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Cooking up Crimes and Maternal Misdemeanours: From Food Ritual to Transgressive Performances

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The use of food as a medium in my performances has developed to reinforce my position on the role of the artist as a social commentator and ethnographer of social customs. This sentiment is shared by artist Susan Hiller when she states, 'I believe art can function as a critique of existing culture and a locus where futures not otherwise possible can begin to shape themselves' (Lippard 1996, p.xiii). The ritual of cooking acts as a substitute for the artistic outcome signifies a shift away from my earlier focus on the production of art objects to ephemeral works that comment on process and action in real time. Baking for private and public performances is an activity that connects the artist, audience, and community, moving the concentration away from a solitary, studio-based practice to an interactive, public ceremony. The food performances generate a complex ritual. They are conducted in the spirit of food happenings created by members of the Fluxus movement who 'demonstrate how an individual action and a collective ritual might extend and perpetuate into larger social configurations — those values and practices shared by the individual artists' (Stiles 1993, p.93). The practices of artists associated with this group, constituted an ideology that recognises art's capacity to acknowledge the processes of life as a strategy for revealing the function of human behaviour. These attitudes were disseminated by artists like Daniel Spoerri, Ben Vautier, Eric Andersen, Philip Corner, Alison Knowles and Valie Export whose food related performances capture the ethos of the Fluxus movement, 'to redirect the use of materials and human ability into socially constructive purposes' (Stiles 1993 p.67). This article will argue that staged food rituals, act as an entry point for discussion about urgent female social issues.

The production of food is traditionally the responsibility of women whose status is often determined through the performance of this domestic role. In my work, baked goods act as a subterfuge for dealing with aberrant human behaviour that I encounter in print media and on the television.



Figure 1a: Newspaper article collected and archived by the artist as source material. Courtesy the artist.

Mum arrest over 9 dead babies

BERLIN — Police have found the bones of nine newborns buried in flowerpots and buckets, and arrested a woman believed to be their mother on suspicion of killing them.

The remains, buried in sand and earth at a site in the east German state of Brandenburg, were found after someone clearing a garage found human bones in a fish tank.

“We are assuming there are at least nine corpses,” said Michael Neff of the Frankfurt an der Oder state prosecutor’s office.

He did not comment on a possible motive.

Police arrested a 39-year-old woman on suspicion of killing the babies immediately after they were born in 1988-2004.

She has said she was the

mother, but has not admitted homicide, a court spokesman said. Her statement was confused.

Shocked MPs asked how it was possible that the disappearance of the babies over 16 years had not come to light earlier.

“We are looking at a crime on a scale that, as far as I can remember, has never been seen in the history of the Federal Republic,” said the Interior Minister of Brandenburg, Joerg Schoenbohm.

“We have to ask ourselves how this incredible crime remained hidden over all these years. It’s a question directed at relatives, neighbours, doctors and the authorities.”

The woman is believed to be the mother of several other children. — REUTERS

Figure 1b: Newspaper article collected and archived by the artist as source material. Courtesy the artist.

The food works are a direct response to these crises in the community and aim to stimulate dialogue about issues surrounding female criminality, the deviant mother and the maternal and non-maternal state, respectively. I have chosen the feminine territory of baking and icing cakes to explore the relationship between the procreation/creation continuums lodged in biological cycles and temporal changes in my artistic and personal life. These baked goods are used in private and public rituals and exhibitions as a pretext for autobiographical introspection and cathartic release. There is also an underlying stratagem to subversively undermine the cultural significance of the cake at gatherings and the social position of women who traditionally produce elaborate ceremonial offerings for family events.

The cake cutting ceremony is a means for mothers and expectant mothers to release suppressed anxiety and vent their emotions in relation to motherhood. Anthropologist, Victor Turner, argued that many forms of ritual serve as an outlet through which the stresses and tensions built into the social structure could be expressed and worked through (Turner 1968, p.30). This monthly ritual acknowledges the potential state of expectant mothers who are on the threshold of giving birth, for other women it represents the movement away from the possibility of motherhood.

