

INTERVENTIONS INTO DISCOURSES OF IDENTITY:
THE ARTWORK OF KISS & TELL, SHONAGH ADELMAN
AND DIANA THORNEYCROFT

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I examine the artwork of a group of contemporary Canadian feminist artists: Kiss & Tell, Shonagh Adelman and Diana Thorneycroft. In connection with the work of these artists, I explore the regulation of sexually explicit imagery in Canada, and sexuality itself as regulation. I identify three strategies shared by the artists: the deconstruction of dominant images, the use of performance and the method of working collaboratively. My analysis considers the potential interventions into discourses of sexual identity that are allowed or encouraged by the artwork. I conclude that artwork such as this can play a vital role in altering how we conceive of and act out sexual identities.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Art threatens not only because it is a space that re-presents culture; it also embodies the sphere in which change takes place

- Beavis 1996:32

In this thesis, I will focus on a group of Canadian artists who are creating imagery that responds to their own desires, artists who are reclaiming representations of women (of themselves) and infusing them with specifically feminist and personal meanings. In pursuing these ends, the artists use a variety of strategies, including the deconstruction of dominant visual codes, collaboration, performance and explorations of personal experience. Through their work the artists challenge the regulatory categories that control discourses of sexuality in Canadian society at the present time.

The artists who I will consider in this thesis are: Kiss & Tell, a lesbian art collective from Vancouver, made up of Persimmon Blackbridge, Susan Stewart and Lizard Jones; Shonagh Adelman, a Toronto/New York artist and curator; and Diana Thorneycroft, an artist from Winnipeg, Manitoba. All of these artists create work that engages with discussions of sexuality, the regulation of sexuality and its relation to constructions of sexual identity.

In our society art is a somewhat marginal form of expression compared to, for instance, advertising. Far fewer people will ever see the work of these artists than will see any Hollywood movie, or an issue of *People Magazine*. While this in

some ways indicates that art has a limited potential for inspiring political change, it may also allow artists a certain freedom that does not exist in more mainstream discourses.

The works of these artists are political, in that they make statements and raise questions about the world in which we live, and about how we live in this world. This is of great significance, because I see art as a means of communicating ideas about our lives, and of creating change in this world. Art makes a valuable contribution to a changing, 'progressive' politics, in Davina Cooper's understanding of progressive: working toward a more just and egalitarian society (Cooper 1995:141).

Davina Cooper (1995) discusses of the need for a vision of a more equitable society. We need to be able to envision a more progressive society in order to continue our struggle for change; otherwise, there is transgression only for the sake of transgression, with no other purpose (49). Cooper calls this creation of a vision "prefiguration:"

The notion of prefiguration, however illusory, offers an important element for a counter-hegemonic project, for it provides a way of convincing people that different practices may be preferable. (139)

She is not affirming any specific identity or practice, but challenging us to envision a more just and equitable society, and to discover strategies that would help us reach that. The artworks discussed here can help us ask the questions we need to in order to envision this society.

These artists have similarities in the work created, but also interesting points of contrast. The works deal with issues of sexuality and the construction of identity.

Categories of sexual identity are questioned. Lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual desires are represented and interrogated. Kiss & Tell began with primarily photographic representations, but have moved on to create video and performance work. Shonagh Adelman was originally a painter, but now produces large photographic work and mixed media installations. Diana Thorneycroft creates black and white photographs of herself, and occasionally others, that have turned into performances in their own right.

Academically and politically, I have been interested in feminism and cultural studies for a number of years. I began my undergraduate work in Art History without much knowledge of women's roles in this discipline but was increasingly interested in this area as my degree progressed. My work on and interest in representations of women, and women's ability to create representations of themselves, sexually and otherwise, became more immediate during my year at the Ontario College of Art. Involvement in the Women's Art Collective and the Menstrual Collective provided space for me to work on some of my own visual representations, and to think through some of the issues involved in this project, such as the representation of women's sexualities and the construction of mainstream discourses about sexuality. Increasing involvement in feminist organizations strengthened my interest in feminist theory and practice, as well as my awareness of the complexities of many of the issues.

Perhaps most relevant to the topic of this thesis are my experiences as a collective member of Vancouver's Women Against Violence Against Women/Rape Crisis Centre. WAVAW has an anti-pornography stance in its

constitution, however, among the other collective members was a woman who worked on *Lezzie Smut*, a lesbian pornography magazine. This, of course, inspired many discussions on the nature of lesbian porn: how, if at all, it differs from straight porn, and whether or not this type of representation is necessary or even desirable. These discussions encouraged me to continue thinking about feminist sexual representation in art, and to consider some of the issues that I take up here.

Through looking at representations of sexuality in numerous forms, and considering my own sexuality and its expression, I have become more and more interested in the topic of visual representations of sexuality. Women have sexual experiences with other women, with men, or by ourselves. Representations of these experiences allow us a way of understanding them, and of questioning their construction and how they have been categorized within our culture. Our society has many discourses of sexuality: ways of constructing and conveying knowledge about sexuality. These discourses include, but are not limited to, medical and scientific knowledge, visual representations, and legal sanctions and provisions. I will argue that feminist sexual representation allows for an intervention into current discourses of sexuality, and plays a significant role in expanding the exploration and construction of sexual identities. I see the creation of the images discussed in this thesis as a political enterprise in that they can change the way we think about and act on our sexualities.

Thus, this thesis deals with identity, but also with regulation. Sexuality is constructed through and controlled by a variety of discourses: legal and medical,

for example. In Chapter 3, I discuss the legal regulation of sexually explicit imagery. In Canada, obscenity legislation helps to set the context within which artists work. While obscenity legislation, read through the recent *Butler* decision, is ostensibly intended to eliminate harm against women created by misogynist sexual imagery, it has been shown to cause the censoring of artistic production, in part through the creation of a chilling effect. Artists are unwilling to create work which may be seized and deemed to be obscene. The state, though, is not the only instrument of regulation. The creation of sexual imagery is also controlled by other discourses and social forces, such as social protest and the accessibility of funds needed to create artwork.

As I began to write this introduction, two events occurred, interestingly, on the same day, that reinforced to me the importance of discussing topics such as this one. The City of Ottawa decided that women would be banned from going topless at public indoor swimming pools. Nancy Friday's *Women on Top*, a book of women's sexual fantasies, was removed from Winnipeg libraries and bookstores after the police, acting on a complaint, determined that the book was obscene. Women's sexuality continues to be regulated and seen as a commodity over which men in a patriarchal society are unwilling to give up control. The interventions made by artwork, such as I am discussing here, are significant in that they play a role in taking control of women's sexuality from men and explore it on women's own terms.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter 2 contains a reading of work created by Kiss & Tell, Shonagh Adelman and Diana Thorneycroft. I situate the artists within the contemporary art scene and describe the works of art to which I will refer throughout this thesis. I explore themes in the works of art, specifically, how the artists deal with issues of representation, power and desire.

Chapter 3 contains a discussion of issues of regulation; that is, how sexual imagery has been constructed and controlled. I include an overview of Canada's obscenity legislation and its impact on artistic sexual representation. Because the work that I discuss in this thesis is sexually explicit, it cannot be considered without reference to how sexual imagery has been regulated in our society. This chapter looks at this legislation in an attempt to convey one aspect of the social climate in which this artwork has been created.

It is not my intention in this thesis to engage in a defense of mainstream male-created pornography. I am specifically looking at the difficulties that obscenity legislation has caused for a group of people: feminist visual artists engaged in the creation of sexually explicit artwork. I am not advocating a free-speech position, as that discussion is often given to false binaries: either we have to accept the censorship of any or all material or we have to support the freedom of individuals to all speech, including hate speech. I am advancing the notion that the creation of female-centred images of sexuality is one strategy among many that can be used to disrupt the restricting ways that our identities are

conceived of and lived at this point in time. The use of this strategy does not, and should not preclude the use of other strategies at other points in time or indeed simultaneously, including anti-racist action, lesbian and gay political activism, or labour activism, to name a few.

Funding cuts are one of the crucial areas of state regulation for artists. Artists depend heavily on government money and when this is threatened, their means of creation is threatened. Funding cuts, justified in terms of financial scarcity by neo-conservative governments, are often used to control artwork that challenges ideas about sexuality. In Chapter 3, I discuss this with specific reference to the work of Kiss & Tell.

Non-legal regulation and its role in controlling the creation and dissemination of sexually explicit artwork is also explored in this chapter. Sexuality as a regulatory regime is discussed. In this discussion, it becomes clear that sexuality is not completely controlled *by* regulation, but it is created *through* regulation. Categories of sexuality play a role in the sexual identities that we claim.

In Chapter 4, I discuss theories of representation and identity in relation to the work of Kiss & Tell, Adelman and Thorneycroft, and the potential interventions into mainstream discourses of identity that are encouraged by the work. I consider several strategies used by these artists. These include the use and deconstruction of dominant visual codes and mainstream images of sexuality. By altering such images the artists bring them into question and attempt to undermine some of their power. I will also consider the collaborative methods used by the artists in an attempt to create images of sexuality in a more equitable manner, and the role

that performance and the use of personal experience play in the creation and examination of the artwork.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis is a reading of various works of these artists, and an examination of their political potential in terms of questioning and re-configuring discourses of sexual identity. In order to proceed with this task, I have drawn on a number of different theoretical sources, including a social constructionist/materialist approach which looks at these images and at discourses of identity as constructed within the society in which we live. I will also use post-structuralist theory which interrogates the categories through which we understand identity and sexuality.

In a well contextualized reading of the artwork of Kiss & Tell, Shonagh Adelman and Diana Thorneycroft, I have investigated how these works act as interventions in contemporary discourses of sexuality. Visual representations, specifically those of the female body, can be seen both to reflect and construct social meanings and specific identities. Thus, I look at these works of art and analyze their potential for disrupting categories of identity.

I have looked at the works of art, both originals and representations of them in texts and resource centres. The Toronto Photographer's Workshop showed Adelman's *Skindeep* in February, and I viewed it at that time. I saw Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line* in 1992, at the Saw Gallery here in Ottawa. I viewed the videos of

Drawing the Line and *True Inversions* at V-Tape in Toronto. The Ontario Craft Council was showing a single image of Diana Thorneycroft's in February, but with that exception, I have seen her work only in reproductions in articles and exhibition catalogues.

I have also investigated the writings of the artists themselves, and critical writings on the work, such as exhibition reviews. The Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography collects exhibition catalogues on the work of Canadian photographers, as well as artist's statements, exhibition notices and so forth and has been a valuable resource. The Women's Art Resource Centre in Toronto has also been very useful. It has, along with a large selection of art periodicals and exhibition catalogues, files on these artists which include slides, resumes and personal correspondences. I have compiled an extensive bibliography on each of these artists, and contacted each of them to obtain permission to reproduce their work.

CONCLUSION

Reading the artwork of Kiss & Tell, Shonagh Adelman, and Diana Thorneycroft alongside theories of regulation and identity, I have come to understand some of the ways that identity is constructed within our society. It is constructed through a number of regulatory regimes, such as compulsory heterosexuality, sexuality and gender. Many factors in our society work together

to determine what artwork will be created and what role it will play in our understanding of sexuality and identity.

If the only images of women's sexuality are those created by men which glorify men's control over women, then this encourages a certain view of women's sexuality. The significance of the art discussed here is that it challenges this. It challenges both the official regulation - the obscenity legislation - as well as mainstream cultural constructions of sexuality. By questioning discourses of sexuality and by breaking up categories such as heterosexuality, these artists are allowing us other ways of conceptualizing and acting out our identities. By asking questions and giving us a vision for the future, they are opening up political space for further challenges.

CHAPTER 2
THE WORK OF KISS & TELL, SHONAGH ADELMAN
AND DIANA THORNEYCROFT

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade a number of feminist artists have created work based on the female body that has a concern with issues such as sexuality, desire and identity. Parallels can be drawn between these artists and the 'body artists' of the early seventies. Amelia Jones, in her article "Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures and Embodied Theories of Art," looks to performance artists of the early 1970s, including Linda Benglis and Adrian Piper, for work that is evidence of a combination of theory and pleasure. Jones writes that these artists "encompass[ed] both the sensual and the conceptual: they trouble[d] the exclusionary value systems of art history and criticism by refusing the prohibition of pleasure"(Jones 1994:20). Jones indicates that with theory such as Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"(1989) coming out in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many feminist artists refused to create work that would or could inspire erotic or sexual pleasure, in the belief that such pleasure is identified with the male. Shirley J. Madill (1993) concurs with this, noting that much of the artwork that emerged in the 1980s had to do with the body in terms of sight (the gaze) rather than pleasure.

Work such as Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document* (1978) and Barbara Kruger's *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of my Face)* (1981) [Illustration 1] are examples of this trend which focuses on the female body without exploration of the possibilities of female pleasure. Kelly's *Post Partum Document* is a six section work that tells of her son's early years, and her relationship with him. Relying on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kelly explores the entrance of the child into the gendered Symbolic order. The piece "emphasizes sexuality as an effect of social discourses and institutions and stresses the potentially oppressive psychosocial production of sexuality" (Chadwick 1990:355). It contains, for example, diary entries and records of the child's first words. This central use of language can also be seen in Kruger's *(Untitled) Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face*. The words (your gaze hits the side of my face) are superimposed over the cropped image of a woman's face. Kruger, a former fashion magazine layout artist, uses the style of that medium in order to make explicit and undermine its messages. Using text and photography (common in fashion illustration) Kruger changes the usual meanings when she gives the woman depicted a voice, and acknowledges the power of the gaze. The works of these two artists deal with issues surrounding the body, sexuality, and the question of patriarchy and male dominance, but it is art that is questioning and acting as a critique, rather than exploring the possibilities of women's erotic pleasure. The trend evidenced here insists on a separation of theory and embodied pleasure: "Within this cultural policing, the possibility of a work of art that is both sensual and consensual, both corporeal and theoretical, both eroticized and politically critical is disallowed" (Jones 1994:27).

For Jones, the recuperation of female pleasure is now of central importance in feminist art, as is the actual presence of the female body in the work of art:

[A]t this particular moment the most radical rethinking of feminism can take place through the articulation of re-embodied theories of female artistic subjectivity, feminist agency, and representation in the broadest sense. (Jones 1994:29)

This thesis is an exploration of several artists who are engaged in this project.

For many feminists, the so-called 'sex wars' of the 1980s acted as a catalyst to open up discussions of sexuality and its representation¹. While some feminists were vehemently against sexual representation, others were committed to exploring the possibilities of a feminist sexual representation. Indeed, these discussions were not limited to the representation of sex, but encompassed also the practice, power and politics of it (Adams 1990:42).

The artists discussed in this thesis are among those recent artists who take up these discussions about sexuality, with a commitment to tackle both theory and pleasure. Kiss & Tell, Shonagh Adelman and Diana Thorneycroft explore issues of sexuality and representation. Their work deals with sexuality and the constructions of sexual identities from a feminist perspective. They refuse the separation between theory and pleasure and attempt an amalgamation of the theoretical exploration of sexual representation and identity, and an expression of pleasure and desire.

