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Subversive Humor:  
The Performance Art of Hannah Wilke, Eleanor Antin, and Adrian Piper

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

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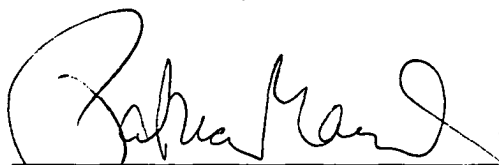
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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

For Felix. . .

## PREFACE

Question: How many feminists does it take to screw  
in a light bulb?

Answer: That's not funny.

The Women's Movement served as a major catalyst for feminist art in the United States during the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> It produced a "carnavalesque" moment when groups of women sought to promote political and social change. Although anger often inspired socio-politically concerned art of the 1970s, there were complicated notions of humor operating at the same time. The majority of historical and critical writings that discuss 70s feminist art, however, focus on the anger, while the humor is either skirted or ignored.<sup>2</sup> This dissertation offers an alternative reading by emphasizing the humorous, yet serious strategies of feminist art from the 1970s.

Humor becomes a feminist weapon in the hands of the "unruly" woman. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, carnival offers a potential site for social and linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> I broadly define feminist art as work produced in the spirit of feminism, which, of course, is really feminisms. Although achieving some sort of change was usually the objective for 70s feminist artists, the art produced was not a monolithic endeavor nor did the artists make up a unified group. The art dealt with many diverse and often conflicting issues. Artists reflected and contributed to the various discourses and disagreements that occupied American feminists in general. The artistic and political debates included ideas concerning racial stereotyping, homophobia, central core imagery, reclaiming the great goddess, the gaze, objectifying the body, nudity, pleasure, craft, quality, the canon, collaborative work, public art, East versus West Coasts, power, and the artist-genius. For a compilation and description of the different art/feminist panels that occurred during the second half of the 70s and beyond, see Judy Seigel, ed. *Mutiny and the Mainstream: Talk that Changed Art, 1975-1990* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1992). See also Hilary Robinson, ed., *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000* (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> There have been some notable exceptions. For instance, Jo Anna Isaak curated an exhibition of women artists in 1982 called "The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter."

transgressions, for historically it produced a time when the populace used humor to rebel against established norms and authority of all kinds.<sup>3</sup> Humor serves as the tool for potential social/cultural change.

I ascribe such carnivalesque qualities to women's performance art of the 1970s, as seen, for instance, in Linda Montano's work. Upon becoming frustrated with conventional art practices, Montano sought to blur the boundaries between her life and her art and turned to performance art. She explored various personalities for her ongoing project, *Art in Everyday Life* (1969-1981), which included the persona Chicken Woman.<sup>4</sup> The alternative identity afforded Montano the freedom to deal publicly with personal subject matters. To construct this alter-ego, Montano donned a strapless, fluffy, toile dress, large white wings, and a helmet-like cap covered with feathers. The costume was completed by a thick feathery-looking neck scarf and stage make-up. On and off throughout much of the 1970s, Montano might be seen dressed as such — perhaps dancing along the streets of New York, or across the Golden Gate Bridge, or fluttering around various established art spaces. In a photograph from *Chicken Dance* (1972) Montano spreads her wings as she seemingly glides past amused and intrigued pedestrians on a crowded San Francisco sidewalk (figure 1). Outrageous humor creates a disruptive communal spectacle that draws

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<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky, with a foreword by Krystyna Pomorska and a prologue by Michael Holquist (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Here Bakhtin writes: "Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed," 10. Also important are Bakhtin's ideas on the novelization of language in M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> The Chicken Woman led to experiments with other personalities, including: Dr. Jane Gooding (shaman and neurosurgeon), Sister Rose Augustine, Kay Rogers (Blues singer), Hilda Mahler (karate black belt and Olympic swimmer). See Linda Montano, *Art in Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1981).

observers into the evolving performance.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Montano produces a sense of carnival.

Montano is only one example of a performance artist who uses a strategy of humor in order to transgress various personal, public, and artistic boundaries. The humor is not necessarily “funny,” but instead provides a vehicle to communicate private, critical, or controversial ideas in a more appealing manner than might an overtly angry or didactic delivery. This dissertation uses case studies to closely examine the different types of humor at work in American feminist performance art of the 1970s, particularly in the production of Hannah Wilke, Eleanor Antin, and Adrian Piper. Their humor is a critical aspect of the period’s spirit — for their 70s art becomes part of the carnivalesque context that simultaneously fostered such feminist productions and expanded as a result of them.

\* \* \*

The first chapter of this dissertation offers an overview of critical issues and contexts that are necessary to understanding the entire paper. It introduces the United States during the 1970s and the integral concept of the “Carnavalesque Diaspora.” Humor is analyzed in relation to women, especially to feminists, which leads to the key premise: that feminist performance art is carnivalesque and reflects the carnival-like environment of the 70s Women’s Movement in general. The thesis is subsequently supported through specific case studies based on the art of Wilke, Antin, and Piper.

The second chapter concerns Wilke’s clever puns and humorous parody, which comprised an ongoing artistic dialogue between Wilke and Marcel Duchamp.

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<sup>5</sup> For this dissertation, “spectacle” is understood as excessive visibility, not necessarily as a function of commodity culture, as Guy Debord defines it in *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1970).

Wilke's mid-70s work *S.O.S — Starification Object Series*, demonstrates her multifaceted use of language in connection to the body. The title of this work simultaneously references ritual scarring, the objectification of famous figures (stars), and an urgent plea for help. The interaction is both playful and critical in its parody of femininity's stereotypical representations. Bakhtin sees such linguistic ambiguities as key to the interactive, always changing nature of "dialogical" language. This chapter explores the way transgressive word-play suggests the disruption of language and its respective social orders, while it also expresses the pleasure and play of language in relation to the body.

To be liminal is to disrupt binary categories, to connect categories by making boundaries fluid. The third chapter highlights Antin's exploration of identity through liminality. Antin masqueraded as four alternating personae throughout the 1970s: the King, the Nurse, the Ballerina, and briefly, the Black movie star. She dressed-up in seemingly "silly" costumes and assumed the personality associated with whatever role the costume suggested. Antin did not "pass" as any of her personae, but rather points to her co-option of these roles and her ability to put them on and off at will. Posturing as another gender, class, profession, or race, Antin defines identity as ambiguous, contradictory, and constructed. This chapter analyzes her humorous efforts to muddle boundaries through "drag," which results in a carnivalesque confusion of identity and its power structures.

Using humor as a means for public criticism and confrontation is a historic tactic. The fourth chapter examines the way Piper's use of humor as a political strategy became increasingly confrontational and deliberately grotesque. She shifted the exploration of identity away from playful caricatures by raising suspicions associated with contamination and strangeness. Piper conducted a series of public performances that involves different levels of humor, irrationality, and anxiety. Via carnivalesque gesture, Piper exploited her identity as an accepted member of society

and socially displaced herself. Her later performances often use sardonic antagonism, which forces Piper's audience to recognize socially embedded sexual and racial prejudices. As a result, her transgressive ideas and actions can evoke laughter and fear simultaneously, in true carnival-like fashion.

Rather than a succinct conclusion, I close with a brief look at feminist art from the 1980s. Linkage of the 1970s with more recent artistic production is crucial not only because it removes 70s feminist work from its artistic ghetto, but also because it contradicts notions that the tremendously successful, ironic women artists of the 1980s burst onto the art scene without art historical predecessors. The recognition of radical strategies of humor in the work of 1970s women artists helps to establish a vital relationship between generations of feminists who typically have been polarized by art historians.



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                           |     |
|-------------------------------------------|-----|
| PREFACE .....                             | v   |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....                     | x   |
| LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....               | xiv |
| Chapter One: INTRODUCTION .....           | 1   |
| I The 1970s                               |     |
| II Carnivalesque Diaspora                 |     |
| III Humor                                 |     |
| IV The 1970s American Art Scene           |     |
| V (Feminist) Performance as Carnivalesque |     |
| VI Case Studies                           |     |
| Chapter Two: HANNAH WILKE .....           | 43  |
| I Introduction                            |     |
| II Play                                   |     |
| III Wordplay                              |     |
| IV Parody                                 |     |
| V Spectacle                               |     |
| VI Ambiguity                              |     |
| Chapter Three: ELEANOR ANTIN .....        | 106 |
| I Introduction                            |     |
| II Liminality                             |     |
| III Uncrowning                            |     |
| IV Spoof                                  |     |
| V Tragicomedy                             |     |

|                                      |     |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Chapter Four: ADRIAN PIPER .....     | 168 |
| I Introduction                       |     |
| II Xenophobia                        |     |
| III The Grotesque                    |     |
| IV The Sardonic                      |     |
| V A Bridge, Rather than a Conclusion |     |
| ILLUSTRATIONS .....                  | 217 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY .....                   | 291 |

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Linda Montano, *Chicken Dance* (from Chicken Woman Series) 1972, performance. Reprinted from Broude and Garrard, eds., 165.
2. Photograph from Women's Strike for Equality March, August 26, 1970, New York City. Photograph: William E. Sauro. Reprinted from Levine and Lyons, eds., 28.
3. Photograph from Women's Strike for Equality March, August 26, 1970, New York City. Photograph: William E. Sauro. Reprinted from Levine and Lyons, eds., 29.
4. Marie Severin, *Ms.* magazine cover from November 1973. Reprinted from Wacks, *SMIRK*, 4.
5. Anne Gauldin and Denise Yarfitz, *The Waitress Goddess Diana*, 1978, performance. Photograph: Maria Karras, reprinted from Broude and Garrard, eds., 183.
6. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*, 1974, 28 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in., Performalist Self-Portraits with Les Wollam. Photograph: eeva-inkeri. ©2003 Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.
7. Hannah Wilke, *Having a talent isn't worth much . . .*, 1976, proposed subway ad for The School of Visual Art, black and white photograph, 45 x 30 in. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 46.
8. Hannah Wilke, *My Mother*, 1978-1983, black and white photograph with poem, 40 x 52 in. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 88.
9. Hannah Wilke, *Dancing in the Dark*, 1978, Performalist Self-Portrait with Donald Goddard. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 92.
10. Hannah Wilke, *Three Goddesses, Three Goddards*, 1976, four black and white photographs, Performalist Self Portrait with Donald Goddard. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 95.
11. Hannah Wilke, *Page of Notes*, 1978, blue ink over pencil. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 6.
12. Hannah Wilke, *Intercourse with. . .*, 1977, performance. Reprinted from *Hannah Wilke: 1940-1993*, 141.
13. Hannah Wilke, *Intercourse with. . .*, 1977, still from videotape. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 25.

14. Hannah Wilke, *Teasle Cushion*, 1967, terra cotta, liquitex, and Astroturf. 9 3/4 x 7 in. Photograph: Lisa Kahane. Reprinted from Hansen, Dybbøl, and Goddard, eds., 10.
15. Hannah Wilke, *Venus Envy, with Richard Hamilton*, 1980, unique Polaroid photographs, 3 3/4 x 13 in. Photograph: D. James Dee. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 52.
16. Hannah Wilke, *I Object: Memoirs of A Sugargiver*, 1977-1978, two cibachromes, each 24 x 16 in, Performalist Self-Portraits with Richard Hamilton. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 132.
17. Marcel Duchamp, *Etant donnés: 1 La Chute d'eau, 2 Le Gaz d'éclairage*, 1946-1966, mixed media assemblage, 95 1/2 x 70 in. Reprinted from Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, 193.
18. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*, 1974, performance. Reprinted from *Hannah Wilke: 1940-1993*, 145.
19. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*, 1974, 1 of 28 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in., Performalist Self-Portraits with Les Wollam. Photograph: eeva-inkeri. ©2003 Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Charlatt. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.
20. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*, 1974, 1 of 28 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in., Performalist Self-Portraits with Les Wollam. Photograph: eeva-inkeri. ©2003 Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Charlatt. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.
21. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*, 1974, 1 of 28 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in., Performalist Self-Portraits with Les Wollam. Reprinted from *Hannah Wilke: 1940-1993*, 39.
22. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*, 1974, 1 of 28 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in., Performalist Self-Portraits with Les Wollam. Reprinted from *Hannah Wilke: 1940-1993*, 39.
23. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*, 1974, 1 of 28 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in., Performalist Self-Portraits with Les Wollam. Photograph: eeva-inkeri. ©2003 Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Charlatt. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.
24. Hannah Wilke, *Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism*, 1977, silkscreen on Plexiglas, 36 x 27 1/2, Performalist Self-Portrait with Les Wollam. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 46.
25. Hannah Wilke, *My Count-ry 'Tis of Thee*, 1976, performance. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 69.
26. Hannah Wilke, *Lincoln Memorial*, 1976, kneaded erasers on postcard on painted wood. Photograph: Dennis Cowley, reprinted from Hansen, Dybbøl, and Goddard, eds., 26.

