Abstract:

Trois Pieces en Forme de Poire

(Three Pieces in the Shape of a Pear)

Karen Ball

We all play roles in life. This paper is a personal reflection on identity, and the questioning of this identity. The writer allows the reader into a dream like environment where a life role is acted out as autobiographical narrative through appropriation and reference to the other. Theoretical sources include Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Joseph Kosuth. With reference to these sources, comparison is made between Jan Vermeer's seventeenth century portraits of women and Bertolt Brecht's early twentieth century epic theatre.

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# TROIS PIECES EN FORME DE POIRE

The Narrated Self: creating identity as autobiographical narrative through appropriation and reference to the other

by

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## Author’s Statement

I want to thank my family for their invaluable support and encouragement throughout this study. I am grateful for the insight and guidance provided by my Academic Supervisor, Dr Danie Mellor and the friendly assistance of Janet Parker Smith, the Printmedia Technical Supervisor at Sydney College of the Arts.

“The writer’s language is not expected to represent reality, but to signify it. This should impose on critics the duty of using two rigorously distinct methods: one must deal with the writer’s realism either as an ideological substance (Marxist themes in Brecht’s work, for instance) or as a semiological value (the props, the actors, the music, the colours in Brechtian dramaturgy). The ideal of course would be to combine these two types of criticism; the mistake which is constantly made is to confuse them: ideology has its methods, and so has semiology.”

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies - Myth Today*, 1957, p.137

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**Trois Pieces en Forme de Poire**
(Three Pieces in a Pear Shape)

Introduction:

*Narrative is simply there, like life itself.*[1]

For at least one hour we had maintained a profound silence. We were looking at an exhibition of handmade artists' books at the Bibliotheque Forney, in the Marais, Paris. I was totally engrossed in the books, overwhelmed by their diversity and intricate beauty. I was also actively committing specific details in them to memory. I assumed my friend's silence meant she was similarly occupied. Later, over coffee, I discovered that was not the case. Her silence was due to her melancholic state of mind. She hardly recalled any details of the books, so we were not able to share the moment in the same way and would, subsequently, remember that day for different reasons. Following that experience, I realised how important observation and preservation of details are to me. They are part of my identity. I collect details: feelings, words and pictures from particular moments then mentally bind them together before they fade away. I am something of a 'bricoleur' in the sense that one can define bricolage as a way of putting together, in an inventive way, elements that come from different areas. In a form of recycling, I make these elements into narratives, like a series of books. I have accumulated quite a library. It is how I make art.

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[1] Roland Barthes, *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*, trans. by Stephen Heath in *Roland Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, London, Vintage 1994, p.251-2

This paper investigates how my art practice is influenced by specific 'collected' details and signification from selected works of art. Within this study, I will also discuss the phenomenon of reprise of historic, innovative theatrical devices, and their implementation in my own and others' contemporary performance art practices. I am the subject of this study. It is composed of text and art objects, in the form of a narrative. It is as an assemblage of myself - a framework to which I attach my identity. I will tell this story and constitute myself through narrative exchange. What constitutes me as a subject is the desire for a response from the Other.[2] It has been said that otherness is joined to selfhood and the response of the other is always contained within the act of the narrative production itself.[3]

In so far as this study acknowledges influences from other artists' practices and historical theatrical devices, it has a polyphonic structure inclusive of the other's voice that can be isolated from the whole of the message.[4] It is a dialogic narrative, composed of several voices which transpose from one medium to another.[5] That is, this narrative is formed from a composite of mediums, involving both my written and studio work. Through this structure of word, image and performance, I will posit questions, in a hermeneutic code, for consideration by the audience and myself. These questions will include the role and implications of transformation, time and repetition on my artistic identity. It has been said that there is no such thing as an innocent eye, as all viewers are conditioned by culturally shaped habits of 'seeing'

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[2] Martin McQuillan, *The Narrative Reader,* Routledge, London, 2000, p.17
[3] Jacques Lacan, *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,* in *Ecrits, a Selection,* translated by A. Sheridan, Routledge, London, 1995, p.86
[4] Mikhail Bakhtin specifically referred to the polyphonic structure of Russian wrtier, Dostoyevsky's fiction in which the other's discourse gradually penetrates the consciousness and speech of the hero. John Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, Routledge, London, 1994, p.9
[5] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories*, in WJT Mitchell (ed) *On Narrative,* Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1981, section 3
[6] Wayne. E. Frantis, *Paragons of Virtue – Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth Century Dutch Art,* Cambridge University Press, U.K. 1993, p.16

and interpretation.[6] Thus, the audience will bring their own meaning to this dialectic through a code - a system of rules, values and assumptions.

Roland Barthes suggested it is through this code that the audience lays claim to the structure of a creative work (literature, art, music). That is, the audience applies their own form to it. Barthes elaborated on this theory in his essay *Death of the Author* [7] in which he theorizes that the reader, not the author, writes the story. Similarly, the audience assigns meaning to the creative endeavour of others through preconceived ideas, experience and expectations. *Trois Pieces en Forme de Poire* resulted from such a code and search for meaning. It was the name given by Erik Satie to one of his musical compositions, in reaction to Claude Debussey's statement that the music lacked structure and form. Debussey attempted to consign his own meaning to the music and Satie reclaimed it by assigning a name, albeit an obscure one, as no pear is to be found in the composition.

I too have been influenced by *Trois Pieces en Forme de Poire*, however, and taking ownership of the name, I have assigned my own meaning to it. I have appropriated it for this study - a narrative divided into three parts: *looking* (and *seeing*), *thinking* and *being (acting out).* There is no pear. Though I have appropriated the name only, this act of appropriation alters and transforms the original interpretation of Satie's creative work. As such, this blatant copy of the title impacts on my identity and integrity as would the appropriation of another's image. Appropriation may manifest as a form of mimicry, homage, subliminal influence, or pure happenstance.[8] Within this study, I will address the premise that 'identity is dependant on others', and discuss issues arising from the reprise of whole or specific sections of historic, iconic imagery. In the context of my own art practice, I will focus on two apparently disparate creative art practices which have influenced me: the seventeenth century portraits of women by

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[7] McQuillan, *The Narrative Reader,* p.307; Roland Barthes, *Death of the Author,*1967, an essay first published in the American Journal, Aspen, appeared later in *Image-Music-Text,* London, Fontana, 1977

[8] Happenstance – a chance instance

[9] 'Epic Theatre' – originally a German expression used in contrast to dramatic theatre. In 1926, epic theatre was utilized by Bertolt Brecht with projected texts, film, treadmill stage and interruption of sequences to address social issues.

Jan Vermeer and Bertolt Brecht's early twentieth century epic theatre.[9] These two creative art practices are influential to me due to their theatrical deployment of space, the conversion of the emblematic space to a meditative one and the reflection on aspects of privacy which pertain to the revelation of identity.

In my analysis I will refer to Walter Benjamin's theories related to Brecht's epic theatre and historical reprise of image and idea. In the early twentieth century Benjamin noted that there was an inevitability to constant reprise of ideas and images which he suggested was due to boredom at the prospect of looking for new ideas and faith in the idea of perfection (of the original).[10] He looked to the nineteenth century covered arcades of Paris to elaborate on this theory. In relation to the Parisian nineteenth century arcades, Benjamin conjectured that out of context use of motifs and objects from earlier centuries was utilized as a means of engaging and seducing the consumer. He also noted that aspects of epic theatre, as pioneered by Brecht in the early twentieth century as a vehicle for social comment, were applied as a means of audience manipulation, influencing interpretation of the image or performance.

To further my discussion of interpretation of the sign and the psychological implications that surround a narrative, I refer to Jacques Lacan's analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*.[11] The original meaning of purloined is *diverted* or *put far off* [12] which can be seen as a means of distraction or audience manipulation, used to influence or alter the perception of what is before them. Lacan used this story, of a diverted letter, to illustrate his theory that *it is the Symbolic Order which is constitutive for the subject – by demonstrating in the story the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier.*[13] That is, the letter travels a definite path which forms a symbolic circuit or signifying chain that cuts across the subjects of the story. Lacan further stated that signifiers only take on meaning in

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[10] Walter Benjamin, quoted by Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing, Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project*, USA, MIT Press, 1989, p.119

[11] Edgar Allan Poe, *The Purloined Letter*, originally published in *The Gift*, Print Periodicals, N.Y. 1845. Jacques Lacan's essay on *The Purloined Letter* opened the *Ecrits* published in French, Editions du Seuil, France, 1966

[12] Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy, *The Works of Jacques Lacan – an Introduction*, Free Association Books, London, 1986, p.97

[13] *ibid*, p.91

relation to other signifiers.[14] Without involvement of the other subjects in the story the letter would carry no power. The letter, as the subject of *The Purloined Letter*, is also a floating signifier [15] that determines the acts and destiny of the human subjects, including the Queen, the Minister, the policeman and Dupin (the detective, who is said to know all). In this context, my act of appropriating the title, *Trois Pieces en Forme de Poire*, has also created a floating signifier. That is, the context of the words and their interpretation, or their contextual reading, has changed because I have chosen to use them for something other than that intended by Satie.

