BORDERLINE ACTS

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Image on title page: Pregnant Texts (Mitchell, 2007)

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Tessa Mitchell

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BORDERLINE ACTS

Masked Dream (Mitchell, 2005)

Abstract

Borderline Acts explores the blurred line between fact, fiction and fabrication in the construction of self – via the artist's own personal and family histories and her evolving role(s) through pregnancy to early parenthood.

This research primarily focuses around relationships between the 'personal' and different forms of conformity, revealing personal reality across a range of social contexts - from everyday interactions to presenting personal content through art – and the ways in which these presentations are subject to various modes of identification, interpretation, categorisation and restriction.

The research is being explored predominantly through a range of performance/ masks, story telling, visual and conceptual practices. The methodology being used acknowledges multiple hierarchies of concerns and issues related to moving between these concerns, and the different power structures they represent.

This research project is 80% practice based and 20% written.

Introduction and overview

A general overview of this project

This research project developed over a relatively lengthy time-period because I gave birth to two children during the process. It has evolved gradually through various practical openings. With both the practices used and the themes explored, the focus shifted significantly through my experience of pregnancy and motherhood.

The project began as a relatively broad investigation into why artists have a need/desire to make art, and an exploration of different issues they face – specifically focussing on the issue of conformity/non-conformity. After I became pregnant, and especially following the birth of my first child, the conditions in which I was able to work were altered drastically. Related to this, a new focus developed around documenting my everyday experiences in my new role as a mother. This focus tended more towards exploring relationships between the personal and the universal – specifically of exposing the personal as a form of revealing the universal, and in exploring both the mundaneness and drama of the everyday unfolding.

I started looking more generally at conformity (not just in relation to artists) and at the individual's subjection to various forms of societal pressure. A more focussed exploration, delving into identity construction, and revealing different kinds of personal content and stories, followed. Throughout this time my children have become entangled in the process in different ways, and I have developed themes relating to interacting with my children, and shared family experiences, stories and language.

In framing the project as exploring 'the blurred line between fact, fiction and fabrication in the construction of self', I am attempting to highlight the play between the 'real' self, the revealed self, and the layers of stories, images and narratives that are constructed as part of the process of protecting that same self. The project uses personal content – my own experience, stories and image, as its primary subject matter – while attempting to draw on this as a way towards exploring more universal themes.

The title 'Borderline Acts' is primarily meant both as a play on the term 'borderline' (often used to signify the possible overstepping of some kind of social boundary) and the inherent half-truth nature of everyday acting which commonly takes place as part of abiding or conforming to social norms. It is in these areas that the conceptual/thematic strands of my practice have focussed most – the blurry territories between acting in the everyday and in transgressing social boundaries by revealing too much personal truth – and how this social dynamic also plays out in different ways with relation to art and performance.

The title ‘Borderline Acts’, while also referring in some way to the fact that my practice is located within various intersections of contemporary art, theatre and documentary traditions, is not meant to frame my arts practice as being particularly shocking, transgressive or provocative (i.e ‘borderline’) – especially within the context of widely documented art performance history of the past 50 years or so. It is through the documenting of everyday images and mundane events, which confront issues of identity and conformity, and the cyclical revisiting of personal narratives through these events, that I have focussed my attention.

The structure of this exegesis and its relationship to the practical work presented

This exegesis sets out firstly to give a broad understanding of my overall approach, methodology, and the related theoretical frameworks behind the project. The second section of the exegesis focuses on the specific research areas – the key ideas, themes and practices that have been explored, along with different issues that have surfaced. Various relevant critical contexts are also discussed. Finally, different works presented over the research period are discussed chronologically.

The sections

Section 1: Methodology and practices

The first section primarily aims to outline the theoretical framing and general processes key to the project’s overall development. It also attempts to briefly contextualise my background practices and set up some of the basic relationships between practical output, key ideas/themes and methods. This first section does not discuss the project’s key ideas and themes in detail, but specifically describes the relationships between those elements and the other practical strands from a more theoretical and process-oriented perspective.

Section 2: Key ideas/themes and critical contexts

The second section develops around an exploration of the dominant themes, issues and various critical contexts in detail – specifically those that relate most strongly to the final presented work. It is in this section that the concepts and processes key to finding inroads into my presented work are most likely to be found.

Section 3: Different works and developments

In the final section, various works and openings are briefly described, discussed and documented chronologically, again with a focus on relevance to my final presentation.

Section 1: Methodology and practices

Theoretical frameworks

My methodology primarily incorporates an interplay between frameworks which acknowledge heterogeneous realities/hierarchies, and those which focus more on dominating constructs of normality. In discussing multiplicities/heterogeneous realities, I will use the Deleuzian metaphor 'Rhizomes' (Deleuze, 1993) as a starting point, and in discussing constructs of normality I refer primarily to Foucauldian ideas around inclusion/exclusion in relation to levels of conformity to different constructs of normalcy (Foucault, 1965).

Noughts and crosses (Mitchell, 2007)

Rhizomes

I am using rhizomes as a starting point because my work tends to develop in diverse groupings or clumps, which gradually make connections, as opposed to working in a clear, directional, tree-like fashion. This project has also been consciously approached in a manner which attempts to acknowledge and support a range of practices without favouring a single element as its 'centre'. By this, I mean in particular that the project has not been based around the exploration of a single question, concept or practice as its 'centre'. The key ideas and themes, rather than being at the top of a hierarchy of practices, have been seen more as part of a core group of practical output and exploration. It has therefore proceeded from the outset as the exploration of a group of related

practices, which feed off each other. Some of these are easily located and oriented by specific ideas, while others have operated via a much more 'practice based' approach where improvised action within specific practical areas has oriented the overall creative development. These different practical areas have been seen as separate creative openings with their own language and centres of growth – which then make connections to the other areas of the wider project.

This approach is partly due to attempting to support those practices which require a more unconscious, improvised approach, or which are less specifically conceptually driven as creative openings. It is also partly due to operating between different critical contexts, which have a certain incomparability in their overall language, social roles, and value systems. These critical contexts relate primarily to different ways of reading, constructing, evaluating and experiencing performance and time-based art.

Background contexts and genres

To briefly contextualise my arts practice, my orientation moves between and around the broad genres of performance art, documentary and contemporary theatre. Although these headings may over-simplify my approach, they are starting points in exploring my practical contexts and how they relate to my methodology. Neither the 'art', 'documentary' nor 'theatre' context necessarily hold more or less value for me. Rather, each has its own concerns, limitations, repetitions and locations. These contexts suggest their own milieu, genealogies and social roles, which are different but also merge and interplay. They can become a clash of interests and concerns – or they can enhance, provoke and propel one another. But, in terms of discussing different ways of reading, constructing and experiencing performance, these broad genres could be assumed as dominant contextual settings which figure strongly in the background of my devising and practical process – and which inform my general orientation/navigation through different areas of research.

So in exploring different contextual possibilities for performance and/or related practices, connections between different approaches and focal points are made, along with specific connections with my own personalised language and experience as a performer/artist.

> 'Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be. This is very different from a tree or root which plots a point, fixes an order' (Deleuze, 1993, p. 29).

Connections occur or suggest themselves in relation to different practices, situational, conditional, critical or social contexts, different semiotic forms or dialects, and between various conceptual, thematic, practical and social concerns. All these factors necessarily co-exist, enunciating and proliferating their various and diverse concerns in different ways.

So a specific location might contribute to the devising of a performance in a very different way to the specific method or performance language used in its composition. Both elements are only strands (among others) that necessarily enter into a relationship in the devising of a performance. But in bringing together a specific combination of method/language, ideas/themes and location (as one possible example), new connections, entanglements and types of material are produced or configured in the specific interplay between these concerns.

For example, in working towards a performance piece entitled *Pregnant Texts*, in which I intended to continue to use my pregnant stomach as a kind of screen to project images, a new practical strand developed – involving the audience reading words as an integral part of the intended mode of experiencing the piece. This, among other factors, combined to skew the work away from being a 'live performance' with a clear beginning and end. It became more of an installation with two projected images – both of which documented the same pre-recorded 'performance' from different angles – which were then edited and re-configured spatially for the public presentation.

Pregnant Texts (Mitchell, 2007)

Because the 'performance' was filmed in relative privacy before the presentational event, it inadvertently opened up the possibility of incorporating my 2-year old son into the piece (something which initially happened accidentally and which probably would not have occurred if I had attempted to perform the idea 'live'). Through this process a new area of work (documenting various games and set-ups with my children and using more of an installation format incorporating multiple projections) opened up and has continued to develop throughout the course of the project. So in the initial interplay between a range of diverging concerns, new configurations were made which altered my approach and which set up new connections and practice strands.

Multiple engagements

A key aspect to this approach is that no one single process, structure, hierarchy or model of concerns is being followed primarily. My practice acknowledges these various engagements, in movement, as being parts of a 'substantive multiplicity' (Deleuze, 1993, p. 30) which is similarly in constant transformation, incorporating different combinations, focus points and dominating forms at different times. Each change in focus, or growth, creates a different shape and configuration of the multiplicity. Similarly, when one grouping or growth falls away or meets an obstacle, another area or grouping develops. Some of these factors or elements may operate relatively independently of each other – regardless of their end effect on the overall multiplicity of concerns. Other elements may operate more within groupings and be more dependent on other elements in order to exist and operate effectively as a 'growth' within a wider range of concerns.

Through this process, different aspects of my overall practice and knowledge are encouraged to either develop (or not) depending on the territories or fields being explored. To draw on the previous example (*Pregnant Texts*), as an illustration, in working towards the initially envisioned context – a performance based around a narrative-oriented collection of ideas – skills, methods and concerns related to composing words, speech, developing storytelling, body awareness and performance presentation would have encouraged development and awareness of those specific practices and responses to those specific issues. On the other hand, an installation based around a more visual and situational collection of ideas encouraged a different focus and development of skills, practices and concerns. For example, there was more of a focus on issues and practices related to spatiality, visual composition, aesthetics, conceptual reduction, sound construction, video editing, etc).

