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Language as visual and conceptual tool in selected video installations of Candice Breitz and Mona Hatoum

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I declare that this is my own unaided work. It is submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

Paula Louw

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Abstract

This research focuses on selected artworks by contemporary artists Mona Hatoum and Candice Breitz to critically examine how they have explored language as a visual and conceptual tool through the use of video and installation. The primary aim is to consider how and why these artists have explored paradoxical aspects of language and to examine the ways in which they have used their medium to question or challenge the adequacy of communication through language. Born in Palestine but exiled in Britain as a result of the outbreak of war in her home country, Mona Hatoum's artworks reach deeply into her own experience of exile. Her video work *Measures of Distance* (1988) is concerned with language and its effectiveness in communication between people separated by geographical and emotional distance, a theme that is very close to the concerns I have in my own practical work. I critically examine Hatoum's artwork to demonstrate how the complex layering of spoken word, written script and visual imagery, together with the complication of the viewer's position, merge to foreground contradictions and conflicting states. I consider Candice Breitz's investigations into the contradictory and provocative nature of speech and language against the background of her upbringing in apartheid South Africa and critically examine her concern with the ways in which identity is culturally constructed. Her preoccupation with the relationship between the mass media and the linguistic formation of self is examined. I have chosen to focus mainly on her video installations: *Babel Series* (1999), *Alien* (2002), *Karaoke* (2000), *Four Duets* (2000) and *Legend* (2004).

My own practical work is discussed alongside these concerns, particularly in relation to contemporary electronic communication such as email and sms text messaging – along with the frustration that results from its impersonal nature (in contrast to old fashioned letter writing). I also discuss its impact on relationships separated by great geographical distances.

Introduction

> "*If visual art is a form of language, with its own syntax, grammar and concept of time, our contemporary art today resembles the moment immediately after Babel*" (Jantjes 1998:16).

In this research I examine selected works by two artists, Mona Hatoum and Candice Breitz, who explore aspects of language, both as a means of establishing connection/communication and as a barrier[1]. They do so by way of including text and/or the spoken word in their video-based artworks. Language (even in the case of one's own mother tongue) often paradoxically presents as much a hindrance to communication as a pathway for it, especially within the use of contemporary electronic communication media such as sms text messaging and email. While these media purport to facilitate direct and immediate communication, they often also frustrate, disrupt and dislocate expression/interaction. As Schwartz notes: "... *we are indeed paying for this [direct/immediate communication] with an increasingly tangible loss of direct sensory contact in the world and with ourselves...*" (1997:13).

In an interview with Jerome Sans, Candice Breitz comments:

> "*There is irony in the fact that this moment in time is marked by so much talk about global communication and connectivity, since one might argue that the possibility of communicating across difference has become increasingly difficult as the hype about transparent communication networks has accelerated (with the arrival of the internet and other such structures). I have always been fascinated by the possibility of a lingua franca, a common language that one might use to communicate across difference…and yet it is of course no easy task to discover such a language*" (2006, *in lit*).

Contemporary electronic processes have pervaded our ways of communication. Grammar and spelling are becoming increasingly cryptic and abbreviated, to the point where single letters and numerals, read as phonetic sounds, are used in place of words (this is particularly the case with sms messages where cost is calculated per

set of characters). My primary focus will be on examining how these two artists explore this paradox of communication and the disruption thereof in language within the medium of video/DVD installation. As Fiona Bradley points out: "*Artists' engagement with language as a visual and conceptual tool takes many forms, and offers a number of ways to explore the potential of a means of communication we may too often take for granted*" (2002:64). The highlighted intention of the artists whose works I examine here is the exploration of language as a tool, visually and conceptually, through the use of video installation, in order to question or challenge the adequacy of communication through language.

I will be looking at, amongst others, Mona Hatoum's 1988 video work, *Measures of Distance*, a single screen video piece which incorporates both the spoken and written word together with visual imagery. By focusing on language, which migrates between the written and the spoken word, this work deals with the pain experienced as a result of political and personal separation of a mother from her adult daughter[2]. The work brings into stark focus the power and at times powerlessness of language to connect the individuals concerned.

South African born artist Candice Breitz, who currently lives and works in Germany, makes video-based artworks which communicate through technology, yet at the same time the communication she uses causes us, as viewers, to question our use of language and the understanding thereof in our day and age. In the preface to *Re-Animations*, a text focusing on Breitz's recent work involving the editing of video footage, we find the following statement:

> "*Her works give us pleasure in recognizing and succumbing to the original power of the artist's source material. But Breitz constantly disrupts and infects this pleasure with doubts and questions…[making cuts in the video footage which] are both absurd and serious…Her characters] are caught up in edited loops from which there is no ending or escape. While Breitz's work operates within a century old history of artists making work that takes popular culture as its starting point, her installations are especially relevant now; creating space for independent thought within these media saturated times*" (Cotter 2003:3).

Breitz has made several video works which relate specifically to my topic in their use of speech and render strange the ways of making meaning with language. By using pop music video clips that are severely edited/freeze-framed, the meanings of the original messages contained within the lyrics are recast so as to expose their logic or to push their boundaries. Her methods erect barriers within presentations which were originally made to be seamless so that the resultant interactions confuse understanding instead of promoting it. The *Babel Series* (1999) consists of the music videos of seven pop stars such as Freddie Mercury, Sting and Madonna, among others. In each case a single syllable has been edited from one of their songs and has been looped in endless repetition. Madonna, for example, sings "da, da, da, da, da" interminably, continuously making the same repetitive movements of her head. The sounds selected appear to allude to the first sounds made by an infant learning to utter speech.

Since Breitz displays her videos as installations, the viewer is assaulted by a cacophony of sound as the monitors (in the case of the *Babel Series* there are seven) scream their utterances towards the viewer. This draws him/her into the activated space between the videos and causes him/her to become the active agent in making meaning, rather than having authorship rest with the artist alone.

My reason for wanting to examine such explorations of communication in artworks came about as a result of very personal experiences of trauma and loss due to close family members emigrating to Australia, the UK and USA. Face to face communication has been replaced by long-distance interaction via sms text messaging, email, webcam and video and it is this paradoxical co-existence of barrier and immediate contact which I explore in my own artworks in terms of expressing an emotional state related to the failure to connect satisfactorily. The new technology creates a dislocated context which enables personal interaction to be maintained by drawing the parties closer together, yet simultaneously it frustrates communication by way of the inability to enjoy intimate, tactile contact. In my own practical work I have addressed this issue of separation and displacement through

the manipulation of media in order to conceptually express the use of these electronic communication media.

Hatoum's and Breitz's video installations have required careful examination in terms of the use of space and viewer participation, temporality, imagery and symbolism, spoken word, sound and text. Their installations are significant for the way in which they "*break open the artistic realm and make it one with social space ... [M]eaning arises out of the encounter between spectator and art work...It is no longer given, residing in the artwork until discerned by the perceptive viewer, it is something that is made in the encounter*" (Archer 1994:13). I will examine how the medium of video, in the form of installation, has been used to explore varieties of production in terms of activating social space.

One of Breitz's major concerns in her video works is, as Christopher Phillips puts it, "*language as an over-arching metaphor for self-definition and social communication*." He goes on to say that:

> "*Breitz's video installations map out a distinctive trajectory...[T]he four large video installations develop a rigorous and sustained thematic..fashion[ing] a surprising parallel between the stages of a child's acquisition of speech and the steps through which consumers absorb the lingua franca of today's global mass entertainment culture*" (2001:25,26).

It is this concern with language as both enabling communication (where it is taken for granted as in the form of mass communication) and as a disabling or hampered form of communication (for example, at the point of the acquisition of language), where a certain grappling with the building blocks of language is analyzed, that I focus on in particular in Breitz's experimentation with video installation as creative medium. The sound of seven looped videos simultaneously playing at high volume within a confined space create a blast of cacophonous sound as the "*gods of pop music are…unceremoniously reduced to babble*" (ibid 2001:27). In the *Babel Series*, the works of 20th century sound poets like Raoul Hausmann and Hugo Ball are evoked, works through which they championed a "*return to primordial phonetic*

sounds" (ibid 2001:27). Breitz's reduction of the lyrics of pop music to meaningless syllables is reminiscent of the manner in which the audience of mass culture is reduced to the helplessness of infants (ibid 2001:27).

A major theme explored in her work is thus her use of metaphors, rhythms and intonations of language in conjunction with visual sequences and fragments and how these impact on the immediate gallery environment. The correlation between sound and image and the relationship between cinematic and real space will be considered. As already pointed out, the spatial orchestration of Breitz's works in the form of installations has an undeniably immediate impact on the viewer who becomes an active participant in the decoding of the artwork. A statement by Karen Raney highlights this aspect of installation:

> "*Instead of seeing an artwork as a self-contained object whose meaning can be uncovered by the right kind of analysis, [i.e. the understanding of the installation artwork being gleaned from within] the space between artwork and viewer [is] where meanings are created by clashes, quotations and cross-references. Meaning is open, fluid, unstable, ambiguous and constantly being made and remade. Meaning comes from a dialogue between the subjectivity of the viewer and what is being confronted. As a result of the dialogue, both viewer and object are defined and gain identity*" (2003:30,31).

I will examine this theme of installation work as a means of establishing an open dialogue between the viewer and the artwork in all the works to be discussed in order to establish how language may be seen to have facilitated communication or failed in this regard. Concerning the point of the opening up of meaning and dialogue, the authors of the book, *Installation Art* make the following statement:

> "*To the extent that the effort to render permeable that barrier which separates us - that is, the everyday world of mass-production - from the realm of the artwork has succeeded, it has allowed meaning, the content of the work, to seep out into its surroundings. In breaking open the 'artistic realm' and making it one with social space, the observer of the work of art becomes implicated with it in a manner that differs considerably from the conventional relationship between viewer and painting or sculpture*" (de Oliveira, Oxley, Petry 1994:13).

This aspect of installation artworks is central to the conceptualization of the works to be discussed and will need to be unpacked further to demonstrate how the use of language within specific spatial parameters can overwhelm the viewer, being too much to take in at once. This is again an indication of the ability, or not, of language to communicate satisfactorily, as seen in Breitz's artworks.

The installation entitled *Four Duets* has four pairs of monitors, each pair positioned to face each other as the pop artists sing 'towards' their own mirror image. Thus the entire space becomes activated and the viewer engages spatially in a somewhat disorienting experience rather than with a contained object. In the *Babel Series*, Breitz sets up seven monitors as an installation in one room, all singing their "*noise-songs*" (Sturm 2001:91) at the same time. The result is to create an installation in which the audial and visual components consist of a cacophony of conflicting sounds and visuals. The following comment seems to relate pertinently to what Breitz is expressing in these works:

> "*It is stupid to want to explain with logical minuteness everything entirely, in all its causes and consequences, because reality throbs around us, bombards us with squalls of fragments of inter-connected events, mortised and tenoned together, confused, mixed up, chaotic. E.g. It's stupid to act out a contest between two persons always in an orderly, clear and logical way, since in daily life we nearly always encounter mere flashes of argument made momentary by our modern experience, in a tram, a cafe, a railway station, which remain cinematic in our minds like fragmentary dynamic symphonies of gestures, words, lights and sounds*" (Marinetti, Settimelli, Corra 1994:18)[3].

This point, made in an article as long ago as 1915 (and quoted in *Installation Art*) had an "*image of a dynamic, fragmented, alogical world*" as being "*essentially a theatrical one...[T]he rational, ordered space that had hitherto existed within the frame of the artwork...had ceased to exist*" (de Oliveira, Oxley, Petry 1994:18). The authors elaborate:

> *"In fact, throughout the century it is the theatre that provides the arena for a metaphorical fusion of art and everyday life. Whether here, with the Futurists, at the Bauhaus in the 1920s (Oskar Schlemmer described*

> *painting as theoretical research and performance as the 'practice' of that classical equation between performer and space), in the blocked out and scripted Happenings of Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine and others in the late 1950s, or in the raw confrontation between viewer and Minimal sculpture (a confrontation described by Michael Fried in 1967 as essentially theatrical), it is the space and time of the theatrical experience which pass for the extensiveness of the quotidian existence"* (de Oliveira, Oxley, Petry 1994:18).

Thus the fact of the artworks under discussion being created in the form of installation lends them a sense of the everyday, what is referred to above as 'theatrical', giving them a relevance in terms of my focus on the use of language and communication in our daily lives. Hatoum's work, which involves sound/language, visuals of the artist's mother in the shower, and script written in the Arabic language contains the added element of the use of text as a visual feature. This is an element which I will examine in terms of how the audio and the visual inclusion of language/text are made to facilitate and/or hamper communication. Angela Dimitrakaki, in her article on Mona Hatoum, makes the following statement: "*In this case"*, [concerning the work, *Measures of Distance*] "*the image and the script have merged into...a dense weaving of identity and its simultaneous undoing...*" (1998:94). Fiona Bradley adds:

> "*Instruments of communication, the letters are clearly an index of separation, their existence dependent solely on the fact that mother and daughter are in different countries. The mother's letters respond...to questions contained in the artists own letters - which we never get to hear - and centre on issues of personal and political identity, as she links the artists sense of alienation within and without the family to the fact of their exile from Palestine to Lebanon, a move which, she feels, stripped all of them of their identity and sense of pride. Eavesdropping on such a private correspondence, the viewer feels privileged to be part of both women's struggle for understanding, and feels bitterly with them the unfairness of their position*" (2002:24).

This statement highlights the central motivation for this paper, that of the attempt at communication between people separated by geographical and cultural distance. The work produced by both artists discussed above reveals a concern for and a focus

upon textural and verbal language and its effectiveness, (or lack thereof) as means of communication and connectedness.

The first chapter provides a brief overview of the concerns that relate to language and video art, particularly in the context of the relatively recent advent of video as medium. I point out that language comes to us pre-stamped by culture, and is therefore not something that can be taken for granted, since signs and images are neither stable, nor fully meaningful (Elwes 2005:77).

The following two chapters deal more specifically with the chosen artists' artworks themselves. Chapter two examines conflicting states in the artwork of Mona Hatoum. Particular emphasis is placed on the video piece, *Measures of Distance* (1988), in which the complex layering of the spoken word, written script and visual imagery are used to reflect upon paradoxical concepts of closeness and distance.

In chapter three, I discuss the work of Candice Breitz, an artist who uses video extensively in the form of installation, editing found video and film footage in order to create alternate meanings and a re-interpretation of the language of consumer culture.

These themes are brought together in a conclusion after which my own practical work is addressed in chapter four. My interest in the paradox of language as a facilitator of communication on the one hand and as barrier on the other, is broached. I discuss my fascination with outdated media, like the typewriter, and also consider my inclusion of themes related to its contemporary counterpart/equivalent – media like sms text messaging and email – in my own artistic practice. I briefly describe each artwork exhibited in the exhibition entitled *Soft Return*, and mention its connection with the concepts with which I have grappled.

Endnotes:

1. I. have relied a great deal on texts by theorists who have analyzed the works I have selected to discuss. Candice Breitz, having communicated with me by email, has sent me a number of such texts, which have been extremely useful. I have been unable to establish email contact with Mona Hatoum, but have used a number of books, articles and web entries relevant to her works.
2. Hatoum's work is rooted in her history as an exile. She was born into a Palestinian family living in Lebanon, but has been living in London since war broke out in Lebanon in 1975.
3. From: 'The Futurist Synthetic Theatre', an article written in *Apollonio*, quoted by Archer in the book, *Installation Art*.

Chapter 1

Problems of Language in Video Art

> "*Language is a map in search of a territory; it imposes order, it draws boundaries; it classifies and taxonomizes and yet remains always an abstraction, separate from the world of the living experience, separate from the things it seeks to describe*" (Jantjes[1] 1998:22)

During the time when video was still fairly new, artists endeavoured to define a creative space independent of broadcast television. There were many artists, in the UK especially, who wanted to build a challenging practice which would engage in an underlying critique of both television and existing political and social structures. As a result, the focus was more on an unraveling of linguistic practices in video art (in the UK mostly), than on exploration of material and process. The modernist approach to this challenge was to deconstruct the illusion of the televisual image, thereby exposing the electronic and mechanical devices responsible for giving rise to the apparently effortless face of television. By working at the level of content, others made it possible for the viewer to see what was absent from our television screens. The silent majorities that western civilization often think of as minorities (which include ethnic groups, women, gays, lesbians and to a certain extent, the working classes) created a platform to make themselves heard through the work of avant-garde artists (Elwes 2005:76).

Jacques Derrida and other postmodern thinkers have claimed that "*identity is constructed by unstable systems of interrelated cultural meanings or 'texts' leading to an individual who is internally fractured and externally determined. Personal truths can only be partial, distorted as they are by the fictionalization of experience that constitutes remembering, the inassimilable nature of extreme experience*"

(Elwes 2005:76). The film maker Abigail Child refers to it as "*the conceptual and social prisms through which we attempt to apprehend*"[2] (ibid 2005:76). With the making of video based on self-representation, there is always the problem of accurately discerning the 'self'. One can never be quite sure how much of the 'self' is a product of social and political conditioning and how much of it is indeed 'nature, nurture or free will'. Based on this, the quest for self-knowledge remains problematic, and it is impossible to obtain an accurate view on anyone or anything[3]. The notion of the individual as a unified, autonomous subject has been challenged by the postmodern idea of identity. The meme theory sees individuals as merely fleeting staging posts for ideas and ideologies that flow, self powered, in the universe[4]. The old advisory to 'know thyself', seems simply to be no longer possible. How does "*one pursue the slippery concept of the real within a matrix of languages that necessarily limits and delimits what we are able to say?*" (Elwes 2005:77).

Similarly expressed in a recent article, Potgieter declares that post-structural theories of language state that "*all meaningful human experiences are subject to language*", but "*we have no access to a true reality or final meanings*" (2007:38). He further notes that if we look at it in a slightly different way, human beings do not have any entry into a reality that is unmediated, as meaning is caused by the "*mediated play of differences in a network of signs that refer to nothing beyond the network itself*" (ibid 2007:38). This concept of language is upheld by the fact that one cannot give a meaning to an abstract term, like for example, 'love' other than by saying it is similar to words like 'affection', 'fondness', 'lust' and 'caring'. Concerning this, Potgieter refers to Neal (1988:152), who quotes Miller as saying "*our linguistic predicament is in not being able…to declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else*" (2007:38).

While (largely during the seventies), conceptualists were busy analyzing methods of communicating information, feminists were looking for ways to withstand the control that patriarchy held over language (Morley 2003:171). Due to a number of

inherent language related obstacles, women could not depend on meanings they wanted to impart being transmitted by the linguistic vehicles that were at their disposal. Language was inherently male. Within its structures, language had gendered positions already securely fixed within them which were dualistic, positive (masterful) and negative (effeminate). The feminist writer, Dale Spender termed this 'man-made language'[5]. Both polarities were seen to be dependent on each other, syntactically and ideologically. Once we have mastered the current forms of communication and have entered into a dualistic symbolic order, "*we do not speak with language, but rather, as the saying went, 'language speaks us'* " (Elwes 2005:77).

Intimately connected to language are issues that relate to power and possession. When it comes to proper names, for instance, the act of the giving of personal names is intricately connected with social, psychic and cultural controls. By means of this act, (giving a personal name) a sense of fixed identity for the self is thus provided, society is offered a means of keeping records and close observation. Indeed a culture is furnished with the power to colonize. In fact, all acts involving the naming of marginalized and silenced peoples are recognized to also be deep-seated acts of imperialism. This means that many marginalized people need to use a language and learn an alphabet that is not their own when speaking or writing. Morley notes that they: "*learn…a tongue and/or script in which, as feminists and ethnic minorities have argued, the self is cast, not as a subject, but rather as an object or absence. Language, in this context, is something oppressively inscribed on the subject, making them intelligible and therefore an object of control* (2003:188).

Representations of femininity, gay sexual orientation and ethnic difference in visual culture are all regarded historically as occupying the 'other' negative polarity, this being the pivotal position against which the heterosexual, white male was established. In the late 1970s, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous, French feminists, encouraged women to cultivate a feminine writing focused on the abnormal languages of neurosis as well as the utterances of babyhood, witchcraft and the body

at the point of death[6]. Cixous also encouraged women to 'write through their bodies' and saw a comparable freedom in the vivid potential of experience in material form that, like the ravings of the insane, could escape the "*constitutive structures of the male symbolic order*" (Elwes 2005:77).

Originating from the insights of Lacan and Marxism, feminist thought, according to the theory of the dynamics of representation, saw masculine logic as essentially dominating representations. This functioned by means of the masculine being put forward as subject and the feminine as object. Even though, historically, women have been depicted in images as 'objects for the male gaze', this simply made it clear that signs are composed in order to strengthen and extend the hold of male standards over consciousness. This, they claimed, was especially true in writing. Indeed, in 1976 Helene Cixous commented:

> "*Far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy… This is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that is frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction*" (Morley 2003:164).

Influenced by feminism, 'visual-verbal' interactions and investigations of 'sense and non-sense' were intensified. American artist Bruce Nauman employed the unstable interaction of word and image in his multi-media works, words being key to his practice. He started to investigate the use of neon and was, in a sense, challenging the tie "*between word and idea and detouring the reader/viewer through a more corporeally replete kind of experience*" (Morley 2003:163). An example of this is, *Run from Fear, Fun from Rear* (1972), where Nauman toys with anagrams reminiscent of Duchamp. He uses words in ways that emphasize them foremost as rhythms of speech rather than as printed text. The wordplay of *Run from Fear* is in fact both visually and aurally dynamic. The artist also sets up a narrative element. By contrasting the meaning of the two phrases in a balanced way – one of which evokes an 'existential terror', while the other evokes vulgar gratification – Nauman makes a connection between the violent and the sexual. In this way he reflects his

conviction that central to contemporary experience exists a state of indeterminacy and absurdity. He comments:

> "*I think the point where language starts to break down as a useful tool for communication is the same edge where poetry or art occurs. If you only deal with what is known, you'll have redundancy; on the other hand, if you deal with the unknown, you cannot communicate at all. There is always some combination of the two, and it is how they touch each other that makes communication interesting*"[7] (Morley 2003:164).

However, many feminists in the1980s were convinced by Spender's proposition that visual and verbal languages were both unavoidably patriarchal and masculine and they decided to continue to work with what they had.

Avant-garde English film makers also examined the language of mainstream cinema. In the same way as Spender, Cixous and Irigaray had found in spoken language, the language of Hollywood cinema was found to be peppered with negative role models for all those who were neither male, middle class nor heterosexual (Elwes 2005:78). Based on the reasoning of psychoanalysis and Saussure's structural linguistics, artists[8] investigated narrative structures in film and television, and recognized them as the means through which these oppressive ideologies were being propagated. "*They observed that the mechanism that enables 'family entertainment' to become such dangerous propaganda was rooted in the psychosocial pleasures of spectatorship and voyeurism*"[9] (ibid 2005:78). The viewer sits in the darkened cinema and has a sense of invisibility due to the illusion that is imparted that though 'we can see them, they can't see us.' When camouflaged in this way, the viewer would seem to look into an imaginary world that pretends to be oblivious to their voyeuristic gaze. The theory was that while retaining the infantile perception of being in control, the reality is that spectators are passively identifying with one or other personality on screen. They become absorbed into the story, but are unaware of the fact that while they are watching, they are "*internalizing ideological messages hidden in the narrative and the fabric of the spectacle*" (ibid 2005:78). For instance, women are placed within the storyline of the typical

Hollywood film to be looked at and to provide motivation for the men to act and cause the story to move on. "*This reflects and reinforces their relative active and passive positions within a phallocentric society outside the cinema. According to the structuralists, the gaze inscribed in the camera's eye is fundamentally male and western*" (ibid 2005:78).

The view taken in the 1970s by structuralist film makers was that any type of narrative was governed by power relations entrenched in a set structure of signification established on difference – male vs female, white vs black and so on. In an effort to sidestep the ideological dangers of narrative, structuralist film makers placed their emphasis instead on the structure and substance of film. They, as did the modernists, focused their attention on processes and materials – things like celluloid, camera moves, light, duration, cuts and dissolves. They turned film into a type of pared down optical event. Storylines, most representations and objects (including their cultural meanings) were often unable to be identified, and spectators were required to turn their attention to the consequences of repetition, optical printing and ambiguous imagery. The structuralists saw this as the way to "*avoid the sins of narrativity and voyeurism*" and indeed "*[t]hese non-narrative films were often hypnotic, visually compelling and evident of a painterly sensibility operating behind the lens*". The main intention was to "*refuse the audiences' narrative expectations and thereby open their eyes to the politics they were being fed along with their Star Wars*" (ibid 2005:79). The theory behind it was that once their eyes were opened, the viewers would no longer trust those in control and be prompted to become active in the dismantling of a repressive social order[10]. Through the rejection of the enjoyment of narrative, structuralists came dangerously close to the old-fashioned attitudes of those "*who blamed Kojak for the actions of psychopathic murderers in the 1980s and, nowadays, point to Gangsta Rap as the cause of urban violence among adolescents*" (ibid 2005:79). Or in its demanding analysis of voyeurism and narrative, structural materialism demonstrated how the presentation of ideology operated in the art and entertainment industries. It was later acknowledged that spectatorship included active elements, and narrative strategies were reintroduced to

film for more subversive purposes than straightforward entertainment (ibid 2005:79).

While independent film in the UK developed separately and focused primarily on the critique of mainstream film in the 1970s, television was seen as the chief opponent for video artists. However, both independent film and video had similar ideas concerning their analyses of popular culture and a cross-fertilization of ideas transpired between disciplines. In fact, when film theorists applied their critique to the work of video-makers, structural materialism became a problem for video artists in its total rejection of narrative. This was because the voices of minorities could no longer be heard from within the very platforms that had afforded them a voice. Ethnic minorities and gays had need of visibility to facilitate liberation campaigns, and feminist's strategies were based on the reconfiguration of the personal as political. With the loss of narrative and recognizable images which took place within the implementation of this particular ideology, the aims of these groups were not furthered at all. The central lesson to be learnt from structuralism was an important one, which was that "*the language of the moving image was not transparent, but loaded with ideological precedents*" (ibid 2005:80). However, the total emptying of meaning proposed by the structuralists was not something that could be sustained, and the next generation of independent film makers rebelled against these limitations. The younger group challenged the idea of the passive movie/television consumer indiscriminately absorbing an ideologically marked entertainment, and it was recognized that people were individuals whose reading of images was influenced by their own individual histories and the moment in which they encountered the work. It has been proposed by feminist commentators that subtexts consisting of women's discourses exist in conjunction with those of their male authors in mainstream film and that, in the case of an active woman spectator, they could recognize and make use of them[11]. In the creation of meaning from a variety of ethnic and gendered spectator positions, this newly 'performative' viewer has more recently been encouraged to become active in the making of meaning in art. "*The languages of art are now viewed not as fixed, but fluid, layered and in a*

constant state of becoming in the charged spaces between maker, viewer and object/video" (ibid 2005:80).

Cultural theories from the 1970s and 1980s eroded the importance that had been attached to the role of author and artist. Barthes' notion of the death of the author and the dominance of viewer subjectivity in the creation of meaning took hold. Many points of view and voices proposed that there was no single correct viewing perception, nor was there just one definitive and indisputable version of the truth. The individual was "*regarded as an independent locus of consciousness capable of Cartesian introspection and judgement*" (ibid 2005:86). Later, the concept of the individual as simply a point where cultural influences come together became prevalent. This can be seen, for instance, in a work that multiplies modes of narration and vocal sources in such a way that it tells a story in a number of different ways at the same time (ibid 2005:86).

Mona Hatoum's work, *Measures of Distance*, which I will discuss in greater detail later in this paper, is typical of this type of representation. She "*experiments with language, using it as an equivalent to visual imagery, bringing words and images onto the same plane and forcing the viewer to look at and interpret them on the same terms*" (Bradley 202:25). This work is a complex single screen video piece which interweaves various means of communication. The work's layers include visuals, text, and sound. At the same time as Hatoum's voice can be heard reading letters, in English, from her mother, the voices of mother and daughter can be heard conversing in Arabic. The letters, written in Arabic script, are layered, screen-like, half covering images of Hatoum's mother in the shower. This work covers a range of issues – cultural, linguistic, political, gender-based, and personal.

This proliferation of viewpoints and voices found within new narrative video in the 1980s "*offered a critique of television naturalism, itself built on a notion of the unified subject, notwithstanding the split personality often suggested in Jekyll and Hyde-style scenarios*" (Elwes 2005:87). Often an artist would deliberately

undermine the unity of a fictional character by splintering its image through creating a multiplicity of voices and narratives at the same time (Elwes 2005:87).

In this way, the notion of self became more flexible, adopting different kinds of speech and creating an array of identities which issued forth from the same individual. Candice Breitz's video installations clearly demonstrate this. Her *Four Duets* (2000), for instance, which I shall also discuss in detail later on, features four different vocalists, each singing towards her own image on a screen opposite. On one monitor, the singer repeatedly sounds the isolated personal pronouns "I, me, my", while the same vocalist can be seen opposite, singing the words, "you, you, you" back to her own image. Each is locked into becoming her own audience. By the mid 1980s, more sophisticated techniques became available on video which had long been possible on film. These allowed for the "*visual atomization of the individual*" (ibid 2005:87). It was now possible to mirror or double faces and figures and create weird and grotesque hybrids through merging of bodies. These were often considered to evoke psychic states.

Video artists in the UK were set on investigating "*both internal fragmentation and the ruptures inherent in language*" (ibid 2005:89). In order to create a sense of our fundamental disconnectedness from the images that represent us, they began by separating the signifier from the signified and the speaker from the sign in televisual language[12]. The opportunity for narrative communication together with visual pleasure was reintroduced at that time, thereby repairing the alienation of subjectivity under the intellectual constraints of structural materialism. "*The new narrativists were not looking for a closed, settled unity, but an internal co-existence of a fractured subjectivity*" (ibid 2005:89). While conducting experiments in the realm of language they believed in the transformative potential of art that they could raise awareness and that they could genuinely make themselves heard from an "*authentic position through the complex and ever-shifting mesh of linguistic conventions*" (ibid 2005:90).

Anselm Kiefer, the German painter, (who devised what have been termed 'history paintings' – richly textured paintings with script gouged into the surface of the paint) employed the metaphor of the book as a symbol for the increase and regulation of knowledge. But in the new world of consumer culture, little place is left for self-expression, history or books. In a culture dominated by electronic media, the book and reading have become 'marginalized', even redundant. Artist Tim Rollins is quoted as saying that when he was growing up, although TV played a central role in their lives, they still read, but with the children of today:

> "*it's all TV and VCR, rented video tapes, and movies and records. It's all through the eyes and ears, bypassing the mind. And after your daily five hours of television, then the movie, then playing the video games, if there's any time left in the day for books, you're lucky. But the book – with its little black marks on the white rectangle of the page – is like a foreign language. The experience of reading is, compared to these other forms of culture, boring, because the imagination – like a neglected muscle – is so soft it can hardly function…the reading levels are incredibly low*"[13] (Morley 2003:175).

The French Situationist-inspired cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard noted that the mass media is characterized by an opposition to mediation and to the manufacture of 'non-communication' – given that communication is defined as an exchange, as a give-and-take space where speech and response can take place[14]. The new electronic media have converged into a nexus which consists of social machinery and control and the result was that diverse cultures were drawn together along a volatile global 'information superhighway'. This was strongly influenced by those who maintained and exercised control over its distribution. The inane and beguiling terminology of advertising, the empty and frequently voyeuristic newspaper text, the television news, the debased conversations and storylines of the television soap opera and Hollywood movies all seemed to announce the success of all that is was trivial and insincere, and announced the ultimate triumph of the culture of consumer capitalism; over any possibility of a feasible 'counter-culture of resistance' (Morley2003:176).

The early grammatical policy used by television and cinema was carefully engineered to keep the viewer unaware of the hidden procedures involved in its making. When artists meddled with parts of it – like disrupting the harmonious flow of sound and image, or removing the storyline – the realism of television was easily undermined. Linear narrative was vulnerable and therefore affected by modes of misrepresentation, discontinuity and multiple performances introduced into the work. The outcome of these procedures was that they not only upset the internal logic of narrative makeup, but they also damaged the authenticity of ideological doctrines propagated by broadcast television. Breitz's work, *Soliloquy Trilogy* (2000), is interesting in this regard, as it removes the storyline, destroys linear narrative, creates a sense of discontinuity and deliberately flattens the characters by isolating them and removing any contextual positioning. The starting point of each video in the trilogy is a familiar Hollywood movie, and a single protagonist is selected for focus. The work comprises a series of three monologues: *Soliloquy (Sharon)* (1992-2000) (fig 1), which features Sharon Stone and has been edited from *Basic Instinct* (1992); *Soliloquy (Clint)* (1971-2000), which stars Clint Eastwood as the character from *Dirty Harry* (1971); and *Soliloquy (Jack)* (1987-2000) (fig 2), which presents a portrait of Jack Nicholson as the character from *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987). The character is then isolated (by cut and paste) from every scene in which she/he appears. In *Sharon* for example, *Basic Instinct* has been meticulously trimmed so that all footage is deleted bar the moments in which Sharon Stone speaks…giggles…groans…or grunts. The re-worked film shows every one of Sharon Stone's vocal moments, each having been isolated and chronologically strung together. In the process, the full length film is reduced to just over 7 minutes (Breitz 2006, *in lit*).

It was thus argued that signs were inherently unstable and permanently bound to capital. Basic assumptions concerning language were shown to be erroneous: "*Meaning is not transparent, there is no such thing as objective knowledge, and language does not give access to eternal or universal truths* (Morley 2003:176).



