DISPLACED CONVERSATIONS

A Genealogy of Feminist Performance

Constance Zaytoun

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

May 17, 2011 — David Savran
Chair of Examining Committee
Distinguished Professor

May 17, 2011 — David Savran
Executive Officer
Distinguished Professor

Jean Graham-Jones
Professor

Alisa Solomon
Professor

Julie Malnig
Professor

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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by
Constance Zaytoun

Adviser: David Savran

A few months before he died, Jackson Pollock attended three performances of the Broadway premiere of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Unable to watch the play in its entirety, Pollock rushed out early each time, grief-stricken. Why did Pollock find it unbearable to witness *Godot*? And what can be understood by examining this (missed) encounter between two of the greatest postwar artists—one a painter and one a playwright? If I exchange the genders of Pollock and Beckett for women artists, these questions form the basis of the twin investigations of my project: 1) why does the act of witnessing feminist performance sometimes go awry at the intersection of performer and spectator; and 2) how may a genealogy of feminist performance reveal itself—specifically, how does performance art emerge from Pollock's action paintings and Beckett's *Godot* (and the encounter between the two), and how does feminist performance art develop as a response to postwar abstract

art in its hyper-masculinized form?

In following the trajectory of feminist performance art, I find conversations taking place among the works of painter Deborah Kass, performance artist Deb Margolin, and sculptor Hannah Wilke, similar to the conversation between Beckett and Pollock. The term "conversation" is not meant literally, since Beckett and Pollock never actually exchanged words and neither have the other artists who are "conversing" in this dissertation. Nonetheless, the works of these women speak to each other, and a significant exchange takes place that concerns common themes and practices indicative of feminist performance art and illuminates their work and their contributions to the feminist movement within U.S. culture. I identify this phenomenon as a "displaced conversation." A displaced conversation reverberates in the gap of a missed encounter between artists who share common artistic influences and who could, potentially, meet physically; that is, they run in distinct, but similar, artistic circles that allow for the possibility of common social, political, and aesthetic influences.

What I find most compelling about listening in on the displaced conversations taking place among these artists is that it reveals a new interdisciplinary narrative of feminist performance art. Although many scholars discuss a history of performance art as following a visual arts trajectory, and others suggest one following from avant-garde theatre practices, I construct a radical trajectory of feminist performance

that examines both perspectives simultaneously. Through these various conversations, I discover that a loose genealogy of feminist performance art begins to emerge like a family tree with many branches.

Moreover, each of these feminist artists engages in the exchange between artist and spectator, and the performative nature of her work provides agency for intervention and witnessing the Other. Witnessing their bodies and work places us into conversation within the exchange of performance, too, but the act of witnessing frequently goes awry. In the chapters of my dissertation, I draw on a rigorous theoretical understanding of the codes of parody, nostalgia, and the psychology of witnessing, and apply these theories in novel ways to examine why the act of witnessing these artists' work is sometimes traumatic. In particular, in regards to the work of Kass, I develop a theoretical foundation for a form of feminist nostalgia called *queer nostalgia*. Finally, in the epilogue, I tie together the displaced conversations among Kass, Margolin, and Wilke and observe how the current political climate affects the state of feminist performance art today. Visual artist Patricia Cronin enters the on-going conversation, specifically through her moturary sculpture, *Memorial to a Marriage,* 2002. Cronin's grave site sculpture inscribes a "future nostalgia" to suggest that only time can make the burden of witnessing easier. I hope that, by reading the pieced-together fabric of a feminist genealogy woven by the works of these women artists, as well as witnessing their radical

bodies in performance, we begin to see something new about performative identities in U.S. culture. Throughout this dissertation, I demonstrate how feminist performance investigates the intersection of the inner space of the artist with individual audience members; the conviction is that through this experience of intersubjectivity and bearing witness to those who suffer, feminist performance transforms each of us through empathy and an acceptance of difference.

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1.

Introduction. A Feminist Exchange: Bridging the Gap between Abstraction and the Body

A few months before he died, Jackson Pollock attended three performances of the New York Broadway premiere of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, at the John Golden Theater, directed by Herbert Berghof, starring Bert Lahr (Estragon), E.G. Marshall (Vladimir), Alvin Epstein (Lucky), and Kurt Kasznar (Pozzo).[1] It is reported that Pollock was unable to watch the play in its entirety, leaving each of the three performances prematurely and grief-stricken. In his second attempt to see the play, he brought his lover, Ruth Kligman, to accompany him. According to Kligman, who was then an ambitious twenty-six year-old aspiring art student and groupie,[2] Pollock was excited to introduce her to *Godot*, calling it "the most important play I've seen. It's abstract."[3] Although Kligman says she could not comprehend Beckett's play, "Jackson did. Every line made him cringe, he got more and more into the play, and by the time Alvin Epstein came out as Lucky, in the most thrilling performance, Jackson was beside himself. He started to cry."[4] Pollock

1. The Broadway production ran for sixty performances from 19 April 1956 to 9 June 1956. Pollock died on 11 August 1956.

2. According to her own account, Kligman intentionally sought out Pollock after their first encounter for the purpose of initiating an affair. See Ruth Kligman, *Love Affair: A Memoir of Jackson Pollock,* 2nd ed. (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1999), 40–41.

3. Ibid., 68.

4. Ibid.

left the theater and returned during the intermission, but the play grabbed hold of him again in the second act. Apparently, Pollock's crying turned into uncontrollable sobs and audible moans which disrupted the audience, and he had to shut his eyes to the action on stage until Kligman led him out of the theater where he remained unconsolable.[5]

Why did Pollock find it unbearable to witness *Waiting for Godot* given how deeply he recognized the play's import? And what can be understood by examining this thrice (missed) close encounter between two of the greatest postwar artists of different mediums—one a playwright and the other a painter? Applying these two questions to feminist artists, I form the basis of the twin investigations of my project: 1) why does the act of witnessing feminist performance sometimes goes awry at the intersection of performer and spectator; and 2) how may a genealogy of feminist performance reveal itself—specifically, how does performance art emerge from Pollock's action paintings and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (and the encounter between the two), and how does feminist performance art develop as a response to postwar abstract art in its hyper-masculinized form?

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5. For more descriptions of this encounter, see Peggy Phelan quoting Kligman's Memoir in "Lessons in Blindness from Samuel Beckett," *PMLA* 119, no. 5 (October 2004): 1281–82; Carter Ratcliff, *The Fate of Gesture: Jackson Pollock and Postwar American Art* (1996; repr., Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 121; Jeffrey Potter, *To a Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock* (New York: Putnam, 1985), 229; and Francis V. O'Connor, "Jackson Pollock: Down to the Weave," Eleventh Annual Pollock-Krasner Lecture, 16 August 1998 in *Such Desperate Joy: Imagining Jackson Pollock*, ed. Helen A. Harrison (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000), 193.

Having spent many years analyzing the work of the performance artist and playwright Deb Margolin, I find forms of "conversation," similar to the kind of conversation between Beckett and Pollock, taking place between Margolin and other feminist artists working in different artistic mediums. The term "conversation" is not meant in a literal sense, since Beckett and Pollock never actually met to exchange words, and neither have Margolin and the other artists who are conversing here—primarily the painter Deborah Kass, and the sculptor Hannah Wilke (who died from lymphoma in 1993). Nonetheless, the works of these women speak to each other, and a significant exchange takes place that concerns common themes and practices indicative of feminist performance art and illuminates their work and their contributions to the feminist movement.[6] I identify this phenomenon as a "displaced conversation." A displaced conversation reverberates in the gap of a missed encounter between artists who share common artistic influences and intentions and who, potentially, could meet physically; that is, they run in distinct, but similar, artistic circles that allow for the possibility of common social, political, and aesthetic influences. In the case of Margolin, Kass, and Wilke, interactions with history and their predecessors shape the content of their work, but while these artists are in conversation with the past, they are also in a displaced conversation with each other.

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6. Although some in the dominant culture believe that feminism is passé, these artists believe/d the movement is still, unfortunately, necessary.

Initially it may seem odd to place artists primarily known for their visual art, like Kass and Wilke, in conversation with a playwright and performer such as Margolin, but there is far less separating these three women than might be supposed. I find it more productive to group these artists together, rather than pairing Margolin's work with other contemporary feminist theatre/performance art practitioners such as, say, Holly Hughes and Karen Finley (who did begin their careers as visual artists but are no longer primarily attached to or identified with visual art and its intersection with theatre and performance), because, like much of Margolin's work, both Wilke's and Kass's appropriates and re-reads the past in a feminist context and draw upon collective memories within U.S. visual culture. Furthermore, many avant-garde artists in the last fifty years have crossed media with painting, sculpture, dance, film, photography, installation, or spoken word, making their work more difficult to categorize and complicating the divisions among visual art, performance art, and ultimately avant-garde theatre practices and performance.

The common denominator in the disciplines of avant-garde feminist performance and performance art, however, is the feminist's personal interest in, and use of, the female body as a conduit for new views and social change, and Kass, Margolin, and Wilke each employ a go-between in their work to help the spectator "see" the body. Wilke's "performalist self-portraits" (her moniker) required

someone to act as go-between and take the photograph so that her staged performative act would be revealed (and from 1978 on that "someone" was the life partner of her last fifteen years, Donald Goddard). In Kass's work, it is her reconfiguration of great and recognizable modernist and pop artists (such as Pollock, Stella, and Warhol) that serves as the go-between, enabling us to see "her" (her desiring body revealed) on the canvas where her cultural identifications are her painted subjects.[7] And throughout much of her career, Margolin has been characterized as a go-between whether she actively sought out the role or not. For example, it is Margolin's position as facilitator for the Split Britches collective, in between the primary couple of Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw, that better allows spectators to see not only Weaver and Shaw's marginalization but also the theatricalized celebration of their queerness. On the other hand, in Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan's co-authored essay, "Queerer Than Thou: Being and Deb Margolin," Margolin is employed to rehearse a drama between two people who were lovers at the time. In this essay Hart and Phelan, effectively mirroring Freudian analysis, use Margolin and her work to play out their own desires and paranoias between each

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7. Even Jackson Pollock needed Lee Krasner (who thought he was the greatest painter since Picasso, putting her own career on hold to take care of him and his work) to literally act as a physical go-between among Hans Hofmann, Clement Greenberg, Peggy Guggenheim, and others, so that his work would be seen and later championed by them; and then also Hans Namuth, who, with his filming of Pollock, acted as go-between with the larger public so they could witness Pollock's performance with paint.

other.[8]

But what I find most compelling is that, through listening to the displaced conversation between these artists and allowing the performative nature of their art to lead me, their work acts as my go-between for this project. By situating their work together, or rubbing them up against each other, I begin to see their art and impact more vividly, which in turn reveals a new interdisciplinary narrative of feminist performance art. Uncovering a dialogue between the disciplines of visual art and performance, I use the phrase "displaced conversations" to call attention to the crossings, missed encounters, and shared historical influences among emblematic NYC–based feminist artists in order to re-consider the ways in which we see the performativity of their work in contemporary visual culture. Although many scholars discuss a history of performance art as following a visual arts trajectory, and others suggest one following from avant-garde theatre practices, I construct a radical trajectory of feminist performance that examines both perspectives simultaneously and recognizes the interdisciplinary interactions between them.[9] A linear history of feminist art and performance is not my goal, nor

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8. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, "Queerer Than Thou: Being and Deb Margolin," *Theatre Journal* 47, no. 2 (May 1995): 269–82.

9. See Noël Carroll, "Performance," *Formations* 3 (Spring 1986): 63–79. Carroll separates art performance from performance art with performance art's origins in theatre. He says that art performance is influenced by abstract expressionism and Rosenberg's notion of action painting nudges art performance into the realm of performance, hence the beginnings of the two forms crossing over into each other's purview (66). I am grateful to Julie Malnig for pointing out Carroll's

is it clearly traceable; instead, through these various displaced conversations, I discover that a loose genealogy of feminist performance art begins to emerge like a family tree with many branches.

The genealogy I propose is not the only mapping that can be drawn; it is one conscious construction of a chain of intertextual references and a conversation revealed across history. Michel Foucault, in his argument for the privileging of genealogy over a linear narrative of history, explains that the branching nature of genealogy retrieves history "in the most unpromising places"[10] and that the genealogist "shortens [her] vision to those things nearest it—the body, the nervous system, nutrition, digestion, and energies."[11] Some of the lines of influence which I retrieve are close to the artist's body and are explicit—as we will see between Tennessee Williams and Deb Margolin—and some are more implicit—as is the case between Thornton Wilder and Deborah Kass. But both explicit and implicit lines are crucial to understanding the work of these artists as well as the insurgence of feminist performance.

Another way to look at my proposed genealogy beget by these artists is that,

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work to me.

10. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139.

11. Ibid., 155.

as in the style of Henry James, Margolin, Kass, and Wilke serve as "reflectors"—reflecting across the different branches of feminist traditions to create a displaced conversation regarding the multi-faceted narrative of the development of feminist performance art in New York's visual art and downtown theatre communities. The idea of using people as reflectors arose from James's decision to abandon fiction and write for the British theatre in the mid-1880s, which marked a critical and, if you will, dramatic shift in his writing style. While writing for the theatre proved to be a "stupendous failure," and his plays were sometimes met with "hisses and jeers"[12] from the displeased audience, when James returned to writing fiction he did so with a new understanding of his characters, the perspective of each, and the role of the narrator. In presenting the subject of his narrative, James presented the story to his audience by using characters with different perspectives, instead of creating an omniscient narrator who decides how and when to disclose parts of the story to ultimately reveal all to the reader.

Francis Fergusson describes Jamesean reflectors and the various dramatic structures James identified throughout his most-noted writing. He explains James's discovery and says:

> A novelist may and often does break down and tell all, while a

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12. The United Press, "Henry James's Play Fails.; Author and Players Were Received with Tumultuous Hissing," *New York Times*, Wednesday, 6 January 1895, under "Archives," http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9502E0DE103AE533A25755C0A9679C94649ED7CF (accessed 9 January 2010).

> writer for the stage never can. In this sense the novelist commands a resource not available to the dramatist. But this resource, so conceived, James disdained. He felt how easily it degenerated into mere formless loquacity. He preferred to dramatize the picture too, by viewing it through a consciousness different from his own, that of a character in the drama.[13]

Fergusson cites James, who explains that reflectors work like lamps surrounding a central subject: each reflector illuminates a particular intercourse and history and "would bring out to the full the latent color of the scene in question and cause it to illustrate, to the last drop, its bearing on my theme."[14] By examining Margolin's, Kass's, and Wilke's common influences, performances, and histories, I derepress a "herstory" of New York feminist performance art that began, largely, with Jackson Pollock's first dance with paint amidst the masculine artistic tradition.

Moreover, each of these feminist artists actively engages in the exchange between artistic performer and spectator, and the performative nature of her work provides agency for intervention and witnessing the Other, however difficult that may be. Witnessing these artists' bodies and work places us, too, into conversation within the exchange of performance, and that conversation can either be direct, displaced, or summarily dismissed with each of those three choices offering a basis for critical analysis. Unfortunately, the act of witnessing frequently goes awry with

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13. Francis Fergusson, "James's Idea of Dramatic Form," *The Kenyon Review* 5, no. 4 (Autumn 1943): 499.

14. Fergusson quoting James, 501.

Margolin's, Kass's, and Wilke's audiences; while very successful on myriad levels, each of these women artists has been ignored, misaligned, or misrepresented by critics—feminist and otherwise—at crucial points in her career, and not one has enjoyed the status of greatness accorded so many of her male counterparts.

My project, then, positions interrelated artists and gives them a place "to meet" in order to witness each other's work. Foucault observes, "genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body."[15] By listening in on their displaced conversations, I mean to guide spectators to see more clearly the socially marked body of these women artists within their work and that the resulting heightened performative exchange allows for a more informed and open reception to feminist production and its transformative possibilities.

A Failed Seeing of the Artist's Body

When I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I am doing. It is only after a sort of "get acquainted"period that I see what I have been about. . . . It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.
—Jackson Pollock[16]

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15. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 148.

16. Jackson Pollock, "My Painting," *Possibilities* (Winter 1947-48): 78–83, in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 17.

Although it is commonly posited that performance art's origins lie in the visual art world, less studied is how feminist performance emerged specifically from artists based in downtown New York. Performance art gained recognition as an art form in the early 1970s, and in 1979 RoseLee Goldberg wrote the first history of performance art, tracing its origins back to the Italian Futurists, Russian Constructivists, the Bauhaus, the Dadaists, and the Surrealists[17]—notably, all of these movements and corresponding artists produced work prior to World War II. As Marvin Carlson notes, Goldberg's history of performance art "is essentially the history of twentieth-century avant-garde theatre,"[18] and many academics continue to follow her foundational views and historical trajectory. Carlson goes on to explore performance art's relationship to earlier performances as old as those found at medieval fairs; however, retracing the origins of performance's history and how it developed into the avant-garde performance of the late twentieth century is not my purpose.[19] Instead, taking my cue from Peggy Phelan as well as Paul Schimmel, the curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, I contend that post–World War II abstract art marks a lesser-discussed beginning of performance

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17. See Roselee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1988). This edition is revised and enlarged; the original was published in 1979 as *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present.*

18. Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 84.

19. And it has already been done—cf. works by Goldberg, Carlson, Catherine Elwes, Jeanie Forte, and Lenora Champagne.

art, and the two primary artistic moments from which it emanates are Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Jackson Pollock's action paintings in combination with Hans Namuth's photographs and subsequent filming of Pollock's work.[20]

Moreover, returning to the earlier discussion of the difficulty Pollock had in witnessing *Godot*, although this meeting between two of the most important postwar artists in the West never physically occurred, even so, a significant exchange did take place both for Pollock and for subsequent critical readings of Pollock and Beckett across the history of art and performance. The (missed) encounter of Pollock and Beckett ushered in an era when witnessing performance bridged the gap between abstraction and the individual body and formal universal ideals met the socially and politically charged physical body within performance's exchange. It was this exchange that translated into postwar performance art, in general, and paved the way for feminist performance art, in particular.

What was Pollock struggling with artistically and personally that led to this important artistic exchange via performance and could justify such a bold claim regarding the source of feminist performance? Perhaps an investigation of Pollock's aesthetic trajectory prior to his attempts to view *Godot* will aid in understanding this foundation for a genealogy of feminist performance. Before his encounter with Didi

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20. I am indebted to Peggy Phelan for planting this seed in her History of Performance Art graduate class taught at NYU's Performance Studies program in the spring of 2002.

and Gogo, and precisely seven years prior to his death, Pollock rose to stardom in American culture when *Life* magazine featured him in a four-page exposé on 8 August 1949. Under a photograph of Pollock standing in front of his eighteen-foot-long painting *Summertime: Number 9A* (1948), the article's title boldly queries, "Is he the greatest living artist in the United States?" Dorothy Seiberling, the art editor for *Life* who wrote the article, does not necessarily answer the question,[21] but recognition from popular culture[22] as a result of the article in *Life* finally made the United States and the art world take more notice of Pollock and arguably placed him at the center of American Abstract Expressionism—and in direct competition with the likes of Willem de Kooning,[23] Arshile Gorky, and Mark Rothko. Prior to this moment no American artist had caught the public eye, and because art critics of the 1940s wanted U.S. culture to match its global presence,

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21. Seiberling once described how the editors of *Life* magazine received more than 500 letters in response to the query and only twenty of them were favorable towards Pollock's work. See Dorothy Seiberling in *Jackson Pollock: Love and Death on Long Island,* 1999 BBC documentary, produced and directed by Teresa Griffiths (London, Close Up for British Broadcasting Corporation, DVD, 2001).

22. Almost two years later for the 1 March 1951 American issue of *Vogue Magazine,* famous photographer and costume designer, Cecil Beaton used Pollock's drip paintings from his 1951 exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery as a backdrop to a couture fashion shoot. Beaton titled one of his fashion photographs with Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30, 1950* in the background *The New Soft Look*, 1951. Incidentally, in its 15 April 1950 issue, *Vogue* also printed Mark Rothko's *Number 8, 1949* in a decorating article discussing the merits of a "many-picture wall" versus a "one-picture" wall. The design article suggests that with a "one-picture" wall in a room featuring a large painting like Rothko's, the entire room will emanate a specific glow and design from that one piece.

23. de Kooning's competition with Pollock is well known, and after Pollock's death, not only did he declare himself "Number 1," in the art world but, to the astonishment of his colleagues, he also had an affair with Ruth Kligman.

Pollock's featured exposé and public recognition in many ways placed him—an American "cowboy" who was born in Cody, Wyoming, but who did not like horses nor could he ride[24]—at the right place at the right time.[25]

Modernist painters such as Picasso, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Klee, Miró, and Cézanne derived much of their work from recognizing and playing within the limitations of their medium—arranging paint, color, structure, shape, and light on the flat surface; that is, modernists are characteristically defined as using their art and all the components of their medium to call attention to art. Influenced by their predecessors, the abstract expressionists were unified by their connections to artistic philosophies, art history, and subconscious thoughts and feelings of the human psyche expressed in visual form. They were also connected by the community in which they worked; the majority of these artists painted in studios in downtown New York, were members of The Club,[26] gathered informally in the neighborhood to

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24. Pollock was born Paul Jackson Pollock on 28 January 1912 in Cody, Wyoming. He was raised in Arizona and California, and came to New York in 1929. There is one photograph of him as an adolescent wearing a cowboy outfit and hat and standing in a prairie-like setting; this perpetuated the idea that Pollock grew up as a Western cowboy. In the late 1920s he did assist his father with a surveying job on the north rim of the Grand Canyon, and along with his brothers, he explored Indian mounds near Phoenix at the home of the family for whom their mother worked as a housekeeper.

25. Many of the Abstract Expressionist community did not, in fact, see Pollock as the forerunner of their art movement, and they were also angry that the media hailed one American artist to represent the group. (Notably, de Kooning, Gorky, and Rothko were not born in the U.S.)

26. The Club, also known as the Artists' Club, emerged as a loose collective in 1948 through artists of the abstract school called "Subjects of the Artists" as well as Studio 35 in NYC who were seeking a more private environment to mutually support the abstract expressionist artists who were working alone either in their downtown lofts or, as in the case of Pollock and a few who followed him, in Springs. (In time, club memberships in the three would overlap.) Artists' Club members

socialize, drink, and discuss artwork, and loosely established what came to be known as the New York School.

Where the artists of the New York School broke away from their avant-garde predecessors was in the manner of fighting leftist socio-political battles, choosing instead to stand apart from conflicts in order to represent universal (if not mythical) Western values via American individualism. Although many of the abstract expressionists had made their living through the Works Progress Administration created under President Roosevelt's New Deal and were political in their personal lives (as a Trotskyite, Lee Krasner was once imprisoned, and Krasner and Pollock first met at a political rally/holiday party), these artists ultimately did not seek political statements in their work. Generally divided into two camps—color field artists (*e.g.*, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman) and gestural abstraction (*e.g.*, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning), or what the art critic Harold Rosenberg coined as "Action Painting" in 1952[27]—these artists incorporated both chance and control while painting with a physical immediacy and gesture.[28]

(primarily just abstract expressionist painters and sculptors) paid dues, created and attended programming, and hosted parties to honor artists who visited the United States such as Alexander Calder and Dylan Thomas. Members also invited critics, musicians, and writers (including Harold Rosenberg, John Cage, Hannah Arendt, and Joseph Campbell) to speak to the group. The Club had several locations in Greenwich Village before its demise in the spring of 1962.

27. Rosenberg originally published his essay, "The American Action Painters" in *Artnews* 51, no. 8 (December 1952): 22ff.

28. In the spring of 2008, New York's Jewish Museum's exhibition titled *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning, and American Art, 1940–1970* focused on the polarizing debate between Harold

Writing about "Action Painting," Rosenberg explains the movement:

> At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act —rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.[29]

More than twenty-five years after this assessment, art critic/historian Barbara Rose reevaluated the conclusions of Rosenberg's influential essay, suggesting it was based on an edited record of Pollock's artistic process. Holding up the "Action Painter" (namely Pollock) as a postwar Western cultural hero, the essay, Rose argues, misguidedly fostered an era which "created a nostalgia for the Man of Action"[30] who never really existed. Perhaps a hyperbolic aura of heroics surrounded Pollock, but the fact remains he did create something wholly new within his medium, and ever since that moment other artists (and Pollock himself) were motivated to create new work underneath the looming shadow of that nostalgic mythical hero; it is this nostalgia that is eventually reconfigured by feminist artists like Deborah Kass, as I will explore in my first chapter. With fluid commercial enamel house paints and the

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Rosenberg (his concern for the process and biographical reference) and Clement Greenberg (his concern for the formal object and idealism). See *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning and American Art, 1940-1970*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (New York: The Jewish Museum and Yale University Press, 2008).

29. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961), 25.

30. Barbara Rose, "Namuth's Photographs and the Pollock Myth; Part I: Media Impact and the Failure of Criticism," in *Pollock Painting,* by Hans Namuth, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: Agrinde Publications, Ltd., 1980), under "The Photographs."

physical action of his poured-dripped-flung gestural paintings, Pollock's "event" synthesized all of the modernist styles (Surrealism, Expressionism, Cubism), reacted against them, and as his wife Lee Krasner—an accomplished abstract expressionistic painter in her own right—stated, "popped the lid, so to speak."[31]

With the emergence of abstract expressionism after World War II, and particularly with the media's attention on Pollock, for the first time in history the focus of the international art world turned from Paris to New York and the New York School of painters.[32] While Pollock's paintings were ridiculed by much of mass culture as "anybody can do it/my kid can do it/I can do it,"[33] as abstract expressionist painter Milton Resnick describes, Pollock's work, image, and mythical story captured the public's imagination, and for the first time "America began to look at art"[34] by contemporary artists. Pollock's fame was instantaneous and unexpected —virtually unknown in 1944, he catapulted to celebrity status by 1948. Soon

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31. Lee Kranser, interview by Bruce Glaser, "Jackson Pollock: An Interview with Lee Krasner," *Arts Magazine* 41, no. 6 (April 1967): 36–39, in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 28.

32. See, for example, Greenberg's perceived destruction of the "easel picture" and its historical trajectory of European painters and which culminates in the avant garde paintings produced by artists in New York in Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture" in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 223–5.

33. Milton Resnick in *Jackson Pollock: Love and Death on Long Island,* 1999 BBC documentary, produced and directed by Teresa Griffiths (London, Close Up for British Broadcasting Corporation, DVD, 2001).

34. Ibid.

afterward, however, his public praise dwindled to ridicule as he was called both "Jack the Dripper"[35] and the James Dean of the art world—"a rebel without a cause." Pollock was burdened by expectations that he would continue to create drip paintings, and Phelan, in her reading of Pollock's multiple encounters with the production of Beckett's play, suggests that Pollock continued to return to "the scene of his failed seeing"[36] because he had become increasingly frustrated with the narrow definitions of abstract expressionism and was unable to deal with (and ultimately became a casualty of) his notorious fame.

"Jack the Dripper" was a demeaning title applied to Pollock during the last six years of his career, indicating that Pollock could not find anything new or worthwhile in painting and that the "great American cultural art project" and its heroic pioneer had failed. Indeed, following Pollock's untimely death, "Happenings" pioneer Allan Kaprow wrote that at first he mourned not only the death of an artist he knew well, but also one who died at the decline of his profession with modern art slipping away.[37] Within two years, however, Kaprow

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35. On 20 February 1956, *Time* magazine cynically referred to Jackson Pollock as "Jack the Dripper" in an article which identified Pollock and de Kooning as the first to be labeled Abstract Expressionists, with their work following the lead of previous European pioneers.

36. Peggy Phelan, "Lessons in Blindness from Samuel Beckett," *PMLA* 119, no. 5 (October 2004): 1282.

37. Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock (1958)," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1993), 1–2. At one time modern art and Abstract Expressionism represented the avant garde and critics like Greenberg would use the terms interchangeable, but with Minimalist, Pop Art, and Neo-Dadaist works emerging as the new avant

realized that, in fact, the accomplishments in Pollock's life and work were not pyrrhic; instead, through the performative nature of his painting, Pollock opened doors to significantly new representations that ultimately inspired Kaprow and other artists in the 1960s to create Happenings and other actions as they became "preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life."[38]

Most critics consider those drip paintings from 1947-1950—where the painted lines neither mark a boundary nor create a figure—Pollock's greatest achievement. He had finally accomplished what abstract expressionistic painters longed to achieve—a canvas in which the painted line is free "from its function of representing objects in the world, but also from its task of describing or bounding shapes or figures, whether abstract or representational, on the surface of the canvas."[39] But art critic and historian Michael Fried goes further and describes in great detail how something subtle and profound was always evolving in Pollock's work even during his drip phase—something which provides another reason why he might have reacted so strongly to watching *Waiting for Godot*. While other critics note how Pollock's work unsuccessfully reintroduced figures after his drip paintings, Fried

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garde in the mid-late fifties, many artists and critics had a difficult time recognizing modern art unfolding into these new practices.

38. Kaprow, "Legacy," 7.

39. Michael Fried, "Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 224.

observes that Pollock had reintroduced figuration as early as 1948, striving to achieve the seemingly impossible within abstract painting: "figuration within the stylistic context of his allover, optical style."[40] And even though, according to Fried, Pollock solved the duality of figuration/abstraction,[41] Pollock continued in his quest to find new forms of painting that synthesized abstraction, objectification, representation, figuration, and opticality, because, even with success, he refused to repeat himself as other abstract painters of his era did. Phelan describes how Pollock's struggle between the opposing scopes of abstraction and figuration in his art explains his repeated failure "to see" *Waiting for Godot*:

> Painting, whatever else it might be, is a drama of appearance. Looking for a way to create an appearance he could endure, Pollock encountered Didi and Gogo's struggles as versions of his own. Insofar as Beckett's play relies on actors, if not quite on characters, it responds to the comforting familiarity of the figurative, but insofar as the play ponders existence as a repetitious tragicomedy, it insists on the value of abstraction. Neither fully abstract nor fully figurative, Beckett's play exposes the vast space between these two expressive modes, a space Pollock was desperately trying to find in his late paintings.[42]

Fried notes that, in fact, Pollock did ultimately stumble upon a synthesis and "what are perhaps the most fecund paintings he ever made"[43] with his paintings of thinned

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40. Fried, "Three American Painters," 227.

41. Ibid, 226–7. See Fried's description of Pollock's painting, *Out of the Web*, 1949.

42. Phelan, "Lessons in Blindness," 1282.

43. Fried, "Three American Painters," 229.

black paint stained onto raw canvas of 1951, but unfortunately Pollock was no longer in a state in which he could harness or grasp his great potential.

Instead, Pollock wandered during the last six years of his life, confined by both critical and commercial expectation and plagued by chronic bouts of depression. Succumbing once more to his well-documented lifelong struggle with alcoholism in 1950,[44] Pollock painted very rarely or, on occasion, drunk[45] (a practice he had never indulged in the past—his studios and paintings represented a sacred solace away from his alcoholic demons). He met the noted beauty Ruth Kligman at the notorious artist-inhabited downtown Cedar Street Tavern in March 1956, almost a year after he painted what would become his last painting, *Search* (1955)[46]—its title far too telling given Pollock's continuous search to find something new. The fact that he had stopped working for almost a year, along with his intense affair with Kligman, in part, drove Krasner out of her home to Europe just one month prior to

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44. In March of 1950, Jackson Pollock's internist *cum* therapist, Dr. Edwin Heller, died in a car accident. Dr. Heller had successfully treated Pollock's alcoholism with weekly appointments and discussions. In November of that same year, Pollock finished filming with Namuth and Falkenberg and soon thereafter began to drink again, ending his longest period of sobriety which began with Dr. Heller in 1948.

45. The story goes that in an attempt to help their friend paint again, one drunken evening sculptor Tony Smith and painter Barnett Newman took Pollock to his studio, rolled out a canvas on the floor, and with some exchange among his friends, Pollock began painting *Blue poles: Number 11, 1952*. The artists' footprints are embedded within the painting, some in paint and some in blood as they stepped on the broken glass of the basting tubes which Pollock had used to apply some of the paint (and those glass fragments are in the painting as well). Today, in the studio at Springs, one can see the blue paint outline from the square poles as well as blue footprints.

46. Ironically, when Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock first met, the painting of his that she observed was titled *Birth* (circa 1941).

the fatal car accident in which Kligman survived but her friend Edith Metzger was killed along with Pollock.

As Phelan suggests, perhaps his searching without finding (or failing to see what he had already found) is what profoundly pained Pollock when he encountered the struggles and inevitable failures of similar tramps, Didi and Gogo,[47] as they waited, unable to move. Waiting similarly in the theater, Pollock immediately identified with Vladimir and Estragon within the first few moments of the play; he vividly understood their accounts of giving up on simple daily routines like pulling off a boot, not trying every option in life's struggle, sleeping in a ditch, beatings by various lots, and, as Vladimir says, how all of it is "too much for one man. On the other hand what's the good of losing heart now. . . . We should have thought of it a million years ago."[48] Phelan describes how "Beckett's play exposes us to the disconcerting fact that in the act of waiting we can sometimes begin to see what makes our usual not seeing such a vital failure."[49]

Waiting with Didi and Gogo in that theatre space at last seems to have caused Pollock to confront his long-ago failure to see his own work. Back in October 1950, on the final day of filming with Hans Namuth, Pollock began drinking heavily

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47. Phelan, "Lessons in Blindness," 1282–83.

48. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: Tragicomedy in 2 Acts* (1956; repr., New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1982), act 1, 7.

49. Phelan, "Lessons in Blindness," 1283.

again, and Namuth, one of several dinner guests in attendance, speculates that Pollock's path toward self-destruction began that evening precisely because Pollock sensed a crisis and a transition within his painting and technique.[50] In an echo of his description of his painting process (the epigraph for this section), Pollock had difficulty "getting acquainted" with this new period and could not "see what [he had] been about." The technical aspects of filming his painting process had forced Pollock to break down his performative act and destructure his process, and, for most artists, creation through step-by-step technique is deadly. Pollock stated that "technique is just a means for arriving at a statement,"[51] and, as Milton Resnick describes, when an artist is trapped by technique, it is difficult to get out of it. In Pollock's case, because he was not authentically painting for the film, but rather performing for (and ultimately *seeing* and repeating his technique through) the camera, he began to feel fraudulent.[52] Famously, that evening with Namuth, the drunken Pollock "playfully" threatened Namuth with cow bells and yelled, "I'm not

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50. Hans Namuth, "Photographing Pollock," in *Pollock Painting*, by Hans Namuth, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: Agrinde Publications, Ltd., 1980), under "Introduction."

51. Jackson Pollock, interview by William Wright, late 1950, Springs, Long Island, NY and broadcast on radio staion WERI, Westerly, RI, 1951, in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 23. This interview took place just after the Namuth filming and this line is also repeated in the film's narration by Pollock, in *Jackson Pollock '51,* 1951 motion picture, produced and directed by Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg with Morton Feldman, composer (New York, viewed at the Pollock-Krasner studio in Springs on 22 May 2010). To view for educational purposes see http://www.ubu.com/film/namuth_pollock.html.

52. Resnick in *Jackson Pollock: Love and Death on Long Island*.

a phony, you're a phony!"

Thus, while Pollock ultimately failed three times to complete the act of witnessing *Waiting for Godot*, as his body revealed, he did recognize the play's abstraction clearly and poignantly through his abbreviated exchanges with the production. Beckett began writing *Godot* in Paris in October of 1948 in the middle of the era when Pollock was creating those celebrated drip paintings out at his studio barn in the town of Springs, in East Hampton, New York (see fig. 1).[53] In other words, these two artists created their most famous works at the same moment in history without knowing about each other. But certainly Pollock recognized in Beckett another artist addressing contemporary issues similar to his own. Pollock understood abstract performance (in that objectives and actions do not motivate the narrative) and how its characters (thinly veiled actors) stand in for the human condition and imagination. What is central to my claim is that an exchange through witnessing that bridges the gap between abstraction and the body, like the one Pollock experienced with *Godot*, is the proto-typical feminist performance art

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53. There is a first edition of *Godot* in the Krasner/Pollock house, but no indication that he ever read the text nor how it came to their collection, except that the play did enter their library before he died. The catalogue note for their personal collection comes from Krasner's assistant, James Valliere, and it reads "Mrs. Pollock says he went to the play," but because Pollock did not like to read, it is doubtful that he read the text. Jeffrey Potter's oral biography, cited previously, shows that in his records, the artist Nick Carone first urged Pollock to see the play (229), but Phong Bui, publisher of *The Brooklyn Rail* who was once a student of Carone's says that Carone once told him the story of how he gave the text to Pollock. See Phong Bui, e-mail message to author, 13 August 2010.

experience which began in the twentieth century.

The difficulty and importance of witnessing is also central to my project. As Deb Margolin writes, "solitary confinement leads to madness, as it obviates the possibility of Witness."[54] During his second encounter with the play, as told by Kligman, Pollock's breakdown which led to his leaving the theater occurred at the moment in Act I when Pozzo enters with the roped and whipped Lucky. (Did Pollock ultimately hear Lucky's long recitation, or did he always depart before that scene?)[55] Something about the enactment of this more primal sado-masochistic relationship severely disturbed Pollock, and the image of Lucky enslaved forced him to avert his eyes and moan. Lucky, the former teacher, finds that his usefulness is failing, and now Pozzo wishes to sell him at the fair, even though it would be best to kill him. "*Lucky weeps*,"[56] and so does Pollock, audibly; these sentiments in relation to the once-great heroic painter who simultaneously believed himself to be innovative and fraudulent must have felt far too prophetic to bear.

Perhaps Pollock recognized (or saw for the first time?) himself and his art from his past, and his mourning for his life's history overwhelmed him; or was he, in

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54. Deb Margolin, "'To Speak Is to Suffer' and Vice Versa," *The Drama Review* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 95.

55. According to Francis O'Connor's description of the event, Pollock first retreated to the bar and did not leave the theater until his breakdown during the second act, and Ruth Kligman says that he left in Act I to retreat to the bathroom and then upon his return to her at intermission, said that he stayed at the bar until the end of Act I. See O'Connor, "Jackson Pollock: Down to the Weave,"193.

56. Beckett, *Godot,* 21.

fact, *unable* to witness himself (feeling like a phony) or accept others' witnessing of both him and his work (i.e, Krasner, Namuth, Kligman, Greenberg and other art critics, the art world, and U.S. culture at large). As such, did Pollock move, unlike Didi and Gogo, both out of the theater and out of relation to those who witnessed him? Didi and Gogo simultaneously live in pain and in relationship to one another, but Pollock cannot endure the recognition and the dualities of his life. He tells Jeffrey Potter about his experience with Godot, "I couldn't take it. I walked out . . . I felt my guts being pulled out backwards every time. Like one of those births they have to drag you out, cut you out."[57] Unfortunately, it does not seem that Pollock ever heard Pozzo's departing words to Didi and Gogo regarding the birth and brevity of human life:

> Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (*Calmer*.) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.[58]

After this encounter, Vladimir (but not the absent Pollock) recognizes that Pozzo, although blind, now *sees* himself, Lucky, Didi, Gogo, and humanity in a way that he

57. Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, 229.

58. Beckett, *Godot*, act 2, 57.

did not when they last met.[59] Vladimir realizes that "habit is a great deadener" to hear the cries of humanity; we sleep and fail to see within our lifetime.[60]

The Visible Roots of Performance Art

While Pollock was profoundly moved by the abstract nature of Beckett's play, Beckett, who had a long history of interest in painting and art before writing his first play, recognized the performative nature of painting and proposed that painting (especially postwar abstract painting) is indeed both an act and an event to be witnessed.[61] Pollock danced in order to paint, and his performance of gesture left a timeless, borderless, beautiful residue. He danced with purpose. As Kaprow states, "Pollock, interrupting his work, would judge his 'acts' very shrewdly and carefully for long periods before going into another 'act.' He knew the difference between a good gesture and a bad one."[62] But how did Kaprow know how Pollock judged his acts and gestures?

In the summer of 1950, Namuth began documenting Pollock at work, although the artistic meeting almost did not take place. As Namuth tells the story,

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59. Ibid, 57–58.

60. Ibid, 58.

61. Phelan, "Lessons in Blindness," 1283–84.

62. Kaprow, "Legacy," 4.

when he arrived to take the photographs, Pollock apologized that the painting was already finished. Disappointed, Namuth asked if he could see the work, and Pollock and Krasner led him to the barn where the wet painting remained on the floor. Without warning, Pollock picked-up a brush (or stick?)[63] and paint can and began to move and dance around the canvas flinging paint, seemingly because he realized the painting was not, in fact, complete. Namuth photographed his dance for thirty minutes; Pollock did not stop moving the entire time, and Krasner says it was the first time Pollock permitted someone other than herself to watch him paint.

Over the course of the summer, Namuth returned for other painting sessions, and even though no buyer took an interest in Namuth's still photographs, he decided that he wanted to film Pollock in action. This performance of the artist's body as seen in the final version of the film, edited and co-produced by Paul Falkenberg,[64] is eleven minutes long with Pollock narrating some of the footage. In June of 1951 the film was shown at MoMA for the first time, and by 1952 its distribution in the art world took off, both in the United States and abroad.[65] This film represents an act of witnessing of fundamental importance. For the first time

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63. During this period, even when Pollock used brushes, he used them as a stick (and sometimes he just used sticks). Regardless, the tool of choice did not touch the canvas.

64. This was Namuth's first attempt at film, and through out-takes of the filming, it is obvious that, particularly at the beginning of the process, Namuth had difficulty with the scope of the lens and his focus on Pollock at work. He then brought in Paul Falkenberg to assist with the technical aspects of the filming.

65. Namuth, "Photographing Pollock," under "Introduction."

painting was viewed as a performative act, because, as Barbara Rose discusses, the film's audiences focussed on the action of Pollock's painting process.[66] Critics, historians, and other spectators (including Namuth and Falkenberg) witnessed not only Pollock the artist and his art, but recognized how a live action, perhaps even a theatrical event, produces an object/relic from the action, a relic which can itself be perceived as performative or theatrical.[67] Drama, as Harold Rosenberg describes action painting, is invoked into a visual art form that contains a distinct action and a spectator who receives the act.[68]

Such an appreciation is a necessary precursor of the field of performance art,

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66. Barbara Rose, "Jackson Pollock: The Artist as Culture Hero," in *Pollock Painting*, by Hans Namuth, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: Agrinde Publications, Ltd., 1980), under "Introduction."

67. It is important to realize that Namuth's film of Pollock is a dramatic film and not a documentary. As the film's out-takes make clear, not only does Namuth ask Pollock to repeat certain acts for the benefit of the film, but many gestures must be re-performed or even interrupted—such as when wind disturbs the canvas, or when Namuth stops filming because Pollock turns his back to the camera, or when Pollock's first attempt to paint on glass is no good and he starts again—but Namuth also instructs Pollock to re-paint so that he can better capture Pollock *performing* his painting. Originally the film's title was "Jackson Pollock '50" with Pollock painting his signature and date within the first frames of footage, but when the release date was later than expected, Pollock was re-filmed painting the words"Jackson Pollock '51." Also, the large red sail cloth that Pollock spread outside on the concrete slab in his back yard becomes the primary canvas for Namuth's filming; however, because of the weeks of repetition of performance required for the filming, Pollock, in fact, "lost" that painting during the filming process (as far as his artistic judgement was concerned) and, ultimately, the sail cloth painting was destroyed. So Pollock's primary performance of Pollock-as-painter, in this film, was performance for performance's sake and did not produce an art object. This marks the first performance of Pollock in film, but another in the film exists with a montage of a figure in the shadows flinging paint. Through the out-takes it is obvious, through an error of walking into the camera's frame, that the shadowed performance of Pollock is in fact, Hans Namuth playing Pollock dancing with paint. I am grateful to Helen Harrison, director of the Pollock-Krasner House and Studio, for providing me access to view the film's out-takes when I visited Springs in May 2010.

68. Rosenberg, "American Action," 27–29.

which only *sometimes* produces an object or relic. In Schimmel's introductory essay for the catalogue published for MOCA's 1998 touring exhibition, "Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949–1979," he identifies the origins of performance art as birthed by four fathers: Jackson Pollock, Lucio Fontana, Shōzō Shimamoto and John Cage.[69] Their compositions, be they paintings, sculpture, or music, Schimmel argues, produced a heretofore unconsidered dimension for analysis of an object of art: the idea that the action of the artist and the artist's body cannot be separated from the object of art produced—an object which is often unrepeatable and impermanent. Schimmel further demonstrates how the "fragility of creation, subject as it was to the forces of destruction of unprecedented magnitude,"[70] had an impact on postwar artists on three different continents. Haunted by the battlefield destruction of World War II, horrified by the premeditated genocide perpetrated by the Germans, and with the devastating bombings of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki serving as a reminder that instant nuclear annihilation loomed at any moment, these four action artists felt impelled to

69. Paul Schimmel, "Leap into the Void: Performance and the Object," in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 18. While Cage's compositions are well known here in the United States, Fontana, as Schimmel describes, was born in Argentina but moved to Italy in 1947. He challenged the surface of painting with perforations and lacerations in order to create space; he called his works Concetti spaziali (Spacial Concepts). In Japan Shimamoto called his paintings *Holes Series*; in these works he layered and stretched newspapers, painted the surface, and then puncture the surface with holes. Later he created works by filling jars with paint and throwing them against the canvas.

70. Ibid, 17.

examine the act of creation combined with its own destruction within the body of their work.

For these artists the "beginning and end became their subject—a subject driven by an overriding preoccupation with the temporal dimension of the act."[71] Indeed, Allan Kaprow wrote about the legacy of Pollock's art, discussing how he simultaneously created and destroyed painting,[72] at least painting as it was known up until 1956. In the voiceover for the Namuth/Falkenberg film, Pollock himself stated of his work: "I can control the flow of the paint; there is no accident, just as there is no beginning and no end. Sometimes I lose a painting. But I have no fear of changes, of destroying the image. Because a painting has a life of its own. I kind of let it live."[73] With the quality and scope of fine art's process and representative object merging with qualities of live art, performance art emerged from the performative actions and temporal gestures that Schimmel traces through these four "fatherly" artists—Pollock, Cage, Fontana, and Shimamoto—and led to the work from the Gutai (*e.g.*, Kazuo Shiraga), *Nouveau Réalisme* (*e.g.*, Yves Klein), Happenings (*e.g.*, Claes Oldenburg), Viennese *Aktionist* (*e.g.*, Rudolf Schwarzkogler), Fluxus (*e.g.*,

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71. Ibid.

72. Kaprow, "Legacy," 2.

73. Jackson Pollock, "Narration Spoken by Jackson Pollock in Film by Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg 1951," in *Pollock Painting*, by Hans Namuth, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: Agrinde Publications, Ltd., 1980), under "Essays."

Joseph Beuys), Judson Memorial Church Dance Theatre (*e.g.,* Trisha Brown), and the like in the avant-garde locus of performance, theatre, film, dance, sculpture, and painting in downtown New York. As such, artists across mediums deliberately chose to experiment with an interdisciplinary approach to their work, refused to identify with just one genre; their work also engaged with the performance and actions of the body and/or bodies interactions within their installations.

Branching Out of Invisibility

Influenced by many of the artists above, yet insisting on not being governed by men within the male-dominated art world, painter Carolee Schneemann broke ground for women artists when she boldly asserted her own naked body at the center of the large constructed multi-panelled three-dimensional painting, *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions,* 1963. Schneemann sculpted her body into her large paintings displayed on various levels and created an instant improvised montage for each of the "36 actions." Seeking integration between the artist's body and art object, Schneemann literally embodies Pollock's description of his own painting when he wrote, "on the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be *in* the painting."[74] Both the subject and object meet when the artist works *inside* her or his

74. Pollock, "My Painting," 17.

action painting.

Although the painted performance was privately viewed in her SoHo loft with "two and a half hours of improvisatory collage,"[75] Schneemann had each action image photographed ("eyed" 36 times) in black and white by Icelandic-Parisian painter and friend, Erró. Describing the work, Schneemann writes:

> I wanted my actual body to be combined with the work as an integral material—a further dimension of the construction... I am both image maker and image. The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring, but it is as well votive: marked, written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will.[76]

While Yves Klein directed the naked bodies of female models as "brushes" for his painting events in front of an invited audience (see *Anthropometries of the Blue Period*, 1960) , Schneemann, who regards herself primarily as a painter, insisted on directing the gesture of the female form herself. By using (and painting on) her own nude body—with all of its cultural, social, biological, and personal significations—within her art, she returned the woman's body back to women, all the while acknowledging that her body is exchanged and perceived through the gaze of other "eyes." Discussing the work of fellow feminist performance artists, Schneemann describes how their "work seized dynamic implications of Abstract Expressionism to extend

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75. Carolee Schneemann, interview by Robert Ayers, "Carolee Schneemann," ARTINFO, http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/10665/carolee-schneemann (accessed 5 February 2010).

76. Carolee Schneemann, "Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions, 1963," Carolee Schneemann Web site, http://caroleeschneemann.com/eyebody.html (accessed 5 February 2010).

the active visual surface of painting into actual physical space and time, and to de-materialize the frame, the object, the aesthetic commodity."[77]

Phelan observes that "it's always ironic that in real life paternity is often denied, while in history writing not a mother can be found and fathers are everywhere."[78] In this vein, then, if Pollock, Cage, Fontana, and Shimamoto are the "fathers" of the movement leading into performance art, I contend that artists Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, Yvonne Rainer, and Hannah Wilke are the mothers of feminist performance's birthright, which, in fact, was influenced by the New York School (and their absence within) and began in New York's avant-garde community years prior to Judy Chicago's better known program for feminist art at California State University, Fresno in 1970.[79] The work of Chicago, Miriam Shapiro, Mira Schor, Faith Wilding, Suzanne Lacy, Alison Knowles, Linda Montano, Rachel Rosenthal, and Eleanor Antin, among others, established Southern California as the

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77. Carolee Schneemann, "The Obscene Body/Politic," in "Censorship II," ed. Barbara Hoffman and Robert Storr, special issue, *Art Journal* 50, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 31.

78. Peggy Phelan, "Shards of a History of Performance Art: Pollock and Namuth Through a Glass, Darkly," in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 502.

79. A year later Judy Chicago relocated the program, teaming up with Miriam Schapiro at Cal Arts in the fall of 1971, and together as Co-Directors they established the leading and most influential Feminist Art Program in the country. Within their first year, twenty-five women students led by the conception of fellow staff member, Paula Harper, created the group's first project *Womanhouse* (1972) which included productions by students such as Mira Schor and Faith Wilding and was open to the public from 30 January–28 February 1972. For a detailed description of *Womanhouse* see http://womanhouse.refugia.net/ (accessed 26 March 2010), and for a text of the *Womanhouse* catalog essay by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro see http://www.suzyspence.com/womanhouse/Womanhousecatalogessay.pdf (accessed 25 March 2010).

hot-bed for a community of collaborative feminist performance in the 1970s; but in New York in the 1960s, the feminist artistic predecessors to this influential movement worked, with few exceptions, primarily alone or in a community that included male artists.

My project examines one of these "mothers," in particular, whose work's impact is perhaps not acknowledged or commended by scholars in the same manner as the other mothers, but who, in fact, began her feminist project just prior to her colleagues. As early as 1959 Hannah Wilke began inserting female bodies, and specifically, female genitalia, into her art. She created what she called "Box" sculptures—abstract vaginal imagery contained within small handmade organic boxes which she repeated in different forms. While she first worked with plaster, fiberglass, and metal, Wilke found the materials not pliable enough to her liking, so she turned to clay boxes, marking the beginning of the fragile clay vaginal folds of varying sizes which she sculpted throughout her extensive repertoire (see, for example, *176 One-Fold Gestural Sculptures,* fig. 2). Wilke's first ceramic boxes are a performative act that extends from abstract expressionism; not only does Wilke call into being explicit gestures of the female form through these sculptures, but she also leaves her mark on these pieces by allowing her fingerprints to remain visible—a more concrete visible gesture of retaining her body within the work. And, indeed, she was the first artist (feminist or otherwise) to sculpt an abstract gesture explicitly

from the vaginal form. Unfortunately, Wilke was not written into history or celebrated for her originality, which predated the widely celebrated vaginal iconography of Judy Chicago (namely *The Dinner Party*, 1974-1979). This historical omission was largely because of conflicts Wilke encountered with women within meetings of the *Heresies* collective,[80] as well as due to the influential feminist art critic Lucy Lippard, who removed her original citation of Wilke's work from a widely circulated art anthology published in 1968.[81]

It seems that now, only after Wilke's tragic battle with lymphatic cancer (which she incorporated into her art), critics and historians have begun the process of re-historicizing her work and placement in the field. Indeed, Lippard now claims that she does not remember why she decided to omit Wilke from the 1968 anthology,[82] because she says she always liked Wilke's work. In an interview with

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80. For example, Wilke once brought her partner, Donald Goddard, to a meeting much to the dismay of most of the membership. Also, in 1975 the Center for Feminist Art Historical Studies in Los Angeles invited Wilke to create work in response to the query "What is Feminist Art?" Wilke's subsequent poster, *Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism,* featured the text and a photograph of Wilke from her *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* (1974-82), in which she affixed her chewing gum sculptures to her naked torso and (in this particular pose) wore a man's tie. The poster was exhibited at the Women's Building, Los Angeles, in 1977, and Wilke later donated it for auction at a *Heresies* benefit. Unfortunately, the collective did not respond well to the poster (which Wilke intended as a challenge to their criticisms of her work), and the poster was displayed in the back room.

81. Saundra Goldman, "Heresies and History: Hannah Wilke and the American Feminist Art Movement," in *Hannah Wilke Exchange Values* (Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain: ARTIUM Centro Museo Vasco de Arte Contemporaneo, 2006), 160.

82. Lippard's chapter "Eros Presumptive" in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968) is a revision of her article published under the same title in *The Hudson Review* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1967): 91–9, which includes her discussion and images of Wilke's early ceramic vagina abstract sculptures.

art historian Saundra Goldman, Lippard attempts to reassess her decision: "I wish I remembered why because she really was the forerunner of Judy [Chicago]'s vaginal stuff." She continues and reveals perhaps "why" in stating, "Hannah was an incredible flirt. . . . A lot of what she was doing made me uncomfortable, which probably meant it was good."[83] Here is another example of witnessing gone awry—the act of witnessing too difficult to allow for an open exchange between artist and spectator. Perhaps the reevaluation of Wilke has taken place because some critics view her now as a "misunderstood mythic she-ro," much like critics viewed Pollock (though, unlike Pollock, most of Wilke's struggles were caused by outside sources and not her own personal demons). In the movement that is feminist art and feminist performance art,[84] Wilke valued not only subjectivity, but also the creation of one's own myth. Her partner and widower, Donald Goddard, says that Wilke always taught her students to "create and become your own myth."[85]

At this point I should reiterate that my attempt is to trace a genealogy of feminist performance art, and that, although Wilke always thought of herself

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83. Goldman quoting Lippard, "Heresies and History," 162.

84. Wilke believed "Feminism" is a movement just like Impressionism, Surrealism, Minimalism, and when its mission is completed, Feminism will be replaced by another movement. See Donald Goddard, interview by author, New York, NY, 31 March 2009.

85. Donald Goddard, interview by author, New York, NY, 23 September 2007.

primarily as a sculptor, I suggest that her art was both performative and theatrical. Moreover, her gestures link her work to the beginnings of feminist performance art, which Wilke continued to develop and explore throughout her career. Wilke was a feminist innovator, and the canvas upon which she acted with her culturally marked body took many forms, from sculptures to paintings to performances to film and photography. In 2008 at the Neuberger Museum of Art, in Purchase, NY, Tracey Fitzpatrick curated an exhibition of Wilke's art titled, "Hannah Wilke: Gestures." Fitzpatrick's aims were to re-establish Wilke's work as a sculptor; to trace her sculptures through Wilke's malleable mediums of clay, latex, erasers, laundry lint, bacon, Play-Doh®, various store-bought/found objects, and chewing gum; and to demonstrate how all of Wilke's work in performance art and photographed performalist self-portraits arose from the sculpting of her own body as an object.[86]

In performance art the primacy of the body in action ultimately overrides the value of the object or the relic created. Just as Pollock left his cigarette butts or his handprint in his paintings, such as in the upper right corner of *Number 1, 1950 [Lavender Mist]*, Wilke leaves fingerprints in her sculptures and other traces of herself/her body within her art and performances. And, when Wilke began to lose her hair from chemotherapy treatments in 1992, she sculpted her hair that fell out to

86. *Hannah Wilke: Gestures*, curated by Tracy Fitzpatrick, Neuberger Museum of Art, 3 October 2008–25 January 2009.

create a series of *Brushstrokes* (see fig. 3).[87] Thus, Wilke transforms her illness into a performative act that produces her art object. She states, "I became my art and my art becomes me."[88] Her sculptural gestures are the fulfilment of what Jackson Pollock began with action painting. Pollock's body was primarily an extension of the sticks he used to paint, but Wilke takes the action a step further and places her body into her art to bridge the gap between abstract art and the body.