So, in the wider context of my ongoing research practice, it is often the new areas of development or growth within this 'multiplicity' that provoke, sustain, make connections to, and generally encourage (or not) the continued use and development of other older-established strands of practice.

Constructions of normality

In referring to heterogeneous and often incomparable concerns within an overall 'multiplicity', the issue of dealing with different constructs of reality – specifically different hierarchies of concerns, leads towards an exploration of the dominant forms of normality, legitimacy and value that operate in these different realities.

I am interested in the conflicting modes of interpretation and codification that develop and dominate in different practical engagements and critical contexts. Related to this, my entry into different territories may require an awareness of localised codes and value systems in order to actively participate or engage with them. This further enables me to be recognised as holding some legitimacy or relevance (as a performer/artist) in these areas. There is an expectation to

conform at some level to established modes of normality dominant in any situational/critical/performance context – and specifically to the modes of reading/experience that dominate those contexts.

For example, in some performance contexts, the dominating concern and over-riding expectation is related to sustaining attention via a sequence of prepared actions/events, of a need to achieve a certain intensity of engagement – a sustained sequence of entertaining intensity is required, regardless of other contributing concerns. In other contexts, different codes may exist, where the need for sustained engagement is not as important as the need for a certain depth of conceptual layering and a strong primary 'image' to enter into the nature of the engagement. A live audience may not even be needed. The work may be accessed instead through some other more easily consumable form of documentation covering the original performance event.

Genres – different kinds of reading and experience

Whatever the set-up, devising work requires an awareness of those dominating frameworks at play in terms of the primary stages of reading, experiencing and interpreting any piece – by an audience. And obviously, when working between and around clear generic territories, different codes often clash, blur or get mixed up and the complexity of issues surrounding competing modes of engagement and/or reading works becomes more apparent.

Drawing again on Foucault, I am similarly interested in exploring how different constructs of normality/convention produce, arrange and contextualise different practices and modes of performance and performativity I engage with. The different areas and contexts in which my practices become entangled and develop all have varying frameworks, historical contexts and milieu, through which work may be 'compared, differentiated, hierarchised, homogenised, excluded – normalized' (Foucault, 1977, p. 195).

I am a Dark River (Mitchell, 1999)

For example, as a woman who often uses storytelling and performance as key aspects of my art practice, it is difficult not to be compared to other women who use storytelling as a key component in their performances. Similarly, if I use a

specific image or device that is similar to one used by another artist, regardless of whether or not there is any conscious 'referencing' on my part, it is difficult not to fall into some form of comparison and evaluation. If I make work that looks at a glance as if it is drawing on a tradition, whether performance art', experimental documentary, installation or theatre, the work is likely to be read, interpreted and compared accordingly. Although this may be stating the obvious in one respect, basic associations like these can become critical hinges to experiencing and accessing work as it is intended.

So there is always a kind of cycle of production, feedback, reflection and contextualisation in creating work and in developing practice strands – received both from others (audience members, friends, mentors, advisers) and from my own self-critiquing, categorising, comparing and evaluating.

Navigating points of connection between practices and genres

Related to this is how the interplay and conflict between constructs also produces new points of identification and resultant practices.

These varying frameworks may work on my micro-practices – certain methods, processes, basic techniques and frameworks related to a range of practical strands I have explored over time which cross pollinate and develop in new directions. But they also work on a more macro level, where the exploration of different contextual frameworks and vantage points in developing a specific idea suggests or requires the development of a new practical strand.

So if my overall practice is conceived as a broad multiplicity (in motion), incorporating these varying frameworks, a development of these different internalised combinations of frameworks occurs which contributes to my personalised identification/value systems as a practitioner, and which regulates and orients my action. I therefore keep developing my own hierarchy of concerns through this process, which similarly helps to develop my own personalised 'apparatus' with which to compare, differentiate, arrange, homogenise, include or exclude other frameworks.

Thematic engagements and practical engagements

My overall practice, as a multiplicity – like anyone's – could be dissected, arranged, and analysed via various different conceptual groupings. I will only specifically explore one possible arrangement here, as a starting point in discussing some relevant critical contexts and issues. This arrangement would be an overall practice, which is defined/produced by the movement between and around two dominant groupings of engagements – thematic/conceptual concerns on the one hand, and practical concerns on the other.

These various entanglements interplay, become entwined and talk to each other. Neither group is necessarily privileged over the other – rather they interact in a

kind of circular process. My thematic concerns do not necessarily define or dominate my practical outputs, but rather are in relationship with them.

I may have a specific recurring thematic concern (e.g the 'personal', revealing, fabricated story), which has been written down, made conscious and reflected on. It might relate to, and work its way into, a 'project' and a wider practice as a point of orientation and return in a different way to that of a specific practical method (which may also act as a point of orientation and return). A specific practical engagement, however, may be a primary means of generating material from which recurring themes and possibilities are located, reflected on and developed. A specific theme may act as a central provocation in the use of, or devising of, methods through which performative and practical 'enunciations' are able to take place. Sometimes a practice produces, or at least uncovers, the content. At other times a thematic or conceptual focus may produce specific practical engagements.

My practical engagements move around different ways of generating, constructing, preparing, and 'performing' performance – but also engage with practices which relate to creating images, using space, writing, conceptualising, researching, interviewing and using various forms of documentation.

My thematic/conceptual engagements mostly gather around exploring different notions of the 'personal' and 'everyday' in relation to different forms of revealing and conforming. These act as key recurring provocations in the devising of work.

Practical engagements

In the past, my practice has been predominantly in a contemporary devised theatre context. This has incorporated several divergent practical strands (or micro-practices) that crossed over into other areas; for example, creating images, working with video/projectors, working with space, interviewing, documentary, and so on. These practical strands have had various connections to art performance, intermedia and documentary frameworks. They provided different pools of process, language and possibility, but they were mostly mediated via a theatre-dominated framework. The theatrical context regulated possibilities in the sense that the work generally conformed to codes and conventions that would be associated firstly with theatre – specifically audience–performer relations, performance sites, form, structure, language and process.

The 'contemporary devised theatre' context provided the key reference points against which my work would most likely be compared, differentiated, hierarchised, homogenised with, judged successful or not, and included or excluded. As practical and conceptual strands related to other contexts developed further, the dominating categorising context moved more towards 'experimental theatre', 'intermedia performance' and 'art performance', and those broad comparative frameworks similarly provided a basis for expectation, normalising judgement and marking out fields of possibility.

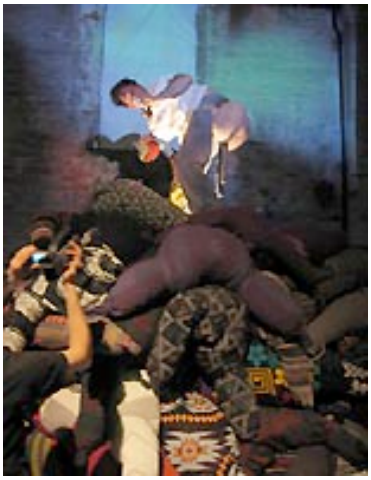
Blurring contextual frameworks

I am interested in how often micro-practices develop into larger strands that cause shifts and transformation of the broader contexts or paradigms through which the work is perceived both by the viewer and maker. As a maker, I am usually concerned with trying to locate and develop the practical strands which intensify new modes of possibility for me, and which are not specifically bound to conforming to one sedentary critical framework.

The practice of collecting, documenting, arranging and presenting my daily mobile texts is an example of a micro-practice which opened up a new area for me to develop work, and which is informed by various critical frameworks/traditions (for example, building narratives/theatre, documentary, and visual/performance art). Likewise, the practices of setting up and documenting various games with my children, and of using various masks and facades and backdrops, opened up a new set of possibilities for me, which again do not fit easily into one sedentary critical framework.

Two examples of artists who interest me, and who provide contextual reference points in the interplay, blurring, and reconfiguring of some of these performance categories, are Romeo Castellucci and John Bock.

Orestea (Societas Raffaello Sanzio, 1995)



Zero Hero (Bock, 2005)

Contemporary theatre creator Romeo Castellucci (Societas Raffaello Sanzio) incorporates radically provocative art performance/contemporary art tactics and language in his work. The radicality of the performance setting, though, is marginal. In a locational sense, he usually creates work in specifically theatrical spaces, but incorporates images, installation, body sculpture, soundscapes, and more generally 'tactics' (shock, duration, enigma, etc.) that transfer the reading of the work to contexts outside theatre (Castellucci, 2000). He has also used his own children in theatre performances – including a baby – often provocatively, in ways which at first glance can seem disturbing and/or unethical, but which on further reflection seem to expose and question many assumptions around how

we treat children and what we expose them to, or what we give permission to as parents.

An almost reverse example is artist John Bock, who largely exhibits in an art gallery context, predominantly 'performing nonsensical dramas' in which he transforms the art space into a theatrical one and has a performance persona with costumes and props. His work, apart from being sculptural, even architectural – in his creation of rambling, often burrow-like installation spaces – draws on art-historical performance sources, but the dominant performance language and approach is highly theatrical (Spector, 2003).

Thematic/conceptual concerns

As previously suggested, specific thematic/conceptual concerns – although frequently coming out of practical output – often orient and determine new practice strands. Similarly specific thematic/conceptual concerns may open up new engagements with alternative contextual frameworks – producing alternative practical processes.

I am a Dark River (Mitchell, 1999)

For example, a work I devised/performed called *I am a Dark River* came from a recurring interest in and exploration of stories and storytelling that specifically gathered around my grandfather – whom I had not met. This engagement with a very specific thematic/conceptual focus led to a large collection of filmed interviews and other related historical visual and literary material, which formed the key ingredients for an inter-media/performance piece. I therefore necessarily worked with a new set of practical and contextual concerns and issues via the development of the resulting theatre-oriented piece, which incorporated various projections and a large video documentary/oral history component (areas I had at that time not previously explored). From this new set of problems and possibilities developed new practice strands, which significantly re-oriented my overall approach in creating work – my multiplicity of concerns.

In the following section I will continue to explore various key thematic/conceptual concerns underpinning this project, focussing primarily on fleshing them out in further detail, but from a less methodologically-oriented perspective.