The human subjects in *The Purloined Letter* are changed and displaced as they look for, lose and receive the letter. Dupin explains to the narrator that the case involves the thief, the meaning of the letter and the symbolic power bestowed by possession of the letter. Lacan endorsed this view and suggested that the symbolic is a substitute for what is missing from its place. In his analysis of *The Purloined Letter,* Lacan deduced that the meaning of the letter, and its very existence, altered according to whose possession it was in or where it was situated. That is, it symbolized something other than what it was and its absence afforded it greater meaning, irrespective of its content (which the audience never knows). In relation to my study, the letter and whose possession it is in, are analogous with the artist and the image, who owns the image and what it signifies. In that context, my study could be known as 'the case of the appropriated work of art' in which I am the perpetrator who looks for, loses and takes possession of specific details from the creative practices of others. The appropriated items are displaced and changed in this process. The audience will interpret the meaning of these appropriated images and be aware of the inherent, symbolic power afforded them by their original ownership while questioning their existence within this new situation.

Lacan's seminar on *The Purloined letter* was particularly concerned with Freud's notion of the repetition compulsion.[16] That is, the idea of perpetual recurrence of the same thing in human relationships which Freud considered to be an unconscious

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[14] John Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, Routledge, London, 1994, p.69

[15] Claude Levi Strauss was regarded as the first to use this term in the 1950's following Saussure's concept of signification, in the early 1900's. A' floating signifier' describes a concept whose meaning changes depending on context.

[16] 'The Repetition Compulsion' is a theory referred to by Freud related to death drive and desire to return to an inorganic state. Lacan expanded on this theory and borrowed the term, *automatisme de repetition* (repetition automatism) from French psychoanalysis. In the 1950's, Lacan increasingly used the term 'insistence' to refer to repetition compulsion. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar Book X1, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1964, translated A. Sheridan, London, Hogarth Press, 1977, p.33

repressed desire to repeat both pleasurable and non-pleasurable experiences.[17] Lacan linked the repetition compulsion with the insistence of the signifying chain, due to his belief that the true subject was the subject of the unconscious, not the ego. Through video documentation, in the performance aspect of my narrative, I will reference (and activate) the repetition compulsion, the conscious (or motivated) and unconscious act.

Lacan's analysis of *The Purloined Letter* was part of his formulation of the Real, described as that which is always in its place and cannot be symbolized.[18] The letter, due to its diversion from place or its 'floating' character, symbolized something other than a letter. Lacan's analysis of language is pertinent to my study, in particular his definition of the Imaginary as in the realm of illusion.[19] In Lacan's analysis of language, the Imaginary depends on a division between the self and the other, but it relies on the reference to the other. In relation to my study, the realm of illusion involves reliance on repetition of the other's ideas and images. Lacan believed that repetition and mimicry was fundamental in living creatures. He described the ethological phenomenon of mimicry in animals as an instinctive act, common to many living creatures. He noted that certain beasts have the habit of assuming the insignia and identity of their surroundings, as disguise or assuming an image.[20]

I begin this narrative with contemplation and reflection on these theories in chapter one, *looking (and seeing)*. This chapter, observed from a personal perspective, is a synopsis of signification, the relationship of objects to each other and the influence of sensory stimulation. I have recorded moments and observations, as both preamble and self-critique with reference to Roland Barthes' *Leaving the Movie Theatre,*[21] an essay in which he analyzes his own borderline moments of immersion in pleasure. Like Barthes, I move from the first to the third person, observe myself and blur the scene without distorting the image. [22] *Looking and seeing* follows a process of transmutation from the written narrative to the tactility of embossed words in a small book, as *mise en abyme,*[23] a preservation of my ephemeral thoughts.

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[17] *ibid*
[18] John Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 69
[19] *op. cit*, J. Lechte
[20] *ibid*
[21] Roland Barthes, *Leaving the Movie Theatre, in The Art of The Personal Essay* Phillip Lopate, Anchor Books. N.Y.1995, p.420
[22] *ibid*
[23] *Mise en abyme* – a replica of a text or narrative embedded within that text or narrative. *The Narrative Reader*. p.322

I follow this with *thinking,* a mental rehearsal of an art performance. I think about what I have seen, read about and how it impacts on my artistic identity. I imagine the presence of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht in the theatre wings. Benjamin's theories, related to the theatre dynamic of the Fourth Wall and Brecht's epic theatre, are critical to my art performance. I am conscious of interruption of sequences and the use of light and sound, as referenced by Benjamin. Contemporary artists, who employ these tools and have influenced me, such as Australian photographic installation artists George Parkin, Rose Farrell and performance artist, Linda Lou Murphy are discussed. I also reference the Japanese writer, Kobo Abe, who creates a fantasy of identity, which involves the mask. Together with the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, the creative practices of these artists and writer are relevant to my narrative. It is through them that I am able to discuss imagery and objects from my art practice as both theoretical and aesthetic objects. Similarly, I look to Benjamin to chart 'the matter itself' and 'where I found it'[23] – the imagery which I have physically and mentally gathered to make my own.

I contemplate the comment by Joseph Kosuth, that art only lives by influencing art after it,[24] or it exists, in perpetuity, for the inspiration of others. He suggests art is a living entity that perpetually influences other art. Kosuth also stated that as the world changes the meaning of things change. *Once a particular artist's reality has gone, the reality of that particular work of art is gone too - its physical residue is little clue to the meaning of the work of art.* [25] This suggests that due to the passage of time or the physical passing of its artist-maker, the original meaning attributed to a work of art has 'gone.' In other words, the work of art can be seen to 'live on' even though it may have lost the impetus and meaning bestowed on it by the original artist. Kosuth does not specify whether the disappearance of meaning, in an artwork, coincides with the personal demise of the artist. However, he does suggest that an empty, creative work will inevitably, over time, be 'recycled' and assigned a new meaning by another artist. The appropriating artist may see the new or recycled work of art as an act of mimicry or homage to the original artist, as a subliminal influence or pure happenstance. The audience may interpret it similarly or the meaning may seem to them to be obscure and confusing.

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[23] Walter Benjamin, *Excavation and Memory*, Gesammelte Schriften, iv, Berlin, 1932 (translated by Rodney Livingstone) p. 400-401
[24] Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After*, MIT Press, Cambridge. Mass, 1991, p.78
[25] *ibid*

Assignment of a new meaning to the image of another, by a subsequent party, can be an act of 'intellectualized' appropriation. That is, it is consciously undertaken by the appropriating artist, as an academic exercise, to challenge their own perception and that of the audience. It can be a dynamic in which the appropriating artist constructs a relationship between borrowed images posed as propositions and paradoxes for the audience. Intellectualized appropriation, however, can create a conundrum for the viewer in relation to the authorial voice. The values and assumptions of the original artist, and their audience, may be at odds with those of the appropriating artist and the contemporary audience. What may be seen as a symbolic motif or signifier in the twenty first century may not have been the intention of the original artist in a previous century. However, creation of a conundrum for the viewer may be the intention of the contemporary appropriating artist. My appropriation of Satie's *Trois Pieces en Forme de Poire* can be seen as a form of intellectualized appropriation in that I have perpetuated the paradoxical title of a musical composition, as an academic exercise, to challenge the perception of and create a conundrum for the audience.

I think of this as I begin my first art performance. It is a defining moment which I describe in *being (acting out).* I have amassed a collection of symbolic objects: including figurative etchings, a suitcase and masks. They have waited, in anticipation of their acting role in my narrative. I handle them all with white cotton gloves. Each item is a signifier, personal to my psyche, yet some are borrowed from the creative practices of others. According to Freud, we protect ourselves through a subtle art of substitution in which an object may stand in for what we are hiding from ourselves.[26] Freud made this statement in reference to displacement and psychical dramas in one's everyday life. In this context, my performance is the first act in a new life drama. I switch on the music. It is the haunting restraint of Erik Satie's *Gynopedies* and *Gnossienne.*[27] I enter the darkened room. The curtains are open and the suitcase is closed. I switch on the lamp. A subdued glow permeates the space. The audience waits silently in the shadows. I can feel them looking - at the objects and me.

