

# women and technology

performance/surveillance/the body

## a foucauldian feminism or a new humanism?

BY BETH JACKSON

*Performances by Barbara Campbell, Jill Orr, Michelle Andringa and Jill Scott were seen recently at Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art (IMA). Beth Jackson discusses these works in terms of the nexus between technology and feminist practice in art and theory.*

The foregrounding of the two paradigms, 'women' and technology, creates a much needed discursive forum in contemporary feminist criticism. The medium of performance is the artist's body. It operated in recent performances by Barbara Campbell, Jill Orr, Michelle Andringa and Jill Scott as a discursive medium, contextualising these two paradigms. The relationship of technology to the body critically engages Michel Foucault's concept of surveillance, while the relationship of women to the body engages concepts of gender construction, biologism and gender division. What, specifically, is women's relationship to technology, the body and social surveillance?

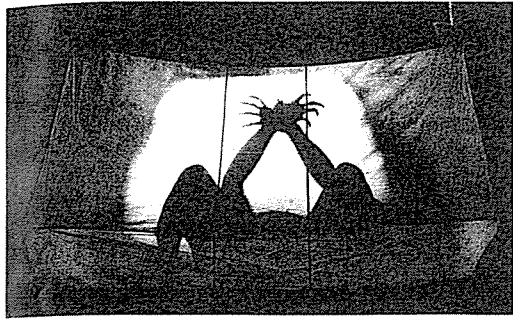
The popular media stereotypes that are immediately called to mind when freely associating women and technology are ones of the helpless female and the passive female—unable to change the tyre on her own car, or to deliver her own baby, let alone program a computer, engineer a skyscraper, or pilot a jet-fighter. Women who fill such roles are defined negatively in terms of their gender deviation (as masculinised bitches and so on). Women are seen to have no natural propensity for technology. They are mystified by it, needing male authority to provide, to explain, and to protect. The popular exception to this media stereotype is in the area of domestic appliances which are provided, invented and serviced by a masculine technocracy but undoubtedly mastered by the female 'kitchen whizz' or 'wonder mum'. The technical-female is permitted authority in the private (powerless and apolitical) realm, adopting the passive role of consumer. Thus women are characterised as powerless in relation to technology through the gender-constructed aspects of the feminine, such as passivity

and irrationality, and through the gender divisions of labour in the public and private spheres.

The corollary of this is that women are subject to more intense social surveillance than men, as has been shown to occur in medical science where the female body is described in detail as a deviation from the male norm.<sup>1</sup> It also occurs in government bureaucracies, for example, the Social Security Department where characteristically masculine claims such as unemployment benefit, are far more straightforward than a characteristically feminine claim such as the sole parent benefit. (When claiming the sole parent benefit the applicant is forced to divulge far more personal information and is compelled to undergo unannounced home inspections and sometimes counselling).<sup>2</sup>

With the effect of bridging these gender divisions and correcting the imbalance of power the performances of Barbara Campbell, Jill Orr, Michele Andringa and Jill Scott attempted to 'domesticate' technology. They have taken technology deeper into the private realm while privileging a subjectivity in which technology is at the mercy of memory and emotion. Concordantly, the subjective realm is 'politicised' as an active ethical terrain, not merely a 'passive' construction of social surveillance (where metaphorically the body may return the gaze).

Foucault's genealogy of power establishes that power touches people's lives more fundamentally through their social practices than through their beliefs (power over our bodies rather than our minds).<sup>3</sup> Modern power is local and capillary. It originated in the "microtechniques" of the disciplinary institutions of the late eighteenth century—the hospital, prison, school and army barracks.



Barbara Campbell, *Loom of Arachne*. Live performance with 2 super 8 film loops. First Draft West, Sydney. Photo: Brian Dougherty.

