



text Tatiana Pentes

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The currency of public debate over issues of sexual politics and gender, and the ambiguities and perspectives of various feminisms, was highlighted in the recent media attention surrounding the Ormond College sexual harassment case. Helen Garner's dramatised account of the case in her novel *The First Stone*, and her own embroilment in it, is more an exercise in social realism than a theoretical discourse on power; some would take the view that Garner is boiling in an emotive backlash against the new breed of campus feminism. However, as the work produced by a number of contemporary artists suggests, the agenda for many is less concerned with legislative reform than with articulating the subtleties of specific identities, where the personal is the political re-thinking which constitutes the feminine, the masculine, the body, and experience. Within feminism there are complexities and a multiplicity of struggles and positions that can't be neatly categorised. Simply valorising that which has been repressed by rationalism such as emotional truth, intuitive wisdom and instinctual self-confidence' and attributing it to the feminine, is to perpetuate the exclusion of the feminine from culture. In order to move beyond this, when the very object of political battle becomes questionable, the only option is to dismantle and reconstruct.

THE STITCH

"Has the pen or pencil dipped so deep in the blood of the human race as the needle?"²² The stitch, that acute internal pain in the side, or that single pass of the needle in sewing, knitting, crochet, embroidery, or in surgery for repairing a wound, is also a potent metaphor for drawing and re-drawing (or fabricating) different kinds of narratives. It is this metaphor which binds together the textiles-based work of Kylie Nadin, the recent performance art of Barbara Campbell, Ari Athan's conceptual jewellery, Faye Neilson's bandaged ceramic medical/torture instruments, Rebekah Fogaty's metallic mouth forms and Anthony Ludwig's fibre and performance art. In these artworks the stitch—the result of needle and thread, or domestic and medical implements for construction and mending—are removed from the connotations of private space and instead, are worked into political signs.

THE TOOL

The brutalising of women and their sexuality was evident in the Medieval witchcraft trials of Europe. Faye Neilson's *Instrument Group*, concerned with the origin of the male midwife, alludes to this suppression of female power in the patriarchal structures of medicine and the church. Outraged, saddened and disgusted by these trials and the destruction of the female midwife, her ceramic and wood instruments are bound together with fabric which she claims is the "symbolic bandaging of wound so that it might heal". These materials evoke the notion of Neolithic simulated artifacts from an archeological dig, while the form of her thirty two tools are loosely based on early obstetric and gynaecological instruments, each approximately one metre in length, and installed like a medical display in groups of type. The theoretical text associated with the production of *Instrument Group* traces the origins of the masculinisation of medicine to the Medieval witch trials. Neilson's text parallels the development of the instruments of torture and execution, used by the Church at the time of the Inquisition on tens of thousands of women, with the development of cruel medical instruments used in childbirth, at the time the male midwife appeared in this historical epoch. Her work is a re-assemblage, a reconstruction of a history silenced when any record of the female midwife seems to have been erased. It is by analogy that these useless and grotesque implements symbolise the operations of power at work through the infliction of pain in the witch trials.

The clinical stainless steel surfaces of Rebekah Fogaty's *Mutations: Mouth Sculptures After Rosemarie Trockel* resonate as gynaecological and dental processes. The seductive quality of their reflective shiny surfaces creates the desire to consume these objects designed for the fleshy oral cavity and teeth, to push the lip forward, push the cheek out, hold the lip up, guard and prise the teeth apart. It is a profoundly sadomasochistic and autoerotic act, wilfully placing metal into orifice. This jewellery for the inside is however outwardly visible and like Ari Athan's vulvic forms, hinge on Irigaray's emblem of the two lips, a positive representation of the multiformity of female sexuality. As Elizabeth Grosz has pointed out, "The two lips are never one, nor strictly two... being

undecidably inside and outside, one and two, genital and oral."²³ However, Athan's conceptual jewellery extends Fogaty's steel surfaced metaphor by privileging the tactile, and curiously denying the visual. Her most fascinating work for the body cannot be seen by an outside world, hidden from sight it is worn as a private and personal act which plays with the motifs of closure/disclosure, concealment/revelation, incision/healing. One such conceptual ring for the self, *Birthstone*—a hollow silver vulvic shell housing tiny smooth black river stones, attached to a fine band—is designed to be slid onto the finger and to impregnate the palm of the closed hand in imitation of maternity and gestation, the symbiotic relationship between mother and child, before the spoken word. One who is momentarily and privately adorned experiences a sense of fulfilment, of the void being filled, but it is not a functional piece of jewellery in that it must be removed and put back into the box.

