The Handbag as Social Idiom and Carrier of Meaning:  
Inner Self Projected as Outer Person

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Chapter 4
The Body-Bag Collection and the Secrets Collection

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 deals with development in my work. My attending a programme in Europe as exchange student influenced both the form and content of my work. I describe such changes here. I also discuss the role of the artist in the creation of meaning as opposed to the role of the viewer. This discussion contextualises my work’s meaning within a wider sociology of art and functions as platform for investigating unintentional and intentional meaning in my work.

The Body-Bag Collection and the Secrets Collection serve as reference and subject under discussion. The discussion includes the origins of the Body-Bag Collection and those processes involved in its materialisation. This Collection continues on the private versus public theme of the previously-discussed Collections. Here I relate this theme to body-object or body-handbag relationships as re-created in jewellery.

The last Collection that I discuss is the Secrets Collection. In this Collection I focus on objects as contents of handbags and their significations.

4.2 Transformation and Shift in Meaning

In these two Collections, the objects represent idea as metaphor or idiom rather than singularity of form, relating a swing from the object as pivotal subject to concept as subject. The Body-Bag Collection materialises in video form in its final representation and the Secrets series materialises as imprints. These Collections also function as new, open-ended platforms from which new ideas can be generated and they expanded the possibilities of engaging with personal issues that carry global significance.

During the course of my studies I left to study abroad at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam in the Jewellery Department for one semester. The physical distance from my culture, known environment and everyone I know to be confronted with the world art scene
for five months was a powerful experience that had a tremendous effect on my approach to my art practices.

In Europe I was the outsider, a situation that was in radical contrast to the well-socialised position I occupy in my home environment. Not being part of the norm in Amsterdam forced me to connect with unfamiliar codes of creative practices. The new environment and my engagement with it guided my work into new directions.

The cultural icons of my home ground were now misplaced, quite strange and even meaningless in the specifically European cultural context. As a result, I started to explore new ways of creating and generating meaning and looking for a more ‘universal’ language that would also communicate effectively in this new environment. Concept as subject presented itself as a possibility and I started to examine that possibility.

4.3 Creation of New Meaning

When evaluating one’s own work in critical terms, it is usual to meander along a variety of different roads. Contemplating and trying to contextualise my own work’s meaning led to augmented insight into the wider sociology of art. I also became aware of the independent existence of my own art pieces and the fact that they, as separate entities, communicate both intended and unintended meaning. This notion leads to the debates around the author or artist as cardinal creator of meaning as opposed to the viewer or reader as creator of meaning. These debates are prevalent in current art critique. Barthes, for example, explains critical investigation and thinking in the evaluation or understanding of art. Like Barthes, I also ask who is responsible for the meaning created in an artwork and who creates the meaning. Barthes’s fundamental concern lies with the relationship between language and the social world and with the literary forms that mediate between the two (Macey, 2000:29-31). In The Death of the Author (1968), Barthes questions the role of the author of a text. He liberates the reader and concludes that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes, 1997:148).

Similar issues are raised by Michel Foucault, who describes himself as a “specialist in the history of systems of thought” (Macey, 2002:133). In his essay, What is an Author? (1969),...
Foucault states that “[i]f we wish to know the writer in our day, it will be through the singularity of his absence and in his link to death, which has transformed him into a victim of his own writing” (Foucault, 1994:180).

As such, structuralist thinking has insisted on a complete negation of the concept of creative agency (authorship). Barthes notes that the author “is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism…” (Barthes, 1997:142). This “traditional” role of the artist or author is criticised by Barthes due to the notion of the “prestige of the individual” that is accompanied by this way of thinking (1997:143). He states that “[t]he explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us” (Barthes, 1997:143).

Barthes also argues (with reference to literature) that “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (1977:146).

Bourdieu, on the other hand, does not banish the artist altogether from the aesthetic field, but he does accept the ideological effects of an exclusive preoccupation with *their artistic intentions and personal life histories*. Bourdieu breaks with structuralist analyses of art and he positions its meaning as a social construct in a system of generative structuralism. He does relegate all considerations of ‘artist-as-creator’ to the realm of bourgeois ideology. Within Bourdieu’s sociology of the aesthetic field, the artist/author occupies a social position no less significant than that of the beholder/reader, such that the actions of each are limited and mediated by the conditions of their artistic practice. However, he has maintained from his earliest work that aesthetic codes, embodied in the aesthetic disposition, mediate between the conditions of artistic production and the conditions of artistic reception. Moreover, this mediation occurs at a cognitive level. Bourdieu’s positioning of habitus in cognition is an indisputable acknowledgement of human agency in art-making practices. Bourdieu says, “[l]ike painting, perception of painting is a mental thing, at least when it conforms to the norms of perception immanent in the work of art or
in other words, when the aesthetic intention of the beholder is identified with the objective
intention of the work” (cited in Codd, 1990:154).

I support the notion of an art work’s meaning originating from the artist’s intent, which in
turn, has its formation in habitus, and I believe this does not exclude the viewer from
interpreting the work in a way particular to herself, thus creating her own meaning. By
writing this thesis I investigate, explain and justify the artwork that I produce through using
references to other texts (and authors) in order to corroborate my insights. I concur with
the notion of writing as an artist about my own art, as it gives me, the artist, the ability to
articulate verbally what I communicated by means of visual text in the form of artworks.
Writing creates a platform from which I can critically think and theorise about my art.
Studying Barthes on this specific subject matter made me aware of this view. Bourdieu’s
generative structure comprising habitus does not exclude multiple interpretations by
diverse viewers. In this sense, Barthes’s thinking regarding the role of the author is
relevant to my work because I believe that, as the artist, I create the work within a social
context, but the work attains multiple meaning once it exists in the public domain because
it is viewed and perceived in various ways by diverse viewers who might originate from
different social contexts.

Barthes says that the artwork itself is never an original work, just as the artist is not the
prestige individual responsible for the artwork. The artwork is but a collection of previous
texts that the artist connects and then produces as an artwork. Barthes states that “[w]e
know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the
‘message’ of the Author God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings,
one of then original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the
innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes, 1997:146).

The artwork or text, according to Barthes, is made of “multiple writings, drawn from many
cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, [and] contestation”
(Barthes, 1997:148). Bourdieu’s ideas differ from this notion in his location of habitus in the
cognitive domain. The habitus, however, is a generative system and the wider the artist’s
social field of reference becomes, the wider her artworks’ reach will be.
Barthes liberates the viewer from the notion that an artwork can carry only the meaning allocated to it by its creator. Regarding multiple meanings in artworks, he says that “there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author” (Barthes, 1997:148). The creation of meaning, the process of understanding and the existence of the artwork unite at the viewer. Barthes notes that “[t]he reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up the writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origins but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (Barthes, 1997:148).

Bourdieu’s theories of the habitus and aesthetic interpretation suggest that the artist’s habitus is inextricably linked to her art-making processes, while the viewer brings her own habitus to the artwork to read the work from her own socially specific perspective. I don’t think it is entirely necessary to go as far as Barthes, who states that in the death of the author the reader comes to life, as I don’t think that the artist is disempowered in her construction of meaning in making an artwork. Although my own work has to stand on its own and convey meaning independent from its social context, I create it in the context of my habitus and its socially specific reference. Once viewed in diverse social contexts, the work continues to communicate because each viewer, with her own habitus, could be free to draw from it a new and different meaning not necessarily related to my originally intended meaning.

I am a woman artist making art objects that mainly relate to women. This becomes problematic, since gender plays a defined role in my work. Rosemary Betterton discusses Barthes’s theories from a poststructuralist feminist point of view in which she questions language as a gendered phenomenon. In her book, *An Intimate Distance: Woman Artists and the Body*, she refers to Barthes’s claim that language is in an “authorial position” that “writes the writer” (Betterton, 1996:164). Betterton states that the language itself constructs an “imaginary coherence of the self” (1996:164), which achieves its unity only in the act of being read. “[A]uthorship gives way to writing in a theory and of practice of textuality” (Miller 1986:104). Betterton further notes that “[l]anguage thus offers us positions through which we are able to ‘speak’ ourselves”. This theory is disrupted from the poststructuralist
feminist critique as “the problem of artistic subjectivity has been redefined from one of the
gendering of the author to the gendering of language itself” (Betterton, 1996:165).

She asserts that language and the institutional discourses that frame it are predominantly
masculine and this offers a sense of selfhood to men, which is not the same as that which
is offered to women: “A female artist cannot simply inhabit masculine artistic space
because, as a woman, she is differently positioned within language” (Betterton, 1996:165).
She explains this notion further in the following statement: “It is the mastery of language
and codes of representation which must be disrupted in order to open up a space for the
feminine. And since language and meaning are themselves open to change, this self is not
fixed, but continually in change and sometimes in conflict: the site of what Julia Kristeva
has called the ‘subject in process’” (Kristeva, 1987:9).

Betterton’s theories relate to my own work in the sense that I reproduce and incorporate
symbols with culture-specific masculine connotations61. I feminise these symbols in order
to deliberately change their meaning. I agree with Betterton that language is gendered.
This view is in opposition to Barthes’s assertions regarding the death of the author. I assert
that, if the voice and language of the author/artist can prove to be gendered, the presence
of the author/artist cannot be denied.

Being a woman artist and creating artworks (handbags) that are strongly associated with
women in a cultural-specific society posits gender as central to my work. So does my
deliberate incorporation and satirical representation of male symbols. Betterton’s theories
would suggest that habitus is also by extension gender specific, thus acknowledging the
artist’s and the viewer’s gender in the creation and the interpretation of artworks. Both the
cognitive location of habitus and the gendered presence of language would establish the
artist as pivotal initiator of meaning in her art and I concur with this view. I also
acknowledge Barthes’s theories on the role of the viewer as creator of meaning, but I do
not believe that they necessarily prevail only at the cost of the author or artist.

61 See Chapter 2 page 43; See Chapter 3 page 104
4.4 The Body-Bag Collection

4.4.1 Origins

This Collection was inspired by the relationship between underwear and the handbag. A thorough discussion of this relationship is present in Chapter 1, where a contextual history of the division of the sexes⁶² is included. It is clear from those discussions that the notion of the handbag as a feminine object originated from its historical relation to underwear.

At the beginning of this research project I started to work with my cultural heritage and related culturally-symbolic objects. This is thoroughly discussed in the chapters dealing with the Mielie and Protea Collections.⁶³ The symbolic objects that I chose had a strong relationship to my cultural reference and myself as individual person. Chapter 2 relates an in-depth discussion about the original sources of my work, however in this chapter I will focus on the second group⁶⁴ of symbols, which also relate more feminine associations. I discuss these symbols within the framework of Bourdieu’s theory regarding the internalisation of externalities and the externalisation of internalities. The symbolic object that I use in this Collection is the undergarment worn by women known as the panties. I assert that my relationship to this object and the reason I chose to work with it can also be related to my social background.

⁶² See pages 3 to 9
⁶³ See pages 40 to 45
⁶⁴ See pages 98 to 102
Figure 4.1
(Johnson, 2002:250).

Figure 4.2
Moschino Bustier Backpack, 1985
(Johnson, 2002:466).

Figure 4.3
Tailor’s dummies bags, Italian, 1950
(Johnson, 2002:467).
I wanted to use an object that would adequately represent the reality of having grown up as the eldest of four sisters. Underwear, with its gender-specific associations with handbags, became the starting point for developing another series of artworks. I enjoyed the idea of using the panties as a symbolic object representing sisterhood and, despite not knowing initially where such a venture would take me, I decided to go ahead, since the panties is a carrier of multiple meanings in our society. I realised it would be a challenge to transform it into a handbag while also retaining the meaning I wanted it to communicate. Pants were the most interesting proposition as subject matter, since braziers have often been used before. An example of a bustier translated into handbag is the *Spiral Bag* (Fig. 4.1) by Issey Miyake, created in 1991 and based on a blazing red bustier which he designed for Grace Jones (Johnson, 2002:250). Another example of a corset used as inspiration for a handbag is that of a bag inspired by Sophia Loren and created by Moschino in 1985 to become the *Bustier Backpack* (Fig. 4.2) (Johnson, 2002:466). In 1950, handbags (Fig. 4.3) inspired by tailors’ dummies and headless torsos appeared on the market in Italy (Johnson, 2002:467).

It is important to know that a fair period of time elapsed between the initial conception of the idea to use the panties as subject matter and its eventual materialisation in the form of a series of handbags. The exploration of the panties as a symbolic object started with the investigations that I conducted in preparation for creating the Protea and Mielie series. While working on those two series, the panties as symbolic object remained in the background to re-appear after approximately a year. I revisited this idea after spending time in Europe at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, an experience that certainly altered my approaches in the development of this series and its influences are certainly reflected in the completed work.
Figure 4.4

Figure 4.5
The drawings I made in researching and developing this series also reflect new and fresh ways of drawing and designing that differ considerably from my usual way of drawing. I regard these changes as constitutive of development. Previously, my drawings and designs were more expressionistic and big. In researching the underwear I realised that the panties as object needed finer and more delicate mark making and also required a greater deal of detail for the design to portray a sense of intimacy (Fig. 4.4). I had acquired such skills in my education and I could therefore combine my existing drawing and design skills in a way that worked particularly well for the subject matter. This ‘new’ controlled way of drawing and designing represent a big step in the development of my designing and art-making practices, since it generated invention. I started designing like this more often and reduced the size of my designs. Working smaller and in more detail gave me a sense of control which made me more comfortable.

During the course of my studies, I tried various ways of designing with a view to creating my own system of inventing new form. Experimenting and ‘trying out’ produced multiple variations, facets and possibilities that all accumulated in a system of working that was in itself not ever fixed, but always actively contributing to new form. In this way, my system was generative, ensuring productive capability. This also contributed to the generative development of my aesthetic disposition and eventually informed my idiolect. Initially I battled with size and wanted everything to be bigger than jewellery size, mainly because I did not want to be restricted to the jewellery field but wanted to work between disciplines. As discussed in the previous chapter, the article of Paul Derrez, explaining the different categories of jewellery that exist, positioned my work within a contemporary jewellery field as an ‘author jeweller’ (Derrez, 2005:12).

