A Feminist Understanding of Liturgical Art

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Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

30 November, 2004
Among church folk in Australia today, there are concerns that soon — with the surge of secularism in our society — there will be no Christian tradition left for their children to inherit. At the same time, there is also a rising desire for spiritual renewal among Australians. It seems that the church and society are worlds apart. It is my contention that feminist liturgical artists are in a unique position to bridge the gap between the church and the world, and to promote the spiritual renewal of both.

My task in this thesis is to devise a feminist model of liturgical art practice which is both aesthetic and prophetic. In this model, liturgical art is capable both of inspiring people to contemplate divine meanings and of calling the people to discipleship in the service of God in the world. It is also able both to encourage hope and challenge injustices. A balanced approach to the aesthetic and prophetic is suggested in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s (1992) four-step model of feminist research, which shapes my project.

The principles which form the framework of my feminist understanding of liturgical art are widely applicable, and do not just apply to women. Even so, I maintain that women are more gifted than men at understanding the world in terms of relations rather than hierarchies. In the Catholic church today, we need this sense of relation more than ever. The church needs to be in creative relation with contemporary culture, or we are going to lose the young
people from our ranks, and consequently our future. Within the church, the hierarchy needs to be in creative relation with the laity, and this requires a more collaborative approach to leadership — including ministry. Within the liturgical environment, the church needs images which are able to draw heaven and earth into creative relation. These inclusive and holistic ideas are basic to a feminist practice of liturgical art as I describe it in this project.

To demonstrate what such a practice might look like, I use examples from my own liturgical artwork. I aim to show how theory/theology and practice are inextricably interrelated in a feminist practice of liturgical art, and that practice precedes theory/theology, and that theory/theology leads to renewed practice. This has certainly been my experience while writing this thesis.

The model of feminist liturgical art practice, which I formulate in this thesis, is postmodern. The largest theoretical challenge for me in this project was to come to terms with beauty theory, a conceptual framework which underpinned modernist art theory. By training and by inclination, I am disinclined to favour an art theory in which the highest value is beauty. Beauty theory was significantly deconstructed in the artworld in the 20th century and the new understandings of beauty arising today show the signs of paradigm shift.

In the case of beauty theology, however, nothing comparable has caused theologians to significantly refigure their core value. Coming to terms with beauty theology was my largest theological challenge. My solution in both cases was to enlarge the category of beauty by adding ugliness. I call this
category 'beautiful ugliness' (Boyd 1960, 200). However, 'beautiful ugliness' is not the focus of my aesthetic approach. I use 'life' as the core value.

Into the mix of feminist postmodern art theory/theology, I add some elements of classical American pragmatism. In a pragmatic frame, ideas need to be tested out in the realities of everyday life. In line with my chosen core value, I use the terms life-relevant and life-enhancing (Miles 1985, 6) as criteria for testing the value of liturgical art.

This project represents my attempt to draw a picture of what a feminist, postmodern, pragmatic, aesthetic/prophetic practice of liturgical art might look like in 21\textsuperscript{st} century Australia. My hope is that there are other women and men artists, like myself, who work with 'passionate purpose' (Alexander 1933, 53) — driven by their faith in God; by their fidelity to the Christian tradition; by a desire to imaginatively explore, express and stretch the boundaries of that tradition; and by a powerful sense of place-connection and of community-belonging — who will find this model useful and perhaps inspiring.
Synopsis
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.
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## Conclusion

## Appendix 1

Focus Group Overview
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Acknowledgements

Elaine Wainwright, as my principal supervisor, has provided an exemplary postgraduate supervisory environment. Her support for me, as an individual and as a student, has survived the contemporary pressures of tertiary education, her sabbaticals, enormous personal workload and six years of effort. She made a lot of sacrifices for me over the years and I appreciate the standard of excellence that she demanded of me.

Marilyn Carney, as my secondary supervisor, made my life easier in the first years of this project. Her support was invaluable and her presence at Queensland College of Art has been reassuring.

David Rankin took over as my official supervisor when Elaine Wainwright moved to the University of Auckland. Thanks to him for being my link to Griffith University over the last two years.

Anne Dawson was generous with her time and expertise in the last couple of years. She often read and edited chapters. Leading up to the finish she was generous enough to edit my List of References — thanks. In the same way, Inari Thiel, my editor-in-chief has done the final edit of the thesis and translated it into PDF format. I thank her for her efforts.

Pat Mullins, Anita Munro and Anne Muzzo have all gone before me on this thesis journey. I admire them and gained a lot of encouragement from their successes. We were members of the Feminist Postgraduates Colloquium together and that forum was invaluable in my early days as a postgraduate scholar.

My family has been incredibly supportive all along this thesis journey. They have given me encouragement, a lot of laughs, the odd meal and some financial help. Thanks to you all!
My undying gratitude is extended to my parish community at Our Lady of Mt Carmel, Coorparoo. My special thanks to those who were part of the Focus Group process in 2000. I began my liturgical art practice at Mt Carmel. I gained most of my skills in its sacred space and among its parishioners who are my faith community.

For many years I have worked for Catholic Education on a part-time basis. When I was at Seton College there were many occasions when I asked for and received flexi-time to go to meetings and seminars. John Breakspeare was particularly helpful in this regard. Thanks to all my colleagues at Brisbane Catholic Education Centre. A special thanks to those in the Multimedia Centre, Trish Meulman in particular. She has been very encouraging and obliging with work schedules so I could finish my project with the minimum of fuss.

Many thanks to all those who have prayed for me over the years when I said I needed miracles to get this project in on time. Special thanks to Jenny Milligan for her prayer support. Well, obviously God and the saints were listening. God bless you all!
INTRODUCTION

The starting and finishing points for this thesis are located within my own practice as a liturgical artist. The scope of my practice is fairly wide. I have worked voluntarily in my own parish making seasonal liturgical installations. I am also commissioned, from time to time, to be artist-in-residence at events like church related conventions or the chapter gatherings of religious orders. Further, I have a contract to do weekly gospel illustrations for a Hobart based internet company which publishes the liturgical texts on the web. So while I don’t always work in church, liturgy is the core reference point of my work.

My practice emerges within the post-Vatican 2 Catholic Church and postmodern Australian society. At this time and in this place, few artists are interested in or knowledgeable about liturgical art. Although there is plenty of theory and theology about liturgy, and about liturgical architecture (including monumental art forms, such as stained glass and statuary) and music, there is an information gap when it comes to seasonal liturgical installation art. Needless to say there is even less information written from a feminist perspective. This is a significant gap, which I hope to bridge with my project. However, the focus of this project is my practice, so I begin with a reflection on my experience of making liturgical art and I end with a practical example of the future directions my practice is taking.
Introduction

Aims

This project fulfils two needs I have in my liturgical art practice. The first need is to bring understanding to my predominantly intuitive practice and consequently develop new ways of thinking about liturgical art. The second need is to develop new ways of practising liturgical art by acting on the new insights.

In order to bring my intuitive practice into the light of understanding, I must ask a vital question: what does this mean? This question is an important aspect of the medieval legend of the Holy Grail. The hero of the legend is Perceval. He is charged to search for the Grail in order to revive the waning fortunes of the Fisher King. Perceval sees a vision (a bleeding lance, the holy grail and a silver trencher) and even though he is consumed by curiosity he is too afraid of making a fool of himself to ask vital questions about its meaning. Because 'he asked nothing', Perceval 'didn't take fortune by the hand' and missed a prime opportunity. In other words, he failed to interrogate the symbol and missed out on the prize. The prize was the transformative meaning of the vision (Troyes 1982, 35-50). 1

I seek understanding from reflecting on and analysing my own experience of making liturgical art; the reception experience of my primary 'audience', Mt Carmel parish community; and relevant theories in philosophy, theology and art. However, answering Perceval's question is about more than just my

1 Perceval: The Story of the Grail (Troyes 1982) was the unfinished work of 12th century writer Chretien de Troyes.
personal motivations for making liturgical art. I also seek to know more about the structural factors in society, particularly within the church and the artworld, which influence the way I work.

For my project, one of the most important factors is the secular nature of Australian society. Another is the seemingly irreconcilable gap between the culture of the church and Australian culture. This is especially clear when I consider some of the obsolete attitudes towards women and the often reactionary theory and theology of art, which are current in the church today. I aim to use my new insights to work towards resolving this gap by constructing a model of liturgical art theory, theology and practice which is capable of being both a life-relevant and a life-enhancing part of 21st century Australian culture. My project will be fruitful if I have the fortitude and presence of mind to complete the quest and transform the world — albeit within the limitations of my small field of operations.

Methodology

The theoretical and the practical aspects of my feminist approach are interdependent. The theoretical aspects concern the conceptual framework which shapes the project, while the practical aspects concern the techniques I use to collect and analyse empirical data and the logic I follow in shaping the argument of the project.

My methodology is fundamentally feminist, postmodern and Australian, to which I add some aspects of classical American pragmatism. Consequently,
my conceptual framework is feminist, contextual and pragmatic. I use this complex mix of approaches as a lens through which to study art theory and theologies of art and liturgy.

The organisation of this project follows the logic of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s (1992) four-step model of feminist research: suspicion, remembrance, proclamation, creative re-imagination. I reshape these steps to fit my project and I envisage them as reflection, analysis, deconstruction, and reconstruction. The process begins with past praxis and provisionally ‘ends’ with the invention of new and more liberating praxis, consequently the process is envisaged as continuously cyclical.

Of the four steps, my two-part reflection is the most clearly discernible. I begin the first chapter with my own reflection on making the Lent/Easter seasonal liturgical installation for the year 2000 in my parish of Our Lady of Mt Carmel in Brisbane. The second, more formal, part of the reflection is a focus group process within the parish using this installation as the focus. The issues which arise from these reflections form the agenda for the rest of the thesis.

These issues cluster around the aesthetic and prophetic approaches to liturgical art. I take these issues and analyse them in the light of contemporary theory and theology, but always within the grounded context of the life-world. Then from this analysis arise issues which challenge the
tradition. The critique is initially deconstructive, but ultimately reconstructive as fresh ideas about, and new ways of doing, liturgical art emerge.

As much as possible I illustrate my arguments with practical examples from my own work. This thesis has been many years in the making and the juxtaposition of text and image show how theory and practice have been developing simultaneously over the years.

Content of Chapters

Chapter 1: A Feminist Conceptual Framework. I begin Chapter 1 by reflecting on my experience of making the jubilee installation from the year 2000 at Mt Carmel. I use both words and photographs to describe the work. In line with my feminist methodology, I begin with experience. This also allows readers to acquire some experience of liturgical art and gain some idea of its scope before they read the theory. In the rest of the chapter, I articulate in more detail my feminist, contextual and pragmatic conceptual framework. For this purpose I refer to the work of the major theorists from feminism, art theory, theology and philosophy, who have helped shape my project.

Chapter 2: Reflecting on the Reception Experience. In Chapter 2, I outline my focus group methodology and report on the results of the inquiry. I also identify those issues to be taken forward into the analysis stage. The issues which emerged from the community feedback related to aesthetic experience, for example the importance of the sensual and the emotional in
the reception experience of liturgical art. Beauty, wonder, pleasure and the impact of colour were also frequently mentioned.

**Chapter 3: Evaluating Liturgical Art in light of the Reception Experience.**

Before I begin the serious analytical work of this thesis there is a compelling task that I tackle in Chapter 3. I begin by defining what a feminist practice of liturgical art is by identifying inclusive and holistic approaches as fundamental values of such a practice. I then list the seven working principles which underpin this practice and place them into dialogue with the focus group material. True to my pragmatic methodology, I use this material as a touchstone to test the validity of my working principles. Lastly, I summarise the major issues to be taken forward from this evaluation. They focus on the responsibility of the artist.

**Chapter 4: Liturgical Art as Aesthetic Experience.**

In Chapter 4, I introduce the notion of the 'big picture' concepts of beauty, truth and goodness which I explore in Chapters 6-8. The aesthetic aspects of liturgical art are the topic of this chapter. I return to the issues which arose from the focus group discussions in Chapter 2, most of which focused on issues of aesthetics: the role of beauty and pleasure in the reception experience. I place these issues within the scope of theological and philosophical aesthetics, but focusing mainly on the latter in this chapter. I name the most significant features of the fields using the work of George Santayana, John Dewey, Carolyn Korsmeyer and others. In order to keep the discussion grounded, I make frequent comparisons between the theory and the focus group responses. Subjectivity
and difference arise as major issues here in relation to the interpretation of images within the common ground of church community. The other key idea is that both pleasure and displeasure are within the scope of aesthetic experience. I describe the critical role that displeasure plays in liturgical art and I use my *Fig Tree* installation to illustrate this point.

**Chapter 5: Liturgical Art as Prophetic Ministry.** Chapter 5 takes up the issues which arise from the evaluation in Chapter 3. These issues focus on the responsibility of the artist. So, in this chapter I construct the model of the artist-prophet. I describe motivation of the artist-prophet as 'passionate purpose' in which unconscious passion and conscious purpose work in partnership. It is here that I begin to articulate the relationship between chaos and order which are essential attributes of the creative process. I use the work of David Tacey and Veronica Brady to explore the relationship between art, nature and the renewal of Australian society. It is in this chapter that I introduce the notion of the larrikin prophet as a critical voice. I look at the role of the larrikin in reinterpreting traditional images of Mary and I use one of Jan Hynes' paintings of *The Visitation* and my digital image of *The Annunciation* as examples.

**Chapter 6: Truth and Reality.** In Chapter 6, finding the truth primarily means drawing the ideal of Truth down to earth by coming to terms with life-world realities. In order to be responsible, artist-prophets must understand the problems and the possibilities of the present time and place. They must be able to respond to the major issues in 21st century Australia. The major
pressing issue dealt with in this chapter is the growing secularism in Australian society. I use my involvement in the National Catholic Education Conference as an example of how a liturgical artist can respond prophetically to promote renewal and change in the church and also in the wider community.

**Chapter 7: Goodness and Responsibility.** In Chapter 7 I take up the second 'big picture' issue, goodness brought to earth by a sense of responsibility. I view Australian society as post-colonial and take up the issues of gender, race and the Land. I describe the value of a healthy sense of place-connection and community-belonging in the renewal of Australian society. I use Judy Watson's painting entitled *Low Tide Walk* as an example of an Aboriginal expression of a sense of place. I use my Sunflower project as an example of how a responsible feminist practice of liturgical art can contribute to the renewal process.

**Chapter 8: Beauty and Ugliness.** It is in Chapter 8 that I discuss the third of the 'big picture' issues, beauty brought to earth by ugliness. I tell the story of the downfall of the concept of beauty in art theory during the 20th century. I describe the emergence of two schools of art during that century, the formalist and the conceptualist schools. I use the work of John Dewey, Robin Boyd, Griselda Pollock and Anne Marsh to name and analyse the main critical issues associated with beauty theory. It is in this chapter where I first identify and define the notion of 'beautiful ugliness'. I use George Mung
Mung's sculpture of *Mary of Warmun* and my digital image of *The Visitation* as examples of 'beautiful ugliness'.

**Chapter 9: The Aesthetic and Prophetic Polarised.** In Chapter 9, I describe the emergence of the conservative and the progressive schools of theology after Vatican 2. I rename the schools aesthetic and prophetic and I align the aesthetic approach to theology with artworld formalism and the prophetic approach to theology with artworld conceptualism. I use the work of John Paul II and Karl Rahner to define these two approaches in terms of the theory and theology of art. I introduce the notion of the aesthetic/prophetic continuum. Then I outline the destructive consequences of the polarisation of the aesthetic and prophetic approaches by telling the story of a recent happening in a Sydney Parish. My aim is to show the importance of establishing a balanced approach - somewhere towards the centre of the aesthetic/prophetic continuum.

**Chapter 10: The Aesthetic and Prophetic, Striving for Balance.** In this last chapter, I look for ways to negotiate a balance between the aesthetic and the prophetic. I examine some concerns I have with the resurgence of interest in the aesthetic approach of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Then I explore some sources for a balanced approach, some from inside and some from outside the Christian tradition. These ideas, some old and some new, set the agenda for the future of my feminist practice of liturgical art. I show how I have already begun to take up these challenges when I describe my role as artist-facilitator in the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy Chapter.
Outcomes

This thesis represents a compilation of the diverse concerns of a feminist practice of liturgical art. It has already proved to be an invaluable source for my own practice and for sharing information with others. My hope is that this project will help to bridge the gap between the church and the world so that more trained artists will see the many creative possibilities in the practice of liturgical art. I also hope this project will prove useful for practising liturgical artists — especially Australians — as a contemporary, grounded and situated model of aesthetic/prophetic ministry. Further, I hope that my use of local theory and images is a useful model of a contextual theory and theology of art. For myself, the project has been a transforming experience. My feminist, postmodern, pragmatic, aesthetic/prophetic and contextual approaches have proved fruitful. My intuitive practice has been informed and I have developed new and more liberating ways of thinking about and making liturgical art.
CHAPTER 1: A FEMINIST CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework which underpins this project is shaped by my practice of liturgical art and vice versa. As the thesis has progressed, theory and practice have developed side by side. However, it is usual for praxis to precede theory. Because my conceptual framework is so dependent on my practice I begin this chapter with a reflection on the liturgical installations I made for the year of Jubilee 2000 for my parish — Our Lady of Mt Carmel, which is a suburban Catholic parish close to downtown Brisbane. Then, in the second part of this chapter I describe the main sources from which my theories have emerged.

This reflection on practice does not properly belong to a chapter on methodology, since I do not outline the techniques and materials I use for the work. However, it is essential to include here some photographs of, and practical notes about, the artwork which was specifically made as an impetus for the more theoretical work of this thesis. The photographs and notes also allow the reader to gain some insight into the nature and scope of parish based liturgical art as practiced at Mt Carmel. Further, they give the reader a visual experience of liturgical art (albeit a second-hand experience through photographs) before having to think analytically about it.
1. Reflecting on liturgical art in the year 2000 at Mt Carmel

The dawning of the third millennium was deeply significant for most of us who live in the western world.² There was a sense abroad that fresh meanings were emerging: it was the beginning of a new age in which creative potentialities abounded, but later experience showed that there were also new horrors lurking in the shadows. For Christians it was especially meaningful because it represented the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ.

The liturgical year of 2000³ was particularly significant for my project. During that year I made two seasonal liturgical installations at Mt Carmel, one was for Advent/Christmas (figs 1-3) and the other for Lent/Easter, and they were both directly related to my research. During the Easter season, and while the Lent/Easter installation (figs 6-17) was still extant, I organised four focus groups, involving twenty-five Mt Carmel parishioners, in order to get feedback about their reception of the artwork. Their responses are reported in the next chapter, but here I simply want to describe the artwork and reflect on my experience of making it. I begin with six pages of photographic records of the installations.

² It is important to remember that for the Jews the year is 5761, for the Chinese it is 4698 and for Muslims it is 1421.

³ The liturgical year began on the eve of the first Sunday of Advent 1999 (29/11/99); but for the sake of simplicity, and because of its Jubilee associations (to which I will refer later), I will call the liturgical year 2000.
This part of my thesis is a visual essay and I have kept words to a minimum in order that ‘the reader’ might be encouraged to look first and read later. The photographs on the next six pages are the most direct way that the reader can make contact with the liturgical art at Mt Carmel for the year 2000, since the installations no longer exist.

You, as reader, need to be alert to the serious disadvantage you have: you are merely looking at two-dimensional reproductions of works which were actually three-dimensional and interactive. The original viewers, the members of the celebrating community at Mt Carmel, could experience the artwork in a whole range of ways that are not open to you. They could touch the work, walk around it, look at it from all sides, watch others interacting with it, talk to others about it; and above all they could experience it within the context of the liturgical celebrations and seasons.

Please take the time to look before reading further!
Fig. 1. The Jubilee Installations began in Advent 1999. Here is the first station of the Advent star wreath.

Fig. 2. The fourth star was over the front entrance to the church.

Fig. 3. The fifth star marked the start of the year of Jubilee and was placed high above the centre of the assembly space.
Fig. 4. The lenten altar cloth with fire stand in front. The bowl holds ash.

Fig. 5. The sanctuary in lent - at far right the flood figures are just visible.
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Fig. 6. The Southern Cross was marked on the floor of the forecourt. Pyramids were placed in four of the stars and the fifth star remained empty until it was used for the Easter fire.

Fig. 7. Detail of the lettering on pyramid one.

Fig. 8. Everyone could participate.
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Fig. 9. Pyramid banner 1.

Fig. 10. Pyramid banner 1, reverse side.

Fig. 11. Pyramid banner 2.
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Fig. 12. Flood figures during lent.

Fig. 13. Flood figures on Palm Sunday.

Fig. 14. Flood figures at Easter.

Fig. 15. Veneration of the Cross on Good Friday.
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Fig. 16. The celebrating space at Easter.

Fig. 17. The Easter Vigil fire.

Fig. 18. Lighting the paschal candle.
The Jubilee installations

In the following pages I offer information about the content of the artwork which might answer some of the questions that the reader/viewer has about the work. Rather than theory, however, much of what follows is simply the ‘story’ of how the installations evolved.

The liturgical year of 2000 began in late November 1999, but the Mt Carmel liturgy committee, of which I am a member, met several months beforehand to start planning. Our primary task was to use the themes emerging from the year of Jubilee\(^4\) as a focus around which to plan the major liturgical seasons within the whole year. Since we were unanimous in wanting to make the celebration of the new millennium and Jubilee an Australian event, we chose the Southern Cross\(^5\) as the image which would best unite the experience of the year.

\(^4\) Pope John Paul II has designated 2000 a Year of Great Jubilee (beginning at the first Christmas mass of 1999). The year is, therefore, linked to the extensive jubilee tradition of Judaism. The Jewish tradition is described in Leviticus 25:8-12 which proclaims every fiftieth year a hallowed year in which prisoners are freed and the people are urged to take time off, to revisit their birthplaces and reconcile relationships with family. The Christian celebration of Jubilee is in line with the mission statement of Jesus in Luke 4:18-21 where he quotes from Isaiah. In this passage the Jubilee is pictured as freedom from oppression, poverty, and illness.

The Year of Great Jubilee 2000 combines these two traditions and their themes of rest, return, healing, reconciliation, justice and celebration. Internationally, the church’s focus is on seeking forgiveness for past wrongs done in the name of the church, and the cancellation of the debts of third world countries. For the Australian church the major justice issue is reconciliation with indigenous Australians.

\(^5\) In fact it was at the initial meeting in preparation for the previous Advent/Christmas season that we decided to use the Southern Cross image for the Jubilee year. In other words, we
Advent/Christmas

In the Advent/Christmas\(^6\) liturgies, the Incarnation is imaged as the dawning of the light into a dark world: ‘The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light’ (Is 9:1).\(^7\) The advent wreath is used in the Northern Hemisphere to herald the coming of the light and to mark time during the four weeks leading to Christmas. In its traditional form, the wreath works best when Christmas is celebrated in winter. In order to make sense of this image at Mt Carmel, I have reinterpreted it by separating out the four candles and placing them at various stations\(^8\) around the celebrating space. In this way the assembly is ‘encircled’ by light and the emphasis is on the gathering and waiting. The gathering circle evokes cultural references to Druidical rituals and Aboriginal corroborees. The circles belonging to those cultures are marked by stones or earthworks,\(^9\) while ours is marked out in light, the symbol of Christ.

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had started thinking and preparing for the millennium/Jubilee long before January 1 2000. Like others in the international community of the Catholic church, we had three years of preparation behind us: 1997 was designated the Year of Jesus; 1998 was the Year of the Holy Spirit; and 1999 was the Year of the Father (which we, at Mt Carmel, celebrated as the Year of the Many Faces of God).

\(^6\) Advent is the time of preparation for the celebration of the Christmas season, but they are not separate seasons, consequently I link their names. I do the same for Lent/Easter.

\(^7\) From the first reading of the Christmas midnight mass.

\(^8\) The sacramental stations are the font, ambo and altar, and the assembly stations are at the front door and the centre of the assembly space. Each Sunday the lighting of one of the candles is incorporated into the gathering rite: for example, the prayer for the candle at the centre of the assembly might begin ‘We gather in this circle of light . . .’

\(^9\) The Aborigines still use bora rings for ritual gatherings. These simple earthworks are open to the elements. Some, like the Jebbribillum bora ring at Broadbeach are no longer used, but preserved as part of Australia’s cultural heritage (Best & Barlow 1997, 49-51).
For the year of Jubilee, the two images of wreath and Southern Cross were linked. ¹⁰ This time the stations were marked by stars: the star for the first week was placed over the font (fig. 1); the second over the ambo; the third over the altar; and the fourth over the front entrance (fig. 2). The fifth star of the Southern Cross was the Christmas star and it was suspended over the centre of the assembly (fig. 3). Each Sunday the new star was acknowledged during the gathering rite: a candle was lit at the station, a prayer spoken, then the candle was taken and placed into a wreath formation around the font, which also acted as a giving circle.¹¹

The colours of the rainbow were incorporated into the star/wreath as well. These were evocative of the first reading of the Jubilee Lenten season: ‘I set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the Covenant between me and the earth’ (Gen 9:13). This was another way to make connections across the entire liturgical year.

**Lent/Easter**

The main symbols of the Lent/Easter season are the ones used during the Easter Vigil: the new light of the paschal candle and the waters of baptism. The symbols have multiple layers of meaning and their meanings tend to interrelate.

¹⁰ This idea was partly suggested by an article in *Liturgy News* by Peter Schutz (1998, 16).
For the last seven years at Mt Carmel, we have used ashing as a symbol of repentance throughout Lent. For the year of Jubilee we marked ourselves every Sunday from a bowl which stood in front of the altar (figs. 4 & 5). It was significant that the stand on which the ash bowl stood was also used as the font stand (fig. 16) and the fire stand (figs. 17 & 18). The result was that some interesting connections were indicated between the ash, the fire, the candle and the waters of baptism during the Lent/Easter period.

The altar and ambo cloths with their negative/positive patterns of hands (figs. 4 & 5) generated a lot of discussion in the community during Lent 2000 and many saw the references to the Aboriginal Reconciliation movement. When I designed the cloths I was thinking about how human logic often compels us to think in dualities: for example, black and white, male and female, and death and life. Our human logic so often puts these things in opposition without seeing the connections that exist between them.

There were two readings from the Lenten period which stimulated my thoughts in this direction: Paul’s comment on the superiority of divine over human logic (1 Cor 1:22-25), and the rainbow reading from Genesis (9:8-15). In the Corinthians reading Paul indicates that when we rely on human logic we

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11 Christmas gifts for the poor are left in the giving circle.

12 We had two stands of the same design: one was used for ash in Lent and for the font in Easter, and the second was used for the fire at the Easter Vigil.

13 Some saw a reference to the ‘sea of hands’ movement which began in Canberra in 1997 in support of Native Title and Reconciliation. I did not intend such a reference, but I thought it appropriate none-the-less.
can get things back-to-front. When we interpret the cross, for example, it can mean foolishness and madness, or power and wisdom, depending on our frame of reference, i.e. human logic or God’s wisdom. It is the latter which copes with paradox: the cross means both death and resurrection at the same time.

The rainbow reading from Genesis is part of the flood epic: the world is destroyed by the primal and chaotic waters until God offers a covenant of hope, signified by a rainbow, to Noah and his descendants. Here there are natural links between the positive power of the rainbow and the destructive, chaotic waters of the flood. The sign of hope arises from the very medium of destruction: a rainbow appears when the rays of the sun are refracted and reflected in drops of water. It is the infusion of light which tames the primal chaos; but both chaos and order are present in this sign of hope.

In the ‘flood figures’ assemblage\(^\text{14}\) (figs 12-14) I made use of the interesting paradox in the rainbow image. The figures flowed out of the tank and onto the floor of the sanctuary towards the assembly space. Relationships between the flood and baptism, and between the primal and the saving waters, were suggested.

The ‘flood figures’ shared two attributes with the Lenten altar and ambo cloths, namely the hand motif and the colours. Here also was a play on seemingly opposite elements: negative/positive, dark/light, chaos/order, male/female.
While the altar cloth changed for Easter (fig. 16), the ‘flood figures’ remained throughout the season.

On Palm/Passion Sunday (fig. 13) (that paradoxical feast which stands between Lent and the Triduum) the ‘flood figures’ were linked to the story of Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, signified by the palm, and then to the Passion, signified by the red cloth: victory and chaos are indistinguishable here. At Easter (fig. 14) the ‘flood figures’ are aligned to the cross and its perennial relationship with both death and life.

During Lent 2000 I made full use of the street front at Mt Carmel. The five stars of the Southern Cross were marked on the floor of the forecourt. Blank, white, three sided pyramid shapes were placed in four of the stars. Each pyramid had a phrase which was printed at the base of its three sides. These phrases were used, one each week for the first four Sundays of Lent, as a focus for a community Jubilee Lenten reflection. In chronological order the phrases read: ‘Our dreams for the new era’ (fig. 7); ‘Our fears for the new millennium’; ‘We acknowledge the sins of a broken world’ (fig. 8); and ‘We recognise the signs of healing in a fractured world.’ The fifth star was left

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14 I use the term ‘assemblage’ to refer to one part of a whole seasonal liturgical installation.

15 I used black cloth tape to mark out the stars.

16 These shapes were built to my specification (in MR MDF) by IN-WOOD, a Brisbane company of furniture manufacturers. I used half of my research allowance to fund this part of the project.

17 The printed phrases were produced to my specifications (in adhesive vinyl) by Design Craft, a Brisbane signwriting firm.
vacant during Lent, but at the Easter Vigil the fire stand (figs 17&18) was placed in it.

Every Sunday the community remained outside for the gathering rite among the pyramids. After mass the members of the community were encouraged to write their comments on the blank sides of a pyramid. There was no trouble about filling one pyramid each week since the response, especially from children and young adults, was very encouraging. Everyone was urged to participate: those too young to write were asked to draw and those who spoke no English were invited to write in their own language.

As each pyramid was filled I added rainbow colours around the comments (fig. 7) hoping that this would make some visual connections between the pyramids and the artwork inside. I also listed and classified every comment and did a content analysis to identify the recurring major themes. I posted brief notes of the weekly results of this research in the parish newsletter.

A mass for the forgiveness of sins was celebrated on the Monday of Holy Week and quotes from the pyramid comments were used in the text of the liturgy.\textsuperscript{18} In addition, I made four double-sided banners (figs 9-11), covered in quotes, which were hung that night in the assembly space. My aim was to make more connections between the inside and the outside of the celebrating space and to draw the concerns of the parishioners into the action of the

\textsuperscript{18} The text was compiled by the parish pastoral associate.
liturgy. The pyramids and the banners both remained in place until the end of the Easter season.

A critical view

So far, in this part of the essay, I have not been critical of my practice, but merely descriptive. It was not my intention to avoid self-evaluation, however, but simply to leave time for you, the reader, to form your own idea of the work. My criticism focuses mainly on form rather than content.

Technical difficulties made the Advent/Christmas installation less than satisfying in my eyes. Although the community response to the wreath (figs 1-3) was very positive I was unhappy with a few aspects. The colour was too brash and the stars were not always easy to see. I used clear vinyl and I wanted the light to pass through the star banners and make them glow with colour; but too frequently the banners hung at the wrong angle and the light created unwanted shadows or reflections, which obscured the stars and colours.

The most frustrating factor about this installation was the lack of preparation time. Because of the Jubilee I had a large commission just before Advent\(^{19}\) and I did not have sufficient time to prepare for the season at Mt Carmel. Planning ahead is important in my practice. I need to allow plenty of time

\(^{19}\) I was commissioned to paint a Jubilee seal which was used to block up the front doors of the St Stephen's Cathedral. The seal was broken at the Christmas Vigil mass to mark the beginning of the year of Jubilee.
(months usually) to mull over the possibilities before I commit myself to
designs for a liturgical season. Later in this chapter the issue of time and its
importance in the development of meaning emerges as a significant issue for
the reception experience too.

I found the Lent/Easter installation a satisfying experience, but one issue did
bother me. The proliferation of cross images in the celebrating space at
Easter happened almost without my being aware of it. Again time was at
issue: the visual elements in the celebrating space change for each of the
liturgies of the Triduum and it is a busy three days. All planning needs to be
done beforehand, but that is not always possible. Liturgies involve many
people and many different aspects of parish life, over which I have no control.
In addition there are times when I have to make changes and adjustments in
response to the needs of the moment. During those times I often make
decisions on the run and it is then that the long planning time usually comes to
my aid: when I am sure of the large ideas, last minute changes can be
integrated more easily.

I was pleased with the way the three crosses, the Jubilee cross, the Southern
Cross and the ‘old wooden cross’, interacted in the celebrating space
because of the different meanings which each evoked. With the wisdom of

\[20\] The Jubilee cross was used as a motif on the altar cloth and on the podium at the centre of
the assembly space. The Southern Cross was on the floor of the forecourt and the ‘old
wooden cross’ was in the sanctuary near the flood figures. Read more about this in Part 4,
Emerging Issues.

\[21\] More about this in Part 4, Emerging Issues.
hindsight, however, it would have been better to restrict the Jubilee cross to the centre of the assembly and use another motif for the altar. This would have made sense considering how the Jubilee cross first appeared in the celebrating space at Christmas (fig. 3): it hung, as part of the wreath, above the centre of the assembly space. Not only did I allow an unnecessary proliferation of crosses at Easter, but I also missed an opportunity to make a visual connection between Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter.

In this section I reflected on my experience of making the installations for the Jubilee year. I described some of the content I consciously put into them. I am always aware, however, that Mt Carmel parishioners interpret the work from the perspective of their own lives. In Chapter 2, the reader has the rare opportunity to hear twenty-five members of my parish community reflecting on their reception experience of these installations in the context of focus group discussions. It may not be possible to see through the eyes of another person, but the focus group material may help the reader to ‘see’ the artwork from several different points of view.

2. A Feminist approach to liturgical art: a conceptual framework

Even though I have stated that praxis precedes theory, I believe that theory and practice are mutually formative. I think through theory and theology and I work through art in liturgy and there are many occasions during the progress of this thesis when these dimensions intersect in the creative space between theory and practice.
In the following pages I outline the feminist, contextual and pragmatic approach which underpins my practice of liturgical art as it is described in the reflection above. This outline is in six parts. First I give a brief overview of my feminist, contextual approach. Second, I identify those aspects of pragmatism which enhance this approach. In the third section, I explore the ways in which pragmatic aesthetics can contribute to my project. In the fourth section, I survey feminist postmodern art theory and it is here that I identify the major issues which arise again and again in the following chapters. In the last two sections I begin to articulate feminist theologies of art and liturgy which are compatible with my project.

Since my whole thesis is about developing a conceptual framework for understanding my practice of liturgical art, the brief overview of my methodology in this chapter is merely the groundwork for the rest of the project. Consequently, the following is not a complete picture, but more of a sketch for the final painting.

A. Feminist & contextual

An important aspect of my project is its location in the here and now of my particular experience. My sense of place-connection and community-belonging are integral to my practice of liturgical art in both its theoretical and practical dimensions. My feminist approach is geographically, socially and culturally located in postmodern Australia and within the Roman Catholic tradition. This means that I am not an objective spectator in this endeavor,
but a “connected critic” who speaks from a marginal location’ and an ‘engaged position’ (Fiorenza 1988, 5). It means also that I write from a particular faith perspective.

For postmodernists, a perspectival approach is inevitable: they reject ‘the chimera of a philosophy without presuppositions’ (Ricoeur 1969, 19). Further, a ‘non-situated’ objectivity is an approach lacking ‘concern’ (24). The ethical dimension of liturgical art practice is taken seriously in this project, which means that I am bound to critique the patriarchal22 structures of the church.

Feminist theology is a form of liberation theology, which is by its nature critical and justice oriented. When I write critically about the church it is with the intention of being faithful to the tradition. My critical role is partly my larrikin side, which is irreverent, rebellious and iconoclastic.23 This side of me is intolerant of sham and double standards in the church, which are particularly apparent in its marginalisation of women. However, the feminist larrikin in me is tempered by my sense of responsibility and earnest desire for authenticity in my life and in the church. Consequently, my critical approach is ultimately

22 I use a broad definition of ‘patriarchy’ which goes beyond a system of oppressions of women to ‘a complex pyramidal political structure of dominance and subordination, stratified by gender, race, class, religious and cultural taxonomies and other historical formations of domination’ (Fiorenza 1992, 115). For a similar understanding of this term see Griselda Pollock (1988, 1).

23 The larrikin is an Australian image. It relates to one who is a transgressive figure, an irreverent jester and myth-buster. The most famous Australian larrikin is the bushranger, Ned Kelly.
reconstructive. This means that I seek to devise new and more liberating ways of thinking and making liturgical art from within the Catholic church.

**Reflection, analysis, deconstruction, reconstruction**
Underlying the structure of my project is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s (1992) four-step model of feminist research. Rebecca Chopp’s describes the model this way:

Fiorenza’s own model of the hermeneutical moment - suspicion, proclamation, remembrance, creative actualization - follows a distinctly pragmatic pattern … The combination of inquiry into a situation, interpretation of text in relation to that inquiry, and the creative imagination of new possibilities for the text and the situation illustrates the intrinsic relationship between pragmatics and hermeneutics in feminist theology. (Chopp 1987, 250-1)

I adapt this model to suit my own purposes and I think of the four steps as reflection, analysis, deconstruction, and reconstruction. The four steps begin with past praxis and provisionally ‘end’ with the invention of new and more liberating praxis, but the model is envisaged as dynamic and cyclical.

The first step begins at the start of this chapter with my reflection on making liturgical art at Mt Carmel. The reflection is then extended to parishioners from Mt Carmel. Several groups of parishioners discuss their reception experience in the context of a focus group process on which I report in Chapter 2. The results of these reflections are then analysed in the light of contemporary theory and theology. The issues which arise from the reflection
and analysis are used to critique the Tradition. From the melting pot of these critical, analytical processes new ideas, new ways of approach, new praxis, emerge. For my project this means the formulation of images which re-imagine the Tradition.

In *But She Said* (1992) Schüssler Fiorenza aligns creative imagination with ritualization in the fourth step of her hermeneutical process.

> . . . a *hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization* seeks to articulate alternative liberating interpretations that do not build on the androcentric dualisms and patriarchal functions of the text. It allows women to enter the biblical text with the help of historical imagination, narrative amplifications, artistic recreations, and liturgical celebrations. (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 73)

However, she warns that a healthy self-critical hermeneutic of suspicion is necessary along the way. There are many pitfalls for the unwary image maker because there is always the danger that she might fall into the traps of dualism herself.

**The problem of dualism**

One of the most oppressive aspects of church life, especially for women, is the dualism which underpins patriarchal structures. Dualism creates false separations and valuations, for example it places male in opposition to, and above, female and the spiritual in opposition to, and above, the material. The ideals of dualism are endemic in the power structures of the Catholic Church,

\[24\] I also use the understanding of the four steps taught by Dr Elaine Wainwright in her lectures on hermeneutics.
which, for one thing, doggedly maintains the exclusion of women from liturgical leadership roles.

Subverting dualism is a major role for feminists engaged in re-imagining Tradition in Schüssler Fiorenza's schema. I take this responsibility seriously in my project by devising inclusive and holistic approaches for the practice of liturgical art. These strategies are discussed in more detail in later chapters, but the concern with dualism is taken up again in the following discussion of philosophical pragmatism.

B. Feminist & pragmatic

There is lately a renewed interest in pragmatism among feminist theorists most notably Jane Duran and Phyllis Rooney\(^{25}\). The major issues that feminists find satisfying in the work of classical pragmatists is their emphasis on experience and social action. Both of these issues are explicitly associated with a critique of Platonic dualism which is very much part of the feminist postmodern project of deconstruction.

In *The Intersection of Pragmatism and Feminism* (1993) Duran writes that both pragmatism and feminism ‘remind us of ways in which we experience life before talking about the experience became more important than the having of it’ (168). She finds echoes of pragmatism in a feminist ‘worldview as

\(^{25}\) See the special edition of *Hypatia* (8, no. 2 [Spring, 1993]) devoted to feminism and pragmatism.
centered in the experience of the senses’ (160-1) and a feminist ontology which emphasises relations rather than detachment.

In *Feminist-Pragmatist Revisionings of Reason, Knowledge, and Philosophy* (1993), Phyllis Rooney sees in pragmatism a recognition of human beings as ‘embodied knowers’ (23) especially in the work of William James who emphasised the centrality of the body in the experience of learning. Rooney finds that ‘both feminists and pragmatists are wary of certain forms of idealization, abstraction and universalization’ (15) in traditional philosophy. She interprets Dewey’s project as reconstructive, in that he focused on ‘undoing the sharp divisions between theory and praxis, between knowing and doing, between reason and experience’ (17).

In Dewey’s epistemology, Rooney finds a satisfying alignment of knowing and responsible action (17-8). She appreciates James’ vision of pragmatism: it is a method for doing practical tasks rather than a set of dogma and it makes theories into instruments - not solutions, but rather programs of work for social change. In both pragmatism and feminism Rooney finds a future orientation, that is, they look forward, beyond the certainties of the known, to possibilities for change.

The pragmatic focus on change does not rule out truth and continuity altogether. In William James’ ‘tree’ metaphor these aspects are accounted for.
When old truth grows, then, by new truth’s addition, it is for subjective reasons. We are in the process and obey the reasons. That new idea … makes itself true, gets itself classed as true, by the way it works; grafting itself then upon the ancient body of truth, which thus grows much as a tree grows by the activity of a new layer of cambium … (James 1975, 36)

This image suggests continuous growth and change. The old truths are not lost in the process; even the oldest traditions can be reinterpreted and used again. James writes that

truth no longer malleable to human need [is] only the dead heart of the living tree, and its being there means only that truth also has its paleontology and its ‘prescription’, and may grow stiff with years of veteran service and petrified in men’s regard by sheer antiquity. But how plastic even the oldest truths nevertheless really are … in our day … the ancient formulas are reinterpreted … (James 1975, 36)

James’ image accounts for the value of tradition and the necessity for new understanding. He sees evidence of both the continuity of human experience and the emergence of new possibilities in the processes of nature.
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C. Pragmatism & art theory

The naturalism of James is reflected in Dewey's approach to aesthetics. In 
Art as Experience (1958)26 John Dewey describes works of art as 
‘celebrations … of the things of ordinary experience’ (11). His aim is to 
‘restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that 
are works of art and the everyday events, doings and sufferings that are 
universally recognised to constitute experience’ (3).

Art & life
The notion that human life follows the pattern of nature is central to Dewey’s 
naturalistic approach. Human life is organically and interactively part of nature 
(246). Culture is the product of prolonged and cumulative human interaction 
with the environment (28). In Dewey’s schema, artworks are objects to be 
experienced directly as part of nature, that is, they have their own reality and 
are not merely references to reality (113). Aesthetic experience is intense 
experience: being ‘fully alive’ (18); being in ‘active and alert commerce with 
the world’; and ‘at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of the self 
and the world of objects and events’ (19). Art serves life, but does not 
 prescribe ‘a defined and limited mode of living’ (135).

Dewey defines experience as ‘the result, the sign, and the reward of that 
interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is 
a transformation of interaction into participation and communication’ (22). Art

26 Art as Experience was originally published in 1934.
as experience is ‘the most effective communication that exists’ (286). It communicates by bridging the gap between the object and subject (287) so that the perceiver and the perceived no longer exist as independent realities (249). An artwork is most expressive when this relationship is ‘trusted with abandon’ (151).

**Art & the perceiver**

Art might have its own reality, but it is powerless until empowered by the interaction of the perceiver. The ‘language’ of artworks ‘exists only when it is listened to as well as spoken’. The perceiver is an indispensable partner. ‘The work of art is complete only as it works in the experience of others than the one who created it’ (106).

For Dewey, the influence of art pervades and renews life. It remakes our vision, reshapes our reality: ‘we are carried to a refreshed attitude toward the circumstances and exigencies of ordinary experience’ (139). It is part of the role of artists to push the boundaries, to explore new experiences, to go beyond the known (189). Moreover, art has the power to exercise social and political influence. Dewey does not mention the dark side of the power of art, but he is aware how symbol systems can be adversely controlled by elite groups (329).

**Art, reason & pleasure**

Life becomes more understandable through aesthetic experience. Dewey understood that intellectual experience bears the stamp of the aesthetic. Both
art and science work to understand the ‘tangled scenes of life’, but they do not
operate in the same ways. The tool of science is conceptualisation; but the
tool of art is ‘clarified, coherent, and intensified or “impassioned” experience’.
In the production and the perception of art, knowledge is transformed.
Concepts are merged into images to form experiences (209).

Reason is not enough for an understanding of life: reason ‘must fall back upon
imagination — upon the embodiment of ideas in emotionally charged sense’
(33-4). It is the sense qualities of art objects which carry their meanings ‘not
as vehicles carry goods but as a mother carries a baby when the baby is part
of her own organism’. Artworks, Dewey says, are ‘pregnant with meaning’
(118).

Aesthetic enjoyment of artworks is associated with the expansion and
enrichment of life (27). Dewey argues that our senses are an intrinsic part of
our meaningful experience of objects (125-6). Any derogation of our senses

… is at once effect and cause of a narrowed and dulled life-experience.
Oppositions of mind and body, soul and matter, spirit and flesh all have
their origin, fundamentally, in fear of what life may bring forth. They are
marks of contraction and withdrawal. (22)

The integration of life-experience dualities means ‘heightened vitality’ (19),
while the disintegration of experience means ‘stunted, aborted, slack, or
heavy laden’ (27). Art as experience is capable of reconciling dualities, such
as actuality/possibility; new/old; objective/subjective; individual/universal;
surface/depth; sense/meaning (297).
Dewey uses the notion of “objectified pleasure” as an example of a duality: in this traditional notion, aesthetic qualities do not belong to objects but are projected onto them by the mind. The aesthetic experience of an object is ‘pleasure in the object. Pleasure is so much in the object that the object and pleasure are one and undivided in the experience’ (248).

In an aesthetic experience, perceivers and artworks merge: the self and the object ‘are so fully integrated that each disappears’ (249). Dewey’s language indicates that this process is intentional on the part of the perceiver and not a case of unconscious ‘enthrallment’ under the spell of art. On the contrary, he stresses the role of the consciousness in the relationship of humans and their environment: they use the resources of nature intentionally to expand their own lives (25).

Art satisfies because it meets a need: our needs are ‘drafts drawn upon the environment, at first blindly, then with conscious interest and attention’ (255). For Dewey ‘disinterestedness’ is a word that can be used to mean ‘distance’ or ‘detachment’ but never ‘uninterestedness’. Detachment implies the ‘fullness of participation’ and ‘distance is a name for a participation so intimate and balanced that no particular impulse acts to make a person withdraw, a completeness of surrender in perception’ (258). The surrender then, is in response to a need or desire; but surrender does not imply powerlessness or passivity - it means the fullness of conscious participation because perception is a conscious act.
Evaluating art
Dewey proposes a model for analysing art in which the relationship of art to other modes of experience is the core issue (12). His criterion for gauging the aesthetic value of an object is the 'degree of completeness of living in the experience of making and of perceiving' it (26). To describe this he uses phrases like ‘enhancements of everyday life’ (6), ‘intensest life’ (17), ‘fully alive’ (18) and ‘heightened vitality’ (19).

In Dewey’s model, art is instrumental in two ways. First, it enables us to look again, with a ‘refreshed attitude’, at ordinary experience: art re-educates our vision (139) so that so that we look at familiar things with new understanding (140). Second, artworks elicit and accentuate in the perceiver the quality of being part of the larger world: a transpersonal experience of a ‘deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences. We are carried out beyond ourselves to find ourselves’ (195).

Many of the ideas which arise in Pragmatism, especially Dewey's pragmatic aesthetics are compatible with feminist postmodern art theory. Preoccupation with themes such as the relationship between art and life can be found in both. The uneasy relationship between perceivers and images is also noted in both, but postmodern feminists are more suspicious of images and the power they can wield over the perceiver.
D. Feminist postmodern art theory

In the last decades of the twentieth century feminist art theorists have been active in challenging modernist presuppositions in aesthetics. These women have questioned ‘the specificity of aesthetic experience; the self-sufficiency of the visual; the teleological evolution of art autonomous from any other social causation or pressure’ (Pollock 1988, 14). They have helped to redefine art in terms of its cultural and the social uses (Broude & Garrard 1982) and its place within the multiple realities of the life-world (Wolff 1975, 44).

The nature and implications of subjectivity and difference have been probed. The myth of the generic perceiver has been exploded. Perception is now understood to be influenced by gender, class, race and culture. ‘The disinterested, disembodied Cartesian knower is replaced by a conception of the knowing subject “as situated, as engaged and as a part of a community” ’ (Brand and Korsmeyer 1995, 18). In theories of the male gaze, the ‘culturally prescribed viewer’ of art has been identified as ‘a male of dominant social standing’ (16). Pleasure in art has been found to be problematic when art serves the interests of patriarchy at the expense of women (Mulvey 1989).

The gender biases in traditional interpretations of historical material have been unmasked, and alternative ways of reading history have been devised. Feminist theorists have challenged the notion of the artist as ‘genius’ and uncovered the prejudices underlying the terms ‘high’ art (Brand and Korsmeyer 1995) and ‘masterpiece’. They have called for new, inclusive
criteria for evaluating art (Salomon 1991). They have asked why it is that women are absent or marginal in the canon of ‘great art’ (Nochlin 1989). They have identified how women artists can work against their own interests in colluding with the oppressive structures of patriarchy (Greer 1995).

Of these issues there are four specific issues which frequently resurface throughout this project: subjectivity and difference; pleasure and responsibility in the practice and reception of art; the relationship between art and reality; and criteria for evaluating art. These are not isolated issues — on the contrary, they are interrelated and all have gender implications.

**Subjectivity and difference**

Feminist interest in the concept of difference emerged in the early 1970s to subvert the fiction that ‘women-are-the-same-as-one-another’ (Marsh 1985, 3). Women's subjectivity was understood to make them different from men as well as from each other. However, commonalities were valued for the sense of solidarity they gave to women. If women were all different, how could they work together in the feminist movement? The tension between the reality of individual differences and the need for solidarity has become a perennial issue for feminists.

In *Feminine Sentences* (1990) Janet Wolff claims that the singularity of experience makes it an inadequate foundation for feminist theory. The

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experience of individuals is shaped by ‘age, class, ethnic identity, sexual orientation and so on’ (81). She opposed the notion that women's experience could form the basis of a separate women's movement in opposition to patriarchal culture.

Wolff acknowledges the partial, perspectival and androcentric nature of the dominant theory. Even so, she identifies patriarchal culture as a ‘dominant, alien, but ultimately enabling culture’ (82). She speaks from within the system, aiming to transform it. Her notion of responsible feminist action amounts to ‘engaging with, and destabilizing, the images, ideologies and systems of representation of patriarchal culture’ (82).

Structuralism made the notion of the knowing, active and autonomous subject problematical and questioned the power of individuals to change the structures of social systems. In Body and Self (1993) Anne Marsh describes how the structuralist analysis of culture almost destroyed performance art forms in Australia during the 1970s. However, during the 1980s performance artists adapted their content and their style. From 'an expressive cathartic practice' they moved to 'a more social appraisal of the body-subject'. In other words, the artist moved from central position in the performances and their personal concerns were replaced by wider, social considerations (184). Marsh saw this as a positive move for feminist practitioners because 'the focus on individual experience tended to reinforce conventional ideas about individuality' (226) and 'binary oppositions' (228) in Western society.
Marsh records that in the late 1980s and 1990s artists began to reexamine the structuralist notion of the social construction of subjectivity. As for herself, Marsh (1985, v) takes a stand for the active subject as an agent of social change.

Like Wolff, Griselda Pollock sees no point in working outside the system. In *Vision and Difference* (1988), she acknowledges the role it plays in her formation.

No doubt the focus of my concerns is conditioned by the conversational community within which I work and to which I have access through magazines, conferences, exhibitions and educational institutions which form the social organization of radical intellectual production in Britain. This community is a mixed one in which alliances are forged under the umbrella of common purposes contesting the hegemony of the dominant paradigms. (Pollock 1988, 15)

The advantage of being part of a cultural elite in society puts her in a position to work more effectively for change. The collective effort is important to her; but the role of the individual intellectual in the struggle for social change is indisputable to Pollock. In her introduction to *Parallax* (1998), Pollock describes Julia Kristeva as a model of the intellectual who is politically and ethically engaged in the life-world.

As Pollock sees it, the task ahead for responsible feminist intellectuals is not so much critique, but the invention of new ways of thinking, imagining and of

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28 Wolff indicates that ‘theory’ refers to science and knowledge.
living in relation (2). She values the singularity of individuals and the notion of the active subject when it comes to political action. However, the efficacy of the active subject depends on their role in communities where solidarity is an empowering factor.

Pleasure and responsibility
Laura Mulvey begins to articulate the theory of the male gaze in Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (1989)\textsuperscript{29}. Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning. (Mulvey 1989, 15)

In the process of analysing pleasure, Mulvey is aware that she will destroy it. Her intention is to destroy the pleasure of the passive voyeur. Any regret that women might feel for the loss of this pleasure is mere sentiment, the gains are too great (17).

Mulvey’s aim is to ‘conceive a new language of desire’ which entails ‘the thrill that comes of leaving the past behind without simply rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, and daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations’ (16). It would involve the audience in the dialectics of film and allow for a 'passionate detachment' of the audience (26).

\textsuperscript{29} Written in 1973 and published in 1975 in Screen.
The thrill of leaving the past behind is transitory, however, and there has to be something more sustaining in ‘the new language of desire’ because once on this road there is no going back. Mulvey’s article only points in the direction of this new language, and leaves others to formulate it.

Janet Wolff (1993, 109) complains that late 20th century art is too focused on its political agenda and not focused enough on pleasure. Wolff fails, however, to describe the role of art outside ideology and social action. She begins to reclaim the notion that there is something specific to the aesthetic, which is not shared by other types of experience, but it is clear that she is not sure what constitutes this specificity. The implication is that the answer lies outside of the realm of knowledge, and that maybe it is pleasure.

In *Pictures of Reality* (1980), Terry Lovell points out that pleasure is essential for political effectiveness and she places ‘knowledge, pleasure and political action’ side by side (78). In this pragmatic/didactic theory, pleasure is tied to the intellect: the pleasure of learning. Lovell points to another intellectual pleasure, that is the recognition of the ‘rules of the game’. There is pleasure in recognising when the rules are ‘obeyed, varied or even flouted’. Lovell calls these ‘learned pleasures’ and they are governed by aesthetic sensibilities. Since class and gender influence the development of such sensibilities these

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30 It is worth noticing the to and fro of feminist deconstruction and reconstruction evident here. In the 1980’s Grizelda Pollock deconstructed the traditional notion of the ‘specificity of the aesthetic’ using Marxist social theory and in the 1990’s Janet Wolff attempts to reconstruct it using similar tools.
pleasures are not neutral or innocent, but can be utilised for reactionary political ends (95).

Hilde Hein recognises the relationship between aesthetic pleasure and learning in *The Exploratorium* (1990). With its pleasures, seductions and invitations, art can overcome the knowledge chasm between ordinary people and scientific knowledge (150). Art can provide the initial encounter, but it can also draw the perceiver into deeper inquiry (160). Hein claims that both ‘science and art together are needed for a full description of the world’ (147). The seductive quality of the aesthetic is what draws the perceiver into an encounter with science, but its role does not finish there. The aesthetic dimension of science is not superficial, but intrinsic to the experience of inquiry since ‘simplicity and intellectual elegance are at the heart of intelligibility’ (149).

For Hein, pleasure is the most potent quality of the experience of the aesthetic. Pleasure is not passive; on the contrary, it enables the perceiver to inquire more deeply, it gives the perceiver the confidence to explore further. She draws responsibility and pleasure together in the perennial human project, i.e. ‘the search for the right answer’ (169).

When Hein (1995, 454) looks more critically at pleasure, she distinguishes feminist notions of pleasure from the masculinist disinterested pleasure or “jouissance”, i.e. ‘a self-contained entertainment’. She knows that pleasure is not always neutral nor safe.
Art and reality

Janet Wolff draws art and life together in *Hermeneutic Philosophy and the Sociology of Art*\(^\text{31}\) (1975). She defines ‘the world’ as both ‘the basic material world . . . and the socio-cultural world of symbolic behaviour, institutions, roles, conventions’ (44). These two dimensions make up ‘the total life-world’ in which art is a ‘mode of experience’ (17). Art can only be understood in the wider context of the ‘total experiential structure’ of human life (8). The multiple realities of life - ‘beliefs, perceptions, evaluations’ (9) - and the realities of art co-exist and are mutually formative. True to her Marxist approach, the notion of a noumenal world is completely strange to Wolff (44).

In her critique of postmodernism, Wolff (1990, 88-91) identifies the most typical postmodern practice as ‘detaching representation from reality’. She claims that this is a superficial exercise which simply dismisses the ‘grand narratives of universal theories’ without proper consideration. She suggests that feminists ‘adopt a middle path between radical relativism (anti-theory) and discredited universalism (totalizing theory)’.

Terry Lovell (1980,19) describes a marxist realist aesthetics in which aesthetic experience can act as a guide to the real. Art can influence the perceiver’s experience and understanding of reality. However, art is not neutral in that it can be used for both progressive and reactionary political ends.

\(^{31}\) Originally written as Wolff’s PhD thesis in the Department of Sociology, University of Birmingham.
Consequently, Lovell acknowledges that not all aesthetic experience is reliable and it is only that which is informed and controlled by theory which is trustworthy as a guide to reality (19). I would add that the converse is also true, that theory without experience is insufficient for a full understanding of ‘reality’.

