

# Corporeal identification in selected works by Berni Searle

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For Michael

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## Abstract

Through a detailed analysis of a selection of works produced between 1999 and 2003 by the South African artist Berni Searle, this thesis explores the need to theorise a corporeal viewer in the process of interpreting art works. Such an approach is particularly necessary when dealing with an artist such as Searle because her work, which deals predominantly with the theme of identity, appeals not only to conceptual but also to experiential and corporeal understandings of identity. Searle incorporates the viewer into an experience of her own identity through a physical identification that the viewer feels in relation to her work. For viewers this means that they are made aware of how their own identity in the moment of interpretation is contingent on visual, mental and physical components. In order to develop this argument the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty is drawn on. These two theorists are very useful for an argument of this nature because both interpret identity as a construction involving an enfolding between the mind and, via the act of vision, the body of the subject. Through an inclusion of the corporeal element in interpretation, this thesis also offers a critique of interpretive theories that would reduce analysis to an interaction between eye and mind by analyzing how the viewer's body participates in the act of looking.

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Pencil, ink marks and  
highlighting ruin books  
for other readers.

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## Introduction

“Identity’s politics is naming.” (Blocker 1999: 74)

This introductory section begins with this subversive pun taken from the art historian Jane Blocker’s book on Ana Mendieta. It introduces the key issue of identity politics, which permeates the oeuvre of the South African artist Berni Searle. The work of Searle is interwoven with issues of ethnicity and the gendered body that make up debates around identity politics. The processes that produce identity and meaning are the topic of Searle’s work. She is critically aware of herself both as an embodied subject orientated by systems of governance to mean particular things, and acknowledges the indeterminacy that surrounds these particular meaningful structures or moments of identification. In the words of the artist herself (in Williamson 2000: 2):

Without providing any definitive answers, I think my work raises questions towards race and gender. I think it operates on different levels and reflects different racial and political experiences – but I don’t think my pieces are limited by that. I hope they transcend and go beyond that, and provide a space for illusion and fantasy. They reflect a desire to present myself in various ways to counter the image that has been imposed on me.

Blocker’s phrase “Identity’s politics is naming” is also used by Liese van der Watt (in Bedford 2004: 124) to describe the manner in which the work of South African artists like Searle discards concepts of identity which have become “burdened with limiting essentialisms” and rather opens up a space in which to consider identity in “new and liberating ways”. What Liese van der Watt points out, and what is critical to this thesis’s interpretation of Searle’s work, is that while it makes very particular references to race, the work must not be limited by interpretations that reduce the work’s meaning to dogmatic essentialisms about race. As van der Watt (in Bedford 2004: 124) continues: “For Searle identity is never enough”. Van der Watt (2003: 24) uses Jane Blocker’s interpretation of Ana Mendieta’s work as a “lifelong process of coming to terms with the estrangement that is the soul of identity” in relation to how Searle approaches her own identity. The manner in which Annie E. Coombes reads Searle’s work in her book *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (2004), shows a critical awareness of Searle’s use of identity politics as a starting point for the investigation of identity, rather than a finite statement about race or gender. Searle works against essentialist positions and rather emphasises the messy

and complicated character of identity without buying into simplistic glorifications of hybrid positions or “planetary humanism”, as van der Watt (2003: 24) puts it. Her work is not “beyond race” (van der Watt: 2003: 24), but rather deals with race as an open question. Searle does not deny her racial classification but rather incorporates it as an experience that she needs to understand and unpack in relation to her own sense of identity and self.

Searle’s work is particularly relevant to discussions of identity within the context of South Africa as her emergence into the South African art scene more or less coincided with South Africa’s first decade of democracy. In the ‘new’ South Africa, issues of identity remain; Searle’s work explores her multiple heritages and the effects of classification on her sense of origin and self. She does not ignore race and gender but uses her racial profile to complicate rather than affirm her racial classification. Searle’s work exemplifies Albie Sachs’ (Richards, Oguiibe & Enwezor 1999: 348) statement that:

We South Africans fight against real consciousness, apartheid consciousness, we know what we struggle against ... but we don’t know who we are. What does it mean to be a South African? The artist, more than anyone, can help us discover ourselves.

In his essay ‘Desperately Seeking “Africa”’ Colin Richards (in Museum of Modern Art catalogue 1990: 38) describes identity as a synthetic term. Further, he expresses his concerns over what has now become a catch phrase for the new South Africa: “unity in diversity”. What Richards (1990: 39) is particularly aware of is how “the image of pluralism is often dragged into what is, in reality, a non-plural present, thereby obscuring reality”. While Richards was writing pre-1994, this statement still holds water within the context of the ‘new’ South Africa, as individuals taught to express themselves through state-indoctrinated racial groups struggle to see themselves outside of political frameworks.

As much as debates surrounding identity and race are becoming rhetorical in South African visual culture, race is relevant to the discussion of Searle’s work because of the manner in which she uses her ‘colour’ to loosen racial symbolic framing within the South African context. What is particularly striking about her work is the manner in which both positive and negative associations attributed to apartheid dogma are confronted. As Liese van der Watt (in Bedford 2004: 120) states: “The oppression of the apartheid years created identity not only as a site of exclusion but also, more positively, as a site of effective mobilisation against oppres-

sion". Searle's work is liberating because it undermines not only the negative associations of colour but, more potently, the previous South African dogma that colour defines an individual's identity. Searle's work enacts the pluralism that Richards feels is actually little existent beneath the rhetoric of diversity. The diversity in Searle's work is not found at the level of ideology, in which race determines the group individuals belong to, but at the level of the subject whose identity is expressed as diverse and open-ended. In Searle's work the very autonomy of the subject as an individual with a stable identity is questioned through personal exploration and performative elements which look at the self as a "node within a complex network of relations" (van der Watt in Bedford 2004: 124-5).

Searle's use of her body in her work is also relevant to feminist discussions, as Annie Coombes (2004: 246) notes: Searle's work can be related to the "long history" of "particularly ... feminist art practice" and in particular "the extensive performance and time-based work of the 1970's, where ...[the body was so often used] as an act of reclamation". Feminist artwork has been very critical of the fact that representations of naked women have reduced women to an object for the admiring male gaze. Searle's naked images of herself contribute to the ongoing critiques undertaken by feminist critics and artists because Searle uses strategies that confront and destabilise the male gaze. Searle's work, however, goes beyond theories of the gaze that deal with power relations between the image and the viewer. She quotes techniques that are used by postcolonial and feminist artists to give the power of the gaze back to the image. But what will be emphasised here is the particular manner in which Searle, rather than using expected rules of spectatorship, creates a corporeal space between the viewer and the image through a particular presentation of her body. It must thus be emphasised that while this study acknowledges the questions of gender raised by Searle, it will not make a feminist examination of the work its focus.

### **Some biographical details**

Searle completed her M.A.F.A at Michaelis in 1995 with a major in sculpture. She then went on to teach sculpture at the Fine Art Department at Stellenbosch University. Previous to her completion of her degree, she had a residency in the Canberra Institute of the Arts. Her final MFA show titled "Illusions of Identity" was exhibited at The Castle of Good Hope Gallery in

Cape Town. Two years later she returned to the site for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Johannesburg Biennale, curated by Kellie Jones, with an installation titled *Life's Little Necessities*. Searle's early sculptural works, completed a year after the 1994 elections, questioned what Liese van der Watt (2004: 74) has called the "euphoric ideals of nationhood and nation building". This interrogation of idealised or finite statements about ideology has continued as a theme throughout Searle's oeuvre. However, there has been a shift from broader statements about ideology towards works that involve more personal examples. Van der Watt looks at the manner in which Searle's struggle with her gender in a male-dominated environment at university and her experience of being a "coloured" under Apartheid law both impacted on and infiltrated her work. Van der watt (2004: 74) does, however, note: "where earlier student works had addressed large issues of nation, ethnicity, and collective identity, Searle now began to look with heightened awareness at the intersection of site, location, and personal identity." The shift therefore from interrogating such essential concepts of 'father land' has now being replaced by a fluidity in which Searle makes her own personal experiences the location through which to play out this performativity.

In 1998 Searle was invited to a two-week workshop on Robben Island. This was in preparation for a show that was held at the South African National Gallery in 1999 titled 'Isintu: Ceremony, Identity and community'. The workshop asked 'black' artists to contribute and subsequently was a forum for Searle to interrogate concepts of colour and blackness in her work for the first time (Williamson 2000:2). Later in 1998 Searle was invited to the 7<sup>th</sup> International Cairo Biennale in which she produced the installation *Red, Yellow, Brown* which formed part of the *Colour me* series, in which she plays with the relationship between colour, race and the body. (This series will be explored in some detail in the following thesis.) In 1999, she produced a collaborative piece with the poet Anoeschka Von Meck titled *Julle Moet Nou Trek* which was exhibited at the Klein Karoo Kunste Fees in the group show *Bloedlyn*. In this work she brought together the experiences of two cultures by integrating the poem *Trekslet*, which was displayed as a text to be read, and a sound recording of a Khomani and Auni Bushman talking. The multimedia installation brought sound and text into a complex forum where her body was the point of intersection between these two distinct experiences of culture and land (Coombes in SANG 2003: 14). She also took part in 1999 in the exhibition *Truth Veils* at the Gertrude Posel Gallery in Johannesburg and exhibited a work titled *The palms of the hands, the small of the back, the nape of the neck, under the belly, the soles of the feet*. This exhibition was commissioned to complement a conference entitled 'The

TRC: Commissioning the Past', which was organised by the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand and the Centre for Violence and Reconciliation (Coombes 2004:246).

In 2000, Searle had a residency at the Gasworks in London and exhibited in New York in a show titled 'Insertion', curated by Salah Hassin. She also exhibited at the University of Wisconsin. In 2001, she contributed an installation for an exhibition, *Encounters with the Contemporary*, at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. She also held a solo show at the Axis Gallery in New York titled *Still*, and exhibited at the Axis again in 2002 in a group show titled *I.D. / OLOGY*. She held a solo show titled *A Matter of Time* at the University of California's Berkeley Art Museum in 2003. The work on exhibit here also formed part of her 2003 Standard Bank Young Artists Award Exhibition. Searle's work while drawing on specific South African experiences also has international appeal because it deals with identity on many levels some of which can be related to international debates surrounding identity and visual culture (Searle, 2003:59-65).

In 2003 Searle was awarded the Standard Bank Young Artist Award. Emma Bedford (SANG 2003: 5) ironically points out that prior to this exhibition Searle was relatively unknown in her own country. *Float*, produced for the Standard Bank Young Artist Award exhibition, brought together a collection of Searle's earlier still photography with some of her most recent video installations. The three video works represent Searle's move towards a more performative exploration of themes developed in her early work. *Snow White*, produced in 2001, was Searle's first video work. It was commissioned by the Forum for African Arts for a show titled *Authentic/Ex-centric* at the 49<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. In 2002, it was exhibited as an outdoors film projection, *Watching Ocean and Sky Together*, and in 2004 it was exhibited for a group show, *The Spaces Between: Artists Engaging Race and Syncretism*, at the Davis Museum and Cultural Centre in Boston. Other works from *Float*, *A Matter of Time* and *Resting 1, 2, 3*, were commissioned by the University of California's Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive as part of the MATRIX programme, and formed a solo show in 2003 using the program's name, MATRIX, as the title of the show. *Home and Away* and *Waiting* were commissioned by the foundation NMAC Montanmedio Arte Contemporaneo in Vejer de Lacan Frontera, Spain (Searle 2003).

## Medium

Searle trained in sculpture but started working in new media after her graduation. Searle (2003: 16) explained her move to Rory Bester in his catalogue essay for the exhibition *Float*, as being motivated by her need for more immediate methods of production. She was however careful to emphasise her exploration of different printing techniques, which allowed her to go beyond the scope of traditional photography and video. Searle makes notably sculptural decisions in her photographic installations, which creates three-dimensionality in a traditionally two-dimensional medium. She has suspended prints, allowed the paper on which the images were printed to drape to the ground, played with transparency, and has pulled the photographic film off the paper to create a particular effect. The designs of her exhibitions are also carefully constructed to make the gallery space part of the work.

Video and photography are also conceptually interesting to use because these media are often susceptible to assumptions that have allowed people to create a one-on-one relationship between a picture of an individual and the individual him/herself. In this relationship the viewer ceases to perceive a distinction between representation and the image, which can almost replace the person. But a flat image is obviously not the same as a three-dimensional individual, and Searle's work is dedicated to exploring this difference. Searle uses these media because they are seductive in their realism. She is able to interrogate the underlining assumptions of mimesis in representation by using another quality these two media offer: mass reproduction. Her identity therefore is captured and then disseminated through video and photography in performances that construct a hall of mirrors, in which the viewer is asked to guess which reflection – or representation, rather – is the real Searle. The 'real' Searle, however, is always absent, not only as a body but also a set identity. What one has instead is a set of images that emphasise bodily presence (and its correlative, absence) and directly interrogate questions of identity by using other substances (spice, henna, imprintable objects) that not only recall art materials (dry paint pigment and ink, for instance) but also turn the body into an artwork. That is, Searle makes of her body a site for representation, and thereby performs the point that identity itself is a series of representations in which no essential individual can be found.

## **Searle's self portraits**

Representations of the artist's body dominate Searle's oeuvre, with her later work becoming more involved in videoed performances of herself. Further, Searle's use of self-representations facilitates identification between herself and the viewer because, as product and producer, she places herself on both sides of the representational boundary, precariously becoming both the viewer looking and the image seen. She puts herself in the position of another person looking at herself and through this is able to see how her identity is constructed by not only what she thinks but how others see her. Caught between the viewer's look and her own, her represented body becomes the site of identifications that this thesis will argue elicit corporeal responses from the viewer. In ways that are varied yet always consistently connected to ongoing themes and concerns, her works set up intersubjective relations with the viewer in ways that make it difficult for the viewer to look at the works in a distanced, detached way. Rather than appealing to a disembodied eye (attached, at best, to a calculating, rational, cold mind), Searle's work incorporates the viewer's body into the process of looking. The conventional viewing situation, in which viewer is subject and work is object, is questioned and challenged by Searle's strategic self-representations. It is difficult for these conventional relations to apply in the viewing of the work, for reasons that will be made clear in this thesis. What is emphasised is the degree to which viewer and work (viewer and Searle, viewer and identity) are enfolded with one another almost like overlaid surfaces, elements of a phenomenology of experience.

## **Brief overview of the chapters**

The aim of the first chapter is to explore how theories of vision have historically subverted the more psychological and political elements of vision and, secondly, to show how vision is a powerful force in the constitution of both meaning and identity in the visible world. It starts with a brief overview of the history of vision starting with the Ancients and ending with two contemporary approaches offered by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The introductory section of the chapter shows how vision was privileged during the Ancient and Renaissance periods and how this privileging caused vision to be split between being a concept in the mind and a physical experience of the body, with

the concept in the mind being favored as the truth. The second half of the first section deals with criticisms of this mind-based notion of vision and introduces an argument for the reciprocity of vision which defines it as an intersubjective experience between the work, the viewer, other people and the external world. Lastly the chapter introduces the work of Lacan and Merleau-Ponty. Lacan is introduced through the theory of the gaze and the discussion looks at how vision is infiltrated by desire and power relations. Merleau-Ponty's work follows with a look at the role of the body as an active participant in the process of looking. This chapter lays down the historical foundation for the argument to follow by showing how in the matter of the visible nothing is simple.

The interpretation of Searle's work is divided between the second and third chapters. In the second chapter work is selected from Searle's early photographic series, *Colour Me* (1998-2000), *Traces* (1999) and *Discoloured* (1999-2000). In the third chapter the installation work *Profile* (2002) and two of Searle's video works, *A Matter of Time* (2003) and *Home and Away* (2003) are discussed.

The second chapter introduces the idea that Searle's work involves an 'otherness' in the act of viewing. This 'otherness' is argued to be the materiality of the missing body of the artist. The chapter carefully analyses how Searle's work plays with traditional spectator positions like 'the gaze' and visual stereotypes such as 'race' by both affirming and subverting their power. It ends by arguing that Searle is able to produce a playful fluidity between terms of conceptual identification because of a corporeal identification between the viewer and the images. To this end the chapter deals with two specific moments of corporeal identification drawn out through the work of Merleau-Ponty and Lacan. Firstly Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the intentional body is related to Searle's representation of her body. Searle recreates the carnality of her body through particular representations that make the viewer identify with her body as a physical thing. Secondly Lacan helps illuminate how Searle is able to place the viewer in a particular relationship to her work where he or she is identified with the perpetrator of the violence represented in her image, because the viewer identifies with the gaze through the image as screen. In this way Searle is able to implicate the viewer in the questions of identity construction raised by her work, and is hence able to involve the viewer in the discourse of race, gender and identity at a scale that ranges from the personal to the historical.

The third chapter focuses on the manner in which Searle's work involves the viewer both physically and conceptually in a performance of identity as a fluid and open term. It starts by proposing a double conceptual and corporeal identification between viewer and work which acts, in the piece titled *Profile*, as a physical push and pull, thereby making the viewer an active participant and not a removed spectator in Searle's representation of her identity. To further emphasize the interrelatedness of conceptual and corporeal concerns in Searle's work a third theoretical voice, that of the narratologist Mieke Bal is introduced. Bal's work is useful because of how it argues for an enfolding of discourse and the corporeal investment of the eye during the viewing of art. Lacan's concept of the screen also plays a vital role in the discussion because it illuminates how Searle is able to push for a corporeal involvement by disengaging the ability of the viewer to adopt a disembodied gaze. The chapter ends with two video works which continue to produce an enfolding of conceptual and corporeal elements but become even more potent in the translation of Searle's experience of her identity because they involve time and movement. The first video, *A Matter of Time*, is discussed in relation to the temporal effects of identity, and *Home and Away* explores the spatial relations of identity through the inclusion of landmasses as identity markers. Through Lacan and Merleau-Ponty the body of both Searle and the viewer is interpreted as a space where signification is both disrupted and confirmed. This chapter shows how Searle is able to translate this disruption and confirmation to the viewer physically, and in so doing opens the viewer up to an active experience of his or her own politics of identity during the act of looking.

## Chapter One

In her commentary on the work of Berni Searle, Liese van der Watt (2004: 126) uses a quote from the art historian, Peggy Phelan, in which Phelan writes about the power of “remaining invisible”. It seems strange for van der Watt to raise the question of invisibility in relation to an artist who uses visible representations of herself in her artwork, but what she is actually addressing though Phelan’s discussion of being invisible is the power that being visible has over people. Being visible is about being seen by other people and according to Phelan being visible to others opens a person to representational systems that mark, name and fix a person’s identity. Therefore when van der Watt raises Searle’s ability to be invisible, what she is also describing is Searle’s ability to remain unmarked, unfixed and unnamed in the visible realm. Searle’s invisibility is, however, staged in the visible realm, i.e. she shows herself as being invisible. This contradiction is achieved through Searle’s use of photography and video, in which she shows herself being hidden and shifted. Searle’s work therefore requires an approach that looks closely at how vision frames and fixes identity and at how Searle is able to use vision to counteract this effect.

In order to understand what is at work in Searle’s art, this chapter will start with a brief overview of theories of vision from early Western times up till contemporary history. This overview aims to show how vision has tended to be privileged almost as a tool or extension of the mind and how this has emphasised the mind and rational thought over the body’s physical process of seeing. Vision conceived of as a mental or cognitive faculty has been associated with other mental activities such as language; to see has become equated with to know. But as Van der Watt points out, Searle’s work is about not knowing and being invisible, and therefore needs to be addressed through theories of vision that take other aspects of vision into consideration, for instance the fact that it is also a physical activity.

This chapter will therefore end with a look towards an integrated approach to theories of vision through which to interpret Searle’s artwork, drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In brief, these theorists consider vision in relation to both the conceptual perception of the mind and processes of bodily vision, and can therefore be used to describe Searle’s contradictory approach.

