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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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Abstract

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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Introduction

"The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible."

Allan Kaplow¹

At the outset of my candidature, my investigation focused upon conveying the impact of stigmatisation upon an obese individual, and how body size negatively influences how a person is regarded by others. I wanted to make work that addressed issues commonly overlooked in contemporary art practice, confronting viewers with their judgemental behaviours and revealing the emotions experienced by overweight stigmatised people. I found that, even while my reading was taking me in a detached anthropological direction, my art practice was demanding a more personal engagement. As I drew on autobiographical source material, I recognised that rather than making objective observations of others' situations, my own embodied experience as an aging, post menopausal and overweight woman was insidiously and persistently creeping into the frame. Accepting this and embedding myself within my work has provided authenticity, and has emphasised subjectivity in my research practice.

Through this self-discovery process, and on a very personal level, I have brought to the surface my repressed fear of judgement and stigma arising from having a 'non-preferred' body.² My anxiety has manifested through a ten year long process of self surveillance, the documentation of which has formed a personal archive. My private archive underpins my research project, and locates me as the fulcrum of the artwork. By situating myself thus, I have confronted the shame I felt about my behaviour. I have also affirmed that all life has artistic connotations. Everyday life is the fundamental source of meaningful art, and when art and life join as simultaneous processes, as in this project, the boundary between them blurs to positive effect.

¹ From: Hoffmann, J., & Jonas, J., Perform, Thames & Hudson, London, 2005, p 11.

² In her text *The Threshold of the visible world*, Kaja Silverman uses the term 'non-preferred body' to classify those whose bodies are inconsistent with society's construct of 'normal', and are accordingly stigmatized. In this text she provides a model to assist with loving bodies that are different, shifting their classification away from the disparaging term, abnormal. Silverman, K., The Threshold of the Visible World, Routledge, New York, 1996.

This project has evolved into a 'lifework', encompassing confessions of and investigations into intimate flaws in my character, beliefs and behaviour. Talking about my research practice in this text is synonymous to disclosing my personal characteristics, as my artwork is inseparable from me. In some ways this relationship between my artwork and 'myself' reflects how the obese person feels about their bodies.³ Obese individuals typically believe that most people define them by their physical shape, not their personality, intellect, skills or other qualities which comprise their unique true self.⁴ The disenfranchising relationship between body/object and body/subject is their lived norm. Experiencing a disjunction between their form and subjectivity, they live with a dualistic tension between separateness and intimacy. While knowing that their body comprises a part of their intimate self, they feel distinct from it, "The body is not 'me' but 'with' me, at the same time as the body is inescapably 'with me'⁵. A true self is multidimensional, encompassing mind, soul, spirit, will, creativity and self determination, and is something apart from the body. Using the bear as a surrogate for the body, poet Delmore Schwartz captures this division between the body and the true self in his 1930's poem, *The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me*.⁶ Schwartz's poem exemplifies why defining or identifying the overweight person by their body size is uni-dimensional, and doing so will underscore the schism that exists between their external and internal appearances, the way they appear to the world versus their own self-perception.

My life experiences and those of my family also drive my interest in the obese body and my desire to make art works that are constitutive of the concerns of the overweight. I have a thirty year background as a health professional and a lifelong interest in the impact of disease and disability on the body, and this interest consistently surfaces in my art practice. Also, two of my sisters inhabit either end of the weight continuum (one previously afflicted with anorexia nervosa) and a third is a clinical psychologist specialising in eating disorders; further driving my engagement with weight, and female body image.

³ Linda Anderson uses the example of poet William Wordsworth (1770 -1850), whose autobiographical texts were inscribed as belonging to him (his narrative signature), and therefore to his readers his self-representation was inseparable from him. From: Anderson, L. R., Autobiography, Routledge, New York, 2001.

⁴ Cahnman, W. J., 'The Stigma of Obesity', in The Sociological Quarterly, 9 (3 Summer), 1968, pp 283-299.

⁵ Bordo, S., Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, p2.

⁶ From Delmore Schwartz's poem The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me in Williams, D., 'Out of Now: the Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh', in Performance Research, 14 (2), 2009, pp 130-131. The complete poem is reproduced in Appendix A.

While the study of obesity, body image and its associated issues are traditionally located within humanities disciplines such as sociology, psychology and medicine, I employ a fine arts methodology in this subject area. I will demonstrate that art can play a persuasive role in challenging power politics surrounding the overweight body. A critically attuned and experimental artistic practice is an ideal mechanism to visually startle, engage and transform our understanding of the body. I will use the specific genres of performance, sculpture and installation to investigate the notion of the overweight, aging female body, and to engage with and contest appearance politics.⁷ I will show how 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. And I will use a body of visual artwork to examine the relationship between the live body (my own) and the materiality of sculpture, exploring the important issue of female aging and appearance often overlooked in contemporary art.

The artwork, entitled *Adiposity audit 2000-2010*, consists of four hundred and fifty three sculptures moulded from animal fat. The sculptures, with their skin like folds and crevices, are body allegories informed by my reaction to my own body. Each sculpture accurately weighs a pre-determined amount that replicates changes in my own body weight as recorded every week from 2000 to 2010. Pristine white wooden 'bar-graph' boxes support the sculptures, with the height of each box correlating to the weight of its sculpture. The boxes are arranged in a calendar grid formation with each box denoting a designated week for the past ten years. I embed myself in the work (avowing its' autobiographical source), enacting a limited-durational installation of the pieces; a repetitive and disciplined performance which replicates the artwork's exhaustive and exhausting processes and provenance. I install *Adiposity audit 2000-2010* in a space where the layout, functionality and history of the room contribute to the work's reading and transformational goals. Through the subtle use of minimalism, display, aesthetics and my own persona I avoid didactic, strident or illustrative statements, and offer a sophisticated and compelling argument for recasting corporeality.

⁷ The politics of appearance refers to culturally constructed mores, behaviours, paradigms and values relating to appearance formed by a network of political influencers which includes commercial, economic, medical, access to power, and access to resources, which impact on individuals or groups. Weitz, R. (Ed.), *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior* (2nd ed.), Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 2003, p 133.

For my research, I define 'overweight' as minimum obesity, and 'obesity' as maximum overweight, using the terms interchangeably. This is because in interactional situations, the stigmatising response to overweight people is much the same as it is to those who meet the more formal classification of obese.⁸ In addition, while obesity is not gender specific, I have focussed on women in my research, since I have authentic experience with the overweight female form. I acknowledge that my art practice and life are informed by my feminist forebears, and recognise the feminist political issues that underscore body dysmorphia and the politics of appearance.⁹ However, I am not adopting an overtly feminist approach in this work as I feel it could dominate and divert from the central issues the work addresses.¹⁰

⁸ Cahnman, W. J., 'The Stigma of Obesity', in The Sociological Quarterly, 9 (3 Summer), 1968, pp 283-299.

⁹ Women's lives are significantly affected by their appearance: culturally constructed 'attractiveness' is a form of social power that advances opportunities for those who conform (for example, employment opportunities, marital prospects, friendships, and higher salaries) and disadvantages those who don't. Weitz, R. (Ed.), The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior (2nd ed.), Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 2003.

¹⁰ In this text I will not engage in an analysis of the way the two sexes make performance art relating to the body. Suffice to recognise that while female performance artists such as Ana Mendieta and Mariana Abranovic traditionally place more emphasis on the vulnerable, used, frail or imperfect body, male performance artists such as Chris Burdon, Dennis Oppenheim and Victor Acconci portray (or parody) their bodies as triumphant, heroic, machismo and indestructible. Writer and curator Lucy Lippard posits that the core difference between the two is a difference in attitude. Warr, T., & Jones, A., The Artist's Body: Themes and Motives, Phaidon, London, 2000, p 252.

Chapter one

On being fat: science and psychology

“No human condition – not race, religion, gender, ethnicity or disease state – compares to obesity in prevalence and prejudice, mortality and morbidity, sickness and stigma.”

American Obesity Association, 2010.

Obesity is justifiably recognized as a pandemic of the Western world. The World Health Organisation identifies that globally there are more than one billion overweight adults, and at least 300 million of them are obese.¹¹ The 2006/07 New Zealand Health Survey found that one in three adults were overweight (36.3%) and that one in four were obese (26.5%).¹² There exists a strong correlation between adiposity and poor health, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and stroke, and certain forms of cancer. History shows that as nations industrialised, consumption of cheap, calorie-dense foods high in saturated fats and sugars increased, and leisure time and physical activity decreased. These lifestyle changes are collectively recognised as key causal factors in the obesity epidemic.¹³

Diet and lifestyle choices are deemed to be within the locus of control of the obese individual, with common opinion asserting that they hold their fate in their own hands. Erving Goffman theorises that this lack of self responsibility is an attribute that leads the obese person to be *“reduced... from a whole and usual person to a tainted or discounted one”*, thus invoking moral judgment and stigmatisation from others.¹⁴ They are branded as gluttons, lazy, unmotivated, negligent, morally reprehensible, and culpable for

¹¹ W.H.O., *Obesity and overweight* [factsheet], <<http://www.who>>, accessed May 2, 2010.

¹² The 2006/07 New Zealand Health Survey found that there has been a rise in obesity in recent decades, from 9% (males) and 11% (females) in 1977 to 20% and 22% respectively in 2003. The survey also found that one in five children aged 2 to 14 years were overweight (20.9%) and one in twelve was obese (8.3%).

¹³ Lower socio economic groups, who have the least disposable income, are over-represented, as they eat cheaper, high calorie food.

¹⁴ Goffman, E., *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1963, p 11. From 1963 when he published his text *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity*, Erving Goffman has been regarded as the oracle of stigma theory and

their own situation. They are shamed. Shame piggybacks on guilt, and it is a useful method of punishing someone for breaching society's rule. Unlike guilt, which focuses on acts, shame degrades a person's identity, and highlights their defects. Derision targets the obese person's spoiled identity not their actions (for example 'he is a glutton' rather than 'he eats too much'). Shame and stigmatisation leaves the overweight individual vulnerable to social injustice, unfair treatment, and impaired quality of life.¹⁵ As a primary human emotion, shame is a powerful means by which societal norms are internalised. It signals the disrepair of social bonds, and shapes social behaviour. In this context shame has emerged as a recurrent theme in my research.

A consequence of public stigmatisation of the obese person is self stigmatisation. This is a process, either conscious or unconscious, wherein the stigmatised person internalises blame, hopelessness, and fear of stigmatisation, and accepts diminished expectations both for and by themselves. Michel Foucault explains that the weight of the public gaze becomes internalised to the point that the subject becomes their own overseer, exercising surveillance over and against himself.¹⁶ In my artwork I provide a poignant example of a subject becoming their own overseer through the habitual practice of measuring and recording my weight prior to my Monday morning ablutions. Confessing this ritualistic behaviour through my art practice has resulted in my confronting feelings of personal shame; shame that I am weak, impressionable and susceptible to the pressure to attain the socially constructed ideal body, and

research. His three categories of stigmatising attributes are either flaws in an individual's character (e.g. mental illness or criminal conviction), or 'tribal' stigmas (e.g. race, gender, age), or bodily defects (e.g. physical disability or visible deformity). As medical intervention has improved vastly through the ages and the fear of contagion from rashes (including measles), tuberculosis, leprosy and such like has diminished, Goffman's spoiled body attribute targets those physical conditions that carry with them the perception of personal culpability. These conditions include alcoholism, eating disorders, lung cancer (smokers or not) arteriosclerosis, sexually transmitted disease (particularly AIDS) and at the forefront, obesity. Obesity falls within two of Goffman's attribute categories, as it can be seen to carry both physical and character deficiencies, and accordingly it's victims are prey to intensified stigmatisation.

