

**WEIGHING THE BODY:
FEMALE BODY IMAGE IN CONTEMPORARY ART**

by

EMILY L. NEWMAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2012

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Professor Anna Chave

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Professor Kevin Murphy

Date

Executive Officer

Professor Mona Hadler

Professor Siona Wilson

Professor Hilary Robinson

Supervision Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT**WEIGHING THE BODY:
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Emily L. Newman

Advisor: Professor Anna Chave

Numerous contemporary artists, particularly female artists, have at key moments in their careers chosen to examine the issue of female body image. The preoccupation with weight is preeminently visual, so artistic interventions can be particularly powerful. Yet no comprehensive study exists of artwork concerned with pandemic issues such as obesity, anorexia, bulimia, dieting, or female body image broadly. In this dissertation, I examine significant examples of such projects by locating works by key artists in social and historical context, including that of evolving feminist discourses on the body: Laura Aguilar (b. 1959), Eleanor Antin (b. 1935), Vanessa Beecroft (b. 1969), Maureen Connor (b. 1947), Lauren Greenfield (b. 1966), Ariane Lopez-Huici (b. 1945), Leonard Nimoy (b. 1931), L.A. Raeven (twins Liesbeth and Angelique Raeven, who work as a singular artist, b. 1971), Faith Ringgold (b. 1930), Rachel Rosenthal (b. 1926), Barbara Smith (1931), and Jana Sterbak (b. 1955).

Many of the artists in question have incorporated their own bodies into their work, at times leading to certain contradictions that deserve discussion. That is, as they choose to diet or to display their eating disorders through their artworks, they may appear complicit in the very syndromes that they are ostensibly critiquing. In choosing to investigate or document extreme examples of thin and fat women, or in chronicling

anorexic and bulimic bodies, these thirteen artists generally raise questions concerning societal pressures on the healthy female body. I argue that each of these artists has somehow questioned female bodily ideals while also complicating the idea of a “normal” female figure. Because the artists in question—though all from the United States and Europe--represent a variety of backgrounds, including Jewish, African-American, Latina, and white, it follows that their work evinces different cultural or sub-cultural understandings of, and approaches to body size. By focusing in a roughly chronological way on projects that date from the 1970s to the early 2000s, I examine how visual approaches to issues surrounding body image have shifted and developed over time as artists move from documenting their own dieting to heralding the fat body to others who justify eating disorders.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the generous support of my adviser Anna Chave, this dissertation would not have been possible. Her challenging and critical advice on the topic and her thorough comments on my writing have undoubtedly made my work stronger. I am indebted to her for helping me to become a better scholar. Mona Hadler provided fresh insight into the project, and I am grateful to her, Siona Wilson and Hilary Robinson for their contributions, as they provided thoughtful commentary that strengthened the dissertation.

With such a broad range of artists discussed, I was fortunate to be able to speak to many of them in person. Many thanks to Barbara Smith, Eleanor Antin, Rachel Rosenthal, Faith Ringgold, Maureen Connor, Ariane Lopez-Huici, and Leonard Nimoy who answered emails, had spirited phone conversations with me, and many even invited me into their homes. For archival research, staff and collections at the Stanford University Libraries Department of Special Collections and University Archives, the Getty Research Institute, and the Walker Art Center were immensely helpful.

Financial support was pivotal towards the completion of this dissertation. The Graduate Center's Chancellor's Fellowship secured that I was supported in my studies. Travel grants and funding by The Graduate Center, St. Cloud State University and Texas A&M University-Commerce allowed me to complete interviews with the artists, present chapters at conferences and finish the research necessary to write the dissertation.

My colleagues from all over the country have helped me in various ways along this journey. Sarah Holloran provided encouragement and insight at the beginning of this project. Robin Goodman exuded kindness and patience, as she read drafts and helped talk me through various concerns. At the Graduate Center, Amy Brandt, Sheila Gerami, and

Lauren Bonilla-Merchav were pivotal in helping me survive the program and continued to support me throughout the writing process. During my time at St. Cloud State, David Sebberson, Justin Quinn, Lynn Metcalf, Kathryn Gainey, Bill Gorica, and Laurie Lietch all provided encouragement and great conversation that helped me understand the dissertation in new and different ways. In particular, Kiera and Ben Faber were always willing to listen about the project, share advice, and generously supplied me with tons of encouragement. In the final push to finish writing and editing, Joseph Daun and my colleagues at Texas A&M University-Commerce supported my efforts and made possible my last few months of work.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the love and support of so many friends and family. Throughout the entire process, I could always turn to Christine Allen, April Anderson, Nathan Petek, Amanda Jordan, and Brent Cannon. Buffy Summers and Willow Rosenberg always provided me with an escape, allowing me to stay sane throughout this process. My grandparents, June and Thornton Wright, constantly and consistently championed my work and my efforts. Without the reassurance and strength from my sister, Allison Newman, this work would not be finished. Laurie Newman, my mother, never faltered, and no matter how things were going, she was my backbone. Not only did she provide advice and support along the way, she never failed to keep me grounded and remind me of my goals. My mother's unfailing support encouraged me to continue and finish, whereas my sister's humor and practicality has kept me afloat. This dissertation is dedicated to them, the two most amazing and inspiring women I know, beautiful inside and out.

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Introduction

The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home. The magazine surely does not leave out sex; the only passion, the only pursuit, the only goal a woman is permitted is the pursuit of a man. It is crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit? In the magazine image, women do no work except housework and work to keep their bodies beautiful and to get and keep a man.

--Betty Friedan¹

In her pathbreaking book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan perceptively articulated the plight of a certain segment, at least, of post-war woman in the United States. She described her view of the societal position of women and their confinement within the patriarchal system in Western culture, often with the device of anecdotes and accounts of personal experiences. Repeatedly focusing on the way women are pressured by societal mores, Friedan described the ways in which women were expected to look and dress in order to be appealing to the opposite sex. Furthermore, she elaborated on the lengths to which women went to manipulate their figures in order to become successful wives and society women.² Over forty years later, Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber demonstrated that many of the issues regarding body image that Friedan articulated are still relevant. Hesse-Biber pointed to a Cult of Thinness, constructed around a putatively ideal female body, and operating as an unspoken pact encouraging women to diet and

¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 36.

² For a thorough investigation of Friedan and the culture of the early 1960s, see Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

exercise compulsively to achieve perfection as defined by popular media imagery.³

Notwithstanding the passage of time between Friedan and Hesse-Biber's writings, both authors framed a view of women as persistently concerned with altering their bodies.

Given the sustained attention to the size and shape of women's bodies in the contemporary era, it is unsurprising that manipulation of the female physique has emerged as a crucial theme in art by women, as apparent in the recent exhibitions that have featured women's art practices. Originating in 2007 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution" was broadly concerned with the way that the feminist movement has altered the art world. As the exhibition showed, feminist attention to body art and performance generally has proven fertile ground for engagement with body image.⁴ In Europe too, major group shows like "elles@centrepompidou" in Paris and "Rebelle: Art and Feminism, 1969-2009" at the Museum voor Moderne Kunst in Arnhem reconsidered collections of contemporary art with an eye towards incorporating work by women as well as art that dealt with feminist issues.⁵ A dominant theme that emerged from these shows was a focus on women's bodies and the desire to manipulate and a corollary engagement with the female physique. Additionally, "Dangerous Beauty" was organized in 2007 by the Chelsea Art Museum in New York in direct response to Spain's ban on underweight

³ Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, *The Cult of Thinness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴ Cornelia H. Butler and Lisa Gabrielle Mark, eds. *Wack!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

⁵ Camille Morineau, ed. *elles@centrepompidou: Women Artists in the Collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne Centre de Création Industrielle* (Antwerp: Deckers Snoeck, 2009); and Mirjam Westen, *REBELLE: Art and Feminism, 1969-2009* (Arnhem, Netherlands: De Rijn, 2009).

models in Madrid's 2007 fashion week, Pasarela Cibeles.⁶ The works in this group show variously prompted viewers to consider the mass media's preoccupation with skinny bodies.

This dissertation looks at contemporary artists who have worked specifically with female body image as a subject for their art. Because the preoccupation with weight is preeminently visual, artistic interventions can be particularly powerful as a way to address societal expectations. I examine significant examples of such projects by thirteen key artists, locating their works within a larger social and historical context as well as within recent feminist discourses on the body. The thirteen artists to be covered in what follows are: Laura Aguilar, Eleanor Antin, Vanessa Beecroft, Maureen Connor, Lauren Greenfield, Ariane Lopez-Huici, Leonard Nimoy, L.A. Raeven (twins named Liesbeth and Angelique Raeven, who consider themselves a singular artist), Faith Ringgold, Rachel Rosenthal, Barbara Smith, and Jana Sterbak.

Despite the large number of important artists who have addressed this subject in the last fifty years, no comprehensive study has been yet made of artwork concerned with female body issues and attendant issues such as obesity, dieting, anorexia, and bulimia. Monographic studies have been written on many of the thirteen artists encompassed by this dissertation, as well as some studies that deal more broadly with body issues in modern and contemporary art. For the purposes of this project, the most relevant writers include Rosemary Betterton and Amelia Jones. In 1996, Betterton tackled the complicated ways that many female artists have used their bodies in their art in *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists, and the Body*. She challenged the way that female

⁶ Manon Slome, *Bellezza pericolosa / Dangerous Beauty* (New York: Chelsea Art Museum and Naples, Italy: Electa Napoli, 2007).

artists like Paula Modersohn-Becker and Suzanne Valedon have been almost exclusively described in the context of the size and shape of their bodies as depicted in their artwork. In doing so, Betterton incorporated into her discussion the role of the artists' political involvements, their experience of motherhood, and their identity more broadly.⁷ In her groundbreaking studies, including particularly the 1998 *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, Jones re-evaluated the way that women artists used their bodies to challenge the conventional position of women as objects.⁸ Joanna Frueh provided insight into the role of feminist art of the 1970s and its relationship to the female physique in her 1994 essay "The Body Through Women's Eyes."⁹ In more recent texts, Sidonie Smith, Melissa C. Thompson, and Stefanie Snider re-examined the role of performance in the context of issues surrounding the size of the female body, and the way that race may complicate this discussion.¹⁰ In *So Much Wasted*, Patrick Anderson innovatively evaluated fasting and eating disorders as complex examples of a form of performance art.¹¹ In addition to referring to these important studies, I have relied on the artists' own writings and on interviews for critical insight into their viewpoints.

⁷ Rosemary Betterton, *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists, and the Body* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁸ Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998).

⁹ Joanna Frueh, "The Body through Women's Eyes" (1994), in *Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 190-207.

¹⁰ Sidonie Smith, "Bodies of Evidence: Jenny Saville, Faith Ringgold, and Janine Antoni Weigh In," in *Interfaces: Women / Autobiography / Image / Performance*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Melissa C. Thompson examines the way that fat can be used as an artistic medium in her "Size on Display: The Dynamics of Female Fat in Contemporary Performance Art" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 2006); and Stefanie Snider, "Envisioning Bodily Difference: Refiguring Fat and Lesbian Subjects in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture, 1968-2009" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2010).

¹¹ Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

A project of this type would be incomplete without the inclusion and discussion of the pivotal texts on female body image by Susie Orbach, Naomi Wolf, Susan Bordo, Kim Chernin, and Joan Jacobs Brumberg.¹² In addition, Becky Thompson's work addresses conflicting cultural positions associated with African Americans and weight.¹³ A thorough history of the increasing societal preoccupation with weight in Europe and the United States is included in Roberta Pollack Seid's 1989 *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies*.¹⁴ None of these authors look to the visual arts, however, when discussing social preoccupations with the size of the female figure. My study will examine how thirteen different artists, through a variety of media and viewpoints, have engaged with contemporary ideas concerning female body size in order to investigate and challenge the imposition of the cultural ideal of the thin woman.

The artists to be discussed have made work that has been fundamentally shaped by the increased societal awareness of body size and the imperative for weight loss that might be dated from the 1960s, signaled by: the founding of Overeaters Anonymous in 1960 and Weight Watchers in 1963; the rise of popular low-calorie food products, beginning in 1962; and the discovery of the importance of exercise to weight loss, evidenced by the first publication of a chart measuring calories burned during certain

¹² Susie Orbach, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* (New York: Berkley Books, 1978); Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (1991; repr., New York: Perennial, 2002); Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1994; repr., Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004); Kim Chernin, *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1994); and Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

¹³ Becky W. Thompson, *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Roberta Pollack Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1989).

workouts, in 1965. With the increasing societal privileging of the thin body came a corresponding increase in instances of fat-phobia and size discrimination.¹⁵ Together, such developments came to affect how women have viewed their bodies since the 1960s.

Also important to bear in mind about the status of women's bodies in the 1960s is that the United States Food and Drug Administration approved the birth control pill as a contraceptive in 1960, in one of the most important social advancements of the twentieth century. By the end of 1961, 408,000 American women were taking the pill and just two years later the number had jumped to 2.3 million.¹⁶ Early versions of the pill contained high amounts of estrogen, resulting in headaches, weight gain, and other negative side effects. In addition to changing women's bodies, the birth control pill was also crucial to the development of the sexual revolution as well as the women's liberation movement.

Significantly, the women's liberation movement moved into mainstream consciousness with the protest staged by Robin Morgan and the New York Radical Women (NYRW) at the Miss America Pageant in September 1968.¹⁷ It is worth emphasizing that one of the first gambits women used to try to dramatize their oppression in the 1960s was centered on society's evaluation of women's bodies based on appearance. Speaking out against the oppression of women, which the NYRW saw as epitomized by the pageant, the protesters staged a series of events including picketing,

¹⁵ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 137-62; and Marjolijn Bijlefeld and Sharon K. Zoumbaris, *Encyclopedia of Diet Fads* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2008).

¹⁶ While the pill was not approved until 1960, many women had been on the pill since as early as 1957, when doctors were using the drug to treat gynecological disorders. See Bernard Asbell, *The Pill: A Biography of the Drug that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 1995), 168-70.

¹⁷ Gail Collins, *America's Women: Four Hundred Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 440; and Bonnie J. Dow, "Feminism, Miss America, and Media Mythology," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 129-31.

guerrilla theater, and visits to individual contestants urging them to quit the pageant. Perhaps the most significant part of the protest was the now infamous “bra-burning” event. More than one hundred women gathered together, throwing bras, girdles, high heels, curlers, make up, and *Playboy* magazines into a trashcan. No bras were actually burned, however. Unable to secure the permits for a fire, the women instead threw the objects into a barrel, dubbed the Freedom Trash Can.¹⁸

Morgan, one of the main organizers, sent a press release to major news outlets to encourage people to attend, but also to explain the reasons behind the protest. She wrote, “On September 7th in Atlantic City, the Annual Miss America Pageant will again crown ‘your ideal.’ But this year, reality will liberate the contest auction-block in the guise of ‘genyooine’ de-plasticized, breathing women.”¹⁹ The press release made clear that Morgan would agree to be interviewed by women only. If any of the group was arrested, she would demand to be arrested by policewomen, which drew attention to the fact that Atlantic City’s female police officers were not allowed to make arrests. Laying out ten points of protest, Morgan attacked what she identified as the institutionalized racism of the pageant, the privileging of looks over brains, and the focus on women as objects to be consumed, among other problems.²⁰

¹⁸ Deborah Rhode, “Media Images, Feminist Issues,” *Signs* 20, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 693; Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York: Dial, 1999), 36-37; and Myra Ferree and Beth Hess, *Controversy and Coalition: The New Feminist Movement Across Four Decades of Change* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 83.

¹⁹ Robin Morgan, “No More Miss America!” (1968), in *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 584.

²⁰ For more information, see Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

Morgan emphasized the problematic body ideal that the pageant imposed on women. Calling the contest “The Irrelevant Crown on the Throne of Mediocrity,” Morgan explained, “Miss America represents what women are supposed to be: inoffensive, bland, apolitical. If you are tall, short, over or under what weight The Man prescribes you should be, forget it. Personality, articulateness, intelligence, and commitment--unwise. Conformity is the key to the crown--and, by extension, to success in our society.”²¹ Pointing out that most women would never even be considered for the title of Miss America because of their race and body size, the NYRW blamed the pageant, and by extension the media and their coverage of the contest, for putting pressure on women to look a certain way. By throwing out bras and girdles, the women made clear they did not want to bind and alter their bodies to make them conform to a given ideal. After Miss Illinois had been crowned Miss America, two protesters unfurled over a balcony a large banner that proclaimed “Women’s Liberation”; this was one of the first times that many had ever heard the term.

The women’s liberation movement, as well as the closely affiliated women’s rights movement, developed in the 1960s under a wide variety of leaders, strategies, and organizations.²² There was not one issue that united the movement; rather, a plethora of issues engaged women on a number of different levels. Susan Welch compared the choice of issues to a “cafeteria”: “women can support the movement for a variety of reasons including economic self-interest, promotion of self-esteem, or strictly social and

²¹ Morgan, “No More Miss America!”, 587.

²² Jo Freeman, “The Origins of the Women’s Liberation Movement,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 4 (Jan. 1973): 792-811.

companionship needs.”²³ But within this multiplicity of ideas and concerns, women generally spoke out to defend equal rights. This ability to join organizations and groups with shared values provided women with an important support system. For example, the National Organization of Women, founded by Betty Freidan, as well as *Ms.* magazine, founded by Gloria Steinem, created new opportunities for women to share their experiences and connect with one another. Magazines, television, books, and all types of media began to present outlets where women could, in the parlance of the times “find themselves.”²⁴

Certain artists also began to embrace the women’s liberation movement. Martha Rosler’s *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (1966-72) represented her transition to a feminist art that addressed issues of body size. In *Food for the Spirit* (1971), Adrian Piper documented her body as she lost weight over a summer during a philosophical exercise, repeatedly turning to the photographs to remind her of her physical existence. These two endeavors were among the first to show how artists can engage societal preoccupations with the female physique. Piper’s and Rosler’s early performance and conceptual works were some of the first artworks to explore the vulnerability and the malleability of women’s bodies.

Finding herself intrigued with old magazines and cheap advertisements, Martha Rosler (b. 1943) began exploring photomontage in the mid-1960s when she was fresh out of college. She explained why she valued the manipulations that the collage process could offer: “It is seizing control of the discourse, the reading, and focusing attention:

²³ Susan Welch, “Support Among Women for the Issues of the Women’s Movement,” *Sociological Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1975): 217.

²⁴ See Patricia Bradley, *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 1963-1975* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003).

‘Look here now!’ Don’t look here in order to go somewhere else in your mind. I thought if you are going to engage with everyday life, you have to very careful about selecting what is to be looked at.”²⁵ *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (figs. 1, 2), a series of thirty-one photomontages, juxtaposed commercial images of women’s bodies with consumer goods and objects. According to Alexander Alberro, these works forced the viewer “to reconsider the use of women as signs for domesticity, docility, sexuality, and the circulation of commodities. . . . The series as a whole parodically fetishizes the female body and its parts while defetishizing the object quality of the art work or the Madison Avenue image.”²⁶

Rosler’s cutout images ranged from *Playboy* nudes to lingerie advertisements to material from women’s fashion magazines. Because each of her sources of imagery is meant to sell something, her use of these images makes it very clear how integral the female body is to the advertising world. In one photomontage in the series, *Cargo Cult*, Rosler organized the entire composition around a loading dock. In this work, large cranes lift plain wooden cargo boxes whose sides are decorated with pictures of women’s faces. Many of the women in these pictures are shown applying make up, trying to make themselves look better. The lifting of the large boxes onto the ship reiterates the ways that beauty can repeatedly be purchased--either through cosmetics or plastic surgery. In another photomontage, *Hot Meat*, Rosler superimposed a side view of a woman’s upper torso and breasts onto an advertisement for an oven. Here she visually connected the

²⁵ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “A Conversation with Martha Rosler” (1998), in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 29.

²⁶ Alexander Alberro, “The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy” (1998), in de Zegher, *Martha Rosler*, 80.

female body with a kitchen appliance, thereby uniting the categories of domesticity and sexual desire. Through works like these Rosler drew attention to sexist views that widely circulated in society.

In cutting up the photographs of women's bodies and refiguring them onto and with advertisements for domestic products, Rosler showed the way women's bodies are appropriated by society. By manipulating the images in her collages, she emphasized how the media had manipulated them first. By choosing only thin, beautiful bodies, she also made reference to the putatively ideal body that fills magazines and mass media.²⁷ While these works critiqued uses of the female body to sell products, they also drew attention to the media's focus on the thin body in particular, a focus that fostered the inadequacies so many women felt in trying to measure themselves against these unrealistic standards.

While Rosler worked on a large series and engaged commercial culture by using it as a source, Adrian Piper (b. 1948) worked on a much more personal level. In 1971 after she had graduated from the School of Visual Arts in New York and was working on a Bachelor of Arts in philosophy at City College of New York, Piper spent the summer reading and reflecting on Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). For this project, she set guidelines for herself; she stayed in her apartment and focused on Kant, leaving only for short trips to the grocery store and walks for exercise. Furthermore, she spent the months fasting and practicing yoga with the hopes that she would thus be able

²⁷ Rosler also dealt with body size in her piece *Losing: A Conversation with the Parents* (1977). In this video, she hires actors to portray parents of a victim of anorexia nervosa, Rosler intended this exercise to not only deal with self-destruction but to also relate to starvation that was happening in Third World Countries. For more information on this piece, see Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life," 96-98; and Jane Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," *October*, no. 17 (Summer 1981): 78-84.

to more fully understand and comprehend Kant's work. Between the isolation and lack of substantial food, she felt herself slipping away both physically and mentally:

Often, the effects of Kant's ideas were so strong that I couldn't take it anymore. I would have to stop reading in the middle of a sentence, on the verge of hysterics, and go to my mirror to peer at myself to make sure I was still there. . . . I rigged up a camera and tape recorder next to the mirror so that every time the fear of losing myself overtook me and drove me to the "reality check" of the mirror, I was able to record my physical appearance objectively and also to record myself on tape repeating the passage in the *Critique* that was currently driving me to self-transcendence. The sight and sound of me, the physically embodied Adrian Piper, repeating passages from Kant reassured me by demarcating the visual, verbal, and aural boundaries of my individual self, and reminded me of the material conditions of my mental state.²⁸

Her performance piece, *Food for the Spirit*, emerged out of this summer and was composed of the photographs and writings that record her wholehearted investigation of the writings of Kant (figs. 3, 4). As she immersed herself in the project, she found herself losing a grasp on the material world.²⁹

This work is intimately connected to Piper's philosophical studies in college. As John P. Bowles explained, "Emerging within *Food for the Spirit* as a rational subject, Piper grounds her claim to the transpersonal universality of Kantian metaphysics in personal experience. However, by emphasizing the need to repeat her attempts to master the material conditions of experience, she posed her claim in the form of a dilemma she cannot resolve conclusively."³⁰ Piper took fourteen pictures of herself standing in front of a mirror in various stages of dress and undress. The photographs are grainy and blurry,

²⁸ Adrian Piper, "Food for the Spirit," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 1:55.

²⁹ While the project was performed in 1971, it was not written about until 1981. See Adrian Piper, "Food for the Spirit," *High Performance* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 34.

³⁰ John P. Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 206.

and Piper's thin frame seemed to emerge out of a foggy background. The photographs were focused on grounding herself in the physical realm, serving to reassure herself of her existence. Simultaneously, the photographs represent a personal experience for Piper, documenting her body and her weight loss over the course of the fast.

As Piper starved herself and her physique shrunk, her body became the physical manifestation of her intellectual changes. According to Patrick Anderson, the photographs were a way of reiterating her body's materiality.

In *Food for the Spirit* alimentary and visual self-consumption stage the "indexical present" as fusion of subject and object: the relentlessly mortal body stares evenly at its own gradual disappearance, objectified by the reflection of an unforgiving mirror, simultaneously subjectified by its spoken and unspoken desire to find itself wholly there.³¹

While starvation is not the central element of the private performance, the fast allowed her to achieve her desired transcendental state while reading Kant. Nonetheless, it is hard *not* to read her photographs as a chronicle of her bodily changes. Piper's focus on the conceptual and on the intellectual changes incurred by a deep reading of philosophy would help shape her career—both as an artist and as a professional philosopher—but her interest in manipulating her body is one of the first instances in which a form of dieting became an important part of an artwork. For example, her molding of her body was a precursor to Eleanor Antin's use of dieting in *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1974, fig. 8) and Barbara T. Smith's exploration of meditation in *Pure Food* (1973).

Piper's and Rosler's photographs of the female body draw attention to the size and shape of its form. While weight is not the central point of their projects, it certainly does play a role. Not until the late 1970s did artists begin to explicitly address weight and

³¹ Anderson, *So Much Wasted*, 109.

body size in their work. Many of the artists covered in this dissertation have incorporated their own bodies into their work, at times leading to certain contradictions. That is, as they choose to diet or to display their eating disorders through their artworks, they have sometimes appeared to be complicit in the very syndromes they are ostensibly critiquing. But in choosing to investigate or to document extreme examples of thin and fat women, or to chronicle anorectic and bulimic bodies, these thirteen artists have generally raised questions concerning societal pressures put on the female body. I intend to demonstrate that by engaging the subject of weight, each of these artists managed to question the dominant ideals of the female figure while also complicating the idea of a healthy female body. By focusing on projects that date from the 1970s to the early 2000s, I explore how visual approaches to issues surrounding weight and body image have shifted and developed over time.³² All of the artists are from United States or Europe and, with the exception of Leonard Nimoy, all of the artists are women. Nonetheless, the artists represent a variety of different kinds of people: white, Jewish, African-American, and Latina; straight and lesbian; and of differing ages. It follows that their work evinces a wide range of cultural understandings of and approaches to body size.

This dissertation is structured chronologically, so that each chapter introduces three different artists from a particular time frame. After discussing the development of their artwork and its relationship to the concept of body image, I will explore a number of relevant cultural texts as well as literature specific to each artist. Furthermore, delineating

³² The thin female body image in Euro-American culture has been increasingly discussed and dissected in the last thirty years. Along with the literature already mentioned, see also Patricia Foster, ed. *Minding the Body* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995); and *Slim Hopes: Advertising and the Obsession with Thinness*, directed by Sut Jhally, videocassette (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2002).

the connections among the art works will lead to a discussion of how aspects of popular culture and society have changed with respect to body image.

The first chapter, “Performing Weight Loss,” concerns the work of influential early performance artists, including Eleanor Antin, Barbara T. Smith, and Rachel Rosenthal. After participating in various consciousness-raising events throughout the 1970s, all three artists decided to confront feminist subject matter in their art. Since Antin and Rosenthal had struggled with their weight, they decided to incorporate their personal body issues into their performances. Antin created the iconic *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1974), in which she adhered to a strict diet over the course of thirty-six days and documented the physical changes of her body through photographs and daily records of her weight. While Antin depicted weight loss, Rachel Rosenthal’s performance *The Death Show* (1978) articulated her concerns about weight gain and questioned the connection between death and obesity through the use of props and a dramatic monologue.

These performances called into question societal norms at a time of increasing preoccupation with weight and dieting, as evidenced by the growing popularity during the 1970s of fad diets and diet groups such as Weight Watchers. In contrast to the solidly built Antin and Rosenthal, Smith was a thin, yet curvy, blonde woman who frequently incorporated her nude body into her work. In *Feed Me* (1973), she stationed herself in a women’s bathroom surrounded by consumable goods, while in the background the words “feed me, feed me” could be heard over and over again. Scholars frequently focus on *Feed Me* as a work about endurance and relationships because of the interaction between Smith and the viewers who enter the bathroom and engage with her, thus the continual

references to food and eating are often ignored. As I will discuss, in part because of its normativity, Smith's thin, white female body did not invite a conversation about body issues, whereas Antin's and Rosenthal's works explicitly show their attempts to make their bodies conform to the ideal that Smith represents.

In "Sewn Shape," the second chapter, I will consider how Faith Ringgold, Jana Sterbak, and Maureen Connor have dissected the pressures on women to be thin through the use of handicraft and clothing. In 1986, Ringgold created *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Story Quilt* (1986), through which she documented her struggles with overeating and recent weight loss. Sterbak and Connor created art works that resembled clothing in order to question clothing's functional uses as well as societal concepts regarding the ideal size of the female body. In her widely exhibited *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987), Sterbak used raw meat to create a dress to be worn by a slender model or a dressmaker's mannequin, while in *Thinner Than You* (1990) Connor assembled a skimpy, stretchy dress with a thin wire dress stand in order to suggest a scarecrow-like human figure. In addressing fashion and exploring its preoccupation with thinness, these three women reflected larger societal concerns in the late 1980s, a time that witnessed the rise of the aerobics industry and an increasing media interest in female celebrities' weight fluctuations.

In the 1990s, fat women like Roseanne Barr and Delta Burke were appearing on television, as movements encouraging fat acceptance--recognizing and accepting people of all sizes, as well as working to end fat discrimination--started to gain steam. In the third chapter, "Photographing Fat," I explore the work of Laura Aguilar, Ariane Lopez-Huici, and Leonard Nimoy. Each of these artists photographed larger women. Often

making reference to famous paintings or well-known photographs featuring substantial female bodies, the artists wanted larger bodies to be appreciated and seen as beautiful. Aguilar primarily used her own body as the focal point in her photographs and videos, as she attempted to become comfortable with her larger physique, while Lopez-Huici worked with models to create collaborative photographs that are often inspired by the paintings of Peter Paul Rubens and Henri Matisse. For his work, Nimoy photographed a group of fat burlesque performers mimicking contemporaneous fashion photographs by Herb Ritts and others. By examining the fat female body as well as the variety of ways the models participated in the photographic process, these artists have complicated the contemporary popular image of women in the media. Featuring fat women in their work, these three artists also provide an important and necessary counterpart to the earlier chapters in the dissertation. By aggressively challenging the thin ideal for women's shape, they responded to the development of fat acceptance movements.

“Documenting Anorexia,” the fourth chapter, dissects the ways that certain artists have reflected the increasing instances of anorexia in Western society by incorporating their own struggles with eating disorders into their art. Vanessa Beecroft's first gallery show revolved around *Book of Food* (1993), a diary that obsessively chronicled her eating and exercising habits. Similarly, L.A. Raeven staged recreations of their own obsessive behaviors in which they dramatically restrict their eating. Using themselves as well as hired models, they presented images of exceedingly thin and unhealthy body types that are nonetheless often represented as acceptable or even ideal. Beecroft and L.A. Raeven participated in numerous interviews and documentaries that focused on their bodies and eating disorders while, in a way, sidelining their artistic achievements.

Despite their creating artwork that attempted to interrogate or address the thin ideal for Western women, their own bodies effectively became in the eyes of critics the most interesting things about them. Their work can be contrasted with that of the photojournalist Lauren Greenfield, who made a documentary film about four women at an eating disorder clinic. In *Thin* (2006), Greenfield showed the struggles and difficult side effects of women suffering from anorexia and bulimia. By contrast, Beecroft drew attention to the troubling relationship between fashion and the thin female body through her own experiences, while L.A. Raeven created artworks that sought to justify and normalize extremely thin, malnourished bodies like their own.

Altogether, these chapters address how female body image has proven not only a viable, but a highly relevant and significant subject matter for artists since the 1960s. By examining the sociological and cultural contexts that have contributed to the creation of these works, I will explore the ways these artists address the manipulation of female bodies in the media, as well as in everyday life. At the same time, these artists' works are often connected to the lives and bodies of the artists themselves, and are therefore in various ways, deeply personal. Perhaps the saddest finding of all my research is the way that almost all the women discussed here express dissatisfaction with their bodies. Through their speech or actions, these women make clear--in ways critical or otherwise--that they believe their bodies are not up to par. Indeed, these artists all effectively reinforce the sorry truth that a woman's body is rarely satisfactory to her in society that is hyper-critical of women's shape.

Chapter One: Performing Weight Loss

What are our bodies? First, they are us. We do not inhabit them--we *are* them (as well as mind). This realization should lead to anger at those people who have subtly persuaded us to look upon our bodies (ourselves) as no more than commodities to be given in return for favors. . . . [W]e view our bodies and those of other women according to how closely they “measure up” to the sexist standards of society. But our bodies are unique because they--us--will never occur again. Love for ourselves and other women, both of which we have never been allowed to experience, begins to surface when we refuse to objectify ourselves any longer and stop depending on the nowhere identity we have been forced to subsist on for so long.

--*Our Bodies, Ourselves*¹

I had never thought of women being artists. And I never thought that I being a woman could become an artist, or if I were an artist I was not a woman.

--Rachel Rosenthal²

For many artists, the weekend of January 21-23, 1972, was an empowering experience. The West Coast Women’s Art Conference, held that weekend, marked the first occasion of its kind, as women met to discuss their art, to share the challenges they faced as women and artists, and to celebrate the opening of *Womanhouse*, a deserted house in a residential area of Hollywood repurposed as an art exhibit (fig. 5). The gathering emerged out of the recently established Feminist Art Program (FAP), which began at Fresno State College in 1970, but emerged more successfully at the California Institute of the Arts in 1971.³ Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro established the latter

¹ Boston Women’s Health Course Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Boston: New England Free Press, 1971), 4.

² “Modern Art in Los Angeles: Feminist Art in Southern California,” panel discussion moderated by Jori Finkel, Getty Center, Los Angeles, March 27, 2007, DVD, Getty Research Institute Library, Los Angeles.

³ Mary D. Garrard, “Feminist Politics: Networks and Organizations,” in *Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Mary D. Garrard and Norma Broude (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 91-92; and Nancy Grubb, ed., *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 32-34.

program, which focused on educating women artists through discussions, consciousness-raising, developing feminist sensibilities, and recovering lost women artists. In organizing this conference, Schapiro and Chicago made clear that the issues the students were grappling with extended beyond the twenty or so students then enrolled in the program--issues surrounding women artists' role in the art world broadly. Southern California had emerged as a key community for feminist artists, which allowed for the flourishing of the Feminist Art Program. These developments led to the opening of the seminal *Womanhouse*, which in turn inspired the development of the L.A. Women's Building, to name just some salient examples.⁴

The first day of the conference centered on *Womanhouse*, as Chicago, Schapiro, and FAP students led tours of the structure. Designed by FAP teachers and students, the house itself was an exhibition of different spaces, all of which posed challenges to the patriarchal social and culture structures of the art world, as well as the world-at-large. For example, Judy Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* was filled with both new and used feminine hygiene projects, with the intention of encouraging conversation about the subject matter. Sandy Orgel placed a female mannequin between the shelves of a filled linen closet; placing one foot out of the closet, the mannequin appears to directly emerge from the confined space. While the exhibit was part of the primary program of the West Coast Conference, after the opening of *Womanhouse* the first day, Judy Chicago and the FAP's Performance Workshop arranged a series of performances, including the debut of Faith Wilding's work *Waiting* and the *Cock and Cunt Play* performed by Chicago and her

⁴ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, "Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century," in *Power of Feminist Art*, 14.

students.⁵ The conference began in earnest on January 22 as Schapiro invited the women “out of our dining room workshops, our bedroom and kitchen table studios.” The conference was informal as people split into groups and hovered over slides in darkened rooms and in the house’s garage. Throughout the weekend, important connections and friendships were made, cementing the lasting impact of the conference. Furthermore, the weekend was filled with various lectures including a discussion of feminist art history by the FAP official art historian Paula Harper, Janice Lester’s presentation on the rediscovered Women’s Building at the Chicago World’s Fair, Schapiro’s and Chicago’s “Central Core Imagery” lecture, and a June Wayne seminar on the professional and economic demands necessitated by being a working artist. Additionally, numerous artists, including Eleanor Antin, Ida Horwitz, Judy Chicago, and Ree Morton, had the opportunity to present slides of their work. A pamphlet written about the conference by New York artist Alexis Krasilovsky summarized the impact of the weekend: “The West Coast Women’s Art Conference signified an end to the overwhelming oppression and isolation of women artists. The memory of each other’s work will serve for years of artistic inspiration and the banding together will bring women the recognition and support we need.”⁶

⁵ Alexis Radael Krasilovsky, *West Coast Women Artists’ Conference* (New York: 1972) and Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, *Womanhouse* (California Institute for the Arts and Wood and Jones, 1972), n.p.

⁶ There is little documentation about conference attendance and there are no known recordings of the proceedings. Most of the documentation concerning the conference comes from Krasilovsky’s pamphlet, *West Coast Women Artists’ Conference* and from Chicago’s and Schapiro’s personal accounts of events published in *Womanhouse*. Additionally, Barbara T. Smith (interview by author, Venice, CA, May 31, 2009), Rachel Rosenthal (interview by author, Los Angeles, May 29, 2009), and Eleanor Antin (e-mail message to author, June 28, 2009) provided their recollections regarding the informality of the conference and the freedom that the structure provided.

One of the strengths of the conference was that women came from all over the United States, allowing for meetings and discussions that would not necessarily have happened without the geographical breadth of the attendees. Rachel Rosenthal has frequently noted that she attended the conference in hopes of meeting Barbara Smith, a performance artist whom she greatly admired.⁷ Living locally, Smith attended the conference with no real expectations, but was amazed by the amount of art being produced by women, and later was intimately involved with the creation of the Women's Building.⁸ Also living nearby thus able to make the drive up from San Diego, Eleanor Antin had been asked to show slides of her work.⁹ Rosenthal, Smith and Antin are now recognized as three of the most influential performance artists of the 1970s and their attendance at this prestigious conference in Los Angeles provides an important starting point for dissecting the plethora of connections between the three artists, while also offering insight into some of the first artists who began to use issues surrounding weight and body size as material for their artwork.

By examining these three feminist performance artists in Southern California active in the 1970s, I want to show that each of them used her body to engage with contemporary pressures on women to conform to an ideal size. Eleanor Antin and Rachel Rosenthal, in a way that paralleled the experience of many women who were unhappy with their body size, created works that not only reflected that dissatisfaction, but also

⁷ Rachel Rosenthal, "Oral History Interview with Rachel Rosenthal," Los Angeles, September 2-3, 1989, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Her reason for attending was also noted by Smith and Rosenthal in interviews with the author.

⁸ Smith (interview) explained that the conference really made her consider women artists as a group, as she expressed that her "amazement was at how much work was being done, how many women were artists."

⁹ Krasilovsky, *West Coast Women Artists' Conference*.

expressed their desire or felt the need to change their bodies. By contrast, with her thinner body that conformed to societal preferences for women's physiques, Barbara T. Smith could make a work about her body that was less about her weight-management, and more about the way she chose to interact with viewers and participants. Because of her body type, Smith's work cannot be read in the same manner as those of Antin and Rosenthal. Rather, Smith's body represented an ideal that Antin and Rosenthal strove to obtain.

Each of these women has spoken of the 1970s women's liberation movement and its effect on their artwork. For Rosenthal, the movement effectively allowed her to live her life as a woman and an artist, no longer viewing the two as mutually exclusive. Yet, it fundamentally changed her artistic production. After the 1972 conference, she stopped pursuing more traditional theatrical endeavors, instead creating performance-based art that was distinctly about her own life experiences.¹⁰ This turn toward biography in art was not limited to Rosenthal, as many artists--specifically, many female artists--began to incorporate elements of their life history in their work. Indeed, as Lucy Lippard has pointed out, at this time feminist artists were in the vanguard of integrating their lives into their work.¹¹ Artists like Rosenthal, Chicago, and others considered themselves as providing voices that differed from the male voices that had previously dominated the art world. Compared to Rosenthal, Eleanor Antin created work shortly after this conference that began to address issues of identity which explored not just herself but other

¹⁰ Rosenthal, interview.

¹¹ Lucy R. Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s," *Art Journal* 40, nos. 1-2, (Autumn-Winter 1980): 362. See also Lucy R. Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," *Art in America* 64, no. 3 (May-June 1976): 122.

constructed “selves,” appearing in her personification of characters such as the King of Solana Beach and Eleanor Antinova.

In short, the West Coast Women’s Art Conference helped usher in the acceptance of new and different kinds of subject matter: notably, women’s perspectives on the female body. Of course the female body is a traditional subject of art, but women artists’ seizing control of that body was a relatively new phenomenon. Historically, artists such as Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun used their own bodies in their artwork, but their self-portraiture remained generally aesthetically consistent with that of their male counterparts.¹² Adopting performative strategies, Antin, Rosenthal, and Smith each used their bodies’ physical presence in their work. By making their bodies integral parts of their performance, they not only drew attention to themselves, but also spoke to ideas concerning the female body more generally. These artists specifically reiterate the physicality of bodies--that is, their availability, attractiveness, and desirability--in ways particular to women’s experience. By contrast, male artistic and performative representations rarely center on physical beauty.

As many historians have noted, performance art was used strategically by feminists in the 1970s.¹³ As performance art was a relatively new mode of expression,

¹² I refer to the traditional pose, posture, and focus on the body of the artist in the center of the frame. Conventions of self-portraiture and portraiture were not, however, exactly the same for men and women. For just a few explorations of the topic, see Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Jonathan D. Katz and David C. Ward, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2010); and Jeannie Banks Thomas, *Naked Barbies, Warrior Joes, and Other Forms of Visible Gender* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

¹³ Meiling Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 33-43; Jeannette Elizabeth Klein, “Excavating the Goddess in the Nineties: Feminist Performance and Video in Southern California” (PhD

men had not yet established their dominance in the medium, allowing women more latitude in using and shaping performance practices.¹⁴ Meiling Cheng observes that “performance also offered the collective environment sorely needed for many women artists, most of whom suffered from isolation, lack of self-esteem, and doubts about their desires to practice art. Live performance helped these women process the information gathered from consciousness-raising meetings.”¹⁵ Performance art became a way that Antin, Rosenthal, Smith, and other women could engage in a discussion of their bodies on their own terms, as art historian Jeanie Forte further articulates:

Women’s performance art has particular disruptive potential because it poses an actual woman as a speaking subject, throwing that position into process, into doubt, opposing the traditional conception of the single, unified (male) subject. The female body as subject clashes in dissonance with its patriarchal text, challenging the very fabric of representation by refusing that text and posing new, multiple texts grounded in real women’s experience and sexuality.¹⁶

By becoming speaking subjects in their performance practice, Antin, Rosenthal, and Smith became united in their challenge to traditional modes of expression. As Smith elaborated in 2009, “It was a growing understanding that we are making a different statement about being a naked body--it was about the gaze... we were making our own

diss., University of Southern California, 1999), 18; and Josephine Withers, “Transforming Ourselves,” in *Power of Feminist Art*, 158-61. This is not to say that women had not used their bodies to make art before the 1970s, as Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, Shigeko Kubota, and Yayoi Kusama all used their body in their performances and projects in the 1960s. So while Antin, Rosenthal, Smith and others in the 1970s were not the first artists to use their bodies, they were pioneering in their use of feminist thinking to produce the work.

¹⁴ See Moira Roth and Mary Jane Jacob, *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970-1980* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983).

¹⁵ Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses*, 36.

¹⁶ Jeanie Forte, “Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism” in *Performing Feminism: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 254.

view of how we are." ¹⁷ Using their bodies in performance resulted in works that could reflect an autobiographical, therefore personal presence, but could also challenge larger societal issues concerning the treatment of women and society's perception of women's bodies and behavior. The examples of the pioneering work of Rosenthal, Antin and Smith illustrate that women artists' performances using women's bodies had a potential previously unrealized in art.

Besides being connected by their choice of medium and their presence at the conference, these three artists also made work that might be said to have spoken to a Southern California sensibility. Barbara Smith was born and raised in Pasadena and spent most of her adult life in the area. ¹⁸ Born in Paris, Rachel Rosenthal fled from the Nazis in 1941, moving at first to South America then to New York, eventually settling in Los Angeles in 1955. ¹⁹ Eleanor Antin was a more recent transplant to the area, having relocated from New York to San Diego in 1969. ²⁰ Curator and historian Howard Fox illuminates one of the attractions that California promised many artists: "Though [Antin] was long a New York resident, she discovered that leaving The City and moving to California granted her a certain freedom – conferred by both critical indifference and collegial laxity to pursue whatever artistic direction her inquiries took."²¹

¹⁷ Smith, interview. See also "Oral History Interview with Rachel Rosenthal"; and Howard Fox, *Eleanor Antin* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999), 206-12.

¹⁸ Marjorie Harth, ed., *The Twenty-first Century Odyssey Part II: The Performances of Barbara T. Smith* (Claremont, CA: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2005), 74-76.

¹⁹ Moira Roth, *Rachel Rosenthal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 205-06.

²⁰ Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 15-24.

²¹ Stephanie Barron, Sheri Bernstein, and Ilene Susan Fort, eds., *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2000), 280.

California, and in particular L.A., emerged after the second world war as a distinct counter to New York's status as the U.S. art center. In her 1966 article "Los Angeles: The Second City," Barbara Rose explained that a shift had taken place, as she pointed out some key differences between N.Y. and L.A. artists, while drawing attention to the rising stars of the California area, such as Larry Bell, Ed Ruscha, John McCracken, and Ed Kienholz. Rose saw California artists as being particularly interested in the west coast, themes dealing with the area and light, blurring the distinction between major and "minor" arts, and excelling in mixed media and assemblage pieces.²² Speaking specifically about Southern California, Rose writes, "Being without the fixed traditions and ties to Europe of the East, Southern California is in many ways a more open, free-wheeling society in which conventional distinctions disappear.... [T]he total penetration of popular culture at all levels seems to make for a complete lack of self-consciousness in its application in a fine arts context."²³ The frequently contradictory culture of L.A. and Southern California is exemplified by the massive freeways and traffic paralleling the inviting coastline, the simultaneous decadence and decay of the Sunset Strip, the rich history of Hollywood, an increasingly varied population, and geography that includes mountains, deserts, and beaches.²⁴ The range of artists active there in the early seventies reflects this diversity and the freedom that Rose describes, as they made work that was as

²² Barbara Rose, "Los Angeles: The Second City," *Art in America* 54, no. 1 (January-February 1966): 110-15.

²³ Rose, "Los Angeles," 112.

²⁴ Neil Morgan, *The California Syndrome* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 229-52.

varied as streamlined hard-edge painting, abstraction, pop, assemblage, and performance.²⁵

California artists may not have had the heavy exposure to Happenings and the early performance history of New York to build on; rather, the multiplicity of styles and events allowed the artists to explore a wide variety of subjects not burdened by history or predetermined structures (or lack of structures). Early California performances ranged from the raucous Be-ins to the improvisatory nature of street theatre.²⁶ Regarding the situation on the West Coast, Moira Roth astutely elaborates: “Early California performance allied itself very closely with life and there is a non-artful vigor in much of the best work. There was only a thin membrane separating the life of the performance from that of the artist and of his or her audience of close friends; and dividing the art from the moods, tastes and actions of the decade.”²⁷ California’s contribution to American art has been underappreciated for some time, and in recent scholarship, the state’s importance has been re-evaluated and its contributions illuminated.²⁸ As

²⁵ Peter Plagens discussed the wide range of artists who shaped the West Coast art scene in the sixties and early seventies in his *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast* (New York: Praeger, 1974).

²⁶ The first Be-in, “Gathering of the Tribes for a Human Be-in,” was held in January, 1967, at the Golden Gate Park in Haight-Ashbury, San Francisco, with performances by the Grateful Dead and appearances by Allen Ginsberg and Timothy Leary. Leary advocated the use of LSD, which had recently been banned by the state of California. The event was inspired by the ban and exemplified 1960s counterculture. For more information, see Christoph Grunenberg, ed., *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005).

²⁷ Moira Roth, “A Star is Born: Performance Art in California,” *Performing Arts Journal* 4, no. 3 (1980): 87.

²⁸ The proliferation of exhibitions and catalogues in the past ten years on the importance of California speaks to the necessary critical re-evaluation of the region. For just a few examples, see Barron, Bernstein and Fort, *Reading California*; Stephanie Barron, Sheri Bernstein, and Ilene Susan Fort, eds., *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2000); Diana Burgess Fuller

mentioned, Southern California's role in the feminist art movement constitutes just one of these important developments specific to the west coast. But Peter Selz has pointed out that many California artists have used their artwork to make political statements, as artists in the past fifty years "have continually questioned our government's activities at home and abroad."²⁹ The feminist art movement, along with the civil rights movement and the Chicano movement, became powerful forces in addressing social ills. As life and art were merging, many artists were also activists, evidence that a communal and "utopian" spirit existed in California that allowed for collaborative experiences that could not be found elsewhere.³⁰

That collaborative spirit that developed in California and contributed to the women's art movement, including events such as the West Coast Women's Art Conference, helped unite Antin, Smith and Rosenthal in friendship or at the very least in acquaintanceship. While the locale of Southern California brought together the artists, the culture of the state informed the artists' work. Howard Fox summarizes Southern California's image as "surfers, fast cars, freeways, snow-capped mountains, vast deserts, Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Disneyland... --a fantasy land where bodies and souls are created--these are the clichés of Southern California lodged in the world's collective imagination."³¹ Yet, as Fox acknowledges, there are truths in these clichés. Particularly

and Daniela Salvioni, eds., *Art/Women/California, 1950-2000: Parallels and Intersections* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Catherine Grenier, ed., *Catalog L.A.: Birth of an Art Capital, 1955-1985* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007).

²⁹ Peter Selz, ed. *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 247.

³⁰ Susan Landauer, "An Overview—Countering Cultures: The California Context" in Selz, *Art of Engagement*, 15.

³¹ Grenier, *Catalog L.A.*, 31.

relevant here is the idea of California women as uniformly blonde and beautiful; they simultaneously occupied the beaches and served as fixtures in Hollywood's version of captivating leading ladies. The fixation on body image and size was heightened in L.A. and Hollywood, that is, compared to the rest of the United States.³²

Barbara Smith explains the effect of the idealized female body image in L.A.: "I suppose we're afflicted really with the idea that you have to be this perfect shape. . . probably more here [in L.A.]. I suppose with the film industry, and the outdoor, active life - people go to the beach in bathing suits."³³ L.A. women were generally viewed as healthy, in that they were thin (if not underweight) and active, participating in the beach culture. In 1983, Dr. Peter Wood published *The California Diet and Exercise Program*, which postulated that Californians "play" more and eat healthier, as he suggested that most American healthy foods come from the fertile valleys in California.³⁴ This active lifestyle and beautiful weather permitted the wearing of skimpy bikinis but also began to be reflected in artists' work in the late sixties and seventies. The icon of the beach-worthy body coupled with proximity to Hollywood, led some women artists to incorporate the social anxieties the location inspired into their artwork. Joanna Frueh confirms that, "In the seventies, women artists became acutely aware of the social and cultural idealizations of the female form – in advertising and media, and in Western art. Idealizations of the

³² This trend is evaluated as per the focus on thinness of Hollywood starlets. See for example Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, *The Cult of Thinness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Joylin Namie, "Good Intentions: Women, Diet, and Food Choice in 'America's Finest City'" (PhD Diss., University of California, San Diego, 2001); and Michelle Lynn Selk, "Hegemonic Thinness and the Hollywood Ideal" (master's thesis, Regent University, 2002).

³³ Smith interview.

³⁴ Peter Wood, *The California Diet and Exercise Program* (Mountain View, CA: Anderson World Books, 1983), 33.

female body reflect and enforce cultural desires about a woman's beauty and sexuality, her social place and power."³⁵

By consistently using her short body and dark brown hair in her work, Eleanor Antin (b.1935) was countering the tall, blonde, popular ideal of the moment. Throughout her career, Antin used her body in combination with popular culture to comment on the position of her body in society. One of the ways she incorporated her figure is by exploring the split between artist and performer as well as the split between artist and self. Antin forced the viewer to constantly confront the feeling that she is at once present in her work and yet not present, as in her performances where she appeared in various guises such as the King of Solana Beach (1972); the Ballerina (1973); the Black Movie Star (1974); Eleanor Nightingale, also known as the Nurse (1976); and Eleanor Antinova, the black ballerina (1979).³⁶ For these projects, she wore costumes and makeup, and used props to "become" these characters in performances, photographs, and films. But this disguising of her body emerged out of her earlier works where she conflated Eleanor Antin the person and Eleanor Antin the artist.

Born and raised in New York, Antin was enmeshed in the contemporary art scene of New York in the late 1960s, befriending Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, Robert Morris, Yvonne Rainer, and John Perrault, among others who were interested in exploring the relationship of performance to art.³⁷ Antin was profoundly impacted, not only by the rise of performance art but by the development of conceptual art, which was introduced to her

³⁵ Joanna Frueh, "The Body through Women's Eyes" (1994), in *Power of Feminist Art*, 190.

³⁶ For a thorough discussion of these personas, see Alisa Lebow, "Strategic Sentimentality: Nostalgia and the Work of Eleanor Antin," *Camera Obscura* 22, no. 3 (2007): 129-66.

³⁷ Fox, *Eleanor Antin* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999), 16-24.

by friends George Maciunas, and Alison Knowles, both affiliated with the Fluxus Movement. An international community of artists, Fluxus incorporated performances, objects, and philosophical and sociological inquiries into their art. Often anti-institutional and anti-commercial, these artists tended to encourage participatory involvement in the construction of their pieces.³⁸ Antin's works often express sentiments similar to those articulated by Maciunas, who desired to create an art to which various types of people could relate. The use of different materials, humor, and often direct ideas allowed for a reconsideration of the boundaries and reception of art.³⁹ By privileging the idea and the process over the final object, conceptual art challenged traditional notions of art making. In 1969, just as performance art was becoming increasingly popular and conceptual art was beginning to crystallize, Antin and her husband David Antin, a poet, moved to San Diego.