The works studied within this thesis share themes and strategies. First, and perhaps most obvious, the works are about female sexuality, pleasure and

¹ For more on the sex wars, see Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter. 1995. *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*. New York: Routledge.

desire. They are about a place where women can explore what they desire sexually, and see their own sexualities and the sexual experiences of other women reflected. They are also about representation. The artists explore, and give the viewer a chance to explore, different ways of representing sexuality, pleasure and desire, and to think about the limits that they and society have placed on what is 'acceptable' in terms of representation. They also encourage a consideration of what is representation and what is sex; that is, is it possible to distinguish between what is sex and what is a representation of sex? Finally, these images deal with issues of power, both in sexuality and in representation.

In this chapter, I will give an introduction to the artists who will be considered in this thesis. Following this, I will explore some of the themes found in the work of Kiss & Tell, Shonagh Adelman and Diana Thorneycroft. I consider what role these images can play in how we think about ourselves sexually. I argue that they create more space to define ourselves and allow us to imagine ourselves to be other than we are, or thought we were.

KISS & TELL

The work of Lizard Jones, Persimmon Blackbridge and Susan Stewart, known collectively as Kiss & Tell, was initially inspired by Vancouver's 1987 International Lesbian Week poster created by artist Li Yuen. This poster was made up of fragments of photographic images of the bodies of nude women, some of them engaged in lesbian sex. In September of 1987, the poster was published in

Angles, a Vancouver lesbian and gay newspaper. For many in the feminist and lesbian communities, it inspired discussion about censorship, the representation of women's bodies and explicit sexuality. For Jones, Blackbridge and Stewart, the publication of this poster was a catalyst to their own exploration of these issues.

The artists of Kiss & Tell work collaboratively in creating work that deals with issues such as lesbian desire, sexuality and censorship. They are multi-media artists and have worked with photographs, video and performance. The work includes the three artists and occasionally friends or partners. The close relationship that exists between the participants is significant because it allows an honest exploration of some very difficult ideas, such as the potential of exploitation in sexually explicit work.

Kiss & Tell's first exhibition, *Drawing the Line*, has been shown throughout Canada, the United States and Australia. It consists of 100 black and white photographs created collaboratively by the three artists with Susan Stewart photographing, and Persimmon Blackbridge and Lizard Jones modeling scenes of lesbian sex. The photographs are arranged on the walls of the gallery in order from least to most explicit. Female visitors to the gallery are encouraged to write their reactions to the photographs on the wall, while male visitors can write their comments in a book provided for this purpose. Viewers can write their opinions of the work, of sexual imagery in general, and can literally 'draw a line' where they think the work becomes too explicit or violent.

The exhibition is intended to emphasize sexual practices and representation, rather than photographic techniques or aesthetics. The work is

not meant to represent all lesbians or all things lesbians do. Because there are just two models used, the viewer is encouraged to talk about what the women are doing rather than what different women look like. However, some women of colour, for instance, have expressed disappointment in seeing only white women in these photographs: "I understand your reasons for using only two models, but I still want to see my coloured face reflected here" (Kiss & Tell 1991:n.p.), writes one Toronto viewer. The focus is supposed to be on the acts, not the models, although viewers respond to both. For Stewart, Blackbridge and Jones, the trust built up over a long period of time is crucial to the work, and would not be present if there were many models involved.

At the least controversial end of the spectrum are images such as that of Jones and Blackbridge, fully clothed, kissing beside a waterfall. Considered slightly more controversial is an image of the two women, again kissing, but this time the woman in front, Blackbridge, is facing the camera and is unclothed [Illustration 2]. The image is cropped at their noses and just below their breasts. Jones is behind Blackbridge and has her hands reaching around to the front, on Blackbridge's breasts. The two are bathed in the shadows of a tree. In Sydney, Australia, the text written by viewers focused on the representation of the nude breasts:

Great tits!

If we say great tits, aren't we just copying the patriarchal way of fetishizing bits and pieces and ignoring the woman as a whole?

No, we're responding to a limited view of a whole woman, that invites us for a moment to focus on her tits.

Can't we just admire her tits? Is this a crime?

(Kiss & Tell 1991:n.p.)

This interaction between viewers immediately differentiates this image from many other representations of women (nude or otherwise) in its promotion of dialogue.

Images containing leather have been generally considered more controversial by viewers given leather's association with sadomasochistic (s/m) practices, even if there is no evidence of s/m in the image. One photograph shows a woman lying diagonally across the frame with a shadow over her face. The image is cropped just below her crotch. She is wearing a black silk bra and black bottoms (perhaps leggings), which are being pulled down by the second woman. The second woman is wearing a leather jacket, with one breast exposed. The image is cropped so that the viewer can not see her face.

At the most controversial end of the exhibition are images of s/m sex, using handcuffs, whips, and bondage [Illustration 5], and women engaging in sex while being watched by a man [Illustration 4]. In response to some of the criticisms of these 'harder' images, Kiss & Tell write: "For women, being 'nice girls' has often been a survival strategy, but that 'safety' traps and silences us" (Kiss & Tell 1991:n.p.). Thus, Kiss & Tell do not pass judgment on any one sexual practice, rather they open up a space and contribute to a dialogue. They question what certain sexual practices mean to one's identity.

True Inversions [Illustrations 6 and 7], a performance by Kiss & Tell and a video directed by Lorna Boschman, continues these discussions in an even more explicit manner. Scenes of sex (between women, oral sex with a man) and masturbation are interspersed with discussions about censorship, safer sex and

representation. Much of it is clearly a performance (not 'real' sex) as the director and camera people are visible. Judy Radul suggests that *True Inversions* rejects the concept of an authentic sexuality, and thus, "works in favour of a sexuality constructed in the arena of the spectator's imagination"(Radul 1994:3). Rather than promoting a single point of view or insisting on one specific identity, Kiss & Tell is providing a context within which women can discuss sexuality and representation, in addition to exploring for themselves the possibilities inherent in the representation of lesbian sexuality.

SHONAGH ADELMAN

In Shonagh Adelman's most recent body of work, the installation *Tele Donna* (1993), and the cibachrome prints in *Skindeep* (1994), she attempts to locate a place where the female viewer can experience pleasure. As with Kiss & Tell, Adelman creates images that do not imply a single or correct sexual practice, but, rather ones that invite questioning and exploration from the viewer about her own pleasure and sexual identity.

Tele Donna consists of eleven phone booth-sized light boxes arranged in a v-formation. On the fronts of these boxes, glowing faintly purple in the darkened room, are line drawings of women [Illustration 8]. The drawings come from a variety of sources - from 14th century medical illustrations to contemporary paper dolls. Because of the use of light boxes, the images had to be line drawings which limited the sources from which Adelman could draw.

However, it is not so much the source, or the origin of the image that matters, but what readings can be made of it in its new placement in this installation. One failing, though, because of the limited number of possible sources, Adelman says, is the lack of images of women of colour (Wright 1994:44). While images that were sexist could be recuperated and 'read against the grain' or reinterpreted in this new light, Adelman did not find this possible with racist images of women of colour.

A phone receiver is attached to each box and when this is lifted by the viewer a three-minute recording of phone sex or a sexual story is heard. While a few of these tapes are professional recordings, most were made by Adelman's friends. In this, as with *Kiss & Tell*, there is evidence of performance and of collaboration - women working together in an exploration of their sexual desires. As well, there is a slippage between the 'real' and the 'performed' because in the making of the tapes some women experienced sexual pleasure. As one reviewer commented, while the visual images are distancing, the sound track is too close (Gender Frames 1993:66). The blacklight line drawings of the visual images act to create a less human representation, while in the phone sex monologues the real human presence is acutely felt.

Skindeep contains eleven large scale, computer generated cibachrome prints. For these images Adelman recycles photographs from a variety of sources, including historical pornographic images and Madonna's book *Sex*.

These photographs are then technically recreated through the manipulation of the images and the juxtaposition of text.

The images in *Skindeep* "critically engage the 'lesbian pornography' produced and mass marketed to heterosexual male consumers"(Ross 1994:9). *Cuniburl* [Illustration 10], for instance, makes use of an image drawn from an 1885 anonymous German source. The image shows one woman performing cunnilingus on another. The first woman is naked and shown from her head to just below her breasts. The second woman is shown from the waist down, and is wearing only black and white striped stockings that end just above her knees. The centrality of heterosexuality is challenged through this depiction of lesbian sex. The text printed across the image reads, *Don't wear out your welcome. Too much of a good thing can make you stupid and then what will you wear?* The source is not revealed, and the text remains ambiguous. Who is the you? The text disrupts the straight pleasure in looking and causes the viewer to question the image and its meaning (Ross 1994:9-10). The text also reveals a sense of humour about the whole situation. As Judith Butler writes " . . . laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for women. Without a doubt, feminism continues to require its own form of serious play"(1990:viii).

Adelman uses images such as this to encourage the viewer to question visual images and to think about where they experience pleasure. By using imagery not created specifically for the pleasure of the female or lesbian viewer, Adelman acknowledges that many women get pleasure from unexpected sources. Some lesbians, for instance, first find evidence of their

sexuality, or confirmation of their sexual identity, on the pages of heterosexual pornography. Thus, Adelman creates work that is both questioning and reaffirming. The use of text makes the viewer pause and consider how the text relates to the image, to the potential desire provoked by the image, and whether this is a place where we want to or should find desire. It is affirming in the sense that Adelman acknowledges that possibilities of desire are found in unexpected places by many people.

DIANA THORNEYCROFT

Informed by feminist theory and psychoanalysis, Diana Thorneycroft creates work that assists in her understanding of the self (Thorneycroft n.d.). Thorneycroft looks at how society has created restrictions which define the female and how the female body is seen and positioned. The photographs she creates to explore this are very fluid and painterly. They have the quality of a dream, where the only light is from a hand-held flashlight and shadows leap across her body and every object in the shot. Her photographs are created in a performance-like situation. She sets up the back-drop and props, takes off all of her clothes, takes her flash-light in hand, turns off the lights, and starts to move. While her first moves may be pre-planned, what soon occurs are more intuitive, improvisational actions. Using a hand-held shutter release, Thorneycroft can create several images in one sitting, but she will not know what they will look like until much later when they are developed.

Images such as *Untitled (Self-Portrait with Clenched Fist)* and *Untitled (Dream)*, both 1990, show her early explorations with this photographic method. In these works the backdrop and props are kept to a minimum. Thorneycroft's naked body is placed centrally and fully frontal to the viewer. In *Untitled (Self-Portrait with Clenched Fist)*, she is wearing a strand of pearls, a gauzy skirt and fake plastic breasts. She is reclining, leaning on one elbow with her legs spread. With her left hand she grasps at the cloth on which she is lying. Her face is almost completely in shadow, except for an area around her mouth. Light darts across her (fake) breasts and left leg. Her crotch is illuminated, but hidden beneath the diaphanous skirt. We are at the same time invited to look and then shown nothing. She exposes the artifice of traditional representations of women and attempts to make meaning by playing with the vocabulary of pornography: pearls, large breasts and the crotch shot.

In *Untitled (Dream)*, Thorneycroft appears naked, and without the props of the previous photograph. She is lit sparsely: part of her face, her right breast, her hand on her genitals. The doll that appears beside her is lit so that all that is evident to the viewer is its buttocks. As explorations of the construction of sexuality, her photographs are both threatening and destabilizing. They threaten the established order and destabilize traditional male-defined portrayals of female sexuality. In this way, she is dealing with issues that have not been dealt with in the mainstream to a great extent: the construction of female pleasure, as well as the fear that sometimes accompanies women's explorations of sexuality and identity.

THEMES IN THE WORK

The artists discussed in this thesis explore issues of sexuality and identity. Identity can be, and usually is, a multifaceted experience. We identify as different things at different times and in different places. Here I am focusing on sexual identity, both the identities an individual chooses herself, and those that are conferred upon her by others. The works that are discussed in this thesis allow the viewer to consider the construction of sexual identity (her identity, the identities of others) in a different manner. I want, at this point, to explore several themes that I see emerging from the work that will allow me to focus on possible interventions into this construction.

Women's sexuality has been predominantly represented by men, such as in pornography and advertising. These are both created for reasons other than women's pleasure. In different ways, and to different degrees, the artists discussed here engage with this issue and attempt to deconstruct some of the meanings of mainstream representations of the female body. Their work also investigates issues of power and desire. The artists depict and explore relations of power within an image and externally in the viewing of it. I will look at how the work is an expression of, and exploration into, the multiplicity and ambiguity of female desire. Finally, I will examine aspects of the context of the work, including the context in which it is created and the context in which it is viewed. In chapter three, I will discuss the social and political context, in terms of the regulation of sexual imagery.

REPRESENTATION

While the images considered in this thesis are about sexuality and sexual identities, they are also, rather self-reflexively, about representation: its limitations as well as possibilities. As Brenda Cossman and Shannon Bell indicate in the introduction to *Bad Attitude/s on Trial: Pornography, Feminism and the Butler Decision*, representations have more than one possible meaning "and can be simultaneously subjected to multiple interpretations" (Cossman et al. 1997:26). It is this ambiguity of the image that is often the focus of the work here.

Drawing the Line is made up of photographs of lesbian sex. They are about lesbian sex and about the *representation* of lesbian sex. Viewers are asked to indicate their "limits regarding sexual imagery" (Kiss & Tell n.d.). As Sandra Haar indicates, the photograph "becomes less an erotic image and more a representation of what may be erotic" (Haar 1988:46). A dialogue is encouraged about what different people find erotic *to look at*. But, "in spite of 10 years of analysis and theorizing about the production and affects of pornography, it is still easy to conflate photographs with real life" (Adams 1990:43). Many of the viewers of *Drawing the Line* commented on the sexual practices as if they were real, not created scenes. This is perhaps because despite the fact that the artists' statement says that these are created scenes, they look 'real' (Kiss & Tell n.d.). It is also because even if the viewer is fully aware that these are constructed photographs and not records of actual sexual

events, they are *about* sexual acts that have some controversy surrounding them - lesbian sex and s/m, for example - and people want to talk about that. The line between representations of sex and sex acts themselves is not all that clear.

Shonagh Adelman's work deals with representation on a slightly different level. She takes images from a variety of sources and reproduces them in her installations. She launches a critique of largely male-created imagery and allows the viewer to participate in this. Where Kiss & Tell creates their own images which speak of lesbian desire, Adelman looks at the possibilities and difficulties of locating female desire in images produced by others. Adelman asks, given the feminist critique of objectification:

How is it possible to make visible, to represent lesbian desire, to cast 'woman' as object of the gaze, without reinscribing phallogentric codes or risking co-optation? The question of authorship and intentionality becomes an important key to shifting these codes (Adelman 1993:24)

She takes images from sources that would not have taken women's desire into consideration, but in her manipulations Adelman wants the viewer to think about her own desire. Because she has re-created the image it now has a new meaning.

