THE RADICAL GESTURE: FEMINISM AND PERFORMANCE ART IN THE 1970S.

by

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This study examines the relationship between the insurgent feminist movement and the development of feminist performance art in North America during the 1970s. The thesis argues that feminist performance was instrumental in challenging the premise that art is an autonomous activity separate from the social and political conditions of everyday life. By adapting the feminist axiom that the personal is political to the practice of art making, feminist artists used performance as a form of cultural intervention in which personal experiences, narratives and representations were drawn upon to contest the prevailing social and political arrangements of gender. In so doing, feminist performance artists played a decisive role in reshaping our understanding of the political and in redefining the relationship between art and politics during this period.

This thematic study of the origins and development of North American feminist performance within the larger cultural context begins with an overview of the relationship between art and politics in the twentieth century. It traces the ideological shifts that account for the transformation of avant-garde art from a highly politicized to a primarily aesthetic movement in the two decades after World War II which in turn resulted in a dilemma for many artists as they questioned whether their art could or should engage with the deepening social and political crises of the 1960s. This study goes on to establish how the rise of the feminist
movement provided women artists with a means to re-engage art as a political practice. It explores the relationship between feminist politics and the formulation of performance as an art form particularly suited to the needs of feminist artists to reach new audiences and use their art as a weapon to renegotiate their role within the art world and to confront the oppressive effects of sexism in the larger culture. Through discussion of an extensive range of works by individual artists in relation both to contemporaneous and more recent feminist theory, this study seeks to account for the specific ways in which feminist performance art has fundamentally altered our current understanding of aesthetic practice in relation to the social and cultural conditions in which it is embedded.
This study has been a long time in the making. I began to consider writing my dissertation on performance art in 1987 while doing my preliminary doctoral work at the University of Toronto. In many ways, though, my interest in this subject was a revival of some ideas that I had originally explored many years earlier in an undergraduate paper written for a class taught by Benjamin Buchloh at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. The decision to pursue this subject for my dissertation was risky, for the logistics of researching something so ephemeral as performance art seemed daunting indeed. I was convinced it could be done, however, and I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Robert Welsh, for his confidence in me at the outset, his ongoing support and advice, and his patience in waiting for the results.

Although progress on the dissertation was slowed considerably by my acceptance of a full-time teaching position at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1990, this proved to be a fortuitous decision in the long run. I had access to the College's extensive collection of material on the period I was researching and benefitted greatly from the personal assistance of librarians Ilga Leja, Mary Synder, Kit Clarke, Linda Potvin-Jones and Janice Fralic-Brown. My friends and colleagues at the College were unflagging in their encouragement, especially Marylin McKay, Jan Peacock, Alexandra Palmer and David Howard, whose critical and theoretical insights were invaluable in helping me struggle through so many of the difficult concepts and problems I confronted. Our secretary Heather McKean went out of her way to help in any way she could. All
along, my friend Leslie Korrick was never more than a phone call away to show by her illustrious example and her heartening words that the seemingly impossible could be done.

The personal recollections of artists Martha Wilson, Lisa Steele and Martha Rosler, who generously offered their time to help me understand the pertinent issues and historical ambiance, were crucial to my research. The Video Data Bank in Chicago and V-Tape in Toronto were the sources for most of the performance videotapes I consulted, and I am grateful to their staff who spent many days helping me find obscure material from their collections.

The support which has been most meaningful to me and crucial to the completion of this project has come from my family. My husband Peter Dykhuis has shown boundless faith in my work and has been a constant source of intellectual stimulation as I endeavoured to articulate the complexities of this study. I owe him my deepest appreciation for his patience and his willingness to give me time to write even when his own work was at least as pressing. Along with my mother, Lynn Wark, he shouldered the burden on the home front especially during the last year when I was immersed in the final stages of the dissertation. But none have given so generously as my two daughters, Claire Dykhuis and Lucy Dykhuis, who have been sharing their mother with her thesis for the whole of their young lives. This thesis belongs to them as much as to me, and to them it is dedicated with much love and many thanks.
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INTRODUCTION

In 1968 Robin Morgan led the way as a troupe of feminists stormed into and disrupted the smooth proceedings of the Miss America beauty pageant in Atlantic City by crowning live sheep as Miss America and throwing hair curlers, false eyelashes, bras and girdles into the Freedom Trashcan.¹ This political protest serves as a colourful reminder both of the exasperation that had once again, after a hiatus of decades, propelled women to demand a new relationship with their culture and of the creative energy with which they did so. This exasperation and creativity would soon swell the women's movement so that by the mid-1970s it was a force that could no longer be ignored.

By that time a feminist consciousness had penetrated deeply into the art world as well, precipitating a confrontation with established values whose long-term effects are still felt today. This new consciousness found what is arguably its most distinctive manifestation in the practice of performance art. Indeed, the revival of performance and the emergence of feminist art in the 1970s are so inextricably linked that it is now inconceivable to speak seriously of one in isolation of the other. And yet, largely because of the inherent difficulties of studying such a transient, often chaotic and poorly documented practice, studies of feminist performance art have been fewer than would seem warranted by its widely recognized significance. This study seeks to redress this situation

by providing a sustained historical and critical analysis of feminist performance art in North America in the 1970s.

The central premise of this study is that feminist performance played a decisive role in negotiating a new relationship between art and politics in the 1970s by bringing about what Janet Wolff has called "the contestation of the social arrangements of gender" through cultural intervention. Certainly one aspect of this contestation aimed to achieve a degree of professional recognition that had previously been denied all but a few "exceptional" women artists. But if gaining entry into the art world was a precondition to engaging with it in a discourse around feminist concerns, this did not mean that all women artists who sought professional recognition did so on the basis of making feminist claims for their work. Indeed many women then--as now--were ambivalent or even hostile towards the idea that gender has anything to do with art making. Others took the view that the very fact of being women would make their work self-evidently different from their male peers. But not all women's art is feminist art, nor is feminism to be confused with femininity. This study will operate upon the premise that feminist art, by definition, is political in that it is made with the conscious intention to remedy the effects and conditions of sexism in our culture.

The idea that art could be political was in itself a radical concept at this time because the art world was still dominated by the belief that the purpose of art was to transcend, or at least provide an alternative to, the crude exigencies of social struggle and political strife. But as women artists began to consider the implications of the feminist axiom that "the personal

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is political," they realized that no aspect of life, art included, was exempt from politics. They began to see the claim that art was a "neutral" aesthetic field uncorrupted by politics as an ideological device to maintain the status quo both within and beyond the art world. In so doing, feminism has played an instrumental role in forcing the contemporary art world into an awareness of how its premises of autonomy and neutrality conceal assumptions of power and authority.

Feminist artists of this period used their art to change their political relationship with the world in two principle ways: by validating or celebrating those aspects or characteristics of women's experience that had been denigrated or dismissed within patriarchal culture; or by employing subversive means to analyse, criticize and expose the endless ways in which that denigration was perpetuated. As visual artists, they were particularly attuned to, and adept at, focusing on the role of representation in maintaining prevailing ideological attitudes towards women. The significance of this point cannot be underestimated, for, in Simone de Beauvoir's words, "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth." As a form of representation, art, like verbal language, is not a neutral vehicle for the expression of pre-existent meanings, but a system of visual signs through which meaning is produced and received. It is not a reflection of the world, but rather an ideological representation of how those who hold the privilege of representing want to see the world.

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But if representation was so crucial to feminist artists' efforts to renegotiate their relationship with the world, we must consider the question of why performance, which does not constitute representation in a conventional, pictorial sense, became so vital to this process that it was the first art form in which women virtually dominated the field. Certainly the generally transgressive character of feminist performance art was an important factor, expressed in its intent to dissolve the boundaries between art and life, its improvisational nature, and its repudiation of the formalist aesthetic values and judgements still dominant at the time. Yet these elements could not be said to pertain exclusively or even particularly to either feminist art or performance art. It has been argued that, unlike more conventional art forms like painting or sculpture, performance art's lack of tradition made it possible for women to shape it according to their own needs and values. While it is true that performance art was not bound by the exacting conventions of other art forms, it is fallacious to claim it lacked a tradition. In fact, the roots of performance can be traced to the late-nineteenth century. Moreover, it is precisely the nature of this tradition, whose historical vitality derived from its inherent potential for provocation and subversion as well as its commitment to destroying the separation between art and life, that made it so conducive to the political goals of feminist art in the 1970s.

These explanations provide only a partial basis for understanding the specific formulation of performance by women during this period, which must also be considered in relation to the characteristic aspects of performance done by men. For if there were no significant differences, there could be no claim that a feminist performance art even existed. The question of this relationship was addressed as early as 1976 in an article
by American art critic Lucy Lippard which was the first important assessment of women's performance. In "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," Lippard attempted not only to map out the key features of such work, but to establish some of the ways in which it differed from performance by men. Lippard's most important point was that:

When women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their selves; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject.4

The clarity with which Lippard articulated this point has been instrumental in shaping the direction of this present study, which has attempted to develop a much more detailed historical assessment of Lippard's provisional observations. It will be shown that this positioning of the self, which was elaborated in greatly diverse ways, was the most crucial determining element that propelled the development of feminist performance art as a politicized practice, for it allowed women to assert themselves as the active and self-determined agents of their own narratives and representations.

Although male artists doing performance or "body art" also placed themselves at the centre of their work, they tended to treat the performer's body as a thing, object, or system upon or with which a series of actions or procedures would be carried out. According to artist Dennis Oppenheim, this emphasis on objectification was in response to Minimalism's preoccupation with the essence of the art object by focusing

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on the "objectifier" rather than on the object itself. Women, on the other hand, made the question of their identity and sexuality both the subject and the object of their work. This crucial aspect of women's performance led artist and feminist theorist Mary Kelly to conclude that:

[T]he specific contribution of feminists in the field of performance has been to pose the question of sexual difference across the discourse of the body in a way which focuses on the construction not of the individual, but of the sexed subject.

And because women posed the question of sexual difference in terms of its implications for social positioning, their work was not restricted to the realm of aesthetic debate, but made explicit reference to a social and cultural politics embedded in the praxis of life itself.

As noted above, however, the literature on feminist performance from the 1970s is very scant and provides little in the way of sustained critical or historical analysis of these issues. Although there are a few important exceptions, most of the material that focuses specifically on women's performance consists of descriptive articles of works by individual artists. There are several important essays on feminist performance that have been included in studies of performance or of feminist art during this period, but their focus tends to be either very broad or very narrow; none combine both comprehensive breadth and

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analytical depth. The only publication entirely devoted to the history of women's performance is an exhibition catalogue, *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970-1980*, with a fairly lengthy essay by historian Moira Roth. Roth's study is an invaluable contribution to this subject, although it can be built upon by making greater use of theoretical analysis and considerations of the relationship between feminist performance and the larger cultural and political context. None of these studies take performance by Canadian artists into account whatsoever. Conversely, studies of Canadian performance have taken no particular interest in feminist performance. Clearly, there is need for further study focused specifically on the history of Canadian feminist performance.

By providing a comprehensive historical and critical assessment of North American feminist performance, this present study therefore makes an important contribution to a subject which, because of its ephemeral nature, is particularly difficult to research and analyse. Because its

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purpose is to consider feminist performance in relation to the concerns and issues of the larger cultural context in which it developed as well as to the politics of the feminist movement, a thematic approach has been taken to the organization of this vast and unruly body of material. The study is divided, therefore, into three parts, each with sub-chapters.

The central thesis of this study argues that feminist performance played a central role in bringing a renewed political understanding to art practice at a time when aesthetics and politics were considered antithetical. The first part, therefore, provides an historical background to this situation by sketching out an overview of the relationship between art and politics throughout the twentieth century. This begins with a summary of the emergence of the historical avant-garde and its role in repudiating the notion of aesthetic autonomy (art for art's sake) in favour of the need for art to be engaged with what Peter Bürger called the "nexus of the praxis of life." The eventual disillusionment with, and rejection of, this premise is then examined in the context of post-World War II political tensions in North America, particularly through the influential writings of critic Clement Greenberg, who came to advocate that art's very survival depended upon a clear and absolute separation between art and the crude contingencies of life and politics in a debased capitalist culture. This section concludes with a consideration of how the escalating political and cultural crises of the 1960s, which had become intrinsically associated with the aesthetic values of High Modernism, forced many artists into a dilemma over whether or not they had a responsibility to address social and political issues in or through their art.

The second part of the study examines the emergence of women's performance in relation both to the feminist movement and the art world itself, which now became seen as the site of an ideological struggle waged by women who wanted to change the gender-based power relations which had long dominated it. It will be shown how feminist performance was heavily influenced by the political strategy of consciousness-raising which, by drawing on personal life experiences, provided women with a crucial, though largely empirical, basis for reconsidering the political as personal. Discussions of individual and collective works focus on the efforts of early feminist performance artists to investigate and expose sexist and confining stereotypes on the one hand, and on the other, to discover and celebrate the existence of what many feminists at this time believed were the unifying characteristics of the "true" female identity and sexuality that lay obscured behind the oppressive facade of patriarchal culture.

The third part of this study concentrates in more detail on the question of how feminist performance artists advanced notions of gendered subjectivity and identity formation in ways that effectively shifted our traditional class-oriented understanding of the political by positing the relationship of the individual to culture as inherently political. It begins with a summary of the major theoretical premises about the nature and formation of identity that have been significant for feminist thinking in the past twenty-five years. This section then investigates the three key strategies by means of which feminist performance artists devised alternative approaches to aesthetic practice by troubling or confusing the relationship between art and life as a way to challenge the dominant narratives and representations of the prevailing tradition of art practice. These general strategies are analyzed through individual works
in order to assess the theoretical and practical implications of their contributions to a self-critical and effective discourse on the relationships of power and powerlessness that lies at the heart of feminist politics and cultural practice.

A final note must be made regarding the definition of performance art. As historian RoseLee Goldberg has observed, performance art is an extremely permissive, open-ended and anarchic medium which "defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists."\footnote{Goldberg, p. 9.} For the purposes of this study, the premise of performance as live art has been expanded to include not only live performance done either for an art audience or an unsuspecting public, but also private performances documented through photographs or personal accounts, certain photographic works which incorporate an aspect of performative self-display, and numerous videotapes, some of which were documents of live performances and some were produced as videotapes in their own right. Generally speaking, the primary criterion for determining whether or not a particular work would be considered within the context of this research is whether the artist engaged in a performative--usually body-centred--action or event. Let us turn now to the particulars of this study.
HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ART AND POLITICS
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

I. Introduction.

The unprecedented participation of women in the flourishing of performance in the 1960s and 1970s was distinguished by a pervasive concern with political issues that was directly linked to the momentum of the nascent feminist movement in North America. Yet the women's liberation movement was only one of several radical political movements in the 1960s that were to unleash a degree of social unrest not seen since the 1920s and 1930s in Europe. The Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam protests, the alliance between the New Left and the students' movement, as well as all the sub-movements for free speech, free love, and so on, affected every citizen of both the United States and Canada, almost turning their respective societies into a series of armed camps in which the common enemy was The Establishment.

One might assume that, in an environment of such social turbulence aimed at overthrowing the "ruling class," the historic and original role of the avant-garde as political agitator would be readily revived. This was not the case. It was not that artists were disinterested in or removed from the issues that were tearing society asunder. Nor were they incapable of acting politically, as when they formed the Artists-Tenants Association in their 1961-64 struggle with New York's City Hall to retain their lofts as
living spaces. Indeed, as the decade progressed, increasing numbers of artists (but always a small percentage of the total) did participate in protests, marches and sit-ins for various causes. "But," as historian Irving Sandler wrote in his *American Art of the 1960s*,

the political awareness of vanguard painters and sculptors did not lead them to put their art in the service of their politics. They did not change their styles (or their life-styles). Political radicalism and artistic radicalism were kept separate. What artists did in the streets, so to speak, had no influence on what they made in their studios.  

Although Sandler does devote one chapter of his book to a discussion of artists' activism during these years, it is more of a chronicle than an in-depth analysis. In order to understand why art and politics were kept separate during these years, rather than engaged in the kind of interactive relationship that characterized avant-garde art in the early-twentieth century, we must address the question of how they had become separate, and why it was so difficult for artists to forge a new kind of engagement to deal with the crises of their own period.

The purpose of providing a historical overview of the events and developments that led up to the impasse between art and politics in the 1960s is to clarify the context in which feminist art first emerged. Only then will it be possible to understand and appreciate the full significance of the main point of this study: that the political goals of the feminist movement were so compelling for so many women artists that they no longer saw art's primary purpose as aesthetic reflection or expression, but

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as an agency of social change. For if the separation between art and politics was inherently a separation between art and life, the fundamental premise of feminist art was to change life itself.

II. Aesthetic Theory and the Autonomy of Art.

In order to account for the conditions that affected the relation between art and life (and by implication, art and politics) in the 1960s we must briefly look back about two hundred years for the origin of many of the ideas that prevailed during that period. Essentially, we are speaking here of a belief that art should exist as an aesthetic practice that is wholly removed from the contingencies of ordinary life so that it can be universal. In other words, art should be autonomous. These ideas were first articulated in the theory of aesthetics proposed by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* in 1790. Although these ideas exerted a broad influence over the development of art throughout the modern period, they would come to have a renewed significance in post-World War II art in North America through the highly influential writings of art critic Clement Greenberg.

The relevance of this is that we witness a situation in the 1960s where artists remained attached to a theory of aesthetics which held that art was universal and the artist's role was to maintain its autonomy from the dross of everyday life. At the same time, however, these artists found

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themselves in a society immersed in a kind of ideological civil war that was increasingly demanding militancy on the one side and accountability on the other. In short, they were confronted with a need to feel *engagé* with the burning issues of the day, yet stymied by the traditional view that engaged art cannot be "genuine" art. This opinion was clearly stated by Sol LeWitt in 1968:

> I do not think that I know of any art of painting or of sculpture that has any kind of real significance in terms of political content, and when it does try to have that, the result is pretty embarrassing.⁴

In order to grasp how difficult it was for artists to move beyond such rigid beliefs in the need for art to remain autonomous, it will be useful to examine how these ideas had become so entrenched in the first place. Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* comprises the most thorough and incisive account of the theory and development of autonomous art.⁵ Bürger argues that the autonomy of art was a paradigmatic expression of a specific historical period--that is, Enlightenment bourgeois society. But, because the theory of autonomy maintains that art is universal, and therefore transhistorical, its very premise depends upon obscuring recognition of the fact that it emerged from within a specific set of social and historical conditions. Bürger explained:

> In the strict meaning of the term, "autonomy" is thus an ideological category that joins an element of truth (the apartness of art from the praxis of life) and an element of untruth (the hypostatization of this fact, which is a result of historical development as the "essence" of art) (p. 46).

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It is important to note that when Bürger speaks of the autonomy of art, he refers not to its contents per se, but to art's social role in terms of function or purpose, mode of production and reception. The historical process of autonomy began with the transition from sacral to courtly art in the Renaissance, which marked a decisive change in the production of art: the artist began to produce as an individual, with a growing consciousness of the uniqueness of his activity. Yet art remained embedded in the daily life of courtly society wherein it served to self-portray that society, hence its function and reception remained collective. Although the content became social rather than sacral, artworks were still put to specific use (pp. 47-48).

With the development of a middle-class or bourgeois society in the eighteenth century, however, the specific use of works of art in what Bürger calls the "praxis" of life was no longer a requirement. Certainly art did not cease to have a function; rather its function changed from reflecting the values of its society within the context of daily life (the self-portrayal of courtly society), to projecting and preserving ideal values within a sphere separate from the means-end activity that dictated the daily lives of a bourgeois citizenry. As Bürger wrote, "Values such as humanity, joy, truth, solidarity are extruded from life as it were, and preserved in art" (p. 50).

Bürger's ideas about the function of art in bourgeois culture were significantly influenced by Herbert Marcuse's essay, "The Affirmative Character of Culture." Drawing by analogy upon the Marxist critique of religion, Marcuse showed how bourgeois culture exiles the "forgotten

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truths" of humane values to the realm of the imagination, which detaches them from reality by means of aesthetic semblance. Marcuse wrote:

The cultural ideal assimilated men's longing for a happier life: for humanity, goodness, joy, truth, and solidarity. Only, in this ideal, they are all furnished with the affirmative accent of belonging to a higher, purer, nonprosaic world.7

Since bourgeois culture retains the "remembrance of what could be." but simultaneously justifies "the established form of existence." Marcuse described its function as affirmative.8 Because Marcuse's discussion referred not to individual works, but to their status as objects set apart from ordinary existence, Bürger concluded that:

[Marcuse's] model provides the important theoretical insight that works of art are not received as single entities, but within institutional frameworks and conditions that largely determine the function of the works. . . . [therefore] I have chosen the term 'institution of art' to characterize such framing conditions (p. 12).

This preservation of art in a separate sphere was literal as well as figural. During the late eighteenth century we find the emergence of all the elements that sustain art in the modern period as a self-contained and self-regulating "institution": the art museum, the public exhibition, the dealer-critic system, and the academy as a training centre and professional affiliation for artists.9 Thus, not only was the ideological function of art now to embody values impossible to attain in everyday life, but the actual reception of art by its audience took place apart from daily life.

7 Marcuse, p. 114. See also, Bürger, pp. 11-12.
8 Marcuse, p. 98.
A central feature of the self-contained institutionalization of art was the development of a philosophical concept of art as a unique activity whose precise function was to transcend the constraints and pragmatics of daily life. This concept was fully articulated in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, which investigated not the work of art, but aesthetic judgement itself. Locating the aesthetic between sense and reason, Kant argued that aesthetic judgement must not be determined either by individual inclination or by moral law, but by *disinterested* pleasure: "The delight which determines the judgement of taste is independent of all interest."\(^{10}\) What Kant meant by "interest" is any concern, such as sensual pleasure or moral didacticism, which might affect one's judgment by a motivation that is not strictly aesthetic.

Kant's theory held aesthetics apart from the contingencies of life: thus true aesthetic judgement must be, *ipso facto*, universal. Moreover, this aesthetic judgement is not to be determined by theory (as in rules or codified concepts), but by universal, yet subjective, agreement. so long as this subjectivity is not propelled by sensual or moral ends.\(^{11}\) Contained within this concept of the simultaneous universality and subjectivity of aesthetic judgement is the very basis of the notion of the autonomy of art. Removed from the context of everyday life into an institutionalized whole based on its own self-regulating principles, the function of art now became purposeless creativity and disinterested pleasure.

Kant's *Critique of Judgement* enjoyed an enduring authority in the field of aesthetic theory, yet even a cursory glance at art of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries indicates that both sensually

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:\(^{10}\) Kant, p. 2, quoted in Bürger, p. 42.

:\(^{11}\) Kant, pp. 31, 35, quoted in Bürger, p. 43.
pleasurable and didactic art existed throughout the period. What must be recognized here, however, is the distinction between the contents of art and its social role. Bürger stressed that although the overtly sensual or didactic contents of art can appear to deviate from Kant's theory of universality, the very fact that art now existed as an institution separate from the praxis of everyday life ensured its autonomous social role. Although artists might have felt compelled to address the worsening social conditions of the nineteenth century by making critical protests, their efforts were ineffectual precisely because they were not played out within society, but were confined to the ideal sphere of art.

III. The Role of the Avant-Garde.

Scholarly opinions differ about precisely when avant-garde art began, or exactly what constitutes it, but it is generally understood to have emerged around 1850 and been characterized by a skepticism about the debasement of culture under capitalism. The debates tend to focus on the relationship of the avant-garde to the larger modernist movement, particularly on the question of whether the two are synonymous or fundamentally distinct. Bürger argued for the latter, based upon the

premise that what specifically characterized the avant-garde was its desire to destroy the autonomy of the institution of art. What is significant for us is not so much his "position" on this question, but the process by which he arrived at his conclusions by concentrating not just on the intrinsic modes of art production (both in terms of form and content), but on the extrinsic factors around that production, that is, the ways in which art functioned and was received in the larger social context. Although many aspects of his theory can be debated, it is generally acknowledged that his most important contribution is the emphasis he placed on the social status or role of art in modern society. As questions about this role lay at the heart of the dilemma faced by artists in the 1960s. Bürger's formulations of the problems and issues can shed light on the present study.

Bürger argued that art had remained autonomous throughout the nineteenth century by virtue of its institutional separation from everyday life. With the symbolist and aesthetic movements of the late nineteenth century, the futility of art to have a social role became recognized and incorporated within the art itself through that transformation of form into content known as l'art pour l'art: "The apartness from the praxis of life that had always constituted the institutional status of art in bourgeois society now becomes the content of works" (p. 27). This recognition of the autonomy of art was a crucial stage in the transformation of the social role of art because only by making its institutional nature visible did it become possible for artists to become conscious of the separation between art and life. But where the Symbolists and Aesthetes responded to this separation

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13 Eysteinsson, pp. 163-166.
by foregrounding their autonomy, the avant-garde held that, since the
dissociation from the praxis of life was the dominant characteristic of art
within bourgeois society, the only recourse for effective change was to
reintegrate art into the praxis of life, but not into the existing praxis. The
avant-garde wanted not to portray a semblance of a better society through
artistic depiction, but to bring about actual change by exposing and
eliminating the institutional status of art.

While it is possible to debate the relationship between modernist and
avant-garde art in the nineteenth century, there is consensus on the
identification of those groups in the early-twentieth century who exhibited
the characteristics we have come to associate with the avant-garde: the
Futurists, the Russian Constructivists and Productivists, Dadaists and
Surrealists. While operating within very diverse historical contexts, with
differing concerns, strategies and goals, these groups shared a commitment
to a revolt against the institution of art. As Matei Calinescu pointed out:

In France, Italy, Spain and other European countries the avant-garde,
despite its various and often contradictory claims, tends to be
regarded as the most extreme form of artistic negativism--art itself
being the first victim. As for modernism, whatever its specific
meaning in different languages and for different authors, it never
conveys that sense of universal and hysterical negation so
characteristic of the avant-garde. The anti-traditionalism of
modernism is often subtly traditional.

This revolt could be expressed as a questioning of the nature of the work
of art so that even a gesture (such as the spreading of glue on the
audience's seats at a Futurist performance) could be understood as a

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14 An example of the extreme contrasts that existed amongst these avant-garde
groups would be the proto-fascism of the Italian Futurists and the aggressive anti-
fascism of John Heartfield's photomontages of the 1920s and 1930s.
15 Calinescu, p. 140. Author's emphasis.
manifestation of art. It could involve a negating of what they saw as the bourgeois concept of individual creation and genius by working collectively or by making art based on the techniques or principles of mass production. Whatever the means, the primary goal was to change both the mode of art production, and even more importantly, its reception; that is, to forge a new relationship with the audience. In this conception of the avant-garde it was not enough to achieve a cultural transformation of an "otherwise persistent and recuperated old order," but to create an entirely new social order.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the avant-garde was ultimately unsuccessful in destroying art as an institution separate from the praxis of life. But because they were able to recognize it as an ideological institution, they were able to destroy its codes and canons which established artistic norms and values. Thereafter, no specific school or group (including the avant-garde) could lay claim to absolute or universal validity. What was destroyed is not the institution per se, but the possibility of "positing aesthetic norms as valid ones" (p. 87). Once the hegemony of the institution was broken, the door was open to challenging its aesthetic values and norms, as well as the ideological, social and political underpinnings of those norms and values. This realization would have vast consequences for the history of twentieth-century art, particularly during the late 1960s when an interest in the relationship

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17 Williams, p. 62.
between the institution and the social role of art was revived after a hiatus of several decades.

By the 1960s though, the politicized art of the historical avant-gardes was a distant memory but for a few residual traces. As artists attempted to come to terms with their sense of moral duty to respond to the deepening social crises of that decade, they were unable to turn to the strategies and premises of their forebears. How and why this situation had come to pass are difficult questions, but can be partly addressed by an overview of the historical fortunes of *engagé* art in both Europe and North America in the period between the two World Wars. We will then be able to understand more fully the basis for the renewed separation between art and life that characterized the period after World War II in North America, which in turn will allow us to place in greater historical relief the specific role played by feminist artists in renegotiating a renewed relationship between art, life and politics.

IV. Engaged Art Between the Wars.

Art historical literature on the relationship between art and politics during the turbulent years between the two world wars has, until quite recently, been very scant. For many years the only text which attempted to explore out this territory in any depth was John Willet's *Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic.* More historians have begun to re-examine this

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rich and vast material, however, resulting in publications such as Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, Helena Lewis' *The Politics of Surrealism*, Kenneth Silver's *L'Esprit de corps*, and *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars*, jointly authored by Briony Fer, David Batchelor and Paul Wood. The advantage of these recent studies is that they endeavor to consider the relationship between art and culture as a whole, rather than concentrating on individual artists and works.

Given the range and diversity during these years of artistic groups who held the conviction that art could and should have a social content, and that it was the responsibility of artists to work for social change, it would be impossible to give a detailed analysis here of each and every one. At any rate, this is not necessary for the purposes of this study. The discussion instead will focus on the two manifestations of an engaged relationship between art and politics that would have the greatest ramifications for the post-war period in North America: Surrealism and Realism during the 1920s and 1930s. The intention here is not to provide a comprehensive history of either of these two artistic phenomena, but to use their activities as specific examples of how profoundly and resolutely art was engaged with the larger social, political and cultural context during

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20 William Rubin's *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (1968; rpt. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982) would stand as a characteristic example of an historical study of this period in which the achievements of individual artists are emphasized over discussion of the larger social and political context.
the unstable years between the wars. It will then be possible to trace the sequence of momentous transformations that would succeed in driving such commitment virtually underground so that when the divisive social conflicts of the 1960s emerged, artists were thrown into deep crisis about whether or how to reconcile their life concerns and their art concerns.

V. Surrealism: Revolutionary Art and Politics.

It is well know that Surrealism emerged from within the spirit of Dada anarchy during the years of the époque floue in Paris between 1920 and 1924, but its adherents soon became convinced of the need to channel their revolt more productively. Nevertheless, an anarchistic element would persist in their thinking, which, precisely because it preserved them from the kind of orthodoxy advocated by the leftist political groups with which they sought alliance, would remain a source of conflict in their efforts to integrate their artistic and political ambitions. Undeterred, the Surrealists persevered in trying to bring about the destruction of the autonomy of the institution of art by working with revolutionary political groups and putting their art at their service. The fact that their ideas and methods for uniting artistic and political goals was so mistrusted by these political groups indicates in itself how entrenched in society the institutional role of art was. In other words, because these groups, like the rest of bourgeois society of which they were still a part, adhered to the idea of art as an autonomous and therefore ineffectual activity, they found it impossible to grasp the real radicalism of the Surrealists' position.
At the root of Surrealism's anarchistic tendencies was their belief that the shackles of bourgeois culture could be overthrown only through a "total liberation of the mind." In this early phase, they dismissed politics as provisional and falsely limited in bringing about any form of true revolution. In an issue of their aptly named journal, *La Révolution surréaliste*, the poet Louis Aragon expressed their collective sentiment when he wrote that he had little taste for the Bolshevik government or for Communism in general. I have always placed the spirit of revolt far above politics. I simply shrug my shoulders at the thought of the Russian Revolution... it is nothing more than a vague ministerial crisis.

Yet this did not mean the Surrealists were content to pursue their revolutionary goals strictly within the context of conventional art-making. In the spirit of their anarchistic Dada legacy, they sought to incite the public through the outrageous declarations, condemnations and demands against bourgeois values which they published in their journals and tracts. In the name of total liberation they demanded the immediate release of all mentally ill patients, they condemned racial oppression, imperialism and colonial exploitation, they declared a war on work, and most inflammatory of all in the aftermath of World War I, they violently opposed all forms of nationalism.

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21 Louis Aragon et al., "Déclaration du 27 janvier 1925," a pamphlet distributed in the streets of Paris under the imprimatur of the Bureau de Recherches Surréalistes. The full text is reproduced in Lewis, pp. 28-29.
23 See, for example, several articles in *La Révolution surréaliste*, No. III (April 1925), including Antonin Artaud, "Lettre aux médecins-chef des asile de fous," pp. 29-34; Paul Eluard, "La Suppression de l'esclavage," pp. 19-23 and Robert Desnos, "Pamphlet contre Jérusalem," pp. 8-9. See also *La Révolution surréaliste*, No. IV (July 1925), which had the slogan "WAR ON WORK" in huge capital letters on its cover.
Through the course of 1925, however, it became increasingly clear to several members of the group that the autonomous institutional status of art prevented even their most vociferous and violent provocations from having any real social impact. It became apparent that if they were serious about becoming more than armchair revolutionaries, then they would have to ally themselves with an organized political movement. This shift in their program was engineered mainly by André Breton, whose increasingly central role was indicated by his assumption of the editorship of *La Révolution surréaliste* from the fourth issue on. The main impetus for this shift came from a rapprochement during 1925 between the Surrealist group and the left-wing intellectuals of the Clarté movement, who published a journal under that name. Through their association with Clarté the Surrealists were "schooled" in Marxist politics. While not ardent supporters of the Russian Revolution, the Surrealists recognized their common enemy in the bourgeois ruling class. The visual artists of the Surrealist group did not often contribute to *Clarté* except to sign manifestoes and declarations, but even André Masson was moved to write:

I believe that . . . every man who wants revolution . . . is necessarily led to consider that the only socially valuable upheaval in our times is the Dictatorship of the Proletariat as Marx conceived it and as Lenin actualized it. Once and for all, I have broken with 'revolutionary bohemianism.'

The outbreak of France's colonial war in Morocco in 1925 galvanized the Surrealists' conviction that the "liberation of the mind" must be accompanied by a social revolution. This was a consolidating moment

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24 Lewis, p. 32.
between Clarté and the Surrealists, even though mutual trust and respect were by no mean unanimous. Nevertheless, members of Clarté worked hard to recommend the revolutionary potential of the Surrealists to the French Communist Party. This was no easy job, since the Party had a deep-seated mistrust of all intellectuals. They were particularly suspicious of the Surrealists, who continued to alarm them with what Party officials considered to be counterrevolutionary bourgeois tendencies. The Party insisted they abandon their "Romantic" attitudes, their "scandals." and their continuing anarchistic tendencies. But the real issue was whether or not they were willing to put the social revolution before the spiritual one. As Pierre Naville, an original member of the Surrealist group who by 1926 had become a militant Communist, put it:

Do the Surrealists believe in liberation of the mind before the abolition of bourgeois conditions of material life, or do they comprehend that a revolutionary spirit can be created only after the Revolution is accomplished?27

The answer to that question was neither unanimous nor consistent. For Breton, the answer was a dilemma. He hated the bourgeoisie more than he loved the proletariat, he never relinquished his belief that the real key to liberation came through the work of the mind and that "irreducible independence of thought which implies the greatest revolutionary determination," and he could not see why Marx and Rimbaud were incompatible heroes.28 But because he understood that to work in artistic isolation (autonomy) was to be impotent in bringing about social change.

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26 For a more detailed account of the relationship between the Surrealist and Clarté groups, see Lewis, pp. 37-54.
he desperately wanted to have Surrealism approved as a revolutionary art form by the Party. Ultimately, it was this desire that prevailed and so in 1927 Breton and four other Surrealists officially joined the French Communist Party, with the expectation of support from the other twenty-five or so members of their group.

It was never an entirely harmonious association. It created bitter divisiveness and resulted in a schism among key members of the Surrealist group\(^{29}\). Nor did it ameliorate the criticisms leveled by the Party for their self-indulgence, solipsism and apparent refusal to engage in real political work with the proletariat. Breton was forever being called before Party bureaucrats at the *Commission de contrôle* to defend some Surrealist action or manifesto. The Party even disapproved of the title of *La Révolution surréaliste*, for, as Lewis noted, "It sounded suspicious, and even heretical because it seemed to indicate a distinction between a Surrealist and a Marxist revolution.\(^{30}\) The Surrealists hoped the name of their new journal, *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, would convince the Party of their unequivocal commitment, which they also demonstrated by pledging allegiance to the Third International and the French Communist Party. They even had a moment of support in the Party's organ, *L'Humanité*, over the scandal caused by the screening of Salvador Dali's and Luis Buñuel's film *L'Age d'or* in Paris on December 3.

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\(^{29}\) Those who left or were "purged" from the Surrealist movement around this time included Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Antonin Artaud, Jean Carrive, Joseph Delteil, Francis Gérard, George Limbour, André Masson, Philippe Soupalt and Roger Vitrac. In the "Second manifeste du surréalisme," published in the final issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* (December 1929), Breton also made vitifying remarks directed at Pierre Naville and Georges Bataille. Essentially, he attacked everyone who had turned either to pure party politics or "art for art's sake." See Lewis, pp. 81-83.

\(^{30}\) Lewis, p. 40.
1930. The public outcry against this film, including its condemnation by right-wing groups as a "Bolshevist spectacle," resulted in official censorship and finally made Party members concede that the Surrealists could serve a revolutionary purpose, although they did not consider this "a film for the proletariat." The following week, when a mob furiously vandalized Surrealist art works on exhibition at Studio 28 in Paris, *L'Humanité* again jumped to their defense to praise the obviously subversive nature of these works.

But if the Surrealists thought this heralded a more sympathetic relationship with the Party, they were sadly mistaken. As the twin spectres of fascism and Stalinism cast a darkening shadow over Europe, positions on both the right and left became rigidly entrenched. In an effort to consolidate all its resources against the growing threat of the extreme right, the Communist Party began to focus on the question of culture. In a series of congresses held between 1930 and 1934, artists and writers worked to formulate an idea of how culture could be made to serve the revolution and fight against right-wing fascists. What emerged out of these organizations was the doctrine of Socialist Realism, in which art was to serve as a weapon in the class struggle of the proletariat within the broader directive of leftist alliance known as the Popular Front. It was inconceivable for the Surrealists to countenance such dogmatic orthodoxy. They were unwilling to keep silent about their dissent over the doctrine of Socialist Realism or relinquish their insistence upon the liberty of the individual and the freedom of art, including the freedom to criticize any

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31 Lewis, pp. 92-95.
33 *L'Humanité*, December 13, 1930, p. 4.
34 These various congresses and associations are discussed in Lewis, pp. 97-118.
and all aspects of society, politics and culture. But in the tense atmosphere of the mid-1930s, no such dissent or individual prerogatives were to be tolerated. One by one the Surrealists were purged from various organizations so that by 1935 they seemed to have no more allies on the left.

Yet, unlike so many other disaffected leftist intellectuals during these years, the Surrealists never went over to the right. Freed from any links with the Party, they were now able to attack the Stalinist "betrayal" and openly express the sympathies they had always had with Leon Trotsky, then living in Mexico after being exiled by Stalin. In February 1938 Breton jumped at the chance to go there on a cultural mission from the French government. His admiration for Trotsky was unbounded and he was overjoyed to find that this venerable old Bolshevist leader shared his views on the special role of the artist in society. Trotsky endorsed the Surrealists' commitment to complete freedom in art and he approved of their criticisms of the conservatism of Socialist Realism, which he considered nothing more than crude propaganda made by bureaucrats.

Together with Diego Rivera, Breton and Trotsky wrote a manifesto, *Pour un art révolutionnaire indépendant*, which would come to have a profound impact on the future direction of art in North America through its publication later that year in the American leftist journal *Partisan Review*.\(^{35}\) The manifesto demanded complete freedom for art, insisting

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\(^{35}\) Although the manifesto was signed only by Breton and Rivera, it is widely believed that this was merely a ruse since Trotsky was forbidden by the Mexican government to engage in political activities. The manifesto was translated into English by Dwight MacDonald and published as "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art." *Partisan Review*, IV, No. 1 (Fall 1938), pp. 49-53. This version has been reprinted in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp. 526-529. All further references are to the Harrison and Wood version.
that it not be subservient to any form of imposed discipline, including partisan politics, but rather that "true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society."³⁶ Although this position would be manipulated in the changed climate of post-war America to support a revival of the notion of "art for art's sake," a return to the autonomy of art was emphatically not what they meant by freedom:

No, our conception of the role of art is too high to refuse it an influence of the fate of society. We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution.³⁷

Breton returned home highly enthused about the possibility of creating a new, inclusive association of revolutionary artists free from the dogma and oppression of Stalinism. But because of the chaos in Europe and isolation from the mainstream of the left, the new Fédération internationale de l'art révolutionnaire indépendant remained a cobbled together and ad hoc affair. Within a year the looming war had erupted. Within two years Paris had fallen to the Nazis and Trotsky had been assassinated by a Stalinist agent. Most of the Surrealists sought refuge in New York, where the terms of their refugee status required them to keep out of political affairs. In the post-war period the Surrealists were scathingly condemned for having abandoned France in wartime and Jean-Paul Sartre's bitter existential pessimism led him to dismiss them as mere rebels, "parasites of the class they insult [whose] revolt remains on the margin of the revolution."³⁸ Their sphere of influence had clearly passed.

³⁶ Breton, Rivera and Trotsky, p. 527.
³⁷ Breton, Rivera and Trotsky, p. 528.
There can be no doubt that the Surrealists' goal of uniting art and politics by destroying the autonomy of the institution of art remained elusive. If the elimination of the autonomy of art meant the loss of freedom through subordination to partisan politics and orthodox doctrine, then clearly this could not be a viable solution to the question of art's social role. In spite of such failures, the Surrealists were successful in drawing attention to the question of art's revolutionary potential in terms of the inseparable relationship between form and content. For the Surrealists, such avant-garde aspirations were meaningful only to the extent to which both form and content were socially revolutionary. As we shall see, however, the depoliticized climate of the post-war years in North America would lead to an altered concept of avant-garde art in which form alone would be construed as embodying a kind of social resistance.

VI. North American Art Between the Wars.

Even a cursory survey of North American art in the twentieth-century reveals such enormous differences in the art produced before and after World War II that it might appear as if these were the artifacts of two entirely separate cultures. That impression would be heavily reinforced if one consulted any of the standard texts on the period, such as Barbara Rose's *American Painting: The American Tradition* (1969), or Irving Sandler's *Triumph of American Painting* (1970). There are two

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main points that such texts, in accordance with most art criticism of the period, endeavor to underscore above all else. Firstly, American art is held to have finally come to its maturity in the post-war period, and secondly, that process of maturing not only allowed it to "triumph" over its own past, but also over the shattered remains of European art.40

This triumph was fully manifested in Abstract Expressionism, which was considered to be the first truly original American art. Rose wrote:

In Abstract Expressionism, then, American artists were at last able to realize their long maturing ambition for an art both of formal grandeur as well as spiritual significance. . . . Abstract Expressionism was an art dedicated, above all, to transcending the mundane, the banal and the material through the use of metaphor and symbol.41

The underlying premise of such valuations is that the transcendence of any reference to the banality of the material world is the most important accomplishment of art. In other words, the transcendence of Abstract Expressionism was a positive confirmation of its autonomous existence apart from the praxis of daily life. In this historical formulation, the "realist" art of the previous period is implicitly disparaged as crude, immature and insignificant precisely because it was intrinsically connected

40 Canadian art could not, of course, claim such a dramatic victory, although here too the break with the past was valorized. With the vitalization of American art in the buoyant economy of the post-war years. Canadian art forged closer ties with cultural activities on this continent than it had with Europe (Québec artists, however, remained more closely attached to Paris). Although the perpetuation of such a colonial mentality has been vociferously challenged by nationalists like Greg Curnoe, Canadian art has continued to come under the sphere of influence of American art, adopting its forms and strategies even when these are based on ideological underpinnings that have little or nothing to do with the specifically Canadian context and experience. Canadian ambivalence towards the Americanization of our culture has been eloquently discussed in Arthur Kroker, "The Canadian Discourse," in his Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/McLuhan/Grant (Montréal: New World Perspectives. 1984), pp. 7-19.
41 Rose, p. 70.
to the banal materialism of daily life, which Rose condemned as the "literalism that limited American art for centuries."  

Sandler too saw post-war American art as surpassing the limitations of older traditions. The first chapter of his book does acknowledge the historical and political ramifications for art during the troubled years of the 1930s and 1940s, but his main purpose seems to have been to establish a basis to distinguish such concerns from the new directions of the post-war years, which he discussed in strictly aesthetic terms. Although a curious student of this period might well wonder how the mere development of a new style of painting could so abruptly displace former concerns about art's relationship to political and social issues, such nagging doubts are neatly jettisoned by these historians' heroic and laudatory characterizations of this new art: transcendence, triumph, grandeur.

Well, perhaps not quite so neatly. Beginning in the early 1970s, this view of history has begun to be revised. Initially the inquiry was directed towards a reconsideration of Abstract Expressionism within the context of the Cold War. Scholars like Max Kozloff, Eva Cockcroft and, somewhat later, Serge Guilbaut investigated the apparent discrepancy between the creation of an art form so visually detached from any external references to the extremely tendentious politics, both at home and abroad, of the Cold War period. In turn, this important research contributed to a revitalization of scholarship on the subject of American art between the wars, which has

42 Rose, p. 70.
benefited from a considerable number of new studies. There is no need to rehearse the contents of these studies, but it will be useful to illustrate briefly some of the ways North American artists between the wars attempted to invest their work with social and political commitment during these turbulent times. In so doing, we shall have a basis for understanding how the neutralization of such concerns came about in the post-war years and led to the dilemma faced by artists in the 1960s.

Artistic activities during the inter-war period in North America ranged from the European-derived modernism of Max Weber to the highly idiosyncratic personal and nationalistic narratives of Frida Kahlo to the unabashed regionalism of Grant Wood or Charles Comfort. But with the crash of the stock market in 1929, the Depression, the ensuing crisis over capitalism itself and the rising threat of fascism in Europe, debates over the function and purpose of art went from being based merely on professional or "stylistic" differences to being based on ideological ones. What was fundamentally at stake here was whether and how art could move beyond the autonomous isolation of self-referentialism and aesthetic preoccupation to engage in meaningful activities for the social good of all.

One possible solution to this dilemma was to be found through President Roosevelt's New Deal welfare and economic reform policies of 1933 that, among other things, involved hiring artists to portray uplifting and noble images of American society in order to alleviate the despair and assuage any potential revolutionary fervor brought about by the

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Depression. Although the government supported a diverse range of visual art, the bulk of their sponsorship was given to large mural decorations of public institutions. For the most part, these murals were executed in variations of the realist style that had become so prevalent during this period both in North America and Europe. This entailed not only a naturalistic figurative style, but a content based on themes of current urgency in a devastated American society: work, family, urban and rural life.

This form of American painting was called "democratic realism" to distinguish it ideologically from the official "Socialist Realism" associated with Stalinism. Its stylistic basis, however, was largely derived from Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros who, in spite of their avowed commitment to socialism, had been given several important commissions in the United States during the 1930s. For example, Rivera rejected his previous Cubist style as irrelevant and elitist, and, while working on his murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1932, declared that: "I want to be a propagandist of Communism and I want to be it in all

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46 For a discussion of the similarities and differences between the various "realisms" of the period in both Europe and North America, see Paul Wood, "Realisms and Realities," in Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars, pp. 250-331.
that I can think, in all that I can speak, in all that I can write, and in all that I can paint. I want to use my art as a weapon. How ironic that a painter like Rivera could not only proclaim his Communism, but blatantly use his art as an instrument of his ideology in such a prominent commission in a country that within twenty years would find itself in the heyday of red-baiting and McCarthyism.

To be sure, it was a complicated and difficult time, marked by tensions between liberal reformers, Communist radicals and nationalist conservatives. But as the decade progressed, it became increasingly clear that such differences paled in comparison to the accruing power of the greater threat of fascism. As fascism in Europe appeared to be successfully absorbing the centre into a right-wing attack against the left, the Communists felt especially threatened. As mentioned above, their response was to form the Popular Front, which was intended to suppress all differences and conflicts between the various groups on the left, even going so far as to solicit bourgeois intellectuals to the cause so as to present a strong and unified resistance to the forces of fascism.

There were detractors of this new policy, especially the Surrealists, whose contempt for the bourgeoisie was so great they could not accept any policy which would have them fraternizing side by side. But the Popular Front did become a haven for progressive intellectuals in both Europe and North America. It made possible that particularly American blend of anti-fascism and pro-democracy that permitted one to be all things at once:


49 The policy of the Popular Front was developed at the Seventh Congress of the Komintern in Moscow in July-August of 1935.
Now you could be for every kind of social reform, for the Soviet Union, for the Communist Party, for proletarian Literature... and in doing so you were on the side of all the political angels of the day... In short, this is the only period in all the world's history when you could be at one and the same time an ardent revolutionary and an arch-conservative backed by the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union.50

For artists it seemed as if their social relevance would finally be recognized and welcomed; this would be the beginning of the end of their alienation.

In response to this new optimism, the First American Artists' Congress was convened in New York in February 1936 to discuss the role of the artist in American society, especially in connection to the strategies of the Popular Front.51 The well attended congress hosted thirty-six speakers including Stuart Davis, Lewis Mumford, Meyer Shapiro, Margaret Bourke-White and David Siqueiros. The themes were broad and diverse, including artists' unions, audiences, the role of government, the Negro, economic concerns and, above all, the issue of war and fascism. In accordance with the policy of the Popular Front, differences and conflicts were played down. Certain positions and attitudes were attacked, such as nationalism and self-indulgent individualism, but not individual American artists. As Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams note in the introduction to their collection of papers from this congress, potentially discordant issues were glossed over or avoided, including any specific discussion of aesthetic issues.52 What was voiced instead were vague calls for social value or relevance, such as Stuart Davis' exhortation to abandon their preoccupation with studio problems and "step into the street."53

51 The complete papers are published in Baigell and Williams. pp.62-215.
52 Baigell and Williams, p. 14.
VII. Disillusionment with the Left.

By avoiding discussion of aesthetics, the American Artists' Congress adroitly circumvented the very problem that the Surrealists had run into head-long—the doctrine of Social Realism. Indeed, as Baigell and Williams observed, the congress exhibitions right through to its dissolution in 1942 were never dominated by an singular style, but ranged from the academic to the abstract.54 While the Popular Front in Europe still demanded a faithful adherence to Stalin's version of Social Realism throughout the thirties, a much greater latitude was tolerated in North America. By the latter half of the decade, however, criticism of the Popular Front began to grow among members of the intellectual left, creating an ideological rift in which debates over aesthetics, which had been so carefully avoided before, returned as the symbolic focal point for a re-evaluation of political positions that was to have repercussions lasting well into the 1960s.

Guilbaut has termed this ideological shift "the de-Marxization of the [American] intelligentsia."55 From the outset, many Americans had rejected the politics of the Popular Front, including those on the left who felt it merely attracted a petty-bourgeois following looking for a new intellectual vogue, as well as those who, like the Surrealists, were troubled by the question of how artistic standards and innovative formal experimentation could be maintained within such a narrowly circumscribed doctrine.56 In spite of such concerns, the Communist hold

54 Baigell and Williams, p. 38.
on the intelligentsia was only gradually eroded towards the end of the decade in response to a series of disturbing events of international significance. First came the Moscow Trials of 1936-38 in which many of the Soviet Union's most prestigious intellectuals were "tried" and condemned, including Trotsky. This surprising act convinced many that the Soviet Union under Stalin represented a form of totalitarian repression no better than fascism. Faith was weakened by this, and the American left was polarized, but not broken. Then in August 1939 the Russo-German pact was signed, destroying most of the remaining hopes for a new future led by the Soviet revolutionaries. For all but a few persistent hold-outs, the final blow came with the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1939.57

In the cultural sphere, these events led to a growing disaffection not only with Stalin and the Popular Front, but with the very idea that culture could play any viable political role. These effects were temporarily delayed as a result of increased sympathy with Trotsky, who had been seen mainly as a dogmatic fanatic before his expulsion from the Soviet Union. Indeed, Trotsky's ideas about the relation between art and politics were to play a brief but pivotal role in the shifting and confusing political landscape of America in the late 1930s. In response to repeated requests from the editors of Partisan Review, Trotsky wrote a letter which they published in 1938 under the title "Art and Politics."58 The gist of this letter was flagrant attack on Stalinism and any sort of doctrinaire control over art, as well as on the bourgeoisie's efforts to reclaim innovative art

57 For example, Stuart Davis, in his role as president of the Communist-dominated American Artists' Congress, was reluctant to issue any condemnation of the Soviets. See Guilbaut, How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art, p. 39.
58 Leon Trotsky, "Art and Politics," Partisan Review. V. No. 3 (August-September 1938), pp. 3-60.
into a new form of academicism. He insisted that art must remain free and independent of partisan interest in order to implement fully its subversive and critical potential. By no means, however, was he advocating a rejection of politics. Art was the most vulnerable aspect of culture, and as bourgeois society decayed, artists had to resist the reactionary urge to escape into aloofness and isolation. The truly creative and revolutionary potential of art lay in its absolute incompatibility "with lies, hypocrisy and the spirit of conformity. Art can become a strong ally of the revolution only in so far as it remains faithful to itself."

The next issue of Partisan Review contained the manifesto, "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," that Breton, Rivera, and Trotsky had written in Mexico City in the spring of 1938. As Guilbaut noted, the further elaboration of this position in an American leftist journal under the auspices of these three great names had a profound impact on intellectuals searching for a way out of the ideological labyrinth in which they were trapped. This impact was felt nowhere more strongly than in the writings of the young art critic, Clement Greenberg. In fact, within a year Greenberg would publish his own manifesto of sorts in the pages of the very same journal. As we shall see, Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." adapted certain aspects of Trotsky's and Breton's concerns, which Greenberg reformulated into a critical position that would influence the course of American art for more than two decades.