California immediately affected Antin's work, as she was fascinated by the consumerism she experienced in the state. After getting her first *Sears* catalogue in the mail, Antin recognized that mail and phone ordering may have been insignificant to New Yorkers but was particularly relevant and exciting to Californians. This inspired her to think about inventing lives surrounded by a myriad of objects that could be ordered over the phone.⁴⁰ Early works like *California Lives* (1969, fig. 6) and *Portraits of Eight New*

³⁸ For more information on the Fluxus group, see Elizabeth Armstrong, Janet Jenkins, and Joan Rothfuss, eds. *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1993); Ken Friedman, *The Fluxus Reader* (New York: Academy Editions, 1998); and Dorothee Brill, *Shock and the Senseless in Dada and Fluxus* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2010).

³⁹ Martin Puchner, "Manifesto = Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 3 (October 2002): 456-459; and Janet Kaplan et al., "Flux Generations," *Art Journal* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 6-17.

⁴⁰ Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 198.

York Women (1970), explored the lives of individuals, some real and some fictitious, by using consumer objects and household items to create portraits.⁴¹ These dissections of women's lives lend themselves to a feminist reading because they explored the commercial and material existence of women's lives, still a relatively new subject matter. Furthermore, it was at this same time that Antin was reading feminist texts and beginning to get involved in the women's movement. Around 1971 and 1972, Antin befriended many of the L.A.-based feminist artists (Miriam Schapiro, Suzanne Lacy, and Linda Montano, among others) and formed a women artists' group at the University of California, San Diego.⁴² At the same time, she shifted from showcasing the lives of other women to integrating her own body into her work. In some sense, Antin becomes the subject of her pieces.

One of the first pieces that showcased Antin's body is *Representational Painting* (1971, fig. 7), a thirty-eight minute film of Antin applying make-up to her face, undergoing a transformation before the viewer's eyes. The woman's body (more specifically Antin's body) in the video became the canvas, to which Antin applied the paint.⁴³ Linda Theung astutely writes, "As a woman who chose not to wear makeup as a political expression of feminism, Antin searches on video to find a face she can live with

⁴¹ A discussion of her early works can be found in Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 24-32.

⁴² Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 204-7.

⁴³ Debra Wacks elaborates on this discussion of Antin "painting" her face: "After every move in the video Antin stops and studies her face as an artist pauses to analyze each new stroke of paint left on a canvas. The analogy between producing an artwork and 'painting one's face' is furthered by the title of the performance, 'Representational Painting,' which simultaneously contrasts with the contemporary Conceptual Art movement. As Antin points to the creation of a kind of feminine beauty, she suggests that make-up application is sublimation for the creative act of painting--women do not paint canvases, they paint their faces." See, Debra Wacks, "Subversive Humor: The Performance Art of Hannah Wilke, Eleanor Antin, and Adrian Piper" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2003), 111-12.

and eventually transforms herself into a sort of *Vogue* hippie.”⁴⁴ As she put on the make-up, Antin was clearly posturing; for her, putting make-up on slowly and deliberately was an act. *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972, figs. 8-11), frequently read as a sequel to *Representational Painting*, again featured Antin’s body. The latter piece is composed of 148 photographs, each of Antin’s nude body as she documented a weight loss over a period from July 15 to August 21, 1972. Each morning for thirty-six days (over a thirty-seven day period, as she missed photographing herself one morning since she was not at home in San Diego), Antin had her picture taken from the front, back, left, and right side.⁴⁵ Viewed from left to right and from earliest date to latest, the pictures chronicled the small changes to Antin’s shape as she gradually lost eleven pounds.

There is a documentary aspect to the photos; arranged sequentially the works seem to refer to a police lineup or possibly Eadweard Muybridge’s photographic experiments. The pseudo-clinical treatment of her body made the weight loss scientific in a way that can distance Antin the artist from Antin the person. As Fox observed, “With great deadpan skill, the piece gently satirizes much of the humorless monotony, ponderously presented under a veneer of pseudoscience and alleged clinical objectivity, that characterized much of the conceptual art of the day.”⁴⁶ The scientific documentation of Antin’s body and weight loss clearly objectifies Antin’s body. While the clinical treatment of the body and the scientific documentation of the diet distanced Antin the

⁴⁴ Linda Theung in correspondence with Antin; see Linda Theung, “Eleanor Antin” in *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 214.

⁴⁵ Antin, e-mail message.

⁴⁶ Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 44.

person from the photographs, the work's success depended on Antin's presence and the fact that she lost weight.⁴⁷

Carving: A Traditional Sculpture was originally created in response to an invitation to show in the Whitney Museum of American Art Annual, which was featuring sculpture that year.⁴⁸ Antin explained, "I thought it was a sculptural Annual and since I figured the Whitney was academically oriented, I decided to make an academic sculpture. I got out a book on Greek sculpture, which is the most academic of all. (How could they refuse a Greek sculpture?)"⁴⁹ Yet Antin did not choose to make a conventional three-dimensional object, rather she treated her body as her medium. Seeing herself as a sculptor and her body as marble, Antin went on a strict diet, chiseling off a total of eleven and a half pounds over the course of the 37 days.⁵⁰ The daily photographs reflect the re-shaping brought about by her diet, and the four different perspectives allow the viewer to appreciate the changes in the round--just as a viewer would approach a sculpture.⁵¹ She

⁴⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the conceptual nature of *Carving*, see Jayne Wark, "Conceptual Art and Feminism: Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson," *Woman's Art Journal* 22, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2001): 44-50; and Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 20-46.

⁴⁸ The Whitney Museum requested an artwork from Antin, expecting something in line with her piece *100 Boots*. When Antin sent them *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, which was composed of photographs and text, the museum rejected it, only to show the work twenty-five years later at the exhibition "The American Century: Art and Culture, 1900-2000." Antin, e-mail message.

⁴⁹ Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with Fifteen Women Artists*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 243.

⁵⁰ Howard Fox and Joanna Frueh simply note that she was on a strict diet. See Howard Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 44; and Frueh, "The Body through Women's Eyes," 195.

⁵¹ Melissa Thompson sees Antin as also toying with gender in her use of the term sculpture, in recognizing that as a female "sculptress" she was an anomaly in the field. As she notes, the continued return of artists to the ideal sculptural form epitomized by that of the female Venus de Milo. The fleshy female body must be constructed and trimmed. Antin's "fat" must be lost through her dieting, in the process reinforcing the idea that she can become ideal, therefore an appropriate subject for the conventionally male sculptors

challenged the idea of sculpture by using photographic representation of the form, as the viewer considers two-dimensional representations of a single three-dimensional form. The Whitney did not classify her work as sculpture, however, considering *Carving* an inappropriate fit for their sculpture show.

Perhaps more accurately, *Carving* can be viewed as a performance piece with photographic documentation, which functions to challenge to the ideal form traditionally associated with classical sculpture.⁵² The work exists today as photographs and wall text, but for Antin in 1972, the piece was a thirty-six day performance endeavor. She explained her actions in the label that she created to accompany the photographs, quoting Carl Bluemel's 1969 book *Greek Sculptors at Work*:

The work was done in the traditional Greek mode: "The Greek sculptor worked at his block from all four sides and carved away one thin layer after another; and with every layer removed from the block, new forms appeared. The decisive point is, however, that the Greek sculptor always removed an entire layer right around the statue. He never worked just a leg, an arm or a head, but kept the whole in view, and at every stage of the work the figure itself was a whole. No detail was allowed to obtrude during the work, the eyes being as important as a lock of hair or a big toe. . . . Thus the same figure which started as a block was worked over in its entirety by the sculptor at least a hundred times, beginning with only a few forms and becoming increasingly richer, more rounded and lifelike until it reached completion." When the image was finally refined to the point of aesthetic satisfaction the work was completed.⁵³

to depict. See Melissa C. Thompson, "Size on Display," *The Dynamics of Female Fat in Contemporary Performance Art* (PhD diss, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006), 44-46.

⁵² Ellen Zweig provides one example of this type of reading: "The performance, of course, was the actual dieting, but the artwork was the row upon row of photographs, attesting to the fact that Antin could at least strive to 'carve' the perfect sculptural form of her own body." Ellen Zweig, "Constructing Loss: Film and Presence in the Work of Eleanor Antin," *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 29 (Fall 1996): 36.

⁵³ Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, black-and-white photographs and text panel (1972; Art Institute of Chicago). In her text panel, Antin quoted Carl Bluemel, *Greek Sculptors at Work* (London: Phaidon Press, 1969), 12.

Through her citation of Bluemel, Antin constructed her sculptural treatment of her own body as a classical exercise. Just as Antin was aligning herself, the artist, with classical artists based upon the supposed similarity of their working methods, she of course recognized that her material--her body--was not at all representative of the classical ideal. As the label text continues, "This artist may have a different aesthetic for the female body than Greek sculpture exhibited for the Korai but it should be kept in mind that two considerations determine the conclusion of a work: (1) the ideal image toward which the artist aspires, and (2) the limitations of the material." After this statement, Antin paraphrased Michelangelo, "not even the greatest sculptor can make anything that isn't already inside the marble." Clarifying her work and her position, Antin emphasized that the ideal image for her work differed than that of the classical works.

The second part of the statement referred to Antin's own body; after all, she made clear that the "material" was her body. Antin, as much as she wanted the freedom and control of the classical sculptor, could only do so much with her body. As she mentioned towards the beginning of the text when describing the basic details of the piece, "The work was originally intended to include a regimen of exercise also, but this proved unacceptable, in practice, to the artist who appears to have lost her former skills at this technique."⁵⁴ While both of these statements are intended as self-deprecating and humorous, they also spoke to Antin's challenges with changing her body. While she was able to succeed at dieting, exercise was problematic. She is acknowledging there was only so much she can do with her body, as if her body was a predetermined shape already

⁵⁴ Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*.

formed within the marble. She was not the classical ideal and never would be. While she can slightly alter the size of her body, she could not become a Kore.

Antin also struggled against the increasing popularization of the ideal of the slender yet curvy body demonstrated by the models (and later actresses) Lauren Hutton (b. 1943), Marisa Berenson (b. 1947), and Cybill Shepherd (b. 1950). These tall, striking, beautiful women obliquely functioned as the desired end result for Antin's dieting.⁵⁵

Naomi Wolf later discussed the issues surrounding this ideal body in her seminal book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (1991), wherein she articulated the issue that Antin was fighting against. Women are constantly bombarded with images of beautiful women whose putatively "ideal," yet heavily retouched, bodies are unattainable. For Wolf, women's aspirations to these ideal standards forced them into a battle over power with men.

"Beauty" is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West, it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves.⁵⁶

Antin, then, is critiquing the way that women have been forced to put forth their efforts to how they look, instead of advancing themselves intellectually or otherwise. By showing her body as it changes throughout the process of weight loss, she is not only drawing

⁵⁵ The feminist reading is proposed by Howard Fox, who sees Antin as comparing her body to popular models of the day. See his *Eleanor Antin*, 44. For example, one of the most popular models of her time, Twiggy emerged on the scene in 1967, standing at 5' 7" and weighing only 91 pounds. Roberta Pollack Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1989), 148-49.

⁵⁶ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (1991; repr., New York: Perennial, 2002), 12.

attention to the pressures that women face, but she is also illustrating her dissatisfaction with her body. While Antin may not have been happy with her body, she repeatedly turned to its form as a starting place for many of her artworks, perhaps explaining her continued separation of Antin the artist and Antin the person.⁵⁷

When viewed together, *Representational Painting* and *Carving*, are united in their critique of the ways that women are told implicitly and explicitly they should present themselves to society. Joanna Frueh agrees, as she expounds on *Carving*, “Just as the classical Greek nude occludes women’s bodies in this kind of aesthetically rigid form, so the socially correct beautiful body disciplines--and punishes--women through frustration, guilt, anxiety, and competitiveness with other women.”⁵⁸ Did losing eleven and a half pounds really make Antin’s body ideal? She did not see her body as challenging the ideal, rather, she lost the weight in the service of her art, “When I was smoking I couldn't [sing]. So I stopped. For art you see. For art I could lose weight. For art I could do anything.”⁵⁹

What many historians do not take into account is the ordinariness of what Antin did: over the course of thirty-six days she put herself on an intensive diet. Anne Wagner hinted at this in her review of the 1999 retrospective of Antin’s work, where *Carving* functioned as a centerpiece in the show: “Yet from what I could tell, the message seemed to strike many viewers less as critical or ironic analysis than as realism pure and simple:

⁵⁷ Antin has written more about the use of her body in her artistic creations in the often cited Eleanor Antin, "An Autobiography of the Artist as Autobiographer," *LAICA Journal*, no. 2 (October 1974): 18-20.

⁵⁸ Frueh, "The Body through Women's Eyes," 195.

⁵⁹ Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists*, rev. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 417.

testimony to the inevitable order of things. Of course women diet.”⁶⁰ Antin’s use of dieting in *Carving* paralleled the burgeoning of the diet industry and the rise of the exercise movement in the early 1970s. The publishing of *Dr. Atkins’ Diet Revolution* in 1972 made history when in just seven months it sold one million copies. In addition, the number of diet essays and books published dramatically increased, with diet articles in *Reader’s Guide* quadrupling over the course of the seventies.⁶¹ Most important to this discussion, the early 1970s saw the flowering of diet groups such as Weight Watchers and Overeaters Anonymous. Founded in 1961, Jean Nidetch created the organization Weight Watchers based on her own experiences in a support group for weight loss, and who was herself described in a 1972 *Time* article as “a 214-lb. Queens housewife [transformed] into a trim 142-lb career woman.”⁶² At that time, Weight Watchers had 101 operations in 49 states and some foreign countries. Along with a bestselling cookbook, magazine, and foodstuffs, Weight Watchers succeeded as their revenues went from \$160,000 in 1964 to a whopping \$8 million in 1970.⁶³

Weight Watchers bears comparing to Antin’s *Carving*, since the organization’s increasing prosperity and visibility corresponded to the development of her artwork and the way members of the group were encouraged to lose weight can be related to the structure of Antin’s piece. *Time*’s aptly titled “Fortune from Fat” report, which reported that three million “fatties” paid to attend Weight Watcher meetings, described the program as follows:

⁶⁰ Anne Wagner, “Eleanor Antin,” *Artforum* 38, no. 2 (October 1999): 141.

⁶¹ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 166.

⁶² “Fortune from Fat,” *Time*, February 21, 1972.

⁶³ “Fortune from Fat”; and Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 138.

The unique mark of the Weight Watchers operation is the weekly class, which combines the atmospheres of a religious revival meeting and a high school pep rally. As they arrive, members weigh in; their weekly gains or losses are recorded on cards and later read off to the assemblage. Under the guidance of a trained lecturer, those who have taken off pounds are loudly applauded; backsliders are sympathetically counseled to show renewed dieting determination.⁶⁴

The members are held accountable by their fellow dieters, and their weight is recorded each week just as possible menus and food diaries are distributed for the week ahead. The public process and scrutiny Antin put her body through as displayed in *Carving*, is not unlike that of a Weight Watchers member who has to confront his/her weight publically each week. The frequency and repetition of the weekly weigh-ins coupled with the encouragement of members to use food journals, demonstrates the group's dependence on documentation to keep its members aware of their weight. Fear of not meeting goal weights prompts anxiety in members, thereby helping to motivate them to lose more pounds.⁶⁵ In addition, the public recounting of weight gain and loss can work towards shaming members into losing weight.⁶⁶ While not as extreme as the nude photographs of

⁶⁴ "Fortune from Fat."

⁶⁵ Daniel Martin, a sociologist who performed a study on the group through research and personal participation, explained how shame becomes a critical role in the effectiveness of the organization. "As a participating observer, I experienced the anxiety that members later recounted in interviews about 'facing the scale,' that is, weigh-ins. Because weigh-ins take place in semipublic space, it is possible that queuing members will learn of one's weight, increasing the anxiety that is already present for some members. Having failed weigh-in several times by gaining weight, I was struck by the capacity for the ritual to evoke, simultaneously, feelings of dependency and embarrassment." See Daniel Martin, "Organizational Approaches to Shame: Avowal, Management, and Contestation," *Sociological Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 129.

⁶⁶ This practice has since stopped, as Martin noted that the increasing singling out of people at meetings in the 1970s resulted in a number of people dropping out of the organization, in turn forcing Weight Watchers to reevaluate their policies, particularly the reading aloud of weight losses and gains. That being said, the organization continues to recognize members in the meetings who have reached a milestone in their weight loss diet. Martin, "Organizational Approaches to Shame," 138-39.

Carving, the Weight Watchers' written and photographic documentation recalls the tools and motivation Antin used to lose her weight.

Rachel Rosenthal (b. 1926) also used photographs of her overweight body as compared to her newer, more svelte figure in *The Death Show* (1978, fig. 12). Both Antin and Rosenthal used photographic illustrations of the fluctuations of their body size to simultaneously illustrate their weight changes and become the subject of their art and performances. While Antin intended her photographs to demonstrate the “sculptural” changes to her body, Rosenthal’s performances entailed a personal revelation about her weight. Even so, both of their artworks were autobiographical, documenting the changes their bodies experienced – for their art, for their health and/or for their appearance.

Rosenthal’s work was much more concerned with exploring her childhood, her familial relationships, and her changing and ailing body. Rosenthal is older than both Smith and Antin, and her art emerges out of experimental theatre groups of the 1950s and 1960s with which she was affiliated. Born in France of Russian-Jewish blood, Rosenthal calls herself a “DP”--a Displaced Person.⁶⁷ Raised in Paris, Rosenthal and her parents were forced to flee due to the Holocaust, relocating first to Brazil in June 1940 and then to New York in April, 1941. From 1946 to 1954, Rosenthal shuffled between Paris and New York, studying with the likes of intellectuals Meyer Schapiro and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, while learning theatrical practices from Merce Cunningham and Roger Blin, who starred in and directed the first staging of *Waiting for Godot* in 1953.⁶⁸ After her father’s death in 1955, Rosenthal set out for California. Exploring art, dance, theatre, philosophy, and even stage direction, Rosenthal established Instant Theatre (1956-1966) in Los

⁶⁷ “Oral History Interview with Rachel Rosenthal.”

⁶⁸ Roth, *Rachel Rosenthal*, 206.

Angeles. This small group of artists and thespians focused on a combination of improvisation and theatre exercises all developed and directed by Rosenthal. This connection to theatre did not preclude her from being involved in the art world, however, as is evidenced by her connections to Robert Rauschenberg, a fellow artist-performer, to Ed Kienholtz and to the Ferus Gallery.⁶⁹ Rosenthal did not, however, produce a project conceived of as performance art until the mid 1970s.

As mentioned, the feminist movement fundamentally changed Rosenthal; she was encouraged by fellow feminists to explore performance art and to incorporate in it her life experiences. She explained in 1989, “I was able to do in my performance work what I had never been able to do in my life, which is to reveal myself, to disclose, to air, to put out all this garbage and turn it around and make it into art, and in a sense reveal all the dark secrets that I had kept locked up all these years. It was redemption and exorcism.”⁷⁰ Her first performance art pieces, *Replays* (1975) and *Thanks* (1975), began to address her relationship with her father.⁷¹ Yet it wasn’t until *Charm* (1977, figs. 13-16) that Rosenthal fully delved into her childhood and made connections to how those issues concerning her father were still shaping her life in the present.

⁶⁹ Rosenthal mentions her friendship with those who showed at the Ferus Gallery, and that they frequently attended her shows. Additionally, in New York, through her relationship with Cunningham and Cage she became very close to Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, even being gifted many of their early works. “Oral History Interview with Rachel Rosenthal.”

⁷⁰ Qtd in Roth, *Rachel Rosenthal*, 14, originally discussed in “Oral History Interview with Rachel Rosenthal.”

⁷¹ More information on these works can be found in Edie Danieli, “Rachel Rosenthal: A Life History” *Artweek*, December 13, 1975, 13.

Subtitled “A Sonata in Three Movements,” *Charm* was performed at Mount St. Mary’s College Art Gallery on January 28, 1977.⁷² The stage was divided into two parts, with a raised platform on one section giving it additional height. The piece began with a voice over (done by Rosenthal’s then husband King Moody) reading from a *Los Angeles Times* scientific article about physics. The piece was structured in three movements around multiple definitions of “charm”, through which Rosenthal weaves in stories about her parents, her childhood, her first home in Paris, and her relationship with her servants. As the piece progressed, the pace quickened and the environment got increasingly frantic. On the elevated platform, supporting cast members dressed in black called “nightmare figures” engaged in acts of sadism and sado-masochism at escalating speeds until they became a mesh of figures. Meanwhile, on the lower platform, Rosenthal remained seated, regaling the audience with tales of her aristocratic Parisian life. Throughout the piece, Rosenthal became increasingly anxious and upset, shouting at intervals, “CAN YOU ALL SEE ME? CAN YOU ALL HEAR ME?”⁷³ As she spoke, a butler presented her with pastries, which Rosenthal ate rapidly, repeatedly asking for more. As the pastries piled up faster than she could devour, she frantically shoveled them in her mouth. For the

⁷² The full script and stage explanations for *Charm* and *The Death Show* have been printed in Una Chaudhuri, ed., *Rachel’s Brain and Other Storms - Rachel Rosenthal: Performance Texts* (London: Continuum, 2001). Rosenthal also performed and recorded *Charm* for “Soundings” on KPFC Pacifica Radio almost ten years after its original production, though the performance was strictly aural and performed with a full cast. The piece was also altered for the radio, including more music as well as a performer who wrote and performed new selections that functioned as the voices in Rosenthal’s heads. Rachel Rosenthal, *Charm: KPFC Pacifica Radio* (Los Angeles, CA: High Performance Audio, 1987), audio cassette.

⁷³ She does this four times throughout the performance, increasingly getting more agitated and louder, see Chaudhuri, *Rachel’s Brain*, 20, 23, 24, and 30.

triumphant finish, the butler brought out a large chocolate cake, which Rosenthal plunged into face first.

As these events took place, Rosenthal tied the piece together by relating childhood stories and events. Rosenthal's family was unconventional; her mother was unable to marry her father for some time because he had another family elsewhere in France. Despite the situation, Rosenthal made clear that her parents loved each other and made every effort to give their beloved daughter everything. For example, she recounted the playful story of her father coming home from work and how they would engage in spirited banter. Yet there was a dark side to her life in Paris. Rosenthal spoke of how she was forced to go to bed early and was left under the watch of the servants upstairs. While her "downstairs" life with her doting parents was enjoyable, pleasant, and most importantly "charming," Rosenthal had a particularly precarious relationship with her governess, who openly mocked her and put the six-year old Rosenthal on a diet. As she explained in the piece, "Downstairs I was adulated and loved. Everything I did was wonderful and pretty. Upstairs my hair was pulled, my face was slapped, I was told I was stupid, that I was an idiot and a show-off, and that people were only nice to me because my father was rich..."⁷⁴ After this comment in the performance, Rosenthal rang a bell to alert the butler for more food. The stories get darker and darker, pushing Rosenthal into a frantic state where she gorged on the sweet pastries.

Charm was the first piece Rosenthal performed where she addressed food, and also marked the first time she discussed her deep-seated self-consciousness about her body. In a 1975 letter to Barbara Smith, she opened up about her desire to lose weight

⁷⁴ Chaudhuri, *Rachel's Brain*, 28.

and change her body size. Rosenthal traced the origins of her overeating to the cordon-bleu chef Julie who worked for her family.⁷⁵ In a letter the following year, Rosenthal explained how her body was physically hindering her work, “Barbara, needless to say, I am petrified. Here I am, almost fifty, having to have my knees operated on, overweight, ten years older, out of shape and training, trying to resume one of the most difficult and demanding forms art can take....”⁷⁶ *Charm* was Rosenthal’s attempt to come to terms with these issues surrounding her body and food, which she so specifically traced back to her childhood. In a later interview, she expands, “My half sister was obese and was getting a great deal of flack from my mother, so I associated being loved with being thin. That created a lifelong problem and an eating disorder. For example, I can never remain an even weight because it either goes way up or way down. I eat emotionally - and for all of the wrong reasons.”⁷⁷ Rosenthal struggled with her weight constantly, and after the revelations discovered throughout the performance of *Charm*, joined Overeaters Anonymous successfully shedding several pounds.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ This exchange with Barbara T. Smith from the summer of 1975, took place when Rosenthal bought “times” in Smith’s auction, *A Week in the Life of....*, one of which included a correspondence exchange. She admired Smith’s performances, and looked up to her as a mentor. Roth, *Rachel Rosenthal*, 158.

⁷⁶ Roth, *Rachel Rosenthal*, 166.

⁷⁷ Linda Montano, *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 198.

⁷⁸ Overeaters Anonymous was founded by Rozanne S. in Los Angeles in 1960, modeled after a Gamblers Anonymous meeting she had attended with a friend the previous year. Following a similar twelve step program like that of Alcoholics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous, the group provides members with a safe meeting place to come together and share not only their struggles with overeating but also coping mechanisms. For a fuller history, see: Overeaters Anonymous, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams: A History of Overeaters Anonymous as Seen by a Cofounder* (Rio Rancho, NM: Overeaters Anonymous, 1996).

After a brief stint trying to revive Instant Theatre in 1976-7, Rosenthal returned to performance art significantly thinner and healthier, which she addressed in *The Death Show* (1978, fig. 12). Performed only once at Space Gallery in Los Angeles on October 21, 1978, *The Death Show* was part of a larger performance and exhibition event, “Thanathopsis: Contemplations on Death,” that involved a variety of media and thirty-two artists. For her performance, Rosenthal bisected the L-shaped gallery with a large platform, allowing the audience to be seated on both sides. An easel draped with a purple cloth was located on the far end of the platform, with a teddy bear and a mask on the floor next to it. The entire space was bathed in dramatic blue, green and purple light. The easel and four candles toward the back of the space amplify the drama.

The piece began as Rosenthal entered holding a candle and passing out crackers to the audience. She asked them to take a wafer, but not to eat it until she instructed them. The sound of Tibetan bells echoed throughout the gallery, and a metronome clicked, at first quickly, but gradually slowing down throughout the performance. Rosenthal recited a text about death, primarily concerned with three deaths that “stick out as prototypes of all the others.”⁷⁹ The first death she addressed was her beloved ‘Teddy’ – a childhood toy taken away from her when the “grownups” felt she was too old for it, under the guise that the bear had fleas. “Defective Kitten” was the next death discussed, though in this instance she felt guilty. One of her cats had kittens, of which one was “defective” and the mother refused to help it. Rosenthal decided to act, drowning the cat as it squirmed and struggled. The third death Rosenthal presented was the 1972 death of her treasured cat ‘Dibidi’, whom she had for eighteen years, during twelve of which the cat was paraplegic

⁷⁹ Chaudhuri, *Rachel's Brain*, 34.

and had to be constantly attended to and supervised. One particularly rough night, Rosenthal asked Dibidi “tu veux me quitter?” (translated as “Do you want to leave me?” - she used French because she felt that was the language the cat understood) and the cat replied “oui” and died in her arms.⁸⁰ As she discussed these deaths, it became clear *The Death Show* was about Rosenthal exorcizing these demons of her past as she strove for redemption. Addressing this piece in 1979, Rosenthal explained that “although our body knows death and stores this knowledge ‘in our memory bank at the cellular level,’ we must consciously rehearse for the ‘Big One’ by learning how to die the myriad deaths of our lives, letting go and shedding people, events, parts of ourselves. If this is not done, a ‘monster emerges.’”⁸¹ While she dealt with the deaths of others, Rosenthal also had to shed a part of herself.

Rosenthal then revealed a picture on an easel, called the Icon of the Fat Vampire. Mounted on plywood was a photograph of Rosenthal before the weight loss, near the time *Charm* was made. Her picture was centered, surrounded by a funeral wreath composed of pastries, cakes, and doughnuts spray painted black. Explaining the icon to her audience, Rosenthal said, “The Fat Vampire is fat from the accumulation of countless botched-up deaths not allowed to die, fat from the unrecognized fear of the Big One, fat from the wrong substances ingested for life and sustenance, fat from opaqueness, the refusal to let in the rays of light. Fat from blocked deaths.”⁸² Emphasizing that the Fat Vampire took over her life, she exorcized it by letting out a primal scream.

⁸⁰ Chaudhuri, *Rachel's Brain*, 35.

⁸¹ Rachel Rosenthal, “The Death Show,” *High Performance* 2, no. 5 (March 1979): 44.

⁸² Chaudhuri, *Rachel's Brain*, 36.

Next, Rosenthal addressed how to rid her life completely of this monster. Initially, Rosenthal resisted killing the Fat Vampire because she was afraid to let go and leave her comfort zone. Lighting candles at the front of the stage, Rosenthal defined the “Stations of the Fat Vampire” as moments where she could have killed the Fat Vampire, but she was too afraid of dying. The stations began with a year, then a type of food, and then a statement about Rosenthal refusing a death (her virginity, her parents, her identity as an artist, etc.). For example:

1. 1946: Rice Croquettes. I refuse the death of my childhood and the subsequent glimpse of paradise.... 6. 1972: Cheesecake. I refuse the death of my feminine role and resist the call to feminist arms.... 9. 1978: Häagen-Dazs Ice Cream. I refuse the death of the Fat Vampire, of my marriage, of 51 years of my life. The 10th Station is this performance.⁸³

The death of the Fat Vampire became an exorcism of all her “deaths”, those demons that have haunted her and made her body fat and bloated:

I want to be a good suicide. I don't want to botch up my death. I want to bury the Fat Vampire, and with it, all my small and medium-sized deaths that were left to decompose without proper burial. To all these, I wish a final and blessed rest so that I may live my real and beautiful death without the confusion of Teddy's euphemistic fleas, but rather with the neatness and clarity of line of Dibidi's sweet departure. To this end do I recite the 'Bardo of the Fat Vampire' and ask you to eat the wafers now, for the Vampire absorbed because it wanted to be absorbed.⁸⁴

A voiceover recited the “Bardo of the Fat Vampire” just as Rosenthal approached the Icon and repeatedly slashed it with a knife. Putting vampire teeth in her mouth and the mask on top of her head, she squeezed the teddy bear between her legs. She bent over and with her head down so that the mask faced the audience, the mask sunk between her

⁸³ Chaudhuri, *Rachel's Brain*, 38-39.

⁸⁴ Here, Rosenthal first refers to the “Bardo of the Fat Vampire,” in which she refers to the bardo, which is defined as the position of the soul between life and death. Chaudhuri, *Rachel's Brain*, 39.

shoulders. In a swift move she lowered the mask to her face. Cuddling the bear, she took off her mask and put it on the bear itself, resting her chin on the bear. Pausing, she bent over and bit the teddy bear's neck, eventually letting the bear fall to the platform. She straightened up, and gradually opened her mouth and eyes as wide as possible in a silent yet terrifying scream. The metronome came to a stop, and there was silence.

By Rosenthal's account, the Fat Vampire took over her life, manifesting itself physically through the size of her body. She claimed to never have been fat, but rather the Vampire wrapped around her body and encased her: "As for me, I finally lost track of my real boundaries and amnesiac of my true self, I too mistook this padded shroud for my own skin."⁸⁵ This concept of alien fat enveloping the true person resonates with Susie Orbach's arguments in *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978). Published at the same time that Rosenthal was producing these works, Orbach's work points to fat as a tool that women use to avoid complex issues. As she explained, "Fat is a social disease, and fat is a feminist issue. Fat is not about lack of self-control or lack of will power. Fat is about protection, sex, nurturance, strength, boundaries, mothering, substance, assertion and rage."⁸⁶ For Orbach, becoming fat can be a way of taking control of one's body and attempting to avoid objectification in the eyes of men. By contrast, Rosenthal claimed that the fat overtook her, shifting, shaping, and obscuring her true self. Both Orbach and Rosenthal, then, see fat as an insidious entity separate from the individual, one that with hard work (dieting, exercising, etc.) can be exorcized.

⁸⁵ Chaudhuri, *Rachel's Brain*, 36.

⁸⁶ Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (New York: Berkley Books, 1978), 6.

As she recounted and demonstrated in *Charm*, Rosenthal was an overeater, and specifically an emotional eater.⁸⁷ Orbach constructed overeating as a deliberate act and choice to avoid becoming the ideal woman, as she wrote:

My fat says 'screw you' to all who want me to be the perfect mom, sweetheart, maid and whore. Take me for who I am, not for who I'm supposed to be.... In this way, fat expresses a rebellion against the powerlessness of the woman, against the pressure to look and act in a certain way and against being evaluated on her ability to create an image of herself.⁸⁸

Such ideas may have been evocative for Rosenthal who was constantly moving from trying to have the ideal, thin body that her mother wanted for her (her mother told her often when she was little, “when you are fat, I don’t love you”) to a larger, overweight body that delighted in consuming French pastries.⁸⁹ Rosenthal’s attempt to gain control of her weight in the late 1970s by joining *Overeater’s Anonymous* coupled with her own comments about her weight, emphasize that she was preoccupied with her appearance. At the same time, she was also concerned about her health and physical condition. In 1989 she was experiencing serious setbacks with respect to her health due to her weight, so much that her art production was hindered. This is probably the period between *Charm* and *The Death Show* when Rosenthal ceased performing:

There was a time in my life when if I’d looked the way I look now I would hide. I would not show myself. I would not perform. I would not go out. I would hide under the sheets and nobody would see me. And I knew, deep in my heart, that I could never be loved or appreciated or even considered as part of the human race if people could see me with these pounds overweight. And now I thank goodness have gotten past that... But it is still a problem, because I know how good I look when I’m thin and I feel so much better too.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ “Oral History Interview of Rachel Rosenthal.”

⁸⁸ Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, 9.

⁸⁹ Rosenthal, interview.

⁹⁰ “Oral History Interview with Rachel Rosenthal.”

The Death Show becomes particularly powerful as it illustrates Rosenthal's exploration of her heaviness as a hindrance and a destructive force – one that provoked anger and violence. But by 1977, Rosenthal had worked to lose the weight that prevented her from creating the work she wanted to accomplish.

To reiterate, *The Death Show* showcased a picture of the larger Rosenthal in the Icon of the Fat Vampire. The pastries she devoured in *Charm* surrounded the face of the former, fat Rosenthal in *The Death Show*. The two pieces, in their demonstration of her weight loss and physical transformation, might recall Antin's comparable, albeit smaller, change as documented in *Carving*. Antin photographed her body and recorded her weight as the changes happened, systematically evaluating the shape and size of her body as she dieted. Her clinical approach is far removed from the dramatic and psychological portrait that Rosenthal presented. When discussed together, the two artists illustrated both the physical and mental experiences one has while undergoing weight loss.

In the early seventies, Barbara Smith (b. 1931) fit the stereotypical California female type with long blonde hair, a slender frame and curves in all the right places--the type of body that Antin and Rosenthal were dieting to attempt to achieve. In fact, Smith's body at that time has frequently been described as "lovely," "beautiful," and "the epitome of Western beauty."⁹¹ Born and raised in California, Smith's life and lifestyle were intimately connected to the environment there. Married for over fifteen years, Smith had three children. Divorcing in 1968, Smith was newly single and decided to commit to her art by enrolling at the University of California, Irvine. Smith studied side by side with

⁹¹ Klein, "Excavating the Goddess"; Charlotte Lindenberg, "Barbara T. Smith Revisited" *N. Paradoxa*, no. 24 (2009): 87; and Harth, *Twenty-first Century Odyssey Part II*, 43.

Chris Burden and became acquainted with artists Allan Kaprow, Dick Kilgroe, and Paul McCarthy. The performance culture that was developing in Southern California, and in particular at UC Irvine, helped shaped Smith's early work as she did many collaborative pieces and performance events with these artists.⁹²

Many of her early works involved food preparation, emerging from her experiences as a wife and mother. The previous twenty years of her life had been spent taking care of others, and these first performance pieces involved her continuing that practice.⁹³ *Ritual Meal* (1969, fig. 17) and *Mass Meal* (1969) both began with Smith planning and serving elaborate meals, culminating in a dinner where she controlled the setting, sounds, lights and the total environment of the feast.⁹⁴ Even in these works where Smith remained behind the scenes, serving as director of the pieces, she was still the provider. Smith traced the performances back to the female body specifically, as she explained in 2009: "I thought of food as almost co-existent with the female body-- because we're the source of all life, and we're equipped immediately to. . . feed the baby that comes with it--and we come with that equipment, so we are virtually food. Our bodies are food."⁹⁵ In feeding her guests, Smith was giving of herself and her body.

Smith continued the practice of giving of her body in *Feed Me* (1973, figs. 18, 19), a performance substantially different from her meal pieces in that now she wanted to be fed and nourished. In this work, Smith stood, fully nude, as a viewer entered a

⁹² In particular, her early performances from 1968 were collaborative, including *One Minute*, *Chicken Sandwich*, and *Raymond Rose Ritual Environment*. For more information regarding the collaborations, see Harth, *Twenty-first Century Odyssey, Part II*, 81.

⁹³ Smith, interview.

⁹⁴ For a fuller description of Smith's meal pieces, see Barbara Smith, *Barbara Smith* (San Diego: University of California, Art Gallery, 1974), 24-26.

⁹⁵ Smith, interview.

designated, private space, made aware of the conditions before they entered. Moving into the room one at a time, the viewer agreed to negotiate with Smith on how to “feed” her.⁹⁶ It was up to the viewer to deduce their role in the piece--which Smith intended was for the viewer to “feed” her spiritually, emotionally, and/or physically. While documentation of this work is scant, her friends took the few photographs that exist and focus on Smith’s nude body as she bent to put lotion on her legs or as she mentally prepared herself for the piece. While the work was not intended to center on her naked body, the photographs and their focus on Smith’s body have immediately pointed to a narrow reading of this work as sexual, presuming Smith’s availability.

Feed Me was performed on April 20, 1973 at the now defunct Museum of Conceptual Art in San Francisco as part of *All Night Sculptures*. This performance event included artists such as Bonnie Sherk, Joel Glassman, and Terry Fox.⁹⁷ *Feed Me* took place in a dilapidated women’s bathroom, which had served the building when it functioned as an old printing plant. Smith filled the space with a variety of “foods”-- books, marijuana, wine, cheese, fruit, perfume, beads, flowers, massage oil--all of which could be used to feed her physically, emotionally, or spiritually. To make the space more comfortable, Smith added rugs, pillows, a mattress, and a space heater. For Smith, this one night experience was intended as a spiritual exercise.⁹⁸ After meditation and

⁹⁶ Harth, *Twenty-first Century Odyssey, Part II*, 60.

⁹⁷ These performances were done throughout the night, and included events such as “drawing a volume of light by constructing a tent for two neon glass tubes (Glassman); demonstrating the oppression of individuals by military and bureaucratic systems by forcing visitors to march toward a red light to the beat of a typewriter (Kos); and creating a permanent installation in the form of a *memento mori* (Fox). Sherk aggressively displaced a group of pigeons from their rooftop sanctuary by scrambling eggs in front of them.” Harth, *Twenty-first Century Odyssey, Part II*, 60.

⁹⁸ Smith, *Barbara Smith*, 26.

preparation, an unclothed Smith waited for participants. Throughout the night, a taped loop of her voice intoned “Feed me.... Feed me....” throughout the performance. Her body on display, Smith received over fifteen visitors (both men and women), who “fed” her emotionally and physically by giving her back rubs, smoking marijuana, drinking the wine, and asking her questions. Simultaneously, Smith offered food and consumable goods to the viewer, and even her nudity and her presence could be read as giving of herself. While the piece itself, and even the surrounding literature, focus on the way that Smith was fed, the viewer was an active participant who gives or nourishes him or herself as well as has his or her own experience.

Even with the conditions laid out before going into the bathroom, the participants were hesitant and unsure on how to interact with Smith. As she further explains in 2004:

I was waiting to see if [the participants] would figure the piece out, to negotiate with me to find out if what they offered was in fact something I wanted or would enjoy. To make an offering, a gift. I could, in fact say “No.” I was confounding what I had been experiencing ever since my divorce, men overriding me without asking just for sex. I was hurt and furious. I may be old-fashioned, but I was reintroducing respect and courtship into the game. Throughout, I was in a state of heightened awareness, of conscious alertness. If, through conversation, I agreed to their “food” offering, I was totally willing to enjoy it, and I did.... I was there for a *mutual* interaction, but on my terms.⁹⁹

Upon the participants entering the room, Smith did not say anything; rather, they had to figure out what to do. The visitors had to present their offer to her, allowing for Smith to decide whether or not to accept their offering. She wanted to emphasize that she was the one with the power. In reality, Smith’s control depended on the mutual interaction between her and the visitor, and beyond that, she also had to rely on the participant’s complicity.

⁹⁹ Harth, *Twenty-first Century Odyssey, Part II*, 34.

The most common anecdote relayed about the viewer's participation in *Feed Me* involves a young couple in a relationship.¹⁰⁰ As the man entered the room, his girlfriend waited outside the door. His way of engaging with Smith was to ask her to “fly” with him. The pair stood up with their arms extended, entering what Smith had described as a “transported state.” Unexpectedly, the girlfriend stormed into the bathroom, proclaiming her jealousy and announced she was leaving. Concerning this experience, Smith explained in 1974:

I am not trying to disturb any relationships, meaning what I am doing isn't real. It isn't meant seriously, but what I am doing on another level is serious. This piece is a very unusual thing for a person to do. Not only did I do it, but I did it in public and the psychology of my mind was totally at peace when I did it. Simply because I disciplined my mind against talking myself into doubt. That is to say I recognized the distinction between art and reality, the girl did not.¹⁰¹

Unwillingly, Smith had become entangled in the couple's relationship, and this unexpected moment has become one of the primary associations with the work. Smith may attempt to separate the performance art from reality, yet for the participant the contradiction remained as the performance is inevitably a form of reality.

Smith looked to performance art to confuse what is real and what is art. On the nature of the medium, Peggy Phelan articulates, “Performance uses the performer's body to pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body *per se*; performance uses the body to frame the lack of Being promised by and

¹⁰⁰ Harth, *Twenty-first Century Odyssey, Part II*, 60; Smith, *Barbara Smith*, 8-9; Jennie Klein, “Feeding the Body: The Work of Barbara Smith,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 21, no. 1 (January 1999): 30-31; Smith, interview.

¹⁰¹ Smith, *Barbara Smith*, 9.

through the body---that which cannot appear without a supplement.”¹⁰² By having a very physical experience with the participants, be it eating or touching, Smith creates a momentary event that resonates with the viewer. For her, the performance is a carefully calculated event that involves preparation of her body and the space. For the participant’s girlfriend, however, this was inarguably an event where her boyfriend went too far with another woman.

In the context of this story, it bears underlining that one of the main readings of Smith’s work depends on heteronormative thinking. As mentioned, Smith intended the work to be about a power relationship between men and women, in the context of her reclaiming her life after her divorce. Maintaining that the work is distinctly feminist, she explains in 2009, “In my pieces with and about men I am the one directing the piece, I have taken the position of power. It could not be more women-centered. It seems easy to have feminist ideals in the absence of men, much harder and a longer process if the work has to include them.”¹⁰³ At the same time, her focus on the relationship between men and women restricted the type of relationship the work could critique. As Charlotte Lindenberg articulates, “Heterosexual relationships have always been the platform on which she carried out various tasks and initiated performances with and about male lovers.”¹⁰⁴ Smith’s nudity and apparent availability allow for accessibility for straight male participants, perhaps explaining the reported popularity of the piece with such viewers.

¹⁰² Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 150-1.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Lindenberg, “Barbara T. Smith Revisited,” 90.

¹⁰⁴ Lindenberg, “Barbara T. Smith Revisited,” 90.

This did not allow for the point of view of women--where did the three female participants fit into this work? Reportedly, only three women entered the bathroom that night, one of whom proclaimed, "I'll be damned if only men come in here."¹⁰⁵ The women who viewed the work walked into the restroom fully clothed to confront an attractive, nude female. The piece's reception centered on the relationship of Smith to the male participants and Smith's role as a straight woman, but the criticism tacitly, if not technically, precluded the role of a female or lesbian participant. Their position and participation in the work has been completely diminished, and in fact, the interaction between Smith and the women has been completely forgotten.¹⁰⁶ While Smith claimed the piece was "women-centered," it may be more accurately described as woman-centered, with Smith as the only woman who has ever received full consideration.

Additionally, one of the most important ideas about the story of the interrupted "flying" is that Smith's desirability and availability created a particularly complicated scenario for women artists. Jenni Klein has more recently noted:

Feed Me points to the real difficulties that confront feminist critics when faced with a performance such as this... the image of Smith does nothing to contradict her apparent objectification. Smith's lovely body, which shows no traces of the three pregnancies that she had experienced, or, for that matter, the inevitable aging that is usually visible on a body that has lived for forty-two years, rewards the scopophilic gaze of the male viewer in general, and her boyfriend in particular.¹⁰⁷

Smith's beauty can be troubling to feminists, because it enabled the piece to be viewed as reinforcing societal norms and stereotypes. This helps explain Smith's repeated assertions

¹⁰⁵ Smith, interview.

¹⁰⁶ Smith, interview.

¹⁰⁷ Klein, "Excavating the Goddess," 150. Klein is referring to Dick Kilgroe, Smith's on-again, off-again boyfriend, an artist with whom she collaborated infrequently; Smith, interview.

that the point of the piece was about her control of the participants, who were primarily men.¹⁰⁸ Despite her age and experience, Smith felt like she had been repeatedly hustled and taken advantage of throughout her life and her career. So to turn the tables, she wanted to be the one to grant men permission, controlling what they can and what they can do.

A comparison with Hannah Wilke is apt here, as Amelia Jones has argued that Wilke, who was also quite beautiful, was frequently viewed as taking advantage of her body and beauty in her art. Critics generally emphasized Wilke's conformity with established beauty norms through her display of her own body, leading to their interpretation of her work as focused on her beauty.¹⁰⁹ But Jones has proposed that Wilke, and I would add Smith, in the act of using their beautiful bodies were actually challenging ideal body types as she explains:

Precisely *because* feminist body artists enact themselves in relation to the long-standing Western codes of female objectification (what Craig Owens has called the "rhetoric of the pose"), they unhinge the gendered oppositions structuring conventional models of art production and interpretation (female / object versus male / acting subject).¹¹⁰

In works like *S.O.S. – Starification Object Series* (1974-1982, fig. 20) and *Art News Revised* (1975), prominently and even proudly on display, Wilke's nude body

¹⁰⁸ See previous quotes by Smith, as well as Klein, "Feeding the Body," 31. Smith recently explained that she has recently gone to great lengths to explain the work as more than photographs of her nude body. Smith has written a specific text that now must accompany photographs whenever this piece is shown in exhibition that details Smith's reading of the work which focuses on her control of the viewers and the entire situation that evening. Smith, interview.

¹⁰⁹ For a full discussion of the problematic criticism and reception of Wilke, see Anna C. Chave, "'I Object' Hannah Wilke's Feminism," *Art in America* 97, no. 3 (March 2009): 104-8, 159.

¹¹⁰ Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 152.

emphasized her femininity. In the act of creating these self-portraits, she also forced the viewer to recognize that the artist herself is female. Wilke attempted to challenge critics and even art historical doctrine, by exposing her body as the object of art while further exploring artistic modes of production.¹¹¹

Through her performances, Smith similarly attempted to assert her control--as woman, as artist, as creator. Just as Wilke's works were often dismissed, *Feed Me* also was frequently pigeonholed. Smith, in her nudity and openness about how she would interact with participants, encouraged the idea that she would be open to a manner of acts, including those of a sexual variety. Like Wilke, Smith positions herself as an agent of her sexuality. Her willingness to be open and free with her sexuality, while also emphasizing her control over the situation, demonstrates an assertion of her sexual identity. In narrow readings, the mattress on the floor and the predominance of male visitors may encourage readings of the piece to be solely about sex and the possible availability of the artist.¹¹² But that limited view precludes the wider critiques that Wilke and Smith were trying to make.¹¹³ They are no longer passive objects meant to be seen or used, rather they are assertive, feminist artists who are challenging the separation of artist and subject, as well as subject and object. By collapsing these distinctions, these artists use performance art to challenge assumptions about female passivity and objectification.

¹¹¹ Jones, *Body Art*, 154-55.

¹¹² In one of the most extreme examples, A. Belard writes that "Barbara Smith exposed herself in a series of one to one relationships with all who would impose their egocentric needs upon her naked open body." See A. Belard, "All Night Sculptures," *Artweek*, May 26, 1973, 3.

¹¹³ Klein asserts that Smith had sexual intercourse multiple times throughout the piece; see Klein, "Feeding the Body," 31.

One of the ways that Smith was able to withstand the duration of *Feed Me* over the course of an entire night was by disassociating herself from her body. Discussing this detachment, she explains in 2009, “It allows me to be someone else. So when I do a performance it’s not me--not Barbara personally--it’s me the artist.”¹¹⁴ Because of this disassociation, Kristine Stiles recognizes *Feed Me* as an expression of a “traumatic need... as sexuality used as a substitute for appropriate care *and* as a force through which she could garner responsible interaction and concord.”¹¹⁵ In this manner, Smith is addressing some of the same issues that Wilke and many other women artists, like Eleanor Antin and Rachel Rosenthal, would have to confront concerning the perception that one could not be a woman *and* an artist. The recent divorcée, Smith, risked her livelihood to go back to art school to pursue her own career. She is simultaneously an artist, a woman, a mother, and even the medium of the artwork at hand. Antin addressed that complication in 1974: “‘My body’ is, after all, an aspect of ‘my self’ and one of the means by which my self projects itself into the physical world.”¹¹⁶ The body is at once identical with the artist, and yet, there is clearly a view, posited by both Antin and Smith, that in a performance the performers can in a way separate themselves from the body on display. While dancers, actors, and performers all incorporate their bodies into their art, a factor which can be seen as involving their personal identities with their work, Antin, Rosenthal, and Smith at once point to and complicate the separation between performance and the personal.

¹¹⁴ Smith, interview.

¹¹⁵ Kristine Stiles, “Barbara Smith’s Haunting,” *Twenty-first Century Odyssey, Part II*, 41.

¹¹⁶ Antin, “Autobiography of the Artist as Autobiographer,” 18.

Antin's and Smith's willed act of dissociation from their bodies resonates differently in view of their contrasting body types. Smith represented the stereotypical California beauty--the curvy, vivacious blonde. By displaying her nude body so prominently in this performance, Smith believed that she was trying to challenge male formulations of female beauty. Yet, even by her account, this was not entirely successful, because by offering up her body in exchange for something, she was playing into fantasies of prostitution, slavery, or the harem.¹¹⁷ In fact, in that way this work can be seen as reinforcing how women's bodies have conventionally been used and manipulated throughout time. Smith highlighted the vulnerability of her body by making herself available. Her emphasis on sexuality, made clear through her nudity and the sensual objects included in the performance space, reinforced heteronormative formulas, as she subjected herself to various acts with the mostly male participants, and let those participants take command of her body and her submissive position.

Inasmuch as Smith's body was a desirable one, comparatively close to dominant ideals, her work and project could be about something else besides the status of her body--about sexuality and vulnerability, say--which was not so simple for Antin or Rosenthal. If Smith's body corresponded to an ideal (particularly one associated then with California women), she can be seen as representing a goal that both Antin and Rosenthal aspired to but could not ever attain. Rosenthal and Antin did not dye their hair or, for instance, undergo rhinoplasty; instead, by dieting, they made clear that it was their body size that they saw as most needing change. With regards to Antin, Lisa E. Bloom has argued that

¹¹⁷ Harth, *Twenty-first Century Odyssey, Part II*, 34.

her Jewish identity precluded her from attaining the putative ideal. Here, Bloom discussed Antin's ethnicity in relation to *Carving*:

Antin's project can be seen as her inability to adapt to the ideal and thus to assimilate as an unmarked subject... Antin does not offer an easy solution to the dilemma of being both Jewish and female. Instead she points to the limits of fitting in, by presenting a series of anti-aesthetic photographic self-portraits that refuse to offer a neutral and undisturbing aesthetic experience.¹¹⁸

The attempt of Jewish women to assimilate and change their figures to look “whiter” has been well documented. As Melvin Konner articulates: “Hair was straightened and dyed blond, eyebrows trimmed and plucked, skin bleached, and ears tucked back closer to the skull in innovative surgical procedures. And, in the greatest step in the cosmetic surgery of the era, Jewish noses were straightened and ‘bobbed’--cut short--to remove this most obvious and ‘indestructible’ Jewish stigma.”¹¹⁹ By tracing the history of rhinoplasty from its invention by the Jewish doctor Jacques (né Jakob) Joseph to the popularity of the surgery with celebrities and teenage Jewish girls, Konner emphasizes the lengths Jewish men and women have gone to change their bodies to fit in.

More specifically, Jewish women--arguably including Antin and Rosenthal--have historically tried to resemble a particular type or types of figure--one that is significantly less Jewish. Sander Gilman explores this idea, “The desire for invisibility, to ‘look like everyone else,’ still shaped the Jew’s desire to alter his/her body. . . . The internalization of the negative image of the Jew is one model of response to the sense of being seen as

¹¹⁸ Lisa E. Bloom, "Ethnic Notions and Feminist Strategies of the 1970s: Some Work by Judy Chicago and Eleanor Antin," in *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, ed. Catherine M. Soussloff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 150.

¹¹⁹ Marvin Konner, *The Jewish Body* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), 170.