After spending quite some time experimenting, I returned to working in a smaller, more workable size. I did this also to be able to use traditional jewellery techniques and tools. The size of these tools is relevant to the size of the product, because it can be restricting. This experimentation with size was present in both the Mielie and Protea Collections and is visible in the shift from big and heavy pieces to smaller, more ‘precious’ pieces. After

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65 See page 101 (Figs. 3.26 to 3.27)
66 See pages 138 to 140
67 See Chapter 2 page 48 (Fig. 2.35); See Chapter 3 page 105 (Fig. 3.32)
my war with size was settled, I was more at ease with making smaller, more detailed work. The process of creating the underwear designs served as the vehicle for this transformation and coming to understand the appropriateness of size in relation to production and product.

Trying to understand the panties as a shape and translating it into new form that also explored its three-dimensional qualities demanded the deconstruction of its components and shapes. I wanted to transform it into a handbag. This process of deconstruction became three dimensional when I took different sizes and shapes of underwear and used resin to fix the shape into a solid form (Fig. 4.5). This was a fascinating exercise for me, because the action of transforming it from pliability to rigid solidity forced me to see and focus on the various possibilities of changing the shapes. I tried various design options, but eventually concluded that if these designs were to be made into handbags in a realistic size for a bag, I would have to sacrifice the quality of intimacy, which was a central and crucial concept of meaning that I wanted to convey. This problem proved to be a big obstruction in the development of the panties bags and my efforts to solve it led me into many different fields of discovery.

My desire to portray intimacy led me to change the notion of ‘designing’ an object to the possibility of using the design itself as the artwork or the object. I liked the drawing in itself. The drawings related the quality of intimacy I wanted to portray. Reflecting on this process, I now believe that the series of decisions I made in this process also engendered a shift in my aesthetic disposition. The idea that the drawing in itself could become the artwork or jewellery piece occurred very early in the developmental stages of this work. The drawings promised the possibility of becoming jewellery, because the size in which I had made them originally held a quality or ‘feeling’ of intimacy. I investigated various practical possibilities for developing these drawings further, but found all my solutions forced. As a result, I let the panties go and decided not to work on them any more. I decided that if, during the

In both the Mielie and the Protea Collection a bronze piece formed a part of the visual art-making process. See Chapter 2 page 66 (Fig. 2.52); See Chapter 3 page 137 (Fig. 3.83) The final Mielie and Protea Collections are smaller and more precious than the bronze pieces which form a part of the visual art-making process.
course of working on other pieces, something came up that referred to them, I would go back and work on them some more.

Figure 4.6

Figure 4.7
4.4.2 Conceptual development through visual research

In his article Richard Harker says, “[c]hange the society and naturally there will be a change in the contiguity and juxtaposition of fields, a change in the balance between family and school, between the kinds (and amount) of capital they produce, their generalisability, together with a whole host of other economic, social, political and cultural factors” (1990:97-98).

While studying abroad and participating in a project titled ‘holes’, I made four drawings (Fig. 4.6). These drawings were made of recycled paper and as I worked on them a need for attention to detail and control emerged (Fig. 4.7). The quality in these four drawings created a visual link to the panties drawings (Fig. 4.4) previously described. The resemblance between these two sets of drawings was almost tangible and I knew that the panties were surfacing in the details of this series. My drawing remained very precise and controlled for the entire time I spent at the Rietveld Academy in the Netherlands. I believe it was my way of trying to control what I perceived as unfamiliar forces in a strange environment. When I compare these controlled drawings to drawings I made in South Africa, the differences in their visual characteristics and manner are quite astonishing.

Figure 4.8
Nanette Nel, 2007. Neck-lace
Worn on the body.

Figure 4.9
Nanette Nel, 2007. Neck-lace
As flat object.

69 See Chapter 3 page 125 (Fig. 3.60); See Chapter 4 pages 156 to 157 (Figs. 4.6 to 4.7)
70 See Chapter 2 page 47 (Fig. 2.34); See Chapter 3 page 101 (Figs. 3.26 to 3.27)
The art school in Amsterdam consisted of numerous departments that could be accessed by all, a situation that enabled interdisciplinary participation. I am interested in fashion design and textile design and decided to explore these departments where possible. I started to use and experiment with textiles as a medium and created a linen neckpiece (Figs. 4.8 & 4.9). I realised that I treated the textile fabric like paper, the same way I did in the 'hole' drawings (Figs. 4.6 & 4.7). I ignored the particular qualities of the fabric (Fig. 4.10). That is why I combined the pieces into a neckpiece. The particular qualities of the fabric only became evident once worn. I found using textiles as paper instead of utilising their dressmaking qualities very interesting. This enhanced my awareness of a garment as a three-dimensional, pliable form that adopts the shape of the body and its movements once worn on the body. When it is not on a body and folded up, it resembles a two-dimensional piece of paper. In making the neckpiece I used mainly natural colorants such as tea, beetroot and coffee. Other materials included ink, hair and nail polish. This was very much a process borne of necessity. I had to use what was available. During this time I became aware of the space a person occupies and the waste one generates. I collected
art-making material constantly because I did not have a studio filled with things or material at my disposal. My hair is the best example of material which I collected and used in that time. This way of working created a definitive sensitive and sentimental feeling on the unbleached linen, which in return referenced the underwear, not only on a material level, but also conceptually and specifically in terms of intimacy.

Figure 4.11. Nanette Nel, 2007. Canvas Clutch. Unbleached linen, ink.

Figure 4.12 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Canvas Clutch. Unbleached linen, ink.

Figure 4.13 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Canvas Clutch. Unbleached linen, ink.
After making the neckpiece with textiles, I wanted to explore the notion of deliberately using textiles as drawing ground or as a canvas. I created the small clutch bag on unbleached linen, namely the *Canvas Clutch* (Figs. 4.11 to 4.13). What I liked about this piece was that the text and the drawing informed each other, thus creating a dialogue between text and object. It is also ambiguous regarding its dimensionality. It is a very flat three-dimensional object, but suggests the two-dimensionality of the drawing surface by the very fact that drawings appear on it. This gives a quirky element to the piece and I see it as the product of an exciting experiment. This piece held a great deal of potential and I tried to take it further.

The second textile bag, the *Canvas Tote* (Fig. 4.14), was definitely three-dimensional and couldn’t be mistaken for a piece of paper. When I started to draw on this bag, I became consumed by attention to detail and I realised that I had started to illustrate details of the bag itself. These details are fragments of recognisable elements of handbags, for example a pocket, stitching or a zipper or decorative corner for the handbag. This aspect of the bag represents a different development that is not present in the first bag. The difference in this handbag is that the drawing is an illustration of something that exists, where the drawing
on the previous bag was informative and suggestive, referencing something like beadwork on the outside and not illustrating it. I thought that if I combined text with this drawing, it would become convoluted and cluttered. The development that occurred from the linen neckpiece to the two *canvas drawing bags* would also contribute to the development of the panties drawings.

The creation of a leather bag flowed from the canvas bags discussed above. I did research on leather works in South Africa and wanted to produce some of my designs in leather. It was a difficult situation because most of the factories could not make patterns of my designs or did not want to take on a project where the main objective was to create a limited edition or ‘once off’ that would not be financially viable for them. With all this background I decided to make a leather bag myself to experiment with the leather and to use the leather in the same way I approached the textile handbags. The final product is a big leather bag with a detailed drawing on the bag (Figs. 4.15 to 4.17). The inside of the leather drawing bag is pink felt spray-painted gold (Fig. 4.16).

Figure 4.15 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Leather Bag*. Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.
Figure 4.16. Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: The inside of *Leather Bag*. Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.

Figure 4.17. Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Drawing on *Leather Bag*. Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.
Figure 4.18
Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Leather Bag
Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.

Figure 4.19
Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Leather Bag
Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.

Figure 4.20
Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Leather Bag on body
Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.

Figure 4.21
Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Drawing on Leather Bag
Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.
Drawing on the leather resulted in a macabre quality resembling tattoos on human skin (Fig. 4.22). After some time the ink seemed to run or bleed a little on the leather in a similar way to what it does on human skin. A Belgian artist, Wim Delvoye, set up an Art Farm in China where he tattoos pigs (Fig. 4.24). He uses the pigs as canvasses for skin art and collectors can “buy the pigs live and pay for their keep as ‘foster parents’ or simply purchase their tattoo-festooned skins for display after the pigs pass on” (Carter, 2008a).

His *Louis Vuitton piglet* (Fig. 4.25) refers to and comments on the use of leather for making handbags. Apart from this criticism of the use of leather, I find this to be a remarkable reference to the body-object relationship. He refers to the piglet tattooed with the French luxury brand monogram logo, Louis Vuitton, and the fact that he works in China, when he says that “[w]e saw all these fake Louis Vuitton designer bags. You always read in newspapers about other countries complaining about these fakes and then, as an artist, I'm interested in what's fake and what's real” (Carter, 2008a).
Zinwoo Park, a Korean artist and product designer, also works with the dichotomy between fake and real. He created and exhibited a series of FAKE Louis Vuitton handbags at the 100% Design in London and at an art exhibition called Wake up Andy Warhol that was staged in Seoul. By combining the graphic image FAKE and a Louis Vuitton handbag (Figs. 4.26 to 4.28), he created a product that questions and satirises the notion of what is fake and what is real. The Fake-Too Perfect product is a reversible canvas bag. The representation of the FAKE Louis Vuitton bag is re-represented on this bag (Figs. 4.29 & 4.30). This is the real FAKE Louis Vuitton bag and is branded as such, and not as a fake fake Louis Vuitton bag (Poketo, 2008).

The reversibility of this bag also resembles and supports the theme of privacy and publicity in my work. In my final Collection, the dresses or Body-Bag Collection, in which I work with the relationship between jewellery as object and the body, I reference Park’s utilisation of both the inside and outside of the Fake-Too Perfect bags. The dresses in my series function on the border between the body-bag and body-object relationships (Poketo, 2008).
Figure 4.26

Figure 4.27

Figure 4.28

Figure 4.29

Figure 4.30
Figure 4.31

Figure 4.32

Figure 4.33
4.4.3 Relationship between handbag as object and the body

During the process of creating the above I also developed a new Collection, the Body-Bag Collection. In this Collection I aimed to develop and augment conceptual representation. The body-object relationship forms the main focus of this Collection.

The word ‘handbag’ reveals the connection between object and body: ‘hand’ referring to the body and ‘bag’ referring to object. Examples where the word ‘handbag’ plays this crucial and specific role can be seen in the work of Jean Paul Gaultier. The 1998 Jean Paul Gaultier Glove Bag (Fig. 4.31) and the Bracelet de Force of 2001 (Fig. 4.32) indicate the relationship between the body and the bag (Johnson, 2002:422-423).

Another example of this relationship materialises in the limited edition monogram canvas bum bag (Figs. 4.33 & 4.34) that Vivienne Westwood designed for Louis Vuitton in 1996. In this bag she combined a sense of the company’s genesis as luggage makers and their fascination with functional bags (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:182). This buttock-shaped ‘fanny pack’ is strapped to a model’s hips, demonstrating a subversive force of a bag that’s shape is suggestive of the erotic (Johnson, 2002:171).
Figure 4.35
Internet Image (Smith, 2008).

Figure 4.36
Jessica Simpson and her dog in a Louis Vuitton Pet Carrier
Internet Image (Simpson, 2008).

Figure 4.37
Left: Paris Hilton with her dog and Louis Vuitton Bag
Right: Nadia Plesner, 2008. Simple Living
Internet Image (Simple Living, 2008).
Figure 4.38

*Armadillo Shoulder bag*, 1920-1940.
A historical example of leather and the use of the actual animal as the ‘body of the bag’ (Van Eijk, 2004:196).

Figure 4.39

Numerous examples of the handbag being represented as the body of a living being exist, such as the doggie bag (Fig. 4.35). This specific handbag is created to refer to celebrities (Figs. 4.36 & 4.37) ‘wearing’ and carrying their tiny dogs as accessories in their very expensive luxury brand Louis Vuitton handbags. This habit signifies the ridiculousness of luxury when it reaches these extremes of wealth, represented by the graphic image of Nadia Plesner that provides social commentary on this issue. Historical examples of the body of the bag referring to living creatures is evident in the Armadillo Shoulder bag (Fig. 4.38) and French Poodle bag (Fig. 4.39).

All these examples influenced the design process of my Body-Bag Collection. During the creation of the Canvas Clutch, Canvas Tote and Leather bags, I made design drawings in which the handbag is directly drawn onto dresses (Fig. 4.40). These drawings were followed by drawings of handbags that were made directly onto the naked body (Fig. 4.41). This was the beginning of the concept of the ‘Dress’ series, which is the Body-Bag Collection. My aim is to present this Collection as a video piece.

The actual objects that are involved in this Collection consist of a series of dresses that function as canvasses or bags in themselves. The shape of the dress resembles a bag and has a bag drawn on the outside. Drawn handbags and written words also appear on the inside of the dress. This represents the relationship between the private and public spheres of a handbag and I explore the idea to maximum capacity in this series. When the dress is raised, the bag drawn on the inside of the dress is revealed and this action also uncovers a line drawing of a handbag on the naked body of the model. In the video form, it is possible to stress the repetition of this action and its revealing functions in a continuous flow, thus further emphasising its importance as idea.

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71 See page 159 (Figs. 4.11 to 4.13)
72 See page 160 (Fig. 4.14)
73 See pages 161 to 164 (Figs. 4.15 to 4.23)
Figure 4.40
Nanette Nel, 2007. Design Drawings
Dresses with handbags drawn or printed on them.

Figure 4.41
Nanette Nel, 2007. Design Drawings
A nude with handbags drawn on the body.

Figure 4.42
Nanette Nel, 2007. Design Drawings
Dresses with handbags drawn on them, referring to the different places they connect to the body.
Dresses with handbags drawn or printed on them.
The bags I chose to represent in this way are bags that have a definite relation to specific areas of the body (Figs. 4.42 & 4.43). Some of the titles are conventional terms or titles associated with types of bags, others are not. The main objectives of the Collection are twofold: firstly, they show how these bags sit and touch the human body and, secondly, they show how the wearer carries her objects within the various pouches.