Fig 1: *Soliloquy (Sharon), 1992-2000*. 2000
Candice Breitz
Video stills. Short film on DVD
07:11 minutes

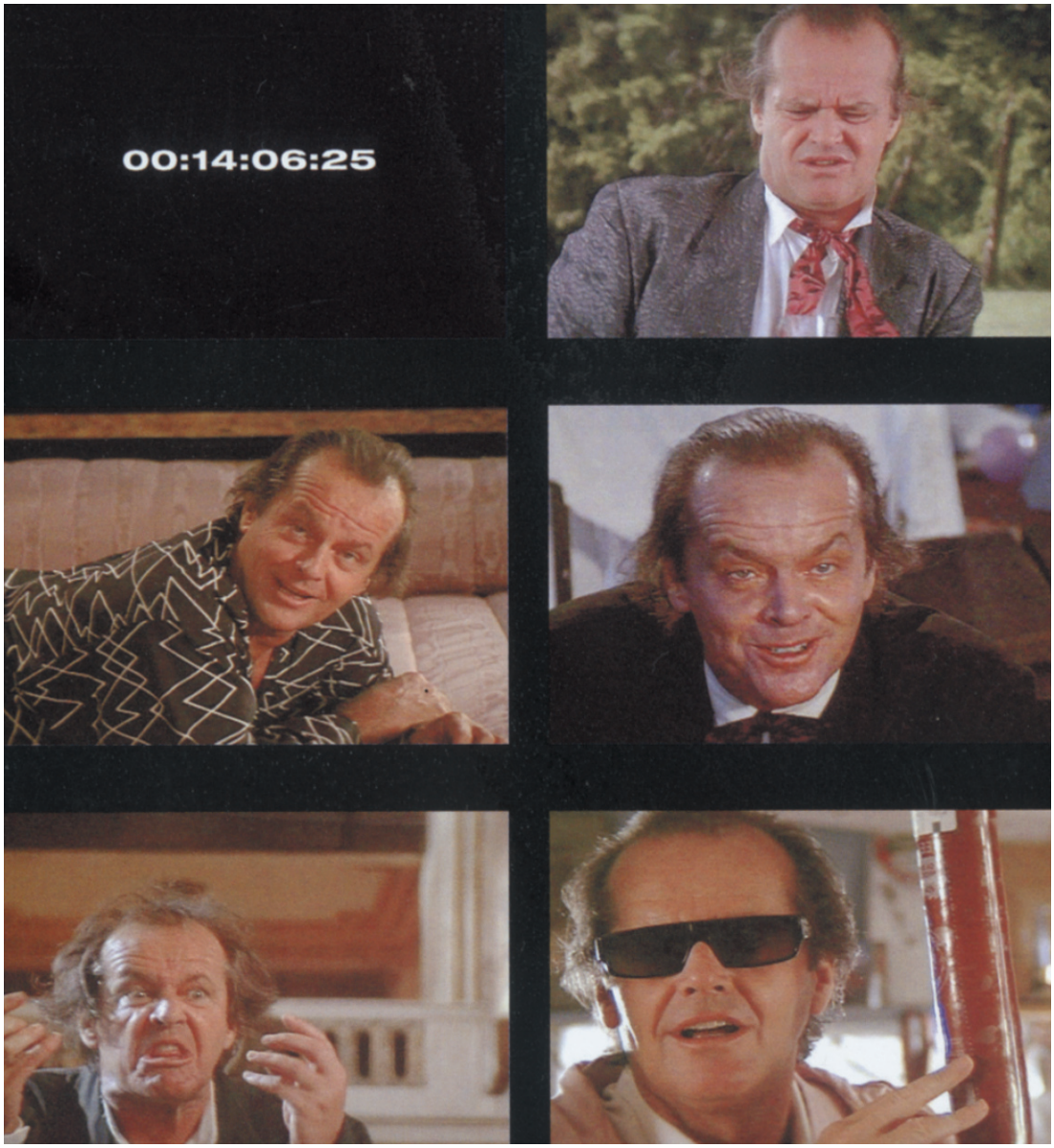


Fig 2: *Soliloquy (Jack), 1987-2000*. 2000
Candice Breitz
Video stills. Short film on DVD
14:06 minutes

Texts do not naturally have an organic unity**,** nor are they the product of autonomous authors or individuals. As an essential 'decentring' of the sign takes place, signifiers should be understood to have drifted free from any link to their signifieds: "*The fact that image, word and world no longer intersected in any convincing way – that language was seemingly a sealed system dominated by capital and giving no access to any external reality – seemed to suggest to many that the best way to describe language was as a prison-house*"[15] (Morley 2003:176).

That was the theory that underpinned the 'anti-aesthetic' art of the late 1970s and 1980s. It resulted in artists being required to operate believing that they were trapped in a situation controlled by preset and economically motivated signs. Consequently, the difference and distance needed between radical art and any other suppliers of signs simply no longer existed. The avant-garde, which had seen itself as part of a type of vertical hierarchy (where either a separation between art and life was pursued, or where art and life were being pushed into uneasy contact) had surrendered to the acknowledgement that art operated within a freshly established culture 'industry' and was part of a non- hierarchical, parallel axis that generated an impenetrable and standardized culture. Some artists abandoned concepts of creative authorship, giving way instead to tactics that highlighted their position as estranged and "*displaced appropriator[s] within a field of ideologically determined cultural codes…Artists saw themselves as situated within language rather than being the source of its effects, and in this situation were recast as deft manipulators of the mass media's glut of words and images, rather than makers of art objects*" (Morley 2003:176). Breitz's *Soliloquy Trilogy*, described above, fits into this category of appropriation, and Breitz herself is a "*manipulator of…mass media's…words and images*". As American artist, Barbara Kruger's works stated, *We are obliged to steal language* (1980). Kruger remarked that she saw her production as a procedure – a sequence of attempts to make specific dislocations in the grammatical and visual fields[16] (Morley 2003:177).

The credibility of television realism depends on the invisibility of edits, dissolves and other transitions and these are used to ease the viewer from one scene to another. Structuralist film-makers however, often reduced the speed of sequences to a virtual standstill so as to eliminate meaning and avoid a fixed narrative, and video-makers of new narrative speeded up and multiplied the editing processes in order to emphasize the multiplicity of alternating images that together form the foundation of conventional film and television (Elwes 2005:90). The underlying substrate of editing that had previously upheld linear narrative in mainstream narratives had been kept well hidden. This was now brought out into the open, and became a key element in the new narrative. Internal coherence and the narrative continuity on which television depends had been ruptured by the type of manipulation that was made possible by editing. The frequent repetition of sequences in videos by 'looping' can disturb and deplete meaning from the image and at the same time generate a new item altogether, in what Vito Acconci termed the 'replicating aspect', as he noted, "*when something is repeated, it becomes matter, it becomes fact*"[17] (ibid 2005:91). This repetition and looping is used extensively in Breitz's work, where she, at times, edits minute fragments of footage from pop culture videos and repetitively uses the same sound, thereby imparting to the work a completely new meaning, as we shall see in the later chapter on her work. As Elwes notes, and this could probably also be applied to Breitz:

> "*In dismantling the codes of conventional televisual language, new narrative began to reconstruct a language of the imagination, a skewed vision of the world that slid between the cracks and fissures of what is known*" (2005:91).

However, Elwes also comments that "*where video drew heavily on uniform popular cultural images there was a danger of blandly reflecting the status quo*" (2005:161). She later comments specifically that contemporary work by artist Candice Breitz is evidence of this 'bland reflection of the status quo'. Footage has been appropriated and used in Breitz's work from television and film and, although it has apparently been deconstructed by means of repetition, Elwes regards it as having failed "*to transform the original while uncritically reiterating its ideological messages*"

(2005:161). This is open to debate and I will engage more fully with Breitz's position on this in my chapter on her work. I would contend, however, that Breitz's work *does* engage critically with popular cultural images *exactly by* reiterating their ideological messages but then also *disrupting* their reading. Her complicitous engagement with popular cultural imagery through processes of recycling and reanimating need not necessarily rule out a position of criticality altogether. What Breitz's work certainly does achieve is to expose the dependent relationship of language to context and society.

Breitz comments that when in the presence of a superstar, the consumer is suspended in an 'eternal present tense' which causes everything outside of that superstar to become flat and standardized. In *Soliloquy Trilogy,* she attempted to find a formal language by which she could convey the remarkable compression of time and space that comes about in the presence of celebrity. Her intention is to filter the presence of these superstars to the place where the aura that surrounds them begins to unravel and becomes one dimensional and shallow.

Isolated from their co-stars and the movie storyline, these stars are stripped of the magnetic atmosphere that surrounds them, and, to use *(Jack)* as an example, "*every unadulterated snort and lusty growl that issues from Nicholson is made obscenely available to our scrutiny*" (Breitz 2006, *in lit*). The soliloquies cause the personas of these stars to degenerate as narrative and contextualization fails to prop them up any longer. The viewer is made aware how strongly language is dependant on context and society for its meaning as the main character in the movie is isolated and deprived of any chance of communication. As Breitz puts it, "*The mechanics of iconicity are somewhat vulgarly exposed with this liberation of the 'femme fatale' from her narrative context and from linear dialogue with other characters*" (2006, *in lit*). This isolation of the main character in the opacity of her own expression, what is effectively deprivation from the possibility of communication – may perhaps allude to the psychosis experienced by the individual who is alienated from interaction with others – from a space of social belonging (Breitz 2006, *in lit*).

Basic assumptions concerning human consciousness have been challenged through these investigations into language and the relationship between word and image (Morley 2003:205). In the next chapter I will examine the work of Mona Hatoum, in which she focuses on paradoxical aspects of communication and on opposing states. The relationship between word and image as well as a consideration of sound will specifically be addressed concerning her video work, *Measures of Distance*.

Endnotes:

1. Jantjes quoting Borges, an Argentinian poet.
2. Child, A. (2000). 'Being a witness'. In Reinke, S. & Taylor, T. (eds), *Lux, a Decade of Artists' Film and Video*, YYZ Books.
3. Phelan, P. (1993). *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance,* Routledge, London.
4. Blackmore, S. (1999). *The Meme Machine,* Oxford University Press, London.
5. Spender, D. (1980). *Man Made Language,* Routledge & Kegan Paul.
6. Cixous, H. (1981) 'The Laugh of the Medusa'. In Marks, E. & de Courtivron, I. (eds), *New French Feminisms*, The Harvester Press.
7. Nauman, B. quoted in Storr, R. 'Beyond Words'. In Benezra, N. & Halbreitch, K., *Bruce Nauman: Exhibition Catalogue* and *Catalogue Raisonne*. Exhibition catalogue, Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, in association with the Hirshborn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C., 1994, p.55.
8. Artists like Laura Mulvey, Peter Gidal and Malcolm le Grice
9. For a comprehensive account of experimental film in the UK, see Rees, A.L. (1999). *A History of Experimental Film and Video,* BFI Publishing.
10. The present concept that we are shaped by the cultural images to which we are exposed is considered by Elwes as utopian and she notes that it is on this basis that television and film censorship has been structured.
11. Pribram, E. D. (ed.), (1988).*Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television,* Verso.
12. Breitz's work, *Alien* (2002), is an example, where the multi-channel installation shows 10 music videos at the same time, and a jumble of ten loudly singing voices accost the viewer as he/she enters the space. This work is discussed more fully in chapter 3.
13. 'Dialogues' in *Tim Rollins + KOS*: Exhibition catalogue, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1988. Reprinted in Brand, J., Gast, N., and Muller, R. J. (eds), *De Woorden en de Beelden: Tekst en Beeld in de Kunst van de Twintigste Euew/The Words and the Images: Text and Images in the Art of the Twentieth Century*. Exhibition catalogue, Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 1991, p.242.
14. Baudrillard, J. (1985) 'The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media' (trans. M. Mclean), *New Literary History*, vol.16, no.3, Spring. Reprinted in Poster, M. (ed.), (1988). *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings,* London, p.207.
15. The phrase is taken from Jameson, F. (1972). *The Prison-House of Language: a Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, Princeton N. J.
16. Seigel, J. (1987). 'Barbara Kruger: Pictures and Words - Interview with Jeanne Seigel'. In *Art Talk*, p.300.
17. Biesenbach, K. (2003). 'Vito Acconci in conversation with Klaus Biesenbach'. In: *Video Acts: Single Channel Works from the Collections of Pamela and Richard Kramlich and the New Art Trust Catalogue*, P.S.1 New York, ICA London.

Chapter 2

Mona Hatoum: *Measures of Distance*

Much of Hatoum's work speaks of contradictions not unlike the paradox found in language where it sometimes connects, but at other times seems to inhibit the connection between individuals. In contrasting order with chaos, Hatoum creates an awareness of the interdependence of these conflicting states. A key element in her work is the process of the negotiation of proximity and distance. "*Careful spacing and installing turn continuously into measures of displacement that form a threa/d/t through all of Hatoum's recent work*" (Philippi 1993:6).

Up to 1988, Hatoum's primary involvement was with video and performance. I will be discussing, in particular, her 1988 video work, *Measures of Distance*, as it focuses on language and communication and includes text and spoken word.

Mona Hatoum was born into a Palestinian family living in Beirut. While visiting London in 1975, war broke out in Lebanon, which prevented her from returning home. As a result of this she experienced a sense of displacement which was amplified by the conflicting emotions of welcome and hostility, safety and frustration. Hatoum's work is thus rooted in her history as an exile. These and other contradictory states, such as distance and proximity, oppression and liberation, surveillance and privacy, are recurrent and pervasive themes. The experience of cultural displacement, both as a woman and an Arab national, has informed much of her artistic practice.

Due to Israeli intimidation, the Palestinian Hatoum family fled their Haifa home in1948, and settled in Beirut, where Mona Hatoum was born and raised. Having been employed by the British administration as a civil servant his entire life, her father worked first in Palestine, and later at the British Embassy in Beirut. He held a

British passport and this became the only identity paper held by the family after their Palestinian nationality documents were invalidated. Since their Palestinian accents unwittingly declared them foreigners while living in Beirut, little Mona had the sense of being simultaneously at home, and yet not at home. This engendered within the little girl a feeling of ambiguity regarding her origins. Hatoum enrolled at an art school in London after having been stranded there by the war at home, and remained as a working artist. Although the school offered her refuge and a sense of freedom by comparison with the turmoil of the Middle East war, she still felt different from the others, being from the 'Third World'. Whereas her fellow students enjoyed a sense of confidence and comfort due to being rooted, Hatoum had feelings of restlessness and dislocation (Brett 1997:34). She experimented widely, discovering in video and performance an area where experimentation by artists in language and media corresponded with the awareness they had of social issues.

By 1982, the war had intensified and events in Lebanon had become extremely troubled. Atrocities were being committed. Hatoum's parents were virtually living under siege in Beirut. The artist, living in England, felt deeply separated from them. The turmoil in her home country was a cause of deep concern to her, and something of which the English society in which she lived, was unaware. When she heard news of the brutal, organized massacre of Palestinian refugees outside Beirut in September 1982, it served as a catalyst and created a turning point in her life. "*She was shocked into a politicization which could only, in her circumstances in England, take a subjective form and cast her in the role of witness*" (ibid 1997:42). Hatoum felt impelled to abandon objective research and become more actively involved in a political sense. This she did through performance art, by harshly confronting her audience and bearing *"testimony to the historical reality of the Third World*" (Philippi 1993:16). There is an immediacy in performance art that facilitates this type of confrontation. Philippi quotes Sara Diamond as saying that, in performance, "*the artist is being herself, making her own statement, and not pretending to be someone else, somewhere else*"[1] (1993:16).

"*Exile is a complex cultural location*" (Noble 2002:1). It seems to be a place where a continuous negotiation exists between past and present; between memories of home comforts and the rigorous need to reinvent oneself in a place that is both unfamiliar and new; between a yearning to return and the desire to achieve recognition in an unknown society. However difficult, the exile is also in a sense, freed to make of her/himself someone new, being released from the restrictions previously imposed by family, culture and class. Although this is often not a situation of choice, there is nonetheless a certain liberty inherent in the possibility for re-creation – as neither Armenian, Palestinian nor Jew, but a re-creation instead by action and speech. And yet, by the same token, exile can be oppressive in way that is just as powerful, always being accompanied by a multi-faceted burden of loss. The loss of family, language, culture and land "*can leave one*," as Noble puts it, "*emotionally and culturally bereft*" (2002:1). Both these aspects, the opportunity for the re-creation of self and the burden of loss, mark positions within which the inherent location of the exile must be negotiated.

Mona Hatoum is an exile in a double sense. On a cultural as well as political level she has, to a large extent, "*lived in other people's space*" (ibid 2002:1). By means of video, performance and more recently with material-based constructions, she has investigated the phenomenological, political and psychological complexities of space formed in exile. Her work is positioned within what Homi Bhabha has characterized as the "*hybridity or irreducible in-betweeness of diasporic culture, in which neither past nor present, home nor not-home, can be experienced in full plenitude*"[2] (ibid 2002:2). Hatoum's work reaches deeply into her own experience of exile: her yearning for home and her indignation and anger at the dispossession of her people. Her work is, however, not straightforwardly autobiographical, but emanates rather from a perspective based on an exilic condition (ibid 2002:2).

Before discussing *Measures of Distance* in more detail, I would like to mention certain other works in which Hatoum tackles concerns that have to do with communication and contradiction/paradox. These will enable me to introduce

Measures of Distance more fully in light of her art production as a whole and works that have lead up to the concerns expressed in this work. Some of these works also demonstrate clearly how the dynamics of space have been integral to her conceptualization of works and thus define her practice as installation-based, even though *Measures of Distance* is essentially a video work (i.e. it can be viewed outside of any specific spatial setting as a video work in and of itself and is thus not entirely linked to a particular site).

A 1979 conceptual work, which embodies perceptual and philosophical paradoxes, *Self-Erasing Drawing* (fig 3), bears a strong relationship to our topic. It is a kinetic three dimensional object with a motorized arm that rotates on a central pivot in a little box of sand. On one end, the arm draws circular lines at a speed of 5rpm onto the bed of sand, while at the other end, the arm simultaneously erases them. The system is a closed one, and offers a paradigm of the relationship between opposites which are ambiguous but inseparable (Brett 1993:18).

The intense focus in her early live works was on her body and herself. There was a very immediate relationship between herself, as artist, and that of the onlooker. However, at the same time, a type of barrier existed between them, since Hatoum revealed a "*gulf of communication*" which came from "*the artist's sense of representing in herself tumultuous dislocations unknown to the society around her*" (ibid 1993:16). This separation was expressed structurally through barriers which took many forms: a cage, a wall, a cell, a plastic membrane, a veil or a hood. A sense of barrier was evident in photographs taken at a live event that took place in 1982, entitled *Under Siege* (fig 4). In this work, the naked artist struggled to stand in a clear container filled with clay. The spectators clustered around, watching her as she slipped and fell, over and over, in a performance that took place over a period of seven hours. The time dimension became another element that created a barrier between artist and audience.

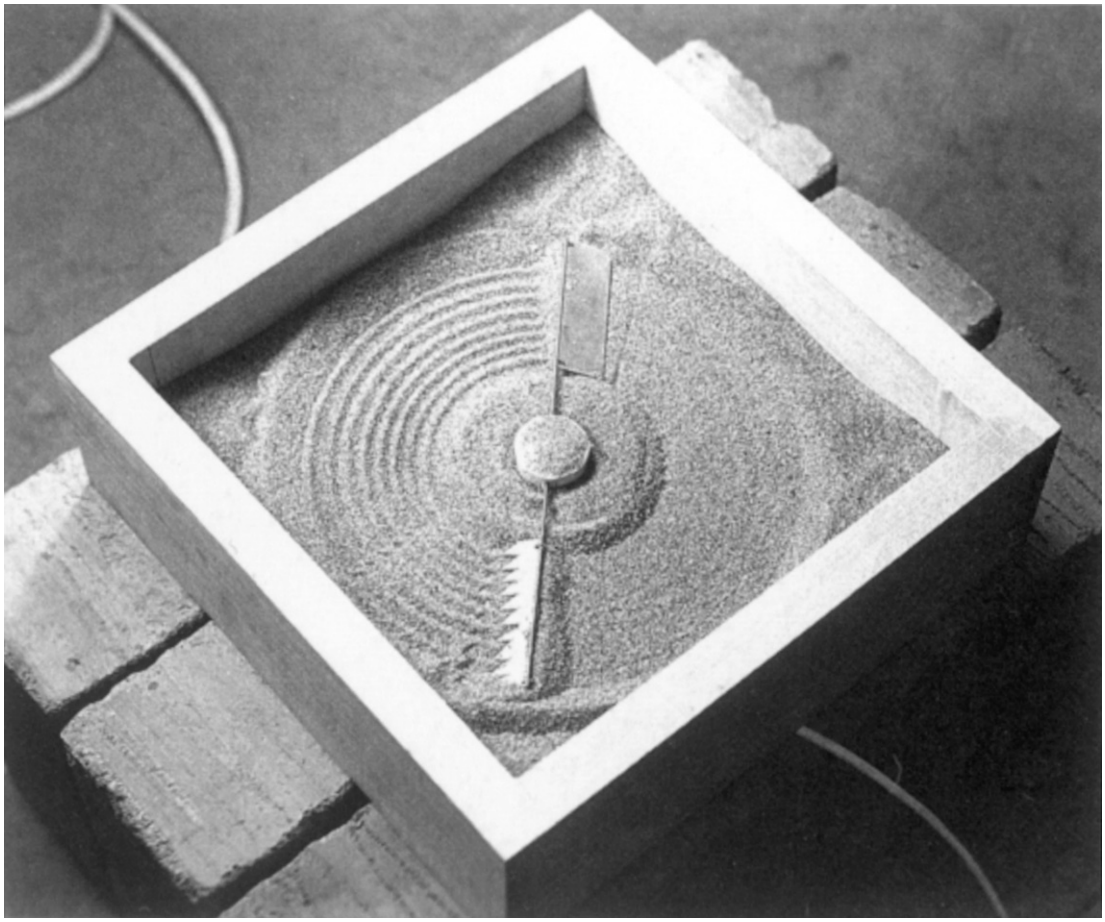


Fig 3: *Self Erasing Drawing*. 1979
Mona Hatoum
Wood, sand, metal, electric motor
95 x 280 x 280mm

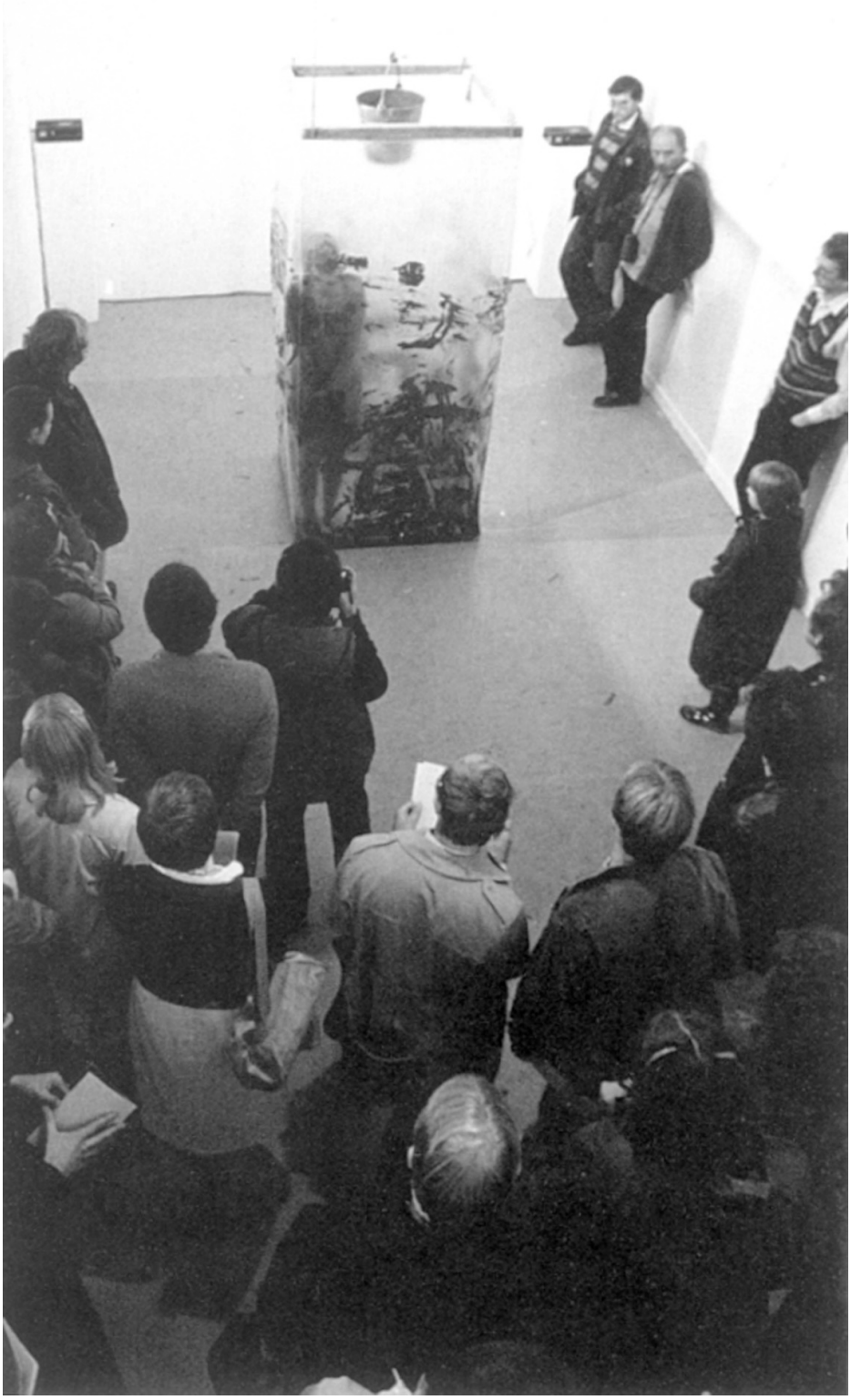


Fig 4: *Under Seige*. 1982
Mona Hatoum
Live work, Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth
7 hours duration

For Hatoum, the performance was an exhausting ordeal, a vigil – with the spectator remaining untouched, content to merely watch – secure, detached and passive. The event as spectacle widened this gulf. An inner intensity emanated from the commitment of the artist "*and self-concentration contained within a precise ordering of time and space*" which gave the emotional impact to these works, rather than any literal description or the demonstration of violence (ibid 1993:17).

Hatoum's first work with the twofold feature of being both welcoming and potentially dangerous was *The Light at the End* (fig 5), an installation exhibited in London in1989 (ibid 1997:17). Situated in a narrow, darkened passage, this work was pared down, almost minimal. The only light source, at the rear end of the room, was a glow given off by several vertical, electrical heating elements held upright in a solid steel frame where only the red lines were visible. This glow drew the viewer closer by means of a visually magnetic pull. In so doing, an intense heat could be felt as the viewer became aware of the elements. A small niche behind the grid suggested a confined space for a single body. The image of a person behind the metal structure forms in the mind's eye. Imaginary scenarios spring to mind, such as prison cells, electric fences, instruments of torture, confinement and possible escape routes, "*or simply that vague but paralyzing feeling of menace, [which] seems to emanate from the piece*" (Philippi 1993:12). A realization dawns on the viewer that the spaces between the red hot metal rods would fit an average human head, and that the space between floor and steel frame is calculated, hypothetically, to accommodate an adult crawling through. It seems these associations spring to mind because the structure becomes a very real barrier which serves to separate a space, (if not a person) on one side and the viewer on the other. Philippi goes on to elaborate:

> "*The effect is heightened by the real possibility of getting too close, of becoming the imagined victim oneself, of getting hurt. In this sense the imagined body is always my body, the confinement, my confinement…'The Light at the End' turns out to be literal and descriptive rather than metaphorical, and the power of the imagination*

in this piece evolves around the power to imagine all the ramifications of confinement" (1993:12).

The reference is to electricity as a web in which we are trapped and that of a prison created by the electrical filaments at the far side of the tunnel (Cubitt 2000:96). Hatoum states that, paradoxically, it seemed to her both attractive and repulsive. When the term 'the light at the end of the tunnel' occurred to her, she realized it would create an expectation of something positive which would be disrupted when the realization hit home that a serious burn could be inflicted by the red hot bars (Archer 1997:17). With *Light at the End,* Hatoum contrasted the clean, sparse lines of metal grids with electrical elements which generate warmth and light, creating combinations in which the ambiguity of comfort as against harshness, or aesthetic beauty as against political ugliness can be observed. Although these works use neither language nor text, the paradoxical concepts which inform Hatoum's works can be clearly seen. They serve to echo parallels often found in language, where it at times, facilitates, but at other times seems to form a barrier to communication.

Incommunicado (1993) (fig 6), as its name implies, focuses on communication, or rather the lack thereof, and shows Hatoum playing with contrasting themes. The work takes the form of an infant's hospital cot, one in which the spring base that should support a mattress has been replaced by fine, tautly stretched, cheese cutting wires. The context suggests violence – parent as a sadistic torturer (ibid 1997:20). The hard, cold, metal cot forms a grid which is neither painted nor padded and has been reduced to a bare and chilling prison. In a structure that should symbolize refuge and comfort, a transformation has taken place that has turned it into a place of claustrophobia, incarceration and hurt – one that is unstable, threatening and hostile, rather than comforting. *Incommunicado* suggests a baby that has no way of communicating its needs other than through a scream. It serves as a metaphor for the dreadful position of many who, as political prisoners, are imprisoned and tortured in solitary confinement and whose cries cannot be heard (Antoni 1998:3).

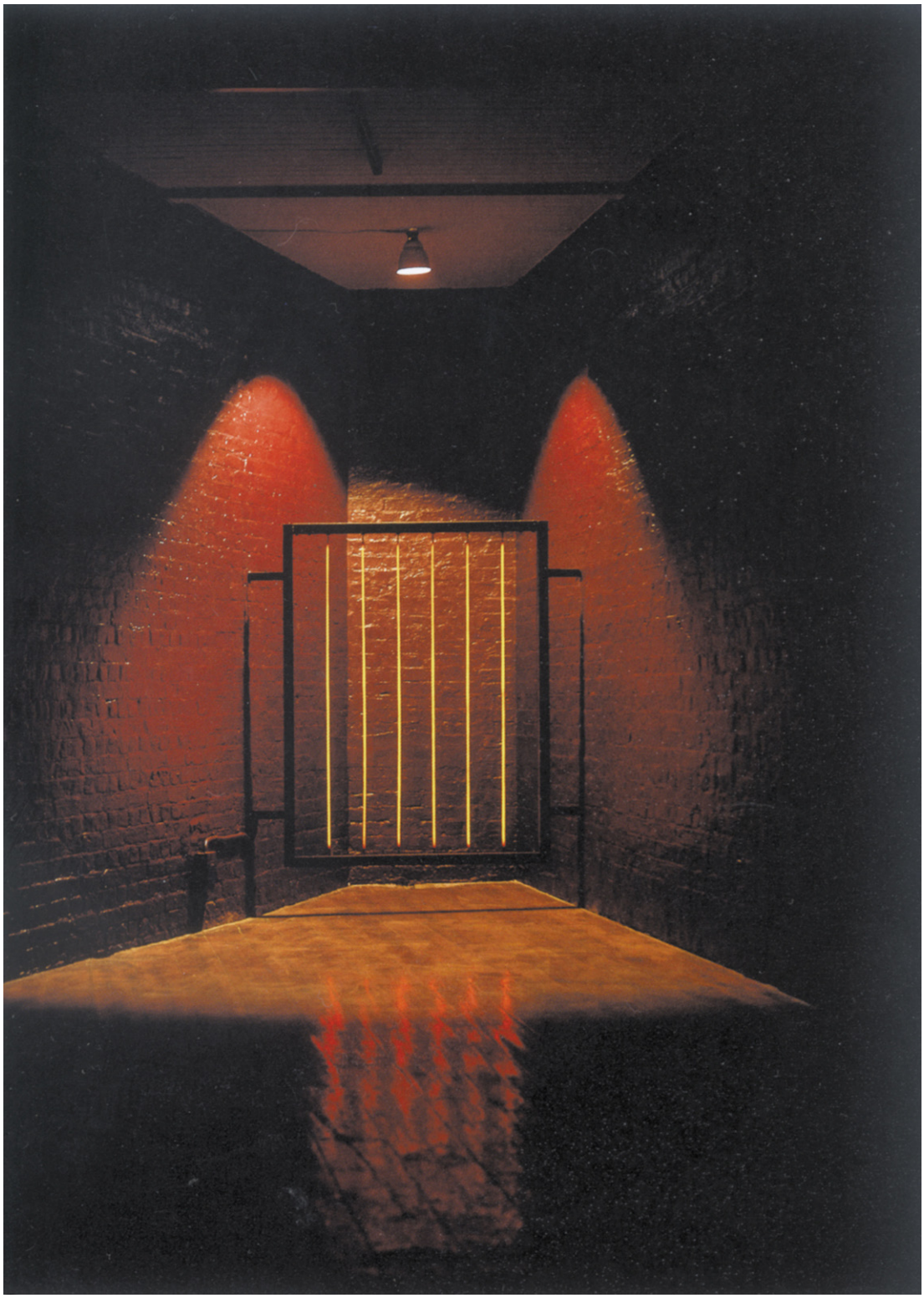


Fig 5: *The Light at the End*. 1989
Mona Hatoum
Angle iron frame, 6 electric heating elements
1660 x 1625 x 50mm



Fig 6: *Incommunicado*. 1999
Mona Hatoum
Mild steel, wire
1270 x 495 x 955mm

The scenario is that of the "*relationship of 'parent'/state to citizen/'child' [and] is presented as cruel and abusive rather than warm and loving, murderous rather than nurturing, the terrifying perversion of many modern Third World democracies*" (Manchester 2000).

Hatoum has mentioned that it is common for people to try to explain her work in relation to her background and notes:

> "*…Explaining it as meaning this or that inevitably turns it into something fixed rather than something in a state of flux. A work of art has two aspects: the natural, physical aspect, which I think of as the conscious aspect that the artist can manipulate and shape; and then there is the very complex cultural and unconscious aspect of the artwork. This is rich and full of meanings and associations, and it is as impossible to explain fully or comprehend as an individual or [within] the social subconscious. Years after making this work, I still discover interesting associations, sometimes pointed out to me by viewers*" (Archer 1997:25).

During the 20th century there has been an ongoing attempt by artists to re-gain a 'real life' context, and escape the stagnation that develops when the work is contained within institutions. The notion of place has concerns within the artwork itself and the place in which it is displayed. Artists have attempted to move their work from the museum/gallery to the street/the everyday and from being an "*expensive commodity to [a] freely-accessible proposal*" (Brett 1997:35). This process is not a simple linear progression, and to attempt to present it as such would be simplistic and naive, "*since the site, displaced from the institution, itself becomes institutionalized*" (ibid 1997:35). However, neither street nor gallery space is either pure or absolute. These sites vary according to cultural or national context. Hatoum has also engaged with these issues and fluctuations. Observing the change that has occurred in her work over the last ten years, one becomes aware of markers that indicate relationships between places set aside for 'art', and that of the 'real world'. From the mid 1980s she started making works expressing her experience as witness of the conditions of the people of the Third World (ibid 1997:35). However, by 1989, as in *The Light at the End*, a strategy had developed within her work where

she deliberately made use of the reality contained within the cleanness and calm of the "*art space as a given from which to induce a physiological change in the immediate experience of the spectator*" (Brett 1997:35). Put another way, Hatoum does not make reference "*to a another reality somewhere else, [but] the work grasp[s] reality 'here and now', thereby allowing the spectator to become conscious, perhaps in a deeper, more internal way, of the experience of others*" (ibid 1997:35,36). In this way, Hatoum creates an artwork which produces an emotional and psychological experience, rather than simply being the re-creation or the illustration of an experience that she wishes to expound. Contradictions between reality and what is imagined thus become effective as vehicles used by the artist to communicate insights.

Metaphors relating to placement/displacement serve as the motivation behind certain of her key works. She speaks of "*the feeling of in-betweenness that comes from not being able to identify totally with my own culture or the one in which I am living*", and of "*the inability to identify with a specific solid reality*"[3] – two statements that clearly reveal a link between her life and her artwork (ibid 1997:36). Hatoum, through her itinerary, provides an example of contingent or local origins being translated into those of an artist operating globally. Traveling frequently, she is put in the position where she is required to work in and adapt to various different contexts. She responds to these by bringing with her an attitude formed by life's experiences, "*rather than colonizing space*" (ibid 1997:36).

Hatoum moved from performance and video towards new media, sculpture and installation. The shift, marked in her art-making by *Measures of Distance* (1988), is significant, and this particular work forms a midway intervention between her early and later work. There was also a shift in her subject matter as the focus moved "*from narrative, issue-based engagements with objective social and political conditions towards a more personal, more provisional exploration of her own subject position*"[4] (Noble 2002:5). Hatoum's thinking dealt with the interpretation of ties and separations and a "*sense of a divide with which she had been preoccupied*" (Brett 1997:53).