‘too Jewish,’ or, indeed, being seen as Jewish at all.’¹²⁰ By documenting her body in a straightforward and scientific approach, Antin further drew her attention to her Jewish nose and short stature and its differences from the California woman. Similarly, the Jewish refugee Rosenthal, a self-proclaimed Displaced Person, never felt she fit in with any group. Her body type, with her dark hair, her larger frame and troubled knees, is certainly distinct from the figure of her erstwhile mentor, Smith. Changing their bodies and making them thinner could serve as a comfort for Antin and Rosenthal, making them more American, and as Gilman said, more “invisible.” Furthermore, as Dr. Thomas Rees asserted, “Everybody wanted to look like a shiksa.”¹²¹ Derived from the Hebrew verb *shakaytz* (to abominate an unclean object), shiksa evolved into an epithet describing the gentile female, one who was simultaneously desired by men but forbidden.¹²² While the term shiksa does not necessarily imply a thin body, it does frequently suggest some attractiveness or appeal that the Jewish woman is lacking. In this discussion, Smith could be cast as the shiksa--the quintessential American blonde W.A.S.P. (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), while Rosenthal and Antin strove to make their bodies look more like that of the shiksa and Smith, and so more conventionally desirable.

Interweaving questions of Jewishness into the struggle about weight certainly complicates Antin and Rosenthal’s relationships with their bodies. Even still, there is something more universal about their struggle to fit, as their attempts to change their

¹²⁰ Sander Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 193. These ideas are further explored in his earlier text, Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹²¹ Quoted in Jane Gross, “As Ethnic Pride Rises, Rhinoplasty Takes a Nose Dive,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1999.

¹²² Christine Benvenuto, *Shiksa: The Gentile Woman in the Jewish World* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), xii-xiii.

bodies parallel the plight of the “average” women, who is constantly trying to conform to a thin ideal. Discussing the artworks by Antin and Rosenthal in terms of their challenge to the ideal body image is not only necessary, but dictated by the artists. Antin denied being aware of the body-issue politics in *Carving* during the making of the piece, but upon the occasion of the first installation of the piece in Los Angeles’ Orlando Gallery in 1972 and seeing the work hanging on the wall, realized the impact and revelation of showcasing her flesh.¹²³ Rosenthal’s overindulgence in pastries, evident in *Charm*, and her subsequent slashing of the picture of her larger body, clearly brought her weight to the forefront of her work. On the other hand, Smith’s body is repeatedly described in positive terms, if it is mentioned at all. The critical conversation concerning *Feed Me* has centered more on issues surrounding the balance of power between men and women. In *Feed Me*, though, the constant repetition of the demand – “Feed me... Feed me...” – coupled with the room being filled with food and other goods, made it clear there was a reliance on and preoccupation with nourishment as an emotionally charged act. Further complicating matters, the photographic documentation of the event focused on Smith’s body. Because Smith is thin and her weight is thereby socially acceptable, the reception of the work had been geared toward examining the relationship between the artist and the viewer-participant (generally constructed as a straight man). If Smith had been overweight, presumably this piece could be viewed differently and more in line with the work of Antin and Rosenthal at least when it comes to the insecurities of their bodies. The “Feed me... Feed me...” chant and the food and wine on offer would then have extremely different implications.

¹²³ Antin, e-mail message; and Nemser, *Art Talk*, 243.

At the time of *Carving*, Antin was thirty-five. Smith was forty-two when she made *Feed Me*, and Rosenthal was fifty-one by the time she made *Charm* and her mature works. Concurrently, these were the bodies of women who wanted to maintain their youthfulness. These works depended in part on the fact that these women were not young and nubile; rather their bodies had experienced major life events, from having children to major surgeries, as well as the passage of time.

Whether by embodying an ideal or expressing a desire for that ideal, each of these women appeared to conform to “the beauty myth” and the unattainable, airbrushed body.¹²⁴ Two of the artists physically changed their bodies in their attempt to achieve this attractive form, while Smith showed her svelte figure off. As they showcased these ideals, however, they were also attempting to subject them to scrutiny. While Antin experimented with dieting, she treated her body as an object, acknowledging that by the full title of the piece: *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*. As the weeks progressed, her body was the sculpture she carved away as the weeks progressed in pursuit of the classical ideal. Similarly, in her creation of the Icon of the Fat Vampire, Rosenthal explained that her weight held her body back and asserted that since she became thin, she had been freed. The extra pounds prevented Rosenthal from being able to work to her fullest capabilities because she was both ashamed of her body but the demands of performing had become too much for her larger frame. Through different weight management techniques, Rosenthal and Antin were able to control their bodies. On one level, the documentation of their weight loss constituted a record of personal changes, but

¹²⁴ “The Beauty Myth,” as defined by Naomi Wolf, is predicated on the idea that just as women have enjoyed more success in their careers and society, the pressure on women to adhere to societal dictates of physical beauty has increased. See Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 9-19.

when presented as art to the public, it operated as an object of analysis and so of a social commentary. By simply drawing attention to the fact that women are pressured to lose weight and look a certain way, these artists are articulating an inequity between men and women in contemporary society.

These three women also benefited from developing their work in the seventies at the height of the feminist movement. Their works stemmed from the consciousness-raising sessions, rife at the time, which gave women permission to explore personal subjects and themes.¹²⁵ The artists reveled in the newfound freedom to express aspects of their biographies. Just as attention was paid to women's lives, their bodies were also receiving more positive attention, as exemplified by the production of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* [OBOS] by the Boston Women's Health Course Collective. The book first manifested as a course booklet in 1970, filled with basic and fundamental information regarding women's health and lives. Then, with help from a non-commercial press, the book was distributed nationally in 1971, with innumerable commercial editions to follow.¹²⁶ Historian Kathy Davis articulates the importance of the book, "*OBOS* combined a scathing critique of an analysis of the political economics of the health and pharmaceutical industries. But, above all, *OBOS* validated women's embodied experiences as a resource for challenging medical dogmas about women's bodies and,

¹²⁵ Besides coming together and sharing her experiences at the opening of *Womanhouse*, each woman participated in various consciousness-raising sessions across California. Smith, interview; "Oral History Interview with Rachel Rosenthal; Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 207; Antin, e-mail message.

¹²⁶ For more information on the history of the organization, see Boston Women's Health Book Collective, "History of Our Bodies Ourselves and the Boston Women's Health Book Collective," *Our Bodies Ourselves*, <http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/about/history.asp> (accessed October 10, 2009).

consequently, as a strategy for personal and collective empowerment.”¹²⁷ Alongside the work of the artists discussed above, *OBOS* attempted to provide education regarding women’s bodies. It insisted upon women’s bodies as important and valid topics of conversations and not just objects to be admired. Antin and Rosenthal each highlighted the oppressiveness of the surrounding norms women’s bodies, by making a graphically manifest their own discontent with their weight and shape. Their work expressly enacted a contradiction: they at once wanted their bodies to conform to an accepted shape and they wanted to draw attention to the problems with that ideal.

Barbara Smith continued to use her body in her art throughout her career. In the years following *Feed Me*, she gained weight and stopped doing as many performances nude. In 1977, she was invited to create a work for the Women’s Building at the College Art Association conference in Los Angeles. Originally, Smith’s work for that occasion emerged in discussion with other women at the Women’s Building, but when it came to the decision as to who would perform the project she came up with, no one volunteered. To see it through, Smith herself would have to perform naked again. As she had gained weight, she was particularly hesitant about doing this piece, titled *Pucker Painting* (1977).¹²⁸ She covered her body with white gesso and handed out brightly colored and especially vivid lipsticks to onlookers, so they could kiss her body and leave their marks upon her “canvas.”¹²⁹ Summing up the situation in 2009, Smith explained, “By then, I’m older. I definitely didn’t have a very trim body. So the humor was that my body had

¹²⁷ Kathy Davis, *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

¹²⁸ Unfortunately, no photographs documenting this event are known to exist. Smith, interview.

¹²⁹ Harth, *Twenty-first Century Odyssey, Part II*, 83; and Smith, interview.

puckers here and there, so there was this punning going on about body image. . . . That was the most difficult one that I ever did being naked, because I really felt funky. I just had to grin and bear it.”¹³⁰ Throughout her career, Smith has also continued to work with food and rituals that often included periods of fasting and feasting.¹³¹ She did not again use her body in the same manner as she had at the time of *Feed Me*. By the late 1970s, Smith was expressing comparable feelings to those Rosenthal and Antin had been addressing in their work.

These artists’ persistent practices of incorporating their bodies in ways central to their projects demonstrated that their work in the 1970s did not resolve any of the issues concerning their weight. Rosenthal’s and Antin’s decisions to showcase their bodies allowed for their work to prompt further examination into body size and its role in art and society by future generations of artists.¹³² Professionally, they did not incorporate their weight issues or insecurities concerning their bodies in their art again. This is not to say that the dissatisfaction with their bodies dissipated; rather, it persisted but did not continue as a subject for their art.¹³³ In an interview in 1998, when discussing her work and her desire for change, Antin explained one of the key reasons that these artists moved away from their dissatisfaction with their bodies: because nothing can really be done about it. “But can you really win? Have you ever seen a revolution that didn’t swallow itself? Isn’t defeat built into the world, as basic as carbon? Aren’t we all doomed? We got

¹³⁰ Smith, interview.

¹³¹ Particular examples include *The Hunger Strike* (1980), *Piercing the Corporate Veil* (1980), *Pageant of the Holy Squash* (1988) and *The Witness* (1999). See Harth, *Twenty-first Century Odyssey, Part II*.

¹³² Other artists inspired by their example include Vanalyne Green (b. 1948) and Faith Ringgold (b. 1930).

¹³³ Rosenthal, interview; and Antin, e-mail message.

out in the morning and we're going to be defeated at night. If we have really bad luck, we'll be defeated by noon."¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Quoted in Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 219.

Chapter Two: Sewn Shape

Karen Carpenter: Death at 32 to the beloved singer after a valiant battle against anorexia nervosa.

--*People* headline, February 21, 1983

Oprah's Vow: "I'LL NEVER DIET AGAIN!" Fed up with her 14-year fight for a model figure, OPRAH WINFREY is learning to love the robust shape she's in.

--*People* headline, January 14, 1991

The worst thing about being fat was squeezing through the subway turnstile sideways; hobbling down the stairs panting and blowing while some bewildered passenger holds the door open for me. And then to have two people get up to give me one seat. I just got to change.

--Faith Ringgold¹

The 1980s brought about an increasingly public conversation concerning women's bodies, focused on the rise of eating disorders, the escalating pressures on women to be thin and the successes and failures of the weight loss and aerobic exercise industry. Television, tabloids, and even the art world started focusing on the shape of women's bodies. One of the developments that encouraged this discussion was the explosion of the United States diet and exercise industry evidenced by the success of organizations like Weight Watchers (founded 1963) and Nutrisystem Weight Loss Centers (founded 1972).² Following these companies' successes, Americans embraced aerobic exercise in the 1980s, with organizations such as Jazzercise adding their programs to the many influences on the shaping of women's physiques. Roberta Pollack Seid explained the rise of the aerobic industry: "Jane Fonda, the female ideal of the eighties, now raised her clenched fist, not as a sign of protest, but to show her biceps.

¹ Text from "Change 2 Song" (1988), quoted in Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: A Bulfinch Press Book, 1995), 242-47.

² Roberta Pollack Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1989), 167.

One's own body, its health and especially its strength, emerged as the new cause célèbre."³ This important shift in emphasis from weight loss to a healthy lifestyle was accompanied by a change in rhetoric, though the expected result--a thin figure--remained the same. To strengthen their muscles, an estimated twenty-five million Americans enrolled in aerobic dance classes between 1981 and 1985.⁴

While health and fitness was the ultimate goal of these programs, something alarming was affecting women instead. In 1984, it was estimated that one in every 200-250 women between the ages of thirteen and twenty-two suffered from anorexia, and as many as 33% of college women controlled their weight through vomiting, diuretics, and laxatives.⁵ Around 90-95% of all anorexics are women, and many experts agree that this disease is closely linked to women's body issues.⁶ Susan Bordo reads anorexia as representing a confluence of cultural issues, which include connections to contemporary practices like bodybuilding and jogging, but also to historical manipulations of the female body, such as tight corseting:

Indeed, female bodies have historically been significantly more vulnerable than male bodies to extremes in both forms of cultural manipulation of the body. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that women, besides *having* bodies, are also *associated* with the body, which has always been considered woman's "sphere" in family life, in mythology, in scientific, philosophical, and religious ideology. . . . We will see that the social manipulation of the female body emerged as an absolutely central strategy in the maintenance of power relations between the sexes over the past hundred years.⁷

³ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 235.

⁴ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 236.

⁵ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1994; repr., Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 140.

⁶ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 15.

⁷ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 143.

While acknowledged as a treatable disease, anorexia is nonetheless viewed as intimately connected to certain social ills of Western culture.⁸ Anorexia represents the extreme case of a woman's attempt to control the size of her body based on an internalization of presumed societal ideals.

In addition, as the 1970s and 1980s progressed, anorexia and bulimia became significant topics of discussion in society broadly.⁹ In 1979 psychiatrists reclassified bulimia from being one of the symptoms of anorexia to being its own distinct diagnosis of anorexia, and in 1985 bulimia was classified as a disease in itself.¹⁰ By recognizing bulimia and anorexia as separate diseases, psychiatrists were acknowledging both the need for more awareness of and the rise of eating disorders. As bulimia and anorexia increasingly became part of the public consciousness, they also became the subject of newspaper features, celebrity tell-alls, and made-for-television movies. The extensive media coverage of Karen Carpenter's 1983 death, Gilda Radner's revelations about her struggles with eating disorders, and even Meredith Baxter Birney's turn in the television movie *Kate's Secret*, in which she portrayed a successful lawyer and mother wrestling

⁸ This association is evidenced by a number of studies of women living in Japan, South Africa, and other countries where the rise of cases of anorexia is directly related to exposure to the celebration of thinness in Western culture; see Anne E. Becker et al., "Eating Behaviours and Attitudes Following Prolonged Exposure to Television Among Ethnic Fijian Adolescent Girls," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 180 (2002): 509-514; Sing Lee, "Engaging Culture: An Overdue Task for Eating Disorders Research," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 28 (2004): 617-21; Rebecca Lester, "Commentary: Eating Disorders and the Problem of 'Culture' in Acculturation," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 28 (2004): 607-15; and Brett Silverstein, Barbara Poterson, and Lauren Perdue, "Some Correlates of the Thin Standard of Bodily Attractiveness for Women," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 5 (1986): 895-905.

⁹ Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, 11.

¹⁰ Walter Vandereycken, "Emergence of Bulimia Nervosa as a Separate Diagnostic Entity," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 16, no. 2 (1994): 105; and Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, 14.

with bulimia, were among the many instances where the media attempted to deal with eating disorders.¹¹ Gradually, people were able to put a face on eating disorders.

Even Jane Fonda (b. 1937), who spearheaded the aerobics movement in the early 1980s with her popular workout videos, harbored an immense secret. Founding her own exercise studio, The Workout, in 1979, she helped to establish aerobics as a recognizable and acceptable way for women to stay in shape. She solidified her importance in the emerging field with her bestselling *Jane Fonda's Workout Book* (1981) and *Jane Fonda's Workout* (1982), the first aerobics home video ever produced.¹² Yet throughout her life, Fonda had struggled to stay thin, and since the age of fifteen she had struggled with various eating disorders that continued until her forties.¹³ Ultimately, she credited her exercise success with breaking her cycle of starvation and purging. "It replaced the control that you feel binging and purging with compulsive exercise."¹⁴ Fonda's problematic relationship with her body continued throughout the 1980s, paralleling the media's dissection of women's body shapes, and the unhealthy means by which many women attained an ideal of thinness.

As more people suffered, and as celebrities continued to make their battles with eating disorders public, the media and the entertainment industry began to use the diseases as subject matter for various forms of entertainment. Some of the programs and

¹¹ Gilda Radner discussed how she lost weight through dieting, attributing her success to sugarless chewing gum and throwing up after meals; Cherie Burns, "Radner's Ready," *People*, December 5, 1977, 92-99. On Karen Carpenter, see Randy L. Schmidt, *Little Girl Blue: The Life of Karen Carpenter* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010).

¹² Jane Fonda, *My Life So Far* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006), 391-94.

¹³ Fonda, *My Life So Far*, 404.

¹⁴ Jane Fonda, interview by Paula Zahn, *Paula Zahn Now*, CNN, October 31, 2005, transcript, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0510/31/pzn.01.html> (accessed May 17, 2010).

movies produced were educational, informing audiences about the symptoms and side effects of eating disorders. On the other hand, showing women purging and hiding their disease from friends and family also served inadvertently as a way to instruct women on how to initiate or maintain such negative behaviors. As Joan Jacobs Brumberg articulated:

In general, it seems that knowledge about the disease, garnered through popular culture sources, may be implicated in generating what Hilde Bruch (1982) called "me too anorectics" or mimetic behavior that erroneously links the process of starvation to glamour rather than pain. What we may be facing is a transformation peculiar to mass culture: the shift of a predominantly psychosomatic disorder into the category of a communicable disease.¹⁵

By continuing to draw attention to the disorder, while simultaneously promoting a thin ideal, the U.S. media likely helped to perpetuate the development of the disease in young women. As tabloid coverage of women's bodies increased throughout the 1980s, it became clear that the bodies of Karen Carpenter and Gilda Radner were up for debate. Were they too thin? How did it happen? Might an eating disorder even be necessary for a woman to have a successful career? The plight of women with eating disorders became a strange fascination for a broader public.

It is not surprising then that the subject of eating disorders also emerged in the art world. By addressing the work of three artists of the 1980s, I will examine the focus on the fetishization of the thin woman's body as reflected through extremely manipulated clothing and objects, in particular in works by Jana Sterbak and Maureen Connor. In 1987, Sterbak made a dress out of meat that rots in the gallery. The public outcry

¹⁵ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, "Fasting Girls': Reflections on Writing the History of Anorexia Nervosa," *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 50, nos. 4-5 (1985): 95.

concerning the work helps to demonstrate the way that the media discusses issues concerning the female body. Whereas Sterbak addressed eating disorders in her work, Connor created a dress for an impossibly thin woman in 1990. Their works' presence in the art world correlated with the public's increasing awareness concerning the health issues surrounding the pursuit of thinness. Just as scientists tried to warn the public about the health concerns of eating disorders, media outlets began to publish what they called "helpful" stories centered on celebrity diets and body image issues. Creating a series of quilts addressing her own struggle with weight loss, Faith Ringgold's *Change* objects and performances dealt frankly with her own experiences with weight loss, but also strongly reflected trends in *People* magazine and other news outlets in their reportage on celebrity body size. Through an exploration of various forms of the unhealthy body, Sterbak, Connor, and Ringgold simultaneously paralleled the increase in society's focus on women's weight in the 1980s, while also trying to critique that preoccupation with the size and shape of the female body.

Each artist drew on the rich history of fashion, as designers have used clothing to shape and manipulate the body to alter its appearance throughout time. The history of the corset especially demonstrates that clothing can be used not only to alter the body but also to project the identity and social status of the women who wear it. The corset is thought to have existed as early as the Minoan era in Crete, but gained in popularity particularly during the Renaissance. From that period forward, two main types of corsets developed: fashionable corsets, which might incorporate metal or whalebone stays, and orthopedic corsets, designed with plates of perforated metal and used by surgeons to help

people recovering from spinal injuries.¹⁶ Fashionable corsets, used solely to enhance the appearance of a woman's body, have often been blamed for the oppression of women, as they have long been believed to exert control over women's bodies, as well as to contribute to considerable health issues. Corsets can dramatically alter the body, by uplifting the breasts, making a smaller waist, and generating a more upright posture, for instance. Those changes are generally tempered by a number of negative side effects, including painful constriction of the abdomen, labored breathing, and awkward, restricted movement.¹⁷

For as much damage and pain as corsets may inflict on the wearer, recent literature has complicated the argument that corsets made women "slaves" to fashion, as Valerie Steele explained in her history of the corset:

By patronizing the women of the past as the passive "victims" of fashion, historians have ignored the reasons why so many women were willing to wear corsets for so long. Explanations that demonize patriarchy also ignore the complex gender politics surrounding the corset controversies of the past, since opponents of the corset included not only feminist women but also many men. Conversely, many women defended corsetry, and women were intimately involved in the production and sale of corsets.¹⁸

While the corset certainly made women appear thinner, Donald Kunzle pointed out that in fact the corset was not exactly popular and not always fashionable. Rather, women of the lower and upwardly mobile classes used the corset to advance their social status by

¹⁶ Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 4-5

¹⁷ David Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism: Corsets, Tight-lacing, and Other Forms of Body Sculpture* (Thrupp, UK: Sutton, 2004), 10-18; and Leslie Shannon Miller, "The Many Figures of Eve: Styles of Womanhood Embodied in a Late-Nineteenth-Century Corset," in *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture*, eds. Jules David Prown and Kenneth Haltman (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2000): 129-148.

¹⁸ Steele, *The Corset*, 2.

attempting to appear more fashionable.¹⁹ Thus the corset, which established ways of shaping and manipulating women's bodies as early as 4,500 years ago, could also be used as a way to advance socially.

Women generally stopped wearing corsets during World War I, in part to conserve metal for the war effort. Revived in certain sectors in the late twentieth century, the corset was popular in both sadomasochistic environments and in high fashion circles where well-known fashion designers integrated it into their couture collections, and eventually also their more mainstream collections.²⁰ In the 1970s, for example, British designer Vivienne Westwood began incorporating the corset in her work, and these designs were the first examples of her exploration of underwear as outerwear.²¹ Other important designers quickly followed suit, solidifying the corset's newfound popularity: Alexander McQueen and Thierry Mugler incorporated corsets into their runway shows in the late 1980s and early 1990s, while Jean-Paul Gaultier famously dressed Madonna in a shell-pink, lace-up corset for her *Blonde Ambition* tour in 1990.²² In the contemporary moment, the corset no longer hides behind layers of fancy silks. Rather, corsets as clothing openly demonstrate ways that the female body can be altered, in combination with the dieting and aerobics that were already part of many women's regular regimes.

Working in New York in the early 1960s, Mimi Smith (b.1942) was one of the first artists to investigate ideas of clothing constraints, like that associated with the corset. Having made her own clothes for years, Smith was interested in taking her domestic

¹⁹ Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism*, 234-35.

²⁰ Rebecca Arnold, *Fashion, Desire, and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 7.

²¹ Arnold, *Fashion, Desire, and Anxiety*, 77.

²² Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex, and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 86-88.

skills and applying them to her art making. For some of her earliest projects, she used unexpected materials to create uncomfortable outfits that challenged feminine roles in society.²³ Her 1966 *Girdle* (fig. 21) used bath mats to create a constricting, narrow dress whose intricate lacing down the front recalled the corset form. The slimness of the dress, combined with the ridges and hard plastic material, made it rigid and presumably unbearable if worn. Her *Maternity Dress* (fig. 22), of the same year, was made of cloth with a clear vinyl cover over the swollen belly of the mother (in this instance, probably Smith herself, who was pregnant with her first child at this time). The A-line shape of the dress was typical of the 1960s, flaring out at the hem, and this dress-type does not generally emphasize the shape of the body. For contrast, Smith inserted a large wooden ring that surrounds the vinyl belly panel emphasizing the changed body and disrupting the conventional style of the dress.

In another series of works, Smith explored connections between lingerie and body image: “I did a see-through bikini, which was enormous, for a heavysset woman--I guess I always thought I was too fat.”²⁴ In this piece, *Bikini* of 1965 (fig. 23), the bottoms are 48 inches wide while the impractical top is composed of vinyl circles with wire enclosing them. As magazines and movies show, thin women displayed their bodies by wearing skimpy bathing suits, whereas fat women in swimwear can rarely be found in such sources. It was assumed that the larger woman would not want to display her body in a bikini, but by making one so oversized, Smith tried to critique narrow-minded views of the fat body in society. In each of her clothing pieces, Smith’s severe distortions

²³ Judith Tannenbaum, *Mimi Smith: Steel Wool Politics* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1994), 5-7.

²⁴ Lynn Miller and Sally S. Swenson, *Lives and Works: Talks with Women Artists* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 164.

challenged the conventionally-depicted thin woman, and addressed the ways that clothing represents or even defines women's identities.

Smith has acknowledged that she was consciously responding to the 1950s feminine ideals she grew up with: "I wanted to say something about being a girl and growing up. I felt that in our society girls especially, but even men, had more experience in looking at clothes than they did in looking at art. So I felt if I made something that looked like clothes already they could understand half of it."²⁵ For this reason, Smith's works serve as an important introduction to the use of clothing as art. Her distorted clothing for women aligned her in a way with later fashion designers like McQueen and Gaultier, who likewise drastically reshaped the female body, though in a different context.

This control that fashion designers could exert through corseted garments was also explored in the early work of Jana Sterbak (b. 1955) who had in common with Smith an eccentric choice of materials. Controlling the body by restricting or forcing movement has been a major theme in Sterbak's work. Her *Remote Control* pieces from 1989 (figs. 24, 25) placed a female model into the skirt of a large, wheeled, wire-framed ball gown, which suggests a mechanized hoop skirt. The model's feet hover just slightly above the ground. For the piece to be fully realized and to move about, two tall men are assigned to help the woman get into the skirt. Once she is placed inside the contraption, one of two things will happen: she may use a remote control to mechanically propel herself through the environment (*Remote Control I*) or one of the men who helped her into the dress takes the remote and controls her movement (*Remote Control II*).

²⁵ Miller and Swenson, *Lives and Works*, 164.

A fundamental element of Jana Sterbak's pieces is the concept of navigating diverse terrains and spaces. Born in Czechoslovakia, Sterbak and her family fled during the Prague Spring in 1968, a period of political unrest and uncertainty. Moving from a state under Soviet control to Canada, a democratic country, while growing up and trying to define herself, she found it "amusing to watch the complete reversal of the values which were the foundation of my childhood."²⁶ She defined the combination of her Czech heritage and her adopted Canadian citizenship as a "colonized identity," since she doesn't solidly identify as Canadian or Czech.²⁷ Trained as a painter at the Vancouver School of Art, Sterbak incorporated issues of identity and displacement when she began exploring sculptural work in the late 1970s, initially working on a small scale. From the beginning, she created sculptural pieces that could be worn, such as the 1979 glove-like piece *Cones on Fingers* (fig. 26) that explicitly addressed the body. Using measuring tapes, Sterbak playfully made cone-like extensions of the fingers that suggested scary, talon-like claws.

Working with extensions and substitutes for the body led Sterbak to create clothing-like objects that stand as surrogates for people. In 1984-5, one of her first dress pieces, *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do (The Dress)*, is a life size wire mesh dress (fig. 27) with an un-insulated nickel-chrome wire running across the midsection of the garment. When someone enters the room the wire heats up and produces a searing orange glow. Like her measuring tape cones, the dress is not functional at all and, in fact, only loosely resembles a dress. Sterbak conceived of the dress as a reference to the story of Medea, the spurned lover who decided to punish her ex-husband's new wife by sending

²⁶ Diana Nemiroff, "States of Being," in *Jana Sterbak: States of Being = Corps à Corps*, eds. Usher Caplan and Claire Rochon (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1991), 15.

²⁷ Jennifer McLerran, "Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies in the Work of Contemporary Artist Jana Sterbak," *Feminist Studies* 24, no. 3 (1998): 535.

her a poisonous dress.²⁸ Similarly, while at first glance Sterbak's dress might appear as an innocuous piece of clothing, this dress is laced with violent intentions.

Sterbak projects a statement behind the piece that pushes the viewer to consider how the dress would feel on human flesh. Her repeated use of the pronoun "I" also encourages the viewer to read the dress as if from Medea's point of view:

I want you to feel the way I do: There's wire wrapped all around my head and my skin grates on my flesh from the inside. How can you be so comfortable only 5' to the left of me? I don't want to hear myself think, feel myself move, it's not that I want to be numb, I want to slip under your skin: I will listen for the sound you hear, feed on your thought, wear your clothes. Now I have your attitude and you're not comfortable anymore. Making them yours you relieved me of my opinions, habits, impulses. I should be grateful but instead. . . you're beginning to irritate me: I am not going to live with myself inside your body and I would practice being new on someone else.²⁹

Medea wanted to take her husband's new wife's place, as that was the only way she could get back into her husband's life. By the end of Sterbak's text, however, it becomes clear that even existing in this other person's space is not enough for her, as she has become dissatisfied and uncomfortable. At the same time, it is hard not to read the "I" as Sterbak herself, imagining that she wants to "slip under your skin." Which also begs the question: Which or whose skin? The skin of the dress? The viewer's skin? By using a number of shifters throughout the text, Sterbak purposely confused the viewer's reading. She not only suggests the potential of the artist as the speaker, but also the reader. The viewer could place him or herself into the situation, assuming that anyone might want to try on the body of someone else.

²⁸ Bruce Barber and Philip Evans Clark, *Jana Sterbak / Krzysztof Wodiczko--49th Parallel*, exhibition brochure (New York: Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art, 1986).
²⁹ Text from *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do (The Dress)* (1984-5), quoted in Barber and Clark, "Jana Sterbak / Krzysztof Wodiczko."

Sterbak continued this exploration of skin and flesh in her best-known artwork, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987, figs. 28-30). This simple, sleeveless shift dress was made of sixty pounds of half-inch flank steak sewn together like fabric. After it was formed, the dress was rubbed with over five pounds of salt, then displayed on a fiberglass mannequin. Over a period of five to six weeks, the meat dried and shrank, taking the form of the mannequin, until the dress fell apart. As the exhibition went on, the dress would be remade as many times as needed.³⁰

When the work was first made, Sterbak hired a model to wear the dress for photographs (figs. 31, 32), which are generally exhibited next to the dress. While the work was not conceived as a performance, the photographs of the dress as worn by a woman, rather than merely displayed on a mannequin, emphasize the physicality of the dress and serve to reinforce its connections to fashion. The dress may be a simple shift, but the seams were intricately sewn and the hem was frequently given a jagged, detailed edge. The bodice was cinched, and the collar was embellished all along the front and back of the dress. The mannequin that the dress was placed on performed a critical role, as when the dress is first made it hangs loosely, but as it dries out it shrinks and clings to the dressmaker's form, emphasizing the shape of the mannequin.

Created for the first time in New York, *Vanitas* was intended as a reaction to the surging art market and the current popularity of Neo-Geo, a clean, almost clinical type of art. As she explained, "The contradictions of a society, whose ostentatious wealth only finds a corollary in an invasive poverty, had no option but to summon the artist's innate

³⁰ Pamela Caserta, Assistant Registrar, Walker Art Center, e-mail message to author, March 22, 2010.

sense of paradoxes.”³¹ During this period, Sterbak had purchased a large amount of meat, which she hung from hooks in her studio as she figured out how to sew it into sculpture. When offered a show at Montreal’s Galerie René Blouin, she decided to incorporate the meat by exploring similar themes as in *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do (The Dress)*. She particularly liked the small, unventilated room that Galerie René Blouin offered her, as the intimacy of the space would allow people to interact with the piece.³² Sterbak worked quickly to make the dress; this was the first and only time she was involved in *Vanitas*’ construction, as for other exhibitions she would provide written instructions for how to make the dress. Displayed in the small space with poor circulation, the dress was meant to arouse the viewers’ visual and olfactory senses. Indeed, the work immediately conjured mixed emotions.

In her use of animal flesh as her main material, Sterbak was influenced by Joseph Beuys. By his account, he used animal fat in his work to recall how he survived in the Siberian wilderness.³³ Yet Sterbak ultimately moved beyond Beuys’s fat, preferring to emphasize a direct correspondence to the cows whose bodies make up the flank steak she appropriated. Additionally, she thought of the flesh dress as a type of skin, similar to the flayed human skins worn by Aztec priests.³⁴ *Vanitas* can be a second skin that emphasizes morbidity, for to create the second layer other creatures have to die. As

³¹ Jonas Storsve, “Jana Sterbak in Conversation,” in *Hors d’oeuvre: Ordre et désordres de la nourriture*, ed. Eric Félonéau and Maurice Fréchuret (Lyon, France: Fage Editions, 2004), 164.

³² Nemiroff, “States of Being,” 29; and Milena Kalinovska, “Jana Sterbak in Conversation with Milena Kalinovska,” in Caplan and Rochon, *Jana Sterbak*, 52.

³³ McLerran, “Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies,” 538. For a skeptical discussion of Beuys’ story, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol,” *Artforum* 5, no.18 (January 1980): 35-43.

³⁴ McLerran, “Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies,” 539.

curator Diana Nemiroff remarked, “a profoundly ambivalent object, it is both body and garment, interior and exterior, human and animal, eternal horrifying metaphor and decaying fleshly presence. The body as garment is an old image, expressing the dualism of body and soul.”³⁵

As Nemiroff’s comments suggest, this work brings up a multitude of issues that deserve unpacking. The medium that Sterbak used is not just uncommon, it is polarizing. She prefers that people refer to the pieces as made of flesh, intentionally reminding viewers of the once-living source material that she has incorporated. As she explained in 2004, “Many people, myself amongst them, have doubts about meat consumption, and, above all, the way our society takes care of its livestock intended for mass consumption . . . This is why meat often does not resemble itself in the effort to divorce it from any appearance that may recall our own flesh.”³⁶

For many, this piece had a moralistic tone, as writers and critics often relate the piece’s use of meat to people’s consumption of animals.³⁷ While there are many reasons people choose not to eat various types of meat, a common belief shared among vegetarians and vegans is that killing another living creature is an immoral act.³⁸ Killing animals for food can be justified in various ways, and there are certainly other foods that can sustain humans that do not involve the same kind of violence. In the production of *Vanitas*, Sterbak never kills the cow herself; rather, her choice of specific, processed parts

³⁵ Nemiroff, “States of Being,” 29.

³⁶ Storsve, “Jana Sterbak in Conversation,” 165.

³⁷ See Nemiroff, “States of Being,” 29-30; and McLerran, “Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies,” 537-9.

³⁸ The immorality of killing living beings is just one of many arguments for pursuing a vegetarian lifestyle. For more information on the choices (and implications of those choices) see: Philip E. Devine, “The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism,” *Philosophy* 53, no. 206 (October 1978): 481-505.

of the animal reflect the supermarket culture that Americans and Canadians have come to expect. The packaging and processing of the meat bears no reminder of the cow that once used the flank muscles to move, as Sterbak has noted.³⁹ The distance between the origins of meat as part of an animal to the packages at grocery stores makes the product easier to consume. In her dress, Sterbak lets the meat rot with the hope that it will draw society's attention to its denial of actual consumption of animals.

The choice of incorporating a processed meat ready to be cooked implies a type of power. In modern society broadly, the people who generally have had more access to meat--considered one of the most hearty, beneficial foods inasmuch as it provides high levels of protein--were comparatively privileged people, especially white men.⁴⁰ Women, as second-class citizens, have been likely to depend more on less costly vegetables, fruits and grains. Similarly, persons of color have often had less access to meat for economic reasons, or at least have had access to less valued cuts of meats.⁴¹ Hence, using meat as a material for a work of art tacitly implies a certain status, one that Sterbak challenged. While women could all along buy meat, they were often supposed to cook it primarily for their husbands and sons. Feminist writer and activist Carol J. Adams wrote in 1990 that, "The sexism in meat eating recapitulates the class distinctions with an added twist: a mythology permeates all classes that meat is a masculine food and meat eating a male

³⁹ Storsve, "Jana Sterbak in Conversation," 165.

⁴⁰ See Carole M. Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999); and Eric B. Ross, "Patterns of Diet and Forces of Production: An Economic and Ecological History of the Ascendancy of Beef in the United States Diet," in *Beyond the Myths of Culture: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 181-225.

⁴¹ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 25-38. By using cookbooks, artwork, writings, and historical documents, Adams traces the history of meat and its connection to privileged white males.

activity.”⁴² While that formulation may be extreme, meat has certainly been coded as a more masculine foodstuff than vegetables, and the “masculine” meat used to make Sterbak’s dress cemented *Vanitas*’s complicated ties to issues of gender. As Sarah Milroy elaborated, “The flesh dress is female, and it is made of meat. In conjoining these two signs, Sterbak commits a major gender infraction, naming the equation between meat and women--both objects for male consumption--that patriarchal society would prefer to leave unspoken (and therefore more pervasive).”⁴³

Sterbak was not the first to make a meat dress that implicitly challenged patriarchal paradigms. Ann Simonton (b. 1952) had a successful career as a model, appearing on covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *Seventeen*. After seeing an advertisement where she had posed seductively for bed linens in 1979, she had flashbacks to a rape earlier in her life and immediately decided to end her modeling career. She began protesting the way women’s bodies are used and manipulated in the media, and, for example, began speaking out against beauty pageants. In one of her most famous demonstrations, she protested the 1984 Miss California Pageant by wearing a dress made of thirty pounds of bologna and a necklace of miniature wieners, while wearing a pageant sash that proclaimed her as “Miss Behavin” (fig. 33).⁴⁴ This elaborate meat evening gown was made to draw attention to the way the contestants were treated as “pieces of meat.” Her dress used bologna, an extremely processed form of meat that had its own humorous connotation, to play on the dismissive slang phrase “that’s baloney.” Like Sterbak,

⁴² Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 26.

⁴³ Sarah Milroy, “The Flesh Dress: A Defense,” *Canadian Art* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 70-71.

⁴⁴ Jill Lieber, “The Woman Warrior: Ann Simonton Fights for Feminist Issues—and Against the SI Swimsuit Issue,” *Sports Illustrated*, February 7, 1989, 131-133.

Simonton wanted to draw attention to the way women's bodies are often viewed as fodder for public entertainment. Simonton, however, did not conceive of her project as an art piece; instead, she was interested in using the dress to create a public fervor and thereby to gain national attention for her feminist agenda.⁴⁵

The inherent femaleness of the dresses that Sterbak and Simonton created provides a contrast to a meat outfit by the Chinese artist Zhang Huan (b. 1965). Zhang's *My New York* (fig. 34), a performance for the 2002 Whitney Biennial, was his first event since the September 11, 2001 attacks and responded to the intimidation he felt city residents were experiencing at the time.⁴⁶ Zhang explained the formation of the work:

In New York, I saw many body-builders who spend hours training themselves, sometimes even beyond what their bodies can support. They use all kinds of vitamins and supplements in order to keep up their strength, but often they go beyond the limits of their hearts. . . . My consultant designed a beef-costume for me. Five tailors spent an entire day and a whole night sewing bits of beef, piece by piece, on to a diving suit. The beef-costume was very heavy, perhaps around fifty kilograms [110 pounds]. I had a hard time walking because of its weight. What a bodybuilder achieves only after going through more than ten years of training, I achieved overnight.⁴⁷

Zhang used the beef to build up his own body, and it became an extension of his masculine self. Whereas *Vanitas* is generally seen as the flesh of an animal, distinct from the person who would wear it, *My New York* relies on the idea that the viewer will

⁴⁵ Simonton became a leader in criticizing the media for its portrayal of women. She later founded Media Watch, an organization that aims to teach consumers to be critical of media imagery. Touring the country, Simonton lectures on media's depiction of women and violence. She has also produced a number of educational videos on the subject. See Rebecca Patt, "By Any Means Necessary," *Metro Santa Cruz*, March 26-April 2, 2003, <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/cruz/03.26.03/heroes-0313.html> (accessed March 21, 2010); and Media Watch, "Media Watch," www.mediawatch.com (accessed August 16, 2010).

⁴⁶ Yilmaz Dziewior, RoseLee Goldberg, and Robert Storr, *Zhang Huan* (New York: Phaidon, 2009), 73.

⁴⁷ Dziewior, Goldberg, and Storr, *Zhang Huan*, 122.

recognize the beef as muscle, which again is associated with masculinity. The meat turned Zhang into what he would call “Mr. Olympic,” embellishing him in a way that invoked a bid for reactions of respect and awe reserved for bodybuilders.⁴⁸ Zhang wore the suit as he walked down Fifth Avenue toward the Whitney, where his performance culminated in the release of white doves from a cage, a gesture of peace rooted in Buddhism.⁴⁹ In the wake of 9/11, Zhang Huan intended to make a form of statement about recovery, and moving forward. He built his body up in his performance so that he appeared symbolically prepared to take on the world--if encumbered at the same time. On the other hand, Sterbak’s work, as a feminine piece of clothing, remains passively static on the mannequin. Whereas Zhang’s work was a one-day performance only, Sterbak’s piece is displayed for longer periods of time, so that it literally rots on the mannequin.⁵⁰

By using decaying meat and including *vanitas* in the title, Sterbak engaged the tradition of *vanitas* still lives. Her earlier education in art history informed this reference, as *vanitas* is a particular subject whose origins date to the fifteenth century. *Vanitas* still life paintings traditionally include images of objects such as human skulls, snuffed candles or rotting fruit, symbolizing “a visual articulation of the consciousness of the end

⁴⁸ Zhang Huan, “My New York, 2002,” <http://www.zhanghuan.com/ShowWorkContent.asp?id=19&iParentID=16&mid=1> (accessed February 13, 2010).

⁴⁹ Giovanni Aloï, “September 2009, Zhang Huan @ White Cube,” *Whitehot Magazine*, <http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/2009-zhang-huan-white-cube/1952> (accessed August 14, 2010).

⁵⁰ In original installations of the work, the dress would only last about six weeks, until it rotted and fell apart. More recently, in exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou and the Walker Art Center, there has been a change in the desiccation. Through more modern practices of meat curing, the dress dries up and shrinks but can last through a much longer installation. Scott Donaldson, “Making Jana Sterbak’s *Vanitas*,” entry posted March 16, 2011, Walker Blogs, Walker Art Center, <http://blogs.walkerart.org/visualarts/2011/03/16/making-jana-sterbaks-vanitas> (accessed April 29, 2011); and Caserta, e-mail message to author, March 22, 2010.

of time.”⁵¹ Sterbak’s work rather presented the raw meat itself and, over the course of the exhibition, the work decomposed. The change in the meat’s color and the smell become a physical manifestation of a *memento mori*--a term Sterbak has used when describing this work and which can be associated with the idea of *vanitas*.⁵² A *memento mori* is a more general reminder of death, and like the *vanitas*, its imagery is used to remind people of the brevity of their own lives. Creating the life-sized dress made of meat served to encourage the viewer to contemplate his or her physical existence, and the reality that nothing lasts forever and everything is constantly in flux. After all, dress that was initially tangible and soft shrank and morphed into something tough and hard.

The full title of this work, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* strongly suggests that Sterbak intended the work to invoke the gender issues discussed earlier. By referring to anorexia, a primarily female disorder, in the title, Sterbak further acknowledged this work’s engagement with body issues and concerns. While the title can be seen as a generic reference to the disorder, it refers more specifically to one of the main inspirations for the work. Sterbak has said the piece is loosely named after a blonde, thin, fair-skinned woman who haunted Sterbak’s neighborhood in New York.⁵³ Sterbak did not know the woman, whose thin, pale, blonde characteristics she rhetorically exaggerated as an “albino anorectic.” This incorporation of anorexia into the title of her work is something that Nancy Spector related to Sterbak’s use of the term *vanitas*:

If realized, such radical attempts at bodily repression [as anorexia] can initiate a false sense of omnipotence; command over physical desires is

⁵¹ Ivan Gaskell, “The Image of Vanitas: Efflorescence and Evanescence,” in *The Story of Time*, ed. Kristen Lippincott (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999), 186.

⁵² Kalinovska, “Jana Sterbak in Conversation,” 52.

⁵³ Anneli Fuchs, Lars Gramby, and Jana Sterbak, *Jana Sterbak* (Humblebæk, Denmark: Louisiana Særkatalog, 1993).

often confused with power in and of itself, providing a sense of control in a world where many people, especially women, have little real agency. It is this illusion of omnipotence that provides the connection between “*vanitas*” and “anorexia” in the work.⁵⁴

Spector thus pointed out that power is an underlying issue in *Vanitas*--control over the body and power over life and death.

All of these disparate terms--meat, anorexia, ambiguity of gender--come together in *Vanitas* in the connection between the physicality of the female body and the flesh of the dress. When worn by a model as seen in the displayed photographs, the dead meat of the dress contrasts with the living flesh of the person underneath. As Lewis Johnson has suggested, “wearing a dress as a woman thus suggests the risk of flesh becoming meat for her spectators; and the meat dress becomes the presentation of an unrepresentability of the otherness of *this* woman, an image of a promise and threat of her becoming nothing other than animal, meat, dead.”⁵⁵ The decaying flesh on the young woman reinforces our awareness that everyone is simultaneously aging, as Jennifer McLerran has emphasized: “Because the image of the fashionable woman is one of youth, slimness, and vibrant good health, Sterbak's piece, with its associations of aging, death, and decay, shows the workings of, but also offers resistance to, the disciplinary force of fashion.”⁵⁶ The model epitomized the compliant follower of fashion, with her thin body, yet while showing off the dress, she at once reinforced the temporality of the artwork and the short life span of fashionable clothing.

⁵⁴ Nancy Spector, “Flesh and Bones,” *Artforum* 30, no. 7 (March 1992): 96.

⁵⁵ Lewis Johnson, “More and Less than Objects: Unapproachable Alterity and the Work of Jana Sterbak and Rosemarie Trockel,” in *Other than Identity: the Subject, Politics and Art*, ed. Juliet Steyn (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997), 176.

⁵⁶ McLerran, “Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies,” 538.

If the rotting dress on the young model emphasizes aging, it may also symbolize the body turned inside out. Sterbak has taken the bodily interior and relocated it to the exterior, creating a grotesque and unsettling juxtaposition. Showing the viewer what is underneath the skin, she exposes something that sustains us and allows us to function, but that constantly remains hidden. This permits the viewer to see a different kind of aging and decaying, a process that happens to each of us, so slowly and gradually that it is often unremarked by us. Further, the material of the dress ages it dries and shrinks--somewhat like an anorectic does when losing weight. Spector has explained that:

[T]he anorexic female body, as victim of self-induced starvation and intense self-discipline, personifies this desperate attempt at control of a personal world rife with paradox. And Sterbak's meat dress, which literally shrinks, seeming almost to subsume itself, serves as a visual analogue to the anorexic's misguided attempts to use mind against body in response to her inability--or refusal--to satisfy our culture's demands of its women for self-restraint, acquiescence, measured ambition, maternal aspirations, and bodily perfection.⁵⁷

Over the weeks the work is displayed it tightens and clings to the dress form, while it often becomes misshapen.⁵⁸ The dress moves from an ill-fitting object to a defined shape that echoes the mannequin, to an entity that eventually falls apart, loosely recalling the way an anorectic body changes shape and eventually starts to deteriorate.

Despite the withering and deleterious other physical side effects, the thinness that occurs when starving oneself is for the anorectic the desired result. Defined as "presence of starvation without evident organic cause," the syndrome of anorexia is often described

⁵⁷ Spector, "Flesh and Bones," 98.

⁵⁸ Unless viewers visit the show multiple times, they will only see one point in the drying and shrinking process. So for most people, the dress is frozen in a certain state—be it blood red and softer or dry, tanned meat.

as a way that women assume an illusion of control over their bodies.⁵⁹ For feminist sociologist Morag MacSween self-control is “an essential feature of femininity and of women’s relationship with their bodies: women watch what they eat, how they dress, talk, sit walk and behave.” She contrasts that with the other side of self control, which is “fear and disgust at the appetites which necessitate that control: women’s potential to overwhelm the boundaries of femininity and restricted feminine space.”⁶⁰ An anorectic woman sees success when her body, becomes a smaller version of its original self. Therefore, in a way, *Vanitas* serves as a stand-in for an anorectic.

On the other hand, Sterbak’s dress is composed of sixty pounds of rich steaks that would certainly never be a part of a strict diet such as an anorectic observer. The dress represents in that regard an impossible temptation made all the more painful by the fact that the anorexic is unbelievably hungry. As curator Lene Burkard explained:

When, for example, clothing is seen as a symbol of individuality or as a means of seduction, it expresses the conformity of consumption, even as it struggles against its appeal. *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987) is one of Sterbak’s works which best conveys this tension. . . . The anorexic subverts the use of food, just like the dress. The refusal to eat is a gesture against consumption, a form of resistance to the body’s social role. In order to free itself from the norms of consumption and from social and organic functions, *Flesh Dress* turns the arguments for consumption inside out, one by one. Here, seduction encounters a sort of cruelty, desire comes out upon repulsion, and time runs up against aging and deterioration.⁶¹

The dress thus simultaneously symbolizes both the desires and the repulsions of the anorexic. Additionally, the large quantity of meat used to make the dress could suggest another common eating disorder, bulimia, where in a model might consume a large

⁵⁹ Morag MacSween, *Anorexic Bodies: A Feminist and Sociological Perspective on Anorexia Nervosa* (London: Routledge, 1993), 17.

⁶⁰ MacSween, *Anorexic Bodies*, 193.

⁶¹ Lene Burkard, *Jana Sterbak: Video Installationer* (Odense, Denmark: Kunsthallen Brandts Klaedefabrik, 2004), 13-14.

portion of meat, and purge it later. Whether it is starvation or binging or both, the startling incongruity between the size of the mannequin or the model in the photographs and the steak that made up the dress helps to make this a pivotal work for discussions of female body image in contemporary art practice.

By exhibiting *Vanitas* next to photos of her model, Sterbak reiterates the identity of the dress as a wearable piece of fashion.⁶² In her photographs, Sterbak's model sits with her hip on the ground, a languid pose that allows the viewer to see the entire front of the garment and that might suggest a page out of *Vogue* or *Elle*. Simply put, we clothe our bodies to make ourselves acceptable in society.⁶³ And the flesh dress clothes the body in a way not only disgusting, but also arguably sensual, with compellingly textured "fabric" and a detailed pattern that, over the course of the exhibition, only becomes more defined and shapelier.

Because the rotting and disintegration of the dress is one of the aims of the artwork, each time it is displayed, a new version is created. Sterbak and her dealer sewed the first dress, but in its later iterations *Vanitas* became a team effort, as groups of museum staff members often work together to build it piece by piece when it is displayed.⁶⁴ The physicality of the act of sewing in question might harken back to the

⁶² In museum exhibitions, costumes displayed on mannequins are often accompanied by photographs of the pieces worn by actual models. One example is the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2009 exhibition "The Model as Muse"; see Harold Koda and Kohle Yohannan, *The Model as Muse: Embodying Fashion* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009).

⁶³ Joanne Entwistle, "The Dressed Body," in *Body Dressing*, ed. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (New York: Berg, 2001): 33-58.

⁶⁴ René Blouin, Sterbak's Montreal dealer, worked with her to acquire the necessary meat and helped sew the original dress. Kalinovska, "Jana Sterbak in Conversation," 52. Both the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, Minnesota) and the Centre Pompidou (Paris, France) own editions of this work. In a recent installation of the work, the Walker Art

work of Mimi Smith. Sewing can be a personal or familial experience, because the craft is often passed on from mother to daughter, or generation to generation.⁶⁵ The homespun nature of dressmaking, coupled with the fact that Sterbak's material is food, serve to relate *Vanitas* to traditional women's domestic chores. In addition, the stitching on the dress, which is clearly visible to the viewer, makes it evident that the work was and is made by hand.

When displayed for the first time at Montreal's Galerie René Blouin in 1987, *Vanitas* did not draw much attention. Controversy erupted when it was shown as part of a retrospective of Sterbak's work at the National Gallery of Canada in 1991. Canadian parliament member Felix Holtman denounced the Ottawa show and threatened to cut off funding to the museum after learning that the National Gallery had spent \$250 on flank steak and allowed it to rot. Defending the work against these attacks, art critic Sarah Milroy pointed out that the work could be situated within the art historical tradition of *vanitas* and *memento mori* images.⁶⁶ Milroy could not stop the public outcry, however, as many were upset about the so-called "wastefulness" of the piece, not grasping that this was one of Sterbak's points: that consumption of meat is intrinsically wasteful.

That spring, the *Toronto Sun* and the *Ottawa Sun* ran a cartoon titled "The National Gallery Needs Your Help" (fig. 35) that was intended to provide a way for

Center chronicled the process of re-fashioning the dress; see Donaldson, "Making Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas*." In a comment posted March 18, 2011, associate registrar Pamela Caserta noted that changes in the curing process of the meat now allow the meat dress to last much longer in exhibition, with hopes that it will last three years in this latest version.⁶⁵ The connection of dressmaking to femininity is discussed in Cheryl Buckley, "On the Margins: Theorizing the History and Significance of Making and Designing Clothes at Home," in *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking*, ed. Barbara Burman (New York: Berg, 1999): 33-54.

⁶⁶ Milroy, "The Flesh Dress," 70-1.

viewers to respond to *Vanitas*. Cartoonist Andy Donato created a drawing of a plain shift dress on a hanger, with its feminine curves exaggerated. The cartoon dress was surrounded by a dotted line with small scissors on the side, which visually suggested to the viewer to cut out the image. Next to the cartoon was a photograph of a young woman quizzically inspecting *Vanitas* in the museum.⁶⁷ Accompanying these images, the newspaper included a brief blurb explaining the materials and process used to create the piece. In a section titled “Here’s How You Can Help” readers were encouraged to cut out the cartoon and mail it to the gallery. “Cut out the area on the right surrounding the hanger, and wipe your dinner plate with the paper. Try to create a colorful garment on the hanger. Then mail it to [curator] Diana Nemiroff. . . HERE’S A TIP – Eat something colorful. Ketchup, mustard, and eggs are nice. Salmon and tuna will smell good in a couple days. Diana will like that.” More than two hundred people mailed the cartoon to the museum, many covered with rotten food and feces, forcing the gallery mailroom staff to open the mail with rubber gloves. Some of these cartoons were even accompanied by threats against both the curator and the National Gallery communications director, both of whom had defended the artwork.⁶⁸

That same spring, Sarah Milroy argued that perhaps one of the contributing factors to this controversy was the fact that the main players were women. “But for a woman artist (and curator) to ‘waste’ 50 pounds of meat constitutes a transgression of her traditional role as woman, a creature who requires no meat, who is herself meat, who saves herself and her resources for male consumption. What is posited by Sterbak’s

⁶⁷ The drawing is clearly signed by Donato, yet the author of the typed text and the relationship between the instructions, the photograph, and the cartoon is left unexplained.

