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Skin, trace and material process in selected works by Leora Farber

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Skin, Trace and Material Process in Selected Works by Leora Farber

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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 Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

Signature:----------

Date:----------

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Abstract

This paper examines skin as a medium and metaphor in the works of Leora Farber. In her work *Dis-Location/Re-Location* (2006-2008) skin forms a metaphorical site of intervention for a process of grafting where the co-joining of skin and plant points to the cultivation of a new hybrid identity. In the context of post-colonial, post apartheid South Africa Farber foregrounds hybridity in her artworks as a way of addressing the emergence of new cultural forms arising from social and cultural exchanges across ethnic borders. Through staging the act of cutting and sewing into her own skin and documenting such performances photographically, she can be seen to explore ideas around the transformation of a negotiated identity and I focus specifically on her engagement with material process in effectively realizing her ideas. I also briefly examine her concerns alongside the work of other contemporary South African artists engaged with ideas around skin and trace in a post apartheid context. In her photographic series *Aleorosa* (2005-2007) and *The Ties that Bind Her* (2005-2007) I examine how she portrays the role of Bertha Marks to reflect on bodily inscriptions that underscore the deeply traumatic physical and psychological changes undergone in response to an alien environment. The role of staged, narrative photography is examined as part of Farber's problematising of boundaries between reality and illusion and I consider its contribution to the reading of her work in terms of her correlation of material process with visual surface and the notion of trace. Farber's project in which she portrays the body as ontologically incomplete and open to social completion also links to my own creative work in which I focus on the process of tattooing as self inflicted wounding and as an indexical marker of trauma. Through the medium of photography I examine the process of tattooing as a rite of passage whereby individuals are able to redefine themselves.

Introduction

My dissertation investigates how skin and the notion of trace have been used as a powerful metaphor through the use of material process in the works of Leora Farber. The correlation of a material process with skin and the visual surface as a signifier of a deeper struggle are particularly pertinent to the reading of her work in which she explores aspects of immigrant identity and a sense of dislocation and displacement. The premise of her exhibition *Dis-location/Re-location* (2005-2008) is how cultural identities are formed and become 'hybridised'. Her work questions the labels 'pure' and 'authentic' and makes reference to Jewish and British ancestry grafted together in an alien environment. In her *Dis-Location/Re-Location* (2006-2008) project Farber portrays human skin as soil which becomes the site for a developing plant hybrid to signify important changes, physical and psychological, in response to a foreign environment. In this research I shall specifically look at *Aleorosa* (2005-2007) and *The Ties That Bind Her* (2005-2007) which form part of the three core narratives in her exhibition *Dis-Location/ Re-Location* where she sets up the illusion of stitching an aloe into her own skin. In order to set the stage for my discussions of Farber's use of skin, trace and material process, I firstly need to introduce and contextualise the works that I will focus my attention on and sketch a background to how Farber arrived at her critical concerns around skin and trace. Observations by writers and reviewers of her work are brought in to expand on her engagement in these aspects.

The ideas for *Dis-Location/Re-Location* started when Farber decided to work with the design team Strangelove[1], Ziemek Pater and Carlo Gibson, on the *Nemesis I* and *Nemesis II* project for Brenda Schmahmann's[2] exhibition *Through the Looking Glass* (2004). In preparation for the exhibition Farber visited Strangelove and found that they were working with leather corsets which looked a lot

[1] Strangelove was formed in 2001 as a fashion design team; however, they consider themselves to be more than fashion designers, preferring to think of themselves as artists using the wearable format of clothes as their medium.
[2] Brenda Schmahmann holds a professorship at Rhodes University, Grahamstown. She wrote and published *Through the looking glass: Representations of self by South African women artists* (2004), a catalogue that accompanied the exhibition of the same title which she curated.

like human skin and were similar in their tactile qualities to the moulded wax which she was working with at the time in creating flowers and other forms by hand. The pliable dimensions of both materials (wax and leather) seemed to resonate for her as did Strangelove's idea of portraying constriction and constraint through Victorian type garments. This was not dissimilar to Farber's own interest in constraint from a feminist perspective which she had explored in her earlier work.[3] It was out of this mutual interest that the collaboration occurred for the work produced for Brenda Schmahmann's show.

The staged colour photographs in the *Nemesis (2003-4)* series reference the artificiality of the conventions of beauty imposed by a consumer society, a topic popularly explored by Western post-modernists from the 1980's onwards such as Cindy Sherman, the American photographer who is well known for her images in which she stages herself with makeup and fake body parts to parody figures in historical paintings and Orlan, the French performance artist who interrogates corporeal, medical and technological boundaries in her performances in which she combines personal theatrics and plastic surgery.

[3] Her work produced just prior to this was titled *Corpa Delicata* (meaning 'delicate, delicious bodies') and examined the female body as site of "social, ideological and sexual conflict." It was distinctive in its visual foregrounding of materiality and engaging with the idea of the dissolution of boundaries through excess (von Veh 2003:24).



Fig 1

Panel 2 of *Nemesis*, (2003-4)

In the three large images which make up this work, the artist sits in an uncomfortably restricting leather corset and full- length skirt, quietly stitching into her own arm, at least the illusion thereof (an artificial membrane was used to resemble skin). The corset also extends to Farber's arms which are partially strapped in leather and in the final stages of completion her flesh resembles a garment in the extent to which it has been stitched together. Below each image there is a narrow photographic strip of a close up view of the stitching in progress. It foregrounds the stitching into 'flesh' more closely from above, presenting it more graphically, not unlike a photo-documentation of a surgical

procedure[4]. In contrast to the cooler register of colours in the larger images above, the close up views below are much warmer in tone which further accentuates the almost inflamed looking (fake) flesh and the leather constraints around it.

The analogy between skin and fabric is disturbingly expressed in this work where Farber becomes the 'surgeon' painstakingly tailoring her own body to conform to Western constructs of femininity. The imagery implies that in much the same way that fabric can be cut and sewn, so too might skin be crafted to meet predetermined constructs of femininity (Farber, 2006:248). In an interesting analogy Farber likens the surgeon's craft of suturing to two gendered creative professions: "the seamstress (female) and the sculptor (male),"[5] the latter fashioning the body to mimic the perfect form whose image can be traced back to high art, particularly the classical and neoclassical periods (2006:248). The word craft can be interpreted in two ways; the forming of an object, in this case the body, altered according to various discourses which act on it, and secondly, it can be seen as a pejorative term indicating women's work as opposed to 'high art,' i.e. femininity becomes bound up with the idea of amateur work (von Veh, 2001:8). Craft was historically used to decorate the home, now women have to craft themselves. The fashion industry constantly presents perfect bodies for women to aspire to.[6]

Schmahmann suggests that in Nemesis Farber submits her body to rigorous self-management in an effort to meet standards of 'normality', i.e. female acquiescence and submission (2004:44). In

[4] This form of close-up is a feature that I also make use of in my own photographs and a video piece in which I examine the process of tattooing. In presenting a group of photographic portraits I also make use of different registers or a clustering of images through which I try to invoke the qualities of tattooing and its association with pain

[5] Farber explores this concept of surgeon as seamstress and sculptor in her video *Four Minor Renovations (revamp, refurbish, retouch, refine)* (2000). James Elkins notes the following about such a confluence of surgical suturing and the craft of sewing in contemporary artworks: "Suturing has found new resonances in fiber arts, where it has become entangled with the histories of sewing, crocheting, and weaving. The confluence of torturous devices to mend the body and "feminine" closures in clothes and fabrics makes an interesting field of possibilities, and contemporary art often plays the themes of domesticity and pain against one another, as in the works by Annette Messager. Her fabrics and stitched pieces are overtly domestic, but so are her hanging collections of photographs of body parts, which are reminiscent of walls hung with arrangements of family photographs. Some […] are in bodylike clumps and the strings that hold them up are like sutures as much as stitching" (1999: 115). Farber's work similarly engages these themes of domesticity and pain.

[6] This idea can now be extended to men who are also under pressure to conform to new ideals laid down by the fashion industry.

reflecting on this very first collaboration with Strangelove Farber recalls: "[t]he work was well received so we started thinking about how we could develop and expand this further and that is how *Dis-Location/Re-Location* came about" (personal communication, 16 October 2010). It was as much a material response to Strangelove's working processes as well as their engagement with similar concerns around body constriction that made Farber decide to enter into this collaborative working project.

In exploring the combination of African and European styling and materials in Strangelove's work the team questioned their own hybridity and identities as South Africans from European descent. It was whilst producing a custom made garment to explore these issues that they discovered the Sammy Marks Museum as a suitable setting for the photographic narratives for *Dis-Location/Re-Location.* It was here that Farber developed a kinship with the figure of Sammy Marks who had a similar background to her paternal grandparents who also came from Lithuania. The limited information on his wife Bertha Marks led Farber to question this woman's life at Zwartkoppies, the home of the Marks couple, which then became the basis for the themes she explores in *Dis-Location/ Re-Location* (Law-Viljoen, 2008:14)[7].

Bertha Marks came from a middle-class, Anglo-Jewish family living in Victorian England, and emigrated at the age of twenty-six with Sammy Marks to live on a remote farm 12 kilometers outside Pretoria. Sammy Marks the "The Uncrowned King of the Transvaal"[8] was born in 1844. A Lithuanian-born Jewish industrialist, he amassed a fortune through his entrepreneurial skills and close contact with the Boer elite, most notably President Kruger. The culture shock to Bertha as a young girl moving from a bustling city to an alien environment must have been enormous and it is this psychological and social adjustment which Farber investigates in her work and correlates to her own

[7] As Wendy Jacobsen notes in her catalogue essay: "The paucity of material on Bertha afforded Farber a creative space in which to explore her curiosity about how Bertha adapted to her new life in the colony, and to consider the links between her own family and Marks's history" (2007:1))
[8] Title of a book by Richard Mendelsohn

ambivalent sense of 'dis-location and dis-placement' and belonging within a Pan-African environment.

Featuring as a part of the *Dis-Location/Re-Location* exhibition in the form of a photo-documentation of the event, *A Room of Her Own* was in a sense the inaugural performance work to the *Dis-Location/Re-Location* project and was presented at the Premises Gallery, Johannesburg in August 2006, to which Farber invited a select audience. The work was made to "address the complex issues of personal, social and historical identity" (Allara, 2008:54). It was an enormous undertaking which involved stage-sets, video, sound, photography and sculptural elements and toured seven museums, ending its run at the Durban Art Gallery in September 2008. The stage set for this performance work was a replica of the salon in Sammy Marks' house in Pretoria and the constructed room was closely based on Bertha Mark's ornately decorated bedroom[9]. The walls with the view into the garden through a set of glass doors were recreated photographically and elements of it were digitally grafted together to create a seamlessly convincing view. The stage set room was reconstructed each time it moved to a new performance venue and each subsequent venue was chosen specifically for its architectural style to be as closely as possible in keeping with the British colonial influence in South Africa. For example, in Johannesburg the work was created in the colonial architectural wing of the Johannesburg Art Gallery building and similarly in Durban, the event was performed in the colonial architectural building of the Durban Art Museum. This format was followed in the other venues[10].

[9] Jacobsen comments that the stage-set installation of *A Room of Her Own* (2006) "derives from Virginia Woolf's address to Newnham and Girton Colleges at Cambridge in 1928 on the subject of Women and Literature and another important literary reference for Farber is E.M. Forster's *A Room With a View* (1908) in which the protagonist Lucy grapples with the tension between the conformity and sterility of her English upbringing and the passion and independence represented by Italy. How far, one might ask, are these literary antecedents submerged in impressions of this exhibition?"(2007:4)

[10] The Albany History Museum, Grahamstown 28 June – 27 July 2007
The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Museum, Port Elizabeth 7 August – 9 September 2007
The South African Jewish Museum, Cape Town 30 September – 15 November 2007
The US Art Gallery, Stellenbosch 16 October – 17 November 2007
The Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein 4 December 2007 – 27 January 2008
The Johannesburg Art Gallery 10 February – 13 April 2008
The Durban Art Gallery 15 May – 27 July 2008



Fig. 2

A Room of Her Own: Generation, 2006-7

On arriving in the auditorium (at the Premises Gallery in Johannesburg this was a scaffold structure in the form of tiered seating) the audience was faced with Farber dressed up as Bertha Marks, sitting to the right of the stage with her thigh exposed by way of an oval opening in her dress. This opening in the fabric of her dress recalled the surgical practice of covering the body with a window drape to expose only the area of flesh to be operated on. A video camera was focused on Farber's exposed leg to record the action of the performance and the image of this recording was simultaneously projected on a large scale TV monitor positioned to the side of the stage, allowing the audience to view an enlargement of the focal activity during the performance. This was not unlike the close-up view of the stitching featured in the *Nemesis* series and once again afforded a more graphic close-up

view of the stitching into flesh. Once the audience had settled down, a classical piano music soundtrack with a narrating voice introduced the performance. Farber sat calmly facing the audience while seemingly stitching young aloe leaves into incisions made in the flesh of her thigh. The exposed area of her thigh was in fact a surrogate piece of flesh-coloured integument, thus setting up the illusion of stitching into her own skin. As the performance of the work unfolded the set gradually began to self-destruct as sculpted wax roses attached to the floral Victorian wallpaper (somewhat camouflaged in the floral design) slid down the walls[11] and crashed to the floor like lumps of flesh. The duration of the performance was approximately thirty minutes and the final moments captured the stitching of several leaves arranged in an oval format in the integument. The melted flowers scattered on the floor created a scene of disarray compared to the restrained opening scene at the start of the performance.

Sewing was considered women's work in the Victorian era and was as such a signifier of femininity through docility and labour. In the narration recited over the music soundtrack accompanying the performance the audience heard a reading of excerpts from the letters Bertha Marks wrote to Sammy whilst he was away, leaving her in charge of the home at Zwartkoppies. Farber explains that she selected the particular quotes "because they reveal the frustration of a married Victorian woman, her loneliness, her concern for the Jewish upbringing of her children, and her ingrained colonial prejudices, attitudes and values" (Law-Viljoen, 2008:22). In the voice-over, Bertha, read by voice artist Gretha Brazelle, alludes to the social position of the family in society and the requirement for a proper Jewish upbringing for her children. This is followed by recollections of Farber's Lithuanian-born mother Friedele, who in her own voice describes her arrival in South Africa and her memories of economic and religious persecution. The narrative finishes with the recorded sounds of the immediate inner city increasing in volume until it drowns the classical piano music which underpins

[11] Bright spotlights and heating panels situated behind the wall panels of the staged setup were designed to slowly allow the flowers to melt and detach from the walls. The heaters created an increasingly stifling atmosphere in the auditorium and visitors were relieved to escape from the venue at the end of it (from accounts of the performance presented at the Premises Gallery in Johannesburg). The wax flowers were largely modelled by a group of Farber's students.

the performance, reminding the audience of the reality of their modern lives. Farber 'borrowed' her seated pose from 19th century British oil paintings which show women with lowered eyes and head bent which Parker[12] suggests "signifies subjugation, submission and modesty" (Law-Viljoen, 2008:22). However, to achieve this 'contentment', these women had to surrender to a life separate from the public world of men. The submissive pose also invites the viewer to take up the position of the voyeur[13].

Though there is a sense of tranquility and restraint about the domestic scene presented, the horror of the realization of the protagonist sewing directly into her 'skin' is all the more heightened. Robyn Sassen suggests that Farber's representation of drawing of thread through her 'own skin' is metaphorically "a suturing of three generations and three different cultures" (Law-Viljoen, 2008). This is especially relevant to my investigation of skin as a site for cross-cultural hybridity where the material process of cutting and sewing suggests the creation (or fabrication/piecing together) of a new persona. Farber becomes the visible marker of three women: Bertha Marks (nee Guttman) Friedele Kagan (Farber's mother) and herself. All three women are female, white, Jewish, and mother and wife and it is the complexities of these labels which Farber explores in her portrayal of Bertha Marks. Wendy Jacobsen comments as follows on this work:

> Bertha's letters to Sammy offer remnants of a life caught and *re*-presented in the museum that was once her home. By occupying Bertha's boudoir and garden, - inserting herself into Bertha's narrative and history – and by capturing the childhood recollections of her mother, Farber attends to a world no longer accessible. By visualizing and reliving the past, she reminds us that post-modern, post-colonial conceptions of identity are not only contingent on space, but are also continuously being performed and created (2007: 4).

The above projects being essentially collaborative work, Farber was only directly engaged in the material making of the *Cultivars* (2006-2007), a series of realistically modeled wax flowers and succulent plants presented on plinths as part of the *Dislocation/Relocation* exhibition and some of the roses which were attached to the wall for the *A Room of Her Own* performance. She noted in an

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[12] Parker, R. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine.* London: the Women's Press, 1984

[13] Voyeurism is the pleasure of looking while not being seen. The convention of depicting women as objects of the gaze and men as lookers supports John Berger's dictum, "men act and women appear" (1972:47)

interview that there were times when she missed the materiality and the making processes that had to be delegated to others in realizing this ambitious project. The cultivars were made with the use of brushes to apply colour and tone and Farber describes the process as essentially being one of painting: "I couldn't have worked that way without my training as a painter. Even though they look three-dimensional they are paintings" (personal communication, 16 October 2010). But material process was as important to her from a collaborative perspective and one which Farber found extremely rewarding in happening as a combined effort: "They bring with them their professional expertise in their field which I found enormously stimulating […] often their suggestions were fantastic" (ibid). They were able to create for Farber something which she simply could not have accomplished on her own.