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[26] Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everday Life*, translated by Alan Tyson, pub. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, p. 15- 42

[27] Erik Satie 1866- 1925, *Gynopedies, Gnossiennes,* recorded by Aufnahme. Enregistrement: De Vereeniging, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, 9/1992

Chapter One

## looking (and seeing)

*It takes years to look at a picture* [28]

I recall the comment once made to me that many people look but do not see. I remember this and look more intently at Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* (fig 1, p.10) in the corner of the room in the Louvre where the lighting is subdued. It is a very small painting. I was surprised when I first saw it. In my mind, it had acquired larger proportions. This is one of only two original Vermeer portraits I have seen. The other is *The Astronomer* and it is significantly larger. Vermeer's portraits, particularly those of a woman alone in a room, have always intrigued me. With each viewing, in books, my interpretation of the image is subtly altered. I have noticed, for instance, in larger Vermeer paintings, in which the woman subject is not alone, that she is still isolated as an autonomous subject. These images by Vermeer are self-contained, interior monologues, each is a soliloquy, a moment of captured drama from a woman's life. They endure in my memory. They seem to appear, disappear and appear again, apparently by their own volition, but are never really in darkness. It is like a great deal of light has fallen on them. I may be blinded by this light, however, as I would be by darkness. In an attempt to understand and decipher the images, I initially consider whether they are a narrative or descriptive presentation. This is determined by certain interpretative models.

[28] Roland Barthes

Fig.1 Jan Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*, 1669-70, Oil

The Renaissance emphasis on interpretation, determined by study of the art of Italy is such an interpretative model. It is regarded as the Albertian [29] definition of a picture or a narrative interpretation. It is described as such by the writer, Svetlana Alpers*: a framed surface or pane situated a certain distance from a viewer who looks through it at a second or substitute world. In the Renaissance, this world was a stage on which human figures performed significant actions based on the texts of the poets. It is narrative art.*[30] Alpers considers much seventeenth century Dutch art to be descriptive, or non-Albertian, rather than narrative as a result of a suspension of action present in many of the works.[31] She suggests that this suspension of action, which could also be called interruption to the narrative, places greater emphasis on the objects and detail in the work and less on the narrative.

[29] Leon Battista Alberti, 1404 -1472, Author, Poet, Linguist, Architect, Philosopher, Cryptographer, Renaissance polymath
[30] Svetlana Alpers, prominent art historian, in *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, USA, University of Chicago Press, 1983, p.xix.
[31] *ibid*

An example of such suspension of action is in *A Lady Writing* (fig 2, p.11) in which the subject interrupts the narrative by acknowledging the viewer with a direct return of her gaze. Alpers concludes that Dutch descriptive art making in the seventeenth century was due to scientific approaches, such as optics and mapmaking, to understand the world. Alpers ascribed the distinction of descriptive art to the work of Vermeer, a view not commonly shared by other twentieth century writers. [32] This is an intersection of debate from which I will discuss my observation of the seventeenth century portraits of women by Vermeer. I will further this by juxtaposition and comparison of what I consider are similar narrative, descriptive and signification elements in contemporary cinema. Both these creative art forms have influenced my art practice.

Fig. 2 Jan Vermeer, *A Lady Writing,* 1665-70, Oil

[32] 1960's Dutch Scholar, Eddy de Jongh, considered Vermeer's work to be narrative and based on native iconographic sources, such as emblem books and proverbs. Martha Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes: Space and Meaning in Seventeenth Century Dutch Art*, University of California Press, USA, 2002, p. 5

Contrary to Alpers' view, I consider that Vermeer's seventeenth century portraits of women possess a unique fusion of narrative and descriptive elements. This results in a compelling aesthetic of ambiguous narrative and exquisite, descriptive detail. The stilled or arrested quality of these works is a symptom of a certain tension between the narrative assumptions of the art and the attentiveness to descriptive presence. Due in part to tension between the narrative and descriptive presence, the image acquires a life of its own in my consciousness and I evolve from solitary watcher to emotional participant. That is, I am inclined to 'read my own narrative' into the image, assisted by the descriptive elements in the work. In doing so, I become involved in the personal space of the subject and imagine I am within or part of the composition and as such have agency in its interpretation. Roland Barthes' speculation, that the audience lays claim to the structure of the creative work, is relevant in this context.

Engagement by the viewer could also be due to the small-scale and inherent detail in most of Vermeer's work, as is the case with *The Lacemaker.* The small scale of this work invites intimate inspection by the viewer. It is as if one is invited in, to 'participate' in the image and conjecture on its possible symbolism. It should be noted that numerous critics have ascribed meanings to Vermeer's work, many of which are didactic or moral in nature. For instance, the term 'disguised symbolism' has been used in reference to Vermeer's work, pertaining to the belief that, as genre paintings, their aim was to instruct or delight the viewer.[33] *The Lacemaker,* which shows a woman alone in a room, dutifully engrossed in handiwork, seems to endorse this view. Virtuous domestic behavior is generally accepted as pleasing to the eye and this woman is so totally focused on her virtuous duties, that she seems disengaged from the viewer's interest in her. There are analogies with Barbara Kruger's, *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)* (fig 3 p.13) in which an inert statue replaces the human form and the male gaze is rebuffed.

[33] 'disguised symbolism' was a term used by Erwin Panofsky, German Art Historian, 1892-1968, quoted in Wayne. E. Frantis, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth Century Dutch Art*, Cambridge University Press, UK, 1993, p.10

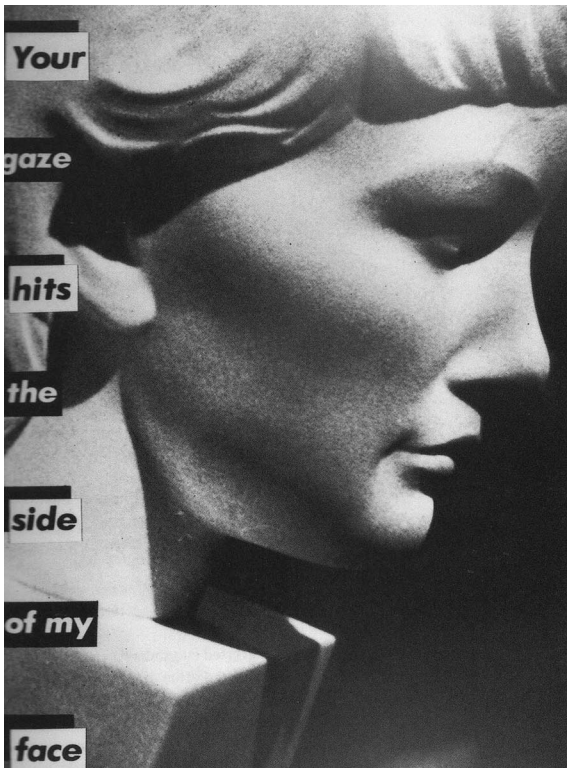


Fig.3 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled*
*(Your gaze hits the side of my face)* 1981, Photograph

In *The Lacemaker*, however, Vermeer has produced a close up view of a woman, available for scrutiny, and seemingly devoid from subtext. Symbolism and genre painting aside, what Vermeer has produced in this small work is a study of 'seeing,' as a narrative in two parts: the subject component – the woman, totally focused on her work at hand and aware, but dismissive, of the voyeur; and the spectator component - the voyeur who, through the gaze, attempts to enter the world of this self-contained woman.

In the performing arts, on the theatre stage and film screen where larger scale is the norm, the subject and the viewer are involved in this same dynamic. The performer subject (actor) plays a role. Their body (actions, dialogue) is the site. The performer subject exploits the viewing subject who has a propensity to treat the site as a projection of fantasy. That projection manifests as a desire by the viewer subject to enter the space of the performer subject. It can be suggested by extension then that the viewing subject has the desire to complete the picture. This experience was similarly described by Roland Barthes who noted that *the film image (and its sound) is a lure, which the spectator can experience twice over: firstly, as a narcissistic body which gazes, lost and engrossed in the image before them, and then as a perverse*

*body ready to fetishize individual elements of the experience – the darkness, the light, the inter-relationship of the theatrical space itself, the audience and the image that is on the screen.* [34] The dual narcissistic and perverse experiences can be seen to create a composite of tension between secrecy and disclosure, between hermetic doorway and invading eyes, which reflect the contingent relation between public and private space. [35] That is, the viewer is involved in the anatomy of someone else's personal space (or life), similar to that experienced in Vermeer's work, with its fusion of narrative and descriptive elements. It would seem that this dynamic, with its voyeuristic overtones, is of relevance to audience interpretation of all creative art practices, particularly performance. In a theatre, the viewer is physically outside the performer's space, but the sensation of being inside the space due to the seductive qualities of the enclosed, dark room. Another aspect of this dynamic, referred to as significant by Barthes, is the viewer's act of leaving the creative space, and how, even then, the act of looking and seeing is still apparent.

The 'act of leaving' is described by Barthes in his essay, *Leaving the Movie Theatre.*[36] Barthes states, that upon leaving the theatre he is able to contemplate the full effect of the film and the seductive theatre environment. Leaving allows him to bask further in the enjoyment of the experience. He describes the darkness of the theatre situation as *pre-hypnotic, as the very substance of reverie – defined as a fit of musing daydreaming*. [37] He recalls the fascination of the 'shining site' of the film on the screen – *it is as if a long stem of light had outlined a keyhole and I peered in. It is the colour of diffused eroticism.*[38] Barthes' observation is acutely focused, if somewhat furtive, as is my memory of Vermeer portraits, in that they are never in darkness, I think of them often and they invoke a feeling of reverie for me. This experience can also be described as 'active attentiveness.'[39] That is, as a viewer, I am beckoned by some aspect of an image so the boundary between viewer and image disappears.