I. Clement Greenberg's Art Criticism: From Avant-Garde to Modernism.

Clement Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" of 1939 elucidated what he saw as the crisis of culture within the enveloping decay of capitalism and the decline of the ruling bourgeois class. Greenberg argued that avant-garde art was being abandoned by the elites of this class, to whom it had always been "attached by an umbilical cord of gold." As support for avant-garde art dissipated, it was replaced by kitsch or mass culture--the pulp novels and popular music favoured by the urban workers and petty bourgeois. Socialist Realism, he said, was just another form of kitsch. One was driven by the greed for profit and the other by party politics, but both were manifestations of a mediated and vulgar academicism. Moreover, these debased forms of culture were an ideological ploy to keep the masses contented in their place, which could only be disrupted by "a surrender to international socialism" (p. 20). Greenberg concluded by quoting Marx to the effect that the arrival of socialism would inevitably bring a new culture, but in the meantime "we look to socialism simply for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now" (p. 22).

In blaming both bourgeois decay and the failure of Stalinism for the crisis of culture, Greenberg's position was similar to that expressed by Trotsky and Breton in "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art." As Serge Guilbaut has noted, however, Greenberg lacked their revolutionary optimism for the conjoining of political and cultural action. In Greenberg's view, the role of the avant-garde was to preserve culture from the invasion of all forms of kitsch and "keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence" (p. 8). The avant-garde had done this by "detaching" itself from capitalist society by means of the l'art pour l'art aesthetic. Having done so, it was then free to "repudiate revolutionary as well as bourgeois politics" (p. 7).

Greenberg agreed with Trotsky and Breton that only a free and independent avant-garde art could resist the forces of political propaganda and capitalist degradation. But whereas their reason was that such art was too critical, Greenberg's was that it was too "innocent" to be manipulated by such crude exploitation. Although he still anticipated the arrival of a new culture under socialism, "the revolution was left inside society" (p. 7). Art, on the other hand, was now to fight the forces of decay and oppression only within the domain of culture itself. If art that aligned itself with either political or capitalist instrumentality inevitably resulted in the mediocrities of kitsch, then what was needed was a return to the freedom of formal experimentation that had so energized Modern art at the beginning of the century. And if kitsch was the culture of the masses.

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only the purest, most authentic artistic sensibility could stave off its corrupt and debased manifestations.

By identifying kitsch as the enemy of true culture, Greenberg provided a way out of the deeply troubling and confusing political impasse of the late 1930s. In effect, he admonished artists to abandon their struggles with "real world" politics and return art to its proper position of "detachment" or autonomy. As he would later write: "some day it will have to be told how anti-Stalinism which started out more or less as Trotskyism turned into art for art's sake, and thereby cleared the way. heroically, for what was to come." What Greenberg wanted was the renewal of an avant-garde that was revolutionary not because of its political stance or content, but because of its style. For him, and for the art world that increasingly came under his influence, only the freedom of formal experimentation could separate real art from the pseudo-art of mass culture. Unlike Peter Bürger, who saw the role of the avant-garde as destroying art's autonomous separation from society in order to change that society, Greenberg saw autonomy as the very condition of the survival of the avant-garde.⁴

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⁵ Greenberg and Bürger probably represent the greatest contrast of views of the role of the avant-garde. Where Bürger is in the tradition that sees the avant-garde as effecting a radical break with past culture, Greenberg is in the tradition that sees the avant-garde as purifying and preserving the best of that culture. While these two positions have been enmeshed in debates over whether and how the avant-garde can be distinguished from modernism, no clear and definitive demarcations seem possible. For an overview of these debates, see Jochen Schulte-Sasse, Forward, Theory of the Avant-Garde, by Peter Bürger, trans. Michael Shaw (1984: rpt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992)pp. vii-xxxix; Raymond Williams, "The Politics of the Avant-Garde," in his The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists (London and New York: Verso, 1989), pp. 49-63 and Astradur Eysteinsson.
Greenberg's views on the relation between art and culture bears similarities to those of the German cultural theorist, Theodor Adorno. Like Greenberg, Adorno suffered from a pessimism that resulted from disillusionment with the leftist strategies of the thirties. He began to reformulate his conviction that art's role within the social totality was one of discerning critique by stressing the need for art's absolute negation of society's instrumental rationalism as it was manifested in the debased mass culture. Art was to preserve itself during these bad times by becoming "pure" and disinterested of all practical concerns. He wrote:

"The asocial in art is the definite negation of the definite society . . . What [art] contributes to society is not communication with society, rather something very indirect, resistance."6

For Adorno, the form and content of politicized art during the thirties had failed because it was based on a regressive stylistic revival of the organic coherence of bourgeois classical and realist art. Instead he advocated a notion of avant-garde art based on the formal negation of any such norms. In order for the avant-gardist work of art to fulfill its role as the "historically necessary expression of alienation in late-capitalist society," it must be based on formal contradictions, not false unity.7 Like Greenberg, Adorno saw autonomous aesthetic practice as the only viable form of cultural resistance against instrumental capitalism. Only this "purity" could preserve art from the practical needs and exigencies of life in the midst of what Greenberg called "the plight of our culture."8

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7 Bürger, p. 85; see also pp. 83-92.
8 Clement Greenberg, "The Plight of Our Culture," Commentary, No. XV, Parts I-II (June 1953), pp. 558-566 and Parts III-IV (July 1953), pp. 54-62; rpt. in Clement
In many ways, the forties and fifties in America were as troubled and treacherous for intellectuals and culture in general as the thirties had been. With America seeking to establish political, economic and cultural ascendancy abroad, and Joe McCarthy waging ideological warfare at home against anyone with any remote association with Communism, this was a dangerous time to be tainted with politics. As Jerold Starr has noted, America's role as defender of international democracy allowed it to justify "the repression of dissent in the name of freedom from Communist repression of dissent." Where Greenberg's theory of the autonomy of art had originally been proposed as a form of cultural resistance and critical negation, in the tense climate of the Cold War it increasingly came to be seen by artists as an ideal sanctuary from such threats.

Greenberg's own writings from the forties and fifties, the period in which he exerted his greatest influence, reinforced this view by gradually abandoning the kind of social analysis he made in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" for a form of purely aesthetic art criticism. Moreover, the aesthetic values and standards he focused on in these writings became inseparable from his advocacy of American abstract art. Although he now avoided any explicit analysis of politics, the political support for American capitalism he had come to embrace was implicitly expressed in his associations of the ascent of American over European artists as evidence of America's new

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Greenberg, Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956, Vol. III of The Collected Essays and Criticism, pp. 122-152. All further references will be to the O'Brian version.

9 These cultural and ideological tensions have been discussed in Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," Artforum, XI. No. 10 (June 1974), pp. 39-41; and Serge Guilbaut, "Postwar Painting Games: The Rough and the Slick," in his Reconstructing Modernism, pp. 30-84.


11 For a discussion of how political detachment became manifested as a neutral stance in art in the 1950s, see Moira Roth, "The Aesthetic of Indifference," Artforum, XVI, No. 3 (November 1977), pp. 46-53.
position as "the center of gravity of industrial production and political power."\textsuperscript{12} By the time he made his definitive statement on the supremacy of American abstract art in "Modernist Painting" of 1961, political references have disappeared entirely in what has become an exclusive focus on aesthetic discriminations.\textsuperscript{13}

In "Modernist Painting," Greenberg attempted to define Modernism as more than just a historical period or a type of art or literature. Modernism, he said, "includes the whole of what is truly alive in our culture" (p. 85). It is a project based on the process of "self-criticism" by which a given practice purifies itself by distilling its own unique and irreducible qualities. Greenberg traced this tendency to the Enlightenment and identified Kant's \textit{Critique of Judgement} as the model for establishing and maintaining the intrinsic capacities and limits of a given artistic practice. Through this process of immanent criticism, a particular practice (in this case painting) can establish its own "characteristic methods" by eliminating any and all effects borrowed from other art forms so as "to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence" (pp. 85-86).

Several important points must be made about this key article. Firstly, it indicated a radical shift from the position Greenberg had once shared with Adorno that the role of the avant-garde was as a subversive resistance to the recuperative tendencies of mass culture by continually generating innovative cultural forms. On the contrary, Greenberg now


argued that the goal of Modernist art is to refine its present forms in a continuity with the past (significantly, the term "avant-garde" has now been replaced by "Modernism"). Secondly, it reveals that Greenberg had now come to see art strictly as a sphere of activity to be enjoyed for the pure pleasure of aesthetic satisfaction by calling upon Kant's theory of "disinterested," or art for art's sake aesthetics. Thirdly, it confirmed his complete abandonment of the premise he argued in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" that the autonomy of art was necessary for the preservation of culture until the arrival of a renewed culture under socialism. He had now come to the conclusion that autonomy was not a means to an end, but was itself the requisite and self-evident rationale for any "advanced" or "ambitious," that is Modernist, form of artistic practice.

II. The Conflicts of the 1950s and the Retreat into Individualism.

Greenberg's moment of greatest influence was in 1961 with "Modernist Painting." Only three years later he organized a monumental exhibition called Post-Painterly Abstraction for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art which was to demonstrate the vitality of the aesthetic values he advocated, but which generated so little interest in the art world that its anticipated international tour was cancelled.\(^{14}\) By 1964 other

\(^{14}\) David Howard, "From Emma Lake to Los Angeles: Modernism on the Margins," in The Flat Side of the Landscape: The Emma Lake Artists' Workshops, curated by John O'Brian (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 1989), pp.41-49. As Howard explains, p. 43, Greenberg had included the work of two Canadians, Arthur McKay and Kenneth Lochhead, because he felt their isolation in Saskatchewan made their work more authentic and, ironically, less provincial than that being exhibited on Tenth Street in New York. For Greenberg's views of the Canadian painters, see his "Introduction
artistic directions had emerged and the authority of Greenberg's aesthetic values declined as the different interests of a new generation began to take hold. This process began in the mid-1950s and was characterized by a questioning and challenging of a tradition which seemed to have become ossified. The widely divergent artistic concerns of this period clearly indicated there was no longer consensus on aesthetic values.

It is crucial to note, however, that although the formal and aesthetic qualities associated with Greenberg's Modernist criticism may have been questioned by the newcomers, the essential principle that art was an autonomous activity separated from the praxis of life remained intact. Although that position had initially evolved in response to disillusionment with the leftist politics of the thirties, it still continued to have relevance for artists seeking to avoid the conflicts of the Cold War. In this new era of ideological strife, artists and intellectuals who felt disaffected from their culture were cut adrift from any form of collective identity or action. Whatever traces of the left that remained by the end of World War II were squelched by paranoia about the atomic bomb and the outright oppression of "Communist conspirators" led by Senator Joe McCarthy at the hearings of the House Committee of Un-American Activities (1951-54). The American "police action" in Korea (1951-53) on the one hand, and the Soviet invasion of Hungary (1956) on the other, made any form of political conviction seem utterly hopeless.

By the mid-1950s "radical politics was 'nearly dead' in the United States."15 Legislated restrictions had weakened the unions and the

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15 Starr, p. 237.
intellectual political left was fragmented and powerless. Many leftist
groups such as the League for Industrial Democracy had become
supporters of President Truman's "liberal democracy" and the Marshall
Plan, under the guise of which American imperialism asserted itself
abroad. The younger generation were reluctant to join political
organizations and by mid-decade only about a dozen universities had
radical student groups with anywhere near fifty members.16 Neither did
there seem to be a tenable position from which intellectuals who had been
on the left could criticize the burgeoning forces of post-war capitalism. As
Dwight MacDonald had summed up the desperate state of affairs in 1947:

In terms of 'practical' political politics we are living in an age which
consistently presents us with impossible alternatives. . . . It is no
longer possible for the individual to relate himself to world politics. .
. . Now the clearer one's insight, the more numbed one becomes.17

Inevitably positions were taken, even though they were marked by
compromise and contradiction. In 1953 Greenberg still upheld the idea
that genuine culture had to resist the "vulgar" culture of the industrialized
masses: the "highbrow has, as it were, to price his product out of the
market in order to protect it from the market's demands."18 But by 1956,
he openly expressed his faith in in the American political system that was
itself preeminently responsible for the proliferation of mass culture:

It has worked--for whatever extra-political reasons--better than
the politics of most other countries, and cannot be complained about

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16 Starr, p. 238.
17 Dwight MacDonald, "Truman's Doctrine, Abroad and at Home," in his Memoirs of a
p. 70.
in terms like those in which we complain about the American personality or the quality of our life.\textsuperscript{19}

For those who shared Greenberg's pragmatic or "realistic" position, and they were many, considering what was to be gained from the active and lucrative speculation in the art market during the 1950s, this outlook signified an acceptance of an inherent conservatism.\textsuperscript{20}

There were others who refused to abandon their faith in art's ability to challenge the status quo of the dominant culture. Critics like Meyer Shapiro and Harold Rosenberg shared a view similar to Adorno's in that they believed avant-garde art could employ formal freedom as an expression of the subject's alienation and desire for liberty within late-capitalist society. More so than Adorno, however, Schapiro and Rosenberg saw the artist's opposition to society as based in his \textit{independence from} that society.\textsuperscript{21} As Serge Guilbaut has noted, this position became a last refuge for leftist intellectuals who refused to abandon Marxism entirely.\textsuperscript{22}

This theory that the individual can act subversively through the negation of established norms and ideologies would continue to have credence for many years, but in hindsight it is possible to discern some of its attendant contradictions and dilemmas.

Because of the reliance upon the will and rights of the individual, this position has been associated with a kind of Sartrean existentialism, which.


\textsuperscript{20} For a summary of the combined effects on art during this period of American boosterism and prosperity, see Francis Frascina, "The Politics of Representation," in \textit{Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties}, Paul Wood et al. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with The Open University, 1993). pp. 124-128.

\textsuperscript{21} Frascina, p. 144.

\textsuperscript{22} Guilbaut, \textit{How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art}, p. 199
in the specifically American climate of the 1950s, emphasized the individual "as an ideological 'being' trying to avoid the 'political trap' of commitment to any political grouping." When political engagement of any kind is seen as nothing but a treacherous trap of stifling conformity, the need to resist the forces of dominance and oppression are collapsed in upon the individual. With no access to collective power, the individual has no means to bring about any effective change, and at best can serve only as a cathartic expression of alienation. Thus the autonomy of art was no longer a critical strategy for change, as it had once been for Greenberg, but merely a justification for individual dissent and aesthetic experimentation.

Although the rapport between Greenberg's Modernist criticism and the dominant aesthetic values remained intact until the early 1960s, by the mid-1950s a new generation of artists had already begun to contest these values. But if the new direction staked out by these artists, especially Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, rejected certain ideas prevalent in the previous period, their work did not signal a complete break with the past. For one thing, the premise of the autonomy of art was retained in the detachment in their work from the complex social and political contingencies of the day. These younger artists also maintained a commitment to individualism, although this was no longer expressed as a subjective response to the artist's isolation and alienation from the larger culture. In fact, what artists like Johns and Rauschenberg rejected most decisively was the belief that it was the responsibility of the avant-garde to resist the forces of this debased culture by preserving the "true" culture of "high" art. Although they wanted their work to remain autonomous

23 Frascina, p. 143.
from political associations, they no longer wanted to be cut off as outsiders from the mainstream of American culture.

A similar desire to bring about a rapprochement between high art and the rest of culture was expressed at a colloquium on Our Country and Our Culture, held in 1952 by members of Partisan Review who wished to discuss the need to find a place within, rather than outside the mainstream of American culture. Tired of being constantly vigilant against the insidious effects of a buoyant American culture, artists and intellectuals now sought to engage playfully with what musician John Cage called "an affirmation of life... which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord." Although one might assume that this reintegration of art with the praxis of everyday life might signal a resumption of the goals of the historical avant-garde, it must be recalled that the historical avant-garde did not endeavour to integrate into the existing praxis, but to employ forms of revolt to bring about a new praxis.

Unlike the historical avant-gardes, however, the artists of this generation lacked any radical or even modest political intentions. Any revolutionary potential in the art of this period was strictly manifested as a challenge to the prevailing Modernist aesthetics. Ironically, however, some of their most favoured strategies were drawn from that most nihilistic avant-garde group--Dada. This renewed interest in Dada has been primarily attributed to the presence of Marcel Duchamp in New York during the 1950s, where his friendship with John Cage brought him into

26 Bürger, p. 49.
contact with Johns, Rauschenberg and the dancer Merce Cunningham. Also of great significance was Robert Motherwell's publication of *The Dada Painters and Poets* in 1951, which made key Dada texts available in English.²⁷ Also influential was the exhibition of Dada art and poetry organized by Duchamp at the Sydney Janis gallery in New York in 1953.²⁸ By means of such typical Dada devices as the use of chance, found objects and heterogeneous materials, the younger "neo-Dada" artists like Johns and Rauschenberg sought to incorporate references to the everyday world, thereby opposing the purist aesthetics of late Modernism (figs. 1-2).

But if these artists drew heavily from the formal properties of Dada, Bürger has insisted that their work must be clearly distinguished from the formation and intention of the historical avant-garde. If we accept the premise that the role of the historical avant-garde was to invest art with the potential to bring about real social and political change, then we would have to concur with Bürger that such a goal is conspicuously absent in the critically detached and aloof work of the neo-Dadaists. Although the desire of these artists to break down the barriers between art and life might be construed as an avant-garde effort to destroy the autonomy of art, their intention was not to critique society or the role of art in that society, but rather to propose aesthetic challenges within an art world that remained institutionally intact in terms of its modes of production and reception.

Because these artists adapted the inherently political strategies of the historical avant-garde for a strictly aesthetic practice, Bürger described them as the "neo-avant-garde:"

the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions . . . [since it] is autonomous art in the full sense of the term, which means that it negates the avant-gardist intention of returning art to the praxis of life.29

The question Bürger confronts us with here is that of the artist's social role. With the collapse of the left and widespread reluctance to become ensnared in any political "traps," artists of this period withdrew into individualism and continued to uphold the post-war conception of art as an autonomous activity. What was relinquished was a concern for the status of art as a force for social change. What was retained was the notion of the revolutionary potential of avant-garde art, but this was now understood in strictly aesthetic rather than political terms.

III. Avant-Garde and Aesthetic Freedom in the 1960s.

From within this welter of complex issues the ideological dilemmas faced by artists in the 1960s may now be brought into clearer focus. Three key issues must be brought to bear on this discussion: firstly, the implications of a purely aesthetic notion of the avant-garde; secondly, contradictory views about the social role of art; and thirdly, the importance of the widespread commitment to individualism as the only viable form of

29 Bürger, p. 58.
freedom, be it political, social or aesthetic. These issues would return constantly to the foreground in overlapping and intersecting ways for those artists in the 1960s who endeavoured to find new ways to imbue their art with some degree of social relevance.

The appropriation of Dada strategies that began with the work of Johns, Cage, Rauschenberg and their contemporaries continued within the aesthetic avant-garde movements of the 1960s. The loosely formed group known as Fluxus expanded the neo-Dadaists' repertoire to include multimedia performance and installation work, manifestoes, posters, slogans and book works, as well as art works that do not look like art, such as George Brecht's *Three Aqueous Events* of 1961 (fig. 3). Contrary to what has been argued by certain apologists of Fluxus, however, the ends to which these means were applied demonstrates unequivocally how far removed they were from those of Dada.\(^{30}\) Where Dada sought to bring about a new society by destroying the institution of art that they saw as a manifestation of the same bourgeois rationalism that had led to war, the goal of Fluxus was to undermine what they saw as the elitist nature of high art by bringing it down to the level of the ordinary, banal and quotidian. As Dick Higgins wrote in his essay "A Child's History of Fluxus,"

Hey--coffee cups can be more beautiful than fancy sculptures. A kiss in the morning can be more dramatic than a drama by Mr. Fancypants. The sloshing of my foot in wet boots sounds more beautiful than fancy organ music.\(^{31}\)

Fluxus artists also rejected the idea of the artist's specialized role as the only creator of art; instead they advocated art as a kind of amusement

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\(^{30}\) Milman, pp. 17-34.

with populist appeal. As George Maciunas wrote in a statement from 1965, "The value of art amusement must be lowered by making it unlimited, mass produced, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all."32 One could argue that this urge to "democratize" art represented a quintessential avant-garde effort to use radical aesthetics to bring about radical political change. It is crucial to realize, however, that the real intent here was not to change society itself, but rather to bring art down to the level of the masses, an idea which Maciunas was fully aware would be abhorrent to a Modernist like Greenberg. But even if one were to accept that Maciunas' desire to destroy the elitist mystique of the artist-creator proposed inherently political implications for the role of art within culture, a collective political agenda was disavowed by most members of Fluxus. Not only were they unwilling to surrender their individualism to sign the manifesto he drew up to proclaim their group ideology,33 the idea of "Fluxus . . . as an ideological revolutionary cadre" was categorically denied by Ken Friedman and others.34

If there was at least a semblance of debate among members of Fluxus as to the possibility of using avant-garde strategies to effect some kind of social change, similar claims could hardly be made by the other characteristic groups or movements of the 1960s. For the most part, their radicalism consisted of challenging what they considered to be outmoded, taboo or dogmatic aesthetic concepts, especially the High Modernist tenets advocated by people like Greenberg, whose authority declined rapidly between 1961 and 1964. But because these artists lacked a full

32 George Maciunas' manifesto statement is from a 1965 Fluxus broad sheet and reprinted in Milman, p. 31.
33 Milman, p. 27.
understanding of the complex historical and political forces that had shaped the High Modernist ideals in the first place, they responded superficially to aspects of form, style and content, while leaving intact the conviction that art was an autonomous, even self-reflexive, activity.

Similarly, the Pop artists of the early 1960s questioned the Modernist notion that art must remain "pure" by resisting the content, style and techniques of mass culture. Pop art constituted a direct challenge to the elitist traditions of high art, which partly explains its popularity with the mass media and the general public. Yet the assumption that Pop undermined the sanctity of high art was fallacious, since Pop art remained thoroughly bound within the capitalist art market and well beyond the means of the average, middle-class person. As with Fluxus, Pop art's transgression occurred at the level of an aesthetic challenge within the institution of art; any allusion to a "populism" beyond this institution was a mere conceit.

In terms of subject matter, Claes Oldenburg's inflated hamburgers, James Rosenquists bill-board-like paintings and Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup cans or Coke bottles did signify an implicit discourse with the forces of consumer-driven capitalism that was America's most characteristic feature (fig. 4). Yet the crucial question of whether such works were a celebration or a critique of America's obsession with consumer culture cannot be separated from the question of audience. While the popularity

of Pop with the public can be attributed to the capacity of such work to enthral audiences by aggrandizing their consumerist values. Art world audiences would undoubtedly be more inclined to see Pop art as an implied critique of such values. To be sure, the ability of art to resist the dominant forces of society through the dialectical reversal of adapting and negating its values has a long pedigree within Modern art. But as Bürger has noted in regard to Warhol's images, when the artist does not indicate his or her intention in adapting the surface appearances of commodity culture, then the potential for critical resistance depends solely upon the individual viewer's capacity to think in terms of a dialectical critique. In other words, these commercially based images will be seen as a resistance to commodity society only to the person who wants to see it there.36

The pervasive reticence of artists in the 1960s to declare an ideological position must be seen in the context of the pragmatic liberalism that characterized that period. The freedom of the individual to self-determination was manifested in art as a pluralism which relied upon a diversification of practice and opposed in principle any form of hierarchy or commitment to group ideology. This pluralism could sustain any art practice that held to the belief that the integrity and vitality of art depended upon its autonomy, from the High Modernist notions of art as a self-contained critical practice, to the pseudo-populism of Pop and Fluxus. The links between autonomy, freedom, individualism and liberalism became so entwined during this period that when artists began to seek a renewed critical relationship with society towards the end of the decade they found themselves deeply entangled in a web of contradictory values.

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36 Bürger, p. 61.
As configured by High Modernists like Greenberg and his followers like Michael Fried, autonomous art inherently constituted "a criticism of life" through the simple process of opposition: art is an ideal realm separate from and uncontaminated by the dross of life. But even those artists who attempted to move beyond this binary opposition and formulate a new critical position that did engage with the contingencies of contemporary society would encounter serious complications around the issues of autonomy, freedom and aesthetic quality. For example, Minimalists like Donald Judd and Carl Andre were openly critical at times about the character and values of American capitalist society, yet they were deeply reticent about engaging these concerns in their work in ways that might have evoked any associations of crudely tendentious politics.

Andre identified himself in a interview in 1970 as an "artworker" whose values were opposed to the "social pretensions" of the middle class. His use of unadulterated industrial products may have been intended to subvert high art aesthetics by alluding to working class ethics, but as historian Francis Frascina pointed out, while it certainly bothered Modernists like Fried, Andre's sculpture was alien to those industrial workers' own notions of culture or politics (fig. 5). Andre was clear in the interview about his contempt for the art world in general because of its preoccupation with commodity rather than quality, and the museums in particular because they were run by the same people who held the political and economic power he opposed in American society:

39 Frascina, p. 99.
It is the pretence of the museum that they are an apolitical organization. And yet . . . the board of trustees are exactly the same people who devised the American foreign policy over the last twenty-five years.  

In spite of his negative feelings about the art world and the museums, Andre's work fit easily into this context. Although he sought to engage his art with contemporary society through a critique of commodity culture, the only way he could envision doing so was within the confines of the institutional world of art. He realized that if artists failed to engage with such issues in their work, it could be read as an assent to the status quo, yet the fact that his major collectors were corporations and museums surely indicates that any implied political critique in his work remained invisible to those at whom it was primarily aimed. Andre was not insensible to these contradictions, but he saw no clear way around them because he saw no other option than to participate within the institution of art. He could question the autonomy of art in terms of its content or references, but he was unable to challenge its fundamental role or status within that society of which he was so critical.

Like Andre, Don Judd felt that his industrially based work embodied political ramifications through its subversion of high art values, but again these were not recognized by the institutions and corporations that supported him (fig. 6). It was certainly not because these institutions were incapable of recognizing political content, or were unconcerned about it when they did. In fact, the director of the Guggenheim Museum, Thomas Messer, cancelled an entire exhibition of Hans Haacke's work in April 1971 because the artist refused to remove a series of overtly political pieces

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40 Andre, in Siegel, pp. 176-177.
documenting a Manhattan network of slum real estate holdings (fig. 7). In a letter to Haacke, Messer made his reasons clear:

[T]he trustees have established policies that exclude active engagement toward social and political ends. It is well understood . . . that art may have social and political consequences but these, we believe, are furthered by indirection and by the generalized exemplary force that works of art may exert upon the environment. Not, as you propose, by using political means to achieve political ends, no matter how desirable these may appear to be in themselves.41

What Messer objected to here was not the possibility that art might have a political impact, but that politics might dominate the aesthetic component, and that the institution of art might be seen to participate in any sort of political or social agitation.42 In other words, he insisted upon an autonomous form of art; generalized or universal issues may be dealt with, but no specific relationship may be drawn between art and the praxis of life. But Andre's and Judd's work, like that of all the Minimalists, was immune to the sort of censure Haacke received precisely because any implied critique of commodity culture in their work remained secondary to aesthetic considerations. As with Pop or most Fluxus art, any social or political meanings in the work had to be posited by a viewer who was disposed to see them there. Judd may have been insulted by the suggestion that the museums had no qualms about exhibiting abstract


work like his because they found it inoffensive, but this only demonstrates how tentatively he grasped the contradictions between the importance he ascribed to his political beliefs and his desire to create aesthetically ambitious works that would succeed in the established art institutions.43

These contradictions lay at the heart of the question of why artists found it so difficult to integrate their aesthetic radicalism within their growing sense of responsibility to take a political stance towards the deepening crisis of American culture in the late sixties. What activism they did eventually take up really revolved around two quite separate issues: the war in Vietnam and their right to self-determination vis-a-vis the art institutions upon which their careers depended. Although the link between the forces of political power that supported the imperialist invasion of Vietnam and the institutions of art as the cultural scions of those political forces was recognized by many artists, there was an unwillingness or inability, perhaps, to take into account the full implications of the collusion between these two phenomena. As a result of this political naïveté, artists' protests tended on the one hand to separate these issues, and on the other to take aim at superficial symptoms rather than contesting the deeper connections. Indeed, this ambivalence about their relationship to the institution led many artists, including Andre and Judd, to feel they could politicize their selves, but not their art.

43 In an interview with Frascina (November 26, 1991) regarding the Guggenheim's cancellation of Haacke's exhibition, Max Kozloff, who had been editor of Artforum at the time, recalled that Messer "had no objection whatsoever to showing abstract art. That would have been very typical . . . of a program considered acceptable by art museums. This was violently contested by Donald Judd . . . who considered that for his work to be considered inoffensive was a great insult and his abstraction was certainly capable of political intonations." See Frascina, p. 123.
IV. The Crisis of Culture and the Question of Political Responsibility.

The first instances of artists' politicization during the sixties were protests against the Vietnam war. Although the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had been promoting a left-wing, anti-capitalist program of "grass roots insurgency" since the early 1960s, their efforts to achieve participatory democracy were, apparently, of little concern to artists. But when the SDS staged the first national demonstration against the war in April 1965, which attracted 20,000-25,000 marchers and the attention of the international press, artists finally seemed ready to take notice of what was going on around them. Their first response was to take out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* on June 27, 1965. Organized by the painter Rudolf Baranik, the ad headlined "End Your Silence" and consisted of a lengthy anti-war statement signed by five hundred artists. It read, in part:

A decade ago, when the people of Vietnam were fighting French colonialism, the artists and intellectuals of France--from Sartre to Mauriac, from Picasso to Camus--called on the French people's conscience to protest their leaders' policy as immoral and demand an end to the dirty war--"la sale guerre." Today, we in our country can do no less.44

There were a few individuals who made the war the subject of art works, such as James Rosenquist's *F-111*, Edward Keinholz's *Portable War Memorial* and May Stevens' *Big Daddy Paper Doll* (fig. 8). Apart from fund-raising, there were only two other major contributions from the art

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community to the anti-war effort. The first was the famous Peace Tower, constructed in 1966 on a vacant lot in Los Angeles. It consisted of an armature designed by Mark di Suvero to which were attached four hundred and eighteen two-foot-square panels made by individual artists (fig. 9). It was supposed to stand until the end of the war, but hostility from pro-war supporters forced the landlord to renege on the lease for the land. The second artist-organized protest against the war and American imperialism was the Angry Arts Week in New York in January 1967. It included a series of dance, music, film and poetry events, as well as a huge Collage of Indignation produced by around one hundred and fifty artists at New York University's Loeb Student Center and attracted scores of visitors (fig. 10). The individual contributions ranged from blatant anti-war and anti-American slogans to graphic representations of the devastation of war, to the more subdued formalism of artists like Richard Serra and Mark di Suvero.45

The fact that the Angry Arts Week was the last large-scale, artist-organized protest against the war certainly cannot be attributed to any abatement in the widespread social unrest of the period. After the military disaster of the Tet Offensive in February 1968, President Johnson declared he would not seek re-election, but his endorsed vice-president, Hubert Humphrey, continued to defend the war in spite of growing public opposition. On April 14 Martin Luther King was assassinated and rioting erupted in one hundred and thirty-eight American cities, to which the police and National Guard responded with ferocious violence. As frustration grew, the tactics of protestors became more militant, occupying

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45 For details on the Peace Tower and the Angry Arts Week, see Schwartz. Part I. pp. 98-100.
buildings (notably Columbia University in May), burning draft cards and "trashing" property, and were met with increased police violence.

Europe also erupted in May 1968, starting with the occupation of universities and the throwing up of barricades in Paris. There, however, members of the cultural sector came out in great numbers. Throughout the summer artists launched attacks at various institutions and art fairs, including the Venice Biennale, the Milan Triennale and Documenta IV in Kassel. There were boycotts and protests, to which the police responded with characteristic violence. But exactly what the artists wanted was not clear. Like so much of the protest of the 1960s, the enemy was vaguely characterized as "The Establishment," representing authority, hierarchy and bureaucracy. The sense of disenfranchisement and powerlessness was articulated in equally vague demands for more self-determined control and the abolition of top-down organization in the various cultural institutions in which these artists had a stake.

Artists correctly perceived these fairs as huge art markets, which they claimed represented the ultimate corruption of capitalist society, in which the spiritual value of art was negated by its commodity value. For all the rhetoric, however, the real issue was not that these institutions were corrupt because they were blatantly capitalist, but that they unfairly favored certain artists and styles over others. The artists were not demanding their closure, or suggesting alternatives, but simply wanted more equitable access to these agencies of power and wealth. Although their political ideology may have been somewhat confused in this regard, many Europeans were at least willing to support the protest by withdrawing from the fairs. The Americans at these fairs were apparently

46 These events are chronicled in Schwartz, Part I, pp. 102-105.
more equivocating in their values and none walked out, resulting in condemnation by their European colleagues.

With all the turmoil in both Europe and North America in 1968, especially during what was supposed to be "the summer of love," it may seem surprising that American artists remained so detached. They did plan a boycott of Chicago art galleries following the Democratic Convention fiasco there in August, but they were soon convinced by dealer Richard Feigen (whose schedule now had a gaping hole in October due to Claes Oldenburg's withdrawal), to do a show of protest art instead. There was considerable debate over the relative merits of a boycott versus an invitation to protest in a dealer's gallery, which seems to indicate nothing so much as the meagreness of the options they were able to envision. Moreover, only a few of the submissions actually focused on the issue at hand, which was the brutality with which Chicago Mayor Richard Daley had instructed the police to put down the convention riot. Many artists simply submitted works in their usual style, including Adolph Gottlieb, Helen Frankenthaler, Richard Smith and Robert Motherwell, whose comments in *Newsweek* magazine are revealing:

> There is a certain kind of art which I belong to. It can no more make a direct political comment than chamber music can. But by exhibiting with these artists who can, and with the theme of the exhibit, we are showing our support.\(^{47}\)

Motherwell's comment returns us again to the inherent contrast between the aesthetic autonomy and political radicalism of art. He seems to suggest that art could be motivated primarily by either aesthetics or politics, but not both. In actuality, most artists categorically rejected the

premise that art could be driven by a political agenda and still remain art (or at least not "good" art). It was fine for artists to become involved in politics, but they should not apply their art to these ends. Significantly, one of the strongest statements of the period to this effect was made by a Russian artist, Abe Ajay, who had fond memories of storming the Winter Palace in 1905, but who admonished artists not to confuse their politics with their art:

I believe the fine artist should sign strong statements against evil at every opportunity and keep his legs in shape for long marches on the Pentagon. As a strict constructivist, however, I believe an artist's work should be clean as a hound's tooth of politics and social protest imagery. It is always bad art, sad and dreary and witless, and persuades one of nothing so much as the artist's poverty of hand and mind and spirit. Good art is never social work. There is no message in the medium.\textsuperscript{48}

Furthermore, not only was "protest art" widely considered to be bad art because it subordinated aesthetics to politics, it was seen as doomed to ineffectualness. As Adolph Gottlieb declared, even though he participated in the Chicago protest exhibition, "Artists as artists have no political strength. It's nice that they think they do, and that they make such protests, but they are always ineffective.\textsuperscript{49}

These quotations reveal an abiding belief that any art with overt social or political meaning is propaganda, which is, in the first place, bad art, and in the second, ineffective. None of these artists explained why it is bad (Ajay's description of it as "sad, dreary and witless" is of little help), nor analysed why it is ineffective. Nevertheless, it is possible to infer that what is rejected here is the possibility that art should be used for any

\textsuperscript{48} Abe Ajay, quoted from an undocumented source in Schwartz, Part I. p. 97.

\textsuperscript{49} Adolph Gottlieb, quoted from an undocumented source in Schwartz. Part II. p. 73.
purpose other than its own aesthetic fulfillment. In other words, they opposed the idea that art should be subjected to instrumentality, which recalls the premise articulated in the thirties by Trotsky, Breton and Greenberg that art must be autonomous precisely to enable it to remain free from the means-ends instrumentality of repressive societies, whether capitalist or otherwise. And when we come to the word "free," we have arrived at the core of the problem for artists in the sixties, for by then the notion of freedom centred on the right of the individual, especially the artist, to a self-determination uncompromised by any external constraints.

Because their understanding of the relationship between politics and culture was so rudimentary, most artists of this period could perceive the situation only in terms of a simple, binary opposition between "freedom" and "propaganda." Towards the end of the decade artists began to feel increasingly compelled to respond to the worsening social crisis, resulting in a number of discussions and symposia in which they debated what their role was as artists and as people. In the same 1968 article in *Metro* in which Sol LeWitt expressed his opinion that art with political content was always "pretty embarrassing," several of his colleagues concurred that art should avoid partisan politics. Don Judd maintained that antihierarchical and unconventional art could have political implications by resisting the dominant values of American attitudes and social structure. And although Allan Kaprow, creator of improvisational and performative events known as Happenings, felt that such events could adopt the *strategies* of political protest, he did not think art should serve specific political causes. Nevertheless, his ambivalence was poignant in that he also spoke of his

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"anguish and helplessness knowing that we cannot directly affect the
course of politics."\textsuperscript{51}

These perceptions and attitudes had not changed much even two
years later, when the editors of \textit{Artforum} magazine published a series of
responses to a question they had posed about the relationship between the
artist and direct political action:

A growing number of artists have begun to feel the need to respond
to the deepening political crisis in America. Among these artists,
however, there are serious differences concerning their relations to
direct political actions. Many feel that the political implications of
their work constitute the most profound political action they can
take. Others, not denying this, continue to feel the need for an
immediate, direct political commitment. Still others feel that their
work is devoid of political meaning and that their political lives are
unrelated to their art. What is your position regarding the kinds of
political action that should be taken by artists?\textsuperscript{52}

The twelve responses constitute an illuminating cross-section of the
perspectives of a range of artists, some well known, some not at all. The
various responses do not conform to a categorization corresponding to the
aesthetic orientations of the individual artists. Thus, those who believed
that art and politics should have no truck with one another included artists
as diverse as Walter Darby Bannard (a confirmed Modernist and old friend
of Greenberg and Fried), and Lawrence Weiner, who was then on the
cutting edge of Conceptualism. Bannard wrote: "Political things should not
affect the \textit{making} of art because political activity and art-making have
never mixed to art's advantage, and my guess is that most artists are
better off out of politics" (p. 36). Weiner was just as adamant: "So-called

\textsuperscript{51} Allan Kaprow in "La Sfida del Sistema." pp. 38-40; quoted in Sandler, \textit{American Art
of the 1960s}, p. 301, n. 18.
35-39. All further references to this symposium will be in the text.
Art whose original intent and most often content is political or social does not concern me as an Artist. They are for me only varied forms of sociological propaganda" (p. 39).

The majority of respondents expressed grave concern over the political situation of the time, but there was no consensus about how they saw themselves and their art functioning in relation to these concerns. For some, their contempt for the situation was so great they could not countenance any association with politics whatsoever. Ed Ruscha explained his cynicism about politics in general:

"I have excluded political science from my program . . . I isolate myself and my work continues smoothly with no involvement in any issue. As an American citizen though I have no trouble seeing how bad things are. . . . [yet] I don't think an artist can do much for any cause by using his art as a weapon" (p. 38).

Robert Smithson expressed most eloquently the sense of futility, disgust and impotence towards what many saw as an utterly corrupt "system:"

"My 'position' is one of sinking into an awareness of global squalor and futility. The rat of politics always gnaws at the cheese of art. The trap is set. If there's an original curse, then politics has something to do with it. Direct political action becomes a matter of trying to pick poison out of boiling stew. . . . The political system that now controls the world on every level should be denied by art" (p. 39).

Not all who expressed concern over the political situation were so despairing. Yet even among those artists who felt that a political commitment was important, none were able to articulate exactly how this might be made evident or effective in their art-making. Jo Baer perhaps came closest:

"I think the time for political action by artists is now and I believe action should be taken in the art world and in the world at large. Political action need not inhibit art-making; the two activities are
dissimilar, not incompatible. In fact all art is eventually political. As the carrier of esthetic experience, art is a powerful effector of choice and action (p. 35).

When Baer describes the kind of work she thinks embodies political concerns, however, it becomes clear that her position is similar to Andre's and Judd's in that the "implications" she refers to are strictly formal. Although she too recognized that art works were treated as "entertainment commodities" to be promoted and distributed like any other product within a capitalist society, she could conceive of no other alternative than to create work whose formal configurations countered an imposed hierarchical structure:

In the new work, forms arise internally and the materials function to prescribe their own arrangements. . . .These new ways have political implications that bear on the sovereignty of the subject and the nature and ramifications of self-determination (p. 35).

Like Andre and Judd, Baer was clearly aware that art and politics were linked, but she too resisted any politicization of her work that would supersede its primary aesthetic significance. The work could have political "implications," but its function within the institution would be no different than work which did not have such implications. Moreover, because the work of these artists was formal and abstract, and therefore "blank," any meaning could be posited. Whatever political meaning was ascribed to such work by its creators, it went largely unnoticed by the critics, collectors and curators who supported it. Judd's argument that "one reason for the popularity of American art is that the museums and collectors didn't understand it enough to realize that is was against much in society" could even be read alternatively as an adage of romantic alienation or a convenient denial of responsibility (p. 36).
Ultimately we have to conclude that, no matter how much these politically conscious artists may have disparaged what they perceived as a corrupt capitalist and imperialist society, they were unwilling to challenge the foundational premises of the very institution, in which they played a central role, by which that society legitimated itself in the form of high culture. Their complicity with the ideological values of this institution is essentially based in their adherence to a belief in artistic freedom expressed through the principle of autonomy. A more engaged form of politicization of their work would inevitably mean relinquishing the right to autonomous self-expression for collective goals and values. Because of their limited intellectual understanding of the relationship between politics and culture (as Irving Petlin said in his *Artforum* response, "we are not European intellectuals" [p. 38]), these artists were unable to see how their belief in artistic freedom epitomized the late-capitalist valuation of the individual as an asocial and sovereign being. This fundamental characteristic of late capitalism has been analysed by John Brenkman:

Through its dominant cultural forms and practices, late capitalism strives to sever social experience from the formation of counter-ideologies, to break collective experience into the monadic isolation of the private experience of individuals, and to pre-empt the effects of association by subsuming the discourses and images that regulate social life.53

This laissez-faire ideology of liberal individualism was, ironically, deeply entrenched even within the sixties counter-culture in general. Indeed, the internalization of this supreme American value within the "anti-Establishment" movement has been recognized as one of its greatest downfalls. It can be seen in the "turn on, tune in, and drop out" apoliticism

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of the Aquarian Youth and the "self-expression" of the drug and rock music cultures, as well as in the hedonistic "life-style politics" of hippies and the back-to-the-land movement.\textsuperscript{54} Even within the SDS, individualism led to a distrust of organization and leadership that militated against their ability "to devise and implement a national strategy necessary to influence federal policies."\textsuperscript{55}

Within this historical context, it is not difficult to understand how artists also found themselves enmeshed in a similarly contradictory situation. By subscribing to the ideology of individualism, artists continued to fulfill their socially sanctioned role as the ultimate cultural symbol of the freedom that is the ethos of capitalist democracy. To compromise the freedom of art with tendencious politics would be to abandon this most fundamental of American values and, as Hans Haacke discovered, to jeopardize support from art world. Unable to forego their social role as individuals committed to aesthetic expressions of freedom, they were complicit with the institutions through which the dominant values were perpetuated within their culture. Although Carl Andre continued to make the kind of autonomous work these institutions favoured, he was disgusted by their hypocrisy:

\textbf{[I]t is the pretence of the museum that they are an apolitical organization. And yet...the board of trustees are exactly the same people who devised the American foreign policy over the last twenty-five years...[they] favour the war, they devised the war in the first place and wish to see the war continued, indefinitely. The war in Vietnam is not a war for resources, it is a demonstration to the people of the world that they had better not wish to change things radically because if they do the United States will send an occupying, punishing force. It is a war of punitive oppression. And

\textsuperscript{54} Starr, pp. 244-245; 280-281.
\textsuperscript{55} Starr. p. 263.
they wish to run these quiet apolitical institutions like museums and universities suppressing politics among artists, among students, among professors...we are killing people ostensibly to maintain the rationale of artistic freedom.\textsuperscript{56}

For all his contempt, however, Andre did not seem willing to question how, as an artist, he implicitly participated in perpetuating the ideological values he despised. As Francis Frascina has pointed out, Andre seemed unable to grasp the fundamental principle articulated by Walter Benjamin in the 1930s "that a necessary aspect of political art was its ability to subvert the normal system of reception, appropriation and commodification."\textsuperscript{57} In other words, it was not enough to invest one's work with political implications if that work did not also challenge the established institution itself and its ability to appropriate and disarm the subversive potential of the work. Frascina suggests further that Andre's awareness of the contradictions between his political beliefs and his unwillingness to challenge the very institutions upon which he relied led to "his insistence that artists should politicize themselves rather than their work."\textsuperscript{58}

Don Judd expressed a similar view in his response to the \textit{Artforum} question. Although he too felt his work had political "implications," his position had been one of "opposition and isolation," that is, autonomy:

Part of the reason for my isolation was the incapacity to deal with it all, in any way, and also work. Part was that recent art had occurred outside of most of the society. Unlike now, very few people were opposed to anything, none my age that I knew. The most important

\textsuperscript{56} Andre, in Siegel, pp. 176-177.
\textsuperscript{58} Frascina, p. 99.
reason for isolation was that I couldn't think about the country in a
general way. Most of the general statements I read seemed
doctrine and sloppy, both typical of general statements. Most of
the advice seemed utopian, impractical or rather fascist itself; I
couldn't think of any great explanations and gradually came to the
conclusion that there weren't any. All the institutions and their
actions seemed like explanations, overblown and unsubstantial. So
my work didn't have anything to do with society, the institutions and
grand theories. It was one person's work and interests; its main
political conclusion, negative but basic, was that it, myself, anyone
shouldn't serve any of these things, that they should be considered
very sceptically and practically (p. 36).

Although Judd continued to uphold the principal of autonomy in his work.
he had begun to feel that something had to be done, but it shouldn't be
done through art. He had come to "the realization that politics, the
organization of society, was something itself, that it had its own nature and
could only be changed in its own way. Art may change things a little, but
not much" (p. 36). Instead, he advocated that:

everyone has to be involved in politics, in organizations that will
defend their rights and obtain more, that will decide on what should
happen in all public matters. If you don't act, someone else will
decide everything. . . . The social organization by definition concerns
everyone; it doesn't belong to experts; it doesn't have the
specialization of most activities. Possibly the time will come when
everyone will spend a day a week or more on public matters. It can
be disagreeable but it's a necessity (p. 36).

This question of political involvement was very important to Judd.
and he went on to discuss various issues and strategies in more detail than
did any of the other respondents to the Artforum symposium. But even
though he believed that art could "change things a little," he too neglected
to consider how it actually functioned within the institution of art, nor did
he acknowledge the status of that institution within the political system of
which he is so critical. Unlike Andre, whose concern about the hypocrisy
of art institutions confronted him with a dilemma about his participation within them, Judd registered no such awareness. Rather than seeing the institution's indifference to the oppositional implications of his work as a manifestation of a particular ideology, he simply saw it as evidence of the lack of perception on the part of individual collectors or museums.

But if most artists in the late sixties lacked a sophisticated grasp of the complex relationship between the institutions of art and the larger social and political forces of the culture, they did begin to perceive these institutions as oppressive and self-serving agencies of "the Establishment." Though most could not articulate the problem as clearly as Andre, the feeling was widespread that the art world was a microcosm of the larger structure, and as such, it was an entirely appropriate place for those involved in it to challenge the assumptions of power and authority upon which it was based. It must be realized, however, that with few exceptions, most of the contentious issues were directly generated by professional self-interest rather than by efforts to effect radical change in society at large.

V. The Art Workers' Coalition and Demands for Institutional Change.

This new phase of activism was initiated by the formation of the Art Workers' Coalition in 1969 in response to a conflict between the Greek sculptor Vassilakis Takis and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. A recent work by Takis had been selected for the exhibition The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age, which opened at the
MoMA in January 1969. In June 1968, however, guest curator Pontus Hultén had decided to substitute a smaller piece from 1960 that was already in the MoMA's collection. After months of fruitless correspondence, Takis, who was then living in New York, and who had participated in the uprisings in Paris in May 1968, became infuriated with the intransigence of the museum officials. Then, on January 3, 1969, he and several friends executed a meticulously planned abduction of the piece from the exhibition into the museum's garden, where they were soon met by museum representatives.

Takis' group insisted that the piece not be put back in the exhibition, nor ever shown again without the artist's consent, issued a four-point list of complaints, and demanded an open forum be held at the MoMA concerning the relationship between artist and museum. Their complaints were printed in a leaflet they handed out: 1) the exhibition of work by living artists without their express consent; 2) the degree of control exercised by museums, galleries and private collectors over the works of living artists; 3) the lack of consultation between museum authorities and artists; 4) the unauthorized use of photographs and other material for publicity purposes.59

It would no doubt take a Herculean stretch of the imagination to see this as a grave injustice against an artist who, after all, was privileged enough to have his work both shown and purchased by one of the world's most prestigious art museums. Judging from the enormous support the incident generated over the next few months, however, it had struck a deep nerve within the artists' community. It could be cynically construed as an example of the kind of fashionable, imitative protest that was then

59 Schwartz, Part II, p. 77.
cropping up in response to all manner of perceived injustice in every high school and university across the continent. Francis Frascina has suggested that "It could even be claimed, with some legitimacy, that [artists] were not so much forming social commitment as responding to a cultural climate in which commitment was expected." Yet the sustained energy, the legitimacy of some of the complaints, and the long-term ramifications of this scrutiny of art institutions, does indicate that this incident unleashed a welter of previously unarticulated, but long-fermenting concerns.

Over the next few weeks strained negotiations were kept up with the MoMA and, finally, a closed meeting was held on January 28 between representatives from the museum and the artists' group. The thirteen points put forth by the artists at this meeting formed the mandate of what was soon to become the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC). These points ranged from the demand for a separate wing at the MoMA for Black artists to the abolition of admission charges, but the main issue was more representation from artists in the operations of the museum. Although this meeting ended in a complete stalemate, the AWC continued their offensive against the MoMA, who responded, predictably enough, by trying to defuse the situation with delaying tactics. When MoMA director, Bates Lowry, finally responded on March 7, he acknowledged only one of the AWC's demands by agreeing to set up a "Special Committee on Artist Relations."

60 Frascina, p. 215.
61 For a list of those involved in the activities of the AWC, see Schwartz, Part II, pp. 77-79 and Part III, passim.
62 The "13 Demands" of the AWC were revised throughout 1969 and published in definitive form in March 1970. This version is reprinted in Art in Theory: An Anthology of Changing Ideas, pp. 901-902.
Although Lowry seems to have defused some of the AWC’s revolutionary zeal, they continued to be active throughout the year. The AWC comprised various sub-groups who pursued issues such as cultural community outreach programs and greater representation for Black, Hispanic and women artists. But the AWC mainly focused its attention on the improvement of conditions for artists in general, with the MoMA serving as the primary object of their attack. However naïve their hopes of effecting real change by reforming the MoMA, they saw it as a symbol of the corruption of capitalist instrumentality within the art world. As Irving Sandler described it, they perceived that the:

Establishment or the System was monolithic: those who were responsible for the war controlled the museums for their own class interests. MoMA was the cultural arm of 'American Imperialism.' Strike at one, you strike at the other.\(^63\)

The AWC’s protestations were largely ineffectual, however. judging from the patronizing manner in which the MoMA treated them, as, for example, when they greeted the three hundred demonstrators who showed up at the MoMA on March 24 with polite signs reading: "The Demonstration is in the Garden, Please Enter by the 54th Street Gate." Ultimately, the museum’s only concession to the AWC was the granting of free admission one day a week. Their demand for a separate wing for Black and Hispanic artists, by far the most controversial issue dealt with by the AWC, was dismissed with the pat response that the museum acquired art "because the curators believed in the quality of these works without regard to race, political creed or national origin of the artist."\(^64\)

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The question never came up as to whose values determined what that perception of "quality" was. Although developments in critical theory over the next decade would elicit a fundamental and hugely influential questioning of the relationships between cultural values, power and representational issues of race, class and gender, at this time such concerns had hardly begun to be articulated.

To a great extent, the futility of the AWC's ability to effect radical change was due to the inherent conservatism of their own position. This conservatism became evident in the heated debates that took place at the momentous Open Hearing held by the AWC at the School of Visual Arts on April 10, 1969. They discussed numerous issues, such as the relationship of artists to galleries and museums, the relationship of artists to society, and the rights of minority group artists, but their main concern was whether or not to continue to agitate for museum reform, especially at the MoMA. Some participants did question the wisdom of allowing the AWC to be monopolized by such a relatively unimportant issue.65 Carl Andre proposed that artists' problems were not "getting rid of the turnstiles at the Museum of Modern Art, but in getting rid of the art world . . . [that] has been the curse and corruption of the life of art in America and in the world."66 Others suggested they should set their sights on larger political matters, such as the Vietnam war or the capitalist system that waged the war. But in the end the reformist position held the day. Although they may have believed that the implementation of more equitable policies at major institutions like the MoMA would have been at least a symbolic victory against the forces of oppression, we cannot overlook the fact that

65 Sandler, American Art of the 1960s, p. 298.
they were not seeking to destroy the power of the museums, but rather to gain greater access to that source of power. Like Andre, Barnett Newman was critical of the museum's institutional status itself, saying "It seems to me this anxiety to become part of the establishment is not very revolutionary."67

In the end the AWC continued to focus its attention on the museum. They staged two more important protests in 1970, the first in response to the brutal massacre of Vietnamese citizens by American soldiers at My Lai, and the second to the killing of four students at the Kent State University protest against the American invasion of Cambodia. The protest over the Kent State killings took the form of a day-long strike on May 22, 1970 that was intended to close down all New York galleries and museums. Having been assured that no vandalism or violence would occur, the institutions complied and the three hundred demonstrators carried off the strike peacefully.68 It offended nobody, permitted the institutions to appear tolerant and supportive of the anti-war movement, and since it occurred outside their premises, nothing was risked or endangered. It was an admirable show of solidarity, but as a protest it hardly ruffled a feather.