## **Vision in early Western theory**

There is no single answer to the question of why vision has been treated as – and even remains treated as – the most privileged sense in western culture. Explanations have ranged from biological to cultural, but what cannot be denied is the primacy that vision has acquired. What is important to analyse is what role this dominance has played in the formation of ideas regarding vision. Martin Jay, in his book *Downcast eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought* (1993), looks at how vision was already being privileged over the other senses in Ancient and Renaissance philosophy. The Ancient Greeks used vision as a measure of truthfulness or accuracy (Jay 1993: 21–22). In his discussions, Plato grouped the creation of sight with the creation of intelligence while the other senses were grouped with man's material being; further, he used the “eye of the mind” as an analogy for the intellect (Jay 1993: 26). The concept of the “eye of the mind” split vision from the body. This separation of vision from the body was further strengthened by the fact that Plato was sceptical of knowledge derived from unexamined sensory experiences. Vision therefore was split between being a metaphor for knowledge (the “eye of the mind”) and being responsible for unexamined sensory experiences. The second description was disregarded as untrustworthy and so vision was situated in the mind.

## **Vision in the Renaissance**

Later Mediaeval and Renaissance philosophy perpetuated the Platonic bias towards vision as the mind's eye (Jay 1993: 37, 44). Jay (1993: 44, 70-82) argues that during the Renaissance, with the rebirth of the study of epistemology, light was used as the metaphor for knowledge, creating the term ‘enlightenment’. Jay argues that using light as the favoured metaphor shows that vision was linked with the mind during this historical period. This led to the development of models of perspective in which rays of light were seen as issuing from objects to be gathered together in the eye itself. The chief Renaissance proponent of this model of vision and light was Leon Battista Alberti.

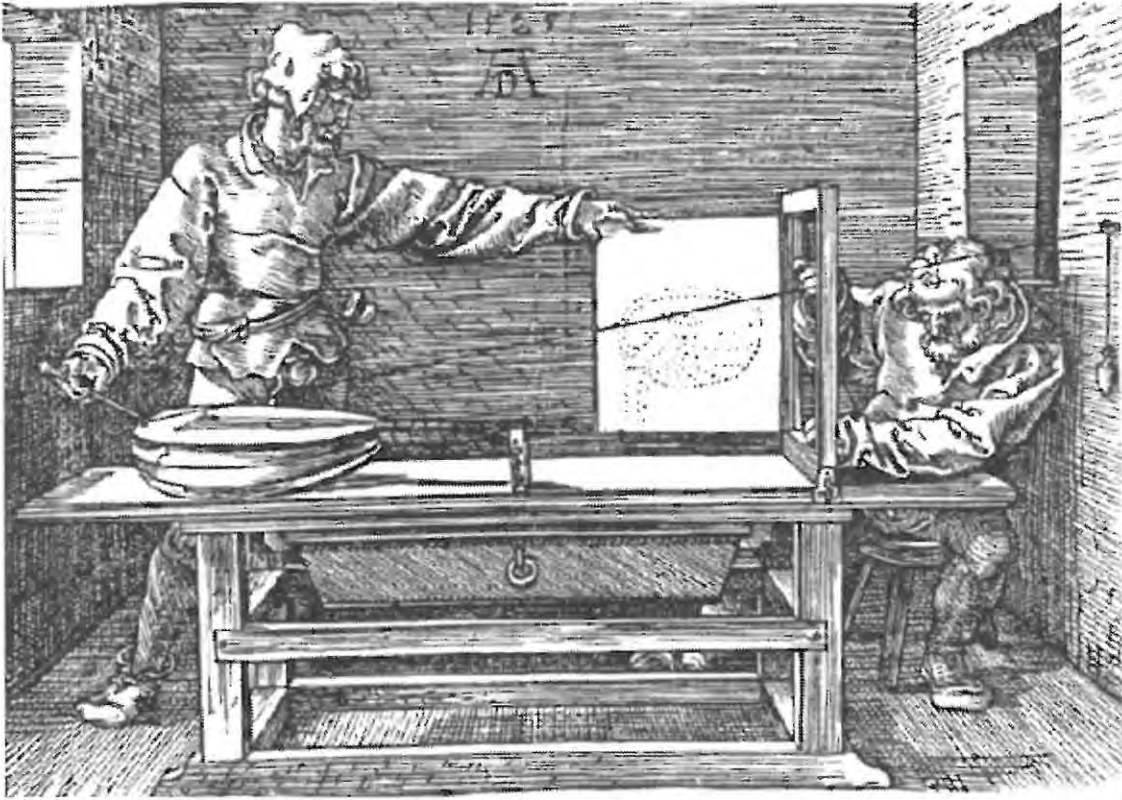


Figure 1

### Alberti's Perspective

Sometime between 1438 and 1444 Alberti wrote the first text, titled *De Pictura* (*On Painting*), in which a quasi-mathematical system was used to create the illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface. The system itself depended on Alberti's notion of the visual pyramid, which proposed that the eye and the object it contemplates are connected by means of lines of light, which converge toward the eye or recede from the eye toward the object. The strength of these lines depended on how near or far they were to the object's centre. Transferred to a painting, the strongest lines were those closest to the centre of the work; the primary line, which Alberti called 'the prince of rays' was the centric line that, translated into perspective, became the point today referred to commonly as the 'vanishing point'. In Alberti's system the rays of light, now translated in the perspective system into lines converging on the vanishing point, centred the image and acted to focus the eye on the point where the perspective came together. In this way painting acted to organise the viewer's field of vision (before the picture, more often than not large enough to fill the said field) around a dominant centre. The appreciation of the painting hence became a matter of

the eye's relation to the painting; the role of the sensing body in viewing was hence, if not sidelined, at least left untheorised. Figure 1 and figure 2 show two different interpretations of Alberti's theories. Figure 1 was printed by Albrecht Dürer in 1525 and shows how an artist would use a grid with an established point of view to represent a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface. Figure 2 appeared in Brook Taylor's book *New Principles of Linear Perspective* (1715) and shows how lines of light travelled from an object to the viewer's eye.

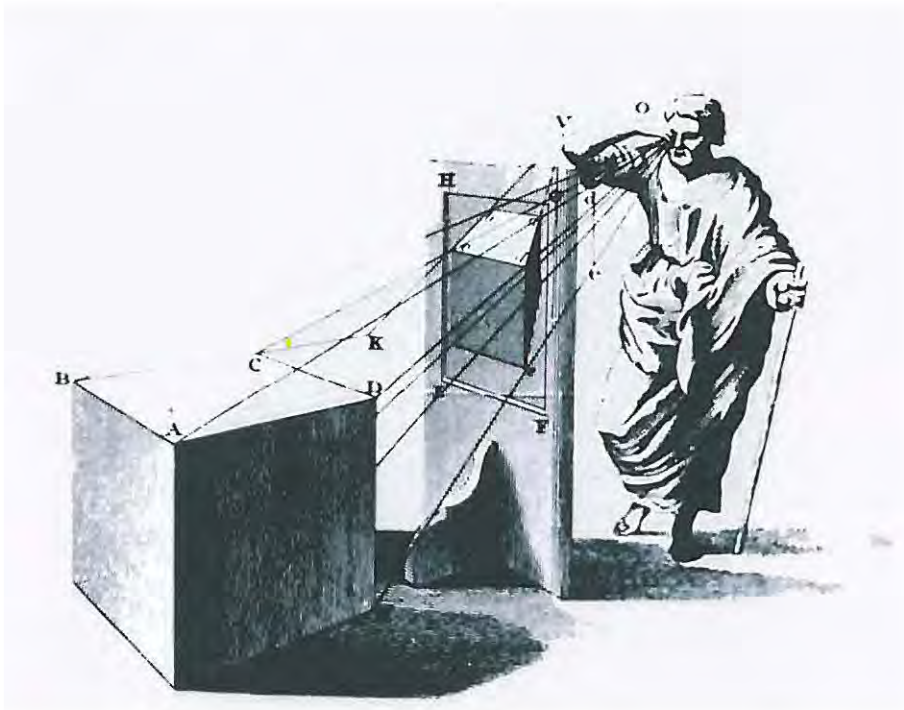


Figure 2

### Descartes

This bias in favour of the mind in its connection with the eye continued to haunt the history of Western vision. About two hundred years after Alberti, the Baroque philosopher René Descartes used perspectival diagrams (originally outlined by Alberti and other Renaissance theorists) in his description of how a person interacts with the external world. Descartes, like Plato, was sceptical about the senses. He therefore structured vision as a geometrical entity that the mind projected onto the external world of objects (Jay 1993: 21-82).

Descartes came to this conclusion through a series of arguments that started with his famous decision to test everything he knew by doubting its existence. Through this process Descartes discovered that the only thing that he could be sure of was that he could doubt. Descartes decided that doubting was thinking and out of this process he produced his *Cogito*: "I think therefore I am". Descartes therefore believed that he could only prove that he had a mind, but not a body, and he could not prove the existence of the external world. The manner in which Descartes chose to overcome this problem was to argue that God created both man and the world and that therefore the rules that guided man's mind should guide the world. For Descartes, the divine structure of both mind and external world could be studied through logical analysis. This led Descartes to use geometrical diagrams, which represented this kind of analysis (Massey 1997:1152-1155).

Descartes outlined this mathematical structure of vision in his text *A Discourse on Method*. In describing light in terms of rays or lines moving from a physical object onto the retina, Descartes' model is derived from Alberti's. The binocularism of biological sight is again reduced to a monocular system subject to a defining geometric point. For Descartes the subject has one mind and one mind's eye, not two eyes or two origins of perspective, seeing the world simultaneously from slightly different angles. Descartes went so far as to affirm the geometric nature of vision with recourse to the analogy of a blind man. He describes how a blind person can conceive of perspective through touching lines of string and so come to understand perspective in the same manner that a sighted person can. Descartes used this example to prove that vision was a matter of the mind and that it could be grasped through the rational application of geometry.

Reduced to perspective, light fails to encompass other phenomena that can dissolve and break up this perspective, for instance the glow created when dust or mist catches the light, or the blinding effect light can have on a viewer. Rationalisation of sight through the lines of perspective thus acted to create distance between the viewer and the world, diminishing the role of experience of physical sight in the viewer's conceptualisation of the world.

Once removed from sensory perception to a diagrammatic model, vision is viewed more in terms of the representation of sensory experience than in terms of sensory experience itself. Direct sensory perception is not easily expressed in theory because any description is already a representation; but the danger arises when the model is taken as a stand-in for experience.

One needs to find approaches that can account for the role of the senses and the body in perception.

Two notable opponents of Descartes' monocular conception of vision are John Locke and David Hume. Locke was born during Descartes' lifetime but would have only been in his teens when Descartes died; and Hume was born 7 years after Locke died. Locke and then Hume focused on how the senses acted to create perception and were part of a group later called the sensationalists (Jay 1993: 84). The sensationalist tradition according to Jay (1993: 84) claimed, "only the perception of external objects and never innate intuitions or constructions are the sources of ideas". This idea is counter to Descartes' notion that prior to the senses ideas already exist in the mind and are projected onto the world. Locke and Hume were not alone in their criticism of Descartes: Denis Diderot, a playwright, intellectual and contemporary to Hume, was also influenced by Locke's idea that all knowledge was derived from experience (Furbank 1992: 54). In 1749 he wrote a text entitled *Letter on the blind for the use of those who see* in which he used the blind man's experience to show how vision was created through the senses and not, as Descartes had argued, before them. In this text Diderot used Descartes' argument regarding the blind man's ability to grasp the lines of perspective as an example against Descartes. Diderot showed that if you constructed a model of perspective using strings as physical representations of the lines of light you could lead a blind man up and down the string and through this experiment show him how perspective worked. Diderot used this example to argue that perspective therefore cannot be the same as the sense of sight because it does not require sight to be understood. He argued that if a blind man can be made to understand vision then something must be missing from the explanation of vision through perspective (Furbank 1992: 54–69). Contrary to Descartes' unidirectional rational projection of the mind's eye onto the world, vision was considered more as a relationship between the world and the mind where external factors helped shape the viewer's perception.

Locke was influential in theorising the importance of the external world in the perception of the subject because he imagined that the mind was an empty slate that was filled through the process of perception of the external world. Later Kantian philosophy, which was also influenced by Locke, emphasised perception as a relationship between the subject and the external world by analysing how the perception of external objects helped to create frameworks of interpretation in the mind. Kant understood the mind to be actively ordering the data delivered to it through the senses and that through an analysis of aesthetic judgment one could

track the self-conscious decisions that the mind makes in relation to its surroundings. The mind and its environment act on each other in the individual's judgement (Wood 1995:678). This is crucial in emphasising the enfolded nature of the viewer's interaction with what is being viewed. Oddly enough, this enfoldedness was already a latent proposition in the diagrammatic constructions of Alberti and Descartes. Both, by virtue of the correspondence set up between the viewer's eye and the painting's vanishing point, imply a reversibility in points of view, and hence a capacity to envision the connection between eye, mind and body and the object being viewed in terms of a reciprocal, interchangeable – hence intersubjective – relationship.

### The reversibility of perspective

Iversen (1995: 81) states that perspectival models “demonstrate a reflexive awareness of the way our perceptual grasp of objects is bound up with those objects”. Norman Bryson, a contemporary art historian, further points out that the reversibility of Alberti's model turns the subject into a point because it structures the subject's position in relation to a vanishing point (Massey 1997: 1149). The viewing point and the vanishing point are mirror images and so in the mirror image the subjects see themselves represented as a point of origin, not a three-dimensional body (Ross 2001: 92). The reversibility of Alberti's perspective system also turns the subject into an object in relation to the vanishing point. Bryson (Massey 1997: 1149) therefore sees the effects of perspective on the viewer as both reducing the viewer to a point of origin and turning the subject into an object. In figure 3 the point of view used to foreshorten the square becomes the vanishing point of the image of the square.

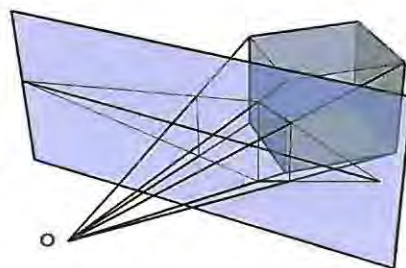


Figure 3

The reversibility of Albertian perspective allows for vision to be seen as an exchange between viewers and viewed. In fact, even during Descartes' lifetime, painters were disrupting the perspectival unity of the high Renaissance in favour of interactive exchanges between the work and the viewer, which included the viewer as an object to the artwork's point of view. This disruption of traditional perspective used during the Baroque is described by Jay (1993: 45) as "the uncanny double of what we might call the dominant scientific 'rationalised' visual order". Baroque art played with perspectival laws, creating multiple points of view and in some cases using perspective to create dramatic effects like anamorphosis and foreshortening. In a text concerning the relationship between Alberti's perspective and Descartes' model of vision Lyle Massey (1997: 1186) argues that anamorphosis (the use of perspectival models to distort images – of which perhaps the most famous example is the stretched skull in the foreground of Hans Holbein's *Ambassadors* (figure 4)) in fact reveals the "arbitrary and constructed relation between (models of) vision (like Descartes' geometric view point) and the visible". Anamorphosis does this because it uses perspectival laws to bring the viewer towards the object of representation on the picture plane. So even though anamorphosis uses the single viewpoint of perspective, it does not reduce vision to this point because the viewer has to take up a particular spatial relationship to the picture plane in order for the illusion to work. Anamorphosis, by creating physical proximity between the viewer and the image, therefore introduces the viewer's body through spatial orientations, which counteracts the distancing that occurs between the viewer and the image in the case of perspective lines. This later interpretation of the use of anamorphosis during the Baroque to disrupt perspective shows how perspective is not necessarily a system used to depict things as they are in the external world but rather a system of representation that can manipulate images to produce multiple representations and points of view. Figure 5 shows a contemporary example of anamorphosis used by the street artist Julian Beever. This photograph of Beever's work from two different angles shows how anamorphosis demands a very particular position from which to be viewed.



Figure 4



Figure 5

## Vision and the gaze

Intersubjective theories of vision posit a viewer who is not alone in his/her perception of the world (Jay 1993: 103–104). Instead the viewer is seen as a subject who is affected physically and psychically by the object viewed, which thus becomes a subject of sorts capable of an interchange with the viewer. The object is thereby invested with a gaze, and acts to define the field of vision as one in which the viewer is not only viewing but also being viewed. The awareness that one can be seen from outside has implications for the subject's awareness of self because one is not only seeing in the world but is also being watched, while seeing, by others. This intersubjective awareness of being seen to be seeing introduces a psychological element to the theories of vision. Vision is no longer attached to a rational transcendental mind but rather becomes understood as infiltrated by the perception of others. This shift in thinking can be described as the move away from a posited clarity towards an experiential opacity, where the world is not revealed to the subject through his or her eye but rather the subject is understood to be part of an already visible world in which he or she needs to negotiate his or her own vision in relation to others.

Theories of vision therefore include power relations in which looking and being looked at determine the subject's experience of self. One example of this is the spectacle of Louis XIV's (the Sun King's) court at the Chateau de Versailles. Not only did the interior of the palace include the now famous hall of mirrors but also the dress and actions of those in the court were all part of a visual performance of splendour and power (Jay 1993: 49-50, 87-89). The "look at me" quality of French court life at the time reflected the overwhelming visual, or scopic, regime of the Baroque. However within this emphasis on everything visual there was also a suspicion of the power of vision. The playwright Jean Baptiste Racine created a theatre of shame: the characters hide in the shadows, thereby preventing themselves from achieving a stable and transparent identity (Jay 1993: 98). Racine's characters enact the power of "remaining invisible" (Peggy Phelan (Bedford 2004: 126)), resisting by staying in the shadows the constitutional powers of vision to frame and fix their identity, unlike the court of Versailles where the desire was to be visible and fixed. Between Racine's characters and courtiers at Versailles notions of power and shame come into play dependent on whether visibility or concealment are desired. Vision is therefore seen to play a role in the constitution of a person's identity.

## Sartre and the Gaze

The fact that being visible to others could affect a person's actions was later analysed by the phenomenologist Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre however believed that in order to modify behaviour one did not need another person to be physically present and actively looking. Sartre described a sense of being seen that acted like the judging eye of God, to which people continually modified their behaviour. Sartre outlined this theory in his work *The Voyeur*, in which he used the example of a voyeur who, while looking into a room through the keyhole in a door, hears a noise behind him. The noise is enough to make the voyeur aware that what he is doing is wrong. The noise conjures up the sense of being under a judging eye, and the voyeur immediately changes his behaviour.

What is critical is that Sartre posits an omnipresent visual presence that is felt by all people with a conscience. He calls this presence *le regard absolu*, the absolute gaze (Jay 1993: 89). The absolute gaze points to the fact that a person is somehow constituted to always feel his or her visibility. The sense of sight therefore has a psychological aspect that modifies behaviour. Two important aspects of Sartre's absolute gaze are that it cannot be reciprocated and, secondly, it therefore cannot be neutralised, i.e. a person cannot try and stare down a disembodied visual presence if it is somehow part of their psyche. There is no denying, however, that the gaze in the field of vision has the capacity to act on the body. Moreover even though the voyeur cannot view the gaze that catches him in the act, he nonetheless associates himself with the gaze that sees him. It is only the sense of shame that he would feel on catching a voyeur in the act that makes him feel ashamed – the gaze thus becomes an externalisation of his own conscience and judgement. Once externalised, this presence acts throughout the subject's visual field. It is partly in this way that Lacan conceives of the gaze in his *Four fundamental concepts of psycho-analysis*, and it is to Lacan's theory that one now needs to briefly turn.

## Lacan and Freud

Before discussing Lacan's argument regarding the gaze, it is necessary to describe Lacan's theory of the development of the subject because it reveals how the gaze frames who the viewer sees and why it is that only through laying down the gaze can two people interact as equals. The gaze is related in Lacan to desire. It is this relationship to desire that causes the

shame in Sartre's voyeur and prompted the visual spectacle and visual power play in the court of Louis XIV. For both Freud and Lacan desire drives existence but is not part of the person's conscious experience of existence. Desire is pre-conscious and is for the most part repressed by the individual, however it infiltrates all conscious behaviour. The repression of desire in favour of appropriate social behaviour is what Freud and Lacan associate with the entrance of the person into culture. For Lacan, this process begins at the point when the child makes its founding discrimination of itself from others – a moment Lacan described as the 'mirror stage'.

