

DIRTY ART: RECONSIDERING THE WORK OF ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG,  
BRUCE CONNER, JAY DEFEO, AND EDWARD KIENHOLZ

by

NATASHA POOR

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

DIRTY ART: RECONSIDERING THE WORK OF ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG,  
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by

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Advisor: Professor Anna Chave

During the 1950s and into the early 1960s, a number of artists in the United States began to construct works that were preoccupied with dirt. Beyond incorporating various forms of dirt into their works, these artists also addressed ‘dirty’ subjects – taboo or morally fraught issues of the day such as abortion, pornography, presumably deviant sexual behavior, or capital punishment. This dissertation focuses on the works of four artists, Robert Rauschenberg, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, and Edward Kienholz, who all created works that dealt with comparable themes and that were aesthetically similar in certain respects, including in their, at once metaphorical and literal, dirtiness. Works by each of these artists are examined in relation to the 1950s’ fascination with dirt and cleanliness; a time during which Americans were bombarded with images and advice that encouraged them to clean up their homes, bodies, and behavior (whether social or political). Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz created works that specifically dealt with issues concerning domesticity and the body, two areas where social preoccupations with cleanliness converged. Through this project’s examination of dirt-related theories, economics, popular culture, and sociological and gender studies, specific commonalities

emerge in the works of these artists, particularly when contextualized in relation to the political and social environment of the 1950s. By creating aesthetically dirty works with subject matter that deeply challenged cultural attitudes concerning cleanliness and containment, Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Conner, in their own ways, drew attention to the existence of dirt and disorder beneath the surface of an ostensibly orderly and clean society.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a 1987 interview, Barbara Rose asked Robert Rauschenberg about his classes taken with Josef Albers at Black Mountain College during the early 1950s:

Rauschenberg: Total intimidation. Abuse. He would say things like, “I don’t want to know who did this.” And of course everybody in class – they were small classes – turned and looked at me. You did it again, Bob.

Rose: The other thing that all the Germans brought with them was hygiene. And even your “clean” works are really messy.

Rauschenberg: That’s what he said. I would work with gloves. I could probably have had someone else do my pasting and it still would have been messy.<sup>1</sup>

In 1961, his friend, composer John Cage, wrote about Rauschenberg’s work: “The message is conveyed by dirt which, mixed with an adhesive, sticks to itself and to the canvas upon which he places it. Crumbling and responding to changes in weather, the dirt unceasingly does my thinking.”<sup>2</sup> Edward Kienholz similarly linked his own work from this period to the concept of dirt. Commenting on the amount and quality of waste produced in the city of Los Angeles while he lived and worked there during the 1950s, Kienholz stated:

That’s one of the reasons I like Los Angeles, because Los Angeles throws away an incredible amount of value every day. I mean, it’s just discarded, shitcanned. From automobiles to desks, to clothes, to paint, to – you know, half-bags of concrete that are hardened up. I mean, whatever it is, there is an incredible waste in the city of Los Angeles, and if you’re living

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 25-26.

<sup>2</sup> John Cage, “On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work,” (1961) in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1992), 718.

on the edge of the economy like that, all the waste filters through your awareness and you take what you want.<sup>3</sup>

As evidenced by these artists' statements, during the 1950s and into the early 1960s, a number of artists began to construct works that were preoccupied with dirt. These works were composed of old and grimy objects such as clothing, doll parts, and furniture. The artists compiled assemblages and collaged fabrics and mass media images onto canvases that were often smeared or dripping with paint, at times suggestive of debris, grime, or visceral by-products. Beyond incorporating various forms of dirt into their works, these artists also addressed 'dirty' subjects – taboo or morally fraught issues of the day such as abortion, presumably deviant sexual behavior, or capital punishment. Their works often suggested decay, death, mutilation, perversity, and violence. Significantly, as this dissertation will argue, an examination of this common theme – dirt, both metaphorical and literal – can help deepen the understanding of this art historical period.

This dissertation will be the first study to focus on this dirty art produced between 1953 and 1963.<sup>4</sup> I chose to limit my examination to the works of four artists: Robert Rauschenberg (1925-), Bruce Conner (1933-), Jay DeFeo (1929-1989), and Edward Kienholz (1927-1994). Born in Port Arthur, Texas, Rauschenberg soon became associated with the New York art scene after moving there early in his artistic career during the 1950s. Well-known for his statement, "Painting relates to both art and life.

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<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Anne Bartlett Ayres, "Berman and Kienholz: Progenitors of Los Angeles Assemblage," in Maurice Tuchman, ed., *Art in Los Angeles: Seventeen Artists in the Sixties* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1981), 11.

<sup>4</sup> This decade is marked by the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953 and the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963.

Neither can be made. (I try to act in the gap between the two.),”<sup>5</sup> Rauschenberg fused conventional artistic materials with found objects from everyday life. His works (or “combines,” as he called them) present a disorderly mixture of paint and objects such as photographs, newspaper clippings, fabric, and discarded items that he salvaged from the trash and streets of New York City.

Like Rauschenberg, Bruce Conner gathered everyday objects and melded them together to create works that most often addressed issues concerning death, decay, violence, and sexuality. Born in McPherson, Kansas, Conner settled in San Francisco in 1957, where he developed his assemblage work. While in San Francisco, Conner became close friends with Jay DeFeo, who had lived and worked in the area for most of her artistic career. During the 1950s, DeFeo created several collages composed of fragmented imagery of nude female bodies, in addition to creating her most well-known and monumental work The Rose (1958-1966). Born in Fairfield, Washington, Kienholz moved to Los Angeles in 1953, where he began to create a body of works assembled from discarded objects, works that commented unambiguously and harshly on the social and political climate of the 1950s and 1960s.

While other artists in the United States at this time created works in a related vein (e.g., Cy Twombly, Allan Kaprow, or Wallace Berman), the four I have chosen to examine specifically dealt with issues concerning domesticity and the body, two areas where social preoccupations with cleanliness converged. In addition, a number of European artists (such as those associated with the Nouveaux Réalistes and Fluxus) were creating similar works, but this project focuses on the United States because I am

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<sup>5</sup> Dorothy C. Miller, *Sixteen Americans*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 58.

interested in the specific impact that the United States' social and political environment had on artistic works of this nature. Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz referenced the surrounding world in their works and, significantly, these references most often engaged concepts regarding dirtiness and cleanliness.

Works by each of these artists can be understood as challenging the social institutions embraced by mainstream society during this period through their often taboo subject matter and their incorporation of aesthetically dirty objects. Throughout the 1950s, Americans were bombarded with images and advice that encouraged them to clean up their homes, bodies, and behavior – advice that was most often directed towards women and the areas of society where women were considered to be more in control: the family and the domestic space.<sup>6</sup> This material ranged from advertisements, such as Tide's 1956 call for "the cleanest clean possible," to films on hygiene shown to schoolchildren, and, on a metaphorical level, to the attempt to purge communism (coded as dirty) from the American democratic society.

The works of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz critiqued dominant power structures during the 1950s that were constituted in terms of morality, culture, politics, and gender. Conceptualizing these power structures in terms of cleanliness as they worked on various levels, I will propose that one of the primary means by which these artists confronted these structures in their art was through the concept of dirt, employing it literally and figuratively on a number of different levels. First, these artists

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<sup>6</sup> There is a vast amount of literature on the subject of women and their societal role as the controllers and coordinators of dirt. For a few examples, see Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon, 1982); Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); and Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

incorporated and referred to literal dirt; second, their works conceptually linked dirt to morality, addressing issues such as sex and violence; and, third, their works engaged in the symbolic relationship between dirt, politics, and governing social ideologies, such as communism and Cold War politics. Likewise, this project will engage the concepts of dirt in a similar manner, particularly in terms of issues related to morality, politics, and social behavior.

In addition, this dissertation will explore both the idealized imagery found in 1950s popular culture and the murkier countercultures that simultaneously existed during that time. Significantly, the works of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz drew from both of these cultural extremes. I will show that the romanticized images and ideologies found in popular culture did not necessarily reflect the behaviors or attitudes of the mainstream, much less the marginal viewing public, instead representing socially desirable ideals. In accordance with encouraging and maintaining these high social standards (and the prevalent social desire to strictly regulate and control bodies, sexuality, and dirt), a proliferation of studies, literature, and debate emerged concerning the dirt of society. Dialogue ensued regarding the harmful effects of comic books, pornography, prostitution, domineering mothers, absent fathers, juvenile delinquency, violence and crime, and homosexuality.

This dissertation will argue that the dirty art of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz engaged in these contemporaneous dialogues by addressing issues related to violence, sexuality, domesticity, and familial roles. In their own ways, their works subverted the repressive underlying assumptions and prevailing images of domesticity and the body, particularly that of the sexualized female body. Culling their imagery and

subjects from pornographic and science fiction magazines, film noir, pulp fiction, comics, and everyday newspaper headlines, these artists produced a body of works that foregrounded disgust, fragmentation, waste, and, at times, a sense of hopelessness. They specifically pulled – literally and figuratively – from the multitude of dirt that existed in the society around them.

In addition, the artists addressed in this dissertation each created a body of works that used the artistic techniques of assemblage and collage in foregrounding uncleanliness and disorder. Assemblage and collage were specifically used by Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz to create works that tended to address issues concerning sexuality, the body, and domesticity. In their use of these artistic techniques, these artists continued a rich artistic history during which these same methods had been used often as a means to challenge dominant political, cultural, and social orders.<sup>7</sup> Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters, Hannah Höch, Max Ernst, and Joseph Cornell, to name a few, used these mediums to engage with and comment on the world around them during the first half of the twentieth century. By the 1950s, assemblage had become a widely used technique in the Euro-American art world and was popularized with the 1961 Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, "The Art of Assemblage," which included works by both Kienholz and Conner.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dawn Ades, *Photomontage* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986); Maud Lavin, *Cut With the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993); Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); and Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21 #1 (September 1982): 43-56, are just a few studies that have addressed the transgressive potential of these artistic modalities during the twentieth century.

<sup>8</sup> John Elderfield has noted that the word *assemblage* was "chosen by the show's curator, William C. Seitz, in order to cover 'all forms of composite art and modes of juxtaposition.' Thus, its reference is, on the one hand, broader than that of the word *collage*, in including fully three-dimensional as well as planar works, and, on the other hand, more specific than that of the word *construction*, in stressing the

In terms of art history, the 1950s and early 1960s work of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz has been nebulously defined. This artistic period as a whole, which has historically resisted simple categorization because it included such a diverse range of artistic practices, might in itself be considered dirty in that it defies straightforward identification. Anthropologist Mary Douglas has defined the hybrid as a disturbance of society's structure of ideas; what is hybrid does not fit into any one definition or category. The works created during this period might be said to present more of a danger to the established art historical order inasmuch as they do not easily fit into an artistic category. While my goal is not to impose a clean and artificial label on a wide range of tendencies, certain commonalities stand out and deserve underlining. By analyzing one of the most salient aspects – the dirtiness of this art – in relation to 1950s society, I intend to define it as a distinctive movement that purposely foregrounded uncleanliness and disorder.

In this project, my goal is to reframe some of the 1950s United States artists who historically have been associated with this ambiguous period. Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz have at times been viewed as part of a movement broadly referred to as Neo-Dada, a movement that encompassed such practices as incorporating found objects through collage and assemblage, thereby fusing art with everyday life.<sup>9</sup> Terming

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accumulation of found elements in such a way that they remain separately recognizable. In effect, assemblage is collage in both two and three dimensions.” See John Elderfield, “Preface,” in John Elderfield, ed., *Essays on Assemblage, Studies in Modern Art, No.2* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 7. Also see Sandra Leonard Starr, *Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art* (Santa Monica, Calif.: James Corcoran Gallery, Shoshana Wayne Gallery, and Pence Gallery, 1988), which provides a good history of assemblage art during the twentieth century.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, Rauschenberg was one of the first artists, along with Jasper Johns and Allan Kaprow, to be designated a Neo-Dadaist in 1958. See Susan Hapgood, *Neo-Dada: Redefining Art, 1958-62* (New York: The American Federation of the Arts, 1994), 12.

the work of these artists “Neo-Dada” was an attempt to describe and articulate common themes running through their works, and emphasized the elements that closely linked the works of these artists to the Dadaists, a politically and socially radical, early twentieth-century, European and American movement that used found objects and collage to express ideas about the joining of art and life.

Certainly, the works of a number of Dadaists could be compared to works by Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz. For example, DeFeo’s collages of fragmented female bodies are reminiscent of Hannah Höch’s photomontages in terms of their visual aesthetics as well as in their explorations of female sexuality and gender identity.<sup>10</sup> In addition, many of Rauschenberg’s, Conner’s, and Kienholz’s collages and assemblages bring to mind the work of Kurt Schwitters. Particularly, Kienholz’s three-dimensional tableaux and DeFeo’s The Rose can be seen in relation to Schwitters’ Merzbau (1919-1937) in that these works combined architectural, collage, and sculptural elements that physically enveloped both viewers and their surrounding environments.<sup>11</sup>

With only a cursory knowledge of art history during the 1950s, Kienholz later remembered his initial introduction to Schwitters’ work: “Christ, I was in Los Angeles without a sense of history of art. Like John Reed stole a book one time in Los Angeles and brought it into Ferus Gallery.... I’d never heard of Schwitters. And that was in

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on Hannah Höch’s photomontages, see Lavin, *Cut With the Kitchen Knife*.

<sup>11</sup> For more information on Kurt Schwitters see Dorothea Dietrich, *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters: Tradition and Innovation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

'57.'"<sup>12</sup> In 1992, Kienholz recalled that his response to Schwitters at that time was "Wow! What stuff!"<sup>13</sup> Rauschenberg recalled a similar, initial response to these early twentieth-century works:

Once I was in a museum and I saw a Picasso collage. He had done it in 1924, the year before I was born. I didn't know about collage at the time and I thought, That's not fair – I wasn't born yet! Then I saw Marcel Duchamp's stool with the bicycle wheel and I thought that was the most fantastic piece of sculpture I'd ever seen.... I found out shortly thereafter about collage because everyone was talking about Schwitters and I had to find out about him.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, although the works of the artists addressed in this dissertation could certainly be seen in relation to Dadaist works, the artists themselves often resisted the Neo-Dada label. For example, in 1962, Kienholz stated: "Everybody lumps us together and says 'Oh well, it's just a rebirth of Dada' – which is not true. The need is different. There's no Dada need, it's just a thing of this time. The thing is social protest."<sup>15</sup> While the spirit in which the term Neo-Dada was coined is significant, Kienholz's statement points to a potential problem with this broad term – the lumping together of some fairly diverse figures. For example, in attempting to pinpoint commonalities among a range of artists, Susan Hapgood's 1994 Neo-Dada: Redefining Art, 1958-62 – although a significant contribution to the study of this period – is so encompassing that it fails to advance a

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<sup>12</sup> As quoted from a 1977 interview in Rebecca Solnit, "Heretical Constellations: Notes on California, 1946-61," in Lisa Phillips, ed., *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), 74.

<sup>13</sup> Hapgood, *Neo-Dada*, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, 57.

<sup>15</sup> As quoted in Arthur Secunda, "John Bernhardt, Charles Frazier, Edward Kienholz," *Artforum* (November 1962): 31.

concentrated examination of the particularities of this period.<sup>16</sup> The typical, alternate approach is to divide this period into a multitude of different movements, such as the California Assemblagists, the Beats, Happenings, Fluxus, and Junk Sculpture. Although these categories can be useful, they tend to result in the fragmenting of this generation of artists into disparate groups, while blurring the character of the period as a whole.

Significantly, the artists addressed in this dissertation rarely aligned themselves with or considered themselves to be part of any particular group. For example, Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz individually have been associated with a movement that specifically challenged the mainstream social order, namely that (largely young) group of artists, writers, and poets called the “Beats” or the “Beat Generation.”<sup>17</sup> The Beats famously rejected the American middle-class and the values associated with it, such as mass consumption, the traditional family, suburban domesticity, and sexual repression. Yet, although embracing the values associated with the Beats, these artists often resisted being labeled as such.<sup>18</sup> Conner, for example, believed that “Beat” was a

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<sup>16</sup> Hapgood, *Neo-Dada*. Also see Catherine Anne Craft, *Constellations of Past and Present: (Neo-) Dada, the Avant-Garde, and the New York Art World, 1951-1965* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> For a comprehensive examination of Beat culture, see Phillips, *Beat Culture and the New America*. Also see Brenda Knight, *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution* (Berkeley, Calif.: Conari Press, 1996), which examines the often-ignored roles that women played in the Beat Generation. For a contemporaneous perspective on the Beats, see “The Beat Mystique,” *Playboy* (February 1958): 20, 84-87, which is composed of three separate short articles by Herbert Gold, “What It Is – Whence It Came,” Sam Boal, “Cool Swinging in New York,” and Noel Clad, “A Frigid Frolic in Frisco.” In addition, see Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg, eds., *The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1958), which not only discusses the meaning of Beat (in both the American and British contexts), but also includes contributions by numerous Beat writers.

<sup>18</sup> San Francisco artist Joan Brown, who was close friends with Conner and DeFeo and who was also a member of Conner’s artistic community, The Ratbastard Protective Society, stated that: “The Beats really weren’t in my generation. I came from the bohemian era. A lot of the Beats to me were a bunch of bums in the sense the hippies were, kind of hanger-ons, more affected in attitude than actually doing something, taking the trappings, and becoming that. I saw McClure and Conner and Wally Berman much more in a bohemian light than as the Beat generation.” As quoted in Starr, *Lost and Found in California*,

derogatory term and felt that the accompanying publicity “exploited, degenerated, and decayed” artists into being mere “providers for art boutiques.”<sup>19</sup> Notably, Conner’s first experience with the Beat concept was closely linked with dirtiness:

I remember I had a collage in the show [in June 1958 at the East West Gallery in San Francisco, California]. There was a little dusty mirror in it and part of a doll. I found [Ms. Gechtoff, the owner of the gallery] in there cleaning it, spitting on the mirror and cleaning it. I said, “Don’t do that.” She said, “Well, it’s dirty. What’s the matter? You don’t like clean? What’s the matter with you? Are you some kind of beatnik? Are you one of those dirty beatniks?” That was the first time I had heard the word. It was a nasty thing to say. You know, like sputnik had happened. It was derogatory.<sup>20</sup>

Although he created aesthetically and metaphorically dirty works, Conner was offended by the insinuation that he himself was physically dirty.<sup>21</sup>

Kienholz’s association with the Beats also was tenuous, although he appreciated their desire for social change. In a 1977 interview, he remembered: “Back at the time of

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100. George Herms, who was also close friends with Conner and DeFeo, stated: “There was bohemia before there were beatniks. What we’re talking about is the West Coast version of bohemia.” Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1995), 168. Smith also asserts that Conner’s formation of The Ratbastard Protective Society was an attempt to substitute “rat bastard” for “beat.”

<sup>20</sup> Paul Karlstrom, “Interview with Bruce Conner,” *Smithsonian Archives of American Art* (12 August 1974): 30.

<sup>21</sup> Apparently, it was a typical assumption at that time that Beat artists were not very clean. For example, Robert M. Coates offered this description of the Beat artist: “The artist’s life, however, has traditionally been ramshackle, gregarious, and poverty-stricken. His studio is frequently strewn with paint, rubbish, and rickety furnishings; his dress is careless and his manners are unconventional.” Robert M. Coates, “The Art Galleries: The ‘Beat’ Beat in Art,” *The New Yorker* (2 January 1960): 60. Perhaps Conner would have been more pleased with the description provided in a 1959 review by Miriam Dungan Cross, who contrasted his clean looks and workspace with his dirty art: “Photographs of the handsome, clean-shaven young Bruce Conner in his tidy studio hardly prepared us for the ‘beatest’ of the new Dada. One Conner object is a faded plush frame. Between two glass sides is stuffed without order such refuse as an old shoe, twisted paint tube, broken doll, stained rags, crumpled newspaper and a fry pan. On the surface hangs a black stocking and a piece of a beaded dress. Surreptitious inclusion of erotic pictures intensifies the lewd impact.” Miriam Dungan Cross, “Shocking ‘Beat’ Art Displayed,” *Oakland Tribune* (29 November 1959): 4C.

Kerouac, there was a change in the air; you could feel a change coming.”<sup>22</sup> Robert L. Pincus has drawn a parallel between the works of Kienholz and the Beat writers (which could apply to Conner’s works as well), stating: “The strongest contemporaneous parallels, for Kienholz’s [works], are to be found in texts that articulate, or are allied with, the Beat sensibility of the late fifties and early sixties.” Referring to Allen Ginsberg’s Howl and Other Poems (1956), William Burroughs’s Naked Lunch (1959), and Norman Mailer’s essay “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster” (1957), he stated that these works “take a passionately critical stance toward American society too. With these writers, Kienholz shared a penchant for horrific images – those pictures of American society, visual or verbal, which could reveal the sordid aspects of American society.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, even though Kienholz associated with a number of Beat artists and poets,<sup>24</sup> he did not specifically align himself with this group and his artistic approach varied in certain ways. As Pincus pointed out, Kienholz parted ways with the Beats “in his rejection of the role of the artist as spiritual visionary.”<sup>25</sup> Certainly, Kienholz’s works avoided an engagement with the mystical and, instead, focused on the everyday material world.

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<sup>22</sup> Lawrence Weschler, *Edward Kienholz: Los Angeles Art Community Group Portrait* (Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, 1977), 126.

<sup>23</sup> Robert L. Pincus, *On a Scale that Competes with the World: The Art of Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), 13.

<sup>24</sup> Kienholz was the co-owner (along with Walter Hopps) of The Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles (1957-1958), which showed the work of Wallace Berman and hosted readings for the poets Michael McClure and Robert Duncan. *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Pincus stated that Kienholz was “thoroughly and unequivocally [sic] atheist.” *Ibid.*, 16.

In the past and current literature on DeFeo, her works are often categorized as part of the Beat movement;<sup>26</sup> yet, she did not consider herself to be part of this group.<sup>27</sup> More than likely, DeFeo has been associated with them because of her geographical location and her close association with Beat writers and poets.<sup>28</sup> While supportive of the work created by this circle of friends, DeFeo most often described her work as a mix of eclectic elements, rather than as Beat: “[My work is] a kind of classic style.... influenced by the Renaissance.... But at the same time something that is essentially either funky or primitive.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Rauschenberg has also been linked with the Beats;<sup>30</sup> but, this association was largely due to his circle of friends in New York (particularly John Cage and Merce Cunningham, and his connections with the Judson Dance Group) and to his attendance in the early fifties at Black Mountain College, a school in North Carolina that was known for its connections to this movement.

The compartmentalization of the artists addressed in this dissertation as part of the Beat movement exemplifies the manner in which this period is often approached.

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<sup>26</sup> For example, see Knight, *Women of the Beat Generation*; Phillips, *Beat Culture and the New America*; Thomas Albright, “The Beat Artists Revisited,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (23 October 1983); Joseph Czarnecki, “Reliving the Beat Period,” *Artweek* (22 February 1975): 11-12; and Cross, “Shocking ‘Beat’ Art Displayed.”

<sup>27</sup> Jane Green and Leah Levy similarly note: “Yet, despite her close associations with Beat-era poets, DeFeo herself never claimed to be a Beat artist. Her art was driven by her own set of ideas and artistic vision.” Jane Green and Leah Levy, “Introduction,” in Jane Green and Leah Levy, eds., *Jay DeFeo and The Rose* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press and New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2003), 2.

<sup>28</sup> DeFeo was close friends with McClure and Berman. In addition, DeFeo’s *The Eyes* (1958) was inspired by a poem by the Beat poet Philip Lamantia, a portion of which she wrote on the work’s verso. See Marla Prather, “Foreword: Beside *The Rose*: DeFeo’s Work at the Whitney Museum,” in Green and Levy, eds., *Jay DeFeo and The Rose*, xvi.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Karlstrom, “Interview with Jay DeFeo,” *Smithsonian Archives of American Art* (3 June 1975): 3.

<sup>30</sup> Phillips, *Beat Culture and the New America*. Also see Coates, “The Art Galleries.”

Although certainly aligned with particular characteristics from this movement and others as well, the artists themselves resisted being categorized as such. While this dissertation may be seen as a similar attempt to neatly separate and define the works of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz, it varies from traditional approaches in that it acknowledges the messiness of this art historical period. Significantly, in my examinations of these artists' works in relation to the prevalent social order, the politics of cleanliness, and the dirtiness of the countercultures from which they drew inspiration, I argue that these aspects were all intermingled and ultimately contributed to the disorder of this artistic period. Approached from this perspective, this dissertation will provide broader sociopolitical viewpoints from which to view the works of these artists, in addition to offering a foundation by which many of the other groups associated with this artistic period potentially can be examined.<sup>31</sup>

Most often, critics and historians frame this period as transitional – from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art – rather than examining it as a significant moment in and of itself. For example, Sidra Stich's Made in USA: An Americanization in Modern Art, the '50s and '60s (1987) focused on particular qualities of the works from this period that categorized them as transitional and argued that they provided the basis for newly emerging movements such as Pop and Minimalism.<sup>32</sup> Another exhibition and catalogue, Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition 1955-62 (1992) approached this artistic period in a similar manner in terms of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, rather than

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<sup>31</sup> Bill Berkson similarly has proposed that DeFeo's *The Rose* (1958-1966) should be considered outside both the Beat and West Coast contexts and instead in relation to a much broader art community, one that encompasses the New York art world. See Bill Berkson, "Without *The Rose*: DeFeo in Sixteen Americans," in Green and Levy, eds., *Jay DeFeo and The Rose*, 43-54.

<sup>32</sup> Sidra Stich, *Made in USA: An Americanization in Modern Art, the '50s and '60s* (Berkeley: University Art Museum and University of California Press, 1987).

regarding the work produced during this period as unique and examining it in relation to its specific social and political context. In the introduction, Paul Schimmel and Donna De Salvo stated that this work:

...remains perplexing, without a satisfactory “label,” for the work produced during this time combines the stylistic attributes of both movements. This work, which we have chosen to call “hand-painted Pop,” was a product of the intense experimentation taking place at a time when one movement was losing its momentum and another was just beginning.<sup>33</sup>

Due to this focus on the relationship between the Abstract Expressionists and the emerging Pop artists, the essays in this book tended to overlook a number of distinctive tendencies of this period as a whole. For example, although Schimmel and De Salvo acknowledged the importance of sculpture, assemblage, and collage during this time, they ultimately decided to include in the show only painted works and to exclude sculpture.<sup>34</sup>

Conversely, the works I have chosen to focus on in this dissertation might be said to be largely sculptural – including assemblage and collage – because it is in these types of works that the uniqueness of the period surfaces. Yet, many of these works also included the medium of paint, so that to separate sculpture from painting creates an artificial demarcation and oversimplifies the artistic initiatives of the period. Although I concur that the artists focused on in this dissertation did influence the movements that developed during and immediately after this period, studies such as Made in USA and Hand-Painted Pop tend to overlook the specific characteristics that serve to separate them from dominant movements, such as Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art.

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Schimmel and Donna De Salvo, “Introduction,” in Russell Ferguson, ed., *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition 1955-62* (Los Angeles and New York: MOCA and Rizzoli International Publications, 1992), 16.

<sup>34</sup> They did include the work of Claes Oldenburg, whose works they believed had “strong painterly and two-dimensional qualities.” Ibid., 17.

There also has been a strong tendency among scholars not only to divide the art and the artists of this period between the East and West coasts, but also to ignore one for the sake of the other. For example, Barbara Haskell's Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance 1958-1964 (1984), not only approached this as a transitional period, but focused solely on New York based artists, thereby ignoring the artistic contributions to this period by West Coast artists.<sup>35</sup> While there has of course been a New York bias in art history, numerous books have addressed the importance and contributions of California artists as well; but, in doing so, they again set up a geographical dichotomy. Two examples, which the present dissertation draws from, are Richard Cándida Smith's Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California (1995) and Rebecca Solnit's Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era (1990).<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, there is a certain amount of validity in approaching this period from a geographical perspective. For example, the art market in California differed from that of New York. West Coast artists, to an extent, existed outside of the established art world that dominated New York and therefore had more freedom to develop their own

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<sup>35</sup> Haskell does mention Kienholz briefly in a footnote, explaining his exclusion from the book as such: "The essay excludes... the art of certain other major American artists – for the most part figurative painters and California Pop and assemblage artists – whose work came to maturity at this time but who did not significantly contribute to the development of the vanguard aesthetic which came to dominate the later 1960s. For example, California assemblagists Ed Kienholz and George Herms, and Pop artists Ed Ruscha and Joe Goode remained linked to the Surrealist tradition; their work, therefore, while outstanding on its own terms, did not break radically from the past." Barbara Haskell, *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance 1958-1964* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1984), 109, footnote #3. Bruce Conner was briefly mentioned as a filmmaker in an included essay addressing the period's independent film industry. See John G. Hanhardt, "The American Independent Cinema 1958-1964," in Haskell, *Blam!*, 123.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, *Utopia and Dissent* and Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco, Calif.: City Lights Books, 1990). Also see Starr, *Lost and Found in California*; Tuchman, ed., *Art in Los Angeles*; and Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast* (New York and Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1974).

particular artistic approaches. One goal of this dissertation, however, is to provide a foundation, a new set of categories, by which artists from this period, geography notwithstanding, can be examined – a foundation that takes into consideration politics, popular culture, dominant social attitudes, and the mass media.

This dissertation turns to other fields and methodological models in order to provide a different perspective on the works by Rauschenberg, Kienholz, Conner, and DeFeo and on this period in art history.<sup>37</sup> In particular, I rely on a number of studies that examine dirt and its social and political significance. For example, Patricia Yaeger's *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing 1930-1990* (2000), which explored the concept of dirt in women's southern writing in relation to broader social, political, and cultural mores, has been extremely useful.<sup>38</sup> Suellen Hoy's *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (1995) also provided an historical framework for examining dirt in regards to the United States' specific social climate.<sup>39</sup> While there have been numerous studies on dirt and its potentially transgressive position within varying social systems, the goal of this dissertation is to examine these established, dirt-related theories in a new context, specifically that of 1950s United States art.

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<sup>37</sup> Robert L. Pincus, who has written extensively on Kienholz, has saliently argued: "The insistent confrontation of [Kienholz's] art with problematic aspects of the social arena also asks that one view these works as part of a larger tradition of cultural criticism. Ultimately, then [his] art insists on an interdisciplinary approach..." Pincus, *On a Scale*, xiii.

<sup>38</sup> Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing 1930-1990* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000). Also see Laura Kipnis, *The Female Thing: Dirt, Sex, Envy, Vulnerability* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006); Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986); and Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York and Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966).

<sup>39</sup> Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*.

This dissertation will also rely on a number of sociological studies on the 1950s, which, during the last fifteen years, have begun to examine and question the stereotypical images linked with this period. Joanne Meyerowitz's edited volume, Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960 (1994) and Stephanie Coontz's The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap (1992) are just two examples that illuminated the tensions that existed beneath society's supposed placid surface in the 1950s.<sup>40</sup> Joel Foreman's "Introduction" in The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons (1997) was particularly useful in its methodological approach. Pointing out that many writers discuss this period as setting the stage and an incubation period for the radicalism of the 1960s, Foreman argues instead that this was a time of rebellion in and of itself.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, my examination of the works by Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz advances from the position that they were part of a burgeoning social insurgence, engaged in the tension, conflict, and resistance that was emergent during the 1950s.

Significantly, as I have pointed out, Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz were not members of a united group and did not align themselves with other groups of the period, such as the Beats. In addition, all four of these artists created unique bodies of

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<sup>40</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-60* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994) and Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). Also see Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

<sup>41</sup> Foreman argues: "It is my contention that to so privilege disruption and struggle is to resurrect and reaffirm what was abundantly apparent to the people of the postwar era, namely, that they were living during a time of 'social change and cultural complexity.' Martin Luther King knew it. As did Paul Robeson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Whittaker Chambers, Frantz Fanon, Hugh Hefner, Alfred Kinsey, John Kenneth Galbraith, Christine Jorgenson, and Alan Freed – just to name a diverse few. Even the notable conservatives of the time – the J. Edgar Hoovers and the Marynia Farnhams and the Ferdinand Lundbergs – knew it. Why else were they struggling so determinedly to withstand change and cultural innovation?" Joel Foreman, "Introduction," in Joel Foreman, ed., *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 5.

work and engaged in dissimilar artistic careers – for example, Rauschenberg’s avid participation in the New York art scene markedly contrasted with DeFeo’s reclusive-like artistic practices that were executed intentionally in the margins of the art world. Yet, even though situated in different cities and even on different coasts, the artists addressed in this dissertation all created works that dealt with comparable themes and that were aesthetically similar in certain respects, including in their, at once metaphorical and literal, dirtiness. One of the main goals of this dissertation is to examine how this rather disparate group of artists all came to be preoccupied with the concept of dirt. Through this project’s examination of dirt-related theories, economics, popular culture, and sociological and gender studies, specific commonalities emerge in the works of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz, particularly when contextualized in relation to the political and social environment of the 1950s.

The main portion of this dissertation is divided into four chapters. Chapter one, “1950s United States and Its Campaign for Cleanliness,” will argue that these artists created works that blatantly intervened in the 1950s campaign for cleanliness by refusing to repress the dirt that threatened American society. This chapter will consider first why this campaign for cleanliness might have arisen specifically during the 1950s and then examine its connection to the works of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz. In addition, it will provide a better understanding of the uneasy social and political atmosphere of this time and how that specific climate led to this focus on cleanliness and order, entailing an examination of the Cold War and the drastic increase in mass consumption. I will argue that these artists’ deviations from both mainstream art and

society were integral to a larger agenda, namely a tacit critique of bourgeois consumer society as well as a critique of the United States' repressive dominant social order.

Chapter two, "Defining a Period: Violence and Masculinity in 1950s Dirty Art," will consider the artistic climate of the 1950s, in particular the relationship between the artists addressed in this dissertation and the dominant United States art movement of the time, Abstract Expressionism. Rauschenberg, who worked mainly in New York, and Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz, who worked largely in San Francisco and Los Angeles, produced works that were generally marginal or opposed to Abstract Expressionism, which was centered in New York. This chapter will examine how Cold War ideologies and dominant social perspectives conditioned the reception of Abstract Expressionism, particularly in terms of violence and constructions of masculinity. I will argue that the works by the artists discussed herein specifically engaged these themes in a manner that both positioned them in opposition to the dominant art movement and that enabled them to comment on issues concerning social and governmental controls.

Chapter three, "Domesticity's Dirt: Beneath the Spotless Surface," will analyze the concepts of domesticity and family in the works of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz. Significantly, the domestic sphere exemplifies the principal space in which the body and its potential dirt and taboos are confronted and negotiated. By refusing to repress dirt, these artists tainted the sanctity of domesticity and questioned the safety and happiness of the 1950s image of the ideal home and family. Most often the vision of the family that was presented in mainstream culture was based on rigid and clearly demarcated gender and familial roles, which were closely linked to the home and to this period's attempts to maintain a semblance of order in a chaotic world. While it is

commonly understood that domestic space is largely where subjectivity is formed and where gender roles and identities are established and performed,<sup>42</sup> it was emphasized during this time that the home was also the site where individuals were shaped into good Americans: patriotic, moral, consumers, traditionally gendered, and heterosexual. Yet, as will be examined in the works of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz, there was a sharp contrast between the imagery embraced by mainstream culture and everyday realities. These artists' works can be understood as countering not only romanticized imagery of the family and home, but, more importantly, as questioning the impetus behind the collective social desire for these idealized representations.

Chapter four, "The Dirty Female Body: Sexuality and Degradation," will examine the treatment of the human body in the works of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz, particularly the sexualized female body and the concept of throwaway bodies<sup>43</sup> (bodies deemed socially transgressive and therefore ignored by or regulated harshly by society). This chapter will pick up some of the themes introduced in chapter one in relation to commodity culture, thereby drawing a connection between throwaway culture and throwaway bodies. Works will be examined that depict the female body, specifically those that focus on a transgressive sexuality and degraded bodily conditions, and that highlight the body's frailty, its fragmented and debased conditions, and its lapses in adherence to societal codes. This chapter will argue that these works subverted the 1950s repressive and underlying assumptions and attitudes toward the female body.

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<sup>42</sup> See Dianne Harris, "Social History: Identity, Performance, Politics, and Architectural Histories," *JSAH* 64:4 (December 2005): 421-423, and Harold M. Proshansky, Abbe K. Fabian, and Robert Kaminoff, "Place Identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 3 (1983): 57-83.

<sup>43</sup> See Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire*, 68.

Altogether these chapters will demonstrate how Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz, in using society's by-products and waste, each created a body of works that countered mainstream ideologies and imagery, which most often focused on cleanliness and strict maintenance and regulation of the body, home, and politics. Chapter one focuses on governmental controls, politics, and social constructions of cleanliness and dirtiness; chapter two continues these themes, particularly in the context of the artistic climate during the 1950s; chapter three examines the works of these artists in relation to prevalent social desires concerning the family and domesticity; and chapter four addresses the manner in which these artists engaged dominant ideas regarding the female body and sexuality. As a whole, this project will explore how the works of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz engaged with and contributed to a period, both artistic and social, that was marked by conflict and tension.

## CHAPTER ONE

### 1950s United States and Its Campaign for Cleanliness

Chapter one will examine aspects of the dominant social order of the United States in the 1950s, particularly in relation to the decade's fascination with dirt and cleanliness. Robert Rauschenberg, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, and Edward Kienholz all created works that addressed similar subjects and that engaged the concept of dirt, both literal and figurative. In this chapter, I will consider how and why works such as these were produced during a period obsessed with cleaning – cleaning up the country as well as its citizens. In addition, I will examine the drastic increase in mass consumption of consumer goods in the United States after World War II and look at how this consumption related to the obsession with cleanliness, which came to be associated with American values and ideals within the Cold War context. Through their artistic methods of assemblage and collage and therefore through their use of society's actual by-products (its dirt), Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz created works that engaged a climate of waste and disposal, one that was specifically connected to increasing consumerism. Ultimately, these artists' works generally transgressed the social order inasmuch as they challenged the increase in consumerism and the bourgeois obsession with cleanliness, including its implicit associations with good citizenship and morality.

In 1954, Conner began an untitled, wall-mounted work (1954-62) that soon developed from a single-sided object to one that featured elements on both sides. On one side (which was the originally intended work), Conner created an abstract collage composed of scraps of wood, nails, and distressed cardboard (figure 1). Collaged

geometric shapes – two circles in the upper section and two squares and a rectangle in the lower section – dominate the rough surface and appear to rise from the monochromatic rust-colored background. As he was working on this side of the work, Conner became interested in the verso. He stated, “I’d seen paintings in the museum that had stamps or seals from certain collections or exhibitions [on the verso]. So I started clipping out seals like ‘Good Housekeeping’ and ‘Parents’ Magazine’ seals, Chick Sexing Association seals, all sorts of things, and started sticking them on the back.”<sup>44</sup> By the time Conner stopped adding to the flipside of this work, it also included images from movie magazines (often science-fiction related), reproductions of famous artworks (most featuring women in various stages of undress), and images of nude women from pornographic magazines (figure 2). In addition, he added a number of newspaper clippings, a notice that he had received from the military instructing him to report for a physical examination, and two labels that quickly catch the viewer’s eye: one in the upper section stating “Warning: You are in Great Danger” and, in the lower section, a second label stating “Fragile.”

Interestingly, Conner started out with an abstract work (the dominant avant-garde mode at the time); yet, this did not seem to satisfy him. He moved to the verso of the image and covered it with an all-over type of composition. This side was not originally intended to be seen by the viewer, only by the person hanging the work, and it was not until 1960 that Conner decided that the viewer should have access to both sides.

Significantly, Conner has referred to the verso of this work “as being evocative of the

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<sup>44</sup> As quoted in Peter Boswell, “Bruce Conner: Theater of Light and Shadow,” in Peter Boswell, Bruce Jenkins, and Joan Rothfuss, organizers, *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 28.

unconscious while the side with the cardboard collage represents the work's composed, proper public face." He stated:

All of those pinups and pictures and awards and documents and things on the back were basically things... that you don't see behind the artwork... I started feeling that there was this whole world of communication that was happening on the backs of paintings and artworks that nobody was paying attention to, and I decided that was an area I was going to work in.<sup>45</sup>

Patricia Yaeger has pointed out, "We tend to think that the surface of things is less hidden than their depth. But I want to offer this crucial idea: the things at the surface are hidden in plain sight. Their very repetition is what conceals them."<sup>46</sup> Something similar might be said about many works created by Conner, Rauschenberg, DeFeo, and Kienholz: most often it is their examination of the mundane – elements that we are exposed to everyday and often do not think about on more than a superficial level – that yields a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us. By addressing everyday subjects – the family or the body, for example – and using everyday found materials, these artists began to examine more deeply what was hidden in plain sight. Specifically, this chapter will explore the manner in which Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz pulled from the existing dirt in both the mainstream and margins of society in order to comment on what they believed to be dirty politics and ideological rhetoric, aspects of society hidden in plain sight.

### **Deploying Dirt: Transgressing the Social Order**

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<sup>45</sup> Statement from a June 1, 1996 interview with Bruce Jenkins and Peter Boswell. As quoted in *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>46</sup> Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire*, 104.

The works created by Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz in the 1950s and the early years of the 1960s interrogated and explored some of the values and concepts held most sacred by Americans at that time, most of which were deeply influenced by the Cold War atmosphere. Central to this belief system and social order was a strong focus on the family, on traditional gender roles, and on social control of the body, including behavioral as well as hygienic control. During a time when the number of bathrooms and kitchen appliances in the average middle class home dramatically increased,<sup>47</sup> cleanliness and the advancing technology of the home became associated with specifically American values, especially considered in relation to Cold War politics. By creating aesthetically dirty works with subject matter that deeply challenged cultural attitudes concerning cleanliness and containment, these artists, in their own ways, drew attention to the existence of dirt and disorder beneath the surface of an ostensibly orderly and clean society.

Although cleanliness was linked, with unprecedented urgency, to good American values during the postwar period, this link had been steadily evolving over a period of time. Sociologist Suellen Hoy has provided a foundational framework for understanding the United States' specific relationship with dirt and cleanliness; she has examined how American practices concerning hygiene developed from the early nineteenth century until the 1950s, when the obsession with cleanliness reached its peak. Significantly, Hoy explained how social concepts of cleanliness in the nineteenth century first began to be

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<sup>47</sup> According to Elaine Tyler May, "In the five years after World War II, consumer spending increased 60 percent, but the amount spent on household furnishings and appliances rose 240 percent. In the same five years, purchases for food rose only 33 percent, and for clothing a mere 20 percent." Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 165.

linked specifically with the rise of the middle class and its ideals, habits, and values. Being clean within one's home as well as with one's body came to mean being "respectable, publicly responsible, and healthy."<sup>48</sup> By the 1950s, however, the connection between cleanliness and middle-class values was taken to new levels as the majority of Americans attained middle-class status for the first time in the history of the country. In addition, Hoy pointed out that cleanliness became associated with a value system that was not simply middle-class, but very specifically American. She stated that at the turn of the twentieth century,

... cleanliness became something more than a way to prevent epidemics and make cities liveable – it became a route to citizenship, to becoming American. It was, in fact, confrontation with racial and cultural outsiders that transformed cleanliness from a public health concern into a moral and patriotic one.<sup>49</sup>

Hoy has noted that the United States' obsession with hygiene reached its peak during the 1950s when advertisements on television and in magazines heralded the advancements in technology directly related to the home and the body that would enable Americans to become even cleaner:

At the war's end and through the 1950s, advertising expenditures doubled and electricity use nearly tripled as millions of suburban homeowners bought household appliances and hygiene products in such quantities as to create a "culture of cleanliness" – a people that used more water and had more bathrooms per family than any other nation on earth.<sup>50</sup>

With the prevailing belief that good patriotic Americans must have clean homes and clean bodies, it is not surprising that many of the products that were mass marketed to the

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<sup>48</sup> Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

public during the 1950s were aimed towards “cleaning up” the country’s citizens. Americans were urged to purchase products that ostensibly would make cleaning their homes easier and faster, such as vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, and washing machines. In addition, consumers purchased greater amounts of personal hygiene products (such as toiletries, cosmetics, and soaps) than ever before.<sup>51</sup> For example, a 1958 Newsweek article, “Cleanliness: The Germ’s Last Stand?,” reported that each year Americans “spend something like \$200 million for products to change or conceal their more or less human scent;”<sup>52</sup> and a 1956 article from Life magazine, “Billions of Dollars for Prettiness,” stated that for that year women would spend for “cosmetics and toiletries, \$1.3 billion; beauty treatments, \$660 million; soap and electric devices, \$400 million; reducing [weight], \$65 million – a total more than double the defense budget of Italy.”<sup>53</sup>

Anthropologist Mary Douglas has analyzed the potential danger and power that disorder, dirt, and pollution pose in a society, specifically addressing the body and its refuse. In her classic study Purity and Danger (1966), she examined “primitive” cultures and their religions through their hygiene rituals, thereby drawing broader conclusions concerning societies in general. One of Douglas’ most significant claims is that dirt not only poses a challenge to, but also specifically offends the social order:

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<sup>51</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg has argued that the postwar emphasis on hygiene, particularly that of women and teenage girls, was directly tied to the burgeoning consumer market and created its own profit-making enterprise. See Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1997).

<sup>52</sup> This article addressed the marketing of two hygienic additive products, Sanitized and Cyana, which killed germs and eliminated odors. The manufacturers promised “a life of sanitary bliss” for consumers who added these chemicals to textile consumer products. See “Cleanliness: The Germ’s Last Stand?,” *Newsweek* (24 November 1958): 99-100.

<sup>53</sup> “Billions of Dollars for Prettiness,” *Life* (24 December 1956): 121.

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.<sup>54</sup>

Basically, Douglas argued that order cannot exist without disorder and disorder cannot exist without order because each is measured by the other. Ultimately, it is the relationship between order and disorder, the clean and unclean, the mainstream and the margins that helps to define the social order.<sup>55</sup>

Douglas argued that dirt is, in fact, essential to maintaining social order:

... ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.<sup>56</sup>

With this fundamental insight in mind, the works of the artists under examination here can be considered as an intuitive response to a system deeply focused on order and cleanliness. Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz created works that critiqued the dominant social order in part by serving as a reminder of what lay buried beneath the surface of a polite and clean society. The artists in question effectively commented on the rigid social order of the 1950s by bringing attention to the actual presence of dirt and

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<sup>54</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 35.

<sup>55</sup> Also see Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, which discusses social order in relation to transgressive behavior. In addition, see Frazer Ward, "Foreign and Familiar Bodies," in *Dirt and Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center, 1992), which examines the appearance of dirt in photographic works (such as documentary photographs of the working class or photographs of abject, visceral by-products such as menstrual blood) in terms of its challenge to existing social structures.

<sup>56</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 4.

disorder, not only in the repressed margins of society, but in the mainstream as well. Their works not only investigated *what* was hidden beneath the surface, they challenged the fact that these things *were* hidden, refusing to operate within a system where dirt was repressed rather than exposed.

While many works created by these artists commented on specific events or ideas that ruptured the surface of a supposedly well-ordered society, Rauschenberg's Hazard (1957, figure 3) seems to literally refer to the period's repressive social order. This work combines newspaper images, oil paint, fabric, and a bird's wing mounted on a small section of wood (which are painted white). A printed piece of paper spells out "ord," while directly below are the letters "er." Beneath these letters is the word "view." Rauschenberg's choice of words and letters might bring to mind the phrases "social order" and "world view." Significantly, the word "order" is fractured or broken, something which also could be said about the period's social order. In addition, the three sections of letters are smudged and dirty in contrast to the clean and orderly world desired by many in society. When considered in relation to the title of the work, Hazard, the message becomes a warning of danger (reminiscent of the label included in Conner's aforementioned work: "Warning: You are in Great Danger"). Color references suggest the United States: the lettering is in red and white while a smudge of blue marks the center of the canvas. The bird's wing, typically signifying flight and freedom, has been clipped and covered with paint rendering it immobile and lifeless. In the lower section of the work, two black-and-white newspaper images feature officially attired men who appear to be in attendance at some formal occasion. Overall, Hazard may be seen as a

comment on the United States' uneasy state of affairs in 1957, and on the people coordinating the country's activities.