¹⁵ Puhl, R. M., & Heuer, C., 'The Stigma of Obesity: a Review and Update', in *Obesity*, 17 (5), 2009, pp 941-964. Further, American Public Health academic Dr Peter Muennig theorises that the psychological stress resulting from the stigma may in itself be a causative factor in the pathophysiology of obesity related disease. For example, as a response to chronic stigmatisation, the obese maintain high level of stress hormones such as cortisol, that are also causative in hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and hypercholesterolemia. The stress of chronic stigmatisation may also lead to smoking, over eating, physical inactivity, feelings of social alienation and social anxiety, and results in social withdrawal. Withdrawal from normal activity can't fail to impair the obese person's overall effectiveness, including negatively affecting their relationships, employment and life style. Muennig, P., 'The Body Politic: the Relationship Between Stigma and Obesity-Associated Disease' in *BMC Public Health*, 8:1 28, (April), 2008.

¹⁶ Foucault, M., & Gordon, C. (Eds.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York, 1980, p 155.

shame that I exhibit an obsessive behavioural characteristic.¹⁷ I am also ashamed that I do little as a result of the findings; illustrating that for me, feeling fat is a metaphor for feeling powerless.

I am conscious that writing about my shame perpetuates my self-stigmatisation.¹⁸ This ingrained self denigration is common in overweight people. Puhl and Heuer found that people who lost weight were often reported as describing their 'before' selves as weak and uncontrolled.¹⁹ Self stigma creates feelings of loss of self-esteem and dignity, fear, shame, and guilt.²⁰ This is exemplified by obese Wellingtonian Linda Sim's comments in the lead article in the *Dominion Post*, June 14 2010.

"I know that people are looking at me and they're making judgments... I feel ashamed..." Mrs Linda Sim.²¹

Figure 1:
Mrs Linda Sim

Lead story photograph.
The Dominion Post June 14 2010.



¹⁷ Rose Weitz (2003) describes social construction as a political process through which ideas develop and become socially accepted, and it reflects competing groups' divergent vested interests (for example, the diet industry and medicine) and differential access to power. Weitz, R. (Ed.), *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behaviour* (2nd ed.), Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 2003, p1. Dr Peter Muennig proffers that rather than being solely attributable to adiposity, the obesity epidemic is partially attributable to social constructs of the idealised body image which exacerbates stigmatisation of the obese. Muennig, P., 'The Body Politic: the Relationship Between Stigma and Obesity-Associated Disease' in *BMC Public Health*, 8:1 28, (April), 2008. Muennig further purports that public health campaigns that promote thinness, as opposed to fitness, healthy eating and social acceptance of heavier people, are likely to generate even more harm.

¹⁸ Paradoxically, writing candidly about myself is also a critical sign of self reflexivity, which, through this project, has led to personal transformation.

¹⁹ Puhl, R. M., & Heuer, C., 'The Stigma of Obesity: a Review and Update', in *Obesity*, 17 (5), 2009, pp 941-964.

²⁰ Van Brakel, W. H., 'Measuring Health-Related Stigma—A Literature Review' in *Psychology, Health & Medicine*, (11: 3), 2006, pp 307–334.

²¹ N Newton, K., 'Obese Women Tell of Surgery Letdown', [Lead story] in *The Dominion Post*, Wellington, June 14 2010, p 1.



Figure II:
Robyn George

Weigh-in day
7.30 a.m., Monday, October 25, 2010.
Studio digital photograph.

The media reflects and exacerbates the social acceptability of obesity stigma. In their 2009 review of the stigma of obesity, Puhl and Heuer found that overweight people are consistently treated badly in situational comedies, movies, magazine, advertisements, and news reports.²² The media continuously bombards consumers with images of idealised, 'contained' bodies. When celebrities such as Britney Spears gain weight, denigrating paparazzi (surveillance) images are published, portraying them as figures of derision for their inability to demonstrate self-control.²³ Moral panic about obesity is rampant in the media, with blame consistently placed on the overweight individual's lack of personal responsibility and willpower. This is particularly meaningful as the framing of obesity in the media has a direct bearing on the public's understanding of obesity, which, according to Puhl and Heuer, shapes social norms and negative attitudes about weight.

The fact that popular media images are often airbrushed or digitally enhanced may escape the consciousness of many consumers.²⁴ Like simulacra, these media images are manipulated re-presentations of the original bodies.²⁵ American feminist philosopher Susan Bordo theorises that while it is common knowledge that celebrities such as Heidi Montag have undergone extensive plastic surgery and no longer have their 'real' bodies, media images of their created form are compelling and authoritative, meeting our sense of what is important, what we seek for ourselves, and what we believe matters "today all that we experience as meaningful is appearances".²⁶

²² Puhl, R. M., & Heuer, C., 'The Stigma of Obesity: a Review and Update', in *Obesity*, 17 (5), 2009, pp 941-964.

²³ Paradoxically, the increasing profile of larger celebrities in the media, for example Beth Ditto, Sophie Dahl, and Geraldine Brophy, may lead to normalizing obesity in the eyes of the public.

²⁴ There are web sites such as *Photoshop Disasters* <<http://www.ps.disasters.com>> dedicated to the exposure of digital enhancement of images.

²⁵ Simulacra, according to Jean Baudrillard, can be likened to when a territory initially provided a model for a map, and then over time the map provided a model for the territory. The map is the simulacra, not the real, and in the era of the 'hyper-real', the distinction between the territory and the map (the real and unreal) has blurred. Baudrillard, J., *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1994, p 1.

²⁶ Bordo, S., *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, p 104.



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

The social imperative to reduce the liability, financial and personal costs associated with poor health related to obesity is difficult to dispute. My healthcare background and life experience have provided me with numerous examples of this imperative. However, the largely arbitrary normative standards of ideal size and shape as promulgated by the fashion, health and fitness, cosmetic surgery and diet industries, is debilitating. As Bordo attests, one has only to consider the prevalence of body transformation or aesthetic rearrangement practices including exercise addiction, eating disorders, and 'poly-surgical' cosmetic surgery addiction.²⁷

Performance artist Beth Ditto (born Mary Beth Patterson 1982) refuses the pressure to conform to these social paradigms, discourses and mores.²⁸ Subverting the politics of appearance, Ditto has actively resisted the defining brand of obesity.²⁹ The flamboyant singer/songwriter and lead vocalist in the American Indie group *Gossip* describes herself as a 'fat feminist lesbian from Arkansas'.³⁰ Lauded for her support of positive body image, Ditto openly celebrates her size twenty two, fifteen stone body. In 2007 she posed naked on the cover of the inaugural copy of *Love* magazine which promised never to publish images of 'sample' body shape.³¹ Ditto has also entered the fashion industry with her own designs for 'girls with differing styles, shapes and sizes' in defiance of the socially constructed boundary between preferred and non preferred bodies.³²

²⁷ Ibid., p 248.

²⁸ Another example of performance artists supporting fat pride is *The Padded Lilies*, a troupe of overweight women who perform water ballet /synchronized swimming. Based in California, they use their fat bodies in promotion of fat acceptance. They believe they were genetically predisposed to being fat, and they are 'normal' as they are. They have appeared on *The Tonight Show*, and have been featured in magazines including the *British Medical Journal*. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk>> accessed 4 June 2010.

²⁹ I do, however, question the viability of Ditto's strategy of resistance to and subversion of beauty codes. It could be argued that capitalism has niche demographic markets which can accommodate a Ditto or two, and her approach is a marketing exercise or commercial strategy.

³⁰ <<http://www.gossipyouth.com>> accessed 1 June 2010.

³¹ <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk>> accessed 1 June 2010.

³² The wider fashion industry however, plays a significant role in the stigmatisation of the obese. For example, even though 65% of women in New Zealand are believed to be size 16 or over, most women's clothing shops only sell up to size 16, and those with bodies larger than that have to resort to the stigma laden 'plus size' shops.



Figure V:

Beth Ditto
Cover image *Love* magazine.
Spring/Summer 2009.

How is it, then, that I and other educated, informed but overweight individuals take on board the judgement of others? In the polite middle class, educated, New Zealand society I inhabit, internal and external influencers remind me that my body does not conform to society's construct of the ideal. In her book *The Transmission of Affect*, Teresa Brennan describes how an individual absorbs feelings of judgement from others. Brennan believes that emotions and energies can be transmitted between bodies, and can enter directly into another.³³ She describes affect as being the constant communication between an individual and their surrounding physical and social environment.³⁴ Accordingly, Brennan would suggest that even if I have good and logical reasoning abilities, a sound self esteem and am sheltered from the direct stigmatising behaviour experienced by even larger people (such as inability to gain employment, exclusion from sports teams, or inability to buy clothes in typical stores), I will still unconsciously absorb the paradigms and perceptions of others, and the cultural codes of the society I inhabit.

Another mode of absorbing the effect of stigmatisation utilises 'micro-power', as described by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Foucault explains micro power as a set of forces that establish positions and ways of behaving that influence people in their everyday lives.³⁵ He posits that people don't consciously consider how they act out their bodily selves; their bodies behave instinctively without their awareness. Childhood instruction and socialisation in accepted (and often gender specific) behaviour, imprints social rules on their bodies, and guides their bodily actions. Our need to constantly monitor our own bodies, feelings and actions is, according to Foucault, driven by this imprinting socialisation, influencing us to make ourselves the subject of our own panoptic gaze.

Multi disciplinary artist Janine Antoni provides an example of this. In her 1993 performance installation *Lick and Lather*, Antoni gently feeds herself by licking chocolate busts of her own likeness, and uses herself (that is, soap busts of herself), to wash herself.

³³ Brennan, T., *The Transmission of Affect*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2004.

³⁴ Affect is a psychological term used to describe feelings or emotions experienced in response to social environments or interactions. Psychologist Manuel London theorises that affect (feeling and emotional reactions) may precede and influence cognition, and that those individuals with low self esteem (such as those who are overweight) may be more receptive to negative feedback. London, M., *Self and Interpersonal Insight*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1995, p42.

³⁵ Danaher, G., Schirato, T., & Webb, J., *Understanding Foucault*, S.A.G.E., London, 2000.

The slow erasing of her features infers 'self removing self', which Antoni describes as a metaphor for love-hate relationships with physical appearances. In her *Art:21 Series 2* segment, she hints at personal issues with self identity "...the problem I have with looking in the mirror each morning and thinking, like, is that who I am?...".³⁶ This self-reflection illustrates that although Antoni's body shape meets the Western ideal of a preferred body, she acts out her bodily self in a manner that is 'written' on her, turning herself into the subject of her own gaze and questioning her own schema.



Figure VI:
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.

³⁶ Sollins, S., Dowling, S., Tatge, C., Shaffer, D., (producers), *Art in the Twenty-first Century: Seasons One and Two*, [two videorecording], Art 21 Inc. and Public Broadcasting Service, U.S.A., 2003.

Prior to the 20th century in Western society, heaviness and obesity were synonymous with wealth and prosperity, success and elevated social status. Obesity could be seen as a proxy measure for affluence and therefore dominance in social hierarchies. However, when advances meant that good nutrition was available to all social strata, fatness was perceived by the upper-echelon as a life choice available to all. The elite in society sought to distinguish themselves, so eating as a way of showing wealth and prestige was replaced with other forms of acquisitions such as jewels, paintings, and luxury houses.³⁷ Thus thinness replaced obesity as the proxy measure for affluence for the upper-echelons of society.

However, as thinness still generally suggested illness (such as tuberculosis) and obesity denoted prosperity, it took until the early 20th century for the link between slimness and social advantage to be widely accepted, and obesity deemed undesirable.³⁸ This change was evidenced by, among other things, increasing numbers of advertisements for diets. As the pace of life in urbanised, industrialised society was speeding up, fatness was a hindrance to efficiency, particularly in factories and industry. Athleticism was admired, and carrying excess weight was seen as a barrier to staying ahead.³⁹ At this time, height-to-weight ratio tables were designed by Western insurance companies who used them to legitimise the charging of higher premiums to overweight people.⁴⁰ These tables were lauded by the medical fraternity for providing empirical anthropometrical measurements from which to make assessment of deviance, and were vigorously promoted. Doctors became adversaries of obesity, the diet industry was increasing, and the preference for slimness over heaviness was now firmly embedded in social consciousness.⁴¹

³⁷ Korbonits, M. (Ed.), Obesity and Metabolism, Karger, Basel, 2008.