In Adelman's *Plastits* [Illustration 11], an image of a woman holding her breasts is superimposed on a wrinkled sheet of red plastic with the words: *I want you to check me out. Get to know me in my absence so that you'll learn everything you need to know about what I like* running across the image. This reverses the role of the subject and the object. The image is addressing *you*,

telling you to find out about *her* pleasure. The female viewer can identify with the woman in the image and see that someone is being encouraged to consider her pleasure; she is not simply there for the pleasure of the male viewer. She can also identify with the desiring viewer, and consider both her pleasure as one who is desiring *and* one who is desired.

DESIRE

Shonagh Adelman's *Grascunt* [Illustration 12] consists of a photograph of a woman in black stockings lying on her back with her legs raised, exposing her genitals. The photograph is layered with the texture of grass and text which reads: *You want to look? Go Ahead, there's no harm in looking. She'll never know the difference.* This directly questions the connection of pornography to violence (there's no harm in looking) and causes the viewer to think and question. As with *Kiss & Tell*, Adelman's images are presented to us in an attempt to create a dialogue about representation, specifically the representation of women's bodies, and the nature of female desire. In this image the text is asking us if we want to look; it is addressing the viewer. What does this mean to a female viewer and her desire? Does this allow the possibility of a desiring female viewer? Susan Cole notes that:

Even the most enlightened and progressive women and men get off on pornography This does not make these people sick, weird or perverted, it makes them well-socialized products of a culture determined to make sexuality the most powerful force . . .
(Cole 1995:41)

By using images from mainstream pornography combined with text such as "I know you want to look," Adelman is acknowledging some women's attraction to pornography. In addressing her work to the viewer, she attempts to create a dialogue that can engage issues such as these. She reveals the complexities of women being attracted to male-created pornography, and the contradictions that this creates. Her work speaks of the erotic pleasure of looking and the place where women who desire women get to have this erotic pleasure. Adelman has acknowledged the agency of the viewer and has made room for the viewer to be female.

Kiss & Tell articulates the importance of speaking one's desire as a lesbian and the possibilities inherent in sexuality, beyond issues of oppression and repression. One image from *Drawing the Line* shows a woman lying on a table/work bench, wearing a dress which is pulled up over her naked breasts, and white underwear which is pulled down to reveal her pubic hair [Illustration 4]. A second woman is holding the first woman's underwear down, with one hand on the first woman's pubic hair and the other on the first woman's thigh. She is looking at the other woman. A man watches the two women. Text written by some viewers says:

"Surely real lesbians wouldn't allow a man in the room to watch. I question the validity of this as an example of lesbian love."
Calm down, it's just a photograph. [Melbourne]
 He's been there in my fantasies. [Toronto]
 (Kiss & Tell 1991:n.p.)

This raises questions about what can/should be desired and if this is desired in real life or in an image only. Is the man there only to watch, signaling an interest in voyeurism, or can he be there also as an object of desire?

Kiss & Tell's *True Inversions* also contains a scene with a man which raises similar issues. One woman is wearing a strap-on dildo, and the man (Paul Lang, one of the camera-people) sucks on it. The words "Censored: politically incorrect" appear on the screen and Paul says, "Censored? What do you mean censored? These people are my friends. I was invited here"(Kiss & Tell 1992). A discussion ensues about whether or not a man should be present in a video about lesbian sex. Ultimately, they have a discussion about being able to disagree without being called a censor. What I find interesting, though, is that very little is said about the actual presence of the man in terms of *desire*, although clearly one of the things that the video is about is the different possibilities of desire. I find the presence of the male character interesting in terms of bisexuality. What if you desire both men and women? Although *True Inversion* does not tackle this in an outright manner, I think it is useful in allowing a space for this discussion to happen. Politically, who you desire has been tied to your sexual identity and also, therefore, to your politics. Judith Butler indicates that "some of the difficulties emerging from identity politics can be traced to the prevailing fiction that how you desire determines who you are"(Kotz 1992:86). She then goes on to say that "the destabilization of those identificatory patterns seems quite crucial . . . [and] may ultimately make possible new lines of political solidarity"(Kotz 1992:88). Thus, by loosening the links between who one desires

and how one aligns oneself politically, new possibilities of identification and of political action may be made possible.

Diana Thorneycroft speaks of desire in images such as *Untitled (Fish Bride)* [Illustration 13] where she poses nude except for a bridal veil. Near her genitals she holds a fish with a wide open mouth. The fish and mouth are both symbols of female genitals across many cultures (Allen 1994-95:13). "The use of vaginal imagery in feminist art defies the suppression of female sexuality and its subsumption into male desire" (Allen 1994-95:13) This use of the symbolic with the real suggests female empowerment, contrasting with images of the vagina in male heterosexual pornography. Through the insertion of the self into these images the objectification of the pornographic is refused; *her* desire is the subject.

In many images Diana Thorneycroft poses with a fake penis and/or fake breasts. *Untitled (Fish Brides)* [Illustration 14] has male models with fake breasts and *Untitled (Twin)* [Illustration 16] shows Diana Thorneycroft herself with a fake penis. There is a confusion of gender roles and sexual identities, and a multiplicity of attractions. She is exploring the construction of gender identities and its connection with the construction of desire and sexual identity. The ambiguity of sexual identity is exposed: Are you the male or the female? Do you desire the male or the female? As Thorneycroft writes:

The androgynous looking figure represents a denial of rigid gender roles, erases the notion of difference and ignores the rules that make us absolute male or female. How do we reconcile this threat with that of desire? (Tousley 1992:C10)

In addition to potentially arousing the viewer with the beauty and sexuality in the images, Diana Thorneycroft also creates a questioning and a space for dialogue:

I wanted people to bring their own bisexual curiosity to the work. If a woman looking at my work was aroused and thought I was male, then that was okay. Or if a man looking at the work was aroused and he knew I was female, then that was okay. But what if he had looked at the work and thought I was a guy? So I was interested in breaking the rules about arousal. I was discovering all sorts of things about myself and I thought, if I can do it to me, can I do it to my audience? (Enright 1996: 25-26)

The space between what society tells us we are to desire and what we feel inside is negotiated in these images.

POWER

Shonagh Adelman writes that Kiss & Tell “employ a discursive approach using various aesthetic means to dramatize the impact of technologies of power on sexuality”(Adelman 1995:30). As Foucault indicates, power is multi-dimensional, created and asserted in many different sites:

Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everything. . . . Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. (Foucault 1978:93)

It is this complex, plural power that is explored by Kiss & Tell, Shonagh Adelman, and Diana Thorneycroft.

In *Drawing the Line*, one image shows a woman lying on top of another woman who is wearing only a white lace slip [Illustration 3]. She is visible from

behind. The other woman is under her, wearing patched and safety-pinned jeans, and boots. Their legs are intertwined holding each other. Text written beside the image reads:

The nude one seems too exposed
That's what makes it hot. Sex is power!
 That's the problem [Toronto]
 (Kiss & Tell 1991:n.p.)

The investigation of power in this way allows a dialogue among viewers. Kiss & Tell depicts power relationships in sex and lets the viewer comment on them. It is crucial to understand that Kiss & Tell is not advocating a single sexual practice, but is encouraging a discussion among women (and men) about where power comes from and how it manifests itself in our lives, particularly in the areas of sexuality. For some women, lesbian s/m, for instance, is a mere copy of heterosexual power relations, and is therefore oppressive. For many s/m practitioners this is completely not the case. They feel their s/m sex is a way of exploring power, of playing with power in a safe environment. They are, in fact, subverting traditional power relationships.²

In *Untitled (Twin)* [Illustration 16] Diana Thorneycroft's use of the plastic penis brings into question the power of the penis, and the question of whether the use of a fake penis or a dildo can undermine the power and authority attached to the real one. The divide between a parody in an attempt to undermine the power of something, and the mere reification of that very thing, is sometimes unclear. Colleen Lamos writes that:

² See discussion of lesbian s/m in Tamsin Wilton. 1996. *Finger-Licking Good: The Ins and Outs of Lesbian Sex*. London: Cassell; or Carole S. Vance, ed. 1984. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

The dildo can at any moment be taken (on) either as a faithful substitute for the penis or as a parodic mime of its phallic pretensions. . . . If phallic potency boils down to the question of who has the penis, the dildo is a direct challenge to male possession of that instrument of authority. (Lamos 1995:111)

In Thorneycroft's work she challenges male power and authority by claiming it for herself but equally important, she opens up an area for debate. She questions whether or not the penis is, or needs to be, a source of power, and if we cannot reveal our own sources of power as women. Think, for example, of *Untitled (Fish Bride)*[Illustration 13] with the power of the vagina revealed.

Discourses, including representations, are themselves acts of power. In mainstream male-created pornography, for instance, power is largely in the hands of its owners and distributors. The artists described here are attempting to alter relations of power. As Mariana Valverde writes:

We should not be thinking about abolishing sexual power, but rather about subverting it, transforming it, so that we are more in control of the dialectic, more free to make choices and changes, rather than routinely fall into prescribed scripts. (Valverde 1984: 15)

The artists attempt to create a space or initiate a dialogue about how we can share and exchange power. They question inherited power relations and identities established by these, and are intent on creating images that are a resistance to the dominant male created imagery that surrounds us.

Foucault indicates that the body is a social site where ideas and discourses about sexuality are played out. In *The History of Sexuality*, he sees the body as a target of power as well as a site of resistance. Despite Foucault's lack of recognition of gender specificity, his notions of power and resistance are very important to my discussion. Foucault sees power as diffuse rather than singular.

Perhaps Foucault's conception of power is inadequate to deal with the continuation of large blocks of power such as patriarchy, but when we see power as ubiquitous, precarious and unstable, we can allow for resistance and the assertion of alternate identities.

Susan Bordo writes that the Foucauldian structures of power "no matter how dominant, are never seamless but are always spawning new forms of subjectivity, new contexts for resistance to and transformation of existing relations"(1993:288). Davina Cooper indicates that "power cannot simply be equated with the control exercised by a particular group"(1995:13); power must be seen to be available to all, otherwise there would be no hope at all of resisting against patriarchy, heterosexism, or racism. Cooper's approach "identifies power as the facilitation of particular outcomes, processes and practices. This may include the maintenance and reproduction of the status quo or, alternatively, its dismantling or transformation"(18). Her point is useful in the discussion of these artists, and in recognizing that their artwork has the potential to inspire or create change.

CONCLUSION

I will conclude with a discussion of the importance of considering context when discussing sexually explicit artwork. Susan Bordo, in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, discusses the potential uses, as well as critiques, of postmodern theory in the reading of the body and the creation of

identity. She insists that the biological body is culturally inscribed, that is, created and understood through aspects of our culture, such as sexual and legal discourses, but dismisses the notion of the body as a fiction. She indicates that our understanding of our bodies is always mediated by language: how we talk about our bodies and the language that we have to do this affects how we understand it. Bordo cautions against a thoroughly textual reading of the body, because the "subversion of cultural assumptions (despite the claims of some deconstructionists) is not something that happens *in* a text or *to* a text. It is an event that takes place (or doesn't) in the reading of the text"(Bordo 1993:292). The mere creation of a text (in this case a piece of art) does not in and of itself change cultural assumptions, such as the assumptions that are commonly held about sexuality or identity. These can only be altered or subverted through the interaction of this text with people. It is for this reason that it is crucial to look not only at the text, but also to look at the context of the work and its reception by the viewers.

The context within which artwork is created and shown influences its reception and its meaning. Meaning will change as the context changes: it can not be fixed. When considering the work of Kiss & Tell, Shonagh Adelman, and Diana Thorneycroft, the possibility of multiple and various meanings is evident. Many of these images could be heterosexual pornography in another context. Shonagh Adelman, for example, in both *Tele Donna* and *Skindeep* does use images that were created as heterosexual pornography which she then recontextualizes and alters to suit her purpose.

In Canada in the 1990s mainstream culture continues to be patriarchal and homophobic. It is within this large context that these works are created. Mainstream images of women tend to be either geared toward male pleasure, such as in the case of male created heterosexual pornography, or toward female consumption, as in advertising. Images of female sexual pleasure are rare.

The specific context within which the piece of art was created says much about the intentions of the artist and the statement that they are making. In Kiss & Tell's *True Inversions*, for example, the context is demystified. The director, camera people and other friends are all on camera talking about the issues involved in the video and performance. Near the beginning of the video is a hot sex scene between Persimmon Blackbridge and Lizard Jones, which is revealed to be acting when the camera person says, "Okay, let's get a little hotter in there . . . Okay, move in"(Boschman and Kiss & Tell 1992). The relationships between the participants are revealed, some as 'real' sexual relationships, such as between Susan Stewart and Ali McIlwaine, and others, such as that between Persimmon Blackbridge and Lizard Jones, which is one of friends and co-workers who perform sex. The video is revealed to have been made in a collective manner, by people who trust each other. That this is made explicit ultimately influences the reading of the work. The viewer is not left wondering if all were participating freely.

Shonagh Adelman's *Tele Donna* contains an image of two women dancing. This image is taken from a manual on ballroom dancing and was not

originally intended to depict lesbians, or one woman's desire for another. In Adelman's context, though, it is read differently (Hanna 1994:44). Taking an image from one context and inserting it into another alters the meaning of the image. Adelman says that: "The phone sex resituates the images in a context of lesbian desire and opens up the potential for evoking female eroticism in a way that hasn't been done visually"(Wright 1994:44-45). Adelman directly takes images from many sources and uses them for her own purposes. As Janice Andreae writes:

Adelman demystifies familiar signs and associations and, similarly, their reading(s). Through (re)mapping different patterns, erotic stimulation(s) and using different frames of reference to contextualize her erotic/sexual subjects(s), Adelman aptly invites her viewer to consider an analogous destabilization of society where her frame works as it does in *Tele Donna* - in three-dimensional *real* space. (Andreae 1994b:48)

Thus, Andreae indicates that by shifting the meaning of an image through the shifting of its context (the 'destabilizing' of the image) the shifting of actual social relations can be considered by the viewer.

The use of sexually explicit images, recontextualized or shown in a specific context that indicates a reading different from mainstream pornography, is a strategy that might have limited potential, but I feel that it is useful as a strategy. A single strategy does not have to be useful at all times and for all purposes, but may be useful for a certain purpose and at a certain time. This use of, and reference to, mainstream heterosexual pornography works to destabilize its meaning for the viewers of these particular pieces. While it may not in itself necessarily destabilize the entire pornography industry or immediately alter it so

that it no longer exploits women, or begins creating images that represent all of our sexualities, the creation of these alternative images of sexuality plays a role in the investigation of different identities, affirming for some people and calling into question for others.

For these artists, then, "the self is a site of investigation and is posited as the site of change"(Allen 1994-94:7). In breaking down categories such as identity and sexuality, Kiss & Tell, Shonagh Adelman, and Diana Thorneycroft are creating work that allows questioning about how we understand and speak about sexuality and identity.

