

## **MATTER AND FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY**

I am an artist and writer and a PhD candidate at Chelsea College of Art and Design. My work concerns text, error, and the maternal<sup>1</sup> within an art practice defined by the artist Mary Kelly as a language 'coincident with patriarchy'<sup>2</sup>. Overall I am interested in how subjectivity becomes suppressed in an increasingly globalised society.

My work began by asking the question – how could female text-based artists in the 1970s and 1980s producing work derived from oppressed experiential subjectivity (Mary Kelly, Nancy Spero, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer) be defined within masculinist Post-Modernist 'authorless'<sup>3</sup> discourse? Whilst male cultural producers were affecting 'voicelessness' women artists were struggling to find their voices, and were recognised for it. In a world which has become increasingly politically 'voiceless' for both sexes, can female experiential agency offer an ethical way forward for future generations? Does a feminine gender-inclusive practice reflect a more complete philosophy where knowing and being aren't separated?

Whilst women have historically been denied agency and in more recent times psychoanalytically designated as 'lack', it is critical to remember that masculinist frameworks of duality and domination which place (or depend upon) women as lack are historical constructs aligned with the domination of form over matter, which have controlled western thinking since the age of pre-Platonic materialism.

### **The Ethics of Matter Mattering**

#### **The Historical Western masculinist necessity to dominate matter**

As the philosopher of science Sandra Harding states (2003) 'All historical enquiry frameworks have, (since Greek metaphysics), taken masculine lives and beliefs as 'reality', interpreting nature or Being as idea-based form not matter, separating mind from body and culture from nature. Neither women's nor men's lives can be understood through these dual frameworks – an evaluation of experience is necessary upon which can be grounded maximally scientific human understanding.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In *Desire In Language* (France, 1969) the psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva first identified the maternal within the unconscious as a semiotic site capable of destabilising symbolic language; however she ascribed this process solely to male authors.

<sup>2</sup> 'Such work is usually scripto-visual precisely because feminine discourse is trying to articulate the unsaid... the negative signification, in a language which is coincident with patriarchy.' Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire*, MIT, Massachusetts, 1996, p 7

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes' landmark essay *The Death of the Author*, 1968

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Harding, Merrill B Hintikka, *Discovering Reality*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, The Netherlands, 2003

## Duality

My work aims to explore the notion of duality – the source of the notion which separates masculine from feminine, mind from body, theory from practice, spirituality from matter and intellect from the act, which does not fit with my experiential working practice, nor my role as a mother and artist. According to the philosopher Carol Bigwood in *Earth Muse – feminism, nature, and art* (1993) the phenomenological method ‘has emerged from a concern for the dominance of the pure sciences whose description of existence (since the Age of Reason) is so distant from actual lived experience.’

I am not interested in continuing an essentialist oppositional argument between patriarchal and maternal philosophy within the art-making process, but as Bigwood states in *Earth Muse*: to activate a ‘stepping back from and reconceptualisation of dualistic oppositions that dominate western thought’ which will let in female experience, thereby creating a more ethically balanced world.

My work crosses all media although I primarily work with video; and although I explore text I am aiming – in a post post-structuralist way - to foreground ground as ground - examining my works through a philosophy of matter and the relevance this may have to a maternal, relational philosophy working *with* not upon matter. It is also important to ask the question – Isn’t all art either a relational experience to matter rather than form, or doesn’t the beingness of the art object always exist in relation to matter? Overall I am interested in a philosophy of making rather than thinking.

## In the Beginning was the word and the word was ‘with’ matter

### The diremption of matter from logos - constructing Masculine Frameworks

#### Phusis and Logos

As Carol Bigwood states: ‘for the pre-Socratic philosophers, Being was named *phusis*, which is a simultaneous movement of unconcealing and concealing... and is our first western understanding of nature... cannot be distinguished from appearance or truth. However, even with the pre-Socratics (Parmenides in particular) a distinction was growing between that which truly is and that which in comparison is only apparently truth (*doxa*). This distinction between Truth or Being and mere Appearance pushed the earlier Greek understanding of *phusis* into oblivion. The distinction between truth and appearance which occurs with Plato as the oppositions between the suprasensuous and the sensuous, marks the proper beginnings of metaphysical thinking. For Plato, truth is not appearance or the unconcealing-concealing sway of *phusis*, but, rather, truth is the unconcealment of the idea (*eidos*)... *Phusis* through Plato, is ultimately

reduced to a field of passive matter that can come into true Being only when exposed to the active, spiritual principle: the idea...