27. Hannah Wilke, *My Count-ry 'Tis of Thee*, 1976, self-portrait as goddess photo murals (10 feet, 9 inches tall), chewing gum on board, and museum architecture. Photograph: Hannah Wilke, reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 70.
28. Hannah Wilke, *Through the Large Glass*, 1976, still from video. Reprinted from *Hannah Wilke: 1940-1993*, 30.
29. Hannah Wilke, *Through the Large Glass*, 1976, still from video. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 133.
30. Hannah Wilke, *Philly*, 1976-1978, black and white photograph, 27 1/8 x 40 in. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 36.
31. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series, Mastication Box*, 1974-1975, chewing gum, black and white photographs, playing instructions, and playing cards, 12 x 8 1/2 x 2 in. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 123.
32. Black and white photograph of Marcel Duchamp and unidentified woman at the Pasadena Art Museum during Duchamp's retrospective exhibition, 1963. Photograph: Julian Wasser, reprinted from D'Harnoncourt and McShine, eds., 130.
33. Hannah Wilke, *C'est la vie rrose*, 1976, still from film. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 133.
34. Hannah Wilke, *Portrait of the Artist in His Studio*, 1971, Performalist Self-Portrait. Reprinted from Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 50.
35. Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (detail), 1972, 144 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in. Photograph: Peter Moore, reprinted from Broude and Garrard, 199.
36. Eleanor Antin, *Representational Painting*, 1971, still from videotape. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 45.
37. Eleanor Antin, *The Bearded Ballerina*, 1974, still from videotape. Courtesy of the artist.
38. Eleanor Antin, *Representational Painting*, 1971, still from videotape. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.
39. Eleanor Antin, *The King's Meditations*, 1974, wash, ink, and chalk on Diazo paper, 17 1/2 x 18 in. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.
40. Eleanor Antin, *The King*, 1972, still from vidcotape. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 63.
41. Eleanor Antin, *The King*, 1972, still from videotape. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 63.
42. Eleanor Antin, *The King of Solana Beach*, 1974-1975, one of eleven black and white photographs, mounted on board, with two text panels, each 6 x 9 in. Photograph: Philip Steinmetz, reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 68.

43. Eleanor Antin, *Battle of the Bluffs*, 1977, performance. Courtesy P.S. 1, New York.
44. Eleanor Antin, *Portrait of the King*, 1972, black and white photograph, mounted on board, 13 3/4 x 9 3/4 in. Reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 65.
45. Eleanor Antin, *Caught in the Act: Choreography I — Center Stage* (Short Tutu), 1973, four of eight black and white photographs, mounted on board, each 7 x 4 3/4 in. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 75.
46. Eleanor Antin, *The Adventures of a Nurse I and II*, 1976, still from videotape. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 90.
47. Eleanor Antin, *The Adventures of a Nurse I and II*, 1976, still from videotape. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 90.
48. Eleanor Antin, *The Adventures of a Nurse I and II*, 1976, still from videotape. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 91.
49. Eleanor Antin, *The Adventures of a Nurse I and II*, 1976, still from videotape. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 91.
50. Eleanor Antin, *The Adventures of a Nurse I and II*, 1976, still from videotape. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 93.
51. Eleanor Antin, *The Adventures of a Nurse I and II*, 1976, still from videotape. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 93.
52. Eleanor Antin, "The Gentleman's Game is the Lady's Gain," from *The Angel of Mercy: The Nightingale Family Album*, 1977, one of twenty-five tinted gelatin-silver prints, mounted on paperboard, each 18 x 13 in. Reprinted from Antin, *The Angel of Mercy*, n. p.
53. Eleanor Antin, "In the Trenches Before Sebastopol," from *The Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in the Crimea*, 1977, one of thirty-eight tinted gelatin-silver prints, mounted on paper, each 30 3/8 x 22 in. Reprinted from Antin, *The Angel of Mercy*, n. p.
54. Eleanor Antin, "War Games," from *The Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in the Crimea*, 1977, one of thirty-eight tinted gelatin-silver prints, mounted on paper, each 30 3/8 x 22 in. Reprinted from Antin, *The Angel of Mercy*, n. p.
55. Eleanor Antin, *Angel of Mercy*, 1977, still from videotape, 1981 version of the live performance. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 106.
56. Eleanor Antin, *Angel of Mercy*, 1977, still from videotape, 1981 version of the live performance. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 107.
57. Eleanor Antin, *Angel of Mercy*, 1977, still from videotape, 1981 version of the live performance. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 108.
58. Eleanor Antin, *Angel of Mercy*, 1977, still from videotape, 1981 version of the live performance. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 109.



59. Eleanor Antin, *Angel of Mercy*, 1977, still from videotape, 1981 version of the live performance. Photograph reprinted from Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 107.
60. Eleanor Antin, *Angel of Mercy*, 1977, still from videotape, 1981 version of the live performance. Photograph: Debra Wacks.
61. Adrian Piper, *Untitled Performance at Max's Kansas City*, 1970, performance. Photograph: Rosemary Mayer, reprinted from *Adrian Piper, seit 1965*, 120.
62. Adrian Piper, *Food For the Spirit* (detail), 1971, performance. Photograph reprinted in Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight I*, 54.
63. Adrian Piper, *Writing the Critique of Pure Reason*, 1975, performance. Photograph reprinted in Cathcart, 59.
64. Adrian Piper, *Catalysis IV*, 1970, performance. Photograph: Rosemary Mayer. Reprinted in Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight I*, 43.
65. Adrian Piper, preparing for *The Mythic Being*, 1974, still from film *Other Than Art's Sake*. Reprinted from brochure for video "Not For Sale," directed by Laura Cottingham, front page.
66. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being, Cycle 1: 6/6/70*, 1974, altered photograph with added text. Reprinted in Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight I*, 110.
67. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being, Cycle 1: 4/12/68*, 1974, page from the *Village Voice*. Reprinted from *Adrian Piper, seit 1965*, 174.
68. Adrian Piper, *Five Full Thought Balloons*, 1973, line drawing in text. Reprinted from Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight I*, 106.
69. Adrian Piper, *Untitled Photograph of Adrian Piper*, no date. Reprinted from gallery announcement for Piper exhibit at Thomas Erben Gallery, 2001.
70. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women #1 of 3*, 1975, performance. Photograph: James Gutmann, reprinted from *Adrian Piper, seit 1965*, 194.
71. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I Embod*, 1975. Oil crayon drawing on 5 x 7 in. photograph, enlarged to 18 x 24 in. poster. Photograph reprinted from *Adrian Piper, seit 1965*, 187.
72. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: Getting Back*, 1975, performance. Photograph: James Gutmann, reprinted from *Adrian Piper, seit 1965*, 195.
73. Adrian Piper, *Funk Lessons*, 1983, performance. Photograph reprinted from *Adrian Piper, seit 1965*, 235.
74. Adrian Piper, *Funk Lessons*, 1983, performance. Photograph reprinted from *Adrian Piper, seit 1965*, 235.

## Chapter One: Introduction

### I The 1970s

As [the Seventies] started rolling, strange times — *better* times . . . began happening. The stark, well-defined straight-versus-freak world of the Sixties fell out of focus — in favor of the freaks. The social loosening and unbridling and unbuckling for which so many had prayed and marched and shouted and smoked was becoming a reality.

— Ashley Kahn<sup>1</sup>

Without a doubt, the full integration of women into the American workplace remains the most significant social movement of the Seventies.

— Edelstein and McDonough<sup>2</sup>

The 1970s in the United States was replete with such contradictions and extremes as war and disco music, recession and decadence, as well as socio-political action and egotism. The Vietnam War dominated American foreign policy during the first part of the decade, and with it the continuation of the grassroots anti-war movement that had started in the 1960s. National politics were burdened with Watergate and the knowledge that the Office of the Presidency was as vulnerable to corruption and greed as any other aspect of American life. Then came

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<sup>1</sup> Ashley Kahn, "Introduction: The Power of Ten," in *Rolling Stone: The Seventies*, ed. Ashley Kahn, Holly George-Warren, and Shawn Dahl (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998) 6. Unless otherwise noted in this paper, all italics in quotes are the author's original.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew J. Edelstein and Kevin McDonough, *The Seventies: From Hot Pants to Hot Tubs* (New York: Dutton, 1990) 67. For an alternative perspective on the Women's Movement and women in the work force, see Francis Fukayama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

the energy crisis, gas lines, and an economic recession that seem to dominate negative perceptions of the decade's latter years.

Many looking back on the 1970s do so not with nostalgia, but with disdain or indifference.<sup>3</sup> Yet, this perception of the period is sometimes contradicted by an overemphasis on its popular culture, noted for bell-bottomed pants, long sideburns, pet rocks, and, of course, John Travolta.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the gloom of war, divisive politics, and a bad economy, 70s pop culture is typically remembered for its lack of seriousness and avoidance of social concerns.

But this dissertation focuses on a 1970s that lies somewhere in between these perceptions. I understand the decade as a liminal — it helped to cultivate a period of invigorating social change, a time when the Women's Movement either swept through or slowly seeped into most areas of the country. The 70s is a time when thousands of women publicly joined forces to transgress social norms in order to change them. Women and women's issues entered into popular consciousness.<sup>5</sup> The unofficial mantra of the Women's Movement, "the personal is the political," inspired women to finally discuss their everyday experiences and subsequently call attention to the far-reaching social relevance of such expression. Conversations about domestic violence, child care, and private dissatisfaction led to laws concerning rape, reproductive freedom, and job security.

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<sup>3</sup> Edelstein and McDonough write: "The idea that the Seventies was merely a lull after the frenetic Sixties is simply not true," vii.

<sup>4</sup> See Eric Levin, ed., *People Weekly Celebrates the 70's: John Travolta and the Wackiest, Tackiest, Funkiest Decade Ever!* (New York: People Books, 2000) or Shelton Waldrep, ed., *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Helen Reddy's song, "I am Woman," was a pop hit in 1972. And Billy Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in the 1973 tennis match billed as "the battle of the sexes."

The history of feminism is vast. Thus for this paper, the focus will be on specific elements of American activities. Most significant is the fact that a large number of women came together in a spectacular fashion. As a result, feminists not only created concrete change, they also stimulated rebellious attitudes and actions around the country — in what will be referred to here as a carnivalesque spirit.

## II Carnavalesque Diaspora

Carnival celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world.

— Bakhtin<sup>6</sup>

Carnival is participatory, joyfully critical, and potentially subversive.

— Robert Stam<sup>7</sup>

Worth recalling is the historical association of the grotesque with women's social movements from the "shrieking sisterhood" of the suffragettes to the "bra-burners" and haridans of the second wave.