CHAPTER 3

THE REGULATION OF SEXUAL REPRESENTATION

INTRODUCTION

In November 1992, Kiss & Tell's *True Inversions* was performed at the Banff Centre for the Arts. *True Inversions* is a multi-media performance which includes projected slides, video and live performance. Susan Stewart, Persimmon Blackbridge and Lizard Jones consider issues of censorship, sexism and male violence, and how these issues connect with women's, and particularly lesbians', pleasurable experience of sexuality and our bodies.

After viewing this performance, Rick Bell wrote an article for *Alberta Report* entitled "Exporting state-funded filth; lesbian 'artists' are a hit in Banff"(1992:23). In this article Bell seems to have misunderstood many aspects of the performance, or at least mis-represents them. For example, Bell writes:

One [performer] said that her lust was 'huge and uncontrollable' for any woman in a white lab coat. Another rattled on about 'femmes' and 'butches.' One of them then donned a fake mustache and cowboy boots, and spoke about the outrage against pornography she had felt since her conversion to Jesus Christ. A cleaning woman romped around the stage and the third performer blew a whistle. The crowd roared. (1992:23)

In reality, the lust felt by the first performer, Lizard Jones, is for a specific woman to whom she is attracted because the woman is a hard worker (Kiss & Tell 1994:69). The use of words such as 'rattled on' and 'romped around' emphasize Bell's contempt for the entire performance. As Persimmon Blackbridge writes, "We have

many complex, conflicted relationships to sex pictures. Rick Bell erased these realities, projecting what is a particular straight, white, male viewpoint onto the images, the audience and the performers"(Kiss & Tell 1994:68). After a demeaning description of the audience and the artists, Bell concludes with, "As usual, the money for this free admission spectacle came from the empty coffers of indebted governments"(1992:23). The article is accompanied by a caricature of the artists in Kiss & Tell, with the caption, "Proudly brought to you by John Gogo, Department of Advanced Education; Doug Main, Department of Culture; Canada Council"(1992:23).

While a bad review can be expected by most artists, this soon became more than just one critic's negative opinion. Ken Kowalski, the Deputy Premier of Alberta saw the article and called *True Inversions* an "abhorrent lesbian show"("Tax-funded" 1993:24). The incident prompted Alberta Community Development Minister Gary Mar to order a review of the funding policies of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts (AFA) (Jefferies 1994:A1). Mar suggested that galleries that showed controversial art in the future would risk losing their funding: "It would be fair to say that funds for particular types of shows could not be supported by the AFA"(Jefferies 1994:A1). Indeed, Mar objects to art that might "offend the sensibilities and the community standards"(Freschuk 1994:E1). He was not more specific about what exactly this meant, and said only that, "pornography is a hard thing to define, but I know it when I see it"(Jefferies 1994:A1). The AFA then proposed guidelines similar to the American Helms Amendment, which would have artists whose work was found to be obscene return their grant money, with interest.

The article by Rick Bell was published in a number of magazines and newspapers, as were others that were based on it. As Susan Stewart writes:

Talking about taxes is a sure-fire way to get attention, and insinuating that scarce and badly needed money is being squandered on lesbian art is a sure-fire way to fan the flames of homophobia. Homosexuality becomes yet again the target and scapegoat for a thinly-veiled process of political maneuvering. (Kiss & Tell 1994:73)

The state is a site over which conflicting groups fight. As Judith Butler writes, "modern power 'administers' life in part through the silent withdrawal of its resources"(1992:361). In this case, various groups, such as Rick Bell and the *Alberta Report* attempted to convince the government (the state) not to fund work that they disagree with. In altering funding arrangements and refusing money to artists who create work that they consider obscene, the government can regulate marginal sexualities through financial control.

All of the artists discussed here have come into direct contact with the regulatory imperatives of the state, whether by having their work stopped at the Canadian-American border on return to Canada or through the threat of the withdrawal of funding, for example. I will explore state regulation, first through a discussion of exactly what I mean when I refer to the state, and what role it can and does play. Second, I will outline Canadian obscenity regulation, and the impact it has had on artistic production in Canada. In this discussion, I will focus on the February 1992 *Butler* ruling, in which the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the current obscenity legislation in the Criminal Code, but changed the rationale from a morals based one to one ostensibly based on the notion of equality for women and the prevention of harm. Finally, I will explore extra-legal regulation. Many

poststructuralist writers have pointed to sexuality itself as a regulatory regime. Having only specific categories of identity available to people through discourse, such as visual representation or law, and allowing only specific practices associated with these identities are acts of regulation in themselves.

REGULATION BY THE STATE

I will begin with a discussion of the state and its role in the regulation of sexually explicit images. Davina Cooper, in *Power in Struggle: Feminism, Sexuality and the State* (1995), indicates that the state is responsive to various demands. It is not simply the enforcement arm of a single constituency. She underscores the difficulty in defining the state, but comes up with a framework that I find useful. She conceives of the state as "contingently articulated, multifaceted phenomena with no fixed form, essence or core. . . . In any given context, one or more state identities will be at the fore, while the others remain in the background"(60-61). She identifies five aspects of state identity:

1. as a set of specific, public arenas that include the courts, local and central government, military, police force, regulatory quangos and welfare providers/organizers;
 2. as the criteria of articulation/linkage and commonality between these arenas - constitutional, disciplinary, cultural, and resource based;
 3. as a corporate entity - the nation state;
 4. as a variously condensed manifestation of economic, racial and gendered power; and
 5. as a key agent of 'legitimate' public coercion and violence.
- (62-63)

Thus, when I am speaking of the state in terms of regulation, I am referring to the bodies, such as the courts and police, but also to the resources provided by the state, the economic, gendered and racial power that the state wields and the possibilities of coercion.

As the state is not a single entity, its various agencies and agents will not necessarily act in concert. For instance, one body (such as the courts) might make a decision and another (such as customs or police) might contradict this. Artists make use of the state for such things as funding, while they might oppose it on other occasions, such as when an image is declared obscene. Finally, as Cooper writes, "the state does not simply respond to discourses, it also re-forms them"(59). Thus, the state may take an external discourse and change it into something different or alter it in some way. Alternatively, the terrain of the state may be changed through discourse or outside power acting on it.

One arena of the state, as Cooper mentions, is the court system. This system can be acted upon by various groups, and is often a site of struggle. In the following section I will explore one such struggle which has been of central concern for feminists and cultural producers: the *Butler* case.

R. v. BUTLER

In February, 1992, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled on the first Constitutional challenge to the current obscenity legislation. In this decision, known as the *Butler* decision, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the obscenity provisions of the

Criminal Code. It was decided that the obscenity legislation was a legitimate limit on the freedom of expression provision of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, based on the equality sections of the *Charter*. The reasoning was that harm is caused to women by pornography and other works that are found to be obscene, and that in limiting these there will be greater potential for women's equality.¹

This case began in August, 1987, when Winnipeg police officers seized videos, magazines and sexual paraphernalia from a store, and charged the owner, Donald Victor Butler, with 250 counts of possessing obscene material for the purpose of distribution and sale, and exposing obscene material to public view (*Criminal Code* s.163). He was found guilty on eight of these charges. Through appeals the case slowly made its way up to the Supreme Court with Butler's lawyers arguing for the freedom of expression provision in the *Charter* (s.2). In February of 1992 the Supreme Court ruled that the *Criminal Code* provision on obscenity did not violate the *Charter's* freedom of expression section, as it was a reasonable limit (s.1). The harm caused to women as a result of pornography was ruled to be enough to result in this limit on expression.

The *Butler* ruling contained three categories of sexual representation that a judge should consider when making a determination about potential obscenity of sexually explicit material. They are:

1. Sexually explicit material that includes violence;
2. Sexually explicit material that does not include violence, but that is degrading and dehumanizing;

¹ See Appendix 1 for details of the *Criminal Code of Canada*; and Appendix 2 for details of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

3. Sexually explicit material that does not include violence, and that is not degrading and dehumanizing.
(*Butler* in Cossman 1997b:87)

Material that falls into the first of these three categories would almost always be found to be obscene. Material that falls into the second category may be found to be obscene if there is assessed to be a substantial risk of harm, and material that falls into the third would generally not be considered obscene unless children are involved, in which case it would be considered under the child pornography law (Bill C-128; *Criminal Code* s.163.1).

Central to *Butler* is its focus on the notion of harm:

Harm in this context means that it predisposes persons to act in an anti-social manner, as, for example, the physical or mental mistreatment of women by men. . . . Anti-social conduct for this purpose is conduct which society formally recognizes as incompatible with its proper functioning. (*Butler* in McCormack 1993:31-32)

Violent pornography is ostensibly to be censored because of the harm that it causes to women. However, theorists such as Brenda Cossman, Lise Gotell and Thelma McCormack feel that *Butler* is missing an underlying feminist analysis in this conception of harm, and that this wording was added as a last resort, in an attempt to explain the idea of 'anti-social conduct' (Johnson 1995:80). Anti-social is framed by the notion of society's 'proper functioning'. Society's proper functioning, though, is not defined within the ruling. Further, it has been noted that by the use of the term 'formally' the ruling should really only be used against those representations which are going to cause people to act in a manner that is sanctioned by the *Criminal Code* (Barclay 1992-93:26). The concept of harm is then unclear in several aspects. It is not clearly defined within the ruling, and, while

the ruling states that the amount, or even presence of harm caused as a result of pornography is not possible to prove, the community is allowed to judge whether this harm is present or not.

The ambiguous words, such as 'degrading' and 'dehumanizing,' found in *Butler's* description of the potential obscene material, have been pointed to as a source of contention. The Attorney General of Canada and the Attorney General of Manitoba both intervened in the *Butler* case, and offered different definitions of the term degrading. The Attorney General of Canada stated that degrading is "a word of common usage, requiring no additional qualifiers. It refers to the debasement of individuals deprived of their dignity and treated as less than equal" (Gotell 1997a:82). The Attorney General of Manitoba agreed with this definition, but then added that degrading also means "sexual practices that most people would consider humiliating" (Gotell 1997a:83). As Lise Gotell argues, by attempting to show that the terms in the obscenity legislation are easily understood, they have in fact, shown that different definitions and interpretations are common. It is not clear what degrading means, or what sexual acts, or depictions thereof are degrading and therefore obscene. It seems very possible that a straight, male judge could find depictions of lesbian sex, for example, humiliating, and therefore, degrading, and obscene under the law.

Obscenity legislation after *Butler* continues to depend on the notion of community standards, as it did pre-*Butler*. This seems to set the lowest degree of tolerance. The 'community' was defined in *R.v.Brodie* (1992) as the 'community' of the 'average' person. Because this is obviously subjective and has been applied

inconsistently, there was some attempt in *Butler* to create a more specific definition. Judges are to determine:

As best they can what the community would tolerate others being exposed to on the basis of the degree of harm that may flow from such exposure. . . . [There must be] a norm that will serve as an arbiter in determining what amounts to an undue exploitation of sex. That arbiter is the community as a whole. (*Butler* in Cossman 1997b:88)

The community refers to a national, fictitious, homogenous group of people. It is clear, though, that there are many different communities. As Persimmon Blackbridge writes, "A look at the walls of *Drawing the Line* is enough to tell me that there are deep differences of interpretation within my community" (Kiss & Tell 1994:78). Communities, such as lesbian, feminist or arts communities are not considered specifically when the courts judge imagery that comes out of these very communities.

For artists, one crucial aspect of the obscenity legislation is the defense of artistic merit. This defense was made explicit in the case of Eli Langer, whose paintings were subjected to a forfeiture hearing on charges of obscenity under the child pornography law (Metcalfe 1997; Cossman 1997b). In order to establish artistic merit, the court must "examine not simply the sincerity of the artist's intentions, but also whether something of artistic value was in fact produced" (Cossman 1997b:90). Thus, it must not just be art, but *good* art. While the artistic community can give evidence here, the final judgment is left, again, to community standards. Thus, the work has to first be found obscene, that is, something that the community will not tolerate. Then, in order to prove that the work has artistic merit, it has to be approved of by the community, as art.

One of the central difficulties of this is that artwork is often produced, as is the work of Kiss & Tell, Diana Thorneycroft, and Shonagh Adelman, to challenge dominant notions held by the community. As Frank Adario (Lawyer to Eli Langer's paintings) writes, "My personal view is that it's technically impossible to write a censorship law that can't be twisted or employed against expression that nobody meant to censor when the law was written"(Hume 1995:D13). Thus, while marginal artistic expression is generally not considered to be the prime focus of obscenity legislation, it is frequently its target.

As Brenda Cossman points out in *Censorship and the Arts* (1995), the artistic defense does not stop police from confiscating work or laying charges (55). The threat of this alone is enough to dissuade some artists from creating work, or some galleries from showing work that is sexually explicit. Calgary artist Diana Sherlock says: "If institutions or individual artists feel like they're constantly going to be persecuted for putting what they do out in public, their first reaction will be to suppress that"(Johnson 1994:A2). For cultural producers, self-censorship creates an atmosphere of fear that limits the production of work.

Foucault develops this notion of self-censorship in his writings on the Panopticon. The Panopticon is an architectural structure from the French revolution which was intended to prevent even the possibility of wrongdoing by surrounding people with others who would police their acts, where soon even the thought of a disallowed act does not occur (Foucault 1980:153). At this point:

there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. (1980:155)

Foucault's Panopticon is a metaphor for the controlling gaze in the present time. When the rules of obscenity are constantly held over artists and when sexual regulation is ever present, these soon become internalized and foreclose any possibility of sincere exploration. Jearld Moldenhauer, former owner of Glad Day Books, writes that censorship forces artists to internalize a censorship mentality (Plakidas 1994:2). This is a regulatory strategy on the part of the state. The limits to the explicitness allowed in artwork, under Canadian obscenity regulations are unclear and can only be tested in court. For artists who generally have very little money, this is a risk that few are willing to take.

Thus, for cultural producers, the Butler decision was largely seen as a failure. However, for many feminists it was celebrated as a victory. It was seen as an instance where regulation, in this case of obscene material, could benefit women. In the next section I will outline the position taken by the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), as they were granted intervenor status at the *Butler* trial.

LEAF INTERVENES IN *BUTLER*

The Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF) was granted intervenor status at the *Butler* Supreme Court challenge. They intervened on the side of the government to uphold current obscenity legislation, saying that violent pornography is not worth protection under the *Charter*. LEAF used the equality provisions of the *Charter* (s.15 and s.28) to argue that a reduction in violent pornography would consequently reduce the amount of harm done to women,

and thus further women's equality. While they recognized that criminal prohibitions would not eliminate pornography, they felt that violent pornography might be reduced, and the harm done to women as a result, therefore also reduced. They claimed to have rejected the notion of moral intolerance that was inherent in the conservative obscenity law, recognizing that this had previously allowed and encouraged the censorship of lesbian and gay imagery.