'thinking is no longer that which arises from phusis. *Thinking is no longer a preserving of logos through attunement to the sway of phusis.* Rather man possesses logos in his self contained mind. Thinking is reduced to the penetration of the unknown by the light of reason... Being, or the essence of everything, is no longer understood as nature but as suprasensuous. For Plato, Being is the Eidos or Ideas; for Aristotle it is the Energeia or Form.'

### Logos

'There is a deep difference for example, between the pre-Socratic logos, whose root lies in legein, and logos as the modern word and logic (and certainly the translation of logos as speech is rather narrow)... We can find an inner bond between *logos* and *phusis* by tracing the root meaning of logos back to *legein*, which means "to say", but more fundamentally to "lay-out" or "let-lie". In legein as in phusis (and thesmos) a bringing-together or gathering prevails.

Understood as a letting-lie, logos is not in opposition to nature, belonging exclusively to human subjectivity, but already belongs to the gathering of nature. .. As many Greek scholars would agree, for Heraclitus, logos is not merely discourse or reason but a name for a steady gathering, the intrinsic togetherness of Being... Heidegger argues that this steady gathering that Heraclitus says is common to all is the same as phusis.'

My work began with the notion of error or negativity aligning with the feminine within a patriarchal symbolic or language. It attempts to intervene with, or reveal what might be called 'other realities' within the patriarchal discourse via destabilisation of text within video, erosion in sculptural forms, intervention within scientific techniques and working instinctively with hand printing. I am interested in bringing theory more into line with practice – attempting to remove dualisms within my own reflexive processes. In order to do this I have to look simply at how theory is constructed, and how lack or exclusion can be made to seem an organic or 'natural' process. Bigwood states: Western metaphysics is a perspicacious revealing of the phallogocentrism of western Being itself.'

### Anti-Matter and Descartes - structural lineage

Since Descartes and 'The Age of Reason' we have been living with masculinisation of thought where objectivity, separation and detachment 'I think therefore I am' has ruled scientific investigation. As feminist philosopher of culture, Susan Bordo states: 'In the transition from early Middle Ages to early modernity the human being emerges as a decisively separate entity, no longer continuous with the universe with which it had once shared a soul - so the possibility of objectivity, is conceived by Descartes as a kind of rebirth on

masculine terms this time.<sup>5</sup> Bordo has written extensively on Feminisation of Thought where the principles of domination and objectivity are replaced by reciprocity and relational values and an application of head, hand and heart in art and production. These are the values I aim to reveal in my art-making, with not upon matter.

Feminist political theorist, Somer Brodribb comments on Descartes' '*Meditations on First Philosophy*' '...structure is God, and the binary code is His Word: light/dark, heaven/earth, male/female. Structure is the new inhuman activity but it is also a historically masculine understanding of matter.'<sup>6</sup>

Descartes states that the scientific mind must be cleansed of all its sympathies toward the object it tries to understand. It must cultivate absolute detachment. Masculine here connotes autonomy, separation, and distance, a radical rejection of any commingling of subject and object. A fear of life and a disembodied approach to nature is an important characteristic of male history and scientific patriarchy.

However, more recently, as feminists have searched for new forms of language or means of understanding experience, phenomenological methods have emerged from a concern for the dominance of the pure sciences, whose descriptions of existence are so distant from actual lived experience.

### **The Importance of Masculine Lineage**

#### **Post-Post-Structuralism: Death of the Masculinist Author**

As Somer Brodribb comments: 'Language, sign and code are the privileged forms of mediation, which is reduced to exchange. The post-war critique of metaphysics led many philosophers to borrow scientific models from the human sciences, especially linguistics. Meaning and value had no place in the analysis of signifier and signified. Indeed the new epistemology is primarily linguistic. *Central to all this is the notion of structure as the reduction of matter to form.*'

Jean Paul Sartre conceived of matter as mechanical and inert, nothing but the site of struggle, necessity and nausea. Levi-Strauss with his binary coded model of nature and culture argued that *matter is entirely negative form.*

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<sup>5</sup> Bordo, S, *The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought*, from Modernism to Postmodernism, Blackwell, 1996

<sup>6</sup> Brodribb, S, *Nothing Matters: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*, Spinifex Press, North Melbourne, Australia, 1992

## **FOUNDATIONS, PRESENTING AND CONCEALING**

One of the questions I have had to ask myself is *how* I can conceive of my work through a philosophy of matter when a philosophy of form has been the standard means of evaluating cultural artifacts. Here I turn to Carol Bigwood again who speaks about a new '*Philosophy of Grounds*'.