Suzi Gablik claims that art is about life in its social and natural dimensions. In *The Reenchantment of Art* (1991) Gablik shows how art points to reality in order to stimulate social and ecological action. It performs these combined functions in three ways: when art alerts the viewing public to oppression and brutality in society (97); when it is an instrument for human maturation and affirmation (106-9); and when it alerts human beings to the needs of the environment (154-5). The artist in Gablik’s model is like a shaman: ‘a cultural awakener or healer’ (143).

**Criteria for evaluating art**

Nanette Salomon identifies the traditional criteria for evaluating art as ‘innovation and influence’ in *The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission* (1991). At first sight these two criteria are seductively sensible for evaluating art, but Salomon shows how they are related to the myth of the ‘artist as genius’ and how this mythology is thoroughly gender, class and race inflected. According to the ‘artist as genius’ model, art is the production of elite individuals who are depicted in art histories as ‘discrete from their social and political environments’ (223).
If ‘innovation and influence’ are no longer safe criteria, what can be used to replace them? Salomon does not suggest any real alternatives but she draws a model in which art is understood ‘as a real component in a process of social exchange that involves both production and consumption’ (233). In other words, she views art and the realities of everyday life as inextricably interrelated.

Hein (1990) mentions three ways in which art is validated: its ‘resonance with the experience of others’ (147); ‘its capacity to enlarge our experience of the world’; and its capacity to ‘enhance our comprehension’ of the world (169). Gablik (1991) judges the ‘success’ of art by its results (111). Art is an instrument for empowering people to act\(^{32}\) (108-9,175) and it can therefore be judged by ‘the quality of the response’ to the work (175).

To this list I would add three more criteria which are relevant to liturgical art. First, liturgical art can be judged by the way it balances the needs of subjectivity and difference with the needs of community. Second, it can be evaluated by how well it balances pleasure and responsibility. Third, it can be judged by the quality of the connections it makes between liturgical ideals and the everyday realities of the life-world.

It is interesting that none of the theorists quoted above mentions beauty per se as a criterion. They are, however, clearly critical of the concepts which cluster around the notion of beauty such as ‘the artist as genius’ and ‘the
artwork as masterpiece’. Consequently, it is refreshing to find a reappraisal of beauty from a feminist theological perspective in the work of Margaret Miles, which I discuss in the following passages.

E. Feminist theology and art theory

Art theory and theology have often drawn close together in the various historical understandings that linked ‘beauty’ with the divine. Many of the traditional applications of beauty theory are unhelpful for a feminist approach to aesthetics because they focus on the universal and the ideal. ‘Beauty’ is one of the ‘large narratives’ that Janet Wolff (1990, 88-91) refers to, but in the 20th century beauty had a chequered history, especially in the artworld. I will look more closely at the problems and possibilities of beauty theory and theology in Chapters 8 and 9.

Margaret Miles is an advocate of beauty. However, her approach to the theology of art is underpinned by her belief that physical existence is the matrix for all aspects of human life including the spiritual. God is knowable in everyday reality through the agency of art. Beauty mediates engagements between the ideal and the sensible world.

Art & reality

In *Image as Insight* (1985) Miles’ approach naturalises the Christian experience: the starting point for her theology is located in ‘the exigencies of

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32 Estelle Lauter (1993, 32) makes this point also.
this life’ (1). She rejects the traditional perspective of ‘soul, reason, ego, or subjective consciousness’ for an alternative perspective grounded in ‘the primary-connectedness of human beings to the natural world by fragile and transitory bodies’ (35). Miles envisions the Christian experience as a participation in ‘the “body of Christ” ‘ with its fulfilment in the resurrection of the body (36).

Both the mind and the body are derived from physical existence in Miles’ schema. While traditional interpretations of human life have focused on the primacy of the mind and its expression in language, Miles suggests that the body and images are a more appropriate focus (35). It is not part of her thinking, however, that physical existence should be the only focus. Her concern is to redress the imbalance: ‘urging the cultivation of embodiment makes sense to balance exclusive attention to cognitive activity’ (37).

Miles is referring to the biases of contemporary scholars, however, and she is not claiming that this approach is universally valid. She recognises that not everyone has the same orientation or needs the same compensatory strategy. For some, physical existence is potentially overwhelming, in which case ‘exhortations to “disdain” the body and cultivate the spiritual life call attention to an aspect of human beings that people are in real danger of neglecting’ (37).

The visual and performing arts of a culture form the affective fabric of a society. Understandings of life from the affective dimension are different from
understandings that arise from the rational. Miles claims that art has a formative role in religion.

Religion needs art to orient individuals and communities, not only conceptually but also affectively, to the reality that creates and nourishes, in solitude and in community, human life … Both are cognitive functions; both involve an organization of experience, but they are different in content and they train different capacities in human beings. (Miles 1985, 4)

Miles holds that words cannot give adequate expression to the affective dimension of life. Images, on the other hand, can translate feelings into objects so that we can observe and understand them (3). The observation needed is ‘long, silent contemplation’ after which the ‘image itself begins to speak’ (150).

Images speak of life, but not just to the physical dimension of life. They can present the embodied perceiver with spiritual possibilities (143). These possibilities are always connected to physical existence, however. Miles describes the perception of liturgical images as powerful and multi-dimensional experiences.

… the image is valued because of its power to move, to focus the senses and the mind, and to offer a mnemonic aid that gathers the worshipper’s strongest and most fundamental ideas, emotions, and memories in an enriched present. An image … may nevertheless contain the power to carry the worshipper to the psychic place in which worship occurs. (Miles 1985, 9)
Chapter One: A Feminist Conceptual Framework

Miles reinterprets Rudolph Arnheim’s term ‘eyesight as insight’ (3) to describe ‘seeing’ in a religious sense, i.e. moments of intense perception of the sensible world in its fulfilled state as a vision of God. The implication is that spiritual experience is mediated by material experience.

Miles understands ‘insight’ as the ability to recognise God in observable reality and to experience spiritual and material realities as one. The experience of ‘insight’ means the physical, intellectual and spiritual encounter between human beings, nature and God (2). In Miles’s schema, the most powerful religious images are those derived from nature.

Objects of the natural world are capable of evoking religious awareness, and these objects provide the strongest and most enduring images of the religious life … Fire, water, light, space, color — these powerful visible properties of the natural world underlie the power of every religious image. Figurative “seeing” is dependent on literal seeing, and the religious life must be conceived and articulated by the use of metaphors based on natural objects if its concepts are not to remain lifeless. (Miles 1985, 2-3)

The role of images is to ‘train the eye’ (3), ‘to focus the senses and the mind’ (9) in order to see nature; but not to look beyond nature to ‘ideal prototypes’, rather to look more deeply into its reality (3).

33 When Arnheim used this expression in Art and Visual Perception (1974, 46) he was referring to cognition, not any kind of spiritual insight. Arnheim’s aim in this book is to reaffirm the intrinsic interdependence of seeing and thinking. He uses the principles of Gestalt psychology in a very naturalised way: like John Dewey, he aligns the human activity of art with biological functions in nature. Arnheim describes his approach as ‘terrestrial’ (7) and he locates artistic experience in everyday life rather than in the rarefied realm of special talent (5,6). In Arnheim’s schema, vision is neither passive nor neutral: ‘vision is an active grasp’ (43) in which connections are made between the seer and the seen.
Images also posit ways of understanding and managing life (132): they impart ‘life-orienting’ information (6).

We need images that express - that help us to “see” - what we are about, and we need images that represent - that make present - aspects of human possibility we have known perhaps only momentarily. (Miles 1985, 149)

Images can inform by compensating for a lack in experience, that is they can offer alternative possibilities which are outside the range of the perceiver’s experience.

**Beauty, pleasure & responsibility**

Miles identifies beauty as the quality which gives images the power to influence the perceiver. She refers to the ‘drawing power of a beautiful image’. Beauty is a ‘somatic experience’ and a religious experience. A ‘somatic experience of beauty’ makes a connection between ‘ideal beauty and the sensible world’. The ‘somatic experience of beauty’ gives perceivers access to spiritual possibilities in the physical world; but more than that it allows perceivers to participate in the presence of God who is made ‘continuously accessible through visible objects’ (142).

Images can make liturgy a more holistic and inclusive experience.

The coordination of intellect and senses in verbal and visual expressions results from a worship and devotional practice that engages the whole human being, in which the senses as well as the intellect are engaged and affirmed. The use of images in worship modifies the tendency of words to exclude people who cannot
subscribe to a precisely defined concept. Images also challenge the tendency to confine ourselves to intellectualizing activity. (Miles 1985, 33)

Further, liturgical images foster community values (132): they orient individuals and communities ‘to the reality that creates and nourishes’ (4). Miles identifies the unique relationships fostered in the sharing of liturgical images in worship.

Those who gaze together at a religious image share participation in the spiritual world made present in its visual representation …

Community founded on the gathering of body/beings for communal participation in the spiritual world embodied in religious images is not the same as community based on a collection if individual subjective consciousnesses. (Miles 1985, 151)

Here, perceivers ‘confront the images as a member of an interpreting community’ (8).

Images are formative and they work by attracting perceivers ‘to some particular feature by interests determined by their life situation’ (144). Looking at images is not passive: ‘a person’s self-image, values, and longing are shaped by the visual objects of her or his habitual attention’ (147). Images can be dangerous because they can transmit either life affirming or oppressive values (8). They are seductive, but they are not omnipotent because the viewer has the power to subvert the meaning of the image (145-6).
Miles' claims that 'an image may seduce the viewer to a certain message, but it will not bully him to that message' (30), but I am not as trusting. There is, in my view, a fine line between seduction and hostile control over a perceiver's imagination and consciousness.

However, Miles' view may have shifted over the years. I can hear a new level of suspicion in Desire and Delight (1991) when Miles explores the reception experience of reading Augustine’s Confessions which 'requires that one must somehow manage to see simultaneously the problems and dangers of Augustine's thought — the authoritarianism, the exclusionary strategies — and its extraordinary power and beauty'. Miles can see that this classic text — part of the cannon of Christian tradition — can be both beautiful and ugly, liberating and dangerous. 'If one reads in the Confessions only its powerful beauty' she writes 'one is susceptible to its many seductions, its prohibitions, its silences, its politics, and institutional allegiances' (11).

Nonetheless, Miles claims that if readers only pay attention to the 'horrors' of the text they risk losing its transformative potential. Her message is clear, when you approach such texts there is the potential for both oppressive danger and creative opportunity. The same can be said of images, even those which are part of the canon of Christian tradition.

'Pleasure' says Miles 'is culturally constructed; it is 'particular, not universal' (9). Can the same be said of beauty? This is a complex issue which I take up again in later chapters.
F. Feminist theology & liturgy

Two of the major issues which arose as reference points for art theory arose again in the section on art theology, namely art and reality, and pleasure and responsibility. Similarly some of those issues arise again in this section on feminist approaches to liturgy.

Just as feminist art theorists have been challenging modernist presuppositions in aesthetics for the last few decades, feminist theologians have been deconstructing contemporary liturgical practices. They have critically questioned 'liturgical ministries, lectionaries, liturgical language or the shape and content of rituals as a whole' (Berger 2005, 77).

Liturgical leadership

Feminist scripture scholars have rediscovered a model of church based on the ideal of the 'discipleship of equals' (Schüssler Firoenza 1992, 121). 'The egalitarian nature of the early urban communities' (Sawyer 1996, 101) was found to have been propitious for women's liturgical involvement. This rediscovery of women's history of liturgical experience has inspired women to look again at contemporary church leadership and the nature of ministry.

The 'servant' model and the 'enabler' model of leadership have been examined and it was found that 'servant language emphasizes the responsibility to the community' while 'enabler language recognizes the
authority given by the community' (Proctor-Smith 1992, 32). The shades of
difference between these two modes of leadership is a creative tension for
some feminist liturgists. However, others simply abandon leadership for the
sake of intensified participation. Their aim is to make women 'full subjects of
the liturgical celebration' (Berger 1999, 122).

In many Protestant churches, feminist theologians and others have
successfully challenged the exclusion of women from liturgical leadership. Of
course Roman Catholic women are still waiting, but many have rejected the
notion of joining the present structures where office dominates charism, where
priesthood is a state rather than a ministry (Hakendorf 1992, 96-7) and where
the 'priests form a separate caste in the cultic mode' (105).

**Liturical Lectionaries**

It is well known that most churchgoers and most lectionary users are women,
but most of the biblical scholars who select the readings for lectionaries are
men (Smith 1999, 79-80). Consequently, lectionaries provide plenty of texts
which describe male experience, for example 'fatherhood, war, property,
competitive leadership, politics, public loyalty' (85), but they present a very
'limited and stereotypical selection of biblical stories about women' (Berger
2005, 76). Further, the lectionary shows an androcentric bias in its biblical
witness through its 'omissions of biblical women's stories' (77- 78). Here are
some examples of the omissions from the Roman Catholic Lectionary:

A survey of the lectionary reveals that the account of the two brave
midwives, Shiphrah and Puah of the Book of Exodus, is omitted entirely
from the lectionary. The weekday reading of Exodus 1:8-22 (lectionary
#389, Monday of the Fifteenth Week in Ordinary Time, Year I) skips from verse 14 to verse 22, thus excising the story of these valiant women who put their own lives at risk by defying the pharaoh's law of death in order to uphold God's law of life.

Deborah, named a prophet and judge of Israel and recognized as a mother of Israel, also is passed over in the lectionary. As prophet and judge, Deborah advised her people, planned a military strategy against the Canaanites, appointed a general and then led the victorious battle. Deborah's song of victory in Judges 5:1-31 is considered to be one of the most ancient extant compositions of the Bible, but it is not used in the lectionary. Although Gideon, Jotham, and Jephthah from the Book of Judges find their way into the weekday lectionary, Deborah is left standing outside the gate. (Fox 2005)

It is critiques like these which show that 'the biblical tradition is far more inclusive of women than the received texts might imply' (Winter 1990, xi). The omissions of women's experience from liturgical lectionaries has prompted some women to devise their own lectionaries to redress the imbalance, while others lobby for more creative and inclusive uses of the official lectionaries.

**Liturgical language**

Gender analysis has shown that liturgical texts are 'powerful gender scripts' (Berger 1999, 23). The 'male-referenced language in liturgy and prayer' excludes women as subjects of liturgy (Proctor-Smith 1995, 17).

Even the naming of sin is a problem for women because of the gender implications. Traditional understandings of evil were defined in terms of masculine attributes: 'pride, self-will, and power'. In feminist liturgies sins
such as 'the lack of resistance to patriarchy, the lack of networking with sisters, and the lack of courage to say no' are named (Berger 1999, 137).

When God is 'imaged and addressed almost exclusively in the masculine' (Berger 2005, 76) then it becomes obvious that 'our imaginations (not just women's) have been colonized' (Proctor-Smith 1990, 19). Feminists have questioned the gendered nature of trinitarian prayer language (Ramshaw 1995, 75ff) and have proposed many degendering strategies for naming God, for example God as Creator (41). Further, they have offered many ways of naming the feminine nature of God, for example God as Mother, Sophia and many others (Berger 1999, 142).

The process of liturgies
Feminists continually experiment with the process of liturgies and they invariably utilise images, poetry and music to enhance the liturgical experience and for 'correcting the limits imposed by patriarchy' (Walton 2000, 39). In this way the liturgical experience can encompass a wider array of human experiences. The order of rationality is complemented by the creativity of the arts and the liturgy becomes a more holistic experience. In the process of experimentation, there is always uncertainty and there are dangers in moving beyond the boundaries. This is not the case with the set and unassailable texts of the official liturgies of the church. Feminists use traditional sources, but they also go outside the traditional texts. In the process something new emerges and sometimes the new thing challenges the traditional meanings, and the conventional methods, of liturgy.
As this boldness grows women will spend less time imitating the old forms and more time exploring the roots, the needs, the strategies that gave rise to them. The resulting liturgical forms will be less and less derivative and, strangely, more and more traditional. (Smith 1999, 69)

Conventional sacred spaces are often deemed to be unsuitable for feminist liturgies because so often their shape and arrangement work against the relational nature of ritual. Feminists typically arrange worship spaces to promote participation. Consequently, the spaces move from 'hierarchical to horizontal' orientation which allows for 'the primacy of the body and of the physical world' (Proctor-Smith 1995, 57).

The gestures and postures of submission are rejected in favour of those which foster mutuality (64).

Horizontal gestures prevail in feminist liturgies; they suggest equality and interdependence; they affirm God know among us. Generally we do not look up to find God. We connect with each other to give and receive blessings. (Walton 2000, 38)

Further, it is customary to pray with eyes open and without bowing the head.

The sacraments

The sacrificial aspect of the sacraments, especially Eucharist is mistrusted by feminists. They understand suffering to be oppressive rather than salvific (Proctor-Smith 1995, 105) and some reject a theology of redemption which focuses on death and suffering, and instead they associate redemption with life (104).
Sacrificial rhetoric, however nuanced or reinterpreted, is an inadequate understanding of the meaning of suffering. In rejecting sacrificial language, feminist theology does not deny the reality of suffering; instead, it rejects any understanding of suffering that diminishes the possibility of resistance and struggle.’ (Proctor-Smith 1995, 133)

In line with incarnational theology, Jesus’ life and mission, rather than the cross, are the focus of the sacraments. Further, discipleship rather than suffering is the appropriate response to the sacramental call to service.

Sacraments are understood in terms of justice and inclusion by feminist liturgists. Baptism is quintessentially egalitarian: when persons are baptised they are ‘no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3:28).

The sacrament of marriage is understood in relation to mutuality following the principle that ‘the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does’ (1 Cor 7:4) (Sawyer 1996, 101). Similarly the sacrament of Eucharist is understood as a paradigm of just relations and mutual sharing (Proctor-Smith 1990, 143).

Justice
Some feminists want their liturgies to be for women only (Proctor-Smith 1995, 145). Others make their liturgies ‘ordinary, organic and for everyone’ (Walton 2000, 12). In either case the methodology is justice oriented and their feminist approaches are usually associated with wider justice issues.
Feminists know that gender biases make the church a less than full experience for all Christians, not just women. Those who, like me, are determined to work from within the church know also that 'imagining new liturgical forms is part of the process of imagining a new Church' and of redrafting 'the liturgical map for everyone' (Smith 1999, 221). I share the idealistic hope that in the future, liturgy will be a model of 'God-sustained gender roles' (Berger 1999, 153), but I submit that this can never be achieved if feminist liturgies get stuck in the by-women-for-women groove which is intrinsically dualistic.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have identified the basic nature of my conceptual framework as feminist, contextual and pragmatic. Postmodern feminist theology gives my framework a creative critical edge and a justice orientation. Elizabeth Schüssler Firoenza's feminist methodology shapes my process and helps to keep the edge sharp and the orientation true. My location in Australia gives my project a unique view from the 'downunder' of here and now. In number of ways, which will become apparent in later chapters, this is also a marginal perspective.

Pragmatic philosophy is useful for my project because it is practical, socially responsible and it has a forward orientation towards change for the better. Pragmatism is a theory of reality, but more than that it is a program of work for
creating or transforming reality. It makes claims to truth, but upholds only those truths which can prove themselves useful in real life situations. It can, therefore, account for both change and the continuity of human experience.

Further, William James' 'ancient body of truth' metaphor provides a model of continuity and change for the Christian tradition which I refer to many times in later chapters.

John Dewey's defiance of Platonic dualism is reflected in the concerns of feminist postmodern art theory. His aesthetics confirmed my own intuition, and enrich my knowledge, about the fundamental connection between aesthetic experience, art and life. Like Dewey, I use 'life' as the core value of my aesthetic approach.

Feminist postmodern art theory identifies four major reference points for thinking about art, even in its relation to liturgy: subjectivity and difference; pleasure and responsibility; art and reality; and criteria for evaluating art. These themes arise many times as my project unfolds.

Margaret Miles' theological approach to images models a feminist postmodern approach which is able to balance both a respect for and a critical approach to the Christian Tradition. Miles' provides an invaluable starting point for re-evaluating the traditional aesthetic concepts of beauty and pleasure.

Feminist liturgists show all the attributes of larrikins, that is, they are risk-taking, trouble-making iconoclasts. They dare to experiment with Tradition
and rejoice in the resulting new ideas and approaches which emerge. They do this from a passionate desire to celebrate life's gifts and to ritually rage against life's injustices. Their boldness challenges me to discipleship and their courage and determination inspire me to step beyond safe boundaries. While their struggle gives impetus to my project, their scholarship provides it with a theological centre within the context of the emerging discipline of feminist liturgy.
CHAPTER 2:
REFLECTING ON THE RECEPTION EXPERIENCE

During the last decade or so, I have made many liturgical installations for Mount Carmel and in that time I have received only casual feedback from the community. While most of that feedback was very positive and encouraging, it did not provide a balanced evaluation of my work. Furthermore, I have made assumptions, over the years, about my practice and its reception, but these have never been formally recorded or tested. I resolved, therefore to ask members of my parish community about their reception experience. The focus group method of qualitative research was the most direct way to get the kind of feedback I needed. My primary aim was to gauge the efficacy of my liturgical art practice, but I soon realised the creative potential of the focus group process, namely it created the environment for new ideas about my practice, to emerge from the community.

In the first two parts of this chapter, I outline my focus group methodology. Then I present the focus group report. This report contains the feedback from the community about my practice. However, the report is not meant to be a full evaluation of my practice, but more of a reflection which holds the data for such an evaluation. Consequently, I continue the evaluative task in Chapter 3.
A feminist approach to qualitative research

In *Feminisms and Models of Qualitative Research*, Virginia Olesen (1994) emphasised that there are many feminisms and many approaches to research, but the common factor among feminist researchers is an interest in social justice for women. My research, like my art, is not about women but it is for women. The transformation of systems and disciplines is how Olesen sees feminist research working for women (160-1, 168-9) and that is how I view my work as a liturgical artist. By ‘reworking the codes’ (Lynch 1996, 5), I hope to transform the liturgical context. In this sense, my feminist approach is more evident in my methodology than in the content of my artwork.  

Olesen identifies intersubjectivity as one of the major issues which have shaped feminist approaches (159). In my role of image-maker, I consider that my community and I co-create meaning. Similarly, the focus group experience at Mt Carmel was a process of shared meaning making. My role in it could never be that of mere observer, I was also an interpreter. While I was careful to allow the authentic voice of the participants to be heard, I did not accept any participant’s account as ‘the truth’. As Oleson states, experience requires interpretation (167).

Data collecting and analysing

In *Qualitative Researching* (1996) Jennifer Mason emphasises the flexibility of qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, methods. She maintains that

34 Read more about this in Part 4, Emerging Issues.
qualitative methods deal more effectively with data which has depth and complexity (62). These methods tolerate the use of a variety of data sources including people, conversations and visual material (35-6). She suggests that it is up to each researcher to identify a useful data source for their project and to discover how knowledge can be generated from such a source (39). The data source for my focus group research is the parish community at Mt Carmel, which is the primary 'audience' of my liturgical art. The ideas generated from this source set the agenda for the rest of this project.

Mason (128-9) suggests that most qualitative researchers use a combination of cross-sectional and holistic methods of data analysis and I have found this approach useful. In the cross-sectional type of analysis trends and patterns are identified across the entire focus group data set. In the holistic type of analysis specific issues are singled out for closer inspection.

The aim, according to the author, is to ‘produce social explanations which are generalizable\textsuperscript{35} in some way, or which have wider resonance’ (6). Mason clearly would be critical of the relativism of a postmodern approach in which everyone speaks for themselves and no one speaks for a cultural system (Olesen 1994, 164): if we can not generalise we can not make judgements nor address problems. For my project, generalising is an important task. I believe that the experience of liturgical art at Mt Carmel has enough common elements to make it relevant to the wider community of the church, especially in Australia.
The focus group method

For information about conducting the discussion groups, I relied on *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* by Richard A. Krueger (1994). Krueger’s description of how to begin the group discussion was useful (113-5) and I modelled my introduction on his four points: the welcome, the overview of the topic; the ground rules; and the first question. I found his rationale of the first question or opening gambit (114) convincing, but he uses it merely as an ice breaker while I make mine an integral part of the overall conversation.

Krueger gives some sound advice on constructing open-ended questions (57-70) and I used his model set of completion questions (61) as a starting point for my own set: I used sentences beginning with ‘I felt’, ‘I think’ and ‘I was surprised’, but I replaced ‘What got in the way’ with ‘I was disappointed by’. The inclusion of both feeling and thinking was particularly useful because it allowed for both affective and cognitive responses. Moreover, I found the completion questions restricted my influence as moderator and allowed the participants to speak.

Some aspects of Krueger’s approach are incompatible with my project. While he is sceptical about the objectivity of the moderator (103), he does not subscribe to the notion of intersubjectivity. This is understandable, since his is a commercial brief and this kind of shared meaning making is outside the

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35 Her italics.
scope of his methodology. Further, Krueger believes that every participant has ‘wisdom’ to impart regardless of education, experience or background (101). I agree with him, but he is a little too uncritical of this ‘wisdom’ which is formed and informed by social, historical and cultural factors. He does not acknowledge the need for interpretation. His is not a critical approach.

I agree with Krueger when he claims that the aim of focus group research is ‘enlightenment’, i.e. to ‘lift the level of understanding to a new plateau’ (135) and not simply to confirm preconceptions. In my research I not only want to verify my own ideas, but I want new information so I can move ahead in order to devise new practices.

Focus group discussions at Mt Carmel

The focus group discussions were primarily centred on the liturgical art at Mt Carmel for the year of Jubilee 2000 — as described and photographically recorded at the beginning of Chapter 1. The discussions were designed to elicit information about community’s reception of the work. Consequently, they were conducted during the season of Easter 2000 while the installation for that season was still in place and intact.

Membership

Twenty-five focus group participants were recruited from the parish of Mount Carmel and most of them were well known to me. Of the participants, two thirds were women and three quarters of these were middle-aged (35-60
years). Not surprisingly, the largest sub-group was middle-aged women who comprised nearly half the overall number. There was only one participant under 35 years of age. These figures reflect the nature of parish life at Mt Carmel, in which mature women figure strongly and young people are scarce. An overview of the membership of the groups is included in Appendix 1.

Recruitment procedures

There were only two selection criteria for the focus groups: the participants had to be adults, and active parishioners of Mt Carmel parish. I judged an adult to be a person of eighteen years or over and an active parishioner to be one who attends church regularly.

Since the annual parish assembly was held just after Easter, I used this occasion to distribute sixty invitation packages (Appendix 2) to parishioners. I tried to spread the packages evenly between men and women, and younger and older people; but, since I gave the participants a choice of meeting times, I knew that I would have little control over the nature of the groups with respect to gender and age.

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36 In Our Lady of Mt Carmel parish records in 2001, there were 200 people involved in ministry and 69% of these were women. There were no statistics concerning the age of the ministry group; but from evidence of my own experience, and after consulting with parish staff, it was obvious that (a) most of the women involved in ministry were middle aged and (b) there were very few young people involved.
Meeting procedures

The meetings were held at my house, which was conveniently situated in the parish, i.e. not far from the church. I wanted the atmosphere to be comfortable and homey so that the participants would be at their ease and able to enjoy the discussions.

Each group met once for ninety minutes and I acted as moderator. My aim was to create a relaxed environment while trying to keep the discussions relevant. There was a definite structure (Appendix 3), none-the-less the process was flexible so that I could take advantage of unique opportunities which arose in each group. The discussions were divided into three main parts: the opening gambit, four completion questions and five general questions. Each of these is discussed in detail in the focus group report below.

Follow up procedures

In line with feminist concerns, I wanted the participants to benefit from their participation in my research project. To this end, I assured the participants that I would share my findings with them and about a month after the meetings I sent a report with a response sheet (Appendix 4) to each participant. In the report, my first priority was to make an accurate record of the discussions. I was aware, however, that interpretation of the material was inevitable. Consequently, my purpose in sending the response sheet was to gauge how accurately the material had been recorded and interpreted. In this
way the participants, who were the source of the data, were also encouraged to take part in the analysis of that data. Only six of the participants responded and they all said that the report was a true representation of the discussions. They were not expansive in their comments but seemed pleased with the focus group process and the report.

Focus group report

This report is not the same as that sent to the participants. The content is substantially the same, with the addition of some clarifying details and interpretive comments, but the style is quite different in that it conforms to the report writing conventions used by sociologists. The most obvious difference here is the use of pseudonyms for the participants; but, more importantly, I have tried to be more specific about who and how many participants expressed an opinion.

Section A: Opening Gambit

I asked the participants to reflect back over the years and to identify their most memorable experience of liturgical art. I tried to make this part of the discussion brief and it usually lasted about fifteen minutes. Although the primary purpose of this question was to break the ice, I was hoping that this

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37 For a transcript of the Group 4 discussion see Appendix 5.

38 Here let me acknowledge the assistance of Dr Angela Coco, of the Sociology department of the University of Queensland, who gave me invaluable advice about the conventions of sociology reports. Further, Angela gave me some sound advice and encouragement from her experience as a feminist researcher.
might be a quick way to gauge some characteristics of the reception experience of the community and of successful liturgical installations.

I was interested to note if any particular liturgical installation emerged as a favourite, but there were many spoken of and none stood out as clear favourite. Four major issues emerged here, however: the importance of immediacy, interactivity and colour in the reception experience, and the relationship between the artwork and the liturgy.

Heather recalled: ‘walking in [to the church] and thinking: wow, look at this!’ The sensation persisted long enough for her to make the connection between the image and its meaning: ‘it just stayed with me and I thought it was just Palm Sunday.’ It was Betty, later in the discussion, who coined the phrase the ‘wow factor’, which so succinctly expressed the immediacy of the reception experience. For Margot, the interactivity of the pyramid assemblage was a challenge ‘to participate’ and ‘the participation fostered ownership of the artwork in the community.’ Colour made a durable impression on Mandy: ‘I can still see the vibrant colours.’ Joyce saw a connection between colour and liturgical meaning: ‘I love the colour and I love the way that they reflect … the liturgical seasons.’ These issues surfaced many times in the subsequent discussions.

**Section B: Completion questions**

The discussion in this section was focused on the artwork for the year of Jubilee 2000. I gave each participant a sheet on which there were four
completion questions regarding their feelings, thoughts, surprises and disappointments about the work. They had about twenty minutes to ponder on their answers and to write notes on the sheets. The sheets were collected later and proved to be a treasure trove of information.³⁹

There were three advantages in using written responses. First, this form of data was helpful when I was transcribing and interpreting the taped conversations. Second, I occasionally found useful comments or turns of phrase in this written material that did not emerge in the discussions. Third, filling in the sheet allowed the participants time to gather their thoughts before sharing their ideas with the group. The data from the conversations and the written comments from this section proved to be the most fruitful part of the focus group exercise.

1. When I looked at the liturgical art I felt …

There was some confusion among participants about the difference between ‘felt’ and ‘thought’ and frequently the comments overlapped from one category to the other.⁴⁰ There were, however, more comments about feelings than thoughts, for example the term ‘uplifted’ was used seven times by six

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³⁹ The information on the sheets was in note form. Consequently, quotes from this source may seem a little stilted.

⁴⁰ For this reason I used some material from this section for the next section where I judged it to be more relevant.
participants in this part of the discussion. The following words were used also: ‘inspired’, ‘wonder’, ‘stimulated’, ‘enjoy’, ‘alive’, ‘patriotic’, ‘celebration’ and ‘hopefulness’. The last two words were used by Carol when she described how the pyramid assemblage drew her into participation and out of her self absorption:

I found that whole thing was helping me to work through …my alienation with my dreams, some holding back, some desire for a more whole hearted religious response. A sense of celebration — do you want to come with us — join in … a searching out and a hopefulness… so I found it interesting and challenging in that way. It interfered with my alienation response.

The importance of the emotional impact of colour emerged. Kath was taken up by a ‘flood of feeling about the colours.’ Mandy was ‘excited by the colours, sometimes … they were so vibrant they leapt out at you.’ Jan described how the ‘vibrancy’ of the colour ‘hit me and gave me a sense of Jubilee.’

In these comments it is clear that ‘seeing’ evoked emotions which could only be described in terms of sensations. Indeed, emotional and sensual responses seemed to be closely related. The clearest example is Amy’s comment:

41 ‘Uplifted’ was used by two women from group 1, two women from group 2, one man from group 3 and another from group 4.

42 This refers to the Australian flavour of the Jubilee imagery, which was mentioned a few times in this section.

43 For ‘dreams’ also read ‘ideals’ — Carol was referring to the texts which were printed on each pyramid (figs. 3a-c).
Chapter Two: Reflecting on the Reception Experience

My feelings were that when I would enter the church I would immediately say: Wow! And then I would go and feel everything and … just see everything that was in there and I’d pat it.

2. When I looked at the liturgical art I thought …

Sam was the only participant who claimed that his predominant response to the artwork was intellectual: he was more aware of the ‘the theology of the artwork — the ideas in it rather than as art.’ There were, however, two participants whose responses show that their initial response, at least, was intellectual. Jim’s comments (here and later in the discussion) showed philosophical interests in art and liturgy and he was inclined to be speculative. He wrote ‘I suppose my questioning, and the fact that the works make you question) draws me into the meaning (both in terms of the season and what the artist is trying to convey) of the pieces.’ Katrina was more interested in how the artwork affected her and the parish community. She focused on the experiential aspects of her reception of the work:

Sort of got me thinking immediately — soon as I walked in and sat down — I start thinking about my faith and what this means to me … in relation to the season that we are in. And then I start — It’s just my train of thought as I’m looking at it — what’s everybody else in the church thinking about when they’re looking at this?

For most others, the emotional and sensual responses seemed to be strongest. Jack acknowledged that he was a ‘sort of emotions person … maybe I don’t think enough about it — I know whether I like it or I don’t but I don’t know whether it’s good art or bad art’. Carol blamed her ignorance of the principles of art for her predominantly emotional response to it: ‘I don’t
relate to art with enough analytical skill so with me it’s purely an emotional response.’ The converse did not apply, however, to Jan, Sue, Margot, Betty and Joyce, whose responses were predominantly emotional and sensual, but who have some understanding or experience of art.  

For some, an initial emotional or sensual response led to reflection. Amy described how ‘you could just become overawed by the beauty’, but she said ‘the art is more than that, it really … makes me, it allows me, to become reflective too.’ Even an ‘emotions person’ like Jack admitted that he ‘spent hours over the Sundays thinking … trying to see what this art should be telling me.’ Just as Sam found the aesthetic quality of the artwork a mystery, the meaning aspect was a stumbling block for Jack. In Margot’s response it is evident that thinking and feeling sometimes overlapped inextricably: ‘I felt inspired by the obvious depth to the art pieces … I also felt hungry to know more, talk more about the inspiration and message intended/expressed by the art.’

During this part of the discussion with Group 3, it became obvious to me that the emotional responses were most prevalent and I asked: ‘I wonder how many people respond emotionally rather than analytically or vice versa?’ Amy gave a telling answer:

'It’s one of those things like the yolk and the white of an egg, you can’t separate them out and still have an egg: the two are integral to each other… you need that intellectual approach or else it won’t sustain the

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44 Jan is a serious student of ceramics, Sue has a daughter who studied art, Margot has studied art at university level and Betty is an interior designer.
emotions and vice versa: if it doesn’t have that emotional response it won’t sustain the theology of it either.

There were three ways in which the artwork evoked thinking responses. First, the artwork could issue a challenge to search for meaning. Both Bill and Jim found the meaning a challenge. The speculative Jim had to ‘work it out’ and having discovered the meaning, which he called ‘the intent’, he found that the meaning itself often held a challenge. Bill’s task was more practical: ‘to focus on the ideas being expressed and relate them to the other aspects of the liturgy’. Heather was less objective: ‘It always challenges me to be aware of why I’m there and to really think about what’s going on.’

Second, it could trigger a train of thought, an association of ideas or a memory. During Advent, Eileen, a parish organist, noticed relationships between the liturgical artwork and the music: ‘the artwork honed in on the words of what we had been practising, you know especially ‘Creator of the Stars of Night’, that hit me really very clearly.’ When Katrina looked at the Lenten altar cloth, it reminded her of ‘the Sea of Hands’ she had seen in Canberra.

Third, meaning could be found in the relationship between the artwork and the participant’s personal faith journey. Amy spoke about the work evoking a spiritual experience: ‘it stimulates me in a way, reaching to God, and yet it’s reflective in that it seems to bring me into the picture and I become part of it.’
Katrina described how the work drew her into a more intense experience of community:

… I am sitting there knowing that I’m probably thinking and musing upon ideas surrounding my faith and the people I worship [with], and the same as everybody else is doing at the same time and that gives me a feeling of us all drawing together.

3. I was surprised by …

The participants were mostly surprised by the power of the images and the responses that they drew from themselves and others in the community. Katrina described the immediate and lingering effects that the work had on her: ‘I was surprised by the immediacy of my response to your work and how every time I come back it means something different … sometimes you just can’t take your eyes off it.’ Jan was surprised at her interest in colour; ‘because’, she said, ‘I’m not a colour person … I felt joy and alive and hopeful.’

Pam spoke of the flood figures assemblage as if it were animated: ‘It seemed to really reach right into the congregation … It really moves me, those hands especially the ones that flow out of the tank.’

The pyramid assemblage evoked many comments here. Sam was taken aback when he first saw them: ‘I remember walking down the drive and seeing these things and wondering what they were and I think I was surprised because they were so big and so public.’ I recall that, on the first Sunday of Lent, Sam told me that he thought the pyramids were an open invitation to
vandals. Even so, Sam wrote in his notes that ‘seen from Cavendish Rd. [the pyramids] made a public statement to all who passed by.’ He was not the only participant who was fearful of the possible consequences of the assemblage: Jan said that the fact that the pyramids ‘were left alone and respected by people … is something special.’

The interactive and inclusive nature of the assemblage impressed many participants, and most were favourably disposed to the work. Mandy was ‘surprised by the way people responded to writing on the pyramids’ and she added ‘you could hardly get near them sometimes there were so many people anxious to write their thoughts.’ She also noted that the pyramids ‘were very interactive symbols for children and adults.’ Concern for the younger members of the parish was evident on a number of occasions, probably because most of the participants were parents and a number of them had young children.

The placement and scale of the whole installation affected people differently. Anne was delighted with ‘the breadth of the artistic experience from the very front of the church extending to the foyer’. Sue, however, was ‘overwhelmed by the visual input’ and, she wondered, ‘is there too much going on?’

Some participants were surprised by the quality of the work and my skill as an artist. Margot said she ‘was surprised by the consistent, professional quality of the art.’ She said this gave her ‘hope for the creative arts within the church, particularly on the local level.’ Jim said he was impressed by ‘how simple
many of the pieces are yet effective.’ Matt was surprised that I ‘never run out of ideas.’ Betty commented that my ‘creative talent is really very extensive.’

During the focus group research process one of my surprises was how curious the participants were about the artwork. They often asked me questions about my motivation and techniques and it was sometimes difficult to keep the discussion on track. While I tried to limit my own contributions to the discussion, I felt obliged to respond their queries. I wanted the discussions to be a satisfying experience for the participants.

4. I was disappointed by …

The need for information about the imagery arose quite frequently partly because participants were intrigued by the work but also because they needed help with interpretation. Margot said she would ‘love to hear more about the inspiration behind the art, hear sharings about how they touch people, and learn more about the artist and the artwork.’ May felt the ‘need for explanation … of the symbols in order to appreciate their full value’ and she suggested using the newsletter for this purpose. Mandy was disappointed with her own lack of perception: ‘I had missed seeing the stars on the forecourt until Fr Wayne drew our attention to them at Easter … and I think: Oh, I’ve sat there for weeks and never saw that’ [her voice expressed her frustration]. Sometimes she needed others to show her meaning: ‘there’s something deeper there, I’ve taken it to a certain level or referred it to myself, which I suppose is OK for my own journey, and that’s fine for me, but then I think: oh, I’m glad someone explained that to me.’
The participants were generally very positive about the work, but they noticed some negative attitudes in the community. Amy suggested that ‘antagonistic’ attitudes arose from ignorance and that ‘the mouth goes before the brain, and they don’t stop to take a close look at it.’ Bill, who (above) said that he felt challenged ‘to focus on the ideas’ in the work, was disappointed by those who ‘take the liturgical art for granted’ and do ‘not attempt to reflect on the meaning and significance.’

The concern for ‘strangers’ emerged as a significant issue in this section, but also across the entire discussion. Tanya, who helped organise the liturgies for the children’s sacramental program, noticed that some of the parents involved were not regular churchgoers. They had not been to Mt Carmel during the season to see the installation unfolding and, therefore, had little understanding of the imagery. She said that ‘many of the first communicants’ and confirmants’ families did not appreciate the setting’ and this was evident from the noisy and distracted tone of the liturgies.

For Sue, it was personal: she returned to the parish after a long stay abroad and she explained that ‘for a new person coming in there was no explanation of the symbolism and I don’t know where to start.’ Apparently, Sue felt like a ‘stranger’ in her own community.

Concern for the young people of our parish made Matt, the father of two teenage children, uncomfortable with the latitude that the artwork allowed the
viewer. He was worried that there was no unified theology in the work and, therefore, no clear guidelines for living. ‘The idiosyncratic nature of contemporary art can lead people off in different directions so that we are not coming to the same place’ he said.

I found this a compelling issue and I asked the participants in Matt’s group if there was ‘any binding factor.’ Joyce pointed to the relationship between the artwork and ‘the liturgy, the Word’ and Amy enlarged on the theme:

… you may be using Australian images, but because it is based on the Word of God and our theology that … can give it its unifying message … that’s what unifies it, its foundation. For liturgical art to be effective, to be appreciated, it really needs that foundation.

Section C: General questions

The five questions in this section are also focused on the artwork for the year of Jubilee 2000. These questions are more general in the sense that I am not asking for reflections on the participant’s reception so much as opinions about what effect the artwork had on the celebrating space, the liturgy and the community. The first question is different, however, it asks about the influence of gender on my practice. I did not tell the participants beforehand that my theoretical and practical methodologies were feminist. I considered informing them in the initial information package, but thought better of it when I realised how much explaining it would require. I was not sure what would be the reaction to this issue, but I was hoping to gauge the community’s awareness of my feminist approach.
1. How does my being a woman affect the liturgical art I make?

Overall there was little enthusiasm for this question. Most people did not think the gender of the artist was an issue. The idea was a surprise to Heather who said ‘I heard you say that before and I thought, huh? It never occurred to me at all.’ Tanya inferred that it was the nature of the individual rather than their gender that was significant: ‘It is not because you are a woman, but because you are this particular woman and because you are sure of your abilities and dare to share you talent with the community.’ Similarly, Sam found that ‘who you are’ is more relevant than gender in this instance. He thought that gender was ‘not a big deal’ because ‘women are in tune with things and men are as well’.

In Group 4, the discussion was so meagre that I did not even bother to record it except to say the participants thought it was a non-issue. In each of the other three groups at least one participant described the difference between masculine and feminine art in terms of traditional prejudices but it seemed obvious to me there was no serious commitment to these ideas. Don suggested that ‘men are not as free to express from the heart as women are.’ Pam said tentatively that ‘women are perhaps more creative.’

Both Joyce and Jim suggested that, if anything, my artwork fits a masculine rather than a feminine stereotype. Joyce was only half-serious:

*If you want to be picky about it you’ve got quite a masculine technique … its very precise, very well executed and to me its not dainty — very definite and structured. To me, I wonder, when you’re lugging some of*
Chapter Two: Reflecting on the Reception Experience

*those things around, where you get the strength to do it. That’s engineering the way you hoist those things up.*

For Joyce, a retired teacher who is a hobby painter, it would seem that male art is characteristically professional, strong, structured and physical, and female art is amateur and ‘dainty.’ Knowing Joyce, I imagine she would spurn such generalisations, however.

The speculative Jim was more serious:

> Quite often [the liturgical art] is very symbolic and I would walk in and say a male has done this … some churches look pretty rather than challenging … I suppose because of conditioning you expect a woman to do something decorative and you would expect a man to challenge you.

I think Jim was well aware that these stereotypes were untenable in reality. When seen in the light of experience, the influence of gender on liturgical art seemed immaterial. Mandy reflected on her experience:

> No, it’s the gift for me rather than the gender because I had an uncle who did beautiful sewing and I think of a lot of interior designers who are male. We had a man come and help me with my home and he just created lovely things …

By the end of the discussion I had to agree with the participants that gender made no definable difference to my practice. I was feeling despondent at this stage and wondering why this issue seemed so irrelevant to the participants and why they could not identify my work as feminist. Sue asked me if I
perceive what I do as ‘women’s art’ and my answer was more to the point than I would have expected:

… I’m writing my thesis from a feminist perspective. I’m trying to formulate a theory and a practice out of feminist principles and some of those principles I consciously put into my work. I was curious to see if other people would notice.

Here I was referring to feminist ideology and methodology and, on reflection, I realised that these, rather than gender, shaped my practice. I also realised that those aspects of my work which demonstrate feminist principles were well and truly acknowledge by the participants in other parts of the discussion.

The issue of subjectivity and difference was reflected on in terms of the relationship between individual interpretations and the shared liturgical meanings in the work. The experience of pleasure was frequently reported, the notion of responsibility arose later in the discussion. Judging by the number of personal associations that the artwork evoked, there was never any doubt that the participants saw a connection between the liturgical images and the realities of their everyday lives. The participants acknowledged the value of the inclusive and interactive nature of the installations, especially with regard to the pyramids. They recognised the value of these principles but simply did not identify them as feminist, which was fair comment.

2. What effect did the artwork have on the liturgical space?

The placement and proximity of the artwork were significant issues for participants. Tanya described how the artworks ‘impinge on your space’ and
therefore could not be ignored. Margot said they were ‘near without being claustrophobic.’ Don was ‘fascinated by the figures on the floor of the sanctuary’ and he said that he ‘could almost imagine them flowing down among the people.’

Kath was the only participant who said the placement of artwork was problematic, but she got no support from others in Group 2, which is evident in the following interchanges:

Kath: \(\text{Where I sit, sometimes the hangings come down just a little too low.}\)

Mandy: \(\text{I don’t think it intrudes and obscures or confuses at all … it draws your attention to down the aisle [towards the sanctuary] … but I feel you use space well without it being overcrowded.}\)

Heather: \(\text{I agree; it’s not at all intrusive. You walk into the church and you can see that it is definitely a church. The way you put it, it enhances.}\)

Pam: \(\text{And it says something about the liturgy … it is part of the liturgy to me.}\)

Members of Group 4 were particularly interested in how liturgical art enhanced and unified the celebrating space and these issues arose in the following interchanges:

Katrina: \(\text{I think it makes what is sometimes a drab, uninviting space a place where you want to … spend time surrounded by visual items that are speaking to you and reminding you constantly why you are there.}\)

Jan: \(\text{For me it’s a coldness; it can be empty.}\)

Bill: \(\text{Sometimes some of the elements of the art help to integrate what’s up front [in the sanctuary] with the congregational space.}\)
There was much agreement in the group at this last suggestion. Then I asked the group members to comment on the initiative of proclaiming the gospel from the podium, at the centre of the assembly space:

Paul:  *Well I think that’s something about using the whole space … the idea is that the whole lot is sacred space, not just up there [in the sanctuary]. It’s the incorporation of everything.*

Jan:  *And even outside, that makes a statement: it starts here!*  

Eileen:  *This is the welcoming.*  

Katrina:  *I think particularly for people who are new or people who are visiting that’s a very important space, out the front. That sort of says before you get in the door what we’re like…*  

Jan:  *The use of the whole church … I suppose it’s the use of the church rather than the artwork. Instead of the adoration of the cross on Good Friday way up in the sanctuary, the cross actually moves around and I think that to me always makes a very strong statement.*

The men’s comments focused on physical space and promoted the ideal of unity, which demanded that the remote and lofty sanctuary (in which the altar and ambo reside and where most of the liturgical action usually takes place) become part of their own space, i.e. the assembly space. The women, however, were more interested in the ambience and its effects on the community. It was typical of Katrina that she wanted Mt Carmel to be an inviting place and she made a direct connection between the artwork and the community’s role of welcoming strangers, i.e. outreach.
Chapter Two: Reflecting on the Reception Experience

3. What effect did the artwork have on the liturgy?

The artwork was invariably understood to be an integral part of the liturgy. Tanya stated that the artwork ‘does not have a role of its own, it serves the liturgy’. Margot saw it as ‘another layer of the liturgy, like music’ and she added ‘the liturgy would not be the same full experience without it.’ Similarly Heather said ‘if the artwork wasn’t there I don’t think the liturgy would speak to me as powerfully.’

Jim became quite philosophical when he outlined two models of liturgical art and described the tension between them:

I can see why beauty is really important because it says something about God; however, good liturgy should speak out of the experience of the community and some way transform it and send it back into the community. Now my question there is: What function does the art serve, does it serve a beauty function — or is it supposed to speak to us of our own experience? … To what extent does the artwork reflect the experience of this community and how does it transform it?

In one model the ‘beauty’ of the art reflects God to the community. In the other model art acts as an expression of the experience of the community, but it does not merely reflect this experience, it transforms it. A little later in the discussion Jim spoke about the pyramid assemblage and the pyramid banners which he called ‘strips’:

Yes I found that more involving and people were writing their concerns in some way outside and then that was reflected in the strips. Yes it says something, well somebody feels this quite strongly and wrote it, and I think that sort of thing somehow brings us, and our concerns, more into the worshiping space.
After listening to Jim, Pam favoured the ‘experience’ model of liturgical art:

‘I sometimes go to the cathedral … it’s a beautiful space, but … it’s of God, you know a holy of holies; but it doesn’t really speak about the people. There is not the message in it like there is in the hands [on the altar cloth] at Mt Carmel.’

The nature and level of community participation in the liturgy became a major issue for members of Group 2 and Group 4 when they discussed question five later in this section.

4. What effect did the artwork have on the community?

In Group 4, the interactive and inclusive nature of the pyramid assemblage were applauded. Katrina said ‘there was a pretty strong engagement, from what I saw, throughout the seasons we’ve just had’ and Paul affirmed that ‘it wasn’t just the young people or the old people, it was a real mixture of people’ who were involved.

Katrina saw the pyramid experience as community building for others and for herself:

The very fact that the art is interactive has given whoever has written on there the opportunity to express where they’re at, to bring that with them to their faith community, to say: this is me and this is where I’m at; these are the things that are important to me; and I’ve brought that here as part of me to share with everybody…

I was just interested to read the thoughts of other people in our parish family. Things that were important to them that I didn’t know were that important to them. I enjoyed reading that and being part of that. I
thought that that’s another way you can draw the community together; because so many of these beliefs and dreams we have in common and we’ve never really got the opportunity to talk about these things.

It was apparent, across the whole discussion and in all the groups, that the participants were aware of the efficacy of the artwork. Only Don, however, attributed responsibility to the artist for the effects of the work. He called my role in the community ‘prophetic’ and spoke about the power of images, their influence over us and how we need to be responsible in our use of them. I was surprised that these issues were not more widely discussed. The other participants focused firmly on the responsibility of the viewer. This was particularly evident in Group 4.

While wanting a rich experience for herself, Eileen realised that others would ‘respond at their own level’ according to the development of ‘their own faith and their own spirituality.’ She acknowledged the inevitability that some will ‘be confused and others will be looking for more’ but she did not expect the liturgical artist to be able to ‘meet everyone’s need all the time.’ Paul affirmed that people were not ‘excluded’ when they were out of their depth: ‘they will get out of it from what level they are at.’ This idea arose again in the discussion of the next question.

5. Imagine that a new artist was coming into the community and that person asked you for advice — what would you say?
My aims for this question were similar to that for the Opening Gambit. In that instance I was looking for information about what makes an installation
successful. Here, however, I was focusing on the artist and looking for information about a successful practice of liturgical art.

Pam was concerned that community participation was stifled by the professionalism of the parish liturgists and the following lively discussion ensued in Group 2:

**Pam:** I suppose I have a problem with Mt Carmel in a sense that not a lot of people are involved … and probably we have a standard which I know is magnificent not only in liturgical art, but in all sorts of things. That deters some people from wanting to, or they could never keep up, you know. And when you talk about liturgy … it’s got to be an expression of the whole community … even Easter Saturday night when I got up to leave the church someone … walked beside me and said: ‘Andrew Lloyd-Webber eat your heart out’ [there was much laughter in the group]… On the one hand I think that was a tremendous compliment to the talent, on the other hand that is also a problem in that it was a magnificent performance.

**Jim:** I think [Pam’s] right. I’m sort of torn a little bit at Mt Carmel in that sense that we do a lot for the community and I don’t know if that’s what it is about … the emphasis is on all these people and how well we are doing all these things rather than what we are celebrating.

**Sue:** The point that you are making is exactly how I feel walking back into the Easter celebrations and I honestly thought — this is a production … the stage had been set and bring on the jugglers … do we need such a high standard of performance?

Mandy suggested that the solution was to encourage the new liturgical artist to ‘collaborate … as much as possible … perhaps we could encourage a team approach and involve more people.’ Sue acknowledged that the focus group process itself was a way of ‘involving a range of people.’
I was intrigued by the conversation in Group 2 and I wanted to see if others shared the concern that the liturgy at Mt Carmel was a performance by experts rather than an expression of the community. Consequently, I introduced the topic to the members of Group 4 with the following results:

Eileen:  *It is typical of Mt Carmel that we have done everything so good for so long. I know that when I came there and I sat in those pews for nine months knowing that I could play the organ, and the music was so good, I really didn’t think I could measure up … And I think with our Easter and Christmas liturgies, and I don’t mean just the artwork, but the whole thing together, is getting on to performance level.*

Katrina: *Well that was my impression and, to be perfectly honest, I didn’t go to the Easter Vigil … and I didn’t go to the Christmas Vigil because the last two I’ve been to for those seasons I’ve thought: where’s the mass in all this? No reflection on the liturgical art, but the whole thing coming together was like a grand performance.*

Bill:  *Yeah — I wasn’t going to go this year, but …*

Eileen:  *A lot of that may come from the fact that we do have very, very talented people.*

Jan:  *I really detest that [idea of] performance. Why does the community have this sense?*

Eileen:  *But if you didn’t practice and you [lower you standards] …*

Katrina:  *No you can’t do that.*

Two participants were keen to reassure me that the artwork was not the cause of the problem. Bill thought the artwork was not ‘overdone’ and the other members of the group agreed with him including Eileen who said:
Jenny’s artwork is tasteful and it is liturgical. It is not art, it is liturgical. It is more than ‘art and environment’ it is reaching into the hearts of people and challenging them. I think it’s tasteful and professional …

Neither Group 2 nor Group 4 reached a satisfactory conclusion about the tension between professionalism and community involvement, but they merely confronted a chronic liturgical issue, which not only involved the parish, but also touched them personally. Despite Bill and Eileen’s assurances, I recognised that this issue also had implications for my practice of liturgical art.

Then I raised the issue of responsibility again and participants reacted guardedly:

Paul: It is liturgical art; it’s not just a good artist.

Jan: Spirituality

Paul: It’s got to have that spiritual connection.

Jenny: That means that a liturgical artist is responsible for those things as well. Do you see that as being responsible - to be reflective? [My question was directed to the whole group]

Katrina: I don’t see it as being a responsibility. I see it as an end product of the gift that the artist gives us. I don’t think the artist has to accept responsibility for other people’s spirituality [there was general agreement in the group].

Jenny: Do you reckon the artwork wouldn’t ‘work’ if the artist wasn’t the sort of person who wasn’t [spiritually mature]? [There was general agreement in the group]

45 This term was coined by the document Environment and Art in Catholic Worship (1978).
Katrina: *Because all you would get then is the same response you’d get from somebody in the community who was at the very beginning or who hadn’t even started on a spiritual journey. All you would get then would be art and colour and that’s it. That’s a starting point, but for a lot of the rest of the community who are at different levels of spiritual development they’re looking for more, much more.*

According to these participants, liturgical art had a formative influence on the community. Further, it was clear that they took for granted the ministry status of liturgical art:

Eileen: *… people bring their own gifts in their own way … Not all our ministers do a great job, but we accept it because they do their best. I think that’s what community is all about it’s accepting that there is good, there is bad, there is mediocre in every aspect, and that’s all right. Personally I would like something in art that would still challenge me. I would hate to go back [to art which has no depth or levels of meaning] … We’ve been brought this far it would be a shame to go back to…*

Jenny: *Change happens.*

Paul: *Change happens and the new artist taking over … might decide well, I’ll do it this way. But then it’s up to the community … to appreciate that that person might have their own gift in doing it in their way. But it would also be a hard act to follow!*

Jan: *… I don’t think you can expect anyone to fill someone else’s shoes … be informed, work with the people they have to, and be in tune with the needs of the community. If they do all that they [will be right] … as a community we have to accept what people do in ministry. None of us knows what situations are going on in their lives most of the time.*
These participants acknowledged the importance of allowing a new liturgical artist to shape their ministry according to their talents and the exigencies of their life. Because they were aware of the realities of parish life, they were not inclined to be idealistic about ministry. None-the-less, it is evident they have experienced liturgical art as a ‘gift’ with the potential to be ‘much more’.

Conclusion
The main work of the focus group report is to record what the community said in the course of the discussions. Consequently, in this chapter I do not use the focus group material to evaluate my practice - although evaluative comments arise - and I keep interpretive comments to a minimum. The interesting tasks, which are (a) analysing the focus group data and (b) evaluating my practice in the light of this feedback from the community, belong to the next chapter. However, before I go further I need to make a few general observations about the material of the focus group report.