Only later were these techniques and practices taken up and integrated into what Foucault calls "global or macrostrategies of domination". Foucault's concept of power, then, may be stated more simply as a politics of everyday life. This rules out state-centred and/or economic views of power. He provides the empirical and conceptual basis for treating such phenomena as sexuality, the family, schools, psychiatry, medicine and social science as political phenomena—as constitutive elements in the modern discursive power regime. It is this most crucial aspect of Foucault's thought that is so useful for feminist criticism which seeks to politicise natural/biologic, medical/scientific and other definitions of the feminine, to politicise the private realm of the nuclear family and to empower subordinate feminine positions in the public realm, positions such as consumer and part-time worker.

Modern disciplinary power operates through the creation of visibility. Populations are organised, homogenised, hierarchised and individualised so that they are continually surveyed. This visibility, as exemplified in the panopticon, is unidirectional. In the panopticon the scientist or warden could see the inmate but not *vice versa*. Because the inmates never knew whether or when they were being watched, it made them internalise the gaze and in effect survey themselves. Thus surveillance, as an instrument of modern disciplinary power, relies upon an asymmetrical relationship. It is the asymmetrical nature of the use of technological surveillance as bound up in modern power which these performances sought to redress.

### Barbara Campbell: A Creative Invisibility

Barbara Campbell's performance, *Loom of Arachne*, included two projected background images (super 8 film loops)—one of female legs in gold shoes skipping a rope, the other of female hands making string patterns. Repeated throughout the performance they established the bodily micro-practices of childhood, disciplined and docile. The accompanying text described the suburban envi-

ronment in which a politics of everyday life can be created.

The performance itself occurred within a two-person tent beneath these projected repeating images. A light within the tent projected the shadow of a woman's naked body turning slowly inside. She lay back and began to make shadow puppets of mythic predatory creatures dancing, rearing, attacking, growing and metamorphosing, accompanied by rhythmic percussive music (by Jamie Fielding). The last creature was the spider which crept slowly, loomed menacingly and descended.

Foucault makes an interesting footnote to his chapter, "Docile Bodies", in *Discipline and Punish*: "I shall choose examples from military, medical, educational and industrial institutions. Other examples might have been taken from colonization, slavery and child rearing." He suggests that child-rearing practices came under closer inspection and more intense supervision in *fin de siècle* France as part of the establishment of modern forms of power. The concept of childhood was demarcated as a particular phase of human development and accorded specific status and behavioural modes. Of course this was achieved through the created visibility of the school, boarding school, medical practice and, perhaps most significantly, of psychoanalysis.

That Barbara Campbell's performance relied on an invisibility rather than a created visibility is important in this context. The shadows of her puppetry were almost the antithesis of the silhouette (the panoptical item). Where the silhouette reveals exact outline and location, the cast shadow is fictional—it has a real source but can be distorted, corrupted, altered in both outlined shape and scale.

Campbell created a private space for the child (the spaces of the cubby hole, the camping tent, of hide and seek) and connected it with concepts of subjectivity, femininity and the 'primitive'. However she empowered this space with a creative invisibility, robbing it of passivity, docility and 'innocence'. It is a realm which can compete with the symbolic order of patriarchy and is not merely patriarchy's projected and powerless (m)other.

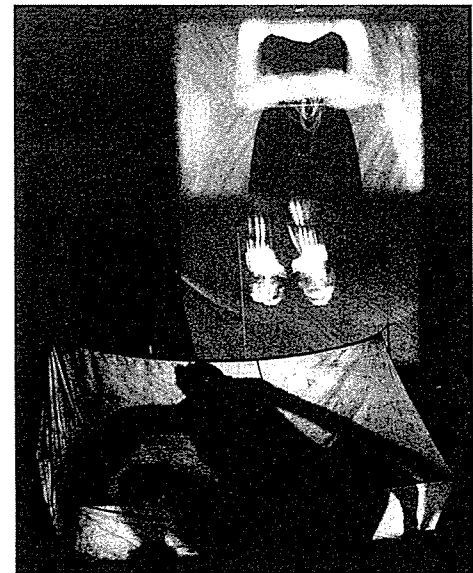
Foucault himself rejects subjectivity as a terrain formed through the individualising panopticon and as a metaphysical construct of modern humanism—both of which are complicit with the modern surveillance regime. Foucault however does not offer an alternative post-humanist ethical paradigm. He does suggest that protest urged in the name of the pleasures of our bodies may have greater emancipatory potential than that made in the name of the ideal of autonomy. The body, as exemplified in Barbara Campbell's performance, is not passive. It is a sensual, active, erotic force. Is it glimpsing a new concept of subjectivity? One which does not result in a sovereign autonomy but,

