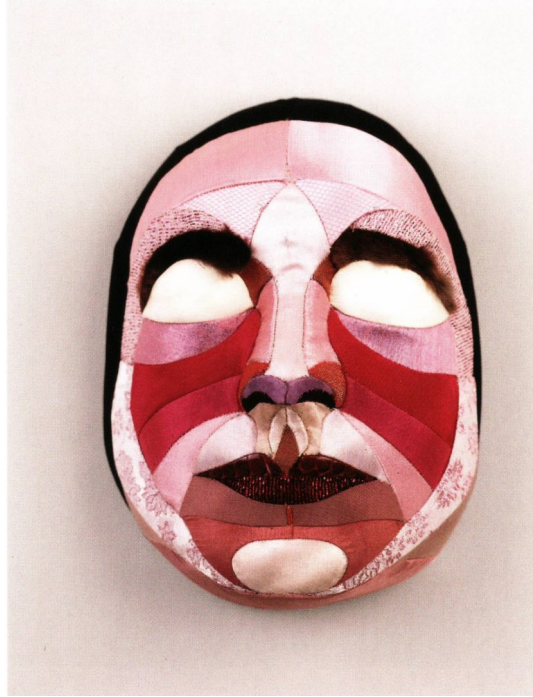


Figure 5 - Helen Chadwick, Textile Mask (c. 1973).

In her essay from 1929 “Womanliness as a Masquerade” Riviere discusses the clinical example of one of her patients, who used the mask of femininity as a reaction to her anxiety and sense of guilt when performing dominant roles²². More importantly, however, is Riviere’s suggestion that femininity is always a masquerade: “[t]he reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade’. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing” (1929: 38). Chadwick’s mask, made through processes traditionally linked to female artistry, may be said to suggest, in art terms, what Riviere had already concluded in her psychoanalytical study, namely, that femininity exists as a role imposed on women, or that being a woman is wearing the mask of femininity.

However, Chadwick’s approach to the acquisition and display of gender characteristics and roles does not merely focus on the negative and repressive implications previously found by Riviere in her female patient (who had developed a psychosis). Indeed, her mask addresses the topic in more ambivalent if not positive ways: made of exquisite and colourful satin and carefully sewn, the mask not only hides the woman behind it, but also

²² Although Chadwick was most likely unaware of Riviere’s essay, which became popular in feminist circles only in the 1980s (in the wake of Juliet Mitchell’s study on feminism and psychoanalysis), some of her work does seem to mirror Riviere’s psychoanalytical findings.

implies and celebrates a female art tradition²³. Therefore, the mask may become an empowering representation of and for women through their very process of masquerading. Similarly, the female starlet from Chadwick's pink art books also plays at masquerading, for she is wearing contradictory props: the signs of the exploited female victim and those of the powerful male master. Hence, the masquerade allows this woman to subvert her traditional feminine role by letting the signifiers play with each other and continuously deny a fixed meaning.

In the art books and textile mask, as well as in her knitted tampons and body cushions, Chadwick recuperates old, private and domestic art forms, which have traditionally been associated with women and femininity and perceived as minor. She gives them an unforeseen cutting edge by using them as ways of re-assessing not only women's role in art, but also in society. Her commitment to such formal processes should, therefore, be seen as the desire to break away from dominant art media, which reinforce the specularization and objectification of women, as well as to challenge the stereotypical views of art produced by 'the other sex' and, thus, to question the relegation of women artists to the domestic and private spheres. The same objective underlies Chadwick's use of performance and installation, new media not yet contaminated by the rules of tradition nor connoted with oppressive forms of female representation, thus being more appropriate for the expression of female subjectivity, body and experience.

1.1.4 Chadwick and/in feminist art tradition

Östlind identifies in Chadwick's graduate work, namely her textile projects and the installations dealing with menstruation and personal hygiene, an interest in claiming a language of one's own (2005: 8). His conclusion brings to mind Virginia Woolf's belief in the woman writer's need for independence in order to truly reflect her experiences (1929). It also recalls the decisive importance of French feminist thinkers such as Luce Irigaray (1977) and Hélène Cixous (1975a) in the introduction and development of the concept of *écriture féminine*. Chadwick's notes on books by these French critics clearly prove that the British artist was aware of and interested in what they had to say and, consequently, reinforce the

²³ See Rozsika Parker's essays in Parker and Pollock (1987) and Deepwell (1995) for a discussion of the importance of textile work in the definition of a female art tradition and in feminist art of the 1970s.

link between her work and feminism²⁴. However, although Chadwick was determined to question the social role and power given to women and the suppression of the female voice in a man's world, she was never committed to the production of an exclusive female art. In fact, Chadwick, whose favourite image- the hermaphrodite- subverts dichotomies by conflating the bodily marks of sexual difference, was much more interested in destroying the binary oppositions that regulate gender attributes.

Rather than inscribing Chadwick in a feminist tradition that has reclaimed a female language and a separatist history, my claim is then that her work offers the possibility of a feminist analysis and evidences, whether the artist acknowledged it or not, a feminist-oriented approach to gendered subjects and gendered bodies. If, on the one hand, her work can be seen as part of a revolutionary movement initiated in the 1970s and led by women artists who sought to dismantle the gender bias characteristic of the art establishment whilst exploring their bodies and sexuality, on the other hand, Chadwick's art denies the 'feminine' label, as it does not propose an oppositional concept of female identity nor a specific form of female expression. In that sense, Chadwick's preference for performative events and hybrid objects further allows the artist to question the notion of a natural female body and, as a result, of an intrinsically female art.

My analysis of Chadwick's early works has hopefully demonstrated that the artist elected the body as her main focus of inquiry. These works begin an oeuvre that will repeatedly evidence a fascination with the body, particularly with the female. By suggesting the oppressive conditions experienced by women, whose bodies traditionally are erotic objects of the male gaze and desire, Chadwick followed a politics of the body and contributed to a feminist art movement that defended the role played by art in general and women artists in particular in the disruption of the dominant phallogentric order and the liberation of the female body and experience. However, Chadwick's wish to collapse the binary structure subjacent to sexual difference led her to expose, often through grotesque or parodic strategies, the way not only women but also their bodies are inherently performative, acting in accordance with the rhetoric of femininity and, therefore, to move beyond an essentialist representation of gender and the body. It also led her to collapse formal

²⁴ Books by French feminist thinkers and notes on them taken by Chadwick can be found at the Helen Chadwick archive, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds.

boundaries by adopting new modes of aesthetic representation and mixing these formal processes with the most traditional forms of female self-expression.

1.2 Tension in the kitchen: women in the domestic sphere

1.2.1 Feminism, women and domesticity

While a Master student at the Chelsea College of Art and Design, Chadwick produced a challenging and carefully designed work called *In the Kitchen* (1977) [Fig. 6]. As in previous works, Chadwick employed new art forms such as performance and installation in order to provide a discussion of women's social position. The focus of *In the Kitchen* is the domestic world and its connection with women's lives, a link that had been previously established in *Domestic Sanitation* in its display of female bodies and objects of female personal hygiene through different rooms. Both of these projects provide a reflection on the implications of the domestic sphere in the social layout of bodies and genders, which can equally be found in several works produced by women artists at that time. For example, in the 1970s Judy Chicago created *The Dinner Party* (1974-79), a collaborative piece with a major impact in feminist-oriented art ever since. With this mega project Chicago paid tribute to women's contribution to history and culture through a domestic setting— a dinner party in which the guests are only women— and domestic objects such as china and needlework, all of them produced by women. In the same decade, Cindy Sherman, in her *Untitled Film Stills* series (1977-1980), was exploring the clichés of femininity found in post-war American films and popular culture and probing into the dreams of middle-class women, unsettling their lives and their hopes with the stings of mimicry and parody. Some of her photographs are set in domestic scenarios, like the kitchen or the bathroom, where Sherman masquerades as suburban, B-movie women, who stare at the camera, sometimes looking puzzled, sometimes distressed.



Figure 6 - Helen Chadwick, *In the Kitchen* (1977).

In the 1960s and 1970s, feminism, particularly its Anglo-American version, was determined to expose how the Victorian ideal of separate spheres (private and female versus public and male) was still prevalent, entrapping women in the obligations and routine of domestic life²⁵. In 1963 Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, denouncing the oppression American women were still facing and exposing their relegation to the domestic world:

The problem lay buried, unspoken for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban housewife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question— ‘Is this all?’ (Friedan, 1963: 15)

²⁵ For an account of the ideology of separate spheres in nineteenth-century United States see Barbara Welter *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1976) and Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman’s Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (1997).

Despite Friedan's bleak description of the suburban housewife, the domestic carries an ambivalent status in feminist discourse and art practice, for it may also be perceived as the place where women's creativity can truly be found, given that an art produced by women (and often for women) has been created side-by-side with the fulfilment of domestic tasks and has been partly shaped by them. In the nineteenth-century, tapestry, needlework, embroidery or ceramics were made available to women in their home environment and were regarded as art forms in which they could excel. In the 1950s and 1960s women were still encouraged to enhance their artistry in such crafts, which, as before, were considered to be appropriate for the private, domestic context in which most women still lived, and perceived as minor and feminine when compared to the virility and power of 'true' and great (that is, male) art. However, women often responded positively to the performance of such activities and they used them for their own ends, creating a domestic art context in which the personal, the creative and even the subversive could be inscribed. Hence, the private and the domestic have been women's loci of oppression and segregation, as much as of personal affirmation, aesthetic creativity and social power.

In the 1970s, feminist criticism replicated the ambivalent relation between women and the domestic sphere for, if on the one hand, it systematically exposed women's relegation to the house and denounced how they felt overburden with household tasks, on the other hand, it often relied on that domestic world for the affirmation of an essential female experience and art, the home thus providing the evidence of female creativity. This same ambivalence can be found in feminist art practice of the period: for example, if Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), a video work in which routine food preparation is violently handled by the artist, expressed the frustration of women confined to their homes, Chicago's *The Dinner Party* addressed female creativity through a dining table full of food/art made by women, reaffirming their culturally established connection with a private and domestic artistry while seeking to inscribe female art in the public and even the sacred spheres (given that Chicago's dining table also evokes Christ's last supper).

1.2.2 *In the Kitchen*: the photographs and the performance

Chadwick's *In the Kitchen* (1977) captures the paradoxes and tensions of domesticity to women's lives and feminism in a work that dares to break the boundaries between art forms, since it is created as both a performance and a photographic document and, therefore, as static and dynamic, immediate and reflexive. In *In the Kitchen* the artist and other women

are presented as part of kitchen gadgets (a cooker, a fridge, a washing machine and a sink unit) made of PVC on a metal structure. The women are so constrained by the household appliances, that the bodies *become* the appliances. With this work the artist clearly addresses the way women are ensnared in a domestic environment and in the performance of stereotypical roles, for in *In the Kitchen* women bodies are trapped in household appliances in the same way that female subjectivity is trapped in those gender stereotypes Chadwick had already addressed in *Bargain Bed Bonanza*. Despite being so restrained, Chadwick's naked body is partially revealed in the photographs of the hybrid (half-human, half-gadget) 'sculptures': behind the fridge door, legs trapped inside the oven, the cooking hobs standing in for the breasts, Chadwick's body also suggests that the relation between female subject and domestic environment is first and foremost experienced through the body. Finally, in *In the Kitchen* the unveiling of the female body, with the signs of its sexual difference caught up in kitchen appliances, also exposes how female sexuality and the eroticization of a body sexed as female are inherent to a patriarchal discourse of domesticity, as well as implied in a male art tradition that systematically denies female identity by obeying to the mechanisms of the fetishist objectification of female body parts²⁶.

Östlind's intensive research for the retrospective of Chadwick's work in Stockholm, in 2005, confronted the critic with interesting differences between the photographs of *In the Kitchen* and the performance itself. As Östlind concluded (2005: 17-20), photographs of this work are generally black and white, with Chadwick putting on the costume, staring blankly at the viewer or rolling up her eyes as a zombie in a terror film. By contrast, the performance had a more relaxed, ironic and parodic tone:

'[M]usak' filled the room where the women-gadgets performed choreographed movements, sang or chatted, interacting both with each other and with the audience. The performance also presented a salesman whose speech, advertising this modern, beautiful domestic world, was targeted at women. This was because, in his own words, 'you [women] are going to be living in your kitchen for quite a while'. (Östlind, 2005: 17)

²⁶ According to Freud (1927), fetishism is a psychic male strategy of disavowal of the female lack (of the phallus) and thus of the fear of castration. To escape that threat, psychological defences come into play and re-write the female lack and its threatening implications. The fetish object is thus a symbolic substitute (a sign) displacing the disavowed mother's penis that the fetishist knows not to exist, but in which he believes nevertheless; this substitution also functions as a mask, covering over and disavowing the traumatic sight of absence. So, the fetish is a way of distracting the mind and the eye (hence its importance in visual culture) from something that needs to be covered up.

Östlind regrets that the majority of the critics have failed to notice this difference between photographs and performance and that they have mainly focused on the oppressive and bleak environment portrayed in the photographs instead of in the more cheerful and optimistic performance.

While not disagreeing with Östlind, it is relevant to add that divergent interpretations are made possible by the distinct media used for this specific project, which was created as both a performance and a photographic series. Chadwick was most likely interested in highlighting different aspects, which is evident in the way she inertly posed for the camera or when, in an opposite register, she interacted with the other performers and the audience. Both the photographs and the performance propose a critical view on the way gender oppositions are staged in the domestic sphere, which comes to signify sexual (female) difference. However, the final outcome is very different in the two media. The photographs, naturally more static than the performance and even more so due to the model's rigidity and fixed stare, denounce the entrapment of women in the domestic world of domestic activities and offer a despairing view of a bleak situation. The performance is also established on a critical principle but, being more dynamic and recurring to parody, gives these women-gadgets the power to subvert their submissive position through their very own instruments of submission, an attitude similar to the feminist embrace of a so-called feminine and domestic art. On the whole, tension prevails in *In the Kitchen*, as it is the case in so many of Chadwick's works.

The ambivalent relation between a woman's body and domestic space that is visible in *In the Kitchen* has a direct antecedent in Louise Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* (1946-47). In Bourgeois's drawings female bodies end up in houses instead of in heads and the relation between woman and house is one of conflict. On the one hand, the house, occupying the place of the head, defines the female body and gives it meaning, literally, reason²⁷. On the other hand, as noted by Whitney Chadwick, the house also constrains the female body and denies women the power to speak (1990: 324). The house, which inscribes the female in the domestic, is here not only a space for self-definition and affirmation, but also an

²⁷ The importance of the house imagery for humankind has been explored by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*. For the French philosopher, the house occupies a central place in the life of every human being: "the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thought, memories and dreams of mankind. . . . In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being" (1958: 6-7). Against Bachelard's false neutral (in the previous excerpt, he explicitly addresses humankind as male) and his concept of the house as a reassuring, organizational principle, Bourgeois's work offers a disturbing and ambivalent view of the relationship between female subject and domestic space.

intimidating place of coercion and annihilation. More than asserting female domesticity and domestic femininity, the *Femme Maison* series represents female identification with the domestic world as a tense and unsolved situation. Hence, both Bourgeois's women-houses and Chadwick's women-household appliances tackle the conflict underlying the relation between woman and the domestic, a conflict of which the artists are well aware and that remains unsolved in the surface of their works.

In *In the Kitchen* Chadwick insists in leaving meanings open, denying the closure of an either-or logic and the safe haven of established certainties and truths. Her housewives are neither the advertised merry wives of post-war suburbia, nor the powerless victims of the patriarchal order, nor even self-liberated and self-assertive women. The domestic world in which they live and the correlated ideology of separate spheres are questioned by the artist, who understands how women can feel oppressed by kitchen gadgets as much as by the discourse of true womanhood, but who also positively gives these women the power to create a domestic revolution.

In *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* Jo Anna Isaak considers how a sense of play is widely used by postmodern female artists who embrace laughter and the carnivalesque as a revolutionary strategy available to them (1996b: 2-3). Isaak establishes this view of female postmodern art by engaging with Kristeva's theory of the abject and Bakhtin's study of the carnivalesque-grotesque, which claims that laughter was a weapon of social criticism and empowerment in Middle-Age folk culture and the Renaissance. Isaak also pays attention to Freud's notion of humour as "*the triumph of narcissism*, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer" (*apud* Isaak, 1996b: 223). As stressed by Isaak, the humorous way through which the self triumphs in face of external pressure is visible in women, whose laughter Freud already saw as particularly rebellious (1996b: 14-15), and intimately connected to their bodies. Isaak is therefore in a position to conclude that: "[t]he crisis of authority and value that is symptomatic of postmodernism has itself in large part been instigated by a feminist deployment of laughter (1996b: 20)²⁸.

²⁸ Isaak's conclusions are further supported by the importance she grants to Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa* in feminist criticism (Isaak, 1996b: 26) and by several examples from the work of contemporary women artists such as Jenny Holzer and Barbara Krueger, who play with a comic and subversive popular tradition and use it as a revolutionary weapon (1996b: 20-46).

Chadwick's performance of *In the Kitchen* can be placed in this carnivalesque and feminist counter-tradition since it too employs women's laughter in order to unsettle their social position. Though Chadwick's laughing women are not entirely in accordance with Freud's suggestion of the ego's invulnerability through the deployment of laughter (after all these women are still entrapped in the domestic sphere), her female performers defiantly refuse to be distressed by their domestic cages and playfully assert their power. This is not to say that Chadwick solves contradictions since, contrary to the performance, the photographs of *In the Kitchen* stress the menacing nature of the household appliances to a woman's sense of identity. Nevertheless, Chadwick's rebellious strategy is not, like Chicago's in *The Dinner Party*, a reconstruction of female domesticity through the feminist ideal of positive female difference, but a questioning of the power relations in the domestic sphere through the carnivalesque effect of women's laughter.

1.2.3 Danger at home: *Wreaths to Pleasure*

Chadwick recovers the menacing danger of a supposedly blissful domesticity in later works, particularly in *Wreaths to Pleasure* (1992-93) [Fig. 7]. The title of this series of thirteen photographs is suggestive of garlands adorning the head of countryside girls or wreaths pleasantly inviting guests to a cosy home environment. The photographs are themselves elegant, cheerful and bright circular compositions where beautiful flowers and natural motifs seem to dominate. However, such suggestion of purity and idyllic domesticity is misleading since the flowers coexist with other not so appealing elements such as engine oil, grease and household cleaning products. These substances are neither solid nor liquid but possess an in-between quality that makes them disturbing and possibly menacing.



Figure 7 - Helen Chadwick, *Wreath to Pleasure No. 5* (1992-93).

Chadwick thus places tension and the fear of contamination at the centre of the wreaths and perversely introduces the uncanny in the comfort and reassurance of domestic life²⁹. The images resulting from the subversive juxtaposition of the beautiful and the nearly abject are unsettling, for they suggest things out of place; one marvels at the cheerful colours and at the sense of balance given by the geometric shape of the compositions, but there is something threatening in the more liquid components and in their thick appearance. The tension between the elements is caused by the need to separate the beautiful from the abject, a process Chadwick's photographs refuse to do. Instead, the artist proposes the fusion of opposites, denying the logic of either/or. Moreover, in these wreaths, which also resemble petri dishes, the domestic becomes an experimental space where the feminine and the masculine cohabit, since some of the flowers are arranged in shapes that resemble female sexual organs, while others the male ones. The dichotomist view of the gendered body is counter-balanced by the unusual combination of flowers, traditional symbols of femininity, with male symbols (for example, *Wreath to Pleasure No.10* exhibits penises made of

²⁹ In his essay "The Uncanny" (1919), Freud refers to the uncanny as that which is capable of provoking dread and horror in the old and long familiar. What is particularly interesting is that Freud asserts that the term *unheimlich* (uncanny) also implies the term *heimlich* (homely, familiar), therefore suggesting how the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable, the alien or the unknown also has the semantic capacity to mean its opposite: the homely, the familiar or the comfortable. Freud's notion of the uncanny thus relies on the ambivalence and contamination of meaning, something also inherent to Chadwick's *Wreaths to Pleasure*. See also Wright (1992: 436-40) for a useful account of Freud's uncanny and the attention this term has deserved from post-structuralists, literary theorists and feminists.

flowers) and is particularly disrupted when female and male forms coexist in the same wreath (as in *Wreath to Pleasure No.12*).

Chadwick's work reflects the threatening potential of domesticity and its implications for the body, especially the female body. Hence, her interest in the female body is very different from that expressed by the Great Masters of the history of art, since it is not an iconic image of male desire but a hub where the game between subjectivity and the social is played. Such view of the body is closer to feminist definitions (as the one provided by Grosz in the beginning of this chapter), just as Chadwick's attention to the domestic is influenced by a feminist perception of the home as not only a space of oppression but of women's self-affirmation. This contradictory or ambivalent understanding of the domestic is evident in Chadwick's work, which explores the tensions in the relationship between female body, female subjectivity and the home. However, tension and contradiction frequently become positive and productive elements in Chadwick's art, which, by adopting different formal strategies and eschewing the boundaries separating female from male, abject from beautiful, evidences a need to question binary oppositions and embrace fluidity.

1.2.4 The eaten/eating female body

Tension, ambivalence and flux also lie at the heart of Chadwick's approach to food, something the artist was interested even as a student: *The Erotic Chocolate Box* and *Strawberry Tart Jelly* (both completed in 1973) were originally made from completely edible material and then casted in resin and fibre glass³⁰. The first of these two works displays exotically flavoured candies shaped as body parts, what Chadwick in a notebook refers to as an "anatomy of aphrodisiacs" (Notebook 2003.19/E/1: 43); the second is a woman's face made of jelly. In a small text from that period the artist justifies her interest in food and eating: "[o]ne of the first themes I became involved with was orality and the sexual significance of food, particularly 'sweets'. At the time, I was suffering from anorexia nervosa, I therefore projected my alienation with real food into my work"³¹. According to Östlund, works such as *The Erotic Chocolate Box* touch upon one of feminism's central slogans– 'the private is political'– (2005: 5) and therefore suggest that the input provided by

³⁰ Chadwick's notes from this period also refer to a project called *Cadbury's Candied Cannibals* and show drawings of different parts of the body transformed into flavoured candies. See Chadwick, Notebook 2003.19/E/1.

³¹ This text appears in documents held at the Helen Chadwick archive. They were used in preparation for Chadwick's graduation show at the Chelsea College of Art and Design.

Chadwick's personal experience (her eating disorder) in the creation of the edible objects was a way of exploring the topic of food in relation to social pressure and contradictions imposed onto the female body. However, her "anatomy of aphrodisiacs" also proposes a way out of the conundrum that characterizes the complicated relationship women and their bodies have with food by embracing sweets as a source of sexual pleasure and unsanctioned desire, transporting the viewer to the pre-oedipal stage when pleasure is orally experienced by the uninhibited infant.

Betterton mentions that sweets and chocolate "have long been metaphoric substitutes for sex in popular songs and in advertisements" and that "in the language of lovers' appetites, women and girls are often 'sweeties', 'sugar' or 'honey pies', metaphors of consumability which point to an equivalence between the female body and sweet foodstuffs" (1996: 156)³². Her observations are very much influenced by Allison James's study on the cultural and social significance of confectionary in Britain, which suggests that the ambiguous and liminal status of confectionary, both food and non-food, "is replete with ritual significance" (Nov. 1990: 673). Confectionary, therefore, evokes the abject, for, according to Kristeva, the abject lies precisely in the transposition of boundaries and the power of contamination (1980a). Chadwick's chocolate box and jelly tart offer an edible woman and edible female body parts, thus exploring the ambiguities of sweets and further suggesting the desired and feared female body.

In 1994, Chadwick once again explored the sexual connotations and the ambivalence of sweets in one of her most famous and controversial projects: *Cacao* [Fig. 8]. This installation was created shortly after *Wreaths to Pleasure* and, as such, it too evidences the artist's interest in breaking oppositions and teasing the audience with mixed feelings of pleasure and disgust. *Cacao* consists of a small circular pool of melted, bubbling chocolate. The pool is continually rotating and at its centre a phallic fountain delivers a constant quantity of chocolate back into the pool. It is a project that directly engages with the audience in more than just visual ways. In 2005, when I had the chance to see a retrospective of Chadwick's work in Stockholm (at Liljevalchs konsthall), the chocolate pool announced

³² Television advertisements of chocolate constantly explore the relationship between women, food fetishism and sexual pleasure. In an *Options* hot chocolate advertisement, a woman is asked to choose between a pampering fantasy, in which alluringly half-naked men suggest sexual gratification, and a cup of hot chocolate. In the end she goes for the hot chocolate and the pleasures it provides. The last shot of this clip depicts the woman lying on the sofa with a mug and a smile of happiness, suggesting that the chocolate may well have been a fetish, thus providing a compensatory erotic satisfaction. The advertisement can be seen in http://www.tellyads.com/show_movie.php?filename=TA1009&advertiser=Options (accessed 22 Jan. 2007).

itself from the lobby where a strong smell, sweet and intoxicating, saturated the gallery. Reaching the room where *Cacao* was being exhibited, the smell became almost unbearable and the pool offered to eyes and nostrils was both reminiscent of the pleasures of chocolate and the revulsion caused by bodily wastes.

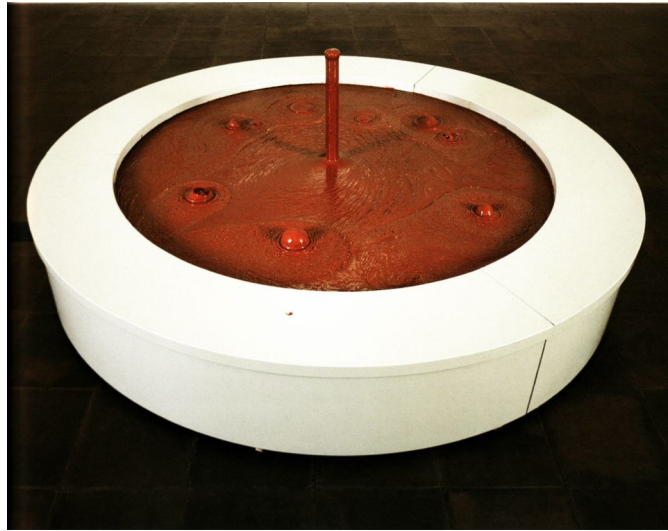


Figure 8 - Helen Chadwick, *Cacao* (1994).

Mary Horlock's stresses the tensions at the core of Chadwick's chocolate pool: "[c]hocolate contains phenyl ethylamine (a substance that induces an orgasmic high) and this gurgling mass embodies the heady excess of sexual pleasure, but conversely the brown pool could represent a seething mass of excrement" (2004a: 42). As Horlock suggests, the bubbling chocolate and the phallic fountain reverberate with erotic fantasies and sexual pleasure, which are there equated with oral satisfaction. Such interpretation is in line with Chadwick's own description of her work: "a pool of primal matter, sexually indeterminate, in a perpetual state of flux" (*apud* Horlock, 2004: 43). Mary Douglas mentions the ambivalent status of treacle or honey due to their fluid and viscous nature (1966: 47). Chadwick's description of *Cacao* clearly connects the ambivalence of chocolate, a substance that, like treacle and honey, is neither solid nor liquid, with sexual indeterminacy and the polymorphic and fluid nature of the pre-oedipal state. Chadwick's words also evidence her wish to dismantle the binary logic of phallogocentrism. Her chocolate pool, with the phallic stem and the bubbling liquid that resembles women breasts and evokes "the womb and its

life-giving fluids” (Sladen, 2004: 25), mixes sexual and oral pleasures, blends sexual opposites and dares to trespass the boundary that separates desire from abjection.

By refusing a dichotomist structure, Chadwick gives a feminist edge to *Cacao*. This perspective is further stressed through the reflection *Cacao* provides on the cultural relation between women and food and on the fetishisation of food by women, particularly when it comes to chocolate. Indeed, more than men, women fetishise food³³. Such process was already subjacent to Chadwick’s edible works from the 1970s, for in her notes from that period she refers to “female fetishisms” (Notebook 2003.19/E/1: 42). Nevertheless, *Cacao* dwells further into the topic: in its surrender to indiscriminate and polymorphous pleasure the work explores food fetishism in order to suggest a pre-oedipal moment when gender differences have not yet been established and when pleasure in food is indistinguishable from pleasure in being inseparable from the mother. Hence, it undoes the process of separation from and loss of the mother by the subject in its path towards language and socialization.

Betterton claims that “[s]weets and chocolate have become increasingly used as metaphors in art by women in the 1990s” (1996: 157) and that “[f]ood offers a way of exploring the pleasures and dangers of the body’s limits in ways that are particularly relevant to women” (1996: 160). Her book chapter dedicated to what the critic labels ‘Body Horror’ provides several examples of women artists, including Helen Chadwick, who have explored the implications of food in their work (1996: 130-60). Chadwick’s attention to the eating body and its implications for women should be seen as part of this wider critical and art context, granting the artist a special place in the female art tradition of the second-half of the twentieth-century.

1.3 Gorgeously repulsive I: celebrating the grotesque body

Helen Chadwick used to describe her work as “gorgeously repulsive, exquisitely fun, dangerously beautiful” (*The Art of Helen Chadwick*, 2004). In her comment, Chadwick confirms some of the aspects most admired in her work by critics and art lovers, not to say

³³ In a study conducted by Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen (1994) on female fetishism, the writers claim that this is primarily directed to food and it is thus based on oral and not on genital gratification. Chocolate is a special focus of female food fetishism, being frequently seen as a ‘guilty pleasure’ by women. Also according to Gamman and Makinen, such fetishism is a psychological way of coping with anxieties regarding identity and the separation between the child and the mother. However, the fact that women choose food as the object of fetishism is culturally linked to norms of femininity and the feminisation of food.

the least its ironic and contradictory nature. As concluded in the preceding sub-chapters, Chadwick's installations, performances, photographs and sculptures are inherently paradoxical and if the artist thrived to achieve a sense of beauty and pleasure, such was often reached through a dangerous game in which the repulsive always had its share. Chadwick's approach to food in *Cacao* demands from the audience a mixed feeling of delight and abjection and her early visions of the female body, explored in *Bargain Bed Bonanza* or *The Latex Glamour Rodeo*, express the grotesque and the monstrous. Nevertheless, Chadwick's adoption of an 'in-yer-face' strategy in these works must not be seen as the desire to shock by gratuitously exposing the gruesome and the filthy, but the result of her interest in making the audience question what is discarded, forgotten or forbidden, along with the normative images of the monstrous, the grotesque and the abject³⁴.

Chadwick's early work sets the tone to an oeuvre that probes into the depths of the grotesque and abject body in order to question ascertained truths, cultural oppositions and the audience's comfortable subject position. In this section I wish to explore the links between Chadwick's take on the grotesque body and feminist criticism and art practice, in particular in terms of the representation of the monstrous female body, at the same time that the idiosyncrasy of Chadwick's approach is taken into consideration. Such approach will hopefully strengthen my view of Chadwick's work as relying on processes of contamination and collapsing boundaries.

1.3.1 Woman as the abject

In *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity*, feminist philosopher Christine Battersby refers to the monstrous as one of the five features of the female subject position³⁵. According to Battersby, this female monstrosity is the result

³⁴ The term *in-yer-face* has been repeatedly applied to British theatre of the 1990s and to a generation of playwrights that include Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Martin McDonagh, among others. These revolutionised the scene of British theatre, addressing violence, sexuality, the abject and the grotesque in a radically new mode. The phrase *in-yer-face* was first coined by Aleks Sierz, in 2001. Sierz sees "in-yer-face drama" as "a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm. . . . Questioning moral norms, it affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown onstage; it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort" (2001: 4). Such drama expresses the desire to challenge "the distinctions we use to define who we are: human/animal; clean/dirty; healthy/unhealthy; normal/abnormal; good/evil; true/untrue; real/unreal; right/wrong; just/unjust; art/life. These binary oppositions are central to our worldview; questioning them can be unsettling" (Sierz, 2001: 6). My use of the expression *in-yer-face* evokes this cultural and artistic milieu, whose aims are shared by Chadwick in her work.

³⁵ The other four features mentioned by Battersby are (1) natality; (2) woman as the primary carer for children and the most suitable nurse within the private sphere; (3) for a normalized female, the not-self, the other, emerges from within her own embodied self; (4) fleshiness.

of a historical link between the female subject position and an embodied, fleshy self which is contrary to the idealised, dominant and masculine conception of the self as “a substance that persists unaltered through change”, of individuals as “ideally independent and equal” (1998: 205). Hence, women become monstrous through their corporeality, a reminder of the subject’s own materiality and mortality, provoking both anxiety and fear.

Battersby’s claim is influenced by the disquieting study Kristeva published in 1980, *Pouvoirs de l’Horreur*, in which Kristeva offers a stimulating analysis of the significance of abjection in the construction and coherence of both subjectivity and the social structure³⁶. Kristeva sees the abject as the non-subject and non-object, an in-between situated at the border between the individual and the social that becomes a necessary non-entity for the subject’s formation and to social stability (1980a: 4). As stated by Grosz, for Kristeva abjection “is the subject’s reaction to the failure of the subject/object opposition to express adequately the subject’s corporeality and its tenuous bodily boundaries” (1989:70). Based on Kristeva’s reading of abjection, Grosz further adds: “‘proper’ subjectivity and sociality require the expulsion of the improper, the unclean and the disorderly” (1989:71). Concomitantly, the abject is what escapes laid out differences, what evades the binary logic of either/or and, because of that, what threatens to disrupt structure, norms and oppositions. An action, a thing, a being are not abject in themselves but because they dare to trespass the boundaries of self and other, or because they disturb neat oppositional definitions. The abject is thus a relational and contingent term, not an absolute or essential one. However, for Kristeva, since the abject can never be completely excluded or forgotten, it always threatens the subject with the dissolution of the stable self (1980a: 9-10). It is this situation that causes the feeling of abjection.

In her study, Kristeva distinguishes the abject in its relation to food (for example, the skin of the milk, a reminder of our own skin, which separates inside from outside), waste

These features are not taken from a feminine model of the self, but from a female one, since they relate to the physical, bodily dimension of women. Battersby explains that “[t]his female subject-position is, however, not immediately and biologically given, but a historically and socially emergent norm that changes over time” (1998: 23).

³⁶ Kristeva’s book was translated into English in 1982 and then given the title *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*; future references will be to the English translation. Kristeva analysis of the abject is influenced by *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), Mary Douglas’s anthropological study on the social concepts of purity, pollution and taboo, as well as by the psychoanalytical, particularly Lacanian, understanding of the subject’s formation, which relies on the child’s separation from the (m)other in order to acquire a sense of self. Kristeva also engages with Freud’s analysis of the incest taboo, which already hints at the abject and its exclusion as a basic need for civilization. Freud’s position is explained in *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (1913), particularly in the first of the four essays comprised in this volume.

(bodily fluids and refuse such as faeces, spit, blood and the corpse, which break the boundaries between exterior and interior, dead and alive) and sexual difference (menstrual blood being one of the examples given by Kristeva)³⁷. All these elements confront the subject with her/his not so ‘clean and proper’ body; they also threaten the subject because they possess an ambiguous status (simultaneously inside and outside, dead and alive, autonomous and all-encompassing). Abject things represent the transgression of borders and boundaries, so important to the construction of subjectivity and to order at the level of the social tissue. Hence, the female body, persistently identified with the maternal principle, is perceived with both repulsion and fascination, as an object of fear and desire; in other words, it is a source of abjection, for, in its maternal potential, it crosses the threshold between self and other, inside and outside³⁸.

By virtue of being culturally and mentally linked to the abject, women are deprived of a positive concept of their body, which either is a hole, sinful flesh, or an abject womb. Such a blank and bleak notion of the feminine denies the feminist dream of finding and defining a female essence, but it also raises the need to give expression to the unattainable, the abjected female body, and to elements that have lied underneath language and discourse (what Kristeva calls the semiotic), in order to bring to the symbolic (that is, representation) that which was suppressed. Such could be the contribution of Kristeva’s discussion on women (in texts such as “Women’s Time” [1979] or “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident” [1977b]), whom, like the semiotic, the critic believes to inhabit a marginal place in Western culture.

1.3.2 Representing the abject female body

Given this theoretical and cultural background, it is not surprising to find so many contemporary women artists exploring issues of abjection in their work and relating them to the female body and female fleshiness, female sexuality, maternity and bodily wastes. The work of Helen Chadwick offers a crucial example. However, in her approach to the monstrous body and the grotesque female body, Chadwick is not alone, for other British artists have been pushing the limits of artistic and social taboos, particularly since the 1990s.

³⁷ Again, Kristeva’s classification of the abject is indebted to Douglas’s research, which also identifies waste, food and sexual difference as elements susceptible of being tabooed (Douglas, 1966).

³⁸ The question of motherhood and the abject maternal body will be given a closer attention in sub-chapter 1.5.

The so-called ‘Young British Artists’ (YBA) of the 1990s include Damien Hirst, Jake and Dino Chapman, Jenny Saville, Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin, to name but a few, all of whom have exposed the relativism of the concept of abjection by pushing the boundaries of art and taste, bridging the gap between high art and mass culture and bringing to the art world that which generally remains unseen or is utterly rejected as abject and grotesque.

In addition, the grotesque female body has been used as a topos of British and North-American feminist-oriented art since the 1970s, as well as being a recurrent issue in feminist debates. Drawing on the “Bad Girls” exhibitions shown in the United Kingdom and the United States in 1993 and 1994, respectively, Paula Smithard recalls the influence feminist criticism and art practice of the 1970s had for women artists associated with the YBA scene of the 1990s³⁹. Taking as paradigmatic examples of a new trend in British art the work of Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin, Smithard concludes that:

Although many of the women artists who have recently come to the fore resist the label or context of a feminist art practice, much of this work could not have taken on the aesthetics and forms that it has without the ground prepared by generations of artists since the late 1960s and early 1970s. . . . In a sense Emin, Lucas and others are artists whose work shows the evidence of over twenty years of feminist art practice. (Smithard, 1996: n. pag.)

Also Betterton, claiming “a rereading of recent British art as less homogeneous and more indebted to earlier histories than its many promoters and detractors suggest” (2001: 288), believes that Tracey Emin’s and Sarah Lucas’s “aesthetic strategies drew explicitly on

³⁹ The “Bad Girls” exhibitions took place at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, in 1993, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, in 1994, and the Wight Art Gallery at UCLA, in 1994. According to Whitney Chadwick, these exhibitions were part of a self-conscious reaction “against the moralist tone of some 1970s and 1980s feminism in order to reconcile politics with pleasure, or to reinsert anger and confrontation as aspects of representation” (1990: 408). The “Bad Girls” exhibitions have often been criticised as oversimplifications of art made by women since the 1970s, packing different artists and different streams of a feminist-oriented art into a sensationalist catch phrase that reinforces the marginality of these artists in the postmodern art market. Moreover, the exhibitions were also criticised for fuelling the stereotypical notions of women’s art and women artists under the pretext of opening mainstream art and art consumption to the different and the marginal. As critics in *Artforum* observed: “to call oneself or to be called a ‘bad girl’ can indicate a form of empowerment and even affection, but only when it’s understood as a term of self-definition, rather in the sense that African-Americans might call each other ‘nigger.’ But title an exhibition ‘Nigger Art’ and you’ve got big trouble on your hands. It’s no different when work by women is subsumed under a pejorative tag” (Avgikos, Weissman and Corris, May 1994: n. pag.). Östlind also discusses the inclusion of Helen Chadwick in this exhibition. While for the curators of this show Chadwick’s supposedly postfeminist approach to the female body is closer to the new artists of the 1990s than to the essentialist and didactic approach of feminist artists in the 1970s, for Östlind such interpretation merely obliterates Chadwick’s relation with feminist art production of the 1970s and the differences that separate her from a younger generation of women artists. It also further contributes to the denial of the crucial influence played by 1970s women artists in the history of art discourse and in art practices since then (Östlind, 2005: 2-3).

gendered identities offered within mass culture, but implicitly on a reworking of sexual politics in art from the 1970s and 1980s” (2001: 288). Although Smithard and Betterton focus on the influence of feminist-oriented art produced between the 1960s and the 1970s on a younger generation of women artists, the fact is that this influence takes a wider dimension and is not only restricted to art produced by women. Indeed, feminist art and art criticism took the lead towards an art that broke away from many of the modernist principles and that developed a different rapport between the social, the artist and the audience. This new perspective crossed the frontier of feminist practice and had an impact in the general world of art (Phelan, 2004). Postmodern art, therefore, cannot truly be understood without an analysis of the importance played by feminism in its development.

Chadwick’s notebooks and personal library, where articles on or by feminist critics like Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Griselda Pollock can be found (Östlind, 2005: 34), prove that the artist was well aware of feminist debates and deeply interested in criticism regarding the abject and the grotesque and their relation to the female body. Moreover, an analysis of her work demonstrates that although Chadwick always challenged and teased the audience with her play on the abject and the grotesque body, this process is particularly visible in her work from the late 1980s and the 1990s, when influential texts, such as Kristeva on the abject, had already been translated into English, and when other British artists were similarly engaged in deconstructing the concepts of abjection and the grotesque body. Chadwick’s approach to the issue must therefore be seen in relation to this wider artistic and critical context.

Despite Smithard seeing Chadwick as a predecessor to the interest in the abject expressed by YBA like Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin, for this critic Chadwick’s art is more abstract and subtle while Lucas’s and Emin’s more personal, a distinction that leaves Chadwick’s work in a different ideological place. Although I disagree with Smithard’s implicit judgement in favour of the younger artists when compared to the “impasse” (Smithard, 1996: n. pag.) raised by earlier feminist-oriented art, I agree that there are key differences in the politics underlying Chadwick’s work and the approach taken by the YBA to the abject and the female grotesque. Hence, while Emin and Lucas are more interested in exposing female sexual oppression or parodying masculinity and masculine power, Chadwick’s main aim was not only to question the hierarchy subjacent to the gender binary, but also the existence of such binaries in the first place. Smithard reaches the same conclusion in the comparison established between Lucas and Chadwick, although her

remarks also oddly imply that Chadwick's critique of binary oppositions has nothing to do with social commitment or social intervention:

Lucas engages with the specificities of the culture's language and gestures, manipulating these collective representations in a way which does not seek to problematise the nature of representation itself but rather the violence of such images. Chadwick's transgressions were underpinned by a concern to disrupt hierarchies of oppositions prevalent in Western philosophy: the mind and the body, male and female etc. and that which is excessive, wasteful and disruptive of such distinctions. (1996: n. pag.)⁴⁰

Betterton's analysis of the 'Young British (women) Artists' scene also highlights the differences between an older and a younger generation of women artists but takes the opposite side of Smithard's argument by claiming that Emin's and Lucas' approach fails to reconceive and reinscribe the body within representation (Betterton, 2001: 301-02) and to transform the sexual politics their work seeks to undermine and expose (2001: 298). In Betterton's words:

The contradictory positioning of both artists between the politics of feminism and a depoliticised post-feminism and between modernist shock and postmodern irony is typical of the ambivalent status adopted by many of the young British artists in 1990s. The content and form of their work was often disturbing and challenging, yet their silence or indifference to its meaning effectively defuses– or confuses– theoretical and critical analysis. (2001: 302)

For Betterton, the parodic approach to the grotesque female body and to gender stereotypes taken by British women artists of the 1990s runs the risk of falling short of the political commitment and interventional direction of much feminist-oriented art produced in the 1970s and, consequently, to change the place occupied by women and the female body in visual art (2001: 302).

⁴⁰ What Smithard fails to conceive is that Chadwick's deconstruction of oppositions prevalent in Western philosophy is in itself a form of social commitment and political intervention. Feminist criticism has always been sceptical of binary opposites and considered their disruption as part of the feminist project for they reinforce the objectification and marginalization of women. A valuable example is French feminist H el ene Cixous, who in her text "Sorties" (1975b) proposes an attack on binary structures because they establish a hierarchical system based in the masculine privilege.

Smithard's and Betterton's discussion of the women artists included in the YBA scene evidences the problems that rise when women artists engage with the abject female body. In fact, if abject art has been identified as the oppositional art practice of the 1990s (Betterton, 1996: 136), its use by women artists has been ambiguously perceived by feminist criticism. On the one hand, by adopting the abject and the grotesque female body in their artwork, women artists are seen to be making the invisible visible, exploring what was previously deemed unrepresentable, transgressing cultural boundaries and taboos regarding female bodies and sexuality and transforming a victimising situation into a source of female power. This is the point of view taken by Isaak in her already mentioned book *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, which celebrates women artists' use of the carnivalesque grotesque as a liberatory strategy (1996b).

On the other hand, feminist criticism is aware of the patriarchal history of visual and social representation of women, which relies on the grotesque female body, frequently elided but always present in its subtext. The force of such tradition may deny the transgressive quality of women's re-appropriation of their monstrous bodies, a political and aesthetic strategy that could become a mere reproduction of oppressive stereotypes. Hence, feminist critic Lynda Nead is not as optimistic as Isaak regarding women artists' appropriation of the female grotesque, for she doubts whether transgressive practices in relation to the grotesque female body, such as those used by feminist performance artists in the 1970s or by the 'bad girls' of British art in the 1990s, are forceful enough to change the discourses that legitimise the notion of the female body and sexuality as abject. Nead also questions the feminist relevance of a process that merely inverts, instead of deconstructing, the dominant binaries that structure the relationship between the sexes (1992: 69-70).

Take, for example, Sarah Lucas's controversial *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992), whose title ironically mimics the sexist and coarse language that socially frames the female body and exposes the subjacent violence in the act of naming. Or Tracey Emin's *Everybody I've ever Slept with: 1963-1995* (1995), which voyeuristically explores female sexuality whilst addressing a woman's desire as monstrous and threatening (notions that converge in the image of the nymphomaniac, as much explored by Emin as by the media coverage of her life and work). The "brutalising vulgarity" (Smithard, 1996, n. pag.) of such projects, their use of the abject and the offensive (either inscribed in the body or in the language that frames the body), have a direct relation with the social experience of women and engage with the sexual politics underlying the notions of femininity, the female body and female

sexuality. However, by mimicking recurrent and pervasive representations of the female body with no evident critical distance, the woman addressed by Emin and Lucas runs the risk of not being transformed into an image of grotesque empowerment but of remaining a mere representation of the female grotesque. Moreover, although these artists evidence a wish to expose the phallogocentric logic that, according to Irigaray, perceives woman as “the other of the same” (1991) (through a binary system in which one of the categories—man— is made the universal referent and the other— woman— is its inferior reflex), there is no further intention of deconstructing the dichotomist structure that legitimizes such logic. For a more radical ideological transformation, we need to look at Helen Chadwick’s work.

1.3.3 *Piss Flowers*: celebrating the grotesque body

Created in the same decade as Lucas’s and Emin’s previously mentioned pieces, Chadwick’s *Piss Flowers* (1991-92) [Fig. 9] operates in a very different level, though it also explores the theme of abjection in its relation to sexual difference⁴¹. Chadwick’s approach in what became one of her most famous projects is closer to Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1989), the source of an ongoing discussion and controversy. Like Chadwick’s flowers, Serrano’s photograph of a crucifix with the body of Christ immersed in urine questions the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the sublime and the abject, though with more obvious controversial effects than Chadwick’s installation, which displays twelve bronze flowers, with huge petals, coated with white enamel plaster and placed on a grass-coloured, carpeted floor. On the other hand, Serrano’s heretical image of Christ does not address the issue of gender opposition and sexual difference, which lies at the centre of Chadwick’s installation.

⁴¹ *Piss Flowers* was exhibited in 1994 as part of an exhibition entitled “Effluvia” and together with works like *Viral Landscapes*, *Meat Abstracts*, *Cacao*, *Wreaths to Pleasure* and *Eat Me*. All these works have in common the celebration of a world of flux, fluidity and possibility, as emphasised by the title given by Chadwick to the exhibition (*effluvia* is the plural form of the Latin word *effluvium*, meaning “flowing out”).



Figure 9 - Helen Chadwick, *Piss Flowers* (1991-92).

In *Piss Flowers* Chadwick plays with flowers as traditional symbols of femininity and decorum, reticence and modesty, even more so because in Chadwick's installation the flowers look like daisies, with a flower symbolism associated with innocence, fidelity and purity. However, Chadwick's flowers are also monstrous, for they were casted after the artist and her boyfriend urinated in the snow⁴². Chadwick's flowers, then, materialise Bakhtin's carnivalesque grotesque (1965), suggesting the bodily lower stratum and establishing a principle of ambivalence found in the body's unfinished, creative and regenerative dimensions. According to Kristeva, bodily fluids such as urine break boundaries and subvert the existing but always fragile distinction between exterior and interior body, becoming, therefore, a source of abjection (1980a:53). In Chadwick's installation this bodily object paradoxically coexists with the beautiful, which causes both grounds to exist in a state of tension. Tension is also accomplished at other levels: sexually (the phallic pistil of the flower is a result of the woman's urine, whereas the smaller stamina placed around the centre are the results of a man's) and formally (the nobility of bronze is hidden by the ordinariness of plaster)⁴³. There is an obvious resonance of purity and cleanliness, given by the flowers and its relation to the white snow, but the unclean lurks nearby and is suggested even in the title given to the installation, which employs the slang

⁴² *Piss Flowers* resulted from a residency at the Banff Arts Centre in Alberta, Canada, in February 1991. Chadwick and her partner, David Notarius, worked on this project, first by urinating in a metal template placed in a pile of snow and then filling the cavities created by the urine with plaster. See Sladen (2004a: 24) for further details.

⁴³ A flower is the reproductive structure found in flowering plants. It comprises, among other parts, an androecium, the male part of the flower, which is composed of one or more stamina, and the gynoecium, the female reproductive part, composed of one or more pistils.

term for urine and hence not only draws attention to the way the flowers have been made but also blends decorum with the vulgar. In *Piss Flowers* sexual drive, bodily pleasure and desire walk hand-in-hand with the repulsive and the abject, questioning social taboos and oppositions.

Piss Flowers reflects the artist's desire to move beyond binary oppositions and hierarchical dichotomies for it rejects the division between high and popular art, female and male, pure and abject. It does not so much expose the oppression suffered by the female-gendered body, as the reductive process that binary structures enact on every body, regardless of its gender. Such proposition of binary disruption is stressed by Chadwick in "Piss Posy", the poem written by the artist as an eckphrastic complement to *Piss Flowers*. In it there are references to "vaginal towers / with male skirt" (lines that most likely refer to the part played by Chadwick and her boyfriend in the creation of the flowers and their reversal of the traditional shapes and items attributed to each sex) and to "inverse pleasures" in "a hybrid daisy chain" (*apud* Chalmers, 1996: n. pag.). In the poem, as in the installation, Chadwick is determined to embrace the body's materiality and celebrate the body's polymorphic sources of joy, something that can only be achieved by refusing the reductive binary of fixed gender and sexual categories.

1.3.4 *Billy Bud*: beyond binary oppositions

One of Chadwick's favourite concepts is that of the hermaphrodite. An intersexual being who subversively elides the binary gender opposition, the hermaphrodite shakes cultural distinctions based on sexual difference and unsettles the borders that keep the abject at bay. Chadwick shared Foucault's interest in Herculine/e Barbin, the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite who was brought up as a woman and later re-defined as a man by the medical establishment, and was familiar with Foucault's theory on the way social power is exerted over the body so as to conform it to acceptable gender definitions and make it socially docile and productive (a theory discussed by Foucault in his impressive study *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* [1976])⁴⁴. Those who, like Barbin, fit in none of the two terms that form the gender binary have been perceived throughout history as freaks, their in-betweenness a sign of monstrosity, a mark of the abject. Chadwick's comments vis-à-vis

⁴⁴ Chadwick refers to Herculine Barbin in the same notebook she discusses *Piss Flowers* (Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 60-1). Her archive also shows at least one book in which Foucault's work on the body is discussed.

Barbin's case express the artist's desire to overcome the damaging effects of sexual opposition and celebrate the body's polymorphic pleasures: "[t]he happy limbo of a sheltered non-identity, the tender nameless pleasures she writes of, end in tragedy. Why do we feel compelled to read gender, and automatically wish to sex the body before us so we can orientate our desire and thus gain pleasure or reject what we see?" (*apud* Sladen, 2004a: 41).

Horlock relates Chadwick's remarks on Barbin with Butler's theory of the performativity of gender (2004: 41), since Butler too perceives gender as a variable, socio-cultural and historically determined category that shapes the body into acceptable sexual norms (1999). Against the determinist and essentialist framing of bodies exposed by Butler, Chadwick, like Barbin, proposes an endless play of sexual pleasures, liberating the body from the social straightjacket that binds it into fixed categories.

Chadwick explores the image of the hermaphrodite in several of her works, including in *Piss Flowers*, where the masculine and feminine elements coexist in each flower. Other projects produced in the first half of the 1990s also explore this figure and frequently use the same device—flowers—since these contain both the female and the male reproductive organs of the plant: despite their traditional gender associations, flowers are turned by Chadwick into privileged images of bisexuality, given that they disrupt gender oppositions by simultaneously displaying male and female characteristics. As already discussed, *Wreaths to Pleasure* relishes in sexual indeterminacy by creating images that juxtapose masculine and feminine forms and in which delicate flowers coexist with toxic matter and domestic waste. These compositions evoke masculine and feminine traits, cleanliness and filth, the toxic and the pure, the abject and the beautiful. The same process is pushed one step further in *Billy Bud* (1994) [Fig. 10].



Figure 10 – Helen Chadwick, *Billy Bud* (1994).

In this illuminated cibachrome print male genitals lie at the centre of an exquisite parrot tulip. The title of the work recalls Herman Melville's novel bearing a similar name (1924). In the novel, the central character, Billy Budd, is an inexperienced and naïve sailor who ends up dead at the hands of the other sailors' wickedness, cynicism and fear of misfortune. In this context, Billy Budd's innocence (stressed by his surname and its suggestion of an underdeveloped, immature being) and his handsome features conflate femininity and masculinity in the body of the sailor, a process also proposed by Chadwick in the photographic project under consideration. The sexually ambiguous character of Melville's text has no place in the clearly male structure that dominates the ship; he is looked at with fear and loath (though also with desire), since his presence disrupts the phallogocentric order. Death is the only destiny for Billy Budd, so that his disturbing presence is no longer felt and order can be re-established. The image created by Chadwick also evokes fear and abhorrence in the face of "matter out of place" (Douglas, 1966: 50), or things that defy classification⁴⁵. However, Chadwick's piece is not merely repulsive, for

⁴⁵ The sense of matter or beings out of place is also part of Melville's text. Several critics have found undertones of homosexuality in *Billy Budd* and have seen the relationship between Melville's characters as exploring the themes of homoerotic desire and social homophobia. The book thus focuses on a young sailor who does not conform to fixed definitions of sexuality and gender and addresses the social and subjective consequences of such fluidity. See Eve Sedgwick's "Billy Budd: After the Homosexual" in her book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), for a discussion of homosexuality in Melville's *Billy Budd*.

there is in it a desirable quality, the spell of the exotically beautiful, suggestions enhanced by the effects created by the cibachrome transparency (producing image clarity and colour purity), as well as by the careful lighting of the composition, the geometric balance of the elements and the exquisiteness of the parrot tulip. Chadwick's own *Billy Bud* ultimately seduces the audience to his polymorphic and genderless nature.

In an interview with Mark Haworth-Booth Chadwick states: "I think I employ strategies of seduction, luring you into the space of the work so that, despite yourself, you are drawn in, and I think that is fairly important. And I think a fundamentally aggressive approach would tend to stop the viewer becoming immersed" (*apud* Haworth-Booth 1996: n. pag.). Chadwick recognizes that her art cannot simply be assembled under the designation of abject or grotesque art as it operates in the crossroad between repulsion and seduction.

By blending the abject and the beautiful in order to disrupt binary structures, Chadwick overcomes the boomerang effect that Nead finds in women artists' use of the grotesque female body. If initially her work seems more interested in denouncing the oppressive social inscription of femininity in women and their bodies and the hierarchy implicit in binary gender oppositions (for example, in *Bargain Bed Bonanza* or *In the Kitchen*), it gradually evolved into a more radical disruption of binary structures. In the 1990s, that is achieved by the artist through work that repeatedly explored the subversive potential of the abject and grotesque body. Like other women artists of the same period, Chadwick is fascinated with monstrous bodies and is aware of the gendered classification of the grotesque. Also like several of these artists, her reworking of the grotesque often leads to a celebration of bodily pleasures and to an embracing of the body in all its materiality. However, not only does Chadwick embrace female fleshy and 'polluted' bodies but she is also determined to deconstruct gender and all sorts of oppositions: seductive/repulsive, grotesque/sublime, human/inhuman, sacred/profane, flesh/spirit. By doing that, Chadwick envisions a new concept of body identity: against the idea of a fixed body and a predetermined sexuality, she proposes a model based on flux, contamination and possibility.

Only a hasty approach to Chadwick's work could find a gratuitous desire to shock through a pointless emphasis on the disturbingly repulsive. On the contrary, there is always something beautiful and celebratory, which should be seen as a philosophically and aesthetically innovative approach to the material body and a rejection of traditional models of thinking and representing the same. We can therefore conclude that Chadwick's art

develops along the inquisitive and the paradoxical levels since it questions dichotomies by aiming at both the abject and the sublime and forcing us into the depths of fear and desire. Chadwick corroborates Isaak's argument on the subversive power of women's laughter (1996a:20), for she too employs play, irony and laughter as weapons of social change and thus connects her work to the carnivalesque grotesque and its potential for social subversion.

Chadwick's approach to the body and sexual identity, her desire to destroy the logic of binary oppositions are still in keeping with the feminist project. Feminist criticism has frequently expressed the need for a different concept of the body and identity and has emphasised the idea of bodies and subjects in process and not as fixed, self-enclosed and oppositional entities. French feminist theory has been particularly fertile in this critical approach. Influenced by Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism, Hélène Cixous has aimed her attacks at patriarchal binary thought, demonstrating how binary oppositions rely on the underlying dichotomy man/woman and are thus deeply ingrained in the patriarchal logic. In "Sorties" Cixous begins her text with a series of oppositions (activity/passivity, sun/moon, culture/nature, and so on) that end up in a final and definite one: man/woman. Based on this oppositional system, Cixous concludes:

Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it transports us, in all of its forms, wherever a discourse is organised. . . . By dual, *hierarchized* oppositions, Superior/Inferior. . . . Is the fact that logocentrism subjects thought– all of the concepts, the codes, the values– to a two-term system, related to 'the' couple man/woman? (1975b: 366)

Against a dualistic and hierarchical logic, and still borrowing Derridean notions of *différance* and the free play of the signifier, Cixous sets up to disrupt "the prison-house of patriarchal language" (Moi, 1985: 106). She attacks this patriarchal language through the celebration of feminine writing (*écriture féminine*), defining it as a subversive process by which texts that work on the difference are produced⁴⁶. In Cixous's essay feminine writing has more to do with the creation of fluid texts, where meaning and closure are permanently deferred, than with the actual sex of the writer. This is because for this French critic all human beings are inherently bisexual. In "The Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous explains what

⁴⁶ My reading of French feminist criticism is heavily indebted to Moi's useful introduction in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985). However, by no means is her study reduced to my brief remarks. Moi offers an overview of the major developments in contemporary feminist thought, tracing its main branches and characteristics. Her study is also critical in that it exposes the contradictions and the problems raised by particular assumptions and stands in feminist theory.

she means by bisexuality by referring to “other bisexuality” (1975a: 254), that is, bisexuality free of the fear of castration, an expression of the presence of both sexes and a “multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire over all parts of my body” (1975a: 254).

Cixous’s concept of “other bisexuality” and her belief that women’s social position grants them better access to a fluid subjectivity and bodily pleasure mirrors Irigaray’s notion of female *jouissance*, which too defies the patriarchal binary logic since it relies on multiple and endless sources of pleasure⁴⁷. Irigaray’s defence of female *jouissance* and her emphasis on a female mechanics of fluids (as opposed to the male emphasis in a mechanics of solids), along with her belief in the “placental economy” (1990: 37-44), that is, the ‘neither one nor the other’ that regulates exchanges of fluids between foetus and mother, contribute to a different notion of identity based on fluidity and collapsing boundaries⁴⁸. According to Irigaray, women represent traces of that other inter-subjective state (epitomised in the relationship between mother and child) that has been repressed by patriarchal ideology and its hegemonic discourses. For Irigaray, as for Cixous, women escape patriarchal logic by virtue of being closer to a fluid, relational and polymorphous state of being and it is precisely that closeness that links them to the abject.

Drawing from feminist theorists but also from other sources such as continental philosophy and Kierkegaard’s notion of woman as hybrid, Battersby also proposes a new model of personal and individual identity based on flux and taken from a female pattern of identity. Battersby’s proposal is challenging:

Rather than treating women as somehow exceptional, I start from the question of what would have to change were we to take seriously the notion that a ‘person’ could normally, at least

⁴⁷ The word *jouissance* is constantly used throughout Irigaray’s texts. For example, in “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother”, Irigaray plays with this term and its meanings: “[i]t is important that we discover the singularity of our *jouissance*. Of course, it is possible for a woman to come [jouir] in accordance with the phallic model. . . . For women there are at least two models of *jouissance*. One is programmed in a male libidinal economy in accordance with a certain phallic order. Another is much more in accordance with what they are, with their sexual identity” (1981: 45). It is a word difficult to translate into English (which explains why it is systematically used in its French form), but in Irigaray’s discourse it is clearly related to women’s polymorphic pleasures and to women’s fruition, a feminine energy that cannot be completely contained in the symbolic order of phallogentrism. Kristeva also frequently employs the term, identifying the fruition inherent in *jouissance* as a form of pre-phallic auto-eroticism centred in the mother’s body. See Macedo and Amaral (2005: 109) for a brief description of the term.

⁴⁸ “The ‘Mechanics’ of Fluids” is also the title of one of Irigaray’s essays (1974: 106-18).

always potentially, become two. What would happen if we thought identity in terms that did not make it always spatially and temporally oppositional to other identities? (1998: 2)

Battersby suggests a new concept of identity that is valid for all humans, regardless of the gender attributed to them (1998: 3). She is thus proposing a radical social and individual change that discards logocentric forms of thought and dichotomist modes of being, establishing in their place new modes of interpersonal relationship and new ways of thinking the body in relation to other bodies. For Battersby, as for Irigaray and Cixous, the feminist project is grounded on a fight for changes in women's social position, but these changes cannot be made without a concomitant revolution in traditional modes of thought on subjectivity, sexuality and the body.

Chadwick's fascination with what defies categorisation, her attention to hybrid forms, fluid bodies and inter-related beings share with the previously mentioned feminist critics the radical intention of questioning and moving beyond the logocentric paradigm of oppositional differences. Though many of Chadwick's works confirm the artist's intention of disassembling all sorts of binaries, some of them specifically attempt to deconstruct gender dichotomies, as in the case of *Piss Flowers*, *Billy Bud* or *Loop My Loop* (1991) [Fig. 11]. In the latter project, a golden plait is enmeshed in a pig's intestine, reminding us that women are both the source of desire and abjection. Betterton's remarks about this work draw attention to the inherent paradoxical nature of the feminine subject: "[f]emininity is represented here both as surface *and* depth. The fetishized sign of femininity is inseparable from a visceral and forbidden interior" (1996: 142). Woman as sign in the dominant male discourse is an object of fascination, but her fetishised image also hides the threat created by the female body and the abjection at the sight of female lack, fluidity and otherness. Betterton's further comments on *Loop My Loop* highlight Chadwick's attempt to replace the binary oppositions denounced by Cixous in "Sorties" by corporeal and gender fluidity: "Chadwick suggests a slippage between opposites, living and dead, human and animal, surface and depth, to suggest an indivisibility of erotic attraction and repulsion which are held apart within the conventional binary division of sexual difference" (1996: 142).



Figure 11 – Helen Chadwick, *Loop My Loop* (1991).

Loop My Loop demands a multi-directional reading and exemplifies Chadwick's complex approach to the grotesque female body. Unlike the British women artists of the YBA scene, like Emin and Lucas, Chadwick was not only interested in abject bodies, but also in beauty and even in transcendence and the sacred. That difference situates the artist and her work in a singular place in the British and feminist art contexts of the 1990s. Clearly, Chadwick's approach to the fleshy self and the grotesque body does not force the viewer to simply face one's feelings of repulsion and abjection; on the contrary, it demands a more ambiguous response in which fear and revulsion are subdued by the pleasure of looking at and engaging with the bodies shown. In many ways, the represented bodies acquire a consecrated and revered aura, through which Chadwick's oeuvre overcomes the distinction between the sacred and the profane.

1.4 Gorgeously repulsive II: consecrating the flesh

1.4.1 Against the philosopher's fear of the flesh

Chadwick's interest in the body is reflected in her fascination with the flesh, that is, the soft substance or tissue of which bodies are made of. Body and flesh have received an increasing philosophical interest due to a critical movement that has claimed for a radical change in philosophical inquiry⁴⁹. The Cartesian logic that establishes the separation of mind and body and sees the first of the two terms as the element providing the definition of humanity is, according to Gilbert Ryle, "the official doctrine" (1949) perpetuated by philosophers well up to the twentieth-century. Philosophical discourse mirrors Christian dogma, which devalues the flesh as the sinful part of the self, opposing it to the superiority of the eternal soul. Such philosophical and religious bias regarding the binaries body/mind and flesh/soul has obvious gender implications for it is women who have provided metaphors and images for the body, whereas men have been the models for the soul and rationality. The mind/body dualism and the dismissal of the body are intimately connected to the subordination of women, philosophy and religion thus being an inherent and fundamental part of a phallogocentric system and discourse.

Chadwick refers to the split between mind and body in very critical terms: "in language dual structures are defined as oppositional: where we have self, there must be other; gender is male or female, and most problematic and absurd of all is the split between mind and body" (*apud* Sladen, 2004b: 23). Her take on the traditional binary structure underlying philosophical enquiry is nowhere more explicit than in *The Philosopher's Fear of the Flesh* (1989) [Fig. 12]. The title of this work draws attention to the philosophically established mind/body opposition and to the associated dismissal of the body, feared because perceived as abject. However, there is an ironic intention underlying this title, since it is attributed to a photographic composition that suggests Chadwick's determination to deconstruct the binary opposition between flesh and soul.

⁴⁹ See in the context of the philosophy of the body Donn Welton (ed.), *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader* (1998).



Figure 12 – Helen Chadwick, *The Philosopher's Fear of The Flesh* (1989).

The Philosopher's Fear of the Flesh displays poultry skin and a human abdomen (most likely male) encapsulated in an infinity sign, as if to signal a perpetual movement between human and animal, mind and body, male and female (Sladen, 2004b: 23). The two fleshy elements are carefully lighted (the poultry skin thus acquiring a translucent look) and the light grants them a sacred or transcendent aura⁵⁰. In notes jotted down at the time this work was created, Chadwick mentions “[t]he male pregnant belly– the impossible return (mother’s body)” (Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 36). The artist could here be referring to the belly depicted in *The Philosopher's Fear of the Flesh*, which, in its full-moon shape, looks as if

⁵⁰ *The Philosopher's Fear of the Flesh* is part of a series of light boxes known as *Meat Lamps* and produced between 1989 and 1991. These boxes present a careful combination of meat/flesh/body and light and evidence the meticulous planning involved in their creation. In an interview Chadwick explains the significance that light played in this series: “[t]hey all use light, whether the light spills around them as an aura or whether the light is contained in a box. These things put them into this ambiguous position of being not exactly a sculpture and not exactly an image, and for me this is the space of a body” (*apud* Sladen, 2004b: 23). It is interesting to notice that Chadwick’s comment conflates the sacred and the body with art, uniting them by the same ambiguous status.

pregnant. Moreover, in this work the navel, placed between light and shadow, seems mysterious and the closeness of the camera lens creates a defamiliarization effect that grants the navel an uncanny, almost oracular, quality⁵¹. The navel is a literal birthmark, the proof of one's birth and the symbol of a lost but pleasurable relation with the mother and the female body⁵². By directing the viewers' attention to the navel and to the theme of maternity, Chadwick, on the one hand, establishes a connection between the philosopher's fear of the flesh and his fear of that other, that is, the maternal body, highlighting how the patriarchal dismissal of the body is implicitly linked to the problematic place occupied by the mother in Western thought. On the other hand, the reverential mode in which the human and the animal body are depicted in Chadwick's work denies the philosopher's fear of the flesh and, by implication, of the female, maternal body, in an attempt to aesthetically overcome that fear through the visual signs of the sacred: representing an illuminated and 'pregnant' body, Chadwick establishes the flesh as a creative and aesthetic principle, not as a source of abjection and fear.

