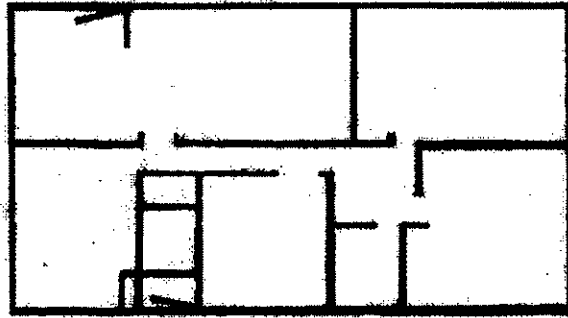


Murmur

A Thesis Statement to the
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By

Janet Piper Jones



Floor Plan

A floor plan connotes a beginning. It was one of the first images that I produced which eventually led to this exhibition, Murmur.

This is the image of the home I grew up in, a type of map signifying a personal geography. It appears in my exhibition on the floor in the centre of the gallery, outlined with tape. We moved from this house when I was 12. Initially, when I drew it, I realized I couldn't remember the specific location of each of the rooms. I phoned my father, who promptly drew a floor plan and mailed it to me. My initial reaction after drawing this floor plan was one of trepidation, followed by feelings of sadness. I associate it with memory, or more accurately, with my awareness of an absence, or loss of memory, and a detachment from a time in my life. I also wondered if it was related to the depression I have experienced repeatedly in my life and which has prompted me, at various times, to inquire into my past to better understand myself. This inquiry has also taught me to be more attentive to my own body as a source of information. Touch, smell, a gesture are all experiences that prompt strong physical responses, sensations that I have come to accept as a type of knowing that I consider memory and which has increasingly informed my art making process. *Murmur* is not a recreation of my primordial home but a recreation of an environment that, while referring to a specific place, situates memory firmly in the body.

Prior to drawing the floor plan I had been researching various theories of memory. I began with the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who reinterpreted Freudian psychoanalysis. I examined Lacan's psychoanalytic concept of the "mirror-stage" and the "imaginary." He refers to the childhood pre-oedipal phase as the "imaginary phase." Here, the child lacks a defined centre of self. (Eagleton 164) The second phase, which is still part of the "imaginary," is called the "mirror-stage." (Tong 220) In recognizing herself in a mirror or reflection, the child comes to see herself as a real self. An integrated self image begins to form. For Lacan, this stage served as the paradigm for all subsequent relations in which the self is always finding itself through reflections in the other. (Tong 221) For the child looking, it is, after all, an image in a mirror, still imaginary, so a blurring of self and object still occurs. The "imaginary" refers to the realm of images in which we make identifications yet misperceive or misrecognize ourselves. (Eagleton 165) I find this theory of memory very compelling conceptually. It provided a framework from which to interpret some of my own experiences in interpersonal relationships and my art.

In addition to considering the sources of my work in psychoanalytic terms, I have also explored how they relate to other theories of memory. In "Memory Works," Peggy Gale, a Canadian cultural critic, investigates how memory is called upon in the experience of watching video art. Gale's argument is that to engage with a work on a psychic, intellectual and physical level memory is required. (Gale 63) What we presently perceive develops out of what we have perceived in the immediate past. Memory also anticipates what we are about to perceive in the future. Time is implicit in the act of remembering. Gale describes memory as functioning like films, sequences that are not fixed in space. (Gale 63) This analysis of memory, I would later learn, is based on the ideas of the phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty. Alex Potts, an art historian,

points out that Merleau-Ponty envisages perceptual awareness as situated in the ever-shifting present. (218) Viewing always involves an awareness of time. It is informed by perceptions of the immediate past and anticipates viewing in the future. I continued to consider these ideas in relation to the production and significance of the floor plan.

Hallway

A hallway is the place in between. It is a transitional space permitting the shifting of locations and perspectives.

Most of my work has involved the body. This installation constitutes a very different body from the images I had painted previously. Within Western culture the body has been portrayed as a unified entity. The body, objectified as “the figure,” was frequently a woman’s. The symbolic significance of the body here is prioritized over the material, physical form. This tradition formed the basis of the art education I received at the Ontario College of Art in the 1980s. However, since that time my own experience of depression, my identity as a lesbian and feminist, have led me to rethink historical and contemporary discourses of the body. I no longer believe that the Western unified body portrays the reality of women’s experience. Within patriarchal culture women deal with the real experience of sexism, the objectification of their bodies, in conjunction with seeing regularly the mediated images of women objectified. Added to this equation is the fact that we are living in a time period that has been described, as the “culture of disembodiment.” (Cavallaro 97) Computer technologies have allowed for a form of communication that erases the body. The way I now evoke the body, the transition from a unified to a fragmented form, more accurately describes my experience and thinking today.