Making a Baby 2003-2006

This performance started in October 2003, when I made a baby-shaped cake for my sister-in-law's baby shower, to celebrate the birth of my new niece.



Figure 2. Picture of the artist's niece Molly with the first baby cake she made for her baby shower, October 2003. Courtesy the artist.

The shape of the cake is dictated by a Wilton aluminum cake tin called the 'Premmie', with a newborn, cabbage patch baby, design pressed into the metal. This baking tin was exclusively manufactured and marketed for creating cakes to celebrate christenings and baptisms. I thought it was perverse that the cake, once iced, resembled a new-born baby and is presented to the mother to stab, cut, mutilate and devour. When I arrived to the party with the cake, I was surprised at how I was praised for producing -'such a beautiful baby'-, everyone was amazed at how much time I had spent making the cake, how much it resembled a baby and how it had 'personality'.



Figure 3. Catherine Bell, Baby Drop, (Baby Cake no. 47, June 2007) Cake detail. Delivered to Mothers' Room, Hungry Jacks, Hoddle Street, Melbourne, Victoria. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

Of course, when the real baby showed, the cake was ignored, but not by my three-year old niece. Every opportunity she had to poke the cake and pick off the icing, she would. Was this her way of purging her sibling rivalry? When my sister-in-law was cutting the cake, I noticed her discomfort at performing the task. She hesitated putting the knife into the cake because she was reluctant to –'damage the baby'. I was interested that she read the cake as infant. She was adamant that she wasn't going to cut up the head. However, once the knife penetrated the sweet outer skin, like a rite of passage, the subject succumbed to the liminal cake cutting process.

This experience inspired a three-year ritual, *Making a Baby*, which enabled expectant mothers and female artists who had chosen not to have children to participate in cutting up a baby cake and express their individual attitudes, opinions and suppressed anxieties about motherhood or childlessness.



Figure 4. Catherine Bell, Making A Baby, (2003-2007) Monthly ritual, baking and icing a baby cake every menstrual cycle .

I realized at my sister-in-law's baby shower the awe-inspiring presence of the novelty cake and the theatrical nature of food. When it was time to perform the ceremonial cutting of the cake, the process evoked questions around the gaze to which prepared food is subjected. The self-referential and repetitive process of baking and icing a cake every menstrual cycle originates from my compulsion to identify with and contemplate the maternal state. The monthly, nine-hour cake baking and icing process demands commitment, care, patience and devotion — attributes that I consider essential to the rearing of children. While decorating the cake, I feel guilty for cursing the baby in progress, for the attention and energy it demands. I start to question my aptitude for this maternal role. Just as working as a nanny for two years was a great contraceptive, so this monthly ritual reminds me of the dedication and self-sacrifice mothers make when they commit to 'make' a baby.

Once the baby cake is completed, it is ready to go under the knife and is presented to pregnant women. However, when pregnant women weren't available to cut the cake, I had those unable to have children, women who are undecided about having children, women not wanting to have children and woman who have miscarried. These women have the prerequisite of being artists in the age group thirty-five and older who haven't experienced child birth. This ritual provides the opportunity for a select group of participating women to purge individual feelings relating to the maternal or non-maternal state.



Figure 5. Catherine Bell, Making A Baby, (Cake no.14, October, 2004) Performance stills. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

In this sense, the making of this baby cake and the ritual of cutting the cake has a cathartic value. The theory of catharsis further argues that unresolved emotional distress gives rise to rigid or neurotic patterns of behaviour or violent outbursts and that catharsis dissipates these patterns. The obsessive creation of this baby cake also recognises the trauma of different groups of women in the community desperate to conceive and committed to the cause of making a baby. Observing close female friends pressured by the 'biological clock' to conceive naturally or through the aid of IVF has revealed a multitude of neurotic and obsessive behaviour. Some female friends, who have been trying to get pregnant, have prepared nurseries, prematurely bought stuffed animals and baby clothes in preparation for the new

arrival.