### **The mirror stage**

In 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I' (Lacan 1997: 1-7), Lacan looked at the child's acquisition of language in relation to the child's recognition of self in the mirror. Vision is important for the acquisition of language, according to Lacan, because it is through vision that the child creates an image of self and other based on difference. The child needs an "I" before he or she can control meaning and language acquisition. Lacan holds that in the pre-mirror stage the child is unable to differentiate between itself and its world; it has no experience of itself as anything, or of anything else as separate.

During the mirror stage, which occurs at about six to eighteen months in the child's development, the child is able to recognise itself in the mirror (Bowie 1991: 21). However, the image in the mirror does not correspond with the child's body because the image is a flat two-dimensional picture that can be seen as a whole image while the actual body is three-dimensional and can only be seen in fragments. The child favours the image over his or her physical experience and a split occurs between the specular other in the mirror and the child's experience of his or her body. The favouring of the image and the subsequent split is reinforced by the fact that the infant's physical development is not fully functional and the infant cannot control his or her movements. The mirror image, according to Lacan, is a 'mirage' that promises an image of control by representing to the child an image of unity (Bowie 1991: 25).

## Mirror stage and desire

The fantasy/actual body rift can be related in this context to the mind/body dichotomy. Like theorists before him, Lacan separates the somatic experience of the body from the visual experience of the body image, but he understands that the two are irrevocably interlinked. However, as Lacan describes it, the recognition of self in the mirror is as much alienating as it is formative, for the image in the mirror displays a figural integration that the child does not experience in its own body. The image, then, embodies the unity the child will later come to associate with a time prior to the differentiation of self and other. This sense of a lost wholeness, coupled with the feeling that the image is more complete than the bodily-invested self, creates what Lacan terms 'desire'. The child will purposefully deny the knowledge that he or she is misperceiving the image in the mirror as the self, and will take the image as a model of a fantasised bodily unity. Significantly, Lacan calls this mirror and post-mirror stage of development the *imaginary*, because of both its fantasy element and its origin in an image (i.e., the child's first image of itself). The imaginary stage builds the founding psychological desire for wholeness, which infiltrates the manner in which the child makes the move towards culture.

This shift from recognition of the image as self to describing the image as self is the move in Lacanian terms from the *imaginary stage* to the *symbolic*. The symbolic stage involves the acquisition of language. The child, through listening and learning from others around him, will establish the image as "me" or "what I see as me". Language, according to Lacan, is in fact a process of castration, since it replaces things with words, leaving the subject irreducibly alienated from these things, and hence always desiring. But the subject does not want to recognise this desire because it is a reminder of incompleteness; hence he or she will continually defer desire by using language to re-iterate his or her subject position: "I am whole". The subject's ability to say "I" is a symbolic statement of completeness. However it is only a symbolic representation of completeness and is still underpinned by the loss of the sense of wholeness imagined in the mirror. The loss cannot be articulated because it was experienced prior to learning language and therefore its 'object' cannot be recovered. Desire is therefore continually perpetuated through vision because each look is permeated with the initial misrecognition of self as image and therefore with the desire for wholeness assumed to have been lost.

In the field of vision this constitutive lack is critical to the way the subject places value on the unseen, yet structuring, gaze. This gaze affirms the subject as part of a community and also becomes an object of desire. That is, the subject desires what the gaze seems to stand (in) for: the assumed lost wholeness. Lacan explored this relationship between subject and gaze in complicated ways, drawing – perhaps unsurprisingly – on Albertian/Descartian models of geometrical vision. This will be explored in the following section.

### Lacan and Albertian Perspective

In Chapter 8 of *The four fundamental concepts of psycho-analysis* one finds two diagrams which Lacan (1994: 91) used in his 1964 seminar, and a further related diagram in Chapter 9 (Lacan 1994: 106). In the first of the two diagrams from Chapter 8 (figure 6) he illustrates the Albertian conception of the visual pyramid – what he calls geometral perspective. One might suggest that in this triangle Descartes' autonomous transcendental subject has the position at the apex ('geometral point'), and his vision spreads out in lines to encompass the visible 'object', which is represented by the flat side of the triangle. The line dissecting the triangle in the diagram is the 'image' or picture produced by the artist. Figure 7, a woodcut produced by Dürer in 1532, shows how the 'image' is created through the use of Alberti's perspective. The grid placed between the subject and object of representation becomes the image that the artist draws. The image on the picture plane therefore represents the depth of the object as structured by the geometric point of the viewing subject positioned in front of the picture.

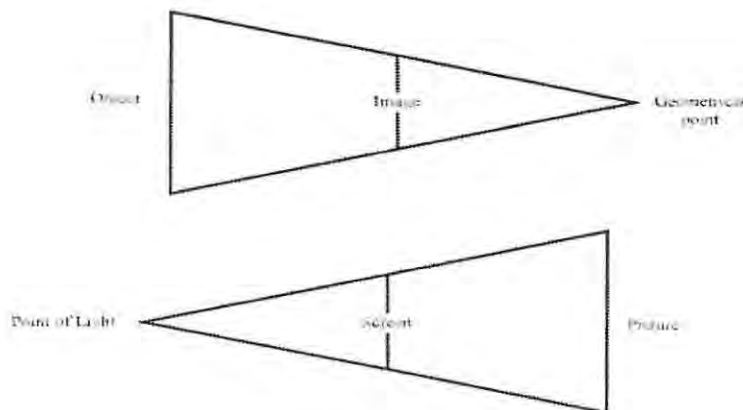


Figure 6



Figure 7

The second triangle reproduced in Chapter 8 (figure 6) represents the reciprocal perspective produced, according to Lacan, in response to the gaze in vision. The first diagram is turned inside out to suggest precisely the reversibility of position that was mentioned earlier in this thesis under the section titled 'The reversibility of perspective'. To comprehend how Lacan arrived at this inversion, one needs to briefly consider the story he recounts about a fishing trip he undertook to Brittany as a young man. While out on a boat with some Breton fishermen waiting to pull in the nets, one of the fishermen (Petit-Jean – a name very appropriate to the story, if one were to dig deeper) pointed out to Lacan a sardine can glinting in the sunlight. Highly amused with himself, he asked Lacan: "You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!" (Lacan 1994: 95). Lacan was left uneasy, clearly because he felt out of place, as a 'young intellectual' among such 'rough' company. He (1994: 96) writes: "I, at that moment . . . looked like nothing on earth. In short, I was rather out of place in the picture". The glinting can makes Lacan self-conscious, but only because its light is tinted by the words of Petit-Jean; it becomes a gaze in 'the picture', making him aware of how little he belongs in it. Framing him as 'other' in the picture, the light thus refers not to a geometrical line but to a visual pressure – not at all far from the pressure felt by Sartre's voyeur. What cannot be overlooked is how embodied the experience makes Lacan feel. The light makes him aware of how his body does not fit into this environment; how the gaze of the can – in fact the gaze of the fishermen (who do not see their scholarly visitor) – excludes him from the field of vi-

sion. If the geometral point is the site of mastery in the first diagram, the 'point of light' is master of the 'picture' in the second.

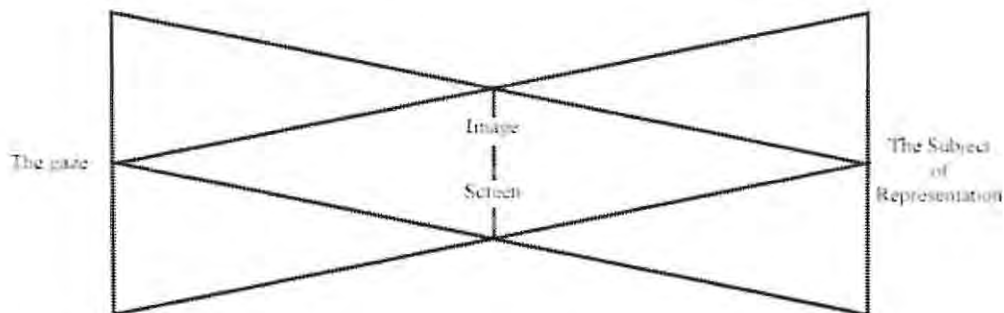


Figure 8

This system of two triangles leaves out the possibility of interplay between them – a point Lacan no doubt understood, because in his Chapter 9 diagram (figure 8) he brought the two triangles together, locking them into a relationship. The terms are now simplified: to the left the 'gaze', to the right the 'subject of representation', with the 'screen' in between. The question of which of these terms has mastery over the other is put in suspension at once, though one feels that if the gaze is the point that turns what it sees into the subject (matter) of representation, it has the determining role. Whoever feels seen by it becomes a subject who represents, so to speak – that is, a subject who represents itself to the gaze in ways to do with its desire (or with giving it what it desires). The diagram is, however, deliberately unclear and can be read in different ways – it suitably relates to vision as an interlocked structure comprising two potentially reversible, or at least directly interrelated, points.

The example of the sardine can does, however, suggest that only the point of light (the gaze) can make the subject feel out of place in the picture (i.e. in the world or environment). The opposite cannot happen: the subject cannot make the gaze feel out of place, because the gaze, as Lacan (1994: 106) states, 'is outside' the field of vision, neither object nor representation – it is not in the picture. At the same time, there could be no act, gesture or representation without its absent presence, and if there is bodily viewing in Lacan it is found here, in what the subject does under the pressure of the gaze – hence we can speak of a performativity of the

gaze, a will-to-perform produced by the gaze. These performances are to be understood as gestures and representations, and it is they who form what Lacan placed between the gaze and the subject of representation: the screen. According to Lacan (1994: 107), the subject

maps himself in [the screen] . . . In so far as he isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is here the locus of mediation.

The screen ends up acting like a filter that “re-establishes things in their status as real” (Lacan 1994: 107). Lacan borrows an analogy of a cone of light from Merleau-Ponty’s work on vision to describe the function of the screen. In the analogy, he describes a milky cone of light that prevents the subject seeing what is illuminated. The cone of light prevents the subject from seeing because it is shining directly in the viewer’s eyes (Lacan 1994: 107-108). By adding a screen between the viewer and the light, the viewer is enabled to see objects hidden by the blinding light, while the light retreats into the shadows. When Lacan refers to a thing’s ‘status as real’ he is in fact referring to a person’s illusion of having a real status (or a status in the Real). The illusion is the shadow created by the screen (now understood in terms of the mirror phase and its resultant alienation). The screen blocks out the light of the gaze, which would reveal the falsity of the person’s image of self (as Lacan’s falsity in the picture was revealed by the can), thereby creating a marginal reality (Lacan (1994: 108): ‘reality appears only as marginal’) that the subject takes as actually real. This reality behind the screen can only be marginal because it marks the subject’s adjustments to evade the revealing light of the gaze; it is a ‘reality’ of masks, screens and mediations. Hence the importance of mimicry and camouflage to Lacan.

Lacan describes the process by which the viewer mediates the gaze as ‘mimicry’. Mimicry is the method by which the viewer attains the illusion of control over the gaze by playing up to it – by showing for it. In Lacan, mimicry in camouflage does not involve blending into a background but a giving-to-be-seen *as* background. Lacan thus makes an appearing of something normally thought of as disappearing. Mimicry in individuals is a means to show themselves for the gaze by mimicking a role already established in the picture (society); it is a way to conform and hence to evade the piercing, disruptive presence of the gaze (as law and order). It is also a way, one might argue, for the viewer to experience the world in a disembod-

ied, rather than embodied, way. The body can in so many ways be devalued by the gaze; hence camouflage – as much as it is performative – is a way to avoid exposure and embarrassment. To act against the gaze, rather than to show for it, is – as much feminist art, particularly that dealing with the grotesque (e.g., Cindy Sherman) has shown – a way to bring the body back into the picture, not only as a stain but as something that can erase the screen and allow for the viewer a more corporeal experience of an artwork. Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers ways for one to consider the implications of such corporeal experience.

### **Embodiment and Merleau-Ponty**

The viewer as a physical entity becomes increasingly important in the interpretation of art in the nineteenth and twentieth century, contributing, Jay argues (1993), to a denigration of ocularcentric models like those of Descartes in twentieth century French thought because vision is no longer seen as a rational projection of the mind but rather as part of mutable experience; the embodied viewer is not a neat geometrical model but has a living, spatial and binocular vision. The re-reading of perspective as a reversible system includes the embodied viewer because what is framed as object is the viewer's body. However, this still reinforces a distancing between the viewer's mind and body because the viewer can be subject or object, but not both; since perspective works as a linear model it distances subject from object through lines of sight. A theory that proposes a physical viewer complicates perspective because it reintroduces what models of vision miss, which is the proximity of sensory experience. An embodied viewer cannot be reduced to a point or an object and so does not conform to the logic of Albertian perspective. While one cannot escape the subject/object relationship, one can figure it in other ways, and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty can certainly help in this regard.

In a commentary on Merleau-Ponty, Stephen Priest (1998: 13-28) describes phenomenology as a "philosophy of description", as it attempts to describe the experience a viewer attains only through his or her senses. Merleau-Ponty was critical of the kind of Cartesian dualism that split the body from the mind, and in his work he rejects "the age-old assumption that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 138). Merleau-Ponty sees vision as a reciprocal action joining the viewer with the viewed. Lacan commented on this reciprocal understanding of vision (1994: 70-72) when he described Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in his seminar

'The Split Between the Eye and the Gaze' as an investigation of how the 'lining' that is representation is joined to that which it is supposed to cover. What Lacan picks up on is the manner in which Merleau-Ponty explained the embodied viewer as an enfolding of viewer with the viewed. However Lacan disagrees with Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the primacy of the individual seer's perception. Lacan (1994: 72) understands vision as infiltrated by "... the seer's shoot – something prior to his eye ... the pre-existence of the gaze ...", while Merleau-Ponty describes vision as the primary relationship between the seer and the visible, which creates an active intercourse between the physical senses and the mind's perceptions.

For Merleau-Ponty, the viewer's body is to be understood as part of the visible realm. The body is described by Merleau-Ponty as a surface of intercourse between the mental world of language and the physical world of experience. Merleau-Ponty is critical of both scientific and intellectual explanations of the subject, which reduce the subject either to a "set of mechanistically-explainable reactions" or a transcendental consciousness that can exist without a body (Taylor 1990: 15). Merleau-Ponty uses many examples to refute the scientific and intellectual approaches to the body, to support his theory of the embodied subject. One example is that of habitual action, which he discusses in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). Habitual action is described as an action that the subject learns, for example driving a car or touch-typing, and once learnt the subject does not have to continually tell his or her body how to execute the movement, the body responds accordingly. Merleau-Ponty argues that the habitual action cannot be accounted for by either the intellectual or scientific explanations because as he puts it (1962: 144), "habit is neither a form of knowledge nor an involuntary action". The body rather acts intelligently as a physical subject. As Merleau-Ponty (1962: 147) writes:

Bodily experience forces us to acknowledge an imposition of meaning, which is not the work of a universal-constituting consciousness, a meaning which clings to certain contents. My body is the meaningful core which behaves like a general function, and which, nevertheless, exists and is susceptible to disease.

"The body is essentially an expressive space" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 146) which allows, without intellectual reflection, for the subject to know his or her positioning in relation to up and down, or to walk around without thinking about the distance between the feet and the head, or to grab hold of a doorknob without thinking about the distance between the hand and the

door. The body feels the space, size and weight of the visible realm and these become included in the process of looking. As Merleau-Ponty (1964: 162) states: "Vision is attached to movement. We see only what we look at. And what would vision be without eye movement?"

In her discussion of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy Monika Langer (2003: 103) describes his theory of the relationship between the body and the world as a "continual dialectic of corporeal intentionality" whereby the "bodily senses are themselves inseparably intertwined" with the external world. The body is described in terms of corporeal intentionality because the body, through the senses and movement, has an understanding of the world that becomes part of any action taken by the person. If a person chooses to jump and he or she has jumped before, the body knows how much to push up to resist gravity and how to land without the need to control every muscle along the way. This corporeal intentionality enfolds the viewer in the physical world because the body is both made of and responds to the external physical world. This is similar to what was discussed as occurring in vision, i.e. one is both seen and sees, but in Merleau-Ponty's conception of the world one both feels and is felt. This relationship between the world and a person is described by Merleau-Ponty as the relationship between a person's two hands touching each other. As one hand touches the other, as they rub together, touching and being touched in the same movement, "my left hand can touch my right hand while it palpates the tangibles, can touch it touching, can turn its palpation back upon it" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 141). The subject's relationship with the world is thus envisaged to be a very proximate, intimate, reciprocal and enfolded one.

In the second example Merleau-Ponty uses to argue for embodied subjectivity, he extends this dual sensation to the dual sensation of seeing and being seen. Merleau-Ponty understands this seeing and being seen as reflexive, and the visual realm is understood as closely implicated in the sensory realm. He (1964:163) argues that for the human body "between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a blending of some sort takes place ... between the sensing and sensible". In his essay 'The Eye and the Mind' (1964) he uses the example of the actions of a painter to illustrate this blending. What he observed in the painter's action was that the painter, through the marks made by the movement of his or her brush, made visible the body's corporeal intentionality in the painter's representation of the world. Merleau-Ponty argued that the artist's brush marks recorded the artist corporeally in the act of looking because the looking was

translated onto canvas by the movements of the painter's body. The brush marks, therefore, are visible marks showing the normally invisible intentionality of the body. The body's actions are invisible because as the body moves it does not normally leave a trace of its path, but in the case of a painter the manner in which the brush leaves paint on the canvas is a visible trace of the body's intentionality (as this is understood by Merleau-Ponty). Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of painting is unfortunately wrapped up in the myth of the "modern painter" as genius and the brush mark as index to that genius, but the underlying premise is useful because it describes a physical relationship between vision and the body.

### **The *Flesh***

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has been described as the philosophy of ambiguity because of the manner in which he intertwines sensory and cognitive experience. Ambiguity is a very important concept for Merleau-Ponty because he felt that it was through the acknowledgment, not the reduction, of the ambiguity that exists between sensory and cognitive elements that an accurate ethics could be produced (Langer in Caro 2003: 87). His unfinished book *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968) was an attempt to write his philosophy of ambiguity into ontology, and thereby to produce this ethics. The 'visible' and the 'invisible' are complicated terms to define completely because what is visible can also be invisible depending on one's point of view; but Merleau-Ponty uses the terms loosely to describe the manner in which the mind creates invisible conceptual maps of the external world which are informed by and inform the sensory experience of the world. One example that Merleau-Ponty offers of the relationship between the visible and the invisible is colour. He describes how the perception of red has both the qualities of a label which allows the viewer to attach it to other experiences of the colour red, and a sensory immediacy that makes each new encounter different because of the shape, tone, lighting conditions, etc. 'Red', therefore, is both a conceptual thing and a seen thing (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 131-32).

In the last chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, titled 'The Intertwining – the Chiasm' (1968: 130-55), Merleau-Ponty introduces the term *flesh* to describe the site of intersection between the invisible and the visible. The *flesh* is a difficult term to define because it is meant to denote an active process and, again, Merleau-Ponty refers to description of an experience to give the term some shape. One of the examples he uses is the aforementioned one of the sensation of one hand touching another. In the quote used earlier the word 'tangibles'

denotes the double sensation of touching and being touched. Merleau-Ponty turns the very fact that one is tangible into an action because having shape means that the embodied subject is always in continual 'palpitation' with the world. Through the hands, the surface of the body can touch itself and the world in the same moment (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 135-37), hence the body is enfolded directly with the external world. Merleau-Ponty uses the doubleness of this experience, where both hands are sensing each other and the world simultaneously, to open up a description of his central concept of the *flesh*. The flesh is the surface of chiasmic interchange between the invisible and visible, the body and the world, and the rational and the irrational.