These bags are titled as follows:

- *The Sweatcatcher* (Figs. 4.45 & 4.46)
- *The Bum Bag* (Figs. 4.47 & 4.48)
- *The Fanny Pack* (Figs. 4.49 & 4.50)
- *The Back Pack* (Figs. 4.51 & 4.52)
- *The Body Hugger* (Figs. 4.53 & 4.54)

I used natural colorants (Fig. 4.44) by combining red wine, coffee, tea and beetroot with drawing ink in different solutions to create the ‘Stained’ handbags on the dresses. Different types of ink pens are used to create text. The textile is 100% cotton or 100% silk with different weaving patterns which were chosen to create differently shaped stains. The concept behind the ‘natural’ colorants and the 100% natural textile was to try and keep the dresses as near in nature to the human body as possible. By including human hair on the dresses the stains also became more suggestive of bodily excretions. The borders between the body-object relationships are explored and blurred by suggesting human waste in the form of stains as visual language.
Figure 4.45
100% cotton, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.46
100% cotton, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.47
100% silk, natural colorants, ink.
Figure 4.48
100% silk, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.49
100% cotton, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.50
100% cotton, natural colorants, ink.
Figure 4.51

Figure 4.52

Figure 4.53

Figure 4.54
Figure 4.55
Mona Hatoum, 1995. *Hair Necklace*
Artist’s hair, Cartier bust, leather (Broadhead, 2005:25).

Figure 4.56
Nanna Melland, 2003. *Decadence*
750 gold, linen
Collection: Gallery Marzee, Neimegen, The Netherlands
(Broadhead, 2005:25).

Figure 4.57
Millie Cullivan, 2004. *Lace collar*
(Broadhead, 2005:27).
Caroline Broadhead writes in an article titled *A Part/Apart* that, “[w]hen objects are active at the boundary of the body – jewellery in its widest sense – there is the potential to explore identity and meaning. Wearing something close to the body offers the circumstances and territory to explore issues that arise at this junction of the personal, social and cultural. Objects that are used in close relationship to an individual can indicate a personal history, declare a relationship to others, and raise issues of identity and status” (2005:25).

Contemporary examples of work that are active at this border or boundary are Mona Hatoum’s *Hair Necklace* (Fig. 4.55), 1995, and Nanna Melland’s *Dekadence* (Fig. 4.56), 2003. They use material from their own bodies and transform what was “once self and what is now not, both a part of and apart from the body” (Broadhead, 2005:26).

In Mona Hatoum’s *Hair Necklace* she created a string of beads, similar to those used in traditional and elegant pearl necklaces. The familiarity of this as object is soon replaced with repulsion when the thought of having someone else’s body waste touching one’s skin, occurs. Nanna Melland’s *Dekadence* is a necklace consisting of nail trimmings that she harvested over a period of one year cast in gold. Millie Cullivan created *Lace Collar* (Fig. 4.57), 2004, which is a temporary work made to last by its being photographed. An image is traced onto the bare skin with white dust or powder. The image is “[t]ransient, feminine, tender, what’s left behind is a memory of touch, evidence of contact with the skin” (Broadhead, 2005:26). Caroline Broadhead explains that the lace collar “is an illusion of substance, but on recognition of its ephemerality, almost a holding of one’s breath so as not to disturb the image” (2005:27).

The reason I use dresses in my Collection is to highlight clothing as active on the border between the body and an object that is worn on the body. Broadhead states that “[l]ayers of clothes are permeable boundaries of the body and, here, the holes have greater importance than the garment itself, as they are the means of passage between inside and out” (2005:32). Adele Lutz created a piece called *Venus Twist* (Fig. 4.58), 2001. In this piece the inside of the clothing is taken to the outside, onto the clothing. The body hair that surfaces through the clothing is underarm and pubic hair (Broadhead, 2005:33). The
traditional function of the clothing, to hide or protect these private areas, is challenged and turned inside out. Susanne Hammer created a T-shirt titled Orientierungshilfen (Fig. 4.59), 1998, in which holes in the T-shirt indicate the individual moles of the person wearing the T-shirt. This creates a unique mapping of the individual that also uses clothing as a boundary that does not isolate, but exposes private elements in order to create new meaning. These pieces represent interesting and playful explorations of the dichotomies that exist between the inside and outside, the private and the public and the body and object relationship.

Monika Brugger is a German contemporary jeweller whose work questions the boundaries that specifically exist between jewellery and clothing. Her piece, Inseparable (Fig. 4.60), 2002, is a linen blouse with a written definition of the word ‘brooch’ embroidered on the shirt. This representation is startling because the “shirt becomes a function the piece” (Sackville, 2006:110). In her installation titled Women (Fig. 4.61), she also incorporates the idea of jewellery and clothing in an interesting way. “The jewellery itself is made manifest in an absence – a hole, a stain, a faded patch – but the purpose of the garment itself is to provide a vehicle through which to make the absence apparent” (Sackville, 2006:110).

Eventually the dress will not be important as an object in the Body-Bag Collection. The final medium, in which the Collection will appear, will be that of video. Despite this, I still use material that is meticulously selected for its specific qualities, because the ideas explained above form the central subject of the Collection, rather than the dress as object. Material and medium continue to play an important and determining role in my art, despite this shift from object to idea.
Figure 4.58

Figure 4.59

Figure 4.60

Figure 4.61
Monika Brugger, 2001. *Woman* (left to right)
*Red*: starched cotton, silk thread
*Mark*: cotton/linen
*Soleil*: cotton (Sackville, 2006:110).
Figure 4.62

Figure 4.63
Brooch series 5 cm x 5 cm  
Plastic, leather, ink, plastic container, plastic model.

Figure 4.64
Necklace 4 cm x 4 cm  
Artist’s hair, plastic model, plastic ball, silk, brass chain.

Figure 4.65
4.5 The Secrets Collection

4.5.1 Origins
The Secrets Collection developed as parallel to the Body-Bag Collection. All the developmental work that I did for this series occurred during the time I spent abroad. There were certain key elements that played an important role in both these series and therefore I will refer to them again in the discussion of this Collection. For some time I worked on various series and projects simultaneously without consciously linking them or realising their commonalities. The moment I came up with the final concept for this Collection I could reflect on the work I had created before and identify several elements that had directly influenced its realisation or at least contributed to the final conceptualisation of the work.

I refer again to the previously discussed Canvas Clutch, Canvas Tote and Leather Bag as key factors in the developmental process of the Secrets Collection. As a direct result of these pieces, I experimented with and created a series of brooches titled My Men-sies (Figs. 4.62 to 4.65). My aim was to create tiny spaces in which these plastic models of human figures could ‘come alive’. The title refers to me and indicates that they are ‘my people’, but by separating ‘sies’ from ‘men’, I also suggest something disgusting or disgraceful with reference to ‘men’. One of these comprises a very tiny person seated in and on a ball of my own hair inside a plastic ball (Fig. 4.64). I titled the piece My Men-sies: se Self and it functions as a self-portrait. These brooches, which I regard as experiments, made me think of how the inside of a bag seems to resemble a world in itself, containing objects as inhabitants of that world. The bag cannot hold its contents in place. As the person carrying the bag moves, so do the objects. In this way, books may become damaged, food may become hidden to grow old and bad, and sweets or chewing gum might become detached from their packaging. These are thoughts that originated from the creation of the brooch collection.

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74 See page 159 (Figs. 4.11 to 4.13)
75 See page 160 (Fig. 4.14)
76 See page 161 to 164 (Figs. 4.15 to 4.23)
77 ‘Sies’ is Afrikaans for ‘disgusting’.
Figure 4.66

Figure 4.67

Figure 4.68
Ted Noten, 2000. *Superbitch bag*
Gun cast in acrylic, snake skin handle. 23 x 22 x 7 cm (Staal 2006:129).
At the Rietveld Academy we were set a project in which we had to adorn any woman whom we admired with any jewellery piece. I chose to represent my grandmother, hence the title *Oumatjie se Bitchbag* (Figs. 4.66 & 4.67). As mentioned in Chapter 2, she lives on the farm Olyfenbult.\(^{78}\) I chose the *Ted Noten Superbitch bag* (Fig. 4.68) for her, thereby referencing my Secrets Collection (Fig. 4.67). Noten’s utilisation of a bag’s contents as subject definitely influenced me. His *Superbitch bag* (Fig. 4.68) shows a gun cast inside an acrylic bag. The transparent acrylic exposes the secret gun ‘hidden’ inside the bag. The bag is also completely non-functional and ornamental, directing all attention to its contents: the exposed gun captured forever in disempowered immobility and therefore as non-functional as the bag. In this way, it becomes a message bag. I specifically used this bag because its multi-layered and powerful messages of violence and impotent protection, frozen vulnerability and defencelessness, relate strongly to the high crime levels in South Africa and to the fear I experienced as child on the farm.\(^{79}\) Noten’s bag exposes the gun as an impotent object rendered useless for either attacking or defending in this captured state. My grandmother, an 84-year-old woman, arms herself with a handgun, a habit that I find ridiculous and shocking, because it simply emphasises her ineffective preparedness, to say the least.

4.5.2 The Public your Private Series
During the time I studied at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, Yuka Oyama hosted a workshop. She is a Berlin-based Japanese artist and her work constitutes performances in which she makes instant jewellery from recycled material (Figs. 4.69 to 4.72). Her work is called *Schmuck*\(^{80}\) *Quickies*. During these performances she creates highly personal jewellery and body accessories in minutes, free of charge to any member of the public who wishes to participate. She has conducted these performances in Munich and Berlin in Germany, Meran in Italy, Niigata and Tokyo in Japan, as well as in Middlesbrough and Saltburn in England.

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\(^{78}\) See page 42
\(^{79}\) See pages 40 to 43
\(^{80}\) ‘Schmuck’ is the German word for jewellery.
Figure 4.69 Yuka Oyama, 2003. Japan
Shinichirou Takahashi,

Figure 4.70 Yuka Oyama, 2003. Japan
Chitose Oochi,
Schmuck Quickie: Ginza (Tokyo)
(Oyama, 2005).

Figure 4.71 Yuka Oyama, 2003. Japan
Schmuck Quickie Ginza, Japan (Oyama, 2005).

Figure 4.72 Yuka Oyama, 2003. Italy
Schmuck Quickie Meran, Italy (Oyama, 2005).
She asks the participants; “what kind of jewellery can I make for you?” (Oyama, 2005). The participants’ responses guide her in making pieces of jewellery in a few minutes in this “performance based interactive jewellery making project”. She documents the pieces by taking photographic portraits of the participants wearing their pieces (Figs. 4.69 & 4.70) (Oyama, 2005).

Liesbet den Besten describes the project in the best possible way when she writes in the introduction of the Jewelry Guerrilla Catalogue that “[a] jewelry guerrilla is a tactic to surprise people in a surrounding where they do not expect something to happen, with the aim to confront them with the jewellery phenomenon. The jeweler goes outside in the public environment to work and talk with people. As such it is the opposite of the safe environment of the artist’s studio. Japanese artist Yuka Oyama framed this way of working” (cited in Oyama, 2007:2).

In the Gerrit Rietveld guerrilla workshop the students had to conduct ‘field tests’ in Amsterdam. These field tests were known as the Jewellery Guerrilla (Oyama, 2007:1). Each student could choose his or her own interest for research. Once all the information had been collected, it had to be retranslated into presentation format. These ‘presentation formats’ were exhibited at the Sieraad, the International Jewellery and Silver Design Fair in Amsterdam as part of an exhibition curated by the Gerrit Rietveld students in collaboration with Yuka Oyama.

**My Guerrilla**

I found the jewellery guerrilla to be a very valuable exercise, since it created a platform from which social research could be done within a structured workshop. I chose to gather information that would relate to my art practices and thesis and therefore continued my handbag theme. I formulated questions around the social phenomena of carrying necessities on or near the body, and questions around the handbag as constitutive of both the private and the public. These questions comprised, for example, ‘what do you choose to carry and why?’, ‘what do you consider private, what would you expose publicly and why?’, ‘how do you feel when someone looks into your bag and why?’ In formulating such
questions I assumed a common function for handbags as ‘working systems’ in which people perform daily life out of necessity and fill their bags accordingly.

Figure 4.73. Nanette Nel, 2007. Public your Private: Sample book. Linen, cotton, canvas, ink.

Figure 4.74. Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Pages from Public your Private: Sample book Linen, cotton, canvas, ink.
Figure 4.75.
Satin, ink, faux pearls, thread, brass chain, copper chain.

Figure 4.76
Satin, ink, faux pearls, thread, brass chain, copper chain.
I decided to call my project *Public your Private* and followed a research process in which I addressed questions directly to members of public. They wrote their response on a piece of fabric and placed it into a sealed box. To avoid their answering “I don’t have any secrets in my bag”, I deliberately suggested examples such as ‘text messages’, ‘maxed out credit cards’, ‘condoms’ and ‘tampons’ as secrets. Such a small degree of prompting resulted in people responding positively and with humour.

I stapled light-coloured fabric to free-for-the-public postcards, attached these with clips to postcard-sized cardboards with hand-written instructions on the back and handed one to each person. The decision to use handwritten instructions on postcards was intended to enhance a personal and intimate exchange for relating secrets. Once the secrets were written on the fabric, the clips were removed and the secrets were folded and slipped into a box.

![Figure 4.77](image)

*Figure 4.77*
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings*
The envelope as theme for the secret subject matter.
I performed my guerrilla at two places in the city of Amsterdam: in the section called ‘chill-out’ of the Bijenkorf, a luxury department store, and the University of Amsterdam.

The ‘chill-out’ department in the Bijenkorf caters for the youthful. As territory of the ‘alternative’ it turned out to be conducive to my task and I collected thirty-seven secrets. The second guerrilla at the UVA\textsuperscript{81} was less successful because the building where we performed the guerrilla was quiet and the students were quite serious while rushing to classes. With the persuasive help of Yuka Oyama, I still managed to collect thirty-three secrets from people who were not very responsive to the event. I received contributions from both men and women in the twenty- to thirty-year age groups.

\textsuperscript{81} University of Amsterdam.
Eventually I had a total of one hundred secrets in my collection and I could proceed with planning the presentation format. I decided to make a sample book consisting of the original pieces and a bag that would function in a particular way that would transform the information that I had collected. The bag as art object would function as symbol for the secrets.

I stitched the fabric rectangles into a book called “Private your Public” (Figs. 4.73 & 4.74). The written secrets became individual portraits of the participants and should be read one by one. Reading a book is at best of times a private and personal experience, but it becomes eerily intriguing when reading other people’s secrets. The Sample Book functioned as the documentation of my research. The fact that the secrets were written on textiles, reminds one of textile sample books. I considered this an effective reference because it added the peculiar dimension of holding samples of secrets, safely tucked away for future reference and each secret carrying its intriguing potential for being shared, recognised and perused by the eyes of others, or rather, the Other, and therefore stripped of its secret status.