The protest over the My Lai killings turned out to be far more contentious. It began as a joint project agreed upon by the MoMA and AWC members that was intended to foster collaborative relations between the two organizations. At the first meeting of the committee struck to oversee this project, they decided to produce a poster based on Ronald Haeberle's Life magazine photograph of the My Lai massacre. Over the

67 Barnett Newman, Art Workers' Coalition Open Hearing, p. 87.
image they superimposed a text taken from an interview between journalist Mike Wallace and My Lai participant Paul Meadlo that read in bold red letters: "Q. And babies? A. And babies." (fig. 11). For the AWC, this colour photograph was vivid evidence of the flagrant violence sanctioned by American imperialism in Southeast Asia. For the MoMA, however, it was simply unacceptable that they should be associated with such a gruesome and blatantly political image. The president of the board of trustees, William Paley, withdrew the museum's support and on January 8, 1970 the following statement was issued:

The Museum's Board and Staff are comprised of individuals with diverse points of view who have come together because of their interest in art, and if they are to continue to function effectively in this role they must confine themselves to questions related to their immediate subject.69

The MoMA board members' reaction to this image reveals decisively how absolutely they felt the separation must remain between art and politics. While they could benevolently tolerate a strike on their doorstep, they certainly could not be seen to participate in political action themselves, nor sanction a work of "art" that, from their perspective, was a vulgar and impudent intrusion of reality into the pure and disinterested realm of art. In response to the museum's withdrawal of support for the project, fifty thousand copies of the poster were reproduced and distributed internationally through art community networks.70 The AWC was not insensible to the MoMA's sanctimoniousness. After all, wasn't

70 The AWC also attempted to arrange for four New York art journals to publish the poster on their cover, but the plan was dropped for lack of unanimity. It did appear on the cover of Studio International, 180, No. 927 (November 1970), and frequently within the pages of numerous art magazines around that time.
Picasso's *Guernica*, one of the most famous anti-war statements in Western art, hanging in pride of place within the MoMA itself? Capitalizing on this irony, the AWC staged two demonstrations at the MoMA where they displayed copies of the poster in front of the *Guernica* (fig. 12). Although these demonstrations pointed to the unmistakable hypocrisy of the MoMA, they were of limited value in explaining the basis of this hypocrisy.

Of all the activities of the AWC, the My Lai poster came closest to an integration of art and politics that directly challenged prevailing assumptions of the autonomy of art. It did so because the politics were embedded in the work itself, although it must be admitted that these politics were expressed in a crude and unsophisticated form. Nevertheless, the poster incident sparked a response from the institution that revealed how absolutely it guarded this autonomy in order to sustain what Edward Said has called the "twinning of power and legitimacy," in which one force obtains "in the world of direct domination, the other in the cultural sphere."  

Even though this confrontation took place within the relatively narrow confines of the New York art community, the event can be seen as a symbolic catalyst of a propitious new awareness that would emerge among artists with regard to the relationship between culture, power and politics. As the new decade unfolded, North American artists became exposed to a body of critical discourse, derived mainly from the traditions of European philosophy, that would significantly enhance their ability to grasp and analyze such issues on a theoretical level. At the same time, they would find themselves increasingly challenged by new groups, particularly women, who would further complicate the issues of contemporary art practice with demands for new modes of political and

cultural understanding. It is to the tensions and conflicts of this period that we will now turn.

The conflicts and dilemmas artists faced in response to the deepening crisis of American culture in the late sixties reveals how profoundly art's critical relationship to society had been complicated by the historical and artistic developments of the two and a half decades following World War II. The articles, statements, interviews and symposia on the relationship between art and politics that proliferated from around 1970 indicate that artists began to feel an increasingly acute need to renegotiate their roles as artists and as members of a social community. While most artists were reluctant to invest their work with the kind of political commitment characteristic of the art of the 1930s, they did express a widespread antipathy to "Establishment" values both in art and society as a whole.

Those values were vaguely defined in social and political terms in the rhetorical language of the various counter-culture groups that had emerged in the 1960s: authoritarian, conservative, anti-democratic.

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oppressive, imperialist, militaristic and so on. But if artists during this period were reticent about engaging the political and social contingencies of the period directly in their work, they did become increasingly aware of the need to make evident the alignment between the dominant social values and their manifestation in cultural practice. And since these values were associated above all with the authoritative prescriptions and judgements of High Modernism, it was against this tradition that artists now began to mount a full-frontal attack.

It must be pointed out, however, that the authority of this tradition was not monolithic during the period under consideration. In truth, the cohesiveness of High Modernism had begun to be challenged as early as the mid-1950s with Robert Rauschenberg's and Jasper Johns' "Neo-Dada." as well as by other movements that emerged in the sixties such as Pop and Fluxus. But even if these art practices gained popular and economic success, they were not accorded critical status equal to that of the proponents of High Modernism's abstract formalism. An artist like Johns might have found sympathy with a formidable critic like Leo Steinberg, but Clement Greenberg and his loyal followers like Harvard graduates Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss continued to dominate the critical ethos of the period with their apologies for the Modernist "pure" painting and sculpture of artists like Kenneth Noland (fig. 13).²

Nevertheless, the critical failure of Greenberg's Post-Painterly Abstraction exhibition in 1964 was clear indication that the authority of High Modernism was being eclipsed. So long as Greenberg's critical

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position had not been seriously in doubt, his writings had demonstrated a benevolent tolerance to alternative practices. After 1964, however, Greenberg's criticism, as well as that of his followers, became marked by a spirit of rigid entrenchment that historian John O'Brien has described as "Modernism with a vengeance."³ One of the most characteristic examples of this new spirit was Michael Fried's well know essay of 1967, "Art and Objecthood," which constituted an open attack against Minimalism.⁴ The vehemence of his sustained and cogently articulated attack indicates just how threatening these developments were to High Modernism.

Fried's main objections to such work was that it lacked the transcendent "presentness" of Modernist painting and sculpture. He argued that the work of artists like Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre and Tony Smith was "literalist art" because it contained references to the dross of everyday life, not only in terms of its materials or processes, but because the objects produced failed to transcend their mundane existence as objects. Fried felt this kind of art was contaminated by associations beyond the self-referential boundaries of Modernist art. associations he described as "literary," "historically specific," "ideological," and, most damning of all, "theatrical." Unlike the instantaneous experience of "presentness" afforded by Modernist painting and sculpture, Minimalist art

held the viewer in the "duration of the experience," which rendered it "corrupted or perverted by theatre" (p. 832).

In essence, what Fried objected to about such work is that it negated the two paramount principles of High Modernism: the autonomy of art and the expression of transcendent subjectivity. And indeed he was correct. Instead of embracing the Modernist moral ideal that art should provide an alternative to, or salvation from, the routines of everyday life, such "literalist art" is permeated by such references. This bothered Fried because "We are all literalists most of our lives. Presentness is grace" (p. 832). Moreover, Fried saw Minimalism as a formidable threat for two main reasons. Firstly, he was concerned that Minimalism's abstract formalism could easily be misunderstood by less perceptive critics or viewers as a coherent development of the Modernist tradition itself. Secondly, and more importantly, Fried recognized that the formalist manipulations of Minimalism did not just present an alternative to Modernism (as had been the case with Pop), but were clearly intended to challenge the Modernist paradigm on its own terms.

This intent was evident in much of the writings by Minimalists like Robert Smithson, Judd and Morris.5 Ironically, one of the clearest expressions of this awareness was in an article by Morris published in the very same issue of Artforum in which Fried's "Art and Objecthood" appeared, thus indicating that by 1967. "If they had not been aware of it before, readers of Artforum were presented with powerful evidence of a

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deep schism within the professional world of modern American art." In this essay, Morris outlined some of the key precepts of Minimalism, which he suggested would have no value to those in the Modernist camp:

Such work which has the feel and look of openness, extendibility, accessibility, publicness, repeatability, equanimity, directness, immediacy, and has been formed by clear decision rather than groping craft would seem to have a few social implications, none of which are negative. Such work would undoubtedly be boring to those who long for access to an exclusive specialness, the experience of which reassures their superior position.

Morris and his colleagues insisted that the terms of their work were in complete opposition to those of Modernism. In contrast to the Modernist concepts of wholeness, hierarchical and differentiated relations of forms, uniqueness, purity of materials, self-referentiality, authenticity, subjectivity, and the instantaneous and transcendent experience of the viewer, they posited the repeatability of forms, anti-hierarchical compositions, elements of equal and undifferentiated status, the value of process over form, the use of industrial or non-art materials and procedures, and the interaction between the viewer and the object (fig. 14). Works like Judd's steel boxes, Morris' piles of industrial felt, Andre's aluminium grids, or Richard Serra's lead splashing constituted a kind of "anti-form" that deliberately antagonized Modernists like Fried, who believed fervently that "The concepts of quality and value--and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself--are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts" (p. 831).

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The Minimalist project of developing diverse strategies to undermine or subvert Modernist notions of quality and value was by no means intended merely as a formalist conceit. Gradually they and other artists of the period had began to identify Modernism as both a symptom and a legitimation of the orthodoxy and hierarchical authority of an elitist "Establishment." The Modernist precepts of autonomy, self-criticism and disinterested aesthetic judgement as the sole criteria for evaluation of quality in art came to be seen not only as impediments to the formulation of an art practice that sought to engage with the disturbing social and political realities of the period, but also as a means by which those realities continued to be repressed within the context of Modernist critical evaluations. Moreover, these Modernist precepts and values came to be recognized as complicit with the major museums and institutions in ratifying an "effective dominant culture" through a process that Raymond Williams has described as establishing the "selective tradition":

the way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded... or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture.

Having identified and repudiated the presumed "innocence" of the autonomous Modernist painting or sculpture as a denial of the social and political realities of the day, the Minimalists' goal was twofold. Their

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8 Jonathan Harris, "Modernism and Culture in the USA, 1930-1960." in Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties, p. 72.
10 The concept of the "innocence" of genuine art from both political and capitalist instrumentality was first expressed by Clement Greenberg in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939); rpt. Clement Greenberg, Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944, Vol. 1 of The Collected Essays and Criticism, p. 20.
first objective was to reveal how Modernism's supposedly disinterested aesthetic values had become stiflingly conventionalized, and how its investment in the "selective tradition" worked to maintain the status quo in both art and culture. It was precisely this situation that Morris alluded to in his 1967 Artforum article when he claimed that Minimalism "would undoubtedly be boring to those who long for access to an exclusive specialness, the experience of which reassures their superior perception."\textsuperscript{11} And since, as Carl Andre tersely stated, "Silence is assent," their second objective was to redress this situation by investing their own work with connotations they believed to be implicitly relevant to the current social and political context.\textsuperscript{12} Their formalist challenge to the paradigmatic Modernist values of purity, transcendence, authenticity, wholeness, immanent presence and so on was, as historian Francis Frascina has described it, linked "metaphorically at least, to aspects of modern US experience such as blandness, meaningless repetition, industrial geometry and the rhetoric of male power."\textsuperscript{13}

II. The Need for Social Relevance.

In the preceding chapter we saw how the deepening crisis in American society fostered a climate in which artists felt a growing need to

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\textsuperscript{11} Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," p. 29.
\textsuperscript{12} Carl Andre, quoted in "The Artist and Politics." p. 35.
\textsuperscript{13} Francis Frascina, "The Politics of Representation." in Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties, p. 98. Frascina's reference to the "rhetoric of male power" is derived from Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power." Arts Magazine. 64. No. 5 (January 1990), pp. 44-63.
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consider their political role. Although many argued that politics had no place in art practice, others, like Don Judd, felt strongly that their work "had political implications, had attitudes that would permit, limit or prohibit some kinds of political behaviours and some institutions."14 These "political implications" were seen to be embodied in the materialist means and processes of what many considered to be a formalism in opposition to the idealist Modernism associated with Greenberg and Fried. Jo Baer made this clear in her response to the Artforum symposium, in which she spoke of the emergence of a new "radical art" that eschewed hierarchical relationships, arbitrary structures, preciousness and self-referentiality: "These new ways have political implications that bear on the sovereignty of the subject and the nature and ramifications of self-determination."15

Such claims suggest that these artists were not content merely to contest the authority of Modernist aesthetics, but to develop a means to imbue their work with a relevance that was congruent with the social and political contingencies of the day. These ambitious goals and ideals notwithstanding, they were fraught with limitations and contradictions that were to compromise their effectiveness within the precariously shifting cultural terrain around 1970. Although we have already discussed how artists responded to the question of political activism, it is necessary to consider more precisely the problems they encountered in attempting to negotiate the need for greater social resonance in their work without abandoning the demands of advanced aesthetic practice.

The fundamental claim made by artists like Judd, Andre, Morris, Baer and others was that their work could challenge the status quo by

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14 Donald Judd, quoted in "The Artist and Politics." p. 36.
15 Jo Baer, quoted in "The Artist and Politics." p. 35-36.
contesting the prevailing modes of cultural authority. In retrospect, however, we can see how the strictly formalist nature of their challenge was to complicate profoundly the validity of the claim. By accepting the basic Modernist premise that form is content, this generation of artists articulated their refusals within a formal language whose signifiers were highly specialized, esoteric and even elitist. While aspiring to have a greater social relevance, their work remained incomprehensible to many and even an object of hostility for some.\textsuperscript{16} To be sure, the austerity and intellectual difficulty of much of this work was motivated by a moral need to resist the seductive banalities and instant gratification of American popular culture, but this position too signified an inherent acceptance of the Modernist demand for autonomy. But in order to grasp the "political implications" signified by the formal and technical refusals of these artists’ works, one had to understand the conventionalized language both of what was being challenged and of the challenge itself. As Charles Harrison and Paul Wood have pointed out, however, "the constituency to whom the new conventions were conventions, that is to say those to whom they were legible, was a restricted one."\textsuperscript{17}

This limitation to their goal of being more than just an "aesthetic avant-garde" was complicated further by the fact that the highly specialized, abstract formal language of the work of this period made the terms of its "meaning" open to widely divergent readings. As Harrison and Wood put it, "far from being 'meaningless,' strips of felt or piles of industrial waste may come to 'mean' anything--and who is to say?"\textsuperscript{18} If

\textsuperscript{16} Chave, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{17} Harrison and Wood, "Modernity and Modernism Reconsidered," p. 214.
Minimalism's cool anonymity, blank forms, industrial materials and fabrication procedures could by seen by some as both a challenge to the elitist exclusivity of Modernism and a refusal of the basic condition of modern instrumental and exploitative capitalism. The point was clearly lost on the primarily corporate and institutional patrons of Minimalist art. The fact that their work was heavily supported by those very power structures that they sought to criticize was indeed a point of consternation for people like Judd and Andre, yet they continued to operate at the level of a rarified discourse within what remained a stable art world system of production, reception and commodification.

The basic dilemma for artists who endeavoured to invest their work with social and political implications that would resonate within the larger social and political concerns of the period stemmed in large part from the fact that they restricted their critique to the level of aesthetics rather than engaging in the contingencies between culture and history itself. This situation calls to mind Theodor Adorno's argument that only a dialectical engagement between immanent (from within) and transcendent (from above) critiques of culture will permit both participation and resistance to co-optation within culture. Such a sophisticated level of analysis was largely unavailable, however, in the American intellectual milieu of the post-war period at least into the 1970s. Consequently, artists of this generation might respond to the era's demands for social commitment by engaging as individuals with its "realpolitik," but any overt infiltration of politics into their art was still seen as a vulgar violation of its aesthetic integrity, autonomy and freedom.

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Although the refutations of the authority of the Modernist tradition and values have so far focused around Minimalism, similar concerns were also central to the other major development during this period. Conceptual art. Although Conceptualism was a highly complex and diverse practice that came into prominence in both Europe and North America between 1967 and 1972, the key unifying issue was a philosophical questioning of the very nature of the art itself. In many ways, Conceptualism can be seen as a logical response to the over-determination of the art object in both Modernism and Minimalism. That response was characteristically expressed by the notion that art was nothing more or less than a series of propositions about its own terms, limits and conditions. Although some Conceptualists, notably the British Art & Language group, took a more expansive view of this process of questioning, for most American Conceptualists, the frame of reference was so confined within the parameters of the art world as to result in accusations of solipsism from some of their contemporaries.

While some of the new research into American Conceptualism may reveal a more socially and politically radical basis to the work, the present evidence suggests that most Conceptualists were no more willing or able to

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20 Earth Art, of course, was another important development, but since it is a category defined more by its material than by a set of coherent principles (that is, it could be produced on the basis of Modernist, Minimalist, or Conceptualist precepts, singly or in combination), it need not be addressed specifically in this context.


22 In Jo Baer's response to the Ariforum symposium, "The Artist and Politics," she referred to "that pair of sexual solipsisms currently known as Concept Art and Color Painting," p. 35.
engage in a dialectical critique of culture than were the Minimalists. Artists like Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth and Robert Barry may have come to the extreme position that a "work of art" may simply take the form of a verbal statement, but they did not seem to feel a responsibility to draw any radical political implications from this. Indeed, Weiner responded to the 1970 Artforum symposium on the question of artists' political role by stating that, although he believed all art was ultimately political, he categorically rejected all "so-called Art whose original intent and most often content is political or social." Further more, as Mary Kelly has argued in her article on "Reviewing Modernist Criticism," the Conceptualists may have attempted to purge Modernism of its aesthetic speculations by foregrounding language in the form of analytic propositions, but the ultimate goal was to arrive at "an exclusively self-referential art." She quotes from Kosuth's essay, "Art After Philosophy:

[T]he propositions of art are not factual, but linguistic in character. that is, they do not describe the behavior of physical or even mental objects; they express definitions of art, or the formal consequence of definitions of art.

That said, it must be acknowledged that Conceptualism's withholding of the sensual, possessible object was certainly intended to subvert the

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23 Much of this research is in progress by doctoral candidates and has not yet been published, although several interesting papers were presented in a session on Reconsidering Conceptualism at the Universities Art Association of Canada's annual conference in Halifax on November 5, 1994: William Wood, "A Penny to the Guys: Effigies in British Conceptual Art, 1966-1972;" Sharla Sava, "Language Plays: Reconciling FLUXUS and Conceptual Concerns on Canada's West Coast;" Frazer Ward, "Institutional Critique and Publicity;" and Alexander Alberro, "The Aesthetic Theories of Conceptual Art."
26 Kosuth, p. 846.
complicity of art production with market capitalism and to "democratize" its reception and consumption. Nevertheless, as Harrison and Wood have pointed out, "it can be said of such works as Weiner's and Barry's that they still present the spectator with a form of object of contemplation--even if this object is imaginary" (fig. 15).27 Furthermore, it can be argued that Conceptualism's claim to resisting commodification by denying the object was largely fallacious. Not only did the photographs, statements, postcards and other documentary residue quickly become prized souvenirs for collectors, the whole enterprise was still firmly entrenched within the established art world system of prestigious New York galleries and dealers. As artist Hans Haacke was to note in 1975, despite the widely held contention that the mass production of such cheap multiples was a means to democratize art by "undermining the myth of the unique, almost religiously revered object, it seems to have more to do with opening new markets than with democracy."28

It must be pointed out, however, that some of Conceptualism's more analytical tendencies were to provide invaluable strategies for negotiating the complex situation faced by the growing body of artists in the early 1970s who sought more effective ways to integrate their art practice within the larger social context. For one thing, Conceptualism's suppression or denial of the sensual art object encouraged a more intellectual, less intuitive approach which would prove to be conducive to a heightened critical engagement between art and culture. For another, the introduction of language as a material permitted the expansion of what could be legitimately considered "art" to include textuality. Both of these aspects

would contribute directly to the more discursive character of art practice that emerged during the 1970s.29

These new critical strategies became part of a general renewal in the art world around 1970 as a broad range of tendencies merged into that peculiarly indefinable phenomenon known as Post-Minimalism or, sometimes, Post-Conceptualism. A flurry of new art periodicals started up at this time to respond to the new directions and provide alternatives to what was then considered the stifling conservatism of *Artforum*. A partial list would include *Art-Language* in England and its New York affiliate, *The Fox*. Also from New York were *Avalanche* and *Data*. In Canada *Centerfold* was launched in 1978 (later *Fuse*) as a radical alternative to the mainstream *Artscanada*. These were low-budget periodicals run mainly by artists, with most of the writing also by artists rather than critics. There were also several important international art exhibitions which attempted to discern coherent tendencies in what appeared to be a highly fragmented field.30 Because so much of the work contributed to these exhibitions took some form of "installation art," the artists themselves were often present, thus resulting in much lively international exchange of ideas and friendships.31 These exhibitions also served as important sites of discussion and debate around the question that preoccupied growing

30 For example, the exhibitions When Attitudes Become Form (London, ICA, 1969) and Information (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1970). In July-August, 1970 the British journal *Studio International* also produced a special issue that was intended to function as an international exhibition. Under the guest-editorship of American avant-garde impresario Seth Siegalaub, six critics were invited to select a number of artists, who were allocated pages in the journal for the realization of specially designed art works.
numbers of artists: how could art function as a critical voice in culture to expose and resist the pervasive political corruption and social oppression?

Since it was becoming increasingly apparent that the "political implications" of work that attempted to achieve such ends by relying on formal, aesthetic critique alone remained largely invisible except within a highly restricted milieu, artists began to explore other approaches to achieving social resonance in their work. This was a formidable challenge. Unlike the thirties, when realism provided an appropriate way to deal with the burning issues of the day, the demands of aesthetic radicalism in the seventies were heavily influenced by thirty years of critical rhetoric advocating the need for a separation between the culture of the elites and the masses. As a consequence, these artists faced a great gulf between their aspirations as proponents of advanced art practice and their desire to make work that could somehow be relevant beyond the elite circles of high art practice.

Moreover, what was understood as political had also changed dramatically since the thirties. The revitalized political debates of the 1960s had resulted from a radically reconfigured concept of politics which had fueled the Civil Rights, anti-war, New Left, and newly emerging feminist movements. Within these new formations the traditional Marxist notion of class struggle was eclipsed by concerns over the question of power itself—who holds it, how is it implemented, how it defines knowledge, and how culture serves to legitimate it.32 By the early 1970s, these concerns were beginning to be clearly focused around issues of race.

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gender and cultural imperialism. For many artists at this time, it became apparent that the attack against the formalist authority of Modernism was inadequate to deal with the complexities of new political issues concerning the relationship between "culture and democracy." 

The heightened awareness that resulted from the political debates of the sixties and the new international flow of cultural discourse led artists to recognize that the Modernist strategy of autonomy as a defense against political manipulation had effectively led to collusion with the " Establishment" status quo. Artists began to focus once again on how art functioned within society and to question the role it played in sustaining the status quo. As Harrison and Wood have pointed out, this desire to redress Modernism's denial of the contingencies of history led artists to call attention to the issue of context in a multitude of ways, focusing on both "production contexts--the material from which the work was made--


34 Harris, p. 71; he explained further: "Though a group or individual might have a particular interest in an issue to do with class, gender, race or anti-imperialism, a linking theme was the relationship between the 'democracy' of US society and the nature of the cultural forms within it. Fine or 'high' art could not be mobilized within the re-politicized conjuncture of 1968."

and consumption contexts—the physical and institutional parameters determining access to the work of art.  

Allusions to context had been tentatively present in contemporary art since at least the mid-1950s when Cage, Rauschenberg, Johns and the Fluxus artists introduced elements of "everyday life" into their work. Yet these references were strictly aesthetic strategies and had no intention to affect the course of everyday life itself. For artists in the seventies, however, context had come to mean the political and institutional superstructure which was the manifestation of the capitalist power base that dominated society. In response to this realization, many artists began to devise art installations as a way to examine the nature and function of the art system itself as an institution within the larger culture. Given the more vibrant tradition of European cultural politics, it is perhaps no coincidence that the artists most closely associated with this form of institution critique, Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke, were both Europeans.  

Their work endeavoured to show how art and the institution that contains and reveals it, is not apart from culture, but a part of it. Buren wrote:

In this way, the location assumes considerable importance by its fixity and its inevitability; becomes the 'frame' (and the security that presupposes) at the very moment when they would have us believe that what takes place inside shatters all the existing frames (manacles) in the attaining of pure 'freedom'.

Haacke, who went even further than Buren in revealing the complicity of the art institution with the larger power structures of society, was fully

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37 Frascina, p. 120, cites Lucy Lippard's remark that the Europeans "tended to be the most militant and the best educated politically although we [Americans] came along fairly fast." Lippard in an interview with Frascina, December 15, 1990.
aware of how much more effective such critiques were than the relatively simple gestures of protest art:

If you make protest paintings you are likely to stay below the sophistication of the apparatus you are attacking. It is emotionally gratifying to point the finger at some atrocity and say this here is the bastard responsible for it. But, in effect, once the work arrives in a public place it only addresses itself to people who share these feelings and are already convinced. Appeals and condemnations don't make you think.39

This realization that art, with its attendant systems of production, reception and commodification, constitutes an institution within culture was of profound significance. As Peter Bürger had insisted in his Theory of the Avant-Garde, only such self-conscious awareness will permit one to see that it is this institutional status, which Haacke also alludes to, that prevents art from having any real connection to society or politics.40 But if Bürger was correct that the historical avant-gardes were ultimately unsuccessful in destroying the institutional autonomy of art, his conclusion that it did not seem possible for a new "post-avant-garde" to emerge and displace the purely aesthetic concerns of the "neo-avant-garde" seems to have been rather premature.41 With our advantage of hindsight, we can now look back at the 1970s as a period which saw the emergence of an art practice whose goals were not entirely dissimilar to those of the historical avant-gardes, at least in terms of negating autonomy by embedding art within the social and political contingencies of everyday life. There is.

however, one important difference. Where the admitted naïve intent of
the historical avant-gardes was to destroy the institution of art, the intent
of radical artists during the 1970s was to expose the very complicity of
that institution with the larger structures of power and domination.

III. The Emergence of Feminism: Redefining the Political.

Although many artists would continue into the 1970s to engage in
various forms of technical and aesthetic refusals of the Modernist idiom.
the commitment to "social effectivity" emerged as perhaps the most
distinct characteristic of art practice during this period. This
commitment to force a fundamentally new concept of the relationship
between art, life and politics bore the traces of the revolutionary avant-
gardes, yet it is clear that by the early seventies the very concept of what
the political was underwent a significant shift. As issues of class struggle
had dissipated in the developed nations of Europe and North America.
political conflicts began to be reformulated in terms of new social agencies
that raised questions of colonialism, imperialism, race and ethnicity. It has
been acknowledged, however, that in the 1970s, "the most insistent bearer
of the struggle for emancipation within Western societies has been the
women's movement in its various forms." 43

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The women's movement, both in its grass-roots and intellectual manifestations, emerged out of the New Left that had formed in response to the crises of the 1960s. But in contrast to the class-oriented language of the left, the women's movement advanced notions of political emancipation and cultural critique that were to affect profoundly our understanding of politics. Essentially, feminism worked to make visible how politics were experienced at the subjective level of the individual, and how society's institutions and "selective traditions" assumed and deployed their power on the basis of the privilege of gender. Because feminism engaged politics at both macro and micro levels, it became particularly conducive to an art practice that sought to negotiate a new relationship between art, life and politics. And because aesthetic practice itself became recognized as a form of gender oppression, feminist artists did not see art as potentially compromised by, or in conflict with, their political goals, but rather as the object of them. Unlike so many of their male peers, women artists sympathetic to the feminist movement tended not to restrict their activities to the level of esoteric aesthetic critique. Above all, feminism was a political movement whose goal was to change the basis of life itself: art was one weapon among many in the struggle for the enfranchisement of all women, both within and beyond the art world.

The women's movement began to revive during the 1960s after a hiatus of decades.\textsuperscript{44} By 1970 the movement was widespread and by 1971.

when *Ms.* magazine published its premier issue, it was poised to become
the single greatest force for social change in that decade. How its politics
evolved, how it came to identify its key issues, how it developed strategies
of protest, resistance and subversion, and how it so effectively conjoined
the practice of activism with an intellectual theorization of that practice
are questions that must be considered briefly in order to establish the
context in which feminist art practice emerged in the 1970s.

The first harbinger of a renewed feminist consciousness had been the
publication in 1949 of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which
constituted the most sustained and theoretical analysis of the oppression of
women to date. Although de Beauvoir's book was translated into English in
1952, it remained a latent influence on North American feminists until
considerably later. Of more immediate influence in this context was the
publication in 1963 of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. In this
pioneering book, Friedan sought to document and give voice to the
widespread malaise experienced by American women who felt trapped in
their homes, isolated from any sense of shared community and constrained
by the ubiquitous, stereotypical images of the "ideal woman" in mass
media and advertising. But every year greater numbers of women were
working outside the home; by 1970 almost fifty percent of women worked,
while the percentage of married women who worked tripled and those

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and David H. Flaherty, eds. Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and
the United States (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992) and
Women Unite!: An Anthology of the Canadian Women's Movement (Toronto:
Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1972).


analysis of the differing precepts and concerns of de Beauvoir's and Friedan's texts,
see Rosemary Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder and
with children increased at an even faster rate. While some women were achieving a degree of professional success, the majority were confined to low-paying, non-unionized service jobs. Women typically received lower wages, even for equal work, a discriminatory practice revealed by the fact that the ratio of women's to men's earnings actually declined from sixty-three percent in 1945 to fifty-seven percent in 1973.47

In an effort to redress these and other blatant discriminations, women began to form protest organizations. In 1966 the National Organization for Women (NOW) was formed in the United States. and in Canada the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was set up in 1967. The original focus on eliminating employment discrimination and establishing government funded day-care centres soon expanded to include a broad range of issues, including equalization of education opportunities, revision of marriage, divorce, abortion and rape laws and constitutional guarantees of equal rights. Although the preoccupation of liberal feminists with legal reforms has been considered inadequate by other feminists because it does not question the basic values upon which social structures and institutions are based, it must be acknowledged that such activism is responsible for ensuring many of the rights we now take for granted.48

Nevertheless, while liberal feminists lobbied for equal rights, another feminist faction consolidated itself around the far more radical and encompassing demand for equal power in society.49 This demand emanated mainly from women who were at the core of the most radical

48 Tong, p. 38.
49 Carroll, p. 34.
group in American society, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The experiences of these women of being reduced to secretaries and coffee-makers confirmed that discrimination against women was so systemic that even those men who were ostensibly the most enlightened, most altruistic, and most democratic in all of society were not immune to sexist practices. As we shall see, the beliefs, values and oppositional strategies of what would come to be known as radical feminism would be highly influential for many early North American feminist artists. In time, however, these positions would be contested and augmented by the increasingly complex, sophisticated and heterogeneous modes of thought that were evolving within the feminist movement.

The situation for women in the art world trying to articulate and bring attention to their concerns presented many of the same difficulties women were confronting everywhere at this time. One of the most obvious problems they had to deal with was the oppression of a historical tradition which had systematically downgraded and marginalized the activities of women as artists.50 Although there were more women artists active in the post-war period than ever before, only rarely had they been given serious critical attention. Helen Frankenthaler, who had been well supported by Greenberg, was a notable exception. Other significant artists who were more or less her contemporaries, like Lee Krasner or Louise Nevelson, fared less well (fig. 16). Indeed, as Whitney Chadwick noted in her study of women artists, the fact that an artist was a woman was often reason enough to ignore or disparage her work; she cites one critic who said about Nevelson: "We learned the artist was a woman, in time to check

our enthusiasm. Had it been otherwise, we might have hailed these sculptural expressions as by surely a great figure among the moderns."

In spite of the blatant sexism of such remarks, judgements about works of art were held to be utterly devoid of any considerations other than aesthetic ones. Since aesthetic judgements at this time were sensible only to the abstract formal qualities of a work, they were ostensibly neutral and disinterested. It follows from this way of thinking that if women artists were less successful than their male colleagues, it must be because they were simply less competent artists, not because they were women. And since such judgements were intuitive rather than analytical, based on the assertion of one's superior aesthetic sensibilities, they were very difficult to refute. As has been shown, however, the hegemony of this supposedly disinterested "selective tradition" was being widely questioned throughout the 1960s. Yet, in a situation parallel to the experiences of women trying to bring feminist issues to the table within the SDS, it became apparent that even those male artists determined to contest established authority remained insensitive to their own role in the ongoing marginalization of women artists.

This marginalization was very much the product of an entrenched historical tradition that remained intact even while so many other aspects of the art world had come under open attack by 1970. Not only were women artists ignored by critics, but they had great difficulty finding dealers to represent them and were rarely included in group exhibitions.

52 A first-hand account of the persistence of this situation even into the early 1970s is given by Lucy Lippard, "Sexual Politics: Art Style," in her From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), pp. 28-37. For a synthesis of statistical information concerning the representation of women artists...
The idea of giving a solo exhibition to a woman artist, especially a living one, was almost unheard of. Indeed, when the National Gallery of Canada gave Joyce Wieland a show in 1971, it was the first solo exhibition by a woman in the history of that institution. These forces of institutional control would gradually come under the scrutiny of a burgeoning feminist theory. In 1971 art historian Linda Nochlin analyzed these problems in a provocatively titled essay: "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?" Nochlin insisted that the explanation was partly due to the fact that women had usually been denied equal access to the educational and support systems available to men. Of far greater significance, however, was her demand for a paradigm shift. She suggested that women had been asking the wrong questions—it was not a matter of why women had not been "good" artists, but of whose values they were being judged by. In effect, Nochlin called attention to the existence of a canon, whose terms and conditions not only militated against the participation of women, but actually denied the possibility that women might have different experiences in and of the world that might have cultural significance. Although Nochlin's essay was of pivotal importance for the feminist movement, its implications were so far-reaching and complex that it would be ten years before its impact was fully understood.54

If lack of recognition of women artists and resistance to the challenge of the growing feminist movement could be taken as a given among the more conservative elements within the art world, the situation amongst its more radical enclaves was not appreciably better. Although there were considerably more women artists active within the generation that came to maturity between 1965 and 1970, they do not seem to have benefitted from the support of their supposedly progressive male peers.\textsuperscript{55} This was especially true if a woman artist attempted to integrate her experiences \textit{as a woman} into her work. One of the first women to bring attention to this situation was Carolee Schneemann, a New York artist who produced films and performances that celebrated the sensual and visceral energy of the body. Although her work had gained some recognition at this time among the inner circle of New York artists, she felt peripheral and undervalued. In her autobiographical book, \textit{More than Meat Joy}, she expressed her anger and frustration at the refusal of her male friends, whom she called "the men's art team" to take her work seriously. She said that women were permitted to participate in the art world, but only so long as they did not challenge and threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club, so long as they behaved \textit{enough} like the men, [and] did work clearly in the traditions and pathways hacked out by the men.\textsuperscript{56}

It was possible for a woman to achieve a degree of success, provided she worked within the conventions established by men. As feminist writer Shulamith Firestone noted at the time, "where individual women have

\textsuperscript{55} For example, when women in the Art Workers Coalition attempted to bring attention to their concerns, they were as summarily dismissed as were the women in the SDS; in response they formed their own organization, Women Artists in Revolution (WAR).

participated in male culture, they have had to do so in male terms."57

Indeed, artists like Eva Hesse, Agnes Martin, Jackie Winsor and Dorthea Rockburn achieved considerable notoriety as artists working within variations of the Minimalist tradition (figs. 17-18). In an effort to validate a history of women artists, feminists have subsequently claimed evidence of a "feminine sensibility" in the work of these important artists, even though none of them aligned their work with specifically feminist concerns. Yet this notion of a "feminine sensibility" has been a particularly vexing one for feminist artists, critics and scholars on a number of levels.58

This concept originated in the early 1970s out of the belief that the experiences of women as women were fundamentally different from those of men, yet their oppression in patriarchal culture had obscured or negated these differences. In art, evidence of this distinct "feminine sensibility" was sought in the work of both historical and contemporary women artists. It was thought that this sensibility could be manifest in contemporary art not only in overtly representational images, but even in abstract manipulations of forms, materials and processes. For example, critic Lucy Lippard felt she could identify a predilection in women's art for "circles, domes, eggs, spheres, boxes, biomorphic shapes, maybe a certain striation or layering . . . [and] fragments, which imply a certain antilogical, antilinear approach."59 This hermeneutical reading of abstract form was consistent with the critical predilections of day, and operated on the same logic as did

58 For a summary of the key issues around this topic, see Gouma-Peterson and Mathews, pp. 334-338.
59 Lucy Lippard, "What is Female Imagery?" in From the Center, p. 81. See also, Lucy Lippard "Projecting a Feminist Criticism," Art Journal, 35, No. 4 (Summer 1976), pp. 337-339.
the claims that Minimalism had "political implications."⁶⁰ And when this line of critical analysis is used to ferret out evidence of a "feminine sensibility" in the abstract work of artists like Hess, Winsor, Martin and Rockburn, it leads to equally problematic contradictions.⁶¹

The basis for the claims of the existence of a female sensibility in the work of artists like Hess, Winsor, Martin and Rockburn was that, even though they employed many of the same strategies of material process, series, systems and forms as did their male counterparts, their art seemed to embody a clear departure from the cool, machinist and often monolithic forms favoured by Morris, Judd, Andre, Serra and other Minimalists. This may appear as a certain visceral sensuousness or an eccentricity of form (Hess or Rockburn), as a concern with texture and handicraft (Hesse or Winsor), or as a predilection for subtlety and intimacy (Martin or Rockburn).

Nonetheless, to claim that these differences are the product of an inherent "feminine sensibility" leads directly into the dangerous terrain of essentialism. Essentialism is a concept particularly associated with feminist theory of the early 1970s, but it has subsequently been much contested and remains a subject of considerable debate among feminists.⁶²

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⁶² The literature on this topic is vast (and will be explored in more detail in subsequent chapters), but two particularly succinct summaries of the problems are provided in Janet Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics," in her Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 1990). 120-141; and Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism," Theory Culture & Society. 5. Nos. 2-3 (1988): rpt. in Feminism/
The premise of essentialism holds that just as all women in all cultures in all times have been subjected to oppression by men, so all women are linked by a bond of innate, essential femininity that differentiates them fundamentally from men. This premise is fraught with treacherous pitfalls, not the least of which is the paradoxical fact that it was precisely such a belief in the "naturalness" of both femininity and masculinity that has been used historically to justify the restriction of roles and opportunities for women. Therefore, the claim that the work of Hess, Winsor, Martin, Rockburn and others manifests an inherent "feminine sensibility" implies that this manifestation is beyond the conscious volition of these artists, which in turn demeans the intellectual basis of their work by reducing it to the level of pre-conscious intuition. The effect of this premise is not only to collapse together the feminine (a "natural" state) and the feminist (a political stance) into meaningless confusion, but to valorize those same characteristics which have traditionally been used to stereotype and downgrade all things female.

On the other hand, it could be argued that such work does constitute a feminist politics in two principle ways. In the first place, the work of artists like Hess, Winsor, Martin and Rockburn can perhaps be seen to defy the prevailing premise that subjectivity is neutral and universal by asserting a consciousness of a gendered subjectivity. In the second place, it can be seen to resist conforming to the dominant language of Minimalist aesthetics, thus constituting an intervention in that paradigm comparable


to the Minimalist intervention in the Modernist one. If these artists' work is thus seen not as the expression of an inherent "feminine sensibility." but as the tentative beginnings of what was to become a key feminist strategy of exposing and subverting the patriarchal authority of the dominant values and systems of power, then a much more fruitful line of inquiry is opened up into the principle concerns of feminist artists in the 1970s.

As the feminist movement progressed during that decade, women searched for and began to develop increasingly effective ways to articulate their political concerns. As the meaning of the political was reconfigured to focus on issues of power in the period after 1968, culture itself came to be seen as playing a central role in this discourse. While not neglecting how extensively issues of race, ethnicity or imperialism affected this redefining of politics, the role of the feminist movement has been absolutely pivotal. This is largely because the movement became so widespread across a range of levels, from grass roots to highbrow intellectual, and its political exigencies led it to harness and deploy any and every potential tool or strategy as a weapon in the struggle. As Canadian art critic Monika Gagnon has stated:

[T]o be a feminist producing art is to recognize that artistic production takes place within a social context: moreover, it is to recognize that artistic production will reflect a variety of gradually evolving shifts in strategy.65

In other words, feminist art was not merely an expressive complement to the larger political agenda, but was a strategic weapon to challenge the means by which power and authority are maintained and

64 Harris, p. 71.
legitimated in society through culture. Women who engaged feminist issues in their art were, by definition, involved in a political struggle. These politics were directed both towards bringing about change in the larger society as well as in the art world itself. To achieve an art which merely had "social resonance" would not suffice. nor would an art practice which restricted itself to subtle and highly specialized manipulations of aesthetic forms and conventions. As participants in a political movement, their goal was to reach out and enfranchise the broadest possible audience, both within and beyond the art world. As we shall see, this goal would encompass not only interventions in existing art modes, but the opening up of practices that had been previously nonexistent, marginalized, denigrated or suppressed.
I. Feminism and Performance: An Overview.

At the close of the preceding chapter, we alluded to the ways the political goals of the expanding feminist movement led women artists to seek new audiences and new ways of formulating an art practice that would further these goals. As feminist scholar Janet Wolff has noted, the special value in bringing about these new approaches lies in the fact that:

[N]ew forms of cultural expression by virtue of the fact that their very existence challenges and dislocates dominant narratives and discourses, provide the space for different voices to speak and for hitherto silenced subjects to articulate their experience.¹

As even the most cursory survey of feminist art in the 1970s will show, an extraordinary number of women felt that it was in the realm of performance art that such new forms of cultural expressions could be most effectively developed. The special appeal of performance to early feminist artists is often attributed to its status as an innovative mode that provided both new spaces from which to speak and thus to challenge the dominant narratives and canonical values of current cultural practice.² Performance, however, is very much rooted in the avant-garde tradition whose historical

² See for example, Mary Jane Jacobs, Introduction, The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970-1980, ed. Moira Roth (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983), p. 11. A clear indication of the belief that "in performance we found an art form that was young, without the tradition of painting or sculpture," was also expressed by Cheri Gaulke, "Performance Art of the Woman's Building," High Performance, 3, Nos. 3-4 (Fall-Winter, 1980), p. 156.
vitality derived from its inherent potential for provocation and subversion as well as its commitment to destroying the separation between art and life. Since these were also the very factors that made performance so especially suited to the feminist political agenda, it is worthwhile to review briefly some of the defining characteristics of historical performance that are germane to the developments of feminist performance of the 1970s.

The provocative intersection of culture and politics within feminist performance has distant but prototypical origins in the dissolution of the boundaries between art and life in the bohemian cabarets of the late-nineteenth century and in Alfred Jarry's outrageous and absurdist play *Ubu Roi*, which was first performed at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris in 1896. During the period just before and during the first World War, the Italian Futurists and the group of Dada artists in exile in Zurich began to develop these early tendencies into the coherent activity of performance as a twentieth-century art form. Although the Futurist and Dada artists differed radically in their respective political positions, both were avant-garde groups drawn by the potential of performance as a kind of shock therapy that, according to Dadaist Hans Richter, was intended to arouse their complacent bourgeois audiences "to rage. and through rage. to a shame-faced self-awareness."

The shock value of these early performances rested mainly upon the fact that their outrageous and absurd antics seemed to have no semblance

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of art about them. Inasmuch as this avant-garde negation of the values of
art itself undermined the ideals of bourgeois culture, this art of
performance was intended not only to denounce the complicity of
traditional aesthetic practice with that culture, but also to forge a new
model for art that was intrinsically engaged with, rather than separate
from, what Peter Bürger referred to as the praxis of everyday life.5
Performance did continue to play an important role in the history of
twentieth-century art, but the provocative, political potential that had
been unleashed by the Futurists and Dadas gradually dissipated. If its role
as political weapon might have been kept alive by the Surrealists, by 1924
André Breton had come to the position that all theatre was profoundly
compromised by its relationship to the audience. Indeed, in her study of
Dada and Surrealist performance, Annabelle Henkin Melzer observed that:

"Theatre was the celebrant at society's feast and Breton, who was
just beginning to crystallize his revolt against society, was unwilling
to play lackey to any commercial venture [and] Artaud and Vitrac
were bounced from the movement for dealing in tickets and
auditoriums."6

After a substantial hiatus in performance activities during the 1930s
and 1940s, resulting mainly from the chaos of the war and the
oppressively conservative climate of the post-war years, performance
began to be revived as an art form during the late 1950s, but with a shift
in emphasis from Europe to the United States. One of the major
precipitating forces for this revival was Jackson Pollock's expressive
"action" paintings. According to the critic Harold Rosenberg, whose views

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had considerable influence in the 1950s. the canvas had become not a picture, but the site of an existential "event". 

Pollock's efforts to break down the distinction between art and life then merged with similar notions in the work of musician John Cage. whose 1958-1959 experimental music classes at the New School for Social Research were enormously influential for young musicians, artists, poets and filmmakers in New York. From this intersection of Pollock's "hot" expressionism and Cage's "cool" intellectual propositions about life as the creative basis of art, came the rich fusion of possibilities that Cage's students developed into the performance events of Happenings and Fluxus.

The key premise behind performance during this period was the emphasis on the ordinary and quotidian as a way to disrupt the traditional separations between "high" and "low" art, between art and life. While this premise was intended to advance what historian Sally Banes has described as "the populist aims of accessibility and equality--for both artists and audiences." any real political potential was stymied by the prevailing liberal pragmatism of the 1960s, in which a pluralistic diversification was favoured over any real form of tendentious practice. 

This reticence to engage directly with the political and historical contingencies of the day was also noted by Robyn Brentano in a recent catalogue essay on American performance art:

The relationship of avant-garde performance to the political realities of the 1960s is a complex issue. While many artists were committed activists who participated in grass-roots activities, performances in the early sixties generally were focused on aesthetic

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innovation and lacked explicitly political content. There was a sense in the air that art would contribute to social change by changing consciousness and by operating outside the institutional confines of the art establishment where it could reach a non-art public.\textsuperscript{9}

As the social and political crisis of the 1960s deepened towards the end of the decade, with the escalation of violence in the civil rights, student and anti-war movements, we do begin to see artists engaged in performances which involved disturbing and often dangerous acts of self-mutilation, physical endurance, and self-denial in order to confront the fears and inhibitions associated with the conflicts of this period.\textsuperscript{10} The 1971 performance in which the California artist Chris Burden had himself shot in the arm is perhaps the most famous work of this type (fig. 19). Yet, because these performances were primarily emblematic or symbolic, they remained resistant to the intrusion of a politics based in the praxis of life.

As women artists' awareness of the feminist movement developed, many struggled to move beyond the dominant artistic paradigms and invest their work with a social and political critique that paralleled the efforts of feminists in all areas of society. Although women had had limited participation in performance art since its inception, during the late 1960s and early 1970s they began to see the potential of performance as a way to achieve their goals of social and political change. This was not only because the history of performance was infused with a spirit of provocation and transgression, but also because its relatively marginal status located it outside the canonical codes and determinations of the mainstream network of controlling agents of critics, curators, dealers and


\textsuperscript{10} Brentano. p. 46.
collectors. While performance appealed to some women because it provided an alternative space in which to establish a separate culture where they could express their own values, concerns and experiences, others saw more fruitful possibilities in how this marginal status could be used strategically to challenge and dislocate the dominant cultural narratives and discourses.

As an art form which features the living body, performance allowed women to mount this challenge by placing themselves, both literally and figuratively, at the very centre of their work. In contrast to the accumulation of centuries of representation in which sexual difference has been inscribed through art by rendering women as the passive object of the male gaze, performance offered women the opportunity to assert themselves as the active and self-determined agents of their own narratives. These were not, however, simple fictions in which the performer enacts character and role. Nor were they merely expressions of the subjective experience of "my" personality or "my" feelings. On the contrary, they constituted a situation in which the personal and the performative were conflated so as to blur the distinctions between author and agent, subject and object. The tension that is thus created between acting and lived experience disrupts the fictive naturalism of theatre with a kind of Brechtian realism centred around the controlled and often ironic intrusion of the personal.11

This intrusion of the personal was, of course, based upon the feminist axiom that "the personal is political." This premise became a crucial part of a two-pronged strategy to develop a feminist art. It served as a way to

undermine the privileging of formal innovation, which had precluded any suggestion of tangible content and forced women to participate in culture under ostensibly "neutral" or "disinterested" terms. It also became the basis for an assault against the dismissive attitudes towards women in the art world and the oppressive representations and conditions of women in all aspects of culture and society. For the majority of women drawn to performance as a way to engage both these aesthetic and social concerns, the dialectics of liberation and oppression intersected nowhere more powerfully than around the politics of sexuality and the female body.

It cannot be taken as self-evident that when women began to use performance to articulate their concerns, they did so because it was available to them as an established site of politicized art practice that could be readily adapted to their particular agenda. For one thing, the political associations of avant-garde performance had long since dissipated. For another, the feminist political agenda was itself still in a formative stage, especially in terms of the theoretical basis that would develop in tandem with the empirical strategies and tactics of practice itself. But these strategies and tactics were not always well conceived or implemented, especially during the early years. Looking retrospectively, it is painfully easy to see the flaws, compromises and contradictions of much early feminist art. Nevertheless, as much was learned from the mistakes and false starts as from the successes of this early work. It must not be accepted uncritically, but neither should it be disparaged or allowed to disappear from memory. Feminism is not an evolution, but a process we must continue to revisit and reconsider as our critical skills and historical perspectives develop and change.
II. The First Feminist Art Programs.

The origins of feminist art in general, and performance in particular, are irrefutably linked to the name of Judy Chicago. This is not because Chicago was a performance artist, but because she used her role as a teacher to galvanize a whole group of young female students into creating a dynamic, collaborative environment for explorations in performance. Although Chicago's particular way of looking at feminism has since been widely debated, she played a central role in coherently articulating some of the problems women confronted in attempting to participate in the professional art world.

Chicago, who had established a fairly strong reputation in Los Angeles as a formalist painter, had already begun to invest her work with feminist concerns by 1969. That year she exhibited a series of paintings called Pasadena Lifesavers, in which the colours and centralized forms were intended as self-expressive metaphors or symbols to evoke both her masculine and feminine aspects (fig. 20). That these formal elements were derived not from strictly aesthetic concerns, but from personal experience was reinforced by the inclusion of a statement on the gallery wall that she was changing her name: "Judy Gerowitz hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name Judy Chicago." Several year later Chicago explained further: "I wanted to make a symbolic statement about my

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12 Judy Chicago, Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 56-57.
13 Chicago, p. 63.
emerging position as a feminist. And I wanted to force viewers to see the work in relation to the fact that it was made by a woman artist." Her intentions were rooted in the conflict she perceived between the fact that she was treated as a "woman" every time she stepped out her door, yet the art world could only see her as a "person" whose art had to be "neutral" in order to be acceptable. Chicago realized that:

if the art community as it existed could not provide me with what I needed in order to realize myself, then I would have to commit myself to developing an alternative and that the meaning of the women's movement was that there was, probably for the first time in history, a chance to do just that. If my needs, values, and interests differed from male artists' who were invested in the values of the culture, then it was up to me to help develop a community that was relevant to me and other women artists."15

The establishment of such a community was Chicago's main reason for accepting an invitation to teach at Fresno State College in California in the fall of 1970. She immediately organized a class for female students only and devised a program that was the first of its kind. Realizing that many young women entered art school but few went on to practice professionally, she wanted to create an environment that would encourage them in their commitment to become artists. Chicago chose fifteen strongly motivated but essentially untrained women to participate, including Suzanne Lacy, Janice Lester, Nancy Youdelman and Faith Wilding (fig. 21).16 This decision to value commitment over aesthetic prowess indicates how far Chicago felt women had to veer from the norm in order

15 Chicago, p. 66.
to establish a "relevant community." It also marks a conspicuous contrast to the prevailing outlook expressed by those artists who had responded to "The Artist and Politics" symposium published in *Artforum* the very month that Chicago began her course. Although Chicago herself did not yet conceive of her activities as overtly political, she provided an environment for her students in which aesthetic values were explicitly framed within a struggle for liberation.