rather, one which is still bonded (woven in *Arachne's Loom*) to the mother, which is neither subject nor object.

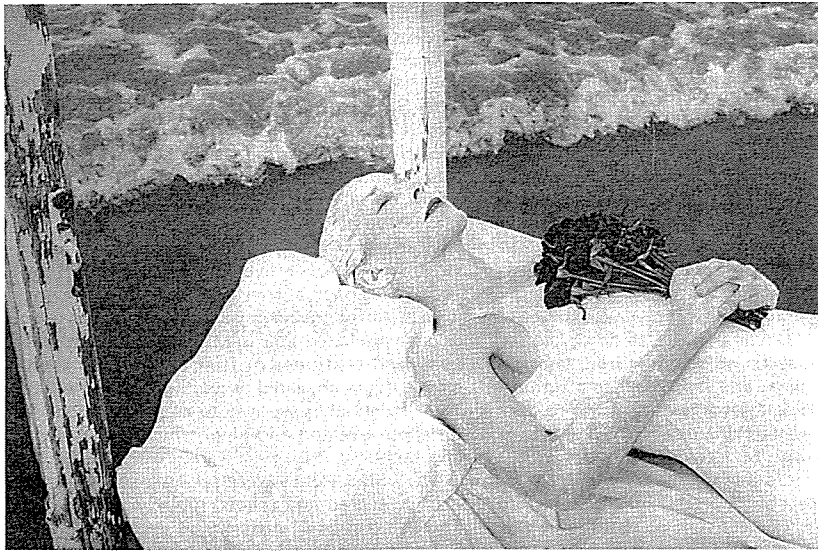
### The Subjectivity of Jill Orr

Jill Orr's *Love Songs* relied heavily on a humanist rhetoric. Her performance utilised, not without irony, symbols of pure romance—the red rose, a figure in white, a figure in black, the waltz, the gesture of outstretching arms. Mediating these symbols and tampering with their purity were two video screens and a live narration (read by Peggy Tsoutas) of popular love song lyrics. The live performer, surrounded by such simulacra of love, was at once alienated and dignified. The stylistically gendered costumes of first a male and then a female figure appeared as another illusory surface. They eventually gave way to an androgynous figure (both live and on video) which was poised to take flight.

The video scenes were set on a sea shore and they partnered and echoed the live performance. The live costumed male figure gestured towards the costumed female figure on the video screen (both are Jill Orr). The sight of a live figure attempting to make contact with a video image made visible the unreciprocal nature of technological media. What emerged instead was an interior dualism—that of the video viewer who can only touch herself. In the same way the quotations from popular love songs read to the audience, featured as spectacle, impenetrably kitsch, while working to stimulate personal memory associations in the individual members of the audience. The audience



Barbara Campbell, *Loom of Arachne*. Live performance with 2 super 8 film loops. First Draft West, Sydney. Photo: Brian Dougherty.



Jill Orr, *Love Songs*, 1991. Photo Virginia Fraser

members also were 'touching themselves'. The theme of 'touching oneself' is developed in the philosophical writings of Luce Irigaray:

A woman 'touches herself' constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually. Thus, within herself she is already two—but not divisible into ones—who stimulate each other...