Measures of Distance (1988) (fig 7a, b)

> "*It is the letters, writing, rather than the image or the voice, which seems the true measure of the distance between them. The letters reveal how the unbearable is borne, the living reality of exile*" (Noble 2002:4).

I have chosen to discuss this work because it is so clearly concerned with contradictory, paradoxical aspects within communication. I will examine it in terms of the way language facilitates communication on the one hand, but seems to form a barrier to it on the other. This work, in particular, reflects on concepts of emotional and geographical closeness contrasted with the concept of distance, among others. Conditions of exile place exceptional demands on communication which are very evident in Hatoum's case. *Measures of Distance* speaks of separation and "*the impossibly contradictory nature of our attempts to overcome it*" (Noble 2002:4).

The video incorporates sound, images of the artist's mother and the use of text as a visual feature. For years Hatoum had "*agonized over whether [she] should use these images of [her] mother in [her] work*" (Antoni 1998:2). Consequently, although the slides had been taken in 1981, it was only in 1988 that she used them in their final form. Hatoum notes that when making the video, she found that it delved into complexities that had been caused by separation and the sense of loss that came as a result of war, displacement and exile. In this way, it caused the image of this person (who happened to be her mother) to be contextualized within a socio-political context (Antoni 1998:2).

This is a poignant and complex piece, and comprises several layered elements: letters written by the artist's mother in Beirut to her daughter in London; a dozen slides taken by Hatoum during a visit to Lebanon of her mother taking a shower; and recorded conversations between mother and daughter.



Fig 7a: *Measures of Distance*. 1988
Mona Hatoum
Video stills, sound



Fig 7b: *Measures of Distance*. 1988
Mona Hatoum
Video stills, sound

The background images of the artist's mother comprise a sequence of stills – slides – which slowly succeed each other. Although a little out of focus, grainy and rather dark, they are nonetheless beautiful and record moments of extraordinary intimacy. The letters from her mother are read aloud in English while a section of the Arabic script from the letters overlays stills of the mother, creating a screen-like effect. The letters make reference to issues discussed by the two women in Arabic on the tape and are interspersed with bursts of laughter – a direct dialogue which imparts a mood of intimacy and familiarity. In terms of the 'distance' (from the title) between the two women, the families, and their places of residence – every image that suggests literal closeness – their relationship, the close-ups of her mother, and their conversation – "*also implies a gulf of separation*" (Brett:1997:56). Since all the modes of communication combine to become one – video – there is an ambiance of finely tuned sensitivity to the nuances of photography, writing and speech in the attempt to 'bring close'.

The conversion from live experience to different ways of recording (slides and sound) and the visual presentation of the dialogue could be well brought to mind by comparing it with a moment in an earlier live performance work, *Mind the Gap* (1986), which introduced the themes we see in *Measures of Distance*. The moment in question showed Hatoum placing her hands onto an image of her mother projected onto a plastic sheet (rather like a shower curtain) and spraying paint around them. She created a host of hand-prints which remained, almost as if she was trying physically to hold onto the moving image (ibid 1997:53).

As the video opens, the screen is covered with a kind of mesh composed of hand-written Arabic script. Behind this we are able to make out the image of a woman as she takes a shower. The soundtrack begins, and we hear two women speaking to each other in Arabic. As this conversation continues, we hear over it a woman's voice in English, reading a letter: "My dear Mona", she begins. The voice is that of Mona Hatoum reading out loud letters written from her mother to herself. Throughout the video we hear letters being read, five in all, each of which begins

with the same genuine longing for "this bloody war" to stop, so that both writer and recipient could see each other again (Bradley 2002:24).

As the letters are read, the story unfolds and the viewer starts to get an idea of what the work is about. The images become clearer, and the woman we presume to be the artist's mother can be seen moving about in the shower. Her mother speaks of these images in her letters, referring to her daughter's most recent visit, which had taken place four years previously, during which Hatoum had taken the photographs and she and her mother had spent time conversing. She speaks in a strong voice of that precious time, of the newfound intimacy that had developed between the two of them while making the video, and of how much it had meant to her. The images are taken close up, and this closeness is echoed by the intimacy reflected in the interaction between the two women, as the mother openly discusses her feelings and responds to questions from her daughter about her sexuality. The work evokes a strong sense of intimacy between a mother and daughter and suggests a transformative relationship through the breaking of taboos around the maternal body. It is through her daughter's art-making project that the mother is able to present herself freely in a form which cements a bond of identity independent of colonial and patriarchal concerns. Hatoum's mother also speaks, in the letters, of her husband's concerns regarding Hatoum's intimate observation of her mother's naked body. This open portrayal of her nakedness had left her husband shocked and feeling betrayed and had resulted in marital tension – "*as if*", she said, "*I had given you something that only belongs to him*" (ibid 2002:24). This was the price that she had paid – but the intimacy had made it worthwhile, having enriched her life a great deal. The absence of her daughter, on the other hand, seems to have become even more intolerable since that time of intense togetherness.

Hatoum likens complexities of meaning and the sort of ambivalence that is involved in her intimate relationship with her mother to, "*wading through a mess of meaning*" (Antoni 1998:2). This she does by juxtaposing a number of formal and visual elements in order to create paradoxical layers of meaning. Visually the work has been constructed in such a way that every frame speaks of the paradox of literal

closeness and yet has the implication of distance (Spinelli 1997:140). As Dimitrakaki notes: "*The image and the script have merged into... a dense weaving of identity and its simultaneous undoing...*" (1998:94).

The lines of Arabic script in which Hatoum's mother's letters are written are decorative and have been superimposed to cover the images (Manchester 2000). They combine to form a concentrated mesh that tends to float over these images – almost like a veil. Some viewers, looking at the work, see the script as barbed wire, while yet others think of it as a Moorish screen, as if communication were in fact a barrier – rather than something that draws close. Its screen-like properties thwart complete visual access to the image and yet at the same time, the letters are the only means of communication (ibid 1997:140). The video has been structured in such a way that the letters play a pivotal role, as they make apparent the point that, although these letters deal with very personal, intimate matters, letters by their very nature still carry within themselves the strong implication of distance. In terms of sound, contradiction is present in both the tone of the voices and in the language itself. The letters, translated into English and read by Hatoum, sound sad and monotonous, and contrast paradoxically with the animated laughter and chatter which can be heard in the Arabic language on the taped backtrack. The ideal of genuine and transparent communication is represented by this lively background conversation which creates a sense of intimacy that is also visually suggested by the beautiful, lush image of Hatoum's mother. What we, as viewers, are privy to, is a "*moment of full plenitude, the unmediated presence of each to the other, the moment longed for in the interstices of exile*" (Noble:2002:4).

The words in the letters relay her mother's tired but loving words, "*weary of war, weary of longing for absent loved ones, weary of exile and the pallid nourishment of memory*" (ibid 2002:4). Although her mother has written in open response to queries by Hatoum, the viewer never gets to hear what they were. Antoni refers to the irony of Hatoum asking these confrontational questions, while her mother keeps repeating, "*My dear Mona, the love of my heart*" (1998:2). In fact, Hatoum mentions in an

interview that her mother uses "*even more flowery expressions that have no equivalent in the English language*" (ibid 1998:2). As the letters come to an end, her mother explains that since the post office has been demolished by a car bomb, she will no longer be able to write. She says that she is aware that it could take days to get a phone connection from London to Beirut, but begs her daughter to keep trying, as this fragile connection is all they have left.

Personal content is not the only area in which the paradoxical interplay of closeness and distance occurs. Western viewers may well become implicated in discontinuities and instabilities in this work. While the 'story' of the correspondence, as read by Hatoum, draws the viewer in one minute, the need to strain in order to hear and understand the narrative is felt in the next. This is because the various forms of mediation and communication, in both the Arabic and English parts, are given equal emphasis (Spinelli 1997:140). "*Language is itself migratory in this work, moving from conversation to letter to translation, from the spoken to the written word and back again*" (Bradley 2002:24). The medium from whence it originates remains quite clear in the mind of the viewer, however. A sense of alienation and distance is generated in the mind of a Western audience and is caused by the inability to comprehend the conversation in the Arabic language. Understanding can only ever be partial, since there is a struggle to translate across language, culture, gender and generation. There's also the gulf to cross between a "*situation of war and displacement, and one of relative stability*" (Brett 1993:22). These issues cause different viewers to have different associations in terms of how each reads this work. One becomes aware of the power and at times the powerlessness of language to communicate accurately ideas that come to mind, as well as the ability, or inability, as the case may be, of language to connect one individual with another (Bradley 2002:25).

The fact of this partial estrangement does not cause the work to be any less moving. Brett goes so far as to say that "*the work as a whole is structured around a refusal to be defeated by all forms of* '*divide and rule*' " (1997:56), pointing out that the connection between mother and daughter is presented as something powerful that

creates and transforms. Through the 'project' in which Hatoum involves her mother (the making of the video), her mother is given the opportunity, which she clearly grasps with both hands, to give of herself fully and without restriction. In so doing, she is able to cement a bond of identity with her daughter which supersedes generations and is free of all patriarchal and colonial prescriptions (ibid 1997:56).

When Hatoum made *Measures of Distance,* she tells of having been criticized for making use of the naked female body by some feminists. They accused her of "*being exploitative and fragmenting the body as they do in pornography*" (Spinelli 1997:141). Hatoum deems this to be a very narrow minded attitude, and far too literal as an interpretation of feminist theory. She comments that her video, far from being exploitative, is, in fact, celebratory of the sumptuous beauty of the body of an ageing woman, who resembles the Venus of Willendorf – definitely not the type normally presented by the media as the criterion for beauty. Taking the work as a whole, it creates for us, as viewers, a comprehensive image of who that woman is in terms of her social context, her personality, emotions, needs, longings and beliefs. Even as I say this however, there is the paradoxical sense in which she is kept concealed, well hidden from us as viewers (ibid 1997:141).

Her isolation, her family having been dispersed and the memories of Palestine (which she keeps close to her heart) haunt Hatoum's mother continually. The image of this special moment is projected into the present and sustained vividly, like a memory. We sense here but a minute trace of the fulfillment, both psychological and emotional, that is represented by the letters, which enables the moment to be brought into the present and shared. Although the happiness and intimacy of that moment are brought to the fore by these letters, in so doing its loss is also amplified. The juxtaposition of her mother's image in the shower together with her simultaneous, retrospective description causes us to be made vividly aware of the intense desire of her mother to recapture that precious moment. Yet, it is only in the light of a life lived, for the most part, in the absence of such moments that the moment portrayed has significance and is understood. With re-description, the sense of intimacy is lost

(Noble 2002:4). Rather than voice or image, the letters and writing seem more truly to be the measure of the distance that separates them. The voice and image are too momentary, too immediate to offer anything other than memory or short-lived relief. We see revealed in the letters a strangely optimistic weariness, a resignation, a submission to the reality of their parting which is yet "*illuminated with the hope of renewal through love. It might be said that 'Measures of Distance' universalizes the exilic condition; we are all of us separated from something we cannot do without*" (ibid 2002:5). The images of her mother contain within them associations with and longings for home. Noble comments that Hatoum's art "*tells a general truth about the necessarily contradictory nature of the concept of home. This is that home can never be an unmediated refuge from the world, its promise as a place of belonging can never be experienced in full plenitude, even though it may be an impossible ideal to give up*" (2002:5).

The details of day-to-day life in a country under siege, the niggling worries of a mother for her daughter and marital pressures coalesce to form an atmosphere of anxiety onto which historic events intrude. Destructive forces beyond her control threatened to reduce this mother to a cold statistic, as had been the case with hundreds of others. If such were to be the case, the event of her death may not even be considered newsworthy, and would certainly barely cause a ripple in the figures. Hatoum, however, insists on that individual life having significance, even though it might, in the grand scheme of things, have been minimized by inadvertently having been caught up in armed conflict. In order to do so, she brings to the fore the "*unique pattern and detail of her mother's embattled existence*" (Elwes 2005:38).

This is the only work where Hatoum has consciously made use of autobiographical details as the text of the work, in spite of how complex, contradictory and confused the material was with which she was dealing (Antoni 1998:2). One of her motives for doing so was to contradict the set identity commonly implied with the stereotypically portrayed picture of people from the Third World "*as a mass or herd*

and not as individuals"[5] (Spinelli 1997:139). She commented that news reports always showed Arabs as 'masses' of hysterical women crying over dead bodies, but rarely do they get to hear of the personal feelings of those who had lost relatives. Another influence was the feminist expression, 'the personal is political'. An attempt was made by the artist to counter the fixed identity that is usually implied in the stereotype of "*Arab woman as passive, as mother, as a non-sexual being*" (Brett 1997:56)**.**

Reporting in the Middle East has, for a long time, been marred by the "*babble of tendentious generalizations and propaganda*", and the story of this mother/daughter relationship, through its specifics, cuts through all that type of jargon by getting straight to the point in terms of the experience of two particular human beings (Elwes 2005:38). The impact of this very personal account of war has much to do with the manner in which it contrasts with television equivalents in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, reports were made by professionals, with individual voices being absent to a large extent. Up to the 1990s, the notion of reality TV had not yet been explored, and experiences of ordinary citizens and soldiers were, by and large, excluded from television. Those portrayals of humanity that did reach the screens took the form of prominent personalities or fictional characters that reflected the aspirations, desires and experience of the white, heterosexual males that controlled the TV networks. Ordinary people, women, ethnic minorities and gays were reduced to stereotypes or were simply not shown at all. Television was a well established institution, with its own particular grammar by the time artists started using video cameras. A personal approach was something through which artists could advantageously contribute (ibid 2005:39).

In an interview with Michael Archer (1997:8), Hatoum commented that in Lebanon the attitude concerning the relation of body to mind is very different from what she had experienced in Western Europe. In Lebanon the split between the two was not a straightforward one, but in her experience, the European outlook at that time appeared to be that people had a sense of being separated from their bodies. She

mentions that when she first went to England, it was obvious that people were "*quite divorced from their bodies and very caught up in their heads, like disembodied intellects*" (Spinelli 1997:141). Hatoum herself is dissatisfied with the type of work that merely appeals to the intellect without any involvement of the body in some way. She uses the physicality of the body as a central focus in her work. As she says: "*…the embodiment of an artwork is within the physical realm*" since "*the body is the axis of our perceptions*", art cannot afford "*not to take that as a starting point. We relate to the world through our senses…first experienc[ing] an artwork physically*" (Archer 1997:8). She states that she does not want her work to be simply one-dimensional, but seeks to have body, mind, senses, intellect and emotions involved in an overall, complete experience (Spinelli 1997:141).

Hatoum has the expressed intention of creating a sense of ambiguity through her work in order to complicate the viewer's positions. Instead of definite, tangible answers, her intention is to suggest ambivalence and ambiguity. Although there is a strong formal presence, and the physicality provokes an emotional and psychological response, reality can become questionable – an assessment of the power structures that dominate us. Things are not what they appear to be. As we have seen, paradoxical themes play a key role in her thinking and in Hatoum's approach to her work. She does not fix her work by narrowly defining meaning, but prefers instead to leave it as more of an open-ended system (Antoni 1998:2).

In the early performance works, Hatoum's intention was to convey, in a sense, a message to the viewer, whereas when it came to installation works, she wanted to involve the viewer in a more experiential situation that was direct and physical. With the pursuit of meaning to come only after the initial impact, Hatoum aimed at engaging the viewer in terms of the visual aspect first, sensually, emotionally and bodily. Even though the title suggests one interpretation, the work is open enough to accommodate any number of personal interpretations, each of which would be valid. No single stable interpretation can be attached to any one piece. Hatoum recounts the story of a woman at the museum who mentioned that the light bulbs she saw

fading on and off in one of the installation works "*made her think of a sexual orgasm*" (ibid 1998:2). The woman apparently remembered, a little while later, that the work was meant to have political implications, and this caused her to reassess her impressions – she began then to see the lights in the cages as symbolic of people in prison. Hatoum sees as problematic the pinning up of explanations and interpretations of artworks by galleries and museums. This, she says, limits the reading of the work and the ability of the viewer to come to it with a fresh mind, unbounded by preconceptions. She comments that she would prefer the viewer's imagination to freely reflect their own experience (ibid 1998:2).

Archer notes that: "*Meanings, connotations and associations come after the initial physical experience as your imagination, intellect, psyche are fired off by what you've seen*" (1997:8). The viewer senses not only the existence of a physical barrier in terms of the screen of Arabic script, but also a barrier or sense of distance in that the piece has neither tangibility nor permanence. Since video is an electronically generated medium, it is without either material substance or permanence, but is composed of rays on a monitor which coalesce to form the mere appearance of an image. This appearance comprises pixels that need to be electronically activated to become visible. Thus the sense of barrier Hatoum has created is probably enhanced by the virtuality of the medium, in contrast with a simply handcrafted work, which would have a very physical, 'bodily' quality. If this work were more tangible, it is unlikely to have communicated concepts relating to distance, nor the contradictory aspects as effectively as it does. The artist's use of metaphor communicates on a conceptual level. Both images and materials have become important metaphorical tools for the communication of her concept. Hatoum's manner of working is to have meaning embedded in the material that she uses. The material has been selected in order to extend the concept, although sometimes in opposition to it, "*to create a contradictory and paradoxical situation of attraction/repulsion, fascination/revulsion*" (Antoni 1998:3).

To close my discussion of Hatoum's work, I would like to quote Brett**:**

> "*By discovering one meaning inside another, I believe Mona Hatoum's works show that the supposed opposites contain elements of one another; that the 'light' contains elements of repression, coldness and death, and the 'darkness' elements of vitality and regeneration. Beyond simply pointing out the contradictory nature of experience, this is the great value of these works' ambivalence. They can be both critical and affirmative at the same time… can combine despair with optimism*" (1993:28).

At a time when the boundaries between traditional artistic disciplines, like sculpture, performance, painting, music, writing, film and dance were overlapping and becoming blurred, video made its entrance and was soon integrated, becoming just another medium for the creation of art (Rush 2003:9). We have seen how Hatoum has integrated it into her work. In the next chapter, I will examine the work of Candice Breitz, who works with video extensively. Where Hatoum uses original material, Breitz manipulates and edits found footage gleaned from the material/substance of popular culture.

Endnotes:

1. Diamond, S. (1987). Interview with Mona Hatoum, *Fuse* (April) p.50.
2.Bhabha, H. (1994). The Location of Culture, *Routledge*, London, p.224.
3. Berger, L. (1994).In Between, Outside and in the Margins, *Art News*, NewYork, (September) p.149.
4. Antoni, J. (2001) "Mona Hatoum Interviewed by Janine Antoni". In Steward Heon, L. (ed.), In *Mona Hatoum: Domestic Disturbance*, North Adams, MA: MASS MOCA, p. 22.
5. Spinelli, C. (1996). Interview with Mona Hatoum. *Kunst-Bulletin,* (September) Zurich. (Republished in: Archer, M., Brett, G. & de Zegher, C. (1997). *Mona Hatoum.* Phaidon Press, London, pp134-143.

Chapter 3

Candice Breitz: An Inharmonious Babble

> "*If there's a rule of thumb for looking at Candice Breitz's work, it's the rule itself. Every one of her video installations can be reduced to a very simple formula. Take 'Four Duets, 1970-2000': select four music videos of sentimental love songs, collect and put together the moments when each of the performers sing either 'I', 'me', 'my', or 'you'. Display the 'I' loop opposite the 'you' loop. Discard all remaining footage*" (Allen 2003:32).

Editing techniques have enabled experiments in video installation art to manipulate and fracture narratives in such a way that they lose their sense of linearity, due to the extension or compression of time. The more they have developed, the faster these techniques have become. The boundaries of perceptual coherence are being tested by the quick-fire editing with which artists have experimented since the introduction of digital editing. At the opposite extreme however, with the arrival of slow motion, video has also developed a meditative quality (Elwes 2005:20). Video installation art may at times appear to be chaotic, "*even an assault on the viewer's senses*" (Rosenthal 2003:23), and this is certainly the case as far as Breitz's work is concerned.

Breitz is a "*recycler at heart*" (Allen 2003:32). Her working process involves extremely 'reductive editing' as she refines the remnants of popular visual culture leaving behind a different and more basic set of resources. Allen compares this process with that of the crushing of a Coke can. Although the resulting distortion leaves behind a mere sliver of the original, it still remains distinctive enough to be recognized for what it once was. In the same way, the original film footage is still recognizable after Breitz's editing process has taken place. Her work may appear simple in implementation, but it is a long way from being simplistic. From an art historical viewpoint, her approach appears to uniquely combine the conceptual,

minimalist strategies used by Sol Le Witt[1] (in his '*Instructions for wall drawings'*) with the assembly line from which Andy Warhol's production of Marilyn Monroes are silk-screened[2] (ibid 2003:32).

By using the tactics of mechanical editing, Breitz thwarts any opportunity of subjectivity for both viewer and characters depicted on screen. Elements that could have appeal for spectators (whether they relate to plot or special effects), are effectively removed and the stars become trapped in never-ending loops (ibid 2003:33). Allen notes that: "*Breitz fully embraces pop culture…tak[ing] the role of an active consumer, transforming and deforming pop cultural products even as she grants them more airtime*" (2003:35). It is, in fact, a challenge for the viewer to find ways of engaging with the resulting videos.

Breitz was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1972. She grew up under the apartheid system, a dictatorship that achieved its ends through disinformation and division[3]. South Africa, with its different ethnic and racial groups, held a seemingly infinite plurality of dialects and linguistic nuances. Language was deliberately used as a means of division. At the same time, its history had been written in the language of the English and Dutch conquerors, which effectively obliterated or stifled a host of other languages. (There are now eleven official languages in South Africa). A great deal of misunderstanding in terms of communication was the result, this being something that was actively encouraged by the then apartheid government (Kroener 2003:1). Breitz remembers a feeling of alienation generated by the multiplicity of strange languages that she heard spoken outside her home, languages to which she could neither relate nor understand, being a white South African child[4]. This passes telling comment on the nature of the concepts she later tackled in her artistic production.

In her work the strong influence of language over a person's life can be seen. This encompasses a perception of one's position in the world; over the manner in which one handles daily life; in relationships and in one's sense of either feeling either at home or alienated (ibid 2003:1).

Candice Breitz was almost 5 years old by the time television was introduced in her country of birth and the exposure she has had to popular culture has been definitive in her art making process. Due to censorship of available viewing material and the strict control that was exercised over televisual images shown in South Africa at that time, the possibility of access to alternate information through that medium was minimal. Within a few years the video machine made its appearance, promising a far wider diversity of viewing and offering with it the subtle, unspoken invitation to the young Breitz to respond and intervene. When the opportunity to do so was presented, it was a source of great delight to her to fast forward, to pause at an especially fascinating scene, to rewind and replay a specific moment, or to record an interesting piece of footage. This instilled in her a love of experimentation and of 'creative resistance'. These early creative and experimental memories of her childhood in South Africa are significant in terms of the thought processes of an artist who consistently refrains from producing biographical works, minimizing and downplaying personal experience. She sees herself as symptomatic of the times in which she grew up (Beccaria 2005:19).

Beccaria comments that investigations into the provocative nature of speech and language, which echo the artist's early Babel-like surroundings, are conspicuous in Breitz's work (2005:19). Her move to video had led her investigations into language to be sharpened, with Breitz claiming that "*for her, the key attraction of working with video [was] not the ability to employ moving images but the opportunity to explore the uses of language in conjunction with sound*" (Philips 2001:26). David Hunt, in his interview with her, notes that Breitz's works many times appear to resonate with a fascination for the "*tyranny of language*", while having no apparent faith in language as a tool for communication (2000, *in lit*). Language instead often gives her work a sinister edge, seeming to be distorted, twisted and brutal. In fact, Breitz admits to being obsessed with the 'slipperiness' of language, a point which I shall discuss in greater detail further on.

The artist's work is grounded in a linguistic form that could be considered 'common' (in the sense of 'shared') as she attempts to move away from too subjective a use of language. She does this by "*adopting as her raw material what she refers to as 'lowest common denominator forms', such as post cards, popular magazines, music videos, soap operas, and Hollywood blockbusters*" (Beccaria 2005:19). The language of the mass media is described by Breitz as "*a somewhat perverse lingua franca*", an area consisting of a shared experience "*that is on the one hand oppressive (flattening local cultures and dialects as it spreads across the globe at a viral pace), but is on the other hand rich in potential, given the huge number of people who are fluent in this common tongue*" (ibid 2005:19).

Breitz's way of working, coupled with the choice of the use of found material, is evident in even her very early works – three photographic series – the *Ghost Series* (1994-1996), *Rainbow Series* (1996) and *Rorschach Series* (1997), where the decision to create works using a detached objectivity in place of the romantic language of personal expression, can be seen. These works are clearly precursors to her video works – the photographic works seeming to look forward toward soon to follow developments in her video installations, encouraging the viewer to take part in the logic of the "*creative deconstruction and reconstruction*" that is at the core of her practice (ibid 2005:20). Breitz probed stereotypes involving gender and race in the *Ghost Series*, what she refers to as "*charged sources*" (Neri 2005:1). Together with the broaching of these topics, Breitz, being a white woman, was aware of a need for certain restraints. At the same time she was also aware of the sense of power and privilege that accompanied her being white, and indeed the series specifically refers to the aggression that can be carried out by whiteness (ibid 2005:1).

A pivotal theme within Candice Breitz's oeuvre is her continuing reflection on how identity is culturally constructed and on the "*exploration of the relationship between the mass media and the linguistic formation of the self*" (Bitterli 2001:107). Breitz's intense focus on the unpacking of cultural systems, media icons and topics that relate to personal responses specific to a world identified by global capital networks

was already evident in 1996 in the *Rainbow Series* of photomontages (fig 8), which received world-wide recognition (Bitterli 2001:107). In these works Breitz examines the commodification of the female body. The viewer finds him/herself confronted with bodies, insubstantially joined, created from fragments of pictures gleaned from ethnic postcards and spliced together with bits of images from porn magazines. The resulting collages reveal implausible, grotesque bodies. The *Rainbow* images are hand-cut with a scalpel and clumsily juxtaposed, created from combinations of limbs and body parts of varying proportions and colours, and appear mechanical and stilted. Very little coherence or even pretence at the restoration of organic unity to the forms has been attempted. In creating a fusion of identities, these works suggest the scarring that would accompany such a process, specifically in response to the trauma experienced through the building of a nation in post-apartheid South Africa[6]. Together with this, the work resonates with wider debates that deal with multi-culturism, suggesting that a certain amount of alienation and fragmentation may actually be prevalent in all cases of identity development. The viewer's response to Breitz's works is activated through an 'open structure', which becomes fundamental to Breitz's poetic terminology (Beccaria 2005:20). In this work, Breitz not only analytically takes apart fictions of national unity and tranquil coexistence that persist in clinging to the youthful multi-national South Africa; but she also re-examines, as a white South African woman, issues of feminist discourse, which inextricably connect the uncertain difficulties of gender with matters of class, race and ethnicity (Bitterli 2001:107).

As Breitz cuts, masks, abbreviates, conceals and disrupts, her work seems to indicate that something has been removed, or is missing. She makes use of traditional modernist strategies such as assemblage and montage, plus the avant-garde linguistic theory. Breitz's appropriation and sampling of existing material draws on a long-established avant-garde tradition. The use of readymade material in her work is not even a choice, but is what she terms an "*inescapable condition*" (Neri 2005:1).



Fig 8: *Rainbow Series #4*. 1996
Candice Breitz
Cibachrome
1524 x 1016mm

Breitz's view on the creative process today is that it does not originate and animate, but instead reanimates a language and material that existed before her own art-making practice, by translating, recycling and interpreting. Neri points out that Breitz is always aware of the strong influence of global capitalism, and how, as consumers, we all take in its cultural produce, especially when one is located in an urban centre (Neri 2005:1).

Her working process can be described as one of selection and translation. As digital technology has become more accessible, the 'cut and paste' methods which have become widespread are reflected in Breitz's creative strategies. These can be found in all disciplines – in film, video, photography, music and fiction. Her choices of formal strategies are intimately connected to meaning in her work. It is easy to detect formal traces, which enable the viewer to identify conceptual decisions she has made. These traces are visible, for instance, in the easily recognizable Scotch tape holding together bits of paper in the *Rorschach Series* (1997), or the white-out (Tippex) in the *Ghost Series* (1996) (fig 9). The latter was a series of rather clichéd images, sourced from postcards aimed at the tourist market, depicting black women dressed in tribal gear, but with their bodies and faces painted white using correction fluid. Rather than what is present (the fragmented bodies that remain visible), it is the absences in this series that speak most loudly. Breitz made this series of photographs soon after she left South Africa, commenting in her interview with Kroener (2003:9) that the way she was thinking about language at that time was still very much influenced by her experience of language in South Africa, with its form of linguistic apartheid. The South African government of the time clearly perceived that censorship powerfully assisted in the perpetuation of its racist ideology.

> "*The divisive language policies that were enforced at every level were a part of this rigorous system of censorship – one's daily encounter of 'other' South Africans was characterized by a series of blanks, omissions, moments of non-understanding and failed communication*" (Kroener 2003:9).



Fig 9: *The Ghost Series #7*; *The Ghost Series #8*
The Ghost Series #9; *The Ghost Series #3*. 1996
Candice Breitz
C-Prints
686 x 1016mm

The vulnerability and power (or powerlessness) of language was made distressingly clear in the 1980s when left-wing newspapers in South Africa were examined meticulously and censored before being 'approved' for printing. Some left-orientated newspapers actually left blank the spaces where information that had been refused publishing permission would have appeared, thereby granting specific visibility to the empty spaces created by apartheid censorship. This was a somewhat poetic way of exposing the vulnerability of the position of language under an oppressive sham which was played out almost daily in South Africa. The soundlessness of those empty white gaps spoke volumes about a presence, the censor, who was neither seen nor heard. Breitz notes that it was this kind of linguistic farce that often informed her work, though it was not always obvious (ibid 2003:9).

Photographs used for the *Ghost Series* originated as contrived images of 'exotic' peoples constructed to appeal to the longing of the tourist for a pure and untainted Africa. By Breitz's simple gesture of whiting-out the bodies of the African women in this series of photographs, she made literal the reality "*that these bodies serve as ... screens for the projection of white desire*" (ibid 2003:10). Breitz specifically chose to apply Tippex (correction fluid), and in so doing, 'corrects' their colour. By this uncompromising, antagonistic interference, the dramatic contrast thus created by the new ghostly images emphasized warped stereotypes of the exotic black subject. She chose to do so during the time in which South Africa was being reconstituted as a democratic republic. It was an acknowledgement of the violence of the white gaze, a gaze which characteristically removes any concept of multifaceted bias so as to preserve "*the simplistic structure of its desire in relation to the exotic other*" (ibid 2003:10). The *Ghost Series* received criticism from those who erroneously understood Breitz to be, as she says, "*erasing the actual subjectivity of the women pictured. I suppose*", notes Breitz, "*that those who read the work in this way believed, as I could not, that there was some kind of real and unmediated subjectivity pictured here in the first place*"[7] (Kroener 2003:10).

These works, comments Wagner, position themselves against stereotypical perspectives that persist in defining the black subject relative to whiteness, where "*the African can only ever be imagined as a semi-naked black body*" (2001:138). The postcards which prompted Breitz inevitably tend to propagate this type of prejudice, consistently framing the subjects that they represent within the rigid constraints of the 'racist white imaginary'. Breitz's crafty skin colour correction "*re-presents these black tribal others as doubles, doubles who can only ever be affirmed and accepted in their relationship to a predetermined whiteness*" (2001:139). In this way, the *Ghost Series* forcefully shatters those types of thinking that define white cultural and political supremacy, inviting us to radically change our focus in opposition to such thinking (2001:139). What Breitz continues to find of interest in this series is the way they explore that which is unable to be and cannot be spoken, instead of focusing on that which *is* being spoken by the images (Kroener 2003:10).

Considering the strategies she uses, Breitz often refers to her work as that of an editor, and her tools as those that would commonly be seen on an editor's desk. According to the teachings of modern art history, the development of collage came about at the same time as the "*introduction of language – as fragmented letters and words — onto the surface of the canvas*" (Beccaria 2005:21). This dramatic development in ideas and practice started with the cubist works of Braque, closely followed by those of Picasso. Ferdinand de Saussure developed his theories on linguistics in *Structural Linguistics* during a similar time frame[8]. *Ma Jolie* (Woman with a Guitar), painted from 1911-1912 is, according to Beccaria, Picasso's most renowned work of this sort (2005:21). The title was an allusion to his lover at the time, but the words *Ma Jolie* were gleaned from the chorus of a popular song. The words in their written form originated in a Music Hall in Paris, which was a then trendy establishment for entertainment[9]. As Beccaria notes, "*almost a century later, pop music, despite its built-in obsolescence, is increasingly a part of the rhythm of our daily lives*." She quotes Breitz as saying: "*[w]e…define ourselves by the music that we listen to; by the songs that we first heard at key moments in our past lives. Pop seems to offer opportunities for self-invention – this is what makes it so*

seductive"[10] (2005:21). In the preface to *Re-Animations* we find the following statement:

> "*Her works give us pleasure in recognising and succumbing to the original power of the artist's source material. But Breitz constantly disrupts and infects this pleasure with doubts and questions... [making cuts in the video footage which] are both absurd and serious... [Her characters] are caught up in edited loops from which there is no ending or escape. While Breitz's work operates within a century old history of artists making work that takes popular culture as its starting point, her installations are especially relevant now, creating space for independent thought within these media saturated times*" (Cotter & Swain 2003:3).

In her 2003 installation, *Becoming* (fig 10), Breitz selected seven movies of the romantic comedy genre and edited them so that only one scene from each movie, featuring the female star, remained. Excess footage was discarded. She then acted out the scene herself, dressed in a white tee-shirt and black trousers, and using minimal props. She mimicked the facial expressions and torso movements of seven actresses in an attempt to express herself as a distinctively stylized Hollywood persona. Nonstop takes in agonizing, quick succession, were necessary before Breitz could accurately lip-synch the words, while mastering the exact (as far as possible) movements of the actresses – Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz, Jennifer Lopez, Julia Roberts, Reese Witherspoon, Meg Ryan and Neve Campbell – copy cat fashion. The original colour footage was displayed on monitors, back to back with her own black and white copy. Each is played to the accompaniment of the identical original movie soundtrack, so that from Breitz's mouth proceeds a voice and an accent quite foreign to her own (Allen 2003:33).

Allen mentions the work of Austrian artist Arnulf Rainer to contrast with Breitz's intentions in using photographic images of her face. In1968 Rainer produced a series of works that were made up of pictures of himself taken in a photo booth, where he sat for long periods of time, out of sight behind an insubstantial curtain on the Westbahnhof train station booth in Vienna.



Fig 10: *Becoming*. 2003
Candice Breitz
Video stills: *Becoming Jennifer* (34:12); *Becoming Julia* (39:03); *Becoming Drew* (41:09)
14 Channel installation (7 dual channel installations), sound

The resulting black and white strips showed endless portraits of a man stretching and contorting his face in bizarre ways, almost as if he were involved in some weird ritual or had been the victim of a psychotic experience. They showed his eyes rolled back to reveal the whites, his mouth pulled in all directions, his nostrils wide and flaring, his eyebrows squeezed closely together, and his head and neck twisted into positions that must have been painful. The photographs were later drawn over with large, gestural graffiti marks, causing them to become hardly recognizable. The intention of these experimental photographs was to reveal "*asocial inner structures*" while Breitz, using a comparable but parallel method, attempted to create "*the most social, the most exterior and…the most omnipresent structures of mass media* " (ibid 2003:33).