— Mary Russo<sup>8</sup>

On August 26, 1970, fifty thousand women marched down posh Fifth Avenue in New York City. In the largest demonstration by women up to that time, feminists

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<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 410.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 92.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 14. Russo uses the term "female grotesque" because such an identity (whether linked to men or women) is "produced through an association with the feminine as the body marked by difference," Russo, 13.

of all kinds united to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the 19th Amendment which had finally given women suffrage. In tandem with the Manhattan march, over one-hundred-thousand women (and some men) participated in rallies in more than ninety major cities and small towns in forty-two states across the country. The occasion simultaneously marked the first of what became an annual nationwide day to rally behind Women's Strike for Equality and pointed to the need for equal employment and educational opportunities for women, twenty-four-hour child-care centers, and abortion on demand. Photographs of the marches show women arm in arm, talking, laughing, and chanting as they stop traffic and take over public streets (figures 2 and 3).<sup>9</sup>

These marches, and actions like them, were enacted by feminists involved in various aspects of the Women's Movement.<sup>10</sup> Goals included garnering support by raising consciousness and encouraging on-lookers to join in the festivities. The ultimate objective, however, was to produce change — change that would radically alter hierarchical society. By acting en masse against the status quo, these women created contemporary parallels with the ideas of Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin

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<sup>9</sup> See Suzanne Levine and Harriet Lyons, eds. *The Decade of Women: A Ms. History of the Seventies in Words and Pictures* (New York: Paragon Books, 1980). For more details about the 1970 women's march and its American reception see Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1994) 163-191. The Women's Movement did not suddenly appear in 1970, Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton) in 1963, which led to the founding of NOW (the National Organization for Women) in 1966. Funny and carnivalesque actions, like the Miss America protest, took place in 1968. For more on this event, see Susan Douglas, 139-161. On page 168, Douglas deals with the common accusation that the Women's Movement is completely derivative of 1960s protest movements.

<sup>10</sup> When I say the Women's Movement, I generally mean that led by NOW, but there were/are many forms of feminism. For background on difference feminisms, see, for instance: Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), or Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1985).

(1895-1975), whose influential analysis deems carnival a potential site for social transgressions.

In his book *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin discusses carnival life of the Middle Ages via the novels of French Renaissance writer François Rabelais (c. 1490-1553).<sup>11</sup> Rabelais situated his uninhibited stories within medieval settings, where life revolved around different types of festivals (connected to cycles of life and holy days).<sup>12</sup> Power was typically hierarchical except during carnival festivities, at which time the people were permitted to make fun of and even transgress social norms.<sup>13</sup> Bakhtin sees carnival (and the carnivalesque) as an alternative world to the mundane, hegemonic, serious routine of everyday living.<sup>14</sup> “Anything goes” during carnival —

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<sup>11</sup> Bakhtin lived during a repressive time in Russian history in which governmental leaders regulated cultural output. Writing was expected to express a social realism that supported the Russian government and, therefore, writers were prohibited from producing certain types of laughter. For this humor, as Bakhtin explains, is transgressive, capable of turning the world upside down. It is not surprising that Bakhtin found Rabelais’ libertine writing exciting while recognizing few (besides Dostoevsky) contemporary examples of the carnivalesque. See Krystyna Pomorska, foreword to Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, xi.

<sup>12</sup> François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. Jacques LeClercq (New York: Heritage Press, 1936). Rabelais first published *Pantagruel* in 1532 and *Gargantua* in 1542 (both in France).

<sup>13</sup> Many domestic and religious events fostered carnival celebrations and feasts in Europe from the late Middle Ages on. Yet, carnival’s origins seem to be traced to pre-Christian rituals, such as the Saturnalia, which, like carnival, was a period of freedom, excess, and hierarchical inversion. Carnival celebrations are still found in contemporary life, for instance in Brazil, the Caribbean, New Orleans, etc. In these cases, carnival is usually associated with the pre-Lenten period. Ash Wednesday is preceded by Fat Tuesday (Mardi Gras), when all of the fat in the home is consumed. The word carnival derives from *carnem levare* or *carne vale* — “giving up” or “farewell to” meat.

<sup>14</sup> Yet, Bakhtin speaks highly of an “open seriousness,” where laughter and seriousness can coexist. He writes: “True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it,” *Rabelais and His World*, 122-123.

for it is a time of upheaval, inversion of hierarchies, blurring of boundaries, and laughter.<sup>15</sup>

To Bakhtin, humor and unreserved laughter are critical to producing a sense of carnival. As Bakhtin describes:

[Carnival laughter] is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives.<sup>16</sup>

Simultaneously mocking and deriding, laughter is contradictory, regenerative, and all-inclusive.<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin describes an utopian laughter, for he uses the term "universal" uncritically. Yet, throughout his study Bakhtin emphasizes a violent humor that either inherently excludes women or includes them against their will.

For instance, in the telling of a ritual wedding thrashing, Rabelais writes:

The bride, weeping for laughter and laughing for tears, complained hysterically. Catchpole had not stopped smiting her, without choice or distinction of members; worse, he had rumbled her hair, and, worst of all, he had

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<sup>15</sup> Of Rabelais' work, William Fleming writes: "In his *Gargantua* and its sequel, *Pantagruel*, the bawdiness and ribaldry of his tales and his unbridled zest for living all too often obscure his essentially serious concerns with politics, education, and philosophy. His real purpose was to liberate men and women from their foolishness so that they could realize their higher potentialities as human beings." William Fleming, *Art & Ideas: Ninth Edition* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1995) 336.

<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 11-12.

<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin writes: "Like the antique 'satyric' drama, so also the medieval culture of laughter was the drama of bodily life (copulation, birth, growth, eating, drinking, defecation). But of course it was not the drama of an individual body or of a private material way of life; it was the drama of the great generic body of the people, and for this generic body birth and death are not an absolute beginning and end but merely elements of continuous growth and renewal." *Rabelais and His World*, 88. This continuous renewal leads to transformation.

grasspresssqueezedrubbangropricknockneadedandcrumpled  
her privipudendapeehole.<sup>18</sup>

Carnavalesque ambivalence is conveyed through the simultaneously crying/laughing bride. Of course there is humor in Rabelais' exaggerated tone and use of wordplay, but there is also a man (Catchpole) battering a woman. It is not a fight, but a one-way beating. Rabelais, according to Bakhtin, means the account to be taken in good, regenerative fun — Rabelais even suggests that the distress caused by the bride's sexual violation is similar to the messing of her hair. Nonetheless, Bakhtin's primary point is that everything has a dual nature in connection to carnival — even being beaten — for life and death go hand in hand. Where there is violence and death in carnival, there is also the reaffirmation of life.

The carnivalesque world described in Rabelais' violent fiction differs immensely from the egalitarian world envisioned by some in the Women's Movement.<sup>19</sup> Yet, Bakhtin indiscriminately uses the term "folk culture" when he refers to the male-dominated events represented by Rabelais.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, this dissertation uses Bakhtin's ideas on humor and the carnivalesque to specifically reference women's "folk culture" as it flourished during the 1970s.

Folk or popular humor is the foundation of carnival's subversiveness for both Bakhtin and this paper. And central to this humor and the overall carnivalesque

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<sup>18</sup> Rabelais, Book 4, Chapter 15, cited in Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 206.

<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin links the liberty of carnival with violence throughout *Rabelais and His World*. For instance, Bakhtin writes: "Freedom and equality are expressed in familiar blows, a coarse bodily contact. Beatings are . . . a tangible equivalent of improper speech," *Rabelais and His World*, 265. Nancy K. Miller discusses the complexity of reading, as a woman, about a woman character's supposedly funny abuse in Rabelais' writing. Nancy K. Miller, "Rereading as a Woman: The Body in Practice," in *The Female Body in Western Culture*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) 354-356.

<sup>20</sup> "Carnival, with its complex system of images was the fullest and purest expression of the culture of folk humor," Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 80, note 29.



spirit is something Bakhtin calls “grotesque realism,” which he describes as a “material bodily principle” that stems from folk culture and is contained in “the people” who are “continually growing and renewed.”<sup>21</sup> The grotesque is particularly associated with the body — the social, limitless body.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, when Bakhtin describes the psychological aspects of feeling a part of “the people” during festival, he stresses the physicality of a large public body:

Even the pressing throng, the physical contact of bodies, acquires a certain meaning. The individual feels that he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people’s mass body. In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; . . . At the same time the people become aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community.<sup>23</sup>

Bakhtin writes of a mass of people coming together where the individual feels a sense of unity — “he” is a part of an indivisible whole.<sup>24</sup> Like their medieval counterparts, women uniting during the 1970s also felt the elation of community and the energy of a vast physical presence.<sup>25</sup> In another description of carnival participants, Bakhtin suggests an innate radicalness to the social body:

The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized *in their own way*, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive

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<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 18 and 19.

<sup>22</sup> To Bakhtin, a grotesque body is a social body, see Russo, 8, 34.

<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 255.

<sup>24</sup> Bakhtin writes that “elements of the old ritual of fraternization were preserved in the carnival and were given a deeper meaning,” *Rabelais and His World*, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas writes: “The media failed to convey the exhilaration of participating in the women’s movement. Yes, there were divisions, battles, and internecine strife. But there was also a compelling utopian vision, a great unity of purpose, and a respect for diversity. Once a woman experienced the sheer joy of uniting with her sisters to effect personal and societal change, only to see on television and in the press an image of grimness and humorlessness, it was hard to trust the media again,” Susan Douglas, 190.

socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity.<sup>26</sup>

The carnivalesque crowd acts beyond established boundaries and becomes a kind of body politic.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, the people marching down Fifth Avenue and across the United States in 1970 were, to use Bakhtin's words, "not merely a crowd." These uproarious, disruptive, transgressive individuals came together to create a spectacle and call for a different approach to life, a new folk culture. In Bakhtin's words, they desired "an escape from the usual official way of life."<sup>28</sup> They produced a form of carnival and evoked a carnivalesque spirit that spread throughout the country. Echoing Bakhtin's description above, these participants organized beyond the parameters defining socio-economic and political structures — specifically with the desire to suspend them, though they intended the suspension to last much longer than the duration of the event.

And according to Bakhtin, circumstances never do return to their exact previous condition once the period of carnival concludes. Rather, Bakhtin notes that carnivalesque suspension inherently brings lasting vitality to an old world (see epigraph). Like a cycle, the old norms are constantly evolving, changing with each influx of carnivalesque newness. Eventually, what had been new becomes old until it too becomes charged with a fresh perspective, which results in a sense of no turning back. Bakhtin understands this inversion as a kind of reoccurring rejuvenation that

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<sup>26</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 255.

<sup>27</sup> When Bakhtin recounts both of the preceding crowd scenes it is unclear whether he is referring to Rabelais' general depiction of carnival or to "actual" periods of carnival. There is a kind of slippage throughout Bakhtin's analysis that conflates "real" events and their artistic representations. Both, it appears, have the potential to create alternative, non-hierarchical worlds.

<sup>28</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 8.

prevents any kind of stasis, particularly static hegemony. Thus, even though the carnival comes to an end, its radical effects may be perpetuated over time.

In this way, carnival and the carnivalesque offer a means to revolutionary change. Indeed, Linda Hutcheon cites the importance of adjusting Bakhtin's ideas to support contemporary examples of rebellion, like the 1970s:

Bakhtin presents us with a paradox: his various "theories," if we can call such deliberate unsystematizing by such a name, are potentially much more plural and open [than his examples]. It is his own statements of application that threaten to place limits upon the concepts' viability. To *adopt* slavishly Bakhtin's specific statements about parody (that is, to imitate his practice) is to fall victim to the arbitrary and monolithic, not to say monologic, in those statements; to *adapt*, on the other hand, is to open up one of the most suggestive Pandora's boxes this century has produced. From Bakhtin's box could emerge a plethora of refreshing approaches to a new corpus.<sup>29</sup>

Following Hutcheon's line of thought, I have adapted Bakhtin's ideas to a 1970s feminist model. I use Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque to recognize the radicality of the Women's Movement in general, and the work of feminists artists in particular (especially when strategies of humor are present). In similar fashion, Robert Stam argues that although Bakhtin never actually wrote on sexual equality, he left the door open for his ideas to be used in ways he had not. "Bakhtinian categories," explains Stam, "display an intrinsic identification with difference and alterity, a built-in affinity for the oppressed and the marginal, a feature making them especially appropriate for the analysis of opposition and marginal practices, be they Third World, feminist, or avant-garde."<sup>30</sup> The concept of carnival, therefore, can be used to study other socio-political instances of rebelliousness throughout history.