The Private your Public Bag (Figs. 4.75 & 4.76) became the product or final presentation format. Originally I wanted to use the shape of an envelope (Figs. 4.77 & 4.78) to refer to the concept of secrets or privacy, but I considered the following options in developing its final form:

1. Using stretchy material and writing on the material when the material is stretched. When it bounces back the text becomes merely a pattern and only when stretched by the viewer the text becomes visible.
2. Writing with ink that is not waterproof. After writing on the textile and placing it into water, most of the text will be destroyed so that only references to words would remain visible.
3. Using a leather bag and writing on the leather to challenge the preconceived idea of the value of leather as a valuable and luxurious material in handbags, as well as the everyday bag being confronted with the secrets it carries.
4. Printing the scanned text on material and making a lining for a bag and covering it with iron-on plastic so that it refers to bags used everyday that includes plastic shopping bags.
Figure 4.79
Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Manufacturing process of *Private your Public: Bag*
Writing on silk.

Figure 4.80
Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Manufacturing process of *Private your Public: Bag*
Pleating the silk.

Figure 4.81. Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: The pleats and text of the *Private your Public: Bag*. 
In the final *Private your Public* silk handbag I copied the collected secrets onto the silk fabric (Fig. 4.79), using textile inks. I pleated the textile (Fig. 4.80). The pleats yield a great deal of movement in the silk and once stretched, extends into a bigger piece of fabric. The aim is to reveal the ‘secrets’ by ‘pulling’ on the textile or by ‘putting’ something into the bag (Figs. 4.81 & 4.82). I also realised how important the hand-written quality of the writing was. The manner in which each person used his own hand writing, his or her particular arrangement or placement of the writing combined with small images that some people added on the rectangular format, culminated into these pieces becoming individual, distinct portraits of their anonymous makers. All these elements reveal fragments of the personalities of those people who gave their secrets to me, thus breaking down the anonymity of their contributions. I wanted to use and keep the originals untouched and therefore decided to transcribe all the secrets in my own handwriting onto the silk. This, as re-representation of the secrets, represented a transformation and transference of the hidden, private and secret into the public domain. All the secrets becoming visible in my own handwriting re-established and re-affirmed the anonymity of the original secrets.

I decided to use the rewritten secrets on the outside, although they would remain hidden by the pleats in the silk. I did this because the action of removing the most private objects from the inside of the bag and representing them on the outside implied the reciprocal interplay between inside and outside as parallels to privacy and public. Furthermore, I integrated the text into a bag that would seem rather conventional until revealing its secrets in its outer pleats to create an element of surprise. The text contains words like ‘tampon’ and ‘condom’ that would go against the social norms of polite or acceptable topics and language. Such words also create an interesting contrast to the prettiness of the musky pink, very feminine, 100% silk, hand-pleated bag.
4.5.3 Introducing contents of the handbag: the Porcelain Collection

As should be clear from all the above, the private and public spheres of the handbag and those actions of hiding and exposing objects are ongoing points of focus in my work. In all my Collections, secret elements feature in one form or another. In the bronze mielie a secret space inside the cob\(^{82}\) is filled with text which lures the viewer into its inner space. Inside the crocheted mielie coin purses,\(^{83}\) surprise elements that only become visible once the clasp is opened or raised await the viewer. In the Protea Collection\(^{84}\) the back and forth articulation between the inside and the outside lends a secret and mysterious element to the objects. In the Porcelain Collection I aim to work with the contents of a handbag, thus shifting focus from the bag to those objects it holds as subject.

4.5.3.1 Research
In this section I discuss and describe some of my own work that pre-empted this shift in focus. I also discuss the work of other artists who deal with the same subject matter. I do this to define and contextualise those concepts of specifically social concern that will form the central topics of the Porcelain Collection.

At Rietveld I created two small works that both in some way or another contributed to the Porcelain Collection. The first of these was a series of photographed images titled Stillewe van ‘n Selfportret I-VI and the second a small book titled holes.

Stillewe van ‘n Selfportret I-VI

*Stillewe van ‘n Selfportret I-VI* functioned as documentation of the objects in my own handbag (Figs. 4.82 to 4.86). The final image in the series below (Fig. 4.86) shows the dust and tobacco that collects in the bottom of the bag. I documented the contents of my bag as a form of ‘self-portrait’ or memento from the time I spent abroad, because each object symbolises something from the whole experience of studying at the Rietveld. I see the collection of items as representative and symbolic of the tools that specific space and society demanded to survive in.

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\(^{82}\) See page 48 (Fig. 2.36).
\(^{83}\) See page 70 (Fig. 2.57); See page 72 (Fig. 2.61).
\(^{84}\) See page 128 (Fig. 3.63); See page 129 (Fig. 3.66); See page 130 (Fig. 3.69); See page 132 (Fig. 3.73); See page 133 (Fig. 3.76).
Figure 4.82 Nanette Nel, 2007
Stillewe van 'n Selfportret I.

Figure 4.83 Nanette Nel, 2007
Stillewe van 'n Selfportret II.

Figure 4.84 Nanette Nel, 2007
Stillewe van 'n Selfportret III.

Figure 4.85 Nanette Nel, 2007
Stillewe van 'n Selfportret IV.

Figure 4.86 Nanette Nel, 2007
Stillewe van 'n Selfportret V.

Figure 4.87 Nanette Nel, 2007
Stillewe van 'n Selfportret VI.
The small book titled holes was divided into categories representing ‘universe’, ‘architecture’, ‘landscape’, ‘nature’, ‘people’ and ‘objects’ (Fig. 4.88). To represent the continuous progress of paging through a book and absorbing its contents as an uninterrupted flow of visual and verbal information I punched holes in designated spots on certain pages to allow glimpses of what would appear after turning the page. I intended this to serve as metaphor for the research processes I was conducting. The process of conceptualising this book focussed my research and I wished to convey this development in the Stillewe van ‘n Selfportret I-VI series.

Figure 4.89

The following images show examples of handbags referring to the mysterious contents of bags. In exploring the contents of the bag as subject of inquiry, I look at examples of images of X-rayed bags, bags referring to the handbag as a book containing information, and the sculptural bags of Ted Noten.

The mystery surrounding the contents of a woman’s purse materialises in the Tanner Krolle Bag advertising campaign. The campaign comprises a series of X-rayed handbags revealing sinister objects like a voodoo doll (Fig. 4.92). The other set of images below shows the bag as viewed by the public and reveals a water pistol (Figs. 4.93 & 4.94). Another example revealing a revolver is the X-posed grocery shopping bag (Fig. 4.91).

Although Tanner Krolle also plays with ideas dealing with perception of reality in this campaign, the significant and relevant issue that is of central concern to what I will work with in the Porcelain Collection is the reference to the sinister nature of those objects that are revealed. The theme of revealing the inside of the bag, and specifically revealing a handgun, is also present in Ted Noten’s Superbitch Bag.\(^85\) I am struck by the presence of the revolver, handgun, pistol and voodoo doll and their connotations to safety, security, vulnerability and defencelessness and violence. These connotations relate to the current situation regarding crime in South African society that I also refer to in Chapter 3.\(^86\)

\(^{85}\) See page vii (Figs. 0.1 to 0.2); See page 184 (Fig. 4.68).
\(^{86}\) See pages 90 to 92.
Books in the form of handbags also indicate secret, concealed contents waiting to be revealed. The *Paloma Picasso Book Bag* from the 1980s (Fig. 4.95) represents a private diary or journal. The Jean Paul Gaultier *Book Bag* of 1993 (Fig. 4.96) resembles Picasso’s bag. The *French Satin Book Bag* dating from 1969 (Fig. 4.97) is a limited edition art bag and even includes text inside the bag. Anna Johnson says this type of bag is “like a journal, filling it with a mixture of the banal, the intimate, and startlingly personal” (2002:463).
Figure 4.95
Paloma Picasso Book Bag, 1980s
(Johnson, 2002:463).

Figure 4.96
Jean Paul Gaultier, 1993
(Johnson, 2002:457).

Figure 4.97
French Satin Book Bag, 1969
(Johnson, 2002:456).
Ted Noten's *Superbitch* bag⁸⁷ is a non-functional sculpture. So are his *Survival Bags*, which comprise acrylic casts ‘containing’ “ordinary species of fish” (Fig. 4.98) (Noten, cited in Staal, 2006:68-69).

Figures 4.98
Ted Noten, *Survival Bags*
Left: Survival Bag 5, 1998: Whiting cast in acrylic, 16x33x7 cm
Right: Survival Bag 4, 1998: Herring cast in acrylic, 13x30x5 cm
(Staal, 2006:68-69).

Figures 4.99
Ted Noten, *Survival Bags*
Survival Bag 1, 1997: Mackerel cast in acrylic, 18x40x10 cm
(Staal, 2006:68-69).

See page vii (Figs. 0.1 to 0.2); See page 184 (Fig. 4.68)
One of the most significant examples relating this fascination with the inside of a handbag appeared in a collaborative project conducted by the French fashion house Chanel and the architect Zaha Hadid. The iconic quilted Chanel handbag known as 2.55 (Fig. 4.100), launched by Coco Chanel in 1955 to become an iconic symbol of style and elegance (Lamberti, 2008:26), inspired this collaborative project. Zaha Hadid is an Iraqi-born, London-based architect and designed the *Chanel Contemporary Art Container* (or Mobile Art Pavilion) (Figs. 4.101 to 4.105) that is now touring the world, staging art exhibitions in various cities around the globe. Twenty contemporary American, European and Asian artists participate in this project that was launched at the Venice Art Biennale in 2007. From there it moved to Hong Kong and Tokyo early in 2008. It moved to New York in October 2008 and finally to London in June 2009, Moscow in September 2009 and Paris in January 2010. The capsule is made of steel and plastic. It consists of arched plastic segments reinforced with steel that fit together to form seams similar to those on the original quilted handbag (Lamberti, 2008: 26-27).

Figure 4.100
Figure 4.101

Figure 4.102
Zaha Hadid, 2007. *Chanel Contemporary Art Container*
Fabrice Hyber, *Comfortable*
The internal wall is a direct reference to the quilted Chanel handbag, the 2.55 (Lamberti, 2008:26-27).
Figure 4.103

Figure 4.104

Figure 4.105
4.5.3.2 **Design drawings of the Secrets Collection**

Originally the design of the Secrets Collection comprised a neckpiece consisting of separate pieces of textile functioning as separate small drawstring bags. These separate drawstring purses would contain secrets about the wearer which she might or might not reveal, depending on the company she kept at any given time (Fig. 4.106).

I drew various designs of conventional handbags (Figs. 4.107 to 4.108), daily practical bags, shopping bags and evening bags. Various ideas of how to represent the contents of the handbag emerged from the drawing processes (Figs. 4.109 to 4.111). Such ideas include stuffing a handbag (Fig. 4.111) with paper printed with images representing the contents of a bag, or creating brooches (Fig. 4.110).

The most convincing idea that I came up with was to represent the contents of a handbag in a monochromatic colour scheme in moulded porcelain forms. The reason for using porcelain is that it is quite a sentimental material and represents domestic everyday-life objects that one tends to take for granted. Although fired porcelain is one of the strongest forms of clay, it is fragile compared to metals. It is therefore both strong and fragile, a contradictory characteristic that interests me.

![Figure 4.106](image)

**Figure 4.106**

_Nanette Nel, 2007. Design Drawings_  
A neckpiece consisting of numerous drawstring purses which reveal secret elements.
Figure 4.107

Figure 4.108
Figure 4.109

Figure 4.110
In the following designs (Figs. 4.112 to 4.114) I look at three different bags and their appropriate contents. The bags' shapes and functions determine appropriate selection of contents. These drawings are purely indications of my ideas, and not representing anything final, as I know that my final pieces may turn out completely differently.

In the first drawing (Fig. 4.112), the idea is that the objects replace the volume of the bag to become signifiers in themselves. The contents will have a definite relationship to the type of bag it ‘comes from’ (in this case the evening bag), whether to size or shape. The second design (Fig. 4.113) shows the contents of an everyday, practical bag. In this drawing there is a distinct reference to the objects in Stilleewe van ’n Selfportret I-V images (Figs 4.82 to 4.87), because I use the contents of my own handbag as a reference in these drawings. I will explore the notion of including some of the information that I collected in the Private your Publi series, as these secret elements will definitely make the contents more interesting. I will include intriguing elements such as a tampon or condom blending with the other monochromatic objects. The third design (Fig. 4.114)

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88 See page 196
89 See page 185
attempted to take the concept further. The idea of having a life-size baguette around one’s neck was quite amusing, but I realised it could come across as very literal and the technical difficulties of making it also rendered it unfeasible. These three designs were the main influence for the decision making of the final collection.

Various other designs (Fig. 4.115) combined with the previously-discussed designs will inform the creation of the porcelain collection. At this point the plan is to create white porcelain, unglazed neckpieces, which will represent the contents of a woman’s handbag. The porcelain will be combined with silk thread used for pearl stringing. I foresee that some changes will occur during the manufacturing of this collection.

Figure 4.112
Nanette Nel, 2008. Design Drawings
The contents of a evening bag, reconstructed in the form of a neckpiece.
Figure 4.113
Nanette Nel, 2008. Design Drawings
The contents of the everyday practical bag reconstructed in the form of a neckpiece.
Figure 4.114
Nanette Nel, 2008. Design Drawings
The content of a grocery bag reconstructed in the form of a necklace.
Figure 4.115

Figure 4.116
4.6 Summary

The shift from object as subject to idea as subject is significant because it demonstrates the influence of environment and one’s engagement with society as formative influences in art-making processes, thereby confirming the artist as self-structuring entity in relation to society, or self as social construct. The shift itself materialises in my work as a move from cultural-specific object as subject to generalised concept as subject, a subject that is also more accessible to a wider, international audience. In general terms, this shift in my work therefore also represents creative growth and development. To my mind, this development also demonstrates the generative nature of the habitus.

My discussions on the roles of artist and viewer lead me to conclude that the artist as producer of art that is also the product of her position in society, and the viewer as subjective interpreter of that art, occupy a position of equal worth and value. Barthes and Foucault liberate the reader (viewer) and assert that the artist or author has no function in the creation of meaning. Bourdieu breaks with this structuralist view and ascribes the creation of meaning to both artist and viewer as equal participants and products of society. Betterton provides a gendered point of view to this theoretical debate, which suggests that habitus is gendered.