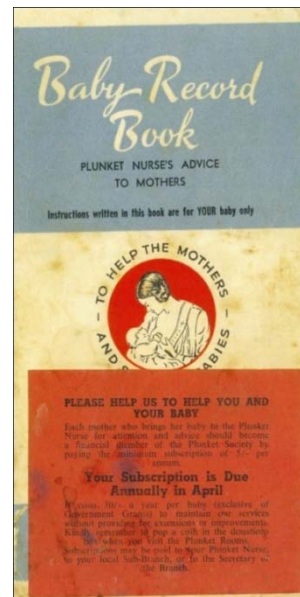
³⁸ Some cultures, such as Polynesian Samoans, are commonly thought to have continued to value obesity as a sign of wealth and prosperity, but research indicates that their massive adiposity is due less to their cultural values, and more to their efficient metabolisms which produce rapid adipose-tissue growth. During early days of Polynesian exploration and settling, those with this predisposition had increased survival rates. This genetic predisposition coupled with rapid dietary and physical activity changes caused by modernisation is most likely to have led to their current obesity issues. McGarvey, S. T., 'Obesity in Samoans and a Perspective on its Aetiology in Polynesians', in American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, 53 (1991), 1991.

³⁹ Korbonits, M. (Ed.), Obesity and Metabolism, Karger, Basel, 2008.

⁴⁰ Insurance companies deemed that overweight people carried greater mortality risk than the norm.

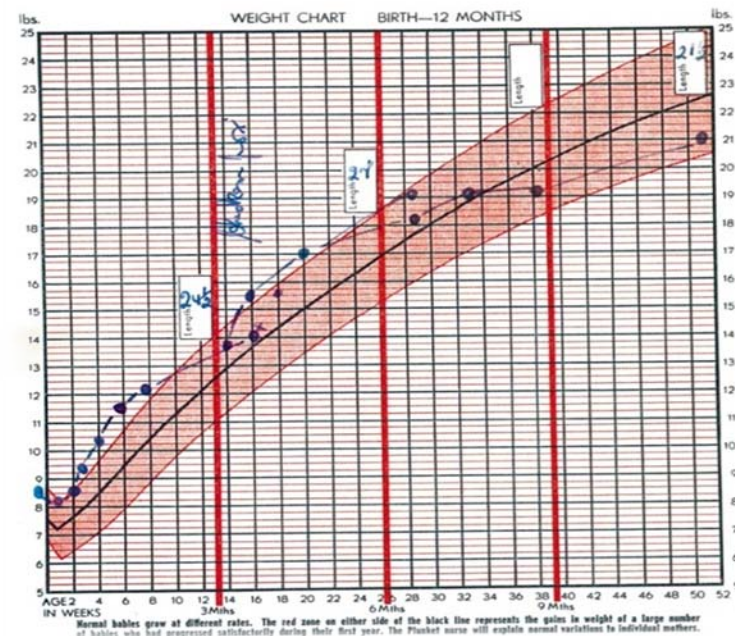
⁴¹ This social consciousness, however, contradicts the ever increasing girths of westernised society over the twentieth century.

To disseminate this paradigm shift toward social intolerance of the obese body, surveillance of the population became a staple mechanism of enforcing control. The goal was to identify (and then manage) those whose bodies didn't conform to socially constructed body size ideals, and therefore were disqualified from being fit and proper members of the social order. Starting at birth our bodies were, and still are, weighed and measured; observations made and then recorded on anthropometrical graphs. Every visit to a health practitioner or school clinic remains punctuated by statistical measurement, tests and assessment, comparing us to the standard norm. I clearly recall as a young mother anxiously awaiting the Plunket Nurse's visits, hopeful she would pronounce that my child had met weight and height milestones, and thereby prove that I was a good and proper mother and he was a 'normal' child.⁴² The prescribed norm parameters were illustrated by a wide swath on the graph in the *Plunket Baby Record Book*, and deviance from this denoted a keenly felt failing in me as a new mother and/or my child.



Figures VII and VIII:

New Zealand Plunket Baby Record Book.
New Zealand Plunket Baby Record Book (detail).



⁴² Dr Frederick Truby King started the *Plunket Nursing Service* in New Zealand in 1907 to support mothers with childcare advice and practical help, and to provide guidance on good nutrition, with the aim of reducing child mortality. The *Plunket Society* still functions across New Zealand, providing for the development health and wellbeing for children under the age of five. <<http://www.plunket.org.nz>> accessed 20 December 2010.

In his books *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963) and *Abnormal* (1974-1975), Michel Foucault aligns these surveillance techniques employed by health institutions with the panopticon architectural model of functioning designed for penal institutions by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. The panopticon prison design allowed for every prisoner to be observed from a central tower.⁴³ The logic was that the best way to manage the mass of prisoners was to make them feel subject at any time to the authorities' 'gaze', a gaze that did not belong to one guard, but the whole institution, and thereby creating a system of social control.

Foucault calls panoptic surveillance a 'generalizable' model of functioning present in many institutions in society, including schools and hospitals.⁴⁴ Health practitioners have permission from society to monitor, assess and intimately gaze upon our bodies, providing them with the most socially and institutionally privileged knowledge of the body.⁴⁵ In contemporary society, other institutions deputise for the medical profession, assuming the role of monitor and embodier of the gaze, particularly over the overweight non-preferred body. These institutions include the health and fitness industry. In gymnasiums personal trainers continue the weighing and measuring data collection, and clamp pincers on flesh to estimate Body Mass Indices, adjudicating whether the body meets ideal parameters.

Another institution avidly encouraging surveillance is the diet industry, which has huge international organisations including *Jenny Craig* and *Weightwatchers*, where overweight people seek assistance to attain a culturally prescribed, ideal body. In these organisations surveillance is distilled even further. Every morsel of food is controlled, every step of activity monitored, waists are measured, weight gain or loss is recorded weekly, and photographs (as evidence of the abject overweight body) are taken. Foucault would describe this as an example of descending individualism, wherein the historical order of individualisation is reversed. Previously, the highest in society was the most unique and exposed to the most gaze, for example the grand feudal lord gazed upon by the collective peasant hordes. In contemporary society, Foucault theorises that this order is reversed, with differentiation and increased surveillance targeting the lowest or most vulnerable. The obese fit this descriptor as they are outside the normative

⁴³ This model contrasted with the then common practice of segregation and removal of prisoners to dungeons, or through deportation.

⁴⁴ Foucault, M., *Abnormal. Lectures at the College de France, 1974-1975*, Verso, London, U. K., 2003.

⁴⁵ Danaher, G., Schirato, T., & Webb, J., *Understanding Foucault*, S.A.G.E., London, 2000.

values ascribed by society. They accordingly need things done 'to' them in the form of increased monitoring, assessing and management in order to address their deviant characteristics and help them achieve normality.

Susan Bordo's thinking supports this theory. Bordo describes representation of Western feminine beauty and attractiveness as a tightly managed body, with a slim, smooth, contained body profile.⁴⁶ The inverse is those with fat bodies that bulge, spill over and exhibit a body out of control. Fat bodies portray "uncontained desire, unrestrained hunger, uncontrolled impulse".⁴⁷ Thus the obese individual demonstrates a lack of self control, and needs others, such as weight loss consultants, to manage them closely.

In 2000 I demonstrated acceptance of this judgement through participation in a structured *Jenny Craig* weight loss programme. During my year on the programme I experienced the power of the authorities' 'gaze'. I felt controlled by the programme. It told me what and when to eat and drink, and rewarded my compliance with a brightly coloured weight loss recording chart (figure IX). As an incentive, large photos adorned the institution's walls, celebrating those who had lost weight and now qualified as fit and proper members of society. Assuming the role of monitor and embodier of the gaze, my weight-loss consultant conducted assessments and measurements of my status each Monday. I waited with tense anticipation for my progress report, as achieving my weight loss goal was crucial to my self esteem. I had become the subject of my own panoptic gaze. With each gram lost, I felt closer to attaining the slim, smooth, contained body profile that has come to represent contemporary Western feminine beauty and attractiveness.

⁴⁶ Bordo, S., *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, pp 187-188.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p 189.

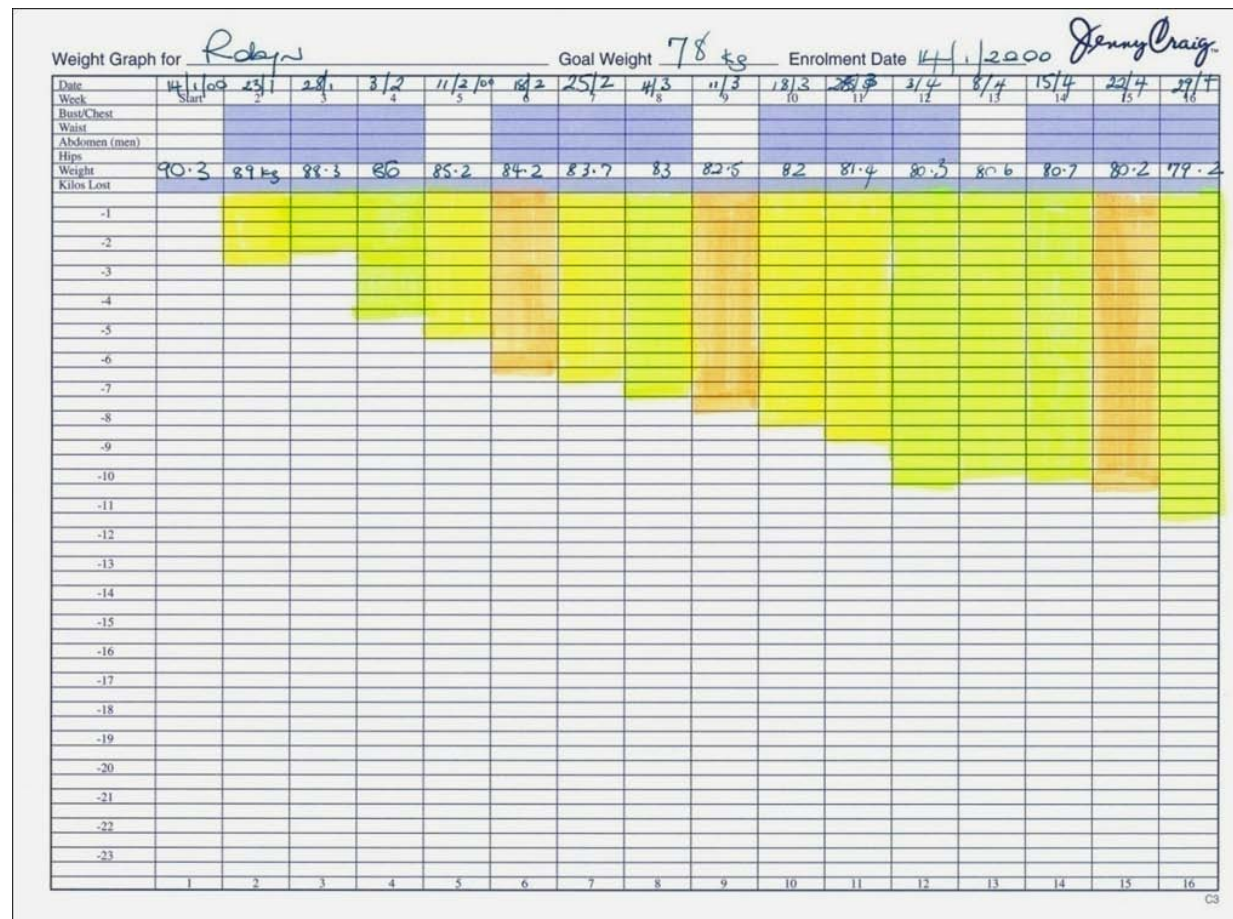


Figure IX:
Jenny Craig weigh-in progress chart (2000).
 Electronically scanned document.