1.4.2 The flesh made sacred

Not only *The Philosopher's Fear of the Flesh* but also the other works that are part of the *Meat Lamps* series focus on transient things like raw meat, body parts and the flesh. These unholy elements are displayed in light boxes that cast a sacred aura over them. The series therefore creates the opportunity to disrupt established oppositional categories, proposing instead an uncomfortable but seductive liminal state. In the preparatory notes for this project Chadwick also suggests a clearly gendered reading of *Meat Lamps*, evidencing her attempt to overcome the binary of sexual difference and, as a consequence, the female identification with the monstrous body: "Meat Lamps: counter offensive against modern binary categories of sexuality. Sex as a simple monolithic binary opposition challenged:

⁵¹ I am using the phrase *defamiliarization effect* in relation to *verfremdungseffekt*. This is a German term coined by Brecht through his epic theatre. As emphasised by Pollock: "the point was to liberate the viewer from the state of being captured by illusions of art which encourages passive identification with fictional worlds. For Brecht the viewer was to become an active participant in the production of meanings across an event which was recognized as representation but also as referring to and shaping understanding of contemporary social reality" (1988: 223: 24). See Pollock's chapter "Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice—a Brechtian Perspective", from her book *Vision and Difference* (1988: 212-68) for a discussion of Brecht's influence in 1970s art, in particular that produced in a feminist context.

⁵² In "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother" Irigaray also refers to the navel as an "irreducible trait of identity: the scar left when the cord was cut" (1981: 39). She perceives naming, and hence language, as an attempt to replace that "most irreducible mark of birth" (1981: 39) and obliterate the powerful initial bond established between mother and child. See also Bal (1991), who discusses the importance of the navel in art terms and as a symbol contrary to the phallus.

threshold of exchange as only valuable point. The threshold of difference” (Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 12).

Produced around the same period as *Meat Lamps*, *Meat Abstracts* (1989) [Fig. 13] is another series addressing the body and fleshiness and juxtaposing in the symbolic field of visual representation the grotesque and the beautiful, the sacred and the profane. Moreover, it explores the tension between repulsion and desire, a tension that lies at the very root of abjection. If in *Piss Flowers* and *Wreaths to Pleasure* a transgressive movement is achieved from exploring the bizarre side of what is commonly perceived as attractive and delicate, in *Meat Abstracts* Chadwick performs the opposite process, that is, she gives a transcendental and aesthetically sublime dimension to what is generally seen as disgusting and worldly and ultimately consecrates the flesh.



Figure 13 – Helen Chadwick, *Meat Abstract No. 8* (1989).

In *Meat Abstracts* the human body gives way to offal (tongues, livers, tripe and the yolk of partially formed eggs), but the curiosity and wonder towards the flesh that had already been expressed in *Meat Lamps* remains. These images could invite disgust from the

viewer at the sight of raw meat and viscera and Chadwick's strategy of turning the body inside-out addresses the philosopher's fear of the splitting or spilling body by acting as a reminder of the frailty of bodily boundaries. However, the artist is clearly trying to go beyond that visceral response by investing in the formal display of the elements, an intention corroborated by the title of the series, which also links the same to the modernist tradition and high art⁵³. *Meat Abstracts* is composed by precise and meticulous photographic compositions, in which Chadwick juxtaposes animal viscera with silken or luxurious cloths, golden spheres and intense artificial light⁵⁴. The careful illumination and framing of the images (created with a Polaroid camera), the sensuality and richness of the materials used along with the offal—suede, silk, wood and gilded spheres—are aspects that create a positive idea of elegance, with a hint of eroticism⁵⁵. Consequently, there is seductiveness in these abstract compositions, as well as an idealisation of the flesh, in sharp contrast to the rawness and transitory quality of the exposed inside body.

Meat Abstracts recalls seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings, but Chadwick goes beyond that connotation by adding bright light bulbs to almost all the photographs in the series—it is not decay or the frailty of life, themes which played such a central role in Flemish art, that concerns Chadwick here, but the miracle of the flesh and the body in its vitality and energy. Therefore, *Meat Abstracts* celebrates the body in almost Eucharistic terms, consecrating the flesh through art. It also defies dichotomies, namely the Cartesian opposition between spirit (symbolized by the light bulbs and the golden spheres) and flesh and the related opposition between sacred and profane. On the one hand, forced to look at meat, flesh, the physical, the material and the inside of the body, the viewer is deliberately exposed to the fear of death, of being trapped in a monstrous body that forever escapes control and that it is only perceived as united, closed, clean and pure in the subject's efforts

⁵³ Horlock connects the title of Chadwick's 1989 series with its carefully planned formal display: "Chadwick's *Meat Abstracts* were so-named because they were based on abstract forms, and they were composed through a precise, formal geometry" (2004: 39).

⁵⁴ In her research notes for *Of Mutability*, Chadwick refers to the golden spheres as "idealizations of touch, rarified into celestial perfect forms, spiritualised caress" (Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 75). Also Warner stresses the spiritual and transcendental connotations of Chadwick's spheres: "[i]n their goldenness, their harmony, their timelessness, integrity of shape and impregnability, the spheres represent the ideal" (1989: 41).

⁵⁵ Referring to *Meat Abstracts*, Horlock states that "[t]he sensual, glistening quality of the Polaroid was also crucial, allowing for the differentiation of textures and creating a sense of luxuriance as well as unease" (2004: 39). Sladen also stresses the fact that the photographs were taken from above, "resulting in images characterized by shallow depth and sharp focus" (2004b: 22). In a notebook, Chadwick refers to one of the works from either the *Meat Lamps* or the *Meat Abstracts* series (possibly *Loop my Loop* or *Meat Abstract No. 7*, for there are references to hair and entrails) as "carnal configuration of erotic" (Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 39), a comment that can equally be applied in general to the two series, which bear formal and content similarities and which were created around the same time.

to achieve a stable sense of identity. On the other hand, instead of completely plunging the viewer into the abyss of the feared body, Chadwick attaches to it positive elements and connotations, thus rendering the beauty of the material, non-cleansed flesh and the revelatory and sacred potential of the body⁵⁶. This strategy is not devoid of social impact, for it destabilises the very principles and oppositions in which Western civilization has sustained itself, as it is not missing from a feminist ethos, since, as previously stated, it is ‘woman’, and not ‘man’, who personifies the flesh, which, in turn, remains a sign of female monstrosity.

Meat Lamps and *Meat Abstracts* differ from earlier works such as *In the Kitchen* in that, despite still focusing on the body, they do not bring forward Chadwick’s own. The artist justified a visible turn at the end of the 1980s to the interior of the body as a way of escaping the scopophilic spectacle her naked body may have been exposed to in previous works. As she remarked in an interview conceded to Emma Cocker in 1998, “I felt compelled to use materials that were still bodily, that were still a kind of self-portrait, but did not rely on the representation of my own body” (*apud* Sladen, 2004b: 22). Chadwick’s comment and her decision to address the body in different terms demonstrate the problems that rise when women artists represent the female body. This is due to the strong cultural link between *woman* and *flesh*. In *Meat Abstract No. 7* female fleshiness becomes explicitly central to the work as Chadwick’s photographs of a woman’s luxuriant hair united by a light bulb. The image offers a complex comment on female fleshiness and the desired/abjected female body, exploring, as much as disturbing, women’s liminal subject and social position. In a process similar to that employed in *Loop My Loop*, Chadwick’s juxtaposition of a woman’s hair and offal addresses the fetishization of the female body (metonymically represented through the hair) as a practice inseparable from the abjectification of women, acting as its reverse. However, the light bulb, a prop repeatedly used in the *Meat Abstracts* series, throws a transcendental, almost sacred, glow over the hair and the repulsive viscera, contradicting their abject connotations.

⁵⁶ According to ancient traditions, meat is a source of oracular disclosure and a cosmic sign. The practice of prophecy based on observation of the entrails of sacrificial animals (hieromancy, hieroscopy or extispicy) most probably had its origin in the Orient and was well established in ancient Greece. Of particular interest was the divination by inspecting the liver (hepatoscopy). Chadwick was probably aware of this practice, especially given her interest in her mother’s Greek origin. Moreover, one of the photographs included in *Meat Abstracts* shows precisely a liver.

Meat Lamps and *Meat Abstracts* turn into powerful objects of delight that which was previously body remains. Offal is saved from the dustbin, acquiring aesthetic value and an unusual spirituality as the artist confronts the audience with oracular meat and cosmic signs. Viscera coexist with elegant fabric and occupy the centre of the artwork. The profane flesh is thus redeemed from abjection and revered in a heretic religion of the body.

1.4.3 *The Oval Court*: edenic and hedonic visions of the female body

A celebratory and hedonistic approach to the body has its maximum expression in *Of Mutability* (1984-86), one of Chadwick's most famous projects. The complexity of this installation is evident in its different parts. The central piece is *The Oval Court* [Fig. 14], a pool where twelve tableaux (in allusion to the twelve gates of paradise) are displayed along with five golden spheres. The scenes, made with full-size photocopies of animals and other creatures swirling around Chadwick's naked body, create an enormous collage, surrounded by printed images of Salomonic columns (inspired by Bernini's Baldacchino in Saint Peter's, Rome, referred by Chadwick as "columns of wisdom" [Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 72]) and Chadwick's weeping and histrionic face.



Figure 14 – Helen Chadwick, *The Oval Court* (1984-86).

This central piece is complemented by *Carcass*, a glass tower full of compost, and *Mirror*, a Venetian mirror with weeping eyes⁵⁷. The different parts of *Of Mutability* invite the viewer to think of the fleeting quality of life and the changing nature of the body, but also to celebrate sensuality and bodily freedom. Critic and Chadwick's friend Marina Warner has dedicated a whole essay to this intricate project. In "In the Garden of Delights", Warner provides a detailed analysis of the several parts that compose *Of Mutability*, tracing the different elements that inspired Chadwick for this installation and highlighting in what ways the artist departed from the original ideas conveyed by those elements. It is mainly influenced by Warner's reading of *Of Mutability* and by Chadwick's extensive notes on this work that I will pay closer attention to one of its constitutive parts, *The Oval Court*, in order to conclude my analysis of Chadwick's consecration of the body⁵⁸.

Chadwick spent months scribbling down ideas, collecting architectonic influences (particularly German baroque palaces and churches) and searching for new formal processes of composition, in an extensive preparatory research for *The Oval Court*⁵⁹. The end result is a cyanotype-blue swimming pool, which can also be described as an upside-down vaulted church ceiling⁶⁰. Chadwick connected this inverted ceiling with an inverted order (Notebook

⁵⁷ Influenced by the approach taken in *Of Mutability*, Chadwick produced shortly after *Vanity* and *Ruin* (both from 1986). The first is a photograph of the artist holding and staring at a mirror that reflects her naked body and *The Oval Court*. This work clearly engages with the Dutch tradition of vanitas painting, which addresses the theme of the passing of time and the ephemeral quality of the pleasures of life, often through the representation of the female body and allusions to vanity, a so-called female vice (see Warner, 1989: 46). The themes of the passing of time and change are also subjacent to *Ruin*, which shows Chadwick in a theatrical pose of despair, holding a human skull while in the background decomposed organic matter is exhibited in a monitor. This visual representation of decomposing matter brings to mind *Carcass*, which is part of *Of Mutability*.

⁵⁸ Chadwick's notes confirm that the artist spent nearly two years working on *Of Mutability*. In an interview given to Haworth-Booth in 1994, Chadwick refers to the amount of research for this project: "I spent longer looking at art historical images and artefacts, looking at architectural spaces, than I have done at any other time. It was really a stitching together of so many different references, ultimately postmodern" (*apud* Haworth-Booth, 1996: n. pag.). It was this major project that granted Chadwick a nomination for the Turner Prize, in 1987, in what was the first time a female artist was nominated for this award.

⁵⁹ Chadwick obtained the images for the *Oval Court* with a photocopy machine, a cheap, perishable and mechanical form of reproduction, hence disrupting oppositions between high and popular ways of artistic representation and questioning the artist's claim to originality. In her interview with Haworth-Booth, Chadwick confirms this process as disruptive and suggests that had always been the case in her work: "I think I've always tried to make things complex whereby the obvious reading does not quite work, through a juxtaposition, so that the gold balls which have all kinds of connotation are sitting on a formica raised floor, with a load of photocopies around them. So there is this peculiar equation between something highly precious and then a piece of trash, a photocopy which would never be considered to have any value because it is just a copy off [sic] an original. So those counterpoised values, which should be oppositional, I think combine a kind of synthesis which opens up perhaps a different way of evaluating what's before you, where the old rules don't quite apply or account for it at all" (1996: n. pag.).

⁶⁰ Chadwick's notebooks demonstrate that she was very specific about the colour that should be used in *The Oval Court* and relentlessly searched for a photocopy machine capable of producing images in the shade of blue she so longed for. Also in her notebooks, Chadwick mentions that she did not want to use red, the colour of flesh, but a non-erotic colour, something with a religious connotation (Notebook

2003.19/E/6: 42), thus disrupting the traditional opposition between the sacred and the profane (heaven versus earth). According to the artist, this subversive process is also subjacent to her choice of an oval shape, since this provides a resolution between the spiritual (the circle, heaven) and the material (the square, earth) (Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 49). Sacred and spiritual connotations are brought forward by the shape given to the blue pool, but also by the effect created by the five golden spheres, elements of permanence and cosmic order in a sensuous and transient world where animals and a voluptuous female body are joined in an aquatic embrace⁶¹.

In *The Oval Court* the theme of mutability is hinted at in several ways: the animals surrounding Chadwick's vibrant body are all dead, maggots fall from a hand and a double-headed figure faces ripeness and decomposition— 'devouring Time' consumes life and brings death. However, other parts of *Of Mutability* (such as *Carcass*) seem more straightforwardly engaged with this topic than *The Oval Court*, which celebrates fugitive life and its sensual pleasures and tries to create a paradisiacal space where, paraphrasing the artist, the conflict between body and spirit is resolved (Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 21). In fact, sensuality is conveyed through several images of the female body interacting with the other elements in the pool: Chadwick's voluptuous body sucks ripened fruits, swims among rabbits, kisses a lamb and is enraptured by a goose⁶². The sensuality of the body is further emphasised by adornments such as pearl necklaces, rings and bracelets and by baroque draperies and lacy frills. Again, the chosen materials are the result of Chadwick's research for this work; this was mainly focused on Baroque art, which Chadwick saw as an apt visual expression for

2003.19/E/6: 19). Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1982: 102-04) refer to blue as the deepest and most insubstantial of colours, disembodying whatever becomes caught in it. As it darkens naturally, it becomes the colour of dreams and the unconscious. It resolves within itself contradictions and alterations and it evokes the idea of eternity, calm, lofty, superhuman, inhuman even. The Egyptians are supposed to have considered blue the colour of truth and Christian iconography has used blue and white in the war against evil. Chadwick's choice of the colour blue, with its religious, spiritual and cosmic connotations, should therefore be seen as a counterpoint to the deeply erotic and hedonistic bodies found in the pool and an effort to reconcile the sacred with the profane.

⁶¹ In her use of the sphere, Chadwick was influenced by the visionary French architect Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728-99), who believed in the perfection of the spherical form and who expressed his idea of immensity, eternity and infinity through the image of the sphere. See Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 23-27, where Chadwick refers to Boullée and his work.

⁶² The image of Chadwick's body held by a goose brings to mind the classical tale of Leda and the swan, in which Zeus disguises himself as a swan in order to conquer physically Leda. The resonance of this myth in Chadwick's installation further stresses its sensuous elements, though the artist was aware of the criticism she would attract with such controversial image, particularly among feminist circles. See Haworth-Booth (1996: n. pag) and Warner (1989: 48), who refer to the feminist critique of Chadwick's installation at the time it was first exhibited. Warner also connects the expression of rapture in Chadwick's body as it is held by the goose with the swoon of Bernini's Saint Teresa when the seraph pierces her breast (1989: 48). Such religious and mystic resonances in an inherently erotic tableau further contribute to Chadwick's strategy of blending the sacred with the profane.

erotic pleasure and an “eruption of sensuality” (Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 37)⁶³. Moreover, ready-to-harvest stalks and fish swirling around Chadwick’s lower part of the body confer to the composition a sense of fertility, a reading corroborated by the artist, who also refers to this work as a placental pool (Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 106). Indeed, animals and artist seem to be swimming in a life-generating pool, given that water is the preferred symbol of life. However, the tears gathered from Chadwick’s crying faces, which are displayed on the adjacent walls, also fill this pool. According to Warner, the tears wept by the heads on top of the Salomonic columns feed the pool and those are tears for “remembered bliss, for erotic fantasies, and dreams of pleasure that of their essence are transitory” (1989: 39). Warner’s interpretation is in line with Chadwick’s comment on the significance of tears: “[t]he tears bridge the fallen state, sorrow gives glory to passion, as they fall they return us into the eye of paradise, washing us clean in their surrender, dissolving the ego into love” (Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 89). Tears, then, bridge the gap between the bodily and the spiritual, which is why they are given such a central place in *The Oval Court*.

Chadwick repeatedly refers to love in her notes on *Of Mutability* but also to desire, the body and the soul. These are terms that are generally placed in a binary and opposite relationship (desire versus love, body versus soul), a structure that Chadwick seeks to overcome through her work⁶⁴. Hence, in *The Oval Court* Chadwick is still hunting for the body, marvelling at its sensuality, but also dressing up its nakedness with numinous and cosmic connotations. In other words, the artist is trying to “find a resolution between transience and transcendence” (H. Chadwick, 1989: 41), for “[s]he wants to express the invisible profane, as clearly as the religious painter sought to body forth the invisible and holy” (Warner, 1989: 48).

Of Mutability and, more specifically, *The Oval Court* are projects that pay close attention to the female body in rather complex ways. Chadwick may be addressing the relationship between women and mental disorder through the unrestrained and theatrical

⁶³ Chadwick was fascinated by baroque and rococo palaces and churches and went purposely to Bavaria in order to study and photograph some of these buildings. In her notebooks she describes them as “like rich icing snaking, dancing over every surface; joyous”; “walls become fluttery”, “tongues of light licking + playing over everything; bright + rich yet lightness” (Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 57). The joyfulness of the buildings also had for Chadwick a spiritual facet: “[t]he rococo is incredibly light, and optimistic. It’s not about power but about pleasure. It’s unique— an attempt at finding a spiritual path through a pleasure principle” (1989: 43). The artist’s comments stress the blending of opposites (profane/sacred, flesh/spirit) that characterises both rococo art and her own work.

⁶⁴ In a poem-shaped note Chadwick stresses the resolution of opposites implicit in *The Oval Court*: “[n]ot a pleasure palace just of the / senses, but resolution of / desire + love, body + soul; / figures not object but / idealisations of the joy of love – / as angels or nymphs, personify the / force + grace of love as a / transcendent physical potential. / Towards a triumph of pleasure” (Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 90).

faces depicted around the pool, for these resemble nineteenth-century photographs and accounts of the hysteric and neurotic women, exhibited to the medical and male gaze by Charcot at La Salpêtrière⁶⁵. Moreover, inside the pool, she represents her own body meshed with natural elements and objects charged with violent and sadist connotations (there are razors, ropes and sticks suspended among the animals or wrapped around their and Chadwick's body). She is therefore engaging with social discourses that either abjectify or fetishise women by emphasising their alluringly fleshy nature or, alternatively, their frightening sinful one. Although Chadwick's strategy is here quite different from the parodic and monstrous female bodies depicted in *Bargain Bed Bonanza* or *The Latex Glamour Rodeo*, in *The Oval Court* the female grotesque still lurks nearby, since the images, created through a perishable and crude formal process of reproduction (the photocopy), represent dead animals (and animals that evoke death such as maggots) in a sensual relation with Chadwick's living body⁶⁶. Consequently, Chadwick's pool comments on the female body as a reminder of the perishable, changing self (as in the vanitas tradition). There is also in this female body an in-betweenness, a permeability of death and life, animal and human, self and other that further rises the feeling of abjection. However, instead of simply corroborating this socially and aesthetically dominant perspective on the female body, *The Oval Court* celebrates Dionysian pleasures, the desirable body and the body's desire, and gives to the female flesh a cosmic and sacred resonance. In conclusion, *The Oval Court* exposes Chadwick's recurrent desire to go beyond established dichotomies and her determination to revere the profane body and celebrate the pleasures of the flesh.

Though feminist art critics had difficulty in accepting Chadwick's exposure of her body, seeing in this artistic act a capitulation to the male gaze and the specularization of women and their bodies, *The Oval Court* and its paradoxical search for bodily pleasure and sacredness can still positively engage with feminist criticism. French feminist Luce Irigaray has extensively written on the power of female *jouissance*, that is, female pleasure or

⁶⁵ See Jacobus (1986) for a fascinating discussion of the hysteric woman in psychoanalytical theory and art.

⁶⁶ The grotesque implications of *The Oval Court* acquired a literal sense in the overall installation given that Chadwick placed *Carcass*, a column of rotting, stinking matter, contiguous to the paradisiacal swimming pool. Warner recalls that when *Of Mutability* was first exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art, the reek of putrefaction was so strong that the organisers decided to take down the piece (1996: n. pag.). *Carcass* demanded a strong, physical and multi-sensorial response from the audience, who was effectively confronted with its fear of death and the resulting feeling of abjection. However, as Chadwick also noticed, the active status of this piece, with its bubbles and smell, paradoxically became more of a metaphor for life than for death (*apud* Haworth-Booth, 1996: n. pag.). The dual nature of *Carcass* thus recalls Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque grotesque as that which disrupts oppositions by establishing a degrading and destructive principle that nevertheless celebrates life and the regenerative powers of the earth (1965: 20-21).

fruition, which, according to this critic, results from the plurality of women's sexuality and lies outside phallic binary oppositions and patriarchal discourse. In "Women-Amongst-Themselves: Creating a Woman-to-Woman Sociality" Irigaray finds in female sexuality and *jouissance* the path to the sacred or what Irigaray terms a 'sensible' transcendental:

[F]emale sexuality . . . seems to me to correspond to the generation of a *sensible* transcendental. Female *jouissance* would be of the order of the constant and gradual creation of a dimension ranging from the most corporeal to the most spiritual, a dimension which is never complete and never reversible. Before, or in a different way to, any procreation of a child, woman generates through her *jouissance*, not, as they say or fear, a 'hole', but a passage or a bridge between what is most earthly and what is most celestial. (1986: 190)

Similarly to Irigaray's text, Chadwick's work represents the female body and female bodily pleasure as an interface through which the sacred and the profane coexist. Moreover, though the artist's naked body evokes the conventional codes of representation (centred on the female nude), she denies the objectification of the male gaze by depicting a female body that exists in a fluid and pleasurable relation with other creatures, beings that, in fact, are no longer perceived as oppositional others. As mentioned by Warner, *The Oval Court* is a vision of "a post-lapsarian Paradise where woman is visible alone among humankind, where she is the matter in question, but what matters is her passion, her physical articulation of her feelings, her relation to created things and her choice among them" (1989: 39). Chadwick's research on the symbolic significance of tears led her to conclude that "[a]rt like crying are acts of self repair" (Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 79)⁶⁷. *The Oval Court* and the tears that fill in this sensual pool offer such possibility of repair, for they create a space where "the wound of difference" (Warner, 1996: n. pag.) is overcome by a fusion of the sacred and the profane in the body of woman.

⁶⁷ Chadwick's research on the symbolic significance of tears is wide. Her notes on the topic (see Chadwick, Notebook 2003.19/E/6) include references to Freud, Kristeva and Frida Khalo, as well as to religious imagery, namely the tears shed by Christ on the cross and by Adam and Eve when expelled from Paradise.

1.5 One flesh: visions of motherhood

1.5.1 The abject and the sacred maternal

Chadwick's approach to the female body in works like *Of Mutability* revises the traditional correlation established between female fleshiness and female sinful nature by attributing to the body a sacredness that counteracts its profane constitution. Consequently, her work reflects an attempt to forge new meanings for the female body, which becomes the site where physical pleasure and spiritual revelation coexist.

Kristeva has analysed both the sacred and the abject dimensions of women, particularly of women as mothers, and her reflections on the subject have often been appropriated by feminist criticism⁶⁸. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva refers to the maternal body as the ultimate source of abjection since it threatens the subject with the loss of identity by recalling the semiotic and polymorphic union between mother and child: “[t]he abject confronts us . . . with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* identity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language” (1980a: 13). She speaks of a “phantasmatic mother who also constitutes, in the specific history of each person, the abyss that must be established as an autonomous (and not encroaching) *place* and *distinct* object, meaning a *signifiable* one, so that such a person might learn to speak” (1980a: 100). In other words, the maternal experience has to be lost, forgotten and the mother must be made into an object, an other, if the child is to reach its autonomy and its place in language and the social. Grounded in a psychoanalytical reading of Lacanian contours, Kristeva's text places the maternal body in the semiotic, which is there before the acquisition of language and the definition of selfhood⁶⁹. This maternal body is a strange space that Kristeva names

⁶⁸ I use the term *appropriation* given that Kristeva has never considered herself to be a feminist. In fact, Kristeva's relation with feminist criticism has always been complex and problematic. Her acceptance of Lacanian theory regarding the construction of subjectivity situates her analysis too close to the phallogocentric structure that feminists wish to expose and replace, and her insistence in an individualistic disruption of social structures minimises the value of a committed feminist politics. Grosz claims that in Kristeva's thought feminist struggles are subordinated to a critique of humanism, since Kristeva “puts feminism in the provisionally revolutionary position of destabilising the norms and expectations” (1989: 96). Also Moi states that “Kristeva's work can in no way be characterized as primarily feminist: it is not even consistently political in its approach” (1985: 166). Nevertheless, Moi recognises that a critique of Kristeva's politics should not overshadow the positive and radical aspects of her work (1985: 171) and that “[f]eminists will find much of value in, for example, her approach to the question of motherhood” (1985: 166).

⁶⁹ The connection between the maternal body and the semiotic is brought forward by Kristeva not only in *Powers of Horror*, but also in “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini” (1975). In this essay Kristeva finds the semiotic in the surface (the symbolic) of Bellini's paintings, precisely because these represent maternal experience through the image of the Madonna.

the *chora* (a word snatched from Plato's *Timeus*, where it has several possible meanings, including "enclosed space", "womb", "receptacle" and "mother"; it is thus a word that, not unlike the semiotic, rejects a stable meaning). Freud had already suggested that the maternal body becomes a source of fear and taboo for the little boy during the Oedipus complex because of the threat of castration it evokes⁷⁰. It is this fear of castration that will allow the boy to identify with the father and his law and, in Lacanian terms, that which pushes the subject from the imaginary into the symbolic and language. From then onwards, the maternal body will remain an eternal site of desire and fear: desire for a pleasurable original moment when the new being and its mother were indistinguishable, when there was no self and thus no other, and fear of the self's destruction in that loss of boundaries. The separation of mother and child is thus "a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (Kristeva, 1980a: 13). The desire to go back to the semiotic state where the pre-oedipal, phallic mother resides must be repressed in any community constituted by exclusions and hierarchies because the feminine (that is, the maternal feminine) "on account of its power, does not succeed in differentiating itself as *other* but threatens one's *own and clean self*" (Kristeva, 1980a: 65). Kristeva thus perceives abjection as that which intervenes when the primal repression, that is, the desire for the mother and her body, is relaxed and the 'own and clean self' is in danger of losing its identity. For Kristeva, then, the maternal body corresponds to Douglas's definition of matter out of place (1966), since the mother and the pregnant body disrupt the notion of a singular, indivisible and bordered subject and break the boundaries between the inside and the outside, self and other.

If *Powers of Horror*, written in the 1980s, offers little solace for feminist criticism and its urge to change women's position in the social and psychic structures because it emphasises that in order to become a full subject one must abject the maternal body, in *The Feminine and the Sacred* (first published in French in 1998 and translated into English in 2001), a joint book and the outcome of an almost one-year letter exchange between Kristeva and Catherine Clément, Kristeva offers a different vision of the maternal body and provides a new discourse on motherhood by turning to the sacred dimension of childbirth: "I will cling to life as the ultimate visage of the sacred" (Clément and Kristeva, 1998: 12). Starting

⁷⁰ Freud's theory of the subject's formation takes as the norm the boy's development, being thus phallogocentric. The relationship between the little girl and the mother's body is much more complex and ambivalent in Freudian theory, which is generally at a loss when it comes to the formation of the female subject. See, in this context, Freud's essay "Femininity" (1933).

from the biological and bodily terrain of childbirth, Kristeva reaches for its sacred dimension and women's crucial contribution to it:

[L]ife, desired and governed by a loving mother, is not a biological process pure and simple: I am speaking of the meaning of life— of a life that has meaning. We stand here at the «zero degree» of meaning, to borrow the expression of Barthes. . . . What if what we call the 'sacred' were the celebration of a mystery, the mystery of the emergence of meaning? (1998: 13)

Kristeva's words redeem women from the stereotypes that reduce maternity to nature by insisting that the maternal function links women to nature *and* culture and that it is precisely this situation that grants women their sacred potential⁷¹. Based on scientific development and on the dismissal of Christian zeal, Kristeva foresees a new era for the sacred, dominated by the figured of the mother: “[a]fter two thousand years of world history dominated by the sacredness of the Baby Jesus, might women be in a position to give a different coloration to the ultimate sacred, the miracle of human life: not life for itself, but life bearing meaning, for the formulation of which women are called upon to offer their desire and their words?” (1998: 14).

Kristeva's rhetorical question undoes the psychoanalytical amnesia regarding the importance of the mother-child dyad by stressing how the maternal function is important to the earliest development of subjectivity and to the child's access to culture and language. She also emphasises how women and mothers need to be seen as speaking subjects, that is, as individuals who participate in the symbolic and not as the abjected representatives of the semiotic. Moreover, she stresses that a change of paradigm is in progress, for at a time when the Western world seems more sceptical of religious dogma and more detached from the sacred body of Christ, women, due to their ability to give life and future meaning, may well be the new carriers of the sacred. However, in contrast to Christian doctrine, Kristeva's “new sacredness” is not achieved by denying the physical, corporeal dimension of women or

⁷¹ The notion of mothers as beings at the intersection between nature and culture had already been expressed by Kristeva in 1977, in her essay “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident”. In this essay the French critic states: “through being pregnant and then becoming a mother, a woman finds a way that is both natural and cultural Pregnancy is first of all an institutionalized form of psychosis: me or it, my own body or another body. It is an identity that splits, turns in on itself and changes without becoming other: the threshold between nature and culture, biology and language” (1977b: 297). For Kristeva, it is the liminal character of the pregnant and maternal body that gives women a subversive potential in the symbolic order.

motherhood. On the contrary, the sacred is reached through the female body since, in Kristeva's words: "[t]he human body, and, even more dramatically, the body of a woman, is a strange intersection between *zōō* and *bios*, physiology and narration, genetics and biography" (1998: 14). To sum up, for Kristeva, the female body and, more specifically, the maternal body are the place where the material and the numinous, the physical and the spiritual coexist.

Despite Kristeva's redeeming view of the mother, in the context of feminist criticism motherhood is often perceived in ambivalent terms. When regarded as that which obliterates female subjectivity under women's reproductive function and ties women to a patriarchal discourse of sexual difference and the performance of stereotypical roles, maternity has been looked with suspicion and as a sign of women's oppression. Running counter to this perspective, feminist criticism has also emphasised motherhood as a positive experience, contributing to a woman's assertion of her own difference and a way to recover the patriarchal myth of the Great Goddess, a celebrated woman in unison with the power and principles of life and earth⁷². Cixous refers to the taboo of the pregnant woman in "The Laugh of the Medusa", where she also claims for a change: "[w]e are not going to refuse, if it should happen to strike our fancy, the unsurpassed pleasures of pregnancy, which have actually been always exaggerated or conjured away— or cursed— in the classic texts. For if there's one thing that's been repressed, here's just the place to find it: in the taboo of the pregnant woman" (1975a: 261).

Irigaray has also developed a remarkable amount of work on the maternal feminine and the maternal body and she is, along with Kristeva, one of the most significant influences in feminist criticism and art practice regarding motherhood. Similarly to Cixous and Kristeva, who see the mother's body as the ultimate abject, lurking in the social and subjective unconscious, Irigaray considers the relation with the mother and her body to be the most important and determinant social taboo (1981)⁷³.

⁷² See Bassin (1996) for an overview of the conflicting positions on motherhood within feminist criticism.

⁷³ Although Kristeva and Irigaray see the maternal feminine as the negative of phallogocentric discourse and therefore related to the socially marginal and abject, there are crucial differences underlying the thought of these two scholars. Whilst Kristeva's acknowledges the abjectification of the maternal body as part of the subject's development, she still perceives the symbolic as a necessary stage in the assertion of the self and its ability to speak. As for Irigaray, she is more critical of psychoanalytical theories, seeing the subject's entry in the symbolic and the Law of the Father as part of a historical and cultural context and, consequently, as open to change. Moreover, while Kristeva defends a concept of motherhood in relational terms, that is, as a function, Irigaray is critical of this idea, refusing to reduce woman to her function as mother and relying instead on the concept of female identity. See Moi, 1985: 146-48, 162-63, 165-66.

The complexity and range of feminist discourses on motherhood, together with the psychoanalytical failure to address the role of the mother in the subject's formation have had a great impact in women's art practice since the 1970s, creating the contextual conditions for women artists to readdress the issue of motherhood⁷⁴. Writing in 1996, Betterton was able to conclude that:

Motherhood, in all its diverse and contradictory forms, has been explored by feminist artists over the last two decades from Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document* in the late 1970s through to more recent attempts to 'reclaim the Madonna' in the 1990s. Such works show a commitment to deconstructing the social and cultural meanings of motherhood for women or to exploring these in relation to different personal experiences. (1996: 123)

The attention given by women artists to motherhood often places their work in the context of a dissident avant-garde identified by Pollock in "Feminity, Modernity and Representation: The Maternal Image, Sexual Difference and the Disjunctive Temporality of the Dissident Avant-Garde" (2004). According to Pollock, such artistic dissidence is composed by women artists who do not fit into the pattern provided by their male counterparts, auto-genetic artists whose work shows anxiety towards the maternal feminine by representing it as a site of monstrous abjection. In contrast, women artists present a different attitude towards the maternal, "outside of the regressive, conservative ideologies of copulation and nursing that confine Woman within the phallogentric paradigm of bio-social motherhood" (Pollock, 2004: 105). Pollock finds this different approach to motherhood in the work of avant-garde women artists from the modernist period (notably Mary Cassat and Berthe Morisot) and rediscovers it again in the 1970s:

In the 1970s, a new covenant was created between a self-consciously politico-aesthetic avant-garde and the re-emergent feminist theoretical and artistic revolution that had been interrupted by the rise of fascism and this internalisation of its gender politics by the Allied nations after the war. It is of utmost significance that the most telling and intellectually

⁷⁴ Though I am focusing on feminist and female artists who, since the 1970s, have addressed the theme of motherhood, there is a tradition of female representation of maternity that goes a long way back and that has also influenced contemporary women artists. Apart from the ubiquitous Frida Khalo (1907-1954), Pollock's influential book *Vision and Difference* (1988), for example, discusses artists Berthe Morisot (1841-95) and Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), whilst Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907) and Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) deserve a whole chapter in Betterton's *Intimate Distance* (1996).

sustained art practices of that moment in the 1970s addressed the problematic of motherhood at the social, ideological, discursive and psycho-symbolic levels. (2004: 119)

A central example in Pollock's essay of the re-emergence of a subversive avant-garde in the 1970s and its reworking of motherhood is Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document* (1973-79). A multi-section, multi-representational installation, Kelly's project chronicles her son's early life and the artist's relationship with him and attempts, in a way that owes something to Irigaray's study of motherhood, to "deconstruct psychoanalytical discourses on femininity and the assumed unity of the mother and child in order to articulate the mother's fantasies of possession and loss, and the child's insertion into the patriarchal order as gendered (male) subject" (W. Chadwick, 1990: 404). Kelly's work thus moves away from an idyllic, aseptic vision of motherhood, exploring the complexities of the situation and exposing the social processes that are at stake in the dynamics of mother and child.

Other artists have also been deeply interested in discussing the relationship between mother and child and the consequences of the same to the perception of the female body and self. In her account of contemporary feminist art practices focusing on maternity and assisted reproductive technologies, Betterton mentions works by several women artists (1996: 124-27). She also goes back to the 1970s in order to discuss Susan Hiller's *Ten Months* (1977-79), a photo-text installation built from the artist's pregnancy. The photographs document Hiller's pregnancy while the accompanying texts reveal the mother-to-be inner thoughts, contradictions and fears.

Chadwick's interest in the maternal body must therefore be understood as part of the feminist attention to motherhood and childbirth, a concern that is evidenced at the level of women's art practice and feminist criticism, both of which Chadwick was well aware of and deeply interested in. Although Chadwick's representation of motherhood bears various similarities with the way the topic is addressed in the work of other contemporary women artists (for example, her use of personal and autobiographic elements is also a strategy employed by Kelly and Hiller in their mentioned works), she follows a very unique and distinct route. As we shall see, Chadwick's answer to the complex network of contradictory meanings attached to the maternal body is to overcome the impasse by a synthesis of opposites through which the spiritual and the physical, the cosmic and the earthly, the sacred and the profane reclaim equal shares. Such strategy is part of a more general project that

aims to destroy the binarism of logocentric discourse and celebrate the fluidity of meanings, bodies and subjects.

1.5.2 Monstrous births

In the 1990s Chadwick created several works that engaged with the impact of scientific practices in the body. *Unnatural Selection* (1996) originated from a residency at the Assisted Conception Unit, King's College Hospital, London, where Chadwick got to know the procedures of in-vitro fertilisation, a process described by the artist as a frankensteinian field for creativity (Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 110). As a result, *Unnatural Selection* focuses on human pre-embryos, discarded possibilities of an in-vitro fertilization process, in order to represent the "body at intersection nature/medical; creation life/technological; maternity/birth" (Chadwick, Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 110).

Referring to this project, Warner draws attention to Chadwick's purpose of showing: "in the field of vision the interdependence between woman and future child: the cells that swim like starry galaxies on the wall of the exhibition are not individual beings but beings in potential. That potentiality has not been fulfilled because it can only be so after implantation and gestation in the mother's body" (1996, n. pag.). Her analysis has in mind the anti-abortion movement propaganda, "which constantly displays the embryo as a viable child-form entity separate from and seemingly independent of the maternal body" (1996, n. pag.). Also Buck stresses that *Unnatural Selection* is a reinstatement of "the notion of dependency while undermining the authoritative view of the foetus as a disconnected, solitary individual" (1996, n. pag.)⁷⁵. *Unnatural Selection* is therefore a work that provides a discussion of the changes brought by artificial processes of insemination to the understanding of maternity and the maternal body, a topic that is further underlined by Chadwick's own words: "Sanctity" of intimate + inviolate reproductive internal power of maternal body challenged + transgressed" (Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 114). Chadwick's last project proposes a fluid understanding of self and body identity and implies the maternal principle in order to overtake the fixed oppositions between the natural and the artificial, the sacred and the profane, the grotesque and the sublime, the self and the other.

⁷⁵ Both Warner and Buck refer to the importance given by Chadwick to "Foetal Images: the Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction", an essay written by Rosalind Pollack Petchesky on the anti-abortion movement's propaganda.

Around the same time, Chadwick was working on the *Cameos* series, a project that remains incomplete due to Chadwick's sudden death, in 1996. In similar ways to *Unnatural Selection*, *Cameos*, made with specimens from medical museums placed within sculpture-like frames, raised fundamental ethical questions about the origin of life and the meaning of subjectivity. In *Cyclops Cameo* (1995) [Fig. 15] a cycloptic foetus lies at the centre of the composition, encircled by a blue and yellow spiral or vortex. Chadwick fell in love with this grotesque creature while doing her research at the Royal College of Surgeons, in London, where she behaved in a way very similar to a scientist's in the age of Enlightenment, exploring with artistic eye human anatomy. There is an obvious contrast in this photograph or sculpture: the aborted foetus, a form of bodily waste usually looked at with revulsion and fear, exists in an abstract, idealised, and pure geometrical shape. Thanks to Chadwick's interest, the aberrant foetus and its freakiness escape the clinical eye of the medical student and are moved from the medical museum to the art gallery, where they can be admired. The foetus' removal from one exhibition space to another very different one intends to cause a similar movement in the way we look at it since instead of abhorrence, the Cyclops paradoxically evokes the beautiful and almost the sublime. The title of the work also shows that the monstrous being may be cherished as a cameo, that is, as a beautiful and exotic jewel, which further inverts the marginalisation of the abject and places the grotesque at the centre of artistic creation. This "re-centring of the grotesque" (1996: n. pag.), as David Alan Mellor labels it, is further emphasised by the frame given to the Cyclops, which suggests in its bright colours and vortex shape the abstraction and pureness of form searched for by High Modernism. By blending science, art and the grotesque Chadwick manages to disrupt the traditional separation of different socio-cultural domains while questioning the boundaries between the socially acceptable and the abject.



Figure 15 – Helen Chadwick, *Cyclops Cameo*. (1995)

Mellor notices too that the female body, more specifically the maternal body, is a crucial element in the *Cameos* series, for the foetus is physically as well as symbolically attached to and dependent of the mother's body. According to this critic, Chadwick: "acknowledged a gendered grotesque, by centring upon foetuses that were incorporated within the maternal body. Indeed, in remarks to Louisa Buck in January 1996, Helen Chadwick imagined these Cameos as 'canvas as maternal body'" (Buck, 1996: n. pag.). Mellor further explores this gendered grotesque by connecting it to the seventeenth-century theory that supposed the maternal imprinting of monstrosity on the embryo through the power of the mother's imagination (1996: n. pag.)⁷⁶. His comment is in line with Kristeva's theory of abjection, for Kristeva refers to the maternal body as the ultimate source of abjection. Chadwick's *Cyclops Cameo* reflects and simultaneously disrupts all these

⁷⁶ In *Monstrous Imagination* (1993) Marie-Hélène Huet provides an impressive analysis of how from classical antiquity to the Romantic era monstrous births bear witness to the fearsome power of female imagination. For an account of the fascinating discussion on the power of maternal imagination in the eighteenth-century see P.K. Wilson, "'Out of Sight, Out of Mind?': the Daniel Turner– James Blondel Dispute Over the Power of the Maternal Imagination' (1992).

readings of the maternal body. By treating the “canvas as maternal body” and by displaying in it a grotesque, unborn creature, Chadwick seems to mirror seventeenth-century concerns with the monstrous, lethal power of women’s imagination and echo Kristeva’s account of the abject maternal body and its threat to the subject’s formation: ultimately, the maternal body threatens the subject with its own death, an aspect that is also emphasised by the Cyclops— an aborted foetus. However, the artist disrupts such parallelism by recognizing in this grotesque being the sign of beauty and by embracing the monstrous.

Warner recalls Chadwick’s enthusiasm when the artist first saw the Cyclops baby: “she spontaneously found him utterly beautiful and was totally won, she said— she had no revulsion to overcome, but found her imagination began instantly to play on his features with a kind of passionate sympathy like love” (1996: n. pag.). Sladen goes even further, connecting Chadwick’s personal feelings towards the beings she found trapped in formalin jars with maternal love (2004b: 27). The love felt by Chadwick when dealing with these abject specimens is visually expressed by the modernist, smooth and curvilinear shapes revolving around the Cyclops⁷⁷. Hence, Chadwick’s artistic gesture transgresses binary oppositions, namely those opposing the abject to the beautiful, re-centres and empowers the Other, i.e. those placed at the margin of socio-cultural discourse and, in psychoanalytical terms, brings the maternal body from the semiotic to the symbolic space occupied by the signifying system of visual art.

Chadwick’s *Cyclops Cameo* materialises Kristeva’s theory on a woman’s marginal position under patriarchy and her subversive potential. In “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident” Kristeva presents women, and particularly mothers, whom the French critic places “at the opposite extreme of dissidence” (1977b: 296), as revolutionary subjects. For Kristeva, “[i]f pregnancy is a threshold between nature and culture, maternity is a bridge between singularity and ethics” (1977b: 297). In Kristeva’s analysis women occupy an ambiguous, liminal space, on the borders of the symbolic, language and discourse, and are, therefore, both inside and outside society: “a woman thus finds herself at the pivot of sociality— she is at once the guarantee and a threat to its stability” (1989: 297). Women have the possibility of disrupting the binary logic dominating one’s understanding of self and others. By focusing on a monstrous foetus and exploring the contradictory feelings it arises,

⁷⁷ Warner (1996: n. pag.) mentions that Chadwick was planning to add Hogarth’s ‘Line of Beauty’ to another of her monstrous cameos. The twisting, serpentine line considered by Hogarth as central to all forms of beauty was first exhibited on the title page of Hogarth’s aesthetic treatise *The Analysis of Beauty*, published in 1753. See Mark Hallett, “Hogarth’s Variety” (2006: 13-14).

Cyclops Cameo also addresses the disruptive potential of a liminal being or situation and connects that disruptive liminality to the mother's body.

1.5.3 *One Flesh*: the maternal body

A radical approach to the maternal body is also undertaken in an earlier work, *One Flesh* (1985) [Fig. 16], which was first exhibited as part of *Of Mutability*. Here Chadwick defies traditional religious representations of the Madonna and, consequently, one of the most dominant and conservative visual representations of motherhood.



Figure 16 – Helen Chadwick, *One Flesh* (1985).

The work had its origin in the birth of a baby from Chadwick's friend and neighbour Paula, an event the artist was invited to witness. The experience resulted in a collage of photocopies (undoubtedly a sacrilegious process in a religious depiction) that, nevertheless, still resembles the canonical religious representations of Our Lady with her baby child⁷⁸. Therefore, *One Flesh* intentionally plays with the powerful religious iconography created

⁷⁸ Warner's analysis of *One Flesh* stresses Chadwick's surrealist-like, outrageous approach to religious iconography by means of the collage process employed by the artist (1996: n. pag). For a brief discussion of the experimental and subversive role given by artists and art critics to collage in the twentieth-century see David Banash, "From Advertising to the Avant-Garde: Rethinking the Invention of Collage" (Jan. 2004, n. pag.).

around the figure of the Virgin Mary. On the one hand, the religious and holly connotations are still central to Chadwick's work: its shape is that of the altar piece and it suggests the Virgin Mary's purity and sinless nature by means of the cloak that throws this modern Madonna into a realm of sacred nobility and decorum and by her downcast eyes, signalling her modesty and protecting her from the viewer's piercing, voyeuristic gaze⁷⁹. On the other hand, such religious iconography is ironically disrupted when the artist superimposes the image of the Madonna with that of her friend, refusing the distinction between the profane and the sacred, the bodily and the spiritual, the secular and the religious. The sacred dimension of *One Flesh* is also obviously challenged by the fact that, contrary to so many visual representations of the Madonna with her baby, we are looking at the moment of childbirth, for the umbilical cord has just been cut by the mother, who holds a pair of scissors. Even in representations of the Nativity scene what we are given to see is the moment after birth, when Mary's body is already carefully wrapped up out of sight and Jesus' lies in the manger and separate from his mother's. Indeed, this painting tradition is built on a 'biological gap', given that it persistently revolves around an episode in Jesus' life that can only be visually represented by its absence. Hence, the Nativity scene suggests Christ's human condition without questioning his sanctity and sacredness and protects his and Mary's images from the profane and the bodily. In contrast, *One Flesh* is determined to reveal the body and to subversively expose the physical connection between mother and child by focusing on a moment when mother and child are, indeed, and to use Chadwick's expression, *one flesh*, an idea further stressed by the relevance given in the work to the umbilical chord.

⁷⁹ Notice how the cloak offers an intricate symbolism in *One Flesh*. It evokes the Madonna's mantle and is thus a sign of withdrawal from the worldly and into God, and a separation from the desires of the flesh. However, the Virgin Mary's cloak is generally blue, not red as in *One Flesh*. Blue signifies heaven and heavenly things and also constancy, purity, truth. By opposition, Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1982: 792-95) describe red as the colour of fire and blood, regarded universally as the symbol of the life-principle. When it is dark, red is nocturnal, female and secret and often connected with the womb, the soul, the libido and the heart. A richer red, slightly tinged with violet, is the emblem of power and has been reserved for emperors since the Romans. Chadwick was aware of the traditional display of the Virgin's garments for she made a note on the blue mantle and scarlet robe of the Madonna (see Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 118). In some medieval and renaissance paintings, including some by the fifteen-century Flemish painter Van Eyck, whose work, according to Warner, inspired Chadwick in *One Flesh* (1996: n. pag.), the Virgin is wearing a blue robe and a red mantle. In these paintings the red colour of the Virgin's mantle emphasises her role as a Queen or Empress of the Church and also her suffering. In *One Flesh* red is suggestive of intense passion. Nevertheless, Chadwick is playing with all these suggestions and linking them to cultural representations of motherhood and femininity. As for the Madonna's downcast eyes, they may also have ambivalent meanings, especially when seen in relation to *The Oval Court*. In *The Oval Court* the female subject appears in the pleasure-seeking swimming pool with closed eyes, which therefore seem to indicate a dream-like, ecstatic state. Such rapture could also be subjacent to *One Flesh* and to Chadwick's take on the experience of childbirth.

Other subversive elements can be found at the apex of Chadwick's collage: where one expected to see the representation of the Holy Ghost, which would confirm the sacredness and holiness of the moment and of the bodies that participate in it, there is a placenta, through which the foetus had been fed and protected from external danger, and above the placenta there is an even more impious image: a vagina with pierced labia. Body piercing is often used as a process of embellishment and its display in genitalia is frequently connected with erotic pleasure. The genital imagery present in *One Flesh* clearly disrupts the asexual image of the Madonna and motherhood, exposing the contradictions of such representation (maternity and childbirth experienced through an asexual and obliterated female body) and reclaiming sexuality and pleasure for the mother. From this interpretation, a question rises: is Chadwick merely refusing the sacredness intrinsic to the iconic visual representation of the Virgin Mary and her child, or is she conflating a revered image in Christianity with other very different meanings? The latter seems to be the case since in *One Flesh* the secular, profane and biological dimensions of childbirth coexist with the religious, sacred and holly images of the Madonna and the Son of God.

Chadwick's aesthetic strategy cannot but be seen as parodic in the sense given to the term by Linda Hutcheon. In *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* Hutcheon proposes a theory of parody based on the ubiquitous use of this process in modern artistic practice (1985: 1). She defines parody as "a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion. . . . Parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (1985: 6). Parody understood in this postmodern sense implies a creative dialogue with a given tradition, rendering this tradition obvious but also reworking it. Parody is a process with an underlying subversive intention and, as such, it requires a critical ironic distance, irony thus becoming the main rhetorical mechanism or strategy for parodic purposes (1985: 31). According to Hutcheon, the subversive practice initiated by parody eventually leads to an alteration in the meaning and even in the value of the original work (1985: 8).

Parody is a strategy frequently used by women artists who wish to actively engage with the history of art but who also feel the need to creatively and critically rework what is often an overwhelmingly masculine and misogynist tradition. Macedo, a propos of Paula Rego, the Portuguese, London-based painter, and her relationship with art tradition, speaks of a parodic revisiting, an ironic and subversive deconstruction of the 'grand narratives', ruminating on old models and forms (06/2001: 66-69). Chadwick's *One Flesh* reflects a

similar interest in pondering upon old models and forms and its parodic, ironic and subversive approach to traditional representations of the Madonna evidences the need to create other visual alternatives to this religious and canonical image. On the one hand, the artist's photocopied collage literally suggests a cheap imitation of the many "Madonna and Child" paintings that populate Italian art of the Renaissance period and that have been central to Catholic iconography ever since. On the other hand, Chadwick's approach to this tradition is not a mere replica of an archetypal representation of motherhood and the strange and uncanny elements introduced by the British artist bring irony to the forefront of *One Flesh* and the critical distance that Hutcheon believes to be central to parody, allowing the viewer to focus on the differences rather than on the similarities between the parodied original and its subversive new version. In conclusion, *One Flesh* revisits and disrupts the symbolic place granted to women and mothers in religious iconography. This process ironically culminates in the mother's pointing finger, which in Chadwick's work directs the viewer's look to the sex of the sacred child only to assert that this is a baby girl. Against a traditional image that can only give woman a place in the sacred family as the virgin mother, *One Flesh* proposes a heretic representation in which female subjectivity, the maternal body and the mother-daughter relationship occupy the sacred centre.

In "Stabat Mater", where the cult of the Virgin Mary and its implications for the social understanding of motherhood and femininity are discussed, Kristeva asks for a new discourse on the maternal body that would be capable of filling in the symbolic and spiritual gap found at the heart of modern discourses on motherhood and resulting from the demise of the cult of the Virgin Mary in modern society. According to Kristeva, the mother's body is an aspect "of the feminine psyche for which that [the Virgin Mary's] representation of motherhood does not provide a solution or else provides one that is felt as too coercive by twentieth-century women" (1977a: 182). "Stabat Mater" is a highly experimental essay in that observations on Kristeva's own experience of maternity, her personal description of the mother's body and of the complex relationship between mother and child, often presented in a poetic format, break up the main body of the text. This process supports Kristeva's interest in linking maternity and female creation, which is also referred by the critic in "A New Type of Intellectual: the Dissident" (1977b: 298). Two excerpts are enough to demonstrate the mentioned characteristics of Kristeva's text:

My body is no longer mine, it doubles up, suffers, bleeds, catches cold, puts its teeth in, slobbers, coughs, is covered with pimples, and it laughs (1977a: 167);

We love on that border, crossroads beings, crucified beings. A mother is neither nomadic nor a male body that considers itself earthly only in erotic passion. A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language— and it has always been so. (1977a: 178)

As the previous excerpts make clear, Kristeva's essay, initially published with the title "Héretique de l'amour", tries to provide a different account of the experience of motherhood and one that, being against Christian dogma and traditional discourses, can only be seen as sacrilegious and profane. Kristeva's 'heretical' description of motherhood is also 'her-ethical' due to her emphasis on maternal love and the fluid status of the maternal body, opened to the other. In other words, in "Stabat Mater" Kristeva emphasises the capacity given to women to generate new life and collapse the boundaries that separate self and other: "[a]lthough it concerns every woman's body, the heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed in the signifier nevertheless explodes violently with pregnancy (the threshold of culture and nature) and the child's arrival (which extracts woman out of her oneness and gives her the possibility— but not the certainty— of reaching out to the other, the ethical)" (1977a: 182). It is the liminal and boundless status of the maternal body, opened to otherness, that is later perceived by Kristeva (for example, in *The Feminine and the Sacred*) as the way through which women can gain access to the sacred.

"Stabat Mater" has deeply influenced feminist praxis since the 1980s and may have provided Helen Chadwick with a theoretical and analytical tool for discussing, in works like *One Flesh*, mothers and their bodies⁸⁰. In fact, Kristeva and Chadwick seem to believe in a similar concept of motherhood and the maternal body, freeing the mother from the religious constraints that repress and tie her to an unblemished, sinless, virginal, desexualised and disembodied condition, while still granting the sacred to the mother and her relationship with the child. In other words, for both Chadwick and Kristeva the sacred maternal is radical and subversively reached through the mother's body and not through its denial. This conceptual difference would bring about a veritable symbolic and cultural revolution (Kristeva speaks of a "herethics" in the conclusion to "Stabat Mater" [1977a:185]), capable of surpassing the old oppositions between mind and body, saving the maternal body from

⁸⁰ Kristeva's "Stabat Mater" was first translated into English in 1985, the year Chadwick created *One Flesh*.

abjection, carrying women into the symbolic and, last but not least, reaching for the ethical, that is, the other.

In her preparatory notes for *One Flesh*, Chadwick confirms that the interdependence between mother and child is a central notion to her artwork, which emphasises that interdependence by using the images of the placenta and the umbilical cord: “Mother + child linked by placenta + umbilicus” (Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 117)⁸¹. Also suckling, an activity represented in *One Flesh*, establishes a bond between those two still so interdependent bodies and beings⁸². By focusing so much of the viewer’s attention on these aspects and by presenting one of them (the placenta) in what is usually a sacred position in religious iconography, *One Flesh* recovers the mother-child dyad and hints at a different concept of subjectivity, one less based on individual boundaries than in fluidity and interdependence.

Not only does Chadwick’s revision of the relationship between mother and child engage with Kristeva’s analysis of motherhood, but it is also close to Irigaray’s discussion of the topic. Indeed, *One Flesh* seems to translate to the visual realm the French critic’s words, particularly those found in “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother”⁸³. In this essay Irigaray revises Freud’s notion of femininity as psychoanalysis’ ‘dark continent’, relating it to the mother: “the relationship with the mother is a mad desire, because it is the ‘dark continent’ *par excellence*. It remains in the shadows of our culture; it is its night and its hell” (Irigaray, 1981: 35). According to Irigaray, elements linked to the maternal body and the original encounter between mother and child, such as the womb, the placenta and the umbilical cord, have been “denied, disavowed, sacrificed to build an exclusively masculine symbolic world” (1981: 41). Against this omission of the mother and the maternal body in the patriarchal and dominant discourse, Irigaray urges women to reclaim a place in the symbolic order for motherhood and for the relationship between mother and child. That’s what Irigaray endeavours too in her essay, granting linguistic and symbolic space to the womb, “our first

⁸¹ Chadwick’s preparatory notes for *One Flesh* are very much influenced by Frida Khalo’s work, which also inspired Chadwick for several aspects of *Of Mutability*, particularly for *The Oval Court*. In the context of her research for *One Flesh*, Chadwick was particularly interested in Khalo’s use of blood imagery and its relation to the placenta and the umbilical cord.

⁸² There is a strong iconographic tradition around the representation of Mary breastfeeding her child. Chadwick was aware of this tradition since in her notes she refers to “‘Madonna Caritas’: suckling of virgin by child” (Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 118).

⁸³ “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother” was a paper presented at a conference in Montreal in 1981 and first published in that same year. It was translated into English in 1991, so well after Chadwick created *One Flesh*, a work from 1985. Not having found any references to Irigaray’s essay in the Helen Chadwick archive, I believe Chadwick’s work was not influenced by Irigaray’s words on maternity. However, that does not deny the similarities in Chadwick’s and Irigaray’s approach to the topic, which suggests how much of Chadwick’s work is tuned to the issues raised by feminist criticism.

nourishing earth, first waters, first envelopes, where the child was *whole*, the mother *whole* through the mediation of her blood” (1981: 39). Irigaray’s text also recovers other elements representative of the primal encounter between the child and the mother’s body: she refers to the navel, “this most irreducible mark of birth this most irreducible trace of identity” (1981: 39), and, like Chadwick in *One Flesh*, gives a crucial importance to the placenta, “the first house to surround us, whose halo we carry with us everywhere” (1981: 40).

Feminist art critic Griselda Pollock has thoroughly discussed the significance of a different concept of subjectivity in feminist-oriented art and related this difference with the feminine maternal. Her thoughts are deeply ingrained in a psychoanalytical framework and have been very much influenced by psychoanalyst and artist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, whose theory and practice determine Pollock’s conceptualization of the maternal as the matrix. The matrix is, according to Pollock:

[N]ot a characteristic or essence of women as defined by the phallic division of the sexes into plus and minus, man and not-man. It is an originary sexual difference premised on subjectivity as always and already an encounter of an I and non-I that is co-habituating. The condition in which this structure arises in the Real is late pregnancy when we can imagine this co-affecting, co-emergence of two subjective entities totally defined in that state by the presence of the unknown other that does not confront a full subject as a full object. These becomings entities share a borderspace of subjectivising elements and affects. (2004: 108)

Pollock’s critical discourse on the feminine and the maternal is grounded on a fluid concept of bodies and subjectivities and takes its model from the relationship between mother and baby in late pregnancy. She is determined to find “nonsymbolized fragments of the body, and traces of an archaic maternal body” (Pollock, 1996: 79), repressed at the level of the symbolic, but that “may in art achieve a borderline visibility” (1996: 79). Her understanding of the artwork is shaped by Ettinger’s belief in the inscription of another, anti-patriarchal gaze in visual art: “[e]choes of archaic partial relations and feminine *jouissance* of before-as-beside the phallic era, which are neither fabricated nor entirely appropriated by the current Symbolic. Such echoes are invested as a gaze and embedded in painting *beyond* the visible as *in-side* that is *be-side* it” (Ettinger, 1996b: 97). This subversive gaze escapes the specularization and mastery of a phallic regime of sexual difference, since it exists beyond appearance and therefore it is “not locked into this logic of subject/object,

presence/absence, see/seer, (self)/different (other)” (Pollock, 1996: 78). Pollock therefore speaks of a need to: “rethink the experiences of artistic activity through the prism of a feminine pressure on the Symbolic, the feminine as a continuous shadow on the phallic order, a sub-symbolic dimension that certain art forms and certain theories reach out to, offering signifiers for a momentary glimpse and an uncanny touch” (1996: 80). She favours a feminist analysis of those “inscriptions in the feminine” in order to make visible “a radical poetics of difference that is feminine not through depositing some gendered essence but through rupturing the phallic norms of fixed gender, fixed identity, fixed sexualities, fixed boundaries” (1996: 76).

Some of Chadwick’s works can be read through Pollock’s (and Ettinger’s) critical framework since they propose a different concept of subjectivity and the body based on the relationship between mother and child: *Unnatural Selection* offers a positive metaphor for a subversively fluid concept of subjectivity by embracing organisms produced through the process of in-vitro fertilization and placing them in a chain that stresses the interrelationship of beings; *Cyclops Cameo* hints at the bond between mother and child and saves from abjection what lies at the margins of the social, thus supporting a feminist critique of the patriarchal models of subjectivity that, based on self-contained units, form and fixity, have defined and restricted the concept of being human and a subject; and in *One Flesh* the repressed semiotic world of the feminine maternal is brought to the symbolic surface and a co-emergence in difference is made visible through the symbols or signifiers that reach that threshold surface.

1.5.4 *Lofos Nymphon*: revisiting motherland

In a series entitled *Lofos Nymphon* (1987) [Fig. 17], Chadwick again explores the theme of motherhood and represents a mother-child relationship, which now possesses a more obvious autobiographical element. The series is part of a group of works to which Chadwick gave the collective title *Lumina*, which occurred to her after seeing by lamplight the prehistoric paintings in the caves of Perigord (Chadwick, 1989: 68). Chadwick’s trip to these French caves also suggested formal tools and materials, since the works produced by the artist around this period generally make use of projected images on the wall. Finally, the prehistoric caves raise the issue of history, of shedding light into the past through an excavation process that is evident in *Lofos Nymphon*, a project regarded by Chadwick as an encounter with her own pre-history (1989: 75).



Figure 17 – Helen Chadwick, *Lofos Nymphon* (1987).

Lofos Nymphon consists of five egg-shaped canvases onto which Chadwick projected slides of her and her mother, standing naked, sometimes embraced and against a Greek landscape. This geographical location plays an important role in the sequence as it played an important role in the artist's life: Chadwick's mother is Greek, although she left Greece for England in 1946 to join the artist's father, a British soldier who had been on active service in the Mediterranean (Sladen, 2004b: 19)⁸⁴. *Lofos Nymphon* offers different views of Athens and several archaeological and historical Athenian sites, seen at different times of the day and from the balcony of the house Chadwick's mother had to abandon when she moved to England⁸⁵. The end result is "a panorama from the Hellenistic roots and flowering of culture through to the founding of the new Greek state" (Chadwick, 1989: 76).

⁸⁴ Chadwick used to spend her summer holidays with her mother's family in Greece, an event recorded by the artist in her diaries and hinted at in *Ego Geometria Sum* (1983). I am thankful to Victoria Morsley and Ian Kaye, from the Henry Moore Institute, for information on Chadwick's life and family.

⁸⁵ The mentioned Athenian sites are the Asteroskopeion (an astronomical observatory from the nineteenth-century), the Agia Marina (a church built in the 1920s), the Agora (the heart of ancient Athens and the centre of Athenian civic life), the Acropolis (the hill where the Parthenon stands) and the Pnyx (a large, theatre-like area where the assembly of Athenians held its meetings).

Chadwick explains in her catalogue *Enfleshings* that her mother's family home was set at the top of the hill that in ancient times was formally dedicated to the nymphs (hence the title given to *Lofos Nymphon*, which can be translated as "nymphs of the hill") and was a gift from the artist's great-grandfather to his daughter, a dowry to be passed down the female line (1989: 76). By leaving the city and losing her name in marriage, Chadwick's mother also lost the house and, as Chadwick concludes: "the historical continuum was broken, leaving a sequence of cuts unhealed" (1989: 76). *Lofos Nymphon* thus emerges as an attempt to re-establish that continuum or at least to try and heal "the wound of difference" (Chadwick, 1989: 75). This reading highlights the meaning of the single thread running through the canvases, linking the different images and offering a complex and relevant symbolic narrative. Chadwick further explains:

Once knots in the navel-string were used to prophesy the future. Here looking back to the source of selfhood in that first and fatal life-giving cut, are five loci for reading, nodes on a thread, to re-evolve the egg, the cartouche of that swollen pendulous body. Together, out of sundered fragments, a portraiture woven of mother and daughter may be born. (1989: 75)⁸⁶

Chadwick emphasises how the connected canvases try to create a journey back to the past, through her own family history. Her words also draw attention to other parallel themes running through *Lofos Nymphon*, namely, the attempt to recover the moment when mother and child were so deeply connected, not least of all by the umbilical chord, and the desire to re-establish the union of mother and daughter, who are represented in *Lofos Nymphon* in each other's arms. Not only are these themes central to the artwork, but they are also intrinsic to Chadwick's cultural and family (pre)history since, as previously stated, Chadwick's personal link to Greece is maternal and the history of that link tells the artist about a kind of matriarchal system that was destroyed when the family moved to England to follow the father. Hence, Chadwick's effort to unearth her geographical and cultural roots is matched by her determination to establish a connection with her mother and maternal lineage. This parallelism is clear when the artist affirms: "[p]erhaps it is timely to consider geography, *and* as the female noun *Geographia*. If the body in question is female, so also is this place, home, an inherited site" (1989: 76).

⁸⁶ Chadwick also refers to the thread in *Lofos Nymphon* as "the narrative cord of a balcony rail" (1989: 76), in reference to the balcony of her Greek family home, from which the slides of Athens were taken.

As stated by Sladen, “*Lofos Nymphon* conflates the mother’s body with homeland, and creates a fantasy of return to each” (2004b: 19). The return to a place of origin is emphasised by the shape given to the canvases— egg-like, thus pointing to the moment of birth. In an ekphrastic text found in her catalogue *Enfleshings*, Chadwick again refers to the search for an origin and asks if the mother and the mother’s body could be the answer to that search:

As a modern, with no centre, no core of belief, is it possible to encounter the void of Origin, to give it form and a body and so to return to the site of beginning? Looking for such a place, might the maternal offer a locus, between birth and identity, there from the moment of separation. . . . Facing open rupture, the wound of difference, what a solace it would be to construct a haven for the disembodied memories of pleasure at the mother’s breast— a chamber where the oscillation of dread and longing merge together and I might resurrect this lost archaic contact safely, quelling my fear of her depths. (1989: 74-75)

Chadwick’s words follow Kristeva’s on the importance of redefining motherhood and its symbolism in modern times. They are also contaminated with psychoanalytical allusions to the fear of the mother’s body, the fear of losing one’s identity, together with the desire to recapture that blissful state when “the wound of difference” has not yet been opened and when mother and child, self and other are still indistinguishable.