Like Wilke, none of the artists whose work I examine in this project consider themselves "performance artists," per se. Deborah Kass identifies herself as a painter, while Deb Margolin fundamentally considers herself a playwright, though, if pressed, admits that she is a performance artist (and now embraces the distinction between the two).[89] But whether they are abstract expressionist painters using actions to create a canvas, or visual artists sculpting their bodies within the fleeting act/performance (only perhaps recorded via photographs, film, or relics), or theatre practitioners who choose to move from behind the mask of the character and perform with an actor/persona translucent duality, these artists highlight both the act and the personal/body in their creation of art which cannot be repeated, re-

87. See, for example, *Brushstrokes #1, January 15, 1992*, hair on Arches paper.

88. Hannah Wilke, quoted in Tracy Fitzpatrick, "Hannah Wilke: Sculptor and Sculture," (lecture, Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY, 6 December 2008), Brooklyn Museum Web site, blip.tv video file, 42:01, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/video/index.php?cat=Lectures (accessed 25 March 2010).

89. Deb Margolin, interview by Douglas Langworthy, "Deb Margolin: Take Back Your Proscenium," *American Theatre* 13, no. 5 (May/June 1996): 38.

created, or imitated in its exact form.

Just as the act of performance makes present that which is absent (as Peggy Phelan thoroughly argues throughout *Unmarked*),[90] so, too, do the objects that Hannah Wilke created, in that they are of unseen or unspoken subjects. Performance also bears traces but can never be repeated, and Wilke's works are usually assembled from fragile materials or displayed in a manner in which they could be easily destroyed or broken. Fragility is evident not only in the materials Wilke chooses, but also in the abstract sculptures themselves. In 1972 at her first exhibition at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, in New York City, Wilke filled the walls with sculptures pinned to the walls made from various hues of pink and peach-colored latex which Wilke poured and shaped into layers of abstract vulvae held together by metal snaps. Douglas Crimp reviewed the installation and describes how he had an "irrepressible desire to touch them . . . yet beyond wanting to touch, one wants to unsnap—to violate."[91] Wilke well understood the fragile/strong feminist duality with which she worked. The latex sculptures may evoke either unseen, delicate, erect, textured skin, or else, as Joanna Frueh suggests, the "Nazi horror"of sagging, hanging skin in which "some recall human skin made into lamp

90. See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

91. Douglas Crimp, review of exhibition by Hannah Wilke, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Inc., New York, NY, *ARTnews*, October 1972, http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/wilke/wilexh_72/press/artnews-01.jpg (accessed 25 March 2010).

shades."[92] And yet, latex is seemingly resilient and is also often a substance used in various forms for protecting the skin.[93] Wilke describes how "anything can break. Things handled carelessly can break. [Women] get repaired more easily. I am very strong. Marilyn Monroe didn't, but I will stay here."[94]

In the 1960s and beyond, while artists like Wilke and Schneemann struggled to define what constitutes feminist work with some of their feminist colleagues (particularly colleagues such as Lucy Lippard, who dismissed their work as narcissistic because they enjoyed exploiting their nude "beautiful bodies" and confused their roles as woman and artist),[95] these women artists also encountered resistence and censorship largely because they worked against the hyper-masculinized art world in New York built up by the New York School—Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, etc.—and the critics and gallery owners who championed them (women included). For example, Schneemann was invited by a New York gallery to display her work in 1963, but when she submitted *Eye Body*, the gallery withdrew its

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92. Joanna Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," in *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*, ed. by Thomas H. Kochheiser (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 18. Unfortunately, Wilke's work with latex media is suspected to be one of the underlying causes of her lymphoma.

93. Interestingly, the majority of these large sculptures did not survive, though in 1975, Wilke changed her latex formula and many of the pieces since that time, while extremely fragile, do remain.

94. Hannah Wilke, interview by Lil Picard, "Hannah Wilke: Sexy Objects," *Andy Warhol's Interview*, January 1973, http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/wilke/wilexh_72/press/1973_wilke_interview.pdf (accessed 25 March 2010).

95. Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), 126.

offer believing her work narcissistic and obscene. Schneemann attributes this censorship to one of the framed actions, in particular, in which her body is positioned "frontal nude with two garden snakes crawling on [my] torso"[96] and the "image includes a visible clitoris."[97] At that time Schneemann was told by the curators and critics whom she had previously learned to respect and admire that she should not bother the art world with running around naked; if she was serious and wanted to paint, she was told, "go and paint."[98]

So she did. Schneemann continued to paint her body into performance art even under threats of censorship, violence, and arrest by local police. Looking back to the atmosphere surrounding the need to suppress women's erotic bodies in the 1960s, Schneemann states:

> My sexuality was idealized, fetishized, but the organic experience of my own body was referred to as defiling, stinking, contaminating. . . . Women artists explore erotic imagery because our bodies exemplify a historic battleground—we are dismantling conventional sexual ideology and its punishing suppressions—and because our experience of our bodies has not corresponded to cultural depiction.[99]

While many of the male artists who participated in Happenings, Fluxus, Body Art, and Environments left performance and returned to the commodity of stable (and

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96. Schneemann, "The Obscene Body/Politic," 28.

97. Ibid, 29.

98. Ibid.

99. Ibid, 28.

sellable) art objects, artists like Schneemann,[100] Ono, Rainer, and Wilke continued to explore the desires of the female body and the event of performance with their body at the center of their work. The feminist performance movement begun by these four "mothers" brings into focus not only readings of cultural bodies, but also the feminist edict of "the personal is political" in that their abstract work bridges universal social ideals with the body's political significations. Schneemann explains:

> There is something female about performance art itself: the way the body carries form and meaning into ephemeral space and actual time; the admittance of unconscious, forbidden material, dependent on self-exposure, self-display. There is a female sense of associative margins in which artists are a raw material, as nature is, moving freely in realms of the uncontrollable and suppressed.[101]

For women artists who, unlike the abstract expressionists, wanted to create room for themselves and their bodies in history, the feminist nature of performance art provided a useful subversive political forum precisely because the form lacked permanence and can only be read in its entirely within the exchange of the present.

Mothers' Outspoken Daughters

The work of feminist artists demonstrates the maxim that Michael Fried identified as

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100. Schneemann finally received her first retrospective at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City, 24 November 1996–26 January 1997.

101. Schneemann, "The Obscene Body/Politic," 31.

"what lies between the arts is theater."[102] As art historian Kristine Stiles states:

> An art of actions meant that art could be simultaneously representational and presentational, simultaneously claiming the primacy of the body as metaphorical content and as concrete presentational forms. Such an art has made more concrete the metonymic relationship of exchange that exists between the viewer and the whole of art. But it has further altered that relationship by presenting an acting subject in real exchange with another acting subject.[103]

With the conflation of artist and object produced via action art, and the primacy of the body over the art object (which was often either temporal or a relic from the act), action art gave way to performance art in its reception with the spectator. Given the theatrical nature of action art with both artist and viewer negotiating an exchange with each other (whether the artist is present or not), art critics such as Greenberg and Fried deplored the work, particularly because they did not want to engage with the language of performance in order to analyze the work they were viewing. Including the viewer in the project, for Greenberg and Fried, degenerated visual art to "the condition of theater."[104]

While in the world of theatre and performance Greenberg and Fried have been criticized for their critiques of theatricality in art, or art's assimilation into

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102. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 164.

103. Kristine Stiles, "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions," in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*, organized by Paul Schimmel (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 228.

104. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 164.

entertainment,[105] what is more important to note here is that they recognized a seemingly "irreconcilable conflict" regarding quality and value between the art installations that, as Fried explains, solicit and include "the beholder in a way that was fundamentally antithetical to the expressive and presentational mode"[106] and the abstract artists he most admired. Fried later writes that he did not realize that the art he championed in fact "would be all but submerged under an avalanche of more or less openly theatrical productions and practices."[107] Nevertheless, Greenberg, Fried, and other art historians/critics did realize that in order to engage with performance art, they would need to engage with another language (which they did not wish to do). As Rosenberg states, any study or genre that involves action is relevant to the criticism of Action Painting with *the exception* of art criticism.[108] He writes that because "the painter has become an actor, the spectator has to think in vocabulary of action."[109]

At this point a loose genealogy of feminist performance art begins to come

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105. Though, note that Fried was not always in agreement with Greenberg's accounts of modernist painting, as he discusses in his introduction. See Michael Fried, "An Introduction to My Art Criticism," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 33-40.

106. Ibid, 41.

107. Ibid, 43.

108. Rosenberg, "American Action," 28.

109. Ibid, 29.

more into focus. Understanding the new vocabulary of action art, the New York School and the artists who gravitated toward that circle of abstract expressionist painters—the Beat poets, composers, musicians, and dancers and other performers at Judson Church—intersected with New York's downtown vanguard and experimental theatre groups like the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, and the Performance Group. The avant-garde mix created a concentration of artists in New York City who crossed various disciplines, and theatre artists, who were rejecting the narratives of conventional theatre, celebrated these multi-disciplinary aspects in their productions. And, like the feminist abstract expressionist painters before them, feminist performance artists and theatre practitioners in New York, like Muriel Miguel, Sondra Segal, and Roberta Sklar, had a more difficult time finding a community of women artists to address feminist issues, so they created their own companies to address issues for women.

Muriel Miguel was a founding member of Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre;[110] in 1962 Chaikin brought dancers into the company he was assembling, and Miguel

110. Roberta Sklar also worked with the Open Theatre before she left to work with Segal and then in 1976, they joined with Clare Coss to form the Women's Experimental Theatre Company. For a history of the collective, see Julie Malnig and Judy C. Rosenthal, "The Women's Experimental Theatre: Transforming Family Stories into Feminist Questions," in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances,* ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 119–37. Also see Julie Malnig, "All is Not Right in the House of Atreus: Feminist Theatrical Renderings of the *Oresteia*," in *Feminist Theatrical Revisions of Classical Works: Critical Essays*, ed. Sharon Friedman (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 21–41.

was studying modern dance in New York City at the time.[111] Miguel appreciated what she learned from Chaikin, who encouraged experimental choreography and dance, improvisational exercises, and individual storytelling. After leaving the Open Theatre, Miguel, a Native American who grew up in Brooklyn, cast about as a performer in New York but was frustrated at being typecast as a stereotypical "Indian princess"[112] or bumped from roles for being "too fat."[113] By 1972 Miguel helped establish the Native American Theatre at LaMama, and later that year she formed Womanspace Feminist Theatre with Carol Grossberg and Laura Foner, with the intention of creating consciousness-raising (CR) ensemble performances.

Having learned from her experience with Womanspace (and the internal conflicts which led to its disbanding), Miguel sought to develop a new ensemble with women who were more or less trained as actors and performers. Miguel convinced her two sisters, Lisa and Gloria, to join her along with Lois Weaver, Pam Verge, Nadia Bay, Brandy Pen, and later Peggy Shaw—all women from different backgrounds and races and committed to developing theatre and performance by and for women. The group challenged the generalized idea that there is a "one-size-

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111. Anne Fliotsos and Wendy Vierow, *American Women Stage Directors of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 287.

112. Ibid, 288.

113. Rebecca Schneider, "See the Big Show: Spiderwoman Theater Doubling Back," in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 240.

fits-all view of feminism" and that "all women's theater is the same."[114] Lois Weaver recalls how their work "was about being women, and for Muriel it was about having been a woman in the Open Theater and feeling isolated and cast down and not appreciated and wanting to find her own voice."[115] Under Miguel's direction, weaving diverse women's voices and bodies into a story much like a tapestry became the group's methodology for developing and creating pieces; as such, in 1976 they called themselves Spiderwoman Theater. The name borrows from creation mythology for several southwestern Native American Indian tribes; Spider Woman, or Grandmother Spider, is an Earth Goddess who teaches her people how to weave as she attaches her spider silk to each person and threads their connections into a large tapestry so that her people may access wisdom and protection.

After many successful performances, the troupe splintered in 1981.[116] While their purpose was to collectively support and present differences among women, difficulties arose in the subject matter for creating the work. As Rebecca Schneider recounts, clashes occurred in the group surrounding issues between native versus white and lesbian versus heterosexual.[117] Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw, and Nadia Bay

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114. Ibid, 241. Schneider quotes from Spiderwoman's press flier, ca. 1981.

115. Lois Weaver, interview by author, London, 19 January 2006.

116. The core members of Spiderwoman (Miguel and her two sisters) still work today, marking Spiderwoman Theater as the longest-running women's theatre company in North America.

117. Schneider, "See the Big Show," 242.

devised *Split Britches* (with Deb Margolin writing large portions of text for the piece) and originally produced the play in 1980 as a Spiderwoman event. Ultimately, though, differences in aesthetics and issues of authority caused a permanent rift, and Weaver and Shaw departed to create their own group, also called Split Britches, and asked Deb Margolin to join them.[118] The foundation of learning how individual stories connect to the fabric of a larger story in order to invite consciousness-raising issues and social change is a method that Lois Weaver learned from Spiderwoman, and for her the idea was revolutionary. Weaver based Split Britches on this concept and explains how she was influenced:

> That was a revelation to me! That personal detail was of any value. I mean, the huge majority of our workshops were just talking about family, and then suddenly it would sort of work its way into the performances. And I really noticed that we all kind of sit down, and they'd talk about Gregory and David and call all of their family members by name, and I would say my sister or my brother or my father, and I realized—and I still do that in a way—but I realized that I didn't imbue them with that kind of credibility as being characters in this play. They were objects in *my* life, but why would anyone else be interested in their names or who they were or what they did? So, no, that I really attribute to Muriel. Allowing and encouraging me to trust those tiny mundane details in my life. And I grabbed hold of that once I learned it and completely built Split Britches on that, among other things.[119]

The primacy of autobiography and the crossings between the personal and quotidian in feminist performance art extends from action painting, as Harold

118. Weaver, interview.

119. Ibid.

Rosenberg described: "A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist,"[120] and "the new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life."[121]

At this point in the construction of my genealogy of feminist performance art, with the founding of Split Britches, we are ready to jump into the more detailed analysis that follows in the next chapters. This is largely because Split Britches marks the beginning of the era of postmodern feminist performance. That is, through the participation of Split Britches as the "resident" company of WOW Café, new notions of performativity and the deconstruction of identity come to the fore.[122] As I discussed, my aim with this extensive, detailed, and loosely interconnected history from New York's artistic fringe, beginning with Pollock's close encounter with Beckett, is to spotlight displaced conversations taking place between feminist artists who overlapped in time but who may have never met. Each contributes to a web, much like the one spun by the Grandmother Spider, which connects them to performance art's history within the locus of New York's avant-garde and which advances the feminist movement and influences artists beyond downtown New

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120. Rosenberg, "American Action," 27.

121. Ibid, 28.

122. See Alisa Solomon, "The Wings of Desire: WOW Café Celebrates Twenty Years of Lesbian Performance," *Village Voice*, 9 January 2001, http://www.villagevoice.com/2001-01-02/theater/the-wings-of-desire/ (accessed February 2011).

York.

By delving into Pollock's life throughout this Introduction, my purpose was to demonstrate how his displaced conversation with Beckett translated into postwar performance art, in general, and paved the way for feminist performance art, in particular. The genealogy of feminist performance can be drawn in myriad ways, and I find clues to its mapping through the displaced conversations and influences of feminist artists. In the following chapters, I will examine displaced conversations in feminist performance and the ways in which Margolin, Kass, and Wilke each connects aspects of feminist performance (e.g., autobiographical content, identifications, woman's body as her own subject, and the quotidian) to the particular themes that her art illuminates, be it through parody, nostalgia, or the insistence on witnessing performance.

Specifically, Chapter Two, "Parodic Performance: Deb Margolin's Aria for (An)other," examines the performance and playwriting of Deb Margolin, who represents an important branch of the genealogy of feminist performance art. Margolin's use of autobiography and her body in performance demonstrate the feminist techniques that extend from action painting and place her in conversation with feminist visual artists. I engage her work through theories of parody normally applied to visual arts or literature, and I extend those theories to analyze why witnessing her performances may go awry among some critics and spectators.

In Chapter Three, "Enough Already! Deborah Kass's Queer Nostalgia and a Feminist Home for Greatness," the work of Kass serves as a prime example of the connection between the New York School and feminist performance art; she appropriates the forms of postwar masters in her paintings, but her subject choices reflect her nostalgic identifications with middlebrow Jewish artists and Broadway musicals, drawing from lyrics, idiomatic sayings, and iconic Jewish figures. Kass's performative interventions insert her feminist-Jewish-lesbian self squarely within the center of visual culture's frame for us to witness and place herself on the stage of art's history. Challenging the belief that nostalgia is always conservative and thus not part of the feminist project, Kass's displaced conversation with her predecessors queers nostalgia to critique cultural narratives and create room for feminist issues.

In my last chapter, "Smoke Signals: Witnessing the Burning Art of Deb Margolin and Hannah Wilke," I ask, what is the quality of witnessing required in the context of feminist performance? How can spectators awaken to the encounter in-time? I find that a reevaluation of Wilke's body of work by critics after her death from cancer provides insights for spectators to see Margolin's work, *O Yes I Will*, which was inspired by her cancer treatments. By alerting their audiences to the suffering, synecdochical body in performance, both Margolin and Wilke defiantly expose the intimate relationships between the self/other and life/art, and create a space for us to see ourselves that may be difficult to bear. I place these artists in a

more direct conversation to illuminate both the ontology and the ethics of feminist performance.

Finally, in my epilogue, "Feminist Imaginings for a Future Nostalgia," I tie together the displaced conversations among Kass, Margolin, and Wilke and observe how the current political climate affects the state of feminist performance art today. I introduce visual artist Patricia Cronin into the on-going conversation, and in particular her piece, *Memorial to a Marriage,* 2002, a larger-than-life three-ton marble mortuary for her partner (Deborah Kass) and herself that disrupts our society's opposition to same-sex marriage. Cronin's grave site sculpture inscribes a "future nostalgia" to suggest that only time can make the burden of witnessing easier. I hope that, by reading the pieced-together fabric of a feminist genealogy woven by the works of these women artists, as well as witnessing their radical bodies in performance, we begin to see something new about performative identities in U.S. culture. Feminist performance investigates the intersection of the inner space of the artist with individual audience members; the conviction is that through this experience of intersubjectivity and bearing witness to those who suffer, feminist performance transforms each of us through empathy and an acceptance of difference.

2.
Parodic Performance: Deb Margolin's Aria for (An)Other

"Repetition with a difference"—the meaning of that phrase works in and out of many concepts in performance studies, and its significance has haunted me throughout my academic career. For example, finding connections across studies in theatre and anthropology, Richard Schechner embraces the unfixed categories of performance and its intersection with social behaviors and defines performance as "restored behavior" or "twice-behaved behaviors of art, ritual, and the other performative gestures."[1] If utilizing psychoanalytical theory, performance scholars often begin their examination with Freud's meditations on the unconscious; as such, Freud's explanation that "the finding of an object is, in fact, a refinding of it"[2] is re-read by Lacan as *objet petit a*—the subject's search for the lost object creates a repetition that reveals.[3] And, when performance studies crosses the border from psychoanalysis to philosophy, many scholars look to Derrida, who deconstructs and reads difference in repeatable signs. Derrida explains that "the graphics of iterability

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1. Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 51–52.

2. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* trans. James Strachey (New York: Basicbooks, Division of Harper Collins Publishers, 1962), 88.

3. Jacques Lacan "Tuché and Automaton," in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 53–56; 60–63.

inscribes alteration irreducibly in repetition."[4]

I found a version of that phrase yet again when I discovered that Linda Hutcheon defines parody as "repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity."[5] Upon further investigation it seems that among all the varying definitions of parody, one common denominator found is that parody is a style that repeats a preceding "text" with a difference, categorized by scholars either as "comic refunctioning,"[6] "allusive imitation,"[7] "imitation which mocks the original,"[8] or "iterations that create contrast,"[9] among others. In fact, in exploring the origins of the word parody, we find that Aristotle uses the term *parodia* to describe the literary form of a "light, satirical, or mock-heroic"[10] moderate-length epic poem, with *Batrachomyomachia* (*Battle of the Frogs and Mice*; authorship debated), the only version of *parodia* to survive. But the repetition with a difference inherent in

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4. Jacques Derrida, "Limited Inc a b c . . .," in *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 62.

5. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 2nd ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), xii.

6. Margaret Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 52.

7. Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 20.

8. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture,* ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 113.

9. Robert Chambers, *Parody: The Art That Plays With Art* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2010), 189.

10. Dentith, *Parody*, 10.

parody is troubling for many critics because it both reinforces and exposes the past, and thus many scholars place parody in either a conservative or progressive camp. Aristophanes's references to the tragedies of Euripides provide an example of the debate which surrounds the complicated history of parody. Were Aristophanes's plays a critical commentary or merely a comic imitation of his contemporary's work?[11]

While parody's origins are first noted in epic poetry and drama, the majority of contemporary scholars re-read parody in literature, poetry, architecture, visual art, or film but rarely in the practices of theatre and performance.[12] One important scholarly debate regarding the nature of parody in postmodern art (but not including theatre) is centered on the dueling visions of Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon, who writes much of her project in response to Jameson's claims.[13] According to Jameson, modernism is characterized by the invention of recognizable and differentiated styles in art and explains that "parody capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to

11. See Dentith, *Parody*, 10–11.

12. See James M. Cherry, "Parody, Melodrama, and the Transformation of an American Genre" (PhD diss., The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2005), 11–45.

13. For an in depth analysis of their competing claims, see John N. Duvall, "Troping History: Modernist Residue in Jameson's Pastiche and Hutcheon's Parody," in *Productive Postmodernism: Consuming Histories in Cultural Studies*, ed. John N. Duvall, SUNY Series in Postmodern Culture (SUNY Press, 2001), http://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/60465.pdf (accessed 23 April 2011).

produce an imitation which mocks the original."[14] Further, "there remains somewhere behind all parody the feeling that there is a linguistic norm in contrast to which the styles of the great modernists can be mocked."[15] Given our fragmented contemporary society, however, agreement cannot be established for "the existence of normal language," and parody, for Jameson, becomes an impossibility in the postmodern, replaced by pastiche.[16] The postmodern world, according to Jameson, consists of a culture proliferated by an excess of technology that, with its heavy emphasis on consumption in a commodity market, results in a culture devoid of history and its political or aesthetic relevance. The codes for parody, therefore, no longer provide the necessary critical distance to signal irony. The repetition of past styles creates a combination of pastiche instead; its difference is not perceptible. "Pastiche is blank parody."[17]

Jameson's theory is based on the idea that the great modernist artists—e.g., Picasso, D.H. Lawrence, Proust, and Prokofiev—are recognized and applauded because their work stands outside the norm and offers something new and aesthetically relevant. Jameson observes that to parody these artists, regardless of

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14. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 113.

15. Ibid., 113–14.

16. Ibid., 114.

17. Ibid.

the parodist's intention, places their masterful works in critical contrast ("cast ridicule")[18] to societal norms. Jameson thus expresses melancholy for the "death of the subject," or the end of individualism, because "nobody has that kind of unique private world and style to express any longer."[19] He is nostalgic for the loss of the modernist project, given its promotion of utopian ideals, and he believes imaginings for change no longer exist in the postmodern, with its capitalist commodity culture replacing an aesthetic one.

Whereas Jameson further argues that the postmodern can only generate pastiche because there is no longer the possibility for original work, for Hutcheon "the dialogue of past and present, of old and new, is what gives formal expression to a belief in change within continuity. The obscurity and hermeticism of modernism are abandoned for a direct engagement of the viewer in the process of signification through re-contextualized social and historical references."[20] Jameson acknowledges the poststructuralist position and cites the mythical nature of the autonomous original subject, but, as Hutcheon notes, he does not explore how the poststructuralist position toward the challenges of intertexuality may, in fact, provide a more authentic basis for parody in the postmodern. Through her readings

18. Ibid., 113.

19. Ibid., 114–15.

20. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), 32.

of Barthes, Kristeva, and Riffaterre, Hutcheon explores the shift in artistic creations from an author-text relationship to a reader-text relationship. She explains, "a literary work can actually no longer be considered original; if it were, it could have no meaning for its reader."[21] For Hutcheon, intertexuality, that is the space between the text and the reader (or, as I would argue in the theatre, between the text/performer and the spectator), provides the critical distance necessary for one to read the signifiers of both meaning and historical context.[22] Unlike Jameson, in Hutcheon's examination of both contemporary literary texts as well as architecture, she finds the critical distance necessary for postmodern parody, "a distance usually signaled by irony,"[23] and she sees parody as a conversation with the historical past in the present.

Feminist playwright and performer Deb Margolin first presented her theories on parody at the conference for the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) in 2002 for a panel titled "Parody as Method."[24] Margolin's essay, "A Performer's Notes on Parody," offers a new dimension to the definition of parody and places her work in conversation within feminist performance artists's frequent

21. Ibid., 126.

22. Ibid., 127.

23. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 32.

24. "Parody as Method: The Theatricalization of Political, Historical, and Cultural Events in Theatre and Performance" (panel at ATHE with James M. Cherry, Deb Margolin, Constance Zaytoun, and Milly S. Barranger as moderator, San Diego, CA, July 2002).

use of parody as a strategy to (re)construct social spaces. Margolin describes parody as "an act of burglary by an inexperienced and weird burglar,"[25] and her outsider status as a Jewish woman who moves to a different beat in cultural discourse marks her as that "weird burglar" with the vision and the impulse to break into spaces that are otherwise closed to her. In her introduction to the published version of Margolin's essay in *Theatre Topics*, Elin Diamond says that she learned something new about parody from Margolin—how parody is, in fact, a "turf" war of sorts and "a sneaky performer's performative."[26]

Parody as a style is reliant on intertextuality as well as an intersubjective dependence on a collective history shared between the artist and the audience in order for the form to be properly witnessed. Margolin calls parody "the brashest most heart-rendering voice of the outsider looking in,"[27] and, the majority of Margolin's heart-felt parodic and performative writings have been well received by critics and scholars. On occasion, however, Margolin's desire to enter certain "ordained" spaces caused controversy and aggressive criticism from some feminists, lesbians, and Jews (including a celebrated Holocaust survivor) who believe that Margolin either crossed the line of appropriateness or crashed their party altogether.

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25. Deb Margolin, "A Performer's Notes on Parody," *Theatre Topics* 13, no. 2 (Sept. 2003): 248.

26. Elin Diamond, Introduction to "A Performer's Notes on Parody," by Deb Margolin in *Theatre Topics* 13, no. 2 (Sept. 2003): 247.

27. Margolin, "A Performer's Notes on Parody," 248.

Evidently, somewhere in the space between Margolin and the audience, the act of witnessing sometimes goes awry. In examining parody in performance, and specifically in Margolin's work, I find that the turf war over parody's function as either conservative or progressive illuminates the liminal space occupied by Margolin's performative, and a closer examination of Margolin's use of parody reveals significant insights to help navigate the witnessing of her work in performance.

Margolin's Collapsible Boundaries and Parodic Theft

While Deb Margolin claims that vaudeville is somewhere in her roots[28] and that she fell in love with language at an early age,[29] her artistic life "officially" began more than thirty years ago as a founding member of Split Britches, the foremost feminist/lesbian performance group of its era. She subsequently became a key figure in the development of feminist theatre and still creates work as a solo performance artist, playwright, and writer of feminist erotica. Overall, Margolin's work offers a non-conventional outlook on the permutations of gender, sexuality, and race in performance. Her shows apart from Split Britches have been produced across the

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28. Deb Margolin, interview by Douglas Langworthy, "Deb Margolin: Take Back Your Proscenium," *American Theatre* 13, no. 5 (May/June 1996): 39.

29. Margolin often repeats this idea in her many interviews. See Deb Margolin, interview by author, New York, NY, 26 July 2005.

United States as well as in Israel, though the majority of them originated in the downtown performance community of New York City and were produced in a wide variety of venues such as Performance Space 122, HERE Theater, Atlantic Theater, The Culture Project, West End Theatre, and Dixon Place.[30] Critics have supported her body of work: she is the recipient of a 1999-2000 OBIE Award for Sustained Excellence of Performance; she was awarded the 2005 Kesselring Prize for Playwriting for *Three Seconds in the Key,* a play based on her relationship with her son as she struggles through treatment for Hodgkin's disease; and in 2008 she both accepted the Helen Merrill Distinguished Playwright Award and became a member of New Dramatists.

Margolin's work has also garnered the attention of some of the field's foremost scholars. For example, Margolin's anthology, *Of All the Nerve: Deb Margolin: SOLO*, which comprises a collection of her performed works (primarily solo) from 1989 to 1997, is edited with added commentary by Lynda Hart.[31] The book historicizes not only Margolin's work and placement in the field, but also capitalizes on the artist/critic pairing—an alliance that Margolin particularly values because she enjoys inviting conversations between critics and herself. This symbiotic artist/critic relationship highlights Margolin's position situated between

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30. See performance index.

31. Hart was Margolin's greatest supporter, ally, and friend before her death on 31 December 2001.

practice and theory, as many feminist theorists use Margolin's work to develop their theoretical interventions in performance. For example, Margolin serves as a theoretical in-between employed to rehearse a drama between two scholars, Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, in their co-written essay, "Queerer Than Thou: Being and Deb Margolin." In this essay Hart and Phelan position Margolin and her work to play out theories of their own desires and paranoias between each other,[32] their struggle against the death drive, and their views of performance.[33] A review of critical literature reveals many other feminist academic alliances with Margolin—Elin Diamond, Jill Dolan, Vicky Petraka, and Alisa Solomon, just to name a few—who closely investigate Margolin's work throughout their various theoretical and historical explorations.

For Margolin, parody's goal is parity, and she finds that the parodic forms of feminist performance provide space for bodies not included in a normative society. Her project, in a way, mirrors her own path to establishing her career in the theatre. Given her accomplishments and notice from prominent critics, it is hard to imagine that Margolin's performance and her texts might not always be welcome in the theatre space, but there was a time in her young adult life when she felt excluded from the arena of performance. Before all of her success, while an undergraduate at

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32. Hart and Phelan were in a committed relationship at the time.

33. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, "Queerer Than Thou: Being and Deb Margolin," *Theatre Journal* 47, no. 2 (May 1995): 269–82.

New York University, Margolin perceived that theatre had neither a place for her language nor for her body type. She was once cast as a flower in a production at NYU, but that role only brought her to re-examine Shakespeare's Sonnet 94—a sonnet that continued to haunt her for many years.[34] Frustrated that she could not find a place to express herself in the social world—a "nerdy, Jewish, straight woman, who is not conventionally beautiful"[35]—she spent the first few years out of college working for several small trade publications as a writer and typesetter.[36] It was not until the late seventies, after she attended three key performances, that she stumbled into feminist theatre. At these performances she realized the manner in which the women performers presented their bodies rang true to her own experience, and that

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34. Margolin once sent the sonnet to President Richard Nixon because she thought it might help him through his struggles, but she received no response. Also, until Margolin was required to teach feminist theatre at Yale, she says she really did not understand the following final lines:

> The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
> Though to itself, it only live and die,
> But if that flower with base infection meet,
> The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
>   For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
>   Lilies that fester, smell far worse than weeds.

Margolin recited the sonnet in its entirety and explained how she realized that relative to the third wave feminist movement she "was a flower that was to the summer sweet but to myself I only lived and died." Margolin came to understand that when she entered her artistic life on stage, she was acting within the movement of change; she was a feminist protagonist without placing a name on it. Until recently, she had never thought about the work in an historical context (at least not to teach feminist theatre). And, with her anxiety that some believe that we are in a post-feminist era, she fears that her students (and others) may not realize the "artifice of equality," or the various "weeds" that surround our society today. Margolin, interview by author, 2005.

35. Ibid.

36. Margolin graduated from NYU in 1975.

the scene of action that feminist theatre presented might be a place where she could parodically insert her own body and steal the stage.[37]

The three feminist performances that so profoundly impacted Margolin were: Jane Wagner and Lily Tomlin's *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1985); the trilogy *Electra Speaks*, a collective performance by the Women's Experimental Theatre, and, specifically, the last part of the trilogy, *The Daughters Cycle* (1977-1981); and Spiderwoman Theater's *An Evening of Disgusting Songs and Pukey Images* (1979). Margolin says that when she attended *The Search for Signs*, she found herself invited to laugh in collusion with Tomlin (and her characters) in a manner she had never before felt with a performer and which, for her, was radical.[38] At *Electra Speaks* (which Margolin once curiously remembered as "The *Life* Who Speaks"),[39] Margolin recalls seeing a woman standing onstage draw an invisible line on the floor with her toe and defiantly cross over it. This moment clearly resonated for Margolin because, years later, in her performance of *Of Mice, Bugs, and Women* (1994), she repeated that moment—with a difference. She, too, defiantly drew a line

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37. See Alisa Solomon, "Steal This Stage: The State of Women in Theater: 1999," *Village Voice*, 18 May 1999, http://www.villagevoice.com/1999-05-18/news/steal-this-stage/ (accessed 10 April 2011).

38. While her viewing of this performance came years after the performances of Spiderwoman and Women's Experimental Theatre, Margolin remembers Tomlin's show as if she had seen it earlier in her life. She remembers her friend Ginny's mother buying tickets for them. But if she saw Tomlin on Broadway, she could not have seen this show until 1985, and the work probably had more of an effect on her solo performance career and the various personas she creates.

39. Margolin, interview by author, 2005.

on the stage, and then stepped back and forth across the line repeatedly chanting "life–art, life–art."[40] And last, when her friend, Ginny Nobbs, who worked for Spiderwoman, took her to see *An Evening of Disgusting Songs*, Margolin witnessed women (among them were Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw) of all shapes, ethnic backgrounds, and sexual preferences sharing the stage; the women were not only announcing biographical experiences, but they were also announcing what was "wrong" with them through the eyes of conventional society. In these three defining moments Margolin saw truths among the blurry distinctions between life and art and recognized how personal "interstitial experiences"[41] could be a credible basis for an inclusive art form in which she could take part. Through the radical interventions of her predecessors, Margolin found a residence in feminist theatre for her "desire to use [her] body in a symbolic way and put language to it—it just seemed like the most glorious dance in the world to [her]."[42] She was hooked.

Interestingly, it was the Messiah who helped lead her to this realization. Margolin explains how she became friends with Joe Friendly, a Jewish moving man, imposing-in-stature, who in his daily life could carry a piano on his shoulder and who, in his worldly life (or other-worldly), also truly believed he was the Messiah.

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40. See Lynda Hart, "Commentary: *A Little Night Music*," in *Of All the Nerve: Deb Margolin: SOLO*, ed. Lynda Hart (London: Cassell, 1999), 107.

41. Margolin, interview by author, 2005.

42. Ibid.

One day, as Margolin rode alongside him in his moving van, Joe unexpectedly decided to turn-off his van in the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge while surrounded by heavy traffic. He paused, bowed his head, and offered this prayer: "Almighty God, may our efforts amuse you enough." On a subsequent day soon thereafter, the Messiah led Margolin to see the Women's Experimental Theater Project,[43] and through these "divine" interventions, Margolin realized that precisely who she is with her body, language, and impulses is "*enough*" both for amusement and for performance.[44]

Margolin and other women performance artists support the notion that the personal is political, and as discussed previously, they were influenced by this edict through the radical practices of feminist visual artists—the performative works of predecessors like Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, and Yoko Ono among others—who broke taboos by insisting on their bodies in performance art. With a focus on self-definition and consciousness-raising toward social and political ills, feminist artists turned to their personal history to create material, and their work

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43. Deb Margolin, interview by Lisa Jo Epstein, "Meet Deb Margolin: A Public Interview With Lisa Jo Epstein, Assistant Professor of Theatre and Dance, Tulane University," 21 October 1997, http:// www.tulane.edu/~wc/zale/margolin/interview.html (accessed 21 April 2011).

44. The Messiah appears several times in Margolin's work, including *O Wholly Night and Other Jewish Solecisms*. According to Jill Dolan, Margolin's contribution to a utopian performative—her particular action that makes utopia appear—is her ability through language to call attention to the passing moments in life that, if witnessed properly, may signal the coming of the Jewish Messiah. Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 56–58.

reflected a connection between the oppression of their bodies and their encounters with societal norms. Convinced of these powerful ideas and placing herself in a displaced conversation with her predecessors, Margolin wanted to apply these radical feminist ideas to theatre and the performance of her own othered body:

> The theatre is a very political locus; I learned that I needed to understand and utilize fully, to take responsibility for, the way my work signified politically. I discovered that the very act of a woman standing onstage is a radical political one; I discovered that I needed to STEAL the stage, not wait for it to be handed to me, and that the very moment of the lights coming up and standing there in a deliberate way before an audience was a political statement on a par with no other.[45]

Because women were not equal partners in many of the political groups during the 1960s, Margolin believes that the performance art of the late seventies and eighties (even if created by men) was a direct result of feminists insisting on their own voices and bodies.[46]

In closely examining her trajectory as an artist, we will observe that Margolin's first "official" public parodic act of theft occurred in 1980 when she first penned text to *Split Britches* for Shaw and Weaver. The story of Margolin's first collaboration with Shaw and Weaver is documented in Lynda Hart's introduction to *Of All the Nerve* in which Hart depicts much of how Margolin first came to write large portions of the play for the collective that would soon be called Split Britches,

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45. Margolin, email correspondence with author, 8 September 2005.

46. Margolin, interview by author, 2005.

so-named for their first play. As the story goes, Margolin finally committed the text to paper because of a cat who kneaded her chest and a mosquito who buzzed above her bed prevented her from sleeping until she got out of bed and scripted the work.[47] Scholars such as Kate Davy, Case, Patraka, and Solomon have explored the formative history of Split Britches as well as their tenure at the WOW Café; however, some of Margolin's history in their collaboration has yet to be documented. By examining Margolin's narrative of performance more closely and listening to her displaced conversations with other artists as well as some scholars, we uncover Margolin's contributions to the continued genealogy of feminist performance.

As Lois Weaver describes it, the work of the Split Britches collective was initially influenced by her work with Muriel Miguel and their experiences together in Spiderwoman, when Weaver first recognized the primacy and the power of personal stories.[48] With conflict and changes rising among the members of Spiderwoman, Weaver teamed-up with Peggy Shaw of Hot Peaches[49] and began the

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47. See Lynda Hart, "Introduction: A Love Letter," in *Of All the Nerve: Deb Margolin: SOLO*, ed. Lynda Hart (London: Cassell, 1999), 3.

48. Lois Weaver, interview by author, London, 19 January 2006. See also Lois Weaver, interview with Elizabeth C. Stroppel, "Lois Weaver on Feminist Acting," in *Women in American Theatre*, ed. Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins, 3rd ed. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 408.

49. Weaver and Shaw first met in Berlin in 1977 where both groups were performing and soon thereafter the two performers became a couple—partners both on and off stage. See Sue-Ellen Case, "Introduction," in *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (London: Routledge, 1996), 4–5.

development of the original *Split Britches*[50] story, originally for a Spiderwoman production. Weaver chose to base the piece on three of her relatives—two aunts and one great aunt who lived together and were buried at the original home place of her family in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. The stories of these women, Cora, Della, and Emma, had never been fully revealed, and, as the story goes, the women lived in a geographically isolated setting as well as one isolated from men. These marginalized, seemingly "forgettable," women[51] resided in a large farm house but chose to utilize only one room for all of their daily needs of eating, sleeping, and washing. Weaver returned to her birthplace in the Blue Ridge Mountains to interview remaining relatives and to gather images and photographs. With tape recordings and transcripts, Weaver and Shaw began to workshop and develop the piece in collaboration with two other Spiderwoman members and they also hired a scriptwriter to work with them.

Meanwhile, with her interest piqued by the performances she witnessed, Margolin started to attend Spiderwoman rehearsals and began to explore her body in performance, which she claims was quite awkward and a source for humor. At these rehearsal workshops, Weaver and Shaw asked her to dance with them and

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50. According to Weaver, the term "split britches" describes a undergarment worn by the women farmers who were her ancestors. The britches are split so that the women (like men) could stand and urinate while they worked in the fields.

51. See Vivian Patraka, "Split Britches in *Split Britches*: Performing History, Vaudeville, and the Everday," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 4, no. 2 (1989): 59.

then proceeded to make fun of how poorly she danced. Margolin agrees that she is a terrible dancer and says that their laughter objectified her in a way that was exciting, flattering, and arousing. Margolin loved it.[52] She credits her education in theatre from her work with Split Britches,[53] and she recognizes Lois Weaver for teaching her the methods and pedagogies of acting.[54] Then, when their scriptwriter suddenly went AWOL, Weaver and Shaw summoned Margolin as a replacement; in so doing, her language first entered the space of theatre. Soon thereafter, when Weaver and Shaw needed to replace a performer as well, Margolin's body then followed to take stage.[55]

True liberation came to Margolin when she was finally able to write for herself and find her own original voice in performance. She found her spiritual home when she realized that all people have what she calls "collapsible boundaries,"[56] so that her voice can be transmitted through other bodies and voices and vice versa. Margolin often states that theatre or fiction is the "redistribution of

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52. Margolin, interview by author, 2005.

53. Langworthy, "Deb Margolin: Take Back Your Proscenium," 38.

54. Deb Margolin, "A Perfect Theatre for One: Teaching 'Performance Composition,'" *The Drama Review* 41, no: 2 (Summer 1997): 78.

55. Before inviting Margolin to perform with them, Weaver and Shaw took her through an audition process which included taking acting classes in Weaver's apartment taught by Polina Klimovitskaya. See Margolin, interview by author, 2005.

56. See Margolin, interview by author, 2005. See also Hart, "Introduction: A Love Letter," 7.

autobiography,"[57] and in *Split Britches*—subtitled, *A True Story*—she weaves a fabric of true stories from the lives of Weaver's aunts, Weaver, Shaw, with her own. Margolin explains the events and her process:

> A week or so before the show was to open, this alleged script writer left the country, taking her pay and leaving no script. I was called in to help, as I was the closest friend in the world to Spiderwoman's then Business Manager, and a nerdy Jewish girl who the Spiderwomen knew loved to write. I went to a workshop rehearsal and understood nothing of what I saw, but, eventually, something of the depth of this investigation seeped into my consciousness, and I ended up writing scenes and monologues and songs and scenarios that constituted both [*sic*] a large portion of the play and the process of which revealed to me that my love of language was most at home in the theatre; that theatre is the redistribution of autobiography, and that images from my life could wind up perfectly and effortlessly in the mouths of characters with whom I had nothing clearly in common, who'd lived a hundred years before I was born, and yet for whom my experiences were perfect metaphors for the struggles of their lives. The next thing I knew, after giving them usable text, one of the women from the workshop production dropped out, and the next thing I knew I was IN the play itself, learning to act, to embody the language I'd suddenly found so effortlessly.[58]

For example, a monologue that Margolin pens for the repressed Della (played by Shaw), who yearns for Cora (played by Weaver) but cannot speak of it, is derived from an experience of Margolin's while she was in college. Margolin found a tiny fire blazing in her coat pocket and while at first she was amazed with the little fire,

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57. Deb Margolin, "Plenary Session and Performance Talk-Back," (talk presented at the Interdisciplinary Conference in Women's Studies, Middle Tennessee State University, 22 February 2007).

58. Deb Margolin, e-mail message to author, 8 September 2005.

she was soon frightened as she found the rusty zipper of her jacket stuck and she ultimately had to "stop, drop, and roll" to put out the fire.[59] Margolin's experience of fascination-cum-fright given her inability to escape from the zipper of her (straight) jacket finds its way into the voice and desire of Della who's desire is also "stuck" or confined:

> Fire ain't just a thing, it's a person, I mean, it ain't a person, it's a living thing. Got a mind of its own. . . . I seen fires. I've felt them on my skin. I heard them cracklin' in my ear, even in the rain. Fires think. They got a purpose. . . . I got fire eatin' inside of me. I can feel it, but you can't see it. And that makes me be a person with a secret. I can feel it in my eyes. I can feel it in my chest. And I can feel it other places. . . . And that fire can make ashes out of me if I ain't careful. Once I had a fire in my pocket. I put my hand in and pulled it out real quick, and I said, why'd I do that? And I looked in my pocket, and there was the fire, lookin' up at me just cute and sweet as a pretty girl. . . . But then it starts to hurt. So you got to beat it. You got to put it out.[60]

Patraka explains that "*Split Britches* is about women too old, too poor, too dumb, too lesbian or too insistent on controlling their own lives to be visible."[61] But by staging their lives not only do Weaver, Shaw, and Margolin give visibility to formerly forgotten women, they also give voice and bodies to unspoken desires so that their new-found visibility translates to those who are marginalized and unrecognized. And, through parodically repeating Margolin's experience with fire through Della's

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59. See Hart, "Introduction: A Love Letter," 3.

60. Peggy Shaw, Deborah Margolin, and Lois Weaver, *Split Britches: A True Story*, in *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (London: Routledge, 1996): 56–57.

61. Patraka, "Split Britches in *Split Britches*," 59.

desire, audiences read Della's account of fire as a subversive performed act.

If boundaries are collapsible, then transgressing them via parodic theft is fluid, dangerous, and exhilarating. Maroglin explains that parody "is the direct result of an attempt to make room for oneself within an airtight, closed or exclusive social, cultural, or theatrical construct. A kind of aria for the poor."[62] With her parodic tools, Margolin makes room for herself and for marginalized women within closed social norms as well as within theatre practice. The poverty of the characters of Split Britches matches the poverty found in women's theatre, and with their reconfigured poor theatre, Split Britches helped alter the fabric for women's theatre. Weaver, Shaw, and Margolin worked to generate space for feminist and lesbian voices and bodies by insisting that their own are relevant and worthy to crash any party and bravely cross into contested social mores. Unfortunately, Margolin's contributions to the foundation of Split Britches' ground-breaking work have not always been critically valued equally with Weaver and Shaw's, and consequently, Margolin's presence in a genealogy of feminist performance has been underwritten.

Seeing a New Aesthetic

As I previously stated, the work of Split Britches received much acclaim by many scholars, critics, and audience-goers. From 1980 to 1992, Margolin wrote and

62. Margolin, "A Performer's Notes on Parody," 248.

performed with this pioneering and award-winning company, and their collective voice was celebrated and repeatedly analyzed by noted theorists in the fields of theatre, performance, and queer studies. During her tenure, Margolin was the primary script writer and created six original pieces with Shaw and Weaver, and in later years she also presented solo work under the auspices of the company.[63] The company performed throughout the United States and Europe, although their primary venue was WOW Café Theatre, in New York City's East Village. Through their association with WOW, they helped establish it as one of the most influential women's community theatre collectives, creating performance alternatives to the dominant social and artistic order and encouraging the work of fledgling women artists.[64] The company's collection of texts, *Split Britches: Feminist Performance/Lesbian Practice*, edited by Sue-Ellen Case, won the 1996 Lambda Literary Award for Drama. In New York, Margolin performed with Shaw and Weaver in *Split Britches* (1980), *Beauty and the Beast* (1981), *Upwardly Mobile Home* (1984), and *Little Women* (1988). Her last collaboration with the group was *Lesbians Who Kill* (1992), a play loosely

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63. See performance index.

64. Along with Pamela Camhe and Jordy Marks, Weaver and Shaw first organized the Women's One World in 1980 and the rest is herstory. For a history and discussions of the importance of WOW, please see Kate Davy, *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers: Staging the Unimaginable at the WOW Café Theatre* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010); Lara Shalson, "Creating Community, Constructing Criticism: The Women's One World Festival 1980–1981," *Theatre Topics* 15, no. 2 (September 2005): 221–39; and Alisa Solomon, "The WOW Café," in "East Village Performance,"special issue, *The Drama Review* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 92–101.

based on the life of Aileen Wuornos, which Margolin wrote for Shaw and Weaver to perform. But by entering into a space—a performance group devoted to exploring lesbian desire at a primarily lesbian venue—where she seems like an outsider, Margolin's performative within the Split Britches collective is a parodic performance. As such, we can ask not only whether the audience witnessed the performance in such a way as to read the codes of parody but also whether the audience appreciated the critique.

Laurie Stone of the *Village Voice* was the first critic to review Split Britches' work and publicly "see" these daring women in performance. She described how their site of performance revealed something new in feminist performance by combining the story-weaving aesthetic of Spiderwoman, the camp and drag of Hot Peaches, and the distancing effect of Brecht in that the group exposed relevant issues of the day without letting the audience forget the persona–performer pairing.[65] Brechtian distance in this case provides the intersubjectivity necessary for parodic distance, and Stone's identification of the practice in performance, I would argue, suggests the parodic codes were being read and were well received. Stone further wrote how "it's rare to see feminism on the boards without banners or goddesses," and she appreciated that their play honored individual women's lives without

65. Laurie Stone, "Vixen Fire," *Village Voice*, 19 April 1983, 105.

making claims to an overarching universality.[66] Margolin recalls the event and describes how, in a not-too-well attended theater, Stone "SAW US. She saw that what we were doing had not been done before, and that we were breaking ground that had the potential to invite a lot of disenfranchised feminine voices and bodies to stand alongside us on that ground."[67] Weaver, Shaw, and Margolin had been touring and performing for a couple of years prior and continued to develop the piece, but the moment Stone witnessed their work in the Saul Farber Auditorium at Bellevue Hospital in New York and published her rave review marked the moment that the women of Split Britches stepped into their future.

Unlike Laurie Stone, however, Sue-Ellen Case is one feminist critic who does not appreciate Margolin's attendance at her party (i.e. the fecund ground of events occurring in the lesbian-centered WOW café). In her project to contextualize, historicize, and honor the work of Split Britches, Case summarizes much of the scholarly critique surrounding the group in her introduction to the 1996 Split Britches collection, which is the primary noted historical document of the group's work (largely because it is the published collection of their texts), and highlights the theoretical developments concerning lesbian identity. After recounting the various

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66. Ibid.

67. Deb Margolin e-mail message to Alexis Soloski, 26 October 2007, author's collection, New York, NY. For an abridged version of this e-mail message, see Deb Margolin, "Letter to a Young Critic," in Constance Zaytoun, "Smoke Signals: Witnessing the Burning Art of Deb Margolin and Hannah Wilke," *The Drama Review* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 147.

developments of lesbian theory in the mid to late eighties alongside the work of Split Britches, Case locates (within her own work)[68] the moment in the late eighties when the radical representation of lesbian sexuality separates itself from the larger feminist discourse.[69] That is, marking her case against the homophobia that creeps into feminism, Case wants to "bring the lesbian subject out of the closet of feminist history" and include the lesbian position on an equal playing field in feminist theory along with issues of class and race.[70] With these goals in mind, Case claims that Margolin's presence on stage changes the lesbian scenes between Shaw and Weaver—"they play lesbian differently when Margolin is present on stage and when she is not"[71]—and that Margolin's writings, "bear the burden of seductive language,"[72] but do not engage in gay and lesbian "inventive recyclings of subcultural"[73] practices and codings in the same manner as Shaw and Weaver's writings do to produce lesbian seduction.[74]

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68. Case cites her essay which first appeared in 1987. See Sue-Ellen Case, "Toward a Butch–Femme Aesthetic," in *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1989), 282–99.

69. Case, "Introduction," 12–14.

70. Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," 283–84.

71. Case, "Introduction," 16.

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid, 17.

74. Ibid., 15-17.

Though Davy points out that "WOW has never referred to itself as an exclusively lesbian theater" and that the space thrives on its open-door policy, the community of performers and spectators at WOW were assumed to be lesbian,[75] and it ultimately provided the ideal alternative to produce, frame, and examine lesbian desire. For many who frequented the Café, the venue was regarded as an origin of sorts for a lesbian performance community; as Solomon describes, WOW gave "birth to a celebratory feminist-and-tinsel-tinged queer aesthetic," and its performances "defy classification."[76] Outside of a heterosexual construct, feminist spectators and scholars view the lesbian representation at WOW as one that offers new alternatives to subvert desire in the dominate culture's narrative.[77] Further, Case suggests the camp and play in the "dynamic duo"[78] of Shaw-Weaver's butch-femme performance represents the strong subject position that "recuperat[es] the space of seduction" and "can through their own agency, move through a field of symbols . . . free from biological determinism, elitist essentialism, and the heterosexist cleavage of sexual

75. Davy, *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers*, 84.

76. Alisa Solomon, "The Wings of Desire: WOW Café Celebrates 20 Years of Lesbian Performance," *Village Voice*, 2 January 2001, http://www.villagevoice.com/2001-01-02/theater/the-wings- of-desire (accessed 21 April 2011).

77. See Jill Dolan, "The Dynamics of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Pornography and Performance," in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991), 59–81; and Kate Davy, "Constructing the Spectator: Reception, Context, and Address in Lesbian Performance," *Performing Arts Journal* 10, no. 2 (1986): 43–52.

78. Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme," 283.

difference."[79]

I find that Case's project ultimately supports a strategic essentialism for lesbian subjectivity, and by the early nineties, her claims begin to diverge from other feminist theorists, such as Hart and Phelan, whose queer social projects support a deconstructionist view of sexuality. Given the advent of poststructuralism and a new-found focus by scholars on Judith Butler's investigations into the deconstruction of subject positions, Case is concerned with what she sees as a move away from lesbian theory before its claims really take hold. Case explains that "as lesbian 'identity' is troubled by an insistence on more complex and fluid processes of visibility and the initial stage of lesbian theory retreats behind (some of) us, the limits, the boundaries of what constitutes lesbian become more intriguing."[80] Case cites the work of Teresa de Lauretis and Lynda Hart[81] as theorists who follow Butler's lead (retreat), and given their influential critiques "neither WOW, nor Split Britches can be 'simply' lesbian any longer." As such, "the complicating presence of Deb Margolin, the heterosexual who has worked in this context, comes to the fore."[82]

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79. Ibid., 297–98.

80. Case, "Introduction," 15.

81. See de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 2 (May 1988): 155–77; and Lynda Hart, "Identity and Seduction: Lesbians in the Mainstream," in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 119–37.

82. Case, "Introduction," 15.

For Case, Margolin's presence in the troupe resembles early feminist alliances across women's sexuality and race and keeps alive that tradition, but Case also suggests that Margolin's experience as a Jew cannot equally compare with the ghettoization of lesbian social lives and the issues lesbians face in contemporary culture, and as such, the polemic of her straight Jewish presence offers an insight to the value of the butch–femme position as subject.[83]

What we find is another "turf war" of sorts over the origins not only of subjecthood, but also over the origins of the WOW performance space, and we find Margolin at the center of the debate as either the problem or the solution. For Case, Margolin's presence is a problem that she chooses to exclude in favor of her political position, but there is an historical point that must be underscored here. No matter the political position a theorist may take, WOW Café, begun by Weaver, Shaw, Mark, and Camhe, was established as a groundbreaking site for performance in the East Village largely due to the presence and performances of Split Britches, and Margolin was a founding member of the collective and, therefore, an influential contributor to the foundation and "force"[84] of how the space of WOW was constructed. As Davy describes, not only did the viewing of *Split Britches* change the lives of so many spectators and artists, but the company was considered "WOW's

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83. Ibid., 15–16.

84. Solomon, "The WOW Café," 92.

unofficial resident company."[85]

Case's claim that the butch-femme position needs to be privileged is necessary only if, with the addition of Margolin, the butch-femme dynamic is weakened. Indeed, Case chooses to side-step the debates regarding the production of lesbian identity preferring, instead, to observe the practices of Split Britches and the "shifting appearances of lesbian, when Margolin is on or off stage, and in the texts she did and did not write."[86] Case ultimately invites her readers into the theoretical debate and encourages a return to the productions of Split Britches. Given her invitation and using the tools of parody to re-read these texts, I think it is valuable to reexamine the historical debate discussed in Case's introduction. I contend that Split Britches was, in fact, more lesbian and more queer *because* of Margolin's performances and writings—her parodic crashing in on a lesbian party. Because of her presence, spectators at WOW, like Case, were better able to see (and desire) the sexuality and the dangerous ground of the lesbian pairing on stage and reject the heterosexual gaze represented by Margolin's characters.

Margolin's inbetweenness in performance helped mark Weaver and Shaw as one of New York's fringe performance community's most provocative lesbian couples both on and off stage. In productions by Split Britches, Margolin often

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85. Davy, *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers*, 7.