Chapter two

On being outside: abjection and disgust

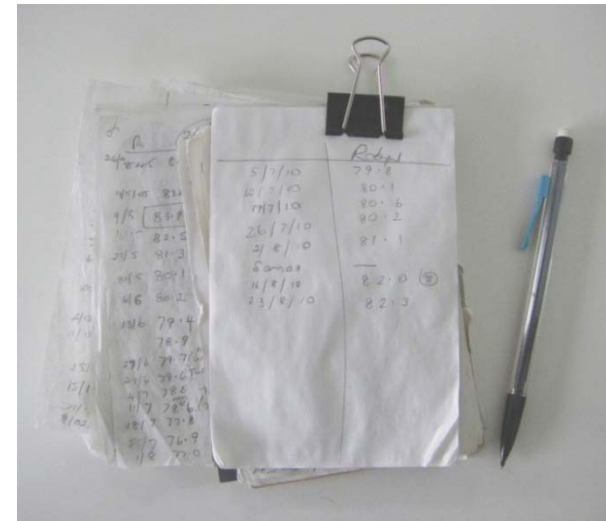
"I must say I admire the courage of the women with less than beautiful bodies who defy convention and become particularly vulnerable to cruel criticism, although those women who do happen to be physically well endowed probably come in for more punishment in the long run."

Lucy Lippard ⁴⁸

Following the completion of the *Jenny Craig* programme and the attainment of my goal weight, I continued the practice of the weekly weigh-in at home. For the past ten years I have religiously (obsessively, ritualistically, habitually, conscientiously - all adjectives appropriate to this behaviour) weighed myself each Monday morning at exactly the same time of day: 7.30 a.m., before my morning ablutions. I then record my weight on a small pad kept in the bathroom cupboard. This small pad is my personal archive, containing anthropometrical data of my weight gain or loss each week for the past ten years.⁴⁹

Figure X:
Robyn George

Personal archive of weekly weigh-ins (August 2010).
Studio digital photograph.



⁴⁸ From: Warr, T., & Jones, A., *The Artist's Body: Themes and Motives*, Phaidon, London, 2000, p 254.

⁴⁹ In the past, when reflecting on this self-surveillance behaviour, I justified it as an internalised habit of assessing and recording formed from years of surgical nursing practice. As a nurse I fixed my medical gaze upon my patients, assessing and monitoring their health status. I would then diligently comply with bureaucratic hospital requirements for comprehensive record keeping by documenting my findings. I now recognise, however, that using this ingrained training as a justification for my behaviour was an attempt to disavow my deeply embedded concerns about the appearance of my aging body.

Since acknowledging my body image issues manifested through self-surveillance, and recognising their basis in appearance politics, I have adopted a politically active stance in my research practice. I have resolved to confront the issue and make my 'private' publically visible through a performative self-exposure installation. Placing my aging, post-menopausal overweight body at centre stage, I will be absorbed within my work; folding the work of art into myself and vice versa, enacting both subject and object for my audience. The materiality of my art objects will disclose the subject of my endeavours, while my enacting their installation will convey the durational, obsessional, laborious values that the installed artwork's static representation can't convey, and will offer viewers a holistic engagement with my non-preferred body.⁵⁰

The form and materials of my art objects signal the overarching concerns of my research. The installation consists of four hundred and fifty three fat sculptures, one for each week recorded over the ten year period from 2000 to 2010. Each sculpture weighs the same as the amount of weight I gained or lost in that given week. The sculptures rest upon pristine, white, box-like bases arranged in a ten year calendar grid formation.⁵¹ These bases, with differing heights, form a continuous bar graph, with the height of the box indicating 'no change in weight' being designated as datum. The datum boxes are 25 cm in height, and each 100 gram gained or lost is depicted as an additional or subtracted 10 cm from datum. Apart from their height, each box base is identical to the other, referencing compliance to society's de-personalising body image standards.⁵²

⁵⁰ The artwork is comprised of sculptures, configured into an installation through a limited-duration performance.

⁵¹ Of the 520 weeks available in the ten year period, I did not record for 67 of them. This is because I was away from my home on those weeks. The missing weeks are denoted by gaps in the installation calendar grid.

⁵² Compliance to society's standards echoes Malvina Reynold's 1962 song about conformance in suburbia, *Little Boxes*.





Figures XII, XIII, and XV

Robyn George

Adiposity audit 2000-2010

Photograph of performance installation (February 2011).

Painted M.D.F. wood and fat.

Photographer: Jane Wilcox.

The colour and form of the bar graph boxes can also be seen in part as references to my personal background. The white colour and 10 cm x 20 cm dimensions are the same as the rectangular ceramic tiles in my bathroom where my surveillance occurs. And the pristine, clean and clinical appearance of the boxes, their organised installation and their likeness to miniature display plinths locates my previous surgical hospital background within my art practice.

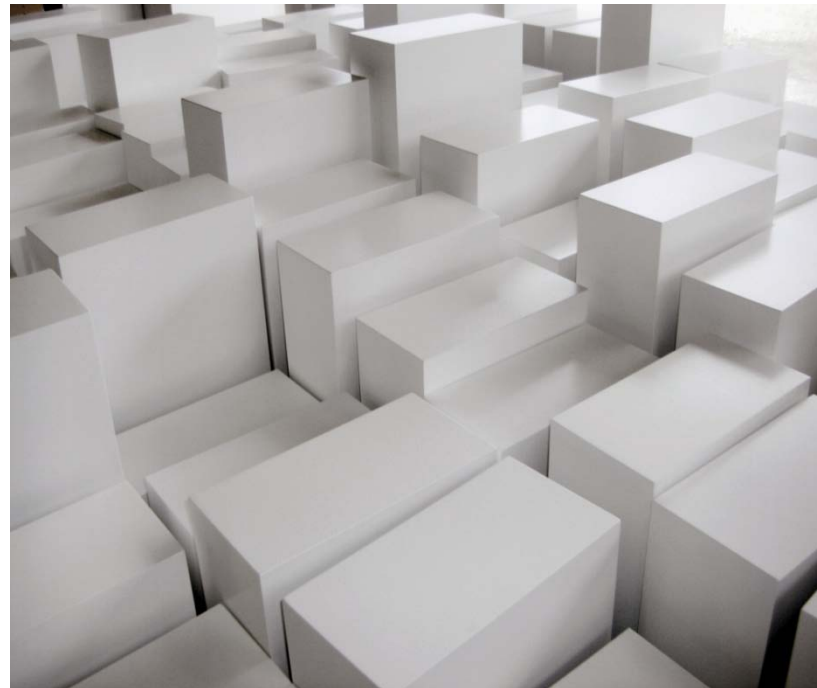


Figure XVI
Robyn George

Little boxes (November 2010)
Painted M.D.F. wood.
Studio digital photograph.

Rachel Whiteread similarly references her personal background in her work *Embankment*, which I viewed in 2005. Like much of Whiteread's work, *Embankment* was cool and minimal, but for me it was accessible through its' social and human resonance.⁵³ Whiteread had made the work following the discovery of a cardboard box in her recently deceased mother's belongings. The box held poignant memories as it had, over the years, been home to a myriad of intimate family processions.

Installed in the cavernous Tate Modern Turbine Hall (London), *Embankment* was a huge 'site specific' installation made from 14,000 casts of the inside of a variety of cardboard boxes. Through her judicious exploitation of volume, scale, absence of colour and simplicity of form, Whiteread provided viewers with a multitude of blank, neutral receptacles for reflective contemplation. The pristine white boxes were anonymous and impersonal, but never-the-less they prompted contemplation about previous contents, the mystery of what sealed boxes contain, and how boxes are used to store intimate possessions. When engaging with the work, I felt encouraged to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, and reflected on how we take unassuming poor material objects for granted, without consideration of their history and unique narratives.

⁵³ Other examples include *Ghost* (1990), the cast inside of a room, and *Holocaust Monument* also known as *Nameless Library* (2000).



Figure XVII
Rachel Whiteread

Embankment (2005)
14,000 cast boxes.
Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London.
Digital Photograph: Robyn George, 2005.



Figure XVI
Joseph Beuys

Corner of Fat in a Cardboard Box (1963)
Fat and cardboard.
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Joseph Beuys also used boxes in many of his works, such as *Corner of Fat in a Cardboard Box* (1963). In this work, the battered cardboard box with one corner containing a wedge of animal fat assumes an abject, almost anthropomorphic quality.⁵⁴ It suggests a soft skin containing a lump of animal or human material, occupying but not filling the interior, and therein changing the nature of the container. As such it differs from Whitehead's *Embankment* in that her boxes are empty spaces for quiet contemplation whereas his box invokes bodily readings.

⁵⁴ I use the term 'abject' in the manner defined by Julia Kristeva in her text *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* (1982). I discuss her concept and how it relates to my research practice in pages 41-43 of this thesis.

In this context, Beuy's *Corner of fat in a cardboard box* has a closer resonance with my own work in that we both use a degenerating corporeal material, fat, to provoke psychological responses and locate thought about bodily issues.⁵⁵ Like Beuys, I believe that people instinctively feel fat relates to inner feelings and bodily processes, and is psychologically impactful. It imbues organic, life-sustaining qualities and as an essential component of our bodies, it comprises part of our primal human essence.⁵⁶ It connects on sensory (smell, touch, taste), cognitive, and psychological levels, and is accordingly a powerful tool to generate responses.

Figure XVII:
Joseph Beuys

Fat Chair (1963)
Fat, wood, and metal.
100x47x42cm.
Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstndt.



⁵⁵ Although fat had not been previously considered worthy of art, from the late 1950s Joseph Beuys used it frequently. Talking about his work, Beuys stressed that he was more concerned with generating thought (which he deemed in itself a sculpture) and he used poor materials including fat, felt, honey, blood and bones as 'primary spaces for thought to occupy'. Beuys found that fat served that end for him as it has properties that prompt consideration of material before form. Schirmer, L., & Borer, A. (Eds.), *The Essential Joseph Beuys*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1996.

⁵⁶ Furthermore, if one accepts the romantic and possibly mythical story of how fat saved Beuys' life, fat would presumably have had intense personal significance for Beuys. It is commonly believed that Beuys was burned in a World War Two aircraft crash in the Crimea, and was found and healed by Tartars who smeared his body with fat and wrapped him in felt. There is no evidence to prove (or in fact, disprove) this story. However, Beuys's ongoing affiliation with felt and fat is evidenced in many of his subsequent artworks such as *Fat Battery* (1963), *Felt Suit* (1970) and *Schlitten (Sled)* (1969).



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

The material found in animal tissue comprised of adipocytes is known as fat, and is an obvious surrogate for body weight. Even though I tested a myriad of alternative materials, I continually returned to animal fat as my preferred material. Fat is at the core of my conceptual concern as well as having aesthetic and sculptural properties that resonate within me.

Fat also has transformative qualities that support the transformational goals of my research. It changes with heat or cold from a flowing golden transparent liquid to an opaque defined solid. The surface texture changes with repeated heating, from smooth and glossy to chalky and dull. Exposure to ultraviolet light alters its colour across a spectrum from buttery yellow to icy white. It offers surprise in its unpredictable and subtle response to manipulation, and I enjoy never quite knowing how it will behave.

Crucially, the smell of fat induces responses on a visceral level, usually revulsion and disgust. This is a response that I seek to exploit in my work in order to push viewers into feeling revolted by a social system that constructs and imprints ideals for body size and shape. However, in *Adiposity Audit 2000-2010* I temper the disgust response, confusing it with the aesthetic beauty of the minimalist sculptural forms. This sensory paradox creates a place for the artwork to occupy that is a space between beauty and disgust; a space, I suggest, that those with non-preferred bodies may also occupy.