In *Lofos Nymphon* Chadwick is searching for the mother and for a blissful paradise, issues widely debated by feminist criticism, which Chadwick knew and read with avid interest, while growing up and working in England. Therefore, her interest in her mother and her mother’s land is a consequence of her family roots but, paradoxically, also of having been uprooted, since her Greek origins are re-imagined (also in the sense of made into images) through the historical, social and cultural situation of England, where the artist lived.

Chadwick’s appropriation of her mother’s homeland follows the structure described by humanist geographers when discussing the relation between identity and place, particularly in relation to migrant experiences. For Ernst Van Alphen the de-essentialization of place resulting from modern migratory movements that create places of hybrid cultures does not simply mean the radical disconnection and displacement of place from culture:

“[o]ne could even argue, that because of (virtual) migrancy, the relationship between cultural identity and place has become more crucial. The difference is that we are no longer speaking about geographical place, but rather about imagined place” (2002: 56). Van Alphen also clarifies how ‘imagined’ is not the same as ‘imaginary’: “imagined places do have a connection with a place that exists geographically. However, the mode in which this geographic place is experienced is ontologically different: geographic place is experienced not through real interaction, but rather through the imagination” (2002: 56). This difference means that when dealing with experiences of migration, imagination and memory are not opposing mental processes but intermingled ones, turning remembering into an active, creative activity and blending present, past and future. Indeed, the present is at stake in this rather fluid vision of migrant identity, since the “act of imagining homeland identity is radically framed by the historical dimensions of the place where the imagining is taking place” (Van Alphen, 2002: 67).

In Chadwick’s *Lofos Nymphon* ‘mother-land’ becomes an imagined country, that is, a place with geographical roots but reworked through memory, imagination and the historical conditions experienced by the artist in Britain. Through this process, Chadwick is able to use her maternal cultural heritage and the actual place where her mother used to live as devices in order to create a visual moment when the daughter returns home, that is, to the mother’s warm body and love, and heals the wound of difference. This is a process confirmed by Chadwick in *Enfleshings*:

From night through dawn to dusk, proceeds illuminated the approach of our re-membered body that is in unison the dome of the observatory, the church’s breasts, the stomach of the Agora, the navel of the Acropolis and the genitals of the Pnyx. Pausing in the quiet melancholic drifts of daydream, I greet these fluctuating rhythms. Polymorphic rhythms of homecoming. (1989: 76)

Chadwick’s re-remembering of the mother’s body is not devoid of a sacred dimension, for it suggests a return to a paradisiacal place and a mythical moment, aspects emphasised in the slides by the abundance of Greek religious temples in the background and by the title chosen for the series: though minor, nymphs are still important deities in Greek mythology. In *Lofos Nymphon* Chadwick also shows that female bodies, whether young or old, can be perceived as sacred and divine, as well as earthly and profane, but above all as bodies in their own

right. She, therefore, proposes a different look at maternity, answering to Kristeva's and Irigaray's desire for the existence of a new, contemporary discourse on motherhood. *Lofos Nymphon* also corroborates Pollock's and Ettinger's belief in the existence of a matrixial element in the visual field that allows for a glimpse of a sub-symbolic and disruptive form of subjectivity based on fluidity and in-betweenness.

Moreover, Chadwick's depiction of the mother-daughter relationship in *Lofos Nymphon* engages with psychoanalytical theories on the subject's formation as well as with the feminist counterproposal. Freud established a model for the ambivalent and complex relation between mother and daughter that took the development of the male subject as the norm and showed a profound discomfort and puzzlement regarding the development of the female self⁸⁷. To put it briefly, in Freudian terms the mother-daughter relationship is doomed from the very beginning due to the lack, the hostility and the envy that both mother and daughter share⁸⁸.

Freud's account of the construction of gendered subjectivity is no doubt damaging for a more positive understanding of the relation between mother and daughter, as feminists are well aware. Kristeva has briefly addressed the issue in "Stabat Mater", where she mentions that a woman's desire to be singular, "alone of all her sex" (Warner, 1976), gives rise to a feeling of complacency or anger towards other women, who dare to aspire to the same (Kristeva, 1977a: 180-82). However, though exposing the problems raised by a psychoanalytical interpretation of the relations between women, Kristeva accepts the underlying structure of subjective and female development referred by psychoanalysis⁸⁹. For a more disruptive reading of psychoanalysis, one needs to turn to Irigaray, who was expelled from Lacan's École Freudienne after presenting *Speculum de l'Autre Femme*, her doctoral thesis, in 1974.

In Irigaray's writings the mother-daughter relationship is given a fundamental place. In "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother" Irigaray addresses the prevailing images

⁸⁷ Kristeva goes even further and in "Stabat Mater" concludes that: "[t]he fact remains, as far as the complexities and pitfalls of maternal experience are involved, that Freud offers only a massive nothing" (1977a: 178-79).

⁸⁸ See Freud's essay "Femininity" (1933) for a classic psychoanalytical analysis of the mother-daughter relationship.

⁸⁹ Grosz draws attention to Kristeva's acceptance of most of the psychoanalytical principles regarding women and the formation of female subjectivity: "in her textual analyses, her use of Lacanian and Freudian, as well as Kleinian frameworks, she is uncritical of her sources and affirms their various misogynistic, phallogocentric presuppositions. This is particularly problematic in her use of psychoanalytic models, which rely on the correlation of femininity and the maternal with castration" (1989: 63).

regarding this inter-subjective relationship and proposes positive and alternative models to the ones provided by Freud and his followers. For Irigaray, a new understanding of the mother-daughter dyad would imply the representation of women beyond their maternal status and the establishment of a genealogy of women, that is, a history of maternal connections and relations that have been omitted by the phallogentric and patronymic discourse:

It is also necessary, if we are not to be accomplices in the murder of the mother, for us to assert that there is a genealogy of women. . . . Given our exile in the family of the father-husband, we tend to forget this genealogy of women, and we are often persuaded to deny it. Let us try to situate ourselves within this female genealogy so as to conquer and keep our identity. (1981: 44)

Above all, Irigaray's project involves a change in the way women engage with their own mothers, which must no longer be in terms of rivalry and anger. The debt that women owe to their mothers is particularly hard to acknowledge under patriarchy since the mother's ability to act as a woman is dramatically curtailed and the daughter is forced into 'exile', cut off from access to the woman-mother (Grosz, 1989: 123).

Against the patriarchal understanding of the mother-daughter relationship, Irigaray argues that "[n]either little girl nor woman must give up love for their mother. Doing so uproots them from their identity, their subjectivity" (1981: 44). In "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" Irigaray considers an anti-patriarchal economy of love, in which woman is not reduced to being an *object* of desire but is also a *subject* in love, a subject *desiring*. This is demonstrated in her text by briefly addressing the mother-daughter relationship, which, for the French critic, is a relation between subjects repressed under patriarchy: "[w]ithout relationships between both natural and spiritual mothers and daughter, that are relationships between subjects, without cultural recognition of the divinity of this genealogy, how can a woman remain the lover [*l'amante*] of a man who belongs to the line of a Father of God?" (1991: 186).

Chadwick's work establishes in the visual field the same re-evaluation of the maternal feminine and the mother-daughter relationship that Irigaray advocates in her texts. *Lofos Nymphon*, in particular, makes visible the artist's 'prehistory' and her primal affective and physical connection with the mother and therefore rejects the condition of exile from the

‘maternal continent’ described by Irigaray. Through this work Chadwick searches for a female genealogy and seeks to establish a link between the artist, her Greek mother and her Greek ancestors, making Greece the work’s geographical, cultural and visual background. She also attempts to recover the lost bond between mother and child and, consequently, to establish a different way of perceiving self and other. As for *One Flesh*, it re-conceptualises the female body in that it goes beyond the conventional representation of maternity, focusing instead on female fruition and pleasure, a strategy that rescues woman from a purely maternal function, creating instead an image of woman as a subject in her own right. In addition, *One Flesh* focuses too on a female genealogy and reclaims a (sacred) history for the mother-daughter dyad.

The works under consideration in this section demonstrate how deeply tuned to feminist criticism Chadwick was, particularly when it came to her representation and re-interpretation of motherhood. Her remarks vis-a-vis *Lofos Nymphon* cannot but bring to mind feminists’ thoughts on the maternal feminine and their analysis of a religious and patriarchal discourse on motherhood, as well as feminism’s belief in a necessary redefinition of the role of mothers and daughters:

The motif of the Mother and Child consoles our fall from this first hearth of pleasure promising a union beyond the one flesh. Idealised and devotional, the Virgin’s love is pure and unconditional. Of spotless body, she can return as bride and lover to her son. This is our Christian legacy. For a woman of human lineage to couple female with female is difficult, since embraces of love in sameness lie in the realm of the unspoken and forbidden. . . . Here, looking back at the source of selfhood in that first and fatal life-giving cut, are five loci for reading, nodes on a thread, to re-evoke the egg, the cartouche of that swollen pendulous body. Together, out of sundered fragments, a portraiture woven of mother and daughter may be born. (Chadwick, 1989: 75-76)

Not only is Chadwick participating in the feminist project and in the dissident female avant-garde described by Pollock (2004) when she reveals, as in the citation above, that she intends to recover the lost bond between mother and daughter, but also when she redefines women’s social role and subject position, celebrating, and no longer denying, their bodily

pleasure and bringing them to the symbolic, where a masculine society, history and culture await to be changed:

I call for the bodies of women to re-enter the stage of the city, to recast it at the edge of history and at the limits of representation, passing into vistas of presence unto absence, desire into *jouissance*. . . . In the gentle ebb and flow of departure to return, separation to union, from daughter to mother to city, history and culture might happily admit to being feminised. (Chadwick, 1989: 75-76)

1.6 The perils of female self-representation

1.6.1 Women in art history: the female nude

As I have already emphasised throughout the course of this chapter, art history evidences a preponderant tradition of male self-representation, affirming the artist's mastery and control over his art and the world. This control is extended to women, who traditionally take the position of models, objects of the male artist's attention and proof of his talent⁹⁰. Occupying a central place in the history of Western art, particularly since the eighteenth-century (Nead, 1992), and evidencing men's scrutinizing and mastering gaze over the female body, the most obvious consequence of this masculine hegemony in visual art is the female nude.

Women artists have always been, sometimes painfully, aware of the place allocated to their sex in art tradition and, consequently, of the ambiguous, contradictory nature of their role as artists (and no longer objects). Nevertheless, they have tried to challenge a profoundly gendered art system by working within the genre of the self-portrait. When she inscribes her work in the highly-regarded tradition of self-representation, the woman artist is subverting her role as the passive model, exposed to the male artist's and viewer's gaze, and occupying an unprecedented position of power. This is undoubtedly a radically transgressive move for, as Linda Nochlin explains, "[w]hile we are culturally conditioned to expect the

⁹⁰ The objectification of women in art tradition and the oppositional and hierarchical place occupied by the male painter and the female model in that tradition reflect the binary of sexual difference exposed by feminist criticism as the underlying dichotomy in all forms of oppositions that structure discourse, the self and society. Art history has, therefore, been under intense scrutiny by feminist art critics, who have exposed the power relations and the sexual difference inherent to the visual arts. See especially Griselda Pollock (1988), Linda Nochlin (1988) and Lynda Nead (1992).

subject of a self-portrait to be male, we do not expect him to be nude; in the case of a woman, our expectations are reversed: while we certainly expect her to be nude, we do not expect her to be the subject of a self-portrait” (1988: 103).

Nochlin remarks also imply the perils of female self-representation, particularly when the woman artist decides to represent her naked body, for even if this strategy translates an effort to assert personal identity, as well as a female voice and power, it cannot be easily dissociated from a powerful tradition regarding the mastering of women and female bodies through the male’s gaze. Sally Potter concludes that “[t]he female body, nude or clothed, is arguably so overdetermined that it cannot be used without being, by implication, abused” (1980: 291), suggesting that replacing a female for a male subject is just not enough if the power structure built from the relation established between a masculine ‘look’ and a feminine ‘being looked at’ (Mulvey, 1975) still frames the artwork, and matters become worse if that female subject happens to be naked. In short, a woman’s naked body is still read as a nude body due to the prevailing phallogocentric discourse that permeates cultural phenomena such as visual art. Therefore, although the representation of one’s life, self and body remains an attractive strategy for a feminist-oriented art committed to exploring issues of female identity and subjectivity, it is still a mine field for women artists who wish to work on their bodies.

Chadwick’s work from the 1970s relied on the artist’s body for the execution of her projects: in *Bargain Bed Bonanza* and *The Latex Glamour Rodeo* Chadwick’s body is almost invisible, hidden behind the mattresses and the latex costumes, but in *In the Kitchen* it is glimpsed inside the kitchen gadgets on display. Throughout her career, Chadwick will persist in representing her body, which sometimes is also exhibited together with biographical details. Such is the case in *Lofos Nymphon*, which depicts Chadwick’s body intertwined with her mother’s. Nevertheless, the explicit use of autobiographical elements and a strategy of self-representation is more expressive in Chadwick’s projects from the 1980s: in 1982, instead of employing models and presenting other people’s experiences, as the artist had previously done in *Train of Thought* (1978) and *Model Institution* (1981), Chadwick decided to focus on her own self, body and life, producing her first explicitly autobiographical work— *Ego Geometria Sum*. This move is intended as a return to the self, as Chadwick explained later, in an interview from 1994: “I felt more and more alienated from my own sense of myself, so it was time to do something for me about me” (*apud* Haworth-Booth, 1996: n. pag.).

1.6.2 The personal is political

An approach to the autobiographical elements and to self-representation in Chadwick's work is enriched by a contextualization indebted to feminist criticism⁹¹. Since the 1970s, one of feminism's main mottos has been 'the personal is political', an expression attracting several and disparate interpretations. Macedo and Amaral affirm that the slogan redefines individual experience as a social process and, as such, it questions the distinction between the public and the private spheres (2005: 160, my translation). If this meaning reflects the feminist need to expose how a woman's life is determined by the cultural, political and ideological structures that shape the self into accepted and normative forms of subjectivity, it also emphasises how a woman's struggle on a private and personal level can have an impact in the conditions of women as a distinct social group. Moreover, 'the personal is political' can be understood in relation to identity and the body. As de Beauvoir affirmed, "[o]n ne naît pas femme; on le devient" (1949: 13); feminism has accordingly stressed that the construction of female identity is experienced through the body, this being a social and culturally encoded place where power relations and gendered identities are developed. The feminist slogan, therefore, also emphasises that the body is not merely a site of biological determinism but of social and political struggle. Finally, the expression captures in a catchphrase feminists' desire to give women voice and a positive concept of female identity, refusing their function as objects and the passive place traditionally attributed to them. In this context, 'the personal is political' reflects feminism's aspiration to a new, more affirmative and active role for women in the social, the cultural and the political.

A similar pro-active goal often underlies the autobiographical penchant exhibited by some feminist critics and the interest in self-representation shared by many women artists⁹². For them, autobiography and self-representation are productive, constructive and

⁹¹ Though the term autobiography is commonly used in a literary context, it is still relevant in visual art, which can be understood, in similar terms to the literary text, as a symbolic process of signification, but built through a visually encoded system.

⁹² In terms of critical discourse, French feminist Hélène Cixous, who frequently writes in a highly personal style, Kristeva, who in "Stabat Mater" (1977a) blends her personal experience of motherhood with her reflections on the Virgin Mary, and Nicole Ward Jouve, particularly in *White Women Speaks with Forked Tongue* (1991), provide good examples of autobiographical texts. Moreover, traumatic and body-related experiences such as rape, death and disease have often been described and discussed in personal, autobiographical terms by feminist critics. For example, in *The Cancer Journals* (1980) feminist poet Audre Lorde considers her fight with breast cancer. In these cases, the creation of a personal text should be seen as an effort to give voice, and thus power, to the silenced woman who experiences a marginal situation, as well as an attempt to explore the subject's sense of identity through these crucial life experiences.

empowering ways of re-inscribing female's experience, body and identity in history, culture and the social. In their effort to make women the first-person narrators of their own lives and to make visible and recognised women's experiences, needs and desires, autobiography and self-representation have become strategies constitutive of an identity politics, understood by Macedo and Amaral as a process of self-awareness (2005: 101).

A much-discussed example of female self-representation in the visual arts is Mary Kelly's work. In the 1970s and 1980s Kelly focused on the personal (most clearly in *Post-Partum Document*) but avoided direct representation of the artist's body in its commitment to reject the traditional and patriarchal mastery of women through the gaze. Instead, self and inter-subjective examination was constructed through language, data and objects, some of which acting as fetishes, that is, as objects replacing direct bodily representation. Around the same time, Cindy Sherman was exploring in her photographic work the clichés relating to femininity and the female body that were produced by mainstream cinema and other visual fields such as advertising. Sherman addresses these issues through the constant use of herself and her body, which acquires the rigid signs presented by stereotypical personifications of femininity. For example, in the *Film Stills* series, produced in the 1970s, Sherman adopts the pose of B-movie actresses, whereas in *Historic Portraits*, created towards the end of the 1980s, she moulds herself and her body in the shape of iconic women from the Great Masters tradition. At the centre of these projects is always Sherman, but the artist hides her body under layers of makeup or prosthetic masks in order to emphasise her creation of a fictional persona. Sherman may then be playing with the elements of self-portraiture but her approach produces something quite different in that it denies an intrinsic and fixed subjectivity. One could also say that she avoids the mastery of the gaze by showing a hole (the hole of femininity as Lacan famously put it) at the centre of her work⁹³.

More recently, other women artists have been working with similar themes and strategies. A good example is Sarah Lucas's work. On the one hand, when Lucas poses for the camera with the commonplace look of a male punk or a misogynist (most expressively in the *Self-Portrait* series, produced between 1990 and 1998 and again in 1999), she is expressing the idea of masculinity as a construction and threatening to destabilize the binary structures that oppose male to female subjectivity; on the other hand, Lucas's roleplaying

⁹³ Sherman's aesthetic options raise several problems for a feminist deconstruction of stereotypical notions of women and femininity, since they can reinforce these same stereotypes. By using recurrent images of women in advertising and the visual arts and emphasising the meaning of woman as a hole, Sherman participates in the phallogentric discourse that denies women a positive concept of subjectivity.

could merely be reproducing the stereotypical visions of identity and the self that come from mass media and advertising. Nevertheless, Lucas's act of self-representation is always anti-personal, even when the artist makes her self and her body the centre of the artwork. Her paradoxical strategy of self-effacement through self-revelation resembles Sherman's but seems quite different from the results created by Tracey Emin's process of self-representation.

Emin's work, which, like Lucas's also started in the 1990s, histrionically embraces self-representation and autobiography as acts of self-exposure, frequently allowing moments of voyeurism into Emin's swaggering life, body and sexuality. In *Everybody I've Ever Slept With: 1963-1995* (1995), Emin unashfully inscribes her lovers on the inside walls of a tent, among references to her family, friends and to her aborted foetus; in *My Bed* (1998) the artist brings to the art gallery her own bed with stained sheets, empty bottles and fag butts and *Abortion 1* (1995) reveals Emin's traumatic experience after an abortion. Betterton establishes a crucial difference between Emin's work and the work of someone like Mary Kelly, since the former "draws on affective experiences largely shaped within mass culture", whereas the latter "engaged in a critical practice of deconstruction" (2001: 295). Moreover, "whereas Kelly sought strategically to distance the viewer from identification with the autobiographical content of her work, Emin insistently adopts a confessional mode in which she herself is the 'star' of her own narrative" (Betterton, 2001: 295). Betterton's remarks, with their insistence on the relation between Emin's work and mass culture and visual consumption (the critic uses the words *star* and *mass culture* in her characterization of Emin's work), makes suspicious the artist's subjective process of self-revelation and self-inquiry. Indeed, Betterton's analysis of Emin also stresses that "[t]he highly mediated procedures involved in Emin recreating her own life narratives as 'art' is seldom recognized by critics, who are happy to take her word for it when she, somewhat disingenuously, describes this confessional art as the truth" (2001: 296). Despite the differences established by Betterton, her assessment of Emin's process of self-disclosure already suggests a connection between her work and Kelly's in that they both evidence how problematic and complex the representation of the female body and self is in the visual field. More importantly, Emin, Sherman and Lucas also remind us that women's self-representation is not necessarily the same as women's self-exposure.

1.6.3 *Ego Geometria Sum*: the individual, the social and the cosmic

As previously mentioned, Chadwick's work in the early 1980s signals a departure from the more socially committed projects created by the artist in the 1970s and a turn to self-representation and autobiography⁹⁴. Chadwick's interest in the circumstances of her own life culminates in *Ego Geometria Sum* (1982-84) [Fig. 18], an installation born out of a placement project at three Newcastle schools, where the artist worked with children in order to create life-size portraits, which were exhibited afterwards in art galleries in Newcastle and London⁹⁵. While working with these students, Chadwick became increasingly interested in her own life and began an exhaustive research into the facts, the places, the objects and the memories that had contributed to her development. Her notebooks show that this autobiographical research expressed a desire to look back and re-examine memory in order to regain equilibrium and throw the past off (Chadwick, Notebook 2003.19/E/5: 6). *Ego Geometria Sum* is thus a project that reflects Chadwick's effort to come to terms with her past.

⁹⁴ Frida Khalo is often mentioned as a crucial foremother in terms of female self-representation (Meskimmon, 1996: 79-80). Horlock refers to the Mexican painter's search for the essence of identity and her obsession with physical reality as an influence in Chadwick's work (2004: 33-34). According to Horlock, "Chadwick greatly admired her, considering her a harbinger of women artists' desire to represent, express and assert themselves through their bodies" (2004: 34). Also according to Horlock (2004: 33-34), there was a renewed critical interest in Khalo's work in the early 1980s, a period which also saw Chadwick more interested in the process of self-representation.

⁹⁵ The exhibition was entitled "Portraits out of Placements" and was presented at the Spectro Gallery, Newcastle. In London the project was exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery and at the Cockpit Gallery under the title "Growing Up".



Figure 18 – Helen Chadwick, *Ego Geometria Sum* (1982-84).

The extensive preparation for this work is meticulously recorded in notebooks and confirms its large scope and complexity⁹⁶. When exhibited in 1984 *Ego Geometria Sum* consisted of three parts: there were ten geometric plywood sculptures representing Chadwick's development from her birth to the age of thirty; ten photographs called "The Labours" that showed the artist holding and carrying the aforementioned sculptures, some with visible effort, and "The Juggler's Table", a series of cardboard models– smaller versions of the sculptures– displayed on a table with photographs of buildings that somehow

⁹⁶ The sheer amount of rigorous, detailed research done by Chadwick for this work is evident in her notebooks, where the artist registered her ideas for the project. These books reveal, for example, that Chadwick looked for an incubator from 1953, the year she was born, that she recorded a baptism and that she measured the furniture in one of the schools she attended as a child (see Notebook 2003.19/E/5).

related to the artist's life⁹⁷. The careful preparation for this work led to the intricacy of detail in its final version: firstly, the created sculptures were hybrid objects given that Chadwick superimposed photographs of herself in their surface; this breaking of formal boundaries was further suggested by the combination of the sculptures and the large photographs displayed across the exhibition room⁹⁸. Secondly, the size of the sculptures was increasingly larger, as they registered the body's growth from a premature baby in an incubator to the age of thirty, and each sculpture had the shape of an object that stood for a period of the artist's life. Finally, the sculptures were meant to occupy a specific place in the exhibition room, resembling planets in the solar system (Notebook 2003.19/E/5: 115) and providing a move from the individual and the autobiographical to the cosmic and the universal; such balance conferred a mystic resonance to *Ego Geometria Sum*, given also that, as stressed by Martischinig, "the ten sculptures are derived from the mystical number ten of the Pythagorean theory of the harmony of the numbers" (2004b: n. pag.)⁹⁹.

This complex structure pushes *Ego Geometria Sum* into several directions; nevertheless, everything is as harmoniously combined as the Pythagorean numbers that inspired the work. *Ego Geometria Sum* has a clear autobiographical dimension since it examines the particular events and moments that shaped Chadwick's existence and being, even if these moments and events are then condensed into general stages identifiable in most people's lives. In this context, and as mentioned by Sladen, Chadwick's decision not to show her face in any of the photographs emphasises the work's universal quality (2004b: 15). Chadwick's approach in *Ego Geometria Sum*, focusing on the particular in order to reach out to the universal, mirrors feminism's universalizing penchant of the 1970s, which led to a discussion of women's personal experiences in order to find a communality in women's lives under patriarchal oppression and to emphasize a sense of sisterhood. *Ego Geometria Sum* also allowed Chadwick to reflect on the relation between being and world

⁹⁷ See Sladen (2004b: 15) for details of the different exhibitions of *Ego Geometria Sum*, since Chadwick presented the project at different stages of its production. The three parts of *Ego Geometria Sum* were initially shown together and in various combinations but they are now scattered among different collections.

⁹⁸ The sculptures were made from plywood onto which the artist first painted photographic emulsion and then exposed monochromatic images in washed-out hues (Sladen, 2004b: 15). This photographic process gave the images a ghost-like appearance, which further emphasized the work's immersion in the past. In an interview Chadwick also revealed how much she was interested at the time in exploring photography as a three-dimensional medium (Haworth-Booth, 1996: n. pag.).

⁹⁹ Chadwick also related the position of the sculptures on the floor with the horoscope, a connection that further stresses the mystic dimension of *Ego Geometria Sum*: "[u]se layout of horoscope on floor plus attraction of masses from Newton's laws of gravity for distribution from centre; cosmic determinism + destiny linked with celestial motions" (Notebook 2003.19/E/5: 111).

and the effects of external factors on the shaping of subjectivity, or what the artist refers to as “the effects and constraining influence of socialisation” (1989: 11). This was a theme already present in earlier works, like *Bargain Bed Bonanza* and *In the Kitchen*, and one that is central to *Ego Geometria Sum*, as it is emphasised in its title (the Latin expression for “I am geometry”, in other words, “I am shaped into a subject”). Also the photographs on the wall, which depict a strained Helen Chadwick lifting and holding increasingly larger sculptures, in addition to the way the artist’s body appears to be constrained by the geometrical objects in which it is caught suggest the confront between that body and “a succession of everyday cultural objects” (Chadwick, 1989: 11).

In *Enfleshings* Chadwick introduces *Ego Geometria Sum* by referring to the metaphoric use of the geometric solids in order to convey the influence of the exterior world in the body’s development: “[s]uppose one’s body could be traced back through a succession of geometric solids, as rare and pure as crystalline structures, taking form from the pressure of recalled external forces” (1989: 9). Such point of view is in keeping with feminist criticism, which has always emphasized how female subjectivity and bodies have been shaped and coerced by a phallogocentric culture, in short, how the body and the personal are political. Nevertheless, *Ego Geometria Sum* employs strategies of self-representation in more complex and ambivalent terms, for they are there not only as a way of identifying shared experiences and to highlight the shaping of the self by the social, but also to explore the self and the body as parts of a cosmic principle and a harmonious universe, a connection that is also established by the pure geometric forms of Chadwick’s plywood sculptures. As suggested by the artist: “geometry is an expression of eternal and exact truths, inherent in the natural law of matter and thus manifestations of an absolute beauty, pre-destined, of divine origin” (1989: 9). *Ego Geometria Sum* is thus a work that successfully leaps from self, body, autobiography and the everyday to the universe, establishing a junction between the personal and the cosmic.

Ego Geometria Sum swings between personal details, “the chaos of everyday experience” (Martischnig, 2004b: n. pag.), and “universal laws”, “immutable forms” (Chadwick, Notebook 2003.19/E/5: 101), creating what the artist described as a “detached view autobiography” (Notebook 2003.19/E/5: 101). As Sladen rightly noticed, Chadwick’s approach in *Ego Geometria Sum* is opposite to the Cartesian division of subject and world (2004b: 16), a division that, in fact, her work always tried to overcome. For Sladen, this effort is even implicit in the formal processes adopted by the artist, including those chosen

for *Ego Geometria Sum*: “throughout her career Chadwick used forms of collage and juxtaposition— overlapping, fragmented and reconstituted images— to disrupt the representation of the subject and to demonstrate the interpenetration of the self and the world” (2004b: 16). For those reasons, Chadwick’s professed interest in herself and her body does not lead to a solipsistic attitude capable of only contemplating the self and its autonomous body, but to the representation of a processual and relational subjectivity also tuned to the all-encompassing principles of the universe. In *Ego Geometria Sum* identity is seen in relational terms and subjectivity is the result of the self’s engagement with and in the world. By taking such viewpoint, Chadwick distances her work from the paradigms of a patriarchal logic and its myth of a masterful, autonomous individual and inscribes it in a feminist-oriented art that has recurrently explored the relationship between the personal and the political.

1.6.4 Chadwick’s body and feminist criticism

In *Ego Geometria Sum* the body is represented as constrained, limited by the geometrical sculptures where it is trapped. As a reaction to this oppressive vision of self (and body) in its relation with the social, Chadwick created *Of Mutability* (1984-86), which offers a more flowing and liberated image of the body in its environment. As Chadwick explained years later: “[a]fter *Ego*, I wanted to use the body again, but not bound up in these geometric structures that seemed like a real Newtonian world. I wanted something more leaky and fluid” (*apud* Haworth-Booth, 1996: n. pag.). Despite this more optimistic vision of the relationship between subject and the social, *Of Mutability* invited a fair degree of criticism, particularly from feminists who criticized the artist for offering her body to the viewer’s masculine and objectifying gaze. Feminism’s less that positive critique had already been voiced when *Ego Geometria Sum* was first exhibited, since Chadwick’s naked body also plays a central role in this installation, but becomes louder with *Of Mutability*, particularly in relation to *The Oval Court*, which represents Chadwick’s body, naked but for the erotic jewellery it wears, voluptuously gliding in an illusory swimming-pool¹⁰⁰. Horlock refers to Chadwick as swimming against mainstream feminist discourse when she made this

¹⁰⁰ In relation to *Ego Geometria Sum*, Horlock (2004: 36-37) refers that Chadwick’s face is always averted and only her cropped hair is visible. This creates the image of an anonymous body that purposefully refuses the objectifying gaze of the viewer. Horlock also insists in emphasizing the theatrical dimension of Chadwick’s work, that is, how the artist ‘stages’ her naked form and thus subverts the objectifying logic central to the male gaze. She gives evidence of the body’s performativity by referring to Chadwick’s poses in *Ego Geometria Sum* as reminiscent of pre-Raphaelite or classical models.

seminal work (2004: 35) and mentions that “[m]any colleagues would criticise Chadwick for using her body in this way, and suggested that she was perpetuating the objectification of women” (2004: 36).

Chadwick responded to this criticism by affirming that in *The Oval Court* she was “trying to open up a territory for desire. . . . a space for the woman as the subject of feeling” (*apud* Haworth-Booth, 1996: n. pag.). *The Oval Court* should therefore be seen as an attempt to recover a paradisiacal moment and a hedonic world where a female pleasure-seeking body engages with other bodies and subjectivity acquires a fluid and transitory potential. Moreover, in *The Oval Court* Chadwick tries to disrupt the traditional hierarchical or voyeuristic relationship between the viewer and the subject of the artwork: “[p]rojections of desire from artist for viewer to project himself into + unify artist– viewer in contemplation of work. Images of rapture to look at, become fascinated + lose oneself in spell– giving one’s ego/identity over to experience of looking as act of love” (Chadwick, Notebook 2003.19/E/6: 123)¹⁰¹. Chadwick’s words suggest that the artwork unites the viewer and the artist since it is a space where a shared desire and love built from the production and contemplation of the artwork can happen. By looking at and as an act of love, the viewer loses the detachment implicit in the voyeuristic game. According to Chadwick, such a fluid subjectivity is also extended to the (woman) artist: “I was looking for a vocabulary for desire where I was the subject and the object and the author. I felt that by directly taking all those roles, the normal situation in which the viewer operated as a kind of voyeur broke down” (*apud* Sladen, 2004b: 18). Warner corroborates Chadwick’s point of view and sees in *The Oval Court* crucial changes in the power relation between voyeur and object of the gaze: “[u]nlike a pin-up, she is in charge of her image. Her embrace of such an abundance of nature . . . cast her, the lover in the piece, as a *domina*, or mistress of creation, and her beloved as the creatures around her, offered like her, like first fruits to our gaze” (1989: 48).

Nevertheless, even Chadwick was aware of the problems brought by the visual representation of the female body, recognising that it was a “tight-rope act, to make images of the body that would circumnavigate that so-called male gaze” (*apud* Haworth-Booth, 1996: n. pag.). The end of the 1980s engaged Chadwick in a new project, *Viral Landscapes*

¹⁰¹ Chadwick’s use of an underlined male pronoun in her comments to *The Oval Court* proves that she had in mind a male viewer and the voyeuristic relation he establishes with the naked female body displayed in the artwork.

(1988-89) [Fig. 19], which illustrated what the artist described as a “viral aesthetics” (1989: 97). Through this work Chadwick hoped to abolish binary oppositions and focus on “synchronous inter-existence, both inside/outside organism” (Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 10). As a result, *Viral Landscapes* could stand against “closure as a principle– device of western representation of selfhood” (Chadwick, Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 10), proposing instead “an ecology where everything is connected and rigid boundaries cease to be” (Chadwick, 1989: 97). In addition, *Viral Landscapes* responded to feminist criticism on Chadwick’s previous works by addressing the representation of body and self in a completely different way.



Figure 19 – Helen Chadwick, *Viral Landscape No. 2* (1988-89).

In *Viral Landscapes* Chadwick turns her body inside-out and brings to the forefront of the photographic composition her own bodily fluids, cellular material taken from her cervix, vagina, mouth and ear. She questions the traditional opposition interior/exterior of the body by exposing what is inside to the outside world, whether that be a natural landscape or the art gallery. The organic fluids were taken from Chadwick using the technological developments of medical science, then manipulated digitally and finally randomly spread over coastal images of the Pembrokeshire coast in Wales and mixed with colourful patches previously created by pouring paint onto the sea and dragging the canvas through the waves (Sladen, 2004b: 21). These patches were made of bright, warm colours and therefore suggestive of the place where the artist created them – not Pembrokeshire, as one might expect, but Greece, where her mother was originally from and where Chadwick used to

spend her summer holidays as a child¹⁰². All these formal decisions reinforce the contamination process lying at the centre of *Viral Landscapes*.

The exchange between self and other already present in *Ego Geometria Sum* and one of the crucial topics in *Of Mutability* is also the underlying theme of *Viral Landscapes*; these photographs challenge the boundaries of the human body, inviting the viewer to see the body's interrelatedness with the outside world and suggesting "unstable, permeable identities" (Chadwick, 1989: 97), capable of counteracting the idealized purity (closeness, fixity) of the body (Chadwick, Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 11).

Still inscribing her work in a tradition of artistic self-representation, but releasing the body from "the bonds of form and gender" (Chadwick, 1989: 97), which could have encouraged a phallogocentric reading of the artwork, Chadwick demonstrates in *Viral Landscapes* how her identity, metonymically represented by her bodily fluids, is built from a whole range of conditions that can be traced back to British and Greek heritages. *Viral Landscapes* therefore proposes the self as a societal and interactive being whose identity is not pre-determined but a process constructed from a network of relationships, experiences and places. Indeed, fragmented and scattered through the landscape, this subject amalgamates bodily fluids, ocean water and the earth, as well as different geographical proveniences. Hence, she is not reduced or nullified but expanded and without borders. Paraphrasing the artist, in *Viral Landscapes* the viral, i.e. the other that lives in close contact with the self, is not damaging but potential (Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 10). Accordingly, *Viral Landscapes* does not suggest "ruined catastrophic surfaces but territories of a prolific encounter" (Chadwick, 1989: 97).

When commenting about the title given to *Viral Landscapes*, Chadwick insisted that viruses should be seen as elements of interchange, a notion further suggested by the digital process chosen by Chadwick, since this too is "infinitely available for modification" (Chadwick, 1989: 97). She also perceived the virus as a dissident, for it "cultivates dissensus as the possibility of change— open to evolution— new solidarities" (Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 8). Viruses, like Chadwick's art, propose a concept for identity and for the relationship

¹⁰² A reference to Chadwick's childhood vacations in Greece is found in *Ego Geometria Sum*, more specifically in the sculptured boat, which has images of a Greek beach. I am indebted to Bo Nilsson, from Liljevalchs Konsthall, Stockholm, for the insight regarding the use of warm, bright colours in Chadwick's work.

between self and other based on contamination and collapsing boundaries. There lies their dissident and subversive potential.

Chadwick's belief in viruses as subversive elements parallels Kristeva's view of women as dissidents due to their marginal position, their place beyond language and laws and their subversion of binary oppositions (Kristeva, 1977b). Other feminists like Battersby (1998) and Irigaray (1974) have also stressed women's disruptive potential due to their fluid and polymorphous characteristics, which challenge phallogocentric structures. Overall, feminist criticism has affirmed that a flexible and permeable pattern of identity is more characteristic of women, who then become privileged subverters of the binary logic of phallogocentric thought. *Viral Landscapes* offers a fragmented body that evades the masterful power of the patriarchal gaze and addresses fluid identities through a seemingly genderless self, or what the artist called a "trans-species" (Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 9). Nevertheless, as emphasised by feminist criticism, it is woman, and not man, whose body seems to be more open to fluidity and whose identity more deeply relies in a sense of interchange with the other. Women, like viruses, are the dangerous and feared dissidents, those who shun an isolationist concept of body and self, proposing, in its place, a "mutually penetrating harmonic relation" (Chadwick, Notebook 2003.19/E/8: 10).

Created in 1991, *Self Portrait* [Fig. 20] is an ironic and final comment on the question of female self-representation, since after this work and until her death in 1996 Chadwick abandoned her body as the prime material for her art. *Self Portrait* was also created during a period when the artist was especially fascinated with the flesh and with the feeling of abjection it exudes¹⁰³. In its depiction of a brain placed in a silky fabric and lovingly protected by Chadwick's hands, *Self Portrait* intends to parody the self-portrait tradition, which has highlighted, in different periods, the subject's social position, physical appearance or inner self, but always by means of external representation¹⁰⁴. Contrary to these traditional ways of expressing the artist's subjectivity and bodily image, Chadwick develops a new aesthetic language and addresses self-representation by employing the inner body, a process the artist had inaugurated with *Viral Landscapes*. Moreover, *Self Portrait*

¹⁰³ *Self-Portrait* is part of *Meat Lamps*, a series that plays with the fear of the flesh and the inside of the body.

¹⁰⁴ The sense of play and parody is accentuated by the fact that Chadwick's *Self-Portrait* cannot indeed be a self-portrait, for it represents a brain placed outside the skull and held by Chadwick's own hands. Chadwick is thus participating in the subversion of the self-portrait tradition that, according to Ribeiro, is found in contemporary forms of artistic self-representation. See Ribeiro (2008) for a very good discussion of the history and the transformations observed in the self-portrait tradition.

also challenges the Cartesian opposition between mind and body, for what Chadwick chose to represent is not the mind, but its physical receptacle, the encephalon. In other words, the 'I' suggested by this particular work is a subject who 'thinks' by means of a 'body'. Clearly, for Chadwick the mind does not exist without the body and the two elements are perceived as deeply connected. That the artist cherishes this body is evident in the way her hands seem to protect, almost caress, the brain, and the silkiness of the fabric where the brain is displayed, together with the sheen created by the lighting, suggest the brain/body not only as a valuable, but also as a sensuous, even erotic, thing¹⁰⁵.

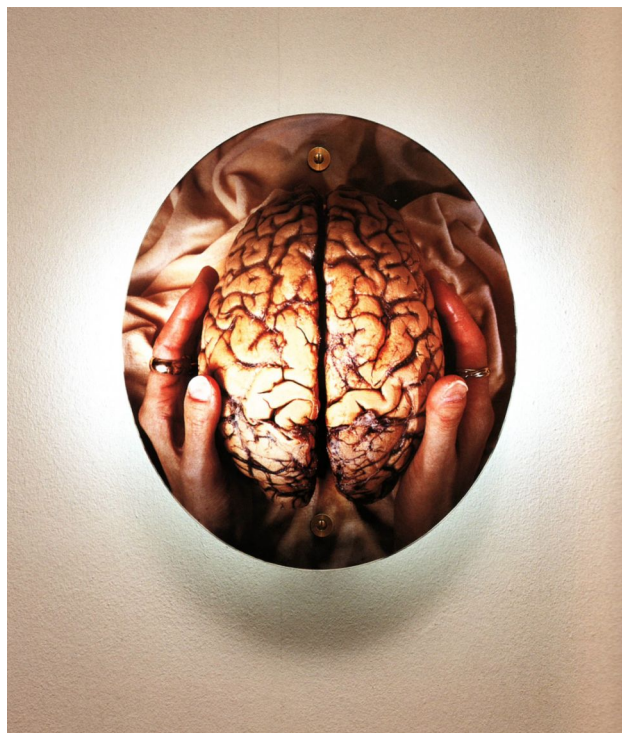


Figure 20 – Helen Chadwick, *Self Portrait* (1991).

More importantly, *Self Portrait* offers a pun on female representation throughout art history. This has emphasized female fleshiness and, consequently, produced anxiety and ambivalence in the woman artist when confronted with the possibility of creating a self-portrait. *Self Portrait* can be regarded as a complex way of dealing with this problem and as a subversive appropriation of the female nude: instead of offering the sight of an alluringly

¹⁰⁵ The erotic connotation of the brain and hence the fusion of the physical and the spiritual, the body and the mind had already been explored in *Eroticism* (1990), a work consisting of two light boxes where two encephala are suggestively displayed in silk fabric.

female naked body, as in the Great Masters tradition, the artist exposes what is assumed to be her brain; this still is, by all accounts, part of the body, albeit one that is suggestive of the mind and the soul, traditionally seen as male attributes. Chadwick thus succeeds in creating a female portrait that embraces female fleshiness, whilst denying the male gaze, and reclaims women's right to being represented through the mind/soul as much as through the flesh/body.

With *Self Portrait*, Helen Chadwick seemed to have come a long way from her work of the 1970s on the repression of women's bodies and from her approach to self-representation in the 1980s, defined by works such as *Ego Geometria Sum* and *Of Mutability*. However, if she progressively created an aesthetics that replaced exterior for interior bodily representation, she was still refusing dichotomies, just as she was disrupting traditional socio-cultural and aesthetic representations of women. Moreover, though often recurring to processes of self-representation, Chadwick's aesthetics can hardly be seen as capitulating to the models provided by a masculinist and masterful self-portrait tradition, since the artist used her body and personal events to produce a work that collapsed the boundaries between the particular and the cosmic, the sacred and the profane, the body and the soul, the self and the other.

2 The Flesh Made Word: Michèle Roberts

2.1 *Food, Sex and God*: Michèle Roberts as a feminist writer

This is a world in which the first thing one sees is a woman . . . writing.
Ursula Le Guin, "A Woman Writing, or the Fisherwoman's Daughter" (1988: 162).

When asked what she writes about, Michèle Roberts has often answered "food, sex and god". Roberts seems to have thought this tongue-in-cheek expression defined so well her writing that it became the title of an anthology of essays, *Food, Sex and God: On Inspiration and Writing*, published in 1998, in which the author gathered texts she wrote mainly during the 1990s and in a variety of contexts (such as lectures, newspapers and radio broadcasts)¹⁰⁶. It is this collection of essays that I propose as the starting point for this chapter, in an attempt to introduce Roberts's concerns as a writer and corroborate a critical reading of her work as possessing an unequivocal feminist ethos.

Food, Sex and God offers the reader the chance to map Roberts's writing in terms of its creative process and in relation to major influences and themes, or "obsessions", as Roberts calls them in the introduction to her book (1998: ix). An attempt to explain the writing process becomes fully exposed in the last section of the anthology, titled "On Writing", where Roberts not only gives advice to writers-to-be but also reveals the methodology behind the writing of some of her novels. But more importantly, this, as indeed the other sections of Roberts's anthology, allows the reader to fully grasp how her writing is shaped by concerns with women: "[o]nly quite recently did I realise that all my novels so far have dealt with homeless women" (1998: 194), as she writes in the *Observer*, in 1992, in a text which is also the first one in the mentioned book section. Hence, Roberts's writing looks into the topics of food, sex and god through women's lives and experiences. Such can be confirmed by Roberts's poetry, novels and short-stories, which further prove that women are always at the centre of her work¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁶ In the introduction to her collection of essays, Roberts explains the origin of the title: "[s]ometimes, when people I've just met discover that I write for a living, they ask me what I write about. I never know what to say. The title of this book refers to the answer I shall give next time I'm asked" (Roberts, 1998: ix). In Roberts's website (accessed 21 Oct. 2010), the origin of this book title is also explained as a "tongue-in-cheek" expression.

¹⁰⁷ In this chapter I will only be focusing on Roberts's essays and fictional work, although she has also published several poetry books.

Other sections of *Food, Sex and God* reveal the same interest. The essays grouped under the heading “God and Sans-Permis” deal with God and Catholicism in general, but more specifically focus on the role performed by women in religious dogma and practices. In her essay “The Place of Women in the Catholic Church: On the New Roman Catholic Catechism” Roberts affirms that she has lost her faith “for the simple feminist reason, that I could no longer bear sitting in silence listening to male priests telling me what to feel and think” (1998: 32) and in “The Flesh Made Word” (originally a radio broadcast from 1997) she explicitly focuses on the oppressive power exerted by religion in general and the Catholic Church in particular over women’s bodies: “[f]emaleness gets hidden out of sight in the interests of equality and difference gets invoked only to cope with issues the Church finds troublesome, like female sexuality. The body, particularly the female body, has remained a problem” (1998: 37). In addition, Roberts’s reviews of books that have inspired her or provoked her comments (a theme that shows up in two sections of her collection, “On Certain Writers” and “On Reading”) all but one deal with women writers and, what is even more conclusive, with writers who have been associated with a feminist writing tradition (Doris Lessing, Jeanette Winterson and Germaine Greer are all discussed by Roberts), or whose books have been widely analysed in the context of feminist literary criticism (such as *Wives and Daughters* by Elizabeth Gaskell or *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë)¹⁰⁸. Finally, the section dedicated to the visual arts, “On Art and Artists”, discusses artworks created by women artists (Helen Chadwick and Vanessa Bell are the focus of Roberts’s attention in her essays “Piss Flowers” and “The Tub”, respectively) or women’s difficult position in an overtly patriarchal art tradition. This is a theme explored by Roberts in “Seeing Differently: What Self-Portraits Might Be”, in which an anxious woman artist looks at herself timidly in the mirror because she is looking “with the eyes of others, the eyes of judges, the eyes of potential lovers weighing her up before rejecting her” (1998: 173).

This brief analysis of Roberts’s anthology confirms that women occupy the centre of *Food, Sex and God*, as they also occupy the centre of her fiction, which is tuned to the issues affecting women’s lives. Hence, it is appropriate that *Food, Sex and God*, like many of Roberts’s texts, was published by Virago Press, the British and internationally-renowned

¹⁰⁸ The only text not written by a woman that Roberts comments on in *Food, Sex and God* is T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent”. However, what interests Roberts in Eliot’s essay is the place given to the personal in the writing process, an issue that in her own essay comes up in relation to women as writers. See Roberts (1998: 111-26).

publisher of women's literature¹⁰⁹. *Food, Sex and God* also corroborates the strong influence played by the feminist movement and feminist criticism both in Roberts's life and in her work. This is not only because the essays gathered in this collection focus on women (writers, artists, characters, religious icons, etc.), but also because they suggest Roberts's attention to the social, cultural, political and subjective conditions of women and her determination to expose the oppression and limitations faced by them in a society dominated by the rules of phallogentrism and gender binarism. These are, therefore, texts that show their author's conviction in a necessary change in 'the rules of the game', that is, in the laws and discourses that govern women's access to the spiritual and the religious, the creative process and artistic and social recognition.

It is through this feminist perspective that one should read Roberts's opening essay, "On Imagination", in which she explicitly denounces the discrimination against women's fiction on the grounds of it being autobiographical and, by extension, "partial, provincial, not really sophisticated" (1998: 5), and implicitly condemns the patriarchal view of women's writing as inferior because interested in the private, the personal and the domestic. In reaction to this sexist point-of-view, Roberts brings forward a counter-proposal, grounded in a mixture of autobiography and imagination ("I feel that autobiography and imagination are deeply connected" [1998: 14], she says), suggesting the contribution and the relevance of both elements to her work¹¹⁰. Other essays in *Food, Sex and God* further confirm Roberts's commitment to feminism and her participation in feminist criticism by exploring themes dear to them; such is the case of "The Place of Women in the Catholic Church: On the New Roman Catholic Catechism", where the writer expresses her frustration at the inability of the Catholic Church to accept the spiritual and bodily dimensions of women as coexistent, or "Mary Magdalene", in which the contradictory image of Mary Magdalene is used to expose the Christian split between the maternal and the sexual.

If *Food, Sex and God* ultimately alerts to the discrimination women suffer at the hands of the established social, political, religious and aesthetic status quo and appeals to a change in these same structures, Roberts's novels often attempt to initiate such a change and to bring forward alternatives to the dominant order, even if merely in fictional terms.

¹⁰⁹ Besides Virago, Roberts has also had her work published by Methuen and Little Brown, of which Virago is an imprint since 1996. Her first two novels were published by The Women's Press.

¹¹⁰ For a more detailed analysis of Roberts's take on the autobiographic genre and her contribution to the feminist confessional and *bildungsroman* of the 1970s see Gruss (2009) and my own sub-chapter later on.

Therefore, her narratives clearly display a feminist perspective, a conclusion the writer would not disagree with, for Roberts has fully acknowledged on several occasions the influence feminism has had in her life and writing. She has no problems in seeing herself as a feminist writer, a fact that is highlighted in interviews, as well as recurrently emphasised in reviews of her work. In an interview from 2003, Roberts rememorate in exhilarating terms her discovery of feminism in the late 1960s: “[w]hen I became a feminist in 1968, I felt that I'd come home: the first home I ever had that was feminine” (*apud* Newman, 2003: n. pag.). Jules Smith also stresses Roberts’s involvement in the movement, in a review of Roberts’s work for the British Council Literature Department:

The other essential facet of Roberts' identity as a writer is her feminism. Its history, advocacy and development, especially in London during the 1970s (when she was for several years poetry editor of *Spare Rib*) alongside the likes of Sara Maitland and Alison Fell, has always been important to her. . . . Whether in the novel, critical article or a broadcast talk, Roberts has been concerned with exploring women's lives, stories, and experiences. This comes out also in her several poetry volumes. (Smith, 2008: n. pag.)

Smith corroborates her analysis of Roberts as a feminist writer by mentioning her participation in the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, of which she was as a poetry editor between 1975 and 1977¹¹¹. But the writer was also involved in other feminist activities, such as women writers’ collectives, as her autobiography *Paper Houses* (2007: 129-31) further documents. With Sara Maitland, Valerie Mainer, Michelene Wandor and Zoe Fairbairns, Roberts produced a number of books, the first of which was a collection of short-stories called *Tales I Tell My Mother* (1978), where the reader is informed that Michèle Roberts “has been involved in the Women's Liberation Movement since 1971” (1978: 162). With women writers and artists Alison Fell, Stef Pixner, Tina Reid and Ann Oosthuizen, Roberts

¹¹¹ See *Paper Houses* (2007: 127-29) for Roberts’s description of her involvement in *Spare Rib*. *Spare Rib* was the most prominent feminist magazine emerging in the 1970s. It was launched in June 1972 in Britain and since then and up to its end in 1993 it provided an arena for discussing previously tabooed issues such as female sexuality. The influence of *Spare Rib* had more to do with its attempt to provide an alternative to the glossy, ‘feminine’ magazines, such as *Elle*, which were available for women at the time. As such, it was not received well by all and WH Smith was only one of newsagents who refused to stock the magazine on its shelves. Many of the founders of *Spare Rib*, such as Marsha Rowe and Rosie Boycott, were formerly involved in the underground press of the 1960s, which had experienced great success with the advent of liberal movements. It was out of this political and social context that feminist magazines like *Spare Rib* (another one was *Shrew*) were created.

published, also in 1978, a poetry booklet, *Licking the Bed Clean*¹¹². In the introduction to this booklet, the participants refer that the publication was the outcome of meetings held for one year, in order to produce the book and to support and criticise each other. This introduction also mentions: “the group helped us to develop and become proud of our writing and to develop confidence in our identity as writers” (1978: 1). In 1980 the same collective published *Smile Smile Smile Smile*, again as the result of their collaborative work.

Roberts’s interest in women’s writing groups confirms her confidence in the struggle advanced by feminism in the 1970s and shows her involvement in activities that fostered a sense of female identity and sisterhood, the latter being a notion that was, at the time, one of feminism’s main backbones, “as countless women discovered the joy of support from other women for the first time, and acquired a new sense of their own worth, potential and importance” (Joannou, 2000: 6). Roberts’s interest in the productive quality of work shared between women led her once again to collective projects in the 1990s (when collective work was already out of fashion as the 1970s belief in sisterhood was replaced by an emphasis on difference). Renewing the encounter held between Michèle Roberts, Kathy Acker, Leslie Dick, Zoe Fairbairns, Alison Fell, Sara Maitland and Agnes Owens, which had led to the publication of *The Seven Deadly Sins* in 1988, the group published *The Seven Cardinal Virtues* in 1990. In that same year, and with Sue Roe, Susan Sellers and Nicole Ward Jouve, Roberts also published *The Semi-Transparent Envelope: Women Writing– Feminism and Fiction*, where the writers propose to compare their thoughts and offer:

[I]nsights into the processes, which for women, inscribe the making of a work of art, and glimpses, from different angles, into the evolution of a work of fiction. We have written it because the procedure of artistic production continues to fascinate us and because we wanted to investigate whether the act of artistic engagement might mean special things to women. (1994: 11)

Such comments show well how the writers involved in this project speak from a feminist position, by emphasising, at least as a possibility, experiences specific to women in general and women writers in particular¹¹³.

¹¹² The poems from *Licking the Bed Clean* were presented alongside drawings by Alison Fell and Stef Pixner.

¹¹³ References to Roberts’s co-authored books are provided in her website, proving the ongoing importance given by the writer to a collective and collaborative writing process.

In a recent interview published in *The Guardian*, a propos of her autobiography *Paper Houses*, Roberts talks about her early days as a writer, when she, as so many other women, was actively involved in feminist politics: “[w]e did line it up with feminist and libertarian ideas. It was politics with a capital P” (*apud* Miller, 2007: n. pag.). Roberts also appreciatively recognises the importance of feminism in the 1970s, as its attack on the patriarchal systems of domination was accompanied by a discussion of woman’s body and sexuality: “[i]t [feminism] made sex better, made it less of a power struggle, because it gave you back yourself. It made women feel able to say to a man: ‘I want this, I don’t want that.’ If you know about your own sexuality you can have better sex. Young women now take this for granted because they read about sex in magazines the whole time” (*apud* Miller, 2007: n. pag.)¹¹⁴.

Roberts’s remarks show that she still believes in the truly disruptive effects of feminism in the 1970s, a period that was, according to her, “genuinely thrilling and radical” (*apud* Miller, 2007). In contrast to this belief is her sense of disenchantment when she talks about the development of feminism in the last thirty years and what the movement has come to stand for:

I feel that the feminism that triumphed is the sort I don’t like: what I call shoulderpads feminism. It’s all about being an individual in a capitalist society. Put on your suit, go to the City, make a lot of money: it’s all me, me, me. My sort of feminism is about collectivity. I think this sort of feminism still exists quietly, in women’s friendships, for example. (*apud* Miller, 2007: n. pag.)

Roberts’s words again suggest that the writer feels particularly linked to the movement’s second wave, when the sense of a common female identity and an emphasis on collective work and struggle were dominant. Her critique of what she describes as “shoulderpads feminism” is based on her disappointment with the feminist capitulation to the selfish ideals promoted by relentless capitalism, an ideology fiercely reacted to and fought back by feminists in the 1970s. Moreover, her reference to feminism’s sense of community and her

¹¹⁴ It is interesting to notice how Roberts’s analysis of the importance of feminism for a discussion of women’s sexuality still seems to be informed by an essentialist concept of the self. When affirming that “[feminism] made sex better . . . because it gave you back yourself”, Roberts seems to rely on the notion of a true female identity or essence, repressed by the phallogocentric power and released by the disruptive force of feminist criticism and action. However, it is important to contextualise her words, for she is referring to things as seen through the eyes of a 1970s-woman faced with the exhilarating freedom and self-discovery provided by feminism.

emphasis on female friendship are aspects subjacent to Roberts's writing process, since, as previously discussed, she participated in several women writing groups, as well as frequently addressed in her texts: female friendship, its rewards and tension, are discussed in all of her novels, from the first one, *A Piece of the Night*, from 1978, to *Paper Houses*, published twenty-nine years later.

2.2 "On Art and Artists": the female body in the visual arts

2.2.1 Images of women in feminist literary and art criticism

In an already-mentioned interview from 2007, Roberts addresses the debate around censorship and pornography. The interviewer half-paraphrases the writer's comments, saying that, "she feels she cannot say yes to censorship, yet she is anxious about the way women "are portrayed as objects to be raped with the eye" (Miller, 2007: n. pag). Roberts's emphasis on the visual dimension of women's oppression and her suggestion of women's objectification by the male eye, or gaze, signals the important contribution given by feminist film and art criticism to feminist politics and theory. As discussed in the previous chapter, critics such as Laura Mulvey, Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock and the studies undertaken by these and other academics since the 1970s on the objectifying power of the male gaze in mainstream film industry and art tradition have questioned the role of women in the visual arts and contributed to widening the feminist debate on the phallogocentric exploitation of female body and sexuality. I believe they have also framed Roberts's comments on art and artists over the years and that is what I propose to examine next.

In the 1970s feminists were determined to expose the female body as a political site and a locus where the dominant discursive game ensured an asymmetrical distribution of power between the sexes. Feminism's interest in the body often came together with a discussion of the way a phallogocentric ideology treated women and their bodies as objects and not as subjects in their own right. Visual art and visual culture provided crucial examples of the objectification of women under the patriarchal eyes, which reinforced the importance of this area of study in the development of feminist criticism. As Macedo and Amaral conclude: "the women's movement, from its resurgence, in the 1960s, in the West, has always been involved in the politics of the visual image, making it a topic for struggle, discussion and analysis and developing a body of texts concerning the critique of the representation of women in the media and the visual arts" (2005: 105, my translation).

Feminist art historians and critics have highlighted the centrality of the male gaze and its objectification of women in the production, circulation and reception of the art object, revealing the inherent sexism and phallogocentric perspective of a predominantly male art history, just as feminist literary critics have been determined to analyse traditional literary representations of women and how these differ from real women's lives and serve the interests of a phallogocentric order. Hence, not only is the significance of the feminist discussion of the politics of the visual image found in feminist art criticism, but also in feminist literary criticism. Such critical approach inclusively led to a 'branch' in feminist literary criticism known as "images of women", that is, the literary study of female stereotypes, predominantly in male writing (Moi, 1985: 41), with the objective of raising the individual consciousness by linking literature to life (Moi, 1985: 42)¹¹⁵. This type of criticism, particularly popular in the Anglo-American context of the 1970s, found in the representation of women in literature similar gender issues to those uncovered by feminist art critics and historians in their re-evaluation of art tradition and history¹¹⁶.

Given the link between the representation of women in literature and the visual arts, Griselda Pollock, one of the first feminist art historians, employed that same expression in the title of an article published in 1977– "What's wrong with 'Images of Women'?", even if used in a different context and not entirely with the same purposes (she was then referring to women artists' effort to represent their bodies and the perils such an approach faced when confronted with, and possibly absorbed by, the masculine art establishment). A decade later, the relationship between literature and visual art is directly addressed by this art historian in "Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature", a chapter from her influential book *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art*, in which Pollock, affirming that "language is an ideological practice of representation" (1988: 142), exposes how Pre-

¹¹⁵ Moi stresses that "images of women" was, in the 1970s, a very fertile branch of feminist criticism, especially if taken into consideration the number of works it generated (1985: 41). She gives a rather critical analysis of this type of criticism, which she accuses of being too simplistic in its understanding of literature as a mere reflection of an external reality, too naïve in its lack of theoretical awareness and too normative, censoring female writers who did not give a faithful or strong portrait of women (1985: 44-47). However, Moi also recognises the "enthusiasm and commitment to the feminist cause" of these early feminist critics, as well as their understanding of the literary text as a cultural and political artefact (1985: 48).

¹¹⁶ Ruth Robbins establishes a link between art history and literary feminist theory in her analysis of "images of women" criticism. She justifies the usefulness of such sub-field in literary criticism by framing it with the critical tools provided by feminist art criticism and cultural criticism: "looking at looking can be a fruitful exercise, depending on how it is done. Useful examples for feminist literary theory can be found in the fields of feminist art history and feminist cultural criticism, both of which are very much concerned with images of women, but which are also significantly focused on placing images in contexts, and on historicising representation" (2000: 65-66).

Raphaelite art and literature confirmed woman as sign, i.e., not as a specific subjectivity, but a signifier expressing patriarchally sanctioned significations¹¹⁷.

Other examples of women simultaneously involved in feminist criticism, literature and the visual arts have come forward since feminism arrived to the academia in the 1970s: Jane Gallop, an American professor of Comparative Literature, has been interested in feminist theory, gender studies, psychoanalysis, cultural studies and visual art. Also Susan Rubin Suleiman, a distinguished American academic, has published numerous books and articles on contemporary literature, visual arts and culture, as well as poetry and autobiographical works¹¹⁸. A particularly interesting case is Marina Warner, who not only is a British academic specialist in myth and fairytales, but also a writer of fiction, art criticism and history. Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (from 1976), *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (published in 1985) and *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (from 1994) are academic and feminist classics that simultaneously deal with literature, cultural studies and visual art. Her work has influenced both Michèle Roberts and Helen Chadwick, who have discussed it in their writing¹¹⁹.

2.2.2 Multidisciplinary work and the notion of sisterhood

A healthy blend between feminist theory, feminist literary criticism and feminist criticism applied to the visual arts has dominated the Anglo-American feminist scene since the 1970s. This theoretical and critical amalgamation should also be seen as one of feminism's most relevant and vital characteristics, for feminism is an umbrella term (which should not, however, be confused with hegemonic), incorporating various methods of analysis and theory (Humm, 1985: 94), as well as practices, disciplines and spheres. Its definition is not, therefore, univocal, possessing, on the contrary, semantic amplitude and a

¹¹⁷ Nochlin is another feminist art historian who in her writing has established connections between literature and the visual arts from a feminist perspective. In her groundbreaking essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (from 1971), she compares the situation of the woman artist with that of the woman writer in the nineteenth-century in order to conclude that the latter was "able to compete on far more equal terms with men" (1971: 163).

¹¹⁸ See Jane Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1982) and *Thinking Through the Body* (1988). See also Susan R. Suleiman's *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (1990) and *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* (1994).

¹¹⁹ Warner's books are mentioned in Roberts's *Food, Sex and God* and in Chadwick's notebooks. Warner wrote pieces for Chadwick's catalogues and the two seem to have been friends.

multiplicity of orientations (Macedo and Amaral, 2005: 76) that reflect its inclusive aim and its politics of difference(s).

Moreover, the cross-pollination of different knowledges and fields that characterised much of the political, social and cultural struggles of the 1960s and the 1970s and the concomitant rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism, which subversively affirmed the relational quality of texts, disciplines and social phenomena, eventually had an effect on all forms of criticism. An interest in hybridism was also the result of the epistemological revolution brought forward by these new paradigms, which led artists, writers and critics to adopt and combine different perspectives and approaches as a way of questioning and ultimately destroying the absolute truths and the division of knowledge that had hitherto structured humanist, modernist and phallogocentric thought¹²⁰. Women artists and writers and feminist critics were particularly receptive to this conceptual and practical miscegenation, for they saw in it the possibility of freeing women and their bodies from traditional systems of representation and domination.

Not only did the promiscuity between the visual arts and literature, particularly visible at the height of feminism's second wave, underlined the influence of works over one another, but also the collaborative process undertaken by women artists and women writers. Like many others involved in the feminist movement, Michèle Roberts participated in several collaborative projects with other women, namely collective writing groups and feminist street theatre, and lived in a number of communes in the 1970s. These are life events vividly evoked by the writer in *Paper Houses*, her autobiographical work from 2007:

I met Alison, my sexual mentor, at the second Women's Liberation Conference at Ruskin, Oxford, on 9 January 1971. . . . I'd like to join women's liberation, I said to Sian: where do I sign on? To whom do I make my sub payable? Idiot, she said: it's not about Them, it's about Us. After a morning of workshops on different topics, over lunch we talked collectively,

¹²⁰ The questioning of universal truths and the emphasis on the relational quality of knowledge and things are critical principles found in some of postmodernism's and poststructuralism's most famous proponents. For example, they are visible in Lyotard's critique of grand-narratives and in his emphasis on language games as well as in Kristeva's notion of intertextuality. See Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge* (1979) and Kristeva's *Desire in Language* (1980).

vociferously, about our demands for equal pay and opportunities and good childcare. (2007: 33)¹²¹

The communal ethos experienced in those days brought together women who were involved in different practices and who came from different backgrounds, but who, nevertheless, felt united by feminism's common goals. Their sharing of life experiences was made possible by the belief that underneath the differences they were all women and, as such, subjects who suffered at the hands of patriarchal oppression. The communes and the collective work were thus appealing to women as ways of finding a true female identity, fighting patriarchy and re-establishing female bonds, which had been lost through the effects of a phallogentric culture focused on heterosexual relationships¹²². Collaboration and co-habitation can also be seen as logical outcomes of the feminist notion of sisterhood, a positive concept of female relationships so important in the 1970s as a way of counter-arguing the phallogentric logic and emphasising the feeling of a shared female identity; sisterhood thus reflected an "effort to create a solidarity between women . . . which . . . would arise out of shared perceptions" (Delmar, 1992: 11). In addition, the feminist emphasis on sisterhood favoured the contact between people working in different fields and, consequently, bolstered a multidisciplinary approach to work. These circumstances contributed to women writers' and women artists' involvement in activities outside their normal scope and an awareness of what was going on in other related fields of feminist criticism and practice¹²³.

¹²¹ In addition to this example, see *Paper Houses*, 2007: 34, 38, 47 (Roberts remembers her participation in the Women's Liberation Street Theatre Group); 38 (the writer refers to her participation in the first London demonstration for women's liberation); and 39, 44-46 (Roberts's account of her life in a communal household).

¹²² As Roberts's *Paper Houses* suggests, not everything was rosy and egalitarian in the utopian communes the writer lived in, in the 1970s. In fact, what her autobiographical narrative reveals is how often inequitable gender and class divisions pervaded the communal life and how hard it was to accommodate a woman's desire for a room/space of her own with the sharing principle underlying the experience at the communes.

¹²³ To a certain extent, Roberts's participation in several writing groups also demonstrates the promiscuity between art forms. For example, the writing collective in which Roberts participated together with Alison Fell, Stef Pixner, Tina Reid and Ann Oosthuizen involved art production: the outcome of their meetings was a joint book, *Licking the Bed Clean* (1978), where poems were accompanied by drawings by Alison Fell and Stephanie Pixner. Both Fell and Pixner are mainly known as writers whose career has been associated with feminist writing and publishing circles, but they are also artists, Fell's work being inclusively referred by Parker and Pollock (1987: 4) as included in the first "Women's Liberation Art Group" exhibition, held in March 1971 at the Woodstock Gallery, in London.

2.2.3 Roberts on art and artists

2.2.3.1 “Piss Flowers”

Roberts has developed an interdisciplinary approach that suggests her interest in discussing other arts forms through her writing. Curiously, one of the most representative texts of her attention to the visual arts is “Piss Flowers”, a short and very poetic piece, originally written for a catalogue accompanying Helen Chadwick’s sculpture show *Piss Flowers*, when this was organised at the Angel Gallery, in Nottingham, in 1995¹²⁴.

