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On being formed: a self-reflexive view of the subjective body.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts at the College of Creative Arts, Massey University Wellington, New Zealand.

Robyn George
2011

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In *on being formed: a self-reflexive view of the subjective body* I investigate and contest appearance politics as they relate to the overweight, aging, female body. Referencing contemporary artists who confront Western society’s construct of the body, I show that art can play a crucial part in challenging cultural systems that create boundaries between differing bodies. These social systems denote bodies that meet their construct of an ideal body as preferred, and others (such as the overweight) as non-preferred. I argue that society exerts power over the overweight person through panoptic surveillance, and that female attractiveness norms serve as a form of social control through which those whose bodies fall outside of socially constructed ideals are marginalised and stigmatised. I consider how overweight people absorb the affect of social judgement, often resulting in debilitating shame and social isolation.

Through the genres of performance, sculpture and installation, I use a body of visual art to draw metaphors with female aging and appearance, a crucial issue that is often overlooked in contemporary art. I seek to confuse the signification of beauty and disgust through my aesthetically alluring sculptures made from a repugnant material, suggesting that there is a space between beauty and disgust which can be occupied by those with non-preferred bodies. Drawing on intimate autobiographical source material, I perform a limited-duration installation from my embodied experience as an overweight aging woman. This personal engagement, which provides authenticity and emphasises subjectivity, has resulted in meaningful personal transformation, and has affirmed the powerful role art plays in investigating and recasting corporeality.
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### Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On being fat (science, psychology and society)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On being outside (abjection and disgust)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On being heard (personal and political)</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Illustrations

Figure I  page 19
Linda Sim
From: Lead story The Dominion Post, June 14, 2010.
Wellington, New Zealand.

Figure II  page 20
Robyn George
Weigh-in day
7.30 a.m., Monday, October 25, 2010.
Studio digital photograph.

Figures III and IV  page 22
Samples of popular magazine cover pages, 2010.

Figure V  page 24
Beth Ditto
Cover image Love magazine.

Figure VI  page 26
Janine Antoni
Lick and Lather (detail) 1993
7 soap and 7 chocolate self portrait busts, each
bust 24 x 16 x 13 inches.
Collection of Jeffrey Deitch, New York.

Figure VII and VIII  page 28
New Zealand Plunket Baby Record Book
New Zealand Plunket Baby Record Book (detail).
Figure IX  page 31
  Jenny Craig weigh-in progress chart (2000)
  Electronically scanned document.

Figure X  page 32
  Robyn George
  Personal archive: weekly weigh-in (August 2010)
  Studio digital photograph.

Figures XI, XII and XIII  pages 34 & 35
  Robyn George
  Adiposity audit 2000-2010
  Photograph of performance installation
  (February 7, 2011).
  Wood and fat.
  Photographer: Jane Wilcox.

Figure XIV  page 36
  Robyn George
  Little boxes (November 2010)
  M.D.F. wood and paint, dimensions variable.
  Studio digital photograph.

Figure XV  page 38
  Rachel Whiteread
  Embankment (2005)
  14,000 cast boxes.
  Turbine Hall, Tate Modern London.
Figure XVI  
Joseph Beuys  
*Corner of Fat in a cardboard box* (1963)  
Fat, cardboard.  
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.  

Figure XVII  
Joseph Beuys  
*Fat Chair* (1963)  
Fat, wood, metal  
100 x 47 x 42cm.  
Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt.  

Figure XVIII  
25 kg Block of fat and calving knife (July 2010).  
Studio digital photograph.

Figure XIX  
Robyn George  
*Fat rolls 3* (June 2010)  
Photograph (studio proof).

Figure XX  
Robyn George  
*Adiposity audit 2000-2010 (detail x 5)*  
Photographs of performance installation (February 7 2011).  
Fat, dimensions variable.
Figure XXI  page 47
David Cross
*Bounce and Bounce (detail) 2005*
Performance/Installation.
Installation photograph, City Art Gallery, Wellington 2005.
Permission to use image obtained from the artist.

Figure XXII  page 48
David Cross
*Untitled I; Untitled II; Untitled III; Untitled IV* (2005).
Installation photograph, City Art Gallery, Wellington 2005.
Permission to use image obtained from the artist.

Figure XXIII  page 50
Jenny Saville
*Branded* (1992)
Oil on canvas 84 x 72 inches.

Figure XXIV  page 50
Jenny Saville
*Propped* (1992)
Oil on canvas 84 x 72 inches.
Figure XXV  
Mary Duffy  
*Venus de Milo* (1995)  
Photographic still from documentation of performance.  

Figure XXVI  
Yayoi Kusama  
*Self-Obliteration by Dots* (detail) (1968)  
Performance, documented with black-and-white photographs by Hal Reif.  

Figure XXVII  
Valie Export  
Poster to commemorate the performance.  
From: Tate Modern, London.

Figure XXVIII  
Hannah Wilke  
*Intra Venus* series #4 (1992-93)  
Performative self-portrait in collaboration with Donald Goddard.  
Chromogenic super-gloss prints 71 1/2 x 47 1/2 inches each, edition of 3.  
Figure XXIX  
Jo Spence  
*Property of Jo Spence* (1982)  
Black and white photograph, dimensions unknown.  
From: Spence, J., *Putting Myself in the Picture*,  
The Real Comet Press,  

Figure XXX  
Jo Spence  
*Skeleton with Camera* (1991)  
Cibachrome, 11 x 15 inches.  
Bowdoin College Museum of Art.  
From: Bell, S., *Talking Bodies: Sociologist Studies Art's Role in Health Movements*, Bowdoin University, Academic Spotlight, 2008,  

Figure XXXI  
Laura Aguilar  
*Nature self portrait #4* (1996)  
Silver gelatine print, 16 x 20 inches.  

Figure XXXII  
Laura Aguilar  
*In Sandy's Room* (1991)  
Black and white photograph.  
40 x 50 inches.  
Figures XXXIII and XXXIV page 62
Robyn George
*Adiposity audit 2000-2010* (February 7, 2011)
Photographs of Performance Installation.
Photographer: Jane Wilcox

Figure XXXV page 64
Roman Opalka
*OPALKA 1965 1-00* (Detail 1-35327)
Tempera on canvas.

Figure XXXVII page 67
Teching (Sam) Hsieh
*One Year Performance (Cage Piece)* (1978-1979)
- Scratch marks
- Occupying his cell
- Day 1 and Day 365
Photographs of Performance.

Figure XXXVII page 69
Robyn George
*Adiposity audit 2000-2010*
1Eo2 studio space, looking through transition/transformation gap from assembly space into art gallery space.
Photograph of performance installation (February 7 2011).
Photographer: Jane Wilcox.