86. Case, "Introduction," 16.

provided visibility for the spectator by walking the lines of straight, carping, and Jewish characters in excess, requiring her to shelve her own personal cultural identities and desire. As Margolin notes, a person's sexual identity may be forfeited when a performer places herself into the work of a collective and its ideals.[87] While she says that, at that time in her performance history, her sacrifice was a small price to pay to be a part of a collaborative theatrical relationship, theorists with a project for cultural and sexual essentialism chose to misread the alliance. Weaver (a Southern strawberry blonde who took on the femme role), Shaw (a Bostonian brunette with short hair who took on the butch role), and Margolin (a New York Jew with long dark hair who took on the relief roles) stood on stage with oppositional bodies in terms of looks, backgrounds, and accents which made just viewing the three performers a unique experience. But with skills that complemented each other and through their parodic performance, the differentiated trio created political acts and highlighted marginalized lesbian desire seen more clearly largely because the audience viewed the codings of the butch–femme relationship through the lens of Margolin's characters, and the three of them created a radical space for the liminal-norm.[88]

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87. Hart, "Introduction: A Love Letter," 7.

88. McKenzie defines "the liminal-norm as any situation wherein the valorization of transgression itself becomes normative—at which point theorization of such a norm may become subversive." Jon McKenzie, "Genre Trouble: (The) Butler Did It," in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 219.

Case was not ready to deconstruct the newly constructed system of lesbian desire and subjectivity by inviting contradiction of the butch–femme binary, so she made a political choice to underplay Margolin's performance with the group in favor of an essentialist project. In so doing her comparisons of the group's participants not only dismiss the merit of Margolin's presence in Split Britches, but also, in effect, historically write-out Margolin's contribution in favor of a preferred image of (lesbian) desire both on stage and in her (re)collections. Even the cover art that Case chose for the book is telling—the front cover is a lush (and now iconic) full-page photograph from *Belle Reprieve* (1991) of Weaver and Shaw in a passionate embrace while on the back is a small 1½ x 1-inch cropped photograph from *Little Women* (1988) of Margolin peering through a pair of binoculars. Margolin seems to peer into a space (the definitive history of Split Britches) from which she feels metaphorically barred. In deconstructing Case's purpose, Margolin retorts:

> It was the staging of their [Weaver and Shaw's] marginalization. I never had an identity. They *allowed* me the Jewish identity, but the true focus, when it wasn't human and comedic, was on them as marginalized people because of the lesbian identity. And what I was, the conduit of that vision. I was the lens through which their queerness was seen. My own queerness was that, "What is a weird Jewish intellectual standing on a stage like this for?" So I had no sexual identity, and that's it. Unless I was given one. I was a person through whom the audience could see *them* more clearly.[89]

With the purposeful privileging of the butch/femme binary, Margolin's ambiguous

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89. Margolin, interview by author, 2005.

and un-fixed presence (or absence) works in opposition and takes on a negative value in relation to Weaver and Shaw. It is Margolin's position as facilitator for the Split Britches collective, performing in between the primary couple and the purveyor of so much of their spoken language, that better allows us to see not only Weaver and Shaw's marginalization but also the theatricalized celebration of their queerness.

In a discipline which privileges marginalized differences and the idea that language cannot fully mirror or express thought or intention, it is compelling to recognize how it is Margolin's *writing*—its revelations, humor, and paranoia—that for many critics and theorists initiates the violation of boundaries and identities. In Case's introduction to the text of *Split Britches*, she comments not only on the powerful imagery in the language of Della's closeted lesbian desire burning inside her pocket (as discussed before, a text penned by Margolin and borrowed from her own life), but she also sees Margolin's character, Emma, as one who "witnesses, accepts, allows the private space" of lesbian representation. However, Case continues that Margolin creates a character for herself who "serves as monitor—the border of lesbian—where it stops."[90] While Margolin's characters throughout the history of Split Britches often trouble the lesbian desire of Weaver and Shaw's femme-butch mimicry, her characters are also, as in the case of Emma, ones who

90. Case, "Introduction," 20.

help spectators better see the unfixed representations of women and lesbians as well as see themselves reflected on stage. Furthermore, Margolin's work provides an opportunity (rather than a hindrance) to examine how we see the markings of representation in excess and view the frame of visibility/invisibility.

Because Case views an acceptance of Margolin's presence as politically dangerous to lesbian subjectivity, she critiques the value of Margolin's presence; Case believes it blurs and collapses the boundaries of *all* of the characters in the performance. Although Split Britches does blur the boundaries of narrator, character, performer, true story, and fiction, shifting boundaries could work in favor of Case's project. For example, each character in *Split Britches* seeks a means of protection as a metaphor for fears which may expose true desire: Della fears the removal of women's clothing and shoes, Cora fears dancing with Della, and Emma fears starvation, reserving a special napkin for her meals; but their fears are blurred with interludes of fantasy, song, and dream enacted within the imaginative space they have created with each other. Hart explains that "depending upon whether a spectator is invested in the production of visible identities or whether she is looking at the performance and making identifications, Split Britches is bound to be caught in the clash of conflicting desires."[91] This clash is one instance where the liminal space that Margolin occupies in performance mirrors parody's ambiguous political

91. Hart, "Identity and Seduction," 134.

ends and results in a case of mis-witnessing. Does Margolin's parodic presence reinforce heteronormative standards, or does it expose its false construction? Margolin's presence conflicts with Case's own viewing desire where it might have served to open-up the possibility that the parodic crashing of the border of a performed butch-femme binary could instead break down fears by insisting on the radical promise of staged differences for women.

In support of challenging desire in the economy of representation, Hart champions Margolin's presence and agrees with de Lauretis's theory that it takes two women to make a lesbian,[92] but Hart argues further that "it takes three people to perform a queer act."[93] The Split Britches trio deconstructs the butch/femme binary and required each of its three members in order to triangulate the gaze between characters, creators/performers, and spectators in their effort to perform radical queer acts, even when their spectatorship was primarily lesbian. For Phelan, a queer act provides agency for us to "see things between us" and Margolin's text and presence are examples of a queering or twisting of performance that helps us see what resides between the gazes, the couples, the audience, and artist. Championing Margolin's work, Phelan states how it aligns with her own project in that it:

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92. See Teresa de Lauretis, "Recasting the Primal Scene: Film and Lesbian Representation," in *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 96.

93. Lynda Hart, in Hart and Phelan, "Queerer Than Thou," 274–75.

> calibrates the "betweenness" that every queer person must negotiate, living and dying as we do between two deaths. Queers are queer because they have survived their own deaths: the death in the world of the Social that demands heterosexuality and kills off, spits out, gets rid of all those who cannot conform to that Law. . . . Writing [as a queer act] enacts the death of the I we think we are before we begin to write.[94]

Because Margolin gives over her identity as well as her own stories to their collective performance, she de-centralizes the importance of "I"/our fixed identity in performance; she realizes that collapsible boundaries lend themselves to fluid identities. In writing for Split Britches, Margolin first sees how "our experiences can go effortlessly into the mouths of characters, [and] that things that we see in the world can come into our bodies and out onto the stage."[95] Margolin's parodic writing crashes into social constructions and her own collapsible boundaries open-up her own personal experiences and identifications for theft, too.

Parodic Entrances into Conventional Spaces

After Margolin began her work with Weaver and Shaw, she realized that her "act of burglary by an inexperienced and weird burglar" helped her do more than steal the stage. She was acutely aware of how important the work was that Split Britches was doing, and she celebrated the realization that language both comes from and returns

94. Phelan, in Hart and Phelan, "Queerer Than Thou," 280.

95. Margolin, interview by Lisa Jo Epstein, "Meet Deb Margolin."

to the body. She states, "in the single impulse of writing a line for someone to say, a thousand things transpire. There are a thousand negotiations and reconciliations in that act. And I knew that I had found a home. I'd bought a house."[96] With her journey into performance and writing for performance (and Margolin firmly believes that the performance impulse extends from the writing impulse and both impulses originate from the same source—her insistence on the body),[97] Margolin found a home for herself where she could allow her desires to lead her through explorations of daily life and to seek inclusiveness without erasing differences.

In 1987 when Ellie Covan, curator and producer of her then new Dixon Place,[98] first invited Margolin to perform on stage alone,[99] Margolin hesitated but then jumped at the opportunity and created a performance that allowed her, at last, to enter the title character from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a role which she had been yearning to perform but in which she knew she would never be legitimately cast.[100]

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96. Margolin, interview by author, 2005.

97. Ibid.

98. Covan began Dixon Place in the spring of 1986 in her storefront apartment on East First Street. She moved into her Bowery apartment/space in 1991, and performances continued in her living room until 2008 when Dixon Place renovated a basement space at 161 Chrystie Street to create its first fully-equipped theatre.

99. Margolin found yet another home in that Covan's performance space was also her living room.

100. Margolin is not alone in wanting to play this role, though she would not traditionally be considered to be cast as Hamlet. She follows a tradition of women playing the title role extending from Sarah Bernhardt's famous 1899 performance to Black-Eyed Susan's playing in *Hamlette* in Ethyl Eichelberger's cross-dressed version of the play at PS 122 in 1984.

Margolin assembled a piece in which she played Miss Tennessee in a Miss America contest, wearing a bathing suit, heels and fishnets, and a rhinestone tiara while she recited Hamlet's "To be or not to be" monologue for the "judges." With her loose Southern accent, Miss Tennessee flubs the monologue, but there is an audience plant who corrects the befuddled contestant. Startled, Miss Tennessee tries to compose herself, turns herself around to wiggle her rear end at the judges, catches her breath, and continues again to finish the monologue with the correct text.

Margolin calls her first solo show an "absurd presentation" with "some crazy, articulate prayer in it. It bespoke my desperate desire to play this role at the same time that it commented actively on the culture standing in the way of that desire."[101] With that first step into making room for herself in a play as well as a performed social event where her "type" is not welcome, Margolin decided to take her (admittedly apologetic)[102] thieving desire into theatre's exclusive circle one step further. At the suggestion of Joni Wong, a lighting designer at WOW, Margolin collaborated to produce an all-woman version of *Hamlet* at WOW, complete with character doubling (Ophelia/Horatio played by Mary Neufeld)[103] as well as an off-

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101. Margolin, "A Performer's Notes on Parody," 249.

102. Ibid., 250–51.

103. Margolin says that if Hamlet "could either have had sex with Horatio or allowed himself reasonable intellectual discourse with Ophelia, his humanity might have found a wholeness and the entire tragedy could have been averted on some level." Ibid., 250.

stage Voice (played by Lisa Kron) as a Jewish mother-like god figure who instructs Hamlet throughout his tribulations. The play is titled *at some point in your life you must have wondered: yo! what's with Hamlet?*, and Margolin's performative and parodic text creates space for herself within Shakespeare's masterpiece.

In her version Margolin plays the Prince of Denmark as a man, but not in drag, and because performance reveals the gap between the character/persona and the actor/performer, the audience's awareness of Margolin's gender provides ironic and telling turns. For example, when the king (who is known only as the King) chastises Hamlet, belittling his on-going mourning for his father as a display of "unmanly grief," Hamlet/Margolin responds with, "You bet it is."[104] Margolin explains how in performance:

> A performance artist will often allow us to see right through the character to the actor him/herself. This is not the same need an actor feels on Broadway to completely BECOME a character. In performance, the gap between character and actor may be left intact, and a large part of the meaning of the piece inheres in the fecund vacuum between the two (sort of like a puppet show with translucent puppets in which you can see the puppeteers' hands).[105]

Because we see Margolin-as-Hamlet responding to his father, the falsity of gendered classifications—that is, what is "manly" versus what is "womanly"—is called into

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104. Deb Margolin, "at some point in your life you must have wondered: yo! what's with Hamlet?", (facsimile, author's collection, 1989), 5.

105. Margolin, "A Perfect Theatre for One," 69.

question.

Margolin uses many standard cuts to the play (Fortinbras, for example, never appears), but is her parodic performance as an outsider who finally gets to participate within this ordained cultural space that permits her to perform the majority of Shakespeare's text that haunted her most of her life. That said, Margolin's embodiment of Hamlet is also didactic, and much of her revised text calls attention to the unequal placement of women in Western culture. For example, Margolin's Hamlet begins his soliloquy from Act I, scene ii, and speaks Shakespeare's text as written: "O that this too too solid flesh would melt/Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew."[106] But Hamlet then pauses and sighs in the middle of his speech, prompting the Voice, knitting in a corner behind a curtain not unlike the Wizard of Oz, to call out for him to "keep going!" Hamlet complains that he does not want to continue because he hates the part of the speech where he talks about "how Fraility Thy Name is WOman! Or those analogies to Niobe All Tears! It sounds like a rock band at The World or something! [*sic*]"[107] The banter continues:

> **Voice**
> Ars gratia artis.
>
> **Hamlet**
> And don't talk that foreign language to me! This fancy chit-chat here

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106. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, act I, scene 2, lines 129–30.

107. Margolin, "at some point. . . Hamlet," 7.

is bad enough!

Voice
Ars gratia artis means Art for art's sake. It means we're not interested in your politics, we're interested in your feelings.

Hamlet
Everything is political . . .

Voice
Oh, come on. This monologue is not political! Both Republicans and Democrats prefer it! It is not political! It's emotional! This monologue is a gem! It's FAMOUS! It's a lapis lazuli of limpid language! It's a ruby, a diamond, a beautiful thing that just exists beyond politics.

Hamlet
Those fucking gems cost a lot of money! THAT'S POLITICAL!

Voice
I can see what's with you. You turn to politics to avoid emotion. In fact, the King just told you you're next in line to hold a powerful political office!

Hamlet
That's the kind of politics that makes me prefer emotions![108]

Blurring the lines of the personal and political, Margolin recognizes the political significance of parody and finds that when we see the personal body and its desires, "the site of the humor is the gap between the actor and the character—what the character is that the actor is not."[109] Margolin knows that as a purveyor of Hamlet/theatre/Western culture, even though she is not invited to participate on an

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108. Ibid.

109. Margolin, "A Performer's Notes on Parody," 248.

equal playing field, she will insist that her presence not be denied (and it is costly to prevent her presence). Hers is an inherently radical political act.

Margolin also knows that while not all parody is funny, parody is a "subset of comedy."[110] Like many comedians, she believes that "comedy is the weapon of the powerless" and is comfortable using comedy "as a tool, as a way to break through what was unbreakable."[111] Her Hamlet also seeks comedy instinctively knowing that only through one of Shakespeare's comedies will he survive. Wishing for the comedy he elaborates to the Voice: "There's room! There's more room! In comedy there's room for ugly people or weird people! You don't have to sing or get your hair done!"[112] Seeking room for herself inside of Shakespeare's text is an act of survival that Margolin's Hamlet knows that he needs in order to live. As Adrienne Rich describes:

> Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: *it is an act of survival*. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society [emphasis added].[113]

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110. Ibid.

111. Hart, "Introduction: A Love Letter," 2.

112. Margolin, "at some point. . . Hamlet," 11.

113. Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *College English* 34, no. 1 (October 1972), 18.

Margolin's comic parodic revisions of *Hamlet* not only create room for her audience to see inequalities, but they also give Margolin space to breathe and live her own identities and identifications within closed cultural spaces. Unfortunately, as Margolin/Hamlet knows, without comedy and the space it provides, one does not survive, and so, too, Margolin's Hamlet dies at play's end.

Margolin's parodic impulses also lead her to revisit the familiar territory of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* in one vignette in her play *970-DEBB* (1990). Williams's play about aged debutantes and gentlemen callers which conjures-up nostalgic memories of an old WASP South[114] may seem like a stretch for the New York-born, Jewish, feminist Margolin to find room for herself, but the outsider status that both Tom and Laura feel is not far from Margolin's own experience. As with *Hamlet*, Margolin was desperate to enter Williams's text,[115] and to do so, she must "*send-up*"[116] his play, explaining that to send-up something parodically builds on top of a foundation and is similar to the need for buildings in New York City to expand upwards. Because there is no room for a building to grow

114. Williams' play actually takes place in St. Louis.

115. Margolin did not publish this vignette in her collection because at the time, she thought her parody might infringe copyright law.

116. Margolin, "A Performer's Notes on Parody," 251.

at street level, architects must send the building up and build above the existing edifice. Thus, as Margolin says, "when there's not enough room, you send it up!"[117]

In her *Glass Menagerie* parody Margolin builds upon Williams's play; she sends-up both the voice of Amanda by playing her "off-stage" and the character of Laura, who now, instead of a crippled foot, walks with a trail of noisy kitchen pots and pans tied to her ankle as a feminist send-up of the burdens that traditionally tie women down (see fig. 4). Calling attention to Williams's symbols and language, Margolin uses parody to make room for specific issues of gender invisibility. For example, when Amanda asks Jim O'Connor (the gentleman caller) to take a glass of wine and some candles out to Laura (the lights are out because Tom failed to pay the electric bill), Amanda apologizes to him and calls out, "now, honey, I'm sorry that the lights have gone out, but the playwright needed to use the darkness as a symbol."[118] The symbolic darkness to which Margolin calls attention represents the moment in Williams's play where Laura is first truly seen by someone. And after Laura explains to Jim how he came to call her "Blue Roses," the exchange in Margolin's text is as follows: Jim replies, "Well, I hope you didn't mind"; Laura responds, "Well it was kind of degrading and insulting but. . ."; and then they both

117. Ibid.

118. Deb Margolin, *970-Debb*, DVD, directed by Madeleine Olnek, P.S. 122, New York, 27 September 1990 (New York: Metropolis Media Productions, 1995).

chime in together, "but the playwright needed it for the symbolism!"[119] By contrast, in Williams's play, Laura's response to Jim is: "Oh, no—I liked it,"[120] absolving Jim of any responsibility for not seeing her, empathizing with her plight, or recognizing her suffering through the serious illness of "pleurosis" (pleurisy).

Margolin's displaced and staged conversation with Williams permits herself to be seen in performing his dialogue between Laura and Amanda (she plays both roles) as well as in the dialogue between Laura and Tom (played by Dan Crozier) and Laura and Jim (played by Kevin Seal). Additionally, her send-up of Tom's character also makes room for Margolin, as it collapses the boundaries of Williams's original narrator, the autobiography of Williams-as-playwright/poet, Crozier the performer, and the biography of Margolin-as-playwright/poet. Tom's opening monologue in Williams's original text reads, "I have tricks in my pockets—I have things up my sleeve—but I am the opposite of the stage magician. He gives you the illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion."[121] Margolin's version parodies Williams's text but diverges meaningfully in order to broaden one of his metaphors:

> I have tricks in my pockets—I have things up my sleeve—but I am the opposite of the stage magician. Theater is an illusion

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119. Ibid.

120. Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, act II, scene 8.

121. Ibid., Act I, scene 1, opening lines of play.

> that has the appearance of truth. I give you absolutely nothing. I'm a taciturn smoker on the edge of a play I couldn't have written if I tried. I'm a poet. I'm a Jim Dandy poet, but all everyone ever talks about is the damn playwright and his damn use of symbols and how he won a Pulitzer Prize. All we ever talk about is my sister Laura and how she clumps when she walks and how my mother lives in the past. Anyone can live in the past. Anyone can clump. But being a poet . . . you try it.[122]

Margolin draws a distinction between the type of theatre Williams constructs and Tom's/her kind of performance. While Williams gives us a symbolic, dream-like memory play to expose truths from the past (i.e., his past), Margolin's poor theatre is a performance of present-day urgency sans illusion. Margolin is not allowed in Williams's kind of theatre, but she identifies with and is in love with his language and claims "I love him more than he loves me, and so I make these crank calls to him just to hear his voice."[123] Through performance and parody, she can stand toe-to-toe with the ghost of Tennessee Williams given that "performance is a theatre of inclusion—anyone can do it!"[124]

970-DEBB also gives Margolin a chance to explore her sexuality in a way that performing with Split Britches did not. When performing with Split Britches, Margolin says she was "terrified of the performative nature of sexuality,"[125] so

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122. Margolin, *970-Debb*.

123. Margolin, "A Performer's Notes on Parody," 252.

124. Margolin, "A Perfect Theatre for One," 69.

125. Margolin, interview by Lisa Jo Epstein, "Meet Deb Margolin."

sacrificing her sexual body was, at first, okay for her. But once she began working in solo performance, she found that she could break down some of her own personal barriers, and via parody, reclaim her sexuality. In the first vignette of the evening, we find Margolin's character working in bed as a phone-sex girl (970 was once the telephone exchange in New York City reserved for phone-sex companies) who, depending on the number the caller presses, might recite her version of *The Tempest*, *As You Like It*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, or *Coriolanus*.[126] Later in the performance, Margolin performs her desire to dance like Madonna, who Margolin's persona says is admirably cool and "the furthest thing from a Jew [she's] ever seen."[127] In tights and a bra Margolin salaciously dances with two men whom she encourages to slap her ass. When she remounted this show in 1991 at the Women's Interart Theatre, Margolin was in her third trimester of pregnancy, and she danced the same lusty dance, parodically making room for her sexualized pregnant body in performance.

970-DEBB is the first solo show in which Margolin creates space for herself to display various aspects of her sexual desire, and, despite any encroaching threats of erasure, she refuses to relinquish the myriad aspects of her identity. One fear of erasure that recurs in the show is that of the WASP crowding out the Jew. For

126. There is also a button to press if the caller wants to hear her go to the bathroom, but when the caller does, predictably, choose this option, Margolin's persona is actually disappointed and replies that she cannot help him at the moment because she does not need to go. Deb Margolin, *970-Debb*, in *Of All the Nerve: Deb Margolin: SOLO*, ed. Lynda Hart (London: Cassell, 1999), 43-44.

127. Ibid., 53.

example, Margolin's persona parodies a WASP by donning a blonde wig and conservative suit. She then discusses with her audience the virtues for a Jew to appear Christian which she learned by joining "TLC, which stands for Trying to Look Christian . . . founded by Sammy Davis Junior . . . who was Jewish."[128] In another vignette, Margolin's character, simply named Woman, holds up a magazine she has just purchased and compares her own face to that of the blonde model on the cover. "I live threatened by airbrushes," Woman confesses:

> Airbrushes. Airbrushes keep me in an apartheid township of self-doubt, a ghetto, a possibility. Airbrushes assail my life. When I'm asleep, they brush up the underconscious things as though my life were a floor dirty from a big party [...] and I wake up clean, like skin after an alcohol treatment. Taut, clean, staving off age like Spalding Gray![129]

Woman/Margolin's life is threatened by airbrushes because she is pursued by a culture that favors images of idealized cover girls which threaten to erase her feminist, Jewish, brainy, truth-telling identity. To clarify her position Margolin's Woman collapses the boundaries between the cover model with the supposed truth-telling performances of Spalding Gray. Margolin asserts that Gray's kind of confession is a form of airbrushing which uses seemingly honest storytelling to hide behind the truth:

128. Ibid., 57.

129. Ibid., 46.

> Yes, I'm a WASP, yes, I'm a WASP bastard, yes I'm filthy with diamonds, yes, yes, yes, smile! Make you feel something, may I please, because I admit the whole thing, I admit it, I'm smiling, my teeth are capped, I'm long, I'm blonde, I'm a WASP, I'm a WASP bastard, my breasts are huge, my hair is fine, I'm a monster in a box, my hair color is a monster in a box, I'm nature in a box, my tits are huge, my diamonds are South African, see it, hear it, no secrets from you, darlings, I love you and I am a fact, panatella and stocking, I am all things considered . . . see you in church! See you in the theater! Think of me when you have your first episiotomy. She looks like Spalding Gray to me, this woman; like a fact that no one knows is just a vision.[130]

Margolin claims that Spalding Gray's monologues "conflate confession with restitution."[131] Her critique of Gray resonates with Williams's stage magician who creates the appearance of truth. For Margolin, Gray's work is superficial and his candid narratives are as "immutable"[132] as the cover girl; immutable in the same way that facts are unchallengable, and, therefore, self-serving and invulnerable to any cure through the exchange in performance.[133]

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130. Ibid., 45

131. Deb Margolin, telephone conversation with author, 6 March 2011. While her position is not popular, particularly in view of Gray's suicide, Margolin still takes issue with Gray's performance and resents it when critics like Laurie Stone suggest that Gray made room for performers like herself. Stone claims, "Spalding's work helped clear a path for many other comedians of ambivalence, among them John Leguizamo, Holly Hughes, Jonathan Ames, Deb Margolin and Danny Hoch." See Laurie Stone, "The Time of His Life: Swimming with Spalding Gray, through good times and bad" *American Theatre Magazine*, online version, March 2011, http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/mar11/gray.cfm (accessed 21 April 2011). Margolin says she would be doing the work regardless of Gray's performance. Holly Hughes also expresses frustration with Gray's superficial performance and mainstream success. Holly Hughes, interview by author, 21 October 1996.

132. Ibid., 45.

133. Margolin believes Gray should have done "something about his being a bastard" and tells of a time that she heckled Gray at a performance of *Monster in a Box.* After she had heard enough about his abuse toward his girlfriend/wife Renee, Margolin stood up in the audience and retorted,

Lynda Hart, on the other hand, tells us that performance artists like Margolin do not "create the illusion of reality," but rather, create "the reality of illusion,"[134] which illustrates parody's power to deconstruct the myth of originality. Indeed, Margolin states that, "at its best, parody can render its object a palimpsest of meanings, and deepen the viewer's relationship with that object."[135] Margolin's parody reimagines woman-as-object in performance and demonstrates for her spectators the layers of that immutable and oppressive conditioned outlook created by the dominant culture.

My Body, My Biography: The Parodox of Equinox

I was reminded of Margolin's use of parody to examine societal constructs of female beauty while I was walking with my partner along Greenwich Avenue in New York City in January 2010; I stopped suddenly upon seeing the ad campaign plastered on the windows of the Equinox gym at the corner of West 12th Street. Beside photographs of people from all walks of life, the tag line read "My Body. My Biography." It was stunning to see a feminist mantra so prominently displayed. Immediately, we snapped a photograph of this "event" (see fig. 5).

"Why don't you go home and apologize? We'll wait here." She was asked to leave the performance shortly thereafter.

134. Hart, "Commentary," 107-108.

135. Margolin, "A Performer's Notes on Parody," 251.

Since the 1970's, feminist performance's *modus operandi* has resided in the primacy of autobiography and the inclusiveness brought about through the woman's reclaiming her body as the subject of her own art. The personal art forms of feminists then translated to others who were also marginalized, widening the circle of inclusion.[136] The relationship between autobiography and the body is integral to the creation and reception of feminist performance; spectators witness the feminist desiring body and voice in performance and discover shared experiences or empathy for the trials and joys of others. The exchange also extends back to the performer—the act of performance can be curative for the artist's body. When Margolin went through chemotherapy treatments for Hodgkin's disease, she says that she felt that she was in exile from her body. She wrote *Three Seconds in the Key* and performed the piece at P.S. 122 in 2001 to re-engage her body:

> One of the liberating precepts of performance is that you do not need to cover up in your work the relationship it has to your life. Theatre always has direct relationships to the artist's life. Now that I had my beautiful fling in the theatre, in which I lost and got my body back every night, I feel like I can go forward and get my tests and scans and see where's it's at. I don't know. We all get three seconds in the key and I have to say, the one of mine I used in this play was not wasted.[137]

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136 While there has been much debate since the 1970's in terms of privilege across race, class, and sexuality among feminists, the feminist revolution is still viewed by those in its ranks as bringing us closer to ending racism, class elitism, and heterocentrism.

137. Rita Sullivan, "Three Seconds to Curtain: A playwright battling Hodgkins disease finds inspiration in the travails of the New York Knicks," *Hoop* 61 (June 2001) 26.

Margolin references her own body and biography in performance, and because much of her audience is aware of her persona's life story, they are aware of the potential origins—or seeming origins—from her life experience. To help us see an event from her past and the body in the present, Margolin's play employs a critical distance from the original event to constitute a parodic performance, and Margolin and her audience find and re-find her body/biography at each showing. Margolin presents a repetition with a difference—a critical distance that allows for an intertextual and intersubjective exchange with the audience.

On the surface, the Equinox campaign would seem to be similarly curative in scope, but, upon further reflection, it reveals itself to be an excellent example of Jamesonian pastiche. The campaign is designed to reveal biographical snippets of individuals who have triumphed over adversity and now possess physical and mental health because of their discovery of Equinox and its ability to help. There is no other text by the photos, however, and so a passerby would only know the more complex message by visiting Equinox's web site.[138] Without the text, as a stand-alone visual campaign—designed for billboards and posters—the primary message conveyed is something closer to "I am the author of my own successful biography with the sweat my body produces at Equinox." In purely visual terms the

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138. See "Equinox's My Body My Biography," Equinox, 2010, http://mybodymybiography.com (accessed 22 April 2011).

compelling stories of the individuals are irrelevant, and those who are photographed—all of them urban, incredibly fit, and good-looking, and many revealing smooth skin and ripped muscles or voluptuous breasts—make it clear that "successful" is defined by the dominant culture's definition of health and beauty.

The Equinox bodies provide an artifice of inclusiveness through the exclusive images/stories presented, but they recall the "cover up" from Margolin's conflation of the cover model and Spalding Gray, and the unintended irony of the ad campaign is thick. The photographs virtually erase markings of what might have ailed the individuals and actually serve to intimidate anyone who does not look like these perfect people. It is the opposite experience Margolin had when she attended her first Spiderwoman performance where "imperfections" were not only publically announced but were also celebrated. The visual message serves in opposition to their claims and instead tells us that going to Equinox erases biography, and essentially turns people's bodies into clones of beauty and success with race and gender as the only visible difference. Unless one goes to the website, that is, and reads their stories. Even then, while the website features myriad life stories (e.g., a man diagnosed with HIV, a woman whose father died from cancer, a man who was in a serious car accident, and a model who was starving herself),[139] imbedded in the

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139. While there is an on-line component to the campaign where people can write-in about their stories, given that the campaign is created by the Yard agency at three million dollars and uses such perfect looking types, it is not known if the featured "members" photographed are truly polled members or hired actors. See "GDUSA Newsletter," Graphic Design USA, February 2011, under

campaign is the selling of a very expensive product for which, even if one found themselves at such a crossroads and could use the magical curative help of Equinox, affording the opportunity (or not affording it) is another issue of inequality against which feminists have long fought.[140] There is nothing radical about Equinox's borrowing of the feminist mantra; the slogan is an example of Jameson's "blank parody" in its starkest, most capitalistic terms, and is, thus, pastiche, not parody.

The campaign's exclusivity under the guise of gracious equality[141] calls to mind Margolin's vignette "Keep Under One's Hat," from her one woman show *Index to Idioms* (2005). Her character, a persona whom many spectators know is based on Margolin's biography given her public struggles with cancer, discusses the ineffectual attempts to offer her counsel by the women of her home town when they finally learn of her diagnosis with Hodgkin's disease (see fig. 6). Some suggest she attend prayer meetings, while others suggest she try psychotherapy to help "*put [her] cancer in perspective.*" Margolin's persona (again, simply called Woman in the

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"Graphic Design News," http://www.gdusa.com/egdusa/2011/0208e2/msg.html (accessed 22 April 2011).

140. I was similarly stunned ten years prior to this event when I passed the same corner on Greenwich and West 12th to find that the Art Greenwich Twin movie house, which had been there since the early-1940's, was slated for demolition to be replaced by an Equinox. The irony of authentic local culture being replaced by a corporate behemoth which tries to augment its local cultural ties by coopting techniques used by the disenfranchised in order to sell premium health club memberships at prices no disenfranchised person could likely afford is breathtaking in its scope.

141. Even the name "Equinox" suggests equality, as an equinox occurs two times in a calendar year when the earth's axis is tilted neither toward nor away from the sun, resulting in day and night of equal lengths.

text) finds that her body, particularly in its current state as she loses her hair from chemotherapy treatments, no longer has a safe place in her society. One day, as she picks up her daughter from school, her body absolutely refuses to let her enter this closed social construct composed of people who sound eerily similar to those used by the Equinox ad campaign:

> Picking her up at school . . . I had to arrive early enough to find a parking space and wait among cliques of healthy, well-dressed women, women languorous and lovely in the sunlight, with nothing but weight gain to worry them about their bodies and no immediate fear of dying before their children were adults. It was the beauty of the day that was so hard, I think. I arrived at five minutes before three, perfect timing, and turned off the car, and felt for my baseball cap, and it was in place. I surveyed the grounds, the clumps of women talking, many of whom I recognized, and I put my hand on the metal piece that opens the door, and it was cold, and my whole body turned cold, and my heart started pounding, and *I could not open the door*, could not get out of the car, I was not a part of the world I was stepping into, like a squirrel who cannot live on the bottom of the sea, I knew I would die, drown, I could not show myself to these women, I would be breathless in their pity, I could not get out of the car to pick up my child. Even with my hat on, covering every thin strand of my poor poisoned hair, I could not get out of the car.[142]

Alas, the intervention of parody cannot help Margolin's persona/body/biography enter the space of exclusive society in "real life;" however, the space of performance allows her to parodically repeat that experience and remake her body within a permissible space. As Margolin's persona performs her autobiographical story on

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142. Deb Margolin, *Index to Idioms: A Performance Novel* (2005), in *The Drama Review* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 170–71.

stage in *Index to Idioms*, she calls attention to the cultural confinement in which women who are ill (and whose bodies manifest the illness) find themselves and ushers them into an inclusive space in a manner that is far more generative than buying into a social gym network.

Parodic Entrances into Unspoken Spaces

Before anyone knew the name Aileen Wuornos, playwright Deb Margolin found tiny articles embedded in the newspaper—what she called, "little shouts of hysteria buried in the *New York Times*"[143]—which she recalls describing a female serial killer who ate breakfast with middle-aged white men before she murdered them. Margolin found something ironic and amusing in the announcements of "another white man found dead on the interstate;"[144] they seemed to cast an archetypal terror of women into an almost vaudevillian relief. While most women are trained to be wary of potential (and inevitable) attacks by men and must remain ever-vigilant, now men might have to learn how to be careful after dark (or at least curb their desire to pick up prostitutes like Wournos). Inspired by the clippings, Margolin began to write a play about this killer in early 1990—one year before it became known that this "serial killer" was Aileen (Lee) Wournos—and she drafted a play in

143. Margolin, telephone conversation.

144. Ibid.

agreement with Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw that they would perform her dramatic text (a relationship never before formalized within the anarchic organization of Split Britches). Weaver and Shaw, frustrated by their own encounters with sexism even in a community of "utopian" queer performance collectives (like Spiderwoman), announced that their next piece would be called *Lesbians Who Kill*,[145] a highly eroticized queer text stuffed with gender anger.

When more facts about Wournos's case because known, some feminists and lesbians took up her case as a *cause celebres*.[146] Most of her supporters believed Wuornos's original story that she killed all of her victims in self-defense, and because she was a prostitute, they understood that she probably had suffered a history of abuse and rape. Prostitutes are a disposable commodity within a patriarchal exchange, and Lynda Hart, who wrote about both Aileen Wuornos and *Lesbians Who Kill*, points out that prostitutes like Wuornos are almost always "the prey, not the predators." Yet Hart describes, too, how incredulous Wuornos was that "most people" did not understand how prostitutes and women, in general, are

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145. Case, *Split Britches,* 29-30.

146. Others took-up her case, as well, particularly those who thought her mentally insane and believed she should not receive the death penalty. See *Aileen: The Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, DVD, directed by Nick Broomfield and Joan Churchill (Columbia Tristar, 2004). See also "Motion to Declare Defendant Incompetent Pursuant to Fla.R.Crim.P 3.815(d)," State of Florida vs. Aileen Wournos, 92-52-CF, (Fla. Ct. App. 8 October 2002), http://www.oranous.com/women/Filed_10-08-2002_WuornosMotionToDeclare.pdf (accessed 22 April 2011).

commonly victimized and raped by men[147] and calls attention to the twisting the FBI had to commit to their standard profile of serial killers which describes serial killers not only as men but also as victimizing members of a powerless group.[148] In order to make Wuornos fit the (male) profile, the authorities shifted her identity as a prostitute worker into the conflated construction of a highway sex predator who lured middle-aged white men (since when are middle-aged, heterosexual, white men classified as a powerless group?) into a sexual exchange in order to kill them and fulfill a fantasized gratification. The authorities recast Wuornos' actions as the work of an aggressive, volatile, masculine lesbian man-hater, and as such, her transgressions against the patriarchal order could not be tolerated.[149] Although she occupied the marginalized space of the prostitute-lesbian, Wuornos's victims were white men and not (an)other of the disposable disenfranchised; as such, she reversed the power structure of culture's predominate subject–object relation and violated regulated representation. Hart says that, while Wuornos plays into the culture of

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147. Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Agression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 141-142.

148. Ibid., 136.

149. Initially, in the police composite of Wuornos and her girlfriend, Tyria Moore, Wuornos was labeled as the "femme" and Moore the "butch" based on stereotypically read appearances. It was not until Moore, who is from a middle-class background, cooperated with police to entrap Wuornos into a confession in return for immunity, that Moore was then perceived as the helpless feminine partner and Wuornos as the aggressive masculine man-hater. For an analysis of the hostile imagery in the media as well as artistic renderings of Wuornos, see Miriam Basilio, "Corporal Evidence: Representations of Aileen Wuornos," *Art Journal* 55: no. 4 (Winter 1996): 56 – 61.

"paranoid male fantasies," with Wuornos the fantasy had been "quite horribly, acted out. If fantasies worked to preclude their actualization, something has gone awry; Aileen Wuornos has violated that barrier."[150]

In a heteronormative order, a death sentence or a symbolic death awaits most killer queers who have ruptured under the slow-burn of gender abuse and rage.[151] In Margolin's parodic world of *Lesbians Who Kill,* queer violence and anger become redemptive because they help queers find space to reclaim their lives—lives previously killed within an essentialist structure. Margolin's parody works itself inside the normative punishment structure of society, the one which punishes queers who, simply by being queer, have already trangressed, will transgress again, and, therefore, must always be destroyed. Robert Phiddian illustrates how parody works from the inside:

> It is clear that deconstruction . . . nests in the structure of the texts and ideas it criticizes, as a cuckoo infiltrates and takes over the nests of other birds. It operates from inside the arguments of metaphysical texts and systems such as structuralism and phenomenology, showing how they cannot totalize the visions they proclaim, and precisely where they double and collapse. It

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150. Hart, *Fatal Women*, 141.

151. More infamous examples are that of John Wayne Gacy, who was labeled as a married bi-sexual and confessed to killing thirty-three men and young boys, and Gwen Graham and Cathy Wood, a lesbian couple, both of whom worked as nurses and were convicted of killing five elderly women. Also, of the numbers of women on death row, it is speculated that half are lesbian though less than half of the female population at large is lesbian. See Sally Kohn, "Greasing the Wheel: How the Criminal Justice System Hurts Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered People and Why Hate Crime Laws Won't Save Them," *New York Universtiy Review of Law and Social Change* 27, no. 257 (2001): 263. See also Victoria Brownworth, "Dykes on Death Row," *The Advocate,* 15 June 1992, 62–64.

> is not primary thought, always secondary, always "borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure." And this is precisely what parody does too. It is preeminently a *genre-bricoleur*, living off the energies and inadequacies of previous writings, "borrowing them structurally" and transforming them with a critical eye.[152]

Daring to claim violence (or, at least, the imagination of violence) against men who wrong women, Margolin's characters in *Lesbians Who Kill,* May (Weaver) and June (Shaw) demonstrate on stage the aberrant female version of simultaneous seduction and violence as well as their corresponding actions. Often described as Split Britches's most erotic production, *Lesbians Who Kill* gives the audience a chance to relish in the extreme portrait society has painted of them.

The eroticism of the play also gives lesbians in the audience the parodic distance to witness their own desire in a safe space of exchange. Visibility of lesbian desire is potentially dangerous in the world of the heteronormative social, and Margolin examines May and June's realm of unspoken danger with a game called "looks like/is like."[153] Margolin explains how the game works in an unpublished version of her text:

> You pick a thing, and then you think of all the things that look like it or are like it, and if the other person doesn't understand why you think that, they can ask you for an explanation. And if

152. Robert Phiddian, "Are Parody and Deconstruction Secretly the Same Thing?," *New Literary History* 28, no. 4 (1997): 681.

153. Deb Margolin, *Lesbians Who Kill*, in *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (London: Routledge, 1996), 190.

> you can make any sense out of it for them, they lose! You have to tell them: does it *look* like the original thing, or is it like that thing in some *invisible* way? And if you're on to something that they couldn't see, they lose! The minute it makes sense to them. They lose everything! And then you start up all over again.[154]

But, as May instructs, "symbols don't count."[155] The words in the game must lead to a concrete association, not a cognitive (symbolic) prerogative. The associations inside the play (as well as in the play of the play) are based on impulses and instincts from the body. Once the person who has challenged the association sees and understands its meaning, she loses the round. Seeing equals loss; seeing lesbian desire is dangerous. Of course, not seeing lesbian desire also carries consequences, and so Margolin's parody opens up a place for witnessing. As Hart explains, Margolin "creates a dissident space of mimicry for Split Britches' butch/femme performers . . . to play out their seductions."[156]

Hart also reminds us that queers are transgressors and are already guilty, thus queer fantasies are policed and investigated.[157] May states that "you can murder someone in your thoughts, you can murder someone just because of who

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154. Lynda Hart obtained the unpublished manuscript of *Lesbians Who Kill* from Margolin and quotes this passage in her book. Hart, *Fatal Women*, 155-56. In fact, Margolin's version of her play differs from the text published in Case's collection for Split Britches.

155. Margolin, *Lesbians Who Kill*, 192.

156. Hart, *Fatal Women*, 155.

157. Lynda Hart, "Theatre Review: *Lesbians Who Kill*," *Theatre Journal* 44, no. 1 (March 1992): 517.

they are."[158] Margolin recognizes that the killer queer desire to murder those who oppress has been building like a slow-burn for generations. Inspired by *The Brothers Karamazov*, Margolin questions when imagination or intention matches truth or reality. Just like the son who was about to kill his father and found he was a moment too late for the act, but still arrested for the murder he did not actually commit, the question of guilt or innocence is a societal technicality. If an intention is present, the actual action (or non-action) does not matter. As May says, she "may" be a murderer. (May)be yes, (may)be no. "I thought about it. I don't have an alibi. I can't account for my time, for my time during the murder."[159] She is already guilty; guilty with her thoughts and desires that exist in a time that cannot contain them. May and June's games are interrupted by radio broadcast blasts tracking the movements of a pair of lesbian killers. According to the reports May and June could look like or are like the lesbian serial killers on the loose—"one blonde and the other brunette."[160] "Looks like/is like." The alarming event of two women who riddle middle-aged white mens' bodies with bullets is "something malignantly new under the Florida sun,"[161] with the "damsel...turning dragon and slaying the knight."[162]

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158. Margolin, *Lesbians Who Kill*, 187.

159. Ibid., 189.

160. Ibid., 209.

161. Ibid.

162. Ibid., 201.

In an oppressive heteronormative society Wuornos, May, and June disrupt the original story of Eve—the first seductress whose actions forever doom mankind. And, because women are constructed as the "non-violent" gender, it is lesbian deviance that is historically cited as the place for women's aggression. Dorothy Allison calls attention to the false construction:

> Two or three things I know, but this is the one I am not supposed to talk about, how it comes together – sex and violence, love and hatred. I'm not ever supposed to put together the two halves of my life – the man who walked across my childhood and the life I have made for myself. I am not supposed to talk about hating that man when I grew up to be a lesbian, a dyke, stubborn, competitive, and perversely lustful. "People might get confused," a woman [therapist] once told me. "People might imagine that sexual abuse makes lesbians." "Oh, I doubt it.". . . "If it did, there would be so many more."[163]

Sadly, in the case of Wuornos, her childhood abuse was summarily ignored, and one can only speculate how that oversight helped her to grow her anger, exceed representation, and ultimately explode into a dangerous woman willing to kill.

My displaced conversation which rubs together the real-life Aileen Wuornos and the fictional-life May and June not only represents the narrow distinction between reality and fantasy, life and theatre, report and performance, but also highlights a parody of Wuornos. By the time the play was produced, and Wournos's story was known, the spectators read Wuornos's life through the

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163. Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* (New York: Plume, 1995), 45. Unfortunately for the patriarchal order that believes in its own myths, a case could be made that there does exist a paranoia that there may be many more killer lesbians walking in our midst.

performance of May and June—a repetition with a difference in a space of "safe" imaginings. Aileen Wuornos had a frightening home when she grew up in Troy, Michigan, complete with abandonment, beatings, sexual abuse, incest, teen pregnancy, promiscuity and heavy drinking with neighboring boys willing to take advantage of her for a pack of cigarettes. As too many women know, home—the setting for learned domestication and submissive behavior—does not always provide a safe haven.[164] Nor were the streets or the life Wuornos lived outside of home; before the age of twelve, her grandfather who raised her threw her out of the house into the snow, and she was forced to live in abandoned cars in the woods. For Wuornos the car continues to repeat itself and serves as a complicated site of duality, that of trauma and potential safety. As a child, the car represented both her expulsion and harsh survival with some refuge of shelter. As an adult the car represented the means of low-class economic entrapment through prostitution, rape,

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164. Dorothy Allison describes not only the life-long struggle of a survivor and the desire for retaliation, but also how she was conditionally raised in the home to be polite despite her rage:

> I had been repeatedly warned throughout my childhood that if I ever revealed what went on in our house, they would take me away. I would wind up in juvenile detention and spend the rest of my life in and out of jail. It did not matter that what was being done to me was rape and that I had never asked for it. It did not matter because I was who I was, the child of my family, poor and notorious in the country where we lived, poor and hopeless. Oh, I had dreamed of killing the man, but little girls do not kill their fathers and get away with it. I was taught to be very quiet, very polite in public. . . .

Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class & Literature* (Ann Arbor: Firebrand Books, 2003), 52.

and murders as well as a site of mobility and money for Wuornos and her partner (Wuornos stole her johns' cars after their murders).[165]

Symbolically referring Wuornos' complicated relationship to car and home, Margolin stages the entirety of her play inside a car. May and June are staked out there, afraid to enter their house which is cursed by lightning, and equally separated from the world outside their car which cannot contain them. May hates the lightening, so she hides in June's lap each time it strikes. The lightening is attracted to their house, and May wants to protect herself from being tracked down and fried by it. Conditioning and repeated histories are all tied up in the house of lightning. May and June cling to each other to ward off the history that haunts. June says, "We kiss for courage! . . . We kiss for memory. We kiss before we fall into history."[166] Trying not to fall into the repetitions of history, May and June are haunted by the question: can they make a difference and alter their representational placement?

The gifts of mobility and protection that a car can offer never actually help Wuornos, May, or June. One car Wuornos stole (and her partner crashed) led to her arrest, and May and June's car is firmly positioned somewhere in between danger and death. Margolin asks how many times can a woman take abuse without either

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165. The visual artist Millie Wilson deconstructed Wuornos' relationship to the automobile in her installation *Not a Serial Killer* (1994). See Miriam Basilio, "Corporal Evidence: Representations of Aileen Wuornos," in "We're Here: Gay and Lesbian Presence in Art and Art History," special issue, *Art Journal* 55, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 56–61.

166. Margolin, *Lesbians Who Kill*, 219.

suffering as the victim of a murder (dying) or inflicting a murder (exploding)? How many times can something happen before a death? Life is painful. Death is easy. May says, "it's painless to die by gunshot. It's when you live that it ends up hurting so much."[167] Margolin's May and June spend their time living in the ongoing painful negotiation between the two deaths represented by their home and the world outside the car, recalling the Phelan quote cited earlier observing that queers survive their own deaths;[168] that is, the symbolic death all queers must pass through within a heteronormative society kills off those who cannot conform to its law, and those who survive symbolic death live inside repeated transgressions.

Deb Margolin wrote this prescient play and then several years later, Aileen Carol Wuornos was indicted for murder, tried, and subsequently convicted of first degree premeditated murder and felony murder of Richard Mallory.[169] When the judge pronounced the decree of punishment, he said, "it is the sentence of this court that you, ... Aileen Wuornos, be electrocuted until you are dead. And may God have

167. Margolin, *Lesbians Who Kill*, 200.

168. Phelan, in Hart and Phelan, "Queerer than Thou," 280.

169. There are many questions and concerns which surround the proceedings of Wuronos's case from her coerced confession, to her lax legal representation, to crucial evidence withheld at trial—Mallory served a 10-year sentence for sexual violence and attempted rape. Furthermore, Wuornos claimed self-defense against Mallory, but the Williams Rule in Florida law permits any evidence relating to other non-convicted crimes to be admitted into evidence in order to demonstrate a pattern of behavior, so all of the other alleged killings and charges were admitted into the trial and weakened her claim of rape and self-defense. Once the trial was over, Wuornos plead no-contest to five other murders indictments without her attorney securing a sentencing recommendation, and she was sentenced to death for each case.

mercy on your corpse."[170] While there was a gasp in the courtroom at the judge's possible mis-speaking, his specific word choice—"corpse"—substituting Wuornos's future inscribed murdered body with that of her soul demonstrates how much the people involved in her case wanted to see her body reimagined dead. May and June also live in this transgressive world where sex and death exist as partners in crime. Margolin reminds us that there is something deeply involuntary about both of them; each person dies just a little bit with every sexual encounter. And, June dreams about May's death which prophetically mirrors the (future) death of Aileen Wuornos. June tells us about her dream of May:

> although she was perfectly healthy, she was dying because death was...persistent...well organized, and persistent...she had, I don't know...a problem, like when a sleeper gets tangled up in the bedsheet...something torturous that just waking up would have solved...but death was persistent, well organized and persistent...she was naked, on her back, pelvis tilted upward, and death was leaning over her, wooing her...she protested...the titled pelvis showed resistence...she always resisted with that part of herself...I dreamt she died that way.[171]

Although Wuornos was sentenced to die by electrocution, shortly before her death, the state of Florida "switched" to the seemingly more merciful death by lethal injection. The pursuit of Wuornos's death was both organized and persistent by the state. "Perfectly healthy" Wuornos was strapped to a gurney with a white sheet on

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170. Aileen Wuornos with Christopher Berry-Dee, *Monster: My True Story*, (London: John Blake Publishing, 2006), 202.

171. Margolin, *Lesbians Who Kill*, 189.

her last day. All of her life she had resisted with her body through sex, which contributed to both her survival and her demise.

As Wuornos was injected with the combination of three lethal drugs which would paralyze and suffocate her organs before ultimately burning her insides, witnesses were reminded of her last words: "I'd just like to say I'm sailing with the Rock and I'll be back like Independence Day with Jesus, June 6, like the movie, big mothership and all. I'll be back."[172] Through books, movies, plays, and even an opera, the story of Aileen Wuornos's life continues to return, just as we witness in performance how May and June mark repetitions. It is an infinite return until you try to wipe out the abused, queer body; but that is an impossible task, just as dividing an integer by zero is. May says, "if you divide a number by zero it's like putting a white sheet over the number."[173] Dividing by zero, the integer that signifies lack, represents the final "looks like/is like" game. The dissolution of an entity or a body is as impossible a task as dividing by zero (there is still *something* – albeit unknown – behind the sheet). As Margolin reminds us, queers fight, or they dream of fighting, but not as the heteronormative social order fears – all bloody and serial-murder like. Queers reclaim their lives fighting with their bodies, words, and

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172. Wuornos with Berry-Dee, *Monster: My True Story*, 213.

173. Magolin, *Lesbians Who Kill*, 222.

(parodic) art to resist symbolic dissolution before they die, and may God truly have mercy on the corpse of Aileen Wuornos and all other queer bodies.[174]

Parodic Entrances into Hostile Spaces

For most of her professional career, praise has been in more abundance than criticism, but there have been a few highly-publicized examples where Margolin's parodic interventions are decidedly unwelcome. Notably, in the spring of 2009, Deb Margolin decided to enter the space of an individual whose actions she could not comprehend: Bernard "Bernie" Madoff, the former NASDAQ chairman who defrauded his investors in the largest Ponzi scheme in American history. Margolin often states that when she does not understand someone, she writes a monologue for him so that she may "see the world through his eyes in order to hear his voice,"

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174. As a postscript to the idea of reclaiming life I was completely taken by the beauty—both her handwriting and artistry—of Wuornos's handwritten letters to her life-long best friend, Dawn Botkins. They are remarkable and, given that Wuornos's barely had an education or any positive attention or reinforcement, I wonder about her missed potential versus those folks who find a scant of nurturing. Without sounding too reductive, as a final thought or question, I wonder what constitutes that very thin line which separates the actions of a killer from a killer contemplator? Margolin's May and June are the manifestation of that fine line. Is it art that is truly redemptive? Is that why those of us who are fortunate enough to have the opportunity to be exposed to art and are the survivors of misfortune, turn to create and explore art? If, for example, Dorothy Allison had not found her incredible voice as a writer, what would have become of her life? If someone showed the tiniest trace of interest in Aileen Wuornos's drawings and creativity, what would have become of her life? How does our witnessing of May and June's play help us discern those differences and possibilities? See Aileen Wuornos, *Dear Dawn: Aileen Wuornos in Her Own Words*, ed. Lisa Kester and Daphne Gottleib (Soft Skull Press, forthcoming). See Appendix 2 for a copy of Letter 2 (6-9-93), and for examples of three letters online, see http://www.aileenfilm.com/core/letters/3-4ba9a3fda3a8cbaf55b232dc06bf9bd1.pdf (accessed 22 April 2011); http://www.aileenfilm.com/core/letters/4-189cce1d16ca3dff796b7931e64072f5.pdf (accessed 22 April 2011); and http://www.aileenfilm.com/core/letters/5-4d8a9d06ac38a5e3c0bd4560a274edb0.pdf (accessed 22 April 2011).

and come to understand "his humanness."[175] Because she recognizes the failure of language to communicate (even though it is the only tool she has), Margolin finds it appropriate to imagine the language of another in a theatrical context—in the theatre, language is merely a stand-in for the subtext of what one truly wishes they could express.

Her writing on Bernie Madoff is just one piece in a series of texts which Margolin has written in response to contemporaneous news. She has created similar parodic acts—entering the space and voice of another—in the past: in 1998, in response to President Clinton's impeachment, Margolin wrote an erotic text from the perspective of Monica Lewinsky titled, *Bill Me Later*;[176] in 2006, in response to the War on Terror, she wrote a monologue for a suicide bomber titled, *When They Quiet Down, I Start*;[177] in 2007, in response to a president whom she believes should have been impeached, Margolin wrote a monologue for President George W. Bush;[178] and, also in 2009, she wrote *Continuing the Conversation with Caryl Churchill: Seven Palestinian Children: a play for the other* which was her response to continue the debate

175. Deb Margolin to Elie Wiesel, letter, 5 April 2010. Margolin has generously e-mailed the contents of the letter e-mailed to me.

176. Deb Margolin, *Bill Me Later*, in *Extreme Exposure: An Anthology of Solo Performance Texts from the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jo Bonney (Theater Communications Group, 2000), 325–31.

177. This piece found its way into a evening of four short plays entitled *Time is the Mercy of Eternity*. Deb Margolin, *Time Is the Mercy of Eternity: a meditation in four acts*, (Samuel French, 2007).

178. This monologue has never been published nor performed. Margolin has graciously given me a copy of the unpublished text.

launched by Caryl Churchill's play, *Seven Jewish Children: a play for Gaza.*[179] As Jameson explains, "a good or great parodist has to have some secret sympathy for the original,"[180] and Margolin strives to find the critical means to investigate historical controversial figures and issues without destroying them.

As she first worked through workshops and readings with the Madoff material, Margolin's play was originally titled, *Madoff: a fictional memoir*, but when it was finally produced she changed the title to *Imagining Madoff*. Margolin could not understand Madoff's "depraved indifference"[181] toward humanity, so she placed Madoff in opposition with an icon of morality: Elie Wiesel. She chose Wiesel as Madoff's foil not only because of the immediate ethical contrast, but also because Wiesel himself was a victim of Madoff's fraud; Wiesel's charitable foundation went bankrupt after the scheme was ended, and he lost millions in personal money as well. Margolin's imaginings of both Madoff and Wiesel prompted her to write a memory play for Madoff, who, from prison, recalls an all-night long conversation between the two men. During this vigil they discuss everything from money,

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179. Deb Margolin, *Continuing the Conversation with Caryl Churchill: Seven Palestinian Children: a play for the other*, The Neshamah Center, 2011, http://www.neshamah.net/seven-palestinian-children (accessed 22 April 2011). 2009 was clearly a turbulent year for Margolin. In addition to the Madoff controversy, as we shall see, Margolin's reading at Theater J of her response to Churchill's play also provoked much controversy.

180. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 113.

181. Deb Maroglin, "I Love My Country: Freedom of Speech, Aaron Sorkin, Elie Wiesel," *The Drama Review* 55, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 154.

baseball, boats, their wives, the Torah, Talmud, the Jewish faith, and one joke in particular, "How many Jews does it take to screw in a lightbulb?" At conversation's end, Wiesel, the noted Holocaust survivor, reveals his favorite answer to the joke—"six million and one"[182] —which of course, Madoff does not comprehend:

> BERNIE: I don't get that joke, Elie.
>
> ELIE: Bernichke! You don't get that joke! You don't get that joke! Bernie! The six million are gone, and the one that's left? He puts on the light![183]

Wiesel represents the light and can help reconcile Madoff with his crimes if only he will first confess, but while we see moments of Madoff struggling to speak out to Wiesel, alas, he cannot address his wrongdoing. Not even the spirituality offered by a man like Wiesel can help Madoff redeem himself.