The circumstantial aspects of Roberts’s “Piss Flowers” and the place where it was originally published already suggest the ambiguity regarding its genre and, consequently, the difficulty in classifying it. Despite being a catalogue entry, it is not an informative or descriptive text that privileges meaning over form in order to produce a rigorous interpretation of the work it is supposed to decode, but, and not unlike several of Chadwick’s catalogue texts, an ekphrastic piece that constitutes a vivid written equivalent to Chadwick’s installation¹²⁵. What I want to suggest is that Roberts’s text is a literary product that, taking Chadwick’s *Piss Flowers* as its starting and ending points, intends to express through a different medium that original artwork.

Roberts’s “Piss Flowers” successfully translates into literary (or even poetic) language the eroticism and the gender fusion at the core of Chadwick’s artwork, by creating a fictional world where two lovers experience an orgasmic experience. Moreover, not only do Roberts’s words evoke some of the meanings of Chadwick’s installation, but also its formal characteristics: the two lovers envisaged by the writer recall the way Chadwick’s flowers were created (Chadwick and her partner urinated in the snow in order to produce the white, floral sculptures); there is also the same emphasis as that observed in Chadwick’s work in the colour white and in its connotations of purity and freshness: “[p]early light in the bathroom, clear flame of the cream-coloured candle, you so white in the enamel bath

¹²⁴ It is interesting to notice that Chadwick also wrote an ekphrastic poem, “Piss Posy”, inspired by *Piss Flowers*. This was transcribed in a posthumously published catalogue *Stilled Lives: Helen Chadwick* (1996) and originally published in *In Side Up* (1991). See previous chapter for a full-length discussion of Chadwick’s *Piss Flowers*.

¹²⁵ The texts written by Chadwick for her catalogues often defy the classifying borders and seem to exist in a liminal state in which the systemic boundaries separating literature from non-literature, narrative from poetry and essay are significantly left behind. This is especially true in the case of *Enfleshings* (1989), a catalogue in which Chadwick introduces each of her visual projects by highly poetic prose fragments written by the artist.

lolling in pale water the colour ice” (Roberts, 1998: 163). On the other hand, and following the undercurrent of meaning in Chadwick’s *Piss Flowers*, Roberts’s “Piss Flowers” is also capable of disturbing that sense of virginal purity with a strongly erotic language that permeates the text with sexuality and bodily pleasure: “I lick and kiss you, our wet mouths full of one another in the flickering light the silky air the watery small room the deep bath that you fill my white flower open like a daisy” (1998: 163).

Another important feature of Chadwick’s installation is the suggestion of gender fusion, her sculpted flowers containing the possibility of overcoming gender binaries. Such trait is shared by Robert’s text, which is set on similar premises. In fact, a common interest in the body, sexual pleasure and the transposition of gender differences may have been what brought the two women, artist and writer, together and what makes their rapport particularly relevant in the context of feminist criticism¹²⁶. Roberts’s description of the lovers’ encounter is built through language that sometimes elides punctuation, as if the writer was suggesting the breaking of norms and rules when pleasure dominates and the free play of bodies is set loose. This transgression of the grammatical rules also implies that male and female are part of the same continuum, that there is no ‘he’ and ‘she’, no ‘I’ and ‘you’, but a joyful and all-embracing ‘we’, constantly surfacing in Roberts’s text: “I sit on you facing you *we* start to laugh to spear each other, thick living flesh spike drawn into that secret mouth lips so swollen *we* wrestle *we* slide all over the place children playing in the snow tumbles of whiteness a twist of legs around crisp edges of frost *we* stagger and fall down” (1998: 163, my emphasis). The repetition of the plural pronoun *we* suggests that the lovers’ encounter is complete, reciprocal and free of boundaries, aspects also highlighted in other moments of the text: “I’m your land and you’re mine, you offer me everything, plenitude, emptiness, the white hollow embracing the white peak” (1998:164). The lovers’ encounter, therefore, creates a pleasure that, because unrestricted and shared, fuses their bodies into a single physical entity: “[p]leasure stalks us, a snow animal that growls and purrs, supple and fat, long slow ripples spreading out wider and wider of this new body we have made between us the body of ourselves making love arching out high up holding each other as we fall rolling over and over in the snow (1998: 164).

¹²⁶ My explanation is here merely suggestive for I could not find any document or text providing references to a meeting held between Roberts and Chadwick or to the reasons for Roberts writing a text for Chadwick’s catalogue. When asked about this relationship at a conference we both attended (Reading Spiritualities. University of Lancaster. 20-22 January 2006), Roberts was not very accurate, merely mentioning that despite knowing Chadwick and enjoying her work a lot, they were not friends and it was Chadwick who invited her to write in the catalogue.

By questioning gender binaries and proposing a fusion of bodies and sexual identities through the celebration of bodily pleasure, Roberts is addressing issues central to her fiction, which the writer also recognised in Chadwick's artwork. Moreover, these issues reveal the extent to which feminist concerns are shared between the two women. Chadwick and Roberts experienced similar socio-cultural conditions, for they both started creating and exhibiting/publishing in the 1970s and in England, at a time when important changes in women's lives and their public participation were taking place, not least of all because of the development of the feminist liberation movement and an active feminist theory and criticism. The impact of feminist politics, with its emphasis on female sexuality and bodily pleasure, together with a questioning of gender inequality and opposition, is reflected in their aesthetic practices, as exemplified by "Piss Flowers" in its literary and visual version.

2.2.3.2 Other eckphrasic texts

Other texts from *Food, Sex and God* manifest Roberts's interest in visual art. In addition, they show that such interest is always from a feminist perspective, since what recurrently captivates the writer's attention is the depiction of women and their bodies in the artworks, the role of women as artists and objects, the cultural, political and historical conditions experienced by them. Such a viewpoint is underlined by the section "On Art and Artists", where "Piss Flowers" is also included, in texts in which essayist and fictional intentions are often combined¹²⁷.

In "Secret Still Lives: On Bonnard" Roberts offers a portrait of Bonnard's wife and model Marthe, capturing her in the bath tub, lost in reverie, and then in her daily tasks, like in so many of Bonnard's paintings¹²⁸. Despite the evident intertextuality with Bonnard's work, the reader is also confronted with a narrative in which the narrator's voice, which is not Marthe's, is nevertheless able to reveal the wife's inner and secret thoughts, to an extent that Bonnard's paintings were never able to. These move from the perception of herself as an object of her husband's gaze– "[s]he's on display in his aquarium, a wild creature tamed in a jar, bobbling in preservative" (1998: 166)– to her view on domestic tasks: "[a] man

¹²⁷ Most of the essays found in the section "On Art and Artists" were originally written for art exhibitions and appear in catalogues of women artists' work, anthologies dedicated to women artists or magazines published by art institutions such as Tate.

¹²⁸ Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) was a French painter, lithographer and designer and one of the most upholders of the Impressionist tradition. He is best known for peaceful domestic scenes to which the term 'Intimiste' is applied. His favourite model was his wife and some of his most characteristic pictures are those in which he depicted her in the bath. Other subjects included flowers and landscapes, as well as self-portraits (see Chilvers, 1990: 72-73).

watching can see this as a kind of sacrament, because he doesn't do it himself. For her, it's daily and necessary. It's what has to be done. Painstakingly repeated over and over, to get it right. Here's the eternal present of housework and cooking" (1998: 168)¹²⁹.

Roberts's text also ponders on Bonnard's paintings of his wife as possessing a "necessary edge, undertow, shadow, sharpness" and interprets that characteristic as the result of Marthe's "occasional troubled darkness" (1998: 171), although she is also a woman who lives "the calm progress of domestic life" (1998: 171). Making the most of the clues left by Bonnard in his work, Roberts thus provides a multi-layered and ambivalent literary portrait of Marthe Bonnard, who becomes a round-shaped character in a text that, on the one hand, highlights the ambiguous and uneasy position of women in the domestic sphere as much as in the visual arts and suggests a power relation between man and woman that is ultimately oppressive to the latter; on the other hand, it demonstrates the liberatory power of art, which can expose women to their own unconscious and recover a paradisiacal moment before the Fall. For Roberts the Fall clearly symbolises separation, division: "[w]e are divided, inside ourselves and between ourselves. Man and woman, inside and outside, human being and natural world, the garden and the house" (1998: 172). In contrast, art has the ability to recover a prelapsarian Eden, where the semiotic mother awaits; for Roberts, as for Marthe, the male painter is still able to "[give] back to himself and her the body of the mother" (1998: 172).

The dangers of the male artist's gaze are again touched upon in Roberts's review of Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), in which the writer describes Marcello, the main character in Fellini's film, as a voyeuristic journalist who "has trouble in naming women and with understanding them as autonomous subjects" (1998: 179), consuming "each and all of them with his gaze" (1998: 179). In contrast, in "Seeing Differently: What Self Portraits Might Be" and "*The Tub* by Vanessa Bell" Roberts explores the implications of being a woman artist and, therefore, the female subject of the gaze.

In the first of these two essays, Roberts presents a fictional woman who is simultaneously the object and the subject of the artistic gaze. The text explores the difficulties that arise when women become the subjects of self-portraits and hence reflects

¹²⁹ Though Roberts's text is written in the third-person, it still gives the impression of giving voice to Marthe's inner thoughts. This narrative strategy also suggests Marthe's self-detachment.

some of the problems raised by feminist art criticism on this specific art tradition¹³⁰. Roberts describes the woman artist's struggle in occupying that subject-position by virtue of the objectifying connotations attached to the body of woman, as well as by her trouble in understanding her multi-layered subjectivity (1998: 173)¹³¹. However, contrary to Bonnard's wife, this woman, who is an artist and not merely a model or a female muse, is in charge of the creative process and thus "[i]t was up to her" to "make herself up. Re-make herself. Dream selves into being" (1998: 176).

A similar discursive and power position is occupied by the woman described in the second essay, which takes Vanessa Bell's painting *The Tub* (1917) as the starting point for a (very) short-story loosely inspired by several members of the Bloomsbury Group¹³². Roberts's vision of an independent, self-assertive woman writer (who remains nameless throughout the text, a fact that reinforces her exemplary role) is sketched in rather positive terms, in contrast to the isolated and anxious female figure of Bell's painting. Despite having problems with her novel, Roberts's woman writer relentlessly strives in her writing at the same time that she is involved in a fulfilling relationship with a sculptor. This personal connection is symbolically represented through the tub in which husband and wife often have bath together (1998: 183, 185). Along with the woman's determination to succeed as a writer, Roberts focuses on the assertive quality of her body, affirming its nudity in the surrounding world, and establishes a link between the relaxed way this woman experiences her body and the sensuality she finds in the written text: "[t]he word *text* gave her pleasure. A sensual word. Like *pelt*: to be stroked and caressed and made to shine. To be teased out with the fingers into a mass of loose wet connected words" (1998: 185). In addition, by exploring the relationship between a woman writer and a male sculptor, Roberts suggests the intermingling of art practices, stressing how these, like genders, can coexist and even profit from one another. In fact, Roberts's text explains that the wife modelled for the husband (1998: 183), just as the husband and his work inspired the wife's writing. Hence, the ending of this short tale, in similar fashion to what Roberts had already dared to imagine a few

¹³⁰ See previous chapter, which also addresses the problems contingent to female self-representation.

¹³¹ See also my comments to "Seeing Differently: What Self Portraits Might Be" earlier in this chapter.

¹³² Vanessa Bell (1879-1961) was an English painter and designer and sister to Virginia Woolf. With her sister and her husband, the painter Clive Bell, she was a central figure of the Bloomsbury Group. See Chilvers (1990: 52), and an interesting article on Vanessa Bell, published in *The Guardian* (McCarthy, 1999).

pages before in “Piss Flowers”, envisages a boundless bodily state in which gender oppositions are thrown away and bodies live with, for and in each other: “[t]hey gave their bodies to each other and gave back what they received. One body, a divided body, two bodies, one body, both body” (1998: 185).

2.2.3.3 Religious iconography

Roberts’s longtime interest in Catholicism and its effects on a woman’s life, identity and body is also explored by addressing the subject of painting, a traditional and powerful way of expressing the catholic faith and dogma. In “The Flesh Made Word” Roberts, just like the painted Mary Magdalene described in this essay, dreams of “a spirituality reintegrated with corporeality” (1998: 39). To that end, she questions the repression of the female body, which, according to the author, has remained a problem in the Catholic Church (1998: 37). Nevertheless, the repressed female body is reinscribed in the Catholic tradition through art, as exemplified by the powerful Mary Magdalene iconography:

The visual image fuses body as symbol with body as reality. Take the thousands and thousands of paintings of Mary Magdalene made over the last two thousand years, and see how gloriously she embodies the female body touched by divinity. . . . The great thing about the Catholic tradition is that, though it oppresses women horribly by naming them as semi-devils, it simultaneously gives them a visible place. (1998: 38-39)

For Roberts, religious art can offer women a redemptive space, since she seems to believe that artists have access to the unconscious and are, therefore, “able to come up with ambiguous, suggestive, inexplicable images that refuse to be neat mirror images of the official portraits of the dominant religious culture” (1998: 42). These remarks are in line with the way some feminists have approached the male-oriented art tradition.

For example, in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, a text framed by a psychoanalytic and feminist approach to art, Jacqueline Rose corroborates Freud’s connection between art and the unconscious, as well as between sexuality and the image. Moreover, for Rose: “the fantasy of absolute sexual difference. . . . could only operate like a law, which always produces the terms of its own violation. . . . Our previous history is not the petrified block of a singular visual space since, looked at obliquely, it can always be seen to contain its moments of unease” (1986: 232-33). Those “moments of unease” are also found by Kristeva

in some of Giovanni Bellini's portraits of the Virgin Mary, who disturbs baby Jesus as much as the male painter in her distancing expression of female *jouissance* (1975)¹³³. I am not sure if Roberts knew these critical texts, which were published before her comments on the visual representation of Mary Magdalene in the Catholic art tradition, but she certainly takes a very similar point of view, once again reinforcing her interest in feminist art criticism¹³⁴.

Roberts's fascination with a long tradition of religious art and iconography, particularly in relation to the representation of women, extends to her fiction. An emblematic example of this is *Daughters of the House* (1992), a novel addressing the apparitions of a female figure in the woods, which are interpreted as either the representation of evil and unleashed female sexuality or the iconographic image of the Mother of God in all her purity and virginity.

2.2.3.4 The rapist male eye in Roberts's fiction

Many of Roberts's novels are prolific in visual art details. Some of them feature fictional characters who are artists or art historians (*Reader I Married Him*, *Flesh and Blood* and *The Mistressclass*) and allude to the rapist eye of the male artist mentioned by Roberts (*apud* Miller, 2007: n. pag.). In *Flesh and Blood*, for example, Félicité, one of the main characters in this fragmented and plurivocal narrative, is seduced by George Mannot, an English artist on visit to France who sees in Félicité an object of desire and aesthetic inspiration (1994)¹³⁵. These same reasons are subjacent to the relationship between Catherine and Robert, who is Catherine's father-in-law and a self-centred, irascible painter, in *The Mistressclass* (2003a).

¹³³ See Kristeva's "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini", first published in 1975. Roberts's take on religious iconography also echoes Pollock's comments a propos of the emergence of the unconscious, the semiotic and the maternal in visual art (Pollock, 1996 and 2004).

¹³⁴ Roberts mentions in an interview Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, from 1991, and Kristeva's reading of the semiotic (Newman, 2003: n. pag.), but I could not find in her writing any direct reference to other texts by the same authors.

¹³⁵ George Mannot is a more enigmatic and problematic character than we are first led to believe. George seems, in fact, to be Georgina, an English woman who painted disguised as a man in order to have the freedom of movement and experience that she would not otherwise be allowed to. In that sense, she overcomes the difficulties faced by Félicité, whom, though feeling the same urge to paint and explore the world, is unable to do both because, as a nineteenth-century woman, she must withdraw herself to the private sphere. Félicité and Georgina are thus mirror images of each other, translating the way social expectations shape gender definitions and restrict the subject's actions.

Roberts's interest in the visual arts is motivated by several reasons. She is the first to recognise it as the logical outcome of having been married with an art historian and having lived in Italy for some years, where she felt enraptured by Renaissance art and the religious iconography of Italian churches¹³⁶. These biographical facts have intermittently inspired her fiction but in *Reader I Married Him* (2005) they become more central to the narrative: set for the most part in Italy, it tells the story of Dawn/Aurora, a suspect and suspicious widow who investigates the theft of Italian works of art. The novel's geographical location provides Roberts with the opportunity to include in her text many examples of Italian art, as does the reference to Dawn's second husband Cecil, an architectural historian. After killing Michael, the seductive police detective-priest-art historian, Dawn finds romance with Frederico, the director of the museum in Padenza; but before reaching that end, the narrative lingers in Padenza's museum or in Frederico's family home, exulting in mouth-watering Italian dinners and the splendour of Italian art.

Roberts's attention to sacred art also comes from her Catholic upbringing. Having attended local convent schools in England, Roberts was raised in the Catholic devotion to saintly iconography and in the Marian cult, which is often expressed through the devotion to the image of the Virgin Mary. This devotion to the iconic image as a representation of the sacred is expressed throughout Roberts's fiction and is even an important part of its meaning, as confirmed by novels like *Daughters of the House* or *Impossible Saints*. It is also a topic discussed in the essays found in *Food, Sex and God*, as already stressed.

Roberts's biographical details are of significance, for they supply relevant clues to her interest in art tradition and in actively using that tradition as background to her fiction¹³⁷. Nevertheless, still as relevant is the importance played by the feminist movement and feminist art criticism in her life and work, since these have also shaped Roberts's understanding of visual art and the role occupied by women in it. That feminist context has made the writer acutely alert to the objectification of the female body by the patriarchal eye of the male artist, a synecdoche for a sexist art tradition, and particularly receptive to those artworks in which gender oppositions are brought forward only to be questioned or in which the female body engages in self-centred and sensual pleasure. In addition, by making her written work the place where the visual and the literary often meet, Roberts creates an

¹³⁶ These reasons were presented to me by the writer during an informal conversation we had before Robert's plenary talk at the Reading Spiritualities conference. University of Lancaster. 20-22 January 2006.

¹³⁷ Some of these biographical details are available in Roberts's website (http://www.micheleroberts.co.uk/life_story.htm).

intertextual, sometimes ekphrastic and hybrid product that partakes of the feminist emphasis on the transgression of existing boundaries, given rules and fixed systems of thought, as much as of the “appropriation, misappropriation, montage, collage, hybridization, and general mixing-up of visual and verbal texts and discourses, from all periods of the past, as well as from the multiple social and linguistic fields of the present”, which, according to Susan R. Suleiman (1990: 191), is the most characteristic feature of the postmodern style.

2.3 From “A Bodice Rips” to “Mud”: subversive representations of the female body

These were two of the adventures of my professional life. The first—killing the Angel in the House—I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet.
Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women” (1942: 62).

2.3.1 “A Bodice Rips”: releasing the female body from gender and genre conventions

In 2001 Michèle Roberts published *Playing Sardines*, an anthology of short-stories that included, among other fictional texts, “A Bodice Rips: A Novel in Seven Chapters”¹³⁸. This follows the structure of a fairy tale in that the female protagonist, Maria (a quintessential feminine name), reaches maturity through a series of challenging events¹³⁹. In many fairy tales the character’s growth is experienced through the body (one only has to think of Snow White and Cinderella, whose bodily awakening matches their sexual maturity and their engagement in a heterosexual relationship), which thus plays a crucial role in these narratives, as Marina Warner’s *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (1994b) well documents. The same can be said of “A Bodice Rips”, making it a particularly useful text for discussing the importance given by Roberts to the (female) body in her fiction. Moreover, this short-story, exemplary of Roberts’s writing skills as much as of her predominant themes, not only rips the constraints oppressing the body, setting it free

¹³⁸ “A Bodice Rips” was initially published in *Sex, Drugs, Rock 'n' Roll: Stories to End the Century*. Ed. Sarah LeFanu. Serpent’s Tail, 1997. However, in her introductory remarks to *Playing Sardines*, Roberts mentions that all the stories were rewritten for inclusion in the anthology.

¹³⁹ Roberts’ fairy tale is close to the gothic and psychoanalytical re-reading of fairy tales offered by Angela Carter’s collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Both writers seem to have understood the symbolic and subversive potential of this traditional genre, which they aptly use as a framework for expressing their main concerns.

and exploring female sexuality, but also rips, or questions, the fixed rules of fictional genres, making both these transgressive movements intimately linked.

If Roberts's short-story flirts with the fairy and myth tale tradition, it also winks an eye to romance fiction, a genre mainly written by and intended for women¹⁴⁰. The connection between Robert's text and the romance novel is already suggested by the title given to the former, which alludes to the expression *bodice rippers*, a derogatory designation (used by mainstream and feminist critics alike) for that immensely popular literary genre published by Harlequin (in the United States) and Mills and Boon (in the United Kingdom). In fact, *Harlequin* and *Mills and Boon* are other common expressions for this type of fiction. In such novels, the heroine, depicted in the front cover as scantily dressed as possible and in a rapturous pose, is involved in a sexually explicit plot that ends with she being seduced by the romantic, over-powerful male hero¹⁴¹. Romance novels therefore emphasise heterosexual love and focus on the protagonist's psychological and physical journey in order to conquer that love.

Such is the case of "A Bodice Rips", which seems to end with its heroine sexually aroused after being seduced by the 'villain-turned-out-hero', who enacts a rape fantasy. This is another typical device of the romance novel, according to Pamela Regis (2003)¹⁴². Another aspect that further stresses Roberts's dialogue with and revision of the genre is her reference to Georgette Heyer (*apud* Newman, 2003: n. pag.), who, beginning publication of her work in the 1920s, is credited for transforming historical romance from an adventure story into a love story that appealed to women readers and whose romances Roberts admits to have avidly read during her adolescence¹⁴³. "A Bodice Rips" pays tribute to Heyer and her work by mixing adventure (Maria's involvement in a revolutionary *coup d'état*) and love affair (her relationship first with the leader of the insurrection, Sylvester, and then with Count Ferdinand, the despot ruler) in a story with some historic references (the plot

¹⁴⁰ Warner admits in her introduction to *From the Beast to the Blonde* that romance and fairy tales bear a strong affinity (1994b: xii).

¹⁴¹ For relevant discussions of romance fiction from a feminist perspective see Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Culture* (1984) and Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women* (1982).

¹⁴² In 1919, E.M. Hull's novel *The Sheik* was published in the United Kingdom. The hero of this book was an overpowering male who kidnapped the heroine and won her admiration through his forceful actions. The novel was one of the first to introduce the rape fantasy. According to Pamela Regis, in this novel and those that followed, the rape was depicted as more of a fantasy; as a result, the heroine is rarely if ever shown experiencing terror, stress, or trauma (2003: 115-17).

¹⁴³ Although Roberts's reference to Georgette Heyer is produced in the context of her novel *Fair Exchange*, it still proves the importance of the genre to Roberts's writing process. See also E. Parker (Spring 2008: 22).

mentions contraband, castles, and aristocratic titles, details which vaguely match the ones found in Heyer's Regency novels), as well as references to manners and class issues so characteristic of the genre.

Roberts is in a position to understand her interest in romance fiction, for she sees it as a genre that "enables us to write about feminine or female concerns in a way that the model of what I call the male literary novel doesn't" (*apud* Newman, 2003: n. pag.). Nevertheless, she is also able to grasp the dangers of this narrative form for the construction of feminine identity since it offers "sentimental and reassuring answers" (Roberts, 2003b: viii), therefore reinforcing the ingrained patriarchal ideals of romantic love and gender oppositions, suggested, for example, by the difference between the helpless woman and "the bloody hero, so able and wonderful" (Roberts, *apud* Newman, 2003: n. pag.).

If Patricia Duncker is right in calling "A Bodice Rips" "a *pastiche* novelette in miniature" (18 June 2001: n. pag., my emphasis), it is also fruitful to read it with other postmodernist terms, like *irony* and *parodic revision*, in mind. In fact, such reading is in synchrony with Roberts's overall purpose for *Playing Sardines*, described by the writer as her attempt to resist being pigeon-holed (*apud* Newman, 2003: n. pag.)¹⁴⁴. I therefore wish to corroborate through my analysis of "A Bodice Rips" Emma Parker's interpretation of Roberts's dip into feminine genres like chick lit and romance fiction, which this critic sees as expressing "concerns central to her work— namely, a critical preoccupation with romance and a desire to challenge boundaries Roberts rewrites romance in order to stress both its perils and disruptive potential" (Spring 2008: 22). I believe the reasons mentioned by Parker for Roberts's interest in what is seen as specifically feminine (and not feminist) literary genres are also closely linked to the writer's intention of bringing to the forefront of her narratives the female body, a strategy that is made possible by the conventions of these genres.

In "A Bodice Rips" Maria is brought up by her widowed father, who is the inventor of a new corset, the 'Revolutionary Bust and Stomach Stiffener', known to its devotees as 'Squeasy', which Maria has to wear at all times. The narrator persistently refers to the coercion exerted by the corset in Maria's body: leaving the churchyard at her father's funeral, Maria cannot bend and pick the glove she has dropped because of the corset (2001:

¹⁴⁴ Roberts's comments are initially made in relation to Sylvia Plath's work, but she then moves on saying, "that's what I was deliberately doing in *Playing Sardines*" (*apud* Newman, 2003: n. pag.).

133) and later she is not able to run also because of it (2001: 134, 135). Moreover, the corset is emphatically described as made of “thin ribs of steel” (2001: 131), a “lattice of total control” (2001: 131), a “flesh-hugging machine” (2001: 131), terms that emphasise the controlling power of the garment over the body. This corset is also covered with the chastest and severest white canvas (2001: 131-32), characteristics shared by the habit worn by nuns. They thus remind the reader of the disciplinary effect of clothes and their wearing. The religious significance of Maria’s corset is emphasised by the fact that her father had created the corset after seeing the “snake-monsters with lascivious faces” (2001: 132) at the regimental chapel where he will later be buried and the idea had also sprung to his mind from the uneasiness and distaste that his daughter’s softness provoked in him (2001: 133). In the Christian dogma, the snake is connected with a woman’s sinful nature, which in turn, is linked to her body and the lust it exhales. By sewing all these meanings onto Maria’s corset, Roberts’s short-story emphasises the pernicious consequences of Catholicism to a woman’s body and to an understanding of female sexuality.

“A Bodice Rips” represents the corset’s controlling power over the body as the effect of dominant religious and social discourses that establish a link between woman and sin through an emphasis in female corporeality. Hence, when Maria, after her father’s death and in the course of stressful events, decides not to wear the corset, she immediately feels guilty toward her father and his “high ideals” (the term *high* being a synonym for religious and socially sanctioned moral notions about the body): “[s]he threw the corset into the corner of the room. It seemed to her that all the warrior saints in the regimental chapel hung their head in shame. She had abandoned their high ideals” (2001: 137). Nevertheless, although Maria had internalized social discourses and cultural values concerning the female body, the death of her father produces a change in the way the protagonist wears her clothes and, as a result, in the way she experiences her body. When instead of the oppressive corset Maria puts on a delicate evening dress, she immediately “had the delicious sensation of thick, rich satin next to her skin, flowing over her soft flesh as smooth and cool as milk” (2001: 137). Roberts’s characteristically sensuous prose, focusing on physical experiences and sensations, reinforces the freedom of Maria’s body, which is now able to run; and for Maria that “was such a marvellous experience that she ran back up and then ran down again” (2001: 137).

The lack of bodily restrictions is crucial when Maria faces the enigmatic, dangerous and seductive Count Ferdinand. Indeed, it is the absence of the corset that enhances the characters’ erotic “game of hide and seek” (the title of one of the chapters in Roberts’s

short-story [2001: 141]) and Maria's pleasure at the touch of Ferdinand's fingers on her skin, slowly ripping the bodice of her dress and moving the narrative towards its romantic end. As Maria, or the narrator (since the text employs free indirect speech), comically conclude: "[l]ife was certainly dangerous when you did not wear a corset" (2001: 148). If shunning the corset gives Maria a sense of danger, of not being safe, in control, this is less in relation to her own destiny than to the bodily pleasure that she is exposed to by the absence of the corset, a released pleasure that makes her shudder and tremble (2001: 143) and that is symptomatic of an, until then, hidden sexuality¹⁴⁵. In fact, by wearing only a dress Maria conquers independence for, as the narrator explains, "Maria had chosen this dress precisely because it was not like a corset. To wear it she did not have to depend upon anyone else" (2001: 143).

Several key issues make "A Bodice Rips" a feminist-oriented story (and not just a story with a female point-of-view, as many romance novels tend to be). Firstly, by repeatedly focusing on the corset as a garment that restricts Maria's movements and imprisons her body in socially expected behaviours, Roberts's narrative presents the corset as an example of what Foucault describes as disciplinary technologies, that is, "methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed on them a relation of docility-utility" (1975: 181). Disciplinary technologies, or biopower, as Foucault also calls it in *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1: The Will to Knowledge* (1976: 140-44), are then a set of practices and techniques (such as the wearing of a corset) meant to produce "subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (1975: 182). However, the corset is not simply a Foucauldian disciplinary technology in general, but more specifically the product of a patriarchal discourse and power that wishes to control and regulate female bodies and their sexuality¹⁴⁶. In that sense, it is an instrument of the phallic order. This connection between disciplinary technologies of the body and patriarchal control is further emphasised in Roberts's text by

¹⁴⁵ Note how the vocabulary used by Roberts stresses the orgasmic nature of the encounter between Count Ferdinand and Maria: "[t]he shock of the touch brought with it a pleasure over which she had no control. . . She felt she glowed golden. . . Her heart pounded. . . Maria breathed deeply. She shuddered as a wave of sweetness pushed through her. She tried to keep still but she was trembling" (2001: 143).

¹⁴⁶ See Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (1992), Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body" (1993a) and Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) for a feminist revision of Foucault's notions of disciplinary technologies and biopower, which brings into the discussion gender issues.

the moralizing and sombre figure of Maria's father, who is the creator of the Squeasy corset and who literally represents the Law of the Father.

Secondly, despite these disciplinary technologies, "A Bodice Rips" proves that Maria's body has the power of resistance, of subverting systems of domination, of putting on different clothes and trying a different embodiment of the self¹⁴⁷. Maria's decision not to wear the corset and her choice of an alternative set of clothes suggest that agency is within the reach of those who are subject to dominant power. Although the text's emphasis on the act of dressing and roleplaying suggests that a liberating process will not bring the body back to an original moment nor provide the self with an essence (neither the subject nor its body will find their 'true identity'), such process will, nevertheless, allow for a less oppressive and more conscious body performance.

Last but not least, different moments in Roberts's narrative show how, on the one hand, the writer is fully aware of a literary tradition of romance fiction and the rules governing the same: Roberts's 'bodice ripper' is sexually explicit and culminates in a seduction scene in which the protagonist discovers 'true', romantic love after succumbing literally at the hands of the male hero, who evidences all the signs of stereotypical masculinity (prowess, determination and physical domination); in addition, before she reaches that narrative and physical climax, the vulnerable heroine had to accept the wealthier and more powerful male character, thus seemingly submitting to the patriarchal rules governing the heterosexual love game. On the other hand, Roberts's short-story ironically revisits the genre by using its devices, namely its erotic potential and its focus on the female protagonist, in order not only to expose and soothe women's anxieties towards men and heterosexual relationships, but also to contest the patriarchal denigration of the female body and its damaging consequences for a woman's sense of identity, proposing instead a celebration of female bodily experience and sexuality. Such celebration is possible because both the plot and the narrator's comments about what is taking place establish a

¹⁴⁷ Foucault, who towards the end of his life proposed a dialogic view of power, also contemplated the possibility of resistance and subversion. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault affirms: "[w]here there is power, there is resistance" (1976: 95), a phrase that suggests how power is not only owned by those who detain the instruments of domination. Hence, if disciplinary technologies and dominant discourses reinforce power over the bodies subject to it, the very nature of this process also creates the possibility of resistance. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that in Foucault's description of power, the conditions of resistance are propitiated by the very power that they oppose to, as there is no subject position outside the system. As Foucault writes: "resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (1976: 95).

connection between female sexual fulfilment or bodily pleasure and the absence of the patriarchal yoke, the latter symbolically represented by the corset.

Roberts's text thus establishes a parodic dialogue with the tradition of romance fiction, in the sense that, following Hutcheon's notions of parody (1985), her literary imitation implies a difference that reframes and subverts the original work and its implicit ideology. Her reading is mainly ambivalent, ironic and ultimately goes beyond the genre, as it is emphasised in the last chapter of "A Bodice Rips", appropriately titled "The Key" (2001: 149). In "The Key", the narrator explains that Maria, Sylvester, Count Ferdinand and the corset are all part of a game played by two girls, who enact and perfect the plot of *The Black Riders*, a children's classic published in 1939 by Violet Needham and the girls' favourite book. This framing narrative establishes a postmodern mise-en-abyme structure that places Roberts's 'bodice ripper' in inverted commas and simultaneously inscribes and subverts the conventions of narrative, to paraphrase Hutcheon (1988: 49).

Roberts's metaliterary reference to *The Black Riders*, whose narrative "A Bodice Rips" often follows, emphasises her short-story as part of a literary tradition but also asks the reader to look critically at the same. Cousins Maria and Nanda read and reread Needham's novel with delight and engage in a roleplay game that directly comes from that pleasure. Roberts connects such pleasure with the girls' sexual fantasies, for Maria is described by the narrator as a "child pornographer" (2001: 150), and even with her own: in the essay "The Mystery of the Man in Black" she confesses to have felt the same passion and excitement for Needham's book when she was ten or eleven (1998: 147). Both "A Bodice Rips" and "The Mystery of the Man in Black", in which Roberts explicitly refers to her short-story as a pornographic text, "making conscious what I now saw as the sub-text of *The Black Riders*" (1998: 152), suggest that not only children's literature but also romance fiction can express unconscious desires related to bodily and sexual pleasure, particularly in relation to women, who are often the protagonists¹⁴⁸. By framing her 'bodice ripper' within a narrative of childhood play and female sexual awakening and through references to a novel where these same elements are implicit, Roberts is drawing attention to the sub-text of romance fiction, that is, the latent sexual content of the romance formula. Moreover, by replacing the expected happy ending of heterosexually fulfilled love by a children's game,

¹⁴⁸ The connection between children's literature, namely *The Black Riders*, and romance fiction is established by Roberts in "The Mystery of the Man in Black", where she identifies in the brief romantic scenes of Needham's narrative "the Mills and Boon element in the book" (1998: 150).

Roberts further subverts the literary tradition. As Susanne Gruss concludes, with “A Bodice Rips” Roberts found “a way to celebrate the genre while at the same time subverting it through the ending, which unveils the ‘bodice ripper’ as a play between ten-year-old girls who explore sexuality” (2009: 234).

2.3.2 The female body in Roberts’s long fiction

Although the previous discussion of the importance of the female body and sexuality in Roberts’s writing has been grounded on a detailed analysis of one of her short-stories, the same conclusions could have been reached through the study of her lengthier fiction, which, as the title of a novel from 1994 suggests, is often about “flesh and blood”. In *Daughters of the House* the bodily and earthly sphere is contrasted with the religious and spiritual one through the progress of two thirteen-year-old cousins, Thérèse and Léonie, the first towards martyrdom and holiness, the second towards sexual awakening and the bodily. Devoted Thérèse eschews food, despises her body and mortifies herself in a desperate attempt to immolate the lives of her beloved Catholic women saints. Holiness, Thérèse believes (a belief sustained by regulatory social groups, such as the family and the Catholic Church), will bring social approval and will bring her closer to her dead mother. In contrast, Léonie engages in sensuous midnight food feasts that clearly defy the social norms regulating food and eating and experiments sexual desire and bodily pleasure with Baptiste. Her narrative trajectory reveals a constant fascination with the body and its functions, which Léonie analyses with a mix of curiosity and sensuous pleasure:

Pissing was a tremendous pleasure. Voluptuously abandoning control. Relief as the bursting bladder emptied itself, easing discomfort. Shitting was an equal delight. It was, to begin with, so varied. Some knobs of shit as hard and beadlike as rabbit droppings fell away from her. Some days slugs or pellets. On others she watched a thick brown snake dive down between her legs. Letting it out felt so good. Shiver as the shit took over, nudged her open, swelled, dropped softly out. (1992: 67)

The interest and pleasure felt by Léonie towards the body and the physical world, as well as her unawareness of the abject, are presented as something typical of childhood, for even Thérèse, when a baby, experiences the world around her in similar ways:

Lino was lovely stuff in Thérèse's opinion. In the corners of the kitchen, where it fitted badly, it could be prised up, peeled backwards, waggled to and fro until a piece cracked, broke off. Chewed, it eased aching gums: a dirty comforter; flexible chocolate. Then in the cracks between the lino strips lurked crumbs, hairs embedded in solid grease. All to be prodded, tested, gouged out. The world balanced, filthy and delicious, on the tip of her forefinger. (1992: 32)

However, so *Daughters of the House* suggests, social upbringing, which, especially for Thérèse, happens amid patriarchal and catholic discourses (Thérèse grows in a small and pious French village and reveres her father, whereas Léonie is initially raised in protestant England and lacks the authoritative paternal figure), soon curtails Thérèse's interest in the worldly and the bodily and in its place establishes a system of binary oppositions that leads to the association of the female body with sin and the abject and sanctions repression and abnegation, proposing salvation only through the spiritual sphere. This socialization process is evident in *Daughters of the House* in several moments and through several agents, from *monsieur le curé*, who rejects the feminine fertility statue venerated by the villagers, to the minutely detailed rituals surrounding mealtimes, which scrutinize, control and sanitize the two cousins' bodies.

A similar situation is faced by Josephine, a defiant nun in Roberts's *Impossible Saints* who escapes the dull, gregarious and oppressive regime of the Catholic convent, where the body as well as the mind are subject to a strict control, their needs and desires constantly repressed, in order to create a different house, one in which spiritual elevation coexists with physical pleasure and female bodies are celebrated. The householders of this special convent are invited to rejoice in their bodies and bodily pleasures (including dancing, eating, drinking and having sex, all sinful activities in the eyes of the Catholic Church). Josephine's impossible, because irreverent and non-conformist, convent is her answer to the dichotomy imposed by the Catholic dogma. Her unusual house would literally provide the nuns with a double life, for it "would have two addresses, one on each street that it fronted" (1997: 192); one side of this house would be a convent without catholic beliefs but with a style of living perfected by the desert hermits, for each woman would have as much solitude as she desired in order to think or write; in the other side of the house the women would follow a "convivial, social, chatty, sexual, dancing and feasting life" (1997: 194). The

narrator subversively calls this side of the house “[t]he sensual convent, where God manifested in sensual joy” (1997: 194).

Josephine’s female utopia offers the possibility of infusing the bodily with the sacred and vice-versa and therefore proposes a way out of the binary system that grants men access to the intellectual and sacred spheres and defines woman as the fleshy and abject other. As Roberts comments, “[m]en were for a long time thought to have more soul than women, who thus became despised as bodies” (1998: 36). In Josephine’s heretic convent such oppositions are not dismantled by reversing the terms but by abolishing the opposing binarism implicit in them: instead of either/or, Josephine’s nuns preach the logic of both/and.

As in “A Bodice Rips”, *Impossible Saints* liberates the female body from oppressive social norms. These norms take the form of a painful corset in “A Bodice Rips”, whereas in *Impossible Saints* (and, to a great extent, also in *Daughters of the House*) they are represented by the Catholic dogma that legislates over the mind and the body of the nuns. By emphasising the different processes through which society regulates the body, Roberts gives literary expression to the numerous techniques of subjugation and control of the body and the ways through which female bodies are particularly subjected to a phallogentric biopower. She is also determined to show how women are able to subvert this power relation in order to celebrate their body and sexuality.

More recently, Roberts published *Reader, I Married Him*, a novel that, just like “A Bodice Rips”, adopts and subverts the conventions of genre literature. According to Emma Parker, this novel “blends canonical nineteenth-century romantic fiction . . . with its contemporary offspring, chick lit. . . . However, inspired by *capriccio*, a form of landscape painting that involves the playful transgression of norms, Roberts subverts the conventions of chick lit by reinventing the romantic heroine” (Spring 2008: 31-32). This new romantic heroine is Dawn/Aurora, a middle-aged woman who has “a lot of appetite” (E. Parker, Spring 2008: 32), in other words, desire that starts at the table and ends in bed. For Parker both aspects are interconnected, since *Reader, I Married Him* refuses the coyness about sex that is typical of most chick lit and offers instead “a woman-centred representation of sex that counters the myth of the vaginal orgasm and affirms female sexual pleasure” (Spring 2008: 34). Indeed, female *jouissance* erupts in the novel together with Aurora’s rediscovered body, which she previously considered to be fat, old and undesirable (Roberts, 2005: 212).

2.3.3 “Mud”: laughter and the female body

Roberts’s latest book, and her third collection of short-stories, was published in 2010. The book, called *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*, was immediately acclaimed by the critics, who also emphasised Roberts’s determination in exploring sensuous and physical experiences¹⁴⁹. That much was already suggested by the title, with its emphasis on the earthly and the bodily. *Mud* therefore confirms Roberts’s ongoing interest in making literarily visible the body and bodily experiences, along with the discussion of female sexuality, which the author traces back, once again, to childhood.

In “Colette Looks Back”, the French novelist Colette (and one of Roberts’s favourite and most frequently used literary sources) remembers her childhood, a time when she showed an intense fascination with the physical world, and describes her sexual awakening when she was about ten years old. Colette reminds the reader that, as well as being a period of body awareness, childhood is a moment when the gender binary is not yet completely established: in those days Colette is “a girlboy, a boygirl” (2010: 12) who sees her friend Jean-Luc as her equal: “[u]nder our different clothes, under our skins, we were alike, that was what I felt” (2010: 19). Colette’s recollections therefore suggest that gender binarism is the result of a socialization process. As we have seen, Roberts’s “Piss Flowers” had already put forward the notion of genderless bodies, swimming fluidly in a sea of bodily pleasure. This concept can also be found in her fictional work, not just in “Colette Looks Back”, but also in *The Visitation*, a novel from 1983 that uses the image of the twins (Helen and Felix) in order to overcome sexual difference, proposing in its place a bodily wholeness that undoes the separation set in motion after birth, when the mother’s body divides the twins’ bodies by calling them out (1983: 3).

“Mud”, the opening story of Roberts’s anthology, is an appropriate conclusion for the analysis of Roberts’s desire to give literary space to the body and physical experiences. This is the tale of a thirty-five-year-old woman, a writer who takes up an academic job in eastern England, and who, despite feeling lonely (she has just left her husband) and being, as she herself admits, “in a sad, a sorry state” (2010: 5), still retains from her childhood the

¹⁴⁹ In *The Guardian*, Stevie Davies calls *Mud* “a virtuoso collection” (26 June 2010: n. pag.), while Elaine Feinstein, from *The Independent*, describes it as “a delicious book, to be savoured mouthful by mouthful like caviar” (9 July 2010: n. pag.). Together with such praise, critics have emphasised the inventiveness of form (Megan Walsh for *The Sunday Times* [2010: n. pag.]), her interest in literary tradition, namely Victorian fiction and nineteenth-century characters (Walsh, 2010; Feinstein, 9 July 2010), and her determination in exploring sensuous and physical experiences (Davies, 26 June 2010).

exhilarating pleasure and probing curiosity about the physical world: “[i]t’s true I was childish. I wanted too much of everything; too much pleasure; my mouth opened to the world to kiss it and take it in” (2010: 2), admits this nameless female character and narrator. Mud therefore becomes a metaphor, repeatedly reiterated throughout Roberts’s text, for the woman’s connection to the “real thing” (2010: 2), which is not just the physical world, but also the body (particularly what Bakhtin called “the bodily lower stratum” [1965]) and sexual experience. Mud is omnipresent in the woman’s life since childhood, when she used to make mud pies and chop in half the worms she found in the mud (2010: 2); mud clings to her pair of black suede shoes (2010: 2); mud embraces her parents’ dead bodies, something the narrator wishes for herself even while still alive: “I could have eaten a handful of earth. . . . I was just part of the mud” (2010: 4); mud is also the metaphor for language, which the woman writer ploughs into sentences (2010: 4); and mud is there, in the narrator’s body and mouth, when she and the artist, who is experimenting on “making pots like little mud babies” (2010: 7), “lay in the muddy river bank, kissing, at three in the afternoon” (2010: 5). Contrary to social conventions, in “Mud” dirt, the messy earth, the decaying body, the female body, sex and female creativity are a source of pleasure; these create joyful, excessive and childish “[h]urricanes of laughter” (2010: 6) that reject any feeling of abjection.

From the laughing old hags described by Bakhtin (1965) in his study of the carnivalesque, to Da Vinci’s laughing female heads, analysed psychoanalytically by Freud in *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* (1910), and the laughing Medusa, subversively re-contextualised by Cixous (1975a), laughter, which seems to be more frequent in Roberts’s recent work, has an ancient history of association with women and their bodies. These bodies, traditionally feared and abjected, have been explored by recent feminist criticism with socially transgressive effects (Isaakb: 1996). Although Roberts has taken seriously Cixous’s injunction that “[w]omen must write through their bodies” (1975a: 256), I believe the laughter of the woman academic, the young Colette and other female characters who populate Roberts’s fiction also inscribes her work in that female carnivalesque tradition in order to further celebrate the female body and sexuality and as a vindication, a way of redeeming women from the abject position they have occupied in Western culture and thought.

In 1931, Virginia Woolf publicly expressed her doubts at the possibility of any woman truthfully write about her body¹⁵⁰. Michèle Roberts, whose first novel was published in 1978, specifically addresses the issue raised by Woolf and, as part of a group of women propelled by the cultural and social revolution brought about by feminist criticism and theory, has shown her foremother that “telling the truth about my own experiences as a body” (Woolf, 1942: 153) is an adventure that women writers have finally undertaken.

2.4 Abject women, sacred bodies

Why do we assume that God must always remain an inaccessible transcendence rather than a realisation— here and now— in and through the body?
Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993: 148).

2.4.1 “Anger”: woman as monstrous

“Anger”, a text from Roberts’s first collection of short-stories, *During Mother’s Absence*, is first centred on a woman, Bertrande, and then on her daughter, Melusine. The writer sets the plot in an agricultural village of Provence. Against this traditional setting, inhabited by hard-working, god-fearing folks, Bertrande’s appearance and behaviour immediately strike her fellow villagers as grotesque and evil: she attends church with chicken feathers stuck in her shawl and wonders on the hillside (1993: 3); she always wears long, dark and heavy clothes (1993: 3) and she has red hair and dirty, broad hands that are used to slaughtering ducks and butchering lambs (1993: 3-4). The villagers also notice that she does not like children and seems unable to conceive one herself (1993: 4). To sum up, Bertrande is a deeply unfeminine, monstrous character, looked at suspiciously by the villagers. Her artistic nature, for she keeps a stack of wax crayons and a drawing-book in her larder and has the bathroom-wall decorated with her own hand prints (1993: 7), also provokes the neighbours’ disapproval and is seen as another sign of her abnormality. Bertrande’s monstrosity becomes overtly exposed when at last she falls pregnant and tries to kill the child she carries in her womb on several occasions. After that child is born, Bertrande definitely becomes the deadly, monstrous mother, attempting infanticide by dropping her baby in the fire. Such behaviour calls for a psychoanalytical reading, for in this act Bertrande seems to personify the abject mother who threatens the child’s existence. No wonder then that for the villagers Bertrande’s fate is very sad but also expected punishment:

¹⁵⁰ “Professions for Women” is an abbreviated version of the speech Virginia Woolf delivered before a branch of the National Society for Women’s Service, on January 21, 1931; it was published posthumously in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, in 1942.

she slowly vanishes as her baby daughter Melusine sucks and “seemed to use up her mother’s strength” (1993: 11). Bertrande, in a re-enactment of the Lacanian drama, must die so that her daughter can survive.

Bertrande’s daughter, Melusine, is prone to daydreaming and, like her mother, shows a passion for drawing. She also has a freakish body, not only because she had been burnt as a baby and the skin in the uppermost part of her body would forever be “shiny, angry and red” (1993: 10), but also because of the thick thatch of red hair that curled from her neck down to her waist and around her breasts (1993: 15). The girl’s grotesque dimension had already been hinted at through her name (Melusine is a figure of European legends and folklore, a half-woman, half-serpent water fairy; Roberts’s story is loosely based on this folklore tale) and is confirmed by Melusine’s father and stepmother, who claim that Bertrande “had delivered herself of a monster” (1993: 17)¹⁵¹. Bertrande, the monstrous mother, becomes responsible for a monstrous birth.

Eventually, Melusine’s strange outpour of red hair, which initially only lasted for five days (a detail connecting the red hair with menstrual blood and consequently with female sexuality), lasts longer and longer and the girl more and more evidences her mother’s creative and rebellious spirit. Driven by jealousy and fear, Melusine’s husband, a school teacher and therefore a representative and a guardian of the social rules that define as much as circumscribe the village and its inhabitants, enters the private sanctuary where Melusine lived while the outpour of red hair lasted, only to find it empty.

Melusine’s fate seems to follow her mother’s and the similarities in their stories could suggest the pervasiveness of the female grotesque, its deadly consequences and the mother’s blame in the process. But Melusine’s disappearance is more of a flight to freedom and her “deformity” (Roberts, 1993: 17) a tribute to her mother’s monstrosity, celebrated in Roberts’ short-story, which, in its sympathetic viewpoint towards the two women, embraces the grotesque female body and invests it with a subversive power. Such celebration includes all the other red-haired, monstrous women briefly mentioned when the villagers try to find traces of Melusine (1993: 25). The red hair ultimately acquires a universal dimension as it comes to represent women’s, and not only Bertrande’s or Melusine’s ‘monstrosity’.

¹⁵¹ In *Possession* (1990), by A.S. Byatt, there is also a character named Melusine (she is the main subject of Christabel LaMotte’s epic poem), who acts as a symbol of creativity and in-betweenness, even in terms of gender. Roberts attributes similar connotations to her Melusine in her transgressive and empowered tale.

However, this monstrosity acquires positive connotations in “Anger”, as it symbolises women’s body, sexuality, creativity and passion, as well as women’s anger at their oppression and their transgressive resistance.

As discussed in the previous chapter, monstrosity is one of the characteristics attached to the notion of *woman* in Western thought and an attribute directly resulting from women’s corporeality, at odds with the idealised, dominant and masculine conception of the self. ‘Woman’ is thus a sign that is devoid of materiality (since in the Lacanian sense it represents that which is absent or which lacks– the Phallus) and simultaneously saturated with sexuality and fleshiness. These stereotypical and contradictory notions have an effect on the female body, which is removed from sight (unless in a fetishist way and as an outlet for male anxiety and desire) and turned into a source of abjection, as suggested by Roberts’s tale.

Catholic dogma has played a role in the abjectification of women, for it has associated woman and sin, not only due to female curiosity but also because of a woman’s lustful and desirable body. Consequently, sainthood can only be attributed to those who reject the pleasures of the flesh and deny their bodies, corroborating Kristeva’s view that “[u]ntil modern times, women’s familiarity with their intense and evasive body made their religious experience a confrontation with *abjection* precisely, and with *nothingness*” (Clément and Kristeva, 1998: 37). In other words, in order to achieve sainthood, women had to abject and deny their bodies, to the point of nullifying themselves and their identity.

Having been raised a devoted catholic, Roberts could not but be interested in addressing the plight of women in the context of the catholic faith, her fictional work establishing an intertextual relationship with the sacred texts, such as hagiographies and the Bible. Roberts’s fiction has recurrently discussed spiritual issues and questioned religious dogma, as well as traditional socio-cultural representations, particularly in relation to the sacredness of women and the denial of their bodies in order to reach that sacred realm. Moreover, Roberts’s spiritual re-readings have clearly been influenced by her feminist activism and her effort to turn upside-down the traditional image of the female body as abject. It is this network of meanings implicit in Roberts’s depiction of the female body that I intend to discuss in this section.

2.4.2 *The Wild Girl*: woman and the Christian sacred

The Wild Girl is described in the author's website as "tak[ing] the misogyny at the heart of historical Christianity and re-write[ing] the New Testament". In this novel from 1984 Roberts dissects and recreates the myth of Mary Magdalene, taking as her starting point the Nag Hammandi gospels, early Christian Gnostic texts that gave Roberts the opportunity to envisage an alternative version of Christianity, one that, on the practical level, would recognise the fundamental contribution of women to the development of that religious movement and, in more theoretical terms, demand the coexistence of man and woman, the bodily and the spiritual in the Christian concept of the sacred¹⁵².

The Wild Girl, like many of Roberts's novels, is a first-person narrative in which the narrator is not only a woman but also a writer; in this case, the woman writer is Mary Magdalene, who offers her secret gospel to the reader as a testimony of her life with Jesus and her interpretation of Jesus' message. Roberts's Mary Magdalene, who is a combination of two biblical women, Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, and Mary Magdalene, the sinful woman who anoints Christ, questions the Christian division of women, who are portrayed as either virgins or whores. She is also "the wild girl" of the book's title, i.e., the girl who, aged fifteen, ran away from home as a way of escaping betrothal, marriage and the authority of the men of her own village (1984: 14). Mary's rummage takes her to Alexandria, where she learns from Sibylla, a Roman courtesan, not only the arts of female seduction, but also that "the life and love of the body is a noble thing, against which the intellect and the spirit need not wage war" (1984: 22). Set early in the narrative, this motto runs through the entire novel.

Roberts's wild girl finds love and friendship in Jesus, but among the disciples she still evokes the unruly feminine and an uncontained or unrestrained body that perpetually represents danger. It is not my intention to offer a thorough analysis of Roberts's book, but several relevant aspects need to be emphasised. I want to briefly focus on the reasons why Mary and her body are a source of danger and to whom they constitute such danger. I also want to suggest that Roberts constructively disturbs the sacred texts of Catholicism so as to produce a more positive account of women's relation with the sacred.

¹⁵² See the author's note to *The Wild Girl*, where Roberts acknowledges the gospels and Gnostic texts as sources for this fictional work (1984: 9).

At the end of *The Wild Girl*, Mary may be ready to bury her heretic writings, but she has not given up her intention of preaching “an Idea” (1984: 180), which she thus summarises in the words she will say to her daughter: “I shall tell her that through her woman’s body she know the Spirit and the Word, that through her body she experiences God, and I shall pray that Wisdom may come to her and enable her to open herself, when the time is ripe, to that mystery of love which brings the Resurrection, and the Life” (1984: 180-81). Mary’s words highlight that spirituality can and, indeed, is reached through the female body, which is not monstrous nor abject, but a channel for touching God and the sacred. This was what Mary Magdalene learned from Jesus but also taught to Jesus, since several times in Roberts’s narrative Jesus admits his learning from Mary’s words and examples¹⁵³. In Mary’s alternative gospel, Mary and Jesus are lovers, friends and equals and as such, their relationship disturbs some of the fundamental principles underlying the Catholic faith, namely, women’s inherently sinful nature and Christ’s asexual one. Rather than seeing in Mary the feared Sinner or the Whore, Jesus falls in love with her, in a way that accepts Mary as his equal and their relationship as based in respect, communication and mutual bodily pleasure:

Jesus forgave me nothing because he said there was nothing to forgive. Nor was he afraid of me. Instead he praised me, singling out as beautiful all the parts of my body I always thought others despised. . . . He told me I was courageous and strong, with a gift for loving and for happiness, and I believed him and thought that I might grow to be so, and he listened seriously to everything I said. He made me rock with laughter at his jokes. He played with me, and we were children and animals together. (1984: 45)

In fictional moments such as the above, Roberts, who defines herself as a heretic ex-catholic still fascinated by this religious tradition, is clearly trying to revise the traditional image of Jesus as this is brought forward in the orthodox texts for, although she accepts and reproduces some of his traditional traits- tenderness, humility, wisdom and capacity to love-

¹⁵³ See, for example, the following excerpt, in which Jesus’ preaching is based on the revelations and dreams communicated to him by Mary: “Don’t you remember the stories of the Greek gods and goddesses that Mary has told us, that she brought back from Alexandria. . . . What about the story of the creation of the world, Jesus insisted: that was revealed to Mary in a dream and which she told me and which I passed on to you?” (1984: 89).

she also represents him as a man who enjoys the earthly and physical pleasures and who therefore preaches a sexualized spirituality¹⁵⁴.

In Roberts's revision of the New Testament, sexuality becomes a route, or a form of divine experience. The celebration of the body and the physical world is repeatedly emphasised throughout the novel, becoming even Jesus' chore message: "[t]hrough our human life, Soul enters Matter and becomes fused with it. Our task, as part of matter, is to allow the spirit to enter us, to fill us, and to shine forth. The body is the mirror of the soul, and *through* the body, not by denying it, we enter the other world, the world of eternity, which coexists with this temporal, fleshy one" (1984: 108-09).

Moreover, in *The Wild Girl* Jesus does not see himself as Mary's Saviour because Mary is in no need of being saved, as she is no sinner. This is a radical (and to some blasphemous) theological move taken by Roberts, since it is intended to liberate women from the sinful and monstrous nature attributed to them by the Catholic orthodoxy and to grant them and their bodies a more positive connotation. Therefore, not only does *The Wild Girl* rehabilitate the body to the sacred realm, but it also challenges the phallocentrism subjacent to Christianity by reshaping Christ's relationship with women and his view of their relationship with religion. Throughout Roberts's book, which corresponds to Mary's secret gospel, Jesus repeatedly states the contribution of Mary, and therefore of women, and Mary's love, and therefore women's love, in the path that leads to God and the sacred: "Mary loves me completely, Jesus answered him: body and soul. Our kisses demonstrate that we are lovers of each other and lovers of God, nourishing each other, conceiving and giving birth between us to God" (1984: 58). Accordingly, in Mary's Gnostic gospel the resurrection occurs in the orgasmic moment when her and Jesus' bodies meet (1984: 67), celebrating the love between man and woman as the source of spiritual uplifting.

Mary's gospel is dangerous and must be hidden; because it argues that women and men have equal access to the spiritual and that the sacred is reached through the body, it disrupts the patriarchal principles in which Catholicism is based. The unorthodox character of Mary's vision is particularly evident in the opposition established by Roberts between

¹⁵⁴ Roberts's self-characterization as a heretic ex-catholic was offered by the author in her keynote address "Getting a/Cross God." Reading Spiritualities Conference. University of Lancaster. 22 Jan. 2006. In a recent interview, Roberts also mentions that her attempt to create a mystical image rooted in the body was: "my way of overcoming the Catholic split between body and soul which damaged me almost irreparably, I would say, as a young woman growing up, because it made me feel so bad about desire, sex, pleasure, myself, my own body" (*apud* Newman: 2003: n. pag.).

Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter, who is the leader of the early Christian Church and the first pope according to the Roman Catholic Church. His views on Mary Magdalene establish a direct connection between patriarchy and Catholicism and make visible the latter's sexism and gender discrimination. As early as their first meeting, Mary identifies Simon Peter as her enemy: "[t]here was another whom I knew for an enemy as soon as I glanced at him: I had met his type before; I knew his obsessive forehead and jaw, his clenched knuckled hands, his puritanical lips. He looked back at me and recognized me for what I was. I saw how he feared women like me, distrusted them" (1984: 33). Mary recognises in Simon Peter and the way he looks at her the patriarchal position regarding women, who are feared and excluded from the sacred sphere by a strict, puritanical view. Simon Peter, the most representative apostle of official Catholicism, is a synecdoche for those figures of authority in the Catholic Church, whom Roberts has described as "quite clearly been damaged by a teaching that can't value the body and blames its own problems on the opposite the sex" (1998: 38). Consequently, for Simon Peter, Mary personifies the Feminine, that is, a female threatening Other whose dangerous and sexual body needs to be permanently controlled and whose access to social power must be curtailed. This view underlies Simon Peter's behaviour when he criticises Jesus for allowing Mary to "raise her voice in public and instruct men" (1984: 60) or when he denies Mary and women in general the right to priesthood (1984: 130-34).

The power of the female Other is particularly represented in Roberts's novel by Salome, the old midwife, whose monstrous body and truant laughter threaten to disrupt the patriarchal order and are therefore seen as sources of danger. Salome resembles Bakhtin's carnivalesque old hag, a laughing, ambivalent and strongly expressed grotesque figure representing "pregnant death, a death that gives birth" (Bakhtin, 1965: 25). Like this hag, Salome is also a grotesque and laughing woman who simultaneously suggests life and death, or birth in death, as it is emphasised in the novel's description of this character:

A tall woman stood at us, laughing at us, her shrewd little eyes twinkling and her hand pointing to the heap of apricot kernels at our feet. Her form was massive, her breasts and hips bulging under her pleated robe as though she were in the prime of life, and yet her matted hair was grey, and her face ancient and criss-crossed with wrinkles. (1984: 53)

The contradictory nature of Salome's femininity is also at the centre of Bakhtin's analysis: "[t]here is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They

combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed (1965: 25-26). The Russian critic's emphasis on the unstable nature of the old hag already suggests her disruptive power in relation to the patriarchal norms, which depend on clear oppositions and boundaries. Similarly, in Roberts's text, Salome becomes the virgin, the mother and the crone (1984: 124); she is the "Queen of Heaven" (1984: 124), but she contrasts with the orthodox image of the same provided by the Catholic Church because she accepts the bodily and sexual dimensions of herself and other women. She is a representation of the Feminine and Maternal principles, of the old mother goddesses, who, as referred by Roberts in "The Flesh Made Word", "survived in pagan practices, in the folklore and heresies that have always flourished at the fringes" (1998: 42) and who have been rejected by men and made into a dangerous and abject otherness: "I am She who is ignored. Men have forgotten me. I am exiled from my house on earth. . . . Men fear me and try to keep me here in the land of darkness and the unconsciousness", laments Salome (1984: 125).

Although *The Wild Girl* typically questions the notion of a single, univocal truth (even Mary Magdalene admits to have discovered, while writing her book, that "finding the truth in words is a struggle" [1984: 162]), it still suggests that Mary Magdalene's vision of Christianity, which recognises the importance of the body, sexuality and female identity in the construction of the sacred and the spiritual, is more faithful to Jesus' gospel than that proposed by Simon Peter. This difference is highlighted in Roberts's narrative by Jesus' positive response to Mary's visions and his use of her teachings. Another detail that gives credibility to Mary as a character, and consequently to her alternative gospel, is the alliance established in the text between Mary Magdalene and Mary (the mother of Jesus), whose roles Roberts poetically blends in a heteroglossia subversive of phallogocentric oppositions:

I felt again the pressure of the hand of the mother of Jesus on mine. This wordless communication brought us both to our feet, looking at each other and smiling. Then, still grasping one another's hands, we turned to the others and sang to them, for the first time singing a song together.

- I am the whore, sang the mother of the Lord: and the holy one.

- I am the virgin, I sang: and I am the mother. (1984: 64)

In fact, like in so many of Roberts's novels, the bonds between women are emphasised and seen as essential to their survival: in the midst of her despair at Jesus' death, Mary Magdalene is 'saved' by Martha, Mary and Salome, who run away with her because they see themselves as "carrying the message of the Saviour . . . the full message for redemption of which we are now the sole guardians" (1984: 135), just as she had been helped before by Sibylla and is lead through by Salome in her dreams. Those women are part of a female genealogy that celebrates the female body, bodily pleasure and the unity of men and women through love.

2.4.2.1 Effects of the real: the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp

The sisterly and fighting spirit of the female characters represented in *The Wild Girl* is also Roberts's tribute to the women of Greenham Common, whose struggle, as the author recognises, "helped spark off this novel" (1984: 7). Roberts is here referring to the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, which was established in 1981 in order to protest at nuclear weapons being sited at RAF Greenham Common, in England¹⁵⁵. This peace camp attracted significant media attention and represents a milestone in peace and feminist activism. In their nearly twenty-year demonstration, women voiced their opinion publicly through their bodies and asserted their power through collective protest. They were also frequently represented as dangerous others, whose behaviour threatened social stability and order. In *The Wild Girl*, the women who dissent from the orthodox Catholic faith also establish an alternative, self-sufficient female community, from which Mary Magdalene eventually leaves to preach "an Idea" (1984: 180). Despite this departure, the bonds between women is the novel's final message, as a female sisterhood and a female genealogy are projected onto the future, when Mary Magdalene's buried gospel is found by her granddaughter, who also speaks in the plural, and therefore on behalf of all future women: "[s]he who dug up and found and copied this book is the daughter of the daughter of she who wrote it We have uncovered and copied and passed on what she wrote in her book, as we have passed on by word of mouth the stories and songs that came from her. Pray for us. Amen" (1984: 181).

¹⁵⁵ For more information on Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp see the group's existing website: <http://www.greenhamwpc.org.uk/index.htm> (accessed 21 Jan. 2011), as well as Sasha Roseneil (1995) and Alison Young (1990).

2.4.3 *Impossible Saints*: a female hagiography

In 1997, Roberts once again revised the orthodox religious text by producing a subversive female hagiography— *Impossible Saints*. This novel, full of monstrous female bodies, also revisits the gothic and fairy-tale literary tradition¹⁵⁶. The main narrative follows Josephine's life, taking as leading clues her secret and unauthorized writings, which exist parallel to *Life*, the official hagiography. Josephine's story is interspersed with small chapters dedicated to other women, who become part of a strange pantheon of female saints, worthy examples in an anti-patriarchal new dogma. As the author acknowledges in an introductory note, the novel is partly inspired by the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila and also by Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, a collection of the lives of over one hundred and fifty saints, written in the thirteenth-century (c. 1260). This was an immensely popular book in the Middle Ages and, as mentioned by Luanda Stannard, "influential in defining culturally acceptable concepts of female behaviour" (2009: 154). If *Impossible Saints* creates an intertextual dialogue with de Voragine's hagiography, it, nonetheless, performs a subversive revision of the original text by producing different versions of the lives of the female saints, who were originally viewed as examples to their sex, for a modern, feminist audience (Stannard, 2009: 153).

Among the saints whose life is revised by Roberts is Christine, a teenager who all of a sudden shows a monstrous behaviour, leading to her parents' disgust: "[s]he combed her hair forwards over her face and glowered from behind this lank curtain shining with grease. She ripped of her nails down to the quick. She ate too many sugary biscuits and put on a lot of weight. She hardly spoke but preferred to communicate in grunts" (1997: 113). Christine's behaviour exhibits the symptoms displayed by the female hysterics described by Freud in *Studies in Hysteria (1893-95)*, who can be seen as speaking through their bodies of the impossibility to perform their socially determined roles¹⁵⁷. Christine, aged fifteen and

¹⁵⁶ Roberts's *Impossible Saints* was published three years after Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde*, which also discusses the lives of female saints. Warner's hugely influential book may have provided some ideas for Roberts's subversion of female hagiographies. Roberts's fusion of grotesque or gothic characters and settings with a fairy tale dimension may also be indebted to Angela Carter, whose work has been so influential to contemporary British female writers. Carter's novels and short-stories are filled with bizarre female characters, who can be both princesses and vampires (the beautiful and lonely queen of the vampires in "The Lady of the House of Love" [1979]), flying angels and freaks with cockney accents (Fevvers, the puzzling circus star from *Nights at the Circus* [1984]). Both Roberts and Carter explore tensions by creating monstrous and fascinating women who subvert the feeling of abjection the reader might have towards them.

¹⁵⁷ Roberts's text also refers to Christine as "the barmy hysterical girl" (1997: 116).

therefore about to leave childhood behind, seems unable to follow the feminine conduct desired by her mother and father and her strange behaviour is regarded by everyone, including the medical community, as an attempt to draw attention to herself (1997: 114, 115, 117), in other words, as proof of the character's narcissism, at odds with the sanctioned image of women as altruistic, capable of putting others before themselves. Christine also insistently draws attention to her body, which asserts its presence through excess rather than through traditional feminine traits such as modesty or withdrawal. She is finally considered insane (1997: 116), her unfeminine actions making her abject and grotesque, and locked in a tower, where, with other insane girls, she paradoxically manages to achieve "interior freedom" (1997: 118). Christine's body is thus presented as a subversive site/sight, as it contests patriarchal oppression and reclaims female independence, even at the cost of pain and imprisonment.