LEAF saw the courts as a place to deliver a message about women's equality, and pornography's negative contribution. They insist that using the courts is one possible arena in the struggle toward women's equality. Recognizing the potential to alter state discourse and practice, LEAF felt that the *Butler* ruling offered great potential for including a feminist understanding of violence against women in the law.

In their submission, LEAF appeared to be relying on the potential objectivity of the law but the ambiguous nature of the wording makes it clear that one should not assume the law will be read as was intended. "Law is a metanarrative that professes to be objective, to be able to distinguish true from false, and in this way legal knowledge, like scientific knowledge, is set apart and above other forms of knowledge"(Gotell 1997:52). This discourse of law, then, privileges certain ways of speaking and marginalizes others. Theoretically and in practice law has frequently been proven unable to 'hear' these marginal voices for what they are. They are unintelligible. As Andrew Payne indicates, law has not been able to read:

the qualitative difference between images women produce for their mutual enjoyment and edification . . . and images produced by men of women for other men (images that not only appropriate the

affective experiences of women for 'fun and profit,' but also prevent, by reason of their hegemony, alternative representations of female desire). (1994:46)

Susan Lord has said that the female voice has been marked as "non-sense" (Allen 1994-95:5). It is not heard.

While the *Butler* ruling has been used against lesbian and gay imagery, LEAF hoped that the use of equality arguments would pave the way for the defense of this imagery². As Persimmon Blackbridge of Kiss & Tell says. "A law based on equality arguments could be turned around to protect the sexual self-expression of women and other marginalized groups"(Kiss & Tell 1994:91). LEAF stated that if applied correctly, the obscenity law would curb violent pornography *and* lessen the censorship of lesbian and gay material that was previously banned based on idea of "moral indecency"(Busby 1994:177) but, in fact, the court failed to be explicit about lesbian and gay imagery. As Persimmon Blackbridge writes, this neglect of lesbian imagery:

leads to a law where what is assumed to be true about men is by default assumed to be true about women. A *Penthouse* portrayal of a woman in bondage and a woman's portrayal of herself in bondage are seen as the same thing. There is no difference between a tired old view of the subordinated Other, and a vulnerable self-exploration. (Kiss & Tell 1994:80)

The court erased, or refused to see, the difference in context between these types of images.

² For a detailed description of LEAF's position on this, see: Karen Busby. 1994. "LEAF and Pornography: Litigating on Equality and Sexual Representation." *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* Spring: 165-192. Busby indicates that since *Butler* almost no obscenity charges have been laid against heterosexual material, but *Bad Attitude*, a lesbian pornography magazine, was seized and Glad Day Bookshop (a lesbian and gay store) was convicted of selling obscene material. In another case Judge Hayes prohibited material destined for Glad Day and found the gay male material degrading by its very nature (184-187).

To justify this censorship and other sexual regulation, the Canadian government and courts appear to have capitalized on the connection made by radical feminists, such as those in LEAF, between mainstream male-created pornography and violence against women. Instead of offering real, long term solutions to the very serious problem of violence against women, we have seen words and images made out to be the villain and criminalized (Marriot 1994:24). The Canadian government, in keeping with its current neo-conservative agenda, has subsumed the 'problem' of pornography into the category of violence against women in order to justify a law and order agenda. "Authority [is] manifested through the simultaneous excitation of sexual anxiety and the provision of defense against it" (Beavis 1996:32). A climate of fear is used to justify this silencing of sexual speech, and sexuality has been re-constructed as dangerous; therefore assertions of sexual pleasure are seen as unintelligible (Gotell 1997a:51).

Obscenity legislation appears to be something fairly simple for politicians to accept and is perhaps more easily achieved than universal daycare or employment equity, for instance, because it is already present in a useable form, and because it costs little or nothing. This allows the government to appear responsive to feminist demands without making any fundamental change. The state, while appearing to respond to the demands of feminists and other activist groups may, in fact, be reinforcing its patriarchal, capitalist base. As Nadine Strossen writes:

The fundamental premise in the pro-censorship feminists' philosophy - that our entire societal and legal system is patriarchal, reflecting and perpetuating the subordination of women - itself conclusively

refutes their conclusion that we should hand over to the system additional power. (1995:217)

Strossen recommends that we make use of the laws that are already in place to deal with sexual assault, rape, breach of contract, and any other crime that is committed against a woman involved in the creation of pornography, rather than try to alter or increase obscenity legislation.

Obscenity laws assume that issues dealing with sexuality have special requirements. For example, the unequal treatment of women in educational institutions would be challenged through affirmative action programs, educational campaigns, sexual harassment policies and the like. Eliminating the educational institution would not be considered. With sexually explicit imagery then, why do we consider eliminating the imagery? To make sexually explicit imagery that explores women's sexual pleasure in a equal manner is potentially accomplished by the use of laws other than obscenity laws. Women who work in sex industries or creating sexually explicit artwork deserve to be treated well in their workplace, as do all women. This can be accomplished through the use of laws prohibiting assault, sexual assault and sexual harassment, as well as labour codes making mandatory certain levels of pay and working conditions. The solution need not be the elimination of all sexual imagery. For many artists and anti-censorship activists, obscenity legislation only reduces the possibilities of creating alternate images.

RADICAL FEMINISM AND SEXUALITY

In their arguments at the *Butler* trial, LEAF embodies the feminist anti-pornography position. Male-created heterosexual pornography is interpreted as violence against women. The regulation of sexuality and sexually explicit images by the state is seen as necessary in order to eliminate violence against women.

In many ways, contemporary anti-pornography feminism parallels earlier social purity movements, as Margaret Hunt points out. Although I feel that Hunt is incorrect in her assertion that most contemporary anti-pornography feminists have a singular focus on the eradication of all sexual imagery, she does make an interesting comparison. She writes that social purity in the past and anti-pornography feminism in the present both hold that sexuality is problematic and needs to be controlled, otherwise it will cause harm. Some kinds of sex are seen as acceptable and others are not. In the case of turn-of-the-century social purity, the sexualities of the working class and people of colour were looked upon with suspicion by middle class reformers (Hunt 1990:25). Currently, male sexuality and s/m sexualities are seen as dangerous by some radical feminists.

Carol Smart writes of the suspicion felt toward the possibility of feminist heterosexuality:

The problem of heterosexuality was redefined in terms of the undesirability of having sex with men at all, rather than in terms of how to demand better sex from/with men. This meant that the focus shifted from reconstructing heterosexuality to avoiding heterosex. (1996: 229)

She writes of this in terms of feminist guilt, which has a powerful effect on discussion about sexuality, resulting in feminists feeling that they have to position themselves far away from discussions about sex (Smart 1996:231). Because sex is so colonized by patriarchy and women are so often represented only in sexual terms, some feminists have felt the need to "position themselves as far from sex as possible"(Fernandez 1991:35). This legacy of anti-sex feminism provides a backdrop for the current discussions of feminist sexual representation, and at times these ideas coincide with those of the state, as in *Butler*.

The artists discussed here refuse to locate themselves away from sexuality. They tackle these issues head-on, despite the fact that a separation from patriarchal sexuality is not always simple or clear. Laura Marks reads Shonagh Adelman's work *Tele Donna* as suffused with patriarchal conceptions of female sexuality: "The phone sex monologues, with their recurring images of spanking, rape and sluts asking for it, were another reminder of how sexuality is already written for us"(1994:94). She locates the images of sexuality within the language men created to speak of sex, but then goes on to say that "what made the monologue erotic was the slow realization that these were, for the most part, amateur phone-sex performers (Adelman's friends, in fact)"(1994:94). Rather than the voices being those of anonymous women performing in an unidentified context, these were women with whom Adelman had a relationship.

Rather than positioning herself far from the male-centred language of sex as radical feminists might, Adelman uses this language to make the viewer/listener question the nature of her desire and the constructedness of this sexuality. As

Annette Hurtig writes, we must refuse to "conced[e] to the notion that erotic images are always and already heterosexual and patriarchal . . ."(Hurtig 1994:7). They can also be lesbian and/or feminist.

Similarly, we must also refuse to understand the gaze - how we look at images and the power embodied by that look - as always heterosexual and patriarchal. In doing so, we would be closing down the possibility of a female desiring look. It is this topic that I now turn to, in a discussion of the gaze and the role that it plays in the regulation of sexually explicit imagery.

THE REGULATION OF THE GAZE

Earlier, I discussed Foucault's Panopticon, and the notion of the controlling gaze. The gaze has also been theorized in a number of different ways. Laura Mulvey, in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"(1989), uses psychoanalytic theory to investigate the scopophilic instinct in narrative cinema. Male-created images of women, particularly the nude, embody what Mulvey has called "to-be-looked-at-ness"(19). They represent a male fantasy of female sexuality and perpetuate stereotypes of women as objects. While Mulvey is referring specifically to Hollywood narrative film, her interpretations have been transferred to many other forms of visual representation, such as advertising, painting and photography. She indicates that cinematic visual codes have structured into them the "actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man"(19). Referring to psychoanalytic theory, she indicates that

"women in representation can signify castration, and activate voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent this threat"(25). In this analysis, there are few roles available to the female viewer; thus, the gaze acts as regulation by foreclosing on the possibilities available to women in visual representation. A female viewer can either identify with the one being looked at, or take on male identification as the viewer or active male within the image.

David Garneau, in a reading of the work of Diana Thorneycroft, uses feminist theories of the gaze to assert that:

the female nude is already an overdetermined site. The erotics of the male gaze has so penetrated the genre that it is rare for any photograph of an unclothed woman, however masked, to escape being contained within the visual history of female nudes of the objectified site as visualized, heterosexual, male desire. (1992-92: 45)

Readings such as this close down the possibility for female centred discussions of sexuality, and the possibilities of the female desiring gaze. While a reading of the female nude must be considered within the history of patriarchy, room has to be left to consider female agency. Diana Thorneycroft and *Kiss & Tell*, for example, when representing the nude female, are representing *themselves* nude. They avoid the power differences inherent in the traditional female model/male artist situation.

Diana Thorneycroft, in a quite humorous talk given as part of *Female Imaginary* (1994-95) at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario, struggles with the notion of the male gaze and its constraining potential:

The most challenging problem for me as I began to understand how politically incorrect it was to take nude pictures of myself, was how then could I be a visual subject without giving up my own sense of self? So I asked myself, if I didn't want to be colluding with *Playboy*, how could I disrupt that big bad wolf known as the Male Gaze? How

could I deconstruct the symbolic order of patriarchy and wash my hair at the same time? (Allen 1994-95:23)

Thorneycroft comes up with the strategy of using unexpected props within her images. For example, she uses a fake plastic penis, not erect but flaccid. By disrupting the standard of male-created pornography (a man with an erect penis and a voluptuous woman), she creates evidence of her own agency, her own questioning of the regulatory powers of the gaze. She is in charge of the image, is not just there for the pleasure of the male viewer. She makes the viewer aware that she is aware of the potential of the gaze, but that she is not going to let it limit her explorations. As she says, "This is important work. I'm not ashamed of this" (Enright 1996:27). She will not let the charge that she is colluding with the male-gaze and male-created pornography deter her from this exploration.

Kiss & Tell, in *Seizure Story* (1997), reproduce the Canada Customs form that accompanied the confiscation of five of their images being returned from an exhibition in the United States. Juxtaposed with this form, they reproduce a confiscated image, which is an image from *Drawing the Line* showing a scene of bondage. Bringing to the fore both the power of the gaze and the official state regulatory powers, Kiss & Tell write:

We didn't get our pictures back, are you kidding? Go down to customs and argue with men who have already looked at her naked body and called it obscene? No way. Take the loss.
(1997:83)

The gaze and the state power of the male customs agent can observe and label, and thus control images of sexuality. In a powerful act of resistance, though, Kiss & Tell take the image that has been labeled obscene and

reproduce it, drawing attention to the issue of regulation, and the control exerted over our sexualities by the state and by individual men. As with Diana Thorneycroft, *Kiss & Tell* shows that they can and will resist through their artwork.

SEXUALITY AS REGULATION

While it is perhaps easy to see the regulatory role played by the state in obscenity legislation, for example, it is somewhat more difficult to see sexuality itself as a means of regulation. Foucault advances the theory that regulation, management, and surveillance, much more so than oppression or repression, have characterized the (western) history of sexuality since the seventeenth century. Sexuality has been put into a multitude of discourses (such as scientific, medical and legal) rather than not spoken of at all. Biddy Martin indicates that in our society sexuality has been used as a "particularly privileged means of gaining access to . . . the individual and the social bodies, as a way of 'policing' society through the procedures of normalization rather than prohibition" (1988:8). Thus, for example, while the obscenity legislation discussed in the first section of this chapter is in many ways a prohibition of sexual material, it is also used as a means of creating and regulating the kinds of sexualities that are produced and experienced.

Sexual representations reflect identities but also help construct them.

Building on Foucault's construction of power, Judith Butler writes:

Within the terms of productive power, regulation and control work through the discursive articulation of identities. But these discursive articulations effect certain exclusions and erasures; oppression works

not merely through the mechanism of regulation and production but by foreclosing on the very possibility of articulation. (1992:354)

Thus, certain rigid categories of identity are conceived of, articulated and acknowledged. For example, Karen Miranda Augustine indicates that the sexual identity of women of colour has been constructed as a rigid category in opposition to that of white women. The sexuality of white women has been constructed as pure and passive, leaving the sexuality of women of colour to be "closely identified with illicit sex"(Augustine 1994:25). Thus, the imposition of specific categories that require us to live in certain ways, or that impose certain expectations on us is a form of regulation.

Shonagh Adelman's *Tele Donna* confuses sexual categories associated with white women. The images of white women, taken from various historical sources, combined with the explicit phone-sex monologues, undermine this association of white women's sexuality with purity and passivity. It "throws into chaos the long-standing association of (white) middle-class femininity with moral/sexual virtue"(Ross 1994:11).

Refusing these associations and the creation of binary oppositions is one strategy that can be used to fight a patriarchal racist culture (Ross 1994:33). As Carl Stychin indicates, though, dissolving oppressive categories will not in and of itself end oppression. Structural inequalities will still exist as "social categories still have material reality in people's lives"(Stychin 1995:143). Political action is necessary to work toward an end to these inequalities, and I would argue that the creation of images of a variety of sexualities is part of this political action.

Much of our knowledge of lesbian and gay sexuality comes from the desire to "classify, police, and regulate"(Kinsman 1987:28) the lives of lesbians and gay men. Judith Butler, in writing about discourses on AIDS, indicates that the homosexual body is always already constructed as pathological. Therefore, any disease that homosexuals may get is conflated with the disease that they already are (Butler 1992:357). This can be paralleled with female/lesbian sexuality which is constructed as obscene, therefore representations of female/lesbian sexuality (even that constructed *by* women and lesbians) is always already obscene. Strangely, though, if lesbian sexuality is considered obscene, it is at the same time invisible: "One might ask whether lesbian sexuality even qualifies as *sex* within hegemonic public discourse. 'What is it that they do' might be read as 'Can we be sure that they do anything at all?'"(Butler 1992:346). The creation of artwork by and about female/feminist sexuality plays a role in the struggle toward a more equitable lived female/feminist sexuality. It makes visible the possibilities open to women and challenges the limits that have been imposed upon us.