The conversation between the two men is fictional, realized only in the space of theatre, but the collapsible boundaries between illusion and reality in the context of performance create a slippery and seemingly dangerous space for those who do not wish for Margolin to make space for herself, imagined or not, within their personal stories. Margolin describes how she first learned the parodic prerogative of entering another's space through her imitation of writers when she was young, and in particular in her imitation of Henry Miller:

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182. Deb Margolin, "Imagining Madoff," 2010, just before the final monologue of the play by Secretary. Margolin has kindly let me review the unpublished manuscript.

183. Ibid.

> I was in love with the work of Henry Miller, for its joy and squalor, for its sexual exuberance, for its iconoclastic and opulent, magnificent use of language; for his lending me his male prerogative; I became as powerful as he was; for his saying, in one of the *Tropic* novels, that he wanted to fuck this woman so she *stayed fucked*. That was beyond beautiful, that was the beginning for me of an understanding of the power of language to hint at things beyond it; the power of language to say what cannot be said. At the time I wasn't aware that he had prerogatives I didn't have. But identification with the aggressor is definitely a palliative, and I really identified with his way, you know. I was both the object and the subject as I read Henry Miller's work. And it freed me, it was very liberating. But the true liberation came when I actually found a voice, when I actually was able to write these things for myself.[184]

Margolin's reflexive writing, even when she lends it to write for another's experience, resides in parody. As such, her work occupies the space of a liminal-norm and is either applauded and theorized for her use of intertexuality or is placed in opposition to the establishment and threatens what is perceived as reality.

By August 2010 the world premiere of *Imagining Madoff,* with three characters —Madoff, Wiesel, and Madoff's secretary—was scheduled to open the 2010–11 season of Theater J, a Washington D.C. theatre devoted to Jewish themes, culture, and issues and run by artistic director, Ari Roth. But the production as originally conceived by Margolin was not to be. In April of 2010, seeking his blessing as well as, perhaps, his support for publicity purposes, Roth suggested that Margolin send her play to Wiesel. In retrospect Margolin wishes she had not done so, but, acceding

184. Margolin, interview by author, 2005.

to Roth's request, she composed an eloquent letter introducing herself, her work, and her play to Wiesel, and his foundation responded with a request to read a copy of the play. Before Wiesel had the chance to respond to Margolin's text, however, Roth issued a press release to *The Washington Post* announcing the play's production,[185] and, by the next day, Margolin received a letter via Federal Express from Wiesel depicting her play as "obscene" and "defamatory" with a promise to sue should she produce her work in any venue.

Unfortunately, Wiesel never specified what he found objectionable within the play nor why he considered Margolin's work an attack on his character; all we know is that he was willing to go to the trouble of threatening an expensive lawsuit (which, of course, he could afford) to make sure he was disassociated with a play called *Imagining Madoff,* although his actions, made public, have forever tied his presence to the text. Perhaps he was embarrassed that he trusted Madoff with his finances and did not want an audience to see how, even within the imagined conversation, his character pleads with Madoff to invest his personal money. The play also includes a moment when Wiesel's character describes the sexually tinged memory of a photograph which he viewed in an exhibit of a beautiful young woman

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185. For the information *The Washing Post* published, see Jane Horwitz, "Backstage: Marcia Milgrom Dodge, Theater J 2010-2011 season," Backstage, *Washington Post*, 14 April 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/ 2010/04/13/AR2010041304232.html (accessed 22 April 2011).

and her baby both dead on the ground of a concentration camp, as well as an eroticized moment for Madoff when Wiesel reverently wraps him in the *t'fillin*. As always, Margolin's theatrical language is fluid and explicit; however, it seems that Wiesel does not appreciate her choice of subject nor her poetry, and he seems to confuse the line between art/life. An anxiety surrounding the examinations of art/life has crept into Western culture and, as Phelan explains, demonstrates a conservative "ever-growing cultural uneasiness with 'ambiguous situations'" so that the arbitrary line separating art/life threatens erasure.[186] The ambiguous nature of the line separating art/life along with an artist's examination of that precise boundary potentially situates an artist in a confrontational and risky juncture; although this was mode of operation that was celebrated in the arts since the advent of the avant garde and performance art.

Whatever his specific reasons, Wiesel was not pleased with Margolin's attempts to make room for herself in his world, and this incident represents another dimension, different from Margolin's encounter with Case, of the hazzards of parody—the dangerous pitfalls when a parodist crashes an exclusive party, unasked for and unwelcomed. It is unlikely that Wiesel's claims of libel or defamation would have succeeded in a court of law because for a work of art, and parody in particular,

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186. Peggy Phelan, "Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows," in "Theorizing the Performer," special issue, *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 4 (December 2004): 571.

the standards of libel are difficult to meet, but it would have certainly been a battle. For example, in the case of "Hustler Magazine and Larry C. Flynt v. Jerry Falwell," perhaps the most famous and seminal lawsuit focused on the issue of the legal protections for parody, Jerry Falwell sued *Hustler* for publishing a fake advertisement in the magazine that claimed, among other salacious things, that Falwell's first sexual encounter had been with his mother. The lawsuit worked its way through the courts, and in a landmark 1988 ruling the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of *Hustler Magazine*, finding in an 8-0 decision:

> that the free speech guaranties of the *First Ammendment* prohibit public figures and public officials from recovering for the tort of intentional infliction of emotional distress by reason of the publication of a caricature, such as the ad parody in question, unless it is shown that the publication contains a false statement of fact which was made with actual malice, that is, with knowledge that the statement was false or with reckless disregard as to whether it was true; and . . . [Falwell] could not recover for intentional infliction of emotional distress, since (a) he is a public figure, and (b) the Supreme Court accepted the jury's finding that the ad parody could not reasonably be understood as describing actual facts.[187]

That Wiesel is a public figure, there is no doubt. That Margolin wrote false statements with actual malice is also greatly in doubt for the law, especially considering the fact that she sent Wiesel the play for him to read beforehand, as well as the fact that she included a respectful letter in the package.

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187. *Hustler Magazine and Larry C. Flynt v. Jerry Falwell*, 485 U.S. 46, 46 (1988), 1.

The controlling issue with *Imagining Madoff* appears, therefore, to be whether a reasonable audience-goer would have interpreted Margolin's imaginings as fact, and herein lies the danger for the parodist. Phiddian cites examples of other artists whose parodic works were misread (and who were subsequently prosecuted), and describes parody as:

> crooked, reflexive writing, with the instability of irony inscribed deep in its structure. If we read parody "straight" as sincere expression without relating it to a structure of criticism, we misunderstand it. . . . Warring readings indicate that parody is an unstable process driven by the contexts in which readers place particular texts, rather than a set of formal properties. As a cultural practice, parody is language about language, and it resonates within semiotic systems.[188]

Perhaps Butler offers the best explanation for how parody may be misread when she explains, "parody by itself is not subversive;" it "depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered."[189] Wiesel likely reads Margolin's work as a presentation of "fact," and his threat to sue is an example of the most dangerous kind of misreadings of parody. Maybe the misreading occurred because, unlike the majority of Margolin's plays, *Imagining Madoff* is not overtly funny. Humor likely generates the greatest distance most efficiently that allows the

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188. Phiddian, "Are Parody and Deconstruction Secretly the Same Thing?," 684.

189. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), 139.

audience to perceive parody, but Hutcheon reminds us that humor is not necessary for parody to exist:

> *Para* in Greek can also mean "beside," and therefore there is a suggestion of an accord or intimacy instead of a contrast. . . . Even in terms of formal structure, the doubleness of the root suggests the need for more neutral terms of discussion. There is nothing in *parodia* that necessitates the inclusion of a concept of ridicule, as there is, for instance, in the joke or *burla* of burlesque.[190]

In *Imaging Madoff*, Margolin explores a parodic intimacy with Madoff "beside" Wiesel that Wiesel obviously did not appreciate, and with the text's content so timely and prescient, Wiesel could not perceive a critical distance.

Although she may have prevailed in court, the lawsuit was one in which Margolin could ill afford to fight in terms of time, money, and energy. Roth himself did not want to produce a play that would upset Wiesel or one in which he would have to stand up to him, so he informed Wiesel's representatives that he asked Margolin to revise the play and remove Wiesel from the text. Margolin ultimately did just that and with dramaturgical integrity transformed Wiesel's character into Solomon Galkin, a Holocaust survivor, poet, and treasurer of his synagogue. Curiously, even with the changes, Roth still wished to send the revised text to Wiesel for approval, but, upon learning of that request, Margolin withdrew her play from Theater J's season. As she explains, "I have not asked Wiesel for his approval

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190. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 32.

on any of my other plays that do not contain him as a character, so why would I do it now?"[191] Within a few months after the *tsuris* at Theater J, Margolin's play was produced at Stageworks/Hudson in Hudson, N.Y., possibly bringing the incident to a happy conclusion; however, as Margolin explains, "I lost something important in losing the imprimatur, the gravitas and painful irony of that other protagonist being Elie Wiesel."[192]

Parody's Postscript—Nostalgic Longings

As Margolin moved from her work with Split Britches into solo performance, her parodic impulse to make room for herself developed in tandem with a discourse and sense of nostalgia for spaces in the dominant culture from which she was excluded. It may seem that the irony of parody and the sentiment of nostalgia are incompatible world views, and in a some ways there are important differences. Whereas the postmodern artist may use parody as a political tool to promote equal rights within a rigid social construct, the conservative nostalgic conjures up memories from the past to preserve the legitimacy of the status quo because the instability is not to her or his liking. In fact, as mentioned above, Case's melancholia for the loss of an essentialized definition of lesbian identity sans Margolin's intrusion is a form of

191. Margolin, telephone conversation.

192. Margolin, "I Love My Country 2."

nostalgia, even though Case feels that the domain of lesbian subjectivity was short-lived (if it ever existed). Case is nostalgic for the exclusivity of the very space which Margolin (and Split Britches) uses her parodic tools to crash. Parody is, indeed, a turf war, as Elin Diamond calls it. Margolin uses parody to gain access, and Case waxes nostalgically to keep Margolin out and erase her "problematic" contribution.

On the other hand, there are important commonalities between parody and nostalgia. Both reference the past in the present and both are triggered by a present that is in some way wanting. Furthermore, a postmodern exploration of nostalgia reveals how parody can co-opt nostalgia for its own purposes. For example, Hutcheon claims that:

> parody has perhaps come to be a privileged mode of formal self-reflexivity because its paradoxical incorporation of the past into its very structures often points to these ideological contexts somewhat more obviously, more didactically, than other forms. Parody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak TO a discourse from WITHIN it, but without being totally recuperated by it. Parody appears to have become, for this reason, the mode of the marginalized, or of those who are fighting marginalization by a dominant ideology.[193]

Parody brings the past into the present to create both a critical distance with its subject as well as an engagement which requires a shared and recognizable cultural vocabulary, and it is an important tool of the postmodern artist and of feminist

193. Linda Hutcheon, "The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History," in "Modernity and Modernism, Postmodernity and Postmodernism," special issue, *Cultural Critique*, no. 5 (Winter 1986–1987): 206.

discourse in that parody encourages a thinking spectator.[194] The engagement that depends upon a shared reading between artist and spectator produces what Hutcheon calls "the pleasure of parody's irony."[195] By contrast, the pleasure derived from nostalgia hinges on a collective ideal from the past. For Hutcheon, the postmodern artist is one who "acknowledges the final impossibility of indulging in nostalgia. . . . In the postmodern . . . nostalgia itself gets both called up, exploited, ironized."[196] Thus parody can ironize nostalgia and create an intertextual space to view difference.

Margolin's performances frequently employ ironic nostalgic. The nostalgia she conjures up—for instance, the joy she and the audience take in being familiar with both Shakepeare's character of Hamlet and the text, or the fondness some people perceive for a simpler time which sincerely embraces a Southern-belle beauty contestant—is ironized because of Margolin's impossible obsession to play Hamlet as well as the absurdity of her type being a Southern state's entry in a Miss America beauty pageant. Margolin's parodic renderings are part of her feminist take on an ironic nostalgia. In *Hamlet* gender codings are "called up, exploited, ironized" and

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194. It is no wonder that Elin Diamond's theorization of Brecht's methodologies within postmodern feminist performance became a much-sited contribution to the field of feminist theory and performance. See Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*.

195. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 32.

196. Linda Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," University of Toronto English Library, http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html (accessed January 2009).

placed into a familiar nostalgic text in the present performance which permit us to see difference in the body of the character/actor. Or in her performance as Laura, Margolin looks back to a past space in which women were not allowed to assert their own subjectivity and restructures the discourse in the present.

But is there another way to use nostalgia in performance to advance a feminist agenda? This is the question I want to examine in the next chapter, through various displaced conversations surrounding the work of the Jewish feminist lesbian painter, Deborah Kass. If we return (with a difference) all the way back to the beginning of this chapter and recall Jameson's focus on the great modernist artists and modernism's project, it is possible that Jameson fails to acknowledge the existence of one culturally accepted norm of which it is still possible to fall outside: the male prerogative. Could it be that some, like Jameson, have killed off the subject before all subjecthood is established? Or, as Kass exclaims, "Roland Barthes declared the author dead before women had the chance to speak!"[197] That is, finally, if "stylistic innovation is no longer possible" and all we are left with is pastiche, what is *new* in the production of performance is the feminist subject.

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197. Deborah Kass, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, 6 August 2008. Kass is referencing Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" published in 1977.

3.
"Enough Already!"
Deborah Kass's Queer Nostalgia and a Feminist Home for Greatness

Over the past thirty or more years, feminist artists and scholars have remained suspicious of nostalgia largely given its usual sentimental accompaniment; the proliferation of irony in the postmodern purposefully worked against the rose-colored ideals of nostalgia's false promises. In support of her project as discussed in the last chapter, Linda Hutcheon, for example, argues that there is "no room for feminist nostalgia" primarily because nostalgia's narratives are based on male-centered stories which serve to alienate women.[1] Hutcheon further describes nostalgia as "fundamentally conservative in praxis"[2] because our nostalgic longings consist of the desire to return our lives to a state in the past. Given that nostalgia upholds the *status quo*, change—and by extension, a feminist agenda—is not traditionally a welcome aspect in the world of nostalgia. Deb Margolin adds that "nostalgia is a luxury," and in the heat of social and political battles, particularly for second and third-wave feminists, "we could not afford nostalgia."[3]

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1. Linda Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," University of Toronto English Library, http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html (accessed January 2009).

2. Ibid.

3. Deb Margolin, telephone conversation with author, 5 August 2009.

Although nostalgic longings may be perceived as an uneasy fit inside a feminist agenda, is there a lens through which we can view nostalgia as constructive in postmodern feminist performance art? In the previous chapter I discussed how postmodern artistic expression handles nostalgia by ironizing it. Through the work of Margolin, we saw how parodic irony can provide the distance necessary for the spectator to (re)view the past with difference and witness a feminist critique—a process which Hutcheon calls "ironic nostalgia."[4] By adding additional feminist artists and listening to the resulting displaced conversation, I will examine the potential of using a more emotional form of nostalgia for a feminist project in art.

The emotional impact of nostalgia is deeply felt and quite powerful, albeit often elusive. Supporting the potential of nostalgia in service of performance's provocation, playwright, performer, and scholar Lenora Champagne argues:

> to deny those tendencies (to nostalgia) would be to ignore a fertile area of contradiction and anxiety, one that afflicts many people, if following the Swiss student who named it, we see it as an affliction rather than, as I would suggest, a form of reverie, as I think Bachelard[5] would have it.[6]

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4. Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern."

5. See, for example, Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological reflection on reverie in *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1971). In the book he states: "So different from the dream (*rêve*) which is so often marked by the hard accents of the masculine, reverie appeared to us in effect—this time beyond the words—to be of feminine essence" (18). "Reverie without drama, without event or history gives us true repose, the repose of the feminine. There we gain gentleness of living" (19).

6. Lenora Champagne, "On Nostalgia" (paper/panel respondent to "Nostalgia's Return? An Examination of the Role of Nostalgia and its Contemporary Reconfiguration in American Theatre and

The resulting symptoms of those who bathe in the reverie of nostalgia are the basis for the arguments levied against the state by many feminists, but Champagne recognizes how our nostalgic preoccupations tap into something deep within our identities that, in turn, can be examined phenomenologically and dramatized through art. By focusing on the experience of nostalgia *a priori* within art and performance, we alert ourselves to nostalgia's emotional and physiological responses and begin to see the means to reimagine those instinctual bodily responses into something new.

In this chapter I preview my examination of a feminist nostalgia by exploring a few instances from theatre and performance in the last century where nostalgia is used either to reinforce or critique the dominant cultural narrative in the U.S. These examples have relevant, though not-as-well-known, connections to the genealogy of feminist performance that I construct. Following, I assemble the psychoanalytical theories underlying nostalgia's power and influence and theorize a recently identified form, termed "queer nostalgia," touched on by Susan Bennett in her book, *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past*. I suggest that queer nostalgia, as it relates to a more complete understanding of Freud's later theories, can be a powerful and, indeed, performative tool for feminist artists to use

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Performance" at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference, New York, NY, 11 August 2009).

to move past the limitations of a good past/bad present binary inherent in the traditional understanding of nostalgia. The second part of the chapter examines the work of contemporary feminist painter Deborah Kass and her use of queer nostalgia as a performative tool in her art.

Kass is perhaps best known for her series, *The Warhol Project:* 1992–2000, in which she meticulously recreates many of Andy Warhol's silk screens but replaces the dominant cultural icons which were his subjects with ones specifically related to her own culture growing up Jewish on Long Island. She suggests that nostalgia's power can, in fact, be harnessed for a socio-political project for change instead of its usual conservative ideals of longing for maintenance.[7] Throughout history Kass recognizes that an "aspiration for greatness" has only ever been an entirely acceptable ambition for artists who are men.[8] Discussing the devastation she felt upon hearing Hillary Clinton's concession speech ending her 2008 presidential campaign,[9] Kass references Clinton's hopeful sentiment but painfully adds: "There's still a glass ceiling, and it has eighteen million cracks in it. And it ain't coming down

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7. Deborah Kass, interview by author, Brooklyn, New York, 6 August 2008.

8. Ibid.

9. From Hillary Clinton's concession speech for the Democratic nomination for President at the National Building Museum on 7 June 2008. The larger quote reads: "Although we weren't able to shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it's got about 18 million cracks in it, and the light is shining through like never before, filling us all with the hope and the sure knowledge that the path will be a little easier next time." See "Hillary Clinton Endorses Barack Obama," *New York Times*, 7 June 2008, under "Politics," http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/07/us/politics/07text-clinton .html (accessed 11 April 2011).

in my generation."[10] Playwright Paula Vogel echoes the sense of exclusion contemporary feminists feel, identifying what she calls a "counter-revolutionary culture" today which refuses to accept women as prodigal daughters; that is, Vogel wonders, when will society ask those women who choose to point out the sins of our parents to return home?[11]

Kass's answer to the continued bleak outlook for women whose lives challenge gender, class, and sexual biases is expressed in her painting, *Enough Already*! (see fig. 7); her project conjures up "a nostalgia for greatness,"[12] as she calls it, for women. The feminist edict of the "personal is political" is still extremely important to Kass just as it is for Margolin, and she views an artistic engagement with nostalgia as a strategy for social survival and political subversion precisely because nostalgia links the personal to the culture at large. The use of nostalgia in her art is both performative and theatrical and reveals strategies by which feminist performance art utilizes nostalgia for a progressive, rather than regressive, agenda. In her painting over the past twenty years, through the harnessing of her own nostalgia toward her feminist objective, Kass not only aims to shed light on both past and present social structures which continue to place a glass ceiling over

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10. Kass, interview by author, 2008.

11. Paula Vogel, opening comments, panel participant for "Summary and Reflections" at the Women in Theatre: Issues for the 21st Century conference, Princeton University, 26 September 2009.

12. Kass, interview by author, 2008.

women artists, but also seeks another home where the disenfranchised are recognized and welcomed into the center of U.S. social discourse and mores.

Nostalgia's Origins and Theatricality

The "Swiss student" to whom Champagne refers in her quote previously cited is Johannes Hofer, who coined the term in his medical dissertation in 1688; thus, nostalgia comes from medical origins and started as a diagnosable (and potentially curable) disease found in displaced peoples—domestic help, servants, soldiers, and students working abroad. Scholar and media artist Svetlana Boym recounts that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, curing nostalgia medicinally could take the form of leeching, stomach purging, hypnotic emulsions, or opium; however, the best remedy was a return home.[13] Hence, nostalgia's etymology is borrowed from the Greek—a longing to return home—from *nostos* (a return home) and *algos* (pain, grief, distress). By the twentieth century nostalgia had progressed from a curable ailment to an incurable modern-age condition of the psyche; within contemporary society, we often feel as if we are living in exile from what we may perceive as our center. In modern-day nostalgia, however, the place of *home* is mistaken for the *time* and *feeling* experienced there; that is, even if we return to the precise space/place/site

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13. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) 3-4.

of home, the afflictions of nostalgia cannot be cured because the time in which the moment from memory was originally experienced has passed.

In 1938 Thorton Wilder utilized nostalgia in performance to challenge Americans' misrecognition of home in his play *Our Town.* *Our Town* focuses on small-town life, death, and the Dead's "memories of their early existence,"[14] primarily through the story's protagonist, Emily Webb. In a less-discussed connection to the genealogy of feminist performance, Wilder's text was influenced by his good friend, Gertrude Stein, and her novel, *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress.* In fact, Wilder wrote to Stein and explained how the play's "third act is based on your ideas, as on great pillars, and whether you know it or not, until further notice, you're in a deep-knit collaboration."[15] While the worlds of Wilder's and Stein's texts are vastly different in tone, each present related ideas for examination within a similar structure. Paralleling Stein's history of one family and its marriage to a second family, Wilder's play divides the history of the Webb

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14. Thornton Wilder to Christina Hopkinson Baker, Tucson, Arizona, 27 March 1938, in *The Selected Letters of Thornton Wilder,* ed. Robin G. Wilder and Jackson R. Bryer (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 342.

15. Thorton Wilder to Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, Zurich, Switzerland, 13 September 1937, in *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder,* ed. Edward M. Burns and Ulla E. Dydo with William Rice (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 175. According to the editors, Wilder's "deep-knit collaboration" refers to a few ideas: that *Our Town* rests on Stein's *The Making of Americans*, that they planned in the future to collaborate on Stein's novel *Ida*, and that Stein's ideas and personality freed up Wilder from his own preoccupations which had made taking time for his writing difficult.

and Gibbs families into the First Act, "Daily Life;" the Second Act, "Love and Marriage;" and the Third Act, "Death."[16]

Stein's book, written between 1906 and 1908, employs a family's history as a synecdochical representation of America's family history, and she problematizes how family narratives repeat, lose individual distinction, and thus breed a feeling of emptiness or "queerness" within the self.[17] Her creative process and writing style is largely performative; Stein specifically writes repetitively with "gradual"[18] progressions and differentiations, using informal non-punctuated language to put forth a novel that originates from within herself and reveals herself on the page from various perspectives. Additionally, Stein's work responds to the argument that expatriates (like feminists and queers) must deny their explorative desires—their non-conformist identities—and return home to America in order to be considered true Americans. Stein's search to define identity for the Other is a theme that will influence Deborah Kass, as we will see, and not just create a thread of feminist

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16. Ibid, editor's footnote, 175–6. Note, too, that at the top of Act II, when the Stage Manager names for the audience the title of each act, he does not, in fact, state a specific title for Act III but merely instructs his audience to surmise its title, saying, "There's another act coming after this: I reckon you can guess what that's about." See *Our Town*, act 2.

17. See, for example, pages 81–83 in Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995).

18. See Stein's "The Gradual Making of *The Making of Americans*" in Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1935), 135–61.

influence, but also a queer genealogy among the displaced conversations of Wilder, Stein, Warhol, and Kass.

Wilder borrowed Stein's device of examining a family microscopically to represent human nature macroscopically. In his preface Wilder reveals his play's central theme and asks the question, "What is the relation between the countless 'unimportant' details of our daily life, on the one hand, and the great perspectives of time, social history, and current religious ideas, on the other?"[19] Written during a time of economic upheaval and class struggle produced by the Great Depression, and coinciding with political unrest in Europe, *Our Town* critiques the nostalgic longings of white Protestant Americans for an "easier" time at the turn of the twentieth century prior to World War I. According to Wilder, early reviews during its first production in Princeton, New Jersey,[20] called the play "a nostalgic, unpretentious play with charm," but, Wilder insists, "what I wrote is damn pretentious,"[21] and he worked throughout the play's road tour to Boston and prior to its opening in New York to remove any "happy interpolations"[22] from the production. By the time the play opened at the Henry Miller Theater in New York

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19. Thornton Wilder "A Preface for *Our Town*"in *Thornton Wilder: Collected Plays and Writings on Theater,* ed. J.D. McClatchy (New York: The Library of America, 2007), 657.

20. The play's world premiere was at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton on 22 January 1938.

21. Thornton Wilder to Alexander Woollcott, Boston, 27 January 1938, in *The Selected Letters of Thornton Wilder,* ed. Robin G. Wilder and Jackson R. Bryer (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 333.

22. Ibid, 336.

on 4 February 1938, Wilder's "no set" production was received as highly experimental and unlike the dramas of its modernist contemporaries; the play was a Broadway hit and ran for 336 performances.[23] The play's unusual theatrical devices focus the audience's critical faculties on how much their (faulty) memories of the past have become cluttered and baroque; how images and feelings have accumulated, or been lost, over time.

As Wilder's Pulitzer-prize winning text aged to become an American classic, however, performed time and time again in community theatres, and as the U.S. revived as an economic super-power, nostalgic longings once more crept into the text's interpretation. The play's enduring appeal hinges on its sentimental power to remind and re-affirm audiences of a picture of idyllic small-town America and a simple celebrated space of "home" they have seemingly lost. Yet, playwright Edward Albee calls *Our Town* "one of the toughest, saddest plays ever written."[24] Given that generation after generation from Grover's Corners, like Stein's two families, have lost their individuality and are seemingly content with their

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23. With *Our Town's* success both Wilder and Jed Harris (producer and director) achieved the rare distinction of running two hit Broadway shows simultaneously. Prior to *Our Town*, Wilder adapted and Jed Harris produced and directed Ibsen's *Doll House*, which opened on 27 December 1937.

24. Bruce Bawer, "'An Impersonal Passion': Thornton Wilder," *The Hudson Review* 61, no. 3 (Autumn 2008): 508.

homogeneous society without any "culture or love of beauty,"[25] Albee wonders, "Why is it always produced as hearts and flowers?"[26]

There have been several productions in the past thirty-some years that have aimed to unmoor *Our Town* from its dusty and nostalgic expectations,[27] but professional productions of the play actually doubled after 2005,[28] and the 2007–08 U.S. theatre season,[29] in particular, saw six different professional productions across the county, all of which approached the play with a distinct interpretation designed to make audiences see the play anew.[30] One of these productions, directed by David Cromer, hailed from a non-Equity Chicago-based company, The Hypocrites, and their successful production transferred to New York's Barrow Street Theatre in February 2009. Cromer stripped down Wilder's already stripped-down play by

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25. Thornton Wilder *Our Town: A Play in Three Acts* in *Thornton Wilder: Collected Plays and Writings on Theater*, ed. J.D. McClatchy (New York: The Library of America, 2007), act 1, 161. The Lady in a Box asks Mr. Webb if there is "any culture or love of beauty in Grover's Corners," and he replies, "Well, ma'am, there ain't much."

26. Edward Albee quoted in Jeremy McCarter, "The Genius of Grover's Corners," *New York Times*, 1 April 2007, under "Sunday Book Review," http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/01/books/review/McCarter.t.html?_r=2 (accessed 28 June 2010).

27. See for example, the Wooster Group's 1981 production, *Route 1 & 9*.

28. Frank Rich, "Some Things Don't Change in Grover's Corners," *New York Times*, 7 March 2009, under "Opinion," http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/opinion/08rich.html (accessed 28 June 2010).

29. This is the season running up to the 2008 Presidential elections.

30. For a description of all six productions see Lori Ann Laster, "Welcome Back to Grover's Corners," *American Theatre* 25, no. 5 (May/June 2008): 24–27, 74–75.

costuming his cast of ordinary-looking actors in nondescript contemporary dress as well as by removing all traces of any traditional quaint New Hampshire characterizations, including accent, pipe-smoking and typically "New England" looking props.

Additionally, up until the last moment of the play, the house lights never completely black out. This theatrical lighting device, as well as placing the small 150-member audience around an intimate three-quarter thrust and staging some of the action in close proximity to the audience, allowed audience members to witness each other as well as the inhabitants of Grover's Corners, as if the audience were included in the community. The role of the Stage Manager, which Wilder played in several regional productions, also calls attention to theatrical artifice within the playing space. Cromer similarly plays the role and furthers our contemporary understanding of artifice by using his cell phone to check the time (and by reminding the audience at the start of the evening to turn off theirs!), and by consulting a yellow legal pad to check any directorial "notes" he may have. Through his choice of staging, costuming, and actors, Cromer removed the nostalgic patina of "Americana" that has encrusted *Our Town*, in an effort to encourage audiences to see the play as striking and new in the same manner as it was viewed on Broadway in 1938.

Cromer's methods seem to have worked, at least for the critic John Simon, who severely reprimanded the choices in production.[31] In his review, Simon calls Cromer's Stage Manager a "Chicago smartass" and clearly reveals his own preference for the play's nostalgic power by maintaining that, in order for the play to work, it requires "a mature, mellow, pipe-smoking New Englander, with the proper accent and manner that come with the territory."[32] Of course, it is precisely Cromer's "smart-assed" approach as both the Stage Manager and the director which provides the theatrical agency to wipe away the traditional "folksy" pseudo-sophistication that smothers sentimental nostalgic productions of this play and perpetuates audiences misrecognition of Wilder's drama.

When *Our Town* premiered in 1938, the country was mostly in denial over the genocidal practices going on in Europe as well as the prospect of war looming in the distance. As the Stage Manager introduces the community to us (or the audience to ourselves seated as the community), he summons the town's newspaper editor, Charles Webb, to provide the political make-up of the town. Webb reports the

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31. John Simon, e-mail message to C. Michael Gast, 30 March 2009. Simon stated more of his opinion of the show in this e-mail: "A further minus was the, perhaps deliberate, ugliness of all the actors, also having to see the audience all around, always distracting, but in this case perhaps not distracting enough. Do you enjoy shows in which the lead actors look worse than Bowery bums? And in which the–let's face it–God figure suggests Dennis O'Hare on a bad hair day?"

32. John Simon, "Foolproof *Our Town* Crumbles Under Urban Renewal," *Bloomberg News*, 26 February 2009, http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601098&refer=movie&sid=a5q6SV8fuwoE (accessed 28 June 2010).

town's sympathies as eighty-six percent Republican, six percent Democrats, four percent Socialists and the "rest, indifferent."[33] Mr. Webb also notes that the town is run by a "Board of Selectmen.—All males vote at the age of twenty-one. Women vote indirect."[34] The only Grover's Corners character who visibly recognizes the pains of the outsider is Simon Stimson, the musician who tries to drink away the pain of life and his mysterious past. In Act III Stimson, a suicide, explains to Emily the blindness of humanity and growls, "that's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those . . . of those about you."[35]

With the onslaught of *Our Town* revivals beginning four years prior to the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama, artistic directors were historicizing their productions by pointing to a similar discordance, indifference, and ignorance in U.S. society almost a century later. Surely the comment on the political make-up of Grovers Corners resonated with New York City audiences left to contemplate the political leanings of towns outside of most major U.S. cities. Furthermore, it seems that U.S. politics repeats its history even in the tiniest of details. At the time of

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33. Wilder, *Our Town,* act 1, 160.

34. Ibid. Wilder's play begins on 7 May 1901 nineteen years before women were given the right to vote. Women's suffrage did not end until 26 August 1920 with the ratification of the nineteenth amendment.

35. Wilder, *Our Town,* act 3, 207-8.

Wilder's writing, Republicans attacked Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies as "fascist,"[36] and claimed that his program "threatens to Hitlerize what was once democratic self-government."[37] In Wilder's personal writings he notes how, as Roosevelt's administration continues, FDR's opponents charge "that he is usurping autocratic powers, that he is 'conceited', that he is buying the peoples' votes with public works, [and] that he is inciting class-warfare."[38] Likewise, within the first two years of Barack Obama's administration, Republicans and conservative spokespersons not only attacked Obama's Great Recession policies as both fascist and socialist but also demonized Obama variously as a "Hitler-Nazi-Fascist-Socialist-Czar-Communist"[39] (yes, politicians and pundits seem to be confused about the distinctions), whose social policies promote class warfare. In concert with

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36. Rich, "Some Things Don't Change in Grover's Corners."

37. "Dr. Frank Declares New Deal 'Fascist': He Calls on Republicans to Fight Program Threatening to 'Hitlerize' Nation," *New York Times,* 30 January 1938, under "Sunday Section: General, Archives," http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F00810F6355A157A93C2AA 178AD85F4C8385F9& (accessed 28 June 2010). New Deal opposition also came from corners other than the Republican Party. See Michael Streich, "New Deal Opposition: Criticism of FDR's Recovery Program in the 1930s," Suite101.com, 9 February 2009, http://modern-us-history.suite101.com/ article.cfm/new_deal_opposition (accessed 5 November 2009); Ronald Bridges, "The Republican Program Committee," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (April 1939): 299–306; Milton Plesur, "The Republican Congressional Comeback of 1938," *The Review of Politics* 24, no. 4 (October 1962) 525–62.

38. Thornton Wilder to Sibyl Colefax, New Haven, Connecticut, 26 September 1940, in *The Selected Letters of Thornton Wilder,* ed. Robin G. Wilder and Jackson R. Bryer (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 381.

39. Perhaps one of the most egregious and visible pieces of propaganda in this vein were the "Obama-as-Hitler" posters which popped-up in 2009 during Town Hall meetings to discuss health care and during "Tea Party" protests.

Wilder's original intentions, recent productions of *Our Town* critique America's inability *to see* political myths, iconic landscapes which lead to war, and the reality behind the nostalgic world many believe is better in contrast to socio-political change. As Cromer's production played out its run in New York,[40] it continued to reverberate against the Zeitgeist.

Cromer, like Wilder, means for the play to resonate with a contemporary spectator, so he reconfigures *Our Town* to call attention to contemporary delusions that obscure reality. The most innovative and startling challenge to the workings of conventional nostalgia in Cromer's production occurs in Act III, when Emily is granted her wish to relive one day back at home–her twelfth birthday. The staging of the town cemetery—with characters seated in chairs across the stage floor—once again seems to merge the seating of the audience with the playing space, this time suggesting that we are part of the community of the dead. Oddly, however, we also smell a faint and distinct whiff of bacon cooking just before a curtain is pulled back to reveal an utterly realistic reproduction of the Webb's kitchen as it would have looked during Emily's birthday on 11 February 1899. All of the details that were previously mimed are restored in this moment, including Mrs. Webb's actual frying of a breakfast of bacon and eggs, a working water pump, bottles filled with freshly

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40. The play closed on 12 September 2010 and as of that date, marked the longest running production of *Our Town* in its seventy-two year production history.

delivered milk, snow built-up outside the window, period costuming, and for the first time over the course of the play, actors speaking with a New England accent. Just as Emily sees her home for the first time, we see the same specificity through Cromer's theatrical "trick/reveal." He shocks his audience into clearly noticing the physical details and movements of daily life as well as how beautiful the quotidian (both the good and the difficult) can be in the present if we only look, smell, listen, and experience each moment.[41]

Emily is (and some audience members are, too) visibly bereft when she realizes that we, in fact, do not normally see this level of detail in the world around us, and the nostalgic visitation of her twelfth birthday is, as predicted, a painful return. Before this moment she did not understand why going back should be painful, but especially as her hard-working mother is too busy to acknowledge their moment together, she soon mourns: "It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. I didn't realize. So all of that was going on and we never noticed."[42] Returning home does not cure nostalgia's afflictions; rather, the return causes even

41. See William Nicholson, *Shadowlands* (New York: PLUME, Penguin Books, 1991). I am also reminded of Nicholson's *Shadowlands*, in which the character Joy Gresham who is dying from cancer tries to help C.S. (Jack) Lewis work through her death with her in the present. She explains how they cannot have the happiness of yesterday without the pain of today. She says "that pain, then, is part of this happiness, now. That's the deal" (90). Lewis does not absorb her message until later and he later echos her words: "I find I can live with the pain, after all. The pain, now, is part of the happiness, then. That's the deal. Only shadows, Joy" (100).

42. Wilder, *Our Town,* act 3, 207.

more pain. Nostalgia creates a form of grief and melancholia that cannot be relieved as we are left to mourn the unattainable moment for which we yearn, even though its physical present is still visible. In a letter from 1966, Wilder explains, "the last act of my play suggests that life—viewed directly—is damned near Hell."[43]

Wilder's use of nostalgia reveals one way in which nostalgia can be used to critique the present, but it is a tricky business. Nostalgia's power is so great it seems to subvert the subversion, and our witnessing of the theatrical device goes awry. Within a feminist performance context, Deb Margolin also describes nostalgia as a "mild form of grief"[44] and, upon further reflection, now finds it as the impetus and the means within her work to deal with past events.[45] Much like Bertolt Brecht's theory of historicization, which posits that a past historical or mythical narrative aids spectators in the theatre to observe similarities between the past and the present, the precise distancing of time through nostalgia also enables us to see issues that repeat (always with a difference) in a new light. Unlike the need for Emily's return, we can

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43. Thornton Wilder to Amy Wertheimer, Hamden, Connecticut, 7 April 1966, in *The Selected Letters of Thornton Wilder*, ed. Robin G. Wilder and Jackson R. Bryer (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 638.

44. Deb Margolin, telephone conversation with author, 21 November 2008.

45. Admittedly, when I first broached the idea of how nostalgia plays into her work, Margolin pondered my questions for several weeks. She responded to me in early September 2008 and steadfastly stated that "after many conversations with herself regarding nostalgia," she finds that she "do[es] not get anywhere." She said that her work "lacks nostalgia in the extreme," because the work itself all concerns "really present issues" with an "immediacy and urgency to speak in the present moment;" however, soon after the November 2008 elections, and after further pondering, Margolin realized that nostalgia does indeed play an important role in her work.

"see" the historical issues and their discrepant contexts from the past before we pass this life, provided we can recognize the distancing from the present. By reintroducing all of the details of turn-of-the-century America, Cromer's production helps us to see the great distance that separates our present from the, not necessarily always pleasant, past of Grovers Corners.

Brecht believed that the scope of human relations depends on historicization; artists "must leave [past social structures] their distinguishing marks and keep their impermanence always before our eyes, so that our own period can be seen to be impermanent, too."[46] As opposed to the past looming as a fixture in our present and prescribing our future, both the past and the present are temporal states. An historicization of our past aids in our acknowledgment of that which is lost and subsequently helps us recognize that the present moment need not be fate-filled given past history; instead, *it is changeable*. Brecht's purpose through historicization (and *Verfremdungseffekt*) was to encourage a thinking audience who react with their intellect when they witness familiar events and objects turned "into something peculiar, striking and unexpected"[47] within the theatre space. In theory, empathy from the audience, as well as from his actors, was not part of Brecht's intention for his socio-political epic theatre practices. However, much like Cromer's intervention

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46. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 190.

47. Ibid, 143.

with Wilder's Emily, feminist artists like Kass, Champagne, and Margolin want spectators to experience both an emotional as well as a thinking response to their work through witnessing their engagement with nostalgia. In order to see, then, how feminist performance finds a way to harness nostalgia's power for its own ends, we need to examine how the emotional power of nostalgia operates on the afflicted.

The S/M of Nostalgia – Recognition's Pleasure and Misrecognition's Pain

Nostalgia provides an experience of simultaneous pleasure and pain because its structure operates between the desire to experience an idealized pleasurable moment (Emily wants to revisit a happy day) and the painful recognition that a return to that ideal is impossible (she realizes the day was not as precious as she remembered). Even if memory serves to recall a past lost place or myth, memory's inaccuracies prevent a complete recovery of that place/time for which we believe we yearn. Nostalgia's constant and allure is that it is marked by inaccessibility and the repeated cycle of desire and failure to return to a seemingly lost origin. This perceived state of lack encourages a melancholy for that which was once possessed but is now unattainable. In this way, our attraction to nostalgia mirrors the psychoanalytical phenomenon of the misrecognition of the Other embedded within our psyche; a misrecognition that exists because the development of subjectivity creates a gap within the self due to the subject's inability to clearly see the complete

self. The misrecognition of the self produces the repeated cycle of seeking and failing to find another outside ourselves to fulfill us; hence, as Freud reminds us, "the finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it."[48]

We operate as nostalgia's sadomasochistic subject when we constantly seek a lost origin to fulfill our present sense of loss for the missed object; a brief sense of pleasure is repeatedly experienced in the finding, but because (an)other can never complete the gap within (as no gap really exists), the outcome always fails, embedded with regret and pain. As theatre and cultural studies scholar David Savran explains, "[t]he formulation of the masochistic subject is always marked by the split within subjectivity itself: . . . there is always a sadistic part that fantasizes the infliction of pain and identifies with the real or imagined tormentor and a properly masochistic part that delights in its own humiliation."[49] Furthermore, nostalgia's quality of sadomasochism not only mirrors the split in the subject but also implicates our present-day existence. The longing for something lost indicates that the present is lacking and that the imagined "remembered" past is a far better, albeit unattainable place. We are fueled by the fond memory and the search backwards, and we operate within the false sadomasochistic binary of a "good

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48. Sigmund Freud, "Transformations of Puberty" in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: BasicBooks/HarperCollins, 1975), 88.

49. David Savran, "The Sadomasochist in the Closet: Sam Shepard, Robert Bly, and the New White Masculinity" in *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 141.

past/bad present," a binary noted as an absolute throughout current theoretical discussions of nostalgia's manifestations.[50]

Hutcheon tells us that "nostalgia, in fact, may depend precisely on the irrecoverable nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal,"[51] and it is a tantalizing emotional response that can be shared by those in power as well as by those who are oppressed; i.e., a marginalized group can have a "strong and understandable nostalgia for what is perceived as a once-unified identity."[52] For example, regardless of age, present-day liberals can look at America's political climate since the era of Reagan and "remember" a better time for liberal thought and progress prior to the emergence of neoconservative politics and Reagan's neoliberalist economic policies. Reflecting on 1960s political movements and the art of that decade, and her work from that time as well, writer Susan Sontag muses that during "the Sixties . . . there was so little nostalgia. In that sense, it was indeed a utopian moment." Sontag continues on to lament how the world of ideals from thirty years prior "no longer exists."[53] Ironically, she is nostalgic for a time without

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50. See Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, Janice Doane and Deveon Hodges *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference: The Resistence fo Contemporary Feminism*, and Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past,* among others.

51. Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern."

52. Ibid.

53. Susan Sontag, "Thirty Years Later . . ." in *Where the Stress Falls: Essays* (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001) 271.

nostalgia. Perhaps the movements of the Sixties provide a window into how one can live in the "here and now" given that fighting social and political battles demand present-ness. If we live each moment in the present day without seeking something outside of us to complete us (or grieving that we may have missed the opportunity for fulfillment from our past), nostalgia has little space in our lives. But the sadomasochistic binary upon which nostalgia depends binds us to a place of missing another object of desire as well as missing ourselves.

Far more dangerous to the social fabric of a society, a campaign of deceptive sentiment is often made using nostalgia's appeal by those in positions of authority to impose collective sites of memory on those who are oppressed; the sentiment creates false, though seemingly authentic, identifications with rationalized "truths." Such social and emotional appeals are evident in the fetishizing of various objects which represent the past, as well as in cultural narratives and sites of manipulative socio-political rhetoric (such as political party national conventions); these fetishized objects conjure up sites of memory which now tell just one story.[54] For example, icons from the fifties collectively promote a story of an era filled with wholesome

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54. In *August: Osage County* Tracy Letts points out the delusions of a single story rhetoric when used to excuse the behavior of America's WWII generation. Confronted by the actions of a doctor of that generation who frequently prescribes her mother unnecessary medication, Barbara retorts: "'Greatest Generation,' my ass. Are they really considering *all* the generations? Maybe there are some generations from the *Iron Age* that could compete. And what makes them so great anyway? Because they were poor and hated Nazis?!" See Tracy Letts, *August: Osage County* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2008), act 3, 100.

goodness and fun with which everyone should identify, all the while erasing real social problems that existed during the decade, such as racial segregation and the oppression of women.[55] Perhaps one of the gravest examples of nostalgia's danger is the appeal by the Nazi Party of Germany in the 1930s for a return to a unified Aryan people which had never really existed. The nostalgic claim fueled support for the Holocaust of Jews, along with other peoples whose identities fell outside of the narrowly defined laws of racial purity.

Susan Bennett explains how, in all of its forms, the practice of nostalgia is conservative not only because nostalgia drives society's motivation to remain culturally unchanged (to maintain the *status quo*), but also because when nostalgia is politically aligned, the nostalgic collective "we" disregards individual pasts and identities in favor of a singular and false sense of utopia.[56] While a nostalgic mourning may be felt by a unified community stripped of power (e.g., German-Jewish communities before the Holocaust or the diaspora, or African-Americans in their native homelands before slavery and their enforced diaspora), more often the dominant culture of the United States induces nostalgic melancholia specifically as a means to ensure the "proper" placement of the Other and to protect the central

55. Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven* (2002) is one film which looks behind the nostalgic veneer of the fifties to examine the racial and feminist issues from that period.

56. Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 5–6.

unity of those who colonize the Other. These forms of nostalgia may be viewed as harmless, but often they perpetuate unexamined social constructions and practices designed to exclude the Other.

An insidious example of the power of a nostalgic cultural placement for women as Other is Dorothy's ever-popular journey in the film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), which teaches her that returning and staying *home* (forget any technicolor dreams beyond those Kansas farm gates) is the only true (yellow brick) road to *her* life-long happiness. There is "no place like home" for a woman, and anything beyond the clear boundaries of home, while it may glitter and sparkle, is strange, filled with unusual characters, and often fearful and dangerous.[57] And, although Dorothy gets her wish to travel to the "other side of the rainbow," it is her own profound nostalgia, from the very moment her house lands on the Wicked Witch of the East, that drives the narrative. For the viewer of the film, Dorothy's journey confirms that dreams are unreal, though they do seem tangible, and our true nature

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57. Consider for a moment the difference between the cultural nostalgia of *The Wizard of Oz* and that of Homer's *Odyssey.* Although both stories concern a "hero"'s journey home, ever since Tennyson there has been a lingering sense that Odysseus's rightful place, unlike that of Dorothy, is not to be found there. Moreover, although much is written in Homer's poem about Oysseus's trials once home, very little of it is remembered as vividly as are the episodes of his journey. Surely Homer is interested in Odysseus's return, but we, when we fondly think back on the story, do not remember that part in the same way. Even Odysseus's name has became synonymous with a journey, not with a return. Ellen McLaughlin, however, has written a modern-day feminist adaptation of the *Odyssey* called *Penelope*, which examines a soldier's attempts to reintegrate into society after a harrowing ordeal away at war from the perspective of his wife who is not necessarily happy to have him return. Ellen McLaughlin, *Penelope* (music-theatre version), directed by Lisa Rothe, music by Sarah Kirkland Snider, NYU Gallatin School, 29 October 2008.

is only revealed at home under the guidance of our family and loved ones. America's cultural fascination with Dorothy is largely due to our nostalgia for "Midwestern," "true," and, almost always, "white" American middle-class family values, which, among other things, places a woman's security within the home.

Notably, Deborah Kass lists *The Wizard of Oz* as her "number one favorite always and forever" movie musical,[58] but through placing the film in conversation with her work, she seems to understand the irony of liking the movie as a feminist. Applying gouache on paper she transforms her nostalgia for the movie and appropriates the cowardly lion's lament, "If I Only Had the Nerve" (see fig. 8). The text of the drawing is struggling to emerge from clouds of primary colors in blue, yellow, and red which threaten to obscure its message. Bursting out of primary color is a hopeful image of finding differentiation among other colors beyond the rainbow and suggests that Dorothy, an Everywoman, is the one in need of some *chutzpah* in order to individuate herself from her home/mother.

The stifling power of nostalgia in *The Wizard of Oz* is evident as soon as the movie is compared to *The Wiz* (1978), another film adaptation of the same L. Frank Baum source novel.[59] Both *The Wiz* and its 1975 Broadway predecessor, *The Wiz*: *The*

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58. Deborah Kass, interview by John Waters, "John Waters Interviews Deborah Kass," *Deborah Kass: Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times* (New York: Paul Kasmin Gallery, in association with Vincent Fremont, 2007), unpaginated.

59. See L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900; repr., New York: Books of Wonder, 1987).

Super Soul Musical "Wonderful Wizard of Oz,"[60] reimagine Baum's story in the context of African-American culture; but the theatrical book, written by William F. Brown, is, perhaps, a simple binary substitution of black characters for white characters, while Joel Schumacher's screenplay for the film version, produced by Motown Productions in conjunction with Universal Pictures, represented an attempt to write a story that Black Americans would find empowering.[61] The film transposes Kansas' farm country to Harlem, New York, circa 1977, and its depiction of Oz is a dystopic urban environment. Moreover, in the movie of *The Wiz*, Dorothy is a painfully shy school teacher of twenty-four who has "never been south of 125th Street."[62] The key to her returning home after being magically transported to Oz via a snowstorm, therefore, is realizing that her true home is not solely defined by the place she left behind but, instead, is more completely found inside of her. Through Glinda's help, who says "home is knowing" just before she sings the reprise of the song "Believe in Yourself," Dorothy learns that she had to journey outward to discover how to know herself.

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60. See Charlie Smalls, *The Wiz: adapted from "The Wondeful Wizard of Oz" by L. Frank Baum / book by William F. Brown; music and lyrics by Charlie Smalls* (New York: Samuel French, 1979).

61. Stephen Farber and Marc Green, "Hollywood Guru: Dr. Werner Erhard," in *The Grove Book of Hollywood*, ed. Christopher Silvester (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 558.

62. L. Frank Baum, William F. Brown, and Joel Schumacher, *The Wiz*, DVD, directed by Sidney Lumet (Los Angeles: Universal Studios, 1999).

Dorothy's final words to the Wiz, who desperately wants to return to his own home in Atlantic City, further reveal the different way in which *The Wiz* treats nostalgia as well as women. She explains:

> They've had what they've been searching for in them all along. I don't know what's in you. You'll have to find that out for yourself. But I do know one thing. You'll never find it in the safety of this room. I tried that all my life. It doesn't work. There's a whole world out there. And you'll have to begin by letting people see who you really are.[63]

An even more feminist reversal in *The Wiz* occurs just before this, when the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Lion discover that the Wiz is not powerful enough to give each the brain, the heart, or the courage he was seeking. In this version of the story it is Dorothy, and not the Wiz/Wizard, who has the wisdom to reveal to the trio that the fulfillment of their desires lay inside them all along.

At the time he was writing the screenplay, Schumacher was an ardent proponent of est and the teachings of Werner Erhard,[64] which explains why *The Wiz*'s message is so different from *The Wizard of Oz*. The sense of empowerment and possibility that est teaches is very different from the xenophobic feelings that pervaded America when *The Wizard of Oz* was released in 1939. And, further, in contrast to the national nostalgia during the Great Depression for a happier time in

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63. Baum, Brown and Schumacher, *The Wiz*, near the end of the movie when Dorothy (Diana Ross) instructs the Wiz/Herman Smith (Richard Pryor).

64. Farber and Green, "Hollywood Guru," 557-558.

U.S. history, what did a Black American have to be nostalgic for in the United States in the sixties and seventies, given the awareness generated by the Black Power movement? Like Susan Sontag's statement about the lack of nostalgia during the 1960s, a better life for Black Americans at the time of *The Wiz*'s release was being looked for in the future, not in the past. A similar sentiment was held by women as well.

Returning to the 1930s film, *The Wizard of Oz,* we see a movie made around the same time as *Our Town*. Both utilize nostalgic longing in their dramaturgical construction, but one denies its authority while the other reinforces nostalgia's claim to truth. In each case, however, nostalgic moments evoke an emotional response from the individual and deliver particular messages which may or may not be fully recognized or analyzed. Until recently, Wilder's project has been largely misread over the decades, and many Americans irrespective of gender (though not necessarily regardless of race) experience a pang of nostalgia as well as "icon-worship" for Dorothy (and, by extension, Judy Garland) and *The Wizard of Oz.* But do we know why? What precisely is encased in our memory based upon what or whom we desire? With whom do we identify and why? What do we long for from our childhood encounter with the movie as well as to what extent do we miss our child-selves? Of course, there are those of us who tear up at the end of the film because traces of Dorothy's journey are still present upon her return home in the

smiling faces of the farmhands, and we wish she could still live that more fantastical life complete with ruby slippers and adventures with her colorful friends. Or perhaps some of us identify with Dorothy and sadly recognize that she (we) will always live with traces from a past that will never be fulfilled in her (our) life. With these culturally charged representations of nostalgia, oftentimes our personal feelings of nostalgia intersect with the dominant culture's imposed collective memory and its nostalgic narratives.

Regardless, manipulative iconic forms of nostalgia have no place in a feminist's life even though those of us, like Kass, may enjoy the momentary diversion of following Dorothy over the rainbow. The anti-feminist message of the film makes it painfully clear that childlike dreams do not, nor should not, come true. The brains, heart, and nerve we really need is to "grow-up" and (gratefully) take our place in the home like the adopted mother-figure we desperately miss, represented by Auntie Em.

In her project to expose nostalgia's relationship to the lost mother-figure and its origin, feminist scholar Lynne Huffer defines nostalgia as a "structure of return, recuperation, and wholeness"[65] and reveals its conservative ties to a fixed utopia that she believes dominates feminist theory. Huffer restates Judith Butler's argument

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65. Lynne Huffer, *Maternal Pasts, Feminist Futures: Nostalgia, Ethics, and the Question of Difference,* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 26.

that "gendered, racial, and sexual identities are based on an illusion of original meaning,"[66] and because theories of performativity serve to dispel such illusions, Huffer argues that the performative proves to be antinostalgic. Performativity, as Butler describes in *Bodies that Matter*, functions through the practice of reiteration via the norm, in that performance produces a bad copy, specifically in order to "open the signifiers to new meanings and new possibilities for political resignification."[67]

But despite Huffer's claim that performativity is antinostalgic, the converse does not hold true: nostalgia does not have to be anti-performative. In Huffer's work, I find a clue as to how nostalgia's structure can be used in feminist performance to iterate an imagined state or feeling in order to create new space. She explains her claim:

> Because nostalgia requires the construction of a blank space, a lost origin to be rediscovered and claimed, it necessarily produces a dynamic of inequality in the opposition between a desiring subject and an invisible other. Further, in a nostalgic structure, an immutable lost past functions as a blueprint for the future, cutting off any possibility for uncertainty, difference, or fundamental change. [68]

If nostalgia's sadomasochistic binary of a "good past/bad present" is, in fact, dependent on the construction of a blank space which is *false*, then perhaps we can

66. Ibid.

67. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 191.

68. Huffer, *Maternal Pasts, Feminist Futures*, 19.

deconstruct nostalgia's binary and view its structure as performative; that is, it can be utilized in performance to call attention in the present moment to the falsity of the space, deconstructing mythical origins within the norm, and to imagine the promise of a future vision.

A Queer Reading of Nostalgia

Invariably, every binary produces a third term, and in the case of the sadomasochistic binary, Savran reminds us that the "spectator, whether real or imagined," is always the "destabilizing third term."[69] The performative also depends on a third person/a witness (either obligatory or voluntary) to read the embodied performance, and thus links the performative to the theatrical with its necessary spectator. If, as Eve Sedgwick and Andrew Parker explain, the performative is "infected with queerness"[70] because of its link to the theatrical, so too may the s/m of nostalgia be queered at the intersection of performance given its witnessing by the real or imagined spectator.

At the end of Susan Bennett's examination of modern Shakespearian productions and the role nostalgia plays in those performances, she briefly discusses

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69. Savran, "The Sadomasochist in the Closet," 141–42.

70. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Introduction: Performativity and Performance," in *Performativity and Performance,* ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

how nostalgia is queered when "the identity-forming discourses of the past are both confirmed and fractured at the moment of performance."[71] In a postmodern world, we witness a large number of experimental artists who grapple with past identifications and ideologies, restructuring those discourses with their traces left intact into their present work; I would suggest, in an extension of Bennett's observation, that postmodern artists are utilizing a queering of nostalgia (the past and that which is lost) in order to critique the present. Bennett further states:

> Queer nostalgia [...] takes place at the limits that transgression is bound to cross and double-cross and our desire for desire, too, finds itself unmistakably queer. At the recognition of the inauthenticity of the authentic past we long to consume, all the time we continue to seek out the production of our own myth of the past, all the time we long to have it confirm our own historical moment.[72]

In performance desire is queered because the transgressive nature of queer nostalgia challenges the dominant cultural narrative, and we see, perhaps for the first time, the exclusion of our "own historical moment" from the historical narrative. But despite recognition, we remain in a cycle of seeking an object or moment outside the self to confirm our identity. I propose that the aim of a queer nostalgia in performance is not, as one might think, to break this cycle, so that one can live a life unencumbered by loss, mourning, or longing; rather, the queering of nostalgia in

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71. Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia*, 159.

72. Ibid.

performance can allow for the simultaneous recognition of that for which we mourn as well as our continuous identification with an other.

I find the theoretical basis for a queer nostalgia in Freud's theories of loss and grieving. In "Mourning and Melancholia" Freud describes how, when we lose a loved object, we experience a painful process of mourning. The loved object may be a person or "some abstraction which has taken place of one, such as one's country, liberty, and ideal."[73] When the object is lost, the ego tries to protect us against this painful process with a denial of the loss, and in so doing, searches for another object, either real or imagined, to replace the lost one. After experiencing the time required for healthy expressions of grief and sadness in remembering the past object of love, a normal and healthy process of mourning ends when the mourner severs her/his narcissistic attachment to the lost object and emotionally reinvests in another.

In contrast, melancholy is a form of mourning that takes an abnormal, unhealthy turn. Freud says that melancholia is a depressive response to the loss of an object due to the subject's pathological and hysterical attachment to the lost object. A melancholic mourns and grieves, but instead of finding and reattaching to a new object, the melancholic clings to an identification with the lost object, unable

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73. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al. (London: The Hogart Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-1974), 14:243, quoted in Tammy Clewell, "Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 52, no. 1 (2004): 44.

to separate the lost loved-object from his/her own ego. In this depressed state, the subject cannot clearly see the lost object since the object is (and, through the subject's unhealthy attachment, always was) introjected by the ego.

At this stage, in order to "let go" of the lost object, the ego must "kill off" a part of itself, but because the psychic removal feels like a killing of the true self, the threat of this psychic killing may bring someone toward thoughts or actions of suicide. Additionally, the subject experiences "an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard"[74] for two reasons: first, due to the repression of violent emotions toward the lost object for its abandonment that are unconsciously expressed when the subject reproachfully attacks itself; and second, due to the subject experiencing bouts of paralysis for failing to live-up to its prescribed ideals as compared to the lost object. In a text written a few years after "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud describes how melancholic subjects

> show us the ego divided, fallen apart into two pieces, one which rages against the second. This second piece is the one which has been altered by introjection and which contains the lost object. But the piece that behaves so cruelly is not unknown to us either. It comprises the conscience, a critical agency within the ego, which even in normal times takes up a critical attitude towards the ego, though never so relentlessly and so unjustifiably.[75]

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74. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al., vol. 14 (London: The Hogart Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953–1974), 246.

75. Sigmund Freud, "Identification," in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), 52.

Freud later discovers that melancholia's divided ego is similar to the subject's identification-formation during the early stages of development when the infant experiences a separation from a primary love object (usually the mother) and compensates for the loss by internalizing an identification with the lost other.[76]

Freud's divided subject is paralleled in Lacan's re-readings of Freud and his description of the subject-formation split which occurs during the mirror stage.[77] Through the subject's misrecognition of the Other within, which is unable to encompass both the feeling and image of the self in reality, the subject's identification with itself is split and difference is discovered. The subject's fear of separation prompts a defense mechanism, created by and for the Ego, through the subject's defensive mis-recognition. The ontological gap or loss created at the center of our subjectivity signals a lack of being which we unconsciously mourn and seek another for its replacement the remainder of our lives. Consequently, for Lacan, the Ego is integrated with an illusion of wholeness which it functions to maintain.

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76. For an excellent reading on Freud's process, claims, and reevaluation of melancholia see Tammy Clewell, "Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 52, no. 1 (2004): 43–67.

77. During the mirror stage of a child's development, the child misrecognizes dueling and false self images: an ideal image that s/he created of the self and another image of how s/he senses the world perceives her or him. Substituting one fantasy ideal for another, the outside image does not adequately represent the unified image the child desires for the self. Consequently, the child is fundamentally split because the reflected image in the mirror both represents and falsifies the self within her or his unconscious as well as in the outside world. Due to the split and the idea that the inner world of a child can not be adequately represented through language, the child enters the next phase of life (the Symbolic) with an overriding sense of loss.

Of interest to an examination of queer nostalgia is Freud's suggestion in "The Ego and the Id" that mourning may never really come to an end; the subject may never find its substitute but absorbs the lost object/other into her/his own identity. The gap from that loss is never completely filled. Peggy Phelan echos the pain and loss felt by the ego, not only for an external object, but for the perceived void formed within the self. She writes, "[a] large part of the ego's energy is devoted to mourning the loss of the ego-ideal, the internal imago that frames and fuels the search for an external beloved."[78] Our ego's identification with the lost object from our past (our othered selves) forever informs both our present and future objects of desire, but will forever frustrate our desire to fuse our inner selves. Like the sadomasochistic binary of nostalgia's longings (a loss of the ego-ideal), the construction of our subject-formation places us in a similar position to seek repeatedly the pleasure of our identification only to find its empty and pain-filled promise. The lack of recognition of the other within and our inability to make unconscious desires conscious produces a habitual and internalized state of melancholia based on an unhealthy and nostalgic attachment to a false, ego-driven identification.

78. Peggy Phelan, "Not Surviving Reading," *Narrative* 5, no. 1 (January 1997): 80.

What hope, then, does this provide for us, if we are forever in a habitual state of melancholia, with no prospect for a "healthy" process of mourning?[79] The question turns out to be based on a false dichotomy between mourning and melancholia due perhaps to an incomplete reading of Freud's body of work. When using Freud's theories to discuss lost loved objects, identifications, and grief, many theorists base their analysis of loss primarily on Freud's work in "Mourning and Melancholia," in which he discusses how mourning is "normal" and involves the process of detachment from a lost object and substitution of another object. And yet, in her analysis of the elegiac ego, critical theorist and literature scholar Tammy Clewell reads and considers the remainder of Freud's essays and theories written after "Mourning and Melancholia" and demonstrates how Freud later suggests a subject who claims both the other and the past in order to find an ethical relation between the past and the future. Clewell summarizes her reading:

> Freud's work counsels us, then, to relinquish the wish for a strict identity unencumbered by the claims of the lost other or the past. In so doing, we realize the possibility of mourning beyond melancholia, a response to loss that refuses the self-punishment entailed in blaming the lost one for our own contingency and that enables us to live in light of our losses. Freud's work on mourning helps us, finally, to establish an

79. For a wonderful discussion of how mourning and activism need not work against each other through a re-reading of Freud, see Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 129–49.

> intimate, indeed ethical, relation between past and future as we embark on the present work of endless mourning.[80]

I propose that Clewell's suggestion for an ethical negotiation within the present mirrors the space that is provided by queer nostalgia and the work of artists who queer the past in order to help us both recognize our attachments and allow for the ongoing mourning of the loss of them at the same time.

The feminist art of Deborah Kass is consciously informed by a queering of nostalgia. Her work is a visual art form which theatrically addresses the spectator and mirrors ongoing melancholia, helping us to see the role of our unconscious and surrender attachment to the other we constantly desire. Utilizing nostalgia to promote change against the maintenance of the *status quo*, Kass presents the possibility for us to operate within a perpetual mourning and still imagine a new order and the imagined home we seek in the symbolic world.

Deborah Kass: "Waiting to Exhale" in her New Home

Although the etymology of the word nostalgia contains the word "home," as we have seen with Dorothy from the film version of *The Wiz*, the search for home need not necessarily require a search backwards to a specific place and time; rather, as Lenora Champagne describes, a nostalgic "search for home [for some] becomes

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80. Clewell, "Mourning Beyond Melancholia," 65.

necessarily a journey, a movement out into the world rather than a retreat into the past."[81] Deborah Kass's body of work as an artist reflects her attempts to carve out a place for herself among the (male) titans of art history; a home where she can shed melancholic conditioning and finally exhale.[82] By using cultural associations of past masterpieces as well as nostalgic associations from her personal history that shaped her identity, Kass queers nostalgia in a performative manner that embraces both her lost past and promising future.

Her artistic journey likely began with one of her earliest identity-forming moments, although she was not conscious of it at the time. Kass was eight years old when she first viewed Picasso's *Gertrude Stein* (1906)[83] at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. With the benefit of hindsight, she explains:

> Picasso never painted another woman like that, who looked like that, with that kind of presence, who wasn't a *thing*! He painted a person, and this personness overwhelmed me. I don't know whether it was because Gertrude Stein was an artist or because she was a Jewish woman or because she was a dyke, but I'm convinced that at eight I got a lot of this information subliminally.[84]

81. Champagne, "On Nostalgia."

82. Deborah Kass, interview by author, New York, NY, 7 November 2008.

83. Stein was one of Picasso's first patrons as well as a life-long friend.

84. Deborah Kass, interview by Holland Cotter, "Art After Stonewall: 12 Artists Interviewed," *Art in America* 82, no. 6 (June 1994): 57.

Kass was entranced by the portrait and felt such an instant (and sexual)[85] identification with the image of Stein, she now refers to that moment as her "first big experience of aesthetic emotion."[86]

As Kass developed as an artist, she longed for home by seeking art forms in the places where she could see her own reflection. Kass explains that "somewhere there is a place where identity meets identification. That place is so vulnerable, so personal, corny, embarrassing, revealing, and beautiful. Because, dare I say? it is so *real*."[87] While these "real" moments may be rare in a lifetime, Kass's previously unclaimed identity met her identification with Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein within a space of exchange at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; it is a revelation where a previously internalized psychic subjectivity meets its present-day manifestation and trespasses dangerously close to the Real—that original psychic place, without lack or loss, prior to separation.

Lacan defines the Real as "the real as the impossible"[88] and explains that an

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85. Ibid.

86. Deborah Kass, e-mail message to author, 3 October 2009.

87. Deborah Kass, quoted in Michael Plante, "Screened Identities, Multiple Repetitions, and Missed Kisses: Deborah Kass's Warhol Project," in *Deborah Kass: The Warhol Project*, ed. Michael Plante (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., in association with Newcombe Art Gallery, Tulane University, 1999), 35.

88. Jacques Lacan, "The Deconstruction of the Drive," *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 167.

encounter with the Real is always missed in real-time, causing a form of trauma in the psyche.[89] The essence of the Real can never be grasped because once we enter the Symbolic with its language, representation, and unconscious desire, we cannot undo that psychic melancholic (dis)integration and live an entirely conscious life without desire for (an)other. Lynda Hart suggests, however, that the Real is that "which evades the frame of representation" and "is precisely the possibilities of the imaginary that are located at the very limits of representation. Or, what representation fails to limit."[90] Kass's encounter with Picasso's Stein, although its significance was "missed,"or not fully analyzed, in childhood, nevertheless impacted her psyche and led her work as an artist to imagine marginal and transgressive frames of representation. Interestingly, Gertrude Stein herself offers a description of real life encounters that sounds very similar to an encounter with the Real, an encounter which Kass looks to experience again and again. Stein explains:

> First anything exciting in which one takes part. There one progresses forward and back emotionally and at the supreme crisis of the scene the scene in which one takes part, in which one's hopes and loves and fears take part at the extreme crisis of this thing one is almost one with one's emotions, the action and the emotion go together, there is but just a moment of this coordination but it does exist otherwise there is no completion

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89. Jacques Lacan, "Tuché and Automaton," *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 53–56.

90. Lynda Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 67.

> as one has no result, no result of a scene in which one has taken part, and so instinctively when any people are living an exciting moment one with another they go on and on and on until the thing has come together the emotion the action the excitement and that is the way it is when there is any violence either of loving or hating or quarreling or losing or succeeding. But there is, there has to be the moment of it all being abreast the emotion, the excitement and the action otherwise there would be no succeeding and no failing and so no one would go on living, why yes of course not.
>
> That is life the way it is lived.[91]

Many years later in her search outwards for that nostalgic place of home and an encounter with the Real, Kass drew on her identification with Stein and painted *How Do I Look?*[92] (see fig. 9) as part of her series called *Art History Paintings: 1989–1992*, in which Kass juxtaposes works from modern and abstract male masters. In *How Do I Look?* Kass paints a collage uniting on a single canvas Picasso's portrait of Stein; Jasper Johns's sculpture *The Critic Sees* (1961); and Gustave Courbet's painting, *The Sleepers* or *Sleep* (1866). The question within the displaced conversation of these artists that Kass (re)presents—"How Do I Look?"—is both self-reflexive and outwardly demanding; her question involves a negotiation of space and the quality of sight—what is seen/not seen/in reality/in fantasy/by Kass/by the spectator. In

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91. Gertrude Stein, "Plays," in *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1935), 99–100. At the Atlantic Stage 2 theater in New York in January–February 2010, David Greenspan read/performed a slightly edited version of Stein's "Plays" lecture.

92. The conference *How Do I Look?: Queer Film and Video* was organized in October 1989 in New York City by the Bad-Object Choices Collective and its members Douglas Crimp and Terri Cafaro (a collection of essays from the conference was published in 1991). The presentations aimed to examine the lack of theoretical discussions concerning gays and lesbians in media, and the screenings aimed to present near parity between gay and lesbian films.

particular her (in)visibility as a feminist lesbian artist within art's history is both called into question and problemitized in the work: an explicit and physical depiction of lesbian sexuality—Courbet's two nude women in carnal, post-coital embrace—is outlined in a peachy color within a flurry of creamy-peachy swirls of paint and lies behind the more specifically detailed reproductions of Picasso's Stein and Johns's critical eyes.

Johns's eyeglassed eyes reveal two different open, toothy mouths cast where the eyeballs should be. Like Deb Maroglin, Johns and Kass are working with synecdochical representations of the body: Johns's mouth-filled eyes represent the bodies of critics and how they, in fact, fail to see and render art absent with their "chewed-up" opinions; and Kass's appropriation of Johns's image in her work represents the failure of society to see women, particularly lesbians. The performative nature of Kass's work means to replace absence with presence, insisting on the acknowledgment of women's absence from history as well as the value of those who identify as lesbians, feminists, and artists. Kass's work also creates several different spectators and produces a complicated and theatrical space of exchange. The spectator in the painting can be read either as the darkly cloaked Stein whose piercing eyes look out into a world that fails to represent her, or it could be the critic whose sight is blocked with non-functioning eyeglasses, or it could be Kass as the painter within her painting. All of these "eyes" exchange views with the

external spectator viewing the painting, and the exact nature of the exchange depends on the point of view and internal projections of the audience/spectator.

The image of the mouth used by Johns and Kass also recalls the female character Mouth from Beckett's 1972 play *Not I,* in which all that is visible of the character's body on the darkened stage is her lit mouth. Mouth is a prominent theatrical example of synecdoche, as it represents an entire body ("she") in absence, and Kass, like Pollock before her, seems to engage in a displaced conversation with Beckett; the space of exchange created by Kass is an arena where the abstract mouth and the physically body of the spectator meet. Feminist spectators may see Kass's depiction of Stein and Courbet's nude women and witness their (and their own) socially imposed isolation in the same manner as the djellaba-cloaked and faceless Auditor of *Not I* responds to Mouth: with "a gesture of hopeless compassion . . . as Mouth recovers from vehement refusal to relinquish third person."[93]

While Mouth's melancholic journey is inward into isolation and the buzzing inside her head,[94] Kass's endless journey is always outward, much like that of the expatriate Gertrude Stein, as she challenges the construction of identities and builds her residence of home. In *Not I* the Auditor and audience hear Mouth's life which

93. Samuel Beckett, *Not I*, in *Ends and Odds: Nine Dramatic Pieces* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), 14.

94. Ibid, 16.

led her to identify in the third person "she," unable to take up the identification of the first person "I" (hence, "Not I"); however, in Kass's *How Do I Look?*, she expands first-person identification, offering a different subjective perception with each set of eyes (or "I"'s). Much like Merleau-Ponty's theories of phenomenology through his analysis and perception of painting and the painter, vision and the body[95] (i.e. "I am touching my hand; I am both touching and being touched."), Kass wants to make visible how the world touches her/us and bring together both the observation of her subject/object as well as its social surroundings.[96] Through the inner-subjective quality of art, Kass seeks her home, her encounter with the Real. She paints a phenomenological reflexivity in that she sees her body as both subject and object in both the painted and received space of performative exchange simultaneously; Kass's painting combines reality with sensuality. Given surrounding heteronormative structures, Kass queers the nostalgic past from her childhood in order to find her place; she insists on herself and her identifications and inserts them in her art so that she paints herself as both object and subject.

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95. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics,* ed. James M. Edie and trans. Carleton Dallery (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 162–63.

96. Cézanne simultaneously represented in his paintings the authentic object and its surroundings in nature. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-Sense,* trans. Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 9–25.

Queer nostalgia requires both an outside and inside reading of cultural codes, aiding the survival of those who are queer. Kass explains how "standing outside and trying on the culture in various ways—not unlike drag—is a particularly gay strategy."[97] Regarding queer readings of normative cultural narratives, Peggy Phelan argues, "[q]ueers . . . are made to read the narrative of cultural homophobia not only as witnesses to it, but also as objects of it." In so doing, they "die to the Law of the Social and find another space. This space, in turn, makes new narrative and psychic acts possible."[98] Phelan also reminds us of the "ego's melancholic struggle" when faced with the loss of a "culturally prescribed ego-ideal."[99] Thus, we can see the connection between the individual ego-ideal and the normative culture's ego-ideal—an ego-ideal which I suggest is part of nostalgia's structure.

At the core of nostalgia and the modern condition, according to Svetlana Boym, lies a "mourning of displacement,"[100] and the "creative rethinking of nostalgia [is] not merely an artistic device, but a strategy of survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming."[101] Kass understands that she "cannot come

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97. Kass, interview by Holland Cotter, 115.

98. Phelan, "Not Surviving Reading," 80.

99. Ibid.

100. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.

101. Ibid, xvii.

home" to what is a falsely constructed space, nor does she want to. Instead, she seeks another home through a melancholic mourning of past lost objects, her acknowledgment of subsequent identifications, and the finding of a newly created space within her art. Kass's use of nostalgia as a performative tool represents her (re)finding of seemingly lost origins not represented in contemporary structures and serves as an act of survival in a culture where the "survival of women," particularly queer women, is dictated by specific codes of conduct.

Boym also suggests that, fundamentally, nostalgia is ambivalent—"it is about the repetition of the unrepeatable"[102]—and she quotes Susan Stewart, who says, "nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition's capacity to form identity;"[103] however, as stated above, we can also view nostalgia's structure as a repetition with a difference, because of its displacement of time and space, and this difference drives the performative nature of queer nostalgia. By performing the repetition (i.e., the bad copy of performance), a queer nostalgia can not only retain the experience of mourning but also recover a home and define new identities. Deborah Kass finds the generative space to

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102. Ibid.

103. Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 23. The actual quote that Boym provides reads, "nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetitions and denies the repetition's capacity to define identity," but this is clearly a misquote. Cf. Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, xviii. Boym also does not include a reference to a page number in her citation of Stewart's quote and gets the year of publication wrong–Boym cites Stewart's book as having been published in 1985.

accomplish this project through elaborations of past images; as such, it is fitting she would turn to a displaced conversation with the one artist who repeated images of culture's ego-ideals originated in the United States over and over on canvas after canvas—Andy Warhol.

Deborah Kass's Feminist Retrospective: *The Warhol Project:* 1992-2000

Thirty years after Andy Warhol first began his work with silkscreen printing and painting, Deborah Kass began what would become her Andy Warhol series. With photographs, glue, silk, and paint, Kass meticulously replicates Warhol's silkscreen process, and while she creates her own screens, the formats and color runs look much like Warhol's and even replicate instances of his "accidental" paint drippings and scrapings on the canvas. Describing his silkscreen process, Warhol said, "you get the same image, slightly different each time. It was all so simple—quick and chancy. I was thrilled with it."[104] Kass, too, investigates what is "quick and chancy," but here she uses the action of iteration to examine the hierarchical world of art and American society. Kass's project is both an homage as well as a critique of Andy Warhol's paintings; she reproduces Warhol's techniques but reconfigures the

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104. Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* (New York: Harvest/Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1980), 28.

content to create a socio-political shift. She called her 1995 show at the José Freire galley in SoHo *My Andy: a retrospective,* and in so doing she claimed a retrospective for a female artist which was (and still is) a rare occurrence at major New York City museums. Kass demands and, in effect, steals a place of equal status within the male-centered American art world. Yet the word "retrospective" also reflects the nostalgic underpinnings, both personal and cultural, of the series.

Just as Warhol challenged subjects deemed appropriate for high art in New York abstract painting, Kass challenges how certain American archetypes are created and mythologized through repetitions. Subverting Warhol's paintings which have, in the intervening years, taken on a nostalgic and canonized glow in American popular culture, Kass either substitutes her own image for Warhol's in his self-portraits or replaces Warhol's now-nostalgic cast of pop culture celebrities (e.g., Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Jacqueline Kennedy) for feminist, lesbian and/or Jewish subjects with whom she identifies. Kass explains, "I wanted to see people like me represented, and no one was going to do it but me. And the way I did this was by taking my adopted language of modernism and postwar painting and making these languages represent me."[105] Kass iterates Warhol's repetitions and paintings of recognizable pop-culture nomenclatures in order to make visible the

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105. Deborah Kass, quoted in Mary Anne Staniszewski, "First Person Plural: The Painting of Deborah Kass," in *Deborah Kass: The Warhol Project*, ed. Michael Plante (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., in association with Newcombe Art Gallery, Tulane University, 1999), 25.

outsider subjects that were, indeed, part of Warhol's identity (i.e., ethnic, working class, queer, non-butch) but which, in fact, he wanted to deny.

Kass suggests that we can now define Warhol as a politically queer feminist artist[106] who highlighted low status domestic objects as art (e.g., Brillo soap pad boxes, Campbell's tomato soup cans, Coca-Cola soda bottles, and wild flowers), but as British art historian and cultural critic Simon Watney explains, Warhol was considered by art critics during the height of his career as an abstract Pop Art artist who championed class struggles. Critics passed over any engagement with Warhol's subversive camp techniques or homosexuality.[107] Like Kass, Watney says that "Warhol was endlessly sensitive to the maternal pull of American culture;" he imaginatively accessed "elements that came most immediately to hand" and "began to invent his own America . . . just as he invented Andy."[108] Kass says that in so doing, Warhol was looking for "his glorified reflection . . . a perfect American glamour, as defined basically by Hollywood, a glamour that he was incapable of attaining because of his gayness, his immigrant family and his looks."[109]

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106. Kass, interview by Cotter, 57.

107. Simon Watney, "Queer Andy," in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, ed. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muňoz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 21–22.

108. Ibid, 23.

109. Kass, interview by Cotter, 57.

In her Warhol series Kass queers the queer nostalgia of Warhol. In her painting *Before and Happily Ever After* (see fig. 10), for example, she hand-paints Warhol's 1960 nose job diptych which he ultimately used in the window display he designed for Bonwit Teller department store in 1961. To the bottom of Warhol's diptych, however, Kass adds a recreation of the animation cel of the moment of re-finding and fitting the glass slipper from Disney's *Cinderella*. While seeking his own American fairy tale early in his career, Warhol dropped the final "a" of his Carpatho-Rusyn name, bought a hairpiece, and had rhinoplasty (in 1957). Not only is *Before and Happily Ever After* a critique of our society's view of what constitutes beauty and the "breakable" fairy tale it affords (especially with women's efforts to perfect and market themselves as a commodity of "princess" for a potential "prince"), but, unlike Warhol's original, Kass's painting is also a celebration of her ethnic identity. As Michael Plante describes, Kass juxtaposes the position of Jews who, out of fear of the Nazis, changed their appearances to become less visible with the awkward modern notion of Jews who buy into invisibility (literally by buying a nose-job/bob) out of the fear that their successes in America will be jeopardized if they do not.[110] While Kass had intended a feminist objective originally with *Before and Happily Ever After*, it was not until after she painted the work that Kass realized

110. Michael Plante, "Screened Identities, Multiple Repetitions, and Missed Kisses: Deborah Kass's Warhol Project," in *Deborah Kass: The Warhol Project*, ed. Michael Plante (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., in association with Newcombe Art Gallery, Tulane University, 1999), 44–45.

she had created instead not only a Jewish painting, but a "Jewish Princess" painting.[111] Nevertheless, Kass reconfigures an oppressive "American" nostalgia for a collective "sameness" into a feminist as well as an ethnic reflection of difference. She once again insists on the presence and the performance of the feminist othered queer body within American culture.

Warhol, on the other hand, was conflicted by his desire to take-up space; he reflects, "I wanted to command more space than I was commanding, but then I knew I was too shy to know what to do with the attention if I did manage to get it."[112] Regarded as extremely shy, introverted, and uncomfortable around people, even his infamous guests and invited artists who frequented The Silver Factory, Warhol still served as one of a few public and heroic faces of "gay identity" during the 1960s prior to gay liberation.[113] While shyness and shame remained part of his identity,[114] Warhol queerly mediated his conflict (misidentification) in order to

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111. Kass, interview by author, 2008. In our country's culture, the perception of a Jewish woman who changes her nose, hair, or any other "ethnic" feature to make her look more WASP-like (and marriage-worthy) is generally classified as a Jewish American Princess (JAP), an anti-Semitic stereotype.

112. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 146–47, quoted in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Warhol's Shyness/Warhol's Whiteness," in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, ed. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muňoz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 134–35.

113. See Watney's discussion of this issue.

114. For a discussion of Warhol's well-known shyness and potential shame, see Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Warhol's Shyness/Warhol's Whiteness."

highlight the tension between high art and accessibility throughout his body of work. His paintings conflate images of glamour and celebrity with quotidian objects based in the home. Although his choice of subjects was considered revolutionary in its day, I suggest his choices were also designed to generate a nostalgic melancholia in the viewer, as they must have done for Warhol,[115] given our (his) inability to access or recover those sites, or, perhaps, sustain our finding of those objects/states of desire for more than "fifteen minutes." Our perception of his paintings continue to keep us within nostalgia's sadomasochistic cycle.

Kass reuses the nostalgia conjured-up by Warhol's art in order to destabilize the myths and sites of performance with which we identify, be it constructed genders, sexualities, or ethnicities. The performativity of her paintings plays on these distinctions constructed within heteronormative, white cultural structures; thus, she replaces the nostalgic media-constructed heightened Hollywood femininity of Marilyn Monroe or the monied high-society grace of Jacqueline Kennedy and their mythic stories with the iconic profile of the legendary diva and political activist Barbra Streisand (see fig. 11). For Kass, Streisand represents a Jewish celebrity whose fame began in the 1960s—the same time as Jackie Kennedy's—but who was

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115. Consider that for a working class person, as Warhol was up through his college days and beyond, Campbell's soup has deeper personal associations than simply being a "lowbrow" object. As Simon Watney says, "cans of soup are only 'banal' to those who didn't have to grow up on canned food." See Watney, 30.

not invited to join the circle of celebrity elite at the time with her brash manner and her too-too Jewish nose. Kass recognizes that Streisand and Warhol were similarly positioned as cultural outsiders, but Warhol did not want to paint this Hollywood star because actually, "he wasn't looking for his own reflection."[116]

By contrast, Kass actively seeks her own reflection in cultural icons and artwork. Initially influenced by the revolutionary art and writings of second-wave feminists such as Elizabeth Murray, Adrienne Rich, and bell hooks, Kass purposefully works to add her feminist personal identifications within the content (the reflected image) of the formal frame of painting (the mirror's frame). Returning to her original identification with Gertrude Stein as the archetypical and unapologetic matriarch of modern art, Kass appropriates Warhol's *Chairman Mao* paintings and paints *Chairman Ma (Gertrude Stein)* (see fig. 12). Moreover, Kass identifies with the powerful and talented Streisand, one of her childhood idols, who refused to assimilate by denying her ethnicity and difference; instead, Streisand insisted on her body in performance and made her difference an attribute. Streisand created her own myth, a new cultural sign, and, ironically, she is now a figure for which even the larger cohort of baby boomers feels nostalgic. This is an inverted example of nostalgia's power to erase differences through the progression of history.

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116. Kass, interview by Cotter, 57.

It is Kass's celebration of Streisand at the center of a parallel American cultural narrative that is most evident in her various appropriations of Warhol compositions. In addition to *12 Barbras*, another example is the various single, double, triple, and quadruple manifestations of Streisand as Yentl, standing in for another titan of the dominant culture's nostalgia, Elvis Presley, in Warhol's series of Elvis paintings from 1963 (see fig. 13). Double-belted with gun blazing, a handsome and macho Elvis makes a stand in Warhol's painting and points his gun in our direction. The image came from a publicity still for Elvis's almost-forgotten 1960 Western, *Flaming Star*. In the film Presley plays the role of the half-breed Pacer Burton, who is hated by both races in the Old West. Some critics argue that this was one of Presley's best acting performances, and Presley truly desired to work primarily as a serious actor; however, his career began its slow decline around 1964. With prescience, Warhol seems to have sensed Elvis's star-image as one of America's celebrated cultural icons beginning to "flame out." Through his choice of subject—a pop-art, gun-toting image of Elvis which repeats within the canvases—Warhol calls attention not only to this American icon with his clean-cut celebrity image fading but also to the macho image which the abstract expressionists of the New York School and their followers wished to repeat and uphold within high art and American culture.

Kass builds on Warhol's project, but instead of pointing the phallic symbol of the gun at the spectator, Kass signals to us with the Talmud, a book of knowledge, carried by a woman whose character must dress in drag in order to obtain the same opportunity for an education as a man.[117] Kass not only addresses how women must use education as their weapon to fight for equality, but she also points to society's issues with gender and sexual identifications and how intelligent ethnic women are rendered invisible in society for purposes of survival.[118] Furthermore, Kass draws parallels from the Yentl character to Streisand's career to Kass's own career as a female artist in the 1990s. In 1991 Streisand's film *The Prince of Tides* was nominated for the Best Picture award by the Academy, but her direction was not. This oversight was publicly noted by many prominent women throughout Hollywood.[119]

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117. Not only her character: Streisand wrote and starred in *Yentl* (1983), and it was her directorial debut, too.

118. On 16 July 2009, when then-nominee Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor came under fire for suggesting that her Hispanic background might helpfully guide her judgement, comic Stephen Colbert called attention to the need for ethnic women to be invisible to survive. During *The Colbert Report*, in his segment of "The Wørd" titled "Neutral Man's Burden," Colbert discussed that in America "white is neutral," using the example of Band-Aids. For years, he said, Band-Aids only came in one "neutral" color: a beige/peachy "flesh" tone. But in response to calls to make their product more inclusive of minorities, the makers of Band-Aids introduced a sheer version which was "invisible." Similarly, Colbert claimed, "If you're a white male like Sam Alito, naturally, everything that happened in your life just helps make you a completely neutral, objective person. But if you're Sonia Sotomayor, everything that happened in your life SHOULD BE INVISIBLE." See Stephen Colbert, "Neutral Man's Burden," "The Wørd" segment. *The Colbert Report.* Comedy Central TV, 16 July, 2009.

119. In 1991 Streisand both acted and directed in *The Prince of Tides,* which was nominated by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for a Best Picture Oscar that year. During the awards ceremony, it was pointed out by Jessica Tandy, Shirley McLaine, and Liza Minelli that Streisand was overlooked in a nomination for Best Directing. Earlier that year, however, she had been nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Director as well as for the equivalent honor awarded by

The idea that women must disguise their gender or perform as men in order to pass is not new, but it was a topical issue in the late eighties/early ninties. Kass takes the issue beyond calling a woman's image into view and suggests that women must disguise and appropriate just to get noticed.

To further address the issue of "passing" in order to succeed, Kass disguises the self-disguisable artist Cindy Sherman inside Warhol's portrait of Liza Minnelli in her painting *Cindy Sherman* (see fig. 14). The celebrated Sherman, who inserts her own image into the collective iconography of women, once said, "I feel I'm anonymous in my work. When I look at the pictures, I never see myself; they aren't self-portraits. Sometimes I disappear."[120] Kass honors Cindy Sherman's "disappearing act" (it is truly difficult to discern Sherman from the iconic Minnelli here), and Kass appreciates that photographers like Sherman took a marginalized art form and made it relevant through subversive acts.[121] But, here again, Kass means to

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the Directors Guild of America. Up to that point, only one woman had ever been nominated by the Academy for Best Directing—Italian director Lina Wertmüller for *Seven Beauties* in 1976—and by the 2010 Academy Awards only two other women had been nominated: Jane Campion for *The Piano* (1993), and Sofia Coppola for *Lost in Translation* (2003). No woman had ever won for Best Directing. Then, in 2010, Kathryn Bigelow was nominated and became the first woman to win the Best Directing Oscar for *The Hurt Locker*. Fittingly, it was Streisand who presented Bigelow with the statuette. After opening the envelope and looking at the name inside, Streisand remarked, "Well, the time has come," and when Bigelow came up to receive the award, Streisand "jokingly" asked, "Can I hold it?"

120. Cindy Sherman, quoted in Glenn Collins, "A Portraitist's Romp Through Art History," *New York Times,* 1 February 1990, under "Arts," http://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/01/arts/a-portraitist-s-romp-through-art-history.html (accessed 28 June 2010).

121. Cindy Sherman had a retrospective of her work in 1987 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, making her one of the few female art stars of the 1980s. Kass believes there is a

undermine the representation of absence within a language (painting) which only represents the cultural patriarchal majority by calling attention to the absence.

Ultimately, Kass also turned to photography to powerful effect at her gallery retrospective to address the issue of passing and performance when she hung *Altered Image #2* (see fig. 15) as well as one of her *Yentl* paintings underneath her title "My Andy: a retrospective." Dressed in jeans, a button-down white shirt, madras tie, and ribbon belt, Kass dons a blonde wig and heavy make-up in order to perform Warhol, who in 1981 collaborated with Christopher Makos to produce photographs inspired by Man Ray's 1921 portrait of Marcel Duchamp dressed in drag as Duchamp's alter-ego Rrose Sélavy.[122] Replicating his pose and disguising herself as Warhol in drag, Kass creates, as the art critic Cherry Smyth says, "a self-conscious replica of a replica of an illusion," or what we might call Kass's queer nostalgic take on Warhol's image, "*denying the originality of the artist*" [emphasis mine].[123]

Kass performs Warhol performing Duchamp—a thrice evolved trajectory–commenting on art and the artist. If Duchamp's ready-mades elevated everyday

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difference in reception, however, for women who create art through photography and those who work with paint as their medium, because painting is a field dominated by men.

122. The name in French sounds like *Eros, c'est la vie*. To view Makos's images, see the Makos Studio website at: http://makos.artistmanager.net/warhol.php and see his slide show of "Warhol in Jeans."

123. Cherry Smyth, *Damn Fine Art: By New Lesbian Artists* (London: Cassell and Co., 1996), 46.

objects as art, and if he performed a female alter-ego to authenticate his more avant-garde works; and if Makos and Warhol referenced Man Ray's photograph as both homage and a means to claim Duchamp's Pop art mantle; then Kass's performance is truly a sad commentary. Kass, who is born "woman" and understands the gender divide, must deny her womanhood and ethnicity and pull a Victor Victoria performance—a woman disguises herself as a man who dresses as a woman (in a gentile blonde wig and plaid!)—in order to claim the mantle of one worthy of greatness.

Throughout her work, Kass is concerned with the history, or lack thereof, marking feminist art, and she clearly believes that power structures will not change until members of the disenfranchised are paid an equal amount, both monetarily and in recognition, to white men. Kass admirably uses Streisand's image to represent one of the few talented women who pushed through limitations in order to succeed. Indeed, Streisand is an unapologetic mega-star who, despite controversy, has made far more money than many of her male counterparts. Interestingly, however, Kass was criticized by various critics in the art community for her use of Barbra Streisand as her subject. A.M. Homes, a noted art critic from *Artforum*,[124] writes:

124. Prior to 1993 Homes was a journalist and had published one novel but had not yet reached her noted fame. She is best-known for her controversial novels, especially *The End of Alice*, which was published in 1996. Perhaps Homes's reaction to Kass's work was an unconscious

> Kass' substitution of Barbra for three of the tragic figures of our time is problematic. On the most basic level, one Barbra does not equal a Jackie O., the grande-dame of the failed New Frontier, a Marilyn Monroe, the little-lost-girl, or Elvis, King in a land where monarchy has been out since 1776. Nor is this substitution an intensely radical gesture as Warhol himself could easily have painted Barbra—the portraits were what Andy did for spending money, available to anyone who wanted to plunk down $25,000.[125]

Homes does applaud Kass's earlier works from her "Art History" series, but she cannot abide Kass's subject choice of Barbra Streisand's self-directed performance. Marilyn Monroe and Elvis are pop-cultural demigods within the hierarchy of certain art circles. But by embracing Streisand as a product of middlebrow art and as the subject for her paintings, Kass's strategy differentiates her work from many other contemporary artists who may embrace the highbrow–lowbrow binary, but almost never the middlebrow, an arena which is often delegitimized by critics.

While Homes fails to see Kass's purpose, her description is telling. America did produce icons of the "failed New Frontier," "the little-lost-girl," and a "King" in a land without kings, but surely Warhol helped in part to reinforce the power of their iconography. And, significantly, Warhol was paid by neither Kennedy-Onassis, Monroe, nor Presley—all three were subjects of his choice (and one was already deceased). Warhol certainly could have painted Streisand, but he did not

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projection onto Kass's paintings, and her review is evidence of a Jewish woman who had not yet come out and who had not yet really thought through the issues Kass presented.

125. A.M. Homes, "Deborah Kass: fiction/nonfiction," *Artforum* 31, no. 7 (March 1993): 95.

paint her precisely *because* her image augments neither white patriarchal American myths nor the nostalgic lens through which he wanted (and through which we all are forced) to identify; instead, Streisand's image specifically suggests a powerful and ethnically Jewish woman of talent. Lisa Bloom states that Warhol "lived through the women's movement and disagreed with its premises and he therefore barely acknowledged it in his work."[126] In fact, Warhol often noted in his diaries his dismissal of Streisand as the epitome of the "nouvelle riche,"[127] but clearly seems willing to have overlooked the class transformations of Elvis and Norma Jean, as well as his own.

Kass's performative gesture is indeed radical as it is feminist. She dips into America's nostalgia for Warhol and for the icons with whom he is affiliated, appropriates those forms, and with parodic substitution, calls our attention to the performance and constructed nature of these mythic stories. Kass responds to her critics describing:

> They saw no feminism. And I would maintain because I'm gay. I would maintain that they thought it was gay, not feminist. I mean, it's like whatever the smaller ghetto is, you get pushed in. And therefore I am continually in the Jewish ghetto, because it's even smaller than the gay ghetto! So, you know, here are these white feminists waving their unconscious heterosexual privilege

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126. Lisa E. Bloom, *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 113.

127. Ibid, 111.

> over me, saying, "What's feminist about Barbra Streisand in drag? I don't get it." They didn't get it. They did not get it![128]

Kass's project is more than just a binary exchange of the male gaze for the female gaze via appropriation; by painting Streisand in drag in place of Elvis's *Flaming Star* image, Kass complicates male/female binary positions and offers new ideas of interpreting white male privilege within American pop-culture and abstract art.

So why did some of the witnessing for Kass's project go awry? Perhaps it is because Kass's work contains an historically noted anxiety for critics, raising again the question of whether the art for examination consists of the remains of her work (i.e., the painted canvas) or the physical performed activity behind the artwork, as critics discovered with the action paintings of Jackson Pollock. Are we merely critiquing an appropriation of Warhol—copy for copy—or is something else revealed in Kass's canvas and the process/context it represents? Like Warhol, Kass creates multiple versions of her paintings, and the act of repetition of her subjects reveals an additional performative aspect in her painting. By creating iterations of canvases with images that reflect her personal (and marginal) identities, Kass calls herself out *within the history of art* as subject of her art. In the act of placing herself as art object in conversation with her spectators, she asks us to look at the reiterated norms which construct American society via specific iconographies.

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128. Kass, interview by author, 2008.

In this respect, Kass's aim is reminiscent of the goals of Adrian Piper, a socio-political artist who, through various multi-disciplinary forms, has been challenging issues of race, identity, and gender since the late 1960s. Like Kass, Piper points out the absent body, specifically of the black female, within the history of abstract art and uses her art to engage the spectator in a conversation that has social-educative possibilities. As a black woman who was often mistaken for white, Piper has created several projects throughout her career that seek to confront her audience with racism and sexism. One of these renditions is *The Mythic Being* series (1972-1975), in which Piper performed a male alter-ego, named Mythic Being, who is enhanced with culturally endowed black stereotypes, such as Mythic's performance when s/he is "Cruising White Women" (1976). Discussing the nature of her conceptual art, Piper states how her own individual work "concerns the immediate relationship in the indexical present—that is, the present of the here and now—between the art object and the viewer as a kind of medium for social relations."[129] Piper, like Kass and many feminists, believes that art which provides the space for a spectator to confront the Other within the present moment, "teaches one how to see" and evokes a personal response. Perhaps Kass's *Yentl* series is mis-witnessed because her

129. Adrian Piper, "from Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture," in *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology*, ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz (New York: Routledge, 1998), 127.

audience is unready to confront conditioned learning surrounding women, Jews, and lesbians.

Then, too, Kass's choice of Barbra Streisand as subject complicates the space of exchange between artist and spectator. Streisand as a public figure typifies the good/bad binary of a celebrity. She is talented, but aggressive; attractive, but with Jewish features; a comedian, but political; wonderful to watch, but difficult to work with; and yet, Streisand rose to the top in her industry at a very young age and continues to succeed and survive in spite of it all. Kass chose a complex subject purposefully to reflect the complex nature of identifications as well as society's relationship with the performance of its nostalgic celebrity heros. Nowhere is this clearer, perhaps, than in her *Gold Barbra (The Jewish Jackie Series)*, in which Kass replaces Warhol's famous *Gold Marilyn Monroe* with a classic profile pose from the 1960s, nose clearly in view, of Streisand (see fig. 16).

Not only was Warhol fascinated with the American fairy tale, he was also fascinated by death and/or the death of the fairy tale's fragile protagonist. Intrigued by placidity, Warhol elevated to the status of art the American nostalgia for celebrities/social elite whose portrayed lives up to the point of tragedy are of one-dimension and fixed within the American fairy-tale narrative. In fact, the birth of Warhol's identification with silkscreens coincided with the death of Marilyn

Monroe. Prior to her suicide on 4 August 1962, Warhol began experimenting with silkscreens using the images of Troy Donahue and Warren Beatty; upon Monroe's death, however, Warhol found his ideal icon and created his first screens of her within the month. He used a publicity shot from Monroe's 1953 film *Niagara*, and most of his first silkscreen paintings are multiples of that image in vibrant colors such as orange-red, mint green, turquoise, fuchsia, robin's egg blue, and canary yellow. The *Gold Marilyn Monroe* is one of the few instances of Warhol's use of gold paint in his Marilyn series, and the composition suggests Byzantine religious iconography. Warhol canonizes Monroe's life-in-death through this one halted image which he recreated some twenty times within the four months after her death. The image of her face also marks the body's absence, as Warhol cropped her celebrated figure from the original publicity shot out of the photograph.

The posthumous aspect of Marilyn Monroe's portrait may, in fact, reflect back to Warhol's desire to see his own image. Warhol identifies with the American tragedy and often paints the tragic image (Monroe after her suicide, Kennedy Onassis after the President's assassination, as well as "disaster" scenes like car accidents and the electric chair), but even though he commodifies the tragedy using a "pop art" sensibility, he does not deconstruct the image.[130] Warhol's art does not

130. This line of inquiry came out of my discussions with Kass.

question the subject choice but rather reflects the stasis of a melancholic state. Warhol is trapped inside the tragic fairy tale, because those images do not reflect him; he desires those images, but they do not reflect his identity. In painting tragic loss, Warhol is nostalgic for something he neither ever had nor ever was. Kass, on the other hand, reconfigures Warhol's tragic nostalgia to point out the bodies absent from the performances and presentations of the classic American narrative and uses her personal identifications as a theatrical alienating device to remind us that we are nostalgic for a one-dimensional fairy tale dramatization.

In this way Kass's queering of nostalgia shows us the possibility of moving past the tragic feelings of loss that nostalgia can evoke. By painting her desired identifications into the appropriated canvas, Kass simultaneously acknowledges her ongoing melancholia for past history as well as her present mourning for her history's absence. Queer nostalgia is not the same as ironic nostalgia which I discussed in the previous chapter. Margolin uses ironic nostalgia in a manner similar to that of Deborah Kass in that both artists use nostalgia to revisit past masters in order to appropriate their work within a new context, but queer nostalgia is a tool for the postmodern artist who wants to queer the past in the present for the purpose of recognizing attachments and allowing the ongoing mourning of the loss of them at the same time. In this regard, the use of parodic tools does not engage with an ongoing mourning for the past in the present. Hutcheon's description of

ironic nostalgia, without engaging in Kass's component of mourning and queer nostalgia, is the playing field in which we find most of Margolin's solo work, but Kass would argue, as I do, that there is more involved than just "ironic nostalgia" in her performative of postmodern painting.

For Kass, identifications are far more intriguing than identities:

> What you identify within the culture, in popular culture, like your music, your movies, you identify with them because you think they define you in some way. Or *vice versa*. You are defined by what you *identify* with. And I don't mean, "I identify as a Jewish lesbian," I don't mean that. I mean, "I love Barbara Streisand, and I'm 12 years old." You know, it's like, "Why?" "Who cares?" "I just want to be her." And I wanted to be her. And I completely identified with her. Period. So I think that's way more interesting, because it's a bigger net. And it's truer.[131]

It is through her personal identifications that Kass sees herself reflected in American culture, and it is through her childhood identifications that Kass realizes she constructed what she calls "me." Following the Warhol project, then, in her third body of work, Kass creates art derived from the musicals and performances that she encountered as an adolescent and that shaped how she identified with the world. Specifically, Kass connects her personal life to cultural nostalgic narratives in order to seek out a home where the marginalized may finally come to the center.

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131. Kass, interview by author, 2008.

For Me? Stepping into Deborah Kass's *Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times*

On a cold Saturday in January 2007, I was invited to Deborah Kass's studio to view her new collection of paintings. Up to this point, Kass was primarily known for the Warhol Project that had marked her career some fourteen years prior, and the New York art world was waiting and intrigued to see her new body of work. As she had been labeled and somewhat "ghettoized" by critics as a feminist, a lesbian, and/or a Jew, Kass truly wanted this new project to expand beyond projections of objectification in order to represent how identifications driven by subjective emotions define us and "how completely subjective meaning really is."[132]

Stepping into her studio, I was immediately greeted by huge canvases with bright candy colors, neons, and confetti-like paint. There were also paintings with thick black enamel paint shellacked on the canvas creating such a high shine I could actually see myself reflected in the painting. One black-on-black painting contained black satin block letters, its text edging the frame to read "Do You Wanna Funk With Me," with the word "ME" centered in the middle of the glossy canvas (see, for example, fig. 17).[133] The direct question from the artist to her viewer, the word "ME," and my shimmering reflection returned to me all converged simultaneously

132. Kass, interview by Waters.

133. The image in the appendix is not the original black on black that I saw, but reproducing that image in this context so that it is readable is virtually impossible.

in that black painted canvas. The lyric harkens back to the music of Sylvester, a singer and a "Black Gay Diva" who dressed in lavish attire, with his fight against the AIDS pandemic and his untimely death in 1988 at the age of forty-one.[134] In that moment I could not clarify precisely what I was experiencing; Kass's collection of paintings brought up deep feelings and meanings for me that I was not consciously able to identify fully upon my first encounter. Was I, perhaps, experiencing one of those moments of reverie as described by Bachelard or a phenomenological affliction which Champagne describes?

Initially, what I did identify by entering Kass's collection is that I stepped into a world filled with some objects that evoked strong memories and others that only seemed fondly familiar. Each of her paintings contains text—the majority are lyrics borrowed from Broadway musicals, but others include lyrics from popular songs, movies, famous quotations, Yiddish sayings, and other idiomatic expressions. Although I take note of the paintings with recognizable texts, it is the stylistic forms of the paintings that invite me into each piece. As is typical of Kass's larger body of

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134. Kass also paints another lyric of Sylvester's, "Make Me Feel Mighty Real," in *Mighty Real*, 2007. This painting is also a tribute to Sandra Bernhard, who sang an homage to Sylvester in her cover of his song. Bernhard begins singing "Mighty Real" with the prelude, "Sylvester, sister, you were an angel walking among us on the face of this earth, you were so beautiful, you were so fragile, you were so real." Kass identifies with Bernhard, and, in Kass's interview with John Waters, she cites a bit from Bernhard's movie *Without You I'm Nothing* (1990) when she says, "Pretend it's 1976 and you're straight." For a discussion of Bernhard's film and how her performance shifts racial and ethnic binaries, see Ann Pellegrini, "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real): Sandra Bernhard's Whiteface," in *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 49–64.

work, the stylistic choices are steeped in the history of painting—histories which beckoned me into their narratives of the past, but after entering each piece, it is Kass's context that provides a scope of inquiry. It was only later that I realized that her question to her viewer—"Do you wanna funk with me?"—is as multi-layered, and as socio-political, as my visual perception of its various returned reflections, and the nature of its answer lies in the performative exchange between Kass and me.

As I browsed through one of Kass's drawers filled with smaller-sized works, I was struck by a nine by twelve-inch painting, *Being Alive* (see fig. 18). This enticing little watercolor and gouache on paper is divided in half. The left side is painted black and white block capital letters spell out the word "BEING;" the black paint tentatively creates negative space for the letters to form from the white paper showing through the paint. The right side is painted a soft watermarked and uneven pink with floating chartreuse polka dots and the word "alive" delicately etched in cursive, barely keeping the surrounding paint from bleeding into its held textual space as one polka-dot overlaps some of the last two letters. The painting generated so many nostalgic feelings for me: grade school painting projects where the paint strokes do not quite cover the paper, bright colors of the sixties and early seventies, modern design, and, of course, seeing Bobby's birthday in *Company* and hearing the music of Sondheim.

Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's *Company* (1970), originally directed by Harold Prince,[135] recalls a time when the dominant U.S. culture was struggling with the social hangover produced by the turbulent 1960s. Traditional constructs of living felt outdated, but new choices seemed overwhelming. To that end, the island of Manhattan served its creators as the perfect metaphor not only for contemporary marriages[136] and a struggle with conformity, but also for the sensation of a lack of human connectedness produced, in part, by the sexual revolution. The "company" of characters represent both a lack of, as well as a search for, community. The narrative of the play centers on a male protagonist, Robert (Bobby), and his encounters with a number of women whom he either dates or knows as one half of a couple. In 1968–1970 the Women's Movement, as it was called then, was still in its fledgling years, and one could argue that the women in *Company* merely represent various modern "types" constructed to serve as foils to Robert. Throughout multiple exchanges with his married friends and the many women with whom he engages sexually, Robert questions the validity of marriage and the value of committing to a relationship. In an almost Faustian fashion, he searches for a perfect answer and/or person. By play's end, after Robert is propositioned by his older

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135. The original Broadway production of *Company* opened on 26 April 1970 at the Alvin Theater, in New York, NY. The book was by George Furth, music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, and directed by Harold Prince. It closed on 1 January 1972.

136. Joanne Lesley Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy: The Theater of Stephen Sondheim* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 39–40.

friend, Joanne, he realizes that he may indeed want to take care of somebody, and this partially formed realization leads to his singing the number, "Being Alive."[137]

By engaging with this male-centered musical, Kass appropriates the famous lyric along with her nostalgia surrounding the song, and she inserts herself into its context. Kass commented that she tried painting *Being Alive* as a large canvas but that it did not work, and I understand why.[138] At its core is the painting's seeming fragility, both contextually and physically, and a large sturdy canvas with layers of oil paint would not provide that desired effect. What is "being alive" if not a fragile and confusing state—a diptych of somber darkness and bright champagne bubbles floating side by side? "Being + alive" is an awkward but harmonious pairing in the same way that Bobby begins to realize what he seeks in his life at the end of *Company*: "I'll always be there/As frightened as you,/To help us survive/Being alive." The nostalgic feelings I experienced when I first viewed the painting (which I described previously) were combined with the smell of paint and the bright lights of

137. The song at play's end was an issue of contention between Sondheim and Prince; Sondheim preferred a more realistic and subsequently negative turn in Robert's character, but Prince insisted that the audience and the play needed a more positive, even if ambiguous, ending. To learn more about the debate, see Joanne Lesley Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy: The Theater of Stephen Sondheim*, 71–73.

138. At a later date, Kass did paint the larger canvas of this painting, and while her colleagues love it, Kass still does not think it works and refuses to show it to the gallery. Currently, the original drawing is owned by the artist, and Kass does not plan to put it up for sale. For her second show, *more! feel good paintings for feel bad times* (2010), Kass painted a different design for a large canvas of "Being Alive."

Kass's Brooklyn studio, the presence of both Kass and my partner, and the familiar sense of yearning to live in presentness that I so often feel in the theatre. In that moment, my past and present collide as I experience the performative quality of Kass's work.

The collection I previewed in Kass's studio would soon be exhibited at the Paul Kasmin Gallery booth in the 2007 Armory Show in New York City that February and then expanded the following fall at the Paul Kasmin Gallery for her solo show entitled, *Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times*.[139] Kass's third body of work is mined from a personal nostalgia rooted in her Long Island middle-class upbringing in the fifties and sixties; she identifies this era as infused with a postwar American optimism, believing "that the world was ours to change."[140] The motivation for the series was inspired by the very different political climate Kass perceived during the Bush administration's War on Terror, when she says, "our past optimism was replaced by a more provisional relationship to the world."[141] The project's title mirrors nostalgia's sadomasochistic binary of a good past/bad present, but rather than operating within that binary subconsciously, Kass calls attention to

139. Deborah Kass, *Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times: Paintings and Drawings: 2002–2007,* Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, NY, 7 September–13 October, 2007.

140. "Deborah Kass: Press release," Paul Kasmin Gallery, http://www.paulkasmingallery.com/ exhibitions/2007-09-07_deborah-kass/press-release/ (accessed 2 July 2010).

141. Ibid.

the phenomenon. Not content to follow the path of many aging baby boomers mourning what they sometimes conceive of as a lost Golden Age, Kass queers her own personal nostalgia in the "Feel Good/Bad Times" series in an attempt to move past the binary and seek out the elusive ethical relationship between past and future identified by Clewell's readings of Freud.

Beginning the project soon after the tragic events on 11 September 2001, (Kass's home and studio, at the time of the attacks, were in Tribeca), and the day after a big milestone birthday, she purposefully set out to explore her personal nostalgic attachments. Kass relates a conversation she had with a male art critic:

> You know, anytime a male artist farts, it's valuable. . . . Any representation or reflection of their adolescence is, like, gold in the art world. He said, "Well, I'd love to know what women think about. I'd love to know what girls think about in their adolescence. I would *love* to see that." And I started thinking about what I thought about my own adolescence.[142]

So Kass started singing in the studio while she sketched. In fact, Kass finds her life rooted in music. As a child, she loved listening to the cast albums from musicals in a manner much like D. A. Miller describes in his chapter, "In the Basement"[143]—imbued with middlebrow musical codings noted by gay children and adolescents who subsequently created a gay male subculture surrounding American musicals.

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142. Kass, interview by author, 2008.

143. D.A. Miller, "In the Basement," *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1–27.

Furthermore, Kass grew up in a household filled with music—her father was a jazz musician who always listened to jazz at home. Kass's father passed on a specific relationship with music to his daughter; she says that her father's music colored her childhood, gave her an understanding of aesthetics, and taught her the art of interpretation in the manner of great jazz artists who cover the same songs. With a male identification of songs carrying much of the personal nostalgia from her upbringing, it is understandable that her first drawing of the "Feel Good/Bad Times" series was *Sing Out Louise* (see fig. 19), a precursor to all that Kass would ultimately express.