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<sup>29</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985) 70.

<sup>30</sup> Stam, 21. See also Stam, 22.

Although medieval festivals did not necessarily include the parity of women,

Bakhtin nonetheless asserts:

What is suspended [in carnival] first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it — that is, everything resulting from sociohierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people.<sup>31</sup>

A world without hierarchies may be considered unrealistic, but to Bakhtin it becomes a possibility during carnival: “The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind.”<sup>32</sup> Expressing her views on feminism, Eleanor Antin claims: “If the world modeled itself on feminist principles we would have Utopia.”<sup>33</sup> Utopia is, of course, a subjective notion. To those involved with the Women’s Movement, however, interpretations of utopia were usually associated with various forms of feminism. In fact, the optimism that seems to have motivated much of the Women’s Movement resounds with Bakhtin’s enthusiastic pronouncements — carnivalesque occasions enabled feminists to envision and influence change.

By mid-1970, Natalie Zemon Davis had already recognized the feminist potential of carnival and the carnivalesque. Whereas Bakhtin focuses on issues of class inversion, Davis addresses the potential for gender subversion. She examines late-medieval and early modern European festivals, art, and popular culture for carnivalesque moments when the so-called “woman-on-top” inverts traditional

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<sup>31</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 122-123, cited in Stam, 21. Bakhtin observes that carnival participants “entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.” *Rabelais and His World*, 9. And Stam states: Carnival is “not the mere disruption of etiquette but a symbolic, anticipatory overthrow of oppressive social structures,” 95.

<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 10. Stam writes that Carnival “is ecstatic collectivity, the joyful affirmation of change, a dress rehearsal for utopia,” 95.

<sup>33</sup> Antin quoted in Dinah Portner, “Interview with Eleanor Antin,” *Journal: Southern California Art Magazine*, number 26 (February/March 1980): 45.

female-to-male subservience or exaggerates a stereotypically feminine attribute.<sup>34</sup> For instance, a woman-on-top might be a woman found in society or art who assumes what would be considered a traditional male position of authority (e.g., Joan of Arc). Or she could emphasize her “lower nature” to a point of radical excess (e.g., highlighting her sexual desires).<sup>35</sup> In addition, both men and women could adopt the part of a woman-on-top by cross-dressing and consequently invert staid notions of gender.<sup>36</sup>

The woman-on-top is part of the carnivalesque world-turned-upside-down, whereby all hierarchies eventually become undone.<sup>37</sup> As inversion occurs, hierarchical structure implodes. Davis concludes that by wreaking havoc on established social orders, a carnivalesque woman ultimately suggests radical

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<sup>34</sup> “Woman-on-top” is Davis’ term, Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).

<sup>35</sup> Uncontrollable sexual appetite is only one of the perceived characteristics of unruly women, Natalie Zemon Davis, 126. Davis notes that women were considered to be at their most powerful during the month of May, which complemented the belief that women’s sexual drive was also at its highest at this time. Men were warned to stay away from women during this carnivalesque period, Natalie Zemon Davis, 134-135.

<sup>36</sup> Davis applies the term “political transvestism,” Natalie Zemon Davis, 147. At times the preindustrial unruly woman dressed as a man or simply exaggerated her feminine identity, Davis, 129. Even though biblical prohibitions forbade any kind of transvestism, cross-dressing was popular during festivals and other rebellious moments. There are many instances of women assuming male roles in plays and imagery from preindustrial Europe and “more of the time the sexual inversion yields criticism of the established order,” Davis, 132. Davis notes that there were more instances of men imitating women during festivals and more instances of women imitating men in literary, theatrical, and visual examples: “males [dressing as disorderly women while rioting and rebelling] drew upon the sexual power and energy of the unruly woman and on her license (which they had long assumed at carnival and games) — to promote fertility, to defend the community’s interests and standards, and to tell the truth about unjust rule,” 150.

<sup>37</sup> Davis suggests that the unruly woman’s ability to create change was often effective enough to necessitate “remedies.” Treatment included “religious training that fashioned the reins of modesty and humility; selective education that showed a woman her moral duty without enflaming her undisciplined imagination or loosing her tongue for public talk.” Natalie Zemon Davis, 126.

alternatives to women in general (whether they are physically participating in carnival related events or not):

The image of the disorderly woman did not always function to keep women in their place. On the contrary, it was a multivalent image that could operate, first, to widen behavioral options for women within and even outside marriage, and, second, to sanction riot and political disobedience for both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest. Play with the unruly woman is partly a chance for temporary release from the traditional and stable hierarchy; but it is also part of the conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within society. The woman-on-top might even facilitate innovation in historical theory and political behavior.<sup>38</sup>

Carnavalesque moments empower women to become “unruly,” which not only alters perceptions, but also stimulates political (feminist) involvement (and results).<sup>39</sup>

Interestingly, members of the Women’s Movement were often accused of characteristics associated with being a woman-on-top: they were called bossy, power-hungry, humorless, over-sexed, un-feminine trouble-makers.<sup>40</sup> And clearly, they were trying “to change the basic distribution of power within society” through carnival-like methods.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, 131. See also, Natalie Zemon Davis, 143. Davis notes that fictitious examples of exceptional women helped “real” women realize their full potential, 144.

<sup>39</sup> Victor Turner discusses Natalie Zemon Davis’ concept of the unruly woman: “The subversive potential of the carnivalized feminine principle becomes evident in times of social change when its manifestations move out of the liminal world of Mardi Gras [carnival] into the political arena itself.” Victor Turner, “Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality,” in *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Press, 1977) 42.

<sup>40</sup> See Susan Douglas, *op. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> “Carnival,” writes Davis “does not, however, reinforce the serious institutions and rhythms of society. . . it helps to change them,” Natalie Zemon Davis, 103.

Carnival supplies both a method and a space for change. Bakhtin, himself, remarks: "Great changes, even in the field of science, are always preceded by a certain carnival consciousness that prepares the way."<sup>42</sup> Subsequently, the mass consciousness raising encouraged by feminists seeking to undo the status quo should be appreciated as a necessary element for the many personal and public changes that occurred in the United States during the 1970s, when a kind of social "rebellion ensued."<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, the socio-political transformations of women's lives at the end of the twentieth century is understood here to be a result of the carnivalesque spirit of renewal and rebellion that became part and parcel of the Women's Movement.<sup>44</sup> In the 70s feminist marches, thousands of independent women acted in unison as a large

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<sup>42</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 49.

<sup>43</sup> Quote taken from Davis: "There are fascinating examples . . . where the tension between the festive and everyday official realms was broken and uprising and rebellion ensued," Natalie Zemon Davis, 119. The many new laws and other changes resulting from feminist 70s activism are too great to enumerate here, see Toni Carabillo, June Bundy Csida, and Judith Meuli, eds. *Feminist Chronicles: 1953-1993* (Los Angeles: Women's Graphics 1993).

<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, some thinkers see carnival as only a "licensed release" — permitted by those in charge as a way for potential rabble rouses to blow-off steam and consequently prevent any real radical changes in hegemony from occurring. See, for example, Terry Eagleton *Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981) 148. Clearly, I disagree with such thinking. Suleiman, observes that just as there is no "a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression," neither "is there an a priori conservative vector." Instead, the question of "political effects" is always a matter of context and the analysis of specific events or works of art, Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 143. Likewise, historical context (the Women's Movement) and formal analysis (of performance art) presents here a separate instance of carnival to be examined on its own for subversiveness. Suleiman is responding to Stallybrass and White: "the politics of carnival cannot be resolved outside of a close historical examination of particular conjunctures: there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression." Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) 16. See also Michael Holquist's prologue to Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, in which he writes: "Bakhtin's carnival . . . is not only not an impediment to revolutionary change, it is revolution itself. Carnival must not be confused with mere holiday or, least of all, with self-serving festivals fostered by governments, secular or theocratic," xviii.

popular force. As such, what began as a grassroots organization became a national folk culture — one that was constantly evolving and growing as it brought new vitality to the old way of doing things. This kind of grotesque body-in-process takes on significant meaning for Bakhtin:

Not the biological body, which merely repeats itself in the new generations, but precisely the historic, progressing body of mankind stands at the center of this system of images [by Rabelais]. Thus, in the grotesque concept of the body a new, concrete, and realistic historic awareness was born and took form: not abstract thought about the future but the living sense that each man belongs to the immortal people who create history.<sup>45</sup>

As women participated in carnivalesque events during the 70s, they should have had a sense of producing something new — of creating history. For that is exactly what they did. During brief moments, some of these women even maintained a utopian belief in sisterhood, one that suggests Robert Stam's partial description of carnival as a "collective *jouissance*."<sup>46</sup> Together women set out to create a topsy-turvy society and they did so with such vigor and pleasure that it may be likened to the liberating, rejuvenating quality of laughter. This is not an individualistic laugh, but a shared laughter emitted from a unified, yet always un-fixed, communal body.

Carnival, therefore, is itself liberated and recognized in locations Bakhtin never anticipated. As a result, it is in the transgressive actions of 1970s feminism that I recognize the "carnavalesque Diaspora," a period of carnivalization that transverses Bakhtin's defined boundaries for carnival proper.<sup>47</sup> This is an important concept to this dissertation. For the carnivalesque is not viewed as a Medieval thread running throughout history, but rather as a condition that periodically appears in different

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<sup>45</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 367.

<sup>46</sup> Stam, 93. The word "*jouissance*" is usually associated with ecstatic (feminine) pleasure as used by 70s French feminists and Roland Barthes.

<sup>47</sup> Stallybrass and White use the term "carnavalesque Diaspora," 190.



places, at different times.<sup>48</sup> The 1970s is one such moment — specifically in relation to the Women’s Movement and the subsequent rebellious spirit it inspired. The Women’s Movement was not linked to seasonal festivals, but to political events or specific personal realities. The idea of carnival is understood as transferred from the strict medieval calendar year and found in the group actions of the 70s — occurrences by which feminists ultimately helped to foster, in Bakhtin’s words, a “new world.”

### III Humor

Humor is not resigned; it is rebellious.

— Freud<sup>49</sup>

Intellectual freedom, independence, and the free play of a sense of humor are closely interdependent.

— Nancy A. Walker<sup>50</sup>

Humor is not necessarily laugh-out-loud funny and it can be both serious and subversive. Typically, women have not been taken into consideration when grand theories of humor have been developed.<sup>51</sup> Freud, one of the few theorists to

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<sup>48</sup> Bakhtin writes: “We give here a broadened meaning to the word ‘carnavalesque.’ As a special phenomenon, carnival has survived up to our time,” *Rabelais and His World*. 217-218.

<sup>49</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Humor,” in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987) 113.

<sup>50</sup> Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 82.

<sup>51</sup> For example, John Morreall, ed. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987) claims to offer an historical account of theories about humor. It begins with the ideas of Aristotle and continues through the twentieth century, but comedy is seen only in its relationship to the lives of men.

specifically mention women in his discussions on the subject, declares that women, who usually serve as the object of smutty jokes, are too “repressed” to appreciate such humor.<sup>52</sup> Statements like this once supported the presumption that all women fundamentally lack a sense of humor, but popular funny women, such as Mae West, Lucille Ball, and Phyllis Diller, ultimately made difficult that broad generalization.<sup>53</sup>

Instead, by the time the Women’s Movement stepped into the public eye, it was feminists in particular who were attacked as humorless, as Susan J. Douglas writes:

There is no doubt that the news media of the early 1970s played an absolutely central role in turning feminism into a dirty word, and stereotyping the feminist as a hairy-legged, karate-chopping commando with a chip on her shoulder the size of China, really bad clothes, and a complete inability to smile — let alone laugh.<sup>54</sup>

This humorless accusation often provided a justification for the public to dismiss politically active women and, ironically, decide not to take them, or their issues, seriously.<sup>55</sup> Vine Deloria discusses this phenomenon in relation to Native Americans,

<sup>52</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1960) 115-120. Jane Gallop analyses Freud’s writing on Jokes in “Why Does Freud Giggle When the Women Leave the Room?” (1984); reprinted in Jane Gallop *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). Elsewhere, feminists discuss the negative effects of comedy. For example, see Judith Wilt’s essay, “The Laughter of Maidens, the Cackle of Matriarchs: Notes on the Collision Between Comedy and Feminism,” in *Gender and Literary Voice*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, inc., 1980) 173-196.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Regina Barreca, ed., *The Penguin Book of Women’s Humor* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).