By contrast, Allen describes Breitz's intention:

> "*[I]n the seven short black-and-white films that constitute one half of the 'Becoming' installation, Breitz grapples to express not a psychotic, animalistic self, hidden deep within, but a highly-stylised self, pre-packaged in Hollywood and delivered via the silver screen for our immediate consumption*" (2003:33).

Rainer's series of portraits, known as *Face Farces, 1969-1975*, gained iconographic status in art history as an experiment relating to the body[11]. Allen notes that Breitz's video installation, *Becoming,* which is similarly labour intensive, is at the other end of the spectrum from Rainer's. Whereas the huge number of grimaces Rainer produced were later altered by the graffiti he applied, Breitz used the footage filmed as is, unaltered.

In her movie montages and imitations, Breitz clearly courts a fascination with a 'common' or 'shared' language, in the context of global capital. The phenomenon that Breitz sees as the closest thing to a universal language today may be identified as an 'insatiable consumerism'. Allen likens this phenomenon to an Esperanto. In 1887, in a search of a universal language, Dr Lejzer Ludwig Zamenhof, a Polish oculist and linguist, invented an artificial language known as Esperanto. His intention was to create a means of communication that would be flexible and easy,

that would serve as a widespread second language and would foster harmony and global understanding (Wikipedia, n.d.). This language was to be constructed from "*words that came from nowhere and thus could be spoken anywhere, by anyone*" (Allen 2003:36), divorcing the language from cultural or national contextualization. Zamenhof published a textbook in Russian called *International Language: Preface and Complete Manual* under the pseudonym Doktoro Esperanto, which means 'the doctor who hopes'. This doctor had displayed a keen interest in languages since he was at school, having been raised in an area where Polish, Russian, German, French and Yiddish were spoken. He had also learned Greek and Latin, but abandoned available languages, being determined to invent a language that would be new and unrestricted by politics, history, class, religions, nation-states, territories, ethnicities or accents. In this way he hoped to avoid the conflicts that were continuously stirred by the type of baggage and inferences associated with words. He proposed a language which would eradicate the customary hierarchy between local and foreign speakers that could be learned far more quickly than any other. The Esperanto language is spelt phonetically, it has a 'building-block vocabulary' and has just sixteen laws relating to its grammar (Allen 2003:36).

Today, this artificial language has in the region of two million speakers worldwide, but has never achieved the status of an international language, as Zamenhof had hoped and remains a rather linguistic oddity. Indeed, it undoubtedly did not attain the prevalence of pop culture, nor did it gain anything like the following achieved by certain globally consumed brands, such as Adidas or Gap, Nokia, Sony or Vogue (ibid 2003:36). Breitz's awareness of an 'insatiable consumerism' as a common language recognizes the spread of global capital in the extension of its borders. As Allen points out:

> "*globalization speaks English and thus bespeaks the American colonization of the cultural imaginary. English has become so popular over the last century because its words have been accompanied by a moving picture element – a fact that Breitz honours by working in video*" (2003:36).

In this context it may be useful to mention the French thinker, Guy Debord, whose 'society of the spectacle' (1967) referred to a profusion of spectacular images in modern times, and how such 'spectacle' has the tendency to mediate all relationships in society[12]. There can be no story without an image, due to the fact that in order to be understood across the board in different languages or cultures, a story needs illustration – text and picture (ibid 2003:37). Closely aligned with Debord's term, 'society of the spectacle' is the phrase, 'global village', as coined by Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher, which refers to how closely we are connected to each other due to the pervasive influence of the media.

Doctor Esperanto's universal language was intended to be rather like a 'spectacle'. It is something that can be easily recognized or seen by anyone, wherever it is found. And it is totally portable. In the same way as Esperanto, the spectacle is more than simply a form of communication. It is a means of acceptance that transcends race, nationality, religion or class. The spectacle, as we experience it, but fail to recognize, is not a group of images, but a social relationship between people that is mediated by images or visually striking performances[13] (Marcus 2002:9). In discussing Debord's theories, Marcus states:

> "*If society is organized around consumption, one participates in social life as a consumer; the spectacle produces spectators, and thus protects itself from questioning. It induces passivity rather than action, contemplation rather than questioning, and a degradation of life into materialism*" (2002:8).

Our spending and consumer related habits are, for the moment, the only resemblance to any shared cross-cultural encounter that we have. Regardless of where we are in the world, we buy and absorb the same cultural products. Working with global media iconography is indicative of working with a corrupted *lingua franca*, the lowest common denominator substance which forms the culture of global capitalism, notes Breitz (Sans 2003:1 *in lit*). She quotes Andy Warhol as saying, "*A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking*". Coca-Cola has become far more than simply an

affordable drink. It's a multifaceted image comprising a logo, vivid red and white colouring, a catchword ('Always'), and countless advertising images. Allen comments that all logos are miniature 'spectacles' – easy to wear, extremely visible, inducing "*a sense of belonging without ever uttering a word*" (2003:37).

In her interview with Neri, Breitz notes: "*Images have different weights and different use values. Meaning is assigned to them in the moment of reception, rather than being inherent to them in some essential way*" (Neri 2005:2). We are surrounded by an excess of visual information, but it is possible to cause images to work on our behalf, instead of only having them work on us. The sinister character intrinsic to the culture of spectacular images is generated chiefly because it is made to appear as the norm, instead of as a set of artificial conventions. We grow so used to this apparently normal landscape that we overlook the fact that it may be possible to chart alternate landscapes. When Breitz works with well-known images, her intention is, partly, to make them seem less familiar to the viewer, to make them seem strange again (ibid 2005:2).

Without a doubt, the most significant means during the last one hundred years used in the creation of image from word – whether written or spoken – has occurred on film. Unforgettable scenes have come out of Hollywood, scenes that have "*condensed millennia of human events into mere slivers of space and time, the history of the world bought to you in ninety-odd minutes*" (Allen 2003:37). Through stories, epics, mysteries, comedies, biographies, romances and horror stories, film has shown itself to be a most effective way of recreating and remembering history. The film industry, especially in the United States, has "*produce[d] a global system of belonging under the umbrella of the spectacle, be it subtitled or not*" (ibid 2003:37). In the final analysis, the 'spectacle', in whatever form it takes – be it film or logo, declares the type of utopian, universal language that Dr Zamenhof devised. As Allen ironically notes, Esperanto may well have been more successful had there been added, together with the words, a "*catchy tune*" and some pictures (2003:37).

In his concise theory of languages, written in 1933[14], Walter Benjamin comments that, as in nature, similarities and mimicry also occur in language. He understands language:

> *"… in the broadest sense of the term, as a moment when meaning is produced not through signs, but through similarities between unlike things, and by virtue of our ability (indeed our compulsion), to recognize these similarities, to act them out and to act upon them. He moves away from the notion of language as a system of representation grounded in a hierarchical relationship between signifier and signified, between absence and presence, between a fake sign and the real thing in the world that it serves to reference*" (Allen 2003:35).

Breitz sees the most basic components of language as having been 'regurgitated' by the representatives of M-TV[15], this medium having reached success "*beyond the wildest dreams of the twentieth century avant-garde – in forging a language that is accessible to people from vastly different contexts*" (Alstatt 2001:3). The culture that is sponsored and supported by global capital[16], as it stretches its boundaries, she says, is the nearest thing we have to an Esperanto. She refers here to "*Michael Jackson English or Bruce Willis Lingo*" (ibid 2001:3), which are 'languages' that go beyond and distort current definitions of common linguistic society. Difference (if recognized) is translated as a coping mechanism, into fashion, by global capital, but this only "*obscures just how far we actually are from attaining Benetton bliss*" (ibid 2001:3). Some critics have suggested that Breitz's work has 'a dystopian air', but in her opinion, media utopias are suspect, and she prefers the acknowledgement that there is still a long way to go before, as she puts it, "*pitching tent at the first mirage*" (ibid 2001:3).

In her artistic practice, Breitz has thought deeply about the type of 'lowest common denominator' that was at the heart of Zamenhof's project.

> " '*Many key members of the twentieth-century avant-garde were preoccupied with the possibility of a universal language that might communicate above and beyond the specificity of linguistic and national differences*', *says Breitz.* '*The quest for ground zero is as evident in the reduction of visual language by artists such as Mondrian or Rodchenko,*

> *as it is in the sound and language experiments of artists ranging from Marinetti to Khlebnikov. I wanted to make a work that would pay homage to such endeavours while at the same time recognizing the extent to which any notion of pure language has become increasingly hard to maintain.' The result was the '**Babel Series**', 1999…*"[17] (Allen 2003:37).

Babel Series (1999) (fig 11, 12)

A description by Martin Sturm creates for us a sense of this work:

> "*We approach the room. Madonna, the media queen, fluttering her lips incessantly. We enter. Noisegate. Cacophony. Reduction. Extreme abstraction. But above all: rhythm, chopped and repeated, over and over again. Language dissolving into a series of dissonant beats. True pandemonium.*
> *We look around. Daylight, filtered. Yellow. Beautiful bow-windows. The blue light of monitors suspended in space. Primary colours. Where are we? The atmosphere gravitates between the ambiance of a sacred space, a ballroom, a space disco.*
> *We meander through the room, taking it all in as we move, wandering from icon to icon. Madonna… Sting… and others, hanging before us, enclosed in the mediated surfaces of the television monitors, trapped in the repetition of a single moment, in the utterance of their grinding sounds and syllables. No point of focus, just axes of vision. We get closer to a monitor in an attempt to make sense of it all…*"
> (2001:89,90*).*

This was Breitz's earliest video installation to be shown, as well as being the first occasion that sound was introduced into her work. It was initially exhibited at the Istanbul Biennale, and is still considered crucial to the understanding of her later work, for the exploration of the association "*between language and subject-formation, and in its keen theft and revision of pop iconography*" (Beccaria 2005:31). David Hunt, a New York based critic, describes this work as a merging of linguistic critique and pop culture (2000:1, *in lit*). It takes on significance when one realizes that the sounds coming from the *Babel Series* are literally the first to be heard from an artwork created by this artist (Breitz 1999, *in lit*).



Fig 11: *Babel Series*. 1999
Candice Breitz
7 Channel installation (7 looping DVDs), sound



Fig 12: *Babel Series*. 1999
Candice Breitz
Prince, Queen, Madonna, The Police, Abba, Wham, Grace Jones
Video Stills on Polystyrene mirror

Breitz takes the viewer back to the edge of language, to the very beginning where, just using monosyllabic sounds, whatever is of importance and has meaning can be said (Sturm 2001:89).

This work creates a shrewd parallel between the stages of a child starting to speak, and the process through which consumers absorb the common language of the global mass entertainment culture of today. The manner in which Breitz reduces the lyrics of pop songs to meaningless syllables is reminiscent of the way in which the audience of mass culture is similarly reduced to a state of powerless infantilism. It could even be said that the repetition of phonetic sounds used here by Breitz indicates the type of deliberate recurrence of sounds upon which linguistic meaning is established, and should therefore, strictly speaking, not be regarded as 'babble' at all. From each monitor individually can be heard a basic chant, which harks back to the earliest sounds made by an infant when it first learns to speak. The apparent childish regression that is manifest in the *Babel Series* touches upon the manner in which we are infantilized, swallowing whatever we are fed, in terms of popular culture. The suggestion made here is that this infantilization of spectators of mass culture does not involve a return to the freedom experienced before being able to speak, it refers instead to the moment indicating the end of that freedom, the moment when society's linguistic mechanism begins to harness the young child's chaotic energies (Beccaria 2005:31). The *Babel Series* presents primal language as something that is contaminated from the start, and in so doing it refers poignantly to the challenges facing the development of the young child in a society where children frequently learn their earliest words from television or by the singing of pop songs. What is implied in the installation is "*that the entry of the subject into language is inevitably inflected through the global media…*" (Breitz 1999, *in lit*).

Even though there have been utopian aspirations to a common language which crosses borders and cultures, these have been harshly displaced by the effects of the media industry, which are prevalent everywhere (ibid 1999, *in lit*). The idea of a universal language (which was characterized by the early explorations with language by the Dadaists, Futurists and Constructivists) has been displaced by a much more

critical take on language and how it, in fact, constructs us, or how we are always already immersed in it. If language is something that 'shapes' us, then the power of language needs to be interrogated, to discover what it is that shapes us as subjects. This then becomes a very critical question and is, in a sense, what the *Babel Series* attempts to address. The utopian spirit of earlier explorations with concrete poetry is now extended to engage with a concern for the "*infernal universality of the media industry*" and how it affects and shapes us (ibid 1999, *in lit*). Andy Warhol's work was already on this track by interrogating the influence of the media on our visual culture. Although the spirit of interrogation and deconstruction of language is still there, it is now geared towards a different goal – one where the influence of global media is critically considered.

In this boisterous work, the *Babel Series*, we find assembled a multifaceted terrain comprising visual and audial elements. The installation has suspended within it seven monitors on differing spatial levels. Stolen fragments of footage from the history of music video, showing an array of pop star icons, can be seen relayed on these monitors – Madonna, Prince, Sting, Grace Jones, Freddie Mercury, George Michael and Abba. Beccaria describes it:

> "*A short extract from an easily recognizable music video can be heard on each clip, manipulated, reduced and isolated, and inexorably simple – a brief, monosyllabic audio-visual fragment. Each clip on each monitor repeats the same sound over and over, continuously stuttering. Like a scratched record fated to repetition, the singers are imprisoned in their frantic loops*" (2005:21).

Allen comments that this work seems to reflect Breitz's confused feelings concerning pop. Each piece is strident and jarring and yet instantly comprehensible, silencing all other sounds around it (2003:37). The level of noise is incredibly, deliberately high, to the point of discomfort, a feature which has become a pattern in each of Breitz's subsequent installations (Beccaria 2005:21). "*Deliberate communication is usurped by the circular and noisy spewing of infantile babble*" (Neri 2005:4).

When all seven tapes are played together, they construct an 'almost architectural' density, a piercing demonstration of a modern-day Tower of Babel[18]. Confined within the same space, they produce an outburst of resonant energy, an inharmonious babble that serves as an allegory for the biblical story from which the title is taken. These videos share a common trait – beyond their consideration of self-centeredness and their careful selection of ambiguously sexed stars – each brings to mind the most basic linguistic building blocks. Together, the videos generate a multiplicity of rhythmical sounds stemming from a succession of discordant beats, a type of "*baby talk*" that approximates utter chaos (Breitz 1999, *in lit*). As Beccaria notes:

> "*The aura of seduction associated with pop – the familiarity of the pop stars' faces and their innocuously memorable hit songs – is translated here into an intolerable pandemonium, a violent assault on the senses…[O]ur fascination with the songs – and the iconic singers who sing them – conceals the serious threat of the destruction of individual identity*" (2005:21).

Breitz has placed severe limits on the language of the 'hijacked' pop stars, which intensifies the impact of the work. Their speech is reduced to perpetual 'primal grunts,' and their language loses all capacity to communicate. Breitz describes the sounds:

> "*A small fragment appropriated from Madonna's song 'Papa Don't Preach,' has her moaning 'pa, pa, pa, pa, pa, pa…' Another video has Freddie Mercury gabbling 'ma, ma, ma, ma, ma, ma…'. Elsewhere, George Michael whimpers 'me, me, me, me, me, me…' while Grace Jones insists 'no, no, no, no, no, no, no…'* " (1999, *in lit*).

The performers' bodies are "*frozen in language*" on the flickering monitors – alternately emerging and breaking up as they articulate; curiously organic as they jerk and twitch but at the same time mechanical, almost hypnotic. Every muscular contraction, gesture of a hand, lift of a lip or blink of an eye recurs trance-like, again and again, as the loops play (ibid 1999, *in lit*). In his appropriation of the title, *Blaring icons: their meaning, our understanding*[19], Martin Sturm accurately pinpoints the nature of the *Babel Series*.

Sting sings '*da, da*' while Madonna wails '*pa, pa*'. It is not due to their unfinished sentences that we find them unable to be understood, but possibly their lack of context, or the illogicality of it all. According to Wittgenstein[20], the value of a word is established when used in language. The same principle is applied to syllables, where, "*only in the game of language*" do they acquire meaning, "*their emotional charge [being] derived from the context of the communication*" (Sturm 2001:90). As single or multiple syllables are uttered, they change to become appellations, signs and signifiers of language. "*Each of us must be spoken into language. In enunciating, I express myself*". To speak is a way of acting. "*The question is then; what do we do when we articulate sound?*" (ibid Sturm 2001:90).

In the *Babel Series*, repetition serves a two-fold purpose. It is both the instrument through which language deteriorates into chaos, and the medium through which meaning is created, both visually and verbally. For example, when "da" is doubled to become "da, da", possibility for meaning is produced, although the randomness of meaning is unmistakable. Depending on who we are, "da, da" may mean 'yes' in Russian; 'father' in Afrikaans; 'there' in German or 'hobby-horse' in French. However, the repetition of "da, da, da, da, da, da" appears to render absurd any opportunity for clear meaning. Language mutates and distorts into babble as repetition wears away sense and the potential for meaningful communication. The throbbing bodies of the hi-jacked performers are made available to the projections of the viewers as they become susceptible to the very audience who would normally themselves be vulnerable to the "*infantilizing spell*" of the pop song (Breitz 1999, *in lit*).

The *Babel Series* clearly indicates the type of loaded and exacting association that Breitz has with language, but at the same time, it brings to the fore the challenges that face any language seeking to go beyond cultural limitations. As she presents her selected array of pop stars who shriek fragments of their hit songs at us, the artist seems to imply that popular culture might be the only universal language left available to us**,** a meaningless adaptation of the language of the original Eden

(Beccaria 2005:21). Indeed, Breitz comments in her interview with Rosanne Alstatt that the story dealing with the source of multiple languages which she finds the most "*provocative*" is the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, in which, she says: "*God punishes man for his vanity and grandiosity precisely by violently denying him the ability to understand the language of others*" (Alstatt 2001:2). This is an interesting point, as Kroener mentions that Breitz connects language with violence and evil (2003:2). Some viewers read an inherent violence in Breitz's work. "*When I made the Babel Series installation*", states Breitz, "*this violent failure, the failure of language to function as the glue coalescing different cultures (which is still the case now as much as it was then), became a compelling point of reference for me*" (Alstatt 2001:3).

It may be worthwhile considering other grammatical forms that make use of very short, abbreviated sounds like, for example**,** the interjection, which carries the weight of a full sentence. The power expressed in a sentiment, like pain, does not necessarily lie in the eloquence of a carefully formulated sentence, but is often more expressively communicated through moans or sharp, pitiful cries, like 'OUCH!' for instance. Possibly the expressions which are of the strongest and most intimate kind are uttered as strings of short sounds, stammered during love-making (Sturm 2001:90).

It is on a similar level that the stars of the *Babel Series* make themselves heard. They shout, wail, implore and assault us. They stammer and stutter. We wonder what it means. They seem to invite us to draw near, but remain aloof. They plead for attention, only to hurl their "*infantile yammer*" in our faces. Sturm refers to them as "*a choir of cacophonous amputees*" (2001:90). The songs which guarantee them their identities have been stripped from them. And yet not completely. Their songs are so familiar; have such a resonance; such a sense of de-ja-vu; they ring forever in our heads. We understand and know them; they have become part of our mutual experience; a part of our very own selves. The experience we have of language has been predetermined. Understanding is made possible due to "*the shared codes that*

structure language… We are interpellated by sound" (ibid 2001:91). The songs sung by these particular pop stars are familiar. We recognise their movements and the visuals of these songs that have been condensed to split-second beats. Because we are offspring of the mainstream, the faces and life histories of these celebrities are well known to us. Their words, narratives and the cultural context are all things that we relate to and recognize (ibid 2001:90,91).

Having said all that, what we know about these icons does not conform to what we now see. We find we do not understand what is before us, our frame of reference has become distorted and our memory of them has been rendered useless. We have been set apart (ibid 2001:91).

> "*…immortal pop gods babbling like young babies…a powerful choir nonetheless, a choir devoid of easy repetition and sing-along refrains. A choir lacking in sweet linearity and smothering narrative surface. Back to the roots of language. Into the realm of sound. Where potential and meaning are freed from containment in closed narrative form. New raw sounds. Noise-songs*" (Sturm 2001:91).

It could be said that the very precise cutting and editing that has been performed in this work somehow takes us back to a grass root level, to a place where sounds form the most basic elements of each utterance and of every linguistic system. Sturm notes:

> "*Units of potential meaning that merge into inventories of signs and develop non-hierarchically into instructions that drive actions yet to be performed, yet to take shape. This is a realm in which the meaning of sound is variable and relative, existing only fleetingly and in relation to the contexts to which it attaches itself. Here sound is still free from inscription into the specificity of a linguistic system. Still woven into a web of emotional inflection and intonation[, in] ever-shifting forms, the beats that make up sound simultaneously evoke the possibility and impossibility of universal communication*" (2001:100).

There is no single translation that can be attributed to the sounds uttered, but each listener must make of them individually what he/she will. The work presents the listener with sounds that don't quite flow together, the beat throbbing, offering the

hearer neither *lingua franca* nor Esperanto. Syntax and grammar have been dispensed with. Sounds exist on a level "*of emotional inflection and intonation*" (ibid 2001:91), but meaningful communication, understandable sentences, phrases and sometimes even words have been rejected. Their lack of form only serves to make us more critically aware of language, which envelops and cloaks us, becoming to us a "*second skin*" (ibid 2001:91), taking shape as we put together words, phrases and sentences from monosyllabic sound. But the *Babel Series* resists being read on a level where meaningful sentences are key. The reason contained within language is cast aside, and we are forced to become aware of the syllables rather than be carried away along the surface of lyrics and melodies (ibid 2001:91).

The artist recalls that, due to her early childhood in South Africa, she became accustomed to the thought of language as something obscure, opaque and rather violent, in a sense, that served to keep people apart, instead of being a "*transparent bridge across which one could negotiate difference*"[21] (Beccaria 2005:21). At that time, access to amenities like busses, restaurants or public toilets was strictly limited and this limitation was based on skin colour. Activities in public spaces and experience were, however, determined not only spatially but also linguistically. In this regard, and in a subtle and menacing manner, the government did an outstanding job of ensuring that South African citizens were divided in terms of language. Breitz notes that South Africans were all expected to speak Afrikaans, which led to violent school riots in 1976, and comments further that the government displayed no interest in encouraging the white minority to learn the languages of the large black population. In fact, she mentions, black South Africans were discouraged from learning too much English, as this might have caused harm to a central apartheid principle, that of 'divide and conquer'. Added to this, the government feared that black South Africans who spoke English might try to elevate themselves above the menial position in society that had been deemed appropriate to them (Kroener 2003:1).

Breitz comments that she found it absurd that she couldn't speak the languages spoken by the majority of her fellow countrymen. She says that on the rare

occasions that she found herself in a place where she could have interacted with them, "*there was always this invisible barrier that discouraged any kind of real communication; that is, one simply couldn't understand what was being said around one in Zulu or Xhosa or Pedi*" (ibid 2003:2). It was this sensibility that fed into works such as the *Babel Series, Karaoke*, and *Alien*, made years later. Each of these video installations suggest that language is only semi-permeable and that human relationships often become more complicated on account of it, rather than being simplified by it. Breitz mentions that she had not even been aware that this could have been an early influence until she had been working with discordant sound pieces for some time. She slowly realized that the forms of jarring, obscure language that were developing in her work may have been informed by those first, very early experiences with language (ibid 2003:2).

There has been a move in recent years among certain more conservative South African circles, suggested by writers like Breyten Breytenbach, to 'protect and nourish' the Afrikaans language by focusing on literature written in Afrikaans. Breitz knew friends who actively resisted Afrikaans while visiting the country during the apartheid era, due to the "*conservative implications, which were impossible to ignore*" (ibid 2003:2). Misuse, through colonization and expropriation, has tainted most languages to a certain extent, says Breitz, when questioned on this issue. If the languages of Central Europe, for example, were to be measured by the evil that had been mediated through them, she says, they too would end up looking tarnished. Breitz's belief, however, is that language in itself is not inherently evil, but when spoken, it becomes ideologically inflected. Afrikaans, she notes, "*belongs just as much to those who were screwed by apartheid (and in particular to the large 'coloured' community in South Africa) as it does to those who invented apartheid, and it is as much a language of resistance as it is a language of oppression*" (ibid 2003:3).

She goes on to say that rather than simply survive, languages tend to evolve, and this is probably the most that can be hoped for in the case of Afrikaans, due to the fact that it is now exposed to pressures and influences from which it was previously

shielded as the privileged language of apartheid. The interesting thing about language is the way in which it is constantly being reinvented through those who speak it, she says (ibid 2003:3).

I started to wonder whether Breitz had been affected, in terms of her struggle with language, by her move from one country to another. It seemed to me that she may well have created works that related to the difficulties she experienced in terms of her understanding, or the lack thereof, of the language of her new domicile. When she moved to Germany, she created the work, *Alien*, and it seemed to follow that the work may well have been influenced by the feelings of alienation she had experienced in her new place of residence, because of the strangeness of the language spoken. She appears to be someone who continues to be much influenced by the language she hears around her, even as she was when a child in South Africa.

Kroener, in her interview with Breitz, discusses the installation, *Alien*. She notes that apart from some comical effects, she finds in *Alien* a sense of estrangement, turmoil even, as she watches foreigners singing popular sing-along songs or German folk songs which are crudely voiced-over by another singer's voice that upsets the flow of their recitals (ibid 2003:3). Both *Alien* and *Karaoke* have emerged from Breitz's obsession with the slipperiness of language, and "*also both hinge on the complex relation of the desires of the individual to national, cultural and social desires. To learn a language is at the same time to sample the cultural, social and national histories that are built into that language*" (ibid 2003:6).



Fig 13: *Alien (Ten Songs from Beyond)* 2002
Candice Breitz
10 Channel installation (10 looping DVDs), sound

Alien (2002) (fig 13)

Alien is a multi-channel installation within a large and dimly lit space, comprising ten monitors, each of which plays diverse music videos. On entering the space, one is accosted by a disturbing jumble of ten voices, all heard at the same time. There is little in terms of visuals to help make sense of the work. The initial experience is that of "*a moaning melancholy, a decomposing struggle*" of voices (Kroener 2003:3).

The arrangement of the monitors is such that only their backs are visible from the middle of the installation space. Each song is in German which might in some way call to mind a sense of home for natural German speakers, if only through familiarity. A narrow space is available into which the viewer can just fit between screen and wall, causing the singer on screen to come into view. This, in itself, is an alienating experience, causing the viewer to have a sense of being separated from other people, even though there is still a fair amount of noise heard on the other side of the television set. One quickly realizes that none of the singers are singing in their own voices. The songs were recorded in a studio, sung originally by ten natural German-speakers. Thereafter, ten non-German residents living in Germany were invited to re-perform the same songs before a video camera. Once the video of the foreigners singing had been captured, the recorded voices and soundtracks were completely erased from the footage, "*leaving a series of ten mute lip-syncing bodies*" (ibid 2003:4). The voices belonging to the native born German-speakers were then imported into these bodies. By using low-tech digital ventriloquism, the self assured voices of the German language speakers were transported into the bodies of ten immigrants, so that:

> "*the foreigners are now literally inhabited by the language of their new home country, with somewhat disconcerting effect…When one speaks one's mother tongue, one tends to have the sense that the language is emanating from within, that the mother-language somehow belongs to one and pours out from a pre-existing interior space…the space of the self. To speak a foreign language on the other hand, is to have the*

> *feeling that one is somehow reaching outside oneself for words and for meaning, as if one has to gather up words from beyond the self, to rein them in from afar and make them one's own*" (ibid 2003:4).

This work was, to a certain extent, inspired by the sense of alienation experienced by one attempting to speak, or 'live' in a foreign language. The bodily or physical relationship people have with an unfamiliar, alien language is reminiscent of the type of association that a ventriloquist's dummy has with speech. In a sense, the dummy serves as the vehicle for language that it does not possess. In a way, what is at risk in *Alien* is a battle with language, a struggle to possess language in place of being possessed by language. In the realm of politics there are a number of metaphors that deal with the voice: there's the 'fight for a voice' and the 'right to have a voice'. *Alien* investigates the shadowy "*realm in which we are not voices, but the voiced*" (ibid 2003:4). The intention of this work is not to make a statement, whether positive or negative regarding our relationship to language or foreign language, but is rather intended to generate a musical expression relating the sense of separation that is often felt as language filters through us, the 'hide and seek' procedure of "*attempting to have a voice*" (ibid 2003:5). The paradox here is that the immigrant singers in *Alien* possess the German songs at the self-same moment that they find themselves dispossessed by these songs. In the final analysis, *Alien* has more to do with the experience of "*entering into and being entered by a foreign language*" (ibid 2003:5) and being indwelt by an unknown quantity than it has to do with the German language and Germany per se. Although *Alien* reverberates with a sense of 'foreign-ness', it never becomes apparent whether what is foreign is the immigrants themselves, the voices that inhabit them, the bodies through which language flows, or the flow of language itself (ibid 2003:5).



Fig 14a: *Karaoke*. 2000
Candice Breitz
10 Channel installation (10 looping DVDs), sound



Fig 14b: Video stills from *Karaoke*. 2000
Candice Breitz
10 Channel installation (10 looping DVDs), sound

Karaoke (2000) (fig 14a, b)

The video installation, *Karaoke*, offers a more wide-ranging look in terms of the construction of identity than the *Babel Series*. When observing these videos, it soon becomes clear that the singers are merely singing words repetitively that appear in front of them, Karaoke style; effectively being used as "*temporary vehicles for words that are never quite theirs*" (Hunt 2000, *in lit*).

Karaoke is a video installation consisting of a ring of ten monitors, each of which faces toward the centre of the room, creating an inward facing circle. The screens encircle the viewer, while each monitor displays the face of a different person. This is unlike, and could be said to be the inverse of the work *Alien*, which was made two years later, in which the monitors face outward, away from the centre, towards the wall. In *Karaoke,* each person sings the same song, but the inharmoniousness of the sound that is heard by the viewer as he/she is surrounded by the rowdy monitors may initially prevent the viewer from being aware of that (Hunt 2000, *in lit*). It is a multi-channel work in which "*the viewer enters a space filled by many disparate and competing voices...becom[ing] a human mixing board*" (Neri 2005:4).

The singers of *Karaoke* are formed of a divergent mix of foreigners, each living in New York, drawn from a range of different linguistic backgrounds and environments. In fact, none of these amateur singers were mother tongue English speakers. The performers met individually with Breitz, by invitation, in a Karaoke bar in New York. Each was asked to sing Roberta Flack's song, *Killing Me Softly*, in English. They did this with the prior knowledge that no one single voice would be able to be picked out later, as all ten voices would be played back together in the installation, and not as a synchronous choir. Because no attempt at synchronization was made, no unity was achieved. Only a discordant racket of diverse voices could be heard.

Breitz describes the mix of voices as instruments, each having been used as elements in the composition that eventually became *Karaoke*. Rather than a harmonious whole, she notes that:

> *"…the result is a disorderly and yet quite seductive mangle of the different renditions of the song, such that it becomes almost impossible to distinguish any of the words, or any [one] voice over any other*" (Kroener 2003:5).

Breitz wanted to create the effect of a "*chaotic meeting of voices in a market place or large international airport, where language envelops one entirely, and yet doesn't necessarily communicate anything specific or tangible*" (ibid 2003:6). The voices, when heard together, seem to compete and become 'shadow voices', in the sense that the singer does not sing spontaneously, but repeats words when prompted, as they appear on screen. The Karaoke singer becomes in this sense, transient, a brief channel for a song that simply passes through him or her. When viewing the singers, one has the sense that they appear to be not quite present in their performances. Each individual singer is totally absorbed in the words he sees before him, yet somehow, at the very moment the words are voiced, they are rendered empty. *"He sang as if he knew me, in all my dark despair. And then he looked right through me as if I wasn't there"* (ibid 2003:6).

During an interview with Breitz, Hunt makes the following comment:

> "*[t]he love song, language at its most contagious, here becomes emblematic of the violence that is intrinsic to language, for though the love song is the very instance in which we would unburden our most intimate feelings, reveal our most interior thoughts, we have no choice but to do so by means of sentiments and phrases that are derived from a repertory that is known to others and externally prescribed*" (2000:2, *in lit*).

In the context of the language of the love song, things are often not what they may seem. Hunt comments that although this 'love song' language supposedly reveals our most intimate thoughts and feelings, the words, the thoughts and the feelings are not actually our own. They are a repetition of what someone else has said, has sung

and has written. They are plucked from a well-established repertoire. It is always a mix, an appropriation of sentiments and phrases that are already out there, and well-known to their audience. This language of the love song is neither as innocent nor as heart-felt as it may seem. It even appears to have a stranglehold over us, to a certain extent, which in a sense identifies it as violent.

In the recent past, oppositional narratives have developed to counteract the "*undifferentiated electronic Babel of the Internet*" (Hunt 2000:1, *in lit*). In this vein, one could mention the uninhibited verbal expressions of hip-hop or the heightened feeling of dystopia that spreads throughout the *Babel Series* installation (ibid 2000:1, *in lit*). The aesthetic resistance Breitz attempts to create, in which she strives to produce "*forms of experience that exceed or at least point to the limitations of such cultures*" has, for her, a sense of impotence in the face of the all-encompassing presence of the popular iconic phenomena of that time, such as Celine Dion or Pokemon (ibid 2000:1, *in lit*). The frustration she feels is as a result of the nullifying of possible strategies of aesthetic resistance that have been developed, because all such strategies have been "*absorbed, packaged and marketed as … product[s] in our current culture*" (ibid 2000:1, *in lit*). An example that she gives of this is that of the 'united colours of Benetton', in which the allusions made are to a worldwide unity, regardless of race or colour. Breitz comments that for a number of years "*artists have been the research and development arm of the fashion and entertainment industries, where their difficult and innovative ideas are repackaged for easy consumption*" (ibid 2000:1, *in lit*). She questions whether there could possibly be any strategies that could "*remain viable at a moment in which narratives of resistance are as utterly available to the mainstream market as fast food*" (ibid 2000:1, *in lit*). Breitz goes further, noting that she feels it necessary to acknowledge in some way, within her artistic practice, the extent to which the struggle against integration of the artistic arena with culture as an industry is immature, even pointless. However, at the same time, she feels it is neither advantageous nor necessary to celebrate this progressively predictable union (ibid 2000:1, *in lit*).

Karaoke, in which the performers obediently repeat the words as dictated, seems to almost portray a rigorous language laboratory. Even the manner in which the performers individually display themselves to their audience becomes a vocabulary of sorts, as much as the words they mouth. The muddled choirs of *Alien* and *Karaoke* convey, possibly more than anything else, the intense desire of the individual for public recognition. At the same time however, they make it patently clear that "*entry into language and public identity is all too often mediated by a pre-existing mass culture*" (Kroener 2003:6).

Coming from without in both *Alien* and *Karaoke*, language, somewhat violently, *takes* its subjects. At the place where the attainment of language and cultural integration merge, violence is unable to be prevented. As Breitz comments: "*Language is the colonizing agent par excellence, and once it has entered our systems, it is impossible to return to the innocence of non-linguistic being*" (ibid 2003:7).

