

## **SEVER/SLICE/REND/STITCH/MEND/HEAL**

To regard Dawn Southworth is to find yourself at the intersection of the sensual, the political and the intimate.

From 1967 to 1968 Richard Serra compiled a list. *Verb List* represents a catalogue of manipulative possibilities for steel. However, more than a mere compilation of words, *Verb list* evokes the sensuality of language. The text, visually enhanced by the elegant scrawl of Serra's hand, helped define a link between steel and human passions.

In approaching Southworth's work, Serra's list is an inspiration. The precision of Serra's language – the meditation on the singular object – is akin to Dawn's obsessive working of her materials. Wood, paper, cloth and metal scraps are carefully considered in terms of their value as indicators of the human body, its trauma and its heroic flashes.

In writing *Political Justice*, Otto Kirchheimer reiterated the Frankfurt School's mantra that everything is political. While such Marxist pretensions have recently come under fire in our increasingly intimate and personalized social discourse, the flesh remains highly charged. Although Southworth steadfastly thwarts attempts to categorize her art under the rubric of 'feminist art', the discourse so clearly articulated by Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago at CalArts in the late sixties and early seventies is apparent and central to this artist. Dawn's work invokes the casket and the womb and all points in between. However, unlike the recent physically brutal and sexually explicit explorations of Ron Athey, Bob Flanagan and the French plastic surgery victim/artist, Orlin, Southworth maintains a classical remove: the object works as a referent to the flesh, not the other way around. Slicing and cutting, stitching and healing – acts of invasion and cohesion: endeavors not to be taken lightly.

Intimacy simultaneously evokes smoky fires in wood paneled hill country cottages and the anemic glow of personal computers greedily chopping away at our instinctual need for social grouping. Technology has provoked an intimacy whose primary feature is invasiveness – Southworth's medical referents illustrate the invasion of the flesh: our (social) bodies lie dissected and neatly compartmentalized on the artist's vision – leaves, trees, grasses all work to reclaim intimacy's spiritual foundation. Meditation and the satiation of human passion – the

original gratifications of intimacy – struggle to hold their own in  
Dawn's work and our world.

Johan Westenburg