CONCLUSION

In essence then, what many cultural producers are aiming for is the problematization of the 'normal' and the envisioning of new possibilities. They are looking at how our sexualities are constructed, the categories that we are required to fit our bodies and our practices into, and how we can value experiences and

identities that do not necessarily fit into the rigid categories that we have been handed.

The creation of artwork allows the artists discussed here to actively resist the current state of sexual regulation and create alternative possibilities. As Carl Stychin writes, "if the formation of an identity is a product of discourse, then free access to the discursive space provides the means by which new political subjectivities can arise"(1995:27). Art is one such discursive space that can be taken advantage of in order to further understandings and explorations of one's identity.

CHAPTER 4

INTERROGATING DISCOURSES OF IDENTITY

INTRODUCTION

In *Untitled (Twin)* [Illustration 16] 1993, Diana Thorneycroft explores the construction and experience of sexual identity. The two images that make up this piece play with sexual signifiers in a way that has the power to provoke in the viewer mixed feelings of desire and confusion. The first image shows Thorneycroft naked, facing off to the right of the image, one hand raised above her head, the other by her side. She is surrounded by flowers, branches and other, unidentifiable, objects. The light and shadow reveals her figure: her breasts are illuminated as is an object placed over her pubic area (the head of a snake?). The sex in this first image is somewhat ambiguous, but perhaps would be read as female. In the second image Thorneycroft poses herself in a similar manner, but her breasts appear flatter because of the shadow, and a (plastic) penis is seen between her legs.

The two images in *Untitled (Twin)* reveal a concern with what Diana Thorneycroft has called our inherent bisexuality (Enright 1996:25). The viewer can explore images that are not clearly 'sexed.' In our response to these images we can question our desire. Do we desire one and not the other? Do we desire both? Do we desire them differently? These are the questions that are at the centre of my discussion of the artwork under consideration here. I question the role that this artwork can play in interrogating various mainstream discourses of sexuality, and

the strategies that the artists use to facilitate this. For instance, when Thorneycroft poses herself with a fake plastic penis in an attempt to undermine and deconstruct dominant images of sexuality, this is a conscious strategy:

What if I tried subverting it [the symbolic order of patriarchy] by putting on my boyish-looking female body the last thing most consumers of pornography would expect? What if I got myself a penis, and wore it exactly where men wear theirs? (Allen 1995: 23)

Thorneycroft wants the viewer to question her reading, and to be surprised by the unexpected use of the fake penis. Thorneycroft refers to mainstream pornography in the use of the nude female body but subverts this by controlling the image herself: the nude body is *her* body. By putting a penis on this body, Thorneycroft upsets one discourse of sexuality: mainstream pornography.

The issues of regulation discussed in the previous chapter can be seen as not necessarily exclusively hindering constructions of identity, but rather as playing a role in this process. Identities are formed in concert, as well as in opposition, to societal structures and regulations. As Himani Bannerji writes: "while I am lecturing on 'bodies' in history, in social organization and spaces, constructed by the gaze of power, I am actually projecting my own body forward through my words. I am in/scribing rather than erasing it" (Bannerji 1995:101-2). Artwork can help construct the context within which we put forth our bodies and identities - asserting them, not erasing them. Sexually explicit images have the ability to shift discourses of identity. Thus, in this chapter I will discuss theories of representation and identity in relation to the work of Kiss & Tell, Adelman and Thorneycroft, and the potential interventions into discourses of identity encouraged by the work.

I am concerned with the potential of visual representations to influence our desires, but also as a place to work out the desires that we have that are not represented in a widespread manner. I am concerned with how images are used in the process of coming to our sexual identities, which is a continual process, not a singular 'coming out', but rather a continuous way of exploring who we are and who we are becoming. It is also a way of showing others what is possible.

When I saw *Drawing the Line* at the Saw Gallery in Ottawa in 1992, I was studying at the Ontario College of Art and was beginning to use my own artwork to deal with issues of my identity. I was collaborating with other women on projects that explored who we were as women, and the relationships that we had with each other. I have continued to use my own artwork as a site of exploration of my own sexual identity, and now want to consider the artwork discussed here for this same struggle. I argue that sexually explicit imagery is useful for this purpose, not just for me, not just for individuals, but on a larger scale: artwork can disrupt mainstream discourses of identity. It can make us look at and think differently about the identities that are available to us and for us, and how we might experience sexuality in ways that are not prescribed for us by the mainstream. The images from Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line* have special meaning for me because they are among the first images I saw as I began to think of this thing called sexual identity, when it became a question for me, rather than a given.

Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line* shows a range of different sexual practices. Combined with the writing on the walls by the viewers of the exhibition, these images suggest that identities are varied or ambiguous. The viewer is shown many

possibilities of desire, although there are only two models. Indeed, *because* there are only two models, it becomes clear that the same woman can have different desires at different times. We are shown that there is not one thing called 'woman,' not one thing called 'lesbian.' Static identities are called into question. In *Drawing the Line*, we see two women perform different sexual acts and realize that there are a multitude of desires possible.

Central to my discussion is the importance of recognizing female/queer agency. I recognize that identity is always a 'becoming' but also that it is a becoming which is not totally out of our control. As Shonagh Adelman writes:

It's not a question of either/or anymore. It's possible to acknowledge that we've all been socialized in certain ways without eliminating agency. It doesn't mean we're passive recipients of some predetermined social and symbolic system. (Andreae 1994a:19)

We can challenge the system. To a certain extent, we can choose how to act out our identity. As Carol Smart indicates, this focus on female agency is not only necessary to the recognition of lesbian identities, but is also a vital part of the destabilization of heterosexual identity (Smart 1996:238) which is premised on women's subordination.

The artists being considered here use a number of different strategies in the creation of their work and the exploration of sexual identity. The first strategy that I will discuss is the use of, or reference to, dominant imagery such as that found in mainstream pornography or advertising. Following this, I will discuss the use of performance within the artwork and the possibilities that this allows in offering the viewer a different understanding of sexual identity. I will also discuss the method of

working collaboratively which is employed by each artist at different times. Thus, these strategies taken together allow a political reconsideration of sexual identity.

DECONSTRUCTING DOMINANT IMAGES

Almost any image of a nude woman or of women having sex will be compared to mainstream images because that is where many of us first experienced images of women's bodies and sexuality: if not from *Playboy*, then perhaps from *Cosmopolitan*. In using these references, the artists are taking a familiar starting point but then, through a variety of tactics, the image is made unfamiliar. Through this deconstruction, and subsequent reconstruction, Kiss & Tell, Shonagh Adelman, and Diana Thorneycroft bring into question the assumed naturainess of 'normal' sexual identities, and question the discourses that uphold them.

Diana Thorneycroft, Shonagh Adelman and Kiss & Tell problematize what appears to be 'normal' in terms of sexual imagery, and envision new possibilities. They are not merely reproducing images that we see everyday on billboards and in movies, images that generally depict a thin, young, white woman. When these images depict sexuality, it is an unambiguous heterosexuality.¹ The artists are, rather, referring to these images and asking: what *other* experiences of sexuality are there? How can we understand the ambiguity of sexual identity? They are

¹ For more on this, see for example: Susan Bordo. 1993. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press; or Dawn Currie and Valerie Raoul. 1992. *Anatomy of Gender: Women's Struggle for the Body*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press.

creating images that allow viewers more possibilities in identifying their own sexuality.

Shonagh Adelman makes the most specific reference to mainstream pornography. In *Tele Donna* and *Skindeep*, she appropriates images from mainstream pornography and uses them directly in her work to convey the ambiguity of sexual identity. In *Skindeep*, for example, images taken from mainstream pornography juxtaposed with text confuse the nature of desire spoken of within the image, and the identity of the viewer and the viewed. "Indeed, rather than conjuring a notion of a true, fixed or stable lesbian identity - or any identity for that matter - the images in *Skindeep* invoke a polymorphous diversity of desire" (Ross 1994:10).

In *Mastbark* [Illustration 9] the image of a masturbating woman, cropped at the neck and black-stockinged thighs, is placed over the texture of bark. The text running across the image reads: *Don't you think you've waited long enough? Maybe the right time will never come. Closing your eyes won't make any difference.* As Becki Ross indicates, this:

self-pleasing female body . . . playfully draws on the nineteenth century sexological pathologization of masturbation (as, for instance, one cause of the 'disease of lesbianism'), only to invert this association - replacing disease with an image of fleshy, sexualized vitality. (Ross 1994:10)

The text can be read as encouraging the female viewer to take control of her own sexuality, not to wait any longer. The historical constraints on women's autonomous sexuality, though, are acknowledged. The legitimacy of a woman

pleasing herself sexually is recognized. Adelman appropriates existing imagery, but makes the meaning different.

Varda Burstyn suggests that women might be attracted to pornography due to its anonymity: the ability to have sex without confronting the "oppressive nexus of social relations in which lived sexuality takes place, including harsh judgment of various stripes"(1985a:12). Artist Eliza Griffiths speaks of this enjoyment of pornography as an unresolved conflict that she has: "the enjoyment of certain patriarchal commodities and culture, even though you have a critical distance"(Allen 1995:15). It is this play between enjoyment and critical distance that Adelman makes use of. It is part parody of mainstream pornographic images, part exploration of the desire created by them.

Carl Stychin suggests that through this use of dominant discourse "in subversive fashion, new identities are shaped - subjectivities that emerge in an oppositional relationship to the universal"(1995:22). This is in part Adelman's project. Not assuming a fixed meaning to the images, the viewer is allowed room for a counter-reading. What is already known about an image cannot be completely dislodged by an artist's reconception of it. Adelman's work with these particular images brings new meaning to them, although these are reliant on the old meanings. Identities and desires emerge and are upset through interaction between the desires of the viewer, the concepts of identity understood by the viewer, and the what is known of the previous meanings of the images.

In both *Drawing the Line* and *True Inversions*, Kiss & Tell make reference to images from popular culture. As Lisa Robertson writes:

They showed no compunction in invading a technique, teasing it out and claiming it. Rather than stigmatizing the many genres of the popular media, they took them on, occupied them, used them to construct images of sexuality and lesbian identity that could answer their own experiences. (1993:37)

Kiss & Tell appropriate images familiar to us from advertising and pornography, such as costumes of black lace underwear and garter belts, in order to encourage a discussion around sexuality and identity. For instance, one image from *Drawing the Line* shows Persimmon Blackbridge naked and handcuffed and Lizard Jones wearing black lace and chains, holding a whip [Illustration 5]. Viewers comments on this image included: "I like tying girls up, but why use men's magazine clothing?" (Kiss & Tell 1991:n.p.). Another image shows Lizard Jones wearing a dress pulled down to her waist and a diamond necklace with Persimmon Blackbridge wearing a black leather jacket. An exchange from Melbourne, Australia reads:

Boy sex.
Why boy sex? What's diamonds and dresses got to do with boys?
 Even if men have these fantasies, can't they be ours too? Must we forsake everything that is even remotely connected to men?
 (Kiss & Tell 1991:n.p.)

Another discussion, from San Francisco reads:

This touches me most intensely because it looks like my experience of real live lesbian sex. It is also the hardest to look at.
Looks like straight women in porn films
 (Kiss & Tell 1991:n.p.)

Clearly, it is not always easy to distinguish between what looks like male-created pornography and what is created by women. Viewers will interpret images differently. Using props and scenes that can be connected with mainstream heterosexual pornography and putting them in a context of art and lesbian

sexuality, Kiss & Tell encourage a discussion about the nature and ambiguity of sexual desires and representations of these desires and practices.²

In *True Inversions*, there are scenes of a man sucking a strap-on dildo worn by a woman, and of anal penetration involving two women. Questions arise about the identity of the participants in these acts, and how our identities relate to the acts that we perform. Because penetration is involved in the second scenario and a man and a woman in the first, these acts confuse the line between heterosexual and homosexual acts and possibly identities.

Carol Smart writes of the value of not assuming an action links one to an identity, such as the idea that penetration is heterosexual:

Wrenching penetration out of a heterosexual matrix of meanings deprives it of its symbolic power. Just as the recognition that a penis is not a phallus is vital to the demystification of men's power, so the recognition that men's bodies are penetrable, and not only by men, is equally significant. (1996:236)

She considers the coding of acts as ambivalent rather than associating them with specific identities. This disrupts the dominant categories that exist in our culture and allows for alternative readings or understandings of identity.

Diana Thorneycroft, in very personal and vulnerable images, explores a sexuality that is different from that most often displayed in the mainstream. Much of the power of her images "lies in their ability to destabilize the sexual identity of the viewer by provoking unacceptable desire" (Allen 1994-95:14). By confusing signifiers of sexual identity, and using at times props such as fake plastic breasts and a penis, Thorneycroft allows the viewer to question her own desire and

² While a 'lesbian context' is indeed hard to define, this exhibition is advertised as one of images of lesbian sexuality, and as such, attracts a mainly lesbian or feminist audience.

identity. She uses the symbols of mainstream heterosexual pornography, such as large breasts, but turns them around to make them mean something different. For instance, in *Untitled (Fish Brides)* [Illustration 14] she uses male models with fake breasts. She had three male friends pose naked outdoors, all three wearing masks of her face above their open mouths, and with fish jaws strapped to their thighs. For Thorneycroft, the creation of this image was almost terrifying. She says that "the idea of taking three men into the woods and ordering them to strip That's a pretty powerful thing" (Everett-Green 1996:E2). Indeed, it is a powerful reversal of a woman's nightmare. While this image has a seductive quality to it in the depth of light and shadow and in the playing with sexual props, it also has a quality of fear and power that Thorneycroft plays with. Again, here is the ambiguity of our desire. Are we seduced by the male model or by the symbol of the female: the breasts? Or, with this image, are we seduced by the power of the woman in control of the sexual situation?

Similarly, in her references to the vagina, Thorneycroft reveals the ambiguity of representations in our culture. The vagina is at once both taboo and ubiquitous (Allen 1995:13). For instance, it plays a central role in mainstream pornography directed at men, but can not be mentioned in tampon advertisements directed at women. Thorneycroft challenges us to reconsider our relationship to representations of vagina. How to reconsider a desiring of the vagina when the only readily available images are created by and for men? How to assert one's sexual identity as a woman, when representations of the vagina for women are taboo? In *Untitled (Matruska Doll)* [Illustration 17], Thorneycroft is surrounded by

plastic dolls, Russian stacking dolls and other objects. Her face, referring to a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz (Enright 1996:32) is covered in black lace. In this photograph, her left hand is on her vagina. The lace head covering seems to refer to a certain romanticism, or perhaps piousness, but the hand on the vagina infuses the image with sexuality. Thorneycroft is displaying control of her own sexuality, asserting herself as a woman with sexual agency. Rather than being caught in one static identity, Thorneycroft is exploring the malleability, the changingness of identity. She has "questioned the construction of self and [has] asked for a re-examination of the way we 'become'"(Thorneycroft n.d.).