The case of J. Edgar Hoover, who served as the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation from May 10, 1924 to May 2, 1972, provides intriguing insights into governmental attempts to maintain social order through the elimination of dirt. Hoover was a key figure in establishing the United States' focus on "cleaning up" the country and was responsible for much of the anti-communist rhetoric so prevalent in the 1950s. Beginning in the 1930s, Hoover began targeting gangster crime, and many of his public speeches focused on the "filthy" behavior and morals of such criminals. In a speech given to Hi-Y Clubs of America on June 22, 1936 (which was also carried over network radio), Hoover stated:

There is no romance in crime and there is no romance in criminals. We have passed through an era in which ill-advised persons and sentimental sob-sisters have attempted to paint the desperate law violators of America as men and women of romance. They are the absolute opposite. They are rats, vermin, regurgitating their filth to despoil the clean picture of American manhood and womanhood. They sink deeper and deeper into a mire of viciousness which inevitably leads to filth in mind, filth in living, filth in morals and bodily health. They travel steadily downward until at last they are no more than craven beasts.<sup>57</sup>

Hoover's attempts to rid the United States of filth continued throughout his career as did his continued use of language that targeted dirt and those who generated it as evil. In the late 1940s and into the 1950s, as communism became a prominent issue in the United States and around the world, Hoover shifted his focus from gangster crime to

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<sup>57</sup> Richard Gid Powers, *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York: The Free Press and London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1987), 210. In another speech, "Patriotism and the War Against Crime," presented on May 23, 1936 to the Daughters of the American Revolution, Hoover stated in regards to criminals: "True, they are dressed as we are dressed. They live as we live and often upon a better scale owing to the rich rewards of their so-called profession, but their standards of life are those of pigs in a wallow, their outlook that of vultures regurgitating their filth." *Ibid.*, 211.

eliminating communism from the country. Again, his language specifically linked this political philosophy with evil and filth. Thus, at one point he stated: “Communism has as its basic principle the overthrow of the laws of our democratic social order, and it is rooted in the slimy wastes of lawlessness.” In a speech given to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) on March 28, 1947, Hoover stated: “Communism, in reality, is not a political party. It is a way of life – an evil and malignant way of life. It reveals a condition akin to disease that spreads like an epidemic and like [or as with] an epidemic a quarantine is necessary to keep it from infecting the Nation.”<sup>58</sup> Hoover left no doubt in the minds of Americans that dirt and disorder – in the form of crime and communism – posed the most threatening challenges to the country’s social order, which was said to be predicated on patriotism, democracy, morality, and by extension, cleanliness.<sup>59</sup>

Mary Douglas focused on the idea of the elimination of dirt as a means to bring order to the world around us as opposed to an action brought about by fear. She stated that “there is nothing fearful or unreasoning in our dirt-avoidance: it is a creative

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 213 and 289, respectively. The first excerpt is from “Fifty Years of Crime: Corruption Begets Corruption,” a May 20, 1939 speech given to the National Fifty Years in Business Club in Nashville, Tennessee.

<sup>59</sup> The fear of communism infiltrated mainstream culture in the form of films, comics, books, television, and radio. David Craven has discussed how, in mainstream popular culture, communism was represented as utterly evil and unredeemable. For example, he noted that “from 1948 to 1954 – after U.S. movie directors had been ‘disciplined’ by HUAC – Hollywood produced more than forty anticommunist films, which ranged from *I Married a Communist* to *I Was a Communist for the FBI*.” David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 110. Also see Cyndy Hendershot, *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America* (Jefferson, N.C. and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2003), which addresses how anticommunist sentiments affected popular culture (particularly film and television) during the Cold War era. In addition, John Earl Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace? American Communism and Anticommunism in the Cold War Era* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996) and M. J. Heale, *American Anticommunism: Combating the Enemy Within 1830-1970* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) both provide solid historical backgrounds on communism and Cold War politics.

movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience.”<sup>60</sup> Yet, Douglas had a specific reason for arguing against “fear,” because she was countering the widespread belief that “primitive” religions were different from Western religious practices in that they were inspired by fear and inextricably linked with defilement and hygiene. Although I agree with Douglas’ assertion that an obsession with dirt avoidance is linked with an obsession with order, dirt avoidance – in terms of the postwar period in the United States – can certainly be linked with a particular kind of fear: a fear of what dirt came to represent politically and socially during the Cold War. This link certainly emerges in the rhetoric of the time. For example, in a 1957 *Newsweek* article, Ernest K. Lindley outlined the advantages of a “clean” nuclear bomb over a “dirty” one. Lindley pointed out that one advantage to the clean bomb was that it “probably would permit even a large-scale thermonuclear war to be fought without making the earth uninhabitable or even causing casualties outside the countries involved in the exchange of nuclear blows – except perhaps from missiles which got out of control.”<sup>61</sup>

As the race began between the United States and the former Soviet Union to develop the hydrogen bomb, most of the world began to experience great anxiety over the threat of a nuclear war.<sup>62</sup> In fact, fearing nuclear war, Bruce Conner moved to Mexico in

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<sup>60</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Ernest K. Lindley, “The ‘Clean’ and ‘Dirty,’” *Newsweek* v. 50 (22 July 1957): 31.

<sup>62</sup> Growing anxieties in the United States eventually led to numerous everyday citizens suspecting their neighbors of communist activities and even to some families adding bomb shelters to their homes. See the chapter entitled “Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb” in May’s *Homeward Bound*, which addresses how the female professional homemaker took on new roles in the home after World War II, sometimes including roles that were specifically geared toward dealing with the possibility of nuclear war. May discusses one of the most extensively publicized campaigns during the Cold War called “Grandma’s Pantry.” Coordinated by the Federal Civil Defense Administration, this campaign provided guidelines for creating and stocking your own home bomb shelter. In addition, numerous popular magazines featured articles on the uses of home bomb shelters and domestic building contractors offered a variety of choices in styles and sizes for consumers’ bomb shelter needs. See *By, For and About Women in*

1961 (but returned a year later). He remembered: “I went to Mexico for many reasons. One of them was that I was sure the bomb was going to drop and we’d be annihilated. So I’d go to Mexico and figure out how to live in the mountains after the bomb dropped.”<sup>63</sup> As Americans struggled with the everyday anxieties associated with living during a period greatly influenced by fear of communism and possible nuclear war, many embraced a mindset that related a well-ordered and clean lifestyle to a more peaceful and orderly world.<sup>64</sup> Conversely, the artists discussed in this dissertation all shaped an aesthetic that emphasized dirt and disorder. For instance, in a 1959 review of Conner’s work, Alfred Frankenstein noted that Conner’s “conglomerations of candle stubs, doll-heads, feathers, buttons, false teeth and bits of cloth and paper are jewels of riotous disorder.”<sup>65</sup>

Conner produced some of the most explicitly politically engaged works in this group, as too did Edward Kienholz, who created numerous works that refused to ignore the underlying anxieties that many Americans were experiencing relative to the Cold War. For example, O’er The Ramparts We Watched, Fascinated (1959, figure 4) amounts to a passionate comment on the Cold War and the space race between the United

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*Civil Defense: Grandma’s Pantry Belongs in Your Kitchen* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, May 1958) and “Their Sheltered Honeymoon,” *Life* (10 August 1959): 51-52, which featured a newly married couple who spend their honeymoon in their home bomb shelter.

<sup>63</sup> As quoted in Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 97.

<sup>64</sup> See Cynthia Lee Henthorn, *From Submarines to Suburbs: Selling a Better America, 1939-1959* (Athens, Oh.: Ohio University Press, 2006), which addresses the rising standards of cleanliness in the United States in relation to World War II technology, as well as to the desire to create a sense of world order. In addition, see Maud Lavin, *Clean New World: Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2001), which examines how graphic design has shaped cultural norms in its attempt to convey order and clarity within the social order.

<sup>65</sup> Alfred Frankenstein, “Bruce Conner Exhibit – Magic in Disorder,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (30 September 1959): 41.

States and the former Soviet Union. In this work, fragmented doll and machinery parts are attached to a background dripping with the American flag colors of red, white, and blue. On the right-hand side of the assemblage is an image of what appears to be an atomic nuclear explosion cloud hovering over a dismal landscape. With works such as this, Kienholz tapped into the apprehensive atmosphere of the time and offered a more pragmatic (albeit horrific) alternative to the harmonious depictions of the United States perpetuated in the mass culture.

Kienholz also created many other works that questioned the legitimacy of the fundamental ideals on which the United States was (in theory) founded. This questioning often took the form of depicting time-honored American icons or histories in ways that went against traditional, patriotic accounts. For example, George Warshington in Drag (1957, figure 5) humorously, yet harshly, critiques the “father” of the United States. In this work, different pieces of found materials are collaged together and attached to the surface of the canvas to create the profile of a figure. A red, white, and blue arch outlines the back of the figure’s head. The arch (with its American flag colors) resembles a feathered headdress, which may refer to the unconscionable mistreatment of the Native Americans by this country’s founding fathers. Etched in the thickly painted surface is the work’s title, which resembles graffiti scrawled across a dirty and peeling wall. Not only did Kienholz irreverently misspell the first president’s name, he depicted him in drag (in a sense, the “father” becomes a “mother”), perhaps suggesting that surfaces sometimes camouflage hidden realities.

Kienholz explained: “Politics are a really murky area for me because politics are really our own abdication of our own responsibility. We hire someone to make decisions

for us. We give up our own power to let someone else exercise power over us.”<sup>66</sup>

Acknowledging that his work dealt with society’s harsh realities, he stated that “we need to say these things: I’m a man. I’m an artist. I make a good sculpture. It may not be art, but I know it’s made well.”<sup>67</sup> Creating works that addressed controversial political issues took a certain amount of daring during the fifties, but this was particularly so in Los Angeles where Kienholz lived and worked. Rebecca Solnit has discussed the 1950s Los Angeles climate:

The anti-Communist hysteria that brought about the blacklisting of so many members of the film community spilled over into other areas. Los Angeles watchdogs saw all creative work as potential subversion, and the group Sanity in Art claimed to find maps of strategic fortifications in abstract paintings. As late as 1962, the American Legion picketed the Pasadena Art Museum for showing an assemblage with an American flag in it by George Herms; and shortly thereafter a vandal broke in and destroyed the work.<sup>68</sup>

Although Kienholz often criticized the United States and its policies, and therefore risked possible censorship or even imprisonment, he continued his work while simultaneously speaking of his love for the country:

I have a very strong feeling about America. I love it a lot. And that all comes out of being raised on a farm someplace. And I love it enough to respect the opportunity that I have to criticize it, also. I mean, I’m not blind to the failures and mistakes that we as Americans make. And I

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<sup>66</sup> As quoted in Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 324.

<sup>67</sup> “Assemblage at the Frontier,” *Time* (15 October 1965): 106.

<sup>68</sup> Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 4. Solnit described 1950s San Francisco (where Conner and DeFeo lived and worked) as a more tolerant environment: “There was genial tolerance for political and social radicalism, and the anarchist tradition begun by Italian workers was continued by artists and writers between the wars and afterward. San Francisco was a favorite spot for conscientious objectors on leave from their wartime camps on the coast, and as a port city, it had sailors passing through, old-fashioned Madam-run houses of prostitution, and a slightly more visible, less intimidated gay community than most other American cities.” *Ibid.*, 26.

would like it – because it’s my country and I love it – I would like it to be a hell of a lot better place than it is. But I love it, and I can’t help that.<sup>69</sup>

For the subject of Lincoln (1958, figure 6), Rauschenberg also chose a well-known and beloved past president who is associated with the fundamental ideals of the United States. On the left side of this work is a photographic reproduction of the Lincoln Memorial. Seated as if in judgment of what is before him, Abraham Lincoln (“Honest Abe”) stares gravely out at the viewer (or maybe in warning). Rauschenberg applied a thin coat of white paint over the image creating the illusion that Lincoln is a stern, ghost-like apparition concerned about the state of things in the country. Without the harsh sarcasm of Kienholz’s works, Lincoln instead appears more as a sad, solemn comment on the country’s political situation.

Also in 1958, Rauschenberg created Docket of Violation (figure 7). Although subtle, this work, too, can be read in relation to Kienholz’s more politically aggressive compositions. Docket features a printed reproduction of the Statue of Liberty, situated in the middle of the lower half of the canvas. Strikingly, the paint covering most of the surface brings to mind the colors of the American flag. White paint obscures half the canvas while the statue is thinly painted over in blue. A red line of paint slashes across the middle of the work, almost bisecting it. Smearred in places, the red may suggest a jagged line of blood. The title of the work provides a further reference to violence: a “docket,” which is defined as a list of legal causes to be tried, is linked to violation, an infringement, disturbance, rape, or desecration of something sacred. Albeit ambiguously,

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<sup>69</sup> As quoted from a 1977 interview in Verni Greenfield, *Making Do or Making Art: A Study of American Recycling* (Ann Arbor, M.I.: UMI Research Press, 1986), 23.

this work can be seen as a comment on the United States' legal and political systems, particularly when considered along with Lincoln.

The atmosphere within which Kienholz, Rauschenberg, Conner, and DeFeo created their works is typically considered to be a period of containment, repression, and conformity.<sup>70</sup> While on the surface many Americans appeared to conform to mainstream conventions (and certainly the media often presented the country in a very homogenous manner), underneath was an uneasiness and, at times, outright rebellion began to seep throughout society. David Craven has noted that:

...the very scope of governmental coercion necessary in the McCarthy era reminds us of just how tenuous the popular consent was concerning the mainstream myths of the postwar period. Here as elsewhere, coercion is most likely when there is no firm faith in the official story on the part of many people, all of which indicates the general uncertainty of any such moment in history. The strength of repression by a given order is thus often inversely proportional to the weakness of popular support. It is this state of affairs that led to the massive repression in the period of McCarthyism...<sup>71</sup>

Although conservative values certainly dominated the spheres of home, family, gender roles, and politics during the 1950s, challenges to these values began to emerge through music (for example, rock and roll),<sup>72</sup> the visual and literary arts (for example, the

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<sup>70</sup> Elaine Tyler May has noted that Americans “wanted secure jobs, secure homes, and secure marriages in a secure country.... And so they adhered to an overarching principle that would guide them in their personal and political lives: containment. Containment was the key to security.” May, *Homeward Bound*, 13. Society also was repressed directly by the government in a number of ways. Obscenity laws were one way that citizens were kept in order, from visual to reading materials, even to language used in public performances. D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), and William S. Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* (1959) were banned as “objectionable” reading material. In addition, Lenny Bruce faced obscenity charges and was arrested due to his language used during public performances. See Lenny Bruce, *How To Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (1962) (New York: Fireside, 1992).

<sup>71</sup> Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, 103.

<sup>72</sup> See David R. Shumway, “Watching Elvis: The Male Rock Star as Object of the Gaze,” in Foreman, ed., *The Other Fifties*, 124-143.

Beats), and a politics of resistance (for example, the Civil Rights movement). The artists discussed in this dissertation created a body of works that countered the images popularized in the mainstream by presenting contradictory images that represented in many ways a protest of social conditions in the United States. The constructions of American life offered in the mass media most often featured images of cleanliness, optimism, orderliness, and wholeness, while Kienholz, Rauschenberg, Conner, and DeFeo presented images of dirtiness, morbidity, fragmentation, and decay. That those latter images may be understood as critiques of dominant values will be argued in what follows.

One area of society that Kienholz, for one, sought to bring attention to was the burgeoning racial tension that was prompting social change during this time. With the newly emerging Civil Rights movement, many United States citizens began to question the state of racial equality and to challenge segregation and racism.<sup>73</sup> For example, The Little Eagle Rock Incident (1958, figure 8) specifically refers to the riots in Little Rock, Arkansas that followed the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1957. With the title, Kienholz combined the names of two cities: Little Rock, Arkansas and Eagle Rock, California (a section of Los Angeles).<sup>74</sup> By merging the two names, he may have been suggesting that the events that occurred in Little Rock could have occurred elsewhere in

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<sup>73</sup> In 1954, legal segregation ended with *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Many consider the violent murder of Emmett Till in 1955 to mark the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. This was the same year in which Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus, setting in motion the Montgomery, Alabama Bus Boycott that led to the Federal district court ruling in 1956 that bus segregation was unconstitutional. See Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

<sup>74</sup> In 1966, Maurice Tuchman noted that *The Little Eagle Rock Incident* was “the first work [Kienholz] titled in reference to a topical event (the crisis in racial integration at Little Rock), although the assemblage was not conceived explicitly in symbolic terms.” Maurice Tuchman, “A Decade of Edward Kienholz,” *Artforum* (April 1966): 41.

the United States. The “incident” (the riots) was not unique or distant but something that needed to be personalized and considered within each viewer’s context of experience. In this work, Kienholz attached a mounted deer’s head to the surface – this was the first work in which he used an intact found object. The head hangs upside down and is painted (along with the surrounding area) a flat black. Above this section is a painted area evincing the American flag in color (red, white, and blue) and symbols (a star and stripes). The Little Eagle Rock Incident exudes a sense of death and violence: the decapitated animal’s head – normally displayed with pride by its hunter – hangs irreverently upside down and is completely covered in black paint so that it blends into the background. We must examine the work more closely in order to discern the dark, almost-hidden “secret” that hangs beneath the American flag.

Kienholz’s It Takes Two to Integrate, Cha Cha Cha (1961, figure 9) also comments on the racial tensions in the United States and, as art critic Gerald Nordland described it in 1961, “makes prejudice transparently evil and stupid.”<sup>75</sup> This work is composed of an open box divided into two sections, each containing a baby doll. The dolls are identical except in exterior coloring. On the left, the doll is painted white with a black grid-like pattern marring its torso and head – as if it has been run over with a tire. The right section contains the opposite: a doll painted black with a white grid-like pattern. The work’s title is reminiscent of the adage “it takes two to tango.” While it may take two to integrate (and to dance), these two figures are strictly separated by a dividing panel. Yet, their enforced separation has not kept each of the two figures from taking on the characteristics (albeit, in the reverse) of the other. Echoing the violence in

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<sup>75</sup> Gerald Nordland, “Kienholz Happy, Affirmative in New Pasadena Art Show,” *Los Angeles Mirror* (22 May 1961): 2.

The Little Eagle Rock Incident with its blackened and mounted deer's head, these figures appear to be stuffed and displayed in a decorative container, a chilling reminder of society's views regarding integration.

### **Consumption and the Creation of Waste**

By using already existing objects in a manner so as to emphasize their dirtiness, Kienholz, Conner, Rauschenberg, and DeFeo can also be seen as challenging the “throwaway” culture that was generated by the drastic increase in mass consumption after World War II. Through consumption, American citizens during the postwar period were urged to clean up the country, their bodies, homes, and minds. Significantly, both consumption and the closely linked value of cleanliness came to be implicitly associated with American identity. American ideals concerning citizenship, morality, family values, and work ethics often were linked during the 1950s to products that could be purchased and that frequently were associated with particular standards of cleanliness. Advertisers suggested that to purchase a dishwasher, a particular brand of soap, or even a certain brand of towels could lead to being a better American (for example, an advertisement for Scot towels from this time period reads “Is Your Bathroom Breeding Bolsheviks?,” specifically linking the concept of cleanliness with the Cold War aim of ridding the United States of dirty communism). Keeping clean and purchasing the correct products to help maintain that cleanliness enabled citizens to be “good” Americans.

After World War II, the United States economy began to thrive and Americans had increased access to money through better paying jobs, government loans, and credit. Men returning from the war, and those women who managed to retain their wartime jobs,

were able to support their families in a manner to which they were previously unaccustomed.<sup>76</sup> As the decade of the 1950s progressed, an overwhelming number of American families entered the ranks of the middle-class,<sup>77</sup> embraced middle-class values (often linked to concepts entailing cleanliness), and began to consume accordingly, buying homes, cars, and appliances.<sup>78</sup> Juliann Sivulka has stated that the postwar era consisted of two distinct phases, describing the first phase as a period of “catching up,”

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<sup>76</sup> World War II provided women the opportunity to work outside the home as men left the country to fight overseas. According to William H. Chafe, “between 1941 and 1945 the female labor force increased by more than six million, or approximately 55 percent.” Although during the war it became socially acceptable (and even encouraged by the government) for women to work, when the war ended and men returned to the workforce, most women were encouraged or forced to return to the home. Even though most women did so, Chafe pointed out: “Still, millions of women were continuing to take jobs; in ever increasing numbers, they were middle-class and married. By 1960 twice as many women were employed as in 1940, and the proportion of wives holding jobs had doubled from 15 percent in 1940 to 30 percent in 1960.... The number of married workers grew from 7.5 million in 1947 to 10.4 million in 1952. The number of mothers at work leapt 400 percent, from 1.5 million to 6.6 million. And the percentage of wives who were employed in households where the husband earned between \$7,000 to 10,000 a year (clearly a middle-class salary in the 1950s) increased from 7 percent in 1950 to 25 percent in 1960.” In addition, he noted that it is “also imperative to recognize how indispensable women’s economic activity was to the development of America’s postwar, consumer society. In the 1960s, Census Bureau officials noted that the number of households earning \$15,000 or more would be cut in half if women’s incomes were excluded. Many members of the ‘new middle class,’ in fact, could never have afforded a new home or new appliances without the wife’s second income.” William H. Chafe, “World War II as a Pivotal Experience for American Women,” in Maria Diedrich and Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, eds., *Women and War: The Changing Status of American Women from the 1930s to the 1950s* (New York: Berg Publishers, 1990), 22, 28, and 32, respectively. See also May, *Homeward Bound*.

<sup>77</sup> According to Juliann Sivulka, the average weekly wage was \$60.53 in 1950, a wage that was double pre-Depression income levels. See Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 241. Gerard Jones has noted: “In 1929, on the eve of the depression, five and a half million American families, about an eighth of the national total, were classified as having ‘middle-class’ incomes; by 1953 their number had soared almost to eighteen million, over a third of the total. And where the older middle-class had consisted largely of independent professionals and small-business owners, the bourgeoisie of 1953 consisted overwhelmingly of salaried corporate employees.” Gerard Jones, *Honey, I’m Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992), 88. In addition, Suellen Hoy has explained: “During the 1950s, for the first time in American history, white-collar workers verged on making up more than half of the labor force, and by 1960 the great majority of families described themselves as ‘middle-class,’ with more material reason than ever before. Thus most people could (and did) acquire what had formerly been *luxuries* only dreamed of. In the process, they achieved standards – even obsessions – of cleanliness that continue to mark American society.” Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, 164.

<sup>78</sup> Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz all came from working-class backgrounds. Therefore, the use of discarded and dirty objects in their works might also be interpreted as a specific stance against the ever-expanding middle-class (with its embrace of mass consumption and middle-class values).

which lasted until 1953. During this time, people made up for wartime rationing and adjusted to new, higher incomes that enabled them to buy luxuries previously unattainable due to the Depression and war years. The second phase lasted from 1954 to the mid-1960s during which consumption was greatly promoted in part on account of corporate fears of a new depression. The market was flooded with new products that encouraged purchasing, which ultimately insured a constant flow of money into the economy.<sup>79</sup>

Yet, simply flooding the market with new products did not necessarily ensure that those products would be purchased by consumers. In order for manufacturers to continue selling their products, they needed to convince consumers to upgrade and purchase new and more fashionable models. Obsolescence was therefore planned into the design stage of many products. Discussing the idea of planned obsolescence in terms of 1950s advertising, Juliann Sivulka has stated:

Consumers soon became conditioned to accept the premise of planned obsolescence. Magazine articles, newspaper “women’s sections,” television programs, and advertisements dispensed advice on maintaining the good life through constant product “upgrades.” Decorating magazines launched annual features on “this year’s colors,” including complicated color charts for readers. New colors meant that everything had to change more often. Glossy advertisements sold the ever-changing “new” ideal.<sup>80</sup>

These drastic increases in consumption were not without complexities. Young American adults faced a psychological dilemma regarding consumption in the post-

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<sup>79</sup> Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*, 240-241.

<sup>80</sup> Sivulka also noted: “In the process the modern kitchen emerged as a status symbol. Because consumer items were concentrated in this room, this was where the products of marketing inevitably began to appear. Manufacturers applied the same styling philosophies that characterized automobiles to consumer mass-produced items. For the first time a range of colors introduced a new fashion element to kitchens and appliances that made them appear dated in a briefer time. In the United States the refrigerator became second only to the automobile as an exercise in planned obsolescence. Each new year’s model had extra features, different styling, and even color changes.” *Ibid.*, 246.

World War II years because they were well aware of their parents' and grandparents' more pessimistic view of the economy. Therefore, in order to persuade consumers and to justify purchases previously considered excessive and frivolous, advertisers began to market products as rewards for hard work to offset the possible feelings of guilt associated with needless purchasing.<sup>81</sup> However, new products were not only marketed as rewards for hard and selfless labor, but, specifically or implicitly, *American* labor, thereby linking consumption with national identity. In fact, Elaine Tyler May makes a significant point, stating:

Still, the values associated with domestic spending upheld traditional American concerns with pragmatism and morality, rather than opulence and luxury. Purchasing for the home helped alleviate traditional American uneasiness with consumption: the fear that spending would lead to decadence. Family-centered spending reassured Americans that affluence would strengthen the American way of life. The goods purchased by middle-class consumers, like a modern refrigerator or a house in the suburbs, were intended to foster traditional values.<sup>82</sup>

Therefore, during this politically and socially tense period, consumerism was widely embraced by a country that learned to link consumption with popularly-held American values.

Although this increase in consumerism was accepted by many in society, some social critics remained skeptical. For example, Vance Packard argued that consumers were manipulated and brainwashed into purchasing inferior and needless products through advertising.<sup>83</sup> In addition, Donald Clark Hodges linked planned obsolescence to the products of the 1962 art world, asking:

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<sup>81</sup> See David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993), 507.

<sup>82</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 166.

<sup>83</sup> See Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1957).

What is planned obsolescence, but planned junk? The mass production of junk-to-be, absurd by humanistic standards, has led partly in reaction, but in the form of exaggeration, to a corresponding absurdist art. Absurd but meaningful – for junk sculpture indirectly criticizes the cozened consumer consciousness and foolery of organized waste.... Junk constructions are meant to be aesthetic; but they also contain a commentary on the “system.” They are a criticism of the thoughtlessly wasteful habits of the Affluent Society, an object lesson of how to be constructive in getting rid of waste, exposing this waste to public view by focusing attention upon it instead of by hiding and disguising it. They re-investigate the brutal facts of poverty in the midst of plenty, while exploding the illusion that “dirt” no longer exists.<sup>84</sup>

In the course of keeping up with the high levels of consumption encouraged by the market system, it is unsurprising that consumers began to produce an unprecedented amount of trash and waste products.<sup>85</sup> Drawing from such discarded materials, Rauschenberg, Conner, Kienholz, and DeFeo continued a rich artistic history during which assemblage and collage had been used, at times, with a view to challenging dominant cultural, political, and social orders. With these artistic methods, works are created by juxtaposing disparate, found images and objects taken from everyday life, piecing them together to create new contexts and meanings. The original purposes of the scavenged material are dismantled as different, often ambiguous, connotations emerge through the relations among the montaged fragments and, by extension, through the interpretations of the viewer. When presented together, comprising a new entity, the found objects tend to create complex, multilayered, and intersecting meanings. Much of

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<sup>84</sup> Donald Clark Hodges, “Junk Sculpture: What Does It Mean?” *Artforum* (November 1962): 34.

<sup>85</sup> With this increase in the amount of trash and waste during the 1950s, environmental groups first began to form with a view to urging society to keep the country clean. Other groups, such as the U.S. Forest Service, the National Parks Association, and the Girl and Boy Scouts of America, also joined in, reminding Americans to maintain the environment. Suellen Hoy points out that it really was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the obsession with personal, private cleanliness shifted to an awareness and concern for the larger, public and environmental cleanliness. See Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, 175.

the potential power of these artistic techniques lie in the appropriation of specifically mainstream images and objects because, through their reuse, the original values associated with them can be challenged. By using objects and images that were “of” the mundane world, these artists were able to comment on issues from everyday life.

During the postwar period in the United States, assemblages of discarded objects became a way for artists to comment specifically on the social upheaval and reordering of society. Rebecca Solnit has stated:

Assemblage emerged in the fifties as a medium uniquely capable of addressing those disparities; it dealt with abandonment, redefinition, juxtaposition, fragmentation, and ideas of order. It proposed an order that was neither absolute nor eternal, but conditional and personal. Assemblage was an effort to come to terms with chaos...<sup>86</sup>

In short, the use of found objects and the creation of assemblages by the artists addressed here afforded a way, not *just* to comment on the burgeoning commodity culture, but also to speak to the period’s uneasy political and social environment. By appropriating everyday objects and reconfiguring them so that new meanings were created, these artists could produce bodies of work that resisted and even offended the reigning social order.<sup>87</sup> What they effectively offered was a reordering – a reordering entailing influx and that reflected the perceived fragmentation around them.

Bruce Conner, for one, was very explicit in his attitude towards society’s production of waste, as may be evident in his use of those by-products in his work. His

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<sup>86</sup> Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, ix.

<sup>87</sup> In his examination of subcultures, Dick Hebdige has argued: “Moreover commodities can be symbolically ‘repossessed’ in everyday life, and endowed with implicitly oppositional meanings.... The symbiosis in which ideology and social order, production and reproduction, are linked is then neither fixed nor guaranteed. It can be prised open. The consensus can be fractured, challenged, overruled, and resistance to the groups in dominance cannot always be lightly dismissed or automatically incorporated.” Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1979), 16.

collecting of discarded objects also stemmed from the prevailing environment of San Francisco, where he worked and where, during the fifties, “urban renewal” was in full swing:

In San Francisco, the city was doing a thing called Redevelopment, which meant they were tearing down all the Victorian buildings in the city. I’d go through those buildings and bring back objects and make them into collages. I’d go through thrift stores and second-hand stores and find things that people had no value for; I thought they were beautiful; I’d bring them home. And I figured that one way at least of dealing with them was to make them into works of art.<sup>88</sup>

Location played a significant part in the types of refuse that were collected and used by these artists. San Francisco, for Conner, presented an environment with materials full of romanticism and nostalgia. He stated that the objects he salvaged from the city “had an implied life of their own; you know, like Victorian designs of wood grains, cloth patterns, images of some kind of nostalgic import. Objects have some kind of spirit in themselves.”<sup>89</sup>

While Conner’s works may be construed as echoing the nostalgia and romanticism endemic in his surroundings, they simultaneously can be understood as dark and disturbing. Indeed, his works may be seen in the context of film noir and in relation to the city of San Francisco itself, which provided the setting for many films of this genre.<sup>90</sup> Film noir, a genre of American films made during World War II and throughout the 1950s, typically addressed issues of violence, morality, and crime. These films were set in seedy, dim interiors or rainy, foggy, and dark urban exteriors; stylistically, they

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<sup>88</sup> Karlstrom, “Interview with Bruce Conner,” 15-16.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>90</sup> These films include *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Race Street* (1948), *Chinatown at Midnight* (1949), *Sudden Fear* (1952), *The Midnight Story* (1957), and *Vertigo* (1958). See Nathaniel Rich, *San Francisco Noir: The City in Film Noir from 1940 to the Present* (New York: The Little Bookroom, 2005).

were black and white, moody, and shadowy.<sup>91</sup> Known for its shady past, San Francisco – a port city that in its early history was composed of immigrants, sailors, prostitutes, and a burgeoning gay community – was legendarily formed by outcasts.<sup>92</sup> In terms of its history and visual aesthetics, this city had all the elements of a crime novel or film.

One way that Conner’s works appear to resonate with the dim, moody, and shadowy atmosphere of film noir – and specifically to engage San Francisco – is through their incorporation of nylon stockings, string, and thread. Conner’s use of these materials functions in a manner loosely comparable to the city’s fog; they simultaneously conceal and reveal the objects that they cover, often creating an eerie and mysterious effect. Nathaniel Rich has described the fog that famously blankets this city, specifically connecting it with film noir:

The city has many fogs, each one distinct. The fog that settles over the bay and the Golden Gate Bridge is majestic; the Twin Peaks fog is glum, like a thick wet blanket; the downtown fog is wispy and capricious... but the Golden Gate Park fog is the eeriest one of them all. It is a looming, shape-shifting mist that, especially at night, plays tricks of perception on anyone it engulfs. It is eerie not so much for what it conceals... but for what one fears it *might* conceal. More than anything else it is this feeling – dread – that is the subject of film noir.<sup>93</sup>

When stockings, strings, or thread are layered across a surface, visibility is lessened but not completely blocked. Viewers learn more as they get closer and study the assorted

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<sup>91</sup> For more information on film noir, see Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir: 1941-1953* (1955), trans. Paul Hammond (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2002).

<sup>92</sup> Nathaniel Rich has noted: “Filmmakers were also drawn to San Francisco’s peculiar mythology, its reputation was a city of misfits and double-crossers. This reputation dates back to the gold-rush era, when the city was nicknamed, with a mixture of derision and terror, the ‘Barbary Coast,’ for its loose morals and looser rule of law.” Rich, *San Francisco Noir*, 10. Also see Kenneth Tynan, “San Francisco: The Rebels,” *Holiday* (April 1961): 92-97, et. al., which drew a correlation between San Francisco’s artists and the city’s eccentric history.

<sup>93</sup> Rich, *San Francisco Noir*, 8.

contents largely hidden beneath the surface; information is continuously veiled and unveiled throughout the viewing process. Referring to his use of these materials, Conner stated:

I never considered any of these collages or assemblages to be finished – they were dated at the time I hung them on a wall. The process had come to that point. Sometimes nothing was solidified or glued down. Nylon, which stretches, breaks, the pressure of the materials that push against it, things being held in place by strings – I expected to never stop altering or changing them.<sup>94</sup>

Not only did Conner use discarded objects to create his works, he also formed an artistic community that he named in reference to a garbage-collection service in San Francisco. Soon after arriving in San Francisco in 1957, Conner formed this group, which consisted of artists and poets. He named this informal, yet by-invitation-only, community the Ratbastard Protective Association (R.B.P.).<sup>95</sup> This title played off the name of an organization, The Scavengers Protective Association, that picked up trash and refuse in the city of San Francisco. Conner has credited his approach to assemblage and use of found objects to not only DeFeo and Joan Brown but also to these local garbage collectors.<sup>96</sup> The Scavengers Protective Association also particularly influenced Conner's creation of the nylon stocking appendages that would hang from his works.

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<sup>94</sup> "A Conversation with Bruce Conner and Robert Dean," (27 April 1990) in *Bruce Conner: Assemblages, Paintings, Drawings, Engraving Collages, 1960-1990* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Michael Kohn Gallery, 1990), unpaginated.

<sup>95</sup> In a 1974 interview, Conner remembered: "I sent out announcements to eight or nine people, ten people probably, telling them that they were all members of the Rat Bastard Protective Association. I was president. They should pay their dues. The next meeting was scheduled at my house. Then it was scheduled after that for every couple of weeks at Fred Martin's, or Joan Brown's, or Wally's house, or wherever... I told them that they could use the approved stamp on their works. Or they could just initial the work with the letters R.B.P., which is an alliteration of P.R.B." Karlstrom, "Interview with Bruce Conner," 33. The initials R.B.P. loosely referred to the nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which used the initials P.R.B. Also see Boswell, "Bruce Conner," 41.

<sup>96</sup> Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 61.

The garbage collectors would gather trash into large burlap bags and then, when the truck was full, they would hang these filled bags off the sides of the truck, which Conner compared to “big pendulous testicles.”<sup>97</sup> In a 1959 exhibition at the Spatsa Gallery, he hung similar appendages containing debris from the ceiling, about which art critic Alfred Frankenstein noted:

Most extraordinary of the objects in this show are its mysterious treasure boxes and grab-bags, some of them hanging by cords from the ceiling. They remind one of the medicine pouches, full of precious, secret objects, which the Indians used to carry. You know that the treasures they contain are trash, or, to put it more accurately, were trash and would be trash again if their wrappings were removed; in their present shape, however, they are both totem and curio, and it would be difficult to say which aspect of their existence is more important.<sup>98</sup>

Thus, Conner drew a comparison between actual trash collectors and the artists who collected the refuse of society in order to create their works.<sup>99</sup> Conner also created an actual rubber stamp with the official seal of the association, which played off the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. Ironically, the objects that this seal most often “approved” (works created by the group’s members) would never have been approved by Good Housekeeping, due not only to the objects’ state of decay and dirtiness, but also to their often taboo subject matter.

Conner produced a number of works that directly referenced this artistic community. In 1958, he created Ratbastard (figure 10), a two-sided square object with a

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<sup>97</sup> Karlstrom, “Interview with Bruce Conner,” 32.

<sup>98</sup> Frankenstein, “Bruce Conner Exhibit,” 41.

<sup>99</sup> Notably, Rauschenberg volunteered for the job of garbage collection while he was a student at Black Mountain College in North Carolina during the late 1940s through the early 1950s. Rauschenberg remembered: “I was the garbage man there [BMC] because I liked to drive trucks. We had one studio and a second studio that wasn’t registered. I would go through everybody’s garbage and take out the things that we would like to have.” Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, 34.

cloth handle at the top. Much like his aforementioned untitled work from 1954-1962 (figures 1 and 2), Ratbastard began as one idea (an oil painting) but soon developed into another (a three-dimensional collage). Aggravated with the original oil painting, Conner stated that he:

... slashed it and hacked it, it was almost like cutting through skin. I dealt with it like it was a physical thing, this small square canvas, and I stuffed a bunch of nylon stockings in it so that it looked like its innards were coming out, wires and such, wrapped a nylon stocking over the front of it, stuck a picture that I found in Life magazine of a cadaver lying on a table, and after it was all finished, it was a full three-dimensional thing.<sup>100</sup>

As evidenced by the manner in which Conner discussed this work, Ratbastard seems to become a living thing (or, at least, the cadaver of a formerly living thing) with “innards” and “skin.” Conner’s use of nylon stockings also added to the work’s anthropomorphic sense, resembling a layer of skin that encased the assemblage. The work could also be carried around with him, creating an existence other than as a static object fixed in one place – Conner stated that he put a handle on it so that “I could carry it around and put it on display any time I wanted to.”<sup>101</sup>

In a sense, Ratbastard can be seen as representing Conner’s artistic community, “embodying” the characteristics that defined its members’ approaches to creating works that engaged society’s refuse. The title adds to this interpretation: “rats” are considered

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<sup>100</sup> Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 61.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 61. Conner felt strongly about encouraging viewer interaction with his artworks, stating: “Art reaches people, involves people and touches them. It is then placed into caskets like the relics of saints, and barriers are put between the people and the artworks. The artworks that the establishment determines are the most successful are the ones that people are forbidden to come near.” As quoted from a 1 September 1985 interview in Joan Rothfuss, “Escape Artist,” in Boswell, Jenkins, and Rothfuss, eds., *2000 BC*, 180. Conner also was open to the idea of viewers touching his works: “... if anybody was going to touch them it was going to be because they were drawn to the work itself. They weren’t involved necessarily in a destructive manner.... I felt that it’s quite possible that somebody would add something to this piece. That would make it just perfect. They would be so involved and in tune with what it was or they would move something.” Karlstrom, “Interview with Bruce Conner,” 26.

nasty creatures that scavenge through trash,<sup>102</sup> while illegitimate births (“bastards”), at least at that time, were considered far outside social norms. Interpreted as such, members of this artistic community were scavengers of trash who existed in the margins of society.

In a 1983 interview, Conner discussed the alienated status of his artistic community:

So they [the artists] were using all the remnants, refuse, and outcasts of our society. The people themselves [The Scavengers Protective Association] who were doing this were considered the lowest people employed in society.... I decided, we’ll have the Ratbastard Protective Association: people who were making things with the detritus of society, who themselves were ostracized or alienated from full involvement with the society.<sup>103</sup>

In a 1959 review of an exhibition that included Ratbastard, the critic, Dean Wallace, would not even print its title because it was so transgressive: “[Conner’s] prize piece is the world’s only midget portable collage, complete with carrying handle, but whose title, alas, I hesitate to print.”<sup>104</sup>

DeFeo was also a member of Conner’s Ratbastard Protective Association.

Although she was not as outspoken as the other artists examined in this dissertation as to her use of discarded materials, her involvement in this community and her close

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<sup>102</sup> Joan Brown remembered: “The Ratbastard Protective Society was Bruce Conner’s idea. He called me up and said, ‘Hey, you guys, want to belong to a society?’ We said, ‘Oh yeah, sure,’ and he named it that. Then he had little badges printed up. We had two or three ‘meeting’ parties. One was at Fred Martin’s house, one was at Bruce Conner’s house, and that was that. The point was that there was really no point. And that was part of the attitude at that time. A lot of us used rats in our images. I certainly did. That went along with the literally ratty found objects that we all used. The rat is an ominous creature, one that most people will do anything to avoid. And here [we] almost glamorize it. We were all so young.” As quoted from a series of interviews conducted from 1986-1988 in Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 99.

<sup>103</sup> Boswell, “Bruce Conner,” 41.

<sup>104</sup> Dean Wallace, “Local Artists Are Toying With Something Akin to Dada,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (18 January 1959): 22.

friendship with Conner should be considered within this context.<sup>105</sup> In many of her works created during the 1950s, DeFeo incorporated found objects. She created several photcollages composed of female imagery taken from pornographic magazines, in addition to The Rose (1958-1966, figure 11), a 2,300 pound work built from layers and layers of paint,<sup>106</sup> wire, mica, stones, jewelry, beads, pearls, wood scraps, and remnants of earlier canvases. Further, DeFeo also produced a multitude of ephemeral works fashioned from the detritus of the world around her, such as postcard collages, jewelry, and sculptures;<sup>107</sup> many of which either disintegrated or that she herself destroyed. In a 1984 interview, DeFeo commented:

I consider my art pretty private, personally. But hasn't that always existed? There've always been artists that are more socially oriented and those that have worked from a more private point of view. I think side by side throughout art history, even as you look back, there were people that were more interested in social issues as artists and those that weren't...<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> A statement made by the artist Wally Hedrick, to whom DeFeo was married in the 1950s, also could be considered in relation to DeFeo's use of found materials: "I think [assemblage art] has something to do with the fact that America has a lot of junk. It's just available. It's everywhere. Look at this room. Sooner or later all this stuff is going to be junk. Now I could say I think I felt it was ecologically better to use it. The idea of taking something that's junk, which means nothing or has no value, and making something out of it, and then assigning it as art, which is one of man's highest accomplishments, [is] a kind of game you can play. You're making something out of nothing." As quoted in Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 75.

<sup>106</sup> The paint that DeFeo used to create *The Rose* was a special type that she helped to invent. Douglas Davis noted: "As for the pigment, that is not really pure oil. After a while, she had to invent something else, which she did, in company with Puzant Shamlian of the Bay Area Paint Co. here. It is a mixture of pigment and an oil-based foundation now marketed as Prime-Rite, a fast-drying, uncrackable substance that dries consistently from top to bottom." Douglas M. Davis, "Miss DeFeo's Awesome Painting Is Like Living Thing Under Decay," *The National Observer* (14 July 1969): 16.

<sup>107</sup> From 1954 to 1957, DeFeo sold her jewelry through the most prestigious jewelry dealer in San Francisco. See Sidra Stich and Brigid Doherty, "A Biographical History," in Sidra Stich, *Jay DeFeo: Works on Paper* (Berkeley: University Art Museum and University of California, 1989), 15.

<sup>108</sup> Jim Newman, "The Dilexi Years and Beyond," in *The Dilexi Years: 1958-1970* (Oakland, Calif.: The Oakland Museum, 1984), 37-38.

Her approach to incorporating found materials appears less as a political or social commentary and more as a way of life.

Like Conner, Kienholz was also very explicit in his views regarding commodity culture and society's production of waste:

It amuses the hell out of me to have something in my house that I've bought used to begin with, and then to get some more use out of it, thereby getting my money back in use, and then pretty soon it becomes worthless and worn out. Then I take that same junk, put it together and make a "thing" out of it, and then somebody comes along and says, "That's a marvelous thing you made!" and they leave me money, and they carry all this stuff down the hill, and I don't have to get rid of the trash then. This amuses me somehow.<sup>109</sup>

Kienholz's approach to recycling materials also stemmed from his upbringing on a farm in Fairfield, Washington. In addition to learning skills, such as carpentry and mechanics, that helped prepare him for his career as an artist, Kienholz was raised with the belief that you "make do" with what you have: "On a farm, you learn how to make do. That's an important phrase: 'You make do.' You break something – you don't drive forty miles to get a new one. You take something else and adapt it. So you also have a highly developed sense of ingenuity."<sup>110</sup>

During the early 1950s in the first stages of his artistic career, Kienholz created two-dimensional abstract works. These early works developed from paintings – most

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<sup>109</sup> Secunda, "John Bernhardt, Charles Frazier, Edward Kienholz," 32-33.

<sup>110</sup> As quoted from a 1977 interview in Greenfield, *Making Do or Making Art*, 18. Kienholz's close friend and former business partner, Walter Hopps, remembered: "Kienholz could not believe that people in a big city threw out furniture. The back alleys of the city of Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, Santa Monica, were treasure troves: all he needed was time and a truck and some energy. He could furnish a house as well as he wanted from what others had thrown out. He'd find a broken chair or a bed that just needed a little fixing. He couldn't understand how so many people had no sense of how to repair things. His natural pragmatic mode of survival became a fertile ground for the material that would soon end up in his art. Instead of buying expensive materials in an art supply store, he used found objects to make collages on surfaces of plywood and other boards, which evolved quickly into three-dimensional works." Walter Hopps, "A Note from the Underworld," in Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, *Kienholz: A Retrospective* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), 27.

often on plywood – to assemblages containing wood scraps and other found objects, which he layered to create relief surfaces.<sup>111</sup> George Warshington in Drag (1957, figure 5) exemplifies this approach with its combination of paint and wooden pieces collaged to the work's surface. Kienholz's work soon progressed to three-dimensional, free-standing assemblages and then to full-scale environments that physically enveloped viewers, works that he called "tableaux."<sup>112</sup> Similar to Conner's scavenging from San Francisco's razed Victorian buildings, Kienholz created his first tableau, Roxys (1961), in part from the remains of a destroyed theater in South Central Los Angeles.<sup>113</sup> In 1977, Kienholz recalled this period:

I worked at that time from a kind of compulsive position. I had a lot of stuff around. I'd go through trash cans and back alleys and junk stores and just keep collecting lots and lots of stuff. And depending how I felt any particular day, I'd take a little of this and a little of that, and I'd screw around with it until it was something that satisfied me.... It just sort of evolved.<sup>114</sup>

Long-time friend, Walter Hopps commented on Kienholz's working-class background, remembering that he "dressed in heavy work clothes, rough and muscular, looked nothing like the stereotype of the artist."<sup>115</sup> In addition to recycling materials to use in his works, Kienholz's working-class perspective came out in other aspects of his

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<sup>111</sup> These early works may have been influenced by the work of Kurt Schwitters, which Kienholz learned about in 1957. See Solnit, "Heretical Constellations," 74.

<sup>112</sup> In Los Angeles, Wallace Berman was also one of the leading artists working in this mode and had exhibited a number of large-scale assemblages at Kienholz's Ferus Gallery in 1957.

<sup>113</sup> Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 14.

<sup>114</sup> As quoted in Greenfield, *Making Do or Making Art*, 22.