⁶⁸ Milroy, “The Flesh Dress,” 71-72.

critics as an issue of class in fact screens an issue of gender.”⁶⁹ A cartoon by Mariken Van Nimwegen (fig. 36) published in the *Vancouver Sun* at this same time reinforced Milroy’s point. A “meat dress” hangs on a rod next to, but slightly behind, a large pair of “meat pants.” The message here is clear: the dress, and by extent the female gender, is dominated by the masculine pants. This cartoon also seems to respond to the gender issue that Milroy speaks of; beneath the controversy was the sheer challenge to the dominance of masculinity in Western culture. It is as if the dress and its femininity (and, by extension, the femaleness of the artist and curator) made an easy target for critics.

Another common theme for cartoonists was the dress’s raw food “fabric.” From Graham Harrops’ “Back Bench” (fig. 37), which jokingly maintained that the dress was just left “out here while we’re defrosting the refrigerator,” to Jim Phillips’s drawing (fig. 38), in which he claimed to “prefer my art barbecued,” the issue here was the absurdity of raw meat in a gallery setting. Caught up in this critique of *Vanitas* as a challenge to masculinity and power is social anxiety concerning class, which also manifested itself in the discussion concerning the wastefulness in *Vanitas*. Letting sixty pounds of meat go bad offended the sensibility of some who recognized that there were people starving everywhere. Pierre Bourque, an important entrepreneur and politician, claimed that *Vanitas* “shows a malignant lack of compassion,” wasting food as people in Canada went hungry.⁷⁰ The cartoonist Terry Mosher (pseudonym Aislin) represented this concern by showing a filthy pauper in tattered clothing standing before Sterbak’s work, plate, fork, and A1 sauce in hand (fig. 39). Sterbak responded to her critics, like Aislin and Bourque,

⁶⁹ Milroy, “The Flesh Dress,” 71.

⁷⁰ Catherine Drillis, “Toronto: De Gustibus. . . Beef Sculpture Raises Stink at the National Gallery of Canada,” *Art Newspaper* (New York), May 8, 1991.

in a press release, saying that “making art with meat is no more wasteful than painting; arguably the money expended for paint and canvas could have been better used to feed the hungry. . . . What is lacking [in Canada] is not food but a political and social desire to distribute the necessary economic means for everybody to purchase it.”⁷¹

Sterbak’s response attempted to address the argument from the vantage point of her detractors. While the work may have cost the museum \$250 every time it is shown, it was not depriving others. Food was actually available, but Canada lacked the institutional structures to efficiently help the hungry. Yet in her comments Sterbak also attempted to maintain her freedom as an artist by pointing out that politicians do not attack artists who use traditional materials. While Sterbak positioned herself as an artist who should have the freedom of choice to make what she wants, she still felt obligated to engage the politicians in their arguments.

One more concern about *Vanitas* was that displaying meat and allowing it to rot could be hazardous to the viewers’ health. Ottawa alderman Mark Maloney ordered regional health inspectors to examine the work, admitting that he wanted its removal and hoped the work would violate Ontario’s public health standards.⁷² He falsely claimed that because people were able to touch the rotting flesh that was enough to shut down the exhibition.⁷³ Addressing the health issue, Guy Badeaux (known as Bado) depicted the dress surrounded by flies (fig. 40) with the caption “Il y en a qui auront toujours

⁷¹ Quoted in Olivier Asselin, “Jana Sterbak,” *Parachute*, no. 63 (July/August/September 1991): 32.

⁷² Bruce Barber, “Thalia Meets Melpomene: The Higher Meaning of the Voice of Fire and *Flesh Dress* Controversies,” in *Voices of Fire: Art Rage, Power and the State*, ed. Bruce Barber, Serge Guilbaut, and John O’Brian (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 112.

⁷³ Drillis, “Toronto: De Gustibus.”

Maloney!” (Some will always have Maloney!) The health concerns could be another manifestation of the gendered issues surrounding the work, for, as with anxieties about the wastefulness of the meat, those concerns were all brought up by men. Oftentimes, along with focusing on the fashion of the dress, the form and shape of the female body was mocked and derided. The debate surrounding *Vanitas* could be seen, in other words, as being about more than the work of art.⁷⁴

Previous to the controversy in Ottawa, New York City’s New Museum had refused to show *Vanitas*. When *The New Yorker* contacted the museum about this decision in 1990, a public relations representative responded, “Canada is Canada. You do that here and who *knows* what will come out of the walls!”⁷⁵ The New Museum seemed to anticipate the prospect of the controversy that unfolded in Canada. Sterbak intended to create a piece that challenged and pushed boundaries. Certainly, many regarded the work as inflammatory; but the critical debate surrounding it often deteriorated into scandal-mongering. The sensationalism of the piece and the avid attention it attracted resonate, moreover, with a contemporaneous rise in media and tabloid attention to women’s, and especially female celebrities’ bodies.

The tabloids’ history can be traced back to the penny presses of the early nineteenth-century.⁷⁶ Yet by the 1980s, the tabloid genre was particularly associated with

⁷⁴ The political firestorm created by the showing of *Vanitas* was preceded by another controversy over spending at the National Gallery. After acquiring Barnett Newman’s *Voices of Fire* for \$1.76 million, the museum was mocked for spending such a large amount of funding on a “simple” painting. The appearance of *Vanitas* in an already volatile situation could have contributed to the media’s hostile behavior towards the work. For more information on this event, see Barber, *Voices of Fire*.

⁷⁵ Adam Gopnik, “Seduction,” *New Yorker*, March 12, 1990, 28.

⁷⁶ For a cultural history of tabloids, see S. Elizabeth Bird, *For Enquiring Minds: A Cultural Study of Supermarket Tabloids* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press,

cheap, sleazy newsmagazines sold at the checkout counter at the supermarket. By this decade, they had achieved a remarkable popularity, so that in 1982, subscriptions to the main tabloid magazines, such as the *National Enquirer*, *Weekly World News* and *Star*, peaked at 11.4 million, with total readership as high as 43 million.⁷⁷ Picked up as last-minute impulse buys, tabloids customarily featured human-interest pieces, gossip, and sensationalized stories and events. One major topic that the magazines returned to repeatedly in the 1980s was dieting and weight loss. With headlines such as “167 Pounds! That’s a Lotta Liz,” “Anita Eckberg... What a Waist!,” “Whale of a Gal! That’s Tubby Tina Onassis!,” and “The Bizarre Starving Disease,” the tabloids emphasized the failures of celebrities to maintain an ideal body shape and size.⁷⁸ In the late 1980s and early 1990s, *The Sun* staff included a weight loss “expert” who “helped” struggling dieters.⁷⁹ By combining pieces on celebrities’ weight problems and plastic surgeries with a proliferation of photographs of often sexy women, the tabloids furthered the media’s sensationalistic attention to women’s bodies. Furthermore, women were the target audience for these publications, as evidenced by their appearance in stores where women were primarily expected to do the shopping and the fact of their being geared towards subjects meant to appeal to women.⁸⁰

1992); and Paula E. Morton, *Tabloid Valley: Supermarket News and American Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).

⁷⁷ Bird, *For Enquiring Minds*, 8; and Bill Sloan, *I Watched a Wild Hog Eat My Baby: A Colorful History of Tabloids and Their Cultural Impact* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2001), 236.

⁷⁸ John Waters, *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 81; and Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, 12-13.

⁷⁹ Bird, *For Enquiring Minds*, 60.

⁸⁰ Bird, *For Enquiring Minds*, 138-43.

The attack on *Vanitas* was prompted in part by societal insecurities and uncertainties regarding body weight and personal appearance--hence, for instance, the cartoonists' exaggerating the feminine curves of the dress. In every cartoon of the dress, it is always buxom yet relatively slim, allowing the shape of the dress to reflect society's preferred female body size. In the same way, images in fashion magazines are designed to appeal to the general public because the women are ideally slender. Tabloids, in contrast, play with the social anxieties experienced in everyday life. In an essay on tabloids for *Rolling Stone* in 1985, writer and director John Waters joked that, "I'm convinced that typical *Enquirer* readers move their lips while they read, are physically unattractive, badly dressed, lonely, and overweight. Especially overweight."⁸¹ Waters went on to discuss a contest organized by a tabloid for the "Fattest Couple," where readers sent in pictures of themselves to try to win a \$200 prize.⁸² As this example illustrates, while tabloids might offer weight loss advice, they simultaneously exploited their audience.

The tabloids frequently laced their stories with absurdity and of course the offbeat Waters was attracted to the headlines that reflected his own absurd sense of humor, with its penchant for social commentary. For him and, I would argue, for Sterbak, too, humorous exaggeration has the potential to challenge preconceptions and stereotypes, as it potentially "exposes the individual and collective horror and regret that our personal failings cause, [while] laughter provides a cathartic release from them, though it can also

⁸¹ Waters, *Crackpot*, 81.

⁸² An important writer, director, and artist, John Waters has written numerous essays on pop culture, many of which were published by *Rolling Stone*. Waters, *Crackpot*, 81.

be unforgiving.”⁸³ In different ways, Waters and Sterbak both used an extreme form of humor as a strategy.

New York artist, Maureen Connor (b. 1947) uses tactical humor in her work as well.

I . . . see it as a mechanism that brings me closer to my audience. It is a way of acknowledging the fear and anxiety that surfaces because of the taboo nature of my material. Rather than creating distance, I think humor can actually produce a kind of intimacy and become a way of making clear that I share certain cultural attitudes toward the subject matter I’m using with my audience instead of just confronting them.⁸⁴

Like Sterbak’s *Vanitas*, Connor’s 1990 piece, *Thinner Than You* (figs. 41, 42), relies on wit to challenge preoccupations about female body size. The piece is composed of a sixty-inch tall metal stand approximating the height of a small human being. The stand--like an abstract stick figure--is clad in a sheer black dress draping from the “shoulders” to the floor, and cinched around the “waist” of the figure to less than ten inches, that is a comical extreme. Clearly, women’s bodies could never be shrunk to the size of a metal rod, so Connor is attempting to point out society’s completely unreasonable goals for women. While one can see the dwindled figure as unattainable and ridiculous, some women might still be attracted to the slender form. Similarly, Sterbak’s dress eventually suggests a troubling ideal of a female shape, after the meat has shrunk and molded to the dress form.

In both Connor’s and Sterbak’s works, mannequins and dress stands are an integral part of the piece. Mannequins, after all, frequently imply idealization. Their basic

⁸³ Dominic Molon and Michael Rooks, *Situation Comedy: Humor in Recent Art* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2005), 8.

⁸⁴ Maureen Connor, *Maureen Connor: Narrow Escape* (Munich: Kunstraum München, 1997), 35.

function is to display clothing, but to do so successfully the clothes must at least in some manner fit the shape of the form. So Sterbak places her work on a curvy dress-form, while Connor uses the extreme, stick-like valet. These substitutes for the human body function as convenient ways to model clothing, but can also be read as implying the ideal shape of, in this case, the female human body. As Vanessa Osborne has noted:

In the urban public spaces of the United States, the widespread exhibition of the artificial fashionable body, depicted as an idea to aspire to or desire, represents how commodified clothing participates in characterization. As the body becomes a placeholder identified and enlivened by the clothing on it and the other commodities around it, fashion contributes further to the identity formation of the modern consumer.⁸⁵

Mannequins inform the viewer or the consumer about how they should look. Connor plays on that idea by using a dress stand, essentially a metal pole, and treating it as if it were a mannequin. While the clothes should fall and hang very loosely on the valet form, Connor gathers the sheer fabric around the “waist” of the figure challenging by exaggerating the thin ideal.

The sheer garments that Connor used in *Thinner Than You* and other pieces from this time period were sometimes mistaken for then-popular body suits made by Donna Karan.⁸⁶ Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the outfits were never intended to be worn. As Connor noted, “So first you accept the elegance and the appropriateness and acceptability of them, then you begin to wonder--what are they? Where do they come from? And finally, what are they doing to us?”⁸⁷ For that matter, it is not initially clear what type of clothing we are looking at in this piece. Connor refers to it as a “body suit,”

⁸⁵ Vanessa Osborne “The Logic of the Mannequin,” in *The Places and Spaces of Fashion, 1800-2007*, ed. John Potvin (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 198.

⁸⁶ Kathleen Cullen, “Maureen Conner [sic],” *Journal of Contemporary Art* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1993): 22.

⁸⁷ Cullen, “Maureen Conner [sic],” 22.

though it suggests the shape of a dress with the sheerness of a slip or piece of lingerie.⁸⁸

Yet, the mystery of how the garment functions does not preclude the viewer from reading it as clothing.

The color of the cloth is critical, as black is known for its slimming qualities. It is frequently the chosen color for formal attire and for sophisticated fashionistas, as well as Goths and punks. Additionally, black is often the color of choice for fetishist clothing and objects that are invested with a particular power or fascination. As Patrizia Calefato elaborated, “Many items of fetishist clothing--from silk lingerie to high-heeled shoes, all naturally inspired by the female body--are black. This color, or non-color, ‘marks’ the body with strips of leather, lace and fabrics like silk, satin and velvet. Black thus ‘dresses’ the female body, incises the skin.”⁸⁹ By incorporating the fetishist nature of the color black with the sheer fabric, and the ridiculously tiny waist, Connor encourages the reading of the work as a fetishization of the beautiful, small-waisted, ideal woman.

Connor’s piece also relates back to the idea of the corset, and its popularity as a garment that can change and modify the shape of a woman’s body. Connor discussed the importance of the corset in her review of David Kunzle’s *Fashion and Fetishism*, in which Kunzle examined the way that fashion has literally shaped bodies. Men’s and women’s bodies are in many ways not that physically different, but, as Connor explained, “Clothing has exaggerated these differences and, as a result, some garments have both mirrored and contributed to the parallel differentiation of sex roles over the country

⁸⁸ Maureen Connor, interview by author, New York, October 31, 2009.

⁸⁹ Patrizia Calefato, *The Clothed Body* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2004), 112.

[United States].”⁹⁰ In her review, Connor also paid particular attention to Kunzle’s term “body-sculpture,” referring to the way that clothing can alter the body. This focus is important, for if you consider *Thinner Than You* as a potentially wearable piece of clothing, then the success of the piece is dependent on its perpetually altering a body and shaping it to an impossible thinness.

Connor’s interest in Kunzle’s work speaks to her continued interest in the history of fashion, which was evident even in her early work and teaching. Throughout the 1980s, Connor taught fashion history at the Parsons School of Art and Design and at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum. One of her earliest pieces involved repurposing clothes from her family’s attic, reshaping them and hanging them across the wall, as in *Tweed Courthouse Piece* (1979, fig. 43).⁹¹ Initially, her work was similar to Mimi Smith’s, in that she was thinking about the ways the production of clothing had traditionally been relegated to women. Indeed, her use of clothing as a theme is one of the ways that she sees herself as feminist: “If my work is feminist, it is because of my attraction to certain materials.”⁹²

Similar to her work with clothing, Connor incorporated the art of napkin folding early in her career, a topic that related to her memories of the women in her family creating elaborate table settings. Taking these traditional techniques in the late 1970s, she began molding large pieces of cloth in a method similar to a long-time domestic ritual, creating the series *Linens* in 1980 (fig. 44). Thus, early in her career, she was engaged by

⁹⁰ Maureen Connor, Review of *Fashion and Fetishism: A Social History of the Corset, Tight-Lacing, and Other Forms of Body-Sculpture in the West* by David Kunzle, *Art Journal* 42, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 169.

⁹¹ Patricia Malarcher, “Maureen Connor: Shaping A Response To The Past,” *Fiber Arts* 9, no. 4 (July/August 1982): 61.

⁹² Malarcher, “Maureen Connor,” 62.

the mutability of cloth: “This work is certainly about transformation. It is also about the idea of pushing the limits of fabric—how far could I push without anything in there doing the supporting?”⁹³ These works addressing clothing and napkin folding became a way for her to explore certain issues brought up by the women’s movement of the 1970s. In 1995, Connor astutely explained:

Over the last several years feminist discussions based on certain early and recent psychoanalytic and theoretical writings have made it clear that femininity and the whole gamut of gender signals can be put on and taken off along with one’s clothing. It is now almost commonplace to say that clothing can be used to reinforce, contradict, or even create not just gender but any identity.⁹⁴

This challenge to gender norms also appears in the striking *Woman* (1987, fig. 45), a melted and misshapen blow-up doll. By the mid 1980s, Connor had started to work with inflatable objects, and the quest for a larger inflatable figure took her to an adult specialty store. The clerk was reportedly embarrassed to sell her the object, which was, as she described it, “really pretty horrifying to look at, the female body was reduced to breasts and orifices and the rest of it was virtually unformed.”⁹⁵ *Woman* ended up unexpectedly looking like flayed skin, as she poured wax into the grotesque inflatable form. As the plastic melted and changed, it was as if the insides of the figure seeped outwards. She elaborated on the effect: “This was clearly visceral, almost a disgusting feeling of negating your body. When you really start to think about what your organs look like and what would happen if your skin were ripped off or your chest were opened

⁹³ Quoted in Jane McGroarty and Deborah F. Nevins, “Environment as Memory: An Interview with Donna Dennis and Maureen Connor,” *Heresies* 3, no. 3 (1981): 65.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Nina Felshin, “Women’s Work: A Lineage, 1966-94,” *Art Journal* 54, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 78.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Amanda Means, “Maureen Connor,” *Bomb*, no. 29 (Fall 1989): 20.

up and you looked inside, it's not something you want to identify with, but something you want to distance yourself from."⁹⁶

As a result of hot liquid distorting the sex doll, *Woman* became less of a sexual object and more about a dissection of simulated flesh and organs. This work signified Connor's shift from dealing only with clothing and the exterior of the body to thinking about the bodily interior and its constitution. Connor explained that she was being "critical of female experience rather than celebratory. . . . But in the previous work I was questioning what the art object was permitted to be by challenging the accepted hierarchies of materials and references as well as the purity of abstract form."⁹⁷ Becoming more critical as she turned the body inside out, Connor made a piece that resembled *Vanitas* in that both works invoke flesh, pushing the interior of the body to the exterior.

As she began to think more about the spaces of the body, Connor decided to incorporate glass models of human organs into a human-sized version of Marcel Duchamp's famous readymade, *Bottle Rack* (1914, fig. 46): "With the bottle-rack pieces I was questioning and attempting to transform and make fluid the identity of an already existing art object."⁹⁸ Connor took the basic armature of an object Duchamp featured, and dressed it up. She created multiple versions of the *Bottle Rack*, sometimes inverting the forms, sometimes even stacking one on top of another. In her 1988-90 series (figs. 47, 48), she filled the bottle racks with brightly colored glass organs. By taking a signature form of one of the most well-known and challenging artists of the twentieth century in

⁹⁶ Quoted in Means, "Maureen Connor," 21.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Cullen, "Maureen Conner," 21-22.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Cullen, "Maureen Conner," 21-22.

her *Bottle Rack* works, Connor wanted to connect her work to the humorous work of Duchamp, but also to acknowledge Duchamp as one of the first artists to deal with the complicated malleability of gender. As she further illuminated, “I’m re-charging these forms. The bottle racks and the lungs they hold become both aggressor and receptor, phallic and vaginal. You can’t tell which is which or define them in any absolute way. You can’t really distance yourself from them by establishing their identity as something other than yours.”⁹⁹

Like Connor’s *Bottle Rack*, Duchamp’s readymades are objects that are bought in a store and, with the exception of small modifications, presented in a museum or gallery unmodified. Duchamp is widely considered the “father” of postmodern art, because of his use of found objects and his reconsideration of what defines the art object, both of which marked a fundamental shift in the art world. Further, as Amelia Jones has argued, interpretations of Duchamp should also be considered to have led the way for postmodernism and feminism:

Framed through a complex interweaving of enunciative expressions, informed by multiple articulations of interpretive desire that configure him as “father” (and yet also as antimasculinist, feminized, feminist, or homosexualized), Duchamp has become a powerful authorizing function by which works produced by contemporary artists claim nepotistic validation as begotten by the Duchampian seed. The contradiction is embedded in this conjunction of terms. Duchamp as disseminating father of an antimasculinist alternative practice.¹⁰⁰

While Duchamp played with gender in his own works, particularly in his alter-ego Rose Selavy, which he used in numerous artworks throughout his career, Jones has posited that the way Duchamp is historicized is also gendered. Connor, by repurposing *Bottle Rack*,

⁹⁹ Quoted in Means, “Maureen Connor,” 21.

¹⁰⁰ Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 16.

referenced Duchamp with the intention of questioning and challenging gender, much in the same manner as Duchamp but also in the way that his work has been discussed. In her versions of the *Bottle Rack* Connor treated the framework as a skeleton--placing sumptuous, variously colored glass organs on the different tiers. In one version, the shiny pink, brown, clear, and black organs are displayed on the inside of the armature, while in another, clear and dark green organs extend from prongs on the outside. By placing the structure on the floor and selecting large, almost human-sized racks (varying from just over four feet to as tall as eleven feet), Connor wanted viewers to feel as if they are looking at a warped reflection of their own bodies.¹⁰¹

In a deviation from this theme, Connor dressed variously sized racks in black G-strings and body suits in a series of *Untitled* pieces (1988-1990, figs. 49-51). Some of these pieces, with two structures stacked together, can reach as high as six feet tall. By placing lacy fabrics on them, Connor feminized the bottle rack. The flimsy but stretchy undergarments were stretched taught from prong to prong. One version of the rack (seen at far left in fig. 49) bulges at the center, as the two racks that compose it are stacked on top of one another with the large bases meeting in the middle. The underwear is placed on the center, largest part of the structure. A complementary piece (fig. 49, center, rear) reverses this format, with the thinnest part in the middle. This work also includes the prongs of the racks going inward instead of the usual outward-facing prongs that can be functional. And yet, both versions maintain a connection to the human form: the one that bulges in the center suggests a protruding belly, while another that gets larger on the top emphasizes the head and the feet.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Felshin, "Women's Work," 78.

These pieces by Connor are more than just reconfigurations of Duchamp's *Bottle Racks*, for Connor has dressed the form. She has manipulated and stretched the fabric to fit over the object-figure. One rack is covered with thin, embroidered lace, while others use stretchy black nylon material or lacy black G-strings. In a 1993 *Vogue* article about contemporary female artists, art critic George Melrod discussed these pieces, "Hinting at sadomasochism, these works create a powerful image of the female body as a sort of torture rack trying to fit into frilly lace. Indeed in a subsequent series of sculptures about thinness, Connor stretched black body suits around skeletal metal armatures, as if casting weight-loss maven Jenny Craig as the mistress of a chamber of horrors."¹⁰² Connor hoped to challenge the ways that women are forced to shape and contort their bodies to look like fashion models. Her bottle racks do not fit the clothes or, perhaps, the clothes are not made to fit the racks. The pieces of lingerie are stretched almost to their breaking point.

Amelia Jones emphasized what the underwear is *not* covering:

Here, ironically, the veil that, in the conventional striptease, ensures the putative "lack" of the female body (hiding the fact that she does, indeed, have genitals that can be seen), becomes the only "thing to be seen," replacing the anatomical signifier of femininity altogether. Again, too, the visitor does not just *see* the G-string, but experiences the hostility and subterfuge by which "lack" is constructed within patriarchal logic: the sharp prongs of the bottle rack prevent her from approaching this "thing to be seen" closely enough to touch.¹⁰³

Arguably, then, Connor used her bottle racks not only to draw attention to issues of body image, but also to highlight the way that women are forced to adopt extreme measures in order to conform to the patriarchal structures of Western culture.

¹⁰² George Melrod, "Lip Shtick," *Vogue*, June 1993, 89.

¹⁰³ Amelia Jones, "The Flesh of the World: Maureen Connor's Phenomenological Feminism," in *Discreet Objects*, ed. Andrew Perchuk (New York: Alternative Museum, 1994), 8.

In *No Way Out* (1990, fig. 52), Connor continued to distort and manipulate the figure, this time by covering a bulbous object with stretchy fabric and propping it up on wiry, claw-like legs. In contrast to the extreme vertical orientation of the bottle racks, this work emphasized horizontality, as it seems to practically crawl along the floor. The work has been described in almost hostile terms: “a nearly seven foot long curvaceous steel stick figure arches up from the floor, legs spread open, with barb-like hands and feet dug into the wood. . . . The emaciated figure evokes not beauty but the grotesque.”¹⁰⁴ Here, Connor paralleled Alberto Giacometti’s 1932 *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (fig. 53). Both artworks are not only placed below the viewer directly on the floor, but more specifically, each implies violence, suggesting the concept of the mutilated or distorted female body. Whereas Giacometti’s piece is confined to its position on the ground, Connor’s work, with its wiry legs, seems to be able to rise up, even possibly run away. In that potential for movement, Jones read Connor’s ever-present struggle with the body, suggesting that the sculpture is doing pushups to shed a few pounds or trying to crawl away from the situation at hand, while “assert[ing] the futility of its own attempt to perfect/escape itself.”¹⁰⁵ The balloon center of *No Way Out* contrasts with the rigidity of the bottle rack works, yet when shown as a group, all of these pieces simultaneously reinforce that they are “other,” not ideal and certainly not desired. In each of these fabric-covered armature sculptures, the fabric appears visibly unstable on the form; the fabric is not made to fit these shapes.

¹⁰⁴ Sydney Pokorney, “Maureen Connor: The Alternative Museum,” *Frieze Magazine* 21 (March-April 1995), http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/maureen_connor/ (accessed October 25, 2009).

¹⁰⁵ Jones, “Flesh of the World,” 8.

Connor's *Thinner Than You, No Way Out*, and bottle rack sculptures express a similar anguish or discomfort in the relationship between clothing and the substitute figure. These works serve to reassert Connor's willingness to call into question the ideal body type; these figure-objects work in tandem with one another to create an army of disruptive models. In fact, she wanted viewers to question their own experiences of their bodies: "I'm looking for an emotional response. Something that would push you out of your head and into your body."¹⁰⁶ The stretch of the nylon or the gathering of the fabric draws attention to the perceived problems of these various "bodies."

Thinner Than You also speaks to Connor's interest in manipulation of gender, as discussed with respect to the bottle rack works. At the base of the figure, she pulled the fabric tight by weighting the hem of the dress down with pennies. Connor suggested that the shape of the fabric pooled at the base of the valet referred both to a testicle (a resemblance at best) and to ejaculate: "It is about a woman as depository, as container. Men ejaculate inside of the women. This is clothing, so it could represent her interior as much as a pocket." When questioned why the "testicle" was close to the floor, she replied that it was "weighing [the *Thinner Than You* figure] down, evoking anorexia. What anorexics do when they go to doctors is try to deceive them into thinking they have not lost weight. So they will put things in their pockets, wear heavy sweaters, as for the doctor not to put them into the hospital [sic]."¹⁰⁷ In this work Connor interwove the two main themes of the series--a complicated notion of gender and the problematic issue of the size of the female body. The wire form became the frame of the anorexic, who pretended to add weight while still trying to shrink her body to her desired size.

¹⁰⁶ Melrod, "Lip Shtick," 89.

¹⁰⁷ Ayerza, "Maureen Connor."

Much of the early scholarship on anorexia explored the motivations behind the anorexic's desire to shape her body. Addressing this question, psychiatrist Arthur Crisp proposed that young women do not eat in an attempt to stave off the breast and hip development that marks puberty.¹⁰⁸ While Crisp's theory has been challenged by Morag MacSween and some other psychiatrists, his ideas have helped shape what we know about the disease today.¹⁰⁹ Crisp's arguments concerning sexual development are based on the ways that women are more directly associated with their body and bodily functions than men. While the disease is clearly related to physical presence, MacSween has integrated the issues surrounding cultural pressures on women. She argued "that articulating the demands of individuality and femininity is precisely what the anorectic woman aims to do through her control of eating and appetite which she describes in exactly the terms used to describe feminine sexuality--as animalistic and potentially overwhelming."¹¹⁰

Psychiatrists and sociologists have dissected anorexia as a multifaceted psychological, cultural, and physical disease.¹¹¹ The anorexic's desire to control the body is sometimes said to parallel a desire to control her femininity. By stopping their periods and seeing their breasts shrink, anorectic women might be seen as trying to renounce their gender. In *Thinner Than You*, Connor included a "testicle"-form to draw attention to the way men control female bodies, and yet the "testicle" might also relate to the way anorexics want to morph their bodies into figures that are not constricted by their own

¹⁰⁸ A. H. Crisp, "Anorexia Nervosa as Flight from Growth: Assessment and Treatment Based on the Model," in *The Handbook of Treatment for Eating Disorders*, ed. Paul Garfinkel and David Garner (New York: Guilford Press, 1997): 248-77.

¹⁰⁹ MacSween, *Anorexic Bodies*, 31-33.

¹¹⁰ MacSween, *Anorexic Bodies*, 192.

¹¹¹ MacSween, *Anorexic Bodies*, 24-51; and Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, 11-42.

biology. Judith Butler noted that gender is often constructed by conscious acts: “gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.”¹¹² The fluidity of gender, which has been noted by many, including Butler, is something that has fascinated Connor, among many other twentieth-century artists.

In her video, *Narrow Escape* (1996, figs. 54-56), Connor further provided a critical commentary on the way women’s bodies are forced to fit into society. Focusing on five women trying to squeeze through a tiny door and to perch on dainty chairs, the short video is shown across three screens viewed through cutouts in the doors of a pale green armoire. In the video, the furniture, the clothing, the sets, and even the elaborate buffet have an over-the-top, rococo flair. Connor invokes a world nostalgic for eighteenth-century decadence. The action begins in the center screen with five young, beautiful women with fanciful coiffures dressed in extravagant clothing. In turn, each woman struggles to enter through a tiny passageway into a space resembling a ballroom. The camera is focused on a single, small doorway, which the women repeatedly make futile attempts to squeeze through. In reality, the door is too small for anyone to fit easily through, but they try nonetheless, their ineffective attempts made all the more humorous by the poufy ball gowns they wear. As funny as the piece is to the viewer, the women in the video are visibly frustrated and uncomfortable as they contort their bodies through the narrow space. At this, the beginning of the film, Connor alerts the viewer to the fact that these women are literally struggling to fit in.

¹¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 1999), 173.

Narrow Escape allowed Connor to fully express the problematic expectations placed upon women of all races:

No matter how much a woman might recognize the absurdity of trying to measure herself against these unobtainable body types, there's something we have learned very, very well – that no matter what else we have achieved we are still judged by the way we look and we can't quite escape the feeling that we have to conform to the ideal body as it is defined by culture at any given moment. In some deep, unconscious way, we find it hard to escape from the expectation that nothing else is going to make us desirable. So the effort women expend in their attempt to conform to this ideal takes up a tremendous amount of time and energy, which in turn produces endless anger and frustration acted out in ways that generate fierce competition as well as self destructive behavior of all kinds.¹¹³

In the video, Connor showed the competition as well as the desperation experienced by these women. The psychological pressures and emotion displayed by the women are evident in the film through their facial expressions but become personal to the viewer through the game the women play.

Once all of the women have shimmied their way into the ballroom, they all take stock of one another, sizing up their competition, because a warped game of musical chairs is about to begin. The chairs are only about one-third the size of normal chairs, with a seat much too narrow for a human body. Wearing billowing skirts that make the game even more difficult, the women are forced to straddle the small chairs. Each time the music stops, the women rush to sit on a chair, but one of the chairs invariably breaks, sending a woman crashing to the floor. The young woman who falls is out of the game, and she moves off screen. The remaining women repeat the game until two are left standing.

¹¹³ Connor, *Maureen Connor*, 37-38.

Cheerful, saccharine music plays throughout, though it takes a moment for the words of the music to actually sink in. A sweet voice intones, “keep young and beautiful . . . if you want to be loved.”¹¹⁴ Just as the girls must be thin to enter the room and to sit on the chairs, the music implies that they have to stay attractive and youthful to find any kind of happiness in life. As each girl tumbles to the floor, she picks herself up and proceeds to a buffet of gourmet foods and desserts (seen on another monitor), gorging herself on pastries. When only two girls remain in the game, they go to sit down and both of the remaining chairs break. They then join the others, each woman taking out her aggression on the food rather than on each other. This final moment recalls Rachel Rosenthal’s video *Charm* (1977), in which Rosenthal’s struggle to come to terms with her childhood, and her battles with weight, pushed her to gorge on French pastries and a large chocolate cake.

Connor’s images of woman devouring food resemble not only Rosenthal’s narrative, but a photographic essay called *Alex Eats* (figs. 57, 58) that appeared in a 1988 issue of British fashion magazine *The Face*. Created by photographer Anthony Gordon and stylist Katy Lush, the photographs featured a model named Alex Arts. A relatively unknown North American model, Arts posed with various items of junk food--hot dogs, hamburgers, French fries, milkshakes, and ice cream – in various, mundane settings while

¹¹⁴ The song was originally written by Al Dubin and Henry Warren for the 1933 film *Roman Scandals* (directed by Frank Tuttle) and performed by Eddie Cantor and the Studio Chorus; see David Jenkins, “Keep Young and Beautiful,” The Harry Warren Web Site, <http://www.harrywarren.org/songs/0259.htm> (accessed May 13, 2010). The song was re-recorded by Annie Lennox and released as a CD bonus track on her 1992 album *Diva* (RCA/Arista), and this was the version that Connor chose to use; Connor, *Narrow Escape*, 42.

wearing high fashion garments.¹¹⁵ From the grocery store to the diner to the butcher shop, Arts has abandoned all forms of decorum as she shovels food in her mouth, and it ends up covering her face, the clothes, the table, even the floor. Studying the photo essay a decade later, Paul Jobling noted that the pictures showing Alex consuming the food, as well as the types of food depicted, seem to be a realistic depiction of a bulimic on a binge.¹¹⁶ There is a guilt and shame associated with eating this much food so quickly, which explains why some women eat in secret. In both Connor's work and *Alex Eats*, the women consume the food in a public space, yet without restraining themselves. Rather, once they get started they are unable to stop. Jobling invoked Julia Kristeva's discussion of food loathing, which described how eating can be at once a necessity of everyday life and a disgusting act. As Kristeva put it, "I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire."¹¹⁷ For Kristeva, the feeling of disgust and the body's immediate response is confusing, causing a conflict between self and object. She continued, "[b]ut since the food is not an 'other' for 'me,' who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself."¹¹⁸

Alex Eats was published at the same time as the waifish model Kate Moss was becoming well-known. Moss popularized what came to be known as "heroin chic," a

¹¹⁵ Paul Jobling, "Who's that Girl? 'Alex Eats,' A Case Study in Abjection and Identity in Contemporary Fashion Photography," *Fashion Theory* 2, no. 3 (1998): 210.

¹¹⁶ Paul Jobling, *Fashion Spreads: Word and Image in Fashion Photography Since 1980*, (Oxford, UK: Berg, 1999), 128.

¹¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (1980; New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

¹¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

trend that valorized the extremely thin, even sickly looking woman.¹¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, Arts was quite thin herself, a fact emphasized by several poses in which her collarbone juts out sharply. She looks somewhat unwell, with dark circles under her eyes in some photographs, while in other photos her bones are visible, and draw attention to her thinness. Seeing someone so thin overindulge on unhealthy food in the name of fashion feels incongruous. Could a model this thin really eat all this food, and still be able to pose in high fashion garments? For that matter, could the women in Connor's *Narrow Escape* gorge on the pastries at the buffet and still fit into those dresses and be able to squeeze through these narrow doors? The gluttony of the women is disturbing, in part because these thin women would not be able to maintain their body size if they continued to eat in such a manner unless they pursued a bulimic's tactics.

The contrast between the copious food and the thin women is so extreme in these examples that it can appear absurd. But Connor explicitly relied on ridiculousness to engage the viewer, as can also be seen in the way she referred to motifs from popular movies from decades ago. "I decided to make my own satirical reworking of the media's and especially Hollywood's idealized images of women. I wanted to use the kind of artificiality, attention to detail and humor--silliness even--found in musical comedy to make fun of the kinds of productions that would ultimately reinforce and reproduce these impossible cultural ideals."¹²⁰ Beyond the film itself, the artificiality of the situation Connor constructs is reinforced in her installation as a whole. The video screens are installed in a large armoire, which is accompanied by the delicate-looking chairs from the

¹¹⁹ For more information, see Maxim W. Furek, *The Death Proclamation of Generation X: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Goth, Grunge, and Heroin* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2008).

¹²⁰ Connor, *Maureen Connor*, 38-39.

film. Originally, the cabinet would have probably housed personal belongings, including clothing, meant for women's beautification. Painted pale green and installed with the television monitors, the armoire adds to Connor's elaborate environment. Now the viewers can become participants in the game of musical chairs, should they be daring enough to try out the narrow seats.

In making a statement about body size in *Narrow Escape*, Connor also addressed race. Of the five actors in the video, four are white and one is black. While the white women are able to push themselves through the narrow door, the black woman attempts to come out backwards. Thrusting her buttocks comically through the doorway, the girl forces the viewer to consider the popular stereotype of the large-bottomed African woman.¹²¹ While racial overtones emerge especially from the actions of the isolated black women, class is implicit in the fanciful setting, elaborate table spread and formal ball gowns. As Barbara U. Schmidt articulated, Connor's piece is ultimately about the search for acceptance in high society. "Perhaps the way [the women] are dressed and coiffured symbolizes not only the importance of belonging to a certain social class but also the circumstances which decide whether and where one is 'admitted.'" Body size is generally an important factor in this game: "The narrowness of the door, however, makes the dimensions of the human body a part of this mechanism of exclusion, too. The most usual means of fitting into the given 'social framework' are strict dieting and rigorous

¹²¹ For example, the highly exaggerated and sexualized images of Saartjie Baartman (the dancer better known as the Hottentot Venus) and Josephine Baker are an example of how black women with exaggerated rear ends have been a fascination for white society; Lisa Collins, "Economies of the Flesh: Representing the Black Female Body in Art," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002): 99-127.

physical training,”¹²² regimes especially associated with white women. The black woman can eventually get into the party, but it is more of a struggle for her. Thus Connor makes a subtle commentary on the relationship of race and class to body size in U.S. society.

A celebrity who led the way for a discussion about weight while also addressing race was Oprah Winfrey, whose battles with her own weight became a common subject on her popular talk show, as well as in other forms of print and television media. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* began as a local talk show in Chicago in 1983. After being syndicated nationally in September 1986, the program was ranked number one out of all daytime talk shows by the end of its first season.¹²³ In a 1986 *New York Times* article that introduced Winfrey to a national audience, journalist Thomas Morgan made a point of bringing Winfrey’s weight into the discussion: “At 5 feet 7 inches and 190 pounds, Miss Winfrey is not the svelte stereotype of a female television figure. Periodically, like many other people, she promises to diet. In one of her shows, she invited the audience to begin the diet with her.” Winfrey told him, “I’m overweight. . . . People tell me not to lose weight, I might lose my personality. I tell them, ‘Honey, it ain’t in my thighs.’ . . . We all want to be happy, we have sad times. If you have lived, you have overeaten at one period or another.”¹²⁴

Her success in syndicated television prompted a diet. After much hard work (and much fodder for her show), Oprah was able to proudly walk onto the set of her show in her “skinny jeans” in November of 1988 (fig. 59). Behind her she pulled a red wagon

¹²² Barbara U. Schmidt, in Connor, *Maureen Connor*, 41.

¹²³ Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, “You’d Better Recognize: Oprah the Iconic and Television Talk,” *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, ed. Charlotte Brunson and Lynn Spigel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 120.

¹²⁴ Thomas Morgan, “Troubled Girl’s Evolution Into an Oscar Nominee,” *New York Times*, March 4, 1986, C17.

filled with 67 pounds of animal fat – the same amount of weight she had lost. A celebration of her achievement, the fat was a way of visualizing the weight lost in a tangible form. Yet the wagon of fat also emphasized her prior unhealthiness and the disgustingness of what was once a part of her body. Winfrey had used a liquid fast to drop the pounds, yet unfortunately, as soon as she stopped dieting, the weight came back.¹²⁵ In her journals, she described her feelings regarding the return of her weight. “Scale said 203 pounds this morning. . . . Dancing on the M. C. Hammer show with the fattest behind I’ve ever seen. I saw that tape and can’t deny it anymore. I really am fat again.”¹²⁶ Winfrey had lost the weight and proclaimed success, but just fourteen months later, she was back to her original size. Only, by this time, her popularity and fame had increased so that more and more people were discussing the changes in her body size and her dieting.

Less than three years after her famous weight loss success was announced, Winfrey graced the cover of *People* with the exclamation, “I’ll never diet again!” (fig. 60). In the article, appropriately titled “Big Gain, No Pain: Chubby Again, Winfrey Drops Dieting and Develops a New Attitude Toward Carrying Her Weight,” Winfrey explained her problem with food and her body. “I’ve been dieting since 1977 and the reason I failed is that diets don’t work. I tell people, if you’re underweight, go on a diet and you’ll gain everything you lost plus more. Now I’m trying to find a way to live in a

¹²⁵ The Optifast plan that Oprah used to lose her weight did not allow for the consumption of solid food, instead providing 400 to 800 calories a day in the form of water mixed with nutrient packets. Costing nearly \$3,000 in total, the program was supposed to be administered under medical supervision; see Ella Howard. “From Fasting Toward Self-Acceptance: Oprah Winfrey and Weight Loss in American Culture,” in *The Oprah Phenomenon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2007), 106.

¹²⁶ Quoted in Howard, “From Fasting Toward Self-Acceptance,” 109-10.

world with food without being controlled by it, without being a compulsive eater. That's why I say I will never diet again."¹²⁷ Winfrey had been a role model to many women, and her successes had served as an emblem of hope for overweight women everywhere. At the same time, many women were equally disappointed by her own obsession with her body and its weight. Every change in her body--a weight gain or a weight loss--inspired an emotional response from her audience and the media. Her resolve to not diet again represented less an acceptance of her current body than an admission of her failure to keep the weight off.

People illustrated its "Big Gain" article with numerous photographs (fig. 61) that recorded both the successes and the failures of Winfrey's diet. Reiterating Winfrey's weight fluctuations by showing the varying sizes of her body, the article showed Winfrey at her thinnest (the famous picture documenting the moment when she walked out on her show in her size-10 jeans) to her 1991 "accepted" weight. The article also discussed the weight of two other popular "TV Heavyweights," Roseanne Barr and Delta Burke.¹²⁸ Because it was addressing the heavier Winfrey, the magazine felt the need to compare her to two other larger women in the commercial media. With her bigger body, like Barr and Burke, she did not easily fit into the norms propagated by mainstream television. But due to her immense popularity, Winfrey especially became *the* person that magazines and tabloids turned to again and again to dissect issues surrounding weight.

After twenty years of focusing on her career and creating successful work, the African-American artist, Ringgold (b. 1930) decided that she, much like Winfrey, needed

¹²⁷ Marjorie Rosen et al., "Big Gain, No Pain: Chubby Again, Oprah Drops Dieting and Develops a New Attitude Toward Carrying her Weight," *People*, January 14, 1991, 82-91.

¹²⁸ Rosen, "Big Gain, No Pain," 86, 88.

to make a change in her body. The two had very different careers, of course, and Winfrey's position as a media sensation made her various weight losses and gains fodder for public discussion, whereas Ringgold's autobiographical artworks received a more limited and more critical reception. Ringgold's art career began in earnest in the 1960s, when she painted large works that confronted issues of race. As an active participant in the civil rights movement, Ringgold was interested in using her artwork to demand equality for people of all races. In the 1970s, her professional successes increased while she started to explore other mediums. Towards the end of the decade, she made a series of soft sculptures and dolls that demonstrated her interests in crafts. She used these works to explore sewing, a manner of working generally considered feminine, while simultaneously pursuing a feminist agenda. When she wanted to lose weight, she decided to chronicle her journey through narratives and photographs incorporated into a series of quilts.

Ringgold's use of quilts stems from a moment in her career when she was seeking a change in direction. In 1980, she collaborated with her mother, Willy Posey Jones, a retired fashion designer, to make *Echoes of Harlem* (fig. 62), a pieced quilt covered with thirty different black faces.¹²⁹ The quilt was made for an exhibition titled "The Artist and the Quilt", in which each artist was paired with a quilt maker who would help the artist realize her vision in a new medium.¹³⁰ Trained as a painter, Ringgold was aghast when her mother wanted to use hand-cut pieces, thinking it would look unprofessional. But, she explained later, "not knowing at that time anything about the tradition of African-

¹²⁹ Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 67.

¹³⁰ For more information on the exhibition, which began in San Antonio but travelled to other cities, see Charlotte Robinson, *The Artist and the Quilt* (New York: Knopf Publishers, 1983).

American quilts, I didn't realize where my mother's free-hand design approach was coming from."¹³¹ Posey died the next year, but in that brief collaboration she had helped Ringgold to find the perfect medium for her artistic vision; quilting allowed her to explore women's issues through the process of sewing and piecing as well as, more generally, by its references to women's domestic lives.¹³² While her first quilt--an arrangement of thirty portraits painted onto quilt blocks—was very simple, reflecting her background as a painter, a few years later Ringgold was incorporating a large amount of narrative text into her work. *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (fig. 63) tells her invented story of Aunt Jemima. In Ringgold's 1986 version, Aunt Jemima attempts to move beyond the stereotype of the mammy and in the process becomes a successful businesswoman. The quilt includes painted pictures of characters in the story, surrounded by the hand-written fiction of Aunt Jemima's life. Ringgold made a number of quilts like *Aunt Jemima*, which incorporated text and visual images. These works, which use a combination of painting and text, became known as her story quilts. They differ from traditional quilts in this genre, which use stitching and piecing exclusively. Ringgold used story quilts to present activist arguments, historical narratives, personal events, and recollections.

In 1986, Ringgold lost one hundred pounds. To celebrate, she created the first quilt of a series of three, all of which have *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt* as their title. These quilts include both

¹³¹ Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 76.

¹³² For more on the relationship between quilting and domesticity, see Marybeth C. Stalp, *Quilting: The Fabric of Everyday Life* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007); and Eva Ungar Grudin, *Stitching Memories: African American Story Quilts* (Williamstown, MA: Williams College Museum of Art, 1990).

photographic and painted portraits of the artist, showing all versions of herself--from young to old and skinny to fat. The first quilt, which provided an autobiographical sketch of the artist written on it in text and matching photographs, was often accompanied by a corresponding performance piece (figs. 65-70). To make the quilt she used a combination of photoetchings on fabric, painted portraits and texts, which were then pieced onto the quilt by assistants whom she had hired. In particular, this quilt focuses on anecdotes and personal feelings regarding Ringgold's weight by incorporating parts of a text she had been writing for a then unpublished autobiography.¹³³

On the first quilt, the personal history text is organized by the decades of Ringgold's life. The central section is the exception, as "January 1, 1986," tells of Ringgold's current relationship with her body and weight-loss goals. Shifting from the first to the second person, the tone of her writing also moves from autobiographical to motivational as the text begins:

In this year, 1986, I will lose 128 pounds. By January 1, 1987 I will weigh 130 pounds, or I'll eat your hat. Mine I've already eaten. Faith, you have been trying to lose weight since the sixties. For the last twenty, twenty-five years you've been putting yourself on diets, charting your lack of progress and gaining weight. For the next six months you'll be in California, away from everybody, the perfect place to make the CHANGE.¹³⁴

Thus, the quilt becomes not just a history of her life through photos and text, but also an attempt to encourage herself to lose more weight. Ringgold has admitted that she wanted to lose weight, not just to look better but to become more healthy and to increase her

¹³³ Michele Wallace, "Soul Pictures: Mid 1940s through Early 1950s," Soul Pictures: Black Feminist Generations blog, <http://mjsoulpictures.blogspot.com/> (accessed June 17, 2010).

¹³⁴ Faith Ringgold, *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photoetching on silk, 1986 (private collection).

agility when working and performing.¹³⁵ In the process of making the quilt, she used the piece as both a personal diary and recollection of her weight loss and as motivation.

Moira Roth astutely articulated the way that Ringgold used the quilt to express her emotional state:

With this quilt Ringgold visually records the progressive transformation of a woman from what she is expected to be to what she wants to be. The weight gain is part of that struggle and a response to the stress and pressures of conflicting demands and expectations. It becomes a protective shield in Ringgold's denial of her stereotyped image as a sex object (the Black temptress).¹³⁶

Ringgold is articulating the desire to claim her body for herself, but by emphasizing weight loss, she is also calling attention to the pressure put on women. Self-conscious about her body, her position relates to Connor's lovely women in *Narrow Escape*, who throughout the video demonstrate their anxiety and discomfort through their facial expressions. Ringgold wants to act on her dissatisfaction by shedding some of her weight.

Roth claimed that Ringgold used her excess weight so that her body would not become a sexual object, an idea that recalls Susie Orbach's writings from the late 1970s. Orbach maintained that "just as many women first become fat in an attempt to avoid being made into sexual objects at the beginning of their adult lives, so many women remain fat as a way of neutralizing their sexual identity in the eyes of others who are important to them as their life progresses."¹³⁷ Ringgold echoes Orbach in the 1970-1979 section of the quilt: "You used to say your husband Burdette made you eat so that no one

¹³⁵ Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 241-250 and Ringgold, interview by author, Englewood, NJ, November 1, 2009.

¹³⁶ Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, *Faith Ringgold: Change: Painted Story Quilts* (New York: Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, 1987), 15.

¹³⁷ Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (New York: Berkley Books, 1978), 13.

else would look at you. And then you didn't look at you either."¹³⁸ Throughout the narrative, Ringgold vacillates between taking responsibility for her own weight gain (listing all the types of food that tempted her) and blaming others who encouraged her bad habits.

The text is often laced with humorous moments. For example, the section for 1980-1985 begins with this insight: "By the 1980s you had finally eaten yourself into a corner. The only way out was cold turkey without dressing."¹³⁹ She goes on to tell the story of a political benefit she attended: "You posed with her [the candidate], not realizing you held a greasy bag of nuts. She slapped you on your hand and ordered you to, 'put that away. . . .' You could have made the front page and the Nightly News that day, 'Fat Woman Goes Nuts,' but you smiled, wiped your mouth, and put your nuts out of sight."¹⁴⁰ The humor, however, cannot disguise the hurt that Ringgold was feeling, as she chronicled painful moments in her life--the binging, the divorces, even the loss of self-control when faced with good wine or chocolate. The text on the quilt is an honest account of one woman's experience, her battle with food, and her determination to overcome her struggles with weight.

After completing the quilt and losing her one hundred pounds, Ringgold incorporated the ideas and anecdotes of the quilt into a performance piece that she would present when the quilt was shown in exhibitions. Through song, dance and spoken word, Ringgold narrated her life and her struggles with weight. At the end of the performance

¹³⁸ "1970-1979," Faith Ringgold, *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photoetching on silk, 1986 (private collection).

¹³⁹ "1980-1985," Faith Ringgold, *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photoetching on silk, 1986 (private collection).

¹⁴⁰ "1970-1979," Faith Ringgold, *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photoetching on silk, 1986 (Private Collection).

she would remove an oversized jacket that had the same photographs and text as the quilt to show off her new thinner body. Additionally, throughout the performance she repeatedly attempted to pull twenty two-liter soda bottles filled with water and placed in two large, black garbage bags. Collectively symbolizing the weight that she had lost, the bottles did not budge easily, a blatant metaphor for the burden of the extra pounds she carried and the difficult of shedding them.¹⁴¹ She invited the audience to get up and pull the “weight,” to experience first-hand the weight of one hundred pounds. In an act anticipating Oprah’s wagon of fat two years later, Ringgold needed to tangibly represent her lost pounds as a way to visualize the changes to her figure. In her performance, Ringgold repeatedly acknowledged her past weight-loss failures: the fad diets, the doctors’ advice, even the weight loss pills.¹⁴² In contrast, the separation of the extra fat (as represented by Ringgold’s bottles) and her body emphasized her triumphs. Throughout her event Ringgold repeated the phrase, “I can change. I can do it. I can do it. I can CHANGE, I can CHANGE. Now.” In an attempt to further motivate herself to lose more pounds as well as to inspire others to join in her quest, she encouraged the audience to join her chant, and they too repeated “CHANGE” over and over.

¹⁴¹ Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 249.

¹⁴² Lori Ann Beaudoin read the materials in this performance as particularly feminine, as the shapes of the two-liter bottles might be reminiscent of her curvy form. “Since Ringgold has expressed her frustration with her weight, she may be articulating the pressures of the ‘American dream’ to be thin, and therefore, feminine. By enclosing the bottles in opaque garbage bags, Ringgold may be in fact denouncing the feminine practice and ideal by covering the hour-glass shape of the bottle-female form. Despite the cultural demands to be thin and Ringgold’s struggle with her eating problem, the performance signifies a positive change towards self-acceptance. Moreover, securing the bags with heavy cord connotes the notion of the umbilical cord, and that there is no escaping from your body, yourself, and who you are in the world”; in Lori-Ann Beaudoin, “A Cultural Illness: Women, Identity, and Eating Problems in Faith Ringgold’s Change Series” (master’s thesis, Concordia University, Montreal, 1999), 41.