THE PORTRAIT

The shift through the processes of performance, video, photography and weaving in Kylie Nadin's *Self Portraits* point to the 'portrait' as an historic and cultural document, a set of visual codes. Still images from her video performances are broken down into the material configuration of colour and tone by reconstructing the video image pixels into embroidered and woven self portraits. As Nadin explains: "Weaving is a medium which relates well to the construct of a photographic image. The intertwined threads create a grid, forming tiny points of colour or tone in the same way grains of colour merge to form a photographic image."²⁴ Echoing similar concerns is a photographic series accompanying the embroideries housed in a box given to her by her father. A collection of polaroid snapshots, abject self portraits, document a trail of red stitches sewn into the flesh, re-tracing the old appendix scar, along with mundane sentimental objects: a baby's dress, a packet of contraceptive pills, a fish. This act of incision into one's own skin, this narcissistic scarification of the body surface, a re-enactment of female ritualised adornment, is described by Nadin as a healing process. Her courageous and

dramatic confrontation of her body as a site of childhood pain is re-visited with performance. "Less openly violent but no less coercive are inscriptions of cultural and personal values, norms... incised through voluntary procedures, lifestyles, habits and behaviours. Make-up, stiletos, bras, hair sprays, clothing, underclothing mark women's bodies..."

Nadin's polaroid document of her hands embroidering over a medical appendix scar might be contextualised by the darkly humorous re-working (undoing) and interlacing of feminine myths and narratives in Barbara Campbell's performance *Cries From the Tower*. Originally programmed for TISEA 1992 and Experimenta 1992, it was re-staged in April 1995 at the National Gallery of Australia as part of the National Sculpture Forum. The performance, a twenty minute unravelling process, featured the intermittent projection of a Super 8 film onto a petit-point needlework frame, detailing red thread being sewn into the palm lines of her hands. Televised real-time from her imaginary tower in the guise of Mary Queen of Scots, she unpicked her 70 metre embroidered ribbon dress to the operatic refrains of soprano Mina Kanaridis singing *Credo* and *Agnus Dei* from William Byrd's *Mass for Four Parts*. The ribbon dress, designed and constructed by Annemaree Dalziel, has been embroidered by Campbell in red text which recites Mary Queen of Scots' *Casket Letter No III* in the three languages of original French, contemporary Scottish and modern English translation. Much of the Queen's nineteen years of incarceration before execution (for the murder of her second husband) was spent embroidering tapestries of exotic mystical beasts and writing letters to rally support for her release. The performance strategy plays on the relations between the textual and the textural, the eye and the hand, the mind and the body, the image and the word, and in which the camera, the needle and music are compositional devices, tools for inscription.

Textiles, the history of which is integrally intertwined with feminine ideals and constraints from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, was an art traditionally consigned to women's hands—as Freud's psychoanalytic text, *Femininity*, suggests. Providing no challenge to the traditional subordination of woman, and relegation of her to the private sphere he claims: "It seems that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions of civilisation; there is, however, one technique which they may have invented—that of plaiting and weaving".⁶ In reproducing and laying bare the mechanisms operating in patriarchal culture, deeply embedded in Biblical and classical mythology, the need to invent or at the very least articulate that which has been subordinated emerges. It is no coincidence that women and their traditional cultural productions, textiles and handskills are marginalised. Arguably, the Eurocentric domestic preoccupation of female 'amateurs' with embroidery, from the time of the Renaissance, may not be considered art, but rather the expression of femininity, even though pictorial art made with thread may not comply with the utilitarian imperative that defines craft.