Figure 6. Catherine Bell, Making A Baby, (Cake no.21, April, 2005) Performance stills. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

There are also deep feelings of resentment expressed in this ritual over lost opportunities to conceive. A number of female artists involved in this project expressed openly that one of the reasons they had missed out on having children was that they couldn't support a child and continue practicing as an artist without parental/spousal support. Reactivating this ritual every month to correspond with my menstrual cycle made me think about how an individual action and collaborative ritual might extend and perpetuate into larger social configurations. These sentiments are compatible with performance artists Valie Export and Bobby Baker who use food as materials and live performances, public rituals, and elaborate installations to redirect human ability into socially constructive purposes. Export uses her body as the principle medium in her work to challenge the prevailing attitudes toward the objectification of the female body in the work of the male performance artists in the Viennese Actionists. Her feminist works resonate with my own as they explore subversive and taboo themes in the public sphere and she solicits the public to participate in the performance action.

In *Homometer II* (1976), the artist straps a loaf of bread to her stomach to symbolize a pregnant belly and approaches passersby with a carving knife. Relinquishing her power, she becomes a human breadboard, offering the loaf, warmed from her body, to be dangerously sliced. In this work, she stages a social transgression that invokes taboos such as cannibalism, abortion, infanticide and transubstantiation. The aim of the artist appears to relate food with reproductive function but is she suggesting that women are bound by their biological role? This is suggested by how the bread is held in place, by the knotted rope harness and it implies the artist is somehow burdened by the task. The public soliciting of strangers to cut and consume the bread ritualizes the theatrical interchange between action and object. The cutting of the loaf is invasive and could be interpreted as a violent act where the participant is left to think about the act of consumption and the female maternal body. The artist serves the bread on her own body to suggest that the preparation and delivery of food, is worn by the woman, foregrounding issues such as woman as provider, nurturer and mother.

Export uses food as a symbolic representation of reproduction and fertility and the performance involves the subversive destruction of the bread belly in a similar way to the cake baby in my rituals. Her performance demonstrates how the performance body can act as a vehicle for projecting the private struggles of individuals into the public sphere, highlighting the role of the artist in society to initiate community exchange and foregrounding issues that affect women. Similarly my cake, like the bread, relates to fertility — it is offered up for the public to cut and devour and the foodstuff acts as a bridge between private catharsis, social issues and community exchange. The bread, a symbol of nourishment and pregnancy, becomes the focus for Export's social interaction with the public. The artist serves the bread on her own body to suggest that the purchase, preparation and delivery of food is 'worn', by the woman, foregrounding issues such as woman as provider, nurturer and procreator.

Export's performance draws a connection between food, violence, and women. The tension in this work hinges on the possibility of the artist being injured during the performance, publicly highlighting social issues such as domestic violence. Positioning herself as potential victim, her vulnerability and self denigration, is suggestive of the control and oppression of women. I relate her work to my own intentions of bringing social crises and injustices to public attention. Her simple gesture communicates complex messages that I interpret as the artist's response to woman in domestic violence relationships who are subjugated and threatened in marital disputes. Food is often at the centre of these disputes when perceived failures of cooking or domestic duties can lead to aggressive attacks on women. As Roswitha Mueller (1994) argues:

The body in Export's work was conceived as the bearer of signs, signals and information. This designation goes in two directions, it means the body is a site of cultural determinations, the place where the law of society is engraved into the individual, on the other, it also implies the body's capacity to signal to the outside world and communicate with it. (p.31)