There are basically two types of recurring issues concerning liturgical art which surface in this focus group data. The first type I will call formalist which refers primarily to the objective form of the work, for example the tactile nature of its interactivity, its shape, texture, colour, and above all its beauty. These issues arise from a reception experience which is primarily sensual and emotional.

The second type of recurring issues I will call conceptualist. These are primarily content issues about the meaning and purpose of the work, for
example its liturgical integration and how images express theological meaning. These issues arise from a reception experience which is primarily rational and analytical.

Formalist and conceptualist are terms which relate to opposing approaches to art practice in the artworld. I maintain that these approaches are not mutually exclusive and that the concerns and interests of both intersect. Similarly, in this focus group material I can see that there are not clear lines of demarcation between reception experiences which are formalist and those which are conceptualist.

However, the formalist type clearly dominates in this research. I was surprised at the number of times that the term beauty was mentioned. Colour was also frequently mentioned and was often cited as the source of beauty. Initial reactions to the work were more often than not sensual and affective, as in the ‘wow factor’.

Later in this project I align formalist concerns with an aesthetic approach to theology and conceptualist concerns with a prophetic approach to theology. Towards the end of my project I describe and model a way of thinking about and making liturgical art which is both aesthetic and prophetic. In the meantime, I explore the focus group more analytically in the next chapter when I use the feedback from the community to evaluate the working principles which have emerged from my practice of liturgical art over the last decade.
CHAPTER 3:
EVALUATING LITURGICAL ART IN LIGHT OF
THE RECEPTION EXPERIENCE

My purpose in this chapter is to use the focus group data to evaluate my practice of liturgical art. I shape the evaluation around seven points. They originally evolved out of my experience of making liturgical art at Mt Carmel long before my serious engagement with theory and long before I conceived the idea of writing this thesis. However, these practical principles form the nucleus of the theoretical issues which I outlined in Chapter 1 and, consequently, many interrelationships are evident. Now, true to my pragmatist bent, I need to check the validity of these working principles in light of the feedback from the community.

In order to ground this discussion in practice, I use the year of Jubilee installations as reference points. Therefore I have a three-way discussion taking place in this chapter: the feedback from the community (focus group data) is in critical dialogue with my practice and my embryo theory of liturgical art. It is from this process of evaluation that the main relevant issues arise which provide the agenda for the rest of this project.

A feminist practice of liturgical art: inclusive and holistic

The very name ‘liturgical art’ implies that my practice is a purpose driven genre. Its main purpose is to facilitate greater participation in the liturgy by the assembly. Further, art can enhance the assembly’s experience of liturgy by
helping to make it relevant, enjoyable, thought provoking and spiritually enriching. For a practice of liturgical art to be feminist, it requires inclusive and holistic approaches.

Inclusive and holistic approaches are not compatible with dualism, a system of thought which divides things into categories of opposites where one is valued over the other, for example the mind over the body. Further, dualism creates hierarchies in which ‘power over’ is the norm.

Inclusive approaches allow for the sharing of responsibility. This means that I look for ways to invite community interaction with the work in the hope that no individual or group is marginalised. Further, it means that the community takes an active role in the meaning making process. Feminist research concerning subjectivity and difference supplies a theoretical background for this issue with regard to the tension between the interpretive authority of individuals and the need for shared meanings and values within the liturgical community.

By ‘holistic’, I refer to those approaches which assume relationships between things rather than separations. Using holistic approaches means devising images which reflect the interdependent relationship of the various aspects of human experience including the sensual, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. Further, it involves images which make connections between our everyday experience and the ritual expression of our relationship with God through liturgy. John Dewey’s pragmatic aesthetics of experience and Margaret Miles’
theology of images and embodiment give me a theoretical/theological basis for a holistic approach to liturgical art.

Over the years, I have identified seven principles which underpin my feminist practice of liturgical art. These include the production of artwork which: (1) is integrated into the action of the liturgy; (2) is planned, made and interpreted collaboratively; (3) is interactive; (4) evokes responses from the community; (5) is life-relevant and life-enhancing; (6) defines the celebrating space in an inclusive way; and (7) reaches out beyond the parish community.

1. Integration of art and liturgy

Art is an integral part of the liturgy when its form and content reflect and interact with the form and content of the liturgy and its seasons. Liturgical art is at the service of the liturgy, it is a ministry. Its tasks are to enrich the experience of liturgy, to focus attention on what is happening and to create a sense of continuity within seasons and across the liturgical year.

In my description of the year of Jubilee installations in Chapter 1, I indicated some of the ways in which the images emerged from the fabric of the seasonal liturgies. I showed how, during Lent, the flood figures assemblage reflected the paradoxical nature of the rainbow covenant and how the cross and the rainbow were woven together at Easter. I also described how the rainbow image was used to link together the two major seasons of the year.
It is usual for the liturgy to shape the artwork, but the pyramid assemblage is one example of how the images can shape the action of the liturgy. Every Sunday during Lent, the community stood among the pyramids for the gathering rite. Then on the Monday of Holy Week, comments from the pyramids were woven into the text of the Reconciliation liturgy. These comments were not mere add-ons, but influenced the content and the tone of the liturgy.

In Group 4, the participants identified the role of art as ministry when they said that it was not just ‘art and colour’ it was ‘liturgical art’ and that to perform its ministry function it needed a ‘spiritual connection’. They were saying that good technique was not enough, for art to be liturgical it had to have content which was directly related to its context.

In the other groups, the participants made it clear that art was an integral part of the liturgy. They said that it ‘does not have a role of its own, it serves the liturgy’, it is ‘part of’, a ‘layer of’ and a ‘natural extension of’ worship. Further, the artwork is ‘a means to assist our prayer-life’ by directing our attention to what is happening and by animating the ‘atmosphere’. Mandy was aware of my role as artist and speculated accurately about my aims: ‘I thought Jenny is portraying something here, that she wants to capture our attention, that she wants to direct us toward one of the themes [of the liturgy]’.
Two participants of Group 2 noticed how the artwork marks the shift of focus within the seasons and, at the same time, maintains a sense of continuity. Mandy, again conscious of my role as artist, said:

*I know you did the artwork in Advent and then Christmas so I realise that one flowed into the other and you added over and above. We were preparing and now here we were actually celebrating and I thought God has entered our world!*

Jim referred to a similar movement leading to the paschal season: ‘*I like the way [the artwork] flows from the season into the celebration: Lent to Easter*.’ Like Mandy, Jim recognised that this was done intentionally: ‘*There is a certain continuity which is done very carefully.*’

None of the participants, however, mentioned the links in the imagery that I had deliberately set up to make connections between Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter. The connections across the liturgical year were either not noticeable or not important to them and I suspect the former. Here is a case in point of the ‘*need for explanation*’ for which the participants called.

**Time and meaning**

Time is important for liturgy and its reception. The cycle of seasons in the church’s year traces the sequence of the paschal mystery. Advent/Christmas celebrates the Incarnation, God made flesh in the birth of Jesus. Lent/Easter celebrates redemption of creation in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Ordinary time celebrates the life and work of Jesus and our other religious role models, the saints. The liturgical year is a unified cycle and the climax of the cycle is the great Triduum: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil.
The importance of time for liturgical art and its reception emerged unexpectedly from the focus group discussions. The participants often referred to the time they spent looking at the artwork. Mandy described her search for meaning: ‘I kept looking for a long time and thinking.’ Amy said she found it ‘intriguing’ and ‘needed time to take it all in’. Bill said the meaning ‘slowly sinks in, it takes me while.’ When I asked him how long it took he replied ‘a couple of months and talking to people.’ Both Katrina and Anne described how a variety of meanings emerged over time. Katrina described how ‘every time I come back it means something different.’ Anne said ‘every time I go there I notice something different that I haven’t noticed before … I noticed the floor the other day.’

The reception of liturgical artworks happens all in good time: meaning is discerned in the many moments of ‘seeing’ which happen over the duration of liturgical seasons. The initial response to the artwork is important, but it is in the extended exposure to the images that meaning takes shape in the imagination, and shapes the experience of, the community.

2. Collaboration

In its production and reception, the liturgy is a cooperative enterprise. At Mt Carmel, the responsibility for planning, making and interpreting liturgical art is

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46 Anne was referring to the flood figures assemblage. Because of its placement some parishioners did not notice it at all – or, like Anne discovered it by accident.

47 By ‘imagination’ I mean the creative power of the mind.
shared (in varying degrees according to the needs of the time) under my stewardship. My job is to make the most of the considerable opportunities which collaboration provides, for example, fostering a sense of community ownership of the work. Using a collaborative approach makes nonsense of traditional aesthetic ideals such as the role of the artist as 'genius' and the artwork as 'masterpiece'.

Planning

Planning liturgies at Mt Carmel is a collaborative experience. Our liturgy committee for 2000 consisted of four people: the music coordinator, who also acted as liturgical overseer; the parish priest, who was presider for most of the liturgies; the parish pastoral associate, who was wordsmith for the group; and myself, the image maker. The flow of ideas in this group directly influenced my work.

Prior to the focus group discussions, I presumed that my involvement with the liturgy committee was common knowledge in the parish. In Group 2, Jim, who was a longstanding member of the parish pastoral council, took for granted that the liturgy committee and I worked closely together but wondered about the process:

*How does the artwork speak of the concerns and the life of the community? If so is that just the liturgy committee ... reflecting on what is happening in this community and how is that drawn into the liturgy? Do you and your committee think about that in planning the art and the environment?*
In Group 3, it was evident that both Sam and Joyce were aware of the committee and they were curious about how it influenced the development of the artwork. I was surprised, therefore, when Anne admitted that she did not ‘realise that you had a liturgical group who actually sits down and tries to put ideas into the ring about where you can go with this.’ She was curious about our process: ‘do you start with the traditional symbols of each season?’ I took Anne’s comments as an indication that there may be others in the parish who need more information about the way liturgy happens at Mt Carmel.

**Making**

There were many occasions where collaborative efforts made a real difference to the experience of liturgical art at Mt Carmel. The design of the font stand (fig. 16), for example, was a collaborative effort. I drew the original sketch which defined the shape, but a fellow parishioner (who was a builder by trade) suggested the materials, designed the mechanism which held the structure together and supervised its construction by a commercial manufacturer\(^48\).

The font bowl\(^49\) (fig. 16) was another collaborative effort. Again I made the original drawing, which suggested the shape, and another parishioner (Jan

\(^{48}\) The design was a prototype and a series of stands were later manufactured for a diocesan conference.

\(^{49}\) This is referring to the water bowl only. The bowl used for the ash and the fire was a commercially produced terracotta plant container (figs 17&18).
from Group 4) invented the complicated techniques and tools and constructed the bowl with no help from me.

Working collaboratively is an integral part of my practice of liturgical art. I have found that, despite its difficulties, collaboration is a stimulating and challenging way of working. There is richness in shared wisdom and it gives me access to a range of skills, techniques and material well outside my own area of expertise. Furthermore, it fosters a sense of ownership of the artwork within the community. Developing a trusting and generous relationship with collaborators requires some compromises on my part, however. I have to give them room to be creative and that is not always comfortable because this means that I don’t have total control over what is happening.

In the pyramid assemblage I was able to involve many members of community in the construction of the artwork: their marks, drawings, thoughts and feelings were essential parts of the finished pyramids. This experience was seen, by the focus group participants, as a way to ‘get people involved’ and to ‘draw the community together’. Of course, it is not always possible to allow for this level of engagement, but I always try to make the artwork interactive in some way.

It was clear that the participants supported the notion of collaboration. Mandy suggested that the incoming new artist might be encouraged to ‘draw ideas’ from ‘the children’s liturgy or … even if there’s people like myself who are not talented, but I might have an idea that someone else can express, or we might
be able to help with the physical stuff.’ Matt also offered to become involved in an uncreative way. Margot, however, expressed a desire to become involved in the creative process. It was ‘the consistent, professional quality of the art’ that made her ‘hungry to know more’ and prompted her to ask ‘can I be involved, even if only on a sharing level?’

Nonetheless, some participants argued that the ‘high standard of performance’ in liturgy at Mt Carmel was a deterrent to true collaboration. In my experience, the balance between the expertise of the parish liturgists and the often naïve expression of the community is a perennial struggle. The solution is not to abandon either expertise or community expression, but to get the balance right, which happens sometimes at Mt Carmel. That is why Sue was able to say ‘I love the things at Mt Carmel I really do; but …’

**Meaning**

The content of liturgical art, that is the liturgical meanings and references, have always been of prime importance to my practice, but I have long suspected that the members of the community interpreted the images through the lens of their own life experience and faith journey. Katrina’s reflections indicated how important both of these considerations were and how interconnected they were in the reception experience:

> I thought what is Jenny trying to say? And I’d stand back and try to be objective about it, and then I thought what was your basic message you put there according to the season we are in, and then as I come back each Sunday … what does this mean to me, does this reflect my faith? Particularly with the hands [on the altar cloth], I started thinking about
reconciliation and about the Sea of Hands and about being down in Sydney on the wall in front of Parliament house … and I thought of the hand of God reaching out. Every time I look at it I think of something else, which is why I guess I enjoy it so much.

The inevitability and the importance of individual interpretation was not lost on the participants. Joyce asked ‘Jenny, they don’t have to always mean the same thing to everyone do they?’ I agreed and she added ‘people see different depths, different thoughts and different ideas from it.’ Paul held a similar view:

It’s the same with the reading … they’ll take whatever interpretation they can when they hear it. The same with the artwork, they’ll get out of it from what level they are at.

My attempts to interpret the images from my own perspective as artist, sometimes merely confuses people. In Group 3, there was considerable discussion about a logo that I made for the liturgical year of 1999.50 Joyce was particularly interested in the imagery. I tried to explain how I used the prime numbers one, three and five as an image of God:

Joyce: You say that prime numbers relating to God meaning the beginning sort of – is that what you meant? The God number in numerology is 9.

Jenny: It was just the image [of the prime number] I was interested in, being divisible by itself and one.

50 This was designated the Year of the Father by Rome in preparation for the Jubilee. In order to be more inclusive, we celebrated the Year of the Many Faces of God, at Mt Carmel.
Joyce: A bit too obscure for me [she looked confused].

Jenny: Now see that’s an interesting point isn’t it? … I put all these intentions into it and I write about them, but whether people see them [the meanings I had intended] or not is something else again. I don’t want to say it means this, because that destroys the whole purpose of the thing.

Joyce: But they are usually not as obscure as that [she laughed].

I think it does help if the artist gives the community some information about the imagery, and I am more than ever committed to that now, but interpretation is, ultimately, the work of the community. Moreover, it is the responsibility of the community to be open to the meaning in the work and allow it to be formative, even ‘transformational,’ as Jim suggested.

Eileen described liturgical art as developmental: ‘It does help you — it’s a growing thing — artwork is a growing thing.’ She was referring to the community, but Sue noticed that liturgical art has been a ‘growing thing’ for me too:

I have a feeling for how much you’ve put into it yourself … I can see, from when you started, tremendous changes in what you’re doing now and that’s quite amazing.

The expression and communication of meaning, rather than interpretation, is the work of the liturgical artist. It is my responsibility to be artistically skilled,

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51 I often write short notes in the parish newsletter about the work during the seasons. In 1999 I wrote an information sheet about the Year of the Many Faces of God images in which I mentioned the prime number imagery.
theologically informed, and spiritually mature (or at least to be progressing in those aspects of my life) so that I can make images which are life-relevant and life-enhancing for my community.

3. Interactive installations

I am aware that most meaning-making happens during the interaction between the artwork and the celebrating assembly. Consequently, I am committed to making opportunities for this interaction. It is important that everyone in the community is welcome to participate: no one should be discouraged or excluded because of age, gender or cultural differences. I seek to engage the senses, imagination and intellect in pleasurable, thought provoking and prayerful interactions with the artwork, in the context of the liturgical action.

The most interactive part of the Jubilee installations was the pyramid assemblage. There was no doubt about how the Mt Carmel parish community responded, as Mandy said ‘you could hardly get near them sometimes,’ because they were popular with adults and children who ‘just openly wrote and read what everybody else had written and just moved around quietly wrote their own thing.’

Betty was the only focus group participant who had a problem with the pyramids and she was just confused by them:

*I could never really understand the pyramids … I was reading what everyone else had said but I could never really understand what it was for … I guess it just didn’t do much for me.*
This was an atypical comment, however, and the other participants, like Joyce and Mandy, were very positive about the pyramid experience:

Joyce:  *It was a wonderful idea to have those pyramids to get people involved.*

Mandy:  *Particularly the children, particularly the young. Very rarely, as a community, do we ask the young people to put down what they think.*

Joyce:  *And they responded — people responded.*

Bill, who wanted his participation to count, said it was ‘*hard to find something that was worth saying.*’ Margot said that she felt ‘*challenged to participate*’ and Carol felt the pyramids ‘*interfered with her alienation response*’ by inviting her to become involved in the life of the community.

The pyramids provided an opportunity for individuals to express themselves within a community context. For Katrina it meant the freedom to say ‘*these are the things that are important to me and I’ve brought them here to share with everybody.*’ The assemblage was also a way to get to know what was important to fellow parishioners. Jan said that ‘*it makes other people’s experience [available] to me*’ and Katrina responded by saying ‘*the more you know about one another the more you value them.*’

In the light of these reflections my theory (above) does not seem to match the community experience of interactive art. The priority for me was encouraging greater participation in the liturgy; but the priority for the participants was
community building. These are not incompatible priorities: on the contrary, liturgy and community are interdependent in the life of a parish. There was a profound engagement in the Jubilee liturgies and the heightened sense of community was an outcome of that engagement.

4. Evoking responses

Explanations short-circuit the process of interpretation. The practice of liturgical art is not about explaining the multivalent symbolic material with which liturgy is replete; instead, my aim is to explore a variety of ways of imaging liturgical material, hoping to evoke responses from the assembly. I have no desire, however, to enthral the assembly with artistic expression: the assembly which is speechless before dazzling visual images is not participating in the liturgy. I have no control over the responses, but I frequently strive to evoke pleasure in the hope that reflection will follow.

During the year of Jubilee I explored three interpretations of the central Christian logo, the cross: the Southern Cross constellation, the Jubilee Cross and the ‘old wooden’ Cross. The first is associated with the great-south-land image of Australia. The second is the triple cross of the international Jubilee logo published by Rome. The third is the large wooden cross which has been part of Lent/Easter liturgies at Mt Carmel for many years.

The Southern Cross was used from the start of Advent 1999 as a reinterpretation of the traditional wreath (figs 1-3). It appeared again, at the beginning of Lent, on the floor of the forecourt (fig. 6) where it became part of
the pyramid assemblage and marked the Sunday gathering place.\textsuperscript{52} The Jubilee cross was introduced as part of the fifth star of the wreath (fig. 3) on Christmas Eve, to mark the beginning of the Year of Jubilee. It was used again in the Lenten stole design (fig. 4) and finally as a motif on the Easter altar cloth (fig. 16). The plain wooden cross was not used in the celebrating space until Holy Week, when it was carried in processions and passed around the assembly on Good Friday.\textsuperscript{53} (fig. 15). At Easter it was added to the flood figures assemblage (fig. 14).

The three permutations of the cross evoked very different associations. The Jubilee cross made references to the international events surrounding the Christian celebration of the dawning of the third millennium. It helped to situate the parish liturgies within the global context of Jubilee. The Southern Cross gave a unique national flavour to our millennium celebrations, with its references to federation’s centenary. The human-sized, plain wooden cross, a familiar part of the liturgical culture of Mt Carmel parish, evoked the death/resurrection themes of the Triduum liturgies. For the Jubilee Easter, the death theme was linked to the flood and resurrection to the rainbow.

The Jubilee cross was not specifically mentioned during the focus group discussions, but the ‘old wooded’ cross was referred to twice. Kate’s focus was on colour rather than the cross, however, when she referred to ‘the lovely cloak over the cross, the lovely rainbow colours.’ Jan was more interested in

\textsuperscript{52} The gathering rites of Sunday liturgies during Lent were celebrated in the forecourt.

\textsuperscript{53} A variation on the traditional ‘Veneration of the Cross’.
how the cross was used and its interaction with the assembly: ‘instead of the [traditional] adoration of the cross, on Good Friday, way up there in the sanctuary, the cross actually moves around and I think that … makes a very strong statement.’

These comments indicate that, even though the cross has meaning as an abstract image (as a logo), it needs form and context to explore the many facets of that meaning and to evoke responses from the assembly.

The Southern Cross image evoked a variety of responses, for example, Anne’s written notes had an objective quality, while her verbal comments had a decidedly subjective tone. She wrote that ‘Christmas ... was an attempt to individualise the Australian Catholic experience.’ She said that ‘the Southern Cross recreation was quite spectacular and it became a focal point on entering the church to see what had been added …’ and later she admitted that ‘when I was talking about the Australian aspects it was really an emotional thing because I’m patriotic about Australia.’

Jan’s patriotic response to the image was tinged with a sensuous delight in colour: ‘I felt the colours were very vibrant ... very Australian ... I saw those stars [intake of breath] this is the Southern Cross and rainbow colours ... but it’s the colour, the vibrancy that hit me and gave me a sense of Jubilee.’ For Katrina, the image evoked a memory of personal experience which led to a sense of community:

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54 A reference to the star wreath (figs 1-3).
You were going with the Southern Cross and I thought: well, gee, isn't that a good idea because that is something that my children and I do at Christmas time ... we often go out and look at the stars and find the Southern Cross in summer time. And ... now it's here it sort of makes me feel part of a faith community ... because ... I'm probably thinking and musing upon ideas surrounding my faith ... the same as everybody else is doing ... and that gives me a feeling of us all drawing together.

It was in responses like these that the relationship between the partial and perspectival nature of individual experience and the shared values and meanings within the liturgical community was most evident.

**Beauty, pleasure and meaning**

Some participants, like Kath, found the beauty of the work seductive:

> It's just so beautiful that I certainly have to admit to being carried away by it ... I just get this flood of feeling about the colours and what you've done and I have to admit to not looking too much into the meaning ... it's just the thing itself, the colours and your artwork ... I just sort of lap it all up. I don't go much into figuring it all out.

Beauty did not always enthral, however, and sometimes it evoked a reflective response. Jack struggled with beauty and meaning: 'visually it was striking, it was beautiful, but I was trying to see what this art should be telling me.' Amy acknowledged the same issue: 'you could just become overawed by the beauty of it ... but art is more than that, it really makes you ... it allows me to become reflective too.'
Chapter Three: Evaluating Liturgical Art in Light of Reception Experience

The term beauty is very problematic because it can be used to mean many different things. The plethora of meanings ultimately deprives the word of value. Joyce used it as a quality of unity: ‘the beautiful unity there’. Heather used it to indicate a professional gloss: ‘how professional it looks … It’s just so beautifully done and finished.’ For Betty it was an integral quality of the immediate and sensual impact of an image: ‘It was the beauty — the wow factor!’ Amy identified it as a discrete quality, distinct from but related to meaning: ‘there was some meaning and some beauty in that.’ Kath used it as an expression of emotion: ‘Oh yes, to me it just comes right into here [she pointed to her heart] and it’s just beautiful.’ She also aligned beauty with colour when she exclaimed ‘those beautiful colours!’ Further, she placed beauty and colour together in a spiritual context: ‘colours [are] always beautifully melded and inspiring.’ Jim claimed that beauty was important because it ‘said something about God’ and he wondered if the role of liturgical art was ‘to beautify and draw us into God’s beauty?’

Here is a very confusing array of meanings applied to beauty and this lack of definition is one of the reasons why I hesitate to use the term. However, one thing is certain, beauty evokes pleasure.

**Colour, pleasure and meaning**

The element of liturgical art which seemed to evoke the most immediate responses was colour. Even Sam, who claimed that he was more in tune with the theology than the aesthetic qualities of art, said that he ‘thought about the beauty and the colour’ of the work.
Colour was mentioned at least eighteen times, in the discussion, as a pleasurable experience and on eight occasions it was described as ‘vibrant’, which implies that it is full of life and throbbing with energy or activity. Bill inferred that colour had an enlivening effect on the celebrating space:

*Colour was the thing that made a big impact on me. Especially since the church generally is fairly neutral isn’t it — brick walls — and the colours you use are really vibrant …*

For Mandy the colours were sometimes ‘so vibrant they leapt out at you.’ Further, the liveliness of the colours seemed to ‘capture our beautiful creation that God has made,’ for example, ‘those blues and green and those vibrant colours.’ Colour was memorable to Mandy: when she reflected back on some of the artwork from 1999 she said ‘I can still see those vibrant colours.’ Both feeling and reflection were evoked in Jan by colour: ‘well I was hit — I felt quite joyful. I can remember I felt the colours were very vibrant … it’s the colour, the vibrancy which hit me and gave me a sense of Jubilee.’

There is an interesting relationship between colour as form and colour as content here. When colour is experienced as form, it is a tool which expresses an idea, for example, where colour points to the creative power of God or to the notion of Jubilee. When it is experienced as content, colour itself is the message, for example, where the experience of colour (the impact, the excitement and the lingering memory of it) is full of meaning.
In any case the effect of colour is plain to see, it evokes pleasure. Jack exclaimed ‘what an impact it made, what a wonderful array of colours.’ Jan said that she particularly like the artwork ‘where there’s an abundance of colour.’ Joyce alluded to a ‘riot of colour.’ Anne used emotive words to describe ‘the gold material’ that was part of the Easter environment as ‘almost like mercury, moving, shooting out.’

There is no clear-cut way to define how colour works in a given situation because its roles, of form and content, so frequently overlap. Similarly, it is difficult to define responses evoked by colour: they can be intellectual response involving a reflection on meaning and they can be affective response involving sensual or emotional experiences of meaning. A variety of responses can be observed clearly in this comment from Betty:

*I’m very attracted to colour … I find that colour is a very emotive thing, it calls on responses. It immediately sets a theme, a mood, it can excite you, it informs you, it can ask you to reflect, it enriches, and it can prepare us for what is to come*.\(^{55}\) *I particularly like the colours that we have got at the moment [Easter], they appeal to me. But it is always different and it’s always exciting.*

Whether it is colour or some other aspect of the artwork, which is evocative, a range of responses is necessary if a satisfying experience of meaning is to be had, as Amy acknowledged:

*You could just become overawed by the beauty of it … but art is more than that, it really makes you … it allows me to become reflective too.*

\(^{55}\) A reference to the progress of the liturgical seasons, ie from preparation to celebration.
In reality, experiences of liturgical art at Mt Carmel are only more or less satisfying and sometimes disturbing, as Sue found when she was ‘overwhelmed by the visual input.’ She was ‘overwhelmed’ because she had spent some time overseas ‘going to a very simple Portuguese Catholic church’ and culture shock was her ‘initial reaction’ on her return to Mt Carmel during the Easter season. This just proves that there are many unforeseen factors that influence the reception of liturgical art.

**Pleasure and meaning**

Amy found the flood figures assemblage ‘intriguing,’ but her fascination was clearly induced by the sensual delight of the object:

*To me it’s intriguing, particularly the floor work [the flood figures were on the floor of the sanctuary]. I can look at that and I can still see things in it. I love to look at that I find it intriguing and just enjoy just watching it.*

Jim was also ‘intrigued’ by the artwork and this led him to question ‘what is going on, what is being put in front of us?’ The ‘pieces’ of liturgical art were ‘almost like parables in some ways’ because they had ‘levels of meaning, all kinds of meanings.’ He found it an interesting intellectual puzzle: ‘I remember trying to work it out and feeling challenged by it.’ Evidently, reflection can accompany the experience of pleasure in the artwork. Katrina affirmed this when she said that ‘every time I look at it [the Lenten altar cloth] I think of something else, which is why, I guess, I enjoy it so much …’ Katrina brought spiritual experience into the equation as well: ‘during repeated visits to the
church … I continued to enjoy my reflections of faith, stimulated by the art around me.’

From these examples, it seems that sensual, emotional, intellectual and spiritual pleasures are interrelated. Furthermore, the experience of pleasure is implicated in the experience of meaning and vice versa. The relationship between pleasure and responsibility is a major issue here.

5. Life-relevant and life-enhancing imagery

Liturgical imagery which focuses only on the ideal and gives value only to the spiritual, lacks the power to make a positive contribution to life. Images are life-relevant when they are grounded in human experience and when they value the various forms of that experience: sensual, emotional, intellectual, spiritual. None-the-less if they do not take us beyond what we already know, they have limited value. In liturgy, eschatological elements — that is, projections of what can be when the cycle of redemption is complete — are a rich source of life-enhancing imagery. It is always my aim, when imaging those elements, to point to the seeds of future possibilities at large in the present. In this way the imagery is both life-relevant and life-enhancing. As I noted in Chapter 1, these evaluative terms are a paraphrase of Margaret Miles' (1985, 6) ‘life-orienting and -enhancing’.

Jim showed that he expected liturgical imagery to be both life-relevant and life-enhancing when he asked this question: ‘to what extent does the artwork reflect the experience of this community and in turn how does it transform it?’
When he said ‘that sort of thing somehow brings our concerns more into the worshiping space’ Jim acknowledged the life-relevance of the image, but he was not sure about the transformational role that it played.

I mentioned above\textsuperscript{56} that when the participants spoke about the pyramid experience they referred to it as primarily a community building activity. From the evidence provided by the focus group discussions, I contend that the assemblage was a brief experience of what community could be like; that is, it evoked a heightened sense of the eschatological ideal of community at work in Mt Carmel parish. Anne’s description of the pyramids, which was incarnational in character, reveals the life-enhancing aspect of the imagery: ‘having the thoughts of the community materialise into art each week made the community seem like a living, breathing entity.’

The term ‘uplifted’ was used seven times to describe reactions to the artwork. At first I was wary about the implications of this word, but soon became reconciled to it when I considered what Pam had to say:

\begin{quote}
You come up to the church and you are thinking of other things … then you are confronted with the art for the first time, say at Advent or … I feel uplifted to another plane so that it gets me to a sense of mission. Lifted out of my everyday thoughts and concerns … it’s only then, you start to question what does this mean what is this about, what is this saying to me?
\end{quote}

This statement was a challenge to me because I had always maintained that the job of liturgical art is to focus us on the realities of the life-world and to find

\textsuperscript{56} See 3. Interactive Installations.
meaning and possibilities for growth there. I believed that to be ‘uplifted’ amounted to ‘enthrallment’. Pam, however, was saying that being lifted out of her everyday realities was a liberating experience which enabled her to become involved in a transpersonal concern, that is, ‘mission’. Further, she said that being ‘uplifted’ freed her to search for meaning. It would appear that distancing from personal considerations can be a transformational experience because it ultimately points back to life and renewed meaning. All of which goes to prove that life-relevant imagery makes connections between liturgy and the everyday realities of parishioners, and life-enhancing imagery enlarges their experience and proposes directions for future growth.

6. Inclusive definition of the celebrating space

Images can be used to unite the sanctuary with the assembly and gathering spaces and to create focal points within the space, for example at the font, ambo and altar. The interior arrangement of Mt Carmel predisposes the members of the assembly to spectate rather than participate because all the action takes place in the sanctuary. The sanctuary, therefore, is the celebrating space. I have tried to subvert this tendency by using installation material to redefine the celebrating space to include the space occupied by the assembly — wherever that might be.

57 Women’s exclusion from ordained ministry is not discussed here. This vital issue is outside the scope of my thesis. In any case, there is a large body of work by others which addresses this issue.
Decisions about placement, size and shape of the artwork are influenced by the limitations of the celebrating space at Mt Carmel. These limitations have been a matter of open discussion in the parish for some years and plans have been drawn up to renovate the space. It is not surprising, therefore, that the focus group participants showed that they were aware of these spatial difficulties and the role that the artwork can play in overcoming them when they commented on how the artwork effected the liturgical space in Section C.

Bill noticed that I tried to ‘integrate’ the space by placing artwork in the assembly and gathering spaces. My aim was to activate those spaces so they too became part of the celebrating space, or, as Paul put it, so that ‘the whole lot is sacred space, not just up there’.

In the year of Jubilee, the forecourt was included and this meant that I had to make connections between the artwork inside and the artwork outside. I did this by using rainbow colours on the pyramids outside and by putting pyramid comments on banners inside. Bill noticed what I was trying to do and he acknowledged my efforts when he said: ‘what I thought was very well done was the pyramids and the translating of some of the information onto the banners’. Jim recognise the value of the pyramid experience outside being ‘reflected in the strips’ inside: ‘that sort of thing somehow brings us and our concerns more into the … worshiping space.’ Defining and redefining the space to foster participation in the liturgy is an important aspect of my role as a liturgical artist.
7. Outreach

When liturgical art is visible from the street it arouses the interest of passers-by. By giving the public this visual access to its liturgy, the parish community can reach out to welcome strangers. In this way liturgical art can be a tool for evangelisation.

Since the dawning of the new millennium was celebrated all around the globe, I thought it appropriate that our festivities were part of the public celebration. Consequently, I made a large statement with the pyramid assemblage on the forecourt. But what message does the artwork send out to the community, and is it welcoming or confusing? Sue had strong views on this subject: ‘for a new person coming in there was no explanation of the symbolism and I don’t know where to start.’ Further she said that ‘for some people who would walk in here … there is so much visual input that you’re not going to listen, you’re looking and you’re not listening.’

The fact that the meaning of liturgical art emerges over time was discussed above\(^{58}\). Evidently, members of the celebrating community decipher the meanings of images during the prolonged exposure to them in the liturgical season. It should not surprise us, therefore, if ‘strangers’ are confused about the meaning of the images when they share one of our seasonal liturgies. How can they understand them fully? They have not experienced all that came before and they will not witness what comes next in the season. This is a serious issue for a community which likes to welcome newcomers; but it

\(^{58}\) See 1. Integration of art & liturgy.
should not deter us from using rich imagery, rather it should make us more conscious of the needs of strangers. This is another reason why information about the liturgical imagery should be readily available in the parish.

**Conclusion**

The focus group material largely supported the theory which I have developed over the years about my practice. I expected this result, indeed it would have been astounding if I had got it seriously wrong, but I was glad to see that there were a number of points on which the community could enlarge my understanding.

The importance of pleasure in the reception experience was obvious in the focus group material. I heard time and time again how pleasure was related directly to aspects of form, especially colour, and about the connections between pleasure and meaning. Sensual, emotional, intellectual and spiritual types of pleasure were discernible in the responses of the participants, but more often than not compound pleasures were expressed. Further, it became clear to me that the term ‘beauty’, however amorphous its meaning, was associated with pleasure.

The participants reminded me how important the form and the context of an image are. Their responses showed that images became life-relevant when the participants identified ideas in the work with their own life journey and when they participated in the work. The images became life-enhancing when the participants experienced meaning and pleasure in the work and
responded to the challenges there. Some participants struggled with meaning, but many saw the interpretation of images as an enjoyable challenge. Even so, most expressed a need for more information and a desire to know the mind of the artist. The artist’s intentions were clearly important to the participants; none-the-less, it was evident that the task of interpretation belonged ultimately to the community.

The formative and transformative nature of liturgical art emerged from the discussions. Being ‘uplifted’, by liturgical art, from personal concerns to a state of mind in which transpersonal consideration could be entertained, was identified as liberating. It was a state of mind in which a heightened sense of ‘mission’ and community could be experienced, and the mind and imagination were free to reflect on meaning. Being ‘uplifted’ was a transformational experience because it gave everyday life new meaning.

Many important issues emerged in this evaluation, but I have identified three as the most significant: the relationship between form, content and context; the relationship between colour, pleasure and meaning; and the transformational role of liturgical art. It is evident again that the formalist (aesthetic) and the perceptualist (prophetic) concerns and interests overlap consistently in the reception experience.

In the following chapters I will take up these issues under the headings of the aesthetic and the prophetic. For convenience I will deal with the two aspects separately, but I am always aware of how interrelated they are, and in the last
chapter I seek to reconcile the two for a balanced practice of liturgical art. In the next chapter I begin by examining the aesthetic issues which predominated in the focus group discussions.
CHAPTER 4:

LITURGICAL ART AS AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

In the late 1980s, when I first became involved in making art for liturgy, I read *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (EAW). This document was published by the American Catholic Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy in 1978 — the same year I finished my art studies. EAW has been widely influential in the church and has been used as a standard text for matters concerning liturgical art and architecture in my own diocese of Brisbane. I was surprised, and a little confused, to find that beauty was used as the highest value for art in this document. At that time I knew nothing of philosophical, let alone theological, aesthetics.

As I outlined in Chapter 1, finding sound criteria for evaluating art is high on the agenda of my thesis. From the outset I knew that I wanted to critique the ideal of beauty in the same way that Nanette Salomon (1991) had critiqued ‘innovation and influence’. Consequently, I was again confused to find how frequently beauty was mentioned in the focus group process. Participants used beauty to describe design features such as unity and colour; sensual and emotional experiences, for example, the 'wow factor'; and spiritual experiences of God's presence. Clearly beauty, the pleasures it evokes and its relationship to meaning were important aspects of the reception experience of liturgical art.
The relationship between colour, beauty and pleasure was referred to frequently in the focus group process also. However, reluctantly I have decided that a study of this complex issue is outside the range of this project.

Issues of beauty and pleasure fall within the scope of aesthetics, and originally I was sceptical about anything positive arising from that quarter. Patricia Anderson's review of the 2004 Sydney Biennale in *The Weekend Australian*, 19-20 June 2004, echoed my own response to aesthetics:

Aesthetics? That was the naughty word that was told to go and stand in the corner of the art-world classroom in the 1970's and, as far as anyone knows, no one has given it permission to sit down at its desk yet.

Aesthetics was simply not on the agenda at my art school and beauty was considered an irrelevant concept.

For the better part of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century in the artworld\textsuperscript{59}, the traditional transcendental of truth, goodness and beauty, were either ignored or used as targets for critical debate. Feminist theorists and artists have made, and continue to make, a significant contribution to the debate on beauty.

\textsuperscript{59} I interpret 'artworld' to mean the various individuals, groups and institutions which take a direct part in the making and reception of art, including artist professionals (artists, critics, curators, academics etc), galleries, museums, art schools, government funding bodies etc. The term 'artworld' is deceptive because it implies a unified and monolithic entity. This is not the case at all. Hilda Hein (1993, 8) describes the artworld as 'unstable by choice, the more so since its existence is contingent upon an ever-changing pool of private sensibilities.' Arthur Danto (2003, xiii) acknowledges that there are 'many art worlds'. I consider liturgical art and artists to be at best fringe dwellers in the artworld.
During the same period in the church, approaches to theology using beauty as the starting point — that is theological aesthetics — suffered a decline. However, traditional understandings of beauty retained a precarious sanctuary in the more conservative quarters of the Catholic Church. These understandings were almost untouched by postmodern deconstruction and only occasionally made a contribution to contemporary church life. I look at these issues again in Chapter 8.

Recently, however, there is new interest in aesthetics, and beauty theory is being drawn from the artworld doldrums. It remains to be seen if, in the light of a new century, critical scrutiny will be any kinder. In the Church, interest in beauty theology is re-emerging; but can it be functional in the contemporary world, or relevant to a new generation of Catholics despite the lack of critical scrutiny?

While I acknowledge that the resurrection of aesthetics is a positive move, I still have some reservations about the re-emergence of traditional ideals of beauty, truth and goodness. However, there is some evidence of new vitality and this may be a concrete example of William James’ metaphor (1975, 36) of a living tree representing the 'ancient body of truth'. In this image of continuity and change, old ideas get worn out with use, but then, after a dormant period, new shoots emerge and ‘the ancient formulas’ can be ‘reinterpreted’ for a new age. The operative word is ‘reinterpreted’, however, and no good purpose is served if antique ideals are re-presented, without revision, for reuse in the 21st century.
My problem with beauty is partly to do with the fact that Australians have never had much interest in aesthetics. Probably the last voice of authority in the Australian artworld who spoke about beauty was Robin Boyd in *The Australian Ugliness* (1960) and he took a critical view. When he sought a value for art, Boyd looked away from beauty. Art was valued for its creative relationship to life and for its fidelity to the exigencies of life. Australia is a pragmatic and secular nation. The new interest in beauty theory and theology is emerging from the United States of America. ‘God’s own country’ is the likely place for such a revival. Can beauty, truth and goodness find a place in art theory and theology in 21st century Australia?

The big picture: truth, goodness and beauty

It is my contention that the ideals of truth, goodness and beauty are natives of both heaven and earth. Traditionally only their transcendent qualities are valued, but in order to be truly life-relevant and life-enhancing, they must also be received as God’s gift in the world. In later chapters I build up an alternative picture of the transcendental in which truth is brought to earth by reality, goodness by responsibility, and beauty by ugliness. In the process, I align truth and reality and goodness and responsibility with the *prophetic*, and beauty and ugliness with the *aesthetic*, and I show how this process is integral to a feminist practice of liturgical art.

This project must seem, to the reader, doomed to failure from the beginning because it takes on a monumental task. Yes, I agree I cannot devise a whole
alternative approach to beauty, truth and goodness in a few chapters. My aim is a humbler one, that is, to draw a 'big picture' in which the details are not yet fully worked out. I am primarily a liturgical artist and, although I use theology and philosophy to build my theoretical framework, my feminist pragmatic approach invariably points theory back towards practical applications. So when I analyse 'big picture' concepts like beauty, truth and goodness, my main interest rests in those aspects which are directly related to my practice of liturgical art. Further, in order to ground this 'big picture', I illustrate the ideas with practical examples from my own work and that of other Australian artists. True to my pragmatic bent, I want to prove that my new ideas work in the real world when they are translated into the holistic and inclusive practices of a feminist practice of liturgical art.

**The major concerns of aesthetics in theology & philosophy**

The task of this chapter is to identify and discuss the major concerns of an aesthetic approach to liturgical art. This involves interactions between theological and philosophical aesthetics. While theological aesthetics focuses almost exclusively on transcendent realities, philosophical aesthetics focuses almost exclusively on the life-world. I maintain that these differing foci reflect the polarisation in Australian society which isolates the religious from the secular.

In Australia today the interest in spirituality is increasing, especially among young people. However, spirituality is problematic for the secular world because of the general lack of experience and shallow understanding among
those who have no religious formation. I discuss this issue in more detail in Chapter 6. In the church, on the other hand, there is profound expertise with the spiritual and also a deep respect for the material. However, the life-world often proves problematic for the church and its celibate hierarchy. Consequently, narrowness of outlook is often evident in its approach to matters concerning the everyday lives of the laity. This shortcoming was embarrassingly obvious when, in the BBC1 Panorama programme *Sex in the Holy City* (12 October, 2003), one of the Vatican's most senior cardinals, Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, erroneously claimed that HIV could pass through the microscopic holes in the latex of condoms.

Although aesthetics in theology and philosophy are worlds apart in many ways, I believe that their interests can be complementary. Theological aesthetics focuses on two major issues: the nature of God, and the perception and appreciation of God in culture and nature. Beauty remains a key concept here and is traditionally understood as synonymous with God. Beauty is either an attribute of God or the perceptible evidence of God in the world, for example, the beauties of nature are the marks or traces which identify God as creator. My interest in beauty is limited to the way it operates in the making and reception of liturgical art.

*Aesthetics in philosophy concerns 'the nature of art and the why and wherefore of artistic activity' (Osborne 1970, 11), but goes beyond art to wider*
life-world concerns. The primary issues are 'theories of perception and appreciation … expression, criticism, interpretation … taste … aesthetic appreciation or pleasure' (Korsmeyer 1993, 199) with regard to both art and nature. While beauty is no longer central to aesthetics and is no longer a necessary attribute of art, it nonetheless 'plays a role in the meaning of the work to which it belongs' and 'is part of the experience of art' (Danto 2003, 97). In any case, the focus group participants made it abundantly clear that beauty is still an important factor in the reception experience of liturgical art.

The making and reception of liturgical art requires many complex interactions between the spiritual and the material. Theological aesthetics can help me to understand the more spiritual aspects of liturgical art, while philosophical aesthetics can assist with the more grounded aspects. Consequently, a dialogue between theology and philosophy is essential for this project. Interplay between the two disciplines must surely be mutually beneficial. It is my hope that, when a working relationship is established between theology and philosophy in the practice of liturgical art, the gap between the culture of the church and the culture of the world might close appreciably. This relationship begins here and develops throughout this project.

I begin, however, with philosophy, since it is from there that the most fruitful information about aesthetic experience emerges. Consequently, theological aesthetics is a minor player in this chapter, but it takes the lead in Chapter 9.

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60 When I use the term culture for the purposes of this chapter I am referring particularly to religion and art - especially liturgical art. When I use the term 'nature' in I mean human
In the following pages, I describe aesthetic experience by defining its parameters and identifying those aspects which are relevant to liturgical art.

**Aesthetic experience: perception and appreciation**

For the purposes of my project, the most important aspects of aesthetic experience are perception and appreciation. Beauty is an attribute of aesthetic experience, but it is a complex issue which, for the purpose of clarity, I prefer to leave as a background issue here. I take up a detailed discussion of beauty in Chapter 8.

In the process of my analysis I will refer to my practical experience of liturgical art, the focus group research results and the work of many theorists — among them three American philosophers: George Santayana, John Dewey and Carolyn Korsmeyer. Santayana and Dewey were contemporaries whose careers spanned the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were active when aesthetics fell into disrepute in the artworld. Santayana’s understanding of beauty in his classic work, *The Sense of Beauty* (1955),\(^{61}\) is still widely influential. His high regard for material reality binds otherwise esoteric concepts of beauty to the earth. In *Art as Experience* (1958), Dewey's pragmatic approach led him to discard the notion of beauty and focus on aesthetic experience. He links aesthetic experience to the enrichment of life. Korsmeyer is one of the new generation of scholars who are finding new ways to study the significance of artistic expression in a contemporary context.

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\(^{61}\) *The Sense of Beauty* was originally published in 1896.
Chapter Four: Liturgical Art as Aesthetic Experience

of approaching aesthetics. She is interested in reframing philosophical aesthetics from a feminist perspective. She critiques the dominant role of rationality in traditional aesthetics, and refocuses on the emotions and embodied knowing in various articles, including *Perceptions, Pleasures, Arts: Considering Aesthetics* (1998).

For my project, aesthetic experience in the making and reception of liturgical art is both embodied and spiritual. Therefore, sensual, emotional, rational and spiritual elements are interrelated in this type of experience. I take for granted that the experience of viewers varies, and therefore when I define 'aesthetic experience', my definitions are necessarily wide ranging. Nonetheless, the sensual and emotional dimensions of human experience are to the fore in aesthetic experience. There is plenty of evidence in my focus group research to suggest that the primary experience of liturgical art for most viewers is sensual and/or emotional and that frequently these lead to rational and spiritual experiences. It is also evident that the boundaries between the different aspects of experience are often breached so that the interrelationship between sensual, emotional, rational and spiritual is a strong feature of the experience of liturgical art. Further, the responses evoked by aesthetic experience include not only pleasure, but also displeasure - or disgust. This range of responses corresponds to the differences among viewers and to the relationship between beauty and ugliness.

Santayana, Dewey and Korsmeyer do not focus on the spiritual dimension of aesthetic experience. Instead, they share an interest in the
cognitive/aesthetic roles of the senses and the emotions. Aesthetic experience is about perception and appreciation of art and nature, or how human beings learn about and value their world primarily through their senses and emotions. The senses are associated with perception and the emotions with appreciation (12-13). Perception refers to recognising and interpreting information about the world, and appreciation refers to valuation and enjoyment.

Life becomes more understandable and enjoyable through aesthetic experience. On the other hand, knowing more about the world can evoke disgust and the desire for change or renewal. It is my contention that disgust aroused by perception or appreciation is also part of aesthetic experience and an important aspect of the function of liturgical images.

The senses and perception

Korsmeyer is suspicious of traditional understandings of the relationship between the senses and reason:

Rationality so dominates Western theories of knowledge, of morals, of politics, of human nature, of culture, that there is no area of philosophy not under its long influence. It is also one of the most complexly gendered of theoretical concepts. (147)

She claims that 'the senses themselves have gendered meanings' within Western theorising (148). She points to the sense hierarchy used by many theorists including Santayana.
Santayana claims that touch, taste and smell are less cognitively useful than sight and hearing. The latter are dubbed 'aesthetic senses'. It is because sight and hearing are more spatial that they serve intelligence better than the more bodily senses (42-48). In the light of holistic theories of knowledge — for example Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences — this reasoning seems rather thin today. Korsmeyer objects to the sense hierarchy because it reflects the traditional 'elevation of mind over body; of reason over sense; of man over beast and culture over nature - of masculine over feminine'. Further, she points out that the lower ranking of touch, taste and smell represents the exclusion of the body — traditionally associated with femaleness — from identification with knowledge and the faculty of reason (148).

Keeping Korsmeyer's critique in mind, the principle that all the senses are both aesthetic and cognitive is a valuable insight. This means that the senses have a role in evoking pleasure/disgust and in the perception of meaning. This insight is borne out in the results of my focus group research when the participants described their delight in seeing the colours and images in the artwork and how these elements sometimes prompted them to reflect on meaning.

In liturgy itself it seems obvious to me that the senses have an aesthetic and a cognitive role, for example, when oil is used for anointing; water is poured or

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62 The theory of multiple intelligences was developed in 1983 by Dr. Howard Gardner, professor of education at Harvard University. Gardner proposes eight different intelligences to account for a broader range of human potential in children and adults. Gardner's system
splashed; bread and wine are consumed; incense is burned; music is played; sacred stories are retold; ritual gestures are enacted; and ceremonial garb is worn. These sensual elements not only create a ritual ambience, they also have inherent religious significance within the context of the liturgy and they make evocative connections with everyday things and events, for example family meals.

Not all perception is aesthetic perception of course. Dewey says that it takes time and an ‘apprenticeship’ to perceive aesthetically (53-54). The focus group participants reflected on the time they spent looking at liturgical images and how the meaning of the work sometimes emerged slowly in many moments of ‘seeing’ during the course of a liturgical season. Some also acknowledged that years of looking at liturgical images had sharpened their ability to perceive meaning in them.

According to Dewey, our senses are an intrinsic part of our meaningful experience of objects. Our senses give us objective information, but also a sense of the significance of things and events (125-6). This is particularly evident when sense-perception gives embodiment to ideas in the form of art (258-259). The ‘tangled scenes of life are made more intelligible’ when our ideas about the world are expressed in the sensual forms of artworks. However, the knowledge gained in aesthetic experience is not pure conceptualisation - it is 'transformed' into an intense experience of understanding, which is infused with emotion (290). Strict boundaries give equal value to intelligences which include facility with: words, numbers, pictures, body,
between sense and emotion are blurred here just as they are in the results of my focus group research, for example in the experience of the 'wow factor'.

In Dewey's schema then, sensual, emotional and intellectual elements are inextricably interrelated in aesthetic experience. In my schema the spiritual element is also included, and it is my contention that through sense-perception liturgical art can make life in all its dimensions more understandable and enjoyable. Further — being life-relevant and life-enhancing — liturgical art can also evoke a desire for renewal. In this case an artist might use ugliness to evoke disgust rather than beauty to evoke pleasure.

**The emotions and appreciation**

It is primarily through our emotional consciousness, rather than the senses and perception, that judgments about value are made, says Santayana (13): 'things are interesting because we care about them, and important because we need them' (4). This dictum goes against the conventional thinking of Santayana’s day concerning disinterested appreciation: that things of beauty have intrinsic value and they are enjoyed and valued for their own sake, and not to satisfy a practical purpose or the vested interests of the viewer.

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63 Notions of disinterestedness became prominent in the 18th century chiefly in the theories of Hume and Kant.
This understanding of disinterestedness is not compatible with the pragmatic methodology of my project. Liturgical art is an applied art form — it serves the liturgy — so the issue of intrinsic value does not arise as a foreground issue. Further, liturgical images are not made or appreciated primarily because of their beauty, but because they enrich the liturgical life of individuals and of the community.

Santayana holds that human interests and the subjectivity of the viewer are important components in a judgment of value: 'a judgment is not trivial … because it rests on human feelings; on the contrary, triviality consists in abstraction from human interests' (5). This corresponds to my own experience. I care passionately about liturgy and my parish community. I am fascinated by Christian traditions and desire nothing better than to use my imagination and creative skills to explore, express and stretch the boundaries of that tradition through liturgical imagery. Samuel Alexander (1933, 53) calls this 'passionate purpose' and Dewey refers to the 'vital interest' of the artist (190). Consequently, the principal of disinterested appreciation holds little initial appeal for me.

Moreover, the notion of disinterestedness has a dark side. Korsmeyer points to the underlying assumption that all viewers have a 'generic consciousness' so their experience of value is similar (203). The notion of a 'generic consciousness' and the 'ideal observer' have long been a bone of contention with feminist theorists such as Sandra Harding (1986), Hilde Hein (1993) and Janet Wolff. In Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture (1990,
80-81), Wolff explores the role of experience in women’s knowledge. She concludes that, because experience is partial and perspectival, ‘we cannot presume a unified experience, or set of experiences, across all women’. Moreover this ‘generic consciousness’ was revealed to be the reflection of the particular consciousness of privileged groups (for example white, Western, male academics). Ideas about the gendered points of view of artists, artworks and viewers gave rise to theories of the ‘male gaze’.

Despite these serious objections, I cannot dismiss the notion of disinterested appreciation. I know that there is a state of mind, which I associate with disinterestedness, because I have experienced it myself when making artworks. I have heard focus group participants describe a similar experience from their perspective. Consequently, I know that it has some positive value and some practical use.

Disinterested appreciation enters into the experience of making liturgical art in those moments when the sheer delight of colour and shape are the most immediate reality. It also enters into the reception experience in those moments when the ‘wow factor’ enthrals the individual viewer. Dewey describes how the viewer is so taken over by the experience of the thing (artistic or natural) that particular interests and practical purposes are left behind in the ‘fullness of participation’ in it (258). This ‘participation’ is in both form and content, so that enthrallment in beauty stands beside engagement with meaning.
One of the focus group participants described being 'lifted out' of her 'everyday thoughts and concerns' and being 'uplifted to another plane' in which she could think transpersonally about Christian 'mission' and about 'meaning'. I recognise the emotional and rational nature of being 'uplifted' and associate this with my sense of 'passionate purpose'. Here, surely, is the true value of disinterested attention: we are enabled to think and imagine on a larger and wider scale than our personal concerns and interests. It is in this concentrated emotional and rational state that subjectivity becomes inter-subjectivity. This does not imply, however, that there is anything universally applicable about the experience.

Perception and appreciation: subjectivity and difference

In Pleasure: Reflections on Aesthetics and Feminism (1993, 200), Korsmeyer defends the role of 'emotional responses as integral to the experience of art and emotive judgments as legitimate critical assessments'. Moreover, she claims that emotions are 'educable and intelligent affective responses that can deliver information about the world, as well as about the experiencing self' (163). If they are 'educable', our emotions can be influenced by a whole range of experiences. Reflecting on what Wolff (1990, 81) says about the partiality of experience — that it is shaped by 'age, class, ethnic identity, sexual orientation and so on' — I would add that our emotions, too, are shaped by these forces. Consequently, the reliability of Korsmeyer's 'emotive judgments as critical assessments' can only be assessed when the social, cultural and historical circumstances of a person's life are understood and
taken into consideration. I would make the same claims for rational judgments as critical assessments.

Dewey writes that in order to understand life we must ‘fall back upon imagination — upon the embodiment of ideas in emotionally charged sense’ (33-4). The emotionally charged sense qualities of art objects are the carriers of meaning (118). Again, neither imagination, nor emotionally charged sense, nor the meanings they carry, are free from the shaping influence of what Wolff (1993, 81) calls 'extra-aesthetic experience and information'.

Santayana says that the values which we give to things and experiences are essential components of our knowledge of the life-world (4). However, I would again add two qualifications from Wolff (1975, 8-9): first, that our values and our knowledge of the world are mutually influential; and second, that both are shaped and limited by the ‘total experiential structure’ of a person's life-world which includes ‘beliefs, perceptions, evaluations’.

Because the 'total experiential structure' of each viewer's life varies, their perception and appreciation of art and nature is marked by difference. This is especially evident in the focus group research when the participants suggest that there are many levels of receptivity to liturgical art within the parish community. This is due to the varying spiritual maturity of individuals who ‘respond at their own level’. Further, participants frequently commented on personal memories and associations, which were evoked by liturgical art and
which influenced their interpretation of the work. I contend that difference reaches all levels of human life: sensual, emotional, intellectual and spiritual.

**Perception and appreciation: common ground**

Some aspects of the perception and appreciation of art and nature are unique to individual viewers. However, we humans live in communities with corporate beliefs, perceptions, and values, which also have formative influence on our experience and our formation of meaning. Griselda Pollock (1987, 93) calls this 'necessary excess baggage' which 'shapes the viewing/reading processes'. She also points to the 'institutional space in which viewing/reading takes place'. Together, the wider community and the specific institutional space form the 'ground against which a particular configuration of meaning is possible'. This applies equally to artists and viewers.

In my 'ground' of meaning, the wider community is Australian society at the dawning of the 21st century. The specific institutional space is a cluster primarily made up of the Catholic Church and academia - both of which connect with wider national and international networks of influence. In their most immediate forms they are my parish, the Brisbane archdiocese and the schools of art and theology at Griffith University. These 'conversational communities' help to shape my practice of liturgical art in 'constant interaction and supportive commentary' (Pollock 1988, 14).
In my parish community at Mt Carmel, nothing is more certain than that the shape of each person's 'ground' of meaning will vary. However, some common ground will be found in the corporate beliefs, perceptions and values intrinsic to the liturgy. It is these shared traditions which provide the rich source of imagery that fuels my practice of liturgical art.