<sup>115</sup> Hopps, "A Note from the Underworld," 29. In addition, his friend Charles Brittin remembered his first impressions of Kienholz: "He was big and burly and drank a lot of beer, looked like a brawler, and was a dealer and promoter. He always had something for sale. He was always making little deals with people." Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 89.

art as well. His dark sense of humor and sarcasm was comparable to that found in hard-boiled detective, crime, and pulp fiction novels that were specifically written for and from the perspective of working-class men. Erin A. Smith has noted that “much of this literature [detective and crime fiction] is wickedly, dryly, darkly funny, and its creators were masters of sarcasm, understatement, and one-liners, always delivered with a straight face.”<sup>116</sup> In addition, the storylines of these novels dealt with the urban underworld, violence, sexuality, and crime, subjects often addressed in Kienholz’s works.

During the mid-1950s, Rauschenberg also began to create assemblage works (which he referred to as “combines”) that combined various two-dimensional materials (such as wallpaper, fabrics, personal photographs, postcards, and images from the mass media) and three-dimensional found objects (from pillows to taxidermied animals).<sup>117</sup> Many of the objects used in his works were salvaged from the streets of New York City, as Rauschenberg recalled: “And I felt very rich in being able to pick up Con Edison lumber from the streets and whatever the day would lay out for me to use in my work. In fact, so much so, that sometimes it embarrasses me that I live in New York City as though I’m a guest here.”<sup>118</sup> In addition, he would often incorporate mass produced

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<sup>116</sup> Erin A. Smith, *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 3. According to Smith, “Affordable and accessibly written pulp magazines were the literature of choice for most workers. Librarians, educators, and cultural critics of all kinds lamented that the proletariat, in fact, read little else. Pulp editors, publishers, and advertisers concurred that the targeted readers of detective, Western and adventure pulps were young, working-class men with little formal education.” *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>117</sup> Rauschenberg exhibited the first of his combines in 1958 at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York. During this time, there were a number of artists working with assemblage and three-dimensional space in New York, such as Jim Dine, Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, Red Grooms, and George Segal, among others. See Pincus, *On a Scale*, 1. Also see Allan Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” (1958) in Pepe Karmel, ed., *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 84-89.

<sup>118</sup> Dorothy Seckler, “Interview with Robert Rauschenberg,” *Smithsonian Archives of American Art* (21 December 1965): 2.

products along with scavenged materials and traditional artistic media, such as with Bed (1955, figure 12), in which he smeared the surface of the work (including an old pillow and quilt) not only with paint and pencil but also with red fingernail polish and a newly marketed, striped toothpaste.<sup>119</sup>

Similar to Kienholz and Conner, Rauschenberg sought to create works that commented on the real world around him, stating: “I don’t want a picture to look like something it isn’t. I want it to look like something it is. And I think a picture is more like the real world when it’s made out of the real world.”<sup>120</sup> Rauschenberg’s desire to create works made from the “real world” can be seen, for example, in Coca-Cola Plan (1958, figure 13), which features a narrow, vertical wooden structure divided into three sections. The top section is covered with brown paper on which “instructions” are written in pencil (below a grid pattern are the words: “Plan – lay out stretcher on floor – match markings and join”). The middle section contains three empty Coca-Cola bottles that have been covered with messily applied paint in various colors. The bottom section contains a wooden post from a staircase handrail. On either side of the wooden structure is a cast metal wing.

While ambiguous in their meanings, certain elements of Coca-Cola Plan point plainly to the United States’ commodity culture. Coca-Cola (a huge corporation) has a “plan”/agenda: the mass production of this specifically American product is connected by Rauschenberg to ascendancy (the staircase newel) and freedom (the outspread wings).

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<sup>119</sup> Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, 53.

<sup>120</sup> As quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 87. Tomkins also stated: “Rauschenberg was starting to think of himself as a reporter, someone who bore visual witness to the constantly shifting, gritty, tension-filled life he saw around him in downtown Manhattan.” *Ibid.*, 115.

Yet, the plan makes no sense: the staircase is missing; the bottles are empty and dirtied; and the metal wings are too heavy for flight. In a 1960 review, Robert M. Coates observed that Rauschenberg emphasized “the castoff and the commonplace,” embellishing his compositions “with shreds of old posters and newspapers, paper doilies, empty Coke bottles, and all the other odds and ends one might find [in a wastebasket].” A sense of social commentary on Rauschenberg’s part was perceived by Coates, who ultimately suggested: “All this is fundamentally work of protest, and, like all protest in art, when honest, is worthy of notice. It’s a protest, I gather, against everything from inflation to credit cards and fat-catism, and I take no sides in the matter, merely pointing out that the attitude exists and is spreading.”<sup>121</sup>

Rauschenberg extended his use of real objects to real bodies, incorporating taxidermied animals into numerous works: Satellite (1955) featured a stuffed pheasant; a Leghorn rooster was mounted on Odalisk (1955/58); a Dominique hen was used in an untitled work from 1954;<sup>122</sup> and an eagle was used in Canyon (1959). Monogram (1955-59, figure 14) featured an Angora goat, wearing a tire around its waist and positioned in the center of a platform placed horizontally above the floor on a wheeled base. Collaged objects (a tennis ball, pieces of wood, a rubber shoe heel, and fragments of printed paper) cover the messily painted platform. The goat’s face also has been smeared with many different colors of paint. Monogram can certainly be seen in relation to Rauschenberg’s oft-quoted statement: “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to

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<sup>121</sup> Coates, “The Art Galleries,” 60.

<sup>122</sup> It was long believed that this hen was of a breed known as Plymouth Rock, the same name that Rauschenberg often called this work. Yet, the hen has now been identified as belonging to the Dominique breed. See Paul Schimmel, “Autobiography and Self-Portraiture in Rauschenberg’s Combines,” *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art and Steidl Verlag, 2005), 218.

act in the gap between the two).”<sup>123</sup> Relating to life in terms of its use of real objects – particularly, the once-alive goat – this work also directly references (as did many of Rauschenberg’s works) the art movement Abstract Expressionism, especially the work of Jackson Pollock, who was known for splattering paint on his canvases while they lay horizontally on the floor.

While Rauschenberg’s works can be understood as engaging simultaneously the real world around him and the contemporaneous art historical climate, Kienholz’s works were meant foremost as a form of social protest.<sup>124</sup> Although similar to Rauschenberg’s work in a number of respects, Kienholz’s work differed in that it predominantly and blatantly commented on society, usually taking as its subjects the victims of society. Reviews by critics at the time most often addressed the social commentary of Kienholz’s works. For example, Barbara Rose, who referred to Kienholz as one of the three major American assemblagists,<sup>125</sup> noted that his “shocking, brutal and effective” works were inspired by the “repressed unimaginable brutality, sadism and violence” hidden beneath the “polite surface of our organized society.”<sup>126</sup> In a review of the 1966 Whitney Annual,

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<sup>123</sup> Miller, *Sixteen Americans*, 58.

<sup>124</sup> Robert L. Pincus has written about the relationship between the works of Rauschenberg and Kienholz, stating that “the works, writings, and statements of Rauschenberg... carried on a dialogue with previous art more than with life,” while Kienholz’s works “were less concerned with aesthetics than with the world and its social shortcomings.” See Robert L. Pincus, “An Ode and an ‘Odious’ for Neo-Dada: Edward Kienholz’ Assemblages and Tableaux, 1959-1965,” *Images and Issues* (Fall 1981): 55.

<sup>125</sup> Barbara Rose, *American Art Since 1900: A Critical History* (New York and Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), 265.

<sup>126</sup> Barbara Rose, “New York Letter,” *Art International* (25 March 1963): 65. Notably, Rose also asked: “Kienholz obviously has something to say, but why has he chosen to express himself visually and not verbally?”

Michael Benedikt stated that: “Indeed, [Kienholz’s] is the most effective and unschmaltzy example of social criticism in the show.”<sup>127</sup>

Yet, even though Rauschenberg’s references to the everyday world were much more subtle in their social commentary, his works still can be compared to those of Kienholz. For example, Lisa Wainwright has suggested that taxidermy evokes “the absent body – it is our body evoked, our humanity questioned, our impending death wishfully forestalled, our sublime unknowing fetishistically unfulfilled.”<sup>128</sup> Therefore, Rauschenberg’s use of taxidermied animals might be considered in relation to his experience with human bodies while serving in the Navy hospital corps. After training at the San Diego Naval Hospital (1943-1946), Rauschenberg was then stationed at Camp Pendleton, near San Diego. Calvin Tomkins stated that while there, Rauschenberg worked with “everything from disturbed draftees to people with acute combat psychosis.”<sup>129</sup> In an interview with Barbara Rose, Rauschenberg remembered: “My job was to wrap corpses, to tie them off so that they didn’t make a mess in the bag, and give them one last bath...” During his time in the military, he also worked as a neuropsychiatric technician:

I had decided while I was in the Navy that I was going to continue with the psycho work. Then I decided that I got too involved. It’s one thing to talk to a piece of tin and it’s another thing to have your heart broken by every patient you talk to. And to deal with the frustration of wishing you

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<sup>127</sup> Michael Benedikt, “Sculpture as Architecture: New York Letter, 1966-67,” (1966) in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: EP Dutton and Company, Inc., 1968), 82-85.

<sup>128</sup> Lisa Wainwright, “From Norman Bates to Annette Messager: Taxidermy for a Reason,” *The New Art Examiner* (May 1996): 22.

<sup>129</sup> Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 18.

could do something about the world so that this wouldn't have happened.<sup>130</sup>

Understood from this perspective, Rauschenberg's creative response ultimately may have been to incorporate real corpses into his works; in a sense, he resurrected the taxidermied bodies while simultaneously emphasizing their lack of life.

Rauschenberg acquired the taxidermied animals that he used in his works from a number of sources. He purchased some from a taxidermist shop on Sixth Avenue in New York City; he received some from friends; and the Angora goat in Monogram came from a secondhand office furniture store. Remembering how he came upon this goat, Rauschenberg explained:

I was walking past a shop that had a stuffed goat in the window. I felt really sorry for that poor dusty, dirty, filthy goat. The place sold used office furniture and supplies. Everything was incredibly dusty. It just looked awful on this beautiful angora goat. I went in and hustled the guy. I asked him how much he wanted for the goat. He said that he didn't want to sell it because it was one of the first mistakes he ever made. You see, he got all his merchandise from railroad auctions and refused materials. This was the first time that he guessed wrong about what was in a box. The goat had been on the way to a wool convention.<sup>131</sup>

Based upon his statement, Rauschenberg felt sorry for this "dusty, dirty, filthy" goat and his purchase appears to have been, in a sense, an attempt to save the dead animal.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, 17 and 18. Elaine Scarry has examined the psychological effects of war in terms of the body: "Whether a boy announces that he is going off 'to die' for his country or going off 'to kill' for his country, he is saying that he is going off 'to alter body tissue' (either his own or another's) for his country, and the eventual destination here is to understand the structural logic of an event in which alterations in human tissue can come to be the freedom or ideological autonomy or moral legitimacy of a country." Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 81.

<sup>131</sup> Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, 60.

<sup>132</sup> Significantly, Rauschenberg also stated: "I stopped doing the animal pieces when I discovered what the taxidermist I used was doing. It was a place on Sixth Avenue – a real old-fashioned taxidermy place. I bought the chicken for the Panza piece, you know, *Plymouth Rock*, and the chicken for *Odalisk* there. There were all kinds of different stuffed animals all over the place. He would say that whatever I

While Rauschenberg's work from this period may be understood as socially engaged,<sup>133</sup> it is significant that he often was ambiguous about the relationship between his work, society, and politics. For example, he stated that "art shouldn't have a concept. That's the only concept that I've ever been consistent with. I don't think I've ever deliberately done a piece that started out to be reactionary or controversial."<sup>134</sup> In a 1965 interview, Rauschenberg admitted that he does "take a stance in questions like race issues and atrocities of all sorts," but stated that "I've never thought that problems were so simple politically that they could, by me anyway, be tackled directly."<sup>135</sup> Rauschenberg's ambiguity seems to have been noted by Kienholz as well,<sup>136</sup> who created a work, Odious to Rauschenberg (1960, figure 15), that was not only an homage to Rauschenberg's work but also a parody.<sup>137</sup> Kienholz planned to send his revolting and obnoxious "ode" to Rauschenberg as an anonymous gift, although he never did.

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was looking for he had. One time I needed a chicken and he said he would have one in two days. Well, it turned out that he went out and killed one. So I quit using stuffed animals in my work." Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>133</sup> Although he did not explicitly discuss his work in social and political terms (as did Kienholz and Conner), many of Rauschenberg's works can be understood in this context. By the mid-sixties, he began to link his work more publicly to social and humanitarian causes. In 1966, Rauschenberg played a leading role in the foundation of EAT (Experiments in Art and Technology), a group created to encourage interaction between artists and engineers; in 1970 he created Change, Inc., a non-profit foundation that disperses emergency funds to artists in need; and from 1984-1991, he created and operated the ROCI (Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange) project, in which he collaborated with other artists to bring art to diverse cultures around the world in the hopes of furthering world peace and awareness. See Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, 83-118, and Enid Nemy, "Artists' Families Needing Aid Get It From Rauschenberg's Group," *The New York Times* (25 September 1974): 46.

<sup>134</sup> Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, 50.

<sup>135</sup> Seckler, "Interview with Robert Rauschenberg," 13.

<sup>136</sup> In a 1992 interview, Kienholz recalled learning about Rauschenberg's work by 1955 from Walter Hopps. See Hapgood, *Neo-Dada*, 53.

<sup>137</sup> For a discussion of this work, see Pincus, *On a Scale*, 37-39, and Pincus, "An Ode and an 'Odious' for Neo-Dada," 53-55.

To create this work, Kienholz used a deer's head, an obvious reference to Rauschenberg's use of taxidermied animals – though Kienholz had used a deer's head in his earlier work The Little Eagle Rock Incident (1958, figure 8). Curving out of the deer's head was a long, curved piece of wood that Kienholz said was “a big kind of tongue that sticks out,”<sup>138</sup> directed at the intended recipient of this gift. When plugged in, the motorized deer's head rotated. Yet, the most interesting aspect of Odious was the real, but hidden, function of the work, as Kienholz described:

Built into that machine was a diathermy apparatus. A diathermy is an early medical radio-radar kind of thing. And when you plug in a diathermy machine, it just completely fucks up the television reception in that area. So I figured that the movement of the head was enough to keep it plugged in, and people would say, “Oh, that's funny.” And they would leave it on. And then there would be complaints going into the police station or the television station, and they'd send out trucks to discover what the trouble is in the community when you get a bad reception like that. Those trucks go around with little antennas; and they finally figure it out, and [whistle] they zero in on it. They'd bust in on it and they'd say, “Okay,” and everybody gets a big fine and goes off to jail. I just thought it would be a really funny kind of thing.<sup>139</sup>

Perhaps Kienholz's Odious to Rauschenberg was a comment on Rauschenberg's refusal to admit that his works had any social meaning or his belief that political problems were too complex to address in a work of art (or at least in his). An examination of Odious is significant in that it offers additional insight into the relationship among the works of these artists. Although all of the artists examined in this dissertation desired to connect art and life in their works, and to draw materials and

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<sup>138</sup> Pincus, *On a Scale*, 38.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 38. Although stated almost thirty years after Kienholz's *Odious*, it is interesting to note that Rauschenberg discussed his work as follows in a 1987 interview: “I don't want my personality to come out through the piece. That's why I keep the television on all the time. And I keep the windows open. I want my paintings to be reflections of life, and life can't be stopped.” Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, 72.

subjects from the everyday world, each went about it individually. Whereas Rauschenberg's works certainly can be understood as existing in the gap between art and life, Kienholz's somewhat different interpretation of this artistic conception materializes clearly in Odious – in order to connect genuinely to life, a work should stir the world around it, cause complaints and even, conceivably, legal penalties.

In the context of a period when Americans were overloaded with images and advice – on television, and in films, advertisements, and magazines – on how to clean up their homes, bodies, minds, politics and even the world, the deliberately dirty work produced by the artists focused on in this dissertation represented a powerful statement on society. The early works of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz, each in his or her own way, commented significantly on a culture obsessed with consumption and cleanliness. To present work that emphasized dirt, decay, disorder, and uncleanness was to critique values that were specifically associated with good American citizenship; this amounted to a strong challenge during the Cold War moment when dirt was often associated with unpatriotic acts. Most importantly, these artists did not just engage dirt through their methods and the subject matter of their works, they also effectually dirtied specific areas held sacred by most Americans – the home, the family, and the body – areas said to be validated through cleanliness and order.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Defining a Period: Violence and Masculinity in 1950s Dirty Art

Throughout this dissertation I examine how Edward Kienholz, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, and Robert Rauschenberg positioned themselves and their works in relation to governing power structures, constituted in terms of morality, culture, politics, and gender. In this chapter, I will address the work of these four artists in terms of power structures specifically as they manifested themselves in the fine art world of the 1950s in relation to the dominant art movement of Abstract Expressionism. Typically, when the relationships between the Abstract Expressionists and Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz are discussed, the subject of messy formal techniques is raised. Although a similarity does exist between some of the works of the younger artists and those of the Abstract Expressionists, especially in terms of an apparently untidy application of paint, ultimately the artistic approaches are radically different. Although influenced by and certainly in dialogue with the works of the Abstract Expressionists, the works of the younger artists in question here moved beyond a formal messiness to engage with society and *its* dirt.

This chapter will examine the works of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz in relation to Abstract Expressionism, specifically in the context of the Cold War, which created a particular social and political environment that influenced the works created by these artists. I will explore how the works created by the Abstract Expressionists and this younger generation of artists represented different responses to this politically anxious and socially tense period. I will also investigate how the Cold War conditioned the manner in which Abstract Expressionist artists (particularly Jackson

Pollock) were discursively understood, as well as how their works and artistic approaches were interpreted. Specifically with reference to issues of violence and masculinity, I will then examine how this younger generation of artists was understood in relation to their elders. Although these aspects were part of an undercurrent surrounding Abstract Expressionism and not necessarily central to an understanding of the movement, I want to bring them to the forefront in my examination of the artists in question here. In so doing, I will be better able to examine the issues of social and political control, power, and the formation of gender identities represented in their works.

### **Setting the Stage: Abstract Expressionism**

After World War II, the center of the art world shifted from Paris to New York, during which time Abstract Expressionism dominated throughout the 1950s. A majority of the Abstract Expressionists had been supporters of socialist ideas during the 1930s.<sup>140</sup> Yet, during and after the war, the artists of this movement increasingly became disenchanted with political activity and the socially oriented art movement of Social Realism, which some had been affected by during the 1930s. Their move away from the political arena stemmed from their disillusionment with Communist governments, which had officially sponsored Social Realism in Soviet Bloc countries. In addition, the Cold War climate of the late 1940s and the 1950s, which was fueled by anti-communist

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<sup>140</sup> Many Abstract Expressionists (for example, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Phillip Guston, and Arshile Gorky) also had been involved in the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), set up initially in December 1933 by the Roosevelt Administration to commission artists to create public art. For more information on the New Deal art projects, see David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro, eds., *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975); and Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1973).

hysteria, made suspect the former socialist sympathies of many of these artists. In their search for a new artistic direction, the Abstract Expressionists mostly desired to create an original art that would express their individual emotions rather than an overt political perspective or social commentary.<sup>141</sup>

Although liberated from political activity in their postwar artwork, the Abstract Expressionist artists remained politically aware and were influenced in particular by two politicized émigré intellectuals, Leon Trotsky and André Breton. In 1938 Trotsky and Breton, along with the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, published a manifesto entitled “Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,” which called for the “complete liberation of art” and thus implicitly rejected state-sponsored Social Realism. This manifesto demanded the exemption of both art and artist from state controls. Breton, Trotsky, and Rivera insisted that true art “is unable *not* to be revolutionary, *not* to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society.”<sup>142</sup> They believed that the opposition of writers and artists to totalitarianism could contribute to the overthrow of regimes that destroy human dignity. Breton, Trotsky, and Rivera did not call for a politically indifferent art, but

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<sup>141</sup> Although the Abstract Expressionists themselves generally did not explicitly reference popular culture or the everyday world in their works, a dialogue can be seen between these artists and the world around them. Through an examination of popular philosophy, Hollywood movies, and other materials of the time, Michael Leja, for example, has argued: “Abstract Expressionism had much more in common with the mainstream culture than some of its aggressively elitist defenders would allow.” Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 4. Significantly, though, Jackson Pollock’s artistic practices *did* create a potential for engaging with the surrounding everyday world, which was understood by a number of artists in this younger generation. Shortly after Pollock’s death in 1956, Allan Kaprow articulated his legacy as follows: “Pollock as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-Second Street.... Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things which will be discovered by the present generation of artists.” Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” 89. Although written shortly after Pollock’s death in 1956, Kaprow’s article was not published until October 1958 in *Art News*.

<sup>142</sup> André Breton, Diego Rivera, and Leon Trotsky, “Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,” in Harrison and Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, 527-528.

rather for an art that struggled for freedom. This freedom could be attained through an incarnation of the artist's "inner world" via an art resultantly rich with "meaning and drama." First published in New York in Partisan Review, this article impressed the artists involved in the initial formation of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

In 1939, the art critic Clement Greenberg expanded the idea of a free art set forth by Trotsky and Breton. Greenberg composed an article, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in which he formulated many ideas that would later be embraced by this post-World War II American art movement. In his article, he argued that the avant-garde keeps "culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence" while producing "art for art's sake" and, in "search of the absolute," arriving at "abstract" or "nonobjective" art.<sup>143</sup> For Greenberg, kitsch represented the popular, commercial, low art of the urbanized masses that are "insensible to the values of genuine culture." Kitsch imitates life and therefore provides no challenge to the spectator. Conversely, the high art of the avant-garde adds "difficulty" to the dynamics of life and requires extended reflection by a sensitive and enlightened audience. This essay positioned Greenberg as the ultimate "interpreter" of inherent meaning and value in the abstract art of the avant-garde.

With Greenberg positioned as the "interpreter" of abstract art, the Abstract Expressionist artists soon were linked together although each of the artists had his or her own unique style. Centered in or near the same geographical location, New York City,

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<sup>143</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in Harrison and Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, 531. Greenberg defined kitsch as "popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc." *Ibid.*, 533. Throughout the 1940s and into the 1950s, domesticity and popular culture remained the antithesis of "high" art. Yet, in the 1950s and 1960s, artists began to examine the domestic interior and popular culture as they challenged the distinction between "high" and "low" art. See Cécile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender, and Consumer Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), which examines the work of 1950s and 60s cultural critics who "gendered the concept of taste" and distinguished between "highbrow male" and "middlebrow female."

the Abstract Expressionists all arrived at their mature visions roughly around the same time.<sup>144</sup> In addition, the associated artists also seemed to share certain assumptions. For example, most of these artists created works that were visually abstract and that avoided overt political and social commentary. Further, although most of the artists were influenced by Surrealism, this group desired to move away from European modernist styles. In so doing, many Abstract Expressionists began to focus on the physical interaction of the artist with the paint and the canvas (which did derive in part from Surrealism's psychic automatism concept). Most often devoid of recognizable subject matter, their works frequently were discussed by art critics and historians in formalist terms and in relation to the concept of the unconscious through which they were said to be created.<sup>145</sup>

### **Differentiating a Dirty Art**

Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz came of age artistically during the reign of the Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s. Young artists living in New York had the opportunity to see firsthand the exhibited works of established artists such as Pollock and Willem de Kooning as well as the works of European artists who came to the United States during and immediately after World War II.<sup>146</sup> While Rauschenberg was based in

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<sup>144</sup> This group of artists is also referred to as the New York School, which is considered by some to be a less confining term, one that encompasses more diverse artistic practices within its frame.

<sup>145</sup> Although many interpreted their art as "art for art's sake," the Abstract Expressionists saw their works as dealing with socially significant subject matter, albeit in an abstract manner. See, for example, Anna Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*.

<sup>146</sup> Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, André Breton, André Masson, Piet Mondrian, Yves Tanguy, Amédée Ozenfant, and Marc Chagall are just a few of the prominent European artists who resided in New York before, during, or after World War II.

New York, Kienholz lived and worked in Los Angeles, and Conner and DeFeo lived and worked in San Francisco.<sup>147</sup> Even though the artists discussed in this dissertation were not all located in the same geographical location during the early stages of their careers, they did share commonalities, a number of which stemmed from their desire as newly emerging artists to distinguish themselves from the Abstract Expressionists.

The relationship between Rauschenberg and the Abstract Expressionists has been extensively explored, as their shared geographical location and direct contact in New York City provides an understandable connection. During the 1950s, Rauschenberg was considered to be part of this movement's second generation of artists and often his work was included in shows featuring the Abstract Expressionists.<sup>148</sup> Rauschenberg's technique of dripping and smearing paint on his works is frequently interpreted as referencing Pollock's painting style, which often appeared disordered and unruly.<sup>149</sup> For example, Pepe Karmel has stated:

But perhaps the most important response [to Abstract Expressionism] occurred in the work of Robert Rauschenberg, a leader in the generation that followed Pollock.... Pollock's example is crucial to works like Rebus

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<sup>147</sup> By the early 1960s, all four of these artists' works were exhibited in two major shows in New York, both at the Museum of Modern Art: *Sixteen Americans* (1959) included DeFeo and Rauschenberg, and *The Art of Assemblage* (1961) included Conner and Kienholz.

<sup>148</sup> This included shows such as the *Ninth Street Show* (60 East Ninth Street, New York City, May 1951), *Artists of the New York School: Second Generation* (Jewish Museum, New York City, March 1957), and *School of New York: Some Younger Artists* (Stable Gallery, New York City, December 1959). Art critic Frank O'Hara even went so far as to call him the "*enfant terrible* of the New York school." See Frank O'Hara, "Reviews and Previews: Bob Rauschenberg," *Art News* 53 (January 1955): 47.

<sup>149</sup> The Abstract Expressionists often are divided into two different stylistic groups: the gestural painters and the color field painters. The gestural painters (Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner, and Franz Kline, for example) focused on the texture and layering of the paint on the canvas, which was meant to emphasize the artist's gesture and physical interaction with the work at the moment of creation. The color field painters (Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Clyfford Still, for example) were also concerned with the physical interaction of the artist with the canvas, yet their works are visually different in that, most often, these artists created large-scale works with broad expanses of color.

(1955), where dripped and smeared paint serves as a kind of visual glue to bind together a varied assemblage.<sup>150</sup>

Yet, when critics such as Karmel note this stylistic similarity, rarely do they elaborate on the different direction in which Rauschenberg, or the other younger artists, took the technique of dripping and smearing paint on their assemblages of objects.

In 1947, Jackson Pollock created Full Fathom Five (figure 16), which is composed of a swirling mass of colors, predominantly blue, green, grey, and black. While no recognizable subject matter is discernable, the composition is created with densely layered drips and splatters of paint.<sup>151</sup> Although the paint in this work (and in his other drip paintings) appears to be chaotically, and even violently, layered across the surface of the work, the paint composing each mark is a unique and carefully calculated addition, applied with a great amount of control and precision. Upon closer examination, Pollock's inclusion of small, disparate objects becomes apparent, which was a typical practice for him in many of his drip paintings. Yet, even though Full Fathom Five includes a torn cigarette, nails, matches, tacks, paint-tube tops, coins, buttons, and a key, the objects are almost invisible, enveloped by the overall mass of the design.

Conversely, Rauschenberg's Satellite (1955, figure 17) includes newspaper clippings, cartoons, a postcard, a pair of dirty, crumpled white athletic socks, a swatch of leather, and a myriad of fabrics (mattress ticking, bed sheets, handmade crocheted doilies, a lace handkerchief, a piece of kitchen fabric decorated with apples, and a filthy

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<sup>150</sup> Pepe Karmel, "A Sum of Destructions," in Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, eds., *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 99.

<sup>151</sup> Pollock created this work using his well-known "drip painting" technique, in which he laid the canvas on the floor and applied the paint as he moved around all sides of the canvas. He smeared, dripped, stained, and threw paint at the canvas using various instruments. See James Coddington, "No Chaos Damn It," in Varnedoe and Karmel, eds., *Jackson Pollock*, 101-115.

washcloth). In addition, a stuffed pheasant appears to be walking across a wooden ledge attached to the top of the canvas. Even though most of the objects included in this work (including the pheasant) are smeared with paint, they remain discernable and together, become the focus of the work, unlike the items used by Pollock. Further, Rauschenberg's paint application appears to have dirtied the found objects: the paint smears across parts of the surface as if it has been accidentally spilt (and then wiped up) and in other sections, the paint globs in chunks as if it has been squeezed directly from the tube. The overall effect is a conglomeration of images and objects that hint at a narrative that must be understood by reading around or through the smudges and blotches of paint.

Certainly, Rauschenberg's dripping paint referenced Pollock's artistic methods; the work's title, Satellite (defined as "an attendant of some important person"), possibly suggested a subtle reference to this older artist. Yet, the complexities of Rauschenberg's work inhere also in the specific objects he used to create what Karmel called his "varied assemblage." Significantly, many of the items attached to the canvas are fabrics found in most domestic spaces and associated with femininity. The athletic socks, although presumably men's, are heavily soiled and pathetically droop on the canvas. Nearly all of the printed materials are cartoons (Popeye and The Gumps) or advertisements from mainstream, popular culture publications. A final, somewhat unsettling, element is the taxidermied pheasant situated at the top of the work. From the position in which Satellite is hung on the wall, the pheasant appears to stare down at the viewer with his dead, but still shining, eyes. Taken as a whole, the work suggests a sense of humor but also has darker undertones concerning gender, sexuality, and death.

Although Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz had varied knowledge of Abstract Expressionism and engaged with aspects of this movement in different ways through their works, they all had a commonality in their creation of hybrid art objects. Whereas Abstract Expressionist artists created works clearly marked as either painting or sculpture, the artists addressed in this dissertation produced works that blurred the boundary between these two media by incorporating aspects of both. A comparison between Pollock's Full Fathom Five and Rauschenberg's Satellite reveals this shift. Although Pollock did add objects to his work, Full Fathom Five still exists solidly in the realm of painting, while Satellite represents a mixture of both painting and sculpture. Hybridity entails an inability to fit into any one category, therefore creating a transitional, marginal, or, in a sense, dirtied state. These artists combined their uses of literal dirt with figurative dirt to create works that refused to conform to orderly artistic definitions.

For example, Rauschenberg created works that he referred to as “combines” because they combined both painting and sculpture. Calvin Tomkins stated that Rauschenberg

liked having another surface to work on in addition to the canvas, and he liked having the picture come out into the room.... Although the results were three-dimensional and sometimes free-standing, he felt that they lay somewhere between painting and sculpture, and so he coined a new word to describe them: “combines,” or “combine-paintings.”<sup>152</sup>

Similarly, Kienholz created works that combined both painting and sculpture; works that developed from three-dimensional, free-standing pieces to full-scale environments (“tableaux,” as the artist termed them) that viewers could physically enter.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 134.

<sup>153</sup> Notably, both Kienholz and Rauschenberg still largely considered themselves to be painters. Rauschenberg stated: “But I’m not really a sculptor in any traditional sense. I tend to work with materials

Likewise, DeFeo's work during the 1950s can be understood in terms of both painting and sculpture, particularly in terms of The Rose (1958-1966, figure 11). In a 1969 interview, she discussed her working process on this 2,300 pound work: "I sharpened knives on a drill press and hacked and carved the surface, adding and subtracting, painting and sculpting, using brushes and painting knives. The result is a marriage between painting and sculpture."<sup>154</sup> In a 1961 statement for Art In America's "New Talent USA," DeFeo commented on her artistic approach:

Although a painter by definition, my work as it has emerged in the past two years could more accurately be described as a combination of painting and sculpture. I consider the aspects of each inseparable and interdependent, the process being one of building and carving, but always in reference to the properties of paint as a medium; for example, the actual three-dimensional aspects of sculpture and a consideration of lighting as it affects the form, are completely integrated with those qualities of color, texture, and the illusory nature of space and dimension that one deals with as a painter. It is not my intention to be first a sculptor and subsequently a painter, adorning the three-dimensional form in a painterly manner. To realize satisfaction in this effort I must cope with the problems of both sculpture and painting as we have understood them in the past, and attempt to solve the new problems that emerge out of the dependency of one upon the other in my work.<sup>155</sup>

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that are a little heavier and put them together as practically as I can. By being a sculptor, I mean I don't weld or solder." Seckler, "Interview with Robert Rauschenberg," 9. Similarly, in 1977, Kienholz noted: "I still today think of myself as a painter. I don't think of myself as a sculptor. I know that I'm a sculptor; I mean, I understand the contradiction. But when I'm fibreglassing a piece, I go to the trouble of building the piece. And when I get it built, then I paint it. And that's it essentially – the painting gesture is the fibreglass." As quoted in Pincus, *On a Scale*, 36. Conversely, Conner appears to have considered himself more of a sculptor at that time: "Artists were using oil paint which I felt was a pretty limited medium for spontaneity; for using what was around you. [I] figured you would use anything you wanted to. The main thing was to make it, to make the image. To make the thing that you were trying to do, and whether it fell apart or not was of secondary importance." Paul Cummings, "Interview with Bruce Conner," *Smithsonian Archives of American Art* (16 April 1973): 15. In fact, Conner remembered his first in-person engagement with Rauschenberg's works at which time he became immediately aware of the difference in their artistic approaches: "For some time I thought that perhaps the things I was doing were like Rauschenberg's. I would see reproductions of his work. Then in 1960 I went to New York and I saw a lot of Rauschenberg's and I realized then that Rauschenberg was a painter and that these were paintings that he was doing, that rather than being a paint stroke it's a piece of cloth." Karlstrom, "Interview with Bruce Conner," 19.

<sup>154</sup> Davis, "Miss DeFeo's Awesome Painting," 16.

<sup>155</sup> John Baur, Dorothy C. Miller, and Dorothy Gees Seckler, "New Talent USA," *Art In America* 49 #1 (Spring 1961): 30.

Working in New York during the 1950s, Rauschenberg saw many works by the Abstract Expressionists, including Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko. He recalled his early impressions of their works:

I still didn't know what those people were doing. I'd never studied with anyone who even mentioned that they existed. I saw a Rothko show at Betty's – the room was filled with fever, really a charged atmosphere. But early on I had the feeling that there was enough room for everybody, and that no two people had to do it in the same way. Besides which I couldn't really emulate something I was so in awe of. I saw Pollock and all that other work, and I said, Okay, I can't go that way. It's possible that I discovered my own originality through a series of self-imposed detours.<sup>156</sup>

During a 1965 interview, Rauschenberg was asked about his views regarding Abstract Expressionism and how his work differed. He responded:

I was in awe of the painters; I mean I was new in New York, and I thought the painting that was going on here was just unbelievable. I still think that Bill de Kooning is one of the greatest painters in the world.... But I found a lot of artists at the Cedar Bar were difficult for me to talk to.... There was something about the self assertion of abstract expressionism that personally always put me off, because at that time my focus was as much in the opposite direction as it could be. I was busy trying to find ways where the imagery and the material and the meanings of the painting would be not an illustration of my will but more like an unbiased documentation of my observations....<sup>157</sup>

Rauschenberg's statement points to a significant difference in his work from the Abstract Expressionists. Whereas works by the older generation of artists were often understood as personal expressions tied to each artist's subconscious or, at least, inner world, Rauschenberg saw his work as documenting his observations of the world beyond

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<sup>156</sup> Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 63.

<sup>157</sup> Seckler, "Interview with Robert Rauschenberg," 2.

himself: “I don’t mess around with my subconscious. I mean I try to keep wide awake.”<sup>158</sup>

Due to their geographical locations in California, Kienholz, Conner, and DeFeo had particularized interactions with and knowledge of Abstract Expressionism.<sup>159</sup> For example, DeFeo received her bachelor’s degree in art from the University of California at Berkeley in 1950, and a year later received her master’s degree in art at the same school.<sup>160</sup> During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Ad Reinhardt taught at the San Francisco Art Institute (formerly the California School of Fine Arts), which was located near Berkeley. In addition, Pollock, Still, and Rothko had exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1946.

Of her early engagement with Abstract Expressionism while studying at Berkeley, DeFeo remembered:

I had never even visited it [the San Francisco Art Institute] and knew nothing about it, necessarily, except that I felt the vibrations kind of coming over toward Berkeley from Clyfford Still and Rothko and all of those people that were just a generation ahead of me. But the impetus of that movement was so powerful that it was really felt by everyone.<sup>161</sup>

About the teachers with whom she worked during her studies at Berkeley, DeFeo stated:

“[M]any of them were products of Hans Hofmann in New York and were enormously influenced and excited by this movement. They brought that to their teaching in a sort of

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>159</sup> For more information on the influence of Abstract Expressionism on California artists, see Susan Landauer, *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*; and Caroline Jones, *Bay Area Figurative Art, 1950-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>160</sup> Upon her graduation from college, DeFeo was awarded the Sigmund Martin Heller Traveling Fellowship, which enabled her to travel to Europe, where she remained for about a year and a half.

<sup>161</sup> Karlstrom, “Interview with Jay DeFeo,” 12.

a second generation way.”<sup>162</sup> Yet, she recalled her impression of Hofmann: “And, oddly enough, frankly some of the Hofmann things I see I can’t get with. I’m not really (in spite of what might seem natural to me), a Hofmann fan. And, to tell you the truth, when I went to see the collection at Berkeley I was disappointed. I thought it was sort of second rate.”<sup>163</sup> Further, DeFeo has pointed out that one of her most influential teachers, Margaret Peterson O’Hagan, was “kind of ‘anti’ Abstract Expressionism in her attitude.”<sup>164</sup> Nonetheless, she seems to have appreciated the spirit of this movement. When asked if she had heard of Jackson Pollock in the 1950s, DeFeo responded: “Who didn’t! Due to all the national publicity, everybody dripped a bit. You know, you couldn’t help it.... It was all very romantic, you know. All this jazz and booze and dripping paint and all that sort of thing.”<sup>165</sup>

Moving to San Francisco in 1957, Conner’s interactions with Abstraction Expressionism varied from DeFeo’s. Before settling in California, Conner lived briefly in and traveled often to New York during the 1950s.<sup>166</sup> He recalled his time spent in New York during this period: “Michael McClure and I went to New York about 1951 or ’52 to gather in depth, secret knowledge about Abstract Expressionism and all modernistic art.”<sup>167</sup> Yet, he left shortly thereafter, as Conner remembered: “I hated New York. I

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>166</sup> Conner traveled to New York to find a gallery in the summer of 1955, when he began his ten year working relationship with the Alan Gallery. In 1956, Conner received a one year appointment at the Brooklyn Museum Art School on its Max Beckmann Scholarship, but he stayed only six months due to his dislike of New York.

<sup>167</sup> “A Conversation with Bruce Conner and Robert Dean,” unpaginated.

couldn't stand it.... I was hungry and I did not know very many people. It did not seem to be a friendly place and I felt claustrophobic after living in Kansas where you can look out the window and see the horizon line.”<sup>168</sup>

Significantly, Conner could have chosen to pursue his art in New York,<sup>169</sup> yet, the environment he found in San Francisco gave him a freedom that enabled him to express his personal beliefs and visions in a way that specifically positioned him in the margins of the art world. Well aware of the possible ramifications of his geographical decision, Conner stated:

New York is the center of that kind of communication. All the magazines come from there. All the information comes from there. If it is not in New York it is “not seen.” It is not taken seriously unless it has come to New York.... All of those people in that business of communicating ideas are all in New York. The world has to revolve around New York.... Whatever was happening in New York did not seem to apply to what we were doing at all [in San Francisco].<sup>170</sup>

Describing the postwar artistic milieu of California, Rebecca Solnit pointed out:

<sup>168</sup> Cummings, “Interview with Bruce Conner,” 12. Although Conner hated New York, it appears to have inspired him in much the same manner as it did Rauschenberg. While attending the Brooklyn Museum Art School, he lived on the lower east side of Manhattan and recalled that it was “the area where all the rag pickers of New York would bring their rags and clothes to sell. The store windows around there would be piled full. The glass windows would be piled with multicolored cloth. I thought about working this into assemblages, of using glass windows and putting things behind the glass windows, cloth and objects.” *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>169</sup> Notably, Rauschenberg was drawn to California during the early 1950s before deciding to move to New York. After his discharge from the Navy, he spent a year in Los Angeles: “The place I knew best, and probably still do, other than New York, was Los Angeles. I liked it even then. If I wasn't going to be in Port Arthur, where was I going to be? I thought, Los Angeles.” Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, 19. It was also in California, while visiting the Huntington Art Gallery near Los Angeles, that Rauschenberg first realized he wanted to be an artist: “It sounds really corny, but my moment of realization that there was such a thing as being an artist happened right there.” Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 19.

<sup>170</sup> Cummings, “Interview with Bruce Conner,” 15. Yet, although Conner chose to live and work in the margins of the New York art world, he still achieved success early in his career. He was among the few Californian artists who received critical recognition on the East Coast during the fifties and when curator William Seitz began organizing *The Art of Assemblage* (1961) at the Museum of Modern Art, Conner was the first West Coast artist he selected. See Boswell, “Bruce Conner,” 26. In addition, Conner's first significant New York show was at the Alan Gallery in the summer of 1956.

For California artists it was a magic interval between provincial isolation and full assimilation into the American avant-garde, and the utter lack of outside interest and support left them free to make an art as daring, as experimental, as uncommercial, as ephemeral and as personal as they could imagine.<sup>171</sup>

Existing in the margins of the New York art world, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz created works in a largely underground environment where their audience principally was made up of their peers, as Conner remembered:

There wasn't anything to do with the work once we did it. Nobody was going to buy it. And probably there wasn't going to be a gallery that would show it. The only gallery that might show it would be a co-op gallery like the Six Gallery, or some other gallery run by artists. And invariably what would happen is that at the opening everybody would come and have a party.... Everybody there were all artists and performers and audience at once. Whatever was in the air was all private air, because we knew each other.<sup>172</sup>

DeFeo also actively rejected the New York art world. Although her inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art's Sixteen Americans (1959) was the first exhibition of her work outside California, DeFeo did not attend. She recalled:

It really surprises many people that we [she and her then husband, Wally Hedrick, who was also included in the show] were the only people included in that show who didn't make an effort to go to the opening. The whole show was a kind of coming-out party, I discovered later.<sup>173</sup>

In addition, DeFeo did not pursue offers from New York art dealers who wanted to exhibit her work and one of her only links to the New York art world was her monthly

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<sup>171</sup> Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, ix. See also Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, which addresses the particularized postwar artistic environment in California.

<sup>172</sup> Karlstrom, "Interview with Bruce Conner," 17.

<sup>173</sup> Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 77.

examination of Art News, which she did in a social setting with her artist friends.<sup>174</sup> In 1984, DeFeo recalled:

The idea of selling anything... it was an embarrassment to sell something almost. I am exaggerating, of course, but the fact remains that, along with record keeping, selling anything was next door to selling out. And it's not a bad thing, the idea that quality work is rewarded with actually making it financially in the world, but that was not the image of the time, back in the fifties.<sup>175</sup>

Similarly, Kienholz held strong opinions about the New York art world. In 1978, he admitted that his attitude towards New York during the fifties was one of “envy, a long-distance chafing under New York’s indifference and... snobbery.”<sup>176</sup> Rather, he preferred the environment of Los Angeles, where “it was virgin as far as art was concerned” when he moved there in 1953.<sup>177</sup> Kienholz moved around the country working odd jobs<sup>178</sup> (and briefly attended college at East Washington State and Whitworth College) before deciding to settle in southern California because “it was so big that you could become completely anonymous. And I liked that. And of course I stayed for a long time and became quite well known.”<sup>179</sup> Upon his arrival in Los Angeles, Kienholz helped to open several art galleries (Now Gallery in 1956 and Ferus

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<sup>174</sup> See Stich and Doherty, “A Biographical History,” 17-19.

<sup>175</sup> Newman, “The Dilexi Years and Beyond,” 35.

<sup>176</sup> As quoted in Hapgood, *Neo-Dada*, 53.

<sup>177</sup> Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 29.

<sup>178</sup> In addition to numerous other jobs, Kienholz bought and sold cars, created window displays, worked as an attendant in a mental institution, worked in a Las Vegas club, and sold vacuum cleaners. See Tuchman, “A Decade of Edward Kienholz,” 41.

<sup>179</sup> Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 10.

Gallery with Walter Hopps in 1957) that were devoted to exhibiting local avant-garde artists, and which contributed to professionalizing the Los Angeles art scene.<sup>180</sup>

### **Violence and 1950s United States Art**

Amidst the Cold War atmosphere of the 1950s, the figure of the Abstract Expressionist artist came to symbolize, to both the United States and the rest of the world, the American-associated ideologies of freedom and democracy. This period was an enigmatic and complex time during which dominant, normative identities, perceptions, and beliefs were threatened and destabilized. The aftermath of World War II, the onslaught of the Cold War and the Korean War (1950-1953), the possibility of a depression (such as had followed World War I), and the fear of communism and Senator Joseph McCarthy's stringent anticommunist tactics posed challenges that would alter the United States deeply. Significantly, the combination of all of these elements created an atmosphere that extended the wartime climate and contributed to social attitudes regarding the role of American artists and their works. Noting that Abstract Expressionism often is understood as a correlate to the United States' military, economic, and technological preeminence after World War II, Michael Leja has argued that Abstract Expressionism also is "generally interpreted as the quintessential artistic embodiment of the qualities and ideals that the nation's mainstream, middle-class culture holds dearest:

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<sup>180</sup> The Ferus Gallery opened on March 15, 1957 with the show *Objects on the New Landscape Demanding of the Eye* that included works by both Kienholz and DeFeo. Ibid., 19. For more information on the Ferus Gallery, see James Monte, *Late Fifties at the Ferus* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Ahmanson Gallery, 1968). Throughout his life, Kienholz remained a supporter of DeFeo's work. In 1979, he organized an exhibition of her work at his gallery (Faith and Charity in Hope Gallery) in Hope, Idaho. See Stich and Doherty, "A Biographical History," 23.

individual freedom, boldness, ingenuity, grand ambition, expansiveness, confidence, power.”<sup>181</sup>

Jeremy Lewison has addressed the reception of Abstract Expressionism in Britain, France, and Italy during the 1950s, and has considered how Jackson Pollock’s artistic subjectivity was discursively understood in Europe after World War II. He asserts:

It has long been argued that the exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism circulating in Europe in the 1950s were part of a cultural initiative during the Cold War to depict the United States of America as a benign superpower and a model of democratic freedom.... The promotion of high art was but one aspect of the pursuit of this goal; Europe simultaneously witnessed an influx of American products, financial aid, and life-style. This context conditioned the reception of Abstract Expressionism and of Jackson Pollock.<sup>182</sup>

Lewison pointed out that, although initially the response to this artwork (and to the influx of American culture, in general) was not very positive, eventually it became embraced as a symbol of America’s freedom and rebellious spirit.

A multitude of studies have been devoted to examining how Abstract Expressionism was appropriated by the United States to signify and promote its ideals of freedom and democracy to the rest of the world during the Cold War. In her well-known 1974 article, “Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War,” Eva Cockcroft examined the rise of Abstract Expressionism in the United States after World War II and specifically how it was “borrowed” by New York’s Museum of Modern Art and select

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<sup>181</sup> Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 5.