Four Duets (2000) (fig 15a, b, c)

Pop culture, particularly the music video clip, forms the raw material for the work, *Four Duets*. From the found footage with which she started, Breitz removed everything that seemed over-demonstrative or too self absorbed and trimmed the remaining footage until she was left with just the bare essentials – brief and to the point. In so doing, Breitz cut away the distinctive, seductive sentimentality that coated these love songs. What remains is the core – now exposed to be what Wagner terms, "*the trash of our civilization*" (2001:135). She manipulates the extract until it becomes a condensed and stuttering loop that is endlessly repeated (ibid 2001:135). Each *Duet* is comprised of two DVD loops, each with its own monitor, resulting in eight monitors in total. The dimensions of the installations are variable, being dependant on the space available.



Fig 15a: Video stills from *Four Duets*. 2000
Candice Breitz
Double Karen; *Double Whitney*; *Double Olivia*; *Double Annie*
8 Channel installation (8 looping DVDs), sound

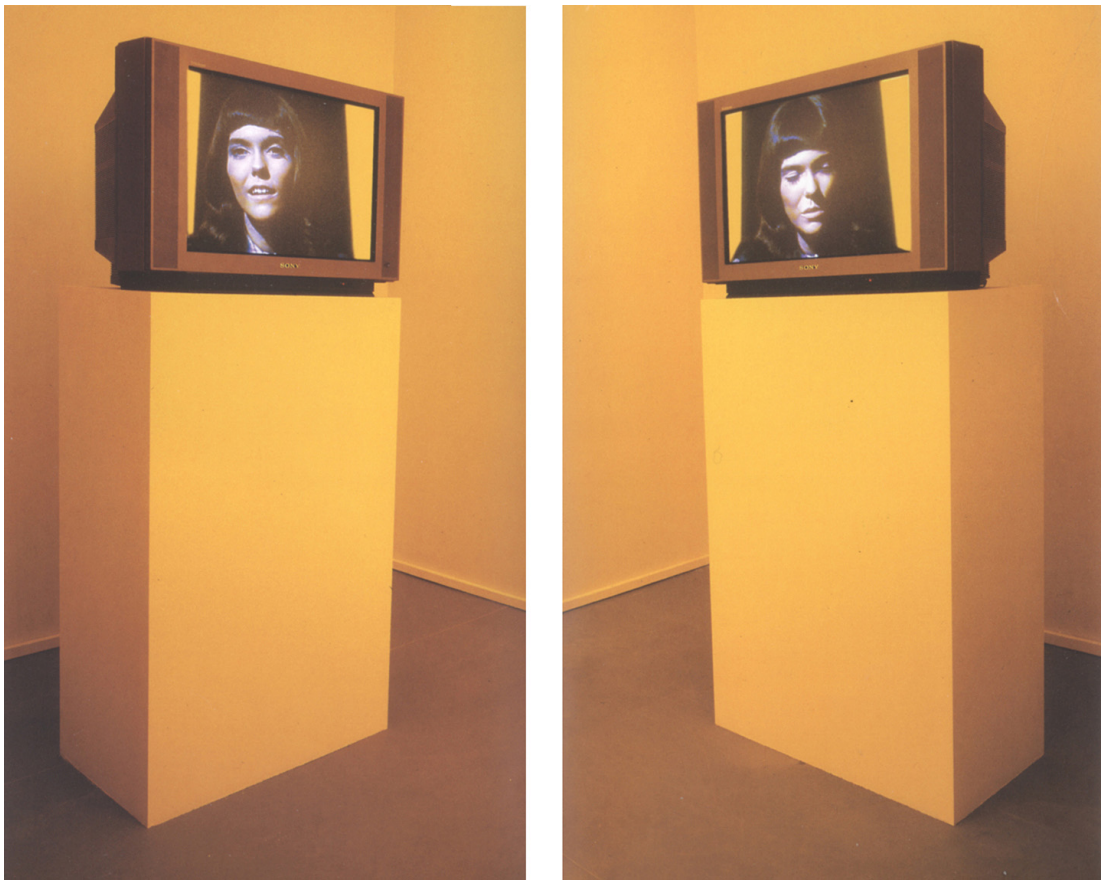


Fig 15b: Installation detail from *Four Duets*. 2000
Candice Breitz
Double Karen (Close to You), 1970/2000
2 Channel installation (2 looping DVDs), sound



Fig 15c: Installation detail from *Four Duets*. 2000
Candice Breitz
Double Whitney (I Will Always Love You), 1999/2000
2 Channel installation (2 looping DVDs), sound

The *Duets* are:

1) *Double Karen* (*Close To You*) – 1970/2000
2) *Double Olivia* (*Hopelessly Devoted To You*) – 1977/2000
3) *Double Annie* (*Thorn in My Side*) – 1985/2000
4) *Double Whitney* (*I Will Always Love You*) – 1999/2000

Four Duets is made up of a selection of four sentimental love songs. Each of the music video performances from which these songs are sourced became big hits in their time: Karen Carpenter's *Close to You* (1970), Annie Lennox's *Thorn in My Side* (1985), Olivia Newton John's *Hopelessly Devoted to You* (1977) and Whitney Houston's *I Will Always Love You* (1999). Breitz picked out and dramatized the sense of longing that gives these ballads their appeal. Having edited (one could even say digitally mutilated) them, they developed finally into sequences of stuttering pronouns.

Each singer is shown twice, once on each of two monitors. The footage of each video was put through two specific and separate editing processes. In the first session, Breitz revised the footage to preserve only those instances in which the vocalist sings a first-person pronoun such as "I," "me" or "my". This resulted in a series of brief fragments of self-reference which were then strung together to create a continuous video loop. During the next round of editing, Breitz eliminated all words other than "you" from the same recording, creating a companion loop. The resulting, much diminished video loops – the "I" loop and the "you" loop – are eventually played back at the same time on two monitors which face each another from opposing pedestals.

These loops are individually restricted to a 29 second duration for the "you" loop, and only a 6 second duration for the "I" loop, but these are endlessly repeated. The "I" is usually taken from the beginning of a song-line and therefore tends to be brief and disjointed, whereas the "you" is mostly found in the last part of a line or refrain, where it can be elaborated on and extravagantly drawn out by the singer. Each *Duet*

occupies its own oppressive room, having walls painted to match the overriding colour of the footage that they display. The result is "*a dramatic leakage between the interior of the footage and the exterior space in which the viewer encounters the dialoguing loops*" (Phillips 2001:31).

On one screen, *Double Olivia* shows Olivia Newton John sounding only the isolated pronouns "I, me, my", repeatedly in a brutal tourette-like stammer[22], while on the opposing screen the same footage has received different treatment and shows her dreamily singing the word "you". Similarly, this word repeats itself indefinitely, having been confined within a continuous cut and paste sequence. The viewer is caught between two monitors, one of which utters "I, me, my", while the other croons "you," over and over, these being the inevitable extremities of longing. Each of the *Four Duets* are similarly structured, having been taken from love songs and cut and pasted in such a way that they constitute the two essential parts of the structure – the "I" loop and the "you" loop – "*set in a somewhat short-circuited and schizophrenic dialogue with one another*" (Breitz 2006, *in lit*).

As one absorbs the *Duets*, vocal gestures made by the singers often obscure the significance of the verbal sign as in, for example, *Double Whitney (I Will Always Love You)*, where Whitney Houston launches into diva-like harmonies of "you, you, you" or in *Double Karen (Close To You)*, as Karen Carpenter ineffectually moans, "me, me, me" (Phillips 2001:31). Breitz sets the extremes of a relationship – two opposing forms of identification – as rivals against one another. An almost hymn-like reverence is drawn from the same song. "I, I, I, I, I…" struggles frantically for support against a second incantation that becomes a reversed response in: "you, you, you…" (Wagner 2001:137). *Hopelessly Devoted to You* was originally released in 1977, as part of the soundtrack to the film *Grease*. The story is set in 1959, in an American high school, with Sandra Dee[23] as lead actress. " '*Double Olivia*' *thus revisits 1959 as seen through the eyes of 1977 from the vantage point of the year 2000, collapsing nearly half a century of nostalgia into two endlessly recurring loops which play on mercilessly*" (Breitz 2006, *in lit)*. The condensed essence that remains of the love songs, as offered to us by Breitz, reduces "*all aspirations to*

nobler meaning" to a mere stutter (Wagner 2001:137). Nothing remains of the intimacy, the longing, the vulnerability and the integrity of which the pop stars sing, in fact the content of the songs have become meaningless (ibid 2001:137).

Wagner speaks of Candice Breitz as an "*unrelenting critic... mercilessly deconstruct[ing] the objects of her attention, in the process unveiling our idols as discontinued models of obsolescence… embod[ying] the dross of the last thirty-five years in the* '*Four Duets*' ". He goes on to say that she makes mockery of the singers with their now shredded messages, and then aggravates the situation still further by situating each singer in opposition to her own image, thus causing each to become her own audience. Indeed, there is no longer any need for a public (2001:137).

Having ruthlessly edited the songs, Breitz set *"in motion the simple logic by means of which the pop song exerts its effect on the listener or spectator*" (ibid 2001:136). The pop songs that turn out to be the most popular are probably the short ones. These are often so powerfully repetitive, that their words – together with the longings contained within in those words – immediately engrave themselves on our minds, enabling us to sing along right away. Wagner asserts that "*[b]ehind this rapid evolution of the haunting tune lies an entire industry that dedicates itself completely to the fabrication of such surrogates of happiness*" (2001:136).
This is evident in the very structure of the pop song. It follows a specific form and is made up of a sequence of quick and clearly defined sound bites. These combine to form a 'teaser', a catchy tune that connects with an intrinsic sense of rhythm in its listeners. (In a lecture given by Breitz at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2004, she referred to the German word, *Ohrwurm*, which translates directly as *ear worm*. This, she commented, aptly describes the nonstop recurrence of a catchy tune as it sounds over and over in one's head.)

The fundamental structural logic of the song is contained in this teaser and what is being expressed in the song becomes of vital importance. Freely flowing rhythms which are embodied in the melody usually develop between the basic poles of an "I" and a "you" – a specific sender (singer/giver) and recipient (hearer/receiver). It is

never quite as easy as that though – the "you" in the pop song should be ambiguous enough to enable millions of listeners to simultaneously identify with the song, and yet still keep them at a safe distance. Each listener needs to feel that his or her relationship with the fantasy "I" of the pop star is somehow special and unique. On the other side of the equation, we have the singer. This is the "I" that we relate to as we identify with this singer – the way she looks and her elaborate body language – but needless to say, she is also an imaginary "I" .This "I" becomes, for the listener, a type of substitute, someone with whom he/she can identify, recreating for him/her the time when his/her own personal love drama took place, enabling him/her to re-live the pain or the joy of the experience again and again. Pop critics have often described these as typical identification mechanisms, which are firmly entrenched in the double sided structure of the pop song. (Wagner 2001: 135,136).

Beneath its humorous exterior, Phillips comments, a couple of rather more serious questions are provoked by this work which have to do with the relationship between celebrity and fan, the 'somebody' and the 'nobody'. As one listens to a pop song, "you" can be fairly creative and assume the place "*of the 'I' of the singer and indulge in a vicarious taste of celebrity power*" (Phillips 2001:32). On the other hand, "you" could also be the one to whom the singer makes her very personal reference, the very "you" toward whom her gaze is directed. Within these imaginary relations a critical twist takes place. As the singers direct their songs toward their own alter egos on the facing monitors, "I" and "you" abruptly collide. Because of the way in which the composition is stage set:

> "*the process of identification and projection is short-circuited, as the singer confronts her own uncanny double. An abyss opens up, into which the fantasy relations of self and other collapse into a cycle that is at times violently onanistic and at other moments virtually autistic*" (ibid 2001:32).

Breitz has implemented a highly developed sampling technique in the composition of the work: "*juxtaposed sound bites and digital weaves of isolated fragments of music merge into new and often repetitive rhythms and sounds*". This sampling was

originally detailed in the techno music movement as a subversive alternative to mainstream culture, but was soon drawn into and adopted by the culture industry. The logic of sampling is well-used at this stage – original footage is taken apart before being rearranged and layered. When badly done, sampling adds up to not much more than ineffectual reprocessing. But when creatively used, it often produces new and exciting musical forms (Wagner 2001:139). Breitz has, however, no interest in composing new rhythms or harmonies, although she creates mutilated harmonies in her sampling. In contrast, her appealingly jerky technique ultimately leads to a harshly analytical disclosure of the teaser which propels each of the *Four Duets*, as well as the different types of connections associated with the teaser. Forms of the hysteric permeate the *Four Duets*, a clinical subject that received much attention in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Recently, the hysteric has been largely forgotten, but this subject was once "*pivotal in the development of various psychoanalytical theories of identity and subjectivity*" (ibid 2001:146). Where the society in which we live is saturated by a never ending flood of media images, Breitz challenges us with an existential need, with the empty space that is etched at the heart of our social relations and with the awareness of absence that characterizes every elusive notion of specific identity.

> "*Both forms of lack – the empty space around which the hysteric defines herself, and the core of absence in relation to which social identity is necessarily constituted – mark the contemporary pop song, that archetypal haven of the cliché and the stereotype*" (ibid 2001:146).

By compressing and simplifying the inconsequential pop song in the *Four Duets*, Breitz projects the minimized remains of the song onto the dual personality of the singer. When its padding of excessive sentimentality has been removed, we become aware of the vulnerability of the human psyche (ibid 2001:146).

A strong connection between the *Babel Series* and *Four Duets* is made in terms of theme. Whereas the *Babel Series* refers to the first stage of an infant learning to utter sound, *Duets* places emphasis on another crucial step in the growing child's mastery of language. This is "…*the advent of the linguistic 'shifter' – a category of words*

whose object of reference varies situationally (Phillips 2001:30). We have seen that this series is particularly preoccupied with personal pronouns*:* "I", "you", "me" and "my". These personal pronouns are indexical shifters, which are claimed and possessed by the speaker for just a moment at the instant of their articulation. A fairly sophisticated control over language is required before a child can successfully use words like these, which verbally indicate the difference between the self and the other (ibid 2001:30).

Legend (2004).

Legend takes another, slightly different look at the celebrity/fan relationship. This thirty channel video installation investigates the legend of Bob Marley and presents him in a different way. He's shown not just as a monumental, inaccessible figure. Instead the viewer is invited to see him as a cultural icon; one whose intricate composite image includes those whose lives have been inflected and whose stories have been told through his music. It is the fans themselves who are considered in this work – those whose devotion worshipfully creates the delicate, multifaceted mechanism that elevates a legend. The installation creates a portrait, *a capella* style, of a superstar celebrity, remarkable for having been the first to come from a third world country (Breitz 2004, *in lit*).

Breitz points out that there is a contrast between works she creates using found footage, and those using amateur performers, who are at liberty to perform as they like. This contrast reveals a basic dichotomy in her work – the difference between the 'somebodies' (stars that have a reputation and are well known, like those in the *Babel Series* or *Four Duets*) and the 'nobodies' (fans and consumers of pop culture, whose identities and obsessions are unseen, for the most part; like those in *Alien* or *Karoake*). Breitz claims that her loyalty lies with the 'nobodies', being one herself, a user of the culture (Neri 2005:6).

The contrasting themes examined in *Legend* involve the Bob Marley respectfully described by Jamaicans to Breitz when she first visited the island in 2004, and that

which has developed into a trade name outside Jamaica. Marley was a man who openly criticized political discrimination and fought for equal opportunities in society through his music and in his life. He has become emblematic among the people of Jamaica as one who rose above the poverty and violence of a life in the ghetto (Breitz 2004, *in lit*).

Brietz was inspired, after having heard of the way in which numerous Jamaicans spoke of the effect Marley had on their lives, to re-work the album, returning it, in a sense, to Jamaica[24]. She brought together thirty Jamaicans and had each sing their version of the entire *Legend* album in a professional recording studio. This resulted in thirty performances, which were then simultaneously screened on a bank of thirty monitors. It is interesting to note that Breitz recreated the work in the same format in which the original was recorded, that of a fourteen-track album. The idea behind this was an acknowledgement of the unquestionable role played by marketing 'the Marley myth'. The presence of Marley is thus ultimately only retained through the voices of his fans, as his own voice and well-known musical arrangements have been stripped away and play no part in the final installation (ibid 2004, *in lit*).

In this way, Breitz manipulates not only the images of the singer, but also investigates the end user, the fan. Putting the two together as one concept, she sees each as playing his/her own unique role in the representation of a portrait of the star.

When she cuts and re-animates found footage, Breitz notes that "*her works tend to be something of an attack on the 'somebodies' who occupy and control the space of publicity*" (Lange 2006, *in lit*). In her manner of dealing with fans, however, she is gentler, she says, being aware that these people are influenced by powerful marketing and publicity, by "*forces that can shape their fantasies and influence their personal formation*" (ibid 2006, *in lit*). The biographical aspect of pop fascinates Breitz, who comments: "*a pop song can trigger very personal memories, prompting you to remember the first time your heart was broken, or where you were when you last heard the song*" (ibid 2006, *in lit*).

Breitz has little interest in expressionistically creating a sense of mood or a feeling and makes no attempt made to give insight into the character beneath the surface. She likes to create the portrait as a reflective plane by working, on a superficial level, on splicing and editing footage. She has, to a large extent, been influenced by the *Screen Tests*[25] of Andy Warhol, which superficially inform the viewer regarding the way those being portrayed would like themselves to be seen. Breitz confesses that her interest does not lie in monumentalizing the portrait, noting:

> "*Avoiding an overtly iconic representation of the pop star is a way to suggest that the star is, on some level, a mirror in which the collective desires and fantasies of her fans are reflected, rather than some kind of fixed, unchanging entity*" (ibid 2006, *in lit*).

Much of Breitz's work deals with the question of how people develop into who they are, and to what extent this process is influenced by the assimilation of values sold to them by the mainstream media. Adults and children as they grow increasingly discover their identities not only from their parents and from their direct social contexts, but also from the culture industry. The media has, in that sense, come to share (and even at times to take over) the intricate job of raising us as individuals. It is odd how effectively the star/fan relationship has charted itself in the parent/child relationship. The star/parent offers itself to the fan/child as a model to be imitated and reproduced, not only insofar as how to dress and talk, but also when it comes to thinking and behaviour patterns. The eternal, uneasy debate concerning the exact effect of the mass media and television on 'our' children continues. A number of questions are posed, such as:

> " '*Are high-school shootings the inevitable result of listening to too much Marilyn Manson?', or even on adults,* '*Does violent porn invariably lead to rape?', is really just the banal way that conservative critics have found to ask questions that have far more profound implications:* '*Why aren't our children reproducing our values? Why can't we control them? Why aren't they becoming who we want them to become?*' " (Matt 2006, *in lit*).

This, notes Breitz, is an essentially unimaginative response to the dilemma, since it inevitably leads to censorship, and ultimately, illiteracy. Breitz rejects censorship, stating that it is preferable to teach children discernment in terms of what to watch and who to emulate, instead of trying to control them by preventing them from watching potentially damaging material. Rather, she states, teach them: "*how to actively cut and paste meaning from the media rather than feeling obliged to sit back passively and swallow it all whole*" (ibid 2006, *in lit*).

Although we are surrounded by an excess of visual information, it is possible to cause images to work on our behalf, instead of only having them work on us. The sinister character intrinsic to the culture of spectacular images is generated chiefly because it is made to appear as the norm, instead of as a set of artificial conventions. We grow so used to this apparently normal landscape that we overlook the fact that it may be possible to chart alternate landscapes. When Breitz works with well-known images, her intention is, partly, to make them seem less familiar to the viewer, that is, to make them seem strange again (Neri 2005:2).

Endnotes:

1. Sol Le Witt (born 1928) is considered to a founder of both conceptual and minimal art. He started making wall drawings in 1968, originating from the radical position that concepts rather than emotions could be a generating force for art. Starting in the 1960s, linguistic and mathematical models began to be used to explore this conceptual approach. Le Witt set up systems of logic which took the shape of written instructions which directed the result of an artwork prior to its implementation–for example: "*lines from the corner, sides, and centre to points on a grid*." The lucidity of this process extracted the most from the relationship between visual and linguistic conventions of depictions. Although these textual systems appear simple, they actually conceal a complex visual structure of infinite permutations, based on a rich conceptual foundation (Ragheb, n.d.) http://www.answers.com. Breitz discusses her editing techniques, and especially the influence of Sol Le Witt with regard to her editing: "*In the last couple of years, I have been interested in trying to develop an alternative to randomly expressive editing procedures, so as to escape the seduction of the increasingly lavish and special-effects-orientated technologies that artists can increasingly access. The work of Sol Le Witt has been my greatest influence in trying to develop non-expressive editing strategies. In his Paragraphs on Conceptual Art (1967), Le Witt writes: 'When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art'. In my most recent work, I have attempted to edit myself out of the process",* says Breitz, *"and to allow simple rules or ideas to almost mechanically predetermine my work, even imagining that it might, at some point, be possible to write down a set of rules that must be applied to existing footage, before walking away and allowing somebody else to see the process through. Le Witt has said of his wall-drawings: 'If I give the instructions and they are carried out correctly, then the result is ok with me'. However, what is really interesting for me about Le Witt's vision is the fact that it is one that he constantly and knowingly contradicts. So, in the Paragraphs on Conceptual Art, Le Witt argues on the one hand that 'If the artist wishes to explore his idea thoroughly, then arbitrary or chance decisions would be kept to a minimum, while caprice, taste and other whimsies would be eliminated from the making of the art…. To work with a plan that is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity…', but, in the very same essay, he also argues that 'Ideas are discovered by intuition' (which is nothing other than subjectivity!). In the editing studio, I find myself fighting the Le Wittian battle - setting an arbitrary series of rules for myself to the ends of eliminating arbitrariness - caught in the battle between the removal of subjective decisions from the editing process… and the inevitable disruption of the work by the return of caprice and whimsy as random creative decisions sneak back into the editing process. The* '*Soliloquy Trilogy*' *is a case in point*" (Breitz 2006, *in lit*).
2. Andy Warhol (1928-1987) played an important role in Pop Art, a movement that became prominent in the 1950's, and was key for approximately 20 years. The non-representational colours used by Warhol in his mass produced portraits make reference to popular culture, which had stimulated Warhol's experimentation in silkscreen printing, a technique popularly used for mass production. In so doing, Warhol distanced himself from the elitist avant-garde tradition and a union between art and commodity culture was forged. A number of mass produced images were created by Warhol in the 1960s from celebrity photographs such as Marilyn Monroe, Jackie Onassis and Elvis Presley. *Web Exhibits*,(n.d.). http://webexhibits.org, visited 30/10/2006.
3. After elections in 1948, the apartheid regime came to power, under the control of the mainly Afrikaans speaking National Party. Nelson Mandela was released from prison on 11 February 1990, and the first democratic elections took place in South Africa on 27 April 1994.
4. The education system specifically excluded any contact between children of differing ethnic groups, the schools being racially and ethnically divided. South African children were not educated in terms of the diversity of cultures and languages in their country, it being deemed unnecessary for white children to learn indigenous languages. Post apartheid South Africa now has 11 official languages, including English and Afrikaans.
5. *Lingua franca* is a common language used between people in an area where several languages are spoken.

6. The title, *Rainbow Series* directly refers to the term: 'Rainbow Nation", coined by Nelson Mandela on 10 May 1994, in his inaugural speech as President of South Africa, in an attempt to focus on a hybrid identity for post-apartheid South Africa.
7. Breitz refers to debates surrounding issues of representation in the South African context. These debates can be followed at length in a book edited by Breitz, C. & Atkinson B. (1999), *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art*. Chalkham Hill Press, Rivonia.
8. *Cours de Linguistique Generale*, first published in 1916. Editions Payot, Lausanne-Paris.
9. The first performance of the song known as "Derniere Chanson", was in 1911, at the well-known Alhambra music hall in Paris. Quoting the words of the chorus, "O Manon, ma jolie, mon coeur te dit bonjour", Picasso makes reference to Marcelle Humbert. From: Weiss, J. S. (1990). 'Picasso Collage and the Music Hall' and Rosenblum, R., (1990). 'Cubism as Pop Art'. In: Varnedoe, K. & Gopnik, A. (eds), *Modern Art and Popular Culture. Readings in High and Low*. Museum of Modern Art, Henry N Abrams Publ, New York, pp82-115; 116-132.
10. Quote taken from an English transcript, in which Candice Breitz was interviewed by Raimar Stange, in Stange, R. (2003). *Zurich in die Kunst,* Roger & Bernard bei Zweitausendiens, Hamburg.
11. From: Rainer, A. (1971). 'Face Farces'. In: *Arnulf Rainer, Face Farces 1969-1975*. Stadtisches Museum, Abteiberg Monchengladbach, (1984). Author's Translation.
12. Debord, G. (1992). *La Societe du Spectacle,* Editions Gallimard, Paris.
13. Debord, G. *La Societe du Spectacle*, thesis 4.
14. From the short essay by Benjamin, W. (1986). 'On the Mimetic Faculty', In: Jephcott, E. (translator). *Reflections*, Schocken Books, New York. pp333-336.
15. According to Wikipedia, "*MTV (Music Television) is a cable television network, headquartered in New York City. Originally devoted to Music, MTV has*" [since the mid-90s] "*opted to show almost no music oriented programming, and has become an outlet for a variety of different television shows aimed at adolescents and young adults*". http://en.wikipedia.org visited 17/11/2006
16. 'Global capital' refers to global exchange in the sense of the global spread of capitalism and all that goes with it. Bullock, A. & Trombley, S. (ed.) (1999). 'The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought', Harper Collins Publishers, p368 defines it as follows:
"*Global capital: in economic terms, refers to the process by which the perceived advantages of Western-style capitalism have been shared with an ever-widening group of developing countries. The political origins of the process can be traced to the end of the cold war and the spread of more democratic political systems to Latin America, Eastern Europe, South Africa, the Far East and parts of the world previously untouched by free market economics. The new world order brought with it a creed of lower trade barriers; an end to exchange controls; freer movement of investment capital; and the displacement of public sector capital by the private sector. As a result there have been huge movements of capital from the richer industrial democracies to the developing countries, with private capital flows reaching some $250 billion in 1996 alone. The benefits in terms of new fast-growing markets for financial services have been enormous for global financial institutions like the American investment banks J.P. Morgan and Merrill Lynch. But there have also been collateral benefits for developing countries which have seen rapid growth, particularly in the Far East and Latin America, and more latterly in Eastern Europe. However, globalization has brought with it nasty side-effects including a degree of corruption, a widening of the gap between haves and have-nots in some developing countries, and on occasions a greater degree of financial instability. In late 1994 a financial crisis in Mexico threatened to spread to other emerging market economies, forcing the Clinton administration in Washington to marshal the biggest rescue operation in financial history*"
17. Taken from Alstatt, R. (2001). Killing Me Softly…An Interview with Candice Breitz. In: *Kunst Bulletin*, (in German), June, pp30-37. The original interview was conducted in English, and the quote has been extracted from the original English transcript.
18. The story of the Tower of Babel comes from the Bible and is found in Genesis 11:1-9. It tells how the original universal language with which man communicated was confounded and people spontaneously started speaking different languages, thereby losing all ability for mutual understanding or communication.
19. 'Blaring Icons: 'Their Meaning, Our Understanding', the title of the essay by Martin Sturm in *Candice Breitz: Cuttings,* has been taken from a noteworthy study on psychological semantics by Hans Hormann.

20. According to online Encyclopaedia Brittanica, Ludwig Wittgenstein was born in Austria in 1889 and died in England in 1951. Regarded by many as the greatest philosopher of the 20th century, his two major works were *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) and *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (1923) http://www.britannica.com, visited 1/11/2006.

21. From an interview with Candice Breitz by Magdalena Kroner. Kroner, M. (2004). *Candice Breitz: Schreien, Stottern, Singen: Das Playback des Ich: Ein Gesprach mit Magdalena Kroner*. In: *Kunstforum*, no 168, January. Cologne.

22. "*Tourette syndrome is a condition in which somebody experiences multiple tics and twitches, and utters involuntary vocal grunts and obscene speech. Full form: Gilles de la Tourette Syndrome"*. Apple Mac Electronic Dictionary, visited 10/12/06

23. "*Sandra Dee (April 23, 1942 - February 20, 2005) was an American film actress best known for her role as 'Gidget'. Born Alexandra Zuck to John and Mary Zuck, of Rusyn ancestry, in Bayonne, New Jersey, Dee was a professional model by the age of four. She progressed to television commercials and then made her first film, 'Until They Sail', in 1957. In 1958 she won a Golden Globe Award for 'Most Promising Newcomer' (along with Carolyn Jones and Diane Varsi). Her film career flourished, and she became known for her wholesome ingenue roles in such films as 'Imitation of Life', 'Gidget' and 'A Summer Place' (all in 1959). During the 1970s she took very few acting roles, but made occasional television appearances. Her 1950s persona was the inspiration for the song 'Look At Me, I'm Sandra Dee', featured in the 1972 Broadway musical 'Grease', and the 1978 film version"*. http://en.wikipedia.org visited 10/12/06.

24. When Candice Breitz was commissioned recently to make a work in Jamaica, she chose to "*deliver Bob Marley's 'Legend' album from the 'Babylon' of consumer culture and to return it to its Jamaican fans*" (Lange: 2006, *in lit*). Thirty devoted Marley fans were recruited and subsequently recorded in a professional studio, singing all the songs on the album. A 30-monitor installation was the result, comprising 30 performances which together created a complex 'portrait' of Bob Marley. *King (A Portrait of Michael Jackson)* and *Queen (A Portrait of Madonna),* re-recordings of *Thriller* and the *Immaculate Collection,* followed soon after, which were also sung by enthusiastic fans of these stars (Lange 2006, *in lit*).

25. *"Warhol's Screen Tests are revealing portraits of hundreds of different individuals, shot between 1963 and 1966. The subjects include both famous and anonymous visitors to Warhol's studio, including poet Allen Ginsberg, actor Dennis Hopper and artist Salvador Dali, along with many other diverse individuals. When asked to pose, subjects were lit and filmed by Warhol's stationary 16mm Bolex camera on silent, black and white, 100-foot rolls of film. Each Screen Test is exactly the same length, lasting only as long as the roll of film. The standard formula of subject and camera remaining almost motionless for the duration of the film, results in a 'living portrait'. The films, projected in slow motion, last 4 minutes each. Outside of Warhol's standardized process there are subtle lighting and focus variations in the Screen Tests. Jane Holzer's is in soft focus and suffused with light, creating an ethereal, hypnotic effect while Piero Heliczer's is darker in mood. In addition, there are a number of Screen Tests that diverge from this format entirely, the sitter purposely moving, gesticulating, or using props.*

These film portraits, referred to by the Hollywood term of 'screen test', were not created for the purpose of actually testing or auditioning actors. A traditional Hollywood screen test is a method used to judge whether an actor is suitable on film, and beyond that, if they are right for a specific character. Usually he or she is given a scene, a script, and instructions to perform in front of a camera. The director then watches the test to make a determination about the actor's appearance and film qualities. In these short films, Warhol creates his own cache of 'Super-stars'. Super-stars are actors interesting enough to carry a film on their own - not by playing a particular role but simply by being 'themselves'. Some of the individual screen tests were selected for Warhol's conceptual projects, such as 'Thirteen Most Beautiful Women' and 'Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys'. Screen Tests were also featured as part of the light show for his 1966 multi-media happenings, the Up-tight and the Exploding Plastic Inevitable. In these shows, The Velvet Underground and Nico performed their ear-splitting, urban-style drone music, accompanied by Super-star dancers bathed in coloured lights in front of large projections of slides and Warhol's films". http://edu.warhol.org from Google, visited 2/12/06.

Conclusion

In this research my primary focus has been on examining selected works by the artists Mona Hatoum and Candice Breitz. I have investigated the ways in which they explore paradoxical aspects of language through the medium of video installation. Both artists' works include text and/or the spoken word in their video-based artworks to reveal a concern with contradictory aspects within communication. In my discussion of Hatoum's work, I have chosen to focus mainly on her video artwork *Measures of Distance*. This work, in its reflection on concepts of emotional and geographical closeness and distance, deals with themes that are very close to the concerns I have in my own artistic practice. In my discussion of this work, I have demonstrated how language has been used by way of a complex layering of spoken word, written script and visual imagery. All of these add up to create the merging of "…*a dense weave of identity and its simultaneous undoing*…", as Dimitrakaki puts it (1998:94). By referring to other works of Hatoum's which engage with contradictions and the interdependence of conflicting states, I have shown how Hatoum sets out to create a sense of ambiguity through her work by complicating the viewer's position. Instead of definite, tangible answers, she suggests ambivalence and ambiguity. By not fixing meaning in her work, Hatoum does not narrowly define it, preferring instead to leave it open to individual interpretation (Antoni 1998:2). Because the reading of the work is complicated, paradoxical aspects of language are further emphasized.

Through the examination of *Measures of Distance,* it becomes clear that exceptional demands are placed on communication by conditions of exile. The work speaks of separation and "*the impossibly contradictory nature of our attempts to overcome it*" (Noble 2002). In terms of the 'distance' between the two women, the families, and their places of residence – every image that suggests literal closeness – their

relationship, the close-ups of her mother, the letters and their conversation – "*also implies a gulf of separation*" (Brett:1997:56).

With all the modes of communication combining to become one in the medium of video, I have tried to foreground the finely tuned sensitivity of Hatoum's handling of the nuances of photography, writing and speech in her attempt to 'bring close'. Besides her articulation of barriers such as the screen of Arabic script and the superimposition of the Arabic and English languages, both of which are heard simultaneously, I have also pointed to another, less tangible barrier generated by the 'non-material', virtual medium of video, which is composed of rays on a monitor which coalesce to form the mere appearance of an image.

Having grown up in South Africa under the apartheid system, which deliberately used language as a means of division, I have shown Breitz's work to be strongly driven by concerns around communication and misunderstandings created by language barriers. Against the background of a Babel-like environment, I have outlined her investigations into the provocative nature of speech and language and her preoccupation with a 'common' (or 'shared') linguistic form. She uses, as raw material, what she terms 'lowest common denominator forms, like postcards, magazines, soap operas, music videos, and Hollywood movies. This, the language of the mass media, is oppressive in that it flattens local dialects and cultures, but on the other hand, is also one that people the world over understand and interact with (Beccaria 2005:19). I have demonstrated how Breitz's work critically focuses on the "*relationship between the mass media and the linguistic formation of the self*" and on the cultural construction of language (Bitterli 2001:107). She identifies an 'insatiable consumerism' as being the closest thing we have to a universal language today. I have discussed several works by Breitz to demonstrate the range of her exploration in terms of paradoxical aspects within communication.