Methodology summary

To summarise, my methodology incorporates an interplay between a rhizomatic approach and critical frameworks which acknowledge heterogeneous constructs of normality and convention. My practice moves across different kinds of engagements, paradigms and critical contexts. My methods have encouraged borderline strands of practical output, and an engagement with a range of different regulatory constructs in the production and presentation of work.

I am conscious of the interplay of two dominant inroads in the arrangement of my various strands of research practice. These refer to the relationship between thematic/conceptual engagements and practical engagements. I have therefore attempted to devise a research approach which acknowledges and supports minority strands of practice, which encourages exposure to new processes and presentation contexts, and which incorporates an exploration of different relationships between ideas and practice.

Section 2: Key ideas/themes and critical contexts

‘The personal’/revealing

In talking about relations between ‘the personal’ and different forms of conformity I am referring both to myself and my own personal content, language, experience, and how the presentation of my own reality is subject to various restrictions, expectations and frameworks of interpretation. I am also referring to a more universal notion of ‘the personal’ – personal stories, languages, and how all personal realities relate to wider social conventions and modes of categorisation and identification.

Central to this exploration of ‘the personal’, and incorporation of my own content, is the issue of revealing/exposure – which in itself has become a kind of recurring thematic strand. Revealing/exposure and the general exploration of my own reality, stories, pre-occupations, body, voice, movement, etc., has, for this project at least, been a key platform from which material has primarily been generated and developed. Through this process I have attempted to use material as a spring-board to probe regulated, ‘normalised’ behaviour to allow for some deeper connections, provocations and reflections to take place**.**

Childspeak (Mitchell, 2010)

Personal content/Self as subject

What I often search for in the work of others is nearly always a kind of connection to personal content, or some kind of revelation, even if it is disguised. I am fascinated by even tiny amounts of intimacy or connection – to the personal or human-ness of the work. For me these real disclosures are both dangerous and courageous and therefore of utmost interest. They connect us, in a way, to the depth of our selves, our emotions and vulnerabilities and can at times provide a platform and a process for both viewer and performer to transcend 'self'.

Through the process of any artist putting themselves 'out there', of taking risks with personal content and allowing for a degree of vulnerability to enter into the audience–maker relationship, an opportunity for communication and connection occurs around the 'actual' experience of being human. Areas can be explored which are not easily seen, discussed or reflected upon in day to day reality. While there is always a fine line when making work using 'self' as the primary subject matter in terms of being perceived as indulgent or self-absorbed etc, I am personally still more interested in exploring this fine line than not allowing for the possibility at all.

> 'Individualism? Narcissism? Of course. It is the strongest tendency, the only intentional constancy (fidelity) I am capable of… Besides, I am lying; I scatter myself too much for that.' Claude Cahun, Aveux Non Avenues, 1930 (Kline, 1998, p. 73)

Working with any personal content, it is difficult to reflect 'objectively', to 'step outside' yourself. The continual myriad reflections upon reflection of self always carry and amplify these difficulties and risks. It is complex, fraught, and yet at the same time it is the substance, rawness and depth of being human that I want to experience both as viewer and maker. So regardless of how my work is actually perceived and read by others, and the many ways and processes of attempting to deal with issues surrounding working with 'self' as an artist, my underlying intention is to create work which opens up this possibility of connection.

Maya Deren, while working in different ways with different issues, is someone whose work comes out of a similar process, and who personifies this particular tradition of attempting to move beyond self via submergence into her 'self' as primary subject matter.

Shelley Rice articulates this kind of intention as follows:

> 'Like both Sherman and Claude Cahun, Deren felt the need to place herself within the epic structure of human experience, to identify with the ancient archetypes given to us as cultural role models. Her use of herself as subject, therefore, is hardly simple self-expression: it is rather, an

> attempt at self-transcendence, an endeavour to replace the isolated individual within the context of the larger collective consciousness.'
> (Rice, 1999, p. 15)

While I do not engage and identify as intentionally with ancient archetypes as Deren did (as with *Inverted Odysseys,* for example), I am similarly exploring relationships between the personal and the universal – specifically exposing the personal as a form of revealing the universal. This draws on both a playing with archetypes and a general attempt to transcend self while frequently using self as a primary subject.

Revealing strategies

'Revealing' may be barely noticeable, or very clear and obvious in terms of content, context, form and style. It can be used as a shock tactic in the sense of surprising an audience/viewer and jolting them out of a mode of easy passivity. It can be used as a way of transgressing certain modes of expectation and codification in whatever the performative and/or critical context is. The rupturing of a comfortable set-up can activate the spectator into one of participation, changing the relationship between performer and viewer. In other respects, revealing can be far more subtle, creating a construct or space in which vulnerability, honesty, fragility and 'reality' (modes of performativity) can take place, again influencing the situational, locational and contextual framing of practices.

Two artists who incorporate revealing in interesting ways, and who serve as key critical contexts for my work, are Gillian Wearing and Laurie Anderson.

Confess all (Wearing, 1994)

At the Shrink (Anderson,1977)

Wearing's piece entitled *Confess all on video. Don't worry you'll be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian* (Wearing, 1994) uses a set-up of 'revealing' which transfers/blurs the role of authorship and creates unusual relationships and connections between audience, performer, participant and artist. In the piece, which incorporated masked respondents to an advertisement confessing on video various transgressions of standard social conventions (theft, dishonesty, adultery, sexual deviancy, etc.), the audience is drawn into an interesting mixture of relations (voyeur, passive viewer, implicated participant). The involvement of

others ‘doing the talking’, the unusual audience participant set-up and the combination of contextual frameworks (documentary, art, performance and entertainment) are all areas I am interested in and which have developed as strands of my practice.

In Anderson’s installation *At the Shrink* (Anderson, 1977), she set up a miniature clay model that had video footage of herself telling a story about a visit to her psychiatrist projected onto it, creating a ‘fake hologram’ (Goldberg, 2000, p. 54), using ‘revealing’ in a very different way, but likewise suggesting interesting contextual cross-overs.

In it, she uses the hologram device as a ‘stand-in performer’, which both masks and defuses an element of her own possible vulnerability as a performer revealing personal information, while at the same time intensifying a certain kind of intimacy in the audiences–performer set-up. The piece, which exhibited in an art gallery context, required the viewer to come up close, because of the small size of the model/projection, which created a kind of one-on-one situation. Again, the cross-referencing of codes and conventions (theatre, storytelling, film, art, documentary) in the work’s presentation, and the layers of masking devices incorporated in revealing a personal story, are elements which I am interested in and which operate as developing strands in my own work

Revealing body

While I have not set out to bring constant focus to my body/face/physicality or my children’s as part of this project, it is an obvious result of using my self – and them – as performing subject(s). The body is, in many of the works, a key component and consequently a key signifier in terms of how the work will be perceived, experienced and read. As Lippard puts it:

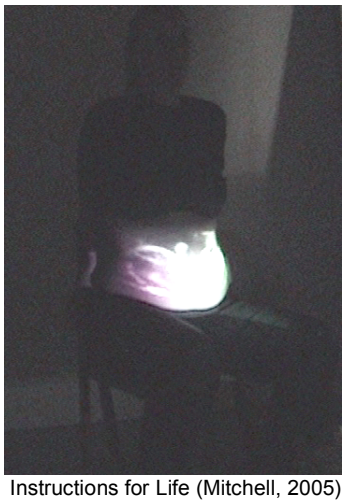
> ‘However theorized and/or objectively perused, the body remains the most private and intimate “thing” we “have.” It is also the most public. The body, face included, is that part of us that is physically projected into the world. It precedes the self. It precedes us, as women, into every social and political situation. It is what everyone else sees and thinks they know.’ (Lippard, 1998, p. 36)

Early on this project, I focussed on the intimacy of the body. There was my pregnant body in *Instructions for Life* and another internal body – the scan of my baby – brought out onto the outside of my stomach. Through the process of making and preparing a performance – getting caught up with other practical strands – it is easy to forget that in terms of identifying and categorising a performer and a performance, it is the revealed body out in front that is seen and experienced first.

In the case of *Instructions for Life* I was projecting my son’s tiny body via a scan as it looked at 3 months in the womb. For a first-time pregnant mother this is, at

some level, a kind of personal revealing, and as a performer at least, it heightens some sense of intimacy and vulnerability. The projected image gave the false impression of the audience having a view under my skin and into my womb through some kind of limited X-ray vision, with my son's body and movements gradually becoming more of a focus.

Instructions for Life (Mitchell, 2005)


Instructions for Life (Mitchell, 2005)

This piece, which culminated in my reading out various instructions from pregnancy manuals and advice from relatives, was exploring the process of being a pregnant mother-to-be and, apart from the bombardment of various new social and biological pressures, of entering into a heightened awareness of body – how it looks and feels and what it means. As surface identity changes dramatically, a whole new spectrum of female archetypes and identifiers comes into being as part of a new body image.

I continued projecting images onto my pregnant stomach with the pregnancy of my second child and this time my 2-year-old son also interacted with the screen/stomach. His hands often came onto it to draw pictures or to stroke. This piece, *Pregnant Texts,* also developed into revealing more psychological intimacy with the private, personal mobile texts sent to my partner projected onto my stomach. Some of these were banal everyday questions and comments, while others were more dramatic – mid-argument or disagreement. They were taken from mobile texts recorded over the first year of my child's life.

The everyday

'The everyday' has been a strand of exploration from early in this research. The continual and almost excessive documenting of daily rituals and editing of the everyday has been a key component in many of my works.

This has been a major focus partly because the day-to-day, repetitive nature and general reality of rearing children constantly brings me back to everyday aspects of daily life where daily routines and rituals take a major priority. Time schedules,

paths and routes travelled, even the focus of documenting ongoing moments in my children's early years, hold me in touch with the everyday.

I began documenting everyday events both for my own private record and, separate to this, as material to experiment with in the creation of work and performance. The line between them started to blur and they crossed into one and the same. As examples, I documented various notes and quotes from parenting guides, books on children, schedules to follow, pitfalls to avoid, habits to reinforce. I collected daily mobile phone texts to my partner and mother, documented the children and the routes travelled with them most days, documented the domestic and neighbourhood environment and many of the characters I saw regularly within it, along with various games and set-ups both with my children and on my own within the home/domestic environment.