In the Body-Bag Collection, the alternating and interchanging exposures of inside and outside function to symbolise the private and public concepts. This interchanging action is supported by the continuous flow of the video medium. The drawn bags symbolise the dividing border between the body and object. The work attempts to demonstrate this division as a social construct and questions its boundaries.

The Secrets Collection continues the theme of the private and public to extend into the contents of handbags as symbolising those secrets people carry with them in their bags. This work plays on the notion that many of our secrets are common property, that various societies carry similar secrets and that those social norms that, as social constructs, cause people to attach shame to certain objects, resemble each other in diverse societies.
Chapter 5
Conclusions: Meaning Contained

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss those concepts that structure the framework of the dissertation in order to explain how the dissertation functions as generator for articulating meaning to form a cohesive whole.

Thereafter I will focus on the intrinsic meaning of the different Collections and the possible symbolical and metaphorical meaning that is generated by the research and the Collections.

5.2 Meaning Through Generative Structure

The four Collections, divided into two groups, also denote the structure of the thesis as a generative structure. The diagram (below) represents a linear timeline from Chapter 2 to Chapter 5. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 describe and discuss the first two Collections that I produced, namely the Mielie and the Protea Collection. The work that followed on these two Collections shows progression that also represents a shift from culturally-specific meaning in the work to culturally non-specific meaning and a shift from materiality of representation to non-materiality or conceptual development of the work. This shift was brought about by time spent abroad as an exchange student at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, which caused a physical remove from my culture and familiar social circumstances. This transformation that took place in my practical work is dealt with in Chapter 4, which describes and discusses the last two Collections, the Body-Bag and the Secrets Collections. Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter that also attempts to draw together the various concepts that were illuminated through the research. I explain the meaning created by the work, my intent and my understanding of its formation in an attempt to answer the problem statement and eventually to open interpretative possibilities of this thesis.
Chapter 2

**Mielie Collection:**
- Externalisation of the internal
- Cultural icon
- Icon developing into a final abstract object
- Material development and progression
- Culture related due to title in Afrikaans and the icon, South African context.
- Independent manufacturing of the object

Chapter 3

**Protea Collection:**
- Externalisation of the internal
- Cultural icon
- Icon developing into a final abstract object
- Material development and progression
- Culture related due to title in Afrikaans and the icon, South African context.
- Independent manufacturing of the object

**Progression and development:**
- Physical distance, living in Amsterdam, the Netherlands
- Personal development and freedom
- Removed from socio-cultural surroundings, removed from culture, viewers do not recognise the cultural icons that were present in the work up to now
- Development from physical icons to conceptual ideas
- Development within habitus, new environment (new/develo

Chapter 4

**Body-Bag Collection:**
- Externalisation of the internal
- Idea/concept
- Abstract topic, stay open because it is a representation of an idea, not a final object.
- Material development and progression not so important
- Global concept which opens the ideas surrounding the topic.
- Interdisciplinary with other artist to create the work.

Chapter 5

**Secrets Collection:**
- Externalisation of the internal
- Idea/concept
- Abstract topic, stay open because it is a representation of an idea, not a final object.
- Material development and progression not so important
- Global concept which opens the ideas surrounding the topic.
- Interdisciplinary with other artists to create the work

**Conclusion:**
- Generative nature of the habitus and idiolect
- Open work
I will briefly discuss the various points of meaning in the different sections. The second and third chapters, the Mielie and the Protea Collections respectively, are referred to in the same manner within this structure, as they have similar themes and were created simultaneously. The same is true for Chapter 4, which represents the last two Collections, the Body-Bag and the Secrets Collections.

In the different chapters I discuss the origins of each Collection by framing it on the concept of the internalisation of the external. The external represents those social influences and surroundings which are internalised by an individual, in this case me, the artist, and that are then externalised in an artwork. This, as both creative and theoretical research methodology, also served as a generative device in formulating meaning in all four the Collections and is relevant to all the Collections.

5.2.1 Generative structuring in the Mielie and Protea Collections
The Mielie and the Protea Collections are cultural icons which I transformed into art works. The manufactured piece as physical entity in itself is important as final work. The material development and progression is a key factor in the progress of the Collection and the final choice of materials is very important because it determines an interpretative focus in the final object. In both Collections the subject matter, choice of material and methods of manufacturing are unique to me and my habitus, to the extent that they contribute to identifying the work as having been created by me. The physical objects were not only created by me, but I also performed my identity in these objects. The Afrikaans titles of the Collections place these two Collections within a South African context, and thus establish them as cultural icons only within this very specific context. The meaning that resides in the Mielie and Protea Collections is closed or limited, because only people who understand Afrikaans and its innuendos within the South African social, cultural and political contexts will understand it. These pieces are ‘site’ specific or culture specific.

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90 See Chapter 2 pages 56 to 72 (Figs. 2.42 to 2.62); See Chapter 3 pages 122 to 137 (Figs. 3.56 to 3.83)
5.2.2 Generative structuring in the Body-Bag and Secrets Collections

The Body-Bag and Secrets Collections both primarily deal with representation of idea or concept, while materiality of form becomes secondary. The focus will not be on final object, but on final concept. In both these Collections I employ technical assistance from other artists, for example a video artist will film and produce the video piece. The concept of utilising and incorporating the skills and know-how of other people also represents development, transformation and a shift between the production of the first two Collections and the last two Collections. The central concept in the last two Collections is not as socially specific as in the previous two Collections, the understanding of which is dependent on cultural-specific reference and context. The Body-Bag and Secrets Collections deal with global concepts which open the possibilities of interpretation and broaden the field of understanding for culturally diverse viewers.

5.3 The Habitus as Generator of Meaning

Through the gradual development of this research project I came to the realisation that I subconsciously internalise fragments of my culture, society, surroundings, influences, relationships, and experiences. I subjectively process, adapt and adjust them in my mind to externalise them as visual representations through the creation of, for example, my handbags. The continuous practice of my art-making process simultaneously brings about and reflects the constant evolution of a dispositional self as it engages in society, culture and environment, causing me to work in a certain manner, to make certain decisions or specific choices while rejecting others in all aspects of my art-making processes. In Chapter 2 of this thesis, I make the statement that ‘these processes of accepting or rejecting propositions and counter-propositions culminate to become behavioural dispositions, which in turn can be understood to become assimilated properties enabling and ensuring perceptual processing, conceptual understanding and psychomotoric ability, essential processes in the practice and production of my art’. In the careful and detailed description of a sequential pattern in the creative development of my work, the validity of this statement confirms itself by creating a convincing framework for the expositions.
In my art practice, I select subject matter (the corn cob and the protea flower) that can be traced directly to my cultural experience and personal history. All these subjects can be understood to represent ideas and things that I relate to culturally and incorporate socially. As elements of cultural background and reference they contributed meaningfully to my habitus and they can all be explained as having been subconsciously recovered, studied and questioned at some point during the course of my personal history. In hindsight the realisation of the employment of the habitus resulted in a displayed and defined characteristic visual idiom, form of visual metaphor or symbolic configuration that also articulates into my uniquely identifiable aesthetic idiolect. My aesthetic disposition is an ever evolving product of my habitus, materialising in my art-making practice to be seen as my own, unique aesthetic idiolect that also accounts for the range of specific choices I make in practising art. The circularity of this exposition is in itself a reflection of the theoretical premise of the thesis, namely the internalisation of externalities and the externalisation of internalities.

Within this research I focus on my thinking processes and behavioural patterns in an attempt to understand how these function to form an aesthetic idiolect, a concept that is based on the individual and visual ‘voice’ of an artist. I conclude that the individual that has and communicates an idiolect exists and functions as a social product in the creation of her art works because of her engagement with all the externally and socially located structures that influence and shape the person during the course of her evolving personal history.

The relationship between the concept of identity and habitus comes to the fore in the thesis. Bourdieu explains that if one wants to give a name to his theory or method it can be called “genetic structuralism” (Bourdieu, 1985a cited in Mahar, 1990:33-34). He further explains that this term can be used in two senses. “First I am trying to describe and analyse the genesis of one’s person. That is, habitus or the notion of habitus. The interest is in understanding how what we call the ‘individual’ is moulded by social structure. That is a problem of the internalisation of social structures and the production of habitus as a generative structure. The concept of habitus is a generative structure” (Bourdieu, 1985a cited in Mahar, 1990:34). The analysis of the ‘genesis of one’s person’ is the concept
which links the idea of identity to that of habitus, and therefore the idea of identity to idiolect if habitus contributes to habitus, which, in my own work, is demonstrated concretely.

The intellectual and creative development and progress that occurs within the individual and that are reflected in the development of creative processes are also a direct representation of ever changing and evolving internal systems of dispositions shaped by her environment, culture and society. This process of development represents a generative principle which, in my work, can be seen in the linear developmental progress that occurred to produce first the mielie and protea series and after those, the last two Collections. The mielie and protea, two icons directly derived from my social and cultural heritage and background, are also clear evidence of the fact that “the individual existed not just as an individual but as a social product” (Bourdieu, 1985a cited in Mahar, 1990:35).

The process of decision making and the realisation that something is not satisfactory or successful originates from my specific aesthetic disposition, the formation of which in turn can be explained by Bourdieu’s theory of habitus. These decision-making processes serve a generative purpose. The urge to make something look better, more beautiful, more contextually appropriate or more appropriately functional also constitutes progress that enables the accomplishment of a product that is pleasing within the framework of my aesthetic disposition and its broader social context. The work becomes and represents quality as a social and cultural norm that also becomes associated with me, thus reflecting an aesthetic identity that is unique to me. In this way my aesthetic disposition is reflected in my aesthetic idiolect and my aesthetic idiolect is generated by my aesthetic disposition, once again a circular process of generation.

In this thesis I establish the handbag as a symbolic object which I explain to be relevant in a global context and relate to the performance and construction of identity and therefore reaching beyond the conventional attributes of handbags to enter the fine art arena of non-functionality in addition to its traditional functional attributes.
In hindsight, I realise that certain points of struggle were present in my manufacturing and creative processes. These points were perceived and experienced as problematic as a direct result of my habitus. They represent specifically size and functionality as two key factors in the design and manufacturing of jewellery. As I struggled through these concepts and also challenged them (a personal struggle), I came to realise that this could be explained by my personal involvement and educational history in the jewellery design field and context.

The detailed descriptions of drawing, designing and manufacturing processes are very important because, as they serve in practice as guiding paths that lead one into directions of creativity that cannot be planned or predicted, their re-articulation serves the same purpose in verbal terms. Manufacturing also has to translate concept into material form and this in itself generates unforeseen opportunities for choices that direct and determine final form. These decision-making processes are ever-changing in their quest for accomplishing specific standards that also answer to the creator's aesthetic sensibilities. The generative nature of such processes can be taken into account from one piece to the next and this, in turn, accounts for new ideas emerging from one piece to the next. These processes also explain the nature of this research and its verbal articulation as generative and revelatory. The verbal articulation of all these aspects also generates new insight, knowledge and meaning.

Because of the habitus being a generative system, the wider the artist's social field of reference becomes, the wider her artworks' reach will be.
5.4 Meaning in the Mielie and Protea Collections

5.4.1 The Mielie Collection

Within the Mielie Collection, the idea of opposites proves to be very relevant as definite elements of intent. In hindsight I realise that the idea of opposites is constant in my work. This notion can be seen in the characteristic functions of hiding and exposing, which are also parallel to concepts of the private and the public, as elements of a handbag. This thesis explains the habitus as origin and source behind this element in my work. The concept of opposites is very relevant to my culture and background, as discussed in the origin of the Mielie Collection.91

I extend the idea of opposites metaphorically in themes of wealth, luxury and the precious versus poverty, necessity and the worthless, to the hungry and the fed, the rich and the poor, the dignified and the worthless people of my country to highlight the continued existence of integrated and segregated cultures and peoples of South Africa. This emphasis in itself serves as a social comment that is also generative of meaning.

The mielie becomes a signifier of opposites. I use it as tool to focus on the poor and the rich in South Africa and the radical division and difference that people experience despite a new political dispensation of integration. For the regular person, corn is an everyday substance, certainly not even worth discussion as a signifier of segregation. For the poor South African it is a staple food, a bleak symbol of hope for survival. Although the mielie handbag as artwork is intended to symbolise hope, acceptance and integration, it also indicates the division between the poor and the rich in the South African community.

The crocheted steel wire body of the bag, which carries the promise of strength in its steely materiality, is in fact fragile as a result of those processes of oxidation or rusting that will occur over time with the bag’s exposure to moisture and oxygen. This fragility is reinforced in the fact that it is made up of one single wire. The crochet technique constitutes a continuous knot of a single thread, in this specific case a single wire. Once the wire disintegrates in any given place, the crocheted wire unravels and the entire bag

91 See page 40
disintegrates. By knotting the wire in this technique, small holes are formed that also render the use of the handbag as a container for privacy and safekeeping impossible. This texture of the bag reveals the private things inside the handbag, rather than hiding them or keeping them safe from visible exposure to the elements and the eyes of others. These characteristics represent or symbolise the probability of gradual disintegration of a society in which poverty continues to exist despite a new political dispensation and governing structures. As the rust that will inevitably develop in these bags will eventually cause the total disintegration of the bag, continued poverty will grow to eventually destroy society. This projected process is symbolic of the bad conditions that people are living in, which also destroy moral values and humanity. By extension, these processes of disintegration are also references to the high crime rate in South Africa and the xenophobic attacks of 2008 as elements of such societal unravelling or ‘rust’.

Steel is commonly used as reinforcement in concrete or cement to strengthen structures. In my handbags the steel is the weak element because of its exposure to moisture and air. So, even though it is very strong, in this case it is also very weak. I use this as a metaphor for the poor in South Africa who are seemingly strong because they endure many sufferings, but as the core of South African society, they signify the fragility and weakness of the country as a whole. This weakness featured in recent xenophobia attacks where anger and frustration about poor living conditions evolved into a situation of prejudice where people killed their neighbours because of their nationality. These concepts become very problematic and complex. Many discussions around these issues exist, but I refer to them from a personal point of view of that of a young, white, Afrikaans-speaking middle class woman and citizen of South Africa that was shocked and saddened by these events which happened in many poor communities.