If one sets Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* against Albertian perspective, what one has instead of two points of view that can be reversed but are still divided by distance is an intertwining of two points such that they cease to be isolated and insular. A suitable metaphor for such intertwining is that of the Möebius strip, the name for a loop (e.g., of paper) that can be made continuous by twisting it in such a way that if one runs a finger around the surface of one side of the strip one in fact never encounters another side. Two previously separate sides are enfolded but never touch and so act like Merleau-Ponty's concept of the *flesh*. The viewer's relationship with the visible world can be thought of as such a continuous loop whose ends, edges and sides can never be clearly detached or determined. Contra Lacanian theory, in which the gaze can never be overturned by the subject of representation, but will always remain outside the picture, structuring it from there, in Merleau-Ponty there is no such exterior gaze. The visible is an interaction with the invisible, the seen with being seen; hence whereas Lacan's model is performative, Merleau-Ponty's is embodied. Instead of showing for, one has a continual entangling in which mastery is made contingent and ambiguous.

Despite their differences, Lacan and Merleau-Ponty are both useful to an investigation of Berni Searle's work. Because her work presents contradictory elements that cannot be exhausted through one interpretation, it must be approached in more ways than one. The embodied character of the viewer's relationship with Searle's work can best be understood with recourse to Merleau-Ponty, but there are other aspects involved in the way her work interacts with the viewer that can only be understood with the help of a notion of a sovereign gaze, such as one finds in Lacan. These theorists will be put to work in the forthcoming two chapters in a bid to demonstrate how in Searle's work the once-widespread philosophical and artistic disassociation of the eye and mind from the body is no longer at issue. Chapter Two

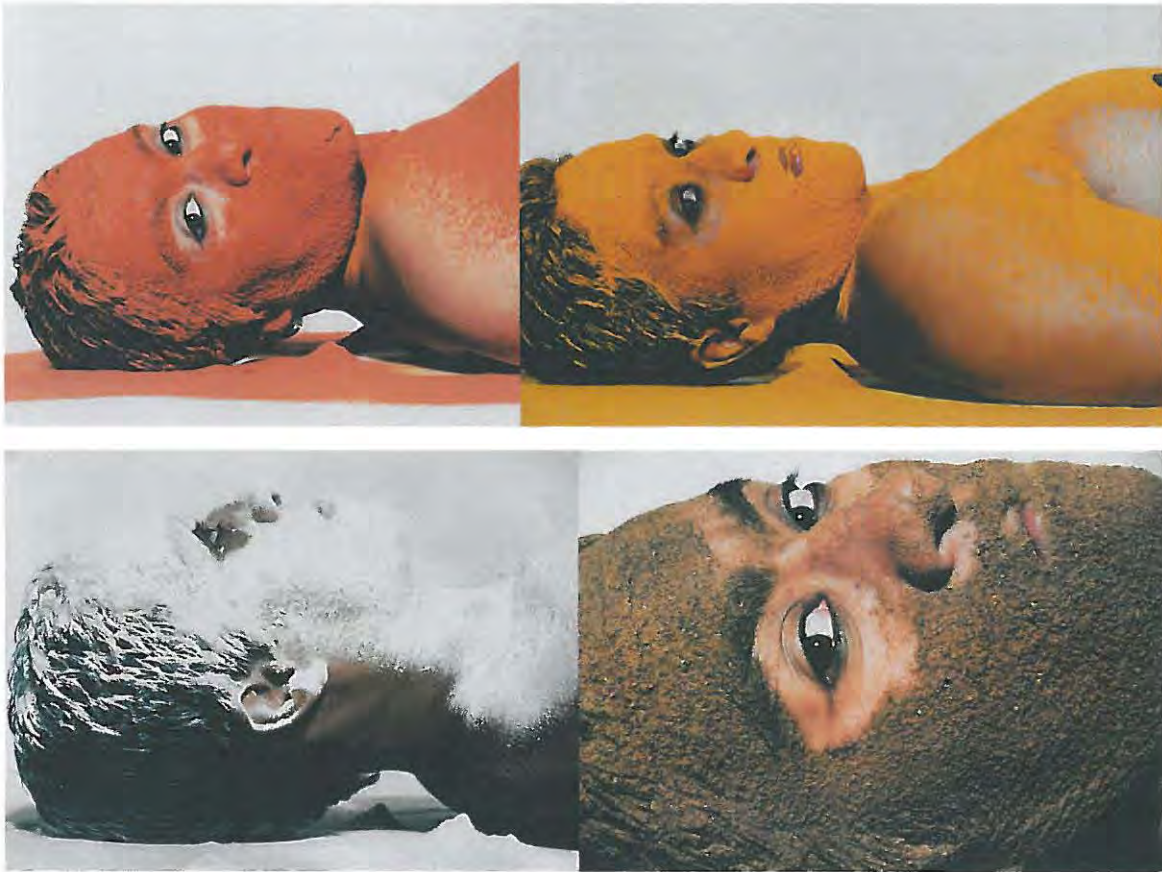
will look at Searle's static photographic works, while Chapter Three will look at the installation *Profile* and two video works. Both will be used to argue for Searle's engagement with images of her own body that are designed to act on the viewer in particularly corporeal ways that suggest an almost Merleau-Pontian entwining between viewer and work.

## Chapter Two

Representations, Derrida argued, were 'sendings' (*envois*), which never reach their final destination or reunite with the object or idea they represent. Because of their inevitable 'destinerrance', their interminable wanderings ... representations can never be replaced by the pure presence of what they re-resent. But neither can their difference from the 'things' they represent be completely effaced in the name of a realm of pure simulacra entirely without a trace of reference. (Jay 1993: 508)

In this quote Martin Jay describes Jacques Derrida's interpretation of the gap between representation and the thing represented as an "otherness" that can never be entirely mastered by the specular image. Jay (1993: 504-5) describes the "otherness" that intervenes between the visual presence and representation as an "invisible materiality". Using Jay's concept of "invisible materiality" as a starting point, this chapter will argue that in the viewing of Searle's work one becomes aware of an "otherness" in the image, which derives from her ability to manipulate the materiality of her body, to both affirm and efface it.

This chapter will focus on Searle's photographic work, which will be discussed in a roughly chronological order. This serves the argument because it shows how Searle's interest in communicating the corporeality of her body begins and how she develops this interest through her oeuvre to her video work, which will be discussed in the next chapter. To assist the interpretation the visual theories of Lacan and Merleau-Ponty will be drawn on. A good place to begin is with the *Colour me* series she produced between 1998 and 2000.



### *Colour Me*

*Figure 9*

*Colour me* consists of a series of photographic nude self-portraits in which Searle appears lying flat on her back. She retains the same pose throughout the series with the only variation being the direction in which she is looking. In some images she is looking straight up but in others she has turned her head slightly towards the viewer and is staring out of the photograph. The photographs are taken in the white space of a photographic studio, giving Searle a neutral background. The photographs have been cropped and resemble portraits that have been turned on their side. She has covered herself with a selection of spices and pea flour. The spices, red paprika, yellow turmeric and brown cloves, have been applied to the surface of her skin, leaving certain areas bare. The spices have not been rubbed or painted on but

rather have been dusted lightly onto Searle while she lies still on the floor. This method of applying the spice or flour to her body leaves Searle passive and inert. The only intervention to the layer covering Searle is her eyes, which have been left uncovered. The spice covers Searle's mouth in varying degrees and in some photographs her mouth is completely covered.

### **The spice**

Searle first used spice in her earlier installation *Com-fort* (1997) installed in the Castle of Good Hope. Searle used the relationship between the location and the spice to refer to the spice trade, which brought Indonesian slaves to the cape. Searle's relationship to spice therefore refers to her relationship to her Diasporic heritage, which includes Malaysia, Egypt and Germany. The use of particular spices defines Malay cooking and establishes a historical link between South Africa and spice countries. Spice not only refers to Searle's heritage but also refers to the colonial assumptions in which the spice countries or 'Orient' carry associations of the exotic for the Western traveller. Searle is very critical of this association because, in her words, "I'm trying to work against ... simplistic, stereotypical classification" (Searle 2003: 15). Searle comments on how she is irritated with how the media has latched onto this aspect of the work. The media's attraction to the exotic nature of spice exemplifies the art historian Jane Blocker's (1999: 74) statement: "Identity's politics is naming". What the *Colour Me* series plays with is in fact the manner in which stereotypes like those used by the media are involved in identity politics. Searle is disappointed that the media has obviously not understood the irony of her title "Colour Me" or the fact that the series is meant to undermine the very assumptions used by the media.

### **Naming the Visible: The Meaning of *Colour Me* Series**

The *Colour Me* Series therefore needs to be interpreted by looking at how Searle undermines these and other assumptions about spice and her identity. Firstly there is something confrontational about Searle first pigmenting herself and then asking the viewer to "Colour [her]". Searle is asking for the viewer's look to colour her image, but what the look is in fact doing is not colouring the image but identifying the colour. In this play on the word 'colour' the viewer's looking becomes equated with his or her naming the image. (Looking as naming reminds one of Blocker's (1999: 74) statement regarding identity and naming.) Searle's title makes one aware of how the identification of a visible thing brings together language and the

visual in a way that fixes the meaning, reducing the ubiquity of an individual's experience to a word. Searle's use of colour is not only pertinent because it relates to race; colour is also a good example of how words do not encompass experience because there is a difference between seeing a colour and knowing the name of a colour.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968: 131-132) in his discussion of colour distinguishes between 'alleged' colours and 'visibles' (described in Chapter One as the difference between red the concept and the actual visible colour). 'Alleged' colour refers to the name of a colour and the 'visibles' refers to all the aspects of colour that escape language, for instance shades, tones and spatial orientation. In the *Colour Me* series Searle treats skin colour in ways that can be related to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of how one sees colour. In this analogy Merleau-Ponty's 'alleged' colour is akin to Searle's race. Searle subverts the semiotic framing of her 'alleged' colour by covering herself in spices that turn skin colour back into hue, texture and shape; and in this way treats her colour in ways that can be likened to Merleau-Ponty's 'visibles'. However there is a contradiction in Searle's re-colouring because while effacing her race by covering herself she becomes labelled as another pigment. The title of the work therefore acts as all language does to direct and frame the image. Searle conceals her racial colouring, but then reasserts the manner in which being visible is enfolded with language by asking the viewer to name her colour again. Searle's work shows how one can never really escape being labelled as something by someone in the visible world.

Searle's choice to cover her skin is not accidental because the skin is the threshold between the body and the world, as described by Diane Victor (2006: 50): "Skin functions as the thin, physically almost inconsequential veneer, the presence and condition of which nonetheless determines whether we are attracted or repulsed". When Searle plays with her skin colour she intervenes at the visible threshold between self and outside world. The action happens at the level of the image and so enacts a mimicry of how skin acts as the visual identity of the subject.

### **Desire for Identity**

The inherent ambiguity of subverting and then reinstating her identity is what makes Searle's work so effective as a *performance* of the experience of identity and not just a comment on identity politics. Searle's reference to her race can be interpreted as a postcolonial statement.

However, a postcolonial interpretation may limit Searle's work to a subversion of her racial past and not address the ambiguity in her work that looks at Searle's desire to be named. Searle has chosen flour and spice to cover her body. These substances are not foreign to her, strangers did not impose them on her; these pigments are an aspect of her own history. Searle is therefore both trying to break away from her racial identity and exhibiting her desire to be re-inscribed by other identities. How we become separate to our image. In Jacques Lacan's *The four fundamental concepts of psycho-analysis* (1994), naming the image marks the entrance of the subject into the symbolic realm. As discussed in the previous chapter, when the subject identifies the image of himself or herself in the mirror as "I" they move from the imaginary image of self to the symbolic realm by creating a subject position in language based on that image. Lacan's theory of subjectivity offers an approach to Jane Blocker's (1999: 74) quote "Identity's politics is naming" because his theory understands the subject position as being semiotic, or in Blocker's terms: to have an identity one must be named. Lacan also addresses the desire for identities because only by being named does the subject have a place in the symbolic realm of culture.

Searle's representational play therefore gets beneath the term identity in a manner that unearths desires and anxieties surrounding visible identity. As Van der Watt (2003: 28) puts it, her work "seeks not origins but networks, not purity but crossings, not endings but processes". Interpreting Searle's work therefore requires an approach that allows for ambiguity to be drawn into the discussion so that the "networks", "crossings" and "processes" are allowed to lead the interpretation. At the beginning of the chapter Derrida was quoted in discussing the gap between representation and the thing represented. It is Searle's awareness and negotiation with this gap that makes her work so open-ended. In Searle's work the gap has two levels: firstly it exists between her representations of her identity and her experience of identity, and, secondly, it is literalised as the gap between her artwork and the viewer. The crossings, processes and networks between meaning exist not only conceptually but also corporeally between the viewer and the work as these are engaged in the process of viewing.

### *Looking Back*

To look in more detail at how Searle's work draws the viewer into a dialogue with the artist's identity in a manner that allows for an enfolding of the conceptual and corporeal aspects of identity and meaning production, it is useful to focus on a set of images within the *Colour Me*

series, titled *Looking Back* (1999). In these images Searle, as the title suggests, looks straight out at the viewer, making one aware of the eyes as crucial in the encounter between viewer and work. Searle returns the viewer's "gaze", and in doing so makes the viewer conscious of his or her looking. One is thus compelled to consider the question of the gaze that Searle puts to work in the images.

## **The Gaze**

In *Looking Back* Searle uses a particular convention discussed in art history as 'returning the gaze'. Michael Fried (1996: 49) in his description of Edouard Manet's painting, *Olympia* (1863) describes the significance of an artwork returning the "gaze". Fried begins by looking at the genre of the nude in which the viewer is able to freely gaze at the naked form of a woman as an object because the woman is painted to be submissive to the viewer (who is presumed to be male). Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962: 360-61) is also aware of the effects of "the gaze" in objectifying the other, or in this case the image of the other. He sees the gaze as arising when the subject withdraws into the core of his or her thinking nature, or in other words: when the subject stares out, like Descartes' seeing mind, in a manner that encounters the other as an object (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 360-61). For Merleau-Ponty this occurs when the subject assumes that his or her vision is objective or autonomous and not part of a continual experience of perception, or in Mark C. Taylor's (1987: 62-63) terms, when "[difference] ceases being experience and becomes signification". This looking that is not experiential is what Merleau-Ponty (1962: 360-61) calls the "inhuman gaze", and it is really this gaze that is at work in the objectifying look of a male viewer before a conventional image of the nude.

Fried argues that Manet, through his interest in beholder relations, subverted this traditional situation which, through vision, structures the image as object and affirms the viewer as subject. Manet paints a nude that candidly stares back at the viewer and therefore makes the viewer aware of his looking. The effect of this is to make the viewer aware of his desiring and objectifying gaze and thereby to instil a sense of shame (Fried 1996: 49). The sense of shame in being caught looking in a desiring fashion at an unaware person is reminiscent of Sartre's voyeur who becomes conscious of his desiring look on hearing footsteps. The objectifying look of a male spectator has been proposed by contemporary feminist theorists in order to analyse how the female body becomes a sexual object in the field of representation.

Linda Nochlin, a contemporary art historian with a particular interest in feminist and gender debates, has argued that certain modernist painters have adopted the male gaze in relation to their female subjects by representing women as fragmented body parts, which turns them into fetish objects for the male spectator. One example in her text *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (1995) is the difference in the representation of women and men in Edgar Degas' work. Nochlin (1995: 41-43) argues that Degas, in a few of his paintings of the theatre, most notably *Cabaret* (1870), aligns the world of men with the orchestra and the world of women with the stage. The women on the stage become visual spectacles that further become fetish objects because Degas fragments their figures by painting only a view of their legs. Laura Mulvey, who is also known for her contributions to contemporary feminist debates, looks at how the male gaze is manifested through a reliance on "the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its [male dominated] world" (Mulvey 1989: 14-25). Mulvey is famous for her adaptation of the Lacanian subject to the cinema. Mulvey argues that the mechanisms that frame the subject in relation to the gaze in Lacan's theory, frame the cinematic image in relation to the male spectator. According to Mulvey there is a difference between representations of men and women in early cinema in the 1930s and 1940s and that this difference is created by a male gaze that frames women as victims and objects of desire and men as confident and in control. The example of Manet shows, however, that this relationship between male viewer and female image can be disrupted and the gaze can be reversed, or at least returned.

Searle's work plays with the art historical convention of the returned gaze because she is not only looking back but has also framed her nudity through the layer of spice. Because of the spice one cannot observe her in an unmediated way simply as a nude, and as a result the way that one experiences her return gaze shifts. There is more to the 'look' of Searle. While the image's look is confrontational enough to grab the viewer's attention, it is not a full eye-to-eye look. Searle is on her back and so her looking is not horizontal but vertical. Her body is restricted by her passive horizontal position and she is only able to look out from the corner of her eyes. Moreover Searle's mouth is covered by pigment and this further refers to her passive relation to the viewer's gaze. The tension between the image's active look and the passive muted pose opens Searle's artwork to an ambiguity in which she points to something more than an interplay of looks. Through this ambiguity Searle is constantly producing images that are not quite what they seem. As a viewer, one must be aware that Searle is offering her body to the viewer's gaze very self-consciously, and therefore what appears to be initially

visible is often only the first step in understanding the work. As van der Watt (in Stevenson 2004: 34) puts it, the ambiguity of the images

enunciates a constant theme in Searle's work in that they are not quite what they seem: the poetic quality of the work is checked by a discomfort, they promise us intimacy but also push us away; they present something like a contradictory and tempered beauty. They emphasise that visual appearances are never quite what they seem.

Commentators on Searle's art have all noted the openness of her work. Searle herself expressed this openness in a statement to Rory Bester (Searle 2003:10):

I'm very aware of not wanting to represent myself in a way that is static. I think that the work itself exists as a result of a creative process, and often my process attempts to convey something . . . a flexibility and a state of flux, which is central to my view of occupying multiple identities.

Here it would help to reintroduce Lacan's theory of the mirror phase, which was briefly explored in the first chapter. It was suggested then that because the subject is formed on the mirror image a gap between the subject and the body is opened up, one which the subject tries to deny by entering into the symbolic. As the Derrida quote at the start of this chapter suggests, though, the gap between representation and the thing represented remains at work throughout the subject's life. The Lacanian gaze operates at the level of that gap, and one of the ways the subject denies its capacity to remind the viewer of lack (as in Lacan's story of the sardine can) is by cultivating a sovereign look. This look can be understood in terms of the aforementioned notion of the inhuman gaze, proposed by Merleau-Ponty. This allows subjects to create an illusionary position of singularity and autonomy whereby they can pretend to control how they see and are perceived in the visible world. In both Merleau-Ponty and Lacan, therefore, we find a discrepancy between the subject's illusion of consistency and the reality of the subject. The inconsistency of actual experience, denied by the subject, is the reason why a term like 'identity' is so difficult to use. Searle would not be able to undermine her identity as "coloured" if this fact was empirical to her, but like all visually ascribed identity it is not. On one level Searle's self-portraits do operate at the level of the imagined image of the perfect self. That is, she can be seen as presenting herself as something other, as playing a role in which the spice idealises her body. She plays on the capacity of the image to efface her own identity, and in this way does not treat herself as the object of an inhuman gaze. Rather, she acknowledges the ability of the body to signify in multiple ways and to put iden-

tity in flux. Searle mimics the imagined self created in the mirror stage by creating multiple images of possible imagined selves. Central to this process is her use of spice, which as a covering can be seen to idealise her body, but acts also to disrupt an inhuman gaze that would associate her with a singular identity.

### **Spice and corporeality**

The spice acts in opposition to Searle's open eyes because while the eyes engage the viewer in a communication with the artwork, the spice covers her body, the object evidently offered to the viewer's look. The spice also covers her mouth and so again in opposition to a look that confronts, the spice silences. The spice, by alluding to the exotic, re-covers Searle's body with references to the colonial other, a reference Searle is simultaneously undoing through a re-inscription of her body's colour. The viewer is thus drawn into an ambiguous relationship with Searle's image in which the spice both asserts and undermines notions of colour.