For the most part, liturgical artists focus on and reflect the commonly held beliefs, perceptions and values of the liturgy. In this way their images are life-relevant; but in order to be life-enhancing it is sometimes necessary to go beyond common ground to more unfamiliar territory - even to images which critique the agenda of the common ground or proffer creative alternatives. This was the case when I made the *Fig Tree* installation for the season of Lent 2001 at Mt Carmel. In this instance both pleasure and displeasure were evident in the reception experience of liturgical art.

The parable of the fig tree

The *Fig Tree* installation was made for the Lent/Easter season of 2001. The parable of the fig tree is from the gospel of Luke (13:6-9) and was read on the third Sunday of Lent. For the installation I broke the text of the parable into two parts. Each part was printed on large banners (2mts x 3mts) which were placed on either side of the front doors of Mt Carmel church (fig. 19). They were clearly visible from the street and the lettering was large enough to be read by passers-by. The banner on the left of the doors was purple, the liturgical colour of Lent, and red, suggesting danger. It had a heading of 'BE WARNED' and underneath that the first part of the story was printed.
A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. He said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' (Lk 13:6-7) The banner on the right of the doors was yellow, an Easter colour, and green, suggesting hope and regeneration. It had a heading of 'TAKE HEART' and the second part of the parable was printed underneath.

The gardener replied 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' (Lk 13:8-9) Underneath the 'BE WARNED' banner I placed the remains of a tree that had been felled recently in my garden. Under the 'TAKE HEART' banner I placed a large, verdant potted fig tree.

Over the weeks of Lent the pile of tree limbs and leaves grew smaller until during Holy Week there was just a small pile of bare branches left. These were burned in the Easter Vigil fire.

Inside the church, the colour scheme was echoed at the altar and the ambo (fig. 20). The colour scheme and live tree motif were also echoed at the empty font (fig. 21). On the third Sunday of Lent the first reading was the story of the burning bush (Exod 3:1-8 13-15), so I gathered the altar candles, our large wooden cross and some of the dead branches from outside into the centre of the assembly space (fig. 22).

During Lent, some members of the community were unhappy about the mess at the front door of the church. Also, there were many comments made about
the risk of fire. Toward the middle of Lent, the parish priest phoned me and said that so many people had complained that we had to do something about it. At first I thought he wanted me to take it all away; but his concern was that the people were so focused on the mess and the danger that they were overlooking the messages and the meanings of the installation. He asked me to think about a solution, so I wrote the following article for the next parish newsletter. It was quite timely because on that Sunday the parable of the fig tree and the story of the burning bush were both read.

‘Is Mt Carmel insured against fire?’ Lots of parishioners have been asking Wayne and Jim this question since Ash Wednesday. The community is worried about the deadwood at the entrance to the church and the risk of fire. Yes, BE WARNED, because there are risks; but TAKE HEART, because the risks are noted and precautions are being taken. Are you insured against the deadwood in your life? This is a significant question during Lent.

On the first Sunday of Lent St Paul tells us that ‘If your lips confess that Jesus is Lord and if you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you will be saved’ (Romans 10:9). So faith in Jesus is our fire insurance.

Being Christ-oriented is how St Paul described his ‘rule of life’ (Philippians 3:17) in the second reading last Sunday. Living in faith requires that we act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with God (communion hymn).

Today we hear Jesus tell the parable of the fig tree: before it is chopped down and reduced to deadwood (BE WARNED), the tree is given one more chance to be fruitful (TAKE HEART).

We also hear the story of the burning bush - the tree that was enflamed without burning. At the heart of our community is the cross: the tree on which Jesus dies without perishing.
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The name of God is revealed from the burning bush: 'I Am who I Am.' The nature of God is revealed from the cross: the one who lives life to the full, who shares our life and is prepared to live and die for us. This is the middle Sunday of Lent and we are now moving towards Easter. It is time to make a turn-around in our lives. So in the next few weeks we look to the cross for messages of hope. At the same time it is our responsibility to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with God. (Close 2001)

I tried to acknowledge the parishioners' concerns and weave them into a reflection on the Lenten imagery. I did have a serious aim, but the tone was tongue in cheek and parishioners knew I was making fun of them! The article provoked a little laughter and the parish priest heard no more complaints.

Colour played an important part in the interplay of sensual pleasures and liturgical meaning in this installation. However, displeasure and pleasure were in tension here. 'BE WARNED' and 'TAKE HEART' represented both a threat and a promise, the rubble of the felled tree embodied the ugliness of warning, while the verdant fig tree embodied the beauty of hope.

Summary

The notion of 'life' (embodied and spiritual) as the highest value is basic to the aesthetic approach I take to my work. When I use the term 'aesthetic experience' for my project I am primarily referring to the sensual and emotional responses evoked by liturgical art. It is initially the senses and the emotions which are engaged in the process of perception and appreciation; but intellectual and spiritual responses arise from that engagement. This process is shaped by the differences between and the common ground
shared by the artist, the artwork and the viewer. The reception experience of
liturgical art is aesthetic when the viewer's responses are charged with affect,
for example: visual stimulation; emotional arousal; intellectual fascination; and
spiritual excitation. These responses could be the result of either pleasure or
displeasure.

In this chapter I have focused mainly on the reception experience and on the
aesthetic. However, the aesthetic approach, which I have only just begun to
articulate here, is not enough for the needs of my practice. In the next chapter
I introduce the notion of the prophetic role of the artist. I maintain that it is in
the space between the aesthetic and the prophetic that a balanced feminist
practice of liturgical art can emerge.
Fig. 19. The Fig Tree installation was visible from the street.

Fig. 20. The sanctuary colours reflect the forecourt designs.
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Fig. 21. The empty font during Lent.

Fig. 22. The Cross is at the centre of the assembly space.
CHAPTER 5:

LITURGICAL ART AS PROPHETIC MINISTRY

Using the focus group material as a guide, it is safe to say that Mt Carmel parish community is not very concerned about the artist's responsibility. The most prominent responses to liturgical art from the community concerned the form of the work. The appeal and efficacy of its beauty — sensually experienced in colours, textures and shapes — is to the fore. My experience as artist, however, is quite different. I have a passion for meaning and an overt sense of responsibility for the images I make and for the way they affect the community.

This is not to say that I do not experience pleasure in the work and the receiving community does not reflect on meaning: pleasure and meaning are intimately related in both the making and reception of art. Indeed, it is when pleasure and meaning are both vivid parts of the making and the reception experience that artwork is most efficacious. Nevertheless, the experience of the artist and that of the viewer are quite different and it is the sense of responsibility that I feel toward my work and to the receiving community that is the subject of this chapter.

I aim to show how liturgical art is a prophetic ministry. Critique of the Tradition is an integral part of a prophetic approach; but a feminist artist-prophet goes beyond critique in order to reclaim, reconstruct and re-imagine the tradition. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1992) refers to creative re-imagining (54)
because it utilises the considerable efficacy of 'artistic recreation, and liturgical ritualization' (73) in order to make new, liberating meanings from traditional material.

**The centrality of liturgy**

The practice of liturgical art is primarily confined to one aspect of the experience of church communities, that is, their communal worship. In this sense, it is a narrow and very specialised field. For Catholics, however, liturgy is central to the experience of being Christian, particularly the Eucharist which is ‘the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows’ (CSL10). Further, liturgy has the potential to influence the culture of the community outside the confines of a parish.

However, a vital interaction between liturgy and culture is mutually transformative, and liturgy can be shaped by the culture of its particular place and time. Because of the importance of liturgy to the church community and its potential to be culturally transformative, all associated ministries, including liturgical art, are prophetic in their nature and weighty with responsibility.

**The prophetic role of liturgical artists**

I maintain that the role of artist-prophets is linked inextricably into the relationships between art and nature — which also involves relationships between order and chaos, matter and spirit, and beauty and ugliness.
approach this topic by tapping into the 'ancient body of truth' (James 1975, 36) of art theory and theology.

In the first section, I use the work of Samuel Alexander and Longinus. Alexander was an Australian philosopher who was active in Britain in the early part of the 20th century. His notion of the 'passionate purpose' of the artist was reflected in John Dewey's analysis (1958, 64) of the creative process. Longinus was an unknown Greek rhetorician probably of the first century of the Common Era whose essay has been highly influential in aesthetic theory from the 18th century onwards. The ideas of these two theorists deal with issues of the aesthetic, and it might seem contrary to use them in the context of the prophetic; but the fact that they are useful here shows how interrelated the aesthetic and the prophetic approaches really are.

In the second section, I describe the role of artist-prophets, drawing on the work of David Tacey, Veronica Brady and Walter Brueggemann. All three theorists describe artists in terms of their prophetic role in society, and they point to the transformative/redemptive potential in the relationship between nature and art.

1. 'Passionate purpose': art and nature

Samuel Alexander (1933, 53-4) uses the term 'passionate purpose' to describe how artists work. He states that artworks are made by

... moulding the material of the art to express a purpose. Not the purpose of creating beauty, for that is the last thing the artist thinks of
… the artist aims to express the subject which occupies his (sic) mind
… His (sic) purpose may be dictated by passion but is still a passionate
*purpose*. The artist works spontaneously … ‘Purpose’ conceals no
mystery. Even where it is most conscious it means that action,
provoked from without, is controlled from within the agent’s mind. Such
controlling factors are present in the work of art, not necessarily and
perhaps rarely in conscious form, most often as a dominant passion,
which guides the artist more surely than conscious ideas, but yet
unifying his (sic) choice of words or colours or sounds into an
expressive whole. (Alexander 1933, 53-4)

Although I do not agree with the universal claims that he makes for this
description, nevertheless Alexander's phrase is useful for describing liturgical
art in terms of prophetic ministry. 'Passionate purpose' refers to spontaneity
and intentionality and to the unconscious and conscious aspects of art-
working. The controlling agent, says Alexander, is the 'dominant passion'
which 'guides the artist more surely than conscious ideas.' Alexander saw the
'dominant passion' arising from the artist's mind like a passionate idea or
belief in an ideal; but there are other possibilities, for example a 'dominant
passion' might arise from identification with a place and a community.

In Alexander's schema, unconscious passion and conscious purpose work in
partnership. Even so, the less rational aspect seems to be the deciding
factor. Longinus (1963) expressed a similar idea in his essay on 'the sublime'
in literature. He describes the interdependent relationship between rational
art and passional nature. Nature is pictured as feminine, 'utterly wayward and
reckless'. It is from 'her', however, that the 'vital informing principle' is derived:
art is dry and flavourless without the creative, chaotic, spark of passion. Nature is dangerous, but ultimately 'she' is the source of creativity (137).

As a feminist, I am cautious about the gendered and negative aspects of this imagery: both nature and women can be demonized too easily as a result. The same can be said of 'the feminine principle' when the term is used by contemporary authors such as Suzi Gablik (1991, 10). David Tacey (1995, 62-) is more aware of the difficulties. He understands that in a patriarchal society the fear of women and the fear of nature are often associated.

In spite of these problems, I am fascinated by the implications of what Longinus (1963) says about the relationships between art and nature, order and chaos, and matter and spirit. Longinus is torn between the requirements of Platonic theory to control nature with reason (137) and his experience of how creative, albeit risky and messy, nature can be (183). In the end, the philosopher agrees that 'the sublime' is evident in art when art and nature are allies (188). For Longinus, 'the sublime' is that quality which makes an artwork efficacious, that is when art has the power to delight and woo, 'to exalt the soul and sway the heart' (191).

The material and the spiritual are directly related in Longinus' theory of art. Art, which has 'a marvellous power and an enthralling charm', is said to be endowed with 'a vocal soul' (178). A passionate outburst, or an upsurge of raw nature, is like 'a kind of "fine madness" and divine inspiration', which 'falls on our ears like the voice of a god' (145). In the following curious passage the
philosopher describes nature as life giving and humans as feisty and full of potential:

…it is not nature’s plan for us her chosen children to be creatures base and ignoble — no, she brought us into life, and into the whole universe, as into some great field of contest, that we should be at once spectators and ambitious rivals of her mighty deeds, and from the first implanted in our souls an invincible yearning for all that is great, all that is diviner than ourselves. (Longinus 1963, 186)

These ideas are counter to the philosopher’s more conventional understandings of what it means to be divine, that is ‘spotless, great, and pure’ (147). Convention places divinity well out of the reach of humanity, but the passage above suggests that humanity and divinity inhabit the same universe. This might merely reflect human hubris, which was a theme in the heroic tales of classical literature; nevertheless, Longinus’ image of nature as mother and of humans as seekers of divinity, is an entrancing one.

In his Platonic mode, Longinus lends great importance to the control of reason, but he grudgingly admits that the rich source of creativity in nature can be accessed only when artists are prepared to abandon themselves to its power (137). Abandonment and rational control are in dynamic relationship in Longinus’ schema, just as passion and purpose are in Alexander’s.

2. Nature, art and spiritual renewal in Australia

David Tacey (1995) describes a path to spiritual renewal in Australia via art and nature. He suggests that artistic ‘expressions of dynamic relatedness to
the land … could provide a new basis for creative and transformative living’ (160). First, however, artists must discard all the inherited, romantic clichés about the bush and be attentive to the ‘mysterious, numinous’ aspects of the land so that they do not merely describe the land, but participate in it. Tacey refers to the poet Judith Wright who, for instance, ‘listens to "the language of leaves"’. Her poetry suggests that body consciousness is the way to reestablish our link to the earth (167).

By attending to the divine in nature, Tacey claims that Australians can gain embodied religious experience and renewed images of God. Tacey looks to the archetypal feminine in nature, and consequently the renewed images of God that he seeks are informed by the feminine principle (107). Further, he suggests that land-centred Aboriginal culture is an essential source for spiritual renewal in Australia (12). This is a major issue in his more recent work and Tacey (2000, 50) makes it clear that accessing Aboriginal culture is conditional on the resolution of land rights and other Reconciliation issues. It is disappointing, however, that Tacey does not sufficiently acknowledge the problem of white appropriation of Aboriginal culture as an extension of colonialism.

Veronica Brady’s approach is more satisfying in that she listens to the voice of Aboriginal artist-prophets as primary sources for renewal. She writes that recent encounters between the writing of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal writers is
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… generating a new sense of plurality. On the Aboriginal side, new power emerges, a new sense of themselves speaking within our culture and challenging us. On our side, a closed and defensive unity of self opens out to affirm the Aborigine not as an object but as another subject, an aspect of ourselves and our history and the moral problem we projected on to them is increasingly recognised as our own. In the past we have shrunk from this discovery, fearing the loss of our self-possession as well as our other possessions. Now it may be that recognition of the discourse of the other points us to a different kind of future'. (Brady 1994, 36)

The different future to which Brady refers involves alternative modes of being in the world. Brady hears one of these alternative modes in Bill Neidjie's Story About Feeling:

I love it tree because e love me too.
E watching me same as you
Tree e working with your body, my body.
E working with us …
That tree, grass … that all like our father.
Dirt, earth, I sleep with this earth.
Grass … just like your brother.
In my blood in my arm this grass.
This dirt for us because we'll be dead,
We'll be going this earth. (Brady 1994, 45)

This is a living example of the participation in nature for which Tacey calls.

Can non-Aboriginal artists achieve this same, or even similar, degree of participation? I doubt it, but in the next chapter I describe the importance, for urban liturgical artists, of developing and nurturing a sense of place-connection and community-belonging.
Both Veronica Brady and David Tacey work from the premise that, because of our unique environment and history, the experience of God in Australia has some recognisable national characteristics which can be observed in the expressions of artists: place and time, they say, have shaped Australian art and spirituality. Contrary to the prevailing academic viewpoint, both theorists claim that a significant vein of spiritual experience is expressed in the work of many Australian artists. These artists do not, however, present a homogeneous view of an Australian spirituality nor do they present a uniformly positive experience of the divine.

Many of the artist-prophets that Veronica Brady studies in *A Crucible of Prophets* (1981, 21ff) suffer from a significant flaw which she calls ‘The Great Refusal’. ‘The Great Refusal’ is a swag of assorted fears, of which the most significant is fear of the land - or what I call *land-angst*.

Land-angst can be observed in the way Australian artists have depicted the land, that is, idealising or demonising it to keep it under control and at a distance. David Tacey (1995) identifies two extreme pastoral schools of Australian writing which he calls the utopian and dystopian. Banjo Patterson’s optimistic images of the land as a ‘friendly pastoral patch’ (7) are pure utopian school, while Henry Lawson’s depictions of the land as a threatening and malign force are decidedly dystopian (41).
Like Loginus, Tacey and Brady see both danger and creativity, threat and promise, as integral to the experience of nature in Australia. The demonic chaos of the land holds the creative possibility of renewal. It is up to artists to bridge the gap between the dystopian and utopian visions of nature in order to take advantage of the renewal experience. When I constructed the *Fig Tree* installation (figs 19-22) I was mindful of these issues and I first began to explore the notion of threat and promise as underlying tensions in nature, art and religious experience. I contend that it is in the creative tension between the artist's passion and purpose, and by exploiting the transformative relationship between the threat and promise in nature, that liturgical artists can make images which promote spiritual renewal in Australia.

**Ministry of inspiration**

Longinus (1963, 145) writes that artistic expressions are *like* 'divine inspiration' when they result from the artist's abandonment to an upsurge of raw nature. The conventional definition of inspiration, however, describes a divine influence immediately exerted on the mind or imagination from the spiritual, rather than the natural domain. Longinus is using a simile. Even so, his usage does imply that inspiration is grounded in physical reality.

Paul Collins (1995) directly links inspiration and imagination with nature. He sees environmental degradation and the stultification of human imagination as parallel processes.

... the poetic, mystical core of our spirituality and culture would dry up, for there will be nothing to renew and nurture it. Our human
imagination would stultify without the inspiration of natural beauty and ecological diversity, and we would lose the ability to conjure up the new possibilities that actually drive us creatively onwards. With the loss of the power of imagination we would descend into hopelessness. (Collins 1995, 4)

Margaret Miles (1985, 2) uses a similar concept when she interprets Rudolph Arnheim's expression 'eyesight as insight'. She uses the term to describe the ability to see God in observable reality. Miles describes the instantaneous aspect of 'insight' as 'transient' and 'intensely experienced occasions' (3). Later, she points to the fact that God is 'continuously accessible through visible objects' (142). Here, then, is a picture of insight as engaging moments in a continuous relationship between the immanent and the transcendent. I would go further and say that inspiration can be like a sudden flash of enlightenment, but more frequently it is experienced as evolving over time.

For my project — and in the context of liturgical art practice — I take 'inspiration' to mean ideas, images and experiences of God's self-revelation, received by artist-prophets both spiritually and through the medium of the world. It is through the experience of prayer, place-connection and community-belonging that artist-prophets are inspired. There are heightened moments of inspiration, but mostly ideas, images and experiences of God take time to evolve and emerge.

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In my schema, abandonment, discernment and expression are required of liturgical artist-prophets in response to the experience of inspiration. I draw parallels between Longinus' notion of the dangerous/creative upsurges of nature and to this experience of inspiration. Further, I maintain that in order to be properly receptive to inspiration artist-prophets must give themselves to the experience and risk the dangers.

The history of spirituality is full of examples of mystics who have experienced the dangers of vivid spiritual experiences. Perhaps one of the most startling is the story of St Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). In the Medieval tale of *Perceval: The Story of the Grail* (de Troyes 1982, 35), the hero suffered from the effects of enthrallment. He became so enchanted by his experience that he forgot to complete his quest by asking the vital question — what does this mean?

Similarly, for artist-prophets it is vital that they reflect on their experience using a rational process of discernment. Terry Lovell's (1980, 19) reservations about the reliability of personal experience are useful here. The author maintains that personal experience alone is not enough — it requires interpretation by theory in order to be a trustworthy guide to reality. Likewise, inspiration can be highly subjective and, like nature, it can be dangerous and messy. Abandonment is therefore not enough; the inspiration experience requires a process of discernment, that is, a rational, critical interpretation based on previous experience and theory/theology. Only then can the raw data of inspiration be shaped into images which are reliable and useful.
Expression of the inspiration experience means that it is passed on so that others become inspired. This is how artist-prophets serve their particular communities. In order to be responsible in their ministry they must be experienced and knowledgeable in spirituality and theology.

Artist-prophets do not have exclusive access to inspiration. For Christians, divine inspiration is an everyday reality — it is part of the dying and rising cycle of daily life. Further, it is part of the promise that Jesus made after the Resurrection: 'I am with you always' (Mt 28:20). This is the promise with which Christians live from moment to moment through life. Brueggemann (2001, 64) reminds us that 'promise' has always been an integral part of our relationship with God and it is part of our collective memory. He suggests that it is the task of artist-prophets to ‘mine the memory’ of the people to remind them of the promise and to show them how to use symbols to transform reality. I would add that their task is to show people how and where God's promise manifests itself in the possibilities arising from the changing circumstances of life.

It is the role of prophets to keep the flame of inspiration alive in their particular communities. It is the role of artist-prophets to be inspired and to inspire by making images which are expressions of their experience of God. They use their skills to shape the inspiration experience into imagery that can communicate the weight and the depth of the meanings of those inspirations.
They make images which are tantalizing enough to 'enthrall and persuade' (Brady 1981, 112) and which are evocative enough to promote reflection.

In so doing, something new emerges. It might be simply a fresh approach to traditional meanings, thereby creating a new understanding. Conversely, it might be a radical shift in meaning arising from contemporary culture. The first might revive the flagging spirits of a community weighed down and worn out by the demands of, for example, family life or civil unrest. The second might challenge a community to replace worn out meanings with those that are more relevant and liberating for contemporary life. Renewal and challenge, therefore, are integral parts of the artist-prophet's role. Moreover, renewal and challenge are inextricably interrelated.

'Ministry of imagination': renewal, challenge and the larrikin prophet

For my project, and in the context of liturgical art, I understand imagination to be that mode of thinking, sensing and feeling which artist-prophets use to express their inspirations and their understandings of the world by making them into images. The transformative quality of these images rests in their ability to evoke renewal and thereby challenge the status quo.

There is a further risk here for artist-prophets and a compelling reason for being responsible: imagination is not innocent or neutral and nor is it exempt from influence and control (Brady 1994, 287). Imagination can serve the cause of the dominant culture just as easily as it can serve the will of God. The dominant culture controls one view of reality and suppresses all others,
but one of the vital tasks of images is that they be 'vehicles for redemptive honesty' (Brueggemann 2001, 45). That is, again, why artists need to be experienced and knowledgeable about spirituality and theology. Experience and theory/theology will, hopefully, keep the imagination and its expressions honest. Even so, artist-prophets never know the whole picture or the complete 'Truth', as Brueggemann writes

No prophet ever sees things under the aspect of eternity. It is always partisan theology, always for the moment, always for the concrete community, satisfied to see only a piece of it all and to speak out of that at the risk of contradicting the rest of it'. (Buregemann 2001,16)

He describes the prophetic role of artists as the ‘ministry of imagination’ (40) and their task is to 'hold together criticism and energizing' (4). For my purposes I use the terms renewal and challenge, but I think of the two pairs of terms as analogous. The different ordering of the pairs is interesting, however. I see critique emerging naturally from a renewed vision, whereas Brueggemann puts criticism before energizing as if the renewed energy comes from the subversive stance. I can see his point of view, but his is a more intentional approach than mine. In my experience, critique is often a by-product of the images that I make and sometimes it is unexpected; that is, occasionally I am surprised by defensive reactions to my work.

In Brueggemann's schema, reenergizing happens when alternative futures are imagined, that is when prophets engage in 'futuring fantasy' (40). At the same time, these alternative futures 'challenge and conflict the dominant reality' (40).
Although art has the power to evoke alternative realities, artist-prophets do not make alternative futures happen in people’s lives — instead, they empower people to reshape their own realities (77). The alternative futures come from God who ‘is free to bestow them’ and they ‘are not derived from or determined by the present’ (111) — they are miraculous. God can create a new thing, a new reality from nothing so that a fresh beginning is possible. The task of the artist-prophet, therefore, is to imagine the possibilities and to communicate them to the community.

Without denying the value of such claims, I think that, for the most part, the potential of alternative and more liberating futures can be found in the here and now, if we are able to read the signs. For my project, then, another task of artist-prophets is to be seekers of these signs. While this activity focuses on the present, there is always an element of future orientation in the hope for better things to come.

David Tacey (1995) identifies ‘imaginal vision’ as essential for the spiritual renewal of Australian society. ‘Imaginal vision,’ he writes, ‘is the act by which things take on meaning and so become symbols and metaphors’ (160). Tacey describes how these symbols and metaphors can be subversive (2000, 88). He writes that Australian culture is predominantly secular, ‘governed by a rationalistic, masculine and practical ethos’ (67), and that the spiritual dimension is substantially repressed in public life. He suggests that it is the
role of artists to subvert the Australian self-image, to present an alternative, by drawing the spiritual to the surface.

Similarly, Veronica Brady (1994, 9) claims that Australians need a ‘renewal of imagination’ and she entrusts this renewal to artists. ‘Literature’ she writes, ‘helps us to interrogate the picture which imprisons us, provoking us by the strangeness, the world-disclosive power of its language’. I apply this notion to visual images also, because they can do the same work. Brady's vision of literature does not stop with critical questioning, however. In her schema artists propose alternative images of reality which, by their nature, are critical of the status quo. In her social analysis of contemporary Aboriginal writing, for example, Brady finds that Bill Neidjie

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\ldots \text{claims the authority of his own kind of truth} \ldots \text{the effect on the reader is thus to call into question notions of power and assumptions about reality, interrogating our culture by offering glimpses of other modes, other definitions and suggesting that existence is polyphonic not monolithic. (Brady 1994, 48).}
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It is the role of artist-prophets to work from a countercultural perspective within the church as well as in society. This means that they aim to transform the perceptions and the meaning structures of the communities in which they work. In the Church, this does not mean destroying Christian Tradition, but renewing it through rigorous critique: reconstruction through deconstruction. Again there are risks, and artists sometimes suffer when their vision goes against the grain of the dominant culture (Tacey 2000, 108). The work of
deconstruction is particularly risky and it is here that we see evidence of the larrikin attribute of the artist-prophet.

The larrikin is a particularly Australian archetype and one which points to an important aspect of artist-prophets for my project. Larrikins are irreverent jesters, rebellious iconoclasts and myth-busters, while prophets are visionaries who can point to realities beyond experience and to future possibilities at large in the present. Larrikins are lively and engaging but irresponsible — all pleasure and no responsibility. Prophets, on the other hand, have a strong sense of duty, but without the larrikin element prophets are too serious, dour and unable 'to spark the imagination' (Brueggemann 2001, 77). In my vision of artist-prophets the larrikin and the prophet are interdependent attributes. Further, in the role of artist-prophet, pleasure and responsibility are reconciled, along with passion and purpose, and nature and art.

**Ministry of hope**

Through their working symbols, which Brueggemann (2001, 63-) calls ‘tools of hope’, artist-prophets can offer new meanings and fresh approaches to life. In this way they can overcome apathy and despair and reawaken passion and the joy of living (117). Brueggemann associates loss of passion with 'the inability to care or suffer' (41) and with 'numbness' (45).

Being a dedicated liberation theologian, Brueggemann places a great deal of emphasis on human suffering and he even claims that grief is 'the
precondition of joy’ (119). He looks to Jesus, in whose message it ‘was clear
that rejoicing in that future [the joy of the kingdom] required a grieving about
the present order’ (118-9).

I believe that this ‘grieving’ is another way of describing a sense of
responsibility. The prophet's task in the midst of suffering is to reawaken
hope and make joy possible. I contend that celebration is one of the major
tasks of artist-prophets; but in his focus on suffering, lament and grief
Brueggemann does not sufficiently recognise the importance of celebration.
He writes about joy in terms of singing a new song, that is, making new and
more liberating realities, or living in a different key from the dominant reality.
Even so, when he describes joy there is little pleasure in it - it is rather grim
and serious and weighty with responsibility (74). He mentions Miriam's song
(Ex 15:21) as an example of a witness to freedom, and his acknowledgement
of the importance of Miriam's prophetic voice is satisfying (16-7). However,
the song and Miriam's witness are understood entirely within an ideological
framework. There is even the suggestion that the song is a call to arms.
Brueggemann completely misses the ecstatic, spontaneous quality of the
song and the fact that, in this instance, the witness to freedom is essentially
celebration of the fulfillment of God's promise. In other words, Brueggemann
leans towards the prophetic and away from the aesthetic.

The Exodus is the archetypal story of exile and of journeying to redemption.
Integral to the story is relationship to the land. Brueggemann (1977, 29)
describes exile as a wilderness place of chaos and suffering, but there are
also opportunities here for new possibilities to arise (126). Exile is a time of promise (149). Here, again, are echoes of Longinus’ vision of nature as dangerous yet creative.

Both Veronica Brady and David Tacey use exile as a metaphor to describe the redemptive journey for Australians. Today in Australia, claims Tacey, the exile experience is beckoning; but spiritual renewal, or re-enchantment, as he calls it, relies on Australians noticing the new possibilities that are arising in this place and at this time. Artists are fulfilling their prophetic function when they draw attention to the new meanings (Tacey 1995, 120).

Brady (1981, 90-) looks to the desert spirituality of scripture as the way of renewal. The desert centre of this continent is figured as the place in which we Australians can come to terms with our heritage, our bodies, our environment and our place in this difficult, but wonderful cosmos. She uses the metaphor of edge and centre to describe the parameters of the spiritual journey that Australians must make: a redemptive return to the centre, to the primal depths. She is referring to the journeys of individuals to the centre of their spiritual experience — a journey of discovery with the object of finding the ‘Self’. Rediscovering the ‘Self’ is still a key concept in Brady’s theories and it seems strangely out of place in a postmodern world where there is no certainty about universal concepts such as the Self - or indeed Truth, Goodness and Beauty. Indeed, we have seen Brady herself more recently arguing that ‘existence is polyphonic not monolithic’ (1994, 48).
Brady’s vision of a return to the centre is part of the longstanding and complex landscape tradition in Australian culture. The underpinning notions might be outdated, but the imagery still has credibility. Twenty years after Brady wrote about returning to the centre a significant symbolic journey to the centre of Australia actually took place. In the year 2000, leaders of nine Australian Christian churches, along with a group of young people, set off on a pilgrimage which they called *The Pilgrimage to the Heart*. The week-long symbolic journey was undertaken by bus from Canberra to Uluru, the symbolic heart of this land. The pilgrims reached Uluru on Pentecost Sunday where they celebrated a reconciliation service in the shadow of the great rock. Their journey was about reconciliation between the churches and with the Indigenous peoples of Australia.

While Brady describes renewal as a journey from edge to centre in search of the fabled Self, David Tacey’s image of exile is more attuned to postmodern notions. He describes the journey of renewal as a movement towards the edge. The edge is the place of exile and it is at the broken edges of experience where risks can be taken and new ideas emerge. In these two models of journey there is tension between the unifying centre and the edge where difference is the rule, just as there is tension between reconciliation and the disruption of the new. In Australia today, artist-prophets work within the multiplicity of tensions which is typical of contemporary life.

Tacey (1995, 205) takes a romantic view when he gives Australia a role in the global renewal. This continent is at the edge of the known world — it is the
place ‘down under’ and far from the centre of things. Given its history and its geography, Australia is a place symbolic of exile. Australian artist-prophets have a rich cultural heritage on which to draw and much of it relates directly to the land.

Ministry of this place and this time

Walter Brueggemann (2001, 116-7) describes artist-prophets as ordinary people who respond to a need in a particular place and time. ‘They can be discerned wherever people try to live together and show concern for their shared future and identity’ (117).

Their job is not an elite role focused exclusively on otherworld realities. An artist-prophet’s job is integral to the everyday life of the community and it is always from that context that the experience of God (immanent and transcendent) is the focus of their work.

Veronica Brady (1981, 113) states that the task of artist-prophets is not to define God, but to find God in the experiences of everyday life, by ‘interrogating ourselves and our experience of living … where and as we are’. Similarly, David Tacey (2000, 118) claims that ‘the artist’s role is not representation but revelation’, that is, an artist can reveal the ever-present reality of the spiritual dimension of everyday life to those whose spiritual sensibilities have been blunted.
How do artists reveal the spiritual dimension of the mundane? Brady (1981, 112) suggests that artist-prophets must use images which are able to ‘enthrall and persuade’. In my experience, constructing a persuasive image means starting with everyday reality so that the image is life-relevant. In order to enthrall, however, the image must be surprising or moving, that is it must be new territory for viewers. They might experience the ‘wow factor’ or perhaps come to a new understanding. Here again is the essential combination of aesthetic and prophetic.

Reinterpreting the tradition is an important aspect of an artist-prophet’s role. One of the most significant images to be reinterpreted within Catholicism is that of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The challenge is to makes images of Mary which acknowledge both her humanity and her special relationship to the Trinity. In this way images of Mary can be life-relevant life-enhancing.

Re-imagining Mary

Jan Hynes is an Australian artist who has taken on the task of re-imagining Mary with a larrikin spirit. Hynes is not a liturgical artist, but in her 2003 Hynesight exhibition in her hometown of Townsville she shows a notable talent for re-imagining Mary. The exhibition contained a number of paintings of scenes from the infancy narrative of Luke’s gospel. The Visitation: Elizabeth Meets Mary at the C-Bar Over Skinny Decaf Cappuccino and Carrot Cake (fig. 23) is set in a popular café on Townsville’s Promenade overlooking Magnetic Island. Rafael’s Visitation was an historical reference for this painting.
Here are two ordinary women meeting for coffee in a place which is well known to the artist and many of her audience. Mary and Elizabeth are not modish nymphs, but big rawboned country girls with the large hands and strong arms of working people. Elizabeth is rather a lumpish figure, but Mary is beautiful in a statuesque way. She is very pregnant — with big breasts and a big belly which she defines with her rapt gaze and her draped hand. She is a self-possessed and self-sufficient figure. Her traditionally blue dress is in tune with the colours of the background environment: the water in Halifax bay, haze of Magnetic Island and the cloudless sky. She is also connected to blue/grey table in the foreground. She is a grounded figure in a number of ways.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, is a foreground figure — more statue than statuesque. Her skin colour is paler than Mary's and her clothes are brighter; nevertheless, as viewer, I was more conscious of Mary. Elizabeth's whole attention is on Mary, who stands in a relatively central position in the picture plane. Mary seems to be independent, despite the fact that Elizabeth is holding her hand.

Mary's visual relationship to the water, the earth and the sky in this picture places her pregnancy within the scope of the creation story. Luke's infancy narrative makes it clear that the fetal Jesus is the Cosmic Christ through whom all things were made. Just as Mary stands close to the centre of this picture here, she is central to the incarnation and therefore the creation.
The picture evokes laughter from the informed viewer; but there is something 'magnetic' and meaningful about these two biblical women imaged in such a familiar tropical setting. Hynes has succeeded in giving her image of Mary a direct connection with everyday life and a significance which goes beyond physical realities. However, it is not the transcendence of divinity here, but a sense that — beyond the jokes — the incarnation is directly relevant to this place and this time.

In the course of my work for Creative Ministry Resources, I have made several modest attempts to reinterpret Mary. I say 'modest' because the graphics I make for the CMR Internet site are illustrations which are meant as visual aids for anyone involved in liturgy preparation. Like all liturgical art they are an applied art form in the service of the liturgy. Nonetheless, my working assumption is that these illustrations have considerable potential to influence the viewer's perception and evaluation of gospel texts. In my illustration for the feast of the Assumption (fig. 24) I tried to make the image meaningful, engaging and gently challenging.

The gospel text for the Assumption is Luke 1:39-56 which contains Mary's prayer. The Magnificat is the expression of a woman who fully lives the Covenant reality: God has 'lifted up the lowly'. In my illustration, my aim was to touch on two levels of meaning: Mary as an ordinary woman who lived a full

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65 Creative Ministry Resources is an independent company publishing online resources for the Catholic Church in Australia and the USA. I do weekly illustrations for their Sunday gospel readings.
life, and Mary as an iconic figure who has cosmic meaning. To evoke the
ordinariness I use the photograph of an elderly woman who lives in a country
town outside Brisbane. I chose her because she is, as Elizabeth Johnson
(1989, 81) would say, 'not one of the powerful ones of the earth' nor is she 'an
ideal beautiful queen', but 'an insignificant rural woman'. Mary, as a real
woman, lived and died; she is essentially a symbol of life. This is brought out
clearly in one of the prayers of the ancient Byzantine Liturgy for the feast of
the Dormition: 'in your Dormition you did not leave the world, but were joined
to the source of Life' (CCC 966). Mary has reached the fullness of the
heavenly state not by losing her life, but by experiencing life to the full.

In this graphic, it is colour which sets Mary apart: she is the quintessential
child of the Covenant, being wrapped in the rainbow. The rainbow is a
creative symbol in Aboriginal mythology and a symbol of covenant in the
Judeo-Christian tradition. Consequently, here Mary is the rainbow woman —
a child of the land and of the covenant who lives in the light, the colour and
the wonder of God's basileia.

Conclusion

Artist-prophets are not all-knowing and unassailable: their intuitions have
authority, but they are not always reliable because their vision is partial. Their
work is shaped and restricted by their historical and social circumstances.
They work with 'passionate purpose' and they are inspired; but they are also
flawed and accountable.
When feminist artist-prophets work with passion it means that they are driven by their faith in God; by their fidelity to the Christian tradition; by a desire to imaginatively explore, express and stretch the boundaries of that tradition; and by a powerful sense of place-connection and of community-belonging. When they work with purpose it means that they use their skills and talents to nurture faith and community and to make liturgies more inclusive and holistic experiences.

Feminist artist-prophets make images which 'mine the memory' (Brueggemann 2001, 64) of their communities to remind them of the enduring promise of God; but they will also 'spark the imagination' (77) of their communities to enable them to make new meaning and to envisage alternative futures.

In order to engender renewal, artist-prophets need to make images which 'enthrall and persuade' (Brady 1981, 112), and also images which challenge the dominant culture of both church and society. This means that they need to utilise both aesthetic and prophetic approaches. For Australians, this means looking to the Land, to Aboriginal culture and to the feminine for images of God which are life-relevant and life-enhancing.
Chapter Five: Liturgical Art as Prophetic ministry

Fig. 23. Jan Hynes, *The Visitation: Elizabeth Meets Mary at the C-Bar Over Skinny Decaf Cappuccino and Carrot Cake*, 2002, oil on canvas, 120cm x 150cm.

CHAPTER 6:
TRUTH AND REALITY

Integral to the prophetic role of liturgical artists is their ability to make images which are life-relevant and life-enhancing for their communities. Therefore, artist-prophets must be able to draw the 'ancient body of truth' of Christian tradition into relationship with life-world realities (James 1975, 36).

In Chapter 4, I claimed that Truth, Goodness and Beauty are integral to a feminist practice of liturgical art, but that in such a practice truth is brought to earth by reality, goodness by responsibility, and beauty by ugliness. These are the 'big picture' issues and the topic of this chapter focuses on the first, that is, truth and its relationship to the realities of 21st century Australia.

In the first section of this chapter, I examine the implications of encroaching secularism on church life in Australia. My focus here is the liturgy, and I leave the analysis of other important topics, such as church leadership, to others. In the second section, I outline the challenges for the future of liturgy. Then, in the third section, I give a practical example of how a liturgical artist can respond prophetically to the realities of time and place in order to promote renewal and challenge the dominant culture — not just in the church, but also in the wider community.
1. Secular society

Today in Australia, people are voting with their feet by staying away from mainstream Christian churches at an increasing rate. This worrying trend has prompted a number of recent studies and publications. The Christian Research Association published *Believe it or Not: Australian Spirituality and the Churches in the 90’s* (Hughes et al. 1995) in response to the National Social Science Survey of 1993. The association also published *Religion in an Age of Change* (1999). *Build My Church: Trends and Possibilities for Australian Churches* (Kaldor et al. 1999) was written as an interpretation of the data from 1996 National Church Life Survey and the 1996 Catholic Church Life Survey.

Besides the statistical data and its analysis, numerous theologians, other scholars, and journalists have commented on the implications of social and cultural changes on Australian churches, among them are David Tacey, Paul Collins, Chis McGillion and Morag Fraser. Peter Molone and Tony Kelly have spent many years developing an Australian contextual theology. Geraldine Doogue presents the weekly ABC Television programme, *Compass*, which often makes significant contributions to the debate; for example, in 2002 the programme screened a three part documentary series, called *Secular Soul*.

*Secular Soul* claims that in Australia ‘the spiritual is no longer bound up in particular organisational structures, but is free, freely available, freely happening’ (‘Part 1: Spiritual Marketplace’). David Tacey (1995, 11) writes that the sacred is being rediscovered in Australia today; but he warns that this
could easily lead to a 'negative form' of spirituality characterised by 'outbreaks of morbid or infantile religious passion' which he associates with extremist Fundamentalism. More frequently, however, the 'new spirituality' is firmly grounded, by which he means that it is more 'concerned with discovering new and better ways of conducting life and community’ than it is with otherworldly issues (Tacey 2000, 6).

According to the 2001 census, only 20% of the Australian population regularly celebrates Christian liturgy. At the same time, there is a growing interest in Eastern religious practices, and an increasing number of people who are calling themselves atheists. Although the figures show that our society is becoming more secular, Australia is not a godless nation.

Charles Sherlock (1999, 47) suggests that spending an hour listening to Triple J's talk-back radio programme will reveal that 'God in Christ continues to be know in this land, but as one option among others'. Within Christian traditions, there is a 'desire to move away from a merely doctrinal approach to truth, and a renewed emphasis on God as experienced reality' (52) which emphasises the relational and affective aspects of spirituality. Sherlock claims this shift is among theologians as well as committed church members.

2. Choosing alternatives

While the census figures show that there is still a lively interest in spirituality, many Australians are pragmatic and eclectic in their choice of religious beliefs.
They are judging from their everyday experience what works best, instead of relying on traditional Christian teachings. Further, they feel free to move around from one church or spiritual experience to another as the need arises. According to Carol Cusack, this is symptomatic of a radical paradigm shift in which 'the absolute value has slipped off Christianity'. She goes further and suggests that people no longer believe that one religion or set of beliefs is 'true and all of the others must be false' (*Secular Soul* 2002, 'Part1: Spiritual Market Place).

Following on from a survey by some of his master's degree students at Australian Catholic University, Denis McLaughlin (2000) explored the beliefs and values of year 12 students in Catholic schools, and found that 'the dominant spirituality of the young is more creation focused, than redemption centred.' They do not believe in original sin or that 'Jesus' prime mission was a sacrifice for their sins and the sins of others.' McLaughlin concluded that most young people are optimistic about their world, but do not 'see active membership of the institutional church as all that important or relevant'.

While young adults are under-represented in church life, there is evidence of a continuing interest in spirituality among them. The shift represents a move away from institutional forms of church rather than distaste for religious experience (Kaldor et al. 1999, 34). Thousands of Australians, not just the young, are trying spiritual alternatives. Some take up religious experiences offered by organised religions; but of those who take up Buddhist meditation,
for example, not many become Buddhists, and this is typical of the trend (Hughes et al. 1995, 12).

With the new interest in spirituality, religion is becoming a private matter for the individual (Sherlock 1999, 59). The criteria for making choices in the spiritual marketplace are based on particularity and partiality rather than the norms of community values and traditions. The benefits of transpersonal religious experience — stored in the collective memory of traditional faith communities — are no longer widely valued. Further, the core beliefs of the Christian traditions, as experienced primarily in the liturgy, have failed to meet the needs of everyday life in twenty-first century Australia.

Tony Kelly (1999, 68), like many Christians, has serious qualms about the 'new spirituality' if it is simply 'a harmonious inner ecology somewhat undisturbed by history, while implying a notion of subjectivity not sufficiently troubled by the social and historical significance of the Cross.' Kelly's model of 'spirituality' is more challenging. It is based on 'an always fragile form of self-transcending consciousness' but also 'a self-giving and compassionate involvement with others at the point of their — and our own — hopelessness, in the name of a peace not of this world' (68-9).

**Secular alternatives**

Australians who search for spiritual experiences and expressions are now more likely to look away from organised religion to the secular domain. Nature (gardening, ecology, natural health, etc), culture (genealogy, the visual
arts, story telling, etc.) and social issues (the environmental crisis and Aboriginal Reconciliation etc.) are proving to be fertile sources of spiritual renewal (Tacey 2000, 3). In today’s world, ‘spirituality’ might have nothing to do with religion or God. It is sometimes understood to be a mysterious and neglected part of the human makeup which is a rich source of wholeness and wellness (Sherlock 1999, 52).

Ritual still plays an important role in the lives of many Australians who are not active church members. The popularity of the yearly ANZAC day parades, and the many ritual responses to events such as the 1996 Port Arthur tragedy, witness to the efficacy of ritual in Australian life. Times of grieving seem to call for rituals, and rituals call people to gather in solidarity. On the fourth anniversary of the Port Arthur massacre, a memorial was erected on the site to commemorate the thirty-five people who died there. The event drew a crowd of nearly eight hundred people who gathered to remember, to reflect and to mourn.

Even if ritual has no spiritual role, it may have significant cultural and personal meaning. For self-professed atheist Dick Gross, the ritual which welcomed his son into their Jewish community was an 'incredibly moving and very important' experience. However, this was a secular ritual borrowed from traditional sources. Gross respects the ceremonial expertise of traditional religions and has no qualms about borrowing ritual elements for secular purposes because 'the rewards are enormous.' (Secular Soul 2002, 'Part 3: Atheists').
For Civil Celebrant and former Catholic priest John Hill, the ritual content of
civil ceremonies is perhaps the richest source of both spiritual and community
experience for many Australians. He claims that 'people cry out for spirituality'
and the civil ceremonies, when 'properly performed' have the spiritual depth
to give the 'meaning and purpose' that people are looking for. The institutional
church, he claims, fails because it is too dogmatic and unrealistic to satisfy
contemporary needs for spirituality or community. (Secular Soul 2002, 'Part 2:
Ceremonies').

Nowadays, when Australians want rituals to mark the important events of life,
they are more likely to seek the services of civil celebrants to perform these
life rituals. Now, in Australia, 55% of all marriages and an increasing
proportion of the funerals, are performed by civil celebrants, according to the
International College of Celebrancy (2003). The role of celebrants is 'to
officiate at ceremonies of beauty and power which would be effective in the
lives of individuals and which would add to the general happiness and stability
of society.'

Personal choice and personal integrity are the hallmarks of this secular
alternative. According to Dally Messenger, people are looking for 'authentic,
honest, personal' rituals. They do not want to celebrate rituals in the context
of belief systems to which they cannot give assent. Messenger is a civil
celebrant who describes his role as 'resource person', 'facilitator', and 'a
reader of people's values and beliefs'. He claims, optimistically, that Civil
Celebrants offer a service which is ideologically neutral (Secular Soul 2002, 'Part 2: Ceremonies').

Australians are making their own choices about who will be celebrant, where their ritual will take place and what will be said and done in the ritual. Personal secular rituals are being devised not only for weddings and funerals, but also for commitment ceremonies for same sex couples, for infant naming, for bar mitzvah ceremonies, and the list keeps growing.

**Christian alternatives**

While interest has been growing away from Christianity, there is at least one area of growth within the Christian tradition in Australia. Census figures show that Pentecostal churches are thriving (Hughes et al 1995, 10). Moreover, while the population of the mainstream churches is aging, that of the Pentecostal churches is much younger (Kaldor et al 1999, 37).

According to David Tacey, the Fundamentalist theology of some of the Pentecostal denominations attract those who are in crisis, who do not have the energy to do their own thinking and are ready to take a 'package deal' (Secular Soul 2002, 'Part 1: Spiritual Market Place'). While the need for stability and certainty are reasons for the popularity of Pentecostal churches, this is not the complete picture, and there are other reasons for their success. The sense of community-belonging that they foster is compelling, along with their commitment to outreach, their witness to family life and their attention to small-group faith formation.
Further, the lively and active style of their worship, with live bands on stage, is attractive to young people. The sensual and emotional appeal of their services mirrors what is on offer in society. Because of the contemporaneity and accessibility of its style, rather than its content, Pentecostal worship enables young people to experience faith in a concrete way. The tone of the services encourages both the cathartic release of emotion and direct personal spiritual experiences. These more liminal aspects of worship are almost always missing from the liturgies of mainstream churches (Secular Soul 2002, 'Part 1: Spiritual Market Place').

The Pentecostal churches do not enjoy complete success, however, because the growing population is also a shifting one (Kaldor et al 1999, 40). This might mean that for many they fulfill a temporary need only. In addition, the limitations of their theology make them too narrow to be a permanent solution for the crisis in Christian faith in Australia.

3. The way ahead for Christian liturgy

I agree with Tacey (2000, 11) when he suggests that 'to express religious life consciously and to celebrate it publicly is the best insurance policy we have against future outbreaks of morbid or infantile religious regression'. There is a real fear that, outside the safeguards of Tradition, the secular choices that people make can go badly wrong. These choices focus on the personal and authentic, the sensual, and emotive. The rituals can lack a genuine sense of
community-belonging and the safeguards of a tested values system held in common. Consequently, they can become merely self-indulgent expressions of personal emotion and their spirituality can lack the nuanced, textured depths that tradition and community can provide. On the other hand, secular ritual makers have opportunities for creative and innovative methods which are not always available to mainstream liturgists.

The alternatives that people are choosing offer the Australian Catholic Church five major liturgical challenges about making more imaginative, flexible, welcoming, and life-relevant celebrations. The first is to celebrate liturgy with imagination, that is, with emotion, sensuality and a certain amount of spontaneity.

The second challenge is to make liturgies and liturgical environments welcoming and enriching in order to nurture a profound sense of community-belonging. This is vital for parish liturgies, but it is also important for weddings, funerals and baptisms when the assembly has large numbers of un-churched participants. A strong sense of community-belonging can give powerful witness of living Christian values to the wider community.

The third challenge is to change the common perception that being Christian means only 'going to Church on Sunday'. While the centrality of the liturgy to community life and the importance of Sunday Eucharist is a given, the common perceptions of the place and time of worship must be reviewed. The richness of the ritual traditions of the mainstream Christian churches need to
be experienced in contexts outside the local parish church, which is now foreign territory to most Australians. As well as trying to draw people into the celebrating spaces, the Church needs to go out to where most people are. The un-churched majority will then see the 'remnant' celebrating liturgy in vital and pleasurable ways in public spaces. It will see Christians praying together outside the traditional, and morally binding, times for liturgy - in places and at times which are accessible to the lives of ordinary Australians. Moreover, providing we have the will, the skills and the imagination, the secular majority will see that our ancient traditions can be continually renewed.

The fourth challenge is to make liturgies relevant to contemporary Australian life. This would require the creative reworking of traditional material — for example sin and redemption — in the context of 'real life' issues such as land rights and conservation. This could make liturgies more 'grounded' and more able to engage the whole person, while at the same time providing the necessary environment for encounters between persons and God within the safeguards of community life.

The fifth challenge is to make non-liturgical rituals, which are not prescribed by canon law, more important in the daily life of the Church. There is room within such rituals for spontaneity and originality. It is here that creative experimentation and innovation can safely take place.

In the following passages I outline my efforts to respond to these five challenges through my practice of liturgical art. I show how liturgy can be
more imaginative and inviting, with the help of artwork. Further, I show how creative liturgies and rituals in public spaces can witness to Christian values and be relevant to contemporary Australian life.

4. National Catholic Education Conference

In the year 2001, I was artist-in-residence for the National Catholic Education Conference (NCEC) held in Brisbane at the University of Queensland. The title of the conference was 'Growing in Wisdom and Grace'. Mayne Hall was the gathering space and, artistically, it was a challenge for various reasons — not the least of which was the wine-coloured carpet. For their 'official' colours, the organisers chose dark green and orange which are hues commonly found in the Australian bush. Integrating these hues into a colour scheme which would be lively and expressive in that space was not easy.

'Conversation Circles', instead of the traditional discussion groups, were an innovative feature of the NCEC process. In response I used a number of circles in the artwork including motifs on the stage backdrops (fig. 25) and floor circles to mark significant spaces in the foyer (fig. 26) and the gathering space (fig. 27). I overlaid the circles with water imagery on the stage backdrops and the motif was echoed on the inside and outside of the windows (fig. 28).

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66 The title is from Lk 2:52.
I hoped that the imagery would suggest that the conference was like a gathering at a waterhole — an occasion for refreshment, socialising and trading in information and goods. Since Mayne Hall was situated close to the heart of the campus of the University of Queensland, there were many opportunities for passers-by to see what was happening.

Mayne Hall was a place where we gathered to pray as well as to do the work of the conference and the purpose of the artwork was to suggest that this secular space was also sacred ground. Within the space, the music, the colour, and the interactive imagery, all helped to make the work and the rituals joyful and engaging (fig. 29)\textsuperscript{67}. One participant, Morag Fraser, described the experience in the following words:

\begin{quote}
... the occasion is also fresh, responsive to its immediate surrounding, and alive. There are no dim festoons of tradition botching its vivacity. It is overflowing with the local, the immediate, things of the antipodean earth. A certain egalitarian humour. When the ceremonies begin at dusk in the late warmth of Brisbane’s tropical spring, you walk into the hall of Queensland University, co-opted for the occasion, and find it hung with tropical colour. Turquoise, bougainvillea, emerald … The liturgy is grand, but subtly attuned to time and place. No triumphalism here. The music is local. Some of it Aboriginal, most of it written in Queensland … the people take up the antiphonal shape of the music with spontaneity and enthusiasm … joy. (Fraser 2003, 66-7)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{67} It is curious that in Figure 3 most of the men are preoccupied and most of the women are engaged in worship. I think this photograph shows how women feel more comfortable about being demonstrative than men.
Fraser also commented on the model of community which she experienced at the NCEC, the atmosphere reminded her of the ‘Catholic tribal gatherings’ of her youth (65). The sense of community-belonging gave clear and alluring witness to the wider community (66).

There were several ways in which the participants could interact with the imagery. During the conference I was busy taking digital photographs of people and events. As often as possible during the day I would print them out and paste them into a book of blank pages which was specially made for the NCEC. Over the four days the book filled up and the participants were fascinated with it, watching avidly to see what images would appear next (fig. 30). The book was both a visual record of the day's events and an alternative expression of meaning: it was meant to be a relief from words which tend to become the sole mode of meaning-making at conferences.

A 'storyboard' gave the participants an opportunity to express their reactions about the day's events directly. For this purpose, I experimented again with the pyramid shape (fig. 31), but this time I used one four sided pyramid. Each side represented a key conference question. The questions started with 'What does it mean to be …' and concluded with '… in the 21st century'. The first question was about being 'a human being', the second about being 'an Australian', the third about being 'an Australian Catholic' and the fourth was about being 'an Australian Catholic Educator'. The pyramid storyboard was painted in blackboard paint, and the participants drew and wrote their reactions to the day's events in coloured chalks which are traditional teaching
tools. Photographs of the comments were taken each day and pasted into the book.

The conference was a highly collaborative experience and I worked closely with the liturgical and the musical directors\textsuperscript{68}. The daily rituals, most of which were non-liturgical, were designed to cater for the whole person. Colour, music and the scent of sandalwood\textsuperscript{69} from oil burners (fig. 27) pervaded the space, stimulated the senses and evoked emotions. There was a lively and uplifting spirit among the participants at the NCEC. The high level of engagement in the rituals left no doubt that they were authentic and relevant.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The rituals and liturgies at the NCEC had the scent of Brisbane on them - both literally and metaphorically. There was something of a partial and perspectival approach which marked them out as local and therefore different without in any sense being disconnected from the tradition. Here, art and reality met and there was beauty and there was pleasure, but these were responsibly contextualised: the artwork (in combination with music and the other liturgical arts) were designed to support the serious work of the conference.

\textsuperscript{68} Liturgical director was Patricia Ryan and the musical director was Michael Mangan.

\textsuperscript{69} When consulted, the Indigenous community recommended sandalwood as the appropriate scent for the geographical area.
In this context what are the criteria for evaluating art? Here I find Margaret Miles' (1985) three criteria useful: 'the sense of importance and delight' they stir (149); the quality of the personal messages received from them; and the extent to which they are 'life-orienting and –enhancing' (6). I think Morag Fraser's comments respond to all of these criteria.

My involvement in the National Catholic Education Conference showed me how the 'ancient body of truth' of Christian tradition can be a source of spiritual renewal for Australia. William James' image of continuity also allows for change\textsuperscript{70}. Liturgy can be the meeting place of truth and reality only if it is both true to tradition and relevant to contemporary life. That is the challenge, but it does not have to be a grim challenge, as the NCEC experience showed. A feminist practice of liturgical art, which is inclusive and holistic, is capable of drawing truth and reality into creative relationship.

\textsuperscript{70} This issue was discussed in some detail in Chapter 1.
Fig. 25. National Catholic Education Conference, 2001 at Mayne Hall, University of Queensland.

Fig. 26. Floor circle and book stand in the foyer of Mayne Hall.

Fig. 27. Floor circle and scent burners inside Mayne Hall.
Fig. 28. The window banner designs reflected what was happening inside.

Fig. 29. The participants responded with energy to the ritual experiences.
Chapter Six: Truth and Reality

Fig. 30. The book of photographs was engaging to many.

Fig. 31. The participants used the blackboard to explore the conversations further.
CHAPTER 7:
GOODNESS AND RESPONSIBILITY

In this chapter I look at the second of the 'big picture' issues. My focus again is Australian society and I look at the sense of responsibility - the ethical approach - which is an integral part of an inclusive and holistic feminist practice of liturgical art. In order to be responsible, artist-prophets must develop their ability-to-respond to the major contemporary issues in society. In this way Goodness can be brought to earth by responsibility. The ethical approach of liturgical artists is inflamed by inspiration and expressed imaginatively. It is underpinned by a desire for renewal, by the courage to challenge the status quo and a fundamental sense of Christian hope.