In the relation she keeps with her body and in the results achieved by that relationship, Christine also resembles the bulimic or the anorectic, who for some feminist critics possess control over their bodies, a power previously denied to them by the patriarchal law, which surveys and disciplines the body¹⁵⁸. In addition, the anorectic and the bulimic expose the burden of social demands over women and their bodies in ways very similar to those exhibited by the hysteric, since their behaviour is always exaggerated, excessive, performed and, because of that, grotesque¹⁵⁹.

Christine's tale stresses the image of a monstrous female body until its very end, when, after escaping from her tower, Christine finishes her days as a performer at weddings, births and funerals, nightclubs, bars and family parties, earning enough money to live on by exhibiting her body to the people "who flocked to watch her [and] shuddered in pleasure at the perversity of a mutilated woman dancing, languorous and cool, in the embrace of a snake" (1997: 124). Christine's abject body, her otherness, is therefore a source of fascination as much as of dread and anxiety; her tale emphasises that monstrosity lies in the eye of the beholder, subscribing Kristeva's conclusion that the abject does not exist in the

¹⁵⁸ For a feminist discussion of eating disorders, see Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (1990) and Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993b). If Christine's behaviour is closer to that performed by the bulimic, Blessila, another of Roberts's 'impossible saints', could represent the anorectic, for she "proved her capacity to attain complete purity and complete peace of mind and complete absence of suffering" by starving herself to death (1997: 28).

¹⁵⁹ In fact, Freud's analysis of women hysterics already connects their behaviour with anorexia (1955).

thing itself but is a relational and contingent notion that expresses the danger of trespassing the boundaries of self and other or disturbing neat oppositional definitions (1980a).

Roberts's novel pays tribute to other impossible saints, whose life is retold with the intention of sanctifying those who transcend and transgress the Law of the Father: Saint Uncumber dares to destroy the main patriarchal symbol– the penis/Phallus, presented in this tale as an emblem of male oppression over women and their bodies; she therefore personifies the monstrous danger of female sexuality: the *vagina dentata* fulfilling the threat of castration. In contrast, Thais is subversively canonized through the punishment she receives for desiring her father: she is shut up inside a dark well and visited by demons, who shout at her and prod her with pitchforks (1997: 173-74)¹⁶⁰. These are the voices that legislate against incestuous love, which, according to Freud (1913), Douglas (1966) and Kristeva (1980a), is a dangerously polluting act expressing defilement and the abject. Thais is a martyr at the hands of a masculine system that ignores or denies her sexual desire and that is also what grants her a place in the novel.

The last woman saint whose life is told in *Impossible Saints* is Mary of Egypt. In contrast to most of the other saints in Roberts's book, this is a mature woman, who abandons her life as a cleaner in Gloucestershire and travels to Egypt and then to the Holy Land. In order to pay for her costs, Mary sold sex: "I fucked my way to Egypt, she said: and then I fucked my way here" (1997: 302). However, when Father Zozimus, her former employer in England, finds Mary, she is retired, and has sex just for fun (1997: 302). Zozimus ends up living the rest of his life with Mary in the desert, as her friend and lover¹⁶¹. Whereas most of the other female saints summoned by Roberts have a grotesque, violent and sad fate, Mary's is peaceful and bright, thus ending the heretic hagiography in a hopeful tone. Her life, which outside the desert could only have been deemed impious, reaches a sacred dimension, which is reinforced by Mary's celebration of her body and her sexuality. Roberts's ultimate irony is that Mary's body is invested with the sacred in the Holy Land, an area of significant religious importance for Judaism, Christianity and Islam. By placing her female saint in this geographical location, the writer performs two important ideological movements. On the one

¹⁶⁰ As Roberts has explained on several occasions (see Roberts, 1998: 211; *apud* Rodríguez, June 2003: 98-99 and *apud* Newman, 2003), *Impossible Saints* stands as a turning point in her writing, adding to her well-known search for the mother an interest in exploring the father/daughter relationship. Therefore, many of the tales inscribed in this novel explore this relationship from the daughter's point of view.

¹⁶¹ As Roberts suggested in a recent interview (*apud* Rodríguez, June 2003: 98-99), Father Zozimus is a good father who contrasts with all the oppressive ones presented in Roberts's hagiography.

hand, she reinforces the presence of the sacred in Mary and her body, thus questioning the Christian dogma that, according to Roberts in her essay “The Flesh Made Word”, would find it impossible to think of certain bodily processes as sacred: “bodies that retch, leak, menstruate, piss and shit, vomit, come ecstatically are not supposed to exist inside a church and are generally not welcome” (1998: 37). On the other hand, she demands a revision of religious dogma, particularly the Catholic one, regarding its understanding of women, their bodies and their sexuality. That revision, so Roberts’s novel suggests in its representation of the relationship between Mary and Zozimus, would profit both sexes, and not just women, which could then live and love in harmony.

2.4.4 The flesh made word: a ‘herethics’

In terms of the patriarchal, phallic law, the subversive women who are the focus of *Impossible Saints* exhibit a grotesque behaviour and are therefore ‘impossible saints’, or ‘her-etics’ when judged according to the dogma set by the Catholic Church and other social organizations like the family. As a result, the transgressive elements of their lives have been banned from official texts, which is to say from History, and replaced by more convenient accounts. That much is suggested in the final fate of Roberts’s heroines, whose bones are scattered over the earth and become part of it (Saint Thais, Saint Barbara), whose tombs remain unknown (Saint Uncumber and Saint Marin) or are desecrated (Saint Paula) and whose existence is seemingly forgotten. However, in a feminist hagiography such as the one envisioned by Roberts, these women are brought back from oblivion, due to their pain and resilience, and their abject bodies, made into words, become sanctified: in *Impossible Saints* monstrosity is no longer the sign attributed to women, but the symbol of the phallogentric oppression.

Roberts’s subversive re-vision of religious texts and her effort to make the flesh word is also present in the central story of *Impossible Saints*, in which Josephine functions as the female saint suggested by Roberts in her essay “The Flesh Made Word” (a title that wittily inverts the religious emphasis on the spiritual): “passionate, maternal, sexy, visionary” (1998: 38). Josephine’s transgressive convent, a place where the bodily needs and pleasures experienced by a woman coexist with the spiritual aims, is clearly inspired by Magdalena’s house, where Josephine lives for a year. Magdalena, like the woman in the Bible bearing the same name, is known for her libertinage, her dubious life. She willingly personifies the lustful, fleshy, sinful woman, a representation of the feared eternal feminine. However, her

acceptance of this social role is a mere façade, as, more than a brothel, Magdalena is running a house that invites the pleasure of the body as much as of the soul and the joyful play between the sexes. Her salon nights are made of dance, music, fine conversation and games. Another interesting aspect of these parties is the role-playing that always occurs. These performances involve the wearing of costumes and props or the staging of a play (1997: 158). Moreover, they always allow for a certain freedom since “in the course of the night, you could take turns to be first one, then the other” (1997: 160). In Magdalena’s utopian house of joy and play, people are invited to recreate themselves and to shape their bodies into new ways of being. Following Butler’s concept of performativity (1990), Magdalena’s players understand the necessary performativity of the self and the body. Such an understanding does not ask for a moment of self-discovery, with the concomitant revelation of a natural body, but for a negotiating process between the individual and the others, a process that produces the social but also grants the self with the power to create and recreate its body identity¹⁶².

Like Magdalena’s house, Josephine’s female community provides an answer to women’s needs and experiences, something that they could not find in the convents set by the Catholic Church. The contrast between Josephine’s house and the catholic convent is implicit early in the novel, when Josephine is trapped in the monotony, deprivation and gloom of the convent, where the petty minds and the repeated chants of the other nuns do not grant this “discontented and antisocial” (1997: 175) woman the much desired solitude and silence. Josephine has no option but to live a secret and ultimately truer version of her life, which she wishes to communicate to her niece Isabel. Accordingly, she records that secret life in bits of paper found by Isabel, “discarded all over the house like vegetable peelings in a bin or balls of fluff under a cupboard” (1997: 235). These textual fragments represent the flesh made word, as they address female bodily experiences and sexuality along with spiritual matters. They therefore propose a female ethics, or a ‘herethics’, as

¹⁶² Josephine’s female community is also very similar to another one, imagined by Toni Morrison in her novel *Paradise*, published in the same year as *Impossible Saints*. In *Paradise* Consolata, who eventually takes up the role of mother-of-saints, instructs the women who live in the convent to the inseparability of body and spirit. As Roberts has admitted on several occasions, Morrison’s work is a recurrent source of inspiration. See, for example, an interview from 2003, where Roberts explicitly acknowledges Morrison’s influence in her work: “I think I specifically learned from Toni Morrison and I actually say that under one of my short stories, you know, ‘This is a homage to Toni Morrison.’ I learned from her this thing about myth-making, that at the heart of harmless life or what can look like the most ordinary life, there’s poetry, beauty, mystery and myth. It completely knocked me over that she does that and I suppose it was *Beloved* that had a major impact. But I’ve read all her novels and I think I’ve learned from her what I call the unconscious” (*apud* Rodríguez, 2003: 105).

Kristeva mentions in “Stabat Mater” (1977a: 185), in which the body of woman is capable of defying death and reaching out for the other.

Roberts’s novel is then also about Isabel (whom the reader eventually finds out to be the narrator [1997: 261]) and her desire to put back together all the fragmented and dispersed parts of Josephine’s body and life through her aunt’s writing: “I reassemble her from jigsaw bits and pieces of writing; from scattered parts. I make her up. She rises anew in my words, in my story. Mended; put back together and restored” (1997: 290), says Isabel, mirroring the reader’s wishes and efforts. That, despite this desire, the novel suggests the difficulty in fulfilling it is also a way of reflecting on the fate of those marginalised subjects, whose histories do not fit in the official accounts and whose lives are deleted or recorded in ways that corroborate the official view.

In fact, that is also Josephine’s fate after her death, since the transgressive elements of her life and work are re-interpreted so as to conform to the Catholic and patriarchal norms and a more convenient hagiography is favoured as justification for the construction of a chapel (the Golden House) adjacent to the convent¹⁶³. As for Josephine’s bones (a synecdoche of her body), they “got tangled up mixed with those of everyone else” (1997: 308), that is, “the nameless ones, the women with no identities” (1997: 2). Josephine and her bones “faded into the background” (1997: 308) and her image as a utopian dreamer of women celebrating the sacred and the profane, the bodily and the spiritual is replaced by a canonised version, which recognises her “as amongst the most humble and self-effacing of her sex” (1997: 308).

2.4.5 Hopeful conclusions

Where does then lie the hope for those forgotten women, those impossible saints? Given that Roberts created her novel with a circular structure, the end sends the reader back to the beginning, which is indeed a new beginning after the end. The first chapter is fictionally placed in the future, when an old Isabel visits the Golden House with her granddaughter and tells her about Josephine. Hope therefore lies in Isabel and, like in *The Wild Girl*, in future generations of women, who will learn about and celebrate Josephine’s

¹⁶³ Incidentally, a similar, if more violent fate, befalls Morrison’s subversive convent in *Paradise*: the men of Ruby, an all-black town in Oklahoma, find their common existence is under threat and blame the women from the Convent, who become their scapegoats. They eventually raid the women’s house in order to kill them and restore order in their small town.

utopian house, as well as the lives of other saints equally subversive of the patriarchal law. These future women will be able to undo the lie and replace it with the truth (or the ‘truths’, since the notion of univocal and universal knowledge is one of the paradigms questioned by Roberts’s narrative, in which different and sometimes untrustworthy sources of information and different interpretations are constantly present, making liminal the relation between fact and fiction, truth and lie)¹⁶⁴; they will learn from their grandmother Isabel that Josephine’s laughter on her deathbed was caused by her final understanding of Christ’s metaphors, which unite the sacred and the body and teach that women should not be afraid of their own sexuality. Is this not what Josephine was trying to tell Isabel and why she haunted her niece’s dreams?: “[t]his bread is my body. This wine is my blood. If you believe that you’ll believe anything. My father is my lover. Do you realise, I spent thirty years of my life being afraid of a figure of speech? I never could remember its name” (1998a: 291).

In Roberts’s novels attention is given to the monstrous female body but far from mirroring the patriarchal image of woman and her body, these texts reveal their writer’s determination in subverting traditional representations of female fleshiness. Like other feminist-oriented writers (Toni Morrison, Jeanette Winterson, Angela Carter and Fay Weldon, to name but a few), Roberts frequently addresses the need to save the female body from an inferior position and an abject place, since she strongly believes in the sacredness of the body. Her writing therefore evidences a constructive idea of disturbance, questioning phallogentric representations of women, their bodies and sexuality as a way of giving the female body and identity a more positive image.

Ursula King, the renowned scholar on spirituality, women and religion, has stated that women are now seeking to define religion and spirituality for themselves, whereas before they were being defined by religion due to the fact that men have usually established what counts as spirituality. That masculine control of the spiritual realm has had a huge

¹⁶⁴ The permanent questioning of a universal truth and factual history has been one of the most recurrent characteristics of Roberts’s fiction, granting her a place in a postmodern tradition. This is also a topic repeatedly explored by critics of her work: see Falcus (2007); Gruss (2009); Kontou (2009); López (2001); E. Parker, (Dec. 2008) and Plummer (2001). It is most emphatically visible in *Impossible Saints* when Isabel identifies herself as the narrator and recognises the palimpsestic (Roberts, 1997: 235) and untrustworthy nature of her biography: “I shall no longer write in disguise, pretend to be a calm witness when I am not and never was. How can I recount the story of Josephine and not admit I am making it all up? I was not there, after all, for so much of her life. I am relying on hearsay, the stories she herself told me, the bits I put together for myself” (1997: 261).

impact on women, who were often seen as not having access to the transcendental¹⁶⁵. I believe Michèle Roberts, who has a tense but unavoidable relationship with Catholicism, could be one of those women mentioned by King. Not only has she, in her writing, tried to personally heal herself from the pain inflicted by the Catholic Church and its patriarchal principles, but also create a new rapport between women and the sacred. Framed by her commitment to the feminist cause, which has also argued against the denial of women's access to the sacred and the spiritual due to their feared bodies and sinful nature, Roberts's texts claim for a religious and spiritual revolution that is only possible through the recognition and embracing of the body. As the writer explains in "The Flesh Made Word", an essay that bashes the Catholic Church for repressing the female body and treating it as abject at the same time that it recognises in Christian iconography the return of the repressed and the reintegration of the physical in the divine: "[w]e are our bodies and what is sacred is our capacity to make symbols of our bodily life. The numinous consists not in looking upwards, denying our bodily existence, but looking outwards and inwards, rejoicing in it, celebrating it" (1998: 40).

2.5 Mirrors of the mother

Nul objet n'est dans un rapport constant avec le plaisir. . . . Cependant, pour l'écrivain, cet objet existe; ce n'est pas le langage, c'est la langue, *la langue maternelle*. L'écrivain est quelqu'un qui joue avec le corps de sa mère
Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du Texte* (1973: 60).

In a talk some years ago, Michèle Roberts mentioned that almost all of her novels start with a dead body (21 Jan. 2006)¹⁶⁶. She also suggested that psychoanalysts such as Freud and Melanie Klein, who often explored the psychic processes disclosed by art and literature, would probably say the dead body was, in fact, Roberts's mother, whom the writer fought over the years. Roberts then concluded, in terms that once again evoke psychoanalysis and its emphasis on the healing possibilities of the talking cure, by referring to language as reparative to the figure of the mother, seeing the writer, and thus herself, as a pot mender¹⁶⁷. This anecdote sheds light into Roberts's writing, emphasising the extent to

¹⁶⁵ These notions were put forward by Ursula King in her keynote address "Gendering the Spirit: Re-reading Women's Spiritualities in the Comparative Mirror." Reading Spiritualities conference. University of Lancaster. 22 Jan. 2006. See also King's *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise* (1989) and, as an editor, *Religion and Gender* (1995).

¹⁶⁶ Roberts also mentions these narrative details and the psychoanalytical interpretation of the same in an interview from 2003 (see Newman, 2003: n. pag.).

¹⁶⁷ Roberts choice of words particularly relates with the work initiated by Melanie Klein on the relationship between mother and child. According to Klein, the destructive and aggressive feelings the baby feels towards the mother lead to a depressive position in which the

which the mother is a powerful driving force in it and corroborating Gruss's conclusion that: "Michèle Roberts's writing is imbued with a profound longing for the maternal. Many of her heroines search for their origins, a search that is expressed as a deeply-felt desire for the maternal (body)" (2009: 106). For this critic, the desire for the mother and her body is already present in Roberts's first novel, *A Piece of the Night* (1978), which, according to Gruss, "is thus more than a feminist and lesbian coming-out novel: it is also an elaborate meditation on the pains of mother- and of daughterhood" (2009: 110), and is explored subsequently in other novels.

Even Roberts's concern with Catholicism is intimately connected with her view that the Catholic Church has replaced the worship of the mother goddess for the Father, with dramatic and painful consequences in the way we relate with our mothers and their bodies. Roberts has addressed this situation through poetry, for example, in "winter sacrament", from her collection *The Mirror of the Mother: Selected Poems 1975-1985*: "last night I met my mother again / at the altar steps/. . . in bed, I shiver and fast / in a snowfield of sheets / lonely for you, my absent guest / our snowflake bodies / melting on each other's tongues / – the true communion" (1986: 84). As for her novels, they frequently express the urge to give spiritual and sacred representation to the maternal principle and the maternal body. In *The Wild Girl*, Jesus' message, retold by Mary Magdalene to the other disciples, is also about the need to re-link to the mother principle: "[w]e have lost the knowledge of the Mother. We do not fully know God if we drive out this name of God." (1984: 111). In this novel, the mother may be represented as the pre-symbolic, archaic, monstrous entity described by psychoanalysis– "[s]he was terrible. She was an absence, a black pit" (1984: 115)– who hunts the patriarchal imagination with her threat of castration: "[i]f we do not respect her image in her creation, she will swiftly act to protect herself. If men do not revere the power of the female in their works and in their acts and in their speech, if they forget from whom they came and to whom they will return, then she will exact vengeance" (1984: 60). But, as the previous passage suggests, maternal vengeance is not the cause but the effect of repression, undertaken by the subject when they accept and internalise the Law of the Father and concomitantly exclude the mother and her body from the symbolic.

baby feels guilty and anxious for the damage caused to the mother in phantasy. The child overcomes this position by trying to repair the phantasized destruction of the actual and the internalized mother. Also according to Klein, reparation is a powerful impetus to creativity. See Wright (1992: 191-92) and J. Mitchell (1986) for a discussion of Klein's work.

If, indeed, Roberts's novels frequently begin (but do not end) with the dead body of the mother, then it is in the house of fiction that the ghostly, repressed image of the mother erupts and it is also there that the writer attempts to go back to that moment when the mother is not yet a ghost, is not yet lost. In psychoanalytical terms, and especially for Kristeva (1975; 1980a; 1977a), the mother's body can only be found in a pre-symbolic, pre-oedipal state, when mother and child are still one and exist in a symbiotic borderlink relationship of co-existence and co-emergence, as Bracha Ettinger would also add (1995; 1996a; 1996b). For Roberts, who is acquainted with Kristeva's work and has a special interest in psychoanalytical theories of the subject's formation (particularly of women), her search for the lost mother transfers to the symbolic surface of language the mother's body, which up till then remained at the level of the unconscious and in the semiotic¹⁶⁸. Moreover, Roberts's fictional search for the mother takes her back to childhood and to a pre-oedipal paradisiacal moment when the opposition between 'self' and 'other', 'I' and 'you', is not yet established. Finally, it also brings the writer home, a place that in her novels is conflated with the mother's body. Although most of Roberts's fictional texts explore motherhood and the presence/absence of the maternal, I will mainly focus my analysis of this topic on *Daughters of the House* (1992) (and will produce shorter comments on *The Visitation* [1983], *Flesh and Blood* [1994] and "Une Glossaire/A Glossary", from her collection of essays *During Mother's Absence* [1993]), for this is a text in which the separation between mother and daughter and a contrasting movement reuniting these two beings is more explicitly present¹⁶⁹.

2.5.1 *The Visitation*: mother as paradise

If Roberts's first novel already explored the mother-daughter relationship, this became central in her next book, *The Visitation*, whose title refers to a moment in the Bible when Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, bringing her the news that both of them are pregnant¹⁷⁰. The narrative is therefore clearly framed by Catholicism and its view on female

¹⁶⁸ See Rodríguez (June 2003: 96), Monteith (2004b: 121) and Robert's essay "The Place of the Imagination" (1998: 20), where she explicitly comments on Kristeva's theories of the maternal. In Monteith (2004b: 128), Roberts also mentions that what is underneath every novel is the world of the unconscious, thus emphasising the importance of psychoanalytical concepts in her writing.

¹⁶⁹ Other novels by Roberts in which the mother-daughter relationship and the search for the lost mother are central ingredients to the narrative are *Fair Exchange* (1999), *The Looking Glass* (2000) and *Reader I Married Him* (2004).

¹⁷⁰ According to the Bible, during the Annunciation, the Angel Gabriel tells Mary that her cousin Elizabeth had also conceived a son in her old age. Mary then goes to her cousin's house to tell her the news and when she salutes Elizabeth, her cousin's baby leaps in her womb.

sexuality and maternity, which, grounded on the asexual image of the Virgin Mary, whose immaculate conception makes her alone of all her sex (Kristeva, 1977a; Warner, 1976), idealizes the mother at the same time that it denies her bodily and sexual dimensions. Contrary to this view, Roberts's novel explores a new form of sacredness, recognizing the mother's body and celebrating its relationship with the child's.

The protagonist, Helen, is, like many of Roberts's female characters, a writer, though still with insecurities as far as her work is concerned. She is searching for some sort of balance in her life, for she is not willing to abdicate of her creativity as a writer, nor of her independence, but she also wants to be fulfilled in a heterosexual relationship and she feels the maternal impulse, now that she is over thirty. The novel explores the theme of maternity from different angles, for Helen is, simultaneously, a mother-to-be and a daughter and her dilemmas are also reflected in the way this character faces those two subject-positions. As in *A Piece of the Night*, in *The Visitation* the mother-daughter relationship is fraught with tension, lack of communication and bitterness, characteristics that come from the way patriarchy has denied or ignored that relationship and filled it with misunderstandings: Helen's meetings with her mother Catherine are always full of unsaid words and resentment from both women (1983: 119, 153).

The two creative dimensions of Helen's life, the professional and the maternal, are in opposition throughout the novel, as Helen is simultaneously pulled by her catholic, suburban middle-class upbringing, her independent, creative spirit and social discourses on women's sexuality (1983: 81). As Helen confesses to her best friend Beth: "[y]ou see before you an anguished white liberal, swept aside by the tide of history and fear" (1983: 81). Nevertheless, a balance is finally reached once Helen is willing to recover and rely on female bonds, such as those uniting her with Beth and her grandmother, and especially when she comes to terms with her own mother. These narrative threads are brought together in the last section of the novel, "The Forth Visitation", when, taken to a park by Beth, Helen has a dream of Paradise:

Here, in this wild wet garden . . . Helen has rediscovered Eden: which is paradise. . . .

Paradise is the mother's body, the orient that travellers wish to plunder, rape, explore.

Mary hence fills the baby and his mother with the Holy Ghost, cleansing them from original sin. Filled with the Holy Ghost, Elizabeth cries "[b]lessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb" (Luke 1:42-45). Mary's answer is the canticle of praise commonly called "Magnificat".

Paradise is that time when it is the twins inside their mother, alone with her. Paradise continues after birth: it is fatherlessness, the time before language: it is not-separation and not-speech. (1983: 172)

In Helen's dream Paradise becomes what was there before the umbilical cord is cut, in other words, before the bond between mother and child is broken; it is the moment when mother and child are one flesh, an image that Roberts further explored in a recent interview, which touches upon the relationship between the writer and her own mother:

I felt separate from my mother, much too separate: she was the paradise from which I had been 'expelled untimely'. The image of maternal body as paradise became very important to me. Obviously it's there in psychoanalytical literature, but it was my journey to discover it. I suppose it's a religious or mystical feeling or quest: to get back to some pre-linguistic state of bliss, which is about unity, non-separation. (*apud* Monteith, 2004b: 121)

Roberts's words are framed by Kristeva's understanding of the maternal and the connection between mother and child, since for this French critic that blissful bond exists before the entrance into the Symbolic, the language of the Father. Similarly, in *The Visitation* not only is Paradise, as dreamt by Helen, "not-separation", but also "not-speech". Accordingly, the novel shows that only after Helen recovers ways to communicate with her mother, can she finally fulfil herself in a personal relationship, be able to write creatively and truthfully and feel whole again: "[s]he is whole, she knows that now, and she can see all the different sides of herself: the masculine and the feminine; the productive and the reproductive; the receiving and the creative; the light and the dark; the rational and the irrational; the active and the passive. She needs to embrace all these parts of herself if she is to live without being maimed" (1983: 175).

The Visitation offers a different concept of subjectivity, since Helen's way to self-fulfilment and individual definition not only happens through the acceptance and embracing of a dual, often even contradictory nature, symbolically represented in the novel by Helen's attachment to her twin brother Felix, but also through the bonds she establishes with other women: the women she meets at the feminist discussion groups, her grandmother, her mother and Beth. It is worth mentioning that Beth is pregnant, a physical and psychological state that symbolically emphasises Beth's importance to Helen's 're-birth': "she cries,

hanging on to Beth's hands, for Beth has birthed her, she has brought her out in water and pain. . . . She cuts the cord, and declares Helen separate, loose, free, baptised by tears. She commands her to sing of her redemption, her life, to speak, to write" (2002: 172-3). Even if Beth cuts the umbilical chord and sets Helen loose in order that the latter can reach a certain degree of independence, she is still an essential part of Helen's life, who thus remains attached to the original maternal principle.

The importance Roberts gives to female and especially to maternal bonds as essential to self-definition and fulfilment is explicitly addressed in *Food Sex and God*, where, employing religious imagery, feminist jargon and psychoanalysis, Roberts admits the search for the lost mother to be a central drive in her writing:

The power of these [old] photographs comes from their capacity to give me back what I lost, thought I had lost forever: the maternal body, my mother's body, alive and warm and generous, an image of that body which says that is how she was, that is how we were, once, together. Blissful mutual giving and taking. What the French call *la jouissance* and what the French feminist writers like Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous say we find again through writing and reading. We all have to grow up, we all have to leave paradise. Those are the autobiographical facts. In imagination we preserve what is precious, we re-enter paradise, or at least we search for it, for the lost mother. (1998: 20)

By reproducing a paradisiacal, blissful and ecstatic encounter between the mother's body and the child in the imaginative space of fiction, Roberts recovers a fundamental bond for the subject's development and one that has been suppressed or repressed by patriarchal discourses. She therefore aligns her work with an important body of feminist theory and criticism seeking to demystify and give visibility to motherhood and one's relationship with the maternal.

2.5.2 *Daughters of the House*: daughters, mothers and houses

2.5.2.1 The lost mother

The haunting presence of the dead/lost mother is again central in *Daughters of the House* and it is with that grotesque ghost, who presides over the gothic family home as much as over the daughters' imagination, that this novel begins:

Antoinette was dead, which was why they had buried her in the cellar. She moved under the heap of sand. She clutched her red handbag, which was full of shreds of dead flesh. She was trying to get out, to hang two red petticoats on the washing-line in the orchard. Sooner or later she would batter down the cellar door and burst up through it on her dead and bleeding feet. The deadness and the evil and the stink were inside Léonie. She rushed up the cellar steps, magically she erupted into her own bed in the dark, the smell of warm blood, soaked sawdust. (1992: 1-2)¹⁷¹

Daughters of the House is set in a domestic environment and centred in the relationship between two cousins, Léonie and Thérèse. As E. Parker comments: “[t]he house in the title of Roberts’s novel is a house of horror and that horror is approached through the recollection of childhood memories” (Winter 2000: 153). The reader is indeed taken to the cousins’ childhood through their memories but also through Léonie’s inventory of the contents of the house. In the period with which the novel is concerned (roughly around the time when the girls were thirteenth years old), Léonie is living with her cousin, her mother Madeleine, her uncle Louis and her aunt Antoinette in France, after her father, a British journalist, died in the Second World War. However, the loss of the father is not as central to the novel as that of the mother, as one of the crucial moments in the text is Antoinette’s death¹⁷².

¹⁷¹ In *Daughters of the House* the search for a maternal genealogy is not only present at the level of its plot, but also in its narrative framework, which is borrowed from the Gothic tradition, a genre in which women writers have particularly thrived (Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, the Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell are amongst the most famous writers of gothic novels). As Roberts explained in an interview: “the gothic allows you to dramatise issues around the body. I mean, the haunted house is a body, a maternal body, a sexual body, a dead body” (*apud* Monteith, 2004b: 131).

¹⁷² In *Daughters of the House* the father figure is one of desire and, therefore, his relationship with the daughter is very much established in Freudian terms. This is the case not only with the death figure of Léonie’s father but also with Louis, Thérèse’s father: “Louis was the King, and Thérèse was his little queen” (1992: 13). In *Food, Sex and God* Roberts also talks about the desire she felt as a child towards her

Antoinette's death (set half-way through the narrative) brings the revelation of a secret hidden in the cellar of the old French house, a secret also related to maternity and childbirth since it suggests that Léonie possibly is Thérèse's twin sister¹⁷³. The mother's death also dictates Thérèse's behaviour from then onwards, as Thérèse's self-immolation and the mortifying experiences through which she hopes to subjugate her body and her passions are the effects of the traumatic loss of her mother. The importance of this mother-daughter relationship is emphatically affirmed by the third-person narrator, who explains that Thérèse's visions of Our Lady in the woods are a consequence of the daughter's desire for the mother's return: "Antoinette had gone away. . . . She was off to somewhere else where Thérèse couldn't follow her. . . . Thérèse had done the best she could. She'd found herself another mother, she'd been sold one ready-made by the priests of her Church" (1992: 165)¹⁷⁴. By juxtaposing the religious image of the Mother of Christ with the desired body of the mother, Roberts's novel offers a concept of the sacred that escapes the catholic celebration of the Father and, instead, looks back to the original bond between mother and child.

These narrative threads come together in the Quimper dish, a domestic object with significant meanings, since it is Antoinette's and her daughters' favourite (1992: 91) and thus a symbol of the emotional bond connecting mother and daughter. Shortly after Antoinette's death, the dish is accidentally broken by Thérèse: "[t]he Quimper dish lay in pieces upon the floor. Violence measured the distance of one fragment from another. Painted jigsaw bits. The Breton lady had been dismembered. Her head lay near a table-leg. Her flower-clasping hands rested at the foot of the stove" (1992: 94). The dismembered body of the Breton lady echoes Léonie's gothic description of her dead aunt's body in the novel's opening pages and further reinforces a female grotesque. It also suggests the loss of the mother, whose body has been dismembered and removed from sight by the phallogocentric

father and tries to explain it in psychoanalytical terms: "[t]he child I was, in my story of my personal past, believed she had damaged that mother, driven her away, perhaps killed her, with her greed and rage, her sexual fantasies, her jealous love for Dad" (1998:126).

¹⁷³ Although Antoinette's rape by a German soldier during the Second World War seems the most plausible conclusion, the novel never totally disentangles the plot and does not confirm nor denies that Léonie and Thérèse are the result of that rape. In fact, several other possibilities are not completely put aside, for the two cousins never reach an agreement about their interpretation of the documents and the events related to their birth.

¹⁷⁴ Thérèse's replacement mother is the one offered by Catholicism and, as such, it is a conventional mother figure that reinforces the daughter's incorporation of the masculine symbolic. As Petra Van Der Jeught concludes: "[s]ince home is no longer where the mother is and the mother no longer where home is, she leaves the house of her mother to find shelter, safety and inexhaustible love in the House of the Father" (2006: 227).

imagination. Completely broken, the Quimper dish is a symbol of the girls' effort and difficulty in putting the female maternal back together so that the connection between mother and child may be re-established¹⁷⁵.

The intensity of the daughter's desire to recapture the lost relationship with the mother and her body is multiplied through the several mother figures who dominate Léonie and Thérèse's childhood: apart from Antoinette, there is also Madeleine, who is Léonie's stepmother and who assumes that role for Thérèse when she marries her father after Antoinette's death, Victorine, the housekeeper, Rose Taillé, the farmer who nursed and nurtured the girls after they were born, as well as the image of Our Lady and the statue of the fertility goddess hidden in the cellar. Roberts emphasises the maternal dimension of these characters and icons by having them constantly interlinked: Rose and Victorine dance and worship in the spot where Thérèse and Léonie have their visions of Our Lady, whilst Antoinette is the one who hides the fertility goddess in the cellar of her house; in addition, not only Rose, but also Victorine and Madeleine are 'surrogate mothers' to Léonie and Thérèse. Mothers are omnipresent in the novel, but they are constantly being lost and found. Searching for the mother ultimately becomes the girls' quest, or pilgrimage, as suggested by Cath Stowers (2000: 61), who thus emphasises the sacred dimension of the daughters' journey.

2.5.2.2 The mother's breast

When explaining the meaning of *Daughters of the House*, Roberts affirmed that: "[a]ll to do with mothers, real and ideal, of course" (1998: 194), confirming that several elements in this novel are related to the feminine maternal. The imagery of food and feeding, actively explored in Roberts's writing in general, is also central in *Daughters of the House* and is certainly connected with the mother, as not only are mothers the traditional nurturing members of the family, but also food can invoke the pleasure of the mother's breast to the child. According to Sarah Sceats, food and feeding are frequently found in women's fiction in order to suggest the yearning to be reunited with the maternal figure, "a fantasised return to the status of wholly fulfilled infant at the breast or even *in utero*" (2000: 5). Such fantasised return to the mother's body and the feeling of fulfilment that would come from

¹⁷⁵ My discussion of the Quimper dish is framed by Roger Luckhurst's analysis of the meaning of this object in *Daughters of the House*. However, Luckhurst uses the symbolic meaning of the dish to emphasise Thérèse and Léonie's effort to uncover the secrets held by the house and not in relation to their attempt to recover the maternal body. See Luckhurst, Summer 1996: 255.

that movement is poetically conveyed when Roberts describes Thérèse's relationship as a baby with Rose Taillé: "[b]liss. Feeding and being fed. Love was this milky fullness, Thérèse born a second time, into a land of plenty" (1992: 33). The previous passage also confirms Sceats's conclusion that contemporary women's fiction "is as much concerned with women's appetites as their nurturing capacities" (2000: 2), for it shows the daughter as a hungry character¹⁷⁶.

Rose's land of plenty explicitly contrasts with Antoinette's lack of bodily contact with her daughter(s), as well as with her dead body (1992: 1-2). Such a contrasting imagery connects Thérèse's physical hunger as a baby and the psychological, affective and spiritual hunger she experiences in pubescence with the lack of the mother. The symbolic and binary structure opposing Antoinette and Rose also recreates Klein's good breast/bad breast (or good mother/bad mother), a splitting mental process with which this psychoanalyst explained the ambivalence felt towards the mother by the child, who experiences opposing feelings of love and hate¹⁷⁷. However, as Gruss perceptively concludes, in *Daughters of the House* Roberts creates a whole universe of mothers that goes beyond the binary kleinian reading of the mother/child relationship (2009: 115).

Moreover, by doubling the figure of the daughter through Léonie and Thérèse and their contrasting approach to food, the body and sensuous pleasure, Roberts also explores the same complexity of subject-positions from the daughter's point-of-view. Thérèse's craving for food/the mother when a child and the denial of bodily contact by her biological mother further justifies her rejection or repression of sensuous pleasure and the disgust with which she looks at her body and bodily functions, as well as her effort to purify her mother's decaying body as it approaches death (1992: 72-74). "At her mother's deathbed, Therese is painfully reminded of the flaws and limits, of dirt and sin, of decay and residue of moral

¹⁷⁶ Léonie's dreams also reinforce Rose's symbolism as the pre-oedipal maternal body capable of replenishing the baby's hunger and need for comfort: "[o]f course I fed you both, silly. I had plenty of milk, didn't I. Of course I fed you both. Rose, foster-mother, mother-in-law, second mother, fostering mother. Rose in her chair by the fire, feet up, blouse undone, a lapful of babies, a shout of joy, the smell of milk, there, my dears, there" (1992: 169). The daughter's hunger for the mother and the pre-oedipal connection established between mother and daughter are also discussed in *The Visitation*: "the first word that she mutters is *more*. It's a demand, a despairing plea, a shout of rage and frustration. . . . Helen is all mouth, a gaping hole crying out to be filled" (1983: 153). In this novel, it is through food and feeding that the reconciliation between Helen and her mother can take place: "Catherine has ransacked her larder and kitchen, now that her daughter proves willing to accept her gifts; they are suddenly pleased with one another, the items of food expressing all that remains unsaid" (1983: 119).

¹⁷⁷ See Klein's essays "The Psycho-Analytic Play Technique: It's History and Significance" (1955: 35-54) and "Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse" (1929: 85-94), the latter of which takes examples from art and literature as a way of discussing the child's phantasies towards the mother's body. See also Segal (1992) for an overview of Klein's work.

values. She takes care of the needs of her mother's fallible body and develops rituals of purity”, Van der Jeught concludes (2006: 231). In contrast, Léonie, who may be Antoinette’s daughter but was never raised as such, focuses her feelings of pleasure on her body, the satisfaction of eating and other related digestive processes (like defecating), and takes in her sexual awakening with interest and curiosity. According to Sceats, Léonie is characterised in the novel by “an active sensuous enjoyment of her body, and of food and eating in particular” (2000: 28), traits that are further highlighted through her secret midnight feasts (Roberts, 1992: 78-79) or in the enumeration of much-loved English dishes: “[s]uet pudding with slabs of butter and white sugar, Léonie recited: fried eggs and bacon, fish and chips, kippers, marmalade, proper tea, Eccles cakes” (1992: 46)¹⁷⁸. Jeught too contrasts the two girls’ approach to eating and food, concluding that: “[f]or Léonie eating creates a feeling of gaiety and frivolity; there is always a sensual quality to eating. Thérèse denies and represses her pleasure in eating; her prayers are her ‘soul food’” (2006: 230). By suggesting such different responses from the daughter to the mother and her absence, Roberts reclaims a literary and cultural space for the need to think about the specificity of the mother-daughter relationship, which has been omitted from or ignored in the dominant discursive forms. Her emphasis on the need to first think and then rethink this bond corroborates the conclusions presented by Irigaray, who finds Freud’s oedipal and androcentric model of child development problematic in the sense that “[i]t leaves no space for restructured relations between women, or for reinventing a body-to-body and a woman-to-woman relation with the mother” (Grosz, 1989: 123). For Irigaray, and certainly for Roberts too, women as daughters should find a language capable of expressing the corporeal relation with the mother (Irigaray, 1981: 43).

2.5.2.3 The maternal home; the patriarchal house

Food taking such a relevant part in Roberts’s fiction, it is not surprising that many of her novels are framed by domestic spaces and have the kitchen as the most visible place in

¹⁷⁸ Despite the contrast established throughout Roberts’s novel in the way Léonie and Thérèse react to food and the body, I agree with E. Parker when this critic stresses that both girls are taught to maintain a clean and proper symbolic body and to experience their female bodies as abject (Winter 2000: 155-6). The fact that Léonie is less disgusted by her body than Thérèse shows that this is a social and learned experience. The social repression of the female body is evident in the girls’ reaction to their first menstruation, a bodily event that causes anxiety and needs to be made invisible: “On the first landing Thérèse uttered a shriek when Léonie overtook her. Do something. Quick. Don’t let them see. You’ve got a huge red patch stain all down the back of your shorts. . . . They walked into the dining-room together only five minutes later. Clean white half-moons of nails held out for inspection, hands reddened from hot water and soap, hair brushed. Proper *jeunes filles*. Which meant having secrets” (Roberts, 1992: 124).

the house, where women meet, chat, raise children and cook. A good example of this emphasis is again *Daughters of the House*.

Women have been the privileged occupiers of the domestic sphere, to which they have been relegated by virtue of their supposedly private and delicate nature. As discussed in the previous chapter, although feminists have highlighted how women have been oppressed because destined to fulfil their social role in the exclusively private world of the household, the domestic carries an ambivalent status in feminist discourse, for it may too be perceived as “the site of a continuing feminine culture” (Humm, 1985: 125), in other words, the place where women’s identity and creativity can truly be found.

Written by a woman who has publicly acknowledged her debt to feminism, *Daughters of the House* reflects that *double entendre* regarding the relation between women and the domestic sphere, for if, on the one hand, home is the preferential space in the novel for the assertion of women’s subject position and for re-establishing the bonds between mother and daughter, on the other hand it is still a place surveilled by patriarchal discourses and Foucauldian bio-technologies that reproduce sexual difference and exert control over women and their bodies.

Home is a central element in *Daughters of the House* and is, indeed, what makes the narrative move forward, for the chapters are organised according to the inventory of household objects written down by Léonie. This inventory reinforces the relation between women and the house, experienced through the domestic items. In fact, it is that relation that leads both Léonie and Thérèse to claim ownership of the family home, Roberts thus proving the importance of the domestic environment in the psychological development of the two women.

As previously mentioned, the kitchen is by far the most recurrent domestic space in the narrative, for it is where the two girls spend a lot of their time during childhood, helping Victorine with the cooking, hiding from the grown-ups or trying to make sense of the world by listening to conversations and whispered secrets. For Léonie and Thérèse the kitchen is the heart of the house, to where they can escape from the social obligations and etiquettes imposed to *jeune filles*. The kitchen can also be the space where revelation (not just into the power and ecstasies of food, the physical and spiritual nourishment it provides, but also into the past and its repressed memories) happens: it becomes a sanctified or holly place that is connected to the maternal through the presence of Victorine and Rose.

Not only Victorine and Rose, but also cooking, which happens in the kitchen, act as reminders of the pleasure felt by the child at the mother's breast. *Daughters of the House* exalts cooking as sensuous and emotional labour (evident, for example, in Victorine and the girls' preparation of meals) and recognises that activity as creative and sacred. This is emphasised in a chapter called "The Recipe Book", in which, according to Patricia Plummer, "the cook book becomes a female 'book of books,' lying on the altar of the kitchen table and linked metonymically to Victorine, who performs the priestly rites of cooking" (2001: 68). Plummer's connection between the sacredness of cooking and Victorine, who acts as a mother-figure for the two girls, once again stresses the sanctified character of the mother and her body.

However, the house may also be the patriarchal house of the Father, for, as Plummer concludes: "[a]s in other female fictions, for instance in Charlotte Perkins Gillman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), the house can be read as both a representative of traditional male norms and as the female body" (2001: 70). In *Daughters of the House* those two opposite meanings are distinguished according to the different parts of the house. Hence, in contrast to the kitchen, other rooms, to which the girls have restricted access and which are dominated by father figures (Louis, *monsieur le curé* and the Bishop) do not summon a maternal principle but social conventions and prescribed social rules. That is particularly evident in the white *salon*, whose heavy furniture is regularly and painstakingly dusted by the two girls and where the family receives its guests, such as the village's most prestigious representatives (or their wives), to whom Léonie and Thérèse must perform the role of proper *jeunes filles* and repress their bodies: "[t]he dresses, in cotton voile, were scratchy with starch. The children took deep breaths, tried to shrink their shoulder-blades, as the buttons were done up at the back. The puff sleeves were too tight under the armpits, pinched your flesh. . . . Mind you behave, Victorine called after them: don't give us cause to be ashamed of you" (1992: 53).

Another place in the house with a similar symbolism is the dining room, at whose table, presided over by the father figure (Louis), Léonie and Thérèse must exhibit their best behaviour and follow a strict set of rules that, once again, regulate their body movements and constrict their pleasure: "Léonie followed his example and had some more too. She eyed the last piece of toast and *rouille*, decided she didn't dare look as though she wanted it. Today she was on best behaviour" (1992: 145).

Meals are represented in *Daughters of the House* as technologies of the body in the Foucauldian sense previously discussed, because they produce a system of rules that legislate over the body, in this case over the young girl's body, so that this body is successfully circumscribed to its social status and function: "[s]urrounding the table are various and powerful family dynamics about gender roles, about being grown-up, about tidiness, about being 'proper jeune filles'" (Jeught, 2006: 230). Meals and the table etiquette that accompanies them are therefore social opportunities for the display and reinforcement of phallogocentric power. However, Sceats also mentions that: "[p]ower is a slippery commodity, and its practitioners may be skilled and subtle dissemblers. So, fictional cooks and consumers wrestle publicly or surreptitiously for domination" (1996: 125). Subversion and resistance is then still possible, even if only in subtle or dissimulated ways: "[Léonie] sulked in her white crocheted cardigan and modelled tiny men from the dough of her bread. She slumped in her chair and waited to be told off" (Roberts, 1992: 71). Léonie's behaviour at the table imaginatively transgresses what is expected of her, whereas devout Thérèse, in love with her father and in awe of his replacement (the Bishop) exhibits a more conformist attitude during meals and a subdued body that follows the prescribed rules for its gender and age.

2.5.2.4 The other(s)

Roberts has mentioned that in *Daughters of the House* she was giving a voice to the weak and the dispossessed: "[t]o me it's important that there are two little girls telling a story about history because I think the idea of a historian being a small girl is not one our culture believes in" (*apud* Newman, 2003: n. pag.). The 'history' that she refers to is that of the Nazi occupation of France, which in Roberts's novel is intimately connected to the daughters' house, since it was there that, during the Second World War, Jews were first hidden and then betrayed, and to the daughters' pre-history (Léonie and Thérèse may well be the outcome of Antoinette's rape by a German soldier). Plummer suggests that "the silenced story of women is linked with the equally suppressed story of the Jews" (2001: 74). In fact, the interwoven plot brings together (literally under the same roof) the social other(s)— children, Jews and women (particularly mothers)— uniting their fate at the hands of repressive and androcentric powers and making the home not only the place of sexual but

also of age and racial discrimination¹⁷⁹. As a result, the intricate narrative of *Daughters of the House* allows Roberts to open the private to the public and to merge domestic life with the grand historical movements, thus refusing the masculine and gendered division of spheres.

At the end of the novel (or at its beginning, for the narrative has a circular structure and denies closure), Thérèse returns home, accepting her desire for the lost mother, at the same time that Léonie, who has learned to acknowledge the presence of the abject other (the Jews) within the house and one's identity, is ready to turn her home "into a site of incorporated domesticity rather than one of destructiveness or negative consciousness" (Jeught, 2006: 225). Both daughters are thus suggesting that it is in the home and in the family that healing and repair owed to those who have been discriminated may commence and that history needs to be re-written from the social and cultural margins.

Luckhurst comments that the secret knowledge held by the house emerges in three places– the cellar, the bedroom and the shrine, all of them forbidden to the girls (1996: 253). Although his analysis of Roberts's narrative is mainly concerned with exploring a history (that of the Jews) illegally buried but leaking (Luckhurst, 1996: 253), two of these places, the cellar and the shrine, are also connected with the maternal feminine (through the ghostly presence of Antoinette in the cellar, Our Lady in the shrine and the fertility goddess in both places). As such, the prohibition to enter them further suggests the repression of the archaic, abject(ed) mother. For that reason, the fact that Léonie feels the need to stay in and own the house may indicate her wish to recapture her lost relationship with the semiotic mother, just as the narrative intimation that she never really feels at home in the French house could also imply the perils of the subject's attachment to the maternal body. In her thought-provoking analysis of *Daughters of the House* E. Parker concludes that:

Like Kristeva, Roberts is concerned with alterations in subjectivity and transformations of the symbolic made possible by confrontation with the feminine. Through an evocation of the semiotic, the protagonists of *Daughters of the House*, Léonie and Thérèse, facilitate a renegotiation of the symbolic order that creates a space within the patriarchal realm not only

¹⁷⁹ Roberts understands her interest in marginal characters, or the other(s), as a trait shared with other contemporary writers: "I'm interested in trying to find and invent voices and stories of people who haven't been seen as important. And I think that makes me a late twentieth-century writer, because it's a project that lots of people have been involved with" (*apud* Monteith, 2004b: 121). Roberts's approach is characteristic of postmodern historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon, 1988), or a postmodernism of resistance, as Macedo also adds (2008a: 19), that is, a literature determined to critically deconstruct traditional narratives and actively intervene in the social and political fabric.

for women but potentially for all those who are denied representation and are repressed by symbolic law. (Winter 2000: 153)

2.5.3 “Words across the Water”: returning to motherland

The search for the maternal bond and the mother’s body is still approached from other angles in *Daughters of the House*. The novel is set in Blémont, an imaginary small village set in the real region of Normandy, in the north of France. This is a geographical location that recurrently appears in Roberts’s fiction (besides *Daughters of the House*, *Fair Exchange*, *The Looking Glass* and *The Mistressclass* all have at least part of the narrative set in this French location), which is surely the result of Roberts’s maternal genealogy¹⁸⁰. In interviews, lectures and essays Roberts hardly ever fails to mention her French heritage and her ties to her mother’s homeland. She thus sees her identity as much a product of British as of French influences.

Roberts’s recognition of a French heritage is further acknowledged in her novels, which contain plenty of references to traditional French cuisine, describing in detail the preparation of typical dishes. In fact, in *Daughters of the House* food is presented as an important source of national and personal identity, separating, for example, the Catholic Thérèse from the heathen Léonie and her mother Madeleine: “[e]veryone knows that English food is terrible, she [Thérèse] stated. . . . I don’t know how your mother could stand it, having to go and eat stuff like that. She stopped being really French, everyone says so. The English are just heathens, aren’t they Victorine?” (1992: 47).

Another related feature of Roberts’s fiction is that even though it is written in English, it is also filled with French words, as exemplified by *Daughters of the House*: “[a]fter the *dessert* and the fruit came the coffee” (1992: 146); “[p]eel the *patates* for me for the soup, she said: and I’ll keep the pan of *choux* mixture for you to lick” (1992: 46). As the previous examples suggest, French words are mainly associated with the domestic sphere, which is true for most of Roberts’s fiction. They provide local colour to her writing and establish a link with the work produced by nineteenth-century realist writers, the most

¹⁸⁰ Monique Caille, Roberts’s mother, was a French school assistant in Wales when she met Roberts’s father, who was in the army and stationed near the school. The connection to the mother’s country of origin was always kept alive in Roberts’s family, who used to spend their holidays in France. Michèle Roberts was also educated in a Catholic convent school because of her mother being a Catholic. She lives in Mayenne (in the North of France) part of the year, therefore carrying forward the connection to her mother’s country of origin. See Roberts (1993: 139).

famous of which are French (Flaubert, Balzac, Maupassant, to name but a few)¹⁸¹. Like her French predecessors, Roberts excels in the psychological characterization of her characters and addresses themes of social conflict, but she also questions these writers' objective perspective through the proliferation of multiple narrators and sources of information that systematically subvert the production of a single and universal truth.

The relation to French culture, history and geography is further established in *During Mother's Absence* (1993). At the end of this collection of short-stories there is a section doubly entitled "Une Glossaire/A Glossary" where Roberts explains the importance and meaning of several French words to her. These words refer to geographical places, food, traditional feasts, rooms of the house and furniture, and again there is a strong connection with the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, the most developed entries in the glossary are the ones dedicated to Roberts's French family. More than a denotative glossary, with entries providing factual, objective information, Roberts's *glossaire* develops a loose autobiographical narrative of her childhood in France and of her still dominant connection to a French background. The poetic quality of each entry provides a literary dimension to a text in which memories are blurred by feelings, tender pictures of relatives, recollections that bring Roberts back to her lost childhood and, most importantly, to the mother. Take for example the entry dedicated to the village in which her relatives still live and in which these dimensions are fully explored: "Criquetot L'Esneval. The name of the village where the family lives. Not just a geographical place: a place in the heart, in the psyche. My mother's home. The past. A way of life. A system of values. A group of people we refer to with respect and love" (1993: 154). In this entry Roberts also compresses France to the size of a small village in Normandy, which becomes a synonym for home: "[i]t is France, *tout court*. Not abroad. Home" (1993: 156)¹⁸².

For Roberts France is a present/real place but also an absent/imaginary one, much like the absent mother from the title of the book in which the glossary is found. The writer tries to recover mother and motherland through her writing, but she knows that she is re-

¹⁸¹ The influence exercised by the French realist writers in Roberts's work has also been essential to the narrative of some of her novels and short-stories: in *The Looking Glass* (2000), the poet Gerard is a figure inspired by the biographies of both Flaubert and Mallarmé, while Colette and Emma Bovary lend their names to the titles of two short-stories in Roberts's latest collection, *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love* (2010).

¹⁸² In "Less Is More", Dydia DeLyser draws attention to the power of synecdoche in landscape, referring that "that such a fragment takes on greater meaning: the projected meaning of the *imagined* whole" (2001: 27). The same process is at stake in Roberts's description of her mother's home village, which represents the whole country and the writer's fabricated image of it.

creating a past and thus an imagined country and a fantasised body. In her essay “The Place of Imagination” Roberts reflects on language, seeing it too as created upon absence, since it is used to designate a reality that is not there, but at the same time, and for that very same reason, helping to create reality: “[l]anguage erupts out of silence and splinters it. So when I write fiction I’m creating a presence” (1998: 12). Connecting the view Roberts has of language to her extensive use of French in her writing, the latter should be seen as another way to reconnect the writer to her French heritage, her childhood and her mother, a conclusion confirmed by the glossary: “French. The French language. My mother’s tongue. My mother-tongue, that I take in along with her milk” (1993: 157)¹⁸³. Roberts’s work thus answers Irigaray’s urge to give voice, language, symbolic representation to the mother and her body, as well as to the bond she established with the daughter (Irigaray, 1981: 43). Moreover, in her essay “Post-Script” Roberts mentions that France is the place where she lives when she is writing (1998: 200), suggesting that not only France and mother-land help in the creation of her fiction, but also that the fictional format may be a privileged symbolic space for finding the mother. Roberts’s personal search is thus mixed with the writing of narratives.

Despite Roberts’s effort to recover the mother through her French heritage, she is also aware of being a mongrel, someone with a hybrid identity who is influenced by different cultures and contexts. She may speak of France as home, but she also looks at French places, with their traditions and their people, as an outsider: “I’m part of this huge, enduring, passionate family; yet my life in London also makes me an outsider” (1993: 177). An outsider is also how Léonie perceives herself to be in France, even after living for so long in the family house: “Thérèse. . . . would not arrive, as Léonie still did in her dreams, as a stranger, confused by the labyrinth that was the house” (1992: 4). So, neither Roberts nor Léonie, who is called “Eengleesh peeg” (1992: 85) in France and “Froggy” (1992: 122) in England, feel truly at home in either side of the Channel. There is ambiguity in their identity, for theirs is not a situation of either/or, as the writer is well aware: “I was bilingual, with a French mother and an English father, and grew up hearing those two languages behave like lassos thrown across the dining-room table over supper” (1998: 138).

¹⁸³ In *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography*, Nicole Ward Jouve, a French scholar who has been living in England for many years, also connects her process of writing fiction in French with her desire to re-unite with the mother: “in some ways French began to function for me as a language of ‘origins’. As a ‘maternal’ language, in opposition to English which I must have cast in the role of a ‘patriarchal’, a ‘symbolic’, a law-giving language” (1991: 23).

Although such identitary ambiguity is disorienting and feared, it is not necessarily perceived as negative: “I’ve been lucky, I think, in that the circumstances of my life have meant that I’ve recognised the need for translation, almost from the day I was born, as simply part of the daily business of sorting out how to live with other people” (1998: 137), recognises Roberts in “Words across the Water”. Further on in this essay the writer explains how it is possible for countries and people to be brought together due to the sheer power of the imagination, so that the distinction between otherness and the same, foreign and home becomes blurred: “[t]he waters of the imagination transform us and our emotional geography, so that she who was a stranger becomes a neighbour and what was foreign becomes the place where we are most truly at home” (1998: 146). Roberts’s arguments mirror Léonie’s thoughts, as she crosses the channel from England towards French territory:

Léonie fought to keep awake, to know the exact moment when, in the very centre of the Channel, precisely equidistant from both shores, the walls of water and of words met, embraced wetly and closely, became each other, composed of each other’s sounds. For at that moment true language was restored to her. Independent of separated words, as whole as water, it bore her along as a part of itself, a gold current that connected everything, a secret river running underground, the deep well, the source of life. (1992: 35)

Léonie’s description of her sea voyage closely resembles her other description of the vision in the woods (1992: 86), for both suggest a maternal principle in their emphasis on a liquid, fluid and primordial state that is the source of life and that makes things connected with each other. That maternal principle, so Roberts’s writing ultimately avows, surpasses binary oppositions and opens the self to otherness¹⁸⁴.

2.5.4 *Flesh and Blood*: the maternal as a narrative format

In 1994 Roberts published *Flesh and Blood*, a novel that further develops the theme of the mother-daughter relationship and upgrades it to its structure, which is open (every chapter, including the last one, ends in a semi-colon) and made of separate and then

¹⁸⁴ See Irigaray’s essay “The ‘Mechanics’ of Fluids”, in which this critic also represents the feminine through oceanic or liquid imagery in order to convey the fluid, “flowing, fluctuating” (Irigaray, 1974: 112) characteristic of the female body and its *jouissance*.

reassembled narrative halves¹⁸⁵. In fact, each section of this highly experimental piece of fiction is a story inside a story, the whole novel resembling a series of Chinese boxes that create a very postmodern effect of *myse-en-abyme*.

Moreover, in more explicit ways than in *Daughters of the House, Flesh and Blood* tries to find the mother by bringing the discourse of the semiotic into language and hence symbolic representation. This happens in the central chapter of the novel, “Anon”, from which the separation between mother and child that had dominated the first half of the novel may begin to be healed: “mamanbébé love you are here with you together us now over and over so non-stop mamanbébé so wanting you born this love us so close skinskin talking heartbeat belonging with you allowed love home flesh my mamanbébé our body singing to you so beautiful love listen mamanbébé listen” (1994: 109). Roberts’s poetic prose demonstrates the semiotic level of language as described by Kristeva, particularly in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), for it is not dominated by morphological rules and syntactic structures (expressed, for example, through punctuation, something that Roberts’s text explicitly lacks) but relies on neologisms (“mamanbébé”, “skinskin”) that stress the attachment between mother and child, an emphasis on sound through the alliterative quality of the prose, a fluid rhythm, conveyed by the aforementioned lack of punctuation, breaking boundaries between words and syntactic elements and creating multiple and superimposed possibilities of meaning, in addition to a general disruption of grammatical rules¹⁸⁶. To sum up, “Anon” is a deeply polyphonic and heterogeneous text, characteristics that, for Kristeva (1980b: 133, 142), define the semiotic. Also according to Kristeva (1974), the semiotic is closely linked to the infantile pre-oedipal and, as such, to the mother’s body and its close relationship with the child. These are notions also inherent to Roberts’s text, in which mother and child are represented by a single word, “mamanbébé”, capable of simultaneously expressing ‘I’ and ‘you’, or by the pronoun “us”, which blends ‘self’ and ‘other’. Mother

¹⁸⁵ The dual structure of *Flesh and Blood* is confirmed by Roberts: “[i]t’s my most experimental, my most original novel, and it’s broken in half: an example of what you asked about form, because the novel is about, crucially, being separated from your mother. Something was broken between you, so the novel’s broken, and it took me about a year of complete madness to get there. You read half of it and you’re also going backwards. Then you get to a paradise and start to cheer up, come out, read the other half and begin to put it together” (*apud* Newman: 2003: n. pag.).

¹⁸⁶ In her essay “From One Identity to An Other” (from her book *Desire in Language*) Kristeva summarises the semiotic in its relation with poetic language and the maternal in the following terms: “[t]he semiotic activity, which introduces wandering or fuzziness into language and, *a fortiori*, into poetic language. . . . Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother. On the contrary, the unsettled and questionable subject of poetic language (for whom the word is never uniquely sign) maintains itself at the cost of reactivating this repressed instinctual, maternal element” (1980b: 136).

and child are then perceived as inseparable through their shared love (“mamanbébé love you”, “this love us”) and their interconnected bodies (“us so close skin skin”).

“Anon” is a crucial turning point in *Flesh and Blood*. The novel begins with the mother’s murder by the daughter, therefore staging in fictional terms Irigaray’s belief on an archaic and socially perpetuated matricide: “[n]ow my mother was dead. I had killed her. I was a slayer of mothers” (Roberts, 1994: 3), says Fred/Freddy/Frederica, who will also tell, among other tales, the story of Eugénie, rejected by her pious and heartless mother, and that of Rosa, abandoned by her mother on a snowy winter day¹⁸⁷. However, the second half of the novel takes the opposite direction as it travels towards the mother and the possibility of reuniting mother and child. As Cherubina, another narrator of this polyphonic novel, suggests, such journey is made possible by the power of fiction (1994: 113-17), books being the place where the mother can be recovered and brought to symbolic representation, as it is also implicit in Rosa’s tale, in which the daughter brings the mother from the dead through her tears and kisses (1994: 115-17).

The last two chapters of *Flesh and Blood* give the power of the narrative voice to first the mother and then the daughter. Louise’s and Frederica/Freddy/Fred’s words therefore address the relationship between mother and daughter from opposite perspectives. Louise’s account focuses on the misconceptions that both mother and daughter have of each other and reproduces the stream of reproaches that characterises that relationship: “[s]he was very difficult. When I was young I wasn’t like that. . . . I did my best. What more could I do? But for her it wasn’t enough” (1994: 170); it also suggests that this is a problem brought by the Oedipal separation of the daughter from the mother, which throws the first into the *nom/n du père*, as Lacan calls the symbolic order. This is a system of patriarchal rules that prohibits the pre-oedipal mother/child bond and defines what is appropriate female behaviour¹⁸⁸. Louise’s section also hints at a repeated pattern that reproduces pain in the mother and the daughter from generation to generation: “[a]nger is the stone in my heart that I have carried since childhood, the stone I must not throw, let my daughter carry it for me”

¹⁸⁷ According to Irigaray: “what is now becoming apparent in the most everyday things and in the whole of our society and our culture is that, at a primal level, they function on the basis of a matricide. When Freud describes and theorizes, most notably in *Totem and Taboo*, the murder of the father as founding the primal horde, he forgets a more archaic murder, that of the mother, necessitated by the establishment of a certain order in the polis” (1981: 36).

¹⁸⁸ The separation of mother and daughter repeatedly represented in *Flesh and Blood* certainly recalls Irigaray’s thoughts on the Law of the Father: “[d]esire for her, her desire, that is what is forbidden by the law of the father, of all fathers. . . . they always intervene to censor, to repress the desire of/for the mother” (1981: 36).

(1994: 171), thus suggesting the perpetuation of a patriarchal system inherently damaging for the relationship between mother and daughter.

In contrast, Frederica's words are about healing and repair. She writes an elegy for her lost mother, in which she acknowledges the fundamental role the mother has had in her life: "[m]y mother was my first great love, she was my paradise garden. . . . She was a goddess who went disguised in the suburbs, but I recognized her, in my eyes nothing could diminish her grandeur" (1994: 173). Furthermore, Frederica's elegy affirms the need to recover the pre-oedipal bond with the mother: "this is also an elegy for the mother I found again she thought I had abandoned her and given her up forever but I had not I needed to go away so that I could come back just as she did" (1994: 173-74)¹⁸⁹. Last but not least, Frederica's words are also a love song and a prayer to her baby daughter to come: "a prayer for my daughter that I shall be able to contain her while she grows, inside me and outside me, that I shall be able to see her through while she needs me then let go, not to bind or fetter her but to see her as she is, different the same, to love her with imagination and plenty" (1994: 175).

In Frederica's daughter lies the novel's and Roberts's final hope for a future imagined differently, for this future is a time when the bond between mother and daughter is not lost and a place where mothers and daughters are able to accept and learn from each other.

2.6 The (auto)biographical impulse and the imagination

I will suggest that *none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography*. Trained to see ourselves as objects and to be positioned as the Other, estranged to ourselves, we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that, in other words, is not a story, but *must become a story*.

Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want?* (1993: 14).

As mentioned in the opening section of this chapter, in her essay "On Imagination" Roberts approaches the discrimination against women's fiction, discussing its description as autobiographical and, by extension, as "partial, provincial, not really sophisticated" (1998: 5). In this section I intend to show and discuss why Roberts's reaction to the derogatory and androcentric reading of women's literature produces a counter-proposal that values the autobiographical impulse at the same time that is grounded in the processes of the

¹⁸⁹ Frederica's desire to recover the connection with her mother and a pre-symbolic state is also expressed linguistically, for her prose, in its fluid and rhythmic nature, is in close contact with the semiotic dimension of language.

imagination. As the writer concludes in the afore-mentioned essay: “I feel that autobiography and imagination are deeply connected” (1998: 14), thus suggesting the relevance of both elements to her work.

In her blend of fact and fiction, Roberts is not alone, for this is a strategy repeatedly found not only in other contemporary women writers (A. S. Byatt, Sarah Waters, Angela Carter and Fay Weldon are some of those who have been exploring hybrid textual forms and subverting genre boundaries), but also in postmodern fiction in general. This is actually one of the keystones to Hutcheon’s analysis of the postmodern narrative, or historiographic metafiction, as Hutcheon also calls it, a genre that, according to this critic, intentionally dissolves the frontiers separating fiction and history and “deliberately confuses the notion that history’s problem is verification, while fiction’s is veracity” (1988: 112). For Hutcheon, then, “[b]oth history and fiction are cultural sign systems, ideological constructions whose ideology concludes their appearance of being autonomous and self-contained” (1988: 112).

The notion of both history and story as cultural systems permeated by and disseminators of ideology has been extremely useful for feminist critics, who have established the feminist practice of reading against the grain of the literary tradition, reclaiming the re-vision of cultural history as a fundamental strategy for upturning phallogentrism whilst affirming the presence of female subjectivity and difference¹⁹⁰. Macedo concludes that feminism has given a political conscious, a sense of the social to postmodernism (2008: 20), corroborating Craig Owen’s influential text “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism”, in which the critic confirms the usefulness of mixing “the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation” (1983: 68) in order to defend the fertile negotiation between these two forms of criticism¹⁹¹. Roberts’s oeuvre, profoundly related with a postmodernist art practice and imbued with a feminist agenda, offers a positive example of such cross-pollination.

¹⁹⁰ See Adrienne Rich’s “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision” (1972) and Elaine Showalter’s *The New Feminist Criticism* (1985). For a contrasting position in relation to the feminist process of revision see Audre Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1984).

¹⁹¹ See also in the context of the relationship between postmodernism and feminism Susan R. Suleiman’s chapter “Feminism and Postmodernism: In Lieu of an Ending”, from her book *Subversive Intent* (1990).

2.6.1 Women's historical novels

In her assessment of contemporary historical fiction by British women, Diana Wallace comments that if the 1980s witnessed the beginning of a renaissance in woman's historical novel (which reached its peak in the 1990s), this happened as a part of a general revival of this literary genre, with popular male writers like Umberto Eco, John Fowles and Peter Ackroyd (all of whom often discussed in the context of a postmodern writing) climbing up the book sales charts (2005: 176)¹⁹². Nevertheless, Wallace also mentions that, while the male-authored novels seemed oblivious to women, "women's historical novels were politically driven, refashioning history through fiction as part of the urgent need to tell 'her story'" (2005: 176). Indeed, women's historiographic fiction has been a way of inscribing women in the dominant 'his-tory', in other words, of bringing female experience, perspective and voice into the literary and historiographic canons and, as a consequence, of asserting women's power and resistance to an hitherto marginalised position. This perspective is shared by Beate Neumeier, who refers that the interest shown by the contemporary woman writer in the historical novel "has to be seen in the context of a literary rebellion against the exclusion of women from historical discourse" (2001: 3) and is further corroborated by Sarah Waters, a writer who has often revisited and revised the genre and who concludes that: "[t]hrough frequently dismissed as romantic, escapist or historiographically naive, women's historical fiction often constitutes a radical rewriting of traditional, male-centred historical narrative" (1996: 176).