I was interested in collecting these everyday snapshots and indicators in a diaristic way, partly to remember later the early years of my children and my experience of them. I was attracted also to the exposing and revealing aspect of documentation, and to the aesthetic – mysterious signifiers gradually surfacing from within the 'no frills' facts of plain notes and mundane images.

More recently, everyday events and practices have become focussed primarily on the games and set-ups improvised with my children. Contributing to these games is the 'backdrop' of our everyday domestic environment. When I started improvising, both alone and with my children inside my apartment, it was partly out of desperation that there was no other performance space available. So the backdrop to many of these edited performances and improvisations has usually been domestic – the dining room or bedroom of our apartment. Therefore the space itself has become another kind of exposure of the personal. Everyday objects sit about, hang on the wall, sneak into every frame, making subtle statements.

After working with masking my face I became aware that it was the interior/domestic space, which had not been altered or dressed in any way, that was in fact doing some of the revealing, as though it were a fellow performer. If the masked face is not giving much away, the surrounding interior is exposing plenty. It speaks of domesticity, children and disorder, revealing clues on the nature of the dwellers, for instance how tidy they are, the type of milk they buy and their taste in music through record covers, etc.

> ' "To live is to leave traces", writes Walter Benjamin. "In the interior these are emphasized… the traces of objects of everyday use are imprinted. The traces of occupants also leave their impression on the interior. The detective story that follows these traces comes into being.' (Benjamin, 1986, p. 155)

I am interested in both this 'detective story that … comes into being' through the revealing of private, interior, domestic spaces, and of the notion of interior space as a kind of personal realm where various layers of social façade are let down to reveal different kinds of normally hidden factors. Background facts – via 'traces' – emerge and occasionally leap out as key identifiers denoting different kinds social or cultural orientation and ritual.

Identity/Construction of self

As with the wider framework of my research project, I am drawing again generally on Foucault's exploration of how different constructions of normality – and related modes of inclusion/exclusion – dominated in different geographical, historical, social contexts in 'Madness and Civilisation' (Foucault, 1965). My project explores the idea of these shifting constructs on a more personalised, local level. So in exploring 'relations between the personal/Identity construction and different forms of conformity', I am focussed on individual movement and orientation between conflicting modes of normality, and how these different modes produce different, contesting forms of self–identification.

For example – through becoming pregnant and then a mother – various roles and forms of self identity, which had previously played out in different social contexts, suddenly changed and/or became more complex in terms of social pressure and expectation to conform. What is 'normal' in one situation is not in another. I am interested in all the conflicts and crossovers inherent in performing different roles for different people in different situations. In my own case, moving between roles of mother, student, daughter, sister, lover, artist and worker creates a kind of moving group of identities which, although all connected to 'me', do not always fit easily in the same room.

The kinds of social pressures to conform that I was experiencing as an about-to-be mother (being inundated with endless instructions, manuals, advice on how to parent and being weary of societal expectations to have a son, in our country at this time in history) led to an exploration of different, conflicting constructions of normality around motherhood and parenting. But it also focussed specifically, and surprisingly, on my own position of power and authority as a parent, of being on the other side of society's key mechanism in the process of individualising and normalising.

Especially leading up to having my first child, all the common fears and anxieties around my unborn child's future physical and mental health (whether I would give birth to a 'normal' child – a child that wasn't handicapped or 'deformed' mentally or physically) came into focus. In the piece *Scan TV* for example, the video sequence which followed the projection of my son's scan on my stomach, incorporated segments of footage taken from a TV documentary about severely deformed people. In it, some extremely intelligent, articulate 'deformed' subjects spoke movingly about how people like them were becoming increasingly less likely to exist because 'screening' during pregnancy is almost universally

available. I became aware that behind all the anxiety about the health of my unborn child lay an almost insurmountable mechanism of normalisation. I was now becoming much more directly involved in this, in my future role as a parent who would discipline my child, steering it towards prescribed social goals.

> 'In a system of discipline, the child is individualised more than the adult, the patient more than the healthy man, the madman and the delinquent more than the normal and the non delinquent. In each case, it is towards the first of these pairs that all the individualising mechanisms are turned in our civilisation; where one wishes to individualise the healthy, normal and law-abiding adult, it is always by asking him how much of the child he has in him, what secret madness lies within him, what fundamental crime he has dreamt of committing.' (Foucault, 1977, p. 193)

In a system of discipline, which operates in order to perpetuate specific constructs of normative behaviour, a process occurs where those who do not fit in become individualised. Those who exhibit behaviour or reveal desires that are not 'normal' in public settings are identified and categorised as individuals who need society's help – in order to become normal. The basic underlying questions asked of the 'individual' follow along the lines of 'Is there something wrong with you?' and 'What is wrong with you?' Society, of course, makes sure that these fundamental questions are internalised, and all individuals are encouraged to also ask 'Is there something wrong with me? What is wrong with me?'

With these basic questions in mind, my recent explorations regarding conformity have been concerned with the construction of my identity from past and present beliefs, and the outer/societal pressures that have shaped this identity. In exploring exposure of the self, the question of sanity or borderline insanity arises – not necessarily because I am any closer to insanity than anyone else – but because in bringing out various inner monologues, reflections occur, questions are asked of one's mind, and an examination of the absurdity inherent in identity construction is examined.

Therefore

The 'therefore' statements, which came out of a pop psychology exercise, draw on internal tapes. A therapist would alter them, whereas I have played with them more as accentuated, the at times absurd exposures/confessionals painting a 'portrait' or 'persona'. Although I speak behind various masking devices, both literal masks and façades, and 'acted' masks and fabrications, there is some relatively perceptible connection to the real self. For instance, 'I was fascinated by women who sell their bodies for sex therefore I pretended it was mostly for the money I worked as a receptionist at the massage parlours'. With each disclosure I individualise myself further. My sanity and general ability to 'fit in' becomes more questionable.

These territories are not uncommon in art – the safety of putting yourself 'out there' within the confines of an art-work is itself an accepted norm. A blurring of characters, masks and fabrications also intentionally supports the veneer of artifice. Nevertheless the underlying question probably still remains – is she mad/scary/pathetic, or is she just pretending?

As Elizabeth Grosz writes in 'The Time of Thought':

> 'To the extent that identity is understood as a subjectively apprehended cohesion which requires personal and collective validation to take its place as real, as recognised, such an identity is always governed and regulated, in advance, by the image and value of the other, the socially dominant others who control the various processes of social validation.' (Grosz, 2005, p. 167)

So, while a performer's identity is still governed by larger social structures, and the dominant modes of symbolic order inherent in these, through the ritual of performance there is an allowance and expectation that certain confines of normative space will be exceeded. In dealing with personal content and the use of self as subject in art, different codes of social reading and symbolic governance cross over and become blurred. This process can facilitate the expansion of borderline areas, where territory is not clearly mapped out – where certain codes and regulatory mechanisms have less power, and where social renewal and experimentation can take place.

Grosz talks about the 'politics of the imperceptible', which 'has its effect through actions, which can never be clearly identified'. Rather than striving to be recognised by the other, it 'seeks actions, effects, consequences and forces which generate transformation' (Grosz, 2005, p. 167-168). Through the process of blurring fact and fabrication – interrupting clear readings of identity and representation –there is an intention to concentrate action towards these areas where surprises and new possibilities around identity can be generated.

I do not set out to make work that is attempting to be 'political'. Yet it is almost impossible to avoid sexual and/or feminist politics because I am investigating self, identity, upbringing/parenting, family histories, conformity and social confines. In dealing with these themes, I do observe, reflect upon and have an interest in gender-based nuances that arise in my work.

Drawing upon Jacques Alain Miller's distinction between the 'true' woman and the 'postiche' (or fake) woman, Jennifer Friedlander says:

> 'The true woman, unlike the postiche woman, "flaunts her lack" rather than disavowing it. In this sense, like the signifier of lack in the Other… the True Woman emerges as a "tuche of the Real… a jolt of surprise." ' (Friedlander, 2003, p. 103)

I am conscious that through the process that occurs in opening myself up to a public gaze – specifically in exposing and playing on my own vulnerabilities, insecurities and neuroses – there is a kind of paradoxical liberation that comes out of being honest, or even pretending to be honest. This liberation is connected to challenging what is expected – what is 'normal' or 'included' behaviour. But it is also connected to letting go of being recognised and comprehended rationally and instead acting out of an internal reality that isn't necessarily perceptible or easily recognisable to others – or even myself.

Fact, fiction and fabrication

The converse of revealing material is that of concealing stories/disclosures and the ownership of them. In playing with the use of masks and my own children, altering text/stories disguises the personal attachment to the material. Yet there remains an underlying revealing/confessional element.

After drawing on family and personal narratives I started to look at ways to distort or exaggerate them. In this way I have been looking at various disruptions and blurring of facts to create new, evolving stories/fabrications. The viewer is encouraged to question whether the stories are a direct re-telling, altered slightly in the retelling, or completely fabricated.

Kids Repeat (Mitchell, 2010)

In repeating my words, my children also often add to this process of layering versions of the truth. For example, in re-telling a story from the past I say, 'She believed him'. My daughter improvises but alters as she goes 'She leaved him'. The new meaning could inadvertently bring one closer to the truth. It is not straightforward repetition that is happening but rather a form of mimicry. They repeat after me because that is the game we have set up. Their desire or enjoyment in copying my intonation or inflection while adding their own variation/slant has a mimetic aspect. I then repeat the new story or meaning by keeping the variations they have made to the narrative. It gradually becomes a cycle of fabrication.

The 'mimetic quality'

This play of 'directing' my children to repeat my words (often speaking about adult themes which they are not really aware of), and the crossovers with language and expressions/intonations that occur, can have a disturbing aspect. I am both interested in the play of parental power and the insinuated cycles of genealogical repetition and slippages of meaning inherent in this play. I am interested in the passing on, re-using and re-configuring of stories, intonations, language – and experience.