But if Chicago and her students did not yet fully recognize their struggle as a political one, this is characteristic of the general ethos of the women's movement at this time. As Sara Evans has pointed out in her account of the history of the women's movement, *Personal Politics*, the channeling of women's discontent and anger into a self-conscious political struggle was a slow process of trial and error. Evans made an analogy between this process of growing awareness and the Marxist theory of class consciousness. In order for a class to organize itself towards a future goal, it must be *self-conscious* of itself as a class before it can act collectively on its own behalf. Substituting the agency of gender for that of class, Evans cites sociologist Karl Mannheim in asserting that this self-discovery of group consciousness "begins with groups attempting to take stock of their position in a new situation." For early feminists, this process took the form of consciousness-raising. Evans wrote:

Young women's instinctive sharing of their personal experiences soon became a political instrument called 'consciousness-raising.'
models for consciousness-raising ranged from the earliest SNCC [Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee] meetings, to SDS's 'Guatemala Guerrilla' organizing approach, to the practice of 'speaking bitterness' in the Chinese revolution. It evolved into a kind of phenomenological approach to women's liberation. Kathie Sarachild advocated that women should junk all the old theories and start from scratch, relying on our own experience: 'In our groups, let's share our feelings and pool them. Let's let ourselves go and see where our feelings lead us. Our feelings will lead us to ideas and then to actions.' Thus consciousness-raising became both a method for developing theory and a strategy for building up the new movement.20

From the outset the Fresno program was much more closely aligned to the women's movement than to mainstream art education or practice. Not only had they formed a separate and relevant community in which they could "start from scratch, relying on [their] own experience." but the model for their activities was adapted directly from the process of consciousness-raising. As Chicago later wrote, she soon realized that before she could help these young women as artists, she "would have to help them feel that they were 'all right' as people."21 At first the students were hesitant and felt intimidated by intellectual discussion. To draw them out and bolster their confidence, Chicago initiated "a kind of modified consciousness-raising, which combined the expressing of common experiences with my trying to help the women understand the implications of those experiences in order to change their behavior patterns."22

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20 Evans, p. 214; the Kathie Sarachild quotation is from "A Program for Feminist Consciousness Raising," Correspondence Files for Thanksgiving Conference of Women, Lake Villa, Illinois, November 28-31, 1968; personal files of Sara Evans.
21 Chicago, p. 72.
22 Chicago, p. 75. It must be noted that Chicago was also very concerned that her students develop the basic skills necessary to succeed as professional artists. She had them find an off-campus studio to rent and fix up, thus forcing them to assert themselves with real estate agents, to work independently and collaboratively, and to become competent using the tools and materials that men took for granted, but which
In this secure and permissive environment the women soon began to talk about things that were never discussed in other art classes—sexuality, family and personal relationships, fear of violence and harassment, anxieties and desires of the most intimate kind. After an initial period of discussions, Chicago suggested that they begin to channel these experiences into art-making. Although there were no restrictions or guidelines as to media, the students spontaneously gravitated towards a role-playing approach. As Chicago later explained: "One of the most important discoveries of the year was that informal performance provided the women with a way of reaching subject matter for art-making. The most powerful work of the first year of the program was the performances."

At the end of the year the students presented some of their performances as part of their studio exhibition. References to violence, rape and slaughter were frequent, as were sexual fantasies. One performance, *Rivalry Play*, dealt with how women, unable to confront their "real oppressor," turn their "self-hatred" against each other. One had a woman led onstage by a butcher (played by one of the students) who tied her to a milking machine that squirted blood into a pitcher while images and sound recordings of a slaughterhouse were played; the butcher then returned and poured the blood over her body. Chicago's graduate assistant, Vicki Hall, performed *Ominous Operation* in a setting with an

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24 Chicago, p. 87.

25 Chicago, p. 89.
operating table hung with gauze and lit by soft, pink lights. Dressed as a
surgeon but with an elaborate headdress of horns and twinkling lights. Hall
and her satyr-costumed assistant performed a mock operation that
transformed a woman into a hermaphrodite with a latex phallus.

These performances were crude but cathartic. As Chicago said in a
later interview with historian Moira Roth.

Performance can be fueled by rage in a way that painting and
sculpture can't. The women at Fresno did Performances with almost
no skills, but they were powerful Performances because they came
out of authentic feelings. 26

By permitting the women to express previously unarticulated feelings,
these performances helped them realize that their fears, anxieties and
confusion did not mean there was "something wrong" with them as
individuals, but rather became the starting point for the gradual
recognition of their oppression as a cultural group. One of the students,
Faith Wilding, recalled:

Most people worked in Performance. None of us had done this
before and we weren't aware of the tradition of Performances and
Happenings. I didn't connect these Performances with art-making at
all, but it was tremendously releasing. It was part psychodrama and
part tapping in the dark. But it was always rooted in Feminism. 27

Although the activities of the Fresno group lacked any solid theoretical
grounding in the politics of women's movement, it led the way to an
empirical understanding of the issues. For most of the women, these
performances served as rites of passage to purge their anger. As Vicki Hall

26 Chicago, quoted in Roth, "Towards a History of California Performance," Part Two,
p. 117: from an interview with Moira Roth (October 24, 1977).
27 Wilding, quoted in Roth, "Towards a History of California Performance," Part Two,
p. 117: from an interview with Moira Roth (November 2, 1977).
said. "I became a Feminist through my art. My art showed me my Feminism, which I experienced on a conscious level."^28

In the fall of 1971 Chicago was encouraged by her friend Miriam Schapiro to become part of a full-scale program of women's art studies at the newly formed California Institute of the Arts in Valencia (CalArts). The program was now officially named the Feminist Art Program, and they were given space, tools, equipment and a budget to establish an archive of historical and contemporary women artists. Several of the women who had been at Fresno relocated to CalArts with Chicago.\(^29\)

During the first semester the group began a monumental project that would come to be called Womanhouse. They located a derelict mansion in residential Hollywood and rented it for three months. After doing basic repairs to the structure, they set about creating an elaborate series of environments throughout the house, which was then open to the public from January 30 to February 28, 1972.\(^30\) The women were compelled by the notion of taking what they saw as the very symbol of their oppression—domesticity—and seeing what would happen if they turned it into the means of art-making.\(^31\) The predicament of the "trapped housewife" had become a key point of consternation for feminists ever since Betty Friedan

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\(^{29}\) There is some discrepancy over the exact number; Roth gives it as six in "Towards a History of California Performance," Part Two. p. 117, while Chicago says it was eight. p. 89.


published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. Middle-class women in this period were relatively highly educated, but discouraged from pursuing meaningful careers or participating in public life. Domestic life failed to meet their rising expectations of "fulfillment." yet in a culture that provided no support for real alternatives, women continued to cling to, and judge themselves by, traditional values.

Although these distinctly middle-class issues had been long fomenting, they had not previously been addressed in an art context. The environments created at Womanhouse evoked ambivalent feelings about the conflation of domesticity and femininity. The fantasy of the perfect marriage was represented by the *Bridal Staircase*, where a bedecked bride ascended to a gray and obscure future. The *Nurturant Kitchen* was entirely painted in a fleshy pink colour and covered floor to ceiling in latex breast-forms (fig. 22). The *Menstruation Bathroom* spilled over with "feminine hygiene" paraphernalia, while in the *Nightmare Bathroom* a plaster female figure sank into a liquid-filled tub (fig. 23). In *Leah's Room*, the title of which was taken from Colette's novel *Chéri*, a woman sat daily applying make-up in a futile effort to stave off "the pain of aging, of losing beauty, pain of competition with other women" (fig. 24).

Following from the success of the performance experience at Fresno, the CalArts program incorporated a Performance Workshop taught by Chicago. Several of the performances they worked on were staged in the living room of Womanhouse for both mixed and all-female audiences. The performances ranged from themes of domestic entrapment to aspects of

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female sexuality. Sandra Orgel's *Ironing* and Chris Rush's *Scrubbing* drew attention to the mundane and repetitive tasks of domestic labour (fig. 25). In *Waiting*, Faith Wilding evoked the paralysis brought on by the social demands for female passivity by sitting immobile on a chair and quietly recited a litany of things women wait for, from birth to death: "Waiting for someone to feed me ... Waiting to grow up ... Waiting for my first date ... Waiting to get married ... Waiting to hold my baby ... Waiting to grow wise ... Waiting for the end of day ... Waiting ..." (fig. 26). In *Birth Trilogy*, three women formed a "birth passage" through which they birthed and then comforted their three "babies" as a ritual celebration of the power of female procreativity and an enactment of a metaphorical rebirth into a community of women. The darker aspects of female experience were brought out in Chicago's satirical farce called *Cock and Cunt*. Wearing ludicrously exaggerated latex genitalia, two women played a couple whose dispute over domestic chores escalates into a violent conflict in which "he" accuses "her" of castrating him and then beats her to death (fig. 27).

After Womanhouse was dismantled, members of the Performance Workshop organized another major event in the spring of 1972. In a large studio in Venice, Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel and Aviva Rahmani staged a group work called *Ablutions* (fig. 28). The themes for *Ablutions*, which had emerged from workshop sessions, revolved around issues of violence, brutality, entrapment and rape. As the audience entered the room, they heard an audio tape (which played throughout the performance) of women recounting experiences of rape. In the centre of the room were three bathtubs, filled with eggs, blood and clay

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35 The full text of this and other Womanhouse performances is reproduced in *Chicago*, pp. 207-219.
respectively, and surrounded by hundreds of broken egg shells, piles of rope and chain, and beef kidneys. A clothed woman led a naked women to a chair behind the bathtubs and slowly wrapped her body in bandage gauze until she was bound to the chair like a mummy. Meanwhile, a third woman nailed a row of beef kidneys to the rear wall of the space while two other women entered and bathed themselves in the eggs, blood and clay, immersing themselves, as Chicago said, in their own biology. As each woman was lifted from the last tub, she resembled an "ancient female fetish figure."36 After the two attendants wrapped the bathers in sheets and laid them on the floor like corpses, they sat facing each other on the floor and began hanging the ropes and chains around their heads. while the woman who had bound the figure to the chair and the one who had nailed the kidneys began to wrap and tie together everything in the space. After these two women left, the audio tape continued for a few more minutes, ending with a woman repeating the words: "I felt so helpless, so powerless, there was nothing I could do but lay there and cry softly."37

As Josephine Withers has noted in an essay on early feminist performance, although we are now far more aware of issues of violence against women and children, at that time it was a painful and shocking experience for women "to name their fears and feelings of helplessness and rage," especially in the risky arena of public performance.38 Although the images generated in this work were metaphorical rather than literal, the presence of the audio tape made explicit the associations with the grim reality of experiences of abuse and assault. Indeed it was this

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36 Chicago, p. 218.
37 Chicago, p. 219
determination to take the dissolution of the boundaries of art and life beyond mere aesthetic device or conceit and transform it into a political strategy from which the visceral power of such works emanated.

This approach signifies the most distinctive characteristic of feminist performance at this time. Yet in spite of the hot-house environment of the Feminist Art Program, their performance work did not emerge in a vacuum. Performance was taught in other courses at CalArts, and many West Coast artists were involved in performance at this time, ranging from the conceptualized "body art" of Bruce Nauman, John Baldessari, Terry Fox and others to the shocking rituals of risk and violence of artists like Chris Burden and Paul McCarthy (fig. 19). Although the students in the Feminist Art Program shared with other performance artists of the period a general preoccupation with the conflation of art and life, important differences can be discerned in their approach and goals. As Robyn Brentano has pointed out, the widespread desire to break down the boundaries between art and life was typically expressed in works that were emblematic in nature and only rarely incorporated intensely personal material in a way that revealed the private life of the performer. . . . [But] with the emergence of feminist performance, a shift occurred in which artists began to present themselves as the subject matter of their art, further eroding or problematizing the art/life dichotomy.

39 General trends in West Coast performance were discussed in Moira Roth, "Towards a History of California Performance." *Arts Magazine.* Part One, 52, No. 6 (February 1978), pp. 94-103 and Part Two, pp. 114-123. The most complete source is Carl E. Loeffler and Darlene Tong, eds., *Performance Anthology: Source Book of California Performance Art* (San Francisco: Last Gasp Press and Contemporary Arts Press, 1989), which includes detailed chronological accounts of individual performances as well as several critical essays. For an overview of how California performance related to activities in other areas, see Brentano, pp. 46-54.

40 Brentano, p. 49.
Brentano has identified the tendency in feminist performance to draw from and enact experiences from the artist's own life. The women in the Feminist Art Program used performance not as an aesthetic end result, but as a cathartic means to deal with difficult and painful experiences and to challenge the conventional roles and expectations demanded of them. The difference in their approach was clearly demonstrated in a heated exchange that took place between Faith Wilding and the well known New York performance artist Allan Kaprow, who was then teaching at CalArts. Having studied with John Cage, Kaprow embraced the notion of art as an affirmation of the beauty of everyday life. Kaprow was presenting his ideas to a group of students and suggested that sweeping the floor could be a performance activity, at which point "Wilding jumped up to protest that half the population in the country was oppressed by household tasks and accused Kaprow of totally ignoring the feelings and history associated with such activities." In contrast to Kaprow, Wilding and her colleagues saw the conflation of art and life in performance not as a way to expand the aesthetic terrain of art, but to transform art into a tool with the potential to change life itself.

III. Personal Politics and Cultural Feminism.

The conflict between Wilding and Kaprow not only reflected different aesthetic strategies, but revealed the distinctive concept that lay at the

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very heart of the formulation of early feminist politics. that is the notion that the personal is political. As Sara Evans has noted, although aspects of this notion can be traced to the civil rights and student democracy movements, its primary impetus came from women's realization that policy changes to discriminatory laws alone did little to alleviate the pervasive oppression they felt in their private lives, which led them to refute the traditional perception that politics were a strictly public matter:

As the public and private spheres interpenetrated, the inherited roles proved less and less adequate as sources of identity and self-esteem. Traditional definitions could not encompass, explain, or help women to cope with the new realities of their lives. Thus, only a movement that simultaneously challenged their roles in both the home and the outside workplace could have tapped the pain and anger of most women and moved them to action.42

The conviction that the personal is political was pervasive among the women in the Feminist Art Program. This is clearly evident in their assertions that the enactment of personal experiences, even flagrantly taboo ones, could constitute legitimate subject matter for an art practice whose goal was to change the terms of life itself. The understanding of the personal as political was perhaps most clearly articulated by Suzanne Lacy, one of the pioneers of feminist performance in the early 1970s:

In the early days of the feminist art movement, when we were talking about the personal is political, we were saying everything that we do—from how we put our socks on to how we wash the dishes and why are we washing the dishes?—should be seen as political, in other words, given political importance because lived experience is the ground from which all politics come.43

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42 Evans, p. 213.
This premise would become one of feminism's most effective strategies for negotiating a renewed relationship for women within culture. But as with any political strategy, it could also lead to regressive or even oppressive ends. Evidence of this tendency in early feminist art was first noted by the artist Martha Rosler in an article she wrote in 1977 titled "The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California." which was one of the most incisive, analytical critiques of feminist art at that time. Rosler's article focused on the Feminist Art Program and its considerable sphere of influence in Southern California, especially on the Feminist Studio Workshop and the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, which had been instituted in 1972 and 1973, respectively. One of Rosler's key points was that the premise of personal politics appeared to have led to an ideology of isolationism. Rather than trying to locate the collective struggle of women within the larger cultural context, she noted the tendency among these groups to focus on women as a separate cultural group.


45 During the year the Feminist Art Program was established at CalArts (1971-72), Chicago became disillusioned about working within the context of a conventional art school. This led to a rift with Schapiro, who wanted to work within the system, while Chicago wanted to be completely independent of it. Consequently, Chicago joined with art historian and critic Arlene Raven and designer Sheila De Bretteville, who had established the first women's design program in the country at CalArts. to begin a new and completely independent program, the Feminist Studio Workshop. Joining forces with several other groups from the women's community, they rented an old art school in downtown Los Angeles and opened the Woman's Building on November 28, 1973. In addition to the Feminist Studio Workshop (which had thirty students), the Woman's Building housed several galleries, a theatre workshop, a printmaking studio, a performance coordination centre, a bookstore and several small publishers, the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization of Women, the offices of the Women's Liberation Union, and the Center for Art-Historical studies run by Raven and Ruth Iskin, which contained the Los Angeles West-East Bag slide registry of women artists' work. See Chicago, pp. 178-206 and Lucy Lippard, "The L.A. Woman's Building," in From the Center, pp. 96-100; rpt. from Art in America. 62. No. 3 (May-June 1974).
Rosler characterized this tendency as "cultural feminism." and equated it with cultural nationalism. The former sees gender as the primary source of its oppression, while the latter sees it as race or nationality. Both seek emancipation through separatism and voluntary change in the organization of private life rather than through an active program of mass education and the seeking of political power. "That is," Rosler said, "they stress the development of alternative institutions rather than a struggle for control of existing ones." This separatist outlook holds that social change can be accomplished primarily through the self-education (consciousness-raising) of women. The aim is to make women more direct in recognizing and expressing their own needs, and to make use of their personal and collective strengths: to validate women's occupations and preoccupations, free of male interference, and help them enter the art world.46

While acknowledging that this approach did have certain advantages, Rosler noted that, as a political strategy, it was compromised on several levels. On the positive side, it provided collective support and an institutional framework for women to make and show art they might not have otherwise been able to. It also helped keep feminist issues from being overshadowed by other concerns. On the other hand, the protective environment created by this separatism discouraged critical analysis and stifled differences within the group. Moreover, it fostered the belief that all women's art is inherently feminist, even if it only constitutes an uncritical valorization of "woman's culture." Her most damning criticism, however, was that this separatism insulated feminist art from engaging in challenges to the patriarchal order itself.47

46 Rosler, p. 67-68.
47 Rosler, p. 68.
What Rosler identified as "cultural feminism" is largely synonymous with gender determinism, or what is now understood as essentialism. Gender determinism was not confined to feminist art at this time, but was prevalent in the writings of radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millett, as well as in the pages of Ms. magazine. The basic premise holds that women are oppressed as a group because they are women: it is therefore their gender that unifies them, regardless of their race, class or culture. This oppression diminishes the status of women within society and their lack of power forces them to assume an identity over which they have little or no control. If the shackles of male dominance could be thrown off, women's true identity would be revealed through the discovery of a mutually comprehensible "female sensibility." Because this "sensibility" is seen to reside in women's bodies and is thus derived from a biological imperative, it is conceived as innate or essential. Thus, women's culture and identity is seen as fundamentally distinct from men's.

Proceeding from an acceptance of such essentialist notions, many women artists at this time sought to enhance women's self-esteem and

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reinforce satisfaction in being a woman by valorizing women's experiences and bodily processes in a variety of ways. This can be seen in the emphasis on "vaginal" imagery in painting and sculpture as a way to counteract the phallic form as a "fundamental idea of male supremacy."\(^5\)

It is especially associated with the centralized, biomorphic forms in the work of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, who claimed precedents for this approach in the work of artists like Georgia O'Keefe. Barbara Hepworth, Louise Bourgeois and Lee Bontecou (fig. 29). Another strategy was to reevaluate those methods, materials and activities traditionally associated with women's art activity, such as craft and decoration, in order to reconstruct a "hidden history" of women's cultural contributions.\(^5\) This approach sought to redeem those aspects of culture denigrated or marginalized within the canonical hierarchy that distinguishes between "high" and "low" cultural forms.\(^5\)

These two approaches attempted on the one hand to introduce women's issues as legitimate subject matter within the dominant "high" art traditions of painting and sculpture, and on the other, to reevaluate the status accorded to "low" art practices like crafts and decoration. By contrast, the marginal status of performance had prevented it from accruing the conventions of a rigid tradition. The fact that it existed outside mainstream art institutions, did not produce consumable objects, and lacked a support system of critics, dealers, and collectors, meant that

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\(^5\) For an overview of these various approaches, see Gouma-Peterson and Mathews, pp. 332-343.

\(^5\) Barry and Flitterman. p. 42, point out that this form of "self-contained subcultural resistance" may ghettoize women's art in an alternative tradition. But Parker and Pollock, pp. 50-81, suggest ways in which a concern with such issues may be used effectively to expose and problematize the role of hierarchy in the ideology of social privilege in terms of class as well as gender.
the process of renegotiating its terms from a feminist perspective was much easier than for women engaged in more traditional practices. Performance could, in effect, be claimed outright as a means to explore those aspects of female culture which preoccupied women artists at this time. Although many of the early performances associated with the Feminist Art Program were cathartic expressions of the suffering of women under patriarchy, this was soon counterbalanced by a more celebratory approach comparable to what was being undertaken in other areas of feminist art practice during the early seventies.


A major factor undoubtedly affecting this new direction was the growing insurgency and ground-breaking political achievements of the women's movement in the early 1970s, which brought hope and a feeling of solidarity to countless thousands of North American women. In this optimistic and buoyant climate, preoccupations with oppressive and debilitating experiences had far less appeal for artists than the ideal of evoking a unifying "female sensibility." This more positive and celebratory approach paralleled the interests of women generally in identifying, reclaiming and glorifying the collective history of women, both real and

mythologized. Scholars across a range of disciplines, including English, religious studies, history and art history, had begun to uncover the "hidden" history of women.54 This project also served as the basis for Judy Chicago's monumental Dinner Party (1973-1979). This work paid tribute to thirty-nine historical women by means of elaborate, hand-crafted place settings around a triangular table, while an additional nine-hundred and ninety-nine names were inscribed on the marble floor (fig. 30).

The growing body of evidence suggesting the existence of both ancient matriarchal cultures and contemporary "primitive" cultures that valued and honoured women was profoundly inspirational for many women.55 Propelled by new research into the role of women in ancient cultures, as well as by the period's widespread interest in alternative forms of religion and spirituality, a number of artists began to create

54 The main texts in the field of art history include the massive dictionary, Female Artists Past and Present (Berkeley: Women's Research Center, Inc., 1974); Eleanor Tufts, Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists (New York: Paddington Press, 1974); Karen Peterson and J.J. Wilson, Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) and Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, Women Artists 1550-1950 (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum; New York: Random House, 1976). As Gouma-Peterson and Mathews note, p. 328, Parker and Pollock's Old Mistresses signalled a departure "from earlier surveys by rejecting evaluative criticism altogether. They turned to an analysis of women's historical and ideological position in relation to art, art production, and artistic ideology as a means to question the assumptions that underlie the traditional historical framework." Nevertheless, the survey approach survives into the 1990s, as in Maria Tippett, By a Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women (Toronto: Viking, 1992).

performances which invoked adaptations of ancient and non-Western myths and ceremonial rituals. The emphasis on ritual, with its connotations of codified actions and behaviors within a culturally shared belief system, revealed a desire for a sense of community and history. Ritual had a particular appeal for women because, as Lucy Lippard said, it connects the past (the last time the ritual was performed) to the present (the ritual now being enacted) and the future (when will it be performed again). Ritual also allowed feminist artists to assert the commonality of their experience, their shared oppression and shared responses, without being rationalized and programmatic.

These ritualized performances drew from a range of tribal, folkloric, Eastern and ancient or mythical practices, often blended with modern associations. Images of goddesses often figured prominently in these early performances since the ancient and non-Western associations of these mythical creatures with nature, fertility and a benevolent spirituality were a powerful, if highly romantic, source of inspiration. References to the goddess figure were often vague and fanciful, however, with little concern for historical accuracy. As Rosler noted, these

Early performances counted on correspondences between symbols and meanings half-recognized by an audience, on the ambivalent conjoining of easily understood with more mysterious personal iconography. Thus they can be said to have alluded to, rather than to have defined, a content.

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57 Rosler. p. 70.
59 Rosler. p. 70.
The first documented performance dealing with such associations had occurred as early as 1963 in a work by Carolee Schneemann called *Eye Body*. One of the key images Schneemann incorporated into this multi-media celebration of physical sensuality was that of a snake coiled over her naked body (fig. 31). In Schneemann's autobiography, *More than Meat Joy*, she explained that her interest in the serpent image had resulted from research she had done for an art history class assignment on symbolism.\(^{60}\) Although her study of snake-like symbols in the artifacts from ancient cultures pre-dated the feminist reassessment of this material that occurred in the early 1970s, she still found enough evidence among male scholars to support her intuitive desire to see the serpent not as a phallic symbol, but as an attribute of the Great Goddess of Neolithic and Paleolithic Europe. The associations of the serpent with the spiraling forms of life-cycles and "cosmic energy" led her to identify it with the female body itself. She said:

I saw the vagina as a translucent chamber of which the serpent was an outward model: enlivened by its passage from the visible to the invisible, a spiraled coil ringed with the shape of desire and generative mysteries, attributes of both female and male sexual powers. This source of 'interior knowledge' would be symbolized as the primary index unifying spirit and flesh in Goddess worship.\(^{61}\)

Schneemann's work remained an isolated but prophetic phenomenon in the 1960s. Unlike the feminist artists of the early 1970s, who had the benefit of group support nurtured by consciousness-raising and a sense of shared purpose shared within the insurgent women's movement, Schneemann lacked critical support and faced hostility towards her efforts to explore explicitly female subject matter in her work. If the relative


\(^{61}\) Schneemann, p. 234.
obfuscity of Schneemann's work at the time precludes ascribing to her an influential role for those artists who came to maturity in the early seventies, her expressionistic, visceral style and ritualistic references to women's ancient roles and traditions appear to merge seamlessly with the concerns and approaches that emerged at that time.

The early performances of Betsy Damon were characteristic of this new direction. Damon was a New York artist who had spent several years of her childhood in Turkey near the Anatolian sites of the ancient Neolithic goddesses. In 1975 she began to assume the guise of *The 7,000 Year Old Woman* and enact ritualistic performances that explored the continuity of female energy and spirituality over the millennia. On May 21, 1977, Damon appeared on Prince Street in New York with her hair and body painted white and lips blackened (fig. 32). She stood motionless in the centre of a circle marked off with sand while an assistant cloaked her with four hundred sacks of coloured flour to resemble the rows of breasts of Artemis of Ephesus (fig. 33). Damon then walked in ponderously slow steps around the circle, cutting off the bags, slashing them open and offering them to the crowd of bewildered bystanders. Having divested herself of her "shield" of invulnerability, she then returned to the centre of the circle. The quiet and dignified drama of these ritualized performances allowed Damon to reach out beyond the art community and draw a public audience into some awareness of her concern with history. fecundity and nurturence as embodied by this ancient matriarchal archetype.

The desire Damon expressed to transform herself into a mythical female deity was a recurring theme in numerous performances done by

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women during this period. In 1973-74 the New York artist Mary Beth Edelson had also created a series of works drawing from what was then known about ancient European goddess worship. Her *Woman Rising* series consisted of several parts, including performances, photographs and painted panels of symbolic forms and images. The performances were private rituals carried out in Outer Banks, North Carolina, in which Edelson "rose up" naked out of the land or water, with arms raised in the manner of the ancient Cretan Snake Goddess figurines (figs. 34-35). The documentary photographs of these performances were then enhanced by painting in a mane of hair, a halo of expressionistic energy lines, and symbols of circles and moons on her body. Edelson was emphatic about the unity she perceived between herself as a modern woman and the powerful female archetypes of history:

The ascending archetypal symbols of the feminine unfold today in the psyche of modern Everywoman. They encompass the multiple forms of the Great Goddess. Reaching across the centuries we take the hands of our Ancient Sisters. The Great Goddess, alive and well, is rising to announce to the patriarchs that their 5,000 years are up—Hallelujah! Here we come.

Edelson continued to work on the goddess theme and in 1977 she made a pilgrimage to a Neolithic cave site in Yugoslavia where a goddess was thought to reside. The private rituals she performed there were documented in photographs, which were exhibited along with rocks and shells from the cave later that year at A.I.R. gallery in New York (fig. 36).

64 Mary Beth Edelson, quoted from an undocumented source in Lippard, *From the Center*, p. 21.
This exhibition was held in conjunction with an installation and group performance called *Proposals for: Memorials to 9,000,000 Women Burned as Witches in the Christian Era*. The relationship between the two pieces was clear. The first was a tribute to the power of the goddess in ancient cultures, while the second, based on the belief that the witch was a medieval embodiment of the goddess' power "gone underground" and attacked by patriarchal society, was her answer to the question of how and when the goddess had been stamped out.

Regardless of the factual accuracy of this belief, it is still widely held within the women's spirituality movement and is sustained by the extremely popular appeal of films like Donna Read's *The Goddess Remembered* (1989) and *The Burning Times* (1990), both produced by the National Film Board of Canada. In spite of the recent scholarship on the role of the goddess and female spirituality in ancient cultures, very little can be concluded with certainty. The disconcerting truth is that the function of ancient sites like Avebury, Stonehenge or Malta remains in the realm of theoretical speculation, as is also the case with the female images and figurines found across Europe from the caves at Lascault to the Cycladic Islands. This lack of concrete evidence has had the deleterious effect of permitting the perpetuation of unscholarly and specious speculations. The harnessing of such material to support a personal mythology in the performances of artists like Damon or Edelson may be seen as a benign indulgence of artistic licence. But, as will be discussed below, this genre of work may also be aligned with some of the most regressive tendencies the feminist movement has engendered.

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V. The Feminine Sensibility and Nature.

The relationship between woman and nature was usually present, at least as a sub-text, in most performances of this period that alluded to spirituality and goddess worship. For some artists the connection between woman and nature was paramount, resulting in works which incorporated direct physical interactions between the performer and the natural world. In many of these works the ancient goddess is seen as Earth Mother, the all-powerful giver of life whose spirit and body were fused with the earth itself. But if such a concept made sense to cave-dwelling societies, for whom the mysteries of life were unfathomable by any other means, how can we account for the appeal of this notion to women living in the scientifically rational and technological late-twentieth century?

A revival of interest in "primitive" or archaic cultures, which had been a recurring theme in modern art since the late-nineteenth century, was hardly restricted at this time to the work of feminist performance artists.67 The emergence of Earth Art in the late 1960s was very much inspired by the megalithic architecture of the ancient world. Work such as Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty not only seemed to possess the potential to bypass the object and commodity orientation of the market-based nature of the contemporary art world, it also revealed a desire to reclaim for modern society some vestige of the direct and personal relationship they had once had with the natural world (fig. 37).68

67 The widespread interest in "primitive" and archaic themes in contemporary art has been documented in Lucy Lippard. Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory (New York: Pantheon, 1983).
68 The irony of Robert Smithson's claims for the "ecological" basis of his work as an
There is no question that feminist performance artists whose work evoked associations with the land and nature were also motivated by a certain discontent with the exploitative consumerism of the art world and with the alienation of modern society from its roots in the earth. At the same time, however, the way female and male artists interacted with nature seems to be characterized by distinctly different approaches and attitudes. This is particularly noticeable in the fact that the grandiose scale and technological complexity characteristic of earthwork projects is conspicuously lacking in the work of feminist performance artists. The impermanence and economy of scale in their work is largely due to the nature of performance itself. It is important to acknowledge, however, that even if some of these women artists had wanted to create larger scale projects, it is highly improbable that they would have been able to garner the enormous financial and administrative support that seemed so readily at hand for their male colleagues.

At any rate, it seems more useful to consider feminist performance of this type in relation to works by male artists that also incorporated a performative element in terms of the interaction of the body with nature. In the work of artists like Richard Long and Dennis Oppenheim, for example, the body was used as a signifier of human contact with nature by opposition to the market-driven corruption of contemporary society has been noted by Francis Frascina, "The Politics of Representation," in Modernism and Dispute: Art Since the Forties, Paul Wood et al. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with The Open University), p. 105: "To make Spiral Jetty, 6,650 tons of material were moved, involving 292 truck-hours and 625 hours' work in total. Approximately $9,000 (not including the many administrative expenses) was spent on constructing the earthwork alone, by Virginia Dwan of Dwan Gallery, New York: and another $9,000 was provided by Douglas Christmas of Ace Gallery, Vancouver, and Venice, California, for a film of the work." Frascina's figures were taken from Robert C. Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 191-97.
tracing actions made upon the landscape, as in the lines and paths marked by Long and Oppenheim in various works (fig. 38). Even though the effect of such works was relatively subtle in comparison to the gargantuan earthworks of artists like Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria and Robert Smithson, in all cases the landscape was seen as offering a site outside the conventional art world that could be "rearranged" in some way through the interactions of the artist.

For feminist performance artists exploring the relationship between the body and nature, however, the goal was not to alter the landscape by means of human intervention. Instead they tended to create private rituals in which the female body became fused with nature in ephemeral and non-invasive ways. Their interactions with nature were based on a belief in the importance the female element had once had in the myths and spiritual traditions of prehistoric cultures, which they aimed to recover and affirm for the present. Their interest in transposing aspects of ancient culture into the late-twentieth century, although just as anachronistic as that of their male peers, differed mainly in its focus on a

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69 Lippard, *Overlay*, pp. 52-55, notes that, although artists like Oppenheim and Long appear to take a more sensitive approach in their interactions with nature than is the case with most male artists creating earthworks, there is a certain ambivalence towards nature in several of their works that can been seen in their predilection for scarring the landscape with huge X's, especially when they have been creating by plowing down crops or decapitating daisies.

70 The notion of earthworks as "rearrangements" of nature was articulated by Philip Leider, the editor of *Artforum*, in an article chronicling his summer trip in 1970 to visit the sites of a number of recent projects in the American West. "How I Spent My Summer Vacation or, Art and Politics in Nevada, Berkeley, San Francisco and Utah," *Artforum*, IX, No.1 (September 1970), pp. 48-49. Frascina, p. 105, made the poignant observation that "In the same year newspapers showed photographs of the US Forces' rearrangement of 'nature' in Vietnam with defoliants. One such 'earthwork' was an emblem, a mile and a half long, of the First Infantry Division (a pentagon with a '1' in the centre) bulldozed in the jungle, north-west of Saigon."

renewal of a female spirituality rather than on the adaptation of ancient forms and motifs as a way to revitalize contemporary art.

The fusion of body with nature in these artist’s performance served to denote metaphorically their conception of the earth as a living thing, the mater omnium whose mysterious generative powers were present everywhere, but especially in the bodies of women. A rather literal manifestation of this intrinsic connection between the female body and the generative powers of the earth was made evident in a 1973 performance by Elizabeth Sowers called Protective Coloring (fig. 39). After completely burying herself in the sand of a beach in Northern California, Sowers slowly began to emerge from the sand, nude and wearing a close-fitting skull cap that entirely concealed her hair, and knelt in the sand, as Moira Roth said, like "a sandstone female figure from an Indian Temple."72 The photographic sequence documenting this performance makes self-evident the artist’s premise that she is born of and part of the earth that surrounds and protects her full and sensual body.

New York artist Donna Henes focused more on the metaphysical links between female experience and the forces of nature. From the middle seventies Henes had been producing performance and installation works in which she created large, hand-knotted webs of yarn and fibre. She gradually began to associate this activity with the mythology of spinning goddesses, particularly the Spider Woman of the Indian tribes of the American Southwest.73 For Henes, these webs represented the fusion of all life energies, at the centre of which was the female creative principle:

webs are built from the most basic female instinct. are what hold the world together. are at once nests and traps.\

Although Henes often worked in conventional galleries, she also executed several performances at outdoor sites chosen for their sacred Amerindian associations. In 1978 she made a visit to the Great Lakes region and, on the evening of the summer solstice, which was also the first day of her menstrual period, she was rowed by a friend out to the middle of Lake Margrethe in Michigan. With her hair plaited into sixteen small braids, she proceeded to wrap her head with yarn in what she called a Cocoon Ceremony (fig. 40). She then cut off her braids and, in a later ritual, deposited them at an Indian circle mound in Newark, Ohio.

No discussion of female performance artists dealing in this nexus of concerns around femininity, spirituality and nature would be complete without considering the work the late Ana Mendieta. Although Mendieta's work shared many of the same concerns as Damon, Edelson, Henes and others, she layered it with personal references that, paradoxically, gave her work a much greater resonance and currency in the larger art world. For Mendieta, whose art became a path she travelled to discover her own roots, vague allusions to ancient myths celebrating the power and unity of the female principle were insufficient. While deeply committed to a belief in the reality and relevance of myth, magic and spirituality, Mendieta sought to explore those ideas in the context of her own specific history and cultural inheritance. This insistence on history and contingency helped her avoid the naive sentimentality, ahistorical assumptions and exploitative

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appropriations of cultural images and meanings that compromise the integrity of much of the work done in this genre.

Because Mendieta's art was propelled by her search for her own cultural roots, it is essential to have some understanding of her background. Born in Cuba in 1948, she and her sister were sent by their parents to the United States, where they were raised in orphanages and foster homes in Iowa. She attended the University of Iowa, where she completed her MA degree in 1972. In 1971 she travelled to Mexico as part of an archeological project, an experience which catalyzed her life-long fascination with her Latin American heritage. In 1973 she re-enrolled at Iowa University as an MFA student. Her growing dissatisfaction with painting during this period had led to an increased interest in the possibilities of performance as a more viable way of dealing with her interests. She explained later that "my paintings were not real enough for what I wanted the images to convey. and by real I mean I wanted my images to have power, to be magic."76

Throughout her career, Mendieta sought to evoke that power and magic through the use of visceral and life-giving elements like blood, earth, water and fire in ritualistic performances that were documented in photographs or films. Her commitment to feminism, which was already evident in 1973 when she enacted a rape performance in response to the murder of a fellow student on the Iowa University campus, remained a constant point of reference in her explorations of the relationship between

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76 This statement was part of a wall text for an exhibition by Mendieta in 1981. It is now among the documents in the Mendieta Estate and was quoted by Petra Barreras del Rio in "Ana Mendieta: A Historical Overview." in Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987). p. 28.
the female body and nature.\textsuperscript{77} As with so many other women at this time who saw the earth as the living source of the creative and spiritual force of the goddess, she believed she could recover that power by immersing her body in nature through ritualistic performances.

But however much Mendieta shared the desire with other women at that time to reconnect with what Lucy Lippard has described as an "anthropomorphized Earth Mother," her feminism was always tempered by an equally strong concern for her specific heritage as a woman of Latin American descent.\textsuperscript{78} Mendieta's need to meld her body with the earth was not predicated on a sentimental fantasy about the emancipatory value of this pursuit, but from the "tragic sense of exile" she experienced as a result of her cultural and familial displacement.\textsuperscript{79} Mendieta explained her position with incisive clarity in a statement from 1981:

I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. The obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs... [in] an omnipresent female force, the after-image of being encompassed within the womb, is a manifestation of my thirst for being.\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{78} Lippard, Overlay, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{80} This previously unpublished statement is quoted in Perreault, p. 10.
Mendieta's reference to her silhouette alludes to the *Silhouette* series she began in 1977 in which she inscribed the outline of her petite, five-foot body in or on the earth in private performances that drew upon Pre-Columbian and Latin American nature religions, especially Santería, an Afro-Caribbean religion that blends the spiritual traditions of the African Yoruba with elements of Catholicism. She adapted the Santería rituals of birth and death, which often involved the use of blood, hair or animal viscera. In these rituals, she became both signifier and signified of her search for place and identity with the earth and with her own history. As performer, she became the "priestess" who unleashed the mysterious and magical forces of nature, and as image she became the "deity" in whom those forces were embodied as a sign of the universality of the female bond with nature. Yet her incorporation of Third World spirituality must be seen as a conscious critique of her sense of alienation within the women's movement. She felt that:

During the mid to late sixties as women in the United States politicized themselves and came together in the Feminist Movement with the purpose to end the domination and exploitation by the white male culture, they failed to remember us. American Feminism as it stands is basically a white middle class movement.

In most of the works in the *Silhouette* series Mendieta traced the outline of her body on the earth with various materials such as rocks, leaves, flowers, sticks or bones, or excavated its impression into the earth itself, which was often then filled with water (fig. 41). Variations included

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81 del Rio, p. 29. noted that Mendieta's library contained a full collection of texts by Lydia Cabrera, the foremost scholar on Santería traditions in Cuba.
the *Fireworks Silhouette* series, where she created wood effigies of her body which were then set on fire, and the *Volcano* series, which consisted of body-shaped holes dug into shallow mounds and then ignited with gunpowder. Gunpowder was the one synthetic material she sometimes incorporated into her rituals. In the documentary photographs, the gust of smoke from the exploding gunpowder creates an extraordinarily dramatic effect as if a mysterious, magical force of energy was emanating from the earth itself (fig. 42).

Mendieta continued to work within variations on the Silhouette theme until 1980 when she visited Cuba for the first time since her exile. Her growing political consciousness had intensified her desire to undertake just such a pilgrimage "to bring the 'Silueta' series to its source." While in Cuba, Mendieta embarked on a new series called the *Rupestrian Sculptures* (from *rupes*, the Latin for rock). These sculptures consisted of carvings made directly into the soft limestone cliffs and caves in the woods around Havana. Unlike her previous works, these carvings were no longer based upon a direct relationship to her own body, but were drawn instead from prehistoric images of female fertility figures, as well as Precolumbian symbols which she associated with the now-extinct Taino Indians of Cuba. While these carvings are formally sophisticated in a consciously primitive manner, they lack the haunting sense of exile and longing that characterized the earlier work. It was as if her return to her homeland had finally made it possible to fill the void that she had marked out with the "silueta." She continued to pursue this new direction over the next five years, until it was cut short by her untimely death in 1985.

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VI. The Question of Essentialism.

It will be manifestly evident by now that the themes of femininity, nature, spirituality and sexuality were highly attractive to many women seeking to move beyond the painful, traumatic subjects that had characterized so much early feminist performance. At the time, these more positive themes seemed to affirm women's struggle to gain recognition and respect in both the art world and in the culture at large. More recent feminist scholarship, however, that raised serious questions about the essentializing tendencies of this kind of approach. In spite of the undeniable affirmative power and pleasure many women found in these beliefs, we must acknowledge that they are fraught with many contradictions that threaten to undermine their positive value.

One of the problems that has already been mentioned is the lack of substantiative evidence to support many of the assumptions that were made at this time about the existence of ancient cultures in which women were celebrated and valued. Moreover, this assumption was based on the notion that whatever importance women had in ancient societies, it was not because of their cultural accomplishments, but because they were profoundly associated with nature itself. Thus nature was seen as the primeval source of power and energy from which all women have sprung and through which they are all fundamentally linked. This conjoining of "woman" with "nature" leads in turn to the belief that there is an authentic female identity that resides in both individual and universal experience.

84 See above, note 48.
These kinds of beliefs emerged largely in response to women's efforts to account for the fact that their views of the world seemed so at odds with and invisible within the institutions and defining values of the dominant culture. As feminist Vivian Gornick wrote in 1973:

For centuries the cultural record of our experience has been a record of male experience. It is the male sensibility that has apprehended and described our life. It is the maleness of experience that has been a metaphor for human existence.\(^{85}\)

In an effort to reveal their growing awareness that social and cultural values were not neutral, but inherently masculinist, women sought to build solidarity and unity within a vast community of women by establishing a strong group identity that could be asserted as different from the dominant patriarchal group. The premise that a "true" female identity could be discovered behind the oppressive facade of patriarchy was typically expressed in the belief that there is a unifying female sensibility that resides in the body and psyche of all women.

But by locating female identity at the level of the natural or biological, this approach has paradoxically replicated the very premise upon which the oppression of women had always been based, which is that man is superior because he controls culture, while woman is inferior because she cannot escape her bonds with nature.\(^{86}\) It also subsumes all of the complex cultural and historical contingencies of women's oppression under the simple, moncausal explanation of biology. And perhaps most controversial of all for contemporary feminism, this approach tended to

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ignore differences between women themselves—between white women and women of colour, rich and poor, old and young, heterosexual and lesbian. Yet even Anna Mendieta, who was certainly aware of feeling marginalized by the mainstream feminist movement, undertook a search for her cultural roots that constituted a parallel kind of essentialism in that she hoped to find those roots in the earth itself from which her people had come.

We must, therefore, conduct our studies of historical feminist practice with full knowledge of the many problems, limitations and contradictions that continue to emerge within contemporary feminist debates. At the same time, we must endeavour to frame our assessments, however critical they might be, within the context of the historical exigencies of the period. As historian Sally Banes has written:

[I]n retrospect the artworks celebrating women's 'femininity' as superior to 'male culture' may appear to us now as an essentialist view of women's bodily powers, part and parcel of the 'positive primitivism' that also set black bodies apart in an alternate realm thought to be richer than white male rationalism. However, as with the white romantic view of African American culture, this view must be contextualized. In its time this was a dramatic and radical way of asserting difference. It was also a step—like Marx's point that in moving from feudalism to communism a culture has to pass through capitalism—that seems to have served a historically necessary role in making a political battleground of representations of women.⁸⁷

These issues and debates permeate to the core of feminist art and thought during the entire period addressed in this study. We shall have cause to return to them in more detail in numerous subsequent discussions.

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⁸⁷ Banes, p. 221.
THE POLITICS OF SEXUALITY

I. The Colonized Body.

As feminists in the early 1970s began to examine the sources of their oppression, female sexuality was confronted head on. All of the traditions which have flowed into Western culture have proscribed against the possibility of women having an intellectual capacity equal to that of men.1 "Woman" has been defined instead as a fundamentally sexual being, closer to nature than to culture, and therefore inferior to man. But if woman's role in Western culture has been limited by this association, it is a role inflected with a wide range of stereotypes, as historian Lisa Tickner noted in summarizing the conclusion regarding images of women that Xavière Gauthier had arrived at in her book, _Surréalisme et sexualité_:

[S]he was both a symbol of purity and transgression, one and multiple, the embodiment of repose and movement, victim and executioner, the nourisher and the destroyer of man, his protector and his protégée, his mother and his child, sky and earth, vice and virtue, hope and despair, death and Satan.2

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1 The most influential and well known views of Western thinkers on women have been collected in Rosemary Agonito, _History of Ideas on Women: A Source Book_ (New York: Putnam, 1977).
Although this (partial) list has been drawn only from the images of woman within a single art movement, it strongly suggests that, whatever woman is, or is thought to be, she is not of her own making.

The struggle to gain control of female sexuality that began in the 1970s was waged on a number of fronts. It was supported by the ground-breaking re-evaluations of female sexuality in the Kinsey and Masters and Johnson studies, and championed by apologists for the liberation of female sexuality such as Kate Millett and Dr. Mary Jane Sherfey. The judicial penalties for rape and assault were legislatively strengthened, and spousal rape was recognized as a criminal act. Birth control clinics became widely established, women gained a larger measure of control over hospital childbirth practices and important lay manuals on women's health were published. In spite of these successful achievements, issues of pornography, abortion, and domestic violence continue to challenge us, as will the conflicts over reproductive rights that came to a head between religious groups and advocates for women in the developing nations at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo.

While these social issues were of great concern to all women in the 1970s, the cultural representation of women was an area in which women artists could make a highly specialized and significant contribution. As practitioners in a tradition whose stock in trade is the production of

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images, they were in an ideal position to examine critically both the long history of the representation of women in Western art, as well as the ideological structures that determined their representation in the television, films and advertisements in contemporary society. These representations, which worked to confirm women’s roles as sexual objects, were not expressions of female experience, but functioned as what Tickner described as "mediating sign[s] for the male." Everywhere women turned they saw themselves represented, but always as the object of someone else's desire, fantasy, fear and even loathing.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that female sexuality and the representation of women in culture became a theme to which women artists would return repeatedly during this period. Because women explored these issues in such varied and abundant ways, it would be impossible to subsume all work that dealt with female sexuality into one monolithic category. This chapter will focus on artists who have treated female sexuality as immanent within the body. Although many of these artists did not discount the extent to which female sexuality is determined by cultural conditions and social structures, they tended to believe that women's experience of their own sexuality could only be discovered by screening out those external social forces and looking inward. In this respect, their work is clearly aligned with the values of cultural feminism, which endeavoured to identify and establish a "true" feminine sensibility to replace the "false" one that has been forcibly imposed upon women by patriarchal culture.

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6 Tickner, p. 237.
As we have seen, this search for an essential feminine sensibility was carried out in a variety of ways, including the emphasis in painting and sculpture on biologically derived forms sometimes referred to as "vaginal iconology," and the validation of art practices based in the "unsung province" of women's traditional association with crafts and the domestic arts (fig. 43). Similarly, the unifying thread that runs through several of the ritualized performances already discussed is the belief that women's "shared but repressed inner reality, predating patriarchal civilization and persisting in spite of it, [could] become a positive force for change." Women performance artists drawn to issues of female sexuality, as opposed to female spirituality, tended to eschew symbolic and mythical trappings and focus instead on the physicality of the body itself.

In the early 1970s, women were not the only artists investigating the physical body. The phenomenon of body art, an offshoot of Minimalism, Conceptualism, video and performance, was one of the most characteristic anti-object tendencies of the period. But as Lucy Lippard

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noted in her essay, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art." women who used their own bodies as the subject matter of their art faced particular dangers. When body art emerged towards the end of the 1960s, it was, with the single exception of Carolee Schneemann, a decidedly male pursuit. Informed by the laconic rigour of Minimalist and Conceptualist aesthetics, sometimes combined with the ontological phenomenology of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the body was treated as a raw material to be manipulated in a detached manner that seemed directly counterpoised to the often disturbing and alienating nature of the activity itself. Lippard observed that, "from 1967 to 1971 when Bruce Nauman was 'Thighing,' Vito Acconci was masturbating. Dennis Oppenheim was sunbathing and burning, and Barry Le Va was slamming into walls." it seemed highly unlikely that body art would "appeal to vulnerable women artists just emerging from isolation." Moreover, there was the strong possibility that women's intentions would be misunderstood, particularly when they engaged in parodies of sexual stereotypes. Lippard wrote: "A woman using her own face and body has a right to do what she will with them, but it is a subtle abyss that

11 Lippard, p. 125. The kind of works Lippard was referring to would include Bruce Nauman's early video recordings of sustained, repetitious activities in his studio, such as Stamping in the Studio, Revolving Upside Down, Bouncing in the Corner, and Wall/Floor Positions, all from 1968; Vito Acconci's Seed Bed (1971), in which the artist masturbated beneath a false floor in a gallery for the duration of a two-week exhibition; Barry Le Va's Velocity Piece (1969), in which Le Va ran back and forth crashing into two walls fifty feet apart as long as he was able; and Dennis Oppenheim's Reading Position for 2nd Degree Burn (1970), in which the artist exposed his torso to the sun long enough to sustain a second-degree burn. Although Lippard does not mention his work, Chris Burden would also fit into this category.
separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of
women to expose that insult." Lippard also noted that, although there is
an element of exhibitionism in all body art, a woman who made such work
found herself in a situation of double jeopardy, particularly if she was
physically attractive. She not only risked having her image reappropriated
as an object of male sexual desire, but also of eliciting accusations of
narcissism and self-indulgence. Lippard wryly stated: "Because women
are considered sex objects, it is taken for granted that any woman who
presents her nude body in public is doing so because she thinks she is
beautiful. She is a narcissist, and Acconci, with his less romantic image and
pimply back, is an artist." 13

In effect, Lippard has alluded here to the conundrum that has
plagued women artists from as far back as we have historical record. On
the one hand, a woman's sexuality was seen as inseparable from her
activities as an artist, and on the other, it made those activities
incompatible with the achievement of "great" or "serious" art. As Rozsika
Parker and Griselda Pollock made clear in their investigation of critical
writing about women artists through the centuries, judgements about a
woman artist's work were almost always conflated with judgements about
her femininity. 14 Thus Georgio Vasari praised the Bolognese sculptor
Properzia de' Rossi as a skilled carver, but also noted that she was
accomplished in household management, beautiful in body, and a better
singer than any woman in her city. 15

12 Lippard, p. 125.
13 Lippard, p. 125.
14 Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock. Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology
15 Giorgio Vasari. The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects, trans. A.B.
The notion that a woman's art is to be judged in relation to her femininity recurs continuously in art historical writing from Vasari on. reaching a climax during the nineteenth century when a woman's art was seen as biologically determined by her *nature*, which in turn determined her social role as "quintessentially feminine, graceful, delicate and decorative."\(^{16}\) So long as a woman artist confined herself to pursuits which were seen as appropriate to her nature as a woman--that is, pastels, portraits, still-lives, miniatures and flower painting--her art would be acceptable as a dilettantish pastime or feminine "accomplishment." But were she to presume to greater ambitions, she would be severely chastised for having betrayed her sex. As Parker and Pollock point out, one nineteenth-century writer made it clear that the very notion of a "woman artist" was a contradiction in terms: "So long as a woman refrains from *unsexing* herself by acquiring genius let her dabble in anything. The woman of genius does not exist but when she does she is a man."\(^{17}\)

Although codes of appropriate behaviour became less rigidly defined during the twentieth century, the notion persisted that a woman who aspired to artistic achievement was either deluded or an aberration among her sex. As late as 1962 the British sculptor Reg Butler could state in a lecture at the Slade School of Art that:

> I am quite sure that the vitality of many female students derives from frustrated maternity, and most of these, on finding the opportunity to settle down and produce children, will no longer experience the passionate discontent sufficient to drive them constantly towards the labours of creation in other ways. Can a

\(^{328.}\)

\(^{16}\) Parker and Pollock, p. 9.

woman become a vital creative artist without ceasing to be a woman except for the purposes of a census?¹⁸

The view expressed by such a statement reveals that, even though women had gained a much greater degree of access to professional training and exhibition opportunities in the twentieth century, their ambitions continued to be circumscribed by the disparaging attitude that their capabilities as artists were inherently diminished by the fact of their sex.¹⁹

Since this attitude applied to a greater or lesser extent to all women artists, regardless of background, training, or talent, it soon became apparent in the early 1970s that demands for equal opportunity would hardly suffice to bring about change when the real issue was the ideological hostility towards women perpetuated in all its various and elusive permutations within patriarchal culture.²⁰

In light of this, we can easily appreciate the implications of Lippard's statement that a woman who put her own body on display in order to explore issues around female sexuality was seen as a "narcissist" while a man making body art was an "artist." Thus, as women artists began to explore issues of female sexuality, they had to challenge the long-standing prohibitions, prejudices and exploitative attitudes towards that sexuality.