The crisis in the Christian churches, which I outlined in the last chapter, is symptomatic of wider social problems. Paul Collins suggests that the preeminent problem in Australian post-colonial society is the 'collapse of our meaning structures and our struggle to find an ethic governing our lives'\(^\text{71}\). Pope John Paul II (1990, 2) calls this ethic a 'morally coherent world view' which he equates with respect for all forms of life, especially human. Australians are still hampered by hang-over colonial 'claim and conquer' and 'power over' attitudes which not only shape interpersonal relationships but also underpin patriarchal systems like the churches. Further, they influence the way Australians typically cope with gender, race and land - three of the

\(^{71}\) From the ABC Television programme entitled God's Earth (1998), which Collins narrated.
most challenging contemporary issues. One of the arenas in which these issues can be engaged creatively is Christian liturgy.

As I outline the three major post-colonial issues of gender, race and the land, I emphasise how inextricably interrelated they are. Then, in the last section, I give a practical example of how a liturgical artist can help to engender a sense of place-connection and community-belonging in response to these pressing issues of contemporary Australia.

1. Gender

In the Catholic Church, the theology and practice of liturgical ministry is flawed by gender discrimination. This stems from unhelpful dualisms, for example oppositions between heaven and earth, spirit and body, and male and female. One result is that women are excluded from ordained ministry, with its unique sacramental role and its intrinsic authority.

The feminist movement has a significant influence in academia, even in the schools of theology in Australia. Feminist theology, as situated within the scope of liberation theology, plays a major role in theological debate. In the public domain, however, the major challenge to the hegemony of patriarchy in the Catholic Church has arisen from the recent sexual abuse scandals involving clergy, and the inadequate responses by some Bishops. The respect and awe in which Bishops and priests were held in the past made their authority unassailable; but now they are, justly, being held accountable. As these abuses are surfacing, there is an opportunity to reform the culture of
the church with particular regard to the leadership role of Bishops and the pastoral and liturgical roles of priests. Since male wisdom has been seen to fail, there is a window of opportunity here for women's wisdom to play a role in this much needed reform process.

It would seem that the Australian bishops do acknowledge that Catholic women have wisdom to impart. In 1996, a research project was launched by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes to analyse the participation of women in the church. As a result, Woman and Man was published in 1999. Most of the participants in the project were women, and a wide range of women's voices can be heard in this report.

By far the greatest number of barriers to women's participation, as presented in the written submissions, is related to patriarchal church structures, which are seen as anachronistic (80). The church generally is viewed as out of touch with everyday realities, especially those of young women (97). Further, because of its gendered nature, the church often mistakes cultural norms for revelation (126).

Inclusive liturgical imagery, language and structures are major concerns in many submissions (97-). Support for the ordination of women is mentioned many times.

There was a strong request for the Church to recognise that women were created in the image of God and that their vocations to the priesthood be welcomed. To achieve such an outcome, it was
proposed that the issue of the ordination of women be explored in the broader context of an examination of the nature of ministry and that the question of women's ordination remain open for discussion and further discernment. (Research Management Group 1999, 127)

The lack of ordained women is felt in the Aboriginal community (248) where women 'are already doing a priest's job' (249). There is a desire among Aboriginal women for the Church to 'ordain women as deacons' and that 'the ban which excludes women from preaching be lifted' (258). Further, the report states that 'across all groups, there was a call for many of the issues concerning ministry and priesthood to be re-examined' and 'it was felt that the Church should ordain female priests and allow married priests' (329).

Women's life experience is cited as a repository of untapped wisdom about sexuality (128). However, it is noted that the church has been unwilling to listen to women, especially Aboriginal women (249). The researchers note that the 'overriding feelings [of the participants] are ones of pain, anguish, anger and alienation' which 'result from the strong sense of women's marginalisation and struggle, disenfranchisement and powerlessness, irrelevance and lack of acknowledgment within the Church' (174).

In response to *Woman and Man*, the bishops established the Commission for Australian Catholic Women. One of the commission's recent initiatives is the National Women Leaders Conference to be held in Cairns in 2005. The conference is an acknowledgement of the many women who hold positions of power and authority in Catholic Church agencies. Presumably, the gendered complexities of those positions will be a major agenda of the conference. In
my own archdiocese, the Office for the Participation of Women was established in response to the recommendations from the Brisbane Archdiocesan Synod in 2003. These are clearly interesting times for women in the Australian church, but there are many women for whom 'pain, anguish, anger and alienation' are still their primary experience of church.

Veronica Brady (1992) describes women who are dissatisfied with present 'definitions of value and purpose' and church order, as pilgrim people who have moved to the frontier in search of 'something more' (24). Their journey is shaped by attentiveness to the exigencies of the present moment, especially its apprehensions and anxieties. Brady sees the frontier wilderness as a 'dangerous place', but one which offers new possibilities (30) and alternative, challenging wisdom (31). This wisdom is centred on 'love and service' rather than power (25).

While Brady does not make a virtue of powerlessness, she does claim that women's experience of powerlessness can become a useful attribute since power can be a corrupting influence: 'women mostly have been able to sit more easily by the wells of life, to know what it is to be solitary, less pressured to conform because less powerful socially, economically and politically' (30). Brady is saying that the new wisdom, emerging from women's journey to the frontier, values 'love and service' over power. I hope she is right and that 'love and service' is also on the agenda when the women of power in the Catholic church meet in Cairns in 2005.
The story of the Exodus provides Brady with a useful metaphor. The author aligns this archetypal story of redemption in the desert with women's struggle in the church; but she also names it as a particularly Australian experience of God (24). There are five stages in her description: scandal, call, journey, encounter and witness.

The scandal of unjust, oppressive authority and the resulting affliction mark the first stage. Part of the affliction is the realisation that those in authority are not always trustworthy (26). The second stage is the divine call to journey, that is, the dangerous but creative shift from the known to the unknown, which Brady calls 'new country' (27). The third involves wandering in the desert — being on the move while waiting for new understandings and experiences of God (28-9). In the fourth stage, there is a redemptive encounter with God who can be 'violent, urgent, transforming'. Redemption and renewal happen in a place which reflects the nature of God: the desert is both dangerous and exhilarating. Brady uses an image from women's experience to describe the process of redemption — a terrible and wonderful, painful and tender birthing (27-30). In the fifth stage it is the task of women, like Miriam, to give witness to the redemption — 'to dance that prophecy … to shout for joy at what we have heard and seen'. Further, it is their task to proclaim the 'revolution of values' and the new ways of loving, worshipping and serving. The 'secret wisdom' gained in the process of redemption is sometimes countercultural and not always welcomed by the authorities. The response to redemption is ecstatic and spontaneous, but the message makes the messenger vulnerable (31-2).
It is this last stage of the redemptive journey which makes the clearest link with my project. Miriam does the work of an artist-prophet when she witnesses to redemption using music and dance. The ecstatic and the vulnerable aspects of witness fall within the categories of pleasure and responsibility. The work of the artist-prophet is an ecstatic witness, but the prophetic nature of the witness can sometimes make life in the church risky for artists, especially for women liturgical artists.

2. Race

Recent political history has proved that Australia is not the tolerant society that white middle class Australians believed it to be a decade ago. The One Nation political movement uncovered a virulent layer of intolerance below the surface of our society and the more recent refugee scandals have shown that the prejudices that underpinned the White Australia Policy are still at large. Moreover, the statistics relating to Aboriginal deaths in custody are a stark reminder that the structures that support white Australia are oppressive to black Australia. Aboriginal activists bear witness that 'power over' principles are still active in the worldview of white Australia.

Two Aboriginal women who write critically of white Australia are sociologist Aileen Moreton-Robinson, and theologian Anne Pattel-Gray. Moreton-Robinson (2000) calls on non-Aboriginal Australians (particularly feminists) to acknowledge how 'whiteness' dominates their worldview and shapes their discourse on justice. She claims that white feminists cannot speak for women
of colour because there are some differences between them which are 'incommensurable and irreducible' (151). She challenges white feminists to 'relinquish some power' by giving the interests of Indigenous women 'some priority' (186). The author particularly stresses that for Aboriginal women race has primacy over gender in their struggle (173).

Pattel-Gray (1991) is suspicious of the rhetoric of multiculturalism and reconciliation in Australia today. She claims that the uniqueness and ethnicity of Aboriginal people is not recognised, and that assimilation, rather than a respect for difference, is still the dominant 'white' attitude (82). The Aboriginal people, says Pattel-Gray, are being crucified on the cross and the churches are part of the system of oppression (93).

These views were echoed in Woman and Man (1999). Aboriginal women expressed a desire for an affirming, 'loving image of God' (247) as opposed to the missionary God who condemned Aboriginal cultural practices. Aboriginal Catholics reported a lack of connection between faith, life and culture (246). This disconnection is especially felt in predominantly white parish church communities, which were viewed as exclusive and patronising (241). It was felt that Aboriginal youth, particularly, had no voice in the white middle class church (244). Issues of race, rather than gender, were clearly primary for the Aboriginal women who participated in this research.

Pattel-Gray (1991, 78-) points to the growing movement towards an Indigenous reading of Christian theology as a means of redressing the
imbalance created by the 'White Saviour' syndrome. Further, she suggest that Aboriginal culture can be a source of empowerment, and spiritual renewal, for all Australians. Because of its land centred spirituality, Aboriginal culture can provide ecological as well as spiritual leadership (5-7).

Rainbow Spirit Theology was published in 1997 as a result of the discussions of a group of Indigenous Christians who gathered twice in North Queensland, to 'explore their Aboriginal culture as a source of mystery, meaning and theology' (vii). The authors, the Rainbow Spirit Elders, represented six Aboriginal peoples and ministry in four Christian traditions. As the title suggests, the elders did not mean their book to be a comprehensive theology but a starting point for further discussion.

Some of the main ideas arising from Rainbow Spirit Theology are:

(a) God the Creator: Creation, rather than Redemption, is the primary focus. The Rainbow Spirit image of God is used to refer to life and rebirth. The traditional representation of the Rainbow Spirit is a snake, and this image of God was misunderstood by Christian missionaries who taught Aboriginal people that it was evil. The Rainbow Spirit image is now reclaimed and reinterpreted 'in the light of the gospel'. The Rainbow Spirit is the source of life, of all living things and the 'guardian of the law, the land and the sacred places in the land'. It is acknowledged and accepted that the Rainbow Spirit

72 It must be said that Norman Habel, a non-Indigenous Lutheran theologian, was scribe for the group and he acknowledges that even though the 'explicit wording of the text' (viii) is largely his own, the ideas belong to the Aboriginal elders.
can be 'portrayed and experienced as powerful and frightening' but this is offset by the sense of 'mystery and majesty' which evoke respect rather than fear (13-4)\textsuperscript{73}.

(b) Primacy of Land: land is at the centre of creation.

The Rainbow Spirit draws all 'life-forces', including human beings, from the land which is called mother (32-3). Human beings, however, have a special responsibility to cooperate 'with the Creator Spirit in replenishing the earth' (32). Aboriginal people have a unique role in this land: they are custodians of the sacred places from which their sacred realities, for example identity, kinship, social structures, and spirituality, have their origins (39-50). Due to colonial exploitation these sacred places and realities have been 'desecrated' (44). The land is crying out in suffering because the right relationship between human beings and the land, that is service, has been disrupted by the colonial practice of ownership (42-). The rift between human beings and the land is echoed in society where right relationships between persons are disrupted. 'Confrontation and competition', rather than cooperation, are foremost, and one result is that Indigenous people are oppressed and disenfranchised (6). The way to healing is through the Reconciliation process, where past wrongs are recognised and issues of land rights are justly resolved (73). This process hinges on the adoption of an alternative values system based on both cooperation and care of the land. Further, it relies on the work of Christ, who is 'calling us, inviting us to be a part of that healing, that reconciliation' (69-70).

\textsuperscript{73} I made reference to the Rainbow Spirit in Chapter 5 when I described my illustration for the Assumption of Mary, the mother of Jesus (fig. 24).
(c) Holistic approach: *there is no division between heaven and earth* (75).

Life means 'life on the land' and the land is the locus of both physical and spiritual realities (23). When Christ became flesh, therefore, 'God camped among us' (59). Salvation is for the whole of creation, so when Christ died and rose it was for 'both us and our land' (69). Rainbow Spirit theology gathers its wisdom from every aspect of life: from lived experience; from Tradition; from the Gospel; and from hope in the future (15-).

(d) Continuity: *God was always present in Australia.*

God, the Rainbow Spirit, was present in Australia before Europeans arrived and Christian missionaries were wrong to claim that they were bringing God to the Aborigines (11). Christ was at work in the sacred and traditional stories and ceremonies that have been handed down for centuries (66). The land is the ancient and spiritual link between Indigenous Australians, the ancestors in the Dreaming and God (12). God's message is not mediated through Western theology, rather 'the Spirit of God is speaking to and through Aboriginal Australians' (6).

(e) Spiritual leadership: *Rainbow Spirit theology is for all Australians.*

Rainbow Spirit theology is 'the voice of the Creator Spirit addressed to all Australians' (27). The primary task of this theology is 'to mould a new spirituality that will bring healing' to Indigenous Australians by liberating them from the oppressive culture of colonial Christianity. The secondary task is to help white Australians to 'free themselves from European cultural bondage in which their theology is imprisoned' (5-6).
These ideas are not unique to Rainbow Spirit Theology, some arise again and again in contemporary Australian scholarship and art where there is an orientation towards ecology and justice. For example, the Earth Bible project is sponsored by the Flinders University School of Theology. The task of the project is to produce ecojustice readings of major sections of the Bible. This alternative reading of the Christian tradition is partly inspired by the 'profound Earth consciousness' of Aboriginal Australians and other Indigenous peoples who have 'a sense of kinship with the land as a spiritual source of their being.' (Habel 2000, 26).

Some Indigenous Australians express 'Earth consciousness' as an overt challenge. In their vision statement, the popular Yothu Yindi (2003) rock band claims a prophetic role for Indigenous people. Most of the members of the band belong to the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land and the statement situates these people on the world stage alongside all other Indigenous people of the world. Their shared status as responsible stewards of the planet, which they call 'Mother Earth', is identified as their common bond. A sense of urgency underpins the message of the statement: this generation is facing the last chance to save the world through recourse to ancient wisdom which involves living with, rather than conquering, the earth. The statement ends with a pledge, by the band, to work for ‘Freedom,’ which suggests that both the rights of humans and the rights of ‘Mother Earth’ are taken into account. Social justice, ecology and the feminine principle are inextricably interwoven there.
Chapter Seven: Goodness and Responsibility

The Earth Bible project places theology in an ‘Earth justice’ context (Habel 2000, 26), which encompasses both the natural world and human society. However, conventional Christian theology places human beings at the centre of creation. So it is not surprising that Pope John Paul II places ecology in a social justice context in his message for the 1990 World Day of Peace. John Paul II acknowledges that ‘many ethical values, fundamental to the development of a peaceful society, are particularly relevant to the ecological question’ (7). He points out that world ‘peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources’ which leads to ‘a progressive decline in the quality of life’ (1). Here the interests of nature and the interests of human beings are interdependent; but the focus is always humanity. It follows that the most challenging aspect of an ‘Earth consciousness’ for Christianity is that human beings are not the centre of creation.

Like John Paul II, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (2002) aligns ecology and social justice. The Bishops claim that ‘our relationship with the land and all of its people will not be fully healed until the relationship between Indigenous and other Australians is healed’. For white middle class Australians like me this requires ‘a conversion, or change of heart’ and mind. In my role as a feminist artist-prophet it requires an ethical stance, not in terms of an esoteric ideal of goodness, but one which arises from the sense of responsibility I feel for the needs of my own particular place and time. This
means responding to the gender, race and land issues which are the greatest challenges facing Australians in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

3. Gender, race and land

It is my contention that gender, race and land are not three separate issues but three parts of the one issue. Moreover, neither gender nor race are the primary issue, but land.

Previously in this chapter I have mentioned how Veronica Brady (1981) uses the term 'The Great Refusal'. It is here that she makes the link between gender, race and land. 'The Great Refusal' represents 'a flight from the instinctual and intuitive', in other words, from nature (62). In this term, Brady aligns the fear of women, sexuality and indigenous culture with fear of the land (95). It is because of the primacy of nature in these arguments that I prefer to use the term 'land-angst'.

Land-angst is powerfully evident in the recent film \textit{Rabbit Proof Fence}\textsuperscript{74} in which the fence represents the Australian urge to control the forces of nature. The fence is also a metaphor signifying the destructive, but ultimately futile attempts by white Australians to destroy indigenous culture. The film focuses on a brutal government policy\textsuperscript{75} to separate 'half-caste' children from their

\textsuperscript{74} The film was released in 2002. It is based on the book, \textit{Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence} written by Doris Pilkington Garimara.

\textsuperscript{75} Australian authorities began removing Aboriginal children early in the nineteenth century, and the practice went on into the 1970s. The best estimates of children taken are between 45 000 and 55 000, mainly between 1910 and 1970.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in order to assimilate them into white society. This unenlightened social experiment did untold damage to thousands of Australian Indigenous people who are known today as the 'Stolen Generations'.

*Rabbit Proof Fence* tells the true story of three young Aboriginal girls who defied government policy by walking 1500 miles through a forbidding terrain to return home. With courage, determination and bush savvy, they outwitted and evaded the authorities for months. Ironically, they used the rabbit-proof fence to guide them home, thereby subverting a European technology of control. Issues of both race and gender speak loudly in the film. Nevertheless, the overarching symbolism is the fence which relates primarily to the control and exploitation of land.

**Land**

According to the World Commission on Water for the 21st Century, over half of the world's major rivers are either heavily polluted and/or drying up in their lower reaches because of overuse. There is a critical diminution of wetlands and freshwater biodiversity on the planet, which has caused an alarming number of people to become environmental refugees in recent years. In response to this trend, and at the behest of the Government of Tajikistan, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2003 as the International Year of Freshwater.
The international focus on water was timely for Australia which, as I wrote this chapter, was facing one of the worst droughts in its recorded history. The drought caused a dramatic depletion of River Red gum trees along the Murray River in South Australia. The Murray is Australia’s largest river and its regulation has caused its ecosystems to decline at an alarming rate over the last decade. During the drought, bush fires burnt out 60% of the Kosciuszko National Park in New South Wales.

The environmental crisis is clearly a major concern for some heads of Christian churches. In 2002 John Paul II and Bartholomew I\textsuperscript{76} wrote the Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics which again placed ecology in the context of world peace and social justice. The responsibility for 'the degradation of some basic natural resources such as water, air and land' is placed at the door of 'an economic and technological progress which does not recognize and take into account its limits.' It seems that disembodied forces are at work; but these leaders acknowledge, using theological allusions to original sin, that human beings are responsible:

\begin{quote}
At the beginning of history, man and woman sinned by disobeying God and rejecting His design for creation. Among the results of this first sin was the destruction of the original harmony of creation. If we examine carefully the social and environmental crisis which the world community is facing, we must conclude that we are still betraying the mandate God has given us: to be stewards called to collaborate with God in watching over creation in holiness and wisdom. (John Paul II & Bartholomew I 2002).
\end{quote}
Human sin, it would appear, is at the heart of the original dualism, that is, the distancing of God from creation.

The centrality of human beings in creation is never in doubt in the leaders' declaration: we alone among creatures are 'marked' with a 'resemblance' to God. Human beings have a special role in creation: 'we have been placed by God in the world in order to cooperate with Him in realizing more and more fully the divine purpose for creation.' It seems the patriarchs don't think of human beings as part of 'the world' because we were 'placed' into it by God.

'Stewardship' is the model of responsibility here, and it is used to mean collaboration with God in the maintenance of creation. Only human beings have 'the mandate' to do this. Although, there is nothing here of *dominion* over and the *exploitation* of nature, nonetheless the centrality of humanity within creation is emphasised.

The Australian Bishops' social justice statement for 2002, *A New Earth: The Environmental Challenge*, describes the relationship between humans and creation in much more approachable terms, and the centrality of humans is less emphatically stated. The Bishops write that 'a relationship of kinship exists among all of God's creatures.' They look to the Christian tradition for precedents and quote St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint for ecology, who 'sang of the sun, the moon, the stars, the wind, the water and fire as brothers

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76 Bartholomew I is the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople and he is commonly known as the green patriarch.
and sisters, and of our sister, Mother Earth.’ They also look to the ancient
wisdom of this land when they acknowledge the ‘special ecological
significance of Indigenous Australians’ kinship with the land’ (6). The Bishops
state unequivocally that human beings are part of God’s creation’ and
‘connected with all creatures, the natural world, indeed the whole universe’
(3). The special role of human beings in creation is responsible stewardship,
and the task of Christians today is to attend to the urgent need for
‘reconciliation with all creation’ (4).

The Rainbow Spirit Elders (1997) share some of these views; but their
understanding of the status of human beings and their relationship to creation
is not clear. It is apparent, however, that they place land at the centre of
creation. First, they say that a person’s spirit is ‘planted’ in the land by the
Creator Spirit (32). Then they write that human beings are ‘created from the
land by the Creator Spirit and eventually return to that Spirit, who is present in
the land’ (33). Later, they say that it is the body and not the spirit which
remains in the land after death (33-4). While this is very confusing, it may
reflect the diversity within the group of elders who were involved in the project
and the open-ended nature of their work. Nevertheless, the land is
consistently central to their thinking, just as it is to that prominent Indigenous
spokesperson, Galarrwuy Yunipingu.

Yunupingu (1996) is not concerned about drawing Indigenous and Christian
religion together. He describes Aboriginal spirituality as ‘all tied up with the
land’. ‘The Aboriginal Spirit’ he writes ‘is born out of a water hole’. The spirit
is born from the land and the land gives the spirit to a newborn baby and the baby is named after some aspect of land, for example a waterhole or a tree (5-6).

The relationship between persons is through the land because they come from the land and will go back to it when they die. The land is the meeting place between his bones and the bones of his ancestors so that he feels ‘a part of a link that started over 60 000 years ago and will continue forever’ (6). ‘Our relationship with the land’ says Yunupingu, ‘is much closer spiritually, physically, mentally, than any other relationship I know of.’ He describes the land in terms of a mother who ‘feeds and nurtures’ and provides for all the needs of a child including wellbeing, value and meaning (8). The land cannot be owned, but on the contrary ‘it owns us’ (7). Guardianship of the land is part of traditional wisdom which makes Aboriginal people smarter than those who proclaim themselves the owners of this country (10).

One of the fundamental beliefs underpinning the Earth Bible project is that the earth has intrinsic value. Human beings are just one group in the Earth community and yet they are responsible for the violent oppression of much of that community. The justice that the project seeks is not social justice, but the broader, more inclusive, ‘Earth justice’ (Habel 2000, 26).

Earth is understood to be the subject, rather than the topic, of the text in an Earth Bible reading of scripture (34). The project is critical of traditional readings because they 'have a strong tendency to devalue Earth' (25).
Further, the project is critical of the biblical texts themselves: Prov 10-24, for example, shows 'that the Earth community is viewed as being in the service of humanity' (28).

The core idea that human beings are at the centre of creation underpins and justifies the colonial values of 'claim and conquer' and 'power over'. Living out these values means that all privilege is enjoyed and no responsibility is taken; but this is certainly not the contemporary message of the two church leaders mentioned above:

> Respect for creation stems from respect for human life and dignity. It is on the basis of our recognition that the world is created by God that we can discern an objective moral order within which to articulate a code of environmental ethics. In this perspective, Christians and all other believers have a specific role to play in proclaiming moral values and in educating people in ecological awareness, which is none other than responsibility towards self, towards others, towards creation. (John Paul II & Bartholomew I 2002).

Without displacing human beings from centre stage, these leaders are identifying 'ecological awareness' as a vital role for 'Christians and all other believers'. The common declaration has some profoundly satisfying messages, but its presupposition of the centrality of human beings in creation is difficult to sustain in today's world, as Paul Collins shows in *God's Earth* (1995).
What 'land'?

So far, I have not been specific about what I mean when I use the term 'land'. The difficulty is that the term can mean many things. 'Land' is both an empirical reality and also a construction of the mind.

In a recent exhibition of Australian landscape painting called *Landscape as Metaphor*, this notion was acknowledged and explored by fourteen contemporary Australian artists, including Judy Watson. Curator Sue Smith describes landscape as ‘a construct of the human imagination … created in our minds — the meaning we see in the land is through the metaphors we make of it.’ Here she is using 'land' as the empirical reality and 'landscape' as the ideational construct. While I am unwilling to divide the term in such a way, I fully support her understanding. The dividing line, in lived reality, between 'land' as concrete and 'land' as metaphorical is impossible to locate, however. Perhaps it is even futile to attempt such an exercise.

This lack of clear distinction can be observed in Judy Watson's painting *Low Tide Walk* (fig. 32), which evokes a sense of ancient myths and modern realities. Mud and sand, marked by the ebb and flow of the tide are represented here with telling economy. Among the watermarks, like a line of crab tracks, is a meandering series of dots. These dots are the only indication that the painting is by an Aboriginal artist and yet they speak powerfully of it.

The dots are a strong compositional element, which form a counter-balance to the seemingly accidental, sandy/muddy marks on the canvas, especially the
darkest pool of brown in the bottom left corner. It is as though design and nature are balanced against each other. There is, however, no sense of incompatibility between these opposites, but a harmonious relationship between the intentional dotted line and the 'natural' muddy marks. It is obvious that there is a human hand at work here; this is not nature, but an evocation of the chaos and order in nature and of the relationship between human beings and the land. This is not 'the land' but a construction of ideas, feelings and memories.

The lack of perspective, or depth of field, is reminiscent of the work of traditional Aboriginal artists, but also of what one sees on a typical meander along the shore — eyes cast down looking for shells. The dots describe the meander, but also evoke the ancient culture of the place. The painter is communing with the land, in which her ancestors walked, and is reestablishing the continuity between herself and her ancient culture. There is a strong sense of the sacredness of time and place in this picture. There does not, however, appear to be any confusion over what 'land' means to Watson and nor is there any land-angst evident. At first glance Low Tide Walk looks like a simple narrative image which tells a story about an experience of walking along the bayside at low tide, but there are layers of meaning here. Watson's 'land' is highly metaphorical, and metaphors, by their very nature, are resistant to single, unified interpretations.

Generally, I use 'land' to mean the same thing as 'Earth' in the Earth Bible context, that is, the 'planet Earth, that living system within which we humans
live in relationship of interdependence with other members of the Earth community.' The concrete and the metaphorical aspects of 'land' are already evident in this definition (Habel 2000, 27).

Sometimes 'land' can mean Australia and all it contains, and sometimes it can take more intimate meanings. When Galarrwuy Yunipingu uses the term 'land' he is referring to the traditional lands of his people and where he was born. Like Watson, Yunipingu's sense of place-connection and his identity are interrelated and they both derive from physical, emotional, social and spiritual links to the place where his ancestors lived. The experiences of place-connection and community-belonging are inextricably interrelated here.

Walter Brueggemann defines 'place' as 'space which has historical meanings, where some things happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations.' Continuity and identity is what makes a place sacred (1977, 5).

My land is urban, and that makes a difference, because place can be described in general, but it cannot be lived in general (Geertz 1996, 262). My ancestors were not Indigenous to Australia and I cannot claim the depth of historical connection to my land that Yunipingu can to his. Nevertheless, I do have a powerful sense of place-connection to Australia, and more particularly to Brisbane where my sacred places are located: my home and family, my church and parish community, my archdiocesan Cathedral and all the people who make up my Catholic family in this part of Queensland.
My land is the sacred space which Australian theologian Geoffrey Lilburne (1989, 29-30) identifies as 'the arena for renewal and sustenance'. Lilburne suggests that urban folk, like me, can lack a sense of place-connection because of their distance from the natural world. In other words, their metaphorical experience of land can be depleted by their lack of empirical experience of land. Further, he suggests that 'by reviving a sense of place we may be able to reactivate the care of the environment, which grows out of a sense of the sanctity and worth of particular places.'

4. The Sunflower Project

How can a sense of place-connection, and the associated sense of community-belonging, be revived? I tried to do just that when I worked on my parish liturgical art for the Advent/Christmas season of 2002. I started thinking about the season while I was making my weekly illustration of the Sunday gospels for an Australian company which publishes liturgical texts and resources on the Internet. I also write brief commentaries to accompany the images, and for the third Sunday of Advent I wrote the following:

The Liturgical cycle and the natural cycle are harmonious in the Northern Hemisphere so that the advent of the light is a powerful image of hope. In Brisbane where I live, we have to reshape the light imagery to suit our seasons: Christmas is in the middle of summer and the warmth and light of the sun are present realities, not future prospects. This is by no means an insurmountable problem: the Advent/Christmas cycle is redolent of past, present and future time imagery. Further,
because of its nature as a multivalent symbol, the 'light' image can be read from many different perspectives and still be fruitful.

By December the sunflowers I have planted in my garden will, I hope, be two metres tall and flowering in time for the Christmas liturgies. If all goes well they will give powerful witness to the efficacy of light. Advent is a time of watching and waiting (on things natural and spiritual) in hopeful expectation. (Close 2002)

By describing what was happening in my garden (fig. 33) at that time, I wanted to remind the Northern Hemisphere users of LiturgyHelp.com that some of us in the church have a very different experience of Christmas. As I wrote about the sunflowers in my garden I realised that they were a perfect image for Advent. So I planted over a hundred sunflower seeds in tubes and a couple of weeks later I transplanted them into seedling pots. Then I persuaded the parish liturgy committee to adopt the image for the coming season. I was given some funding from the parish and I bought one hundred eleven litre pots and a square metre of potting mix. Two weeks before the start of Advent, some volunteers from the parish helped me to pot up the seedlings. The plants were set out in my courtyard and they prospered in two weeks of warm weather (fig. 34). On the first Sunday of Advent the potted sunflower plants were given out to parishioners as an Advent family activity (fig. 35). The sunflower motif was used also to enhance the celebrating space (fig. 36).
In order to prepare the parish for the sunflowers, I wrote two articles in the parish newsletter on the Sundays before Advent. Then, on the first Sunday of Advent, I wrote the following:

If you drive down Kanumbra Street you will see a garden that is full of sunflowers — hopefully on the way to flowering by now. I planted them in October in the hope that the flowers would be ready for the Christmas liturgies. In the meantime I am watching and waiting.

Advent is a waiting time and a time of change in our world. In the Northern Hemisphere the leaves are showing autumn colour, the nights are getting colder and winter is edging in. In Brisbane, trees are budding and fruiting, the air is hot and the sky is blue. Things are changing, but the changes can take us by surprise if we are not alert and looking for them. The natural cycle echoes the Advent mystery: we wait in hope for the coming of the Kingdom, for the end time, for the completion of creation.

That is the grand plan and the long view, but there is something a little more pedestrian here. After all, the Kingdom is among us now and it can be observed at work in our world. It shows in the ebb and flow of our lives and we need to pay attention to these changes, just as we watch and respond to the changes in nature.

In the gospel today, Jesus urges us to 'stay awake' so that when the changes come we will be prepared. In fact we are watching and waiting for the advent of the Light, which is the main image of Christ in the Advent/Christmas cycle. This image makes sense as a powerful image of hope in the Northern Hemisphere, but in Brisbane we have to reshape the light imagery to suit our seasons: because Christmas is in the middle of summer, the light and heat of the sun are present realities rather than future prospects. That’s why I have planted sunflowers in my garden and, if all goes well, they will give powerful witness to the efficacy of the light.
This Sunday, the parish is offering parishioners an opportunity to share in the sunflower imagery. Pots of sunflowers will be offered to anyone who is prepared to nurture them and to watch and wait while they grow and flower. Please join me in this rewarding Advent reflection! (Close 2002)

I tried to emphasise that this was an opportunity for sharing and inclusion. To this end I asked some students from the parish school to make life size painted sunflowers and these were put on the back wall of the church. The space between them was designated as a display area where people could put up photos or drawings of their plants as they grew and flowered. In addition I made posters describing the project so that parishioners would know how it developed and who was involved.

My garden flowered (fig. 37) and faded by late December, so I asked parishioners who still had flowering plants to share them with the community at Christmas (fig. 38).

The response to the project was very positive and there were not enough plants to go round. Many people spoke to me about the progress of their plants and it was apparent that the project was meaningful and pleasurable. What made it all the more satisfying were the connections made between local experience and Christian tradition; between the private world of home and the public space of church; between the parish and the wider community; and between liturgy and land.
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Liturgy and land came closer together when Earth meanings were recognised and celebrated in the Advent/Christmas narrative. The concrete experience of growing a plant was teamed with the deeply textured metaphorical experience of the liturgical season. In order to reinterpret the traditional culture of Advent/Christmas, I tried to enhance the sense of place-connection by using local references - to what was happening in nearby gardens and generally in the Brisbane climate.

Conclusion

The Sunflower Project was a small event and, like many of my installations, it's 'audience' was restricted to the local parish and the local community. It did, however, make a difference to the Advent experience of hundreds of ordinary catholics who lived in and around Coorparoo, and who shared sacred time and sacred space each week.

This project can be evaluated using two of the criteria which I listed in Chapter 1, namely the response that it evoked (Gablik 1991, 175) and the 'resonance with the experience of others' (Hein 1990, 147). I can only judge by what I saw and that was a high level of participation and enthusiasm among Mt Carmel parishioners especially with regard to watching their plants grow and flower and, further, the pride that some took in sharing their mature plants with the community at Christmas. There was much pleasure in the experience, but the events also called for a responsible approach to place and community. The project made connections between liturgical meanings and the everyday
home life of parishioners. Further, the project fulfilled the requirements of my feminist practice of liturgical art in that it was inclusive and holistic.
Fig. 32. Judy Watson, Low Tide Walk, 1991, synthetic polymer paint, powder pigment, pastel and charcoal on canvas, 192.5cm x 130cm. In the collection of the Queensland University of Technology Art Museum.
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Fig. 33. The Sunflower Project started in my front garden.

Fig. 34. I potted up one hundred sunflowers with help from a few parishioners.

Fig. 35. On the first Sunday of Advent the potted plants were distributed.
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Fig. 36. During Advent, the wreath was placed in stations around the celebrating space.

Fig. 37. The sunflowers in my garden flowered before Christmas.

Fig. 38. Parishioners brought their flowering plants to share with the community at Christmas.
CHAPTER 8: 
BEAUTY AND UGLINESS

The third 'big picture' issue is beauty brought to earth by ugliness. As I said in Chapter 4, my project actually began with my desire to critique the ideal of beauty used as a value for art. In this chapter I claim that new approaches to beauty and ugliness developed within the critical environment of 20th century art theory have much to offer theology. To explore this claim I first give a brief overview of the story of beauty's downfall in the 20th century. This is not meant to be a comprehensive history, which is outside the scope of this study, but a way to situate the critiques of beauty within an historical frame, and a means of identifying the major critical issues. In the second section of this chapter, I look more closely at those issues through the work of four 20th century art theorists. In the third section, I point to a new, more holistic, approach to aesthetics using 'beautiful ugliness'. Then I use a practical example to show how beauty can be brought to earth in the context of the liturgical environment.

1. Beauty's fall from grace in the 20th century

The agenda for the 19th century Western artworld had focused on aesthetic issues: the distinction between the aesthetic and ordinary experience; judgements of taste; the universal value of beauty and the pleasure it evokes; the artwork as masterpiece; the artist as genius; and the generic subjectivity of the viewer. Above all, the concept of beauty was central to aesthetics in
this time. In fact, so much so that 'beauty theory' is a reasonable term for 19th century aesthetics. I use this term along with 'traditional' and 'conventional' to distinguish it from late 20th century aesthetics which has wider concerns than beauty theory. I looked at some of those concerns in Chapter 4.

For much of the 20th century, beauty theory was either ignored or challenged. Arthur Danto (1999), among others, has chronicled the downfall of beauty. He tells of two rebellions against aesthetic approaches to art, the first by Dada and the second by Pop art. Dada was the initial catalyst for the split between formalist and conceptualist approaches to art during the century.

**Formalism and conceptualism**

Even before World War II, two schools of art emerged in the Western world - the formalist and conceptual schools. These terms are useful generalisations, but it must be acknowledged that they do not reflect the reality of art practice. I envisage formalism and conceptualism as extremes at either end of a continuum, and therefore as not mutually exclusive, but related. Consequently, there is a multitude of practices encompassed by the formalist/conceptualist continuum.

At the formalist end of the continuum the focus is on original *making* and therefore the art *object* and its *form* are valued. Aesthetics is the ideological framework and beauty is the highest value. Formalist schools of practice dominated modernism. Matisse is one artist who is generally associated with the formalist schools.
At the conceptual end of the continuum, original thinking is the focus and the experience of art and its content are more important than the objects related to that experience. Critical theories such as structuralism replace aesthetics as the ideological framework for conceptual practices. Social and political issues such as gender and ecology are the focus here. Conceptualist schools of practice dominate the postmodern era. Duchamp is a pivotal figure associated with conceptualism.

**Dada**

Disenchanted by the failure of 19th century certainties and values to cope with the grim social realities of the world after World War I, artists of the Dada movement rebelled against aesthetic approaches to art. At the heart of these approaches was the concept of beauty. Danto places Marcel Duchamp's readymades of 1915-17 at the epicentre of the rebellion. The readymades represent the 'the most radical dissociation of aesthetics from art' (185 - 6).

Duchamp presented objects such as *Fountain* (fig. 39) to the artworld as art objects. Because they were mass produced functional items rather than self-expressions, readymades stood outside the milieu of beauty and, therefore, judgments about good or bad taste. Taste was irrelevant to Duchamp 'who saw art as a much higher activity than beautification' — it was 'intellectual and analytical', that is, conceptual. The signature on the work read R. Mutt — the name of the manufacturer — - so the concepts of the artist as original genius
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and the concept of the artwork as masterpiece were disintegrated in this transgressive practice.

Pop art

Formalism still dominated the artworld when there was a second onslaught on beauty theory by the latter day Dada movement, American Pop art, in the 1960s. Pop art arose in the midst of wider social upheavals in the Western world, which also gave rise to the gender and race liberation movements.

The Pop art movement swept aesthetic considerations aside in an attempt 'to overcome division between fine and vernacular art — between the exalted and the coarse, the high and the low' (Danto 2003, 3). Art forms and subjects were taken from everyday life, from cartoons and other commercial sources. Andy Warhol's Brillo Box (fig. 40), for example, was an appropriation from the supermarket shelf. Pop art challenged the aesthetic notion that what separated an art object (conventionally understood to be an object of beauty) from an ordinary object was its distance from functionality or commercial use. Pop art claimed that 'anything could be art'. In order to find out what art was 'you had to turn from sense experience to thought … to philosophy' (Danto 1997, 13).

Danto traces the end of modernism to this moment in history. 'Modernism was too local and too materialist, concerned as it was with shape, surface, pigment, and the like as defining painting in its purity … it could only ask the question "What is it that I have that no other kind of art can have?"' (14).
Issues of specificity of aesthetic experience, the self-sufficiency and uniqueness of the art object and its autonomy from the exigencies of everyday life were also discarded by conceptualism (Pollock 1988, 14). Matthew Collings describes Warhol's contribution to the upheaval of values.

With shallowness Warhol defeated the withering disease that had afflicted Modern art because of its turning away from the outer world. Artists were in conflict with the outer world because it was rubbish or plastic or phoney or too consumerist or capitalist. But Warhol let the outer world into his inner world so there wasn't any conflict. He remade himself in its image. His iconic, celebrity mass art was a pure expression of his new inner self. (Collings 1999, 27)

However, not all conceptual artists took the shallow approach. In general, feminists were more socially responsible, focusing on the difficult issues of gender politics — although they received much less attention and public acclaim.

**Conceptualism's new understanding**

Danto (2003, 133-9) claims that the shift in dominance from formalism to conceptualism was precipitated by the need, in the contemporary world, for 'another kind of knowledge' from that which 'disinterested contemplation' can give. Conceptual art has the ability to interrogate life and the potential to be transformative for individuals or societies. He uses the installation work of feminist artist Barbara Kruger to show how conceptual art 'does something more than sits on its ass in some museum or other' — images such as Kruger's 'enter the stream of life' and 'raise hell'.
In the 1970s and 1980s performance and installation art forms were commonly used because they denied the art object any commercial value and also its status as masterpiece. By encouraging the participation of the audience, they subverted the notion of the authority and genius of the artist. Feminists, such as Australian performance artist Jill Orr, took up the difficult issues of gender politics. In Orr's performance of *She had long golden hair* (fig. 41) the audience was invited to cut off the artist's hair, the symbol of stereotypical feminine beauty. The artist assumed the role of art object, which became fully realised only when the audience joined in on the socially transgressive behaviour. The objectivity of formalism was overruled in favour of the subjectivity of the artist. The artist's personal experience and her body were central to the imagery of the artwork. Orr describes her performances as 'cathartic actions, ways of expressing private horrors' (Marsh 1993, 124).

However, too often such performances focused on the artists' obsessions with exorcising personal demons. The aim was to validate personal experience, authenticity being the underlying value; but the outcomes were not always salutary. Anne Marsh (1993, 100) comments that violent attempts at transgressing social taboos often resulted in confusion and fear rather than clarity and unity for the participants. Further, the masochism and/or eroticism underpinning many of the feminist performances tended to reinforce misogyny rather than exorcising it.
More nuanced practices began to emerge in the 1980s under the influence of the structuralist analysis of culture. For feminists who were 'addressing the social construction of femininity' the problem was to 'find a place in which women could speak about their gender difference without falling into the trap of celebrating biological specificity' (5). Social issues, rather than artists' personal concerns, began to reshape feminist conceptual practices.

**Conceptualism & the question of meaning**

The concept of beauty and the various issues surrounding it were no longer relevant to Conceptual theory, and beauty was no longer a necessary quality of an artwork. Nonetheless, sensual appeal remained apparent in some conceptual artworks. However, ugliness in various forms (for example the horror of violence and the shock of transgressing social or cultural taboos), was of positive interest to artists and theorists. This was partly a reaction to the values of formalism, but also a response to the critical social analysis of structuralism and post-structuralism.

Australian feminist theologian Anita Monro (1998, 19) describes structuralism as 'concerned with the underlying principles of the organisation of meanings and systems'. She lists four of the basic premises of structuralism.

'(i) human meaning systems are arbitrarily constructed according to certain structures, albeit deeply unconsciously embedded ones; (ii) these structures are essentially binary or dualistic; (iii) the construction process of meaning systems governs the nature of the constructed meanings within them, i.e. the unconscious binary structures produce dualistic systems of meaning; and thus (iv) there is no real referential
relationship between language (and other symbols) and the "objects" which they purport to represent. (Munro, 1998, 19)

Munro describes how Poststructuralism takes the analysis of 'the constructed nature of meaning' to its 'inevitable conclusion'.

… the structures undergirding systems and meaning are revealed to be neither inevitable nor absolute. Rather, structures are shown to be highly determinative of meaning and systemic content, yet arbitrary, fallible and flawed. The validity of meanings and systems is thus called into question, and alternatives outside of such structural constraint are sought. (Munro 1998, 20)

This theoretical background gave artists and theorists of the conceptual school reasons to either discard or critique the traditional values of aesthetics. These values, which inflected the meaning and authority structures within the established system of the artworld, were shown to serve the interests of cultural elite groups. Further, the beauty theory served to disconnect aesthetic experience from life-world experience.

The limits of conceptualism

The experimental nature of performance and installation art was characteristic of conceptualism. The mistakes in early experiments indicated that — even though they were dominant in the artworld after the 1960s — conceptual practices did not necessarily achieve the aims of their practitioners.

The critical edges of both Dada and Pop were modified in time. Ironically, it was often the sensual appeal (or beauty) of Dada and Pop artworks which
made them successful. Further, choice examples of Dada and Pop art became absorbed into the canon of Western art through inclusion in major museum collections, and art histories. Duchamp, Warhol and others became superstars in the artworld. So the aesthetic fascination with beauty, the artist as genius, and the notion of the masterpiece had been questioned but not banished. However, a new aesthetic sense arose from conceptual art.

Beauty was often still discernible in the new aesthetic, but it was no longer a necessary attribute of an artwork.

But the loveliness we find in a lot of art … We don't want to talk about it, or at best only talk contemptuously of it, but hardly any forms of painting don't have it. It seems to be a property or quality that can never be wholly got rid of. However much we may stop mentioning it and try and shame it into leaving, it just keeps on hanging around. (Collings 1999, 104)

There was an alternative to beauty, or a new beauty which emerged: 'a terrible beauty, or a strange or ecstatic or mad or new beauty' (104). This beauty had an innate relationship to ugliness.

The cult of the artists as genius still operated, but there was a shift from the mystical to glamour: 'even with Duchamp' says Collings, 'the idea of genius isn't that interesting. Plain ideas about him, not ideas of magic, are more interesting' (35). Genius had been brought to earth and Duchamp was seen as an urbane man who was frequently profane, but never wild or angry.

He made a living from advising collectors on what to buy. He acted as a dealer … He was kind to children … When he was old there was a sudden widespread resurgence of interest in Readymades because of
the vogue for Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg in the 50s who both claimed Duchamp as an influence. So he started having them remade in Italy and signing the remakes and selling them in editions, because, although he was against commercialism, he thought it wasn’t an impossible contradiction to get some cash in at this late stage while he still could. (Collings 1999, 36-7)

The nature and the status of the art object had been seriously challenged and this was perhaps the more pervasive influence of conceptualism. Matthew Collings' description of Martin Creed's *A Sheet of A4 paper crumples into a ball* (fig. 42) exemplifies the disjunction of conceptual art from aesthetic approaches to art practice.

All Creed's works have plain descriptive titles preceded by a number. A work in the eighties from 1994 is a piece of paper screwed up into a ball, called *A Sheet of A4 paper crumples into a ball*. A more recent work is the sound of a doorbell amplified through a guitar amp in a gallery. The sound can be heard inside every time someone rings the bell outside. The event lasts as long as the sound lasts. When it's not heard there's no event. (Collings 1999, 142-3)

Here Creed is stretching the boundaries of what art is and linking the art object with the ordinary objects of everyday life in much the same way as Duchamp did with *Fountain* in 1917.

The outcome of the 20th century critique of beauty in art practice was that the formalist obsessions with the beauty of form gave way, to new obsessions about transgressive ideas and the social efficacy of content. Aesthetics was replaced by social and cultural critical theories and conceptual art practices were used as mediums for personal and social transformation. For feminists,
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the social construction of subjectivity, and therefore gender differences, was high on their content agenda.

**Beauty theory**

As I have shown, there are a number of issues inextricably related to the concept of beauty which, for my project, I gather into three clusters under the umbrella term of beauty theory. The first cluster of concepts concerns the separation of aesthetic experience and the art object from life-world realities. This cluster also includes ideas about universal ideals of beauty, the artist as genius and the art object as masterpiece. The second cluster concerns the tension between generic subjectivity and difference. The third concerns the tension between pleasure and responsibility.

Here again are the frequently recurring issues which I first listed in Chapter 1 and which are the critical issues of many postmodern conceptual artists and art theorists of the 20th century. With the dawn of a new century there is renewed interest in aesthetic approaches to art. After the prolonged deconstructive work of conceptualism, aesthetics has a new shape. However, that does not mean that the critical work, by feminist artist and others, is complete — there are many aspects of beauty theory which remain problematic.
2. The problems with beauty theory

In order to look more closely at the major critical issues concerning beauty theory, I have chosen to survey the work of five art theorists: John Dewey, Robin Boyd, Griselda Pollock, Matthew Collings and Anne Marsh. I chose these five for a variety of reasons. First, they are openly critical of beauty theory as described above. Second, their critiques arise from different parts of the Western world, in different eras of the 20th century and from within different disciplines. I aim to show how comprehensive is the critique of beauty theory and by implication how comprehensive the critique of beauty theology should be.

Dewey and Boyd are echoes from the past. Dewey was an American philosopher who was active when Dada rebelled against beauty theory in the era between the two world wars. Boyd was an Australian architect and social critic who was active when the second rebellion took place in the 1960s. Pollock, Marsh and Collings are contemporary theorists whose work intersects with the resurgence of interest in beauty theory in the Western artworld in the 1990s. Pollock is a British feminist art historian whose criticism of traditional beauty theory is the most searching, direct and sophisticated of the five. Marsh is an Australian feminist artist and art historian whose analysis of performance art is a unique contribution to late 20th century Australian theory. Collings is a British artist and art historian who begins to reassess the possibilities of beauty.
There have been shifts of interests and focus in the artworld since the ideas of all five theorists were published — so, the reader might wonder whether or not their theories are relevant to the contemporary scene. I claim that some ideas are perennial in the artworld and the three clusters of concepts surrounding beauty theory are such. Ideas about art and reality, subjectivity and difference, pleasure and responsibility, surface again and again over the years in the artworld, and not only for feminists.

**Art and reality**

The critique of beauty theory is at the heart of Dewey's aesthetic project in *Art as Experience* (1958). He uses a participation aesthetic in which art and the life-world are inextricably interrelated. Dewey values the sensual appeal of artworks and he dismisses the Platonic understanding of beauty's purpose, that is, 'to lead us from sense and phenomena to something beyond'. He describes 'Plato's ladder' as 'a one-way ascent' from which 'there is no return from the highest beauty to perceptual experience' (291). Ideals of beauty belong to 'a philosophy of enclosure, transcendence, and fixity' (321) and bring 'about contempt for the body, fear of the senses, and the opposition of flesh to spirit' (20).

In *The Australian Ugliness* (1960) Boyd calls beauty a 'theocratic term' and a 'mystical riddle' (157-8) which muddies the waters of art theory with 'ancient dogmas' (180). Traditional ideals of beauty are shaped by 'wishful thinking' and hidden prejudices, as in the theory of the golden rule (183). In this theory the ideal human body is made in God's image. The ideal body is the centre of
creation and the template of nature. Its dimensions are the starting point for design. Boyd dismisses the golden rule — as exemplified in Leonardo da Vinci’s famous diagram of a squared and encircled male figure — which has proved compelling to artists and architects from the renaissance to modernity. He unerringly points out the racial and gender prejudices inherent in this model.

Where is the perfectly proportioned human on which we can base our proportions of buildings? No doubt he is an athlete, tall, trim, and bronzed, poised against the blue sky of ancient Greece, or perhaps a modern Olympic competitor. Western, of course; Caucasian and all that, and male. (Boyd 1960, 183)

The golden rule is shown to be an ideal constructed by a privileged group — Western, white and male — to support its own values and interests. Further, the model does not reflect human experience and for Boyd this is unpardonable.

For Dewey (1958, 21-2), human life is at its best when it follows the patterns of nature and human beings can realise their relationship with nature through their senses. Sense experience holds an immediate reality which has the potential to give insight to human experience. Dewey is critical of the cultural dominance of reason in his own society.

Boyd (1960, 194) claims that human beings, even at their creative best, are not the centre of the universe but participants in it: ‘The greatest architect and the meanest speculative builder involuntarily work, alongside the vulture and leaf mould, under the ultimate law of the expanding universe’.
Consequently, Boyd, too, discards the metaphysical aspects of aesthetics, and focuses on the role of art to serve life.

For if architecture were ultimately to serve every physical need of man with scientific exactness while understanding and obeying precisely the physical laws of matter, then it would succeed in identifying itself with creation; or, if you like, architecture would merge into the cosmic pattern — not directly but through man. (Boyd 1960, 159)

'Many an artist-architect' says Boyd 'is a Flash Gordon at heart' reaching for the stars, when the real work is to apprehend 'albeit obscurely the patterns and arrangement of the real world' (194).

For Dewey (1958), aesthetic experience is the intense experience of being 'fully alive' (18), that is, being in 'active and alert commerce with the world' (19). Consequently, Dewey identifies Platonic dualism as the cause of the separation of art from life (6, 262-3). He names the primary task of his project as restoring the 'continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art ' and ordinary human experience in the life-world (3).

In Dewey's schema, artworks are 'celebrations … of the things of ordinary experience' (11). The link between art and life is broken when an artwork is elevated to the status of masterpiece.

In common conception, the work of art is often identified with the building, book, painting, or statue in its existence apart from human experience … the very perfection of some of these products, the prestige they possess because of a long history of unquestioned
admiration, creates conventions that get in the way of fresh insight. When an art product once attains classic status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience. (Dewey 1958, 3)

Becoming ‘classic’ means that artworks ‘serve as insignia of taste and certificates of special culture’ (9). When that happens, art is relegated to the museum or the private collection and supports the interests of social and cultural elite groups. Ordinary folk are left to glean aesthetic experience from popular culture.

The arts which today have the most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip, and too frequently, newspaper accounts of love-nests, murders, and exploits of bandits. For when what he knows as art is relegated to the museum and gallery, the unconquerable impulse towards experiences enjoyable in themselves find such outlet as the daily environment provides. (Dewey 1958, 6)

It is ironic that Dewey understood that aspect of modern experience which so inspired Pop artists several decades later, although he could not have foreseen what use they would make of it. In any case, some aspects of his work may have been inspired by the artists of the Dada movement in their attempts to change the dominant paradigm of the artworld.

In Vision and Difference (1988), Pollock was pioneering in her critique of modernism, in which she targeted some of the central issues of beauty theory: ‘the specificity of aesthetic experience; the self-sufficiency of the visual; the teleological evolution of art autonomous from any other social causation or
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pressure’. Each of these tenets of modernism distances art from the processes of life (14).

The modernist classification of aesthetic experience as unique and 'special' within human experience has allowed social and cultural elite groups to raise aesthetic experience above ordinary practical perception and appreciation. Then art objects are superior to ordinary objects, art has no relevance for daily life, and art production and appreciation are for persons of a higher order. The notion of the artist as genius is associated with this idea.

To claim that an artwork is self-sufficient means that it is a world unto itself with its own meaning system. This concept isolates art from the social concerns and pressures of the life-world. The result is an apolitical, rational, value-detached understanding, in which there is no ethical responsibility allowed for, in either producing or interpreting art. All the meanings are inside the object and the object is a closed system, often reflecting patriarchal values, and so new meanings for a new social location cannot be applied to the object. Consequently, the object’s partial and perspectival view of reality cannot be challenged. The notion of the artwork as masterpiece is associated with this idea.

To claim that art has evolved independent of other social and cultural processes is to distance art form the commercial or political needs of life. In the rarified milieu of art, beauty is the highest value and utility and purpose
have no value. When the status of art is exalted, the Museum becomes its proper home and again art is isolated from everyday life.

The alternative understanding of art which Pollock proposes is 'not to treat the work of art as object but to consider art as practice' (4). The author focuses on art as a cultural practice within the basic Marxist conception of 'the totality of social relations' envisaged as 'production, consumption, distribution and exchange' (3).

The notion of a beautiful object or fine book expressing the genius of the author/artist and through him (sic) the highest aspirations of human culture was displaced by a stress on the productive activity of texts - scenes of work, writing or sign making, and of reading, viewing. (Pollock 1988, 6)

Cultural practices are 'signifying systems' of representation. They are not for making 'beautiful things evoking beautiful feelings', but for the production of meaning, the production of objects which carry the meaning and also the formation of interpretive communities. These understandings have implications for the artist.

This formulation banishes the typical art historical narrative of a gifted individual creating out of his (sic) personal necessity a discrete work of art which then goes out from its private place of creation into the world. (Pollock 1988, 3)

As a specific cultural practice, art is located within a complex web of relations including 'production, criticism, patronage, stylistic influences, iconographic sources, exhibitions, trade, training, publishing, sign systems, publics, etc.' (5). Pollock's project is to investigate the production of meaning within this context.
Marsh advocates performance art as a feminist practice in *Body and Self* (1993, 1-3). She describes it as *presentation* rather than *representation*. As such it is a practice rather than an object which simply refers to life. The most distinctive element, which makes performance art different from more traditional forms, is 'the presence of the artist before the audience'. In performances in which audience participation shapes the work, 'the artist's presence as unique maker of meaning or the authorial, powerful voice' becomes problematic. This practice leaves little room for notions about the artist as genius, or even artist as the 'primary maker of meaning' (188), nor the artwork as masterpiece.

For Marsh, performance art has the potential to fulfill the twin political aims of the ' "democratization" and the "dematerialization" of art'. Democratization means interactive projects in which the audience becomes involved in the artwork, even in its construction and interpretation. The dematerialization of the work means privileging content at the expense of form. After all, form is associated with beauty.

For Pollock (1988), the role of art is to make meaning by which we can understand our world; but this meaning is 'ideological, partial, conditioned by social place and power' (7). Questions must be asked about how meaning is produced, what meaning is made and for whom. Pollock particularly mistrusts ideals of beauty with respect to the representation of women in art. It is in such representations that social attitudes are formed. She asks 'Is the beauty
of the physical object, the painting, a defense against anxieties excited by the represented object woman?’ She answers that formal beauty is 'opaque and thoroughly suspect' (126).

**Subjectivity and difference**

John Dewey (1958) struggles with the notion of the ideal generic perceiver. He rejects the notion and yet he knows that artworks can be appreciated by viewers of different generations and cultures. He acknowledges that social, cultural and historical factors influence the reception experience and can even make the art of other cultures and times 'a sealed book to us'. He also acknowledges the difference between individual perceivers. There is no reason, he maintains, that aesthetic experience should be the same for every perceiver (330-2).