THE CARCASS

This idea is clearly disrupted, where the needle and blade are writing devices, in Anthony Ludwig's fibre art and suspension performance installations—incorporating the body, wood, twine, skeletons and water. Some might view Ludwig's *Numeral Herd Corset* as falling into a post-Beuysian trap, where fibre/textile art unproblematically mimics the aesthetics of modernist art. Perhaps another way of discussing this work might be in terms of craft practice incorporating a visual arts discourse; work where the idea is visibly privileged. In the 1994 Tamworth Biennial this work was criticised for "plundering a primitivist aesthetic", engaging with the potentially magical properties of raw materials (the artist as shaman). I wonder what the same critic would have to say about *Numeral Herd Carcass*, a larger incarnation of *Numeral Herd Corset*. The imaginary unburied carcass escapes from the ruptured canvas in which it is enshrined. Stitched up and to industrial partitioning with string, the carcass is blackened stiff with tar bitumen. Where the corset confines and disciplines the human body, the impurity of the carcass, neither subject nor object, is an abomination. The stitches, according to the artist, represent attention, suffocation, fragility (delicacy) and strength, a system of signs which translate across his work. Exhibited in the *In Site In Sight* (textiles) show at the Tamworth City Gallery in December 1993, *Untitled: threads and skeleton* is another such volatile



1 In Barbara Campbell's performance, *Cries From the Tower*, the intermittent projection of a Super 8 film onto a petit-point needlework frame details red thread being sewn into the palm lines of her hands.

2 An Athans, *Time*, 1994. Bracelet carved from sandstone and forged in mild steel.

3 An Athans, *Untitled*, 1994. Series of four vulvic forms forged in silver and steel.

4 Kylie Nadin, *Self Portrait Series #1* (detail of 36 images), 1994. Printed warts woven in cotton, nonstick fabric, silk and polyester, overprinted and painted, mounted on sheet steel. Original image generated from video, deconstructed through photography, collage and print, then reconstructed through weaving. *Self Portrait Series* comprises 3 sets each of 36 images, totalling 108 images.

5 Faye Neilson, *Instrument Group* (detail), 1993. Clay, wood, fabric and string binding, each instrument is approx. 1 metre in length. Photograph: Liane Audring.

6 Anthony Ludwig, *Oxen Meat Reign*, 1995, a performative work which references flesh, sticks and alembic to regenerate crisis as an artificial reconciliation.

7 Kylie Nadin, *Family Portrait Series* (detail), 1994. Double cloth pick-up weaves its mensurised collars. Series of 27 family portraits.



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and violent work. Multitudes of fine cotton threads hold the construction of found and made remains together and risk suffocating it entirely. Tension is created in this disturbing private space between the soft strength of fine cotton which binds skeletal forms. In the artistic statement for this work Ludwig references Pollock's totems: an American Indian hanging *Element Totems* and *Harry's Circumcision*, a spoken mirror song by Lou Reed and John Cale in which the lyrics describe not wanting to look like his mother or father, and so the slicing of his throat, ears and genitals. This goes beyond exploring the masculine fear of castration and becomes an ode to phallic dismemberment.

THE SCAR

The scar, which cannot be forgotten, is a common thread running through the artists' various works which play with the physical trace of incision and wounding; that which has healed over leaves its mark on the flesh. In Ludwig's large performance/suspension installation pieces the multitudes of threads both cut into the body and become extensions of the body. Bird-like he strings himself up with 80 to 90cm in diameter of thread, wood and twine. The stitch takes over tearing into his neck, almost completely suffocating him. Blood-letting can take place in these performances, where he cuts into his skin with a knife. He believes this process builds strength and he calls it "meddling with the elements". Ludwig becomes alchemist when he purifies the incisions with water that mix with the blood, dripping down to pigment the fibrous strands. The abrasions from the cutting of the skin later heal and form permanent scars for his body. Ari Athans, another artist fascinated with traces, has produced *Time*. The bracelet carved from sandstone and forged in mild steel is a contemplation of the temporal and ever-present tyranny of the flesh, although it looks and feels like an instrument for torture. If the hand entered this form it would be immobilised by the sheer weight of rock and the sinews would surely be impaled by the spoked circumference. Athans represents another kind of scar, the psychic one, in *Untitled*, a progressional series of four vulvic forms forged in silver and steel.