Roberts's oeuvre has often been read through this critical perspective. In her survey of the historical novel produced by British women writers between 1900 and 2000, Wallace refers Roberts's work, commenting that one of the most ambitious refashionings of the historical novel to recover 'herstory' in the early 1980s is Roberts's rewriting of the New Testament in *The Wild Girl*, a novel that reinserts "women into history" (2005: 184). In addition, Wallace claims that "[f]rom the mid- to late 1980s women writers began to write increasingly playful and sophisticated 'postmodern' historical novels" (2005: 180), a change

¹⁹² In an article addressing the relationship between contemporary British fiction and postmodernism, Patricia Waugh concludes that "British novelists on the whole responded somewhat cautiously to the contemporary theoretical turn by assimilating continental versions of textual self-referentiality and social constructionism into an indigenous fictional tradition" (2005: 69). According to Waugh this indigenous fictional tradition is one in which "realism has largely tempered romance, and ethical commitment has often allied itself with a broadly empiricist tradition surviving into the twentieth century" (2005: 69). Beate Neumeier (2001) also mentions the strong realist narrative tradition in Britain, which has led to the connection of experimental techniques and realist conventions in British literature.

that Roberts's novels reflect in their non-realistic discourses, such as myth and fantasy (2005: 184). Her fiction may then be seen as an example of Hutcheon's postmodern historiographic metafiction, that is, "novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon, 1988: 5).

Roberts has engaged with and disrupted History as both a male narrative and the presentation and ratification of an undisputable truth. Even if her books often replace in the stage of history male characters and narrators for female ones (Mary Magdalene instead of Jesus in *The Wild Girl*, Mrs Noah instead of Mr Noah in *The Book of Mrs Noah*, Mallarmé's lovers instead of the male writer in *The Looking Glass*, Mary Wollstonecraft instead of William Wordsworth in *Fair Exchange*), thus offering a female perspective and giving visibility to an until then invisible female history, her multiple narrators, who express different female points-of-view or interact from different moments in history, permanently destabilise the assumption of a universal, all-encompassing truth and disrupt the notion of history as a continuum. Moreover, and appropriating Wallace's contention regarding women's historical novels, in Roberts's writing the formal experimentation "is not mere intellectual gameplaying but urgently linked to the political and moral necessity of recovering women's history" (2005: 180).

It is not my intention to further explore Roberts's use of a metahistoriographical and postmodernist framework potentially charged with politically subversive effects through the use of processes of re-vision and ironic distance, female narrators, multiple points-of-view and overlapping historical moments, for these issues have been consistently explored by several critics (Falcus, 2007; Kontou, 2009; E. Parker, Dec. 2008; Plummer, 2001 and White, Fall 2003 have all stressed Roberts's questioning of traditional history). Despite these very pertinent critical analyses, I am more interested in following the autobiographical elements in Roberts's fiction and discussing the way the writer intersects the autobiographical and the imaginary. Obviously that Roberts's autobiographical writing cannot be separate from her wider questioning of History and women's participation in that grand-narrative for, as concluded by Sonia Villega López, the "demystification of the historical discipline is carried out through an (auto)biographical discourse, raised in women's novels to the condition of female historiography, and favouring the end of history as we know it" (2001: 177). But the autobiographical dimension of Roberts's fiction also allows us to think about the problems faced by women writers, and visual artists, in their processes of self-representation.

2.6.2 The autobiographical impulse

Susanne Gruss is one of the few critics who have addressed the presence of autobiographical elements in Roberts's fiction. In her thorough analysis of the writer's work (2008), she discusses those elements by articulating them with the subversion and refashioning of history. Gruss's research is very accurate and detailed and it is in some aspects of it that I will ground my own analysis. She begins her discussion of the topic with a brief reference to the tradition of autobiography as a genre, asserting the influence of Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), one of the most crucial texts of fictional feminist biography in its radical combination of creative biography and fiction and its persistent questioning of gendered identity (Gruss, 2008: 246). Though Gruss does not mention any specific work by Roberts particularly indebted to Woolf's gender/genre-subversive biography, I find its tutelary presence in *Paper Houses* (2007). This is Roberts's memoir as a young aspiring writer involved in 1970s feminism, who discovers her sexuality at a period when gender boundaries were shamelessly disregarded and engages in relationships with people of both sexes, thus exploring a trans-gendered existence, just as much as the book in itself explores the possibility of a trans-genre by transgressing the boundaries that separate fact from fiction, biography from novel: "[w]ho was that 'I', that young woman of twenty-one? I reconstruct her. I invent a new 'me' composed of the girl I was, according to my diaries, my memories (and the gaps between them), and the self remembering her. She stands in between the two. A third term. She's a character in my story and she tells it too" (2007: 14).

Gruss also mentions the importance of autobiography as a feminist genre in the 1970s, at a time when the relationship between the literary and the political was particularly explored, for it was capable of drawing attention to women's experiences, bodies and problems, which were then discussed from a female point-of-view (2008: 282). Joannou confirms this connection by referring that: "[t]he writing which had the strongest connection to women's liberation movement in the 1970s were the feminist confessional novels. . . . These had a direct relationship to consciousness-raising and were often read in consciousness-raising groups to help women's self-esteem and combat their feelings of isolation" (2000: 190-91). As Gruss also comments: "[a]s in the de/reconstruction of the literary canon and the creation of herstories, the fact that female autobiographies were not part of the 'canon' of autobiographical writing was one of the driving forces for the creation

of female and/or feminist (auto)biographies” (2008: 247). She therefore concludes that Roberts’s first novel, *A Piece of the Night*, can firmly be placed within the confessional feminist novel tradition (2008: 282).

In fact, not only Roberts’s early novels, but also her work as a whole supports an autobiographical reading. As highlighted by Gruss (2008: 284), Roberts’s struggles with the Christian image of femininity, her participation in lesbian communities, the conscious use of unconscious content, such as her pre-oedipal relationship with her father and her longing for the maternal, as well as her double nationality, are all elements of Roberts’s biography that shape her fiction. And yet, Roberts’s autobiographical impulse is constantly submitted to a process of fictionalization.

2.6.3 The fictionalization of autobiography

In *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference*, Shoshana Felman suggests the complex relationship involving women and the autobiographical mode, convincingly arguing that the text can be a place of female resistance, created as “*a joint effect of interaction among literature, autobiography and theory*” (1993: 133). She reinforces this point of view by adding that “the most innovative women writers who have ‘authorized autobiography,’ those whom we regard as our ‘founding mothers,’ have authorized it only through such a resistance” (1993: 133-34) and, similarly to Gruss, invokes the spectre of Virginia Woolf, this time by referring to *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). According to Felman, Woolf’s theoretical text on the woman writer is pervaded “both by fiction (literature) and by a narrative (autobiography) that, paradoxically, *gets personal* only in the way in which it claims to be inherently *impersonal*” (1993: 141)¹⁹³. Indeed, as Woolf herself paradoxically puts it in the opening pages of her book: “[f]iction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. Therefore I propose, making use of all the liberties and licenses of a novelist, to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming here. . . . I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence . . . ‘I’ is only a convenient term for someone who has no real being” (1929: 6).

Roberts too often operates through a fictionalization of her autobiography, a process particularly explicit in her “Une Glossaire/A Glossary”, where the writer re-tells her

¹⁹³ *A Room of One’s Own* is an extended version of a series of lectures entitled “Women and Fiction”. It was delivered, in October 1928, at Newnham College and Girton College, two women’s colleges at Cambridge University.

childhood experiences in France and suggests the fictional process involved in remembering the past. This past is described as “this line of fluid script” (1993: 131), in other words, a palimpsest resulting from a process of reselection and rearrangement. *Paper Houses* also documents the blending of (feminist) theory, autobiography and fiction that, according to Felman, is so characteristic of women writers’ work. Its narrator constantly reminds the reader that personal memories have been fictionalized, a process that suggests the impossibility of recovering the past as it was: “[t]his memoir is like fiction, in as much as I have shaped and edited it, but it is as truthful as I can make it, honouring both facts and the way I saw them at the time. On the other hand I know that memory, under pressure from the unconscious mind, is unreliable; and I have forgotten a lot” (2007: 7).

What are the effects, or the consequences, of Roberts’s permanent melange of autobiography and imagination? As Gruss concludes, Roberts’s disruption of the boundaries separating fact from fiction radically subverts the notions of the confessional and questions the genre of autobiography, which is no longer offered by the writer as a faithful and accurate account of one’s life, in other words, as an objective reconstruction, but as a past that can be revisited, re-visioned and made up (2008: 288). By doing so, Roberts achieves three related results. Firstly, she destabilises the notion of History (autobiography being one possible historiographic source), which through her work becomes unreliable, unstable and plural: “story-telling and histories become the only way of making sense of the world” (Gruss, 2008: 289). As a consequence, she also subverts the boundaries between two inherently narrative forms: story and history. Finally, she disrupts notions of the literary, claiming that autobiography, a traditional way of female writing (not only expressed through the confessional novels of the 1970s, but also through older forms such as diaries and letters) and one that has been removed from the canon due to its private, domestic and un-literary status, be included in the category of the literary. As Joannou stresses: “the demand to be allowed access to territory that was the exclusive preserve of the privileged few has a long history of representation in women's writing” (2000: 189). By embracing the autobiographical dimension of her work whilst recognising the role of the imagination, Roberts confronts and revises a gender-biased literary tradition, asserting in the process a female ‘I’ who claims her access to the literary.

2.6.4 Autobiography and the authority of the authorial voice

Autobiography is closely linked to authorship and textual authority; in relation to women's writing it makes visible a female authorial voice that disrupts the hegemony of the male voice and power. Susan Sniader Lanser begins her book *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* with a chapter entitled "Towards a Feminist Poetics of Female Narrative Voice" in which she suggests that "[f]ew words are as resonant to contemporary feminists as 'voice'" (1992: 3), because for women, part of the collectively and personally silenced, "the term has become a trope of identity and power" (1992: 3). Therefore, for Lanser, "regardless of any woman writer's ambivalence toward authoritative institutions and ideologies, the act of writing a novel and seeking to publish it . . . is implicitly a quest for discursive authority; a quest to be heard, respected and believed, a hope of influence" (1992: 7). Lanser draws attention to the social and political implications of the authorial voice, which in the case of being female can only have transgressive implications, given that it claims a power and a public visibility traditionally denied to women.

However, the assertion of a female authorial voice clashes with the post-structuralist and postmodernist questioning of the romantic notion of the author, who is 'killed' (most notably by Barthes in "The Death of the Author" [1967]) in the name of the reader or discourse. As Macedo and Amaral conclude: "the destruction of the notion of the author raises several questions for feminists, given that it comes up at a time when women are looking for their own subjectivity and authority" (2005: 8, my translation). The postmodern woman writer therefore faces a contradiction in her work given that as a postmodern she questions a single and omnipotent source of knowledge, which in literature has been traditionally represented by the authorial voice, whilst as a woman she wants to acknowledge an individual experience and assert a subjectivity historically denied to her.

Roberts's writing reflects the dilemma faced by the postmodern woman writer and makes the rejection of binary oppositions its answer to the problem. Indeed, by repeatedly creating a fictionalised female voice that echoes that of the writer Michèle Roberts, Roberts produces a hybrid text that is both the product of autobiography and imagination. Through this strategy she is able to affirm a female authorial voice and claim a literary space for a woman's body, feelings and experiences, whilst refusing a truthful, reliable and overwhelming authorial subject. As mentioned before, this critical position is further stressed by the co-existence in most of Roberts's narratives of not one but several female

narrators (some of whom also historical characters), who multiply the points-of-view and disseminate the sources of knowledge, hence questioning a unitary truth, as well as the notion of history as fact.

2.6.5 Self-representation in art and literature

Roberts's strategies of self-representation can be approached to the ones employed by contemporary female visual artists, namely Helen Chadwick, whose work is often centred in her own body (most famously in *Of Mutability*) but who, like Roberts, reinvents the autobiographical model (for example, in *Ego Geometria Sum* and *Viral Landscapes*, works in which the boundaries separating exterior/interior body and the personal/the cosmic are obviously questioned). These artists affirm a female subject and presence amongst a tradition that has seen in women and their bodies the preferential objects of the (male) gaze, but they, nevertheless, refuse the artist's self-revelation or the viewer's objectification of their bodies through a series of formal strategies that avoid the viewer's fetishist gaze or that construct a fictional persona who defers the inherently gendered and derogatory autobiographical reading of their work¹⁹⁴. Those strategies lead Meskimmon to assert that: "women artists throughout the twentieth century have challenged the conventions of the genre [self-portrait] and concepts of the self and have negotiated new and extraordinary spaces in which they have produced their self-portraits" (1996: 1).

Despite these similarities, there are also interesting differences in the processes of self-representation undertaken by women writers and visual artists, differences that a juxtaposition of Roberts's and Chadwick's cases illustrates. For although the writer Michèle Roberts writes against a literary tradition that has denied or at least belittled a female authorial voice and women's right to discuss their bodies and experiences through literature by critically deeming those very same topics as unworthy of figuring in the canon, she does not face the questions and problems brought by Chadwick's disclosure of her vibrant female body in the visual field¹⁹⁵. I am not suggesting with this comparative analysis that the representation of female bodies and sexuality undertaken, for example, by the feminist confessional novels of the 1970s, an inspiration for Roberts's own literary production, was

¹⁹⁴ The autobiographical reading and its patriarchal implications have affected the woman writer and the woman artist as well. See Wagner (1996) and Meskimmon (1996) for a further analysis of this topic.

¹⁹⁵ See previous chapter, particularly the last section, for a discussion of the reception of Chadwick's processes of self-representation and the artist's reaction to the same.

not utterly subversive and radical and, hence, highly controversial, but that, being a writer, Roberts has not had to face the objectification of her body in the same way the woman artist has, because her work is not subjected to the cultural and psychic dynamics of the visual¹⁹⁶.

A comparison between the feminist reception of Roberts's and Chadwick's work is here pertinent, given that although both women explore female bodily experiences and bodily pleasure, Roberts's fiction has been assessed by critics (Gruss, 2009; Haas, 1997; E. Parker, Dec. 2008; Plummer, 2001) as liberating women from a patriarchal literary tradition that has systematically denied them the right to represent themselves and their bodies, whereas the feminist art critic, particularly that of the 1980s, was much more suspicious of Chadwick's bodily exposure, considering that, despite her subversive intentions, the artist was not able to avoid an androcentric art tradition and a voyeuristic psychic model that constantly objectified and fetishised the female body through the power of the male gaze. Hence, in 1981, Parker and Pollock considered feminist artists who openly used their bodies as a reaction against the dominance of the male point-of-view and a reappropriation of women's bodies for women as "dangerously open to misunderstanding" (1981: 127) and "easily retrieved and co-opted by male culture because they do not rupture radically meanings and connotations of woman in art as body, as sexual, as nature, as object for male possession" (1981: 130)¹⁹⁷. This different assessment by feminist criticism further proves that, despite having similar objectives and often employing similar strategies, female self-representation in the visual arts and in literature still possess a number of distinct implications.

¹⁹⁶ According to Joannou, the sexual confessional moved into literature in the work of several writers (for example, J.D. Salinger and Kingsley Amis) although sexual outspokenness and sexual bravado already existed in the work of twentieth century male writers like Jean Genet, Ernest Hemingway or Vladimir Nabokov. Nevertheless, "[b]y the end of the 1970s the sexual confessional had become closely identified with women writers, with the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s, and with a number of texts which were destined to become classics of the women's movement" (2000: 104).

¹⁹⁷ See also Lucy R. Lippard's "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art", included in *From the Centre* (1976) and republished in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (1995: 99-113), as well as Betterton's collection of essays *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, first published in 1987.

3 At the Threshold: Helena Almeida

Desregular as coisas,/ devagar
Ana Luísa Amaral, *Imagias* (2002: 16).

3.1 Asexual silence: art criticism and Helena Almeida's work

3.1.1 Asexual silence

When Helena Almeida was invited to integrate the Portuguese representation at the Biennale of Sydney, in 2004, there was critical consensus, for the decision was seen as the much-awaited recognition of the relevance of this artist's work in the national and international art panorama. In that same year, Almeida received the Prémio BES Photo (a distinguished Portuguese arts award) and the year before she had been granted the PhotoEspaña Award (reflecting the regular exhibition of her work in Spain). In 2005, Almeida had her work exhibited at the Portuguese Pavilion in the 51st Biennale of Venice, a fact that further confirmed her institutional acceptance. About Almeida's presence in Venice, Paulo Cunha e Silva, director of Instituto das Artes, refers, in the small catalogue that accompanied the exhibition: "[t]his year the artist who officially represents Portugal at the 51st Biennale of Venice, occupies with particular pertinence this focal point" (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 9, my translation).

In fact, given that Almeida, born in 1934, has been regularly exhibiting since 1967 (the year of her first exhibition, at Galeria Buchholz, in Lisbon), the recognition of her work in the new millennium seems somehow rather belated, as the artist also commented in a recent documentary (*apud Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005). Moreover, a genuine interest in Almeida's work has often found expression more internationally than nationally (Almeida has exhibited in places as different as Austria, Spain, New York, France, Scotland, Germany, Switzerland and Japan). In an article written for the magazine *Grande Reportagem* in 2005, João Pombeiro mentioned that when the Centro Cultural de Belém put up a retrospective of Almeida's work in March 2004, it was seventeen years since the artist had had another relevant exhibition in Lisbon (2005: 28-30). During that long period of public absence, her work only deserved attention from the Portuguese museums circuit in 1995, when it was exhibited at Fundação de Serralves, in Porto. Such general oblivion also

reflects the relationship that Almeida keeps with the wider public, for she does not share the celebrity status that someone like Paula Rego, for example, currently has in Portugal. Such difference is not devoid of some irony given that, contrary to Rego, who has been living in England since 1976, Almeida never really left her country and the city where she was born¹⁹⁸. Indeed, although she has been regularly exhibiting her work abroad, Almeida has always lived in Lisbon and worked in the same studio that used to belong to her father, the sculptor Leopoldo de Almeida. Those circumstances reflect an ambiguous relationship between exterior and interior spaces, international exposure and the national context, a problematic that is not only evidenced in biographical terms but also at the level of the dominant axis in Almeida's work, as I hope to demonstrate later on.

It seems, then, that Almeida has remained, at least until recently, an artist's artist, or an art critic's artist, that is, someone whose name and work are well established in the highly selective and enclosed art world but who remains unknown in the wider social and cultural spheres. It may even be the case that that same art milieu has decisively contributed to this situation, for several art critics have repeatedly referred to the formal and abstract qualities of her work, which is thus placed outside the mundane, the historical and the contextual. The following comment by Fernando Pernes offers an appropriate example: "Helena Almeida . . . practices an art whose meaning is memorialist in which ritualistic and mythical atemporalties prevail over immediate sociological schemes of typification" (1998: n. pag). Pernes's understanding of Almeida's work removes it from specific historical, social and cultural contingencies by emphasising its "mythical", "ritualistic" and "memorialist" qualities. Carlos Vidal emphasises similar aspects in his reading: "[t]here is here [in Almeida's work] an uninhabited and asexual silence (recalling minimalism, which is also asexual). . . . And that is what makes Helena Almeida's work an eminently formalist territory" (1996: 16-17, my translation).

Both Vidal and Pernes have contributed to the dominant view of Almeida's work, taking formal concerns and the ontological questioning of art as the artist's starting and

¹⁹⁸ Several reasons may help to explain the different popularity experienced by Almeida and Rego in Portugal. Firstly, not only has Rego's art a wide reputation in Portugal, where she began exhibiting individually in 1965, but also in other countries, particularly in England, where the artist has been a household name since the 1980s; in contrast, Almeida, who has always lived and worked in Lisbon, has taken longer to build an international reputation. Moreover, although both artists inscribe their work in a figurative tradition, Rego's art possesses a referential dimension, namely in relation to particular circumstances of Portuguese identity and history, that is absent from Almeida's highly meta-referential work. Finally, Rego's reputation may also have something to do with the return to painting experienced in the 1980s, from which Almeida's photographic work demarcates itself.

concluding points. In this canonical view, her work proposes an abstract and non-representational aesthetic world, devoid of references to the contextual reality in which it was created. Moreover, the fact that this work is centred on the female body, a topos with a crucial signification and significance in Western art tradition, as feminists art historians such as Linda Nead (1992), Linda Nochlin (1988) or Griselda Pollock (2004) have been claiming over the last thirty years, does not seem to raise particular critical interest or questions. In reality, for Vidal sexual difference is even entirely absent from Almeida's art practice, which manages to produce, in the critic's own words, an "uninhabited and asexual silence"¹⁹⁹. Consequently, the full implications of Almeida's interest in her body, which is granted a crucial place in her art project, remain silent and invisible. In addition, critics like Vidal preclude the possibility of creating a nexus between Almeida and other women artists, some of whom explicitly re-working canonical visual representations of the female body and inscribed in a feminist-oriented art tradition. Finally, analyses like the ones produced by Vidal and Pernes on Almeida's work corroborate the modernist understanding of abstract art.

3.1.2 Abstract art and gender difference

In the modernist pantheon abstract art occupies the highest place due to its formal depuration and its ability to rise above the contingent and the particular. To that extent, the canonical history of modernist art is also the history of the progressive removal from the figurative and it is this process that grants artists like Picasso, Kadinsky and Mondrian their place above the rest. However, in their discussions of the abstract impulse dominating Western art in the twentieth-century, Rosemary Betterton (1996), Anne Wagner (1996), Briony Fer (1997) and other feminist art historians have consistently dismantled the modernist and formalist discourse that asserts the impersonal, the asexual and the a-historical as elements granting superior and canonical status to abstract or non-figurative art, by demonstrating that the modernist discourse on abstraction is in fact deeply grounded in an androcentric concept of the art object, valued because seen as masculine and opposed to the feminine principle. This principle is, in turn, recurrently associated with popular forms of culture and mass consumption. Betterton, for example, has stressed how the language of

¹⁹⁹ It is odd that Vidal has chosen the word *uninhabited* to characterise Almeida's art practice when *inhabited* is a word so often used by the artist in the titles of her works. Also interesting is his description of Almeida's work as "silent", given that feminist critics have systematically exposed how women have been consigned to a mute position. Vidal's choice of words becomes even more problematic when juxtaposed with a work like *Ouve-me/Hear me* (1979), where Almeida interpolates the viewer in her wish to be heard.

art history and criticism both refers and seeks to contain the collapse of the distance between aesthetic and sexual meaning (1996: 80) and concluded that: “[i]t is the question of precisely how abstraction functions as a representation of *gender* difference, however, and more specifically of the differently gendered body, which modernist criticism has signally failed to acknowledge” (1996: 79). She has also mentioned how abstract or non-representational art has been one of the most ignored areas of feminist intervention due to the fact that feminist cultural politics has focused primarily on questions of signification (1996: 79). However, her research proves that it is possible to think about abstract art in political, cultural, psychic and, more importantly, in gender terms, since these aspects are not exterior but always inherent to the production and reception of the artwork.

Most of the criticism of Almeida’s work has followed the modernist canon, disregarding the inscription of a historically situated sexual difference in that same work. It has therefore often displayed a pervasive ‘sexual blindness’ and pulled the artwork from the political, social, historical and psychic conditions that necessarily frame it. By failing to see and read the signs of an inscribed sexual difference, this kind of criticism has contributed to the perception of Almeida’s art practice as an autistic aesthetic proposal, caught up in its formal obsessions and too idiosyncratic to deserve a comparative study capable of highlighting the connections with other contemporary women artists.

Having said that, it is also true that some critics have been more responsive to a gender-concerned analysis of Almeida’s work. For example, in *Helena Almeida: Dias Quasi Tranquilos* Isabel Carlos, one of Almeida’s most constant and insightful critics, refers to the piece *Ouve-me/Hear me* (1979) as the translation of the mute (muted) feminine condition or even as a critique to that condition (n.d.: 21). Another exception to the canonical reading of Almeida’s work can be found in *Helena Almeida: Aprender a Ver/Learning to See*, where Ángela Molina recognises in Almeida’s art the feminine gaze. For Molina, this feminine gaze is the reverse of the one dominating the optical field, an interpretation that the critic acknowledges to be taken from Irigaray’s notion of woman as the blind spot in the man’s gaze or as the other/the mother (2005: 27). In “Helena Almeida e o Vazio Habitado”, a rather provocative reading of Almeida’s work, Ernesto de Sousa also suggests the analysis of the gender implications of the family structures implicit in Almeida’s art practice. According to de Sousa, such an analysis would shed light onto the way Almeida responds to the patriarchal tradition, experienced at the broadest and the smallest social levels (1977b: 159-60). Finally, in Peggy Phelan’s brief but stimulating study, “Helena Almeida: O Interior

de Nós” (2005), there is a particularly sensitive discussion of the nexus possible to be established between the Portuguese artist and a feminist art context. Phelan chooses a critical point-of-view that allows her to compare Almeida’s work with that of other contemporary women artists (Cindy Sherman, Hannah Wilke and Louise Bourgeois are some of the other artists mentioned in Phelan’s essay, all of whom have deserved a close attention from a feminist-oriented critique) and with a feminist art practice concerned with the female body and its political, social and historical significations.

It is in line with Phelan’s essay that I wish to situate my own discussion of Helena Almeida’s oeuvre, in order to perform a countermove through which I hope to disrupt the prevailing modus of interpreting her work and foster an analysis that articulates the historical, cultural and social context of that work, particularly the way that context disseminates and reinforces the discourse on sexual difference, with the artist’s processes of art production and self-representation. By taking such an analysis I also intend to address the challenge posed by abstract art to feminist criticism and demonstrate that abstract art can and should be discussed in gender terms. Finally, I want to make visible Almeida’s inscription in and subversion of art tradition, as well as the parallels possible to be established with other women artists and a feminist-oriented art practice.

3.2 Wearing the canvas: hybrid works and feminist-oriented art practices

3.2.1 *Pink Canvas to Wear*: Almeida and the (neo)avant-garde

Although many of Almeida’s critics have highlighted the original position the artist enjoys in the national and international art scenes and the idiosyncratic way through which she explores her media and her own body, there is a communality of aesthetic languages linking her work with conceptual, minimalist and abstract art, as well as with performance and body-art: in other words, with some of the major movements and artistic transformations of the last half-century²⁰⁰. This connection is already visible in Almeida’s

²⁰⁰ See, for example, Cunha e Silva, who refers to the *singularity* of Almeida’s work (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 9). Vidal uses that same word in “Helena Almeida: Pecado, Expição, Redenção (uma Mulher em Tempos Sombrios)” (2002: 32). Focusing on the work produced in the 1960s and 1970s, de Sousa’s discussion of Almeida’s work also stresses how she did not owe much to what was happening abroad: “Helena Almeida’s modernity, an authentic modernity that makes her presence requested in a growing series of international events, owes

early work, as mentioned by Alexandre Melo, who refers that in the 1970s Almeida broke with more traditional formats and methods and, together with other Portuguese artists, opened up the national art scene to new experiences and methods (1998: 10). Such radicalism granted the artist her participation in “Alternativa Zero”, a controversial exhibition organised by Ernesto de Sousa that marked the Portuguese cultural panorama in 1977 and where new artistic languages, such as performance and installation, and new processes of exhibiting artworks and getting the audience involved gained public visibility²⁰¹.

Emerging in the late 1960s, Almeida’s work reflected the important changes dominating European art at the time. Obviously that those aesthetic revolutions were filtered by the conditions experienced in dictatorial Portugal, where all sectors of the country’s cultural life were atrophied under a ‘proudly alone’ policy that expressed the government’s rejection of external influence. As Melo concludes on the Portuguese artistic and cultural conditions of the period, the isolationist policy fostered by the dictatorship kept Portugal away from the international circuits of artistic production and circulation (1998: 39)²⁰². Still, Almeida was able to make the most of her rather privileged position, for she was, after all, the daughter of Leopoldo de Almeida, one of the regime’s most cherished sculptors, responsible, among other works, for the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* (1960), symbol of a glorious past as much as of a dictatorial present.

After she graduated from Escola Superior de Belas Artes de Lisboa, where she completed her degree in painting, and dedicating four years of her life to her children and family (*Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005), Almeida spent a year in Paris (in 1964), with a scholarship, while her husband stayed in Lisbon, with their children. This was a period vividly remembered by the artist in an interview conceded to Isabel Carlos in 1997. In Paris, released from family obligations, Almeida was free to spend her days going to

directly very little to what-is-happening-outside, very little to a concern with synchronising her clock with the clock of others” (1977b: 165, my translation).

²⁰¹ For a more in-depth analysis of “Alternativa Zero”, see Ernesto de Sousa’s “Alternativa Zero” in *Ser Moderno... em Portugal* (1977a: 67-77). See also the website from the Centro de Estudos Multidisciplinares Ernesto de Sousa, which has a valuable database, with references and articles on “Alternativa Zero” (<http://www.ernestodesousa.com/?cat=9>. Accessed 30 July 2009).

²⁰² Melo’s analysis of the Portuguese art context since the 1970s is very useful. In his discussion, Melo highlights how the democratic revolution of 1974 initiates a process of cosmopolitan openness, which, nevertheless, brought little changes to the cultural infrastructures of the country (1998: 41-43). This is also a period when the socio-political concerns superseded the cultural ones and when art sees its autonomy shaken (Melo, 1998: 52).

lectures and exhibitions, reading, watching films censored in Portugal and meeting people (she was in close contact with the Portuguese art community in Paris) (Carlos, n.d.: 47)²⁰³. She confessed to Carlos that she did not do much work back then, but the experience abroad certainly allowed her to get in touch with new art trends; in Paris, in the 1960s, the artist could see minimalist works and witness the emergence of neo-avant-garde movements, such as Fluxus and Nouveau Réalisme, and the beginnings of the conceptual turn, which became more obvious by the end of the decade.

Returning to Portugal in the late 1960s, Almeida soon evidenced the lessons learned from Duchamp and the Dadaists (whom had been rediscovered by the *nouveaux réalistes* and the conceptual artists) in works like *A Noiva/The Bride* (1969) and *Sem Título/Untitled* (1968), where the duchampian desire to question social dogmas through the introduction of humour and irony in the artwork and to short-circuit the visuality of the art object can be found. In these works Almeida is frequently exploring what lies behind the painting, turning the canvas inside out so as to represent a window or a door, and establishing a teasing relationship with the audience, whose expectations are permanently challenged: in *Primavera/Spring*, from 1970 [Fig. 21], bulky and delicate fabric materials escape from the canvas and unexpectedly produce flower bouquets²⁰⁴. By investigating the characteristics of the medium, in this case of painting, and its relationship with the material support, that is, the canvas, Almeida was certainly engaging with an abstract and minimalist vocabulary. She was also performing a conceptualist research, which often stresses the relationship between ideology and aesthetic practice and adopts deconstructive and revolutionary approaches, including humour (de Sousa, 1977b: 162).

²⁰³ Pombeiro mentions too that while she was in Paris, Almeida was in close contact with other young Portuguese artists like Jorge Martins, Lourdes Castro and José Escada (2005: 25).

²⁰⁴ The relation between Almeida's early works and the duchampian and surrealist heritage is highlighted by Delfim Sardo in *Helena Almeida: Pés no Chão, Cabeça no Céu*. Sardo concludes about this parallelism by saying that: "[t]he paintings that evoke Duchamp . . . show the same sense of irony and the same biting of humour that prevent them from being instructive or comment on art criticism as applied to painting, supposedly present" (2004: 16).

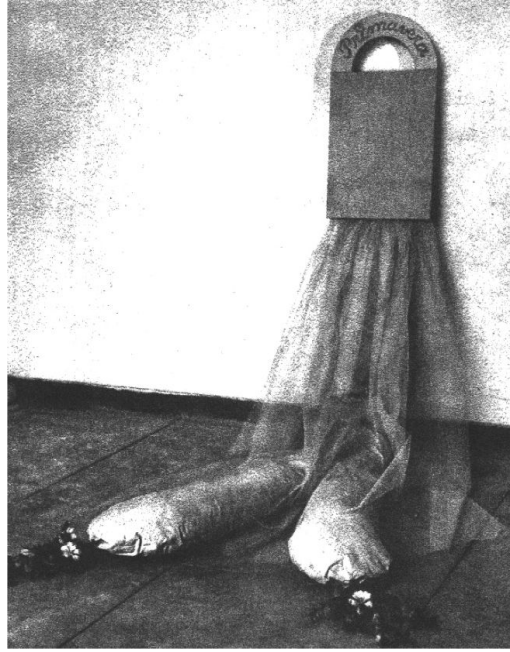


Figure 21 - Helena Almeida, *Primavera/Spring* (1970).

The connection between Almeida and the conceptualist matrix is further evident in the artist's early work through its focus on the function of art and the circumstances or the processes of art creation (leading to a strong self-reflexivity in the artwork, which thus exhibits an ontological drive), as well as the desire to disavow art tradition and explore different media such as performance or photography. A good example of the previously mentioned aspects is *Tela Rosa para Vestir/Pink Canvas to Wear* (1969) [Fig. 22], a crucial work in Almeida's art practice. It documents a sort of performance, registered photographically, in which the artist wears a pink canvas and mockingly grins at the viewer. Almeida has mentioned (*apud Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005) that *Tela Rosa para Vestir/Pink Canvas to Wear* was very much connected with Botticelli's *Primavera* (c. 1482), thus directly inscribing her work in the art tradition, particularly in the painting canon. However, several ingredients of *Tela Rosa para Vestir/Pink Canvas to Wear* prove that Almeida's appropriation of the history of Western art is deeply disruptive.



Figure 22 - Helena Almeida, *Tela Rosa para Vestir/Pink Canvas to Wear* (1969).

First of all, by representing an anthropomorphic canvas, *Tela Rosa para Vestir/Pink Canvas to Wear* creates a carnivalesque act that subverts the principles of painting and the relation established by the artist and the medium with the viewer. In performing that subversive move, *Tela Rosa para Vestir/Pink Canvas to Wear* resonates with Duchamp's witty ready-mades as well as with the importance given to performance by Fluxus artists and the conceptualist humour referred by de Sousa, although she is seriously testing the limits of her medium (painting) and inquiring about the nature of the creative act. Moreover, by blending the female body with the canvas, Almeida is denying the role attributed to women in art tradition, for the female body has moved from the traditional position of model in the painting to painting itself. Finally, by registering her intentions through photography, a medium central to conceptual art, Almeida further puts into question the supremacy of painting in the art canon. As a result, photography is used as another ironic device, allowing the artist to develop her art practice in a hybrid zone where several disciplines and media coexist²⁰⁵.

²⁰⁵ As Sontag explained, photography has the reputation of being the most realistic of the mimetic arts (1971: 51); it is a way of certifying experience (1971: 9) and possesses the allure of the document (1971: 56), rendering reality faithfully (1971: 87). Therefore, besides being used ironically, photography also confers to Almeida's artwork an essence and truthfulness, something that the artist has consistently searched for.

3.2.2 Defying art tradition: hybrid media

A disruptive approach to fixed art norms and uncontaminated forms is particularly visible in Almeida's works from 1969, considered a revelatory year by the artist (*apud Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005), for it is when the body and the canvas become inseparable and painting is thus perceived as a process or an action. By stressing that painting is an action (in a sense, a performance), experienced by the artist's body and registered by the photographic camera, these works cut with the bi-dimensionality and the purity of painting, playing with the ephemeral and the permanent and suggesting also a cut with the traditional principles underlying the painting tradition²⁰⁶. Such cut will be re-enacted several times, for example, in photographs from the 1980s with suggestive titles like *Corte Secreto/Secret Cut* (1981) or *Ponto de Fuga/Point of Escape* (1982). These works defy the established principles of painting also because they are hybrid art objects where other artistic languages, such as photography, performance and body art, coexist.

Several critics have stressed the formal hybridism of Almeida's work and the proximity of it to other art forms like cinema, dance, body art and performance (Carlos, n.d.; Vanderlinden, 1998; Sardo: 2004). Certainly, although Almeida's artwork is mainly experienced photographically by the viewer, it exhibits traces of other media. For example, the rapport with the cinematic language is visible in many of Almeida's sequential photographs, which represent an action or a series of actions, and there are hints of dance in projects like *A Experiência do Lugar II/The Experience of the Place II* (2004), a video work in which the artist walks on her knees across the studio floor in a choreographed ritual. Also, many of her photographs seem to capture a performative moment, though that moment is never immediate and present but always private and carefully staged. In *Tela Rosa para Vestir/Pink Canvas to Wear* (1969), *Dentro de Mim/Inside Me* (1998) and *Voar/Flying*

²⁰⁶ The notion of painting as an action was central to Action Painting or Abstract Expressionism. Both terms are used to describe a style, widespread from the 1940s until the early 1960s, in which painting is dribbled, splashed and poured over the canvas. Its most famous exponent was the American painter Jackson Pollock. The term *Action Painting* was coined by Harold Rosenberg, who believed that a painting should reflect the actions of its creation (Clarke, 2001: 3). For Rosenberg, the painting was only the physical manifestation of the actual work of art, which was in the act or process of the painting's creation. This aspect is very much present in Almeida's praxis, which generally implies careful preparation. However, there are also major differences between Almeida and the abstract expressionists, the most obvious of which being that Almeida no longer remains within the traditional process of painting, literally moving out of the canvas and exploring other media. This rupture taken by Almeida in her work is influenced by her encounter with Lucio Fontana, the founder of Spatialism in the 1940s, who professed an art that transcended the canvas. The influence of Fontana's work is particularly visible in Almeida's works from the 1980s, in which the artist is often seen slashing materials and documenting the coexistence of different dimensions in the artwork.

(2001), the viewer has the feeling that the photographs document a performance of the artist. This coexistence of several art forms leads Michael Tarantino to insert Almeida in a group of artists who are connected with photography but whose focus lies elsewhere: in body art, in sculpture, in cinema or in architecture (1997: 7). Cecilia Pereira Marimón also states that Almeida's exhibitions always leave us perplexed, for: "how do you categorise an artist who has always used photography but who does not take photographs, who presents the photographs of her actions or performances but does not create performance art, who always uses her body but does not create body art, who represents her ideas but no conceptual art?" (2000: 170).

Despite Marimón's emphasis in Almeida's idiosyncratic practice, her work should be placed in an art context derived from the transformations happening in Europe and the United States, when Almeida began creating her work. This was a time when, mirroring many of the changes fought for and introduced in all sectors of social life, artists and art critics began questioning the long-standing modernist assumptions that dominated their view of the art object and the art world. In their effort to destroy fixed paradigms, they were ready to collapse the boundaries that had hitherto framed distinct art forms by embracing hybridism and, thus, giving birth to art practices inherently problematic to define, such as performance, body art, installation and video art²⁰⁷.

3.2.3 Hybridism/feminism

Women artists enthusiastically embraced the aesthetic revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, as they were particularly interested in destabilizing the phallogentric rules lying at the centre of art making, criticism and history and in exploring new artistic strategies, uncontaminated by exclusionary premises (W. Chadwick, 1990: 338, 345). They were aware of the modernist canon as made of esteemed and superior art forms (that is, high art), above all painting and sculpture, and exclusionary of lower art forms (popular art), such as ceramics or weaving. They also knew that these oppositions and hierarchies have never been

²⁰⁷ The hybridism so defining of contemporary art can also be seen as an instance of postmodernism, defined by Hutcheon as "historically aware, *hybrid*, and inclusive" (1988: 30, my emphasis). Also Rosalind Krauss, in a seminal essay on the features of postmodern sculpture, refers to its expanded field, in that, since the end of the 1960s, the notion of sculpture has changed in order to include hybrid art forms such as earth art and site-specific works (1979). Finally, Charles Jencks, one of the exponents of postmodernist architectural theory, regarded hybridism as a postmodernist feature: "[o]ften in history there is a combination of continuity and change which looks perplexing because our view of both and the new is altered. Thus, with Postmodern Classicism the meanings, values and forms of modernism and classicism are simultaneously transformed into a *hybrid* combination" (1987: 281, my emphasis).

gender neutral: whereas painting and sculpture have been described and perceived in masculine terms and, therefore, as naturally produced by men, popular art forms have been regarded as containing feminine elements and, as such, more prone to the woman artist. As a reaction to this situation, women artists embraced new or mixed art practices, less burdened by the weight of traditional gender bias, and redeemed forgotten art forms, in an attempt to give them visibility and public recognition.

In the 1970s Judy Chicago, through her Feminist Art Program (the first feminist art education program in the United States) and collective art projects, sought to give public visibility to forms traditionally linked to a feminine and domestic sphere, giving them also the institutional attention that painting and sculpture had hitherto deserved, while Marina Abramovic, Carolee Schneemann and Mierle Laderman Ukeles were more interested in exploring female sexuality, corporeality and identity through performances, installations, events and other hybrid art forms. In Portugal, in the same period, and particularly after the democratic revolution of 1974, some women artists were also engaging with new or traditionally feminine art forms in order to address female experience: in her video performance *Episódios/Episodes*, from 1979, Emília Nadal connected domestic femininity with capitalist consumerism; Ana Vieira also explored the link between woman and the domestic in her installation from 1977 *Santa Paz Doméstica, Domesticada/Holy Domestic Peace, Domesticated*, whereas Clara Menéres and Isabel Laginhas were creating work through traditionally feminine and domestic media like embroidery and tapestry²⁰⁸.

An assessment of Almeida's work profits from being discussed in the context of this concomitant female and feminist art production for she too has embraced new artistic strategies and media, cultivating formal hybridism, and is suspicious of established and fixed art principles, namely those regarding the status and the laws of painting. She thus participates in women artists' oblique relationship with art tradition and in their transgression of borders. *Tela Rosa para Vestir/Pink Canvas to Wear* is again a good example of that subversive dialogue carried out by Almeida with the art canon, for with this work she questioned the internal laws of painting and its visible materials by creating a performative moment, registered by the photographic camera, in which the artist's body holds the canvas and becomes the painting.

²⁰⁸ I am deeply grateful to Márcia Oliveira for making available information and documents related to Portuguese women artists and their work in the 1960s and the 1970s.

3.2.3.1 Performance/body art and feminist practice

The importance played by the body in Almeida's oeuvre approximates it to body art and/or performance art, hybrid art practices that emerged in the 1960s and placed the body, frequently the body of the artist, at the centre of artistic reflection²⁰⁹. This relationship between Almeida's work and performance art is particularly significant, given that there is something inherently dramatic in the way Almeida produces her artwork and displays her body, focusing on the body's temporal and spatial bearings.

Although Almeida never really produced performances, mainly because her 'performances' are always deferred through the photographic image, there is still a performative dimension in her work that could not but contaminate the representation of the artist's body, the main material of the visual representation²¹⁰. Almeida has recognised her indebtedness to performance, although she has also demarcated her work from that art form since, according to the artist, she is not interested in the self-revelatory aspect of the performance: "[p]erformance has certainly influenced me. But the aspect of exposing the body to the audience hasn't really interested me. I thought they were interesting works, but they were things that didn't have to do with me, that were distant to me" (*apud* Carlos: 2005: 43-44, my translation).

Carlos offers a comparison between the use of performative strategies by Almeida and the characteristics of performance as this art form reached its most prolific period in the first half of the 1970s. For Carlos, in both performance and Almeida's art practice the body is elected as author and content, that is, the body of the artist is inseparable from the body of the work, thus denying the reduction of art to a signature, a name or an abstract author (n.d.: 17). Moreover, Almeida refuses the idea of creating a fictional character through the artwork, a standpoint shared by performance artists, who search for the presentification of the artist as opposed to the representation of the same (Carlos, n.d.:

²⁰⁹ Foster et al register the close association between body art and performance art in the following terms: "[h]ere performance will be limited to art where the body is 'the subject and object of the work' (as the critic Willoughby Sharp defined 'body art' in 1970 in *Avalanche*, the most important review of such work), where the body of the artist in particular is marked or otherwise manipulated in a public setting or in a private event that is then documented, most often in photographs, films or videotapes" (2004: 564).

²¹⁰ Parallel to her photographic projects, Almeida has developed some video work, where the artist comes closer to performance art, since the video registers her sequential actions and her body movement in a specific space. That is what happens in *A Experiência do Lugar II/The Experience of the Place II* (2004). However, these videos are still not quite performances, since the audience does not directly participate nor is physically involved in the artist's actions, which are only presented a posteriori, in a recorded format.

18)²¹¹. However, despite the fact that both Almeida and the performance artist reject the creation of a fictional reality, Almeida is not interested in presentifying the body of the artist. By generally employing photography as a way of aesthetically registering her body, Almeida denies the viewers access to a present time and a presentified space, which is so important in performative events. Carlos can thus conclude that Almeida “imposes on us, in opposition to the ephemeral nature of performance, the eternal action” (n.d.: 19, my translation). This also means that the artist’s body is not used as a vehicle for directly communicating actions and emotions to the public but becomes instead a way of investigating the limits and questioning the frontiers that traditionally separate artistic disciplines (Carlos, n.d.: 19).

The central place given by Almeida to her body in her work not only connects it to body and performance art but also to feminist-oriented art, which was particularly evident in the 1960s and the 1970s. In fact, during that period performance and feminist art were deeply connected since the former was an art form widely used by feminist artists as a way of addressing female experience whilst denying the place granted to women in more traditional art forms²¹². The novelty of this aesthetic process, which greatly relied on the body of the artist and the communicative connection it established with the audience, itself an active participant in the art process, allowed women artists to place their female bodies at the centre of the artwork and to explore, along with their audience, topics previously repressed or denied in art tradition and connected with women’s lives, experiences and emotions. These characteristics are present in some of the most well-known performative work by women artists: in *Meat Joy* (1964), Carolee Schneemann developed a collective performance meant to celebrate the human body and explore erotic pleasure, whilst Marina Abramovic, who was more interested in exploring pain and physical resistance, created *Rhythm 0* (1974), a performance in which the artist offered her body to the viewers, who could do with it whatever they wanted; performance was also the art form chosen by Valie Export when she decided to confront the male objectification and fetishisation of the female body in *Genital Panic* (1969), and by Adrien Piper, who in *The Mythic Being* series (1975) focused on racial and gender identities in order to address the double oppression felt by

²¹¹ The refusal to create fictional characters is an aspect that clearly distinguishes performance from performative art forms such as theatre or cinema.

²¹² Performance was an art form particularly favoured by feminist artists working in the United States, where public feminist interventions and a direct visual investigation of the female body, sexuality and experience were more present than in Britain. Parker and Pollock document this difference in *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985* (1987).

black women. To sum up, performance proved to be an ideal art practice for the feminist agenda of the 1970s: it was personal and it often relied on the body, opening up the private to the public; it directly addressed the audience, asking for its participation and promoting more democratic ways of art making, and it was highly effective in communicating an alternative vision of women and their power in the world²¹³.

Almeida's work, which emphasises the relevance of the artist's body, crosses the borders of several aesthetic languages and investigates the relationship between the artist, the artwork and, ultimately, the audience, shares some of the characteristics of the feminist performances of the 1970s. Similarly to feminist artists of that period, Almeida understands the potential of this new art form to address her concerns in ways that do not necessarily have the weight of art tradition. Works like *Tela Rosa para Vestir/Pink Canvas to Wear* (1969) and *Tela Habitada/Inhabited Canvas* (1976) [Fig. 23] exhibit distinct performative elements, for the artist's body occupies there the central position and the photograph captures the movement of that body, performing intentional actions (wearing the canvas and walking with it), which are explicitly addressed to the viewer through an inviting facial expression. Performance, therefore, allowed Almeida to subvert the conventions of painting. However, by refusing to grant the viewer a glimpse of the personal and by always mediating the performative act through photography, which thus holds the performance to a fixed time and space, Almeida also moves away from some of the most visible and discussed traits of feminist performative art of that period.

²¹³ Despite its popularity among feminist-oriented art practitioners, feminist art critics and historians were also aware of the dangers involved in the use of performance by women artists, for the visual display of the female body has been unavoidably linked with the female nude, whose presence is so ubiquitous in Western art tradition, and with the visual display and objectification of women's bodies, which accompanies contemporary Western cultures of the spectacle. As Sally Potter alerts in an article from 1980, "[w]omen performance artists, who use their own bodies as the instrument of their work, constantly hover on the knife edge of the possibility of joining this spectacle of woman. The female body, nude or clothed, is arguably so overdetermined that it cannot be used without being, by implication, abused. But of course it is unthinkable that the only constructive strategy for women performers would be their absence" (1980: 291).



Figure 23 - Helena Almeida, *Tela Habitada/Inhabited Canvas* (1976).

To conclude, though Almeida's art practice can be seen in the context of the possibilities offered by contemporary art forms, and specifically by performance and feminist-oriented art practices, it does not entirely capitulate to them or, better still, it forces these movements to challenge their conceptual boundaries²¹⁴. Whereas in performance and feminist art of the 1960s and 1970s the body is often explored as a medium for expressing subjectivity and personal experiences previously elided by the power of social constraints, in Almeida's work her body is *and* is not a subjective element, for even if it can be seen as an index of the artist and a sign of her presence, it more often than not escapes a reading based on self-revelation. Nevertheless, Almeida's systematic employment of her body and her embracing of mixed media definitely connect her work with that of other contemporary women artists and reinforce the connection between disruptive and hybrid art practices and a potentially feminine/ist challenge, capable of opening a new aesthetic territory. By approaching Almeida's work to a female art tradition, the possibility of a critical look at her work from a feminist-oriented perspective is made possible. As I hope to demonstrate, such perspective does not necessarily involve the discussion of the female body and identity in

²¹⁴ I am here using notions borrowed from Briony Fer. In *On Abstract Art* (1997) Fer discusses how several canonical modernist artists create their work in a position of discontinuity and heterogeneity from the movements they are inscribed in and simultaneously differ from, destabilising the fixed boundaries of those same movements.

essentialist terms, a critical stance that would try to find in the artwork and in the represented subject the traces of a universal and trans-historic female identity, but certainly asks for a reflection on the inscription of a historical and contextualised sexual difference and on the effects of that same sexual inscription²¹⁵.

3.3 My work is my body, my body is my work

Although Helena Almeida favours photography as her preferred medium, she still considers herself to be a painter and, as a painter, her work has dealt with the process of painting²¹⁶. Photography, then, is often a method through which the artist reflects on the coordinates in which painting exists. Hence, for Vidal in Almeida's work the "body of painting" is inseparable from the photographic caption, since to the artist's constant question "what is a pictorial image?" the answer can only be given by the photographic deviation (2002: 30). By recurrently questioning the formal strategies inherent to the act of painting, deconstructing and exposing its founding principles and probing into its limits, Almeida has given to her praxis an important self-reflexive dimension. It is this approach that allows her to say: "I paint painting" (*apud* Molina, 2005: 23).

In Almeida's meta-analytical process, her body is of the uppermost significance for it is through it that the act of painting is presented to the viewer and the dialogue between photography and painting made possible. As the artist puts it: "[m]y work is my body, my body is my work" (*apud* Molina, 2005: 23). This whimsical expression captures the relevance of the body to Almeida's art practice and connects her to other contemporary women artists, like Helen Chadwick and others mentioned in the first chapter, whose work is focused on the body, often the artist's body. Indeed, despite employing a variety of visual strategies and producing contrasting visual effects, many women artists have chosen their own bodies as their preferred medium of expression. Moreover, the female body is one of the most fundamental topoi of what can only be described as a feminist-oriented art practice. This link between Almeida's work and the importance given by feminist/female artists to the female body is what I ultimately want to explore in this section.

²¹⁵ For a discussion of the inscription of sexual difference in the artwork and a defence of art history as grounded in a historical approach to artworks see Griselda Pollock's "Inscriptions in the Feminine" (1996).

²¹⁶ In an interview conceded to Maria João Seixas and motivated by the BES Photo Award, Almeida categorically defines her work as "[p]hotography, done by a painter" (*apud* Seixas, 2004: 28).

3.3.1 The body of painting

Melo perceives Almeida's body as an origin, a producer and a guarantee of meaning (2001: 11), as it is its presence in the artwork that allows the artist to pose essential questions concerning the art process²¹⁷. His reading is corroborated by Carlos, who remarks that the centrality given by Almeida to the body is the result of the artist's identification between 'being' and 'doing' (n.d.: 9). So, rather than being a passive object offered to the viewer's gaze, the body is for Almeida a dynamic element: it is through it that meaning is produced and that the art object is created.

A common feature of many of Almeida's works is the body's fusion with paint. It happens in *Pintura Habitada/Inhabited Painting* (1976) or in *Estudo para um Enriquecimento Interior/Study for Inner Improvement* (1977-78) [Fig. 24], works that literally represent the bodily act of painting, photographically, and often sequentially, translating the process by which paint 'happens' and acts upon and through the body.



Figure 24 - Helena Almeida, *Estudo para um Enriquecimento Interior/Study for Inner Improvement* (1977-78).

²¹⁷ Melo mentions some of the questions posed by Almeida through her body: "how do a body and the movement of a body– the artist's body– make a painting or a drawing? How come in that process it is the body that becomes painting or drawing? And after the body and the drawing have crossed their borders in multiple directions and tried in several ways to interact with each other– absorption, penetration, occultation, habitation– what is left in art that is not just the crossing of a body?" (2001: 10, my translation).

These representations owe something to Yves Klein, whose work was well established in Paris, in the 1960s, when Almeida visited this city. In fact, both Klein, particularly in his *Anthropométries*, and Almeida employ the body in order to create the art object and they make that visible by physically inscribing the body in the surface of the artwork (though in Almeida that inscription is always deferred through the photographic process). The dialogue with Klein is further suggested in that the Portuguese artist often employs blue pigment, in a shade similar to the ‘International Klein blue’. However, Almeida is the first to distance herself from Klein, particularly when she has in mind Klein’s *Anthropométries*, which were made by using naked female models as living paintbrushes. In an interview from 1997, Almeida confessed her shock when she saw Klein’s way of squeezing women onto the canvas (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 51). For Klein the female body is still an object in the hands of the male artist, it is a thing with no volition and no creative power, for that power is dependent of the artist’s decisions and actions (the models were often dragged across the floor or laid upon the canvases by Klein, a process confirmed by the performances that gave origin to some of his *Anthropométries*). In contrast, in Almeida’s art practice the body offered to the viewer’s gaze is the artist’s body and, as such, it possesses an expressive and active force that is absent from Klein’s models.

Almeida’s body is the starting point for the creation of the art object and in the course of that creation it reaches a meta-artistic power, becoming itself a medium through which to reflect on the creative act. Specifically in relation to painting, the body incorporates the process of painting that the photographic shot will register and document a posteriori²¹⁸. In other words, the artist’s body has the power to translate the creative act by its very existence and actions. Hence, it is not photography but the body that is the main revealing instrument of the artwork (E. Oliveira, Mar. 1988: 15).

Almeida’s early works, from 1967-68, already show the artist pondering on painting and thinking about it in material terms. This is a period when Almeida creates “anti-paintings” (de Sousa, 1977b: 161) by exposing the other side of the canvas and revealing what generally remains hidden (like in *Sem Título/Untitled*, from 1968), or when the painting acquires a three-dimensional quality in order to explore the dialectic outside/inside.

²¹⁸ I am aware that the chronological and spacial sequencing suggested in Almeida’s work by which paint and body coexist in the same physical plane is staged. However, although the brushes of vivid colour are added afterwards onto the photographic print, Almeida wants the viewer to be complicit with her illusory game. In fact, similarly to the baroque images she so much admires, Almeida’s pieces often rely on a *trompe l’oeil* effect.

This dialectic can be found in several works known as “os chouriços da Helena/Helena’s sausages” [Fig. 25] (de Sousa, 1977b: 161), produced between 1968 and 1970, where things vaguely organic due to the warmth and shape of the materials employed by the artist insistently escaped from the canvas and ended up lying on the gallery floor. Almeida retrospectively justifies that early period by saying: “I wanted to do everything with painting except having it on the canvas. I wanted to free it into space” (*apud* Seixas, 2004: 32). Her words emphasise her experimentation with the limits and the boundaries of painting and her desire to subvert the painting tradition, a process further discussed by the artist in the following terms: “[t]hey were paintings. But I already wanted the painting to ‘go out’, to fall. I was already feeling tempted to put the works ‘on top’ of me” (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 43, my translation). Almeida’s description of her early work traces a path that starts with a questioning of the limits of painting and ends with the artist’s body as a further way of giving concrete form to that same questioning.

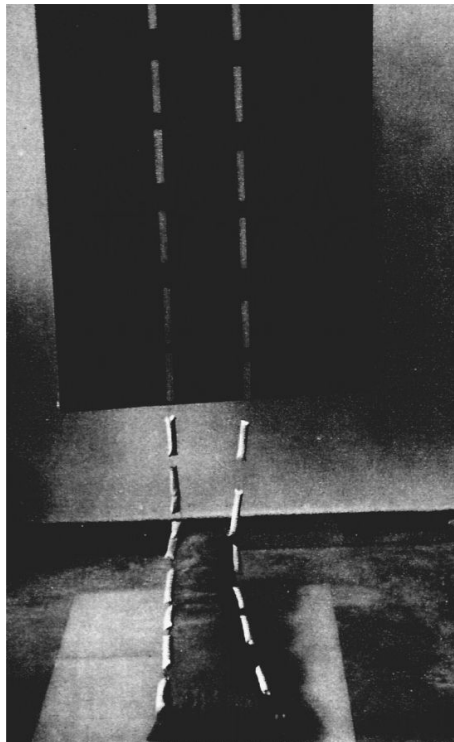


Figure 25 - Helena Almeida, *Sem Título/Untitled* (1968).

As previously discussed, in 1969 Almeida short-circuits the bi-dimensional axes of painting and celebrates the fusion between body and painting. It first happens in *Tela Rosa*

para Vestir/Pink Canvas to Wear, but the process will often be repeated in subsequent moments. For example, it shows up again in 1976, in *Tela Habitada/Inhabited Canvas*, and in the three series named *Estudo para um Enriquecimento Interior/Study for Inner Improvement*, created between 1977 and 1978, where Almeida documents the creation of the painting and how this process corresponds to a movement from the exterior to the interior of the artist's body and then again to the exterior (and ultimately towards the viewer)²¹⁹. The fact that paint travels to the inside of the body and is then brought back to the outside world of visual representation suggests that some alchemical process may take place in the body, through which the transmutation of paint into painting or art happens. This transmutation may even be implied in the title of the mentioned series, since, similarly to the alchemist who transforms common metal into gold, Almeida's body is also capable of improving plain paint by absorbing it and then returning it to the viewer in the form of the artwork. In any case, the artist's body is an active producer of meaning and art objects and, as a result, absolutely essential to art creation.

Almost twenty years later, Almeida produced *Dentro de Mim/ Inside Me* [Fig. 26], a series of photographs from 1998 where the artist is still addressing the relevance of her body to her art practice. That body is here seen almost as an abstract form lying on the studio floor and the different positions of the body are registered in successive camera shots that capture its condition of matter or material for the creation of the artwork, just like the paint, which is superimposed on the body towards the end of the series, is the material of painting. All these examples insist on the permeability between body and paint, body and artwork, suggesting that it is not the artist's body that inhabits the artwork, at least in any autobiographical sense, but the artwork that inhabits her body and lives through it.

²¹⁹ Almeida has often repeated the titles of her artworks, sometimes with small, other times with no variations at all. This circular and mimetic process evidences a conceptual problematic that is reworked over and over again, as emphasised by the artist: "I move in circles; cycles repeat. Work is never finished; it has to be done, again and again. What interests me, it's always the same" (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 53, my translation).

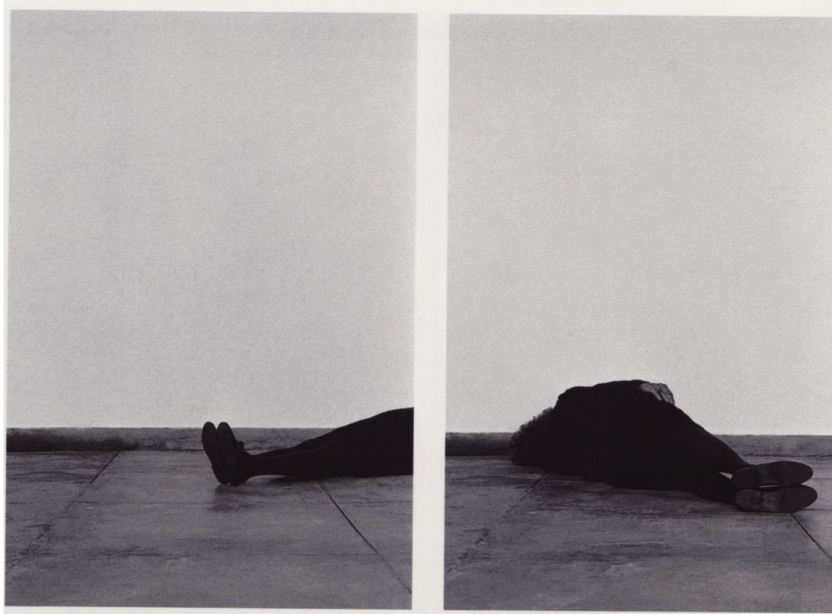


Figure 26 - Helena Almeida, *Dentro de Mim/Inside Me* (1998).

3.3.2 Drawing and the body

Sometimes the act of painting is replaced in Almeida's photographs by the act of drawing, but the two creative processes should be seen as interchangeable, for they both provide opportunities to reflect upon the nature of the artwork and its relationship with the body. Almeida's interest in drawing is particularly visible in her early works, when, like painting, it was explored in a tri-dimensional way (usually through the use of graphite or horsehair) in order to escape the constraints of the flat paper. The artist has even mentioned that it was through drawing that she deliberately arrived to photography, for she wanted the viewer to better understand her holding the drawn line (*apud* Faria, 2005). In *Desenho Habitado/Inhabited Drawing* [Fig. 27], from 1975, or in two series with that same title from 1976 and 1977, Almeida uses horsehair so as to register and simultaneously transgress the principles of drawing. Liliane Touraine, who sees Almeida's early work in the context of the intellectual destabilization that characterised the 1960s and the 1970s, draws attention to Almeida's drawings, which carry to the extreme the subversive impact of the visual shock they enact²²⁰. For Touraine, this shock comes "de la confusion entre la perception d'un

²²⁰ It is interesting to notice the resemblances between Helena Almeida's and Eva Hesse's approach to drawing, given that both artists have been connected to a minimalist tradition, which they have used in order to explore the corporeality of their artistic processes. Fer, for example, refers to Hesse's use of strings in many of her works as tri-dimensional drawings (2004: 226), a description that could also be applied to Almeida's works in which she reflects on the materiality of drawing.

signe– un trait tiré sur une feuille de papier– et la réalité palpable d’un objet, un fil de crin étroitement collé à la surface du support, en un prolongement strictement symétrique” (Mar. 1988: 27).

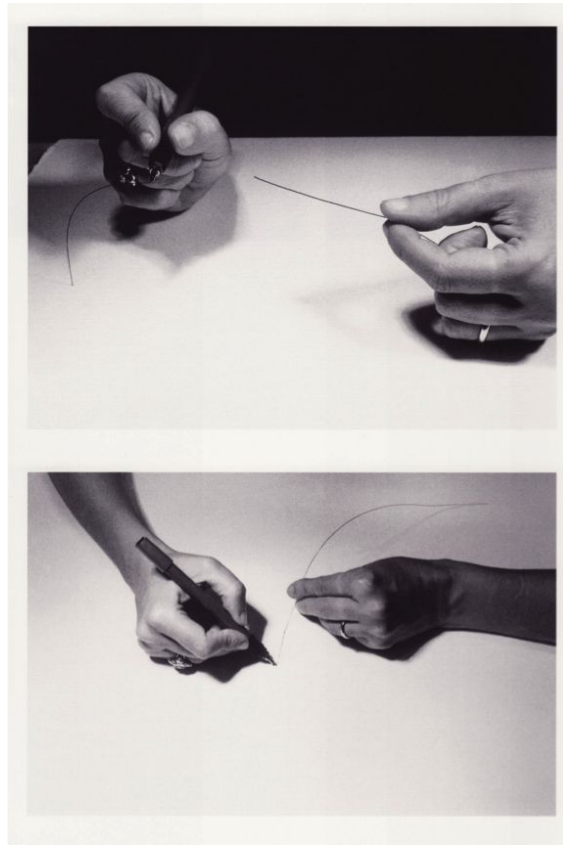


Figure 27 - Helena Almeida, *Desenho Habitado/Inhabited Drawing* (1975).

Through a process of *trompe l’oeil*, a surrealist or baroque fantasy, Almeida’s photographed drawings investigate the limits of the adopted medium, capturing moments through which the drawing overcomes its own limitations. As José Sousa Machado concludes, it is as if the artist was determined to create a drawing that was “heteronymised” (Feb. 1996: 14, my translation), that is, a drawing that is not a drawing, or a drawing transformed into something else. Sousa Machado’s suggestion of a heteronymised drawing connects Almeida to the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa in their common effort to understand and represent the nature of the creative process and the way the artist is implicated in it. The metaphor also suggests Pessoa’s desire to reject the sentimental, the

autobiographical and the egotistic in art, a critical position very closely followed by Almeida in her work.

In *A Onda/The Wave*, a sequence of photographs produced in 1997, and in *Desenho/Drawing* [Fig. 28], a series from 1999 in which the artist's hands, her working tools, occupy the centre of the image, Almeida returned to drawing, creating images in which black graphite invades the artist's body and becomes inseparable from it. As Phelan argues, in these works Almeida suggests that herself, as a body composed by lines, is the *medium* through which drawing and photography are united or even sewn to each other (2005: 70). The connection between body and drawing, which is the same as that experienced by the body in relation to painting, is fully grasped by the artist: "[t]o become a drawing: to turn my body into a drawing: to be my work— that was what I was chasing" (*apud* Carlos, n.d.: 13, my translation). Almeida's comment reflects the artist's conviction that her body is her work.



Figure 28 - Helena Ameida, *Desenho/Drawing* (1999).

3.3.3 Hear me: women in art tradition

Almeida's insistence in disrupting the conventional surfaces of the canvas or the paper has led the artist to abandon these material supports altogether and increasingly explore what other artistic practices, like sculpture, architecture, dance and performance, have to offer. Her later work is thus much more inscribed in these fields than her initial production, which is often subordinate to the artist's questioning of the painting and drawing processes, presented to the viewer through photography. In her series *Dentro de Mim/Inside Me* (1998) Almeida devised a photographic project that, not only still focuses on painting through the inscription of slabs of paint on the body and the photographic print, but also has strong resonances with performative work, given that the artist's body is presented to the viewer in a series of choreographed movements or moments. The same could be said of other recent works, such as *Seduzir/Seduce* (2002) and *Sem Título/Untitled* (2003), all of which share the same gusto for hybrid forms and the subversion of art principles. And yet what the juxtaposition of these projects make particularly visible is that whatever the medium or the media involved, Almeida's artwork is always experienced and made visible through the artist's body.

However we may wish to formally define Almeida's work, the artist's body is always a pervasive presence and it is indeed this body that directs and controls the artistic act. Even though the body seems to create an almost abstract, self-referential world, it is clear that, given the place allocated to the female body in art tradition, Almeida's art practice grants an unprecedented function to that female body, which in her work is no longer the passive object of male desire and virile creativity but the active agent of art production. In this respect, Almeida is inarguably linked to a female and feminist (counter)tradition that has vindicated a subversive role for women and their bodies in art, as well as in all other social and cultural domains.