For Searle spice is a choice medium for other reasons, as the following quote reveals:

I am drawn to spice on a number of levels. From its very definite associations: of tactility and smell, what it's used for, and its richness in terms of colour and texture . . . As an artist, I'm attracted to its material richness and sensuality. I am seduced by it to some extent as well (Searle 2003: 15).

Searle's attraction to the spice is therefore corporeal. Her physical attraction to the spice becomes evident in the manner in which it is used in relation to her body. It gives weight to the viewer's looking, which becomes a kind of covering look, a look that can be equated with the invisible pressure exerted by the layer of spice covering Searle. This layer according to Kathryn Smith, can be related to burial. There is a slippage between being coloured and being covered as Smith (2000: 1-2) elaborates: "[c]overing her naked body with spices and flour and presenting herself for our observation, the hues are at once seductive and deadly, carrying with their opacity an implicit threat of suffocation and burial". The visual weight of the spice covering the body also expresses a sense of the psychological smothering of identity. There is a play between covering and looking because the spice makes Searle's actual skin invisible but makes her body's shape visible. There is therefore a tension between showing and hiding, showing an identity even while hiding another.

The spice as a familiar substance that Searle was “attracted” to also makes the covering comforting. Searle clothes herself in the spice and in a way this clothing acts as a protective layer shielding her from the gaze of the viewer. This comfort again has weight because one is aware of the spice’s physical presence in the manner in which it has been photographed. The comforting weight is like climbing underneath a blanket, it gives the cover substance. But again there is an inversion; clothing the naked body to shield it from being seen has biblical connotations of sin and guilt. The spice carries this metaphor because it refers to the exotic and the desired other and therefore also refers to Searle’s desire for her identity.

The physical nature of the spice is accentuated by the manner in which Searle has been photographed. Searle’s body, apart from the application of spice, has not been altered through technological means and has been presented very close to life-size. The photographs have also cropped the image of Searle so that there is very little sense of distance between the viewer and the image of Searle. Michael Fried (1978), in his analysis of the beholder in Gustave Courbet’s paintings, argues that one of the aspects of Courbet’s work that allows the viewer to identify with the body of the artist, notably in self-portrait paintings like *Sleeping man*, is that the figure is painted so close to the pictorial surface that the invisible unpainted body is implied to extend beyond the frame of the canvas. Searle’s photographs, both in their intense colour and in her close presence to the surface of the photograph, can in a similar manner create a corporeal connection between the viewer and work. The viewer can see the pores of Searle’s skin along with the texture of the spice. The body of Searle is photographed so that viewers identify with the image in the same way that they would identify with a tangible person present before them.

By identifying with the body of Searle, the viewer is also identifying with being covered. One can propose that in looking at the image the viewer feels the pressure of the spice. But the viewer is implicated in this process of burial because the viewer’s colouring look is also a covering look. So the spice creates a double sensation in the viewer because the viewer identifies and feels the weight of the spice and yet at the same time Searle is obliquely accusing the viewer of being the source of that weight. The spice therefore introduces a physical component that interrupts the viewer’s gaze and makes the viewer aware of the physical pressure of being visible. The physical nature of Searle’s work often expresses itself as physical vio-

lence that Searle simulates on her body. This violence again is ambiguous in relation to the identity of the perpetrator because Searle does it to herself, but in the presentation of her work she makes the viewer identify with the violence and so turns the viewer into the perpetrator. It is in the very nature of being visible that the gaze can master and objectify. Again the ambiguity in the subject is that while creating an image of self that elides or challenges the gaze that image is in fact structured by the gaze. So Searle's relationship to the spice covering is violent, oppressive and also comforting and familiar. One can hence understand why *Colour Me* is so appropriate as a representation of identity, which is so ambivalent, unstable and multivocal.

In sum what is being suggested in relation to *Colour Me* is that Searle not only challenges the gaze of the South African spectator who would frame her according to race but goes beyond the specifics of this context in her ability to evade art historical categories that would want to canvas her work for particular genres. Searle's work rather includes something else through the act of viewing, which I am attempting to draw out through the different sets of eyes that are interlaced in this analysis: Searle the artist looking at herself as image, Searle the image looking back at the viewer, the viewer looking at the image of Searle, and the two chief theorists (Lacan and Merleau-Ponty) whose eyes this thesis has chosen to look through. The position of Searle the artist is critical because it points to the missing referent discussed by Derrida, the living breathing Searle who is driving these multiple images of self. Also critical is the viewer's engagement with the image, which is enfolded with Searle's own engagement with her image. The body of Searle allows for the corporeal identification between the viewer and the artwork. The body of Searle is not present when the artwork is been viewed but because of the physical and intimate nature of Searle's work her body's physicality is communicated. Searle is very physically involved in her work and this, one can argue, is translated to the viewer through the image. This translated physicality makes looking at Searle's work about more than just reading a commentary on identity. The work is an expression of the experience of identity in which the body interrupts the conventions that would posit it as a sign for a complete identity by emphasising rather that it is a mutable living process.

In one of the images in *Looking Back* the body almost literally looks back at the viewer through the focal point of a nipple. The nipple gives the body of Searle the quality of an eye

endowed with the agency to return the gaze of the viewer. Searle's work therefore requires a viewer with a body; the weight of the spice is not felt by the gaze but by the viewer's embodied vision. The body of Searle looks back at the body of the viewer by referring to the missing weight of Searle's actual body. It can thus be suggested that the viewer cannot view Searle as a single, detached eye, but rather is embodied in the physicality of looking, feeling with the body as much as seeing with the eye. In Merleau-Pontian terms, more than another set of eyes is required for the interruption of the gaze; what is required is a shift towards recognizing that the eye is attached to a physical body and that before the disembodied gaze there was the embodied viewer. For Merleau-Ponty, then, understanding that vision is an active sensory experience disrupts the gaze.

## Traces



Figure 10



The *Colour Me* series (1999) was followed by *Traces* (1999), a series very similar to *Colour Me* in that Searle uses images of her body covered in spice. In *Traces*, however, the covered body has been photographed from above to present frontal images of Searle. The photographic paper is double-sided and on the back is an image of Searle's imprint in spice once she has removed herself. The double-sided images are hung vertically on paper suspended from the ceiling, the effect of which is a suspended image that is encountered at body height. The suspended sheets of paper are connected at the bottom and there is a continuous piece of paper running along the floor from one suspended image to the next. The pictures of Searle's covered body are on the inside facing each other and the imprints in spice are on the outside. The immediate effect is that it looks as if Searle has pushed herself through the paper, which is covered in spice, to the other side. Searle's knees are slightly bent and this adds to the impression of Searle pushing out of one plane onto the other. At the bottom of the images on both sides is a postal scale filled with the same type of spice that Searle has just displaced. The images of Searle's spice-covered body all face each other on the inside of the installation and the outlines of Searle's body left in spice are on the outside of the installation.

The spice, as in the *Colour Me* series, is the substance that marks the ambiguity in Searle's image. The spice in the postal scale at the bottom appears to represent the spice displaced by the body, and almost literally seems to stand for the shift from the visible body on the one side of the image to the invisible body on the other. In *Colour Me*, the visual weight of the spice was discussed in relation to the viewer's looking. Here the weight of the spice has been put on the scale and measured. What is strange with relation to corporeality of the spice in the *Colour me* series versus the applied spice in *Traces* is that in *Traces* the spice on the body does not have the same weight because the image has been displayed to show the body vertically. The fact that now the image does not correspond to gravity means that the spice on the body loses its weight. The only item that still retains that weight is the scale filled with spice. The traces of Searle appear almost ghostlike; she seems to hover above the scale like a spectre or vapour.

The immaterial qualities of the images act in contrast to the material weight of the spice in the scale. The scale of spice can thus be seen as standing in for weight that the immaterial body is missing but in doing so it reconstitutes the body's value as an amount of spice on the

scale. There is an exchange here between the body and spice. This exchange can be related to the history of the spice trade in which bodies were exchanged for goods like spice.

Liese van der Watt (2004: 124) describes the disappearance of Searle's body in *Traces* as a staged escape from the weight of the *Colour Me* series. Van der Watt sees the weight of the spice covering Searle as an oppressive force, however she further points out that the actual weight cannot be that heavy and argues that this indicates that even "tenuous links" like the weight of the spice become heavy through the greedy politic of claiming identities. In *Traces* the spice in the scale is formed to point upward, to lead the viewer's eye towards the above image. The images of Searle appear on another level or realm than the scale and also refer to the discrepancy between the material body and the immaterial image or identity that drives the subject's desire. Van der Watt (2004: 124) claims that in her work Searle "returns again and again to that invasive weight"; but in this instance, by distancing the weight-bearing spice from the traces of her body, she turns what was once a covering or skin into a substance. Where, in *Colour Me*, the viewer was invited to dust Searle with a spice and hence colour her, here the viewer is invited to measure the spice in the scale to determine how much would be needed to 'fill in' the absent body of Searle. There is thus a physical appeal to the viewer, produced by the relationship Searle sets up between the spice in the scale (as body substance) and the haloes of spice that suggest the contours of Searle's body. Again the viewer experiences the interplay of presence and absence, the visible and the invisible, in a way that also intertwines vision and the body.

## **Discoloured**

After *Traces*, Searle leaves the spice behind and works on a series that draws on scientific and taxonomic language to represent her image of self. This series was titled *Discoloured* (1999-2000), referring to the effects of the black henna used by Searle on her body. Again the title is provocative in terms of race relations and refers, like *Colour Me*, to the visual presence of the body. The henna fills a similar conceptual space as the spice because, like the spice, it refers to Searle's heritage: one of her maternal great-grandfathers came from Saudi Arabia, where henna is used by women to adorn their bodies.



Figure 11

In this body of work she presents her body to the viewer in fragments. In *A Darker Shade of Light* (1999), for instance, Searle has had pictures taken of her body that are reminiscent of images one would normally see of a corpse during an autopsy that has been photographed for evidence. The henna has been applied to the body and in the context of the taxonomic nature of the images, looks like bruising. The presentation of the images furthers the sense of the body being under investigation because they are placed on huge light-boxes. The images float at different levels in the light-boxes and the photographs appear flimsy and rough-edged. This appearance is due to the fact that Searle pulled the backing paper of the photographs off, leaving only the image-imprinted emulsion.



Figure 12

Placing her body under the scientific or medical gaze, Searle offers herself as an object of investigation. What prevents the viewer from easily adopting a scientific gaze, however, is not visual weight but visual tactility. The stain left on Searle's body by the henna looks like bruising, and this signifier to physical violence interrupts the scientific gaze because it equates the objectification of the body with physical violence. Skin and ink come together to show the violence often involved in turning the body into an image. The violence is further referred to because Searle has peeled off the back of the white paper and the photographs bear marks to that action. The transparent paper has folded in slightly on the sides where it was stretched. The surface has folds and wrinkles clearly visible under the bright light of light

boxes. The viewer is therefore made aware of the photograph as tactile object rather than passive image. Placed on light-boxes, the photographs also gain objecthood because they are not hung on the wall but rest against each of the walls in the room. In this way the transparency of the image is paradoxically attached to what can be thought of as a body, which appeals to the viewer's sense of touch.

The image and tactility of the photograph come together clearly in the photographs of the underside of Searle's feet and of her stomach. In both of these pictures the picture plane is disturbed by pulling the photograph off its white backing. In the picture of the feet the wrinkles on the bottom of the foot are mimicked by wrinkles on the picture surface. In the image of Searle's stomach there is one fold running at the top of the picture that mimics the fold in the stomach by the belly button. What Searle does here is to make the representation of a fold into a real fold, thereby bridging the gap between absent body and visible image. The viewer may not have access to the body of Searle but the corporeality of Searle's body is physically mimicked in a manner that allows the viewer to become tactilely involved.

The tactile relationship between the viewer and the image again stands in for the missing body of Searle. At the same time the gap that exists between the missing body and the viewer is signified in this image by a pane of glass that Searle has pushed up against her feet. As in all her work there is an inversion. The proximity to the body created by the mimicry of the picture plane is cut by the glass, which signifies the distance between the viewer and the missing body. Searle here again plays with the viewer's looking by actively enfolding the viewer in the process of identifying with the image. On one hand, the viewer is absorbed by the tactility of the image and on the other hand Searle pushes the viewer away by making it clear that this is only a representation. However the feet are pushed against the glass and so while the glass signifies distance it also shows the physical pushing of the body in the image. The relationship between the wrinkles on the surface and on the body acts in a similarly conflicted manner because while the mimicry brings a tactile quality to the picture surface it also alerts the viewer to the fact that this is an image and not a body that one can reach out and touch.

## Merleau-Ponty and the flesh

The image therefore forms a threshold between the viewer and the absent body of Searle. One is reminded of Merleau-Ponty (1968: 131-32), in his essay 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm', in which he uses the notion of two hands touching and being touched to describe the enfolding of vision and the look. The two hands may touch each other, as vision touches its object when one looks at it, but at the same time their enfolding is not such that the two become the same. Touching and being touched, like looking and being looked at, involve a degree of difference, hence what results is not substitution or blending but rather a kind of pulsing between hands (or between vision and its object). The Merleau-Pontian term *flesh* is also significant in terms of how it describes the chiasm between visible and invisible, between viewer and world. The term is deliberately tactile and corporeal to emphasise the viewer's embodied position in relation to the world. Images that use a material to emphasise tactility thus draw attention to this embodied relationship. Searle, for instance, turns the surface of the photograph into skin or flesh by tearing off its white background and making sure that the pictorial wrinkles mimic the skin of the body in the image. In this way such images introduce a corporeal presence by making the picture surface tactile. Transparent image and wrinkled emulsion interact as a kind of flesh that appeals to the viewer's body. At the same time, of course, Searle mediates this bodily lure by inserting a glass pane between the viewer and image. The pane and the picture plane are forced into proximity with the feet, all of which push at the viewer as if to extend into his or her space. But this implied extension is interminably delayed, so that the viewer is left identifying with the body in its absence as a series of stained fragments. The body is offered, but only as bruised, corpse-like and fragmented, signifying a lost and irrecoverable wholeness. If these works re-stage the mirror-phase, it is only to put the viewer's own sense of bodily wholeness at risk, and perhaps to remind him or her, yet again, of the incompleteness and instability of identity.

In his discussion of Merleau-Ponty, Mark Taylor (1987: 69) describes how the body in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is a "gaping wound" that always remains 'incomplete'. Searle's work exemplifies this sense of the body not as an object to the self-conscious subject but as an openness that shifts and flows. Searle's work is like an open wound. The physical weight of the spice, the henna as bruising, the tactile marks, all pull and push on the viewer, corpo-

really disrupting the viewer's ability to create a critical distance between the work and him or herself. Searle therefore uses the carnality of her body to disrupt systems of signification that operate to reduce the body to a specular object. She emphasises the physical experience of being visible and so incorporates the invisible pressure of the body into the specular realm. In this way, as much as she might draw on conventions of representation that would appeal to an 'inhuman gaze' and situate her as passive object, she always disrupts the expected. Sara Heinamaa (2003: 67), in a commentary on Merleau-Ponty, looks at how he sees the body not as "the body-object [corps-objet] described by biologists ... but the living body of the subject". It is this body which Searle in her various ways represents, and in the process she lives the relationship between her identity and her body through her art.

### **The stain**

One more aspect of *Discoloured* needs brief attention, and that is the staining in terms of how one can read it from a Lacanian perspective. Staining is obviously critical to these works, and the manner in which they interact with the viewer via the stain is significant. In an edition of these photographic prints Searle included the following definition of the word 'stain': "A stain is a spot or mark that is not easily removed" (Searle 2003: 26). In Lacan's system, the stain is a guarantee of one's existence in the world – or in what (as discussed in Chapter One) Lacan calls the 'picture'. "[I]f I am anything in the picture," writes Lacan (1994: 97), "it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain, the spot." The screen, as earlier noted, is the point of mediation between the subject and the gaze; hence the screen is really a mask that shows itself to the gaze. It is at this level that the subject stains itself to settle into the picture (its world). Lacan has animal mimicry in mind when he describes all this: the crustacean *caprella* adapts itself to a "stain shape" to camouflage itself, hence "it becomes a stain, it becomes a picture, it is inscribed in the picture" (Lacan 1994: 99). There is, in other words, a preexistent shape to which the animal adapts itself, thereby taking up a place in the picture, as another element of the composition. For Lacan, camouflage is not a process of harmonising with one's background but rather of "against a mottled background, becoming mottled" (Lacan 1994: 99); that is, it is an act of showing by means of which one is not lit up (and exposed) by the gaze (as Lacan was in his story about the sardine can). Safely 'mottled', the subject can live in a world where the gaze can be sidelined, and in which vision need not be more than a matter of the ability to see oneself seeing oneself. In the visible

world, therefore, by becoming the stain, by showing for the gaze in order to elide it, the subject maintains his or her illusion of consistency.

Searle, by literally staining herself and forcing her feet or other body parts against the picture plane of a physically-experienced screen (the emulsion), draws attention to the kind of dynamics discussed by Lacan. In effect, the viewer is rendered uncomfortable in his or her picture by being shown images in which the body is directly shown to the gaze. The viewer, however, cannot be sure whether the gaze is his or hers or belongs to the light in the boxes which illuminates Searle as stain. If one could easily adopt a medical gaze, it would be possible to say that the viewer is the gaze that fixes Searle as a stain. But fixes her where? There is no other term in the artwork other than the light. There is no equivalent, beyond the stained screen, for a picture. It is only the viewer who is in a position that equates with Lacan's notion of the picture. Hence the light of the boxes can only be aligned with the point of light as gaze, and Searle's images – her body – become the stain in the *viewer's* picture. Lacanian theory therefore offers another way of conceptualising the uncomfortable proximity Searle's images produce. By staining the viewer's picture, these tactile images almost wrap over the viewer like a skin, enfolding him or her in acts of violence. He or she is turned into a possible perpetrator of the bodily pressure that has led to the would-be bruising. The corpse-like quality of many of these *Discoloured* images further implicates the viewer in unspeakable deeds. Of course, this is not a matter of shedding blame, but a means by which Searle enfolds both herself and the viewer in a shared history of race-based violence. The corpse is also an object of memory and mourning, something to contemplate, a reminder of past injustices and the passivising results of a regime that aimed to reduce identity to colour. The body of Searle is a stain in Apartheid's picture.

What has hopefully been demonstrated through the discussions in this chapter is that Searle's work enfolds the conceptual process of interpretation with the corporeality of the body and this enables her work to communicate with the viewer on more than one level. Searle's work communicates something to the viewer's body that enables the viewer to become physically active in viewing and interpreting the work. Through this multi-layered approach Searle is able to not only show but express her own enfolded relationship between her identity and her body. Searle however teases the viewer by drawing on traditional forms of spectatorship that

set up a conceptual relationship between the artwork and the viewer, only to interrupt these structures with a phenomenological approach. This double strategy shifts the beholder from being a passive, objective onlooker to being an embodied and subjective viewer. The fluidity and plurality that most of Searle's commentators find in her work is created through this double strategy. Searle therefore encompasses an embodied inter-subjective approach that also allows for what Heinamaa (2003: 105) calls "bodies gearing into each other in conversations". This chapter has therefore argued that Searle's work requires an interpretive approach that includes the viewer as both a body and a mind.

## Chapter Three

[I]t is the look that knows how to demand, in their turn, distance and intimacy, knowing in advance that the truth lies not in one or the other attempt, but in the movement that passes indefatigably from one to the other. One must refuse neither the vertigo of distance nor that of proximity; one must desire that double excess where the look is always near to losing all its powers. (Jean Starobinski in Jay 1993: 19–20)

The last chapter ended by arguing that Berni Searle's artwork required a double approach that looked at both the conceptual and physical elements at play in the interpretation of the work. Such a dual approach allows one to account for how Searle is able to consider not only her identity as a label but also as an experience that is related to her sensation of her body. Through this incorporation of a corporeal element in viewing her work, Searle creates artworks that are able to communicate the shifting, sliding and pulsation of identity in the visual realm between the experience of the body and the naming of one's body. The destabilisation of identity increasingly includes the viewer as an active participant as one moves through Searle's work between 1999 and 2000, culminating in her video works *A Matter of Time* (2003) and *Home and Away* (2003). This chapter will look at how this corporeality, in fact, drives the interpretation of the artwork so that static assumptions about interpretation and identity become fluid and plural.