The quilt itself has a performative element. The last panel records the specific date that she completed the quilt, as an update to her progress since the first panel of January 1, 1986. “It is September 27, 1986, and though I have 40 pounds yet to lose I have lost 88 pounds. Today I am thinner than I have been in the last twenty years. I eat fresh fruit and vegetables instead of pasta and pork chops, and I exercise almost every day. I am out to prove something right here and now.”¹⁴³ What exactly has she proved? The numbers on the scale had changed, and she admitted that her diet had also become healthier--but this change was not enough. Ringgold’s quilt articulated her feelings of insecurity and dissatisfaction tinged with hopefulness. The stories expressed in the quilt repeatedly emphasize her anxieties regarding her body. This omnipresent discomfort led Ringgold to continue the series as she continued to lose weight and attempted to come to terms with her physical presence.

A second quilt dealing with her weight loss, *Change 2: Faith Ringgold’s Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Quilt* (1988, figs. 71-73), was originally intended as a celebration of losing another thirty pounds. Yet as she noted in her 2005 autobiography, “I must admit I failed to do that, but I was still fortunate because I didn’t gain back the weight I lost.”¹⁴⁴ The focal point of the quilt is the center panel, which depicts Ringgold’s ideal, svelte figure in a simple bathing suit. Yet behind the thin woman she included the larger shadow of her current, imperfect self. Like the first quilt, *Change 2* includes lithographed photographs; here, five recent photos of Ringgold posing in front of her first *Change* quilt and other works of art (each of these photos is repeated

¹⁴³“January-October 1986,” Faith Ringgold, *Change: Faith Ringgold’s Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photoetching on silk, 1986 (private collection).

¹⁴⁴ Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 247.

twice, for a total of ten photographs incorporated into the quilt) are accompanied by eight text panels that provide the lyrics to her *Change Song*. The photographs and text surround Ringgold's ideal self, creating a desired body image.

Again, Ringgold created a performance that matched the quilt, where she wore a costume that worked to accentuate her waist and her successful maintenance of her one hundred pound weight loss. This one was made of glamorous and glittery fabric that shimmered as she danced around the room. Rather than recite the stories of the first quilt, for the second performance piece Ringgold sang the *Change Song* with accompaniment by a drummer and an actor who asked questions during the song.¹⁴⁵ The song used similar motivational lyrics as the text in the first quilt:

I just got to change
 I just got to change
 I can't stand the pain
 It's like a fire in my brain
 Everyday it's the same
 Never mind who's to blame
 It's me that's got to change
 Eatin' all that food is so insane

I just got to change
 I just got to change¹⁴⁶

At the conclusion of the song, she encouraged everyone to get up and dance with her. She has said that “[t]his performance piece was by far my most successful. I performed it approximately twenty-five times from 1988 until 1991.”¹⁴⁷

Audience participation was evidently critical in Ringgold's *Change* performances, as a communal spirit was said to emerge as people sang and danced alongside Ringgold,

¹⁴⁵ Faith Ringgold, interview.

¹⁴⁶ Faith Ringgold, *Change Song* from *Change 2: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photoetching on silk, 1988 (artist's collection).

¹⁴⁷ Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 247.

bonding over their commonalities concerning weight loss, body image, and general insecurities concerning body size. Indeed, the audience, in its support of Ringgold and her project, did not challenge their assigned role in Ringgold's weight loss. Speaking of Rikrit Tiravanija's relationship to his audience and participants, Claire Bishop discusses the problem that some artists have when working directly with participants, in a way that happens to illuminate also Ringgold's case:

Despite Tiravanija's rhetoric of open-endedness and viewer emancipation, the structure of his work circumscribes the outcome in advance, and relies on its presence within a gallery to differentiate it from entertainment. Tiravanija's microtopia gives up on the idea of transformation in public culture and reduces its scope to the pleasures of a private group who identify with one another as gallery-goers.¹⁴⁸

In these events, Ringgold did not critique or challenge the pressure on women to look a certain way. Rather, Ringgold used the people in her performances as a support structure to help her maintain her lower weight. Furthermore, the participants' complicity reinforced the need for change in Ringgold's body, and perhaps for others' weight loss in the group.

Ringgold's performances captured the desire she felt to fit in and to find others who were experiencing the same challenges. *Narrow Escape* also used a group mentality, in a way, with the actors sharing the experience of breaking the chairs and overeating. Even Oprah, reaching out to her audience, sought solace by sharing her experiences. Echoing the strategy used successfully in *Weight Watchers* and *Overeaters Anonymous*, Oprah and Ringgold both found support through group participation, which recognizes

¹⁴⁸ Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, no. 110 (Autumn 2004): 68-69.

that the struggle with weight or to be comfortable with body size is something that many, many women are working through.

In the painted portrait of *Change 2*, Ringgold was beginning to fantasize about her body size. While she had successfully lost one hundred pounds while making the first quilt, she acknowledged in 1988 that she had failed to lose an additional thirty pounds. In fact, she gained weight while traveling in Europe and Japan for exhibitions in 1987. In addition, she continued to use the subtitle *Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Quilt* for her second quilt, even though it recorded different goals and articulated altered priorities. She maintained the celebratory nature of the project despite setbacks, so that the series remained motivating and optimistic about her potential to lose weight. Without denigrating the accomplishments of the first quilt--because losing one hundred pounds was most certainly a victory for her--the second quilt evinces a measure of sadness. That she *still* felt she needed to change was evident in the quilt block depicting her thinner (though not quite thin enough), idealized self overshadowed by the large shape of her actual body. Essentially, this block serves as her own before-and-after comparison, explicitly referencing the popular pairings of images that conventionally demonstrate the dramatic transformations of successful celebrity dieters.

Similarly, the photographs in Ringgold's first two *Change* quilts can be read as before-and-after shots, and not simply as snapshots of various phases of her life. The six photographic panels on the border of the first *Change* quilt show Ringgold's younger self, her graduation portraits, her dressed up in costume, posing in front of her artwork, etcetera. With a scrapbook-like quality, these panels illustrate the transformation from girl to woman; from a college student to a model for her mother's fashion designs to a

working artist; and, strikingly, from thin to fat. The center panel here depicts Ringgold in skintight attire, as this “new” Ringgold stands, facing the viewer, with her hands on her hips, emphasizing her new thin waistline. Being in the center of the quilt, this panel highlights the “change” that she has experienced, with her new figure surrounded by all the photographs of her former self.

Change 2 was arranged quite differently, in that she only included five different photographs of herself at different weights, each repeated twice. In the center panel of this quilt, she based the painted image on the pose used in the same location in the first quilt – only this time her waistline has shrunk even more, arguably to an unattainable smallness. This drawing represents Ringgold after she lost her last thirty pounds. The shadow behind this even thinner Ringgold is much larger, representing the woman before the loss of the last thirty pounds, or perhaps, the woman before any weight loss. Here she has combined the before-and-after into one picture on the quilt, using the shadow to represent her prior self and her new, slender figure wearing a skimpy bathing suit to represent her future.

Ringgold’s *Change 2* and Winfrey’s 1991 *People* interview show in different modalities both sides of the weight loss experience--success in losing weight as well as failure to maintain a thinner figure long term. Ella Howard’s keen summary of Oprah’s relationship to her body and weight could apply to Ringgold as well:

Winfrey has waged a search for her ideal physique, setting out to re-create her body by regulating her activities and disciplining her desires. At times, she has expressed feelings of victory and celebrated her achievement of the physical ideal, crediting therapeutic strategies with helping to liberate her from troubled relationships with food, exercise, and physical appearance. At other times, she has represented herself as a failure in her quest, expressing frustration and despair. But throughout her struggles she

continues to rely on the self-help model, employing new or familiar therapeutic strategies in pursuit of her goals.¹⁴⁹

Though their audience sizes differed drastically, both made their struggles accessible to ordinary women, acknowledging that obsession with body weight is a common experience. Through documenting their trials, they offered to teach and motivate other women, spreading the idea that “anyone can do it.” Yet, ironically, by their accounts of their experiences, they effectively supported the idea that everyone should be of an “ideal” weight, regardless of the fact that they could not maintain such a weight themselves.

By trying to achieve a putatively ideal body, Ringgold and Oprah could also be said, in effect, to have tried to achieve the ideal *white* body. As Sidonie Smith argued:

“Faith's” identity as a subject of disordered eating and disordered self-restraint is a social identity, one manifesting the psychic formations of her specific history as an African American woman. The ironic self-analysis of the narrative points to a profound psychic wound, the internalization of the phantasm of the idealized “feminine” body, raced as “white,” and the degraded African American female body stereotyped as unconstrained and excessive.¹⁵⁰

Traditionally, African Americans have been more accepting of a heavier body type than other ethnic groups.¹⁵¹ But since the 1980s, the African-American magazines *Ebony* and *Jet* have shown a marked increase in attention to diet, exercise, and body image issues. According to Becky W. Thompson, only in the last two decades have black women been able to communicate about their struggles with weight, breaking from the mammy

¹⁴⁹ Howard, “From Fasting Toward Self-Acceptance,” 105.

¹⁵⁰ Sidonie Smith, “Bodies of Evidence: Jenny Saville, Faith Ringgold, and Janine Antoni Weigh In,” in *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005),” 145.

¹⁵¹ Meg Lovejoy, “Disturbances in the Social Body: Differences in Body Image and Eating Problems Among African American and White Women,” *Gender and Society* 15, no. 2 (April 2001): 240.

stereotype (large, de-sexualized black women) that haunted them.¹⁵² Winfrey's and Ringgold's open discussions about their weight drew attention to the fact that people of color, like whites, could have issues with their bodies, and even struggle with eating disorders.¹⁵³ The desire for slenderness so associated with Western white women is no longer specific to them, as women of other ethnic groups have generally come to adhere to the same ideals. On some level Ringgold's and Winfrey's battles with their weight seem to demonstrate that their black bodies cannot fit into society the way that they are-- they have to be modified, slimmed down, to be accepted. Furthermore, their desire to be thin points to a figure frequently missing in the literature on anorexia, bulimia and weight issues, namely the black body. They represent a real-life parallel to Connor's black actor who forces herself through an undersized door.

Ringgold had started to weight put back on by the time she began making *Change 3: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Quilt* (1991, fig. 74).

Weight gain is not uncommon after dieting. Writer Ruth Raymond Thone emphasized how weight commonly returns through a discussion of her own experiences, "After those weeks of faithful attendance at Weight Watchers, I weighed 133 pounds and was a heroine, a victor, a winner. There began my weight gain. My body had endured one more starvation and would respond appropriately: gaining back enough to make it through

¹⁵² Becky W. Thompson, *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 109-111.

¹⁵³ Doris Witt, "What (N)ever Happened to Aunt Jemima: Eating Disorders, Fetal Rights, and Black Female Appetite in Contemporary American Culture," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 99-127.

another starvation siege, which means more than I had lost.”¹⁵⁴ Both Ringgold and Winfrey used a liquid diet, specifically Optifast, to quickly lose pounds. Originally Ringgold lost one hundred pounds, and kept the weight off in part through the exercise entailed in the performances and dancing for the first *Change* and for *Change 2*. A trip to France and a pause from her performances prompted a weight gain of about twenty-five pounds.¹⁵⁵ Basically, as soon as Winfrey and Ringgold began to eat solid food, the weight returned.

For Ringgold, this weight gain served as the impetus to create her third quilt, *Change 3: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt* (1991), which “contain[ed] no photographs but rather a painted ‘group’ self-portrait in the nude, showing me at my various different weights over the years - a testament to the continuing struggle I have had with food. The text for this quilt is about the eating habits of different ‘women’ (all of them, of course, are just me) who are portrayed on this quilt.”¹⁵⁶ These different nude Ringgolds, while of varying sizes, were much closer to a thin body than to the heavier woman she once was and could become again.

The text for *Change 3* is illuminating. It explains that the central image is a party where everyone invited is actually various versions of Ringgold. “At my party everyone invited is actually me and therefore knows me so there is no need to posture and pretend.... The extreme manifestations of me showed up at the party uninvited, and were snubbed. One was eating a fried pork chop sandwich from a greasy bag. When she left in

¹⁵⁴ Ruth Raymond Thone, *Fat--A Fate Worse Than Death? Women, Weight, and Appearance* (New York: Haworth Press, 1997), 66-67.

¹⁵⁵ Osteoarthritic knees also contributed to her weight gain, as her painful knees discouraged her exercising. Eventually she underwent knee surgery, which improved her mobility and her ability to exercise. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 248.

¹⁵⁶ Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 248.

a huff, she got stuck in the door.”¹⁵⁷ The text makes clear that, as much as Ringgold wants to be open to all versions of her body, she is not able to accept her fat self.

Yet, as much as she desires to be thinner, she also has a problematic relationship with the thinner selves that are represented in the center panel of *Change 3*: “There is another woman who likes only to look at food. She is a culinary voyeur. I admire that. She will prepare delicious food and never eat it. I am very fond of her, though I rarely see her.”¹⁵⁸ This thin Ringgold, and another self-disciplined Ringgold, who only eats one low-fat meal a day, do not make appearances in Ringgold’s life very often. Ringgold attempts to position her real self as someone in the middle of the weight range, one who eats but does not gorge. Unsurprisingly, Ringgold’s favorite version of herself is the thinnest version, a figure who still gets to indulge in food and whom she describes on the quilt as one “who eats nonstop and never gains weight.” This woman is not invited to the party, as this fantasy is perhaps too painful for Ringgold to consider. The brief text on the quilt ends with the note that two larger women had showed up at the party, eaten all the appetizers and then invited Ringgold for “coffee-cake and ice cream after dinner. Really?” Ringgold questioned these two women, perhaps because she identified with them. These sweets were among her weaknesses, and it is as if these two women were perpetuating Ringgold’s bigger body. She would rather not go out with these women, but instead wants to associate with the thinner women who either show restraint or have disordered eating habits. With those women, her body is safer.

¹⁵⁷ Faith Ringgold, *Change 3: Faith Ringgold’s Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photoetching on silk, 1991 (artist’s collection).

¹⁵⁸ Faith Ringgold, *Change 3: Faith Ringgold’s Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photoetching on silk, 1991 (artist’s collection).

Because the third quilt does not contain pictures or anecdotes from Ringgold's life, it relies on a fictional event and painted (often idealized) portraits of the artist. Creating this image of her world allowed Ringgold to express these alter-egos, some of whom are past versions of herself, while others are fictitious and exist solely in her mind. There are the skinny and the overweight Ringgolds, the emotional eaters and the ones who starve. Ringgold's point is that all of these people are in her, and probably in most people. Nonetheless, the text makes clear that she is clinging to the idea that one day, maybe she can be as thin as the women in the quilt. For Ringgold at the time of *Change 3*, the goal was still to lose more weight.

What had begun as a celebration of her weight loss had morphed into a hopeful wish of what her body could be and ended with a reluctant acceptance of her fluctuating weight. The *Change* series tracks her mindset regarding body image, but also provides for the hope that maybe one day she can achieve her desired weight. Susan Bordo has argued that the slender body becomes a symbol of "correct attitude." She continues, "it means that one 'cares' about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to shape your life."¹⁵⁹ A fat person can thus be seen as weak, as fatness can "be seen as reflecting moral or personal inadequacy, or lack of will."¹⁶⁰ This example is perhaps best seen in *Change 2*, as Ringgold's imaginary thin body is weighed down by her heavy shadow. She will never reach that ideal weight, no matter what diet she goes on.

In her 1995 memoir, she discussed plans to make a fourth quilt in the series.

¹⁵⁹ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 195.

¹⁶⁰ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 192.

The content of the quilt and performance is slowly evolving from a daily documenting of the following: Food intake, exercise, work, play or entertainment, feelings either pleasant or traumatic, happenings, which include good things as well as bad. The first six months of this personal research will shape the form and content of the quilt and performance. My premise is that if I make a public document of my behavior patterns, then I will be forced to transform them in order to make myself more acceptable. This public self-therapy will reveal not only the food I eat but what else is going on in my life at the same time.¹⁶¹

As she was dieting this time, she was also using the process as research. Ringgold used a journal to keep track of what she was eating and how she was feeling, and even drew a daily self-portrait that recorded the change in her self-image.¹⁶² While she had met her initial goal of losing one hundred pounds, she never lost one hundred thirty, by the mid 1990s she had gained back some weight and the fourth *Change* quilt was never made.¹⁶³

Ringgold was not alone, however, as over ninety-five percent of women reportedly cannot maintain the weight lost after a diet.¹⁶⁴ Anorexics and bulimics may be successful, but at an extremely high cost to their health. Connor's *Thinner Than You*, with its extremely narrow waistline, emphasized the impossibility of success by dieters or anorexics. Sterbak put her model in a dress made of meat, food that the dieter, and especially the anorexic, would be loathe to consume. These three artists, whether through an exploration of personal experiences or an expression of universal pressures, have each drawn attention to society's extreme attitudes towards women's bodies. By bringing these matters into the art world, these artists are challenging what they see as unfair demands on the shape of women's figures. Yet, further, these artists call into question gender

¹⁶¹ Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 249.

¹⁶² Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 249.

¹⁶³ Ringgold, interview.

¹⁶⁴ F. Kramer et al., "Long-Term Follow-up of Behavioral Treatment for Obesity: Patterns of Weight Regain Among Men and Women," *International Journal of Obesity* 13, no. 2 (1989): 123-26.

norms, methods of art-making, experimental mediums, human insecurities, media practices, even histories of clothing. Taking as a starting point a received view of how women should look, according to ubiquitous signals from the media, these artists' works can also critique how women are represented in society: as a piece of meat, as a sexual object, or as feminine ideal. Through their art, Sterbak, Connor, and Ringgold added much needed voices to the discussion--namely, the voice of independently minded women's--and much needed strategies, specifically their diversely creative, inventive undertakings.

More than before, these artists also brought in more participants into their projects--from Connor's actors, to Sterbak's models, to Ringgold's audience joining in the refrain of "I just got to change"--their ideas about the body and eating reached more and more people. Presenting their bodies or stand-ins for their bodies, Connor, Ringgold and Sterbak implicitly questioned the way that the female physique is discussed in the media, but without providing a specific, clear alternative. While the meat dress rots or the attempt to achieve the impossible is emphasized, these artists aimed to complicate our perception and discussion of female bodies while underscoring the pressure for change at any cost.

Chapter Three: Photographing Fat

[B]eing fat is important enough to give fat women in this culture a set of shared experiences, especially shared pain. Being fat is a gestalt of experiences that start before you are five and never end till the day you die. We are bombarded many times every day with hateful messages about fat. Most of these messages are also about women, from diet center ads through “Your Health” columns to the images of conventionally beautiful thin women on every magazine page and television screen. But the fat woman herself is rarely shown at all, and virtually never shown as beautiful, or real.

--Debbie Notkin¹

In 1984, Debbie Notkin and Laurie Toby Edison organized a series of panels entitled “Fat, Feminism and Fandom” at science fiction conventions across the United States.² Filled with discussions about fat oppression and fat liberation, these sessions were immensely popular. Outside of their collaboration on the sessions, the two began to work together. A thin woman who weighed about 120 pounds, Edison made jewelry based on the human figure.³ Notkin, a large woman, modeled for Edison, who ultimately found the bronze pieces based on Notkin too expensive to make. Edison also felt that she was unable to adequately convey a clear sense of acceptance concerning body size in jewelry, which led her to pursue photography and its documentary capabilities with Notkin as her first model. The photographs were taken at Notkin’s house, and eventually, one of these photographs, *Debbie with Stripes* (fig. 75), would grace the cover of *Women En Large: Images of Fat Nudes*, a 1994 book of photographs of large women from

¹ Laurie Toby Edison and Debbie Notkin, *Women En Large: Images of Fat Nudes* (San Francisco, CA: Books in Focus, 1994), 91-92.

² Notkin and Edison were both involved in the science fiction community. They each subscribed to magazines, participated in fan events and attended conferences. After reading a published letter from a prominent man in the science fiction world disparaging fat women, they decided to organize discussions about the role of fat women in this community; see Debbie Notkin, “Enlarging: The Personal Story,” in Edison and Notkin, *Women En Large*, 108-13.

³ Notkin, “Enlarging,” 109.

diverse backgrounds. In *Debbie with Stripes*, Notkin lies on her side in a corner of her couch, with the sunlight streaming through the blinds creating stripes over her face and body. The photograph is taken from above, so we see the curve of her hip, the shape of her breast, and even the dimples of her flesh. This photograph became a centerpiece of the slide shows that the two women presented throughout the country to raise money to publish the book. These lectures helped them publicize their work, while they also continued to advocate for the inclusion of respectful images of fat women in the media and the art world.

In their work, Edison and Notkin wanted to show all types of women, not just fat women but also fat women who were young, old, black, white, etcetera. Their subjects ranged in age from twenty-two to fifty-six, and over forty percent were women of color. Additionally, they included women with different medical histories, such as a woman in a wheelchair, a diabetic, and a woman who had undergone a mastectomy.⁴ As Notkin explained, “The most important thing I learned was the one that should have been most obvious: the label ‘fat woman’ tells you only two of the hundreds of things you need to know about a person to understand her.”⁵ One of *Women En Large*’s main purposes was to give women a space to view the myriad natural types of women beyond the thin white women most often shown by the mainstream media.

Women En Large was one of first endeavors that sought to display larger woman in a dignified manner that treated the fat body as a form to be celebrated. However, the impact of the book was limited. As artist Tee Corinne explained, “Because this is content-driven work it functions outside of the codifications and language of academic

⁴ Edison and Notkin, *Women En Large*, 111-12.

⁵ Edison and Notkin, *Women En Large*, 91.

theories. The photographs are closer to documentary practice than to traditional art historical discourse. . . . *Women En Large* expands the visual dialogue, the repertoire or catalog of stored images upon which aesthetic understanding rests.” So Notkin and Edison opened the door for larger bodies to function as a legitimate subject, and, as Corrine said, to “establish a right to a territory.”⁶

While they might not have been familiar with Edison and Notkin’s book, art photographers Laura Aguilar, Ariane Lopez-Huici and Leonard Nimoy have all undertaken the depiction of fat women, since the 1990s or, in Nimoy’s case, the 2000s. Each of these artists seeks to insert imagery of larger women into the contemporary art-world. By presenting their work in galleries and museums, outlets with greater status than informal slide shows or a self-published book, these artists gained a larger audience for their photographs, creating a broader impact. Using recognizable allusions to artistic traditions, these photographers sought to align their work with historical precedents. More importantly, these artists’ works--which depict a range of fat people, including members of lesbian Latina groups, burlesque entertainers and disabled citizens, for instance--are primarily about showing larger female bodies with respect and dignity, and so about acceptance. But the initiatives of Aguilar, Lopez-Huici and Nimoy would not have been possible without the work of fat activists like Edison and Notkin, who tirelessly advocated for the inclusion of fat women mainstream and art-world imagery. These activists helped voice the frustrations of many fat women who felt that they were erased from the visual field of society.

⁶ Both statements from Tee Corinne, Review: *Women En Large: Images of Fat Nudes*, by Laurie Toby Eddison and Debbie Notkin, *Afterimage* 22, no. 5 (December 1, 1994): 10-11.

When fat women appear in commercial media, they are commonly described in language with negative connotations, such as chubby, porky, rotund, plump, heavy, flabby, chunky, or corpulent. Even the more scientific terms, overweight and obese, no longer seem appropriate, however. Overweight implies that there exists a normal, correct weight, and so has been cited as a term that is generally meaningless.⁷ Obesity, a diagnostic term used by doctors and health professionals, suggests a disease. Furthermore, the definition of these words is constantly changing, as the determining guidelines for the obese and morbidly obese are in flux.⁸ To make matters worse, Americans are continually being threatened with an “obesity epidemic.” At the 1985 National Institute of Health Consensus Conference on Obesity, obesity was defined as a “killer disease.”⁹ If the definition of obesity is ever changing, how can there be an epidemic? A definition of obesity predicated on weight alone also precludes any space for fat people who are comparatively fit and healthy. Simply put, overweight and obese are inadequate terms to describe people, and often result in discriminatory practices.

From 1960 to 1980, twenty-five percent of adults in the U.S. were defined as “obese,” using the criterion that they were twenty percent over their normatively desirable weight. Since 1980, that number has grown to include one-third of American

⁷ Marilyn Wann, *Fat!So?: Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1998), 19.

⁸ Linda Bacon, *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight* (Dallas: Benbella Books, 2008), 132-35.

⁹ Pat Lyons, “Prescription for Harm: Diet Industry Influence, Public Health Policy, and the ‘Obesity Epidemic,’” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 79. Lyons also addressed the fact that many of the people who were given grants and viewed as obesity experts at this conference were paid consultants to weight loss and drug companies.

adults.¹⁰ Employers can use obesity as a determining factor in denying insurance to employees.¹¹ Activist Marilyn Wann elaborated on the problem of using the marker of “obesity” to determine care:

Weight is an inaccurate basis for predicting individual health or longevity, much less someone’s eating or exercise habits. For example, the majority of people categorized as “obese”--seven out of eight--are not diabetic.... “Health” can be used to police body conformity and can be code for weight-related judgments that are socially, not scientifically, driven. “Health” can also cover a whole range of beliefs and behaviors (eating disorders, moralizing about food or fitness, alienation from one’s own body) that reinforce social control around weight and can be very damaging to well-being. Like the F-word, health is a term that calls for a conscious project of reclamation.¹²

In their project to advocate for fat people, fat activists have had to not only reclaim terminology by reinstating “fat” as the appropriate descriptor, but also have had to explain the ways the healthcare system and society have neglected the bodies of those who are fat.

Fat men and women do face serious health risks. But to be clear, fatness or obesity is not generally a direct cause of diseases. Sander Gilman explains:

Obesity is not itself a ‘disease’ but rather a phenomenological category which reflects the visible manifestation of bodily size, which in turn can have multiple (or multifactorial) causes. No one dies from ‘obesity’. One dies from those pathologies which may result from extreme overweight.

¹⁰ Christopher J. Ruhm, “Current and Future Prevalence of Obesity and Severe Obesity in the United States,” *Forum for Health Economics and Policy* 10, no. 2 (2007): 1-26.

¹¹ Elizabeth Kristen, “Addressing the Problem of Weight Discrimination in Employment,” *California Law Review* 90, no. 1 (January 2002): 57-109; Jay Bhattacharyaa and M. Kate Bundorf, “The Incident of Healthcare Costs of Obesity,” *Journal of Health Economics* 28, no. 3 (May 2009): 649-58; and Adam Gilden Tsai, David A. Asch, and Thomas A. Wadden, “Insurance Coverage for Obesity Treatment,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 106, no. 10 (October 2006): 1651-55.

¹² Marilyn Wann, foreword to *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Solovay and Rothblum, xiii.

Obesity may be a tertiary cause of morbidity or mortality: it may lead to diabetes, which may lead to vascular disease.¹³

In the 1980s and 1990s, media and public figures paid increasing amounts of attention to the coincidences of fatness and disease, and the two became intimately linked. Numerous studies have shown that larger body size equates to a greater potential for developing diabetes, heart disease, cancer and other problems.¹⁴

To combat the so-called “Obesity Epidemic,” numerous organizations across the U.S., including the White House and the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, were encouraging people to lose weight. While the incidence of dieting had been steadily increasing since the 1950s, it is not surprising that an easier way to lose weight was desired. Early types of surgeries dealing with digestive ailments had been developed as early as the 1950s, and the more modern bariatric surgery was developed in the 1990s.¹⁵ For those that believed obesity was genetically determined, this type of surgery provided one solution.

For many people, if obesity is not genetic, that must mean that something else must be wrong with a fat person. Part of the support for the fat studies movement stemmed from the consistent rise in fat prejudice. J. Eric Oliver maintains that “the

¹³ Sander L. Gilman, *Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1988), 18.

¹⁴ For example, see Alfred A. Rimm et al., “Relationship of Obesity and Disease in 73,532 Weight-Conscious Women,” *Public Health Reports* 90, no. 1 (January-February 1975): 44-51; Gary D. Friedman and Lisa J. Herrinton, “Obesity and Multiple Myeloma,” *Cancer Causes and Controls* 5, no. 5 (September 1994): 479-483; Bénédicte Stengel et al., “Lifestyle Factors, Obesity and the Risk of Chronic Kidney Disease,” *Epidemiology* 14, no. 4 (July 2003): 479-487; and Dorit Carmelli, Heping Zhang, and Gary E. Swan, “Obesity and 33-Year Follow up for Coronary Heart Disease and Cancer Mortality,” *Epidemiology* 8, no. 4 (July 1997): 378-383.

¹⁵ Sander L. Gilman, *Obesity: The Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 123-4.

derision of fat people is pervasive throughout American culture. In magazines, television, and film, fat people are often the objects of ridicule and disdain, stereotypically depicted as gluttonous, lazy or impotent.”¹⁶ This is further complicated by the fact that class and race are often aligned with anti-fat sentiments. Body size does vary consistently by education, income, and race. The numbers are quite startling: people below the poverty line are 15% more likely to be obese and nearly 50% of poor black and Latino women are obese (with a Body Mass Index of 30 or above).¹⁷

What has often eluded the media and scientists is that body size was not a perfect determinant of health. Fat activists, like the authors of *Women En Large* and Marilyn Wann, often tried to disassociate fatness from poor health. This was also one of the main purposes of groups like the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), which was founded in 1969 to help educate and advocate on behalf of people of all sizes. The group’s mission is “to eliminate discrimination based on body size and provide fat people with the tools for self-empowerment through public education, advocacy, and support.”¹⁸ The group was founded by William Fabrey, who was angry about the size discrimination suffered by his wife Joyce. “When I began NAAFA, all the fat people I knew had bought into the prevailing myth that said they were inferior because of the size of their bodies. It took me--a thin man, someone not in their oppressed group--to have enough self-confidence to fight for size acceptance.”¹⁹ He co-founded NAAFA with

¹⁶ J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America’s Obesity Epidemic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 61.

¹⁷ Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 75.

¹⁸ “About Us,” National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, <http://www.naafaonline.com/dev2/about/index.html> (accessed August 17, 2010).

¹⁹ Quoted in Charlotte Cooper, *Fat and Proud: The Politics of Size* (London: Women’s Press, 1998), 131.

Llewellyn Louderback, the author of *Fat Power* (1970)--an early work of activism that articulated the group's views about the way society is prejudiced against fat people.²⁰ Positioning themselves as civil rights activists and following on the heels of the Black Power and early feminist movements, NAAFA intended to rid the word "fat" of its negative connotations by arguing "that fatness is a form of body diversity that should be respected, much like diversity based on skin color or sexual preference."²¹

While NAAFA was a strong presence in fat activism in the 1970s, another, more radical group, the Fat Underground, likewise forged a political presence. Sara Golda Bracha Fishman and Judy Freespirit founded this new group in 1973.²² The women were working as therapists at the Radical Feminist Therapy Collective in Los Angeles, a group that "attempt[ed] to find political connections to 'personal' problems in order to empower individuals to seek collective change."²³ Moved by Louderbeck's *Fat Power*, the two women reached out to NAAFA to start a local chapter in Los Angeles. In 1998, Fishman explained the group's early philosophies:

From the start, our small NAAFA chapter took a confrontational stance with regard to the health professions. We accused them--doctors, psychologists, and public health officials--of concealing and distorting the facts about fat that were contained in their own professional research journals. In doing so, they betrayed us and played into the hands of the multibillion-dollar weight-loss industry, which exploits fear of fat and contempt toward fat people as a means to make more money.²⁴

²⁰ Llewellyn Louderback, *Fat Power: Whatever You Eat is Right* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1970); Cooper, *Fat and Proud*, 130.

²¹ Bacon, *Health at Every Size*, 123.

²² Fishman has also gone by the names Aldebaren and Vivien Mayer.

²³ Cooper, *Fat and Proud*, 133.

²⁴ Sara Golda Bracha Fishman, "Life In The Fat Underground," *Radiance: The Magazine for Large Women Online* (Winter 1998), http://www.radiancemagazine.com/issues/1998/winter_98/fat_underground.html (accessed August 17, 2010).

This aggressive stance proved to be unwelcome at NAAFA, which sent a letter asking the Los Angeles chapter to tone down their behavior. The letter caused the women to break off and form the Fat Underground, a group founded by and for fat people. The group was extremely active throughout the late 1970s, publishing papers on fat oppression and discrimination, while continuing to challenge the health profession's and weight-loss industry's attitudes towards fat people.

While the Fat Underground's struggle to maintain its membership base caused them to disband in the 1980s, the group inspired the formation of other groups that similarly addressed fat discrimination. One of the first texts published on fat studies was *Shadow on a Tightrope* (1983), an important anthology that gathered together essays by early activists, along with interviews with important leaders, and documents that had helped shape the movement's development, such as the "Fat Liberation Manifesto" of 1973. Written by Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran, that short text elaborates on the way that fat bodies are frequently attacked, mistreated, and manipulated. In 1973 the authors explained, "We are angry at mistreatment by commercial and sexist interests. These have exploited our bodies as objects of ridicule, thereby creating an immensely profitable market selling the false promise of avoidance of, or relief from, that ridicule." The way to move beyond these prejudices, they asserted, is to "reclaim power over our bodies and our lives."²⁵

In 1994, *Women En Large* visually expressed certain ideas put forth earlier by NAAFA and by the Fat Underground. One activist idea that Notkin and Edison wanted to

²⁵ Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran, "Fat Liberation Manifesto" (1973), in *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*, ed. Lisa Schoenfelder and Barb Wieser (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1983), 52-53.

illustrate through their photographs and essays was that being fat could be a genetic trait, rather than a personal failing, like laziness, aversion to exercise, or overeating.²⁶ The “obesity gene” was discovered in mice in 1994, leading to reports that soon a genetically engineered solution would be available to eliminate fatness. The fact that the gene was not found in humans and only occurred in a fraction of obese mice was generally overlooked by the press.²⁷ For her part, Notkin wanted to remove the stigma of being fat, and the idea that being fat was beyond a person’s control could obviously help to remove personal blame and imply that fat people were fundamentally the same as anyone else.

To that end, the selection of photographs in Edison and Notkin’s book is extremely strategic. Besides the variety of nude women shown, the photographs also display a range of activities. Edison shows most of the women in their homes in a combination of daily activities and poses--exercising, dancing, playing instruments, stretching, and relaxing on their furniture--but never eating, as she did not want the images to reinforce stereotypes of fat people gorging on food. Additionally, most of the women are shown moving, contradicting the stereotype that fat people are lazy. The photographs are complemented by short essays written by each model, which give each woman a voice and an opinion. By using the models’ own words, Notkin and Edison helped to challenge perceptions about the attitudes and health of fat people. Each woman is not only described through a brief biography, but also given a forum to express her opinions. For example, Rhylorien n’a Rose says, “I understood that beyond the fat, beyond the disability, beyond the missing body parts, what really matters was how I felt

²⁶ Edison and Notkin, *Women En Large*, 95-96.

²⁷ Le’a Kent, “Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women,” in *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Janae Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 132-33.

about who I am. I don't need approval from anyone except myself. I am not what others think of me."²⁸ By giving a voice and individuality to their models, Notkin and Edison perform similar work to that of the Fat Underground. Both groups showed that fat people are more than just their bodies, while simultaneously debunking stereotypes. As cultural historian Le'a Kent explained: "Notkin sees medicalizing discourses as the major enemy of fat subjectivity, but also relies on them, marshaling scientific citations to debunk the assertion that fat people are inherently unhealthy. What is inherently unhealthy, she argues, is yo-yo dieting and the inhumane stresses that a prejudiced world inflicts on fat people."²⁹

Notkin and Edison positioned their text and photographs as a way to help fat women become newly visible in a positive light. In addition, they also pushed fat women to make themselves visible and to accept themselves more. For historian Kathleen LeBasco, it is then about creating a sense of belonging: "[Notkin's] text is intended less to radically revamp society's perception of fat bodies than to aid fat women in feeling better about themselves."³⁰ This attempt to change perception is evident in the last photograph included in the book (fig. 76). In one of the rare images taken outdoors, five women of various races are perched upon the side of a rocky bluff. Three women sit in various poses and one leans against a rock, looking at the camera. The fifth woman, standing at far left, looks towards the group. Each of these women's heads is held high, as they confidently own their bodies. The women look relaxed and at ease, as the

²⁸ Rose has a physical ailment that prohibits her from walking easily. She also survived breast cancer after a mastectomy. In her photograph, her scar is prominently displayed as she holds onto a chair for support. Quoted in Edison and Notkin, *Women En Large*, 99.

²⁹ Kent, "Fighting Abjection," 139.

³⁰ Kathleen LeBasco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 47

photographs attempt to create an air of informality. Most of the images in the book feature women individually or in pairs and, as this photograph makes clear, there is an important sense of community to be found here. Notkin and Edison have conjured a place where no one is judged or marginalized, where fat women can be together celebrating their bodies.

Women En Large arose in a distinctly North American context and, in fact, NAAFA and the Fat Underground are also uniquely American. The divide between fat and thin began in the United States as early as 1890, as evidenced by how changing fashions privileged slim women, as well as by the emergence of dieting and early forms of eating disorders.³¹ Today, the idea of the fat American living on fast food has become a well-known stereotype and fat is often located as an endemically U.S.-based problem, despite the fact that fat people can be found in all cultures and countries.³² Kelly D. Brownell and Katherine Battle Horgen, explain how pervasive fast food has become,

Perhaps more than any American export, our food has powerful symbolic importance to the world's inhabitants.... American food also represents the bloated U.S. lifestyle and American domination of the world. It may portend, in the eyes of non-Americans, obesity, poor health, and disability, along with the takeover of local culture and further enrichment of America.³³

Fast food is cheap, convenient, and to many people it tastes good. Its rapid rise in popularity over the past thirty years can be attributed to a shift in American priorities, but it also corresponds to the rise in obesity. As Eric Schlosser has noted, "Wherever

³¹ Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 5.

³² Charlotte Cooper, "Maybe it Should Be Called Fat American Studies," in Solovay and Rothblum, 329-30.

³³ Kelly D. Brownell and Katherine Battle Horgen, *Food Fight: The Inside Story of the Food Industry, America's Obesity Crisis, and What We Can Do About It* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 2004), 57.

America's fast food chains go, waistlines start expanding."³⁴ It is unsurprising, then, that this increase in fatness in the United States (and in consumers who eat American fast food) parallels the development of fat studies literature and programs across the U.S.³⁵ *Women En Large* and the work of artists such as Laura Aguilar (b. 1959) emerged out of this weight-obsessed culture.

Born in Southern California, Laura Aguilar considers herself a self-taught photographer, despite pursuing photography in high school and at a local community college.³⁶ Notwithstanding her self-consciousness regarding her lack of conventional education, Aguilar has established a career that has included both national and international exhibitions.³⁷ Her determination to prove herself stems from the challenges she has faced in her everyday life due to her low-level reading and writing skills,

³⁴ Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004), 242.

³⁵ Even the scientific research has been dominated by a focus on United States populations; see Cooper, "Maybe it Should Be Called Fat American Studies," 328. For more information see, Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight is Hazardous to Your Health* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004); Greg Critser, *Fatland: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003); Laura Fraser, *Losing It: America's Obsession with Weight and the Industry that Feeds on It* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994); and J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (New York: Oxford, 2006).

³⁶ Diana E. Hulick, "Laura Aguilar," *Latin American Art* 5, no. 3 (1993): 52; and Alice di Certo, "The Unconventional Photographic Self-Portraits of John Coplans, Carla Williams, and Laura Aguilar" (master's thesis, Georgia State University, 2008), 54-55.

³⁷ She has had solo shows at the ArtPace Foundation in San Antonio, Texas; the La Caixa Foundation in Barcelona, Spain; and the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles. Her work has been included in a number of important exhibitions, including "Bad Girls" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City (1994) and the 1993 Venice Biennale, and various group exhibitions at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art. For examples of her feelings about her education and her attempts to further her career, see Laura Aguilar to Jeffrey Aaronson, June 19, 1987, box 1, folder 2; Laura Aguilar to Esther, May 9, 1987, box 1, folder 2; and Laura Aguilar to Julia Nelson, undated [1987], box 1, folder 2; all Laura Aguilar Papers and Photographs, 1981-1995, Cecil H. Green Library, Stanford University, Stanford, California (hereafter known as Laura Aguilar Papers).

dyslexia, depression, and lack of financial security. She found photography to be an outlet and confronted her issues by incorporating them into her art. In a letter to a friend, she expressed her anxieties: “I used to worry about being different: I am slow in how I learn, it’s always make [sic] me feel retarded. I don’t read or write well and it frustrated [sic]. About being Mexican. About doing my photography. Also being gay.”³⁸ Some of the main subjects of her work reflect those facets of her own identity: her Mexican-American background, her sexuality, her educational struggles and her mental illness. Indeed, the unifying thread throughout much of her work is the inclusion of her own body or bodies like hers, that is, raced, gay, and/or fat.

Exposing the way that Aguilar’s body can function in her art, Amelia Jones explained that “Aguilar’s work simultaneously expresses anxiety about the incoherence of the self (proposing a multiplied but still ‘authentic’ voice for various oppressed subjects, such as Latina lesbians) but also exuberantly plays out the dissolution of the notion of the ‘individual’ as codifiable in terms of a singular and universalizable identity.”³⁹ Aguilar’s body often stands in for her ethnic identity, her race, her sexuality and more. At the same time, what defines Aguilar has also caused her hardships. For example, her dyslexia has hindered her ability to incorporate text by her photographed subjects. Each of these struggles comes together in the physical representations of her body and her writing. As Aguilar explained in 1993:

My artistic goal is to create photographic images that compassionately render the human experience, revealed through the lives of individuals in the lesbian/gay and/or persons of color communities.... Hopefully the universal elements in the work can be recognized by other individuals'

³⁸ Aguilar to Nelson, Laura Aguilar Papers.

³⁹ Amelia Jones, “Bodies and Subjects in the Technologized Self-Portrait: The Work of Laura Aguilar,” *Aztlan* 23, no. 2 (Fall 1998): 208.

communities and can initiate the viewer to new experiences about gays, lesbians and people of color.⁴⁰

In an example of how she situates her national identity, Aguilar's *Three Eagles Flying* of 1990 (fig. 77) shows the artist flanked by Mexican and U.S. flags. The artist incorporates her body into the center frame of the photographic triptych. The outer panels are pictures of the American flag (left panel) and the Mexican flag (right panel). These side photographs are simple, with the flags placed in front of the same black background that is used in the center panel. Here, Aguilar is bound with a rope across her stomach and around her wrists. A United States flag is wrapped around her torso, and a Mexican flag is tied over her head, with the eagle appearing where her face would be. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano has noted that the title is a pun, playing on the three eagles--the one on the Mexican flag, the symbolism of the eagle associated with the United States, and Aguilar herself--as *águila* means eagle in Spanish.⁴¹ For Yarbro-Bejarano, even the title emphasizes Aguilar's struggle with her identity.

The flags, each representing a distinct place to which Aguilar simultaneously belongs, are practically trapping her. Diana Hulick has articulated Aguilar's conflicted position: "In much the same way, Aguilar feels constrained and surrounded by these two cultures. In the U.S., she is looked down on because she is Chicano; in Mexico she is separated by her relatively lighter skin color and her lack of fluent Spanish. Both cultures

⁴⁰ Laura Aguilar, "Artist's Statement," *Women Artists of the American West: Lesbian Photography on the U.S. West Coast, 1972-1997*, <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/waaw/corinne/Aguilar.htm> (accessed August 20, 2010).

⁴¹ Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, "Laying It Bare: The Queer/Colored Body in Photography by Laura Aguilar," in *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. Carla Trujillo (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1997), 286.

bind her and neither is fully accepting. She is caught between two worlds.”⁴² This piece might recall the work of Frida Kahlo, who also expressed a fractured identity through clothing and setting, as evidenced in *Self-Portrait on the Border Between Mexico and the United States* of 1931 (fig. 78). In this work, flags signify the divided identity of the artist: at center, Kahlo holds a small Mexican flag in her hand, while in the background we see on one side symbols of her Mexican heritage--floral and plant life, a temple and icons—and on the other an industrialized U.S. landscape filled with tall skyscrapers, factories, and pollution.⁴³ Both Kahlo and Aguilar illustrated their discomfort in defining their own identity, and the pull between two vastly different worlds. Yet, because Aguilar has stripped the image of any extraneous detail besides the flags, the differences between the actual countries must be read on Aguilar’s body.

According to Diana Hulick, “Aguilar incorporated the flags into this image to explain that to deny one’s culture is to deny the other.”⁴⁴ Hulick continued to elucidate that Aguilar’s work is frequently about “the other”--groups and communities that do not easily fit into our idea of “normal.”⁴⁵ The flags symbolize different countries, but Aguilar, in the center, denies committing to one or the other. Rather, she clothes herself uncomfortably in both flags. The large ropes wrap around her face and her neck, practically suffocating her. One flag wraps around her waist, while the other covers her

⁴² Hulick, “Laura Aguilar,” 53.

⁴³ For more information, see Rebecca Block and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep, “Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in ‘Gringolandia,’” *Woman’s Art Journal* 19, no. 2 (Autumn 1998/Winter 1999): 8-12; and Oriana Baddeley, “‘Her Dress Hangs Here’: De-Frocking the Kahlo Cult,” *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 1 (1991): 10-17.

⁴⁴ Hulick, “Laura Aguilar,” 53.

⁴⁵ Hulick, “Laura Aguilar,” 54-55.

face, so that they are restraining either her movement or her speech. Thus, this image is an account of Aguilar's refusal to easily accept either identity.

In a letter to her friend Pat Lyons, Aguilar revealed that this work was not easy for her to make: it took her over a year to gather the right materials and configure the photograph. Aguilar's poverty restricted her from being able to purchase the materials, so she was left to find and borrow the flags and the rope. Furthermore, she could not afford, nor could she find, anyone who would model for the work--a move which caused her to use her own body. She felt trapped by her working class status, her poverty, and her struggle to survive day-to-day, all of which complicated her photography and slowed her career.⁴⁶ The ropes that bind her can easily be interpreted as symbols of the way her poverty and her class hold her back.

Aguilar's body, however, cannot be fully restrained, as her breasts and upper torso remain exposed. Her arms cross in front of her body, while her hands are tied together with the heavy rope. With her hands and legs bound, she cannot easily move. Her stomach and breasts figure prominently, drawing attention to her large girth. Yet her nudity also exposes her brown skin, inasmuch as it can be seen in black and white photography. Since she often places her breasts, as in this instance, directly in the center of her photographs, her gender is at the forefront of her work. Her body--in its size, race, and gender--makes visible two problematic qualities that cause a person to be ostracized in U.S. society.

Her body, which can incorporate a number of meanings, was a frequent subject for Aguilar. Through repeated photographs of herself, Aguilar struggles to define and to

⁴⁶ Aguilar to Pat Lyons, February 2, 1990, box 1, folder 5, Laura Aguilar Papers.

accept the size of her body. Her first nude self-portrait, *In Sandy's Room* of 1990 (fig. 79), was unplanned. While staying at a friend's house for a few days, she experimented with taking self-portraits, never intending to exhibit them. After showing them to a friend, who called them the most honest work she had done to date, she decided to seriously pursue the series.⁴⁷ In this inaugural photograph, Aguilar shows herself leaning back in a chair with her feet propped up on an ottoman. The image exudes a sense of comfort: as she reclines, she holds a cool drink as a fan pushes a breeze over her skin. Her head tilts back as if she is pausing and taking refuge from a long, hot day. The room is sparse; the simple furniture is low, allowing the large window to dominate the upper half of the photograph. The light streaming in through the window illuminates Aguilar's body. The repetition of horizontal lines and forms makes the image seem long, but the light helps also to keep the atmosphere relaxed and soft. The photograph is potentially easy for the viewer to relate to: who has not relished a cool breeze and an icy drink on a hot day?

In Sandy's Room is one of Aguilar's most reproduced images. The first time she showed the work, in 1990, she exhibited it in a 16 x 20 inch format. A few years later, in 1993, she enlarged the work to 3 x 5 feet. By presenting her large body in a large format, she made the work more confrontational and dramatic. The use of large format prints was a breakthrough for Aguilar, as she found the larger size appropriate for her continuation of the nude self-portraits. *12 Lauras* of 1993 (fig. 80) repeated the emphasis on Aguilar's body but in a more direct way--in a carefully composed series of twelve photographs

⁴⁷ Aguilar discussed the origins of her nude self-portraits in *Laura Aguilar: Life, The Body, Her Perspective*, produced by Michael Stone, Chicano Cinema and Media Art Series 8, DVD (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2008).

arranged in a three by four grid. Each of the twelve photographs focuses on her nude upper torso, yet each is slightly different. While often looking directly at the camera, she caresses her breasts or plays with her hair, moving in and around the picture frame, seemingly shifting the focus of the camera to her head, neck, or breasts. The individual photographs were printed in the same large format--3 x 5 feet--with the intention that they would take up entire walls and galleries. It was a courageous act for Aguilar to make these prints of her body so big. Aguilar's increasing willingness to show her body was accompanied by a dramatic shift in scale, as she is encouraging the viewer to also become more accepting of her body.

Of course, Aguilar's body can be read as larger than "normal," as Ann Marie Rousseau noted in a review of Aguilar's 1999 exhibition: "Aguilar's impudent photographs direct our gaze into a world where a woman has gained a good deal more than five pounds. It is not that she is overweight. She is much more than that."⁴⁸ Rousseau struggled to explain just what Aguilar was--as if afraid to say the word fat. Critics often are unwilling to fully address Aguilar's weight, reflecting societal discomfort with fat bodies.⁴⁹ Rousseau continued:

She reclaims her body for herself. Art becomes a means of personal transformation. Hers may be a body as distorted and suffering (in terms of health) as the over-thin model, but it is her body, and she has found a way of using it to carve out space in the public arena for artistic discourse. That said, it is only because her body is at the extreme end of a continuum that we give these photographs a second glance.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ann Marie Rousseau, "The Empress Has No Clothes," review of Laura Aguilar, "Stillness and Motion," Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, March 8-April 8, 2000, A. M. Rousseau Art Photography <http://www.amrousseau.com/articles/photometro10.html> (accessed May 11, 2011).

⁴⁹ For society's discomfort with larger bodies, see Laura Fraser, *Losing It*; and LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?*.

⁵⁰ Rousseau, "The Empress Has No Clothes."

Thus, Rousseau made the case that these images are interesting only because Aguilar is not “thin” or “average,” unlike the women whose images are popular and commonplace in the mainstream media.

The visual impact of Aguilar’s photographs does result in part from her willingness to show the viewer a different kind of body. One of the few ways that the fat bodies appear in the mainstream media are as “headless fatties.” Fat activist Charlotte Cooper uses that term to describe the ambiguous bodies that often accompany news or magazine stories. For example, to illustrate a news piece on obesity or ill-fitting clothes, larger men and women are often shown headless--with their large bellies and behinds being the focus of the camera.⁵¹ *12 Lauras* defies this convention by showing her face along with her body. Moving across the frame of one of the photographs, Aguilar reaches up and grabs her hair. She turns to one side, then confronts the camera then moves around to the other side and even closes her eyes for a moment. In the last row of pictures, her head and torso are at the center of the photograph, as she grabs her breast or again reaches to touch her hair behind her head. Her touch borders on the erotic, and in the sexual caress of her hands over her breasts and stomach she hints at sensual pleasure. In this series, her body is intimately connected to her personality, identity and sexuality, so that she is able to refute the trope of the “headless fattie” and claim ownership over her body.

The series has a filmic quality, as if each photograph is a still from a film where Aguilar moves and fidgets while self-consciously touching her hair or her body. Indeed,

⁵¹ Charlotte Cooper, “Headless Fatties,” [charlottecooper.net](http://www.charlottecooper.net), January 2007, http://www.charlottecooper.net/docs/fat/headless_fatties.htm (accessed October 15, 2010).

at this moment in her career, Aguilar was exploring her body in film as well as photography. Her experimental 1996 videos *The Body* and *The Body 2* (each 7 minutes) essentially look like a moving version of *12 Lauras*.⁵² While touching her body, she talks about the pressures of being her size and about her position as an outcast from society. The films are filled with quick edits--one moment she appears clothed and then, after an abrupt cut, she is nude. The camera zooms in and out, focusing on various parts of her body: her breast, her nipple, her arm, her hand, her chest, her torso. The films allow a more visual, fluid exploration of her body while also providing an audio component in which Aguilar discusses her feelings concerning her physique.

One of the first anecdotes that Aguilar tells in *The Body* is how *In Sandy's Room* came to be. After printing the photograph, Aguilar sought validation from a male friend. She needed to feel that the photographs of her nude body were worth exploring and seeing. The video then cuts to a closeup of her torso, in profile, from the top of her breasts to just below her navel. After a pause and with the camera still on her torso, Aguilar sighs, and then begins to explain how it feels to live in her skin.

Well, this body is not the body one wants to promote or have, but it's the body I happen to be in. And I started feeling comfortable being nude and--seeing myself and accepting myself and, you know, it's comfortable, I mean--[playfully slaps stomach]. It's strange, but even though I'm overweight, and this is not something one wants to aspire to be [turns to face camera, stops at three-quarters]. There's a comfortableness that I have found within my own body, through doing my own work and photographing myself and other people nude. It's strange how it became. . . I try [turns her body to face camera fully] to work on my diet, and just trying to make my life and myself more healthy in every way. . . . The thing is I am comfortable with myself. I never thought I would be comfortable with myself. This is who I am today, and maybe this is who I will be tomorrow. Through my art, I've been able to find some comfort

⁵² These films are featured in *Laura Aguilar: Life, The Body, Her Perspective*.

and some peace within my own body through its sags and its stretch marks and its shapes.⁵³

Aguilar attempts to face her body--to look at it, to document it, to feel it, even to point out its imperfections. For Aguilar, the more she can talk about and photograph her body the more she allows herself to feel comfort with her body, regardless of its size.