Walter Benjamin describes the 'mimetic quality'

> '… as a moment when meaning is produced not through signs, but through similarities between unlike things, and by virtue of our ability (indeed our compulsion), to recognise these similarities, to act them out and to act upon them.' (Benjamin, 1986, p. 134)

So through the use of these kinds of devices and games, I have been exploring family stories, experience and identity as an ongoing interactive process of back and forth, effect and response. I am looking at this process as an interaction between generations and through evolving groupings of power within family structures and larger social groups. Through the back and forth of generational normalising and categorising we all interpret the other, via our own perspective and language, within each inter-generational relationship or discourse. The sound and the meaning is often similar – but different. When a child copies a parent's words, sounds or actions mimetically, there is usually a moment when meaning takes an abrupt turn as the two underlying languages collide and temporarily fall apart. Irrational flashes suddenly expose the gap between the original communication and the acted, copied version as the child returns to its own internal language structure and dominant codes of meaning.

Kids Repeat (Mitchell, 2010)

Kids Repeat (Mitchell, 2010)

Masks

Returning to the concealment/fabrication theme, I have been interested in artists such as Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman in terms of their constructions of different selves/identities through the use of façade, 'acting' or superficiality. I am drawn to their cutting up (montage) of persona and their staging/theatricality. Their use of masking both with literal masks and 'acted' characters has in different ways motivated my own use of some similar devices.

Untitled #13 (Sherman, 1978)

Self Portrait (Cahun, 1947)

As a trained actor, I am relatively aware of and interested in the public/presented self in contrast to the intimate one. I am fascinated by the dichotomy between the ideal/public self shown to the world generally and the more intimate (honest) 'real' aspects of self – and the various layers of masking that necessarily take place in most public situations and locations.

In the work *Fabrications*, along with footage and material taken from *Therefore* statements, improvising with my children, and the continued use of texts, I also incorporated excerpts from various films, ads, TV and theatre shows I have acted in. I intended to both contrast and blur/mix up the superficiality of many of the acted characters/identities with the more intimate documented material. Some of

the acted material has a Cindy Sherman-esque quality in the sense that, to me, much of her work has a strong 'pretence and artificiality' while paradoxically somehow still incorporating a certain 'reality'. Her self-portraits are like film stills to me. I recognise her, like an actor, who is also a 'real' person. She is gradually identified and exposed frame by frame via a range of different costumes and characters.

> ' "Under this mask, another mask. I will never be finished removing all these faces." ' Claude Cahun (Lippard, 1998, p. 27)

In various works, Cahun uses scenic postcards as a back-projection, continuing the theatricality/façade of her aesthetic. The 'backdrop' creates a two dimensional artifice. While putting herself in front, she brings focus to her self, both her vulnerabilities and strengths. I liked this play of two contrasting strands, and decided to explore my own family history using postcards as back projections also. I have always been sent vintage postcards from my aunt's travels, found in junk shops, where someone unknown to us both has left them.

In recent works *Therefore* and *Fabrications* the backdrop (a postcard of pink beds) was a play on these opposing strands – of masking/façade versus revealing/exposing. I was also playing with the notion of interior/exterior spaces being like the outer and inner self – or even the exterior being male and the interior female. I liked the visual humour and was interested in the overtly feminine, 'staged' aspect of the setting – the pink beds representing the inner anatomy of the self, all pale pink, symmetrical and female.

> 'The exterior of the house, Loos writes, should resemble a dinner jacket, a male mask; as the unified self, protected by a seamless façade, the exterior is masculine. The interior is the scene of sexuality and reproduction, all things that would divide the subject in the outside world.' (Colomina, 1992, p. 94)

Deutsche adds, in *Evictions,*

> ‘The division typically implies a connoting of the public sphere as rational and masculine, and of the private realm as the opposite: irrational and feminine.’ (Hansen, 2002, p. 197)

In working with layers of masking, and juxtaposing this with the revealing of personal content and stories, I am attempting, in part, to play up this dichotomy between the irrational, ‘real’ self and the normalised, ‘fake’ self. One side is exposing, confessing, attempting to invite an audience in and open itself up. The other is protecting, disguising, on guard – weary of the normalising, objectifying gaze and the various mechanisms of societal power.

There is an ongoing interactive relationship required between these two realities, between the protection of the façade that the ‘unified self’ offers, and the productive, transformative powers offered by the irrational self. Gauging the relationship between these realities, while exploring different forms of personal content and ways of presenting it, is a critical factor for me as an artist working in this way.

Summary

To summarise, in focussing on different forms and aspects of personal content, and issues related to using my 'self' as subject matter, I have explored the nature and process of exposing the self to a public gaze. This exploration has centred on different social mechanisms at play in identifying, categorising and limiting the exposure of self, and different frameworks of examining and interpreting issues related to these broad mechanisms.

I have explored relationships between the 'personal' and the 'universal', and the play of archetypes inherent in presenting any human subject and in examining their experience. This has incorporated the documentation and presentation of various everyday experiences and events – specifically those relating to my experience as a pregnant woman and new mother. It has led to an examination of identity and the construction of identity, of the contrasts between private/inner and public/inner self. It has also in turn encouraged an exploration of different approaches to experimenting with and presenting these contrasting realities within the context of both exposing and masking myself as a performer.

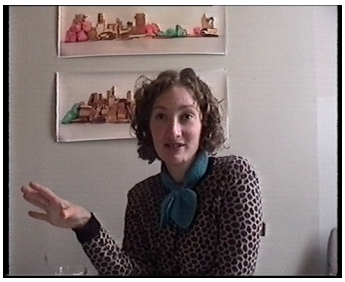
Throughout this research project there has also been an ongoing experimentation with, and examination of, different strategies and tactics in terms of 'revealing' as a mode of engagement within the contexts of art and performance. Related to this, there has been an exploration of spatiality, both in terms of how it can be used to encourage different kinds of experience, and in the representation of different kinds of personal space.

Section 3: Different works and developments

Chronological documentation of works and key developments

Artist interviews, January–April (2005)

I started by researching, interviewing and documenting various artists. Each person discussed issues, struggles and breakthroughs in terms of dealing with various inner and outer pressures associated with being an artist. Various common themes and issues came out of this process, which I explored both via the video footage itself as well as in my own videoed performance improvisation and conceptual play. This initial exploration set up an ongoing thematic strand focussing on issues of non-conformity, and a general interest in the social mechanisms at play in challenging different constructs of normalcy.



Artist interviews (Mitchell, 2005)

Masked Dream, Performance, July 7 (2005)

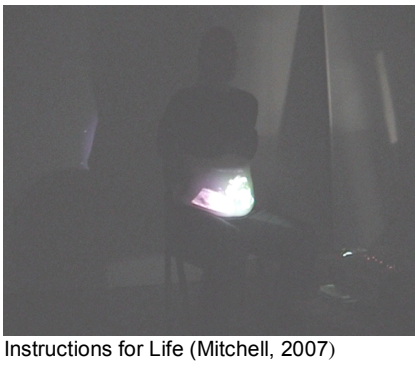
Masked Dream came out of improvised experiments, which I developed and performed for a tutorial class. I was exploring my own experiences with an interest in teasing out the confessional qualities that had often permeated my past work. The main confessional element – discussing a real dream – was performed while being behind the façade of a theatrical mask. The same mask is used much later in the project as a recurring character/device.

Masked Dream (Mitchell, 2005)

Instructions for Life, Performance/intermedia, June 9 (2005)

Instructions for Life was my first performance work that involved a projection onto my pregnant stomach. It started with the image of the ultrasound of my unborn child and me performing slow, deep breathing exercises. It then developed into a sequence of memorised instructions and advice, spoken vocally by me. These instructions were taken from various manuals – and friends and relatives – and mostly related to pregnancy and motherhood. Some of the instructions also related to the masters degree and being an artist.

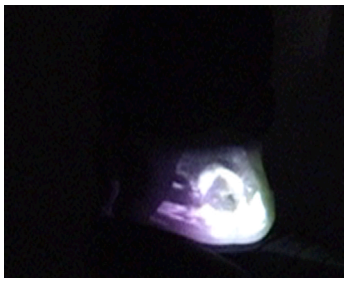
I was attracted to the simplicity of the primary image, and to the obvious play on archetypes. This central image was combined with the various interruptions and provocations coming via the monologue and vocal sounds. This work opened up key thematic strands relating both to parenthood, and its relationship to wider societal power structures, and to incorporating my children into my work.

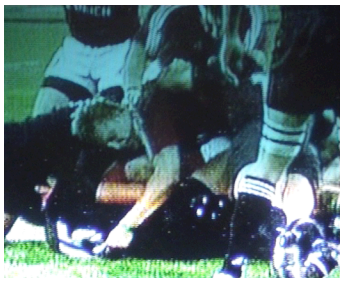


Instructions for Life (Mitchell, 2007)

Scan/TV, Performance/intermedia, 1 September (2005) (Performed as part of the first *Lazy Susan* group show, St Paul's Gallery)

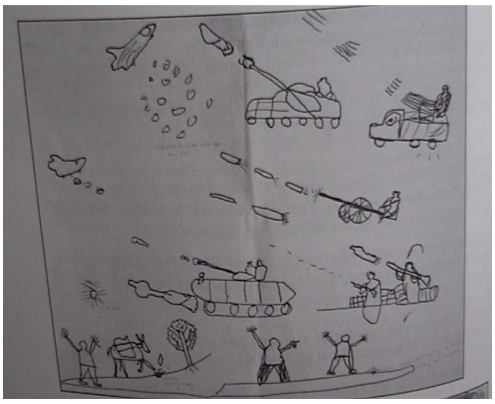
Scan/TV was a live performance and a development on the original *Instructions for Life,* and also began with the slow moving image of my son's 3-month scan projected onto my stomach. In this version, it developed, via an abrupt cut to a new video sequence – also projected onto my stomach. This sequence incorporated cut-up footage from newspapers, television and video games, including a documentary with severely deformed people talking about their experience on the edge of society, Condoleezza Rice addressing the nation, family photos, images of rugby scrums, and pictures of children.