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²⁰ The informal and often unspoken nature of this attitude makes it particularly difficult to document, but an extensive litany of discriminatory remarks, associations and attitudes has been compiled by Lucy Lippard in "Sexual Politics: Art Style," in From the Center, pp. 29-33: rpt. from Art in America, 59, No. 5 (September 1971).
As artists, they also had to confront the deeply ingrained contention that what they were doing did not even constitute art. Yet their struggle was as much a political as an artistic one. As such, these women artists played a crucial role in formulating a new kind of art practice that was able to achieve a degree of social resonance for which most artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s could only make rhetorical claims.

II. The Female Grotesque.

The first artist to attempt to loosen the straightjacket around female sexuality within patriarchal culture was Carolee Schneemann. The need for both personal and sexual freedom, the predominant theme of all her work, was already evident in her *Eye Body* performance of 1963 (fig. 31). As she wrote in her first autobiographical book, *Cézanne. She Was a Great Painter*, Schneemann saw sexuality as the expressive language of a body that had been oppressed by the privileging of mind within the Western cultural tradition:

[T]he life of the body is more variously expressive than a sex-negative society can admit. I didn’t stand naked in front of 300 people because I wanted to be fucked, but because my sex and work were harmoniously experienced [so] I could have the audacity, or courage, to show the body as a source of varying emotive Power.21

Although *Eye Body* was inspired by associations with ancient goddess worship, symbolized by the snakes which writhed over her resplendently

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naked body. Schneemann’s desire was not to return to some past idyllic state, but to confront modern society’s negative attitudes towards sexuality in general and the female body in particular. Schneemann wrote:

In some sense I made a gift of my body to other women: giving our bodies back to ourselves. The haunting images of the Cretan bull dancer—joyful, free, bare-breasted. skilled women leaping precisely from danger to ascendancy, guided by my imagination.  

Schneemann’s revelry in the physical body thus operated both as a celebration of self-determined female sexuality and as a defiant challenge to the restrictive social forces that had constrained it. The next year, she was involved in two other performances which would counterpoise the spectrum of issues that concerned her as a woman and as an artist. The first of these was a performance collaboration with Robert Morris called Site (fig. 44). The second was Schneemann’s Meat Joy, which was performed in Paris and London in May 1964, and again in November at the Judson Memorial Church in New York, which had become the premier centre for avant-garde performance and dance in the early 1960s.

Site was devised by Morris during the period when he was closely involved with the Judson Dance Theatre in New York. He was intrigued by their Minimalist dance aesthetics, which provided him with an ideal way to explore the "situational" nature of his sculpture in a temporal context.  

Site contained many of the hallmarks of Minimalism, such as an emphasis on structure and form as well as a cool unexpressiveness. Its centrepiece.

however, was a reclining odalisque played by Schneemann that was a virtual recreation of Manet's *Olympia*. Around this centrepiece, Morris literally constructed his tableau onstage, wearing a mask and work gloves while manipulating the large panels used to "frame" his image. As historians Sally Banes and Henry Sayre have both noted, the gender-role determinations of Morris' *Site* are unmistakable. Schneemann is presented as a body, an object of sexual desire, and then re-presented as an object of visual consumption by Morris the artist/construction worker. While confirming her feminine role as a passive one, rendering her both sight and site of the male gaze, Morris clearly contrasted his own active, and therefore safely masculine, role as an artist.

Given the consciousness of gendered power relations in the art world that Schneemann had already demonstrated with her earlier work, *Eye Body*, it is difficult to understand why she agreed to allow herself to be so passively objectified. The fact that she does not discuss *Site* at all in her book, *More than Meat Joy*, would suggest that she has subsequently divested herself of involvement in it. She did include a small photograph of it, however, beside which she wrote: "My own private . . . and ironical title was 'Cunt Mascot.' Cunt Mascot on the men's art team. Not that I ever made love with ANY OF YOU NO! I didn't feel perceived by our group--not even sexually." As Sayre has suggested, "One is forced to accept this as her gloss on the performance itself." which nevertheless seems to have

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catalyzed her process of discovering "the seeming imperturbability of the masculine position, a certain obdurate blindness born of power." 27

Unlike the restrained formalism of Site. Schneemann's Meat Joy was "an exuberant sensory celebration of the flesh" in the tradition of the Happening, or Kinetic Theatre, as Schneemann preferred to call it. 28 Banes has firmly located this work in the context of the early sixties' fascination with a shameless glorification of sensory, gustatory and erotic transgression, which was particularly evident in the campy experimental films of those years: Andy Warhol's Kiss, Eat and his notorious Blow Job; Jack Smith's Bionde Cobra and Flaming Creatures; Barbara Rubin's Christmas on Earth; and Jean Genet's Un Chant d'Amour. 29 Although a scornful mockery of bourgeois values pervades these and similar works, many of which had overtly homosexual content. Banes noted that "The apotheosis of libidinal plenitude in performance was Carolee Schneemann's ecstatic revels of the flesh. Meat Joy." 30

As the audience entered the darkened room where Meat Joy was performed, they heard Schneemann's voice reciting her notes for the performance, as well as slightly pornographic descriptions of dream images and fantasies. 31 Schneemann's voice was mingled with multiple soundtracks of rock and roll music, Parisian street traffic and market vendors, and French vocabulary lessons referring to body parts, scents both pleasant and unpleasant, and to human and animal characteristics.

27 Sayre. pp. 75-76.
30 Banes. p. 216.
Then a group of male and female performers entered the space. undressed one another, wrapped each other in paper and rolled around on the floor smearing paint all over themselves. As the tempo increased, they introduced raw fish, chickens, and sausages and generally cavorted in a total immersion of primitive bodily sensations that defied all sense of propriety and public decorum. Banes cites a contemporary critic for the Village Voice as having perceptively written:

The fish in 'Meat Joy' could symbolize the watery matrix of our origins. It doesn't matter. The point of the meat and fish and paint was to demonstrate the sensual and scatological pleasure of slimy contact with materials that the culture consumes at a safe distance with knife and fork and several yards away in a gallery or a museum.32

As a celebration of a total sensuality that pushed pleasure to the frontier of the disgusting, Meat Joy has been described as residing in the realm of the abject.33 The notion of the abject has come to have a particular significance for feminist theory, especially through Julia Kristeva's writings on psychoanalytic theory.34 In Kristeva's account of the formation of the subject, as the child separates from the body of the mother, it fears both being reincorporated into the mother as well as the mother's generative power: the maternal body therefore becomes "abject"-an object of horror and threat that Kristeva described as the "monstrous-feminine." But as Janet Wolff noted, Kristeva did not define this process as a specifically gendered one, although psychoanalytic theory suggests that it

is particularly the male child who confronts the trauma of separation and therefore associates the feminine with a threat to masculinity. In this conception, it is not woman herself who is abject, but all things which are opposed to the dominant masculine values in patriarchal culture; thus the "feminine" connotations of body, nature, passivity, and amorphousness are opposed to the "masculine" ones of mind, culture, activity and form—a contrast that was foregrounded in Morris' Site.

But as Banes' historical account makes clear, the transgressive, abject character of Schneemann's Meat Joy was but an extreme version of a genre that was fairly widely established in the films and Happenings of the sixties. Nevertheless, it is possible to construe the transgressive irruption of Meat Joy as a specifically feminist (or at least proto-feminist) practice. The very fact that Schneemann undertook such a work must be read as a bold intervention in gendered power relations. As Michel Foucault has shown in his studies of social institutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the body, especially the female body, has been systematically regulated and disciplined by strict codes of social control. In order to transgress those regimes of control, one must already possess power, or one must appropriate power. For male artists like Warhol and Smith, who dominated this genre of transgressive libertinism, the possession of

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36 Jones, p. 34.
38 For a study of the relationship between the body, transgression and the politics of power since the seventeenth century, see Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (London: Methuen, 1986).
that power was a given. But for a woman to author a sexualized work, especially one of such libidinous abandon, constituted a usurping of power.

Furthermore, Schneemann's *Meat Joy* accorded the manifestation of female sexuality a far greater degree of self-determination and openness than in other works in this genre. The women who participated in *Meat Joy* were not constrained by stereotypical conventions of female sexuality. They were neither passive objects of the male gaze, nor voracious predators driven by uncontrollable sexual forces gone awry. On the contrary, they were as active, exuberant and self-fulfilling as the male participants. Male and female did not act upon one another, but were joined together along with their audience, who witnessed their erotic pleasures at such close proximity that the performers sometimes rolled into them in what Banes called an optimistic spirit of community.³⁹

But whatever optimism Schneemann expressed in *Meat Joy* about transcending the dichotomies of traditional gender roles, by the mid-1970s she expressed a view of masculinity as a repressive force which sought to stifle and demean her creative energies as a woman and as an artist. This view became abundantly clear in a performance she did in 1975 for the Women Here and Now series in East Hampton, Long Island, and again at the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado in 1977. The work was aptly called *Interior Scroll*. for, after undressing and painting her body contours with loose, broad strokes, Schneemann began to extract a long paper scroll from her vagina and read from it (fig. 46). The text, which had been written for her film *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973-77), described her meeting with "a happy man, a structuralist filmmaker" who blithely disparaged "the personal

³⁹ Banes, p. 217.
clutter, the persistence of feelings, the hand-touch sensibility, the diaristic indulgence, the painterly mess" of her films:

he said you can do as I do
take one clear process
follow its strictest
implications intellectually
establish a system of
permutations establish
their visual set . . .
he protested
you are unable to appreciate
the system of the grid
the numerical rational
procedures--
the Pythagorean cues . . .
he said we can be friends
equally though we are not artists
equally I said we cannot
be friends equally and we
cannot be artists equally

he told me he had lived with
a 'sculptress' I asked does
that make me a 'filmmakress?'
Oh No he said we think of you
as a dancer40

This "structuralist filmmaker" who dismissed her intellectually and artistically was the same "happy man" who relished the display of her body as a "dancer." As Schneemann stood naked onstage reading from a scroll pulled from her most intimate bodily cavity, the audience could not have mistaken the irony of word and image. The deliberate grotesqueness of her display was a defiant attempt to assert the corporeal reality of her body as a challenge to the objectifying gaze of "the happy man."

III. Breaking Taboos.

By no means was Schneemann the only feminist performance artist who turned at this time to the notion of the "grotesque" female body as a powerful political strategy. As Janet Wolff has noted, the research of Foucault and others has shown that the process of civilizing has involved strict patrolling of the body, so that its public and private functions are rigidly maintained.41 As the body is purged of its more primitive functions in this process, it results in what Mikhail Bakhtin has called the "classical body" which, like a classical statue, has no orifices or base bodily functions. The "grotesque body," which has orifices, fluids, genitals and protuberances, signifies a resistance to the civilizing process.42

One reason why women artists became so fascinated at this time with the notion of the grotesque body was that it allowed them to subvert the false idealism of the perfect female body, which was ubiquitously on display in both high art and popular culture. It also allowed them to bring into public view the corporeal realities of women's bodies as well as those functions society endeavoured to suppress: menstruation, sex, pregnancy, aging, and illness. While many of their performances assumed a tone of delightful if searing parody, others were painfully serious accounts of autobiographical experiences. These explorations of the most rigidly circumscribed taboos surrounding female sexuality and biological

41 Wolff, pp. 124-125.
processes resulted in some of the most powerful feminist performances of
the period.

Many early feminists considered the negative social attitudes
towards women to be based in conceptions of female biology and sexuality
as repulsive and bestial on many levels. They felt that an emancipatory
power could be gained by transforming these connotations of inferiority
into sources of pride. To be sure, this strategy is vulnerable to the charge
that it posited a simple, binary reversal wherein that which had been
repudiated was now to be celebrated. At the same time, however, there
were numerous positive benefits that resulted from this strategy, including
the enhancement of self-knowledge about women’s actual biological
functions, the establishment of a sense of community and shared
understanding, and for artists, a validation of women’s rights to determine
their own subject matter and an understanding of how the body could be
used as a form of political protest.

As perhaps the quintessential signifier of the "grotesque" body,
menstruation was one of the most rigidly enforced taboos around female
sexuality. In some cultures, menstruating women have been accused of
blighting crops, rusting iron and causing animals to miscarry. Even the
Bible was unequivocal about the foul nature of women in this state:

When a woman has a discharge of blood, . . . this uncleanness of her
monthly periods shall last for seven days. Anyone who touches her
shall be unclean till evening. Any bed she lies on in this state will be
unclean; any seat she sits on will be unclean. . . . If a man sleeps
with her . . . he shall be unclean for seven days. Any bed he lies on
will be unclean\textsuperscript{43}

See also Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (1952: rpt.
Given the unremitting strength of this taboo, evinced by the fact that the representation of menstruation is virtually absent in art prior to the 1970s, it is no surprise that, as Lisa Tickner said, it invited feminist artists to violate the taboo.44 One such example was the Menstruation Bathroom installed by Judy Chicago at Womanhouse in 1972. Another was Menstruation Wait, a performance executed by Leslie Labowitz-Starus in Los Angeles in 1971 and again in Dusseldorf in 1972. Labowitz-Starus printed a poster that announced that she would be in her studio waiting for her menstrual period to begin and anyone who wished could join her there (fig. 47). Those who did so found Labowitz-Starus sitting on the floor talking about her pre-menstrual feelings, recording audience reactions, and recounting memories of her mother telling her about menstruation and the pill. The performance ended when she started to bleed.45

In 1979 British artist Catherine Elwes created a similar performance in which she enclosed herself in a glass-fronted compartment in a corner of a studio at the Slade School of Art and bled visibly for several days. Like Labowitz-Starus, her purpose was to confront "the forcible eradication of women's biology from culture."46 By Elwes' own account, this performance provoked intense hostility from the same male students who emulated the brutally violent and aggressive performances of artists like Vito Acconci, Chris Burden and the Viennese Aktionism group.47

44 Tickner. p. 246.
47 Elwes. p. 192, n. 35.
Lisa Tickner has argued that the real power in violating such a taboo has to do with the fact that, although the biological reality of women's bodies is often considered to be disgusting, women are expected to present themselves publicly as pristine objects who pose no visible threat of contamination. Public references to bodily functions like menstruation therefore symbolize a disrespect for the social order, and a rejection of the normal patterns of domination and submission which are enshrined within it. Vulgarity can be means of enhancing dignity 'when the obscenities are merely signals conveying a message which is not obscene.'

Women artists who exposed these taboos through "vulgar" actions and images revealed not only how disruptive and alien such issues were even in the context of an art world that had become acclimatized to extremely brutal gestures and images, but also the extent to which associations of female nature, sexuality and "proper" femininity were bound together in a treacherous web of dichotomies and contradictions.

Many of these dichotomies and contradictions were skillfully brought into play in a videotape made in 1973 by Mako Idemitsu called What a Woman Made. For the first four of this eleven-minute tape a silent, motionless, abstract black-and-white image gradually comes into focus to reveal itself as a tampon leaching a trail of menstrual blood into the water of a pristine, white toilet bowl (fig. 48). As we are finally able to recognize the image and realize its taboo connotations, a male voice-over begins to

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read excerpts from the Japanese best-seller, *How to Raise Girl Children*, written by the former baby-sitter to the Royal Family. This text is profoundly misogynist, and barely conceals a revulsion that conflates physiology and personality in an utterly degrading assessment of the innate nature of Japanese women. They are described as pieces of property to be safe-guarded until marriage, as talentless, indecisive and unable to solve problems by themselves. They are expected to be passive, obedient and, above all, pleasant at all times. Given these extremely negative attitudes towards women in Japanese culture, it is not surprising that Idemitsu made this work while living in the United States, where she became involved in the women's movement.

Idemitsu manipulates the viewer's reactions to this tape in a subtle but highly subversive way. As we focus on the ostensibly disgusting image in her video, we soon become entranced by its exquisitely beautiful patterns, lines and contrasting textures. But just as we might be tempted into admiring this image as a validating signifier of female biological processes, our reverie is shattered by the authoritative male voice reading the litany of defects and negative characteristics imputed to female biology and sexuality. By layering her image with this text that codifies notions of female nature, Idemitsu reveals the impossibility of simply detaching and reclaiming a "positive" female biological imperative from the cultural prescriptions that determine and constrain its meanings.

While Idemitsu alludes to complex relationship between culture and nature here, she does not develop these ideas as thoroughly as others would later on when it became increasingly clear that, to effect real change, feminists would have to engage in what Martha Rosler called a critical analysis and struggle for control of the dominant culture's ideology.
and institutions. Like many feminists in the early 1970s, Idemitsu focused more on resisting and defying, rather than analyzing and deconstructing, patriarchal prescriptions about female nature and sexuality. At this stage of the movement feminists were mainly preoccupied with stripping away what they saw as the layers of male interference in order to reveal their own needs and experience.

IV. The Body Reclaimed.

In their efforts to challenge the rigid taboos around female sexuality and reclaim its more positive aspects, we might expect that women artists would have also investigated experiences such as pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. After all, these experiences, which were universally considered to represent the ultimate ideals of feminine fulfillment, had fostered some of the most deeply ingrained and repressive ideologies confronted by the feminist movement. Ironically, however, very few women artists seem to have felt compelled to take up these issues in their struggle to take control of their own sexuality.

Lucy Lippard noted this in her "Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth." commenting that by 1976 "no women dealing with their own bodies and biographies have introduced pregnancy or childbirth as a major image." She pondered whether this was because women artists tend to avoid or conceal motherhood for fear of undermining their status as "professionals."

50 Rosler, pp. 67-68.
or because the associations with biological creativity are anathema to women who want to be recognized for their artistic creativity, or because the states of pregnancy and childbirth were still considered so unattractive to the male world that women did not want to risk alienating themselves. It would seem that the absence of such references in women's performance art stemmed from a desire among feminists to distance themselves from what they had come to consider a traditional and restrictive role. It was one thing to be fascinated by the great mother goddesses of ancient mythology, but quite another to explore the implications of one's own motherhood at a time when women were seeking to renegotiate and redefine their roles within contemporary society.

The only work Lippard was able to cite that dealt with these themes was the Birth Trilogy that was performed at Womanhouse in 1971, and even this was only a metaphorical birth experience. The subject of childbirth seems to have been more conducive to the film medium, perhaps for obvious logistical reasons. At the 1973 international festival, Women and Film: 1896-1973, two films were shown that incorporated childbirth, one by Susan Kleckner simply called Birth Film (1972), and one by Freude Bartlett called My Life in Art (1971-73). The Toronto portion of the festival included a showing of recent videotapes, among which were some "video journals" by the New York artist known simply as Viva. Viva's tapes took a very personal approach to the documentary format.

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52 Women and Film: International Festival 1973 began under the initiative of a collective of Toronto filmmakers including Kay Armatage, Sylvia Spring and Deanne Taylor in the fall of 1972. The project expanded to a national organizing committee of over 200 women working to bring the festival to nineteen Canadian cities. The catalogue, Women and Film/La Femme et le film: 1896-1973 (Toronto: 9a Charles Street West, 1973) includes a brief description of Kleckner's film, p. 22, and Bartlett's film, p. 25.
including scenes of the birth of her child intercut with images from home movies of her own childhood. Historian Carol Zemel noted that one particularly intense sequence showed close-ups of Viva's hospitalized grandmother juxtaposed with the grimacing newborn baby and Viva's own tearful, exhausted face as the baby was placed in her arms.53

But if the concept of motherhood was the source of some of the most prevalent and powerful ideologies and mythologies about female nature and roles, very little evidence can be found of interest in this theme on the part of artists during the early 1970s. Lippard noted that both Mary Beth Edelson and Dennis Oppenheim incorporated their children into works, but neither dealt directly with the topic of motherhood/parenthood per se (fig. 49).54 One work overlooked in Lippard's essay, however, was a videotape by the German artist Ulrike Rosenbach.55 Wrapping with Julia is a short tape made by Rosenbach in 1972 when her daughter Julia was three or four years old. The tape begins with Julia sitting on Rosenbach's knee, both of whom are naked (fig. 50). The sound track is of a slow, deep breathing such as a fetus might hear in utero. As mother and daughter silently face the camera, Rosenbach begins to wind a long banner of gauze around their torsos repeatedly until they are tightly bound together. The effect is both to symbolize the bond of the mother-child dyad, as well as to evoke recollections of their physical union during the gestational period.

Although Rosenbach's video presents a self-generated image of motherhood—in contrast to the untold thousands of images of motherhood

created by male artists—it could not be considered a provocative image, nor does it present any politically or socially challenging notions about motherhood. By contrast, the conventional expectations of motherhood and professional decorum have been acutely challenged by British artist Shirley Cameron, who has toured and performed with her twin children since they were three weeks old. Some of Cameron's performances involved the construction of a wire cage inside which the artist would simply sit with her children and "perform" the act of mothering.56

Contrary to Lippard's conclusions, these examples show there were at least a few isolated efforts during the early seventies to explore such quintessential female experiences as childbirth and motherhood. But it must be acknowledged that these works tended to support, however inadvertently, the notions of biological determinism that are associated with early feminism's search for an "authentic" womanhood that could be reclaimed from the controlling forces of an oppressive patriarchal culture. Significantly, however, there was one major work of this period which dealt with the theme of motherhood not as a way to validate the experience on its own terms, but to explore the extent to which our notions of motherhood as a "natural" female experience are effectively shaped by social discourses and institutions.

In 1973 Mary Kelly, an American artist in London, began working on her Post Partum Document, an elaborate, multi-section work that documented the relationship between herself and her son within the process of socialization during six-year period after his birth.57 Using

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56 Elwes, p. 182.
diaries, notes, and residual objects as well as making reference to literary, scientific, psychoanalytic and linguistic theories. Kelly questioned assumptions about the "natural" proclivity of the woman to mother and nurture by showing not only how the child's personality is formed through its relationship to the mother, but how the mother's "'feminine' psychology is sealed in this division of labour through reproduction and childcare."58 The *Post Partum Document* therefore posited sexuality and identity not as innate, but as "an effect of social discourses and institutions and stresses the potentially oppressive socio-psychological production of sexuality."59 Moreover, Kelly resisted putting the mother (herself) on view, thus deflecting any possibility that her body could be recuperated as an image or object to elicit emotional or intuitive responses in the viewer. In both of these respects Kelly's work differed markedly from work being produced at that time within North American feminist circles, especially in the realm of performance art, where a more empirical than theoretical approach determined how attention was drawn to issues of female sexuality.

The more empirical approach of North American feminist performance artists can be attributed to a number of factors, some of which have their roots in the depoliticization and anti-intellectualism that characterized North American art of this period in general. While the intellectual tradition had remained relatively strong in Europe during the post-war years, an interest in the relationship between cultural theory and art practice would not become widespread in North America until well into the 1970s and early 1980s. Furthermore, as Mary Kelly pointed out in an

58 Parker and Pollock. p. 164.
interview in 1982. North American feminism's theoretical understanding tended to be "circumscribed by radical feminism on the one hand and traditional Marxism on the other." as opposed to the more complex. multi-faceted theoretical discourse favoured within European feminism.\(^{60}\)

As we have seen, the primary political strategy adapted by North American feminists during this period was that of consciousness-raising. To recall Sarah Evans' explanation, the purpose of consciousness-raising groups was to start from scratch by relying on personal experience and feelings; in effect, to derive theory from practice rather than the converse.\(^{61}\) Not surprisingly, many of the discussions in these groups centred around female sexuality and the female body as a site of political struggle. The consciousness-raising model was highly influential for feminist art practice of this period in general, and was directly adapted to at least one specific work, Julie Gustafson's videotape *The Politics of Intimacy* of 1972-73 (fig. 51).

Gustafson's tape is a documentary style montage of ten women of different ages and backgrounds telling personal stories about sexual experiences and feelings. The tape is structured to emulate a consciousness-raising group, and the anecdotes and testimonials have a lively, animated quality, but it is never made clear how many of these women are in the same room with one another. Eventually it is revealed that two of the women are speaking directly to one another, but mostly the women seem to speak to a silent and off-screen listener. Nevertheless, a mood of intense intimacy is evoked as these women struggle to discuss

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what is an obviously difficult and painful subject. This intimacy is enhanced by cinematic devices such as frequent facial close-ups and close framing, which puts the viewer in a position that critic Martha Gever has described as "trusted friend."62

Gustafson's tape, although not strictly a performance work, is an important document of how pervasively women’s questioning of their own sexuality permeated a wide cross-section of North American culture. The women reveal a range of positions, from confident and relaxed to anxious and hesitant, but an underlying commonality is evident in the belief that this is an important subject of investigation, with far-reaching implications for women's struggle to extricate themselves from a sense of oppression and inferiority in their private and public lives. The empirical nature of the inquiry served strategically as both diagnostic tool to explore the terra incognita of female sexuality and eroticism, and as a remedy for the sense of isolation and uncertainty experienced by so many of these women.

Gustafson's tape also indicates the kind of defiant openness with which women had begun to address their own sexuality and to refute the presumptions and prescriptions that had prevailed throughout history. These concerns were also expressed by feminist artists during this period in works that ranged from optimistic celebrations of female sexuality like Schneemann's *Eye Body* to defiantly transgressive challenges to conventional expectations and decorum like Idemitsu's *What a Woman Made*. While the transgressive gestures of many such works were intended to disrupt male fantasies with the shocking evidence of "real"

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female sexuality, some artists took more direct aim at such fantasies by means of parody and satire.

One particularly acerbic but witty example is a short videotape produced in 1974 by Susan Mogul, the premise of which is implied by its title: *Take-Off*. It is a take-off on a videotape made two years previously by Vito Acconci called *Undertone*. By the early 1970s, Acconci had become very well known as a performance artist, producing works which explored the body as a site of a highly personal psychology that traversed public and private boundaries. *Undertone* exemplified his work of this period in that it was based upon a structural premise which established a disturbingly intense and intimate relationship with the audience as voyeur. Sitting at a table opposite the camera/viewer, Acconci expounds a masturbation fantasy about a girl rubbing his legs and groin (fig. 51). At intervals he interrupts his rambling monologue to address the viewer directly, saying he needs to know you are there listening to him, tense and on edge, forcing him to keep talking to you, screening out his lies, pushing him against the wall to keep him from deceiving you. Ultimately, Acconci's intent is to sexualize the relation between performer and viewer, whereby the viewer's role as voyeur completes the scene and becomes inseparable from the fantasy itself.

Mogul's tape opens with an identical setting to Acconci's *Undertone*. With head lowered and arms concealed under the table like Acconci, Mogul tells us in a seductive voice that there is nobody under the table rubbing her legs, nobody fondling her groin. In an unexpected twist, she tells us instead that she has a vibrator under the table. She then raises her head to address the viewer, again mimicking Acconci's actions, and shows us the vibrator. Eschewing Acconci's intensely confrontational demands upon the
viewer/voyer to witness his fantasy. She matter-of-factly describes the vibrator, tells us where she got it, what kind it is and how many batteries it takes. She then repeats these two actions, alternating the head-down monologue about nobody being under the table with blandly factual comments to the viewer about the problem of batteries wearing out. But what a bargain it is to have sexual satisfaction for such a small price. For all its crude simplicity, Mogul's *Take-Off* is a deliciously funny satire. By equating Acconci's overburdened, highly psychologized sexual fantasy with her trivialized account of masturbating with a battery-operated sex-aid, she mocks and diminishes his claims to psychological power.

On one level, Mogul's parody of Acconci's tape was in response to the very unsubtle sexual objectification in his fantasy of a woman under the table administering to his sexual needs. On another level, it responded to the fact that this insult was exacerbated by Acconci's indisputable stature as an artist who played a central role in redefining performance as an art based on personal, body-centred experience. Of course women had begun to play a major role in reshaping the nature of performance at this time, but as Lippard pointed out, their work was still neither well known nor taken seriously within the male-dominated art world. By contrast, Acconci's work quickly achieved notoriety in the early 1970s, largely due to the perception that he had taken the conceptually based element of Post-Minimalist performance, as seen in the work of Bruce Nauman or Dennis Oppenheim, and invested it with a more psychological involvement. Not only did Acconci pioneer many effective strategies for exploring the body as a site of personalized artistic activity, he legitimated such activity

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at a time when artists were still subjected to harsh criticism for using real-life situations in an art context.

In a number of ways, therefore, Acconci's work served as an important influence for feminist artists seeking to transgress boundaries and access taboo subject matter. At the same time, however, the contrast between the relative ease with which he achieved notoriety and the dismissive repudiation of similarly personalized work by women as self-indulgent and narcissistic rankled many feminist artists and critics. Acconci's work provided an important model for how art could be shifted into a more personal terrain, yet it also seemed to reveal how a male artist could deal with the psychological and physical aspects of sexuality and still have his work considered gender-neutral, while the work of women artists that attempted to reveal this premise as actually gender-biased was dismissed as trivial and irrelevant. Given these contradictions, the ambivalent attitude expressed towards Acconci's work in Mogul's *Take-Off* becomes more clearly understandable.

Some of these contradictions were also brought out in Lynda Benglis' work of the early 1970s, which included both videotapes and sensual, abstract sculptures that evoked allusions to female sexual forms. Benglis' video work focused on a kind of teasing out of tensions between process and content by investigating the formal properties and limitations of video. Most of her tapes from 1972-1973 involved a variety of technical manipulations that questioned such notions as real time, the relation between original and duplicate images, between image and sound, and the truthful, documentary properties assumed to be inherent in the video medium. By 1973, however, Benglis began to incorporate into her video work some of the feminist concerns already evident in her sculptures.
These concerns appeared most clearly in *Female Sensibility*, a tape from 1973 which attempted to transpose Benglis' formal investigations of the ostensible authority, neutrality and objectivity of video into an emphatic response to the politics of feminism. The tape opens with a close-up of two women's heavily made-up faces. With slow and deliberate actions, the women pose their hands and nuzzle their faces together, and then begin to kiss and caress one another in a passionate yet obviously contrived way (fig. 53). The audio component consists of a montage of radio programming, including a talk show host razzing callers about male-female relationships, country-and-western music, a discussion about parapsychology, and advertisements for keeping America beautiful. At one point Benglis cuts in, talking on the phone about an upcoming exhibition of her work for which she is planning an announcement featuring a photograph of herself.

The contrast between the barrage of random samplings of American popular culture and the intense intimacy the women display to the camera creates a disconcerting disjunction between public and private that forces the viewer into an unequivocal confrontation with their role as voyeur. Although the viewer's discomfort at witnessing this highly charged erotic scene is reminiscent of many of Acconci's videos, what distinguishes Benglis's tape is how she has focused that discomfort very specifically around the gendered positions of looking and being looked at. By thus framing of the act of voyeurism within the sexual politics of viewing, Benglis' tape clearly demonstrates how feminist artists struggled to refute the ostensible neutrality of both the production and reception of art.

Benglis was to pursue this issue in an even more confrontational way in a series of four photographs that were published as exhibition
announcements

As Lucy Lippard noted, Benglis was living in California at the time, "where an honored macho tradition is the exhibition announcement showing a photograph of the artist--usually featuring a cigar, cowboy boots, a truck, or a dog--rather than his work." In a kind of guerilla parody of this macho tradition, Benglis portrayed herself as a child dressed in a skirted Greek soldier's costume, as an androgynous punk leaning arrogantly on a car, and as a pin-up girl. naked except for her jeans dropped to her calves, and peering coyly over her shoulder. The pièce de résistance, however, was the fourth image, which appeared as a full-page colour advertisement in the November 1974 issue of Artforum. Naked and slicked up like a body-builder, Benglis assumes a belligerent, hand-on-hip pose, sporting nothing but sunglasses and a gigantic latex dildo (fig. 54).

It will come as no surprise that Benglis' photograph sparked a wild controversy within the art media, which accused her of narcissism, pornography and penis envy. A group of Artforum editors wrote what Lippard called a "pompously irate letter" in which they condemned her ad as "an object of extreme vulgarity . . . brutalizing ourselves and . . . our readers." The majority of readers were supportive of Benglis, including historian Robert Rosenblum, who voted her "three dildos and a Pandora's box." Others remained peevish, however, including one man who, according to Lippard, tried to vandalize one of Benglis' sculptures in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The critic Robert Pincus-Witten was

generally supportive of Benglis' work, but felt the photographs were trite, especially in comparison to what he saw as Acconci's more meaningful engagement with issues of sexuality:

Benglis' sexual photographs are not to be confused with Vito Acconci's performances on erotic themes... Superficially, Benglis' work reveals the tasteful, the glossy, and the narcissistic, while Acconci's secret sexual systems are more populist, and tend toward the squalid, the exorcistic, and the puritanical.68

Benglis said her intention was to create a "media statement... to end all statements, the ultimate mockery of the pinup and the macho."69

Taken together, the mixing up of the signifiers of gender and role through the use of costume, pose and accessories in the four photographs constituted a general mockery of the pervasive sexual stereotypes of our culture. But Benglis' attack against culturally codified expectations was much more specifically aimed at critiquing the extent to which a gender bias permeates the art world itself. Her ironic parody of this type of exhibition announcement succeeded in drawing attention to its underlying myths and associations. The exemplar of this genre, and surely the one uppermost in Benglis' mind, was Robert Morris' advertisement that had appeared in the April 1974 issue of Artforum (fig. 55). In this half-length photograph, Morris appears wearing a World War II German helmet, aviator sunglasses, and grasping a massive chain draped around his neck and naked torso. But not a ripple was elicited in the art media by this image, even with its violent, militaristic and sado-masochistic undertones.

Benglis saw clearly how such an image revealed the extent to which the myth of artistic creativity was invested in, and conflated with, the identification of the artist's virility and sexual power. Nevertheless, the prevailing ideology was that artistic practice was neutral, an idea underscored by the corresponding argument that "quality" was the sole criterion for evaluating art. As Lucy Lippard has shown, this argument was perpetually advanced as a way to justify the exclusion of women of women artists from professional opportunities. Not only was this seen by feminists as blatant discrimination, but it also revealed the insidious and debilitating contradictions inherent in this myth of the neutrality of artistic creation. In spite of the rhetoric of neutrality, history shows that for as long as critics have discussed art, they have consistently associated achievement with "positive" masculine characteristics (virile, vigorous, bold, forceful, strong, passionate), and non-achievement with "negative" feminine ones (delicate, fussy, detailed, weak, small, sentimental, hesitant). In short, it is a tradition in which aesthetic judgement is assumed to be pure and disinterested, while the criteria for those judgements are entirely determined by the values of the dominant group.

By the early 1970s, this tradition remained strong. A few fissures and cracks in the edifice had begun to show as artists from the late 1960s and early 1970s began to question whether art could or should remain separate from the praxis of everyday life, but they seemed largely

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70 For an historical discussion of the association between virility and creativity, see Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," Artforum, XII, No. 4 (December 1973), pp. 30-39; rpt. in Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 293-313.
72 For a historical discussion of this dichotomy, see Parker and Pollock, pp. 1-49.
unprepared to accept the premise that the particularities of female experience might have aesthetic or political relevance for art practice. Thus the outraged reactions to Benglis' transgressive photographs reveal an awareness of their threatening power, which made it all the more necessary to dissipate their critical intent by denigrating them as vulgar, narcissistic and trashy. In an essay on "Transgressive Femininity," Leslie C. Jones has pointed out that this negation pre-empted a more positive association with the use of abject materials and imagery in the work of many female artists like Benglis, Schneemann and others, while it simultaneously earned for male artists like Acconci and Morris "the accolade of rebel-innovator." The time when these kinds of critical judgements could succeed in intimidating women artists into accepting prescribed roles and limitations was quickly passing. As the feminist movement advanced, providing an ever-expanding network of support systems both within and beyond the art world, the number of women willing to refute, challenge and criticize the inequities of patriarchal power and privilege grew exponentially.

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73 Jones. p. 53.
IDENTITY AND SUBJECTIVITY: A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

I. Framing History: Terms and Categories.

The feminist art that has been discussed in this study so far shared the general characteristic of asserting the rights of women to self-determination as a way to change the social values and institutions that have historically defined them as inferior beings. For the most part, the work of these artists focused on a search to discover what women are, in contrast to what they have been told they are within patriarchal culture. This work can be described as cultural feminism in that it attempted, as Mary Kelly said, "to excavate a separate order of language and culture for women" by valorizing the "hidden history" of women and by celebrating the female body as the fundamental site of the individual and collective experiences shared by all women in all cultures at all times.\(^1\)

As with the work already discussed, most feminist performance of the 1970s constituted a quest for identity. But for the artists who will be discussed in the following chapters, that search led not to the body, but to the social and cultural experiences of women. Although this work was not always immune to the precepts of essentialism or gender determinism, it can be distinguished from cultural feminism in that it was concerned not with the establishment of a separate culture of women, but with changing the culture that already existed.

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\(^1\) Mary Kelly, "No Essential Femininity: A Conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith, Parachute. No. 26 (Spring 1982), p.32.
Because this body of performance work was so vast, heterogeneous and unsystematic, any attempt at coherent classification runs the risk of creating arbitrary and rigid categories. In order to organize this material for the purposes of historical analysis, therefore, the categories that will be used in the following chapters are, with some modifications, based on the critical and descriptive terms that were applied to this work in the early literature on women's performance art: autobiography and narrative, role playing and transformation, and the representation of women. These categories are thematic in nature, which permits a selective and flexible approach that allows for the consideration of separate works by individual artists within the context of different categories.

Taken together, these chapters constitute a study of the various ways in which feminist performance artists pursued an investigation of the nature and cultural significance of identity and subjectivity. In that their work asserted subjective experience as gendered, it must be seen as a contestation of the received notion of subjectivity as neutral or universal. This contestation is inherently political, for it demanded fundamental changes to gendered relationships of power and powerlessness. As theatre historian Janelle Reinelt wrote, "Feminism must be defined with a political edge; its application to performance is and must be a political act." Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that feminist performance artists' understanding of the political dimensions of issues of identity and subjectivity varied greatly between individuals and over time. In order to establish some of the key terms of reference that determined these artists' understanding of performance, I turn to a consideration of their work and the ways in which they addressed issues of personal and political identity in performance.

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concerns and approaches. discussions of their work will be prefaced with a theoretical overview of how notions of subjectivity and identity have been formulated and debated as political concepts within feminist thinking. In this way, we shall be better equipped to consider the performance work of this period from theoretical and critical, as well as historical, perspectives.

II. Early Modern Theories of Subjectivity.

Judging from the sheer quantity of material that has been written about identity and subjectivity over the past twenty years or so, this is a topic of profound importance in contemporary thinking, particularly within the debates of postmodernism. The extent and complexity of the discussions around these issues reveal what political scientist and psychotherapist Jane Flax has described as "the growing uncertainty within Western intellectual circles about the appropriate grounding and methods for explaining and interpreting human experience."3 Debates around issues of identity and subjectivity are certainly intrinsic to the study of gender relations, but also resonate within discussions of cultural relations, identity politics, and post-colonialism.4 While many of the same skeptical


4 The literature on these subjects is vast, but a succinct discussion of the issue of subjectivity in post-colonial debates can be found in Simon During, "Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today," in Postmodernism: A Reader, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 448-462; rpt. from Textual Practice, 1, No. 1 (1987), pp. 32-47.
questions (about truth, knowledge, power, the self) may be posed across this spectrum of debates, the present study will focus on those issues that pertain primarily to the question of subjectivity in relation to gender.

In order to understand how the concepts of identity and subjectivity acquired such prominence in feminist performance in the early 1970s, it must be determined how these concepts might have been understood at that time. Since the notion of identity is fundamentally rooted in definitions or perceptions of the self, then a logical starting point would be a brief overview of the implications for gender identity that are embedded in some of the main streams of Western thought. This is certainly not to presume that all artists concerned with investigations of identity and subjectivity in the early 1970s were deeply familiar with the underlying premises of any or all of these ideas. Nevertheless, many of these ideas have resonated pervasively in Western culture and thus were widely available to the kind of empirical analysis that characterized this period in both North American art and feminist thought.

Since the emergence of the "cult of personality" in Renaissance humanism, we have defined our modern selfhood by a belief in individualism. This severing of ourselves from outside agencies and forces (God, kings, nature) was refined by Enlightenment thinkers into the concept of a stable, autonomous, and coherent self capable of the powers of reason that invest authority in "universal" laws and truths. Because this self relinquishes its individuality only to the authority of the truth claims of reason, which are objective and therefore universal, one is not bound to the authority of any individual. This not only allows the exercise of one's freedom and autonomy by obeying those laws that emanate from the right use of reason, it permits escape from, or transcendence of, the
contingencies of individual existence. Although such Enlightenment thinking has subsequently been subjected to modifications and revisions on a number of levels, the central concept of an autonomous, coherent self capable of reasoned insight into its own processes of formation has remained largely intact within those modern belief systems which seek to establish the causal foundations of being and knowledge.

The study of modern psychoanalysis is a case in point. Sigmund Freud's greatest challenge to Enlightenment thinking lay in his assertion that, although rational thought plays a decisive role in how we conduct our lives, we are chiefly motivated by the unconscious forces of unreason which constantly threaten to erupt into our conscious (rational) existence. Yet, like his Enlightenment forebears, Freud upheld the belief that, through reasoned (that is, neutral, objective, scientific) study, he could devise a coherent, overarching explanation for who we are and why we do the things we do. The centrepiece of Freud's study of psychoanalysis was his theory of the process of individuation. A classic example of a totalizing and universalizing Enlightenment story, Freud's explanation rests upon the premise that our identity is the direct product of our psychosexual development, specifically the Oedipal and castration complexes. Through this process, the human adult acquires its most distinctive and inalienable characteristics—the attributes of gender. In Freud's scenario, the boy severs himself from his mother due to the anxiety of the castration complex, pushing him to internalize the father's values and thus develop

5 Flax, p. 41.
the super-ego, a patriarchal, social conscience. Because the girl does not face the threat of the castration complex, the Oedipal phase is never fully resolved and she is not traumatized into identification with the father's values, and this prevents her from developing the strong super-ego that determines the traits of civilized people.\(^7\)

As the process of individuation described by Freud is primarily determined by biology, it is given the gloss of "natural law," which is then used to justify a host of presumptions: anything but heterosexuality is abnormal; genders are exclusionary and opposite categories, whereby the male identity is defined by what he is not (like his mother), and the female by what she lacks (penis/phallus); gender relations are prescribed by the superiority (and hence domination) of the one over the other; and only one of these gender categories has the capacity to attain full and autonomous selfhood. In short, Freud's explication of the process of individuation tells us that only through the resolution of the rupture of original unity can a stable and coherent sense of individual identity be attained, and that such attainment can never be as complete for females as for males. Yet Freud did acknowledge that gender was not strictly tied to biological sex since masculine (active) and feminine (passive) character traits are present in differing degrees in all persons. Nevertheless, the normal or typical outcome of the resolution of the drives and complexes will result in correspondence between gender and sex, which thus "naturalizes" the oppositional categories and relations of the genders/sexes.\(^8\)

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Where psychoanalytic theory locates the process of individuation within the unchanging, transhistoric conditions of gender differentiation, it has its corollary in Marxism, which seeks to place this process within the contingencies of history. Although Marxism repudiates the "possessive individualism" of bourgeois society, it is no less preoccupied with the attainment of a full and complete individuality. But for Marx, it was not "the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness." In other words, identity is not innate, but results from our mode of existence, which, in monopoly capitalism, is either that of the exploiter or the exploited. To attain emancipation, the exploited must first become aware of their false consciousness, which instills the illusion that they are as free and equal as their exploiters. Through a slow and painstaking process of struggling together on issues of mutual concern, people who once had no more unity than "potatoes in a sack of potatoes" gradually become a unity, or true class. Once this true or class consciousness is achieved, the goal of emancipation is almost inevitable.

The rewards this process accrues to the individual are crucial to its success. The central premise is that the exploited will win release from the deep sense of social alienation that causes their loss of wholeness and unity. The goal of communism, therefore, is to bring about "the complete and conscious return of man himself as a social, that is, human being." Moreover, this goal promises the ultimate freedom, since persons living

under communism are not only free to do what they want (as they are under capitalism, but only within the constraints of the system), but free to be what they want because they themselves hold the power to change the system that shapes them.\textsuperscript{12}

This power may theoretically apply equally to women as to men, but traditional Marxism devotes very little attention to the particularities of gender, and even then "the woman question" is subsumed under issues of class and economics. In his \textit{Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State} (1845), Friedrich Engels argued that the structured, monogamous family unit replaced the collective unities of original societies as modes of production moved outside the household and began to create surplus wealth.\textsuperscript{13} The sexual division of labour—which arose out of physiological differences—then began to acquire a value differentiation it did not originally have. In order to maintain control over all aspects of their greater economic value and power, men reshaped the family and society in entirely patriarchal terms. Since the oppression of women is the result of men's control of private property, it can cease, but only with the dissolution of private property.

Unlike Freudian-based psychoanalysis, which posits the separateness and inequality of the genders as the immutable foundations of identity, Marxism proposes that the oppression experienced by one gender at the hands of the other can be eliminated because this disparity is the effect, rather than the source, of their different experiences and existence. But if Marxism thus proposes the possibility of historical change, it also implies a

\textsuperscript{12} Tong, p. 45.
more intractable explanation for women's oppression by locating the origin of the sexual division of labour within the "division of labor in the sexual act." Consequently, even if private property were abolished, so long as the "division of labor in the sexual act" persists—and its roots in the institution of heterosexuality makes this probable—so too will the inequities of gender. Finally, because gender is subsumed under the "sex-blind" categories of Marxism, and the ostensibly neutral revolutionary subject is actually male-defined, the self-conscious identity that leads to emancipation is, theoretically speaking, unavailable to women as women.

In spite of their legion differences, Marxism shares certain key premises with psychoanalytic theory in terms of how issues of identity and subjectivity intersect with those of gender. Both adhere to the notion that the formation of "true" identity results from overcoming the loss of an original unity (with nature, with the mother). In psychoanalysis this process is one of resolving the trauma of biological imperatives, while in Marxism it is one of class struggle. In her article "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," Donna Haraway described it thus:

[T]he twin potent myths...[of] Marxism and psychoanalysis, in their concepts of labor and of individuation and gender formation, depend on the plot of original unity out of which difference must be produced and enlisted in a drama of escalating domination of woman/nature."

Such criticisms notwithstanding, both psychoanalytic and Marxist (among other) theories have served feminists well as sites from and within which

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15 Tong, "Marxist Feminism," pp. 50-51.
to gain a deeper understanding of the problematic and virulent forms of oppression faced within our culture.

III. Existential Theories of Subjectivity.

Modern conceptions of identity and subjectivity have also been heavily influenced by the theories of existential philosophy that were popularized by Jean-Paul Sartre in the 1940s and 1950s. Since this body of ideas also formed the basis of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), the first sustained theoretical analysis of the specific conditions of women's oppression, it is the inevitable starting point for understanding how issues of identity and subjectivity have passed into the contemporary feminist movement.17 Taken together, Sartre's and de Beauvoir's opposition to some of the key premises of both psychoanalytic theories of identity formation and Marxist theories of freedom would come to have important implications for feminist theories of subjectivity.

The centrepiece of existentialist philosophy repudiates the notion that the self ever was or ever can be unified and free of internal conflict. Drawing from G.W.F. Hegel's theory of consciousness as divided between the transcendent self, or observing ego, and the immanent self, or observed ego, Sartre redefined these parts as the Being-for-Itself (*pour-soi*) and the Being-in-Itself (*en-soi*).18 In essence the Being-for-Itself is

conscious of its existence as a self-determining subject, while the Being-in-Itself is not conscious, but simply exists, a determined object. Sartre also came to the significant conclusion that there is no human nature, no essence common to all human beings. Although Sartre's belief that our condition or existence precedes essence concurs with aspects of Marxism, he disagreed that our freedom could be constrained by our life condition. On the contrary, the Being-for-Itself achieves self-definition through making conscious choices and decisions, and nothing can compel this Being to act in one way or another against his will.

Where Marxism conceived of freedom as the outcome or agency of a unified class consciousness, Sartre posited it as both a curse and a blessing since the conscious Being-for-Itself can never escape from the questions and responsibilities of making choices. Our efforts to do so result in what Sartre called "bad faith," which deludes us into thinking that our choices are in some way constrained, either by outside agencies or by our human nature (essence). This is the false (or non) consciousness of the Being-in-Itself, who is blissfully oblivious to his or her own freedom of choice. Furthermore, Sartre saw bad faith as an ethical horror because it perverted the assumption of responsibility that freedom entails. For this reason he condemned Freudians for permitting people to hide their ethical responsibility in their supposed attempts to repress the biological instincts and psychical drives of the "so-called unconscious."\(^{19}\)

Sartre's concept of the self as the site of alienating and conflicting tensions between the Being-for-Itself and the Being-in-Itself was an important contestation of both psychoanalytic and Marxist beliefs in an

\(^{19}\) Tong, p. 199.
original unity that could be regained either through the resolution of psychic trauma or class struggle. Sartre added to these a third category, the Being-for-Others, which is far more significant not only because it would "foreshadow today's general repudiation of all dualistic [Cartesian] metaphysics," but because it provided a model from which Simone de Beauvoir was able to develop her specifically feminist critique of gender identity and relations. The concept of the Being-for-Others refers specifically to how consciousness relates to social interaction. Within society, each Being-for-Itself must establish itself as a conscious subject by defining all other beings as objects, as Others. This process of self-definition thus creates relationships of conflict as the subject seeks power over other beings. In seeking this power of self-definition, each Being-for-Itself not only describes and proscribes roles for the Other to conform to, but conceives of itself as transcendent and free and the Other as immanent and enslaved.

De Beauvoir's brilliant and original transposition of these ontological and ethical claims was to declare unequivocally that "man has named himself the Self and woman the Other." In her long (nearly one thousand pages) and complex thesis, The Second Sex, de Beauvoir elaborated a sweeping account of the myriad ways in which woman's designation as Other has resulted in her oppression and subjugation. She begins her discussion by analyzing the inadequacy of the three other explanatory theories that sought to account for the causes and reasons of woman's condition: biological, psychoanalytic, and economic (historical materialism).

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21 Tong, p. 197.
22 Tong, p. 201.
Her opinion of the "facts" of biology was that the reproductive role of the female made it more difficult for her to become and remain a self, but that her capacity for selfhood was no less than a male's. She argued that a woman's body or reproductive role was not enough to define her as a woman, nor justify reducing her to a Being-in-Itself since "there is no true living reality except as manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of society."\textsuperscript{23} Psychoanalysis provided a no more convincing theory of woman's Otherness. She considered the Freudian attribution of all human motivation and character to sexuality to be a reductive and simplistic attempt to explain the self's desire to apprehend the world in all possible ways. Moreover, she felt the theory of woman's inability to resolve the castration complex (resulting in her sense of lack due to penis-envy) was inadequate to explain her inferior status relative to man. Women covet not the penis, but the power and privilege accorded to men. De Beauvoir found the doctrines of historical materialism were also insufficient to explain why woman had been relegated to the position of Other. She was not convinced that men's will to power over women began with the institution of private property or that their relations of power and powerlessness would end with the transition from capitalism to socialism or communism.

Having analyzed the inability of all these theories to account for women's oppression, de Beauvoir argued instead that it required an ontological explanation. She drew here upon the existentialist premise that, as the self seeks to assert itself as a free subject (Being-for-Itself), it becomes aware of and feels threatened by the existence of the Other. In

\textsuperscript{23} De Beauvoir, p. 37.
order to maintain its subjectivity, the Being-for-Itself must define itself by what it is not. De Beauvoir proposed that man has been able to define himself as the self/subject largely, but not entirely, because his freedom from reproductive burdens has allowed him to produce the culture and technologies that have raised the human above the animal. In order to assert and maintain his transcendent freedom and subjectivity, man has extrapolated from woman's reproductive role the view that she is bound to nature, to her body, to the realm of immanence, to Otherness.

IV. Feminist Theories of Identity.

The Second Sex was to have such inestimable importance for the re-emergence of the feminist movement in the 1960s that, in spite of many criticisms levelled against it, its influence continues to be felt within the theories and debates of feminism today. The primary value of de Beauvoir's text for the purposes of this study lies in how she reconceived the notions of identity and subjectivity from a specifically feminist point of view. Her book provided a crucial challenge to Freudian psychoanalytic theories which had become a vogue in North American popular culture. It also undermined the supposed gender neutrality of the Marxist-

24 Although de Beauvoir pursued this concept only in terms of gender, its relevance for other critical discourses has been recognized. For example, Donna Haraway, p. 198, described postcolonialism as the "discourse dissolving the West and its highest product--the one who is not animal, barbarian or woman: that is, man, the author of a cosmos called history."
25 Tong, pp. 202-205.
26 Mitchell, pp. 296-97.
influenced thought of the American New Left, the fallacy of which began to be recognized by feminists like Robin Morgan, Shulamith Firestone and Sara Evans in the late 1960s. By the time the women's movement in North America really began to build momentum around 1970, *The Second Sex* retained its significance among the handful of consciously feminist publications that were then available.²⁷

As de Beauvoir's ideas were so completely absorbed into this early period of North American feminism in general, so they were also apparent in the efforts of artists to explore feminist issues in their own cultural practice. It is appropriate, therefore, to consider this practice on the premise that, insofar as its predominantly empirical tendencies were moderated at all by theoretical understanding, it was an understanding that derived ultimately from a de Beauvoirian concept of feminism. At the same time, however, it is an obvious fact that feminist theory and practice has changed tremendously since the early 1970s. Caution must be exercised, therefore, in considering the ideas in play at an earlier historical moment from a vantage point informed by the theoretical shifts, debates and refinements that have emerged within feminist thinking to date. Consequently, the remainder of this theoretical overview will be addressed in two parts. The first will focus on how de Beauvoir's ideas were received into the emergent feminist movement of the early 1970s. The second part will examine some of the principal ways in which these ideas have been

modified within more recent feminist theory. The intention is to provide a basis for a further investigation of feminist performance practice of this period in which historical understanding is enhanced by contemporary feminist critiques, without being distorted or obscured by them.