Difference is an important aspect of Boyd's (1960) critique of beauty. Art is distanced from the realities of life when the partial and perspectival nature of human experience is subjugated by ideals of beauty which are presumed to be universal, but in reality are historically, socially and culturally located. Boyd's critique rejects the notions of the generic perceiver and aesthetic norms inherent in traditional beauty theory, and points to the evident reality of difference. Beauty is predicated on the unaccountable and shifting subjectivity of the artist and viewer, or as Boyd puts it, on the 'moist foundations of [their] special private delights, preconceptions and prejudices' (170). Beauty is 'too full of mysteries' to be useful as a theoretical principle (160). Neither the viewer nor the experience of beauty is constant. The
qualities which give pleasure to one generation may not please a future
generation in the same way (171). On a larger scale, classical concepts of
beauty fail to account for differences in ideals and values between races and
civilizations (197). He agreed with Piet Mondrian: ' "Beauty is relative
because men (sic) are different" ' (187).

Pollock (1988, 10) identifies her primary responsibility as placing gender at the
centre of her analysis. She identifies the heart of the struggle for feminists as
'the social construction of sexual difference' (8) which is 'produced through an
interconnecting series of social practices and institutions of which families,
education, art studies, galleries and magazines are part' (9). In Pollock's
assessment, traditional aesthetics, which uses beauty as an ideal concept, is
deeply implicated in the formulation of oppressive understandings of gender
roles in society.

Griselda Pollock's difference as a feminist underpins her role as an art
historian within a male dominated discipline. In Differencing the Canon
(1999), Pollock addresses 'the total asymmetry in the canon' of art history (5)
and speaks from a position of difference.

I write in the role of an interested reader of culture and a motivated
analyst of representation. A difference that I can introduce into the
canon is the difference of that specific, invested, historically and
socially overdetermined position from which I read, and then write.
(Pollock 1999, 36)

Pollock sees herself as an active subject who works for change. Her project
focuses on challenging the hegemony of the dominant Eurocentric and
phallocentric approaches to art history. She does this by tracing the 'maternal body' that 'the modernist sons attempted to create' in art. 'The mother' says Pollock, 'is the space and presence that structures subjectivities both masculine and feminine; but differently'. It is the work of feminist theorists to rethink the mother in order to 'identify and yet disrupt the matricidal murder characteristic of Western modernist culture' (35). It is also part of the feminist art history project to open the way for a 'polylogue' to subvert the monologue of masculinist art theory (6). Differencing the canon means to draw on the many and varied possible interpretations of art and art history.

Pleasure and responsibility

Matthew Collings was, like me, an art student in the 1970s, so I was not surprised when he wrote the following about beauty in This is Modern Art (1999):

Beauty and loveliness — we don't expect them to be high on the Modern art agenda or even on it at all because nobody talks about them. Did they used to in the old days?

We know Matisse was a great artist of beautiful colour and patterns. But we are not sure what to do with him since … he fits so awkwardly with the art of now. Shouldn't he have been more angry? Why was he only calm, luxurious, and voluptuous instead? … What was he on, that Matisse? (Collings 1999, 103)

In his inimitable laid-back style Collings points to one of the major problems that the contemporary artworld has with beauty — its detachment from the problems and issues of the world. Beauty is essentially about the pleasure of looking and of contemplating rather than doing. Collings responds to pleasure
with a guilty cringe: shouldn't art be more responsible? I am sure that both Pollock and Marsh would join me in answering yes.

Collings acknowledges the relationship between beauty and ugliness when he says of art that 'nothing is purely beautiful or purely visual or purely pleasurable, probably' (137). On the one hand he aligns beauty with the form of an artwork and asserts that no art is pure form and devoid of content. On the other hand he is suggesting that beauty and ugliness are not mutually exclusive. These are some of the ideas which are drawing beauty theory back into the discourse of the contemporary artworld.

The implications for liturgical art

Dewey's notion that aesthetic experience refers to being 'fully alive' and engaged with the world is one a foundational principle of my feminist practice of liturgical art. Of course he did not envisage the spiritual life as part of the equation as I do. Although I still use the term beauty, I make it clear that life is the highest value for my project. I maintain that it is when beauty and ugliness are in balance that liturgical art is life-relevant and life-enhancing.

Dewey suggests that, because of their spiritual nature, ideals of beauty bring about contempt for or fear of the body. These are the attitudes which Veronica Brady (1981, 21-) calls 'The Great Refusal'. Similarly, I maintain that underlying many traditional images of Mary the mother of Jesus is a morbid suspicion of material reality. Such images focus solely on Mary as an ideal spiritual role model and they ignore the human dimension of the woman Mary.
In Chapter 5, I showed two examples (figs 23 & 24) of how Mary can be re-imagined in order to draw out her humanity. Mary’s role as first among the disciples of Jesus is overlooked in many traditional images as well. Ideals of beauty, which focus solely on the spiritual, nurture contemplation but ignore discipleship; in other words, they project the ideal of Christian life as distanced from the concerns of the world.

When Pollock pointed to the power of the ‘mother’ she was thinking of a psychological archetype rather than Mary the mother of Jesus. Nonetheless, I can think of no other Catholic image which has been more powerful in defining the gender roles of Catholics, especially women, down the ages, than Mary. I see great significance for my ongoing practice of liturgical art in tracing the ‘maternal body’ — that is, images of Mary constructed by the patriarchal church — and in subverting the oppressive aspects of that Marian archetype.

Artworks which are only, as Pollock says, ‘beautiful things evoking beautiful feelings’, are not enough for liturgical art. Liturgical images serve life and for this reason I agree with Pollock, that art is more practice than object. The art object is important in as much as it conveys meaning. However, the art object is more important to me than it is to Marsh. Her transgressive practice of ‘dematerialization’ is only useful in the short term as a way of promoting change, but ultimately I support the notion that liturgical art is most efficacious when form and content work in relation.
The three issues which Pollock (1988, 14) identified as key concepts of modernism — 'the specificity of aesthetic experience; the self-sufficiency of the visual; the teleological evolution of art autonomous from any other social causation or pressure' — also have implications for liturgical art. If liturgical art is only aesthetic/spiritual experience then its images, experiences and meanings are designed to orient the viewer to heavenly realities and away from everyday life. A liturgical image, like the miraculous medal image of Mary, which is given the status of 'self-sufficient', becomes unassailable as a spiritual masterpiece. Its meanings cannot legitimately be questioned. This can only be sustained if liturgical art is understood to be separate from the culture of the wider community. If it were part of the world at large its images would be open to critical scrutiny. The result might be that some images are discredited and some succumb to enculturation.

Enculturation is a controversial liturgical topic today. Boyd’s comments, which disparaged the gendered and Eurocentric nature of ideals of beauty, are pertinent here. The 'Roman' church is in many ways just exactly that. The Eurocentric nature of the liturgy clearly has ethical implications, but it also has practical implications as well. The major liturgical symbols of Christian liturgy are shaped by the seasonal cycles of the Northern Hemisphere. For an Australian liturgical artist this means that I have to reinterpret seasonal symbols constantly to make them relevant for my community — as I did in the Advent Sunflower Project (figs 33-8).
So far, I have not sufficiently addressed the issue of the relationship between beauty and ugliness. This has emerged as a new concern for my project where I understand them as two extremes at either end of a continuum. Neither beauty nor ugliness is a discrete or self-sufficient concept either philosophically or theologically - they are interrelated.

Sets of continuums are characteristic of my holistic approach to aesthetics, since my aim is to replace the oppositions of traditional dualism with relationships. I discuss the application of continuums in more detail later. However, I began to articulate this kind of approach in Chapter 5, when I described ‘passionate purpose’ in terms of the relationship between the creative potential of chaotic nature on the one hand and the ordering power of art on the other.

In order to find ways of drawing beauty and ugliness together, I look to the contemporary artworld where the critical voice is more likely to receive a sympathetic hearing than in the church. In the next chapter I hope to show how critical approaches to beauty theory can help to reshape beauty theology for use in the 21st century. Before I can do this, however, I need to define the seemingly antithetical relationship between beauty and ugliness.

3. The possibilities of 'beautiful ugliness'

Beauty is no longer a necessary quality of an artwork, nonetheless formal beauty is still evident in some contemporary artworks. Arthur Danto (2003, 58) regards ‘the discovery that something can be good art without being
beautiful as one of the great conceptual clarifications of twentieth-century philosophy of art' and he acknowledged that the discovery was made by practitioners rather than theorists. However, he also suggests that in the time 'before the Enlightenment gave beauty … primacy' in the artworld, other aesthetic qualities, such as distaste and ugliness had a place in art. Since the 20th century critique of beauty began, those qualities have been rediscovered.

The critical value of ugliness and disgust were found to be useful to artists in a number of ways, for example for giving the viewer insights into the horror of violence. This rediscovery might have been made initially by artists, but there were early insights into the relationship between beauty and ugliness in theory which emerged early in the century, as I will show. Further, the critical value of ugliness was used as a tool by formalists as well as conceptualist artists.

'beautiful ugliness'

Boyd (1960, 197-200) identifies the failure in traditional beauty-speak: the underlying dualism of the language polarises beauty and ugliness, and stipulates that what is 'unbeautiful' can only be ugly. This mutual exclusion of opposites is not born out in Boyd's experience. He points to the 'beautiful ugliness' of the convict ruins of Port Arthur in Tasmania. Here beauty and ugliness are both part of the perceptual quality and the sensual experience of the site. When I visited the site in 2001 I was aware of the visual pleasures of the landscape and the fascination of the historical exhibits. At the same time, I could not ignore the brutal history which had shaped the place - including the massacre of 1996 which was still raw in the national collective memory. In my
experience, the memory of violence hung about Port Arthur like a background miasma and funded the uneasy mix of beauty and ugliness, pleasure and displeasure in my experience of the place.

Boyd sees the need for 'a new word or a new meaning for the old word of beauty'. His term 'beautiful ugliness' will do for now, but ultimately I suggest we need to speak in terms of a beauty/ugliness continuum. Towards the centre of the continuum there is a balance between the two extremes, but the centre is not a fixed point and the balance is not in stasis. The 'proper' balance between beauty and ugliness in liturgical art is contingent upon the exigencies of the moment and it will move — now towards the beauty end, now towards the ugliness end.

Beauty is all that is spiritual, finished, harmonious, ordered, and stable.
Ugliness is all that is natural, raw, discordant, chaotic but ultimately creative.
Beauty can 'enthral and persuade' (Brady 1981, 112), it can inspire faint hearts with hope, and foster contemplation. Ugliness can confront injustice, challenge the status quo and foster discipleship. Together, they can transform the world.

In a way, Samuel Alexander (1933, 163-164) uses the notion of a continuum in his thinking. The philosopher identifies one aesthetic category which he labels beauty and within that category he describes 'the beautiful as easy aesthetic beauty and the ugly as difficult beauty'. Further, he says that 'ugliness as unattractive is an ingredient in aesthetic beauty, as the discord in
music or the horrors of tragedy.' In Alexander's aesthetics the artist's expression of 'passionate purpose' is the primary. Artists are not aiming at 'creating beauty, for that is the last thing the artist thinks of … the artist aims to express the subject which occupies his (sic) mind' (58). The focus is meaning (38). In terms of the formalist/conceptualist continuum, Alexander's theories, which are aesthetic and which uphold many of the conventional modernist tenets regarding art, can be placed well to the formalist end. However, beauty does not have primacy in his theories and he allows that ugliness can be useful for the sake of meaning. So here is evidence of my claim that formalist and conceptualist theories are not mutually exclusive. Such overlapping of paradigms and the breaching of boundaries is typical of the artworld in both theory and practice. I maintain that these transgressions are frequently evident in the history of beauty theory, especially now that there is new interest in beauty.

I see the blurring of boundaries in the work of Matthew Collings. Like Alexander, Collings uses beauty as a whole category within which both beauty and ugliness operate. Collings belongs to an artworld which is dominated by 'a rhetoric of anti-loveliness' (108) and where pleasure in beauty is forbidden fruit. Even so, he thinks that 'the human nervous system is tuned to seek out loveliness and beauty and to crave them' albeit guiltily (108). He sees beauty everywhere in contemporary art, but it is not conventional — it is the type of beauty which can be confronting, serious and cerebral:

There is a strain of Modern art beauty which is quite respectable. The intellectualized hysterical beauty of Surrealism for example — the poetic beauty of some odd thing or other next to something else odd on
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an operating table. This is a terrible beauty or a strange or ecstatic or mad or new beauty. (Collings 1999, 104)

Surely this is the 'difficult beauty' of which Alexander writes.

The notion of 'difficult beauty' arose in the Regarding Beauty exhibition in 1999 at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington. In his review, Daniel Kunitz (2000) says that he 'found some of the most compelling art in a room with the heading "Difficult Beauty," devoted to work that assigns ugliness an essential role in beauty.' The room held paintings by Pablo Picasso, Willem de Kooning and Lucien Freud.

In her catalogue essay for the exhibition, Olga Viso (1999, 97) points to a recent widespread interests in the relationship between beauty and ugliness. In 1995 there was an exhibition on the topic at the ARC Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris called La Belle et La Bête (Beauty and the Beast). For the Abject Art exhibition, in 1992 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the curatorial team used Julia Kristeva's essay Powers of Horror (1982) as its theoretical basis. Kristeva, says Viso (1999, 97), explores 'a type of artistic degradation with transformative potential that could move darkness and pain into aesthetic form'.

**Ugliness as abjection**

'Abjection is above all ambiguity' says Kristeva (1982, 9) and in order to contain the abject 'an unshakable adherence to Prohibition and the Law'
(including 'Religion' and 'Morality') is necessary, but it is 'unfailingly oppressive' (16).

Abjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution in the paganism that accompanies societies with a dominant or surviving matrilinear character … Abjection persists as exclusion or taboo (dietary or other) in monotheistic religions, Judaism in particular, but drifts over to more "secondary" forms such as transgression (of the law) within the same monotheistic economy. It finally encounters, with Christian sin, a dialectic elaboration, as it becomes integrated in the Christian Word as a threatening otherness — but always nameable, always totalizeable. (Kristeva 1982, 17)

She goes on to say that 'the various means of purifying the abject' through catharsis 'make up the history of religions'. The quintessential form of catharsis is identified as art (17). I think liturgy can be included in Kristeva's category of art, for example in terms of the washing of baptism and the healing power of reconciliation and anointing.

Kristeva's ideas remind me of the imagery which has emerged from the so-called 'war on terror' which George W. Bush envisages as a global struggle between good and evil. Christian America is at odds with Islamic evil and God is, after all, on the side of 'God's own country'. In this instance the purification is through war rather than art. A similar sort of rhetoric was used against the Jews by Nazism — a political system which was adept at using art to support its own interests. Kristeva refers to the Holocaust more than once in her book.
Dave Hickey analysed the influence of moral idealism on the arts in his volume of essays *The Invisible Dragon* (1993, 29). This work was instrumental in re-igniting American artworld interest in issues of beauty. Hickey wrote his essays partly in response to the public outcry surrounding Robert Maplethorpe’s *X Portfolio* exhibition. Hickey points to a transgressive form of beauty in Maplethorpe’s photographs, which is ‘not about transgression for its own sake’ but for the sake of changing the world. In other words ugliness has the potential to be transformative.

**The Cross and ugliness**

Danto reflects on the abject nature of the Christian Cross and its representations which either evoke suffering or seek to suppress it.

The tendency in the Renaissance to beautify the crucified Christ was in effect a move to classicize Christianity by returning the tortured body to a kind of aesthetic grace, denying the basic message of Christian teaching that salvation is attained through abject suffering … What Abject art has done is to seize upon the emblems of degradation as a way of crying out in the name of humanity. (Danto 2003, 57)

I would add that the Cross and the Resurrection together make up a whole image, that is, the ugliness of the Cross in tension with the beauty of the Resurrection. Ugliness without beauty is unbalanced and shocking, while beauty without ugliness is unbalanced and enthralling. There are ‘proper’ moments for these unmitigated experiences, however. In the case of unmitigated ugliness, I judge the ‘proper’ moment to be when there are injustices to confront, when the status quo requires challenging, or when there are oppressive ideals or images to destroy. In the case of unmitigated beauty,
the 'proper' moment is when people need comfort or encouragement in order to take heart, reflect and pray.

Ugliness as the 'torn function'

Danto names abject art as a 'genre of contemporary art' which emerged in the early 1990's (56). If so, I predict that the genre will have a short lifespan. My view is that abjection is a mode of ugliness, which is one of the tools in the contemporary artist's repertoire that can be used or not according to the exigencies of the moment. However, ugliness is a potent and risky tool - it has the power of what Georges Didi-Huberman (Taylor 1992, 7) calls 'a torn function — that is to say, a function including the power of the negative within it'. For an artist to utilise the 'torn function' means that they must dare to go beyond what is accepted and acceptable.

Marc C. Taylor (1992, 8) describes the 'torn function' as focusing on 'the faults, fissures, crack, and tears of figures'. In this theory the most potent meanings are found at the broken edges of things or in the space between things. Because these spaces are beyond known limits, they threaten the harmony and the unity of the known. Consequently, the 'torn function' is feared and spurned by those who count on certainty.

Didi-Huberman's idea of the 'torn function' bears some similarities to the way Longinus (1963, 17) describes the role of nature in art. Nature is passional while art is rational in his schema. Longinus describes nature in the same terms as I use to describe ugliness: chaotic but ultimately creative. He
envisages art as ordered, but dry and flavourless without the 'vital informing principle' of nature.

Mary of Warmun — a torn figure

In 1998 Rosemary Crumlin curated the Beyond Belief exhibition in the National Gallery of Victoria. One of her favourite artworks in the exhibition was George Mung Mung's Mary of Warmun (The pregnant Mary) c.1983 (fig. 43). This small sculpture could not be called beautiful in a conventional sense, but for me it epitomises 'beautiful ugliness'. Issues of beauty or ugliness were probably irrelevant to Mung Mung — it seems more likely that the sculpture is the expression of the artist's 'passionate purpose' as Samuel Alexander puts it. However, for the viewer (especially a non-Aboriginal viewer) the sculpture's 'beautiful ugliness' is an issue — especially since this is a liturgical artwork. Apparently, it was made to replace the traditional plaster statue of Mary which was knocked off its table and broken by the community's dogs.

In her catalogue essay, Out of an Ancient Culture Comes the Mother (1998, 128), Crumlin says that 'to create' the image 'Mung Mung entered into his "two-way" or the place in himself where the traditional Aboriginal and the Kartiya (‘whitefella’) aspect of his life overlapped. The dominant attributes of his Aboriginality were related to place-connection and community-belonging: his traditional beliefs in the ancestor spirits; his right relationship to the land and his position as elder in his Turkey Creek community. His Kartiya side was shaped by his Catholicity. From the space between these two realities he was
able to 'create' a 'reconception of the meaning and image of the Christian Mother and Child.' I consider this as the 'third way' in action. Crumlin records Mung Mung's own words which describe the sculpture:

This young woman
she's a young woman, this one.
The spirit of the little baby
comes in a dream
to his mother.
Proper little one,
his mother says.
The babe grows and
he might be ready at
Christmas time.
He says,
Mother, I'm ready now.
And the old woman take her away
And the little one is born
down in the river here.

The torn figure is a transgressive image when it blurs the line between Aboriginal and Christian culture. The Incarnation is shown as an Aboriginal reality and Aboriginality is imaged as the norm of the Incarnation event. I think it is significant that Crumlin used the term 'create' and not 'make' since
something new emerges here — a new image and a new idea. Further, the new image and idea go beyond orthodox Catholic theology of the Incarnation and beyond what is accepted and acceptable in a church where the dominant culture is Western.

**Uglifying strategies**

Collings (1999) names both Picasso and Matisse as major figures of the twentieth century whose work reflects the paradoxical relationship between beauty and ugliness. He says they saw themselves as 'guardians of something important — the tradition of painting' of which beauty was an integral part. Their role was to change the tradition 'in order to preserve it' by renewing it. They did this by 'mixing ugliness with [beauty] to freshen it up' (109). He puzzles over the role of ugliness in painting and says that 'its odd that a slight discordant quality often seems to accompany beauty.' In the work of British artist Chris Ofili, for example, lumps of elephant dung are used to critique and challenge the beauty of the decorative surfaces of his paintings. For artists like Picasso, Matisse and Ofili, ugliness is a strategy (132).

Dewey (1958, 173) claims that artists use ugliness to confront viewers and draw their attention to, and cast a new light on, some ordinary aspect of life which is usually overlooked. Further, they use ugliness to challenge the preconceptions of the perceiver.

Danto (2003, 55) suggests that artists use disgusting images as a means to denounce false idealism, for example in Hollywood films, and 'awaken us to
the awful truths'. The 'disgustingness' of the images 'is a mean to edificatory ends'.

Similarly, Boyd (1960, 194) highlights the larrikin role of ugliness. The comfortable harmony of beauty is a challenge to some artists who rebel against the status quo and 'find their own satisfaction in the disharmony or, in terms of the canon, ugliness'. This understanding is similar to Dave Hickey's notion of transgressive beauty which breaks the rules in order to change the world and the difficult beauty of the 'torn function'.

I have used uglifying strategies many times in liturgical art over the years. The *Fig Tree* installation (fig. 19-22) was one such occasion. Here I give another example where I try to re-imagine Mary and come to terms with her, not as queen of heaven, but as a woman who was literally full of life.

**Mary as 'mother'**

This digital image of *The Visitation* (fig 44) was made as a gospel illustration for the fourth Sunday of Advent 2003. The gospel text is Luke 1:39-45. In his retelling of the Visitation, Luke weaves rich threads of associations into the story so that Mary and Elizabeth are highly symbolic figures. Nonetheless, their flesh and blood reality is not entirely lost. On that level they are just like any other women who give each other support and share the joys and anxieties of pregnancy. I made no attempt to modify or refine the shapes of the two women. On the contrary I emphasised their burgeoning bellies. The uncomfortable clumsiness of the two lumpish bodies is mitigated by the way
they gaze affectionately at each other. The colour and the light in the composition suggest that something special is happening. Mary as the ideal of Christian beauty is brought to earth in this representation by her womanly body and by the fact that she is full of life.

Conclusion

The only criterion I can use for judging this image is the connections it makes between liturgical ideals and the everyday realities of the life-world. Integral to my role as a feminist liturgical artist is to re-imagine Mary. She is ‘the mother’ of the Christian psyche and imagination. My task is to represent Mary in many guises, from queen of heaven to woman. *The Assumption* (fig. 24) shows her in a more cosmic light, while *The Visitation* is a more grounded image. Re-imagining Mary is part of my ongoing project.

Mary is the quintessential figure of ‘beautiful ugliness’. In theological terms beauty refers to divinity and ugliness to material realities. However, ugliness is not a disparaging term. Ugliness might be natural, raw, discordant and chaotic but it is ultimately creative. I used this term ‘beautiful ugliness’ to indicate a balanced relationship within the beauty/ugliness continuum. I claim that a ‘proper’ balance is somewhere towards the centre of this continuum and that the balance is not stable, but requires movement towards one end or the other according to the needs of the time.
Chapter Eight: Beauty and Ugliness

Fig. 39. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917.

Fig. 40. Andy Wahol, *Brillo Box* (soap Pads), 1968, synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen inks on wood, 44.2cm x 44.2cm x 36.3cm.

Fig. 41. Jill Orr, *She had Long Golden Hair*, 1980, performance.

Fig. 42. Martin Creed, *Work no. 88*: a sheet of A4 paper crumpled into a ball.
Fig. 43. George Mung Mung, Mary of Warmun (the pregnant Mary), c. 1983, carved wood and natural pigments, 64cm.

Fig. 44. Jenny Close, The Visitation, 2003, digital image.
CHAPTER 9:  
THE AESTHETIC AND PROPHETIC POLARISED

In Chapters 4 and 5 I began to articulate some aspects of the aesthetic and prophetic approaches to liturgical art and I showed how they are interrelated. In this chapter I take that theme further. First, I draw historical parallels between formalism and conceptualism in the artworld, and the aesthetic and prophetic approaches to theology. In the process, I compare the aesthetic approach of John Paul II and the prophetic approach of Karl Rahner. Second, I outline the basic characteristics of the two approaches in terms of a continuum. Then I tell the story of how polarisation between the two ends of the aesthetic/prophetic continuum is having grave consequences for one Catholic parish in Sydney. My aim is to show how important it is to strive for a 'proper' balance.

1. Formalism and conceptualism in art meet the aesthetic and prophetic in theology

The story of beauty theology during the 20th century is very different from beauty theory in the same period — although I maintain that there are many parallels. In the time since Vatican 2, the rigorous process of postmodern deconstruction, which challenged and changed the concept of beauty in the artworld, had little or no impact on the concept of beauty in Catholic beauty theology. Beauty theology was sheltered by some theologians and ignored by others. I maintain that the lack of critical scrutiny has made beauty theology
problematic for use in the 21st century. I also claim that the history of beauty theory in the artworld holds valuable lessons for beauty theology.

It is generally accepted that after Vatican 2 two prominent schools of Catholic theology emerged, which are usually called the conservative and the progressive. For my project, I name them aesthetic and prophetic. The former is associated with Hans urs Von Balthasar and the latter with Karl Rahner.

In *Debating Karl Rahner and Hans urs Von Balthasar* (2003), John Allen describes the difference between the two schools in terms of their attitudes towards the world.

Rahner stressed the presence of grace at the deepest level of every human being — the so-called “supernatural existential.” Von Balthasar saw an “analogy of being” between God and humanity, which placed more distance between the two and thus left room, he felt, for greater realism about sin. Rahner was a basic optimist about culture, so much so that von Balthasar once accused him of negating the necessity of the crucifixion. (Allen 2003)

In *Polarisation and Liturgy* (2004), Andrew Cameron-Mowat describes the two schools in terms of their liturgical approaches. ‘The von Balthasar camp’ is ‘true to the tradition, maintaining the authority of the church over [secular] humanity’ with ‘emphasis on the holiness of faithful Christians’ and the inherent sinfulness of the world. By contrast, Cameron-Mowat describes ‘the Rahner camp’ as ‘allowing for the possibility of change and development, of
inculturation, of the importance of the human person, of the pastoral needs concerning weakness, sin, suffering'.

The polarisation in liturgy can sometimes resemble the tension between the formalist and the conceptualist schools in the artworld. This was the case when an interesting debate arose in The Weekend Australian newspaper recently. The initial article, *In Praise of a Return to Ritual*, 10 April 2004, was written by Christopher Pearson and published for the Easter weekend. Pearson described 'pre-modern' Holy Week rituals as they were celebrated in the 1960s as 'a pinnacle of the human imagination'. He focused on 'traditional' liturgical music, which is 'lovely', has 'emotive power' and lingers in the 'popular memory'. On the other hand Pearson called the 'new Roman rite in English ... a betrayal', 'botched vestiges', 'maimed' and 'protracted austerity', which 'serious liturgists' reject.

In response to this article, a well respected liturgist, Rev Dr Gerard Moore, wrote a letter to the editor, 12 April 2004. Among other things, Moore said that 'serious liturgists respect the liturgical reform, seek its authentic celebration by the faithful, all the while preferring to concentrate on its power of conversion before any cultural aesthetic appeal.'

The next weekend Pearson's article, entitled *Sensuous Appeal of Worship*, 17 April 2004, was a well buttressed counterattack. The article was accompanied by a large photograph of Archbishop (now Cardinal) George Pell of Sydney and chairman of the Vox Clara committee, with a quote from
that source about the decline in churchgoing which Pearson saw as a direct consequence of 'cack-handed vernacular liturgies'. Pearson also quoted von Balthasar, a 'Traditional Dominican' and a 'venerable orientalist'. The latter sensibly suggested that 'aesthetic appeal and conversion cannot be placed at war with one another … the beauty of the churches' solemnities invites the individual to conversion.' I agree with the 'venerable orientalist', who is advocating a 'proper' balance between the aesthetic/formalist and the prophetic/conceptualist approaches.

Like conceptualism within the artworld, the prophetic school of theology has been dominant since the 1960s in the Catholic Church. However, aesthetic approaches to theology have been gaining influence since Karol Józef Wojtyła was elected to the papacy in 1978.

As I have intimated, there are some curious similarities between aesthetic approaches to theology and formalist approaches to art, and similarly between prophetic and conceptualist approaches. In order to examine how these relationships work in the theory/theology of art, I compare John Paul II's *Letter to Artists* (1999) and Karl Rahner's *Priest and Poet* (1967). These works display some typical characteristics of the aesthetic and prophetic approaches respectively.

In the last chapter, I placed formalist and conceptualist within the context of a continuum, and I do the same with aesthetic and prophetic here. Again, neither of these extreme positions relates directly to reality, but in the space
between them is a multitude of shifting positions. So it is here; neither John Paul II nor Karl Rahner can be said to take up an extreme position in the aesthetic/prophetic continuum.

John Paul II: an aesthetic approach

John Paul II gives the clearest outline of his theory of art and theology of beauty in *Letter to Artists* (1999). He focuses primarily on the contemplative aspect of beauty theology but he does not deny the necessity for art to engage in life-world realities. In his opening remarks, John Paul II echoes Paul VI when he calls on artists to "search for new "epiphanies" of beauty" to enrich the world. This expression presumes that art is capable of facilitating transformational encounters between God and creation. Moreover, these encounters have the potential to be 'new', that is, to reveal something previously unknown. Indeed, there is a special relationship between art and Christian revelation.

Beauty and ugliness in art

John Paul II aligns art and beauty as inextricably as any artworld formalist. Beauty is an artist's vocation (3) and yet there is a case for ugliness. Beauty is above reality, but ugliness is a reflection of it.

In so far as it seeks the beautiful, fruit of an imagination which rises above the everyday, art is by its very nature a kind of appeal to the mystery. Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption. (John Paul II 1999, 10)
Because beauty is the 'visible form of the good' (3), it is capable of promoting spiritual and ethical renewal (4). It has the power to inspire us to work and to reflect (3). Beauty defeats despair with joy (11), and stirs our enthusiasm with a sense of wonder (16). It is a 'key to mystery', 'a call to transcendence', an invitation to enjoy life and to dream of the future, and it 'stirs that hidden nostalgia for God' (16).

It might be the 'visible form of the good', but can it challenge evil or is it capable of being countercultural? Beauty might encourage us to reflect, but does it help us to question? It might give us glimpses of heaven and the future, but does it guide us through the exigencies of everyday life? None of these issues is considered here, maybe because the critical and worldly roles belong to ugliness. For this reason, I maintain that beauty is not enough for an aesthetic approach to liturgical art; ugliness is needed for a 'proper' balance.

**Art as communication: expression theory**

Art is essentially a communication for John Paul II, and the artist's self expression is central to his schema. Expression theories in Western culture have links with the Romantic Movement. It is not surprising, then, that John Paul II's two major sources are Polish writers Cyprian Norwid (1821 - 1883) and Adam Mickiewicz (1798 - 1855), both heavily influenced by
Romanticism. The latter is remarkable for his personal popularity in Poland even today. Mickiewicz is an icon of Polish culture and a national hero for his efforts to promote Polish national identity at a time when the country was divided and colonized by European powers. His poems are heavily laced with feeling and his patriotism took on mythical dimensions. These attributes are consonant with Romanticism.

Romantic expression theories of art first focused on the communication of emotion; then, in the time of modernism, they focused on the self-expression of the artist. John Paul II does the latter. He focuses on the communication of being. For the viewer, art reveals something essential about the artist's own character and personality. For practitioners, making art is a unique way to express themselves and promote their own spiritual formation (2). Art is a ministry of communication (11).

Expression theories are instrumental; that is, art is judged by how well it performs its function — in this instance, how well it communicates that essential something about the artist; but art is also useful for teaching the faith, especially when it is inspired by Scripture (5). John Paul II goes further and claims that art is an authentic source of theology (11) — even more; it is

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77 Romanticism is recognised as an historical movement in art history, which was in opposition to Classicism. Romanticism emphasized the subjective, the emotional, the imaginative, the visionary, and the transcendental, while Classicism emphasized order, calm, harmony, balance, idealization, and rationality. However, the tension between romantic and classical tendencies are discernible in just about every period and school of art practice, including Modernism and Postmodernism. This is perhaps another occasion for employing a continuum.
revelatory (13). Art, then, is prophetic in nature, but can it also be critical — can artists be larrikin prophets? I see no sign of this aspect in the letter.

Art is revelatory for the world, but can the world be revelatory for the church? For John Paul II revelation comes through the church and church sanctioned art. He gives no sign that that some aspects of church renewal might come from listening to the voice of the larrikin prophets outside the church and even from within the foreign realms of contemporary culture itself (12-13).

**Art as a reflection of the ultimate realities: naturalistic theory**

In naturalistic theories, art is a reflection of the actual or the ideal. John Paul II takes the latter into his schema and applies it to his expression theory: the works of artists 'reflect in some way the infinite beauty of God and raise people's minds to him' (11).

Art is a 'sensory evocation of mystery' (7). In line with the spirituality of St Francis and the mystical theology of St Bonaventure, the supreme beauty of God can be encountered in nature because the footprints of God are evident there. However, 'true' art goes beyond sensual reality. It is a reflection of the ultimate reality which is mystery and which can only be glimpsed in moments of 'genuine artistic intuition' (6).

Every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of man (sic) and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience it ultimate meaning. That is why the Gospel fullness of truth was bound from the beginning to stir
the interest of artists, who by their very nature are alert to every "epiphany" of inner beauty of things. (John Paul II 1999, 6)

It is interesting to note that 'inmost reality' and 'inner beauty' are used here as parallel concepts. John Paul II focuses on the role of art to reflect or communicate transcendent realities through immanent realities, but the latter are almost incidental. It is here that the influence of Neoplatonism and of Balthasar are most evident in his thinking.

Even though Franciscan spirituality and theology are interesting to John Paul II, he never takes up the notion of participation which underpins the aesthetics of Bonaventure. In participation aesthetics, humans know God by participating in the being of God. This is too intimate a relationship for John Paul II who, like Balthasar, maintains an insurmountable distance between God and creation.

God as distant and paradoxical: 'beautiful ugliness'

John Paul II has high expectations of art and it is not surprising that he aligns the ingenuity of artists with the creative activity of God, although he is careful to point out the differences.

With loving regard, the divine Artist passes on to the human artist a spark of his own surpassing wisdom, calling him (*sic*) to share in his creative power. Obviously, this is a sharing which leaves intact the infinite distance between the Creator and the creature . . . (John Paul II 1999, 1)

It is clear that God is not in creation, but immeasurably distanced from it.
John Paul II claims that artists experience the distance between God and creation as an 'unbridgeable gap' between their artworks and the origin of those works. This distance has a paradoxical aspect however.

Believers find nothing strange in this [unbridgeable gap]: they know that they have had a momentary glimpse of the abyss of light which has its original wellspring in God. Is it in any way surprising that this leaves the spirit overwhelmed as it were, so that it can only stammer in reply? (John Paul II 1999, 6)

The 'momentary glimpse of the abyss of light' is a description of a mystical moment. For John Paul II this mystical moment is the closest encounter with God. He goes on to describe it as a 'fleeting vision of beauty and of the mysterious unity of things'. So here is a paradox: there is insurmountable distance, and yet a 'mysterious unity of things' (6).

There is another paradox here and it is reminiscent of the notion of 'beautiful ugliness' which I outlined in Chapter 8. It is totally contrary to align 'abyss' with 'light', because light traditionally refers to clarity, enlightenment, holiness and beauty, and an 'abyss' is a yawning gulf, or a bottomless pit, or a reference to the primeval chaos, or ugliness. Moreover, the 'abyss of light' flows from its source in God, so John Paul II places paradox at the heart of his image of God (6). He makes this abundantly clear when he concludes the letter with a quote from Adam Mickiewicz: "From chaos there rises the world of the spirit" (16).
Art as contemplation without critique

In line with his nineteenth century influences, John Paul II uses many of the stock concepts favoured in the 'high' aesthetics of the Romantic movement such as the artist as genius, and the notion of the masterpiece. As I showed in the last chapter, these concepts generally have been discarded from contemporary beauty theory, but they are ever present in this letter.

Writing from this Apostolic Palace, which is a mine of masterpieces perhaps unique in the world, I would rather give voice to the supreme artists who in this place lavished the wealth of their genius, often charged with great spiritual depth. From here can be heard the voice of Michelangelo who in the Sistine Chapel has presented the drama and mystery of the world from the Creation to the Last Judgement … (John Paul II 1999, 9)

The lofty tone of his address is suited to the author's position as one self-consciously at the epicentre of Catholic power, culture and faith in the world: the Papal Palace, the Sistine Chapel and St Peter's Basilica.

In this grand triad, John Paul II finds the supreme expression of a Catholic theology and worldview, which he presents as a model to artists.

From this place, from the majestic Basilica dedicated to the Prince of Apostles, from the Colonnade which spreads out from it like two arms open to welcome the whole human family, we still hear Bramante, Bernini, Borromini, Maderno, to name only the more important artists, all rendering visible the perception of the mystery which makes of the Church a universally hospitable community, mother and travelling companion to all men and women in their search for God. (John Paul II 1999, 9)
Does the Basilica and its Colonnade really convey these generous qualities? Perhaps, but it also conveys messages about the social dignity, the cultural value and the political power of the church in the world. Further, it represents the power and authority of the hierarchy within Catholicism. It is pertinent to remember that the Basilica is an artwork which emerges from a particular historical moment: its construction began during the Council of Trent and on the eve of the Counter Reformation.

John Paul II makes no comment on the influence that the Reformation and the Counter Reformation might have had on the Vatican's founding artworks - much less the theology expressed in them; but these are important issues. Why does the author ignore them? Perhaps because he is trying to reflect a unified, ideal picture of the Church. If so, he chose a strange moment in its history on which to focus. Pope Julius II, who caused the foundations of St Peter's Basilica to be laid and commissioned Michelangelo to paint the Sistine chapel, is more renowned for defending the political power of the papacy rather than promoting religious values. In his day, the Church of Rome was teetering between aspirations of political hegemony and the dissolution of the Reformation (Chadwick 1972, 17).

The sixteenth century was a catastrophic era especially for those, like Michelangelo, who held strong religious beliefs. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel was painted a decade prior to Luther’s excommunication and The Last Judgement painted a decade before the Council of Trent. There is an obvious contrast in the mood of the two works. In the ceiling frescoes the focus is on
the beauty of the human body which expressed the inner spiritual reality of the human person. In *The Last Judgement* the triumphant Christ is the most commanding figure, but beauty is no longer the focus. The power of redemption and the ugliness of damnation are dominant visual themes.

Surely this shift from optimistic idealism to apprehension was in some way influenced by the disturbing social, cultural and political factors during the artist's lifetime? If so, it is important to examine how these events influenced the artist's representation of the 'drama and mystery of the world from the Creation to the Last Judgement'. Artworld scholars ask this sort of challenging question as a matter of course. It is even more relevant to challenge the interpretation of these images, since John Paul II holds them up as models of beauty and theology (John Paul II 1999, 9).

Perhaps this letter is not the place for such reflections, but its tone leaves me with the impression that the founding artworks of the Vatican City are for contemplation and aloof from critical scrutiny. They epitomise the aesthetic value of 'the self-sufficiency of the visual' (Pollock 1988, 14). They are masterpieces, their makers were geniuses, and their status as classics places them beyond question. We must gaze with awe and admiration and be spiritually nourished.

Does critical scrutiny destroy contemplation? I don't think so, but it does strip away some of the patina of mystery and awe which John Paul II constructs around the Renaissance. This was the period which produced religious art
that rose 'to heights of imperishable aesthetic and religious excellence' (John Paul II 1999, 9). It was also the time when regaining and maintaining political power was high on agenda for the hierarchy of the Western Church, but John Paul II does not make that link. Does this reflect his ecclesiology? Must Catholics trust in the authority of the Vatican hierarchy — contemplating without questioning?

Perhaps, but this is not the whole story. Recently, John Paul II suggested to some American bishops, who were on their ad limina visit to the Vatican, that they should adopt more collaborative style of governance, sharing their responsibility with the laity. This suggestion was made in the wake of the sex abuse scandals in the United States of America. Consequently, I am not sure if this was more of a damage control strategy than a move to answer an immediate and growing pastoral problem (Catholic News Service 2004).

**Dead, white, Western, male**

John Paul II's survey of religious art begins with early Christian times and virtually ends with St Peter's and the Renaissance. Contemporary cultural expressions are not entirely forgotten, but neither are they understood. There is a sense of hope that religious art and the beautiful — against the odds in a more and more hostile social and cultural climate — survives to rise above the everyday and succeed in its 'appeal to the mystery' (10).

Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situation where culture
and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience. (John Paul II 1999, 10)

There is a considerable respect for contemporary culture expressed here, but the perspective is narrow.

There is no mention of women’s contribution to the arts and the culture to which John Paul refers throughout is European, except for brief references to the Orthodox traditions. The cultures of South America, Africa, Asia or Oceania are not acknowledged; so how do Catholic artists from these continents read his letter? Enculturation is a very controversial topic today, especially with regard to liturgy, and yet it is not mentioned here.

**Summary**

On the whole, the aesthetic approach of John Paul II is underpinned by outmoded conventions which have, in the artworld, been thoroughly deconstructed during the 20th century. These conventions are being revisited today with the revival of interest in beauty, but the ground has shifted and there is a new beauty arising today in the artworld. However, *Letter to Artists* shows little or no sign that the critical efforts of the 20th century have been heard.

Nonetheless, there are at least four positive aspects of John Paul II's approach which require recognition. First, he allows that ugliness has a role in art, even if a strictly negative one. Second, beauty has a contemplative
role, but it also promotes discipleship. Third, art and artist are prophetic.

Fourth, contemporary culture is valued, no matter how flawed it might be.

On the other hand, the aesthetic approach of John Paul II is based almost solely on the contemplation of beauty and therefore it lacks the critical edge which ugliness can give. This is the positive contribution that ugliness can make. The spiritual aspects of contemplation are always more important than the embodied aspects of discipleship. Art and artists might be prophetic, but again nothing is said about the value of the critical voice. Further, there is little recognition of the revelatory role of contemporary culture itself.

Over and above these difficulties, John Paul II has no hesitation in claiming that the church needs art. He also claims that art is impoverished when it abandons the inexhaustible layers of meanings in the gospel message. I agree with him on both points, but only if art has the freedom to represent both the beauty and the ugliness of the 'good news'. I maintain that John Paul II's aesthetic approach is influenced by the prophetic, but it is not a balanced approach. A balanced approach can encompass all that is spiritual, finished, harmonious, ordered, and stable, as well as all that is natural, raw, discordant, chaotic but ultimately creative in the gospel message.

**Karl Rahner: a prophetic approach**

As one of the most influential Catholic theologians of his time, Karl Rahner speaks from a privileged position within the theological academy in *Priest and
Poet (1967). His writing is therefore as authoritative, in its way, as that of John Paul II. He does not write as a poet, but as a priest/theologian.

Rahner's essay shows the residual influence of Romanticism which had been a powerful force in early 20th century German history, notably in the era of Nazism. More importantly, Rahner’s essay figures poetry/art as a reflection of reality, human and divine. It might seem, then, that Rahner's view of art would correlate with that of John Paul II, but nothing could be further from the case as I will show. When Rahner applies expression theory and naturalistic theory to the dynamics of the proclamation and reception of the word, he focuses on the content rather than on form of art. His approach is intellectual but grounded: the word of God is in the world but experienced primarily intellectually and spiritually. Rahner's prophetic approach allows for a more intimate relationship between God and the world than the aesthetic approach of John Paul II.

Logos and language: the rational order of the universe

Rahner focuses on language, which he identifies as 'words', 'our word' or 'the word'. Word is both immanent (human language) and transcendent ('the word of the Spirit'). Words are embodied thoughts and experiences, and they are efficacious.

Words can divide and unite. They can be constructed or interpreted; primordial or new; interpretive or expressive; definitive or symbolic. They can focus on the particular or the universal, the immanent or the transcendent.
Some words are secular and inform us about the world, while others have the power to evoke mystery (295-6).

The word is the 'eternal Logos of God' (303). The Logos — the rational ordering principle of the universe which is named the Christ — is epitomised in the ordered discourse of humans. The word of God is also human language, because the Logos is embodied in Jesus: 'all human discourse witnesses to the word and to the reality of God only by its character of absolute paradox' (313). It is not surprising that Rahner identifies poetry as the primary art form, after all, 'the word alone … lives in transcendence' (302) and other art forms are more sensual.

I do not share Rahner’s penchant for words. I see this as a prejudice which is characteristic of an intellectual for whom words are his natural medium and it may also be a derogation of material reality. For my project, language is just one form through which Revelation is transmitted to creation. In the Eucharistic liturgy, for example, words are one element along side gestures and the physical elements of bread and wine. For my project, I apply Rahner’s theory and theology of poetry to the arts generally, in order to find what is useful for liturgical art.

**Word as a reflection of reality**

There are two classifications of words which Rahner describes: 'utility words' are those which communicate human knowledge about worldly realities, and
'primordial words' are those which communicate divine knowledge about ultimate realities (296-7).

In every primordial word there is signified a piece of reality in which a door is mysteriously opened for us into the unfathomable depths of true reality in general. (Rahner 1967, 298)

It is here that Rahner's naturalistic theory is apparent. 'Primordial words' reflect the ultimate reality, but this reality can never be entirely comprehended.

'Utility words' are human constructs and they are understandable and definable. 'Primordial words', on the other hand, are given by God and they are full of mystery and defy definition (296-7).

'… the primordial words reflect man (sic) in his indissoluble unity of spirit and flesh, transcendence and perception, metaphysics and history . . . all things are interwoven with all reality and therefore every genuine and living word has roots which penetrate endlessly into the depths. (Rahner 1967, 299)

Here Rahner describes a holistic view of reality in which 'primordial words' reflect both human and divine reality — they are the 'primordial sacrament of all realities' (302).

**Word as conceptually sacramental**

'Primordial words' have two layers of meaning, the literal meaning and the 'intellectual-spiritual meaning' (298). They are transgressive because they break through the barriers between the two layers of meaning. New words are formulated in order to point to the ultimate reality which is beyond material reality (297). These new words have 'positive freshness': something new emerges from the primordial (301).
'Primordial words' have power over us (296) because they bring into being what is said. They transgress the barriers between human reality and God's reality. Form and content are one and what is spoken embodies its own meaning: a primordial word 'brings the reality it signifies to us, makes it "present", realizes it and places it before us' (299). Therefore, these words are sacramental.

The word which 'makes God present in the world as God' is not always and everywhere accessible because it is an event rather than an objective reality. Since Jesus is no longer on the earth, the word must be proclaimed again and again by human voices (304). It is only when proclaimed that God's love and grace can be really present. Proclamation is only half the story, however; after it is spoken, the message has to be heard, accepted and answered (305). Hearing is the only sense that Rahner refers to and, of course, it is the one most closely related to language.

Rahner sees the ultimate reality of God revealed, or embodied, in Proclamation of the word, that is in a conceptual rather than a sensual form. This approach echoes one of the primary concerns of artworld conceptualism, that is, valuing the ideas in an artwork more than the form of the art object. There is a suggestive parallel between the theological notion of proclamation, and performance art practices which are more concerned with presentation rather than representation (see Chapter 8).
There is a sharp contrast here with the thinking of John Paul II, for whom the form of the art object is of central importance. John Paul II dwells on the scale and the imposing nature of the Vatican artworks, especially architecture. Rahner is interested in artworks which exercise the mind and the spirit and which do not interact with the body as do buildings, sculptures and paintings.

Rahner largely rejects the objectivity of aesthetic approaches to theology. Of course, he acknowledges the value of objective realities such as the sacraments, but he claims that their only purpose is to bring into and maintain 'in being the subjectivity of happily loving hearts' (311). Compared with his largely intellectual approach, this sounds rather sentimental. Rahner frequently mentions the human heart in this essay. Subjectivity and the moral agency of the individual are preoccupations in his work generally, and here again there is a parallel concern with artworld conceptualism.

Interest in subjectivity and the moral agency of the individual surface most clearly in this essay when Rahner compares the efficacy of the selfless work of the 'Saints' to the 'sheer Objectivism' of the institutional church. Clearly, his theology of church does not centre on Rome and the Vatican, as does that of John Paul II. The holiness of the church is the work of the people of the church who sustain it 'with glowing hearts, selfless dedication, the heroic throwing away of life, the divine impatience, the dark night of mystical suffering, the smiling love for the poor brother'. These are important realities of the church just as surely as 'the infallible truth of the divine word and the objective holiness of the sacraments' (311).
This understanding of the self-sacrifice of 'Saints' needs a more nuanced interpretation in today's world, especially in the light of the recent activities of terrorist groups who promote martyrdom among their followers. However, that sort of fanaticism was clearly not in Rahner's imagination. Selflessness in the service of others and 'the smiling love for the poor brother' shows his prophetic approach to theology - the focus of the gospel message, and therefore Christian life, is outreach to the poor. Moreover, I presume that, when he refers to 'Saints', it is living persons as well as the canonised variety he means.

**God as known but incomprehensible**

For Rahner, God is present in the world and yet not contained by the world. God has two ways of becoming known.

... either he seizes us and the world immediately into the dazzling brilliance of his divine light, by bestowing upon his creatures the direct vision of God, or he comes in word. (Rahner 1967, 303)

The first way is through direct encounter and the second through the word, which is already in the world. The first echoes the Transfiguration experience in the gospels of Luke (9: 28-36) and Matthew (17:1-13) in which the disciples were overwhelmed by the bright light which transfigured Jesus and revealed his transcendent aspect.

Rahner acknowledges a mystical type of encounter with God; nonetheless, he is more interested in God's word, which is accessible because it is *in* the
world. God makes known Godself in 'the primordial word' which is 'the primordial sacrament of all realities' (302). The word is a living sign of God's transcendent reality within creation. God's transcendence 'both negates and liberates', which indicates that God's nature is paradoxical. If God is totally other, God cannot be known in nature or human activity, and yet God is in creation as primordial word, which reveals the reality of God to creation.

[The word] alone is capable of making God present as the God of mysteries to the man who does not yet see him, in such a way that this presence not only is in us by grace, but is there for us to perceive. Thus the word, as the primordial sacrament of transcendence, is capable of becoming primordial sacrament of the conscious presence in the world of the God who is superior to the world. (Rahner 1967, 304)

God is both transcendent and immanent. God is totally other, and at the same time primordially present in natural reality. God is mysterious and yet can be perceived, experienced and encountered — not so much in material reality as in consciousness. God is present in the world 'in grace and in the word'. The word is the embodiment of God's grace, and when the word is proclaimed it does not merely represent God, it makes God present to us and changes us (303-5).

When the word communicates the transcendence and immanence of God, it also reflects the 'indissoluble unity of spirit and flesh, transcendence and perception, metaphysics and history' of human reality (299). In this holistic approach to human reality Rahner overcomes the traditional oppositions of dualism.
God as light and darkness: 'beautiful ugliness'

The traditional image of God as light is a repeat motif in this essay. Again in line with tradition, light is associated with the Logos: the home of the word is in the light (300). Light is used as a unifying image of God as compared to the chaotic variety of creation: 'The one white light from him must be refracted to all the prisms of the world' (306).

Rahner figures human beings as having both light and darkness. God's self-revelation is described as enlightening human darkness in an intimate encounter (303). The word is said to enable 'realities' to emerge from their 'dark hiding places into the protective light of man' (302). Light is used to signify redemption and darkness to signify sin: the redeeming 'primordial words' spoken by the poet with artistic and spiritual intensity draw things 'out of that darkness where they cannot remain, into the light of man' (301).

Like John Paul II, Rahner uses both light and dark to describe God: he refers to 'the luminous darkness' (297) of the Father. God is in the world and the light of God's grace shines 'by burning the oil of the world' (313), so God is intimately engaged in the life of the world. However, there is a fearsome side to God's light: it 'burns with the oil of our hearts, until it has consumed them'. This expression is used in the context of holiness and the self-giving of the 'Saints who sustain the church' (310). It appears that if you offer yourself to God, the sacrifice will be accepted. This applies to poets/artists and certainly to priests, of whom Rahner says that because they are less important than the word to which they minister, they must 'be submerged and unseen behind the
message' (305). They are not the authors of the message and so can take no credit for it.

In Rahner's image of God there is light, radiance, 'intimate clarity' and absolute fullness (302); there is also darkness, terror, peril and remoteness in God (309). It is in this paradoxical imaging of God that I can see, as in John Paul II's letter, a reflection of what I call 'beautiful ugliness'.

**The role of beauty and ugliness in art**

Rahner makes no mention of ugliness in this essay, and beauty is mentioned only in passing. Truth and love are paired as the highest values in Rahner's schema. However, truth and love are not esoteric ideals, they are lived realities.

On the last day, out of all this objective reality, only that will be gathered into the eternal barns of God which entered into living hearts: truth and love, and both of these in the way that they are realized, appropriated, lived. (Rahner 1967, 311)

Love is not lived as law, but as happiness. The truth is not lived as 'propositions or dogmas', but as 'the most intimate truth of deified hearts' (311).

Beauty is briefly referred to as 'the pure appearance of reality' as it is revealed in the word. Reality is referred to frequently in this essay but beauty is only mentioned twice; consequently, reality rather than beauty is more sacred to Rahner. The primordial word is the sacrament of reality (302). Its content
always points to both a specific piece of immanent reality and to transcendent reality (298). Consonant with his intellectual approach, the content or meaning of the word is more important to Rahner than the beauty of its form.

The primordial word, for all its certainty and grandeur, enters the human world even when that world is raw, discordant and chaotic, that is, ugly.

… it can enter into the kenosis of the human word, into its baseness and banality. The word of God too can take on the form of a slave and be found as human word of the street; simple without pretension, almost worldly wise.' (Rahner 1967, 314)

The word is life-relevant, it can engage with human problems and find solutions with ‘the aged shrewdness of a very earthly experience of life’; but it can also engage in the learned discourse of theology (314). Further, the word is also life-enhancing, because it is efficacious. When it is proclaimed it transforms the world and redeems it (314).

**The role of art and artists: poetry and poets**

Rahner has just as high expectations of art as John Paul II, but artists are not geniuses and artworks are not masterpieces in Rahner’s schema. His approach is instrumental, and the purpose of art and artists is to proclaim the word. Art is clearly an activity which promotes revelation. It reveals the infinite reality within the finite reality of the human world. Poetic words (or images, for my project), while they may not be as clear as theology, are more original, more comprehensive and more alive (316). Because he privileges
poetry, art is more of an intellectual, spiritual and an emotional experience than it is sensual for Rahner.

The word and its proclamation is the focus, rather than artists and their self-expression. Rahner does, however, identify the differences between the poet and the priest in terms of self-expression. In the words of Goethe — one of Germany's most celebrated Romantic poets — he professes that the artists' power to express what they experience is a divine gift. They express their own meanings and their expressions contain a revelatory light. However, the role of the priest is not self-expression, but to 'communicate God's word like a faithful messenger' (313).

In line with the influence of Romanticism in his thinking, Rahner describes the anguish of the creative process of the poet.

The poet experiences the blissful, but also perilous, extremely perilous, pleasure of an aesthetic kind of identity between his (sic) being and his consciousness. He attains that coming-to-himself and being-with-himself which St Thomas call the *reditio completa in se ipsum*, not merely in the abstract concept in which the unpoetic, profane man knows about himself. He experiences it in that concreteness full of images which is in fact a poetic and concentrated expression where everything is given in one; spirit and body, what is far and what is near, what is infinitely profound and what is childishly clear. Oh what a sublime blessedness it is to be so reconciled with oneself, so near to oneself, so close to one's immeasurable remoteness; to be able to understand oneself, by uttering oneself, even while one appears to speak of something quite different! (Rahner 1967, 309)
This paradoxical image of the pleasure and pain of creativity is a little inflated for my contemporary sensibility, which understands artists to be ordinary people engaged in an everyday activity. However, I agree with Rahner in as much as 'everyone pronounces primordial words'; that is, everyone is capable of being inspired and every Christian is capable of proclaiming the word. Consequently, everyone can experience what Rahner describes above at moments of inspiration. I maintain that the reception experience of inspiration is the same for all Christians — it is the expression of that experience which is the particular gift of the artist. I explained this concept in Chapter 5 where I described what it means to be an artist/prophet. The thing that marks out an artist/prophet is that they have 'the calling and the gift of speaking [primordial] words in powerful concentration' (301).

Artists have a role to play in the embodiment of grace, in the proclamation of the word.

But grace is here. It is present wherever we are… Everything in man (sic) should enter into the service of the divine life of grace. Must not he also, who is capable of uttering man and by his utterance of calling up man and his powers and of leading him to himself in knowledge and action, must not the poet render his service to grace and its revelation in the word of God? (Rahner 1967, 313-14)

Again, this is a holistic view of life: every aspect of life should be engaged in proclaiming the word. This presumes that everything in life is worthy to perform this role. Here is a reiteration of one of Rahner's central ideas, that God is in the world and, even though it needs redemption, the world is basically good.
Here is another of the differences between the aesthetic and the prophetic approaches to theology. For Rahner, the world is clearly graced by God, the site of redemption and worthy of being embraced. The opposing view is not so obvious in John Paul II; but for Balthasar, the world is the site of sin, and redemption involves shrugging off the cloying materiality of earthly reality. However, Rahner clearly identifies as grace-filled only those aspects of the world which are more intellectual, spiritual and emotional, and he stops short of allowing the more material or sensual into his rational worldview. I see this as a flaw.

Another gap is the lack of the critical voice. Rahner never mentions anything about the critical role of the artist — to disrupt the status quo, to confront dysfunctional theological paradigms or liturgical images or practices. However, I see some indications of this disruption when Rahner describes the word as both ‘primordial’ and freshly new. It is the word which disrupts, which ‘obtains possession of us and draws us into its unsounded depths’ (297). It is this word to which artist-prophets minister.