Our bodies and our identities are constructed and understood through the lens of the culture within which we live. Any interventions that we might hope to make will also occur within this context. As Himani Bannerji writes:

The questioning and reconstructing of identities has to take place in the context of hegemonic history - and involves situating them within their particular social, cultural and ideological relations and forms. (1995:28)

The entire language with which we discuss and understand issues of sexuality and identity comes from the hegemonic culture, but this does not mean that there is no room for intervention. Within the artwork discussed here, it becomes clear that one of the strategies that can be used to explore this dilemma is the use of hegemonic signs and symbols to express something different from their original intention. These signs and symbols have been appropriated, deconstructed and re-deployed in a political manner in order to undermine standard, previously understood meanings.

PERFORMANCE

If identity is something that is not static; if it is something that we are always becoming, rather than being, then it is very much a performance. As Judith Butler suggests:

How and where I play at being [a lesbian] is the way in which that 'being' gets established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed. . . . [I]t is through the repeated play of this sexuality that the 'I' is insistently reconstituted as a lesbian 'I'; paradoxically, it is precisely the repetition of that play that establishes as well the instability of the very category that it constitutes. (1991:18)

The recognition of identity as always changing both creates an identity and at the same time denies that very identity any stability. Butler writes of gender being constructed through a constant repetition, and the possibilities for subversion which inhere in this repetition. Sexual identity is constructed in similar terms and this notion of performance is explored by these artists. Aspects of identity are repeated through conscious performance and at the same time, questioned and undermined. By modifying the repetition, by repeating sexuality *differently*, these artists intervene in the construction and understanding of sexual identity.

in Shonagh Adelman's *Tele Donna*, the phone sex tapes are performances that blur the line between performance and the 'real'. These tapes were mostly recorded by Shonagh Adelman's friends, some of whom brought sex toys with them, and got turned on in the making of these tapes (Wright 1994:45). One says: "I love girl chicken! Oh yeah, I got my dildo and my dildo's on my clit . . . It's making me shake"(Marks 1994:94). Muffled giggles can be heard on the tape. As Laura U. Marks writes:

Their suppressed laughter and genuine arousal frayed the edges of the porn vocabulary, suggesting that there is indeed a desire just on the fringe of representation . . . I got the feeling that the tropes of male heterosexual porn were being pushed to represent something quite different. (1994:94).

These women are performing something sexual, based perhaps on a mainstream pornographic model, but pushing to be something different, something which explores their own pleasure.

As with Kiss & Tell's *True Inversions*, the question can be asked: what makes sex real? Can sex be real if it is made for the purpose of art? As one viewer of *Drawing the Line* wrote: "I feel ripped off - why didn't you show real lovers - this is fake sex, fake tenderness, fake love" (Kiss & Tell 1994:48). But Lizard Jones asks:

What about the sex you have with someone you should have broken up with months ago? Is it only real sex if it's good? Is it only real sex if you come, if you touch her cunt? If you say I love you? If no one's watching? If it's a spontaneous expression of love? (Kiss & Tell 1994:48)

These works reveal discrepancies in our definitions of sex and encourage the questioning of set notions of what constitutes sex. The use of performance, with its proximity to 'real action' is useful for this, because of this very closeness. The line between the 'real' and the 'performance' is an unclear one. In these performances sexuality and sexual practice are repeated over and over, performed for the viewer.

In both *Drawing the Line* and *True Inversions*, Kiss & Tell are performing for the camera or for a live audience. For example, when Lizard Jones and Persimmon Blackbridge are photographed in poses of s/m sex, they are trying on an identity and letting the viewer react to, and explore this identity with them.

Similarly, when a man is involved in sex scenes in *True Inversions*, other identities are explored. Is this still defined as lesbian identity or is it other? Bisexual or heterosexual? This is left to the viewer to decide.

The creation of Diana Thorneycroft's photographs are performances. She performs with a hand-held flashlight in front of the open shutter of her camera. *Untitled (Snare)* [Illustration 15], has also been presented as a performance in front of an audience, and as a video. In this piece, Thorneycroft poses herself naked and bound. While this piece was originally conceived of as a memorial for a rabbit she killed as a child (Enright 1996:24), given Thorneycroft's concern with sexuality and identity, I feel that it can also be read as a questioning of these issues. As Robert Enright writes of Thorneycroft's work:

The effect of these shifts of identity and gender is extraordinary: as a viewer, you're never quite sure what it is you're reacting to - an act of theatrical posturing, a condition of confused sexuality, a deforming shift in identity. (1990: 69)

Diana Thorneycroft explores different sexual and gender identities, acknowledging for the viewer that none of these are static. Jeffrey Weeks asks of sexual identity: "Is it a snare . . . or a delusion, a cage . . . or an opportunity?" (Weeks 1987:32, ellipses in original). Thorneycroft is asking these same questions. She explores how identities can be restrictive but also where they can give us power.

Our identities are continually being made through performance and we are constantly acting out who we are. These images play a role in that process. They are a way of further exploring identities by acting them out. Identities are intelligible through this repetition. They are not completely pre-determined but also not totally arbitrary. What is 'natural' is revealed to be a performance. As Butler

writes: "In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; 'agency' then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition"(1990:145). Shonagh Adelman, Kiss & Tell, and Diana Thomeycroft offer us a variation on this repetition in their artwork. For the viewer, though, this work provides a space where they can experience the subversive repetition of sexuality.

THE USE OF COLLABORATION

Working as a collective eliminates some of the hierarchies inherent in the traditional relationship between artist and model. While Susan Stewart photographs in *Drawing the Line*, she, Blackbridge and Jones together come up with the ideas behind the images. In other work, such as their book, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, and the performance *True Inversions*, a collaborative effort is also evident. These pieces have been created by the three artists of Kiss & Tell, and in the case of *True Inversions*, with other friends and colleagues, as well. This piece in particular makes clear the constructedness of the project, and its collaborative nature, by exposing the working relationships between the performers and indicating what role they all play.

Because these artists have worked collaboratively for many years, they feel safe to investigate issues that are as intimate as sexuality and as controversial as pornography and s/m. In response to one image from *Drawing the Line* which shows the two women in the bathtub, lying one on top of the

other kissing, hands holding each other, a viewer wrote: "If a man had taken these photographs, I'd be suspicious of his intentions, but knowing that a woman is photographing a woman makes a difference"(Kiss & Tell 1991:n.p.). The viewer's reading of the work is influenced by the working relationship between the artists, as it is in Shonagh Adelman's *Tele Donna*, where she worked with her friends in the creation a number of the phone sex tapes.

Diana Thorneycroft makes use of collaboration in *A Slow Remembering*, where she works with the poet, Di Brandt and the curator/writer Sigrid Dahle. The group, working under the name *The Fish Brides*, "has been exploring nature of interdisciplinary collaboration and investigating individual and collaborative artmaking processes"(Dahle 1994:8). This collaborative effort indicates a willingness to dispose with the traditional notion of the individual genius, and explore different points of view. Each woman creates a piece which is individual, yet related to the others.

Thorneycroft's *Untitled (Snare)* [Illustration 15], created as part of this collaboration, shows her nude and bound to a chair. Her face, looking down is covered and she is surrounded by strange and somewhat threatening props: a cow tongue, an animal hoof. Accompanying this, Di Brandt writes:

inside the bound woman is another, who loves to dance,
who rode the wind above a snowstorm once, wild & high

....

inside the paralyzed woman inside the bound woman is
another, whose breathing is proud and free, who stretches
past concrete, past paralyzing cells

whispering *remember me, me*
(Brandt in Dahle 1994:n.p.)

Thorneycroft's insistence that she was not *really* bound (Lovatt 1996:2) pushes us to move beyond a literal reading of the image and poem. *Untitled (Snare)* questions how our identities, or the assumption of certain identities, bind us in particular ways and the fear that this causes.

Sigrid Dahle calls Diana Thorneycroft's work 'dream work' and writes, "Dream work mechanisms open up a limitless labyrinth of representational and interpretive possibilities, weaving a tangled web"(Dahle 1994:4). She says that perhaps we do not have all of the clues needed to read these images. Perhaps they are so personal an exploration that the meaning eludes us. In a true meaning eluding us, though, we are given the possibility of deriving our own meanings. Through the collaboration of these three women, the viewer is shown three different explorations of identity and sexuality. This opens up to us three different possibilities and indicates that many readings and many interpretations are possible. My reading of the work, as a viewer from a particular background and at a particular time in my life, will be different from that of other viewers. In her text, Sigrid Dahle underscores this point, leaving us with the important understanding that our sexualities and identities are numerous and open to potential change.

Performance is very closely linked to experience. Judith Butler's idea of sexuality constructed through repetition is really a way of understanding and questioning experience. We are constantly performing our sexuality, repeating it through experiences, whether these are experiences of viewing art, for instance, or having sex. Experience is evident in two ways here: the role played by the

personal experience of the artists in the creation of their artwork; and the experience of the viewer brings to the work.

As Diana Thorneycroft says: "I think first and foremost my practice comes out of a lived body experience"(Allen 1995:26) and "The camera challenges the private by making public what has been privatized: a woman's self"(Fulton 1991). Thorneycroft uses her struggles toward the creation and understanding of her sexual identity as the basis of much of her work. The private experience of sexuality is transformed into a public dialogue. It is through this public exhibition and dialogue that understandings of identity can be altered and challenged.

This public/private dichotomy has been central to feminist theorizing. Feminist theory has revealed that this is a false split and that one arena necessarily informs the other. Certain aspects of sex are very public, such as the use of sex in advertising. However, there is a limited public understanding of what sex is, or what 'good' or 'proper' sex is. Sex that falls outside this area is labeled deviant. My query here is if the public depiction of personal experiences of sexuality by these artists can encourage change in what is considered sexuality. By introducing new visions of sexuality into the public domain, discourses of sexuality can be altered.

As Lovatt writes: "What the body knows of itself is essential to the formation of identity"(1996:2). Identity is created and altered when a viewer gains experience of the body through viewing it in visual images. The viewer's body knows more of itself through the experience of viewing other bodies: how is my body, my sexuality like that? How is it different? Does my body desire that body? These are questions that develop a sense of identity which can then be propelled

into a public space through its acting out, and in turn can play a role in altering the discourses of identity in our society.

Joan Scott indicates that experience is often seen as evidence of a fact, as proof, rather than a way of exploring how subjects are constituted, but she writes that "it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience"(1991:779). What we need instead of an assumption of unchanging subjects, is an exploration of how these subjects are created through experience. In terms of identity, seeing experience this way, will allow an:

inquiry into the ways in which female subjectivity is produced, the ways in which agency is made possible, the ways in which race and sexuality intersect with gender, the ways in which politics organizes and interprets experience - in sum, the ways in which identity is a contested terrain, the site of multiple and conflicting claims. (Scott 1991:787)

This attention to experience can confirm or upset knowledge, can allow a subversive repetition. By paying attention to how we are constituted through experience, space is opened up for political change.

As Shane Phelan writes " . . . we might acknowledge that speaking and being heard does not mean simply drawing on our 'experience' in an unmediated way but means articulating our lives, interpreting and reinterpreting them in ways that link us to others"(1993:779). The artists' use of personal experience must 'be heard' by the viewers and encourage an examination of their lives and identities.

The artists here are searching for the gaps and open spaces in dominant narratives or arguments into which they can assert themselves in order to upset dominant notions of the stability of identity. The exploration of experience as

constitutive, rather than set or unchanging, is one aspect of this. For Shonagh Adelman and *Kiss & Tell*, who do not necessarily base their work on personal experience, it is the experience of the viewer that is significant. Viewing the artwork and participating in the dialogue or thought about these issues is part of the construction of who they are and how they experience their own sexual identity.

CONCLUSION

In this exploration of sexual identity, I have delineated a number of strategies used by the artists. These include the use of dominant imagery, the method of working collaboratively, and performance. By using or referring to imagery drawn from a number of sources such as mainstream heterosexual pornography, a dialogue is created between the original image and the reconstituted image. The viewer contemplates the changed meaning and the original meaning is destabilized.

The power relationship between an artist and model has been the subject of critique by feminist art historians. This power relationship is in part undermined by the method of working collaboratively that is employed by *Kiss & Tell*, Diana Thorneycroft and Shonagh Adelman. By sharing the responsibility for the creation of a piece of art, and participating in various capacities, both as model and photographer, for instance, power is more equitably shared.

Judith Butler writes of gender being constructed through constant repetition: a performance. Norms of sexuality construct us as either male or

female, as either homosexual or heterosexual and dictate characteristics that go along with these constructions. Butler questions uses of identity that become regulatory imperatives, and searches for a way to conceive of identity that does not allow this:

The critical task is . . . to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (1990:147)

This process is allowed by the creation of artworks such as these. They are a part of a political process that is working to allow alternative and varied constructions and experiences of identity.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In the last decade many feminist artists have created artwork that explores female sexual pleasure. This work plays a role in the understandings we have concerning categories of sexual identity. It also encourages a concurrent dismantling of those categories which can allow for a less constrained experience of one's own identity. Rather than rigid categories of sexuality, which can be experienced as limiting, sexual identities are questioned. Kiss & Tell, Shonagh Adelman, and Diana Thorneycroft are among those Canadian artists exploring sexuality in the 1990s. Using a wide variety of media, these artists explore female sexuality with a commitment to both pleasure and theory. Their artwork creates a context within which women can explore issues of sexuality, pleasure and identity.

In an exploration of various themes found in the works, including those of representation, power, and desire, I find that these works challenge many mainstream notions of sexuality. Using strategies such as the deconstruction of dominant imagery, performance and collaboration, multiple desires are shown and explored. The works suggest that women can and do desire women and men in a multitude of ways. In providing evidence of this, these images create space which facilitates dialogue about the nature of identity and desire. They also point to potential political action connected with or rising out of this.

Finally, I want to emphasize why this concept of the changing and ambiguous nature of identity is important. By acknowledging sexual identity as

something that is not fixed and singular but, rather, always changing and multiple, current discourses of identity which give rise to political and social inequalities can be undermined. As Judith Butler writes: "The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated" (Butler 1990:148). The works of art discussed here can play an important political role in this area.

Identity categories do not necessarily reflect specific practices, but do create certain expectations and have certain regulations attached to them. They are categories that force us to think we should behave in certain ways, and have certain desires. There are many different acts, though, and different desires that do not necessarily conform to specific identity labels. I recognize the importance of labels for political action¹. For instance, when lesbians need to identify as lesbians in order to bring attention to the fact that women living in long term relationships with other women do not get certain benefits that women living in long term relationships with men get, but I want to look toward a time when who we sleep with and how, and who we fantasize about does not divide us in these ways.