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[34] Roland Barthes, *Leaving the Movie Theatre*, from *The Rustle of Language* by Roland Barthes, translated by Richard Howard. Reprinted by permission of Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, inc. in *The Art of the Personal Essay, An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, Phillip Lopate, Anchor Books, a division of Random House, New York, 1995, p.418

[35] Martha Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes: Space and Meaning in Seventeenth Century Dutch Art*, University of California Press, USA, 2002, p.5

[36] *ibid*, Barthes, *Leaving the Movie Theatre*, p.418 -420

[37] *ibid*

[38] *ibid*

[39] 'active attentiveness' is a term used by Christiane Hertel in *Vermeer: Reception and Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.13-71 which draws from Michael Fried , *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1980.

The boundary between viewer and image disappeared when I saw the film, *The Lives of Others,*[40] set in East Germany in 1984 prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. In this instance, the audience is 'invited into' others' lives via the large cinema screen. I experienced the lure of the film twice over, as a narcissistic body and a perverse body. My enjoyment was enhanced when I left the cinema and thought more about the film. *The Lives of Others* is about looking and seeing into people's private lives in which the state is principle voyeur. Chosen individuals (the secret service, known as the Stasi) are its agents. The contingent relation between public and private space, and the sensation of watching creates a dynamic in which the viewer is drawn into the intimacy and stark reality of others' lives. There is an interplay between style and content in the film which creates tension in the viewer. The script (content) analytically reveals facts and the camera is able to analyze and humanize the actors.

The film is also a study of signification, involving a manuscript, secreted under the floorboards of an apartment. The manuscript is a signifier of something other than what it is, and has a power reminiscent of Poe's *The Purloined Letter* in which the letter, and its unknown contents, threatens the Queen's integrity. The manuscript, in the film, has the power to change or possibly terminate several lives. In this instance, contrary to the plot of *The Purloined Letter*, the audience does know the contents of the manuscript, its whereabouts and the harm it can do its authors. Therefore, the audience can be seen to be complicit in its diversion from place, its travels and the definite path it forms in a signifying chain which cuts across the subjects of the story. The manuscript acquires power, as was the case with Poe's letter, when each character refers to it, is in its possession, or comes within its vicinity. The principal characters in this signifying chain include one who is portrayed as patently evil and two others, the vilified writer and actress, as almost saint-like. These characters can be seen to portray specific genre types such as those ascribed to Vermeer's portraits. Throughout the film there is reference to past East German writers who made social statements through the arts, including Bertolt Brecht, with quotes from his plays. Though unseen, Brecht becomes part of this signifying chain. The audience, also as voyeurs, are part of the chain in a similar way to the secret service agents who spy and compile dossiers on fellow East German citizens. It can be said that the audience of the film take the same role as the narrator from *The Purloined Letter* – the audience has agency in the plot.

[40] *The Lives of Others* – a film by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, Germany, 2006

The audience is inclined to mentally compile their own dossiers from the descriptive presence of a gray city, sparse decor of the rooms and intense demeanor of all the characters. Similarly, the viewer of Vermeer's seventeenth century portraits is able to compile dossiers from the descriptive presence of opulent bourgeois interiors. There is tension between narrative assumptions and descriptive elements in the film. At times, the narrative assumptions, drawn from the actions of characters, are contradictory to the descriptive elements. For instance, one evil character, without altering his facial expression, commits an act of compassion and humility. He saves the life of another but this results in his personal ruin. His limited range of expressions, unchanged even when he wants to redeem himself, belies this. His expression echoes the hollowness of his life and also creates unease in the viewer, as to his real intentions. The character portrayed as an innocent actress is a similarly self-involved, flawed person and this proves to be the catalyst for her own demise.

*The Lives of Others* represents oppression. It has a palpable, heavy presence of both narrative and descriptive elements. This is achieved partially by the method of filming which alternates between close ups on the faces of stressed and anxious people, and long views down corridors and empty streets – all of which have connotations of doom. Interestingly, close ups on the faces of Vermeer's women, who are often unsmiling, expressionless but not anxious, or, in the case of *The Lacemaker*, disinterested in the viewer's gaze, create intrigue rather than doom. Similarly, extended views, into other rooms or beyond the subject, in Vermeer's work, is a descriptive tool for embellishing the narrative not a portent of doom.

Though this film presents the viewer with a tableau which is diametrically opposed to the beautiful portraiture of Vermeer's women, in which an air of domestic bliss and virtue are displayed, the same art-historical notion of meaning is at play, involving history, context and forms. The interpretation of meaning, in Vermeer's portraits and *The Lives of Others,* assumes connoisseurship by the audience. The audience are subliminally influenced and conditioned by culturally shaped habits of 'seeing' and 'interpretation.' However, some elements, such as the representation of domestic harmony in Vermeer's portraits present a dichotomy for the viewer. Though there is rarely anything overtly confronting in Vermeer's work, his portraits establish a tension of opposites. The seemingly benign narrative of domesticity is informed by nuance of posture, gaze, expression and subtle juxtaposition of objects. A similar dichotomy is presented in the film when some characters are simultaneously portrayed as evil and

compassionate. It could be said that the range of expressions in Vermeer's women is as limited as the dour characters in *The Lives of Others,* yet the steady return (or rebuff) of gaze, with its associated signification, is predominant and powerful in both. The gaze and demeanor of all these individuals suggest something other than perfection. The nuance of posture, gaze and expression are tropes employed to open up the visual space and narrative for absorption and interpretation by the viewer. Vermeer, however, absorbs the viewer more subtly than the film director.

Vermeer's portraits and the characters (and plot) in *The Lives of Others* combine descriptive and narrative elements, further informed by viewer insight and memory. The French refer to this as *reflection faite* (looking back). It is a personal and intimate view with an understanding of both the narrative and descriptive elements of what is seen. Among the things the viewer reads into the image are its symbolism, its reflection of, or resistance to, moral values, its realism and how elements are arranged within the composition. Each of these elements underlies the narrative function of the image and how it is read.[41] I have looked at the Vermeer images, watched the film, *The Lives of Others* and pondered on them. Now, I wait in the shadows, somewhere between imagination, memory and reality. What is real is not as important as what I perceive or feel. In my imagination, I transmute into something nobler and more sublime to speak of the experience. It is like writing a fiction in which I have many voices. I can direct my gaze back at myself, look and see. There is a long stem of light. My thinking is clearly lit. I am the woman in the small Vermeer painting.

[41] Harriet Stone, *Tables of Knowledge: Descartes in Vermeer's Studio*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, London, 2006, p.xvi

Fig.4 Karen Ball *I see, I think,* 2007, Etching

## Chapter Two **thinking**

*All the world's a stage*
*All the men and women merely players*
*They have their exits and entrances*
*And one man in his time plays many parts.*[42]

I imagine I am at the Fourth Wall – at the front of a standard proscenium stage.[43] Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht watch from the theatre wings. I think about the role I will play and the theatrical devices I will employ to engage the audience. I am informed by Vermeer's portraits of women, and more recently, by two Australian contemporary performance-installation practices: Rose Farrell and George Parkin, and Linda Lou Murphy. These seventeenth and twenty first century art practices are historically and contextually remote, but have a common element, known as 'reception in distraction' which was cited in Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre[44] by Walter Benjamin. Reception in distraction has similarities to 'suspension of action,' as quoted by Svetlana Alpers, in reference to seventeenth century Dutch art.

[42] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 1599 -1600

[43] 'The Fourth Wall' is a drama term referring to the position in front of the stage at which the audience are kept 'at arms length', aware that they are not part of the performance. 'Proscenium Stage', in theatre, is the space between the curtain or drop scene and the orchestra, with an enclosing arch.

[44] *Epic Theatre* – originally a German expression used in contrast to dramatic theatre. In 1926, utilized by Bertolt Brecht with projected texts, film, treadmill stage and interruption of sequences as an aid to address social issues.

It was noted by Walter Benjamin, in the early twentieth century, that 'distraction' of the audience, in epic theatre, was utilized as a tool to manipulate audience reaction. This method of audience manipulation was discussed in Benjamin's essays on the technological reproducibility of art: *Little History of Photography* [45] and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.*[46] Benjamin described it as 'reception in distraction'- *the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception*.[47] Apperception, in this context, refers to both empirical and transcendental apperception, as distinguished by Kant. The former is consciousness of actual self with its changing states, whereas the latter is pure, original consciousness that is the necessary condition of experience. Benjamin acknowledged that changes in apperception, in all areas of art, impacted on both the method of presentation chosen by the artist and audience interpretation. He noted that due to the interruption of sequences in epic theatre, situations were discovered, not reproduced. He acknowledged that it gave agency to the audience in a performance - the audience were not only spectators but collaborators.