Scan/TV (Mitchell, 2005)

While still using the primary image of the previous work and obviously dealing with similar themes, this piece focussed more on parental projections of fear and anxiety around the upcoming birth of my child. It explored more explicitly societal projections onto the 'clean slate' of the unborn child, and the role of the parent as the primary intermediary between the outside world and the child. In this piece, I started to explore more consciously this dual role of the parent – of trying to protect the child from the world, while at the same time trying to prepare it for the world.



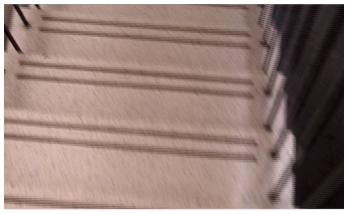
Scan/TV (Mitchell, 2005)

Post-birth

After I had presented these initial pieces and given birth to my son, I began working with a series of new openings, most of which involved exploring new approaches towards generating material. I was keen to move away from a reliance on live performance and some of the related conventional processes that often tend to go with that, while also looking at different contexts in which to present work. My new situation as a mother, as already suggested, demanded a different approach to making work. Some of the openings I worked with – and continue to work with – are as follows:

'Everyday' documentation pictures

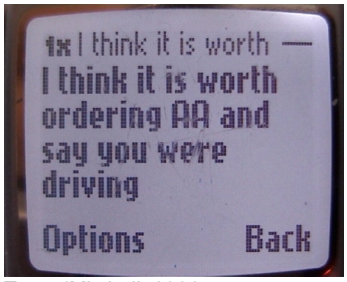
I documented aspects of my everyday routines with my son Rufus, including paths we took daily, the people we saw from our apartment, the rubbish trucks and council workers who work in our neighbouring park. I did this in the form of video footage and with still images, which I was able to collate and edit.

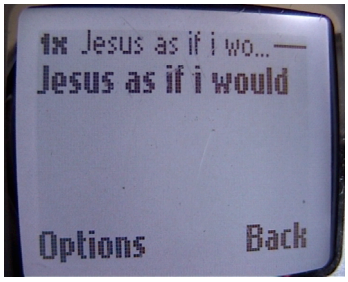


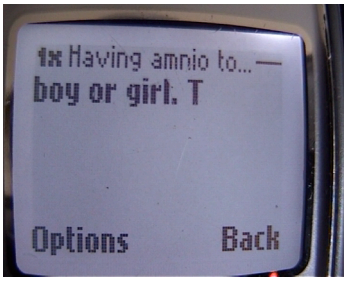
Everyday Documents, Mitchell (2005–2006)

Mobile texts

The phone texts were another part of this exploration into the everyday. These immediately brought up juxtapositions – between banal and sometimes dramatic texts – which often had an exposing or confessional nature. There were many hundreds of texts collected and documented over the year between Rufus' birth and the discovery of my second pregnancy. This particular strand of work would become a recurring feature of some later presented works, often acting as a kind of presentational device. Texts were arranged in various orders and groupings to set up sequences of narrative, often disjointed and fragmented due to only ever revealing half the story.







Texts (Mitchell, 2006)

Improvised play

I set up improvisations in front of a camera as part of ongoing performance experimentation, often involving my children. This kind of play and experimentation using various provocations or briefs as starting points has for me been a foundational practice. But due to having much less time available on my own, Rufus and then gradually Sian (my daughter) also became involved in this regular activity. Out of these improvisations came various game ideas to entertain Rufus and keep him involved, reflecting our everyday play. This strand has gradually become more of a focus as my children have become better used to the whole ritual, and as my interest in some of the resulting documented footage has initiated further developments.

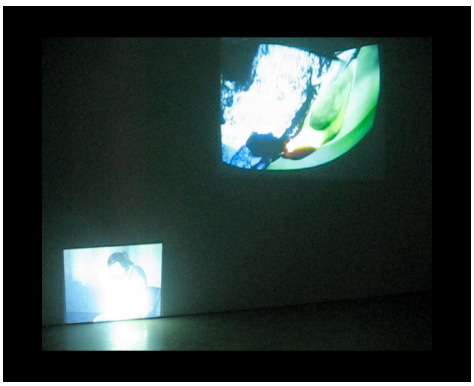
Noughts and Crosses (Mitchell, 2006)

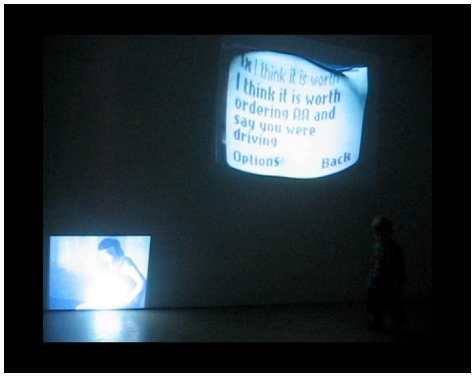
Presentational contexts

Although I was still working with my pregnant stomach and projections, I was exploring new ways of presenting my work and wanted to allow it to have a

potentially longer life, or at least be able to present it again without being pregnant. So while I was reverting to this already-used image, I was able to develop it and incorporate new ideas.

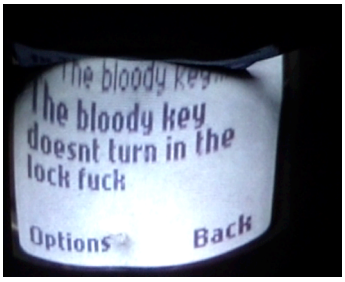
Pregnant Texts, Installation/performance (AUT), June 1–2 (2007)





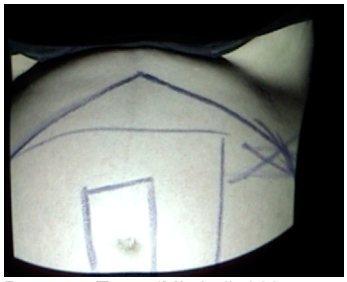
Pregnant Texts (Mitchell, 2007)

With *Pregnant Texts* I wanted to push my practice into a slightly new area – to make it less reliant on a 'live performance' and get away from my voice, which immediately pinned the work down to certain theatrical conventions. The piece came out of a mixture of the new openings I had been exploring, and of a desire to develop the first investigation around my pregnant body and projections now that I was heavily pregnant again. Although the new series of documented everyday images and texts were suggesting various other possibilities in terms of presentation, I specifically wanted to devise, develop and document a piece incorporating the pregnant body projections, as this was probably my last opportunity to do so. It wasn't a performance I would probably be able to repeat in the future.



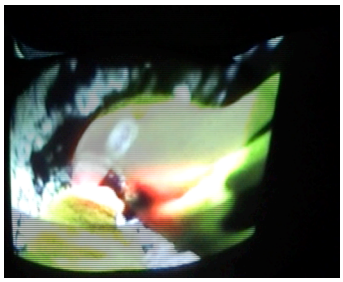
Pregnant Texts (Mitchell, 2007)

Over a series of four weeks I experimented with a two-camera set-up in videoing various performative situations involving the projections. Various edits of video sequences were projected onto my stomach and explored with the inclusion of Rufus in performative play. Out of that came visual developments and surprises related to the involvement of Rufus – what he reacted to or interacted with – which gave me new ideas to present these explorations/situations.



Pregnant Texts (Mitchell, 2007)

For example, he always became very engaged when his favourite things appeared on my stomach – like diggers, tigers and some his favourite toys that I had documented. With the final presentation, I consciously used his 'feedback' as I attempted to set up a situation that could involve little children and allow for their inclusion in an audience. I invited various family and friends with children for the presentation, and the kids created an added layer by interacting with many of the images that Rufus had initially responded to, as well as generally performing with each other in the space.



Pregnant Texts (Mitchell, 2007)

The image of my glowing pregnant stomach was an unexpected effect that occurred from recording it on an old video camera, which was causing distortion, accentuating the blown-out, glowing effect on my stomach. This was able to be used as the smaller projection which shows the interaction between the two of us and a kind of overview to the main projection which can be read by itself as a 14-minute sequential video piece or as part of a more open-ended two-screened installation. The two images were shown in sync, as different shots of the same single take of one of the original documented 'performances'.

This work sparked a greater interest in the use of space. In particular it motivated me to explore preparing spaces and devising situations, which encouraged a more open-ended unfolding of work and the experience of it.

Neighbourhood set-ups, Video, March–June (2008)

After presenting the installation *Pregnant Texts* I became interested in the idea of creating set-ups for interaction and exploration with children in my community setting. I took cardboard boxes out into the Freemans Bay apartment community 'commons' to encourage the neighbourhood children to create their own worlds and characters and generally interact in documenting the various situations that

unfolded. Although I did not carry on exploring this area with the local children as a key focus, it did open up a deeper exploration with masks and improvisation with my own children. It also clarified and focussed my interest in the running theme of the parent/child relationship as a central platform.

Neighbourhood (Mitchell, 2008)

Western Park, Video/stills, January (2009)

Western Park is the recreation of an original black and white photograph of my mother sitting in Western Park with my brother picking wild flowers in spring, and me as a 20-month-old on her knee, playing. The original was staged and photographed by my father. The replica was inspired by the fact that my son and daughter were the same age as my brother and I were when the original photo was taken – it was spring and flowers were coming out again. I was interested in the cycles of repetition that take place from generation to generation. I was surprised by the fact that we had been regularly re-enacting this same scene unconsciously – initially without realising it (the same park happens to be next to where we live).

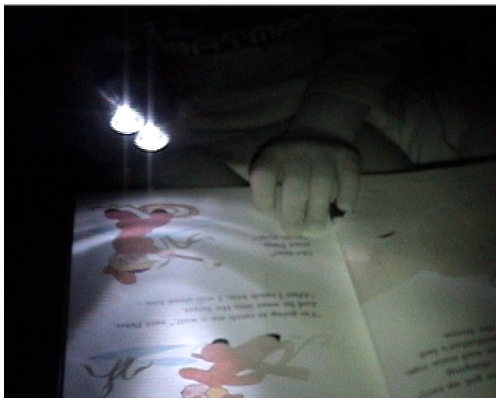
Western Park (Mitchell, 2009)

My partner helped me shoot a ‘recreation’ of the original shot on digital video and I made various stills from the footage. I then made a sequence of the recreation edited together - using the original and the replica stills, as well as some video material of the recreation. In it, the play of parental instruction and contrivance comes to the fore as we try to direct the children into various ‘natural’ poses and positions based on the original arrangement. This artificial ‘staged’ aspect is in

contrast to the children's obliviousness to the exercise and general play, along with the natural setting of the park itself.

