

VIVIAN LYNN

SPIN:

VERSOR,

VERSARI

CITY GALLERY, WELLINGTON

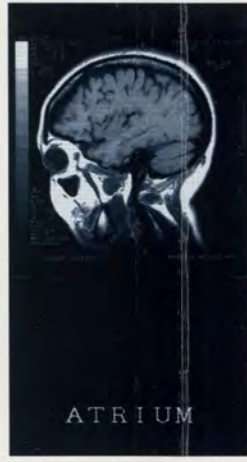
27 SEPTEMBER - 23 NOVEMBER

H O I

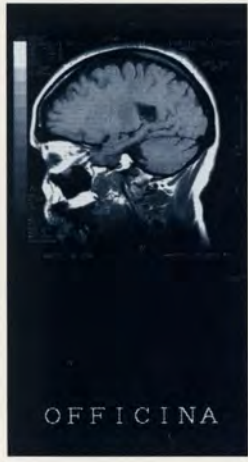
O E O T



VESTIBULUM



ATRIUM



OFFICINA



CULINA

Christina Barton Vivian, your installation makes use of images of your brain you had made by means of a digital scanning process called MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging). Tell me something about this process and what it means in terms of the content and structure of the installation.

Vivian Lynn To get these images I lay in a machine which functioned like a magnet and sections of my brain were imaged sequentially from left to right. To achieve this the cells of my brain were split into a finely spaced sequence, by exposing them to an electromagnetic wave of radio frequencies. The nuclei of my braincells are constantly spinning. The scan intervenes to describe a pattern of resonances from which detailed information about the brain can be gathered. The 'spin' here, though, is that MRI investigates disorders in the physical state of the brain, but in my case there was no physical disease, thus the disorder I am suggesting is not physical but metaphysical - it is the

which will throw light on the old... (continued on back page) with. Now new research in genetics is providing information conditioning factors as being stronger than those we were born for survival and education (which led to freedom). I saw how we fared in adult life because it provided the basic necessities the premise that the economic base was largely responsible for When I made the *Book of forty images* (1973-74) I started from a woman's self portrait: it is my brain and my house.

VL Yes, it's an acknowledgment that there is a symbolic order and it is that with which I have to deal. A stereotypical semiotic interpretation of *Spin* might be the oppositional 'brain' equals 'masculine' and 'logic' while 'house' equals 'feminine' and 'emotion'. This reading is confounded by the fact that *Spin* is a woman's self portrait: it is my brain and my house.

CB Typically, to do this you draw on a range of references from the very ancient to the contemporary, can you explain why you have used the typologies of Roman architecture to label the various parts of your brain?

VL I am still seeking to address in *Spin*, which I am still seeking to address in *Spin*, relational alternative to the standard opposition of those terms, between inner and outer, which in a way offers the kind of the body. It was a kind of literal embodiment of the space also because it occupies a liminal space, both inside and outside Then I used hair, not only because of its sensual nature but

echo-spin-resonance: 'If you don't know your past you don't know your future', to quote Ziggy Marley. In Pompeii and Herculaneum I experienced this affinity while walking in domestic architecture - spaces with rooms opening into courtyards and gardens not unlike middle-class homes today. I saw an analogy between these once domestic spaces now made public through tourism and my own home, once more clearly defined as private, but now open to the world through the web, email and the fax machine. I'm suggesting then that the old definitions of public and private are being contested by technology and economics.

I was intrigued by the Villa dei Misteri at Pompeii which is thought to be where women were initiated into the Dionysian cult. I wanted to recreate the kind of smouldering coolness which I associate with one room in particular which was painted black, with minimal linear decoration in the Egyptian style.

VL First, the history of architecture and town planning demonstrates that, as medical discoveries were made about the human body (blood circulation, knowledge of arteries and veins, for instance), these altered the way in which bodies were moved around in the spaces of newly planned towns. Secondly, in the

CB You draw connections between the parts of the brain, the various functions they perform and the mental processes which occur in a series of chambers, with the Latin names for rooms in a house; can you tell me a little about why you've drawn that analogy.

VL Yes, my mental set. Maybe it's a portrait of resistance. Like the work I made in 1981, *Self portrait*, I am using the body as a metaphor to investigate how we are culturally conditioned.

CB But this is also your brain, your house?