Fat is fundamental to my project as it is abject on three fronts. Firstly, it is a foodstuff. Julia Kristeva identifies food loathing as the most basic and primal form of abjection.⁵⁷ Fat is present in a multitude of food items, and the unadulterated smell, taste or texture of fat in the mouth can evoke repugnance in many. Feeling repulsed or repelled by the fat, a common reaction is to eject it, spit it out or vomit. It is abject.

Secondly, as menstrual blood, semen, faeces, and vomit are abject bodily substances, so too is adipose. It doesn't leak from inside the body, but, encased with flimsy skin, it overflows the banks of its' skeletal form, bulging and rolling, attempting to spill across the boundary to the outside. Discrete parts of the body such as dimpled thighs, flabby abdomens or multiple chins are prey to sustained

⁵⁷ Kristeva, J., *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.), Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, p 12.

abjection by the cosmetic surgical industry, which identifies them as aberrations which need to be amended in order to achieve (as termed by Kristeva) a 'clean and proper' body.⁵⁸

And thirdly, the obese body containing an excess of fat is abject. This abjection is not because the body is smelly, or sweaty, or unwell as a result of attributable health conditions. According to Julia Kristeva, those features do not cause abjection "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order...what does not respect borders, positions, rules."⁵⁹ The obese body disturbs society's identity by markedly deviating from acceptable preferred body parameters. It does not observe 'normal' boundaries. It is an outsider, a body out of bounds, and it is consequently relegated to the binary opposite position from the ideal body, where it exists as non-preferred.⁶⁰ It does not respect the rules or order of good health, aesthetic appearance, or assume personal responsibility, and thus is abject.

I have adopted an explicit abject identity in my work through my fat sculptures. The sculptures, with their skin like folds and crevices, are body allegories, but are informed by my reaction to my own body. Their moulded forms reference being outside the skin of the body; something a part of, but separate to, and expelled from my overweight body.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ibid., p 13.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p4.

⁶⁰ Silverman, K., The Threshold of the Visible World, Routledge, New York, 1996, p 4.

⁶¹ Ironically, even my confessional narrative is loosely 'abject', since it is a representation of behaviour, beliefs and characteristics rejected and expunged from my inner self because I consider them to be unworthy and shameful.





Figure XX:
Robyn George

Adiposity audit 2000-2010 (detail x 5)
Photographs of performance installation (February 7 2011).
Fat and painted M.D.F. wood. Dimensions variable.

As a result of his personal experience of occupying an abject body, the Australian multi/interdisciplinary artist David Cross's work primarily focuses on exploring the space that exists between the beautiful (preferred) and grotesque (non-preferred) body. In his 2005 performance installation works *Bounce* and *Closer*, Cross exposes his optical abnormality to the viewer's gaze by accenting his abject leaking, reddened eyes.

While initially perceived as humorous and playful, on closer engagement *Bounce* and *Closer* can engender a visceral response in viewers who feel discomfort, disgust and horror from the realisation that there is a live body within the bouncy object; a body with bloodshot, weeping, scarred and hairless eyes looking out at them. And in *Closer*, the same eyes are obliquely gazing from behind clown masks. Cross is using his abject body to confuse the signification of beauty and grotesque. He provokes his viewers into experiencing an 'uncanny' feeling, therein asking them to examine their parameters of the idealised, preferred body. Cross challenges the binary opposition of ideality and abjection through articulation of Silverman's notion of an in-between space in which to locate his and other bodies that are neither preferred nor non-preferred but are 'good enough'.⁶² He is suggesting that, rather than a binary opposition, there is a continuum on which all bodies can be located and accepted.⁶³

While my artworks are very different from Cross's, we have similarities in our intentions. I predict that viewers, recognising that my sculptures are made from animal fat, will initially recoil with disgust at the smell and associations of this material. However the disgust response will be negated and confused by the aesthetic beauty of the minimalist sculptural forms. I want to provoke viewers to reflect on the implications of their reaction to fat, and to question the social construction of obesity with its' associated stigma.

⁶² Cross, D., Some Kind of Beautiful: the Grotesque Body in Contemporary Art, PHD Exegesis, Queensland University of Technology, Queensland, 2006.

⁶³ In order to identify his body as abject and abnormal, it is likely that every time Cross looks at himself in a mirror he reviews his eye's status, monitors changes, and measures progress or deterioration against society's construct of a preferred body. Thus, he too would be the subject of his own panoptic gaze.



Figure XXI:
David Cross

Bounce (2005)
Performance/installation.
Installation photograph, City Art Gallery, Wellington.
Permission to use image obtained from the artist.



Bounce
(detail)

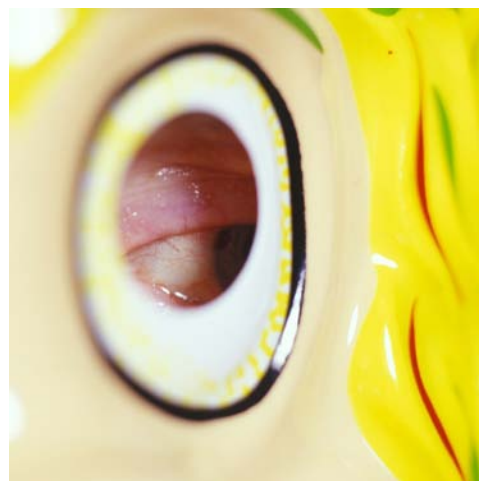


Figure XXII:
David Cross

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

Another artist who uses disgust to provoke viewers to examine representations of the culturally idealised body is English painter Jenny Saville (b. 1970).⁶⁴ Making works sympathetic to fat acceptance politics, Saville's large, confrontational paintings of obese women have been lauded for transforming cultural representations of fat bodies.

Saville challenges the Western culture of fat phobia and dieting through depiction of bodies rarely appreciated in contemporary Western culture. Her paintings stimulate discourse around the struggle women have with their bodies, and why we find bodies which are so different from the classical female nude (typically made by a male artist), difficult to look at. According to the American feminist academic Michelle Meagher many (mainly female) viewers react with disgust to Saville's paintings.⁶⁵ This disgust, rather than being directed at the paintings themselves, is more a recognition of a system of cultural ideals that often compels women to see their bodies in a negative and distorted manner. The cultural theorist and philosopher Martha Nussbaum would describe this reaction as a shrinking from the contamination that is connected to the human desire to be non-animal. Disgust expressed in this manner is often connected with questionable social practices in which the discomfort people feel over having an animal body is projected outwards onto vulnerable people, such as the obese.⁶⁶ Through provoking a disgust response in her viewers, Saville is reflecting this shrinking back towards the perpetrators of the judgement as complicit constructors of the idealised body. In so doing, she gives rise to questioning of a cultural system that establishes boundaries between differing bodies, denoting some as preferred and others non-preferred.

⁶⁴ Fat acceptance movements have existed in Western countries since the 1960s, and encourage fat men and women to reject the culturally imposed shame associated with their body shape and replace it with fat pride. The movement resembles other liberation movements of the late 20th century, such as gay and lesbian liberation.

⁶⁵ Meagher, M., 'Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetic of Disgust', in *Hypatia*, 18 (4 Fall/Winter), 2003.

⁶⁶ Nussbaum, M., *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2006.



Figure XXIII:
Jenny Saville

Branded (1992)
Oil on canvas.
84 x72 inches.



Figure XXIV:
Jenny Saville

Propped (1992)
Oil on canvas.
84 x 72 inches.

Chapter three

On being heard: personal and political

“How do we invent our lives out of a limited range of possibilities, and how are our lives invented for us by those in power?”

Allan Sekula and repeated by Jo Spence ⁶⁷

In previous chapters I have argued that within contemporary Western society, persons with non-preferred bodies are marginalised.⁶⁸ They don't conform to standard societal assumptions and are not deemed relevant or valid. There is proven evidence that (to varying degrees) marginalised people feel disempowered.⁶⁹ One strategy for the marginalised to give voice to their situation is through autobiography, a process of self-reflectivity that enables them to speak the personally political in public, while liberating and empowering themselves in the process. Autobiographical performance in particular gives a means to talk out, talk about and talk back, and allows the subject to move from the margins to centre stage.

The relationship between marginalised people and autobiographical performance is not co-incidental. Deirdre Heddon views contemporary autobiographical performance as 'engaging with the pressing matters of the present', such as human rights, equality, and justice.⁷⁰ Heddon posits that autobiographical performances are transformational acts which add to the broader network of

⁶⁷ From: Spence, J., Putting Myself in the Picture, The Real Comet Press, Seattle, 1988, p 94.

⁶⁸ To marginalise is to 'move from the centre, treat as marginal: depreciate, undervalue.' From: Trumble, W., & Brown, L., Shorter Oxford English dictionary (5th Ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, U.K., 2002.

⁶⁹ The feelings of disempowerment experienced by stigmatised and /or marginalised people is identified by Goffman, and supported by Millett-Gallant and Cahnman. Goffman, E., Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1963. Millett-Gallant, A., The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art (1st ed.), Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010. Cahnman, W. J., 'The Stigma of Obesity', in The Sociological Quarterly, 9 (3 Summer), 1968, pp 283-299,

⁷⁰ Heddon, D., Autobiography and Performance, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke England and New York, 2008, p 3.

political action. Yayoi Kusama provides an early example of a marginalised woman whose exotic body and Japanese culture were outside of Western tradition and who embedded her body in her performances to contest normativity of the time.⁷¹ In numerous performances during the late 1960's, she activated her naked body (albeit young, slender and firm) as a tool for political action, provoking debate about identity and social politics.⁷² She, and other feminist performance/body artists such as Carolee Schneeman, Marina Abramovic and Vaile Export, engaged the 'artist's' body in a dynamic relationship with the 'social' body. Vaile Export's 1969 *Action Pants: Genital Panic* performed in Munich illustrates this relationship. Export entered an art cinema showing experimental films with her hair in disarray, wearing pants with a triangular piece cut from the crotch exposing her pubic hair and genitalia, and carrying a machine gun. She then strode up and down the aisles with her crotch at viewers face level, brandishing her gun as if to challenge anyone gazing upon her. This aggressive confrontation defied the voyeurs in the cinema with a body that returned their gaze, and challenged the (perceived) cliché of women's historical representation in films as passive objects that were denied agency.⁷³ She, like Carolee Schneeman in *Meat Joy* (1964) and *Interior Scroll* (1979) provocatively used this tactic to tackle the meta-narratives surrounding the aestheticising and objectification of the female (nude) body, and the politics of gender.

Contemporary performance artists have subsequently built on this history, frequently placing the non-preferred body at centre stage. An example is Irish performance artist Mary Duffy, who was born with no arms. Like the obese body, her disabled body is non-preferred. Duffy employed shock value when she used her naked body in her 1995 performance *Venus de Milo* to mount a critique of the politics of appearance.⁷⁴ In her 'seeing and telling' performance she talked about how her body is defined by society as lacking, inadequate and undesirable, and spoke of how that stigmatisation impacts on her sense of self.⁷⁵ By highlighting her white naked body against a black background, Duffy summoned the gaze of her audience, inviting the stare and attentiveness customarily projected toward those with physical differences. This stare gives agency to the starrer, and stigmatisation to the object,

⁷¹ Including masculine based art historical tropes (such as formalism) and commodification of the art object.

⁷² For example, Kusama regularly participated in 'happenings' protesting at the US presence in the Vietnam War.

⁷³ New scholarship is exposing this performance by Vaile Export as staged. *Amelia Jones in conversation with David Cross mid 2010*.

⁷⁴ Her performance is documented in the film *Vital Signs: crip culture talks back*. Mitchell D T (Director), *Vital Signs: Crip. Culture Talks Back* [film], Brace Yourselves Productions (Producer), Fanlight Productions, Massachusetts, U.S.A., 1997.