The artistic, and ultimately social and political, disruption suggested by Almeida's work is connected by Phelan to feminist art due to the Portuguese artist's dual position as both the maker and the subject of her own creations (2005: 70). According to Phelan, this relationship between creator and subject is made possible through the body of the artist, which thus operates as a *medium* (2005: 70). For that reason, Almeida's seemingly deputed art participates of the feminist desire to imagine the female body as something more than an image or an object of contemplation and connects the Portuguese artist to other

women who have imagined themselves in the double role of artist and object, creator and thing created (Phelan, 2005: 70)²²¹.

In this context, *Ouve-me/Hear Me* [Fig. 29], from 1979, may be seen as an apt visual correlative to the feminist effort to give voice and an affirmative presence to the female subject and its awareness of the impossibility to speak in the dominant art context and through the dominant systems of representation. That impossibility to speak, or be heard, is also suggested in a recent series, *Eu Estou Aqui/I Am Here* (2005) [Fig. 30], in which the artist produces a muted scream (*Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005), and by *Estudo para Dois Espaços/Study for Two Spaces*, from 1977, where Almeida's hands—metonymically representing the artist's labour—are caught behind gates and doors. Against the imposed silence to women's presence in the art canon, Almeida consistently inscribes the active female body of the artist in the visual art object, granting women in general and women artists in particular a representational and assertive space.



Figure 29 - Helena Almeida, *Ouve-me/Hear Me* (1979).

²²¹ Phelan also connects Almeida's double role (as the producer of the image and the produced image) with the influence of dance and performative arts in her work, for these art forms emphasise the corporeality and materiality of the aesthetic act. Such influence is acknowledged by the artist, who has commented on her admiration for Pina Bausch's choreographies (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 53) and collaborated with the Portuguese choreographer João Fiadeiro. In his choreography *I Am Here*, from 2003, Fiadeiro, well-known by an oeuvre situated between dance and fine art, was inspired by Almeida's imaginary, since, in the choreographer's own words, she is "an artist with which I share the desire to remain at the visible frontier and to spy reality aslant (as if it was not me)" ("João Fiadeiro: I Am Here." http://idanca.typepad.com/photos/artistas_2006/i_am_here.html, accessed 29 July 2009).



Figure 30 - Helena Almeida, *Eu Estou Aqui/I Am Here* (2005).

3.3.4 Parodying the seductive female body

In *Seduzir/Seduce* (2002) [Fig. 31], Almeida may seem to indulge in the androcentric image of the female body as a site of voyeuristic pleasure and erotic desire. The artist has described this series as to do with heroic people (*apud Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005), since it was inspired by her sister, who was terminally ill at the time, and her need to still look elegant and well groomed (*apud Carlos*, 2005: 59). Despite this tragic origin, *Seduzir/Seduce* explores the relationship between the eroticised female body, the image and male scopophilia in order to parody it and ultimately question and subvert the pressure put upon women and their bodies by this specular economy. That subversion happens at several levels.



Figure 31 - Helena Almeida, *Seduzir/Seduce* (2002).

First of all, the photographs show the lower part of a woman's body (the series mainly focusing on legs, feet in high-heeled shoes and hands often placed in the waist), not granting the audience the vision and entrapment of the face and denying the construction of an individual subjectivity. One of the photographs goes as far up as the neck, revealing the wrinkles of a middle-aged woman, an age also emphasised in other photographs by the discernible veins in the woman's legs, thus placing her outside the canonical representation of the young and desirable female body. Moreover, there is some flare of passion in this woman, suggested by the red patch of paint marking a foot or a heeled shoe. But there is also something of the performer and the clown in the theatrical poses taken by the body or in the clumsiness of the feet. So, although the body assumes the well-known signs of female desirability (the slightly pulled up skirt, the high-heeled black shoes) and recalls the voyeuristic pleasure at the sight of the seductive woman, most of its gestures are grotesque, or carnivalesque, parodying with excessive dramatic effect the signs of female seduction²²².

²²² The comic and parodic gestures of Almeida's middle-aged seductress recall Paula Rego's *Dancing Ostriches* (1995), a series that represents women with a sardonic sense of aging, as well as with the same bodily weight, clumsiness and eagerness to seduce as Almeida in *Seduzir/Seduce*. Rego says of her women-ostriches that: "[t]hey're quite vulnerable but they kick. . . . They're trying to make themselves attractive and dance on points, but they're past it. It's grotesque but I'm not making fun of them. How could I? They're just like me" (*apud*

Maria Almeida Lima also focuses her attention in the seductive aspects of the female body represented by the series under consideration in order to emphasise the subversion of those same aspects:

If the hand lifts a bit of the skirt in a ‘coquette’ gesture and the high heeled shoes reinforce it, two aspects disrupt the choreographic intent: the body is a black shape, formless and headless, focusing the onlooker’s eyes on the skin of the legs and the feet, and on an unexpected blot that has dyed a hidden part of the body red, and hints at the disguised violence that it, and some games of seduction, may contain. (n.d.: n. pag)

Lima emphasises a gendered reading of *Seduzir/Seducer*, highlighting how the performance enacted by Almeida in this series contradicts the erotic and fetishised nature of women in visual representation and exposes the oppressive nature of such an overpowering visual tradition over female bodies and subjectivity. *Seduzir/Seducer* is about keeping the right appearance at all costs but the series implies that, at least for women, the price may be too high. This is particularly evident in the photographs where Almeida grabs one of her legs, suggesting, as the artist has mentioned, a form of mutilation (*apud Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005).

Seduzir/Seducer may also re-view the theatrical poses of the hysterics at the Salpêtrière, who were voyeuristic and erotically described and appropriated by the medical community (Isaak, 1996a: 190-92). If this is the case, then Almeida’s work mocks that medical scene and, similarly to the nineteenth-century hysteric, who ‘stages’ a performance centred on her body in order to both comply with and deflect the masculine and normative views on femininity, it puts up a show through which the artist controls the viewer and escapes appropriation.

To conclude, Almeida’s work performs a cut with tradition and with the place occupied by women in that tradition. This cut is achieved through the artist’s body, which is the most constant element in her art practice, where it features as object and subject, medium and material. Almeida’s body, a female body, abandons the passive role allocated to it by a phallogocentric art canon and, instead, succeeds in directing the creative act and controlling the viewer’s gaze, rather than being framed by both. By displaying the female body in ways that

Jaggi, 17 July 2004: n. pag.). Rego’s comments a propos of her failed ballerinas could equally be applied to Almeida’s series. In fact, Rego’s painting is mentioned by Almeida in an interview from 1997 (*apud Carlos*, 2005: 54).

challenge the androcentric ruling of art (and art history), Almeida re-appropriates the visual field, a strategy that is shared by other contemporary women artists, including Helen Chadwick, who, as we have seen, also explores with subversive effects the female body in her work. Moreover, by making use of her body as a strategic site for reflecting on the art process and the convergence of different media, Almeida, just like Chadwick, takes the viewer into hybrid, borderless and ultimately uncharted territories.

3.4 Eccentric self-portraits

As discussed in the previous section, since Almeida created *Tela Rosa para Vestir/Pink Canvas to Wear*, in 1969, she has placed her own body in the centre of the artwork, creating an unusual continuum between the body of the work and the body of the artist (Carlos, n.d.: 10). Her oeuvre can, thus, be inscribed in the self-portrait tradition, which has played an important role in art history since the Renaissance and has been the focus of attention and re-making in the second half of the twentieth-century, as a result of the “progressive questioning and emptying out of the notion of reference and a diminishing of the *subject* as a category, successively legitimised by structuralist, post-structuralist and deconstructionist [and feminist, I would add] readings” (Ribeiro, 2008: 311, my translation). Almeida’s engagement with the genre of self-portrait could invite the viewer to approach her work as a form of self-revelation and even as an autobiographical and confessional process reclaiming a subjective space in the visual economy, for these are aspects central to the history and the tradition of this genre (Ribeiro, 2008). However, she often denies that interpretative possibility and her physical inscription in the artwork demands a more complex, sometimes even contradictory reading.

When Mary Kelly refers to a “feminist problematic in art” (1980: 303), she finds it centred in issues of subjectivity and the body. Through this feminist practice “[t]he work of art ceases to be a fetishized object, the deposit of a coherent, autonomous subject/author”, becoming instead “theorized as a text, a site of working through culturally as well as personally freighted materials” (Pollock, 1996: 73). Almeida’s depurated art apparently defies gendered and cultural readings like the one proposed by Kelly and Pollock in relation to feminist art practice, since the artist’s recurrent process of self-representation has nothing to do with autobiography and, in that sense, nothing to do with personal revelation. Almeida corroborates this interpretation of her work when she affirms that she has chosen herself as her own model because she knows best the positions to occupy and the attitudes she must

take, “[b]ut it’s not me. It’s as if it was someone else” (*apud* Carlos, n.d.: 10, my translation). Her work thus poses a challenge to a feminist analysis: how is it possible to discuss the self-representation proposed by the artist in historical, cultural, gender and subjective terms if that artist’s self-representation systematically denies personal revelation? It is this challenge that I wish to take in the next subchapter in order to go beyond the genderless interpretation dominating the critical discussion of Almeida’s work and find in it, like Molina does, a feminine way of looking at things (2005: 27).

3.4.1 Erasing the self from sight

Even though the vast majority of Almeida’s works is centred on her body, the artist has systematically hidden her face, which may be behind added strokes of paint (see, for example, *Pintura Habitada/Inhabited Painting*, from 1975 [Fig. 32]) or cut by the perspective adopted by the camera (as in the *Seduzir/Seduce* series, from 2002). According to Almeida, the face has been erased because it distracts too much (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 48), corroborating the interpretation of critics like Maria Filomena Molder, who has recognised that Almeida’s works from the 1990s, where the face is generally absent, have a greater power of abstraction (Molder, 1995: 27). The erasure of personal details from the artwork is further accomplished by Almeida’s insistent use of a black-and-white colour-scheme, even if this is sometimes undermined by strokes of vivid paint, and the process is also emphasised by the plain and black clothes in which the body is always photographed, since, as the artist admits, black is always neuter, creating an effect that a patterned skirt would not be able to produce (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 59-60).



Figure 32 - Helena Almeida, *Pintura Habitada/Inhabited Painting* (1975).

Deprived of a face, dressed in black, the artist's body becomes, at least since the 1980s, a "gigantic ductile mass" (Sardo, 2004: 28), or a "huge corporeal shadow" (Sardo, 2004: 26), sometimes even a formless 'stain' that spreads over the floor and onto the white walls of the studio, as in *Negro Agudo/Sharp Black* (1983) and *A Casa/The House* (1982) [Fig. 33]. In all these images, Almeida's body ceases to be a female body, in fact, even ceases to be a human body, turning into a black shape with the qualities of abstract representation for, as expressed by Sardo, the artist's body is "a form that slits space, that structures it and pierces through it" (2004: 26). In addition, apart from the regular presence of colour pigments and surrogate elements like black graphite and long, black fabrics that enhance the body's staining of the walls, in Almeida's photographic compositions props are kept to a minimum (there may be a chair, a pair of shoes, pieces of glass) and the studio is presented in monastic bareness and ascetic despoilment. All the mentioned strategies employed by the artist prevent a reading of her work based on self-exposure and self-revelation.



Figure 33 - Helena Almeida, *A Casa/The House* (1982).

Almeida's display of her body denies the appearance of autobiographical and confessional elements. These elements are often recognizable in women artist's self-portraits, in which they are used as a way of bringing forward women's lives and experiences previously precluded by the dominant and male art tradition. Their presence may thus be found in some of the most emblematic works produced by women artists (some of them openly producing feminist art) over the last fifty years, from Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79), which documents the artist's relationship with her child, to Jo Spence's therapeutic photography, produced when the artist was dying with breast cancer, or Tracey Emin's exposure of her pain in the *Abortion* series (1990-96). In contrast, Almeida's self-portraits empty the self so that the viewers can enter or project themselves in it, as the artist has mentioned (*apud Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005), that is, they perform the erasure of the self from sight, preserving the self's intimacy, as pointed out by Carlos (n.d.: 24), and creating in its place what Molder calls a "dramatis persona" (1995: 27).

3.4.2 Self-representation as aesthetic representation

Despite Molder's comment, Almeida has stated that her self-portraits do not create characters either but are, instead, an effect of her relationship with drawing, with painting, with space and with emotion (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 51). As previously discussed, this understanding of the role played by the body highlights the formal qualities of that body, which is seen as material or element in the internal dynamics of the artwork, making Almeida's process of self-representation intrinsically connected with her attempt to represent the creative act and the emergence of that process in the photographic print. The artist is thus on an ontological quest for the meaning of the art process and the role of her body in it, this being a fundamental cause for the difficulty in establishing a connection between the intra and the extra-aesthetic realms. Carlos thus concludes that:

Her work is instead the constant appearance of the image of a woman who is transformed in painting or drawing, who is herself painting. It is a fictional body in the sense that, as we have already seen, her works do not possess either the characteristics of the character nor of the mask or the self-portrait. They are images of a body, they are pictorial representation in itself and that is what sets Helena Almeida's work apart from other contemporary artistic practices that also employ the self-portrait and self-representation. (n.d.: 11, my translation)²²³

It is with Carlos's interpretative framework in mind that the repetition of words related to an intimate and private world in the titles chosen by Almeida for some of her works needs to be considered. For example, Almeida has repeated the titles *Estudo para um Enriquecimento Interior/Study for Inner Improvement* and *Dentro de Mim/Inside Me* in several series and she has agreed with the term *intus* (meaning "within or "inside") to introduce her participation at the Biennale of Venice, in 2005²²⁴. In the context of the works they describe, these verbal expressions cannot be seen as indicative of a confessional

²²³ Carlos exemplifies the contrast between Almeida's and other artists' use of their bodies by referring Cindy Sherman and stressing that Sherman employs the painting canon in order to build self-portraits and self-representations (n.d.: 11). This comparison is not very fortunate, since Sherman, like Almeida, ironically plays with and subverts the process of self-representation, though in ways different from the ones presented by the Portuguese artist.

²²⁴ The term *intus* was suggested by Isabel Carlos, who was the curator of the Portuguese participation in the Biennale of Venice that year. Almeida agreed with it because the word expressed something that came from inside into the outside and she felt the works she prepared for the exhibition had an introspective and intimate characteristic (*Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005).

intention but a way of stressing the relationship between the body of the artist and the creative act.

So, when Almeida says *Eu Estou Aqui/I Am Here* (2005) the phrase is not intended to suggest any personal disclosure but to emphasise the ritualistic, performative and almost sacred offering of the artist and her body to the viewer by means of her work (Carlos, 2005: 14). In *Eu Estou Aqui/I Am Here* Almeida acknowledges the viewer's contribution to the development of her work and her artistic career and, as the artist has also mentioned, she is asking for acceptance (*apud Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005). There is no discernible and traceable face in this series, as if Almeida was denying or controlling the voyeuristic impulse of the viewer and keeping the offering of her body within the limits of the artistic performance. The characteristics of this work therefore protect Almeida from exposing herself in an intimate way, even though she urges the audience to look at her²²⁵.

3.4.3 Between figuration and abstraction: women artists and the dominant art tradition

Almeida's oeuvre seems to exist between figuration and abstraction, as the artist tries to embrace both elements of this duality. Phelan corroborates this reading when she mentions that: “[f]or Helena Almeida the representation of the body is simultaneously abstract and figurative” (2005: 75, my translation). This ambivalent, interstitial standpoint found by Phelan in Almeida's process of self-representation allows this critic to approximate the Portuguese artist to another contemporary woman artist, Eva Hesse, whose work also moves between those two modes of representation and often through the re-working of the body within it²²⁶. The similarities between the two lead Phelan to conclude that: “maybe for some artists, and especially for women artists from Eva Hesse's and Helena Almeida's

²²⁵ *Eu Estou Aqui/I Am Here* documents a performance very different from those created by several women artists in the 1970s, namely Adrian Piper, Carolee Schneemann and Ana Mendieta, who consciously revealed something about their personal lives, experiences, emotions and pleasures.

²²⁶ The similarities between Hesse's and Almeida's works are particularly visible in the 'anti-paintings' produced by the Portuguese artist in the late 1960s, at a time when Hesse was also creating her hybrid paintings/sculptures/installations. In fact, when comparing Almeida's 'sausages' with Hesse's works such as *Hang Up* (1966) or *Area* (1968), it is evident that both artists were interested in subverting the principles of painting, from which their work originated in the first place, by emphasising three-dimensional space and the openness of the canvas to the exhibition space. Moreover, Hesse and Almeida disrupted the boundaries separating aesthetic languages and forms and they created a thin line between abstraction and figuration, in works that explored the junction between outside and inside, the organic and the inorganic, structure and randomness.

generation, form is always a kind of bet in the always uncertain dividing line between form and the absence of form, between continuity and rupture” (2005: 75-76, my translation).

The ambivalent use of abstract and figurative elements is also found in other Portuguese women artists, whose work is contemporary to Almeida’s. According to Márcia Oliveira, Lourdes Castro, who began working in the late 1950s, has consistently explored the topoi of the shadow and the mark in their function as representations of the human body; as a result, her work evidences an irresolvable impasse between figuration and abstraction (8 Nov. 2008)²²⁷. In the 1960s, Portuguese artist Paula Rego was also producing artwork that her husband, the also artist Victor Willing, characterised as:

[A] plethora of semi-abstract forms which have been drawn and painted, cut out and cut up, then re-assembled and painted around and over until the desired composition is reached. . . . The forms, not abstract but nevertheless difficult to read, demand constant re-interpretation as they shift in both formal and conceptual relation to one another. (*apud* Bradley, 2002: 14)

Gluttony (1959), described by Fiona Bradley as “not quite abstract” (2002: 115), *Salazar Vomiting the Homeland* (1960) and *Stray Dogs* (1965) are some of Rego’s works from that period in which the artist crossed the boundary separating abstract from figurative art, depicting bodies that somehow have been distorted almost beyond the limits of representation but still bear some figurative elements.

The fluidity between abstract and figurative elements that Phelan believes to be a determinant formal aspect of Almeida’s and Hesse’s art and that can also be found in the work of the afore-mentioned Portuguese artists, may be connected to women’s position vis-à-vis the art tradition. As Phelan suggests, that position is mid-way between continuity and rupture (2005: 76), acquiescence and dissent, thus pointing towards women’s historically and culturally (as well as subjectively) experienced gender difference(s), which have had an impact in the way they have approached their work, namely in their ambivalence towards figuration and abstraction.

²²⁷ The image of the body as a shadow, a mark or a stain specifically approaches Castro’s to Almeida’s work from the 1980s, when Almeida’s body became a blotch in the studio walls. Other parallelisms can be established between these two artists. They both embrace formal hybridism, having built their careers through several art practices. Moreover, like Almeida, Castro traverses the European avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes and is deeply influenced by the teachings of Duchamp.

If we accept these premises, we may begin to answer that initial challenge (how is it possible to discuss the process of self-representation proposed by Almeida in historical, cultural, gender and subjective terms if that artist's self-representation systematically denies personal revelation?). The answer to it may lie precisely in the terms found in the question, that is, in self-representation without personal revelation, which could well be another way of referring to the ambivalence between figuration and abstraction, continuity and rupture, found in the work of contemporary women artists and which is symptomatic of the position occupied by women and women artists within the art canon. In other words, although Almeida persistently resists self-revelation and that resistance removes historical, cultural and subjective circumstances from view, the figurative exposure of her body and the tension it establishes with the pull of abstraction should be historically and socially analysed and in that analysis gender differences should be taken into consideration.

3.4.3.1 The autobiographical reading of women artists' work

In *On Abstract Art* Briony Fer discusses Hesse's work, highlighting how the organic elements, usually associated by art critics to the artist's 'feminine condition', coexist with the "harder edges" and with "an economy of loss", in which Fer includes the loss of meaning and figuration (1997: 110). Anne Wagner's study *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner and O'Keefe* (1996) also pinpoints similar aspects in Hesse's work. Her full-length analysis begins by stressing that gender issues are central to art criticism, which, nevertheless, sees itself impervious to such contingencies, particularly when discussing abstract art since, so the story goes, this is mainly concerned with form and devoid of subjective references. However, Wagner proves otherwise by deconstructing the critics' comments on three women artists who have ambivalently worked with an abstract lexis or explored the tensions between abstraction and figuration, but whose art has systematically been described as essentially feminine and autobiographical.

Wagner's discussion of Georgia O'Keefe is particularly interesting for it stresses the way O'Keefe searches for a negotiation between figuration and abstraction, juxtaposing these formal oppositions and developing them as cognate means to explore issues in her work other than her own experience of bodily sensation. According to Wagner, through this constant movement between figuration and abstraction, O'Keefe tried to evade the quintessential female embodiment identified by art critics in her work: "[s]he was intent, rather, on other effects: on throwing attention back onto the means by which bodily

analogies could be generated, on demonstrating how effects of the bodily can be destabilized; on undermining assurances that the body in representation takes one stable, easily legible— even easily gendered— form (1996: 100). For Wagner, O’Keefe’s ambivalent take on abstraction is a theme lying at the centre of her most famous works, the flower paintings, which “induce the viewer to see the bodily in novel, unexpected terms” (1996: 64). Nevertheless, these paintings have more often been read as exemplary metaphors of the female body and sexuality, in other words, as images of a true female identity. As Wagner concludes, in this canonical reading of O’Keefe the friction between abstraction and figuration, which allowed the artist “to demonstrate the figurative suggestiveness of the abstract, and the abstractness of the figurative” (1996: 99), has been systematically put aside.

Wagner’s discussion of O’Keefe and the critical reception of her work draw attention to the specific difficulties posed to women artists by the art canon, especially when these artists have tried to move into the ‘superior’ realm of abstract art, whose principles have been persistently revered by modernist criticism since the beginning of the twentieth-century. According to Wagner, the problems experienced by women artists are intrinsically linked to an analysis of their work based on the autobiographical and feminine nature of the same. Such an analysis has acted as a “disciplinary tool”, through which the stature of the woman artist is ultimately contained and her work excluded from “spheres of meaning and achievement that exist outside the female persona” (Wagner, 1996: 101).

Almeida’s work, which ambivalently plays with the conventions of figurative and abstract art, shares some of the characteristics of the works produced by the contemporary women artists discussed by Fer and Wagner in their studies. The game through which Almeida’s body simultaneously discloses and hides itself draws her strategies of self-representation particularly near to those employed by O’Keefe in her flower paintings, since, similarly to the American artist, Almeida encourages the viewer to see the bodily, and more specifically the female body, in new ways. Although in Almeida’s case the reception of her work did not face the problems encountered by the women artists discussed by Fer and Wagner, for it has seldom been read through a biographical lens, it has still suffered from the apparent gender-blindness so characteristic of abstract art criticism, as discussed in the first section of this chapter. In other words, if criticism of O’Keefe’s work indicates that, in terms of the dominant canon, female art cannot be abstract, Almeida’s shows the reverse, that is, that abstract art cannot be female gendered.

Moreover, Almeida's refusal to disclose personal details and her explicit effort to divert the viewer's attention from the most subjective loci of her body (as, for example, the face) can be interpreted as ways of denying the personal and biographical investigation to which women artists often fall prey. If this is the case, then Almeida's art reflects the problems acutely felt by women artists and provides a possible solution to them. This solution is also a compromise for, contrary to feminist artists like Mary Kelly, who at the end of the 1970s was advocating the complete removal of the female body from representation as the only way to escape male scopophilia and female objectification, Almeida seems determined to visually expose her body, though in ways that disallow the phallogocentric reading of the same²²⁸.

What is here being suggested is the possibility of discussing Almeida's ambivalent take on self-representation in gender terms and in the context of the problems women artists have had to face regarding the representation of themselves and their bodies. Those problems are the outcome of the personal and biographical reading referred by Wagner, as well as of the specific relationship women and their bodies have with the image in Western culture. As previously discussed, that relationship is unavoidably connected with the history of the female nude. Nead (1992) and other feminist art critics (Betterton, 1996; Nochlin, 1988) have demonstrated that the link between woman and the body and the objectification of the female body were central, even if overlooked, characteristics of modernism and have contributed to denying women access to the abstract world of high art, for they were constantly connoted with the particular, the physical and the bodily.

3.4.4 The female subversion of the self-portrait

In *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-portraiture in the Twentieth Century* Marsha Meskimmon addresses the issue of female embodiment in terms of self-representation, referring that women's self-portraiture reflects the problems brought by the art tradition and produces particular answers to them: "women artists throughout the

²²⁸ In the 1980s and in Britain, feminist criticism advocated the banishment of the female body from visual representation as a way of denying the fetishist gaze of the male eye/I. Nevertheless, the divide opposing American-1970s-essentialism to British-1980s-poststructuralism is a generalisation, or a fetishised divide, as Alexandra M. Kokoli understands it (2008c: 206-26), for since the outbreak of feminist art interventions in the late 1960s, there has been a heterogeneous number of feminist practices and criticism that destabilise and put into question dogmatic distinctions. See in this context "Introduction: Looking on, Bouncing back" (2008b: 1-18) and "Fetishism and the Stories of Feminist Art" (2008c: 206-26), by Alexandra M. Kokoli, essays that trace the developments in feminist art criticism, particularly in Britain, of the last thirty years.

twentieth century have challenged the conventions of the genre [self-portrait] and concepts of the self and have negotiated new and extraordinary spaces in which they have produced their self-portraits” (1996: 1). In the foreword to Meskimmon’s study, the artist Rosy Martin (who collaborated with Jo Spence in her phototherapeutic project) also stresses the disruptive quality of women artists’ take on the self-portrait tradition:

By critically contesting traditional notions of autobiography– the true story of the life of the already famous– and self portraiture– a route to knowing the creative personality through the image- the impossibility of any transparent relationship between the author and subject of the text is established. Arguing against any simplistic anecdotal reading of women’s self-portraiture, individual artists’ oeuvres are repositioned back within their intellectual and aesthetic concerns. (*apud* Meskimmon, 1996: xvi)

As Martin clarifies, one of the approaches brought about by women artists in the twentieth century is to reject the autobiographical reading of the self-portrait tradition, opening the artwork produced by these artists to other concerns previously denied to them by art history²²⁹. As previously mentioned, an auto or psychobiographical reading has been particularly evident in relation to women artists’ work, which has been fully contained by references to these women’s personal life. Such reading is also stressed by Meskimmon in her study: “women artists work has suffered even more from this psychobiographical approach than men’s because of their assumed links with the personal sphere” (1996: 79). Nevertheless, this critic suggests that: “women artists over the course of the twentieth century have challenged simple psychobiography in the form of serial self-portraiture, subverted easy ‘historical’ or ‘biographical’ accuracy, queried the significance of mimesis and revealed the ways in which their ‘selves’ were the products of shifting social constructs and definitions of ‘woman’” (1996: 73).

In addition, Meskimmon also mentions that women artists, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, a time when women were fighting for their rights and liberties

²²⁹ According to Meskimmon: “autobiography shows obvious biases towards the celebration of ‘great men’ and towards a particular version of history, narrative chronology and mimetic truth, the truth of ‘likeness’. All of these presuppose a link between the persons and forms of autobiography and the nature of subjectivity which operates within masculine aesthetic traditions” (1996: 65). The autobiographical model has been applied to the analysis of the self-portrait, which, accordingly, has been biased towards the celebration of ‘the great male artist’ or ‘the Old Master’. Meskimmon is then in a position to conclude that the subject of the self-portrait or the autobiography, which is the ‘great men’ of history, has tended to exclude women, people of colour and the working-class (1996: 65-66).

in every front, consistently explored the self-portrait genre as a way of showing the woman artist at work. This was a powerful and challenging mode of self-representation, despite the simplicity of such iconography, for women were shown as active makers of culture: “[b]y producing such occupational portraits, women asserted their professionalism and, in some cases, their economic independence” (Meskimmon, 1996: 28). Women artists were, therefore, reacting to the fetishisation of their bodies by the male gaze as much as to their role as female muse/model/object in the masculine art tradition.

Almeida’s work shares many aspects of this counter-history of female self-representation running parallel to the dominant, masculine one. Although the artist systematically employs her body, that presence in no way supports an autobiographical model, since it does not allow: “a psychoanalytical reading always performed in male terms” (Meskimmon, 1996: 67). She thus questions painting as a vehicle of self-definition (Vanderlinden, 1998: 41) and in her work it is rather the artist’s body that is a vehicle for the definition of painting. The scarcity of visible objects (which would connect the aesthetic realm with the world experienced and lived by the self), the erasure of the artist’s face (one of the main focus of interest in the self-portrait tradition), the frequent use of seriality, through which, according to Ribeiro, contemporary art not only incorporates the notion of mobility in the portrait, suggesting the incomplete in terms of variation (2008: 287), but also disturbs the belief in the portrait as evidence (2008: 306), as well as the fluidity between abstract and figurative elements, are all aspects that contribute to the subversion of a traditional narrative structure and of the significance of mimesis, thus suggesting an alternative model for viewing self-representation that does not rely on “easy ‘historical’ or ‘biographical’ accuracy” (Meskimmon, 1996: 73).

Moreover, Almeida challenges the stereotypical notion of woman as merely involved with the personal sphere by focusing on her body as an appropriate element for discussing artistic processes and aesthetic ontology and hence opening up the female body to wider contexts of signification. In so doing, Almeida’s work also shares some of the characteristics of female self-portraiture in the first half of the twentieth century, as presented by Meskimmon, a period when works reflected a renegotiation of the boundaries defining the woman artist as both woman and artist. Like her foremothers, Almeida represents the artist as the active maker of culture and art, asserting her professionalism and power and denying her role as merely the model and the object of the male gaze.

3.4.4.1 Woman and the mirror

Two of Almeida's series entitled *Dentro de Mim/Inside Me* (produced between 2000 and 2001) [Fig. 34] ingeniously capture the woman artist's renegotiation of her place in the history of art by adding to the image of the woman artist, which is recurrent in her work, the symbol of the woman as image, that is, the mirror, in order to subtly explore, as well as transcend, the habitual gender connotations of this symbol.



Figure 34 - Helena Almeida, *Dentro de Mim/Inside Me* (2000).

Mirrors are common objects in artworks and their presence is often associated with the female body, itself a common 'accessory' in art tradition. Marina Warner has discussed the association between woman and the mirror in the vanitas tradition, which uses both in order to induce a reflection on the ephemeral character of life, the body and beauty (1989: 46)²³⁰. Meskimmon (1996: 3) also stresses how the presence of mirrors in the works of the

²³⁰ The vanitas tradition is also explored by Helen Chadwick in *Vanity* (1986), a work that was part of her *Of Mutability* project (1984-86). See note 57 in the first chapter.

Great Masters is inseparable from the tradition of the female nude, since they indicate that women are appropriate and compliant objects of masculine specular consumption. As Nead concludes, a woman “looks at herself in the mirror; her identity is framed by the abundance of images that define femininity. She is framed— experiences herself as image or representation— by the edges of the mirror” (1992: 11). Mirrors, therefore, legitimize the voyeuristic looking at the body of woman and control a woman’s image of herself.

In contrast, *Dentro de Mim/Inside Me*, which represents Almeida’s body stuck to pieces of glass, returns the gaze back to the viewer, exploring a movement that starts in the self (or inside the self, as the title of the series makes clear) and is directed towards the exterior. The mirrors are not used to reflect the female body, nor to offer an articulated and coherent image of the self, as the Lacanian mirror does during the child’s mirror stage, but to make possible the opening of the self to the surrounding environment and to otherness, since they recognise the presence of the viewer, who is invited by the artist to participate in the art process (Martinez, 2001: 21)²³¹. Molina highlights the subversive character of Almeida’s mirrors, which “are open to emptiness, absence, space and thus an immense otherness, a very different case from female bodies in the pictorial tradition, flattened, mutilated, fetishised. The masculine gaze expulses the other, paralyzes women” (2005: 27). Hence, these mirrors refuse the subject’s solipsism or narcissism and the autobiographical model appropriated by art tradition, as much as the voyeuristic gaze at the female body. They participate in what Ribeiro defines as the contemporary subversion of the identity promise of the portrait, suggesting, by opposition, the subject’s de-centralization and a resistance to the politics of representation, understood as perceptive authority and possession (2008: 306).

Since photography can also be seen as a mirror (it is, after all, a reversed image of the real), it is possible to expand the meaning found in the mirrors of *Dentro de Mim/Inside Me* to most of Almeida’s art practice, as the artist systematically photographs her body but

²³¹ For Sardo, the fusion between Almeida’s body and the studio is reached by two functions attributed by the artist to the mirror: “when applied to the artist’s body, she sucks the space into her body; when the mirror lays on the ground, on the baseboard or on the wall, it means to swallow the artist’s body into a space” (2004: 38). In the first case, “the artist’s body gains the status of a third space, of an almost magnetic force that contains the studio’s universe in itself, because that is its field of action” (2004: 38); in the second one, “the mirror creates a fracture, a fissure in the studio’s fictional world, leading to another condition, which the artist tries to overcome by diving, or trying to dive, in that virtual abyss” (2004: 40). It is also worth noticing that for Sardo the mirror multiplies the represented space, creating another dimension within the representation, from which the viewer is excluded (2004: 38). This aspect of Sardo’s analysis contradicts mine and Martinez’s, both of which emphasise the opening up of the representational space to the viewer and to the other means of the mirror.

refuses to capture the self and expose it to an objectifying and reductive gaze. On the contrary, Almeida's self-portraits allow hybrid art forms to coexist and create the conditions for the artist to discuss the premises of her aesthetics. It is also through the self-portrait genre that, paradoxically, a dialogue with otherness is attempted by the artist. This is something suggested by doubling the mirroring process of the photographic shot in order to reveal the outer space, like in *Dentro de Mim/Inside Me*, or by focusing the camera on a pair of hands crossing different elements, as it happens in *Estudo para Dois Espaços/Study for Two Spaces* (1977) [Fig. 35]; the dialogue with the other may also be implicitly present when the artist addresses the viewer— in *Eu Estou Aqui/I Am Here* (2005)— or physically interacts with her studio— in *A Experiência do Lugar II/The Experience of the Place II* (2004). In her most recent works, communication between self and other may even occur more explicitly, like in *A Conversa/The Conversation* (2007), where an-other body, a masculine body, is captured by the camera in interaction with the artist's²³².



Figure 35 - Helena Almeida, *Estudo para Dois Espaços/Study for Two Spaces* (1977).

The mentioned examples demonstrate that Almeida's body rejects being fetishised and made into a passive object of male contemplation and that it is, instead, an active

²³² See section 3.7 of this chapter for a more thorough discussion of *A Conversa/The Conversation*.

participant of a communicative process. That body also denies its disappearance from the visual field, the fate of many female bodies in the 1980s, when feminist artists and art critics were fiercely rejecting the direct visual representation of women, which they saw as an essentialist process that capitulated to the dominance of masculine pleasure and the male gaze. Almeida does not evade the direct depiction of her body, replacing it for a symbolic and mediated device such as language. This was a strategic substitution favoured by feminist critics and artists and used in referential feminist works, like Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79), Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* (1977-82) and Nancy Spero's *Codex Artaud* (1971-72). Nevertheless, when compared to the dominant and masculine art tradition, it is clear that Almeida represents her body and, by extension, the female body, in radically new ways, for this is not the product of male desire and voyeurism nor an autobiographical presence justifying the private and minor significance of this woman's artwork. The end result of her transgressive process of self-representation is the production of eccentric self-portraits, that is, self-portraits that are placed at the margins of the canon, whilst still dialoguing with it, and at the margins of the self, who is in dialogue with the other²³³.

3.5 Liminal art spaces

3.5.1 Alice through the loophole

In 1981 Almeida created *Corte Secreto/Secret Cut* [Fig. 36], a work in which the artist, a gigantic, almost grotesque Alice who has eaten all the cake, dares to cross the threshold into a secret, imagined place. *Corte Secreto/Secret Cut* and other works from the 1980s (for example, the series *A Casa/The House*, from 1983) focus on a cut, suggesting the artist's rupture with traditional formats, spaces and readings.

²³³ My preference for the word *eccentric* in this section is inspired by "Eccentric Abstraction", an exhibition organised by Lucy R. Lippard, in 1966, and held at the Fischbach Gallery, New York. This exhibition, which included works by, among other artists, Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, set the standard for what would later be regarded as postminimalism, process, or antiformal art. According to Lippard in her essay "Eccentric Abstraction" (from 1966), the artists that came together under this exhibition produced some sort of deviation or incongruity that threatened the regularity of structure or that opened up paths other than the consideration of medium specificity.



Figure 36 - Helena Almeida, *Corte Secreto/Secret Cut* (1981).

This opening of a gap in the space of representation had occurred before— in *Senteme/Feel Me*, from 1979, where the artist's hands, superimposed with a slab of blue paint, open a cut in the canvas and slide to the other side— and is still a recurrent topos in Almeida's art practice, although it may be expressed in different ways. A cut may happen in terms of the perspective chosen for the representation of the body, which is frequently cropped either by the obliterating effect of the paint added to the print (like in *Pintura Habitada/Inhabited Painting*, from 1977) or by the camera angle (for example, in *Seduzir/Seduce*, from 2001). The cut is also achieved by the sequential format of many of Almeida's works (as in *Dentro de Mim/Inside Me* [2000] and *Voar/Flying* [2001]), a process that suggests gaps between the photographs, as if these were built from different film frames.

Phelan interprets this suturing process as a cinematic trace in Almeida's practice, reflecting the syntax and logic characteristics of that medium (2005: 89), whereas Molina sees Almeida's violation of the traditional space of representation, perpetrated by the bareness of details that characterises the photographic setting (as if the viewer was facing a

blank space), as a cutting process adopted by the artist in order to stress the disruptive quality of her work (2005: 23). For Molina this subversive approach to tradition is influenced by the teachings of Lucio Fontana, who saw the painting as an interstitial site (2005: 23). Likewise, “Almeida opens zones between spaces, represents bodies in transition which pass from one reality to another” (Molina, 2005: 23).

Molina’s reading suggests that Almeida’s cutting process corresponds less to a way of separating spaces, methods and elements than to linking them, though in an unusual way. She thus sees her work as a liminal aesthetic space, situated in the threshold found between the exterior and the interior, something that not only points to the artist’s refusal to comply with established rules but also to her disturbance of normative boundaries. The following comment made by Almeida a propos of *Tela Rosa para Vestir/ Pink Canvas to Wear* confirms that the artist is aware of the borderline space in which her work frequently lives: “[t]here was no distinction between the canvas, the canvas’ plane and myself. *There was no distinction between exterior and interior. Everything was in everything*, and I understood that; that it was global, that everything was in everything, that the canvas was completely in me, just as I was completely in the canvas (*apud* Molina, 2005: 24, my emphasis). Besides suggesting the fusion of self and artwork, Almeida’s words demand a reading of her art practice as a fluid and open space, made possible by the artist’s body, through which different media coexist and boundaries are demolished, and by her transgression of art rules, thus corroborating the analysis that Sardo carries out of her work, since he too sees it as: “a violation of the representational place and the concurring creation of another dimension. . . . This separate interstitial space doesn’t belong to a different dimension, it doesn’t refer to any other level of representation— *eg*: a fourth dimension— but emerges as a liminal space, an interstice that doesn’t have a name nor an existence” (2004: 18).

In several works produced in 1977 and repeatedly entitled *Estudo para Dois Espaços/Study for Two Spaces*, the notion of a liminal aesthetic dimension is convincingly put forward [Fig. 35]. Here the artist insistently registers a performance in which her hands (a metonymical representation of Almeida’s art practice) dare to cross boundaries and borders, like windows, doors or gates, and simultaneously inhabit different spaces (exterior and interior, concrete and shadow-like) or different states (solid, gaseous and liquid). These hands, which leave behind the logic of either/or, do not suggest a fourth dimension (as Sardo cautions) but a threshold, the creation of an interstitial place summoned by the art object as much as by the artist’s body.

3.5.2 The avant-garde, the semiotic and sexual difference

Almeida's insistence in such interstitial and borderline aesthetic, with blurred distinctions between exterior and interior, self and other, reality and dream, and with the power to disturb order and fixed boundaries, again connects her work to the avant-garde. Indeed, the experimental and transgressive character of her art practice may be approached to the radical and non-conformist movements of the first half of the twentieth-century, particularly Dadaism, which was deeply anarchic and against the rules of bourgeois society, and to emblematic avant-garde artists, like Duchamp, who pushed the limits of what was considered art and questioned the traditional role of the artist. These were crucial influences to the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s, as well as to Almeida's work²³⁴. Such connection reinforces the radicalism of Almeida's art practice, at the same time that it confirms its dialogue with tradition (in this case, and paradoxically, a tradition of rupture set by the avant-garde).

It is this rapport with the avant-garde that also connects Almeida's work with poetic language as this is understood by Kristeva, particularly in her full-studies *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) and *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980b). In the latter of these two texts Kristeva focuses on Russian futurist poetry, which she defines as the "future anterior" (1980b: 32) of language, in order to emphasise the relationship between the poetic language of the avant-garde and the semiotic²³⁵. This is an anarchic, heterogeneous, fluid and instinctual principle lying below the surface of language. Kristeva also presents the semiotic as "a disposition that is definitely heterogeneous to meaning but always in sight of it or in either a negative or a surplus relationship to it" (1980b: 133); in other words, the semiotic contradicts the logic, the rules and the structural boundaries of the symbolic, with which it, nevertheless, coexists.

For Kristeva poetic language and some particular moments in the history of literature, like the avant-garde, are the signifying loci where the semiotic is most visible, as its disruptive power erupts into representation: "[a] playful language therefore gives rise to a

²³⁴ See section 3.2.1 of this chapter for a fuller discussion of Almeida's work in relation to the (neo)avant-gardes.

²³⁵ See Macedo's "Futurism/Vorticism: The Poetics of Language and the Politics of Women" (1994).

law that is overturned, violated and pluralized, a law upheld only to allow a polyvalent polylogical sense of play that sets the being of the law ablaze in a peaceful, relaxing void” (1977b: 295). The avant-garde work then becomes an open and ambiguous space, with a certain “wandering” or “fuzziness” (Kristeva, 1980b: 136), since in it the boundaries separating the semiotic from the symbolic have collapsed.

Also according to Kristeva, the semiotic is the trace of the pre-oedipal state in which the child lives before the acquisition of language and which is characterised by polymorphic pleasure (*jouissance*) and absence of boundaries (between the child and the mother, self and other). It is therefore connected with the feminine maternal, which is why Kristeva believes only a woman can initiate a discussion of the semiotic able to shed knowledge into this process: “[i]t was perhaps also necessary to be a *woman* to attempt to take up that exorbitant wager of carrying the rational project to the outer borders of the signifying venture of men” (1980b: x). Kristeva suggests that it is through art that the experience of the semiotic can be recalled in adulthood. As such, art offers a problematisation of the symbolic, whilst it is also inscribed in it. Moreover, since the symbolic is deeply connected with the normative structures (like language) that install sexual difference and push the child into gendered adulthood, the visibility of the semiotic in the aesthetic object also implies the disruption of these very same gendered structures.

By focusing on Almeida’s work in terms of its liminality, its capacity to disrupt fixed boundaries and its adoption of an all-encompassing perspective, replacing the logic of either/or with a constant play with ambiguity, it is possible to draw attention to the semiotic level of this work and to open up a critical space for discussing it in terms of sexual difference. Through this reading, the inscription of a female subjectivity with the power to destabilise the binary economy organising the dominant masculine order is made visible, particularly when Almeida’s body is seen crossing boundaries, cutting through materials and inhabiting several planes and media.

3.5.3 Colour and its disruptive potential

In “Giotto’s Joy” (1972) Kristeva abandons her considerations on the relation between avant-garde literature and the semiotic and instead discusses the disruptive possibilities of the Florentin artist Giotto²³⁶. Focusing on Giotto’s frescoes for the Arena

²³⁶ “Giotto’s Joy” is an essay included in *Desire in Language* (1980b).

Chapel, in Padua (c. 1303-1306), Kristeva demonstrates how this artist's use of colour, "his translation of instinctual drives into colored surface" (1972: 210), destabilised the narrative structure of the work as much as the rational apprehension of it. In Giotto's frescoes, which narrate the life of the Virgin and that of Christ, colour seems to be closely associated with the semiotic, whereas the narrative structure of the frescoes is linked to the symbolic. Colour is thus perceived by Kristeva as a disruptive element, for it destabilises the linear narrative of visual representation and the norms that define the world: "it constantly *pits itself* against the everpresent norm. It tears itself from the norm, bypasses it, turns away from it, absorbs it, goes beyond it, does something else— always in relation to it" (1972: 215). Like the literary language of the avant-garde, Kristeva perceives Giotto's frescoes as both inscribed and free from the norm, achieving a relative escape from the symbolic order. Such subversion in visual art is achieved through colour, which for Kristeva becomes simultaneously the place of prohibition and its transgression: "[c]olor might therefore be the space where the prohibition foresees and gives rise to its own immediate transgression. It achieves the momentary dialectic of law— the laying down of One Meaning so that it might at once be pulverized, multiplied into plural meanings. Color is the shattering of unity" (1972: 221). Kristeva suggests that colour destabilises the symbolic order by exposing representation to the multiple and, in that sense, it subverts the binary logic that lies at the centre of the symbolic and its meaning.

Several aspects of Kristeva's discussion of colour may be productively employed in the analysis of Almeida's work. It has already been noticed that Almeida often relies on a sequential and cinematic structure that suggests the presence of a narrative element and the artist has also mentioned her intention of telling stories through her work (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 53). The narrative dimension of this work inevitably links it to the symbolic. However, it has also been stressed that the artist's strategic use of colour (most often the colour blue, central in Giotto's frescoes, where it represents the sacred) disrupts the narrative and the viewer's linear reading of the same by operating a cut on its surface²³⁷. The colour imprint also makes possible for different moments and media to coexist in the same work. Hence, the rules of painting are left behind by the Portuguese artist, who cuts with the norm and the symbolic order by creating an interstitial network of relationships through the insertion of colour patches in her photographs. Following Kristeva's discussion of Giotto's

²³⁷ In more general symbolic terms the colour blue is directly related with a dreamlike, unconscious state (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1982: 102-3) and hence with the semiotic.

frescoes, those colour patches may correspond to the visible presence of the semiotic in the artwork, a presence that disturbs rational expectations by confronting the viewer with a multiplicity of meanings, moments and entities, as well as with the coexistence of different media.

Almeida's use of colour can also be approached to Chadwick's in her series *Viral Landscapes*, where the British artist employs patches of paint in order to stress co-existence, hybridism and an (geographically, physically, psychically and socially) interstitial space. What I am trying to suggest is a concomitant reading for the colour slabs found in many of Almeida's photographs: they do not merely signal paint as art material, nor do they just efface the marks of subjectivity from visual representation (though these are all important issues to bear in mind), but they also point towards a liminal, borderless and plural signifying space that disturbs the symbolic logic as much as the frontiers separating different art forms.

In her analysis of the significance of colour in visual art, Kristeva sees its presence in the image as an excess meaning through death: “[c]olour is not zero meaning; it is excess meaning through instinctual drive, that is, through death” (1972: 221). Her reference to the death drive surely refers to the destruction of the subject, since by creating an excess meaning (that is, meaning produced by a process of both/and instead of by a logic of either/or), colour sends the subject back to the semiotic, where it can no longer be a subject, since it ceases to be a stable and single entity separate from the (m)other. In Almeida's photographs colour often produces a similar effect: in moments like *Pintura Habitada/Inhabited Painting* (1975; 1976) [Fig. 32], Almeida loses her identity by gradually hiding herself behind patches of blue colour. These works witness the death of the subject (or of subjectivity) through excess, ambiguity and liminality, all of which suggested by the artist's effective use of colour²³⁸.

²³⁸ Death seems to have been an important input for the creation of many of Almeida's works, as recognised by the artist: “[d]eath is something that has always disturbed me a lot, to finish as suddenly as that . . . many works were motivated by the news of the death of someone close” (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 53, my translation). Miguel Von Hafe Pérez stresses the importance of an existential gravitas and death in Almeida's oeuvre. For this critic, death is a theme addressed through Almeida's use of seriality, which creates a suspended temporality (*apud* Helena Almeida: *A Segunda Casa*, 2005).

3.5.4 The blurring of sight and the disruption of the modernist canon

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva argues that what disturbs fixed boundaries and threatens the established order with its in-betweenness, escaping the binary logic of either/or, belongs to the abject and is thus a subversive element capable of disrupting the social norm (1980a). Following Kristeva's notion of the abject, Almeida's work may be perceived as approaching abjection by eschewing fixed categories and emphasising the semiotic dimension of the art object. This reading once again confronts her work with the Law or the norm and stresses its dissident power. Moreover, by highlighting the disruptive elements of Almeida's work, it is possible to move beyond the formalist reading dominating its assessment and consider its psychic dimension, as well as its historical context.

In *On Abstract Art* Fer adopts a similar approach in her reading of abstract art, for she argues that there is a deviant and destructive principle (that she connects with the death drive and with the modern unconscious) at work on the site of the modernist canon itself. Contrary to the dominant reading of modernism, which has emphasised the pull towards abstraction and highlighted desire and the pleasure principle in the modernist artwork, Fer emphasises the presence of loss. Her objective is thus to examine the discontinuities entailed in diverse modernist practices, exploring the heterogeneous elements that compose those practices and revealing the points of rupture from the logical circuitry of the modernist imagination (1997: 4-5). Fer's reading leads her to conclude that at the heart of modernist thinking lies the danger of pollution and in all the striving for the Ideal lurks the threat of the stain (1997: 47), a suggestion that links her study to Mary Douglas' analysis of the social importance of the concepts of pollution and taboo (1966), as well as to Kristeva's notion of the abject.

Despite these critical links, Fer's book is above all influenced by Bataille's discussion of the sadistic and destructive impulse found in modern painting²³⁹. As Bataille stated: "un changement de sens contraire a eu lieu de nos jours dans les arts figurés: ceux-ci ont présenté assez brusquement un processus de décomposition et de destruction qui n'a pas été beaucoup moins pénible à beaucoup de gens que ne le serait la vue de la décomposition

²³⁹ Fer's analysis is also very much based on a psychoanalytical account of the subject's formation, albeit not necessarily grounded in a Lacanian or Freudian matrix. In fact, her psychoanalytical reading owes more to the studies conducted by Melanie Klein and her followers, who have stressed the drive towards destruction, violence and death and the presence of phantasies of hate, envy, and greed in very young children. In "Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse" (1929), Klein discusses the role of art as the sublimation of anxieties felt in relation to the ambivalent feelings towards the mother, whom the child both loves and hates.

et de la destruction du cadavre” (1930a: 253). Bataille’s understanding of modern art allows Fer to conclude that: “[r]ather than a digression from the concerns of modern painting, annihilation and obliteration were the concern of modern painting” (1997, 79)²⁴⁰. Fer, therefore, subscribes Bataille’s notion that obscurity (or dust, as Bataille metaphorically refers to it in several of his writings) is a condition of modern painting, as well as his belief that the blurring of sight frequently found in modern artworks corresponds to the blurring of meaning, which becomes necessarily opaque (Fer, 1997: 77)²⁴¹. As Bataille concluded in his analysis of Miró’s paintings: “[p]uis les petits éléments coléreux et aliénés procédèrent à une nouvelle irruption, puis ils disparaissent encore une fois aujourd’hui dans ces peintures, laissant seulement les traces d’on ne sait quel désastre” (1930b: 255). Hence, the dialectic between pleasure and loss found by Fer in the modernist canon is also expressed by a game between visibility and invisibility.

Fer’s and Bataille’s discussion of modern art is relevant to the study of Almeida’s work, for this often shows the game between visibility and invisibility (most important of all, in relation to the artist’s body, but also to spatial referents) and testifies the blurring of sight through sharp cuts imposed by the camera angle or through the recurrent presence of overlaid patches of paint that obscure the subject’s face or body and suggest the opacity of meaning or, in Kristeva’s words, “excess meaning” (1972: 221). These patches may, therefore, be seen as evidence of the stain considered by Fer to be so intrinsic to the modernist Ideal. In addition, the coexistence of several media in the same piece, which thus becomes a hybrid form, and the insistent representation of liminal spaces are elements of Almeida’s art practice that express heterogeneity and discontinuity, both of which are emphasised by Fer and Bataille in their counter-reading of the modernist canon. Following this interpretation to its logical conclusion, it can be said that Almeida’s work evidences the sadistic, deviant, abject and destructive impulse that Bataille and Fer believe to be at the centre of modern art. If this is the case, then there is a carnivalesque principle at stake, through which Almeida has addressed as much as disturbed the modernist imagination²⁴².

²⁴⁰ Bataille’s discussion of modern art is produced in the context of his analysis of drawings by children and primitive art and of his interpretation of some of Miró’s paintings, which, through a process of collage, emphasise decomposition instead of composition and express Miró’s desire to murder painting.

²⁴¹ “Poussière” (dust) is the title of one of Bataille’s essay, in which the critic discusses the pervasive presence of dust in Sleeping Beauty’s awaiting body (1929: 197).

²⁴² Despite not being mentioned by Fer and Bataille, Bakhtin is obviously a tutelary reference in their discussion of modernist art, particularly his research on the novel, in itself a modern art form. According to the Russian critic in *The Dialogic Imagination*, the novel is

Fer's discussion of the modernist canon also leads her to conclude that for the modernist artist pollution, filth and the abject are connected with the feminine (1997: 85). Her analysis is here clearly shaped by Kristeva's, for the latter connects the female body with the abject and the semiotic. According to Kristeva, a woman is simultaneously outside and inside the symbolic, her body is "a threshold where 'nature' confronts 'culture'" (1975: 238) and, as such, she exists in an in-between or liminal space with a power for disruption that lies precisely in the absence of fixed borders and in the capacity to promote co-existence.

Almeida's artwork should be seen as representing such liminal space, especially given that the artist employs her body— a female body— to further suggest that space. The female body is then the threshold that makes possible the co-existence of different moments, media and spaces, abolishing the boundaries between exterior and interior, present and past, self and other. Moreover, by operating with different aesthetic languages, instilling formal ambiguity, or dust, in the artwork, and by facilitating the eruption of paint in the material surface, Almeida's body registers the semiotic in the visual representation.

Sexual difference is, hence, inscribed in Almeida's oeuvre, but the terms of that inscription are, nevertheless, inherently different from those exhibited by the phallogocentric modernist canon. Since she disrupts the normative visual representation of the female body, Almeida can be said to participate of a feminist problematic in art, in other words, of "a radical poetics of difference that is feminine not through depositing some gendered essence but through rupturing the phallic norms of fixed gender, fixed identity, fixed sexualities, fixed boundaries" (Pollock, 1996: 76). Despite her art being often described in formalist and abstract terms, thus participating in the sanctioned history of modernism, the visual re-inscription of the female body it proposes rejects fixed borders, makes possible the existence of liminal spaces and discloses the presence of the semiotic. These aesthetic processes are not devoid of political and social implications and should therefore invite a critical reading aware of the traditional signs of the feminine in the visual economy and of the strategies through which those same signs can be radically disrupted.

a text characterised by carnivalesque and dialogic dimensions that allow the presence of different voices and thus create a liminal and hybrid literary object transgressive of the binary norm (1981b).

3.6 Looking beyond the studio walls

3.6.1 Self, body and place

In the context of Almeida's participation at the Biennale of Venice, in 2005, the artist explained in what ways her work had changed over the years:

[I]t's no longer the problems of painting and drawing, but I am all alone in my work, it's just my body. I sometimes add pigments, but it's not in the same way as I used to do in the beginning, in the 1970s, when it was in order to question painting and drawing. That is no longer there. It's only me in my studio, and my body. . . . Things have changed because it's also my studio that becomes part of my work.²⁴³

Almeida's emphasis on a development in her work suggests that, though the artist is still concerned with the processes and elements of art creation, she is deeply interested in considering her body in relation to the physical space and, more specifically, to the studio where she has always worked. It is as if the artist was asserting *I am here*, an expression that is also the title of a series from 2005 in which Almeida visibly anchors her physical presence in the space that is her studio.

The importance of the studio to Almeida's work is conspicuous in the video installation she prepared for the Biennale. In *A Experiência do Lugar II/The Experience of the Place II* (2004) Almeida goes through the studio on her knees, as if on a prayer, a movement that is also part of a reconnaissance mission intended to explore the relationship between the artist's body and the studio and between that place and the objects that occupy it, for Almeida is seen carrying a stool and a desk lamp, things that, according to the artist, are intrinsically associated with her art practice (*apud Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005)²⁴⁴. This network of relationships forms a symbiotic whole, as suggested by Almeida

²⁴³ Almeida's words come from a documentary in French found, without further bibliographical information, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJ8gFEFtKR4> and under the title "Helena Almeida: Biennale Serie 2005 Lisboa." (accessed 26 May 2009, my translation).

²⁴⁴ Carlos describes *A Experiência do Lugar II/The Experience of the Place II* in terms of a religious experience since, as the critic emphasises, the etymological meaning of the word *religion* is "to re-connect, to bind or tie together". Carlos also mentions that in this work Almeida ironically engages with several religions (not only through the artist's decision to move on her knees, thus connecting her actions to the Catholic faith, but also in her kissing the floor, which recalls the Muslim dogma (*apud Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005).

in her description of this piece: “[i]t is space being touched with the body, in another way. I integrate the space in the body. The floor, the wall, the objects” (*apud* “Helena Almeida.” *Diário de Notícias*. 19 January 2005: n. pag.).

A Experiência do Lugar II/The Experience of the Place II also possesses a dimension of offering, for Almeida kisses the floor, in recognition of the role the studio has played in the creation of her work, just like she acknowledged the contribution of the viewer in *Eu Estou Aqui/I Am Here* (2005) (a project that was also part of Almeida’s presentation in Venice)²⁴⁵. Finally, *A Experiência do Lugar II/The Experience of the Place II* continues the artist’s spatial investigation through video work, a medium previously employed in *A Experiência do Lugar/The Experience of the Place* (2001). This was a commissioned project for the Faculdade de Ciências, Universidade do Porto, where Almeida also examined the spatial surroundings, but the most recent of the two projects brings that investigation closer to home.

As Carlos has justly noticed, in Almeida’s first photographs “the background is white, abstract, neutral and then, progressively, the physical, concrete space shows up, and space becomes more and more present” (2005: 52, my translation). Indeed, if in the beginning the camera closed up on the artist’s body (or on parts of her body), over the years Almeida has increasingly widened the camera angle in order to include the studio, thus answering to a self-confessed need to represent the wall and the floor (Carlos, n.d.: 52)²⁴⁶. Therefore, in the 1990s the camera was already placed further away from the walls so as to reveal other spatial elements, such as the studio floor (*Entrada Negra/Black Entrance* [1995]) and the edges of the room (*Rodapé/Molding* [1999] [Fig. 37]) and by the end of that decade, with the creation of *Dentro de Mim/Inside Me*, series from 1998 and 2000, the studio had definitely conquered a central position, which the projects produced for the Biennale of Venice further confirm.

²⁴⁵ Explaining why she decided to kiss the floor, Almeida concludes: “it was love” (*apud Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005, my translation).

²⁴⁶ In fact, spatial concerns have always been at the centre of Almeida’s art practice, as the artist is the first to acknowledge. When describing her earlier work, Almeida perceives it as already concerned with space since it expressed her desire to let the painting go out or to paint forward by making space the physical support of the painting (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 47).



Figure 37 - Helena Almeida, *Rodapé/Molding* (1999).

Humanist geographers such as Edward S. Casey distinguish between space and place, since the former term merely refers to where things are located, while the latter indicates a human and bodily experiencing (including in historical, cultural and social terms) of physical space: “[t]here may well be space and location in the absence of an embodied self. . . . But in the presence of place there can be no subject other than a corporeal subject” (Casey, 2001: 416). Hence, for Casey not only is there “no place without self and no self without place” (2001: 406), but also the body is in effect placialised (2001: 414), that is, it is “shaped by the places it has come to know and that have come to it- come to take up residence in it, by a special kind of placial incorporation so central to classical Freudian theory. Furthermore, places are themselves altered by our having been in them” (2001: 414)²⁴⁷. Although Almeida does not make the distinction between space and place proposed by Casey, the title chosen for two of her works– *The Experience of the Place*– and the way the artist actively engages with her studio suggest an understanding of place as lived space, that is, space experienced by the self and the body.

A Experiência do Lugar/The Experience of the Place (2001) is one of those rare moments when Almeida produced artwork outside her studio. Several critics like Molina (2005: 14-16) and Martinez (2001: 18-22) have emphasised how Almeida’s focus on

²⁴⁷ Other relevant critics claiming the importance of place in humanist and cultural geography can be found in *Mobilizing Place: Placing Mobility: The Politics of Representation in a Globalized World*, edited by Ginette Verstraete and Tim Cresswell (2002). Elizabeth Grosz has also written on the relation between human embodiment (particularly female embodiment) and lived space, namely in *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (1995).

the representation of her body is accompanied by the way the artist circumscribes her art practice to her studio. By representing her own studio (and representing herself in that place), Almeida could be inviting the viewer to witness the emergence of the personal in the artwork, but, as we have seen, the artist rejects the confessional mode of the self-portrait tradition and occupies such a depurated, almost blank, space, seemingly so devoid of social, political and cultural frames, that she has encouraged critics to describe her art as an aesthetic space existing in a a-historical time. This is a point-of-view I wish to address and challenge by looking into the wider implications of the presence of Almeida's studio in her work.

3.6.2 Fathers of tradition: the artist in his studio

Almeida's studio is situated in Campo de Ourique. This is known as an area of Lisbon inhabited by artists and writers since at least 1946²⁴⁸. In that period, a compound with glass roofs provided working space for artists like Leopoldo de Almeida, Pedro Anjos Teixeira and Lázaro Lozano. One of those studios was later borrowed by Almeida from her father, the sculptor Leopoldo de Almeida. Nevertheless, this studio entered Helena Almeida's life long before her work, for, as she has mentioned, she often used to visit her father in his studio, where she would pose for him as a model (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 44) and showed him her drawings (*apud Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005). It is worth pausing to reflect on Almeida's reminiscences of those days:

When I didn't have school I used to go there. And I felt an immense pleasure in modeling with the cloths... and the silence of the studio, the noise of the salamander; my father making the sculpture. And what I mainly learned with him were the working hours: how much it's necessary to work, hour after hour, under conditions in which you must stop feeling the body. The body doesn't exist and it was also as if my body didn't exist. I was standing there: I was a model, I couldn't be hot nor cold. And that was good. (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 44, my translation)

²⁴⁸ In "Ávalos, notável escultor espanhol está a trabalhar em Portugal", an article from *Século Ilustrado*, dated from 30 November 1946, the reader is informed of the recent "Colony of Artists" in the popular Campo de Ourique neighbourhood, in Lisbon. See Joaquim Saial (2007).

Despite the nostalgic optimism with which Almeida looks into her past and recognises the valuable lessons her father taught her through his practice, her comments also reveal some ambivalence regarding those early days as a model. On the one hand, she expresses gratitude to her father for having shown her the hardship that comes with the process of art creation. That indebtedness is further suggested in the pleasure the artist says to have felt when posing wrapped up in cloths. On the other hand, she also seems to be aware of the objectifying space in which her modeling body was exposed to the artistic gaze— she even acknowledges that her body did not exist while she stood in front of the sculptor without moving. This last remark is particularly relevant since, in contrast to what Almeida felt as the absence of her body as a model, her work has reclaimed the presence of that same body, which is represented as an artist's. If, like Carlos concludes, Almeida refuses the model and being the model of her father's work and creates an oeuvre with her own body and self (*apud Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005), then her art practice must also be seen as a reaction to the objectifying place granted to the female body by a masculine tradition ultimately symbolised by Leopoldo de Almeida.

For Pollock, the power of the patriarchal art tradition and its need to reduce the female body to the objectifying gaze of the male artist is intrinsically connected with “the privileged space of modern art, the studio” (1992: 138). In this space, “the artist is canonically male (signalling the fusion of Culture with masculinity); *his* material is female (the assimilation of nature, matter and femininity)” (1992: 138-39). In other words, in the modernist spatial imagery, the body of the painter and the feminine body occupy opposite places and are hardly interchangeable, for whereas the masculine body of the painter is active and creative, the female body of the model is passive and objectified. Pollock thus finds in the studio, which is also symbolic of art, a social and sexual hierarchy, demonstrating that this is not “*the* discrete space where art is made” (1992: 146), but, like the gallery or the exhibition catalogue, part of: “the signifying system which collectively constitutes the discourse of art. While the spaces of art have specific and local determinants and forms, they are, furthermore, part of a continuum with other economic, social, ideological practices which constitute the social formation as a whole” (1992: 146). According to Pollock, the studio is not just a physical but also an ideological space and its visual representation in the artwork is a process through which social discourses are disseminated and sexual difference, with the adjacent symbolic value of gendered bodies, is reiterated.

Almeida's childhood memories replay the modernist canon by describing an active male sculptor at work in his studio, where a passive and constrained female body is offered to the artist's gaze. The patriarchal implications of this scene are further reinforced by the fact that the male artist is also the father of the female model. In psychoanalytical terms, the family is the primary unit through which the patriarchal order is enforced. This patriarchal order is expressed by the Name of the Father (or Lacan's *nom/n du père*), to whose Law his children must obey. As Freud explained in his essay "Femininity", the daughter complies with the patriarchal law by assimilating her gender difference. Such assimilation is concomitant with seeing the father as the object of desire and envy, as well as with identifying with the mother (although this identification is full of unresolved ambivalence) and accepting her female psychology as "giving preference to *passive aims*" (Freud, 1933: 149, my emphasis). In an interview conceded to Maria João Seixas, Almeida confesses she had always wanted to be an artist because it was what she saw her father doing and what her mother admired (*apud* Seixas, 2004: 28). The artist's comments repeat classic motifs of the psychoanalytical family drama in that they suggest the daughter's envy of or desire for what she lacks— the paternal phallus—, which she understands to be what the mother desires too²⁴⁹.

3.6.3 Questioning the familiar centre

In a challenging and provocative article from 1977, Ernesto de Sousa also addressed the ambivalent relationship Helena Almeida has with the family, be it in personal or art terms, and related the relevance given by the artist to her body, as well as the development and coherence of her work, to the family structure. According to de Sousa, this is experienced in terms of the artist's relation to both her father and Portuguese culture and art tradition, aspects intrinsically connected, given that Leopoldo de Almeida was a representative of the academicism dominant in the Portuguese art system until the 1970s (1977b: 159-60)²⁵⁰. As suggested by de Sousa, the circumstances of Almeida's life produced an ambivalent response in the artist, not only fostering an artistic conscience and a rigorous approach to art production but also the desire to set free from aesthetic conventions.

²⁴⁹ See Laplanche and Pontalis (1967) on penis-envy (302-04) and Oedipus complex (282-87), as well as Elizabeth Wright's feminist discussion of these psychoanalytical terms (1992: 290-96, 303-06).

²⁵⁰ De Sousa's article first appeared in *Colóquio Artes*, in 1977, and was added to his posthumously edited book *Ser Moderno...em Portugal*, from 1998.

This familiar picture, again both in personal and in art terms, produced a crisis of expression experienced by Almeida in 1969-70 that ultimately led to the fusion of Almeida's body and the canvas (1977b: 160). De Sousa interpreted this change as the result of Almeida's interest in destroying the terms through which the *familiar* is constructed and perceived (1977b: 163). He also concluded that, though expressed in different ways throughout her career, Almeida's questioning of the familiar corresponded to an investigation of the centre (1977b: 159), to which the diverse family structures (personal, artistic) ultimately correspond.

As feminist criticism has argued, the notion of a centre is intrinsically connected with the phallo-centric order, a hegemonic structure articulated through a set of binary oppositions that privilege some signifiers and exclude to the margins everything deemed other (other race, other gender, other sexuality). By questioning the *familiar centre* and engaging ambivalently with it, Almeida performs a subversive move through which the power of the phallogocentric authority is undermined and a new way of understanding difference is proposed.