The stage becomes a magic space in which perception of reality is challenged and there are sufficient gaps in the action to allow the audience to reflect and 'imagine.' Benjamin referred to these performance gaps as 'quotable.'[48] That is, each scene was for itself. The audience was made aware of separate, quotable elements of the performance: words, music and setting. Epic theatre was used to stimulate, alienate and astonish the audience: ordinary objects were made to appear strange, both audience and actor encouraged to reflect on them. Benjamin speculated, that the audience was inclined to be carried away or 'intoxicated' by epic theatre in that it created a strange weave of time and space.

The art practice of contemporary Australian photographic installation artists, Rose Farrell and George Parkin utilizes the weaving of time and space of epic theatre, as referred to by Benjamin. Farrell and Parkin's use of suspense, evocative silence,

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[45] Walter Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*, published in *Die Literarsche Welt*, Sept - Oct 1931, Gesammelte Schriften, 11, Berlin, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London, NLB, 1977

[46] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt, translated Harry Zohn, Fontana / Collins, U.K. 1973 (originally published, Schriften, Germany, 1935)

[47] Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Scheweppenhauser Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,1974 ff.

[48] *op. cit*. Benjamin, *Little History Of Photography*, p.536

appropriations of Renaissance engravings and biblical stories culminates in large photographs printed in sepia-toned limited editions. To realize a composition, they construct film-like sets using papier-mache and alfoil in which Farrell poses in costume and is photographed by Parkin.
(fig 5,p20)

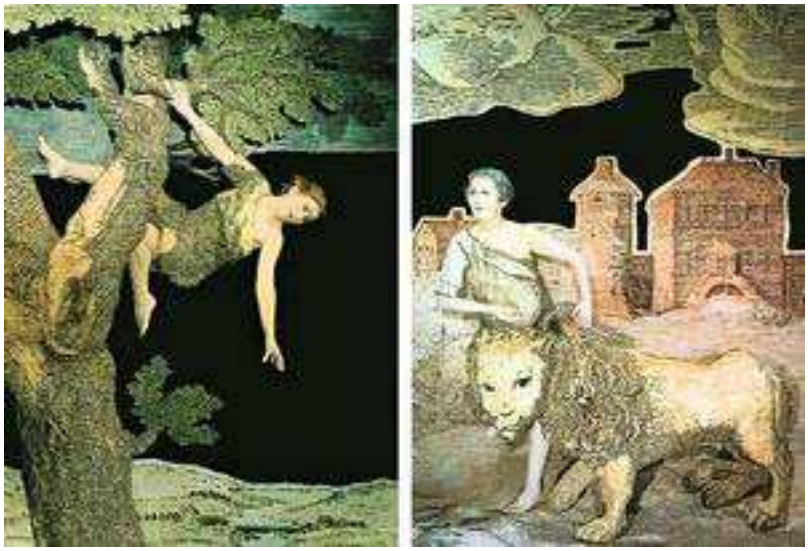

Fig. 5 Rose Farrell and George Parkin
*Edge of the Divide and Cause for Consternation*, 2005, Photographs

Farrell and Parkin acknowledge that their imagery is posed or contrived, in a method comparable to Bill Henson's *Opera Series* of photographs. Similarly, their work is theatrical, playful but dark, with ambiguous subject matter. The large, life-size scale of Farrell and Parkin's photography is both engaging and disconcerting to the viewer who is inclined to view the descriptive, multi-layered work very closely, uncertain as to whether the female subject is posed by a human, or is a cartoon cut out, such is her bizarre appearance. Farrell and Parkin's use of such visual conundrums in their appropriated tableaux create a magic space with 'gaps' to allow viewer reflection. Nevertheless, the audience is distracted.

The audience is distracted, but mesmerized, by Linda Lou Murphy (fig 6, p. 21), an Australian performance artist, as she moves slowly and deliberately through their midst. She stands on a low, wooden stool and returns their gaze. They instinctively move back to allow a performance space. No announcement or request is made of them. Murphy uses the actions of stepping onto the stool and return of gaze as a 'distraction', 'interruption' or 'suspension of action', as did Brecht in epic theatre and

Vermeer in *A Lady Writing* to unsettle the audience. Articulated without words, Murphy's performances recall and transform experiences of the past as a ritualistic revelation of identity. Murphy, as a sole performer, uses key signature elements - strange pleated, paper garments and pins combined with installation and performance. Other elements in her performance include a wooden stool, cotton thread, paper and scissors - everyday objects that would normally be associated with female domestic duties.

Fig. 6 Linda Lou Murphy, *drawing threads*, 2006, Performance at Object Gallery, Sydney.

This illusion of domesticity is shattered when Murphy alters the context of the objects and uses them to symbolically act out, with suggestion of a darker meaning. One specific action, that of drawing a thread of cotton from her mouth, cutting the thread and attaching it to the wall has a compelling, ritualistic quality. After each of her actions, Murphy returns the gaze of an individual member of the audience. She displays an awareness of the watcher which is unsettling to the recipient. In another part of her performance, Murphy repositions a paper hat from the top of her head to her face so that it is transformed into a mask. It reveals, then conceals her identity.

Vermeer's women are also sole performers. Even when there are others in the composition the woman is portrayed as an autonomous subject. Unlike Murphy, Vermeer's women are immobile, whether seated or standing. In his compositions, the women silently beckon the viewer, the signature element always being the scene of

domestic harmony. Vermeer's women also project an air of control in the return of the viewer's gaze – they watch the watcher while continuing to pursue their task. In *A Lady Writing*, the subject interrupts her writing, maintains the posture of her hands and her task of writing, and looks directly at the viewer. The viewer, however, does not assume the role of an erotic voyeur. Vermeer's women display autonomy and a sense of purpose that undercuts erotic voyeurism. His women were portrayed in domestic situations, engrossed in duties not usually associated with eroticism or thought to be of interest to the voyeur, yet the return of gaze by the subject suggests deeper meaning. The illusion of a naturally ordered world, in Dutch pictorial representations of Vermeer's time, has also been linked to the tradition of the idyll. It is said that the moment of interruption brings this 'naïve' world to an abrupt halt.[49]

I continued to think about the specific dynamics of Vermeer's portraiture, the art practices of Farrell, Parkin and Murphy, and what I perceive to be their relationship to epic theatre, as I made art objects and planned my own performance: a sole performance, a motivated act with interruption of sequences in which I would be an autonomous subject. Influenced by Linda Lou Murphy's mask, that was transformed from a garment (hat) as a means of disguise, I began making masks. It was suggested by Oscar Wilde that *man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell the truth.*[50] My decision to make masks was also influenced by the novel, *The Face of Another* [51] in which the mask is used as a disguise and to alter personality.

*The Face of Another* is an allegory, in the genre of Samuel Beckett's existential melodrama. The term 'allegory' is derived from a Greek word and means 'other speaking', through metaphor, allusion and symbolism. [52] The mask in my narrative is a form of 'other speaking.' It is also said that allegory is common to narrative and all language can be read as saying something other than that intended by the speaker.[53] As such, the strangeness of the mask will be pivotal in its influence on the audience and how they will read the narrative in my performance. In *The Face of Another,* the protagonist wears a latex mask so perfectly formed to be indistinguishable from reality. He has bought the mask from a total stranger, someone whose own face it

[49] *op. cit*, p.116
[50] Walter Sorrell, *The Other Face- the Mask in the Arts*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1973, p.13
[51] Kobo Abe, *The Face of Another,* translated by E. Dale Saunders, pub. Charles E. Tuttle and Co, Tokyo, 1964
[52] P. De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust,* Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1979
[53] *ibid*

replicates. It is procured as a form of disguise, to deceive and spy on his partner. In this instance, the action of buying the mask appropriates the other's face and it is not unlike 'the physical residue of a work of art, or that which remains when its maker's reality has gone' which was suggested by Kosuth to invite reuse by another.[54] It is the intention of the protagonist, in *The Face of Another,* to 'recycle' the face, apply his own meaning to it and assume the identity of the other.

To apply meaning to my own masks, I firstly made twelve miniature clay masks, small enough to fit into the palm of my hand, (fig 7, p. 24) with expressions that range from quirky, to humorous and sad – encompassing a range of human emotions. This led me to make life-size ceramic masks, which reference the Japanese Noh mask that dates from the 13th century (fig 8, p.24). Noh masks are traditionally worn only by the main character which has relevance to the autonomous nature of the sole, motivated act which I am referencing. The Noh mask traditionally stylizes the person in one of five categories: gods, demons, men, women and the elderly. As the Noh mask generally has a neutral expression, the skill of the actor is required to bring it to life. My masks wait for me to bring them to life. They are stored in a suitcase. They wait, like actors for a role, poised to make an entrance, or perform their monologue. Some, however, will always metaphorically be understudies and remain in the suitcase, an unresolved act. That the masks are in a suitcase is also suggestive of travel or of someone's intimate belongings. These masks signify my personal journey, and in that context, can be seen as my alter ego, the second self or the other.

