

INCUBRA

Julie Clarke©, 2006

Reference to typical and atypical female bodies, occasional by technological invention and intervention is demonstrated in Cynthia Verspaget and Adam Fiannaca's *Incubra* (2006) – a black gothic, high couture fetish corset¹ embedded with a air bladder, temperature gauge, warming mechanisms, micro video unit and an incubator that sustained and nurtured a minute amount of human biomaterials.² *Incubra*, underscored the significance of the corset as fetish, as technology to fashion the unrestrained female body, as wearable art, as vehicle for reciprocity between artists and for duty of care to the living cells of others. Verspaget performed with *Incubra* by using a pump embedded in the corset to elevate her breasts, which drew attention to them as objects of desire and as glands for nurturing.³ Since she wore the 'incubator bra' to provide alternative housing for the biomaterials of another couple, this occasioned a reading consistent with the notion of the female body as surrogate.⁴ However, since the incubator and biomaterials were such a small element of the overall artwork, the function of the corset requires consideration.

A hybrid of soft luxurious fabrics combined with hard industrial materials, such as glass, plastics and electronics, *Incubra* illustrates techno-fetishism that portrays a dual anxiety, read as a fear of entrapment or control through a technological prosthesis, whilst simultaneously desiring containment in order to take advantage of the freedoms offered.⁵ The Gothic bra, which alludes to certain freedoms associated with normative and non-normative sexual practices and desire, was embedded with high tech gadgets, which, in light of recent developments in technologically mediated human reproduction, simultaneously grounds the female in her biology as well as exempting her, through technological innovation from having to carry a child or engage in usual sexual practices in order to become pregnant.

The *Incubra*, like other technological prosthesis, such as Virtual Worlds, provide occasions for the adoption of an imaginary avatar identity and an idealized bodily form. However,

¹ The corset was constructed by *Marquis De Sade* Fetish Fashions in Melbourne, Australia and engineered by Adam Fiannaca.

² The biomaterials were extracted through liposuction from Stelarc and Nina Sellers' body and used in their *Blender* installation at *Teknikunst* in 2005.

³ Cynthia Verspaget performed with *Incubra* for *Teknikunst's Gendertopia* in North Melbourne, 2006.

⁴ However, given the biomaterials were primarily fat, which are a source of stem cells, the work may be read as referring to debates surrounding the use of allogenic (one or more human or animal) donors in tissue-engineering applications.

⁵ For an excellent account of techno-fetishism see: Amanda Fernbach, *Fantasies of Fetishism: From decadence to the post-human*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2002.

in these interactions the individual is essentially tethered to the computer console in order to become the person that they desire to be. The ideal body is only possible by technological mediation and even then, the marker for what is perfect is consistently moved along a continuum.

Zygmunt Bauman's take on the infinite choices to become 'anybody', in what he refers to as 'liquid society', is wrought with disquiet, since 'The state of unfinishedness, incompleteness and underdetermination is full of risk and anxiety; but its opposite brings no unadulterated pleasure either, since it forecloses what freedom needs to stay open'⁶ Indeed *IncuBra* presents the fluid body, that is, the body that extends in its own directions and form (fat is deposited randomly throughout the body), as thoroughly restrained and contained in the prosthesis, which delimits this flow.

IncuBra, which restrains Verspaget's body, covertly draws attention to the way that the female body has become a site of contestation in high tech biomedical negotiations that fulfill consumer desires for perfect bodies, through cosmetic surgery, breast implants, liposuction and tissue-engineering and perfect offspring enabled by embryo procurement and NRT's. Indeed the fluid body, natural and unrestrained is played off against the fantasy body through the prosthesis.

Since *IncuBra* housed a 'relic' of another artwork in a small transparent container, our attention is drawn to body surveillance, authenticity and fragmentation. Authenticity of bodily remnants has a long history and was exemplified in the medieval Catholic 'cult of relics', which '...emphasized body as the locus of the sacred'⁷ According to Michael Barilan, 'The tradition of the relic is metonymic, respectful and highly personal...import from this tradition may enhance our respect for images of the body and for its tiniest parts.'⁸

In contemporary biomedicine bodily fragments (human and animal DNA, stem cells, tissue and organs) are venerated for their healing potential and Verspaget and Fiannaca aptly demonstrate theoretical associations to be drawn between procured or cast off body materials, their use and reuse in other artworks or bodies *ad infinitum*, as well as the manner in which bodily fragments have become sacrosanct through the rhetoric of biomedical discourse. *IncuBra* poses a challenge to our notion of the authentic body—as recognizable and belonging to a particular individual or individuals by combining unrecognizable, fragmented and partial bodily parts with a real body, albeit one constructed as fantasy. Undeniably we are forced to ask whether the authentic body (of Verspaget or the artists from whom the biomaterials were gleaned) is the

⁶ Bauman, Zygmunt (2000). *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, p.62

⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York, Zone Books, 1992, p.184.

⁸ Barilan, Y. Michael. 'The story of the body and the story of the person: towards an ethics of representing human bodies and body parts'. *Medicine, Healthcare & Philosophy*, 8.2 (August 2005): 193(13). Thomson Gale: The University of Melbourne Library. Accessed 6 Mar. 2007

biological body or whether authenticity is attributed to personal identity and gender maintained through the trappings provided to us by consumer society.

By recuperating a remnant that refers to live individuals the artists remind us of the delicate balance between life and death deployed in bio-political relations (surrogacy, live organ donations, cell and bone marrow procurement) as well as a providing a persuasive metaphor of tissue engineering cell lines, such as HeLa, which can be immortalized in that they can be reproduced over and over again.⁹ Verspaget previously drew attention to ethical concerns surrounding use of HeLa cells in her *Anarchy Cell Line* (2000)—a tissue engineered heart shape, constructed from her own as well as HeLa cells. It was appropriate that Verspaget create a heart shape, since the heart is potent metaphor of ‘...the center of decisive things, of the moral conscience, of unwritten law...’¹⁰ Verspaget drew attention to the fact that although Henrietta Lacks’s cancerous cells are immortalized and her recognition to science engendered through the cells naming, that a certain exploitation occurred to this African American woman and her descendants. Indeed, Henrietta Lacks’ family has never received any financial remuneration even though HeLa are used in hundreds of laboratories around the world.

⁹ The cells removed without permission in the fifties from the cancerous tumour of an African American woman Henrietta Lacks is the most widely used cell line in the history of tissue culture.

¹⁰ Le Goff, Jacques. (1989) ‘Head or Heart’, *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Part Three, (eds) Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi, Zone 5, Urzone Inc., New York, p.16.