The fake skin and cicatrisation marks that appear on Farber's own skin in the photographic recreations of Bertha Marks in her *Dislocation/Relocation* project were both prepared by a make-up artist who was also involved in the preliminary work for each of the photographs. Farber arranged several preparatory meetings with her make-up artist two weeks in advance of the shooting. Each photograph would be the result of a full day's work and the make-up alone could take eight hours with four hours spent on the photography. Farber recalls how everything was simulated, the intention being to get as close as possible to the actual experience, i.e. what it might be like if a plant were to grow in your arm.[14] In discussing the details of their work Farber notes that the team "had bizarre conversations like: "If the roots are growing out of the wrist would they grow along the surface or deep under the skin? What would the protrusion look like? Is it a bulge or a gaping wound?" The aloe would be prepared beforehand, the stem shaved away to give a flat surface to make the attachment to the arm simpler. Farber notes: "We had to keep thinking about skin and how a botanical plant might merge with skin in such a way that was believable" (personal communication, 16 October

[14] In 1975 Petr Stembera unsuccessfully attempted to graft a plant to his arm using normal growth hormones and grafting techniques. It was suggested that his personal art be read as a metaphor for the need for a wider social healing, […] the difficulties of assimilating the individual into the collective and of absorbing an alien culture into one's own" (Warr, 2000:126).

2010). The shooting of the plant growing out of the arm was an agonizing experience in that the arm had to be propped up for about eight hours and strapped down so that it would not move. The weight of the branch started to press down such that the arm started to swell and turn blue.

Materials used in this project would vary. A special latex/rubber was used that would wrinkle when prodded in much the same way that skin does. Creating the pearls required a sculptural approach: An impression was made in clay to obtain the negative of the surfaces of the string of pearls and then thin layers of latex were painted on one layer every day until it was thick enough. It was then glued onto the skin with particular make-up glue and masked with a special base such that the join became invisible.

It is through evoking the materiality of flesh and the presentation of a parallel material as displacing the idea of skin and flesh that Farber explores the hybridity of her personal history. As I will demonstrate later on in my research, in her work skin is not only permeable and a covering but a surface to be 'written' on or removed, further heightening the notion of displacement or dislocation which her work is so much about. She argues that the sense of dislocation which she herself feels is a state of being which many white South Africans are feeling at the moment: "I feel I no longer belong. Is this still home? How do I fit into the future? I feel as if I am being marginalized" (ibid). Farber continues: "It seems that many people do have feelings of dislocation and alienation, and trying to adjust to a new way of being can often be traumatic and difficult" (personal communication, 16 October 2010). This is very clearly one of the major themes she explores in this project which I will examine more fully later on in terms of her articulation of materiality of surface through process.

In this paper, as already pointed out, I shall specifically examine *Aleorosa* (2004-2007) and *Ties That Bind Her (2006-2007). Aloerosa* (2004-2007) formed part of the photographic component of her exhibition *Dis-Location/Re-Location* (2006-2007) presented at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (August 2006) and in a similar vein to the above-mentioned performance, explores aspects of immigrant

identity and the sense of dislocation and displacement experienced by Bertha Marks. The series was shot in the grounds of the Sammy Marks Museum outside Pretoria in the formal rose garden originally laid out by Bertha Marks. In both series we find Farber cutting and sewing into her flesh in an attempt to 'graft' Africa into her Anglicized body. Farber suggests that the cutting and sewing deliberately evoke "Victorian constraints of femininity, specifically the idea that women become accomplished needle workers" (Law-Viljoen, 2008:17). But Farber can also be seen to simultaneously subvert this idea by using needlework as a form of agency to re-negotiate the identity of a white woman in Africa.[15] She explains that "these activities are metonyms for my attempts, as a South African woman with English affiliations, to negotiate a sense of being African within a postcolonial environment" (Farber, 2005:4). The stitching and cutting into the flesh in both these series make us see the extent of the damage/inscription to the skin that Farber is prepared to endure to undergo her transformation and her scars in the form of scarification and grafts become the indexical markers of her trauma.

In the first image of the Aleorosa series, *Aleorosa: Induction* (2004-2007), it is the drop of blood that hints at the horror taking place even though the protagonist's serenity belies this and alludes to the ambiguity unfolding in this narrative.

[15] In pointing out the status of vulnerability to which women are always reduced as the receptors of the gaze, Laura Mulvey, in her seminal 1973 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* which defines the condition of the way in which women were viewed by post-war Hollywood cinema, speaks of a "sexual imbalance, [wherein] pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Geczy 2008:70).



Aleorosa: Induction, 2004-2007

Fig.3



Aleorosa: Induction (detail), 2004-7

Fig.4

As the story unfolds in *Aleorosa: Propagation* (2006-2007), we find Farber sleeping in amongst aloe plants which appear to engulf her. The aloe has taken root and is growing under the skin, however,

the inflammation around the healing wound suggests that all is not as it seems. It has not been an easy process though the transformation is now complete. The narrative changes in *Aleorosa: Efflorescence* (2006-2007) where Farber awakens from her slumber in an environment which is now barren. She moves into the grey, abandoned landscape until in *Aleorosa: Maturation I and II* (2006-2007) she lies disheveled and broken, holding the aloe that she has now ripped out of her arm.



Aleorosa: Maturation II, 2006-7

Fig.5

It is the final image in this series, *Aleorosa: Supplantation,* (2006-2007) which suggests that Farber has finally accepted her hybridity as a fraud; the bodice is left strewn on the ground with the aloe nowhere to be seen. The hint of new shoots growing all over her body affirms her transformation, her Africaness. As Farber puts it: "From the formal upright order seen in the rose garden she has become something else, she has become quite other" (personal communication, 16 October 2010). She is still alone in this vast landscape, underpinning the sense of exile and isolation but having

discarded the fake integument. Bertha is now able to accept her true nature, concealed within the boundaries of her own flesh.

In the series of photographs that follows on, namely *Ties That Bind Her* (2006-2007), Farber again uses a fake integument to conceal and camouflage and again sets up a duality that explores the visible and hidden. The scarification and stitching become the metaphor for body and skin on which the wounds and scars formed in Bertha's transformation can clearly be seen. They become the traces of the grafting of two dissimilar cultures, the purpose of which is to create a new species (to be discussed more fully in a later chapter). Her transformation in this series of images seems less traumatic. In the first scene, *Ties that Bind Her: Preservation* (2006-2007), Farber sits in front of a Victorian dressing table sewing a cameo of an English rose into her breast[16].

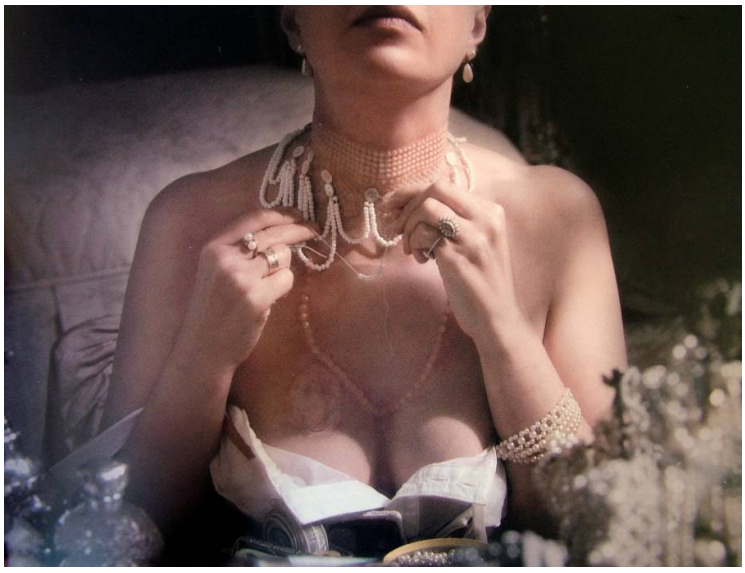


Ties that Bind Her: Preservation, 2006-7

Fig. 6

[16] Jacobsen notes that the mirror is used as a motif in several of Farber's images and quotes Virginia Woolf who, "deploring woman's lot, […] invokes the mirror": "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size." (2007:4))

This is her first act, the attachment of an English 'rose' suggesting that perhaps Bertha wants to protect herself from anything that would cause her change. Farber suggests that it was a way of preserving her "Englishness" because she was planting it in her breast next to her heart, expressing the following sentiment on behalf of Bertha: "I know I am going to lose this so I want to actually try and keep it close to my heart. I know it is going, so how can I hold on?" (Personal communication, 16 October 2010). However, as the series progresses, the string of pearls, very much a symbol of an English lady, the cameo, and pearl choker are subsumed into her body, recalling forms of West African cicatrisation in the process of entering beneath the skin. The pearls appear to have grown into beads not unlike those worn by Ndebele women as part of their traditional dress. This process of incorporation suggests that her defiance has given way to submission.



Tires that Bind Her: Reparation (detail), 2006-7

Fig.7

Ties that Bind Her: Reparation (2006-2007) sees Farber stitching African beadwork into her flesh to suggest cicatrisation. The title '*Reparation'* would imply **restoring** something to good condition. The

immigrant has, however, been obliterated and her hybrid has taken her place. Bertha is healed but not restored as there is no sign of her former self. She is repaired, but as a hybrid. She has finally surrendered to her new life in Africa and her transformation is now complete. The flesh with all its material scars and cicatrisation, serves as a crucial reminder of the pain and difficulty of grafting new values. Farber's social construction is now complete but she has displaced herself to the point of becoming a 'monstrous misfit' (Farber, 2005:6), never part of the environment, always isolated and alone. In both these photographic series the protagonist is depicted alone, evoking a sense of alienation and loss.

In the final image of this series, *Ties That Bind Her: Regeneration,* (2006-7), the healing is now complete and the regeneration of the rose into the beaded flower and beads into flesh have been dramatically enacted. The instruments which replace the accessories usually found on a dressing table are now scissors, needles and tongs, tools of torture with which Farber has performed the gruesome transformation and they remind us of the painful process of change. In a much earlier work, *Skinless* (1997), Farber used these instruments to signify medical tools used for the construction of beauty. *Skinless III* and *Skinless IV* (1997) consist of three stainless steel rectangular containers with lids, hanging on a wall with their lids open. Each contains a selection of haberdashery and medical instruments nestling on lumps of pink flesh. The juxtaposition of haberdashery with medical instruments forces the viewer to re-evaluate these objects which now create a sense of horror. In *Ties That Bind Her* the scissors are again the medical instrument nestling in amongst the innocuous toiletries but important also because they are also an essential element of the craft of needlework. Farber expands: "What I am trying to do is almost a medical practice of surgery in the body with needlework, cutting into flesh like you would cut into fabric" (personal communication, 16 October 2010). Clearly she embraces the ambiguity which arises from her alignment of needlecraft with surgical practices of suturing.

Aspects of depth and interiority are implied in the inscriptions and transformations on the subject's flesh as they form part of processes of masking. Such masking features frequently in Farber's work and is evident both in the artificial skin which she uses as a graft as well as the clothing she chooses to have made and which she herself wears for the artworks. Both are used as' tools' or 'vehicles' for the social inscription on the body. As already pointed out, Farber's clothes evoke the Victorian era and the corset becomes a metaphor for the constricting nature of the customs that the protagonist has to endure. But the strange combination of parachute fabric with cowhide used to make Farber's dress points to Bertha's hybridity and sense of dislocation and introduces fabric and animal skin as a 'second skin ' of sorts. Farber thus uses clothing as a means of interrogating women's corporeal experiences and creating a different identity.

The instability of skin as a boundary is also an important aspect to Farber's work and I will argue that her use of artificial skin creates a further ambiguity that questions the boundaries between reality and illusion by setting up the deceptive effect of grafting. In this way Farber's work can be read on two levels: On the one level she performs self-mutilation on a 'constructed' character (that of Bertha Marks), and on another level she deals with the reality of her own skin which she disguises and inscribes. Farber's performance thus becomes a masquerade, where she uses her skin, as it were, to implode the notion of a natural body. Material process thus signifies in a very particular manner in this way.

In chapter one I focus my attention on skin and how it signifies, especially around issues of gender. Part of this investigation will look at how body art and performance art has evolved and why artists have turned to this art form to critique the male gaze and to disrupt patriarchal forms of representation. In an essay titled *The Wound as Creation* (2007:1), David Le Breton notes the following on body art:

> In body art, performances constitute a discourse on the world, a questioning in the form of a personal commitment […] the artist invests his/her entire self in the action. These performances hurt the artist and shake the viewer's sense of security. They forcefully question sexual identity, body limits, physical endurance, male and female representations, sexuality, pain death, relationship to objects and to others, space, duration, etc. The body is the ultimate place for questioning the world. The intention is no longer to affirm beauty but to provoke the flesh, to turn the body inside out, to impose disgust or horror, to unleash what is repressed, to hammer home a question. The body presents itself in its materiality, and sometimes in a radical manner. The viewers are physically affected, participating in the artist's suffering or malaise (or what they imagine it to be) by proxy.

Whilst Farber is not seen to carry out actual self-mutilation but rather stages an illusion thereof, it is nevertheless necessary to consider her work in relation to body art practices, particularly as she can be similarly seen to assert the materiality of the body. Though I will not be discussing Feminism in any depth, I will discuss aspects thereof that may be pertinent to my topic, especially with regard to examining performance art as a means to challenge male stereotypes of women. I shall also consider the works of South African artists who specifically deal with the materiality of the skin in exploring the body as a site for social inscription. Here I will focus briefly on the work of Minette Vari, Paul Emmanuel and Berni Searle who question stereotypes engrained in the South Africa psyche.

Chapter two positions the *Dis-Location/Re-Location* (2006-7) project in Farber's oeuvre and looks at her performative work as a language which, like other semantic systems, is unstable and open to multiple interpretations (Warr, 2006:200). The material body as a surface for inscription is central to my investigation and the work of various theorists who focus on the body as a social subject constructed to legitimate different systems of power are briefly investigated. Grosz's depiction of the body as "amenable to social completion" will be examined as will Derrida's approach to text and its meaning (Grosz, 1994: xi). The body as marked and written upon as discussed in relation to Farber's performance can be fruitfully linked to notions of Jacques Derrida's theories of deconstruction, as I will attempt to do briefly, especially with respect to the metaphor as "an unstable network of references" (Stevens, 1996:38). Grosz[17] argues in her book *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal*

[17] Elizabeth A. Grosz is an Australian feminist academic living and working in the USA. She is known for philosophical interpretations of the work of French philosophers Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, as well as her readings of the

Feminism (1994) that subjectivity can be thought in terms other than the duality of physical/mental, mind/ body,[18] as proposed by various philosophers and feminists. She suggests that hers is not a reductionist theory precluding categories of interiority such as agency, reflection and consciousness but rather a reconfiguration which allows the body to move to the centre of analysis. It resists the temptation to attribute human nature to an individual's interior (1994: vii-ix). As she puts it: "All the effects of depth and interiority can be explained in terms of inscriptions and transformations of the subject's corporeal surface" (1994: vii). It is her argument that the body is ontologically incomplete and open to social completion. Farber's work clearly explores this idea through staging the image of the wound as an emblem of trauma. The wound is simultaneously inside and outside and in her work this is manifest in her cutting into 'flesh' (an integument) and inserting foreign objects, i.e. the plant that will grow from within and extend outwards. She can be seen to articulate this simultaneity of inside and outside as a tension between surface and depth, materiality and iconography and this is further heightened by the fact that she is staging and faking the act, thereby introducing a further tension between organic and artificial. Cicatrisation, also known as scarification, is another form of body inscription primarily used in African and Oceanic societies, where members scar their bodies to acknowledge important events and rites of passage. Farber suggests a form of cross-cultural process of cicatrisation to make reference to the transformation in Bertha Marks' life. The scarring implies not only memory but traces of events in the past. This is especially relevant if the mark is capable of being changed in any way, thus making it as uncertain and ambiguous as any written word. In a similar fashion Farber's material process of covering and disclosure creates multiple perspectives from which identity can be read. The chapter continues with a look at De Jager's notions of trace which is a central theme in Farber's work.

works of French feminists, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Michele Le Doeuff. She has mainly written on questions of corporeality and their relations to the sciences and the arts. In 2002, she became a professor of women's and gender studies at Rutgers University.

[18] In dominant discourse the human subject is seen as being made up of opposed characteristics mind/body, reason/passion, psychology/ biology. This thinking ranks two polarised terms so that one is dominant over its negative counterpart. Woman is the other that defines man.

Chapter three examines photography as a chief means of recording an otherwise ephemeral performance. I shall briefly examine narrative photography and determine the role it plays in this performance. The indexical nature of photography and practices of cicatrisation as both being practices that leave traces (photography in the sense that light leaves an 'imprint' of an image) will be discussed as will Farber's use of 'staged photography' which relies on a narrative for its reading. In its multi-layered approach it is well suited to Farber's concerns which problematise the boundaries between reality and illusion, i.e. the reality of her own skin and the illusion of the constructed character of Bertha Marks. The narrative is located in the relationships between the photographs in each series of *Aleorosa (2004-2007)* and *The Ties That Bind Her (2006-2007.)*

Finally, chapter four outlines my own concerns in my creative work which relate to practices of tattooing and the traces and experiences associated with this painful process. Tattooing, a process which incises and covers (Geyser, 2009), though not directly employed in Faber's work is nonetheless an important practice to consider alongside Farber's work which nevertheless implies it. Grosz makes clear that the tools for body engraving, which include social, surgical and disciplinary as means of signification, all mark the body in culturally specific ways (1994:18). The writing instruments, in Farber's case a knife, needle and thread, function to incise the body's blank page. Tattooing similarly links to the idea of skin as a tablet for inscription whereby individuals are able to 'redefine' themselves. The skin becomes a ground on which things are disclosed and developed. The tattoo symbolizes the trauma and transformation in social construction and becomes a mark of changing subjectivities. The increase in the popularity of tattoos in Western societies seems to indicate a need to break with socially accepted beliefs. Tattooing compares with other art forms in contemporary Western culture and as Taylor puts it: "In a world where virtual bodies seem everywhere, body art represents a sustained effort to reverse the dematerialization of art by making the body matter" (cited in Schildkrout, 2004:320). Taylor maintains that tattooing is more than just a fad "precisely because of the powerful materiality of the body" (ibid). The power of pain is to "utterly nullify the claims of the world" and as Karl Marx observed "There is only one antidote to mental

suffering, and that is physical pain" (cited in Scarry, 1985:33). It is our relation to the world through our bodies that shape our experiences, as Grosz points out: "the body is my being in the world" (1994:87). Sophie Calle's ethnographic portrayal of her subjects will be briefly examined as far as it pertains to my working method.