Breitz's video installation, the *Babel Series*, presents primal language as something that is contaminated from the start, and in it she merges linguistic critique and pop culture (Hunt 2000:1, *in lit*). It draws a perceptive parallel between the early stages

of a child starting to speak and the process through which consumers absorb the common language of the global mass entertainment culture of today. In rejecting meaningful communication, clear sentences, phrases and even words, Breitz forces us to become more critically aware of language surrounding and cloaking us like a "*second skin*" (Sturm 2001:91). In *Alien* the focus shifts to the sense of alienation experienced when attempting to speak a foreign language. Here Breitz tackles the separation that is often felt as language filters through us. *Karaoke* examines the language of the love song and the merging of the attainment of language and cultural integration, or as Kroener puts it, language as a "*colonizing agent*" (2003:7). In my discussion of *Four Duets,* I have demonstrated how Breitz's trimming of love ballads to become sequences of stuttering pronouns exposes an empty core that identifies the cliché and the stereotype so typical of the contemporary pop song. Wagner notes that it points to "*the sense of absence that defines every fragile notion of given identity*" (2001:146). Finally, *Legend* is shown to examine the star/fan relationship and the way in which it charts itself in the parent/child relationship. It articulates the idea that the media have come to share the intricate job of raising us as individuals.

In closing, it may be appropriate to quote Jantjes again :

> "*In a world overwhelmed by images which stand in for reality, and in which notions of mother tongues are as false as those of racial purity, one will only get a handle on the here and now if one is prepared to undertake the incomplete and seemingly impossible task of translation. Translation is not humanity's attempt to return to Eden and re-establish the 'one voice' stability before Babel. It marks the navigation of another in-between, another beyond, where messages fall between definitions, and lose their clarity as their meanings pass from one language to another… Each work evolves the parameters of its own language, each invents images which link the visual, emotional and spatial senses to one's thought processes. The grammar of art is not about the construction of coherent sentences but the strategic placing of images into the visual domain as free subjects, verbs and adjectives whose incoherence makes fruitful cognizance*" (1998:16,17).

Chapter 4

Soft Return: My Own Practical Work.

In my own practical work I address the issue of separation and displacement as well as the attempt at communication through the use of electronic media between people separated by geographic and emotional distance. The work produced by both artists discussed above reveals a concern for and focus upon language and its effectiveness (or not) as a means of communication/connectedness, whether by means of text or verbally. My own concerns are very similar.

My reason for wanting to examine such explorations around communication and the paradox of language in artworks came about as a result of very personal experiences of trauma and loss due to close family members emigrating to Australia, the UK and USA. Face to face communication has been replaced for me by long-distance interaction via sms text messaging, email, web-cam and telephone and it is this paradoxical coexistence of barrier and immediate contact which I have explored in terms of expressing an emotional state related to the failure to connect satisfactorily. The new technology creates a dislocated context which enables personal interaction to be maintained by drawing the parties closer together, yet simultaneously it frustrates communication by way of the inability to enjoy intimate, tactile contact.

In choosing to discuss these particular artists' works, I was motivated by the way in which they seem to be concerned with the paradox of language as barrier on the one hand, and in the facilitation of communication on the other. Mona Hatoum's position of having been separated from her family and her attempts to re-connect with them reflects on notions of cultural and geographical closeness/distance, a theme which is very close to my own concerns. Her 1988 video work, *Measures of Distance,* brings into stark focus the power and at times powerlessness of language

to connect the individuals concerned. Breitz's work focuses more directly on how language relates to subjectivity and also critically investigates the relationship between the mass media and the linguistic formation of the self.

In my artworks I use words and images from cell phones and mechanical parts derived from old typewriters. I am interested in inter-personal communication processes, particularly how contemporary technology has affected these by way of sms text messages and emails which often bear only the most basic words and letters. Dysfunctional, contradictory aspects within communication intrigue me and inform my artwork. The materials I use address the concepts I am grappling with. I move between old and new modes of making where some works are hand-crafted and labour intensive and thus very tactile, while others are digitally created and far less tangible. I try to engage with these two extremes.

Moving between past and present, I have made works sourced from the components of dated black typewriters. The American artist, Susan Hiller, commented that she 're-juggles' her source material, taking fragments and making of them something different/new (Jantjes 1998:23). In a way that is what I have done – having totally dissembled these typewriters and then having reassembled the individual components by connecting them to plexiglass sheets, I have made of them something new.

My connection with typewriters is very personal and dates back to my childhood. For years my late father was General Manager of Olivetti in South Africa. He had an analytical mind and a great love for words and language and read the Shorter Oxford Dictionary for pleasure. Communication with him was difficult for me and our relationship was a stormy one. In an odd way this has informed my art as it touches on aspects of communication and its barriers. Indeed, one of the works – the first of the typewriter series that I made – is entitled: *Portrait of my Father*. The silent, dismantled typewriter and the gaps between the machine parts speak of absence and loss in terms of communication and connection.

While breaking down the old typewriters, I became aware of the fact that they had a long, though unknown history embedded within them. In dissecting these machines, I was looking forward towards their new arrangements, but was also always acutely aware of the past life of this machine. My mind wandered as I worked at breaking down and cleaning those wonderful old relics and I could not help but wonder what letters or documents had been typed on their keyboards in the past. One beautiful old machine still had the remains of candle wax that had dripped and run down into the machine workings. The original typewriter from which the work entitled *Underwood 1907* was made, before being dissembled, had a list of printed, though rather worn dates of manufacture, still visible in gold on the back. The most recent of these was 1907 – at that time ninety nine years previous! They are a bit like extinct creatures from a bygone era and a certain type of nostalgia clings to my associations with them.

In days long gone, when letters were hand written and manual typewriters often used, a different ethic was applied from that by which life is lived today. When a letter was written, certain conventions were adhered to and a sense of ceremony invested in the process. A letter was not customarily treated as simply a remote vehicle by which to convey a material transaction; it was the facilitator of a relationship. The evolution of the typewriter forms part of the ongoing history in the need of humankind to communicate. The development of the typewriter was the result of a desire to speed up this process and gradually a machine emerged that revolutionised the work of the writer. In the days when manual typewriters were used, a slower form of communication than that of today demanded greater reverence and respect in our manner of addressing people. The speed and intensity of pace that characterizes the current use of contemporary technology seems to be in direct opposition to the manner in which letter writing was handled in the past.

The typewriter mechanism has a very direct and close contact with the human body. The percussive strike of the key, which produces an impression on paper, causes the transferral of mental thought to become a very physical kind of experience. In fact, the typewriter could almost be regarded as a natural extension of ourselves and in

this sense it could be said to ‘describe’ a human space. This interface, but also disjuncture between the human being and the machine underlies much of my work in terms of concept. The typewriters that I have dissected and pulled apart have been rendered useless – they no longer function and have lost their life-force. They are like silenced writer’s tools, cancelled and mute.

The speed-related, instant gratification type of communication that we use today by means of sms text messaging and e-mail tends to neglect the warmth of the interpersonal connection. Misunderstandings and confusion frequently result from hastily written and much abbreviated texts. These are often quite impersonal and bear only the most basic of letters and words, indicating the communication of absolutely essential information. They routinely hold within them nothing of the reverence for relationship which generates a sense of well-being between the parties concerned. My works play throughout with ideas that have to do with contradiction and paradox. While we may long to spend time connecting with those we care about over a leisurely dinner, we hardly have a moment even to make arrangements, and so a hastily worded text message somehow serves as the facilitator for this special time of togetherness.

A series of works has been made from words gleaned from individual sms messages lifted from the virtual and translated into a physical presence by means of the twisting of coloured telephone wire. These have then been joined together to form irregular passages of script. These ‘wired’ messages foreground our manner of day-to-day communication by translating the virtual text into manual handwork. I noted down all the words of the cell phone text messages I had received over a period of about two years and then recreated selected ones by ‘drawing’ them in telephone wire. This resulted in the creation of a series of rather jumpy but very delicate passages. Twisting telephone wires into words destroys the notion of speed, as it is a very time consuming process. It also affects the visual regularity of the text, causing it to become fairly difficult to read at times. The messages I chose to work with were only those I had received via sms, i.e. they did not include my responses and the result is thus one-sided in terms of dialogue. I chose to transcribe those texts which

were a bit quirky or those that made me chuckle. Translated into wire-writing, these messages become a bit like mad knitting and are very tactile, contrasting greatly with the virtuality of the digital cell phone text. They are fairly fragile, unraveling easily, since the wire used is soft and pliable. In their awkwardness they resemble young children's first hand-writing exercises – where the letters just will not conform to the neatly spaced lines of the page. It could be said that the translation of digital text into wire slows down the message in an attempt to pin down and make more concrete the fleeting moments of everyday interpersonal communication.

Works made using digital cell phone photographs taken of family members have also been included that make reference to the fleeting moments of interconnection. My own experiences of having close family members living abroad has meant that face to face communication has been replaced for me by the use of electronic media.

The following is a short description of each work featured in the exhibition entitled:

Soft Return

Soft Return (2006) (fig 16)
Neon tubing, electrical cabling and current
820x170mm

'Soft return' is a term used by printers when referring to the beginning of a 'new line', as opposed to the first line of a 'new paragraph'. I chose to have the title of the exhibition repeated in this work which also served as an entrance point to the exhibition as a whole. Choosing a script-like font, I had the words manufactured in the form of a bright red neon sign, although in the photograph (fig 16), the colour appears to be yellow.





Fig 16: *Soft Return*. 2006
Paula Louw
Neon tubing, electrical cabling & current
820 x 170mm variable

Displayed against a red wall in the Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg, this work exuded a warm and inviting glow to the first room of my exhibition. The red also alludes to the colour of typewriter ribbon which was usually provided alongside the black ribbon and reserved for special highlighting purposes in typed text.

Messages 1-12 (2005-2006) (fig 17a, b)
Photograms
404x304mm each

This series of photographic works features wired text messages transferred to photographic paper. The wired 'text' was positioned directly onto a sheet of photographic paper which was then exposed to light and developed. In this way, the text was transformed into white script on a black ground. Each *Message* was originally sourced from a virtual/digital sms text message and re-worked in wire. Taking it a step further, by then translating the hand-made works into photographic ones, they seem to become mere traces of the original, as if they were shadows. This has to do also with the isolation of a moment of communication in time, and freezing it; which in a sense foregrounds the fleeting nature of the 'virtual' message. It plays off the old method of photographic process against the newness of the LCD screen.

Hammer (2006) (fig 18)
Collage, bitumen, pastel, paint, ink, charcoal, sticky tape on paper
1480x960mm

A mixed media drawing of a single typewriter hammer which contains painted and collaged areas. The oversized rendition of the hammer was a drawing produced in response to the dismantled typewriter parts used in some of the larger works. I had decided on using typewriter parts as subjects for my works and found that the monumentality of individual components was a direction I wished to explore.



Fig 17a: *Messages 1-12*. 2006
Paula Louw
Photograms
404 x 304mm each

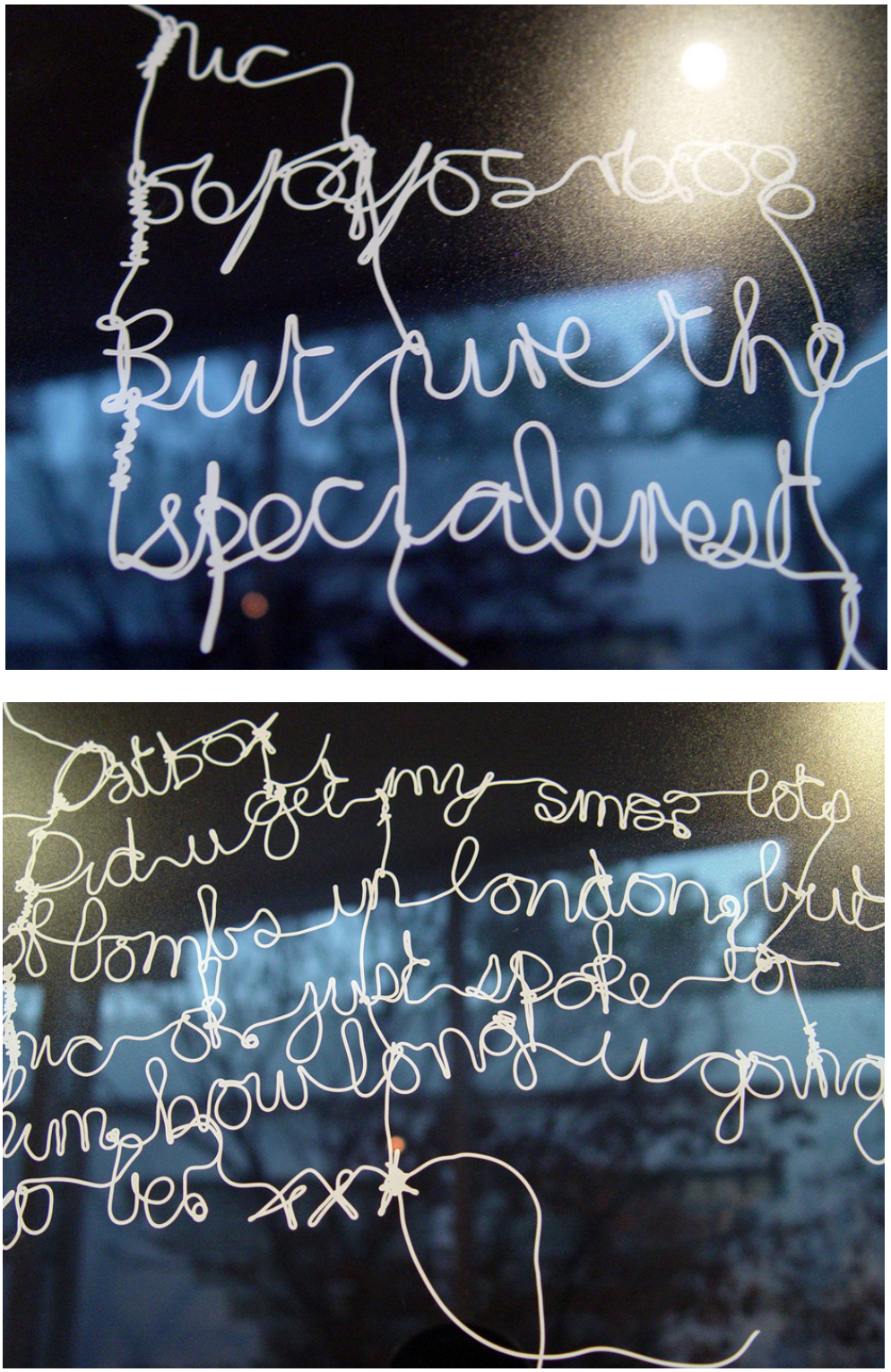


Fig 17b: *Messages*, details. 2006
Paula Louw
Photograms
404 x 304mm each



Fig 18: *Hammer*. 2006
Paula Louw
Bitumen, pastel, paint, ink, charcoal, collage, sticky tape on paper
1480 x 960mm

The word ‘hammer’, within itself, has strong associations. This adds to the impression of an almost violent act in the striking of a typewriter key to produce a typed letter on a page. There is something decisive and determinate about the function of this tool which I wished to express in this work.

Ribbon Key (2006) (fig 19a, b)
Typewriter components, trace wire, wood, paint
870x350x120mm

This work displays a black typewriter ribbon with its spooling mechanism isolated in a vertical box frame. The spooling mechanism is attached towards the top of the frame and the ribbon unravels to fall loosely from one reel to the bottom of the box frame, where it lies in a heap before continuing on its way up to its companion reel. On closer inspection, the traces of embossed lettering, as a result of many years of typing are here exposed. These traces appear be in the form of a code, rather like Morse code, with its dots and dashes (fig 19b). The tangle of ribbon at the bottom of the box is representative of the accumulation of many years of writing and communication.

Articulator (2006) (fig 20a, b)
Olivetti typewriter components, trace wire, clear plexiglass box
370x420x110mm

This free-standing work consists of a plexiglass box containing typewriter components. Set horizontally into the top of the box is a typewriter roller. Beneath this, the typewriter hammers, keys and other small parts are tightly packed and hang from a thin steel rod, which forms a supportive axis. Keys are fully isolated and can be viewed from all sides. The weight of the hammers causes the axis to droop slightly. At the same time the congested nature of the packed components suggests storage/filing, the jamming in of information/communication, as if as much as possible were being squeezed in.



Fig 19a: *Ribbon Key*. 2006
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, wood, paint
870 x 350 x 120mm



Fig 19b: *Ribbon Key*, detail. 2006.
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, wood, paint. 870 x 350 x 120mm

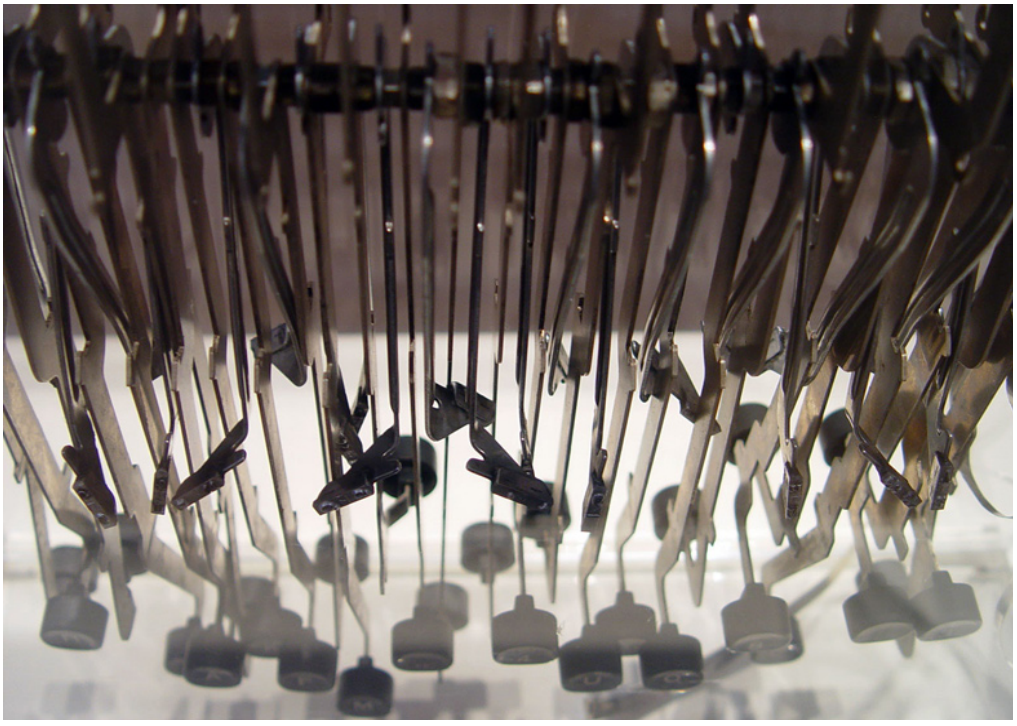


Fig 20a: *Articulator*, detail. 2006.
Paula Louw
Olivetti typewriter components, threaded rod, plexiglass. 370 x 420 x 110mm

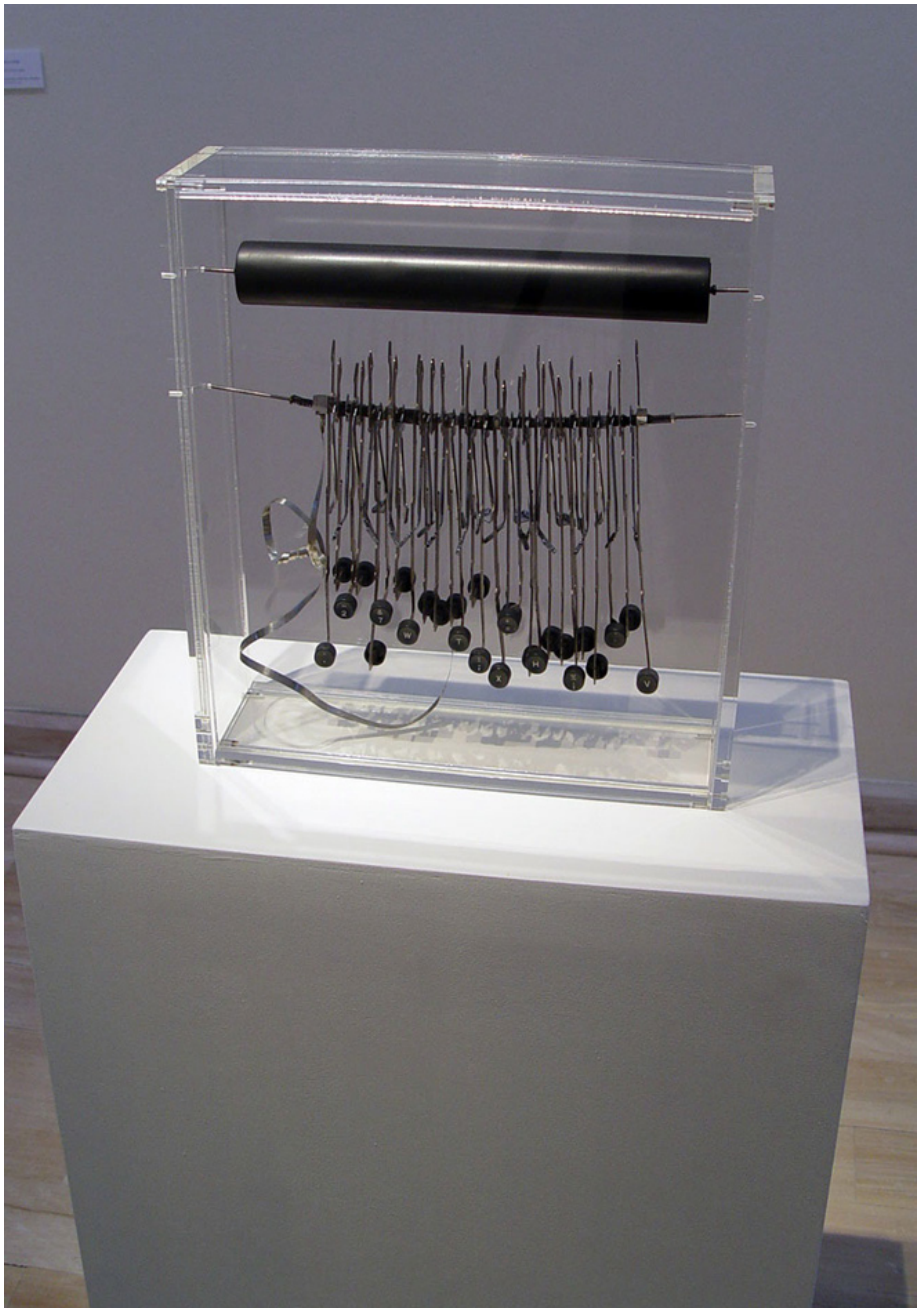


Fig 20b: *Articulator*. 2006
Paula Louw
Olivetti typewriter components, threaded rod, plexiglass
370 x 420 x 110mm

Portrait of my Father (2005) (fig 21a, b, c)
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wooden frame
1820x1200x120mm

This is the first of several large works made by using parts from old manual typewriters attached to plexiglass sheets. Typewriter machines were totally dissembled/dismantled and each and every component was then laid out, in plan format, rather like the illustrations one sees in the type of car manuals used by mechanics which show exploded views of the separate car parts. The individual elements were attached to a large plexiglass sheet by way of drilling holes in pre-assigned positions. Trace wires, wound around every mechanical part – every nut and bolt – were threaded through the holes, then caught and fixed in place at the back by means of a 'sleeve' which was finally crimped closed. Attached to a transparent base, the disarticulated typewriter thus appeared in the form of a suspended field of neatly arranged mechanical parts on the surface. Projections of the wires on the other side of the plexiglass sheet created a tactile mass of bristles that somewhat complicated the reading of the neat arrangement of parts in front. Shadows cast against the backing board of the box frame also contributed to this profusion of detail.

In their dismantled formats the typewriters are clearly 'disabled' and 'silenced' and with the absence of connection between the parts, they articulate a sense of breakdown in communication/connectivity. In their box frames they have been rendered useless and incapable of functioning. At the same time they are made to appear like categorized fragments or relics.



Fig 21a: *Portrait of my Father.* 2005
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, aluminium, wood, paint
1820 x 1200 x 120mm

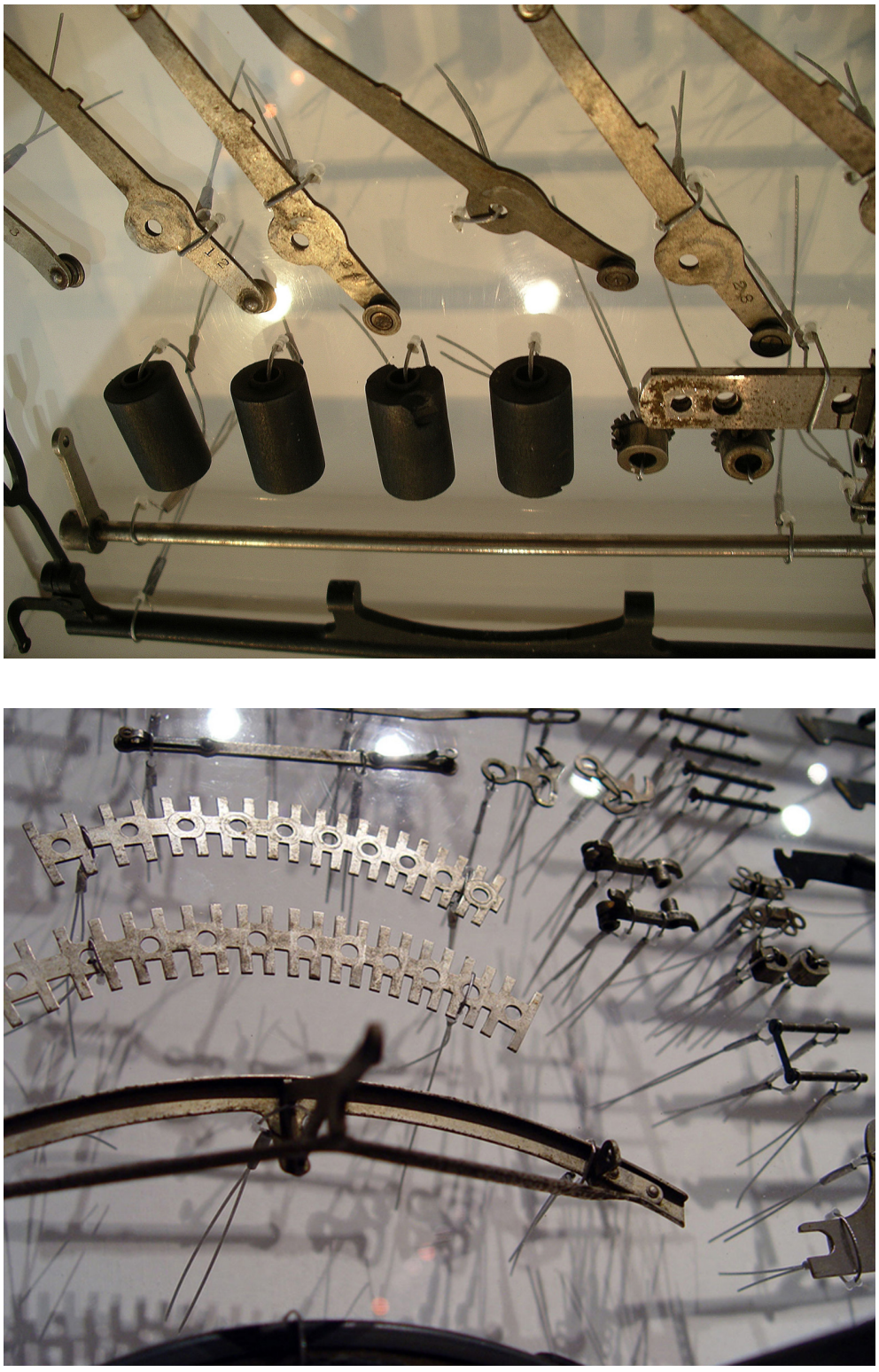


Fig 21b: *Portrait of my Father*, details. 2005
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, aluminium, wood, paint
1820 x 1200 x 120mm

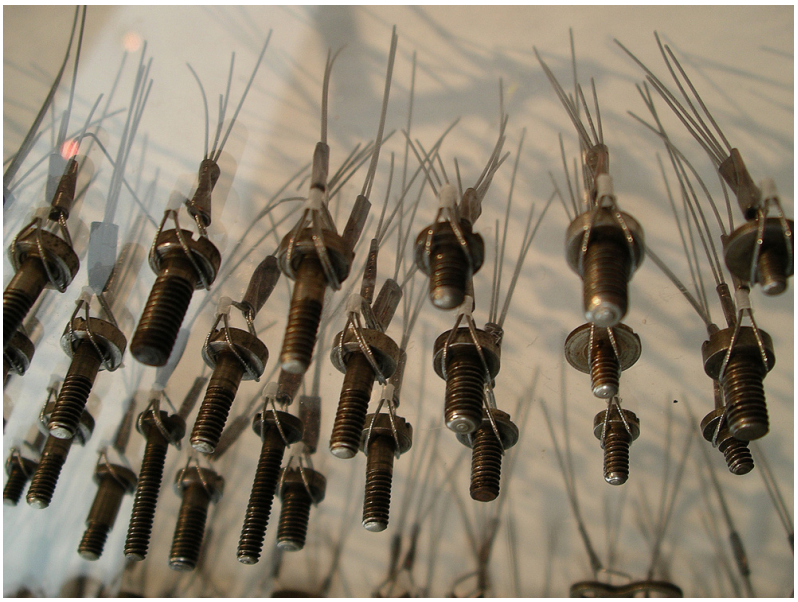




Fig 21c: *Portrait of my Father*, details. 2005
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, aluminium, wood, paint
1820 x 1200 x 120mm

Stripped Torpedo (2006) (fig 22a, b)
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wooden frame
1860x1240x120mm

This is the second of the large typewriter works. Components of a Torpedo typewriter are attached to a plexiglass sheet, much like the previously discussed work. The title, with its connotations of military warfare, suggests a disarmed weapon and even hints a little at Marcel Duchamp's famous work: *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors Even* or the so-called *Large Glass*. In format my plexiglass works do remind one somewhat of this work of Duchamp's and his notion of the 'celibate machine'. Duchamp's term refers to the machine that is beautiful because it has no function at all, or has absurd functions - machines consecrated to waste. In a similar sense my dismantled typewriters also allude to a lack of function. However, my works do not engage on a more complex level with Duchamp's concerns.

Template Study 1 (2006) (fig 23a, b)
Template Study 2 (2006) (fig 24a, b)
Bitumen, tracing paper, blue thread
1845x1200mm each

This pair of works reflect the layout of the typewriter components as they appear wired in position in the works *Portrait of my Father* and *Stripped Torpedo*. In a sense they serve somewhat like templates for these works. The shapes were painted onto smallish pieces of tracing paper with a liquid bitumen mixture. These pieces of paper were then stitched together with pale blue thread to form a larger field.