After my first year in the Masters Program my work began to change substantially. I became

increasingly dissatisfied with representational painting. I tried addressing this concern conceptually in paint. At the same time I was experiencing a heightened awareness of the real space of the room I was in. This hyper awareness of a room coincided with dream images I had repeatedly of interior spaces. I dreamed of a capacious room, the enlarged chandelier in the centre leaving little space for me to move through it. In the next dream it was a room in a courtyard seemingly inside and out simultaneously.

I no longer wanted to force my attention to the illusionary two-dimensional space of the canvas. Ironically, at this time I was working on a painting that conceptually, was attempting to undermine traditional notions of perspective and perception. Objects were painted together yet from a variety of different perspectives. I was attempting to undermine the Western technique of organising a point of view that privileges a single viewer. Later art movements such as cubism would undermine traditional notions of perspective. It is a model however, that continues to be taught in art schools. Merleau-Ponty criticized this model of perception as misleadingly objective. (Potts 214) He argued that we cannot understand the complex sense we have of an environment by isolating the purely optical level of awareness (Potts 214). This articulates what I was trying to understand intuitively at the time. It corresponds to my experience and awareness within the room. According to Merleau-Ponty the “body we inhabit, the body that is looking at and in contact with the world, is not in its essence a mass of solid stuff. It is a field of awareness and sphere of possible action that extends well beyond the limits of the body as a bounded object.” (Potts 220) I wanted to respond to this new field of awareness in my work. The first transition was to work with sculptural forms. I began collecting found objects that referenced domestic space. I then proceeded to cover them with fabric. Soon I was sewing felt tightly around these forms. The chair

and lamp forms which both appear in this exhibition are a result of this process.

The next steps taken during this time of transition involved this grouping of tiny drawings.



These sketches, done quickly, initiated both a shift in my process, and in how I would evoke the body. The drawings were intended to connote an emotional experience of pain or loss. I wanted to convey the sense of collapse, the heavy-weighted physical experience of depression. It is a form in the process of metamorphosis which drops, spills, and is in transition. This was the first time I chose a non-objective drawing to describe an emotional state. The impetus for these drawings came from a class discussion in which the instructor posed the question: could one visually describe an experience that exists outside of language? I was intrigued. My interpretation of this was to reconsider non-objective images in relation to language. If the image was a three-dimensional non-objective object that couldn't be named then our engagement would involve the body. I began to translate these drawings into sculptures using felt. Although initially considered non-objective forms, during the process of making them they began to evoke the body. My understanding of the floor plan I had drawn began to shift from an association with the absence of memory to recognition of the sensate embodied experiences that encompass memory.

In rethinking how the body informs perception I began to become more attentive to bodily sensations within my own artmaking practice. Previously I hadn't considered why I was sewing. I

now recognized my desire to return again to a repetitive activity, the gesture of sewing. Sewing became the central activity. Another repetitive gesture would be the wrapping of the smaller sculptural forms. Does the comfort in the gesture, the resulting sensation in the body, evoke an experience of memory? Is it obsessive? A type of repetitive thought returning again and again? Does it withhold an expression of emotion, keep depression at bay?

Sewing is an activity traditionally associated with women and maligned as “craft.” I was pleased to incorporate this medium and surprised to be involved in an activity that I had previously disliked. For both practical and symbolic reasons I invited my father and partner to participate. I also sought the help of a neighbour, an older woman with expertise in various crafts. Doing so breaks with the patriarchal Western construct of the mastery of the artist expressing his unique consciousness that is somehow separate from external reality. Elizabeth Grosz, a philosophy professor specializing in corporeal politics, points out that in Western thought, consciousness is “positioned outside of the world, outside the body, outside of nature: it is removed from direct contact with other minds and a sociocultural community.”

Bedroom

A room for the physical and psychic needs of the body. The bedroom is a site for sleep, and waking and desire.

The bedroom is housed within the patriarchal family where heterosexuality is the preferred practice of desire. This paradigm excludes my identity today as a lesbian. In her book, Volatile Bodies Elizabeth Grosz’s project is to “displace the centrality of mind, the psyche, interior, or consciousness in conceptions of the subject through a reconfiguration of the body.” (Vii) In her inclusion of the body, she turns her attention to the ambiguous term “sexuality.” One of her

concerns is to examine sexuality in terms of one's sexual identity. I found myself re-examining the way woman artists have evoked the body and sexuality.