<sup>54</sup> Susan Douglas, 165. Douglas also writes: “[The news] coverage repudiated feminists as ugly, humorless, disorderly man-haters in desperate need of some Nair [hair removal cream],” 189.

<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, Regina Barreca writes: “Feminist criticism has generally avoided the discussion of comedy, perhaps in order to be accepted by conservative critics who found feminist theory comic in and of itself,” in Regina Barreca, “Making Trouble: An Introduction,” in *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca (New York: Marion Boyars, 1985) 4.

who have habitually been misrepresented as humorless and “granite-faced” in American mythology.<sup>56</sup> This stereotype has ultimately prevented non-Native Americans from identifying with Native Americans, as Deloria explains:

People have little sympathy with stolid groups. [The comedian] Dick Gregory did much more than is believed when he introduced humor into the Civil Rights struggle. He enabled non-blacks to enter into the thought world of the black community and experience the hurt it suffered. When all people shared the humorous but ironic situation of the black, the urgency and morality of Civil Rights was communicated.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, the habitual representation of 70s feminists as humorless typically isolates the Women’s Movement from mainstream America.<sup>58</sup> Yet stereotyping feminists as taking themselves “too seriously” often allowed anti-feminists, by contrast, to display their “good humored-ness” as they laughed at the so-called militant or angry women.

The common characterization of feminists as having no sense of humor necessitates a blindness to the humor that is present and, consequently, leads to a misreading of the actions and art produced by these women. Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, scholars began to take note of the gender disparity in humor studies and not only started to excavate examples of humorous women from various eras, but also started to formulate new theories of humor’s transgressiveness

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<sup>56</sup> Vine Deloria, Jr. *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969) 146.

<sup>57</sup> Deloria, 146.

<sup>58</sup> Bakhtin uses the term “agelast” to describe “a man who does not know how to laugh and who is hostile to laughter.” Along with being humorless, this same person is simultaneously seen as supporting the “static, unshakable hierarchy.” *Rabelais and His World*, 267-268. Bakhtin suggests that the public is suspicious of seriousness, which is exactly what enemies of the Women’s Movement tapped into when they accused feminists of being humorless. See, for example, *Rabelais and His World*, 100. Hence, even though thousands of women across the country were marching in unison and radical changes eventually occurred, the stigma of being humorless often hindered an overwhelming sense of sympathy/empathy for the cause.

in the hands of women.<sup>59</sup> In the 1970s, French feminists referred to the power of humor as a revolutionary tactic.<sup>60</sup> According to Hélène Cixous, women may “blow up the law [and]. . . break up the ‘truth’ with laughter.”<sup>61</sup> Humor offers a way to counter, even destroy patriarchal authority. No wonder opponents of the Women’s Movement took pains to describe feminists as humorless — it served to disarm women from the potential subversiveness of comedy.<sup>62</sup>

The tide continues to turn. For instance, although Barry Sanders basically excludes women from his historical account of rebellious laughter, in the final pages of his book, he observes: “The power of laughter — and I think the feminist movement has produced more joking than, say, the antiwar movement ever did — has helped a bit to bring about changes in attitude.”<sup>63</sup> Sanders’ acknowledgment of

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<sup>59</sup> See Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*; Audrey Bilger, *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1980); and Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994). The use of humor by women artists during 1970s, however, remains neglected.

<sup>60</sup> Irigaray’s credo that “women among themselves begin by laughing” offers an alternative insight into the Women’s Movement. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977), trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 163.

<sup>61</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen (1975), in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991) 344.

<sup>62</sup> Nearly every book focusing upon women and humor deals with the humorless accusation. Lisa Merrill states that “women’s so-called ‘lack of humor’ is, in fact, a refusal to comply with the *premise* of a joke . . . when women no longer identify with the ways in which we traditionally have been defined, humor which ridicules our departure from those expectations no longer amuses us.” Lisa Merrill, “Feminist Humor: Rebellious and Self-Affirming,” in *Last Laughs*, 273. Using humor to define humorlessness, *The Feminist Dictionary* states: “Humourless: the cliché ‘she lacks a sense of humour’ is applied by men to every threatening woman when she does not find the following funny: rape, big breasts, sex with little girls. On the other hand there is no imputation of humourlessness if she does not find impotence, castration and vaginas with teeth humorous,” Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler, *The Feminist Dictionary* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1997) cited in Gray, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) 274.

transformation, spawned by the Women's Movement, is representative of the initial steps toward understanding the carnivalesque humor used by feminists during the 1970s.

There are many ways to analyze humor, as there are many types of comedy. But is there a kind of humor that is particularly feminist? Yes, according to the British writer Lizbeth Goodman, who defines "feminist comedy" as

comedy which purposefully subverts traditional expectations about "what women are" or "should be," and which also subverts the very means of expression and representation by and through which such expectations are conveyed.<sup>64</sup>

To Goodman, feminist humor is less a matter of provoking laughter, and more about the potent subversion that accompanies comedic action or thought. Humor carries with it the capacity to both reject damaging stereotypes of women and disrupt the actual system producing such conventions. Likewise, Gloria Kaufman defines feminist humor as that which communicates the "nonacceptance of oppression."<sup>65</sup> Humor not only points to the viability of comedy as transformative, but also highlights the intrinsic connections between humor and power.<sup>66</sup> Feminists can question hierarchical structures and refuse oppression through humor. For it brings with it an anti-passivity, as Sanders writes: "Passivity and the sharp, aggressive

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<sup>64</sup> Lizbeth Goodman, "Gender and Humor," in *Imagining Women: Cultural Representations and Gender*, eds. Frances Bonner, Lizbeth Goodman, Richard Allen, Linda Janes and Catherine King (London: Polity Press, in association with The Open University, 1992) 289.

<sup>65</sup> Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely, *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire* (New York: Paragon House, 1986) no page given, cited in Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 145.

<sup>66</sup> Frances Gray posits that the power structures of laughter may reinforce traditional hierarchical dualities: "good/evil, man/woman, culture/nature. . . I laugh/you don't," Gray, 7.

expression of wit simply do not mix.”<sup>67</sup> By wielding humor, women actively take part in liberation.

Indeed, although often overlooked, 1970s feminists found significant ways to employ humor. For instance, the November 1973 cover of *Ms.* magazine confronts presumptions of feminists’ humorlessness with a comic-strip style cartoon containing two figures (figure 4). A bubble over the man’s head reads: “Do you know the women’s movement has no sense of humor?” To which the woman answers: “No. . . . But hum a few bars and I’ll fake it!” Marie Severin, the designer of the cover, playfully mocks and subsequently challenges popular stereotypes concerning the humorlessness of politically involved women. Her gesture succeeds specifically because humor is the vehicle by which the defense is articulated.

Feminist publicity, such as posters proclaiming support for the Women’s Movement, often incorporated some form of humor to convey its messages.<sup>68</sup> For example, the expression, “A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle” uses absurdity to counter the popular sentiment that an unmarried woman is somehow lacking. While Florynce Kennedy’s notorious remark, “If men got pregnant abortion would be a sacrament,” employs paradox to draw attention to the sexist imbalance of power intrinsically linked to both reproductive and church policies.<sup>69</sup> And the declaration, “Disarm rapists,” relies on biting sarcasm to stimulate thought about the violence of rape and the urgent need for punishment and control. These catch phrases

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<sup>67</sup> Sanders, 273.

<sup>68</sup> See Toni Carabillo, June Bundy Csida, and Judith Meuli, eds.; and Liz McQuiston, *Suffragettes to She-Devils: Women’s Liberation and Beyond* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997).

<sup>69</sup> Although the quip was originally stated by Florynce Kennedy, it was made popular by Steinem in Gloria Steinem, “The Verbal Karate of Florynce R. Kennedy, Esq.,” *Ms.* March 1973, 33.

are among the many that were used as slogans on the popular t-shirts, buttons, and circulars that proliferated in the 1970s.

Some of the most successful television situation comedies of the 1970s featured funny women and/or feminist humor. Mary Tyler Moore starred in the popular show (1970 - 1977) bearing her name as the independent, single, accomplished, and generally satisfied news producer who, as the theme song declares, will “make it after all.” She lived what could be seen as a feminist-influenced life that was also filled with laughter. Mary’s wise-cracking best friend Rhoda, was given her own spin-off series (1974 -1978); on which new television ground was covered as audiences watched the lead woman marry, struggle, divorce, and then “make it” on her own. On the long-running show, “One Day at a Time” (1975-1984), a mother of two teen-age girls finds she must reinvent herself and her life after her husband of seventeen-years divorces her. A trope of the program has the lead character, Ann Romano (her maiden name), constantly remind individuals not to call her “Mrs. Romano,” but “Ms. Romano.” She is portrayed as ambitious, feisty, caring, funny, and a feminist. Such television comedies used humor to challenge preconceptions of women characters and their lives while presenting different options and experiences to home viewing audiences.

In terms of dealing with serious feminist/women’s issues via humor, perhaps the best example is the television show “Maude” (1972-1978). In one episode, for example, Maude wakes her husband Walter up in the middle of the night to talk. He complains that he has a very busy work day ahead of him and needs his sleep. His problems, Walter claims, are much bigger than hers — a man has so many duties. He condescendingly assumes that she is trying to decide what to serve for lunch the next day, to which Maude sarcastically responds: “I’m upset because my sink doesn’t sparkle, I have ring-around-the-collar, and I need a hysterectomy.” With one sentence, Maude points to the ridiculousness of commercial marketing targeted at

women and paradoxically raises the real problems women must deal with, but no one talks about.

Certainly, no prime-time comedy program had previously tackled the scary prospect of uterine surgery or its ramifications. Maude explains to Walter that she is concerned about her sexual desirability and as she details her worry about facial hair, Maude sardonically holds a black comb under her nose to see how she would look with a mustache. As the couple discuss and argue over Maude's concerns, humor not only offers emotional release, but actually provides a means to confront pressing issues, and helps resolve any differences by the end of the show.<sup>70</sup> As a funny feminist Maude deals with a wide range of topics, from racism to abortion, while simultaneously contradicting any stereotypes presuming the humorlessness of socially-involved women.

Feminist humor tends not to provoke the mindless uproarious or violent laughter that Bakhtin attributes to carnival festivities. Instead it is more of a communal chuckle, a knowing laughter, or an ironic smirk. Still, Bakhtin's thoughts on the subversiveness of carnivalesque humor offers a productive ideal, a place from which this paper starts. For "techniques of humor" are found in various forms.<sup>71</sup> Rather than attempt to define humor as a generalized whole, I describe specific methods of humor for the purposes of this dissertation; with the understanding that they function as aspects of feminist humor and the carnivalesque.<sup>72</sup> Throughout the

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<sup>70</sup> There were many other funny feminists from the decade, like Jane Curtin, Gilda Radner, Lily Tomlin, and Whoopi Goldberg. Clearly, much more could be said about the topic. For more thorough feminist analyses of 70s television, see Frances Gray, 63-69; and Susan Douglas, 193-219.

<sup>71</sup> Arthur Asa Berger, *An Anatomy of Humor* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993) 18.