⁷⁵ Millett-Gallant, A., *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (1st ed.), Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010.

and is the social enactment of exclusion from those self-identified as 'fully human'.⁷⁶ Duffy upsets the dynamic of the stare by turning it back on her viewers in her verbal narrative, changing from a silent object into a speaking subject. She confrontationally appropriated terms others had used to describe her body (such as congenitally malformed), forcing the viewer to consider her body as she finally describes it; whole, complete and functional. Duffy explains that by self-objectifying her already medically objectified body, she was talking back, and turning her monologue into a social dialogue.

" By confronting people with my naked body, with its' roundness and its threat, I wanted to take control...I wanted to hold up a mirror to all those people who had stripped me bare previously...the general public with naked stares, and more especially the medical profession. "

Mary Duffy

Figure XXV:
Mary Duffy

Venus de Milo (1995)
Photographic still from documentation of performance.



⁷⁶ Garland, R., 'Staring Back: Self-Representations of Disabled Performance Artists', in *American Quarterly*, 52 (2), 2000, p 335.

⁷⁷ Spina, N. L., 'Disabled Woman: the Forging of a Proud Identity', a paper presented at the Women's Studies Conference *Fulfilling Possibilities: Women and Girls with Disabilities*, Southern Connecticut State University, Southern Connecticut, U.S.A., 1998.

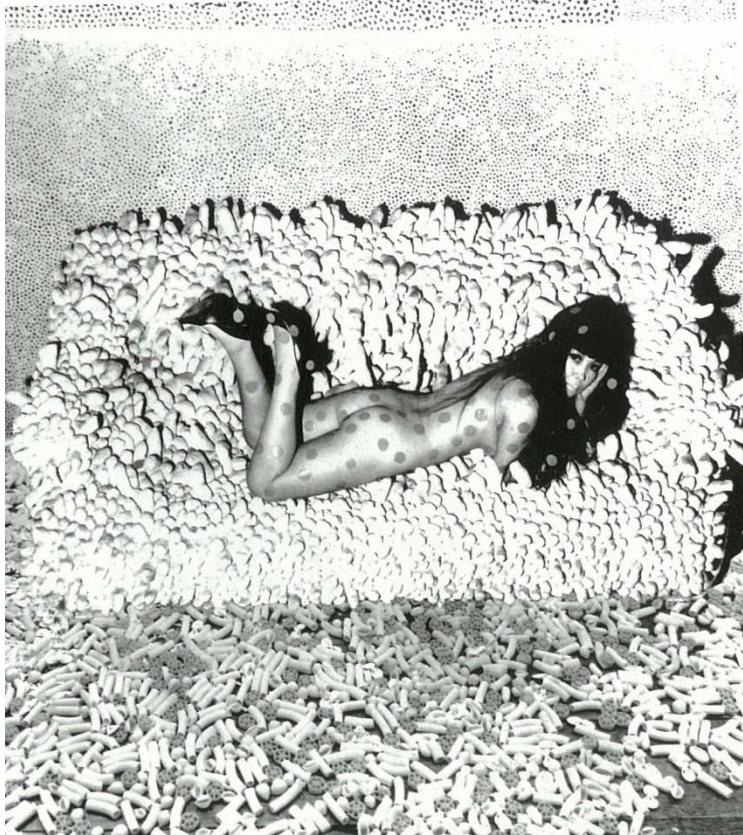


Figure XXVI:
Yayoi Kusama

Self-Obliteration by Dots (detail) (1968)
Performance documented with black-and-white photographs.
Photographer: Hal Reif.



Figure XXVII:
Valie Export

Aktionshose: Genital panik
(*Action Pants: Genital Panic*) (1969)
Poster to commemorate the performance.

Each of the female performance/body artists discussed, however, performed these works when (relatively) young. Seeking to locate my work with cohorts, I discovered a significant dearth in the literature. Very few women are talking about their aging bodies in their performative art works. My resulting assumption, reinforced by personal experience, is that post-menopausal women are no longer of use for reproduction, and as a consequence have reduced sexual value and visibility. We do not need to attract a mate for procreation so presumably physical appearance should no longer be relevant or merit artistic consideration. Accordingly, contemporary art that addresses appearance politics as it relates to aging women is virtually invisible.

Notable exceptions to this void are Hannah Wilke (1940-1993), Jo Spence (1934-1992) and Laura Aguilar (b.1957).⁷⁸ These women have presented their aging bodies in video and photographic format, modalities of body art that academic Amelia Jones includes as a performative practice even though the performances did not take place in front of an audience. Their images were an enactment of their (the artists') bodies, later experienced by others through photographic or video documentation, and thus, according to Jones, are performative 'body art' works.⁷⁹ In both Wilke's and Spence's compelling autobiographical works, they enacted their own (diseased) bodies to make forceful statements about appearance politics and the aging female body.

⁷⁸ Marina Abramovic and Yayoi Kusama continue to make performance based works, but their work of recent years has rarely focused on issues specifically pertaining to the body. For example, Abramovic's *Balkan Baroque* (1997, Venice Biennale) was a work about mourning and healing for the civil war in the Balkans and her 2010 three month long 'endurance' performance at M.o.M.A. *The Artist is Present* referenced Buddhist spiritual enlightenment arising from suffering (consistent, according to Raselee Goldberg, with Abramovic's earlier work, pushing the limits of her body to reach a different mental state.) Warr, T., & Jones, A., *The Artist's Body: Themes and Motives*, Phaidon, London, 2000, p 246. Kusama's poetry reading sited in a cemetery, exhibited in the accompanying documentary to the *Yayoi Kusama Mirrored Years* exhibition, (Wellington, 2010) referenced her affinity with nature, and the connection between the dead body and the natural environment.

⁷⁹ Jones, A., *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998, p 13.

In collaboration with her husband Donald Goddard, Wilke documented her multi-year battle with lymphoma in photographs and video. Her last work, the 1992-93 *Intra Venus series*, records Wilke's body as it disintegrates, graphically showing her body, ravaged by the illness and its treatment. Epitomising abjection, her decaying body leaks fluids from all orifices. Through performing her own life and art, Wilke continues with her lifelong position "I become my art, my art becomes me"⁸⁰. This position resonates with me, reflecting as it does my stance in my current research practice.

To the end, Wilke's practice continued her feminist discourse, using the rhetoric of the pose to challenge codifying of the sexualised female body.⁸¹ Even as it disintegrated she refused to be defined by her aberrant body and its appearance, showing a dignity and charisma in her decline that is both poignant and powerful.

Figure XXVII:
Hannah Wilke

Intra Venus series #4 (1992-93)
Performative self-portrait in collaboration with Donald Goddard
Chromagenic super-gloss prints, 71 1/2 x 47 1/2 inches each, edition of 3



⁸⁰ Fitzpatrick, T., 'Hannah Wilke: Sculptor and Sculpture' [Public lecture], in Brooklyn Museum Lecture Series: 2008, Brooklyn Museum, U.S.A., 2008.

⁸¹ In her earlier work of the mid 20th century, Wilke had been known for using her face and body to question assumptions about how we look at the female body. At that time her work was often dismissed as she was accused of narcissism and pornography. Lucy Lippard views this response as common at a time when women were often objectified as sex objects, and any woman artist who presented their nude body in public was seen as doing so because they thought they were beautiful. The woman was labelled an exhibitionist, in contrast to her male peers (for example, Acconci) who were deemed artists. Warr, T., & Jones, A., The Artist's Body: Themes and Motives, Phaidon, London, 2000, p 253-262.

British artist Jo Spence also documented her body as it was decimated with breast cancer in the 1980s and leukaemia in the early 1990s, leading to her death in 1992. Only forty six years old when first diagnosed, Spence's autobiographical photographs exposed breast cancer as a social experience, not just a disease. In particular she abhorred the power dynamics she experienced as a patient in the health system. She saw the doctor (or nurse)/patient relationship as exemplifying the passive object status (as opposed to the active subject) of women's bodies. Spence reclaimed power over her own body by controlling the treatment it was subjected to, and she spurned traditional radiotherapy and chemotherapy in favour of an holistic approach to alternative treatments such as using photography as a therapeutic tool.⁸²

Spence's 1982 self portrait *Property of Jo Spence* (Figure XXIX) from her series *The Picture of Health?* illustrates how she contested medical power dynamics when, prior to surgery for a lumpectomy, she reclaimed her breast by writing on it '*Property of Jo Spence*'. Through her talismanic inscribing of this text on her breast, Spence moved her diseased breast (and body) from the status of passive 'medicalised' object to a valued component of her subjective self. While naturopathy apparently cured her breast cancer, Spence succumbed quickly to her leukaemia. It was at this time she sought to make work addressing the notion of aging and death. She viewed aging and death as the ultimate human condition, which, like appearance politics and the aging female body, often goes unexplored in contemporary art.⁸³ She planned on making *The Final Project* 1991-1992 in collaboration with her one-time collaborator/partner Terry Dennett and her husband David, but she deteriorated so quickly that few images were made or released for public viewing. However, in *Skeleton with Camera*, made the year before she died, Spence offers insight into the black-humorous approach she adopted to her impending demise, whimsically placing a camera over the place of the absent left breast on a skeleton.

⁸² Interrogating photos she had taken of her health journey was, in her opinion, more useful as a self-healing therapy than counselling or anti-depressants. It was, she believed, a way of engaging in a dialogue with oneself about the pressures or tensions of daily occurrences, such as ill health, aging or oppression. Dennett, T., *The Wounded Photographer: The Genesis of Jo Spence's Camera Therapy*, [published article] 2001, <<http://www.edwarddebono.com>> 2010 (2 November), accessed December 15 2010.

⁸³ Ibid.



Figure XXIX:
Jo Spence

Property of Jo Spence (1982)
Black and white photograph.
Dimensions unknown.



Figure XXX:
Jo Spence

Skeleton with Camera (1991)
Cibachrome.
11 x 15 inches.

While Wilke and Spence later work's led the discourse around appearance politics and the aging female body, Laura Aguilar's work most closely aligns to my objectives as she is specifically talking about her own overweight body. Her self-portraits are stark (black and white) images of her voluptuous naked, mature and unquestionably abject body, flesh rolling and spilling over its' thinly encased form. To add to her particularity, Aguila identifies herself as a 'Latina Lesbian' living in USA, meaning that she is vulnerable to marginalisation and stigmatisation on many fronts.

That her body somehow feels not her own, being as it is talked about and deemed inferior by the dominant Eurocentric culture, results in Aguila feeling anguish and suicidal "her body is a burden she finds unable to bear at times".⁸⁴ In response, Aguila reclaims her body through enacting herself in her work. She uses her body as a signifier of her marginalised identities, while confronting issues of non-normative subjectivity. Her images are startling and honest, and support Amelia Jones theory that the more a body surfaces and exaggerates its difference to its' audience, the more potential it has to challenge codes of normativity.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Jones, A., Body Art/Performing the Subject, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998, p 223.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p 9.



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.

While I am not as comfortable as Wilke, Spence and Aguila in removing my clothes to exploit my naked aging overweight body in my work, my inhibitions are still challenged through the work's performative modality. It was a natural progression for me to utilise performative attributes to make and install this art work. Building on the philosophical notion of self as an embodied performance, through the enactment of my intimate 'confession' I will not only exhibit my work but will exhibit my own existence within my art.⁸⁶ My weekly ritual of weighing myself, recording my weight, and reviewing changes from previous weigh-ins, is, in itself, a performance. I 'perform' the weighing activity, and assess my body's 'performance' (weight gain or loss) to determine if I 'perform' to society's appearance standards. The long and laborious process of making the work, and then installing it within pre-determined time frames, echoes its' performative and durational provenance.