Searle's works are personal and they offer through their corporeality the intimacy that exists between two bodies touching. Through this personal commentary on her negotiation with her identity she also manages to express the broader dilemma of the subject in the visible realm. The dilemma arises, as Merleau-Ponty (in Jones 1997: 41-42) so eloquently puts it, from the fact that "he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it". By making herself into visible images Searle becomes vulnerable by exposing herself to the vision of others, but she also makes the viewer vulnerable by structuring her work to transfer that vulnerability through certain devices like the gaze and the screen, to the viewer. Therefore both the artwork and the viewer possess and are possessed by each other's looking and by the visible. What will be critical in the discussion below is how that possessing and being possessed becomes a physical push and pull between the viewer and the work.

The first two chapters explored the historical significance of the shift in focus from rational models of vision to more integrated approaches that emphasize the ambiguity of experience. This chapter looks at select works by Searle in order to demonstrate that, in the process of viewing, the body acts in some way to create an enfolding of the visible and the corporeal. Vision, in what will be argued, no longer marks the separation between mind and the world, as was the case in Descartes' model, but rather involves an entangling of the mind and body in sensory and conceptual experience. The approach adopted therefore needs to be sensitive to folding over and entanglement as a method of interpretation, which mimics the action in Searle's work between the viewer and the artwork. In fact Searle supplies us with the very metaphor for this approach in her video *Snow White* (2001), in which she kneads flour into dough. The flour falls onto her from above to be joined a little while later by a trickle of water. Searle takes both and kneads them together. This video piece represents both the action of Searle's negotiation with her identity and the action of the mind and body as they become enfolded in vision.

In exploring this embodied vision further, one last photographic installation will be examined, one that links to many of the concerns already addressed yet also looks forward to the video pieces with which the chapter concludes, namely, *Profile*.

### *Profile*



Figure 13

In 2002 Searle produced a series of Duraclear Lambda prints titled *Profile*, which was installed in the centre of the Michael Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town. The series consisted of eight images of Searle's own facial profile, which were suspended to create two crosses at the level of the viewer's eye. The prints were 980 mm x 1200 mm in scale, creating larger-than-life-sized images of the side of Searle's face. The shape of the installation required that the viewer walk around the piece in order to see all sides of the work. "Seeing all sides" is probably not the appropriate phrase, because while one can walk around the suspended crosses, it is difficult to obtain a clear image of Searle because of the varying transparency of the Duraclear Lambda prints. The fluctuating transparency creates at certain positions around the installation a kaleidoscope of fragmented Searle portraits in which an ear is seen through a nose and an eye is seen through the pores of the skin. Searle has chosen therefore to confront the viewer very directly with a sense of her self-portrait as both fragmented and interspersed. From certain angles, two of Searle's images are totally annihilated. A picture of *Profile* in the *Fresh* (figure 14) publication of Searle's work (Bedford 2003) illuminates this point because in the photograph two of Searle's profiles are visible but the third dimension has been reduced to a line which seems to represent the annihilation of the subject at the edge of the gap. This use of surfaces that divide and mediate between each other emphasises the gap examined in the second chapter which Searle negotiates between representation and the object or the body shown.



Figure 14

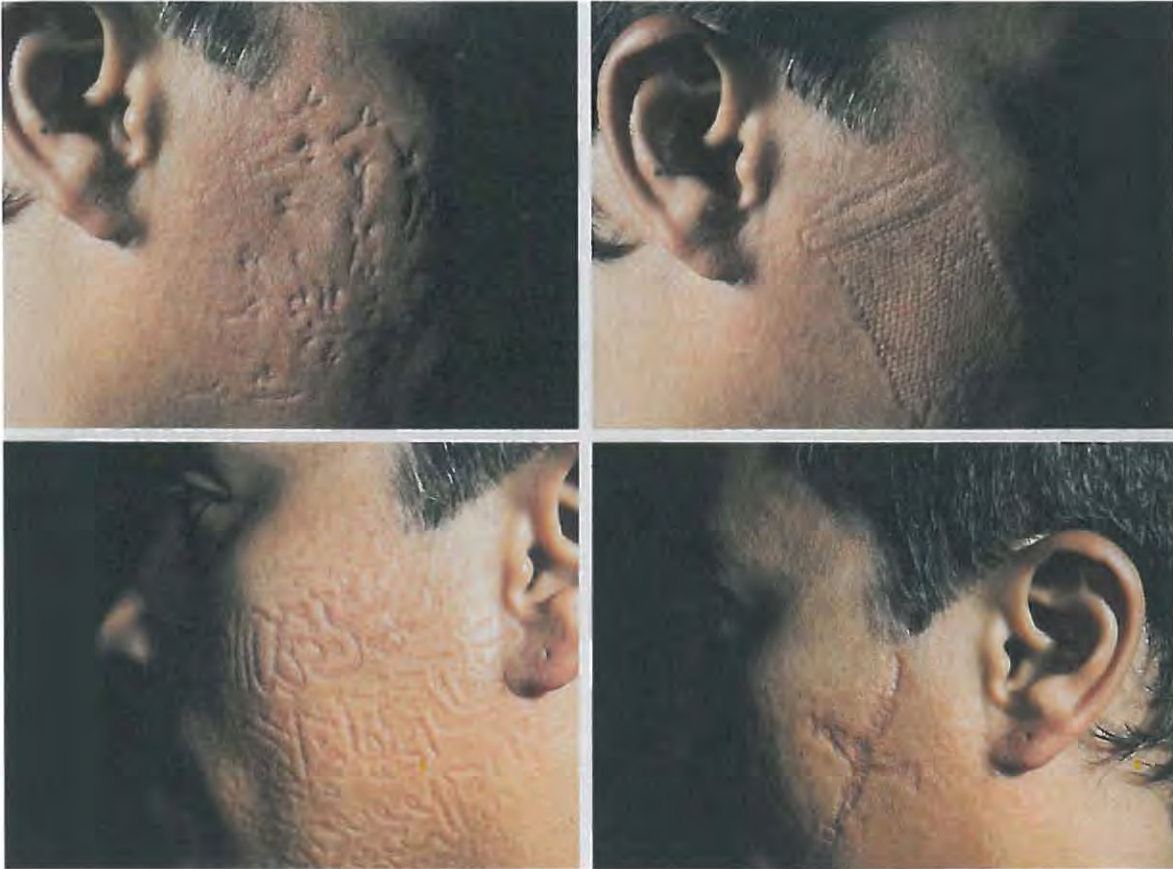


Figure 15

Searle further mediates the *Profile* images by imprinting a selection of items onto her skin. These items include a South African curio flag, a crucifix, a *rakam* (Muslim prayer), a British imperial crown, an Apartheid-era coat of arms, cloves and a Dutch windmill. These items, like the spice and the henna, form part of what Searle considers aspects of her identity, though they also allow for broader associations.

In this installation, because of the physical sense of these items as objects, the negative trace they leave on the skin makes them read three-dimensionally in the photographs. The items are not covering or staining the skin, as was the case previously with the spice and henna, but are pushing into it. What was in *Colour Me* and *Traces* a simulacrum of physical weight and violent bruising becomes in this installation an actual physical intrusion into Searle's body. The spice and Henna performed suffocation and violence in an almost ritualistic fashion:

Searle's body symbolically bore the weight and bruising but did not show signs of having been actually crushed or broken. In *Profile* she crosses over from symbolic to physical force. The two video works that will be discussed in this chapter, *A Matter of Time* (2003) and *Home and Away* (2003), also involve Searle's body in a physical confrontation with her representational processes. Hence *Profile* marks a significant step away from photography to Searle's interest in video.

*Profile* therefore needs to be read both physically and at the level of the image. As is the case with Searle's other work, locating where these two approach and converge involves an exploration of what in the realm of the image catches and pulls on the viewer corporeally. *Profile* extends the corporeality of looking into the viewer's three-dimensional space (or picture, to reinvoke Lacan), for the work requires that one circle it a few times, literally and figuratively, to gain a fuller sense of the elements at play within it. The transparency of the screen also simulates physical movement by requiring the viewer to continually reposition themselves in light of the changing transparencies. The transparency further causes the muscles in the eye of the viewer to relax and contract in an attempt to focus on the work. These observations are important in looking as a form of corporeal identification because they deal with the viewer as a physical being.

However, the observation that the body moves around the work is not enough to argue for a physical interpretation because observing the body's movement is not sufficient in explaining the physical investment of the viewer; the body could still be reduced to an object that the mind operates on, thereby turning the body's actions into an object of investigation rather than an active participant. The incorporation of the physical element needs an approach that does not treat the body as an object of analysis but rather as a surface of subjective engagement. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology helps one to deal with the question of the viewer's active involvement of the body because he understands the body as a surface of intercourse between the mental world of language and the physical world of experience. In the case of viewers walking around Searle's work, they do not think or reflect about each step taken as they negotiate around the work. Rather, the body gauges the space between the work and the viewer. The body feels the space, size and weight of the work and these become included in the process of looking. As Merleau-Ponty (1964: 162) states: "Vision is attached to movement. We see only what we look at. And what would vision be without eye movement?"

In *Profile*, Searle therefore not only makes her body's corporeality visible by pushing objects into the flesh of her face and photographing her skin in high detail, she also makes viewers conscious of their own corporeality through the medium of their physical participation in viewing the artwork. The viewer can be made conscious of having to move around the work because of the difficulty of trying to find a focal point to look at. Merleau-Ponty (1964: 162) writes that "[m]y mobile body makes a difference in the visible world, being part of it", and: "The visible world and the world of my motor projects are total parts of the same Being". Movement, be it the squeezing of the muscles of the eye or the orientation of the shoulders, shows how the body is part of the work in the act of interpretation. Here one realises how far Searle's transparencies are from the monocular model suggested by Alberti's perspective. The multiple images set at angles to one another eradicate the possibility of the viewer taking up a stance that would correspond with a central point in the picture. In this way the work acts against a static viewing position, puts a process of movement into play, and hence embodies the viewer in the extended space of representation.

Dr Tom Martin (2005: private discussion), a contemporary philosopher who focuses on Merleau-Ponty's work, argues that Merleau-Ponty's description of the body's intentionality does not create a constant relationship between the body and movement but rather puts the body on a sliding scale where at one end the body is a subjective force and on the other end it is an object to the subject. An example of this would be the difference between moving around an installation and standing still in front of it. When viewers are still in front of an artwork their bodies are inactive, creating an instance where they could withdraw into the core of their thinking nature (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 360-61). In this instance the body becomes an object to the subject. This motionless position before an artwork can reinforce the body as object if the artwork is structured to "return the gaze", thereby forcing the subject to see him- or herself as an object through his or her motionless body. Once the viewer moves around the image, the body's action becomes more subjective and a corporeal approach is required to understand the relationship between the artwork, the viewer and meaning. By standing still at certain points and moving around at others the viewer, in a sense, slides between the image and the corporeal. In *Profile* this sliding is made visible in the semi-transparency of the artwork. The transparency forces the viewer to move back and forth, creating a corporeal relationship that makes it difficult for the viewer to adopt an inhuman gaze that would reduce his or her relationship to the artwork to one of subject and object.

## Catching the viewer's eye: Mieke Bal and erotic looking

Before the viewer can be involved in this embodied experience with the work, his or her eye needs to be engaged by it. In part this is achieved through the semi-transparency of the photographs. The viewer's focus is 'caught' by the sudden focusing of the eye on a visible detail between the transparent sections of the screen. This attraction to the surface of the visible image recalls what art theorist and linguist Mieke Bal refers to as a 'visual erotic'. The visual erotic is for Bal not related directly to sexual desire but to the corporeality of the viewer's look, to the dance of the eye over the surface of an image. Certain images for Bal offer something other than a typical narrative; they offer some visual effect for the eye to feast on and to get lost in. Bal discusses erotic looking as arising out of a second look or "episode". She identifies this 'second look' as operative in the work of the contemporary artist David Reed (Bal 2001: 219). Reed's work echoes the large free-form, all-over paintings of the Abstract Expressionists but where their brush marks were often expressive and painterly, indexing the artist's hand (and personality, by extension), those of Reed are deliberately formed and stylised (in a manner reminiscent of Roy Lichtenstein's parodies of Abstract Expressionist paintings but with depth and baroque chiaroscuro in the shift from dark to light). The key characteristic of the paint marks that Bal picks up on is the fact that they swirl and overlap to form a field of folded colour.

Bal uses narratology to interpret artwork and argues that, as in the case of a book, one can establish first, second and third person voices within an image. (In narratological terms a voice is the perspective from which the book is written and can also be called a focaliser.) For Bal (2001: 215) Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning can be associated with first-person narration because of the "emphatic inscription of the hand of the artist". Third-person narration, meanwhile, is described by Bal (2001: 215) as operative in a painting that "eliminates references to the painting process" and focuses on the subject matter being painted, for instance a battle scene or a portrait of someone. Bal argues that David Reed's work is an example of second person narrative because it creates an active intersubjective relationship with the viewer whereby "I" and "you" can be interchanged between the painting and the viewer. Bal suggests that in one's first interaction with Reed's work one might opt to read the paint marks in terms of first-person narrative because these marks appear to communicate the artist's intentions. However, Bal argues that because Reed's folds of

colour are so slick and sumptuously painted, the eye is attracted again to consider to work from a different perspective. The second look, according to Bal, is tactile because, unlike the first look, which as Bal (2001: 219) puts it, “‘thinks’ abstract expressionism”, the second responds to the way in which the surface emphatically tugs at the eye. The eye’s attraction to the surface is erotic, according to Bal, because it sets up a flirtatious teasing with the eye that makes the viewer look again and again in detail across the picture. In this way he or she is involved with the surface as a sensual visual experience. The eye is encouraged to travel around, under, over, even into the folds – themselves like so many enfolded Möebius strips – becoming an extension of the body, of the fingers that might caress folded silk or the curves and creases of a lover.

### **Transparency and second person narrative**

While Searle’s photographs do not have anything quite so sensuous in them as Reed’s folds, it can be argued that at a certain level they address the viewer as “I” to “you”. The structure of the works invites being enclosed within them, between the transparencies; and the close-ups of Searle’s skin encourage an unusual proximity. Moreover, the overlaying of images is similar to folding, and produces effects in which the viewer is allowed to delight. The viewer’s eye is caught at both the surface of a single image and the depths of overlaid images. There is a point just before the image becomes clear when the front of Searle’s face is obscured by the dark surface of the print, leaving only the contours of Searle’s face floating in the semi-transparent darkness of the screen. At this particular point the only thing that is clear is a section of Searle’s skin.

One might therefore suggest that, when it is registered as a surface the skin becomes ‘erotic’. As happens in response to the folds in Reed’s paintings or the play of light and dark in Caravaggio’s paintings, also discussed as ‘erotic’ by Bal (2001:225-28), the eye invests in the tactile nature of the work, producing an embodied looking which gains pleasure in a physical identification with Searle’s skin. Skin calls to skin, so to speak, setting up a somatic connection that might even leave some viewers compelled to imprint their own skin, increasing the level of bodily response and involvement. The skin, like the skin described by Bal in Caravaggio’s paintings, is registered ‘erotically’ as the eye moves over the surface, registering each pore. The erotic investment in Searle’s skin gets wrapped up in the indentations

made by the objects she has pressed into her cheeks. At the level of the surface of the image, these indentations only increase the 'erotic' involvement of the eyes as they offer more detail to become absorbed in. Moreover, some of these objects, especially the *rakam* and cloves, leave imprints that have soft folded in, even convoluted edges. These can be seen in the light of Reed's folds and are more bodily in the sense that here it is literally a body that has been marked with folds. (One is also reminded of the marks left on the body by one's bed-sheets, producing more connotations of folds and sensuousness).

On another level one might also suggest that the viewer's gaze could be seen as the weight responsible for the imprinting of the objects into Searle's flesh, especially if one considers the reciprocity and enfoldment at work in Merleau-Ponty's notion of the *flesh*. At this level the works become extremely intimate and in the implicit violence, they not only relate back to *Discoloured*, but also propose connections between erotic looking and pleasures of a sado-masochistic nature. (Indeed Searle's inflicting of these 'wounds' on herself suggests a reading in terms of masochism, though this is not the present study's point of interest.) *Profile* thus continues the implication of the viewer in the fundamental material (spice, henna, objects) used by Searle to interrogate her identity – colour me, weigh me, discolour me, imprint on me. The viewer is never allowed the comfort of a disembodied gaze; Searle always makes him or her aware of the roles we play as social beings in affecting, even determining, the identities of others. The viewer's look is a pressure that impacts on Searle's body, and which in turn reminds the viewer of his or her own body. Searle's materials can thus also be seen in terms of what Bal (2001) calls an artwork's 'navel' details.

For Bal, the 'navel' of a painting is similar to Roland Barthes' (1984) concept of the *punctum*, but lacks this term's implication of violence (puncturing, piercing, shooting). A navel detail stands out in the way of the *punctum* and also acts against the dominant meaning of an image, but its appeal is less to the eye than to the body. Bal looks at Jan Vermeer's painting *Woman Holding a Balance* (1664) as an example of a work containing a navel detail. Bal argues that the nail in the wall on the top left becomes a focal point for the viewer; it draws the eye towards it because, in a painting where each detail is immaculately depicted, the nail seems out of place, a mistake. This detail acts, according to Bal, to make viewers aware of their interpretive presence because it makes them question the relevance of the nail in the picture. The discussion of how the nail acts as a navel is complicated and need not be recounted

here; what matters is that for Bal these navel details in an image are significant because they disrupt the conventional meanings a picture might construct. In this way, a work's navels appeal not to first-person (mark-making) or third-person (standard narrative) but to second-person narration. The navel becomes bodily because it creates a kind of "I"- "you" umbilicus between viewer and work.

For Bal this connection is not, however, solely sensory; it also involves discourse. "Using bodily metaphors," she (2001: 84) writes, "is one way of acknowledging the impossibility of disentangling oneself from the discourse into which one is, so to speak, born." Hence the navel embodies discourse and one's entangling in it is a second-person connection that draws the viewer into an enfolded relationship rather than into a subject/object relation in which the viewer's look is objective and detached. One can suggest that the markings on Searle's cheeks in *Profile* act like navels (some even take forms reminiscent of navels) to establish this kind of embodied connection with the viewer, which appeals to the physicality of the viewer's body while also drawing him or her into a conversation, hence into a discourse. A discourse, that is, about the body, about marking, about identity markers, about history and the question of one's dual implication in it. At the same time, this navel-to-navel connection requires something that initially disrupts the viewer's tendency to take up a dispassionate gaze in viewing the work, and this leads us back to a consideration of Lacanian theory.

### **Lacan and the screen**

In Chapter One Lacan's double-triangle diagram was described in order to discuss the intersection between vision and subjectivity in Lacan's theory. In this diagram (figure 8) the subject is understood to be the 'subject of representation', who mediates his or her relationship with the gaze by means of the screen. The gaze in this model is a threat to the viewer's subjective consistency since its 'light' can reveal the extent to which what the subject takes to be reality is really a marginal construction needed to deny the fundamental castration and alienation that Lacan associates with the symbolic and imaginary registers. The construction that allows the subject to become a stain to the gaze is what Lacan calls the picture. One's identity is affirmed by the degree to which the picture is taken to be real, and ordinarily the picture only holds together if it is not disrupted.