<sup>72</sup> Because I see the Women's Movement as the primary contextualizing force for the work of Wilke, Antin, and Piper, here I use the idea of feminist humor as an umbrella concept for understanding their art. In the individual chapters the focus is on the specific kinds of humor employed, like parody, or tragicomedy. Although both Wilke and Antin are Jewish, I have decided not to emphasize this



1970s, popular culture and art yielded a variety of examples of smart, witty, politically-minded women who used humor strategically and who should be contextualized within the carnivalesque spirit of the Women's Movement.

#### IV The 1970s American Art Scene

The seventies valued internal contradiction in the artistic forms that it produced.

— Shelton Waldrep<sup>73</sup>

Although through the twentieth century women artists had been part of vanguard movements, in the 1970s women artists were the vanguard of the vanguard.

— Carrie Rickey<sup>74</sup>

In 1967, Michael Fried published his now notorious denunciation of Minimalist art, citing its ambiguity and its failure to adhere to the purity of its own medium.<sup>75</sup> Fried claimed that the avoidance of internal references in Minimalist sculpture forces a viewer to establish relationships with the always changing

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aspect of their humor. For analysis of Jewish humor, see, Arthur Asa Berger, or Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*. Neither will African American Humor be stressed in relation to Piper. Instead, see Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy, from Slavery to Chris Rock* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), or Ron Jenkins, *Subversive Laughter: The Liberating Power of Comedy* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

<sup>73</sup> Waldrep, 3.

<sup>74</sup> Carrie Rickey, "Writing (and Righting) Wrongs: Feminist Art Publications," in *The Power of Feminist Art*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1994) 129.

<sup>75</sup> Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (Summer 1967); reprinted in *Minimal Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 116-147.

environment surrounding it, which not only results in unstable meanings, but also creates a dependence on the viewer's experience over time, making the work "theatrical" in nature. This borrowing from another genre is anathema to the Formalist critic, who declares: "The theater is now the negation of art."<sup>76</sup> In contrast to the autonomy of Formalist art, Minimalist work is understood as inherently flawed in its lack of fixed self-sufficiency.<sup>77</sup> Much to Fried's chagrin, however, his condemnation of the theatrical came to be a foreshadowing of more to come — notably during the 1970s, when ambiguity and lived experience dominated most of the emerging art scene.

With the 1970s came a backlash against the kind of Formalism espoused by Fried and fellow critic Clement Greenberg. Especially under attack was the presumption that Formalist art was transcendent in its ability to maintain an undefined "universal aesthetic quality."<sup>78</sup> In contrast, postmodernists in the visual arts advocated multiplicity, eclecticism, and inclusiveness — epitomized by the habit of referring to the 1970s art world as the "pluralist era."<sup>79</sup> Over the decade, varying artistic styles competed for attention, including: Postminimalism, Conceptual art, Earth art, Installation art, Pattern and Decoration Painting, New Image Painting, Abstraction, and Performance art. While the art was diverse, many artists agreed in their attempts to eschew the established art world and, with it, its co-optive market. In the case of performance, artists broke with art historical tradition and the gallery

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<sup>76</sup> Fried, 125.

<sup>77</sup> See Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996) 10.

<sup>78</sup> Sandler, 6.

<sup>79</sup> See Corinne Robins, *The Pluralist Era: American Art 1968-1981* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

system by changing their focus from making marketable fine objects to being objects themselves. Adrian Piper explains:

For me the great leap intellectually was to abandon three-dimensional constructed objects altogether as tools of investigation . . . I experimented with my own objecthood, transforming it sculpturally as I had other objects, took it into the street, confronted others with the end products, and watched the effects on my social relations.<sup>80</sup>

Rejecting the sanctity of the salable art object, Piper experimented with her body as a new medium, as did many 70s artists.

Using one's body to produce art is not without artistic precedent, but as an art historical phenomenon, performance flourished in the 1970s.<sup>81</sup> The term "performance art" started to appear around 1970 and then was retroactively applied to earlier instances of ephemeral, body based, or performance-oriented actions.<sup>82</sup> Other terms (like "body art" or "live art") are used to describe the same works or

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<sup>80</sup> Adrian Piper, "Flying," in *Adrian Piper: Reflections 1967-1987* (New York: The Alternative Museum, 1987), reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968-1992* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996) 227.

<sup>81</sup> Fluxus, for instance, encompassed forms of performance art. Howard Fox notes: "Fluxus artists were deliberately tweaking the conventional definitions of (even avant-garde) art, effectuating a mixture that was about two parts Groucho Marx to one part Karl Marx. Fluxus artists wanted to demystify high art, to expose its inherent triviality, and to create humorous art of raucous absurdity; what is more, they harbored the high moral purpose of liberating art from its own conventionality and pomp and the desire to democratically disseminate their vision to the broadest possible public." Howard N. Fox, "Waiting in the Wings: Desire and Destiny in the Art of Eleanor Antin," in Howard N. Fox, *Eleanor Antin* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999) 18. See, RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979); reprinted as *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988); and Paul Schimmel, ed. *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1998).

<sup>82</sup> Robyn Brentano, "Outside the Frame: Performance, Art, and Life," in *Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object* (Cleveland: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994) 32. Brentano points out that Allan Kaprow established performance as a separate academic discipline in 1970 at the California Institute of the Arts, 57, note 3.

events, but this paper relies on “performance art.”<sup>83</sup> A purposefully broad definition of this hybrid and interdisciplinary medium is supplied by RoseLee Goldberg, who simply states that performance art is “live art by artists.”<sup>84</sup>

By employing Goldberg’s definition, emphasis is placed on the active production of art by artists, not professional actors, and, as such, the work can be placed within both historical and art historical contexts.<sup>85</sup> For instance, the breaking away from the art market by performance artists may be perceived as an outgrowth of frustration and political concern. Noting the dismay felt by artists during the late 1960s through the 70s, Irving Sandler writes:

A disgust with the past, coupled with a loss of faith in the future, caused disaffected young people to look only to the present. . . . Little wonder then that radicalized young artists valued the immediate sensation and did not hesitate to embody it in whatever form seemed appropriate, no matter how ephemeral. . . . Their art would be aesthetically radical; and it would end up being anticonventional, antibourgeois, and thus politically radical.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Cindy Nemser uses the term “body art,” and states of Richard Serra’s 1968 performance, *Hand Catching Lead*: “Finally the actor and the acted upon came together.” Cindy Nemser, “Subject-Object: Body Art,” *Arts Magazine*, September/October 1971: 40. Howard Fox makes a distinction between “audience-oriented performances” and “life performances” that this dissertation does not, see, Fox, “Waiting in the Wings,” 156 note 9. For more on performance-related terms used outside the United States, see RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art Since 1960* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998) 12. See also, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement, 1970-1985* (London: Pandora, 1987) 39, 290.

<sup>84</sup> Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 9. Goldberg explains: “Any stricter definition would immediately negate the possibility of performance itself. For it draws freely on any number of disciplines and media — literature, poetry, theatre, music, dance, architecture and painting, as well as video, film, slides and narrative — for material, deploying them in any combination,” Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 9.

<sup>85</sup> Some thinkers specifically associated with “performance studies” locate performance art in connection with dance or theater. See, for instance, *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). I, on the other hand, construct “performance art” here in relation to the history of art.

<sup>86</sup> Sandler, 14.

By focusing on the present, many artists may be said to have produced inherently rebellious art throughout the 1970s — especially through the untraditional medium of performance art.<sup>87</sup>

But the art world was not as inclusive as radical politics or postmodernism might suggest. Postminimalism and its offshoots were privileged, while the art of women and people of color were often excluded from significant art events and/or discourses. Whereas there was a general increase in art activism in New York City (against the Vietnam War, etc.), women artists, in particular, had begun to come together in the hopes of dismantling patriarchal authority in the socio-political realm, as well as within the art world. For instance, when the women members of the New York artists' organization, Art Workers Coalition, realized that AWC was only fighting the art establishment for the increased representation of minority men artists, they formed a separate feminist group, Women Artists in Revolution (WAR), in 1969.

The increased awareness of discrimination against women artists inevitably effected the work of individuals, like Judy Chicago, who had spent most of the 1960s trying to divorce from her art any personal feelings or politics she held as a woman.<sup>88</sup> But, by the early 1970s, circumstances began to change:

Then, the first material from the slowly developing women's movement reached the West Coast. When I read it, I couldn't believe it. Here were women saying the things I had been

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<sup>87</sup> The political radicality of the 70s not only manifests itself in the use of untraditional materials, but also in the echoing of the violence that seemed to be everywhere. For instance, many men and some women performance artists dealt with their dismay by producing sadomasochistic works. See, Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

<sup>88</sup> Chicago explains: "I learned that if I wanted my work to be taken seriously, the work should not reveal its having been made by a woman. One of the best compliments a woman artist could receive then was that 'her work looked like it was made by a man'," Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975) 36.

feeling, saying them out loud. I trembled when I read it, remembering the put-downs I encountered whenever I had tried to express the facts of my life as a woman artist. . . . at last there was an alternative to the isolation, the silence, the repressed anger, the rejection, the depreciation, and the denial I had been facing. If these women could say how they felt, so could I. . . . I felt I *had* to reach out and take this opportunity to be myself, offered implicitly by the women's movement.<sup>89</sup>

Chicago ultimately abandoned her abstract paintings in favor of women-identified projects and the development of the first feminist art program at Fresno State College (now California State University, Fresno) in 1970. A year later, she joined forces with Miriam Schapiro and moved the program to the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. Collaboration, consciousness-raising, and artistic content were accentuated in what was to be called the Feminist Art Program. Chicago and Schapiro decided early on to address the most important and personal issues facing contemporary women artists in a project called *Womanhouse*, "a collaborative art-environment addressing the gendered experiences of women in the context of a real house located in an urban neighborhood in Los Angeles."<sup>90</sup> Here, the personal was not only emphatically political, but it was also used as fodder to produce art.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 59-60.

<sup>90</sup> Faith Wilding, "The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970-75," in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 39. See also Arlene Raven, "Womanhouse," in *The Power of Feminist Art* and, Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands: The Women Artists' Movement, Southern California, 1970-1976* (Santa Monica: Double X, 1977).

<sup>91</sup> Sandler states: "In asserting the relevance of the personal in art, feminists contributed considerably to the death of modernism and to the birth of postmodernism," 115. This point was initially made by Craig Owens in "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983). Robyn Brentano, among others, recognizes performance as a "marker for the shift between modernism and postmodernism," Brentano, 33 and 57, note 7. See also Henry Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

Consciousness-raising sessions not only encouraged autobiographical subject matter, but also fostered new kinds of artistic expressions, like performance art.<sup>92</sup> For example, in Faith Wilding's performance for *Womanhouse, Waiting* (1971), she voices the realization that many women spend most of their time passively waiting for something to happen to them, rather than actively taking control over their lives. Rocking back and forth in her chair, Wilding slowly recounted a litany of (heterosexual) quiescence: ". . . Waiting to get married/ Waiting for my wedding day/ Waiting for my wedding night/ Waiting for him to make the first move/ Waiting for him to excite me/ Waiting for him to give me pleasure . . ." <sup>93</sup> Likewise, in key spots around the country, women artists involved in some form of feminist thought and/or action were beginning to produce performance-related work.<sup>94</sup>

On the East coast, women artists created their art more independently, but they came together to produce highly visible actions. For example, members of WAR formed the Ad Hoc Committee of Women Artists in 1970 specifically to contest the paltry number of women included in the Whitney Museum's Annual exhibition and permanent collections. Their actions included forged press releases and sit-ins, as well as in-situ protests entailing fake docent tours, noisy whistle-blowing, and the unruly strewing of tampons and painted eggs throughout the museum.<sup>95</sup> Protesters demanded the inclusion of 50 percent women and 50 percent

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<sup>92</sup> Judy Chicago writes: "One of the most important discoveries of the year was that informal performance provided the women with a way of reaching subject matter for art-making. The most powerful work of the first year of the program was the performances," Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 87.

<sup>93</sup> The text for *Waiting* is reprinted in Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 213-217.

<sup>94</sup> See Josephine Withers' essay "Feminist Performance Art: Performing, Discovering, Transforming Ourselves," in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 160.