Furthermore by performing an autobiographical narrative, I provide authenticity and subjectivity. This enables me to make forceful comment on the politics of appearance, but from the lived experience of a woman who has succumbed to social control mechanisms. This relationship between theory, anthropology and artistic practice has been recognised as existing in performance art since the 1960's by thinkers such as Erving Goffman (sociology), Judith Butler (gender studies), and Richard Schechner (performance studies). While each of these theorists offers a particular perspective (as articulated throughout Amelia Jones's *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998) and Hoffman and Jonas's *Perform* (2005), it is possible to draw their ideas together to come to this conclusion.⁸⁷ Even if silent, performance art speaks volumes about the cultural circumstances and time in which it was made and the documentation of performances through video, photograph and notes has added to the global body of social anthropological knowledge.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p 39. By Jones' definition my work could be categorised as body art, as it "emphasises the implications of the body (...with all of its' apparent racial, sexual, gender, class and other apparent unconscious identifications) in the work " ibid., p 13

⁸⁷ To précis, Goffman speaks of the process of socialisation (forming social identity) as a form of performance, Butler proffers gender identity as a performance rather than a natural absolute, and Schechner connects theatre and anthropology through the inter-relationship between performers and audience.



Figures XXXIII and XXXIV:
Robyn George

Adiposity audit 2000-2010
Photographs of Performance Installation (February 7, 2011).
Photographer: Jane Wilcox

Live, unscripted performances offer immediacy and uncertainty, and they have to incorporate any incident or accidental surprises. In comparison, my weekly weigh-in performance was a planned, repetitive activity, regulated by time. The same actions have occurred for ten years, at virtually the same time (7.30 a.m.) every Monday morning, in the same location (my bathroom), using the same scales and while I am naked. This repetitive performance of endless duration now seems futile, as no transformation was affected as a result; no sustained behavioural change (diet, lifestyle or exercise) or cognitive recognition of personal anxieties until this research project unearthed the inherent issues underlying it. However, the enacting of my confessional narrative has turned my gaze upon myself, and has as a consequence, activated meaningful personal transformation. I have changed psychologically, behaviourally and cognitively. I am seeking to elicit similar tangible transformation in viewer's paradigms, from my performance installation.

A performance where I perceive transformation as indiscernible is the final project of Polish artist Roman Opalka. In 1965 Opalka commenced making a figurative representation of time through the painting of sequential numbers on canvases. The complete work *OPALKA 1965/1-oo* is comprised of a series of canvases, each entitled *Detail* and is layered with sound recordings of Opalka reciting the number he is painting in Polish and photographs of himself taken each day. Starting with the number 1, he has already exceeded 5,000,000, and plans to continue with the project until he dies. Through this performance, Opalka has chosen to personally engage with time, working his way into time and toward infinity for the duration of his lifetime.⁸⁸

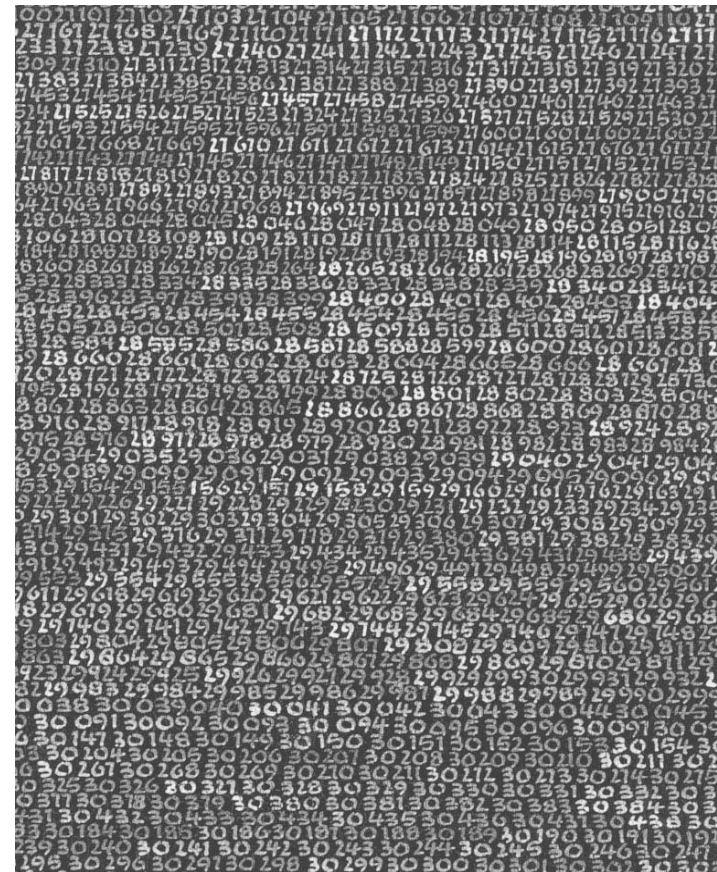
OPALKA 1965/1-oo is an oeuvre of deprivation. Opalka renounced all variety and difference, including colour, choosing only shades of ghostly grey. He applies rigorous rules to the making of *Details*, such as changing his brush each canvas, and standing up to paint. The canvas's colour, size, height, and style of numerals do not change, however since 1972 he has altered the pigment mix by adding 1% white each day, and ultimately should be painting white on white. This deprivation speaks of Opalka's miserable early childhood, his incarceration in a World War Two prisoner of war camp and the hardship he experienced in post war Poland. Indeed, this history supports Savinel et al's reading that *Detail* suggests tattooed human numbers (like those inflicted upon Prisoners of War in occupied Poland) in place of names, and the neutral colour adds to the reading of counting for the lives of those who can't count anymore.

⁸⁸ Savinel, C., Roubaud, J., & Noël, B., Roman Opalka, Editions Dis voir, Paris, 1996.

Opalka's work, like mine, is inseparable from himself. His is a total embodiment wherein he describes his paintings as "the flow of his life"⁸⁹. However, this exhaustive performance is not, as Marina Abramovic observes, 'doing life'.⁹⁰ Opalka is, rather, just painting and getting older. There is no transformation from or within his practice; no apparent (or acknowledged) psychological or meaningful physical changes and only one or two decisions to subtly change his process.⁹¹ But when challenged on the monotony inherent in the work, Opalka debunks the accusation, responding that his paintings are "an action, where repetition is just an appearance"⁹². While I applaud the artist's tenacity and fixed commitment, I feel *OPALKA 1965/1-oo* and Opalka's artistic processes *are* monotonous, and as there is no surprise left in his work I believe it is becoming weakened by its non-transformative, repetitive and never-ending nature.

Figure XXXV:
Roman Opalka

OPALKA 1965 1-00 (Detail 1-35327).
Tempera on canvas.



⁸⁹ Ibid., p 18.

⁹⁰ Hsieh, T., & Heathfield, A., *Out of Now: the Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*, Live Art Development Agency MIT Press, London, Cambridge, and Massachusetts, 2009, p 352.

⁹¹ As Abramovic suggests, he is somewhat caught in a cleft stick, as even if he wanted to change he couldn't; commercial imperatives as well as the strength of his original concept won't allow him to. Ibid., p 352.

⁹² Savinel, C., Roubaud, J., & Noël, B., *Roman Opalka*, Editions Dis voir, Paris, 1996, p 8.

In this context, Opalka's work contrasts with those who engage in repetitive durational performances, but whose work affects transformation. One such artist is Tehching 'Sam' Hsieh (b Taiwan 1950), who entered America in 1974 as an illegal immigrant. As an illegal immigrant he was marginalised within his New York community, suffering social isolation much like that experienced by those with obese non-preferred bodies. He lived an impoverished, alienated and mundane life, eking out a living wherever he could. This environment with its paucity of creativity gave birth to his five *One year Performances*. In these 'lifeworks' Hsieh demonstrated extreme deprivation and solitude, mimicking his lived experience in his new country and "making a form for how I felt".⁹³ He gave new depth to Johnson's perspective that performance art, as a genre, is defined by its drawing on autobiographical source material, through making his life his performance, and his performance his life.

There are synergies between my performance and Hsieh's. He was very structured in defining the particular living conditions and 'rules' for his projects that required absolute focus, discipline and commitment. He stipulated the time frame, what would or would not occur within that period, and how the performance would be documented. Likewise, my research project follows my self-imposed parameters. My weigh-in performance occurred at the same time (7.30 a.m.) every Monday for ten years. I took ten weeks to make my bar graph boxes, and ten days to mould my fat sculptures (see appendices pages 81-87). I commenced my installation performance at 7.30 a.m. on a Monday, and completed the installation in ten hours. The documentation of my installation performance recorded one minute video clips every hour for ten hours, making a ten minute film.⁹⁴ All self imposed rules that, like Hsieh's, require focus, dedication, and discipline.

⁹³ Johnston, J., 'Tehching Hsieh: Art's Willing Captive' in *Art in America*, September, 2001, pp 140-144.

⁹⁴ Documentation of an ephemeral art work (such as a performance) not only provides a record through which the performance can be reproduced, but is evidence that it actually occurred. When an artist integrates documentation into their performance (as I am) they are also signalling their assumed responsibility to a wider audience than the original. I expect my performance audience to be few due to the examination conditions of the day, and my performance documentation is primarily to allow my subsequent exhibition audience access to the performative aspect of my work. Performance documentation through video, photograph and notes is ontological in nature, with the event preceding and authorising its' documentation. As the performance reflects the time, cultural and social circumstance in which it occurred, the documentation of the performance also adds to the global body of social anthropological knowledge. Auslander, P., 'The Performativity of Performance Documentation', in *PAJ: a Journal of Performance and Art*, 84, 2006, pp 1-10.

Prior to starting his performance, Hsieh would publish his self-imposed conditions and then enact his life/performance within them. For example, in the first of his five year-long works *Cage Piece* (1978-1979), he built a cell in his loft. He furnished it with a cot, a sink and a bucket, and posted a notice saying *I shall NOT converse, read, write, listen to the radio or watch television until I unseal myself on September 29, 1979*. He then locked himself into his cell, and had the exit sealed by a lawyer. Each day of his year-long performance Hsieh would scratch a line on his cell wall with his fingernail, denoting the length of time he had survived his ordeal, and would photograph himself from the same position, measuring the passage of time with the lengthening of his hair. He engaged an assistant to bring him food and remove his waste, but did not talk to him, thus remaining alone with his thoughts.

The stance I adopted in my performance received similar thoughtful consideration, but I took a differing approach to Hsieh as I sought to model the simultaneous processes of art and life in my limited-duration performance. The persona I communicated was not a theatrical one, it was my own, and so I maintained my customary courteous and friendly demeanour. I did not, however, engage with my audience further than a nodded greeting due to focusing intently on my laborious and highly ordered installation. My movements were repetitive and deliberate, applying my body to space as I would brush to canvas. Enacting myself, I did not wear foreign clothing (unlike Hsieh who wore white prison overalls) that may have distracted or confused the work. I also continued my everyday studio habit of having a radio playing quietly to provide background white noise, but no external distractions (such as audience participation) diverted me from my performance.

With his intense performance Hsieh turned social isolation into art. He spent his time staying alive and thinking, activating Joseph Beuys's premise that thought is art. Each of his successive *One Year Performances* was transformational, building on and changing from the previous. But they remained consistent in constructing spaces of 'severe self imposed deprivation and constraint within which time passes and thinking happens'.⁹⁵ Interestingly, while he refused to engage with his audiences during his performances, they were clearly very important to Hsieh. He documented each performance rigorously and extensively; showing everything, but telling nothing, and thereby providing the viewer with the opportunity for diverse readings. I read his works as intense explorations of time and personal struggle, but Hsieh is more whimsical in how he now characterises his art as 'wasting time art'. "Wasting time

⁹⁵ Williams, D., 'Out of Now: the Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh', in *Performance Research*, 14 (2), 2009, pp 130-131.

is my concept of life. Living is nothing but consuming time until you die".⁹⁶ So rather than feeling shame about my seemingly time-wasting weigh-in performance of the past ten years, I will appropriate Hsieh's paradigm and reframe my behaviour as a valid personal choice on how I consume my allotted time, performing my life.