[54] Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After,* MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., USA, 1991, p.78

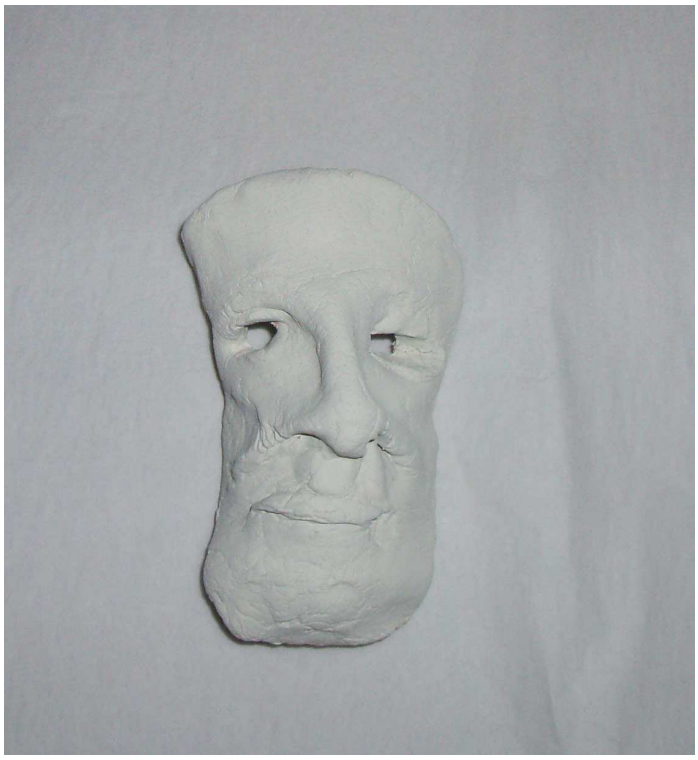

Fig. 7 Karen Ball, miniature mask (from a series of twelve)
2006, Clay

Fig.8 Japanese Noh Mask

As I made the miniature and life size masks, my focus was directed on the juxtaposition of their 'faces' with my hands and an aspect of visual composition, involving the hands, face and the motivated act, became apparent to me. This pause in my creative process was a moment of realization, one that could be compared to reception in distraction. That is, my actions were interrupted and I transmuted from active subject to enthralled viewer. Not only did the masks, as faces, return my gaze, my hands were 'framed' within my personal visual space. The posture of hands and return of gaze communicates meaning, as is seen in the pictorial style of Vermeer's portraits and as was referenced in Murphy's carefully articulated movements. Vermeer used the gaze and position of the hands to interrupt the narrative. He utilized interruption to create a pause in the narrative, or the original story was suspended and an alternative scenario suggested.[55] In other words, one's initial interpretation of Vermeer's portraits and the interpretation of Murphy's performance are both altered by a subtle change of posture, positioning of the hands or return of gaze by the subject. Vermeer's method of 'framing' the hands (and face) of his women subjects focuses attention on performance, or the motivated act, a device used by Murphy, whose hands and facial expression are central to her performance. I resolved to appropriate these framed actions in my own work.

The action of framing the hands and face can be seen in Vermeer's *The Pearl Necklace* (fig 9, p. 26). This is a perfectly balanced moment in which the young woman fastens her necklace and her hands and face are 'framed', or central to the composition. As with most of Vermeer's portraits of women, *The Pearl Necklace,* presents classical ideals of order, harmony and integrity, and when combined with autonomous control, acts to isolate, yet empower the woman through definition of her spatial position. The hands are the focal point of this composition and in terms of classical ideals, the moment is eternalized rather than just captured.[56] The response of the viewer to such 'freezing of a moment' in a performance is similar to that which Barthes referred in *Leaving the Movie Theatre.* That is, the experience is extended beyond the moment. It invokes a feeling of reverie in the viewer who is able to experience it twice, as narcissistic and perverse body. The eternalized moment results in it acquiring iconic status in the memory of the viewer. Thus, it is long remembered.

[55] Bryan Jay Wolf, *Vermeer and the Invention of Seeing*, University Chicago Press, USA, 2001, p.115
[56] Leonard J. Slatkes, *Vermeer and his Contemporaries,* Abbeville Press Pub. N.Y. 1981, p.52

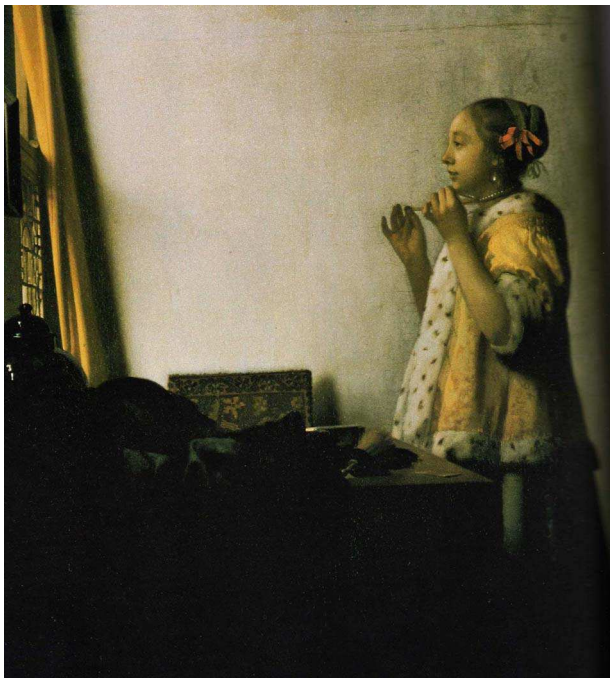

Fig.9 Jan Vermeer, *The Pearl Necklace*, 1664, Oil

Vermeer's use of light within his portraits is another form of eternalizing an aspect of the composition. Vermeer uses light as a frame to illuminate and isolate key compositional elements and it is a common inclusion in his works. The woman subject is often looking toward, or illuminated by, the light of the window. The window, also a frame, can be said to structure the knowledge required to interpret the subject. It mediates the interior, exterior, nature and the mind. Further to this, the light from the window in *The Pearl Necklace* can be seen to have religious connotations. The woman looks serenely toward the light and it frames her hands and face. In this context, some critics have likened the position of the woman's hands in *The Pearl Necklace* to be analogous to the Annunciation.[57] Vermeer's use of the window, in *The Pearl Necklace*, reinforces the notion of the frame and the paradigm of framing. The other objects in this work are illuminated to a lesser degree by the light from the window, and as such, are identifiable as secondary elements. The lack of adornment on the walls limits visual distraction and reinforces the importance of the 'framed' focal point: juxtaposition, and framing, of the hands and the face.

[57] *The Annunciation* : the announcement of the Incarnation made by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, Luke 1: 26-38 , as theorised by Siri Hustvedt, *Mysteries of the Rectangle*, N.Y., Princeton Architectural Press, 2005, p.12

Informed by the specific postures and framing in *The Pearl Necklace* and *The Lacemaker,* I will use light to frame and illuminate the motivated act in my performance. The act of switching a lamplight on and off, at the beginning and end of the performance, to illuminate and eternalize specific moments, will be utilized as a form of interruption or distraction. This will be integrated with a peephole view for the audience, so that they have the voyeuristic sensation of watching from outside the room. The performance and viewer's space will be divided by a partially drawn curtain. The use of a curtain also has a long tradition, particularly in religious art, as an instrument of divine revelation. The draped curtain exposed important motifs, either blatantly or through the subterfuge of partially hiding them. It recalls the tradition of pulling back the curtain to reveal the truth, sacred or otherwise.[58] The curtain is often included in painting and compositional techniques such as *trompe l'oeil,*[59] implemented in early Greek painting and in more recent times, to play with the viewer's perception of reality and illusion. In the context of my performance, the curtain will enhance the disjunction between the interior, private space and the outer space, through the doorway. It is a demarcation between public and private life. It is my intention to unsettle the viewer's perception of the narrative in the 'framed' performance beyond the curtain.

Vermeer used the peephole motif (known as *doorkijke)* into an adjoining room, as a form of framing, similar to the curtain and the light from the window. The peephole view suggested an alternative narrative. *The Love Letter* (fig 10, p. 28) is an example of the use of doorkijke and of an 'absent presence' suggesting an alternative narrative. In this painting there is an empty chair, barely visible, in the dark, foreground shadows of the ante-room. It is indicative of a lost love (in reference to the title of the painting) or someone who has left the home. The disheveled sheets of music and a garment draped over the chair indicate the occupant has only recently departed. That is, the represented forms of a garment and sheet music refer to someone or something real, which cannot be seen – that person is physically absent, but psychically present in the narrative. That the empty chair is in front of the open door, and the door frames the main composition, serves to interrupt and inform the narrative. It reveals that the chair is part of the narrative, and it signifies something other than a chair, as did the letter in Poe's *The Purloined Letter.* The empty chair, as signifier, takes on meaning in relation to other signifiers.