Having recognized the inadequacies of existing explanatory theories to account for woman's oppression, de Beauvoir expounded a theory in which gender was seen as a category of identity acquired by human beings as a result of the need to assert one's subjectivity by describing and prescribing roles to which the Other must conform. One becomes a man by having access to the privilege and power of being able to determine one's subjectivity and role (transcendence), and one becomes a woman by relinquishing subjectivity and accepting determined roles (immanence). As she emphatically declared:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.28

By redefining the ontological formation of identity and subjectivity in terms of gender, de Beauvoir made it possible for feminists to see that their place within society was constrained not by their biology, psychology or class, but by the social roles ascribed to them. This emphasis on the relationship between gender identity and social role played a crucial role in allowing women to recognize the extent to which social values were neither "naturally" determined nor neutral. This realization led many feminists to the conclusion that the relegation of women to the position of Other had precluded and obscured their ability to formulate their own

"true" identity. As a result, feminism in North America in the early 1970s was largely characterized by two strategies employed in tandem: to expose the presumed neutrality of social values, and to discover and assert the fundamental differences of women's experience and identity.

Although de Beauvoir's ideas were crucial to the formulation of these strategies, certain aspects of her ideas were viewed quite critically by many North American feminists during this period, particularly those sympathetic to the tenets of radical feminism. One point of contention revolved around the mind/body split in de Beauvoir's thinking. De Beauvoir had clearly associated the subject with the mind (transcendence) and the sphere of Otherness with the body (immanence). Not only was this seen to valorize the man/culture over the woman/nature association, but it denigrated the role of the body as one of the key signifying differences between male and female. 29 Although radical feminists concurred with de Beauvoir that the oppression of women precedes all other forms of oppression, they maintained that the roots of something so fundamental and widespread must be located in biological differences.

While radical feminism's insistence upon biologism as the cause of women's oppression contrasted with de Beauvoir's emphasis upon social roles, it had the effect of intensifying the tendency in her work to treat male and female as fixed and oppositional categories. Thus the categories "woman" and "man" were seen to exist a priori, separated from one another by those innate characteristics that each shares as a group. In contrast to de Beauvoir's denial of the notion of human nature or "essence," a belief in the essence of gender came to be widely accepted in North

29 Tong. pp. 212-213.
American early feminism. Over the past twenty-five years, however, early feminist positions have been disputed and refined in myriad ways. While a discussion of the nuanced complexity of these debates is beyond the scope of this study, it is necessary to consider the three principle ways in which early feminism's understanding of identity and subjectivity has been reconsidered within subsequent feminist discourse, particularly as it has encountered the theories of postmodernism.

V. Feminism and Postmodernism.

Firstly, early feminism's attempts to explain sexism on the basis of gender alone has been widely repudiated as a "meta-narrative" prone to the same flaws as all Enlightenment theories that seek to discover foundational causes to explain the "truth" of things, which in turn becomes the source of their legitimation. Such monocausal, explanatory theories are seen as inherently essentializing and ahistorical, regardless of whether they are based on biological, psychoanalytical or philosophical precepts.30

Secondly, such an overarching and essentializing theory cannot account for the specificities of class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and history of the supposedly unified group designated by the category "woman." Early efforts to define a theory that could encompass all women and thus enhance sisterhood has now been seen to have the opposite effect

of eliding differences among women by glossing over their distinct identities and diverse experiences of sexism.\textsuperscript{31} Awareness of diversity has led to the shift from woman to women, from feminism to feminisms. It has forced the recognition that, as Sandra Harding says, "'We women' are both diverse and, often, in dominations relations--consciously or not--with each other."\textsuperscript{32} Consequently, many feminists now disavow the notion that an identity of "woman" can exist prior to any other form of identity.

Thirdly, the very premise of a fixed and stable identity has been challenged within much contemporary cultural theory that draws upon the intersecting psychoanalytic, linguistic and political streams of thought associated particularly with the work of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. Lacan's psychoanalytic theories about the impossibility of the self being formed independently of its relation, though language, to the external social order (Symbolic Order) precludes the notion of a fixed and stable identity.\textsuperscript{33} Derrida's critiques of the Symbolic Order focus on how modern philosophy since Descartes has been preoccupied with the unity of consciousness and the singularity of thought (expressed in binary oppositions such as true-false, self-other, male-female, nature-culture). Derrida questioned such totalizing concepts by means of a method he called deconstruction, which seeks to bring out those irreducible particularities or differences (différance) that are repressed or denied, especially within the signifying codes of language.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{31} Fraser and Nicholson, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{32} Sandra Harding, "Feminism, Science, and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques," in Feminism/Postmodernism, p. 90.
\textsuperscript{34} See Iris Marion Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," in Feminism/Postmodernism, pp. 303-305.
This questioning of the notion of a stable, unified subject or identity has had profound consequences for feminist thought, especially as it has been theorized by feminists like Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, who were associated with the French organization Psychoanalyse et Politique. On the one hand, feminists have used these theories to turn to their advantage the notion that women are the Other. Rather than a condition that must be transcended in order to attain a self-determined subjectivity, Otherness can be a position of difference and critical distance from which to scrutinize the norms, values and practices of the (patriarchal) Symbolic Order. Furthermore, the rejection of the belief that one can possess a unified, integrated self-identity that bears an essential relationship to truth or reality has allowed women to slip away from prescribed meanings and roles into what Julia Kristeva has called the heterogeneity of the subject-in-process.

On the other hand, grave concerns have been expressed about the impact of such theories on the politics of feminism. For example, Christine Di Stefano has noted that such theories negate the premise of gender as a category of difference which can "pose a radical challenge to the humanist Enlightenment legacy which has come under increasing feminist scrutiny as a masculinist legacy." Di Stefano also worries that the postmodern prohibition against subject-centred inquiry tends to displace the theoretical and political strength derived from feminism's modernist insistence upon the importance of gender and, therefore, undermines its legitimacy as a broad-based political movement. These observations

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35 Tong. p. 219.
36 Young. p. 304.
37 Christine Di Stefano. "Dilemmas of Difference." in Feminism/Postmodernism, p. 65.
38 Di Stefano. p. 76.
raise two particularly troubling and interrelated problems within contemporary feminist theory that are germane to our investigation of the relationship between feminist theory and practice as it was manifest in performance art of the 1970s.

The first of these problems is this question of the postmodern prohibition against subject-centred inquiry. As Nancy K. Miller has pointed out, this question has been on the agenda among French intellectuals since at least 1968 when Roland Barthes declared the demise of subjective agency in his essay "The Death of the Author." Miller argues that because women "have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production" as have men, nor felt as "burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc." the death of the subject perhaps "prematurely forecloses the question of identity for them." She also points out the significance of the fact that the dispersion of the authorial subject was aligned by Barthes (and Derrida) with the decentred. disoriginated. and deinstitutionalized position of the feminine. Miller is suspicious of the irony that the abandonment of the authorial subject is thus proclaimed from a position of male power and privilege when, for women, "the condition of dispersal and fragmentation that Barthes valorizes (and fetishizes) is not to be achieved but to be overcome." Similarly, other feminists like Nancy Hartsock, Wendy Brown and Jane Flax are "deeply suspicious of the motives of those who counsel such a move at

40 Miller. p. 106.
the moment when women have just begun to remember their selves and claim an agentic subjectivity." 42

This dispersal of the subject leads to the second problem, which is the question of whether and how feminism can be defined and/or sustained as a political practice seeking emancipation. This question lies at the centre of contemporary feminist debates around the relationships between feminism, modernism and postmodernism. If the origins of the concept of emancipation are to be traced to the critical ethos of modernism, then we can also locate there the origins of the feminist critique of gender. But if feminism's problematizing of gender can thus be aligned with the modernist tradition of social critique, postmodern theory has drawn attention to the dangers of replicating modernism's tendency to create totalizing (and hence discriminatory to some), cross-cultural and transhistorical categories. To counter this tendency, the anti-modernist stream of postmodern thought proposes the dispersal of the subject into the fragmented particularities and multiplicities of "micro-narratives." 43

Not only has this proposal elicited some feminists' suspicions that it prematurely forecloses the possibility of subject-centred inquiry for women (and others), it also effectively reifies or fetishizes the alienation and disempowerment of the non-subject/Other.

Even more importantly, the dispersal of the subject conveys seemingly irreconcilable conflicts for feminism's emancipatory goals. The


43 The *locus classicus* of this argument is to be found in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
loss of gender as a category of identity that is implied by the prohibition against subject-centred inquiry forces home the very troubling questions asked by Judith Butler: "What constitutes the "who." the subject. for whom feminism seeks emancipation? If there is no subject. who is left to emancipate?" For many feminists. including Donna Haraway. the provisional solution is to accept the pluralistic and often contradictory aspects of our individual and collective identities. and to build from this a politics not of commonality. but of affinities. alliances and coalitions. Although other feminists would certainly agree with Haraway that "women of color" should replace the unitary category "woman." they also worry that feminist politics might suffer if the notion of women as a relatively unified social subject is allowed to dissolve entirely. To evoke the ideal of endless difference can either lead feminism into political collapse or to the relativism of abstract individualism. with the perhaps unintended. but seemingly inevitable associations of liberal pragmatism.

The encounter with postmodern theory has affected feminist thinking in profoundly crucial ways. forcing an awareness of its essentializing tendencies and providing important strategies for self-reflexive critique. At the same time. however. feminism's central focus on political goals has revealed many weaknesses in the ability of postmodern theory to provide for historically specific social critiques of a phenomenon as pervasive and deeply embedded as sexism. As feminists today debate the usefulness of the category of gender as the subject of ontological and

political inquiry, they struggle to redefine the choices and responsibilities of feminism as a political practice. At the very core of the current dilemma is the question of whether the goals of negotiating a political movement that is both inclusive and unified are desirable or even possible.

The desire for inclusiveness and unity has always been central to the feminist movement. What has changed is the awareness that what may appear to be liberatory concepts or categories may also contain oppressive or deleterious elements within them.\(^\text{48}\) Thus the goal of unity may subsume difference under commonality just as the goal of inclusiveness may lead to politically ineffectual relativism. While we must continue to pursue such debates in the present, we must also bring our awareness of them to our analysis of history. But if postmodern critiques have forced us to recognize that modernist notions of universality conceal the historical locatedness of thought and knowledge claims, it must also be remembered that postmodern theories are themselves the outcome of a historically specific point of view. We must be attentive to their usefulness for analyzing a past historical moment, but we must be careful not to obscure that moment's own historical specificity by projecting anachronistic judgements and values upon it.

VI. The Identity Question in Early Feminism.

This summary of some of the main theoretical premises around questions of identity and subjectivity that have emerged in the last few

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\(^{48}\) Nicholson. p. 16.
decades provides us with a framework in which to locate our analysis of how these concerns were pursued in the work of feminist performance artists in the 1970s. It is worth reiterating here that the critique of subject-centred inquiry expounded within European intellectual circles was at this time still largely unknown in the North American context except perhaps in certain university philosophy or linguistic departments. The theoretical terms of reference available to the majority of North American feminists remained those of liberal, Marxist, radical and existentialist feminism. For feminists engaged in art practice, the focus on challenging the patriarchal nature of culture seemed to draw most profitably from radical and existentialist feminism.

The emphasis in these streams of thought on gender as the most basic and persistent category of oppression gave them a way to understand that what they personally experienced as an acute sense of marginalization was the result of a culture-wide denigration of women. Early feminists realized they existed within a patriarchal culture that excluded them from meaningful participation by coercing them into prescribed and delimited roles. Basing her analysis on de Beauvoir's existential model, Vivian Gornick described this condition in her 1971 essay, "Woman as Outsider:"

In every real sense woman . . . is an outsider. one in whom experience lives in a metaphorical sense. one whose life and meaning is a surrogate for the pain and fear of existence. one onto whom is projected the self-hatred that dogs the life of the race. Only a brief look at the cultural and religious myths and the literary projections of woman that surround the female existence—smothering it, depriving it, manipulating it. and in the final irony, creating it and
then reflecting it—will instantly reveal the essential outsidedness of women.49

This recognition of woman as outsider was, and remains, a critical concept in the formation of a feminist politics. As Jill Dolan has written more recently, "feminism begins with a keen awareness of exclusion from male cultural, social, sexual, political and intellectual discourse."50 For many feminists, becoming conscious of their role as the excluded outsider became a way to grasp the extent to which they had been precluded from formulating a coherent idea of who and what they were or wanted to be. In existentialist terms, woman's role as the Other rendered her a mere chimera, an illusory projection of what the male subject defines himself not to be. As Gornick wrote in her essay,

I am not real to the culture that has spawned me and made use of me. I am only a collection of myths. I am an existential stand-in. The idea of me is real—the temptress, the goddess. The child. The mother—but I am not real.51

Thus the need to discover and assert identity became central preoccupations within the feminist movement in the 1970s. For some it was expressed in the belief that a "true" female identity existed which constituted the essential link between all women. For others it was motivated by a desire to shed imposed roles and discover how women themselves could determine their own existence and meaning. For many, the search for identity also demanded exposure of the presumed neutrality of what women clearly perceived as gender bias in social and cultural

51 Gornick, p. 144.
practice. However it was pursued, the goal of this quest was to change the circumstances that had relegated women to the position of outsider.

To be an outsider is to lack the means with which to engage in culture. It is to be alienated and silenced and to feel one's own experience to be of diminished or even negative value. The crucial question for feminists, especially during the early period, was how to effect the changes they desired. As Julia Kristeva put it:

No longer wishing to be excluded or no longer content with the function which has always been demanded of us (to maintain, arrange, and perpetuate this sociosymbolic contract as mothers, wives, nurses, doctors, teachers ...). how can we reveal our place. first as it is bequeathed to us by tradition. and then as we want to transform it?52

Within feminist art practice, the pursuit of these questions became the focal point of a body of performative work that took up the themes that have been outlined in the introduction to this chapter: autobiography and narrative, role-playing and transformations, and the representation of women. By investigating these themes, which have become so closely identified with the ethos of early feminist performance, we will be able to come to a clearer understanding of the particular role and contributions of this performative work in relation to the history and concerns of both feminist theory and practice during this period.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND NARRATIVE.

I. "What Am I?"

The extensive interest in autobiography and narrative in women's performance in the 1970s must be seen in the context of the general preoccupation during this period with the conflation between art and life as a way to dissolve the formalist categories and hierarchies entrenched in High Modernist aesthetics. But for women artists, the rejection of such aesthetics went beyond the desire to expand the aesthetic terrain of art. Rather, it became a crucial way to manifest the feminist conviction that personal experience was inherently political. Feminist artists' purpose in investing their work with personal references was to bring to attention the specific politics of gender, which, until the early 1970s, had not been conceived of in the art world as a form of politics at all.

Personal experience, therefore, was not just a new source of raw material with which to engage in a cultural practice, but became the basis upon which culture, and indeed life itself, could be problematized in political terms. In this sense, the efforts of feminists to make explicit their understanding of the intrinsic links between life and art, and to use art as a strategy to change life itself, can be seen to embody the goal that Peter Bürger identified as the distinguishing characteristic of the historical avant-gardes, that is "to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art."¹

Had Bürger been able to extend his analysis to include feminist art practice in the early 1970s, it is possible that he might have reconsidered his premature conclusion that the avant-garde's efforts to engage art with the praxis of everyday life had devolved from a political to a merely aesthetic project ever since the 1960s. From our historical vantage point today, we are in a much better position to see feminist performance artists' conflation of art and life as a conscious strategy to contest the politics of gender both in and beyond the art world. This strategy served three main goals. Firstly, the incorporation of personal experience offered women the opportunity to assert themselves as the active and self-determined agents of their own narratives and experiences, in contrast to their traditionally sanctioned role in art as the passive object of the male gaze. Secondly, it served as a way to undermine the privileging of formal innovation and to contest the ostensibly "neutral" or "disinterested" terms of aesthetic practice. Thirdly, it allowed women to challenge dismissive assumptions that any reference to the experience of women as women was irrelevant and self-indulgent.

Feminist preoccupations at this time centred around questions of identity, such as they have been phrased by Lucy Lippard: "What Am I? What Do I Want to Be? I Can Be Anything I Like but First I Have to Know What I Have Been and What I Am." Issues of identity were already being explored through autobiographical and narrative modes in many of the performances created by students in the Feminist Art Programs at Fresno State Collage and CalArts. As has been noted, much of the impetus for such

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performances came directly from the consciousness-raising tradition of "speaking bitterness" about personal pain and anger. The importance of the consciousness-raising model was confirmed by artist Joyce Kozloff:

In consciousness-raising, one examines one's personal experiences to formulate one's politics. Much recent art is personal and autobiographical, and I believe that the Women's Movement has been a contributing force in giving artists permission to openly explore their inner lives in their art.\(^3\)

The significance of this process was not only in what was said, but in saying it among an intimate group of empathetic peers. This allowed women to emerge from their debilitating isolation by formulating the personal within a group politic and enfranchising a new audience. As Suzanne Lacy pointed out in 1980, this concern with audience has had important implications not just for the development of feminist art, but for contemporary art practice in general:

Another area in which feminist theory has led the art vanguard is in the notion of audience. Today everybody talks about the audience, and so did everybody in the feminist movement in '69. However, artists weren't talking about it then. At first feminist performance artists brashly, even antagonistically, put the stuff out and the audience reacted in kind. After that there was a retreat into a cooler analysis: Now, what do we really want from these audiences?\(^4\)

This emphasis on personal politics and audience reception were instrumental in allowing women to challenge the "selective tradition" of art, which was "circumscribed by a particular gendered notion of 'public' importance."\(^5\) In recognizing this tradition as based on a hierarchy of

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gender, feminist artists responded by attributing political significance to what was normally regarded as "'unproductive,' personal or too wrapped up with the 'inner speech' of dream, desire, and fantasy."\(^6\) In so doing, they intervened in what critic Craig Owens has described as "that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting and invalidating others."\(^7\) Owens noted further that, although woman is prohibited from self-representation within this system, she is ubiquitously present as the object of representation, as a sign or cipher of meanings extrinsic to herself ("Nature, Truth, the Sublime, etc.").\(^8\) Or, as Lisa Tickner put it, "What can we possibly deduce from this fact that [woman] can be everywhere, but the knowledge that she is nothing? She seems everywhere present in art, but she is in fact absent. She is not the expression of female experience, she is a mediating sign for the male."\(^9\)

It was this absence of presence that women sought to redress through autobiography and narrative, but not just as a means to foreground personal experience as the content of a work of art. Autobiographical and narrative modes of performance served to frame and assert the presence of the artist as producer of the work. Since the gender of the producer was inescapably evident, such work exhibited a certain denial of the presumed neutrality of aesthetic judgement upon which rested that system of regulating power and authority Owens described.

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\(^6\) Frascina, p. 165.
\(^8\) Owens, p. 59.
And because performance allowed women to enter the field of art production as both agent and agency of their own representations, it allowed them to assert this activity as political practice in a way that was unparalleled at the time by any other form of art making. In this sense we can understand feminist performance and its vestigial objects (photographs, scripts, videotapes, props, etc.) as constituting what historian Henry Sayre has described as a kind of "postmodern salon des refusés."10

II. Stories of the Self.

As Sayre goes on to suggest, autobiographical or narrative modes invoke their own history, the process or story of their making, which we, as viewers, are invited to reconstruct.11 Consequently, memory was frequently drawn upon as a way to assert the subjectivity of one's particularized history in order to discover "What I Have Been and What I Am." It was in this spirit that California artist Eleanor Antin presented an autobiographical performance simply called Eleanor 1954 at the Los Angeles Woman's Building in 1974 (fig. 56). Since the previous year Antin had been creating a gallery of performance personae based on aspects of herself, including the King, The Black Movie Star, the Ballerina and the Nurse. In Eleanor 1954, the artist attempted to harken back to her own history of twenty years earlier in order to "confront my four selves.

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11 Sayre, p. 96.
trying to reach a real self."12 The performance included a videotape showing stills of her current personae as well as glamorous publicity photographs of herself as an aspiring young actress while Antin's narration "shifted back and forth between her past and present selves, her attitude moving from mockery to analysis to compassion toward her younger self."13 Antin's recollections about who she was in the past thus served as a kind of touchstone for the four "selves" that she was then in the process of formulating.

The element of self-mockery in Antin's work is indicative of the wry, ironical humour that characterized much autobiographical feminist performance of the mid-seventies. These characteristics are also conspicuously evident in the first videotape produced by Californian artist Ilene Segalove, entitled Coal Confession (1973). Just over two-and-a-half minutes long, the tape shows Segalove sitting before the camera recounting a story from fifth grade when she received an A++ for an essay on coal mining which she copied directly from the World Book Encyclopedia (fig. 57). One can easily see the deadpan seriousness with which she intones her confession of such a trivial childish crime as a direct parody not only of much of Vito Acconci's work, but also, perhaps, of certain aspects of the more expressionist stream of early feminist performance in California.

This deadpan and ironical approach to history and memory was also taken by Toronto artist Lisa Steele in one of her early video performances. In Birthday Suit: Scars and Defects (1974), the camera is placed on the floor at one end a long room that appears to be Steele's apartment. Steele

enters at the far end, quietly undresses, then approaches the camera and proceeds to give a "show and tell" of every scar and defect her body has accumulated over the course of her twenty-seven years, after which she returns to the far end of the room and sings Happy Birthday to herself (fig. 58). Steele's account of the incidents that have left their physical trace on her body has a poignancy with which the viewer can easily identify, but as she carries this on for a full twelve minutes, our sympathy soon turns into bemusement that anyone could be so accident prone. Steele does not evoke psychological revulsion, as did so many male artists who inflicted physical punishments upon their bodies at this time, but a kind of endearing affection for the body as a physical repository for memory and the passage of time.

But if the autobiographical and narrative performances of this period often revealed an ironic sense of self-mockery, at the other end of the spectrum they could manifest an intensely serious search for identity and meaning in one's life. These concerns were perhaps most evident in the work of Linda Montano, for whom autobiography, memory and the passage of time served as cathartic strategies for personal emotional growth and spiritual transformation. The autobiographical element is so intrinsic to Montano’s performances that she has not merely used her life as a source for her art, but has endeavoured to make her life itself a form of living art. Montano designates her life activities as art and frames them within the institutional systems of the art world, so we must acknowledge them as art even though there may be nothing else to distinguish them from the activities of her everyday life.
Raised as a devout Catholic, Montano would retain a deep fascination with spirituality and ritualism in her work as an artist. She enrolled in college as an art major in 1959, but left a year later to enter the convent of the Maryknoll Sisters, intending to become a missionary nun. Although the rigorous self-discipline she learned there would become highly influential for her subsequent performance work, she left after two years, suffering from anorexia nervosa and weighing eighty-two pounds. She returned to college, and by 1969 had completed two graduate degrees in art. Although trained as a sculptor, by 1971 she was working exclusively in performance.

By 1973 Montano had moved to California and begun to create performances in which art and life were linked in a direct, synthetic way. Her first performance of this kind was *Home Endurance* (1973), in which she remained in her house for a week and sent invitations to her friends to visit her. Throughout this time she documented all her thoughts, activities, meals and phone calls in a journal and photographed all her visitors. Montano's intention was to concentrate on becoming peaceful and harmonious by "framing" her stillness as art making, a theme she would return to several times in works of increasingly sustained and rigorous endurance.15

The characteristic self-discipline of *Home Endurance* was explored again later in 1973 in collaboration with another artist in a work called *Handcuff: Linda Montano and Tom Marioni* (fig. 59). Marioni was also interested in creating situations that dissolved the boundaries between art

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and life, so he and Montano agreed to spend three days handcuffed together at the Museum of Conceptual Art (MOCA), where they were "on display" and available to the public. Montano saw the work as a way to explore her life at the time, specifically in terms of redefining her relationship with her husband: "That relationship needed some change, so I changed it in the only way I was able to do at the time which was through my work." As is so often the case in Montano's work, the framing of an activity as art gave her a kind of permission to explore aspects of her life that she was otherwise unable to do.

Montano's interest in art as a way to frame and thus heighten her awareness of her life continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In her 1975 performance called *Three Day Blindfold/How to Become a Guru*, she lived blindfolded for three days in the Los Angeles Woman's Building in order to alter her social habits and judgements through isolation and sensory deprivation. In December of the same year, she and the artist Pauline Oliveros performed *Living Art*, in which they camped in the desert for ten days and considered everything they did to be art. Perhaps the most famous of these living art situations, however, was *One Year Performance*, in which Montano and Tehching Hsieh spent an entire year living and working together in New York while connected by an eight-foot

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18 Loeffler, p. 379.
rope in 1983-84. More recently, she carried out her *Seven Years of Living Art*, an epic project lasting from December 1984 to December 1991 involving a highly complex and individualistic interpretation of the Indian *chakras* system of spiritual enlightenment.

Montano has claimed that her work is "about making myself more available" because she felt she hadn't been available to anyone but herself. Nevertheless, her work appears to be dominated by a self-absorption bordering on solipsism. She considers her art a kind of therapy akin to the many forms of mysticism, personal healing and spiritual enlightenment she has embraced over the years: Catholicism, Buddhism, yoga, EST, gestalt therapy, transcendental mediation, mind dynamics, Zen, rolfing and acupuncture. While her activities have been described as a form of social work--she has received certification as a yoga therapist and hospice worker for the terminally ill, and provided Life/Art Counselling sessions one day a week at the New Museum of Contemporary Art throughout the *Seven Years of Living Art* project--her interest in the social remains at an entirely individualistic level. In a recent interview, Montano said that her goals have not been to effect social change, but "to relax into my true nature. . . . [A]s the political arena gets messier and the world gets more desperate by the moment, I try to tap into my own clarity


22 Montano, quoted in Roth, "Matters of Life and Death," p. 6.


24 Fisher, p. 28, provides a resumé of Montano's health care and counselling work.
and spiral away from my own confusion." Claiming that "The revolution is not just in the world; its taking place inside yourself." Montano admitted to being unable to deal with the larger politics: "I don't have a TV and I don't open a newspaper . . . one of my survival modes has been: as much isolation as possible."25

Montano's isolation and self-absorption forces us to question how she can define "life" as being so completely detached from the nexus of social and political realities that impinge upon it. Her outlook is one of extreme liberal individualism in which the "I'm OK, you're OK" philosophy of the seventies has merged with the self-help therapies and "value-free" New Age spiritualism of the nineties. Because of this, it is difficult to reconcile her work with the goals of feminism as a political movement, rather than as a pathway to individual fulfillment. Although her work shares many of the characteristics that have come to be associated with feminist performance, such as autobiographical methods, the creation of characters and personae, the stress on roles and transformation, there is actually very little in her work that reflects on her particular experiences as a women, and even less that would ascribe a political significance to those experiences. In the same interview, Montano suggested that, although "role models for women are gaining momentum . . . we also have permission to fall back . . . permission to be pre-women's movement and pre-conciousness raising."26 While her lack of interest in the politics of feminism would not in itself preclude considerations of her work from a feminist perspective, her reticence to engage her work with the larger social context makes any such association ambiguous indeed.

26 Montano, quoted in Juno, pp. 62-63.
III. Stories of the Family.

The emphasis on autobiography and personal narratives has become a hallmark of feminist performance during the 1970s. As a reliable voice of the critical milieu of the period, Lucy Lippard noted that it was precisely these aspects that made feminist art seem so alien to the supposedly disinterested aesthetic values of the dominant tradition:

Bodyworks by women and art dealing with specifically female and feminist issues, materials, images, and experience . . . became publicly visible with more difficulty than mainstream art and have therefore acquired a 'radical' image in some circles. . . . This despite the fact that the autobiographical and narrative modes now fashionable were in part inspired by women's activities, especially consciousness raising. Indeed, since much of this women's work came out of isolation and feminist enclaves, rather than from the general 'scene,' and since it attempted to establish a new iconography, it was justifiably perceived as coming from an 'other' point of view, and was frequently labeled retrograde for its lack of compliance with the evolutionary mainstream.27

But even though women's performance was forced to the margins of contemporary practice, its central focus on the subjective experience of the artist was commensurate with the tradition that had been well established by male artists at least since the 1960s. But, as Mary Kelly observed, women artists' approach to performance demonstrated a highly original

27 Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," in her From the Center, p. 122; rpt. from Art in America. 64. No. 3 (May-June 1976), pp. 72-81.
and strategic intervention in this practice in that it focused "on the construction not of the individual, but of the sexed subject."

While it is certainly true, as we have seen, that many feminist performance artists formulated their notion of the sexed subject specifically in terms of the physical body, many others looked to how the sexed subject was constituted within social discourse. As these feminists sought to reveal how the personal politics of gender were shaped by the larger social context, autobiography and narrative became key strategies in the acquisition of their own "voices," for language is the dominant signifying code of the "symbolic order." As artist Judith Barry wrote:

"Narrative has been a part of the women's performance art tradition since women invented ritual to expiate their feelings. ... women are using narrative structure dialectically both to explore their placement within the social structure and to foster an identification with the audience. Women are beginning to speak as women in a language that represents their entry into the symbolic order and that is by definition necessarily related to the lived-experiences in which they find themselves."

These "lived-experiences" were understood to be decisively affected by the patriarchal conditions of all aspects of culture, both private and public. It was a perfectly logical step, therefore, for feminist performance artists to concentrate not only on the experiences of the individual, but to place those experiences within the larger social context, beginning with the family itself. Unlike their male peers, such as Vito Acconci, Chris Burden or Dennis Oppenheim, whose work never questioned the assumption of the

universal validity of their subjective experiences, women artists insisted upon the significance of personal, familial and social relationships as the intrinsic conditions within which the sexed subject is formed, for, as Sally Potter has noted, "Ideology is not merely reflected, but produced in the context of the family and personal relations." Consequently, the exploration of the family as the subject of art was a phenomenon associated exclusively with the practice of female artists at this time.

This particular trajectory of feminist art was not without historical precedent. In a recent essay on early video by women, Ann-Sargent Wooster made a connection between feminist subject matter—"language and personal narrative, discussion of the self, sexuality, women's experience in the world, and the presence of everyday life"—and the "genre" subjects of classic art history. The domestic focus of genre accorded it far lesser status than religious or history painting in the hierarchical art classifications that were established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the time of the Impressionist movement, however, with its interest in contemporary modern life, such traditional categories were overturned in favour of scenes of bourgeois leisure and family life. But, as Griselda Pollock has pointed out, although this change made the Impressionist movement much more available and attractive to women artists like Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, the bourgeois conventions of sexual difference confined their access to scenes of domestic life, rather than to the iconography of the popular and public spaces of

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urban modernity. Pollock argued persuasively that these artists attempted, through a variety of formal and iconographic devices, to give visual evidence not only to their sense of domestic confinement, but to how their social positioning was determined by structural and ideological divisions between the public and the private realms.

It is safe to say, therefore, that femininity has traditionally been associated with the private realm of family and domesticity. Although it was not a territory that had been of much interest in modern art since the time of Impressionism, the emerging feminist concerns of the 1970s brought a renewed enthusiasm for exploring the relationships between women, domesticity, family and the ideology of femininity. These issues had already constituted the central theme of the first large-scale feminist art project at Womanhouse in 1971-72. But where the focus there had been on a resistance to the myriad forms of domestic confinement experienced by women, subsequent emphasis tended to shift to an interest in the family as the site of personal locatedness and identity formation.

It is notable that the great majority of works dealing with the subject of the family during this period were video productions. This may be because video was particularly well disposed to the narrative substance of the subject and to the pseudo-documentary approach associated with home movies. One of the earliest examples of this approach is a video by Lynda Benglis called *Home Tape Revised* (1972), which documents a visit by the artist to her family home in Louisiana. The tape opens with a scene of a man typing, but then cuts to blurry images of people who we discover are her relatives (fig. 60). This interspersing of clear and blurry images

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(distorted by retaping off the monitor) repeats throughout the tape. These blurred images are accompanied by the artist's voice-over, describing in detail who the people are and what they are doing, while the clear images are unmodified. In her voice-over, Benglis also refers to the end of certain reels of tape or sounds from outside the studio interfering with her recording of the audio track. The tape ends with the man at the typewriter, talking aloud about writing and telling stories.

As is generally the case in much of Benglis' video work during this period, *Home Tape Revised* is a self-reflexive and critical investigation of what were believed at the time to be the "inherent" properties of the video medium: "its sense of 'real' time, its supposed immediate and truthful relation to the world, and its supposedly privileged viewpoint in relation to events."33 Her distorting or "traumatizing" of the documentary sequences and clarity of the images of this otherwise ordinary family portrait is seen to counteract the "perpetual now of video time" in order to call into question the reliability of the medium and to distance herself from an emotionally involving situation.34 Yet the circumspection and ironic distancing that characterizes Benglis' approach to the formal properties of video may be seen to have their corollary in her use of this particular iconography, which essentially introduces the element of the low-brow home movie as a disruptive intrusion into the rigourously structural and intellectual realm of high-art video at the time.

Like Lynda Benglis, Nancy Holt worked mainly as a sculptor, but also produced a number of videos in the 1970s that called attention to the

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nature of the video medium by manipulating its technical properties. Her videos, like her sculptures, involve issues of space, site, time and perception. But whereas the source of these interests in her sculpture is based on natural phenomena, cycles and systems, her videos tend to incorporate memory, personal history and the psychic connections one makes with particular places. One such place was the home of her Aunt Ethel in New Bedford, Massachusetts, which forms the site of Holt's Underscan (1974). This tape consists of still images from photographs of Ethel's home, which are seen in two or three different configurations by altering them through the technique of "underscanning," which compresses either just the sides or the whole image on the monitor (fig. 61). The images are accompanied by Holt's reading of letters written to her over the years by her aunt. These letters describe the details of her aunt's life, her preoccupations with her garden, her roomers and repairs to her deteriorating house. These ordinary details also reveal a subtext of aging, illness and the certainty of death, for Ethel also tells about making funeral arrangements for a family member and herself, during which she ends up being robbed of seven hundred dollars she had saved for the undertaker.

Holt's technique of underscanning serves as a kind of visual and structural analogy for the compression and inevitable distortion of time, memory and personal history evoked by the old photographs and the reading of the letters from her aunt. She said she wanted to make a "portrait of someone where you never saw a person . . . touching someone with them never being there. I thought about the cyclical nature of time and how it is reflected in the film and video process through editing."^35^ Given her careful attention to the telling of her aunt's poignant story, it

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^35^ Nancy Holt, quoted in Wooster, p. 32 (from an interview of January 1988).
seems paradoxical that Holt seems to privilege the technical process of underscanning in the title of the video, which tends to obscure the actual contents of the tape. While this may have been intended to underscore the integral relationship between form and content, it may also reflect a certain ambivalence towards the legitimacy of such personal content in the work of an artist who came to maturity in the milieu of Post-Minimalist preoccupations with structuralism and formalism.

The video work of Hermine Freed emanated from this same ethos, but she showed little reticence in adapting structuralist devices to serve the purposes of her decidedly feminist goals. Like Benglis and Holt, she used technical distortions and the crude special effects typical of early video in works which emphasize the personal and the psychological aspects of time and memory as the basis of history. As is often the case in Freed's videos, her *Family Album* (1975) utilizes images of the artist as a way to place herself in a self-reflexive relationship with the spectator. The tape incorporates a montage of old family photographs and film footage mixed with current images recorded for the video. Freed begins by musing over her past and about how her present identity is formed by past experience, but says she can't remember how this happens. As the old family images are shown, Freed's voice-over narrative speculates about whether she really remembers these events, or if her memory has merely absorbed the photo-souvenirs that remain. She then superimposes current images of herself and family over the old images, and vice versa, describes these individuals in the past and the present, and compares her relatives' memories of the past with her own.

Through these non-sequential juxtapositions of past and present, of photographic document and personal memory, Freed explores her
relationship to her past. She recalls that as a child she admired older, pretty women and shows photographs of what she describes as "beautiful" women with babies. Freed then appears with her own young daughter, about age four, who holds up photographs of herself. By the end of the tape, Freed concludes that she has not been able to discover her true childhood self. She says she remains a stranger to herself, somebody who, in fact, she knows less well than anybody else. Her search for the "truth" of her identity has not arrived at a point of closure or certainty, and these old family photographs can provide only phantom-like traces of her "absence of presence." As with the work of Benglis and Holt, Freed's explorations of the relationship between the self and the family relied heavily on the video medium's ability to be manipulated to create a structural syntax that echoed and enhanced her subjective perceptions of time and memory as discontinuous, elusive and unfixed. Her *Family Album* seems to suggest that, if our identities are formed by histories and memories so unstable as these, then what about ourselves can we really claim to know or be?

For other artists, however, the video medium was used not as a device to confound the histories and memories of the family, but to trace moments of family crisis or events of acutely traumatic personal experience. Because such works sought to make these experiences as vivid as possible, they are propelled by the continuity of narrative in order to concentrate and condense the intensity of the impact. Some of these works may be less formally experimental in that they use the video medium as a

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kind of straightforward "pen-camera" to document the moment in real time. Their radicalness lies instead in their content, in their will to record "the previously unseen minutiae of women's lives," which effectively contests both the structuralist preoccupations of early video and the prohibition against contaminating art with the ostensibly self-indulgent and narcissistic trivialities of private and personal experience.

The narratives of these performative videos sometimes assumed a confessional quality in order to underscore their intensely private and personal nature. One of the earliest and most moving of these is Lisa Steele's *A Very Personal Story* (1974), which recounts a past experience of profound intimacy. The tape consists of a single, unedited scene in which we see Steele sitting naked on the floor, a metaphor for her intention to reveal all (fig. 62). Yet for much of the tape she holds her hands, fingers touching, in front of her face so that they fill the screen as a kind of barrier. She begins at the end of her story--the day her mother died in 1963 when Steele was sixteen. She then recalls the beginning of that day, when everything was still normal. She vividly describes the smell of the toast cooking in the electric frying pan, setting out for school on a cold winter's day, the events of the school day and her return home after school to a dark house. She found her mother lying cold and dead, but she says she felt surprisingly unaffected by this, neither frightened nor horrified. She recalls that her first instinct was to get a blanket to warm and protect her, but not to cover her face. She says she was aware of a great sense of loss, but that it was difficult to know whether it was because of, or in spite

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38 Wooster, p. 36
of, this loss that made this the day when "I felt more like myself than I had ever done before."

While Steele may not have been inclined to a histrionic reaction to this most profound tragedy of her young life, the depth of its effect is evident in her need to return to this moment twelve years later. Although her tone is confessional, she has chosen to relate this experience not to a priest or analyst, but to an audience who are intended to see this as art. Since 1972 Steele had been deeply involved in establishing and maintaining Interval House, a women's shelter in Toronto, and found it very difficult to balance her commitments there with her efforts to build an art practice. Her experiences at the shelter exposed her to an unimaginable private world of domestic violence, suffering and abuse around which society constructed an impenetrable wall of silence and shame. Although loath to exploit these women's experiences by incorporating them in her own art making, Steele seems to have brought her own story into the public view as a way to break the silence that surrounds and represses the intimate and personal in both art and society.

In what is perhaps her most compelling work, Linda Montano also used her art as a way to mark the death of a loved one. *Mitchell's Death* recorded the artist's reaction to the events surrounding the sudden and violent death in 1977 of her husband, Mitchell Payne. It was also a dramatically ritualistic act of mourning which enabled Montano to express her grief and loss as a means of self-transformation and cathartic release. Although Montano and Payne were separated at the time of his death, they had remained close friends and she was deeply shocked by his death by gunshot in what was apparently a skeet shooting accident. After two earlier attempts to come to terms with his death, she performed the final
version of *Mitchell's Death* in 1978 at the University of California, San Diego, which was documented in the form of a videotape (fig. 63).

Drawing from her interest in both Catholicism and Eastern religions, Montano created a performance that invoked the symbolism of both. The setting consisted of a cross-like structure with Montano at the centre, the musicians Pauline Oliveros and Al Ross on either flank playing a Japanese bowl gong and a struti-box. The front of the cross was marked by a video monitor with Montano's face tightly framed, while the far point was formed by light/shadow projections on a vertical screen. Montano began by applying white make-up to her face, which she then pierced with acupuncture needles. In the video document we see her face slowly coming into focus during this stage. As she begins to tell the story of Mitchell's death her voice is electronically altered to create a slight, three-part echoing, which enhances the chanting monotone of her voice.

Her story begins on the morning she received the call from Kansas City telling her the stunning news. She recounts in precise detail everything that occurred from that moment, who she talked to, how she felt, her guilt about their failed relationship, her recollections of what Mitchell was like, and her fear that it might have been suicide. She describes her frantic trip to Kansas City, her meeting with Mitchell's family and friends, and finally, seeing his body in the mortuary and trying to communicate with him.

Montano says that *Mitchell's Death* was intended as an act of "mourning, not art." These claims notwithstanding, the complex

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40 Roth, "Matters of Life and Death," p. 9.
ritualistic artifices of this performance were clearly perceived as a form of cultural practice which the audience found to be intensely moving.41 The video cannot duplicate the intense presence of the original performance, but even as a documentary souvenir it has a compelling power over audiences and is probably Montano's best known piece. While so much of Montano's work has been motivated by the desire to transform her life into art, this is usually accomplished by the act of framing her life within certain conditions that she designates as art. In the case of Mitchell's Death, the axis between art and life and death has been placed within a dialogical tension of transformation that results in a far more meaningful resonance for the audience.

The potential for video to document traumatic crisis and personal loss within the family was also explored by Shigeko Kubota in the very personal elegy she made to her dead father in 1975 (fig. 64). Kubota's My Father differs markedly from both Steele's and Montano's tapes in ways that can be directly attributed to her involvement in the Fluxus movement when she first came to the United States in the sixties. Though the highly personal and autobiographical approach of her work in general has more to do with feminism than with the abstract propositions about collapsing the distinctions between art and life typical of Fluxus, the Fluxus influence is very much evident in her interest in the relationship between video and television as cultural signifier and commodity.

Kubota's tape opens with a display of text that says her father died on the very day she bought a ticket to Japan to visit him. It goes on to say that a friend called and when Kubota told her she was crying the friend suggested Kubota make a videotape of herself crying. Kubota then tells us

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41 Roth, Amazing Decade, p. 118.
that she has video footage taken in Japan two years earlier when her father had first been diagnosed with cancer. She plays this tape on the television in her apartment and sits before it crying and mourning her dead father. The earlier tape shows Kubota sitting with her already sick father as they watched television together on New Year's Eve. The phoney glamour of the Japanese pop singers on the television contrasts poignantly with her frail and bedridden father. The image of Kubota watching this tape on her television is intermittently superimposed with texts that reveal personal things about her father during his sickness. We learn that the doctor didn't tell him he had cancer, that he preferred sake but settled for grape juice, and that he liked to eat chestnuts. Kubota's own expressions of grief and sorrow also appear as texts ("Father, why did you have to die?"), as do her mother's descriptions of the funeral they had for him on the same day Kubota received the telegram announcing his death.

The disquieting effects of Kubota's tape come not only from our empathetic response to her evident sorrow, but from the startling and alien intrusion into her real-life tragedy of the melodramatic artifice of the television entertainment. In this layered interplay between past and present, text and image, public and private, presence and absence, there is a haunting pathos in the fact that "the television emerges as the link between Kubota and her father" at this most intense moment of grief and mourning.42

Though vastly different in their individual approaches, this range of works are linked by their insistence upon the importance and meaning of personal experiences of the family. As author and theorist bell hooks has insisted, such autobiographical experiences are significant precisely

because they define who and what we are. She has theorized, for example, about how confronting the death of family members can be not only personally liberating, but can invest one with the courage to resist the forces of domination and cultural confinement. She recalls sneaking in to watch her dead grandmother being taken away and thinking:

'Wow--if this is death and it can be looked at and faced, then I can do anything I want to in life! Nothing is going to be more profound than this moment!' And I see this as a moment in time that shaped who I became . . . that allowed me to be the rebellious child I was--daring and risk-taking in the midst of my parents' attempts to control me. Like the work of these artists, much of Hooks' work is what she describes as "confessional" in nature. She is unequivocal about how the enforced separation between the private and the public is connected to a politics of domination:

I know that in a way we're never going to end the forms of domination if we're not willing to challenge the notion of public and private . . . if we're not willing to break down the walls that say, 'There should always be this separation between domestic space/intimate space and the world outside.'

IV. Critiques of the Family.

Hooks' observations constitute an explicit articulation of theoretical ideas that were more implicitly suggested in these performative works dealing with personal experience and familial relationships. But other artists of the period evoked an even more direct engagement with how

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44 Hooks, quoted in Juno, p. 86.
relationships of power and powerlessness are inscribed and played out at the level of the personal. Their conviction that ideology is produced in the context of the family and personal relations is evident in their more self-reflexive and critical approach to this subject matter. From a focus on the values and belief systems entrenched within the intimacy of the institution of the family, the work of these artists expands to encompass issues of gender, class, and ethnic or cultural relationships.

One of the earliest examples of this more critical approach to the structure of family relationships is a video produced by Kyoko Michishita called *Being Women in Japan: Liberation Within My Family* (1973-74). Although Michishita began to use video to make art in the early 1970s, she was trained as a writer and studied journalism at the University of Wisconsin, where she also became involved in the women's movement. Given this background, it was logical for her to adopt a method and style more aligned with *cinema verité* than with the complex structuralist manipulations that dominated North American video art at this time.

Michishita's video documents the recovery of her sister from brain surgery, which kept her in hospital for four months (fig. 65). Her interest is not only in the personal struggle of her sister to regain her health and well being, but in how this crisis effected a major rupture in the daily life of her sister's family. Much of the footage is of interviews with family members at the hospital. For example, she asks the young children how they feel about their mother's long absence and how they cope with domestic details such as food, housekeeping, laundry, and help with schoolwork. It becomes clear from these interviews, which are interpreted in an English voice-over by Michishita, that "her sister is more needed than respected in the family and that her function is defined by food
preparation and the maintenance of the routines of domestic life—with little acknowledgement of her individual identity.\textsuperscript{45}

Michishita also talks with her sister and their mother about their perceptions of women's abilities and feelings compared to those of men. Both the mother and sister feel it is a question of individual rather than gender-based differences. But then Michishita reminds them that Japanese women must always be obedient to a man, whether father, husband or son, and cannot, in fact, do as they wish or fulfill their individual capabilities. Michishita's tape thus serves both as a document of her sister's recovery of her life to the point of being able to return home and, through the conversations she initiates, as a catalyst for her sister's changing awareness of herself and of her need to be taken more seriously within her family.

During the mid-1970s Ilene Segalove also produced a number of videotapes examining women's traditional roles within the family. While these works are not overtly political, they touch upon issues of lifestyle and materialistic preoccupations with Segalove's characteristically ironic approach. Grouped together as \textit{The Mom Tapes} (1973-76), these short vignettes have a technical virtuosity that results from Segalove's desire to emulate the look and feel of television, which she saw as the centre of her family life growing up in the affluent neighborhood of Beverly Hills. Compelled by the way television blurred the distinction between fantasy and reality, Segalove wanted to put her own family, especially her mother, on the TV screen.

\textit{The Mom Tapes} reflect upon Segalove's background, upbringing and relationship with her mother, who acts as "straight man" in these ingenious

\textsuperscript{45} Wooster, p. 36.
and slightly mocking depictions of the "emptiness, loneliness, and dependence on material possessions that characterize the life she documents." In Advice from Mom, Segalove follows Mom around the house asking her advice on where to buy a range of items, from steaks to shoes to furniture. In another segment, Segalove flaunts Mom's advice by going down the very underpass we hear Mom's voice cautioning her never to use because criminals might be lurking there; she then shows the tape she made in the underpass to Mom on their living room TV. In The Red Slippers we hear Mom telling how she picked up a pair of red shoes for Ilene on a recent trip to the Orient while we see the shoes hanging from two huge nails on the wall of Segalove's apartment. "With you, everything is art," sighs Mom.

At eight minutes, Professional Retirement Home is the longest and perhaps most revealing of The Mom Tapes. Segalove's mother takes us on a tour of their luxurious, rambling modern Californian home, which she says is now too big since the children have moved out (fig. 66). She points out the finer features of the house, but admits that "It's hard to keep such a big house clean." "I sure do a lot of walking here," she says, as we follow her around the pathways and patios that connect the numerous levels and wings. In a whimsical moment, she shows us how she likes to take shortcuts through the windows instead of using the doors. But even though it is so big and she has to walk so much, Mom loves the house and could not imagine moving into a condominium. Her solution to this dilemma is to invite "a few nice couples" to come and live there, turning it into a "professional retirement home." Although Segalove's tapes reveal a genuine affection for her mother, she shows her as a woman trapped

46 Wooster, p. 40.
within an insular and self-absorbed world fed on the bourgeois lifestyle fantasies of consumption and privilege promulgated by American television and marketing. Segalove's ambivalent feelings towards her family seem to echo, and even be a dimension of, the relationship she explores between video and television.

In contrast to Segalove's gently satirical approach, the work of Martha Rosler has consistently demonstrated an insistent conviction that art must function as a critical force within the everyday life of our culture. Rosler began as an abstract painter in the 1960s, but was provoked by her outrage at the Vietnam war to begin to do what she has described as "agitational works." From reading Michael Fried's critique of the "theatricality" of Minimalism in his "Art and Objecthood," Rosler concluded that "he was right, but on the wrong side of the question." Rosler embraced the notion that art could function as theatre as a way to forge a new, more active, relationship with her audience because "we should all be activated as subjects of a culture that intended to make us all audience spectators rather than citizen participants."

Rosler's need to activate her audience's awareness of the political dimensions of everyday life was further honed by her growing involvement with the feminist movement in the early 1970s. One of her earliest efforts in this direction was Service: A Trilogy on Colonization (1973-74), a project in which she mailed out three postcard novels about the role of women as service providers in our culture: McTowers Maid, about a woman who organized the workers in a fast-food chain; Tijuana

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48 Rosler, p. 58.
"Maid," about a Mexican woman working as a maid in a middle-class home in San Diego; and "A Budding Gourmet," about a middle-class housewife who takes a gourmet cooking course for self-fulfillment. This trilogy was Rosler's first examination of food as a central issue in women's lives, a theme she would return to on several occasions. She said that "food is the art of womanhood... It is an art product, but one that is made for the delectation of others and which disappears... I also see food in relationship to class differentiation." And as she makes clear in "A Trilogy on Colonization," in relationship to cultural differentiation as well.

In 1974 Rosler re-made "A Budding Gourmet" as a videotape (fig. 67). The subject of her tape is the stay-at-home, haute bourgeoise housewife epitomized by Segalove's mother. This woman, played by Rosler, sits at a table leafing through cookbooks and food magazines. Close-up images from these sources are intercut with still photographs of gourmet food shops and people labouring in Third World countries. The woman's monologue about food and cooking is accompanied by a background of classical music. "I wish to become a gourmet," she says, and begins to talk about the importance of good cooking in order to enjoy life fully because people eat for pleasure, unlike animals (and, as the images suggest, poor people). Following the formula of magazines such as "Gourmet" and "Bon Appétit," she talks about travelling and eating in foreign countries, comparing the economical value of good food in Brazil to Europe. She bows to the great tradition of European cuisine, however, reading recipes developed by Escoffier, chef to the French nobility at the turn of the century. She also talks about how epicureanism is linked to manners.

etiquette and breeding, which in turn allows food connoisseurs to be more sensitive to different cultural traditions.

Rosler's deadpan irony makes her critical intentions unmistakable. In this woman's aspiring gourmet fantasies, the preparation and consumption of food has been transformed into a signifier of class privilege and a means of rationalizing cultural imperialism. The connections Rosler implied here between ideological formation of gender, class and race serve as an important counterpoint to much feminist art of this period which treated issues of gender as if they were detached from, and somehow more foundational to, all other relationships of domination and oppression. By examining women's roles within the context of "ideal" family values, Rosler exposes the extent to which they too are complicit in fostering and sanctioning forms of privilege and exploitation.

Rosler returned to these ideas in her later video Losing: A Conversation with the Parents (1977). In a kind of burlesque of the television documentary, a couple sit in their living room describing the death of their daughter from anorexia nervosa, a psychological disease mainly afflicting teenage girls from middle-class families. The mother laments the conflicting information disseminated through popular culture, where magazines show pictures of cream pies on one page, and stick-thin models on the next. The parents struggle visibly to make sense of their tragedy by placing it in the context of the politics of food on a global scale, referring to hunger strikes and concentration camp victims. Although they acknowledge the irony of their daughter's "starvation in the midst of plenty," their reflections on responsibility, guilt, cause and effect are continually ruptured and contradicted by their middle-class values. Rosler said of this work, "The seams of ideology are somewhat frazzled. The
characters are, I hope, revealed as caught in their ideology of liberalism. shared, I suspect, by most viewers."