In my conclusion I draw together the ideas discussed in the previous chapters and reflect on my foregrounding of skin as the central focus in my research, both in Farber's work and my own. Inscriptions and markings on human skin and the trauma associated with such acts are underlined by MacCormack when he comments on skin as being "infinitely complex in [its] own capacity to make us speak our own bod[y] and [its] force on the world" (2006: 10).

Chapter 1: Materiality and Signification of Skin

Skin is the focus of this chapter. It is "the flexible, continuous caparison of our bodies, like a cloak it covers us all over. It is the oldest and the most sensitive of our organs, our first medium of communication, and our most efficient protector. "The whole body is covered by skin" (Montagu, 1986: 3). As Connors points out, the membrane between us and the world has never been so much in evidence as it is today. The visibility of its surface in all different forms of cinema and photography and its control through cosmetics and plastic surgery reflects our obsession with skin and seems to bear out James Joyce's observation that "modern man has an epidermis rather than a soul" (Connor, 2004:9).

In the South African context skin pigmentation and skin itself have played a significant role – politically, socially and culturally and it is therefore not surprising that it has featured strongly as a focus of concern in the work of many contemporary South African artists. As curator of an exhibition titled "Skin – to – Skin" (Kaunas Textile Biennale, 2007), Fiona Kirkwood goes on to say in her introduction to the exhibition:

> For centuries in South Africa – after the arrival of the white settlers in the seventeenth century – peoples' skin colour was used to define their social status, culture and ethnicity and to keep them apart. This reached its climax under the apartheid regime when people were classified as "white", "black", "coloured" or "Indian" according to the colour of their skin. The result was that black and white people could not live in the same neighbourhoods, go to the same schools, eat in the same restaurants, do the same jobs, swim in the sea together, get married or even have sex. Literally, "skin – to –skin" relationships of the most intimate kind between people of different colours were outlawed.

Skin has in fact come to mean the body itself, "it has become the definite article the 'the' of the body" (Connor, 2004:29) and concerns around skin in contemporary art practice have frequently focused on the body in performative modes of expression. It is for this reason that I would initially like to spend some time investigating how body art and performative practices involving the body in contemporary Western art have evolved and the reasons why artists such as Farber have turned to

this form of art in their preoccupation with aspects of skin. As part of this investigation I would also like to situate Farber's work in post apartheid South Africa and explore how other South African artists, also concerned with issues around skin and trace, have used material process to engage these aspects in their work.

Marshall Mcluhan[19]famously pronounced that "the medium is the message" (cited in du Preez, 2008:30). Art matters through the stuff that it is made of and it is through this materiality that the art object exists in this world. Du Preez suggests that we view art not primarily in terms of the content/iconography but rather through the materiality through which it presents itself. It follows that if one were to change the medium, the artwork's meaning would change too. The transition by several artists from working on canvas (in the 1980's and early 1990's) to engaging more directly with the body itself is pertinent to a deeper understanding of Farber's work and its development. Farber uses skin as a site to investigate her relationship with the world. She challenges the idea that the 'truth' of the self lies in the interior or that subjectivity is found inside the body (Flanagan, 2006:6), as will become evident in my discussion of her work.

In his book *The Skin Ego (1989)* Anzieu proposes three functions for the skin: as an envelope which contains and protects, as a boundary which divides inside from outside, and as a site for communicating to others, the latter being an important aspect to my investigation into tattoos (discussed more fully in chapter 4). Anzieu refers to skin as an "inscribing surface for the marks left by others" (1989:40) and in Farber's performance this aspect is highlighted through the enactment of social norms (in the case of Bertha Marks' embroidering in skin) and through the constricting nature of the clothing which is a metaphor for external pressures exerted by society.

[19] Herbert Marshall McLuhan, CC (July 21, 1911 – December 31, 1980) was a Canadian educator, philosopher, and scholar—a professor of English literature, a literary critic, a rhetorician, and a communication theorist. McLuhan's work is viewed as one of the cornerstones of the study of media theory, McLuhan is known for the expressions "the medium is the message" and "global village" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_McLuhan [15/02/2010]

Connor argues that skin is a sign of our transformability, our ability to change and adapt to new circumstances and is part of our survival:

> Flaying is always, it seems, accompanied or followed by the possibility of a re-assumption: either the assumption of another skin, or the resumption of one's own skin (through healing). The skin therefore provides a model of the self preserved through change, and also reborn through change […] The skin is the sign of our transformability, our *alentity,* so to speak, or ability to become other, as well as our identity, our ability to persist and survive in becoming other. This is why the gift of skin, to furnish disguise or transformation, is also so often a means of preservation (2004:31-32).

Farber's self-mutilation becomes the means through which she is able to construct an alternate self in an alien environment through the assumption of another skin, i.e. the idea of a healing process through the assumption of another skin. The horror in Farber's masquerade is in the cutting which marks the skin as an object and not a living thing; it exposes the vulnerability of the skin and the threat that it cannot resist external violence (Connor, 2004:65).This ability or feature of skin to disguise and transform is the means of preservation which Farber employs to construct an alternative self. The mask/fake membrane allows her become another person.

Skin is also a metaphor for a blank page on which inscription can take place and meaning or signs can be transmitted much like writing. Artist and game designer Mary Flanagan (Flanagan, Booth, 2006) points out that "skin becomes the boundary/surface, as well as the place where critical tensions between surface and depth, interior and exterior, are played out" (2006:6). Extending on this idea, Elizabeth Grosz (Grosz, 1994)[20] comments that the "effects of depth and interiority can be explained in terms of inscriptions and transformations of the subject's corporeal surface" (1994: vii) and that cultural inscriptions quite literally represent bodies and help to produce them as such. Farber plays out this notion in her suturing of two incongruent cultures to create a hybrid. She uses the materiality of the process to create skin as a site for the cultivation of a cross-cultural identity where text is inscribed in the form of grafting and cicatrisation.

[20] **Elizabeth A. Grosz** is an Australian feminist academic living and working in the USA. She has mainly written on questions of corporeality and their relations to the sciences and the arts.

For a deeper understanding of Farber's work and this particular art form involving direct engagement with the body it will be useful to sketch a brief historical overview of so-called 'body art' and performative practices involving the body which emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Western art practice, as well as to consider some critical responses to such practices that have emerged over the past decades. Tracey Warr [21](Warr, Jones, 2006) writes that the use of the body as material "reveals a cross-fertilisation of ideas and ideologies" from Freud's theories of the unconscious[22] to the Dada artists in 1910 and 1920 wishing to challenge traditional representation in art (2006:11). Escaping from the conventional realm of the museum, Dadaists made art in places they felt were "more real and more relevant" (Warr, 2006:11). The impact of both WW1 and WW2 was immense and brought the reality of corporeal existence into sharp focus. In terms of art dealing with sexuality, the two most important movements of the twentieth century were Surrealism and Pop Art: Surrealism focused on erotic desire as a motivating unconscious force and later in Pop Art we see the appropriation of the sexualized commercial imagery of the pin-up, sex symbol and screen icon (Watson, 2008: 18).

The 1960's and 1970's saw feminists "*embody* the female subject publicly in order to politicise her personal experience" (Jones, 1998:46) and to voice their needs and particularities as subjects. This period "saw the transition from a modernist body subjectivity that was struggling with a mind/body split to a dispersed postmodern subjectivity construed through the eyes of the audience" (Flanagan, 2006:90).[23] The psychoanalytical interest in body performances of this period focused on such

[21] Tracey Warr is an independent British curator and writer. She was previously Lecturer in Fine Art at Oxford Brookes University, Oxford and Researcher in Site-specific Art at the Surrey institute of Art and Design, Farnham, Surrey (1997-99). Warr is currently Director of Arts and Cultural Management at Dartington College of Art, Totnes Devon.

[22] Freud's idea that the unconscious mind affects behaviour in ways that the subject is not necessarily aware of has changed the way in which the relationship between mind body and behaviour are perceived (Warr, 2000:11)

[23] In his book 'Art and Sex" (2008), Gray Watson notes: "The erotic potential of the body was directly mobilised in the 1960's by the new phenomenon of Body Art. It sprang from the new focus on the body as a medium that characterised the wider Performance Art movement, though many artists shunned the term 'performance' for its theatrical connotations, preferring instead terms such as 'action',' happening' or 'live' art. This development had been made possible on the one hand by Harold Rosenberg's characterisation of Abstract Expressionism 'action painting' and on the other by the delayed influence of Marcel Duchamp, whose valorisation of the business of everyday life was epitomised in his claim, late in his life, that every breath he had taken was as important artistically as any of the artefacts he had happened to make. It drew too on the visual theatre inspired by the theories of Antoni Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski, and the Butoh dance theatre, departing from traditional theatrical characterisation and scripting. This focus on the immediacy of the body

themes as the narcissistic body and the body in relation to others. The 1970's saw the heyday of "Body Art" (an off shoot of Performance Art). In Body Art, the artist's own flesh (or the flesh of others) is the canvas and it is in this arena that I shall be focusing my investigation of both Marks' transformation and tattooing as a method of self expression for both the tattoo artist and the tattooee.

The 1980's saw a turn away from the body which can be partly explained by charges of fetishism. The negative attitude to body art on the part of feminists stemmed from a concern "with which womens' bodies have been constructed as object of the gaze" (Jones, 1998:24). Feminist commentators such as Catherine Francklin argued that "female artists who use their own nude bodies are colluding with the objectification of women" (Warr, 2000:13). It also derived from the idea that the artist may depict her own embodiment or supposed 'lack'[24] and therefore compromises her influence. Jones, however, argues that feminists adopted Bertolt Brecht's[25] *distanciation* which required that the artist make the spectator aware of experiencing text and precluding him from identifying with the illusion of the representation. In this way it was perceived that the viewer became an active critic. Griselda Pollock, a British feminist historian argues that this became an important tactic for feminists because of its "erosion of the dominant structures of cultural consumption which are classically fetishistic" (cited in Jones, 1998:24).

The body and body art practices made a dramatic return in art of the 1990's. In these 1990's extensions of the use of the body in art, the self is no longer explored mainly in relation to culture and

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was enacted by a young generation of artist who displayed their own, often naked, bodies in the public sphere, and extended by some who made their own bodies the theme of their artistic exploration. Pioneers included: in America such practitioners as Vito Acconci and Carolee Schneemann; and in Europe Gunter Brus and the Viennese Aktionists, as well as Gina Pane and Marina Abramovic. The rise of Body art in the 1960's was followed by a relative decline, though recent years have seen the resurrection of Body Art by a later generation of artists such as Ron Athey and Franko B (Gray 2005, I.B. Tauris Press :8-9).

[24] Bergeron cited in von Veh (2002:33)(von Veh 2003) explains that Freud identified femininity in biological terms referring to a woman's lack of a phallus, thus defining femininity in terms of absence.

[25] Bertolt Brecht **(**10 February 1898–14 August 1956) was a German poet, playwright, and theatre director. Brechtian distanciation aims to make the spectator an agent in cultural production and activate him or her as an agent in the world" (Jones 1998:25). **Distanciation** - in Brechtian performance, when actors maintain distance from their character by reminding the audience through often stylized gestures or behavior that they are simply people pretending, instead of trying to identify with their character" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Stagecraft/Terminology/List_of_theatre_terms accessed 11/05/2010

context. With new technological possibilities the body is under "techno phenomenological examination" (Flanagan, 2006:90):

> These 1990's bodies do not feature a bodily identity at all; they do not reveal a graspable subjectivity. Rather, they are returning to more primordial questions regarding the materialities of the body, such as questions of the body's appearance through its skin, the ego-envelope, or the border zone between inside and outside (ibid:91)

Historically, it is generally acknowledged that feminism had a strong influence as a political movement on the emergence of the body as a topic, which is an aspect especially relevant to Farber's work in which she explores the female body and the social and cultural constraints imposed on it. Claiming the right to represent themselves has been central to the feminist agenda since the struggle for women's rights began. "[…] Women's bodies in Western culture have almost always been viewed as objects of display. Women have rarely been permitted agency in art, but instead have been restricted to enacting […] scenarios constructed by male artists" (cited in *Feminist Aesthetics Stanford Encyclopedia,* 2008:15).(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2008) Bronwyn Law- Viljoen (Law-Viljoen, 2008) suggests that Farber uses needlework to subvert the ideal of femininity and as a form of agency to re-negotiate the identity of a white woman in Africa (2008:17). She uses the idea of self-mutilation as a form of external agency and a form of control over the body, which is an idea that also underpins my own creative work in which I document the process of tattooing. At the same time the flesh in Farber's work with all its material scars and cicatrisation serves as a reminder of the injuries inflicted on the body by a patriarchal society and suggests traces of a life once lived.

By the 1960's writers such as Susan Sontag were disputing the position of formalist Greenbergian critics and argued against interpretations that posited an artwork as essential in meaning (Warr, 2006:12). Amelia Jones added her voice to the growing criticism of Modernism's standpoint and stated that "body art has been defined as constitutive of postmodernism because of its fundamental subversion of modernism's assumption that fixed meanings are determinable through the formal

structure of the work alone" (Jones, 1998:21). Jones argues that there is no "essential" meaning in body art and "that the exclusion of body art from the postmodern debate[26] reinforces the modernist project of privileging certain practices and derogating others on the basis of their interpretively determined cultural value" (1998:30). She declares that body art invites the spectator into the work "as an intersubjective exchange" and that it "insists upon subjectivities and identities (gendered, raced, classed, sexed and otherwise) as absolutely central components of any cultural practice […] this gendered subjectivity is *the* central issue of postmodernism" (1998:31).

Using her own body in enacting the role of Bertha Marks for her *Dislocation/Relocation* exhibition artworks was important to Farber despite the difficulties encountered. Her body became the sculpture, the 'thing' acted on: "I wished to feel as embodied as possible […] often things like facial expressions would be a problem. I am not an actress and nor am I a model, I am not used to using my body in that particular way […] It was quite limiting at times." Farber goes on to say that it was important to use her own body as it was a masquerade on three levels: "On the one hand I am masquerading the life of Bertha Marks, on the other I am masquerading myself and finally I am masquerading femininity which is a masquerade in and of itself […] It is a performance of both Bertha's character and my character" (personal communication, 16 October 2010).

The point of the gendered subjectivity being the central issue to much performative body art is critical to an understanding of Faber's work in which she uses the materiality of her body to investigate the hybridity of a woman of European Jewish descent in Africa. I agree with Law-Viljoen who argues that Farber's work addresses "subjectivity" and "agency" in order to enact debates around women as makers and crafters of meaning, even as they are inscribed by, and in, socially hegemonic discourses" (2008:51). The use of her body is well suited to this. Farber's performance appears

[26] Postmodernism turned away from the portrayal of the body in the work of art, arguing against the pleasurable effects assumed to accompany such inclusions (Jones 1998:29). Postmodern feminists insisted that art should not try to portray a female essence which would only serve one ideology or other but should rather reveal how womanhood and femininity are socially constructed. They saw femininity as a masquerade and maintained that there was no female essence (Heartney, 2001:53).

regressive in its return to staged as opposed to engaged performance[27] and this is in itself an interesting challenge to feminist performance. Further, active engagement of the viewer is usually central to body art and performative practices of this sort but Farber's enactment of Bertha's life in *A Room of Her Own*[28] appears to test this intersubjectivity since the viewer appears to be excluded by passively observing the performance as in a theatrical event. Allara describes the event critically: "herded into uncomfortable chairs a full hour and a half before the performance the audience was made to feel like "docile, passive observers" (2008:55). Allara observes that she was not alone in her anger at this patronizing treatment and it was only later that she realised that this was a carefully orchestrated part of the act: "The very docility she induced in the audience of over 100 arts professionals was that which characterizes 'the feminine' she is performing in her work" (ibid).

Further criticism of performance/body art practices focused especially on early claims when this form of contemporary Western art practice first emerged, that body art was the only art form to guarantee the presence of the artist. In 1975 art historian Ira Licht proudly declared that body art do away with the traditional forms of art namely painting and sculpture to "deliver […] information directly through transformation" and artist Rosemary Mayer proclaimed body art as a direct reflection of the artist's life, while art critic and curator Chantal Pontbriand argued that it "presents, it does not re-present." More recently Catherine Elwes[29]argued that the performance/body artist is both the signifier and the signified, "[n]othing stands between spectator and performer" (Jones, 1998: 33). I agree with art historian Kathy O'Dell who suggests that by using their bodies as material, performance artists "highlight the 'representational status' of such work rather than confirming its ontological priority"

[27] Brecht cited in Allara insisted that "we abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind which will become the theatre of action" (2008:56).
[28] As I have already pointed out in the Introduction, *A Room of Her Own* was the inaugural performance work to the *Dis-Location/Re-Location* project.
[29] Elwes' research Interests include [The History of] Film and Video Art, Artists' Films, Feminist Art, Landscape in Moving Image, Installation Art. She is a member of ICFAR - International Centre for Fine Art, UAL research unit. Recent consultancy includes Advisory board panels for ACE Film & Video (2000-2003), British Artists' Film & Video Study Collection, REWIND - Video Archive Project (since 2004) as well as the Artists' Film & Video Study Collection at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design; member of the Editorial board of the ACE funded Vertigo magazine, Visiting Fellow at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia (2005) and regular assessor and mentor for AHRB and NESTA fellowship programs.