⁹⁶ Sontag, D., 'A Caged Man Breaks Out at Last', in The New York Times, (March 1 2009), <<http://www.nytimes.com>>, p.3, accessed October 10 2010.

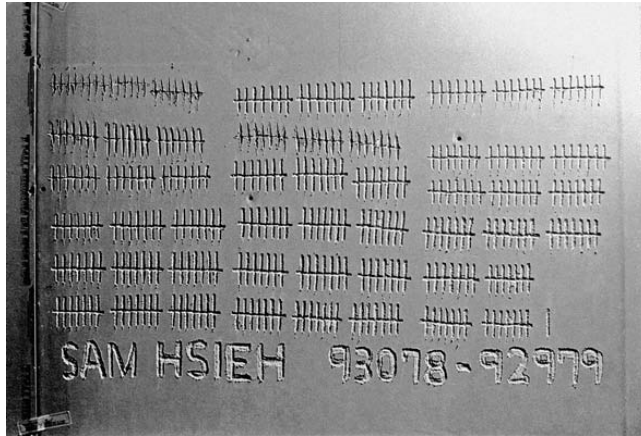


Figure XXXVI:
Tehing (Sam) Hsieh

One Year Performance (Cage Piece) (1978-1979)

- ☐ *Scratch marks*
- ☐ *Occupying his cell*
- ☐ *Day one and Day 365*

Photographs of performance.

Conclusion

Adiposity audit 2000-2010 is a transformative work. From the outset I intended for the work to affect change in viewers' paradigms, challenging their compliance with socially constructed ideals for body size and shape. I deliberately activated a response of disgust to the fat to prompt questioning of appearance politics and a social system that stigmatises and marginalises those who fail to meet artificially constructed body ideals. However I tempered that disgust response with the aesthetic beauty of the sculptural forms and pristine minimalist installation. I did this in order to confuse the signification of beauty and disgust, and to suggest that there is a space between beauty and revulsion that those with non-preferred, overweight bodies can occupy.

I sought also to provide an experience, echoing my own, of the semi-transparent divide between life and art. I used my performance persona to this end, but a further means I used to foster this experience was the structure and functionality of the space I selected for my artwork's installation. I sought space to perform the installation of *Adiposity audit 2000-2010* in which the work and the place could engage in an exchange through which a meaning of the work is defined. I drew on semiotic theory in my rationale that the relationship between a work of art and its' place and position contributes to its' reading. Accordingly, I selected Massey University's large studio space, 1E02.⁹⁷ Room 1E02 had been my allocated studio space for my undergraduate degree, so I have a genuine connection with the room as both a working and exhibiting space. Furthermore, the mobile white 'T' walls enabled me to create a division within the room to separate it into two discrete but conjoined spaces. By imbuing each space with different functions and appearance, I would foster the transformative experience I was seeking for my audience, as they moved between the two spaces.

⁹⁷ I hasten to differentiate my selecting this location from site-specificity as described by Richard Serra, when talking about the relocation of his work *Titled Arc* (1981). Serra's position was that the site and sculpture together formed the work; the site was integral to the work, and to relocate the sculpture destroyed the entire work. Kaye, N. (Ed.), *Site-specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation*, Routledge, London, 2000. My performance installation is site 'type' specific (architecturally and functionality) versus Serra's works' site specificity.

Like Rachel Whiteread in her installation of *Embankment* at the Tate Modern, I wanted to create a pause between the outside (ordinary) and inside (high art).⁹⁸ For that reason I assembled my art objects, working table, anthropometrical data check lists, clock, scales, lap top and other accoutrements pertaining to my performance installation in half of the room. This is my working space, my assembly warehouse, my 'ordinary'. I then constructed a dividing wall in the middle of the room with a gap in the centre, and installed the artworks within the enclosed 'art gallery' space. By providing a transition place (the gap) between the two spaces, I create a place of pause and revelation that gives the viewer opportunity to reflect on the relationship between art and life. I want viewers to experience the transformation from (outside) everyday dynamics to (inside) high art, replicating my research practice findings of art moving closer and closer to the common happenings of daily life; what Allan Kaprow describes as "the blurring of art and life".⁹⁹ I suggest that this void between art and life offers a space where transformation of paradigms and subjectivity can take place.

Figure XXXVII:
Robyn George

Adiposity audit 2000-2010

1Eo2 studio space, looking through transition gap from
warehouse assembly space into art gallery space.
Photograph of Performance Installation (February 7, 2011).
Photographer: Robyn George



⁹⁸ Whiteread, R., *Embankment*, Tate, London, 2005, p 4.

⁹⁹ Hoffmann, J., & Jonas, J., *Perform*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2005, p 11.

A personal transformation that I had not predicted resulted from changing my research stance from an objective impersonal approach to a subjective personal one. Mary Duffy provided me with a vivid example of the efficacy and power of autobiographical performance. Her *Venus de Milo* (1995) performance prompted my realisation that by performing my own story from the embodied experience as an overweight, post menopausal, middle-aged woman, I would speak with a more compelling voice than had I made observations of others' experiences. By embedding myself in my work, I follow the example of others working in the autobiographical genre, becoming the medium and the content of the work. Rather than just telling the story, I act it out. Through this enactment of my paradigmatic narrative, I disclose my own private rituals, and show that even the middle aged and informed can be prey to society's control mechanisms.

Norms of female attractiveness serve as a form of social control through which those whose bodies fall outside of socially constructed ideals are marginalised and stigmatised. Making both the fat sculptures and boxes according to data from my personal archive, and using pre calculated mathematical formulae to determine the height of each base, I am mimicking contemporary society's panoptic control devices. My ten year duration weigh-in performance illustrates how I had become the subject of my own gaze, subjecting myself to self surveillance in order to determine if I met society's standards for my ideal body size, and whether I was accordingly a fit and proper member of society. Such is the power of appearance politics, and the resulting fear of inhabiting a non-preferred body. A poignant outcome from the enacting of my confessional narrative is that it has enabled me to get to know more of who I am, and reach self realisation and acceptance of previously self-denigrated behaviour and characteristics.

My research practice investigates the notion of the overweight body by engaging with and contesting appearance politics, and it provides a fresh and compelling response to a multidisciplinary concern. It also adds to the slim body of art work addressing the critical issue of female aging and appearance often overlooked in contemporary art. The most profound outcome, however, has been the extent to which my art practice has transformed my psyche, and has activated meaningful personal change. This affirms that art is a powerful modality for not simply investigating corporeality, but for recasting it through live engagement with bodies in space.

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Appendices

Appendix A page 79

The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me, A poem by Delmore Schwartz
In: O. Williams (Ed.), A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry, Chas. Scribner's Sons, New York, 1946

Performing the artistic process

Appendix B page 80

Assembling and sanding 453 wooden boxes (September 2010)
S.o.F.A. Workshop, Massey University, Wellington, Studio digital photograph.

Appendix C page 81

Spray painting 3 coats on boxes (October/November/December 2010)
S.o.F.A. Workshop, Massey University, Wellington, Studio digital photograph.

Appendix D page 82

Measuring and moulding fat sculptures (November 2010), Studio digital photograph.

Appendix E page 83

Preparing grid for performance installation (February 2011)
Room 1EO2, Massey University, Wellington, Studio digital photograph

Appendix F page 84

Preparing assembly/warehouse space for performance installation (November 24 2010)
Room 1EO2, Massey University, Wellington. Studio digital photograph.

Video documentation of the performance installation in situ for MFA Graduate Exhibition 11-19 February 2011,
S.o.F.A., Massey University, Wellington.
Studio digital photograph.

The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me

Delmore Schwartz

The heavy bear who goes with me,
A manifold honey to smear his face,
Clumsy and lumbering here and there,
The central ton of every place,
The hungry beating brutish one
In love with candy, anger, and sleep,
Crazy factotum, dishevelling all,
Climbs the building, kicks the football,
Boxes his brother in the hate-ridden city.

Breathing at my side, that heavy animal,
That heavy bear who sleeps with me,
Howls in his sleep for a world of sugar,
A sweetness intimate as the water's clasp,
Howls in his sleep because the tight-rope
Trembles and shows the darkness beneath.
The strutting show-off is terrified,
Dressed in his dress-suit, bulging his pants,
Trembles to think that his quivering meat
Must finally wince to nothing at all.

That inescapable animal walks with me,
Has followed me since the black womb held,
Moves where I move, distorting my gesture,
A caricature, a swollen shadow,
A stupid clown of the spirit's motive,
Perplexes and affronts with his own darkness,
The secret life of belly and bone,
Opaque, too near, my private, yet unknown,
Stretches to embrace the very dear
With whom I would walk without him near,
Touches her grossly, although a word
Would bare my heart and make me clear,
Stumbles, flounders, and strives to be fed
Dragging me with him in his mouthing care,
Amid the hundred million of his kind,
The scrimmage of appetite everywhere.

Appendix B

Making 453 M.D.F. wooden boxes.
(October/November/
December 2010).
S.o.F.A. Workshop.
Massey University,
Wellington.
Studio digital photograph.



Appendix C

Spray painting 3 coats on M.D.F. wood boxes.
(October/November/December 2010).
S.o.F.A. Workshop, Massey University, Wellington.
Studio digital photograph.



Appendix D

Measuring and moulding 453 fat sculptures (November 2010).
Studio digital photograph.

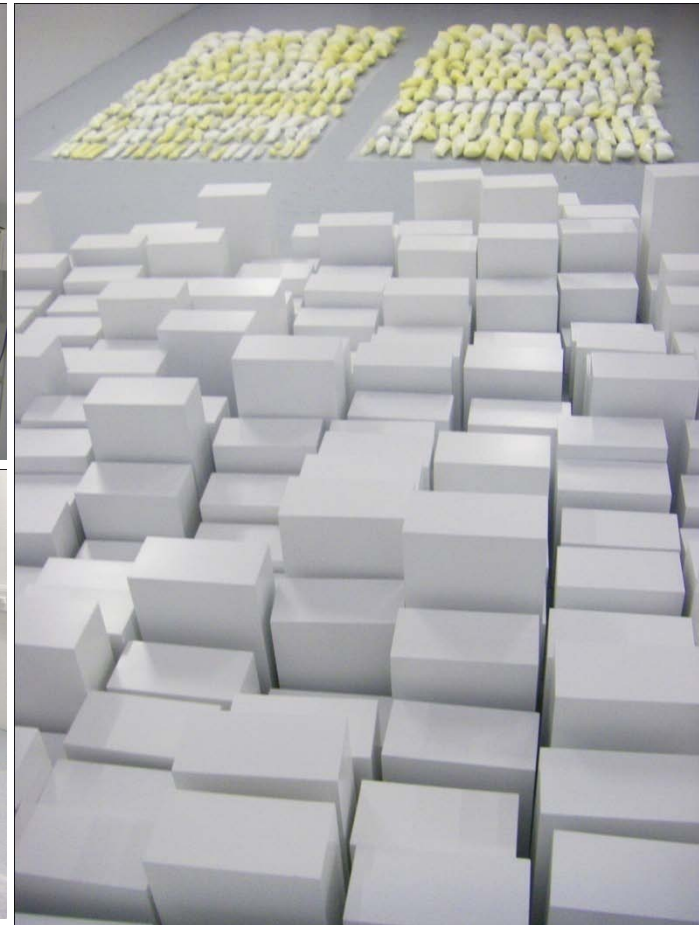


Appendix E



Preparing calendar grid for installation (February 2011).
Room 1Eo2 Massey University, Wellington.
Studio digital photograph.

Appendix F



Preparing assembly warehouse space for test performance installation (24 November 2010).
Room 1Eo2 ,Massey University, Wellington.
Studio digital photograph.

Appendix G



Video documentation of the Performance Installation in situ for MFA Graduate Exhibition 11-19 February 2011.
S.o.F.A., Massey University, Wellington.
Studio digital photograph