When I grow up I want to be, Video, March (2009)

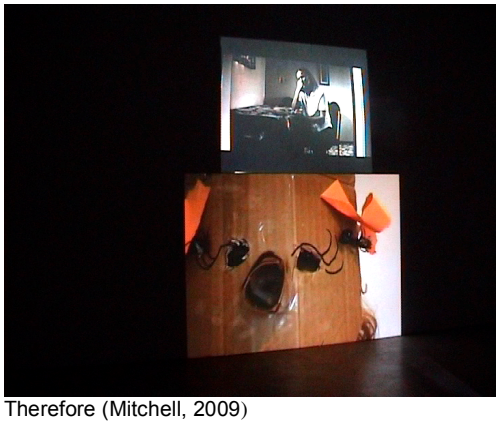
When I grow up I want to be is a video sequence made from a series of shoots in which my son improvises, attempting to solve his fears through play. This particularly focuses around his obsession with wolves, being chased and protecting himself. There are also various distorted video/voice segments of me using one of his favourite toys – a voice distorter – that interrupt the material focussing on Rufus. These relate to my own childhood desires and fantasies of my potential self, while also dealing with fear and doubt. 'When I grow up I don't know what I want to be', is a statement of doubt from my own adolescence, starting with childhood idealisation and changing to one of doubt. Like my son's current belief that you can be whatever you desire and change it daily.

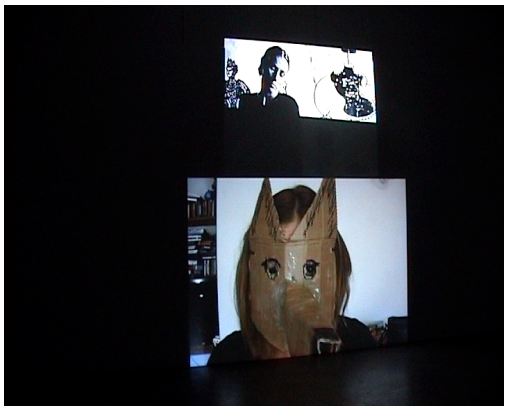


When I grow up I want to be (Mitchell, 2009)

In it, Rufus conquers his fear through imagining his future adult 'profession'. The hunter will kill the wolf, the super-hero will trap the wolf in his web or just 'tell it off', while the builder simply designs and builds a safe house to keep wolves out. I was interested in the mixing up of our different but related narratives, through exploring stories and play around the theme of future identity and fantasy.

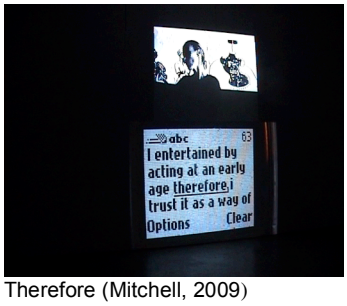
Therefore, Installation (Video/performance), May 8 (2009)

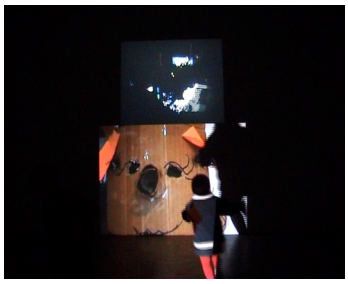




Therefore (Mitchell, 2009)

The original *Therefore* is an installation with two projections, a smaller screen above a larger screen. The larger screen has a sequence of 'therefore' statements written on mobile phone text, and also spoken by myself in various masks. Each 'therefore' statement (based on an exercise from a pop psychology book) connects my past or upbringing with my current situation or the future. My son repeats them and alters them each time he does. For example, I say 'My mother is an occupational therapist therefore I should have my shit together'… Rufus says 'My mother is an occupational therapist therefore I should have my mum'.

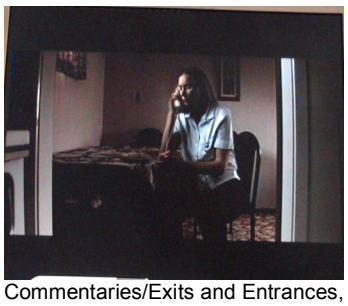




Therefore (Mitchell, 2009)

The smaller screen above has a sequence of film and television excerpts, which I acted in previously, running at the same time as the 'therefore' statements. As previously discussed elsewhere, this work explores the dichotomy between the private/public, real/fake self. There is a play of contrasts between personally exposing information (transmitted via both the mobile texts and me) and the segments from TV/film work, which are noticeably acted and contrived. The segments incorporating my son act as an interruption to the play of opposites, while at the same time intensifying the irrational nature of the statements. This piece opened up an interest in the play of repetition and mimicry with my children, which has since become a key focus. This has in turn opened up a new strand relating to cycles of disruption and fabrication, through the repeating of stories back and forth between my children and me. These new strands will feature as a component part of my final presentation.

Commentaries/Exits and Entrances, Video, August–September (2009)



Commentaries/Exits and Entrances, Mitchell (2009)

An opening that initially arose from the two-screen installation *Therefore* was two experiments using the acting component of myself. I was attracted to the idea of using old footage of myself 'acting' in various contexts from the past as a way of bypassing my usual process of generating material.

Commentaries

In the first piece, I commented on each segment as though looking at the TV/Film 'actors' as 'others'. I had been looking at Cindy Sherman's work around this time and was inspired by her own commentary on herself. It was if she was seeing another character unknown to her. I also attempted to view my performances as though seeing each one for the first time and critiquing or investigatively analysing them.

Exits and Entrances

Entrances and Exits is a piece that involved editing the film/TV 'entrances' and cutting them next to reversals of the same scene to imply 'exits'. It uses, as a sound track, a real answer-phone message that was left for me as a prank (which I believed to be real). In the message, it was as though an English director was offering me a part in a big commercial. This work explores the idea of the scene entrances representing imagined openings, potentials and hopes. Each fantasy is repeatedly negated with the reversals, serving as exits from each imagined future role/identity. I was playing on a familiar reality for up-and-coming actors – of rehearsing for parts, having auditions, and then not getting chosen for the part. I was interested in the cross-overs in a wider societal sense of how individuals experiment with their identity at different stages in their life. With each experiment, and process of acceptance (or not) by different milieu, a new aspect of identity is either socially recognised or rejected as an appropriate 'fit' for a new imagined social role. The piece concludes with the original mobile text received from a friend explaining that the answer-phone message about the commercial was only a joke.

Flasher, Performance, 3-4 October (2009) (Part of group show – One, Heritage Festival)

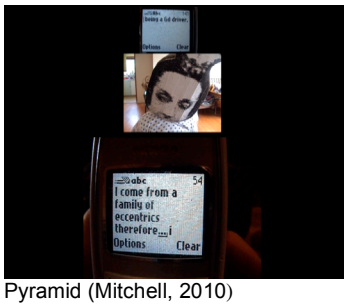
Flasher was a one-minute performance for a rotating audience of one – part of a collaborative show called *One*. This was performed as part of the Heritage Festival in the site-specific space of the Old Folks Coronation Hall (off

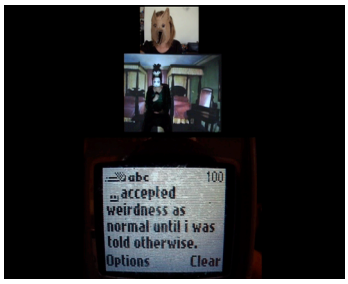
Karangahape Rd). In this piece I told a true childhood story about a flasher in a vacant lot. I used heavy breathing as a device partly to evoke the atmosphere of the story but also to intensify the intimacy of the performance set-up. I wore a silk veil/mask (like a nun's habit or burqa), which had a 'distancing' effect. The actual site for my performance was in a men's toilet cubicle, which was boarded up except for a peep-hole (referencing both the peep shows around the corner on Karangahape Rd and a kind of confessional booth). I was specifically interested in the set-up of a one-on-one performance encouraging a physical closeness and intimacy while telling a revealing story.

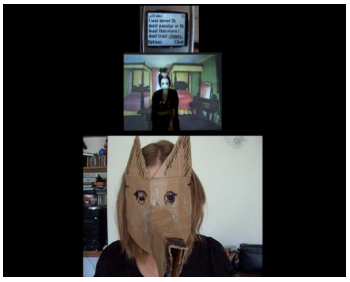
Flasher (Mitchell, 2009)

Pyramid, Installation (video/performance), June (2010)

This is a development on the original *Therefore* installation. This time it uses three screens tiered from small at the top to larger at the bottom in a 'pyramid'. It is made up of various 'therefore' edits performed by both my children and me, masked and edited together. It then merges into several stories in the same setting. The construction of the three screens is attempting to play with a kind of piecing together of self, using top 'head', middle and bottom parts.







Pyramid (Mitchell, 2010)

Childspeak, Video/performance, August (2010)

Childspeak is a series of video excerpts which focus on exploring the language used by my children, especially when copying my stories and phrases. In this series I copy their (already copied) phrases, using a doubling up of pre-recorded audio material and videoed performance. This series has been shot with professional photographer/filmmaker, Greta Anderson, using a high-quality camera and lighting, on HD video. Most of my previous work has embraced a relatively low-fi approach, both for practical and aesthetic reasons, but this was an opportunity to explore a much more contrived, refined visual quality and

process. The piece is based around the juxtaposition of the much more literally ‘dressed up’ self, and the unusual mode of speech resulting from copying/miming my children’s phrases.