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[58] Martha Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes- Space and Meaning in Seventeenth Century Dutch Art,* p. 24-31

[59] ' trompe l'oeil '– a painting technique in which the objects presented have the illusion of reality

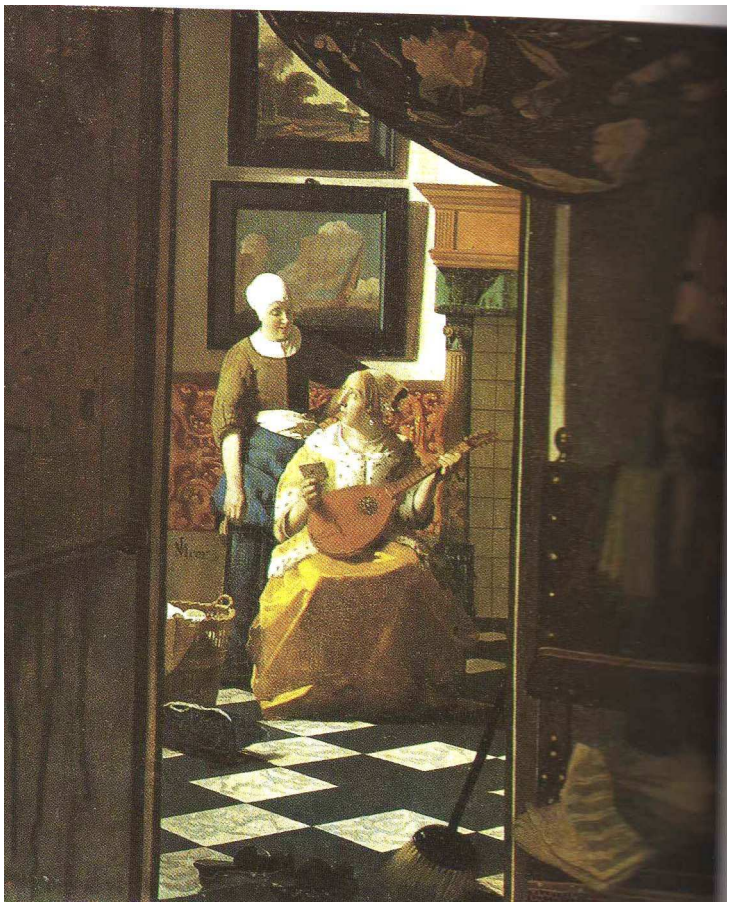

Fig.10 Jan Vermeer, *The Love Letter*, 1669-70, Oil

I continue to think about this empty chair with its psychically present but physically absent person. The chair personifies Alpers' 'suspension of action' and Benjamin's 'reception in distraction.' I reflect on this, as I stand next to the chair, in front of the door and just behind the curtain. I am both subject and viewer. I watch Vermeer's women reading the letter. I watch myself arrange objects. Being, being present, being there. I am at the Fourth Wall.

Chapter Three

## being (acting out)

*He who has been, from then on cannot not have been: henceforth this mysterious and profoundly obscure fact of having been is his viaticum for all eternity.*[60]

I

walk

past

the

curtain

and attach my fragmented self to the wall with masking tape. It takes the form of two figurative life-size etchings: one of a naked female body, with no head or feet, the other of bare feet emerging from a full skirt. The etchings seem to stand guard over the suitcase. Earlier, I had placed the suitcase on top of a plinth and secured a shelf, hook, coat hanger and a small box to the wall. The small box contains a pair of white cotton gloves, a light and a mirror. Finally, just behind the curtain, I position a standard lamp. This completes the installation of my small theatre. These are concrete details, descriptive notations within this narrative. They are details of which you should be aware.

[60] Vladimir Jankelevitch 1903-1985, French Philosopher and musicologist (born of Russian parents)

I have made no allusion as to the contents of the suitcase. Its contents are also concrete details, descriptive notations. One may recall that masks have been residing in the suitcase, 'off stage' so to speak, in anticipation of a role in my life drama. There are other items in the suitcase but I want to leave enough room in the narrative for you to imagine what they may be. I have been influenced by the writer, Paul Auster, who said that it is important for the reader to inhabit the narrative[61] in what seems to be a reference to Barthes' essay, *Death of the Author.*[62] That is, Auster believes that the reader, not the writer, writes the book, in that they graft their own experiences into the story as Barthes similarly suggested in *Death of the Author* in relation to the creative work being dependant on the impressions of the reader (viewer, audience) more than the passions or tastes of the creator. Barthes also stated that descriptive notation is a pure encounter between the object and its expression.[63]

The pure encounter between the suitcase and its expression is such a descriptive notation in my performance. The suitcase is raised on a plinth, visually elevating its status, and I will return to it several times during my performance. As the subject (and an object) in this small theatre, I can be seen to defer to the suitcase, through pure encounters. The sum of its contents, unknown to you, will be returned to it at the duration of the performance, as if it is 'a home.' Without the involvement of these other, unknown objects in the performance, however, the suitcase would carry no power. The suitcase, the other objects and I form part of a signifying chain in the narrative. The suitcase, in particular, travels a definite path which forms a symbolic circuit or signifying chain that cuts across the other subjects of the narrative. My encounters with the suitcase are motivated acts: acts which express and transform my inner dramas into a work of art outside my body as a sublimation of the self. I afford much power to the suitcase and other inanimate objects in this expression of self.

The seemingly banal or insignificant nature of some of these objects belies their importance as did the piece of string drawn slowly from the mouth of Linda Lou Murphy during her performance. In my performance, the roll of masking tape physically and metaphorically connects, or holds together disparate pieces, such as

[61] Paul Auster , *The Red Notebook*, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p.111
[62] Roland Barthes, *Death of the Author*, 1967
[63] Roland Barthes, *The Reality Effect ( L'Effet du Reel )* in *Communications*, 11 (Seuil, Paris, 1968) p. 84- 9

my fragmented self. I think of the masking tape as a floating conjunction. Its meaning changes according to whether it waits quietly, rolled up, or I physically tear a piece from it to hold my fragmented self together. It can be said to exhibit anthropomorphic qualities of a voice when torn or silent attentiveness while waiting on the lamp table. Similarly, the white cotton gloves have multiple roles which suggest plural interpretation. They simultaneously reference the fastidious nature of domesticity, or perhaps, can be seen as signifiers of obsessive, sexual longing such as that portrayed in Max Klinger's nineteenth century *A Glove* series.[64] White gloves were also employed as subversive instruments of espionage in *The Lives of Others,* a film of influence to me*.* In this film, white gloves were used by agents to 'mask' their identity (fingerprints) when searching for 'clues' about fellow citizens*.* At the moment, my white cotton gloves are bereft of a role. They reside, innocently, in the small wooden box on the wall in the performance space, as the masks have done in the suitcase. I have, however, kept the light on in the box for the gloves. It reminds me that they are there. I recheck the gloves, and my arrangement of the other objects, before exiting through the doorway. The doorway is the threshold between one state of being and another, between public and private space. You will enter, with the audience, through this same doorway to watch me. I will watch you all.

The aggressive nature of looking into the picture space is aptly described by the seventeenth century Dutch terms, *insien* (view into) and *doorsien* (view through).[65] *Doorsien* is also a narrative device in which the foreground and background elements are divided and there is emphasis on the hierarchical arrangement of figures and objects.[66] Important figures are centrally placed and subsidiary characters placed below and to the side. As such, my placement of the suitcase on the plinth, central to the performance space, signifies its importance to the narrative. Similarly, my own deliberate movements and gestures, between the centrally situated suitcase and other objects is a device to denote their importance and engage the attention of the viewer.

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[64] Max Klinger, German, 1857-1920, *A Glove*, portfolio of 10 prints*: Place, Action, Yearnings, Rescue, Triumph, Homage, Anxieties, Repose, Abduction, Cupid.*

[65] Terms used by Karel Van Mander, Seventeenth Century Dutch theorist and painter, quoted in Martha Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes - Space and Meaning in Seventeenth Century Dutch Art,* University of California Press, Berkley, L.A., London, 2002, p.8

[66] *ibid*

Everything is ready. This is a defining moment. You may now enter the darkened room.

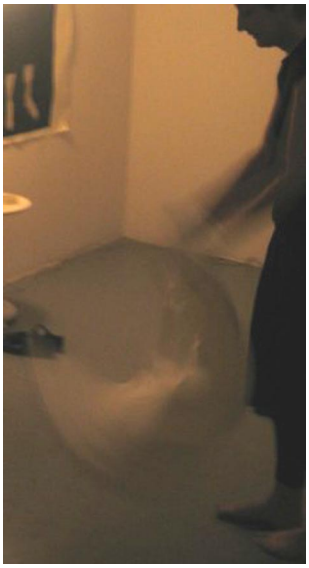
The
only
sounds
are
our
footsteps
and
Satie's
music

a gentle, repetitive rhythm.