The act of interpreting and referencing other artists in her work is fundamental for Kass. "I used art history the way other painters used light, color, and form,"[144] she says. "It's always been my impulse to use art history as almost a ready-made."[145] Even before her "Warhol Project," and the "Art History" series before that, Kass explored and embodied the work of abstract painters throughout her educational years in the late 1960s and the 1970s. She would frequent New York's Museum of Modern Art on a regular basis and contemplate such male modernist masters as Paul Cezanne, Pablo Picasso, Willem de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg, Jackson Pollock, Frank Stella, and Jasper Johns. While she studied

144. Kass, quoted in Staniszewski, 25.

145. Kass, interview by Waters.

reverently, she did not understand how their work reflected her life experience specifically. Kass often says, "I didn't realize that I had been looking at my absence in art. There was no representation of me as a human."[146] Only later did she realize that the curators and critics "unconsciously assumed the subject position of all great art to be male," as had all of her teachers and colleagues at that time, and so she, too, had assumed that position.[147]

Kass discusses how up until the mid-1970s she was "entirely and erotically male identified,"[148] but in 1976, at the age of twenty-four, when she saw Elizabeth Murray's first solo exhibition at the Paula Cooper Gallery in Soho, her entire world shifted. Prior to that moment, Kass claims that she had been oblivious to feminism, particularly as the movement had taken root neither in New York School abstract painting, nor in formalism, nor in the art programs she attended, such as the Whitney Museum Independent Studies Program in the neighborhood of what was soon-to-be-named Tribeca (and where the only woman artist associate in the program was Yvonne Rainer). But with Murray's show, Kass actually saw her

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146. Kass, interview by author, 2008.

147. Deborah Kass, "That 70's Show" (talk given as part of panel discussion titled "Painting in New York City, Then and Now" moderated by Katy Siegel for the exhibition *High Times, Hard Times: Painting and Politics in New York City, 1967-1975* at the National Academy of Design, New York, NY, 1 March 2007).

148. Ibid.

reflection for the very first time in art and witnessed herself as the artist's intended audience.

While Murray's style had its origins in abstract expressionist painting and its history, she along with many other women artists in New York in the 1970s, such as Pat Steir, Joan Snyder, Louise Fishman, Susan Rothenberg, Jo Baer, and Hannah Wilke, created work from a different vantage; they reconfigured both the male gaze and male-centered abstraction, intervening within abstract expressionist art's impersonal language to create a different language and an art form that was different and new and personal to women. Kass explains, "the subject was female. And I mean subject as it came to be defined in the '80s and '90s. The speaking subject, the specific subject. The subject with agency. The political subject."[149] Although painting was deemed "dead" by the late 1960s, with no one able to find any innovation after the likes of Pollock, Stella, and Pop Art, women painters in the 1970s resurrected the form by inserting the female subject into the frame to create something new.

After Murray opened Kass's critical eyes by literally bursting through the frame of male-reflected art (many of Murray's canvases are constructed to create a multi-dimensional painting surface), Kass recognized that her arrival in downtown

149. Ibid.

New York City at the height of second wave feminism was fortunate for her and her work as a woman painter. In 1971 feminist art historian Linda Nochlin published her infamous essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," in *ARTnews*, and her question seemed to generate a quick response with Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's collaborative expansion of the Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts on the west coast; and in New York, where the work of women artists consistently appeared in SoHo art galleries and at the Whitney Museum behind the enthusiasm of the museum's first woman curator, Marcia Tucker.

Kass and her generation of women painters from New York learned from the women artists whose works they viewed as well as from their own practical applications. Kass now realizes that she was working at what she calls, "the intersection of New York School painting and feminism" but says "they didn't teach this then."[150] She continues:

> I mean first of all, New York was a disaster area. The only people who wanted to be here were painters and artists. No one else wanted to be here. This—there was no theory, there was no identity, there was no feminist women's studies. This did not exist. Period. It was a blank—it was men, men, men, men, men— 'til second-wave feminism. But when I came to New York, it was the height. So, during second-wave feminism, when they looked at the artists, like, who are sort of in sync with the poets, it would be painters, because it was pre post-modernism. And it wasn't LA, and it wasn't Cal Arts, and it wasn't the Womanhouse. It wasn't . . . Mimi Shapiro and Judy Chicago bringing feminism to a bunch of young artists my age.

150. Kass, interview by author, 2008.

> We didn't have that in New York. We did not have that on the east coast. It was unbelievably sexist. But these women [NY women artists like Elizabeth Murray, et al.] were, when I moved to New York—it looked fabulous for women, because all these women were really a big deal. In the '70s.[151]

Performance artists and the feminist painters Kass admired in the 1970s largely defined themselves in opposition to the capitalist based art market, and Kass notes that in recessionary times, women artists come to the fore because "there's no money to spend on art, anyway."[152] Regardless, Kass believed that because of the success of her women painter "she-roes," there was possibility for American culture to cultivate an aspiration of greatness for her generation of women artists just as it did during the 1970s.

Unfortunately, with the election of Ronald Reagan and his adopted economic policies of neoliberalism, the majority of the non-commodity based art world of the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, with its profit-driven business model for both artists and dealers. Male "art stars," such as Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Anselm Kiefer, and their style of regressive conservative neo-expressionism,[153] dominated the art scene and squeezed out their female counterparts. Furthermore, only a small number of retrospectives by women were

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151. Ibid.

152. Kass, interview by author, 6 August 2008.

153. See Donald Kuspit, "The Appropriation of Marginal Art in the 1980s," *American Art* 5, no. 1/2 (Winter–Spring 1991): 132–41.

sponsored by major museums that decade, with Louise Bourgeois and Georgia O'Keefe among the few. To address the absence of women artists represented in art museums, in 1985 the Guerilla Girls established themselves in New York as an underground group of feminist artist-activists. Each group member, who was, herself, a visual artist, took a pseudonym from an under-celebrated women artist in history, and they collectively performed their protests wearing gorilla masks to conceal their identities and maintain the focus on their issues. As the issue of under-representation has still not yet been remedied, the group continues to work and perform today (and participate in academic conferences).

With male art stars setting record-high prices at auctions for their paintings, the decade of the 1980s viewed painting as a regressive and patriarchal activity. Echoing the sentiment of Susan Sontag, who in the late 1970s observed, "[n]ow all art aspires to the condition of photography,"[154] many highly regarded women artists such as Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, and Barbara Kruger (seemingly wisely) chose photography as their medium. But Kass remained committed to painting and fervently believed that through the medium's rich history, she would find her own voice and subject. She says, "[l]ike any language, it [painting] is dependent on the voice of the colonized and marginalized to keep it alive. And, like any language, it

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154. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 149.

will die without it."[155] In using art's history and repeating styles of male master painters, Kass, like other feminist artists of the 1970s, learned their abstract language and forms in order to transform their codes and communicate her own. She often quotes Adrienne Rich and says, "this is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you."[156]

Throughout her work Kass continues to find new ways to paint her presence into art and its historical trajectory. Indeed, there are many instances when she resorts to the parodic commentary of women-in-drag and the erasure of their identifications as her source of language. In *Painting with Balls* (see fig. 20), from the "Feel Good/Bad Times" series, Kass enters into yet another displaced conversation with Jasper Johns to examine the story behind his *Painting with Two Balls* and creates a queer nostalgic turn of the drive that kept her painting through the fallow period for women painters of the 1980s. In Johns's original work, the canvas is split and wedged apart by two small wooden balls. While many art critics analyze the work either as a demonstration of the tension between painting and sculpture in Johns's work or as a discussion of painting as object, queer artists read the signs imbedded

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155. Deborah Kass, interview by Patricia Cronin, "A Conversation on Lesbian Sexuality and Painting with Deborah Kass," 1992/1993, in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory, and Criticism*, ed. Susan Bee and Mira Schor (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 80–81.

156. Ibid, 81. Kass is quoting from Adrienne Rich's five-poem sequence with prose segments, "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" published in her collection *The Will to Change* (1971).

in his work. The painting is a performed sexual act, and Kass comments how the coding is obvious: quite literally it is a canvas with a horizontal opening and two balls inserted in its crack.[157]

Johns's painted the piece in 1960 toward the end of his more-than-six-year relationship with Robert Rauschenberg. During their relationship, the two artists supported each other, fed into each other's art work and were roommates and lovers. But no one spoke of or acknowledged the love between Johns and Rauschenberg, two of the greatest rising stars in the art world, least of all either of them, knowing that they would be shunned and their work ignored.[158] The 1950s in the United States were not a kind environment for outed homosexuals, who were imputed and branded as Communists partly as a result of the subversive (albeit necessary) nature of their concealed identities; the world of modern abstract expressionist painting pioneered from the New York School was not much better. The artists who assembled at the Cedar Street Tavern downtown—Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko among them—claimed a macho, white, and straight world in order to stave off any idea that their art could be

157. Deborah Kass, telephone conversation with author, 11 June 2009.

158. Not until much later in his life did Rauschenberg acknowledge the depth of their relationship. For an interesting discussion of their tacit relationship, and the ways in which each artist enriched the other's art and life, see Jonathan Katz, "The Art of Code" in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership,* ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1993), 189–207.

viewed as effete and also so that their work could stand in for language and represent the universal.

Johns's own parody of abstract expressionist painting as a virile masculine action independent of language is reconfigured by Kass as she concretizes Johns's implied language both in words and in form to comment on the "'nads" (or, "cojones," as Kass paints) required by painters and in painting: to paint in this world, a painter (and in Kass's particular case, a woman painter) has to paint with balls. "My painting is a comment on a comment, almost in a Talmudic way. Commenting on the commentary."[159] Kass appropriates the styles of modern art, but because she does not stay with one particular authored style and instead focuses on the painting's content, she recreates the abstract style into an anti-author, anti-modernist, and feminist point-of-view. She explains:

> My work is about the construction of difference within high modernist art practice. Since modernism is based on ideas of transcendence and universality, it denies specificity or—my specificity. To see high modernism as another language or part of the bigger language that constructs difference in very particular and political ways, is just another way to deconstruct it.[160]

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159. Kass, interview by Waters.

160. Kass, interview by , 81.

Taking the conversation with Johns one step further, Kass not only honors the art history learned in her formative years but also adds the nostalgic longings learned from her past to create a new (queer) space for both her and her spectator.

Many of Kass's paintings in the *feel good/bad times* series turn to musicals for their content, particularly shows about shows, because Kass likes art about art.[161] Employing a poignant queering of nostalgia for the classic musical *Gypsy* and her love of Rosalind Russell, Kass paints *For Me* (see fig. 21). Rosalind Russell played Mama Rose in the film version of *Gypsy* and became one of Kass's early identifications with a powerful woman when Kass saw her in the 1958 movie *Auntie Mame*.[162] Kass boldly proclaims in *For Me* that her time has come: posed against the status quo, she queers nostalgia to educe change and to seek a home *for her* within her art. But Kass also finds a home for exiled Jewish artists by painting their texts from Broadway musicals. Jewish male composers such as Jule Styne, Richard Rodgers, and George Gershwin defined middlebrow popular music in the U.S. after World War I largely "behind the scenes," so-to-speak, as celebrated Gentile female performers such as Ethel Merman, Mary Martin, and Jeanette MacDonald sang the songs onstage and took "ownership" of them within the narrative of visual culture. In the *feel good/bad times* series Kass takes what has been "offstage" and frames it

161. Kass, interview by author, 2008.

162. Ibid.

"onstage." Kass reclaims the Jewish-ness underlying the lyrics and highlights Jewish production of one of the most American art forms.[163]

Taking the stage for herself, Kass paints one of the central works in the series, titled *Daddy* (2007; see fig. 22), which takes its text from the Kleban and Hamlisch song "At the Ballet" from *A Chorus Line* (1975). In the painting Kass returns to Warhol and appropriates his camouflage forms for the background and recreates the essence of Pollock's drip action paintings for the lyric's lettering in the foreground. With the range of American modernist abstract painting that starts with Pollock and ends with Warhol, these two artists represent the "fathers" book-ending painting before the medium of painting was declared defunct—and before any woman painter could be declared a "master." By using their language of painting, Kass's identifies with these two masters of modern art as her combined, historical, artistic "Daddy," simultaneously pointing out the absence of women at that time and, through the lyric's insistence, asserting her right within her performative dance with paint to aspire to artistic greatness, as well.

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163. Andrea Most explains in *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) that Jewish artists were fundamental to the invention of the Broadway musical as a theatrical form and used musicals to "fashion their own identities as Americans" (1), given their outsider/immigrant status in the first half of the 20th century (26–27). These artists were trying to assimilate, or, at the very least, minimize their ethnic differences from the dominant culture (6–7).

The painting is also steeped in a far more literal connection to "daddy." Kass actually dreamt the painting in 2007, inspired by an incident that occurred some eight years prior. Working in her studio and listening to the original cast recording, Kass was overcome with emotion and began to weep during "At the Ballet," when the lyric "Daddy, I would love to dance" was sung. She continued to sob for three days, only later realizing why. The song taps into emotions regarding her father who had died at 47, her realization that she had lived to be older than he, and the vivid memory of dancing on his feet just as the character Maggie from *A Chorus Line* describes. The idea of a little girl dancing on top of her daddy's feet is a nostalgic fifties American cultural image, and Kass acknowledges that her nostalgia in remembering those moments fondly locates her generationally as she chooses to interpret her culture through paint.

The nostalgic image with its affirmation from "Daddy" represents Kass's performance of both mourning and identification, and Kass recognizes the generational differences between her father and herself. Her father, a frustrated saxophone player, died at a young age, burdened, in part, by the assimilationist need of first-generation Jews to maintain middle-class respectability as a professional (dentist). Kass's journey stands in stark contrast. Her generation of secular Jewish artists understands how identities are created through performance and allows them to embrace their difference from the culture at-large. Phelan

describes our need to report and repeat histories; a failed attempt that is always transformed and as such, fuels our desire to seek “its mimetic return.” She writes:

> The desire to perform etymological histories is itself a nostalgic gesture, an attempt to return to the origin of a specific word. The nostalgia that motivates the etymological search (re)writes nostalgia itself: the search deepens the wound inflicted by nostalgia even as it seeks a cure in the wish, the (failed) attempt, to return. The failure secures the return of the wish.[164]

Returning to her own father through musical lyrics, Kass recognizes the need both for her own attachments as well as the ongoing mourning of a failed return which she can transmit through her art. She understands how her performed identities create both her visible self as well as her invisible self and consequently place her in a constant social negotiation.

By embracing the middlebrow art form of musicals as the subject for her paintings, Kass’s strategy differentiates her work from many other contemporary painters who may embrace the highbrow–lowbrow binary, but almost never the middlebrow. Furthermore, Kass finds that musicals recently revived on Broadway engage in a more subversive strategy as well. She observes that the subtext of past musicals (such as *Cabaret*, *Gypsy*, and *South Pacific*) are now the primary text within

164. Peggy Phelan, “Reciting the Citation of Others; or, A Second Introduction,” in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 19.

their current revivals.[165] By bridging her musical identifications with the culture's historical narrative, Kass brings music, painting, and a personal exchange into her art. Sontag's earlier quote about photography is actually a rewrite of Walter Pater's edict in which he postulates that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music."[166] Eschewing the photographic, perhaps Kass comes close to fulfilling Pater's original intention by seeking an emotional (undefinable) impact in an art form that signals both absence and presence through visual perception. Kass's art engages in either a painted form of photography (silk screens) or musical lyrics and memories of their performances, and her work calls up nostalgic emotions. Her body of work captures representations of both the object and the subject; she acknowledges different points of view and the body's reaction across the trajectory of modern and contemporary art. Perhaps, instead of Pater's (or Sontag's) edict, Kass's work demonstrates that all art aspires to performance. With painting serving as a mirror on the wall, Kass not only seeks her reflection but creates a space of exchange which places herself in conversation with her viewer, culture, and current socio-political issues.

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165. Ibid.

166. Walter Pater, "School of Giorgione," in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1919), 135.

Seeing It—Home is in the Distance?

Rather than finding that her nostalgic repetitions "deepen the wound," as Phelan would have it, Kass instead discovers that through nostalgic repetition something new and, perhaps, hopeful is uncovered: the falsity of Huffer's original "blank space" is exposed. Kass's performative works repeat versions of canvases, phrases, images, and forms over and over, and through these repetitions with a difference she is then able to see her identity reflected where it never before existed. Her work is an example of the powerful use of nostalgia as a feminist instrument; a strategy that at first glance seems opposed to feminist theory. But by placing herself as subject into her art objects via vehicles from the historical and/or mythical past, her work reconfigures nostalgia into a socio-political project for change. Like much of performance art and feminist art in general, her work is not only self-reflexive, it also occupies the critical place of identification where nostalgia (an internalized norm) serves to reawaken our attachment to cultural objects and narratives in order to discover an equal place for the disenfranchised with new meanings. With a transgressive and reconfigured play on nostalgia, feminist artists like Kass operate within a queer nostalgia and find the means to make visible that which was always already absent.

Kass's sight also extends to her dreams; she dreamt the final painting that she created prior to the "Feel Good/Bad Times" exhibition, and it combines one more return to the text "Daddy I would love to dance" as well as a displaced conversation with the three "daddies" whom she claims in her life—her biological father, Andy Warhol, and Frank Stella. In 1970 when Kass was a senior in high school, she viewed Stella's first retrospective during one of her weekly trips to MoMA. His work greatly influenced Kass by teaching her what it means to be an artist, and the retrospective represented the first time she was able to follow an artist's thought process step-by-step from series to series. Kass came away from the experience with a critical awareness of the trajectory an artist's oeuvre could follow. Kass remarks, "Stella's work changed my life for good."[167]

In 1962 Stella painted *Jasper's Dilemma*, and as art critic Harold Rosenberg explains, Stella "translates the paintings of Jasper Johns into unresolved issues concerning the representation of three-dimensional objects [e.g., Johns's painted flags, targets, and numbers] on a flat surface."[168] While artists like Johns and Rauschenberg expanded abstract expressionism by focusing on both content and gesture, Stella chose to reinterpret the movement by strictly exploring its form—size,

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167. Kass, "That 70's Show"

168. Harold Rosenberg, "Young Masters, New Critics: Frank Stella," in *The De-definition of Art*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972) 123.

shape, pattern, surface.[169] Hence Johns's dilemma: how does an artist negotiate the binaries of inside/outside, subject/object, invisibility/visibility, and content/form within the painted surface? Kass answers this question by theatricalizing the canvas and inserting her spectator into the equation; she means for her work to evoke a response. She paints the diptych, *Frank's Dilemma* (see fig. 23), a reconfiguration of Frank Stella's *Jasper's Dilemma,* with Stella's style in the background, an overlay of Warhol's camouflage shaping the text "Daddy I Would Love to Dance" on one side, and the two artist's styles reversed on the adjoining panel with the same lyric. If Stella was pointing to the challenges of Johns's methods—painting as object vs. painting as representation—and paying homage to an artist he admired, Kass furthers the point by performing both Stella's dilemma and her own feminist dilemma.

As discussed in depth in the Introduction, the theatrical aspect and dependence on the spectator within postmodern art was considered the demise of modern abstract art by the likes of modern art critics such as Clement Greenberg, Barbara Rose, and Michael Fried. Kass's painting is performative in that she calls into being both herself as well as her history; she actively historicizes and subverts modernist artistic forms. Hers is a theatrical feminist intervention via nostalgia. The

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169. Ibid, 124.

nostalgic act of seeking out "home" within the frame of abstract art is both a radical and a complicated act, particularly for a contemporary Jewish artist. In her analysis of Jewish women artists, Lisa Bloom discusses Clement Greenberg's contempt for the desire of middle-class Jews to embrace and produce popular culture in America. Greenberg advocated abstract art and celebrated those intellectual artists who created a self-imposed distance from dominant culture. Bloom states:

> The best art, according to Greenberg, is always "homeless." Artists must leave their middle-class "home" in order to see or feel differently. That is why for Greenberg the best Jewish artists are always in exile from both their presumably working-class or middle-class backgrounds and from American popular culture at large.[170]

This abstract distance is what, for Greenberg and others, creates the discourse for universal humanism, a utopia of sorts, that erases difference; it is a sentiment largely rooted in combating the anti-Semitism of the 1940s.

Bloom describes how many contemporary Jewish artists deal with this "Greenbergian legacy" and choose, instead, to embrace "too Jewish" representations. An abstract utopia may be desired by Greenberg, but it is not a representation that works for Kass and other feminists; instead it is precisely through her use of queer nostalgia that Kass means to call attention to the differences still present in modern society and that utopian thought fails to embody.

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170. Bloom, *Jewish Identities*, 106.

Kass's performative act makes visible that which is absent from the past, and her nostalgic repetitions uncover something new and hopeful in the present; Kass's act is not only self-reflexive, but subversive. By combining her own queered identifications with cultural nostalgia, Kass creates space for anyone to identify with her disenfranchised self and thus queers everyone within the performative exchange. Even though the queering of the spectator may not be recognized, Kass explains that, "there's lots to hang on to, enough to relate to and plenty to repress even if it is as clear as the nose on Barbra Streisand's face."[171] Kass's art claims everyone as *enfranchised*;[172] all of us are marginal and all of us can come to center.

Gertrude Stein says that "the business of Art . . . is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to *completely express* that complete actual present."[173] Through the queering of nostalgia in Kass's performative paintings, she allows for the simultaneous recognition of that for which we mourn as well as our continuous identification with an other—she clearly expresses what is present. Having spent some time examining two artists who struggle to live in the present and express the gaps of the present within their work, in the following

171. Deborah Kass, interview by Patricia Cronin, 79.

172. Deb Margolin, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, 20 July 2010.

173. Stein, "Plays," 104–5. Emphasis mine.

chapter, I would like to examine the difficulty of living in the present fully enough to bear witness, particularly to those bodies who bear the marks of pain or illness.

4.
Smoke Signals:
Witnessing the Burning Art of Deb Margolin and Hannah Wilke

I have long felt that bearing witness is the most tender, beautiful, generous thing any one of us can do for any other. We cannot prevent each other's deaths, we can barely mitigate each other's suffering; what we can do is bear witness.
—Deb Margolin[1]

I worked with Hannah on several projects, including the last one, and I always felt, as I held the camera, that she was looking at herself, the coordinates of space around her, and the world in general from her eyes through my eyes. The grid of *The IntraVenus Tapes* collapses time and space, as the grid always did in her work, to contain the simultaneity of life. I hope it turned out the way she would have wanted it, but then she had as much faith in others as she had in herself. Hannah is still present, as we all are. And all of us can still see from her eyes.
—Donald Goddard[2]

What does it mean both to see and listen to the performance of feminist bodies that suffer? The question is a tricky one because the pained body in performance insists that spectators join in the conversation in such a way that we cannot keep the same distance we might otherwise maintain. Within the exchange of performance, the spectator is forced to make a categorical choice with the artist—either to engage in a direct conversation, a displaced conversation, or dismiss the conversation entirely. The issue is even more treacherous in the examination of the life and work of both

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1. Deb Margolin, "'To Speak Is to Suffer' and Vice Versa," *The Drama Review* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 95.

2. Donald Goddard, quoted in John Carlson, "ArtNYC: Hannah Wilke: Venus and IntraVenus," Cambridge Buzz, entry posted July 25, 2007, http://cambridgebuzz.blogspot.com/2007/07/artnyc.html (accessed April 2011).

Margolin and sculptor, painter, and performance artist Hannah Wilke. Although both artists were diagnosed with similar forms of lymphoma, because of advances in medical treatment available to Maroglin and not to Wilke, Margolin is now in remission, whereas Wilke did not survive her fight with cancer.

Distinctions between these artists' lives and their art blur, and as Wilke iterates, the experiences in the space between her art and her body are inseparable.[3] Both Margolin and Wilke insist on the body in performance; that is, the body is both source and canvas for their art, and they find particular truths inscribing interstitial personal experiences into their work. By using an intertexutal reading between their bodies of work, we can listen to a very immediate displaced conversation taking place between Margolin and Wilke that illuminates the possibilities for witnessing the pained body. Whereas in previous chapters we have been listening to displaced conversations between artists and the past, we can see how Margolin and Wilke's work reflects off each other energetically, and the resulting more direct conversation operates like urgent call and response.

As a starting call for the conversation, Margolin asserts that she simply does not understand anything that is said about performance—or at least so she writes in an essay originally written for a panel at the Performance Studies international 12

3. Hannah Wilke, "Essays 1978" (1978), in *Unterbrochene Karrierren: Hannah Wilke (1940-1993)*, ed. Isabella Graw et al. (Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft fur Bildende Kunst, 2000), 144.

conference in June 2006 and later published in *TDR*.[4] Furthermore, she does not think it is her fault that she does not understand anything that is said about performance. What she does understand is that just as language fails in performance, so does it fail in the interpretation, theorization, and criticism of performance. And it is precisely that failure of language, she believes, that creates drama—and, for many of us, the circumstances to study that drama. For a playwright and performer who claims that she does not understand anything said about performance, Deb Margolin is, in fact, a keen sage of both theatre and performance studies.

In her essay, Margolin describes how theatre is defined by the relationship between language and silence and its residual texture. She compares this relationship to the drawings of M.C. Escher, created through the juxtaposition of positive and negative space.[5] Just as Escher occludes shadowed and non-shadowed figures to draw our attention to the specificity of individual images as well as a

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4. In fact, Margolin ultimately could not attend the conference in London. Peggy Shaw agreed to read Margolin's paper; Shaw's performance of Margolin's words provided an interesting reading of the text, particularly as Shaw fumbled with and commented on Margolin's language and meaning. Later that summer, Margolin was able to attend the ATHE conference in Chicago and deliver her essay there. The panel at PSi#12 was entitled "Bridging Investigations of Humanity: The Role of Performance in Creating Citizenship both Privately and Globally," with presenters David Savran, Deb Margolin, Constance Zaytoun, and Marvin Carlson (moderator). The panel at ATHE was entitled "Feminist Performance and Dramaturgy: (In)visibility and Recontextualization from the U.S. to Israel" with presenters Sharon Lehavi, Deb Margolin, Constance Zaytoun, and Liz Engelman (moderator).

5. Margolin, "'To Speak Is to Suffer' and Vice Versa," 95.

larger whole, Margolin believes that silence and language combine in theatre to serve a similar purpose. Furthermore, what may seem like negative space in Escher's drawings, is, in actuality and upon closer inspection, an object; so that positive space and negative space switch places. And Margolin believes silence and language in the theater likewise often switch, so that what may seem like the absence of language is, in fact, language, and *vice versa*.

As a playwright, Margolin is in love with both language as well as language's failure, because through their occlusion and constant switching she recognizes the exact value of what is brought into focus: the corporeal body on stage, shared among playwright, performer, and audience members. This triangulation of bodies in performance is an extension of a tool used by playwrights that Margolin identifies as "collapsible boundaries."[6] As discussed throughout this project, many artists in the creation of theatre, and art more generally, use autobiographical material to compose the words and images that create the imagined lives of other characters and personas, regardless of the characters' differing backgrounds and identities. In her own work, as I discussed in Chapter One, Margolin borrows experiences and words from her life which ring true in new and different characters' bodies and voices. But I wish to return to the concept of collapsible boundaries because it plays an important role in witnessing feminist performance. While Margolin utilizes this

6. See for example Deb Margolin, interview by author, New York, NY, 26 July 2005 as well as Lynda Hart, "Introduction: A Love Letter," 2.

tool in the creation of her artwork, she takes it one step further in practice to investigate the intersection of the inner space of the artist with the individual audience member. In this way the individual body in performance collapses boundaries with spectators; experiences are shared among all of the different conversing bodies within the performance space as the artist is witnessed and as the artist witnesses the spectator.

The texture of language takes many forms in performance, and in the creation of her art through the language of the body, Wilke, like Margolin, also uses collapsible boundaries to explore the intersection of the artist with the audience. One rather literal example is from her performance of *S.O.S.—Starification Object Series* (1974–1975), in which Wilke would have the audience members chew pieces of gum "until the sugar is out, so that the gum is sufficiently plastic"[7] enough for her to sculpt. She would then interact with the chewers and collect the pliable masticated pieces and form them into mini labia-shaped sculptures, evoking either the vulva or the glans of a penis. Clothed in just a pair of jeans, Wilke would affix these curvy colorful "stars" decoratively on her torso and face and then pose in various iconic images of women. The immediacy of this performed act effectively connected Wilke's feminist body with the bodies of her spectators, regardless of the gum chewer's gender, sexuality, race, or social/political affiliations. Her husband and

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7. Joanna Frueh, "Hannah Wilke: Food," in *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective,* ed. Thomas H. Kochheiser (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 73.

collaborator Donald Goddard classifies Wilke's use of chewing gum as a medium and states that "she loved the idea that it had been in somebody's mouth, that it had their bodily fluids in it and she was making something out of it. It was an extraordinary realization of humanity somehow."[8] Through the reciprocal exchange between spectator and performer, boundaries blur, and spectators—as well as Wilke—find themselves positioned as both subject and object inside the performance and inside the relic of performance when viewed.

But Wilke considered the gum sculptures in *S.O.S.* more than just stars; she thought of them as scars as well thus her *S.O.S.* is a distress call inviting us to witness the symbolic markings on her body and, by extension, the experiences that have scarred her. The star sculptures represent an external manifestation of internal scars as well as the visible stampings of the ways in which all types of women are objectified. By insisting on the scarred woman's body in performance—consisting of all of her movements, gestures, and interactions with spectators—Wilke demonstrates the suffering of women with both pathos and parody, turning our attention to both visible and invisible markings. In *Intercourse with ...* (1977), a performance from the same period of time as her *S.O.S.* series, Wilke describes the effects of identity markings:

> As an American girl born with the name Butter in 1940, I was often confused when I heard what it was like to be used, to be spread, to

8. Donald Goddard, interview by author, New York, NY, 23 September 2007.

> feel soft, to melt in your mouth. To also remember that as a Jew, during the war, I would have been branded and buried had I not been born in America. Starification-scarification/Jew, Black, Christian, Moslem . . . Labeling people instead of listening to them...Judging according to primitive prejudices. "Marks-ism" and art. Fascistic feelings, internal wounds, made from external situations.[9]

With her *S.O.S.* performance, Wilke employs a woman's body to negotiate the marks of invisible and visible wounds created from situations beyond her control. She states that she "chose gum because it's the perfect metaphor for the American woman—chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece."[10]

Wilke's self-sculpted body in performance draws a feminist focus to cultural identities and experiences. Her tiny chewing gum sculptures reflect both her and other bodies, especially "if you think about the way they turn and curve and come back on themselves. They're all bodies of some kind."[11] Wilke used the stars/scars for several years and presented the small sculptures in myriad variations meant for sharing her crisis call with others. The works include *S.O.S.—Starification Object Series: An Adult Game of Mastication* (1975), a game box with Wilke's chewing gum sculptures, photographs, extra gum for participants to chew, and instructions for

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9. Hannah Wilke, "Intercourse with..." (1976), in *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective,* ed. Thomas H. Kochheiser (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 139.

10. Hannah Wilke, quoted in Frueh, "Hannah Wilke: Food," 73.

11. Goddard, interview.

play; and another called *Hello from Donald!* (1976), a postcard created to memorialize fellow artist Donald Evans. Throughout his lifetime Evans created postage stamps with watercolors, depicting on a small scale luscious scenery from invented countries. After he died unexpectedly, unable to escape a house fire in Amsterdam, Wilke affixed one of her gum sculptures to a postcard announcement of his work that he previously had sent her (see fig. 24). Wilke's star/scar is not only a celebration of her friend, but also a testimonial to his own fatal wounds. As such, Wilke lends her wounds to another and recognizes how the scarring of women is shared across all identities and tragedies.

While there have been many critical studies regarding the nature of the body in performance, Margolin chooses to describe the body as "synecdochical,"[12] the singular body onstage representing all bodies—performer, individual audience members, all citizens. Performance provides the opportunity for an individual to recognize her or his own othered body in relation to others' bodies. As such, the audience bears witness not only to (an)other's story, but also reciprocally to itself. By insisting on the synecdochical body, Margolin and Wilke, along with other feminist artists, defiantly create in performance fluid and intimate relationships between the self and the other, and thus create a space for us to see ourselves.

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12. Margolin, "'To Speak Is to Suffer' and Vice Versa," 95.

Not unlike Wilke, Margolin may directly ask her audience to share in her marked body in an effort to manifest specifically the synecdochical body in performance. For example, Margolin suggests that her audience at the very beginning of her 2007 solo performance *O Yes I Will (I will remember the spirit and texture of this conversation)* imagine themselves in her body. She claims that she feels claustrophobic within her own body and believes her soul is chained inside her body. Margolin likens the confined soul to Houdini: both struggle to get out. Margolin is fascinated by the metaphor Houdini represents, especially being a Jew who could free himself from his bindings. Just as Houdini "present[s] himself, chainless and whole, at the doorstep of an incredulous public,"[13] Margolin desires for her soul to reach beyond her body and present itself in conversation to other souls and bodies in her performance, and like Houdini, her soul does always manage to find a way to escape through her performative act. Inviting us to envision her body and experiences as our own, she beckons her audience to perform with her: "Look at this body; this is your body. This is your body. What will you do?"[14] Margolin proposes an actual soul sharing among all bodies in the performance space and substitutes the collective "we" in the text for the personal "I" so that we may call ourselves into being within the performance space with her.

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13. Deb Margolin, *O Yes I Will (I will remember the spirit and texture of this conversation)*, in *The Drama Review* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 175.

14. Ibid.

The effect of collapsing individual boundaries and sharing identities is to realize, through bearing witness, an acceptance of difference and an empathy for suffering that is transformative; however, feminist artists like Margolin and Wilke who present their suffering, a synecdochical body in performance invites a witnessing that is sometimes difficult to bear. Both Margolin's solo show, *O Yes I Will*, and Wilke's *Intra-Venus Tapes, 1990–1993* are performances that demand a shared witnessing of the body through all of its tragedies, exquisite beauties, and struggles through illness. Both of these artists reenact traumatic happenings without sentiment, reconfigure their experiences into art, and ask spectators to imagine and consequently see the connections between the body and the soul through their presence in the performance space. These artists' performances occupy a particularly blurry borderline and require both a witnessing of their bodies and their aesthetic and, ultimately, an ethical participation from their spectators. But can we surrender ourselves to read their work, see their bodies, and share in their proposed exchange? In each chapter of my project thus far, I have examined various cases of witnessing feminist art gone awry. What is the psychological cost of witnessing and/or failing to witness? After examining examples in this chapter of mis-witnessed performances by Margolin and Wilke, I consider the successful trajectory of Wilke's career and use her work (and primary witness Donald Goddard) to provide some clues to re-engage the means to witness feminist

performance.

A Feminist Escape, "Houdini-esque"

Because she "trust[s] the body more than language,"[15] Margolin's preference is that we see directly inside of her body and bear witness to her life experience while she remains silent onstage.[16] But she is, after all, Deb Margolin, and she cannot stop herself from speaking or writing. Margolin may declare that she desires silence, but her body in performance is forever precise and articulate:

> I'm trying to think: What is language, anyway, what is speech? Does it just float, like smoke from fire, away from the speaker, signifying rather than being the thing that caused it? Is speech, like smoke, a byproduct of some burning rather than the burning itself? It is that, isn't it, my speech is like smoke and my body is the burning, can't you see that, I'm sure you can see that, be gentle with this eternal flame as you extinguish it be mindful of its eternity, and bring it back dear gentleman dear older older gentleman. . . .[17]

Can you see Margolin's speech smoke floating away from her burning desire-filled body? Like Houdini, Margolin's soul is struggling to escape from the identifiable bindings placed upon her body. Through her speech-act we not only become witnesses to her body (the "eternal flame") but we are also entrusted with its care. In her staged performance, Margolin invests her spectators with the responsibility

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15. Deb Margolin, telephone conversation with author, 11 January 2008.

16. Margolin, "'To Speak Is to Suffer' and Vice Versa," 96.

17. Ibid., 97.

for the body's safe return, and so it is imperative that we genuinely engage with her shared representation.

Prior to writing the above passage, Margolin said she did not know the story about the dream of the burning child discussed in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* and much analyzed by others.[18] Because her practice more often than not proves theory, it is compelling that her performative text emulates the essence of the father's dream. Freud's description of the traumatic dream is as follows:

> A father had been watching beside his child's sick-bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child's body was laid out, with tall candles standing round it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours' sleep, the father had a dream that *his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: "Father, don't you see I'm burning?"* He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child's dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them.[19]

Literary and trauma theorist Cathy Caruth explains that Freud interprets the dream as serving two purposes: one is fulfilling the father's wish to keep the child alive and the other is fulfilling the father's more acute wish to remain asleep. According to Freud, the latter wish is tied to a far more basic desire: the father prefers not to wake

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18. Deb Margolin, discussion with author, 12 June 2006.

19. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (1965, repr., New York: Avon Books, 1998), 547–48. Italics in the original.

up and instead consciously means to turn away from the violent reality—the death of his child.[20]

Caruth, however, explains that Lacan, in a rereading of the dream for his seminar "Tuché and Automaton," furthers Freud's analysis by exploring the question of "how and why the father wakes up."[21] Lacan determines that the father's dream is "no longer a function of sleep, but rather a function of awakening."[22] According to Caruth, Lacan's analysis extends Freud's notions of trauma: trauma is a delayed response to an unexpected threat (of death) that is repeated through various enactments in a failed attempt to release the subject from the first (missed) violent event. Awakening, for Lacan, is a repetition that reveals; it is a traumatic encounter with the real as well as another site of trauma.

Caruth explains that the father's belated awakening to his child's burning reveals, as Lacan suggests, the repetition of his inability to consciously experience the original traumatic event of his son's death as it was happening in real-time: "To awaken is thus precisely to awaken only to one's repetition of a previous failure to see in time."[23] Nor was the father able to process the added trauma of living longer

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20. Cathy Caruth, "Traumatic Awakenings: Freud, Lacan, and the Ethics of Memory," in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 96–97.

21. Ibid., 97.

22. Ibid., 99.

23. Ibid., 100.

than his child: "By shifting the cause of the awakening from the accident of the candle falling outside the dream to the words of the child inside the dream, . . . Lacan suggests that the awakening itself is not a simple accident, but engages in a larger question of responsibility."[24] The father's awakening, as well as his survival, is now marked by the rebuke of his dead son and his failure to see, both inside and outside the dream.[25] Thus, the survivor's act of witnessing places the survivor in "an *ethical* relation to the real."[26]

Like the father's dream of the child, Margolin's speech begs for an awakening from trauma. She wants us to see both inside and outside—both inside the burning body as well as the smoke that is its outside signifier. But, unlike Freud or Lacan, Margolin truly believes that we can see, as Caruth says, "in time" (or in real time or the present moment). At the site of performance, we recognize our common struggles, we begin to move past trauma, and we begin to recognize the (mis)recognized other within the self. If we can maintain a generous spirit when we encounter the traumatic subject, theatre's reflexivity provides a space for us each to bear witness to performers, to playwrights, to fellow audience members, and to our own selves.

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24. Ibid., 100–01

25. Ibid., 102–03

26. Ibid., 102.

How possible is it to maintain the generous spirit necessary to witness performance? Herbert Blau laments that it may well be impossible:

> There is always the sensation that somehow we're not seeing it, or each other, truly. Through the entire history of the canonical drama, we appear to be dealing with some essential rupture that even love can't heal, a fundamental wound that prevents us somehow from being precisely what we are, and to be perceived as what we are."[27]

What creates this wound? As we have seen with the father's awakening from his dream, the act of witnessing imposes particular obligations on the spectator. Caruth identifies one of the obligations as, "to awaken is thus to bear the imperative to survive."[28] If we truly bear witness to the synecdochical body through the theatre—"theatre" being here a pseudonym for the space to process trauma—the exchange of the shared body between performer and audience through the collapsed boundary not only provides the means but the *imperative* for compassion. Margolin believes the ethical imperative includes a larger call to citizenship as well.[29] Witnessing is actually a precondition of citizenship; bearing witness enables us to observe each other's rights respectfully. Is it any wonder, then, that many of us prefer to close our ears and eyes? After all, "now the autobus of the superego has a

27. Herbert Blau, Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta, "The Play of Thought: An Interview with Herbert Blau," *Performing Arts Journal* 14, no. 3 (September 1992): 9.

28. Caruth, "Traumatic Awakenings," 105.

29. Margolin, interview, 2005.

new nonpaying passenger,"[30] and how many of us want the responsibility for our fellow citizens or want to wake up from our own sweet slumber of denial?

Shame, particularly for survivors of trauma, also prevents witnesses from awakening, once the significance of the missed event is realized. And often, if the trauma involves witnessing another's struggle with a debilitating illness, we transfer our shame for surviving onto the victim due to our desire not to see. Wilke recognized this phenomenon while she watched her mother suffer through terminal breast cancer. Wilke observed how clinical procedures tend to hide patients from loved ones, inscribing death and its preceding struggles with "personal shame."[31] Lynda Hart says that "shame is particularly resistant to intervention: in order to work through it, one must in a sense reexperience it."[32] Wilke chose not to turn away; instead, revisiting the feelings of shame inflicted on the disenfranchised. She created art out of her mother's illness and, later, her own cancer, and through her insistence on the body, no matter its condition, forced her spectators to see her ravaged body (see fig. 25) as well as the many instruments employed to treat its disease when she created sculpture out of metal radiation blocks used around her

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30. Margolin, "'To Speak Is to Suffer' and Vice Versa," 96.

31. Richard Vine, review of Hannah Wilke exhibition at Ronald Feldman Gallery, *Art in America*, May 1994, under "Press," http://www.feldmangallery.com/pages/home_frame.html (accessed 20 April 2011).

32. Lynda Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism* (New York: Columbia University Press), 172.

neck, bandages from bone marrow transplants, the hair that she lost, or multiple pill bottles and syringes that she gathered in a small bird cage entitled, *Why Not Sneeze...?* (1992; see fig. 26), which is a parody of Duchamp's 1921 sculpture *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?*

Wilke even turned an accidental illness into a call to arms. In 1982 she recorded her song "Stand Up" with Jeff Gordon for a compilation album representing artists of the Feldman Gallery called *Revolutions Per Minute: The Art Record* (Wilke wrote the lyrics and Gordon the music). Insisting on revealing the truths of women's bodies in a patriarchal society, Wilke sings in "Stand Up," "exposing the truth is like nudity / so stand up, darling stand up. / Stand up for women to decide / stand up they're bodies your inside."[33] Just prior to the album's release, however, Wilke injured her neck, so that when Goddard took her photograph for the album with her lying on their bed, her neck brace was incorporated into the image (see fig. 27). This episode coincided with the period when Wilke's mother was dying from cancer.[34] On the photograph Wilke wrote, "STAND UP HANNAH WILKE STAND UP," underscoring the pain and weight in both experiences as well as her call to encourage all those in anguish to find

33. Hannah Wilke, in *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective,* ed. Thomas H. Kochheiser (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 146.

34. Donald Goddard, e-mail message to author, 10 February 2008.

strength. Wilke wore a real brace for a real reason, but as Goddard explains, she was always delighted when the "accidents" in her life directly related to her art.[35]

In contrast to Blau, Margolin, like Wilke, believes that performance is the perfect "flawed space" that allows us to work through our shame. Margolin recognizes that because we cannot actually "see inside" each other, theatre is a substitute for the exchange of experience; in performance the substitution creates a gap between performer and audience member which mimics and alludes to the gap between silence and speech. Caruth says "the dream, as a delay, reveals the ineradicable gap between the reality of a death and the desire that cannot overcome it except in the fiction of a dream."[36] According to Margolin, these gaps are necessary because "in order to bear witness to something, there needs to be a silence around the object, an ability to hear, to think, to see."[37] Silence and space: bearing witness and overcoming shame require remaining present to the "what is" as well as the space and time to reflect on the traumatic event. Performance creates the space for recognition, an awakening, and the means of surviving both trauma and death.

While Lacan argues that seeing in time is impossible (hence the need for dreams), theatre can serve as the awakened dream state for the conscious mind to

35. Ibid.

36. Caruth, "Traumatic Awakenings," 95.

37. Margolin, "'To Speak Is to Suffer' and Vice Versa," 96.

process trauma and shame in time. In fact, returning to the father's dream, we see the necessity for space, be it physical or temporal, to process trauma. Caruth's analysis of Lacan fails to realize that the father is not *awakened*; he generates a performance space in his own imagination and in fact awakens himself. By attributing the awakening to the *child* who speaks to his father,[38] her analysis assumes that the father's unconscious mind is seemingly divorced from his body. In fact, it is not the actual dead child—an entity outside of the father—who speaks; on the contrary, it is the father's own unconscious mind that creates the child begging him to awaken to consciousness. His imagination is at play just as the spectator's imagination is engaged by performance, and those reflected imagined images provide space to transmit an awakening.

Seeing and Transmitting Deb Margolin

For more than twenty-five years, Margolin has placed her body onstage, and through the gorgeous failure that is theatre she has displayed her "syncretic passion"[39] for language and performance. Margolin's performative act reveals an awakening, as she is one who practices onstage the survival of trauma and the acknowledgment of death. Caruth explains that:

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38. Caruth, "Traumatic Awakenings," 105.

39. Margolin, "'To Speak Is to Suffer' and Vice Versa," 97.

> As an act, the awakening is thus not an understanding but a transmission, the performance of an act of awakening that contains within it its own difference. . . . The words are *passed on* as an act that does not precisely awaken the self but, rather, *passes the awakening on to others.*[40]

Hence, we receive her transmission through her performance. Or do we? Are we instead caught in a cycle of repetition waiting for "the ethical imperative of an awakening that has yet to occur"?[41] Does our own fear of death and/or the shame of awakening to the other prevent us from seeing in-time?

In September and October 2007, Dixon Place presented Margolin's solo performance, *O Yes I Will (I will remember the spirit and texture of this conversation).* Margolin, despite her previous successes, had a difficult time finding a venue to present the piece, and the two published reviews of the production do not indicate that any "awakening" was detected. During the sixty-five minute piece, we are subjected to the sound of instruments being sharpened—which we realize are scalpels in an operating room—as Margolin takes us through five different twelve minute versions of what she may have said in a semiconscious state before anesthesia finally took hold of her prior to a biopsy. (The sum of the five twelve minute versions represents the sixty minutes of time it took for the operation.) The piece's title is Margolin's insistent response to her surgeon who claimed, as she tells

40. Caruth, "Traumatic Awakenings," 106–07. Emphasis in original.

41. Ibid., 112.

us in the piece, that she will not remember any of her actual twelve minute diatribe upon awaking.[42] But Margolin insists that *conversation*, displaced or otherwise, is inscribed and remembered in her body.

The first "official" act of witnessing Margolin's performance for the historical record was a review by Charles Isherwood published in the *New York Times*. While his review of Margolin's performance is seemingly positive, a closer reading reveals another story. He describes the piece as a "slight," sometimes funny, romp through the unconscious, and he calls Margolin "an experienced slinger of epistemological slang . . . [who] sometimes gets lost in tic-ridden byways of performance-art-speak."[43] As an example of "performance-art-speak," Isherwood quotes a section of the same "speech/smoke" passage I cited earlier in this essay.[44] This section, however, is not just a "tic-ridden byway," it is actually the on-ramp to her treacherous journey. These words are spoken before she goes under the anesthesia (on a literal level the dear older older gentleman she refers to is the anesthesiologist), and they are both her call to witness her burning body and her invocation that her body be returned with care. Perhaps Isherwood is not prepared to receive

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42. See for example Margolin, *O Yes I Will*, 177.

43. Charles Isherwood, "While the Superego Sleeps, A Mind at Play," review of *O Yes I Will*, by Deb Maroglin, directed by Merri Milwe, Dixon Place, New York, *The New York Times*, 1 October 2007, http:// www.nytimes.com/2007/10/01/theater/reviews/01reme.html (accessed 20 April 2011).

44. I took the passage from the conference essay, but, in fact, Margolin originally wrote it for the *O Yes I Will* text.

Margolin's transmission with her body burning and speech smoking in performance. While he does notice her body and acknowledges her "ebullient physicality," Isherwood describes Margolin's "anxious, inquisitive eyes," along with her humorous and warm personable presence, as if she had invited us to a cocktail party where she told some jokes and peppered us with a few sincere questions.

On the contrary, Margolin's is a very intimate invitation to explore her experience of hovering between life and death and her "deep rehearsal of the return to the surface"[45] (see fig. 28). Isherwood references the title of the piece and argues that, "alas,"[46] her assertion is not true; Margolin did not remember the spirit and texture of her twelve minute conversation. But here Isherwood is confusing the memory of precise words with the conversation that the subtitle actually references. In fact, just as she insisted to the surgeon, Margolin does have a memory of the spirit and texture of her conversation through her body's experience—hence the creation of her performance. Isherwood overlooked the intimate relation between speech and the body and the fact that Margolin came away from that heightened event with an awakening that revealed a very tender memory engraved inside her body. And with her use of synecdoche, she asks her spectators to join her body's conversation

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45. Margolin, *O Yes I Will*, 176.

46. Isherwood, "While the Superego Sleeps, A Mind at Play."

in revisiting the unsettling episodes from her surgery and imagine five different versions of what she(/we) may have said in a sodium pentothal daze.

Isherwood further called the piece a shortcut to the unconscious that most people can only uncover through "years of hard work in therapy."[47] Yes. Therapy usually involves the kind of deep investigation through repetition and transference that Margolin suggests through her performance work, and Freud tells us that we repeat traumatic events in order to process them (hence, our past is always in front of us). But there is nothing "easy" about witnessing Margolin's performance. Through collapsible boundaries in performance, we witness the traumatic story of (an)other and mark ourselves with their wound in order to process our own wounds/feelings of shame. Encounters in and studies of performance also take work in the same manner that therapy takes work. "At its best," Margolin maintains, "theatre is revelatory of the most difficult aspects of humanity,"[48] which requires a shared intimacy in order to create space for the revelation.

Just as Lacan argues that an encounter with trauma is always missed in real time and that there is no conscious space for an awakening, Isherwood missed that Margolin created a performance from the unconscious vestiges that remained in her body after awakening and provided the time and space so that she(/we) could

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47. Ibid.

48. Deb Margolin, telephone conversation with author, 21 December 2007.

process her(/our) encounter. Margolin believes that Isherwood's superego is afraid of bodies, especially women's bodies, in performance that speak deeply of personal subjects. She writes of Isherwood:

> He is a man who isn't particularly relaxed around women's theater (to the point where he recently described a woman's body as "scary,"[49] I maintain that if a man is scared of women's bodies, he should drive a cab; the cabdriver's back is to the body of the customer, and one need only reach back to take the money owed at the end).[50]

In fact, Margolin calls his work "generally gynophobic"[51] and believes it is a sad state of affairs to have this frightened man reviewing provocative women's performance. Margolin says, "There is no language without identity; there is also no

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49. See Charles Isherwood, "A Friendly Face with A Foul Mouth That Sings," review of *At Least It's Pink*, by Bridget Everett, Michael Patrick King and Kenny Mellman, original music by Kenny Mellman and Bridget Everett, directed by Michael Patrick King, Ars Nova, New York, *New York Times*, 26 January 2007, http://theater.nytimes.com/2007/01/26/theater/reviews/26pink.html (accessed 20 April 2011). Isherwood never actually describes Ms. Everett's body as scary, but in one sentence he describes her personality as "frightening." The relevant passage about her body is this:

> In referring to Ms. Everett's unexceptional looks I should clarify that I referred only to her face. Ms. Everett's richly endowed figure is more striking. There is an admirable audacity in her careless flaunting of a body type that cultural attitudes dictate she should disguise in shape-hiding fabric. None of that for big Bridget Everett. In the glare of the solo spotlight, the most demure article of clothing she chooses to wear is a fake-snakeskin bustier. Of course Ms. Everett's courageousness in displaying her curves does have its drawbacks. You may well leave "At Least It's Pink" ruing the day that fishnet was invented, for instance. To say nothing of the thong.

For an artist who got her start watching the fearless performers of Spiderwoman Theater, Isherwood's sarcasm must be particularly alarming.

50. Deb Margolin e-mail message to Alexis Soloski, 26 October 2007, author's collection, New York, NY.

51. Margolin, telephone conversation, 2007.

identity without language. And herein lies one of the deepest paradoxes of . . . performance. Collapsible boundaries are both exquisitely beautiful and terrifyingly dangerous."[52] The perceived danger is in the seeing: if we see what we have failed to recognize and acknowledge, we may expose shameful truths about ourselves. Isherwood is seemingly sentenced to remain within his own sanctioned traumatic state of repetitive misrecognition of the other. Refusing to converse and work through the "traumatic encounter" within the performance exchange with Margolin, Isherwood instead projects the fear of an intimate engagement, and, as such, an awakening through her performance eludes him.

If Margolin's work, and, as we will see, Wilke's as well, demands a thoughtful and active witnessing, what then is the role of critics? Have they become, as the playwright Jon Robin Baitz points out in his criticism of Isherwood and his colleagues at the *New York Times*, merely advocates for consumers as opposed to rigorous and passionate advocates for the theatre?[53] Perhaps there is an additional function for critics: Can they also operate as witnesses? Shoshana Felman states that "the truth does not kill the possibility of art—on the contrary, it requires it for its transmission, for its realization in our consciousness as witness. . . . Out of . . .

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52. Margolin, interview, 2005.

53. John Robin Baitz, "All the Views Fit to Print? Charles Isherwood on Whither the Playwrights (Plus a P.S.)," *The Huffington Post*, 14 November 2007, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robbie-baitz/all-the-views-fit-to-prin_b_72637.html (accessed 20 April 2011).

crisis, witnessing becomes, in all senses of the word, a *critical* activity."[54] Margolin examines the critical impulse and observes that unlike traditional theatre, performance art is:

> characterized by a lack of opacity. It's not that there isn't acting going on, but you actually see the wheels and cogs. . . . And therefore it gives critics a lot of vision into the nature of the moment for a performance artist, into the nature of the entire landscape of performance.[55]

The visionary artist-critic dialogue in feminist performance studies began years ago with scholar-critics such as Elin Diamond, Jill Dolan, Lynda Hart, Rebecca Schneider, and Peggy Phelan, just to name a few who not only engaged in meaningful conversation with the artists they chose to study, but also historicized women artists to prevent them from being "painted out of history"[56] as so often occurred in the past. Like Deborah Kass, Wilke also observed how, historically, it was the men who painted women and created their iconographic images and identities. She believed it was her social responsibility "to create an iconography about a woman by a woman"[57] to ensure that there was an alternate representation. What happened to the vibrant and vital conversations that once took place between

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54. Shoshana Felman, "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*," in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, MD (New York: Routledge, 1992), 206.

55. Margolin, interview, 2005.

56. Ibid.

57. Wilke, "Essays 1978," 140.

artists and critics, particularly feminists interested in the branches of their own history, as the fringe community grew? Margolin questions whether that critical conversation ever really took hold and got off the ground.[58] Furthermore, with greater insight into the machinery of performance, today's critic-witness perhaps feels s/he has been granted permission to refuse authentic engagement with the material and instead comments, from a distance, on the merely superficial "by-ways of performance."[59]

Historically, the *Village Voice* is the paper that was largely responsible for recording the New York downtown theatre movement and particularly women's performance. Some of its reviewers—such as C. Carr, Alisa Solomon, and Laurie Stone—substantially raised the public's awareness of the value of women's performance.[60] Unfortunately, however, the *Voice* did not fare much better than the *Times* with its review of *O Yes I Will.* Devoting only two paragraphs to a review that relayed only the play's conceit and structure without analyzing (positively or negatively) Margolin's content or the issues it addressed, its content was not even useful in historicizing the performance, beyond merely recording its existence–a

58. Margolin, telephone conversation, 2007.

59. Isherwood, "While the Superego Sleeps, A Mind at Play."

60. See Alisa Solomon, "Steal This Stage: The State of Women in Theater, 1999," *Village Voice*, 19–25 May 1999, http://www.villagevoice.com/1999-05-18/news/steal-this-stage (accessed 20 April 2007).

very superficial kind of history. It was almost as if the review was written about an emerging artist who had no history of performance in the genre.

Like Isherwood in the *Times*, the *Voice*'s appointed reviewer, Alexis Soloski, claimed that Margolin did not fulfill the promise of the play's subtitle; once again misunderstanding exactly what the subtitle actually insists she will remember. Strangely, Soloski even echoes Isherwood in her use of the word "slight" to critique Margolin's performance (although Soloski qualifies it as "somewhat slight").[61] Continuing the uncanny similarities between the two reviews, Soloski's title, "Anesthesia can't stop Deb Margolin from monologuing: The Talking Cure?"[62] even recalls Isherwood's suggestion of therapy. Posed in the form of a question, however, Soloski's subtitle reads like an insult cloaked in humor (Freud might have asked what she meant to expose through her joke), and, alas, the final product is a broad and, indeed, "slight" review.[63] Thus, Soloski also seems to have failed to engage in the act of witnessing in her review.

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61. Alexis Soloski, "Anesthesia Can't Stop Deb Margolin from Monologuing: The Talking Cure?", review of *O Yes I Will*, by Deb Margolin, directed by Merri Milwe, Dixon Place, New York, *Village Voice,* 2 October 2007, http://www.villagevoice.com/2007-10-02/theater/anesthesia-can-t-stop-deb-margolin-from-monologuing (accessed 20 April 2011).