<sup>182</sup> Jeremy Lewison, “Jackson Pollock and the Americanization of Europe,” in Varnedoe and Karmel, eds., *Jackson Pollock*, 201. He also states that “it was mainly through film and music that young people became entranced with America. While the older generation regarded American films as vulgar, unhealthy, and in westerns and gangster movies, displaying an offensive elementary Darwinism, the majority of the cinema-going public enthusiastically absorbed Hollywood’s visions of excitement, affluence, democracy, and rebellion.” *Ibid.*, 203.

former CIA operatives to counter communism during the Cold War.<sup>183</sup> She described how Abstract Expressionist works were exhibited abroad in order to represent American culture and its embrace of freedom and democracy. Following Cockcroft's article came numerous studies that challenged or expanded on her arguments and those of other scholars who explored this same issue.<sup>184</sup>

In the midst of the Cold War atmosphere, aspects of Abstract Expressionism also became associated with a certain level of violence.<sup>185</sup> For example, in 1946 Clement Greenberg wrote that "Pollock's superiority to his contemporaries in this country lies in his ability to create a genuinely violent and extravagant art without losing stylistic control."<sup>186</sup> The terminology typically used to describe this artwork – as violent, brutal, rough, unfinished, forceful, chaotic, and emotional – equally reflected certain popular

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<sup>183</sup> Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* (June 1974): 39-41.

<sup>184</sup> See Max Kozloff, "American Painting during the Cold War," *Artforum* 13 (May 1973): 43-54; John Tagg, "American Power and American Painting: The Development of Vanguard Painting in the United States since 1945," *Praxis* (Winter 1976): 59-79; and Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). A number of scholars have argued that Abstract Expressionism did not represent, implicitly or explicitly, the dominant ideologies of the United States during the Cold War. For example, see Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* and Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*.

<sup>185</sup> See, for example, Howard Devree, "Among the New Exhibitions," *The New York Times* (25 March 1945): sec. 2, p. 8 and Manny Farber, "Jackson Pollock," *The New Republic* 112 #6 (25 June 1945): 871-72. More recently, Andrew Perchuk has stated: "The drip paintings were born out of violence – violence against Pollock's previous imagery, against the notion of good painting, against the transparency of metaphor, and against the organic." Andrew Perchuk, "Pollock and Postwar Masculinity," in Perchuk and Helaine Posner, eds., *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1995), 35.

<sup>186</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation* 162 (13 April 1946): 455. Also see Clement Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," *Horizon* (October 1947): 20-30 and Clement Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation* 164 (1 February 1947): 137-39. Jeremy Lewison has discussed the associations of Pollock's work with violence: "Anxious to assert the originality of Pollock, and by implication of a nascent American art, Greenberg contrasted Pollock's 'violence' against the suave sophistication of Europe. This idea was to be a leitmotif of British and Continental art criticism during the 1950s." Lewison, "Jackson Pollock and the Americanization of Europe," 204.

American characteristics. In fact, in a 1967 interview, Abstract Expressionist artist Robert Motherwell said, “I think the ‘Expressionist’ part of Abstract Expressionism had to do with a certain violence native to the American character; I do not think it was the result of esthetic considerations.”<sup>187</sup>

In a 1952 essay, Harold Rosenberg, a principal promoter of Abstract Expressionism, coined the term “action painting.” Without mentioning them by name, Rosenberg described the gestural painting styles of Pollock and Willem de Kooning as “extinguishing the object” from the work of art. Further, he called the canvas “an arena in which to act,” asserting that:

What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter.<sup>188</sup>

Surrounded by “mythology” and “hero worship,” in the act of creation the artist experiences the “exhilaration of an adventure” and through the intrusion of his body “extinguishes” the subject matter.<sup>189</sup> Rosenberg’s articulation of action painting focused on the performance of the artist’s body and ultimately romanticized the (masculine) artistic subject.

In addition, Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory of Existentialism, especially as filtered through Harold Rosenberg’s criticism, strongly influenced many artists after World War II and helped shape the conception of Abstract Expressionist artistic subjectivity. The

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<sup>187</sup> Sidney Simon, “Concerning the Beginnings of the New York School: 1939-1943. An Interview with Robert Motherwell,” in Shapiro and Shapiro, eds., *Abstract Expressionism*, 45.

<sup>188</sup> Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” in Harrison and Woods, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, 581.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 582-583.

American interpretation of Existentialism encouraged a shift away from 1930s' ideas of mass consciousness to ideas of individual responsibility and freedom. Through action painting, society witnessed the rise of a male Existentialist hero, who, in turn, affected views about the role of the artist in society. The leading French art critic during that time, Pierre Restany, stated in a 1997 interview that "it was difficult not to see Pollock as an Existentialist at the time." He elaborated:

Through Sartre, Existentialism became not only the expression of the privileged and the elite but part of broader behavior. It became common currency. It was a very special time, because it is rare for a philosophical concept to be part of the base behavior of youth. It was a kind of anticonformism. Violence was the basic material of protest. Pollock was emblematic of that.<sup>190</sup>

Pollock, specifically, soon came to symbolize an exaggerated form of post-World War II American masculinity in his associations with violence and rebellion. A 1956 article from Time magazine, "The Wild Ones," referred to Pollock as "Jack the Dripper."<sup>191</sup> This title referenced the artist's well-known "drip painting" technique as well as the name of the infamous murderer, Jack the Ripper, who was known for the violence he inflicted on his victims. This name becomes even more loaded when considered in conjunction with the photograph of Pollock that accompanies the article (figure 18). Eight head shots of male Abstract Expressionists are depicted, with Pollock's photograph situated at the top of the row. Directly facing the camera, as if in a mug shot, an unshaven Pollock stares intensely at the viewer with a cigarette dangling

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<sup>190</sup> As quoted from a November 5, 1997 conversation with the author, in Lewison, "Jackson Pollock and the Americanization of Europe," 221.

<sup>191</sup> "The Wild Ones," *Time* (20 February 1956): 70-75.

from the corner of his mouth.<sup>192</sup> Although the nickname, “Jack the Dripper,” certainly mocked Pollock and his painting techniques, his public persona simultaneously was mythologized and romanticized.

### **Interrogating Violence**

Many of the works created by Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz were also associated with violence. Yet, rather than symbolizing violence themselves (as Pollock did) or creating works that were understood as the end products of a romanticized violent act (action painting), these younger artists often created works that presented violent subject matter, frequently commenting on specific contemporaneous acts carried out within the United States. Whereas Pollock and his works were promoted in the United States and Europe as representing the American ideals of democracy, freedom, and power, these four artists, in their own ways, created works that specifically questioned those ideals, works that directly engaged the tense social and political environment in which they lived. Robert L. Pincus has noted a “penchant for horrific images” among writers, poets, and artists during this time. Comparing the work of Kienholz, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Norman Mailer, he stated: “The overarching theme in all of these works is strikingly similar; confronting American society in the late 1950s, each artist sought to expose the forms of oppression and

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<sup>192</sup> Even though this article referred to the group of eight male artists as “the wild ones,” the other seven men (including Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and Mark Rothko) do not appear as “wild” as Pollock in their photographs, and, in fact, seem to be quite unremarkable and standard in their appearances.

violence, psychological and physical, of a society that looked calm and complacent on the surface.”<sup>193</sup>

Expressing their personal beliefs through their art often meant commenting on the restrictive consequences of governmental policies they witnessed in the world around them. Addressing the notions of violence and social control, Kienholz, Conner, Rauschenberg, and DeFeo were part of a fundamental shift in the manner in which a work of art engaged an audience. Not only did they present violence-as-subject of their works, they employed violence-as-technique in that many of their works demonstrate an apparent aggression derived from the artist’s hand. Further, many of their works also antagonized viewers, positioning them in psychologically uncomfortable, unpleasant, or embarrassing situations. Much of this antagonism may have stemmed from the artists’ own anger regarding the subject matter of their works. Conner has discussed his tense psychological state during the 1950s, which he linked to his views of the military:

I was draft age. I was in a state of perpetual anguish, anxiety, tension. I was one of the most nervous and hyper people you could possibly meet. I’d become physically ill. I managed to keep out of the army, but it was the worst violation I could imagine. A physical rape by this institution that permeates every aspect of our lives and is an untouchable malicious monster that is designed to destroy life. It destroys the fruit of the womb. It hates women, it hates children. They can’t make children, they destroy children. They destroy themselves and they are physically locked up so that all this sexual demand and energy is rechanneled deliberately, so that the frustration comes out in anger.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Pincus, *On a Scale*, 13.

<sup>194</sup> As quoted in Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 64.

In 1982, Kienholz similarly reflected on his work from this period: “Adrenalin-producing anger carried me through that work – though that hard-cutting anger is now gone.”<sup>195</sup>

Kienholz, Rauschenberg, Conner, and DeFeo certainly were not the only artists during this time that focused on violence in their works. From the late 1950s onward into the 1960s, this became a predominant theme in the works of artists associated with Neo-Dada, Fluxus, and the Nouveaux Réalistes, most of whom directed this violence into artistic performances that usually involved their own bodies or those of others. For example, Yoko Ono repeatedly hit her head against the floor in a 1962 performance; Yves Tinguely’s Homage to New York (1960) exploded and burned in front of an audience at the Museum of Modern Art; and Niki de Saint-Phalle, as well as invited audience members, fired a shotgun at her paintings during live performances. Notably, Rauschenberg (who shot at one of her “tir” paintings in a performance in Stockholm on May 23, 1961) and Kienholz (who lent her rifles for a performance in Los Angeles in March 1962) were associates of Saint-Phalle.<sup>196</sup>

Specifically addressing violent subject matter, Kienholz’s Psycho-Vendetta Case (1960, figure 19) focused on the well-known case of death-row inmate Caryl Chessman, who had been convicted on circumstantial evidence of kidnapping and sexually molesting a child. For over ten years, Chessman had been imprisoned at San Quentin in San

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<sup>195</sup> Pincus, *On a Scale*, 12. Notably, Walter Hopps, co-founder with Kienholz of the Ferus Gallery, recalled that the name of the gallery was chosen, in part, because of an anthropological reference to the term *Ferus hominus*, which referred to “the very primitive people of the Australian aborigines or a prototype people described in, as I remember, Probers’ Anthropology textbook as having a certain contained violence, irascibility, and tremendous physical prowess for survival – definitely subhuman pre-*Homo Sapiens*. So it was from *Ferus hominus* that this seemed to describe, somewhat ironically, the kind of people we were and the kind of people we were dealing with.” Ibid., 10.

<sup>196</sup> See Maurice Berger, “Forms of Violence: Neo-Dada Performance,” in Hapgood, *Neo-Dada*, 67-83; “Violence in Art,” *Art and Artists* 1 #5 (August 1966): 5-7; and *Violence in Contemporary Art* (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1964).

Francisco fighting his death sentence, which sparked an international campaign against the death penalty.<sup>197</sup> With his work, Kienholz drew a parallel between Chessman's case and the famous 1927 Sacco and Vanzetti case, in which two Italian immigrants were wrongly executed for murder due to their fascist political beliefs.<sup>198</sup> Literally a "case," the work opens to reveal on the inside two small flags: one of the United States and the other of the state of California. Contained inside the case is what appears to be a nude man's backside as he bends over. Upon closer examination, the viewer's eye is directed towards a periscope, which is located in the shackled hands situated at the top of the man's backside. Kienholz explained this work as follows:

It's just a box that swings open, made out of tin cans.... It's got the great seal of approval of California on the surface of it, and when you open it up, it's Chessman with just his ass exposed. The hands are holding a tank periscope. And when you look in that, you read down there, and it says "If you believe in an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, stick your tongue out. Limit three times." And you realize while you're reading that you're lined up exactly with his ass.<sup>199</sup>

Kienholz's statement highlights the potential layers of meaning in this work. On the one hand, Psycho-Vendetta could indicate a stance against socially sanctioned acts of violence, such as the death penalty, and Chessman's case, in particular. On the other, "an eye for an eye" could suggest that Chessman's punishment should equal his crime, requiring Chessman to be humiliated and violated sexually. In addition, this work specifically placed viewers in a psychologically uncomfortable position by engaging

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<sup>197</sup> Chessman was eventually executed in May of 1960.

<sup>198</sup> Kienholz was unaware at the time he created this work that Ben Shahn had also taken the Sacco and Vanzetti case as the subject of his painting, *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (1931-32). See Pincus, *On a Scale*, 23.

<sup>199</sup> As quoted in Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent 1955-69* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd., 1996), 73.

them in a vulgar spectacle that encouraged them to lick the exposed ass (and, in the process, becoming the conveyors of the punishment). However, any reading of this work entails an acknowledgment of violence, either from the perspective of the perpetrator (both the criminal and the executioner) or the victim (of an individual's actions or society's).

Bruce Conner's The Child (1959, figure 20) also was inspired by Caryl Chessman's case, particularly when the artist read the newspaper headline "Chessman Must Die."<sup>200</sup> Conner explained:

It started out that way because I saw [Chessman] as a child strapped into a high chair, and he was going to be strapped into that chair in the gas chamber. I was going to put it inside a green box. But the more I got involved in working on it the more I felt I didn't want to put it into the box. It became this high chair, this sculpture, and it became The Child. The child formed and constrained by the social forces that were going to kill him out of their own guilt.<sup>201</sup>

Although aggressively commenting on the country's judicial system and political and social ideas of control and punishment, like Kienholz's work, The Child is much more elliptical in its approach.<sup>202</sup> Composed of a small, male figure modeled of brown wax bound to a child's highchair with nylon and twine, the work evokes references to Chessman fastened to an electric chair.<sup>203</sup> The mutilated figure appears to be rotting and

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<sup>200</sup> As explained in Alexander Fried, "Artist Defines 'Child' Meaning," *The San Francisco Examiner* (15 January 1960): sec. 1, p. 19.

<sup>201</sup> Karlstrom, "Interview with Bruce Conner," 31.

<sup>202</sup> Conner's use of cryptic titles and objects was an integral aspect of his artistic approach: "A rewarding experience for me is a narrative structure where you are not told what to think and what to do. Otherwise, that's what you get in jail. That's what you get with government. And when you get it in art, it can put you to sleep." Boswell, "Bruce Conner," 31.

<sup>203</sup> Joan C. Siegfried pointed out that the "stuffed nylon stocking bags hanging behind [the highchair], [are] suggestive of the excrement that often accompanies violent corporeal punishment." Joan C. Siegfried, *Bruce Conner: Sculpture/Assemblages/Collages/Drawings/Films* (Institute of Contemporary Art: The University of Pennsylvania, 1967), 2.

in a state of decay with decomposed limbs that end in stumps and that have been nailed to the arms of the chair. Although childlike in stature, the man-child possesses prominent adult genitals that protrude from between its splayed legs, creating a disturbing sense of sexuality, similar to Kienholz's Psycho-Vendetta Case.

Most people were reportedly repulsed by The Child, as Conner recalled: "With The Child sculpture people would see it from a distance and not go near it. They were scared of it."<sup>204</sup> In a 1960 review of this work at the San Francisco Art Association's annual exhibition, which was held at the De Young Museum in Golden Gate Park, the critic Andrew Curtin wrote that "a grisly bare figure called 'Child' has become a storm center of controversy." He further stated that the sculpture "has turned all eyes and some stomachs in the museum gallery," referring to it as "something out of a grave-robber's nightmare." Curtin interviewed a museum official who reported that the public reaction was "not very favorable."<sup>205</sup>

In another review of the same show, Alexander Fried interviewed Conner, who admitted, "When I have [The Child] at home, I myself can't stand to have it around. I have to put it in a closet." When asked about the meaning of this "frightful sculpture" that was "mystifying everybody – both public and experts," Conner stated:

Philosophically, I'm a sort of anarchist. I don't favor the idea of government and the pressures of control and refinement that society imposes on the individual. I'm against putting down the free spirit of man. As I see it, "The Child" is a symbol of the way every person is born into the world as it is. Bureaucracy and rules of all sorts are bound to get us down.

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<sup>204</sup> Karlstrom, "Interview with Bruce Conner," 33.

<sup>205</sup> Andrew Curtin, "The Unliked 'Child': Art, or Grave-Robber's Nightmare?" *San Francisco News-Call Bulletin* (14 January 1960): 21.

Fried described the figure as such: “Undoubtedly the sculptor has formed the figure very cleverly. Yet its net expression is simply awful – like something a ghoul would steal from a graveyard.” Elucidating the public’s response, he further wrote: “Despite its repulsiveness – which punctuates the museum gallery air with comments of criticism and exclamations of ‘ugh!’ – Conner’s piece has consistently been attracting more interest than anything else in the Art Association exhibit.”<sup>206</sup>

In 1988, Conner commented on The Child: “After a while it stopped being Caryl Chessman and became a child that had been tied up, gagged, and mutilated. I felt it had some universal message of pain and anguish, and of how natural impulses are thwarted and distorted.”<sup>207</sup> Conner’s statement provides possible insight into why this work may have repulsed so many viewers. In her writings on the abject, Julia Kristeva has argued that “the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life.”<sup>208</sup> The figure presented in this work appears to be a corpse, or at least, a figure existing in a state of decay – its hands and one of its legs appear to have rotted off, leaving stumps for limbs. Its head tilted back, the figure’s mouth opens as if screaming in pain and horror. While this work referred to an actual person who was violently killed by a socially sanctioned act, it also can be understood in a more universal manner – that of death’s infection of life.

Conner’s Black Dahlia (1959, figure 21) also was inspired by a specific act of violence, taking as its subject a real event from the headlines of everyday life – in this

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<sup>206</sup> Fried, “Artist Defines ‘Child’ Meaning,” 19.

<sup>207</sup> Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 96.

<sup>208</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

case, the infamous, brutal, unsolved 1947 murder of Elizabeth Short, who was referred to as Black Dahlia in the media after her murder (in the manner of pulp fiction).<sup>209</sup> An erotic and aggressively violent assemblage, this work features (at the top center) a black-and-white photograph of an almost nude woman seen from behind. Dressed only in a black garter belt and stockings, the dark-haired woman kneels submissively, facing a wall, with her arms outstretched above her head. Nails have been repeatedly hammered into the photograph, covering the woman's back. In addition, a large nail protrudes from her rectal area and nails have been hammered into each of her hands, as if she has been violently attached to the wall in front of her. A layer of flesh-colored nylon hosiery shrouds the long and narrow collage. The woman shares her encasement with an assortment of fetishistic accoutrements (peacock feathers, sequins, jewelry, and fragments of ribbons and lace) and various other objects (a pattern for a death's-head tattoo and comic strips) that somewhat obscure her body but largely settle towards the bottom of the work, suspended in the hosiery.

The violence of Short's murder may be understood as directly represented in this work. In addition to being disfigured facially with a knife and sodomized, Short's body had been cut completely in half with a butcher knife. The black garter belt worn by the woman in Black Dahlia bisects her body, highlighting the point where Short's body was cut. The nails driven into the photograph of the woman's body point to the violence inflicted upon Short's body; the nail hammered into her rectal area, a possible reminder of the sodomy. Yet, while this work addressed the degradation and mutilation of the

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<sup>209</sup> For more information on Elizabeth Short's murder, see Dirk Cameron Gibson, *Clues from Killers: Serial Murder and Crime Scene Messages* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004) and Steve Hodel, *Black Dahlia Avenger: A Genius for Murder* (New York: Arcade Publishers, 2003).

female body, it can certainly be argued that Black Dahlia presented a romanticized vision of violence as well. Although inspired by an actual event, the subject matter of this work could have been pulled from any of the popular pulp fiction of the time – such as crime novels, comic books, and film noir – in which violence most often was romanticized.

For instance, in 1955, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton published (in France) the first book on American film noir, A Panorama of American Film Noir: 1941-1953, in which they discussed film noir's plots in relation to violence, brutality, murder, crime, and sexuality.<sup>210</sup> Asking “why crime has suddenly assumed such importance in the Hollywood output of the last ten years.... Why have American audiences become sensitized to films of violence and murder?,” they specifically linked film noir's violence to American society:

Film noir is linked to a much wider social context, and the depiction of the criminal milieu derives from the everyday reality of the USA. Local police corruption, the connections between the underworld and politics, large-scale drug trafficking, widespread prostitution, and the all-powerfulness of organized gangs have often been denounced in the American press. All that was needed was to transpose these themes to the cinema.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> According to M. Christine Boyer, film noir (B-rated films from 1939 to 1959) expressed the “anxieties and trepidations of postwar American culture. To hint at revolt, to offer a more exhilarating life than bourgeois morality allowed, to wallow in pessimism and misogyny, to depict the urban malaise, to tell the story from the criminal's point of view – these were some of the themes that B-rated films explored.” M. Christine Boyer, “Crimes in and of the City: The *Femme Fatale* as Urban Allegory,” in Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman, eds., *The Sex of Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 105.

<sup>211</sup> Borde and Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir*, 20 and 21. Borde and Chaumeton also referenced a September 1953 report by J. Edgar Hoover, who stated that “1,047,290 crimes and serious offenses have been committed in the United States between 1 January and 30 June 1953. The number of crimes and offenses reached 2,036,000 in 1952, a record figure. This record will be beaten in 1953 if the current trend continues.” *Ibid.*, 20.

Although written from a French perspective, there were many in the United States who also drew a correlation between the violence depicted in Hollywood films and the violence they witnessed in society.<sup>212</sup>

In fact, the real story of the Black Dahlia reads as a film noir script. Set in 1940s' Los Angeles, a beautiful, 22-year-old woman with questionable morals (she was rumored to be a prostitute) is brutally murdered and her body then disposed of in a vacant lot. Her killer is never caught, forever giving her death an air of mystery. This story has the elements of a film noir plot: violence, brutality, mystery, sexuality, and perversity – elements also linked with notions of taboo dirtiness. Specifically, Black Dahlia could be seen in the context of the *femme fatale*, the traditional role played by women in film noir, described by Borde and Chaumeton as such:

... the femme fatale is also fatal unto herself. Frustrated and guilty, half man-eater, half man-eaten, blasé and cornered, she falls victim to her own wiles.... This new kind of woman, rubbing shoulders with and masterminding crime, tough as the milieu surrounding her, as expert in blackmail and “vice” as in the use of firearms – and probably frigid – has left her mark on a noir eroticism that is at times merely an eroticization of violence.<sup>213</sup>

M. Christine Boyer also has described the *femme fatale* as symbolizing disorder and disruption – she “threatens the social order and represents the horror of all that escapes the authority of control.”<sup>214</sup> She is generally associated with “male fears about female

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<sup>212</sup> For example, see Geoffrey Wagner, *Parade of Pleasure: A Study of Popular Iconography in the USA* (New York: Library Publishers, 1955).

<sup>213</sup> Borde and Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir*, 9.

<sup>214</sup> Boyer, “Crimes in and of the City,” 109.

sexuality” and is “an ambivalent figure who harbors a threat of enticement, of artifice, of excess, which must be avoided.”<sup>215</sup>

Boyer also pointed out that in noir detective films, the (male) detective “traditionally functions in society as a restorer of social order” (social order often was restored through the punishment or murder of the threatening *femme fatale*)<sup>216</sup> and it is from his position (the masculine gaze) that the story is told and that the viewer gazes at the *femme fatale*.<sup>217</sup> The manner in which we view Black Dahlia situates us in this masculine position, reinforcing our perspective as the one who dominates, controls, and ultimately, perhaps, kills her. Notably, Conner has stated that he envisioned this work as “a dialogue between the victim and the person who was assaulting her.”<sup>218</sup> Although a certain amount of pleasure may be derived in viewing this provocatively dressed woman, it becomes an uneasy pleasure as we realize that we are effectively involved in the violent acts taking place against her, either as perpetrator or as complicit voyeur. The possible

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>216</sup> This also can be understood within the context of Laura Mulvey’s foundational theories concerning the cinematic male gaze and how patriarchy has structured film form. Mulvey argued that within narrative cinema, the man “controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator...” She argued that the body of the woman represented the lack of a phallus and this produced a fear of castration in the male viewer. In order to escape the anxiety of castration, the male unconscious must follow one of the two avenues: demystify and punish or forgive the woman for the action or illness that created her castrated state or disavow her lack by fetishizing her female body. See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 20-21.

<sup>217</sup> Boyer, “Crimes in and of the City,” 111.

<sup>218</sup> Conner further stated: “The collage could be a dialogue between separate attitudes trying to reach a common agreement: a drama.... I felt this was, like performing a play. It was a theater. I was using objects and photographs and endowing them with character. Like my movies where I take parts from other, different, movies and endow them with an entirely separate character by the juxtaposition of one image to another.” Karlstrom, “Interview with Bruce Conner,” 11. Notably, Conner is also known for his filmmaking, which began in 1958 with his first film, *A Movie*. Like his assemblage works, Conner’s films also were constructed from found footage and edited together to create ambiguous narratives. For more information on Conner’s film work, see Bruce Jenkins, “Explosion in a Film Factory: The Cinema of Bruce Conner,” in Boswell, Jenkins, and Rothfuss, eds., *2000 BC*, 185-223.

viewing pleasure comes at a cost, one which forces the viewer to confront his or her own perspectives of violence.

Many viewers also associated Rauschenberg's Bed (1955, figure 12) with an act of violence. To create this work, the artist splattered a quilt, pillow, and sheet with oil paint, pencil, toothpaste, and fingernail polish. The splattered bedding is mounted on a rectangular stretcher roughly in the proportions of an actual cot-like bed and hung on the wall, confronting the viewer from an upright position. The work looms large and almost lifelike, measuring a little over 6 feet tall and 2 ½ feet across. With this work, Rauschenberg presented a banal, everyday domestic object found in most homes across the United States. In general, a bed serves as a site where intimate and vulnerable bodily functions occur such as sleep, sickness, sex, birth, and death. Although a bed is often considered to be a place of comfort, Rauschenberg's Bed does not conjure an inviting and cozy space into which the viewer would want to climb, both because of its vertical positioning on the wall and its filthy appearance.

The handcrafted dingy quilt appears to be soiled and stained from extreme use, while the smeared and splattered pencil and paint on the bed's surface encourage thoughts of base bodily fluids (such as blood, semen, vomit, breast milk, oil, and mucus) and activities.<sup>219</sup> Many initial viewers were repulsed by this work and some even further associated it with the aftermath of a violent act or crime.<sup>220</sup> In a 1958 review of Bed,

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<sup>219</sup> See Helen Molesworth, "Before Bed," *October* 63 (Winter 1993): 68-80, which discussed Rauschenberg's works from the early 1950s (the *Black Paintings* and the *Red Paintings*) in terms of their resemblance to fecal matter, blood, and the products of base bodily functions.

<sup>220</sup> Rauschenberg's close friend, John Cage asked: "Is there any need before we go to bed to recite the history of the changes and will we in that bed be murdered? And how will our dreams, if we manage to go to sleep, suggest the next practical step? Which would you say it was: wild, or elegant, and why?" Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work," 720.

which was shown at the Castelli Gallery, the reviewer stated that “it recalls a police photo of the murder bed after the corpse has been removed.”<sup>221</sup> More than five hundred visitors attended that same show and some left comments in the guest book, such as “astonishment,” “abalabala,” and “Well, if it isn’t art, then I like it.”<sup>222</sup> Calvin Tomkins has discussed this work’s early reception, noting that it:

...seemed revolting to a lot of people when it was first shown in 1958. To some it looked like the scene of a bloody ax murder. When it was sent with a group of works by twelve young American artists to the first Festival of Two Worlds at Spoleto, also in 1958, the Italian authorities refused to show it; Bed remained throughout the exhibition in an office, safely out of sight.<sup>223</sup>

In addition, referencing Bed’s early reviews, James Leggio pointed out that “what the first viewers of this object *thought* they saw was not just a pillow and bedclothes with some paint on them. It seemed instead the evidence of some horrible crime – an axe murder, perhaps.”<sup>224</sup>

A telling difference between the works created by Conner and Kienholz and those by Rauschenberg can be seen in the manner in which these artists spoke about their own works. Works created by Conner and Kienholz were most often direct comments on

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<sup>221</sup> “Trend to the ‘Anti-Art,’” *Newsweek* (31 March 1958): 94.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 96. Two years later, another reviewer still seemed somewhat confused by Rauschenberg’s work and his acceptance by the art world. Noting that the artist’s work at the Leo Castelli Gallery “drew admiring crowds, though some gawkers seemed in secret doubt of what they saw,” the reviewer compared Rauschenberg to the emperor who “paraded in invisible clothes.” The reviewer ended the article by asking: “...the combines created in Rauschenberg’s Manhattan loft bring from \$400 to \$7,500 apiece. Such public demand for such private images is one of the art boom’s most fascinating phenomena. Does it reflect a starvation diet of subjective experience amongst the mass of rich Americans? Or do people buy Rauschenberg to share in his quiet protest against what they think cellophane-wrapped sort of world?” See “The Emperor’s Combine,” *Time* (18 April 1960): 92.

<sup>223</sup> Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 137.

<sup>224</sup> James Leggio, “Robert Rauschenberg’s *Bed* and the Symbolism of the Body,” in Elderfield, ed., *Studies in Modern Art*, 80.

social or political issues or events. Conversely, Rauschenberg typically did not create works that made outright statements on public issues, and even when his works could be interpreted as such, his statements regarding his intentions remained quite enigmatic. For example, he claimed: “I think of Bed as one of the friendliest pictures I’ve ever painted. My fear has always been that someone would want to crawl into it.”<sup>225</sup> The contradiction between Rauschenberg’s (albeit, possibly ironic) interpretation and those of initial viewers (most of who seemed to have no desire to crawl into Bed) reveals a fundamental shift in the manner in which viewers understood representations of, or even allusions to violence.<sup>226</sup>

One of the reasons that viewers were so uncomfortable with Bed may have been due to the types of fluids that they associated with the paint-splattered bedding. Considering Jacques Lacan’s theory of the “erotogenic” zones of the body (cuts and gaps on the body’s surface such as the lips and the anus), Susan Stewart has pointed out that the body’s exposed apertures and the products they emit “work to constitute the notion of the subject, of the individual body and ultimately the self.” Further, and, perhaps, most importantly, she writes that “those products which cross such boundaries thereby become products of great cultural attention. What is both inside and outside the body (feces, spittle, urine, menstrual blood, etc.) tends to become taboo because of its ambiguous and anomalous status.” And, as Stewart points out: “A great deal of cultural regulation is

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<sup>225</sup> As quoted in Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 137.

<sup>226</sup> James Leggio has asked: “But should we take the artist’s claim at face value and simply reject the murder interpretation as a mistake? Or instead is it Rauschenberg himself who is in some way mistaken, if not about his intentions than at least in imagining that others, too, would perceive *Bed* as being ‘friendly’? The contradiction between the revulsion expressed by some early viewers and Rauschenberg’s own positive feelings tells us that in some fundamental way, indicative of this artist’s oddly sophisticated naïveté, he was ‘wrong’ about what his painting’s body language might say to people.” Leggio, “Robert Rauschenberg’s *Bed* and the Symbolism of the Body,” 81.

required to privatize the erotogenic zones and to prohibit the projection of their pleasure within the domain of the public space...<sup>227</sup>

In other words, Bed appears to be smeared with taboo substances – specifically, fluids emitted by the body that are typically regulated by society, either through actual legislation or through social norms. Because there are social standards regarding the disposal and maintenance of human by-products, these fluids are considered dirty (matter out of place) if they are not properly cleaned and regulated. Further, a hierarchy exists in which certain body fluids are considered more taboo than others, as Laura Kipnis has pointed out:

Bodily products are socially ranked from the “cleanest” (tears) to the “dirtiest” (shit, vomit). These rankings may reside below consciousness, but they stage-manage our activities and emotions nonetheless. “Clean” body products give rise to empathetic feelings: tears provoke sympathy...; the “dirtier” bodily products provoke avoidance, contempt, and disgust.<sup>228</sup>

In this case, Bed appears to be soiled with any or all of the following body fluids that typically provoke high levels of avoidance and aversion: blood, feces, vomit, urine, and semen. While these fluids are certainly linked with beds at particular times (such as death, sickness, sex, and childbirth), they are associated with private acts. These fluids become transgressive, shameful, and disgusting not only when they are not maintained (cleaned) and strictly regulated, but, especially, when they are put on public display.

While Bed appears to be smeared with transgressive substances and to reference potentially violent activities, Rauschenberg’s use of comics in the majority of his works

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<sup>227</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 104.

<sup>228</sup> Kipnis, *The Female Thing*, 89. Also see Christian Enzensberger, *Smut: An Anatomy of Dirt* (1968), trans. Sandra Morris (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972).

from the 1950s also could be examined in the context of violence. His inclusion of this heavily debated print medium was, perhaps, a subtle engagement with the ongoing dialogue at that time about the influence of comics on younger readers. In 1955, Geoffrey Wagner noted that “at no time until now has mankind been able to boast that a multi-million-dollar industry exists, geared to the provision of a literature of violence for children.”<sup>229</sup> In their 1956 study on the relationship between obscene literature and juvenile delinquency, the United States Senate reported:

Surveys of stores and newsstands in all parts of the Nation established that almost without exception the comic books were displayed indiscriminately in the midst of magazines notorious for their emphasis on sex, nude torsos and exaggerated accentuation of some physical characteristics of male and female alike.<sup>230</sup>

In addition, the Senate committee found that “the reading of crime comics stimulates sadistic and masochistic attitudes and interferes with the normal development of sexual habits in children and produces abnormal sexual tendencies in adolescents.”<sup>231</sup>

According to Dr. Fredric Wertham, who also linked juvenile delinquency with the reading of comic books in his well-known and widely-read, 1954 study:

All child drug addicts, and all children drawn into the narcotics traffic as messengers, with whom we have had contact, were inveterate comic-book readers. In the lives of some of these children who are overwhelmed by

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<sup>229</sup> Geoffrey Wagner further stated: “It is estimated that ninety-eight per cent of all boys and girls in the USA read comic-books between the ages of eight and twelve..., while eighty-seven per cent of all adolescent boys and eighty-one per cent of all adolescent girls read them also. Yet forty-one per cent of all male adults from the ages of eighteen to thirty are fans too. A recent survey in a town in the Mid-West reported that two-thirds of comic-book readers there were adult. Marya Mannes, a *Vogue* editress who lately contributed a brilliant article on the subject to the *New Republic*, claims that ‘in one out of every four American homes they are virtually the only reading matter.’” Wagner, *Parade of Pleasure*, 71.

<sup>230</sup> United States Senate, 84<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, *Obscene and Pornographic Literature and Juvenile Delinquency* (Washington, D.C.: 1956), 1.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

temptation the pattern is one of stealing, gangs, addiction, comic books and violence.<sup>232</sup>

Arguing that the basic ingredients of comics are violence, sadism, cruelty, and lust, Wertham further concluded: “Often there is a typical vicious circle: the comic books lead the child into temptation to commit delinquencies and stimulate him sexually. Then this is followed by fears and worries – as a result of which he reads even more comics to forget them.”<sup>233</sup>

Rauschenberg’s Collection (1954, figure 22), a huge work consisting of three separate but connected panels, is covered with an assortment of comics, fabrics, and various printed reproductions and papers, all of which are obscured with smeared and dripping paint. In addition to the multitude of comics, Rauschenberg significantly also included several newspaper clippings: “16, He Breaks in just to Sit at Caddy Wheel” and “Gang Boys.” Keeping in mind contemporaneous ideas regarding the link between comics, violence, and juvenile delinquency, Rauschenberg’s juxtapositioning of comics and headlines featuring violent youth seems apropos. Importantly, he also dirties the comic book imagery, covering them with paint and scribbles, so that they are almost indecipherable; in effect, making them as dirty as many believed them to be.

Rauschenberg’s continued use of comics during the fifties and early sixties may be seen in the context of the debate concerning the negative effects of comics on the country’s youth.

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<sup>232</sup> Fredric Wertham, M.D., *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York and Toronto: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1954), 26. According to Wertham, “by 1949 comic books featuring crime, violence and sadism made up over one half of the industry. By 1954 they form the vast majority of all comic books.” *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

The debate concerning the relationship between comics and violence extended to pornographic imagery as well. The aforementioned 1956 United States congressional hearing on pornographic literature reported: “Another aspect deeply disturbing to the subcommittee is the increasing concentration on pornography expressive of fetishism, sadism, masochism. Torture, maiming, and killing have been the tragic consequences.”<sup>234</sup> DeFeo’s Applaud the Black Fact (figure 23) and Blossom (figure 24), both created in 1958, could be examined in terms of the period’s discourse on pornography. DeFeo composed these two photocollages from pornographic imagery featuring the nude female body. Yet, rather than incorporating the images in their original entirety, she aggressively reconfigured the female body parts so that the works are composed of fragmented breasts, torsos, buttocks, arms, and legs. Although elegant configurations, the collages nonetheless present these formerly whole bodies as mutilated, damaged, and fractured. The relationship of violence believed by many to be related to this type of imagery is here made manifest visually.

### **Constructions of Masculinity in 1950s United States Art**

Another underlying potential in Abstract Expressionism that Kienholz, Conner, DeFeo, and Rauschenberg often chose to explore in their works (and, more subtly, as artistic subjects) was the subject of masculinity and gender socialization. The Cold War atmosphere helped govern identity constructs decades after World War II had officially ended and specifically led to a faltering of masculine identity constructions. As Kaja Silverman has argued in her writings on constructions of masculinity, it is “through

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<sup>234</sup> United States Senate, *Obscene and Pornographic Literature and Juvenile Delinquency*, 8.

ideological belief that a society's 'reality' is constituted and sustained, and that a subject lays claim to a normative identity." She further suggests that "'exemplary' male subjectivity cannot be thought apart from ideology, not only because ideology holds out the mirror within which that subjectivity is constructed, but because the latter depends upon a kind of collective make-believe in the commensurability of penis and phallus."<sup>235</sup> Society's "collective make-believe" concerning gender identity played a complex and dominant role in empowering male subjects and in overpowering feminized others in art discourse and in the United States culture at large.

Numerous art historians and critics have addressed the Abstract Expressionist movement's exclusion of women.<sup>236</sup> For example, Ann Eden Gibson pointed out that Abstract Expressionism's redefinition of styles "neatly invalidated the products of those who were not among America's most powerful persons: white heterosexual males."<sup>237</sup> While the Abstract Expressionist movement stressed an individual approach to creating an autonomous art, only art produced by white heterosexual men would be validated as having reached the pinnacle of abstraction, while work produced by feminized and marginalized "others" was largely overlooked. Within the Abstract Expressionist movement, women artists were invariably relegated to peripheral roles. For example, in order to create a space for artists to congregate, socialize, and discuss their work, a group

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<sup>235</sup> Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 15.

<sup>236</sup> See Francoise S. Puniello and Halina R. Rusak, *Abstract Expressionist Women Painters: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, M.D. and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996); Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996); and Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*.

<sup>237</sup> Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), xix.

formed the Eighth Street Club in New York in 1949. Yet, although the Club was founded to provide a system of support for artists, it soon became a men's club that tolerated but a few women in the margins.<sup>238</sup> Functioning mainly as an audience at the Abstract Expressionist gatherings, women artists, as Michael Leja remarks, existed at the margins of the masculine social scene and functioned “as essential accessories of bohemia,” while their presence was often seen as “confirming the heterosexuality or ‘masculinity’ of their partners.”<sup>239</sup>

Not only was Abstract Expressionism a male dominated movement (which certainly has been typical of most art movements throughout history), but often its “aura of masculinity” was promoted specifically by the media. Michael Leja points out that:

The functions served by Abstract Expressionism's aura of masculinity have also come into clearer focus: it was a crucial component of cold war U.S. national identity, differentiating the nation politically and culturally from a Europe portrayed as weakened and effeminate. In some contemporary aesthetic theory it served to distinguish avant-garde painting from kitsch, also strongly gendered as feminine.<sup>240</sup>

Most often, it was through popular culture and mass media publications such as Life and Time magazines that the mainstream population saw or heard of Abstract Expressionism. In those publications' articles, this movement was frequently snidely commented on, but

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<sup>238</sup> Abstract painter Ruth Abrams stated that being a woman “was worse than being a member of a minority group. If you were Black or Chinese or whatever in the art world, you were still accepted – if you were a man.... The rationale was that men were the breadwinners and somehow women, if they competed, were taking away their jobs.” *Ibid.*, 152-153.

<sup>239</sup> Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 255.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

what figured more importantly was most often the masculine artistic subjectivity of the artist.<sup>241</sup>

A well-known example is a 1949 article from Life magazine, entitled “Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?” The article begins with the sentence: “Recently a formidably high-brow New York critic hailed the brooding, puzzled-looking man shown above as a major artist of our time and a fine candidate to become ‘the greatest American painter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.’”<sup>242</sup> Just in this first sentence the author called Pollock’s supporter a “high-brow New York critic” separating the critic from the middle-brow audience reading the article but at the same time describing Pollock as “brooding” and “puzzled-looking,” therefore presenting Pollock on a level that would be potentially more appealing to its readers. In addition, the main image that accompanied the article presents Pollock, dressed all in black, standing in front of one of his works, arms and legs crossed in a “bad-boy” stance (figure 25). The artist scowls with a furrowed brow at the viewer, while a cigarette dangles from his mouth.

Due to society’s fear of emasculation, the “reality” of postwar masculinity was arguably altered and reinvented through the type of the hypermasculine, virile, heterosexual rebel. This brand of masculinity was manufactured and marketed repeatedly

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<sup>241</sup> This image of the Abstract Expressionist artist (and American men, in general) was being marketed in Europe as well. Jeremy Lewison has discussed how many European presses “capitalized on the myth of the rebel,” stating: “Such headlines as ‘The Volcanic Pollock’ and ‘The Presley of Painting,’ as well as references to ‘barbaric apparitions,’ ‘frenzy,’ ‘screaming,’ and James Dean, all helped to build the stereotypical image of the artist that circulated around Europe in this period, and was indebted to the assimilation of popular culture.” Lewison, “Jackson Pollock and the Americanization of Europe,” 227. Also see Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), which addresses the performative aspects of both Pollock’s art and his masculinity.

<sup>242</sup> “Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?” *Life* 27 #6 (8 August 1949): 42-45.

in the mass media and by Hollywood during the 1950s through heroes such as James Dean, Rock Hudson, and Marlon Brando.<sup>243</sup> In 1955, Geoffrey Wagner noted:

Today the... undershirt... is *de rigueur* for the male lead, and if it is well soiled with grease and filth, like Marlon Brando's in A Streetcar Named Desire, so much the better. For it is "beefcake" that is said to be attracting the girls of today to the cinema. They want their lovers to be rough. None of this junk about opening a door for a lady.... In fact, Madeline Castle, a pretty model who frequently appears in pin-up magazines in a fetching, near-naked costume, typifies this trend when she confesses, in Cover Girls Models for March 1953, that "My kind of man is a little rough.... He looks as if he could cuff you – or kiss you. And he can! If a man's like this, he's for me."<sup>244</sup>

Although a trend in Hollywood films, these constructions of masculinity became popular ideals in mainstream culture, and, as evidenced by Life's photograph of Pollock, extended into the art world.

While actual physical traces within Pollock's works, such as hand, finger, and footprints, reminded the viewer of his physical presence, an emphasis on his masculinity, power, and virility composed a strong undercurrent in much of the discourse surrounding Pollock and his work.<sup>245</sup> In a 1967 article "Who Was Jackson Pollock?" friends and

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<sup>243</sup> See the work of Steven Cohan who argues that many fifties Hollywood films were responding to cultural and social anxieties regarding the faltering of masculine identity at that time. For example, see Steven Cohan, "The Spy in the Gray Flannel Suit: Gender Performance and the Representation of Masculinity in *North by Northwest*," in Perchuk and Posner, eds., *The Masculine Masquerade*, 43-62; and Steven Cohan, "Masquerading as the American Male in the Fifties: *Picnic*, William Holden, and the Spectacle of Masculinity in Hollywood Film" in Constance Penley and Sharon Willis, eds., *Male Trouble* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 203-232. Also see Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1983), 257, which notes that another popular Hollywood stereotype was the sensitive, sensible, and pragmatic male – men "who cooperated rather than competed; they put family ahead of career, were moderate in their ambitions, attuned to the needs of others, were not afraid or reluctant to ask for help, and some even had an inner life, heretofore the prerogative of women.... Men, in other words, were becoming more like women. They were becoming 'feminized.'"

<sup>244</sup> Wagner, *Parade of Pleasure*, 57.

<sup>245</sup> For example, Sam Hunter wrote that what emerges in Pollock's work is "something like a pure calligraphic metaphor for a ravaging aggressive virility." Sam Hunter, "Among the New Shows," *The New York Times* (30 January 1949): sec. 2, p. 9.

colleagues all described Pollock's physicality as heroic and powerful. His wife Lee Krasner stated: "He was not a big man, but he gave the impression of being big.... His hands were fantastic powerful hands.... All told, he was physically powerful." His friend Anthony Smith commented that: "You felt there was no end to his strength, yet he could move deftly, gracefully.... Pollock had a strong face, a rugged physical presence." His dealer from 1948 to 1952, Betty Parsons also noted: "I loved his looks. There was a vitality, an enormous physical presence. He was of medium height, but he looked taller. You could not forget his face. A very attractive man – oh very."<sup>246</sup> Andrew Perchuk made an interesting point regarding this article, stating: "One gets the impression from these accounts that Pollock's physical attributes, his power and presence, are a necessary component for understanding his significance and his work."<sup>247</sup>

### **Interrogating Constructions of Masculinity**

The conflation of an artist's manufactured subjectivity with his work potentially feeds the notion of "artistic genius." Arguing that the modernist artistic subject is constructed to produce a source of meaning for the work of art, Griselda Pollock has written:

The preoccupation with the individual artist is symptomatic of the work accomplished in art history – the production of an *artistic subject for works of art*. The subject constructed from the art work is then posited as the exclusive source of meaning – i.e., of "art," and the effect of this is to remove "art" from historical or textual analysis by representing it solely as the "expression" of the creative personality of the artist.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> "Who Was Jackson Pollock?" *Art in America* (May/June 1967): 49, 53, and 55, respectively.

<sup>247</sup> Perchuk, "Pollock and Postwar Masculinity," 33.

<sup>248</sup> Griselda Pollock, "Artists Mythologies and Media Genius, Madness and Art History," *Screen* 21 #3 (1980): 58.

When the artistic subject is posited “as the exclusive source of meaning,” art is removed from its social, political, and historical context and, consequently, the artwork becomes the product of “transcendent” creative genius. Through their works, and in their own ways, Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo and Kienholz altered this popular conception of the artistic subject as “transcendent genius.” These artists rejected abstract painting and, in doing so, challenged the lofty values and goals associated with the high art of Abstract Expressionism. By bringing in references to the outside world, the mass media, current politics, and cultural references, these artists brought the subject position of the artist down to earth and made the artist “of” the world, just as they believed their artworks were.