Bobby Baker focuses on the incarnation of food itself. She uses food to create an installation called *The Edible Family* (1976) by filling a mobile home with each of her family members made of edible treats. The life size figures were made of cake worked into chicken wire scaffolds (Barrett & Baker 2007, p.101). The public moved through each room, and was invited to eat the mother, father, son, daughter

and baby situated in separate rooms of the house while Baker dutifully made and served pots of tea to wash it down (Barrett & Baker 2007, p.84). Here, Bobby Baker is the creator, responsible for making the family, and the subject, as she takes her place in the family as the coconut baby cake (ibid, p.84). This perverse cannibalism entraps the guest, invited to the family tea party, to become performer, devourer and destroyer. Baker has said that experience of witnessing the food family disappear, represents her erasure as an artist (ibid, p.38). This erasure is a prophetic work because when the artist actually started a family she disappeared from the art scene and ceased producing artwork. Just as my baby cake works foregrounds the issues confronting female artists and mothers, Baker's *Edible Family* reiterates the loss of artistic identity after childbirth. The artist describes the way in which women tend to abandon their practice to pursue motherhood and the anxiety of making the choice over an art career or being a mum (Barrett & Baker 2007, p.90).

Baby Drop 2007

After three years, the monthly ritual *Making a Baby* developed into the stealth intervention *Baby Drop* in 2007 because it became increasingly more difficult to find pregnant women and female artists who had not had children to cut the cakes I baked each month. The regularity of this monthly ritual made it difficult to find participants and I started to feel guilty about the cakes proliferating in my bedroom and refrigerator.



Figure 7. Baby cakes stored in the fridge for Baby Drop performance. Courtesy the artist.

These cakes had reached a stage where they could no longer be cut and eaten. I felt incredible shame for the wastage and my failure to perpetuate the three year project. To alleviate my anxiety, I covertly disposed of six baby cakes in public toilets and waterways near my home. When I dumped the cakes, I had an enormous sense of relief. I also remembered the teenagers I had read about who hid their pregnancies until they gave birth and then dispose the baby in a public place.

● DUMPED NEWBORN

Dead bub had cord

A newborn baby found dead in a shopping bag dumped at a bus stop still had his umbilical cord attached, police said.

The baby was a Caucasian male. Preliminary tests showed he was 24-48 hours old.

Investigators said the mother may have given birth without medical assistance because the umbilical cord had been torn, not surgically cut. It's not known if the baby was born alive or dead.

The boy was dressed in a yellow singlet with a blue jumpsuit and wrapped in a yellow polo fleece and yellow cloth.

The body was placed in a green shopping bag, which was found by a man putting out his rubbish bins at about 5.30pm yesterday in a bus shelter at Grahamvale, near Shepparton.

Investigators hold grave con-

cerns for the mother's welfare and have urged her to seek medical care.

The homicide squad's Det-Sgt Graham Guy didn't know when the baby had been dumped, but a sighting near the bus stop may offer the clue.

"Between 4.45pm and 5pm last Tuesday evening, a man observed a silver or white sedan parked directly in front of the bus stop with a woman at the boot area carrying a green enviro bag.

"The woman was described as Caucasian, aged in her 20s to 30s, with fair-coloured hair."

Investigators want to speak to the woman, anyone who may know the mother, and medical staff who have given a woman after-birth care in unexplained circumstances.

Figure 8a: Newspaper article collected and archived by the artist as source material. Courtesy the artist.

Bail for mum in dumped baby case

Tracy Ong

A WOMAN who allegedly hid her pregnancy and abandoned her newborn child in a laundry has been granted bail after a magistrate accused police of misleading the court.

The 31-year-old woman, who cannot be identified, was arrested and charged with the attempted murder of her son on Thursday when she was released from psychiatric care, facing court for the first time yesterday.

Police allege she gave birth to the boy in the bathroom of the flat she shared with 1960s rock drummer Leon Isackson on Sydney's northern beaches, placing the baby in the toilet bowl to cut the umbilical cord.

The woman allegedly left the baby in a communal laundry after wrapping him in a towel and putting him in a beer carton.