Searle's images could be considered disruptive of the viewer's picture, and hence subjectivity, because they destabilise vision and offer pictures that implicate the viewer in acts of violence that are directly related, via the objects chosen to be imprinted on her skin, with a racially-divided past and a multicultural present in which identity is difficult to determine. It is this disruption that the viewer faces when standing before the transparencies, which are literally screens because of their transparent nature. Lacan's diagrams introduce three protagonists in viewing *Profile*; the subject, the object and the gaze. In the previous chapter, our three protagonists were described as Searle the image, Searle the artist, and the viewer. On first glance the three can be related to the structure of *Profile*: the artist is the image or screen while the artwork is the object and the viewer is the gaze. In this scenario Searle as artist manipulates the image of her body to create an object for the viewer to gaze at. If one shifts the Lacanian roles around the image can be read as the screen and the viewer as object and the artist as the gaze. In this case Searle manipulates the image in such a way that viewers become aware of their looking and become an object to the image. Or thirdly the image is the object, the viewer is the screen and Searle is the gaze. In this scenario, as was the case in *Discoloured*, the image becomes a stain in the viewer's picture.

However, the reading does not quite hold up because there is no literal stand-in for the gaze (such as the light-boxes in *Discoloured*). Nor, really, would Searle appear to be in possession of the gaze, because she is not looking at the viewer, but is instead very much a stained image on a transparency, offering her face as a kind of text, a (navel) writing.

It can be argued that it is indeed the inscriptions on Searle's face that act as a gaze – one that has no origin as such, for the overlapping or serial (depending on one's viewpoint) transparencies suggest erasure or extension, neither of which discloses a point of origin. The gaze, as that which marks, is what issues through the prints, through Seale's face, to strike the viewer and stain his or her picture with the same questions of identity and history that Searle alludes to through the cloves, Zulu love-letter, and so on. In this way Searle conflates image (herself) and viewer, incorporating both at the level of the screen, and implicating both in the multicultural present. Caught between picture and stain, the viewer is also caught between the visible and the invisible, the present and the past, presence and absence, outside and inside. The work pushes and pulls on the viewer, moving him or her in the very negotiation with the image and not only in terms of physical movement. Yet the function of the gaze here is to put this to-and-fro motion at work in the viewer, to allow for the kind of navel connection men-

tioned earlier. The gaze does not hail the viewer into a position of blame, but operates to implicate the viewer in the image's concerns with the plurality and uncertainty of identity. This is a discourse into which the viewer can enter, and is expected to become involved. The work re-enfolds the viewer, consciously, into a discourse that is otherwise so often left marginal to the viewer's day-to-day existence.

In the next work to be looked at, a video work titled *A Matter of Time* (2003), the pressure of the body on vision, identity and the viewer becomes even more corporeal because video includes time and movement, two aspects (Merleau-Ponty argues) that the body's intentionality gives to the subjective experience. But being a video, any sense of the viewer's corporeality in vision is mediated through the flat screen of the installation. This is metaphorically an extension or continuation of the screen noted in *Discoloured's A Darker Shade of Light* which Searle presses her feet against, or of her object-imprinted face in *Profile*, which is so close to the picture plane as to become it. The screen signifies Searle's corporeality because she pushes against it, making her body visible not as an image but as a three-dimensional presence which undoes the screen as barrier to the viewer. At the same time the emphasis on that picture plane makes the viewer conscious of the barrier between corporeal space and (the subject of) representation. The screen therefore plays an ambiguous role, representing both the distance and proximity present in viewing Searle's work.

## A Matter of time

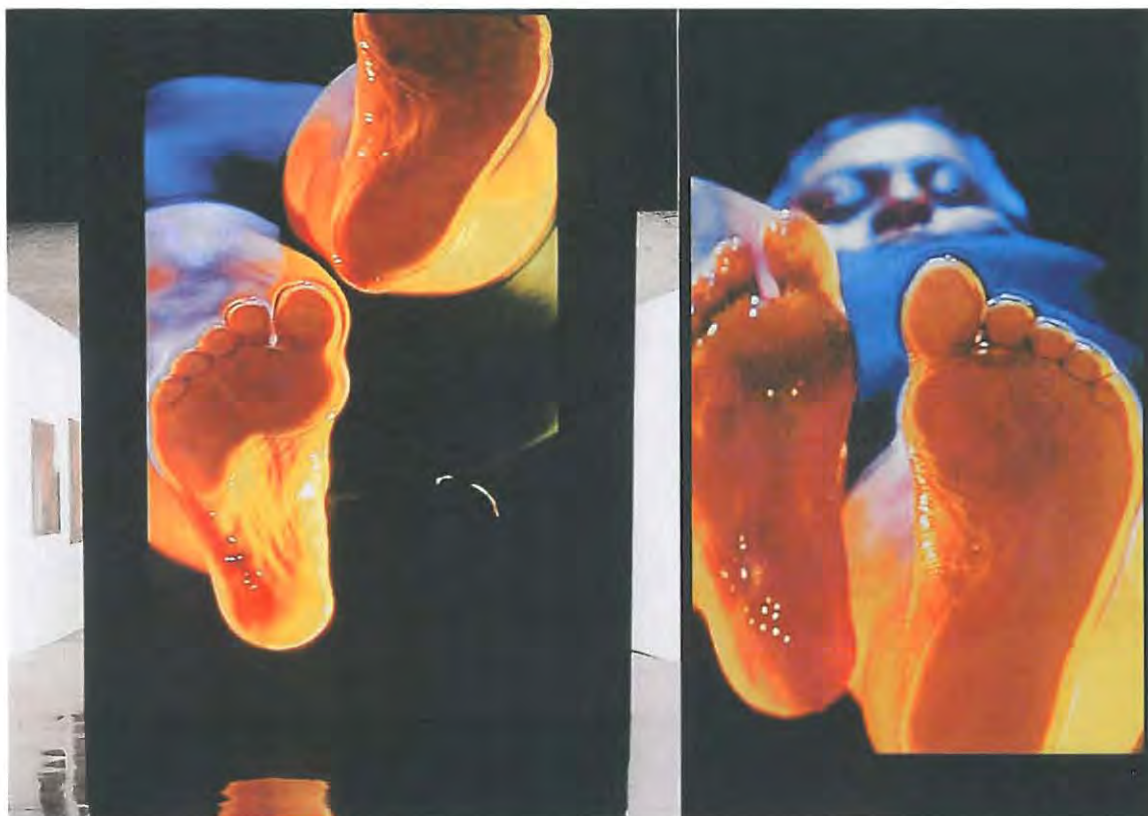


Figure 16

In this work Searle filmed herself walking on a transparent Perspex box, which was suspended in a circus tent. While she balances on the clear oblong box, olive oil is poured onto the surface. Searle then walks through the oil across the box. As she walks the angle of the box tilts and at a certain point the angle becomes too steep for her feet to grip and she slides down the surface. Moments later she reappears for another attempt, only to slip backwards again. *A Matter of Time* formed part of Searle's Standard Bank Young Artist Award exhibition, *Float* (2003). In its installation at the Standard Bank Gallery in the Monument building in Grahamstown the video piece was projected in a narrow rectangular space created by dry walling. The space was small enough to create a sense of intimacy and was almost tucked away to one side of the room; only one or two people could view the work at one time. The space mimicked the narrow rectangular shape of the projected image and so again the space created a three-dimensional element to complement the video. The rectangular shape also

mimicked the shape of the viewer's bodily presence because it was built like a doorway so that the walls took on the proportions of a body.

The video is filmed so that Searle looks as if she is walking up the surface of the projected image. However, what we actually see is a view of Searle from below the Perspex box, creating the sense that we, as viewers, are looking up at Searle from the same place as the camera was positioned. The result is that Searle seems to loom over us and her body is dramatically foreshortened with the focal point being her enlarged feet. Compressed above them, we see her face. Because she looks down at her feet the impression is created that she is looking at us. There is thus an exchange of looks that emphasises the connection between viewer and Searle. At the same time, however, the surface that emphatically flattens her illuminated feet exaggerates the presence of a divide between the viewer and Searle – a divide that is simultaneously picture plane and screen. Van der Watt (in Stevenson 2004: 34) comments that Searle's work promises intimacy and in the same moment pushes the viewer away. Van der Watt's use of the term 'promise' is important because a promise is an express assurance on which expectation is to be based. The promise made to the viewer of an intimate moment is never completed because in Searle's work there is always a sense of loss and distance created through her use of the screen. While the body on the screen looks real enough to touch, it is only a projected image that does not have any substance.

The layer of olive oil that is poured onto the surface of the box adds a further layer over the surface of the Perspex. However the oil acts differently to the layer of Perspex because it creates a mobile layer that morphs as it is poured over the surface. It is the oil, in fact, that makes the Perspex layer visible because one can see the oil at its boundaries where it produces a meniscus as it adheres to the Perspex. The oil is reminiscent of Bal's discussion of folds in Caravaggio's work because it ripples as it is poured on. It mediates between the alienation of the video screen and the viewer's body by making the surface of the screen look like a living skin. The oil further shows up the movement of Searle's body by being displaced by her feet as she walks through it. The displaced oil moves with the muscles of the feet, signifying the movement of Searle's body.

At the beginning of the video, Searle stands on the box and the oil is poured around her feet. The oil moves up the image first and Searle follows. The oil acts as a boundary around Searle as it moves up the image before her. It also reminds one of Searle's skin in *Profile* in that it

shifts to accommodate the pushing of her feet, just as in *Profile* her skin accommodated the impression of the eight items. It also acts like skin by recovering its shape once the foot has moved on. Here Searle's body imprints the screen like the objects imprinted on her face. The displaced oil gives the viewer a sense of the weight of Searle's body. As immaterial as the image may be (no more than projected light) the chosen sequence exerts an undeniable corporeal pressure. The muscles also indicate the weight and corporeality of Searle's body because, as Searle walks across the screen, the feet flex and adjust to the surface. The viewer identifies not only with the actions but with the weight represented by the flexing feet and displaced oil.

From another angle one can even suggest that the downward pressure of Searle's body presses against the viewer's vision, as if the Perspex screen were also the surfaces of the viewer's eyes. The oil reiterates this visual pressure because it acts like the wet surface of the eye. In this act, the screen of the projection folds onto the surface of the eye. This action collapses what is at the crux of vision's ambiguity: that the eye is both an object that can be seen and the site of the subject's vision. Searle, by walking on the viewer's screen, makes the link between eye and vision and so enfolds the physical eye with the image on the retina. She makes the screen curve as her body's physical pressure pushes out at the viewer, counteracting the difference James E Cutting (in Jay 1993: 131) notes between the screen and the physical eye: "The photograph, the canvas, and the sketch pad are flat; the retina conforms nearly to a section of a sphere."

*A Matter of Time* therefore undoes the passivity of the previous works we have looked at. Whereas all of those suggested that Searle was using her materials in ways that would implicate a viewer in her own struggle with markers of identity, in this work she becomes the one who presses and marks by walking across the surface of the viewer's vision.

### **Video screen and Lacan**

The mechanism of projection is often forgotten in favour of the image on the screen but the projector offers a perfect example of the manner in which the Lacanian gaze functions. The projector is a device that emits a beam of light. Only when the artist's video artwork is played through the projector does the image become transferred through the light, but while it is solely light it is invisible. So, much like Lacan's first two diagrams, the light is the gaze

through which all things will be seen, but the light must be cut by a screen put in front of it, on which the image is produced. What viewers see is the image on the wall, but if they turn around to see where the image is projected from, the light of the projector blinds them. Searle's use of video as a medium, then, can be related to her use of a transparent and photographic screen that mediates between the viewer and light. The difference here, produced by the deliberate mechanism of projection, is that the viewer ends up in the position of the Lacanian screen, caught between the gaze of the projector and the subject of representation, Searle, who shows us her 'picture' – one in which she is struggling to find a sure footing. Whereas Searle was previously the stain in the viewer's picture, the viewer now becomes the stain in Searle's picture.

Needless to say, this is only one way of reading the relationships of viewing which *A Matter of Time* sets up. It is very easy to reverse the situation such that, while the viewer remains at the point of the intersecting screen, the projector actually becomes the subject of representation and Searle the gaze. A projector is indeed a subject of representation to the extent that it produces representations, which are then made visible on an object such as a screen. In Lacan's combined diagram, as Kaja Silverman (1992) has noted, the gaze ends up on the side associated with the object (contra the subject), hence it is not inconceivable that a projected image could, even without being the literal point of light, become the site of the gaze. In *A Matter of Time* the gaze can be even more easily attributed to Searle because of the way she dominates the dynamic of viewing, looming over us and looking down upon us. This ties up, then, with the earlier point about how Searle seems to exert a kind of violence on the viewer by seeming to tread on his or her eyes. Searle's strategies lead the viewer to feel ill at ease in his or her picture by commanding the gaze and by using her body as a visual pressure that is experienced corporeally. This corporeal discomfort suits the subject of the piece, which deals so physically with Searle's own discomfort as she tries to move across the oil-slick surface. This discomfort may have yet further references if one considers the implications of the word 'time' in the work's title.

## Time and identity: the terminal screen

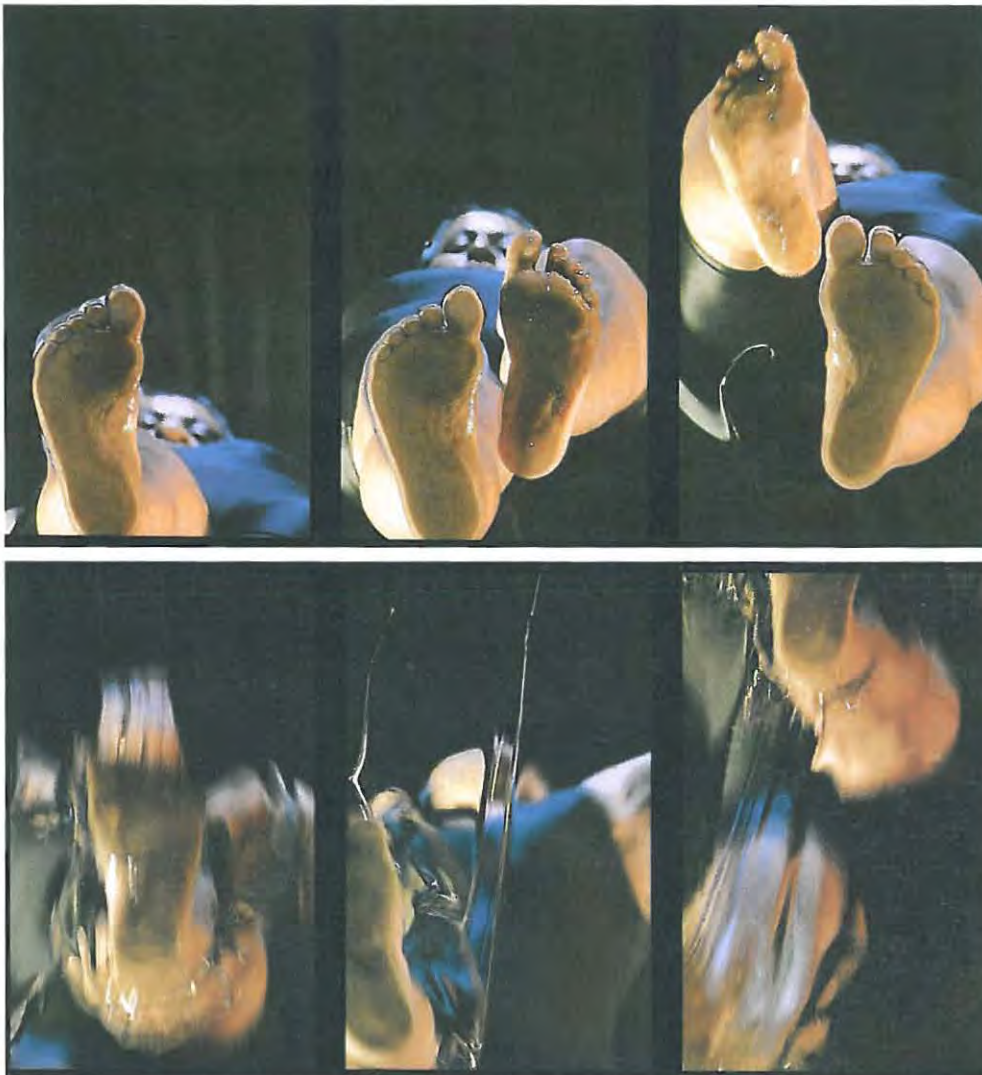


Figure 17

Using video allows Searle to play with the effects of temporality on her image. *A Matter of Time* shows the viewer a screen that has a beginning and an end. With each new appearance of Searle's feet after her fall, the camera zooms in a little, until in the last sequence Searle almost takes up the whole frame and the sequence ends. The screen in this work is therefore a terminal screen – a screen representing the passage of time and the mortality of the temporal image. Searle's title alludes to at least three interpretations that offer different aspects of the sense of the terminal. *A Matter of Time* could mean: (a) it is only a matter of time before I (Searle) slip (and slip again), (b) that the video, a moment or a life only takes a matter of time

to view an experience, (c) that humans are made of matter susceptible to time. In the last two cases time and death are intertwined, possibly producing anxiety in the viewer.

The ultimate reality of the gaze is, for Lacan, death. As a reminder of castration, of the subject's exteriority to that which determines him or her, the gaze represents a point at which the subject is annihilated. It is not an accident that Lacan used the example of a distorted skull (in Holbein's *Ambassadors*) to draw a connection between anamorphosis and the gaze. The gaze which strikes the subject from outside of the subject's geometrically-centred self makes the subject aware of his or her mortality because it shows this self as a distortion or image that acts like a stand-in for the physical reality of the person. The body's reality cannot stick to the screen and in *A Matter of Time* it slips and falls. The sliding body creates a blurred image that can be related back to the anamorphic skull as the skull and sliding body both represent termination. The video thus links the anxiety people feel in response to the effects of time passing to the tenuous relationship between the subject's visual identity and his or her body.

Searle chose to use olive oil in *A Matter of Time* because it functions as a reference to her heritage and becomes an identity marker like the spice used before. But she slips on the oil and shows that her relationship to this marker is not fixed. She loses her footing and becomes a blur. The sudden disappearance of the body enacts what Van der Watt (in Bedford 2004: 120, 124) refers to as 'becoming invisible' or 'unmarked'. 'Unmarked' and 'invisible' are corollaries of 'unnamed'. In the moment when Searle slips, she becomes a blur and escapes identification. But the slipping also represents death. To be unnamed, unmarked and invisible is to be symbolically dead. Searle performs the desire and dread involved in being visible as an image to others, a desire and dread that Searle makes physical. Discussions regarding identity often remain at the level of the image; in *A Matter of Time* Searle puts her physicality on the line to a point because she could fall and hurt herself, and in risking this she performs what in previous works was only a surface phenomenon (e.g., the application of spice or indenting of objects into her cheeks). Sliding down the Perspex surface, then walking carefully back up it become actions that bespeak Searle's constant physical negotiation with her self-image and identity. Even though Searle has renamed and unnamed herself again and again through different applications of surface pigments and interventions with culturally significant items, her body, like the skin in *Profile* that recovers, becomes a force that gets up after it has slipped – only to slip again.

The desire and dread of being visible is transferred to the viewer through the body. The very action of trying to grasp the Perspex with her feet makes the viewer feel a sense of physical vertigo. The slow procession of Searle's feet is mesmerising to watch but also involves a sense of growing tension. The tension is seen in the muscles of the feet progressively flexing tighter and tighter. The sense of impending doom transferred through the ever-increasing tension in Searle's feet turns Searle's walk into a spectacle which prevents the viewer from attaining a critical distance from the scene. The viewer identifies physically because as Searle's feet flex, the viewer becomes aware of his or her own feet, and as Searle balances so, too, does the viewer. When Searle suddenly slides down, the shock is registered physically, for the viewer can imagine through his or her physical body what it would be like to undertake such movements and to be in so precarious a position. The action of walking up the beam and sliding down is repeated three times and each time the image increases in size so that Searle fills the frame in the last few rotations, giving the viewer the maximum effect of the sense of a sliding body. Repeating the action with the image of Searle expanding each time also increases the tension. Once the viewer knows Searle is going to slide down, the anticipation of the next moment of this action makes watching her ascend even more stressful.