Throughout art history women artists have addressed the complex position of the body, most significantly women's bodies, in culture. The question of the body's status in culture has been at the heart of recent theoretical debates. Debates by feminists in the late 1970s and early 1980s about pornography coincided with debates concerning the question of aesthetics within feminist cultural theory. (Betterton 11) In the early 1970s affirmative depictions of "femaleness" were followed in the latter part of that decade and in the 1980s by works evoking the body through absence. In visual art the woman's body effectively disappeared in an effort to disrupt the pleasure of the viewer and draw attention to the existing relationship between cultural forms and women's oppression. Mary Kelly is one artist who examined the relationship between images and language. She identified how viewing practices are implicated in oppressive regimes. (Pollock 198)

However, if women were to be represented as desiring agents, then a return to the body seemed necessary. In the 1980s, women artists struggled to represent women's sexual bodies in ways which couldn't be framed by the male gaze. (Betterton 9) This work was frequently highly theoretical. By the 1990s many works began to emphasize the physicality of the body. During my research I discovered the problematic aspect of classifying periods of art. In her analysis of Canadian art, in an essay entitled "The Anorexic Body," Judith Mastai laments the absence of materiality of the body in installations by women in the 1990s. (136) The physicality of the nineties that I mentioned previously may not be representative of what was happening "everywhere."

One artist who was, throughout these decades, committed to evoking the physicality of the

body was Louise Bourgeois. Bourgeois and Eva Hesse are two women artists whose work I have examined. Both artists produced work that challenged gendered binary oppositions. In the 1960s Bourgeois developed the biomorphist or polymorphist sexuality and fusion that characterized much of her work. (Chadwick 18) Both women also evoked multiple and shifting associations with skin, interiority and exteriority, bodily shapes and orifices. It is interesting to note that at this time Lucy Lippard used the term “body ego” to describe how an image might refer simultaneously to inner and outer bodily sensations. (Chadwick 19) It seems a precursor to the corporeal politics of today.

Eva Hesse’s work show some influences of minimalism yet also undermines this movement and some of its assumptions. In one well known piece entitled *Accession III* she uses the geometric square form and covers the interior with tiny transparent vinyl tubes. Clearly the body is evoked. In referencing the body and interiority she is breaking with minimalism’s commitment to literalism.

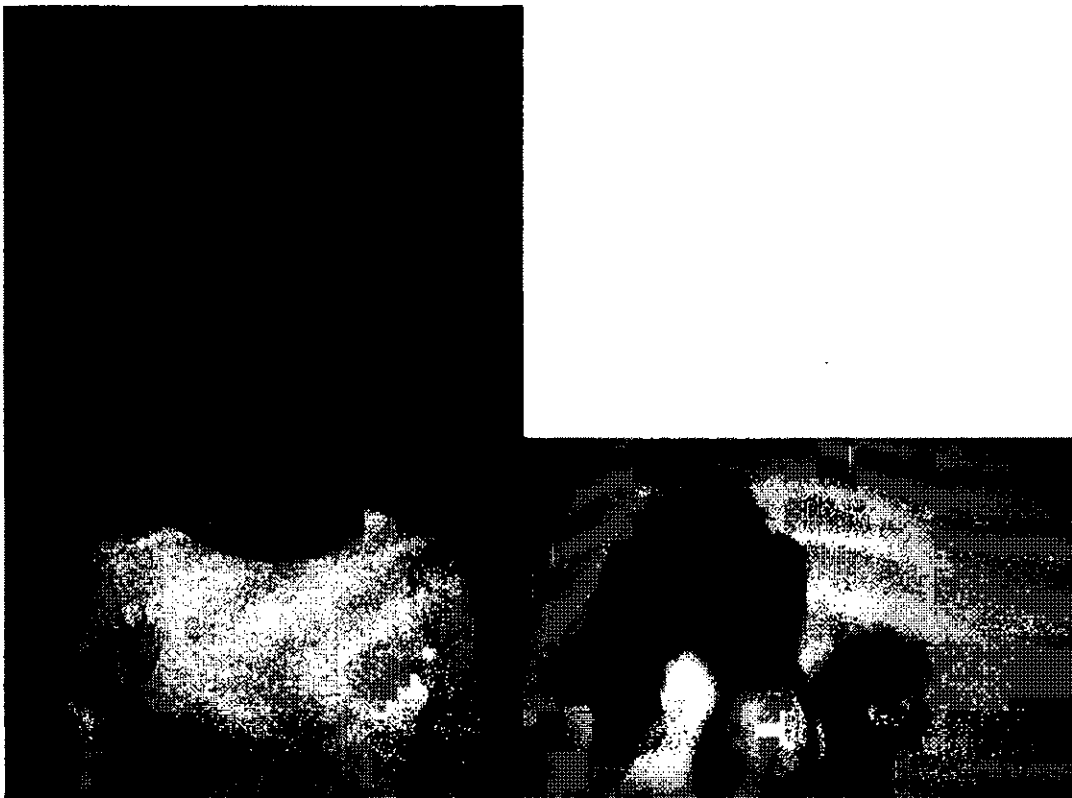
Bourgeois’s work often included architectural references in conjunction with the body. That reference was frequently the home. It is her later work, the *Cells*, which I find most compelling. *You Better Grow Up* is the title of one *Cell* from 1993. It is an enclosed, contained space. *Cell*, as a reference to prison, is the association I take from this. It also refers to the real cells within the body’s interior chemistry. This series of installations signifies the complex relationships of the body, family and interpersonal relations. Nancy Speaker refers to Bourgeois’s use of architecture as describing the state of female “intersubjectivity in which the boundaries between inner psychic and outer empirical realms collapse.” (Katik 81)