<sup>95</sup> Such transgressive actions should be seen as carnivalesque. In particular, eggs are often associated with carnival, see Timothy Hyman and Roger Malbert, *Carnavalesque* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2000) 21.

“non-white” artists in museum exhibitions, which was written in lipstick across the museum’s bathroom mirrors and indicated on strips of paper scattered throughout the galleries. The action was considered moderately effective when the Whitney responded in the following Annual by increasing the representation of women from around eight to twenty-two percent.

Many other museum and art establishment protests followed, as did the creation of important feminist shows and exhibition spaces, like the first all African-American women’s art show, “Where We At Black Women Artists,” in 1971, or the still successful women’s cooperative gallery, A.I.R. (Artists in Resident), in 1972, both in New York.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, art historians began to approach art history differently. At Vassar college, in 1969, Linda Nochlin taught what is thought to be the first feminist art history course. But it was her 1971 ground-breaking article, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” that forever changed the discipline of art history.<sup>97</sup> Inspired by the Women’s Movement, Nochlin examined the patriarchal art historical systems that presented almost insurmountable barriers to potential women artists of the past.<sup>98</sup> Henceforth, the door was opened for feminist art history and many rushed through, as evidenced by the formation of the Women’s

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<sup>96</sup> Many women-only exhibitions and galleries appeared across the country. See Judith K. Brodsky, “Exhibitions, Galleries, and Alternative Spaces,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*.

<sup>97</sup> Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” *ARTnews* (January 1971): 22-39, 67-71.

<sup>98</sup> Speaking of her first consciousness-raising experience, Nochlin writes: “It is hard to recapture the sheer exhilaration of that historical moment, harder, perhaps, to remember the concrete details of a conversion experience which, for many women of my age and position, was rather like the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus: a conviction that before I had been blind; now I had seen the light.” Linda Nochlin, “Starting from Scratch: The Beginnings of Feminist Art History,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 130.



Caucus for Art (in association with College Art Association) or the founding of *Feminist Art Journal* in 1972.<sup>99</sup>

While the art world was forced to change as the result of women's activism, both men and women turned to the spontaneous and transgressive new medium of performance art. And because of the unprecedented adoption of feminism, women artists were noted for taking their performances to a subversive high. For the first time in recorded art history, women were the mavericks leading the progressive artistic pack. They did so not for art's sake as much as for the sake of transformation. Many feminist artists believed art could "influence cultural attitudes and transform stereotypes. Naive as it sounds," admits artist Suzanne Lacy, "change was our goal."<sup>100</sup>

## V (Feminist) Performance as Carnavalesque

Marginal and subversive art, with its adversary relationship to power and to official culture, thus reincarnates the spirit of carnival.

— Stam<sup>101</sup>

Women in performance have been more important in the development of feminist art than any other media or area because it really cuts through.

— Tina Keane<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> *The Feminist Art Journal* was created by Patricia Mainardi, Irene Moss, and Cindy Nemser. Many other feminist art organizations and journals (like *Chrysalis* and *Heresies*) were founded throughout the 1970s, see Mary D. Garrard, "Feminist Politics: Networks and Organizations," and Carrie Rickey's essay in *The Power of Feminist Art*.

<sup>100</sup> Suzanne Lacy, "The Name of the Game," *Art Journal* 50, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 65.

<sup>101</sup> Stam, 99.

In 1978 Anne Gauldin and Denise Yarfitz appeared to spontaneously enter a restaurant in Venice Beach, California. Both were dressed in traditional coffee shop-waitress uniforms, but Gauldin covered the front of hers with more than a dozen rounded rubber breasts. Her hair was crowned with pink flowers and she pinned plastic vines of pink and red grapes to her white skirt. Both artists proceeded to explain to the unsuspecting diners that underpaid and overworked waitresses, “are the debased modern version of the ancient Great Mother Goddess as nurturer.”<sup>103</sup>

Gauldin and Yarfitz were members of the feminist performance group The Waitresses, in which they disrupted various eating establishments with their piece, *The Great Goddess Diana*, from 1978 to 1981. Gloria Feman Orenstein describes the performance as ritualistic, radical, and participatory:

The Waitresses often invited the participation of the spectators charging the exorcism of patriarchal oppression and the reclamation of matristic values with the collective energies of the crowd. Involving the audience and passersby lifted a barrier between art and life so that the new cycle of the Goddess would be ushered into the world, and not remain cloistered and cut off from the populace, as so often occurs in the art world and in academia.<sup>104</sup>

A photograph of *The Waitress Goddess Diana* (1978) shows the two performers making grand gestures as they address the grinning diners/viewers (figure 5). Their feminist messages combine with play, parody, spectacle, and sarcasm, which produces a performance that is simultaneously humorous, feminist, socially transgressive, and therefore, carnivalesque.

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<sup>102</sup> Tina Keane, cited in Parker and Pollock, 40.

<sup>103</sup> Gloria Feman Orenstein, “Recovering Her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 187.

<sup>104</sup> Orenstein, 187, see also page 269.

Gauldin and Yarfitz are two of many performance artists who should be identified as inspired by and evoking of 70s feminist carnivalism. The way in which they involve viewers, display unruly bodies, and present alternative perspectives, is in fact characteristic of performance art in general. It is a premise of this dissertation that performance art is a perfect expression of the carnivalesque conflation of art and life, as well as the enactment of carnivalesque liberty. Striving to avoid and discredit inhibiting boundaries and hierarchies, feminist performance artists turn to a medium that revels in transgression.

Even Bakhtin recognizes the rebellious qualities of performance when he analyses what he deems as an early carnivalesque play, Adam de la Halle's "The Play in the Bower" (performed in France, 1262).<sup>105</sup> Bakhtin explains that the plot is autobiographically based on events from Halle's life, while comedy and a festival theme are used to imply the "privileges" of carnival: "the right to emerge from the routine of life, the right to be free from all that is official and consecrated."<sup>106</sup> Halle's private life is presented to his audience through humorous and festive tactics, which provides entertainment and means to escape from the everyday hegemonic structures of life.<sup>107</sup> Here, already there are parallels between the autobiographical slant of 70s feminist production (inspired by the claim that the personal is political),

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<sup>105</sup> Bakhtin acknowledges that in order for carnivalesque humor to have a broader impact, it had to enter the literary (or, in this case, artistic) realm. See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 96. And on page 97, Bakhtin writes: "The culture of laughter begins to break through the narrow walls of festivities and to enter into all spheres of ideological life. Official seriousness and fear could be abandoned even in everyday life."

<sup>106</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 257.

<sup>107</sup> The first part of "The Play in the Bower" focuses on the "personal family affairs of the author," which are "presented with utmost freedom and familiarity. There follows a no less frank presentation of the other citizens of Arras [Halle's home town], in which their private lives and their boudoir secrets are disclosed," Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 262.

and Bakhtin's definition of carnivalesque performance, which provides the freedom to be publicly private.

Important to the overall sense of liberty in Halle's work is the fact that it was performed during the period of carnival in May and some of the play's actions correlate with this popular festival. Hence, the general sense of carnival beyond the play contributes to creating a more tolerant atmosphere within the work itself. For instance, at one point in "The Bower," Halle uses a madman as his mouthpiece to criticize a decree by Pope Alexander IV that reduces scholastic privileges — a ruling that clearly effected Halle's "real" life. Normally, to criticize the Pope would have been blasphemous, but under the protective umbrella of carnival (the May festival) and comedy (the madman), Halle could safely voice his dissatisfaction with the powers that be. Although being burnt at the stake was not an overriding fear of 70s feminist performance artists, the heightened sense of release provided by the contemporaneous Women's Movement nonetheless furnished these artists with a carnivalized context where humor and radicalism could dovetail.

As in "The Bower" (or in *The Great Goddess Diana*), humor provides the opportunity to strategically state one's opposition without authoritarian or social repercussion. At the same time, it also acts to present fresh perspectives that inevitably affect the "real" world. In Bakhtin's understanding of the carnivalesque cycle, the old ideas held by viewers become imbued with the newness of the carnivalesque performance, so that there is no reversion, observers leave the performance slightly altered, rejuvenated. As Bakhtin claims: "This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things."<sup>108</sup> Peter Stallybrass

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<sup>108</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 34.

and Allon White take Bakhtin's pronouncements and specifically apply them to elitist culture:

The main importance of his [Bakhtin's] study is its broad development of the "carnavalesque" into a potent, populist, critical inversion of *all* official words and hierarchies in a way that has implications far beyond the specific realm of Rabelais studies. Carnival, for Bakhtin, is both a populist utopian vision of the world seen from below and a festive critique, through the inversion of hierarchy, of the "high" culture.<sup>109</sup>

The carnivalesque subverts not only political hegemonies, but cultural ones as well.<sup>110</sup>

Thus, performance artists, who are already bucking traditional art historical categories, magnify their critique of "high" culture by employing carnivalesque inversion.

In addition to providing a critique, carnival-like performances spread the spirit of carnival in much the same way as an actual festival feast.<sup>111</sup> Bakhtin, for instance, mentions the medieval tradition of permitting costumed actors, dressed as devils, to run around town days before a performance, at which time "they created an atmosphere of unbridled carnivalesque freedom."<sup>112</sup> This street performance exudes and evokes a sense of carnival wherever it travels, releasing it from pre-designated and restricted times or places (the carnival becomes Diaspora-like).

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<sup>109</sup> Stallybrass and White, 7.

<sup>110</sup> Stam agrees: "Carnival, in our sense, is more than a party or a festival; it is the oppositional culture of the oppressed, a countermodel of cultural production and desire," Stam, 95.

<sup>111</sup> Street festivities often produced performances that assumed political and/or social significances. See Natalie Zemon Davis, 110-111.

<sup>112</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 266. Here Bakhtin explains that "even when these actors [dressed as devils] remained within the limits of the parts assigned to them, they still preserved their extra-official character. Their roles permitted both abuse and obscenities. They spoke and acted in contradiction to official Christian mores," 266.

The running-devil tradition also points to another important attribute in carnivalesque performance: the notable lack of theatrical devices. When Bakhtin analyses a performance that is described by Rabelais, he observes: "The absence of clearly established footlights is characteristic of all popular-festive forms. The utopian truth is enacted in life itself. For a short time this truth becomes to a certain extent a real existing force."<sup>113</sup> Again, Bakhtin notes the connection between carnival qualities and utopia, in this case both are found in a play; a performance in which "the boundaries between the play and life are intentionally erased. Life itself is on stage."<sup>114</sup> Life is performed — seen in the use of autobiographical elements that mix identifications between performer and character, or in actions that intermingle boundaries between performer and viewer.<sup>115</sup> Just as in performances by *The Waitresses*, viewers are encouraged to take part in the event (either physically, emotionally, or intellectually) and thus create a type of carnivalesque collectivity.

The group dynamic that occurs during carnival-like performances does not completely exclude the idea of spectacle, but rather, to Bakhtin, becomes part of it:

Because of their obvious sensuous character and their strong element of play, carnival images closely resemble certain artistic forms, namely the spectacle. In turn, medieval spectacles often tended toward carnival folk culture, the culture of the marketplace, and to a certain extent became

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<sup>113</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 265. Stam writes: "Bakhtin shares with Marxism the assumption that cultural processes are intimately linked to social relations and that culture is the site of social struggle," 8.

<sup>114</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 258.