Political action is created in part through the initiation of dialogue. It is here that this artwork has its greatest strengths. By modeling images of ambiguous and/or multiple sexual desires and identities, these artists and their work encourage a dialogue about sexuality that has the potential to create a much

¹ For more discussion on lesbian and gay political action see, for example, Davina Cooper. 1995. *Power in Struggle: Feminism, Sexuality and the State*. New York: New York University Press; Gary Kinsman. 1996. *The Regulation of Desire: Sexuality in Canada*. Montreal: Black Rose Books; Carl F. Stychin. 1995. *Law's Desire: Sexuality and the Limits of Justice*. London and New York: Routledge.

less rigid system of sexual identification than is in existence right now. We participate in self-creation and self-definition through discourse and these images are a part of this discourse.

The need to participate in this discourse is the reason that extensive regulation of sexual imagery is dangerous. Without the ability to have this discussion only certain sexual identities will be allowed and acknowledged. The acknowledgment of only certain sexualities as legitimate designates others as deviant. This in turn creates and allows the continuation of social inequalities for those whose sexual identities are not recognized or approved of, that are called deviant. It is with this in mind that I suggest that these categories of identity should be disrupted. I recognize that labels are necessary for certain struggles and at certain points in time. I also, though, recognize the negative history of labeling. Labels are not always of our choosing.

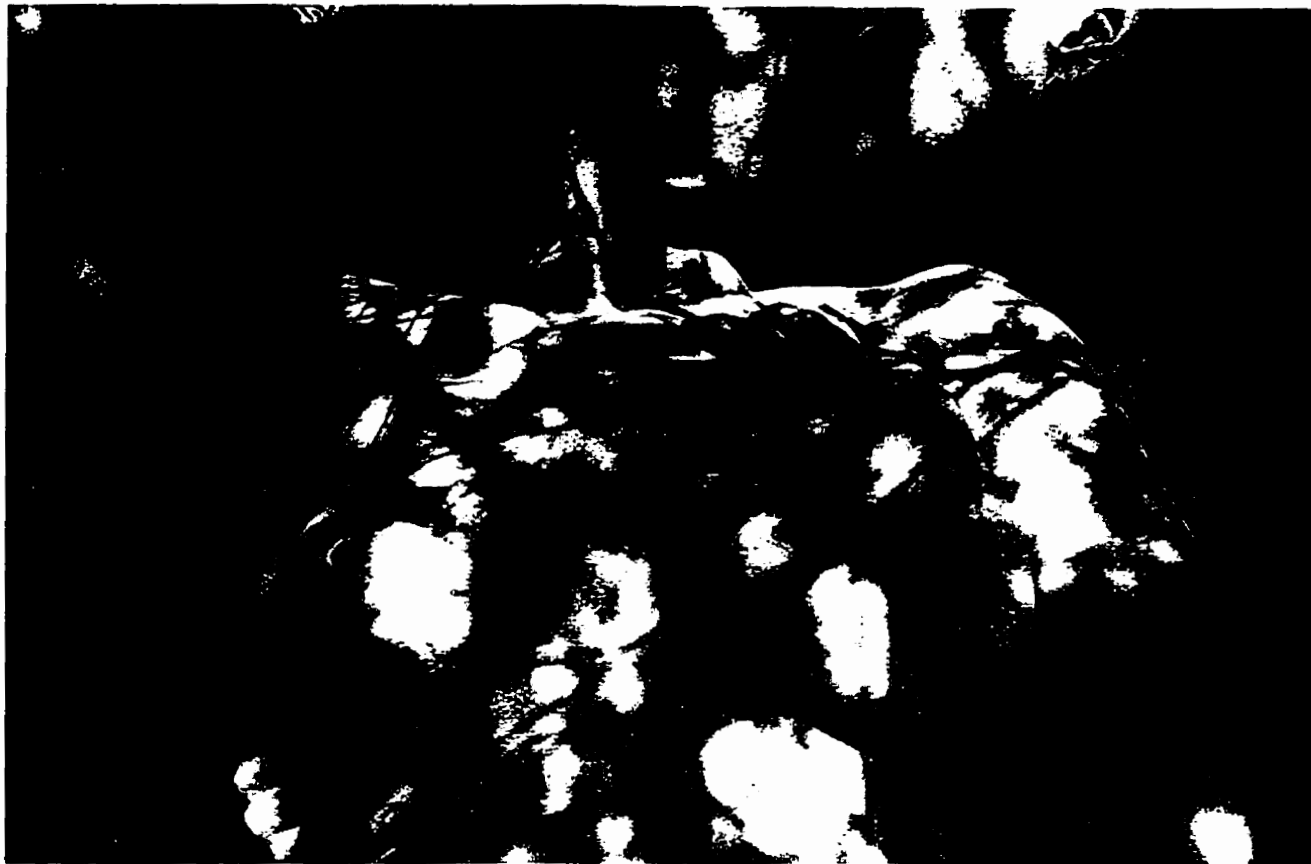
As discussed in Chapter 3, categories of sexuality and identity often prove to be constrictive. Strict categories limit and demarcate sexual desire and behaviour (Weeks 1987:35). Theories of identity must be linked to social structures in order to further political action. Rather than assuming static identities and using these as the basis for political action as proponents of identity politics would, what I am suggesting here is that the very ambiguity of identity can itself be a political tool. By not singling out a specific group of people or sexual practice for unequal treatment, the acknowledgment of multiple sexual identities and of the fact that identity is always changing could eliminate social inequalities based on the identities. Rather than striving for equality for specific groups of people because

someone will always not fit into the group, we could eliminate the idea of groups based on sexual practice.

This is perhaps a utopian idea at the present; thus, many theorists suggest that "a provisional unity and coherence is required to engage in collective political struggles"(Stychin 1995:154). Categories, such as identity categories, can be asserted for particular political purposes. These provisional identities, though, must not become reified and static. While attempting to deconstruct restrictive categories, the assertion of contingent categories is at times necessary. As Carl Stychin writes: "The tension between the assertion and the deconstruction of identity categories is irresolvable and should be understood as a continuing contestation"(Stychin 1995:140).



1. Barbara Kruger
Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of my Face), 1981.



2. Kiss & Tell
Drawing the Line - lesbian sexual politics on the wall, 1991.
B/w photograph.



3. Kiss & Tell
Drawing the Line - lesbian sexual politics on the wall, 1991.
B/w photograph.

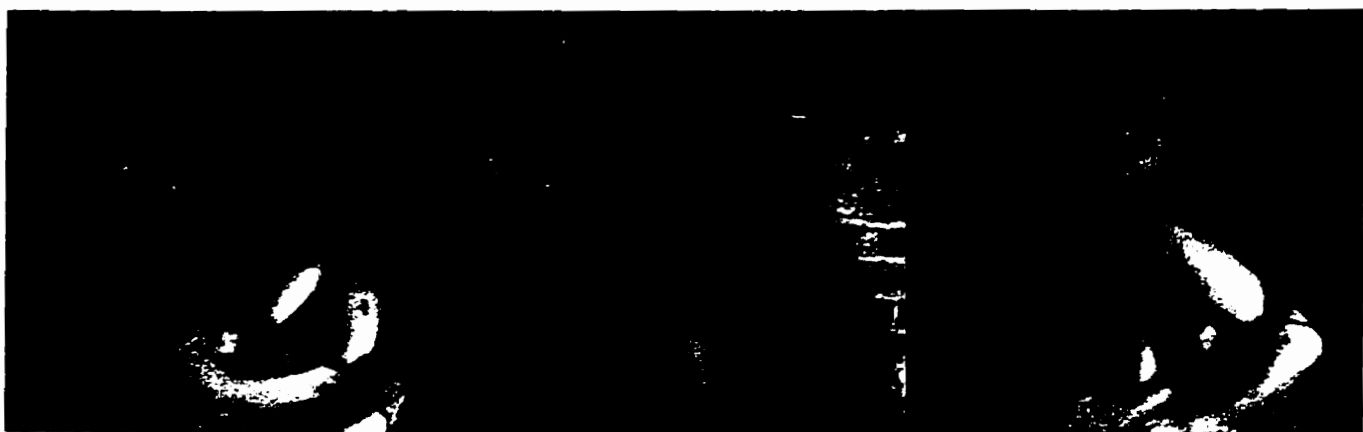


4. Kiss & Tell

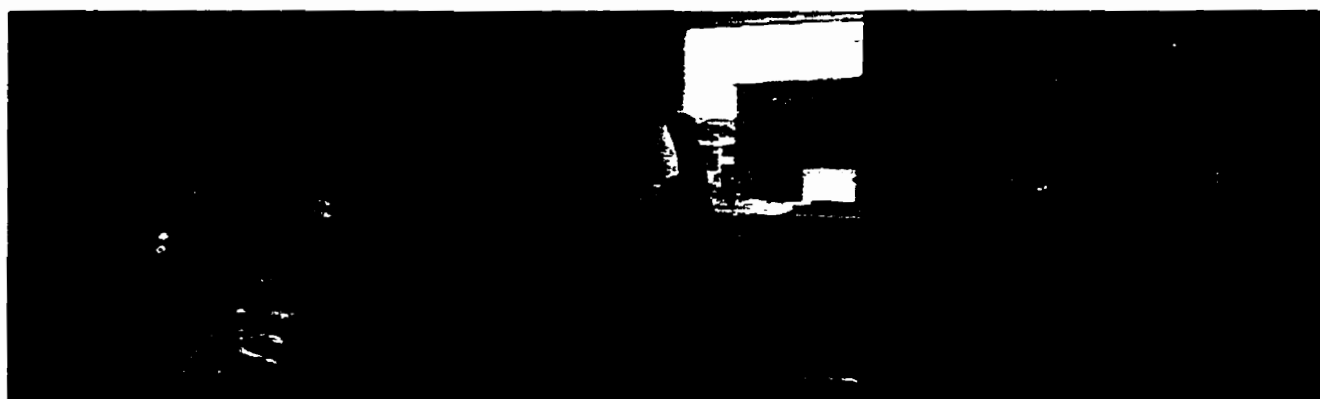
Drawing the Line - lesbian sexual politics on the wall, 1991.
B/w photograph.



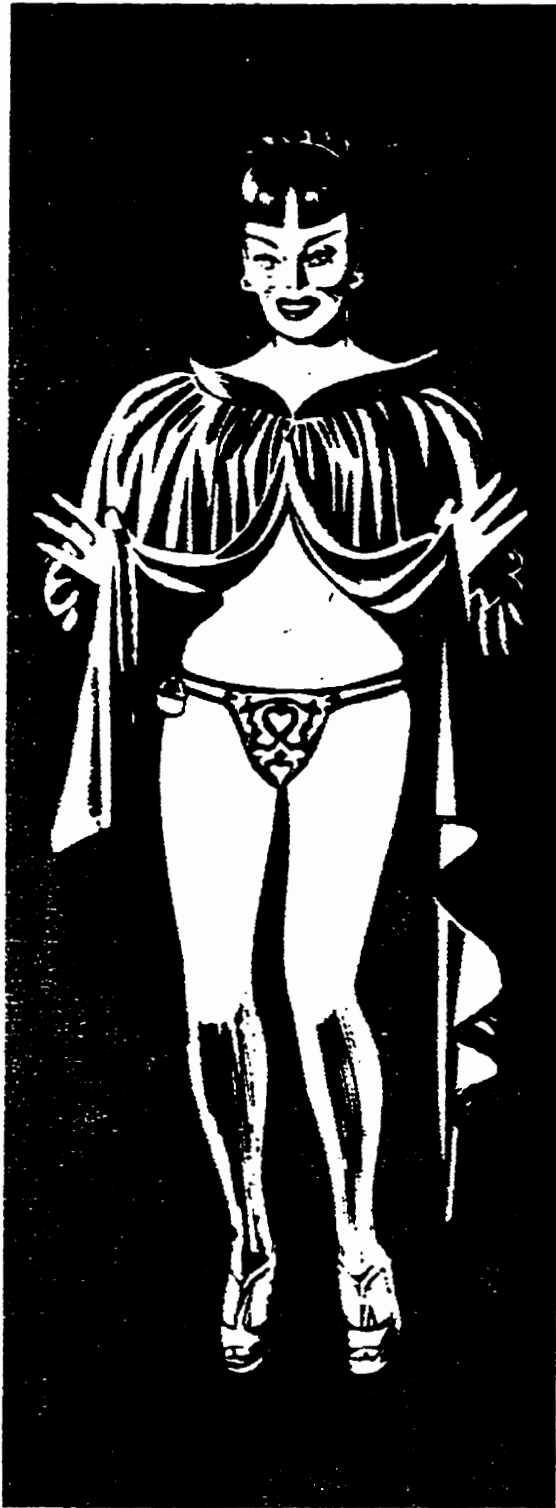
5. Kiss & Tell
Drawing the Line - lesbian sexual politics on the wall, 1991.
B/w photograph.



6. Lorna Boschman and Kiss & Tell
Still from *True Inversions*, 1992.
Video.



7. Lorna Boschman and Kiss & Tell
Still from *True Inversions*, 1992.
Video.



8. Shonagh Adelman
'Expose' from *Tele Donna*, 1993.
Blacklight box.



9. Shonagh Adelman
Mastbark, 1993.
Computer generated cibachrome print.



10. Shonagh Adelman
Cuniburl, 1993.
Computer generated cibachrome print.



11. Shonagh Adelman
Plasits, 1993.
Computer generated cibachrome print.



12. Shonagh Adelman
Grascunt, 1993.
Computer generated cibachrome print.



13. Diana Thorneycroft
Untitled (Fish Bride), 1992.
Silver print.



14. Diana Thorneycroft
Untitled (Fish Brides), 1992.
Silver print.



15. Diana Thorneycroft
Untitled (Snare), 1992.
Silver print.



16. Diana Thorneycroft
Untitled (Twin), 1993.
Silver print.



17. Diana Thorneycroft
Untitled (Matruska Doll), 1993.
Silver print.

APPENDIX 1

Criminal Code of Canada

Offenses Tending to Corrupt Morals

163. (1) Every one commits an offense who
- (a) makes, prints, publishes, distributes, circulates, or has in his possession for the purpose of publication, distribution or circulation any obscene written matter, picture, model, phonograph record or other thing whatever.
- (2) Every one commits an offense who knowingly, without lawful justification or excuse,
- (a) sells, exposes to public view or has in his possession for such a purpose any obscene written matter, picture, model, phonograph record or other thing whatever.
- (8) For the purposes of this Act, any publication a dominant characteristic of which is the undue exploitation of sex, or of sex and any one or more of the following subjects, namely, crime, horror, cruelty and violence, shall be deemed to be obscene.

(Rodrigues 1997:144-145)

APPENDIX 2

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

1. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.

(Canada 1982:1)

2. Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:

b. freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media communications.

(Canada 1982:3)

15. (1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical ability.

(2) Subsection (1) does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its objective the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical ability.

(Canada 1982: 15)

28. Notwithstanding anything in the Charter, the rights and freedoms referred to in it are guaranteed equally to male and female persons.

(Canada 1982: 29)

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