62. Ibid.

63. Just one week later, Soloski wrote a more engaging review of Chuck Mee and SITI Co.'s production of *Hotel Cassiopeia* (to which the *Voice* devoted six paragraphs). While Soloski concluded that Bogart and Mee did not quite make art in their production, she did at least enter into a discussion and also credited them for their past work. See Alexis Soloski, "The Life of Joseph Cornell, Via Bogart and Mee: Sky Boxes," review of *Hotel Cassiopeia*, by Charles L. Mee, directed by Anne Bogart, BAM Harvey Theater, Brooklyn, NY, *Village Voice*, 9 October 2007, http://www.villagevoice.com/2007-10-09/theater/the-life-of-joseph-cornell-via-bogart-and-mee (accessed 20 April 2011).

Desperate as she is to speak and to connect her body with other bodies, Margolin insists on communicating with the critics who review her work. Instead of maintaining the chasm that generally exists between artist and critic, she desires to bring about a more complex conversation and thoughtful contextualization of performance. Corresponding with Soloski by email, Margolin refers to Isherwood's review and describes *O Yes I Will* as:

> the deepest meditation I have written to date on the body and its many mortalities, on the ultimate, beautiful, poetic, complete failure of language to stop us from suffering or dying or even understanding each other in love and on the ways in which, ultimately, there are some senses in which the body has a far greater immortality than the word, written, spoken or bethought. . . . Isherwood referred to my play as some kind of shortcut to the subconscious. . . . It was no shortcut. It was the longest cut I've ever made.[64]

It seems the scalpel from her operation was not the only thing cutting Margolin. Why did Margolin write this email to her reviewer, given her recognition that language fails to bring about understanding no matter the conversation?

In her essay on performance, Margolin compares the critical scholars of performance studies to Gidget, referencing the title character of the 1957 novel by Frederick Kohner.[65] As Margolin tells it, fifteen-year old Gidget, in her desire to keep a date with the older Moondoggie, with whom she has spent fun-filled days on the beach learning how to surf in a desperate bid to impress him, lies to her father

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64. Margolin, e-mail message to Soloski.

65. Frederick Kohner, *Gidget*, (New York: Putnam, 1957).

and says that she is going to a girlfriend's house after dinner to watch surfing movies. Her father responds with, "*You're going to look all night at this crap you do all day?*"[66]

There is always something lying beneath the surface of Margolin's humor that she knowingly wishes to expose, and I realize that I (as well as all performance studies scholars) am implicated in her analogy. Like Gidget, I endlessly discuss the performances, theatre productions, and critical theories that I witness on a regular basis. But—also like Gidget—I LIE about my intentions and secret desires. I am lying when I say all I want to do is revel day and night in Margolin's work—though I might want to do that, too. As with other feminist art, what I also want is to support her as an artist, and what I often wonder about is why this accomplished performance artist and playwright, who has worked solidly in the New York performance community in the past and largely contributed to its history, is now struggling to have her new work seen and heard?

Margolin's Gidget analogy reveals insight into the answer to that question. The theatre used to be a leisure activity for audiences at which performers worked; however, feminist performance begs an alternate version in which the spectators must work, too (like Isherwood and Soloski's nod to therapy). Spectators must confront (them)selves and their unconscious defenses within the play of the

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66. Margolin, "'To Speak Is to Suffer' and Vice Versa," 96.

performer. If critics, as Baitz suggested, are no longer active witnesses of artists and are, instead, advocates for the consumer, then that might explain the resistance to engaging with traumatic art. Perhaps Margolin wrote to Soloski because she hopes to encourage a renewed desire to investigate deeply and see clearly in a new generation of critic-witnesses.

Perhaps, too, Margolin wrote to Soloski because she recognizes that the number of times any one of us has to converse with each other is decreasing. As mentioned in Chapter One, in the discussion of her play *Lesbians Who Kill* (1992), Margolin says that there is math in life that is especially evident at life's end.[67] Her characters May and June wonder about the finite number of times that they will kiss, fight, or witness the rain before they die.[68] Since most people do not know the number of times they may do something before they die, why waste time NOT speaking about what concerns you passionately? Consequently, Margolin wants now more than ever to speak of her burning as often and as articulately as possible. As I noted earlier, Margolin often describes how language is her only hope to scream for help accurately,[69] and what continues to burn Margolin is how feminist voices

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67. Margolin, interview, 2007.

68. Deb Margolin, *Lesbians Who Kill*, in *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (New York: Routledge, 1996), 222–23.

69. Deb Margolin, "Plenary Session and Performance Talk-Back," (talk presented at the Interdisciplinary Conference in Women's Studies, Middle Tennessee State University, 22 February 2007).

are still not heard and feminist bodies are still not seen! On the stage floor in *O Yes I Will* she sardonically likens her wails and screams to the futile screams of Kitty Genovese, a young New Yorker raped and murdered in 1964, whose screams went unheeded by neighbors. Will any witness acknowledge this woman and respond to her? Which form of occlusion do spectators need to help us see her suffering, albeit ever-present body in time? What will provide the space for a witness to awaken and receive her transmission for compassion and change?

An Imagined Conversation between Two Venuses

It is Friday afternoon, 12 October 2007, just a few days after I have seen Margolin's solo show for the third time in nine months. I head over to the Ronald Feldman Gallery in SoHo for the last weekend of the Hannah Wilke exhibition, *Intra-Venus Tapes, 1990-1993.*[70] I do not know what took me so long to get to the exhibit—perhaps I just wanted to avoid facing the last years of an artist who died of lymphoma—but I knew I could not miss this show. As I think about the displaced conversation with both of these artists—Margolin and Wilke—their connections are many: both are strong, feminist, Jewish women who grew up in New York; both place women's bodies (primarily their own) at the center of performance; both are in love with language and its multiple meanings; both are fascinated by the seemingly

70. Hannah Wilke's *Intra-Venus Tapes, 1990-1993* were exhibited from 8 September to 13 October 2007 at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York City.

mundane found in nature and our everyday lives; both blur the boundaries between spectator and performer; both demonstrate humor in their work; both are tattooed, literally and figuratively, from their struggles with lymphoma, and both insist on the body in performance, no matter if the body is in a state of illness or in perfect health, in order to seek hope and regeneration. While parallels exist between their work and the autobiographical material that they use to inform their work, there are, of course, differences as well. But to reiterate, both of these artists implore us to witness their work; a witnessing that, for many of us, is difficult to bear. Placing Margolin and Wilke's work in a more intimate displaced conversation illuminates both the ontology and the ethics of performance. I find that I have been marked by the wounds of both of these women and believe that the experience of seeing Wilke's final performance may supply clues to a critical awakening through Margolin's *O Yes I Will*.

At the Feldman Gallery, two rooms are filled with Wilke's photographs, watercolors, and sculptures, many of which were displayed previously in the 1994 *Intra-Venus* show, the first posthumous exhibit of her work after her death at age fifty-two. The highlight of the 2007 exhibition, however, is a video installation of more than thirty hours of tape that she and her long-term then-partner/soon-to-be husband Donald Goddard filmed while she battled lymphoma and its effects on her beautiful body and spirit. The installation involves sixteen monitors—arranged in a

four-by-four grid—that proceed chronologically, left-to-right, each simultaneously displaying footage from the last two-and-a-half years of her life (see fig. 29). Wilke, Goddard, and other friends began taping in the summer of 1990, three years after she was first diagnosed with cancer. Each monitor contains almost two hours of unedited tape (with the exception of removing blank spots), with the entire installation compiling over thirty hours of images. Per Wilke's instruction, to avoid confusion, the sound from each of the tapes is not heard concurrently. Instead, sounds were edited to find balance and overlap with the images. Following her death in 1993, Goddard inherited the task of editing and producing the project. After raising funds and working through the technical aspects, Goddard showed its final version fourteen years after her death.

Viewing Wilke's future-inscribed performance (a project she optimistically wanted to call "CURE," so that when she got well she could watch it),[71] spectators witness Wilke eating with friends, chatting on the phone, listening to music, vomiting after chemotherapy treatments, saving the strands of her thinning hair, dancing, bathing, going to the bathroom, painting, swimming nude in a pool, stroking her pet peach-faced love birds, nursing one sick bird and then crying profusely when a second one dies, marrying Don Goddard surrounded by close

71. Goddard, interview.

friends, and spending her final moments comatose in a hospital.[72] The screens offer interesting coincidental juxtapositions. In one monitor we may see Wilke dancing to an opera record, perhaps Puccini or Verdi, with joyful abandon regardless of the lump in her neck; while in another monitor Wilke is singing to herself in the mirror, à la *West Side Story*: "I feel pretty, oh so pretty...oh, I feel shitty. I feel so shitty." Her wit and humor transform into sadness and Wilke cries.[73]

The un-performed performance of her life seen in Wilke's videos is not mere documentation of the quotidian, albeit dramatic, struggle with the progressive effects of the lymphoma. Because spectators witness segments of those two-and-a-half years simultaneously in almost two hours, the framed compression of those events provides a mirror of this experience structured in the manner of performance. The sixteen monitors playing at once offer each spectator a unique experience, as each viewing is different. The spectator in the gallery space is forced into a subjective relationship with the performance, as in the theatre, as opposed to the objective relationship normally created when viewing performance edited through the lens of a camera. Wilke's *Intra-Venus Tapes* exists in the gap between the reality of her life experience and an artistic interpretation of that experience.

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72. Hannah Wilke, *Intra-Venus Tapes, 1990-1993*, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY, 8 September–13 October, 2007.

73. Ibid.

Throughout her career, Wilke's work generated much controversy on both artistic and sociopolitical grounds. Many critics dismissed her body art in particular as essentialist and narcissistic, and argued that her work did not challenge the dominant culture and its production of visual representations. For example, referencing Wilke's works *S.O.S.—Starification Object Series* (1974) and *Hannah Wilke Super-T-Art* (1974), Lucy Lippard claims that Wilke is "a little too good to be true when she flaunts her body in parody of the role she actually plays in real life."[74] She says that Wilke means to seduce through her art and confuses "her roles as beautiful woman and artist, as flirt and feminist."[75] Jill Dolan positions Wilke as a cultural feminist whose use of nudity privileges the biology of women and, as such, fails to critique sexual or gender-based constructions.[76]

At the height of the feminist movement when there was "a lot of withdrawing from the sensuality and beauty of the female form,"[77] it is true that Wilke chose not to deny her body or her beauty, insisting on how important the female figure was to her work. Calling herself a "living sculpture"[78] Wilke used her naked body and

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74. Lucy R. Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 126.

75. Ibid.

76. Jill Dolan, "The Dynamics of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Pornography and Performance," in *Theatre Journal* 39, no. 2 (May 1987): 158–59.

77. Goddard, interview.

78. Ibid.

sculpted it in space and time to claim the prerogative of women (see fig. 30). In so doing, she was "trying to de-objectify the object in us and say we are both mind and body."[79] She repossessed the Venus figure and "that was difficult for some people to accept."[80] But Wilke did not want to place herself on a pedestal *sans* personal engagement; she always physically placed her body in relation to her work. For example, she often photographed herself amid her sculptures, and whenever she exhibited her work, Wilke would interact with spectators in the gallery to share with them and witness for herself the effect her work had on them (see fig. 31).

After seeing the first *Intra-Venus* exhibition in 1994, critics reevaluated Wilke's "performalist self-portraits" (her own moniker) within her oeuvre, realizing that, indeed, her project was both purposeful and important, and does, in fact, question the placement of the body within cultural ideologies. Amelia Jones notes this profound critical shift at the first posthumous exhibit[81] and reinterprets self-portraiture to demonstrate how Wilke uses a form of "radical narcissism" to expose issues of the female subject/object relation throughout her art.[82] Jones quotes Wilke's

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79. Robert McKaskell, "Exposing Taboos," in *Intra-Venus* (New York: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 1995), 15.

80. Goddard, interview.

81. See Amelia Jones, "Everybody Dies…Even the Gorgeous: Resurrecting the Work of Hannah Wilke," *Markszine.com*, 2003, under "Press," http://www.feldmangallery.com/pages/home_frame.html (accessed 20 April 2011).

82. See Amelia Jones, "The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art," in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,

retort from 1985 when she argued, "people give me this bullshit of, 'what would you have done if you weren't so gorgeous?' What difference does it make? Gorgeous people die as do the stereotypical 'ugly.' Everybody dies"[83]—sadly, an all too soon prophetic statement. Other critics praised the depth and complexity of *Intra-Venus* and found the work provocative, without trading in victim sensationalism. Perhaps, the critics seemed to suggest, Wilke's beauty and her seduction are not the primary focus of her sculpture and performance art.

Indeed, Wilke highlights the artifice of intellectual classifications and cultural identities through the language of her body. During her battle with lymphoma and until her last days, Wilke believed that her body remained sensual and her attachment to life was a cause for celebration. She continued to make art with her body and insisted on reclaiming the quintessential icon—a Venus of women *for* women—even when her body was marked from her cancer treatments (see fig. 32). Reconfiguring all parts of her body, Wilke framed herself and collapsed boundaries between young/old, healthy/ill, and object/subject by insisting on every aspect of her body and experience, or what Amelia Jones calls "a profound feminist negotiation of the boundaries between self and other through the image of the body/self."[84]

1998), 151–95.

83. Hannah Wilke, in Jones, "Everybody Dies...Even the Gorgeous," paragraph 1.

84. Jones, *Body Art*, 193.

Why did the *Intra-Venus* exhibitions have such a profound impact on Wilke's legacy as an artist? And does her reevaluation by critics and feminist scholars provide insights for critical spectators as they witness Margolin's current work?

Waiting for Goddard—A Bridge Between Abstraction and the Body

Bonnie Marranca examines the performalist self-portrait photographs from Wilke's first *Intra-Venus* exhibition in 1994 in relation to her history as an artist and finds that "her last photographs exhibit a sublime will to truth."[85] Marranca continues:

> Wilke was fully experiencing her death as an artist, just as she had been fully present in its most life-affirming artistic moments. In the end, she had the courage to follow the assumptions of her aesthetic to their absolute end, bringing body art as close as it can come to the tragic mode.[86]

Indeed, Wilke's confrontational gestures in the *Intra-Venus Tapes* went one step further than Marranca and others were able to observe in the performalist self-portraits and sculptured relics from the first posthumous exhibit: Wilke's final performance literally compressed the last two-and-a-half years of her life. The performer was dying in front of us.[87] Wilke's performative movement suspended in time mirrors much of Margolin's marking of time; both artists are conscious of their individual clocks ticking.

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85. Bonnie Marranca, "Performance, A Personal History," *Performing Arts Journal* 82 (2006): 9.

86. Ibid.

87. See Blau, "The Play of Thought," 13.

But Wilke and Margolin's awareness does not suggest fear as they look toward what we all must face, death, but rather a respect for their life in the present moment. In "version i" of *O Yes I Will* (the first 12-minute monologue delivered in her anesthetic haze), Margolin tries to delay the surgical procedure with multiple stalling tactics in order to connect with her surgical team. She feels that if she is going to lie naked in front of "men with knives" they should at least have a little chat and get to know each other.[88] In an exacting fashion, Margolin writes time with her body and implies that her situation requires physical grace. Sitting with legs raised, leaning back, her body positioned in a backwards L-shape to suggest the hands of a clock at 10:10 (see fig. 33), she seductively describes the time-shape as womanly and "inhumanly elegant."[89] She informs the doctors in the operating room:

> I'm not afraid I'm going to die. I think I MIGHT die, but I'm not AFRAID I'm going to die. Death is just…change! Whenever something changes, the thing before it dies! That's just true! Hell! Something dies when you get a fucking haircut! Hell! Am I right? You come home looking like an asshole, am I right? Change is death, I'm not afraid of death![90]

88. Margolin, *O Yes I Will*, 178–79.

89. Ibid., 179.

90. Ibid., 178.

Margolin is fearless in performance creating art out of fearful situations, and, like Wilke, she invites her spectators is to identify with her body and asks that we view death as change.

Insisting on the body also means that any body no matter its gender, age, sexuality, appearance, or race, has the right to present itself in performance. In one of the more comic moments of *O Yes I Will*, Margolin reenacts a moment from her childhood when she played softball for the neighborhood team, the Shalimar Shallies. One of her teammates, Peter Nubile, who is called "Nobs" by the kids, hits a ball through the bedroom window of their neighbor's home. Instead of scattering, Nobs and the rest of the Shallies remain in the yard to receive their punishment from the lady of the house, Mrs. Muller, who runs out in her fury without a robe.[91] Grabbing her crotch and breasts, Margolin unabashedly imitates Mrs. Muller standing before the kids in her bra and girdle. She purposefully flings her body in front of the audience to reobjectify the manner in which the dignified Mrs. Muller unintentionally displayed her matronly, undergarment-clad body in front of the Shallies (see fig. 34).

Margolin despises the idea that Western society invites middle-aged women to think of their bodies as "dried-up." In her performance essay, when she quotes William Butler Yeats's "After Long Silence," Margolin pairs his poetry with society's

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91. Ibid., 182.

view that the only remaining resource older women have for their explorations is speech, since they no longer have a youthful body to fulfill their desires.[92] As Wilke does in her *S.O.S.* call, Margolin concedes nothing to age and wholeheartedly rejects the notion that women are "dried-up" or chewed-up. Rather than hanging out with the likes of Yeats, Margolin would prefer to go surfing with Gidget.[93] Although Margolin invites us in *O Yes I Will* to imagine her body as our own and shows us the "claw marks"[94] scratched across her arm (our arm)—marks left from her chemotherapy treatments for Hodgkin's disease—Margolin fights with her (our) body in performance to celebrate both the metaphysical scars and the beauty introduced throughout a lifetime.

In Wilke's case, however, given that her performance is viewed in retrospect, we are accorded some distance from which to confront the more extreme nature of her performance, making it somewhat less difficult to witness the trauma. Returning once again to the dream of the burning child, the father missed the

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92. Margolin, "'To Speak Is to Suffer' and Vice Versa,"96–97. Rush Limbaugh recently alluded to this phenomenon on his radio program when he questioned whether "looks-obsessed" Americans could ever tolerate Hillary Clinton as president. Americans, Limbaugh wondered aloud, would never want to watch a woman president "get older before their eyes on a daily basis." In contrast, Limbaugh intoned (hopefully?), that when men age they "look more authoritative, accomplished, [and] distinguished." See Rush Limbaugh, "Does Our Looks-Obsessed Culture Want to Stare at an Aging Woman?", *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, 17 December 2007, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/ site_121707/content/01125114.guest.html (accessed 20 April 2011).

93. Margolin, telephone conversation, 2008.

94. Margolin, *O Yes I Will*, 175.

trauma of his child's death in real time and required the space of the dream to awaken to both his child's death and his own inability to see in the present. Because Wilke's imagined "future performance" occurs 14 years after her death, spectators are granted space and time to encounter the trauma of her terminal illness. It is as if Wilke (re)appears to us in our own dream and asks if we can see she's burning. Phelan explains how "a photograph inserts the past within the present; the copresence of the past and the present staged by photography links it with theater. Photography's theatricality stems from the possibility that one can address and be addressed by the dead."[95]

Of course, even though it seems as if Wilke is looking at us from beyond, it is only a one-way viewing—she cannot see us in this scripted performance. There is no chance of Wilke appearing to us "in the flesh;" her presence remains "in the film," and as such, spectators witness Wilke's body as a displaced conversation through her specifically predirected framing as well as through her primary witness, Donald Goddard. Spectators encounter Goddard through his eyes and his lens via Wilke: we see her image, captured by him as he watched her looking back at him (see fig. 35). Wilke's future-inscribed performance from the past and witnessed in

95. Peggy Phelan, "Francesca Woodman's Photography: Death and the Image One More Time," *Signs* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 981.

the present is a return, a repetition with a difference. Or as Phelan reminds us, "death forces the living to revise understandings of the past."[96]

Margolin's return to the present in *O Yes I Will* reveals her complete trepidation at the prospect of undergoing surgery, "trying to rehearse how to lose and regain consciousness, trying to figure out how to return from a place we couldn't really fathom"[97]—rehearsing death. But because she appears to us "in the flesh" and her primary witness, the anesthesiologist, is absent, Margolin acts as her own witness to her body's desire. In turn, she (metaphorically) asks her audience, as she has often described it: "Excuse me. Whoa. Did you see that? Am I the only one who saw that? Did you see that?";[98] she repeatedly pleas with spectators to witness with her.

Interestingly, both Wilke and Margolin's primary witnesses are men: Goddard is Wilke's primary witness, and Margolin's primary witness is the gentleman anesthesiologist. Wilke and Margolin feel an intimate and close connection to these men who take up the position as the feminist spectator in their work and represent the continuum of identities to which both artists subscribe. Margolin passionately believes that the act of a woman standing onstage is a radical

96. Ibid., 980.

97. Margolin, *O Yes I Will*, 176.

98. Margolin, interview, 2005.

political act—because women are still members of an oppressed group. But Margolin's assertion of identity is not isolationist, nor even strictly bound by determinations of gender or sexuality, extending to greater significations of cultural identity. To the contrary, Margolin says that "gender, and even cultural, identity doesn't have to be something that tears you apart from other cultures and gender identifications. . . . If it gives you self-respect, it enables your relationship with other people."[99]

The two-and-a-half years represented on the monitors in Wilke's installation allow spectators to observe her life burning in real images over a specific time frame. By contrast, witnesses of Margolin's performance are required to imagine the description of her experience and memory engraved across her body and in her words. Her performance is more subjective, and as Isherwood's as well as Soloski's comments show, more likely to be dismissed by those who cannot see with her. Did she or didn't she (remember the spirit and texture of her conversation)? With Wilke's performance, spectators witness a more literal act of dying (i.e., the performer dying in front of us). As difficult as that is, it may be far easier "to see" Wilke's representations than to recognize and trust the residual impressions performed through the smoke and body of Margolin.

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99. Ibid.

Perhaps more profound, however, is that Wilke's *Intra-Venus Tapes* addresses a phenomenon that has troubled Margolin throughout her career, which is related to the silent moments onstage that allow witnesses to see the effect of all of her life experiences:

> I've always been bothered by the body as representation, and the lack of control and the lack of artistry that we have as bodied souls; it's very *finite*. . . . I look like this person who's this age and this shape or whatever, but I'm much more than that. . . . I look like I'm fifty, but I'm actually everything I've ever been. I'm all those ages. I'm a continuum. My whole life, I am everything I have ever been. . . . I am *all* that, right now, and you can, at any point, . . . see manifestations of that, that will seem inappropriate because I'm supposed to be this fifty year old lady.[100]

Returning to the M.C. Escher analogy, just as positive and negative space switch places, identities in performance also change. Boundaries collapse and the viewer recognizes that each of us is capable of embodying multiple identities; we are not just one fixed identity. Margolin understands, however, that a more effective way to collapse boundaries involves connecting with spectators on a broader range of identity representations. Our ability to visualize others as a continuum of bodies and ages permits us to see ourselves better. In that one moment of performance with a single body onstage, it is difficult to see the trajectory of the body's experience. Perhaps this phenomenon makes it more difficult for some to relate to Margolin's self-presentation of the synecdochical body because, as she herself

100. Ibid.

laments, we cannot see all the physical manifestations of her body in that brief moment of performance; whereas Wilke's art provides images that enable us to see more clearly the body's progression.

Margolin and Wilke also acknowledge that outer markings are not as important as the markings inside the body. Recognizing that identity markings provide masks and limits to selves, they passionately acknowledge the scope of the life experiences that are remembered inside of them, both consciously and unconsciously. So the "solutions" that go inside their bodies and which are meant to provide healing (such as chemotherapy) mingle with their inner Venus and reveal their inner truths—like sodium pentothal does. Once again, however, Wilke's reception is in a privileged position, because her performance covers a broader range of time and identities—Wilke had more opportunities (over the course of two and a half years) to make the invisible visible. In his analysis of the *Intra-Venus Tapes*, Marco Nocella, an art director at the Feldman Gallery, stated that Wilke generally maintained a wall of sorts between her public and private life, but in this last installation, she let us into her inner space completely. For example, in all the many years that he had known Wilke, he had "never heard her cry," and he was astonished by the brutal honesty contained within the videos.[101]

101. Marco Nocella, telephone interview with author, 30 October 2007.

Pairing an outtake from the *So Help Me Hannah* series photographed at P.S. 1 (1978; see fig. 36) with a watercolor "face"—*January 14, 1989*—from the *B.C. Series* (1989; see fig. 37) demonstrates the inside/outside projections of her body's work. At P.S. 1, lying on a classroom floor, Wilke's face is heavily made-up and her body is marked not only with soot from the school's dirty floor, but also with found L-shaped objects such as rope, wire, metal plates, and flowers that create metaphorical images of guns. Her body looks like it is already consumed, and she lies in a "coffin pose," complete with makeup (eyes open), indicating "please do not touch." Perhaps the gun-shaped objects are placed on her body to ward-off potential harm—a flimsy attempt with flimsy and "fake" objects for protection. Wilke looks as if she is bracing herself for what her body will one day need to face—objectification, scarring, disease, and death.

The *So Help Me Hannah* photographs are a critical examination of the patriarchal cultural view of the outside form of the female body. But, like Margolin, Wilke attempts to give the spectator another kind of metaphor for her inner state. The form of her body and hair from this outtake reveal a similar shape to the watercolors in her *B.C. Series*. "B.C." stands for "Before Cancer"; Wilke began painting the many abstract renditions of her face in 1986 prior to the diagnosis that the lump in her neck was lymphoma (although this particular watercolor dates from after her diagnosis) and she continued with these paintings for five years. Goddard

believes that on some deep level Wilke knew that she had cancer when she first painted these faces, particularly because there was such a powerful emotional charge in each self-portrait. In an undefinable feeling of recognition, Goddard cried when he saw her first series of these paintings on their loft floor.[102] His reaction is a powerful validation of the effect of boundaries collapsing in the moment of witnessing trauma, whether specifically named and visible or not.

Perhaps Goddard, as Hannah Wilke's primary witness, provides us with an example of one who sees in time, and we can apply those critical principles to Margolin's *O Yes I Will*. Over the span of their more than fifteen-year collaboration (Wilke and Goddard met in 1975), Goddard acted as Wilke's witness and conduit throughout much of her work, explaining that she would see her work through him, and "it would come back in the form of a picture."[103] Witnessing the progression of her disease while working alongside his beloved, how is he able to be present with her in time? And how can we do the same: witness someone in pain and permit boundaries to give way to allow another passenger on the "superego autobus"? Goddard's response to how he was able to bear such traumatic moments is:

> There were a few moments when she was in distress, and I look at them now and I think, "What the hell - Why was I filming? Why wasn't I comforting her?" It wasn't just that she wanted me to, but I wanted to. That was, I mean, that was as important as anything. I

102. Goddard, interview.

103. Ibid.

> mean, I'm sure there are other times when I did comfort her, but this was . . . the business of living.[104]

Goddard knows he could not prevent Wilke's suffering and did not allow shame or a denial of death to prevent him from engaging in and with the work. On the contrary, his witnessing is an example of queer nostalgia in that he is able to hold on to the mourning for an object he is losing in real time, while simultaneously acknowledging the love for the lost object in the present. Goddard recognizes how Wilke's attachment to life with all of its possibilities included a cancer that did not frighten her. In fact, she had a respect for the cancer and considered it "a living form" that grew and changed in her body.[105] Her view of "living" connects absolute joy to horrific descent, and Goddard describes the entire range in between those polarities as "this phenomenon of life."[106]

Goddard recognizes the importance of witnessing; his love for Wilke does not involve trying (and failing) to resolve her pain; his loving gift is his generous spirit, his willingness to bear witness. And that gift, in turn, is transmitted to spectators. Goddard's actions demonstrate Margolin's moral imperative: the best we can do for each other is bear witness. We must witness! Be it inside/outside, private/public, burning/smoke. As stated previously, "solitary confinement leads to madness,"

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104. Ibid.

105. Ibid.

106. Ibid.

Margolin believes, "as it obviates the possibility of Witness."[107] In a way, circling all the way back to Pollock's inability to witness *Godot*, we see an artist who was not able to move past his own shame of feeling like a fraud and went mad. Awakening and witnessing not only provide social agency and citizenship, they also help to keep us sane and to survive trauma.

Returning, then, to the question of how to bear the pain of witnessing Margolin's burning body in performance, perhaps we can see Margolin in real time in the way that Goddard saw Wilke. With Margolin's presence spectators may feel either obliged, overwhelmed, or powerless at the idea of taking on responsibility for another individual. "What can we do?" we ask ourselves. What action can we take when confronted with the residual relics of the female othered (cancer-ridden) body of one who clearly sees the distinction between life and death? Dori Laub explains the dilemma:

> For the listener who enters the contract of the testimony, a journey fraught with dangers lies ahead. There are hazards to the listening to trauma. Trauma—and its impact on the hearer—leaves, indeed, no hiding place intact. As one comes to know the survivor, one really comes to know oneself; and that is not a simple task. . . . The listener can no longer ignore the question of facing death; of facing time and its passage; of the meaning and purpose of living; of the limits of one's omnipotence; of losing the ones that are close to us; the great question of our ultimate aloneness; our otherness from any

107. Margolin, "'To Speak Is to Suffer' and Vice Versa," 95.

> other; our responsibility to and for our destiny; the question of loving and its limits; of parents and children; and so on.[108]

Wilke's final gift gives us a map to witness the living, such as Margolin's burning body. Like Wilke did before her, Margolin recognizes that she is dying in front of us (as we are also dying in front of her) whether we want to recognize that life condition or not. But witnessing life's continuum, like Goddard did, without holding onto unrealistic hopes, allows us to bridge ruptures and break down limits.

Felman addresses the distinction between holding on and letting go in the act of witnessing:

> Freud discovers, *it takes two to witness the unconscious* . . . One does not have to *possess* or *own* the truth, in order to effectively *bear witness* to it; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, *not available* to its own speaker.[109]

Ultimately, Margolin also recognizes the possibility for a second person to aid in accessing the truth. Her last reconfiguration of her 12-minute diatribe in *O Yes I Will* is entirely physical, a final acknowledgement of the failure of language. Presented as a silent dance monologue, anesthesiologist, her primary witness, appears for the first time with her onstage. Demonstrating that it takes "two to tango," she dances

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108. Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, MD (New York: Routledge, 1992), 72.

109. Felman, 15.

her conversation with him of her own volition before she can she permit her body, "the ultimate articulator,"[110] to rest.

Margolin's and Wilke's explorations provide an intimate exchange between a woman at the center of the performance and her spectator, and they create a space not only for witnessing but also for permeating the boundaries of identity. Margolin says:

> We have incriminated ourselves with intimacy, committed ourselves to the repercussions of intimate knowledge. We have evaluated our own proximity or distance from these events in human life, and that process of evaluation gives us a position in regard to the character we see that is part of a committed human experience; a relationship.[111]

The genre of performance art, and solo performance in particular, engenders a more intimate conversation due to the many layers of translucent identities on the performer's constituent body. Unlike traditional art forms, performance art offers four different layers of the singular body in performance: the creator/playwright, the persona/character, the performer/actor, and often the identifiable biography of the person/artist who may be someone we know or have a shared history with or we may at least know her history. (The last phenomenon is fairly common in the fringe community, whether one has personal contact with the artist or not.) With all of these layers of identity providing greater possibility for contact and reflection,

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110. Margolin, *O Yes I Will*, 186.

111. Margolin, "'To Speak Is to Suffer' and Vice Versa," 96.

performance creates more opportunity for exchange from body to body. The occlusion of Margolin's and Wilke's performances speaks to how we may actually see in time, extend collapsible boundaries towards citizenship, and achieve the agency of the witness.

Interestingly, Goddard comments on how art's transcendence can be difficult to witness even with retrospection:

> It's funny, because it's true that [Wilke's] death and her last work caused a tremendous reevaluation of her work. . . . The idea that Hannah's work is more acceptable now because we know she suffered remains an idea. The art itself is something more than that, and perhaps harder to deal with for its being so physical.[112]

Margolin acknowledges art's difficulty, too, and observes the high price humans have had to pay through evolution to gain language. "Is talking worth flight? . . . If I had, beloved, wings you'd never see me again. . . . I think that someday, when alone, I will do that—fly!"[113] Complex as is it to actively witness Margolin's work in time, I believe her speech is worth it, and through her body and the intimate performance space that she shares with her audience, she fans our own smoke with her wings.

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112. Goddard, interview.

113. Margolin, *O Yes I Will*, 185.

5.
Epilogue.
Feminist Imaginings for a Future Nostalgia

The creative revolution—to take a chunk of the imagined future and put it into the present—to follow the law of the future and live it in the present.
—Rabbi Arthur Waskow[1]

My project proposes listening to displaced conversations—specifically a triangulated conversation regarding feminist performance which I arranged among Deborah Kass, Deb Margolin, and Hannah Wilke. In many respects the work of these three artists lays bare the core of the various notions of feminism that have evolved and have been debated since second-wave feminists began to stake out ideological claims within the field of critical discourse. Kass, Margolin, and Wilke believe/believed that anyone of any performed gender is a feminist who upholds women as equal to men; that is, women must be respected, acknowledged, and compensated with parity. Each of these artists also believes that her work must promote that agenda and engender social change in support of women and those who are marginalized in U.S. culture. How to promote that change and with what tools via feminist performance is largely the displaced conversation we hear among these artists. And how we, as spectators, witness their work and absorb their radical and empathetic message is the conversation I hope we can hear just a bit more clearly.

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1. Quote taken from Mary Corita (Sister Corita) Kent, *let the sun shine*, 1968, in Julie Ault, *Come Alive! The Sprirted Art of Sister Corita* (London: Four Corners Books, 2006), 66.

But is there too much static today to listen in to what these feminist artists reveal through their work? My loose genealogy of feminist performance art in the Introduction ended with Split Britches, and while Kass and Margolin and many other women artists continue to create work, the collective import of feminist performance practices seems to have lost some of its impact. The vibrant artistic performance community fueled by the activist generation of the 1960s reached its peak in the eighties/early nineties and began to diffuse by the mid-1990s. Sadly, performance became less meaningful or worse, absent, and as recent studies reveal, the production of women's voices in U.S. theatre and performance still lacks parity.[2] How do feminist performers, producers, and scholars foster a continuation of the movement for progressive change with a new generation of artists/scholars?

Perhaps part of the problem in finding an answer to the question is connected to Jameson's notion that a capitalist, commodity-obsessed culture destroys the ability for artists to create parody in favor of pastiche. In a postmodern culture Jameson states:

> we [are] unable today to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience. . . . It is a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself—or at the very least, an alarming and pathological symptom of a

2. See Susan Jonas and Suzanne Bennett, *Report on the Status of Women: A Limited Engagement?* (prepared for the New York State Council on the Arts Theatre Program, January 2002), http://www.womenarts.org/ advocacy/WomenCountNYSCAReport.htm (accessed 6 May 2011).

society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history.[3]

The voice of the body politic has been co-opted by corporations and turned into the means to sell *things.* The Equinox campaign discussed in Chapter One serves as one example of the commercial co-opting of a feminist mantra. As Phelan explains, "a significant aspect of the US-based performance art of the early 1970s defined itself in opposition to the commodity based art market,"[4] and in this market-driven economy, the "things" women artists produce are severely undervalued.

Of the three artists I have examined, Deborah Kass is perhaps the one who is in the most immediate conversation with mass culture; she actively works with middlebrow cultural productions as well as the history of high art practices to insert her project for change within visual culture. I find her persistence as a sign of hope, and yet, when she recently addressed a group at the Neuberger Museum, Kass discouraged several women students' inquiries toward their involvement in the arts because she said that she cannot see enough room for them to survive in the world of art in the future.[5] In 2006 Kass painted *Let the Sun Shine In* (see fig. 38) as an emotional call to action during the two years leading up to the election of President Obama. She appropriated not only the lyrics from *Hair,* but also the work of Sister

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3. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 117.

4. Phelan, "Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows," 570.

5. Deborah Kass (artist talk, Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, Purchase, NY, 24 March 2011).

Corita who painted *let the sun shine* in 1968. Corita's painting itself is an appropriation of the aesthetics and graphics of mass marketplace advertisements, but Corita inserts her own progressive message to revise systems of hierarchy. Her social commentary for *let the sun shine* pairs a yellow shadowed image of Pope Paul VI with the above quote by Rabbi Waskow. Kass continues Corita's tradition; her nostalgic mining of the past confronted in the present in order to imagine a new future seems promising. Since that time, however, Kass says that she despairs that there may be no mechanism for lasting socio-political change; her second collection of "feel good/feel bad"[6] paintings exhibited in 2010 expresses a project that moved from Kass's anger in reaction to the Bush administration to hopelessness that change is impossible in Obama's presidency.

An alternate question might be that if, as Jameson proposes, our postmodern Western culture is proliferated by an emphasis on consumption in a commodity market which results in a culture devoid of historical and political consciousness or aesthetic relevance, where is the critical edge of radicalization to be found? I think the answer lies in a return to the core of the feminist project: witnessing the body in performance. Feminist performance, in particular, is where the humanizing effects of private performance meet the dehumanizing effects of imperialism. The inherent messiness of theatre and the imperfect acts of performance counter-act the slick,

6. See *MORE! feel good paintings for feel bad times*: 2008–2010, Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York City, 23 September–30 October 2010.

homogenizing force of capitalist globalization in the same way that the hand-made object is more authentic than mass-produced kitsch. We need to see the "messy" othered body, and in a larger sense, we need to see our collective body's flaws and imperfections in order to achieve, per Jameson, "aesthetic representations of our own current experience" and promote change.

Margolin addresses the need for messiness in *Why Cleaning Fails* (2001), and examines how our society tends to separate and commodify its participants after tragic, life-altering events like 9/11. The play features three vignettes book-ended with appearances by the NARRATOR (played by Margolin) and the GIRL (played by Margolin's daughter, Molly).[7] Peeking into the etiology of the Lady Macbeth complex, the play visits the lives of seven characters, many of whom are plagued with self-inflicted isolation, sadomasochistic abuse, or the compulsion to clean. Margolin observes that cleaning, particularly compulsive cleaning, is usually an outgrowth of some form of embarrassment or guilt, personal or collective. The stifling silence evoked by cleaning is highlighted in the play's first vignette about a home improvement show hosted by Phyllis Gill, a hyper-Martha Stewart-like personality. "Cleaning," Phyllis screeches:

> is the opposite of embarrassment! It is the antonym of humiliation! Because nothing in your personal history needs to be visible if you're a competent cleaner! Your past cannot be seen

7. *Why Cleaning Fails,* by Deb Margolin, directed by Lee Gundersheimer, Dixon Place, New York City, 26–27 October 2001.

> if you clean! Your vacuum has no voice! Your sponge is no soprano! Your toilet never says what it sees! You can bribe history into silence with the touch of a broom![8]

Cleaning up did not work for Lady Macbeth, and during the course of the vignette we witness Phyllis's downfall through her interactions with her assistants, the somewhat stupefied couple, Kippy Viscardi and John Ernwright.

By satirizing our society's addiction to cleaning, Margolin's work aims both to bring participants together after personal events associated with shame and trauma, and also to foster empathy with the individual in the context of a public tragedy. Cleaning, Margolin suggests, is anti-empathetic and thwarts human connections because it aims to hide the embarrassing evidence—such as the causes of death and suffering—and sweep the issues under the rug. Moreover, cleaning promotes "obscurity as an artifice." Margolin suggests that in contrast to Broadway and its large budgets, downtown theatre with its tiny budgets reveals the artifice of social constructs without the benefit of contrived effects. The NARRATOR describes her experience with a Broadway production of a Sherlock Holmes play and say, "I spent a lot of time staring at the lighting instruments, they have such a lot of money on Broadway, don't they, and the lights are just amazing. In my world we've grown up using clip lights and matches, and if anyone can see a fucking thing you praise Jesus." In the arena of feminist performance art, unlike Broadway, the artifice of

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8. Deb Margolin, *Why Cleaning Fails,* 2001. All quotations are taken from an unpublished manuscript.

pinpoint lighting effects is not necessary. Margolin insists that the power of performance lies in the performer's desperate desire to speak, and as such, she creates a "spectacle" just by insisting on her body and voice in a public forum.

Margolin reminds us that performance is inclusive: "anyone can do it!"[9] By play's end, Kippy and John rise above their shame and find an awakening through witnessing each other's pain. Kippy finds her voice and speaks; she chooses to restore her health by revealing and honoring the dirt of her experience. Breaking through the shame and trauma of her own life, Kippy declares that she desires to be a sponsor and say a few words. She asks, "How much does it cost, Mrs.? If I can give you some dimes, Mrs. I would like to say something, Mrs., how much for a word?" John gives Kippy "some dimes and some dollars," and she instructs us that for mere dimes and dollars "everyone can speak if they can be a sponsor." While inexpensive venues for speaking may not be as prolific as they once were in New York, they still exist[10] and artists must work to create a space to be heard.

But the requirement is to speak aloud. If thoughts are only recorded on paper then, as Kippy explains, not only can someone "can make [them] go away," but also:

> Seeing is different than hearing. When you see things you think you can touch them, but when you hear things, you know that the things inside the words go most into your ears and into your mind. If you touch them, they stop right there.

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9. Margolin, "A Perfect Theatre for One," 68–69.

10. For example, the WOW Café Theatre's operating budget remains at $15,000-17,000 per year. Davy, *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers*, 109.

> . . . What the words mean you can't touch that.

Although proclamations in performance are ephemeral and exist only in that momentary exchange, the words spoken within the performed act are revolutionary and represent the radical act of bearing witness. Kippy revolts against Phyllis Gill and inspires us that we can do the same. But it takes courage. It takes courage both to perform words and to absorb them during our encounter in performance.

Margolin calls for a reaffirmation of poor theatre. Like Kippy, we do not need a lot of money; all we need is "some dimes and some dollars." Feminist theatre is poor theatre that speaks for parity, and therein lies its power. It is our imagination that connects us to the real and makes possible the kind of self-examination which endures. Without art or imagination to ease the burden of self-examination, it is easy to understand the lure of denial and the appeal of cleaning. Margolin says thank God cleaning fails, because only by examining the dirt and mess can we achieve some measure of self-realization. Through performance Margolin calls us to witness the beauty and the messiness that is life, and as the clip lights fade to black, she invites us to borrow her vehicle of expression—the body.

Throughout her career, Hannah Wilke's use of her body as a medium of expression, and the level of love in witnessing her body that I observed through Donald Goddard's role as her go-between for her artistic interventions, left a deep

impression upon me. This past March I attended *The Talent Show* exhibit at PS1,[11] primarily to view again Hannah Wilke's *The IntraVenus Tapes, 1990–1993*. After living with this material for several years, I thought more about the blurry line between art and life and what it takes for an artist to yield her body for viewing so that we may all ask what our ethical responsibility is when we view a body, particularly one who is suffering, other than our own. At this second encounter with Wilke's project, I sat in front of the installation for almost ninety minutes and witnessed the final moments of each monitor's footage. One by one each of the sixteen tapes expire, though not in chronological order, and with each hard cut to a black screen, viewers lose the various daily moments shared with Wilke. The blacking out of the monitors reminded me of Emily Webb's epiphany in *Our Town*, regarding the quotidian moments in this world that flash by us largely unnoticed. The last moments played out until thirteen of the screens were blank, and only three remained in conversation with each other—one on the top row with a flock of birds in the air, one in the middle with Wilke talking on the phone, and one in the bottom right corner showing Wilke's last moments in the hospital in Houston, Texas.

Viewing the triangulation formed by the three screens captured the life of the artist as one who used language and speech in her art, as one who loved nature and especially birds, and one who was unafraid to use her body in performance. The

11. *The Talent Show*, MoMA PS1, Queens, NY, 12 December 2010 – 4 April 2011.

first of those three to turn-off was Wilke talking on the phone (a nod to the speech that leaves us first), so all that remained were birds winging above her lying in the hospital bed. Once the video of the birds cut to black, we were left with the sole frame of Wilke and Goddard in the hospital room together. Finally, the camera pans, and Wilke's body leaves the frame for the last time. The camera moves to the highway traffic outside her window and settles on a large billboard of the Marlboro Man looking across the road. For a feminist artist who insisted on the importance of the woman's body throughout her life's work, it is ironic that Philip Morris's Marlboro Man monitored her final moments, albeit from a distance. A feminist's work is never complete, and the gap between the personal and political can seem as cluttered as a highway with heavy traffic. As Don Goddard describes, "it was so strange looking out the hospital window at the constant traffic below, like some great arterial system, the system that Hannah was so acutely aware of in all its embodiments, presided over by the Marlboro Man."[12]

Wilke is buried at the Green River Cemetery in Springs, New York, just down the road from the Krasner–Pollock studio and house, and both Krasner and Pollock are buried there, too. "Pollock is under a big rock, Krasner is under a smaller rock, and Hannah is just down the hill under her angel drawing" (see fig. 39).[13] The angel

12. Donald Goddard, e-mail message to author, 5 March 2011.

13. Donald Goddard, e-mail message to author, 15 June 2010. From the photograph at Green River, notice the large boulder to the left behind Wilke's grave which marks Pollock's grave. Krasner had the boulder brought to the cemetery from piles found in the back of their home at Springs.

drawing to which Goddard refers is a self-portrait which he had engraved on her headstone. The portrait, *Self-Portrait as Angel*, 1977, comes from a notecard commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art. For the drawing, Wilke revisited one of her poses from her *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*. Parodically referencing herself, she removed her vaginal gum sculpture star/scars from her torso and face, and on her left shoulder she added an angel wing influenced by a drawing by Albrecht Dürer, who is famously known for his 1514 engraving of a female angel, *Melencolia I*. In medieval philosophy, melancholy is one of the four humors; it is associated with black gall, the least desirable of the four, but also with creative genius. Wilke and her beautiful woman-*cum*-angel drawing, which she called her "Left Wing Angel," looks over her right shoulder to glance at us; in her embodied in-between state, she symbolically transforms our melancholia with the imaginings of a creative present-day mourning.

Typically memorials are nostalgic celebrations of someone's life. Wilke's gravestone is no exception, although through the engraving we witness a woman who straddles a liminal space both on earth and just slightly beyond the earth. Unlike Walter Benjamin's description of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*,[14] who is propelled with his back toward the tumultuous future of progress, Wilke's left wing angel still luxuriates in her body which she shares with us, though her front is

14. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (1968; repr., New York: Schocken, 1988), 257–58.

pointed toward something unknown. She almost looks like she may just tell us what she sees ahead of her, and in the meantime she waits for her right wing to appear so she can travel there.

Memorials may also serve as a public commemoration and representation of society's normative culture, particularly mortuary sculptures in nineteenth-century garden cemeteries. Contemporary artist Patricia Cronin, whose life-partner is Deborah Kass, parodies the idealized images of a neo-classical nationalist form "to address a federal failure"[15] for her political project. In *Memorial to a Marriage* (2002; see fig. 40), Cronin's larger-than-life three-ton marble mortuary for Kass and herself disrupts our society's opposition to same-sex marriage. With a parodic nod to Courbet's 1866 painting *Sleep* or *The Sleep*, Cronin's erotic sculpture features the two women lying down together in an embrace, naked with a sheet tangled around their legs. With her attention to the history of art, Cronin explains "I love Courbet. I think he's one of the most important French painters. *The Sleep* might be the first painting of two women depicted in post-coital bliss. I wanted that kind of intimacy in my piece, but coupled with good old 19th-century American Puritanism."[16]

What is unavailable to her in life—a federally recognized marriage—Cronin inscribes into the future. Celebrating her "unofficial" marriage in life by carving it

15. Patricia Cronin, "Making the Personal Monumental: A Conversation with Patricia Cronin," by Jan Garden Castro, *Sculpture* 22, no. 1 (January/February 2003), http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag03/janfeb03/cronin/cronin.shtml (accessed 6 May 2011).

16. Cronin, "Making the Personal Monumental."

officially in death, I find that Cronin ascribes a nostalgic future, complete with its own mourning both in the present and for the future—it is a mourning of what is absent in the past as well as the present, it points to a future mourning in the present, and it brings together an ethical relation between those temporal states. Cronin's memorial to their marriage will operate in the future-past tense once either Kass or she is buried there.

Bridging Kass's and her life together with their deaths, the sculpture is permanently installed on their grave site at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx (see fig. 41); however, in 2010 Cronin replaced the white marble sculpture with one that is bronze, following in the tradition of Parisian cemeteries which made the change because of the wear and destruction that occurs when marble is exposed to the elements (see fig. 42). Interestingly, in these same cemeteries, it is customary for visitors to rub different body parts of the mortuary statues for good luck. Cronin likes the bronze because she sees how, through the repetition of rubbing on favorite body parts, visitors at Woodlawn[17] might leave their mark which "extends the performative nature of the project."[18] In witnessing her work now, we may not only see their bodies in the present (both women are still alive) and imagine their bodies

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17. Cronin and Kass's grave site is the third most visited one after those of Duke Ellington and Miles Davis. See Anthony DePalma, "Urban Studies/Sleeping Together; A Daring (and Icy) Duet," *New York Times*, 23 February 2003, http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/23/nyregion/urban-studies- sleeping-together-a-daring-and-icy-duet.html (accessed 6 May 2011).

18. Patricia Cronin, interview on 6 September 2010, Velvetpark: Dyke Culture in Bloom, Flash video file, 2:28, http://www.velvetparkmedia.com/video/memorial-marriage (accessed 6 May 2011).

in the future (since the sculpture is on the site of their grave), but we may also participate with their art through the desire of touch. The site of performance is moving because it is a future memorial to a marriage that our society continues to repudiate, and we are invited to participate in their desire and touch their sensual figures. The dominant culture wants to keep them invisible, but Cronin heightens their visibility in a very public forum so that it cannot be ignored.

In his close encounter with Beckett, Pollock found witnessing the pained abstract body unbearable, even upon returning twice. Of Emily's failed return, Thornton Wilder writes, "she is shown how impossible, how futile it is to return. The past cannot be re-lived. Living people, humans, occupied with their petty occupations and small thoughts, know little of true joy or happiness. Truth is to be found only in the future."[19] The physical rubbings on the explicit future-inscribed bodies of Kass and Cronin—bodies which, in fact, are still present in the world—need time to wear down the bronze surface and manifest themselves as visible markings. Perhaps, then, we can hope that the continuous act of rubbing up against the feminist project will place us in a more direct conversation with these artists so that future witnessing will get easier and transform us with empathy.

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19. Thornton Wilder, "'Our Town': Story of the Play," in *Collected Plays & Writings on Theater*, 660.

APPENDIX 1.
LIST OF FIGURES

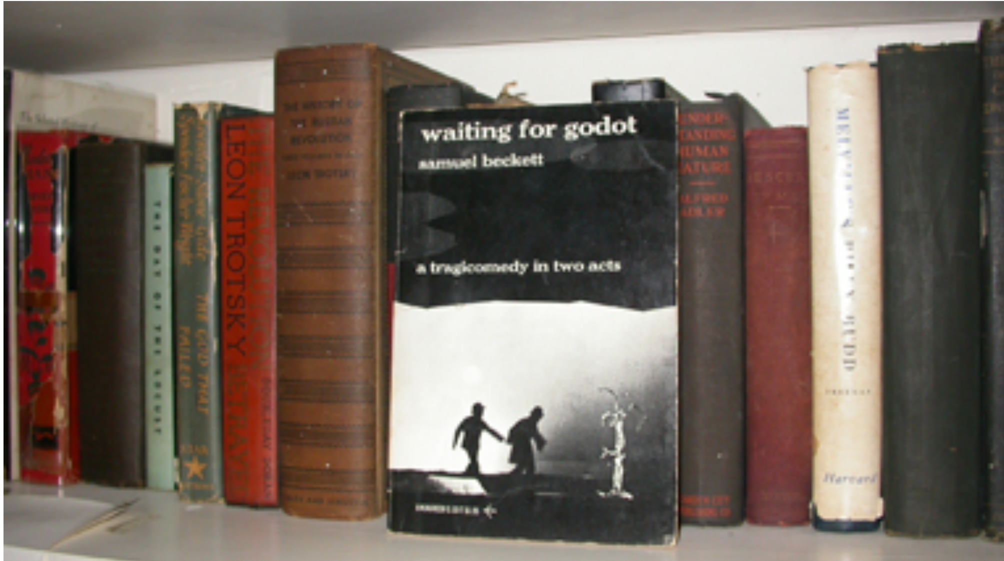

Figure 1. First edition of *Waiting for Godot* found in the Krasner/Pollock house, Springs, NY, 22 May 2010. (Photo by Helen A. Harrison)

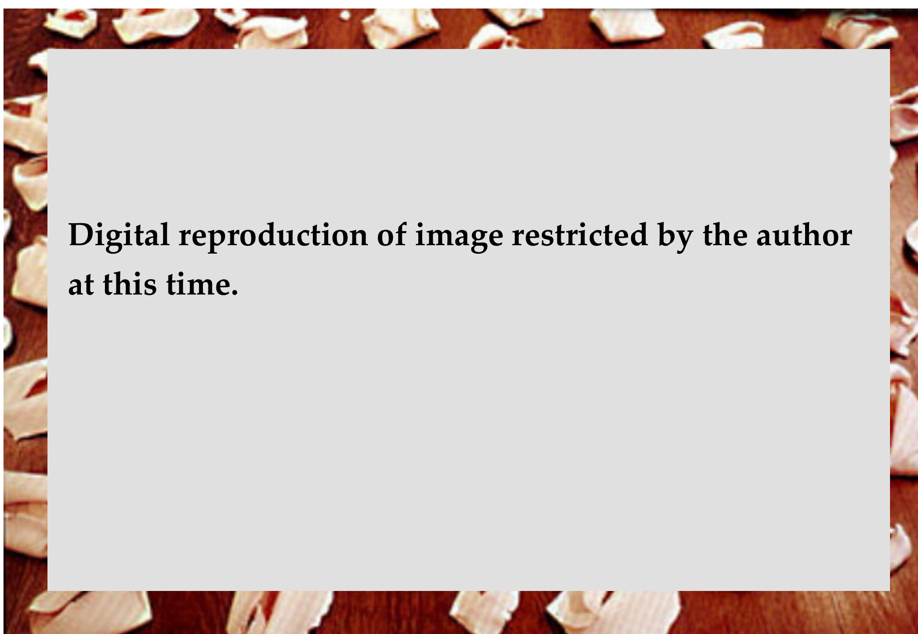

Figure 2. Hannah Wilke, *176 One-Fold Gestural Sculptures*, 1974, terra-cotta dipped in pink liquitex, installed on painted floor for "405 East 13th Street Show," curated by Jean Dupuy. Private Collection. (Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

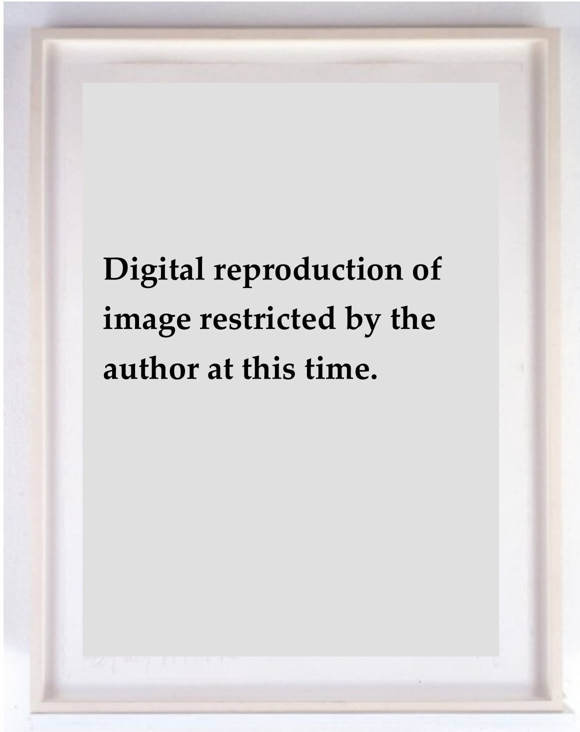

Figure 3. Hannah Wilke, *Brushstrokes #18: May 10, 1992*, 1992, artist's hair on Arches paper, 33" x 25 1/2". (Photo by Hermann Feldhaus; courtesy of Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

Figure 4. Deb Margolin and Kevin Seal, *970-DEBB*, 1990, directed by Madeleine Olnek at P.S. 122, New York City.