By focusing on such corporeal processes, Searle makes viewers feel as if she is pushing on them physically, and therefore makes them aware of their physicality in relation to their role as spectators. Moreover the oscillation between proximity (of Searle's feet) and distance (of her head), as well as the shift between front and back of the tilting Perspex box, creates a push and pull on the viewer more dramatic and physical than any noted in her earlier work. Searle's viewer is drawn into a chiasmic relationship where the work pushes, pulls, and even drops them. As Searle's body slips and slides on the surface of the image so the image slips and slides in the perception of the viewer. The corporeal investment is through the gut of the viewer, which responds to the procession of Searle's feet with feelings of vertigo and anxiety. These are generally things sensed by the gut not the mind. The work makes – or may make – the viewer feel a sense of vertigo because the gut, as in Merleau-Ponty's (1968: 130-155) discussion of the enfolding of the physical and conceptual in the chiasm of the *flesh* does “not lose sight of the brute thing ...” Merleau-Ponty uses the term hyper-reflection in relation to the chiasm because hyper-reflection concerns the folding of the image and the perception into one another. Hyper-reflection, according to Merleau-Ponty commentator Taylor (1987: 78), is always open to both ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’.

One should, however, avoid treating the otherness and anxiety-producing aspects of *A Matter of Time* in a solely negative sense. There is in Searle's walk across the pane a certain playfulness that reminds one of a child's sportive attempts to master walking. There is also a potential comedy in Searle slipping, all of which offers a comic relief for what otherwise might be solely a source of anxiety. Along with this possibility for pleasure there is also the potential for Searle's contact with the oil, and the oil itself, to be experienced in ways that remind one of Bal's erotic looking. The screen becomes a skin and looking becomes a touching. The oil shimmers on Searle's skin and slides as it lubricates the Perspex surface. One need only think of the role of oil in massage to realise the sensual connotations it evokes as a substance that touches the skin, which is worked into the skin. It is also a medium through which two skins come into contact, and hence talks of a pleasurable sensuality. The pressure that Searle seems almost to apply to the viewer's eyes can therefore also be seen as a comforting pressure, an expression of closeness between two people. It is this intimacy that might allow the viewer to willingly share in Searle's process of slipping, and to find in that sharing not anxiety – or only anxiety – but also an ambiguous joy. Whatever the viewer's response, however, it is the specific ways in which Searle sets up a corporeal encounter with the viewer that makes looking in *A Matter of Time* an intertwined, chiasmic relationship rather than a dispassionate business of objectifying the image.

In the last work to be examined in this thesis, *Home and Away* (2003) Searle yet again uses her body to involve the viewer in a quasi-corporeal experience of identity that both discomforts and comforts the viewer.

## Home and Away



Figure 18

*Home and Away* represents the desperation of Moroccan people who make the life-threatening attempt to cross the stretch of ocean between Morocco and Spain in the hope of improving their lives. Searle thus again deals with the mortality of the body, even as she also encourages the viewer to contemplate questions to do with borders, migration and definitions of home.

Searle films herself afloat in the ocean between Morocco and Spain. She wears a long red satin skirt with a translucent white overlay. The ends of the skirt are filled with polystyrene pieces so that the material is buoyed around her body while she drifts in the water. The installation is projected on two screens which face each other. On the one screen the video begins with an image of the sky; the camera is pointed straight at the sun. It then moves around the sky mimicking the manner in which a person floating in the ocean on his or her back would look around. It slowly moves from the sky to a coastline on the horizon. The sequence ends with the camera fixed on the wake of a boat moving away from the coast – the coast, in fact, of Morocco.

On the other screen we see Searle in the water; initially she fills much of the screen and the angle of the view ensures that the water fills out the rest of the image. The camera does not follow Searle, but rather moves around, mimicking the ebb and flow of the water so that at

certain moments Searle's form disappears from the image. In the last part of the video, a black liquid suddenly moves into picture and envelops the floating figure of Searle. As the liquid engulfs Searle completely the camera moves away from her. Searle then recedes further and further away as the camera moves away on a boat, and as the view widens we finally see the other coastline, of Spain, so that the two coasts end up mirroring each other. During the double projection of the video the voice of Searle is heard in the room uttering conjunctive forms of the verbs 'to love', 'to fear' and 'to leave'.



Figure 19



Figure 20

The alienation of the figure of Searle in the sea expresses the plight of the immigrants whose journey Searle is in a sense recreating. By using the journey of would-be immigrants, *Home and Away* talks about an identity that is linked to a country. The immigrant is a perpetual outsider, an other in the gaze of the adopted country – how much worse the immigrant who has not yet become an immigrant, who is caught on a makeshift raft between a coastline representing an unhomely home and one representing an unhomely destination which will hopefully become home. This sense of dislocation expressed in relation to a physical place is further emphasized in the reception of the work because the viewer has to find his or her place in the indeterminacy of the installation. One has to move around the installation, or at least constantly turn back and forth between the two screens in the hope of forming a complete picture and sequence. One might suggest further that Searle's floating body analogises the viewer's own body as he or she almost floats between the two screens.

Of all the works explored in this thesis none so surely projects its mechanisms into the viewer's space, or so forces him or her to comply with the video's own logic. Searle is very careful in her use of video installations, and designs her gallery spaces to become active reception areas for her work. In her Grahamstown showing of *Home and Away* (2003) she requested dry walling that would fit the exact size of the projections. Unfortunately, the specifications were slightly off and white borders were left around the projections, but this example shows how Searle was attempting to incorporate the room into the installation so that the logic of the videos would have a specified effect on the viewer. The bodily appeal in *Home and Away* is such that not even the most complacent or indifferent viewer would not be moved to turn in the direction of both screens at least once. Whereas in earlier work discussed before, the viewer was able to occupy a space – always-already impinged on, of course – that was outside of the representation, in this work the viewer is literally *in* the representation. Because of the way the screens face each other, he or she is incorporated into the space between them and thus ends up, as suggested above, becoming an equivalent in the space of representation for the drifting Searle in the image. One might claim, easily perhaps, that the structure of the screens thus positions the viewer at an intersection, in a chiasmus – to reinvoké Merleau-Ponty – where he or she is corporeally intertwined with the space of representation. The viewer's space and the space of representation become one enfolded, interrelated *flesh*, in which the body is emphasised again and again. Viewer's body, Searle's body, body of water, body of the absent immigrants evoked by Searle, bodies of land – all of these interact to produce a corporeal experience even in a situation that would remind many of the

disembodied character of looking in a cinema. It is the lack of seats in the space, the dual projection, and the situating of the viewer between two screens – as well as the physicality of Searle, her flowing clothes and the water – that counteract such detached viewing.

### **Lacan's screen again**

Of course the structure of double projection in *Home and Away* inevitably brings Lacan's double-triangle diagram to mind. The two projectors can be read to mimic the two apexes of the intersecting triangles, while the position of the screen in the intersection is the point occupied by the viewer. Searle's body in the one image functions like a stain, not only because of the vertical filming which makes her read initially as a pattern across a surface, but also because of the ink stain that engulfs her toward the end of the piece. All the familiar Lacanian terms are in place. The problem is, if there are two projectors, both emitting points of light, how does one determine which represents the gaze? The answer is to be found in the images that are projected. The notion of country is one that quickly leads to concepts such as patriotism, loyalty, and so on. For many people in many countries the idea of leaving one's country of birth is little short of high treason (one need only think of the 'chicken run' in South Africa, the scorn many South Africans feel for their fellows who have moved overseas, to be convinced of this point). One's country and its systems are a part of identity; its laws, languages, values, national emblems, physical features, etc., run deep in each individual, and are part of what makes a country hold together as a nation. Those who emigrate from their country, regardless of the appalling conditions leading to their flight, are exposed to the highest charges of disloyalty and subversion.

It is being suggested, then, that the gaze in this work is the joint gaze of the home country, represented by the land mass of Morocco. In the water between it and the coast of Spain, the fugitives fight for their lives, only to become – in the case of many – stains on the picture of their country of flight (Spain), objects of xenophobia. It is this out-of-placeness, this displacement and homelessness, which Searle's work poignantly evokes. As she focalises her verbs – 'I love' (first person), 'You love' (second person), 'We love' (third person) – the viewer is made aware of how the community these verbs form and point to is in a state of fragmentation and dis-location. The immigrants, under the gaze of their homeland, are becoming a part of another picture (another country, community, nationality), where they will continue to ne-

gotiate for the rest of their lives the difficult terrain between the identity they left behind and the one they have to create. Throughout that time the home gaze fixes on them like a point of light, turning them into a picture in which they may never feel that they belong. *You see that? Well, it doesn't see you! Not any more.*

The question, though, is what happens to the viewer in this situation? The installation, in fact, makes the viewer feel very much as if he or she is out of place. There is no fixed focal point, as Searle's body and the fluid nature of the sea make it difficult to focus. The viewer cannot find a place to either be the subject of the spectatorship or an object in the image. Like Lacan mocked by the fisherman Petit-Jean, the viewer feels out of place. The landmasses are foreign, Searle is in a horribly precarious position, the screens compete for attention. For the viewer the problem is not of an undying judging gaze but of the absolute absence of a gaze. Searle recedes and dwindles out (perhaps to her death); the boat wake goes on rising with an idiot persistence, mechanically and without purpose, formless. In the intersection, the viewer stands stranded, aware of his or her body but unsure what to do with it. How does one act now? To what end? Where is the gaze to which I must show myself and perform? Where is the other who mimics me yet comforts me as a reflection of myself? It is merely fortuitous that one is left asking the question, where?

### **'Who' into 'where'**

Van der Watt (in Bedford 2004: 126) in her description of Searle's work *Traces* uses the title of Jane Blocker's book *Where is Ana Mendieta?* (1999) to describe how Searle's play between invisibility and visibility begs the question not who but *where* is Searle because Searle is "never determined ... she is always moving". By using two coastlines as identity markers in *Home and Away* Searle again transforms the question of "Who are you?" into a question of "Where are you?" The artist's identity is thus transformed into a spatial phenomenon occurring, one might say, between spatio-temporal points. Searle becomes a marker or a point between two coastlines, two sites of home, two nationalities and identities. The push and pull in Searle's work can then be seen as an oscillation between the body and identity in which the body is 'where' and identity is 'who'. 'Who' is a lot more specific than 'where' because 'where' has a temporal aspect. A person's position can change whereas a person's identity is assumed or expected to remain the same. According to Taylor's (1987: 67-68) reading of

Merleau-Ponty, “the temporality of subjectivity ‘decentres’ the self-consciousness because of two facts about time”. The subject is structured to think that he or she came first, before any ‘where’, but, according to Merleau-Ponty, reflection on one’s self cannot be posterior to the perception of oneself. The two occur together in embodied moments that connect self to the world as a continuous ‘flesh’.

Secondly, the achievement of self-consciousness takes time: “Temporal deferral opens a gap in the subject that self-consciousness cannot close” (Taylor 1987: 68). If identity is experienced through time and perception it becomes open and plural because identity changes as time passes, for example a person will not have the exact same reaction to the exact same stimuli if there were a ten year gap between incidents. However, Searle again incorporates the sense of longing for an answer to “Who am I?” by referring to origin as *Home*. She expresses a desire for home, which can be linked to the desire for an origin or the final answer to the question “Who am I?” while remaining aware of the effects of place and time on her identity.

Who and where thus are not actually reducible to identity and body, respectively, for identity is dependent on the body, and vice versa, just as location alters both. Who I am is part of where I am. What *Home and Away* opens is the awful gap created by a situation in which identity and location are severed, leaving the person in a state of suspension. Who am I? I am Moroccan. Where am I? In Spain. How then can I be Moroccan? The difficulties of establishing identity when place no longer functions as a marker is transferred to the viewer, who likewise becomes a where rather than a who in the stranded space between the screens. Who am I? I am a corporeal being. Where am I? In a representation. How then can I be a corporeal being? *Home and Away* thus exploits the gap between the thing and the thing represented in perhaps far more effective ways than in Searle’s earlier work. Identity and representation are shown up to be chiasmically interrelated, as identity is to place, and in the end the viewer is the one who has to (re)negotiate these two poles in ways that will invariably involve the body and the mind.

## Conclusion



Figure 21

I am going to end this thesis with an anecdotal recollection of my first encounter with Searle's work so that the argument of this thesis can be contextualised through my own person experience. It is important to end with this encounter because so much of what this thesis has been about is the attempt to understand and explain my reaction to the work in the first place.

I first saw Searle's work in 2003 at the Standard Bank Gallery in Grahamstown. The exhibition was *Float*, Searle's 2003 Standard Bank Young Artist award-winning show. I was struck firstly by how Searle had transformed the space of the gallery. I was familiar with the Standard Bank Gallery as it is one of the only available exhibition spaces in Grahamstown. Searle used dry walling to divide the space up into a series of external passage spaces, in which photographs were hung, and more intimate rooms that seemed to envelop the video installations

that were playing in them. The effect was to create a sense that one was walking into another reality. Bester (in Searle 2003: 12) in his catalogue essay for her award exhibition notes that Searle prefers to locate her work in 'abstract space' that is void of references to any specific site or location. However any neutrality often offered by the 'white box'-style gallery which allows for a certain critical distancing between art work and viewer was disrupted by the labyrinth-like passageways and slightly claustrophobic rooms. You were not sure where to go or which work to look at first, or even how to look at the work. This disorienting feeling disrupted the viewer's ability to assume the contemplative semi-detached pose of the art spectator. There was a constant milling around the works in which people bumped into each other while moving between spaces, trying to both avoid collisions and look for guidance while trying to get a good view of the work. There was a sense that Searle's neutral environment was itself part of the artwork, that it was a device to destabilise the viewer, reminiscent almost of a maze you would put white mice into. In this exhibition you were not a spectator but an active participant.

The sense of entangled viewing was further emphasised in the works themselves. As one entered the exhibition one encountered a set of photographic stills. The stillness of these works was interrupted by the peripheral sense of sound and movement coming from elsewhere. The photographs in this exhibition were not like those in her previous photographic installations, *Colour Me* or *Discoloured*, because they were displayed framed and flat on the wall and presented production shots of her video work. The photographs were very beautiful and seductive, showing underwater images of Searle during the filming of *Home and Away*, but did not appear to follow the conceptual flow of the exhibition, acting rather as an anchor point in a space of spectatorial indeterminacy. As a viewer you were torn between the comfort of the still images, and the certain security they offered as static photographs, and the mutability of the video works.

Off to the right of the photographs was the video work *Home and Away* and to the left, around a corner, was *Snow White*. *A Matter of Time* was hidden at the back in a small semi-isolated space. Each video space had its own ambience as Searle had taken care to ensure that the sound and lighting conditions in each space were matched to the work being shown. It was mentioned earlier (in discussing *Home and Away*) that she had planned for the video projections to reach to the corners of the wall but this was unfortunately not achieved because of a miscalculation. You did however get the sense that each space was carefully considered to

create a very particular effect. Searle's installations worked three-dimensionally, and this sense of space is one of the aspects of her work that I was very attracted to. Video and photographs are often only considered as two-dimensional mediums but Searle makes them work spatially.

I saw Searle's exhibition in the first year of work on my master's degree, at a time when I was still considering my topic. I had started my master's with an interest in looking at vision because I felt that something was often missed in the critical interpretation of an artwork. I had not proceeded very far with my work when I encountered this exhibition, but it immediately resonated with me as an example of art that needed more than just a critical eye, it needed a critical body too. One of the reasons that I was interested in the inclusion of the 'critical body' was due to a tension that existed between my practical work and my theory. I am a sculptor and there is an immediacy in my sculptural work that I could not quite come to terms with in my theory. Searle's material approach to her exhibition and video work immediately resonated with me. The work troubled my ability to create a critical distance through learnt spectatorial conventions, and was able to pull on my sensibilities in a manner that undermined any conceptual approach I was familiar with.

I will only recount my experience of the two video works discussed in the last chapter because while *Snow White* was part of the exhibition it did not affect me in quite the same way as *Home and Away* and *A Matter of Time*. I would attribute the lesser impact of *Snow White* to the fact that in this work Searle does not put her body on the line in the way she does in *Home and Away* and *A Matter of Time*. In the thesis I have discussed *A Matter of Time* first, chronologically, but I saw it second during my viewing of the exhibition. I was drawn first in the exhibition space to *Home and Away*. In this work the uncertainty as to where one should view the work from created by the shape of the exhibition was heightened as one entered the room in which *Home and Away* was projected. The video projections were on walls on either side of the entrance and you therefore walked into the middle between the two projections. The effect of having the wall-sized projections on either side was disorientating enough but the subject matter further added to the sense of dislocation. The disorientating view of Searle floating in a fairly rough ocean on each side of the room was exacerbated by the video camera which rocked and rolled with each wave. I kept thinking that someone who suffered from seasickness would have difficulty with the installation.

Suddenly through the overwhelming movement and power of the visual image, Searle's voice started to speak from somewhere above and between the projections. The sensation was strange because her voice was almost calming in relation to the dislocation caused by the projections. The voice, however, was in the same moment both a reference point to hold onto and also unsettling because it was a disembodied voice speaking not from the position of the body in the ocean but from somewhere else. When I first heard the voice, it seemed to offer some promise of reclamation or narrative between the two projections, but I slowly became aware that it was only a repetition of verbal conjunctions which acted to further the sense of irreconcilable points between myself and the meaning of the work, or between the floating body of Searle and the two landmasses on either side of the ocean. The words seemed to signify a repetition of a failed attempt at reconciliation.

I moved from *Home and Away* to *A Matter of Time*. I still felt the dislocation produced by the water and the ghostly voice as I encountered this work, and it seemed to reiterate for me what I had just seen and felt in relation to *Home and Away*. It acted almost to show me how I was feeling, as if I was slipping off the surface of *Home and Away*, unable to grasp at a position of stability – the stability that my assumed identity, graduated art student, normally afforded me in relation to interpreting an artwork. However *A Matter of Time* was more comforting than the all-encompassing *Home and Away*. It had an intimate nature, being accessible only to one or two people to view at any one time. It also had muted lighting and offered a kind of invisibility to counter the exposure I felt while viewing *Home and Away* of being suspended out in the open (ocean) between two projections. *A Matter of Time* offered the seclusion of a small enclave with the video projected onto the wall in front of you. The intimacy of the scene allowed me to feel as if Searle was identifying with my sense of dislocation. It was as if she was showing me how I felt by slipping and sliding and getting up again in relation to her image. The repetition in this work seemed not only to signify the failure of identity and meaning to be stable but that this uncertainty does not necessarily mean we are all doomed to indecision. Rather, indecision and opacity are constituents of identity.

When I returned to *Home and Away* I was still aware of how identity is a process and not a determined thing. *Home and Away* however seemed now to press towards something else; it felt like a representation of where I was, lost, on the sea of indeterminacy. It not only resonated with my sense of uncertainty but expressed through Searle's situation of floating between two countries the desire for solid land. Plurality and relativism and other open concepts

are part of the landscape of contemporary theory. *Home and Away* expressed this sense of flux but it did so through the body of the artist, a body that became like the solid land that I identified with. The indeterminacy was thus not a theory that could be guaranteed; it had become part of a shared experience between my body and Searle's body, entwining both with our searches for home and identity.

As a South African viewer I had become accustomed to using the language of 'identity politics', which had often acted to reduce my visual experience because of the often forced politicization of the use of colour and culture in art. My vision therefore was suffering not only under the misuse on my part of certain art historical interpretations but also under the burden of (interpretations of) South African visual culture. Searle's work undermined my ability to nonchalantly adopt either view. It rather disturbed any ability to fix and frame the work in any context, and it humbled my newly-graduated viewpoint by disrupting my reductive application of theory through an assault on my senses. I stood in the video installation *Home and Away* dumbstruck. The work grabbed me from a place unprotected by the theory I had learnt and the liberal identity politics I had adopted. It was able rather to push me to recognize how both these things were contingent on experience. Searle somehow grabbed me, as Merleau-Ponty would put it, at the level of the experience before I could reflect and frame the work through some label, definition or argument. In a moment, not long after I had graduated with a sense of my own immortality, Searle's work reminded me of the mortality, fluidity and indeterminacy of my identity in the visual world.

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