The silver pips (Mielie) represent a pattern of natural growth and generative processes that occur in the plant. The pattern is duplicated in the form of clasps for the different pieces. Although duplicated, they vary in shape and pattern. The pattern is a repeat of a specific shape, but as these clasps are duplications of real corn cobs, their shapes differ slightly. The pips symbolise the repetitiveness of the nature of commercial farming and the continued pattern of a division between the poor and the rich that is perpetuated in such
systems of agricultural practice. The patterns of these pips also relate visually to the pattern of the crocheted bag. The silver clasp, which is a strong solid metal, durable enough to withstand the elements, symbolises the rich and the ‘fat cats’ in South Africa. This element is positioned in direct opposition to the fragility of the crocheted steel body of the bag, which will eventually rust and disintegrate. I use this as metaphor that signifies the fact that the wealthy sectors in South Africa are getting richer and more powerful, while the poor are getting poorer, weaker and seemingly more and more insignificant.

The silver clasp is joined to the crochet body of the bag by crocheting, thus knotting the two elements together. This creates a joint that looks fragile, but is in fact quite strong.

Because of the generative nature of the dispositional decision making that is demanded in manufacturing processes, new ideas are generated by the act of making. The fact that I make the object myself without assistance means that a specific idiolect and handwriting become evident in the product. Manufacturing therefore plays a crucial and formative role in the materialisation of an aesthetic idiolect. In the Mielie Collection, for example, I deliberately treated the clasp and the body of the bag as separate entities, as I wanted to communicate the concept of opposites. Eventually the clasp dictated and informed the eventual form the handbag took and the final aesthetic of the handbag, but my intention was to try to retain the notion of separateness in order to direct focus to the symbolic and metaphorical meaning of opposites, as discussed above.

In the Mielie Collection a variety of materials are utilised to symbolise specific concepts within the Collection. Generally, all elements work cohesively to symbolise the notion of contradiction and the ironic messages that are hidden in opposites.

The low quality pearls in the coin purse series symbolise the decay of the country as a whole. In this piece the concept of the pearl, the value and meaning it has in the minds of people, is a metaphor for the new South Africa. The idea of the pearl as valuable object is in direct opposition to the fact that these specific pearls are low value, low quality pearls. They flake easily and will eventually disintegrate completely. As such, they rather indicate or symbolise the darkness of the situation, the reality of the situation in South Africa where
a fifteen-year-old democracy fails to bring about positive change for the poor sectors in the country. Along the same lines and in tandem with this symbolism, the teeth signify the hungry as opposed to the well nourished and the greedy as opposed to the victims of greed.

The diamonds symbolise the complex history of Africa and, more specifically, the history of South Africa and its resources. The colonisation of the country and the consequent development of the diamond mining industry, the effect this had on society and community, signify here. The diamond as symbol of wealth stands in direct opposition to the poverty of those who mine the diamonds and signifies the ever growing division between the poor and the rich. The small size of the diamond, (1.3 mm), and its colour, black, that I use in the handbag, however, indicate its low value, thus contributing more to conceptual value rather than to the material value of the bag. Despite this, and ironically, the value that diamonds have in the minds of people rather connotes the idea of preciousness with the bag.

The titles of the Mielie Collection, *Brand Suid-Afrika*, *Gryp*, *Grou*, *Gruis*, *Gruwel* and *Bemin*² are harsh-sounding Afrikaans words. With the exception of *Bemin*, these titles were deliberately chosen for their intrinsic meanings denoting aspects of poverty, hardship, evil and abjection, thus bringing a morbid quality to the work. ‘Bemin’, in contrast, means ‘to love’. The difference in meaning between the word ‘bemin’ and the other words highlights the contrast between poverty and wealth that exists in a ‘burning’ and corrupt South Africa. ‘Gryp’, meaning ‘grab’, refers to both greed and hunger in a society where wealth cannot be shared equally, but grabbed by a small segment of society, while others remain hungry. ‘Grou’ and ‘gruis’, meaning ‘grey’ and ‘gravel’, are references to the historical and current hardships of agricultural pursuits in a harsh environment. ‘Gruwel’, meaning ‘evil’, refers to apartheid and its integral racist policies and

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² Brand Suid-Afrika: Burn South-Africa
Gryp: clutch, grab, grasp, snatch
Grou: grey, gray, grizzly, drab, monotonous
Gruis: gravel grit, crushed maize
Gruwel: abomination, atrocity, horror
Bemin: love
the moral guilt that Afrikaners carry as a result. As title of the final piece, ‘bemin’ also carries meaning denoting redemption and reconciliation.

5.4.2 The Protea Collection
Although the Protea Collection is a product of my culture, the Afrikaans culture, it has wider significance too. The protea is a symbol of peace. It was used by the apartheid government and is continued to be used by the post-apartheid government. It is a symbol which functions to unite the different cultures of South Africa. When looking at the protea in this manner, it is also appropriate to refer to the protea as a symbol of forgiveness and redemption amongst the peoples of South Africa. The brooches and rings in the Protea Collection hold a secret element to them that is intended to function as a keeper of peace. In this way I perceive the protea to own a secret that, because it is accepted and loved by both, also joins the two opposing sides constituting supporters of the previous and current governments. In this way, the protea in my series serves as a symbol of reconciliation.

The protea is a durable and strong flower that also symbolises the Afrikaner nation that, despite the humiliation, guilt and shame caused by its political history in this country, is being accepted as integral to the current South African society and will therefore probably survive in this harsh environment of continued struggles.

The proteas in this Collection are round and their shape is intended to serve as a symbol of the rotational course along which life cycles move, thus ensuring both generation of new form and regeneration of existing form or continuity. In my work I intend this to refer to the fact that, despite the overall changes that occurred in South African society when the political dispensation changed in 1994, not much changed for large sectors of our society and specifically not for the poor black community. The new dispensation seems to have regenerated poverty. The protea in my work is thus a symbol of the repetitive nature of life as a circularly regenerative form.

93 See page 132 (Fig. 3.73); See page 133 (Fig. 3.76); See page 136 (Fig. 3.80); See page 137 (Fig. 3.83);
The fact that some of the silicone proteas are turned inside out symbolises the idea that those changes that are necessary for bringing about the elimination of negative aspects sometimes merely hide these aspects temporarily, while in fact simultaneously bringing about a return to embracing such aspects that ultimately constitutes no change at all. Although the drive to change may expose on the new outside those things that were necessary to do to bring about change, things remain the same on the [new] inside. Revealing or exposing the private aspects of, for example, the Afrikaner in apartheid helped to bring about change in South Africa. The exposure of private things, revealing skeletons in the cupboard, also can create a new platform from which issues can be discussed.

The silicone is flexible and will disintegrate in time. The silver, in contrast, is oxidised and solid. It is strong and will stand the test of time. The two different materials are opposites, in character and in abilities. The silicone is fragile and strong, but if it is pulled too hard it will break. It is thin and flexible, therefore it can tear. The connecting points in the brooches and handbags create holes in the silicone. These holes in the silicone will also initiate processes of disintegration. These dualities refer to or symbolise societal disintegration, which manifests in xenophobic violence and attacks as statements of rejection of foreign people who are perceived as threatening invaders by previous victims of segregation as a result of their continued economic fragility.

At the same time, my proteas, featuring as handbags, brooches and rings, are also symbolic of a more positive message. The flexible, elastic pink silicone could also be interpreted to refer to the flexibility of the Afrikaner in coping with transitional developments in the political landscape of South Africa. I think it can also symbolise a resilience that can be perceived in the Afrikaner’s apparent ability to adapt to new circumstances, a flexibility that can be read in the silicone’s flexibility and ability to stretch while remaining resistant to tearing.

While the silicone refers to the disintegration of the nation as a whole, the metal, in contrast, refers to strength and solidity as a factor that holds more potential for continuity, and in these contradictory notions the thematic idea of opposites is also continued in the
work. As I mention above, the lack of durability of silicone signifies those elements in society that signify its disintegration. The previous political dispensation, for example, was based on a morally problematic foundation and therefore could not last. In contrast to this, the silver structures refer to those principles that form a strong basis for society, such as acceptance, forgiveness, redemption and integration, which would hopefully endure to outlast their opposites. In my mind these characteristics activate and signify the hope for being forgiven.

The utilisation of the silicone in these handbags also signifies non-functionality, because the silicone handbag cannot shut or close. The silicone can tear if too many objects are stored inside the bag. Thus the bags are rendered impotent in terms of not only their durability, but also in terms of their ability to store or contain objects safely or to preserve privacy effectively. My handbags can therefore not function in the conventional way, which in itself is a signifier of political or societal impotence. This concept relates to the idea of disempowerment which can be seen as a result of or integral to poverty and its consequent disadvantaged social status.

Through these aspects of symbolism, my work becomes layered and complex in meaning. In the case of the brooches the layering of two incompatible materials also relates to layered meaning. The silicone layer is pierced and connected to the metal layer. The joining of the two materials is difficult because the silver framework is a solid, hard and stiff structure that forces the flexible silicone to adapt to a specific and rigid shape. In its final form, the silicone shape is therefore forced and, while the two materials remain true to their own natures, the silicon is forced to adapt and compromise to form. This is echoed in the processes of transformation and their effects in a multicultural South African society.
5.5 Meaning in the Body-Bag Collection and the Secrets Collection

5.5.1 The Body-Bag Collection

At the time of writing this, this Collection is in the process of being created. Words that come to mind while working on it are ‘deception’, ‘appearance’, ‘effect’, ‘impression’, ‘bare’, ‘strip’ and ‘strip off’, ‘pretend’ and ‘false’, indicating that the revealing elements of nudity, facsimile, simulation and illusion will evolve to become central themes. The action of removing a dress from a female body serves to simulate the relationship between a handbag and the body. In this performance the dress itself is of no importance as an object and the work will be visible through video as medium. Despite this, I still use materials or fabrics that are meticulously selected for their specific qualities. This contradiction, the insignificance of the dress in contrast to the significance of the material or fabric it is made of, generates new meaning within this art-making progress. The specifically and carefully chosen fabrics of the dresses consist of natural fibres and colorants to symbolise the natural body or nature as highly valued but private entity. The idea of using 100% silk and cotton and natural colorants as symbolic of preciousness and luxury, and juxtaposing this quality with staining and soiling the fabric as symbolic of the abject qualities of poverty, is central to this work. To further enhance the illusion of fabric and to emphasise the symbolic significance of the fabrics, the pieces will carry labels that also stipulate the fabric types clearly. These elements all represent a playful altercation between contradictory concepts within the Collection. In this way material and medium continue to play an important and determining role in my art, despite a shift from object to idea.

The dress becomes the symbol of femininity. The stains become the symbol of the abject, that which must be hidden because it is repulsive. The different placements of the bags, one on the outside of the dress, one on the inside of the dress and one on the body, symbolise the complex relationship between the private and public domains of the body. What is acceptable for public exposure and what not? This layered, multi-fragmented Collection will be a metaphor for the perceived simplicity of the bodily as opposed to the complexity of the mind. The concept of representing this idea in video form signifies the idea of the immateriality of body as image: a flashing idea, a mere illusion.
5.5.2 The Secrets Collection

In the final Collection, the Secrets, I move from the external to the internal and the central theme becomes the contents of handbags and their function as containers as symbolic of the private as opposed to the public. This Collection will be produced in monochromatic colours in moulded form, and the medium will be porcelain. Porcelain as medium carries associations with sentiment and nostalgia and, in this sense, signifies the ordinariness of domestic functional objects that are taken for granted. Porcelain is at once fragile and strong, a quality that I find interesting and attractive to the extent that it has become a consistent theme in my work. Porcelain symbolises the mundane, while it is also and contradictorily regarded as valuable and precious, refined and civilised.

Even though the aim of this Collection will be to eventually expose the private, it also hides the secret. I reflect this in the deliberate utilisation of monochromatic colours, which serve as camouflage for the hidden. The contents consist of imprints of the objects that leave the actual objects to be formed in the viewer’s imagination. This plays on the idea of suggestion as opposed to fully-defined clarity, which in turn relates to the private as opposed to the public. By extension the intention is to, in this way, refer to the fact that all people regard the same aspects as private and want them to remain secret, yet their shared status of privacy also exposes this very privacy as public knowledge. For example, genitals and their secretions are regarded as private and are always hidden, yet all people have them and deal with their functions and therefore all people know about them, thus damaging their secret status and in fact rendering their privacy impossible.
5.6 The Final Conclusion

This inquiry enables me to accept as given that I internalise objective social structures, process and assimilate their dynamics and influences, which accumulate into a system of perception that constitutes my particular dispositional personality, which in turn is tantamount to my inner person. This dispositional personality functions as a generative source in processes of externalising that which has been internalised.

I can account for the particular nature of my art works, their specific idiom, language and characteristic visual qualities because I employ social and culture-specific particularised dispositional systems of perception and conception when I externalise internalities in new form or art form. I relate meaning in my art works back to socially located sources, thereby confirming my personal visual voice and its idiom as social and cultural construct.

By tracking the meaning generated in my art back to society and culture as a field of reference, and by verbally re-articulating visually formative, interpretative and manufacturing processes, I discover how social and cultural context as externalities inform my work, how I, as artist, transform, generate and develop such reference as products of a singular imagination that uses a particular language.
List of figures

List of Figures Introduction

Figure 0.1 Ted Noten, 2005. Murdered Innocence. Suitcase, 24x68x6 cm (approx. 20 kg). Gun with a silencer, holy communion dress, pearl, diamond, bullet. [Internet Image] (Noten 2005:http://www.tednoten.com/work/portfolio/murdered-innocence).


List of Figures Chapter 1

Figure 1.1 German almoner. 15th century. (Johnson, 2002:xx).

Figure 1.2 Judge, Citizen and Farmer, from ‘Geschichte der Costüme’. Germany, 15th century. (Van Eijk, 2004:28).

Figure 1.3 John Collet, Tight Lacing, or fashion before Ease. England, Collection. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, USA. 1770-1780. (Van Eijk, 2004:29).

Figure 1.4 Fashion plate from ‘La Belle Assemblée’. France. 1815. (Van Eijk, 2004:28).

Figure 1.5 “Fashion plate from ‘La Mode illustrée”. France. 1882. (Van Eijk, 2004:29).

Figure 1.6 Small bags associated with underwear such as ‘knickers’ and petticoats. (Van Eijk, 2004:82).