Athans, who began her career chipping away at rock in subterranean mines as a practising geologist, has fused her morphological understanding of rock with her understanding of human morphology. Her jewellery and object design brings together expertise from the widely different fields of geology, gemmology, iron work, and lapidary (stone and gem inscription). An invocation of feminine castration and a powerful metaphor for the multiformity of female sexuality, the *Untitled* series are vulvic forms incised by the absent blade. The incisions are then stitched and repaired or healed over by a cruel joke which, like female circumcision, is silenced as "...the annihilation of the bodily sources of woman's genital pleasure, in the interests of men. It is the excision of the possibility of a certain kind of genital sexual gratification for women... There is not and can never be symmetry between the two sexes here. It is not circumcision but removal of the penis... which is the physiological (if not cultural) counterpart of clitoridectomy".⁵ Both a void (to be filled or sewn up)

and a repository (for insertion), these lips that are open, lips that are sealed, brings to mind Anne Brennan's gag series, *Something Altogether Else* (1986), jewellery for silencing speech and Rebekah Fogaty's *Mutations*, jewellery for the inside.

Imaging the body in physical and psychological pain—pain which not simply resists language but actively destroys language,⁶ is perhaps one of the only means of its representation. In an embroidered biography of family and self, Kylie Nadin's *Scar Series* deals with this pain. The collection of ten embroideries were installed at mantle piece height, a space often occupied by photographs and trophies. Integral to the investigation of how 'biography' is created by the individual's story and the process of remembering is how the memory is recorded and the context in which the sentimental object or cultural artefact is placed. In memorialising family and self, the painful event long since past is reconstructed and preserved. Scar images were machined then a coloured grid was over-embroidered by hand. The systematic geometric ordering of the grid in its abstract visuality also silences language⁶, flattening and breaking down the scar into a non-mimetic set of co-ordinates that mirror the warp and the weft.

As a way of provoking consideration of the relation between the imagery and symbolism of the feminine and the masculine in crafts practice, works discussed have been drawn together for their concerns with the personal as political, the body and experience, where the "analogy between bodies and texts is a close one: tools of body-engraving—social, surgical, epistemic or disciplinary—mark bodies..."⁷ The works are both metaphoric tools for construction—the instrument, needle or absent blade, and the trace of these tools of incision—the scar, and the stitch which binds fabric, metal, and skin. Politically charged they occupy ambiguous territory, some based in a scientific knowledge of the properties of materials, some purely a fabrication, but all are engaged with ideas that reflect on the craft process. ◻

ENDNOTES

- 1 For instance, developing a lexicon of the female psyche as American Jungian analyst Clarissa Pnolka Estes' book *Women Who Run With The Wolves* does, through myth and storytelling to show how women can reclaim their true feminine power.
- 2 Roszika Parker, 'The Creation of Femininity' in *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine*, The Women's Press, London, 1984, pp iv.
- 3 Elizabeth Grosz, 'Luce Irigaray and Sexual Difference' in *Sexual Subversions*, Allen & Unwin, 1989, pp115-116. See also Luce Irigaray, 'When our lips speak together' in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Cornell University Press, 1985.
- 4 Kylie Nadin - artist statement.
- 5 Elizabeth Grosz, 'The Body as Inscriptive Surface' in *Volatile Bodies: Towards a corporeal feminism*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1994, pp141-142.
- 6 "...If it is so, we should be tempted to guess the unconscious motive for achievement. Nature herself would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing the growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals", from Sigmund Freud's essay 'Femininity' in *Introductory Lectures*, vol 1, Penguin, 1976, pp132.
- 7 Roszika Parker, 'The Creation of Femininity', p6.
- 8 Elizabeth Grosz, 'The Body as Inscriptive Surface'.
- 9 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985.
- 10 Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, pp9-22.
- 11 Elizabeth Grosz, 'Inscriptions and Body-Maps: Representations and the corporeal' in Terry Threadgold's *Feminine/Masculine and Representation*, Allen & Unwin, 1990.

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8 Kylie Nadin, *Bodywork* (detail), 1994. Continuing the *Scar Series*, this work uses her approach to scar as a site of physical and emotional turmoil, stitching over the scar as a ritual of healing recorded by a series of potentials.

9 Kylie Nadin, *Scar Series* (detail) from series of 10, 1994. Cotton, machine embroidered, by web, hand-stitched wax thread. Larger embroideries approx. 28 x 12cm, smaller approx. 22 x 12cm. A coloured grid re-marks the scar, wandering the wound to history.

10 Rebekah Fogaty, *Mutations* after Rosemarie Trocket, series of 5 mouth sculptures, 1994. Formed and worked stainless steel.



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