But if Rosler's investigation of the politics of food often implicated women within the bourgeois ideology of the family, she has also used food as a means to resist and rebel against imposed cultural roles. In *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1974) Rosler was concerned with the notion of the "'language speaking the subject,' and with the transformation of the woman herself into a sign in a system of signs that represents a system of food production, a system of harnessed subjectivity." In this parody of a Julia Child-type of cooking demonstration, Rosler glumly dons a fussy apron and begins an alphabetical tour of familiar kitchen implements. She announces the name of each item and mimics its function with increasing and disarming aggression: "bowl . . . chopper . . . dish . . ." As Jan Peacock has written in an exhibition catalogue, "When she reaches the word 'icepick,' and then plunges one into a wooden cutting board with broad and repeated stabs, one begins to see where the alphabet leaves off and where the 'semiotic' is heading" (fig. 68). As she reaches the last six letters of the alphabet, she abandons all references to the kitchen and instead uses a knife and fork to slash these letters into the air like a samurai warrior. At the end of Rosler's "coolly furious piece of homicidal comedy" she looks at the camera and shrugs. With this simple gesture she both minimizes the power of her unfocused aggression and assures the viewer that she is "not

51 Martha Rosler, quoted in Jane Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler." *October*, No. 17 (Summer 1981), p. 82.
52 Rosler, quoted in Weinstock, p. 85
54 Peacock, unpaginated loose insert on Martha Rosler.
a victim in the sense of someone crushed. She's still there at the end, stuck to the spot, no further brutalized than at the beginning."\textsuperscript{55}

Rosler shared the belief of many feminists that analyses of power and domination that do not take into account their operation at the personal and private level are simply inadequate. Because she has always sought to reach the widest possible audience, the theme of food has provided her with an ideal opportunity to explore complex relationships between gender, class, race and global politics in the context of the commonplace. She has described her work as trying to question the mythical explanations of everyday life. We accept the clash of public and private as natural, yet their separation is historical, and the antagonism of the two spheres, which have in fact developed in tandem, is an ideological fiction--a potent one. I want to explore the relationships between individual consciousness, family life, and culture under capitalism.\textsuperscript{56}

Feminist performance that focused on personal experience played a vital role during the 1970s in a number of ways. It provided women with a means to exchange and communicate their histories with one another, thus enabling them, as artist Catherine Elwes has said, "to conceive of personal difficulties as an effect of collective oppression, rather than the result of individual weakness or neurosis."\textsuperscript{57} As feminist art critic Arlene Raven has pointed out, these communications were not significant only for personal growth and community solidarity, but for the innovative aesthetic developments that resulted:

\textbf{[P]ersonal narrative entered women's visual vocabulary as expression and public disclosure of the great rush of speech which women exchanged privately when they broke their silent isolation}

\textsuperscript{55} Rosler, quoted in Weinstock, p. 86.  
\textsuperscript{57} Elwes, p. 177.
within home, studio or workplace to gather for consciousness-raising conversations. These expressions eventually took many creative forms within visual arts--visual 'speech,' inventive linguistics, diaristic and imaginative narratives, words with and as images.58

More importantly, the assertion of the integral relationship between personal and social politics in feminist art has had a significant impact upon mainstream art practice by bringing to light issues generally submerged or even denigrated within the dominant cultural discourse. In so doing, feminist art has been a vital force in the questioning of values and aesthetic criteria that has characterized the transition from modernist to postmodernist modes of thought.59 This process has been formulated along two axes with a common goal in sight. On the one hand, it has done much to reveal how those values were invested in maintaining the separateness of the aesthetic terrain as a way to insulate it from complex and (op)pressing political realities. On the other, it has enabled women (and others) to recognize the potential of aesthetic practice to engage directly with Bürger's "praxis of everyday life" in order to disrupt and challenge our assumptions about both.

Yet the focus on personal issues in feminist art has sometimes lost sight of the political dimensions of the everyday and lapsed into solipsism. As Martha Rosler has insisted, issues of the private and everyday must be addressed in ways that have a wide social and political significance. She has been openly critical of feminism that ignores the larger context in order to create a kind of separatism or inversion of patriarchy in which the

female is elevated to primary status. She has also warned feminists that an emphasis on the personal is in jeopardy of losing political significance when "the attention narrows to the privileged tinkering with, or attention to one's solely private sphere, divorced from any collective struggle or publicly conjoined act and simply names the personal practice as political." Similar concerns have been raised by other feminists who worry that women's art that presents itself as a unified, non-contradictory "other" is politically weak and too easily re-assimilated into a marginal position within a patriarchal culture. As Judith Barry has written:

While it is important for women to explore their feelings and attitudes and to develop self-esteem through love and trust for one another there are serious shortcomings with this position as a strategy for implementing social change. Specifically, it positions women's culture as separate and different from mainstream culture. It is not subversive because it continues to maintain women as different, as outsiders. By failing to theorize how women are produced within the social complex this position has little insight into the social problems indigenous to any social grouping. Setting up a fallacious equivalency between the personal and the social, and forcing the group to rely on personal decision as the solutions to social problems. Further, women as a category is pre-supposed, still defined as sexually different, and femininity is considered unproblematic.

In other words, if personal politics are to have any lasting significance, they must be effectively applied to diagnosing and revealing the structural and institutional operations of all categories of oppression.

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61 Martha Rosler, from a panel discussion, "Is the Personal Political?" at the London Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1980; quoted in Etwes. p. 178.
62 Barry, p. 452.
I. "What Do I Want To Be?"

The exploration of autobiographical and narrative material provided feminist artists with a vital strategy to break their silence and find a "voice" to speak about the particularities of their experiences as women. But if artists working in autobiographical modes focused on the question "What am I?," other artists were more concerned with the question "What do I want to be?" As a question that implied the possibility of both personal and social change, it led many artists into a more direct engagement with the ideas about subjectivity and otherness that Simone de Beauvoir had so forcefully articulated in The Second Sex. We recall that de Beauvoir had concluded that, in defining himself as the subject, the Being-for-Itself, man relegated woman to the position of object, the Being-in-Itself. She argued that woman has been confined to this position of immanence because of the limits, definitions and roles imposed on her within patriarchal society. De Beauvoir acknowledged that there are no easy ways for women to escape this immanence, but she insisted that if women are to overcome the forces of circumstance, the process must begin by recognizing and asserting their right to self-determination.¹

The impact of De Beauvoir's emphasis on the forces of social circumstance and the imposition of roles and restrictions for women is

clearly evident in feminist performance in the 1970s that examined the relationship between identity, roles and transformations. This broader theme can be divided into two subcategories. On the one hand, there were artists who sought to assert their subjectivity by making evident their capacity to be agents of their own identities, which could be transformed or altered at will. On the other, there were artists who used performance as a way not only to challenge notions of the fixed nature of identity, but to expose the oppressive assumptions and fallacies which had confined women within powerless and objectified roles. Because this second approach tended to take the social implications of these issues more fully into consideration, its subversive potential tended to be strongly evident.

II. Personal Transformations.

The artists whose work can be considered in the first category outlined above were primarily concerned with issues of subjectivity and identity in relation to the potential for personal transformation. In most cases, these transformations of the self involved the creation of personae or characters that evoked the multifaceted nature of identity. As Moira Roth has noted, "Some of these creations were lifelike and closely linked to autobiographical sources while others, distanced from the artist's personality and everyday life, were clearly framed as artistic inventions." Yet, unlike theatrical performance, where the credibility of the fiction

requires the actor to be completely effaced by the character or role being played, the presence of the artist was always maintained in these performances, regardless of how convincingly the transformation or enactment was carried out.

Since the early 1970s the artist Eleanor Antin had been exploring the idea of personal transformations in a variety of ways. In Carving: A Traditional Sculpture (1972), she devised a kind of conceptual sculpture whereby she photographically documented the physical results of a period of strict dieting from July 15 to August 21, 1972 (fig. 69). Her intentions were clearly intended as wry parody on a number of levels: of the photograph as a documentary convention of Conceptualism; of Minimalist and Post-Minimalist preoccupations with process; and, perhaps most directly, of the traditional mode of sculptural carving in which the ideal form is gradually "released" from the stone. This work can also be associated with the myth of Pygmalion, the sculptor whose desire brought inert matter to life in the form of the ideal woman. In the contemporary context, however, the projection of this desire can be more clearly understood in reference to the codes and images of ideal femininity promulgated by the fashion and fitness industries.³

Over the next two years, Antin began to do live performance work involving specific, yet typological, characters. This shift in direction was motivated by her desire to use her self in her work, but in such a way as to bring out what she perceived as the problematic aspects of identity in general, and her own identity in particular. In a statement she wrote to accompany her Eleanor 1954 performance at the Los Angeles Woman's

Building in 1974, she explained how her early aspirations to be an actress related to her current interest in developing personae out of her self:

I decided to try and find her, that old Eleanor of 20 years before, that desperate romantic, who became an actress out of a kind of perverse honesty brought on by her suspicion that she hadn't any self of her own and might as well call a spade a spade by borrowing other people's.4

Antin's desire to work with her "own skin" necessitated the use of what she has described as a

mythological machine . . . capable of calling up and defining my self. I finally settled upon a quadripolar system, sort of a magnetic field of 4 polar charged images--the Ballerina, the King, the Black Movie Star and the Nurse.5

While Antin's invention of these characters relates to her early acting ambitions, each one was a complex hybrid of autobiography and fiction. Thus, her creation of a male role in form of the King was in response to her wondering "If I were a man, what sort of man would I be."6 After experimenting with a variety of guises with the aid of a video camera and monitor, Antin finally settled on the image the Cavalier King whose "similarity to the Van Dyke portrait of Charles I [of England] was noticed by everybody."7 After doing some research, much of which she rejected as too particularized and irrelevant, Antin discovered in this historical figure a kind of phenomenological core stunningly and intensely related to me, of a small, Hamlet-like man, alternatively power mad and

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depressed, alienated from the world by a stubborn romanticism--the romantic ruler of an absolute void. Like all of Antin's characters, the King was able to slip between the art world and the "real" world with ease. Though he has appeared in photographs, videotapes, and performances in art galleries, his main interaction was with his "subjects" at Solana Beach in California, where he conversed with beer-swilling surfers about the war in Vietnam and with senior citizens displaced by real estate developers (fig. 70).

As Antin stepped into and out of her various characters she further confounded the distinctions between art and life, between fiction and reality. Like the picaresque novel style to which she has compared her work, she shifts abruptly but easily between roles. One day she is King, and on the next she is Nurse Eleanor, inventing the romantic fantasies of a young nurse helping the sick and wounded. Her interest in nursing and in what Florence Nightingale, the founder of nursing as a profession for women, had actually invented--"Could it really have been that small subservient space that nursing seems to occupy today?"--led her to create *The Angel of Mercy* (1977), an elaborate re-enactment of the Crimean War using forty nearly life-size masonite figures.

Antin's best known characterization is probably the Ballerina. Like her other characters, the Ballerina emerged out of her efforts to explore the fluid gaps and connections between identity and appearance. After studying ballet for several months, she began to have herself

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photographed in order to see 'what kind of ballerina I was becoming.'

Realizing that she could convincingly portray a Russian-style ballerina, her Ballerina character emerged and began to plan a career. In *The Ballerina Goes to the Big Apple*, performed along with *Eleanor 1954* at the Woman's Building in 1974, the Ballerina was looking forward to fame and fortune in New York. Later that year Antin's talent for Chaplinesque parody is revealed in the video *The Ballerina and the Bum*, in which the Ballerina and a bum meet in a train yard and discuss life, hopes and dreams while waiting for their boxcar to depart for New York (fig. 71).

The Black Movie Star is Antin's most enigmatic persona, for the character's role is not to *be*, but to *act*. And so the Black Movie Star began to play all of her other characters. But when a photograph of the Black Movie Star was published in the magazine *Chrysalis*, feminist author Michelle Cliff wrote to the editor attacking Antin for "Blaxploitation." In response, Antin replied:

As for my being a Black Movie Star, it is the nature of movie stars to play roles, to act. So I have begun to color all of my selves black—the Black Ballerina, the Black King the Black Nurse. My blackness is the existential center of my work, calling up the theatrical structure of reality by placing the role of the actor—she who is 'other' than herself—up front. Blacks are 'the other,' as women are 'the other,' as for that matter, artists and kings are 'the other.' Black people, like women people, are invisible, embarrassing, disturbing, dangerous. Liberals may see us a noble, natural, innocent, sensitive, even talented—a sort of updated 'they sing and dance well.' But we blacks do not experience ourselves as 'the other,' as we kings do not experience ourselves as 'the other.' Thus there is a continuous struggle between the world and the self over the nature of reality.

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11 Antin, "Dialogue with a Medium.", p. 23.
The invention of the Black Movie Star added new dimensions to Antin's characterizations. For example, when played by the Black Movie Star, the Ballerina became Eleanora Antinova, the black Russian prima ballerina. Through this complex layering of self-propelling characters, Antin deflected any tendency to reduce her work to simple binary oppositions (art/life, reality/fiction, acting/being).

The fluidity with which Antin moved into and between the shifting positions of her performance personae underscored her refusal to accept the limitations of a fixed identity or history. Autobiography was the starting point for all her work, but it was an autobiography that was mobile and active, capable of being constantly transformed through the process of narration. Antin declared that for her,

"Autobiography in its fundamental sense is the self getting a grip on itself . . . [It] can be considered a particular type of transformation in which the subject chooses a specific, as yet unarticulated image and proceeds to progressively define [herself] . . . The usual aids to self-definition--sex, age, talent, time, and space--are merely tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice."¹³

The autobiographical origins of Antin's characters bound them to herself, but she never wholly became them, nor they her. No matter how complete her transformations, the gap or différence between herself and the personae she authored always remained to signify her subjectivity not as being, but as the agency of being. In this way, the credibility of Antin's personae was always undermined by subtle, but persistent, reminders that made evident the degree of artifice involved in their creation.

This foregrounding of the imposture itself was a structural device utilized extensively by feminist performance artists exploring transformation and role-playing in the seventies. This device served to draw attention to the complex relationship these women were exploring between the self as subject and object. As Robyn Brentano has explained:

As many performers confronted the gaps and differences between their subjective perceptions, dreams, and fantasies and the realities of a gender-biased world, they began to develop fictional personae and to work in quasi-narrative forms to negotiate the divide and challenge stereotypes of women. Concern with showing the contingencies of identity and representation of women led to a kind of doubly-aspected performance in which the artist was both herself and other. In many works, the performer conveyed both an air of authenticity and the falseness of her inscribed identity. Performance used disruptive strategies to reveal the multiplicity of selves required of women in daily life.14

In other words, the authenticity and the falseness of these performance personae were held in tense counterpoint as a way to disrupt the fictive naturalism associated with characterization and to dissemble fixed distinctions between being and acting. This device, therefore, can be seen to reflect the growing perception among women that femininity was at one and the same time a role that women played and an identity or position that determined how they experienced the world.

Like Antin, Lynn Hershman was an artist who created a persona who took on a self-propelling existence. In the early 1970s Hershman had been creating environments in which she tried to evoke the presence of absent people. These environments were usually located in hotel rooms in California (a run-down motel in North Beach) and New York (the Chelsea

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Hotel, the Plaza and a YWCA hostel), and included mysterious sleeping wax figures with their various personal paraphernalia strewn about the rooms.\textsuperscript{15} From these efforts to create vivid portraits of imaginary beings, she conceived of the idea of making a living portrait, which would be played by Hershman herself. After choosing a name, Roberta Breitmore, she researched the image and character by photographing women whom she thought Roberta might resemble. Sensing that there was something of Roberta in almost all these women, Hershman began to construct her as a kind of meta-portrait, an archetype of the "Everywoman."\textsuperscript{16}

Having acquired an appearance, style, language and gestures by 1975, Roberta began to venture out into the world and assume a life of her own. She got a driver's license and bank account, developed a resumé, attended therapy sessions, placed ads for dates in the newspaper, applied for welfare, and rented a room in San Diego which could be visited by the public for two hours a day. Her existence was documented in photographs, films, drawings and live performances as well as in a detailed diary of her daily thoughts and experiences.\textsuperscript{17}

The exhibitions Hershman organized about the Breitmore character included images of herself making up as Breitmore as well as manipulated photographs of Breitmore with accompanying charts showing the brands and colours of make-up used (fig. 72). As Martha Rosler has noted.

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\textsuperscript{17} For excerpts of Roberta Breitmore's diary, see Lynn Hershman, "Roberta Breitmore: An Alchemical Portrait Begun in 1975," \textit{La Mamelle Magazine: Art Contemporary}, No. 5 (Fall 1976), pp. 24-27.
although these images raise intriguing implications about the visual construction and display of desirable femininity, Hershman seems to have been more interested in the psychological aspects of the Breitmore character as a "portrait of alienation and loneliness." Yet Rosler saw an inherently subversive aspect in Breitmore's pursuit of an identity cobbled together within "the interstices of orderly society;" for, in contrast to the normal outcome of the process of individuation, Hershman declared that "When Roberta becomes 'real' enough, it is likely she will commit suicide." This moment occurred in 1978 and Breitmore's "uneasy soul" was put to rest in a ritualistic burial in Italy, followed by an exhibition at the M.H. de Young Museum entitled Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore.

The work of both Hershman and Antin typified the interest among many women performance artists at this time in transforming themselves into ontologically different personae. Linda Montano also created a number of characters, including Chicken Woman, who, according to Montano, "became my totem and my twin." In a series of performances over a seven-year period in the mid-1970s, Montano appeared in public in a thrift shop ball gown with feathered headpiece and wings, sometimes dancing absurdly, sometimes quietly meditating (fig. 73). But where Antin's performances problematized the notion of identity as fixed and singular, and Hershman's Breitmore character served to frame femininity as a constructed layer of identity that was both particularized and generic.

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19 Rosler, "The Private and the Public," p. 73.
21 Roth, pp. 20, 102.
22 Linda Montano, quoted in Withers, p. 165.
Montano's character performances were so exclusively focused on self-expression and personal fulfillment as to seem to have little relevance as a specifically feminist inquiry into the nature, role and formation of identity within a social context.

III. Social Roles.

For a number of other feminist performance artists, role-playing and transformation enabled them to focus attention on the specific ideological structures and conditions that determined femininity as a social construct. But in the early 1970s, the function of ideology and the notion of identity as social construct rather than innate being were often more vaguely grasped than clearly understood, particularly since such ideas were even in conflict with many of the prevailing beliefs of both artists and feminists in North America. In many ways, this was a period of groping in the dark, trying to define the relevant issues and how they could be engaged in art practice at a time when, on the one hand, many feminists still adhered to a belief in the existence of a timeless, changeless essence of female identity. and on the other, the male-dominated art world was preoccupied by aesthetic concerns that precluded any consideration of gender as an issue.

In the milieu of the early seventies, even "radical" art forms like Conceptualism and Post-Minimalism required compliance with the dominant, ostensibly gender-neutral, aesthetic values. The art world was hostile not only to the intrusion of work which raised the question of gender in any way, but even to the idea that women could make good or.
in the critical language of the day, "serious," artwork at all.\textsuperscript{23} As evidence of this, it can be noted that there is not a single female artist whose name is prominently associated with the Conceptualist art that dominated the period from 1968 to around 1973/74.\textsuperscript{24}

By the early seventies, women artists had begun to develop an empirical understanding of how the premise of gender neutrality in art served to maintain male privilege and power through a gender bias. Though we now take this as axiomatic, we cannot underestimate the professional risks and personal costs that women artists confronted at this time in their struggle to expose the sexist basis of this ideology. The stakes of this struggle were high indeed, for the art world constituted a terrain on which man's self-definition as subject, as Sartre's Being-in-Itself, was legitimated at a cultural level. In response to their sense of alienation in this terrain, many women artists used role-playing and transformation as strategies for investigating what they considered to be the contentious relationship between subjectivity, identity and social role.

These issues, and the difficulties women faced in articulating them in the art world, were manifestly evident in the early work of Martha Wilson. Wilson had moved from Wilmington, Ohio to Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1970 to do graduate work in English literature at Dalhousie University. Through personal connections, Wilson became involved in the art community at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, where she also began teaching English grammar after dropping out of the Ph.D. program in 1972 due to conflicts with her supervisor over her dissertation proposal. At the time, the College had become a centre of Conceptual art and for Wilson, who had

\textsuperscript{23} See Lucy Lippard, "Sexual Politics: Art Style," in \textit{From the Center}, pp. 28-37.

\textsuperscript{24} Although some female artists, like the German Hanne Darboven are considered within the context of Conceptualism, their positions have been marginal at best.
always been engaged in language, "it was an unbelievable revelation that visual art could consist of language." In 1971 Wilson began to produce language-based art works which resembled the spare, laconic approach of Conceptualists like Lawrence Weiner, Douglas Huebler and James Lee Byars, all of whom were visiting artists at the College during this period. Wilson's works, however, were radically different in that they dealt with human relationships in terms of proposals about the genetic and cultural relationships between parents and their offspring:

**Determined Piece**: A Woman selects a couple for the genetic features she admires (good teeth, curly hair, green eyes, etc.) and raises their baby.

**Cultural Piece**: A WASP couple and a non-English-speaking ethnic couple have babies and trade them. The children may be told the identity of their parents if they ask.

**Chauvinist Piece**: A man is injected with the hormone that produces symptoms of motherhood.

By 1972 Wilson had shifted from making abstract propositions about identity to using herself as the subject of identity transformations in works which incorporated photographic documentation along with text-based proposals. Several of these early works involved cross-gender transformations. In *Posturing: Drag* (1972), Wilson set out to discover how "form determines feeling" by posing as a man making himself up as a woman (fig. 74). In *Captivating a Man* (1972), Wilson posed as a man whose appearance is enhanced by make-up, although "he" remains a man. Although Wilson was working at this time in isolation from other feminist

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25 Personal interview with Martha Wilson, April 12, 1995.
26 Martha Wilson, personal files, Franklin Furnace Archive, New York. No study has been made of the role of women in the Conceptual art movement, so Wilson's early work has never been published or discussed within that context.
communities, her work with gender transformations can be linked to feminist speculation at this time about the possibility of androgyny as a solution to the social iniquities of gender as they currently existed. For feminist performance artists like Lynda Benglis, Eleanor Antin, Martha Wilson and others, the acquisition of male character traits could serve to parody the privileges of patriarchal culture, to reveal subjectivity as male-defined, to refute the biological basis of identity, or to explore the multiple aspects of an ostensibly fixed and stable self.27

In addition to these gendered transformations, Wilson also explored the characteristics and limitations of her own identity by subjecting herself to the objectifying process of self-scrutiny. In Painted Lady (1972), Wilson examined how disguise could be used not to "mask" the self, but to effect the "disappearance of 'my own' features," creating a "vacuum" or free space which could then be filled with a range of expressions or attitudes at will (fig. 75). From such experiments Wilson realized that "artmaking is an identity-making process. . . . I could generate a new self out of the absence

27 The issue of androgyny became a subject of much interest in the early 1970s as feminists attempted to develop theories to explain the historical roots of sexism and propose solutions to ameliorate or eradicate it. Androgyny was explored from theological, philosophical, literary, psychological and sociological perspectives, resulting in numerous publications, such as Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Toward the Promise of Androgyny (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973); Alexandra G. Kaplan and Joan P. Bean, eds., Beyond Sex-Role Stereotypes: Readings Toward a Psychology of Androgyny (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976) and a special issue of the journal Women's Studies, 2, No. 2 (1974). An interest in androgyny also became evident in the performances of a number of male artists at this time who posed as, or mimicked the traits of, women (e.g., Vito Acconci, William Wegman, Urs Lüthi and Colin Campbell). While this phenomenon has occasionally been noted, to date no extended study has been made, nor has the question of the similarities or differences between the approaches and goals of male and female artists been adequately examined. See Robert Knott, "The Myth of the Androgyne," Artforum, XIV, No. 3 (November 1975), pp. 38-45; Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," in From the Center, pp. 127-129 and Catherine Elwes, "Floating Femininity: A Look at Performance Art by Women," in Women's Images of Men, ed. Sarah Kent and Jacqueline Morreau (1985; rpt. London: Pandora, 1990), p. 188.
that was left when my boyfriends' ideas, my teachers', and my parents' ideas were subtracted."\(^{28}\)

These works served to focus Wilson's attention on the difference between how she felt during the process of transformation and how she appeared in the photographic documents. She wrote: "I find that in front of the camera I don't feel particularly male or homosexual or whatever; the identity shock comes when I look at the photographs of myself in those roles."\(^{29}\) This realization led Wilson to a more concerted questioning of the notion of a "real" self and of its relationship both to an "ideal" self and the self as perceived by others. As she became increasingly conscious of the incongruities between these various aspects of the self, she came to see identity itself as a kind of "real-life" performance. Her work became more consciously performative at this time, and she began to augment her photographic work with videotapes and live performances.

Many parallels can be seen between Wilson's work from the early seventies and that of other feminist artists even though Wilson was working in isolation (a women's group was not formed in Halifax until late in 1973), and had no background as an artist. The College community was among the most progressive to be found anywhere at the time, but she was treated and felt like an outsider. She recalls ironically that, at a time when anything could theoretically be art, "there was no recognition that this could be art, let alone that it was art."\(^{30}\) Critical commentary

\(^{28}\) Martha Wilson, quoted in Lippard, "Making Up: Role-Playing and Transformation in Women's Art." p. 106.
\(^{30}\) Personal interview with Martha Wilson. The fact that Wilson's work was not included in a 1973 survey of video art made at the Nova Scotia College of Art And Design is indicative of how insignificant it was perceived to be; see Garry Neil Kennedy, "Video at NSCAD," Ariscanada, 30. No. 4 (October 1973), pp. 62-63.
amounted to being told that "serious art was only done in black and white" [Wilson used colour photography], "and women don't make it anyway." Even Vito Acconci told her while visiting the College that work like hers was "self-indulgent and irrelevant." The first female visitor to the College was Lucy Lippard in 1973. After seeing Wilson's work, Lippard told her that what she was doing was definitely art and that there were women all over North America doing similar work.

Lippard included Wilson in an exhibition she organized in 1973 called c. 7,5000, which featured conceptually based work by women artists. This exhibition brought Wilson into contact with Jacki Apple, a New York artist who shared Wilson's interest in identity transformations and role-playing. Through correspondence, they planned a collaborative performance in New York called Transformance: Claudia. Wilson and Apple would jointly play the role of their invented persona, Claudia "a composite person who exists in the space between our selves, a fantasy self who is the result of the merging of the realized and the idealized selves." Claudia was not going to be a powerless or tormented victim, but a self-assured, glamorous and powerful fantasy of self-definition.

On December 15, 1973, Wilson and Apple elaborately adorned themselves in elegant but flamboyant clothes and went with an entourage of "paparazzi" to lunch at the Plaza Hotel, followed by a limousine trip downtown to visit the SoHo galleries "as women of influence rather than as young artists of little repute." As historian RoseLee Goldberg has noted.

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31 Personal interview with Martha Wilson.
32 Personal interview with Martha Wilson.
33 Personal interview with Martha Wilson.
34 Martha Wilson, description of Transformance: Claudia. artist's personal files.
35 Roth, pp. 17-18.
their performance "was as much a general comment on power and money as it was on the role of women in the hierarchy created by power and money."36 Although attracted by Claudia's allure of power, their real intentions were to appropriate and challenge the cultural and media stereotypes of female power as vested only in wealth or beauty. This notion of power was an illusion, Apple wrote, and "We exaggerated it. 'lived' in order to shatter it, expose the illusion, blow it up, not reenforce it, or validate it."37 As Wilson explained, by parodying such stereotypes, the performance enabled them to manipulate "elements from the culture to our own ends . . . [in] an omnipotent fantasy . . . represent[ing] power over destiny, choice of and responsibility for one's own actions. It symbolizes woman's awakening to the 'self'."38

In May, 1974, Wilson finally left the isolation of Halifax for New York, where she continued to do performance art and founded Franklin Furnace Archive in 1976 as a centre for temporal art and an archive for artists' books. Although she never received due artistic recognition at the College of Art and Design, the videotapes she left in the library began to be unearthed around mid-decade by female students who had become aware of the international influence of women artists working in alternative and experimental media like film, photography, video and performance.39 One of these students was Susan Britton, who studied at the College from 1975 to 1976. Like so many other women artists at this time, Britton's work

38 Wilson. description of Transformance: Claudia, artist's personal files.
involved the creation of characters, which she developed into elaborate narrative-based performance videotapes.

Britton's video *Susan* (1976) is a classic example of what Bentano referred to as the "doubly-aspected" nature of feminist performance which "conveyed both an air of authenticity and the falseness of an inscribed identity."\(^{40}\) Drawing from autobiographical facts (her name, her family and upbringing in Winnipeg, and her current residency in Halifax) and fictional inventions, Britton constructed a *cinema verité* portrait of Susan, a prostitute played by Britton herself (fig. 76). As the camera follows her around town, a first-person voice-over tries to dispel conventional notions of the prostitute as a degenerate creature of the night by talking about how she misses her family and likes to spend Sunday afternoons in the Public Gardens just like everyone else. The scene shifts from a sunny day in the park to her apartment living room where Susan describes details of her "job," which, in ironic contrast to the pleasant setting, conjure up an alien underworld of pimps, johns, encounters with police and so on.

Britton's *Susan*, like her other video work, reveals an interest in the kind of one-dimensional, generic characters generated by the mass media. As Jan Peacock has observed, "Susan's breezy walk through the Public Gardens owes as much to the opening sequence of the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* as it does to the film portrait genre."\(^{41}\) Peacock also notes that Britton/Susan adopts an easy intimacy with the camera, drawing us into a familiar dynamic that "leaves us in the same unresolved place that television leaves us in, but which it pretends not to: equipped with only partial, conventionalized, and superficial information, we are no closer to

\(^{40}\) Bentano, p. 50.  
\(^{41}\) Peacock, unpaginated loose insert on Susan Britton.
knowing who 'Susan' is." In so doing, Britton reminds us, as did Wilson and Apple, not only of the oppressive existence of stereotypical female roles, but of the way in which they are legitimated within the cliché language and images of popular culture. Unfortunately, Britton did not incorporate issues of class and economics into her juxtaposing of the "normal" and "deviant" aspects of being a prostitute; had she done so, her tape would undoubtedly have opened an even more provocative inquiry into how identity is formed and located within specific social conditions.

Those social conditions, on the other hand, were to form the basis of Adrian Piper's art. Piper's concern with issues of social context is directly related to her background and personal experience. Raised in Harlem in the 1960s as an only child of well educated parents who might be described as "genteel poor," Piper had art, music and dance lessons from an early age and received her education on scholarship at a private school. These advantages separated her from the other children of her neighborhood, who called her "Paleface" on account of her light skin and straight hair. Having almost nothing in common with her affluent white schoolmates, who treated her as a kind of curiosity, Piper grew up feeling alienated from both communities. She was able to "pass for white." but felt it would dishonour her family to deny her black heritage. In a text-based work called Political Self-Portrait #2 (1978), Piper explained that when asked about her background, "I would never simply say Black because I felt silly and as though I was coopting something, i.e., the Black Experience, which I haven't had. I've had the Gray Experience." (fig. 77).

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42 Peacock, unpaginated loose insert on Susan Britton.
Piper survived her teens by hanging out with a Puerto Rican gang, taking classes at the Art Student's League, and doing stints as a model and disco dancer. By 1970 she had become a philosophy major at university (she is now a professor of philosophy at Wellesley College), but she remained deeply interested in art practice. Given that this was the heyday of Conceptualism, which many understood as a philosophical inquiry into the condition of art, these interests were by no means incompatible. This was also a time when the New York art world was attempting to become responsive to the social and political cataclysms of the era through the formation of the Art Workers' Coalition and its sub-organizations. Though not involved in any of these groups, Piper protested the US invasion of Cambodia by withdrawing her work from the exhibition Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects at the New York Cultural Center in April 1970, replacing it with the following statement:

The work originally intended for this space has been withdrawn . . . I submit its absence as evidence of the inability of art expression to have meaningful existence under conditions other than those of peace, equality, truth and freedom.45

As Judith Wilson has observed, this precipitated a crisis for Piper as she struggled to define the direction she wanted to take in her art.46 Although she was becoming aware of political issues, this awareness was filtered through her own experiences "as an artist, a woman, and a

46 Wilson, "In Memory of the News and of Our Selves," p. 43.
black."\(^{47}\) Concluding that established art forms were inadequate to address the ways social oppression operated on an individual level, she began to develop a strategy of "methodological individualism" which allowed her to confront her audience with an immediate and concrete reality.\(^{48}\) Her first effort in this new direction involved an unannounced performance in 1970 at Max's Kansas City, a restaurant and bar near Union Square popular with artists, poets, fringe actors and various trendy hangers-on. Wearing a blindfold, ear plugs, nose plug and gloves, Piper walked around the crowded bar for an hour, speaking to no one (fig. 78).

Piper's performance at Max's was largely in response to her growing dissatisfaction with the idea of art as an autonomous "Kantian 'thing in itself':"

I can no longer see discrete forms or objects in art as viable reflections or expressions of what seems to me to be going on in this society: they refer back to conditions of separateness, order, exclusivity, and the stability of easily-accepted functional identities which no long exist.\(^{49}\)

The purpose of Piper's experiment was to devise a creative act which depended not on discrete forms, but on the direct interaction between herself and her audience. Although the blocking of her sensory perceptions by means of the blindfold, gloves and nose and ear plugs was at least partly intended as a statement about wanting to insulate herself from being co-opted into the "art consciousness" of the day, it also led her


to a complex consideration of subject/object relations. In the performance at Max's, she had turned herself into a spectacle by objectifying herself, but, paradoxically, she also functioned as a subjective agency capable of effecting change in her audience.

Piper began to refer to this subjective agency as a catalytic force with the potential to concentrate the entire artistic experience into a moment of confrontation in which "the work has no meaning or independent existence outside of its function as a medium of change; i.e., it exists only as a catalytic agent between myself and the viewer." Later in 1970 she explored this concept further in a number of performances that she called the Catalysis series. She wanted the Catalysis works to avoid any association with an art context, which she saw as preserving the illusion of an identifiable, isolateable situation—much as discrete forms do—and thus a prestandardised set of responses. Because of their established functional identities, they prepare the viewer to be catalysed, thus making actual catalysis (rather than its more comfortable illusion) impossible.

The Catalysis works were thus carried out in completely ordinary, public contexts, which Piper would invade in totally unpredictable and outrageous ways. In Catalysis I she rode the subway at rush hour and went browsing in a book store wearing clothes that had soaked for a week in vinegar, eggs, milk and cod liver oil. In Catalysis III she covered her clothes with sticky white paint, attached a "WET PAINT" sign, and went shopping for gloves at Macy's department store. In Catalysis IV she dressed very conservatively, but stuffed a red bath towel into her mouth, letting the rest of it hang down her front, and rode the bus, subway and

50 Piper, quoted in Lippard, "Two Proposals," p. 45.
51 Piper, quoted in Lippard, "Two Proposals," p. 46.
Empire State Building elevator (fig. 79). *Catalysis V* found her reading and signing out books at the public library with a concealed tape-recorder playing loud belches at full volume.

Unprepared to see these confrontations as art, people considered her actions "either meaningless or insane" and frequently responded with hostility.52 Piper initially found it very difficult to do these works. Because she was aware of appearing so grotesque, she had to imagine the people around her were not there in order to maintain her composure and sense of identity. She claimed at the time that these were not politically motivated works, yet acknowledged that being a woman who violated her body in a public way was an important factor in the responses provoked by her confrontations. But even though these performances objectified her, she was very conscious of being in control of the situation, which she found to be exhilarating and powerful.53

The *Catalysis* series were a continuation of the ideas Piper had first explored at Max's Kansas City: subject/object relations, the insistence upon direct impact with the viewer and a concern with the potential of art to effect social change. In her next major project, Piper brought together her interest in social perceptions with a heightened awareness of how identity was shaped and framed by issues of race, class and gender. Drawing upon the power of personal transformation she had discovered in the *Catalysis* works, Piper created *The Mythic Being* series (1972-75), in which she adopted a more "socially specific" role.54 Wearing an Afro wig, dark

53 Lucy Lippard, "Catalysis: An Interview with Adrian Piper," in *From the Center*. p. 170; rpt. from *The Drama Review*, 16, No. 1 (March 1972), pp. 76-78.
54 The distinction between the generalized transformations of the *Catalysis* series and the typological role Piper assumed in *The Mythic Being* series was made by Lucy
glasses and moustache, she assumed the guise of an abrasive, hostile, working-class inner-city black or Latino youth (fig. 80).

In many ways, *The Mythic Being* was an alter-ego creation which enabled Piper to "change not only gender but class, and [acquire] the overt racial characteristics she lacked."\(^5\) But as a being created both out of her awareness that the civil rights movement had failed to "overcome" the class subordination of blacks as well as her own sense of social and self-estrangement, *The Mythic Being* series contained many autobiographical elements as well. Thus the speech bubbles that accompany the photographic panels of *The Mythic Being* were drawn from entries in Piper's journal, which revealed her obsessions about "the failure of friendship, of dialogue; self-interest, mistrust, and mutual indifference; dishonesties, evasions, polite surfaces, deflected contact."\(^5\)\(^6\) Appearing among the gallery ads of the *Village Voice* or seen mugging one of Piper's friends on the street in Cambridge, Massachusetts (where Piper was a graduate student at Harvard), *The Mythic Being* was an image of Third World hostility and alienation, an "antagonistic Other [that] represented the alien in all of us."\(^5\)\(^7\)

While acknowledging that when she first began *The Mythic Being* works she was still concerned with "internal growth," over time Piper began to think of the image "more as some kind of objectification of certain social realities with which I very much identified but that had some social

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Lippard in an unpublished manuscript from 1987; quoted in Wilson, "In Memory of the News and of Our Selves," p. 47.
\(^5\) Lippard, quoted in Wilson, "In Memory of the News and of Our Selves," p. 47.
\(^7\) Wilson, "In Memory of the News and of Our Selves." p. 48.
meaning whether I identified with them or not."\textsuperscript{58} Although The Mythic
Being series signaled the beginning of what would become a sustained and
overt concern with larger social and political issues in her work, Piper has
explained that her point of entry and engagement has always been a
personal one:

Through the work I try to construct a concrete, immediate, and
personal relationship between me and the viewer that locates us in
an indexical present that is itself embedded in the network of
political cause and effect. In this way my work differs from what I
call 'global' political art that attempts to educate its viewers about
issues that bear no direct and obvious relationship to their lives. My
purpose is to transform the viewer psychologically, by presenting
him or her with an unavoidable concrete reality that cuts through
the defensive rationalizations by which we insulate ourselves against
the facts of our political responsibility.\textsuperscript{59}

Piper's work has never focused exclusively on issues of gender, but
her locating of social and political concerns at the personal level shares a
fundamental strategic approach with that of so many feminist performance
artists during this period.\textsuperscript{60} But where many early feminist performance
artists relied upon personal transformation to embody political change
through the appropriation of subjectivity--that is, acquiring a voice and
place from which to speak--Piper's goal was to locate the process of
transformation more directly in the viewer. In this way, her work
provided a coherent way to understand the complex and insidious links
between all forms of oppression by exposing the social operations of
oppression rather than concentrating upon individualized effects.

\textsuperscript{58} Adrian Piper, quoted in Bruce Barber and Serge Guilbaut, "Performance as Social
\textsuperscript{59} Piper, "Xenophobia and the Indexical Present." p. 290.
\textsuperscript{60} It should be noted, however, that Piper considers herself a Conceptual rather than
performance artist in that she subordinates medium to idea. See Piper, "Xenophobia
and the Indexical Present," p. 291. This point was also made in a letter to the author.
April 28, 1996.
The works discussed in the context of this chapter by no means comprise the full range of feminist performances from the 1970s that dealt in one way or another with role-playing or transformation. Clearly, the capacity for self-determined change implied by the process of personal or social transformation was seen feminist artists as profoundly liberating. It is undeniable that the radical potential of such assertions of subjective agency was sometimes dissipated by a regressive tendency towards a liberal individualism. More often than not, however, role-playing and transformation performances served as subversive disruptions to prevailing notions of identity as fixed or innate. Lucy Lippard described them as an "exorcism" of the oppressive, authoritative assumptions and expectations of imposed female roles.61 In this sense, such works clearly embodied an aesthetic practice whose ultimate goal was to transform life itself.

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I. Being and Being Seen.

Role-playing was clearly a crucial way for early feminist performance artists to enact what Lucy Lippard described as "the self-transformation that now seemed possible."¹ Though the use of costumes, disguises and fantasies were an important part of this activity, Lippard surmised that role-playing was aimed at self-discovery, not disguise: "Perhaps such trying on, or trying out, of different roles is the opposite of disguise. A woman who assumes a primary or 'male' role is not (as is presumed) 'in drag,'" but rather exploring aspects of her own "self-consciousness."² Women's use of role-playing and self-transformation in performance art can, therefore, be seen as a denial of, or resistance to, the notion of a singular or fixed feminine identity. Feminist performance art of this kind has been related by Judith Barry to Julia Kristeva's literary critique of "the unitary text based on the construction of a single entity with its own consistent identity," in place of which Kristeva advocated a "multi-valent plural vocal text whose various discourses confront each other in opposition [and which is] an apparatus for exposing and exhausting ideologies in their confrontation."³

² Lippard, p. 106.
Role-playing and transformation thus allowed women to explore the various dimensions of their own self-consciousness and thereby displace determined roles and identities with self-determined ones. These strategies were less able, however, to account for the process and operations by which the prevailing prescriptions of femininity were circulated and authorized within culture. But as practitioners in a tradition whose stock in trade is the production of visual images, many feminist artists at this time became increasingly aware of the powerful role of visual representation in this process of legitimation. Recognizing that neither the creation of positive, celebratory female images, nor the assertion of a self-determined, subjective "voice" would be adequate to challenge the authority of the dominant ideology, these artists began to wage what Martha Rosler called "a struggle for control of existing [institutions]" by considering the formation of femininity as a social and discursive construction. Rather than concentrating on attempts to establish what women are, or what they imagine they could be, these artists began to address the problem of how women are seen within what Janet Wolff has called the "regimes of representation" that structure power and powerlessness upon the basis of sexual difference.

The problem that these artists grappled with was given its first clear articulation in John Berger's 1972 BBC Television series and book, *Ways of Seeing*. Berger's analysis of the representational traditions of Western art

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led him to describe how woman's identity is composed of two constituent elements: having been taught from childhood to see herself as others see her, she combines within herself both the surveyed and the surveyor.6 The role of spectatorship in the traditions of representation was further analysed in 1975 by Laura Mulvey in her well known article examining the controlling operations of the "male gaze" on the female body in film in terms of what she called "political psychoanalysis."7 As Janet Wolff noted:

The devastating implications of this work in general appears to be that women's bodies (particularly the nude, though not just that) cannot be portrayed other than through the regimes of representation which produce them as objects for the male gaze, and as the projection of male desires.8

It cannot be assumed that feminist performance artists in the early 1970s were necessarily aware of this work, or that they would have understood its full theoretical significance. Even so, the largely empirical approach to questions of image and representation in early feminist performance provides an important complement to the larger theoretical discourse around these issues that has been expounded by feminists working across a range of disciplines. Furthermore, the investigation by feminist performance artists in the 1970s into the relationships between identity formation, spectatorship, and cultural representation would come to exert a decisive and sustained impact on the course of subsequent art practice, both within and beyond feminist terms of reference.

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8 Wolff, p. 128.
II. Make-up, Mirrors and Masquerade.

The interest among early feminist performance artists in the representation of femininity resulted from the same sense of self-alienation that lay behind autobiographical and transformation works. In response to the disjunction they saw between the existential self and the self as it was perceived by others, many women sought to reveal femininity as a mask they were required to wear in order to achieve cultural acceptance and desirability. This strategy is clearly manifest in the considerable body of performance art from this period in which making up became a literal metaphor for how women assume the mask of femininity. In fact, this notion was so intrinsic to the ethos of feminist performance art that the obsessive act of making up was featured as early as 1972 in Leah's Room at Womanhouse (fig. 24). As the authors of this performance, Karen LeCoq and Nancy Youdelman, explained, their intention was "to deal with the way women are intimidated by the culture to constantly maintain their beauty and the feeling of desperation and helplessness once this beauty is lost."9

The notion of make-up as a form of representation was explored again later in 1972 in Eleanor Antin's first videotape, Representational Painting. In this work, which Antin described as a response to the fact that "a woman paints herself to represent herself to the world," Antin undergoes a transformation involving a facial, make-up job and fashion

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Henry Sayre has noted that the video is a kind of preview of the direction Antin's subsequent work would take, leading to her ultimate transformation as the black ballerina, Eleanora Antinova. In 1980 Antin produced Being Antinova, a day book chronicling her three weeks of painstaking preparations leading up to Antinova's ballet performance, Before the Revolution, at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York. Throughout the book Antin/Antinova is obsessed with her cosmetic transformation. For example, she describes how, after spending four hours one day having false nails applied to her stubby fingers, she returned to her hotel to make herself up with a renewed confidence, comparing the art of makeup to that of painting:

I was feeling very cheerful to be painting again. I always liked doing portraits—chalk, pastel, wash. I'm good at likenesses... I want my skin to gleam with rich color like the models in Vogue... My confidence in paint, and my ability to handle it is amazing. If it wasn't such a measly profession, I might really have taken up painting.

If, as Lucy Lippard observed, "To make yourself up is literally to create, or re-create, yourself," then the act of making up can indeed be seen as a form of representation, a fictional construction. But unlike other cultures which practice flamboyant forms of self-adornment like tattooing, painting, scarring and so on, the purpose of make-up in the West is to use artifice to create the illusion of its absence so that beauty appears, above all, to be "natural." The goal of make-up is thus to create the fiction

13 Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," in From the Center, p. 130.
of an ideal, natural femininity. Women's efforts to attain this elusive, yet codified, goal are regulated by the presence of an "internalised patriarchal surveyor" who determines their success or failure.¹⁴

Exposing the consequences of that success or failure was precisely the point of a video performance Martha Wilson did shortly before leaving Halifax in 1974. Sitting before a video camera, Wilson applied make-up in two distinct phases; first to bring out her best features, and then to emphasize her worst features. The process and resulting images are fully encapsulated in the title of this work: *I Make Up the Image of My Perfection/I Make Up the Image of My Deformity* (fig. 81). Wilson's use of makeup, the optimum tool of feminine perfectability (or, in this case, of its inverse), troubles the assumed congruence between identity and appearance, thus revealing her own femininity as a facade of tenuous and conflicted fragments. Moreover, by accompanying the actions in her video with verbal descriptions, the fragments of her identity/appearance are embedded in the process of transformation itself, which prevents them from coalescing into an ostensibly integral and authentic whole.

By using make-up and peering anxiously into mirrors or video cameras, feminist performance artists put what is normally a private act of self-judgement on public display. In so doing, they ventured into an area which has been extensively addressed in feminist theories of the role of spectatorship in film. In her article on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, "Laura Mulvey proposed a theory of spectatorship in which the viewer's position is inherently a masculine one, leaving the female spectator the choice between identifying with a masculine position, or with

the object of his gaze/desire.\textsuperscript{15} For a woman to assume the former position by identifying with the active male hero necessarily entails a certain "masculinization" or psychological transvestism. For her to identify with the female character requires her to adopt a passive or masochistic position that is characterized by a closeness or proximity between herself and the feminine object on display on the screen.

In her article "Film and the Masquerade," Mary Ann Doane pursued Mulvey's observations further. Doane argued that, while transvestism (identifying with the masculine position) may be one way for women to inhabit a sexual mobility, it is too easily recuperated as an acquiescence to male subjectivity "since everyone wants to be elsewhere than in the feminine position."\textsuperscript{16} It is far more subversive, she said, for a woman to "produce herself as an excess of femininity," as a kind of masquerade because:

\[\text{IIt is femininity itself which is constructed as a mask--as the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity. . . . The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be work or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as. precisely, imagistic. . . . To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image.}\textsuperscript{17}

The implications of Doane's observations for feminist performance that used make-up to unmask femininity as masquerade are striking. Within the traditions of Western culture, where woman is everywhere and nowhere, the act of female self-representation is a radical appropriation of

\textsuperscript{15} Mulvey, pp. 19-21.
\textsuperscript{16} Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator." Screen, 23, Nos. 3-4 (September-October 1982), p. 81.
\textsuperscript{17} Doane, p. 81.
the privileged position normally accorded only to masculine subjectivity. But it is more profoundly subversive for a woman to present herself as a masquerade of femininity because this not only undermines the assumption of femininity as "natural," it confounds the dominant structure of the look whereby the woman is held in immanent closeness to herself and at an objectified distance from the masculine spectator. In this way, the possibilities are opened for the spectator, whether male or female, to be forcibly confronted with a "defamiliarization of female iconography" that brings about a consciousness of how the subject/object dichotomy in representation is aligned in terms of sexual difference.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{III. Negotiating Spectatorship.}

By holding femininity at a distance from itself, female masquerade involves a self-consciousness of being seen, of being a representation. This allows for a mobility between the "feminine position" as the object of the look and the "masculine position" as the subject of the look. The possibility of problematizing the positionality of the gaze would seem to be inherent in the nature of performance art, where the artist occupies the dual role of subject and object. While it would be misleading to purport that feminist performance artists in the early 1970s were familiar with such ideas at a theoretical level, the evidence of their work shows that many understood their significance at an empirical level. Already by 1976 Lucy Lippard could offer the critical insight that "When women use their own bodies in

\textsuperscript{18} Doane, p. 82.
their art work, they are using their *selves*; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject." Lippard goes on to point out, however, "that there are ways and ways of using one's own body," meaning that the female performance artist is extremely vulnerable to being reappropriated as object by the dominant spectatorial order.\(^\text{19}\)

Female performance artists during this period deployed various strategies to negotiate the treacherous terrain of spectatorship in order to challenge dominant expectations of gender position and role. As we have seen, parody could be exploited to underscore the artificiality of "normal" womanly behaviour and reveal what Catherine Elwes has described as the "masculinist expectations of the audience . . . as the active agent in the (mis)representation of femininity."\(^\text{20}\) Examples that immediately come to mind are Lynda Benglis' *Artforum* advertisement and Susan Mogul's video, *Take Off*. We have also seen how effectively the act of making up could be used to disclose the artifice of "natural" femininity by holding it up as mask to those for whom it is worn.

The objective of such works was to return the gaze of male spectator as a way to confound the psychological consumption of the female performer as object of the look. This approach may be seen to share certain similarities with work that presented the female body as grotesque or abject. But where the image of the female as grotesque or abject works to *block* the male gaze by frustrating the desired expectation, the idea of *returning* the gaze reveals a more specific engagement with the codes of spectatorship. Performance works of the latter kind tended to be less concerned with the image itself than with the way it is seen. Their self-

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20 Elwes, p. 171.
reflexive involvement with the dynamics of seeing and being seen attempted to strip away the viewer's cloak of invisibility and, in effect, put his/her/our own viewing position on display.

It must be pointed out that, apart from Lucy Lippard's 1976 article "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth," the few critical discussions from the period which addressed issues of self-reflexiveness and spectatorship focused on the medium of video, rather than on feminist work per se. Nevertheless, some of these discussions raise implications that, in retrospect, contribute significantly to our understanding of the specific motivations and goals of feminist performance and performative video in the 1970s. One of these discussions was in a 1976 article by Stuart Marshall which attempted to explain in psychoanalytic terms the tendency of artists to peer into the camera/monitor like a mirror, or to use actual mirrors in their tapes, as evidence of a preoccupation with what Jacques Lacan had identified as the Imaginary or mirror phase of development.21

The mirror phase is an intermediary stage of development in which the child first recognizes itself as an independent and cohesive being (ego). But this is only a misrecognition of unity. for the child really becomes two: the self who sees and the self who is seen in the mirror image. This oscillation between self and self-as-other is only resolved as the child proceeds through the Oedipal crisis and enters, through language, the social matrix of the Symbolic Order.

As Marshall saw it, video work that was preoccupied by self-reflection was trapped in the regressive (that is, anti-social) mirror stage of development. Of the four artists Marshall discussed at any length, three

were women (Joan Jonas, Lynda Benglis and Hermine Freed). Ironically, however, he did not note the fact that Lacan specifically associated the mirror phase with female identity because the female’s incomplete resolution of the Oedipal crisis positions her perpetually outside the Symbolic Order, where she remains the objectified Other upon whom the male subject projects difference and lack in order to maintain his own fantasy of unity. Because Marshall’s discussion takes no account of issues of gender, he overlooked the possibility that these women’s work may constitute a deliberately problematized engagement with the dichotomies of subject/object relations. Instead, he summarily dismissed their work as embodying a regressive narcissism expressed in their exhibitionist display for a voyeuristic camera/audience.