(Cited in Jones, 1998:33). The work therefore serves only to expose the lack of the body as posited above. The document/photograph exposes the body as supplementary, as "both the visible proof of the self and its endless deferral" (ibid: 35). In Warr, Phelan has argued to this end that performance is about disappearance and tracelessness, rather that representation. The body was presented in performance and as such became a transient, temporary thing, a trace or memory. It was left to photography to testify to the materiality of something once present. Photography's role as mere recording device changed to that of becoming the object, the art material itself which is a crucial aspect of Farber's exhibition *Dis-Location/Re-Location* (2008), which I shall focus on later. In her work the photograph becomes the trace which is further invoked through Farber's scarring and cicatrisation of the skin.

Narcissism is a further criticism frequently leveled against performance art, i.e. "the exploration of and fixation on the self." Jones identifies it as being endemic to a capitalist culture requiring obsessive self absorption and the manufacture of desire for commodities, but rather than accepting the conventional negative connotations that accrue to this term, she opens it up "as a manifestation in body art (through a fixation on performing the self) for its potentially radical implications" (1998:46). Pam Allara insists that by going back and updating performance art, Farber points to our regressive age where values have been reduced to "empty clichés" where stories of the like of Paris Hilton cover up the "stories literally buried inside, listing the latest body counts from Iraq" (2008:56). Allara suggests that Farber may have wanted to explore the suffering of the Jewish diaspora, but instead reveals that our material culture has made this history pointless "A legacy of shame (one the sheltered Bertha was privileged to ignore) […] is papered over by contemporary scandals" (ibid). Thus Farber's masquerade is open to a multiplicity of meaning.

The 1990's saw the return of discourses involving the body which "acknowledge the deep implications of the politics of representation in relation to the embodied spirit" (Warr, 2006:98). In South Africa the issue of race was clearly of special significance in view of the developments of the

first democratic elections having been held in 1994 after a long period of apartheid rule during which the rights of the majority black inhabitants were curtailed. A system of racial segregation was introduced following the general election in 1948 which classified the inhabitants as “black”, “white”, “coloured”, and “Indian”. Residential areas were segregated, sometimes by means of forced removals, as was education, medical care, and other public services. Essentially, blacks were deprived of their citizenship and their right to vote. At this time there was little in the South African galleries to give a clue of the socio-political problems of the country. Poet Breyten Breytenbach wrote: “The white artist […] cannot dare look into himself; he doesn’t wish to be bothered with his responsibilities as a member of the ‘chosen’ and dominating group” (Williamson, 1989:8). . This, however, changed in the 1980’s when a groundswell of artists amongst them Penny Siopis, Jane Alexander, William Kentridge, Helen Sebidi, to name a few, responded to the political situation and depicted the struggle for freedom. In describing the three grotesque figures that make up Jane Alexander’s well known sculptural tableau *Butcher Boys* (1985-1986) Mike Nicol points to the shame of apartheid: "In their woundedness and their bestiality, they are personifications of the appallingly spiraling violence, the anarchy, the necklace killings, the civil war, the police brutality, the child detentions, the burning and the lootings of South Africa in the 1980s" (http://library.thinkquest.org 7/05/2010).

Post-apartheid the body emerged as a thematic construct in the visual arts and took on more personal issues. South African artist and academic Penny Siopis[30] stresses that being black or white was arguably more important when our lives stressed the “exteriority of experience, when we lived on the surface of our skins, when institutionalised racism made it extremely difficult for colour to signify anything more or less than the possession or lack of power” (Enwezor, 1997:58). In the years following the democratic elections, artists began to use their bodies as the subject matter of their

[30] Penny Siopis was born in 1953 in Vryburg in the Northern Cape Province. She studied Fine Arts at Rhodes University and Portsmouth Polytechnic before taking up a lecturing position at the Natal Technikon in Durban. In 1984, she moved to Johannesburg and has lectured in the Department of Fine Arts at the Witwatersrand University (Wits). Siopis is particularly interested in the intersection of biography and autobiography in narrating aspects of South African history through film, and the questions raised by the changes in South Africa’s history. Her concern with history and memory has led her to become an important analyst of race and gender issues. www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/siopis_p.htm

works to explore issues of social inscription and hybridity, both being instances relevant to my study of Farber's work. Pamela Allara[31] infers that hybridity acknowledges the fact that concepts of 'race', 'nationality', and 'gender' no longer have fixed meanings. Post 1994, it seems that the idea of hybridity emerged as a model to portray the political change and our unity as a "Rainbow Nation"[32]. Allara thus points out that Farber's transformation of the corporeal surface into a hybrid reinforces this notion.

Flanagan notes: "Our idea of ethnic difference so often relies upon skin colour, where colour has so often been represented as a characteristic of a particular race (Flanagan, 2006:8). The 'self' as body and site onto which questions of race, gender and identity are inscribed became the focus of many contemporary South African artists who used the materiality of their bodies to question stereotypes and "apartheid's violence on the body" (Perryer, 2004:34). Several South African artists began to use their bodies to dismantle the parameters of accepted norms and disrupt accepted signifiers of identity. One South African artist who explored this idea vividly in her photographic work carried out in the mid 1990's was Minette Vari[33]. She appropriated the black body to question her own position within a changing society. In *Self Portrait II (*1995) *digital print on vinyl*, *size variable* she illustrates her struggle for an identity within a changing South Africa by photographing her own naked body and then digitally darkening her skin and adjusting her features in order to change her racial identity. The hybrid images leave a disquieting feeling that the image presented is not entirely true. Vari asserts that her images are about artifice and illusion and question the signification within the index 'black' (HAR A/101 1998:44). Her work is an analytical inquiry of the way in which concepts of reality are created, bringing into question our reading of surface.

[31] Pamela Allara is part-time Associate Professor in the Department of Fine Arts at Rhodes University. An art historian, she teaches courses in the history of women's art, contemporary art, film, photography and visual culture. Her recent research has been on activist art in South Africa. In 2003, she organized the exhibition, "Co-existence: Contemporary Cultural Production in South Africa" for the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis and the South African National Gallery in Cape Town.

[32] Rainbow Nation is a term coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to describe post-apartheid South Africa, after South Africa's first fully-democratic election in 1994. The term was intended to encapsulate the unity of multi-culturalism and the coming-together of people of many different nations, in a country once identified with the strict division of white and black.

[33] Minnette Vari (born 1968) is a South African artist known primarily for her video installations. Born in Pretoria, Vari studied fine
the University of Pretoria where she obtained her masters degree. She lives and works in Johannesburg.

Field Code Changed

Paul Emmanuel[34] and Berni Searle[35] are two young South African artists who engage with performance art as a form of social and identity-based protest. Both have employed the use of blind embossing onto the surface of fleshy parts of their own bodies and have presented these actions in the form of photographically documented installations. In *Profile (*2002) "Searle uses her face as a support to blind embossing, exploring the ambiguities, anomalies and diverse roots in her identity" (Sassen, 2007: 55)[36]. "Colouredness" as a third racial category in apartheid South Africa, lies between black and white identities and is a crucial marker addressed by Searle. She uses her skin as the critical gap in South Africa's obsession with racial categories. In *The Lost Men (Grahamstown)* (2004), Emmanuel examines the political implications of his gender through the names and thus the identities of young men killed in South African wars during the nineteenth century. He embosses hot lead text bearing the names of fallen heroes into vulnerable parts of his own body such as face, feet, stomach, and the back of his shaven head. Sassen argues that the inscription of a visual symbol into their flesh suggests a tie with the practice of scarification in some African cultures.

Sassen suggests that these works engage with both the materiality of the body and the history of marking the body to denote ownership by others (2007:61). Searle indirectly touches on the idea of slavery through the impressions on her skin which includes a Dutch windmill and cloves, referring to the spice trade that led to the Dutch colonizing Africa and which brought Searle's ancestors to Africa as slaves. Emmanuel alludes to the idea that his "maleness could have led him to be a casualty, fighting a war in which he had no vested interest […]" (ibid). Both artists use the material process of

[34]Born in 1969 in Kabwe, Zambia, Emmanuel graduated from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1993. In 1997, The Ampersand Foundation made him the first recipient of the prestigious Ampersand Fellowship, which afforded him a three-month residency in New York.

[35]Berni Searle (born 1964) is a South African photographer and installation artist. Trained originally as a sculptor, she is best known for her installations.

[36] The work is an installation of 21 sheets of silk, 1x2m in size, digitally printed with photographic images of parts of the artist's naked and shaven body. The sheets were hung on washing lines within the indigenous landscape (Sassen, 2007:60).

embossing on the skin to signify a deeper struggle and to question “individual ethnic and societal values […] inscribed to enhance ideological needs” (Sobopha 2005:118).



Paul Emmanuel
'The Lost Men' (Grahamstown I)
Photograph: Andrew Meintjies, 2004

Fig 8

Criticism has been leveled at Farber’s performance *Dis-Location/Re-Location* (2006-2008) for ignoring important political issues (such as addressing the atrocities of the holocaust, apartheid and the exploitation of blacks during apartheid) by not taking on such aspects which are implicit to the context in which the work is set. Allara points out that if white female identity is to be performed, it surely must be performed in relation to that of the majority female population, for that relationship is not contingent; rather it is fundamental to South African society (2008:57). When questioned about

the omission of race, Farber (in Sally-Anne Murray's[37] essay titled "Awfully Pretty: Female Embodiment in *Dis-Location/Re-Location"*) replied: "I wonder if race is not addressed through the politically incorrect yet insistent focus on the protagonist's white body/skin? Perhaps blackness is implicit, in its absence? In her performance Farber can be seen to present layers that construct a white, gendered identity. She reveals how these have been used in art as a means of controlling representation of the female body and uses the materiality of her body as raw material and as a site of inscription and cultural meaning" (Flanagan, 2006:89). The body has replaced the materiality of the paintbrush with the materiality of the cultural body to dismantle the parameters and norms of accepted signifiers of identity. The body has, however, also been replaced with the digital image which has corporalised itself and has taken the place of the actual body. The implication is that no body exists as raw material. This is confirmed through Farber's use of photography and video which become the only record and proof of the performance.

In her preface to her book *The Artist's Body* (2006) Warr points out that the wildly contradictory reactions to various body art performances are evidence of the difficulty of controlling and using body as language. Bodily experiences are complex and body art gives form to such complex aspects which are inevitably controversial. Jones argues that such body art works which enact subjects in "passionate and convulsive" relationships (quoting Antonin Artaud) have the potential to achieve certain radical dislocating effects of social and private experience. She views body art as a set of performative practices that, "through such intersubjective engagement, instantiate the dislocation or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism". This dislocation is, she believes, "the most profound transformation constitutive of what we have come to call postmodernism." (1998: 1) Whatever the reaction towards body art, its potency lies in the fact that it "*enacts* or *performs* or *instantiates* the embodiment and entertwining of self and other. Body art is one of the many manifestations or articulations of this contingency or reciprocity of the subject that we now recognize

[37] Sally-Ann Murray is a Professor in the Department of English at the University of Kwazulu- Natal. She is the award winning author of the poetry collection *Signposts* and *Open Season.*

as postmodern" (ibid: 38). It dramatically foregrounds a direct theatrical enactment of subjects in relation to one another. In Farber's works the performative aspect points to a focus on the surface of the body, its physical wounding and scarring through cutting, grafting and stitching and the traces that are left behind. In materializing and overtly performing the acts of wounding and suturing she can thus be seen to inflect her medium in a way that embodies an indexical relationship to its subject. The fakeness of the wounding is in itself a 'tracing off' (Gibbons, 2007: 29) of the actual world in the sense that it 'copies' and simulates the real. It is this ambiguity between the 'traced' and the 'real' that I wish to explore more fully in the following chapter.

Chapter 2: Staging the Image of the Wound

In this chapter I shall examine the sequence of photographs in Leora Farber's exhibit *Dis-Location/Re-Location* (2006-2007) which include *Ties that Bind Her* (2006-2007) and *Aleorosa* (2206-2007), specifically with a view to addressing the ambiguity which lies at the heart of the deception or illusion in her work. Her action of sewing into her 'skin', a fake membrane, emphasises the duplicity of meaning in this metaphoric work which resides in the process of signification, a process "*perpetually in formation"* (Ord in Law-Viljoen, 2008:103). The difference between a sign and its referent provides a space which is open to a variety of meanings and interpretations. Part of this ambiguity is also reflected in the trace and indexicality of the scars and in the photography itself which will also form part of this discussion.

For a clearer understanding of this body of work it is important to position it within Farber's oeuvre. On her official web-site Farber has included her artist's statement written in June 2003 and which is still relevant to this project:

> My artistic practice revolves around a general theme with multiple offshoots, namely the (de)construction of gender identity. One of these off-shoots is the interrogation of Western constructs of 'femininity', realised through the exploration of the female body as discourse-a site of plenitude and pain, control and excess, order and chaos, matter and form.

She goes on to say that:

> Using my physical being-in-the-world (the 'lived body') as a starting point, I attempt to depict the body not as static shell, but as a felt experience- a vehicle through which women (Westernized, urban, but not necessarily only Caucasian) experience the world and through which that experience is mediated (www.leorafarber.co.za).

It is apparent then that under Farber's "'scalpel' the female body becomes a site of rupture and transgression of the patriarchal order" (Friedman, 1997:2). The surface/skin becomes the boundary on which rites of passage are negotiated through Farber's material process.

In her earlier body of work created during the mid 1980's she subverted the feminine stereotype by breaking the conventional boundaries between viewer and viewed by allowing the paintings to literally spill over the frames, "exposing their messy underside and inverting their traditional symbolism" (ibid). Her work submitted for the masters in Fine Arts degree at the University of the Witwatersrand under the title *Opticality and Tactility in Selected South African Still Life Painting (1992)* involved a collection of found objects which appeared to disgorge themselves from large, painted canvases which Kathryn Smith refers to as her "bulimic paintings" (Smith, 2002:1). Farber describes these works as an exploration into an alternative to patriarchal representations through the emergence of tactile and bodily sensitivities (cited in von Veh, 2002:30). It is from this position of exploring tactility as a marker of a postmodern identity that Farber moved her attention to the female body as "abject and hysterical" (Karen von Veh, 2003:23) and where she began to investigate more closely the female body and the social and cultural constraints imposed on it.

Her move to incorporate clothing as part of her work became a more direct way of dealing with the issue of the patriarchal representation of women. As von Veh points out, by using "emblematic objects" Farber avoided accusations of "colluding with the objectification of the female body in art" (ibid: 31). *Muse for Medea Series 1 (1993-4)* and *Muse for Medea Series II (1993-4)* which commented on "the excesses of the uncontained body" (von Veh 2002:31) were the first examples of work in which Farber used wax.[38] These two sculptures, a catalyst for the change in Farber's work, started as one work which was meant to be a wedding dress on a tailor's dummy. Because of

[38]Farber notes "Wax is a conservationist's nightmare. Dust soaks into the material if it is uncovered, so I have found that I've had to try and seal the surface with a kind of varnish. It's not ideal, but helps. The choice of wax is more for its flesh-like qualities" (personal communication, 16 October 2010). It is perhaps of interest to note here that wax was commonly used in creating early anatomical copies of the human body. As Elkins notes: "Varnished bodies and wax *écorchés* are among the most unflinching representations of the body[…] they are one-to-one reproductions […] they demonstrate that it is possible to visualize the inside of the body, but that in order to do so it may also be necessary to lay down the tools that Western artists have always employed in favor of the almost mechanical duplication of the body". (137) He also notes: "Among the most accurate representations of the body's inside before the invention of photography are plaster and bronze *écorchés* (some of them made directly from wax casts of muscles and bones). Ludovico Cardi da Cigola's *écorché* called *The Beautiful Anatomy* (*La Bella Notomia*), made shortly before 1600, is the usual starting place for the history of Renaissance anatomic models, but wax models are attested in Pliny, and from 1200 to 1600 many anatomic wax ex-votos, called *bóti*, were made in honor of the Madonna in Or Sanmichele. Major collections of wax models are found in medical museums in London, Paris, Vienna, Budapest, and Florence; some models have an unsettling degree of realism – they are fitted with human hair and arranged on real linen beds". (134) (1999:134)

difficulties with balance this piece had to be split into two, showing the front and the back of the dress. These were then made stiff with wood glue and built up with cotton waste, tissue paper, bits of fabric remnant and scraps of wool. This waste becomes the viscera bursting through the body cavity and spilling onto the floor suggesting excess and the breaking of boundaries.