Click. I switch on the lamp. A warm glow illuminates the room. The colour of diffused eroticism. I remove my shoes and slide them against the wall, next to the plinth. Left of centre but part of the narrative. Shoes are markers of sexuality and passion according to domestic genre painting. They also signify travel and romance but, when removed, they allude to domestic commitment and forgoing the adventure of travel – virtuous domestic behaviour. My bare feet make no sound on the cool, concrete floor. I can hear the music as I walk towards the light inside the small box on the wall. I open the box and remove the white cotton gloves. They glow even whiter in the light as if to signify divine importance. I pause for a moment and observe my own reflection in the mirror then place the gloves on my hands. My hands, no longer bare, will have no direct contact with any of the objects. The gloves signify the purity of my endeavour, my virtuous domestic commitment. With gloved hands I open the suitcase, lift out three ceramic masks and place them on the wall shelf.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

As if to confirm their presence, the masks make a hollow sound as lift them from the suitcase and they touch the wall. They are aware of my intent. They watch me. Shadows, created by the lamplight on the wall, make them appear larger and more lifelike. I then lift a white paper skirt and camisole from the suitcase and shake them out. The garments seem alive. They make the sound of grass rustling in the wind.

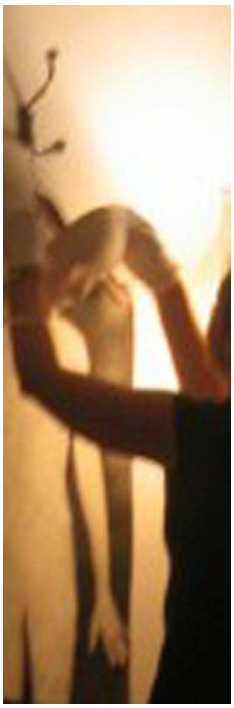


I must silence them. I attach them with masking tape to the naked figure etching.

The mask, on the coat hanger, looks down at these crinkled garments and says,

“ Who am I?”

Before the mask can say another word, I gently touch it with my gloved hands, place it on my own face and turn to you. I return your gaze. We say nothing. Pause.



I will tell you the truth.

I return to the suitcase, repack the masks and remove the masking tape from the garments. They berate me as I shake them, fold them up and put them away. Then they are silent. I carefully close the lid and turn out the light.

Click.

Pause.

I remove my gloves and offer them to you as I walk out of the room. I leave the door ajar. The music continues to play.

The self has fleetingly come into focus.

Images:

Page 33 - 36 Karen Ball, *being (acting out),* Performance, Photographs, 2006 -7

Page 35 Jan Vermeer, detail, *Girl Interrupted,* 1660-61, Oil

## Conclusion

For at least one hour we had maintained a profound silence. Or perhaps it was only ten minutes. Nevertheless, you watched my performance with the others in the audience, as both narcissistic and perverse body. Then, you collated details of it before they faded away. In your desire to complete the picture, you entered through the hermetic doorway of the performance space to focus on my hands, face, movements, the motivated act - my actions.

Subsequently, I would
reclaim watch
those the video
details documentation
bind compulsively,
them over
together and
print over,
the then
images write
as etchings my story
and constitute myself through narrative exchange.

You entered the performance space through the same doorway as me, an action which references Vermeer's seventeenth century portraits of women in which the viewer is metaphorically invited into the private space of the subject. This action blurred the contingent relation and demarcation between public and private space. By allowing you to enter my private space, I deferred to you as a collaborator, an acknowledgement of Walter Benjamin's theories related to Brecht's epic theatre, the audience and 'reception in distraction.' That is, I crossed the invisible fourth wall of the theatrical space, paused and engaged directly with you. This engagement was a conscious act by me, part of my own 'strange weave of time and space,' as described by Benjamin.

I combined this with other conscious acts: the strategic placement of objects, subdued lighting and further pauses in the narrative. My focus on the theatrical deployment of space and the conversion of that space from emblematic to meditative was a means of identity revelation and influenced by the composition and dynamics of Vermeer's portraits of women. To achieve a representation analogous with 'the Vermeer woman in a virtuous domestic situation', I presented a close up view of myself, engrossed in packing and unpacking items in a room, as a pseudo domestic enactment. This enactment was a self-contained, interior monologue, a soliloquy, a moment of captured drama in my life available for scrutiny. Unlike Vermeer's *The Lacemaker,* however, it was heavy with subtext, included objects as signifiers and allusion to symbolism.

I began my performance by focusing on my shoes. In that shoes suggest sexuality and passion in domestic genre painting or virtuous domestic behaviour when removed, this created a tension of opposites. I removed my shoes but they remained clearly visible and dominant in the performance space. Thus, the audience was distracted by the presence of the shoes, and inclined to contemplate their role in the narrative. In this context, the shoes were not only suggestive of either sexuality or virtue but became a metaphor for shifting identity, or a form of 'other speaking' also known as an allegory. Allegory is common to narrative and inclusive of metaphor, allusion and symbolism. In this same context, I wore a mask as a form of other speaking. It had been suggested by Oscar Wilde that it would allow me to speak the truth. I chose silence, however, and observed that the other masks on the shelf made sounds as I unpacked them and they observed my performance.

The masks on the shelf had ‘speaking roles’, together with the garments. These sounds served to interrupt the narrative and further allude to aspects of strangeness and distraction pertaining to epic theatre.

The suitcase was silent throughout the performance but its dominant presence, elevated on a plinth, furthered my discussion of the symbolic order and the psychological forces that surround a narrative, as referenced by Lacan in his analysis of Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. The itinerary of the suitcase, as signifier, cut across the subjects (including myself) in the story. The suitcase determined the acts and destiny of the other subjects in the narrative: the suitcase housed the masks and paper garments, was positioned centrally to the space and I returned (deferred) to it throughout the performance. Without the involvement of each of these elements, however, the suitcase would carry no power. The suitcase and small box on the wall were initially closed, opened, then closed again. The contents were revealed then concealed. In that context, both the suitcase and small wooden box referenced secrecy and disclosure.

Utilization of the curtain to frame the space also referenced secrecy and disclosure or an alternative narrative such as that portrayed in Vermeer's *The Love Letter* in which two women are engaged in dialogue beyond the curtain and an empty chair is in front of it (with its allusion to a psychically present subject). During the course of my performance, as a device to unsettle the audience, I walked in front of the curtain (the frame), silently engaged with you and then returned to my private space.

I have said nothing of Satie and his music, a pervading presence punctuating this narrative. One of Satie's compositions is the title of this paper and another is the music accompanying my performance. I allowed the music to continue to play after I left the space, suggesting its inspiration lives on in perpetuity for the inspiration of others, as quoted by Kosuth. My appropriation of Satie's creative works can be seen as an expression of my artistic identity through transformation, time and recurrence. I transformed his music to that of a haunting soundtrack to my own drama. The metre, or time, of his music was echoed by the metre of my movements. The inevitability of recurrence in art and life, as suggested by Kosuth and Benjamin, was referenced by the continued refrain of the music, when my performance had finished, and my act of leaving the door open as I left the space.

The white cotton gloves that I wore for the duration of the performance had a similar pervading presence. The gloves directed the viewer's focus onto (framed) my hands and my reference to the specific hand posture of Vermeer's women, but they were also suggestive of sexuality, purity and domestic commitment. At the end of my performance, however, I turned and looked at you and I offered you my gloves before I left the space. I was reminded of Linda Lou Murphy's mesmerizing performance and her direct visual engagement with the audience. My act of offering you a symbolic article, one which was intrinsic to the acting out of my life drama, was an acknowledgement of the role of the other and my desire for a response from the other. It is that response which constitutes me as a subject in this narrative production. It is said that otherness is joined to selfhood and the response of the other is always contained within the act of the narrative production itself.[67]

[67] Jacques Lacan, *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,* in *Ecrits, a Selection*, translated by A. Sheridan, Routledge, London, 1995,p.86

I have utilized video, photography and photo etching as a means of recording and repetition in this narrative. The images I have produced reference and appropriate specific works by Vermeer. That is, I have repeated then reinterpreted Vermeer's iconic imagery. It has been my intention to maintain the level of seduction in the original, iconic image and enhance it within the new image. In this context, I endorse a statement made by Sherrie Levine in regard to appropriation:

"I am interested in making work that has as much an aura as its reference. For me the tension between the reference and the new work doesn't really exist unless the new work has an auratic presence of its own. Otherwise, it just becomes a copy, which is not that interesting." [73]

This autobiographical narrative production is also a work of the imagination - one that I have come to believe in. It could not, however, have succeeded without you. I have relied on your response as I look, see, think and act out, as I draw on the real, the imagined and the borrowed (appropriated). I have asked that you also 'believe' in this work of the imagination, believe that this is the way things are. For some time, I have known of my 'bricoleur' propensity to collect details, words, feelings and images. I have revealed it to you through the manifestation of this autobiographical narrative. Now, we both know that we know it.

[73] Sherrie Levine, exhibition notes, Simon Lee, London, infosimonleegallery.com,2007

Images:

Pages 39-42 Karen Ball *being (acting out)*, Performance, Photographs, 2006-7

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