The only artist to whom Marshall attributes a conscious provocation of the subject/object positionalities within voyeurism is Vito Acconci. It is true that Acconci’s videos force psychological confrontations (through confessions, demands, physical disclosures) that create unstable and disturbing relations between the viewer and viewed. But even if Acconci’s work deals with the problematics of voyeurism, it is highly questionable whether he ever becomes the objectified Other. According to Mary Ann Doane’s thinking, Acconci, as a male performer, is unable to move between subject/object positions because “the male is locked into sexual identity” that is coextensive with the masculine position of the spectator. In other words, the male performer cannot be both subject/spectator and

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23 Marshall, p. 245.
24 Doane, p. 81.
object/spectacle. Doane's theory does appear to be borne out in Acconci's work precisely because he never relinquishes his subjectivity to that absence of presence that is reserved for the female in the patriarchal order. Acconci remains the subject even when he says "I want my presence to become so unfocused that contact with it becomes difficult." Similarly, in Acconci's film *Conversions*, in which he attempted a sexual transformation by burning off his chest hairs and tucking his penis between his legs, where it is swallowed up by his female assistant, his position as controlling subject is irrefutable (fig. 82).

In 1976 another important article applied psychoanalytic theory to a resolutely formalist reading of video art. In "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," Rosalind Krauss also disparaged video artists' preoccupation with self-regard as narcissistic because it was locked into what she considered the atemporality of the mirror-reflection. "Narcissism is characterized," she said, "as the unchanging condition of a perpetual

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26 One might think that a man who performs as a woman would be able to occupy a dual subject/object position. There is, of course, a long tradition of female impersonation in theatre and popular forms of entertainment. Many examples can also be found in the field of performance art, starting with Marcel Duchamp's Rrose Sélavy character and Francis Picabia's ballerina role in his and René Clair's film *Entr'act* of 1924. As has been pointed out by Esther Newton, however, female impersonation is an institutionalized paradigm that in modern times is particularly associated with camp; see her, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). Marilyn Fry has also argued that female impersonation is "a kind of serious sport in which men may exercise their power and control over the feminine. . . . But the mastery of the feminine is not feminine. It is masculine."; see "Lesbian Feminism and the Gay Rights Movement: Another View of Male Supremacy, Another Separatism," in her *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983), p. 137. These ideas have been summarized and expanded in Kate Davy, "Fe/male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 231-247.
frustration."27 She argued that the "self-reflection" of video is in complete contrast to modern art's important critical strategy of "self-reflexiveness." Unlike video's self-reflective and solipsistic collapsing of subject and object, self-reflexive art, like Jasper John's American Flag, creates a dialogue by maintaining a distance between the subject and object, thereby evoking what she calls the "consciousness of temporality."28

The articles by both Marshall and Krauss were written at a time when the women's movement was well underway and women artists were beginning to attain significant recognition.29 Both even referred to women video artists (Krauss mentioned Nancy Holt, Joan Jonas and Lynda Benglis). And though both used psychoanalytic theory as a basis for analyzing video, neither gave more than the most cursory suggestion of the social implications of such associations, and virtually none at all to possible gender implications. From our current perspective, however, we are better prepared to reconsider how performative works by female artists that were denigrated at the time as "self-indulgent" and "narcissistic" were actually engaged in a critical dialogue around the gendered basis of subject/object relations and spectatorship.30

One of the two female artists discussed by both Marshall and Krauss is Joan Jonas (Lynda Benglis is the other). Trained as a sculptor, Jonas

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28 Kraus, p. 59.
29 Not only was this the year when Lucy Lippard published her important collection of feminist essays, From the Center, Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin also organized the first major historical exhibition of women artists and published an accompanying catalogue, Women Artists 1550-1950 (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York: Random House, 1976).
began doing live performance and dance in the 1960s, and by the early 1970s was also using video. Like so many video artists of this period, she explored the formal and technical properties of the medium, but always in an effort to materialize her own psyche, especially as a manifestation of the body's physical presence. In a work from 1972 called *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, Jonas incorporated video as a spectatorial device turned on herself and four other performers. Wearing elaborate costumes and masks covered with feathers and jewels, Jonas and the other performers manipulated mirrors, cameras and monitors to create a disjunctive collage of real and reflected images (fig. 83). Although these women might initially appear to be participating in the kind of unwitting self-objectification that Lucy Lippard warned against, a reading of the work that draws upon cinematic theory can perhaps reveal how it operated on several levels to dispel such objectification.

As Laura Mulvey observed, the conditions of narrative cinema rely upon two forms of visual pleasure: narcissistic and scopophiliac. The former involves the viewer's ego *identification* with the active/male protagonist who advances the story, while the latter involves a *separation* from the object of erotic desire, the passive/female. John Story has summarized this cinematic structure as based in moments of narrative and moments of spectacle:

The first is associated with the active male, the second with the passive female. The male spectator fixes his gaze on the hero ('the bearer of the look') to satisfy ego formation, and through the hero to the heroine ('the erotic look'), to satisfy libido. The first look recalls

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32 Mulvey, pp 16-17.
the moment of recognition/mis-recognition in front of the mirror.
The second look confirms women as sexual objects.33

When visual pleasure is satisfied in the second manner, it constitutes what Mulvey calls voyeuristic scopophilia, in which the female object's sexual difference (that is, her lack of a penis, the source of the castration trauma) is disavowed by devaluing, saving or punishing her. The other avenue to this disavowal is through fetishistic scopophilia, which turns the object of desire into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than threatening.34

While an element of objectified visual pleasure can certainly be discerned in Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy, the spatial and temporal fragmentation of the imagery and actions disrupted any possibility of the continuous narrative flow required for voyeuristic scopophilia. The presence of the bejeweled and feathered masks might appear to evoke associations with fetishistic scopophilia instead, but this possibility is mitigated on several counts. Firstly, fetishism is dependent upon the static image, the isolateable yet timeless moment of spectacle, which is incommensurable with the disjointed collage of images manipulated by Organic Honey's mobile, active performers. Secondly, the performers repeatedly put on and took off masks, while also holding mirrors and cameras up to one another, actions which constantly disrupted the spectacle of the fetish by framing it within the constructs of looking and being looked at. Thirdly, as a paradigmatic example of femininity as a masquerade that can be worn or removed, this self-conscious framing of the fetishistic image made the positionality of spectatorship an issue that was inescapably imbedded in the work itself.

34 Mulvey, pp. 21-22.
Later in 1972 Jonas performed a variation on *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* which she called *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*. After the live performance, Jonas composed the documentary images and sounds into a self-contained videotape called *Vertical Roll*. In the videotape, Jonas played with the image by adjusting the frequency of the monitor so that a roll bar interrupted the image at regular intervals. She then rescanned the monitor, so that the final tape incorporates this "flaw," making it appear that the images are being pulled down off the screen, or jumping over the roll bar (fig. 84). This repetitious rupture of the image is intensified by the soundtrack of a spoon being banged on a mirror or pieces of wood being clapped together to mark the moment when the roll bar strikes the bottom of the monitor. The relentless and jarring visual distortion of *Vertical Roll* works as a spatial and material metaphor for the shifting psychological identity of the costumed and masked figure of Jonas, who "roams the screen, negotiating the rolling barrier of the screen's bottom edge."35

Along with other videotapes Jonas produced in this period—such as *Mirror Check* (1972), in which Jonas examines her naked body with a hand mirror, and *Left Side Right Side* (1972), in which her face is doubled in a split screen so that her gestures and references to one side or the other never correspond and created confusion about what appears to be a symmetrical image—*Vertical Roll* was intended to forge a new relationship between performer and audience.36 Jonas wrote:

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36 These and other works by Jonas which focus on the splitting and desynchronization of the performer(s)' image are discussed in Douglas Crimp, ed., *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions, 1968-1982* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, University of California, 1983).
From the beginning the mirror provided me with a metaphor for my investigations as well as a device to alter space, to fragment it, and to reflect the audience, bringing them into the space of the performance. These events were rituals for an audience that was included by this reflexion, or by their immediate involvement in the process of making a moving picture.37

By thus presenting her audience with reflected and distorted images within a fragmented time and space, Jonas makes the experience of watching the female face, body and fetishized mask disconcerting and confusing. The insistent artifice of the technical manipulations echoes and reinforces the artifice of the images, which forces us into a conscious self-reflection on our role as viewer.

Because the nature of the video medium typically involved the isolated viewing of the image in the "box," unlike the real-time, multidimensional experience of live performance, it is not surprising that so many female artists at this time experimented with video as a way to create a distilled focus upon the to-be-looked-at function of feminine identity. Such concerns were implicitly evident in most of Martha Wilson's work from the early 1970s that examined the relationship between appearance and identity. They were even more explicitly stated in a video she made in 1974 called *Psychology of Camera Presence* in which the video feedback monitor functions as a mirror. Sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the camera, Wilson begins to move by methodically and slowly rotating her body so that it eventually disappears from the camera's range (fig. 85). But before she begins, she makes the following statement:

In the presence of the camera I split from my body, I see myself from the outside. My watching myself now on the video monitor

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symbolizes this state of split awareness. My objective in this piece is to disappear psychologically, to be aware only of my absence, not of my awareness of my awareness. I will do this by moving my body in a repetitive manner. I have used this device in past times of stress to make my mind go blank. I will move slowly out of camera range to symbolize the blanking process. The absence that is left is not a negative; it is a positive.\textsuperscript{38}

Wilson's direct address to the viewer here is characteristic of much early performative video, and can be seen to reflect the pervasive influence Vito Acconci had in this genre. But where Acconci focused on creating a powerful psychological projection of his presence through the "box" and into the viewers' space and consciousness, Wilson concentrates on making us aware of the camera's presence. Under the scrutinizing eye of the video apparatus she splits herself in two in order to remove her body from view. She experiences the resulting absence for the viewer as positive for herself in that it dispelled her own awareness of her awareness (of being seen). In effect, that awareness of awareness is turned back on the viewer in a confrontation between being (identity) and being seen (appearance).

Dorit Cypis was a student at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design from 1971 to 1975. Though Wilson's teaching responsibilities at the College during these years were restricted to English grammar and literature, it is evident that her art work had a strong impact on Cypis. In the same year that Wilson produced \textit{I Make Up the Image of My Perfection/I Make Up the Image of My Deformity and Psychology of Camera Presence}, Cypis also began to work with video. \textit{Exploring Comfort} was one of her first attempts to perform on camera and, as Jan Peacock noted, it was typical of such fledgling explorations among young women.

\textsuperscript{38} Martha Wilson, artist's statement for \textit{Psychology of Camera Presence}, artist's personal files, Franklin Furnace Archive, New York.
artists in that it presented "a vulnerable female subject who sets the task of seeing herself under conditions of being seen."\textsuperscript{39}

Seated on a stool before a static camera, Cypis starts by announcing "I need some comfort" (fig. 86). After a short pause, she repeats with emphasis, "I need some comfort." She then proceeds to stare expectantly into the camera. Cypis' deafening silence and relentless stare at the viewer may make this the longest, most excruciating forty seconds in video history. As Peacock astutely notes, if this were a live situation, we might either offer up some word or gesture to the performer, or turn away with embarrassment at this irritating and inappropriately expressed need. If it were TV we would simply await the inevitable cut to a more benign and soothing moment. But to sit locked in Cypis' gaze (and we do not know how long she intends to keep this up) "is to live without comfort—or rather live with discomfort: hers, our own, or both."\textsuperscript{40}

Suddenly Cypis breaks the tension, demonstrating what she means. She begins to touch her face and body, sometimes holding herself in an embrace. She then moves very close to the camera to scrutinize her face, practicing a series of grimaces, smiles and laughs, all the while checking her image against an off-screen monitor. Next she gets down on the floor and twists her body into a series of positions, some odd and awkward, some clearly fetal. The disturbing effect of Cypis' short (ten-minute) tape makes the audience's agonized embarrassment at Robert de Niro's famous "Are you talking to me?" scene from \textit{Taxi Driver} pale by comparison. For we not only look \textit{at} her on-screen affectations, she watches \textit{us} as we look.

In this devastating yet simple tape, Cypis turns the privilege of the

\textsuperscript{39} Peacock, unpaginated loose insert on Dorit Cypis.

\textsuperscript{40} Peacock, unpaginated loose insert on Dorit Cypis.
viewer's gaze into a form of not-so-subtle torture as our scrutiny of her, through the camera, transforms her need for comfort into our discomfort. We are, most decidedly, in the realm of visual un-pleasure.

The presence of the camera and/or video monitor were such highly charged signifiers of the dynamics of spectatorship that these devices were incorporated even into the few live performances from this period that dealt with returning the voyeuristic gaze. This is so not only for Joan Jonas' *Organic Honey* performances, but also for Adrian Piper's *Some Reflective Surfaces* (1975) which, unlike her *Catalysis* works, was performed for an art audience (fig. 87). As Piper's description of this performance makes clear, the inclusion of film and video images were crucial to her efforts to make the audience self-conscious of their position:

I am a neutral object in black clothes, white face, moustache, dark glasses. I tell you, the audience, a story of myself as a disco dancer as I mimic and repeat the dancer's movements. Sometimes I stop to rest, practice, and refuel myself with whiskey. A film, of me, dancing with friends and watching you, is projected on and behind me as I dance to the song *Respect* [by Aretha Franklin]. A man's voice criticizes my dancing in sharp commands. As I move into the spotlight my image appears on a video monitor. The film and music stop; I acknowledge you; the light goes out."

As Piper obeyed these instructions, the theme of the song (self-esteem and confidence, especially for young blacks), and the premise of popular dance as spontaneous and free self-expression, were thoroughly undermined by the scrutiny of this male presence who not only watched her, but verbally exercised his authoritative ability to coerce her to improve herself by complying with his desires. The audience, meanwhile, was forced into the acutely difficult situation of identifying either with

Piper's "masochistic" role as the object of scrutiny, or with the controlling, "sadistic" role of the male who, by remaining disembodied, echoed the function of the internalized surveyor Berger said exists within all women.

The question of why there were not more live performances by women in the 1970s dealing explicitly with sexual objectification within the gendered positions that structure spectatorship remains difficult to answer conclusively. Some critics and historians have argued that the spectatorial consumption and gendered positionality inherent in film or video are negated by the very conditions of live performance, which activates a different kind of relationship with the audience. Judith Barry, for example, has posited that in live performance, the audience cannot identify with the scopophilia of the camera, and so becomes more participant than voyeur.42 Both Catherine Elwes and Henry Sayre have suggested that the mobility or active agency of the female performance artist effectively disrupts the desire of the controlling scopophilic gaze to turn her into a static, fetishized object.43

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that, just because a woman is the subject/agent of a performance, live or not, this is not sufficient to ensure her escape from the dominant structures of spectatorship and representation that, as Janet Wolff said, "produce them as objects for the male gaze, and as the projection of male desires."44 This is particularly so when a woman uses her body in a sexualized way, for even though her intention may be a critical one, Lippard reminds us that it is "a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from

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42 Barry, p. 440.
43 Elwes, p. 172 and Sayre, p. 76.
44 Wolff, p. 128.
women's use of women to expose that insult." As Elwes has noted, a woman who wants to flaunt femininity as a masquerade must ensure a significant distancing between the self and its manufactured appearance; otherwise her display of femininity will be seen as innate, or close to itself, and, therefore, as a narcissistic celebration of her own nature. If this happens, the work risks appearing as an affirmation of an essentialized femininity, which will allow it to be reappropriated back into the dominant male culture rather than being seen as engaging in a dialectical relation with that culture.

The artist whose work has always been a focal point of controversy around these issues is Hannah Wilke, who died prematurely in 1994. Her work is diverse (encompassing sculpture, performance, video, film, photography, posters and book works) and complex, involving a layering of imagistic and linguistic metaphors, as well as autobiographical references. At the centre of it all is Wilke's underlying theme of female sexuality:

Since 1960, I have been concerned with the creation of a formal imagery that is specifically female. . . . Its content has always been related to my own body and feelings, reflecting pleasure as well as pain, the ambiguity and complexity of emotions.

Wilke's work not only included abstracted sculptural representations of female genitalia done in clay, latex, laundry lint and chewing gum, she herself appeared constantly in her work since the early 1970s. She has repeatedly stated that her intention has been to dispel the negative

46 Elwes, p. 171.
connotations of sexuality and sensuality and, especially, to reclaim a positive eroticism for women and their bodies:

My interest in developing a specifically female iconography for both sexes in the early 60's was in direct conflict with a society that prohibited its citizens from and sometimes arrested them for using the words fuck, cock, and prick. In the United States the state of nudity is still a problem. My concern is with the word translated into form, with creating a positive image to wipe out the prejudices, aggression, and fear associated with the negative connotations of pussy, cunt, box.49

Statements like this might suggest that Wilke's agenda was mainly libertarian, and to a degree, that was the case. Wilke wanted to use her art as a way to allow women's feelings and fantasies to emerge uninhibitedly from the destructive psychic and physical wounds inflicted on women through their exploitation and oppression in patriarchal culture. Her self-representations, therefore, tend to be complex images in which her decidedly beautiful face or body is symbolically marked or scarred by those wounds, yet is nevertheless offered up for the viewer's pleasure. In Hannah Wilke Super-T-Art, a performance done in New York in 1974, Wilke draped and posed herself in an allusion to both Christ and Venus (fig. 88). Though Christ's crucifixion makes him the ultimate victim, Wilke saw both figures as symbols of charity, with which she aligned herself in her self-designation of "Sugargiver."50 In her S.O.S. Starification Object Series (1974-1982), Wilke created a similarly ambiguous reading by having herself photographed in a variety of seductive stereotypical female poses in which her face and body are "adorned" with chewing gum "scars" that resemble the folds of the female genitalia (fig. 89).

49 Wilke, script for Intercourse with . . . , in Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective, p. 138.
50 Joanna Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," in Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective, p. 56.
Because Wilke has posed herself so insistently as a spectacle for the camera or video eye, it is logical to consider how her work might function as a subversive inversion of its apparent narcissism and voyeuristic objectification. Yet her work remains highly ambiguous on this level. As Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman have observed:

In objectifying herself as she does, in assuming the conventions associated with a stripper (as someone who will reveal all), Wilke seems to be teasing us as to her motives. She is both the stripper and the stripped bare. She does not make her own position clear; is her art work enticing critique or titillating enticement?51

Those who defend Wilke's work have seen it as a positive effort to reclaim "Wilke's own participation as sex object, . . . [as] a statement of presence and self-knowledge, of pride in the delight of receiving a sexually scrutinizing and admiring look and of being able to give pleasure."52 But more critical views of Wilke's work have been expressed since the early 1970s, and were summarized by Lucy Lippard in 1976:

[H]er own confusion of her roles as beautiful woman and artist, as flirt and feminist, has resulted at times in politically ambiguous manifestations that have exposed her to criticism on a personal as well as on an artistic level.53

Lippard's statement suggests that much of the criticism levelled at Wilke was due to the fact that the face and body she put on display were stunningly beautiful. As Barry and Flitterman have pointed out, however, the problem is more complex:

It seems her work ends up by reinforcing what it intends to subvert. In using her own body as the content of her art, in calling her art

51 Barry and Flitterman, p. 39.
52 Frueh, p. 35.
'seduction,' she complicates the issues and fails to challenge conventional notions of female sexuality.  

Although Wilke clearly intends these self-representations to be positive images for women, we are reminded of Jacques Lacan's insight that "images and symbols for the woman cannot be isolated from images and symbols of the woman. . . . It is representation, the representation of feminine sexuality . . . which conditions how it comes into play." Whatever Wilke's intentions otherwise, her work is ultimately vulnerable to reappropriation into the stable, pre-existing meanings of objectified female sexuality because she affirms her feminine sexuality precisely as the object of desire rather than seeking to distance and problematize it within the scopic "regimes of representation." In other words, Wilke may have wanted to present more positive images of women's sexuality, but in so doing she has eschewed a more critical engagement with questions of how the prevailing codes of representation foster relationships of power and powerlessness in which "men look and women exhibit 'to-be-looked-at-ness'--both playing to and signifying male desire."  

IV. Cultural Representation.

The codes of representation have become a focus of inquiry in art practice in general since the late 1970s, largely influenced by a renewed

54 Barry and Flitterman, p. 39.
56 Story, p. 130.
interest in photography in tandem with a heightened understanding of the cultural and political implications of postmodern critical theory. In the work of artists like Victor Burgin, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall and others, the exploration of photography's relation to commerce and popular culture revealed the world of representation as a site of cultural or ideological construction. The goal of such work was not to escape or provide alternatives to the representational myths and ideologies produced within culture, but to interrupt their flow, to diagnose and reveal their mechanisms, and thus play a role in liberating people from the institutions that control their lives.57

Yet many of the ideas that were advanced in the 1980s about the role of representation in the construction of culture were directly related to issues that were first articulated within feminist art practice of the 1970s. Indeed, feminist artists' pervasive concern with destroying the derogatory myths surrounding female experience had from the beginning been largely based on a questioning of representation. While much of their work was less theoretically based than art become in the 1980s, it offered an expanded understanding of politics beyond the traditional class- oriented language of the left by focusing on conceptions of human experience and subjectivity as inherently gendered.58 Moreover, because feminist artists saw themselves as part of a much larger political and social movement, they were especially concerned with the need for their work to be meaningful both within and beyond the art world.

58 Harrison and Wood, p. 224.
As we have seen, however, such was not equally the case for the Minimalist and Conceptualist artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Whatever "political implications" they claimed for their work, they were articulated as such highly abstract, specialized and technical refusals that the audience to whom they were legible was a highly restricted one. For most feminist artists, on the other hand, the goal was to reach the broadest possible audience by means of a clearly legible, though not simplistic or crude, aesthetic discourse. The representational, imagistic basis of feminist performance provided a culturally shared language through which women could refer to the contingencies of experience in the contemporary world. In this sense, their work can be more closely aligned with the political role of the historical avant-gardes as Bürger defined them than to the narrower aesthetic concerns of the majority of their male peers.

But if feminist art in the 1970s was generally characterized by a renewed interest in representation and image-making, it could not be claimed that all such work was concerned with investigating the specific question of how representation functions within culture. As we have seen, much feminist art used representation either as a way to replace negative images of women with positive ones, or to expose the debilitating and oppressive effects of determined and stereotypical roles and identities for women. Although such work played a vital part in advancing women's resistance to their subjugation within culture, it tended to focus on the effects of oppression rather than a consideration of how women are constituted through social practices and the production of ideological meaning in culture. There are, examples of performances from this

60 Barry and Flitterman, p. 36.
period that examined how the cultural representation of women worked to produce those effects by legitimating relationships of domination and subordination in all spheres of culture.

One form of cultural representation to which feminist performance artists were drawn was the historical tradition of art itself. As the realm in which cultural ideology is given its highest validation, artistic representation offered an abundant and complex array of highly encoded cultural myths and meanings. These representational forms configured "woman" in a variety of ways, but almost always with what Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock have referred to as "the specific connotations of body and nature, that is passive, available, possessable, powerless."61 Such representations of woman distinguish her from man by aligning her with the category of nature, over which man demonstrates his power through his access to culture. Parker and Pollock maintained that the question of whether such representations of women are good or bad is not really the point. What is more at issue is the fact that:

Art is not a mirror. It mediates and re-presents social relations in a schema of signs which require a receptive and preconditioned reader in order to be meaningful. And it is at the level of what those signs connote, often unconsciously, that patriarchal ideology is reproduced. . . . As female nude, woman is body, is nature opposed to male culture, which, in turn, is represented by the very act of transforming nature, that is, the female model or motif, into the ordered forms and colour of a cultural artefact, a work of art.62

Artistic representation, therefore, not only establishes a range of codified stereotypes that define what women are by how they are seen, it also

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62 Parker and Pollock, p. 119.
delineates a *place* which is culturally assigned to women by men. That place may bear the burden of sexual objectification and desire, but the real purpose is to confirm the privilege of patriarchal power and control over women.

The way in which that power and control is entrenched through the institution of art history was the subject of a videotape by Hermine Freed called *Art Herstory* (1974). In a reconsideration of the authority of the canonical values of "truth" and "objectivity" in historical interpretation, Freed intervenes in archetypal images of women in an effort to unravel their historical and institutional stability. The tape opens with the image of Cimabue's *Madonna Enthroned*, but it is Freed posing as the Madonna, while her friend's heads appear in the roundels above her as they talk about how historical chronology may be altered by shuffling the images as one would a deck of cards. Freed and her friends then recreate a series of Old and New Master paintings of women, from Raphael to Warhol (fig. 90). The constructed nature of these images is patently obvious, for not only do several appear on the screen at once, all of different sizes, but the "figures" talk back and forth about how accurately each one is portraying the image.

The artifice of these representations is further underscored by Freed's frequent appearance in them with her video camera or tape recorder, explaining the technical issues and comparing the contrivances of the studio set-ups to those of the historical images. She also muses speculatively on history itself, which she complicates by layering present over past so that both seem equally inconclusive. Ultimately, she concludes that our knowledge of the past is as much a product of chance.

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63 This premise was articulated in the context of cinema by Doane, p. 87: "The entire elaboration of femininity . . . is not the definition of an essence but the delineation of a *place* culturally assigned to the woman."
and circumstance as it is the result of significant, determined events. While positioning herself as a self-reflexive, controlling agent at odds with the historical representations, Freed does not seek to rewrite that history in her own image so much as to reveal its contradictions and disrupt the signifying conventions through which both patriarchal ideology and canonical authority are reproduced. The cultural representation of women in the history of art was also a subject of interest for the German artist Ulrike Rosenbach, whose work has become well known in North America. Like Freed, Rosenbach used video technology to intervene in canonical images of women. But where Freed addressed the history of art and its conventions as a cultural institution, Rosenbach concentrated on individual images as paradigms of the false reflections women face as they peer into the "mirror" of historical representation. Rosenbach's Don't Believe I Am an Amazon (1975) consists of two parts, the first of which shows a reproduction of Stefan Lochner's late medieval Madonna of Rosenhag, superimposed over Rosenbach's own face (fig. 91). Rosenbach then raises a bow and shoots fifteen arrows into the Madonna's face, which has also become her own. The juxtaposition of the sweet, suffering image of the Madonna with that of the strong, female archetype of an Amazon creates a visceral shock as each arrow simultaneously pierces victim and torturer. As Lucy Lippard wrote, "the feminist shoots down the old image of masochistic woman."64 In the second half of the tape, the camera is turned on Rosenbach as she shoots, so that the viewer becomes the target of her arrows. As in much of Rosenbach's work, the dual themes of the idealization and oppression of

women are enacted as a way to extricate herself from the snare of their representational power.

That Rosenbach saw the conventions of representation as a device which traps women within an imposed construct of femininity is clearly apparent in another video, *Reflections on the Birth of Venus* (1976).

Wearing a full-length leotard with a white front and a black back, Rosenbach stands in front of a life-size projection of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. At her feet is a styrofoam shell with a small video monitor playing images of surging waves. As Bob Dylan's song *Sad-Eyed Lady of the Low-Lands* begins to play, Rosenbach slowly and repeatedly rotates so that when she faces forward the image of Venus is superimposed on her body, and when she is turned to the back the image is absorbed into her body (fig. 92). Although this metaphoric display of the way in which women internalize and reflect the ideals of cultural representation is Rosenbach's primary intention, she said she also wanted to reclaim the original associations of the Venus-image with fertility and rebirth as a way to undermine the profanity of its modern signification as the paradigm of sexual desirability.65

For Rosenbach, such images were the literal embodiment of what she saw as the patriarchal facade that created an "enigma of femininity" by concealing woman's true identity. In order for the true feminine identity to emerge and resolve the enigma, this patriarchal facade must be stripped away.66 As Mary Kelly has argued, however, the idea that femininity is an

enigma that can be resolved by revealing the "true" nature of femininity is problematic in that it posits the existence of an "essence in woman." Not only does the existence of an "essence" locate woman decisively within nature--where man has sought to relegate her--it thereby confirms femininity as a fixed category. Although Rosenbach sought to expose the oppressive strictures of conventional representations of women, her premise that "false" or negative images of femininity can be supplanted by "true" or positive one implies that one set of stable meanings can be replaced with a more positive and authentic, but no less stable, alternative.

Because Rosenbach saw the representation of women as a mirror reflecting cultural values, she, like Hannah Wilke, focused more on the negative effects of such representation rather than analyzing what Martha Rosler defined as "the social and economic context which produced and perpetuated these stereotypes." Yet we have seen that several other performance artists of this period had indeed begun to recognize the conventions of representation as signifying codes that function precisely to stabilize meaning within the dominant culture. Artists like Joan Jonas and Martha Wilson, for example, consequently placed their emphasis on the task of destabilizing the meanings of cultural representation so as to pose questions of identity and sexual difference in self-reflexive, non-essentializing ways. Nevertheless, it was far less common for artists during this period to consider how notions of identity, the body and representation itself are produced and inscribed within the social relations and historical contingencies of cultural discourse.

67 Kelly, p. 97.
68 Roth, p. 20.
These concerns lay very much at the centre of Martha Rosler's work, however, and are consistently evident in her sustained examinations of how the represented meanings and behaviours of the gendered body are prescribed and proscribed within social relations. Rosler's emphasis on the cultural context is particularly evident in her Vital Statistics of a Citizen Simply Obtained, which was initially done as a live performance in 1973 and reenacted as a video in 1977 (fig. 93). In a dark parody of positivist science, a male researcher and assistant verbally interrogate Rosler in a clinical setting. As the examination proceeds to physical informations, Rosler gradually undresses and every inch of her body is scrupulously measured by the two men, while three female assistants record the measurements and indicate with bells, whistles, or kazoos how her body compares to the standard female body. The forty-minute tape also includes a voice-over narrative which recites a litany of sexual and physical crimes against the colonized bodies of women. More significantly, this narrative also reflects upon how one learns to "manufacture" oneself as a being in a state of culture, as a "product" which exhibits itself externally by simulating an idealized version of the self as "natural."69

On one level, Rosler's Vital Statistics is a searing indictment of how society circumscribes and controls female behaviour and roles not only through mythical ideals, but also through the "objective" evaluations of science. On another level, and this is particularly significant given the early date of the original version of this work, it exposes the fallacy of the binary opposition between nature and culture by proposing the female body as a site of an ideological struggle in which the appearance of the

69 Martha Rosler, script from The Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained; quoted in Martha Geyer, "Interview with Martha Rosler," Afterimage, 9, No. 3 (October 1981), p. 13 and in Sayre, pp. 82-83.
"natural" is itself a necessary and enforced cultural construction. In other words, the external appearance of the self does not *conceal* the true or natural self, but is a *representation* of the self as natural.

Rosler's *Vital Statistics of a Citizen* did not deal explicitly with the question of how the social relations and historical contingencies of cultural discourse which produce gender are also determined by the economies of race and class. Yet, along with Adrian Piper, Rosler was one of the few feminist artists of the period whose body of work reveals a concern with how the ideological forces of culture produce relationships of domination and oppression beyond those of gender alone. Feminism's emphasis on the way oppression is experienced subjectively made an important contribution to the study of post-colonialism and identity politics that would flourish in the 1980s. At the same time, however, feminism in the 1970s has come to be frequently criticized as a primarily white, middle-class movement. Indeed, apart from Adrian Piper, the involvement in art practice of women of colour was extremely rare.

One exception is Faith Ringgold, whose work since the 1960s has focused on the black cultural experience in the United States. Most of her work entails painting or story quilts, but she has also done performances which expressed her desire to have a more direct interaction with her audience than she felt was possible in her painting. As she said in 1976, "There's no reason why art has to be so complicated and difficult to deal

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70 The work of writers like Adrienne Rich, Bell Hooks, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Audre Lord and artists like Trihn-T. Minh-ha and Mona Hatoum are particularly well known for having forced feminism to confront its own exclusionary practices. For a theoretical overview of these issues, see Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press. 1988).
with. That's one of the things I've gotten from the feminist movement."  

Ringgold's direct approach was exemplified in collaborative performances such as the *Wake and Resurrection of the Bicentennial Negro* which took place at Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania in 1976. Within the scenario of a funeral at an Abyssinian Baptist Church, Ringgold invited students, both black and white, male and female, to don masks and costumes to enact a symbolic ritual of spiritual resurrection that is central to African-American life (fig. 94).

By the early 1980s, the situation for non-white artists had improved only marginally. But since the art world is one of the crucial areas in which ideological struggles are waged over the meaning of representation, it was inevitable that its exclusionary practices would come under open attack from those who had been isolated. Notwithstanding its rhetoric of inclusiveness and collectivism, feminism too was seen by some to have betrayed its egalitarian vision as soon as feminist artists had attained a degree of recognition within the mainstream institutions of high culture. In an exuberant and provocative display worthy of the Futurists, American artist Lorraine O'Grady staged a kind of guerilla attack against this situation at the opening of the Personae show in 1981 at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York (fig. 95). Wearing a tiara and a gown made of one hundred and eighty pairs of white gloves, O'Grady appeared as *Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire* and disrupted the opening by shouting angry


72 The connection between O'Grady's tactics and those of the Futurists was made by Olivia Georgia, "Framing Out," in *Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object: A Survey History of Performance Art in the USA since 1950*, curated by Robyn Brentano et al., (Cleveland: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994), p. 95.
poems against the racial politics of the art world which had sponsored the "Nine-White-Personae show."\textsuperscript{73}

In a recent article, Martha Rosler has written that "Questions of race and class still haven't been answered within the [feminist] movement, despite years of struggling."\textsuperscript{74} She acknowledged that political pressure from marginalized groups have gained a degree of inclusion in the art world, but she argued that such inclusion misses a crucial point because it does not sufficiently address the question of audience. The main problem is that since the audience for art is almost exclusively comprised of intellectual or economic elites, the demands of professional success make the possibility of considering issues of class exceptionally difficult:

'Identity' in the art world has so far coalesced around race, sexuality, and gender. . . . (working-) class identity is not a currently powerful mobilizer; it is either despised (by non-working-class people), dismissed (because self-evidently powerless), or denied (by working-class people). A problem with the invisibility of class is that people benefiting from class privilege submerge themselves in identities suggested by skin color or ethnicity without acknowledging their superior access to knowledge and power.\textsuperscript{75}

Rosler's comments emphatically do not dismiss the significance of the intervention of racial politics in the art world. Her concern is that a focus on "essential" characteristics such as gender or ethnicity tends to isolate a politics of identity from the determining conditions of economic or class structures. The danger, she says, is that the absence of references to class


\textsuperscript{75} Rosler, "Place, Position, Power, Politics." p. 66.
or economic issues makes such work easily absorbed into the controlling institutions of the art world as a sign of their progressive liberalism:

Looked at from the perspective of a fashion-driven industry, the advent of art world identity politics, or multiculturalism, represents the incorporation of marginal producers, who bring fresh new 'looks' to revivify public interest. . . . Powerful cultural institutions like the Rockefeller Foundation and many universities, which didn't care for the older [Marxist] version of political art, have been quick to sponsor multiculturalism, which is, after all, a demand for inclusion rather than for economic restructuring.76

No doubt Rosler's comments will be seen as highly contentious within certain circles. Although she concentrates here on the issue of the identity politics of race or ethnicity, the feminist emphasis on gender as the root of women's oppression has also obscured crucial questions about the structuring of gender within the historically specific context of capitalism and the bourgeois ideology which sustains it. Significantly, the body of work which has made the most concerted attempts to analyse the relationship between gender, class and cultural representation has been produced by British feminists.77 Rosler's consistent attention to these relationships was unusual in the context of North American feminist art practice in the 1970s, even though the American feminist movement had initially emerged from within the Marxist enclaves of the New Left.

In the early 1980s, however, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design became an important locus of interaction between North American

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and British feminism as a result of its very active visiting artists program, which included brief or extended stays by Mary Kelly, Sandy Flitterman, Dara Birnbaum and Martha Rosler. The experience of being exposed to the vital and enthusiastic debates of this period had a decisive impact on the young artist Wendy Geller, who was then a student at the College. In 1982 Geller produced a video that reflected the growing interest at that time among scholars and artists in the study of all forms of representational modes. But what is particularly significant about Geller's video is the way she engaged these issues within a context that foregrounded the intrinsic relationship between gender and class.

The title and premise of Geller's video, *48-Hour Beauty Blitz*, was taken directly from an article in *Glamour* magazine designed to instruct the reader through a weekend-long, self-renewal and beauty make-over plan. Feminists had long seen such representations of women as indicative of how the prescriptive ideals of femininity were inculcated within women. Geller's intention, however, was not merely to expose the oppressive effects of such representations of women, but to understand her own fascination with them. In this sense, Geller's work must be seen in the context of a growing interest at this time, especially among British feminists, in the role of popular culture in structuring femininity.

One of the most important studies on this subject was a book by Rosalind Coward called *Female Desire*. Coward attempted to understand why popular culture for women held such massive appeal, even when the women's movement had "enlightened" us about its oppressive and exploitative capacity. She argued that this appeal was based on the representation of pleasure and desire; consequently, she did not see these

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78 "48-Hour Beauty Blitz," *Glamour*, 80, No. 2 (February 1982).
representations as constituting "the forcible impression of false and limiting stereotypes:"

Instead . . . I see the representations of female pleasure and desire as producing and sustaining feminine positions. These positions are neither distant roles imposed on us from outside which it would be easy to kick off, nor are they the essential attributes of femininity. Feminine positions are produced as responses to the pleasures offered to us. . . . These are the experiences which make change such a difficult and daunting task, for female desire is constantly lured by discourses which sustain male privilege.79

Even though Geller's video predated Coward's book by two years, it is clear that she too was intrigued by the way her female desire was lured by the pleasures of popular culture, which she could not shake off in spite of the fact that she was an ardent and committed feminist. Seeing women's magazines as embodying a fantasy of glamour, frivolity and sensual pleasure that bore little resemblance to her own mundane life, Geller said:

I couldn't escape their impact on me and I realized I had to confront this. I set out to do all the things I was told to do, to follow all the instructions as closely as possible. I really wanted to see what would happen.80

But as we watch Geller faithfully following Glamour's detailed instructions for dieting, exercising, make-up experimentation, and hair and skin treatments in the confines of her shabby, student rooming house, it becomes patently obvious that there is a huge discrepancy between the intentions of the beauty makeover and the results that Geller experienced. This discrepancy results not only from the fact that this beauty work turns out to be isolating, tedious and exhausting, but equally from the profound contrast between Geller's efforts to immerse herself totally in an excess of

80 Wendy Geller, quoted in Peacock, unpaginated loose insert on Wendy Geller.
femininity and the persistent hindrances of her impoverished reality. For example, with a dour and dead-pan expression, Geller tells us that she is supposed to use her best china and crystal so as to make this regimen as pleasant as possible; what she holds up for us to see, however, are a few chipped and mismatched dishes from a thrift store. Later we see her cooking the prescribed dinner--a two-egg omelette--in a pie pan on a hot plate. With devastating satire worthy of Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Geller repeatedly uses the magazine itself as a cover for the broken blender in which she buzzes health drinks. At another point, the discovery that her rooming house bathroom is occupied at a critical moment forces her to administer a messy and complicated facial at her kitchen table with a bowl of water and a ragged scrap of towel (fig. 96).

As Jan Peacock noted, the huge discrepancy Geller experienced may have had to do with how she "spends the 'reading periods' allotted in the 48-Hour Beauty Blitz: rather than escaping into a nice romantic novel, she reads from her own journal a litany of questions about how female identity is formed, valued and mythologized" within the representations of popular culture.\(^\text{81}\) But the disjunction between the fantasy and the reality of the *Beauty Blitz* is not just a matter of Geller's inability to live up to the impossible ideals of feminine beauty and desirability. Indeed, the most debilitating obstructions to her achievement of the presumed pleasures of the *Beauty Blitz* result from the hardships of her economic reality, which, Peacock says, are revealed within "a disclosure of class relations."\(^\text{82}\) Her poverty's constant thwarting of her beauty efforts casts a glaring light on the extent to which her ideological purchase on femininity is curtailed by

\(^{81}\) Peacock, unpaginated loose insert on Wendy Geller.

\(^{82}\) Peacock, unpaginated loose insert on Wendy Geller.
the limitations of her economic purchase on consumption. Ultimately, Geller's conflation of gender and class brilliantly reveals the fallaciousness of any assumption that femininity, or the female body, can exist outside the effects of social "practices, ideologies, and discourses."\(^{83}\)

Wendy Geller's 48-Hour Beauty Blitz lies just outside the chronological period under consideration in this study. Yet it is a transitional work with gathers within itself the force of a decade-long investigation in art practice of how women can analyse and understand their relationship to the world of which they are an intrinsic part. Like most feminist performance from the 1970s, it works from the premise that personal experience is the basis of cultural and social politics, but it also demonstrates a clear understanding of the concerns that would come to be more fully articulated in the 1980s about how female identity is not just confined by, but also lured by, cultural discourses that sustain both patriarchal and economic privilege. Geller's work signals the end of the period in which performative strategies were seen as most conducive to the feminist goals of negotiating a changed relationship with culture and society. Given that Geller's interest in the relationships between identity formation, representation and the discourses of popular culture points so decisively to the new directions of art practice in the 1980s and 1990s, it seems fitting to close this study with a discussion of her work, which was sadly cut short by her premature death early in 1996.

\(^{83}\) Wolff, p. 135.
The intention of this study has been to assess the relationship between the insurgent feminist movement and the emergence and development of feminist performance art in North America in the 1970s. The central argument has been advanced that feminist performance was instrumental in redefining our concept of aesthetic practice and its role in contemporary society by challenging the premise that art is an autonomous activity separate from the contingencies of everyday life. By drawing upon the documentary evidence and critical literature of the period, as well as more recent cultural and feminist studies, it has been possible, I believe, to show that feminist performance art was, by definition, a political art in that its purpose was to use aesthetic practice as a weapon in the struggle to change the social and cultural conditions that determined women's place in the world.

Within the context of this larger goal, feminist performance has made vital contributions to the questioning of the prevailing assumptions about cultural practice that lies at the centre of modernist/postmodernist debates. Feminist artists' recognition of the gender-bias inherently embedded in the presumption of aesthetic values and judgements as neutral or universal has been instrumental in revealing the "disinterested" basis of concepts like autonomy or quality as a legitimation of an oppressive status quo. Feminist performance artists have effected a radical revision of our notion of the political by asserting it as something experienced--and, therefore, potentially renegotiated--at the personal and
subjective level. The most characteristic feature of feminist art, and feminist performance in particular, was the constant inclusion of material and discourses that traditionally lay outside the realm of "Art." The intrusion of such references not only served to contest the authoritative prescriptions and judgements as to what constitutes legitimate or relevant art practice, but also permitted the work to have resonance in contexts beyond the art world itself. Finally, the opportunity to be both agent and agency of one's own narratives and representations allowed feminist performance artists to dislocate the dominant discourses in which they had been marginalized in both art and life. It also enabled them to reconsider representation not as a mirror benignly reflecting cultural values, but as an ideological structure by means of which those values are inculcated and legitimated in order to sustain relationships of power and powerlessness.

These impressive achievements notwithstanding, this study has attempted to balance the need for the recognition of the historical significance of feminist performance art with the need for a dialectically critical assessment. It must be acknowledged that feminist performance art, like all liberatory concepts, categories and practices, may simultaneously contain within itself controlling, regressive, or even oppressive elements. With a few exceptions, the existing studies of feminist performance tend to gloss over these tendencies in favour of empirical claims that all feminist performance is self-evidently emancipatory. This present study, on the other hand, has endeavoured to temper this approach by subjecting the work to a more critical and

1 Francis Frascina, "The Politics of Representation," in Modernism in Dispute: Art since the Forties, Paul Wood et al. (New Haven and London: Yale University in association with The Open University, 1993), p. 82.
theoretical mode of analysis that draws from recent feminist discourse. Such theoretical considerations do not, I believe, obscure the historical origins, conditions or significance of feminist performance in the 1970s, but rather permit us to attain a more discerning view of its cultural and political implications. In conclusion, it is hoped that this study not only makes a valuable contribution to our knowledge of this important period in the history of feminist art, but helps to make a more critical understanding of that history available as the basis for a more rigourously self-critical feminist art practice in the present and future.
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Figure 3. George Brecht, *Three Aqueous Events*, 1961. Performed at Happenings, Events and Advanced Musics, held at Douglass College, Rutgers University, 1963.
Figure 4. Andy Warhol, *210 Coca-Cola Bottles*, 1962. Oil on Canvas 214 x 267 cm. Collection Martin and Janet Blinder.
Figure 5. Carl Andre, *144 Lead Square* [sic], 1969. 144 lead squares each approximately 1 x 31 x 31 cm; overall, 1 x 368 x 369 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Figure 6. Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1966. Six galvanized steel boxes each 102 x 102 x 102 cm. Exhibited at Dwan Gallery, New York, 1967.
Figure 7. Hans Haacke, Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971. 1971. Two maps, one of the Lower East Side and one of Harlem, each 61 x 51 cm; 142 photographs of building facades and empty lots, each 25 x 20 cm; 142 typewritten data sheets, attached to the photographs and giving the property's address, block and lot number, lot size, building code, the corporation or individual holding title, the corporation's address and its officers, the date of acquisition, prior owner, mortgage, and assessed tax value, each 25 x 20 cm; six charts on business transactions (sales, mortgages, etc.) of the real estate group, each 61 x 51 cm; one explanatory panel 61 x 51 cm. Edition of two; one in Collection Françoise Lambert, Milan, one in Collection of the artist.
Figure 8. May Stevens, *Big Daddy Paper Doll*, 1968. Oil on canvas. 198 x 426 cm. Collection of the artist.
Figure 9. *Peace Tower*, Los Angeles, under construction, 1966.
Figure 10. *The Collage of Indignation*, 1967. 3 x 37 m. Installation at Loeb Students' Center, New York University. Photograph by E. Tulchin.
Figure 17. Eva Hesse, *Accession II*, 1967. Galvanized steel and plastic extrusion, 78.1 x 78.1 x 78.1 cm. Private collection.
Figure 18. Jackie Winsor, *Bound Grid*, 1971-72. Wood and hemp. 213.4 x 213.4 x 20.3 cm. Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris.
Figure 20. Judy Chicago, *Pasadena Lifesavers*, 1969. Acrylic on plexiglas. 152.4 x 152.4 cm. Collection Mary Ross Taylor.
Figure 21. *Miss Chicago and the California Girls*, 1971. Poster produced by the Feminist Art Program, Fresno State College, California.
Figure 22. Susan Frazier, Vicki Hodgetts, Robin Weltch, *Nurturant Kitchen* (detail), 1972. Mixed media site installation at Womanhouse, Los Angeles, California.
Figure 23. Robbin Schiff, *Nightmare Bathroom*, 1972. Mixed media site installation at Womanhouse, Los Angeles, California.
Figure 24. Karen LeCoq and Nancy Youdelman, *Leah's Room*, 1972. Mixed media site installation and performance at Womanhouse, Los Angeles, California.
Figure 27. Judy Chicago, *Cock and Cunt* Play, 1970. Performed at Womanhouse Los Angeles, California in 1972 by Faith Wilding (left) and Janice Lester (right).
Figure 30. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974-78. Mixed media installation. 1463 x 1463 x 1463 cm. Collection of the artist.
Figure 32. Betsy Damon, *7,000 Year Old Woman*, 1977. Performance on Prince Street in New York.
Figure 35. Late Minoan, *Goddess with a Crown of Doves*, from Cazi. c. 1250 B.C. Terracotta, 52 cm high. Archeological Museum, Heraklion.
Figure 36. Mary Beth Edelson, *See For Yourself*, 1977. Performance at Grapčeva Cave, Hvar Island, formerly Yugoslavia.
Figure 37. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*. 1970. Mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, water; length of coil 457 m. Great Salt Lake, Utah.
Figure 39. Elizabeth Sowers, *Protective Coloring*, in Northern California.
Figure 40. Donna Henes, *Cocoon Ceremony*, 1979. Performance on Lake Margarethe, Michigan.
Figure 41. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled, (Silhouette series)*, 1977. Colour photograph, 50.8 x 33.1 cm, of earth-body work of mud and water, executed at Old Man's Creek, Iowa City, Iowa. Collection of Ignacio C. Mendieta.
Figure 42. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled, (Volcano series no. 2)*, 1977. Colour photograph, 33.1 x 50.8 cm, of earthwork with gunpowder, executed at Sharon Center, Iowa. Estate of Ana Mendieta.
Figure 43. Faith Wilding, *Flesh Petals*, 1970. Graphite on paper, 76.2 x 61 cm. Collection of the artist.
Figure 44. Robert Morris and Carolee Schneemann, *Site*, 1964. Performance at the Sur + Dance Theatre, Stage 73, New York.
Figure 47. Leslie Labowitz-Starus, Poster for Menstruation Wait. 1972. Performance in Dusseldorf, Germany.
Figure 49. Mary Beth Edelson, *Centering: Ritual with My Daughter*, 1974. Series of sixteen documentary photographs, each 81.3 x 81.3 cm. Collection of the artist.
Figure 50. Ulrike Rosenbach, *Wrapping with Julia*, 1972. Black-and-white videotape, 5:00 minutes. Distributed by V-Tape, Toronto.
Figure 52. Vito Acconci, *Undertone*, 1972. Black-and-white videotape. 30:00 minutes. Distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.
Figure 53. Lynda Benglis, *Female Sensibility*, 1974. Colour videotape, 14:00 minutes. Distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.
Figure 54. Lynda Benglis, advertisement in *Artforum*, XIII. No. 3 (November 1974), pp. 4-5.
Figure 55. Robert Morris, advertisement in *Artforum*, XIII, No. 1 (September 1974), p. 44.
Figure 58. Lisa Steele, *Birthday Suit: Scars and Defects*, 1974. Black-and-white videotape, 12:00 minutes. Distributed by V-Tape, Toronto.
Figure 60. Lynda Benglis, *Home Tape Revised*, 1972. Black-and white-videotape, 25:00 minutes. Distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.
Figure 61. Nancy Holt, *Underscan*, 1974. Black-and-white videotape. 8:00 minutes. Distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.
Figure 62. Lisa Steele, *A Very Personal Story*, 1974. Black-and-white videotape 17:00 minutes. Distributed by V-Tape, Toronto.
Figure 63. Linda Montano, *Mitchell's Death*. 1978. Performance at the University of California, San Diego. Documented as a black-and-white videotape 22:00 minutes. Distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.
Figure 64. Shigeko Kubota, My Father, 1975. Black-and-white videotape. 15:00 minutes. Distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.
Figure 66. Ilene Segalove, *Professional Retirement Home*, 1973. Black-and-white videotape, 8:00 minutes. Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, California.
Figure 68. Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975. Black-and-white videotape, 6:00 minutes. Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York and Video Data Bank, Chicago.
Figure 70. Eleanor Antin, The King of Solana Beach with Surfers. 1979. Performance at Solana Beach, San Diego, California.
Figure 72. Lynn Hershman, *Roberta Breitmore's Construction Chart*. 1975. Third generation cibachrome print, 45.7 x 61 cm. Collection of the artist.
Figure 73. Linda Montano, *Chicken Dance*, 1972. Street performance in San Francisco.
Posturing: Drag

Form determines feeling, so that if I pose in a role I can experience a foreign emotion. This was an attempt at double sex transformation; I am dressed in "drag" so that the transformation is from female into male, back into female. Theoretically, the uninitiated audience sees only half of this process, from "male" into "female".

February, 1972

Figure 74. Martha Wilson, Posturing: Drag, 1972. Colour photograph and text. Collection of the artist.
Painted Lady

As a "painted lady" I may be seen by others as an object, but my purpose is to defend "masking". Instead of making myself up as someone else (which would limit expression), for this piece I made myself up as myself, exaggerating or stylizing my own skin, lip and hair color, hair style, bone structure, and so on. Experimentally, the application of makeup helped me objectify myself; comparison of the introverted "before" expression and the extroverted "after" expression demonstrates that disguise makes more various expression of self possible. Exaggeration and stylization of my surface results in disappearance of "my own" features, or sensation of an absence of preconditions. A range of possible expression, of unaccustomed attitudes, can fill this vacuum; absence of self is the free space in which expression plays. Thus the "obstacle, the painted surface, is ironically the means of expression.

May, 1972

Figure 75. Martha Wilson, Painted Lady, 1972. Colour photograph and text. Collection of the artist.
Figure 76. Susan Britton, Susan, 1976. Black-and-white videotape. 10:30 minutes. Collection of the artist.
Figure 77. Adrian Piper, *Political Self-Portrait, # 2*, 1978. Poster, 61 x 91.4 cm Collection of the artist.
Figure 78. Adrian Piper, *Untitled*, 1970. Performance at Max’s Kansas City, New York City.
Figure 79. Adrian Piper, *Catalysis IV*, 1970. Street performance in New York City.
Figure 80. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I Embody Everything You Most Hate and Fear*, 1975. Poster, 45.4 x 61 cm. Collection of the artist.
Figure 82. Vito Acconci, *Conversions*, 1971. Black-and-white Super 8 film. 72:00 minutes.
Figure 84. Joan Jonas, *Vertical Roll*, 1972. Black-and-white videotape. 20:00 minutes. Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.
Figure 85. Martha Wilson, *Psychology of Camera Presence*. 1974. Black-and-white videotape. 7:00 minutes. Collection of the artist.
Figure 89. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series, Mastication Box*. 1974-75. Chewing gum, thirty-five black-and-white photographs, playing instructions and playing cards, 30.5 x 21.6 cm. Collection of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.
Figure 91. Ulrike Rosenbach, *Don't Believe I Am an Amazon*, 1975. Black-and-white videotape, 15:00 minutes. Distributed by V-Tape, Toronto.
Figure 92. Ulrike Rosenbach, *Reflections on the Birth of Venus*. 1976. Colour videotape, 15:00 minutes. Distributed by V-Tape, Toronto.