I want to turn now to examine my own sculptural forms and the issue of representing the

body and sexuality. As I mentioned previously, the sculptural forms based on the drawing were altered and informed by my own body in the process of making them. The emphasis I intended on making in the forms was the sensation of weight and collapse. However, as I continued to work, the reference that emerged was of interiority and exteriority. Orifice or interior spaces would now appear in all the maquettes that I made. The significance of the floor plan now altered in my mind and I began thinking of my sexual identity in relation to my past.

Basement

This is a storage place for items of no apparent use. Tucked away and misplaced their existence is forgotten. They remain hidden from view.



Although not part of this exhibition, these photographs were important sources leading to this body of work. In one photo my head is covered with a translucent veil while one eye peers out. It

is my partner who is veiled in the second photo. We are back-to-back. While working on my MFA degree, our relationship has been a long distance one. The fact of not being able to see each other is implied by our positioning. The gesture is further complicated by the veil draped around her head. If we faced one another seeing would still be impaired. Again, Lacan's "imaginary phase" is relevant here. The complexities of love-interpersonal relationships and desire for authentic communication have been a theme in my work and are evident in my exhibition in the sculpture of two chairs joined with obvious tension.

In the photo my partner's identity is hidden. Her face is not visible. This strategy has been employed by woman surrealist artists. Whitney Chadwick, an artist and art historian, claims that masking and masquerade have been crucial for the "production of feminine subjectivity through active agency." (22) While aware of this tradition, I am using the veil to signify a hidden identity. I have included a type of veiling as one of the materials in *Murmur*, using it in conjunction with smaller sculptural forms. The use of translucent material is intended to hide the small hanging objects which reference the body. Some of the sculptures are more obviously sexual and others are more ambiguous in referencing the body.

Contrasting with the translucent fabric is the opacity of felt. It is the dominant material in this exhibition and appealed to me for its tactile quality and opacity. I covered familiar objects with felt. They are hidden and insulated. My use of this material has similarities to the work of Joseph Beuys, an artist well known for incorporating felt in his installations and sculptures. He made a suit entirely of felt and, in an installation he made in 1985 called *Plight*, he placed a grand piano in a room lined with rolls of felt. This transformation implied the muting of sound, of music. Felt was the material used to insulate his body aiding his survival after a plane crash in winter. (Mapp

9) For Beuys, felt signified healing. For me it raised the question: if the past is hidden to me, does it render part of me mute? These photos, upon further reflection, hinted at my awareness of the need to speak more clearly of who I am, to allow my own voice to emerge. I also began to consider the references to gender and sexuality I was evoking in the work.

Murmur

As I continued to work with forms that evoked the body and space, my interest evolved into a consideration of architectural space and the body. In this exhibition I chose to keep the floor plan as a simple two dimensional linear drawing on the floor. In situating the floor plan in the middle of the gallery it functions as a kind of stage to be viewed from a variety of perspectives within the gallery. It is relatively small within the larger context of the gallery space. This domestic space is without walls, a drawing on the floor that can be walked on. The private and public realm are thus collapsed. Architecture is a discipline that defines its boundaries and design according to orthogonality, the right angledness of the line. (Ingraham 264) The geometric floor plan in *Murmur* provides a stark contrast to the biomorphic forms of the sculptures. The sculptures do, however, reference the real architectural space of the gallery. They spread out, seep, onto the flatness of the gallery floor. Sinews or hair- like strands emerge from the membrane of the wall and ceiling, and parallel the column structure within the gallery. In this way, interior and exterior spaces are confused. The forms encroach upon the linearity of the floor plan and the real architectural space. By conflating the architectural structures with the body in this way, I am insisting on the presence of the body in space and undermining the idea of architecture as a neutral space. In her essay, entitled "Bodies-Cities," Elizabeth Grosz points out that cities organize

family, sexual and social relations. (250) The structures and norm of the city “seep into and affect all the other elements that go into the constitution of corporeality and/as subjectivity.” (249) One of these structures is the construction of the space, the architecture that surrounds us.

In this paper I have identified the numerous shifts, both materially and conceptually, in my work which led to this exhibition, *Murmur*. My initial feelings of trepidation have transformed into a renewed sense of self-awareness and the conviction of the importance of subjective ways of knowing. As the title of this exhibition connotes, there has been a transformation from, a silence or muteness to the quiet emergence of a voice.

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