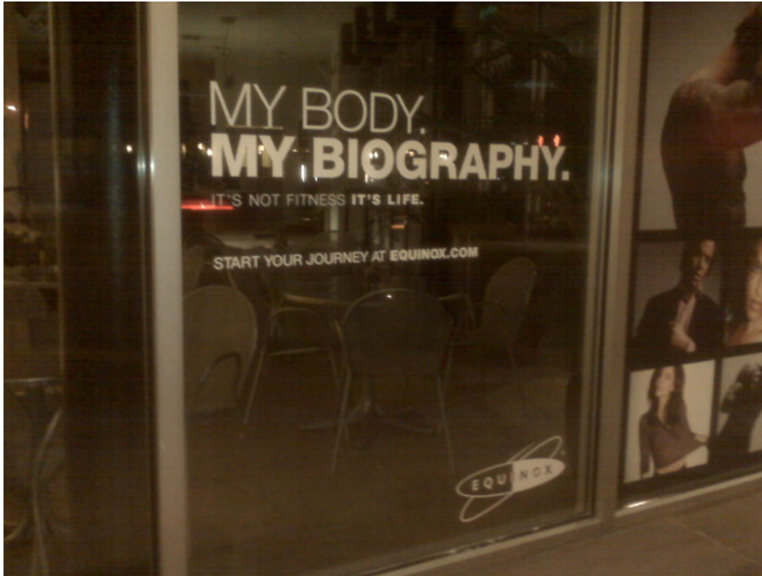

Figure 5. Window display of Equinox, corner of Greenwich Avenue and West 12th, New York City, 6 March, 2010. (Photo by Marc Stuart Weitz)

Figure 6. Deb Margolin, *Index to Idioms*, 2005, directed by Merri Milwe at Culture Project, New York City. (Photo by Jim Baldassare)

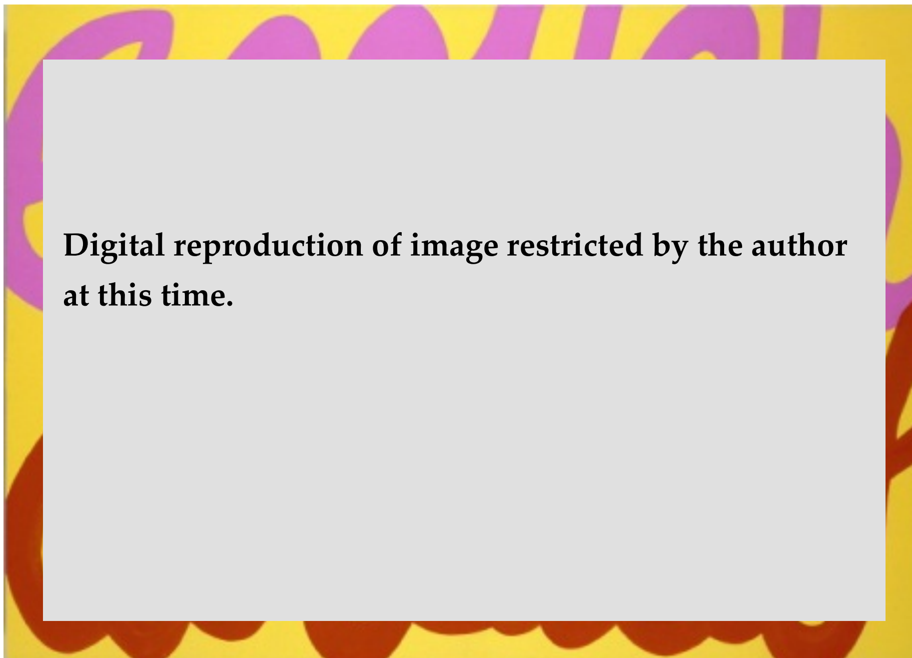

Figure 7. Deborah Kass, *Enough Already*, 2006, from *feel good paintings for feel bad times: paintings and drawings:* 2002–2007. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 45" x 63". (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

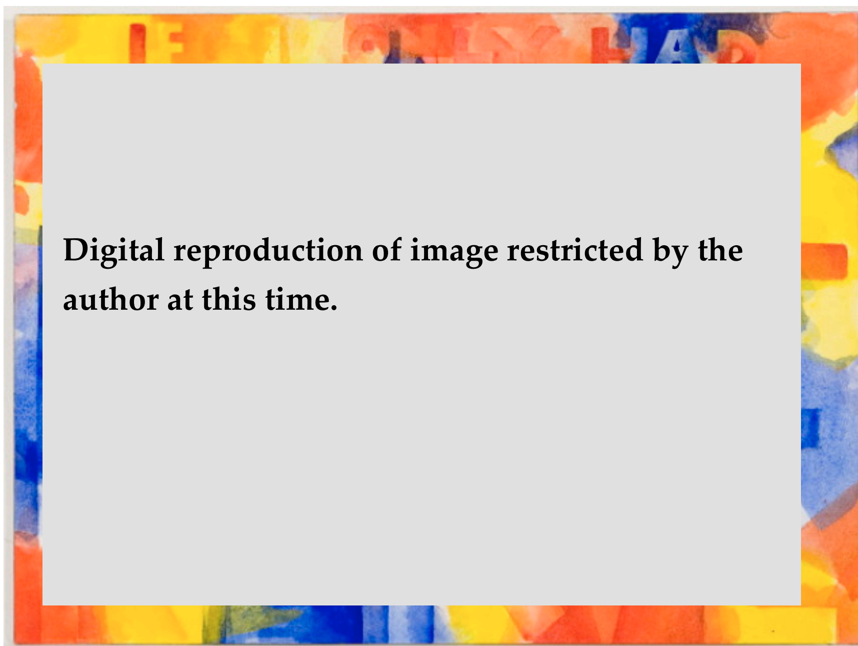

Figure 8. Deborah Kass, *If I Only Had The Nerve*, 2002, from *feel good paintings for feel bad times: paintings and drawings:* 2002–2007. Gouache on paper, 10 1/4" x 14". (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

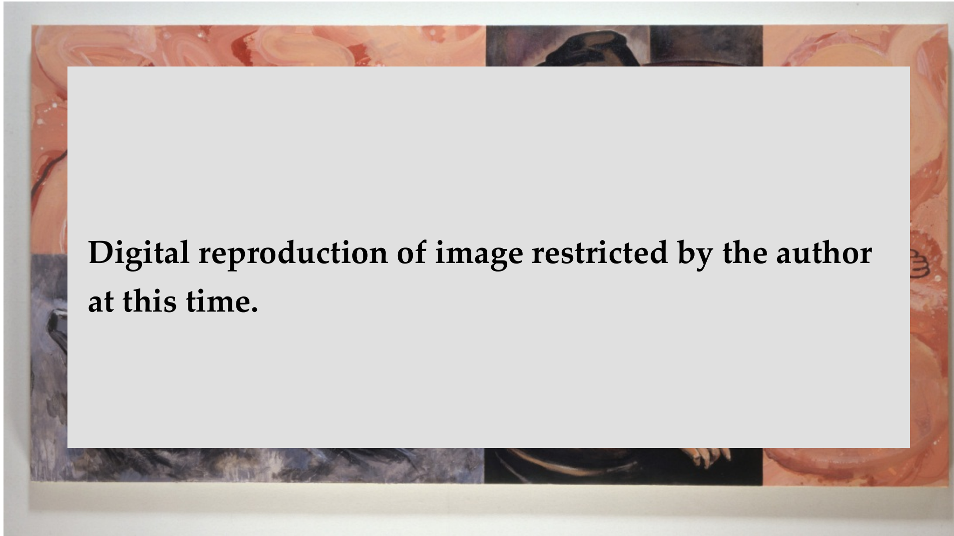

Figure 9. Deborah Kass, *How Do I Look?*, 1991. Mixed media on canvas, 50" x 100". (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

Figure 10. Deborah Kass, *Before and Happily Ever After*, 1991, from *Art History Paintings:* 1989-1992. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 72" x 60". (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

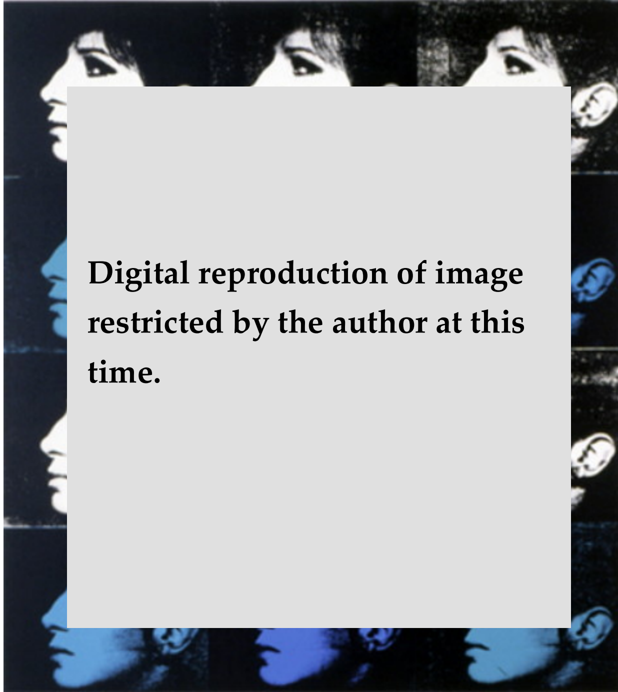

Figure 11. Deborah Kass, *12 Barbras (The Jewish Jackie Series)*, 1993, from *The Warhol Project:* 1992-2000. Silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 60” x 54”. (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

Figure 12. Deborah Kass, *Chairman Ma (Gertrude Stein #1)*, 1993, from *The Warhol Project:* 1992-2000. Silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 46” x 42”. (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

Figure 13. Deborah Kass, *Triple Silver Yentl (My Elvis)*, 1993, from *The Warhol Project:* 1992–2000. Silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 72″ x 36″. (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

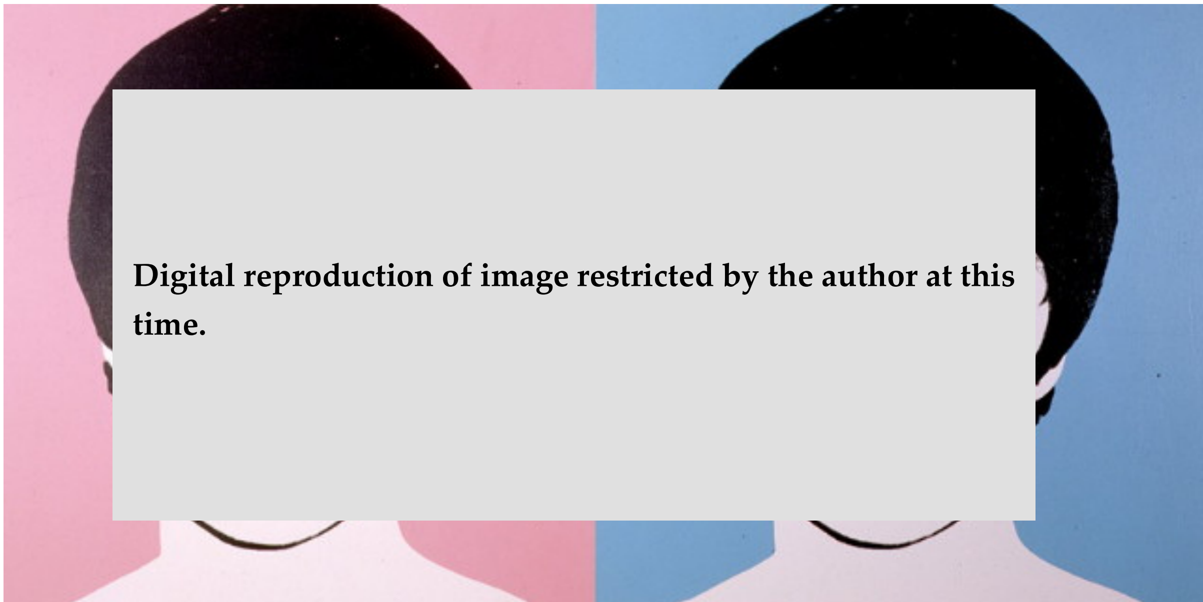

Figure 14. Deborah Kass, *Cindy Sherman*, 1995, from *The Warhol Project:* 1992–2000. Silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, two panels, 40″ x 40″ each, 40″ x 80″ overall. (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

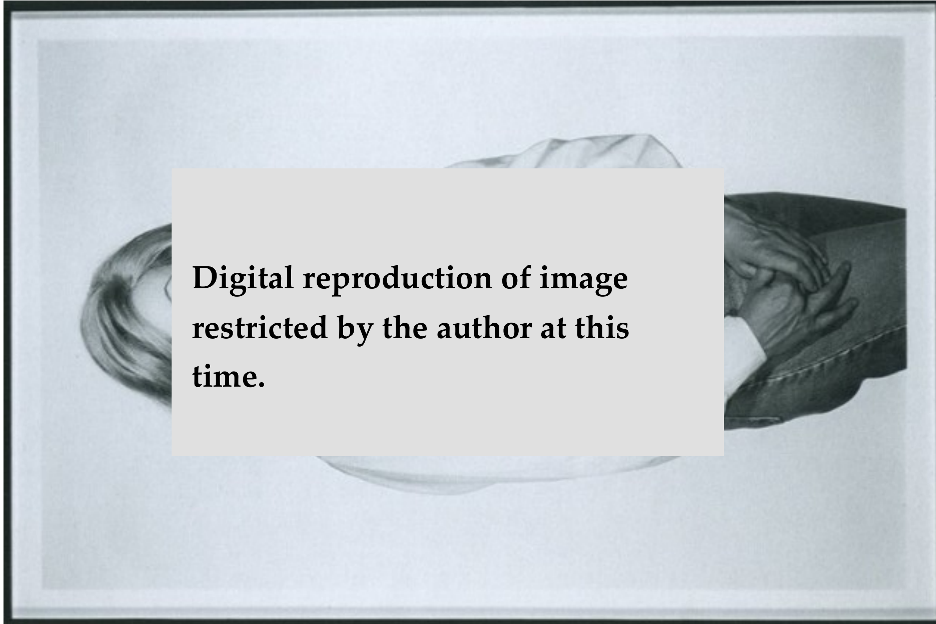

Figure 15. Deborah Kass, *Altered Image #2*, 1994 –1995. Gelatin silver print, 60" x 40". (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

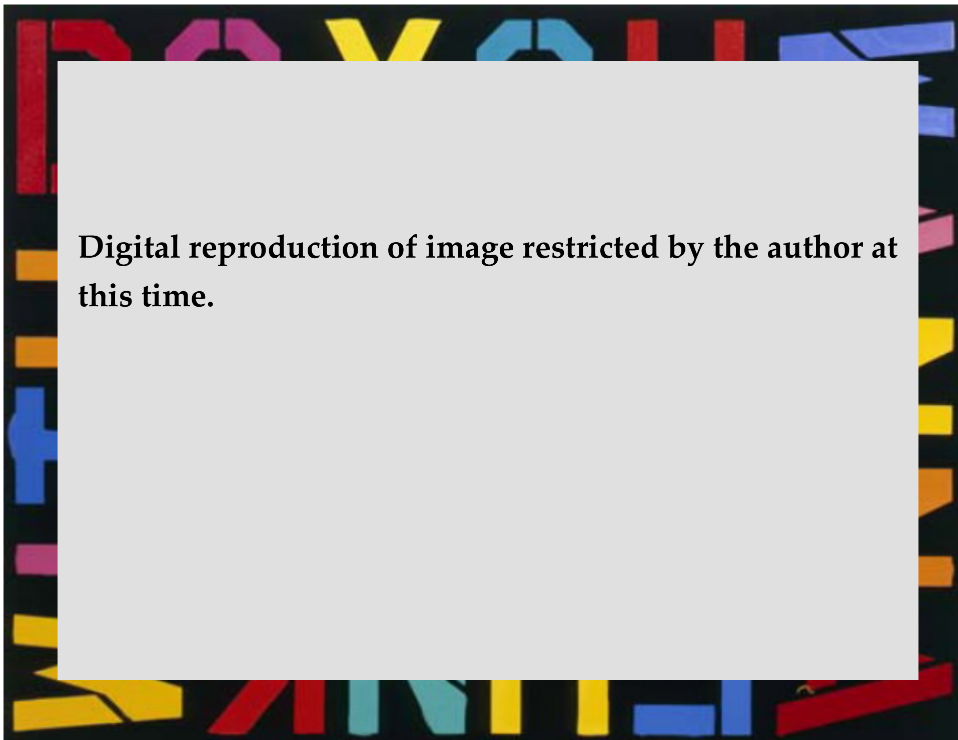

Figure 17. Deborah Kass, *Do You Want To Funk With Me*, 2008, from *feel good paintings for feel bad times: paintings and drawings:* 2002–2007. Oil and enamel on canvas, 52" x 68". (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

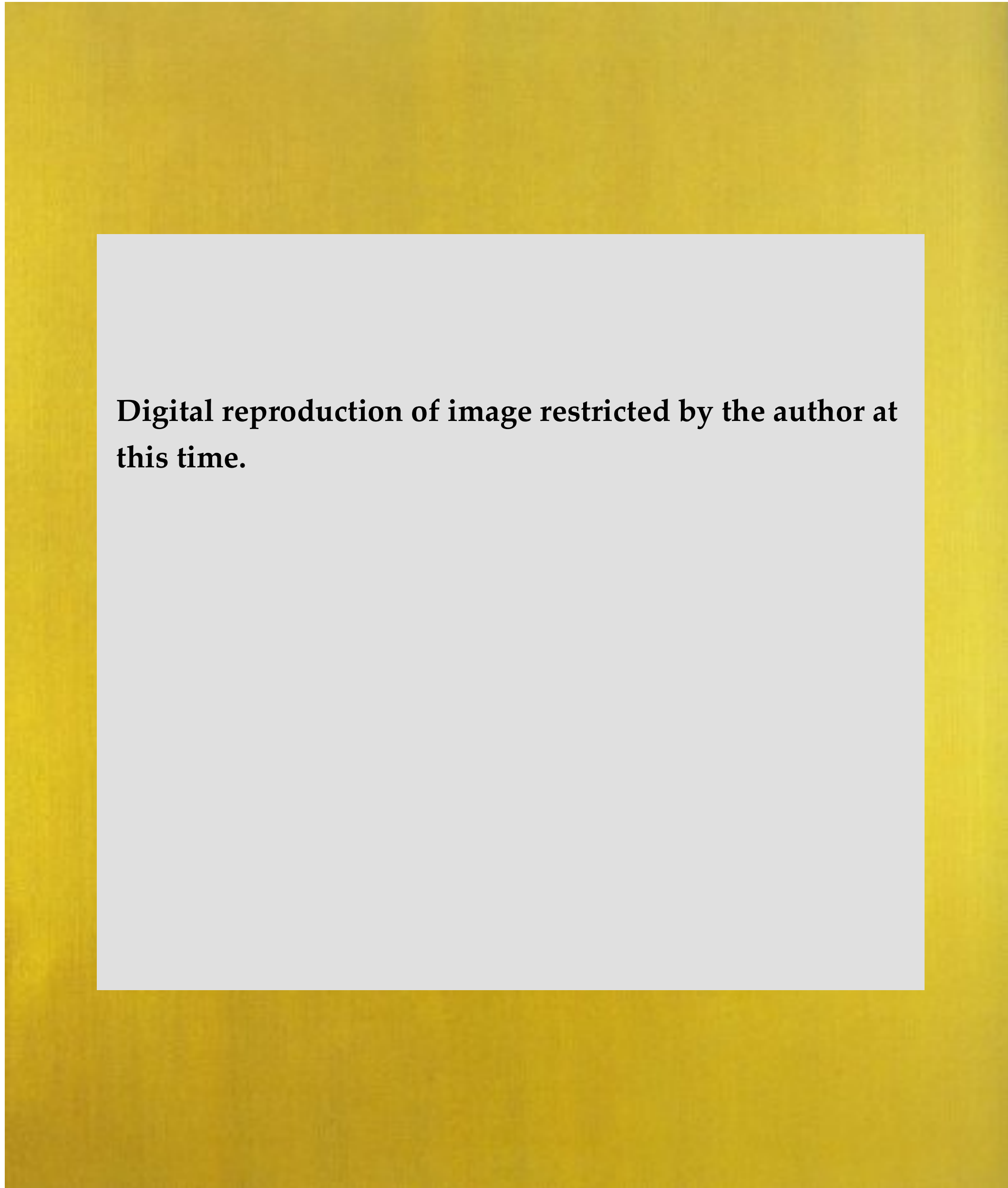

Figure 16. Deborah Kass, *Gold Barbra (The Jewish Jackie Series)*, 1992, from *The Warhol Project:* 1992–2000. Silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 72" x 60". (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

Figure 18. Deborah Kass, *Being Alive*, 2003, from *feel good paintings for feel bad times: paintings and drawings:* 2002–2007. Watercolor gouache on paper, 9” x 12 1/4”. (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

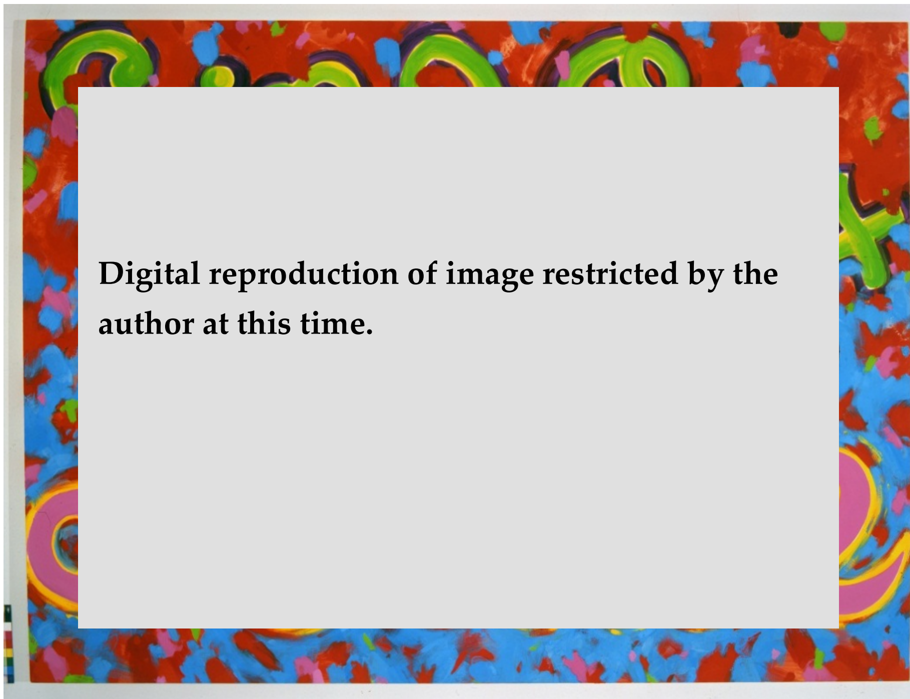

Figure 19. Deborah Kass, *Sing Out Louise*, 2004, from *feel good paintings for feel bad times: paintings and drawings:* 2002–2007. Oil on linen, 66” x 88”. (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

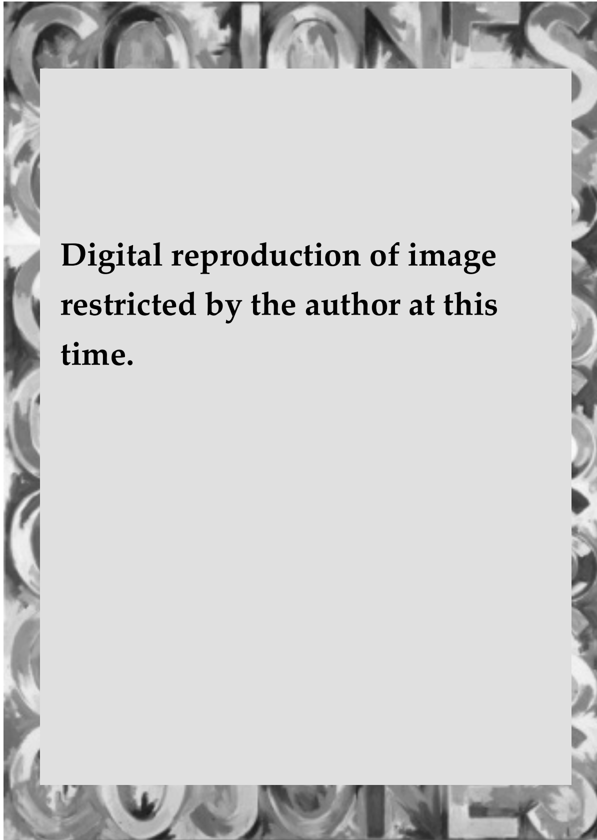

Figure 20. Deborah Kass, *Painting With Balls*, 2005, from *feel good paintings for feel bad times: paintings and drawings:* 2002–2007. Oil on linen, 84″ x 60″. (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

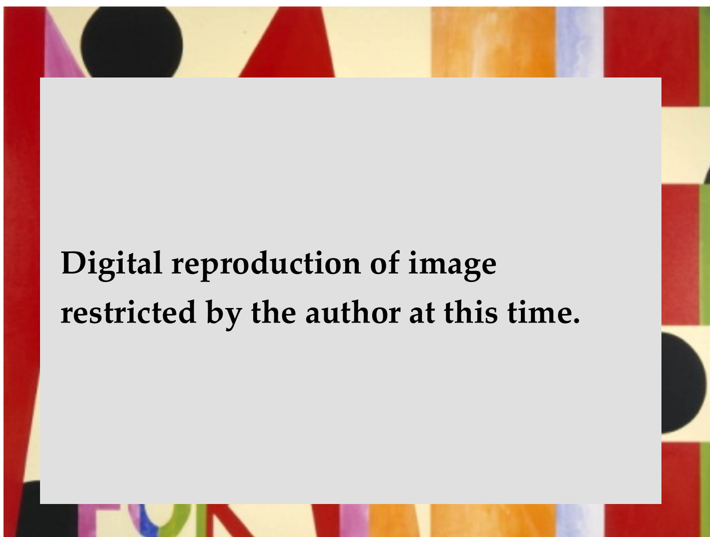

Figure 21. Deborah Kass, *For Me,* 2004, from *feel good paintings for feel bad times: paintings and drawings:* 2002–2007. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 84″ x 112″. (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

Figure 22. Deborah Kass, *Daddy*, 2007, from *feel good paintings for feel bad times: paintings and drawings:* 2002–2007. Enamel and acrylic on canvas, 78" x 78". (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

Figure 23. Deborah Kass, *Frank's Dilemma,* 2009, from *more! feel good paintings for feel bad times: paintings and drawings:* 2008–2010. Acrylic on canvas, 78" x 156". (Courtesy of the artist)

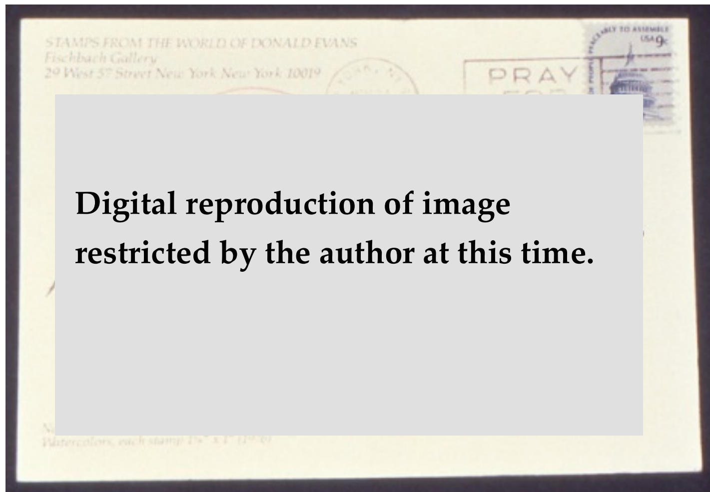

Figure 24. Hannah Wilke, *Hello From Donald!*, 1976, in Memoriam for Donald Evans. Chewing gum on postcard, 14 ½' x 15 ½". (Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

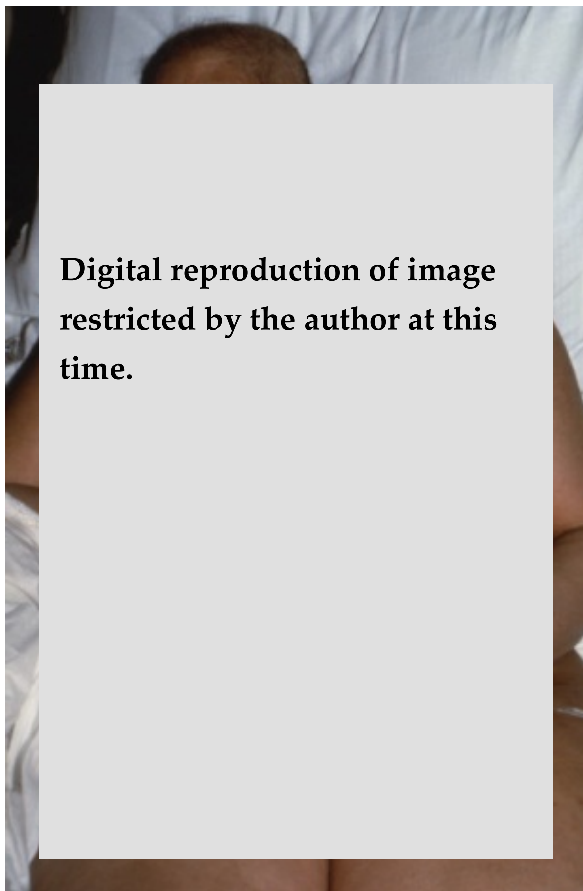

Figure 25. Hannah Wilke, *Intra-Venus Series #10, June 22, 1992*, 1992-93. Chromogenic supergloss print, 71 ½" x 47 ½". Performalist self-portrait with Donald Goddard. (Courtesy of Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

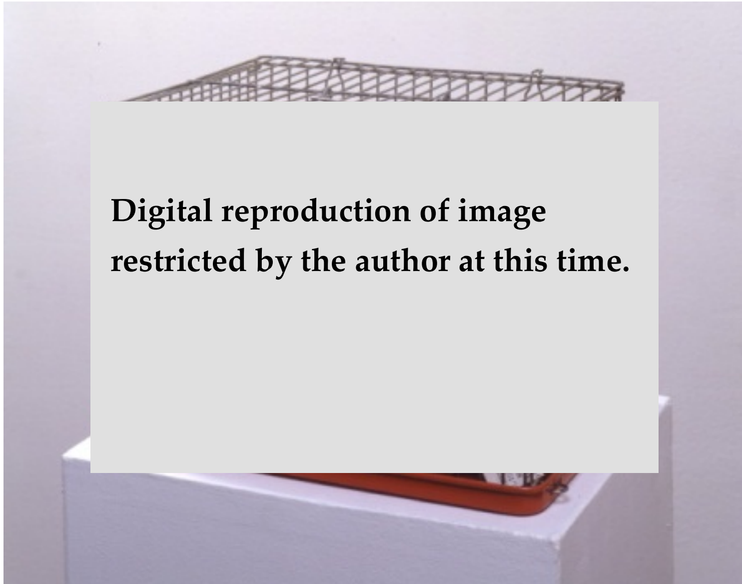

Figure 26. Hannah Wilke, *Why Not Sneeze...?*, 1992. (Photo by Dennis Cowley, courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

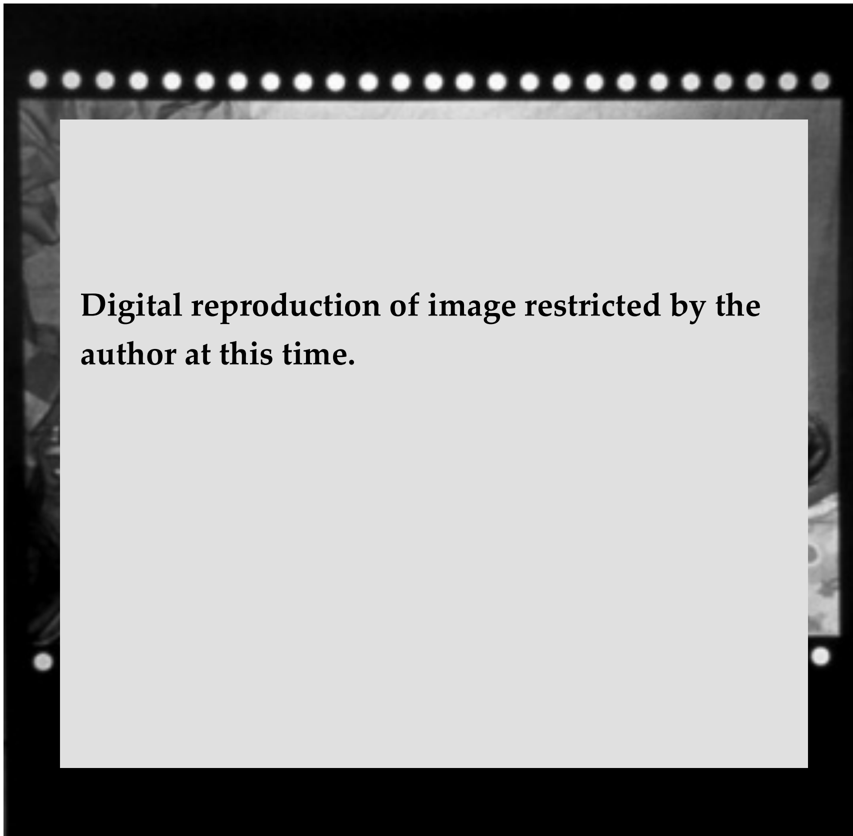

Figure 27. Hannah Wilke, *Stand Up*, 1982. Photo-offset print, 18 ¼" x 18 ¼". Performalist self-portrait with Donald Goddard. (Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

Figure 28. Deb Margolin, *O Yes I Will (I will remember the spirit and texture of this conversation)*, 2007, directed by Merri Milwe at Dixon Place, New York City. (Photo by Janusz Jaworski)

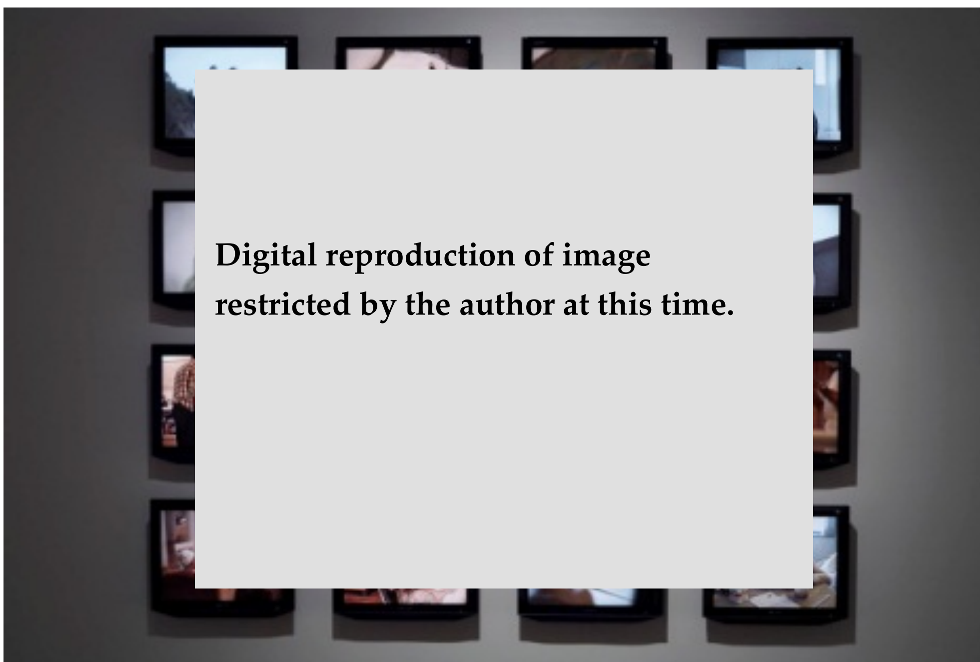

Figure 29. Hannah Wilke, *Intra-Venus Tapes*, 1990-1993. DVDs on grid of 16 video monitors. Duration, almost 2 hours. (Photo by Hermann Feldhaus, courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

Figure 30. Hannah Wilke, *So Help Me Hannah* (outtake), 1978. Performalist self-portrait with Donald Goddard. (Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

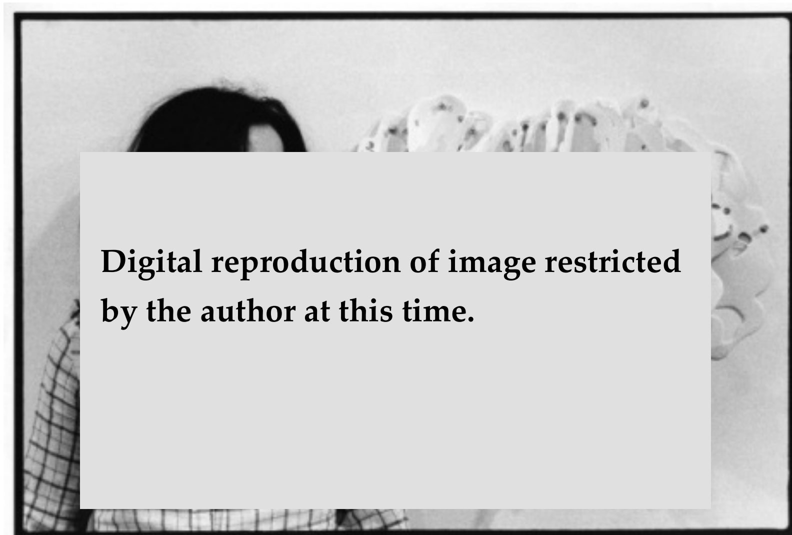

Figure 31. Installation view of 1975 show, with artist. (Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

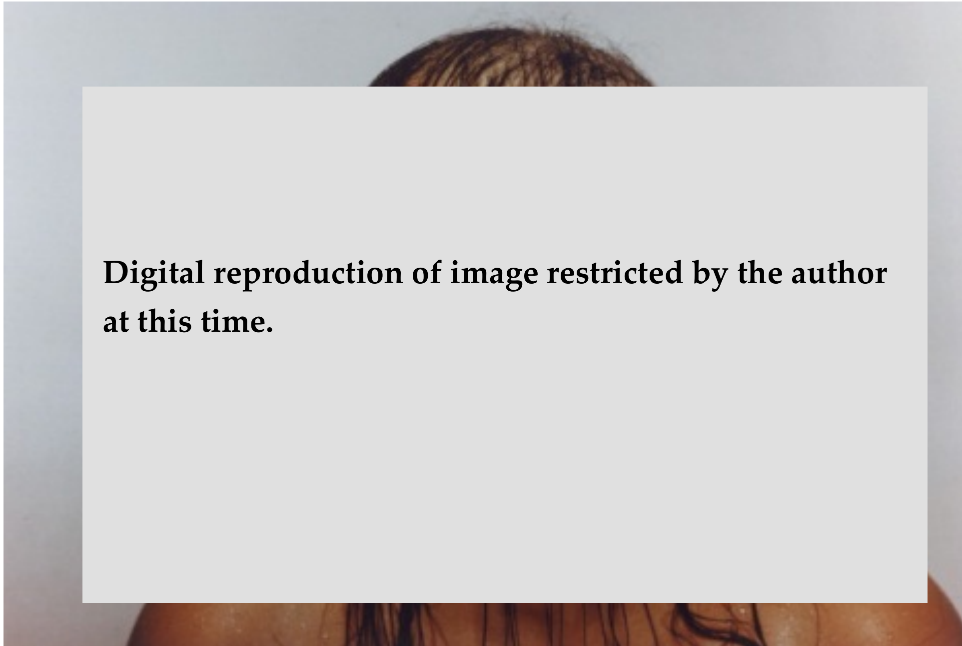

Figure 32. Hannah Wilke, *Intra-Venus Series #6, February 19, 1992*, 1992-93. Chromogenic supergloss print, 47 ½” x 71 ½”. Performalist self-portrait with Donald Goddard. (Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

Figure 33. Deb Margolin, *O Yes I Will (I will remember the spirit and texture of this conversation)*, 2007, directed by Merri Milwe at Dixon Place, New York City. (Photo by Janusz Jaworski)

Figure 34. Deb Margolin, *O Yes I Will (I will remember the spirit and texture of this conversation)*, 2007, directed by Merri Milwe at Dixon Place, New York City. (Photo by Janusz Jaworski)

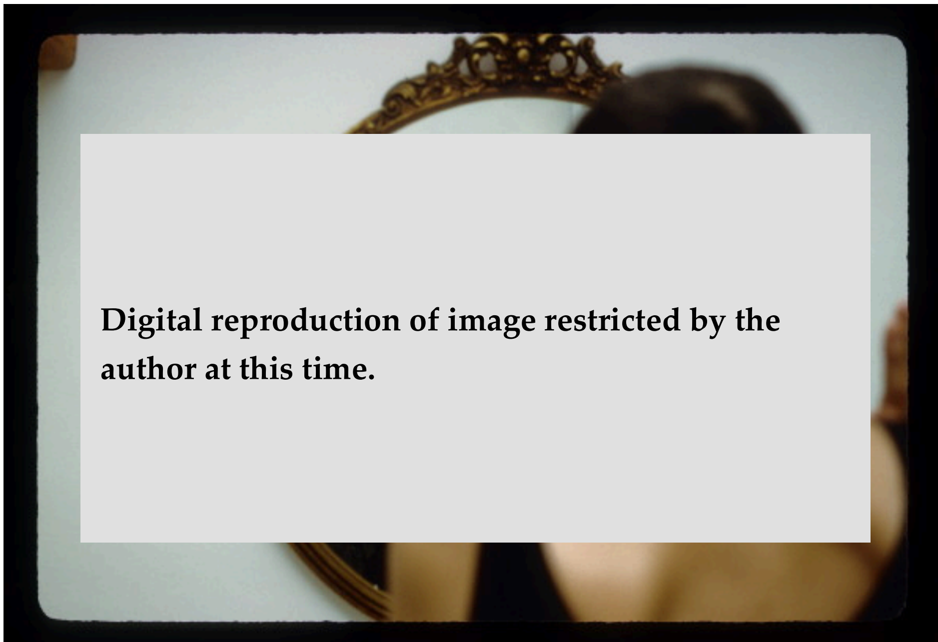

Figure 35. Hannah Wilke and Donald Goddard (December, 1992) at 62 Greene Street, New York City. (Photo by Donald Goddard)

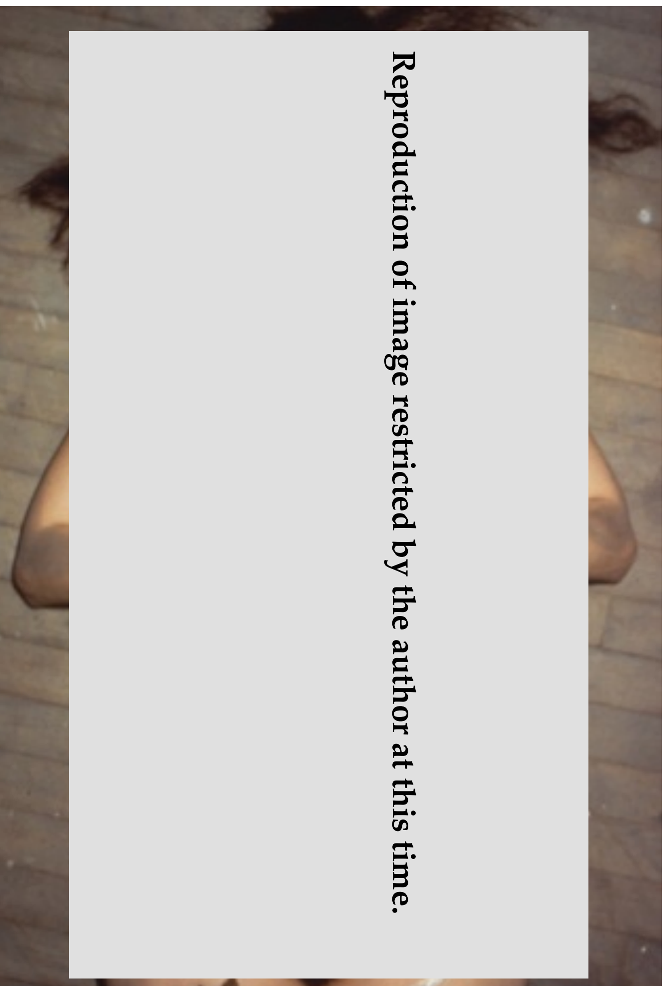

Figure 36. Hannah Wilke, *So Help Me Hannah* (outtake), 1978. Performalist self-portrait with Donald Goddard. (Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

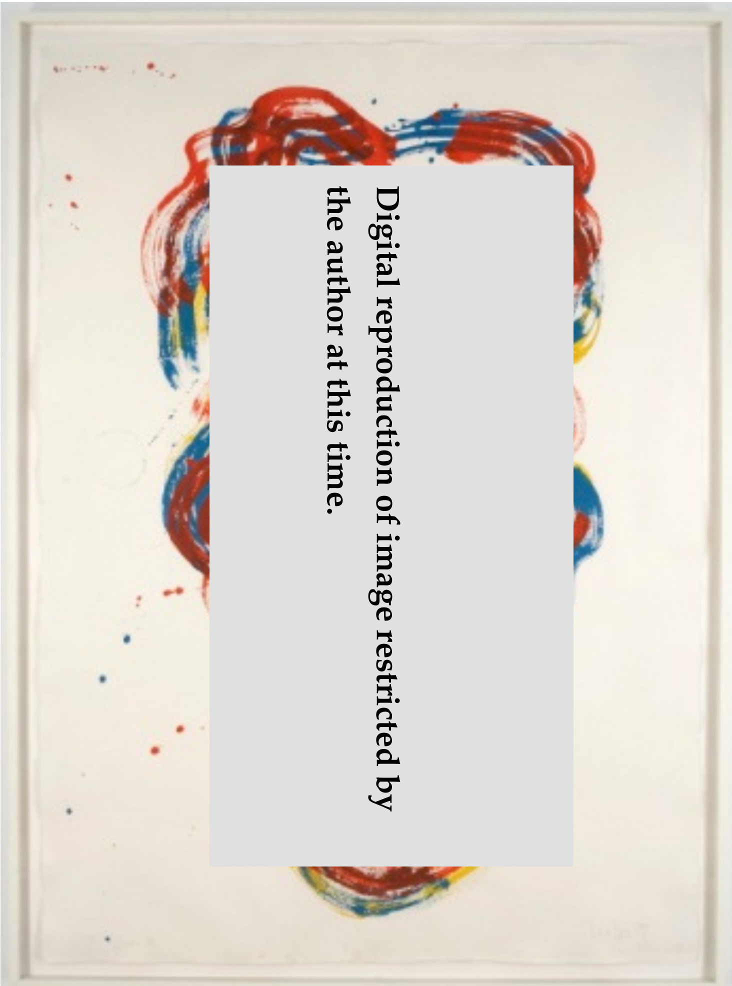

Figure 37. Hannah Wilke, *January 14, 1989*, from the "B.C. Series," 1989. Watercolor on Arches paper, 71 ½" x 51 ½". (Photo by Hermann Feldhaus, courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

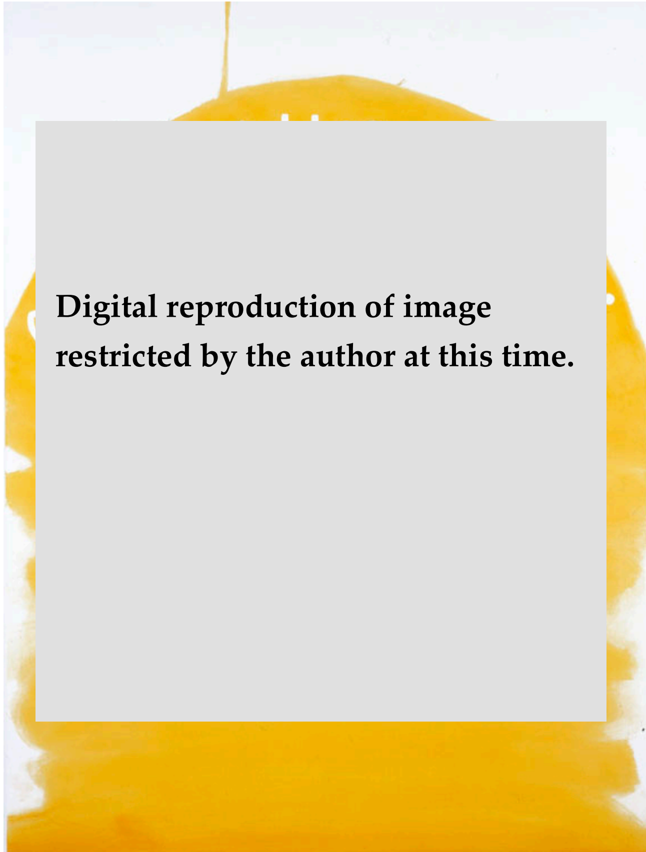

Figure 38. Deborah Kass, *Let The Sun Shine In*, 2006, from *feel good paintings for feel bad times: paintings and drawings:* 2002–2007. Oil on canvas, 60" x 45". (Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

Fig. 39. Hannah Wilke's grave site at the Green River Cemetery in Springs, New York.

Figure 40. Patricia Cronin, *Memorial to A Marriage*, 2001–02. Carrara marble, Over life-size, 84″ x 42″ x 27″, The Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, NY. (Photo by Marc Stuart Weitz, courtesy of Patricia Cronin)

Figure 41. Patricia Cronin, *Memorial to A Marriage*, 2001–02. Carrara marble, Over life-size, 84″ x 42″ x 27″, The Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, NY.

Figure 42. Patricia Cronin, *Memorial to A Marriage*, 2004. Bronze, Over life-size, 84” x 42” x 27”, The Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, NY.

APPENDIX 2.
PERFORMANCE INDEX & OTHER WRITINGS FOR DEB MARGOLIN

Plays

2010 *Imagining Madoff*, Stageworks/Hudson, Hudson, NY
2009 *Continuing the Conversation with Caryl Churchill: Seven Palestinian Children: a prayer for the other*, Theater J, Washington, D.C.
2008 *Time Is the Mercy of Eternity: a meditation in four acts*, includes *When They Quiet Down, I Start* (2005), West End Theatre, New York City
2006 *Clarisse and Larmon*, Ignite Festival, Ohio Theatre, New York City
Stalling for Time, Britebar, New York City
2005 *The Rich Silk of It*, staged reading Women's Work Festival, Women's Project, New York City
2002 *Why Cleaning Fails*, HERE Arts Center, New York City
Rock, Scissors, Paper, Humana Festival, Actor's Theatre of Louisville, Louisville, KY
2001 *Three Seconds in the Key*, P.S. 122, New York City
2000 *I Call for the Fireman and the Arsonist Comes*, play by Madeleine Olnek at Joe's Pub, Public Theater, New York City
1999 *Bringing the Fishermen Home*, Dixon Place, New York City
1997 *Critical Mass*, P.S. 122, New York City
1996 *Bearing Witnesses*, Theater for the New City, New York City
1993 *The Breaks* (w/Rae C. Wright), Women's Interart Theatre, New York City
1992 *Lesbians Who Kill*, One Dream Theatre, New York City
1990 *970-DEBB*, P.S. 122, New York City
You Don't Even Know Where the Strike Zone Is

Solo Performance Pieces

2011 *Good Morning Anita Hill It's Ginni Thomas I Just Wanted To Reach Across The Airwaves And The Years And Ask You To Consider Something I'd Love You To Consider An Apology Sometime And Some Full Explanation Of Why You Did What You Did With My Husband So Give It Some Thought And Certainly Pray About This And Come To Understand Why You Did What You Did Ok Have A Good Day*, Cultural Conversations Festival, Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA
2007 *O Yes I Will (I will remember the sprit and texture of this conversation)*, Dixon Place, New York City
2005 *Index to Idioms: A Performance Novel*, Culture Project, New York City
1996 *O Wholly Night & Other Jewish Solecisms*, Women's Interart Theatre, New York City

1995 *Carthieves! Joyrides!*, HERE Arts Center, New York City
1994 *Of Mice Bugs and Women: The Secaucus Monologue*, P.S. 122, New York City
1991 *Gestation*, Theatre Club Funambules, New York City

<u>*With Split Britches Lesbian Feminist Theatre Company*</u>

1989 *Of All the Nerve*, P.S. 122, New York City
at some point in your life you must have wondered: yo! what's with Hamlet?, WOW Theatre, New York City
1988 *In a Vacuum*, Dixon Place, New York City
1986 *Coupla Weirdos*, WOW Theatre, New York City
1982 *The God Show*, Bellevue Theater

<u>*Founding Member, Resident Playwright, Split Britches Lesbian Feminist Theatre Company*</u>

1992 *Valley of the Dolls House*, University of Hawaii, Oahu, HI
1989 *Honey, I'm Home: The Alcestis Story*, Hampshire College, Amherst, MA
1988 *Little Women: The Tragedy*, Women's Interart Theatre, New York City
1984 *Upwardly Mobile Home*, WOW Theatre, New York City
1981 *Beauty and the Beast*, WOW Theatre, New York City
1981 *Split Britches*, Women's One World Festival, New York City

<u>*Erotica*</u>

2001 *Dateline: Fire Island*
2000 *Bill Me Later* – formerly *I Am Monica Lewinsky* (1998)
1999 *Alfie and Joe*
Handling the Curves: The Erotics of Type
Til Death Do Us. . .
Var. Unpublished and untitled texts

Appendix 3.

Letter from Aileen Wuornos

See http://www.aileenfilm.com/core/letters/4-189cce1d16ca3dff796b7931e64072f5.pdf (accessed 22 April 2011).

ileen Wuornos
150924 DR#1
roward correctional Institution
.O. Box 8540
embroke Pines Florida.
33024

6-9-93

Going my Way!?

copyright of Mad

Dear Dawn,

Shoot goofed on the nose! Anyway!
This is me, 15 years after death Row. They finaly convicted the cops and set me free. So I decided to hit a few freeways again, and check out a little tooty. Wooo Wee! Havent had it in soooo wooooo long. I'm even given it away this time! God forgive me, but I need a real sensation. In this new generation, Munster said I was ugly. Shit! This is what he'll look like after 10 to 20 of hard labor. The pussy Pus. ha ha ha ha ha ...... Shit screwedup my crazy character had to write him off. It was munster. ha ha ha ha ha........
OK! now I'm pissed!!, It took me a long time to draw this guy up above!! and thats straight talk honey! Then I boo boo the page thinkin of Munster cause I hate the egg head, humpty dumpty funky pig so bad. Well!, I just hope some other swine picks up that over hauled piece of garbage and incenerates the creep in some rat infested prison pen. That piece of crap

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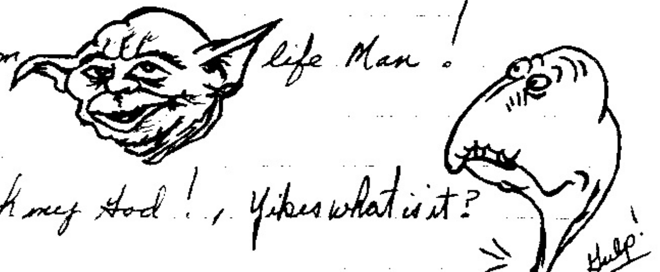
rattles my shit around. Y Aileen, calm down Calm down. remember your christian virtues. ME I dont have them any-
-more whenever I think of him and his co hosts. All I think of is hell and hopin they'll burn eternal in it. With all their evil. And that they shed on others, compelling others to be as one of them. I'm sure he and his comrades will,

Y Aileen did you free hand or copy the drawin?
ME I copied.! Now whats it too ya! I'm pissed off, now **BACK OFF**!, Y Aileen its me, Dawn, ME oh yeah, Sorry, lost my sense of reality there for a moment I hate that **Ugly** mother so bad., Munster,

Guess what Dawn! I just found out I read the cross-referrence wrong on Jesus being God. page 280 in the N.T. gives details galore on the trinity. Jesus was God as far as not being begotten. Never born, in heaven. He always was with God the Father. But the born in begotten means to the flesh. "On earth". So this is what they were trying to express. There still is 3 seperate distinct beings. One Father - One Son - One Holy Ghost. page 95 1st column B N.T.
page 204 1st column A

Wow what a switch Aili. From anger to God! I know Dawn, thats what Death Row will do to ya.

turn you alienated from life Man!



Well, my sanity has slightly returned. And now I guess its time to close Dawn. I've got to get back into the bible. Before the Devil does get a hold of me.

And how Arlee doin ?!,

I haven't heard him bark in a long..... time! :)

OK. I best close. 2 days now I've laid off the bible readin. Its time to get back in it. Love ya Dawn. Got your clippins by the Way. Funny! :) The court one was the best. The circle one, of the swedish lookin country back ground of horses, its up on my foot locker. Thanks. :) I had fun readin the stuff. The riddle I couldnt do. To bad, but it could be bad buisness. Darn! :(shucks. alright. Untill next time.

Keep eatin healthy,

Love always

Lee Aileen

P.S. 7 stamps enclosed, thought you might need some. :)

nic nic

See ya!

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