Chon A. Noriega perceives this honest monologue, and in Aguilar's work as a whole as a *testimonio*. Developed in Cuba in the 1960s, the *testimonio* is a narrative that offers a person's position on a particular issue that became popular in Latin American communities.

[O]ne can situate the *testimonio* somewhere in the space between first- and third-person accounts of historical events. . . the *testimonio* places the speaking subject outside the theoretical binarism of the autonomous individual versus the decentered subject. Rather, the speaking subject initiates an "ethics of identity" that places him or her into direct relation with other people, albeit mediated through language.⁵⁴

Viewed as a *testimonio*, Aguilar's work creates a relationship between its autobiographically-minded artist and the viewer. So as to establish a community, the work functions, in Noriega's words, "not as something to be represented to an outside audience, but as a space within which to represent the self. . . . [C]ommunity becomes strategic, a necessary backdrop against which the self can be defined."⁵⁵ What these films suggest is that the process of the *testimonio* can be both personal and political,

⁵³ Laura Aguilar, *The Body*, video, 1996 (artist's collection).

⁵⁴ Chon A. Noriega, "Talking Heads, Body Politic: The Plural Self of Chicano Video," *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, ed. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 210. Regarding the *testimonio*, see also John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio (Testimonial Narrative)," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 11-28.

⁵⁵ Chon A. Noriega, "Laura Aguilar: Clothed Unclothed," *CSW Update: Newsletter of the UCLA Center for the Study of Women*, May 2008, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/0vw2z527> (accessed October 14, 2008).

enunciating an “ethics of identity” in which art mediates between the speaking subject and other people.

Drawing on the tradition of the “oral history,” historian John Beverly observed that people who use the form of the *testimonio* are frequently illiterate or struggle with their writing.⁵⁶ This characterization would apply to Aguilar, who is afflicted with dyslexia. Her writings and letters are often filled with apologies. She has admitted that it often takes her a long time to respond to people as she carefully crafts her prose, and she regrets her frequent misspellings and awkward phrasing.⁵⁷ She finds film an easier way to express herself. The concept of *testimonio* fits Aguilar’s straightforward approach, as she seeks to tell her story by speaking directly to the camera. Yet, the rough cuts and the many restarts that Aguilar included in the final versions emphasize her struggles, even when speaking, to articulate her thoughts. Jones commented on the way that Aguilar uses the medium to confront her personal challenges:

Aguilar appears both affirmed by the testimonial effects of the video and trapped by its rigid framing device. As she moves back and forth, in and out of the frame, she speaks of unspeakable things: her psychic pain, her art work and its therapeutic role, her alienation as a dyslexic whose body is overweight, and finally her desire to dissolve the boundary between life and death through suicide.⁵⁸

Aguilar’s poverty and repeated attempts to secure a job that included health insurance were constant concerns for her throughout the 1990s.⁵⁹ Over the years, her

⁵⁶ Beverly, “The Margin at the Center,” 15.

⁵⁷ Aguilar, [Statement], July 5, 1983, box 2, folder 2; Aguilar to Suda House, undated [1980], box 2, folder 2; and Aguilar to Jim Goldberg, May 8, 1987, box 1, folder 5; Laura Aguilar Papers.

⁵⁸ Jones, “Bodies and Subjects in the Technologized Self-Portrait,” 210.

⁵⁹ Aguilar to Pat Martel, October 5, 1992, box 1, folder 7, Laura Aguilar Papers.

dissatisfaction with her body was also a key source of her depression.⁶⁰ One of the ways she dealt with these issues, besides medication, was to confront them in her art. In *The Body II*, she brings up the idea that she should be ashamed of her body. While she reveals her beliefs regarding what society must think about her body, she ends that section with the bold statement: “I don’t care what people think of me.” She continues later:

I am a large woman. And I’m not supposed to be comfortable with myself. You pick that up in society--how dare I be comfortable? I’m not jumping for joy. Please. I don’t want you to think that I’m jumping for joy because I’m overweight. Being overweight has caused a lot of pain in my life. And, but, I can’t hate myself for everything. And there has come some sort of peace and acceptance and hopefully my body will change--hopefully not any bigger. For the time being this is the body I have, and I am comfortable. But you know, you aren’t supposed to be comfortable in this society. . . . I wonder what people think about me putting my images up on the wall in the gallery. I don’t have the answer to the question, I just wonder constantly.⁶¹

Aguilar is able to use the *testimonio* format to break from traditional modes of expression and to confront her concerns regarding her body. Her repeated insistence that she is comfortable with her body also acts as a reassurance to Aguilar herself. She is confirming to, or even convincing, herself that, yes, she is or can be comfortable with her body.

In a 2005 interview, she again brought up her growing acceptance of her body size.⁶² Though throughout the 1996 film Aguilar consistently repeated the mantra that she is comfortable with her body, that comfort would be much more evident later, in her works from the 2000s, as demonstrated by behind-the-scenes footage of Aguilar’s work

⁶⁰ See her short films, *The Body* and *Talking about Depression*, in *Laura Aguilar: Life, The Body, Her Perspective*.

⁶¹ *The Body* and *The Body 2*, in *Laura Aguilar: Life, The Body, Her Perspective*.

⁶² Laura Aguilar, interview by Jennifer Sernad, Joshua State Park, California, 2005, in *Laura Aguilar: Life, The Body, Her Perspective*.

on the series *Grounded* (2005-6).⁶³ She and an assistant planned the images by taking a number of preparatory photographs. Aguilar takes off her clothing and positions herself in various rock formations. She moves around freely without any hesitation and possesses a self-assuredness in dealing with her body that does not appear in the earlier films. These later photographs showcase Aguilar's body amongst various natural elements, a motif she began working on in the mid-1990s. In this theme, she was influenced by the work of Judy Dater, whose workshop Aguilar attended in 1991.⁶⁴ In Dater's *Self-Portrait with Stone* of 1981 (fig. 81), she is curled into a fetal position amidst rocks in a deserted landscape. The viewer can see her back only, which stands out because of the difference in textures between her soft skin and the rough ground. This photograph became an inspiration for Aguilar, who decided to position her body in a similar manner in the desert.⁶⁵

Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait 2* (also called *Her Spirit Moves Me, A Homage to Judy Dater*) of 1996 (fig. 82) entails a composition similar to that of Dater's *Self-Portrait*, but Aguilar has altered Dater's viewpoint: the horizon line and the endless sky are no longer visible. Instead, Aguilar focused more on the ground and a view of her body from above. Aguilar tried to position her body in the same pose as Dater, yet she could not be quite as compact. She joked that it was the "closest I could get to the fetal

⁶³ "The Photographer Laura Aguilar is her Own Model," Joshua State Park, 2005, in *Laura Aguilar: Life, The Body, Her Perspective*.

⁶⁴ Luz Calvo, "Laura Aguilar Biography," *Latinos in America*, <http://www.jrank.org/cultures/pages/3578/Laura-Aguilar.html> (accessed May 10, 2010).

⁶⁵ Aguilar discusses this in a lecture presented at Stanford University in 2005, as seen in *Laura Aguilar: Life, The Body, Her Perspective*.

position.”⁶⁶ Just as Aguilar’s body is more substantial than Dater’s, the rocks also are larger and more prominent. Everything is oversized in Aguilar’s work, as if her large body requires more ground and bigger rocks.

Nature Self-Portrait 2 was taken as Aguilar was on her way to New Mexico with friends to attend a memorial for her childhood friend Gil Cuadros (1962-1996), a prominent writer and activist who had just died from AIDS. The trip was a chance for Aguilar to try to recover from her loss, but she also used it to seek out inspiration for new subjects. Prior to Cuadros’s death, Aguilar had been working in series, making self-portraits and photographs of Latina lesbians, biracial couples, and societal outcasts. After his death, Aguilar lost interest in that body of work. The desert scenery on the trip to New Mexico inspired Aguilar to revisit self-portraiture. The landscape reminded her of childhood hiking and fishing trips she had taken with her grandmother and her father in California.⁶⁷ For her grandmother and for Aguilar herself, these sojourns were tantamount to religious experiences. Aguilar remembers her grandmother saying, “Where you are, that’s where you are worshipping God.”⁶⁸

Aguilar’s self-portraits in landscapes are imbued with a personal spirituality. These quiet moments represent Aguilar’s search for peace and tranquility, particularly after the trauma she went through when her Cuadros died. Throughout the series, she appears alone and isolated amidst the endless desert. The scenes move from different rock formations to areas near water to spaces framed by dried branches. The softness of her body and flesh separates her from her surroundings, yet Aguilar often uses her body

⁶⁶ See Stanford University Lecture. See also Bill Smith, “The Natural: Laura Aguilar, in the Flesh,” *LA Weekly*, January 9, 2003.

⁶⁷ Stanford University lecture.

⁶⁸ Smith, “The Natural.”

to mirror the curves of the rocks or the ground. Writing in the catalogue for Aguilar's 1998 show at Fundación "La Caixa," Berta Sichel elaborated, "her form is enhanced by the mimetic relationship it establishes with the arid environment she has chosen as a backdrop. In this desert-like land, her body is reminiscent of a large piece of rugged rock. It also suggests something not totally identifiable, possibly belonging to the animal kingdom that has been turned upside down."⁶⁹ In Dater's photograph, the body stands out from the landscape; by contrast, Aguilar's photograph focuses on the relationship of her body to the natural forms.

Women, as a gender, have frequently been tied to nature. Sociologist Sherry Ortner, for one, pointed out in 1974 that conventionally speaking, a "woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, 'artificially,' through the medium of technology and symbols."⁷⁰ By situating her body amidst rocks as if it were a part of the landscape, Aguilar effectively alluded to such conventions, yet at the same time she assumed the 'male' role of creative agent.

In many of the photographs of the *Nature* series of 1996, such as *Nature Self-Portrait 6* and *Nature Self-Portrait 10* (figs. 83, 84), Aguilar lay down on a gently curved plateau, allowing the subtle curves of her body to evoke the subtle undulation of the landscape. In another photograph using the same rock formation, her hair dangles above the water as she lies on her stomach. In a number of images, such as *Nature Self-Portrait*

⁶⁹ Berta Sichel, "Laura Aguilar: Why Do We Look at Her?," in *Laura Aguilar* (Barcelona: Fundacio La Caixa, 1998), 38.

⁷⁰ Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?," in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974): 75.

14 (fig. 85), she incorporates her reflection in water, recalling the myth of Narcissus. In Greek mythology, Narcissus' beauty was spectacular but his relationships with women were troubled. After a scorned lover prayed to the gods asking that Narcissus love himself in the way others had loved him, Narcissus became so completely infatuated with his own image reflected in the water that eventually it killed him.⁷¹

Like Narcissus, Aguilar positions herself around bodies of water so that her reflection is visible. In *Nature Self-portrait 14* (1996), she looks at her reflection with her hand poised just above the water, as if testing the falseness of her mirror image. Other photographs, including *Nature Self-portrait 6* and *Nature Self-portrait 10* (both of 1996), show Aguilar with her back to the water, as she denies herself the privilege of seeing her body. The transgressive nature of Aguilar's images lies in her defiance of the commonly held belief that fat bodies are not fit subjects for works of modern and contemporary art. By forcing the comparison between her own body and the legendary beauty of Narcissus, however, Aguilar brings up that bias by defying the viewer's expectation and focusing on her nonconformist body. Whereas Narcissus is supposed to be the embodiment of attractiveness, Aguilar presents her larger body in contrast to the barren landscape. Like the fascination that Narcissus has with himself in the mirror, the viewer can be just as interested in the juxtaposition of Aguilar's body and the desert.

Aguilar continued to explore the theme of her body in nature in her series *Stillness* (1996-99), *Motion* (1999), and *Center* (2001), though in these works, her face is rarely visible. Many times her hair is draped over her face; other times her back is turned to the viewer, obscuring her identity. She is not being bashful or hiding; rather Aguilar is intent

⁷¹ Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (1942; reprint, New York: Penguin Group, 1969): 87-88.

on making herself more universal, standing in for other women who might relate to her size, her sexuality or even her race. In other photographs (fig. 86), she is accompanied by women of different shapes and sizes, as if bringing to life the popular “Health of Every Size” program that developed in the 1990s at the University of California, Davis by nutritionist Linda Bacon.⁷² By including her nude body with others of different sizes, she encourages a widening of society’s acceptable body types. As Berta Sichel emphasized, “Ambiguity is key to the image’s beauty, for by exposing her body and emphasizing the otherness of her own form, Aguilar creates a visionary dialectic bent on transforming conventional concepts of attractiveness.”⁷³

In photographs like *Stillness 26* of 1996 (fig. 86), *Motion 58* (fig. 87), and *Motion 59* of 1999 (fig. 88), multiple women are seen posing together, sometimes supporting one another. In *Stillness 26*, Aguilar and a model hold a sheer piece of fabric between them, letting the cloth catch the wind. In *Motion 59*, Aguilar’s body forms a bridge between two women who fold their bodies on top of her. The three women are physically connected to each other, and it becomes complicated to separate one woman from the next. In *Motion 58*, Aguilar and another woman are lying down as another two women are propped up against branches, their bodies loosely overlapping and touching one another. The suggestion of community in these photographs speaks to the larger need for the fat woman to find an integrated place in society, as well as moral support from other women.

⁷² For more, see Deb Burgard, “What is ‘Health at Every Size’?,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009); and Bacon, *Health at Every Size*.

⁷³ Sichel, “Laura Aguilar,” 38.

It is noteworthy that, as Aguilar and others were exploring fat acceptance through photography in the early 1990s, fat women were becoming increasingly visible and accepted in television and film. The actress Ricki Lake made her film debut in 1988 in the popular John Waters movie *Hairspray*, as a precocious, bubbly teenager who landed a spot on a popular television dance show despite her fatness. The role was intended as inspirational, as a young woman overcame the odds stacked against her because of her body size. Yet, the film also reinforced stereotypes about body size, as her physique (and her mother's) was frequently the butt of jokes. While her role in *Hairspray* led to other starring film and television roles, Ricki Lake lost 125 pounds in 1993-4 in the hope of becoming even more successful.⁷⁴ At the same time, in 1993, the thinner Lake became the host of her own syndicated talk show. Her weight loss was a source of pride that was just as important as her new television show, according to a *People* magazine report of November 1994. Next to a picture of her new, thinner self, the title proclaimed "Ricki Lake: She's slim (after dropping 125 pounds), she's sassy and, at 26, she has the hottest talk show on TV. (Are you listening, Oprah?)" Yet, like Oprah's and many other dieters, Lake's weight loss was not permanent.

Similarly, Delta Burke, who starred in *Designing Women* (1986-1991), and Roseanne Barr, the star of *Roseanne* (1988-1997), were both full-figured women, whose weight fluctuations were often a subject of the shows' humor. A 1991 *People* article, "For Delta, Roseanne and TV's Other Big Talents, Heavy Means High Ratings," revealed that the stars were constantly subjected to comments about their weight.⁷⁵ In 1990, Burke

⁷⁴ Peter Castro, "Ricki on the Rise," *People*, November 21, 1994, 114-19.

⁷⁵ Marjorie Rosen et al., "For Delta, Roseanne, and TV's Other Big Talents, Heavy Means High Ratings," *People*, January 14, 1991, 86-90.

won her first Emmy for a *Designing Women* episode that dealt with her weight gain; it was ironically entitled “They Shoot Fat Women, Don’t They?” *Roseanne* presented a different side to larger women and men. Barr is outspoken about her acceptance of her weight, as Kathleen K. Rowe has noted: “Concerning her fatness, she resists the culture’s efforts to define and judge her by her weight. Publicly celebrating the libidinal pleasure of food, she argues that women need to take up more space in the world, not less.”⁷⁶ Moreover, Roseanne and her husband Dan were both fat, but were nonetheless vibrant characters engaged in a tender and loving relationship. Burke’s and Barr’s bodies challenged the traditional ways that women had been depicted on television.

Following the popularity of *Designing Women* and *Roseanne* emerged a short-lived sitcom, *Babes*, that ran on the Fox television network for one season (1990-1991). The show focused on the close relationship of three sisters who shared a small apartment. *Babes* was received positively, though hesitantly, because of its handling of fatness, as the writers definitely used the size of the women as a source for comic relief and for sight gags.⁷⁷ In the first episode, the three sisters are settling into their miniscule New York City studio apartment, where they must share the sofa bed. At the end of the show, the bed breaks just as they get comfortably situated, sending all of them crashing to the floor as the women erupt into laughter. As much as their size might be laughable, these women seemed to be in on the joke and were willing to embrace it. Additionally, Fox presented these women as beautiful and desirable. As Jane Feuer articulated, “The three women are

⁷⁶ Kathleen K. Rowe, “Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess,” in *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, ed. Charlotte Brunson, Julie D’Acci, and Lynn Spigel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 80.

⁷⁷ Jane Feuer, “Averting the Male Gaze: Visual Pleasure and Images of Fat Women,” in *Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays*, ed. Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 192-96.

represented as beauty objects with their glamorous clothes. The show provides access to visual pleasure based in the adorned fat body, a pleasure that is legible despite the narrative context of a vulgar Fox sitcom or perhaps because of it--one can shut out the crude sitcom framework even if one finds it offensive."⁷⁸ Without the fat liberation movement and the increasing popularity of larger-sized actors like Barr, Feuer posited, the radical, and frequently challenging show *Babes* would never have aired. Moreover, *Babes'* premise hinged on the bonding of the three sisters. The women supported one another, supplying housing when one got divorced, helping find employment when needed, and generally providing a shoulder to cry on. Mutual support, such as was shown in *Babes*, was a key element within fat acceptance groups as well.

Evidence of fat women morally supporting other fat women factors in the later photographs of Laura Aguilar and is also a theme in *Women En Large*. In a series of photographs from 2006, Ariane Lopez-Huici (b. 1945) explores a similar subject in her approach to nude women. Her studio-based photography often focuses on people who are uncommon subjects in the art world, not just fat women but also handicapped dancers and models who have undergone amputations. In *Rebelles* of 2006 (figs. 89, 90), Lopez-Huici focused on a grouping of women touching and connecting with one another in a manner reminiscent of the women in Aguilar's photographs. In her characteristic style, Lopez-Huici positioned the women against a black backdrop in a simple studio setting. Whereas Aguilar's and her models' faces are often hidden or turned away from the camera, Lopez-Huici's models either look at one another or towards the camera and the viewer. Between their subjects' nudity and the way the women touch and embrace one

⁷⁸ Jane Feuer, "Averting the Male Gaze," 195.

another, Aguilar and Lopez-Huici create photographs with significant lesbian undertones.⁷⁹ The sensuality of the touch and the interest in the flesh, coupled with the way the women interact with one another (more evident in Lopez-Huici's work), adds to the potential desirability of these women. In appearing to locate their subjects as potential sexual partners for the other women in their photograph, the artists move away from the more straightforward depictions of fat women in the *Women En Large* images to photographs that engage the art historical tradition of painting women as beautiful, sexual objects on display.

Much like Aguilar, Lopez-Huici used the simplicity of black-and-white photography to draw attention to the women's bodies by emphasizing the highlights and the shadows of the folds of the flesh. In the *Rebelles* series, the four white women wrap their arms around one another in poses that suggest women engaging with and relating to one another. In one grouping, the women are posed on various levels, from sitting on the ground or in a chair to standing straight up or leaning. Turned at different angles, the models show us all sides of the female body, in a manner reminiscent, say, of the composition of the figures in Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *The Large Bathers* (1887; The Philadelphia Museum of Art). In fact, Lopez-Huici used works by artists such as Renoir, Michelangelo, and Peter Paul Rubens as inspiration for both her and her models.⁸⁰ Showcasing the way the women's skin wrinkles and puckers, while also showing them

⁷⁹ Because of Aguilar's own sexuality, the role of lesbianism in her photography is significant, and should not be understated. For a thorough discussion of these issues, see Stefanie Snider, "Envisioning Bodily Difference: Refiguring Fat and Lesbian Subjects in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture, 1968-2009" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2010)."

⁸⁰ Ariane Lopez-Huici, interview by author, New York, NY, April 23, 2010; also discussed in *The Body Close Up*, directed by Marilia Destot, unreleased, 2008 (collection of Ariane Lopez-Huici).

women physically interacting, Lopez-Huici casts the women's forms as desirable and attractive, Rubensian bodies at a time when such a model of female pulchritude had long since fallen out of favor, notwithstanding the increase in fatness in contemporary society.

Beginning in the 1990s, Lopez-Huici developed a consistent body of work that is almost exclusively studio-based, and often relates to cinematic moments. The studio setting reflects her early background in film: Lopez-Huici had traveled extensively as she pursued her artistic studies and worked as an assistant to a filmmaker.⁸¹ Controlling the environment and using only minimal props, she allows the camera lens to focus centrally on her subjects. Against the dark backdrops, the nude bodies present vibrant surfaces for light to reveal and shadows to pool. Her models' poses vary from moving and dramatic to still and pensive. Eliminating distractions, Lopez-Huici draws the viewer into a visual exploration of these bodies.

Lopez-Huici's models often begin as acquaintances, but in the process of creating photographs together, they become her friends. Lopez-Huici feels that this close relationship is necessary: by building a sense of trust and comfort with her models, she can get the pictures that she desires.⁸² One of her most popular models, Aviva Stone, had been a model for art classes and professional artists throughout New York City, but had rarely, if ever, posed for photographers.⁸³ Other models had similar stories. The fact that Stone and others agreed to pose for extremely intimate photos by Lopez-Huici shows their support for her work.

⁸¹ Brooks Adams, "The Camera and the Flesh," *Art in America* 93, no. 2 (February 2005): 61; and Lopez-Huici, interview.

⁸² Lopez-Huici, interview.

⁸³ Lopez-Huici, interview.

Stone had begun modeling in the 1970s when she was a dancer and in excellent shape. By the 1990s, she had gained weight and was not modeling as frequently, yet was approached to pose for a SoHo drawing group. "They just loved my butt. What can I tell you? They just went crazy. It is a pretty solid butt. . . . They were totally happy, and that was the beginning. Suddenly, the girth was welcomed. I mean, you are in a society where everyone is telling you, take it off. Now my friends are telling me, you have a career. Get to the heavy cream."⁸⁴ When Stone embraced her larger size, her career as a model was successfully revived. Preferring to pose for artists who worked in painting and drawing, Stone rarely posed for photographs, so her relationship with Lopez-Huici was quite an anomaly.⁸⁵

In discussing Lopez-Huici's work, critics and scholars frequently focus on the difference in size between the photographer and her model. Lopez-Huici is a rather petite woman, and she is frequently asked about this contrast. She responds:

Why? I'm small and petite and Aviva, Dalila and Holly are Rubensian. In creative work there are many unknowns, for me at any rate. If I knew the answer, I wouldn't take photographs. The choice of models depends on many circumstances: encounters, desire, the potential that attracts and intrigues you, the transcending of established norms, the trust that you create in order to persuade someone to pose. It's the irreducible mystery of my models that I photograph. These models are heroes of our time. With their talent, strength and courage they help to enlarge our emotional and visual field. Their beauty comes from the poetry of their imperfections.⁸⁶

For Lopez-Huici, her models can occupy a space that she cannot. The discrepancy in size between Lopez-Huici and her models positions Lopez-Huici very differently than

⁸⁴ Jeffrey Hogrefe, "Wet Dreams at Auction; The 200-Pound Supermodel," *New York Observer*, March 22, 1998.

⁸⁵ Lopez-Huici, interview.

⁸⁶ Ariane Lopez-Huici and Joan Ramon Escrivà, *Ariane Lopez-Huici* (Valencia, Spain: Generalitat Valenciana, 2004), 20.

Aguilar. Regardless of how she depicts and engages with her models, Lopez-Huici is always an outsider with respect to her fat models.

Before Aviva Stone appeared in *Rebelles*, she posed for a number of individual portraits, each titled simply *Aviva* (1996). In one example (fig. 91), Stone lies on a chaise covered with a white cloth. The background is completely black, and this darkness is repeated in the small black pillow that rests under her arm. Lying across the couch and meeting the photographer--and so the viewer's--gaze, she is at once defiant and confrontational. Stone asserts that she is a woman in command of her body. In the pose and assertive gaze, the image loosely resembles Edouard Manet's famous *Olympia* (1863; Musée d'Orsay), as well as some other nineteenth century odalisques, as Carter Ratcliff has pointed out: "[Stone's] poses conform to the artifice of that motif: on elegantly arranged bedclothes, a naked woman assumes languorously horizontal postures. Yet she is not an odalisque because, to speak bluntly, she is too fat. Her bulk makes it impossible for her to squeeze into the image of ideal female beauty."⁸⁷ As Ratcliff articulates, Stone does not conform to the expectations of beauty associated with the odalisque.

The *Dalila Khatir* series of 2002 (figs. 93-95), like the *Aviva* works (figs. 91, 92), are studio photographs of a solitary woman who does not conform to contemporary ideals. Born in France of Algerian descent, Khatir is a popular singer and dancer, known for performances in a costume with many veils. Because Khatir is a Muslim, she believed that it was wrong to show or display her nude body in public. After Lopez-Huici asked

⁸⁷ Carter Ratcliff, "Beyond Athens and Eden: The Art of Ariane Lopez-Huici," in *Ariane Lopez-Huici: Visions d'excès*, ed. Guy Tosatto (Grenoble: Actes Sud/Musée de Grenoble, 2004)
http://www.kirili.com/lopezhuici/textes/2004_Carter%20Ratcliff_Beyond%20Athens%20and%20Eden_MuseeGrenoble_E.pdf, (accessed February 1, 2008), 5.

her to model, she and Khatir built a relationship over the course of several days.⁸⁸ Lopez-Huici allowed Khatir to review the images, and promised not to use anything that Khatir did not approve.⁸⁹ Once she felt comfortable, Khatir was more willing to explore her nudity, using the opportunity to capture the movement and life of her dance moves in photography. Yet Lopez-Huici acknowledged that these are photographs are risky. “I know that Dalila could be severely punished under Koranic law for posing nude; never for a moment do I forget her tremendous strength of character.”⁹⁰

The works, particularly when viewed as a series, emphasize the movement of Khatir as a dancer. In one work, she commands the scene as she pauses to cover her breasts, then she appears regal while raising her arms in exaltation in another photograph. Furthermore, she displays a wide variety of facial expressions varying from joy to surprise to contemplation. In these photographs, Lopez-Huici used extremely dramatic lighting, reflecting Khatir’s stage career. Part of her body is illuminated in a bright light, while the rest of the body is hidden in the shadows. Heightening the performance-like quality of the work, Lopez-Huici wanted the dramatic lighting to allude to the mystery and the rebellion of the Muslim Khatir.⁹¹

In one photograph (fig. 95), Khatir is seated on a rough hardwood floor, her back to the camera and her legs covered by a blanket loosely draped around her waist. Her hair is covered with a scarf wrapped around her head and knotted at the nape of her neck. She

⁸⁸ Ariane Lopez-Huici, interview.

⁸⁹ Edmund White, “The Sacred Monsters of Ariane Lopez Huici,” in Lopez-Huici and Escrivà, *Ariane Lopez-Huici*, 37.

⁹⁰ White, “Sacred Monsters,” 37.

⁹¹ Lopez-Huici, interview.

looks off into the distance at an angle, so that her face is scarcely visible. The pose feels familiar, as Brooks Adams has articulated:

A static shot of her. . . has something of the art-historical charade to it, punning as it does on the precedents of Ingres's and Man Ray's odalisques. . . . The full expanse of her back suggests a gigantic fruit or pepper, a la Edward Weston, but the textures of her wrapped head, the nubbinness of the striped towel swathing her lower body in a sharp black arc shape and all the scratchy particularities of the floorboards on which she sits bring the depicted scene back down to earth in the bohemian here and now.⁹²

In connecting Lopez-Huici's image to those by more famous artists, Adams elevated the status of her work, while implicitly comparing Khatir's fat body, with its folds and imperfections, to the thinner women in the sexualized images of Man Ray or Weston. At the same time, Adams noted that Khatir's body looks like a "gigantic fruit or pepper"--not just an ordinary object or women to be consumed, but a woman whose weight is her defining characteristic.

The photographs of Khatir standing from 2002 (fig. 93, 94) like those of Stone standing from 1994, both exude a regalness that derives from the women's postures as well as from the low camera angle. Yet Khatir's body is more in shadow, which, coupled with her turban-wrapped hair. Through the photographic series, Lopez-Huici is slowly revealing to the viewer Khatir's body. By using scarves and shadows, Lopez-Huici cautiously shows us Khatir's back, side, and breasts, as if recalling her performances but also her hesitancy to show her body because of her religious beliefs. On the other hand, Stone's body is illuminated clearly by bold, direct lighting, which gives a clear view of her body. Despite their similar nude bodies and dark backdrops, these photographs also speak to the different personalities of the sitters. Khatir's shyness is coupled with her

⁹² Adams, "The Camera and the Flesh," 61.

talented dancing, while the photographs of Stone recall her confidence as a seasoned model.

Both women reappear in Lopez-Huici's *Triumph* series of 2007 (figs. 96, 97), images which might again invite loose comparisons with paintings by Rubens or Renoir, such as the latter's 1918-1919 *Bathers* (fig. 98), where two women lie in the foreground of a lush landscape. Renoir provides the viewer with different perspectives on the female body, as the foremost woman's breasts are prominently displayed whereas the second woman's breasts are mostly covered, but the sensual outline of her hip is emphasized. In the background, three women are bathing in the river, each in a distinct pose. Renoir seeks to compare woman to the lush vegetation and natural world, which might be seen as a form of resistance to increasing feminist demands in the late nineteenth century.⁹³ Through his idealized woman in nature, Renoir displays his reluctance to embrace the modern woman.⁹⁴ Stripped of all props, Lopez-Huici's photographs show only the four bodies in front of a simple black background, which, in turn, draws the viewer's attention back to the women and their bodies. The high contrast between the skin and the backdrop heightens the poses, each of which, as in Renoir's composition, emphasize different parts of a woman's body allowing for a dynamic group portrait. Lopez-Huici challenges Renoir's idealized bodies trapped in the natural world by replacing them with images of real women.

⁹³ In particular, Renoir resisted the advancements of women in the professional world, as he spoke out against women writers, lawyers, and politicians. In numerous letters, Renoir expressed his desire for women to stay in the domestic realm and maintain the home. Tamar Garb, "Renoir and the Natural Woman," *Oxford Art Journal* 8, no. 2 (1985): 6-8.

⁹⁴ Garb, "Renoir and the Natural Woman," 3-15.

In the *Triumph* series, four women smile and smirk at the camera, while also engaging with one another or touching one another. In two of the works, models raise their arms in exhilaration. As in the solo views of Aviva, they appear confident and, by contrast with the quieter *Rebelle* works, seem to be jubilating and exalting in their flesh. As John Wood has suggested, “[Lopez-Huici] confronts us with fat, assaults us with the immensities of flesh and forces us to look and look again. . . . We will have seen so much of the body’s muchness laid out before us like sculpture that our prejudice begins to abate.”⁹⁵ Like many supporters of Lopez-Huici, Wood rightly reads her work as challenging cultural norms of beauty.

Lopez-Huici’s studio-type photography might recall the procedures of the early and immediately popular photographic studios that arose in the mid-nineteenth century. At a time when photography necessitated long exposure times and bright lighting, the portraits were often taken in carefully arranged spaces, with simple backdrops and props.⁹⁶ Lopez-Huici’s work uses the studio setting to draw attention to and focus on the flesh of Khatir, Stone and others.

Leonard Nimoy (b. 1931) also often uses an austere setting in his photographic figure studies, likewise allowing the shape of the nude form to be the entire focus of the photograph, as in his *Full Body Project* (2007). This set of photographs includes a series of images of large, middle-aged women. Originally exhibited in various groups, the photographs were eventually published together in 2007. His previous works, including

⁹⁵ John Wood, “Ariane Lopez-Huici: Monumental Beauty,” http://www.kirili.com/lopezhuici/textes/2004_John%20Wood_Monumental%20Beauty_E.pdf (accessed February 12, 2010), 2.

⁹⁶ For more detail on this development, see Roger Hargreaves and Peter Hamilton, *Beautiful and the Damned: The Creation of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Photography* (London: Lund Humphries, 2001).

the *Shekhina* series (begun in the mid-1990s, published 2001) and a series called *Classic Nudes* (n.d.), depicted conventionally beautiful and thin models. Nimoy began the *The Full Body Project* in 2000 after being approached at a *Shekhina* exhibition by an unconventionally sized model, who suggested that Nimoy expand his range of subjects.⁹⁷ He agreed to photograph her, but he later expressed discomfort dealing with the larger woman during the photo shoot: “I was concerned how to photograph this kind of figure because I simply was not used to it. I shot her in black-and-white. I was quite satisfied with what I got, because I thought she looked like a marble sculpture in black-and-white.”⁹⁸ After he photographed this initial fat model, Nimoy continued to seek out larger women.

Nimoy had been engaged in photography for over thirty years, as a side project to his more prominent acting and directing careers. His early works--mainly nudes, slender dancers, and landscapes--were more or less studies in the medium. In 2001, however, he published a group of untitled photographs that attempted to explore the physical embodiment of the Old Testament spiritual figure Shekhina (fig. 99). Originally, Shekhina meant the physical presence of God in the earthly world, though the term evolved to signify a female counterpart to God who could represent and argue for humanity. In Nimoy’s photographs, a dark-haired model wears flowing robes and moves amidst simple forms and landscapes. This Biblical subject matter, including glamorous

⁹⁷ This model is not identified by Nimoy in the book or in interviews, as she is no longer in touch with the photographer; Leonard Nimoy, telephone interview by author, July 15, 2010.

⁹⁸ Nicole Pasulka, “Live Large and Prosper,” *Salon.com*, December 12, 2007, http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2007/12/12/leonard_nimoy/print.html (accessed March 4, 2009).

almost-nude women, was fairly controversial because women were often segregated and secondarized in traditional Judaism and often segregated.⁹⁹

Moving from *Shekhina* to photographs of much larger models presented a dramatic change in subject matter for Nimoy. His anxiety about the project led to his solution to treat his model's body like a sculpture or an "artform" (figs. 100-02).¹⁰⁰ The model was surrounded entirely by black props--from the couch and cushions, to the backdrop, to the scarf that covered various parts of her body. The first image of this model in the book (*Sphinx #1*) renders her sphinx-like, in a profile pose, lying on her stomach, and propped up on her elbows.¹⁰¹ In another photograph (*Sphinx #2*), we see the reclining model from the back. Drapery, wrapped around her head, gently traces the curve of her back and, wrapped around her legs, cuts them off just above her knee. The scarf thus creates a bizarre sectioning of the body, as we see the model's torso and upper thighs, but not her legs, hair, or the top of her head. We do see the folds of her body, the ripples of her skin, and her flesh as gravity pulls it toward the couch. As Nimoy has discussed, he worked hard to achieve a level of comfort for both the model and himself.¹⁰² His wife, Susan Bay, assisted at the photo shoot, directing the model's poses and generally trying to ease Nimoy's working process.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ For more on this series, see Donald B. Kuspit, "The Gnostic Nude: Leonard Nimoy's Photographs," in Leonard Nimoy, ed. *Shekhina* (New York: Umbrage, 2002), 90-91.

¹⁰⁰ Abby Ellin, "Girth and Nudity, a Pictorial Mission," *New York Times*, May 13, 2007.

¹⁰¹ As published in the book, none of the photographs are given titles. I am using the titles given on the website of Nimoy's dealer, R. Michelson Galleries, Northampton, Massachusetts, http://www.rmichelson.com/Artist_Pages/Nimoy/pages/MaxBeaut.htm (accessed September 1, 2010).

¹⁰² Ellin, "Girth and Nudity."

¹⁰³ Despite her contributions on the set, Nimoy does not consider Bay a collaborator. Rather, she is an assistant while Nimoy is attributed as the sole artist. Pasulka, "Live Large and Prosper."

Other images of the same model show her in a variety of positions, including a reclining pose in which she is rotated to face the camera. The position of the cloth shifts in the various poses. In one photograph it covers her legs. In two others, the fabric drapes across her neck, separating her head from her body isolating the fleshy torso. In a way, the use of the cloth to focus the viewer's attention on specific parts of the human form could be compared to the uses of drapery in Greek and Roman art, for example. But this group of photographs is more surrealist than classical, recalling the fragmenting of the body in certain photographs by Man Ray or Brassai. For example, in Man Ray's 1934 photograph *Minotaur* (fig. 103) the head of the female is conspicuously absent, and the limbs fade into the shadows. Nimoy's draping is less subtle, and seems to hide parts of the body while still acknowledging their presence.

The disconcerting effect of Nimoy's is to visually chop the model into pieces. In that respect, these images might be said to have a violent aspect. Whereas Aguilar determines her own poses and Lopez-Huici attempts to collaborate with her models, Nimoy's discomfort with the situation becomes apparent as he uses the scarf to fragment his model's body. While he might want to compare her to broken Greek sculptures, cutting off her head and limbs undercuts her identity and humanity. These awkward, violent acts to his model lack the vitality and life that Aguilar and Lopez-Huici's models, Stone and Khatir, embody.

Despite the cloth covering parts of her figure in this series, Nimoy often highlights her face, so that the woman maintains her individuality. All her dimples and scars are displayed, as are the movement and the folds of her flesh. Writer and fat activist Marilyn Wann elaborates: "I think the photographs in this book tell us that we're looking

at some quite specific people. These are very real people. Their exuberance and their sense of life comes off the page.”¹⁰⁴ This uniqueness of the body and the movement and spirit Nimoy captures is even more evident in his group photographs. After creating the *Sphinx* photographs, he reached out to Heather MacAllister (1968-2007), the founder of the theatrical production company Big Burlesque and the touring branch Fat-Bottom Revue, which were composed of fat activists and artists.¹⁰⁵ Nimoy had specific ideas in mind for his potential subjects, and sent the group reproductions of photographs by Herb Ritts (1952-2002) and Helmut Newton (1920-2004), as well as paintings by Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). Using these works as inspiration, he recreated the poses and gestures of for instance, Ritts’s supermodels with the women of the burlesque group.

Founded in 2002, this popular burlesque group was the first to be composed of women of all sizes. The group’s success extended beyond the bay area as they traveled across the U.S. and Canada. Big Burlesque and Fat-Bottom Revue gained notoriety and success as a dance troupe through their humor and charm, while relying on their larger bodies to defy the notion that burlesque dancers must be thin.¹⁰⁶ Just because they were larger than most dancers did not mean they could not be beautiful or dance well, and their talents were evident in Nimoy’s photographs. In one work, which recalls Ritts’s famous group photograph of popular 1980s supermodels entitled *Stephanie, Cindy, Christy,*

¹⁰⁴ Marilyn Wann, “Full On With Leonard Nimoy,” *SMITH Magazine*, December 1, 2007, <http://www.smithmag.net/2007/12/01/full-on-with-leonard-nimoy/> (accessed June 22, 2010).

¹⁰⁵ Ellin, “Girth and Nudity.”

¹⁰⁶ For more information on Heather MacAllister and Big Burlesque, see Heather MacAllister, *Big Burlesque*, 2002-2008, <http://www.bigburlesque.com/> (accessed March 16, 2011) and Snider, “Envisioning Bodily Difference,” 251-260.

Tatjana, Naomi, Hollywood of 1989 (fig. 104), Nimoy seated the women together intertwined on a hardwood floor (fig. 105). Nimoy's women mimic the composition that Ritts used, but no longer are bones and ribs visible; rather, the concave forms of his models' backs are replaced by fuller bodies with folds, tattoos, and piercings. These women not only do not match the physiques of the supermodels, but they also are marked in a way that was uncommon in the modeling industry.¹⁰⁷

More than Aguilar and Lopez-Huici, Nimoy presents larger women in a manner that opens them up to being described unconventional or on the margins of society because of their tattoos and piercings. Nimoy, however, by choosing to focus on women from the Big Burlesque group is benefiting from their celebration of fat women. By the nature of her advocacy, Heather MacAllister, who is at the top and center of the pyramid of women in Nimoy's photograph, did much for promoting the beauty of women of all shapes. As she told Nimoy, "Any time a fat person gets on a stage to perform and is not the butt of a joke--that's a political statement."¹⁰⁸

One of the ways that Nimoy's models seem to own their bodies by confronting the viewer and maintaining eye contact. As Natalie Angier elaborated in her foreword to *The Full Body Project*: "[This] is the gaze of gimlet-eyed women who know perfectly well that they are on view, and that their unclothed bodies are not the standard models of beauty as brought to you by museums, the movies, or Maybelline." Angier further argued

¹⁰⁷ As permanent marks on the body, tattoos are frequently used by different groups to create communities, to bring together those who might be considered outcasts from mainstream society; see Margo DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

¹⁰⁸ Ellin, "Girth and Nudity."

that the eye contact encourages us to see the faces of the women first, giving them a sense of personality and identity before we take in their bodies:

And the paradoxical result of our face-based introduction, our feeling that we understand these women as individuals and already count them as friends, is that we see their bodies less personally, relieved of any object lessons or projections of our private pieties and fears. Rather than rejecting their bodies as unacceptably obese, the opposite of what we health-conscious, weight-hating Americans strive for, we see them almost as abstractions, an interplay of geometries, patterns, and themes. We can see them for what they are, for what every body must be: an imperfect, magnificent evolutionary compromise between the life forms that preceded it, and the life forms yet to be.¹⁰⁹

These imperfect bodies are the focus of a work in which Nimoy references Helmut Newton's 1981 photographs, *Sie Kommen, Dressed/Sie Kommen, Naked* (fig. 106, 107). Newton's diptych originally included two views of a group of four women walking towards the camera, cool and detached. In one view they are nude, in the other they are clothed in suits and outer garments (fig. 108, 109). Nimoy repeated Newton's format, though he used the women of Big Burlesque. Newton's models wear designer clothing, while Nimoy's pose in their burlesque costumes—high-heeled shoes, elaborate corsets, and feather boas. *The Full Body Project* diptych does not show the ideal and highly desired bodies of supermodels; rather, the women's marked bodies and their sexualized costumes adds a sense of vitality and individualism that Nimoy desires.

In yet another interpretation of a recognizable image, Nimoy referenced Henri Matisse's *The Dance (I)* (1909; Museum of Modern Art, fig. 110). In this famous painting, Matisse depicted five nudes in a simple landscape, holding hands and dancing in a circle. In *Matisse Circle* of 2007 (fig. 111), Nimoy repeated Matisse's composition with six women from the Fat-Bottom Revue, though his women dance not in a lush

¹⁰⁹ Angier, foreword to *The Full Body Project*, 6.

landscape but rather on a tiled studio floor. The photograph is shot from above, echoing the vantage point of Matisse's painting. However, Nimoy's addition of a sixth woman, who unlike the others is dark, not light-skinned, makes the composition of the work more balanced and symmetrical than Matisse's. Of course, Matisse's daring use of color, with its flat broad planes and stark simplicity, is also replaced by the gradations of the black-and-white photograph. Nimoy substituted Matisse's subversive play with color for a subversion of ideal beauty by his emphasis on the fat female body.

Nimoy continued to use a circle of women in a variety of settings and configurations. In a number of pieces he uses contemporary artworks as props. In several shots his models move around a large column in an art gallery whose walls display a backdrop of large drawings by Jenny Okun (b.1953), (fig. 112, 113). The series of photographs shows them moving around the column in a dance-like manner, though they are no longer holding hands. Originally, the figures circled a large sculpture, but because the sculptor decided not to be a part of Nimoy's project, the column was digitally added at a later date.¹¹⁰ The stark rectilinear column becomes the centerpiece that the women walk or dance around in a sort of jubilant celebration. By contrast, in another set of images the women move around a large, mirrored, crag-like sculpture, *Shangri-La* (2005), by Patty Chang (b. 1972), (fig. 114, 115). The work, which was then installed at the Hammer Museum and rested on a rotating platform, created a moving play of light on the walls of the space.¹¹¹ Nimoy's group of Fat-Bottom Revue women face the sculpture in various positions as their bodies are reflected across the surface of the work. While

¹¹⁰ Nimoy, telephone interview.

¹¹¹ For more information regarding this specific artwork, including the exhibition on display at the Hammer Museum when Nimoy took his photographs, see Patty Chang and Russell Ferguson, *Shangri-La* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2005).

their bodies are turned away from the center in one photograph with the column, they are turned instead toward the Chang piece, apparently admiring the way it fragments and replicates their bodies. Not only does Nimoy incorporate references to famous paintings, but he also photographs his models at museums and galleries encouraging the perception of these larger women as embedded in an artistic endeavor.

In fact, each of these artists--Aguilar, Lopez-Huici, and Nimoy--made art historical references throughout their photographs of fat bodies. Aguilar and Nimoy reinterpreted the works of famous artists, while Lopez-Huici looked to art history as inspiration--a starting point for her own photographs. Yet each artist used these devices differently. Aguilar referred to Dater's work to begin her investigation into the use of her body outside in nature. Lopez-Huici was interested in Renaissance and Baroque masters, who used larger bodies that looked similar to those of her own models. Nimoy's recreations of Matisse and Newton are more reductive and staged-looking than the work of Lopez-Huici and Aguilar. When he began to work with Heather MacAllister and the Fat-Bottom Revue to create *The Full Body Project*, Nimoy sought out influential photographers and painters on which to base many, if not most, of his photographs. These references provided him with a way of positioning his models, but also an explanation for his choice of models. In 2007, Nimoy described the project as driven by a shift in models:

The development of ideas came from the project itself. . . I thought, "OK I've got these women to shoot. Now what would be interesting to do?" I think the first impulse I had was the Herb Ritts photographs, because that was so much about fashion models of a body size and shape that is sold as the ideal. Once I latched on to that, then the rest of it came--the Helmut Newton, Matisse, Duchamp and the Raphael.¹¹²

¹¹² Pasulka "Live Large and Prosper."

Finally, Nimoy explored female agency differently from Aguilar and Lopez-Huici. Aguilar, in using her own body, clearly defines how she wants herself to be seen. Lopez-Huici and her models have always maintained that they are working collaboratively. From searching for inspiration, to discussing the poses, to going over the proofs of the photographs, Lopez-Huici incorporates her models' opinions through each step of the process. To help establish trust and openness with her models, moreover, Lopez-Huici embarked on the film, *Toak* (1995), where she performed a modern dance nude to improvised jazz on the occasion of her fiftieth birthday.¹¹³ Part of the idea for the film was to be vulnerable and to put herself into her art in the same way that she asks her models to bare all.¹¹⁴

By contrast, Leonard Nimoy admits to not having anything in common with his models. He elects to work with his wife to help create the images and/or he bases his photographs on famous paintings and photographs by male artists. In effect, he uses his models as props. More so than having and illustrating their own identity, the models function to realize Nimoy's agenda as overseer of the project.

Critics frequently compare the women represented by Nimoy, Aguilar, and Lopez-Huici to the *Venus of Willendorf* (c. 22,000 BCE) or a generic Mother Earth or Earth Goddess figure.¹¹⁵ Striving to find an adequate analogue to these unfamiliar images of fat women, that is, many critics reach back to some of the first examples of artwork

¹¹³ Adams, "The Camera and the Flesh," 60.

¹¹⁴ Ariane Lopez-Huici, interview.

¹¹⁵ For just a few examples, see Angier, foreword to *The Full Body Project*, 5; Joe Fyfe, Review of "Ariane Lopez-Huici: Photography" at New York Studio School, *Artcritical* January 22, 2008, <http://artcritical.com/2008/01/22/ariane-lopez-huici-photography/> (accessed February 1, 2008); White, "Sacred Monsters," 2; and Rousseau, "The Empress Has No Clothes."

ever produced. Even Stone, Lopez-Huici's model, has claimed that one of the fantasy roles she thinks about as she poses is "the new Venus of Willendorf, a figure that came out of Europe as a fertility goddess."¹¹⁶ But it is time to move beyond such facile comparisons. Lopez-Huici herself has noted that "what I really want to say in those works is that they are sexy bodies. I do not want to put on them this Earth Mother side. It is to deny again their identity."¹¹⁷ These artists' models are generally opinionated women, each of whom, by posing for the photographs, becomes a visual counterpart to the work of the Fat Underground and NAAFA while also choosing to be a desirable object. These fat women, in asserting their right to be active participants and subjects with agency, have helped to find and claim a place for the long marginalized fat women in society. By showing these bodies that are not traditionally recognized as beautiful or desirable, these three artists daringly define themselves against the hordes of fashion photographers and mainstream media presenting women as impossibly slender and digitally altered supermodels. Perhaps more importantly though, unlike Antin, Rosenthal, and Ringgold who had expressed shame about the size and shape of their bodies, here, larger body types are confidently celebrated.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Hogrefe, "200-Pound Supermodel."

¹¹⁷ Lopez-Huici, interview, 2010.

Chapter Four: Documenting Anorexia

I aspired to be as thin as an anorexic. I loved fasting once I got past the pain of the first few days, which I did with the help of amphetamines, but I never went too far. . . . ultimately I didn't want to waste myself. Bulimia is, among other things, a form of research for my work: a source of information about what's going on inside me.

--Vanessa Becroft¹

While five percent of our population may be clinically diagnosed with an eating disorder, even more struggle from the same issues to a milder degree and often never get help. In light of this era of “diet crazes” and the competitive nature of American society, dieting and weight loss have become points of connection and commonality among individuals.

--Dr. David Herzog²

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, eating disorder diagnoses are higher than they have ever been in the United States. Women are more likely to develop an eating disorder than men, and almost 10% of all women are in some way affected by the illness. Furthermore, the mortality rate of women aged 15-24 with anorexia is twelve times higher than for women of the same age from the general population.³ While anorexia and bulimia represent the extreme end of the spectrum, as many as 75% of women are thought to experience some kind of disordered eating--including anorexia, but more commonly skipping meals, avoiding food with carbohydrates, bingeing and purging, and even some ill-conceived types of dieting.⁴ It has been estimated that as many as

¹ Quoted in Judith Thurman, “The Wolf at the Door,” *New Yorker*, March 17, 2003, 117-18.

² David Herzog, “Eating Disorders: Truth and Consequences,” in Lauren Greenfield, *Thin* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006), 86.

³ James I. Hudson et al., “The Prevalence and Correlates of Eating Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication,” *Biological Psychiatry* 61, no. 3 (2007): 348-58.

⁴ Cynthia Bulik, “Strange Bedfellows: UNC Eating Disorders Program, SELF Magazine,” *Chapel Hill News*, May 6, 2008; and Tula Karras, “Disordered Eating: The

twenty-five million men and women struggle with disordered eating in the United States alone, and as many as seventy million people worldwide.⁵ Ideas advocating disordered eating appear everywhere in society--from the ads for various diets to popular magazine tips on how to appear and become thinner. It has even become a common plot element in movies, particularly in female-centric films, where at least one character suffers from some type of disordered eating--as seen in *Drop Dead Gorgeous* (1999), *Girl Interrupted* (1999), *Center Stage* (2000), *Mean Girls* (2004), *Disfigured* (2008), and *Black Swan* (2010), to name a few examples.

It is not only mainstream films, however, that feature both eating disorders and disordered eating. There have been an increasing number of documentaries that have illustrated the problematic effects of anorexia, bulimia, and disordered eating. These efforts include several episodes of *Intervention*, A&E's reality series on addiction, and *What's Eating You*, a series by entertainment and gossip network E! that focused on individual cases of eating disorders. They extend to longer documentaries such as photographer Lauren Greenfield's *Thin* (2006); feminist educator and filmmaker Jean Kilborne's four-part series about the effects of advertising on women's bodies, *Killing Us Softly* (1979-2010); an episode of PBS's *NOVA*, "Dying to Be Thin" (2000); and PBS's *Perfect Illusions: Eating Disorders and the Body* (2003). A common thread in these films and documentaries is that many of the filmmakers focus on women who have careers or hobbies that put their bodies on public display. For example, in *Perfect Illusions* the

Disorder Next Door," *SELF*, April 2008, <http://www.self.com/fooddiet/2008/04/eating-disorder-risk> (accessed January 30, 2011).

⁵ Renfrew Center Foundation for Eating Disorders, "Eating Disorders 101 Guide: A Summary of Issues, Statistics, and Resources," October 2003, www.renfrewcenter.com/uploads/resources/1067338472_1.doc (accessed January 29, 2011).

audience met Jaynee, who was first introduced to bulimia while competing at a beauty pageant. “Dying to Be Thin” focused on the abundance of disordered eating problems in the dance world. By the nature of their hobbies and careers, in short, certain women feel forced to mold their bodies into an overly or even shockingly thin state. Other documentary films, like *Thin*, focus on women who struggle to be thin for a wide variety of personal reasons unrelated to their employment. The dramatic increase in interest in and production of these documentaries in the past ten years coincides with the proliferation of eating disorders. By portraying real women who are suffering from these diseases in documentaries, producers can create a relatable portrait of eating disorders that has the potential to encourage viewers to seek out medical attention, while also often hoping to challenge the media’s portrayal and discussion of women’s bodies.