Whereas Rauschenberg’s dripping of paint has been seen as a reference to (and distortion of) Pollock’s masculine painting style, his use of fabrics can be seen as an affront to the display of masculinity by the Abstract Expressionist men.<sup>249</sup> In the majority of his works from the 1950s, Rauschenberg used various fabrics, such as bedding, clothing, and curtains – materials that could be found in most domestic spaces. He attached these pieces of fabric to his works and often splattered them with paint and other materials. For example, the aforementioned Bed (1955, figure 12) is composed of a quilt and bedding while Satellite (1955, figure 17) features an array of materials

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<sup>249</sup> When discussing the relationship between Rauschenberg and the Abstract Expressionists, one work that is typically addressed is Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953). With this work, Rauschenberg took a drawing by Willem de Kooning and attempted to erase all of de Kooning’s marks from the surface (which has been read as an attempt to “erase” the “father”). De Kooning’s trace (pencil residue) remained and eventually merges with Rauschenberg’s erasure residue, pointing to the fact that traces and references (to past generations) will always remain even if the end product is different. See Rauschenberg’s statements regarding this work in Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, 51, and in Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 96. For an insightful examination of this work, see Craft, *Constellations of Past and Present*, specifically the chapter entitled “Robert Rauschenberg Erases a Drawing.”

specifically associated with femininity and the home. Attached to the canvas and smeared with paint are handmade crocheted doilies, a washcloth, mattress ticking, bed sheets, and a piece of kitchen fabric. These items were not unique to these works; they were used repeatedly throughout his works from the 1950s. Significantly, Rauschenberg's use of domestic fabrics and objects came at a time when the country was focused on domestic space as a corrective to political and social uncertainties. In addition, his appropriation of feminine objects also coincided with Abstract Expressionism's extreme associations with masculinity. As Lisa Wainwright points out, Rauschenberg's use of fabrics sharply contrasted with the "high masculinity" of Abstract Expressionism: "By turning his back on pure painting and soiling his canvases with junk, Rauschenberg began to disobey his 'fathers' [the Abstract Expressionists]. Using fabric only exacerbated the disrespect."<sup>250</sup>

Yet, not only did Rauschenberg reference femininity in his works by using objects with those specific connotations, he also included many objects that alluded to masculinity, most often a hypermasculinity. An overview of his works from this time turns up a myriad of masculine paraphernalia, most often men's clothing: athletic socks, neckties, hats, and dress shirts. In addition, images of men are also constants throughout. Kenneth Silver has pointed out that "the male body – especially the athlete's body, or the working man's – in the form of glances stolen from newspaper and magazine photos, and perhaps made by his own camera as well, is ubiquitous in Rauschenberg's art, in the

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<sup>250</sup> Lisa Wainwright, "Robert Rauschenberg's Fabrics: Reconstructing Domestic Space," in Christopher Reed, ed., *Not At Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 197.

combines, silkscreen paintings, and transfer drawings.”<sup>251</sup> These references in Rauschenberg’s art may be seen as commenting on the prominent display of masculinity in Abstract Expressionism and culture as a whole but also as a more subtle reference to his own homosexuality.

Responding to postwar society’s focus on masculinity and its ramifications for the artistic subject, Kienholz, like Rauschenberg, specifically addressed the subject of masculine identity in many of his works. For example, his limbless John Doe (1959, figure 26) is composed of a male mannequin’s head and torso, which are bound to a baby stroller. In order for him to move – a circumstance which may evoke men returning from war emasculated by lost limbs and other body parts – John Doe must be maneuvered by someone else. Not only is he infantilized through his baby stroller and his inability to coordinate his own movements, his inadequacy is compounded by the removal of his penis, which is hidden in the drawer in the backside of the stroller. Instead of the active, heroic physicality associated with the masculine ideal, Kienholz presented the viewer with a fragmented, passive figure. The artist’s figure of masculinity certainly was not aligned with the popular representations in the mass media or with dominant conceptions of the masculine artistic genius. Instead, we are shown vulnerability, weakness, and an inability to live up to the socially sanctioned male role, with its focus on strength and virility.

Both John Doe’s upper (situated in the front of the stroller) and lower (situated directly behind his upper torso in the back) torsos appear to drip and leak fluids that resemble both fresh, red blood and dried, darkened blood. Created by dripping paint

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<sup>251</sup> Kenneth E. Silver, “Master Bedrooms, Master Narratives: Home, Homosexuality and Post-War Art,” in Reed, ed., *Not at Home*, 216.

down the surface of the work, the coagulated streams of fluid seem to stem from both a head injury and the large open wound in his chest. Kienholz referred to this work as “the exquisite corpse of the great American masculine ideal,” and, as such, named him a name typically assigned to unidentified dead men.<sup>252</sup> John Doe can be seen in terms of both the hypermasculine ideal and the often-criticized overconformist extreme. In either case, this pathetic figure becomes a caricature of contemporaneous conceptions of masculinity.

John Doe comprises one of three figures in a series about family members (Doe Trilogy, 1959-61), in which he emerges as the “father” through the title of another work, Boy, Son of John Doe (1961, figure 27). This oozing father figure presents a contrast to the artistic figure of Pollock (a kind of father figure to Kienholz’s generation), who was often interpreted as heroically “ejaculating” his “fluids” onto the canvas’s surface.<sup>253</sup> Even though the dripped paint in Kienholz’s work can be seen as representing by-products of the body, the end result was not associated with the artist’s own heroic production of those “fluids.” The splattered work represents the aftermath not of an act of genius, as Pollock’s works often were considered to be, but instead, the aftermath of some gruesome or pitiful event. Kienholz’s dripping father ultimately becomes a perversion or even parody of Pollock’s (the “father’s”) dripping. Positing that Pollock’s painting style can be read not only as masculine, but also as feminine, with its uncontrollable flows and its connections to the unarticulated unconscious (characteristics typically associated with femininity), Anna Chave has stated that Pollock “remained, on

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<sup>252</sup> Tuchman, “A Decade of Edward Kienholz,” 41.

<sup>253</sup> Critic William Feaver saw Pollock as “casting paint like seed... onto the canvas spread at his feet. This was no sissy.... It was, demonstrably, the real thing... painting composed of... manly ejaculatory splat.” As quoted in Anna C. Chave, “Pollock and Krasner: Script and Postscript,” (1993) in Karmel, ed., *Jackson Pollock*, 265. Also see Perchuk, “Pollock and Postwar Masculinity” and Jones, *Body Art*, specifically chapter two, “The ‘Pollockian Performative’ and the Revision of the Modernist Subject.”

some level, a man using his masculine authority to appropriate a feminine space.”<sup>254</sup>

Significantly, it was this transgressive potential in Pollock’s appropriation that Kienholz’s works can be seen as liberating from this older artist’s work and subjectivity.

A photograph taken in 1959 depicts Kienholz pushing John Doe, in his baby stroller, down a sidewalk in front of a backdrop of blurred storefronts (figure 28).<sup>255</sup>

Although unable to navigate by himself, John Doe appears almost human as he/it engages with the outside world. The marked contrast between Kienholz (strong and mobile) and John Doe (a broken father-figure bound to a stroller) emphasizes the challenge that this work posed to the socially sanctioned masculine ideal. The image also sets up an interesting relationship between Kienholz and John Doe. As the creator of this work, Kienholz now becomes the father. With this assertion of authority, the question is raised: can fatherhood weaken masculinity? Although maneuvering the product of his own creative endeavor down the street, is Kienholz emasculated by the fact that he pushes a baby stroller, as women conventionally do? In addition, an image such as this bears consideration in terms of the positioning and packaging of an “artistic genius.” Kienholz challenged these constructions not only by referring to everyday life with this work (albeit with his own horrific and sarcastic twist), but also by actually taking the work out for a ride in the real world.

DeFeo and her work should be considered also in relation to social expectations regarding gender and art historical constructions of the masculine artist. For example, to

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<sup>254</sup> Chave, “Pollock and Krasner,” 272.

<sup>255</sup> This photograph was taken in front of the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles and although no photographer is identified, I would guess that it possibly was taken by his close friend and co-owner of the Ferus Gallery, Walter Hopps.

create her most well-known work, The Rose (1958-1966, figure 11), DeFeo went against traditional feminine stereotypes. The creation of this incredibly large, 2,300 pound work required physical strength and stamina, qualities typically associated at that time with men. Not only did she use drill presses as she hacked and chopped at the surface, DeFeo ultimately created a work that physically overwhelmed the viewer and created a psychologically uncomfortable viewing position.<sup>256</sup> Further, because The Rose took eight years to complete and few people had seen it while she was working on it (in fact, it was not publicly exhibited until 1969), DeFeo and her work took on a legendary status, a reputation usually reserved for the masculine “artistic genius.”<sup>257</sup>

As she created this enormous work, its progress was documented in numerous photographs, most of which she either took or posed for along with the work.<sup>258</sup> One photograph was taken in late 1960 by New York photographer Burt Glinn, who took a series of photographs for an article for Holiday magazine.<sup>259</sup> In this photograph, she

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<sup>256</sup> *The Rose* developed from an already existing work entitled *Deathrose*. Tragically, another aspect of *The Rose* lends itself to violent connotations: many believed that the paint DeFeo used to create this work had high concentrations of toxic lead, which led to her prolonged illness and eventual death of lung cancer. The conservator Niccolo Caldararo conducted tests on the paint’s lead content after DeFeo’s death and found that it actually contained very low lead levels; yet, spot tests done on the original *Deathrose* canvas indicated high lead levels. See Niccolo Caldararo, “Conserving *The Rose*,” in Green and Levy, eds., *Jay DeFeo and the Rose*, 114 and 123. Whether *The Rose* helped lead to DeFeo’s death or not, the paint did contain enough lead to cause the loss of her teeth. DeFeo created a number of works referencing this loss: *September Blackberries* (1972), *Crescent Bridge I* (1970-72), and *Crescent Bridge II* (1970-72).

<sup>257</sup> Martha Sherrill has written about DeFeo’s relationship with *The Rose*: “It was never-ending. It was both laughable and tragic. People joked that the work would be finished only when the artist herself died, and a myth grew up around them, DeFeo and *The Rose*: a religion, a relationship, a compulsion, an addiction, a fabulous love affair that would not end.” See Martha Sherrill, “The Story of *The Rose*,” in Green and Levy, eds., *Jay DeFeo and The Rose*, 30.

<sup>258</sup> Many of the photographs were taken by fellow artist and friend Wallace Berman. See Sandra S. Phillips “Photographing *The Rose*,” in Green and Levy, eds., *Jay DeFeo and The Rose*, 65-67.

<sup>259</sup> The article was Kenneth Tynan’s, “San Francisco: The Rebels,” *Holiday* (April 1961): 92-97, et. al. Although this specific photograph was not used in that article, it did accompany an article in *Look* magazine, John F. Kennedy, “The Arts in America,” *Look* (18 December 1962): 104-123.

stands on a stepladder and appears to be in the process of working on The Rose (figure 29). The only objects in the image are the work, the artist, and the stepladder. DeFeo does not gaze out at the viewer with her work situated as a backdrop. Rather, she gives us her back and appears oblivious to the camera as she intensely engages with her work. While her right hand works, her left dangles a cigarette. She wears old, splattered work clothes and worn sneakers.

A comparison of Kienholz's photograph with John Doe and DeFeo's with The Rose raises an interesting issue – in each of these images, the artist takes on the identity of the opposite gender. Rather than portraying herself as glamorous and feminine (the socially accepted roles for women), DeFeo presented an artistic figure that can be compared to that of Pollock (with his rebel stance and cigarette) or even to that of Michelangelo (on a ladder painting the walls of the Sistine Chapel or chiseling away at a large block of marble). Similarly, Kienholz is not depicted in a physically strenuous act of creation or posed in a typically masculine manner (again, as exemplified by Pollock's brooding stance for Life); rather, he pushes his emasculated creation down the street in a baby carriage. Both DeFeo and Kienholz's photographs featured the artists in a manner that challenged traditional constructions of the masculine "artistic genius." Further, the manner in which they presented themselves in these images should be considered in relation to the postwar period's embrace of clearly defined and sharply demarcated gender roles that emphasized masculine men and feminine women.

DeFeo's photograph should be considered also in terms of the manner in which she negotiated a space for herself and her work in this artistic climate. Her location in San Francisco, rather than New York, contributed to her break from the masculinity that

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dominated the art world at the time.<sup>260</sup> DeFeo received much support and respect from her male cohorts in both San Francisco and Los Angeles. In 1988, she recalled: “I really felt that I had the respect of all my male friends who were artists. It wasn’t an issue maybe because there wasn’t any competition for wall space, even any competition for jobs at the time.”<sup>261</sup> Including her work in the 1957 inaugural show at the Ferus Gallery, Kienholz greatly admired DeFeo: “She just had a flow, a creative flow, coming from her that was fantastic to observe.”<sup>262</sup> In addition, during a 1974 interview, although Conner was persistently asked to draw correlations between his art and that of Wally Hedrick [DeFeo’s former spouse], he argued that his work was more closely aligned with DeFeo’s: “[My work] had more to do with Jay’s work, things of Jay’s that you never saw.... There’s more relationship... between myself and Jay’s work than there ever was between Wally’s work and mine.”<sup>263</sup>

As an artistic subject, Conner also positioned himself in a manner that was not in line with traditional representations of the modernist artist. He infrequently allowed photographs to be taken of himself or to be used to promote his work: “I didn’t let

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<sup>260</sup> Lucy Lippard has noted: “San Francisco’s lack of a powerful art market at the time was no doubt also liberating and has been credited with producing an atmosphere of relative gender equality.” Lucy Lippard, “Transplanting the Rose,” in Green and Levy, eds., *Jay DeFeo and The Rose*, 57.

<sup>261</sup> As quoted in Solnit, “Heretical Constellations,” 82.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 82. According to Richard C. Smith, “Edward Kienholz remembered DeFeo as the ‘seminal force in San Francisco’; her influence extended to Los Angeles, where there was a keen interest in her work among collectors and young artists. Kienholz was impressed by her purist approach. She was one of only two artists he knew who bought pigments and ground her own paints so that she could achieve the exact shades she envisioned.” Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 191.

<sup>263</sup> Karlstrom, “Interview with Bruce Conner,” 16-17. Conner’s admiration was reciprocated by DeFeo. Remembering Conner’s impending arrival in San Francisco in 1957, heralded by his long-time friend Michael McClure, DeFeo stated: “For a long time there was this talk that ‘Bruce is coming, Bruce is coming.’ I used to have dreams about all these crates of Bruce Conner’s paintings coming. Honest-to-God dreams. And by God, one day, all these trunks came full of Bruce Conner’s paintings, preceding his own arrival.... I marveled at the skill of such a young artist.” Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 56.

anybody take my picture. Up until around 1965 nobody ever saw a picture of me.”<sup>264</sup>

Often, when asked for photographs for catalogs or magazine articles, Conner submitted pictures of other people. In a 1990 interview, he discussed his reasons for avoiding being photographed:

When people have tried to take my photograph, either I would be photographed from the back or in such a way that nobody could recognize me. I didn't want to be recognized as Bruce Conner. So in the 1950's and 1960's I tried to become anonymous. There was a period of time where I didn't sign my work. I didn't feel that I could identify with the process. I could put my name on some of these works, but many times I was using bits and parts of other people's minds, objects and materials, films, photographs, etc. All artists live off the lives of other artists, they look at other artists. They use things that they see in other people's work all the time. One of the persistent myths of the art world is that art is original.<sup>265</sup>

In addition, Conner refused to sign many of his works, exhibited at times under false names, and created multiple artistic personas:

I used to have two totally different biographies – one in Who's Who in American Art and one in Who's Who. In Who's Who in American Art, I was born in India and went to exotic schools. Then I got tired of getting letters in the mail that asked me to update my biography. So I sent them back saying “deceased.” Who's Who in American Art absolutely believed that and never put me back again. And then they sent me a form for information for Who Was Who. I updated all the information way beyond the time I died and sent it to Who Was Who and they listed me. Then about ten years ago I got another letter that they wanted to include me in Who's Who – I'd been recommended. Now I am in Who Was Who as a dead artist and Who's Who as a living film maker.<sup>266</sup>

A rare photo from this period depicts Conner modeling one of his works, Rat Back Pack (1959, figure 30), whose title referenced the artistic community (The

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<sup>264</sup> Karlstrom, “Interview with Bruce Conner,” 39. Also see Rothfuss, “Escape Artist.”

<sup>265</sup> “A Conversation with Bruce Conner and Robert Dean,” unpaginated.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid. Rebecca Solnit has suggested that “some of his ambivalence about being Bruce Conner stems from the extreme reactions his work has elicited, which have sometimes been hostile, and often mistaken about the artist's intent.” Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 58.

Ratbastard Protective Association) he formed shortly after arriving in San Francisco in 1957. The title of the work also is reminiscent (and perhaps a parody) of the all-male, gang of celebrity friends known for their displays of hypermasculinity. Yet, the artistic group of which he was a part was composed of artists living in the margins of society. Perfectly illustrating his perspective regarding the artist's anonymity, the man standing sideways in the photograph and looking back at the viewer could be anyone: Conner's head and neck are completely covered by a woolly winter hat and large, black sunglasses hide a portion of his face. The focus of the image is the bulky conglomeration of objects sheathed in nylon attached to Conner's back and not the artist who created it.

Ultimately, the works and subject positions of Rauschenberg, DeFeo, Conner, and Kienholz must be considered in relation to the dominant movement of Abstract Expressionism, specifically in relation to the subjects of violence and masculinity. Significantly, the subjects that this group of artists interrogated through their art were elements that were being fundamentally redefined and challenged in the everyday world due to tensions and changes in the political and social realms. In reference to Harold Bloom's often-cited argument regarding the relationship between a "poet/father" and a "poet/son,"<sup>267</sup> Rosalind Krauss has stated:

The "strong misreading" – the concept of the critic Harold Bloom – is not a *misunderstanding* on the part of a younger artist in his or her relation to a powerful older one, but rather something more like a perverse, but very canny, *deep* understanding, which liberates from within the target work a *potential* (often anarchic or transgressive) that had been hidden or obscured by the official, even self-professed, idea of the older artist's meaning.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973); 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>268</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," in Varnedoe and Karmel, eds., *New Approaches*, 161.

I would argue that this perversity and transgression that Krauss describes can be seen in works by the artists addressed in this dissertation.

Aware of the violent undercurrents (or at least the romanticized interpretations of violence) and the focus on masculinity in the Cold War atmosphere of the United States and in much of Abstract Expressionism, these artists chose specifically to address these subjects in many of their works. In so doing, they might be said to have, in Krauss's terms, liberated from within the work of a target movement a hidden potential.

Essentially, this younger generation of artists took the potential that existed in the Abstract Expressionists' works for addressing issues related to violence and masculinity and created works that transgressed mainstream artistic constructions regarding these subjects. These artists' works engaged with the outside world, addressing and questioning topics often left unexplored in the art world during the 1950s. And, ultimately, their visions presented an aggressive, disorderly, and most often, unclean world.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### Domesticity's Dirt: Beneath the Spotless Surface

This chapter will analyze concepts of domesticity in relation to the works of Robert Rauschenberg, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, and Edward Kienholz. By refusing to repress dirt, these artists tainted the sanctity of domesticity and questioned the 1950s image of the ideal home and family. Significantly, the domestic sphere exemplifies the principal space in which the body and its potential dirt and taboos are confronted and negotiated. Specifically, I will examine how these artists' works engaged contemporaneous beliefs regarding familial and gender roles, their representations of space (related to the home and domesticity), and their use of actual domestic objects to create their works. As Richard Cándida Smith has noted about this period: "The turn to private experience as a counter to public authority meant, for example, that the ideology of domesticity, which historians have correctly identified as a pillar of conservative social thought, was also, at least after 1945, a source of disruptive change."<sup>269</sup> In other words, as this chapter will explore, these artists turned to issues concerning domesticity in order to counter public ideologies that concerned private life.

Many of the works created by Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz can be seen as subverting idealized images of the 1950s and early 1960s American family and domestic space. A 1953 photograph taken by Gordon Parks represents typical imagery from this time (figure 31).<sup>270</sup> Depicted in the photo is a family of five: a father, mother,

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<sup>269</sup> Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, xxiv.

<sup>270</sup> This image was originally taken for Time Life Pictures.

and three children. This action-shot captures the family barbecuing in their backyard. The parents are busy preparing food while the children enjoy playtime. Illustrating the American ideal, this white, middle-class family is shown with the luxuries of the postwar period: modern consumer products (a barbecue grill, picnic table, playpen, and swing set), relaxing leisure time with the family,<sup>271</sup> and the ownership of suburban property (complete with white picket fence). While imagery such as this was not the only familial images readily available to the public (examples of non-stereotypical families could be found in the marginal media as well as in everyday newspaper headlines), it was representations such as Parks' photograph that the artists addressed in this dissertation challenged most directly in their works.

For example, Edward Kienholz's Doe Trilogy (1959-1961) presented a family in deep contrast to the idealized families that were typically represented in popular culture. Composed of three separate free-standing works, the Doe family includes a father, a mother, and a son. John Doe (1959, figure 26), a male mannequin's head and torso attached to a baby stroller; Jane Doe (1960, figures 32 and 33), a female doll head attached to a sewing cabinet largely concealed by her bridal gown; and Boy, Son of John Doe (1961, figure 27), a male mannequin body with a toy car attached to and surrounding his torso. Kienholz's Doe family, with their paradigmatically nondescript names, can be understood as representing the average American family or even unidentified dead bodies. This family, led by an infantile and crippled father and a submissive mother tied to conventional female roles, countered certain standards or ideals of family life and

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<sup>271</sup> See Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1994), chapter two "Hyphenated Culture: Painting by Numbers in the New Age of Leisure," in which she discusses the postwar embrace of leisure family time.

gender roles upheld by and promoted within society through imagery such as Gordon Parks' photograph.

Significantly, the works of Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz involved dirtying (either literally or metaphorically) both the home and its family. Mary Douglas has argued that dirt is defined in relation to a society's most sacred concepts, stating that "[i]n short, our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications."<sup>272</sup> To challenge a society's approach to the elimination of dirt is most often to challenge that society's conventions regarding what it holds most sacred. Usually those things that are seen as sacred in a society are approached with higher standards of cleanliness (in this case, the wholesome family and its clean home). Therefore, through their use of dirt, these artists contradicted cherished notions concerning what many believed to be the foundation of American life.

### **Postwar Domesticity**

In the aftermath of World War II, the Cold War was integral to establishing the 1950s obsession with the family and home. Not only was it seen as a haven and a site of safety (at least in theory) from the chaos of the outside world, the home was emphasized in the media and by the government as a means to produce patriotic American citizens. In the postwar years, the political and domestic realms became fused as advanced technology and an overload of consumer goods (both particularly related to domestic space) were seen as a way to "win" the Cold War. For example, Vice-President Richard Nixon, during the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow in what became known

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<sup>272</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 36.

as the “kitchen debate,” explained the American way of life to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in a model middle-class home while praising the virtues of the new consumer products that made American life easier and better (and therefore superior to the communist way of life).<sup>273</sup> For Nixon (and the majority of Americans at this time), a fully equipped and modernized home provided by a working father and coordinated by a homemaker mother represented something fundamental about the spirit of American democracy. As Elaine Tyler May has argued:

For in the early years of the cold war, amid a world of uncertainties brought about by World War II and its aftermath, the home seemed to offer a secure private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world. The message was ambivalent, however, for the family also seemed particularly vulnerable. It needed heavy protection against the intrusions of forces outside itself. The self-contained home held out the promise of security in an insecure world. It also offered a vision of abundance and fulfillment. As the cold war began, young postwar Americans were homeward bound.<sup>274</sup>

Young postwar Americans were also generally determined to fill those homes with large families and consumer products. At the end of World War II, the birthrate rose

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<sup>273</sup> Nixon explained American democracy and freedom to Khrushchev as such: “To us, diversity, the right to choose, . . . is the most important thing. We don’t have one decision made at the top by one government official. . . . We have many different manufacturers and many different kinds of washing machines so that the housewives have a choice. . . . Would it not be better to compete in the relative merits of washing machines than in the strength of rockets?” As quoted in May, *Homeward Bound*, 17. Also see Stephen J. Whitfield, “The Road to Rapprochement: Khrushchev’s 1959 Visit to America,” in Foreman, ed., *The Other Fifties*, 307-332.

<sup>274</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 3. Drawing from numerous mass media sources, including sociological publications and documents of public policy, May examines the period’s preoccupation with strict gender roles (especially the male breadwinner and the female homemaker), parenting advice, sexual containment, and domestic consumerism. In addition, May utilizes and often references the Kelly Longitudinal Study (KLS), a data collection that consists of several surveys of 600 white middle-class men and women who formed families during these years. Although the KLS provides an insightful look into this period (due to its more personal nature), it is important to keep in mind that May’s study (as she points out herself), as well as most available statistics and studies concerning the 1950s, is based on the white middle-class experience and does not necessarily provide a wide demographic perspective.

25 percent (familarly referred to as the “baby boom”) and stayed there throughout the 1950s.<sup>275</sup> Carole Kismaric and Marvin Heiferman state that:

...seventy-six million American babies were born in less than two decades. The baby boomers, as they’ve been called ever since, came in two tidal waves, the first from 1944 to 1949, the second between 1950 and 1957.... What got turned loose was a flood of postwar consumer goods, and parents across the nation did their share by mass-producing new consumers. The economy and the baby boom lunged forward together, for better and for worse.<sup>276</sup>

Home ownership grew 50 percent from 1940 to 1950 and during this same decade the number of new homeowners rose from 23.6 million to 32.8 million people.<sup>277</sup> In fact, by 1960 three out of five families owned their own homes.<sup>278</sup>

As the demand for home ownership increased, many families moved from more urban areas to the suburbs where it was easier to find affordable housing.<sup>279</sup>

Communities in the suburbs were geared towards white, middle-class families and, at least on the surface, represented the ideal American family lifestyle.<sup>280</sup> One of the most

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<sup>275</sup> Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*, 241.

<sup>276</sup> Carole Kismaric and Marvin Heiferman, *Growing Up with Dick and Jane: Learning and Living the American Dream* (New York: Collins Publishers, 1996), 30.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 and 57, respectively.

<sup>278</sup> Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*, 242. According to Suellen Hoy, “Owning a house represented, above all else, the quintessential American dream. By 1960 that dream had come true for 31 million of the nation’s 44 million families, according to President Eisenhower in his State of the Union message.” Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, 167.

<sup>279</sup> For more information on the country’s move to the suburbs, see Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). According to Kismaric and Heiferman, “Of the thirteen million homes built in the decade after WWII, eleven million of them were in new suburban developments.” Kismaric and Heiferman, *Growing Up with Dick and Jane*, 15. In addition, Elaine Tyler May notes that: “Between 1950 and 1970, the suburban population doubled, from 36 million to 74 million; 83 percent of the nation’s growth during those years took place in the suburbs.” May, *Homeward Bound*, 170.

<sup>280</sup> Living in the suburbs was often equated with a high level of patriotism and morality. For example, William J. Levitt claimed: “No man who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do.” As quoted in Marling, *As Seen on TV*, 253. Also see Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism*

well-known suburban communities (which included recreational and shopping areas) built during the postwar period was Levittown, a Long Island, New York development designed and constructed by contractor William J. Levitt in 1947.<sup>281</sup> Drawing from his wartime experience as a military contractor, Levitt used automobile assembly line production methods to create prefabricated Cape Cod-style houses, which were virtually identical in design, size, and appearance.<sup>282</sup>

In its June 1953 issue, Mademoiselle gave its “last word on suburbia,” representing the manner in which the suburbs were often depicted in the mass media:

Young Mrs. Henny Penny saw the cloud of soot and cried in righteous wrath: “The sky is falling... and chicks have better pickings in the sticks.” She headed down the highway with her brood, her sights set on a better world all around: detached (or at least semidetached) privacy; leafiness in season (and snow to shovel out of season); a patch of lawn in front and out in back the jungle gym, the barbecue, the clothesline and the flower bed. Exuberant children, masters here of all that they survey, running free or organizing an assault upon parental time – a trip to the beach, a picnic, a new baseball bat. In such casual, friendly atmosphere there is no need to put on airs for, after all, the neighbors’ TV screen is also twenty inches wide. Indeed, there isn’t time! With Sketch Club, P.T.A., and Susan’s

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*and the Model Home* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 1, who has stated: “When something is built, the process documents underlying structures of work, technology, and economics. It also serves as a metaphor, suggesting and justifying social categories, values, and relations. Domestic architecture in particular illuminates norms concerning family life, sex roles, community relations, and social equality. Of course, architecture itself does not directly determine how people act or how they see themselves and others. Yet the associations a culture establishes at any particular time between a ‘model’ or typical house and a notion of the model family do encourage certain roles and assumptions.”

<sup>281</sup> For more information on Levittown, see Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1993) and Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003). Also see Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), a sociological study of a suburban community in New Jersey based on the author’s lived perspective from 1958-1960.

<sup>282</sup> Through low-interest loans, home ownership was encouraged by the government and was particularly geared towards GIs returning from the war. Costs for these homes ranged between \$7,770 and \$9,500. See Kismaric and Heiferman, *Growing Up with Dick and Jane*, 64.

dancing class, the busy hours rush past until the family is rejoined by *him*, who toils all day in soot to make this whole life possible.<sup>283</sup>

However, Mademoiselle's depiction of the suburbs had complex undertones. On the surface, Henny Penny's new suburban life sounds much better and cleaner than living in a soot-filled city of toil; she and her family now have access to nature and more space, her children are exuberant, and she is surrounded by friendly neighbors. Yet, under this idyllic surface, constant maintenance of the lawn and flower beds is needed; the children become masters that assault parental time; the neighbors own identical consumer products; and the father (*him*) appears largely absent.

Although millions of families eagerly moved into homes and communities similar to Levittown, many social critics remained skeptical, viewing these domestic structures as isolating women, domesticating men, creating delinquent children, and as outward signs of consumer conformity. In the 1950s, the architectural critic Lewis Mumford described the suburbs as:

... a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television programs, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold.<sup>284</sup>

In his 1957 book, The Crack in the Picture Window, John Keats offered a similar perspective on suburban life:

For literally nothing down – other than a simple two per cent and a promise to pay, and pay, and pay until the end of your life – you too, like a

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<sup>283</sup> “Mlle’s Last Word on Suburbia,” *Mademoiselle* (June 1953): 37.

<sup>284</sup> As quoted in Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., *The American Family Home: 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 227. See Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961), 486.

man I'm going to call John Drone, can find a box of your own in one of the fresh-air slums we're building around the edges of America's cities. There's room for all in any price range, for even while you read this, whole square miles of identical boxes are spreading like gangrene throughout New England, across the Denver prairie, around Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, New York, Miami – everywhere.<sup>285</sup>

In addition, women were perceived to dominate these middle-class suburban homes in the absence of their husbands; and therefore were considered the principal shoppers for the home and family. Associated with the recovery from the war as well as the fight against communism, consumerism filled the suburban home with all the goods and products said to provide the American family with health, happiness, and success. Magazine advertisements illustrated women who stood proudly with their appliances in spotless and beautiful homes.<sup>286</sup> These products and services were marketed to the female consumer, the purchasing housewife who decorated and fulfilled the needs of the home.

Traditionally gendered as feminine (and therefore inferior), mass media, popular culture, and domesticity play off many gender-based assumptions, such as those associating men with production, public spaces, and wage earning, and women with consumption, domestic spaces, and non-wage labor.<sup>287</sup> Yet, while women were given the power to consume products, many felt trapped and isolated in their homes and in their prescribed roles as mothers and housewives. Juliann Sivulka explains that:

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<sup>285</sup> John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company and Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1957), xi. Also see Gans, *The Levittowners* and Bernard Rudofsky, *Behind the Picture Window* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955).

<sup>286</sup> In the 1950s, the United States bought almost three-fourths of all the appliances produced in the world. Marling, *As Seen on TV*, 255.

<sup>287</sup> See Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, eds., *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1957), which contains a collection of works by cultural critics and social analysts on mass culture in the 1950s United States.

Although millions of married women entered the labor market in record numbers, the “American way of life” still celebrated the middle-class suburban existence in which Mom stayed at home and Dad worked in the city. In these early housing tracts, women no longer had access to the corner store, nearby grandparents, or the convenient streetcar that they had relied on to ease the burden of shopping, housework, and child rearing. By making work outside the home increasingly difficult for women, suburban life further advanced traditional gender roles in postwar society.<sup>288</sup>

During the 1950s, although women were encouraged to consume mass culture’s products, there was a general attempt to keep them out of the wage earning labor market – to preserve jobs for the lately returned military men – which ultimately led to this period’s cult of domesticity.

### **The Family Façade**

With the country’s fixation on the home, it is not surprising that much of popular culture and the mass media was directed towards the family and attempted to establish standards and codes of behavior. Juliann Sivulka has discussed how advertising specifically was used during the 1950s to reinforce conservative family values:

The results mirrored what postwar American society regarded as the most appropriate life for its citizens. A profusion of ads pictured idealized versions of Mom, Dad, Junior, and Sis, as Americans struggled to fill these unrealistic roles. The ads usually portrayed Dad as the strong, decisive father and businessman, equally productive around the home and at the office.... In contrast, society did not expect the woman to have a productive role in the economy. Instead, she was to find satisfaction in the narrow roles offered by conventional family life as homemaker, mother, and wife.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*, 258.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

In addition to advertising, magazine articles and books overflowed with advice to both women and men on how to achieve and perfectly maintain their respective roles in society.<sup>290</sup>

Furthermore, a majority of the popular television programs during the 1950s, such as Leave it to Beaver (1957-1963), Ozzie and Harriet (1952-66), and Father Knows Best (1954-62), were based upon the ideal, wholesome image of the American family, with each member happily and successfully playing his or her part.<sup>291</sup> Yet, television did not necessarily reflect reality, as Gerard Jones has pointed out:

When the pop culture eye turns toward the mid-1950s, it almost invariably sees a time of placidity and changelessness, an eerily homogeneous landscape of spacious houses and smiling, self-satisfied WASP families. This was the image that most advertisements and entertainments of the time seemed determined to project. Yet this willfully quiet veneer was hiding – and facilitating – the biggest shift in the American way of life since the spread of industry and the great immigrations in the last century. The sitcoms of those years, which have done so much to shape our impression of the era, were conceived to explain and exploit and take

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<sup>290</sup> For example, see Jean and Eugene Benge, *Win Your Man and Keep Him* (New York: Windsor Press, 1948); Robert F. Winch, *The Modern Family* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1952); Ray E. Baber, *Marriage and the Family* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1953); Lee Graham, *If You Are a Woman* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1954); and James A. Peterson, *Education for Marriage* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956). In addition, children were also well indoctrinated on their proper roles within the family and society. One such example was through their Dick and Jane primers, a series of books that were published from the 1930s through the 1960s and focused on the life of an ideal American family. As children learned to read, they were taught the fundamentals of the American dream, which was particularly true during the fifties when eighty percent of the first-graders in the United States learned to read with Dick and Jane. See Kismaric and Heiferman, *Growing Up with Dick and Jane*, 21.

<sup>291</sup> Gerard Jones has noted that many “saw in the mass media a classroom for teaching them [the public] how to behave in the perfect society. Entertainment had always come under scrutiny from citizens’ groups and moral leaders, of course, but never had popular culture been so explicitly linked to social education as in the early 1950s.” Jones, *Honey, I’m Home!*, 96. In addition, according to Jones, *Father Knows Best* “preached many basic lessons: Fulfill your promises; respect others; don’t lie to your parents; always do your best work. But if it had one driving theme, it was this: Learn to accept your role.” *Ibid.*, 98. Also see Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) and Ella Taylor, *Primetime Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California, 1989).

some of the fear from that shift. In the process they came to crystallize some of the great American self-delusions of the 1950s.<sup>292</sup>

That many of Kienholz's, Conner's, Rauschenberg's, and DeFeo's works addressing domesticity and gender roles may be understood as counters to those self-delusions will be argued in what follows.

The tragic case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg provides an interesting perspective on postwar society's sacredly held concepts regarding the American family. One of the most prominent legal cases of the 1950s entailed the conviction of this husband and wife, who were ultimately executed for sharing atom bomb secrets with the Soviets.<sup>293</sup> As the country watched this case unfold, fascination with and fear of an infiltration of communism and/or communist sympathizers within the democratic United States, and the possibility of being unjustly accused of engaging in such treacherous activities intensified. The Rosenbergs' executions in June of 1953 can be seen as setting the stage for the upcoming decade and as contributing to a Cold War climate that attempted to maintain strict social order through the elimination of unpatriotic activities (a form of dirt) from society.<sup>294</sup> When considered in relation to the prevailing attitudes of the time, the Rosenbergs' political activities were considered so dangerous because, at least on the surface, the couple appeared to be so ordinary: a father and a mother who had two

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<sup>292</sup> Jones, *Honey, I'm Home!*, 87.

<sup>293</sup> Julius Rosenberg was arrested on July 17, 1950 and Ethel Rosenberg was arrested on August 11, 1950. Their trial began on March 6, 1951. For further information on the Rosenbergs' cases see Marjorie Garber and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds., *Secret Agents: The Rosenberg Case, McCarthyism, and Fifties America* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>294</sup> Elaine Tyler May has discussed the ideology of "containment" during the Cold War period: "Domestic anticommunism was another manifestation of containment: if presumably subversive individuals could be contained and prevented from spreading their poisonous influence through the body politic, then the society could feel secure." May, *Homeward Bound*, 14.

children. The accusations of transgressive behavior extended not only to their supposed communist political activities but also to their questionable family values and home life. In the postwar United States when the family and its home were considered sacred, the Rosenbergs' deviation from the "normal" wholesome family also branded them as bad Americans and unpatriotic.

One of the main aspects of the case that both the government and the public focused on was the assumption that Ethel had been a bad mother to her two young sons, Robert and Michael. By engaging in treacherous political activism, she was seen as refusing to abide by the conventional codes of motherhood (which focused on issues regarding the private domestic sphere and not public concerns such as political ideologies) and thereby sacrificing her children's wellbeing in exchange for a dangerous and unpopular (and to many, evil) political ideology. Intensely scrutinized, Ethel was seen as the stronger and more malevolent of the two, even though the evidence against her was even less convincing than that against her husband.<sup>295</sup> As a wife and mother (portrayed as the most important roles that a woman could achieve during the 1950s), Ethel *should* have been trustworthy and good. Therefore, betraying her country *and* her children, it was believed that this woman must be extremely evil. As a woman, and therefore the one who, in theory, controlled and maintained the home (which included

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<sup>295</sup> Joyce Antler states: "Ethel's failure to break down under the pressure of her arrest and trial gave rise to the widespread belief that she cared more about ideology than her offspring and was therefore guilty. Her own denial of guilt, along with her repeated reliance on the Fifth Amendment, created the impression, according to one legal scholar, of a 'cold, well-composed woman lacking 'normal' feminine characteristics'.... According to another juror, she was certainly guilty – of being a bad mother: 'I had two daughters at the time, and it bothered me how they would subject their children to such a thing. I just couldn't understand it.'" See Joyce Antler, "A Bond of Sisterhood: Ethel Rosenberg, Molly Greenberg, and Radical Jewish Women of the 1950s," in Garber and Walkowitz, eds., *Secret Agents*, 206. For further information on the then commonly held belief that Ethel had been a bad mother to her children – an assertion that her sons, as adults, have been concerned to refute – see Marie Ashe, "The Bell Jar and the Ghost of Ethel Rosenberg," and Robert Meeropol, "Rosenberg Realities," in Garber and Walkowitz, eds., *Secret Agents*, 215-231 and 235-251, respectively.

sustaining certain standards of cleanliness, moral as well as hygienic), Ethel was held to a higher standard in terms of transgressive behavior.

The Rosenberg case was disturbing to many Americans because the surface of the accused couple's home life revealed nothing about what was going on behind closed doors (or at least what many believed was going on). Kienholz's The Secret House of Eddie Critch (1961, figure 34) offers insight into a period when many families attempted to present a façade that placed them within mainstream norms. Created from an old, drop-front, wood veneered writing desk (the surface of which is cracking and bears traces of paint), this piece of household furniture houses a "family" of three. Since it is only the height of a coffee-table, the viewer must squat down in order to peer into the desk and observe the family. Both the drop-front and the top of the cabinet can be opened or left closed so that the family is either hidden or exposed. Either way, the family appears to be trapped inside because even when the doors are opened, chicken wire covers the entire front.

This secret house's trapped family is composed of three figures that suggest a father, mother, and child. Situated in the middle, the "father" is made from a cone that is covered with leather and embossed with a family crest (a lion standing on its two hind legs). Protruding from a leather-lined hole in the top of the table, the top of the cone is rough, as if his "head" has been hacked off. The more mature-looking, female doll on the left appears to be the mother figure. When the front door is opened, her genital area (which is enclosed along with her upper legs in an open wooden box) becomes the focus. Her armless and headless torso also protrudes through a hole – this time fur-lined – in the top of the cabinet. When the top of the cabinet is opened, the fur- and leather-lined holes

appear to be heads floating above the decapitated figures. The baby doll on the far right is completely trapped inside the desk with no hole at the top. Her body is contained inside a box as well (except for her legs) but she has been disfigured and twisted so that her face rests against her own buttocks.

The Secret House of Eddie Critch seems to hold some mysterious hidden narrative. Who or what do these dolls and objects represent? The title only adds to the confusion. Who is Eddie Critch? While Kienholz has given no clues as to who Critch is, could the title have been a play on his first name, Edward? Is Eddie contained in the house, did he construct the house, or both? What about this house must be kept secret? Kienholz's use of enigmatic and ambiguous titles encouraged viewer involvement in that they solicited active participation as a means of deriving meaning. While no easy answers are to be found through an engagement with this work, certain elements do pertain to the subjects at hand. Created at a time when the home and its family were seen as a site of safety and as a corrective to the world's problems, this "house" with its distorted and trapped family offered an alternative vision to those presented in popular culture and encouraged by the government.

### **Constructions of Femininity**

During the postwar period, the most important roles that the American woman was expected to fulfill were those of wife and mother, which had a larger social importance.<sup>296</sup> As homemakers and mothers, women were entrusted with the critical

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<sup>296</sup> According to Elaine Tyler May, "By 1956, one-fourth of all urban white college women married while still in college. To do otherwise was a gamble. A woman who decided to postpone marriage, complete her education, and attempt to pursue a career during these years was likely to find it difficult, if not impossible, to gain access to a professional school or to find a job in the occupation of her

responsibility of training the country's children to lead morally clean and patriotic lives.<sup>297</sup> Because of women's independence during World War II (both financially, as they entered the workforce in large numbers, and socially), there were widespread fears that women could effectively destroy the family, and therefore the nation, if they were not willing to return to the home and their traditional roles after the war. Yet, women were not simply expected to be wives and mothers; these roles were strongly tied to the patriotic duty of fighting communism through the creation of strong moral values. To raise children who would grow into responsible, mature adults with strong characters, was to eradicate the potential of communist infiltration of the United States.<sup>298</sup> Yet, even though an attempt was made to connect women's domestic roles with national security, many women ultimately felt trapped in the home and unfulfilled with their limited positions in society.

Preoccupied with gender roles, social scientists and cultural critics produced endless identity studies during the postwar period. At the core of these studies was the belief that women were domineering, controlling, and so were ultimately creating generations of emasculated men by negatively affecting both their spouses and sons. One 1947 study stated that, as a group, women (referred to as a "highly disturbed

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choice. She might also find her chances for marriage reduced if she waited too long." May, *Homeward Bound*, 79.

<sup>297</sup> Kristin Ross makes an interesting point regarding the role of the woman in relation to the home and, in a broader sense, the nation. She states: "An efficient, well-run harmonious home is a national asset: the quality of the domestic environment has a major influence on the physique and health of the nation. A chain of equivalences is at work here; the prevailing logic runs something like this: If the woman is clean, the family is clean, the nation is clean." Although Ross is discussing the French woman and the nation of France during the 1950s, this same sentiment certainly applies to the American woman and the United States during this same period. See Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1995), 78.

<sup>298</sup> See May, *Homeward Bound*, 102.

psychobiological organism”) “are a problem to themselves, to their children and families, to each other, to society as a whole.”<sup>299</sup> The authors of this best-selling study, Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham, believed that the woman’s duties included tending to children, being a “spirited companion,” obtaining a surface knowledge of current events, and, in short, not being an “ignoramus.”<sup>300</sup> They concurred that, while generally afflicted with a deep level of penis-envy, women also were “disturbed, discontented, complaining, unreasonably demanding, aggressive.”<sup>301</sup>

These sentiments were echoed in a 1953 article, “‘Masculine’ Women Are Cheating Love,” in which Dr. William G. Niederland referred to women who refused to adhere to the socially acceptable roles of wives and mothers as “masculine,” pointing out that they most often conceal themselves behind a placid mask that “hides an inwardly tense and emotionally unstable individual, seething with hidden aggressiveness and resentment.” Along with psychoanalysis, this article suggested “preventive work – through proper education, especially in matters of mental and sexual hygiene, healthful home environment, helpful guidance during adolescence and mature upbringing.”<sup>302</sup>

Clearly driven by suspect motives and biases, studies such as these, which were viewed as scientifically founded “medical” opinions, attempted to confront the psychology of the immediate postwar United States as well as to assuage fears of

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<sup>299</sup> Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1947), 67 and 1.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 149. Lundberg and Farnham argued that Mary Wollstonecraft, a contributor to the founding of the Women’s Movement, as well as many later feminists can be examined as case studies of psychiatric imbalance.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>302</sup> William G. Niederland, M.D., “‘Masculine’ Women Are Cheating Love,” *Coronet* (May 1953): 44. Notably, this article was included in the Mother’s Day issue.

women's threat to the fragile constructs of masculinity. Such fears spurred acceptance of theories that safely positioned women – who had left their traditional roles as homemakers to enter the workforce during the war – back in the home and raising children. During the postwar period, women were expected to fulfill their “natural” roles as mothers and wives, and debates about proper femininity centered on the family, the home, and the need to maintain equilibrium in an uneasy environment.

Although women would begin to speak out about these issues in the 1960s and 1970s, during the 1950s the sentiments that many women felt regarding their limited roles were not widely discussed or acknowledged publicly.<sup>303</sup> Yet, the artists addressed in this dissertation created a number of works during this time that began to explore the manner in which women were represented in the media or were expected to fulfill their roles in society. For example, Kienholz's Jane Doe (1960, figure 32) offers an interesting psychological perspective: the title simultaneously alludes to the “average” American woman and an unidentified dead woman. Composed of a female child mannequin's head attached to a wooden sewing cabinet (which is largely concealed by a bridal gown), Jane exists passively. Like her husband John Doe (1959, figure 26), she has no limbs. But, whereas he is given the potential for some mobility through his attached baby stroller, Jane has none. Forever connected to a traditionally domestic and feminine activity (she *becomes* the sewing cabinet), she remains immobile and paralyzed, dressed in a bridal gown, marking her most important purpose in life.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963), which termed and addressed the frustration middle-class women felt during the 1950s when faced with the pressures to become mothers and housewives.

<sup>304</sup> Notably, two years after Kienholz completed *Jane Doe*, he was awarded full custody of his two small children after his divorce from his first wife. In 1977, Kienholz recalled: “I was caring for two kids because Mary and I had divorced, and I had custody of the children. I was changing diapers, working at

Jane Doe alludes to yet stands in marked contrast to the happy and efficient homemaker who was featured often in the mass media. For example, “‘Be a little gay!’ The Good Wife’s Guide,” a short article featured in a 1955 issue of Housekeeping Monthly, contained typical advice directed at women during the fifties. Providing a list of do’s and don’ts for the dedicated housewife, it included pertinent suggestions such as “Don’t complain if he’s late home for dinner or even if he stays out all night,” “Don’t ask him questions about his actions or question his judgment or integrity. Remember, he is master of the house and as such will always exercise his will with fairness and truthfulness. You have no right to question him,” and finally, “A good wife always knows her place.”<sup>305</sup> Considered in relation to the social expectations outlined in this article, Jane Doe represents an outcome of such an existence. She basically becomes an ineffectual piece of furniture rooted in the domestic space and the expression on her face appears forlorn, certainly not one of gaiety.

Kienholz’s choice of a child’s mannequin head is interesting: a little girl’s mind should not be filled with adult concerns. Jane Doe implies that a wife’s existence, in a sense, was child-like (“The Good Wife’s Guide” instructs: “Let him talk first – remember, his topics of conversation are more important than yours.”). In addition, like a little girl at play with her mother’s make-up, Jane has exaggerated eyelashes, heavy eye-liner, and bright red lipstick that extends beyond the lines of her lips (according to “The

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art, being a mother, and learning how to cook enough to feed them.... I was thinking about what women go through.” As quoted in Greenfield, *Making Do or Making Art*, 21. His second wife, Nancy Reddin Kienholz, remembered that Kienholz felt that “this child-rearing experience made him more of a man because he had to be both mother and father.” Nancy Reddin Kienholz, “Chronology,” in Kienholz, *Kienholz*, 254.

<sup>305</sup> “‘Be a little gay!’ The Good Wife’s Guide,” *Housekeeping Monthly* (1955). Reprinted in *Hip Mama, The Love Issue* (2001): 27.