Instrumental (1997) and *Skinless (1997)* saw a change in the direction of Farber's work where she confronted the control of the body rather than its excesses. Her exploration into excess and control was powerfully portrayed when she began to alter corsets, gloves, and other womens' garments to complete the distinction between the exterior and the interior. Von Veh points out that the imagery and textures of Farber's work are suggestive of flesh and dismembered parts created so beautifully "that at once it evokes a simultaneous reaction of both allure and revulsion" (2001:5) This ambivalence forces a re-evaluation of identity and gender construction which has always been the main focus of her work. The importance of this attraction and revulsion is crucial to an understanding of this work. Betterton points to such ambivalence in the context of issues around gender "as an inherent and long held reaction by men towards the nature of women who have provoked both desire and revulsion in equal measure" (von Veh, 2001:7). Farber continued with this theme in her *Corpa Delicata (2002)* in her investigation of indulgence and its consequences through the portrayal of carefully constructed 'chocolates' made out of wax which were arranged on stainless steel troughs that were heated during a performance at her exhibition opening. Through the melting process the ornately made 'chocolates' ended up as a formless mess dripping onto a dish on the floor. It investigates order/ chaos and control/excess and how these are controlled by society.[39]

Later on this ambivalence is further explored in *Dis-Location/Re-Location* where Farber is both attracted and repulsed at what she is doing to herself. She is fascinated and horrified but she is also entering into a territory of in-betweeness, of liminality. As she says of her character of Bertha: "She

[39] Abjection is that which is despised, rejected, expelled but also our own from nail clippings to excrement. It is a fundamental condition of the body and its representation (Elkins, 1999:54).

is neither flesh nor plant, she is neither here nor there; she is in a state of becoming which involves the ambivalence of horror and fascination, strangeness and familiarity" (personal communication, 16 October 2010). She is however in control of her own body. Farber suggests that self-mutilation is a way of expressing something about the body if a person cannot talk verbally and cannot feel heard. It is a way of trying somehow to physically express one's feelings and trying to claim agency. Farber's cutting and sewing points to the secretive self-wounding behavior as practiced by some individuals, usually teenagers. Richard Schechner points out in his essay *Self Inflicted Wounds: Art, Ritual, Popular Culture* (2010), "[m]aking oneself bleed adds a uniquely personal and cultural possibility to the natural flow of things. It is a way of taking over, of empowerment." He quotes a passage from Glucklich (2001:81) about an adolescent girl, Jane, whose self-wounding operates at a personal level and speaks of empowerment:

> Jane made a list of reasons for cutting herself in which she included more than thirty items. However, the word that recurred most frequently in that list was *power*. 'I cut right into the fold of a finger […] It was so sharp and so smooth and so well hidden, and yet there was some sense of empowerment. If somebody else is hurting me or making me bleed, then I take the instrument away and I make me bleed'. It says, 'You can't hurt me anymore. I'm in charge of that'.

Schechner comments that there is a pathological aspect to this kind of behavior but he sees "similarities among the practices of teenagers, ritualists, and artists […] who voluntarily wound themselves across a wide range of actions from subincisions to 'delicate self-mutilation' to performance art" (2010: 1, 8)[40]. Scarry also remarks on this need to "end the madness" through physical pain. She makes the observation that self-flagellation, in this case self-mutilation, is not so

[40] Laurence J Kirmayer (2007) comments:
"The complex relationship between physical and emotional pain is illustrated by the experience of people who deliberately cut or burn themselves in order to experience relief from emotional suffering (Favazza 1989). Such patients often have a history of severe childhood physical abuse (Carrol et al 1980). They report intense feelings of emotional tension and physical discomfort (usually associated with experiences of loss, rejection, or perceived defeat), which are abruptly relieved when they deliberately cut themselves. In some cases, they describe the experience of self-cutting as causing a pain that is comforting in its definite quality and in the way it displaces other feelings of distress. In other cases, they report feeling little pain – only relief. Self-cutting replaces out-of-control emotional pain with controlled self-inflicted physical pain. The act of self-cutting accentuates individuals' sense of their own boundedness and solidity; it reestablishes body boundaries and a sense of wholeness in individuals who are experiencing fragmentation due to intense feelings of anxiety. Pain cuts through the cloud of anxious feelings that leave the person feeling self-estranged and 'disembodied.' The effects of self-cutting are not only symbolic – marking the boundary of the self and reasserting self-control over suffering – but also physiological: physical injury activates endogenous pain-control systems that relive tension and anxiety (Fanelow, 1986). By the same mechanisms of activating endorphin systems, pain also suppresses subsequent pain (Willer, Dehen and Cambier, 1981) so that after the first moments of pain on self-cutting the pain of additional acts of self-injury may be diminished. These effects of pain fit with its role in the organization of 'fight or flight' behaviour" (2007: 374-5)

much about denying the body but a way of "so emphasizing the body that the contents of the world are cancelled and the path is clear for the entry of an unworldly, contentless force" (1985:34).

Control is again investigated in *Dis-location/ Re-Location* where the materiality of the skin is used to portray the constraints of living in a Victorian era. The suturing into the 'skin' displaces the meaning of the work and creates a gap between signifier and signified. Farber does not sew into her own skin but onto a fake integument which then becomes a second membrane and another layer of metaphorical meaning is invoked. It is this aspect of her identity as being incomplete which speaks loudest in these works and it underscores the post-structuralist idea of "the constant slippage in the play of signs, in the relations between signifier and signified" (D'Alleva, 2005:137). Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction[41] articulates the idea that "signifiers and signified are not identical: they differ from each other, there is a space between them. Signs not only differ, they also defer (*différer*) to many other signs as part of an endless chain of signifiers. In this sense, culture becomes a network of relations: differences, displacements, traces, deferrals" (ibid: 144). In saying this, Derrida disputed "that texts have meaning" and questioned the notion of meaning as something stable, and language as a reliable conveyor of meaning[42]. Rather, he sees text as "a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces" (Stevens, 1996:38). He argues that the text is not a stable, unified or autonomous object but a network of references. Thus the meaning of a sign lies in its difference from other signs and this meaning is constantly deferred. The viewer therefore has a responsibility as the producer of meaning, and has a role as creative as the artist (ibid: 40).

[41] Poststructuralism was first introduced by Derrida as a theory of literature where the transition from work to text was easy since it stayed in the realm of language. Artworks are by contrast objects created from materials and appeal as much to sight as mind, therefore poststructuralists, prompted by Derrida saw the work no longer as an object but as a space between the object and the viewer, "in a constantly shifting intertextual process" (Stevens,1996:38).

In her artist's statement Farber acknowledges that she is not attempting to prescribe or dictate meaning, "rather, I attempt to provoke my viewer into critically engaging with certain dominant ideologies concerning the body, hopefully encouraging consideration of those ideologies in ways that do not necessarily uphold the dominant status quo" (2003). Farber the creator becomes the sign of a white, female, Jewish South African and an English Jewish immigrant, Bertha Marks, the meaning of the work, however, shifts between a discourse of the 'real' body and that of the created one. Jennifer Ord comments that what is important to an interpretation of a work of art "is the signification of information which is *perpetually in formation,* since what the work signifies is formed by any number of subjects not permanently resident in it. These subjects are the engaged viewer […]" (2008:103). Meaning is not exact, as it has been created by a number of signs which when dismantled, can lead to different interpretations.

Language as metaphoric presents a further problem or additional 'complication' in this context[43]. Foucault states that

> […] the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the invisible they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is vain to say that we see what we see; what we see never resides in what we say" (Stevens, 1996:33).

The difficulty in describing Farber's work is thus further complicated by the layers of metaphorical meaning. This multi-faceted piece sets up an illusion which foregrounds the slippage in meaning where the two skins, the organic and the artificial meet and the slippage in meaning which naturally occurs when attempting to describe a visual piece verbally. Ord suggests that Farber becomes a sign that the Farber/Marks figure represents more than itself. In this case her portrayal becomes "a

[43] Another important aspect to art criticism is that of language and the singularity of art which ties in with signs and their meaning. Various theories which are based on language can have the effect of denying art's peculiarities. These theories negate art's uniqueness or its specificity (Heywood, 1997). The things which make art 'art' its singularity- the artist as maker, the artwork itself, the process of making- are all important aspects of art which cannot be denied- and is often overlooked when art is seen merely as a 'text' in terms of deconstruction or some postructuralists' theories. Heywood takes issue with various postmodern theories for which singularity of art is seemly unimportant.

metonym that refers both to herself as a white, female Jewish South African, and to an English, Jewish immigrant antecedent, Bertha Marks" (Law-Viljoen, 2008:106). Her figure attests to the two paradigms of colonialism and post-colonialism, both important considerations in contemporary South Africa (2008:106). Ord points out that the past is signified in the present in that the full Victorian skirt worn by Farber/Marks is made out of contemporary, synthetic material. She wears a corset now made of local cowhide. She appears as a middle/upper-class Victorian lady and yet places herself in typical South African grassland. Nevertheless, to Ord the most important signifier is the Acanthus Aloe which Farber uses to metaphorically characterize Africa and it is this '[w]hich is transplanted into its significant other, the lily-white corpus of Europe" (2008:106). Ord poses the interesting question that perhaps it should be the English rose which is transplanted into the body of Africa? This is perhaps alluded to in the second of the series of photographs where I believe Farber uses cicatrisation as a portrayal of 'becoming African'. In these photographs one sees Farber implanting a cameo of a rose into her breast which later transforms into an African beaded flower.

As already noted above, the relation between signs and their meaning is dependent on difference, and Ord applies this idea to society at large saying that "there are no 'seamless' cultures but an 'animated mix on the move". The aloe will always remain distinct from its host which raises the question of its survival. Ord points out that the dividing line between Farber/Marks and the aloe is the skin which not only demarcates boundary of the person but becomes "the space between forms/signs, the interval that permits the infinite play of difference and deferral in systems of signification" (ibid). Farber's portrayal of skin reads as being at once artificial and organic.

Farber employs material process to perform a masquerade of self-mutilation through her use of a second membrane which creates another layer of meaning. Had Farber cut directly into her own skin[44] her work would have a different reading to that of her cutting into a fake membrane. The

[44] In 1975 Petr Stembera unsuccessfully attempted to graft a plant to his arm using normal growth hormones and grafting techniques. It was suggested that his personal art read as a metaphor for the" need for a wider social healing,

problem which arises in much autobiographical work is self-censorship which occurs when the artist does not have the courage to present themselves fully. Whilst important performance artists such as Marina Abromovic and Cara Solamo have bravely endured intense pain to highlight body issues, Farber's portrayal begs a different interpretation. Farber, in setting up the illusion of grafting, is questioning the boundaries between reality and illusion. Her work can therefore be read on two levels: On the one level she performs self-mutilation on a constructed character (that of Bertha Marks) to address the rigid constraints imposed on the Victorian female body, thereby affirming agency over her own body. On another level she deals with the reality of her own skin to articulate that which lies on either side of it- the indigenous African and the immigrant European. "The adoption of Africa by the European immigrant through self-inflicted intervention describes acculturation as an aggressive appropriation" (Law-Viljoen, 2008:107). The notions of 'trace' and *difference* are used by Derrida to explain this network of references that is an artwork. Stevens explains that each sign in a text carries traces or multiple references to other signs as in Farber's ambivalent use of aloe to rose, corset to cowhide, and plant to human. For Derrida, this substitution of one trace with another, and then with another, is an infinite process (1996:38) each leaving a hint/trace behind even if only in the form of a memory.

Theories around trace are also evident in Farber's use of photography, insertions and scarring which she uses as signifiers for a deeper struggle. Farber's photographic work reinforces the analogy between the photograph and the skin, both being a receptive medium which leave a trace/index. A central theme in Farber's project is absence which is a characteristic of trace. Her wounds mark the trauma which is now absent. Farber uses material process to enact the transformation which becomes a veneer hiding the banality of an ordinary life. The artifice of masking her own flesh also serves to conceal the truth about the sitter. The traces; aloes and scarification create another layer of meaning generated through the regrowth around the wound. They become absorbed into Farber's body and become the text which exposes Faber's sense of displacement.

In her paper titled *Tracing and Erasure in Kathryn Smith's Psychogeographies; The Washing Away of Wrongs* Maureen de Jager[45] discusses the indexical nature of traces in terms of "the having been there". She suggests three areas that are also of interest to my investigation of Farber's work and which I will further elucidate in my dissertation below:

Traces which are difficult to find

Traces which when found reveal loss

Traces which erase the past that produced them (2008:41)

Colin Richards speaks of the notion of memory as a trace in terms of forming a "layer of unspoken words" (personal communication, 7 April 2009) difficult to find and this reminds us of the original experience which we can only understand through language, another unstable network of references. Photography, as a receptacle, sits well within this notion, "it sees and lures the viewer into the feeling that the static image […] is an avenue for retrieval, a way to get the thing or person back" (Hustvedt[46] cited in Wright, 2005:26) (to be discussed more full further on). Farber's wounds mark the trauma which is now absent. Bertha experiences the loss of a life once lived.

In the series *Aleorosa* (2004-2007) and *Ties That Bind Her* (2006-2007), photography becomes the trace which also reveals loss. It is as much about presence as absence, "the thing that has been, bears witness to the thing that is there no more […] the photograph points to a vanished past declaring that the referent is no longer there" (de Jager, 2008:45). Bertha's Africanisation through self-inflicted surgery suggests the demise of the European immigrant. With time the trace fades into an endless process of erasure, "its existence is dependant on the very presence of that which produced it" (ibid: 48). For Derrida the trace signifies the loss of our presence and yet at the same time without trace there would be no evidence of our having been there (ibid: 49). Despite this, the

[45] Maureen de Jager, BFA, MFA (Witwatersrand) Dissertation titled *Ambivalence, the sublime and postmodern melancholia: the dead-weight of impossible ends* 1999. She is presently Senior Lecturer at Rhodes University.

[46] Siri Hustvedt (born February 19, 1955) is an American writer. Best known as a novelist, Hustvedt has also produced a book of poetry, and a number of short stories and essays.

indexical nature of the photograph which always claims ownership, no matter how brief with that which has actually existed, is critical to an understanding of Farber's work. Photography guards against invisibility, the photograph bears witness to the person having been there. As de Jager points out, the indexical nature of the photograph offers the hope of finding the truth, yet the paradox is that traces are insubstantial and as a result fill us with doubt. This is further complicated with digital photography where continuing technological developments provide means of masking and transforming (through digital manipulation) and it is in this arena that Farber is able to redraft herself where the boundary between what is real and that which is merely an illusion becomes blurred. The narrative reads as superficial/on the surface in the sense that it is deliberately staged and artificial.

The trace which erases the past that produced it is well illustrated by the graft, the purpose of which is to cultivate a new species. The term 'graft' is frequently used in post-colonial discourse to describe intersections across ethnic boundaries as an emergence of a new cultural form. Colin Richards' use of the term "graft" as chosen title for an exhibition of contemporary South African art is relevant here[47]. It suggests the fusion of two dissimilar materials which in the instance of Richards' text reads as cultures. It can be "regenerative, reparative, and even redemptive," or as he puts it:

> The cut is not simply a boundary […] but a deep, even traumatic incision, an inscription. In cutting into and across 'difference', 'graft' enjoins the discourse of "hybridity" without disavowing the violence and desire which underpins cultural fusion (Richards, 1997:234).

Imports grafted onto indigenous plant forms create new hybrids in much the same way as foreigners are 'grafted' onto an alien land, often leading to an 'imperfect fit'. The flesh of this new species, no matter how perfect the graft, will always reveal traces of that from which it came and suggests traces of a life now erased. Farber points out that as the foreign body, the aloe takes root and disfigures the body, Bertha Marks turns into a "monstrous misfit" attesting to the psychical trauma inherent in the

[47] Colin Richards curated the "Graft" exhibition at the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale 1997. He is also a theorist who is the acknowledged expert on conceptualism in South Africa, an art historian, and critic. As a professor at the Wits Art School, he teaches theory and studio practice to senior students. As an artist, Richards is known for his sensitive and detailed drawings, watercolours and prints, often drawing on his earlier career as a medical illustrator.(http://www.artthrob.co.za 14/02/2011)

acculturation of two such diverse cultures (2005:6). The evidence of past trauma, however, remains hidden behind the veneer of "politeness and decorum" (de Jager, 2008:42).

Flesh/skin as a surface, becomes a place where text is inscribed in the form of grafting and cicatrisation. As already pointed out, it becomes the metaphor for a "blank page" on which inscription can take place and meaning or signs can be transmitted much like that of writing[48]. The significance of the superficiality of surface, i.e. the 'nearness' to the surface which Farber demonstrates in her performance is elucidated by Grosz's argument that all the important facets of an individual's make-up can be explained using the subject's corporality as a framework. Grosz argues that "the body therefore is central in the formation of individual identity and is the site of the subject's desires and fantasies, actions and behaviour" (Nead, 1992:71). She continues that cultural and historical factors help produce the body and that part of its nature is an "ontological incompleteness" which therefore leaves it open to social completion (Grosz, 1994: xi). Her fake membrane allows Farber to become another person, alluding to the fact that cultural inscriptions quite literally represent bodies and help create them. The body can be read as a text signifying the social world around it. It is able to create meaning, to embody the self and act on the world.

Michel Foucault has shown that in the modern period the body has become a highly politicised object, a crucial site for the exercise and regulation of power. This power need not only be exercised by others but can also be self-regulatory and exercised from within. Nead (1992:10) adds that the most important label inscribing women is that of femininity of which the dominant aesthetic is the

[48] Elkins makes the following interesting observation in pointing out a correlation between medical dissection terminology and thought: "Medicine dissects dissection into a half-dozen specific procedures, each of which can function as a metaphor for analytical thought. There is the uncovering of a specific organ in situ (known as "prosection"), as well as its removal ("excision" or "Exeresis"). A doctor can tie together two separate organs ("grafting"), divide the healthy from the pathological ("diaresis"), or implant a foreign body ("prosthesis"). Each of these terms names a way of thinking about a problem: Jacques Derrida's neologisms, such as *différence*, are prostheses in the text of philosophy – implants, which may or may not be assimilated. (They may "take," or the may be rejected.) Each term also has its corresponding narrative forms. Montaigne, for example, touches on most of these strategies in the course of failing to speak in a logical fashion about his subjects. Given the confluence of words for dissection, seeing, and thought, it is not surprising that these words are also well fitted to describe the process of *depicting* bodies. (127)

white, healthy, middle-class and youthful body as the ideal. In her discussion Nead proposes that the "formless matter of the female body has to be contained within boundaries, conventions and poses" (ibid). Farber performs her masquerade of femininity in her photographic series where she experiences herself as image or representation; she is framed by both the edges of the mirror and by the dictates of a social construct and the plethora of images defining femininity. Farber judges herself in her reflection and makes the necessary adjustments.