In the early hours of August 27, neighbours found the crying infant in "a state of hypothermia". Police prosecutor Patrick Besso told Manly Local Court the baby would have died within 15 minutes if he had not been found.

Police claimed the woman concealed her pregnancy from Mr Isackson, wearing large jumpers around the house.

Magistrate Andrew George criticised Sergeant Besso, who opposed bail, for incorrectly saying the woman had no suitable living arrangements.

Mr George pointed out her mother and grandmother were sitting in the court.

Mr George asked Sergeant Besso if he was intentionally "misleading the court".

The woman, who no longer lives with Mr Isackson, was released on bail into the custody of her mother and grandmother and is due to appear before Downing Centre Local Court on November 2. She was ordered not to see her son.

Additional reporting: AAP

Figure 8b: Newspaper article collected and archived by the artist as source material. Courtesy the artist.

NEWS

Baby's body found in bag

By JAMIE DUNCAN

THE body of a baby lay in a green shopping bag at a country Victorian bus stop for almost 10 hours before it was discovered late yesterday, police say.

A local resident found the body of the baby, believed to have been aged between two weeks and three months, inside the bag wearing a jumpsuit and wrapped in a blanket about 5.30pm at Grahamvale, near Shepparton.

Police believe the bag had been at the bus stop since 7.45am.

Homicide detectives are investigating the find at the intersection of Ford and Mouser roads at Grahamvale, about 180 kilometres north of Melbourne.

4 Detectives are considering three possibilities in relation to the find. 7

Victoria Police spokeswoman Senior Constable Julie-Anne Newman said detectives were considering three possibilities in relation to the find.

"One, that the baby was abandoned and died of hypothermia, that it was a SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) death and the parents didn't know what to do, or it's a homicide," she said. "It's too early to say at this stage."

A post mortem will be conducted this morning.

Senior Constable Newman said police were concerned for the welfare of the parents and urged them to come forward.

Investigators have appealed for witnesses who saw anyone in the area around the bus stop at 7.45am or before to contact Crimestoppers or Shepparton police.

Greater Shepparton mayor Eric Bott said the community would be devastated.

"I'm shocked. Without knowing any of the details, it's just a shocking thing to hear," Cr Bott said. "It's a tragedy. It's difficult to know what to say. It's very sad."

Police have not revealed the baby's sex.

AAP

Figure 8c: Newspaper article collected and archived by the artist as source material. Courtesy the artist.

I am fascinated by the mother's decision to hide the pregnancy, but then abandon the baby in a public thoroughfare where they are more likely to be discovered. I chose mother's rooms in shopping centres as the drop off point because there is a discordant situation created between the cake and the space that frames it. The fold out change table resembles an altar, so the cake becomes a commemoration of criminal cases of infant neglect, abandonment, and murder.



Figure 9. Catherine Bell, Baby Drop, (Baby Cake no. 43, February 2007) Delivered to Mothers' Room, Ikea, Victoria Gardens, Melbourne, Victoria. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

The print media accounts are used as a catalyst for the performance and from multiple standpoints I interrogate my relationship to this act and experience the shifting subject position from, artist, criminal, voyeur and citizen. Susan Sontag (2004) in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* argues that certain emblems of suffering can be used like *memento mori*, as objects of contemplation to deepen one's sense of reality as secular icons, the cake is not simply an icon for reflection but an obligation to act. The mother who finds the cake becomes the intermediary, or translator, responsible for interpreting the social meaning between orphaned cake and chosen location. The ultimate challenge for the person who finds the cake is to intervene, a behavioural response that endows the cake with a mortal or performative presence.



Figure 10. Catherine Bell, Baby Drop, (Baby Cake no. 48, July 2007) Delivered to Mothers' Room, Caulfield Plaza, Melbourne, Victoria. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

I want the viewer to recognize that the cake is handmade, that it is lovingly laboured over.