3.6.3.1 Escaping from the familiar: the female artist in her studio

In the 1970s, Almeida created several pieces where she was trying to open up a space, to get out at any cost (*Retratos: Obras da Coleção da Caixa Geral de Depósitos*, 2005: 27). Works like *Tela Habitada/Inhabited Canvas* (1976), *Desenho Habitado/Inhabited Drawing* (1976), *Pintura Habitada/Inhabited Painting* (1977) or *Retrato de Família/Family Portrait* (1979) [Fig. 38] represent Almeida claiming that aesthetic space for herself and her body.

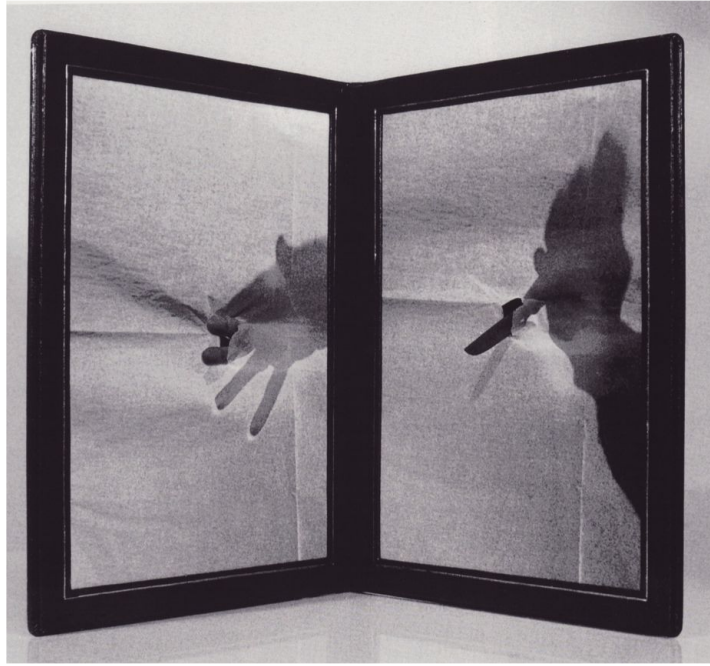


Figure 38 - Helena Almeida, *Retrato de Família/Family Portrait* (1979).

Retrato de Família/Family Portrait is particularly interesting, as it depicts a pair of hands, one of them with a knife, tearing, from behind, the paper held on a gate-fold photo frame; its title implicitly connects the artist's violent and disruptive action, which is also assertive of her power, with her desire to break from familiar approaches to art, in the dual meaning given to the term *familiar* by de Sousa, and assert her presence in the visual field from a marginal position previously invisible. In the other mentioned works from this period, the repetition of the word *inhabited* (one of the artist's favourite words, showing up regularly in the titles of her works) is certainly linked to a sense of lived or experienced place. Therefore, this word emphasises the spatial dimension of Almeida's art, not only suggesting that the artwork is a space inhabited by the body (Carlos, n.d.: 23), but also that there is an intimate relationship between Almeida and her studio. In those cases where it verbalises the cutting moment visually represented, the word *inhabit* confirms Almeida's desire to conquer a space for herself in the art system and the art tradition, both of which symbolically represented by the art studio²⁵¹.

²⁵¹ In his geophilosophical inquiry of the notion of place, Casey mentions the relevance of the concepts of habitus (derived from Bourdieu's use of the term) and habitation for an understanding of the active, social and subjective meaning of place. He says that both terms link place and self; however, "[i]f habitus represents a movement from the externality of established customs and norms to the internality of durable dispositions, habitation is a matter of re-externalization— of taking the habitus that has already been acquired and enacting it anew in the place-world" (2001: 413). As Casey's definitions suggest, habitation implies a re-enactment of internalized customs and norms, it is habitus put into action. When Almeida engages with and transgresses the normative space of the studio in her art practice,

For feminist critics such as Pollock the visual space desired by Almeida is, indeed, hard to conquer by women due to the problematic created by a regime that perceives the body of the painter as essentially male and the studio as the place where that male painter exerts control over his model's female body. The contrasting placement and signification of those two opposite-gendered bodies has led Pollock to conclude that when women want to make art, they also want "the right to enjoy being the body of the painter in the studio—the creative self in a private domain" (1992: 140). As Pollock's conclusion implies, a woman's art can be discussed in spatial terms, since it involves a dislocation of the place traditionally occupied (or inhabited) by women in the studio. The studio thus acquires a different symbolism in women's art practice and one that will question the patriarchal order sustaining the traditional connotations of that space.

Working and representing herself as an artist in what used to be her father's studio, Helena Almeida performs a series of socially subversive moves, undermining the patriarchal framing of art as much as the family romance described by psychoanalysis. By taking on the role of the artist, she is obviously transgressing the spatial and gender polarities of the modernist canon described by Pollock and she is, in that sense, creating a new place, with effort, due to the weight of the masculine tradition in art production and reception. Almeida's transgression is particularly subversive since by adopting both the position of the artist and that of the model, she does not merely reverse the gender roles, creating instead new possibilities of representation that reject the binary opposition between the body of the male artist and the body of the female model. This is explicitly suggested in *Pintura Habitada/Inhabited Painting* (1974) [Fig. 39], where Almeida appears wrapped up in white cloths (like the ones she remembers wearing when she modelled for her father), painting with a brush the space in front of the easel. The artist is model and painter, object and subject, in an ironic revision of art tradition. In addition, she is also stealing the power (represented by the artist's tools—the brush or the chisel) from the male artist and the father, refusing to conform to the model of passive femininity assigned to her sex.

she is also re-externalising customs and norms, namely those of the art establishment. She is, therefore, 'habitating' or inhabiting that subjective and social place.



Figure 39 - Helena Almeida, *Pintura Habitada/Inhabited Painting* (1974).

Hence, for Molina Almeida's work is set against the rhetorical tradition of feminine gestures and postures, as if the artist's body had fallen (or freed itself) from the plinth symbolically represented by Almeida's father (2005: 26), a conclusion also reached by Carlos, who opposes Almeida's work to the monumental scale of traditional sculpture, personified by Leopoldo de Almeida (2005: 43). Contrary to her father's practice, Almeida has created a hybrid art form (where sculpture still plays a part, as acknowledged by the artist [*apud Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa*, 2005]), radical in its methods and focused on the body— the body of a female artist who asserts her presence in the visual and cultural fields. Nevertheless, by working in her father's studio, Almeida situates her subversive gesture within the patriarchal tradition, spatially symbolized by Leopoldo de Almeida's working space, and questions the stereotypes associated with that place. The inherited studio may thus be said to represent Almeida's desire to inscribe her art in the dominant male art tradition, but the way she perceives herself and her body in that space also shows her determination in appropriating that art tradition in her own terms.

3.6.4 Beyond the studio walls: the Portuguese dictatorship

The patriarchal connotations of Almeida's studio are also related to the authoritarian regime under which the artist worked in the first decades of her career, given that it was

there that Leopoldo de Almeida produced work commissioned by *Estado Novo* (as the fascist-leaning right-wing dictatorial regime installed in Portugal, in 1933, by António de Oliveira Salazar came to be known). Although Helena Almeida has justified her father's connivance with the dictatorship by saying that he had had no choice but to participate in the commissioned circuit if he wanted to survive as an artist and achieve some financial stability (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 44), she has also expressed her need to demarcate her work from that political context: "I didn't like that my father had to respond to all of those commissions. I would like him to do more what pleased him, because when he did what pleased him, he would do beautiful things. Maybe it's because of that that I have been so radical in my work, as if I was afraid of being caught in the trap of the commissions" (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 44, my translation).

Works such as *Estudo para Dois Espaços Study for Two Spaces* (1977), *Ouve-me/Hear me* (1979) and *A Casa/The House* (1981) may visually represent Helena Almeida's desire to be radical and detach her art from the authoritarian regime with which her father complied, since the entrapped body seen in these photographs seems to retrospectively allude to a social moment when civil liberties were curtailed, the right to move and speak freely denied and oppression constantly felt, even at the bodily level. Phelan also sees Almeida's recurrent representation of her body as a reaction to the lack of freedom experienced in Portugal, in the 1960s. As she explains:

[W]hen the return to figuration associated to Pop Art happens in London or in New York in the Sixties, it may well represent a refusal of abstract expressionism in those places, as it is usually claimed. In other places, however, the return to figuration, especially when it inspires the artist to use his/her own body as *medium*, may also represent an answer to the suppression of human dignity by the war, the dictatorship and/or aggressive capitalism. For Helena Almeida, the possibilities of figuration and the notion of the body as *medium* were central, although they do not constitute by or in themselves any type of immediate political or psychological liberation. (2005: 72-75, my translation)

In a repressive period when personal integrity and subjective liberties were permanently threatened and the body possibly crushed and violated by a dominant and brutal power, Almeida's decision to figuratively represent her body acquires a localised and historical significance.

3.6.4.1 Feminine difference during *Estado Novo*

When Almeida began exhibiting her work, in the late 1960s, there were visible signs of opposition to the established order in Portugal, despite the control and repression exercised by the dictatorship and its enforcing organisations. An increased and more dynamic resistance to the regime, propelled by the expectations of an effective reformation created by the *Primavera Marcelista* (1968-1970), would eventually lead to the end of the dictatorship in 25 April 1974.

Portuguese women were an active part of this public contestation, associating themselves to other victims of repression and participating in oppositional groups, the majority of which were clandestine. In addition to the fight for liberty and democracy, these women were also demanding gender equality and access to the public sphere. As Vanda Gorjão mentions in her insightful analysis of the female and feminist opposition to *Estado Novo*, most women's groups and commissions integrating the oppositional movements of the period were demanding civil rights for women, as well as their social, cultural and economical promotion (2007: 119)²⁵². The authoritarian regime was thus also understood and experienced by women as a patriarchal one. This is not surprising, given that during the forty-two years of *Estado Novo* Portuguese women saw their rights and liberties drastically curtailed by an ideology that masked a differentiation of rights according to gender differences under an apparent reinforcement of women's social value and function (Pimentel, 2007: 91) and by a dictator who "considered women not as individuals, someone with rights, but as mythified beings, existing always in relation to men and as fundamental pieces to the family" (Ana Vicente, 2007: 66, my translation). Ana Paula Ferreira therefore concludes that in this period:

[T]he feminine difference is not simply a cultural construction, a taboo or a prejudice inherited from tradition but, in fact, assumes the legal status of social and political difference institutionalized by the Constitution of 1933. This difference is disseminated by a whole

²⁵² According to Ana Vicente, in relation to the feminist movement in Portugal: "[t]he quality of the feminist thought and action, both of women and men, in the first half of the twentieth century is in everything similar to what was happening in some European countries. However, where the situation becomes distinctive is in the dimension and the strength of the obstacles placed, in a much more active way, to women's emancipation" (2007: 70, my translation). Moreover, though women's issues were not ignored by oppositional groups during the dictatorial period, they were often diluted in the general antifascist struggle and in the defense of democracy and socialism (Gorjão, 2007: 118). These factors lead Gorjão to the conclusion that by the beginning of the 1970s: "the women's movement in Portugal had almost no expression" (2007: 120, my translation).

range of symbolic practices that address Portuguese women and intend to make them aware of their mission as wives-mothers, ‘angels-in-the-house’ who reproduce the nationalist and colonialist ideology of the ‘Portuguese Home’. (1999: n. pag., my translation)²⁵³

As Ferreira clarifies, the obstacles to Portuguese women’s emancipation were many until the democratic revolution of 1974²⁵⁴.

3.6.4.2 Portuguese women artists and the dictatorship

Despite of, or as a result of the oppressive power exercised by the dictatorship in all levels of women’s lives, some Portuguese women artists were determined to address that situation and explore in their art practice experiences specific to women. Ana Hatherly’s work from the 1970s is particularly relevant in its effort to make art a political space, capable of expressing the social circumstances of the period. In 1977, Hatherly created a series of collages entitled *As Ruas de Lisboa/The Streets of Lisbon*, where she suggests the exhilarating and carnivalesque freedom achieved through the democratic revolution. Clara Menéres’s work from the same period also exhibits a strong political intervention (for example in *Jaz Morto e Arrefece o Menino de Sua Mãe/Lies Dead, Turning Cold, the Mother’s Boy*, from 1973), to which the artist often adds a feminist problematic by bringing to the centre of her work the feminine body (as in *O Parto/The Delivery*, from 1963). Another artist whose work has reflected the conditions of Portuguese society in the twentieth century and who has been particularly alert to the oppressive effects of patriarchy on women

²⁵³ The lack of citizenship rights for Portuguese women during the *Estado Novo* period was further expressed through a series of laws and decrees. Although the regime granted the vote to some women, only after 25 April 1974 does the right of vote become universal. Regarding women’s judicial situation, the celebration of the Concordat between the Holy Church and the Portuguese state in 1940 meant that all the couples married by the church were no longer allowed to get divorced. Moreover, in 1967 the new *Código Civil* (the Civil Law) kept the husband as the head of the family, which was represented by him; the couple’s assets, as well as the wife’s, could only be administrated by the husband; women were still forced to adopt the husband’s address and unable to leave the country or move deposits without the husband’s consent. As for women’s education, Salazar promoted a specifically feminine education, creating for that effect technical degrees and schools where women could learn how to be nurses, social workers or primary school teachers. For a further analysis of women’s social position during *Estado Novo* see Pimentel (2007: 90-107).

²⁵⁴ Despite the obstacles to Portuguese women’s emancipation, in 1972 Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Velho da Costa (also known as ‘As Três Marias/The Three Marias’) published *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, which still is a national and international reference for feminist literature and politics. The book, described by Maria Alzira Seixo as a mixture between a determinately social act and an individual fictional work (1998: n. pg.), introduced feminist writing in Portuguese literature and had an impact that immediately extrapolated the limits of literature and art in general, since it was censored and its writers brought to trial in 1973. See also Maria Graciete Besse, “As *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* e a Contestação do Poder Patriarcal” (2006) and Ana Luísa Amaral, “Desconstruindo Identidades: Ler *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* à Luz da Teoria Queer” (2001).

and their bodies is Paula Rego. Rego, whose work began in the 1950s (her first group exhibition happened in London, in 1955, and her first solo in Lisbon, in 1965), recurrently addresses women's social and historical position, exposing the way their bodies have been the locus of male fear, desire and control but also expressing how these bodies can become the focus of female resistance and power. This ambivalence placed between victimization and power is often played in Rego's paintings through family narratives centred on the experiences of women, as it is the case in the *Red Monkey* series, from the early 1980s, or in *The Family* (1985), *The Policeman's Daughter* (1987) and *Snow White Playing with her Father's Trophies* (1995). These works show that in the familial structure gender differences are reinforced but also subverted.

Although Rego has been living in London since 1976, her imaginary is still very much framed by her Portuguese upbringing and, as such, by the effects of the dictatorship, witnessed first-hand until the artist moved to England shortly after the democratic revolution of 1974. Her early works, which often imply violence, even in formal terms by means of a collage process involving a cycle of "creation, destruction and recreation" (Bradley, 2002: 10), focused on Salazar's authoritarian regime, as in *Salazar Vomiting the Homeland* (1960), *When We Had a House in the Country* (1961) and *The Exile* (1963). Her subsequent works still establish a connection with the repressive period of the dictatorship, which had one of its touchstones in the promotion of traditional family values, by referring to the family and the position occupied and transgressed by women in it. As Rego commented in 1993: "I was being repressed and restrained by my mother, not Salazar. Maybe the authoritarian thing comes right through to the kid, who takes it out on the dog or the doll" (*apud Jaggi*, 2004: n. pag.).

The importance played by the Portuguese dictatorial regime in Rego's work is further suggested by Maya Jaggi, who has noticed that a "hatred of political persecution still surfaces in her work, as in her 2000 pastel series, *The Interrogator's Garden*" (2004: n. pag.). This is a painting that, according to Rego, came out of her "contempt for bullies: when the secret police interrogate a victim on their own, they can do whatever they like" (*apud Jaggi*, 2004: n. pag.). Rego could here be referring to PIDE (Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado), the law enforcing arm of *Estado Novo*, notorious for employing torture as an interrogation method.

3.6.4.3 Helena Almeida, Paula Rego: gendered affinities

It is interesting to notice that Helena Almeida admires and feels deeply connected with Rego's work. Of the latter the former says "she is my favourite Portuguese woman painter, by far; I feel a strong affinity with her world" (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 54, my translation)²⁵⁵. Almeida's words may seem strange due to the many differences that separate the two artists in question: Rego is a printmaker and a painter, whereas Almeida employs hybrid media and usually relies on photography; Rego's work is often underpinned by a narrative intention and the artist frequently draws her subjects from fictional texts, nursery rhymes or tales she heard in her childhood, while Almeida's does not evidence such intertextual dimension; moreover, Almeida has made her body the main subject of her work, while Rego has always employed models other than herself; finally, Rego's paintings are openly embedded in their socio-cultural context, exploring the position of women in it and the way they negotiate that position, whereas Almeida creates an almost abstract artistic intervention.

Nevertheless, Almeida has referred that she shares a "strong affinity" with Rego. Such affinity is reinforced by the fact that Rego is critically described as a painter who tells stories of women through her visual work (Macedo, 2004) and Almeida also characterises her art practice as "ways of telling a story" (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 53, my translation), thus suggesting that both artists embrace a subjective point-of-view and an urge to be heard. These characteristics are also frequent in contemporary female art production that has fought against women's invisibility and discrimination by the art establishment and sought to inscribe in it their experiences and perspective. In fact, looking at the affinity between the two Portuguese artists through the prism of their shared gender can help explain Almeida's appreciation of Rego.

Almeida has also identified with women artists in general: "[m]y work could only have been made by me. I am a woman. But I don't see it inscribed in a feminine gender, because that designation excludes the person, my specificity. But I frequently identify myself with the work of other women, it's natural, it has to do with my issues (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 54, my translation). Just as Almeida identifies with Rego's "world", she also relates to other women artists and recognises that her art shares "issues" with these women's. Her

²⁵⁵ Almeida employs the feminine gender of the portuguese word *painter* [*pintora*]; her words thus seem to indicate that the artist has a gendered appreciation of Rego and her work.

words, therefore, reinforce the need to investigate in what ways her work reflects a female embodiment and subjectivity. On the other hand, Almeida's quoted comment expresses ambivalence towards the gendering of her artwork, or the reading of that work in terms of gender. In this respect, she is very different from Rego, who has often professed her alliance to the feminist cause, but she shares her ambivalence with many other women artists, who are afraid of their work being placed in an aesthetic ghetto and deemed inferior when discussed in terms of sexual difference²⁵⁶. As Pollock concludes: "what women artists make is located in a space categorically different from that of art" (1979: 172).

In works such as *Joseph's Dream* (1990) and *The Artist in her Studio* (1993) Rego showed that she was also interested in discussing the social position of women in art terms, given that in these paintings she subverts the place occupied by women in art tradition. *Joseph's Dream*, a subversive reading of Philippe de Champaigne's *The Dream of Saint Joseph* (c. 1638), is particularly revealing, for with this painting Rego dismisses the traditional role played by women in art, that is, that of model, inspiring muse and object of the male gaze, and instead represents a woman who assumes the role of the artist. Hence, it is the woman who is in charge of the studio as much of the aesthetic process and who controls and directs the viewer's gaze. By comparison, the male model, defenceless in his sleep and old age, seems incapable of controlling anything, least of all the hefty woman artist, and is at the mercy of her gaze. Though it is not clearly a self-portrait, Rego's painting has something of self-representation, since it portrays a woman artist in her studio. It therefore denounces an effort to move women from the object to the subject position.

Joseph's Dream is a good example of what Macedo, in her article "Through the Looking-glass: Paula Rego's Visual Rhetoric, an 'Aesthetic of Danger'", describes as Rego's "oblique relationship with tradition" (Mar. 2001: 68). Such tradition is culturally formulated in masculine terms and subverted by Rego through appropriation and rewriting strategies, as well as through a parody of high art, as Macedo also refers in the same article (Mar. 2001: 72)²⁵⁷. In *Joseph's Dream* that parody involves the displacement of opposite

²⁵⁶ See Ana Gabriela Macedo's *Paula Rego e o Poder da Visão: A Minha Pintura É como uma História Interior* (2010), which emphasises Rego's interest in the feminist cause. Anne Wagner mentions that the women artists under consideration in her book *Three Artists, (Three Women)* (1996), were all very ambivalent towards the definition of their work as female and connects such ambivalence with the way women artists and their work are perceived and (under)valued by the art establishment.

²⁵⁷ Another good example of Rego's parodic revision of the art tradition and its masculine framing is her triptych *Crivelli's Garden (The Visitation)* (1990), which was inspired by Carlo Crivelli's *La Madonna della Rondine* (after 1490). Both Crivelli's and de Champaigne's

gendered bodies from the positions occupied by the same in the studio of art tradition. The painting thus demonstrates Hutcheon's notion of parody as "imitation characterized by ironic inversion" (1985: 6), that is, a differential repetition that produces recognition as much as transgression, in this case of women's place in high art.

From Rego's work we return to Almeida and her studio, since, as Rego in the painting just discussed, Almeida too performs a parodical and critical movement through which the artist appropriates a patriarchal tradition in order to rewrite it in her own terms, through a process that involves the repositioning of the female body in the artwork and in the artist's working space. That repositioning of the female gendered body is particularly humouristic in Almeida's early works, where the artist is seen grinning while she ironically wears the canvas, but is also visible in her entire oeuvre, through which she subverts the modernist canon and the discourse of high art, as well as the place allocated to women in a phallogocentric social structure, such as the one acutely experienced by Portuguese women until 1974.

By assuming a role different from the housewife's, Helena Almeida, who was already married and with children when she began exhibiting her work in the 1960s, was in clear defiance of the idealised image of womanhood proposed by *Estado Novo* and of its conservative notion of the nuclear family. That idealised image was suggestively questioned in works like *A Casa/The House* (1981) [Fig. 40], in which the juxtaposition of the domestic world invoked by its title with the artist's face obliterated by a white screen and black lines, running down the face like bloody ropes (Phelan, 2005: 75), suggests the condition of invisibility and the violence to which women and their bodies were subjected by Salazar's patriarchal ideology.

paintings are on display at The National Gallery, in London, and are thus included in the art canon also by virtue of their presence in that art institution.

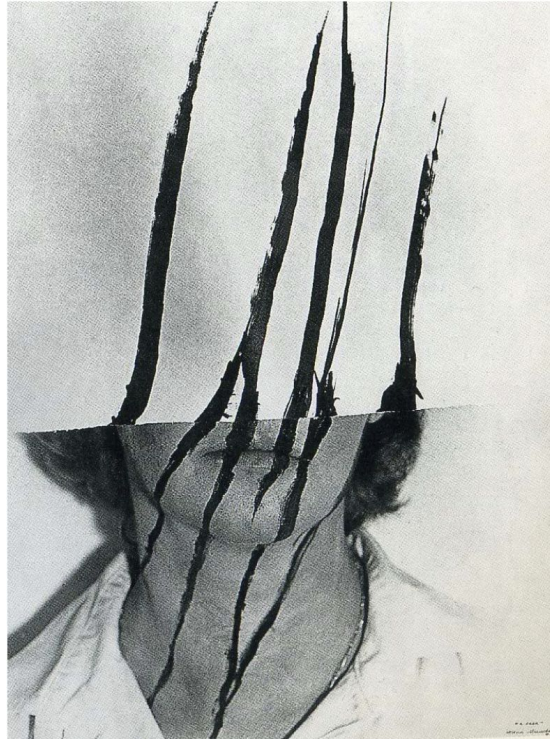


Figure 40 - Helena Almeida, *A Casa/The House* (1981).

When considering the private sphere allocated to women under his dictatorial regime, Almeida's art practice offers a stark contrast by emphasising an aesthetic of corporeal presence that places the female body of the artist in the centre of the artwork and grants power to the female gender in the art context and in the public domain. When Almeida first exhibited her work in 1967, she was already thirty-three years old, a detail that tells much about the difficulties of being an artist and a woman artist in Portugal, during a conservative regime that denied equality to women. Almeida's self-portraits may thus be perceived as a way of affirming the artist's professionalism and her right to being the artist in the studio. Moreover, by usurping the place occupied by her father in the studio, Almeida is also defying the child's obedience to and respect for the father. This was a crucial part of the ideology promulgated by *Estado Novo*, since obedience to the head of the family mirrored the obedience due to the head of the state.

3.6.5 Subversion from within

Just as Rego subverts from within (within established social organisations, like the family, within the art tradition), so does Almeida perform a similar intervention when she works and repositions her body in the male artist's studio. Almeida's studio should then be

discussed not just as the private space where the artist has been creating her work, but as a place that is “part of a continuum with other economic, social, ideological practices which constitute the social formation as a whole” (Pollock, 1992: 146). It is this social and historical repositioning of Almeida’s working space that has allowed us to establish a connection between her work and Rego’s and to talk about the shared experiences of women artists. What is needed, then, is a critical consideration of those gendered experiences and their relation to the socio-cultural, political and historical circumstances existing beyond the artist’s studio because they all are, nevertheless, still implicated in the creative process happening inside that very same space.

In this section I have tried to see beyond the walls of Helena Almeida’s bare studio and to associate the artist’s representation of her body in the studio, which, at first sight, seems so ‘un-representative’ and abstract, with relevant aspects of feminist-oriented criticism. Such a critical dislocation intended to demonstrate that even the analysis of an art so depurated and scarce in contextual and historical references, as Almeida’s is, cannot remain shut to the relevance of the study of gender in contemporary art production. Although Almeida’s photographs only reveal the artist’s body enclosed in the studio, this is still a place where the social, the political and gender difference are inscribed. Therefore, when Almeida, talking about her studio, says it is “where it all happens” (*apud* Seixas, 2004: 31), that statement should be taken in its wider implications: the studio is the place where Almeida has permanently grounded her art practice and where she has explored the relationship of her body with space, transforming abstract space into lived place; it is also where she has dialogued with the art canon and a dictatorial regime inherently patriarchal and where she has displaced both by a process that undermines the rules of art tradition and ironically subverts the position traditionally occupied by women in the family and in the artist’s working space. The studio is also where, as we shall see, Almeida has abandoned the traditional methods of art creation and embraced a more pluralistic notion for the artist and the self.

3.7 Artistic marriages: self, other and the nature of Almeida’s collaborative work

In the previous sections Helena Almeida was said to subvert the male art tradition in which she is even physically inscribed by focusing on the woman artist and her body, thus

defying the place traditionally occupied by women in the artist's studio. No longer offered to the paralysing and objectifying power of the male artist/gaze, Almeida's body controls the creative act and directs the viewer's attention, while the woman artist affirms her power as an artistic subject in her own right.

However, it is not Almeida but her husband, Artur Rosa, who has been behind the camera and taken the photographs that constitute an essential part of her work. This detail raises several questions: are Almeida and her body ultimately capitulating to the male gaze, occupying once again the position of powerless objects in the visual economy? What is the reason for this collaborative process and what function does it possess? The next subchapter will seek to address the nature of such artistic marriage.

3.7.1 Giving a hand: Helena Almeida and Artur Rosa

Almeida has commented that in her work nothing is left to chance, since everything is previously decided and carefully planned:

[B]efore I always make drawings of the situations I want to photograph. In fact, since the 1980s I have used video in order to experiment, because a gesture can be very deceiving: a hand in a different place is already something else. So, I first rehearse it with the camera. The photograph is the last part of the work, it's like the champagne cork when it pops. But before it there is a lot of work. (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 51, my translation)

Her unique method is fascinating in several ways. First of all, it is another evidence of a hybrid art practice, as the use of scripts, drafts and even video suggests a cinematic influence and emphasises the performative and temporal dimensions of the artwork. Moreover, by relying on media other than photography and placing herself in front, and never behind, the camera, Almeida further complicates her relationship with the photographic medium, at the same time that the preparatory scripts and the detailed annotations confirm her tight control over the image²⁵⁸. This may even be one of the reasons why the artist does not take the photographs herself, since that could make the careful planning more difficult to follow. Last but not least, by requiring her husband to photograph her body's rehearsed movements and positions, Almeida brings into her work the question of collaboration without offering

²⁵⁸ In December 2006, Galeria Filomena Soares, in Lisbon, held an exhibition dedicated to Almeida's preliminary drawings. These proved the amount of detail and precision put by the artist into the preparatory phase of her work.

any straightforward answer to it. In fact, it is difficult to assess if the consorted function attributed to husband and wife is a collaborative practice, which would imply “united labour, co-operation; *esp.* in literary, artistic, or scientific work”, as the term *collaboration* is described in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989: 469), or a process by which Rosa merely assists Almeida with the camera, giving a hand (almost in a literal sense) to his wife²⁵⁹. If so, then Rosa does not take the traditional place of the male artist, in charge of the artistic process and in control of the woman’s body. His function would be merely technical, as he closely follows the detailed instructions given by his wife, who prepares the shots beforehand and creates scripts to be rigorously followed at the moment of execution.

3.7.2 Reinventing tradition: collaboration in the process of art creation

In an interview from 1997, Almeida discussed the way through which her photographs were produced and explained why it was always her husband taking them: “[b]ecause it is important that the photographs happen in the same physical place where I have thought and projected them. As such, it has to be someone close to me. . . . For me it’s not important that who photographs knows a lot about photography; it doesn’t have to be a professional photographer. Technical perfection is not fundamental for my work” (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 51, my translation). Her comment again stresses that the artist is in complete charge of the process through which her body, let us not forget a female body, becomes visually represented. It also confirms that she does not consider herself to be a photographer, since photography is not the main focus of her work. This could also explain her refusal to being behind the camera. As for the other person involved in the art process, that is, Artur Rosa, Almeida suggests that his participation is the result of the personal relationship he has with the artist (she seems to feel more at ease and better understood with him around), rather than of his technical skill as a photographer. As she has recently admitted: “[i]t was by chance that everything started. He had the camera and he was near me. Then things started to work really well. He is the person with whom I talk, to whom I show the drawings” (*apud* Lusa, 18 Nov. 2008: n. pag., my translation)²⁶⁰. Rosa is therefore more than an assistant with a secondary and minor role, showing up in Almeida’s art practice in a position of dialogue with the artist.

²⁵⁹ Rosa has described his participation in Almeida’s art practice as helping with his hands. He has also mentioned that he does not really take photographs, but merely triggers the camera shutter (*apud* Helena Almeida: *A Segunda Casa*, 2005).

²⁶⁰ Almeida reiterates her ongoing dialogue with Rosa in the documentary *Helena Almeida: A Segunda Casa* (2005).

A productive and communicative process held between Almeida and Rosa may also result from the fact that, though mainly known as an architect, Rosa is also an artist, with an aesthetic vocabulary shared by Almeida, since he too moves at the crossroads of several different disciplines, most notably sculpture and architecture, but also painting, performance art and installation. Also similarly to Almeida's, Rosa's art practice has often indulged in optical games and his experiments in painting have attempted to supersede the flatness of the medium by launching lines and geometric objects into three-dimensional space (like in one of his most well-known pieces: *Evolução de um Triângulo numa Malha Logarítmica/Evolution of a Triangle in a Logarithmic Net*, from 1966).

As already discussed, a familiar environment is conveyed by the spatial bearings of Almeida's work, which are well known to the artist, given that the studio belonged to her father and was regularly visited by her as a young girl. As such, the studio becomes much more than a working place, for it is a lived one, where personal and familial relationships are interwoven with the physical space and the creative process. Not only is Almeida flirting with a predominantly male art tradition when she interacts in and with the studio, but also reinventing it and the position occupied by opposite genders in the art system. I want to suggest that the collaborative methodology followed by Almeida in the process of photographing her body has also contributed to the artist's reinvention of tradition, for she has chosen her husband and fellow artist to register her intentions and, as a result, she has further contaminated her art practice with the personal and the private. Moreover, by working with Rosa, Almeida has also destabilised the normative notion of the artist and the sanctioned origin of art creation by pluralising the art process and complexifying the place of the artist in the studio. In other words, because it disseminates the aesthetic action through several bodies and subjects, Almeida's art practice denies a fixed, single and original subjective source, something fundamental to the romantic notion of authorship still dominating the contemporary art system.

3.7.3 Women's art and the dynamics of public and private spheres

As mentioned by Almeida, she has benefited from her husband's collaboration because "he was there" (*apud* Lusa, 18 Nov. 2008: n. pag.), thus confirming the inscription of a personal dimension in her work. A connection between art creation and the private or personal sphere is common in women's art practice. In fact, it is visible in some of the most discussed feminist works, from Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79), to Martha

Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) or *Feministo: Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife* (1975-77). The latter was a postal event that took place around Britain and through which women held up from the public sphere by their domestic lives communicated with each other, using that same domestic world of household chores and childrearing as the content and material of their messages²⁶¹. Moreover, projects like *Feministo* were a strong reaction to the gendered image of the artist as genius, proposing in its place an emphasis on the collective experiences of women and on the collaborative production of artworks, for they were created through a network of women (not all of them artists in the traditional meaning given to the term), who were thus openly rejecting the sanctioned and authoritative ways of art production.

In the Portuguese context, the contamination of the art object by a personal and domestic dimension can be found in Paula Rego's art practice, for the artist has employed Lila Nunes, the woman hired to look after Victor Willing after him being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, as her favourite model for more than 35 years. Such contamination is also implicit in Lourdes Castro's work: in 1963 Castro created a series of boxes with glued and painted objects, old or unattractive things found at home, whereas *O Grande Herbário de Sombras/The Great Herbarium of Shadows*, created during the summer of 1972, reproduces on heliographic paper exposed directly to the sun more than one hundred different botanical species collected by the artist in the island of Madeira, where she was born and to where she returned in 1983 (Castro, Fernandes and Rosa, 2010: 159, 164). In addition, with *Teatro de Sombras/Shadow Theatre*, a long-standing project (1973-1985) created with her husband, and also artist, Manuel Zimbro, Castro displaces the narcissism of the modernist artist and emphasises the collaborative quality of some of her work.

Meskimmon emphasises that since women have had to work with the people and spaces available to their sphere of action, domestic time and space have often been used by these artists in their work (1996: 74). Women artists have thus played with the dynamics of interior and exterior, confounding distinctions between inside and outside, domesticity and professionalism, art and craft, public and private spaces, and creating "a concerted political effect in the fact that all of those boundaries are socially regulated in order to keep them in place" (Meskimmon, 1996: 161). Catherine de Zegher also draws attention to contemporary art practices "defined by inclusion, connectivity, conversation, construction, constituting and

²⁶¹ See Parker and Pollock (1987: 206-214) for a discussion of *Feministo* and the exhibition associated with this art event.

even healing attitudes” (2006: 216). She sums them up as an “aesthetics of relation and reciprocity”, which, according to this critic, results “in the greater part, from the work of women artists” (2006: 216).

Of course that the artist Helena Almeida has enjoyed a particular and even privileged position since, as mentioned by de Sousa, she is the daughter, wife and mother of artists (1977b: 165) and belongs to a certain cultivated and privileged Portuguese bourgeoisie interested in the arts (1977b: 160)²⁶². Nevertheless, Almeida has still used the people and places familiar and available to her, as confirmed by the participation of her husband and the importance played by her father and his studio in her work, and, as such, her art still evidences the fusion of domesticity and professionalism, public and private spheres, found by Meskimmon in the work of many other women artists. It is also the dual positioning of Almeida in relation to these binaries and the collaborative nature of her work that inserts the same in a female art tradition.

A dialectic between interior and exterior has been an integral part of Almeida’s art practice and the theme is even central to some of her early works, which explore the dynamics of inside and outside by disrupting the limits of the canvas and bringing the painting out, as in *Tela Rosa para Vestir/Pink Canvas to Wear* (1969) and *Tela Habitada/Inhabited Canvas* (1976), or by exhibiting the tension between the oppositions ‘in’ and ‘out’, ‘this’ and ‘other’, like in the series of photographs entitled *Estudo para Dois Espaços/Study for Two Spaces*, from 1977. In 2006 Almeida returned to the theme, creating *Dois Espaços/Two Spaces*, a series in which the artist evidences the desire to abolish boundaries and create a third and plural space from the intersection of exterior and interior. Similarly to her works from the 1970s, Almeida’s body plays a crucial role in these photographs, but whereas in the earlier series that body was the element that made possible the coexistence of different spaces, elements and experiences, now it is synonymous with an interior or inside space (suggested by the central position occupied by this body in the studio and in the photographic composition) that is sometimes invaded (as the photographic image also is) by an-other, peripheral and marginal body. One of the works in this series [Fig. 41] is particularly suggestive because it represents two bodies (with the recognisable codified signs of opposite genders) intersecting each other. Here *Dois Espaços/Two Spaces* disrupts subjective and socially drawn boundaries, which not only separate inside from outside, but

²⁶² Almeida is also the mother of the artist Joana Rosa.

also centre from margin, self from other, male from female, proposing in its place a third and hybrid spatial, cultural and subjective dimension, where an assertive and ‘trans-gressive’ otherness, moving from its marginal position and traversing space, touches the self and claims a place in the centre of visual representation²⁶³.



Figure 41 - Helena Almeida, *Dois Espaços/ Two Spaces* (2006).

3.7.4 In conversation: dialogues between self and other

The dialogic condition of Almeida’s practice is deeply linked to Rosa’s contribution to it. This was first put forward visually in 1979, in a series of photographs called *Ouve-me/Hear Me* [Fig. 42], where the communicative intention or desire expressed by the title starts in and with Almeida and ends as a two-way process in which Almeida and Rosa are indiscriminately involved. In these photographs, a paper balloon, reminiscent of the word

²⁶³ The male body represented in *Dois Espaços/Two Spaces*, Fig. 41, is most likely Rosa’s, since he is Almeida’s ongoing collaborator and has also been in front of the camera in Almeida’s recent works.

balloon so defining of the comic book and its dialogic nature, transits from Almeida's to her husband's mouth, only to finally rest, full of air, between the two, thus implying that exchange is not only essential to life but also to art creation.



Figure 42 - Helena Almeida, *Ouve-me/Hear Me* (1979).

In 2007 Almeida produced two photographs where again two human bodies are the main subjects. Both their faces have been removed from the image and, as such, from the viewer's gaze, but the artist's physical presence is recognisable and the other body is her husband's, who was still responsible for the photographic shot²⁶⁴. The titles given to these works— *O Abraço/The Hug e A Conversa/The Conversation* [Fig. 43]— suggest an intimate situation and a communicative experience, which the representation of the two bodies, both dressed in black, intertwined on top of a stool and difficult to distinguish, also convey. Even more than in *Ouve-me/Hear Me* (produced almost thirty years before), in *O Abraço/The Hug e A Conversa/The Conversation* the collaborative process subjacent to Almeida's art practice is made visible on the surface of her work, explicitly proposing a dialogue between self and other. This dialogue seems particularly relevant in her most recent works, as confirmed by *Dois Espaços/Two Spaces* (from 2006), which also addresses the theme.

²⁶⁴ As Rosa has explained "I would place the camera and I had 10 seconds to place myself with Helena. She doesn't want professional photos. She wants the photos as they appear, with this dust" (*apud* Lusa, 18 Nov. 2008: n. pag., my translation). Rosa's choice of the word *dust* is particularly interesting as it once again inserts Almeida's work in the modernism tradition described by Bataille as profoundly marked by obscurity and the blurring of sight/meaning (see section 3.5.4 in this chapter).



Figure 43 - Helena Almeida, *A Conversa/The Conversation* (2007).

In the context of his analysis of Almeida's work, de Sousa found the desire to include the other in the self one of the most dangerous and promising features of the avant-garde (1977b: 158). He then connected the search for the other with several Portuguese artists who were also couples and whose personal relationship, sustaining the dialogue between self and an intimate other, may have had an impact in their work: Vieira da Silva/Arpad Szenes, Sarah Afonso/Almada Negreiros, Ana Vieira/Eduardo Nery, Helena Almeida/Artur Rosa (1977b: 160)²⁶⁵. Although de Sousa's discussion was produced in the 1970s and in relation to Almeida's work from that period, it is still pertinent when articulated with the series created by the artist in 2006 and 2007, particularly the later one: representing a black, organic volume set against the white walls of the studio, these photographs make Almeida's and Rosa's bodies almost indistinguishable and suggest the presence of a plural subjectivity, a 'we' that comes into existence from the recognition and

²⁶⁵ We may also add Paula Rego/Victor Willing to de Sousa's list of Portuguese artists-couples.

embracing of difference and that has got rid of the borders separating male and female, self and other. This plural or hybrid being, this *transitive* subject who is able to exist *between* two entities, transgresses the binary and exclusionary logic of either/or and proposes instead that identity and difference are radically grounded in co-existence, mutual understanding and respect, effects and affects expressed in visual, bodily (*O Abraço/The Hug*) and linguistic terms (*A Conversa/The Conversation*). What these works then suggest is a notion of the subject in relation to other subjects, which are understood not in terms of opposition or assimilation (since no subject supersedes the other) but of acknowledgment and cooperation, something that the personal relationship shared by Almeida and Rosa further emphasises.

Feminist critics like Luce Irigaray (1977), Christine Battersby (1998) and Bracha Ettinger (1996a), who reject the binary and discriminatory logic framing the phallogentric imagination in favour of an inclusive and fluid concept of difference in and along with the self, express a similar view of the relationship between subject and other to the one put forward by Almeida in the works under consideration. Ettinger's thoughts are especially useful in the context of Almeida's recent work, not only because she has articulated her critique of phallogentrism and orthodox psychoanalysis in the context of the aesthetic experience, but also since she has hypothesised "[a] certain awareness of a *borderspace shared with an intimate stranger* and of co-emergence in difference" (1995: 28).

As previously mentioned, Ettinger calls matrix to that borderspace (or borderlink) that allows to understand the subject as not only phallic, that is, as created from a cut, but also as a trans-subject²⁶⁶. The word *matrix* means "uterus" or "womb" and, consequently, possesses a maternal/feminine source (Ettinger, 1995: 22). Though Ettinger is referring to a situation experienced by mother and child in late pregnancy, a moment when it is possible to establish a relation with the other in terms of "besideness", continuity and "withness", since there is then a capacity for "jointness", she also suggests that we relive and re-member the matrixial moment throughout our life in our encounter with the other, which reproduces that initial "com-passion"²⁶⁷. The encounter with the archaic M/other can also refer to our experience as art viewers, for art can put us in touch with an "uncanny other or with a screen

²⁶⁶ See first chapter, section 1.5.3 for a further discussion of Ettinger's notion of the matrix and its inscription in visual art.

²⁶⁷ I am here also using terms and ideas explored by Ettinger in a keynote address delivered at the M(o)ther Trouble Conference. Birkbeck, University of London. May 2009.

across which seeps something already familiar, curious, intriguing, disturbing” (Pollock, 1996: 80).

Grounding her work on an ongoing collaborative process and making that artistic marriage the theme of her most recent photographs, Almeida has been suggesting, particularly over the last few years, a plural subjective experience and an engagement with the other that is reminiscent of a matrixial moment. In those photographs in which a hybrid body is represented or the intersection of subjective spaces is documented, the artist is defying the exclusionary boundaries of the phallogentric regime, which has played a crucial role in the history of art tradition, namely in the cult of the artist as a singled-out genius. In contrast, Almeida’s collaborative work with Rosa, in which physical and subjective boundaries are denied and the artist’s body is visibly in dialogue with an-other body, suggests that borderspace/borderlink referred by Ettinger, replicating it in the studio where the photographs are taken. Her work thus represents the artist and an intimate stranger co-emerging in the space of visual representation.

3.8 The female aerialist

In 2001 Almeida created *Voar/Flying* [Fig. 44], a sequence of photographs that registers the artist’s desire (symbolically reinforced by the blue hue with which the photographic process was tinted) to conquer the aerial space and leave the inhabited studio behind²⁶⁸. The staged flight also implies the chimerical escape of the body from its weight, vanquishing gravity, but the series ends up in dystopian and ironic terms. In fact, there is from the beginning something awkward in the way the artist stretches the arms and precariously tries to balance herself on a stool, as if preparing the viewer for the end result, which could only be a clumsy and ridiculous fall²⁶⁹. Probably with some pain (even if only in her dashed ambition), the subject of *Voar/Flying* realises she cannot escape the body, as the body cannot escape its material weight, nor can she fly away from her spatial environment, for place and self are deeply inter-related.

²⁶⁸ *Voar/Flying* is a group of works composed by a diptych and two series of four photographs each, all of them made addressing the same dream of flying and escaping the ground. Almeida has justified the use of the blue hue in the photographic process (something the artist has done only in this work) by saying that it was a question of creating an ethereal atmosphere capable of making explicit the contrast between the heavy body and its desire to fly (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 60).

²⁶⁹ Rego’s *Dancing Ostriches* (1995) resemble Almeida in *Voar/Flying*, for both series focus on middle-aged women who repeatedly try to do something they cannot and whose bodies clumsily and unsuccessfully attempt to defy gravity.

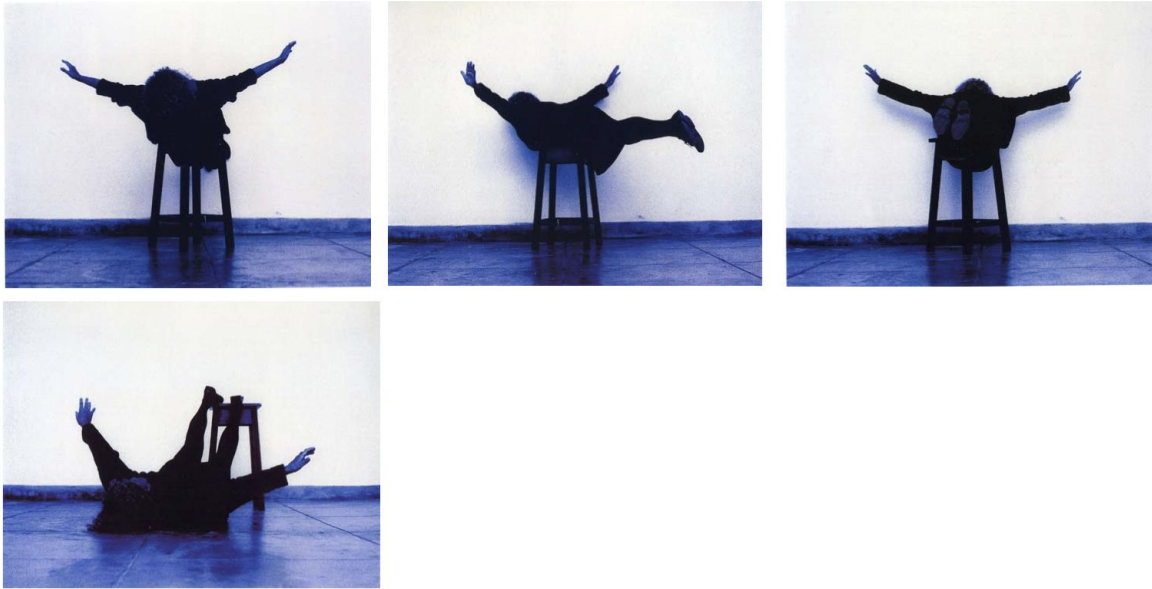


Figure 44 - Helena Almeida, *Voar/Flying* (2001).

Almeida has commented that in *Voar/Flying* she wanted to equate our impossibilities and the limits of the body; she wanted to say “see how limited I am” (*apud* Carlos, 2005: 60, my translation), suggesting that the impulse to fly (and to dream) is legitimate but also that it involves a certain degree of risk, derision and failure. In other words, these photographs play with our ambition to overcome restrictions, boundaries and confines, but they also touch on our human condition of being fragile (Carlos, n.d.: 26). Moreover, although Almeida’s description of *Voar/Flying* implies that the work refers to a universal experience, the female subject’s futile aspirations and her sense of corporeal constraint cannot but have gender implications. The desire to overcome bodily limitations and to conquer aerial space must therefore be articulated with a history of female bodiliness and with the place occupied by the female body in art and its history.

In her analysis of Almeida’s work, Molina reminds us that, according to Cixous, flying is the gesture of all women:

[W]e’ve lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers. It’s no accident that *voler* has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It’s no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in

jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down. (Cixous, 1975a: 258)

Connecting the woman from *Voar/Flying* to Cixous's flying woman, Molina sees Almeida's aerial intentions as nothing but subversive and disruptive of the social order and the roles ascribed to each sex, for the artist's attempt to fly also reflects a woman's intention to spoil the order of space, changing the value or the connotations of the female body and turning its relevance upside down (2005: 28). Moreover, because for Cixous woman is not only a bird but also a thief, there is danger involved in her actions, just as there is risk, and even failure, in Almeida's disruptive flight, as it is confirmed in *Voar/Flying* by the body's clumsy fall.

In line with Cixous, Mary Russo has also described the flight of the female aerialist as subversive, but she sees it too as grotesque and dangerous. In *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, Russo begins her discussion of the modern female grotesque with Bakhtin's account of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, elements that the Russian critic found in medieval folk culture and contemporary feminist critics and artists have often re-appropriated as performative (in the sense given to this term by Butler [1990]) strategies that effectively subvert the masculine representation of the female body and gender. However, Russo replaces Bakhtin's emphasis on the production of an earthly grotesque, which, according to her, leaves a static and universalistic notion of the feminine securely in place, with a female grotesque "up there" and "out there", so as to introduce a principle of turbulence, or uncertainty, into the configuration female/grotesque (1995: 29). For Russo, this aerial grotesque, which can also be an aerial sublime, is a more productive and complex image, capable of emphasising the trapeze girl as an ambivalent and daring figure that necessarily involves a consideration of contemporary and multi-vectored technologies of spectacle, aspects that the Bakhtinian model of the grotesque as symbolically 'low' could not possibly encompass (1995: 29). Similarly to Cixous, Russo's aerialist performer creates a model for female subversion in which liberation, risk and failure are equally present.

Almeida's female Icarus could well be the visual representation of the female aerialist discussed by Russo, in that it is a grotesque, clownish figure (as evidenced by the tentative way in which the body tries to balance itself on the stool, as well as by its awkward fall) that expresses the desire for liberation (from the body, from spatial constraints and

ultimately from tradition) at the same time that it mockingly recognises the risks and the impossibility of completely fulfilling that dream. This flying woman seems to be saying: “[t]he end of the flight in this sense is not a freedom from bodily existence but a recharting of aeriality as a bodily space of possibility and repetition” (Russo, 1995: 181), a repetition that is enhanced through the serial process frequently adopted by the artist, as in the photographs under consideration. Almeida’s aerialist also becomes “an exhilarating example of the ambivalent, awkward, and sometimes painfully conflictual configuration of the female grotesque” (Russo, 1995: 159), exposing the perils of subversively returning the female body as a grotesque image to the contemporary culture of the spectacle, which has disseminated the dual and opposite image of woman as either idealised beauty or grotesque monster²⁷⁰.

What *Voar/Flying* is then suggesting is that the fall may not only correspond to the dashing of one’s dreams, but also to the destruction of a romanticised, or monstrous, but always ideal, image of woman and her body. By visually acknowledging the woman’s fall, Almeida is stepping her down from the pedestal in which she has been placed by a dominant and male art tradition that has objectified the female body. Once the rigidity of the conventional modelling poses dictated by a patriarchal ideology have been abandoned, the female body is free to wear the canvas and destabilise the implicit rules of art creation (whilst also acknowledging them), ultimately redesigning the representation of female corporeality and conquering a space for female subjectivity in the visual economy, as suggested by many of the works created by Almeida since the 1970s.

Almeida’s female aerialist is still connected with the power of the carnivalesque body as this is described by Bakhtin, for whom “women have historically been aligned with the popular comic tradition” (Isaak, 1996a: 19) capable of subverting the established order. As in the medieval world of carnival, *Voar/Flying* ridicules social idealism by emphasising the subject’s corporeality and making the viewer laugh at it all. In 1970, in a catalogue that accompanied the exhibition of her work, Almeida confessed that she had always been complicit with humour (*apud* de Sousa, 1977b: 161) and her initials works, which visibly

²⁷⁰ Russo’s citation refers to Fevvers, the protagonist of Angela Carter’s novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984), whom for Russo encapsulates the characteristics of the female grotesque in modernity. Russo thus suggests the aerialist as an appropriate definition of twentieth-century women artists and writers. Her female grotesque can also be found in other works by Almeida, such as those from the 1980s, when the camera captures her body in a large scale, representing it as a huge, black, corporeal mass that extends the limits of the body with the help of prosthetic claws, cuts the aesthetic space wide open and dares to cross it.

subscribe the Duchampian transgression of the rules of painting and art tradition, confirm that feature. There is thus in her oeuvre an element of play, of revolutionary and liberating female laughter (Isaak, 1996b) that connects works such as *Voar/Flying* not only to the medieval carnivalesque and its potential for social disruption but also to postmodern strategies that parodically and ironically dismantle accepted truths and grand narratives²⁷¹. One of these grand narratives is, of course, the discourse on and of art, circulated through the institutions of art education, art criticism and art history, spaces in which the opportunity to represent and discuss a feminine subject-position has been systematically curtailed and replaced by the objectification of the female body by the male artist and in the male artist's studio. In *Voar/Flying* the aspirations of the female aerialist and the grotesque movements of her body expose the implicit weight of the masculine tradition, but Almeida also parodically, and hence subversively, reaffirms female corporeality.

Voar/Flying beautifully sums up Helena Almeida's ongoing dialogue with tradition, which has been addressed in several ways throughout her career, from the impact of the artist's studio and the family in her art practice, to the way her work is inscribed in the history of the self-portrait and negotiates the narcissistic and individualistic role ascribed to the artist. This is necessarily a subversive dialogue, situated at the threshold and through which the Portuguese artist engages with dominant ways of making and understanding art whilst transgressing them too.

Not just *Voar/Flying* (a photographic series with traces of the cinematic and performative modes) but Almeida's oeuvre as a whole suggest that such transgression may be expressed through a hybrid approach to art creation, capable of destabilising the sanctioned boundaries existing between art disciplines, investigating their fissures and playing with liminality. But most importantly, Almeida subverts art conventions by exploring her own body, which is always the carrier and the disseminator of meaning(s) in her work. This body is not an asexual or a-historical organism, but the physical expression of someone living under specific social, political cultural and historical conditions. In other

²⁷¹ The connection between Almeida's work and the postmodernist approach to art is not just circumscribed to the artist's use of parody as a process that effectively questions established systems of knowledge and representation. Almeida's emphasis in breaking the frontiers that separate different art forms, her insistence in creating 'anti-paintings' and her desire to performatively explore her body are issues also central to the postmodernist aesthetic, which has explored similar issues through the topoi of irony, *trompe l'oeil* and *mise-en-abyme*.

words, Almeida's body (like any body, for that matter) and its visual representation must be articulated within a "politics of location", to use the expression coined in the mid-1980s by the North-American poet, critic and feminist activist Adrienne Rich, who argued that "a place on the map is also a place in history" (1984: 64). By looking at Almeida's body as created by and creator of history (Rich, 1984: 64), we are in a position to understand how the processes and strategies through which that body is visually represented offer the viewer the possibility to "rethink the politics of representation and redraw the limits or borders of the body, thus implying the discovery of new cartographies of the feminine and, as such, new identitary forms anchored in the social" (Macedo, 2003: 20, my translation).

A discussion of Almeida's work in terms of its 'gendered condition' has generally been absent from its critical assessment, but an analytical approach framed in terms of a feminist problematic in art uncovers the implications, expressed at the level of the praxis and the artworks, of being a woman producing art in a visual context dominated by a masculine tradition of which women have only taken part as objectified bodies. Such approach, which I have followed throughout this chapter, denies the asexual nature of 'true' art, exposing how asexuality is, in fact, the basic principle of a discriminatory critical discourse based on sexual difference. The sanctioned notion of art (or at least of high art) as impervious to sexual and gender differences, in addition to the belief in the aesthetic experience as removed from the social, the historical and the political, are aspects which are open to deconstruction and which a feminist analysis of Almeida's work ultimately questions²⁷². This analysis needs to discuss how the female body and female experience are visually represented by the Portuguese artist and reflect on the processes through which her "aesthetics of relation and reciprocity" (Zeghrer, 2006: 216) engages with and subverts a phallogentric art tradition.

²⁷² Despite the difficulties in discussing Almeida's work in relation to feminist-oriented art practices, partially due to the critical assessment of her work, which has tended to emphasise its abstract, formal and a-historical nature, the artist was included in "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution". This was an exhibition organized in 2007 by the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Los Angeles (MOCA), which examined the international foundations and legacy of feminist art. See Lisa Gabrielle Mark (ed.), *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007).

Conclusion

não há acasos no encontro e desencontro das pessoas . . . o tecido desse encontro e desencontro existe e serve para alguma coisa
Nuno Bragança, *Square Tolstoi* (1981).

This thesis has aimed to discuss issues transversal to contemporary visual art and literature produced by women from different geo-political locations, with particular emphasis given to three paradigmatic cases: Helen Chadwick, Michèle Roberts and Helena Almeida. By taking such methodological approach, it has contributed to the productive intersection of interartistic research with the study of gender difference from a feminist perspective.

As mentioned in the introduction, Mitchell perceives transdisciplinary studies in terms that accept uncertainty, deconstruction and even failure and hence his preference for the word ‘indisciplinarity’ (*apud* Grønstad and Vågnes, 2006: n. pag.). It has been our contention that an interdisciplinary or indisciplinary approach to contemporary art and literature produced by women is the best way to highlight the dialogic (in the Bakhtinian sense of the word), subversive and sometimes even contradictory nature of women’s literary and visual practice.

As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, Chadwick, Roberts and Almeida manifest the conscious or unconscious desire to visually and literarily represent experiences related with the feminine, particularly in terms of an embodied and self-reflexive subjectivity. Moreover, they present a complex dialogue with the dominant and masculine art/literary tradition and its representation of women and their bodies. Our research has led to the conclusion that their engagement with these issues often assumes an ambivalent and liminal position, as well as the favouring of hybrid formats and genres. Their work can therefore be defined by a strategy of contamination, in other words, a mix between tradition and rupture, public and private, sacred and profane, spiritual and bodily, grotesque/object and beautiful, self and other, as between high art or traditional media and minor art forms or new processes of art creation. According to feminist criticism, such viral or hybrid approach is connected with being woman (particularly in its relation to the maternal process of becoming) and a female way of doing things. In addition, it is the result of the relationship the culturally and socially marginal (this study has focused on the gendered other) establishes with the powerful centre (the masculine self).

Our central argument has, therefore, been that a shared emphasis on hybrid and interstitial processes of representation and self-representation, which are deeply subversive of the Cartesian logic, is connected with Chadwick's, Roberts's and Almeida's position as women and women artists and therefore with the inscription in their work of a subjectivity formed in the feminine (Pollock, 1996: 74). This does not mean the reading of gender difference in terms of a female essence, but the articulation of both the subject and the artwork with the social and the cultural. Sexual and gender differences have a social and historical meaning, which is circulated, reiterated and subverted through a range of cultural practices in which art and those involved in it participate.

By looking at Chadwick's, Roberts's and Almeida's work from a gendered perspective, we have also tried to emphasise that not only is meaning produced within the internal structures of the visual or literary object, but also articulated from and in relation to the subjective, social, cultural and historical discourses and formations in which art production and reception play a part. Our analysis has precisely been aimed at drawing attention to the relationship existing between these women's work and those conditions in which art is situated and to which it contributes, with particular emphasis on the ways sexual difference and gender oppositions are assumed and revised by artists/writers, critics and viewers/readers.

Furthermore, although the notion of difference (gender has been our focus here, but other 'differences' should be taken into consideration: race, class, sexual orientation) is crucial, it cannot be understood as referring to a stable and monolithic position; instead, feminist criticism has proved that difference, perceived as a set of performative acts (Butler, 1990), permanently embraces contradiction, dislocation and change (Macedo, 2003: 20-21). A contradictory and transitory concept of sexual difference is precisely what not only is subjacent to Almeida's female aerialist, whose grotesque body claims the aerial space at the same time that it ironically affirms its weight, but also what seems to characterise Almeida's, Chadwick's and Roberts's oeuvre as a whole.

Finally, our research has concluded that these three women's work presents traces of a female subjectivity formed within and in conflict with a phallogocentric system (Pollock, 1996: 74). We have therefore investigated this body of work in terms of its participation in a female (and frequently feminist-oriented) counter-tradition contemporary to their art practice, with which they share an interest in defying social norms and art rules, through

strategies that involve hybrid media and liminal art spaces, the female body and disruptive and empowering processes of self-representation, an emphasis on collaborative work and the transgression of the boundaries separating self from other. By favouring these strategies, we believe this work is contaminated by the theoretical, cultural and social revolution brought by feminism in the 1970s and provides possible answers to Mary Kelly's question: "what is a feminist problematic in art?" (1980: 303).

In relation to Helen Chadwick, her work specifically approaches the relationship between the artist and her own body, raising the issue of female self-representation in the visual field, a topic intensively debated by feminist criticism. From her early works, which defiantly exhibit Chadwick's naked, young and beautiful body (most paradigmatically in *The Oval Court*), to the artist's withdrawal into the inside body (for example, in *Viral Landscapes*), Chadwick is constantly examining female (or sometimes simply gendered) identity and bodily experiences, as well as reflecting and negotiating the position taken by feminist criticism in relation to art practice and art history. In other words, Chadwick, who did not like to be labelled a feminist and had an ambivalent relationship with this political and critical movement, produced work that is deeply contaminated by feminism. This is explicitly visible in some of her projects: in *Domestic Sanitation* she addressed the domestic oppression of women, *Cacao* may be said to suggest the relationship between women, eating and food and in *One Flesh* the artist expressed the need to think about the maternal body and the relationship between mother and daughter. Our reading of Chadwick's work as feminist-oriented has also framed other aspects of her art practice, such as its intention to defy binary oppositions— abject/grotesque and beautiful, the spiritual/sacred and the bodily, high art and mechanized or domestic, and hence feminized, processes of art creation— and collapse the boundaries separating different art forms (photography, installation, performance, painting). Instead, her work suggests a logic of both/and that is in tune with the ontological and epistemological changes proposed by feminist critics. Nevertheless, we have also stressed that Chadwick ultimately moved beyond some of the problems raised by the visual economy to feminist criticism, namely in terms of the representation of the female body and its appropriation by a phallogentric art tradition: abandoning the direct visual representation of her body and thus denying the voyeuristic framing of the male gaze, she turned the body inside-out, bringing to the surface of representation what generally lies hidden under one's skin.

Contrary to Chadwick, Michèle Roberts has explicitly described herself as feminist and inscribed her work in feminist literature and criticism. Her writing (for we have analysed her novels and short-stories in articulation with her essays) addresses topics widely debated by feminist critics, such as the need to requalify the female body, which is no longer perceived as grotesque and evil or, alternatively, as fetishized, but as a source of self-pleasure, desiring as well as desirable and capable of granting women access to the spiritual and the sacred: in a defiant reversal of the catholic dogma, Roberts professes her belief in the flesh made word. In addition, she discusses the implications of women's inscription in the domestic sphere and their relationship with food, as well as the search for the maternal body and the concomitant need to recapture the bond uniting mother and child. These are themes that, like in Chadwick's case, allow the writer to play with the interstitial. Moreover, Roberts's novels establish an important dialogue with and subversion of the literary tradition and history, a process that is typical of the postmodernist writer (who Roberts, in many aspects, can be said to be), but to which her feminism adds a political urge. Similarly to other critics of her work, we too have highlighted how Roberts re-writes stories and history in order to inscribe women's lives and experiences in them. But we have also claimed that a dialogic strategy of revision is implicit in the autobiographical dimension of her work. Last but not least, we have discussed how the hybrid nature of most of her writing, which introduces multiple viewpoints and several, often unreliable, female narrators, creates a liminal written space, situated between literary genres, and questions a normative, rigid notion of truth and the dynamics of a logic of either/or. Such process of contamination even possesses an interartistic dimension, since Roberts has been particularly interested in the representation of women and their bodies in the art tradition and has inclusively channelled that interest to her essays and fiction.

If Roberts and Chadwick have been associated with feminism and there are evident signs, both in the form and content of their work, of their articulation of a feminist problematic, Helena Almeida seems to defy such connection: her oeuvre has an abstract, pure quality, as it has been persistently referred by art critics, and not only seems to refuse the genderization of the represented subject (which is Almeida, with very few exceptions), but also to make irrelevant the historical, social and political conditions existing beyond the walls of the artist's studio, this being the dominant spatial presence in her work. It is against such gender-blind and a-historical reading that we have placed our own analysis of Almeida's work, emphasising themes and strategies that, even if addressed in different

ways, the Portuguese artist shares with Chadwick and Roberts and hence identifying in her art practice a feminist problematic. Despite the photographic format of most of her work, Almeida is a hybrid artist, as she considers herself to be a painter who, nevertheless, also establishes bridges with other art forms, such as performance, sculpture and installation. She therefore disrupts the norms of a dominant and masculine understanding of art practice, taking part in a neo-avantgarde movement that subverted the arts in the 1970s and that was greatly propelled by the arrival of women artists and feminism to the visual field. In fact, one of the most original and pervasive elements we have found in Almeida's work is her dialogue with and subversion of art tradition, proposing, instead, an aesthetic threshold, that is, a hybrid and dialogic art space, which is inherently transgressive. This has also been the strategy undertaken by Chadwick, Roberts and several other women artists and writers, due to the place they have traditionally occupied in the literary or art canon and their effort to claim an unprecedented position of power. Such a critical perspective has framed our discussion of fundamental aspects of Almeida's work, from her exhaustive and paradoxical (for it reveals at the same time that it conceals) process of self-representation, in particular in terms of the representation of her body, to the ambivalent, even if determinant, relationship with her father, whose work represents the academic, dictatorial and phallogocentric taste, as well as the collaborative nature of her art projects (created in partnership with her husband Artur Rosa). All these characteristics have allowed us to conclude that Almeida has developed an "aesthetics of relation and reciprocity" (Zegher, 2006: 216) that is typical of the woman artist.

The three case studies under consideration have therefore demonstrated that the presence of the feminine in contemporary art and literature is signalled by processes of bodily representation and self-representation. It has been our contention that these processes imply the dialogic re-vision of the androcentric paradigms and the masculine tradition and, most importantly, a strategy of contamination through which "different topologies of self" (Betterton, 2004: 92) are inscribed in the artwork. Our research has focused on women whose work began being published and exhibited in the late 1960s and in the 1970s and who, therefore, witnessed and experienced first hand the huge changes brought about by the revolutionary spirit of the period and, in particular, by the feminist movement. We have hinted that perhaps it is also that interstitial position— between the old and the new order, tradition and revolution— that made Chadwick, Roberts and Almeida so tuned to hybrid formats, intersubjective experiences and liminal corporealities. Given that our further

examples have, for the most part, also shared this historical framework, it remains to be studied what the position is of a younger generation of women artists and writers and how they place their work vis-à-vis the art and the literary tradition. Moreover, if feminist-oriented art and literary practices, developed since the 1970s, can be said to have now their own (counter)tradition, in which Chadwick, Roberts and Almeida participate to different extents, the questions of which tradition(s) these younger women and their work dialogue with and in what terms that dialogue takes place need to be addressed.

In a highly personal text entitled “Como Me Tornei Feminista” (“How I Have Become a Feminist”), Ana Paula Ferreira, a second generation Portuguese emigrant in the United States and an expert on Portuguese and Brazilian literature, gender studies and comparative studies in Spanish and Portuguese, grounds her academic feminism in a hybridism of living spaces and places of enunciation (2008: 143). Ferreira’s autobiographical text seems to suggest that women are particularly receptive to research and modes of existence characterised by in-betweenness and dialogue. As a woman doing a doctorate on women writers and artists, not only have I too adopted liminality and hybridism as productive research strategies, but I have also found them in the work of Helen Chadwick, Michèle Roberts and Helena Almeida, allowing me to conclude that the representation of the feminine in contemporary women’s art and literature is indeed marked by a constant process of self-inquiry as to the limits and boundaries of each specific artistic field, and the affirmation of an overall strategy of contamination.

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Note: the date of the first edition is indicated in square brackets, except when the consulted edition is also the first edition. In the case of translated works, the date of the first edition refers to the publication in the original source language.

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