Slowly, people are responding to these repeated calls for changes in the way that women’s bodies are objectified in public. Madrid’s regional government placed restrictions on models’ sizes for the first time in 2006 during the Pasarela Cibeles, Madrid’s fall fashion week. Using the body mass index as a guide, medics turned away thirty percent of the women who had taken part in previous fashion shows because they were deemed unhealthily thin.⁶ In light of this mandate, the Chelsea Art Museum organized the exhibition *Dangerous Beauty* in 2007. Acknowledging the dramatic new viewpoint espoused by Spanish officials, the museum explained the intent of the organizers: “The exhibition aims to raise questions about the mass ideology of beauty and

⁶ Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan, “Fashion Group Sets Guides to Rein in Ultra-Thin Models,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 8, 2007; and “Skinny Models Banned from Catwalk,” *CNN.com*, September 13, 2006, http://articles.cnn.com/2006-09-13/world/spain.models_1_association-of-fashion-designers-skinny-models-pasarela-cibeles?_s=PM:WORLD (accessed January 29, 2011).

explore the connections between beauty and violence, the phobia of aging, issues of self-perception and the element of power inherent in an ‘ideal.’”⁷ That same year, French model Isabelle Caro posed for a campaign against anorexia sponsored by Italian fashion label Nolita (fig. 116). At the time of shoot, the 5’4” model weighed just sixty pounds.⁸ The pictures of her nude body, which was not only incredibly thin but also ravaged by malnutrition (as evidenced by discolored feet and a skin rash), were plastered all over Italy for the 2007 Milan fashion week with the slogan “No Anorexia.”⁹ While each of these instances of public outcry corresponded specifically to the fashion world, they represent available moments in which people in public positions responded to the pressures on women to be thin.

Often using the fashion world as a reference, the artists L.A. Raeven and Vanessa Beecroft have used art to speak for their own problematic relationships with their bodies. Each artist uses her own body in her work in addition to hiring models to function as her surrogates in performances and films. The artists also seek out similarly thin women to create “armies” of women who reflect their idea of an idealized body.¹⁰ Their work is complicated by the fact that they allow other photographers, writers, and filmmakers to

⁷ Chelsea Art Museum, “Dangerous Beauty,” press release, January 25, 2007, <http://www.chelseaartmuseum.org/exhibits/2007/dangerousbeauty/index.html> (accessed January 29, 2011).

⁸ The photographer, Oliver Toscani, is best known for photographing the United Colors of Benetton ads (1982-2000). He gained notoriety for these campaigns, many of which took on challenging subjects like racism, the treatment of AIDS patients, and capital punishment.

⁹ William Grimes, “Isabelle Caro, Anorexic Model, Dies at 28,” *New York Times*, December 30, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/31/world/europe/31caro.html> (accessed January 10, 2010).

¹⁰ Keith Seward, “Classic Cruelty,” *Parkett* 56 (1999): 100; and Jennifer Allen, “L.A. Raeven--What Appears is Good; What is Good Appears,” in *L.A. Raeven: Analyse / Research*, ed. Ellen de Bruijne (Zeppelinstrasse, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 79.

document their lives and their illnesses. Beecroft's and L.A. Raeven's objectification of other women in their work mirrors the way that the media has objectified their own bodies. Their artwork and the public image of their private lives often seem to undercut any critique of the mass media potential in their projects, making them instead seem to acquiesce to societal and media-driven prescriptions for how a woman should look. None of the artists seems to attempt to get better or to confront their eating disorders; rather, Beecroft and L.A. Raeven seek in effect to justify their disordered eating and unhealthy bodies. In their art, they are making the case for bodies like their own under-developed and malnourished bodies, with a view to both normalizing and promoting image of the unhealthily thin female body.

Vanessa Beecroft (b. 1969) is undeniably beautiful. She was photographed by one of her idols, iconic fashion photographer Helmut Newton, for a 2001 *Vogue* article (fig. 117). Wearing a Roberto Cavalli leather bikini and black stilettos, she stood in an open doorway and looked away as if presenting her body to the viewer. With her abundant curly hair gathered on top of her head and her face angled away she recalled the majestic profile of Queen Nefertiti. Her body is marked by a number of tattoos: an anchor on her right forearm, a bird on the inside of her right bicep, a nude girl on her left forearm, and a tail of a dragon peeking out beneath her left breast and extending onto her side. The leather bikini top was too small, allowing her breasts to escape beyond the taut material. In the caption she claimed to have been "Helmut Newtonized," recalling the often sado-masochistic, black and white photographic works of the famed photographer.¹¹ In this photograph, as in many of Newton's works, there is something vaguely uncomfortable

¹¹ Dodie Kazanjian, "The Body Artist," *Vogue*, April 2001, 372.

about the positioning of the body, as Beecroft avoids meeting the gaze of the viewer and looks resistant to displaying her body.¹²

In fact, Beecroft has had a troubled relationship with her body since her childhood. When she was four years old, her British father and her Italian mother divorced and she moved to Northern Italy with her mother, who followed an extremely strict diet and lifestyle. In 2001, Beecroft elaborated, “I was raised with no TV, no Coke, no chips, no bubble gum, no chocolate, no telephone, no cars—no pasta even. [My mother] was vegetarian, macrobiotic.”¹³ This introduction to highly regimented eating shaped her own relationships with food and her body, as she explained in 2005:

When I was twelve, I started to become a woman and my body began to change. I was devastated because I couldn't be a boy anymore. I lost my boyish look. When I started to become something else, I didn't know how to keep it together. It was really painful--the more you eat, the more like a woman you become. That's when my obsession with food started.¹⁴

At fourteen, Beecroft began keeping track of her exercise and everything she ate. Originally, she claimed to have started the project to document how much or how little she ate because “I thought I was abnormal and not worthy to live,” and she hoped to give it to a doctor to analyze one day.¹⁵ The project evolved into an obsession, as she would constantly think of documenting every scrap of food she ate immediately afterward.¹⁶ She continued to work on the project when she went to study in Milan at the Accademia di

¹² For more information on Newton, see Klaus Honnef, *Helmut Newton: Portraits* (London: Schirmer Art Books, 2004); and Helmut Newton, *Autobiography* (New York: Nan A. Talese and Doubleday, 2002).

¹³ Quoted in Kazanijian, “The Body Artist,” 377.

¹⁴ Quoted in Nick Johnstone, “Dare to Bare,” *The Observer* (London), March 13, 2005.

¹⁵ Vanessa Beecroft, interview by Thomas Kellein, in *Vanessa Beecroft* (*Senefelderstraße*, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 123.

¹⁶ Johnstone, “Dare to Bare”; and Germano Celant, “Vanessa Beecroft: Carnal Drawings,” in *Vanessa Beecroft Performances, 1993-2003*, ed. Marcella Beccaria (Milan: Skira, 2003), 21-22.

Belle Arti di Brera Scenografia in 1988. As the project grew and developed, she started keeping track of more information including her weight, which fluctuated between 125 and 135 pounds (57 and 61 kilograms). Furthermore, she noted places, people, and events that were important to her. These could be as generic as a city she visited, a reference to her family, or her school exams. Oftentimes, she referred to her state of mind or mood, by recording brief phrases such as “I’m Dying, I Feel Bad, Horrible, I Can’t Sleep Anymore, Depression, Terrible Anxiety, Colitis, Happy, Disasters, Slut, Trying to Vomit, Dogged Bulimia, Making a Clean Sweep, Monster, Apathy, Fatigue, Fear, I’m Bursting.”¹⁷ This food log combined with derogatory sayings and names became a way that Beecroft defined herself. As Germano Celant explained, “The daily account becomes a valuable, constant locus, that of the intimation and communication of a way of being and seeing oneself. Taking written possession of the act of intaking foods, linking them to the person’s internal and external situations, is a first attempt to control and construct a communicative personality.”¹⁸

The systematic recording of her diet, weight, and feelings about her body, a practice she continued until age twenty-three, led her to produce a series of drawings beginning in 1993 (figs. 118-121).¹⁹ These works frequently depict human fragments such as limbs, heads, or hands. Sometimes they depict the torso or figures that are vaguely human but lack any kind of specific information. Vomiting heads, figures with red hair, and disembodied arms or legs appear frequently in her work. Using a very restricted color palette, Beecroft often drew the figures in solid colors like orange or

¹⁷ Quoted in Celant, “Carnal Drawings,” 21; also described in Johnstone, “Dare to Bare.”

¹⁸ Celant, “Carnal Drawings,” 23.

¹⁹ Beecroft, interview by Thomas Kellein, 127.

green, much like her experiment to eat only orange things to become orange herself. As she discussed in 2001, “I would write down what I ate every day, to see if I would turn green if I ate something green, or if I would turn orange if I ate carrots. That was an experiment, and the drawings went with it.”²⁰

The line drawings and watercolors with just one or two colors made an impact through the clear elucidation of their ideas. The vomiting heads became an expression of what Beecroft desired most--the ability to purge her food. Beecroft has discussed how she repeatedly tried to make herself vomit, much like her school friends who were purging to stay thin. Yet she never could throw up her food: “Every other girl could and I couldn't. I would try in the bathroom with my head in the toilet for two hours and eventually I'd start bleeding because I was hurting myself and I got scared. My best friend [at school] used to be obese, and then she looked like a model because she smoked cigarettes all day and threw up, and I was so jealous.”²¹ Her drawings then become a way of purging her excesses. Since she could not vomit her food, at the very least she could purge her emotions. In her diary and drawings, she could call herself fat and a slut, show herself vomiting, all the while strictly monitoring her food intake and weight.

The drawings almost always seem gendered; the figures' hair, thinness, and delicateness point to them as female. As Elizabeth Janus articulated, “These drawings always show a prepubescent female, often fragmented, filled in with garish colors, or covered with black markings. She may also have a wide-eyed innocent face lost in masses of brightly colored hair; a contorted body; hands clutching at her throat; a mouth

²⁰ Quoted in Munro Galloway, “I Prefer Nudity,” *Art Press*, no. 265 (February 2001): 28.

²¹ Quoted in Johnstone, “Dare to Bare.”

spewing black liquid; or arms gesturing defensively.”²² Beecroft’s body of work is generally recognized to be a type of self-portraiture, and the drawings certainly do seem to draw on her experiences of attempted bulimia and excessive exercising, and even to reference the colors of the food she eats.²³

Beecroft’s work can be compared to that of Nancy Spero--an artist of a prior generation who, herself, cut a notably gaunt figure. Spero’s drawings and paintings seem to be a clear precursor to and influence for Beecroft’s works on paper. Janus points out the similarities to Spero’s work, “particularly her ‘nightmare figures’ from the early '60s, in which human heads vomit, spit poison, or stick out their tongues” (fig. 122).²⁴ Spero’s women are surrounded by darkness, reaching out into the uncertain space or with mouths agape as if screaming. Having recently been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, Spero was often in pain, which she channeled into these black drawings. A few years later she moved away from the dark backgrounds and began making pointed commentary on the universal suffering caused by violence and war, as evidenced in her 1966 *Female Bomb* (fig. 123). Her figures are outlined in a bold stroke similar to Beecroft’s, though Spero often includes more tonal variety. Spero’s figures are vomiting, and the emphasis on the heads and the vomit itself certainly parallels Beecroft. But Spero’s women and men are violently reacting against the toxins of war, while Beecroft focuses on self-inflicted injury based on physical appearance.

Germano Celant viewed Beecroft’s drawings specifically as a manifestation of her disordered eating: “We are once again dealing with a communication that is anchored in

²² Elizabeth Janus, “Vanessa Beecroft,” *ArtForum* 33, no. 9 (May 1995): 92-93.

²³ Jeffery Deitch proposed this idea in *The Art Star and The Sudanese Twins*, directed by Pietra Brettkelly, DVD (New York: IndiePix Films, 2009).

²⁴ Janus, “Vanessa Beecroft,” 92-93.

the physiological condition, for the flow of the stroke and color is no longer the result of a contemplation and acquisition of reality but the crystallization of an urgency centered around the impulse to release tension and emotionality.” These drawings became a way that Beecroft could express her desires and feelings toward her body. On one hand, they are vibrant and lively, bold strokes of energetic color that depict hands and arms in motion. Yet the drawings often feel unstable. As Celant continued, “The sketched image takes on all the emotional and nervous fluctuations residing within the person. . . . It is a doubling that seems to aspire to harnessing, through creativity, the problems of the unconscious in an extreme act of technical and behavioral control (repeated execution and recopying).”²⁵ Beecroft’s repetitive and controlling impulses had appeared in her diary, and it is as if she transferred those compulsive tendencies to her drawings.

The drawings and the diary are an integral part of her first performance, later titled *VB01* (using her initials and the number of the current performance). A professor at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera Scenografia invited her to participate in a group show in Milan at the Inga-Pin Gallery in 1993. She adapted her hand-written record of her diet, exercise, and mood to make the typewritten *Despair* (later retitled *Book of Food*) (fig. 124).²⁶ Beecroft placed the book in the gallery, allowing it to become the centerpiece of the performance. Twenty years later she explained, “I exhibited the diary because it was the only document that had a conceptual relationship with the drawings and that

²⁵ Celant, “Carnal Drawings,” 23.

²⁶ The first four years of the journal were lost when Beecroft hired a friend to type them. Only the last five years remain. Occasionally, the project has been referred to as her *Diary of Food*. See Johnstone, “Dare to Bare.”

represented me at that moment. I had it typed and made into a book in the shape of a white cube, like a minimal sculpture, and installed it in the empty gallery.”²⁷

The book was just one component of the exhibition and performance. On the walls and floors she placed her drawings, as her professor had encouraged her to do. In fact, the professor had invited Beecroft to participate in the exhibition based on the drawings, not the book. The seemingly haphazard and scattered display, however, made them seem an afterthought. For the performance element, Beecroft invited thirty women to be present in the gallery space to function as a “live sculpture” or a “live painting” (figs. 125-127).²⁸ She sought out women whose bodies were similar to her own thin frame. Many of the women were fellow students whom Beecroft believed also suffered from eating disorders.²⁹ The rest of the women came from the streets of Milan. In 2004, Beecroft described the performance at length, explaining her desired intentions:

At the last minute I decided to bring in a “special audience” of thirty girls from the academy or the street. Some of them had very long legs, some were too pale or they were asymmetric. . . . I was fascinated by them. Before that day I had wanted to grab them but hadn’t known how and I didn’t really feel like a friend of theirs. I decided to invite them to the gallery. I brought a bag of my clothes for them to wear. They could wear what they wanted. . . . Since they were invited as a special audience they weren’t really under my control. I told them to hang out in the room with the book. They were at ease together and compact. They revealed themselves as a very strong visual material. There were no rules then. At the end some of them were screaming. It was chaos. People got uncomfortable and left or stood against the walls with a grin on their face. The girls took over the place. I was ashamed.³⁰

²⁷ Quoted in Marcella Beccaria, “Conversation Piece,” in *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, 16.

²⁸ Johnstone, “Dare to Bare.”

²⁹ Beccaria, “Conversation Piece,” 17.

³⁰ Beecroft, interview by Thomas Kellein, 123.

Beecroft was not pleased with the models' performance because they acted out. While the models' appearance and their interaction with the gallery space was what she desired, the lack of rules and loss of control made for a scene that she felt was troubled and chaotic. For instance, she had hoped to have the piece photographed, but the photographer never showed up. The performance was documented only in a rough film (later called simply *Film*).

VB01 was Beecroft's first use of her "girls," the term she uses to describe the thin and beautiful women that she has utilized in performances throughout her career. By calling them "girls" and not women, she emphasizes her authority over them. Using the belittling term for female adults stresses that regardless of their age or status in life, she views them as beneath her. Their presence in this initial work was intended as a visual reference to the *Book of Food*. She wanted thin models, including her schoolmates, because she was sure they must all be obsessed with food--just as she was and remained.³¹ The *Book of Food* was occasionally exhibited again but separately from other performances. She would continue to use the drawings marginally as a complement to the performance events, often showing the drawings in an oversized format on the wall as a backdrop to the "girls." Yet from this point forward the models took center stage, and despite the rocky beginnings in *VB01*, Beecroft continued to create performances centered on her "girls" and based on her own body.³² In her earlier work, she sought out thin women whom she believed to have eating disorders. By gathering them in one space, she reinforces that she is not alone in the way she approaches her body. This gathering of

³¹ Beccaria, "Conversation Piece," 17.

³² She has done just a few performances that include men, dressed in U.S. naval uniforms or formal attire, such as *VB39* (1999), *VB42* (2000), and *VB65* (2010).

unhealthily thin women can also be seen as a call for recognizing the prominence of this type of body.

As her work progressed, she stopped using her own clothes, preferring to style the women in matching clothing, wigs or hairstyles, and shoes. So notwithstanding the fact that she incorporates a number of women of various ages, heights, and sizes, Beecroft strives to make her “girls” look identical.³³ The similarly styled women appeared in *VB02*, *VB03*, *VB04* and *VB08* (all 1994, figs. 128, 129), in which the models all wore bright red wigs (again, based on her own hair color, albeit an exaggerated version of it). Gradually she decreased the amount of clothing worn by the models, so that by *VB12* in 1995 they appeared only in white briefs, black bras, and yellow wigs (fig. 130).

Beecroft’s next major breakthrough came in 1998 with *VB35: Show* (figs. 131, 132), held at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. This performance in a prominent institution established Beecroft as an international sensation, and prompted her to append to the project a rare subtitle, “Show.”³⁴ Produced by Yvonne Force Inc., a curatorial consulting company, *VB35* was her most expensive project to date. Twenty thin, gorgeous women stood in Frank Lloyd Wright’s famous rotunda for about two hours. Fifteen wore rhinestone bikinis designed by Tom Ford of Gucci. The remaining five were nude. All the women wore identical four-inch spiked heels. The makeup, which included body makeup and powdered hair, was intended to make the women look the same.³⁵

³³ This is an ongoing practice, as she still makes performances that are centered on creating a unified group of women.

³⁴ Galloway, “I Prefer Nudity,” 27-28.

³⁵ Roberta Smith, “Critic's Notebook: Standing and Staring, Yet Aiming for Empowerment,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1998.

VB35: Show was a huge production, one that betokened with Beecroft's rise in fame. In the 1990s, she began working with Jeffrey Deitch, a banker turned art consultant. His gallery, Deitch Projects, opened with her performance *VB16* in 1996.³⁶ The gallery catered to young artists and professionals by frequently showing celebrity artists and celebrities who engaged in art, such as Dash Snow, Björk, Terry Richardson, Michel Gondry and David LaChapelle. Deitch also cultivated the careers of already established artists with a degree of mass appeal, including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Shepard Fairey, and Kehinde Wiley. Deitch's openings were huge, lavish events where celebrities and art world luminaries gathered to be seen as much as to see art. Beecroft and Deitch worked well together, in part because both actively cultivate celebrity status and fame.

Her affiliation with Deitch, as well as with the bigger production companies, altered her work primarily because she had considerably more financial support. By the mid 1990s, Beecroft's performances became carefully choreographed affairs. Instead of "hanging out," as Beecroft described them in *VB01*, the women in *VB35* stood in a loosely organized circular arrangement.³⁷ To counter the chaos of that first performance, Beecroft had instituted a firm set of rules, which included the following:

Do not talk, do not interact with others, do not whisper, do not laugh, do not move theatrically, do not move too quickly, do not move too slowly, be simple, be detached, be classic, be unapproachable, be tall, be strong,

³⁶ Jeffrey Deitch's career and gallery are discussed in David Colman, "The Wonderful Wizard of Art," *Harper's Bazaar*, September 2000, 536-39. In the article, Beecroft even styles and conceptualized the accompanying photo tableau. Deitch closed his gallery in 2010 to take over the directorship at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, where he has pursued a similar agenda. His gallery projects are archived at Deitch Projects Archives, http://www.deitch.com/projects/archive_by_artist.php?sort=AF (accessed May 25, 2011).

³⁷ Beecroft, interview by Thomas Kellein, 123.

do not be sexy, do not be rigid, do not be casual, assume the state of mind that you prefer (calm, strong, neutral, indifferent, proud, polite, superior), behave as if you were dressed, behave as if no one were in the room, you are like an image, do not establish contact with the outside . . . alternate resting and attentive positions, if you are tired, sit . . . interpret the rules naturally, do not break the rules, you are the essential element of the composition, your actions reflect on the group, towards the end you can lie down, just before the end stand straight up.³⁸

Beecroft's rules evince the isolation to which her models are susceptible, since they cannot speak to anyone and their movement is restricted. Yet while Beecroft creates a strict code of behavior for her models, she also gives them some freedom to move and to interpret the rules as they see fit. She attempts to grant them a modicum of individuality while still maintaining control over the situation.

By this point in her career, Beecroft wanted her models to appear nude, though she had trouble finding a space and models to accommodate her desire. "I had a clear idea of this Irish or British-looking girl naked in Manolo Blahnik shoes." Beecroft continues, "The idea of nudity was there from the beginning, but nobody would let me do it. . . . I told Yvonne Force that for the Guggenheim project I wanted naked girls. Then she established a relationship with Tom Ford so we had to use his designs. . . . I wanted twenty girls naked, and I got only five of the twenty."³⁹ Financial matters often forced aesthetic decisions for Beecroft. Her collaboration with fashion houses began in 1995, when she contacted Prada requesting shoes for her models.⁴⁰ Beecroft needed help financing projects, and branching out into fashion helped her to lower costs while granting her access to higher quality clothing and shoes. But these decisions also brought

³⁸ Instructions for *VB46*, in Julia Steinmetz, Heather Cassils, and Clover Leary, "Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate Vanessa Beecroft," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 3 (2006): 753.

³⁹ Galloway, "I Prefer Nudity," 27-28.

⁴⁰ Galloway, "I Prefer Nudity," 27-28.

her a reputation as a sell-out.⁴¹ Her alliance with fashion designers may have allowed her access to more fashionable and costly shoes, but it forced her to make sacrifices so that the piece could go on as planned. Nonetheless, her successful collaboration with Tom Ford in 1998 would lead to other high profile sponsorships with the designers Gucci and Louis Vuitton. Beecroft fit easily into this area of intersection between high fashion and art, helped by her dealer, Deitch, who had curated shows dealing with fashion as early as 1992.⁴² By working with designers, curators, and dealers who had fashion ties, Beecroft emphasized that she was interested in challenging the way that women are presented to other women in order to model designer fashions and to sell products.

Beyond engaging with the fashion world, *VB35* referred to many types of performances at once, as Daryl Chin explained:

⁴¹ Claire Bishop notes how her performances have become entertaining spectacles for high society: “VB43 was a perfect conflation of performance, sponsorship and private view: the fashionable throng assembled outside the gallery, the bouncers, the rumour of naked models--were all bound to get everyone in the designer restaurants opposite talking. And when you were finally admitted to the space, you were given a ticket exchangeable for a free cocktail in the bar opposite”; Claire Bishop, “Vanessa Beecroft: VB:43,” *Make: The Magazine of Women’s Art*, no. 88 (Summer 2000): 31-32. Additionally, many critics reference her corporate sponsorship, remarking the names of celebrities and designers who work with her, specifically noting the way that these collaborations are beneficial for both parties. See Johnstone, “Dare to Bare”; Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 121-140; and Roberta Smith, “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2000. The most scathing commentaries on Beecroft often come from artists themselves, see Steinmetz, Cassils, and Leary, “Behind Enemy Lines,” 753-783; and Lisette Smits, “Looking for Trouble: Interview with L.A. Raeven,” *Casco Issues*, no. 6 (2000): 34-36.

⁴² For example, the Deitch curated exhibition, “Post Human,” featuring the figurative work of artists Robert Gober, Jeff Koons, Charles Ray and thirty other artists, though never shown in the United States, traveled successfully abroad in 1992 to the FAE Musée d’Art Contemporain in Lausanne, the Castello di Rivoli in Torino, the Deste Foundation in Athens, the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg, and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. For more information, see Marga van Mechelen, “The Tête-à-Tête of Performance in Fashion and Art,” in *Fashion and Imagination: About Clothes and Art*, ed. Jan Brand, José Teunissen, and Catelijne de Muijnck (Arnhem, Netherlands: ArtEZ Press, 2009), 104-15.

Show, then, was a weird amalgam: part fashion show, part strip show, part art show. But in all cases, the meanings had been reduced. A fashion show has a purpose: it is an exhibition of commercial goods for the season. A strip show has a purpose: it is an entertainment which has an explicit sexual component. Nudes in an art show have a purpose: the presentation of the beauty of the human body in a context which is supposed to exalt the viewer. Vanessa Beecroft, in her postmodern cool, would have none of this. . . she has emptied out the meanings in her presentations, so that the human bodies on display become empty vessels. It's a case of half-empty, half-full.⁴³

Chin argued that Beecroft strips her models of their individuality. She presents the women in the space, drawing attention to the clothing (or lack thereof) over a period of time. Over the course of the performance, the women become incredibly uncomfortable perched on their high heel “pedestals” and trying to stay more or less still.⁴⁴ Beecroft does not of course read these performances as meaningless; rather, she feels that over the passage of time the experience conveys a message. As Beecroft asserts, “They're about shame: the shame of the audience and, to a lesser extent, of the girls, but most of all my own.”⁴⁵ Beecroft points to the shame of witnessing the models in a vulnerable position, the shame of the model’s nudity or of not having the strength to stand the entire time.

Often left out of the discussions about her works are the models themselves and their experiences. two- to four-hour long events involve a fair amount of preparation for the models, including grooming, makeup, and pre-performance photography. Beecroft provides her models with the rules in advance, but then removes herself from them and from the preparatory process. By the time she made *Show*, she frequently used a production company to organize and handle the performance. Because she had enough

⁴³ Daryl Chin, “Models of Fashion,” *Performance Art Journal* 20, no. 3 (September 1998): 25.

⁴⁴ Thurman, “The Wolf at the Door,” 117.

⁴⁵ Thurman, “The Wolf at the Door,” 116.

sponsorship, she was able to, and preferred to, have someone else handle the preparations.

Before and during the performances, the models spend a large amount of time together and, reportedly, quickly form a bond. As Meredith Drum, a model for Beecroft elucidated, “I felt this intense sense of bonding, because we were all so raw and exposed. . . . there was this camaraderie. The switch for me was from this feeling of ‘oh, I’m not good looking enough to be around all of these women’ to ‘oh, what the hell; we’re all here together.’”⁴⁶ The relationships among the models helped the women brave the painful performance. By the end of the evening, Beecroft’s “girls” had formed their own kind of community.

While this sense of community became necessary for her models to endure the intense experience of the performance, such communities have also become an important part of the lives of women who have eating disorders. The Internet has proven a key resource in forming such communities, with websites and message boards that offer support and comfort. At the same time, the web can also be destructive--offering hints and tips to enable those frequenting the sites to sustain eating disorders. Most pro-eating disorder sites (often called pro-Ana or pro-Mia, nicknamed after the diseases anorexia and bulimia respectively) are interactive, including message boards and chat rooms where users can share information. Eighty to ninety percent of these websites include components called “thinspiration,” different types of material such as photo galleries,

⁴⁶ Quoted in Vanessa Beecroft and Michael O’Neill, “My Body,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1999, SM100. Drum was one of the models Beecroft gathered for a concept performance and photo shoot for the *New York Times*, which also interviewed Drum and another model about their experiences.

quotes, writings, and even jewelry meant to encourage thinness and weight loss.⁴⁷

Additionally, the “Ana Creed” provides instruction on a way of living that women seeking out pro-Ana and pro-Mia sites want to support. While no author for this popular text is known, many versions include similar professions to the following: “I believe that I am the most vile, worthless and useless person ever to have existed on this planet, and that I am totally unworthy of anyone’s time and attention. I believe that other people who tell me differently must be idiots. If they could see how I really am, then they would hate me almost as much as I do.”⁴⁸ On these websites, these women seek solace from others who are experiencing similar feelings and insecurities. They have a community that not only affirms what they do but also can provide helpful hints and instruction for maintaining their fasts. Like the painful high heels worn by Beecroft’s models, which bond fellow performers, women on pro-Ana and pro-Mia websites seek asylum, comfort, and camaraderie in their own painful rituals.

As with the camaraderie of the websites, the experience of being a twin can also entail support and encouragement or, on the other side, “thinspiration” to stay skinny. In some instances, twins can develop a competitive relationship, which can manifest as an eating disorder. Identical twins Liesbeth and Angelique Raeven (b. 1971), who work under the professional name L.A. Raeven, use their own struggles with eating and weight as subjects for their art. Engaging with social imperatives for thinness, the artists

⁴⁷ Dina L. G. Borzekowski et al., “e-Ana and e-Mia: A Content Analysis of Pro-Eating Disorder Web Sites,” *American Journal of Public Health* 100, no. 8 (August 2010): 1529; Mark L. Norris et al., “Ana and the Internet: A Review of Pro-Anorexia Websites,” *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 39, no. 6 (2006): 445; and Eda R. Uca, *Ana’s Girls: The Essential Guide to the Underground Eating Disorder Community Online* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2004), 13-16.

⁴⁸ Borzekowski, “e-Ana and e-Mia,” 1530; and Uca, *Ana’s Girls*, 43-45.

establish their own kind of communities of women concerned about weight. In *Test Room* (2000), for example, models answered a casting call orchestrated by the artists (figs. 133-135). Upon arrival at the Vienna Gallery in Milan, the models were measured, and when they did not meet the impossibly thin standards set by the artists, they were put into a room with other “rejects.” There, they were videotaped while also being watched through a window by onlookers.⁴⁹

The artists stocked the room with food, beverages, and alcohol, while the women, clad only in their underwear, talked about their careers, eating habits, and their uncomfortableness with the situation. As seen in the videotape, the women display increasing anxiety over the two hours they are left in the room without explanation. They attempt to make small talk, and several of them repeatedly approach the door asking for their handbag, cigarettes, or cell phone. Some women even try to leave the gallery--each time to be denied by the artists. In 2010, L.A. Raeven explained the *Test Room* project as “a one-off study into the identity of ‘ideal figures.’ We filmed the women while they were made to wait endlessly. Because of the length of the performance they gradually became more and more themselves; their professional model facades slowly crumbled. . . . It is in fact very animalistic.”⁵⁰ As with Beecroft’s performances, L.A. Raeven put their models in a situation where they had to endure a contrived environment and set of circumstances. For *Test Room*, the girls were put on display so the public could watch how they reacted to the boredom, the poor treatment, and, most of all, the feelings of

⁴⁹ Ellen de Bruijne, ed., *L.A. Raeven: Analyse / Research* (Zeppelinstrasse, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 31.

⁵⁰ Tanja Elstgeest, “Wild Zone: A Conversation with L.A. Raeven,” *From*, no. 4 (2001): 56. Liesbeth and Angélique Raeven give interviews as a pair, and their individual voices are often indistinguishable. Occasionally the speaker will be identified as one of the sisters, but in the majority of interviews they speak on behalf of L.A. Raeven.

rejection. One participant mused during the project, “It is really embarrassing with all these people. Is it really so interesting to watch us?”⁵¹

Like the models they used in *Test Room*, the artists themselves have always been extremely thin. The two are dependent upon one another, notwithstanding their early attempts to live separate lives. As teenagers they both expressed an interest in making art, but because they wanted to pursue separate careers they decided to flip a coin. Angelique was the “winner” and got to pursue a career as an artist, while Liesbeth trained as a nurse. Ultimately, Liesbeth was dissatisfied with nursing, so she “obtained permission” from Angelique to enroll in photography studies in 1993.⁵² By this point, Angelique was finding success in Paris working for Jean Paul Gaultier. In Amsterdam, however, Liesbeth was struggling emotionally and ailing. She moved to Paris to reunite with Angelique, who eventually quit her job to spend more time with her sister. When living apart, the two had been relatively healthy. However, Angelique, who had suffered from anorexia on and off since age thirteen, regressed quickly when Liesbeth moved into her apartment.⁵³

Returning to the Netherlands in the late 1990s, the two began to make art together. Their work often dealt with issues concerning weight and disordered eating. As they worked together, Angelique got sicker, dropping down to 63 pounds (29 kilograms). As the twins received public health care, Angelique was sanctioned under the mental

⁵¹ The transcript for *Test Room* is published in de Bruijne, *L.A. Raeven*, 45-50.

⁵² Zoran Erić, “Identity in We: On L.A. Raeven’s Thematization of Body Ideals and Twinhood,” in *L.A. Raeven*, 98.

⁵³ Biographical information is culled from “Cutting Edge: Trapped by My Twin,” directed by Agnieszka Piotrowska, Channel 4 (UK), originally aired April 4, 2007; and *L.A. Raeven: Beyond the Image*, directed by Lisa Boestra, DVD (Amsterdam: Viewpoint Productions, 2010).

health act in the Netherlands. She was confined to a mental hospital, where she actually got worse and stopped eating entirely. The roles of the sisters reversed and Liesbeth became the healthier twin, and went to visit Angelique every day. It was only during these visits that Angelique ate at all. The two made a pact to eat together always, and because she was stronger and healthier, Liesbeth was in charge of the food. For years afterward, Liesbeth and Angelique ate exactly the same food, carefully measured out by Liesbeth and monitored by their constant switching of bowls and plates.⁵⁴ The two went so far as to prepare bites for one another, and frequently bickered over the portions of the food. Today they remain extremely thin and suffer from early onset osteoporosis, one of the many side effects of their poor eating habits.

While L.A. Raeven has only been making art for just over ten years, their works have been seen in major European and American museums like MoMA PS1 in New York; Institute of Contemporary Art, London; Villa Medici in Rome; National Gallery Prague; and the Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem in the Netherlands. Ellen de Bruijne Projects, L.A. Raeven's primary gallery, has organized numerous openings and exhibitions for the artists while also arranging for a major retrospective catalogue, *L.A. Raeven: Analyse/Research*, to be published in 2010. Their drawings have been so popular, that de Bruijne has encouraged them to make more work to meet the demand.⁵⁵

Many of their artworks feature thin, anorectic bodies much like their own. One of their first projects, and one for which they achieved a substantial amount of notoriety, was *Ideal Individual* (1999-2001, fig. 136). This piece was a product of a group the two

⁵⁴ Until 2010, the artists ate their meals together, making sure to eat the same amounts of food. See *L.A. Raeven: Beyond the Image*.

⁵⁵ *L.A. Raeven: Beyond the Image*.

founded in 1999 called the L.A. Raeven Analyse and Research Service, which they established to provide legitimacy or credibility to their work.⁵⁶ Combining the methodological and scientific processes Liesbeth learned in nursing school with their art backgrounds, the artists used the group to structure their projects. Hence, research questionnaires, documentation, preparatory work, and preliminary sketches accompany many of the videos and performances they produce. Yet it is more than a scientific credibility and respect they desire, as they used the formation of this group to attempt to establish themselves:

We established the L.A. Raeven Analyse and Research Service in order to profile ourselves as professionals and to conduct research centered on ourselves. We wanted to increase our influence (as outsiders) and create a future in which we would represent the ideal, the idea being that if we were the ideal, the whole world would conform to the standards we set.⁵⁷

Ideal Individual set the tone for their art and for this organization by determining that the ideal individual is the thinner and idealized version of Liesbeth and Angelique Raeven.

Ideal Individual began with an advertisement that L.A. Raeven placed in a variety of types of European newspapers, including the free press *The Big Issue* in Leeds, the more heavily circulated *Der Standard* in Vienna, and the smaller *Het Parool* in Amsterdam. The ad defined the mission of the project and of their “research service”: “We are currently investigating new future life styles, changes in society, current trends in fashion and advertising. We are looking for an Ideal Individual.”⁵⁸ Following the introduction, there were several requirements the “ideal individuals” should meet: height less than 170 centimeters (5 feet, 7 inches), waist less than 43 centimeters (17 inches),

⁵⁶ de Bruijne, *L.A. Raeven*, 7-8.

⁵⁷ Quoted in de Bruijne, *L.A. Raeven*, 7.

⁵⁸ Reprinted in de Bruijne, *L.A. Raeven*, 25.

hips and chest less than 82 centimeters each (32 inches), and age less than 28.

Additionally, L.A. Raeven requested that if possible the individuals should also have “no full breast development,” “long and slender” limbs, “under-development of secondary sex” characteristics, lack of pubic hair, “loss of hair,” and a general “infantile appearance.” Not only did they request that the applicants be childlike and androgynous in appearance, they also wanted them to have unusual habits like disordered eating, regimented schedules, and an inability to make decisions easily or handle stressful situations. L.A. Raeven requested that each individual send in a picture with personal measurements and a curriculum vita. The ad explained that if people answered the ad and met the requirements, they would go through a test investigation and be “registered” with a tattoo on the right upper arm.

The *Ideal Individual* they were looking for was and is not the ideal for many, as the extensive list of requirements ended up defining an emaciated, sickly woman. The ad suggested that the artists were looking for a young, pre-pubescent girl or underdeveloped women, but they actually based the text on the characteristics and symptoms of a woman with triple-X syndrome. One out of one thousand women will be born with an extra X chromosome, the result of a genetic mutation. While many women may show no signs of the syndrome, others may be rather tall, have a small head, delayed development, or weak muscle tone, and in rare cases may have trouble producing eggs or develop malformed ovaries.⁵⁹ In fact, L.A. Raeven was interested in working with women who were incapable of having children. “We do not necessarily consider the fact that a woman with

⁵⁹ “Triple X Syndrome,” Mayo Clinic, August 17, 2010, <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/triple-x-syndrome/DS01090> (accessed January 30, 2009).

such a deviation is barren as a disadvantage: the birth rate is declining, and nowadays many women voluntarily choose not to have any children. . . . You could interpret this chromosome defect as a further step in the process of human evolution.”⁶⁰ While they exaggerate the problems associated with triple-X syndrome, they emphasize infertility to harken back to a pre-pubescent state, when women’s bodies are generally thinner, lacking hair, and without any sexual development (particularly a lack of defined breasts and hips). The androgynous, thin bodies are similar to their own, and the symptoms of triple-x syndrome become an easy way for L.A. Raeven to articulate the type of body they desired to use in their art, and what they actually consider “Ideal.”

The two drawings that L.A. Raeven produced to include with the advertisement reflect that same type of body. One shows a topless woman, wearing only jeans, with arrows pointing to her height and the width of her shoulders. The other shows the torso and buttocks of a woman with short hair viewed from the side. Her loose tank top and jeans emphasize her long, thin arms. An arrow points to her simple tattoo of two dark lines that will provide the “registration” for each of the “Ideal Individuals.” The drawings are based on sketches L.A. Raeven made of their own bodies (fig. 136), which also served as the basis for the entire project.

These pencil drawings, with their repeated lines, are quite different in their precision and accuracy from Beecroft’s watercolors and drawings. Beecroft’s figures were made with bold outlines and a simple color palette different from the build-up of lines seen in L.A. Raeven’s depictions of the body. Furthermore, L.A. Raeven emphasized the thinness and boniness of the body, whereas Beecroft focused on the

⁶⁰ Quoted in Elstgeest, “Wild Zone,” 54-55.

individual limbs and parts of the figure, along with the disembodied heads and vomiting. Beecroft emphasized the process of losing weight while L.A. Raeven focused on the desired effects. Yet drawings by each of the artists were expressions of their obsessive thinking about disordered eating and desired thinness. It is easy and appropriate to read these drawings as a type of “thinspiration” for the artists, for their audience, and especially for the women applying to be the Ideal Individual.

One major newspaper refused to publish the advertisement, which caused a minor scandal in England. Citing concerns regarding child pornography, *The Guardian* felt it best not to run the images and descriptions.⁶¹ Liesbeth and Angelique later responded to the censorship by drawing attention to the complicated closeness of the sick and the putatively ideal body, saying, “Apparently, a certain imaginary line between the desired, ideal body and the ‘sick’ body had been crossed as disordered eating is conventionally presented as ‘sickness,’ and, moreover, ‘sickness’ reserved for women.”⁶² That disordered eating is indeed sick, by definition, seems to have eluded them.

Their advertisement was just one component of L.A. Raeven’s project. The artists also logged and filed all the responses to the ads, cataloguing them almost scientifically. Later, they made a 35-minute video of the “test investigation” in which women were evaluated (figs. 137, 138). To determine if they met the artists’ high standards, six women were given a large white tank top to change into and were instructed to wear nothing else but their underwear. Lined up against a black backdrop, the women changed in front of the camera. The women behaved modestly, turning their backs to the camera when taking off their shirts. Yet in this movement they revealed the extreme thinness of

⁶¹ Francesca Gavin, “Mixed Doubles,” *Blueprint*, no. 192 (February 2002): 30-32.

⁶² Quoted in Erić, “Identity in We,” 97.

their bodies, which was emphasized by their visible spines and bones covered by the taut skin. Once they donned the appropriate uniform, L.A. Raeven, who are not in view, instructed them to line up directly in front of the camera. One after another they approached the camera, where L.A. Raeven assigned them each a case number (a way of identifying them without calling them by name), and they appeared to have their body fat measured by a skin fold meter. Instead, their arm is marked with two black stripes—the “tattoo.” After her measurements were taken, L.A. Raeven told each woman to report to the “non-selected room.” In the end, none of the women were selected to become an Ideal Individual, or part of what L.A. Raeven described as their “army.”⁶³

Ideal Individual recalls Martha Rosler’s *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (performance 1973, videotape 1977). In that performance, Rosler gradually took off her clothes as actors dressed as medical professionals took her measurements. The extraordinary thoroughness of the taking of her dimensions emphasized the physicality of her body, while it also drew attention to the power of the medical establishment. In the film, Rosler includes a voiceover that narrates a number of “crimes against women,” acknowledging the way that the measuring and sizing of a female body can have a negative impact on women. By incorporating the directness of measuring and recording the sizes of various body parts and types, these three artists used a pseudo-scientific process to gather information about the female body. In the end however, the numbers do not mean anything for these artists. Rosler attempts to create a more universal narrative, using her body as an example for others, whereas L.A. Raeven find the bodies of other women inadequate for their project. Alexander Alberro notes that

⁶³ de Bruijne, *L.A. Raeven*, 19.

Rosler “shows how popular wisdom and scientific paradigm creation are both capable of implacable oppression of women, and people generally, simply by controlling the definitions of categories, leaving no room for self-definition.”⁶⁴ L.A. Raeven echo that sentiment, though they take it further by actually degrading the models that they have solicited.

The *Ideal Individual* project led to *Test Room*, another video that focused on those who had been rejected. In neither project could the artists find women who could meet the impossible standards for their “product line.” Jennifer Allen argued that “the artists exploit advertising to make endless copies of their bodies.”⁶⁵ They repeatedly attempted to find women who fit their mold, much like Beecroft in her early works cast women who looked like her. As Nick Johnstone explains, “The girls. . . are self-portraits according to Beecroft, diary entries translated to a safely distant, removed canvas of space and anonymous flesh. She assigns the girls . . . her shame, her self-disgust, her anxieties. She turns the girls, some of whom have been diagnosed with eating disorders, into a reflection of her own ugly emotional panorama.”⁶⁶ Similarly, L.A. Raeven search for women who look like them. Beecroft and L.A. Raeven use these women to reiterate their extreme perspective on the body, articulating their personal desires to make their own bodies as thin as possible by seeking out that same characteristic in others.

Furthermore, L.A. Raeven also seek to create a type of brand based on body size. Angelique clarifies, “When I worked in fashion, I noticed people created a more

⁶⁴ Alexander Alberro, “The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy” (1998), in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 98.

⁶⁵ Allen, “L.A. Raeven,” 79.

⁶⁶ Johnstone, “Dare to Bare.”

dominant image of the brand than the clothes. It's not about clothes any more, but about people and identity. Their aim was to put on a fashion show with models who wore their own clothes but looked physically similar."⁶⁷ This body branding would be based on their own bodies and the extreme thinness they prefer. Positioning themselves as trendsetters, they elaborate, "We consider ourselves outsiders in this society and live by rules and laws different than the customary. Trend watchers observe not only the mainstream but also society's outsiders to discern trends and make prognostications. But why should one not be able to take oneself as the starting point to dictate trends?"⁶⁸ As their own starting point: "We do not try to change ourselves, but to try to alter the existing idealized image."⁶⁹ In mirroring their own bodies or idealized versions of their bodies, L.A. Raeven effectively argue for bodies that are clinically unhealthy and too thin.

All three of these artists have used, and even exploited, their thin, potentially unwell models. Beecroft forced her models to stand for hours, while L.A. Raeven temporarily "branded" their models. For Liesbeth and Angelique, marking the women was crucial to their project. "Our ideal individual is also measured, that looks like a tattoo. And that is very ambiguous because tattoos are very cool and hip, but at the same time it also has an association with [cattle] branding."⁷⁰ One of the key points of the videos *Ideal Individuals* and *Test Room*, is to show the models experiencing degradation and rejection. L.A. Raeven does not refer to the models by name; instead they give them case numbers in *Ideal Individuals* and write numbers on their arms in *Test Room*. The women are allowed to wear only their underwear and ill-fitting tank tops. The artists

⁶⁷ Gavin, "Mixed Doubles," 32.

⁶⁸ de Bruijne, *L.A. Raeven*, 7.

⁶⁹ Elstgeest, "Wild Zone," 55.

⁷⁰ Smits, "Looking for Trouble," 35.

induce a feeling of exasperation and frustration in the test subjects by putting them through endless and futile measurements and forcing them to wear unattractive and revealing clothing. Their rejection is critical, as they are told they will not be used for the projects. Of course, the women *are* used in L.A. Raeven's artwork, but they do not realize that the project revolves around their rejection.

In *Test Room*, the models wait around the room; the anger is palpable as they realize they have failed the test. These are women whose primary occupation is modeling, and they had simply responded to a casting call. Many of the women try to leave, while others beg the artists for more cigarettes or food. Not only do they talk about their own bodies, but they start insulting the bodies of the artists. For example, at the end of the project, Case #2 shows her severe exasperation with the experience, asking: "What will happen after this, as we get out of here? I claim my money; I have been sitting here for three hours doing nothing, looking stupid. What did they do?"⁷¹ These women are presented and treated as failures. But their anger, though directed primarily at L.A. Raeven, can also be read as an expression of not feeling like they are thin enough.

In fact, some of Beecroft's models showed the same feelings of failure when they lost control of their bodies, unable to stand for the duration of the performance as their bodies eventually gave in to sweating, shaking, pain, and exhaustion.⁷² The experiences of Beecroft's models was documented when two members of Toxic Titties, a collaborative art group, infiltrated *VB46* in 2001, Beecroft's first show in Los Angeles (figs. 139, 140). The members of Toxic Titties were graduate students at CalArts, and originally enrolled in the project to make money (they would be paid \$1500 for their

⁷¹ *Test Room* (2000), transcript, in de Bruijne, *L.A. Raeven*, 50.

⁷² Steinmetz, Cassils, and Leary, "Behind Enemy Lines," 774.

participation), though they decided to take advantage of opportunity and try to make a statement about the exploitation of women by Beecroft. The members told of their conflicting feelings regarding their participation--both wanting to be an individual separate from the group and desiring to blend in. Heather Cassils envisioned hiding an egg in her vagina and releasing it during the performance. Instead, realizing that the act would be too disruptive, she decided to stand for the entire duration in protest against Beecroft, who had told the girls to sit before they got too exhausted.⁷³ Clover Leary ignored her friend in the audience, who was trying to make her smile. Leary explained her resistance, "A departure from the instructions would differentiate me, draw unwanted attention, and force me to inhabit my own subjectivity again; to do this within the context of the performance would be terrifying."⁷⁴

Leary's reluctance to differentiate herself from the other models during the performance stemmed from the difficulties she endured during the preparation for the show. Prior to the event, the models were prepped and photographed. Each model was to have the hair on her head and eyebrows bleached and the rest of her hair waxed off. The painful procedures, especially the waxing, were not fully explained to the models in advance, and yet, despite the pain, the constant fear of not getting paid prevented the models from leaving.⁷⁵ Additionally, the women were given painfully high shoes to wear, many of which were the wrong size. Though each model was asked her shoe size at the casting, the shoes handed out for the performance were all size ten. During a break from the photographing, the women discovered this inconsiderate action, which helped to unite

⁷³ Steinmetz, Cassils, and Leary, "Behind Enemy Lines," 757, 775.

⁷⁴ Steinmetz, Cassils, and Leary, "Behind Enemy Lines," 772.

⁷⁵ Steinmetz, Cassils, and Leary, "Behind Enemy Lines," 762.

them by providing a grievance. Additionally, two days before the event Beecroft took photographs of the women, which would be sold to collectors after the performance. Covered in white body paint and instructed to be careful not to smudge it, the models posed for fifteen hours the first day and sixteen hours the second, much longer than the contract stipulated. At the performance the next day, the women struggled just to stand, and many were already shaking by the time the audience entered. Some women found that the buckles on their shoes started breaking because of their swollen ankles, which led to many of the straps on the shoes being off cut before the performance started to prevent loss of circulation.⁷⁶ The models' experience was tiresome and painful, and one of their coping tactics was to befriend the other women participating, with the hopes of making the project less isolating and more manageable.

Photographs of the event reveal no signs of the model's taxing experiences. The broken shoe straps were edited out, just as sweat was made to disappear. Additionally, some women's broad shoulders or waists were trimmed to suggest a more feminine shape.⁷⁷ In the end, it appears that Beecroft's models were not ideal enough either, which is made clear by her editing and modification of their bodies in the final photographs (such modification being, in any case, endemic in fashion photography). To Beecroft, another benefit of the photo editing process is that one the bodies can be made more

⁷⁶ Steinmetz, Cassils, and Leary, "Behind Enemy Lines," 764.

⁷⁷ Steinmetz, Cassils, and Leary, "Behind Enemy Lines," 776. At her events, Beecroft customarily takes pictures of her models before the performance, and also poses for photographs with the audience at the event. The sales of the photos are used to finance future projects.

similar. In her words, she forms an “army,” a homogeneous group of women standing together in formation.⁷⁸

In her act of having the models stand for hours at a time, her works might recall the endurance performances of artists such as Tehching Hsieh or Chris Burden. For example, in his yearlong performances of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Hsieh altered his life by following regimented guidelines that structured his daily life. In his *Cage Piece* (1978-1979), he placed himself in a cell in his studio, essentially sentencing himself to solitary confinement.⁷⁹ Similarly, but on a smaller scale, Chris Burden confined himself to a locker (two feet high, two feet wide and three feet deep) for five days. His *Five Day Locker Piece* (1971) required incredible stamina and endurance.⁸⁰ Beecroft and Raeven constructed endurance tests that blended art and life in a comparable manner, although instead of using their own bodies like Burden and Hsieh, they frequently manipulated the bodies of others.

Further evaluation of Beecroft and Raeven’s performances can relate them to what has been described as the performance of anorexia itself. As historian Patrick Anderson articulates: “Anorexia derives, concentrates, and facilitates its clinical and cultural power *as a performance*.”⁸¹ He organizes this idea around four major points, which he discusses in context with *Five Day Locker Piece*, but which could also apply to L.A. Raeven and Beecroft’s performances. Anorexia is durational, as the disease

⁷⁸ Keith Seward, “Classic Cruelty,” 100.

⁷⁹ Adrian Heathfield and Tehching Hsieh, *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh* (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2009), 65-100.

⁸⁰ For more information, see Jon Bewley and Jonty Tarbuck, *Chris Burden* (Newcastle: Locus+ Publishing Ltd, 2007)

⁸¹ Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 38.

develops and builds over time. The artists' performances may last for just hours, but it is pivotal that time is incorporated into the work so that the models grow uncomfortable and allow the performance to really develop. Secondly, Anderson reads anorexia as an "embodiment of predetermined modes of resistance to a given set of alimentary norms." Each artist is reacting to the ideal body--trying to achieve it or try to be even thinner than the ideal. Furthermore, he recognizes that the disease is manifested in a wide variety of genres and media, which can be seen in the range of artwork discussed. Lastly, anorexia is both an individual practice and a form of social movement, as can be seen in Beecroft and L.A. Raeven's personal struggles with eating disorders, as well as in the way they engage their models and their audiences.⁸² Not only do the artists seem to justify the existence of an anorectic body, but their performances actually mirror many of the key characteristics and symptoms of their own eating disorders.

Unlike Burden or Hsieh, who generally endured their intense situation by themselves, however, these female artists hire models to perform painful acts. While anorexia is typically thought of as a inflicted upon oneself, these works blur that premise. Speaking on L.A. Raeven, Zoran Erić articulates, "With their radical way of problematization and display on the issues of identity in twinhood, of body ideals versus eating habits--the issues they are facing in their daily lives--L.A. Raeven are touching on neuralgic and traumatic aspects of society that are perceived with even greater empathy or repulsion once seen in a work of art."⁸³ These works can be seen as violent and appalling not just because they are effectively demonstrations of eating disorders, but

⁸² Anderson, *So Much Wasted*, 38-9.

⁸³ Erić, "Identity in We," 100-101.

because those disorders ensnare other people.⁸⁴ In this act, the subject and the object is confused, which can also occur in anorexia, as discussed by Anderson:

Playing perilously with the binaries subject/object and active/passive, self-starvation produces political subjects who attain positions of such demonstrative power precisely because they seize these techniques of bodily violence and hover treacherously on the brink of self-destruction. The meaning of self-starvation, and the force of its effects rests on the rearticulation of what is conventionally the *object* of bodily violence as both subject and object.