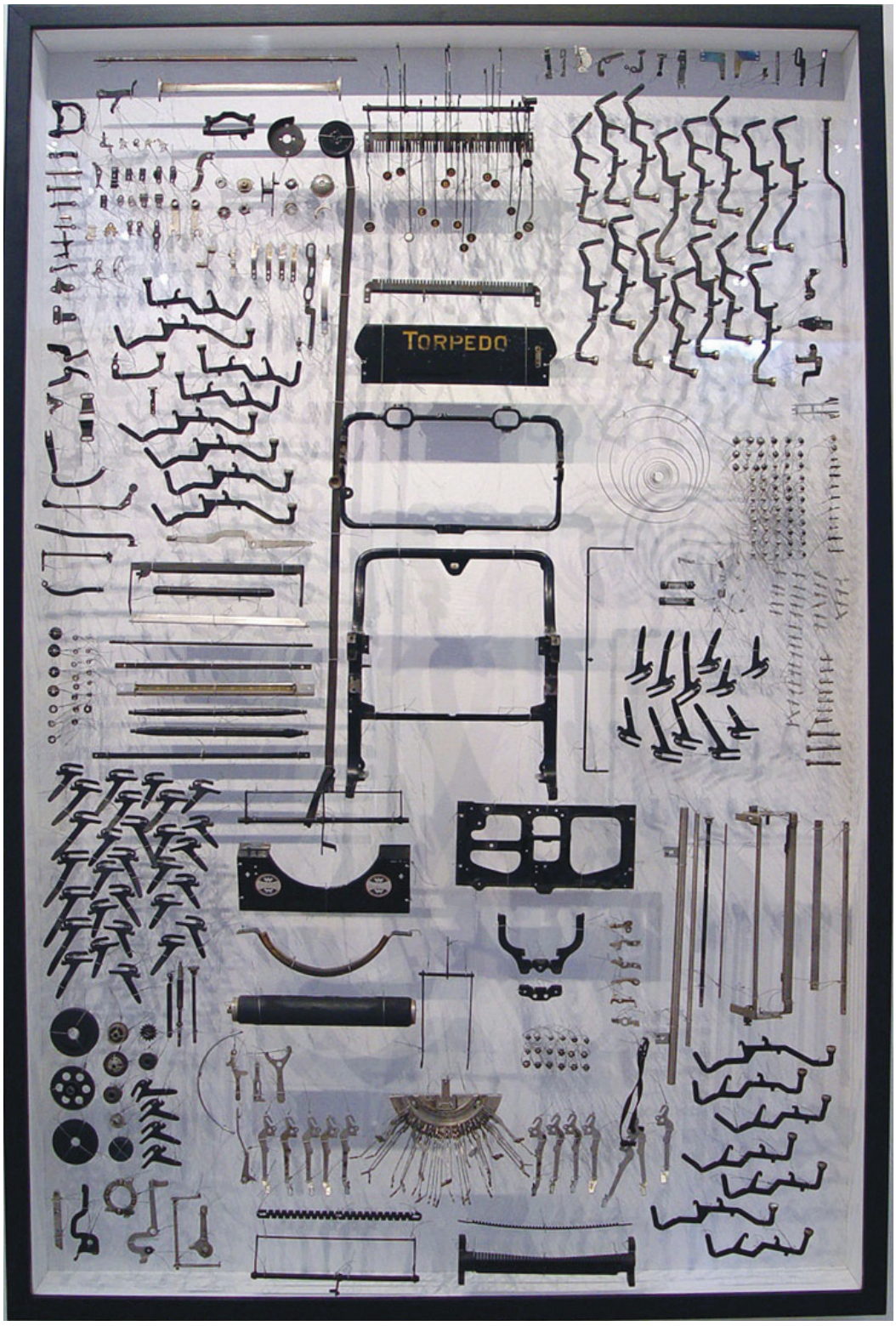


Fig 22a: *Stripped Torpedo*. 2006
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wood, paint
1860 x 1240 x 120mm



Fig 22b: *Stripped Torpedo*, detail. 2006
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wood, paint
1860 x 1240 x 120mm



Fig 23a: *Template Study 1*. 2006
Paula Louw
Tracing paper, bitumen, blue thread
1832 x 1188mm

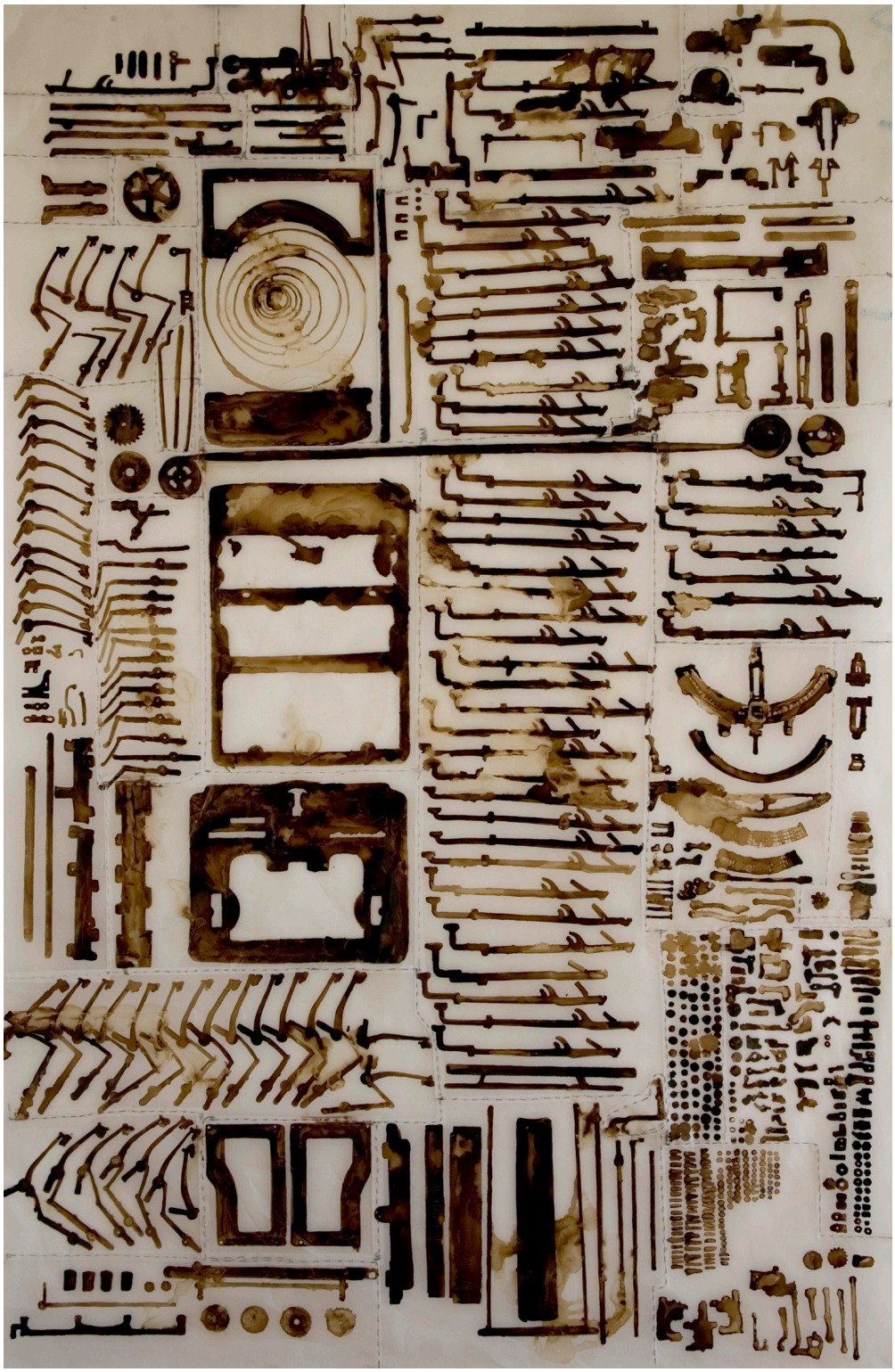


Fig 24a: *Template Study 2*. 2006
Paula Louw
Tracing paper, bitumen, blue thread
1832 x 1188mm

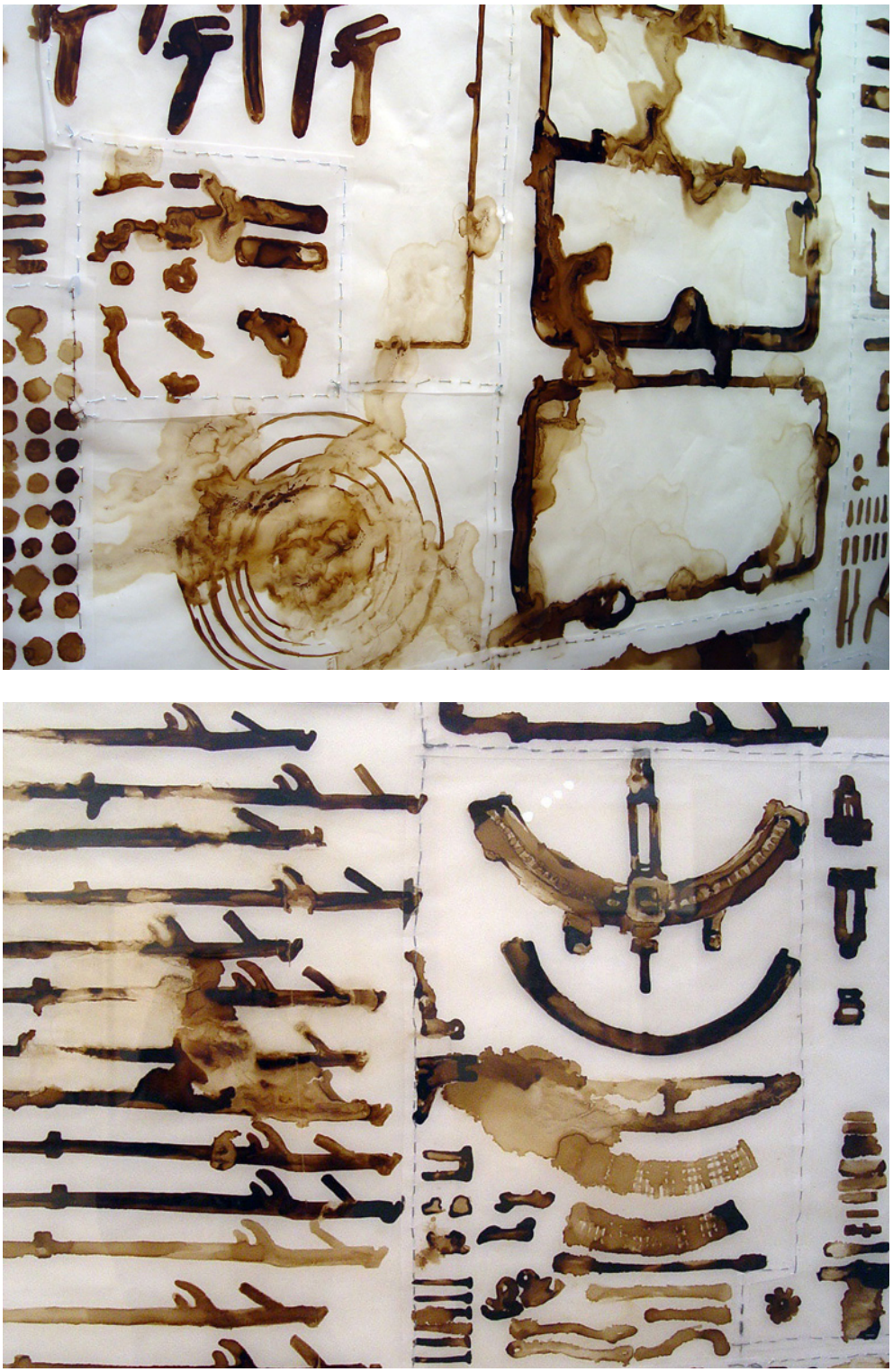


Fig 23b: *Template Study 1*, detail; Fig 24b: *Template Study 2*, detail. 2006
Paula Louw
Tracing paper, bitumen, blue thread
1832 x 1188mm each

1956 (2006) (fig 25a, b, c)
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wooden frame
1340x690x120mm

The third typewriter work using dissembled components. *1956,* together with its companion piece, *Underwood 1907*, is somewhat smaller and more compact than the previously discussed pair. Whereas with the earlier two I had dissembled mechanical parts and re-attached them directly as mostly individual parts, this work has the keys of the typewriter reassembled to form an irregular and erratic, although non-functioning keyboard.

Underwood 1907 (2006) (fig 26a, b, c)
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass
1340x690x120mm

Similar to *1956*, the components of *Underwood 1907* are tightly packed and compact. The setting of keys and hammers creates the impression of movement by way of positioning them at various angles to suggest the striking of typewriter keys in action.

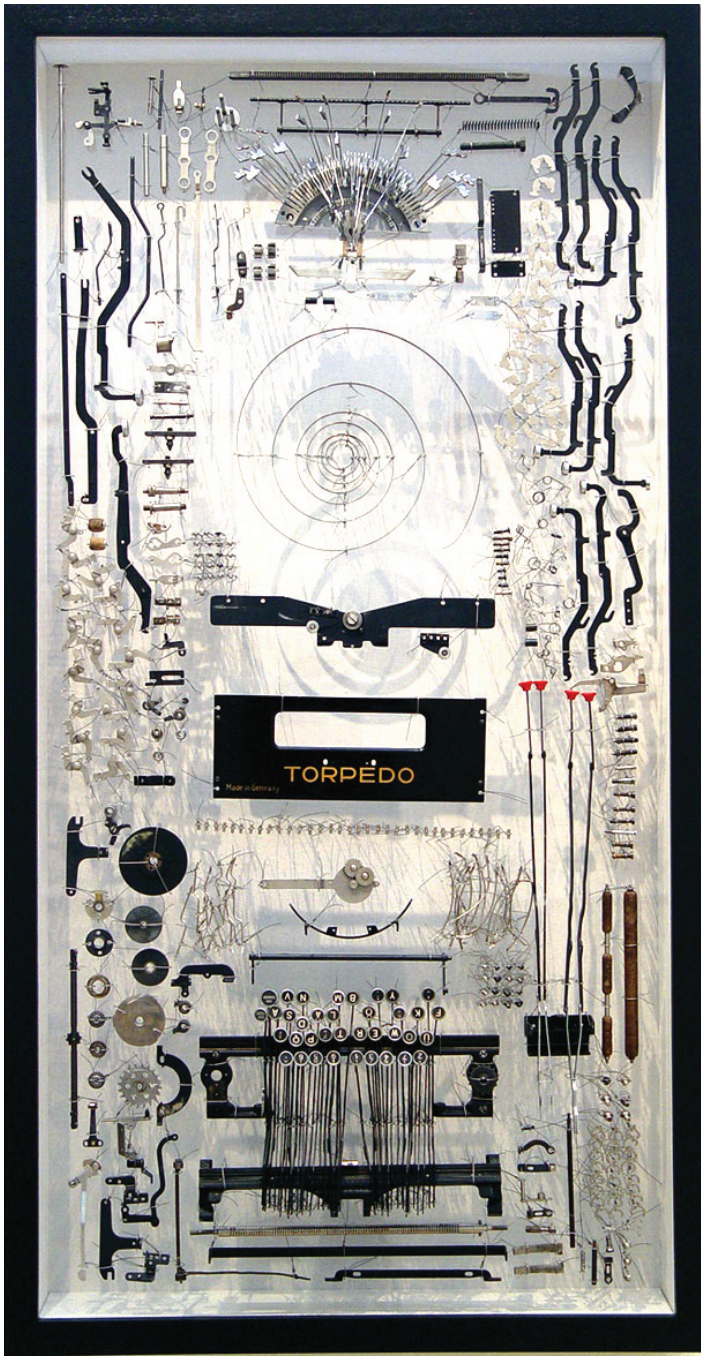


Fig 25a: *1956*. 2006
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wood, paint
1340 x 690 x 120mm

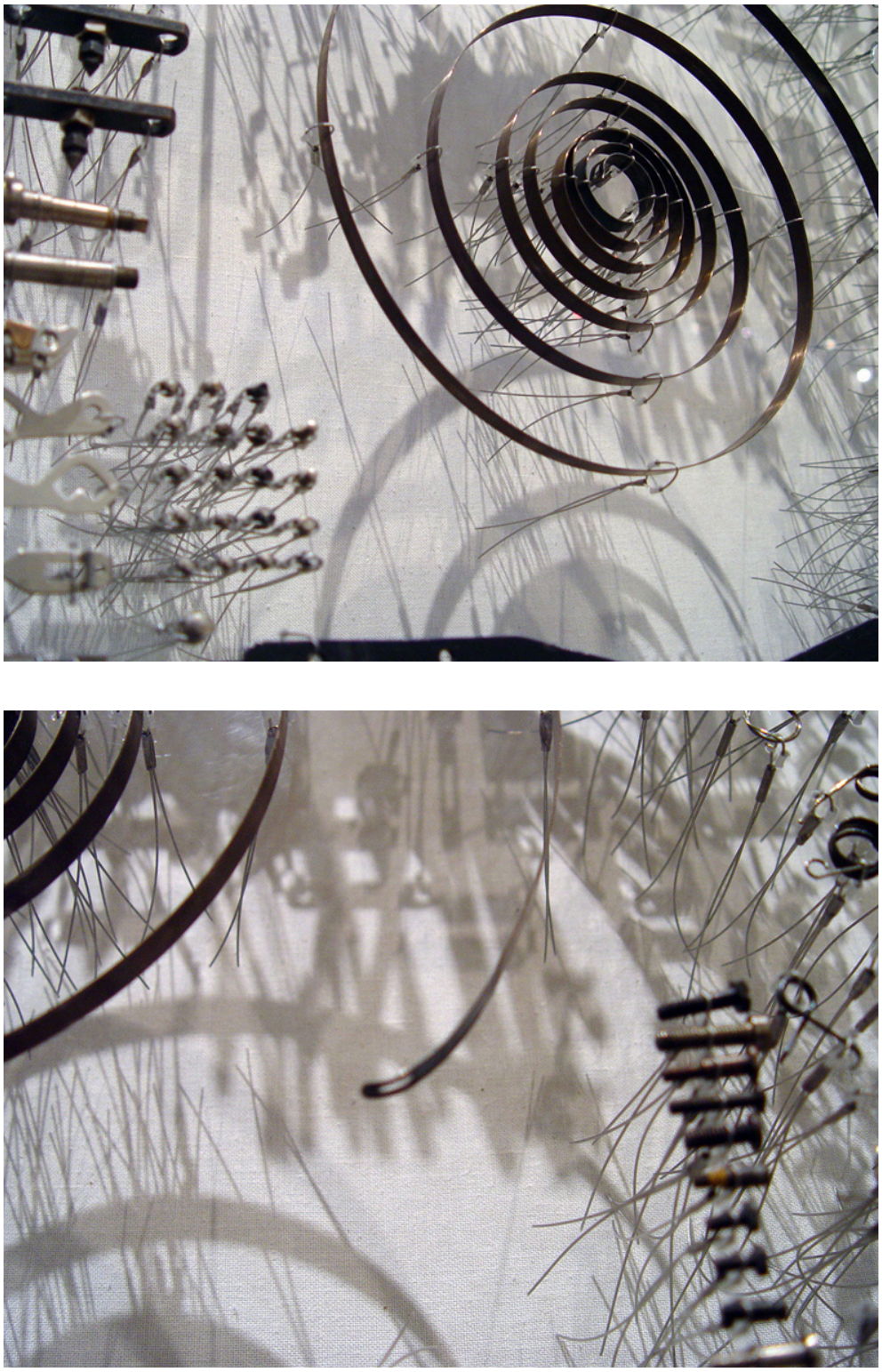


Fig 25b: *1956*, details. 2006
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wood, paint
1340 x 690 x 120mm



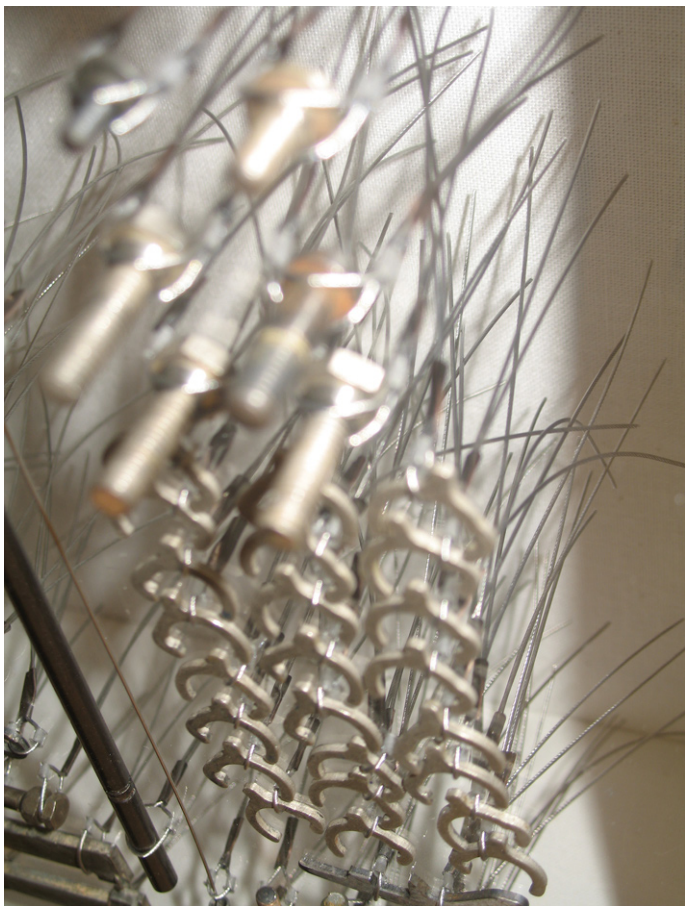


Fig 25c: *1956*, details. 2006
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wood, paint
1340 x 690 x 120mm

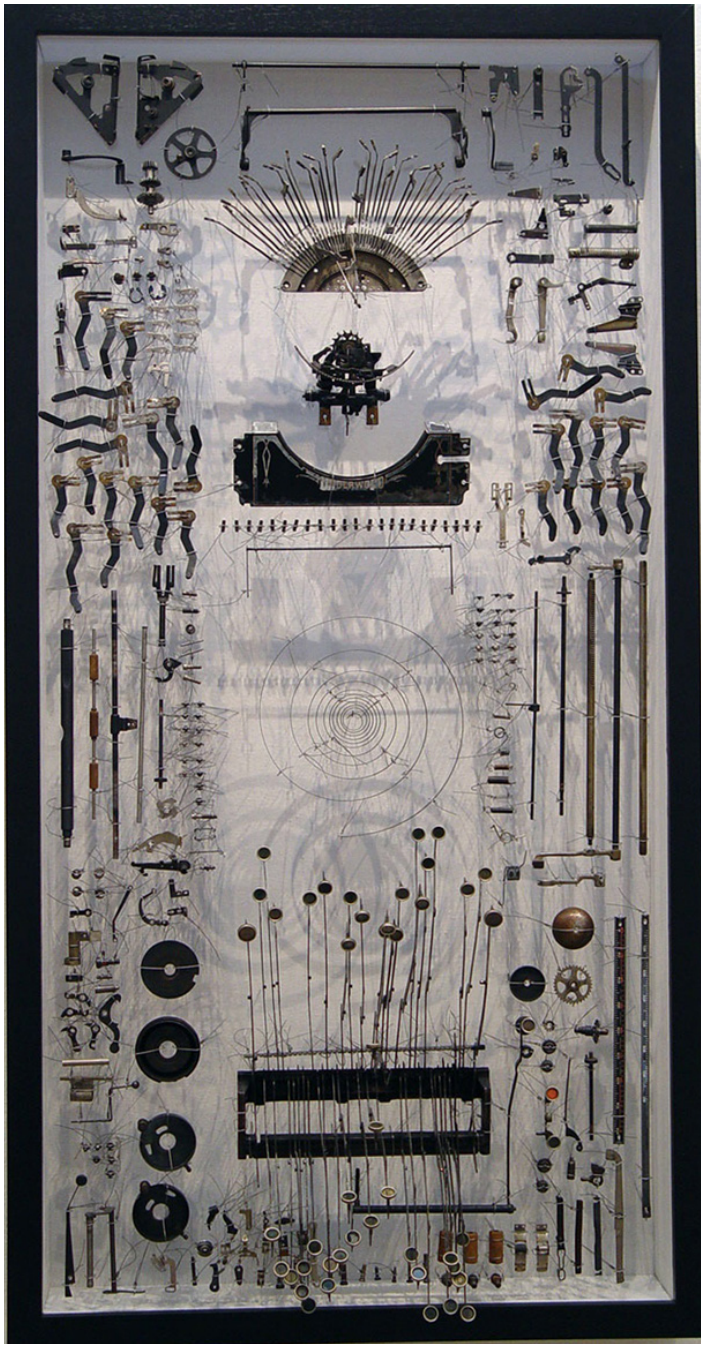


Fig 26a: *Underwood 1907*. 2006
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wood, paint
1340 x 690 x 120mm

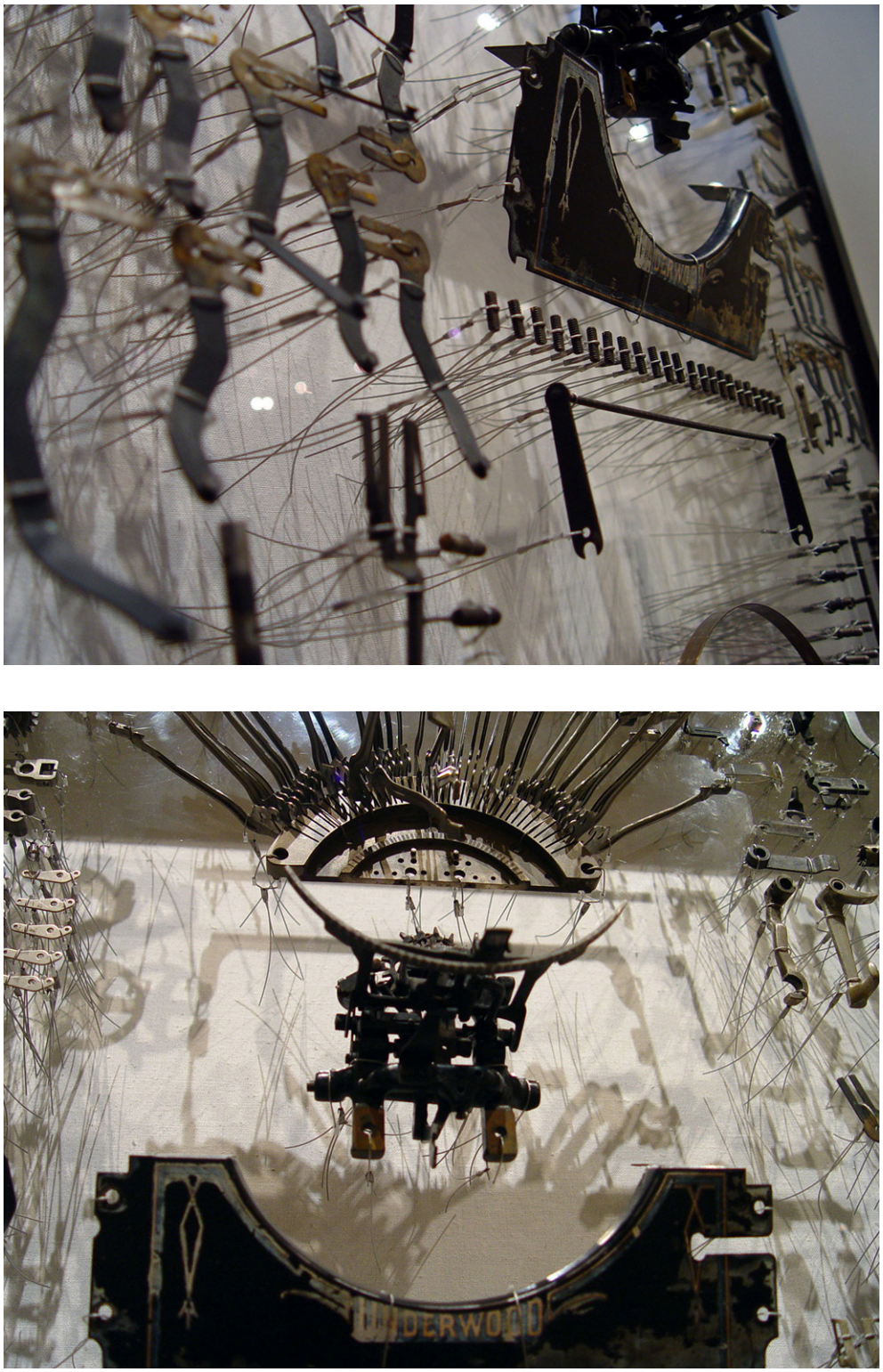
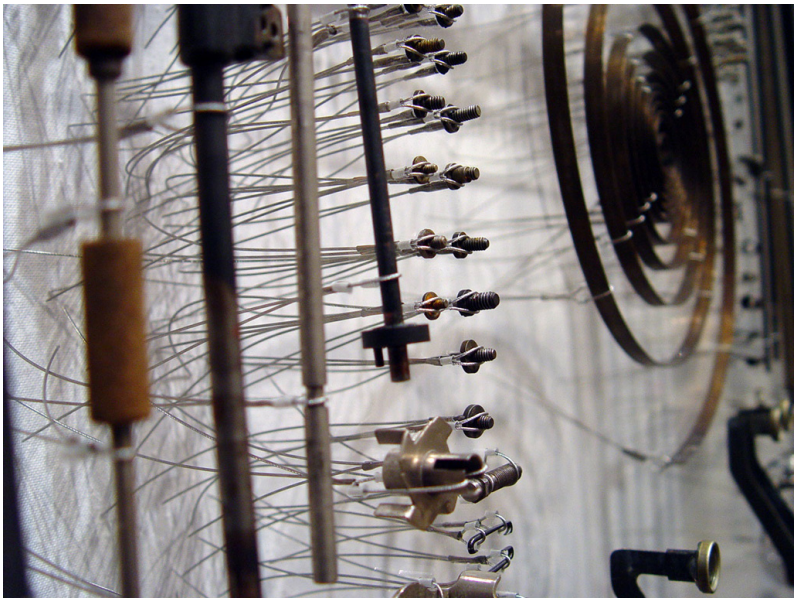


Fig 26b: *Underwood 1907*, details. 2006
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wood, paint
1340 x 690 x 120mm



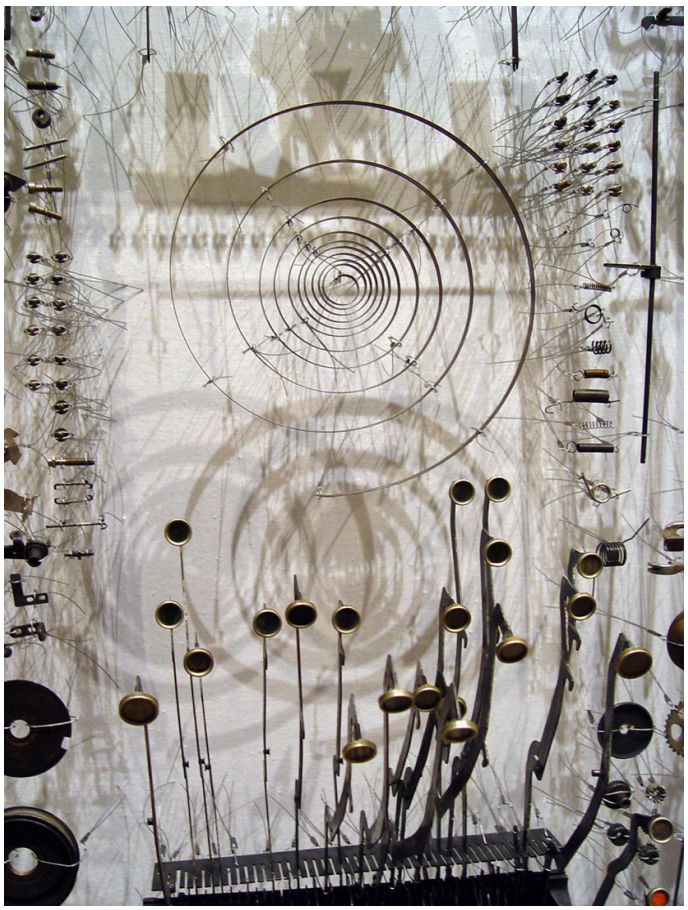


Fig 26c: *Underwood 1907*, details. 2006
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wood, paint
1340 x 690 x 120mm

Appendix 1 (2006) (fig 27a, b, c, d)
Appendix 2 (2006)
Appendix 3 (2006)
Appendix 4 (2006)
Appendix 5 (2006)
Appendix 6 (2006)
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass
400x350x100mm each

This series comprises six works; each piece having, as base, a plexiglass sheet. Onto this I neatly wired a number of very small typewriter parts such as screws, washers, bolts and nuts in grid formations. The ends of the trace wires used to secure these pieces firmly to the base were all made to project towards the back, so that the typewriter components occupied the front. Projecting behind the plexiglass like whiskers, the ends of the tied wires created tactile extensions not unlike brush formations. These unframed works were suspended by thin nylon thread in a row from a high ceiling, approximately 150mm apart and 120mm from the wall and thus appeared to be suspended in mid-air. The shadows which were cast by these works onto the wall, due to their lack of backing board or frame, created a double reading of the works and generated a sense of ambiguity.

My Dear Nicky (2006) (fig 28a, b)
Collage and mixed media on paper
1495x950mm

This work presents a collaged grid of enlarged colour photocopies of typewriter key letters. These have been torn from, or cut out of the original image from which they were taken. They appear at first glance to be randomly scattered, as indeed some are, but upon closer inspection, the viewer realizes that there are words, short phrases, telephone numbers and the like hidden in the lettering. The words, “My Dear Nicky” are among the hidden messages.

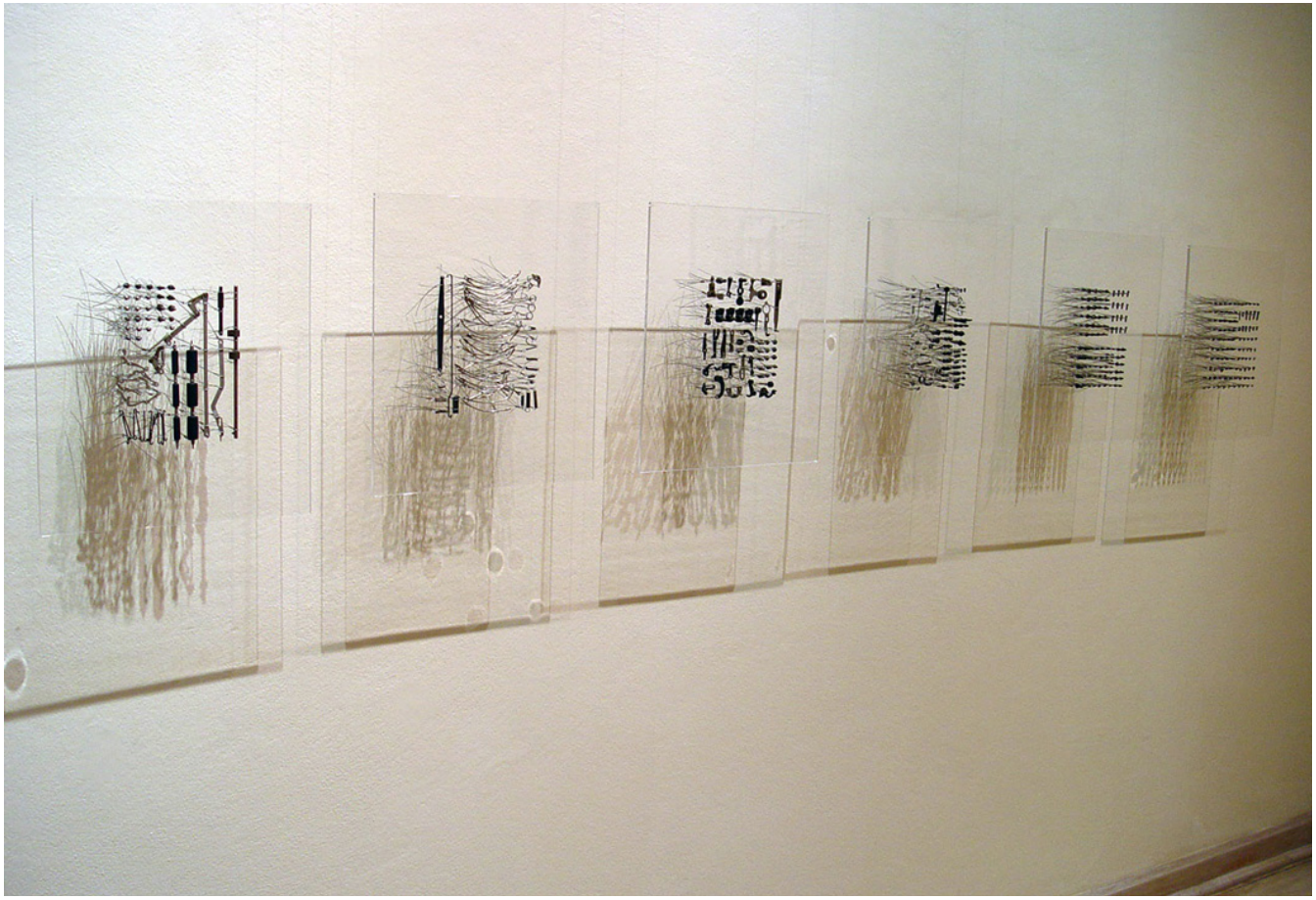


Fig 27a: *Appendix 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6*. 2006
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass
400 x 350 x 100mm each

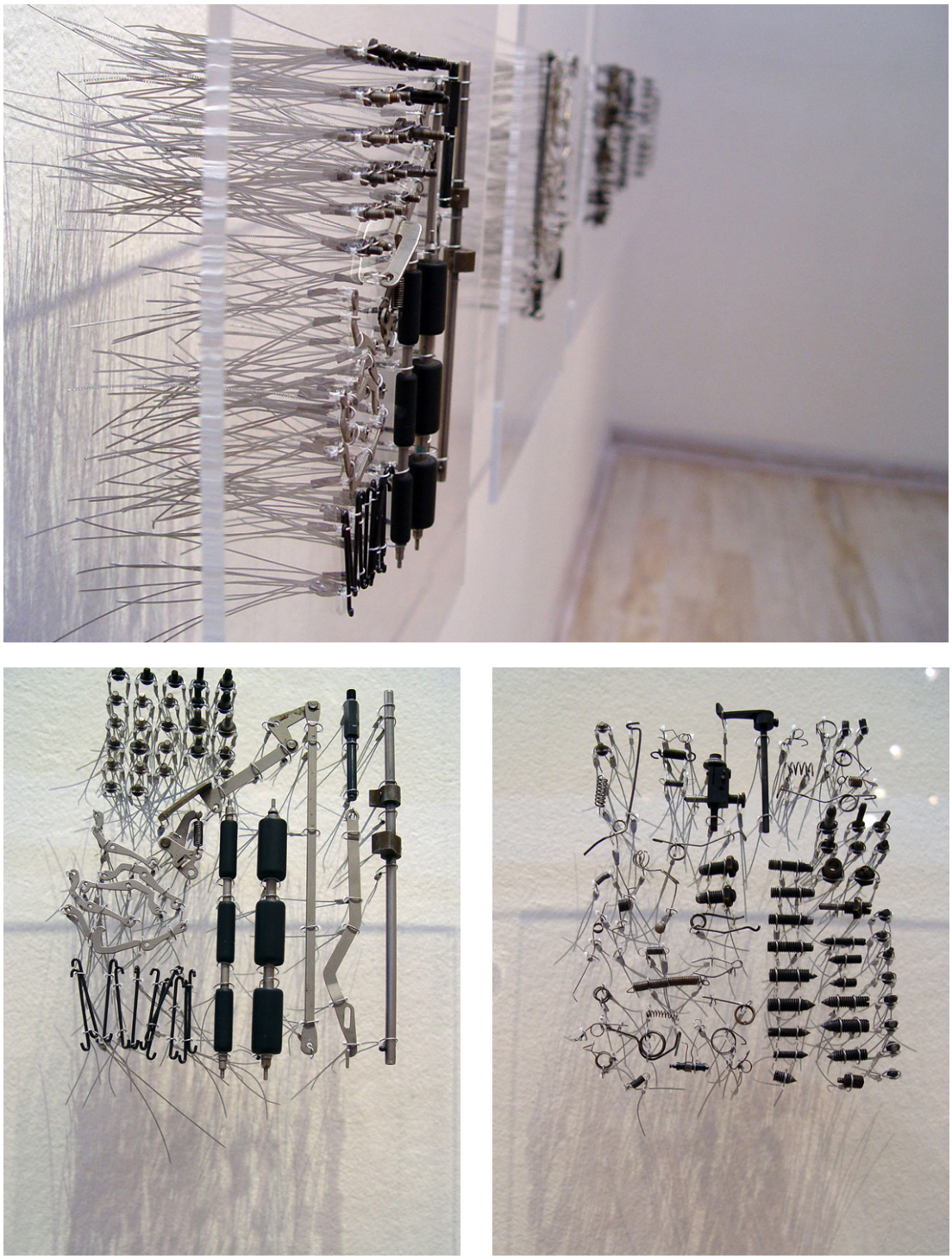


Fig 27b: *Appendix 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.*
Appendix 1; *Appendix 4*. 2006
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass
400 x 350 x 100mm each