Summary

I have chosen John Paul II and Karl Rahner as typifying the aesthetic and prophetic schools, with some justification. However, neither author is at the extreme end of the aesthetic/prophetic continuum. Consequently, some aspects of their works overlap; for example, neither mentions ugliness, nor gives it a positive role, but they both use the traditional, paradoxical image of
God as light and darkness, in which I can sense 'beautiful ugliness'. Both authors understand art to be revelatory. However, John Paul II focuses on the role of the artist as genius and the form of the artwork as masterpiece. Rahner focuses on the content of the artwork, the 'primordial word' which for the most part is received rationally.

The aesthetic school holds beauty as the highest value, and the beauty of art and nature as a reflection of God's beauty. The most exalted role for a Christian is to contemplate God's beauty. For the prophetic school, God is the ultimate reality; and therefore, art's relationship to reality on all levels is of primary importance. The most exalted role for a Christian is discipleship, to give oneself freely in service of the poor. However, neither school would deny the value of both contemplation and discipleship for Christian life, but their respective emphases are different.

I maintain that the most significant difference between the aesthetic and the prophetic schools is in their understanding of the relationship between God and creation. John Paul II places an insuperable gap between God and creation. For Rahner, God is in the world and yet not contained by it: God is known but is incomprehensible.

2. Liturgical art and the aesthetic/prophetic continuum

In general, I do not see aesthetic and prophetic approaches as being mutually exclusive and in my practice of liturgical art I find that I need to negotiate between both. What I strive for is a 'proper' balance which can be found
somewhere towards the centre of the continuum. Again this 'balance' is not a
fixed place, but a position which moves and adjusts in response to the
exigencies of time and place.

The extreme aesthetic end of the continuum, which is oriented towards
heaven and the spirit, is what I call bloodless. The extreme prophetic end,
which is oriented towards the earth and the body, I call soulless. Somewhere
towards the middle of the continuum is a 'proper' balance in which a fragile
relationship between heaven and earth, soul and body, aesthetic and the
prophetic is continually being negotiated.

To explain this continuum and to show what implications it has for liturgical
art, I will outline two scenarios. Neither scenario is a lived experience. I am
merely describing extreme positions in order to gauge the scope of the
continuum. What I hope to show is the necessity for balance.

The aesthetic

The aesthetic approaches are typically theology from above. God is
experienced rationally and spiritually but is distanced from the everyday
realities of life. The contemplative mode of spirituality is highly valued;
consequently corporate worship and personal piety, rather than active worldly
engagements, are the focus here. The world is often viewed with suspicion
and its enticements are shunned in favour of more spiritual delights.
Experiences of mystery and awe are hallmarks of this school, and the noble
ideals of beauty theology and the formal concerns of liturgy are embraced with
 vigour. Consequently, importance is placed on lavish vestments and the adornment of the liturgical space with visuals that reflect spiritual ideals — for example, images of saints. When adherents look toward the future they cast their eyes to heaven and long for the gift of God's promised eschatological fulfillment. Contemplative waiting and watching are the appropriate attitude here.

**Bloodless liturgical art**

On the extreme bloodless end of the continuum, liturgical images project a distant God — transcendent, totally other, all-powerful and glorious — who lacks intimate connection with the world, who is heedless or contemptuous of creation. They engender fear of God instead of awe, and mystification and superstition rather than mystery. This happens when traditional symbols, which have lost their meaning, are doggedly retained and become disconnected from life-world realities.

The liturgical environment is bloodless when its unbalanced concern for the spiritual stifles the social aspect of the liturgy — when getting a foretaste of heaven is more important than living life to the full. Liturgical leadership is strictly hierarchical and the laity have little authority and a minimal role in the liturgical action.

I associate the philosophical notion of 'disinterested appreciation' with the pleasures of the bloodless end of the continuum. Practical purpose and human interests are not active here, and the everyday issues are
transcended. Desire does not influence the viewer's appreciation of liturgical art and the senses and emotions are overshadowed by the rational, spiritual and disembodied.

Universal and communal values are promoted, which means that there is no place for the individuality of either artist or viewer. Tradition is the only source for valid images and meanings. Consequently, liturgical imagery is highly symbolic and there is no place for the particular. Images are of sacred, ideal realities and, although there is great hope for a heavenly future expressed in these images, there is little concern for everyday realities.

At this end, beauty is spiritual and salvific. Ugliness, on the other hand, is associated with the body and sin. The beauty of heaven is figured as 'real', but the world and its pleasure are phantoms and have to be shunned. Beauty might be the overwhelming reality at this end of the continuum, but all is not sweetness — or rather the sweetness is cloying.

Bloodless beauty is not truly life-relevant or life-enhancing. The cloying sweetness of bloodlessness is experienced in the rigidity of the status quo and the vacuousness of disembodiment. Because everything is complete there is no possibility of anything new, which means there is no creativity. There is the constriction of the closed circle, and of uniformity. The focus is the 'centre' and the 'edge' is dangerous and out of bounds.
Chapter Nine: The Aesthetic and Prophetic Polarised

The Prophetic

The theological mode of the prophetic approaches is more likely to be from below, and consequently the presence and activity of God in the world is an important premise. They are characterised by engagement in the affairs of the world, particularly with regard to social justice. The liturgical orientation is towards the dynamic of relationships between God, humanity and creation generally. Evangelism and conversion are central concepts of liturgical theology here, and individual commitment to ethical behaviour is highly valued. Reality is one of the highest values. Traditional ideals, which are judged to bear no relationship to the realities of life, are discarded. When adherents look toward the future they envisage possible futures which are more liberating and fulfilling. They work with the grace of God, which is at work in the world, to bring about eschatological fulfillment. Readiness and action are the appropriate attitudes here. Prayer, including liturgy, is understood in the context of action in the world.

Soulless liturgical art

Soulless liturgical images are entirely earthbound. Images of God at this end of the continuum are reflections of human life with all its foibles and limitations. God is immanent, inextricably part of creation but never moving beyond it. The human condition and ecological issues are the sole focus of the imagery. The aims of liturgical art are pragmatic and its values are individualistic.
The egalitarian approach to liturgical leadership devolves into a lack of leadership and a diminution of prophetic vision and hope. The realities of everyday life are the focus, and spiritual experience is neglected in favour of grounded social engagement.

Soulless images project a God who lacks the power to transform the world. The meaning of the images is entirely relative and they are disconnected from the rich sources of Tradition. The liturgical environment does not inspire the community or encourage the faithful to lift up their hearts beyond the limitations of life-world aspiration. Liturgical environments focus on the present and everyday needs of the faith community without regard to the sense of mystery which gives spiritual depth to sacramental realities.

Suffering humanity is more 'real' than the communion of saints, but there is no way to look beyond the suffering. Ugliness is more potent than beauty here. Because ideals of beauty ignore the realities of life, they are rejected as bankrupt and sinful — they oppress humanity and the earth. While life is salvific and the world is the site of redemption, the bitterness of reality poisons hope.

Liturgical images, which engage with the soullessness of ugly realities without the inspiration of hope, are not truly life-relevant or life-enhancing. The bitterness of soullessness is experienced in the shallows of the material dimension of life and the restlessness of constant change. Because all is relative and nothing is 'finished', there is no possibility of rest in the chaos and
violence of creativity. There are no boundaries and no continuity. The focus is 'edge' and there is nothing to be gained from the dead 'centre'.

3. The struggle to negotiate balance

Towards the centre of the aesthetic/prophetic continuum there is neither bloodlessness nor soullessness but something between, a 'proper' balance. This 'proper balance' is lived out in deep respect for both the Tradition and human experience, and commitment to both the spiritual life and social responsibility. It is my contention that within the church the bloodless and the soulless ends of the continuum are not lived realities, because balance is continually being negotiated, often painfully.

The Redfern struggle

This is the case in St Vincent's parish in the Sydney inner-city suburb of Redfern as I write. A new parish priest was appointed to St Vincent's parish in Redfern in 2003. The new priest and the Aboriginal community have clashed.

Father Ted Kennedy was the parish priest at St Vincent's for thirty years until illness precipitated his retirement. On ABC radio's *Encounter* program Fr Kennedy was described as 'a passionate advocate for social justice — and a very sharp thorn in the side of the Catholic Church hierarchy.' During his incumbency, St Vincent's was a refuge and a home to hundreds of Aboriginal people who lived there and sometimes died within its walls. Ironically, there were never many Aboriginal people in the pews on Sunday, but the place
continues to have profound significance for the indigenous community, who are plagued by substance abuse and other social ills related to their cultural disenfranchisement.

Cardinal George Pell appointed Fr Gerry Prindiville as parish priest and Father Dennis Sudla as assistant. Both priests are members of the Neocatechumenal Way. The new priests have a very different vision of sacred space from their Aboriginal parishioners. They have recently carpeted over the bare boards of the church floor. This has outraged community members for whom the bare boards held significance.

Many Aboriginal people have died in this church, and their bodies have been on these boards. And they died in many different ways, but often in the loving arms of people who tried to support them in their last few hours or minutes. And to try to cover it up … is just missing the point of the whole vision of what the Church should be doing with all the people. (Encounter)

The customary twice-weekly meal which was shared inside the church has been curtailed by Fr Prindiville because it was ‘inappropriate’.

Marnie Kennedy, Fr Ted Kennedy’s sister, commented that ‘The sort of god that is projected by [the new priests] is severe, there’s a lot of emphasis on sin and guilt and shame. Well that’s no help’. She also described how the new Parish Priest has adopted an exclusive attitude to the services offered by the parish.

Ted has buried hundreds of Aboriginal people. He has never questioned whether they’re Catholic or not, so a few weeks ago, one of the elders died, Aunty Betty. So her daughters came and asked if she
could be buried there, because her son ... was buried from Redfern, and we supported them through their tragedy. So she wanted to be buried in that same church. But they had to go round to the priest's place to ask for permission to use the church ... Jerry ... didn't express any condolence, he said to them, 'Are you Catholic? Is your mother a Catholic? If not, how could she be buried in the church?' And so that sort of thing goes round the Aboriginal community like fire. They have an enormous underground communication, so they pass on to each other that this is not the place to come. (*Encounter*)

Another of the many clashes that have occurred in the parish recently focused on two images of women.

Behind the altar here, there's a photo of Shirley Smith or Mum Shirl, who died in 1998, and she's revered among the Aboriginal and white congregation as a genuine saint (if not an officially canonised one) . . . The new priests feel that the photo of Mum Shirl is inappropriate, and the community has had a fight on its hands to keep it up on the wall.

On the adjoining wall here, the priests have put of an image of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour - a more traditional Catholic icon. (*Encounter*)

It appears that Mary (fig. 45) is effectively in competition with Mum Shirl\(^78\) (fig. 46), and a false separation between the two is the result. However, there is an opportunity for a 'proper' balance to emerge here. A significant juxtaposition might be established between the two figures: Mary, the spiritual ideal of divine love to a suffering world and Mum Shirl, a living example of perpetual help to her community in Redfern. Here is an instance where truth can be brought to earth by reality, goodness by responsibility and beauty by ugliness.
Sydney based artist Bill Clements met Mum Shirl at Mass in St Vincent's church. In his sculpture, simply called Mum Shirl (fig. 47), Clements has represented her realistically — she is a middle aged ordinary Aboriginal woman, who was also an extraordinary human being. In his digital image (fig. 48), Clements showed where he thought the sculpture ought to be placed.

Here is Mum Shirl sitting at the entrance to St Mary's Cathedral in the heart of Sydney and at the heart of Cardinal George Pell’s archdiocese. Like a true larrikin prophet, Clements uses a transgressive image, the torn figure of Mum Shirl, to critique the dominant culture of the Church.

The situation in St Vincent's parish is a poignant example of the struggle that happens when the space between heaven and earth, soul and body, aesthetic and the prophetic, religion and life, beauty and ugliness, and Tradition and the 21st century, is in the process of being painfully renegotiated. The influence of the Neocatechumenal Way has already proved divisive and, as the struggle continues in Redfern, it remains to be seen if a balanced approach can emerge or if the situation will devolve into a polarisation of positions. Sadly, the latter looks more likely. If that happens, there will be untold damage done to the members of the Redfern community (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) for whom St Vincent’s is sacred space. In the name of religion, a community will be fractured and the Australian church will become even less relevant to Australian society.

78 Mum Shirl was a Wiradjuri Aboriginal woman who was often referred to as 'the black saint
Conclusion

The present mood of polarisation within the church between the aesthetic and the prophetic schools of theology is divisive, but it is not an insurmountable problem. In order to achieve a 'proper' balance, I believe the church needs to listen to the critical voice of larrkin prophets within the church. Feminist liturgical artists in particular have a role to play here, because it is an integral part of their role to creatively reclaim the tradition. The church also needs to pay attention to wisdom from outside the church — from Protestant sources, from the artworld and from secular philosophy. It is the task of the next chapter to identify some of these sources and to explore the wisdom they offer. An integral part of that wisdom is the creative relationships between truth and reality, goodness and responsibility, and beauty and ugliness.
Fig. 45. Our Lady of Perpetual Succour.

Fig. 46. Photograph of Mum Shirl, Colleen Shirley Smith, which hangs in St Vincent’s church in Redfern, Sydney.

Fig. 47. Bill Clements, Mum Shirl, c. 1990, plaster, lifesize.

Fig. 48. Bill Clements, Mum Shirl, c. 2001, digital image.
CHAPTER 10:
THE AESTHETIC AND PROPHETIC: STRIVING FOR BALANCE

In order to maintain a balance between the aesthetic and the prophetic in theory/theology of art and in the practice of liturgical art, the space between the bloodless and the soulless ends of the aesthetic/prophetic continuum has to be negotiated continually. In this chapter, I aim to show that the aesthetic and the prophetic models are interdependent in the balanced theology that I need to support my practice of liturgical art. Arriving at a 'proper' balance between aesthetic and prophetic is not a one-off task, but involves a constant struggle to negotiate the space between the two extreme positions.

In this chapter, I explore some ways to achieve such a balance for my ongoing project. First, I analyse some aspects of the aesthetic approach of Hans urs Von Balthasar and his successors, and try to find ways of balancing them with the prophetic approach. In this section, I show that I am still wary of traditional beauty theology and that this hermeneutic of suspicion is also part of my ongoing project. In the second section, I look back over my project and try to draw together the many threads of meaning that have emerged. Lastly, I use my experience of artist-facilitator at the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy Chapter as a model for my ongoing feminist practice of liturgical art.
Chapter Ten: The Aesthetic and Prophetic: Striving for Balance

1. Balancing Balthasar

As with beauty in the artworld, there is a renewed interest in beauty theology, particularly the aesthetic approach of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who managed to draw beauty into a comprehensive theological system. However, I maintain that Balthasar's approach is more suited to a bygone era than the 21st century. Louise Dupré says of Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord* (1982)\(^{79}\):

> With a feeling of great awe the reader closes the final volume of this last great *summa*, so original and so traditional, in which Tridentine theology attains its final, perhaps most beautiful expression. (García-Rivera 1999, 75)

Recent publications by Catholic theologians show a marked tendency to use Balthasar as a major source. Cambridge University Press has just published *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Oaks & Moss 2004). I still have some reservations about the way his ideas are used. Consequently, in the following section, I look at five issues in Balthasar's aesthetic approach which need balancing before I can use his work as a source for my feminist practice of liturgical art.

**Culture and counterculture**

When Balthasar describes the rejection of beauty in contemporary times, he dismisses contemporary Western culture as 'a world of interests' and of 'avarice and sadness'. The 'world' is inadequate and Balthasar does not see the creative potentialities there (81). Things were better in the past.

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\(^{79}\) Originally published in 1961.
John Saward uses Baltasar's romantic attitudes towards the past as a starting point for his own project in *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty* (1997). The 'great' theologians of the 'Patristic centuries' and the 'Middle Ages (up to and including the great Schoolmen)' were saints, 'their faith was vibrantly alive with charity, and their understanding of faith perfected by the Gifts of the Holy Spirit'. By contrast the theologians of the present day, who have lost the 'Patristic and medieval unity', are simply ideologues and psychologists under the spell of the 'heresy of Modernism' (24).

Saward shows open contempt for contemporary culture. He calls his attitude 'resistance to the present age, this *contemptus mundi*’ (174). This is a strange inconsistency because Saward, in line with his aesthetic approach, is generally positive about the value of creation, especially humanity: 'Man's (*sic*) rational and spiritual soul' reflects God's beauty most powerfully. The soul and the body together resemble God more completely than just the soul (52).

In *The Community of the Beautiful* (1999), García-Rivera names Karl Rahner as the leading light of faith for the modern era, but claims that Hans Urs von Balthasar will perform the same role for the postmodern era. He, like Balthasar, shows a startling pessimism towards contemporary culture. He accuses the natural and human sciences of operating with 'impoverished Facts and impoverished Ideas' (174). But the author says nothing of the great advances in science which have been life-enhancing for many. He also
denigrates modernity, which he calls an 'abyss', and postmodernity, which he calls a 'morass' (76).

García-Rivera knows the liberating affects of Vatican 2, especially for the Latin American Church (4). He views the Catholic Church as a victim, as 'battered by the challenges of Modernity' (50); but he can not see that, if it were not for the challenges of modernity, the changes in the church might never have come about. He places his project within a 'lively ecclesial tradition that had developed distinct from Modernity' (51) and the Tridentine Church; but he does not align it with postmodernity. Is García-Rivera being consciously countercultural in the same way as John Saward? This is not clear, but outside his ecclesial community and the wider Christian community, humanity and its culture is not to be trusted.

In my view, the tendency to disparage contemporary culture is irrational. It comes of thinking too idealistically and failing to ground theology in life-world realities. Saward seems to view creation only as objective material reality, but I disagree: culture is as much part of creation as land and bodies. He calls his approach countercultural, but I see it as a willful denigration of one aspect of God's creation. I agree that Christians need to be prophetic in the world and that means being critical of the dominant culture. However, I maintain that if you begin the transformation process with a world-view which encompasses both the cultural 'defilement' of the world and the truth/goodness/beauty of the Church, then the transformation will turn into fundamentalist, destructive and oppressive 'purging'.
On the other hand, if the transformation process begins from an appreciation of culture as part of God's creation, then the renewal will be respectful, constructive and liberating. In Saward's vision, the transformation is all one way — from Catholicism to the world. I would add another dimension — that the world (including culture) is a source of renewal for the church. This idea is in line with the spirit of Vatican 2, and I will refer to this again later. The church itself is part of contemporary culture, but I agree that it still needs a certain distance from secular concerns in order to be counterculture, that is, to project the liberating gospel message; but that distance is a far cry from Balthasar's and Saward's 'contemptus mundi'.

**Beauty, truth and goodness**

Balthasar (1982) makes an impassioned plea for recognition of the 'transcendentals' — the Platonic triad of beauty, truth and goodness — but he places beauty at the centre his project. He knows the world as 'not wholly without beauty' (18-19), and that is as far as he is willing to go. When he dismisses contemporary Western culture as 'a world of interests' and of 'avarice and sadness', he forgets all those who are the victims of the vested interests and greed. In his view, the world is basically evil: 'nature has been alienated from its origin' and 'God's Word no longer speaks through all beings' (81).

Balthasar lifts his eyes to heaven and places his hopes there, so when he looks at the world he does not see the face of God in the world's suffering. He
does, however, acknowledge that 'the folly of the cross ... finds access to the primal beauty of our existence'. So he can reconcile Christ's suffering with beauty; but he cannot make the leap back to the human situation and find 'the folly of the cross' embodied in the suffering of the world (82-3). Surely if God is prepared, as a human being, to die on the cross, then ordinary human suffering must be dignified with positive acknowledgement — even if only as a reflection of Christ's suffering? Furthermore, Balthasar overlooks the creative ugliness of the world. When ideas are new they often appear natural, raw, discordant, and chaotic — just like the creation itself at its beginning.

In *Theology of the Arts* (2000, 144-51), Richard Viladesau describes Balthasar's theology as placing 'God's glory within an ontology of beauty' (147). Everything, including ugliness and suffering, is understood within the context of beauty.

> We need God's grace to open our eyes to see God's work at hand in creation and the beauty of human life, despite its sorrows and tragedies. (Viladesau 2000, 147)

Here, human suffering seems to be swept up under the all enveloping category of beauty. Indeed, suffering can be beautiful if 'it makes us realize the truth of the human situation in need of salvation, evokes the beautiful vision of hope, and stirs up the beautiful moral response of compassion' (148).

Alejandro García-Rivera (1999) also uses only the one category of beauty, but that beauty is a paradoxical beauty which is difficult, transgressive and founded on difference. The traditional notion of beauty as harmony is deeply offensive to García-Rivera.
Harmonizing suffering away is an obscene not an aesthetic act. Only a cultural aesthetic which can face up to suffering, even find its aesthetic force there could adequately describe Hispanic and Latin American experience. (García-Rivera 1999, 60)

I maintain that beauty is not a large enough category to hold hope and compassion as well as suffering and need. Only 'beautiful ugliness' can contain all these aspects of divine and human reality.

For Balthasar, God is beauty, and in defence of this ideal he lashes out: 'We can be sure' he says, 'that whoever sneers at [beauty] as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past — whether he (sic) admits it or not — can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love'. The truth is that, when Balthasar wrote this, not many were listening. Those who might have been well disposed to hear were often too busy trying to do good in a less than beautiful world. They sometimes found that the traditional ideals of beauty, truth and goodness were the very ideals which underpinned the oppressive systems they struggled against.

I am thinking of someone like feminist theologian Phyllis Trible, who wrote Texts of Terror (1984), in which she analyses four biblical horror stories about women victims of slavery, rape, dismemberment and human sacrifice. Trible describes her motivation this way:

Choice and chance inspire my telling these particular tales: hearing a black woman describe herself as a daughter of Hagar outside the covenant; seeing an absurd woman on the streets of New York with a sign, "My name is Tamar"; reading news reports of the dismembered body of a woman found in a trash can; attending worship services in
memory of nameless women; and wrestling with the silence, absence, and opposition of God. All these experiences and others have led me to a land of terror from whose bourn no traveler returns unscarred. The journey is solitary and intense. (Trible 1984, 1-2)

Being a responsible Christian, attentive to the ugly realities of life, led Trible on a terrifying, but ultimately creative journey that challenged the traditional ideals (truth, goodness and beauty) of Christian culture. She found in scripture a forgotten history of violence against women. She sought to 'recover a neglected history, to remember a past that the present embodies' and to call for repentance (3).

Contrary to Balthasar's prediction, when Trible focused on ugliness she did not stop praying or loving. The very last lines of her book are a poem or a song of lament. It is written in memory of the 'beloved and lovely' unnamed daughter of Jephthah, whose death is 'a terrible sacrifice to a faithless vow' (109).

Trible found a kind of beauty among the ugliness and sufferings of the biblical women whose stories she told. However, like García-Rivera, she stands by the ugliness and does not allow the horror of the stories to be diminished by harmonizing rhetoric about rewards of self-sacrifice or the joys of redemption (2). The 'beautiful ugliness' of the women and their situation stands. Similarly, truth has been grounded by reality and goodness by a sense of responsibility, in Trible's project.
Contemplation and discipleship

In *Theology of Beauty* (1986, 4), Noel O'Donaghue recognises that Balthasar's firm focus on the contemplative represents Christian life as passive/receptive. He asks: 'Surely the human heart and mind have something to say, something to give, really to give as they respond to the Father's love?' My answer is yes. I maintain that we need both the receptivity of the contemplative and the responsibility of discipleship.

In *Christianity, Art and Transformation* (2001, 132-5), John De Gruchy outlines Balthasar's 'recognition and affirmation of the "practical concerns" of liberation theology', but also 'his reluctance to allow theology to engage in critical social analysis lest it become the tool of secular ideologies'. It appears that Balthasar was not prepared to allow beauty — even the beauty of the cross — to journey into hostile territory. Being South African, De Gruchy is in a position to know how Christians can misuse the Tradition to support the ideologies of an oppressive regime; but he also knows first hand how Christians who are faithful to the Tradition can help to change the world through political engagement. De Gruchy looks to Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a model for 'helping us overcome the separation of faith and politics, and hence live creatively in the tension between what he calls the "mystical" and the "prophetic"' — I call them aesthetic and prophetic. In his own project, De Gruchy searches for ways to balance the two orientations. He finds Balthasar's spiritual orientation inspiring, but knows that it is too removed from the life-world.
Transcendence and immanence

The 20th century Protestant approach to beauty theology is outlined by Edward Farley in *Faith and Beauty* (2001, 74): ‘if beauty does pertain to faith, it is only as a postponed beauty — something which comes with eschatological redemption’. Beauty, then, is totally transcendent and too far from everyday life to make a difference. On the other hand, Farley describes how in Balthasar’s vision, the beauty of God ‘not only manifests itself but appears and is embodied in the incarnation, the Church and redemption’ (76). It would seem that the beauty of God is vitally immanent here. This is a very appealing vision; but in Balthasar’s work, and so much of Catholic theological aesthetics, it is only *ideally* true, since the beauty of God, being utterly transcendent, never really engages with the cut and thrust of everyday life.

García-Rivera (1999, 82) finds Balthasar’s notion of analogy, as opposed to the Rahnerian transcendence, satisfying: ‘the analogy of being plants the human being firmly in creation and from there God must be found and known.’ In Balthasar’s view, he says, humans have to ‘contemplate the Creator from within the very stuff of creation rather than from some transcendental horizon’. Again, the implication is that the aesthetic approach offers a more intimate relationship to God; but for Balthasar, God is utterly other, and the distance between human beings and God is insurmountable. In Rahner's view, God is 'in' creation, and knowable, although mysterious and incomprehensible. For my project, I see a balance of the two ideas: God is in creation but cannot be contained by creation. God is utterly other and incomprehensible, but God makes Godself intimately known through the 'very stuff of creation'. I maintain
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that this more generous view can be found in the theology of St Bonaventure which I allude to later.

Summary

My aim is to achieve a 'proper' balance between the aesthetic and the prophetic for a feminist practice of liturgical art. I have identified four issues that still need to be resolved in Balthasar’s aesthetic approach before his legacy can make its mark on such a practice. Further, I have indicated ways that these issues might be resolved. First, a balanced approach involves taking a respectful, but critical stance within contemporary culture. Second, it is only within the scope and balance of 'beautiful ugliness' that relationships between the contingent realities of human life and the ultimate reality of God can be experienced. Similarly, to be life-relevant and life-enhancing, the ideals of truth and goodness need to be balanced by life-world realities and a sense of responsibility. Third, a balance of contemplation and discipleship is required in a full and active Christian life. Fourth, in a balanced approach to the aesthetic and prophetic, God is represented as mysterious, yet intimately knowable through creation, as in the world, but not contained by the world. These ideas are part of the agenda for my ongoing project.

2. Looking back and looking ahead to the ongoing project

After making my last critical comments about beauty theory, all I can do now is to look back over my project and try to draw the threads of my argument
together. I began by asking Perceval's question: what does this mean? I used the Jubilee installations as an example, and sought feedback from my parish community at Mt Carmel about their experience of the work. The comments of the participants affirmed the value of my work, but they challenged me to think differently about my approach. They showed me the significance of beauty. Until then, I had thought that the only purpose of the 'vibrant colours' was to attract people’s attention to the more serious content of the work — the liturgical meanings. I soon discovered that the 'wow factor', or the experience of beauty itself, had its own meaning and was in fact the primary experience of the reception community. Meaning always came first for me and beauty, if considered at all, came second; but for most of the Focus Group participants, the experience of beauty was a significant part of their journey into meaning.

So, while I still ranked beauty secondary in my practice, I had to come to terms with its importance in the reception experience. Was that liturgy document *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (1978), right all along about the centrality of beauty and about using beauty as the highest criterion for art? I still had some serious doubts about this, so I went back to the document and found the concept of 'beauty' applied in a number of ways there.

In its most exalted meaning, beauty in EAW is associated with the spiritual ambiance of the liturgy, where 'the numinous, the holy' can be sensed (34). Beauty is also aligned with 'feelings of conversion, support, joy, repentance,
trust, love, memory, movement, gesture, wonder' (35). It is applied to the environment, which is beautiful ‘when it is hospitable, when it clearly invites and needs an assembly of people to complete it … when it brings people close together … when it helps people feel involved and become involved' (24). An object, such as the altar, is beautiful when it is ‘attractive, impressive, dignified, noble’ and designed in ‘pure and simple proportions' (72). The problem is that beauty seems to mean everything that can be construed to be liturgically positive, but no negatives are identified. Ugliness is not mentioned, and the critical role of art is not considered.

Spurred on by the Focus Group responses, I embarked on a mission to find out more about beauty. I also had my own issues about the responsibility of the artist, which the community did not seem to share. At the time, the journey into beauty was like stepping back into the dim past, but I was sure that my own agenda would take me forward. So I unequivocally planted a starting marker for my journey in the present moment. In Chapter 1, I outlined my feminist postmodern approach to art theory, which was critical of the values underpinning traditional beauty theory. It was here that Perceval's question (What does this mean?) gained four new facets.

First, I began to ask what implications the subjectivity of individuals had for the reception experience of liturgical art. I wondered about the nature of the relationship between the evidently partial and perspectival nature of individual experience, and the ideal need for Christian community — for common ground and shared values, especially with regard to liturgy.
Second, I asked about how the evident desire for beauty and pleasure in the reception experience related to my passion for meaning in liturgical art. I wondered whether it was possible to reconcile the pleasures of beauty with a sense of responsibility.

Third, I began to ask about the implications of the relationship between art and reality. In particular, I needed to understand the relationship between liturgical art and life-world experience. This led me to inquire into the relationship between heaven and earth, the transcendent and the immanent.

Fourth, I asked what criteria I could use for judging art. 'Innovation and influence' (Salomon 1991, 133) seemed just as biased as beauty. I wondered if I could value liturgical art by the way it engaged individual viewers in community meanings and by the way it made connections between the everyday realities of people's lives and the ideal realities of God.

In order to balance the critical feminist postmodern approach, I added two more elements to the conceptual framework I was building. The first was a group of concepts from classical American Pragmatism. This involved walking back into the past, but in the case of John Dewey's aesthetics of experience, it was a past which was countercultural in its day. His theory of art was grounded in the life-world.
Dewey (1958, 18-27) describes aesthetic experience as being ‘fully alive’ and in ‘active and alert commerce with the world’. Aesthetic enjoyment of artworks is associated, in his schema, with the expansion and enrichment of life. The receptive attributes of our bodies, especially our senses, are vital to the full experience of life so that, if the sensual experience is disregarded, life is 'narrowed and dulled'. Binary oppositions of 'mind and body, soul and matter, spirit and flesh' are signs of the fear of 'what life may bring forth' (22).

The second element I added to my conceptual framework was the theological approach offered by Margaret Miles. Her schema is not primarily focused on beauty, but heaven and earth are drawn together there in the experience of art.

Miles's theology (1985) is constructed from a holistic worldview in which the starting point is 'the primary-connectedness of human beings to the natural world by fragile and transitory bodies' (35). She envisions the Christian experience as a participation in 'the “body of Christ” with its fulfillment in the resurrection of the body (36). The theological role of images is to ‘train the eye’ (3), ‘to focus the senses and the mind’ (9) in order to see nature; but not to look beyond nature to ‘ideal prototypes’, rather to look more deeply into ‘the reality that creates and nourishes’ (3-4).

Miles also offered the phrase from which I constructed my alternative criterion for judging art, namely ‘life-orienting and –enhancing’ (6), which I renamed life-relevant and life-enhancing. So now I had a new primary value for my
project, 'life', which made more sense to me than beauty. So my problem was how to reconcile this new value with Christian Tradition and with the Focus Group material?

**Life as the highest value**

I have not yet fully explored the notion of reconciling the new criterion to Tradition, so this is part of my ongoing project. However, remembering what William James (1975, 36) said about the 'ancient body of truth', I look to tradition. Like an old tree, there are parts of the tradition which are aging and some which are new. Sometimes the old parts die and fall away, but sometimes they show signs of new life. One of the signs of new life today is the renewed interest in beauty theory and theology. However, in the first section of this chapter, I have shown that this is not an unalloyed blessing. So, when I take up an aesthetic approach to liturgical art I look to 'life' as the highest value, and I try to understand beauty in relation to that value.

In the Tradition, there are some impressive precedents for 'life' used as a central value. In the scriptures, God is life. In the gospel of Matthew, for example, God is the 'living God' (Mt 16:16) and the God of the living (Mt 22:32). Also, in the early church there is the famous saying of St Irenaeus\(^{80}\): 'the glory of God is a living man *(sic)*'. Irenaeus goes on to say that 'the life of man *(sic)* consists in beholding God … the manifestation of God which is made by means of the creation, affords life to all living in the earth'. There is no
opposition between 'soul and matter, spirit and flesh' in Irenaeus' adage; and, despite the gendered language, I don't think there is any opposition here between man and woman either. If read generously, this is an inclusive and holistic image of life fully lived through the vision of God perceived and appreciated in creation — in culture and nature.

'Life' and my working principles

In the face of the emphasis that the community placed on beauty in the Focus Group discussions, placing 'life' in central position over beauty was complex. In Chapter 3, I evaluated the seven working principles which underpinned my inclusive and holistic approach to liturgical art, and I found that they were basically supported by the Focus Group responses; but nowhere in my theory was there a focus on beauty. This was the major challenge that the community gave me and which I began to address in Chapter 4. In the meantime, I focused on my seven principles.

I called these principles my *embryo theory of liturgical art*. They include the production of artwork which: (1) is integrated into the action of the liturgy; (2) is planned, made and interpreted collaboratively; (3) is interactive; (4) evokes responses from the community; (5) is life-relevant and life-enhancing; (6) defines the celebrating space in an inclusive way; and (7) reaches out beyond the parish community. I still use the terms inclusive and holistic to describe

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80 From *Against the Heresies* Bk 4, 20:7, http://www.ccel.org/fathers/ANF-01/iren/iren4.html#Section20
my feminist practice, and I still find the seven principles useful, but I group them differently and understand them in a broader context now.

The integration of liturgical images into the action of the liturgy has taken on a new meaning and importance since I realised how ‘the specificity of aesthetic experience; the self-sufficiency of the visual’ and the ‘teleological evolution of art autonomous from any other social causation or pressure’ (Pollock 1988, 14), could distance art from the processes of life. In my practice of liturgical art, the emphasis is on activity rather than objects. Objects are valued, but what is more important is the level and quality of the interactions that the community has with those objects, and the way in which the images make a difference to the lives of community members. With the emphasis on interactive art and collaboration, notions of the ‘artist as genius’ and the artwork as ‘masterpiece’ are out of place.

The art objects, in their collaborative and interactive mode, have three roles. The first is to facilitate full participation in the liturgy; the second is to call the community to the contemplation of meaning; and the third is to call the community to active discipleship.

Within the interactive/collaborative approach is an implicit acknowledgement of three important tenets of my conceptual framework. The first is that people are different. The second is the need for solidarity in the common ground of the liturgical environment, where many perceptions and values are held in
common. The third is the need to reach out beyond the parish to the wider community.

A further implication of the interactive/collaborative approach is that, when liturgical images evoke responses from the community, I know that there will be a huge variety of ideas, memories and associations that will emerge. Hopefully, all these can be drawn together by the common, traditional liturgical meanings, which are the core element of the artwork. It has to be acknowledged that the tension between difference and solidarity is a living reality of the liturgical environment.

Probably the most enduring aspect of my embryo theory is the twin notions of life-relevant and life-enhancing, which developed into my main criteria for judging art. The life-relevant aspects of art primarily relate to life-world issues, and the life-enhancing aspects primarily relate to eschatological fulfillment. But these are not mutually exclusive concepts; far from it. It was when I appropriated these terms from Margart Miles' project that I first began to envisage the notion of continuums. I could see that life-relevant and life-enhancing were two ends of a continuum which covered the full spectrum from the concerns of the body to the concerns of the spirit.

Even with her emphasis on the life-world, it is not part of Miles' thinking that physical existence should be the only focus. She acknowledges that for some, physical existence is potentially overwhelming, in which case 'exhortations to "dismain" the body and cultivate the spiritual life call attention
to an aspect of human beings that people are in real danger of neglecting’ (37). Here, Miles is seeking to find a 'proper' balance between the soul and the body, which — like the elusive centres of my continuums — is dynamic rather than stable.

After evaluating my working principles, I then needed to return to the concerns which the community expressed in the Focus Group responses. The major issues had to do with aspects of aesthetic experience. So, in Chapter 4 I looked at philosophical aesthetics, past and present.

A return to the 'grand narratives'

It was in Chapter 4 that I looked at concepts relating to perception and appreciation. Here I was able to identify the sometimes difficult clash between the reality of difference and the need for common ground. Also, I claimed that the whole gamut of human experience from pleasure to displeasure were part of aesthetic experience. This led me to the most important new idea in my thesis — the critical role of ugliness.

Having rediscovered the value of ugliness, I tried to work this concept into the theology of beauty, and found that the category of beauty — as it was used in theology — was not a large enough category on its own. I knew that the only way to encompass the whole gamut of experience, from displeasure and ugliness to pleasure and beauty, was to place these concepts within a beautiful/ugliness continuum. Eventually, I borrowed a term from Robin Boyd (1960, 200) which sounded close to the mark, namely 'beautiful ugliness'.
That started me looking for similar possibilities for truth and goodness. I eventually paired truth with reality, and goodness with responsibility. The aim of these pairings was to draw ideal realities into relation with life-world realities.

I called these ideas 'big picture' issues, and I was reminded of what Janet Wolff (1990, 88-91) said about the value of 'grand narratives'. Griselda Pollock (1998, 2) dismissed such ideas as failed modernist myths, but no Christian can afford to be cavalier with the great stories and ideals that are an integral part of our Tradition. I said at the start of my project that when I write critically about the church, it is with the intention of being faithful to the tradition. That is why, instead of abandoning truth, goodness and beauty, I sought to reinterpret them. Reinterpreting is the role of the larrikin prophet.

The critical voice of the larrikin prophet

Beauty and pleasure were issues which arose from the reception experience, while ugliness and displeasure arose from my need to balance the ideal with the real. This need was an expression of my sense of responsibility as image maker for my community. It was my sense of responsibility — which I eventually called 'passionate purpose' (Alexander (1933, 53) — which prompted me to engage in this project in the first place.

The notion of ‘passionate purpose’ opened up a whole range of issues related to the role of the artist as prophet. One of those issues was the relationships (rather than disparities) between nature and art, and between chaos and
order. It was here, too, that I first explored the importance of the Australian-ness of my project. I drew on specifically Australian — indigenous and non-indigenous — content and theorists. Issues of encroaching secularism, of race, gender and land, were seen as important aspects which shaped a feminist prophetic approach to liturgical art in 21st century Australia. The healing value of place-connection and community-belonging were also acknowledged.

One of the more challenging roles for an artist-prophet was to be a larrikin, critical voice within the church and within society. A feminist practice of liturgical art which is inclusive and holistic will, by its very nature, be critical of patriarchal church structures which are shaped by the ‘power over’ concepts of dualism. I showed by practical examples, especially in the Fig Tree installation and in my reinterpretation of the images of Mary in The Annunciation and The Visitation, how I tried to live up to the role of larrikin prophet.

I eventually discovered that the critical role was not enough for a balanced feminist approach to liturgical art, however. I reflected back again to the voices of Mt Carmel parishioners as they described their pleasure in beauty. So, I turned again to look at beauty theory and theology. This time, however, I was drawing closer to a model for employing ‘beautiful ugliness’ and the related concepts of truth/reality and goodness/responsibility. I found that the aesthetic issues of the community, and my concerns with the prophetic,
overlapped in many ways. Eventually, I saw that the aesthetic and prophetic represented another continuum.

As I explored the relationship between the aesthetic and prophetic approaches, I found that the polarisation between the two approaches could have devastating consequences in the church. I began to find ways to reconcile the evident experience of beauty in my parish community with my sense of responsibility as feminist liturgical artist. The major part of my ongoing project is to continue to find a balanced approach between the aesthetic and the prophetic. This balance is implicit in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s (1992) four-step model of feminist research. In this model the tension between deconstruction and creative reconstruction is a key feature.

'Beautiful ugliness' as invitation and challenge

The newest aspect of my theory, which I have not yet had time to explore fully, is the notion of a participation aesthetic in which beauty acts as invitation. The notion of a participation aesthetic is very appealing to me, and there are several sources which I can look to for information about this promising idea.

In EAW, beauty is associated with hospitality and invitation: ‘a simple and attractive beauty in everything that is used or done in liturgy is the most effective invitation to [liturgical] experience’ (12). Hospitality is an essential attribute of the liturgical environment, and invitation is an integral part of beauty. Built into an invitation is the freedom to choose to accept or reject,
therefore an invitation is inherently empowering to the viewer. The giving and receiving of an invitation is an ethical element in the relationship between the artist, the artwork and the viewer, which denies the threat of enthrallment. Enthrallment has a seriously dark side. If viewers are enthralled by an image their ability to make judgements is impaired because of their unreasoning devotion to the form of the image. Often, the meaning which the image carries is not fully understood, or even noticed.

Beauty as invitation is an integral part of the participation aesthetic which operates in the 13th century theology of St Bonaventure, as expressed in The Soul's Journey Into God (1978). Here, God is imaged as 'the supreme craftsman' (63) or a creative artist and the creation is God's self-expression.

The material world is imaged as vestiges or footprints of God (59), a ladder to God (60) and 'a mirror through which we may pass over to God' (63). Bonaventure juxtaposes 'the book of creation' with the 'book of Scripture' which both reveal God to the world (67). It is through 'the greatness and beauty of created things' that God is 'seen and known' (63) — 'not only through them but also in them as he is in them by his essence, power and presence' (69). Yet God is 'uncircumscribed in all things' (65).

God is intimately present in creation, and grace for the journey into God is available for the asking. The beauty of creation, but above all the beauty of Christ, is God's invitation into God's self: 'in all our delights we are led to seek' the 'primordial and true delight' which is God (73). Creation — including
human beings, their culture and the church — is God's self-expression, and because creation is God's self-expression, it shares being with God. Creation is, metaphorically speaking, 'organically' related to God. Human beings, then, can know God by participating in God's being.

In the artworld, the principle of participation, which is only just being rediscovered, works as a reflection of Bonaventure's theological model. In The Invisible Dragon (1993), Dave Hickey talks about 'the generosity of beauty', and describes this as a feminine trait (50). He also writes about the rhetorical function of beautiful images: 'first they enfranchise the beholder by exhibiting markers that designate a territory of shared values, thus empowering the beholder to respond' and secondly they 'valorize the content of the image …' (57). So it is the function of beauty to make common ground so that meaning can be shared. There is meaning already in the image, and that meaning is proposed as valid.

In practical terms, this is the way participation aesthetic works in the relationship between artist, image and viewer: an artist makes an image, and the beauty of the image and the experience of sensual and other pleasures by the viewer, invites the viewer to participate in the meanings therein. However, viewers will not just accept the meanings that the artist intends — frequently they are not even aware of those — they will find new meanings derived from their own memories and experiences. This is part of the generosity of the artist and the image — an invitation to participate in meaning-making also involves the risk that unexpected meanings might arise.
Beauty as invitation is not enough on its own, however. For a responsible feminist approach to liturgical art a balance of invitation and challenge, of beauty and ugliness, and of aesthetic and prophetic are needed. This balance is described in the recent American liturgy document, *Built of Living Stones* (2000). The beauty of artworks can 'draw the People of God into a deeper awareness of their lives and of their common goals as a Christian community as well as of their roles and responsibilities in the wider world' (148). Further, artists 'do not always confirm comfortable piety but, like prophets of old, they may confront God's People with their faults and sins and they challenge the community's injustice and lack of love' (150).

**Summary**

So now I have some of the answers to Peceval's many layered question, which I made my own for this project. I know what it means to be a feminist liturgical artist working in 21st century Australia. It means being inclusive, and making images which reflect a holistic view of creation and its relationship with God. It means negotiating the spaces between the extreme ends of the continuums of truth/reality; of goodness/responsibility; of beauty/ugliness; and of aesthetic/prophetic. It means facing up to the major issues of contemporary Australian society with respect for that society. It means working from within the culture and the church to renew them.

In the following section, I describe my involvement in the chapter process of the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy. This project was an experience in which many
of the ideas which have surfaced in my thesis emerged as part of my practical work. I use this as a model for my ongoing feminist practice of liturgical art.

3. Sisters of Mercy Chapter 2003

During 2003, I was artist-facilitator for the chapter of the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy. Their chapter is a five-yearly gathering where they do their future planning and the election of a leadership team. There was a year-long preparation leading up to the chapter, but my involvement began mid-way through the preparation process.

The chapter Process Committee agreed to follow a creative model of theological reflection as a preparation for the chapter. So, as well as theological ideas, they also focused on evocative images. I was commissioned to work in collaboration with the committee. By the time I joined the committee, a number of ideas and images had surfaced in the discussions already. Three of these visual images were significant for me: fractal patterns (fig. 49), a spiral (fig. 50) and a labyrinth (fig. 51). It is obvious that they share a family likeness.

Fractal patterns are part of chaos theory. They are objects that display self-similarity at various scales. Mandelbrot sets are computer generated fractal patterns. As the pattern grows it changes in infinitely complex ways. The parts of the pattern are self-similar, but not exactly repetitive. What appeals to me about these images is that order and chaos operate creatively together in them, and that there are parallels between the fractals and patterns in nature.
The Mercy sisters did some work on Mandelbrot sets as part of their preparation for the chapter. The patterns were used as metaphors reflecting the predictable and unpredictable aspects of their congregation and its mission in the world. The aspect that interests me most is the relationship between chaos and order, which is central to my notion of ‘beautiful ugliness’.

The spiral is an organic model of outward cyclical movement and growth. As it circles around its centre, it goes over the same ground but moves ahead with each rotation. The spiral image suggests both continuity and change, and the relationship between these twin concepts is a frequently recurring theme in my thesis.

The main image for the chapter was the one with the clearest connection to Catholic Tradition, and also the one which gave me the most qualms. The labyrinth image was taken from the tiled pattern on the floor of the Chartres Cathedral, where it was originally used by Christians in the Middle Ages, and is still used today, as a pathway for symbolic pilgrimage. I was asked to make a labyrinth to be used as a visual focus for the preparation days leading up to the chapter, so I made a two meters square, painted fabric banner (fig. 52).

The labyrinth image was problematic for me because it seemed static. There is only one way in and one way out of a labyrinth — they are not mazes with false paths for the unwary. There seemed to be no room for variation or alternatives: the aim of walking the labyrinth was to get to *the centre*. 
The predictability of the labyrinth was worrying to a postmodern person like me. That is why, when I made my labyrinth banner, I tried to draw on some of the fractal chaos using colour. In this way I could tarnish the predictable regularity of the labyrinth, disrupt its spiritual, finished, harmonious, ordered, and stable demeanour. It now had the underlying flavour of the natural, raw, discordant, chaotic but ultimately creative. The labyrinth became a figure of 'beautiful ugliness'.

Later, during the days of the chapter proper, the element of chaos actually arose spontaneously in the walking of the labyrinth. The process committee organized for two full sized labyrinths to be available for the sisters to use during the chapter — one indoors (fig. 53) and one outdoors. The Mercy women who walked them experienced all sorts of variations: they were interrupted by time constraints; they got lost and had to start again or abandon the walk temporarily; they had to step aside for others along the way; or they were distracted by the ever-present wildlife. It was interesting how the sisters used these experiences as metaphors and found parallels in their own lives.

For the chapter preparation time, a theological reflection process based on storytelling was used. The process had three stages. For the first storytelling day each woman brought a story and a visual symbol, both of which expressed a significant aspect of her vision for the future of the congregation. These were shared in small groups (fig. 54). In order to support the storytelling process, I made spiral circles — painted fabric circles, fifty centimetres in diameter — to be placed on the floor and around which each
group gathered (fig. 55). An echo of the fractal chaos is evident here. I also supplied a rainbow coloured scarf for each group. These were used as storytelling 'mantles' which were passed on as each woman shared her story (figs 56-7).

The facilitators, including me, were aware that the Mandelbrot, spiral and labyrinth images had a life of their own and that the sisters would interpret them in their own way. Similarly, the distilled stories that emerged from the groups were interpreted and reinterpreted by the participants over the three stages of the storytelling process. The fact that the sisters had the wisdom to make the process fruitful was a taken-for-granted principle.

On the second storytelling day, the groups distilled the most significant elements from the stories, which showed some future direction for the congregation. On the third day, more distillation provided a series of seven stories, which represented the threads of meaning for the future visioning of the congregation. A significant part of the storytelling process was the negotiation of the space between personal story and congregation story. Somewhere towards the shifting centre of that space, the sisters found a 'proper' balance in the distilled seven. These stories were given visual form by the sisters, using mixed media on fabric panels.

My job was to make each story panel into a banner by attaching further panels to top and bottom. Then I gave the seven images a linking visual theme — using labyrinth imagery — so that there would be some visual relationship
between all the images. The banners were made to be used as environmental motifs for the chapter space, so they had to be aesthetically pleasing as well as meaningful. They were used, also, in the opening liturgy of the chapter (fig. 58). Then they served as visual foci for the initial round of chapter discussions (fig. 59).

A vigorous participation aesthetic played a major role in the storytelling process. This creative approach expressed an invitation to find meaning and to participate in the making of new meaning. This new meaning was one of the major tasks of the chapter, that is, planning and envisaging new directions for the future of the congregation. The success of the storytelling process can be judged partly by the way that the roles of the facilitators, including my role as artist, were overshadowed by the active engagement of participants. The photographs of the storytelling groups (figs. 54, 56 & 57) are evidence of the quality of that engagement. There was no room for my role to take on 'artist as genius' status in this event. I was facilitator and collaborator; the meanings were largely constructed by the women themselves. Consequently, there was also no room for the artwork to assume the status of 'masterpiece' in these events. Visual images were just one aspect of a whole, multifaceted experience. Moreover, the artwork was directly involved in the events that were taking place — it had a job to do.

The storytelling and visual imaging of the chapter process allowed the sisters to express their major concerns and hopes for the future of their order. Most focused on issues relevant to their apostolic lives, especially the injustices and
human suffering they found among refugees, the marginalised, the sick and the needy with whom they work in Australia and elsewhere in the world. The storytelling and visual imaging allowed the women to place the realities, the responsibilities and the creative ugliness of their apostolic lives into the context of the truth, goodness and beauty of the God of life. This is God who, in Jesus, brought truth to earth in reality, grounded goodness in a sense of responsibility and became 'beautiful ugliness' out of compassion for the world.

In the Mercy chapter, I shared my role of artist-prophet with the sisters. Their role was mostly the prophetic. Their apostolic work was the focus of most of the future visioning and forward planning, which was the purpose of the chapter. My role was to help embody the concerns and hopes of the sisters — which they expressed in storytelling — in visual images. Sharing my role as image maker meant that I had to compromise on the formal quality of the work. However, the compromise was worth it for the benefits it brought. The ugliness of clumsy images was balanced by the wisdom in their meanings. It was fascinating to me how much dedication and emotional energy the sisters put into making the story panels (fig. 60)

In, what I call, the 'LISTEN' banner (fig. 61) the artwork is pretty crude, but the message is clear. 'LISTEN' suggests that attentive listening is the way to hear the cry of the poor in order to respond. 'RELINQUISH' indicates that sometimes the sisters have to let go in order to move on. Their journey into the future is not a straight line, but a spiral evolution. The black arrows suggest that sometimes their path takes them away from the main road. At
the progressive end of the spiral 'NEW SHOOTS' are a symbol of hope in the future. There are challenging ideas here: listening is sometimes more productive than doing; relinquishment and diminishment is sometimes better than acquisition and expansion; ordered pathways sometimes need to be abandoned; and, despite the problem of an aging congregation, new life is always possible. These are larrikin messages because they challenge the status quo.

**Conclusion**

My experience as artist-facilitator at the Sister of Mercy chapter was, in many ways, a model for my ongoing feminist practice of liturgical art. I was able to see how images could express the partial and perspectival differences of individuals, and also the shared values and meanings of the common ground of community. I could see balanced relationships between pleasure and responsibility, and art and reality. Further, I could see how 'life' could be used as the highest value for art where the beautiful ideals of theology met the creative ugliness of life.

In the chapter experience, my seven working principles were exemplified. In this instance, the chapter spaces were also liturgical spaces, and the artwork was well integrated into the spaces and into the work and the prayer of the chapter. There was collaboration, the artwork was interactive and it evoked responses. The story banner images, which were devised by the sisters themselves, were directly relevant to their life-world situation and, because they were part of the future visioning for their order, the images expressed
ideals, but were also made to be put into action. This experience was both life-relevant and life-enhancing. The inclusion of the story banners into the working space of the chapter helped to create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere.

In the storytelling and visual imaging of the chapter process, a balance was negotiated between the aesthetic and the prophetic, between beauty's invitations to contemplation and the larrikin prophet's call to discipleship. In the life-world experience and the spiritual wisdom expressed in the story banners, I could see truth brought to earth by reality, goodness by responsibility and beauty by ugliness.

The chapter was an Australian event. It was an expression of the here and now realities of the life-world of the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy. It was also the expression of the future hopes and vision they have of more liberating futures. My feminist practice if liturgical art is in this tradition. It is a tradition derived from the distillation of women's experience and from the collective wisdom (in theory and theology) of the church and the world.
Chapter Ten: The Aesthetic and Prophetic: Striving for Balance

Fig. 49. Cygnus Software, *Rubber Bands*, c. 1994, fractal image.

As part of the preparation for their chapter, the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy studied the elements of chaos and order in fractal images. As well as fractals, spirals and labyrinth images emerged from their discussions as metaphors which were meaningful for their chapter journey.

Fig. 50. Jenny Close, digital design for the spiral circles which were used in the storytelling process.

Fig. 51. J. Geoffrion, c. 2003, digital image, of a plan of the labyrinth on the floor of Chartres Cathedral.
Chapter Ten: The Aesthetic and Prophetic: Striving for Balance

Fig. 52. Jenny Close, *Labyrinth Banner*, 2003, synthetic polymer paint, chalk, crayon and oil marker on non-woven interfacing fabric, 200cm x 200cm.

Fig. 53. The sisters walk the indoor labyrinth. The labyrinth was commercially supplied and made of paint on canvas.
Chapter Ten: The Aesthetic and Prophetic: Striving for Balance

Fig. 54. A storytelling group gathered around a spiral circle. The storyteller wore a rainbow 'mantle'.

Fig. 55. Spiral circle (detail).

Fig. 56. A storytelling figure.

Fig. 57. Each participant shared a symbol relevant to her story.
Fig. 58. The story banners were used as processional banners in the opening ritual of the chapter.

Fig. 59. The banners were integrated into the chapter meeting room.
Chapter Ten: The Aesthetic and Prophetic: Striving for Balance

Fig. 60. Sisters working on a story panel.

Fig. 61. The finished story panel.
CONCLUSION

A responsible feminist artist-prophet in Australia today aims to make images which are able to promote renewal in the church and the world. These images will, by their very nature, challenge the advance of secularism, and challenge the dominance of patriarchy in both church and society. Their images will 'mine the memory' (Brueggemann 2001, 64) and 'spark the imagination' (77) of their communities. Further, their images will 'enthrall and persuade' (Brady (1981, 112). In this way, the 'ancient body of truth' (James 1975, 36) of Christian tradition will be the source for all new meaning, including life-relevant and life-enhancing images of God, and more liberating ways of thinking and living in the future, beginning now.

In line with Christian tradition, I accept that 'beauty' is synonymous with 'God', and that the beauty of created things is the presence of the creator God in them, namely all that is spiritual, finished, harmonious, ordered, and stable. However, when I align beauty and God, it is the image of the 'living God' and the God of the living to which I refer, and that beauty has another dimension. The God of the living became flesh and blood and joined human beings in their natural, raw, discordant, chaotic but ultimately creative reality. The God of the living, then, is the personification of 'beautiful ugliness' (Boyd 1960, 200) in the Incarnation, the Cross and the Resurrection.

Beauty has a vital role in my practice of liturgical art. However, in a balanced approach, the generosity of invitation is balanced by prophetic challenge. The
pleasures of beauty are balanced by the displeasures of ugliness. Further, the contemplation which beauty inspires is balanced by the call to discipleship.

For Australians, the tradition also encompasses unique sources, including our ancient Land, Aboriginal culture and the feminine images of God which arise from both. Issues of race, gender and ecology are inextricably inter-linked in Australia today. This is the wounded cultural context out of which I work as a feminist liturgical artist-prophet. The 'beautiful ugliness' of Australia challenges, distresses and delights me. It is the brokenness of this situation which fuels my passion and shapes my purpose. It is 'passionate purpose' (Alexander 1933, 53) which lends authority to my work, gives me the courage to keep taking risks and urges me forward in hope.

What of the future? I hope that this project will give some encouragement to artists who are also Christians. Very few artists find the church a hospitable environment, but the liturgical tradition is full of wondrous treasures which beg for creative expression and interpretation. Furthermore, our parish folk are hungry for meaning. They see the present crisis in the church of the West, and they fear for the next generation. They wonder if, by the time their children grow up, there will be anything left of the Christian Tradition for them to inherit.

I maintain that, if it is to prosper in the world of the 21st century, the church needs to change with the times. This does not mean abandoning its mission
to challenge injustices and confront immorality, but it does mean
acknowledging its status as a part of culture, which in turn is part of God’s
creation. Artists, especially those with knowledge of and experience with
liturgy, are in a unique position to draw church and culture into living relation.
However, it has to be said that women are generally more gifted in creating
relationships than men. They effortlessly draw church into relationship with
life-world realities.