The feminine aesthetic can be extended to clothing which becomes a powerful communicative tool and which Farber uses as a mask. The corset she wears becomes a metaphor for the constricting nature of the social mores the protagonist has to endure. Like the inscribed body, clothing condemns the body to representing the social role, position, or hierarchy within society. Farber uses clothing as a means of interrogating women's corporeal experiences and as Linda Nead points out in this regard: "[…] signs and values can be transformed and different identities can be set in place" (cited in von Veh, 2002:31)[49].Like the inscribed body, clothing condemns the body to representing the social role, position, or hierarchy within society. It becomes a further layering beyond the fake integument.

Bodily experiences are complex and body art gives form to such complex aspects which are inevitably controversial. Jones argues that such body art works which enact subjects in "passionate convulsive relationships" (quoting Antonin Artaud) have the potential to achieve certain radical dislocating effects of social and private experience. She views body art as a set of performative practices that, "Through such intersubjective engagement, instantiate the dislocation or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism". This dislocation is, she believes, "the most profound transformation constitutive of what we have come to call postmodernism" (1998:1). Whatever the

[49] In contemporary society clothing, as a second skin, becomes an ethnic marker. Jeans and the t-shirt have become the choice for people wanting to identify with youth and its values. Even within this group counter-cultures and subcultures have formed. "Currently popular descriptions among white South African teenagers are skater, punk, yuppie, raver, jock or bungie. These are often associated with certain clothing labels, such as Diesel, Nike, Adidas, or Quicksilver" (UNISA GAR211A/102/2009).

reaction to body art, its potency lies in the fact that it "*enacts* or *performs* or *instantiates* the embodiment and entwining of self and other. Body art is one of the many manifestations or articulations of this contingency or reciprocity of the subject that we now recognise as postmodern (Jones, 1998:38). It dramatically foregrounds a direct theatrical enactment of subjects in relation to one another. In Farber's work the performative aspect points to a focus on the surface of the body, its physical wounding and scarring through cutting, grafting, and stitching and the traces that are left behind. In materializing and overtly performing the acts of wounding and suturing she can thus be seen to in inflect her medium in a way that embodies an indexical relationship to its subject. The fakeness of the wounding is in itself a 'tracing off' (Gibbons, 2007:29) of the actual world in the sense that it 'copies' and simulates the real. It is this ambiguity between the 'trace' and the 'real' that I wish to explore more fully in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Staged Photography and Trace

Photography is especially critical to Farber's work as material record of her staged performance and the medium contributes in a significant way to the reading of her work in terms of her correlation of material process with visual surface and the notion of trace. In the series of photographs for her *Dis-Location/Re-Location* project Farber employs a form of narrative photography to reconstruct and reevaluate a family history, i.e. her staged photographs rely on narrative for their reading. As practiced by a whole generation of artists since the 1990s, such narrative photography has often incorporated "elements of fantasy, artifice and make-believe" and as Susan Bright continues about these artists:

> By scrupulously staging events and working with their subject matter in a similar way to that of a film director, artists created often sumptuous and seductive fictitious tableaux in which narrative elements came to the fore. Carefully choreographed, performative and elaborately conceived, photography that deals with narrative owes much to the language and look of cinema. The term 'narrative' suggests a story, and therefore movement. A story needs to progress in order to be told. At first this seems to be at odds with the singularity of a photographic still, but 'staged' photography distils stories into one-off images, packed full of multi-layered information. Such images function densely rather than chronologically, as experienced in a photo story. Although many of the artists featured [in her book titled *Art Photography Now*] do work in series, each of their images also stands alone in the same way as a painting or a film still does (2005: 78)

In her similarly staged photographs Farber can be seen to make herself the object by dressing up and performing and shifting the subjectivity of the enacted reality which has its origins in personal experience. Scenes are deliberately staged for the camera and a fictional reality is thus created which sets up an illusion whilst at the same time practicing deception. It is perhaps also significant to mention here that Victorian photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron practiced a similar kind of enacted photography, turning to popular poems and literature in creating elaborate 'tableaux vivants' (ibid). Farber's references to the Victorian era can thus also be seen to include such practices of self-consciously staged narratives and performative roles for the camera. In the late 20th century artifice was employed in photography in a bid to undermine the belief in 'documentary truth' and to subvert stereotypes and question politically accepted beliefs (answers.com 2010/11/09) and this is also the way in which Farber can be seen to employ the medium in her articulation of ideas

around alienation and hybridity. The medium assumes further significance in Farber's work if one considers Barthes' claim of the death of the subject through the photograph. Barthes describes the moment the photograph is taken as a moment when "I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: "I then experience a micro-version of death […] I am really becoming a specter" (2000:14). In her performance Farber can in this sense be seen to enact the 'death' of the young Bertha Marks, newly arrived from England, brought back to life in the form of the African hybrid and through the act of interpretation.

With the decline of the art object or "the dematerialization of art" as Lippard and Chandler have referred to it (du Preez, 2008:32), and the advent of so-called 'conceptual art' which emphasised the thinking process almost exclusively, the art object remained as a conveyor of the idea/concept and the medium/matter was dismissed as being of no real consequence. The photograph exposes the "body as supplementary, as both the physical proof of the self and its endless deferral" (Jones, 1998:34), a point that is significant in relation to Farber's concerns as discussed in the previous chapter. Through its materiality the photograph exists physically in the world. It provides a trace of the vanished artwork and has passed from being merely a tool to become the art object itself. Photography gives form to the implicit which can be bound and captured in such a way that it can now be seen. Put bluntly, "[…] the matter of art 'matters'" (ibid: 35).

Photography is well suited to producing narrative fictions because on some level we believe in them as accurate copies taken from lived experiences and situations and because they are always out of context, i.e. lifted from a previous context in time and space. As a result the viewer is invited to weave the "before" and "after" sections of the story themselves. In her narrative, Farber is able to redraft herself where the boundary between real and that which is merely an illusion becomes blurred and translates as part of her masquerade. This artifice is foregrounded in the photographic process which dematerialises the object and transforms it into an image, which now becomes a questionable 'truth'. Cindy Sherman is another artist who uses masquerade to investigate the

'otherness' of women within contemporary Western representation. Well known for her self-portraits investigating the consumption of the female body in patriarchal domination, her work suggests that female subjectivity resides in disguise and displacement (Phelan, 1992:60). Likewise, femininity in Farber's work becomes both a masquerade and artificial construction warding off the 'otherness' hidden within. Confronting the viewer and looking straight back at him in what bell hooks[50] refers to as the "oppositional gaze" is one way of subverting essentialised notions of the gendered body. Farber, however, invites the viewer in. In her series of photographs Farber observes herself in the mirror. She does not confront the viewer. So too in her performance where she coyly bends her head and averts her eyes as she sews into her body. The artist uses her body to construct her own identity but then surrenders control and allows a voyeuristic scrutiny suggesting the submissiveness and passivity in Bertha Marks' narrative.

Jones suggests that through performance and staged photography, artists who engage in self-portraits "explore the capacity of the self-portrait photograph to foreground the "I" as other to itself". She suggests that this exploration requires "technologies of representation" and that "the self-portrait photograph, then, becomes a kind of technology of embodiment, and yet one that paradoxically points to our tenuousness and incoherence as living, and embodied subjects" (2002:950). She adds that the self-portrait photograph allows technology to mediate and produce subjectivities in our world. The interpretation of these subjectivities, however, should be seen as open and unstable as in Farber's enactment where the body is depicted not as a "static shell but as a lived experience" (www.leora.farber.co.za). It is the "interpretive divide between images and constructed selves" (Jones, 2002:950) which interests me in Farber's embodiment of Bertha Marks. An ambiguity is created between what is staged and what is real and gives these images their power. The ambiguity is created at the point where "the self and other, intertwine to produce intersubjective meaning"

[50]Gloria Jean Watkins (born September 25, 1952), better known by her pen name bell hooks, is an American author, feminist, and social activist. Her name's unconventional lowercasing signifies what is most important in her works: the "substance of books, not who I am" She wrote her first major book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), Available http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aah/hooks-bell-gloria-jean-watkins-1952 [June 2010]

(Lacan cited in Jones, 2002:957). This point in time becomes what Lacan refers to as the screen. These women become the masks for the "real": Sherman through her endless self-reiterations of other female figures and Farber through her staging of the arrested drama in which she mimics Bertha's transformation. Both assume a pose in order to interact with the viewer who through the "ongoing dynamic of subject formation" receives "from the other […] 'a thrown-off skin' the screen" (ibid: 958).

The deception allows us to catch a hint of the issues of hybridity that Farber is grappling with. Although Farber works in series in her *Dis-Location/ Re-Location* project, each of her images could stand alone. The single photograph compares with the tableau vivant and the film still in that all three capture the pregnant moment. Barthes' claim that the film still has the capacity "to extract the entire diegesis of the film" (http://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/tableau-vivant/ 30/11/2010) corresponds with Farber's photographs which have this capability of revealing the fictional world in which her story of trauma unfolds through references to restrictive clothing, domesticity and more especially the obsessive suturing of self. The interplay between what appears real and the fantasy also creates a tension which compels the viewer to complete the linear narrative in his/her mind.

It is necessary to establish the significance of the photograph in Farber's work and how she uses it in relation to her concerns with skin and trace. As already pointed out, what distinguishes photography from other forms of art is its indexicality with the referent, with that which has been photographed: "[…] in photography I can never deny that the thing has been there" (Barthes, 2008:76). The reflected light off the object is responsible for the image produced: "The photograph becomes the supplement which in itself indicates absence" (Jones, 1998:34).That the indexicality of the photograph promises the "real" can, however, be questioned. I would like to argue that Farber, through her "exaggerated performativity," subverts this assumption (Jones, 2002:951). Her work exposes the self-portrait as mere illusion and complicates the idea that the self-portrait can deliver

"the true subject to the viewer - a belief central to modernist discourses of art and photography" (ibid). Farber as author of the image and the figure in the image reveals herself as representation.

In the 1950's and 1960's Modernists, heavily influenced by American art critic Clement Greenberg, largely rejected narrative in art and instead focused on the purely visual fact of an artwork. Postmodernists however returned the narrative in its many guises; religious, allegorical, rhetorical, historical and personal (Hossack, 2008:16). There are various forms of narrative photography[51] and here self-representation becomes appropriate when questions of identity are at issue. This involves a prearranged and prepared performance enacted in front of a camera similar to the dramas of tableaux vivants[52] where the artist, in this case Farber, becomes both the director and the actor. The 'framing aspect' of the camera, i.e. detaching a space in the world from its surrounding context, is equally important to this supplementary notion. Within the photograph all boundaries are arbitrary. Any part of the photograph can be separated and made discontinuous form anything else. All that is required is to frame the subject differently. Farber can be seen to approach her work through a form of framing in that her self-representations are also carefully selected in setting up boundaries by which Farber in turn questions the validity of boundaries created by other systems of control. She sets up a multiplicity of instances by means of 'framing' where she locates herself within feminist debate and issues of hybridity. Her presentation is in this way interwoven with questions of power and vulnerability.

[51] Self-presentation, narrative tableaux the difference between this and the previous being the number of performers involved the latter requiring two or more, miniature stages suggesting the doll house and along with it childhood and childhood fantasy, still lifes signifying an image composed of small and medium sized objects that can be placed on a table, and finally sculptures and installations (Kohler, 1995:38-42).

[52] In the nineteenth century it was often allegorical and symbolic, an early example being Hippolyte Bayard's Le Noye (The drowned Man, 1840) in which he protested against the government's apathy towards his development of a paper-based photographic process in 1839. Two major periods of staged photography can be identified: mid-Victorian and late 20th century photography which was informed by conceptualism and postmodern theory.

The photograph then becomes the material, the object as a reminder of Farber's performance. Through photography Farber interacts with the viewer in an intersubjective exchange from which different narratives can be read.

Chapter 4: Traces of Pain – Tattooing as transformative process

> […] The sensation of pain is an essential feature of being human; an inability to feel pain is considered a major deficiency not only in terms of health but also in terms of morality. It is human to feel pain, while the inability to do so is detrimental to our humanity. This positive attitude toward pain is predicated on the belief that embodiment and sensitivity are two essential features of humanity… (Tu Weiming cited in Oakley, 2007:221).

In his book *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis* (1999), James Elkins says the following about skin:

> A diffuse pain exists somewhere inside the body. A muscle throbs, or a headache pounds. An entire body, straining under a fever, feels dull and hot. These are the kinds of unlocalized pain that tell us something is wrong with the inside of the body. With the skin, it is different. If I hurt someplace on my skin, then I know exactly where that place is. I can see it, perhaps with the help of a mirror, and search the origin of the pain up to the limits of my vision. Is it even possible to imagine a vague pain of the skin? Sensation on the surface is sharp and well focused. Even if my skin hurts – it also hurts individually in each place (35).

Elkins goes on to compare "this sharp, ocular quality of pain on skin to the sharpness of the way we perceive the beauty of skin:

> Skin is beautiful, and often skin is what is beautiful. Its beauty is local, like its pain: a wrinkle or a pimple is a brief ugliness, and a flat stretch of skin is a moment of pleasure. A person's skin is not beautiful in a vague way, but by virtue of specific qualities and forms. This pain and this beauty are linked by their exactness (ibid).

These observations make Elkins wonder "if skin isn't the place where all sensation is most precise, or – to invert the equation, in accord with the preeminence and priority of the body itself – if sensation, and everything else somatic (the viscera, the excreta, food still to be eaten, the disembodied self) is only a smeared reflection, an abjection, or a failing echo, of that primary source." He goes on to point out that it is interesting "how far the optical metaphor takes us in a domain where there are no eyes":

> In skin, everything is immediate, bounded, instantaneous, and *sharp*. Skin is like the thin plane of perfect focus in an optical system: everything beyond it (outside the body, in the world) and everything in front of it (in the body, in the more-or-less hidden insides) is blurred."

Elkins' observations thus point out that "skin may be the most sensitive and eloquent signifier of the body, and the organ most aligned with sight" (ibid: 36). Skin is also a conduit, it "communicates by representing states of the body and mind to the outside world […] it is also a writing surface on which the body's thoughts are inscribed" (ibid: 46).

As outlined in the previous chapters, the materiality of skin is a dominant theme in Farber's work in which she sets up the illusion of the self-inflicted wounding of her skin as an indexical marker of the trauma of transformation. My practical work, in which I focus on the process of tattooing, similarly examines skin as a border and dividing line between internal and external and as a marker of trauma and transformation. I examine some instances of tattoos that people have chosen to have inscribed into their skin and the pain associated with having this done. The body as site for social construction and more especially as a text that can be read and upon which social meaning can be inscribed is of particular interest to me. The marking of the skin treats it not as a living thing but as an object which gives form to the implicit and allows a person to become an 'other'.

In both Farber's work and in the act of tattooing the instances of pain have been externalized through the weapons used. The scissors and needle and the tattoo machine and needles both create a visual picture which allows the viewer to imagine the pain. In her book "The Body in Pain" (1985) Elaine[53] Scarry notes that the weapon is the instrument that goes into the body and produces pain; it therefore lifts pain out of the body and makes it visible. It is this recognition in the weapon which is the enduring one. The physical act of sewing into the skin or puncturing the flesh relies on our perception of the pain generated to make our understanding of the hurt real. It could be argued that people who experience the pain of loss also externalize their pain through "the language of agency"

[53]Elaine Scarry (born 30 June 1946), a professor of English and American Literature and Language, is the Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics and the General Theory of Value at Harvard University. Her interests include Theory of Representation, the Language of Physical Pain and Structure of Verbal and Material Making in Art, Science and the Law. Available http://partners.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/20001119mag-scarry.html Accessed [2010/01/30].

which requires the body being acted upon (Scarry, 1985:16). In both instances the self-inflicted wound becomes the marker of a changed subjectivity.

Scarry furthermore speaks of "pain's triumph" in that it brings about "this absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of the other persons" (1985:4). For the person in pain it is a real sensation and is "effortlessly grasped", for the other person it is indefinable and may exist as doubt in the mind. Thus pain becomes unsharable; on the one hand it cannot be denied on the other it cannot be confirmed. Scarry goes on to say that pain "ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language. "English" writes Virginia Woolf, "which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear has no words for the shiver or the headache […]" (ibid). In fear and in love it is "for" and "of" something outside the body. Physical pain has no referent "it is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language" (1985:5). Unsharability is central to a reading of Farber's masquerade where there is no sense of reality in the trauma enacted. We align ourselves with the person being "tortured" only to discover that the torturer and victim is one and the same person. On another level we understand that the pain is not real since this is a masquerade. This duplicity further complicates Farber's work which asks that we empathise yet our natural instinct is either to recoil in horror at the imagery or to deny that the pain is there in the first place. We cannot share in Farber's pain because we do not believe it is there.