Figure 1.7 Isaac Cruikshank, (24 November 1799). Parisian Ladies in their Full Winter Dress for 1800. An over-the-top exaggerated satirical caricature print on the excesses of the late-1790s Parisian high Greek look, and the too-diaphanous styles allegedly sometimes worn there. [Internet Image] (Cruikshank 2008:http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d4/1799-Cruikshank-Paris-ladies-full-winter-dress-caricature.jpg).

List of Figures Chapter 2

Figure 2.1 Hermès Kelly Bag, 2001. (Johnson, 2002:12).

Figure 2.2 Grace Kelly on the cover of LIFE magazine holding her Hermès Kelly Bag, 1956. (Johnson, 2002:xvi).

Figure 2.3 Jennifer Lopez, Glow, [Internet Image] (Lopez 2008:http://www.healthandbeauty.net.au/images/jennifer-lopez-glow2.jpg).
Figure 2.4 David and Victoria Beckham, *Intimately Beckham*. [Internet Image] (Beckham 2008: http://www.newsonfire.com/2008/03/04/top-ten-celebrity-perfumes-that-really-stink/).


Figure 2.6 Elizabeth Taylor, *White Diamonds*. [Internet Image] (Taylor 2008: http://www.healthandbeauty.net.au/images/elizabeth-taylor-white-diamonds12jpg).

Figure 2.7 Britney Spears, *Curious*. [Internet Image] (Spears 2008: http://www.healthandbeauty.net.au/images/britney-spears-curious3.JPG).


Figure 2.10 Hermès *Birkin Bag*. (Johnson, 2002:41).

Figure 2.11 Jane Birkin with the Hermès *Birkin Bag*. [Internet Image] (Birkin 2008: http://www.luxwear.net/hermesbirkin.htm).

Figure 2.12 It-bags with high prices and a time-consuming manufacturing process. (Handbags by the Minute, 2007:20).

Figure 2.13 Roberta de Camerino *Bagonghi Bag*. (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:146).

Figure 2.14 French Souvenir Reticule. 1855. (Johnson, 2002:278).

Figure 2.15 Beaded reticule ‘Souvinir De Venice’. 1825-1850 Italy. (Van Eijk, 2004:101).

Figure 2.16 Beaded coin purse showing the arrival of the first giraffe in France. 1827. France. (Van Eijk, 2004:101).

Figure 2.17 Louis Vuitton *Steamer*, 1901. (Johnson, 2002:26).

Figure 2.18 Louis Vuitton *Steamer*, 2000. (Johnson, 2002:27).

Figure 2.19 Louis Vuitton *Noe* bag, 2001. (Johnson, 2002:5).
Figure 2.20  Louis Vuitton *Noe* bag, 1932. (Johnson, 2002:14).

Figure 2.21  Hermès *Bollide*, 1923 (Johnson, 2002:4).

Figure 2.22  Hermès *Plume*, 1933 (Johnson, 2002:15).

Figure 2.23  Hermès *Le Trim*, 1958. (Johnson, 2002:15).

Figure 2.24  This silk reticule was sold to raise funds for the ‘Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves’, 1827. England. (Johnson, 2002:273).


Figure 2.26  Celebrities wearing the *I’m not a plastic bag* tote. [Internet Image] (My Fashion Life 2008:www.myfashionlife.com/archives/2007/03/20/im-not-a-plastic-bag/).

Figure 2.27  Nat Thakur, *100% Reusable* collection. Leather. [Internet Image] (Thakur 2008:www.fourgoodcorners.com/i-am-not-a-plastic-bag/).

Figure 2.28  Craig Native; Spring/Summer 2005-2006. [Internet Image]  
(I Fashion 2008:  
(I Fashion 2008:  
(I Fashion 2008:  

Figure 2.29  Nanette Nel, 2006. Mielie Material Development. The mould making process.

Figure 2.30  Nanette Nel, 2006. Mielie Material Development. Resin.

Figure 2.31  Nanette Nel, 2006. Mielie Material Development. Plastic.

Figure 2.32  Nanette Nel, 2006. Mielie Material Development. Wax.

Figure 2.33  Nanette Nel, 2006. Mielie Material Development. Clay, silver paint.

Figure 2.34  Nanette Nel, 2006. Design Drawing. Mielie handbag.
Figure 2.35 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Boervrou.* Bronze, Hessian.

Figure 2.36 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: *Boervrou.* Inside the mielie cob, words in Afrikaans. Bronze, Hessian.

Figure 2.37 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Hessian bag.* Hessian, cotton, resin.

Figure 2.38 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Hessian bag of *Boervrou.* Hessian, bronze.

Figure 2.39 *Alfonso Smuts, 1977: Kaalvoetvrou.* Harrismith. *(Swart, 1989:257)*

Figure 2.40 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings.* Design drawings and technical planning of the hardware possibilities for the mielie series.

Figure 2.41 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings.* Design drawings and technical planning of the hardware possibilities for the mielie series.

Figure 2.42 Nanette Nel, 2007-2008. *The Crotched Mielie Collection.*

Figure 2.43 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings.* Design drawings and technical planning of the hardware possibilities for the mielie coin purse series.

Figure 2.44 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings.* Design drawings and technical planning of the mielie coin purse series.

Figure 2.45 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Brand Suid-Afrika.* Steel, silver, charcoal.

Figure 2.46 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Brand Suid-Afrika.* Detail of the charcoal inside the silver. Steel, silver, charcoal.

Figure 2.47 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Brand Suid-Afrika.* Detail of the attachment of the silver and the steel wire. Steel, silver, charcoal.

Figure 2.48 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Brand Suid-Afrika.* Detail of the silver buttons and the crotchet. Steel, silver, charcoal.

Figure 2.49 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Brand Suid-Afrika.* Detail: in relation to the body. Steel, silver, charcoal.

Figure 2.50 Nanette Nel, 2007. The original version of *Gryp.* Steel, silver, black pearl.

Figure 2.51 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Gryp.* Steel, silver, black pearl.

Figure 2.52 Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection/*Grou, Gruis, Gruwel.* Steel, silver, black pearls, teeth.

Figure 2.53 Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection/*Grou.* Steel, silver, black pearls.
Figure 2.54  Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection. Detail: Grou. Steel, silver, black pearls.

Figure 2.55  Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection. Detail: Grou. Steel, silver, black pearls.

Figure 2.56  Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection. Gruis. Steel, silver.

Figure 2.57  Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection. Detail: Gruis. Steel, silver.

Figure 2.58  Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection. Gruis. Steel, silver.

Figure 2.59  Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection. Gruwel. Steel, silver, teeth.

Figure 2.60  Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection. Gruwel. Steel, silver, teeth.

Figure 2.61  Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection. Gruwel. Steel, silver, teeth.

List of Figures Chapter 3

Figure 3.1  Louis Vuitton Vernis Collection advertisement. (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:133).

Figure 3.2  Louis Vuitton Vernis Collection advertisement. (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:38-39).


Figure 3.4  Fake Louis Vuitton Trash bag. [Internet Image] (Social Graph 2008:http://socialgraph.blogspot.com/2007/10/louis-vuitton-trash-bag-moving-through.html).

Figure 3.5  Hermès Birkin Bag. Black Crocodile with Diamonds. [Internet Image] (Purseblog 2008:http://www.purseblog.com/brands/hermes/hermes-diamond-crocodile-birkin).

Figure 3.6  Judith Leiber. Polar Bear minaudière, hand covered rhinestones set by hand. (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:72-73).

Figure 3.7  Judith Leiber and her Minaudières. (Johnson, 2002:99).

Figure 3.8  Judith Leiber and a patriotic American Minaudière. (Johnson, 2002:367).
Figure 3.9 Louis Vuittone advertisement. “A peek of red lingerie hints at the intimate world contained within the bag”. (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:53).

Figure 3.10 *What is in you bag?* [Internet Image] (Flickr.Com 2008a:http://www.flickr.com/photos/jcutts/2531316767/) [29 August 2008] Uploaded on May 28, 2008 by jessiecutts.

Figure 3.11 *What is in your bag?* [Internet Image] (Flickr.Com 2008a:http://www.flickr.com/photos/love_sex_and_dirty_streets/466030007/) [29 August 2008] Uploaded on April 20, 2007 by hunting bear.

Figure 3.12 Members of the group *What Is In Your Bag?* [Internet Image] (Flickr.Com 2008a:http://www.flickr.com/groups/84819657@N00/pool/page2/) [29 August 2008].

Figure 3.13 Design. *Blanche – Protea cynaroides.* (Lups, 1976).

Figure 3.14 Embroidered example. *Blanche – Protea cynaroides.* (Lups, 1976).

Figure 3.15 Design. *Four different Protea designs.* (Lups, 1976).

Figure 3.16 Embroidered example. *Lizel, Magda, Carin, Rene, Estelle, Maria.* (Lups, 1976).

Figure 3.17 Title page: *Catherina - Protea repens. Borduur Die/ Embroider The Protea.* (Lups, 1976).

Figure 3.18 Back page: *Louisa - Protea cynaroides. Two flowers and monogram of authors.* (Lups, 1976).

Figure 3.19 Pattern. *Marien – Protea Minor.* (Lups, 1976).

Figure 3.20 Embroidered examples: *Marien, Emily and Maretha.* (Lups, 1976).

Figure 3.21 The South African National Cricket Team Emblem. [Internet Image] (South African Cricket 2008:http://india-southafrica.cricket.deepthi.com/images/south-africa-cricket-board-logo.gif).


Figure 3.23 *Protea cynarodes* or the king protea. [Internet Image] (Citrusart 2008:www.citrusart.co.uk/images/F2806723.jpg).

Figure 3.24 *Protea cynarodes* or the king protea. Detail: leaves look like velvet [Internet Image] (Citrusart 2008:www.citrusart.co.uk/images/F2806736.jpg).
Figure 3.25 Nanette Nel, 2008. Visual study Drawing. Inside of king protea resembling a faceted stone.

Figure 3.26 Nanette Nel, 2006. Design Drawings. Visual research for the Protea Collection, 150x200 cm.

Figure 3.27 Nanette Nel, 2006. Detail: Design Drawings. Visual research for the Protea Collection.

Figure 3.28 Nanette Nel, 2006. Detail: Design Drawings. Visual research for the Protea Collection, Single protea handbags designs.

Figure 3.29 Nanette Nel, 2006. Protea sculptures. Clay designs and models.

Figure 3.30 Nanette Nel, 2006. Protea sculptures. Wax protea models.

Figure 3.31 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Bronze Protea.

Figure 3.32 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Bronze Protea sculptures (candle holders). Bronze, steel, sandstone.

Figure 3.33 Nanette Nel, 2006. Protea experiments. Plastic, pva paint.

Figure 3.34 Nanette Nel, 2006. Protea experiments. Silicone, thread, needles.

Figure 3.35 Papier-mâché handbag with cut steel frame: France, 1820s. (Van Eijk, 2004:177).

Figure 3.36 Detail of lock of cut steel frame on handbag, German, 1820. (Van Eijk, 2004:179).

Figure 3.37 Leather handbag with cover-sheet of tortoise-shell inlaid with mother-of-pearl: Germany, 1820. (Van Eijk, 2004:186).

Figure 3.38 Leather handbag with cover-sheet of tortoise-shell inlaid with mother-of-pearl: Germany, 1810-1820. (Van Eijk, 2004:186).

Figure 3.39 Leather handbag with ivory cover sheet, Greek dancers, silver border: Germany, 1920. (Van Eijk, 2004:188).

Figure 3.40 Leather pochette with ivory cover-sheet, Pallas Athena, silver border: Germany, 1925. (Van Eijk, 2004:188).

Figure 3.41 Left: Maison de Bonneterie. Right: Elizabeth Arden. USA, 1950s. Plastic beads. (Van Eijk, 2004:277).

Figure 3.42 Four plastic Rodolac pochettes. USA, 1937. (Van Eijk, 2004:276).
Figure 3.43 Silver ring mesh handbag with ivory ring to open and close. Germany, 1910. (Van Eijk, 2004:267).

Figure 3.44 Mesh handbag designed by Elsa Schiaparelli for Whiting and Davis. USA, 1936-1937. (Van Eijk, 2004:266).

Figure 3.45 Nanette Nel, 2007. Trou-Trou. Silicone, perspex.

Figure 3.46 Silk bridal bag with decoration in silver and gold thread. Italy, 1700. (Van Eijk, 2004:39).

Figure 3.47 a. Leather and silk lettercase with embroidery, poem and miniature by Favorin Lerebour, France 1806. 
b. Finely embroidered letter case, France, 1800. 

Figure 3.48 a. Silk bridal bag with groom (the French King Louis XV) on enamel on copper. Limoges, France, 1752. 
b. Silk bridal bag with bride (Princess Maria Leszcynska, the bride of King Louis XV) in enamel on copper. Limoges, France, 1752. 

Figure 3.49 Revivals, 1999. Modern wedding bag. (Johnson, 2002:262).

Figure 3.50 Gioia, 2000. Hand-made silk bridal bag. (Johnson, 2002:420).

Figure 3.51 Ted Noten, 1999. Designing: Ageeth’s Dowry. 56 gold rings and other paraphernalia cast in acrylic, pearl. 18x25x8 cm. (Staal, 2006:49-52).

Figure 3.52 Ted Noten, 1999. Ageeth’s Dowry. 56 gold rings and other paraphernalia cast in acrylic, pearl. 18x25x8 cm. (Staal, 2006:53).

Figure 3.53 Ted Noten, 1999. Ageeth’s Dowry. 56 gold rings and other paraphernalia cast in acrylic, pearl. 18x25x8 cm. (Staal, 2006:53).

Figure 3.54 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Inside the Silicone Protea. The translucent characteristics and textured detail of the material. Silicone.

Figure 3.55 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: The Silicone Protea. The flexibility and movement of the material. Silicone.

Figure 3.56 Nanette Nel, 2007. Design: Om-gekeerd. Design drawings and technical planning of handbag series.

Figure 3.57 Nanette Nel, 2007. Design: Verkeerd-om. Design drawings and technical planning of handbag series.
Figure 3.58 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings* and technical planning of handbag series: hardware.

Figure 3.59 Nanette Nel, 2007. Design drawings and technical planning of handbag series: chain.

Figure 3.60 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings*.