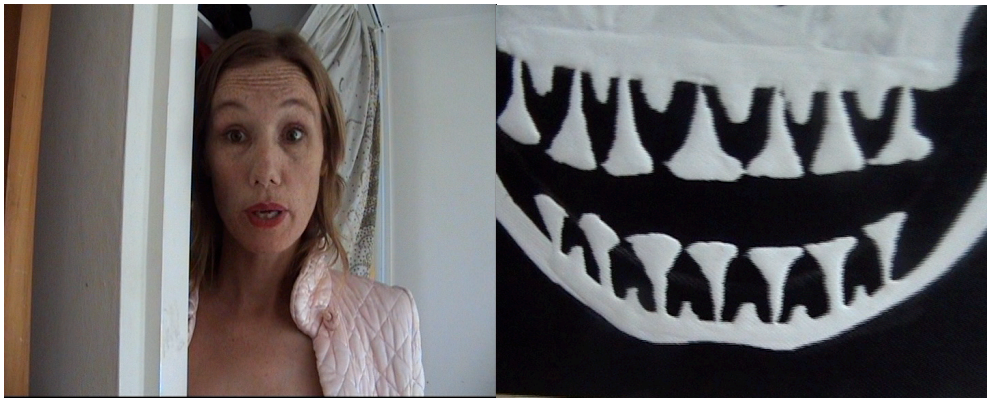
Childspeak Mitchell (2010)

Therefore/fabricate (final presentation), Installation (video/performance), September–November (2010)

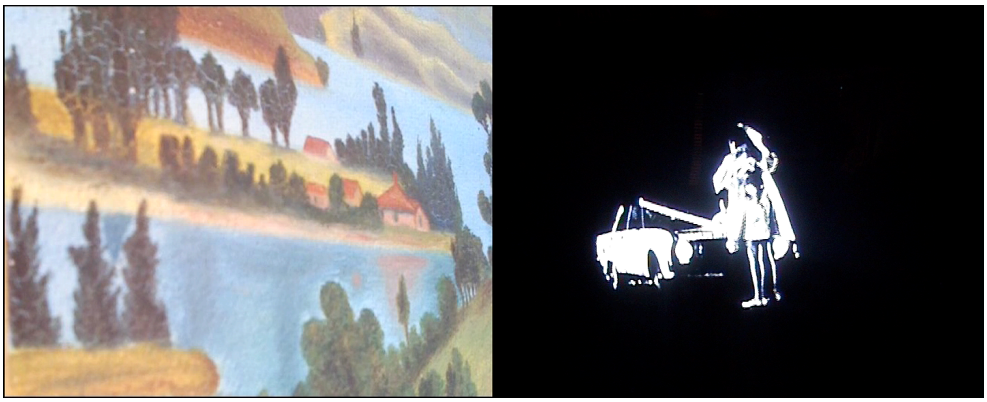
The final presentation consisted of a two-screen video installation with two large projections side by side. It operated as one continuous looping sequence. This piece can be seen as a development of the original *Therefore* works, while incorporating various strands from more recent groupings of work, *Pyramid* and *Childspeak.* In this piece I was interested in generating a conversation between the various components, and in developing the play between the private and public self.

This work combines new openings from personal stories and histories retold by my children – altered in the re-telling – then circling back to me repeating their versions by lipsyncing. Again, there are various excerpts from various film/TV segments, the use of masked characters in story-telling and confession, and a return to using still images from the continued documentation of everyday domestic images (my children's toys, rubbish skips, dress fabric, etc.). I also developed the use of sound to a much larger degree in this piece – with an intention to incorporate sound as a far more prominent device in creating an overall experience.

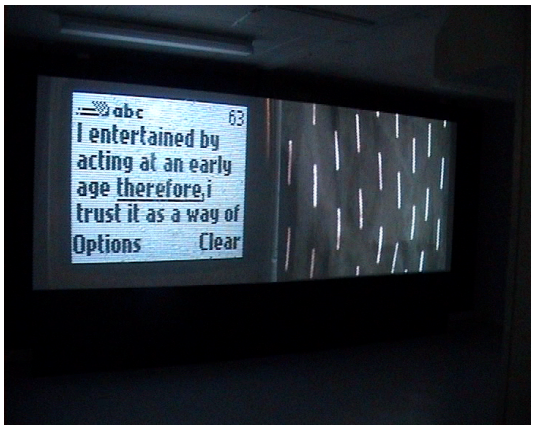
As with previous developments, two images run in parallel. The footage is not intended as a linear narrative but rather runs as a fragmentary collaged sequence of events, sounds and images. While there is usually some kind of tension between the opposing images, the sound component moves from left to right, which encourages a kind of experiential shifting of focus.

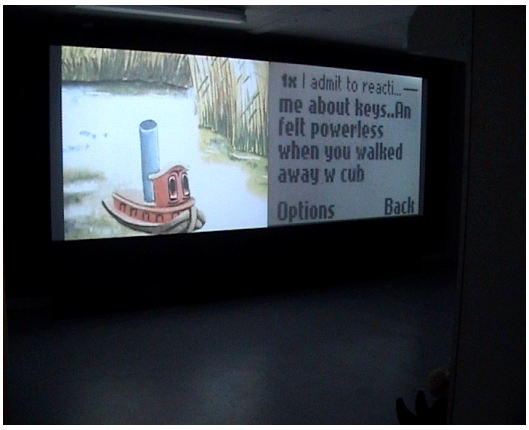


The sound component primarily incorporates the various spoken narratives from different footage with much more ambient suggestive sound and music material. The piece therefore moves between different kinds of experiential suggestion: between the spoken narrative performance, the texts (which require reading), excerpts from film and TV – many of which are mostly music and sound, or which have spoken elements that are barely audible – and various still images which encourage a more meditative mode of experience. More emphasis was focussed on streamlining the sound and image with this work, in way which directs attention more cohesively, and introduces more space than some of the previous developments, while still allowing for open-ended associations to take place.

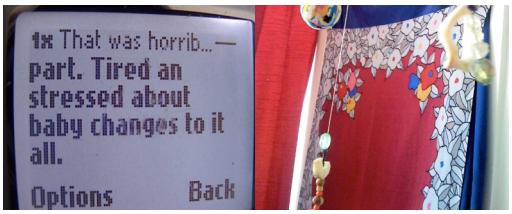


The relatively conventional presentational format of two large, side-by-side projections was used because it seemed to best support the ideas and the work within the confines of both the space I was given to present in and the context of being part of a large group show. Specifically it emphasised the relationship between the opposing modes of acting in the everyday, playing up this duality.



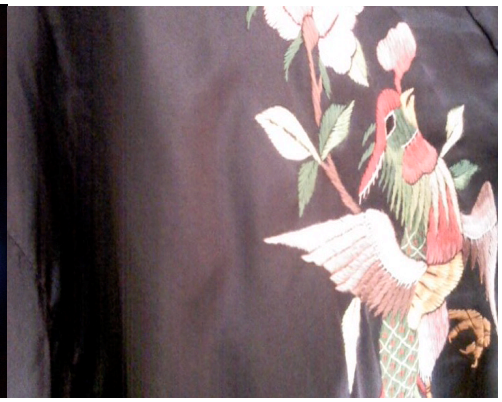


It also allowed me to present the various strands of work as an installation-type set-up, easily accessible to both pedestrian viewers and groups of people watching together. It was intended to be accessible both as short segments and as a whole piece. It also supported the mixing up of filmic/TV language with modes of viewing more associated with an art gallery context. I was specifically intent on continuing to develop ways in which I could present to a mobile audience (i.e not seated for a duration) the various documented performances – amongst other strands of visual material – which didn't rely on live performance taking place as part of the presentation.



So, while the work at it's surface rests upon this relatively conventional presentational format, the format supports and accentuates what are for me the most crucial and alive areas of my research at this stage – i.e various strands of documented performance and related everyday imagery via a dual focus, suggesting a kind of dialogue and relationship between the two aspects of outer/inner self.

As mentioned above, with this work there was greater use and awareness of space (in the experiential sense). The still images, and various kinds of ambient sound/incidental music, allowed for much more non-narrative-oriented experience to take place and for various new associations and relationships to enter the work.



The most prominent aspect of this for me was the added layer of artifice or masking at play; for instance, the integration of my clothes, the patterns of material, and many of my children's gender-specific toys as other elements referencing identity construction via façade and association. Similar to this, the constant 'fake' tension of the incidental music, which often played out as underlying, understated expressions of hysteria, drama or neurosis, also signified layers of both masking and revealing different emotional resonances.

Chronological summary of practical and thematic developments

Thematic developments

My research project started with an investigation into why artists have a need/desire to make art in relation to different pressures to conform with various societal norms or expectations. My overall focus shifted when I became pregnant and I started looking more generally at the expectations we all have about ourselves (not just artists) in relation to various societal norms. Related to this was a focus on parenthood as a key mechanism in perpetuating various constructs of normality in society.

Following the birth of my first child, the conditions in which I was able to work were altered drastically and, related to this, a new thematic focus developed around documenting my everyday experiences in my new role as a mother. This focus tended more towards exploring relationships between the personal and the universal – specifically of exposing the personal as a form of revealing the universal – and in exploring both the mundaneness and drama of the everyday *unfolding.*

A more focussed exploration of revealing personal everyday experiences, and delving into personal content and stories, followed. As part of this process, issues of identity, façade and the dichotomy between public and private self emerged. Then, through this, combined with documenting regular games with my children, a new area opened up focussing more towards different forms of mimicry and repetition. This was especially related to my children, and shared family experience, stories and language.

Practice orientation and shifts

Because of my background in performance/devised theatre, I have often relied on word-based narrative, vocal content, performer presence or persona as starting points in creating work. Early on in the project, these kinds of practices dominated my approach, although there was a lot more focus on creating images, especially primary images. So while some of the earlier pieces incorporated standard narrative sequences and performer–audience set-ups, the works usually focussed around one central image.

In live performance my previous work was largely collaborative (often relying heavily on an outside eye for example). In later work I have had to extend my devising approach into a more independent process, which has tended to increase my use of video and various masking techniques.

Over the course of the project, my practice moved increasingly towards documenting and arranging images and events, devising performative set-ups with my children, and exploring different presentational contexts. Through this process I have worked in a deeper way with visual, conceptual and spatial concerns while still incorporating a performative base.

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