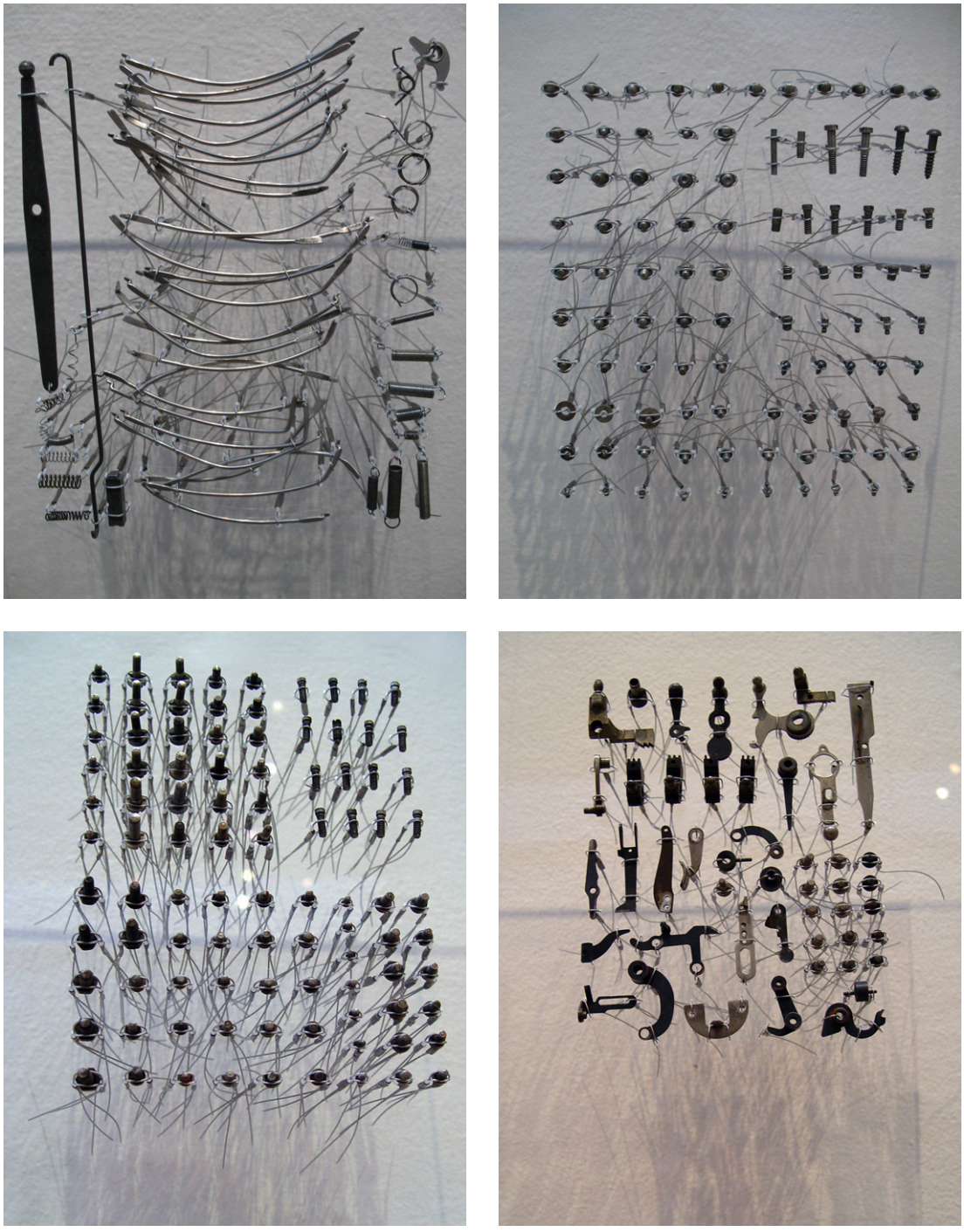


Fig 27c: *Appendix 2*; *Appendix 6*
Appendix 5; *Appendix 3*. 2006
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass
400 x 350 x 100mm each

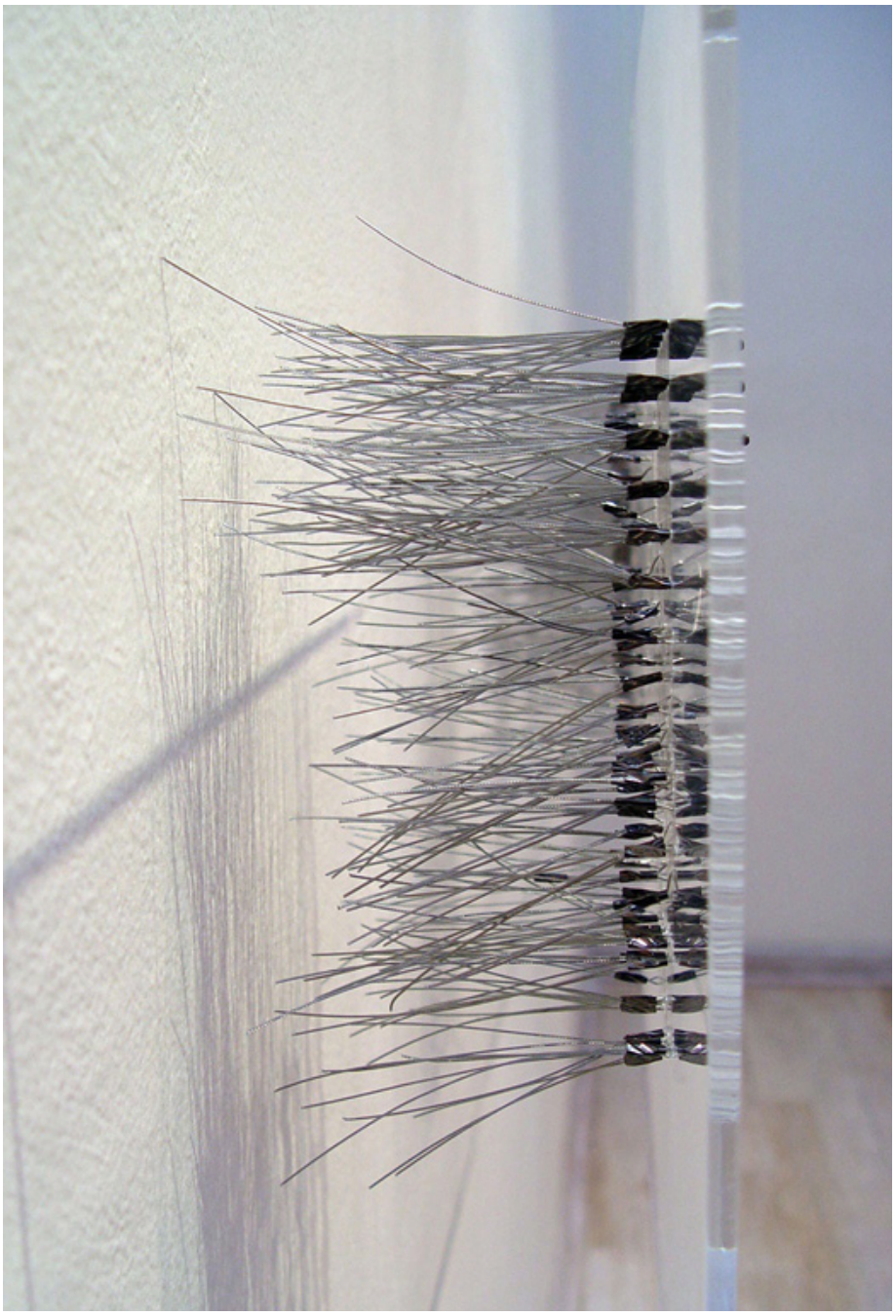


Fig 27d: *Appendix 1*. 2006
Paula Louw
Typewriter components, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass
400 x 350 x 100mm

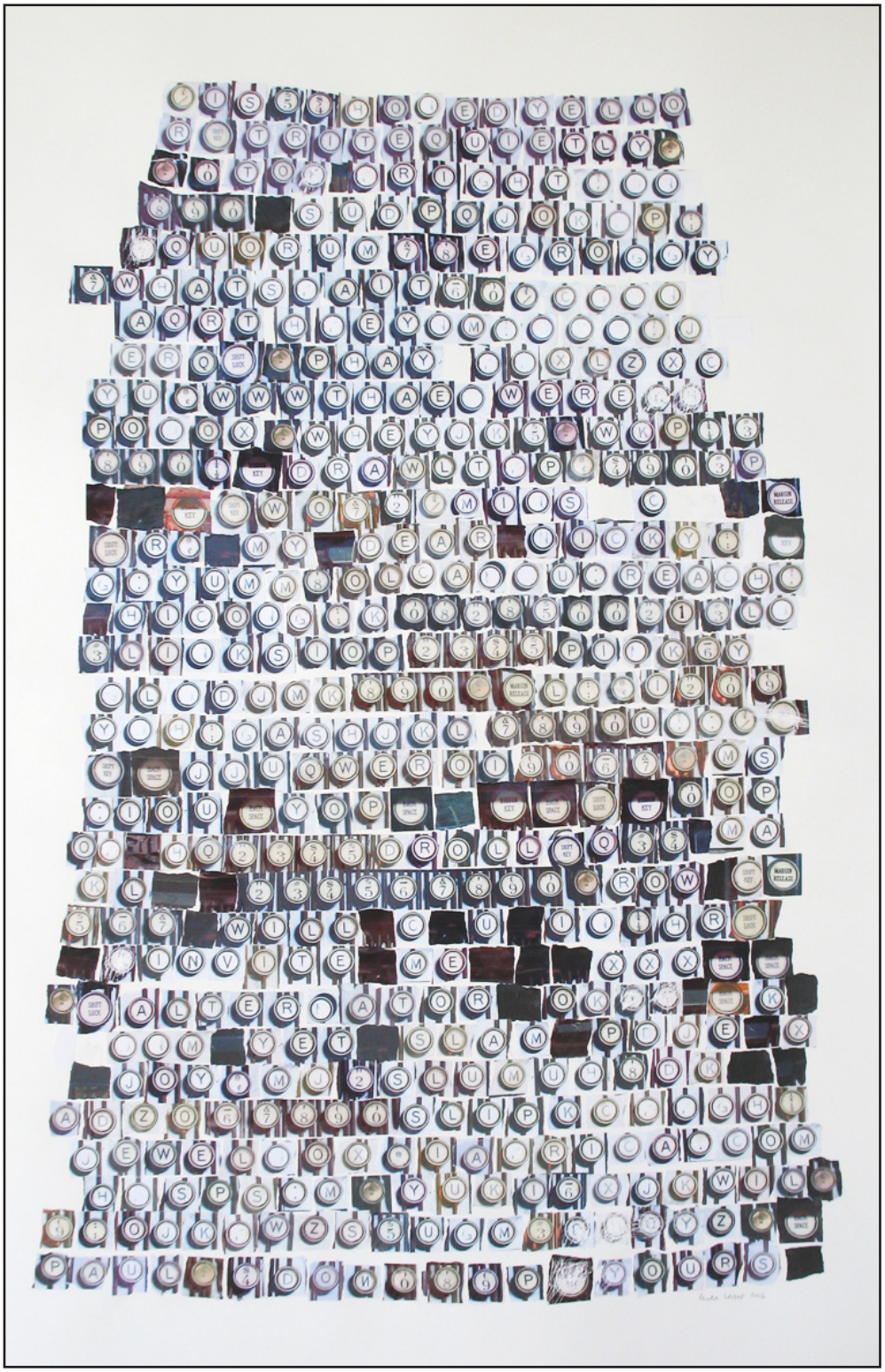


Fig. 28a: *My Dear Nicky*. 2006
Paula Louw
Collage and mixed media on paper
1495 x 950mm



Fig 28b: *My Dear Nicky*, detail. 2006
Paula Louw
Collage and mixed media on paper
1495 x 950mm

My main motivation in making this work was to engage with the tactile display of the ordered typewriter keyboard and to play this off against the selective process of formulating cohesive text. A sense of disjunction and lack of cohesion greets the viewer at first glance, but 'hidden' text reveals itself upon closer scrutiny. The work thus requires time to be deciphered.

Traces (2006) (fig 29a, b, c)
Wire
1900x1600mm variable

Suspended from the ceiling by thin nylon thread, this brightly coloured work consisting of 'hand-drawn' telephone wire messages (translated from some of my cell phone text messages) was hung approximately 120mm in front of a grey wall. Made from the fine PVC coated copper wires found inside telephone cabling, these multi-coloured text messages were formed in a script-like font and were connected to each other, not unlike the patches of a quilt. The overall appearance was of a transparent trace/lace-like screen, suspended in mid-air. The shadows of the text cast against the wall heightened the fragile nature of the net of words, creating a sense of profusion and suspension. The physicality of the work contrasts with the shadows and the fleeting nature of sms text messaging. The unevenness of the text and randomly joined patches of mainly blues, reds, blacks and whites contributed to a sense of a contingent or conditional state, something that could easily disintegrate. Being fragile and very light-weight, the piece was susceptible to air movement, and tended to move gently in the breeze. There is something ironic about using the material conductors of phone line messages to create whispy script that floats in mid-air.

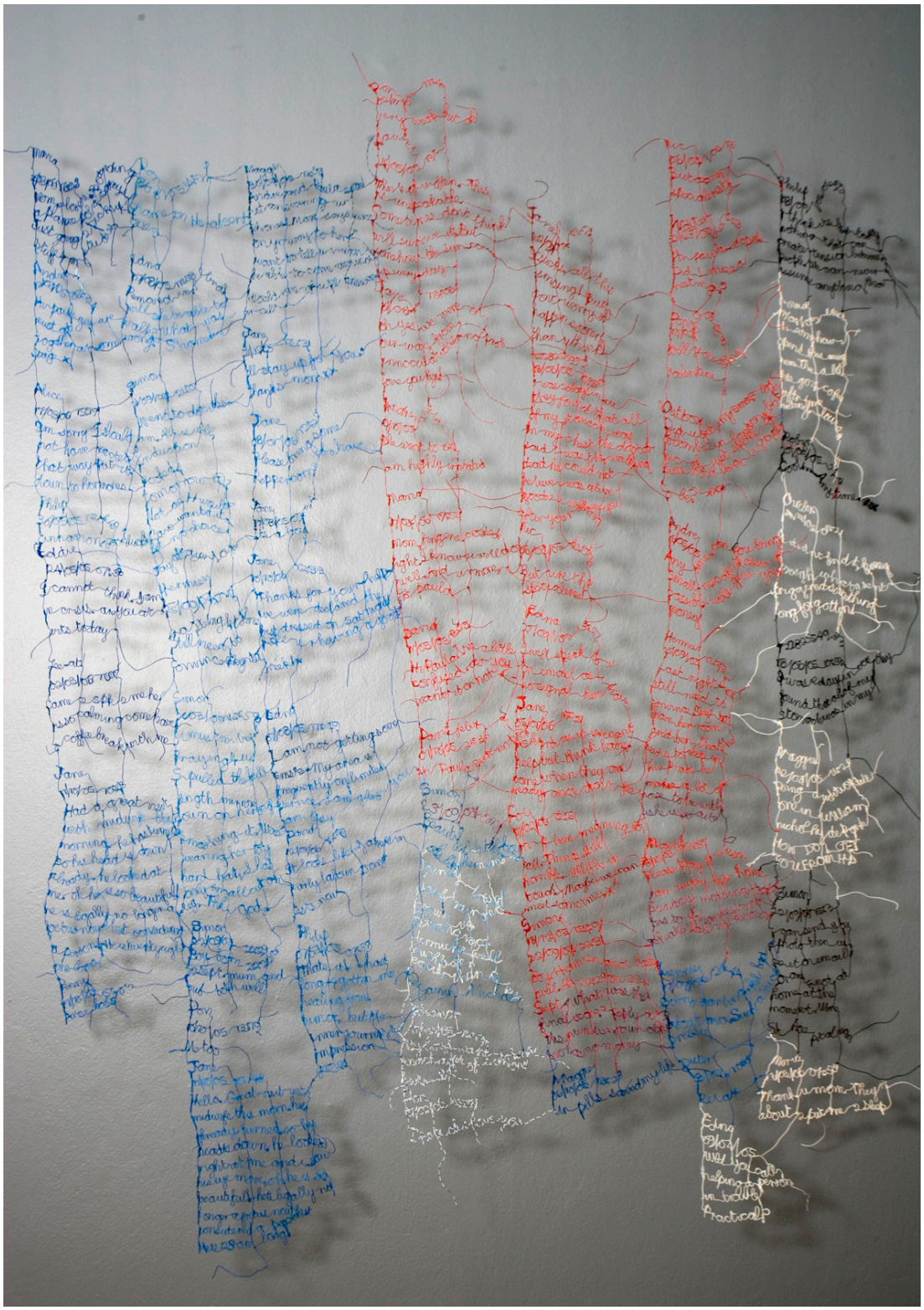
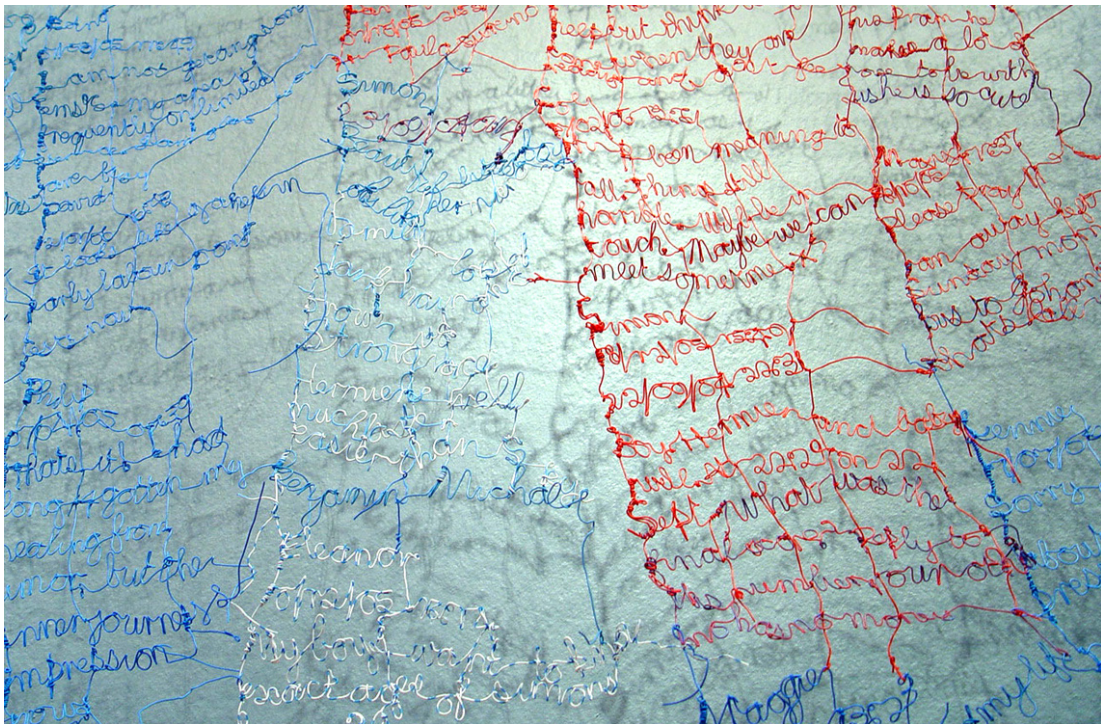


Fig 29a: *Traces*. 2006
Paula Louw
Wire
1900 x 1600mm variable



Fig 29b: *Traces*, details. 2006
Paula Louw
Wire
1900 x 1600mm variable



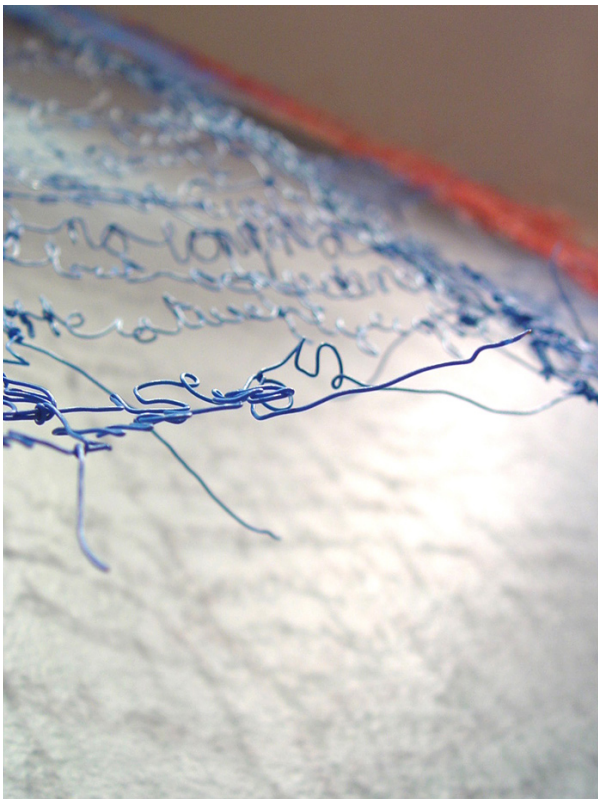


Fig 29c: *Traces*, details. 2006
Paula Louw
Wire
1900 x 1600mm variable

Nic (2005) (fig 30a, b, c)
Simon (2005)
Jane (2005)
555 (2005)
Wire, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wooden frame, varnish
430x380x100mm each

In this series of four works I make use of the contents of text messages taken from my cell phone, particularly those received from friends and family members. Unlike the wired messages in *Traces* (discussed above), in which a number of messages were co-joined, I twisted the wire into script and then placed these, as isolated messages, into frames to be read singly. In a manner similar to the dismantled typewriter parts, these wired scripts were attached to plexiglass with trace wire and box framed. They were presented as sealed behind a second plexiglass sheet. In this way a barrier was formed which effectively inhibited connection, placing the message well out of reach.

Passages 1, 2 and 3 (2006) (fig 31a, b)

Passages alludes to the many moments in relationships which, although each is brief and fleeting, collectively come together to form a cohesive whole**.**
This large work comprises three sections which I discuss as independent works below:

Passages 1 (2006)
Digital print from photographic cell phone images
1660x1200mm

This work was made by way of taking a series of small photographs (using my cell phone camera) and printing them out in grid format. It comprises 665 images, each 55x65mm in size and separated one from the other by a fine white line.



Fig 30a: *Nic*; *Jane*; *555; Simon*. 2005
Paula Louw
Wire, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wood, varnish
430 x 380 x 100mm each

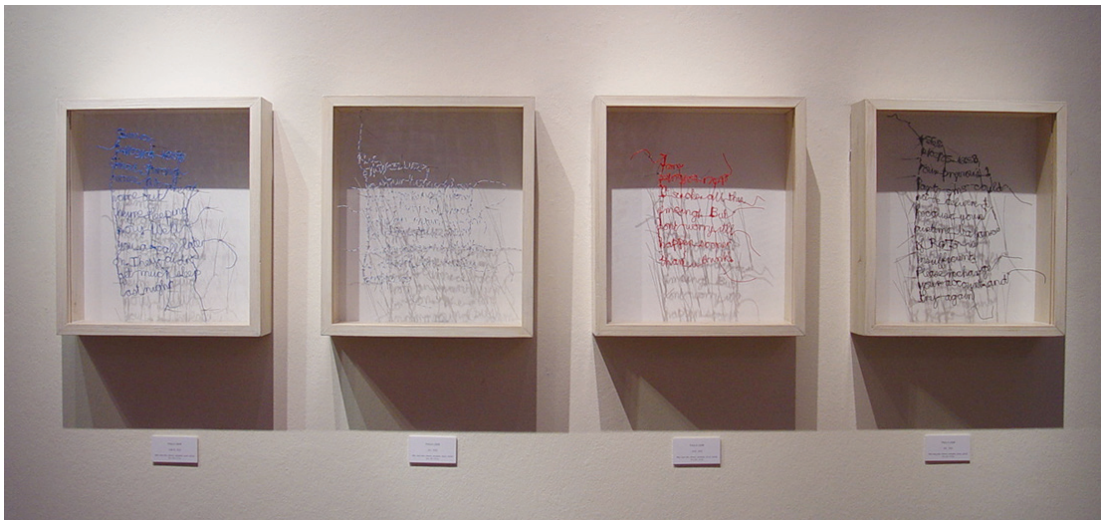


Fig 30b: *Simon; Nic; Jane; 555*. 2005
Paula Louw
Wire, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wood, varnish
430 x 380 x 100mm each

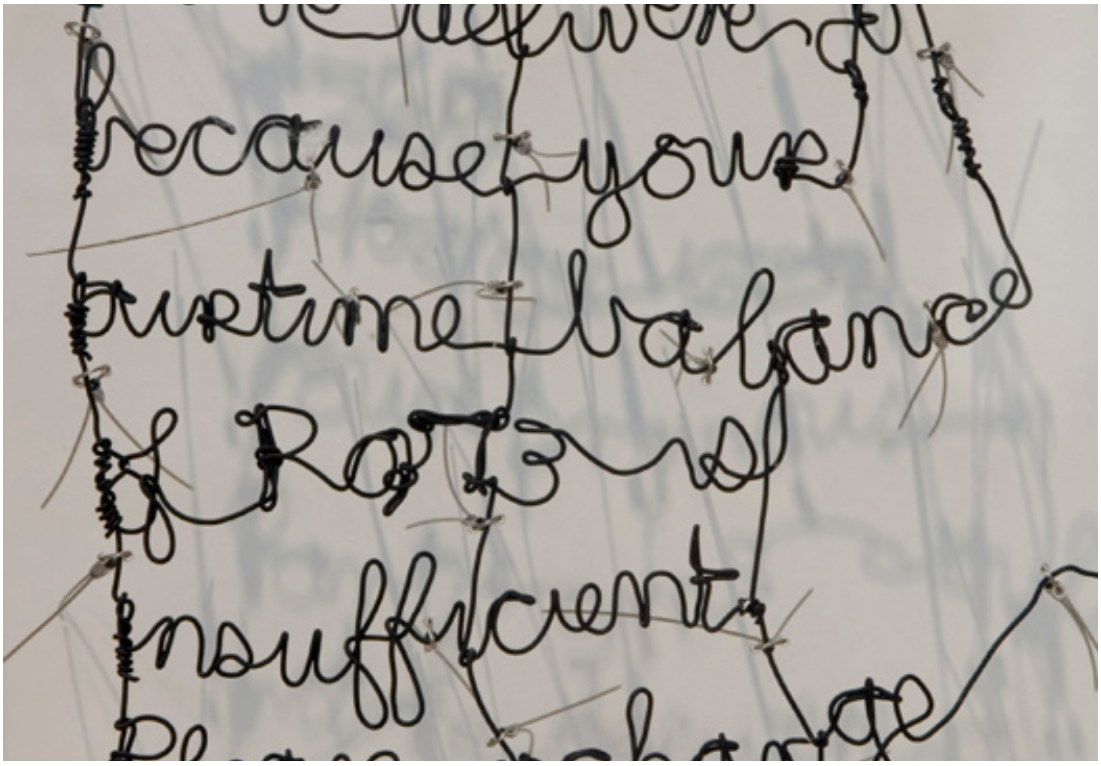


Fig 30c: *555*, detail. 2005
Paula Louw
Wire, trace wire, sleeves, plexiglass, wood, varnish
430 x 380 x 100mm

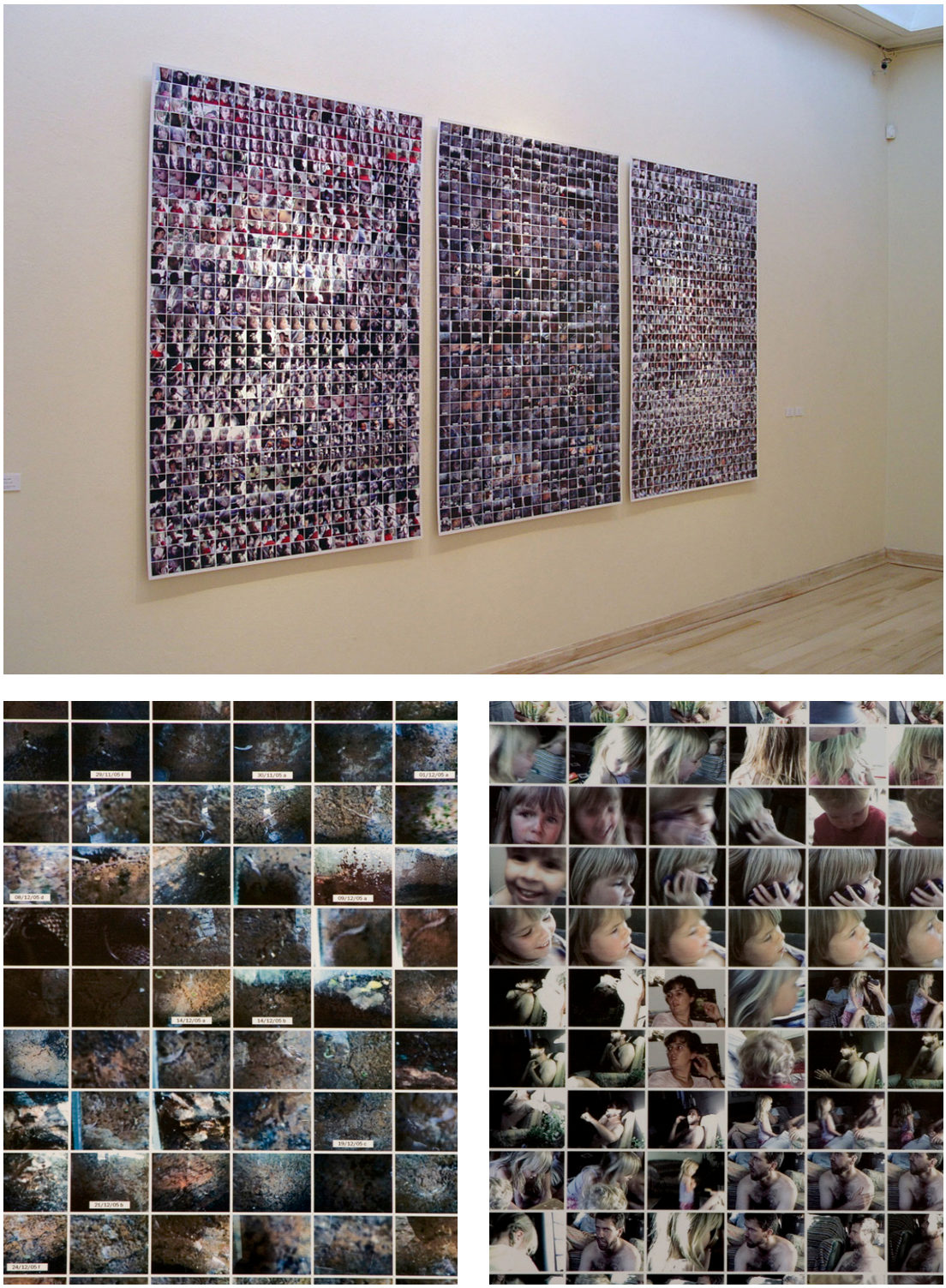


Fig 31a: *Passages 1, 2, 3*. 2006
Passages 2 and *3*, detail
Paula Louw
Digital print from cell phone images
1660 x 1200mm each



Fig 31b: *Passages 3*. 2006
Paula Louw
Digital print from cell phone images
1660 x 1200mm

The images focus largely on my son Simon and his family, who live in Perth. Their photographs were taken when they visited us in South Africa in December 2005. Taken using a low resolution, some images appear rather blurred due to movement of the subject, which gives a sense of their fleeting nature. Many were taken consecutively, i.e. in quick succession, to form small series or rows of grouped images. The completed work was printed digitally, using a satin finish, and mounted to project approximately 20mm off the wall.

Passages 2 (2006)
Digital print from photographic cell phone images
1660x1200mm

The second in this series, this work has, as source, photographic documentation from a project begun in October 2005 and photographed almost daily for a period of 6 or 7 months. A large, narrow, clear, plexiglass container, open at the top, was filled with soil and approximately 350 earthworms were included. These were fed daily, enabling them to breed and multiply. The intention was that the worms should tunnel in the soil along the clear walls, burrowing a network of channels, which would be clearly visible and easily photographed through the transparent walls. In practice, this did not happen. Although some tunnels were visible in the early morning, these closed quickly, due to watering and rain. Photographic documentation was made and dates inserted in white text onto the final work. My motivation for this work was to observe and record the creation of the interconnecting tunnels made by the worms in the soil. These became symbols for a burrowing through of obstacles or barriers, even through or across continents. The fact of my being separated from my sons by large chunks of earth, (one lives in the UK and the other in Australia) seemed naturally to prompt this concept. I placed the two family orientated panels on either side of the central (earthworm) one, with its focus on tunnels. In a sense this separated them, but at the same time paradoxically seemed to serve as a connection (through the communication channels). This work did not conform to my intentions or expectations, and so, in a way, created a parallel with the type of paradoxical issues that take place in communication, where barriers,

miscommunication and confusion often result. Often the photographs (cell phone pictures) showed reflections of my toes or fingers as I took them, in this way speaking pertinently of communication/connectivity problems or the inaccuracies experienced when emails bounce back, or other similar misconnections occur.

Passages 3 (2006)
Digital print from photographic cell phone images
1660x1200mm

The subject of the third in the series is my daughter and son-in-law before, during and after my daughter's pregnancy. Much emphasis is placed on her belly as is swells over the months and on the little newborn when he arrives. This focus points to the longing for a connection with someone who is beyond physical reach. In this way it was possible to photographically document the development of their unborn baby. The work is similar to the first in the series in that it makes reference to my documentation of precious moments in a familial context.





Lower gallery
Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg



Lower gallery
Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg



Lower gallery
Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg



Upper gallery
Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg

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