In an attempt to interpret the need for this transformation it is important to make a distinction between self-mutilation and body modification. The mental health use of the term expresses the self-mutilated body as the suffering self. Psychologist Corinee Sweet finds "what we do on the surface nearly always has some deep structure behind it. The expression of anger may be impossible, so we turn it on ourselves" (Featherstone, 2000: 294). Wendy Lada is also quoted as saying that the various forms of body modification derive from some deep seated psychological urge which has now found a socially acceptable avenue for self expression in the form of tattooing, piercing and branding

(ibid: 295). Body modifiers take offence at the suggestion that they are mentally ill. They interpret their practices as asserting self-control over their own bodies and embrace the "rush of pain". Women body modifiers in particular claim to be redefining beauty and resisting men's views about how women should look, thus claiming self-ownership over their own bodies.

In the West, tattooing was until recently commonly considered to be a practice executed on the fringe and signified defiance of social conventions[54]. It was seen as anti-establishment and defined individuals as separate from their own social group. The permanency of tattooing is perhaps seen as a resistance against the superficiality of our consumer culture. As Featherstone notes, as corporeal expressions of the self, tattoos become "contemporary body projects; as attempts to construct and maintain a coherent and viable sense of self identity through attention to the body, more particularly the body's surface" (1991:53). There is a duality in the tattoo, "[i]t becomes part of the wearer's skin, but it also bears the qualities of the superficial, the superimposed' (Marczak, 2009:1). Alphonso Lingis claims that "[i]t's superficiality offends us; its permanence alarms us. We are not so much surfaces as profound depths, subjects of hidden interiority, and the exhibition of subjectivity on the body's surface is, at least, from a certain class and cultural perspective, "puerile" (his word) (Grosz 1994:138). He also makes the distinction between the primitive body and the civilised body, comparing the "sign-ladenness" of the former with the mystery of the latter, and makes the observation that "where the savage wears his identity on his skin, 'civilised society' wear their identity on the inside" (ibid:140). However, many non-Western cultures have a differing view of this need for a hidden interiority and see tattoos as an affirmation of their subjectivity. Whatever the merits or problems of Lingis' depiction, it is clear that inscription takes place in our culture as much as in others, often in ways according to sex, class, culture and race. These would include coercive inscriptions of cultural and personal values such as body shape, make-up, clothing, hair-styles, personal grooming and height and of course gender and skin colour. Within our Western society the

[54] This perception seems to be changing. A 2007 Harris poll reported that over 40% of Americans ages 25-40 had at least one tattoo, as compared to 3% 20 years ago (Martin 2010: 2)

body has always been presented as an object ready for alteration especially in make-overs which convince that with enough money and effort the body can be transformed to meet the standards of beauty laid down by our consumer culture. The body as garment becomes something which can be changed at will. The skin becomes a register of agency and for many it is akin to an external fabric which can be fashioned according to personal taste. Farber notes: "As a by-product of postmodernity, skin could thus become the ultimate medium for self-expression […]" (2006: 248).

From what I have been able to gather there appear to be two different types of tattooees: those who choose to tattoo their bodies purely for aesthetic purposes[55] and those who do it for symbolic reasons, however, in both cases it represents the transition and hybridization in the process of becoming. In a study published in *Archives of Dermatology* it was shown that the main purpose for getting a tattoo included that it "helped me feel unique" [44%], "helped me feel independent [33%], and "made life experiences stand out for me" [28%], indicating that the tattoo supports internal expectations of uniqueness and self-identity (2008:3). The tattooists work needs to be read in this social context. Erica Reischer notes that we cultivate our bodies which then become "the indexes and expressions of the social world we inhabit" (2004: 299). In her essay titled: "The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World" she looks to explain the "symbolic" and "agentic" body (ibid). The first focuses on the body as a conduit for social meaning, an icon of social values and a mechanism of power and control. The second sees the body as an active participant in the social world and becomes the site for social construction and performance of gender. It follows then that the agentic self is able to appropriate the symbolic body to his/her own ends.

As tattooing forms such an important focus in my creative work I feel it necessary to briefly investigate some of its symbolic significance in different places and different cultures and how it has impacted on Western culture. The tattoo has different meanings in different cultural contexts. The

[55] Laser removal practitioners have pointed out to me that it is only those people who tattoo for aesthetic purposes who later have regrets and want to have their tattoos removed.

human skin becomes the canvas on which differences are written and there is no common vocabulary to decipher the tattoo. Schildkrout describes the volatility of the body markings in Western Europe and their capacity to mean one thing in one period and then shift to mean another through time. She notes: "The Greeks, Romans, Celts used tattoos "for penal and property purposes" which later changed in early Christendom to signify religious observance (ibid: 325). Based on this it is thought that tattooing in Europe predated the age of exploration around the sixteenth century and that of the Cook expeditions two centuries later. Through Greek medieval times tattooing was variously used to mark outlaws, nobility, insiders and outsiders, soldiers and slaves. Irish Literature shows not only evidence of tattooing as a cultural practice but as a means of passing God's word through generations through tattoos inscribed on the bodies of Saints, like the stigmata of St Francis of Assisi (ibid:325). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries marking the body with celestial inscriptions was common practice, though not sanctioned by the church. Archeological discoveries support the idea that far from being an import into Europe, tattooing has a long history on the continent. The first recorded tattoo was that of a man frozen in a glacier near Austria believed to be 4000 B.C. He had approximately 57 carbon tattoos consisting of simple dots and lines on his lower spine, behind his knee and right ankle. A website entry comments as follows:

> The tattoo has had so many different functions throughout history that it is hard to come up with a definitive list. Tattoos have been used as rites of passage, to mourn the dead, as decoration, for protection, to harness natural magical powers, to proclaim membership in a group, to proclaim one's defiance of social norms, to heal the mind/body split, as punishment, and to record the events of one's life (Marczak, 2009:1).

It is significant therefore that the tattoo which the West ascribes to the "other" is in fact very much part of its historical culture.

In non-Western societies, bodily transformations involving tattooing, scarification or painting are rooted in rituals of transformation. The French anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Levi Strauss described the body as a surface waiting for the imprintation of culture: "The purpose of Maori tattooings is not to imprint a drawing onto the flesh but also to stamp onto the mind all the traditions

and philosophy of the group" (Schildkrout, 2004: 321). In his monumental work on tattooing in Polynesia, British social anthropologist Alfred Gell wrote about the "exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorisation of the exterior" (ibid: 321). He explains that the tattooed skin not only negotiates between the individual and society and between different social groups, but also with spirits and the divine. As mentioned earlier this is not to say that Western culture does not have its own form of signification. Levi-Strauss wrote about "mask cultures" where masks replace tattoos as the mark of culture.

Although tattooing increased in popularity after the invention of the electric tattoo machine, it was not until the 1960's that the popularity of tattooing in popular culture radically shifted. In 1998 Rubin refers to a "tattoo renaissance" which saw a swing in many aspects of Western tattooing (ibid: 320). Tattooists became tattoo artists, and badge-like images in some cases became full body tattoos where the artist began to work with the contours of the body. Enid Schildkrout points out that as more and more middle class people were tattooed and as artists with formal art training in other media entered the profession, the tattoo has gained new respectability and people have begun to collect tattoos as works of art[56]. Part of this development saw mainstream institutions being asked to recognise tattooing as an art form (ibid: 335). Schildkrout makes the observation that this surge in tattooing and body art in the West may have evolved as a response to the dematerialization of art, by making the body matter:

> As various kinds of social movements, from women's liberation to punk, to neo-tribal, to Goth used body art as a way of affirming identity, tattooing, piercing and other forms of body modification crossed class boundaries and became common among people who would never have considered it, and moved into media as part of celebrity culture and fashion. By the turn of the millennium, tattoo became a fashion statement and had in some quarters […] become disassociated from bikers, seamen, and carnival performers who had once claimed it as their own (ibid)

[56] In 2008 a Swiss man sold his Virgin Mary Tattoo for the sum of $260 000- 00. When the Seller dies, the tattoo will be removed and given to the buyer. The tattoo which took 35 hours was created by Belgian artist Wim Delvoye. Available http://eplay.typepad.com/eplay_online_sports_fanta/2008/09/swiss-man-sells.html Accessed [201011/11].

The violence in the act of tattooing has become the focus of my practical work. Farber too points out that critical to an understanding of her work is the creation of new subjectivities through traumatic interventions (Law-Viljoen, 2008:17) and it is this aspect of self imposed trauma through the act of permanently inscribing into the skin that I investigate in various instances.

French performance artist Orlan uses the same aesthetic of changing the body to become congruent with changes in the self. In 1990 Orlan began a project called "the Reincarnation of Saint Orlan" in which she underwent a series of nine operations to redesign her face and body. Through plastic surgery and drawing on facial features from Judeo-Christian iconography and Greek mythology she reinvented her own appearance. The tenth operation was designed to alter the slope of her nose to make it resemble the parrot-like nose of King Wapacal. Her appropriation of Judeo-Christian iconography also included the featuring of blood and its association with sacrifice and transformation in her documentations of these procedures (Featherstone, 2000:187). Orlan claims that her work is not intended to replace the classical body with the grotesque but as an investigation into oppositions: "All my work is based on the notion of 'and': the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the public and the private" (Featherstone, 2000:9). In much the same way as Farber's 'monstrous misfit', her body modifications are an affirmation of 'self'. Julie Clarke in her essay "The sacrificial Body of Orlan" suggests that Orlan is influenced by her Lacanian psychoanalyst Eugenie Lemoine-Luccioni who remarks:

> The skin is deceptive […] in life one only has one skin […] there is an error in human relations because one never is what one has […] I have an angel's skin but I am a jackal […] a crocodile's skin but I am a puppy, a black skin but I am white; a woman's skin but I am a man; I never have the skin of what I am. There is no exception to the rule because I am never what I have (Featherstone, 2000:9-10)

Perhaps it is this search 'to be the skin of what I am' that motivates individuals to inscribe their bodies, whether in the form of tattooing or other body modification.

At an early stage in my engaging with this subject matter I attempted to document the process of tattooing and also collected all the evidence that was being disposed such as needles, gloves,

tissues etc. I discovered the work of French artist Sophie Calle, described as a self-styled ethnographer, who set out in her earlier works to investigate the subjectivity of those who pry on the lives of others (Susanne Kuchler in Coles, 2004:94). To reacquaint herself with Paris after being abroad for seven years Calle followed strangers around the city. She soon discovered that observing their behaviour provided information with which to construct their identities. This bears some similarity to Farber's constructed identity which creates a reality contingent on context. Both artists express a 'truth' which reveals other truths otherwise disregarded. Using chance events in ordinary life, Calle creates a narrative through performances which she initiates to make the connection between art and life (Nicola Homer, 2009:1). Typically, Calle's installations are presented in the form of photographs, lists and text which I chose to a certain extent to adopt as my modus operandi for my own creative work.

In my investigations I accept that for various reasons the stories may not be truthful and that the narratives related to me may have distortions and exaggerations which could be deliberate or 'fiction become fact'. American author and critic, Mary McCarthy, when referring to her autobiography *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood (1957),* claims that on the one hand her story is the truth because it really happened but "on the other hand the fictions she creates to cover the gaps in history and memory have come to fit so neatly in her narrative that they attain the status of the remembered" (Cited in Hossack, 2008:21). This I felt was especially true of one of the tattooees I interviewed. Juan lost both his parents to cancer at the age of seven and explained that his tattoos are a testament to his ability to cope. His images are based on Terry Pratchett's book *Mort* a novel set in Discworld which takes a satirical look at death. Juan explains that the Grim Squeaker (a rat) which he had tattooed onto his arm was "his conscience" (his words). He lives by the mantra "this too shall pass". As his tale unfolded I had an uncomfortable feeling that he was not being 100% honest with me. I realise that it was not my place to question and pry into his life and that it would be less invasive for me to construct a 'truth' or reality, or rather to accept his 'truth' as his mask.

In approaching my project of examining the process of tattooing as a form of social inscription and a rite of passage I decided to focus on documenting individuals who had undertaken to have themselves tattooed and to investigate the reasons behind such acts of indelible inscription. My approach was therefore strictly a form of documentary photography but I also resorted to cropping, framing and compiling groupings of images in specific ways so as to direct the reading of them. In some cases I provided text which would sketch the context of an individual's decision to be tattooed and in other cases the text would have no immediate bearing on the photographed person, or else an oblique one. *Antonio* is a case in point. From my discussions with him I gathered that he spoke from a very fundamentally religious position, so much so that he indicated that he did not even accept the theory of evolution. Below the diptych representing him and his tattoos I added the quote: "Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh, nor print any marks upon you. I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:28, New King James Version). Though a cynical inclusion on my part, it provokes a question towards his fundamentalist beliefs in choosing to engage in tattooing which is clearly forbidden in biblical text. I leave it to the viewer to interpret. In other cases I have masked the narrative, thus ensuring a degree of privacy. (To be discussed later). Words may therefore offer another layer towards interpreting the works.

These photographic groupings offer a perspective on the pain endured and in some instances also the emotional pain that seems to motivate the redefining of an identity by way of tattooing. The materiality of skin becomes a site for communicating something to others. My fascination is also with the permanence of the tattoos and what drives the commitment towards executing such indelible inscription. The often closely cropped photographs of detail of tattooed skin and the resultant swelling and bleeding attest to the traumatic nature of these permanent inscriptions. These photographs do not only capture information. Through the close-cropping and the juxtaposition of images they also construct and reflect on my experience of meeting these individuals during their process of tattooing and/or beyond. In presenting several of these inscriptions at the point when they have just been made and the skin is tender and bleeding, the visceral nature of these images will

inevitably result in a strong and immediate response by the viewer. As in Farber's photographs, these images at times zoom in on the trauma of the act but also function as a form of portraiture. In empathizing with the subjects being tattooed we may become to a certain extent emotionally engaged. In a much quoted passage from *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes elaborates on a form of 'touch' that a photograph can evoke which he then links to the notion of skin:

> From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here […] A sort of umbilical cord links the body to the photographed thing to my gaze: light though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed (2000:80-81).

The photographic image of tattooing and the resultant trauma to the skin seems to dramatize this connection even further through its explicitness.

The tattoo often operates as a metaphor to reference the need to break with socially constricting norms and to affirm identity, especially in an environment where there is social pressure against individuals signifying their own bodies. MacCormack talks of volition, the ability to make conscious decisions or choices which emphasise the ability to take control of one's own body and make one's own skin unique[57]. She goes on to say:

> The empowerment of being a tattooed body is not about choosing something taboo or transgressive to inscribe on the body in order to retaliate against strict regimes of signification. Tattooing is not necessarily a form of active will to present a body in relationship with the subject's own volition. The tattooed body problematises binaries of the natural/volitional, surface/interior, discursive and designated (2006:2).

The tattooed body becomes an altered surface and both a site of signification and a "site of analysis by the non-tattooed body" (ibid). The permanence of tattooing is perceived as a resistance against the superficiality of consumer culture and is seen as a construction of a viable self-identity involving a strong "commitment to oneself" (Featherstone, 2000: 5).

As pointed out earlier, there are two basic reasons for tattooing; either it is a symbolic act or an aesthetic choice (not to say that a symbolic choice does not involve aesthetic choice, but the

[57] In contrast to plastic surgery which mutilates people to make them look like copies of each other and Barbie-doll wannabees.

overriding motivation seems to be either or in most cases that I came across). As tattooing becomes more and more mainstream, the aesthetic choice would suggest that it too is joining the "supermarket of style" (Paul Sweetman cited in Featherstone, 2000:55) and can be seen as just another empty signifier more or less floating in a "carnival of signs[58]" (ibid:53). Both reasons become the focus of my project in which I attempt to address the issue of pain, whether emotional and/or physical. Tattooing, scarification and self-mutilation involves individuals who go through extreme pain to redefine their relationship between the self and society through the skin whilst at the same time masking that which lies beneath the troubled surfaces of their lives. I would agree with author and gay activist Christian Klesse who, in trying to account for body modifications, notes: "I make a statement, I've chosen myself. I am part of a culture but I don't believe in it. My body modifications are my way to say that" (Featherstone, 2000:2).