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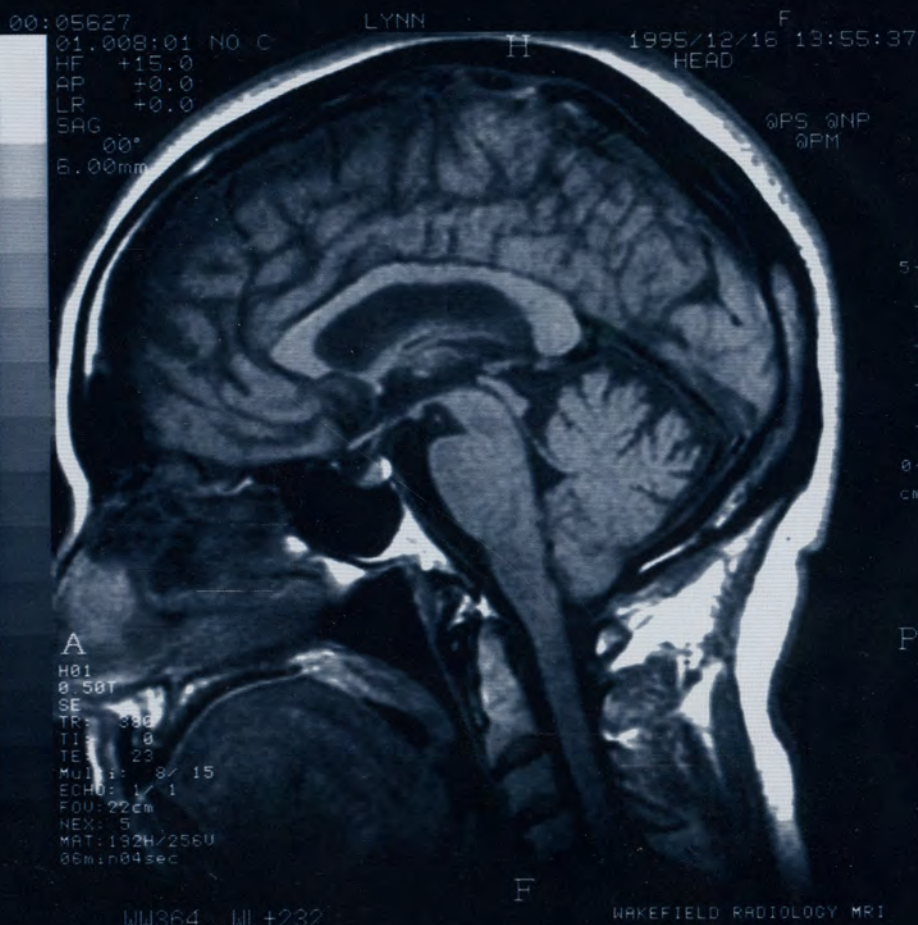
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Christina Barton in conversation with Vivian Lynn

Perception and understanding of the world are partly a function of the fact that consciousness is not pure but exists within a membrane of flesh and blood.

Artist's notes¹

Vivian Lynn's latest project, *Spin: versor versari*, (her first major solo installation since 1986) was initiated in 1989 by a visit to the Villa dei Misteri in Pompeii. The conceptual development of the work was completed in 1995 with a brain scan by the digital process of Magnetic Resonance Imaging, at Wakefield Hospital. The result is an installation consisting of nine largescale, digital prints of the artist's brain - each combined with the Latin name for a room in a Roman house - hung clockwise around the walls of the City Gallery and illuminated by eight dimly glowing lamps arranged on the gallery floor. I talked to Vivian Lynn about this work in late August 1997. This interview is the result of our conversation and the exchange of many notes.

... nature/culture, nature/nurture debates. Geneticists now argue that genes are gendered and that it is the female, not the male, gene which carries the codes for intelligence. This has shocked me, as it did the scientists who discovered it. But for me it is a wonderful shock. Nevertheless, the issue remains, how does one represent the 'intelligent female' when we still live in a culture dominated by masculine value systems? No matter what we find, it will be filtered through the language of that dominant culture.

CB So your project continues to be to dislodge or disrupt the binary oppositions which condition us, taking on the value systems which a western metaphysics entails?

VL Yes, though it sounds rather earnest. I am not trying to reverse the polarities of that binary structure, rather put them into relation to each other, to restore the repressed, to interject something which will stuff the system up. Technology can be used positively or negatively, to restructure our bodies for different ends - ends to benefit a society we cannot yet imagine. I want to make sure that technology doesn't take away the sensuality which is encoded in, but suppressed by, the thousands of years' history of what the body is about. That's why I used hair and why I'm imaging the brain. I want a toxic image, not merely to shock the public, but to serve as a device to cut the ropes which moor us to our conditioning.

a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh

Sappho

1. *From M. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, quoted in Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought.*

2. *Richard Sennett, Flesh and Stone, WW Norton, 1994, p.77.*

Vivian Lynn was born and educated in Wellington. After graduating from the Canterbury University College School of Art in 1951 and Auckland Teacher's College in 1952, she became a painter. Her work was included in the significant exhibition *Contemporary New Zealand Painting* at the Auckland Art Gallery in 1963. By 1968 she had abandoned painting, saying: "A feminist oil painting on canvas is an oxymoron."

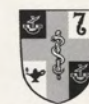
Lynn subsequently embarked on a series of works using diverse technologies to develop a new language of visual representation. By 1973 she had developed the conceptual praxis begun in 1968, which continues to inform her work. Her interest was to break down boundaries which categorised artforms in the field of visual representation. She is known for her multi-media installation works which have incorporated hair, jelly, and industrial materials.

Until recently Lynn was a lecturer in the School of Architecture and Design in Wellington. She has travelled widely conducting research and professional practice in the USA and Europe, and a fact-finding trip to Africa and the Pacific. In 1992-93 she worked in the Bauhaus, Germany, on a research grant.

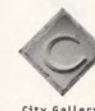
Vivian Lynn is one of New Zealand's most significant artists. Her works are included in public collections throughout New Zealand, and international collections including the Smithsonian Institute and the Honolulu Academy.

Christina Barton is a writer and curator currently employed as a lecturer in the Department of Art History at Victoria University of Wellington. She was formerly Curator of Contemporary New Zealand Art at Te Papa Museum of New Zealand (1992-94) where she first met Vivian Lynn in the process of acquiring her major installation: *Guarden Gates* (1982), for the collection.

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