

marital pregnancies and delaying first pregnancies rather than of spacing children. The packaging was a marketing tool in itself. The initial dispensing of pills in a regular pill bottle understandably made it difficult to remember to take one daily. The revolutionary Dialpack of pills was the invention of an American man who'd had a series of rows with his wife about whether she had remembered to take her pill.

Central to the story of the pill are the people involved in its development. In the US, Margaret Sanger, the lapsed Catholic who had witnessed her mother's early death from the effects of too much childbearing, was an ardent advocate for birth control throughout her life. It was she who encouraged Gregory Pincus, a controversial biologist, to create the pill. Pincus had suffered severe criticism in the 1930s for work on parthogenic (fatherless) rabbits. Katherine McCormick, trained in biology and married into a fortune, financed the project. The first human trials in the US were undertaken by John Rock, a gynecologist and devout Catholic who became an outspoken and convincing advocate for the pill.

Marks' story of the pill is told in brilliant detail using extensive primary sources and interviews with those involved in the research, development and marketing of the pill. Occasionally, as in the detailing of the early trials, the narrative bogs down — but never for long. Marks handles the complicated interweaving of politics, culture and science with real clarity. In the end the reader is left with an elegant understanding of how the complex interaction of these forces led to the development of one of the 20th century's truly revolutionary discoveries.

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Reference

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Lifeworks

Radiation diptych

Lying so still in a cold room with her breast exposed, and feeling acutely the stretch of her right arm extended beyond her head, she began to think about the surreal situation in which she found herself. Perhaps because she is an art historian herself, it occurred to her that this awkward, vulnerable pose was an ironic restatement of the classical pose of the recumbent female nude of art history, who lies in the frontal plane of the picture, coyly welcoming the admiration of the spectator or, through feigned sleep, transforming the viewer into a voyeur. Feminist art historians refer to the woman in these paintings (which are invariably painted by men) as the "object of the [male] gaze." The pose she was placed in for radiation

therapy seemed to transcend this traditional iconography.

The reclining female nude of Renaissance and Baroque art seems very passive and vulnerable, her essence and worth defined by her sexuality and her availability. Here, the pose of the woman undergoing therapy ironically signifies empowerment — through the powerful beams of radiation, whose goal is to reclaim life through death. When cancer cells are killed, life triumphs. Associations of ideas are triggered, and opposites are transcended. From death to life; from stillness to movement; from inside to outside; from outside to inside. From despair to hope.

The pose of the female patient is so similar and, at the same time, so far removed from the eroticism and aestheti-



Veronica Wisniewska

Monique Westra, 1998. *Giorgione Grid*. Collage (colour photocopies mounted on gatorboard and wood), 27" x 27" x 2"

cism of art. Like a parody, it is similar — but different. She, too, is the object of the gaze, but it is not the predatory gaze of the male but the restorative gaze of radiation beams. Implicit in this pose is an intriguing paradox: the body of the woman is restrained with the up-raised arm and torso fixed in place, rendering her passive and immobile. It does recall the painted Venus of old and, more ominously, the ultimate rigidity and stillness of death. Yet, paradoxically, this immobility of pose yields life and restores hope. As therapy for cancer, it is regenerative and life affirming.

This pose, which here is so wrought with tension and mystery, is indolent and relaxed in traditional art, where it is clearly sexual and provocative in nature, meant to titillate the spectator. The casting of the female model in the mythological role of Venus, a conceit of art history, cloaks and at the same time enhances its eroticism. In the photograph taken of the patient exposed to the Clinac 67 Radiation machine, there is no model, no artificially contrived pose and pretext. In the aseptic environment of a hospital room, the reclining female is not a sexual object or a victim. She is a very real person, and the camera records her as she lies, only minutes before the onset of radiation. In another ironic subversion, the iconographic topos of “modesty” is recalled — but, in this case, the woman’s face is hidden because the procedure requires her to turn her head away.

Lasers emit strings of red lines that alight soundlessly, intersecting at right angles to divide her breast into equal quadrants. The exposed breast is marked by lines and crosses, signifiers of healing, creating on her chest a linear design that guides the radiation beam. The horizontal scar lying like a brow above the nipple, still red and sore, serves as a reminder of the surgery, its pain tangible and real.

Images and imaging are central to both art and medicine: lines drawn across the breast; pictures taken inside and outside; multiple exposure. The reclining female here is targeted by the eye



Monique Westra, 1998. *Radiating Circle*. Photographic collage mounted on metal. 27" x 27" x 2"

of the awesome and mammoth machine that slowly encircles her; she is the focus of four lasers, two videos and the lens of the camera that photographs her. Finally, she is observed by the viewer in the exhibited artwork, which creatively transforms the clinical process.

Both art and medicine have the potential to reshape life and reaffirm belief by focusing attention on those things that really matter. Like art, medicine can signal a profound change by realigning life's priorities and irrevocably altering one's thoughts and feelings. Both entail a rupture of consciousness. Everyday routines of living, prosaic and ordinary, become parentheses to the extraordinary transformative event of daily radiation.

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I thank the members of the Department of Radiation Oncology at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre, Calgary, for their co-operation in the realization of this project.

Artist, writer and art historian Monique Westra created this work with the help of photographer Veronica Wisniewska while undergoing treatment for breast cancer in 1998. The photographic collages, created from images of the artist undergoing radiation therapy, were first exhibited at a faculty show at the Alberta College of Art and Design. The text was displayed on a panel accompanying the collages.

The original artwork is in the possession of the artist, who would like to donate it to an institution where it would be seen by women undergoing radiation treatment for breast cancer. Please direct inquiries to Monique Westra at mwestra@telusplanet.net