These violent acts that are not solely self-inflicted may, then, serve to escalate the upsetting, or at least mixed feelings in the viewer. For example, L.A. Raeven's work and appearance has been described as "painful to watch, but fascinating," "repulsive...alluring," and "insensitive."⁸⁵

Yet, despite their discomfort, the audience evidently stays, watches the performances, and even purchases the related drawings and photographs, as evidenced by the successful careers of Beecroft and L.A. Raeven. Over the duration of *VB64*, the crowd continued to move throughout the large exhibition space, and only grew larger as time passed. Besides fawning over the celebrities in attendance, the crowd was occupied with trying to take their own pictures of the models while waiting for the models to break character.⁸⁶ While Vanessa Beecroft is often surrounded by her dealer and celebrities, Liesbeth and Angeliqe Raeven are often awkward and distance themselves from gallery

⁸⁴ For an example of this type of commentary, see Sean O'Hagan, "Hungry for Fame," *The Observer* (London), February 17, 2002.

⁸⁵ Sam Wollaston, "Last Night's TV: Trapped By My Twin," *The Guardian* (UK), TV and Radio Blog, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/may/08/tvandradio.comment> (accessed February 17, 2008); Barry Schwabsky, "Focus: L.A. Raeven; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London," *ArtForum* 40, no. 10 (Summer 2002): 169; and Bill Leak, "Is L.A. Raeven for the Birds?," ABC Radio National (Australia), <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/nclub/stories/s486106.htm> (accessed May 24, 2011).

⁸⁶ *VB64*, Deitch Projects, Long Island City, New York, March 6, 2009.

visitors. At events they are too shy away from the public, and often become confrontational when discussing their art, particularly when discussing issues concerning anorexia.⁸⁷ Whereas L.A. Raeven has staged a few performances, their work differs from Beecroft's events in that they are more focused on videos, drawings and staged environments.

The effectiveness of Beecroft's and L.A. Raeven's projects is often based on the cohesiveness of their performances and videos. Beecroft controls every aspect of her performances in order to suggest a unified group of seemingly identical individuals. Comparably, L.A. Raeven costumes and brands the members of their "army," limiting where they can and cannot go throughout the performance. The military terminology reinforces the idea of unity, as well as the potential for all of the members to look and behave alike, and to maintain the same diet and exercise regime. Despite their title *Ideal Individuals*, L.A. Raeven aim to rid their subjects of any individuality. As Zoran Erić explained, "The art of L.A. Raeven, fully embedded in the reflection of the artists' identity formation, strongly questions the ideas of singularity and individualism cherished by Western societies."⁸⁸ From giving their models all the same size shoes to calling them by numbers rather than names, Beecroft and L.A. Raeven strove to drive the focus away from the individual identities of their models and to bring the focus instead to the artists themselves and their artwork.

It is much easier for L.A. Raeven, and for Beecroft, to manipulate hired models than spectators. In their performances, the models might be dressed, shaved, bleached, tattooed, and made over. They might be forced to eat or drink, confined to a particular

⁸⁷ L.A. Raeven's behavior at exhibition openings is documented in *L.A. Raeven: Beyond the Image*, and Catriona Wrottesley, "Art Review: Dying for Their Art," *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh), February 27, 2002

⁸⁸ Erić, "Identity in We," 100-01.

space, denied use of the bathroom, or restricted in their movements. Caterina Brown and Karin Jasper elaborate on the importance of control to women with eating disorders: “By exerting control over their bodies, women hope to gain self-esteem and an increased sense of power and control over their lives. Powerlessness and dissatisfaction can be replaced by the self-satisfaction, social approval, and sense of accomplishment won through weight and shape control.”⁸⁹

L.A. Raeven’s rules for behavior in a performance double as an application to be a member of the L.A. Army, and include rules that define the desired patterns of behavior. Many of the rules are intended to unify the “army,” outlining how the applicant can become like the other person (or the rest of the army). L.A. Raeven instruct the applicant on how food should be consumed, how it should be specifically portioned to match that of the others in the group, and how it must be eaten entirely. The artists leave a space for the member to sign the paper, creating a contract.

Similarly, Vanessa Beecroft also establishes a contract and financial relationship with her models, which she claims “serve[s] the aesthetic function of uniting the girls as a group and therefore as a single image.”⁹⁰ Beecroft also uses military terminology, referring to her “girls” as an “army.” Keith Seward proposed that by using such terms Beecroft is “implicitly positioning herself as commander or general. . . . Her army of girls is not Amazonian, and her model ‘soldiers’ hardly seem ready for combat. Instead, their militarism consists in homogeneity, uniformity, and ability to follow rules.”⁹¹ Her rules

⁸⁹ Caterina Brown and Karin Jasper, “Why Weight? Why Women? Why Now?,” in *Consuming Passions: Feminist Approaches to Weight Preoccupation and Eating Disorders*, ed. Caterina Brown and Karin Jasper (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1993), 17.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Seward, “Classic Cruelty,” 100.

⁹¹ Seward, “Classic Cruelty,” 100.

restrict movement, talking, and placement, so that her performances will begin in a perfectly ordered and structured manner. Beecroft then dictates how the models should sit or lie down gracefully when they become tired. Explaining the power her rules create, Beecroft noted in 2004: “When I direct the girls and give them the rules, it is as if I was the man. I tell them to shut up, not to talk to me. . . . Maybe I reproduce life history, I act as their enemy, so that they won’t need fiction to interpret what I am trying to represent. I am the Fassbinder and the Helmut Newton with them, not a woman.”⁹²

Given this statement, it is ironic, then, that when she worked with Helmut Newton in 2001, Beecroft was upset by the objectification she felt. While being photographed by Newton, Beecroft seemed to realize the parallels between her treatment of her models and Newton’s treatment of her:

It was a tiny, trashy [swimsuit] but I do the same to my girls. So I cannot complain. . . He said, “I am the father of your performances.” It came out in such a violent way. It made me feel embarrassed. It was as though he was saying, “You show girls. Here it is. How does it feel?” He kept saying, “Stretch, feel tall, as if you are the tallest in the world. You are the bride of Count Dracula.” . . . I lost all my intellectual confidence in that moment and I became an object. I felt decadent. He completely Helmut Newtonized me, so I wasn’t myself anymore.⁹³

As a result of her “Newtonization,” Beecroft recognized that she achieved a level of notoriety. She lost herself and her individual identity, but became part of the body of work by a photographer she admires. The sacrifice of her identity was a necessary part of Newton’s process. While she may justify her objectification because of the end result, she was self-conscious and embarrassed afterward as she recalled her own models’ recollections about their experiences. Just as Beecroft accepts her loss of self in the

⁹² Beecroft, interview by Thomas Kellein, 146.

⁹³ Quoted in Kazanijian, “The Body Artist,” 406.

service of art, and particularly that of her idol, Helmut Newton, she also demands acceptance and compliance from her models.

In Beecroft's, as well as L.A. Raeven's, exertion of total control over their projects, their roles can almost be seen as usurping traditionally masculine roles of the leader and director. Ariel Levy has challenged this type of behavior, where women repeat male chauvinist behavior, explaining, "It can be fun to feel exceptional--to be the loophole woman, to have a whole power thing, to be an honorary man. But if you are the exception that proves the rule, and the rule is that women are inferior, you haven't made any progress."⁹⁴ In her reproduction of Newton's own controlling and harsh modes of production, Beecroft reinforces a problematic relationship with feminism that emerges in the 1990s, and it bears noting that the three artists do not refer to themselves as feminists.⁹⁵ Art historian Maria Elena Buszek has described Beecroft, in a way that also relates to L.A. Raeven, "There's an ambivalence in her work that is present in the work of many of her contemporaries, which is the result of a culture that has both internalized feminist goals more than any generation that preceded it, and chafes against what it perceives as feminism's restraints."⁹⁶ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards articulated this sense that feminism is redundant in their pathbreaking book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (originally published in 2000), which is often seen as the pivotal text on feminism in the new millennium. After describing the many advancements that women have made over the past forty years, they declare, "The

⁹⁴ Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 117.

⁹⁵ Deborah Siegel, *Sisterhood, Interrupted: From Radical Women to Grrls Gone Wild* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 1-20.

⁹⁶ Maria Elena Buszek quoted in Johnstone, "Dare to Bare."

social-justice movement, formerly known as feminism, is now just *life*.”⁹⁷ In refusing to call themselves feminist, Beecroft and L.A. Raeven can perhaps be seen as accepting the status quo. In fact, they work to reinforce the pressures put on women to be a certain size, going so far as to argue that women should be thin to the point of unhealthiness.

This becomes all the more evident when Beecroft and L.A. Raeven use their own bodies and avoid using a stand-in or a model. While Beecroft rarely appears in her work, she did appear briefly in *Film*, the video documenting *VB01* (fig. 127) where she is shown trying to organize all the models in the small space. L.A. Raeven have used their bodies much more frequently and explicitly than Beecroft has. They are the subjects of *Wild Zone 1* (2001), a twelve-minute video installation first presented at Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam (figs. 141-144).⁹⁸ The piece utilized a double projection, with each screen showing two different parts of the gallery space. In the video, crumpled paper and abandoned wine and water glasses were strewn about the room; this trash was also used in the same gallery space to recreate the filmed environment. To create a sensual experience, the artists filled the gallery with a special scent they had concocted especially for the exhibition. Though it was supposed to smell like their body odor, it has often been described as smelling like urine.⁹⁹ The artists

⁹⁷ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010): 321.

⁹⁸ The title of the work (originally *Wild Zone*) came from the name of the group show at Witte de With, to which they were asked to contribute a new work. It became *Wild Zone 1* after the creation of another piece the next year, which was named *Wild Zone 2*. L.A. Raeven in conversation with Ana Finel Honigman, *Saatchi Online Magazine*, April 18, 2008, http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/blog/art_news/la_raeven_in_conversation_with_ana_finel_honigman/4458 (accessed March 6, 2009).

⁹⁹ L.A. Raeven in conversation with Honigman.

appeared onscreen wearing simple white tank tops and jeans, with makeup that made their faces look sickly and tired. One screen focused on one of the twins (the viewer is never given information about which specific woman it is), who engaged the viewer by looking directly at the camera, shuffling about, moving and fidgeting as if uncomfortable, and simultaneously trying to peer out the window. The other side of the projection showed both women sitting on the floor of the gallery amidst the detritus. As they lounged around the space, they sometimes touched one another, or fed each other crackers.

Nothing much happens over the course of the twelve-minutes of *Wild Zone 1*. Making only small and fidgety movements, the sisters appeared bored and disinterested. Yet in this mundaneness, the sameness of the two women is made apparent, as Barry Schwabsky explained:

Gazing out impassively at the viewer, disaffected and sullen-looking, the artists/subjects seem to share that deep rapport often attributed to twins. Through its very wordlessness, this implicit communication excludes any third party. . . . Here before these life-size figures in all their indifference to the world, one had the feeling of being excluded from a club one hadn't even aspired to join.¹⁰⁰

The women are expressing their own inner, impenetrable world. Because they are identical twins, they often find themselves as objects of fascination. Not only are they twins, though, they are extremely thin—the type of thinness associated with illness. Both Liesbeth and Angelique acknowledge that they are thin to the point of unhealthiness. They position their thin, sick bodies as a commentary on society by blurring the line between an ideal, healthy, and thin body and a body that is only thin because of unhealthy behaviors. L.A. Raeven's work heralds the thin body, though the methods used to achieve

¹⁰⁰ Schwabsky, "Focus: L.A. Raeven," 169.

skinniness are often questionable. There is never any condemnation of anorexia or any other types of disordered eating; rather, the diseases become a method to achieve the putatively ideal form they desire, even if it is sickly.

On one hand, this type of work is a self-portrait, yet the idea of a self-portrait is complicated by the fact that the artists are twins. Because they are identical, going so far as to view each other as the mirrored self, the question arises whether it is even possible to create a unique self-portrait.¹⁰¹ A portrait of one twin is identical to the other. Twins experience the “ultimate closeness,” as Barbara Schave Klein described:

As important to idiosyncratic twin development are the unique bonding attachments that twins form with each other, which creates special strengths as well as distinct limitations for each member of a twin pair. The most apparent strength that comes from sharing everything around you—parents, genetics, and environment—is the increased capacity for closeness and sharing, and a deep longing for intimacy.¹⁰²

It is clear even from the way that Liesbeth and Angelique eat that they are extraordinarily close, and even as adults they demonstrate the bond of twins. This relationship was explored in “Trapped by My Twin,” an episode of the Channel 4 television series *Cutting Edge*. The episode was filmed in 2006 and 2007, and during that time, the two women slept in the same small room, exercised together, worked together, and ate exactly the same things. With respect to their food, everything was measured exactly for each woman. They were so serious about following their prescribed food intake that when a single pea fell off one of their plates in the documentary, the two began an intense argument about who should eat the pea. Their closeness is connected to their patterns of disordered eating, so that as Angelique developed anorexia so did Liesbeth.

¹⁰¹ Allen, “L.A. Raeven,” 75.

¹⁰² Barbara Schave Klein, *Not All Twins are Alike: Psychological Profiles of Twinship* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 1.

By 2010, when they appeared in the documentary film *L.A. Raeven: Beyond the Image*, Liesbeth, who had been the dominant twin ever since Angelique's hospitalization in 2003, wanted more independence.¹⁰³ The film follows the artists as they move into a bigger apartment where they will each have their own bedroom. Additionally, Liesbeth has a boyfriend and is taking fertility treatments to get pregnant. The sisters have grown apart, and no longer eat together. At the end of the film, Liesbeth announces that she plans to move out within the next year and a half. Angelique is clearly displeased throughout the film, desperately wanting things to stay as they are and to stay close to her sister. As they turn forty, both are seriously re-evaluating their lifestyle, much as they did when they were teenagers. Angelique clings to their identity as twins while Liesbeth desires her independence.

The conflicted interconnectedness of their relationship, which is an integral part of their work together, was the main focus of *Wild Zone 1*. The theme reappears in *Wild Zone 2* (2002, figs. 145, 146), in which L.A. Raeven hired two boys, and dressed them similarly to their own appearance in *Wild Zone 1*, complete with tank tops and eye makeup. In *Wild Zone 2*, the boys painstakingly measured their food so that it is the same for both, following the rules carefully written out by the artists. In the film, one of the boys reads the rules aloud: "I WANT and I NEED to eat EXACTLY THE SAME as HIM, both in HOW MUCH and in WHAT I eat."¹⁰⁴ In *Wild Zone 2*, the artists have recreated their own complicated relationship with food, which is captured in detail in "Trapped by My Twin." In fact, the careful measuring of the wine in the glasses appears

¹⁰³ *L.A. Raeven: Beyond the Image*.

¹⁰⁴ The artists' rules about food are presented as a contract for the models to sign, and are also incorporated into *Wild Zone 2*. The rules are reprinted in de Bruijne, *L.A. Raeven*, 71.

exactly in both the artwork by the twin boys and the documentary by Liesbeth and Angelique. Their artwork and their life are intertwined, just like their relationship with one another.

While a good part of their art is based on their personal lifelong battle to be thin and the side effects of disordered eating, the discussion surrounding their work and the fascination with their bodies has been the subject of two documentaries. Indeed, both films on L.A. Raeven focus almost exclusively on their lives, their eating, and their health, and not on their artwork. “Trapped by My Twin” mentioned their art only briefly, whereas *L.A. Raeven: Beyond the Image* used clips from their videos to illustrate their eating problems. By utilizing their drawings and videos only as a window into the relationship between the two women, the documentaries effectively deemphasized their art. In fact, both documentaries suggest that the most interesting thing about these women is their disease and disorder; their art is presented only as a manifestation of that disease. Journalists have treated *L.A. Raeven* similarly, so much so that one author reached out to a psychotherapist to diagnose the artists, despite the fact that she had never met nor spoken with the twins.¹⁰⁵ Even the art world seems to be more fascinated with L.A. Raeven’s personal lives than with their art. On the occasion of the opening of a show at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London in 2002, the museum brought in noted eating disorder specialist and feminist Susie Orbach to moderate a discussion with the artists. Ostensibly, the conversation was to be about art, though it ended up evolving into somewhat of a therapy session.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ O’Hagan, “Hungry for Fame.”

¹⁰⁶ Allen, “L.A. Raeven,” 75; and Wrottesley, “Art Review: Dying for Their Art.”

The public treatment of Vanessa Beecroft has often been similar, as evidenced by an infamous interview by Judith Thurman for the *New Yorker* in 2003. While intending to use the article to introduce Beecroft's art, Thurman instead wrote more about Beecroft's eating disorder and the way that it controlled her life. The article went into great (and often unnecessary) detail about Beecroft's life and everyday experiences, noting, for example, "her bulimia--exercise bulimia--isn't life-threatening. It isn't like anorexia, which can lead to death. It isn't even like the more conventional kind of bulimia, which involves vomiting, and which can lead to unpleasant physical conditions, such as gum disease, tooth decay, ulcers, etc." Thurman articulated her agenda in an online interview with a *New Yorker* editor at the time of the article's publication:

I wanted to write something on art and bulimia, and I had heard about Beecroft's [*Book of Food*]. I wanted to write about the motives behind it, and about eating disorders--a neglected and fascinating subject that ought to be addressed by more artists but, for mysterious reasons (having to do with courage, I suspect), isn't. So that is the reason bulimia has such a prominent place in the piece. My initial interviews with Beecroft were all about food and eating.¹⁰⁷

The article's preoccupation with eating disorders, then, seems much more connected to Thurman's own priorities than to the artist's.

Certainly, Beecroft's disordered eating is central to her life, as Thurman acknowledged: "Her obsession does, of course, 'eat up' a tremendous portion of her life, daily and psychic. But it also apparently feeds her art. And she does see a therapist. As she says herself, she didn't (and I think doesn't) want to 'waste herself' completely."¹⁰⁸

While eating disorders are integral to Beecroft's work, Thurman, like the directors of the documentaries on L.A. Raeven, found eating disorders to be the most fascinating part of

¹⁰⁷ Dellinger, "Q&A: Reckless Perfectionism."

¹⁰⁸ Dellinger, "Q&A: Reckless Perfectionism."

the person. While Beecroft willingly participated in the interviews and talked to Thurman extensively about her eating and exercise patterns, she later spoke out about Thurman's putative misinterpretation of her art and her eating disorders, saying that "she wrote an entire article about my bulimia while I never really had it. I had girlfriends who were sick. I was obsessed and still am, but it didn't take me over."¹⁰⁹ These films and articles on Beecroft and L.A. Raeven created a profile of the artists that becomes so discussed that their work became inextricable from their personal struggles. In this conflation of art and life, their work might recall that of some very early performance artists, for instance Eleanor Antin or Allan Kaprow, whose work often intentionally problematizes the separation of art and life. But whereas Antin often distances herself from her work in interviews, Beecroft and L.A. Raeven tend to share private information with the intention of involving those personal elements in their work, such that it is hard to separate their work from their eating disorders.

There is of course something troubling about witnessing such painful acts of starvation and disordered eating. But what is the role of the viewer witnessing women starving themselves or being put in uncomfortable, if not painful, situations? Should the bystander help the women who can no longer stand in their stilettos? This type of question can be traced to a vein of performance art from the late 1960s and 1970s, epitomized by Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971). Appropriate to our discussion of the role of the audience, Frazer Ward describes the way the work was received:

The very violence of *Shoot* seems to have called out for intervention on the part of collaborators or audience members. It doesn't seem too far-fetched to imagine the marksman calling it off at the last moment, or someone in the audience trying to talk everyone out of it. Yet once it was

¹⁰⁹ Beecroft, interview by Thomas Kellein, 152.

in train, some combination of the expectation of a specialist public (and Burden's manipulation of that), prurient fascination, an antimoralistic, anti-authoritarian historical milieu, even the brevity of the work, prevented any such intervention. As a result, *Shoot*, however tendentiously, negatively, or repellently, limned the public as an arena of responsibility of dilemma and decision--as an ethical realm.¹¹⁰

The viewer may feel a desire to intervene, but instead, generally sits back and watches the spectacle.

Of relevance to this type of audience response, Kathy O'Dell has described audience members of 1970s performance art as entering into a contract with the artist.

She explains:

In the case of Burden's *Shoot*, for example, audience members chose not to stop the shooting, just as individuals involved, therefore, agreed to tacit or specified terms of a 'contract' with the artist. . . . I would argue that the crucial implication of such masochistic performances concerns the everyday agreements--or contracts--that we all make with others but that may not be in our own best interests.¹¹¹

This "contract" does not prevent members of the audience from leaving, but the situation is set up so that the work more often than not continues without any intervention. O'Dell adds, "such performances reminded viewers of their own roles as witnesses and of their own capacity to occupy the position of either perpetrator (subject) or victim (object) of violence."¹¹² While the work of Beecroft and L.A. Raeven is not about an immediately violent act, it is still about the imposed deterioration of the flesh, albeit gradual. The artists effectively remind the viewer of society's privileging of the thin body and, by extension of their tacit complicity with the perpetuation of eating disorders.

¹¹⁰ Frazer Ward, "Gray Zone: Watching 'Shoot,'" *October*, no. 95 (Winter 2001): 117.

¹¹¹ Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 2.

¹¹² O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 6.

It is also important to note, as Sean O'Hagan does, that L.A. Raeven's works are different from the time-based works of performance artists like Burden or Hsieh, among others: "There is a crucial difference between an artist who decides to become thin for a time in order to make a political point about society and the media's attitudes to women's bodies, and an anorexic who finds a place to parade her illness in the slippery area that is conceptual art."¹¹³ Exploiting their own disordered eating, both L.A. Raeven and Beecroft conflate art and life in a way that O'Hagan feels is manipulative, and basically a cheap tactic. By incorporating their affliction into their work, these artists have found a platform to raise issues concerning their diseases.¹¹⁴ But on a certain level, their works might be said to amount at the same time to a manifestation of those diseases, and, as noted, can be read as supporting the eating disorders themselves.

While they may be frustrated about their art getting less attention than their eating disorders, Beecroft and L.A. Raeven allow these conversations and discussions about their weight and eating disorders to take place, after all, and even encourage them by participating in interviews and documentaries. Furthermore they perpetuate this focus by making statements such as, in Beecroft's case that she "wished demonically for something horrible to happen to me just to make me thin." She further elaborated that she has "weighed every one of my life's experiences on the scale of how many kilos I have gained or lost from it. In the end, I don't even care if people say I'm a good artist. I only care about whether or not I'm fat."¹¹⁵

¹¹³ O'Hagan, "Hungry for Fame."

¹¹⁴ The clearest discussion of their preoccupation with food and their eating disorders can be found in Thurman, "The Wolf at the Door," and *L.A. Raeven: Beyond the Image*.

¹¹⁵ Thurman, "The Wolf at the Door," 114.

The 2003 *New Yorker* profile was just one of the many instances where Beecroft courted celebrity at no matter what cost. Her performances have become full-blown spectacles, epitomized by the Guggenheim *Show* in 1998. The actor Leonardo DiCaprio somehow became the go-to commentator on *Show*, as his remark on the performance, “That’s dope”--meaning cool or hip--is often quoted in discussions of this piece.¹¹⁶ Celebrity interest in Beecroft’s work parallels the interest of fashion houses, such as Gucci, Prada, and Louis Vuitton, all of whom have sponsored her work. The collaboration with Louis Vuitton led Beecroft to an introduction to hip-hop star Kanye West.¹¹⁷ She created a performance for his record release party in November 2008 and later collaborated on his short film and music video “Runaway” in 2010. He returned the favor by funding the video and photographic documentation of *VB64* (2009), and his appearance at the event with his high-profile model girlfriend was another way of drawing attention to her work.

L.A. Raeven disagree with Beecroft’s use of fashion and commercialism, explaining: “To Gucci it’s peanuts to sponsor Vanessa Beecroft with shoes. But for Vanessa Beecroft it’s not so good that she did that Because then you become the artist who is used by Gucci.”¹¹⁸ What L.A. Raeven recognized is that in Beecroft’s willingness to alter her style (for example, when her sponsors requested she have some of her models wear bikinis instead of being nude, as she initially desired), she was compromising herself. L.A. Raeven had the advantage of hindsight, in that they were able to recognize that, at the moment Beecroft was beginning to incorporate financial help

¹¹⁶ Johnstone, “Dare to Bare”; and Smith, “Critic’s Notebook.”

¹¹⁷ Kanye West, conversation with author at *VB64*, Deitch Projects, Long Island City, New York, March 6, 2009.

¹¹⁸ Smits, “Looking for Trouble,” 34.

from fashion designers, the fashion world was benefiting from its relationships with museums.

The most famous, or notorious conflation of art, fashion, and money was perhaps the 2000 Armani exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Including over 400 garments displayed throughout the museum, the show, curated by Germano Celant and Harold Koda, attempted to provide a comprehensive look at three decades. Prior to the announcement of the exhibition, the Guggenheim received a three-year, fifteen-million dollar commitment from the Armani fashion house.¹¹⁹ Not only did the Armani show appear to be a direct response to this generous gift, but the exhibition itself was sponsored by a celebrity gossip magazine, *InStyle*. That was besides the Hugo Boss Prize administered by the Guggenheim Museum since 1996. Beyond the Guggenheim, an increasing number of exhibitions were devoted to fashion photographers and designers; and one could also chart the rise in popularity and notoriety of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's annual Costume Institute Gala since 1948.¹²⁰ All of these phenomena served to illuminate or, arguably, to confuse the relationship between the art world, the fashion industry and celebrity culture. Harold Koda, curator-in-charge of the Costume Institute, observed at the time of his appointment in 2000 that from his perspective, "Now you have artists who are manipulating art as commerce. I mean, it's

¹¹⁹ Carol Vogel, "Armani Gift to the Guggenheim Revives Issue of Art and Commerce," *New York Times*, December 15, 2009.

¹²⁰ A recent example, "Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2011, blurs the line between art, fashion, and commercialism. The exhibit, one of the ten most popular exhibits in the museum's history, was sponsored by the McQueen fashion house and Condé Nast, publisher of *Vogue*. See Diane Cardwell, "Waiting Hours to See the McQueen Exhibit, in a Line Not Unlike a Runway," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2011; and Andrew Bolton, *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

Warhol on steroids! It really has blurred the lines. When you flip through art journals, it's difficult to tell if you're looking at an editorial about contemporary art photography or a Gucci or Prada ad.”¹²¹ In her use of corporate sponsorship and the financial help she received with shoes and clothing, Beecroft is not just drawing attention to the contemporary conflation of art, fashion and commerce, she is also benefiting from those relationships to create more costly and elaborate performances.

Early in their career, L.A. Raeven was trying to draw attention to the complicated relationship between art and fashion that Koda articulated. In 2000, they began a series of projects that recreated Prada advertisements. Receiving a grant from the Henry Moore Foundation in Leeds, they set about upon reviving the image of that organization by attempting to make the it more culturally relevant. The result was a revamped Prada advertisement replacing the institution's name with the sobriquet “Henry.”¹²² A similar project of the same year involved a commission from P.S. 1 in New York, where the artists requested media kits from influential art magazines like *Artforum*. They attempted to critique the way luxury companies appealed to people affiliated with the art market by taking out an ad in the magazine for themselves in which they illegally appropriated the logo of Prada. Whereas Beecroft uses the companies to sponsor her, and often has to give up something in return (ranging from signage and recognition of financial contributions to losing full creative control), L.A. Raeven is trying to use advertising to critique the way that commercial companies benefit from their relationships with the art world. Critic Jennifer Allen explains:

¹²¹ Quoted in Albert Lee, “Art for Armani’s Sake,” *salon.com*, October 18, 2000, <http://www.salon.com/business/feature/2000/10/18/armani> (accessed June 19, 2011).

¹²² Smits, “Looking for Trouble”; and de Bruijne, *L.A. Raeven*.

The duo is completely dedicated to the fetishistic power of the brand; they understand all too well that even the slightest visual reference to Prada can increase the value of an adjacent image. ... They criticize the idealization of the body by the media, but then launch their own bodies as the new ideal; they are against Gucci-Becroft, but for Prada-Henry.¹²³

Instead of using the established fashion system and relationships to major art institutions like Becroft, L.A. Raeven has in a way infiltrated the fashion system and critiqued its popularity--in particular, the way that it has shaped women's bodies. They explain, "The ideal image that we mold is also dualistic: on the one hand we want to establish our ideal image in order to gain a certain popularity; on the other, our appearance is also a result of deep-seated anger, a protest against the imposed ideal image projected by this society, with all its prejudices based on how you look."¹²⁴ L.A. Raeven's idea of thinness is a more extreme version than Becroft wanted in *VB01*. The thinness in question in both cases is that of unhealthiness, and differs from that of, say, Claudia Schiffer and Heidi Klum, who represent a curvier, more womanly supermodel-type popular in the early 1990s.¹²⁵

Simply put, the ideal female body is hard to define. One idealized type of the thin female body is a curvier model that generally has appeal to men and may be featured in male-oriented, as well as certain women's fashion magazines. By contrast, in their quest for a thinner ideal promulgated in other by fashion contexts or moments, Becroft and L.A. Raeven are addressing the idealization of an effectively pre-pubescent frame.

¹²³ Allen, "L.A. Raeven," 77.

¹²⁴ Quoted in Elstgeest, "Wild Zone," 55.

¹²⁵ In Becroft's later works, beginning with *VB48* (2001) and *VB50* (2002), she worked to incorporate different types and sizes of women. Less reliant on the stick-thin model body, she also started pursuing women of different races, which led to an exploration of a variety of body sizes. As her work has progressed throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, she has moved away from using modeling agencies, while trying to recruit "average" women directly from the street.

Certain trends throughout the 20th century have privileged the exceptionally thin body, for example, in the popularity of Twiggy (born Lesley Hornby) in the 1960s or of so-called heroin chic in the mid-1990s. These trends become problematic, however, inasmuch as there is not much difference between the thinness that is idealized by many fashion designers and photographers and a degree of thinness that is sickly. Isabelle Caro represents the case of someone who moved from a putatively ideal thinness, when she was a successful fashion model, to someone who is patently and visibly showing signs of malnutrition. The prevalence of the use of computer manipulation to modify and trim already-thin models' bodies attests in another way to the unattainability, for healthy women, of the kind of thinness in question.

When searching for models who correlate with dominant ideals, Beecroft and L.A. Raeven are not just reinforcing the representation of women on designer runways and in fashion magazines. Beecroft seeks out models for her performances, who--after grooming, body paint and make-up--are able to represent a perceived slender ideal due to having very little body fat. Grouped together, the women begin to look quite similar and anonymous, losing their individuality as they serve to represent Beecroft's ideally thin woman. By contrast, L.A. Raeven take this one step further; for them women suffering with severe eating disorders can not meet their requirements. Beecroft is able to present her image of the ideal in the performances of her "girls," whereas L.A. Raeven problematize the ideal by emphasizing its unattainability. L.A. Raeven's repeatedly unsuccessful quests to find these perfectly thin women parallel in a way the anorexic's unending dissatisfaction with her own body.

In addition, L.A. Raeven draw attention to the way that the kind of objectification of women face, not just in model casting but also in every day life, can lead to competition and, in extreme cases, to eating disorders. In *Proband A/B*, a performance from 2001, L.A. Raeven forced visitors to choose one of the twins over the other. The title refers to the realm of scientific research practices which the artists prefer as a framework, as the word proband refers to a patient who is studied, and the term is often used in scientific experiments. The second part of the title, the “A” and “B,” refers to the designations given to twins at birth, twin “A” being the firstborn.¹²⁶ In keeping with the title, the entire feel of the performance was that of a scientific experiment. Upon entering the Ellen de Bruijne Projects in Amsterdam, visitors encountered Liesbeth and Angelique standing outside separate rooms, either one of which visitors could choose to enter. Each room was filled with music and food selected by one of the twins. The artists believed that couples would split up, each going into separate rooms so that they would not offend the twins. To prevent couples reuniting, L.A. Raeven did not allow their visitors to change rooms, thus forcing a separation between people who came to the event together. They later explained that they wanted visitors to choose sides by choosing one twin over the other: “But as a twin, and we experienced this ourselves, when you see people’s preferences it really gives you a feeling of guilt, you feel like you’ve done something wrong and I think that makes you very vulnerable to eating disorders.”¹²⁷ In trying to

¹²⁶ “L.A. Raeven, 19/05/01–07/07/01: ‘Proband a/b,’” Ellen de Bruijne Projects, <http://www.edbprojects.nl/2001/05/exhibitions/archive/l-a-raeven-190501-070701/> (accessed February 5, 2011).

¹²⁷ Quoted in “L.A. Raeven in Conversation with Janet Treasure,” in de Bruijne, *L.A. Raeven*, 139.

create a brand based on their bodies, they seek to address a sense of public humiliation that they have experienced.

The media's infatuation with L.A. Raeven's and Beecroft's eating disorders reflects the general interest in and concern about the impact of eating disorders on women. In the last decade directors have often turned their cameras on anorexic and bulimic women. One of the most successful films of this type is Lauren Greenfield's *Thin* (2006), which was later adapted as a traveling art exhibition and catalogue. Greenfield (b. 1966) works as a journalistic photographer for *The New York Times Magazine*, *Time*, *National Geographic*, and *The Guardian*, while also building a reputable career in fashion photography by working for *ELLE*, *Vanity Fair*, *Marie Claire*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. She combined these two types of work in one of her first major projects, *Girl Culture* (2002), for which she spent five years traveling and interviewing girls and young women about their bodies, consumer culture, fashion, and behavioral expectations. The project dealt with the way girls learn the assigned roles of the female body in society.¹²⁸ This initial interest in the development of female body image led her to further investigate the lengths women can go to manipulate their bodies in *Thin*, her first feature-length documentary film.

In *Thin*, Greenfield focused on the Renfrew Center in Coconut Creek, Florida, a residential treatment center that houses about forty women with various types and degrees of eating disorders. The private facility carefully monitors patients by controlling their diet and limiting certain types of behaviors. Greenfield's film centered on four women (ages fifteen to thirty) at the Renfrew Center, suffering from severe mental

¹²⁸ Lauren Greenfield, *Girl Culture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002).

illness. Historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg described the project as a detailed look into an eating disorder clinic: “[Watching the film] we develop a sense of the daily therapeutic routine: early-morning, blind weigh-ins, periodic room checks, and required group and individual therapy sessions, all structured around three scheduled, nutritionally ample, sit-down meals.”¹²⁹ The clinic provides order and structure for its patients, and enforces a set of strict rules about when, where and how much they could smoke; curfews and bedtimes; amount of exercise; and diet; and includes a reward system of field trips and other benefits. As *Thin* revealed, the patients figure out ways to cheat the system, however. Perhaps more important to the women are the rules that they set up for themselves. One woman, Alisa, monitored her calorie intake so specifically that she was able to get down to only 170 calories a day. Ata, another patient, was quite specific about scheduling the times and amounts of food she ate: for example, at 2:13 pm every day she would eat a teaspoon and a half of Light and Fit yogurt.¹³⁰

Certainly, the rules these patients follow echo L.A. Raeven’s elaborate eating habits. The role of the twins’ relationship to eating disorders is also explored by Greenfield: one of the central figures in the film is Shelly, who has a twin sister named Kelly (figs. 147, 148). Naturally slightly skinnier than her identical twin, Shelly was obsessed with maintaining her thinner form. The two were, like most twins, extremely close growing up. They both started restricting their diet as juniors in high school, and their disorder progressively worsened in college. When Kelly spent time abroad, the twins grew apart. Kelly became less preoccupied with eating and her weight. By contrast,

¹²⁹ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, “Introduction” in Greenfield, *Thin*, 16.

¹³⁰ Greenfield, *Thin*, 78, 147.

the separation caused Shelly's anorexia and food restriction to become much worse.¹³¹

Much like Angelique and Liesbeth, when Shelly and Kelly split up, one twin struggled significantly.

Greenfield introduced another competitive woman from the clinic, also with a view to emphasizing the potentially problematic relationship between two very close women with tendencies towards eating disorders. Fourteen year-old Stephanie described an extremely competitive and unhealthy relationship with a friend, in which they challenged each other to lose weight and to exercise excessively. Stephanie explained, "She would monitor everything I ate and I would monitor everything she ate. She would call me and say, 'I ran 5 miles today.' Then I would say, 'I've got to go and run 10 miles.' Or I would see her run up the stairs and then go to class, and then I would use the hall pass so I could run up the stairs and burn those calories also."¹³² These tense and competitive relationships recall the pressures and discussions chronicled in both documentaries about L.A. Raeven, as well as in their work, such as *Proband A/B*.

In *Thin*, art plays a therapeutic role, in a similar way to Beecroft who used her drawings to explore her own bulimic tendencies. In one photograph, Greenfield shows the results of a body tracing exercise, a common practice in treatment of eating disorders because it allows women to see their distortion of their body size (fig. 149).¹³³ First, patients are asked to draw an outline of their body size onto a large piece of paper. Generally, they drastically overestimate the size of the bodies. The therapist will then

¹³¹ Greenfield, *Thin*, 94-96.

¹³² Quoted in Greenfield, *Thin*, 34.

¹³³ This can also be called a Body Contour Drawing (BCD). For more information, see Mary Rabin, *Art Therapy and Eating Disorders: The Self as Significant Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 40-42.

have the patient lay down inside the outline they drew and trace a new, more accurate line around their body.¹³⁴ In one photograph published in the catalogue, fifteen year-old Brittany stands next to a drawing that included her oversized outlines with the thin accurate outline inside. She had grossly exaggerated her shoulders and hips. Adding a few words to the drawing, Brittany wrote “yeah right” next to the line of her thin waist.

While this record of therapy is different from what L.A. Raeven and Beecroft create, all three artists engage in drawing extensively. As in the body tracing exercise, they each use art to exaggerate and distort their bodies, lengthening the limbs and necks. Beecroft focuses on contour lines for her drawings, though she separates out body parts and limbs. L.A. Raeven’s drawings are much more detailed, but often focus on the same people that the women at the Renfrew Center refer to as “thinspiration.” Lindsay Lohan and Nicole Richie are often mentioned in the journals of the women at Renfrew, and they also appear on a wall of images in L.A. Raeven’s apartment meant to serve as inspiration for their drawings.¹³⁵ One of the women that L.A. Raeven has drawn repeatedly is anorectic fashion model Isabelle Caro. Like the makeup they wore to make themselves look sicklier, in their characteristic, detailed pencil drawings, they emphasize Caro’s boniness and the dark circles under her eyes (2008, figs. 150, 151). The inspirations are the same for the girls at Renfrew, but L.A. Raeven has transformed it from part of a therapeutic process to a commodity of high art.¹³⁶ Their work, in its close resemblance to thinspiration and easily available pro-Ana and pro-Mia websites, is successful and profits

¹³⁴ Lisa D. Hinz, *Drawing from Within: Using Art to Treat Eating Disorders* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006), 119-20.

¹³⁵ Greenfield, *Thin*, 35, 171; and L.A. Raeven: *Beyond the Image*.

¹³⁶ Angelique discusses the drawings as necessary to her artistic process. She says she often hides some of the drawings from her dealer, Ellen de Bruijne, because the dealer can sell them very quickly. See L.A. Raeven: *Beyond the Image*.

because of their eating disorder. Their elevation of thinspiration to high art, however, provides a completely different view than on cult websites. The display of these works in galleries and important cultural institutions imbues it with an authority, one which seems to advocate for the disorder as a successful way for maintaining an ultra-thin body.

By airing on the successful cable television channel HBO in 2006, Lauren Greenfield's *Thin* has been given a platform to show and argue for in-patient treatment for eating disorders. The project extended beyond the film, as Greenfield continued to take photographs at Renfrew for an entire year after filming was complete, and also conducted detailed interviews after her subjects left treatment. These documents were compiled in the book of the same name. An exhibition, curated by Greenfield and Trudy Wilner Stack, brought together many of the photographs in the book with facsimiles of the patient's journals, and a shortened version of the documentary. In 2006 through 2010, the exhibition traveled to many college and university galleries, clearly appealing to a key demographic that suffers disproportionately from eating disorders and serving as a form of social outreach.

By casting very thin young women, and even children in their work, Beecroft in the 1990s and L.A. Raeven in the early 2000s have drawn attention to certain ways that women are encouraged to look in Western society while acknowledging that many of the women who conform to these ideals--such as fashion models--can only do so because they suffer from eating disorders. In contrast, exhibitions and documentaries like *Thin* can serve as a warning to young women who might be suffering from an eating disorder, or as a way of encouraging them to seek help. Beecroft and L.A. Raeven reject any kind of suggestion of therapy or of a need for help in their work, which heralds the very thin

body. Furthermore, the rules the artists set for their models paralleled rules they set for themselves. They have been complicit in the way the media discusses their bodies, largely allowing the media to shape the conversation in question. Their public identities and their work thus both hinge on a form of, more or less blatant endorsement of disordered eating.

As *Thin* and the artwork discussed here makes clear, eating disorders are often seen as a younger woman's problem. The median age for the onset of various types of disordered eating is now as young as twelve, with 3.8% of young women aged thirteen to seventeen said to be experiencing some type of eating disorder.¹³⁷ Significantly, as Vanessa Beecroft and Liesbeth and Angelique Raeven have aged, their work has become less aggressively concerned with body image (though their problems with food and disordered eating have continued). Beecroft has started exploring race, traveling to Africa and creating works that confront problematic race relationships across different countries. Dealing with consumer culture, L.A. Raeven has expanded their oeuvre to include work that explores the ways that the U.S. is governed by capitalist motives. Their work had been almost exclusively about their youth and their bodies, but as they age and their lives shift dramatically (the twins grow apart and Beecroft connects to celebrity culture and becomes a mother), their professional focus also shifts, to a degree; plus, their bodies are not as appealing to the media as they age.

¹³⁷ Madison Park, "Toll of Teen Eating Disorders Described," CNN.com, The Chart blog, entry posted March 7, 2011, <http://thechart.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/07/toll-of-teen-eating-disorders-described/> (accessed March 10, 2011); and National Institute of Mental Health, "Eating Disorders Among Children," July 29, 2010, http://www.nimh.nih.gov/statistics/1EAT_CHILD.shtml (accessed March 10, 2011).

Conclusion:

Greg: No, I'll tell you what I really got a better sense of in these last months, it was this: not just that beauty and stuff like that is only skin deep--we *always* hear that--but that it may not even actually exist. It's this mirage . . . some nonexistent thing, really, that we see on people's faces or in what we imagine their bodies to be and it has so little, I mean, absolutely almost no *real* value with anything important or tangible in our lives, and yet we can't stop from chasing it . . . *Why?* It has nothing to do with a person, or is such a small, small part of who they really are as human beings as to not even be of any consequence . . . or shouldn't be, in the scheme of things. And yet we can't stop staring at movies and TV shows and *tons* of magazines . . . all of 'em saying that beauty is this big deal. It isn't!

--Neil LaBute¹

In his 2008 play, *Reasons to Be Pretty*, Neil LaBute presents a discussion of what beauty means to both men and women, and its effects on heterosexual relationships and society-at-large. The play begins with an explosive fight between the protagonist Greg and his girlfriend Steph, who has been told about him fawning over a new girl at work. When comparing her to Steph, he was overheard saying, "Yeah, well, maybe Steph hasn't got a face like that girl's--maybe her face is just *regular*--but I wouldn't trade her for a million bucks."² Greg's use of the word "regular" infuriates Steph, and ultimately leads to their break-up. Greg is incapable of understanding why his use of the word "regular" is so upsetting, given that he loves her and wants to be with her no matter what she looks like. At the end of the play and after Steph has gotten engaged to someone else, Greg discusses what he has learned, emphasizing the intangibility of beauty and how it is disconnected from the actual identity and personality of people. Yet, as his failed relationship demonstrated, beauty and physical appearance are valued in society, despite Greg's epiphany that they should not be so revered.

¹ Neil LaBute, *Reasons to Be Pretty* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008), 125-26.

² LaBute, *Reasons to Be Pretty*, 16.

Reasons to Be Pretty was LaBute's third play in a trilogy about the way physique, body size, and prettiness function in society.³ In spite of his divisive reputation, LaBute's thoughtful evaluation of the pressures women face was an important inspiration for this dissertation. In his exploration of the way men and women pursue relationships, and the effect of that pursuit on the way women perceive themselves, LaBute has over the last ten years effectively described problematic aspects of dominant social perceptions of the female body.

My own work has covered the past forty years, and focused on the development of female body image as an important subject for visual artists. The thirteen artists whose work was discussed here have addressed the ways that women's bodies have been subjected to increasingly unrealistic demands by the mass media and other elements of the general culture. By creating drawings, paintings, films, photographs, and performances engaging with the topics of dieting, obesity, and eating disorders, the artists discussed here have illuminated the struggles that many women go through every day. Yet, it was only on account of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and '70s and its consciousness-raising tactics that such issues became so available for critical treatment. That is to say, insecurities and concerns surrounding female body image certainly existed before the 1960s, but it was not until the rise of the women's movement that women were able to freely, publicly, persistently address, challenge and critique the imposition of unrealistic female bodily norms

My original intention in writing this dissertation was to be as inclusive as possible, pushing beyond the boundaries of the United States, where the feminist art

³ *The Shape of Things* (2001) and *Fat Pig* (2004) complete the trilogy.

movement was especially concentrated. In fact, I have discussed artists from, or working in, Canada, the Netherlands, and France who have created artwork that engaged with patterns of disordered eating. But regardless of their nationality, the thirteen artists treated here are focusing on weight issues that have become particularly prevalent in the United States, which has led the way in privileging a thin female body, as various historians and sociologists have argued.⁴

I incorporated a variety of media in this dissertation, to emphasize that the subject of female body image is not relegated only to the literal representations of the body most commonly seen in photography or painting. From quilts to theatrical performances to a meat-dress, the artworks discussed here span all types of materials and objects.

Additionally, I wanted to make sure that this project was not just about thin bodies, so the dissertation includes artists like Rachel Rosenthal, who believed herself to be fat and inadequate, and Faith Ringgold, who was still dissatisfied with her body even after losing a significant amount of weight. The chapter, “Photographing Fat,” also introduces artists who created flattering images of larger bodies, as well as detailing the ways that artists, writers, and others have pushed for a redefinition of beauty that does not primarily center on thinness. At the other end of the spectrum, the bodies of twins Liesbeth and Angelique Raeven are described here as being too thin, to the point of being malnourished. What, of course, emerges out of this dissertation, is that the media and society-at-large are putting

⁴ Charlotte Cooper, “Maybe it Should Be Called Fat American Studies”; in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Laura Fraser, *Losing It: America’s Obsession with Weight and the Industry that Feeds on It* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994); Roberta Pollack Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1989); and Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

increasing amounts of pressure on women to be thin. Women, and for that matter, human beings generally, possess a wide variety of body types and sizes, all of which can be considered uniquely beautiful. Instead of celebrating differences, the media imposes harmful expectations and standards on what the female body should be, encouraging the proliferation of body image issues and eating disorders.

This dissertation may be the first of many scholarly studies to examine the subject of body image in art. It is only a beginning. Because of the limited scope of this project, I was unable to include a number of artists whose work might well be re-evaluated in this context. For example, painters Lucian Freud (b. 1922) and Jenny Saville (b. 1970) have often depicted women who are larger than average. Janine Antoni (b. 1964), Helen Chadwick (1953-1996), and Nicoletta Comand (b. 1965) have worked engagingly with food and edible objects to address the eating and dieting habits of women. In her 1985 film *Trick or Drink*, Vanalyne Green (b. 1948) examined her own battles with bulimia by reading family albums and adolescent diaries and by recreating crayon drawings. With further study of these and other artists, I hope we can advance the discussion of the problematic ways in which would-be ideal images of the female body are constructed and deployed with a view to lessening the pressures on women to look a certain way.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly discuss one artwork that actually forces the viewer to consider his or her own weight, Annetta Kapon's *Floor Scale* (1991, figs. 152, 153). Known for playing with repetition, minimalism, humorous juxtapositions, and repurposing of mundane, everyday objects, Kapon (b. 1950) was born in Greece where she completed her BA in English. She then continued her education in London, finally finishing her BFA and MFA in the United States, where she has lived since 1982. In her

interactive gallery installation *Floor Scale*, Kapon covered the gallery floor wall to wall with bathroom scales. Viewers are invited to enter the room, but to do so they must step on the scales, which then measured the weight of bodies as they move throughout the room.⁵ Kapon explained her attempt to capture weight through sculpture: “This measurability is often effected [sic] by addition, multiplication, subtraction. In the end, however, like all obsessional counting, these values do not come close to giving any definitive answers. Their function is rather to call into question both empiricist and rationalist ways of thinking.”⁶ Kapon recognized the absurdity of placing such an importance on numbers and measurements, and yet, if viewers choose to enter the room they must confront their weight, a number imbued with an immense power for many in Western society.

Margaret A. Morgan has described the reaction of viewers to the scales:

The floor measures the presence of every viewer, triggering tacit obsessions with body and body image, each onlooker a participant in the bizarre, because denatured, private ritual of seeing if one’s body *measures up* The scales’ erratic little dials are an endless dissatisfaction, an irritant, their shifting inconstancy a testimony to the elusiveness of the body’s ontology. True to latter-day clichés of the feminine, distortions of self-image tip and swing, like the gaze of a woman who stares at the tiny, distant dial at her feet, in front of her toes, beyond her foreshortened body, hers a gaze that runs over the object in question only to find it always, ineluctably, too much or not enough.⁷

⁵ Jacob Dahlgren’s *Heaven is a Place on Earth* (2006) is remarkably similar. Dahlgren’s piece included a different conglomeration of brightly colored Ikea bathroom scales arranged in the gallery in the same fashion that Kapon had fifteen years earlier. His work was first shown at the Bonniers Konsthall in Stockholm in 2006 and at Chelsea Art Museum’s 2007 show “Dangerous Beauty.”

⁶ Annetta Kapon, “Portfolio of Art Work: Measurability, Quantification, Repetition,” http://annetakapon.com/measurability/measure_floorscale1.htm (accessed May 25, 2008).

⁷ Margaret A. Morgan, “A Box, a Pipe, and a Piece of Plumbing,” in *Women in Dada: Essays on Sex, Gender and Identity*, ed. Naomi Sawelson-Gorse (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 71.

This public weighing recalls Weight Watchers meetings which used to begin with every person being weighed in front of the others, but it can also bring up more private experiences with a bathroom scale or at a doctor's appointment. A repeated viewing of the work would easily allow people to compare their weight to the last visit, forcing them to confront the changes or lack of changes that their bodies experienced since their last viewing. By forcing engaged viewers to measure their weight, Kapon's *Floor Scale* intentionally puts participants in an uncomfortable situation. And in putting the viewer on the scales, Kapon forces a direct involvement with her work. In the new millennium, many feminists are reluctant to become involved in activism, or even express ambivalence about calling themselves feminists. Deborah Siegel explains that the inconstant contemporary young feminist is a type of woman who watches *Sex and the City* and who could believe that dressing up like a Playboy bunny or stripper could serve as a form of empowerment. Elaborating further on young feminists, she says, "In many ways, they epitomize the dilemma of a generation: caught between the hope of a world that no longer degrades women and the reality of a culture that is still, nevertheless, degrading."⁸ Over ten years into what is sometimes called third wave feminism, no coherent mission or goal has emerged. Feminism has become increasingly global meantime, and varying types of ideas and goals may be folded into the term.

One trend that has emerged in the past ten years has been a surge in literature concerning positive body image. Roseanne Olson's project *This is Who I Am* (published 2008) is a collection of photographs of all different types of women, inclusive of various

⁸ Deborah Siegel, *Sisterhood, Interrupted: From Radical Women to Grrls Gone Wild* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 159.

ages, races, and sizes. All nude or draped in a sheer cloth, the women are posed to emphasize the shape of their bodies. She explains the project:

I wondered what would happen if I invited women of all shapes and sizes to discuss their feelings about their bodies and then let me photograph them in the nude. My goal was one of complete revelation--not hiding behind clothing but exposing both body and mind. What would we learn about ourselves? What would we learn from each other? Would we--could we--become more compassionate? Not only toward ourselves but toward one another?⁹

Similar to *Women En Large*, Olson's project was nonetheless more inclusive. This book is just one of many published in the last ten years that intends to instruct and help women create a more positive body image.¹⁰ Encouraging positive body image is a growing movement in other ways besides books, with the formation of organizations such as LoveYourBody.org, Adios Barbie, and Love Your Body Day, a group founded by the National Organization of Women. These texts and groups encourage women to be more accepting and less critical of their physiques, regardless of their size, and aim to counteract the media's deleterious messages about body size.

In their own examinations of the size of the female body, the thirteen artists addressed here took a variety of different stances. From the desire to alter the body for health or personal reasons to supporting the movement for fat acceptance, these artists are all contributing to the discussion about what a woman's body should and should not look like. As artists continue to challenge how our perceptions about weight and body size

⁹ Roxanne Olson, *This is Who I Am* (New York: Artisan, 2008), xi-x.

¹⁰ For example, Michelle Graham, *Wanting to Be Her: Body Image Secrets Victoria Won't Tell You* (Nottingham, UK: IVP Books, 2005); Sarah Maria, *Love Your Body, Love Your Life: Five Steps to End Negative Body Obsession and Start Living Happily and Confidently* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2009); Thomas E. Cash, *The Body Image Workbook: An Eight Step Program for Learning to Like Your Looks* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2008); and Pat Ballard, *Ten Steps to Loving Your Body (No Matter What Size You Are)* (Nashville, TN: Pearlsong Press, 2008).

have been molded, the conception of an ideal body size is increasingly revealed as a malignant cultural fiction. Furthermore, because publishers and advertisers rely heavily on airbrushing and retouching in their images, even those actual model bodies that most conform to the ideal have become increasingly unreal, not to mention impossible to emulate. The artists discussed here have presented a diverse range of female bodies and types, encouraging the viewing public to be more skeptical of media messages about the way the female body should look, and potentially more accepting of all shapes and sizes of women.

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