Women, as liturgical artists, are a rich source of future visioning for the
church. Feminist liturgical artists have the sense of responsibility to be
prophetic, to be the larrikin voice in the face of complacency; but they also
have the sense of hope, to be the joyful sound of Miriam who celebrates the
fulfillment of God’s promise (Brady 1992, 31-2). It is out of these twin
archetypes, the larrikin-Miriam, that a feminist liturgical artist can be both
prophetic and aesthetic. The larrikin-Miriam can draw the ideal reality of God,
and the life-world of human realities, into relation: she can earth truth with
reality, goodness with responsibility, and beauty with ultimately creative
ugliness.
APPENDIX 1

Focus Group Overview

This appendix contains an overview of the Focus Groups. It shows the makeup of each group with regard to age and gender.
## Focus Group Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>PARTICIPANT</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
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<td>F</td>
<td>61 &amp; OVER</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Don</td>
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<td>5 Older (61 &amp; over)</td>
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4 groups 25 participants 17 Females 8 Males
APPENDIX 2

Focus Group Invitation Package

This appendix contains the documents given to prospective participants in the Focus Group participants in May 2000. It contains three sheets: the invitation; the consent form; and the project information sheet.
You are invited
to take part in a discussion group as part of a research project called

Lituragical art at Mt Carmel -
what does it mean to you?

**TIME:** see the Consent Form to choose one of the following times

- **Tuesday** 10.00am - 12 noon 30 May
- **Thursday** 7.30 pm - 9pm 1 June
- **Monday** 7.30 pm - 9pm 5 June
- **Wednesday** 7.30 pm - 9pm 7 June

**VENUE:** my place - 20 Walker St, Coorparoo

I am a student in the school of theology at Griffith University and the information I gather from this project will form part of my PhD thesis. Attached is an Information Sheet which gives a brief outline of this project. Also attached is a Consent Form which Griffith University requires each participant to sign.

If you are willing to participate please return your signed Consent Form by Wednesday Friday 19 May. Please use the return envelope provided, or fax me at the number above.

Yours truly,
Jenny Close
Appendices

Consent Form

I agree to participate in the project called ‘Liturical art at Mt Carmel: what does it mean to you?’ and give my consent freely. I understand that the project will be carried out as described in the information statement, a copy of which I have retained. I realise that my participation is voluntary, that I can withdraw from the project at any time and that I do not have to give any reasons for withdrawing. I have had all questions answered to my satisfaction.

Signatures:

_________________________________________  ___________________________
Investigator                                      Date

_________________________________________  ___________________________
Participant                                      Date

Name: _______________________________________
Address: ____________________________________

Ph: ___________________ Fax: ________________ Email: ___________________

Please indicate when you are available to participate in a discussion:

Tuesday      10.00am - 12 noon          30 May  __________________
Thursday     7.30 pm - 9pm            1 June  __________________
Monday       7.30 pm - 9pm            5 June  __________________
Wednesday    7.30 pm - 9pm            7 June  __________________

Please return this form by 19 May in the envelope provided or fax me on 3397 7451.
APPENDIX 3

Focus Group: Structure & timetable of meetings

This appendix contains two sheets that I used during the Focus Group discussions in June 2000. The first is a sample of my running sheet for the discussions. The second is a sample of the worksheet I gave to participants. I retrieved these sheets and recorded the notes in the transcripts of the discussions.
WED 7 June, 2000
7.30pm - 9pm

PARTICIPANTS
1. Jan
2. Katrina
3. Eileen
4. Bill
5. Paul
6. Jenny

AIM
My aim is to get information about three things:
1. your personal experience of liturgical art
2. how liturgical art works at Mt Carmel and what effects it has
3. what difference does my being a woman make

RULES
1. There are no wrong answers
2. I am just as interested in negative comments as positive - sometimes the negative comments are the most interesting.

A. OPENING GAMBIT
To start the ball rolling I’d like to go round the group and ask each person this question:
Thinking back over the years, what was your most memorable experience of liturgical art?
APPENDIX 4

Focus Group Report and Response Sheet

This appendix contains the report I sent to each Focus Group participant in July 2000 - after I had transcribed and completed the initial analysis of the material. I used this as the starting point for the report in Chapter 2. The last page of the report was a Response Sheet.
Appendices
Dear participant,

Cast your mind back a couple of months to the discussion groups you were involved in during the Easter Season. Here is a report of those discussions, written especially for you. It is merely a summary of the basic trends which emerged from the discussion, but it will give you some idea about the issues that were useful for my project.

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The aim of the project

The focus group discussions were primarily focused on the liturgical art at Mt Carmel for the year of Jubilee 2000 and designed to elicit information about community’s reception of the work. There were two reasons why this information was valuable for my project.

First, I needed some way to test my theories. During the last fourteen years, I have made many liturgical installations for Mount Carmel and in that time I have received only casual feedback from the community. While most of that feedback was very positive and encouraging, it did not provide a balanced evaluation of my work. During that time I have made assumptions about my practice and its reception, but these have never been formally tested. The focus group discussions seemed the most direct way to test my theories.

Second, I was looking for new information about the work and its effects in the parish community. I was confident that, if the climate in the groups were open and comfortable, some unexpected and challenging ideas would emerge.

The groups

There were four focus groups comprised of eight men and seventeen women. All twenty-five participants were recruited from the parish of Mount Carmel and most of them were well known to me. Age was not a feature of the selection, but the four groups consisted of one young adult, eighteen middle-aged and six elderly people.
The Discussions

The discussion was divided into three sections: the opening gambit, four completion questions and five general questions.

Section 1: Opening Gambit

I asked the participants to reflect back over the years and to identify their most memorable experience of liturgical art. I tried to make this part of the discussion brief and it usually lasted about fifteen minutes. Although the primary purpose of this question was to break the ice, I was hoping that this might be a quick way to gauge some characteristics of the reception experience of the community and of successful liturgical installations. I was interested to note if any particular liturgical installation emerge as a favourite, but there were many spoken of and none stood out as clear favourite. Four major issues emerged, however, in this section: the affectivity of the immediate impact of the images on the viewer, which one participant called the ‘wow factor’; the importance of colour in the reception experience; the relationship of the images to the liturgy; and the value of interactive art.

(a) I remember walking in and thinking: Wow, look at this! And it just stayed with me and I thought it was just Palm Sunday.
(b) I can still see the vibrant colours …
(c) I love the colour and I love the way that they reflect the seasons, the liturgical seasons.
(d) (referring to the pyramids) I felt challenged to participate … the participation fostered ownership of the artwork in the community.

These issues arose many times in the subsequent discussions.
Section 2: Completion questions

The discussion in this section was focused on the artwork for the year of Jubilee 2000. I gave each participant a sheet on which there were four completion questions regarding their feelings, thoughts, surprises and disappointments about the work. They had about twenty minutes to ponder on their answers and to write notes on the sheets. The sheets were collected later and proved to be a treasure trove of information. Overall this section proved to be the most fruitful part of the Focus Group exercise.

When I looked at the liturgical art I felt …

There was some confusion among participants about the difference between ‘felt’ and ‘thought’ and frequently the comments overlapped from one category to the other. There were, however, more comments about feelings than thoughts, for example the term ‘uplifted’ was used seven times in this part of the discussion. The following words were also used: inspired, wonder, hopefulness, stimulated, enjoy, alive and patriotic. The last referred to the Australian flavour of the Jubilee imagery, which was mentioned a few times in this section.

The importance of the emotional impact of colour emerged:

(a) I just get this flood of feeling about the colours … and I have to admit to not looking too much to meaning.
(b) I just got excited by the colours, sometimes they were stark … other times they were so vibrant they leapt out at you.
(c) … what an impact it made, what a wonderful array of colours.
(d) … it’s the colour, the vibrancy, which hit me and gave me a sense of Jubilee …

81 The information on the sheets was in note form. Consequently, when I quote from the sheets, the information might seem a little stilted.
It was difficult, if not impossible, to separate out the emotional from the sensual responses because in most cases they were integral to each other. One participant did make a conscious connection between the emotional and the sensual sense of ‘feel’, however:

My feelings were that when I would enter the church I would immediately say: Wow! And then I would go and feel everything and … just see everything that was in there and I’d pat it.

It was difficult, if not impossible, to separate out the emotional from the sensual responses because in most cases they were integral to each other. One participant did make a conscious connection between the emotional and the sensual sense of ‘feel’, however:

My feelings were that when I would enter the church I would immediately say: Wow! And then I would go and feel everything and … just see everything that was in there and I’d pat it.

**When I looked at the liturgical art I thought …**

Only one participant stated that his sole response to the artwork was intellectual. For most the emotional and sensual responses seemed to be strongest. For some, however, the initial emotional response led to reflection:

(a) You could just become overawed by the beauty … but the art is more than that, it really … makes me, it allows me, to become reflective too.
(b) I spent hours over the Sundays thinking. Visually it was striking, it was beautiful, but I was trying to see what this art should be telling me.

Thinking and feeling responses sometimes overlapped inextricably:
I felt inspired by the obvious depth to the art pieces … I also felt hungry to know more, talk more about the inspiration and message intended/expressed by the art.

During this part of the discussion with group three, it became obvious to me that the emotional responses were most prevalent and I asked: ‘I wonder how many people respond emotionally rather than analytically or vice versa?’ One participant gave a telling answer:

It’s one of those things like the yoke and the white of an egg, you can’t separate them out and still have an egg: the two are integral to each other. You’ve got to have the understanding and the perspective and reason for being – so you need that intellectual approach or else it won’t sustain the emotions and vice versa: if it doesn’t have that emotional response it won’t sustain the theology of it either.

For some the artwork initiated a train of thought or stimulated an association of ideas in their minds:

(a) I thought: What is Jenny trying to say? … and I thought of the Sea of Hands and about being down in Sydney and on the wall in front of parliament house.
(b) Having practiced the music for the season of Advent … what struck me was that, when I walked into the church, was that the artwork honed in on the words of what we had been practicing, you know especially ‘Creator of the Stars of Night’, that hit me really very clearly.

Some participants found that the artwork issued a challenge or an invitation to search for meaning:

(a) It always challenges me to be aware of why I’m there and to really think about what’s going on.
(b) I remember trying to work it out and feeling challenged by it … and often on discovering the intent quite challenged.
(c) Challenged to focus on the ideas being expressed and relate them to the other aspects of the liturgy.
(d) My questioning, and the fact that the works make you question … draws me into the meaning, both in terms of the season and what the artist is trying to convey, in the pieces.

Meaning was sometimes found in the correspondences between the artwork and the participant’s personal faith journey:

(a) … it stimulates me in a way, reaching to God, and yet it’s reflective in that it seems to bring me into the picture and I become part of it.
(b) (referring to the Advent wreath installation) Sort of got me thinking immediately, soon as I walked in and sat down. I start thinking about my
faith and what this means to me … in relation to the season we are in … I thought you were going with the Southern Cross and I thought: Well gee, isn’t that a good idea because that is something that my children and I do at Christmas time … we often go out and look at the stars and find the Southern Cross in summer time. And I thought, now it’s here, it sort of makes me feel part of a faith community … because I am sitting there knowing that I’m probably thinking and musing upon ideas surrounding my faith and the people I worship with, and the same as everybody else is doing at the same time and that gives me a feeling of us all drawing together.

(c) (referring to the pyramid assemblage) I found that whole thing was helping me to work through having dreams\(^{82}\), being naïve/ not being naïve … so I found it interesting and challenging in that way. It interfered with my alienation response.

\(^{82}\) For ‘dreams’ also read ‘ideals’.
I was surprised by …

The participants were mostly surprised by the power of the images and the responses that they drew from themselves and others in the community:

(a) (Referring to the figures on the sanctuary floor) It seemed to really reach right into the congregation. It really moves me, those hands especially the ones that flow out of the tank. The effect they had on me surprised me.

(b) I was surprised by the immediacy of my response to your work and how every time I come back it means something different. And it can be very much of a focal point for prayer and reflection … sometimes you just can’t take your eyes off it.

(c) I was surprised at my reaction to the colour because I’m not a colour person … I felt joy and alive and hopeful … The other thing that surprised me was the pyramids, the fact that they were left alone and respected by people. In this day and age there is so much vandalism … and I think that is something special.

(d) I was surprised by the way people responded to writing on the pyramids because you could hardly get near them sometimes there were so many people anxious to write their thoughts. I thought they were very interactive symbols for both children and adults. I was very surprised at how people responded and just openly wrote and read what everybody else had written.

(e) (The following is an interactive dialogue between three participants in Group 3)

It was a wonderful idea to have those pyramids to get people involved. Particularly the children, particularly the young. Very rarely, as a community, do we ask the young people to put down what they think. And they responded, people responded.

Concern for the younger members of the parish was evident on a number of occasions, probably because most of the participants were parents and a number of them had small children.

Apart from colour, the placement and scale of the work gave it impact:

(d) … the white pyramids. I can remember walking down the drive and seeing these things and wondering what they were and I think I was surprised because they were so big and so public.

(e) … the breadth of the artistic experience from the very front of the church extending to the foyer.
Not everyone’s surprise was enjoyable, however:

I just got this feeling of being overwhelmed by the visual input. And it actually crossed my mind that this is fantastic, but how do strangers who come into our community – what would be their reaction, is there too much going on?

Some participants were surprised by the quality of the work and my skill as an artist:

(a) I was surprised by the consistent, professional quality of the art. I didn’t know much about the artist and the art gave me hope for the creative arts within the church, particularly on the local level.
(b) … how simple many of the pieces are yet affective.
(c) I get a bit surprised because you never run out of ideas.
(d) … your creative talent is really very extensive

During the Focus Group research process one of my surprises was how curious the participants were about the artwork. They often asked me questions about my motivation and techniques and it was sometimes difficult to keep the discussion on track. Many participants said that they found the discussion enlightening.

I was disappointed by …

The need for information about the imagery arose quite frequently partly because participants were intrigued by the work but also because they needed help with interpretation:

(a) … would love to hear more about the inspiration behind the art, hear sharings about how they touch people, and learn more about the artist and the artwork.
(b) … the need for explanation, sometimes, of the symbols in order to appreciate their full value … newsletter could be a means of communication more frequently.
(c) I was disappointed by the fact that I often miss some of those symbolic meanings until someone explains it to me … I had missed seeing the stars on the forecourt until Fr Wayne drew our attention to them at Easter … and I think: Oh, I’ve sat there for weeks and never saw that … there’s something deeper there, I’ve taken it to a certain level or referred it to
myself, which I suppose is OK for my own journey, and that’s fine for me, but then I think: Oh, I’m glad someone explained that to me.
(d) Sometimes there are two things, say the Word and the art, going along parallel and maybe sometimes I don’t make the crossover. There does not have to be a whole homily about it but there could be a brief reference to just make the linkage.

but then I think: Oh, I’m glad someone explained that to me.
(d) Sometimes there are two things, say the Word and the art, going along parallel and maybe sometimes I don’t make the crossover. There does not have to be a whole homily about it but there could be a brief reference to just make the linkage.

The participants were generally very positive about the work, but they noticed some negative attitudes in the community.

(a) I was disappointed when people have been antagonistic to the things that you have done and I guess that they haven’t given it the benefit of the doubt, that somehow there is some meaning and some beauty in that, and the mouth goes before the brain, and they don’t stop to take a close look at it …
(b) … the way some seem to take the liturgical art for granted and not attempt to reflect on the meaning and significance.

The concern for ‘strangers’ emerged as a significant issue in this section but also across the entire discussion:

(a) For a new person coming in there was no explanation of the symbolism and I don’t know where to start. Having spoken to some people they don’t actually follow the symbolism in it because, you know they are in and out of the church on a Sunday …
(b) Many of the first communicants’ and confirmands’ families did not appreciate the setting.

The last comment was from a participant who was involved in the liturgy for the children’s sacramental program. She noticed that some of the parents involved in the program were not regular churchgoers. They had not been to Mt Carmel during the Lenten season to see the installation unfolding and, therefore, had little understanding of the imagery when they arrived one Sunday to see their child receive a sacrament.
Concern for the young people of our parish caused one participant in Group 3 to be uncomfortable with the latitude that the artwork allowed the viewer. He was worried that there was no unified theology in the work and, therefore, no clear guidelines for living:

The idiosyncratic nature of contemporary art can lead people off in different directions so that we are not coming to the same place.

I found this a compelling issue and I asked the group if there was 'any binding factor':

(a) I think that’s how it is related to the liturgy, the Word …
(b) … you may be using Australian images, but because it is based on the Word of God and our theology that … can give it its unifying message … that’s what unifies it, its foundation. For liturgical art to be effective, to be appreciated, it really needs that foundation.

Section 3: General questions

The five questions in this section are also focused on the artwork for the year of Jubilee 2000. These questions are more general in the sense that I am not asking for reflections on the participant’s reception so much as opinions about what affect the artwork had on the celebrating space, the liturgy and the community. The first question is different, however, it asks about the influence of gender on my practice. I did not tell the participants beforehand that my theoretical and practical methodologies are feminist. I considered informing them in the initial information package, but thought better of it when I realised how much explaining it would require. I was not sure what would be the reaction to this issue, but I was hoping to gauge the community’s awareness of my feminist approach.
How does my being a woman affect the liturgical art I make?

Overall there was little enthusiasm for this question. Most people did not think the gender of the artist was an issue:

(a) I heard you say that before and I thought: Huh? It never occurred to me at all.\(^8^3\)
(b) It is not because you are a woman, but because you are this particular woman and because you are sure of your abilities and dare to share your talent with the community.\(^8^4\)
(c) now its very, very difficult to pick a woman artist from a male artist because we’re not talking about men and women we’re talking about the personality that makes us all who we are male or female … rather than the role thing.\(^8^5\)
(d) women are in tune with things and men are as well. It depends on who you are. Its not a big deal.\(^8^6\)

In each group someone described the difference between masculine and feminine art in terms of traditional prejudices:

(a) Men are not as free to express from the heart as women are.\(^8^7\)
(b) I see women as perhaps more creative.\(^8^8\)
(c) If you want to be picky about it you’ve got quite a masculine technique … its very precise, very well executed and to me its not dainty - very definite and structured. To me I wonder, when you’re lugging some of those things around, where you get the strength to do it. That’s engineering the way you hoist those things up.\(^8^9\)
(d) I don’t know because quite often it’s very symbolic and I would walk in and say a male has done this … some churches look pretty rather than challenging … I suppose because of conditioning you expect a woman to do something decorative and you would expect a man to challenge you.\(^9^0\)

\(^8^3\) This comment was from a female participant.
\(^8^4\) This comment was also from a female participant.
\(^8^5\) This comment was from a male participant.
\(^8^6\) This comment was also from a male participant.
\(^8^7\) This comment was from a male participant.
\(^8^8\) This comment was from a female participant.
\(^8^9\) This comment was also from a female participant.
\(^9^0\) This comment was from a male participant.
The last two comments were a roundabout way of saying that my artwork fit, if anything, a masculine rather than a feminine stereotype. When seen in the light of experience, the effects of gender seemed immaterial:

No, it’s the gift for me rather than the gender because I had an uncle who did beautiful sewing and I think of a lot of interior designers who are male. We had a man come and help me with my home and he just created lovely things.

There were only three participants who put up arguments for the relevance of gender in my practice, but even they were not convinced in the end that it made a definable difference and by that time I had to agree with them.

I was feeling despondent, at this stage, and asking myself why people could not see what I was trying to do. One participant from Group 2 asked me if I perceive what I do as ‘women’s art’ and my answer was more to the point than I would have expected:

… actually I’m writing my thesis from a feminist perspective. I’m trying to formulate a theory and a practice out of feminist principles and some of those principles I consciously put into my work. I was curious to see if other people would notice.

Here I am referring to feminist ideology and methodology and, on reflection, I realised that these, rather than gender, shape my practice. I also realised that those aspects of my work which demonstrate feminist principles were well and truly acknowledge by the participants in other parts of the discussion. The feminist principles to which I allude are (a) inclusiveness mainly through making the images interactive, and (b) images which acknowledge the interdependent relationship of body and spirit, ie of everyday human experience and our relationship with God. The participants recognised the value of these principles but simply did not identify them as feminist, which is fair comment.
What effect did the artwork have on the liturgical space?

The effects of placement of the artwork, especially proximity, was a significant issue for many participants:

(a) It is near without being claustrophobic.
(b) … they impinge on your space so you can’t ignore them.
(c) I was fascinated by the figures on the floor of the sanctuary. I could almost imagine them flowing down among the people.
(d) I worked with Jenny during Lent and I noticed that she was constantly aware of where things went – she often asked: ‘Where will the cross go?’ … also using the forecourt was a way to reach out to the wider community.

Only one participant said she thought the artwork interfered with the space. Referring to hanging banners, she said they ‘sometimes’ interrupted the view by being ‘just a little too low’. Most participants thought the artwork improved the space:

(a) It’s not at all intrusive. You walk into the church and you can see that it is definitely a church. The way you put it, it enhances.
(b) I think it makes what is sometimes a drab, uninviting space a place where you want to be and you want to spend time surrounded by visual items that are speaking to you and reminding you constantly why you are there.

The role of liturgical art in unifying the celebrating space and creating focal points was mentioned here and in other parts of the discussion:

(a) Sometimes some of the elements of the art help to integrate what’s up front with the congregational space.
(b) I don’t think it intrudes and obscures or confuses at all … it draws your attention to/down the aisle (towards the sanctuary).
(c) The idea is to use the whole lot as sacred space not just up there (referring to the sanctuary), it’s the incorporation of everything.
(d) the use of the whole church … I suppose it’s the use of the church rather than the artwork. Instead of the adoration of the cross on Good Friday way up in the sanctuary, the cross actually moves around and I think that to me always makes a very strong statement.
The role of art in the forecourt was explored in the following interaction between three participants of Group 4:

And even outside, that makes a statement: ‘It starts here!’ This is the welcoming. I think particularly for people who are new or people who are visiting that’s a very important space, out the front. That sort of says before you get in the door what we’re like.

Here again the concern for strangers is evident in the community.

**What effect did the artwork have on the liturgy?**

The artwork was invariably understood to be an integral part of the liturgy:

(a) It does not have a role of its own, it serves the liturgy.  
(b) It is another layer of the liturgy, like music. The liturgy would not be the same full experience without it.

A male participant of Group 2 identified a tension that he could see between two models of liturgical art. In one model the ‘beauty’ of the art reflects God to the community. In the other model the art acts as an expression of the experience of the community; in this model art does not merely reflect this experience, it transforms it.

(a) I can see why beauty is really important because it says something about God; however, good liturgy should speak out of the experience of the community and some way transform it and send it back into the community. Now my question there is: What function does the art serve, does it serve a beauty function – or is it supposed to speak to us of our own experience? … To what extent does the artwork reflect the experience of this community and how does it transform it?

A little later in the discussion the same participant reflected on the pyramid assemblage in the forecourt and the pyramid banners which he called ‘strips’:

(a) Yes I found that more involving and people were writing their concerns in some way outside and then that was reflected in the strips. Yes it says something, well somebody feels this quite strongly and wrote it, and I think that sort of thing somehow brings us, and our concerns, more into the worshiping space.
A female participant from the same group favoured the ‘experience’ model of liturgical art:

I sometimes go to the cathedral … it’s a beautiful space, but … it’s of God, you know a holy of holies; but it doesn’t really speak about the people. There is not the message in it like there is in the hands at Mt Carmel.

The issue of the liturgy at Mt Carmel being a performance by experts as opposed to an expression of the community arose in Group 2.

(a) I suppose I have a problem with Mt Carmel in a sense that not a lot of people are involved … and probably we have a standard which I know is magnificent not only in liturgical art, but in all sorts of things. That deters some people from wanting to, or they could never keep up, you know. And when you talk about liturgy … it’s got to be an expression of the whole community … even Easter Saturday night when I got up to leave the church someone … walked beside be and said: ‘Andrew Lloyd-Webber eat your heart out’ … On the one hand I think that was a tremendous compliment to the talent, on the other hand that is also a problem in that it was a magnificent performance.

There seemed to be some interest in this idea and I wanted to check it out in another group, so I introduced the idea into the discussion of Group 4 with the following results:

(b) It is typical of Mt Carmel that we have done everything so good for so long. I know that when I came there and I sat in those pews for nine months knowing that I could play the organ, and the music was so good, I really didn’t think I could measure up …

(c) I didn’t go to the Easter Vigil … and I didn’t go to the Christmas Vigil because the last two I’ve been to for those seasons I’ve thought: Where’s the mass in all this? No reflection on the liturgical art, but the whole thing coming together was like a grand performance.

Two participants were keen to reassure me that the artwork was not the cause of the problem and the others agreed:

Could I just add about the artwork, I don’t think it is overdone … Jenny’s artwork is tasteful and it is liturgical, it is not art it is liturgical. It is more than ‘art and environment’\(^91\) it is reaching into the hearts of people and challenging them. I think it’s tasteful and professional …

\(^{91}\) This term was coined by the document *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (1978).
Appendices

What effect did the artwork have on the community?

In Group 4, the interactive nature of the pyramid assemblage was seen as community building:

(a) I was just interested to read the thoughts of other people in our parish family. Things that were important to them that I didn’t know were that important to them. I enjoyed reading that and being part of that. I thought that that’s another way you can draw the community together; because so many of these beliefs and dreams we have in common and we’ve never really got the opportunity to talk about these things.
(b) The very fact that the art is interactive has given whoever has written on there the opportunity to express where they’re at, to bring that with them to their faith community, to say: This is me and I’ve brought that here as part of me to share with everybody.
(c) … often the liturgical art at Mt Carmel is an interactive thing … it engages the community more than the performance/audience type arrangement … there was a pretty strong engagement, from what I saw, throughout the seasons we just had.
(d) … it wasn’t just the young people or the old people, it was a real mixture of people.

Also in Group 4 the pyramid banners were seen as a way for the everyday experience of parishioners to become part of the liturgy:

Someone cares enough to have read what I wrote – it’s actually part of the mass now.

It was apparent, across the whole discussion and in all the groups, that the participants were aware of the efficacy of the artwork. Only one participant, however, attributed responsibility to the artist for the effects of the work. He called my role in the community ‘prophetic’. Most participants placed the responsibility with the viewer:

(c) It can be as interactive as an individual or a group wants it to be and they will engage with that at whatever level they are at.
(a) I don’t want the holy picture, I prefer something that I can delve into. But I would say that there are a lot of people … at different levels in their own faith and their own spirituality … and you’ve got to tap in somewhere. People respond at their own level, but you’re not going to meet everyone’s need all the time. Some will be confused and others will be looking for more.
(b) … with the artwork, they will get out of it from what level they are at. I don’t think they are excluded.
This question arose again in Group 4 when they answered the next question.

**Imagine that a new artist was coming into the community and that person asked you for advice – what would you say?**

My aims for this question were similar to that for the Opening Gambit. In that instance I was looking for information about what makes an installation successful. Here, however, I was focusing on the artist and looking for information about a successful practice of liturgical art. The following conversation arose between the members of Group 4:

... be informed, work with the people ... be in tune with the needs of the community.
It is liturgical art, it's not just a good artist.
It's got to have that spiritual connection.
Is it the artist’s responsibility to be reflective?92
I don’t see it as being a responsibility. I see it as an end product of the gift that the artist gives us. I don’t think the artist has to accept responsibility for other people’s spirituality.
(There was general agreement with this statement.)
Do you reckon that the artwork wouldn’t work if the artist wasn’t spiritually mature?93
(Again the group agreed.)
Because all you would get then is the same response you’d get from somebody in the community who was at the very beginning or who hadn’t even started on a spiritual journey. All you would get then would be art and colour and that’s it. That’s a starting point, but for a lot of the rest of the community who are at different levels of spiritual development they’re looking for more, much more.

The controversy about performance versus community involvement arose again in Group 2:

(a) I love the things at Mt Carmel, I really do, but having been away from it, and worshipping in the very simple way, to come back there was this feeling that the stage had been set and bring on the jugglers. We are here we can worship anywhere ... do we really need it to be such a high standard of performance?

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92 This was my question to the group.

93 This was also my question.
(b) If you had to pass on to somebody else this role perhaps what you could encourage the people to is to collaborate ... as much as possible ... perhaps we could encourage a team approach and involve more people.

One participant recognised that the very group process that they were involved in, ie the Focus Group discussions, was a way of involving people in the work:

We were talking here about involving a range of people and that is exactly what you are doing here, you are getting the impressions of people.

**Summary**

In this report I have *not* tried to cover all the issues which arose in the course of the discussions. For practical reasons I have focused only on those issues which directly affect my project. Some of these issues need more detailed handling, but that can only be done in the context of my thesis. Here I have simply given an overview of the main, relevant points of the discussion.

There were ten issues which emerged as pivotal in the discussions:

1. The importance of colour
2. The affective nature of initial reactions to the work – the ‘Wow factor’
3. The way that affective responses often led to reflection, ie feeling often led to thinking
4. The need for more information about the work
5. The community’s concern for ‘strangers’ and how they experience the artwork
6. The close relationship between the artwork and the liturgy
7. The way the artwork unified the celebrating space
8. The greater importance of community involvement in liturgy than ‘performance’ standards
9. The need for liturgical art to be transformational
10. The value of interactive art
Your comments

My thesis will not be finished until 2002 and I am still gathering information. I am anxious to get some feedback about this report, so if you wish to express your opinion you can (1) write your comments in the space below and return this sheet to me in the envelope provided; (2) phone or fax me on 3397 7451; or (3) email me at j.close@mailbox.gu.edu.au

Many thanks for your participation,

Jenny Close

What have I missed?

What have I misinterpreted?

What suggestions can you make?
APPENDIX 5

Focus Group Discussion Transcript

This appendix contains the transcript of the discussion of Focus Group 4.
TRANSCRIPT OF FOCUS GROUP 4

Time: Thursday 5 June 2000, 7.30pm – 9pm

Participants: Jan, Katrina, Eileen, Bill, Paul & Jenny (the researcher)

(*** Indicates where there are words missing which were impossible to hear on the tape)

Opening Gambit
Thinking back over the years, what was your most memorable experience of liturgical art?

EILEEN: I think the one that stands out for me – it was because it was so stark – and that was as I arrived and then I went into the church. But what struck me was just these dead sticks and gradually the green appeared so you must have had that in the church as well, because the green started to appear. *** very much so!

PAUL: I think the one that struck me really is the one that’s there now coming out of the – forming across the side of the altar – the sanctuary [referring to the flood figures on the floor of the sanctuary]. It was only when I walked up there that I realised what it was exactly. To me it was – something seemed to be flowing and it was only when I got up there and actually looked on it and stood near it - that I saw what it was. It looked very real from the back of the church ***.

KATRINA: I think it was quite a while back when I was reasonably new to Mt Carmel – and it was Palm Sunday – with the huge - and I hadn’t seen a church done out like that before – with the huge palm fronds and the red ribbon. It immediately focused me on the season that we were in. Then it was either the same day or later in the week - the white cloth with the red paint on it - I walked in the church and went – OH [intake of breath]! It was really very stark and straight to the point.

BILL: The liturgical art for the Vigil mass [in the year 2000] really struck me overall. Perhaps a more specific thing - what I thought was very well done was the pyramids and the translating of some of the information onto the banners.

Completion questions
Reflecting on the Liturgical art for this Jubilee year, 2000 …

1. When I looked at the liturgical art I felt . . .

EILEEN [from written comments]: Advent – that having spent time practising the music fro the season that the liturgical art ‘fitted’ the words of the music – the stars, the simplicity to a degree, it captured the essence of Advent. Lent –
a wonderful sense of art typifying what Lent meant – searching inner self –
looking for the association of the words on pyramids to my life.

EILEEN: Having practiced the music for the season of Advent – yeah Advent
more than Lent I think. What struck me was that – when I walked into the
church – was that the artwork honed in on the words of what we had been
practicing – you know especially ‘Creator of the Stars of Night’ – that hit me
really very clearly.

JAN [from written comments]: joy, alive. Very Australian (stars – Southern
Cross, Rainbow – Aborigine connection). Celebratory (colours, vibrancy) –
hopeful that the jubilee did mean something.

JAN: Well I was hit – I felt quite joyful. I can remember I felt the colours were
very vibrant. *** To me very Australian – because to me I saw those stars
[intake of breath] this is the Southern Cross and rainbow colours – Oh the
inclusiveness – with the rainbow – you know the rainbow serpent story. But
it’s the colour – the vibrancy which hit me and gave me a sense of Jubilee
because – yeah we all heard about the Jubilee *** but I had other things going
on.

BILL [from written comments]: Challenged to focus on the ideas being
expressed and relate them to the other aspects of the liturgy. [Bill had an
arrow from ‘felt’ to ‘thought’ on the sheet and seemed to question where these
comments belonged].

BILL: Colour was the thing that made a big impact on me. Especially since
the church generally is fairly neutral isn’t it – brick walls - and the colours you
use are really vibrant and there is a strong contrast between adjacent ***.

KATRINA: Sort of got me thinking immediately – soon as I walked in and sat
down – I start thinking about my faith and what this means to me – what the
visual, what the art that I am looking at, means to me – in relation to the
season that we are in. And then I start – It’s just my train of thought as I’m
looking at it – what’s everybody else in the church thinking about when they’re
looking at this? I thought you were going with the Southern Cross and I
thought well gee isn’t that a good idea because that is something that my
children and I do at Christmas time. Because stars play such a major part in
all sort of songs and rituals around Christmas – we often go out and look at
the stars and find the Southern Cross in summer time. And I thought now it’s
here it sort of makes me feel part of a faith community.

JENNY: Because it aligned with your own experience – is that what you
mean?

KATRINA: Yes and because I am sitting there knowing that I’m probably
thinking and musing upon ideas surrounding my faith and the people I worship
[with] and the same as everybody else is doing at the same time and that
gives me a feeling of us all drawing together.
PAUL [from written comments]: Uplifted as it brought meaning to the events happening. It was symbolic of what was happening. It was easy to slip into the mood of what was being remembered and re-enacted.

PAUL: The first thing I had down was I just feel uplifted - that going in there’s – whether it be the stars or the hands – that it’s meant to tie in. It either ties in with the music but *** colour and then I just look at it and say the hands, well, yes that fits in very well with the whole idea of reconciliation. With the stars is leading on to following the star. And I think the other thing is that I was surprised - the proportion – that everything seemed to be in so much proportion –that the altar cloth and the one on the ambo – when you look at them that the proportion is absolutely magnificent – it just fits in with the size of what’s there. And I suppose I try to think how did she paint that? [much laughter at this point] To me the proportion is just spot on and how it fits in – even those stars. The other thing I put down that surprised me - that those banners that you’ve got there with the comments on – they are two sided – that it’s only when you are up at the front of the church reading, giving out communion or doing something up there that you perhaps realise that it is both sides.

EILEEN: There is a need to see both sides in those banner.

[I was just about to start the ‘think’ question when BILL spoke about his confusion with ‘felt’ and ‘think’]

BILL: This is the first one – well I’ve got something more there. I said that *** an initial reaction was to feel challenged to focus on the meaning. It slowly sinks in - it takes me a while. So you know rather than just thinking of it as something that is visually trendy.

JENNY: Does it take a while - how long does it take sometimes – over the period.

BILL: A couple of months & talking to people.

JENNY: So it’s a process?

BILL: Yeah.

2. When I looked at the artwork I thought . . .

BILL [from written comments]: How well they were executed – innovative, appropriate to the season, and inspiring.

PAUL [from written comments]: That everything was in proportion in the artwork itself – the hands – reconciliation.

PAUL: To me it just seems to fit in with what is happening so the stars talk about the journey – discovery, the whole idea of the hands during lent. [he referred to his experience of doing reader’s preparation and coming into the church and seeing artwork which echoes the ideas that he had been speaking about in the reader’s session].
JAN [from written comments]: re Lenten hands – God giving me the chance to re-create anew – like Cistine Chapel. God’s grace being outpoured, I truly have to connect.

JAN: *** I just stood there and I looked at them and it really hit me [spoke about the children’s mass where Fr Wayne spoke to the kids about the hand motif on the Lenten altar cloth – she couldn’t relate to what he said, but for her it evoke a memory of the creation scene in the Cistine Chapel. She also said something about it being challenging].

KATRINA [from written comments]: What does this mean to me – what is the artist trying to tell me – how is my faith reflected through this?

KATRINA: I thought what is Jenny trying to say? And I stand back and try to be objective about it. And then I thought what was your basic message you put there according to the season we are in? And then as I come back each Sunday I would be drawn to different points around the church and – what does this say to me? Does this reflect my faith? Particularly with the hands, I started thinking about reconciliation and about the Sea of Hands and about being down in Sydney and on the wall in front of parliament house. I thought that was a very good idea. And I thought of the hand of God reaching out. Every time I look at it I think of something else which is why, I guess, I enjoy it so much. I get something different out of it every time I look at it.

EILEEN: It does help you – it’s a growing thing – artwork is a growing thing. Because for someone like you, preparing it, you’ve looked at all the readings ahead; but for most people who come to mass on Sunday they come in and they haven’t prepared the reading before they’ve come: they come in raw. So at first it’s - what is that meaning? Because they haven’t heard the readings for the day. But after that first reading then you realise what role you’re on. Oh, we’re onto the vine and the branches or you can see it coming - and that’s when the artwork starts speaking to you because you’re growing and, as Katrina said, as you’re looking for more things that fit with what you’re thoughts are.

JENNY: Do you think it matters that you know me – that you know who I am, that I’m a member of the community? As you said before – what is she trying to get at – what difference does that make?

KATRINA: [indicated that this was not an issue for her]

3. I was surprised by . . .

PAUL [from written comments]: The symbols which clearly portrayed what [was] being remembered. With the banners hanging in the church with the messages on, it was a couple of weeks before I realised they were double sided.

JAN [from written comments]: my reaction to the colour – not a colour person. Pyramids – hardly any graffiti etc so understand that respect was shown by locals.
JAN: I was surprised at my reactions to the colour because I’m not a colour person. And I really was – the first one I felt joy and alive and hopeful and that was *** so that did surprise me. The other thing that surprised me was the pyramids – the fact that they were left alone and respected by the people *** In this day and age there is so much vandalism *** and I think that is something special.

BILL [from written comments]: The creative ways in which the ideas and themes were expressed.

BILL: [he referred to his notes and said that he would never have thought of those ways of expressing the ideas]

KATRINA [from written comments]: The immediacy of my response to the artwork and the number of times during repeated visits to the church that I continued to enjoy my reflections of faith, stimulated by the art around me.

KATRINA: I was surprised by the immediacy of my response to your work and how every time I come back it means something different. And it can be very much of a focal point for prayer and reflection.

JAN: ‘You get a different impact’ [she was difficult to hear on the tape, but she spoke enthusiastically about the effects of light on the work: how at different times of the day the light shines from behind or onto the work and creates different impressions. She also mentioned the difference that that night lighting makes]

KATRINA: Sometimes you just can’t take you’re eyes off it.

JAN: No, no [speaking in agreement].

4. I was disappointed by . . .

EILEEN [from written comments]: At first the plastic look of the stars.

EILEEN: I’ve never been disappointed with your art. The only thing I felt was that I was a little bit disappointed when I first saw that your stars were like plastic. I don’t know for why, but I was disappointed to see that – but then as it grew it didn’t worry me. But just walking in - and I don’t know if you’ve used plastic before. I don’t know whether I have an association that plastic is cheap – or that might be coming out of my – but as I said that was probably initial. And also, too, I think that just the one star there it was rather stark to begin with but then as it grew the colours emerged more.

PAUL [from written comments]: When things do not change e.g. – remain the same during the Easter season.

PAUL: I put down here that I’m disappointed when nothing changes. I suppose the last six weeks. I suppose part of that surprise is you walk in and say – what will there be this week? Knowing that at times, eg Advent and Lent, there is that tendency for change. For the last six weeks it’s been the same. And its only: Oh, there something else on the other side of the banners to read. So I’m a bit disappointed when things don’t change. Because I walk
in and say: well what’s there and how does it link in? So that’s a bit of a disappointment – disappointment in a good sense. [he explained that it was not that there was a fault with the artwork, but rather that there was no new art to engage with]

KATRINA [from written comments]: I can honestly say I have never felt disappointed by the liturgical art at Mt Carmel – perhaps only in ‘ordinary’ time when liturgical art is minimal – maybe we are spoilt during our major feasts.

KATRINA: [she read her notes and then made the following comments] Except for the possibility of ordinary time. I miss it, possibly because we are pretty spoilt during our special seasons.

BILL [from written comments]: The way some seem to take the liturgical art for granted and not attempt to reflect on the meaning and significance.

BILL: I think sometimes it might be good if there is some reference to the artwork or the changes that have occurred in the artwork.

JENNY: More information you mean?

BILL: Yes, yes. Sometimes there are two things, say the Word and the art, going along parallel and maybe sometimes I don’t make the crossover. *** There does not have to be a whole homily about it but there could be a brief reference to just make the linkage. [he said something about the connection between the artwork and the Word and that a little information would help make the connection explicit]

JAN: [mentioned that some information was done throughout Lent 2000 in the newsletter]

KATRINA: Can I make a special comment on that big circle? [a reference to the logo from the year of the many faces of God 1999]. I thought that was fantastic – I just loved that and everything on it was just fantastic. I thought that was one of the most stunning – wonderful!

[many people spoke at once in agreement here – BILL mentioned the symbols that he saw of different religions]

BILL: Did you get any adverse comment about that [meaning about the symbols of non-Christian religions]?

JENNY: Actually there were not any non-Christian symbols – the crescent moon – is that what you mean? I don’t know of any one who picked that up, but one person said something about it looking like a pentagram – which is a cultic symbol – in fact it’s not a pentagram at all [I tried to describe what a pentagram was]. I don’t think it was a major problem, but I never heard that that there were symbols from other faiths.

BILL: I took it, obviously incorrectly, to mean the integration of the faiths – perhaps a bringing together of ***.
JENNY: That’s interesting, because I didn’t purposely do that, but that doesn’t worry me [I assured him that that was a reasonable interpretation to make however. I listed some of the traditional Christian symbols in the piece]

BILL: That almost suggest astrology doesn’t it?

JENNY: Yeah, but see all those symbols have been used in Christian iconography for many, many generations.

KATRINA: It suggested to me progression of faith from the time of creation.

EILEEN: Exactly, that’s what it meant to me – creation.

JAN [from written comments]: Some other’s remarks [meaning the negative reactions of some people]

JAN: [referring to her sheet] You get some people who are not visual and that’s it. [meaning that they lack the natural ability to appreciate the visual]

EILEEN: There is a lot of negativity in the parish - not about art – like you never hear the positives, you never hear people ringing up and saying ‘tell Jenny that that artwork is superb’. They might think it but they don’t say it. All you here is the little negatives: why does that vase of flowers get shifted from the middle of the altar? For those three or four comments there’s probably a hundred thinking this is wonderful, but they don’t say it.

General Questions

Jenny: The completion questions focussed on your personal experience of the artwork. Now I want some more general information about this year’s liturgical art.

1. What effect did the artwork have on the liturgical space?

KATRINA: I think it makes what is sometimes a drab, uninviting space a place where you want to be and you want to spend time surrounded by visual items that are speaking to you and reminding you constantly why you are there.

JAN: For me it’s a coldness – it can be empty

BILL: Sometimes some of the elements of the art help to integrate what’s up front with the congregational space [there was much agreement in the group to this suggestions and some mentioned the banners].

JENNY: [I asked what they thought of our move to use the centre of the church by putting the podium in the centre and having the gospel read from there etc]

PAUL: Well I think that’s something about using the whole space – putting the banners - and over the years you’ve used different things there. ***Talking about doing something with the church [referring to proposed renovations] the idea is to use the whole lot as sacred space not just up there [in the sanctuary]. It’s the incorporation of everything. [he mentioned that the ambo drops etc make the sanctuary area unified, but when there is nothing there the
space looks ‘very cold.’ He also mentioned the stoles which are in the same visual theme] He’s [the presider is] at the front and it [the stole he is wearing] merges everything in [meaning that the stoles are a unifying factor in the space].

JAN: And even outside [meaning the forecourt], that makes a statement: it starts here!

EILEEN: This is the welcoming.

KATRINA: I think particularly for people who are new or people who are visiting that’s a very important space out the front. That sort of says before you get in the door what we’re like. It can be very off-putting [coming to a new place].

JAN: The use of the whole church – the things I really enjoy – the palms. And also, I suppose it’s the use of the church rather than the artwork. Instead of the adoration of the cross on Good Friday way up in the sanctuary, the cross actually moves around and I think that to me always make a very strong statement.

2. What effect did the artwork have on the community?

EILEEN: I think it would have a varied effect. And I think that comes out of people’s spirituality – where they are at. I suppose that’s the part I like about it, because it makes you think. Like for some people they prefer the simple shepherd [referring to the simplistic image on the altar cloth made by the children’s sacramental program team] but for me I need more depth to, you know, having a little search, trying to make me grow a little bit more. I don’t want the holy picture: I prefer something that I can delve into. But I would say that there are a lot of people - it’s like preaching a homily – you’ve got just so many different people at different levels in their own faith and their own spirituality in front of you and you’ve got to tap in somewhere. And I think the artwork would have the same effect.

JENNY: You’ve got people who have got different experience and different knowledge but you’ve also got different age groups – you’ve got kids then the youth and then the adults. Can you see anything in this year’s artwork which might engage all those different levels? Would anyone have a reason to feel excluded?

PAUL: I think, as Eileen said, that they wouldn’t be able to appreciate it. I think the Good Shepherd one [the simplistic image mentioned above] is a good example. I was struck as I walked out because of the reading, and it was good for that Sunday because it explained the readings. But then I like to sit there and have a look at it and say: how does it challenge me or how does it fit in? And depending on what level they are at – and their faith level – maybe the Good Shepherd is the level that they are at and whether they are four or forty-four or eighty-four. Therefore, they might be left out because it’s beyond their capacity to depth it. It’s the same with the reading: you get up and do the readings and practice them, you spend time going through them and you think: how are people going to understand that, because we don’t
understand it? And they’ll take whatever interpretation they can when they hear it. The same with the artwork, they’ll get out of it from what level they are at. I don’t think they are excluded.

JENNY: Katrina you’ve got kids do they ever comment on the artwork?

KATRINA: Yes, both my kids do – as you probably notice I never have any trouble getting my kids to come to mass – its not an issue with them, so it’s very much part of their life. As they see the change in liturgical art through the seasons they both comment on it and ask the same questions that I have asked myself without any prompting from me. What does this mean? What is the artist saying? What do you think it means Mum? And then they start talking to me and expressing their ideas. Yes, they look for it as the seasons change, they look for what is coming next – they enjoy it – it’s an integral part of their faith. As far as the effect on the community as a whole I think, as everyone has intimated, it’s up to them – the fact that they are there at church – they are somewhere in their faith and they will take what is appropriate for them where they are. And I think that often the liturgical art at Mt Carmel is an interactive thing like when the podium was in the centre of the church. It engages the community more than the performance/audience type arrangement. The gathering on the forecourt, having the ash out there on the forecourt – you have the pyramids. It can be as interactive as an individual or a group wants it to be and they will engage with that at whatever level they are at. I think there was a pretty strong engagement from what I saw, throughout the seasons we just had.

PAUL: Jenny, you were at most masses – and you would have seen the age range – it wasn’t just the young people or the old people, it was a real mixture of people. [he was referring to the pyramids assemblage]

JENNY: It was a real mixture, but I suppose the older people got the less spontaneous they were to participate. It was the little kids who rushed to do it and the teenagers – I didn’t have to ask them twice or encourage them much – I needed to ask them though, they wouldn’t bowl up and do it themselves. And the older people got they often said no no no.

EILEEN: I think it’s just the type of people they are and where they are at for every type of thing. [she mentioned that some people shy away from taking a newsletter – perhaps because of a fear that they might be committing themselves to something, or a fear of something new].

JENNY: Did you all write something [referring to the pyramids]. [They all assented]. Were you self-conscious or did you find it hard to find something to say – or what?

BILL: Hard to find something that was worth saying.

JAN: [spoke about the risk taking involved – the fear of expressing yourself by writing in a public place – the vulnerability involved]
KATRINA: And if somebody saw you write it there they would know where you wrote and they could come back, when you’re not there, and look to see what Julie wrote.

JENNY: What did you think about the comments?

KATRINA: I was just interested to read the thoughts of other people in our parish family. Things that were important to them that I didn’t know were that important to them. I enjoyed reading that and being part of that. I thought that’s another way you can draw the community together; because so many of these beliefs and dreams and hopes we have in common. And we’ve never really got the opportunity to talk about these things.

JENNY: did you notice anything about the number of people who wrote certain things – like patterns? In the second week where people were writing about their fears there was a lot of correlation between people’s dreams and their fears.

KATRINA: [she noticed that environmental issues were mentioned in both weeks]

EILEEN: which means that people were looking at a global level issues rather than at local issues.

PAUL: [commented that the responses were influenced by world events, eg the Olympics]

JAN: [said that she saw comments which expressed the fears and desires which are alien to her, but very real issues to some people in the parish and she found this eye opening. In the normal run of things, ie with church involvement she did not come into contact with these issues]

JENNY: I was surprise at the number of kids who wrote comments about bullying.

KATRINA: I wasn’t surprised at all when I saw that. I thought yeah, they’re verbalising it: stop this happening to us! It’s a terrible problem and it’s just horrendous.

PAUL: It’s part of society and it is very hard to do anything about it.

JENNY: What have those comments got to do with art and liturgy?

KATRINA: The very fact that the art is interactive has given whoever has written on there the opportunity to express where they’re at, to bring that with them to their faith community, to say: this is me and this is where I’m at; these are the things that are important to me; and I’ve brought that here as part of me to share with everybody. It comes with me when I come to church, when I’m praying it’s with me. The interactive liturgical art gives people the opportunity to do that. And that’s important because you shouldn’t have to hide anything. Really, you should be who you are when you come to church.
PAUL: But then there’s a risk involved.

KATRINA: There’s always a risk.

JAN: It makes other people’s experience [available] to me.

KATRINA: The more you know about one another the more you value them.

JENNY: That was in an artistic context – but what about the kids stuff from the sacramental program [photos etc on the back wall of the church]. It is important too but that wasn’t in an artistic context and I’m wondering what is the significance of putting into an artistic context.

KATRINA: Well the pictures of the kids on the back wall of the church that is more or less part and parcel of the sacramental program. They have been requested and it’s almost expected that they do that. When you give people the opportunity it is their choice to do it. [there was much agreement from the others here].

EILEEN: they can take hold of that pen or they can say no. And with looking at the bullying issue – [she said most kids would not think to bring that bullying issues into a church context, but they were able to write it down there] how you get that from out there into the liturgy I just don’t know.

JAN: Except in the prayers of the faithful and . . .

JENNY: [I spoke about the comments on the banner and the comments that were quoted in the prayers of the Mass of the forgiveness of sins] So that’s how I tried to do it – to bring the outside in.

KATRINA: Somebody cares enough to have read what I wrote – its actually part of the mass now.

EILEEN: [commented that the actual words that kids use eg bullying rather than adult words like references to human suffering etc should be used in prayers of the faithful]

3. How does my being a woman affect the liturgical art I make?

[Generally not a gender issue for any participant]

4. What advice would you give to a new liturgical artist?

JENNY: [to introduce this question I asked: If I were knocked down by a bus and a new person had to take over, what advice would you give the new person coming into the ministry?]

KATRINA: I would say something that would engage the entire community and use the whole space.

BILL: A practical suggestion would be to look at what has happened in the past [pointing to the photo album] and reflect on that – each person has their own expression – but they would do it in their own way [much agreement form the other participants]
EILEEN: You would have to allow that to happen because people bring their own gifts in their own way and [said something about no one being irreplaceable] but life goes on and the job gets done – it mightn’t be done as well – but it still goes on. We’d probably be jolted into thinking how lucky we were to have what we had, but then you adapt. Not all our ministers do a great job, but we accept it because they do their best. I think that’s what community is all about it’s accepting that there is good, there is bad, there is mediocre in every aspect and that’s all right. Personally I would like something in art that would still challenge me. I would hate to go back to the [here she mentioned art in which there is no depth or levels of meaning]. We’ve been brought this far it would be a shame to go back to …

PAUL: It would be a shame to go back, but it’s a little bit like when Wayne takes over from David [referring to a change of parish priest]. In one sense that there is a ritual there that they have to go through and you can do certain changes but then the personality comes in and well they’re two different people.

JENNY: Change happens

PAUL: Change happens and the new artist taking over might need to look to see how the previous person has used the space, but then they might decide well, I’ll do it this way. But then its up to the community [not] to say ‘its no good because it wasn’t what was done before’ – but to appreciate that that person might have their own gift in doing it in their way. But it would also be a hard act to follow!

JENNY: It is interesting that you should put it that way because one point that came up in one of the other groups was that they had reservations about the professional level, the ‘performance’ quality, of the liturgies, which they took to be intimidating to the average parishioner who may have shrunk from volunteering from ministry – thinking it beyond their reach.

EILEEN: It is typical of Mt Carmel that we have done everything so good for so long. I know that when I came there and I sat in those pews for nine months knowing that I could play the organ, and the music was so good I really didn’t think I could measure up to that, so I would just sit here and pretend I can’t do it. It wasn’t until Paul Gurr got right up and said that we are desperate for organists and I went timidly and said ‘look I did play before at a parish but I don’t know …’ He said ‘go out and play something’ and I played two bars of *** and he said ‘You’re hired.’ People are a little too frightened to read. [She spoke about her musical trio who think of their ministry as pray] And someone came up and said ‘Oh, so you’re performing today’ and we were devastated because the thing we were trying not to do was the word that came out. And I think with our Easter and Christmas liturgies, and I don’t mean just the artwork, but the whole thing together, is getting on to performance level.

KATRINA: Well that was my impression and to be perfectly honest I didn’t go to the Easter Vigil at Mt Carmel for that reason. And I didn’t go to the Christmas Vigil because the last two I’ve been to for those seasons I’ve
thought: where’s the mass in all of this? No reflection on the liturgical art, but the whole thing coming together was like a grand performance. I don’t want to do this – I want to be here for the reason that I’m here – not for a performance. I don’t know how you’d go about simplifying it – perhaps the redesign of the church will address that in some respects that you haven’t got the stage and the audience.

BILL: The Easter Vigil service I felt had got …

JENNY: Bigger than Ben Hur?

BILL: Yeah. I wasn’t going to go this year, but [he said something about it seeming more simple this year]

EILEEN: A lot of that may come from the fact that we do have very, very talented people.

KATRINA: I used to be in the music ministry and that was the reason I got out of it [ie, the performance level].

JAN: I really detest that *** performance – why does the community have this sense?

KATRINA: What do you do to address it, make that perception not be there?

EILEEN: But if you didn’t practice and you [lower you standards].

KATRINA: No, you can’t do that.

EILEEN: [made the comment that it is a case of balance] But there’s still all the hype that goes on with it. But you have to practice and when you’ve got the [here she mentioned the names of a talented singer in the parish] – they just are absolutely beautiful singers so its going to come across as top stuff.

BILL: Could I just add about the artwork – I don’t think it is overdone [much corroboration from the others here] there are a limited number of elements ***

EILEEN: Jenny’s artwork is tasteful and it is liturgical. It is not art it is liturgical. It is more than ‘art and environment’ it is reaching into the hearts of people and challenging them. I think it’s tasteful and professional and I would hate you to be knocked over by a bus.

JAN: Can I go back to your questions: what would you advise? The only thing that I could think was, I don’t think you can expect anyone to fill someone else’s shoes. [she said something about advising them to do the preparation eg readings and reflection and then to do what they can do]

JENNY: Be true to themselves and be informed?

JAN: Yes, be informed, work with the people they have to, and be in tune with the needs of the community. If they do all that they [will be right]. We have to,
as a community, we have to accept what people do in any ministry. None of us know what situations are going on in their lives most of the time.

PAUL: It is liturgical art – it’s not just a good artist.

JAN: Spirituality.

PAUL: It’s got to have that spiritual connection.

JENNY: That means that a liturgical artist is responsible for those things as well. Do you see that as being a responsibility – to be reflective?

KATRINA: I don’t see it as being a responsibility. I see it as an end product of the gift that the artist gives us. I don’t think the artist has to accept responsibility for other people’s spirituality.

[there seem to be agreement that the viewer and artist are responsible for their own spiritual growth]

JAN: [she seemed to think that artwork effected people only if they were willing for it to ‘touch them’]

JENNY: Do you reckon that the artwork wouldn’t ‘work’ if the artist wasn’t the sort of person who wasn’t [spiritually mature]?

[There was general agreement that it would not.]

KATRINA: Because all you would get then is the same response you’d get from somebody in the community who was at the very beginning or who hadn’t even started on a spiritual journey. All you would get then would be art and colour [implying a lack of meaning] and that’s it. That’s a start point, but for a lot of the rest of the community who are different levels of spiritual development they’re looking for more, much more.
REFERENCE LIST

Aristotle’s Poetics; Demetrius on Style; Longinus on the Sublime. 1963. London: Everyman’s Library.


Reference List


Pattel-Gray, A., ed. 1996. *Aboriginal Spirituality: past, present, future*


Reference List


The biblical translation quoted throughout this thesis is the *New Revised Standard Version*. 

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS


Synthetic polymer paint on non-woven interfacing fabric. Our Lady of Mt Carmel Catholic Church, Brisbane.


22. Close, J. 2001. *Fig Tree Installation: Lent.* (Detail: Cross). Wooden cross, 250cm x 125cm, tree branches. Our Lady of Mt Carmel Catholic Church, Brisbane.


Queensland, Brisbane.


List of Illustrations


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All illustrations (except for 23, 32, 39-43 and 45-49) are photographs taken by the artist/author.