The prevalence of the gaze, discrimination of form, and individualisation of form is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Woman finds pleasure more in touch than in sight and her entrance into a dominant scopophilic economy signifies, once again, her relegation to passivity: she will be the beautiful object... In this system of representation and desire, the vagina is a flaw, a hole in the representation's scopophilic objective. It was admitted already in Greek statuary that this 'nothing to be seen' must be excluded, rejected from such a scene of representation. Women's sexual organs are simply absent from this scene: they are masked and her 'slit' is sewn up.<sup>4</sup>

Irigaray takes patriarchy's definition of the vagina as 'negativity' and 'lack' and finds a site of invisibility from which to combat social surveillance. It is thus also a positive site, erotic and gendered, from which to construct Foucault's 'pleasure of bodies'. Jill Orr's performance *Love Song* did not use the core symbolism of the vagina. It concentrated, rather, on male and female images equally and had a deliberately androgynous conclusion. Nevertheless, on another level, the performance could be read as Jill Orr's own body relating to itself in different guises. *Love Songs* privileged a private, subjective domain furnished with all the

trappings of pure romance (which historically has been a female domain), relying heavily on the nature-symbol of the ocean (which can be read as a predominantly feminine one).

The invisibility with which Orr is concerned is not a physical space from which can be extrapolated a set of micropractices or a politics of everyday life. Rather it is the far more problematic metaphysical space of subjectivity with all the humanist baggage of the dignified individual. Irigaray attempts to locate a physical site and practice for this 'touching oneself' in the vagina, but her analysis is subject to its own problems of biologism and essentialism.

Jill Orr's 'touching herself' is the metaphysical dualism of humanism itself—that of subject versus object. In the modern discursive power regime the individual is at once the constituted subject of social surveillance and its epistemic object of enquiry. No sooner does the subject pole endow the individual with dignity, freedom of thought and creativity than the object pole denies these qualities, seeing the individual as historically and socially burdened, predicted and determined by alien forces. This is the unsolvable dilemma of humanism and one which Michel Foucault entirely repudiates and rejects. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* describes the fabrication of the objectified individual while the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* describes the fabrication of the subjective side. Where

humanism criticises the objectification of people in the name of subjectivity, Foucault's analyses demonstrate that subjectivity is every bit as problematic as objectivity. Indeed, the two poles are symmetrical and complementary. The "subjected sovereignty" of the individual can lead in practice only to hierarchies of domination.

Foucault's adopted meta-ethical position is essentially useless for feminist criticism. Feminism cannot afford a rejectionist critique of modern humanism (or indeed modernism!) when no post-humanist ethical paradigm has been developed. Alternatively feminism must opt for a dialectical approach to these concepts and to a reinterpretation of history. Michelle Andringa's performance *Old Myths* generated such a dialectic and traced out its own technological and cultural tradition.

#### **Michelle Andringa: Towards Reciprocity**

The performance began with two silent films. The larger one, *Super VHS* filmed on a portable video camera, had been produced in black and white and then colour-washed to purple, achieving a sixties-style film effect. The scene was of a woman playing cards—either *solitaire* or perhaps reading a tarot pack. This segment had been filmed in a consciously Warholian style, extremely slow and spacious: the woman sat, thought, turned over a card, sat, thought, lit a cigarette. The contemplative solitary image gave way to interactive female images in a "Gibson girl" style.

Accompanying the large projected film which covered the back wall of the Institute of Modern Art, was a second film played on a small television monitor. This sequence began with clips from the sixties—Fred Astaire, warships, trains, maps—and featured two excerpts from 'foreign' films of the same period. These sub-titled black and white scenes (from romantic comedies) provided a TV history of the 1960s as partner to the aesthetic Warholian referent in the larger contemporary video.

While both films played, a voice-over provided a cohesive narration which began and ended with two Arabic couplets, used as story-telling devices.



Jill Orr, *Love Songs*, 1991. Photo Virginia Fraser