Carol Bigwood: 'I argue for a notion of ground that is neither the firm foundations of metaphysics criticised by Derrida and before that by Heidegger nor the nihilistic groundless ground that is currently in vogue because of the poststructuralist critique. This discussion of ground and the associated notions of identity, subject, origin and essence will help us come to terms with the body and will help orient readers within the region of a feminist ontology. We must find a new way of thinking about grounds (and this includes thinking about our bodies, subjectivities and identities, about origins, presence and truth).'

Traditional philosophy replaced matter with metaphysics. Heidegger criticises metaphysical thinking as a representational thinking which gives grounds - to account for it as something grounded or secured and known but not what it is. We always already necessarily exist in relation to Being.

Bigwood speaks of Heidegger's thinking on being as away from calculative thinking of metaphysics to meditative thinking where meanings are not fixed but a musing on the simple 'that it is' of beings. Heidegger speaks of *presenting* – a movement that simultaneously emerges, granting the unconcealing of beings, and holds itself back, concealing itself. According to Heidegger presenting vibrates, shimmers, because it is a presenting that is always simultaneously absencing. Heidegger (1962) states: 'we always have an understanding of an inherence in Being by virtue of our spatio-temporal embodied human be-ing.

Carol Bigwood states in *Earth Muse*: 'Art can help philosophy because art holds in place the very phenomena that philosophy attempts to describe.'

The emphasis upon *phenomena* as a key to understanding philosophical change seems paramount.

## THE ARTWORKS

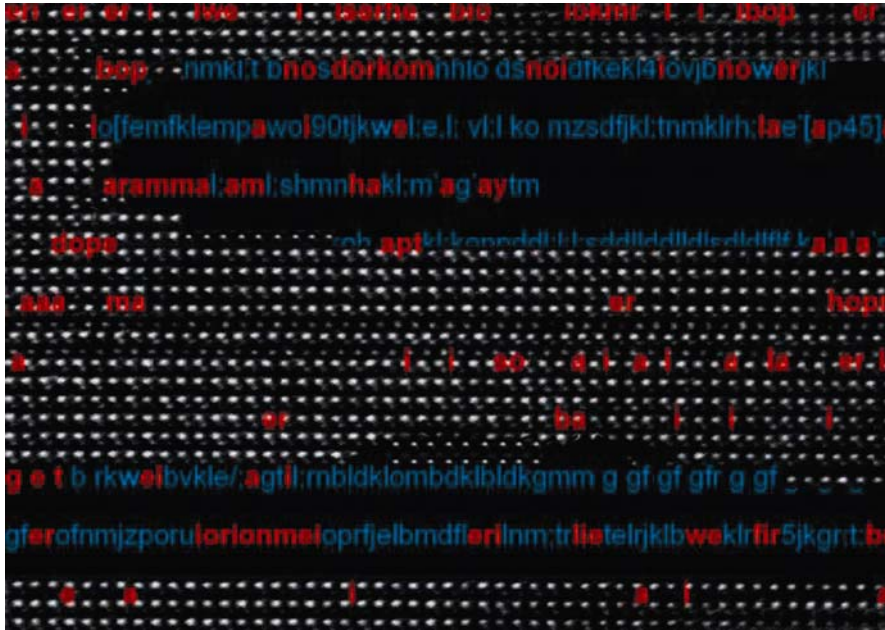
### THE VOICE and MATTER

*Patterned Utterance* began as an attempt to question patriarchal scientific methods of objective analysis or monitoring. Utilising the sensitivity of a scanning probe microscope to probe a piece of silicon I have, through the vibrations from my voice, subverted the readings given, thereby altering the on-screen data from the microscope. Where I have spoken there are 'errors' in the readings (where there are paler lines) – thereby creating art from the spoken word without sound and an intervention within the patriarchal symbolic. The dialogue is decoded on the case of the d.v.d.

This work also seems to literally re-iterate Kristeva's associations of the maternal unconscious with vocal and kinetic rhythms which are to be discussed in another paper. In my videos speaking has taken on an importance I had not expected. We could ask the question does speaking entail a laying-out, or by its nature of being a gathering?



Patterned Utterance (still from d.v.d.)



*Blanks in Discourse: 06* (still from d.v.d.)

This work reiterates the importance of defeating paternal logic. Words are made in error by randomly pressing the keys on a computer keyboard. These words are highlighted in red, (signifying error within the publishing world) and scroll over a microscopy surface, whilst the random letters pass behind this screen, visible only through ruptures in the surface. The scrolling format defeats the logic of lines and columns, the act of printed type itself an example of valid, authorised thought. The sound of breathing accompanies the piece but does not align with an individual visual element. A pattern begins to form by the words created through error.