Figure 11. Catherine Bell, Baby Drop, (Baby Cake no.49, August 2007) Cake detail. Delivered to Mothers' Room, Northcote Plaza,

Melbourne, Victoria. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

These reactions will influence the decision to report or ignore, to salvage or discard, the response to the cake is reliant on the individual's ability to empathise with it and consider the conditions in which the disposed object produces social meaning and social awareness. The cake like the dirty nappies that are changed in the mother's room, will eventually be discarded and I wonder if the disposal will occur in the same vicinity as the change table, or will the cake be taken away for examination? Will security dissect and autopsy the cake? One of my Baby Drops responded to a highly publicized case in the media where a woman left her newborn daughter in a cardboard box outside the Dandenong Hospital on Mother's Day 2007.



Figure 12. Newspaper article, Herald Sun, Tuesday May 15th, 2007 p.1 Collected and archived by the artist as source material. Courtesy the artist.

The nursing staff who found her, christened her baby Catherine and the headline on the front page of the paper the next day was –'Where's my mum?'- This event shocked me because the baby was given the same name as mine and the incident happened on the same day I was dropping one of my cakes at a shopping mall on Mother's Day. My next cake was abandoned at the Dandenong Hospital site in an open cardboard box that the mother had used. When I was placing the box, I thought about how baby Catherine's birthday cake would commemorate the day she was abandoned by her mother.



Figure 13. Catherine Bell, Baby Drop, (Baby Cake no.45, June 2007) Delivered to Dandenong Hospital, Melbourne, Victoria. Courtesy the artist.



Figure 14. Catherine Bell, Baby Drop, (Baby Cake no.45, June 2007) Cake detail. Delivered to Dandenong Hospital, Melbourne, Victoria. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

I see the cakes as having a symbolic relation to the public they engage, the space they occupy and the children they commemorate. In the case of the women who abandon their infants in a public place, the cake acknowledges the anti-celebration, drawing attention to the very act the women want to hide, to deny, to forget. The cake's vulnerability is heightened by its exposure in a public place where it awaits eminent discovery and disposal. The violence and trauma suffered by the cakes is evident by its battered edges, bruised features and haemorrhaging icing.



Figure 15. Catherine Bell, Baby Drop, (Baby Cake no.49, August 2007) Delivered to Mothers' Room, Northcote Plaza, Melbourne, Victoria. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

The fact that the cakes appear spontaneously and disappear swiftly accentuates the urgency of the crisis the work memorializes. Valie Export, Bobby Baker, and I use food to intersect private catharsis with social issues and community exchange. The food used in these performances is both real and performed, staged and theatricalised. The food-centred activities that I have selected to examine contextualise my own food actions. They are devised for the public arena and incorporate elements of repetition, embrace collaboration and demonstrate ritualistic processes. The artworks I have examined constitute an ideology that recognises art's capacity to acknowledge the social practices and processes surrounding food as a strategy for revealing the function of human behaviour subvert and redefine the social meaning in daily ritual and gestures. The cake becomes the catalyst through which multiple acts and social relations may be viewed.



Figure 16. Catherine Bell, Making A Baby, (Cake no.5, February, 2004) Cake detail. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery Melbourne.)

The evil or abhorrent dimension of the cake ritual — that positions the cake as a scapegoat — is not seen as infiltrating, contaminating or undermining the good will toward the participants. The performance does not implicate the participants in a subversive act. Their involvement acts out my catharsis because they are directed to destroy my creation, while I document. The cake cutting ritual also creates a dynamic of dominance and submission that relates to most genres of contemporary therapy — manifest within the process of transference, containment and enactment. These steps are relevant stages in the cake cutting operation. Reflection on this ritual procedure to date has revealed a connection to tribal healing ritual as a primitive form of psychotherapy. In this ritual the participant is offered an opportunity to temporarily surrender autonomy and submit to a total process which has autonomy of its own. Remembering that there is a ritual within a ritual — as before the cutting there is a dramatic and processual structure to baking and icing the cake that occurs independently.