[58] For writers such as Baudrillard, post modern fashion can be characterised as 'a carnival of signs with no meanings attached, an eclectic mish-mash of once potent styles and devices, desperately appropriated from a variety of sources in a vain attempt to lend authenticity to that which is no longer imbued with meaning (Tseelon cited in Featherstone 2000:53)

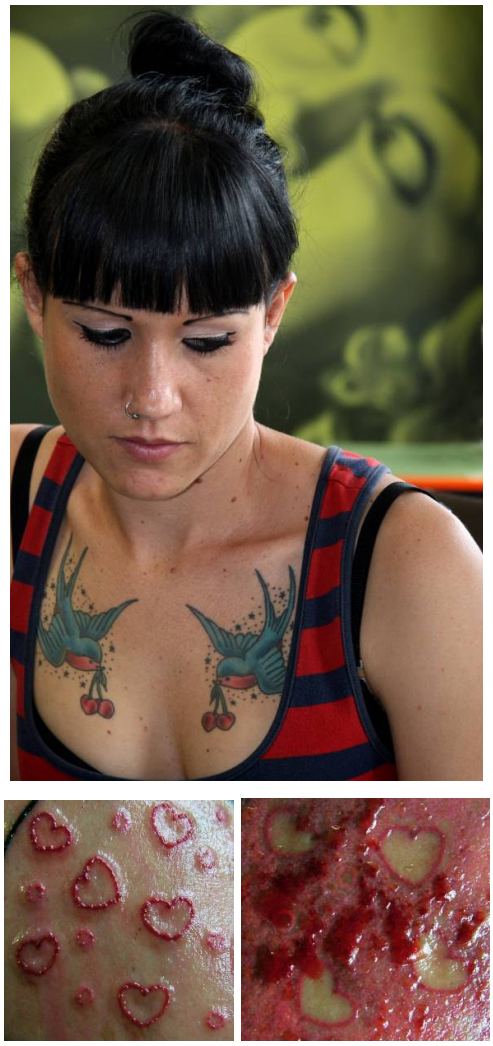


I Love My Zombie, 2010
Fig 9

I will start my discussion on specific works by focusing on those individuals I met who claimed to have themselves tattooed purely for aesthetic purposes. Tattooing is as complex as any form of social creativity and often individuals are unwilling or unable to fully articulate the motivation for their actions. Chelsea is a case in point. In an image of her titled *I Love My Zombie* taken in the tattoo studio *Lil shop o' horrors*, the tattoos on her upper chest are exposed by the dropping of her sleeves while she looks away and is cropped at the level of the eyes. In Farber's portrayal of Bertha Marks' transformation the material process of scarification and insertion signified important changes and here Chelsea's change in subjectivity required the puncturing of the skin with a tattoo needle[59]. The tattoo on her chest shows an arrangement of red roses surrounding a heart which is being torn apart by zombie fingers. She can give no reason for being tattooed and says there is no particular

[59] The tattoo needle is not a single needle but consists of a cluster of anything from seven to nine needles.

relevance to the images she has chosen to be inscribed onto her body other than her affinity for zombies, a person who is or appears to be lifeless, apathetic; a form of automaton. Tattooing then becomes the primary material for her self-expression and may fulfill the need for inclusion into a sub-culture which the individual subscribes to. The image of Chelsea in *I Love My Zombie* is presented with four sheets of carbon tracings hanging in a row below the portrait. These sheets of carbon paper are used in the transferring of the tattoo image to the body and after several uses of the same sheet they leave a layered trace of designs that have been transferred. The resulting 'scribbles' remain as a record of the tattooing process.



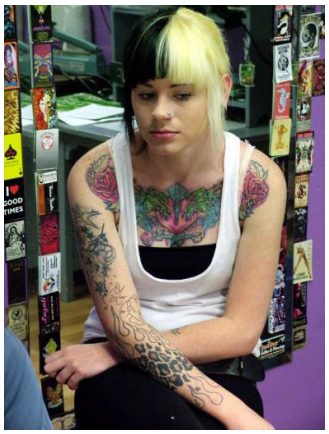
Bleeding Hearts, 2010

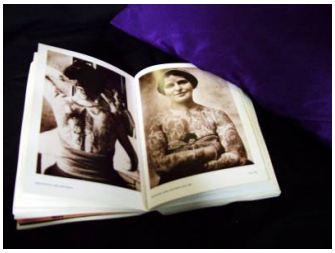
Fig. 10

Tarryn is another young girl who attaches no specific meaning to her tattoos other than finding them attractive and desirable. I met her at *1933 Classic Tattoos* where she had other tattoos done. On one of her legs she had images of ice-cream cones tattooed and on the same leg she also sports a multi-coloured candy striped sucker. She wants her whole leg to be tattooed with various brightly coloured confectionaries and plans her next tattoo to be a colourful cupcake. Her main criterion for choosing

her images is based on them being “cute and colourful,” suggesting that her body is therefore an object for design and adornment and in this work I chose to contrast this aspect of attractive embellishment with the invasive process of the tattooing into flesh. Schechner comments that practices of “[c]utting and bleeding are ritualised actions, sometimes painful and always evocative. The ritualists seek transformation, the artists seek expression, and the teenagers seek empowerment. Or maybe all these groups seek all these things” (2010:7). Tattooing can be similarly viewed in ritualistic terms. Tarryn can be seen as empowering herself through her ability to mark her skin with a self-expressed subjective inscription. In my portrayal of her I chose to juxtapose three images, a portrait of Tarryn and two smaller images of close-up shots of her tattoos whilst in progress. I wanted to highlight the qualities of tattooing and its association with pain by depicting the seeping blood and inflamed flesh (see fig 8 above). The cropping of the image and the blown up scale accentuate the focus on the inflamed skin in stark contrast to the cheerful superficiality of the heart pattern. The strong colour and reflective moistness of the skin further capture the rawness of the tattooing process.





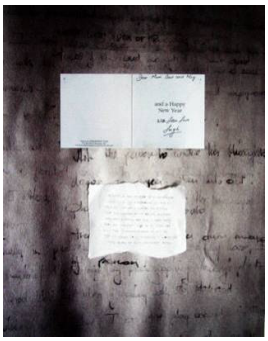


The Collector's, 2010

Fig. 11

In another work focused on Chelsea I chose to include a portrait of Edith Burchett (photographed in London in 1920) which happened to be in an open book amongst the material surrounding Chelsea in the tattooing parlour when I took the photographs of her. Edith was married to George Burchett (1872-1953), 'King of Tattooists', who became one of the most famous tattoo artists in the world. In the book "Memoirs of a Tattooist" (1956) Burchett recalls how at the age of 12 he was expelled from school for tattooing his classmates. He subsequently joined the royal navy at 13. A favourite among the wealthy upper class and European Gentry he also tattooed King George V, King Alfonso of Spain, and King Frederick of Denmark. The fact that royalty would be associated with tattooing comes as a surprise and I considered it significant to include in countering the stereotype surrounding the common association of tattooing with the lower classes, sailors and prisoners. Both subjects are shown with their arms folded, displaying their tattooed chests and arms. Edith smiles at the camera whilst Chelsea looks away. The tattoo styles are very different: on the one hand, the delicate, lace-like Victorian patterns and on the other a contemporary, colourful inscription. Chelsea's tattoos appear to have no apparent theme but seem to represent a kind of a time-line: images which chronicle important events in her life. Atkinson refers to the "flesh journey" which he describes as a means of "intentionally reconstructing the corporeal in order to symbolically represent and physically chronicle changes in one's identity […] over time" (Schildkrout, 2004:337). This is how Chelsea's tattoos seem to function in being both symbolic and agentic; they are a conduit of social meaning and underscore the body as an agent in the world.





Absence, 2009

Fig. 12

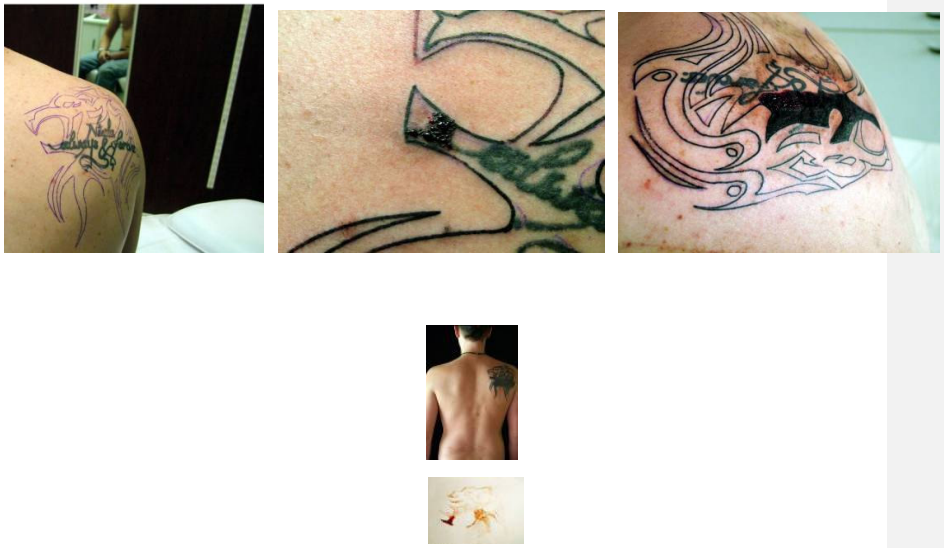
In relation my group of photographs depicting individuals who have chosen to be tattooed for symbolic reasons, Freud's remark on such practices is interesting here: "[…] the demands on the body become ideas in the mind" (Cited in Elkins, 1999: ix). Most of these images of mine do not focus on the pain of tattooing as much as the emotional pain behind the act of commemorating loved ones. Through their actions these individuals share their pain through the "language of agency"

(Scarry, 1985:16). In displaying this set of photographs I also provide a brief narrative, at times somewhat disguised, to point to the private dimension of such inscriptions.

I approached Megan when I noticed the small signature tattooed on her wrist. She explained that it was the signature of her sister Leigh who had passed away in a motorbike accident at Rhodes University. She had mentioned to her mother that she wanted to tattoo her sister's signature onto her body as a form of commemoration. No more was said until one day she came home to find all the correspondence her sister had written to her parents on her desk. She chose the signature on a Christmas card to be transferred to her wrist. The tattoo serves as a tender reminder of her sister and her tragic death. Nietzsche's proposal that pain is the key in creating memory lends support to the notion that skin is a tablet or reminder (Grosz, 1994:131-132), something that I tried to foreground in this work.

A larger portrait of Megan (820 x 550 cm) displaying the tattooed signature of her sister on her wrist is accompanied by a second, smaller image (510 x 400) in which I placed a copy of the Christmas card from which Megan chose her sister's signature as a trace bearing testament to the person who is there no more. The story of her sister's tragic passing appears somewhat masked together with this card in that I typed it on a small sheet of thin paper and subsequently reinscribed the text with a tattoo needle to puncture the paper and render it less legible. It was thus a conscious choice to disguise her story somewhat in respect of her pain. As a backdrop to these two objects I presented a black and white photographic blow up of a page of notes I made whilst researching this work and reflecting on my modus operandi. This initially involved asking individuals to give me their reasons for tattooing their bodies. The penciled text appears erased and is also difficult to decipher. The size of Megan's portrait above this smaller frame requires some distance from which to view the work whereas the smaller frame encourages a more intimate viewing which draws the viewer closer. This photographic portrait underlines both aspects of presence and absence.

Another individual whose story I strongly empathized with was Daryl who had the words "Nicola always and forever" tattooed onto his shoulder as a public expression of his love. After his girlfriend broke up with him he decided to delete her name by covering this tribute with a lion's head. His tattoo thus acts to conceal and forget a relationship in his past and is in this sense the opposite to Megan's commemorative tattoo of her sister. A triptych of three large close-up images (900 x 650 cm) of the tattooing process documents the deletion of Nicola's name. Below this, in a much smaller format, I have juxtaposed two images: the first shows a back torso shot featuring the final cover-up tattoo on Daryl's shoulder and the image below displays the bloody trace of the design on a sheet of roller towel. It serves as a painful reminder of the process of transformation. Again the small format is important in drawing the viewer into a more intimate viewing against which the three large images above are offset in presenting a dramatic close up focus of the tattooed image. In this set of images I chose not to provide any supporting narrative in that the title "*Deleting Nicola"* speaks very clearly in and by itself.



Deleting Nicola, 2009

Fig. 13

Maud de la Forterie's comments on the deliberately detached, frontal representations by Gavin Younge[60] of a group of tattooed prison gang members (recently displayed on an exhibition at the *Circa* Gallery, Johannesburg,) perhaps best describe my own work too. In response to these large portraits she quotes Walker Evans' thoughts on the photographic portrait in which "there is no attempt to capture the reality of 'the real person' by claiming to see through the social mask the individual shows the world, but, rather, to examine the mask just as the person is prepared to wear it" (Younge, 2010:38). The tattoos displayed by the individuals that I have photographed are just such masks, displayed yet also presenting hidden aspects.

I have chosen not to discuss every image on the exhibition but rather to focus on a few that represent the broader concerns of my work. My exhibition also includes a video projection of tattooing in progress. I filmed a tattooing procedure and zoomed in closely to foreground the trauma enacted on the surface of the skin. The penetration of the needle into the soft skin and the constant rubbing and wiping off of ink and occasional bleeding are highlighted whilst the incessant buzzing sound of the instrument continues throughout. As a looped video, the projection affords the viewer a close-up view of tattooing in progress which also accentuates the durational and ritualistic dimensions of such procedures. In all cases that I documented, individuals remarked that the tattooing is a very painful procedure to undergo and it is therefore surprising to discover that, in the majority of cases, individuals return for more tattooing. For many it seems to become an addictive process but no-one seems able to explain why other than to suggest the release of endorphins as a strong motivation in committing to such permanent inscriptions.

Grosz's observation that "Bodies have all the explanatory power of minds" (1994: vii) is central to this research. Farber's insertions into her flesh seem transitory and remain an act of illusion while the tattooees' marks are more permanent, illustrating a strong commitment to a change in subjectivity

[60] Gavin Younge had his exhibition September 2010 at the Circa Gallery. Part of his show comprised a series of large photographs of tattooed inmates).

and affirming a strong sense of self-identity. Both become an act of volition to emphasise controlling the own body and making it unique. As Grosz goes on to say:

> Bodies are fictionalized, that is, positioned by various cultural narratives and discourses, which are themselves embodiments of culturally established canons, norms, and representational forms, so that they can be seen as living narratives, narratives not always or even usually transparent to themselves" (1994:118).

Conclusion

This research has focused on skin and trace and their articulation through material process in selected contemporary artworks. Through this focus it has also addressed issues related to the shifting boundaries and subjectivities of the postmodern body and its ability to act in society. Skin as a covering can signify age, health, race, and gender. It can be touched; it can be read it can be altered. It is the mutability of skin which makes it ripe for cultural inscription and it is this which has become the primary focus of my research.

Farber's project *Dis-location/Re*-Location centers on an enactment of her own family history and by extension the many lives of Jewish-European descent. By examining her work and its engagement with the materiality of skin I have demonstrated how Farber has performed a gendered subjectivity to enact debates around hybridity and cross cultural/racial mix and how she has used the visual surface of flesh as a powerful metaphor to signify this deeper struggle. In enacting the role of Bertha Marks she can be seen to question Victorian notions of sexuality and female decorum which is measured in such menial tasks as sewing and embroidery that Farber redefines "into a form of agency" (Farber in Law-Viljoen, 2008:17). By foregrounding methods of control Farber's work can be seen to comply with the "materialist feminist viewpoint of revealing identity as something that is socially constructed" (von Veh, 2001:5). By way of insertions and cicatrisation, her hybrid is sewn into the surface of her body as she tailors it to conform to Western stereotypes of femininity. I have attempted to show how Farber's enactment of the body as marked can be seen to foreground Jacques Derrida's theories of deconstruction, especially the notion of the metaphor as an unstable "network of references" in which the final closure of meaning is endlessly deferred (Stevens, 1996:38). This allows for multiple interpretations and in her constructing of a hybrid identity in her work, Farber is shown to create a space which allows for a productive ambiguity.

Scars left on the surface of skin are agents of memory that share some of the qualities of photographs in that they are visible signs of events from the past. In my discussion of Farber's use of photography as an appropriate medium in articulating her concerns around skin and trace, I have addressed the indexical nature of the photograph which can always claim relationship, no matter how brief, with that which has already existed. Through the practice of staged photography in the arena of the digital, Farber is able to redraft herself in a way in which boundaries between what is real and illusion become blurred and through this the "play of meanings across the boundaries" (Stevens,[61] 1996:33) becomes part of her masquerade.

I have investigated Farber's enactment of sewing into her own skin as a masquerade where the trauma and pain of isolation, alienation and dislocation are performed through a form of exaggerated artifice. It becomes a representation of pain and as such does not portray the true horror in cutting into the skin; I do not feel her pain. As a result I cannot empathize with Farber's construction and I cannot share in her hurt. In contrast the self-mutilation of the tattooed individuals is real and the physical pain is tangible. The viewer can sense the trauma of the skin and the co-commitment pain of the tattooee. These pictured bodies "force the thoughts about sensation and pain onto the viewer's body" (Elkins, 1999:x). I have brought in Scarry's observations on an association with pain as being one of visualising the tool of torture piercing the flesh, but in Farber's case one is reminded that it is always a fake skin. The weapon, in the case of my subjects the tattoo needle, externalizes the pain and makes our understanding of the hurt accessible.

In the final section of this study I address the practical component for the Masters Degree, namely my exhibition *In/Between: Indelible Inscriptions,* and attempt to link my concerns with my discussion of Farber's work in the previous chapters. My creative research explores the enactment of trauma in the formation of new subjectivities through images of tattoos and I have focused on both the materiality of the body in the enactment of permanent body inscriptions as well as the motivations

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behind such acts. Grosz comments that "[c]icatrisations and scarifications (in my case tattooing) mark the body as a public, collective and social category, in modes of inclusion or membership; they form maps of social needs, requirements and excesses" (1994:140). She adds that unlike messages to be deciphered they are more like a map detailing legible texts and narratives which can be read on the surface. It critiques the notion of the classical body and conventional standards of beauty laid down by patriarchal stereotypes which view the most objectionable aspects of body modification as not only the permanency of the aesthetic but also the pain and violation of the body which presents itself as self-mutilation but which I argue is a form of self affirmation and empowerment. The skin becomes a garment which can be changed to become one with changes in the self. The closely cropped photographs underscore the vulnerability of skin and the pain in tattooing. The scars, in this case the tattoos, form a time-line which continuously charts the past and reminds of the relationship between the skin, the self and responses to cultural and psychological factors.

Though the tattoo is permanent it bears the qualities of the superficial in that it appears on the surface of the skin and it is this sense of in-betweeness which prompted the title to this exhibition. The title *In/Between: Indelible Inscriptions* suggests a border, boundary, dividing line between the internal and external of which the integrity is transgressed when cuts or insertions are made. It also suggests perceived boundaries between genders, self and image, past and future. It is the unstable space between signs, the interval which allows an infinite play of difference.

Through choice the individual has the power to inscribe and define his/her subjectivity through his/her own skin and so "the world presented to my touch imprints itself on me" (Paul Schilder cited in Connor, 2004:34).

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