Good Wife's Guide" a woman should "take 15 minutes to rest so you'll be refreshed when he arrives [home]. Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking."). In contrast to the refreshed, ideal wife, Jane appears filthy and to be dripping with dried blood, as if she suffers from a head injury or as if her head has been severed and placed atop this piece of furniture.

Like the rest of the Doe family, the figure of Jane contains compartments that hold objects that could easily remain secret and hidden from the viewer (unless the viewer is willing and able to engage closely with the members of this disturbing family, who were typically displayed together). As the hidden objects are uncovered and more is learned about each family member, the viewer becomes enmeshed in the family life of the Does. Concealed by her wedding dress, Jane's body (the sewing cabinet) contains three drawers. With no limbs, she stands helpless, unable to stop the viewer from lifting her skirt (which Kienholz expected and encouraged), opening her "drawers," and examining the objects she secretly keeps inside (figure 33). The contents found in the cabinet suggest the three stages of a woman's sexuality: the top drawer is empty and painted white (virginity), the middle drawer is full of baby figures (motherhood), and the bottom drawer contains a hard, dried wooden knur (infertile old age).<sup>306</sup>

In a 1953 McCall's article, "What He Likes About You," women are offered this advice: "You're a wise wife if you keep your prettiest picture in his mind and eye, and manage to do some of your beauty chores behind the scenes."<sup>307</sup> Because "he doesn't like to know all your grooming habits," Peggy Bell suggested that women curl their hair,

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<sup>306</sup> Rosetta Brooks, "Plates," in Kienholz, *Kienholz*, 78.

<sup>307</sup> Peggy Bell, "What He Likes About You," *McCall's* (June 1953): 124-125.

shave their legs, and apply their deodorant and face cream in secret. The woman featured in the photograph accompanying this article has an eerie similarity to Jane's disfigured body (figure 35). In this image, a man reclines in a chair, his feet propped on a footstool with a pipe in his hand. He gazes appraisingly at the woman placed in front of him. Beautifully made-up and dressed, the woman's legs have been replaced with an ornate, marble pedestal that is partially covered by her long dress. Similar to Jane, this woman stands immobile, trapped by society's expectations. Yet, whereas the photographed woman was cast as a work of art, Jane appears to be a castoff piece of junk, possibly suggesting the reality that such expectations entail.

While more visually ambiguous than Jane Doe, Conner's Bride (1960, figure 36) can be seen as addressing similar subject matter. Even though Conner has drawn parallels between this work and Miss Havisham, the jilted bride in Charles Dickens' novel Great Expectations,<sup>308</sup> it can still be considered within the same cultural context as Jane Doe. No woman is actually depicted in this work; rather, the bride consists of a three-dimensional wooden structure layered with shreds of nylon hosiery, string, and thread. Lodged in these layers is a white paper doily, reminiscent of bridal gown material. Numerous candle stubs are located around the work, while white candle wax heavily encrusts the thickly layered nylon material. Appearing fragile (the delicate layers of hosiery) yet stiff (the encrusted candle wax), the bride is old and worn, the flames of her candles long ago extinguished; a decayed object devoid of life.

During the postwar period, the most important goal for women was to marry and, accordingly, a multitude of books were written in order to help women achieve that

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<sup>308</sup> Rothfuss, "Escape Artist," 180.

goal.<sup>309</sup> For example, in Win Your Man and Keep Him (1948), Jean and Eugene Bengé explained that “the most important event in a girl’s life is her wedding, yet her prior education and experience normally give her very inadequate background for marriage.”<sup>310</sup> After describing their sad, spinster friend named Stell, the Bengés stated:

In order to prevent herself from becoming another Stell, in order to find and win a man, then hold him, a girl must know herself – inside out and inside in. She must know exactly what her shortcomings are and must strive to build her personality to overcome those flaws. Further, she must know what kind of women men like. That’s the purpose of the self-analysis quizzes you’ll take in this book.<sup>311</sup>

The self-analysis tests included sections on domestic skills, charm, femininity, adaptability, and neurotic behaviors. With Bride, Conner depicted not the popular stereotype of the happy wife-to-be nor the ideal discussed in the profusion of advice books. Rather, his bride appears to be a “Stell”; in this case, a dusty object to be examined with curiosity and aversion from a distance.

Although this dissertation focuses on the works of only four artists, there were others during the immediate postwar years who also explored constructions of female identity and the manner in which women were represented in the media. For example, Willem de Kooning had worked with the subject of women since 1940, and in 1950 began a series of works featuring enormous women who were simultaneously sensuous

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<sup>309</sup> Advertising also contributed to the potential conditioning of American women, as Juliann Sivulka has described: “Another wave of advertising portrayed the ‘little woman’ in what the admakers promoted as middle-American, slice-of-life scenarios. Ads featured familiar stereotyped characters like the shy but lovely single girl, the triumphant bride, and the gossipy neighbor. Perhaps the most common stereotype, however, was the dedicated homemaker who sacrificed all personal aspirations to pamper her husband, chauffeur her children, scrub floors, and teach her daughters to do the same.” Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*, 254.

<sup>310</sup> Bengé, *Win Your Man and Keep Him*, 3.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

and menacing. He built up the surfaces of these works with thickly layered paint, creating tactile, expressive, and dynamic representations. De Kooning began the series with Woman I (1950-1952, figure 37), in which the figure's outline blurs so that she appears to melt into the chaotically painted and colored background. Applied in an ostensibly rough and aggressive manner (although, in actuality, de Kooning meticulously and slowly executed this work), the paint slashes, drips, and smears across the surface of the canvas create the shape of a formidable and powerful figure who looms over the viewer. This larger-than-life woman (she almost fills the canvas, which measures 6'3 7/8" X 4'10") bares her teeth and stares at the viewer with huge, widely opened eyes.

Notably, similar to the reception of Conner's works, de Kooning's series of women was received at times with repulsion and linked to the artist's supposedly misogynistic views of women.<sup>312</sup> In 1953, the critic James Fitzsimmons wrote: "De Kooning's paintings of The Woman are the ugliest and most horridly revealing that I have seen. I am not talking about their physical appearance – which I find repellent enough,... – but about the woman, the creature, the goddess they depict..."<sup>313</sup>

Fitzsimmons also stated: "I know of one painter who has been unable to paint since he saw the paintings and I have heard at least a dozen others describe them as 'profoundly disturbing' and call The Woman 'a horror' and 'an evil muse'...."<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Conner remembered viewers' responses during the 1950s, stating: "On somebody's review of a show of mine, they said, 'He must really hate women.'" Karlstrom, "Interview with Bruce Conner," 21.

<sup>313</sup> As quoted in Mildred Glimcher, "De Kooning/Dubuffet: The Women," in *Willem de Kooning/Jean Dubuffet: The Women* (New York: The Pace Gallery, 1990), 22. See James Fitzsimmons, "Art," *Arts and Architecture* (May 1953).

<sup>314</sup> As quoted in Sally Yard, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1997), 56.

Significantly, de Kooning based his representations of women on the popular pin-up imagery of that time. In fact, in the study for Woman I, he attached the “T-zone” smile of a woman advertising cigarettes in a print ad to the face of his woman. In 1960, de Kooning stated: “When I look at them [the women] now, they look vociferous and ferocious, and I think it had to do with the idea of the idol, the oracle, and above all the hilariousness of it.”<sup>315</sup> Yet, in his representations of women, de Kooning distorted the idealized female body and sexual objectivity typical to popular imagery. His women were imposing, powerful, and threatening and, as a result, made many viewers uncomfortable. Conversely, although Kienholz and Conner also engaged idealized imagery of women in popular culture and created works that also often made viewers uncomfortable, they presented representations of women quite the opposite of de Kooning’s. In works such as Jane Doe and Bride, these artists offered women that were pathetic, passive, and that appeared to be victims of abuse or simply neglect.

DeFeo’s creation of The Rose (1958-1966, figure 11) offers additional insight into the manner in which the group of artists addressed in this dissertation interrogated constructions of gender. As a woman and an artist, her specific subject position encourages consideration of this issue from a perspective apart from her male contemporaries. For eight years, DeFeo devoted her life to the creation of this single work, during which time she created no other works, refused to exhibit any other works,

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<sup>315</sup> David Sylvester, “De Kooning’s Women, Interview with Willem de Kooning,” (1960) in Shapiro and Shapiro, eds., *Abstract Expressionism*, 227.

and was considered to be a professional recluse.<sup>316</sup> The Rose, which grew larger and larger over the years, was created in her home, which doubled as her studio.

From the perspective of the period, DeFeo's work on The Rose could be seen as a form of protest and a rejection of the traditional roles that women were expected to perform. On the one hand, DeFeo was very much isolated in her domestic (and work) space. Yet, unlike many other women of her generation, her isolation was self-imposed and the activities she performed in her home differed from society's expectations of a woman's duties. Rather than devoting herself to more traditional domestic activities, such as cleaning the house and raising a family, DeFeo focused solely on her private, solitary artistic endeavor. Significantly, while isolating herself in her domestic space, DeFeo's focus was not on the elimination of dirt.<sup>317</sup> Rather, metaphorically and literally, she collected cast-off debris, mixing and building it up to create the 2,300 pound conglomeration of what appears to be decayed and ashy dirt, to which DeFeo referred as a "*dirty gray painting slightly yellowed*" [italics mine].<sup>318</sup> During a time when women were encouraged only to pursue the roles of wife and mother, DeFeo's decision to pursue her art can be considered a stance against the social standards of womanhood. She

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<sup>316</sup> Richard Cándida Smith notes that DeFeo "was professionally reclusive, while her husband [Wally Hedrick] was one of the most active, vocal figures in the local arts community." Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 194. After completing *The Rose*, DeFeo stopped painting for six years. During that time she suffered from severe depression and her marriage to Hedrick ended.

<sup>317</sup> While not a mother, DeFeo was married to the artist Wally Hedrick for ten years. Yet, their marriage does not seem to fit the typical 1950s standard. For example, DeFeo claimed that her relationship began with Hedrick when he came by her home to eat the contents of her refrigerator. Hedrick claimed that the only thing her refrigerator contained was years of dirty laundry. Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 46. In addition, DeFeo's home contained a huge number of dead Christmas trees because she refused to throw them out. *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>318</sup> Davis, "Miss DeFeo's Awesome Painting," 16. Kienholz remembered visiting DeFeo's home while she was working on *The Rose*: "I saw her studio at that time and the piles of paint scrapings under the easel looked like chicken drippings under a roost that had never been cleaned." Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 78.

pursued her art with a stereotypical “masculine” artistic obsession, to the exclusion of all else.

In 1965, DeFeo was forced to move from her apartment on Fillmore Street in San Francisco. Perhaps the most important consideration the move entailed was the removal of The Rose, which stood in a large bay window, completely blocking out the outside world.<sup>319</sup> In order to remove the work, an entire wall and window had to be taken out and then lowered by forklift to the street below. In a sense, DeFeo’s work physically took over her domestic space. A photograph taken during the removal of The Rose from DeFeo’s apartment creates an interesting visual juxtaposition between DeFeo’s subject position and that of the typical housewife (figure 38). Taken from street level perspective, the image depicts DeFeo standing on the fire escape supervising the removal of her work. Bruce Conner can be seen in the window with his camera filming DeFeo.<sup>320</sup> A woman stands on the street, dressed in a suit and hat, along with her daughter who looks at the unidentified photographer. The woman stares up in curiosity at the events taking place. A marked contrast exists between this neatly dressed, middle-class woman who stands observing the artist above her, who is dressed in work clothes, positioned precariously on the outside of the building, and actively directs the activity around her.

An examination of DeFeo’s creation of The Rose from a gendered position also should be considered in relation to a broader art historical perspective. As I have argued, DeFeo’s work on The Rose can be seen as a rejection of traditional roles expected of

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<sup>319</sup> After its removal from DeFeo’s home, *The Rose* traveled to the Pasadena Art Museum, where DeFeo continued working on it and where it was eventually exhibited in 1969. The work finally found a permanent home at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (1994) but until that time, most of its existence was spent sequestered from public view at the San Francisco Art Institute where it was stored.

<sup>320</sup> Conner’s film, *The White Rose: Jay DeFeo’s Painting Removed by Angelic Hosts* (1965), documents the removal of *The Rose* from DeFeo’s studio/apartment on Fillmore Street in San Francisco.

women during the 1950s. Yet, her artistic endeavor also can be seen in terms of a challenge to the traditional “masculine” artist, bringing to mind a comparison to Kurt Schwitters’ creation of Merzbau (1919-1937).<sup>321</sup> Similarly, Schwitters created his work in his home/studio, which eventually became an all-encompassing work that dominated his living/working space. In addition, he built up this architectural and sculptural work using discarded objects, wood scraps, and plaster. In terms of both the scale of her project and the magnitude of her artistic endeavors, DeFeo’s creation of The Rose can be seen as a rejection of traditional constructions of gender in relation to her own time period as well as to the historical conception of “artist.” Understood from this perspective, DeFeo and her work offered an alternative feminine identity to both contemporaneous and historical constructions, as suggested by the photograph discussed above.

### **Constructions of Masculinity**

Not only were women subjected to rigid social expectations; men were expected to attain and maintain certain roles in society as well. For men, there was pressure to fulfill the traditional roles of father, husband, and provider for the family. Although most men felt compelled to achieve these particular social standards, a fear simultaneously developed regarding how meeting these standards would affect constructions of masculinity. “Conformity” soon became a national concern not only due to its association with communism but because it came to symbolize the emasculation of men. In the 1950 best-selling study, The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American

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<sup>321</sup> See Dietrich, *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters*.

Character, David Riesman explored the American social character, proposing that society was shifting from “inner-directedness” to “other-directedness.”<sup>322</sup> He argued that the character of the inner-directed person is guided by early formative experiences with adult authority, whereas the other-directed person is directed by his conformity to the desires of peers and contemporaries, and therefore, paradoxically “remains a lonely member of the crowd because he never comes really close to the others or to himself.”<sup>323</sup> Sensitivity to the expectations and predilections of others insures the conformity of the other-directed and, as a result, they “lose their social freedom and their individual autonomy in seeking to become like each other.”<sup>324</sup> Riesman’s study indicates the level of national concern over the “deteriorating” American male character and its simultaneous move towards and withdrawal from conformity.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Through the national production of studies such as Riesman’s, the relationship between the individual (albeit an implicitly male individual) and society became an important topic in the 1950s. Other well-known sociological studies of the time were C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953) and William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956). Significantly, although these were sociological studies, they became best-sellers among the mainstream population. Fictional publications also addressed issues concerning constructions of masculinity and, in the process, proffered stereotypical roles for women. For example, in his notes on the original book cover for *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), Sloan Wilson, while crediting his wife, wrote: “[This book] could not have been written at all if my wife hadn’t kept the children quiet or away from the place I was working. She also managed all household finances, repaired the children’s bicycles, made excuses about why I didn’t have any social engagements, was cheerful and ornamental.”

<sup>323</sup> David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), v.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>325</sup> The masculinity crisis became a mainstream issue in the 1950s. See “New American Domesticated Male,” *Life* 36 (4 January 1954): 42-45; Margaret Mead, “American Man in a Woman’s World,” *The New York Times Magazine* (10 February 1957): 11, 20-23; Amran Scheinfeld, “The American Male,” *Cosmopolitan* 142 (May 1957): 22-25; Robert J. Moskin, “The American Male: Why Do Women Dominate Him?” *Look* 22 #3 (4 February 1958): 76-80; George B. Leonard, Jr., “The American Male: Why Is He Afraid to be Different?” *Look* 22 #4 (18 February 1958): 95-104; and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “The Crisis of American Masculinity,” *Esquire* 50 (November 1958): 63-65.

Yet, although Riesman's study did present a challenge to specific postwar social constructions, his perspective ultimately presented a whole new set of issues that in many ways paralleled the dynamic in gender roles and relationships during the 1950s. So, at the same time that Riesman questioned societal roles, he also furthered gender stereotypes. Barbara Ehrenreich has stated that, although ambiguous, Riesman's final judgment on the changing character of American society "reinforced the average gray flannel rebel's gnawing perception that conformity... meant a kind of emasculation."<sup>326</sup> Pointing out that Riesman's study pertained only to men, she noted that, in fact, a book on "other-directed women" would have been unimportant (or an oxymoron) because other-directedness was considered to be an inherent character trait in female social roles as wives and mothers. Ehrenreich correlated the traits Riesman associated with the other-directed personality to those that the sociologist Talcott Parsons had recently attributed to women: emotional and attuned to the feelings of others (men were, of course, considered rational and task-oriented). Ehrenreich concluded that Riesman's other-directed man shared the same character traits as a "Parsonian woman" and consequently the United States character transformation symbolized the "feminization of American men."<sup>327</sup>

Kienholz's John Doe (1959, figure 26) must be considered within the context of this masculinity crisis. Created from a male mannequin, which is cut in half and placed back to back on a baby's stroller (figure 39), John is crippled, dependent upon his stroller for mobility. This disfigured man is also castrated (and therefore symbolically emasculated): a stovepipe juts out from his lower torso, in place of his missing penis,

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<sup>326</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor Press, 1983), 32. Also see Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

which is hidden in a drawer underneath the stroller. The stovepipe extends through John's chest, which is splayed open revealing a wooden cross and dripping with what appears to be red blood. A placard on the front of John's stroller reads: "Riddle: Why is John Doe like a piano? Answer: Because he is square, upright, and grand. – Old Soothe Saying." Yet, this square, upright, and grand figure represented the ultimate conformist man of the time: weak, infantile, inadequate, immobile, and vulnerable. In 1962, Kienholz described John Doe as the modern American male:

John Doe... is a creature composed of a male department store dummy cut in half with the clothed upper portion facing front and greeting one with his desperate smile of friendship. He is the exquisite corpse of the great American masculine ideal resplendent with all of his standard status symbols all the way down to the white wall tires on which he rides – the carriage being obviously a baby stroller. Facing rear is the secret half of this ideal creature – the nude lower half of the manikin [sic] standing on a wooden box in which is concealed, for his own ego's protection, the symbol of the prowess he so much wants to believe he has.<sup>328</sup>

John Doe, with his nondescript name, symbolized the "average," overconformist, "other-directed" man described by Riesman. Based upon Kienholz's description, the figure of John Doe represented a desperate, emasculated dummy, whose name takes on further significance when considered as the corpse of the "American masculine ideal." Kienholz's opinion of the modern male was shared by many. For example, in 1957, John Keats described the stereotypical, conformist man of the time (who he similarly named John Drone) as such: "Besides, Drone has served us well. In T. S. Eliot's words, he has been an easy tool, deferential, glad to be of use, politic, cautious and meticulous – but a bit obtuse; at times, indeed, almost ridiculous – almost, at times, the fool. But basically a

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<sup>328</sup> As quoted in Tuchman, "A Decade of Edward Kienholz," 41.

good guy. We wish him well.”<sup>329</sup> John Doe can be understood as the physical manifestation of Keats’ John Drone. Although a good guy (“square, upright, and grand”), Doe nonetheless appears a fool and literally easy to push around.

Kienholz’s Boy, Son of John Doe (1961, figure 27) also can be understood in terms of the period’s social conceptions of masculinity, specifically addressing the socialization of American male teens.<sup>330</sup> Created from a male mannequin, he stands life-size with an additional set of legs. Each of his four legs is dressed differently: jeans/casual shoe, dress pants/dress shoe, work pants/tennis shoe, and a bare leg/swim flipper. A child’s blue pedal car surrounds his torso. In the trunk of his attached car are record albums, comic books, playing cards, a beer can, a pint of whiskey, a package of cigarettes, a tin condom case, a switch blade, and a zip gun. Epitomizing the male conformist of a younger generation, Boy possesses objects that simultaneously define his masculinity and symbolize his immaturity and inability to grow up (the car *is* a small child’s toy). Absorbed with sex and violence, Boy follows the crowd and becomes involved in activities that will weaken him morally.<sup>331</sup> Further, in contrast to the sad and pathetic expressions worn by his parents, this adolescent’s grey-colored, featureless face is dominated by red eyes, making him appear hostile and aggressive.

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<sup>329</sup> Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window*, 164. Also see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 236.

<sup>330</sup> The creation of *Boy* was documented in a film, *The Story of an Artist* (1961), by David Wolper, who followed Kienholz to junk yards and flea markets where he collected the pieces used to construct this work.

<sup>331</sup> This work might also be considered in relation to the issue of juvenile delinquency, which became a major topic in mainstream culture and was addressed in films such as Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and Richard Brooks’ *Blackboard Jungle* (1955). See Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*.

Significantly, while his father is crippled, Boy's mobility is emphasized. Not only does he possess four legs, the male adolescent's body also actually merges with his car (in a sense, they become one). This aspect of the work can be seen in the context of the period's fascination with the car and the open road, a romance that was closely aligned with American identity, symbolizing freedom (versus the repressiveness of communism), masculinity, sexuality, and autonomy.<sup>332</sup> The car specifically came to represent social mobility and status as well as power (its design often mimicked space ships and jet fighter planes).<sup>333</sup> In addition, with increasing car ownership, more and more teenagers were now getting their own cars, which many saw as encouraging loose morals and rebellion. In fact, Richard Cándida Smith notes that during this time “psychologists and psychoanalysts had developed a model for the stages of personal development that particularly identified the motor vehicle with male adolescence.”<sup>334</sup> With his physical union with his car, Boy literally can be seen as signifying this

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<sup>332</sup> This romance was a huge part of mainstream culture, from the popularity of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) to numerous rock and roll songs dedicated to the subject, such as Chuck Berry's *No Money Down* (1955). In 1955, eight million cars were built in the United States, totaling \$65 billion, and accounting for 20 percent of the United States' gross national product. In addition, car registration went from 26 million in 1945 to 40 million in 1950 to 60 million by 1959. See Kismaric and Heiferman, *Growing Up with Dick and Jane*, 82 and 57, respectively. For more information on the car culture of the fifties, see Chris Finch, *Highways to Heaven: The Auto-biography of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Mark S. Foster, *A Nation on Wheels: The Automobile Culture in America since 1945* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2003); and David L. Lewis and Laurence Goldstein, eds., *The Automobile and American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983).

<sup>333</sup> According to Nigel Whiteley, “A gleaming new car may have been a sign of financial success, but the make, model and age of the car was what really mattered because this announced to his or her peers the owner's position on the social ladder.” See Nigel Whiteley, “Toward a Throw-Away Culture. Consumerism, ‘Style Obsolescence’ and Cultural Theory in the 1950s and 1960s,” *The Oxford Art Journal* 10 #2 (1987): 6.

<sup>334</sup> Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 147. Smith cites several psychological studies by Robert Linder that addressed the negative relationship between adolescent males and automobiles: *Rebel Without a Cause: The Hypnoanalysis of a Criminal Psychopath* (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1944); *Prescription for Rebellion* (New York: Rinehart, 1952); and *Must You Conform?* (New York: Rinehart, 1956).

psychological stage in male adolescence during which time, it was believed, rebellion, sexuality, and violence dominated.

The title of this work offers another psychological glimpse into this period's concerns regarding the formation of gender identity by raising the question: What is the relationship between Boy and Jane Doe? Is Boy meant to be her son? Is Jane Doe so passive that she can not even take credit for the creation of her son? Although these three works typically have been understood as a family consisting of father, mother, and child, the relationship between these two figures is not made explicit (as it is between Boy and his father; in fact, Boy does not even have a name and is identified *only* by his relationship to his father). During the postwar period and throughout the fifties, many believed that mothers were solely responsible for creating delinquent children (particularly their sons) who would grow up and become communists and/or homosexuals.<sup>335</sup> Elaine Tyler May has noted that psychologists and psychoanalysts argued that “mothers who neglected their children bred criminals; mothers who overindulged their sons turned them into passive, weak, and effeminate ‘perverts.’”<sup>336</sup> Therefore, it was believed that a son's strong identification with his father produced a morally strong, responsible, and mature man. Yet, Boy (whose connection to his mother goes unmentioned) represents what society fears: an immature, morally weak adolescent

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<sup>335</sup> This belief was popular and widely accepted in mainstream culture. For example, Philip Wylie, in his 1942 best-selling book *Generation of Vipers* (he expanded on these ideas in a 1955 revised edition), coined the term “Momism” and argued that overprotective mothers created weak and passive sons (which he believed led to a weakened and passive nation). He stated that “the nation can no longer say it contains many great, free, dreaming men. We are deep in the predicted nightmare now and mom sits on its decaying throne.” Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Rinehart, 1955), 196. See also Jennifer Terry, “‘Momism’ and the Making of Treasonous Homosexuals,” in Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, eds., *“Bad” Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 169-190.

<sup>336</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 96.

male enthralled with sex and violence. The father he has explicitly been given – and the parent with whom he is supposed to connect – is not the father-figure sanctioned by society.

During the 1950s' masculinity crisis, the success of the American man was linked not only to his commitment to family, home, and American democracy but also to his virile heterosexuality. According to Elaine Tyler May: "Many contemporaries feared that returning veterans would be unable to resume their positions as responsible citizens and family men. They worried that a crisis in masculinity could lead to crime, 'perversion,' and homosexuality."<sup>337</sup> Senator Joseph McCarthy's stringent anticommunist tactics (which explicitly linked communism and homosexuality) also fueled rampant homophobia in this Cold War era.<sup>338</sup> Even if a man was heterosexual, he faced suspicion if his interests veered from traditional male-oriented activities. Bruce Conner remembered his childhood in Kansas: "When I was in Wichita, if you were even interested in poetry, classical music, art, you were called a queer, a commie, or just a jerk."<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Ibid., 87-88.

<sup>338</sup> See United States Senate, 81<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government* (Washington, D.C.: 1950). Elaine Tyler May has noted that: "Many high-level government officials, along with individuals in positions of power and influence in fields ranging from industry to medicine and from science to psychology, believed wholeheartedly that there was a direct connection between communism and sexual depravity." May, *Homeward Bound*, 94. Also see Robert Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>339</sup> As quoted from a 1983 unpublished interview with Boswell, "Bruce Conner," 39. Kienholz had similar memories of his childhood (1977): "In a farm community artistic stuff is pretty suspect if you're a boy. I mean, it's nice for girls to do watercolors or something, but a boy's got to do something substantial, like hammer and pound and be involved in cars and machines and that stuff." As quoted in Greenfield, *Making Do or Making Art*, 18.

In this social context, Rauschenberg's references to gender and sexuality in his works can not be overlooked. During the 1950s, Rauschenberg began discovering his homosexuality and many scholars have linked the references in his works to domesticity with this aspect of his life.<sup>340</sup> Although I have argued that Rauschenberg's work should be considered also within the context of the period's social norms and in relation to the work of other artists from his generation, this knowledge about his personal life does provide insight into the artistic choices he made. From 1954 to around 1962, Rauschenberg was involved in a relationship with the artist Jasper Johns. Bed (1955, figure 12) was created the year they moved in together and therefore is often read in the context of their relationship. Kenneth E. Silver has addressed the relationship between Rauschenberg's Bed and sexuality, stating:

In Rauschenberg's work it is unclear, and quite deliberately so I think, whether this particular bed points to the renunciation of sex or its exhibition. In the first interpretation, the cot-size mattress, splattered with paint, makes us think of the monk's asceticism – all is sacrificed for the “vocation” of art.... On the other hand, Bed can be seen as exhibitionistic, sexual writhings appearing indexically in the wild paint splattered on sheet, pillow, and upper part of the quilt; in this case, the rigors of the studio are subverted by the imperatives of desire, located in a sign of the domestic.<sup>341</sup>

Although there *is* a certain amount of ambiguity in an interpretation of this work, ultimately Rauschenberg *did* create it with his own bedding.<sup>342</sup> And, with this reference

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<sup>340</sup> See Wainwright, “Robert Rauschenberg's Fabrics”; Silver, “Master Bedrooms, Master Narratives”; Jonathan Katz, “The Art of Code: Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg,” in Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 189-207; and Leggio, “Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* and the Symbolism of the Body.”

<sup>341</sup> Silver, “Master Bedrooms, Master Narratives,” 215.

<sup>342</sup> The quilt was originally given to Rauschenberg by Dorothea Rockburne, a fellow student at Black Mountain College, who used it herself for several years before passing it along. See Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 136.

to his own body and its private functions (a bed is possibly the most intimate of domestic furniture), Bed can now be read in relation to his rejection of a traditional, heterosexual, domestic space.

In his rejection of traditional domestic space, Rauschenberg was not alone. During the 1950s, men faced an interesting dilemma: on the one hand, they were encouraged not to follow the crowd and to resist conforming to mainstream social expectations; yet, on the other, if a man remained single and pursued an alternative lifestyle, he risked being considered immature, irresponsible, and possibly homosexual. In his rebellion against a traditional domestic family and home, a single man placed his heterosexual reputation in jeopardy and encouraged doubt in regards to his “proper” sexuality. The “playboy bachelor” soon became one answer to this dilemma: a single man who thwarted suspicion by maintaining a hypermasculine façade. Not merely heterosexual, the playboy constantly enjoyed the company of women and existed in an environment conducive to this objective. The bachelor and his accompanying bachelor pad were presented in popular culture and embraced by the mainstream because this role enabled men to rebel (whether in actuality or in fantasy) against domestic conformity, yet to confirm their heterosexuality. Numerous Hollywood movies and men’s magazines created fantasy lives and spaces that viewers and readers could vicariously live through, although not necessarily fully achieve.<sup>343</sup> The bachelor and his pad were constructed

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<sup>343</sup> For example, *Pillow Talk* (1959) featured a smooth-talking bachelor (Rock Hudson) whose bachelor pad served as the base for his sexual conquests. Ironically, by the end of the film, he marries the character played by Doris Day, whom he allows to redecorate his “pad.” For an interesting article on this film, see Cynthia J. Fuchs, “Split Screens: Framing and Passing in *Pillow Talk*,” in Foreman, *The Other Fifties*, 224-251. For examples of men’s magazines that promoted this hypermasculine lifestyle, see *Playboy* (1953), *Male* (1950), *Real: The Exciting Magazine for Men* (1950), *Impact: Bold True Action for Men* (1957), and *True* (1956). Popular women’s magazines of the period (such as *McCall’s*, *House Beautiful*, and *Ladies Home Journal*) comparably advocated a “hyperfeminine” fantasy lifestyle to women.

(although at times, in a satiric manner) as acceptable alternatives to traditional notions of domesticity.

Playboy magazine (created by Hugh Hefner in 1953) became a principal promoter during the 1950s of a lifestyle that rebelled against traditional constructions of domesticity, which included marriage, children, and a family home (although it is important to keep in mind that this rebellion was entirely contained by the dominant culture in its appeal to middle-class men who, in actuality, could not attain the glamorous playboy lifestyle).<sup>344</sup> The bachelor apartment and its accessories were integral to this rebellion and to Playboy's representation of the playboy.<sup>345</sup> The bedroom served as the playboy's most revered performance space and to acknowledge that, a November 1959 article introduced "The Playboy Bed" (figure 40), which "should be a major furnishing in any well-appointed bachelor's diggings, a sumptuous haven in which the gentleman can

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Kismaric and Heiferman have explained: "Magazines like *McCall's*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Family Circle*, *Woman's Day*, and *Redbook* provided road maps to fulfillment, recipes, homemaking tips, ads and editorials that either idolized or chastised women who felt responsible for everything and answerable to everyone. Articles instructed women what to eat, how to dress, how to live and, most importantly, how happiness was to be measured." Kismaric and Heiferman, *Growing Up With Dick and Jane*, 46.

<sup>344</sup> For example, in a 1955 issue, Jay Smith wrote "What do we get out of monogamy? Nerves, that's what we get. Anxiety states. Manic-depression, schizophrenia, hypertension, premature impotence, venereal disease, and more than two million frigid, frustrated female shrews." Jay Smith, "A Vote for Polygamy," *Playboy* (July 1955): 15. Also see Shepherd Mead, "The Dream House and How To Avoid It," *Playboy* (July 1956): 53; Burt Zollo, "Open Season on Bachelors," *Playboy* (June 1954): 37; and "Miss Gold Digger of 1953," *Playboy* 1 #1 (1953): 6.

<sup>345</sup> Although rebelling against traditional domesticity, the playboy (as fashioned by *Playboy*) still enjoyed and embraced a form of domesticity. In the first issue of *Playboy*, Hugh Hefner stated in the opening text: "We plan on spending most of our time inside. We like our apartment. We enjoy mixing up cocktails and an *hors d'oeuvre* or two, putting a little mood music on the phonograph, and inviting in a female acquaintance for a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex." See *Playboy* 1 #1 (1953). Also see "Playboy's Weekend Hideaway," *Playboy* (April 1959): 49-55; "Playboy's Penthouse Apartment," *Playboy* (September 1956): 53-60; "Playboy's Penthouse Apartment: Part II," *Playboy* (October 1956): 65-70; and "Playboy's Progress," *Playboy* (May 1954): 22-23. In articles such as "Modern Art as Hobby," the playboy was instructed on how to view, appreciate, and collect modern art. Notably, when it came to the playboy's choice in modern art, he preferred Abstract Expressionism. Hugh Hefner decorated his own bachelor pads (the Playboy Mansions in both Chicago and Los Angeles) with the works of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline, which were described by *Playboy* as the most important works at that time. See Roger Price, "Modern Art as Hobby," *Playboy* (April 1955): 49.

take his ease, with eyes open or closed, yet not be completely cut off from the niceties and conveniences of apartment living.”<sup>346</sup> This ideal throne designed by James E. Tucker offered a voice-activated dictating machine (which “takes care of your off-hours inspiration”), a custom refrigerator, a bar with counter and cutting board, a stereo, and a television set poised in the air above the foot of the bed. Beneath the stereo center a “master” panel housed “two dozen man-sized plate switches” that allowed control of the entire apartment (such as opening or closing the windows and drapes, controlling the temperature and lighting, and making the morning coffee).

An interesting comparison can be made between Rauschenberg’s Bed and the bed of the Playboy bachelor. Initially, the comparison may seem odd: one is an art object, the other is a fantasy bed designed for a magazine. Yet, both were based on real beds of single men: Rauschenberg used his own bedding to create his work while the Playboy design was based on the notorious eight-and-a-half foot bed of Hugh Hefner, which was located in his Chicago playboy mansion. These two beds can be seen as challenging traditional notions of domesticity, but from two opposite extremes. One bed is geared towards the whims and desires of an overtly heterosexual man – a bed that we can assume accommodates numerous women but not a singular, permanent woman (i.e., a wife). The other bed now can be associated with the homosexuality of its creator and, as such, can be understood as signifying a form of refusal of women.

The Playboy Bed appears sterile and clean, with no obvious signs of human activity. Mixing technology and sex, this modern bed is a site prepared for action – inviting and relaxing, it is ready to be entered and enjoyed. Conversely, Bed appears to

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<sup>346</sup> “The Playboy Bed,” *Playboy* (November 1959): 66.

present the aftermath of some type of activity. Splattered with paint, toothpaste, and fingernail polish (which resemble dripping, unidentifiable, and questionable body fluids), the handmade quilt and bedding seem used and filthy. The Playboy Bed celebrates nighttime (and even daytime) pleasures and pursuits, while the twin-size Bed appears desolate and pathetic, its dirty bedding sagging downward with gravity. If seen as testimonies to their functions, it is apparent that the more desirable and acceptable alternative during the fifties to traditional domesticity was to be found in the fantasy of the hypermasculine playboy rather than in the reality of homosexuality.

### **Interrogating and Recreating Domestic Space**

Throughout the 1950s, Americans anxiously tried to distinguish themselves from the foreign “other.” Significantly, these foreign “others” came to be seen as existing within the boundaries of the United States as well, represented by those individuals who did not choose to live by traditional American values (including not only communists but also, for example, homosexuals).<sup>347</sup> Marketed as a site of safety in an unsafe world, the home was embraced as an antidote to the evils of the world. In its June 1953 issue, McCall’s presented its findings on how the modern American bride lives, which was based upon two nation-wide surveys. In the article, “The Luckiest Girls in the World,” a

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<sup>347</sup> Wini Breines has explained: “Literal and figurative boundaries were important in the fifties, a period in which distinctions between ‘them’ (foreigners and deviants) and ‘us’ flourished.... Internationally, the borders of the United States became a central metaphor in the fear of invasion by communists. In popular culture, aliens often circumvented frontiers by invading from the sky. This was captured in the plethora of science fiction films in which alien pods and blobs invaded and destroyed everything we cherished.” Wini Breines, “Postwar White Girls’ Dark Others,” in Foreman, ed., *The Other Fifties*, 57. Also see Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*. As Suellen Hoy has outlined, a link also has existed throughout American history between cleanliness, patriotism, the home, and the fear of “outsiders.” At the turn of the twentieth century “cleanliness became a route to citizenship, to becoming American. It was, in fact, confrontation with racial and cultural outsiders that transformed cleanliness from a public health concern into a moral and patriotic one.” Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, 87.

newly-married, young woman stated: “If we stopped to think about the hydrogen bomb and all that, we’d never do anything. We’ve just decided to forget it and go on living.”<sup>348</sup> To “go on living” meant, for most young women and men, a renewed concentration on traditional family life and the connected realm of domesticity. The artists addressed in this dissertation engaged in this prevalent dialogue by incorporating literal objects from the home into their works as well as creating works that alluded to actual interior domestic spaces.

Certainly, during the 1950s and throughout the 1960s, a number of artists, particularly those associated with the Pop Art movement, began to examine the domestic interior.<sup>349</sup> The works of artists such as Tom Wesselmann – who incorporated actual mass-produced goods and appliances into his works – and Claes Oldenburg – who sculpted domestic objects out of plaster, canvas, and vinyl – should be considered in relation to the political and social environment that this chapter has thus far explored. Yet, as the following section will examine, the works created by Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz that engaged domestic space most often retained a nightmarish quality and presented a darker interpretation of domesticity than those rendered by the Pop artists. While addressing issues similar to the Pop artists such as gender roles and consumerism, the artists discussed in this dissertation ultimately created a body of works

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<sup>348</sup> “The Luckiest Girls in the World,” *McCall’s* (June 1953): 145. Elaine Tyler May has noted: “Of course, nobody actually argued that stable family life could prevent nuclear annihilation. But the home represented a source of meaning and security in a world run amok. Marrying young and having lots of babies were ways for Americans to thumb their noses at doomsday predictions.” May, *Homeward Bound*, 24.

<sup>349</sup> See Cécile Whiting, “Pop at Home,” in Reed, ed., *Not at Home*, 222-236 and Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*.

that, while commenting on pop cultural representations of the home, drew from existing countercultures in order to explore these areas of society.

For example, to create Couch (1963, figure 41) Conner used a typical domestic piece of furniture. Yet, although the title seems to refer to a mainstream, middle-class couch, his choice was not from a modern home. Instead, he used a filthy and dilapidated chaise longue that resonated with the past, specifically, an overstuffed, cluttered, and dusty Victorian parlor. The use of a Victorian period piece of furniture can be linked with Conner's location in San Francisco where Victorian architecture and objects were readily available due to urban renewal. But, his use of Victorian elements (found in many of his works) also specifically referenced a nostalgic past, one known for its conservative and repressive constructs of domesticity, gender, and sexuality. Smearred with debris and hanging in tatters, this once-elegant couch contrasted sharply with new, sleek, modern mid-century designs. Reclining on this couch is what appears to be a decomposed corpse, an invading foreign body. Instead of conjuring images of a cozy, inviting domestic space, this work suggests death and decay, as if we have entered some old, abandoned house with crumbling furniture and stumbled upon long-dead human remains.

Imbuing a nightmarish quality and a flipside of domestic bliss, the rotting couch with its sprawling corpse creates a sense of shock and unease. The disturbing nature of this work could be considered in relation to the "uncanny," which Sigmund Freud has stated "is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality." He defined the uncanny as "something which is secretly familiar, which

has undergone repression and then returned from it.”<sup>350</sup> In addition, a sense of the uncanny is also created when seemingly secure realms are invaded by a foreign or strange presence.<sup>351</sup> Based on these notions, Conner’s work can be seen as existing in an uncanny world in which the distinction between the imagination and reality blurs. Couch situates the concepts of domesticity and the home, with their connotations of safety and comfort, in a realm in which conventional standards of order no longer apply; this work implicitly evokes a world in which the familiar becomes unfamiliar and frightening.

In reading this work through the uncanny lens of Freud, an additional element must be examined. The word “uncanny” is the English translation of the German word “unheimlich,” literally “unhomely,” which is the opposite of “heimlich” or “homely.” The home, in theory, connotes safety, protection, and a refuge from the harsh, exterior world. Yet, the images that Couch conjures rupture these notions and present a sense of domesticity that is disquietingly “unhomely.” Blurring lines between the familiar and strange, private and public, and clean and dirty realms of society, this work encourages a reconsideration of cherished subjects. Created from a familiar domestic object from the home, Couch evokes a sense of the uncanny in that its reference to domesticity presented a marked contrast to the secure and comforting interiors that were typically marketed to

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<sup>350</sup> Sigmund Freud, “An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works,” in Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII, 1917-1919, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1986), 244-245.

<sup>351</sup> Anthony Vidler has discussed Edgar Allan Poe’s stories in terms of the uncanny, stating that: “The favorite motif was precisely the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence; on a psychological level, its play was one of doubling, where the other is, strangely enough, experienced as a replica of the self, all the more fearsome because apparently the same.” Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1992), 3.

the public. The references to the home that Couch offered – a decomposed corpse and deteriorated furniture – shattered notions of security in which many wanted to believe.

Conner created a number of works that combined allusions to domestic space with a sense of something foreign or strange, such as his series of works from 1959: Spider Lady, Spider Lady Nest, and Spider Lady House. Spider Lady (figure 42) is composed of an actual painted, wooden window frame and screen, complete with a ripped, dirty window shade. Situated in front of the shade is a bicycle wheel with spokes that mirror the shredded nylon stockings and string that encase the work. At the top of the window, numerous garter belts are attached; the belts hang down, connecting to the shreds of nylon. Enmeshed in the layers are several magazine photographs of scantily-clad women. Other objects are nested within the nylon and string web, including a Band-Aid box, cigarette butts, and wadded-up, filthy fabric.

In viewing this work, we are placed in a voyeuristic position, much like a peeping tom attempting to spy on the woman who resides in this space. Yet, we are not given a clear view: our vision is obstructed by the layers of flesh-colored nylon hosiery stretched across the space, the ripped window shade, and the spokes of the bicycle wheel. Our voyeurism is complicated as we become aware of our limited perspective into this lady's "nest." This window not only invites a peek into the Spider Lady's room but into her subjectivity as well. But, just as our vision is blocked from viewing her interior space, the clues we are given to her life are also limited and veiled. Who is the Spider Lady? A prostitute or woman of ill-repute? Her name conjures thoughts of the Black Widow, a female (spider) who mates with and then kills her male partner. In addition, the Spider Lady's residence closely resembles a spider web with its delicate layers of nylon. And,

similar to a web that catches prey, this shrouded window exudes death and decay. The Spider Lady's allure is aided by enticing feminine objects (garter belts and stockings), while the aftermath of an encounter with this lady may require Band-Aids.

Similarly, Spider Lady Nest (figure 43) consists of framing elements that create the appearance of a window; yet, we view this work from a different perspective. Instead of positioned outside a window trying to peer in, we are placed inside the room attempting to look out. The dirtied, partially-pulled window blind faces us, placing us inside the room. Situated in this position, we either must be the Spider Lady herself or we are trapped in her nest. The window has been boarded up (and splattered with black and white paint) so that there is no view and, possibly, no escape – in order to do so, we would have to cross through the web-like material (nylons and thread) and break through the boarded window.

Spider Lady House (figure 44) also depicts the domestic space of the Spider Lady. Creating the sense of a room's interior, Conner covered the background of the work with scraps of wallpaper. In the center is a small open box shrouded with layers of nylon and string, making it difficult to see the enclosed items. Close examination reveals a doll's head that has been pierced by a large nail. On the outside of this box, Conner attached pieces of jewelry, a bird's feathered wing, and a child's black ice-skate. Black fur frames the assemblage. Similar to Kienholz's The Secret House of Eddie Critch (1961, figure 34), Spider Lady House suggests a space that contains many secrets, particularly with its subtle allusions to violence.

Conner's representations of domestic interiors suggest a darker underworld, one filled with crime, violence, and sexuality. All three of these works are connected by the

central figure of the Spider Lady, a vague character who is both concealed and revealed in these works. Although ambiguous, the Spider Lady does not appear to be the typical housewife represented in the mainstream media who maintains the home and family. Rather, her name and her sexually alluring accoutrements seem to suggest a particular kind of female character found in a crime novel, comic-book, or B-movie, settings where frightening or threatening femininities were displayed. In fact, the Spider Lady could have been a reference to a female villain of the same name that appeared in the first Superman movie serial in 1948. In this episode, Superman battles the Spider Lady, a sexually alluring but deadly woman who wants to dominate the world.

Similar to Conner's Black Dahlia (1959, figure 21), the Spider Lady series conjures thoughts of a *femme fatale*. The Spider Lady's dark and dismal environments resemble spaces where, in the imagination, a crime could occur, possibly murder or, at least, immoral behavior. In her discussion of film noir settings, M. Christine Boyer noted that "the film noir hero resides in seedy hotels with torn window shades and exposed light bulbs hanging from the ceiling, while the *femme fatale* hangs out in two-bit motels or rooms rented by the week."<sup>352</sup> Certainly, Conner's representations of domestic space not only resemble seedy, questionable interiors, but they also evoke a sense of the uncanny in that a strange presence seems to inhabit them. Transgressive sexuality and violence converge in these domestic spaces – notions not associated with the period's popular conceptions of domesticity, which focused instead on order, cleanliness, and security.

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<sup>352</sup> Boyer, "Crimes in and of the City," 108.

During the 1950s, a majority of Rauschenberg's works were composed of fragmented fabrics that specifically alluded to domestic space, such as lace curtains, tablecloths, mattress ticking, doilies, and wallpaper. For example, *Minutiae* (1954, figure 45), a large, freestanding combine, is composed of oil paint, fabrics, wood, metal, and newspaper fragments.<sup>353</sup> The back section rests partially on a furniture leg, while various pieces of dirtied and/or messily painted fabric – including a handmade lace doily, blue cloth printed with red apples (a material he used in numerous works), and swatches of velvet and taffeta – cover the entire combine. Perhaps his most interesting reference to domestic space was his subtle inclusion of newspaper text and fabric/paint swatches that referenced home decoration. Text on the upper-right-hand side of the back section reads “Right Around HOME,” while nearby a section of a paint swatch claims “odorless Interior Finishes.”

Certainly, *Minutiae* creates the sense that we are looking at the walls of an interior space. Yet, the space is not inviting; the walls are filthy, covered with debris and smeared with dripping fluids. The peeling and encrusted surfaces do not conjure impressions of “odorless interior finishes.” Rather, the interior space into which we have entered appears disorderly and potentially unsafe, with its chunks of trash adhered to the walls with dubious matter and fluids. Rauschenberg's use of dilapidated and aged fabrics

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<sup>353</sup> Rauschenberg's *Minutiae* was created for his friend Merce Cunningham's dance, *Minutiae*. Rauschenberg served as stage manager during this production at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, first performed December 8, 1954. For more information on the relationship of Rauschenberg's combines to the theater, see Charles Stuckey, “*Minutiae* and Rauschenberg's Combine Mode,” in *Robert Rauschenberg*, 199-209. Around 1950, Rauschenberg met dancer Cunningham and composer John Cage at Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina. Through his friendship with them as well as the multifaceted artistic environment at the school, Rauschenberg became involved in many aspects of the stage and theater, such as dance, costumes, and theatrical props, involvements which continued throughout his career. For more information on Black Mountain College, see Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987) and Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972).

was certainly in opposition to the preferred modern decorating designs and materials of the day,<sup>354</sup> a time during which new and constantly improved products were seen as a way to maintain an orderly and clean lifestyle (and country).<sup>355</sup> By using objects that were not clean and sterile, his works called into question the sparkling and vibrant façades of the idealized domestic spaces represented so prevalently in mainstream culture.