Figure 3.61 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Design Drawings*.

Figure 3.62 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Design Drawings*.

Figure 3.63 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Verkeerd-om Silicone Protea Handbag*. Detail of the top and opening of the handbag.

Figure 3.64 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Verkeerd-om Silicone Protea Handbag*. Detail of the top and opening of the handbag.

Figure 3.65 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Verkeerd-om Silicone Protea Handbag*. Detail of the bottom of the handbag.

Figure 3.66 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Om-gekeerd Silicone Protea Handbag*. Detail of the top and opening of the handbag.

Figure 3.67 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Om-gekeerd Silicone Protea Handbag*. Detail of the top and opening of the handbag.

Figure 3.68 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Om-gekeerd Silicone Protea Handbag*. Detail of the bottom of the handbag.

Figure 3.69 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Verkeerd-om Silicone Protea Handbag*. Male model playing with handbag.

Figure 3.70 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Om-gekeerd Silicone Protea Handbag*. Male model playing with handbag.

Figure 3.71 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design: Silicone Protea Brooch I*. Detail of the hardware of the brooch.

Figure 3.72 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Silicone Protea Brooch I*. Side profile of the brooch.

Figure 3.73 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Silicone Protea Brooch I*. Detail of the bottom (left) and the top (right) of the brooch.

Figure 3.74 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design: Silicone Protea Brooch II*. Detail of the hardware of the brooch.
Figure 3.75 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Silicone Protea Brooch II*. Side profile of the brooch.

Figure 3.76 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Silicone Protea Brooch II*. Detail of the bottom (left) and the top (right) of the brooch.

Figure 3.77 Nanette Nel, 2007-2008. *The Protea Collection*. The Collection worn on the body.

Figure 3.78 Nanette Nel, 2007-2008. *The Protea Collection*. The Collection worn on the body.

Figure 3.79 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Design: Silicone Protea Ring collection*.

Figure 3.80 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Silicone Protea Ring collection*. Cherry wood, rosewood, embuia wood, goldleaf, silicone, black diamonds.

Figure 3.81 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Silicone Protea Ring collection*. The silicone can be pulled off of the ring. Cherry wood, rosewood, embuia wood, gold leaf, silicone.

Figure 3.82 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Silicone Protea Ring collection*. The silicone can be pulled off of the ring. Embuia wood, gold leaf, silicone, gold dust.

Figure 3.83 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Silicone Protea Ring*. Embuia wood, gold leaf, silicone, gold dust.

Figure 3.84 Ines van Lamsweerde, image for Patrick Cox. (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:55).

**List of Figures Chapter 4**

Figure 4.1 Izzey Miyakey *Spiral bag*, 1991. (Johnson, 2002:250).

Figure 4.2 Moschino *Bustier Backpack*, 1985. (Johnson, 2002:466).

Figure 4.3 Tailor’s dummies bags, Italian, 1950. (Johnson, 2002:467).

Figure 4.4 Nanette Nel, 2006. *Panty Design Drawings*. Individual sketches 10cm x 10 cm.

Figure 4.5 Nanette Nel, 2006. *3D Panties*. Resin, textile.

Figure 4.6 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Hole Drawings*. Mixed media.

Figure 4.7 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: *Hole drawings*. Mixed media.

Figure 4.8 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Necklace*. As worn on the body.
Figure 4.9 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Neck-lace.* As flat object.

Figure 4.10 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: *Neck-lace.* Linen, hair, drawing ink, cutex, beetroot extract, tea extract, coffee extract, thread, paper.

Figure 4.11 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Canvas Clutch.* Unbleached linen, ink.

Figure 4.12 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: *Canvas Clutch.* Unbleached linen, ink.

Figure 4.13 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: *Canvas Clutch.* Unbleached linen, ink.

Figure 4.14 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: *Canvas Tote.* Unbleached linen, ink.

Figure 4.15 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Leather Bag.* Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.

Figure 4.16 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: The inside of *Leather Bag.* Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.

Figure 4.17 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Drawing on *Leather Bag.* Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.

Figure 4.18 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: *Leather Bag.* Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.

Figure 4.19 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: *Leather Bag.* Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.

Figure 4.20 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: *Leather Bag on body.* Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.

Figure 4.21 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Drawing on *Leather Bag.* Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.

Figure 4.22 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Drawing on *Leather Bag.* Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.

Figure 4.23 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Drawing on *Leather Bag.* Leather, felt, ink, lace, spray paint.

Figure 4.24 Wim Delvoye. Tattooed pig. [Internet Image] (Delvoye 2008a:www.cpaulcarter.com/blogimage/fina3ltattoo.jpg).


Figure 4.27 Zinwoo Park, 2007. FAKE Louis Vuittone. [Internet Image] (Flicker.Com 2008b:www.flickr.com/photos/superlocal/278993377/).


Figure 4.30 Zinwoo Park, 2007. Detail: Inside the Fake-Too Perfect canvas bag. [Internet Image] (Flicker.Com 2008b:www.flickr.com/photos/superlocal/278993341/).

Figure 4.31 Jean Paul Gaultier, 1998. Glove Bag. (Johnson, 2002:423).

Figure 4.32 Jean Paul Gaultier, 2001. Bracelet de Force. (Johnson, 2002:422).

Figure 4.33 Vivienne Westwood for Louis Vuitton, 1996. Limited Edition Monogram Canvas Bum Bag (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:182).

Figure 4.34 Vivienne Westwood for Louis Vuitton, 1996. Limited Edition Monogram Canvas Bum Bag (Johnson, 2002:171).

Figure 4.35 Meryl Smith, 2008. Excessory Baggage. leather, papier-mâché, gold paint, zipper. [Internet Image] (Smith 2008:www.counterfeitchic.com/2008/04/).

Figure 4.36 Jessica Simpson and her dog in a Louis Vuittone Pet Carrier. [Internet Image] (Simpson 2008:http://www.seenon.com/celebrities/jessica-simpson/photos/the-star-treatment/).


Figure 4.38 Armadillo shoulder bag, 1920-1940. A historical example of leather and the use of the actual animal as the ‘body of the bag’. (Van Eijk, 2004:196).


Figure 4.40 Nanette Nel, 2007. Design Drawings. Dresses with handbags drawn or printed on them.

Figure 4.41 Nanette Nel, 2007. Design Drawings. A nude with handbags drawn on the body.

Figure 4.42 Nanette Nel, 2007. Design Drawings. Dresses with handbags drawn on them, referring to the different places they connect to the body.
Figure 4.43 Nanette Nel, 2007. Design Drawings. Dresses with handbags drawn or printed on them.

Figure 4.44 Nanette Nel, 2007. Experimental Samples of Textile. Natural colorants tested on 100% cotton (left) and 100% silk (right).

Figure 4.45 Nanette Nel, 2008. The Sweatcatcher. Inside/Outside. (Work in progress). 100% Cotton, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.46 Nanette Nel, 2008. The Sweatcatcher. Detail. (Work in progress). 100% Cotton, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.47 Nanette Nel, 2008. The Bum-Bag Outside/Detail. (Work in progress). 100% Silk, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.48 Nanette Nel, 2008. The Bum-Bag Outside/Inside. (Work in progress). 100% Silk, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.49 Nanette Nel, 2008. The Fanny-Pack. Outside/Inside. (Work in progress). 100% cotton, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.50 Nanette Nel, 2008. The Fanny-Pack. Detail. (Work in progress). 100% cotton, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.51 Nanette Nel, 2008. The Back-Pack Outside/Inside. (Work in progress). 100% cotton, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.52 Nanette Nel, 2008. The Back-Pack Front/Back. (Work in progress). 100% cotton, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.53 Nanette Nel, 2008. The Body-Hugger. (Work in progress). 100% cotton, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.54 Nanette Nel, 2008. The Body-Hugger. Detail. (Work in progress). 100% cotton, natural colorants, ink.

Figure 4.55 Mona Hatoum, 1995. Hair Necklace. Artist's hair, Cartier bust, leather. (Broadhead, 2005:25).

Figure 4.56 Nanna Melland, 2003. Decadence. 750 gold, linen. Collection: Gallery Marzee, Neimgen, the Netherlands. (Broadhead, 2005:25).

Figure 4.57 Millie Cullivan, 2004. Lace collar. (Broadhead, 2005:27).

Figure 4.58 Adele Lutz, 2001. Venus Twist. (Broadhead, 2005: 33).

Figure 4.59 Susanne Hammer, 1998. Orientierungshilfen. (Broadhead, 2005: 33).


Figure 4.62 Nanette Nel, 2007. *My Men-sies* series. Brooch series 3.5cm x 3.5cm.

Figure 4.63 Nanette Nel, 2007. *My Men-sies: Old Soldier*. Brooch series 5cm x 5cm. Plastic, leather, ink, plastic container, plastic model.

Figure 4.64 Nanette Nel, 2007. *My Men-sies: se Self*. Necklace 4 cm x 4cm. Artist hair, plastic model, plastic ball, silk, brass chain.

Figure 4.65 Nanette Nel, 2007. *My Men-sies* Series.

Figure 4.66 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Oumatjie se Bitchbag*. Mixed Media on cardboard.

Figure 4.67 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: The bag of *Oumatjie se Bitchbag*.

Figure 4.68 Ted Noten, 2000. *Superbitch bag*. Gun cast in acrylic, snake skin handle. 23 x 22 x 7 cm. (Staal, 2006:129).


Figure 4.71 Yuka Oyama, 2003. Japan. Schmuck Quickie Ginza, Japan. (Oyama, 2005).

Figure 4.72 Yuka Oyama, 2003. Italy. Schmuck Quickie Meran, Italy. (Oyama, 2005).

Figure 4.73 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Public your Private: Sample book*. Linen, cotton, canvas, ink.

Figure 4.74 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Pages from *Public your Private: Sample book*. Linen, cotton, canvas, ink.

Figure 4.75 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: *Public your Private: Bag*. Satin, ink, faux pearls, thread, brass chain, copper chain.

Figure 4.76 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Public your Private: Bag*. Satin, ink, faux pearls, thread, brass chain, copper chain.

Figure 4.77 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings*. The envelope as theme for the secret subject matter.
Figure 4.78 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings*. The envelope as theme for the secret subject matter.

Figure 4.79 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail Manufacturing process of Private your public: Bag. Writing on silk.

Figure 4.80 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Manufacturing process of Private your Public: Bag. Pleating the silk.

Figure 4.81 Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: The pleats and text of the *Private your Public: Bag*.

Figure 4.82 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Stillewe van ‘n Selfportret I*.

Figure 4.83 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Stillewe van ‘n Selfportret II*.

Figure 4.84 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Stillewe van ‘n Selfportret III*.

Figure 4.85 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Stillewe van ‘n Selfportret IV*.

Figure 4.86 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Stillewe van ‘n Selfportret V*.

Figure 4.87 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Stillewe van ‘n Selfportret VI*.

Figure 4.88 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Hole Research, Book*. User guide.

Figure 4.89 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Hole Research, Book*. Category: People.

Figure 4.90 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Hole Research, Book*. Category: People and Nature.

Figure 4.91 *X-posed grocery shopping bag*. [Internet Image] (X-posed 2008:http://neo-nomad.kaywa.com/files/images/2007/7/mob588_1185874914.jpg).

Figure 4.92 *Tanner Krolle bag*. Advertisement. (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:204).

Figure 4.93 *Tanner Krolle bag*. Advertisement. X-rayed bag revealing a water pistol. (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:88).

Figure 4.94 *Tanner Krolle bag*. Advertisement. A lady-like beaded bag opposed to the revealing contents. (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:89).

Figure 4.95 Paloma Picasso Book Bag, 1980’s. (Johnson, 2002:463).

Figure 4.96 Jean Paul Gaultier, 1993. (Johnson, 2002:457).

Figure 4.97 French Satin Book Bag, 1969. (Johnson, 2002:456).

Figure 4.99  Ted Noten, *Survival Bags*. Survival Bag 1, 1997: Mackerel cast in acrylic, 18x40x10 cm. (Staal, 2006:68-69).


Figure 4.102  Zaha Hadid, 2007. *Chanel Contemporary Art Container*. Fabrice Hyber, *Comfortable*. The internal wall is a direct reference to the quilted Chanel handbag, the 2.55. (Lamberti, 2008:26-27).


Figure 4.106  Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings*. A Neckpiece consisting of numerous drawstring purses which reveals secret elements.

Figure 4.107  Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings*. A study of conventional handbags.


Figure 4.109  Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings*. Experiments regarding the contents of a handbag.

Figure 4.110  Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings*. Brooches revealing the contents of the bag by hanging upside down.

Figure 4.111  Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design Drawings*. Handbags being constructed of a single item retrieved from the inside of a handbag.

Figure 4.112  Nanette Nel, 2008. *Design Drawings*. The contents of an evening bag, reconstructed in the form of a neckpiece.
Figure 4.113 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Design Drawings*. The content of the everyday practical bag reconstructed in the form of a neckpiece.

Figure 4.114 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Design Drawings*. The content of a grocery bag reconstructed in the form of a neckpiece.

Figure 4.115 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Design Drawings*.

Figure 4.116 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Design Drawings*. Illustrating installation possibilities.
Bibliography


Young, I. M. 2005. On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays. New York:
Addendum

US Gallery, Dorpstreet, Stellenbosch
Nanette Nel, Graduation Exhibition
February 2009
US Gallery, Dorpstreet, Stellenbosch
Silver, silicone, onyx, gold leaf, black diamonds.
US Gallery, Dorpstreet, Stellenbosch
Silver, steel, black pearls, black diamonds, teeth, charcoal.
US Gallery, Dorpstreet, Stellenbosch
Nanette Ne, The Body-Bag Collection (2009)
Digital Prints on Cotton Paper
450x250 mm

US Gallery, Dorpstreet, Stellenbosch
Digital Print on Cotton Paper
450x250 mm
US Gallery, Dorpstreet, Stellenbosch
Digital Print on Cotton Paper
450x250 mm

US Gallery, Dorpstreet, Stellenbosch
Video Installation
US Gallery, Dorpstreet, Stellenbosch
Digital Print on Cotton Paper
450x250 mm

US Gallery, Dorpstreet, Stellenbosch
Porcelain, silk, pearls
300x350 mm
US Gallery, Dorpstreet, Stellenbosch
Porcelain, silk, pearls
300x350 mm

US Gallery, Dorpstreet, Stellenbosch
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