The importance of the concept of sacred space in understanding ritual and ritual process is essential to this performance. Decorating the

cake is the most time consuming aspect of the ritual and takes place in the same room the cake is destroyed. This ritually defined place and time perpetuates the unchanging pattern of the ritual although this order is continually challenged. Eliade (1964) writes about the human experience of sacred and profane space and time in relation to initiation and transformation, stating that, 'not only is sacred space linked to the myriad transformations of archaic experience of cosmos and culture, more specifically it is closely linked to phases of transition' (p.131).

The environment where this ritual eventuates is considered a sacred space as it provides a structure, both constant and familiar during this time of deconstruction. It is also a space consigned to the institutional framework of the home in which one experiences the Oedipal scenario. This room also functions as a safe psychological space in which surrender can occur. The participant enters the house, often as a stranger to me and is ushered into the privacy of this domestic realm in anticipation of the ritual unfolding without requiring too much explanation. The lounge room, usually a room for communal relaxation in front of a television for entertainment and the dissemination of information, becomes the arena to perform the obsessive routine. Therefore, it is important that it is comfortable, secure, neutral and insulated from the rest of the house. Within this interior there are the psychic spaces of desire and anxiety that surround the activity and themes of childbearing and childlessness. When I decorate the cake in this room, the television is on constantly and I imagine how many women must be watching the same daytime talkback shows, melodramas and infomercials. These programs seem to target overweight, lonely, downtrodden housewives encouraging them to diet, meet a partner, and purchase kitchen utensils to make their life more enjoyable or join a gym or weight loss group. Television's ability to merge the public and private spaces balances the ritual and its movement between the personal narrative and the community drama unfolding in the media. This space becomes a container for verbal exchanges, cathartic action, emotional reverberation, and narrative events watched on the television and incorporated into the ritual process.

The baby cake becomes a scapegoat or sacrificial offering allowing the participants in the cutting ritual to transfer their sorrow, pain and hopes onto the effigy, which is deliberately fashioned as a symbolic object.



Figure 17. Catherine Bell, *Making A Baby*, (Cake no.10, June, 2004) Performance still. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery Melbourne.

Those who cut the cake partake in the consumption of the baby sacrifice while the remainder of the cake is disseminated throughout the community. Each participant in the ritual is encapsulated in the symbol, as the role of the woman who cuts the cake becomes a representative one, in which her interaction indicates a social group or category. For instance, the women, who have cut the cake to date, belong to a defined group of women in their late thirties and early forties who have made decisions to have children late in life after establishing careers or have resigned to the fact that they will not have children.

The risks involved with having children later in life has been reflected in the unpredicted deformities occurring due to baking malfunctions and abnormalities appearing during icing accidents, such as extra fingers. Hence, the baby cake has embedded within its creation something of this information and without the interaction of these participants in the ritual drama, the meaning and cultural significance of the symbolic making of the baby would not exist. The core group of women asked to participate are those who have made the choice to remain childless and those experiencing their first pregnancy late in life. One pregnant woman involved in the cake cutting, made a wish with every insertion of the knife, to resist any negative repercussions and to overcome superstitions. For example, when she plunged the knife into the heart of the baby cake, she made a wish that her unborn child has a good heart and when cutting the head she wished that the baby would have a good brain. Another woman who cut the cake after she experienced a miscarriage cut out and ate a section of cake that symbolised the locality of the infant's heart. This became a symbolic gesture of the hole she felt in her own heart at

this very personal loss. She communicated out loud how much relief and closure she felt in performing this act. Most of the pregnant women involved in the project have resisted cutting the face of the baby and prefer to take this part of the cake home with them intact. This sentimental action is in keeping with the fact the participating pregnant women identify with the cake as a baby as opposed to afternoon tea. This fact is legitimized by the psychological state of mind called, 'transformation . . . when symbol and object seem to fuse and are experienced as a perfectly undifferentiated whole' (Moore & Meyerhof 1977, p.13).