Similar to Minutiae, Rauschenberg's Interview (1955, figure 46) also created a sense of domestic space; the walls again filthy, covered with debris and smeared fluids. Standing about six feet tall, this three-dimensional, wooden structure is divided almost in-half by a hinged door that can be closed in order to hide the contents in the recessed space on the right-hand side of the work. Attached to the walls of this structure are various types of fabrics, newspaper fragments, printed reproductions, a washcloth, a brick, and a fork. With this work, Rauschenberg loosely recreated an actual space found in the home

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<sup>354</sup> In her discussion of 1950s home decorating and product design, Karal Ann Marling noted: "Color dominated the whole retail field. By 1957 nylons and panty girdles came in giddy pastels.... Kleenex added pink and yellow to its rainbow palette of toilet tissues and Dial Soap tested five shades.... But it was a fact of American life, nonetheless, this yen for things that looked rich, unusual, gay, decorative, or simply pretty." Marling, *As Seen on TV*, 239. Kismaric and Heiferman noted that: "After two decades of seeing black-and-white images of a drab, deprived world, the fifties introduced colored cereals, colored appliances and colorful magazine advertisements that promoted optimism and progress to adults and children." Kismaric and Heiferman, *Growing Up With Dick and Jane*, 86.

<sup>355</sup> New domestic products were linked often with a military rhetoric not only in their association with Cold War propaganda but in the fact that many products were created with materials or technology that had been developed during World War II for wartime use. Kismaric and Heiferman state that: "Polyethylene, once used as electrical insulation, was molded into Tupperware. The small cathode ray tubes that guided bombers now made television sets cheaper to produce and radios small enough to fit in a pocket. Polystyrene, used for life preservers, was shaped into Styrofoam coffee cups." See Kismaric and Heiferman, *Growing Up With Dick and Jane*, 56. For example, one of the most significant materials to be introduced into everyday American culture was plastic, which was embraced because it was sterile, sanitary, and cheap. Cynthia Lee Henthorn has noted that advertising and mass media images at that time "argued that if clean, convenient products, like plastics, were used to instill higher standards in design and efficiency, then a safe and lasting ordered world would ensue." Cynthia Lee Henthorn, *Commercial Fallout: The Image of Progress, the Culture of War, and the Feminine Consumer, 1939-1959* (Ph.D. Dissertation, City University of New York, Graduate Center, 1997), 320. Also see Henthorn, *From Submarines to Suburbs*.

– a space in which personal items are privately stored and hidden from public view.

Reminiscent of a teenage boy's closet, both sections of this work house objects potentially found therein: a softball, a found painting of a beach scene, pinups from girlie magazines, a photograph of a smiling young woman, and a handwritten letter. Similar to Kienholz's Boy, Son of John Doe (1961, figure 27), Interview suggests an engagement with social constructions of adolescent masculinity, particularly in its inclusion of objects that link this subjectivity to dirtiness and a preoccupation with sex.

With Pink Door (1954, figure 47), Rauschenberg recreated another fragment of a domestic structure. Yet, this work appears to be an opening either into or out of a structure, rather than a space within the interior, such as Interview. Pink Door appears to be an entry into a house: an actual-sized replica of a screen door with pink gauze (serving as the screen) and wooden slats framing above and below. Similar to a diptych, the screen door on the right is hinged to another door of equal size, both of which appear to be able to close in on one another. Yet, the adjoining door creates quite the opposite effect; instead of a delicate, soft surface, the left hand door is heavily layered with thick, dripping, and globbed paint, silky material and lace, clothing fabric, and newspaper fragments. We are given an opening through which we are unable to enter or exit. In order to make sense of our limited perspective, we must either strain to see through the gauzy, pink screen or attempt to decipher the encrusted, ambiguous clues on the side panel.

During the 1950s, Rauschenberg created three works that were not part of a series per se, but should be considered together in the context of the issues addressed in this chapter. The first of these works, Red Interior (1954, figure 48), creates a sense of a

domestic interior not only in its references to space (for example, the post-and-lintel aspect at the top of the canvas, a pulley that appears to open a window shade, and a piece of material embossed with the words “Push Toilet Service Deliver Goods in Basement”<sup>356</sup>), but in its incorporation of fabrics that would be used to decorate a domestic space. Predominantly painted in black, red, and muted shades of rusty-orange, this work appears aged, as if referencing an interior of the past. Yet, Rauschenberg has included a newspaper fragment that advertises “2 Big Comic Sections,” clearly situating this interior within the 1950s and the period’s debates concerning comics and their potential link to juvenile delinquency, immorality, and violence. With its references to a toilet (a receptacle of waste) and a basement (the lowest level in a structure), Red Interior suggests the base and dirty aspects involved in the maintenance of domestic space.

Created two years after Red Interior, Rauschenberg’s Interior (1956, figure 49) creates an interesting continuation in this series of works. Attached to this large canvas are numerous separate sheets of aged, off-white paper. In the upper right hand corner hangs a man’s dirtied and misshapen hat (bringing to mind the adage “where a man hangs his hat is his home”), which is the only section of the work that is smeared with brightly colored paint. On the left hand side of the canvas is a section of rusty pressed tin with an embossed flower urn and architectural elements. The work appears to mimic a wall of an interior space. Divided between the masculine (the man’s hat) and feminine (the decorative tin), this canvas brings to mind ideas related to both domestic architecture and social constructions of gender.

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<sup>356</sup> As stated in Schimmel, “Autobiography and Self-Portraiture in Rauschenberg’s Combines,” 214.

Rauschenberg created a third Interior work in 1958, Interior 2 (figure 50). Created from two separate canvases connected vertically, this work also combines architectural elements and subtle references to gender. Metal ceiling squares cover the lower canvas: five of these are painted white, one dark blue, and the center six are covered with a thin, tan-colored, floral fabric through which the outlines of the metal squares are apparent. In both Interior and Interior 2, Rauschenberg used these mass-produced pressed tin ceiling pieces, which were cheap and ornate wall coverings found in middle-class homes. Hanging on the left hand side of the work is a man's necktie painted almost entirely with white paint. On the right hand side of the top canvas is a sepia-colored image of a darkened landscape featuring a low rock wall. Appearing to be a border of some kind, the dividing wall in the image can be seen together with the division between the two canvases, with the more feminine elements dominating the lower and the masculine necktie attached to the top.

All of the above-described works can be understood in terms of gender, particularly its connection to domestic space. With Interview, it appears that we have gained access to the private space of a teenage boy's closet, viewing his pasted pinups and personal possessions. Pink Door bears the color pink, a color typically associated with femininity, thereby designating domestic space as female territory. Interior and Interior 2 both appear to demarcate masculine and feminine elements – femininity is referenced through domestic architectural components and masculinity is referenced through men's clothing. While Rauschenberg frequently included references to gender in his works, these references often have been read in terms of the artist coming to terms with his homosexuality. Yet, this aspect of his work could be considered in relation to

the gender role divisions of the period, roles which tended to be strictly separated and often directly tied to the home. Much has been written on the relationship between architectural space and human subjectivity; and, certainly, Rauschenberg's works can be understood as alluding to the manner in which spaces can become gendered, particularly during the postwar period.<sup>357</sup>

As this chapter has explored, the cherished notions of "traditional" family life that were so strongly embraced (at least on the surface) in the postwar period were largely new and complicated concepts. Elaine Tyler May has explained:

The legendary family of the 1950s, complete with appliances, station wagons, backyard barbecues, and tricycles scattered on the sidewalks, represented something new. It was not, as common wisdom tells us, the last gasp of "traditional" family life with roots deep in the past. Rather, it was the first wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all its members' personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life.<sup>358</sup>

The ideals associated with the family were not always wholeheartedly embraced and were, in fact, met with resistance by many in society. This resistance was either out of sheer inability to achieve the set standards or out of a desire to challenge what those ideals represented. The artists examined in this dissertation were among those who refused to ignore the negative aspects of the "traditional" family. Individual in their approaches, these artists can be seen together as addressing a set of concerns that many in

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<sup>357</sup> In his work on the relationship between architectural space and gender, Joel Sanders has noted: "Although purportedly outside the domain of politics, the way buildings distribute our activities within standard spatial configurations has a profound ideological impact on social interaction – regulating, constraining, and (on occasion) liberating the human subject. Architecture, through the establishment and alteration of reiterated types and conventions, creates the space – the stage – where human subjectivity is enacted and performed." Joel Sanders, "Introduction," in Joel Sanders, ed., *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 13. Also see Agrest, Conway, and Weisman, eds., *The Sex of Architecture*, and Debra Coleman, Elizabeth Danze, and Carol Henderson, eds., *Architecture and Feminism: Yale Publications on Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).

<sup>358</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 11.

1950s society faced. Creating works that drew attention to the home and family, these artists explored beneath the surface and presented a distorted and often uncanny world. Although familiar and cherished subjects, the home and the family that occupied that space became, in these artists' works, dirtied, undesirable, and uninhabitable.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Dirty Female Body: Sexuality and Degradation

During the 1950s, dialogue concerning sexuality flourished – sexual attitudes, activities, and behaviors were made public through articles, scientific studies, and polls. Alfred Kinsey published his best-selling scientific studies of sexuality, which addressed masturbation, homosexuality, and premarital sex.<sup>359</sup> Simone de Beauvoir’s groundbreaking The Second Sex, published in the United States in 1953, addressed, among other things, menstruation, masturbation, self-mutilation, and sexual desire.<sup>360</sup> Christine Jorgensen<sup>361</sup> received the first sex change operation in 1952 and Hugh Hefner’s Playboy magazine began publication in 1953. In addition, pornography, underground films, adult comic books, and pulp publications were widespread and easily accessible.<sup>362</sup> Popular topics of discussion for both the mainstream United States and its government included

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<sup>359</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948) and Alfred C. Kinsey, et. al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1953). Kinsey’s studies stimulated a significant amount of response and discussion. For example, see J. M. Sakoda, “Volunteer-Error in the Kinsey Study,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 47 (April 1952); Edmund Bergler and William S. Kroger, *Kinsey’s Myth of Female Sexuality* (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1954); and Jerome Himelhoch and Sylvia Fleis Fava, eds., *Sexual Behavior in American Society: An Appraisal of the First Two Kinsey Reports* (New York: Norton, 1955).

<sup>360</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1953), trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974).

<sup>361</sup> See “The Great Transformation,” *Time* (15 December 1952): 58-59, and “The Case of Christine,” *Time* (20 April 1953): 82-84.

<sup>362</sup> See Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*; Wagner, *Parade of Pleasure*; and Marie Torre, “A Woman Looks At the Girly-Girly Magazines,” *Cosmopolitan* (May 1963): 42-47. Also see Jaye Zimet, *Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction, 1949-1969* (New York: Pention Group of Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1999) and Michael Bronski, *Pulp Friction: Uncovering the Golden Age of Gay Male Pulps* (New York: St. Martin’s/Griffin, 2003).

issues concerning prostitution, homosexuality, sex crimes, and sexual perversity.<sup>363</sup> Yet, this growing public dialogue about sexuality spurred the government and society as a whole to take steps to control, contain, and repress the human body – particularly that of women – and its activities.<sup>364</sup>

As I have noted throughout this dissertation, the social order of the United States during this period was radically shifting and being redefined. This can be seen in the manner that bodies were treated, particularly transgressive bodies or bodies that refused to adhere to the social order. Early in the decade, in 1953, for example, the Rosenbergs were executed in the electric chair. Shock treatments became a popular way to deal with the mentally ill during the 1950s.<sup>365</sup> The atrocities of World War II were still being addressed, the majority of which had been directed towards physical bodies.<sup>366</sup> Evidence of a generally repressive attitude toward the body ranged from anti-homosexual bias and

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<sup>363</sup> See “What Can We Do About Sex Crimes?” *Saturday Evening Post* (11 December 1948): 30-31; Joseph Paul DeRiver, *The Sexual Criminal: A Psychoanalytical Study* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1949); United States Senate, *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government*; Benjamin Karpman, M.D., *The Sexual Offender and His Offenses* (Washington, D.C.: Julian Press, Inc., 1954); and United States Senate, *Obscene and Pornographic Literature and Juvenile Delinquency*. Also see John D’Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) and Estelle B. Freedman, “Uncontrolled Desires: The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960,” *Journal of American History* 74 (June 1987): 83-106.

<sup>364</sup> Numerous books and articles were written that advised women on how to control their (and their partners’) sexual behavior. For example, see Shailer Upton Lawton, *Sexual Conduct of the Teen-ager* (New York: Spectrolux Corp., 1951); Betty Cornell, *Betty Cornell’s All About Boys* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1958); Cecile-Jane Richmond, *Handbook for Dating* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958); and Peg Bracken, *I Try to Behave Myself: Peg Bracken’s Etiquette Book* (New York: Curtis Publishing Co., 1959). Also see Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

<sup>365</sup> See Lothar B. Kalinowsky, *Shock Treatments, Psychosurgery, and Other Somatic Treatments in Psychiatry* (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1952).

<sup>366</sup> It has been estimated that at least seventeen million soldiers lost their lives in battle as well as close to eighteen million civilian lives. Among those eighteen million civilians were the almost six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The war also uprooted perhaps as many as thirty million people from their homes in Europe. Michael J. Lyons, *World War II: A Short History* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1994), 320.

laws to the unprecedented level of marketing of deodorants, soaps, and sanitary products. Along with an obsession with personal cleanliness, and the resultant skyrocketing of consumer purchasing of hygiene products, came an increased desire to shape, maintain, and control the human body, particularly those of women and teenage girls.<sup>367</sup>

Throughout this dissertation I have examined how works by Kienholz, Conner, DeFeo, and Rauschenberg challenged the dominant social order, particularly through their engagement with dirt. This chapter will address specifically these artists' representations of the female body, and their engagement with the "dirtiness" of sexuality, pornography, and prostitution. Patricia Yaeger has noted that "when the social hierarchy is threatened, when the margins of power start to shift, the body not only becomes prominent, it becomes a site for mapping social change."<sup>368</sup> From that perspective, these artists' works can be understood as part of an emerging protest against governing societal restrictions. Much of Kienholz's, Conner's, DeFeo's, and Rauschenberg's work focused on the condition of the physical female body, often appropriating the manner in which it was presented in the media. From that starting point, these artists proceeded to underscore transgressive sexuality, degraded and debased bodily conditions, and the body's lapses in adherence to societal codes. In so doing, these artists engaged contemporaneous attitudes concerning the sexualized female body –

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<sup>367</sup> Significantly, this focus was not simply encouraged by the ever-expanding consumer market; it was actively promoted by manufacturers of products such as girdles, bras, acne medications, and deodorants. See Brumberg, *The Body Project*.

<sup>368</sup> Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire*, 127. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White similarly argue: "Manners, regulations of the body, thus become the site of a profound interconnection of ideology and subjectivity, a zone of transcoding at once astonishingly trivial and microscopically important. Traversed by regulative forces quite beyond its conscious control, the body is territorialized in accordance with hierarchies and topographical rules which it enacts automatically, which come from elsewhere and which make it a point of intersection and flow within the elaborate symbolic systems of the socius." See Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 90.

particularly focusing on aspects of commodification – while simultaneously questioning the period’s attempts to repress and contain the female body.

### **The Sexualized Female Body**

A central theme for many of the works created by the artists focused on in this dissertation was the sexualized female body, and much of that work deployed pornographic imagery. Elaine Tyler May has noted that “fears of sexual chaos tend to surface during times of crisis and rapid social change,” and that during the Cold War period, “much of the anxiety focused on women, whose economic and sexual behavior seemed to have changed dramatically.”<sup>369</sup> Most often, DeFeo’s, Conner’s, Rauschenberg’s, and Kienholz’s depictions of the female body were fragmented or otherwise damaged. By presenting the body in such ways, they drew attention to the manner in which women were presented in the media (both mainstream and marginal media) and to the manner in which women’s bodies were objectified. Most often, these artists’ works depicted the nude female body in a violent and disturbing manner.

During the postwar period, pornography became a major social and political issue, with many arguing that this (then) \$500 million a year business directly led to crime, sexual perversions, and even murder.<sup>370</sup> J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, stated:

The publication and distribution of salacious material is a peculiarly vicious evil; the destruction of moral character caused by it among young people cannot be overestimated. The circulation of periodicals containing

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<sup>369</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 93.

<sup>370</sup> United States Senate, *Obscene and Pornographic Literature and Juvenile Delinquency*, 3.

such material plays an important part in the development of crime among the youth of our country.<sup>371</sup>

In 1956, the United States Senate conducted a study on the relationship between pornography and juvenile delinquency, reporting that:

[D]uring 1953 a sex criminal was arrested somewhere in the United States every 6.7 minutes, day and night; since 1937, rape cases have increased 110 percent. Boys of 18 and 19 years of age are committing more rapes than males in any other age group. The percentage of rapists under 20 has doubled since 1940. Venereal disease rates in some localities have risen 25 percent and it is to be stressed that these are only the known cases. The subcommittee finds that there is a relationship between this deplorable statistical summary and a mushrooming growth in the production, distribution and sale of pornographic materials.<sup>372</sup>

In view of this public debate concerning pornography, the use of pornographic imagery by DeFeo, Conner, Rauschenberg, and Kienholz may be seen to have represented a complex social commentary on representations of the sexualized female body.

In 1958, DeFeo created two photocollages composed of fragmented images of nude female body parts taken from pornographic girlie magazines and pin-up photographs. Applaud the Black Fact (figure 23) features disjointed female body parts of differing scales, in addition to images of male hands and a black horse, collaged together on a large beige background. A laughing, blonde woman holds a covering around her truncated torso, which merges into various other female body parts. Below this, the head and nude upper torso of a woman is shadowed with black-and-white stripes, creating a surreal, zebra-like appearance, which then fuses with another upside-down nude female torso. Blossom (figure 24) is also composed of female legs, arms, feet, breasts, torsos, and buttocks, all of which merge together on a large cream-colored background to form

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<sup>371</sup> As quoted in *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

an abstract, floral design. The female parts are collaged together to create a “blossoming” pattern, drawing the eye initially to the overall shape rather than to each separate body part.

Significantly, in both of these works, DeFeo has included references to men, specifically as bearers of the appraising gaze, positioning the male presence as a controlling or approving force. At the top of Applaud the Black Fact's composition are two male hands that appear to applaud the surrounding collection of body parts. At the bottom, a man's hand reacts oppositely, turned in a “thumbs down” position. Extrapolating from the title, this work suggests the acceptance (applauding) of the objectified position women typically hold in society (a black fact). Forming the center of Blossom is a small photograph of a group of smiling men who appear to be cheering and clapping with outstretched arms in response to the female body parts around them. Positioned directly above them is a seated woman who appears in full form; facing the viewer, she gazes downward towards the cheering crowd of men. Huge in scale compared to the tiny men below her, she looms above from an almost goddess-like position. Although predominantly composed of female bodies, these collages' inclusion of male figures foregrounds the division between women as passive, sexual objects to be viewed and men as active and evaluating owners of the gaze.<sup>373</sup>

DeFeo was publicly reticent regarding the treatment of women in society and the media. Further, Blossom and Applaud the Black Fact were exceptional works for her; she mainly considered herself a painter and was somewhat indifferent about her

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<sup>373</sup> See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,”(1973) in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 14-26.

collages.<sup>374</sup> Yet, even though DeFeo did not discuss her collages in terms of the objectification of women, and even though she denied that the images of pinup girls that she used had any meaning for her,<sup>375</sup> her works certainly should be examined within this context. An inevitable connection exists between her use of girlie magazine images and the resulting reconfigured (provocative yet mutilated) body parts, aggressive reconfigurations that stemmed from her own hand. She literally turned the female body into an object – by fragmenting it into small pieces and by collecting those pieces together to create an entirely different object. DeFeo’s process can be understood as both a violent endeavor (she cuts these women to pieces) and a healing one as well. In a sense, she sutures women together; individually, they may be fragmented and damaged, but as a group, they create a seamless, new whole.

DeFeo’s alteration of these photographs of women’s bodies may be seen in light of Kaja Silverman’s examination of the procedures of “suture” in the cinematic process. She has explained that the camera’s shots, as well as the editing process, provide the “agency whereby meaning emerges and a subject-position is constructed for the viewer.”<sup>376</sup> Traditional narrative cinema denies the existence of the camera as much as

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<sup>374</sup> The critic Dean Wallace described DeFeo’s 1959 show at the Dilexi Gallery as exciting and packing “a tremendous wallop,” yet he seems to have been indifferent about her included collages as well: “In the collages, though, facility strives toward virtue and falls short of the mark. The work is professional but the technique is one that might better be left to amateurs – that of creating synthetic abstractions by pasting up magazine illustrations. Cuteness of this kind ill becomes an artist of DeFeo’s power.” Dean Wallace, “S. F.’s Luck: Good Art at Half N. Y. Prices,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (27 July 1959): 39. However, DeFeo’s contemporaries, Bruce Conner and Wallace Berman, were impressed by these collages even though DeFeo was offhand about them. See Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 51. It is also significant to note that during the early 1970s DeFeo returned to making photocollages, many of which included or referenced women’s bodies.

<sup>375</sup> Richard Cándida Smith, “Vectors of Emergence, Lines of Descent,” in Green and Levy, eds., *Jay DeFeo and the Rose*, 140.

<sup>376</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 201.

possible (much as pornographic photography substitutes the camera lens for the male gaze, thereby implicitly rendering the camera invisible), encouraging the viewer to believe in its autonomous perspective, a perspective asserted to belong to a fictional character within the cinematic narrative. Examining the famous shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho (1960), for example, Silverman argued that its choppy and disorienting cuts reminded the viewer of the camera's and editor's roles in the narrative process, therefore forcing the (tacitly male) viewer to abandon his belief that he voyeuristically controlled the viewed objects with his gaze, and impelling him instead to identify with the viewed subject. Silverman further pointed out that feminist writers like Laura Mulvey "suggest that it is precisely at the point where suture joins with female subjectivity that it is most vulnerable to subversion."<sup>377</sup>

Although Silverman was referring to cinematic suture, a similar argument could be made regarding DeFeo's fragmented female bodies. Her choppy and so disorienting cuts of these bodies interrupted the viewing pleasure typically associated with imagery such as this and, in the process, reminded the viewer that he (or she) was not in control of the viewed object. Subverting the original meanings and functions of these images, DeFeo reconfigured the female bodies to establish a new viewing context. She choreographed *her* narrative specifically through collage and suture, reminding the viewer of the editor's (her) involvement. Foregrounding the artistic process by altering the images, DeFeo asserted her presence by regulating the access that the viewer had to the bodies of these women. Although seamlessly joined, the body parts in Blossom and

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 236.

Applaud the Black Fact jerk the gaze from one body part to another, prohibiting the viewer from controlling the spectacle of the nude bodies.

Through its very nature, the technique of collage that DeFeo used to create these works is inherently messy in that it entails various fragments being pieced together to create works that typically do not offer easy and straightforward meanings. Most often the visual appearance of collaged and montaged works appears disjunctive and, at times, disorderly. It follows that the process that viewers must engage in so as to interpret the work potentially presents a somewhat “messy” experience – they must confront and accept disorder. In order to interpret and assign meaning to the work, viewers must consult their own beliefs, and those of the society as a whole, in regards to the appropriated images. Because the meanings on offer in the work tend not to be straightforward or obvious, viewers are effectively encouraged to draw their own conclusions and interpretations.

In Blossom and Applaud the Black Fact, the disfigured female bodies specifically focus the viewer’s attention on the body parts typically considered most alluring, marketable, and, therefore, in a sense, disposable. As viewers, we are specifically positioned to view these fragmented women as objects to be admired and consumed. Girlie magazines and pulp publications (and, by extension, the women depicted in their pages) were considered by many to be “dirty,” “trashy,” and disposable.<sup>378</sup> Associated with immorality and violence, pulp magazines, as Erin A. Smith has explained, were “named for the untrimmed, rough wood-pulp paper on which they were printed” and

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<sup>378</sup> Some girlie magazines at that time included *Night and Day*, *Police Gazette*, *Scope*, *Pic*, *Pix*, *Picture Follies*, *Eve*, *Glance*, *Peep Show*, *Cover Girls Models*, *Whirl*, *Keyhole*, *Zip*, and *Wham*. See Wagner, *Parade of Pleasure*, 115.

were “unambiguously ‘trash,’ cheaply produced escape literature designed to be thrown away once read.”<sup>379</sup> Composed of imagery culled from these sources, DeFeo’s works’ meanings become multilayered, playing with ideas of commodification and disposability on a number of levels.

Significantly, around the same time that she created these two collages, DeFeo posed nude and semi-nude with two of her other works from this period: The Rose (1958-1966) and The Eyes (1958). In collaboration with her close friend and fellow artist, Wallace Berman, DeFeo created a series of images in which she posed in front of these two works. The Eyes is a large (4’ x 8’) graphite drawing of a pair of eyes, which she based on a photograph of her own eyes (figure 51).<sup>380</sup> Similar to her collages, this drawing also depicts a fragmented body part. Yet, this is her *own* body and it features her eyes, not the parts more typically objectified on the female body. In one of DeFeo’s photographs in front of The Eyes, she stands shirtless, dressed only in black tights (figure 52).<sup>381</sup> Positioned in the center of the two eyes, DeFeo stands straight and rigidly, arms at her sides, staring directly at the camera. Despite the insertion of her entire physical self, the viewer’s gaze is liable to be distracted by the large, powerful eyes behind her. Although DeFeo is shirtless, the photograph emphasizes the strength of her body, more so than presenting it as a sexualized object.

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<sup>379</sup> Smith, *Hard-Boiled*, 19.

<sup>380</sup> Philips, “Photographing *The Rose*,” 67. *The Eyes* was also inspired by Philip Lamantia’s poem: “Tell him I have eyes only for Heaven/ as I look to you/ Queen mirror/ of the heavenly court,” which is partially written on *The Eyes*’ verso. As quoted in Prather, “Foreword,” xvi.

<sup>381</sup> Berman photographed nine images of DeFeo with *The Eyes*, which were later shown in 1959 at a private exhibition at his home in San Francisco along with DeFeo’s photographs taken with *The Rose*. Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 69.

DeFeo also collaborated with Berman on a series of images taken with The Rose. In one of these photographs (1959, figure 53), she stands strongly with her arms outstretched, positioned directly in front of the work.<sup>382</sup> Superimposed on her bare chest is the Hebrew letter “tzaddi,” which numerologically represents DeFeo’s name.<sup>383</sup> Although she is nude, DeFeo’s image is lit in such a way that details of her body are not easily seen. Notably, she described the images taken with Berman as “an early experiment in erotic photography, and an objective collaboration between two artist friends.”<sup>384</sup> Yet, I agree with Lucy Lippard’s assertion that “if one facet of The Rose is indeed body-related (as Berman’s ‘crucifixion’ photo suggests), it is a sacred body, not a biological or erotic one.”<sup>385</sup> Rather than being erotic, this photograph emphasizes the overall design of the image – somewhat like the graphic quality of DeFeo’s collages. Even when considered as a private artistic exchange between two friends, these photographs create an interesting parallel to the mass-produced images of female nudes that DeFeo incorporated into her collages.<sup>386</sup> Comparable to Blossom, the photograph of DeFeo with The Rose (a blossom) highlights a floral, radiating design created by both the

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<sup>382</sup> Although this image is signed and dated 1958, it is now believed to have been taken in 1959. See Prather, “Foreword,” xxi, footnote #23.

<sup>383</sup> Robert Berg, “Jay DeFeo: The Transcendental Rose,” *American Art* 12 #3 (Fall 1998): 71.

<sup>384</sup> Prather, “Foreword,” xvii.

<sup>385</sup> Lippard, “Transplanting *The Rose*,” 63. Although I argue that the photographs taken by Berman of DeFeo with *The Rose* should be understood as more than erotic photography, other photographs taken by Berman of DeFeo certainly can be seen in this manner, such as the 1959 photograph of DeFeo that accompanied a 1978 *Artforum* article on Berman. See Merrill Greene, “Wallace Berman: Portrait of the Artist as an Underground Man,” *Artforum* 16 #6 (February 1978): 56.

<sup>386</sup> These photographs of DeFeo did remain somewhat private until more recently when they began to be included in a number of books and articles. Previously, they were shown only in a private exhibition at Berman’s home in 1959. The specific photograph examined in this chapter was used as the catalogue’s coverpiece for a 1975 exhibition of Californian artists, which included DeFeo and Berman. See *Art As a Muscular Principle: Ten Artists and San Francisco, 1950-1965* (Mount Holyoke College, 1975) and Berg, “Jay DeFeo,” 70.

work and her body. Yet, her body is presented in its entirety, not fragmented into bits and pieces. Further, whereas cheering men form the center of Blossom, DeFeo's whole female body marks the center of The Rose, a position that enables her to actively control the space around her.

Significantly, the creation of The Rose consumed DeFeo for eight years of her life. In a sense, that is evidenced in this image of her with the work: her body merges with her creation; she becomes her work and her work becomes an extension of her.<sup>387</sup> Although DeFeo was petite (around five feet tall), her body was not dwarfed by the huge work behind her. Rather, it appears as if light rays are radiating from her body or as if she has completely spread open a magnificent set of wings. The Rose has been discussed in terms of its possible religious connotations,<sup>388</sup> and such a perspective is certainly supported by this photograph in which both DeFeo and her work exude an ethereal, sacred air. In fact, DeFeo appears goddess-like, invoking the idea of the artist as "god-like creator" (an idea that had been reserved predominantly for men).<sup>389</sup>

By contrast with DeFeo, Conner was outspoken regarding his use of women as subjects in his works. In a 1974 interview, he discussed the societal roles that both women and men were often forced to play during the period when he created these works: "Well, I'm always dealing with theater of one sort or another and with characters.

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<sup>387</sup> Sandra S. Phillips has noted that *The Rose* "was almost part of DeFeo's body, a physical extension of herself. At one point in the process, she reputedly dropped her own pearls onto the surface, where they were gradually engulfed by the pigment." Phillips, "Photographing *The Rose*," 67. In addition, as noted in Chapter Two of this dissertation, it is believed that the lead paint DeFeo used to create this work led to the loss of her teeth and eventually contributed to her death from cancer, further connecting her physically to this work.

<sup>388</sup> See Berg, "Jay DeFeo."

<sup>389</sup> In addition, DeFeo's body and position in this photograph have been compared to Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian" man, connecting her not only to this universal and ideally proportioned creation but also to the artist/creator himself (da Vinci). *Ibid.*, 72.

I felt that everybody was involved in play acting forms that really weren't them, or they were under the control of forces, imposing themselves on them. I think it's true that a lot of it has to do with my view of women."<sup>390</sup> Conner further explained:

Well, there was like this tremendous separation of emotions, attitudes, and views of life; one was characterized by women, one characterized by men; and there wasn't supposed to be anything in between. Men were supposed to work hard and go to war and kill and die. Women were supposed to have babies and fuck and don't have any brains. And like talking about Women's Liberation, you know, true liberation would be liberation of men and women.<sup>391</sup>

Certainly, the manner in which Conner incorporated references to women in his works (the types of imagery as well as the amount) draws attention to how women frequently were viewed by society – as sexual objects without brains.

For example, an untitled work of Conner's from 1954-62 (figure 1) features an abstract design composed of cardboard, wood, and scrap material. While working on this abstract collage (on the side meant to be seen by viewers), he began to cover the verso (figure 2) with images from magazines (pornographic, science-fiction, and movie publications), reproductions of artworks, numerous stickers, and various printed materials. Conner stated that the two sides of his work dealt with two perspectives: the surface, public view on one side (the abstract collage) and the unconscious, hidden view (the collaged images) represented on its verso.<sup>392</sup> Significantly, the unconscious, for Conner, involved not some abstract indecipherable representation, but rather, images from the everyday world. And, it was not until the last few years he spent working on

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<sup>390</sup> Karlstrom, "Interview with Bruce Conner," 20.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>392</sup> Statement from a June 1, 1996 interview with Bruce Jenkins and Peter Boswell. As quoted in Boswell, "Bruce Conner," 28.

this object that he decided that each side should be acknowledged, both the public face and the unconscious:

I had never intended it originally to be seen on both sides. It's all very personal. Here's my draft board notice, all these odds and ends. To me it was in a way (by making references to traditional art forms) like the Temptation of St. Anthony, combining threats with temptations of physical delights or obsessions and compulsions à la Hieronymous Bosch.<sup>393</sup>

As with DeFeo's imagery, Conner's selection of collaged materials also should be considered in relation to pulp publications. His chosen imagery, his subject matter, and the overall visual effect of most of his works, with their muted, as if dirty tones, and dismal imagery, closely relates to pulp fiction (particularly the hard-boiled detective genre) and film noir. Such publications and films featured stories that centered on sex, immorality, and violence. Certainly, the verso of Conner's work, with its "temptations of physical delights or obsessions," and threats of violence, is reminiscent of the underworld depicted in pulp fiction and film noir.

The overall impact of Conner's untitled work derives from the sheer amount and repetition of nude imagery. While DeFeo most often fractured the bodies in the images she used, Conner fragmented some female bodies and left many others intact, as exemplified in the verso montage. The collection of women is densely layered across the surface, forcing the eye to jump haphazardly and randomly from one body to another. The majority of the images feature women in various stages of undress involved in numerous activities, such as bicycling, bathing, dancing, and running. Yet, Conner has intermingled various other printed materials, suggesting complex and subtle narrative possibilities. For example, the inclusion of his physical examination notice from the

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<sup>393</sup> Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 64.

United States military alongside the nude female bodies visually illustrates his perception of the strictly demarcated gender roles during that time – men “go to war and kill and die,” while women “fuck and don’t have any brains.” Other textual clues hint at violence and danger (“Warning: You are in Great Danger,” “Fragile,” and “Weird Tales”), although it is unclear as to whether the warnings are meant for the depicted women or the viewer. In addition, some elements allude to the collecting and commodification of the female body: a “Cash on Delivery” receipt and a notice featuring the word “COLLECT.”

Arguing that identity operates through repetition, Judith Butler has posited that the “subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects.” Butler added that it is, therefore, “only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible.”<sup>394</sup> In other words, identity norms are constituted through performances of subjectivity dictated and regulated by society; and, in order to disrupt the norms that society puts forth as the acceptable standard, these normative signifying acts must be performed in a variant, disruptive fashion, such as parody. With the repeated use of images of women as sexualized objects in conjunction with text that drew attention to the constructedness of those representations, Conner’s work potentially had the power to disrupt, or, at least, complicate the manner in which society viewed the objectification of women.

If we approach pornographic magazines (the sources from which Conner culled his imagery) from the perspective that they are, in general, collections of imagery

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<sup>394</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 145.

featuring the nude female body, then Conner's work can be understood as pulling from a set of already existing collections; Susan Stewart states that "the collection marks the space of nexus for all narratives, the place where history is transformed into space, into property."<sup>395</sup> From this perspective, a collection of images can be read as a narrative, a narrative that effectively belongs to the collector. The collection becomes a space in which history may be rewritten and the narrative becomes the property of the collector.

According to Stewart, the collection is:

... a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context. Like other forms of art, its function is not the restoration of context or origin but rather the creation of a new context, a context standing in a metaphorical, rather than a contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life.<sup>396</sup>

As the viewer weaves his or her own narrative, a distance forms between the viewer and the viewed subject in which a viewing "spectacle" is created and the viewed subject becomes an object. No longer is the depicted subject taken into consideration when constructing meaning. Stewart further explained that:

The viewer of the spectacle is absolutely aware of the distance between self and spectacle. The spectacle exists in an outside at both its origin and ending. There is no question that there is a gap between the object and its viewer. The spectacle functions to avoid contamination: "Stand back, ladies and gentlemen, what you are about to see will shock and amaze you." And at the same time, the spectacle assumes a singular direction. In contrast to the reciprocal gaze of carnival and festival, the spectacle assumes that the object is blinded; only the audience sees.<sup>397</sup>

The presentation of women in these pornographic "collections" of imagery creates a viewing spectacle. Encouraged to stand back, the viewer assumes that the viewing

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<sup>395</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*, xii.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

relationship is not reciprocal. Collected and displayed en masse, the women no longer seem to represent individual narratives. Rather, presented together as a whole, the collection takes on a life of its own; a life that is coordinated and directed by the collector. As required by the spectacle, the collection blinds the gaze of the depicted object as it simultaneously mutes its narrative voice. Therefore, pornographic magazines featuring nude women contribute to the spectacle of the photographed body and present the female body as dirty as well as a site for the construction of ideological power.

The voyeuristic viewpoint plays an essential role in the production of the spectacle. David Carroll has discussed the traditional position of the voyeur in the viewing process as follows:

A voyeur can never enter into the scene being spied on, never participate in it except at a distance – to be seen seeing is to lose the supposed neutrality of one’s perspective on the scene and the imaginary integrity of the scene itself. Voyeurism is thus the ideal situation in which to see, for the invisibility of the voyeur produces a frame that encloses a scene of total visibility and creates the illusion that everything is seen as it “really is.” As long as the viewer remains hidden, the contradictions in the scene spied on and of his own perspective can be ignored.<sup>398</sup>

Based upon Carroll’s assertion, voyeurism becomes the ideal situation in which to view potentially problematic images in that the viewer can ignore his or her own involvement with the subject matter. By refusing to acknowledge their own perspectives and involvement in the production of meaning within the viewing experience, viewers can create and maintain the illusion that everything seen within their particular framing of the world is static and “real.” Ultimately, pornographic imagery tells us more about the viewer or the audience for whom it was created than the depicted women themselves,

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<sup>398</sup> David Carroll, *The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 194.

demonstrating instead preconceived notions and stereotypes rather than providing realistic insight into the world of those visually represented.<sup>399</sup> Traditionally, this is the kind of viewing that takes place with pornographic imagery – a voyeuristic perspective where viewers create their own closed and empowering narratives that ultimately further the objectification of the viewed subject.

Yet, Conner's use of pornography complicated typical narratives associated with this imagery. By using these found materials, he became a collector of already existing images, putting them together to construct new narratives that challenged traditional representations and collections of imagery depicting women's bodies. The collections of bodies presented by Conner created new contexts – contexts that he controlled and manipulated. The imagery he incorporated in his works therefore can be seen as not only transforming the original context but also as altering the audience's originally intended use for the collection of female bodies – he manipulated the images in such a way that viewers, while drawing their own conclusions, had to reassess their initial responses. Although Conner can be seen as collecting and controlling the sexualized female body, he did so in a way that enabled him to reorder the system. He drew attention to the manner in which society as a whole attempted to control and commodify the female body; and to the idea of the manipulated and constructed narrative so insidious in the commodification of sexuality.

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<sup>399</sup> Laura Mulvey has pointed out that “women are constantly confronted with their own image in one form or another, but what they see bears little relation or relevance to their own unconscious fantasies, their own hidden fears and desires. They are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men. Yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man. The true exhibit is always the phallus. Women are simply the scenery onto which men project their narcissistic fantasies.” See Laura Mulvey, “Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious or ‘You Don’t Know What is Happening, Do You, Mr. Jones?’” (1972) in Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 13.

Conner also addressed the sexualized female body through his use of women's feminine accoutrements, such as lace, jewelry, bras, nylon stockings, and garter belts. Rather than actually depicting the female body (as he did in his untitled work), he often used these objects as traces of the body, such as with Spider Lady (1959, figure 42) in which he layered numerous garter belts and nylons over the surface of the work. The feminine accoutrements Conner used in his works stood-in as props for or represented the roles that he believed women were encouraged to play in society:

What I'm showing there isn't women. It's garter belts and halters and nylon stockings and false eyelashes, and falsity. You know, it's a false mask. I see them as demonic devices. Like there's no reason why a martyr should go around carrying chains and thongs like you might see in a medieval icon. But that's what gets identified with them. I was pointing out that these were the same sort of things...<sup>400</sup>

Yet, although his artistic intentions were to draw attention to the manner in which women were objectified by society, Conner's works were often linked personally to his supposedly misogynistic views of women.<sup>401</sup> In fact, he recalled that people often responded aggressively towards him after viewing his works:

When I exhibited, people would project on to me the violence of these pieces. Like they would identify me with a person who was obsessed with love's garbage or was very violent... And I got so involved in it and it became very difficult; it became violent; it threatened me.... I was attracting violent responses. I was so involved in processes you know, I had to deal with it personally.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> Karlstrom, "Interview with Bruce Conner," 21.

<sup>401</sup> Conner remembered viewers' responses at the time, stating: "On somebody's review of a show of mine, they said, 'He must really hate women.'" Ibid., 21.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 11 and 22-23, respectively. In addition, Conner tells a story in which the artist Ray Johnson mailed him a package containing a woman's fur muff: "When I opened the package inside was one of those curved knives that are used for cutting open cardboard boxes; it's sharp on all edges. When you put your hand in [the muff] you get cut." Ibid., 23.

For an art festival student publication at the University of Chicago, Conner submitted an unusual request:

I am turning to nylon stocking assembling and would appreciate small dignified announcement in school paper that I have a nylon stocking fetish and place a dignified receptacle for contributions at the exhibit of my work. It is very difficult to obtain them by legal sources. I would appreciate. I will also hope (but not request openly) to get brassieres, panties, dirty photos, jewelry, feathers, psyloceben [sic], smoke writers in the sky, lamp posts.<sup>403</sup>

Although a humorous prank, Conner's approach to obtaining, as well as his use of, women's undergarments certainly would have aroused suspicion and, in extreme cases, violent responses when considered in terms of the 1950s social and political climate. Fetishes were linked with sexual perversity and ultimately to further social transgressions, such as torture and murder, suggesting why some viewers responded so aggressively to Conner's works.

For example, during the 1956 United States Congressional Hearings on "Obscene and Pornographic Literature and Juvenile Delinquency," the subcommittee questioned Dr. George W. Henry, a professor of clinical psychiatry, about fetishism:

Mr. Gaughan: Doctor, would you tell us what is a fetish?

Dr. Henry: A fetish is usually some object, material, or substance which becomes the chief source of sexual stimulus for a particular person.

Mr. Gaughan: In your medical textbook entitled "All the Sexes" you state in your chapter on fetishes that high-heel fetish, and women's lingerie fetish are two of the more common types of fetishes....

Mr. Gaughan: Doctor, I ask you, could children be sexually perverted by looking at, by studying, and by dwelling upon photos of this nature [photos that encourage viewers to take part in fetishistic acts] and the contents of this book?

Dr. Henry: Yes.

Chairman Kefauver: Doctor, is it a very unwholesome influence, this sort of thing?

Dr. Henry: It is.

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<sup>403</sup> As quoted in Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 63.

Chairman Kefauver: In your opinion the increase in sex crimes, deviations that we are having – does that increase result in part at least from the reading and looking at magazines and pictures of this kind by children?

Dr. Henry: I would think that was an important factor in the increase.<sup>404</sup>

Yet, notably, Conner's inclusion of women's undergarments in his works coincided with the period's fascination with women's breasts and the resultant increase in marketing for bras, girdles, and undergarments for women, particularly for teenage girls.<sup>405</sup> In a 1954 article that instructed women on how to increase their sex appeal, Lee Graham addressed the subject of female breasts:

The most celebrated focus of the male's visual attention is probably the female bosom. Through his experience from infancy on, he has been conditioned to think of a woman's breasts as *the* symbol of her femininity and therefore of her sex appeal. Although the contour and shape of the breasts vary with individual heredity, men generally like a prominent, uplifted bustline. This public demonstration may seem like a breach of decorum to some people, but it is a much healthier attitude than the one which reigned after World War I and induced women to flatten their breasts into virtual non-existence.<sup>406</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> United States Senate, *Obscene and Pornographic Literature and Juvenile Delinquency*, 9-10.

<sup>405</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg has explained that “until the 1950s, the budding breasts of American girls received no special attention from either bra manufacturers, doctors, or parents.” She elaborated: “In an era distinguished by its worship of full-breasted women, interest in adolescent breasts came from all quarters: girls who wanted bras at an earlier age than ever before; mothers who believed that they should help a daughter acquire a ‘good’ figure; doctors who valued maternity over all other female roles; and merchandisers who saw profits in convincing girls and their parents that adolescent breasts needed to be tended in special ways. All of this interest coalesced in the 1950s to make the brassiere as critical as the sanitary napkin in making a girl's transition into adulthood both modern and successful.” Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 111. Also see “Bras and Girdles for Teenagers,” *Good Housekeeping* (November 1956): 289 and “Plan for a Prettier Bosom,” *Seventeen* (May 1959): 108.

<sup>406</sup> Lee Graham, “10 Secrets of Sex Appeal,” *Coronet* (March 1954): 31. This article was adapted from the book, Lee Graham, *If You Are a Woman* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1954). Tracing the development of female “body projects” throughout the twentieth century in the United States, Joan Jacobs Brumberg has pointed to the 1950s' focus on clean and healthy “girls” with ample bosoms: “Throughout history, different body parts have been eroticized in art, literature, photography, and film. In some eras, the ankle or upper arm was the ultimate statement of female sexuality. But breasts were the particular preoccupation of Americans in the years after World War II, when voluptuous stars, such as Jayne Mansfield, Jane Russell, and Marilyn Monroe, were popular box-office attractions. The mammary fixation of the 1950s extended beyond movie stars and shaped the experience of adolescents of both genders. In that era, boys seemed to prefer girls who were ‘busty,’ and American girls began to worry about breast size as well as about weight.” Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 108. Conner's specific interest in

Along with this focus on female breasts came the advertisements for the garments that were designed to control and maintain those sexually alluring body parts. For example, a 1953 advertisement for Formfit asked, “Flat Chested? Don’t despair! You, too, can have the New ‘Outer-Look’ with the New Inflation Bra by Formfit. The new ‘Outer-Look’ calls for a high, full bustline. Confidence-inspiring, the way Formfit’s Inflation Bra lends just the degree of subtle ‘build-up’ you need...” Yet, as Joan Jacobs Brumberg has pointed out, this new industry was part of a “general philosophy of ‘junior figure control’” promoted by both physicians and entrepreneurs, and so, in effect, by society as a whole. Addressing advertisements for the “Bobbie” bras and girdles by Formfit, Brumberg noted that they “suggested good things about girls who controlled their flesh in this way: they were pretty, had lots of friends, and drank Coca-Cola. As adults, they would have good figures and happy futures because they had chosen correct underwear in their youth.”<sup>407</sup>

Undergarments – or at least the manner in which they were advertised throughout the 1950s – became a way to control not only the bodies of young women but also their attitudes and actions. And, while I am in no way suggesting that women’s undergarments are inherently dirty, the manner in which they were appropriated during this time could be related to issues that have been defined thus far as dirty: repressive societal restrictions that controlled both the bodies of women and the manner in which women’s sexualities were represented. Certainly, Conner’s use of women’s garters, bras, and nylons should

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the commodification of women’s sexuality, particularly in terms of movie stars, can be seen in works such as *Homage to Jean Harlow* (1963), *Homage to Mae West* (1961), and *For Marilyn* (1962).

<sup>407</sup> Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 114.

be considered in this context, particularly in light of his belief that these feminine accoutrements were false props that functioned to relegate and dictate positions in society for women.