When I started the project, I would film and photograph the process and converse with the women involved as they were cutting the cake. It resulted in a very uninhibited dialogue. I noticed the first time I engaged in conversation with a participating mother, that as she discussed her fears and hopes of motherhood, she also played with the pieces of cake. Like a jigsaw that has been dismantled, the baby was reconfigured piece by piece into a personalised shape. In this instance the head was left intact, as the mother to be was too suspicious to deface it, stating it was too cute too disfigure. After the body was cut and a slice consumed, the decapitated head was positioned upright, sitting on its neck, poised and positioned to witness its own dismembered body.

Another idiosyncrasy I have observed with the pregnant group is the women's need to push the cake back together after it has been cut so the inside of the cake is hidden. A Japanese expectant mother became quite agitated at the thought of inserting the knife. Her unorthodox solution was to move the knife along the cake horizontally and likened the manoeuvre to cutting tofu. This way she avoided destroying the icing on top of the cake and assured that the overall design was intact and the face was preserved. I also started to add red food dye to the cake mixture to heighten the drama of inserting the knife. The shades of the cake vary to resemble a pink flesh to the deep crimson of solidified blood. Consuming these cakes intensifies the notion of cannibalism as there is an instant identification with the colour and the corporeal.



Figure 18a: Catherine Bell, Making A Baby, (Cake no.14, October, 2004) Cake detail. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery Melbourne.



Figure 18b: Catherine Bell, Making A Baby, (Cake no.14, October, 2004) Cake detail. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery Melbourne.

Rituals allow violence to be deflected and diffused in society and this explains why rites of passage can fulfil a function only as long as they maintain their character as impressive and painful and at times unendurable, testing ordeals. The creation of this cake as a scapegoat, embodying the sadness realised by the abuse inflicted on children and the ever-present threat of infanticide in our community, has a personal and public function. The trance like state induced by the repetitive act of icing is embedded with mixed narratives of joy and pain. Case studies of the woman who have killed innocent babies merge with the elated tales of friends whose babies have just entered the world. Making this cake indicates two orders of exorcism, originating as a personal catharsis and extending to become an act and art of public exorcism or scapegoating. Freud has written about the idea of 'incorporation' when the subject imagines an object entering the body and retains it there:

Incorporation constitutes an instinctual aim and a mode of object-relationship which are characteristic of the oral stage although it has a special relationship with the mouth and the ingestion of food (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973, p. 211).

The meaning of incorporation has relevance to the baby cake project but is also descriptive of the methodology of performance practiced, 'incorporation means to obtain pleasure by making an object penetrate oneself; it means to destroy this object; and it means, by keeping it within oneself, to appropriate the objects qualities' (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973, p. 212). Incorporation in this respect consists of the way the crisis will not only be taken on but taken in, consumed, maybe not so literally as eating the cake, but my performance body becoming a human vessel for the conflict or trauma that once possessed, held inside, needs to be exorcised.

The cake in my performances becomes the catalyst through which multiple acts and social relations may be viewed. Individual peculiarities and habits of baking, decorating, cutting and consuming the cake resonate with the personality of all those that interact and imbue it with interpretive force. Documentation of the cake cutting ceremony becomes the art work. Performance stills of the participant negotiating where to make the first slice, then cutting the cake and close ups of the dismembered remains record each participant's idiosyncratic approach to the task. This ephemeral process turns ritual action into a symbolic action. Further analyses of the different ways women have approached the task and responded to the cake are embedded in the relics. In the cake cutting ceremony, the ritual is a specific performance, re-written every time it is executed, rather than an exercise in repetition.



Figure 19. Catherine Bell, Making A Baby, (Cake no.19, March, 2005) Performance stills. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery Melbourne.

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