Rauschenberg's works also can be considered in terms of the period's attempt to clearly demarcate gender roles, particularly the positioning of women and their sexuality. For example, Rebus (1955, figures 54 and 55), a large work (8' x 11') that features a band of complex imagery running horizontally across the surface of the work, includes images from the mass media that illustrate men and women engaged in stereotypical activities or poses. Reading from left to right, this collaged imagery begins with two copies of a political poster featuring a woman (we only know her as "Karen" because her last name has been partially ripped off) running for the office of lieutenant governor. One poster bears the traces of graffiti – someone has written "Pony Boys" in pencil above her head and has scratched out her eyes. Covering the bottom portion of the second campaign poster is a photograph of another kind of race: two male athletes running in a competition. The last image on the far right side of the work depicts these same two athletes at a different stage in their race. Next to this last image is a photograph of a smiling woman who bares her breasts as she takes off her shirt. Her back faces the two men who appear to be running strenuously toward the disrobing and unaware woman. Between these two images of running men, are numerous other images: comic strips, newspaper articles, a reproduction of Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus (1486), and an Albrecht Dürer self-portrait. These images are interspersed with sections of dripping paint, pencil and crayon scribbles, and graffiti-like pencil sketches, one of which is a nude woman with a moustache.

In numerous works from the 1950s, Rauschenberg included pornographic imagery from girlie magazines, such as he did in Rebus.<sup>408</sup> Notably, Rebus could be seen in terms of the heated debate concerning pornography during this time. Although not necessarily indicating a particular stance on the issue, Rauschenberg's works might be seen, in some ways, as echoing this dialogue. During the postwar period, women were encouraged and expected to be sexually attractive. In fact, women's sexuality was seen by many as dominating the mass media. For example, in 1955, Geoffrey Wagner asked:

Are we really all such drooling morons and mental masturbators that nine-tenths of the illustrative matter printed must be of half-naked women? Mr. McLuhan sees more sinister implications here. The insistence on a sexy girl accompanying every advertisement, he proposes, is due to a desire to reduce the public to a state of helplessness. If your psyche is kept fairly continually churned up by sexual titillation, it is unlikely that you will set up rational critical barriers which might question the product to be sold.<sup>409</sup>

In a 1963 Cosmopolitan article, "A Woman Looks At the Girly-Girly Magazines," Marie Torre discussed the overwhelming availability of girlie magazines and imagery of sexualized women from a woman's perspective: "Like the Pied Piper who led children astray, a new social phenomenon is entrapping young American men in a Never-Never Land, where bachelorhood is a desired state and bikini-clad girls are overdressed, [and] where life is a series of dubious sex thrills..." She then described entering an ice cream parlor in Illinois where "one entire wall of the establishment was

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<sup>408</sup> According to Charles Stuckey, Rauschenberg's use of girlie magazine imagery "can be understood as gestures against his mother's censorship of nudes in his work" and as a reference to "de Kooning's controversial Woman paintings combining abstract and figurative elements." While I agree with Stuckey's assessment, these elements in Rauschenberg's works should also be considered within a larger social context. See Stuckey, "*Minutiae* and Rauschenberg's Combine Mode," 207.

<sup>409</sup> Wagner, *Parade of Pleasure*, 120. Also see Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* and Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951) (Corte Madera, Calif.: Gingko Press, 2002).

papered with girly-girly magazines” and proclaimed the effect to be “as subversive as Communism.”<sup>410</sup>

In addition to being surrounded by imagery of sexualized women in the mass media, everyday women consistently were offered advice on how to be sexually attractive and active (but, within the confines of marriage).<sup>411</sup> In 1954, Lee Graham, for example, outlined how married women could achieve and maintain their sex appeal:

Through more exposure to education, the average woman revised her thinking about what she had been taught was “wicked.” She began to see that being an adept mistress was part of being a good wife, that both giving and receiving sexual satisfaction in her marriage was a means of preserving it. She seemed to realize that being a fine cook and an attentive mother were now insufficient to hold a husband. In her efforts to accent her sexual charms, she borrowed heavily from the dress and manner of the courtesan. The frank use of cosmetics, the tinted hair and all the other devices associated with yesterday’s woman of the streets are now employed by women in the home.<sup>412</sup>

Graham further advised women to get rid of body hair, to bathe often, to not compete with, criticize, or nag their husbands, and to cooperate with their husbands “in adding variety to the sex act.”

Such cultural expectations and standards concerning women’s sexuality might be seen as playing out in many of Rauschenberg’s works. In Rebus, for example, the types of representations of women are quite limited. “Karen” is evidently an independent and intelligent woman, though the manner in which her image has been defaced with graffiti

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<sup>410</sup> Torre, “A Woman Looks At the Girly-Girly Magazines,” 42.

<sup>411</sup> Elaine Tyler May has explained that “unlike Victorian mothers who were expected to be reluctant sexual partners who tolerated sex for reproduction only, wives in the postwar era were recognized as sexual enthusiasts whose insistence on conjugal satisfaction would contribute to erotically charged marriages. Sexual containment – unlike sexual repression – would enhance family togetherness, which would keep both men and women happy at home and would, in turn, foster wholesome childrearing.” May, *Homeward Bound*, 102.

<sup>412</sup> Graham, “10 Secrets of Sex Appeal,” 29. Also see Bell, “What He Likes About You.”

indicates how her political endeavors may have been viewed by a suspicious public. As Marie Torre pointed out, the general theme of pornographic magazines was that women were “an accessory for the well-dressed bachelor. Of course, she is discarded when she reaches age twenty-five, or before that, if she exhibits any intelligence.”<sup>413</sup> Although drawn from a myriad of sources, all of the other representations of women included in Rebus are sexualized: a typical “girly-girly” photograph depicts a woman baring her breasts as she takes off her shirt; Botticelli’s romanticized, non-threatening Venus rises from the sea in an art reproduction; and a sleazy, bathroom-wall-like sketch of a nude woman sports a moustache. This collection of female imagery perhaps alludes to the types of imagery presented so often in the media at that time.

Whereas Conner’s works – in conjunction with his stated views on the subject – can be understood as critiques of the period’s strict gender roles, Rauschenberg’s works are less straightforward in their positioning regarding these issues. Although the imagery in his works might be seen as reiterating the contemporaneous social standards concerning gender, Rauschenberg’s works nonetheless contributed to the prevalent dialogue during that time by positioning found imagery within a new visual context, thereby potentially providing a different perspective from which to view these provocative images.

### **The Disposable Female Body – Bodies of Waste**

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<sup>413</sup> Torre, “A Woman Looks At the Girly-Girly Magazines,” 43.

Constantly surfacing in his works, the human body and its predicaments were integral components of Kienholz's works. Most often, the figures he depicted represented people who were completely overlooked by society, or in Patricia Yaeger's terms, "throwaway bodies." Addressing such bodies' positions in society, she explained:

We must pay attention to the difficult figure of the throwaway body – to women and men whose bodily harm does not matter enough to be registered or repressed – who are *not* symbolically central, who are looked over, looked through, who become a matter of public and private indifference....<sup>414</sup>

Many of the subjects that Kienholz chose for his works could be considered within this context. As throwaways of society, the bodies he frequently depicted – criminals on death row, prostitutes, and groups of people denied equality within society – were treated as if they had no social importance and were considered by many to be disposable and worthless. Yet, this chapter will focus specifically on the manner in which female bodies were represented in Kienholz's works in relation to degradation and disposability.

Degradation and disposability are central aspects of Kienholz's Bunny, Bunny, You're So Funny (1962, figure 56), which features a female mannequin's lower torso. Placed horizontally on its side, attached to a wrought iron stand, and positioned at waist-level, this fragmented body begins at the waist and ends at the knees, to which are attached metal doorknobs resembling rounded stumps. Wearing only a welded metal garter belt attached to red fishnet stockings (created with paint and chicken wire), the figure exposes a prominent patch of steel wool pubic hair. Covered with a sheet of glass, her waist opens to reveal a headless baby doll torso dangling inside her womb, which can be rotated by a small metal handle on the mannequin's hip (figure 57). Attached to the

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<sup>414</sup> Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire*, 68.

baby doll's chest is a mirror – including mirrors in his works was a common practice for Kienholz – so that when viewers lean in for a closer look, they see their own reflections suspended in this body's interior.

Bunny is in a way reminiscent of the classical female nude depicted throughout history; she is laid out horizontally for viewing pleasure. Yet, the typical pleasure derived from viewing a recumbent female nude is complicated by this figure; her blatant sexuality and fragmented body creates tension and discomfort, as evidenced by the manner in which the work initially was viewed by some. For example, in 1963, Kienholz was invited to exhibit in a show entitled “Art at Mid-Century” at San Fernando Valley State College (later California State University, Northridge). During the installation of the show, the Chairman of the Fine Arts Division, Don E. Sudlow, saw Bunny and decided that the work was indecent, pornographic, and “indefensible in a public, tax-supported institution where young children may visit,”<sup>415</sup> resulting in school administrators withdrawing it from the exhibition before the show opened. Controversy ensued concerning the school's censorship of the work; the other artists included pulled their works in protest and the show closed after only three days.<sup>416</sup>

Part of the charges that this work was indecent may have stemmed from Bunny's overt sexuality (such as her prominent patch of pubic hair, typically not featured on

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<sup>415</sup> Gerald Nordland, “‘Bunny Bunny’ – Not So Funny,” *Frontier* (May 1963): 20.

<sup>416</sup> Gerald Nordland remarked: “A narrow, nervous and pathetic leadership destroyed a worthy program, demeaned an educational institution, maligned a sincere artist and provided clear evidence of fundamental misunderstanding of the very nature of democratic procedures and honest educational policy.” *Ibid.*, 21. Art critic, Henry Seldis, noted at the time: “At issue here is not the ‘good taste’ – or lack of it – in Kienholz’ work, but the withdrawal by campus authorities of an invitation issued by the college art department. This is regrettable, even to those of us who have no admiration for this artist’s work.” Henry J. Seldis, “Area Art Centers Buzzing Over ‘Censorship’ Row,” *Los Angeles Times* (22 March 1963): IV, p. 6.

classical female nudes throughout history), which through its unconventional representation ultimately created a specimen to be examined, as well as possibly an object of desire. In contrast to a classical figure, Bunny appears grotesque – her body is open, fragmented, and her genitals are emphasized. Bunny's existence as a passive and powerless object (which is what bunnies tend to be) is further accentuated by her lack of arms, upper torso, and lower legs. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have discussed the grotesque body, stating:

The classical statue has no openings or orifices whereas grotesque costume and masks emphasize the gaping mouth, the protuberant belly and buttocks, the feet and the genitals. In this way the grotesque body stands in opposition to the bourgeois individualist conception of the body, which finds *its* image and legitimation in the classical. The grotesque body is emphasized as a mobile, split, multiple self, a subject of pleasure in processes of exchange....<sup>417</sup>

Certainly, the mainstream viewing audience did not find its image and legitimation in a figure such as Bunny, as evidenced by the charges of obscenity. Yet, by emphasizing its distinction from the viewer while simultaneously exposing its interior and exterior, this work underscored the manner in which the female body can be objectified. While an exaggeration of mainstream imagery, and even soft-core pornography, this work also pointed to the degradation to which women's bodies often were subjected in that, although Bunny is not necessarily a "subject of pleasure," the "process of exchange" is evidenced here: the exchange and commodification of a woman's sexuality.

An aspect that cannot be overlooked is the work's title, which could have been a reference to the "bunnies" featured in Playboy magazine. Like the animals for which they are named, these women engage often in sexual activity (at least, in the

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<sup>417</sup> Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 22.

reader's/viewer's fantasy), and are cute, passive, and harmless. For the price of Playboy, the reader/viewer not only purchased the magazine, he purchased the virtual company of the women presented in its pages. Many of the images were accompanied with text that introduced the reader to the photographed woman, most evidently seen in the centerfold layout.<sup>418</sup> The featured “bunny” of the month was presented in several photographs. The smaller, side images depicted the “bunny” engaged in various activities that she supposedly enjoyed, while the centerfold image (big and in color) presented her nude or partially nude body to the viewer.<sup>419</sup> These introductions to the “bunnies” made the women appear to be girls-next-door as well as sexual commodities to be purchased, consumed, and then discarded.

Richard Keller Simon has noted that Playboy “is at once the most successful, the most respectable, and the most complex of girlie magazines, *clean and dirty at the same time* [italics mine], radical and conservative, liberating and repressive, serious and profoundly ridiculous.”<sup>420</sup> Bunny appears to make “fun” of the supposed respectability and “cleanliness” associated with this “dirty” magazine. Ironically, there is nothing “funny” about Bunny, as the full title would seem to suggest – Bunny, Bunny, You’re So Funny. Instead, the “bunny” Kienholz offered the viewer, while overtly sexualized, is

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<sup>418</sup> British artist Richard Hamilton wrote in 1961: “It is the *Playboy* ‘Playmate of the month’ pull-out pin-up which provides us with the closest contemporary equivalent of the odalisque in painting.” Richard Hamilton, “For the Finest Art, Try Pop,” (1961) in Harrison and Wood, eds., *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, 727. Also see Richard Keller Simon, *Trash Culture: Popular Culture and the Great Tradition* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999), who examines *Playboy* in relation to the history of the female nude throughout Western art. In addition, see Torre, “A Woman Looks At the Girly-Girly Magazines,” for a contemporaneous female perspective on *Playboy*.

<sup>419</sup> Early on, the centerfold often hinted at nudity rather than presenting full exposure of the woman’s body. For example, in the February 1958 issue, the centerfold, Cheryl Kubert, is presented in her accompanying photos as an avid skier – she is shown polishing her ski boots and adjusting her goggles. In her centerfold image, she wears a large sweater that only partially reveals her nude body.

<sup>420</sup> Simon, *Trash Culture*, 101.

also disturbing and pathetic. In addition, there are no niceties or endearing introductions as with Playboy's bunnies. In fact, Bunny's steel wool pubic hair does not invite the touch and even could be harmful. Her sheet metal garter belt is not soft and delicate; rather, the hard material is more like a harness permanently attached to her body. Further, the dangling baby doll torso inside Bunny's body reminds us of what we would not see in pornographic representations of women – an explicit (though disturbing) reminder of the reproductive functions of a real, sexual female body, in which we are encouraged to engage by rotating the metal handle inserted into her hip, thus moving the doll and controlling the activity that occurs in her womb.<sup>421</sup>

In another work, Conversation Piece (1959, figure 58), Kienholz again examined the themes of degradation and disposability in relation to the female body. Addressing the treatment of Native Americans as well as the female body, this work recreated a young Native American girl's lower body – shot, stuffed, and hung on the wall like the dead body of a hunted animal. Her lower torso and moccasin-clad feet jut out from the framed work while her arms and hands – removed from her body and placed beneath her torso – serve as holders for the hunter's rifle. Viewed from this perspective, the focus of the hanging trophy is the figure's genitalia and arms, rendered useless by their removal from the body. Kienholz stated that this figure represented the "stuffed remains of an Indian girl raped by frontiersmen."<sup>422</sup> Contributing to the work's narrative, the title suggests that horrific historical events such as rape, murder, and genocide simply become

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<sup>421</sup> Kienholz's *Jane Doe* (1960, figure 33) can be seen in this same context. She defenselessly and passively exists as a victim with no arms or legs, while the viewer can lift her skirt, open her drawers, and examine her hidden contents.

<sup>422</sup> Walter Hopps, "Plates," in Kienholz, *Kienholz*, 72.

conversation pieces to be discussed in the comfort of the home. Typically, trophy pieces such as these proudly display animals that the hanger of the work hunted and executed. In Conversation Piece, the girl's body stands in for the animal – one that has been overpowered, captured, and killed. As with Bunny, this figure's head has been removed and only the lower torso is left. In addition to representing an easily disposed of life, this work also underscores the degradation that continues in death.

Kienholz also addressed the subjects of death, degradation, and sexuality in Roxys (1961, figure 59), his first environmental work (or, as he referred to it, tableau). With this work, Kienholz constructed a space into which the viewer must physically enter in order to experience the work. He defined a tableau as follows:

A tableau is a total thing. Each piece is related to all the others. Parts from one will show up in another one. A total thing like a toy or a piece of furniture will be taken apart and then those various parts will be used here and there and they are all related. They are not created individually. They are created as an entirety. I'm not trying to make a "happening." I'm not interested in that. I am interested in an environment.<sup>423</sup>

At first glance, Roxys appears to be a quite ordinary and conventional domestic interior of the 1940s, complete with time-specific furniture and memorabilia – the wall calendar and magazines establish the year as 1943. Yet, upon closer examination, viewers realize that they have entered a full-scale brothel and are surrounded by decomposing prostitutes comprised of skulls, doll and mannequin parts, and other found objects. The viewer (customer) enters through several adjoining, softly-lit rooms comfortably furnished with sofas, overstuffed chairs, tables, and dark, patterned rugs. Just as if we had entered a real

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<sup>423</sup> Secunda, "John Bernhardt, Charles Frazier, Edward Kienholz," 30. In reference to his tableaux, Kienholz also explained: "I always felt that if I provided an environment for people that they could go into, and that environment was not that totally strange to them, and if they made the connection that that environment they were in was called art, then it might be easier for them to understand art." See Weschler, *Edward Kienholz*, 356.

brothel, our senses are stimulated by the smells of disinfectant and cherry perfume, and the sounds of music playing on a functioning Wurlitzer jukebox. Real fish and plants add to the reality of the experience.

Roxys was first shown at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles on March 6, 1962. At the opening, Kienholz required that visitors attend in formal attire. He stated: “I wanted people to be on their very best behavior. No one should look down on the girls or feel superior to them.”<sup>424</sup> Encouraged to mingle with the working women who resided in Roxys, visitors became an integral part of the environment as they walked around drinking boilermakers, which were served as refreshments. Even after the opening, viewers were encouraged to sit on the couches, read the magazines and private letters of the prostitutes, and engage with the figures. As with all of his tableaux, Kienholz expected viewers to open drawers, look into cavities, and physically examine the works, as he has explained:

Tableaux are only a collection of freestanding pieces.... (They) take the viewer in, where he has to stop, touch, participate. It becomes a trail that commits a direction of thought. I try to disappear. The viewer may flee, but at some point he'll have to reckon with what he fled from. Or he stays and thinks it through. The scale interests me and the control that you can exercise.... They're fantasies. They're fantasies that are worked out.<sup>425</sup>

By actively engaging viewers in his tableaux, Kienholz complicated them in the social issues he put forth, as well as encouraged them to negotiate their own positionalities in relation to the subject matter, either as involved participants or as passive voyeurs.

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<sup>424</sup> Kienholz even hired a security guard to enforce the dress code. Pincus, “An Ode and an ‘Odious’ for Neo-Dada,” 54.

<sup>425</sup> Weschler, *Edward Kienholz*, 103-4.

Roxys houses numerous “prostitutes,” individuals typically treated by society as disposable. The mutilated, decayed, and worn figures of women appear to be corpses or, at the very least, barely-alive victims of either some crime or simply overuse and the passage of time. To create this collection of female figures, Kienholz substituted for their body parts objects normally not associated with the body. Significantly, the throwaway status of these women is underscored by the fact that they are mostly composed of discarded, waste materials and trash, which emphasizes their dirtiness and worthlessness. Their uncleanliness is further highlighted by the sharp contrast between their bodies and the environment in which they exist – a clean and orderly domestic-like interior that smells of disinfectant and perfume.

The first figure to greet viewers upon entrance into the brothel is The Madam (figure 60). This ominous creature, part human and part animal, is composed of a wigged boar’s skull attached to a clothed dress-form placed on a pedestal. Similar to the other figures in Roxys, she simultaneously appears to be both dead and alive, corresponding to Kienholz’s statement that “all my work has to do with living and dying, our human fear of death.”<sup>426</sup> As such, these women can be seen in terms of the “abject,” which, Julia Kristeva has argued, potentially poses a threat to repressive social systems: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”<sup>427</sup> With this in mind, the madam and her prostitutes exist in a state of

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid., 342.

<sup>427</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4. In addition, Susan Stewart has stated: “In anthropological and historical studies considerable attention has been focused on the ways in which such symbolic inversions present the world upside down, the categories and hierarchical arrangement of culture in a recognizable disorder. Theories of inversion have explained these symbolic phenomena as reaffirmations of cultural

abjection, not simply because they are unclean, but because their very existence disturbs system and order. Existing ambiguously somewhere between life and death, their decomposing and unstable bodies refuse to adhere to typical social standards. Further, these figures exude a sense of humanity and frailty in their degraded and vulnerable positions.

In addition, these figures' physical compositions also disturb identity and order. For example, The Madam is both human and animal (therefore violating physiological boundaries) while the other prostitutes also evade straightforward definitions regarding their physical structures, such as A Lady Named Zoa (figure 61), which is a tall vertical assemblage compiled of a doll's head and torso with a coin dispensing machine as an abdomen.<sup>428</sup> Kienholz's inclusion of a discarded, dirty, and disfigured doll seems to suggest the loss of innocence typically associated with childhood and the element of play. The coin machine rests on a fur-lined box (evocative of a vaginal cavity), with its lid opening downward. The lower half of Zoa's body is composed of a single mannequin's leg, which is caged inside a metal round stand with supporting thin legs. Significantly, this prostitute's purpose and existence is physically marked on her body – she becomes a sexualized money machine that is rendered powerless, trapped, and immobile.

The figures that reside in this reconstructed whorehouse should be considered in relation to Kienholz's perspective as he created this work:

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categories through learning, as mechanisms for change and revolution, and as 'safety valves' for an otherwise turbulent populace." Stewart, *On Longing*, 106.

<sup>428</sup> Kienholz's *A Lady Named Zoë* inspired the creation of *Roxys*. After completing this first work, he began creating a whole series of women that soon developed into the larger work. But, while working on the other figures, *A Lady Named Zoë* was sold to the dealer Virginia Dwan, who later refused to contribute it to the final work. As a result, Kienholz created a second work, *A Lady Named Zoa*, that was almost identical to *Zoë* and that Kienholz imagined as being her twin sister. See Pincus, *On a Scale*, 40.

When I decided to make a whorehouse, it was just a funny gesture or a funny idea. I wanted to make it as good as possible. So I went back in memory to going to Kellogg, Idaho, to whorehouses when I was a kid, and just being sort of appalled by the whole situation – not being able to perform because it was a really crummy, bad experience, a bunch of old women with sagging breasts that were supposed to turn you on, and like I say, it just didn't work right. So I took those feelings and the name from Las Vegas of a whorehouse that was there, a very famous one, which I'd never been in.... But later, when I decided to name my whorehouse Roxys, then I was really sorry that I hadn't been inside the original, I hadn't seen what the décor was like, what the ambience was like. So my Roxys is a combination of eighteen-year-old rememberings, blue movies, imagination, and whatever.<sup>429</sup>

Notably, Kienholz did not simply recreate the past; rather, he reinterpreted his memories, feelings, and imaginings to create a new environment that instead reflected his current perspective on his past experiences. As such, Roxys' figures become disposable stand-ins for the originals, while simultaneously existing as products of Kienholz's imagination and memories.

A perusal of the bodies that inhabit Roxys certainly suggests the “crummy” experience to which Kienholz referred. Instead of finding erotic, attractive women, we are introduced to degraded figures composed of trash. As another example, seated and covered with a red garment that opens to expose her body, Cockeyed Jenny is composed of a bedpan and a trashcan (figure 62).<sup>430</sup> Serving as receptacles for waste, these objects transform her body *into* a receptacle for waste, paralleling the act of prostitution and bringing to mind Yaeger's assertion that “waste is something that must be secreted away, hidden, a matter of attraction and shame.”<sup>431</sup> The surface of Jenny's body drips with a

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<sup>429</sup> Weschler, *Edward Kienholz*, 231-233.

<sup>430</sup> *Cockeyed Jenny*'s name referred to slang terminology describing a son's first visit to a brothel with his father. See Brooks, “Plates,” 90.

<sup>431</sup> Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire*, 87.

red-colored, sticky resin that appears to be blood. In contrast to these repellent elements, she wears high heels on her splayed mannequin legs and a black, lacy bra on her trashcan torso. When the wig-covered lid of her trashcan is opened, the word “love” is revealed – secreted away, this wasted love becomes a “matter of attraction and shame.”

Another work, Five Dollar Billy (figure 63), an unclothed mannequin, lies on her back, horizontally atop an old Victorian sewing machine with a foot pump that can be activated by the viewer. If viewers choose to activate the foot pump (therefore positioning themselves as “customers”), Billy undulates up and down as she lays there on her back. Further, in contrast to Jenny, who hides the word “love” inside, Billy openly sports the word “FUCK,” which is carved on the base on which the sewing machine stands. Her head, with its matted, unkempt hair, hangs off the end as if she is dead or unconscious. A squirrel crawls out of her chest and a white rose grows from her neck – both possible signs that we are observing a corpse. Shriveled and out-of-proportion to her body, Billy’s legs are crippled and useless (similar to Zoa, whose one leg appears to be caged by a metal trap).

Roxys, and in particular Five Dollar Billy, caused much controversy when it was exhibited at Kienholz’s solo exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1966.<sup>432</sup> Warren M. Dorn, the Los Angeles County Supervisor, wrote at the time: “I

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<sup>432</sup> Along with *Five Dollar Billy*, Kienholz’s *The Back Seat Doge ’38* (1964) created the biggest scandal. In 1966, Alfred Frankenstein wrote: “Not since the New York Armory Show of 1913 has there been so stormy a controversy over an exhibition of art as the one stirred up last week over the display of assemblages by Edward Kienholz at the Los Angeles County Museum.” Alfred Frankenstein, “Kienholz Stirs Up a Storm,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (3 April 1966): 23.

found... the house of prostitution repugnant. This kind of expression is not art in any sense as far as I am concerned.”<sup>433</sup> In a 1966 review, Alfred Frankenstein wrote:

What particularly enraged Supervisor Warren Dorn about Billie is that a loving couple named Fred Ulrich and Catherine Kleinbaum have carved their initials into her, if very discreetly; for this reason the figure will have to be displayed on a platform wide enough to prevent the public from seeing the offensive carving.<sup>434</sup>

After much debate, Kienholz eventually agreed to widen the base of Five Dollar Billy so that viewers had to stand further away from the work, making the word “FUCK” less obvious.<sup>435</sup> Although the work remained in the exhibition, Kienholz stated that he regretted the controversy because “now people would not come to see his works as art but as objects of sensational controversy.”<sup>436</sup>

In a 1963 review of a show at Iolas Gallery that featured Roxys, Dore Ashton stated: “[Kienholz’s] images are tough, vulgar and inherently shocking. Horrible, in fact.” She described the “girls”: “Their limbs are streaked, their bodies distorted, their faces (when they have faces – some are faceless) lacerated. The pleasant dream of comfy Roxy’s becomes a tawdry nightmare.” Referring to Kienholz as a “moralist to the core” with an “irrepressible puritanical bias,” Ashton posited that “he visits violence upon his subjects only to condemn violence.” Although she admitted that there were some elements about Roxys that gave “rise to something akin to art,” Ashton ended her article

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<sup>433</sup> Dorn stated this in a letter from March 17, 1966 to Edward W. Carter, President of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Board of Trustees. As quoted in Ayres, “Berman and Kienholz,” 11. Originally printed in Gerald D. Silk, “Ed Kienholz’s ‘Back Seat Dodge ’38,’” *Arts Magazine* 52 #5 (January 1978): 117.

<sup>434</sup> Frankenstein, “Kienholz Stirs Up a Storm,” 23.

<sup>435</sup> Kienholz also agreed to the posting of a guard at the door to *The Back Seat Dodge* so that it could be closed when minors were present.

<sup>436</sup> Frankenstein, “Kienholz Stirs Up a Storm,” 24.

on an indignant note: “[Kienholz] is a bitter, impatient nature expressing itself with a curious combination of humorless naiveté and rueful adult anger.”<sup>437</sup>

In another review of the same show, art critic Barbara Rose noted: “It was hideous, nightmarish, but unforgettable. I came away feeling I had witnessed a murder.”

She further observed:

I have ambivalent feelings about what [Kienholz] is doing: on the one hand I am impressed by the vividness of the experience, and on the other I suspect the trick that forces the reaction. It is after all virtually impossible not to respond empathetically to the mutilation of the human body.... But in the end I think Kienholz is on to something. Beneath the polite surface of our organized society is repressed unimaginable brutality, sadism and violence – the model boy from Kansas who shoots up his family, the senseless rapes and beatings that crowd the ads for space in our daily papers. This is where Kienholz finds his inspiration.<sup>438</sup>

Although she found Roxys to be hideous and nightmarish, Rose, unlike Ashton, still seemed to find something valuable in the viewing experience, which she linked to its social commentary.

As evidenced by these responses, Roxys' figures of women may create for some viewers a tension that simultaneously attracts and distances. Perhaps some of the aversion to these figures stemmed from the fact that they represented dirty and degraded female bodies. According to Laura Kipnis:

All bodily secretions are construed as dirty (tears are the exception), but menstrual fluids are even dirtier than the rest, possibly even lethal. The vagina is frequently associated with rot and decay, a gateway through which evil enters the world. In fact, the entire female body is frequently seen as a source of dangerous contagion, subject to bizarre taboos and superstitions, many of which persist into the present.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> Dore Ashton, “Ed Kienholz,” *Arts & Architecture* (March 1963): 6.

<sup>438</sup> Rose, “New York Letter,” 65.

<sup>439</sup> Kipnis, *The Female Thing*, 114.

Covered with a sticky resin that resembles blood, Roxys' women are deformed and broken. On the one hand, we are repulsed and have no desire to touch their viscous and soiled surfaces. Yet, on the other, it is almost impossible not to respond emotionally or physically to these women. It is difficult *not* to pump Billy's pedal; fascinated, yet disgusted, we want her to move for us. Similarly, we want to see what is inside Jenny; but, faced with her secret desire for love, we close the lid on her pathetic needs.

As Mary Douglas has established, dirt and the manner with which it is dealt is culturally symbolic. Historically, proper femininity has been defined through the manner in which a woman controls dirt, either domestically or bodily. A woman's inability to manage physical dirt often has been linked with her own morality and class.<sup>440</sup> In addition, the distancing of the body and the suppression of its natural functions have been associated historically with the rationality of the human mind.<sup>441</sup> Considered from this perspective, Roxys' women were certainly in need of both hygienic and moral containment.<sup>442</sup> Not only were they created from waste materials, they represented

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<sup>440</sup> See Cara Mertes, "There's No Place Like Home: Women and Domestic Labor," in *Dirt and Domesticity*, 58-73.

<sup>441</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White discuss this separation of rationality and embodiment in terms of class, arguing that, historically, this split has been a deliberate political strategy that enabled the bourgeoisie to separate themselves from the lower classes. They explained that "the bourgeois subject continuously defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as 'low' – as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating. Yet that very act of exclusion was constitutive of its identity. The low was internalized under the sign of negation and disgust. But disgust always bears the imprint of desire. These low domains, apparently expelled as 'Other,' return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination." Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 191.

<sup>442</sup> According to Elaine Tyler May: "Wartime ushered in a fear of all forms of nonmarital sexuality that had been dormant since the Progressive Era and that continued in the postwar years. This preoccupation ranged from a concern about prostitution and 'promiscuous' women to fierce campaigns against homosexuals and other 'deviants' in military as well as civilian life." May, *Homeward Bound*, 71. During World War II venereal disease was even associated with the "girl next door" in order to deter promiscuity, according to Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States Since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 164-165.

bodies out of control, irrational bodies that existed outside the acceptable boundaries of the social order. Privy to their pathetic desires, blatant sexuality, dripping body fluids, and the interiors of their bodies, viewers were invited to enter an uncivilized (and therefore, possibly, repulsive and threatening) world.

In the smallest of his tableau works, Illegal Operation (1962, figure 64), Kienholz again addressed the disposability of the sexualized female body. This work captures the horrific nature of an illegal abortion and illustrates the manner in which bodies that refused to obey the social order and its laws were treated. Centrally positioned, a metal shopping cart serves as the operating table on which lies a filthy sack filled with hardened cement that has oozed from a vaginal-like opening at its base. Underneath the cart sits a bedpan and a cooking pot, both of which are filled with rusty and dirty medical instruments. Also included in this scene are a bright red milking stool, a bucket filled with soiled rags, and a standing lamp whose shade bears a bloodied handprint. While most of Kienholz's works directly referenced or represented the human body, Illegal Operation diverged from this practice in that a body is only suggested. Similar to its title (which does not explicitly mention abortion), the cement-filled sack implicitly suggests the lifeless and violated body of a woman. The sack becomes a surrogate for the mutilated and degraded body abandoned in the aftermath of this traumatic act.

Significantly, during the 1950s, abortion was considered to be a social transgression and was linked with immorality.<sup>443</sup> Although in some cases available, legal

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<sup>443</sup> Elaine Tyler May stated: "Advocates of family planning endorsed contraception, but drew the line at abortion. Unlike contraceptives, which were promoted as a means of strengthening the family, abortion was considered a threat to sexual morality and family life. While contraception was the reward for the virtuous, abortion was the punishment for the immoral." May, *Homeward Bound*, 153. Also see Joseph Fletcher, *Medicine and Morals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954).

abortions were rare during this time and the majority of the performed abortions were illegally executed underground. Illegal abortions were done on an estimated 250,000 to 1 million women each year during the postwar years and, according to Elaine Tyler May, these abortions were responsible for an estimated 40 percent of all maternal deaths.<sup>444</sup> Based upon these statistics, although a woman may not have readily admitted to having had an abortion (or to knowing someone who had), this was certainly an issue of which most women were well aware. In fact, the issue of abortion was discussed in mainstream publications such as Newsweek, which reported the following statistics in 1958:

The biggest patron of the abortionist in the U.S. is not the unmarried girl, widow, or divorcee but the wife, especially the young bride under 20. Of all pregnancies among married women, only 66 per cent result in the birth of a child. The other 34 per cent are ended in equal proportion by miscarriage and abortion. By the age of 40, one in four (24 per cent) of the wives had abortions.<sup>445</sup>

Ultimately, Illegal Operation can be seen as a criticism of the government's attempts to control and repress the female body.<sup>446</sup> Notably, beginning in 1959, liberal politicians in California began to discuss the reformation of state laws that would make it easier for women to obtain legal abortions. The statute's proposal in 1961 to the state

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<sup>444</sup> May also noted that Alfred Kinsey reported in his 1953 study that "24 percent of the wives had had abortions by the time they were 40, and that almost 90 percent of premarital pregnancies were aborted." May, *Homeward Bound*, 153. Also see Paul Gebhard, et. al., *Pregnancy, Birth, and Abortion* (New York: Hoeber and Harper, 1958).

<sup>445</sup> "The Wed and Unwed," *Newsweek* (7 April 1958): 92. Also see "The Death of a Girl," *Time* (26 September 1955): 72, which described the suspicious death of a 22-year-old woman, the eventual determination that her death was the result of an "illegal operation," and the ensuing arrests of the involved parties. In addition, see "A Reno for Abortions?" *Time* (22 February 1954), which addressed the high rate of nonresidential legal abortions performed in Geneva, Switzerland, calling it "the abortion capital of western Europe."

<sup>446</sup> *Illegal Operation* was included in the 1966 Whitney Annual in New York. Reviewing the show, Michael Benedikt wrote that "certainly Edward Kienholz, with the disgusting pillows and pots and curettes and lamp of his *Illegal Operation* (all blood-stained) belongs among the eccentrics too, although his forms are not abstract. (Indeed, his is the most effective and unschmaltzy example of social criticism in the show.)" Benedikt, "Sculpture as Architecture," 82-85.

legislature led to a series of public hearings in southern California for the next three years.<sup>447</sup> Certainly, this work should be considered within this particular political and geographical climate in which it was conceptualized and created. Kienholz's close friend, Walter Hopps, stated that "Kienholz was known personally to abhor most instances of human abortion, although he strongly supported a woman's right to choose and disdained the governmental prohibitions that led to the squalid practices shown in this artwork."<sup>448</sup> When asked in a 1977 interview about this work, Kienholz responded:

I don't want to talk about The Illegal Operation.... Have you ever seen it in the flesh...? It's a lot of old history. And it's more personal. One thing I would say about The Illegal Operation is that I'm not sure what Art is – you know, Art, capital A-R-T – and I even don't care a hell of a lot about what Art is, but if there is such a thing as Art, and if I ever made a piece of Art, The Illegal Operation would be it. That's because it contains the kind of fury that is felt.... You see it and you feel it out of that piece.... I'm not sure how you could put emotion into an inanimate object, but that piece has emotion in it, for me and for other people – we bleed off of it.... It's primarily a woman's business. And the fact that we can legislate – we, out here someplace, can tell that person what to do with her body – is absolutely wrong.<sup>449</sup>

As this chapter has examined, the 1950s was a complex period during which a near-fetishistic fascination with sexuality and the female body proliferated; while, simultaneously, rigorous attempts were made to control and repress those same aspects of society. As Peter Schjeldahl has pointed out: "When you presume to constrict, divert, disguise, and otherwise finesse a primal drive, you give it the run of your imagination."<sup>450</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> The abortion reform was finally passed in 1967. See Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1984), specifically chapter four which addresses the reformation of California's abortion laws.

<sup>448</sup> Walter Hopps, *Edward Kienholz, 1954-1962* (Houston, TX: Menil Foundation, Inc., 1995), 13.

<sup>449</sup> As quoted in Greenfield, *Making Do or Making Art*, 21.

<sup>450</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, "Nothing On: Sex and the Victorians," *The New Yorker* (30 September 2002): 143.

Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz's works from this period certainly engaged this prevalent dialogue, addressing issues concerning sexual identity and objectification, as well as the commodification of the female body. Through their works, these artists, in their own ways, subverted pervasive attitudes towards the sexualized female body and, while not all of their works involved literal dirt, they all addressed figuratively dirty topics, such as rape, pornography, prostitution, sexual perversity and fetishism.

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## CONCLUSION

On the surface during the 1950s, the United States was presented (to itself and the world) in a very homogenous manner through images and ideologies that I have explored in this dissertation. During this time of middle-class growth and prosperity, the burgeoning consumer culture helped proffer images of happiness, wholeness, and cleanliness. In conjunction with the rise in consumerism, the Cold War climate also was integral to the period's embrace of domesticity, the family, and traditional and clearly demarcated gender roles. To be a patriotic American was not only to have a family and home but also to fill that home with as many consumer products as possible. In addition, during this uneasy postwar climate, popular culture emphasized lifestyles that privileged cleanliness and order, which also were often associated with the American values and ideals of integrity, health, freedom, and democracy.

Yet, these idealized images masked real conflicts that existed beneath the controlled and composed surface of society, tensions that revolved around politics, governmental controls, repressive gender constructs, and race. While there was a hegemonic image of orderliness and optimism that was being manufactured and presented in the dominant culture during the postwar period, there simultaneously existed counter-cultures that challenged the implicit notions that dirt either did not exist or was being successfully contained. The main goal of this dissertation has been to identify struggle and resistance during this period, specifically as evidenced in the works of Robert Rauschenberg, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, and Edward Kienholz.

Often, historians frame this period in art history as transitional, thereby overlooking its specific characteristics that distinguish it from other dominant movements. In addition, historians also tend to divide this period into a multitude of varying groups, thus obscuring the nature of the period as a whole. In this dissertation, I have demonstrated another perspective from which this art historical period can be examined. In addition to focusing on primary sources, I have examined the works created by these artists in relation to dirt theories, economics, popular culture, and sociological and gender studies. Further, this study has contextualized these works within the political and social environment of the 1950s. The fusion of traditional art historical methods and scholarship from a variety of disciplines presented throughout this study will serve as one possible model of how this period can be examined.

Conner's Homage to Minnie Mouse (1959, figure 65) can be understood as a concluding representation of the spirit of the works created by this group during the 1950s. Although individual in their approaches and producers of unique bodies of work, Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz all addressed common themes in their works, which shared a similar essence. Foremost, these artists commented through their works on prevalent ideologies embraced by mainstream culture and idealized representations of the family and gender constructions. Most often, they did so by appropriating these ideals and images in a manner that sullied what many Americans held sacred. Engaging issues related to politics, morality, social behavior, and the female body, Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz specifically drew from existing counter-cultures that candidly embraced violence, sexuality, and dirt in order to counter conventional accounts of the period and environments in which they lived.

Many of these elements are evident in Conner's Homage to Minnie Mouse. Composed of a large glass window covered with black silk chiffon, shredded and dirty lace, ripped nylons, and dark twine, this work is largely undecipherable, unless the viewer is within inches of the work. It is only after careful and close study that objects begin to appear from its murky depths: rope, a bra, fabric, newspaper fragments (one caption reads "London Sperm"), a sequined piece of material with a butterfly motif, wood, and string (among other ambiguous objects) are suspended behind the glass, while doll parts, 8mm film, window screening, jewelry, and a page from a book identifying flowers rests in front of the glass. A metal, pull-cord for a light hangs on the right-hand side of the work as if the viewer could reach over to illuminate the shadowy interior of the work. In viewing this work, our perceptions constantly shift; we are at once aware of what is visible and what is imperceptible beneath the surface. Significantly, this was an aspect that was revisited continuously in all of these artists' works and particularly, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, as a means to interrogate the manufactured, idealized surface of society that often masked shifting and complex realities.

Notably, this work's title acknowledges one of the most innocuous and innocent cartoon characters of the 1950s, while appearing to honor a much darker character instead. Rather than visually signifying an icon of happiness, childhood, and family vacations at Disneyland,<sup>451</sup> Homage to Minnie Mouse instead engages objects often associated with mystery, sexuality, and a subtle sense of violence; elements more aligned with characters or subject matter from a darker, alternative culture. In a sense, this work merges conflicting images that were mass marketed during that time: a uniquely

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<sup>451</sup> Disneyland opened in Anaheim, California in 1955.

American and family-oriented product that represented wholesome, clean entertainment versus the murky, erotic, urban underworld of pulp fiction, film noir, and crime novels. Although Minnie is a mouse, she is nonetheless female, and her presence (and sexuality) is suggested uncannily with black silk, shredded and dirty lace, ripped nylons, a bra, twine, and rope; thus Conner's "homage," to not only Minnie Mouse but to everything this mass marketed product symbolized, is dark and dirtied.

As evidenced by Conner's irreverent and enigmatic Homage, the works created by the artists addressed in this dissertation potentially unsettled and distanced viewers through shock and confrontation, which I believe was directly tied to their references to and uses of dirt. In creating their works, these artists most often did not use detritus that had totally disintegrated; rather, they used objects and images that were still recognizable and that still referred to their past uses. Mary Douglas has pointed out the dangerous aspect of dirt that still retains its identity:

To deal with dirt first. In the course of any imposing of order, whether in the mind or in the external world, the attitude to rejected bits and pieces goes through two stages. First they are recognizably out of place, a threat to good order, and so are regarded as objectionable and vigorously brushed away. At this stage they have some identity: they can be seen to be unwanted bits of whatever it was they came from, hair or food or wrappings. This is the stage at which they are dangerous; their half-identity still clings to them and the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by their presence. But a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognized as dirt. In the end, all identity is gone. The origin of the various bits and pieces is lost and they have entered into the mass of common rubbish. It is unpleasant to poke about in the refuse to try to recover anything, for this revives identity. So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous. It does not even create ambiguous perceptions since it clearly belongs in a defined place, a rubbish heap of one kind or another.<sup>452</sup>

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<sup>452</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 160.

I quote this passage at length because it helps illuminate why the assemblage and collage works of these artists posed a tacit threat to the social order in the 1950s. By retaining their “half-identity,” the discarded objects they used became part of an implicit comment on the world from which they were salvaged and, importantly, they impaired the clarity of that supposedly well-ordered world.

Throughout this dissertation I have examined the myriad ways in which these artists employed dirt. Chapter one addressed the political and social climate of the 1950s, particularly in relation to the Cold War atmosphere and its contribution to a culture of cleanliness. Through rhetoric and imagery, a culture was created that linked ideal American values such as freedom, democracy, and consumerism with cleanliness and order. Through their uses of dirt in their works, the artists addressed in this dissertation engaged the politics and dominant ideologies of the time, and, in a sense, labeled them dirty. Further, their works can be understood in relation to the manner in which societies in general are structured by dirt, and to a society’s efforts to relegate dirt to its margins. When viewed from this perspective, it is understandable that these artists would pull from the dirt in the margins of society in order to comment on mainstream ideologies, which often attempted to deny the existence of dirt. In addition, this chapter explored the artistic methods employed by these artists, particularly their use of assemblage and collage. In their use of society’s actual by-products (its dirt), Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz created works that engaged a climate of waste and disposal, one that was specifically connected to a drastic increase in mass consumption.

Chapter two addressed these artists’ references to and uses of dirt in terms of their artistic environment, particularly in relation to the Abstract Expressionist movement. On

a general level, a comparison can be made – and has been noted certainly by other critics – between the messy techniques of the Abstract Expressionists, many of whom created ostensibly disorderly works, and those of the artists discussed herein. Yet, my examination in this chapter delved deeper into the subject of dirt, specifically its connections to violence, repressive governmental controls, and constructions of masculinity, particularly in relation to the Cold War climate. While approaching these themes from a broad social and political perspective, I also related them to the dominance of Abstract Expressionism and explored how this movement often was associated with violence and hypermasculinity, albeit in a romanticized and exaggerated manner. By integrating these prevalent social issues of the time into their works, Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz questioned, both directly and indirectly, the power and dominance of Abstract Expressionism.

Chapter three explored the manner in which the artists addressed in this dissertation engaged the concepts of dirt in relation to the subjects of family and domesticity, which were embraced as part of Cold War propaganda as a means to win the war and defeat communism. Understood as such, representations in the mass media and popular culture, which included movies, television, magazines, and books, idealized and venerated the family and the role that each family member played. In addition, the home was portrayed and marketed as a site of safety, security, and a space in which good American values were to be instilled. Yet, in their portrayals of these same sacredly-held institutions, Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz dirtied those idealized representations. Not only did they present imagery in opposition to conventional gender constructions of the time – for example, Kienholz’s defiled and dismembered Jane Doe

(1960, figure 32) or Conner's dried-up, dusty, and disillusioned Bride (1960, figure 36) – they created representations of domestic spaces or used domestic objects that appeared disgusting or potentially dangerous, such as Conner's Couch (1963, figure 41). In so doing, these artists critiqued reigning notions regarding the ideal family and the space that it occupied, suggesting the existence of other possible domestic realities, such as unfulfilled and repressed homemakers, emasculated and emotionally-detached men, domestic violence, and homosexuality – certainly things that were often hinted at in the mainstream but largely represented as only existing in the subcultures and margins of society.

Through an examination of the manner in which the sexualized female body was represented in the media (both mainstream and marginal) and in which the female body often was subjected to degradation and understood as a disposable commodity, Chapter four explored the concept of dirt on a number of levels. Rauschenberg, Conner, DeFeo, and Kienholz engaged, in various ways, representations of the sexualized female body in their works and, while not all of their works involved literal dirt (such as DeFeo's polished photcollages, figures 23 and 24), they all addressed figuratively dirty topics. Throughout history the female body and its fluids often have been considered dirty and taboo. With this as a basis, the themes examined by these artists in their works also have been considered quite sordid and immoral, such as rape, pornography, prostitution, sexual perversity and fetishism. Arguing that these subjects not only existed but were topics of discussion and debate during the 1950s, this chapter explored the manner in which these artists in their works acknowledged both the presence and repression of these aspects of sexuality, particularly in relation to the female body.

One way to expand this study would be to relate my explorations to a broader group of artists from this period. Some of the most apparent artists would be those already linked with the artists addressed in this dissertation, such as Joan Brown, Wally Hedrick, Wallace Berman, Fred Mason, or Jim Dine. Certainly, these artists had distinctive artistic approaches but it would be interesting to examine the concepts I have outlined in this dissertation in relation to their works from this period and explore the different directions in which they took these influences. In addition, the concepts explored in this study could be examined in relation to some of the artists associated with the Nouveaux Réalistes, such as Arman and the American expatriate Niki de Saint-Phalle. Although these artists were based in France, they maintained rapports with artists in the United States and an examination of their references to dirt and violence in their works in relation to their own political and social environment would provide an interesting comparison with artists working in the United States.

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