<sup>115</sup> As Marcia Tucker writes: "Perhaps most important of all is that the observer of carnival festivities is also a participant, even if intermittently, and so the relationship between observer and 'performer' is one of exchange and dialogue." Marcia Tucker, "Attack of the Giant Ninja Mutant Barbies," in *The New Museum of Contemporary Art, Bad Girls* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994) 24. The "Bad Girls" show received a lot of attention in 1994 for its exploration of humor in art. It focused on contemporary rule-breaking women (and several men) artists who use humor subversively, but 1970s artists were completely excluded (except for a few sources mentioned in the catalogue's bibliography). As a result, subversive humor in feminist art is made to appear like a radically new phenomenon.

one of its components. But the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play.<sup>116</sup>

One of the defining characteristics of 1970s performance art is its blatant disregard for the separation between “high” art object and artist.<sup>117</sup> Yet, while performance breaks down such boundaries, it concomitantly maintains ties to the potency of spectacle. This potential power can be harnessed and exploited by individuals, in this case by women performance artists. For although women have traditionally been objectified and rendered powerless by the gaze, Kathleen Rowe posits that “power also lies in possession and control of the visible.”<sup>118</sup> By engaging in the spirit of carnival, women can tap into the grotesque and intentionally “make a spectacle” of themselves. This affords them the power of aggressive visibility, in contrast to passive objectivity.<sup>119</sup> The anti-passivity of spectacle combines with the anti-passivity of humor in the best examples of carnivalesque feminist performance art.

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<sup>116</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 7.

<sup>117</sup> Hutcheon writes: “Like Bakhtin’s Renaissance and medieval carnival (and, we might add, like the 1970s performance art), modern metafiction exists on the self-conscious borderline between art and life, making little formal distinction between actor and spectator, between author and co-creating reader,” Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 73.

<sup>118</sup> Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas, 1995) 12. Rowe argues against Laura Mulvey’s conclusion that as a spectacle, woman is to be passively looked at. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (Boston: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984).

<sup>119</sup> Rowe writes: “Because public power is predicated largely on visibility, men have long understood the need to secure their power not only by looking but by being seen, or rather, by fashioning — as subject, as author, as artist — a spectacle of themselves. How might women use spectacle to disrupt that power and lay claim to their own?” Rowe, 11. Rowe answers this question: “I want to suggest that women might begin to reweave the web of visual power that already binds them by taking the unruly woman as a model — woman as rule-breaker, joke-maker, and public, bodily spectacle,” Rowe, 12. See also Russo, especially page 53.

Rowe further explains that women who purposefully become spectacles may be labeled “unruly” — disturbing social and gender norms, disorderly, and behaving out of place.<sup>120</sup> “The unruly woman on the [carnival] float,” states Davis, “was shameful, outrageous; she was also vigorous and in command.”<sup>121</sup> Building upon Davis’ ideas, Rowe defines the unruly woman as “an ambivalent figure of female outrageousness and transgression with roots in the narrative forms of comedy and the social practices of carnival.”<sup>122</sup> She suggests that the unruly female body can be associated with the grotesque, and therefore women often have special access to the power associated with carnivalesque spectacle.<sup>123</sup>

The carnivalesque characteristics found in spectacle (exaggeration, limitlessness, subversion) parallel Bakhtin’s ideas on the grotesque (an anti-classical, ambivalent, rejuvenating rendering of the social body). Davis, among other thinkers, has adapted Bakhtin’s ideas on the grotesque body to recognize parallels with the feminine. Women (and their female/feminine bodies) can be viewed as particularly grotesque when their bodies stress process (whether through pregnancy, excessive

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<sup>120</sup> Rowe, 31.

<sup>121</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, 140.

<sup>122</sup> Rowe, 10.

<sup>123</sup> In order to better define the “unruly woman,” Rowe provides a list: (1) The unruly woman creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate men. She is unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place. (2) Her body is excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites. (3) Her speech is excessive, in quantity, content, or tone. (4) She makes jokes, or laughs herself. (5) She may be androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social construction of gender. (6) She may be old or a masculinized crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque. (7) Her behavior is associated with looseness and occasionally whorishness, but her sexuality is less narrowly and negatively defined than is that of the *femme fatale*. She may be pregnant. (8) She is associated with dirt, liminality (thresholds, borders, or margins), and taboo, rendering her, above all, a figure of ambivalence.” Rowe, 31. Rowe explains that she formulated this list based upon the framework and examples found in Natalie Zemon Davis’ *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. Wilke, Antin, and Piper each may be associated with different aspects of Rowe’s list.



sexuality, or other material or “lower” aspects).<sup>124</sup> And women performance artists, with their emphasis on the outrageous and transgressive body, recall the carnivalesque rebelliousness associated with spectacle and the grotesque. Indeed, such artists exaggerate their femininity, use their bodies to transgress boundaries and stereotypes, and envision/enact alternative worlds.

As active members in the Women’s Movement accessed the subversive power of the carnivalesque world turned upside down, many feminist artists were likewise participating in this trend through the carnivalesque medium of performance — the result is an unruly woman par excellence. By combining the rebelliousness of spectacle and grotesque transgression with 70s feminist politics and humor, women performance artists tapped into an explosive mixture. It granted them the ability to convey their ideas through humor while attempting to alter the hegemony. Reexamining this feminist performance art within a carnivalesque context highlights the radicalness of the artistic gestures.

## VI Case Studies

I may be ironical, I may be funny, but I’m not kidding.  
— Antin<sup>125</sup>

Humor is subversive, performance art transgresses physical and artistic boundaries, and the 1970s Women’s Movement produced a spirit of carnival that

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<sup>124</sup> “The female sex,” asserts Davis, “was thought the disorderly one par excellence in early modern Europe,” Natalie Zemon Davis, 124.

<sup>125</sup> Antin quoted in Howard N. Fox, “A Dialogue with Eleanor Antin,” in Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 219.

penetrated public and private life throughout the United States. This dissertation combines and utilizes these themes as a springboard from which to examine the radical work of 70s feminist performance artists, specifically that of Hannah Wilke, Eleanor Antin, and Adrian Piper.

As in Rabelais' carnivalesque writing, humor in the performances of these three artists assumes anti-hierarchical, political qualities. Each has a rich body of work that has been art historically recognized, but the way in which humor is used subversively in their art has mostly gone unexamined (perhaps mentioned in passing, but not analyzed). Consequently, some of the key elements of their performances have been overlooked. Through close analysis of individual performance pieces, I uncover and explore the way in which Wilke, Antin, and Piper were influenced by and involved in the carnivalesque milieu of the 1970s.<sup>126</sup> Because they are three among many women artists who evoke the carnivalesque through performance, they serve as representative case studies to support the thesis — serving as examples of women performance artists who used carnivalesque humor to convey their political ideas during the 1970s.

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<sup>126</sup> Whenever available, I use videotapes and photographs to analyze the performances. Quite often these not only serve as documents of performances, but as actual works of art in and of themselves. Some of the performances were "live" and only captured through documentary means, while other performances were "private" and performed specifically for a camera. Wilke and Antin each produced many private photographs and videos to be works of art. This is less the case with Piper's earlier public performances, but becomes more so with the imagery created in relation to her alter ego. Due to the transitory nature of the work, interviews, written accounts, and art reviews are also utilized to describe performances. I was extremely fortunate with the timing of this dissertation, for each of the three artists focused on here received a retrospective exhibition as I was researching their work (Wilke: 1998, Antin: 1999, Piper: 1999). As a result, videos and photographs that had previously been unavailable to me could be closely studied now. In addition, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts allowed me to peruse their artist's files and to borrow performance videos. Electronic Arts Intermix thankfully permits visitors to view their extensive video collection and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery generously sent me a rare video of a live performance by Wilke.

By relying on different kinds of humor, Wilke, Antin, and Piper access various forms of the carnivalesque. Their strategies are conceptualized along a spectrum: as their humor becomes more bold and/or confrontational, references to the grotesque increase. Within this spectrum, humor moves from Wilke's puns to Antin's masquerade to Piper's sarcasm. I examine the inter-connections between this continuum and the artists' individual socio-political interests in order to understand better the complexities of their rebellious feminist productions.

All three artists work with levels of gender experimentation and bodily transgression. They all employ their bodies in unruly fashion, making connections with the carnivalesque concept of the woman-on-top through performance. To Wilke, Antin, and Piper, as with all performance artists, the body is the primary medium. It is a social body and as this dissertation moves along its spectrum of humor, it also transverses a body-politic axis: beginning with Wilke's mimesis of the classically beautiful body, to Antin's liminal body, and ending with Piper's purposefully disturbing or grotesque body.

The fact that the performances to be examined here were produced by feminists during the 1970s becomes part of the analysis and should always be kept in mind. Context becomes part of the text. The carnivalesque spirit exuded during this decade created a rich environment for feminist production in general, and for the humorous tactics of Wilke, Antin, and Piper's performance art in particular. That feminism is diverse and is demonstrated in a myriad of ways quickly becomes evident in the work of all three artists. Wilke focuses on the representation of women, issues of beauty, and the subversion of language; Antin disrupts limiting social constructions of identity and raises questions concerning structures of power; while Piper confronts sexism and xenophobia, particularly in relation to race.

## Chapter Two: Hannah Wilke

### I Introduction

I really don't look like I'm serious, but, I'm very serious. . . .  
 humour is much more difficult to attain than humourlessness.  
 . . . it's hard to make a joke. . . . jokes are like the most  
 serious things in the world.

— Wilke<sup>127</sup>

Hannah Wilke, née Arlene Hannah Butter, was born in 1940 in New York City, and died of lymphoma in 1993. Trained as a fine artist at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, Wilke produced sculpture, paintings, photographs, and drawings throughout her career. Yet Wilke quickly exceeded traditional boundaries of “fine art” when she embraced performance as early as 1970. Although she often declared the importance of feminism to her life, Wilke did not belong to any women’s group in particular. Instead, both her feminism and her art were cultivated on her own terms, which almost always included humor. Humor acts as a common bond interconnecting Wilke’s varied work and serves as a means for her to subtly convey serious feminist ideals. At the same time, Wilke skillfully used humor as a device to begin to chip away at established ideas and hierarchies, which ultimately included the feminist art movement itself. Where and how her performances, feminism, and humor come together is the subject of this chapter.

Wilke’s work is further complicated by the fluid process of her overall production: individual works of art borrow from and merge into each other, documents act as performances, and language works in tandem with visual imagery.

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<sup>127</sup> Wilke quoted in “Artist Hannah Wilke Talks with Ernst (Part 1),” *Oasis d'Neon* volume 1, number 1 (1979) n.p.

Moreover, Wilke's sculpture and private life are key components of her photographs, videos, and films, which are usually subsumed under the umbrella term, "performance art." An example of Wilke's working fluidity may be seen in her evolving project *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series* (1974-1979) (figure 6). The title refers to the group of privately produced photographs, known as "performalist self-portraits," as well as to the public performances of the work. Wilke coined the term "performalist self-portrait" to encompass the many self-constructed photographs that were taken of her.<sup>128</sup> The neologism punningly combines two seemingly antithetical art concepts, performance and formalism, and provides a way of describing Wilke's non-conformist art. For "performalist" makes clear that when Wilke produced a private performance, she also conceived of its formal aesthetics.

In the photographic images of *S.O.S*, Wilke mimics typical poses used by models often seen in commercial advertisements. As both artist and model, Wilke simultaneously creates and co-opts her own image. Her artistry is doubly announced by her trademark vaginally shaped chewing-gum sculptures that she sticks onto her body.<sup>129</sup> The unique gum-works consequently become part of the subject/object of Wilke's body and crucial to the private performance photographs. The thirty-five performalist self-portraits that comprise *S.O.S* are each considered to be part of the larger *S.O.S* performance and as an individual performance in and of itself. Therefore, an image acts as art object, performance, and document all at once.

The small gum-sculptures also play a vital role in the live performances, in which Wilke usually asked viewers to help her with the physical chewing of the gum.

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<sup>128</sup> Wilke first used the term "performalist self-portrait" in 1979 and retroactively applied it to earlier images of her. These photographic self-portraits were taken with the technical help of someone else, but Wilke always claimed creative authorship. Although the professional photographer, Les Wollam, took the actual photographs for *S.O.S*, Wilke retained control over her representations as the artist.

<sup>129</sup> Wilke produced countless vaginally-shaped sculptures throughout her career, which varied in both size and material.

The malleable material was then folded into a vaginal form and stuck onto either Wilke's body, a viewer's body, or mounted onto a piece of cardboard to be considered a distinct object. Simultaneously, separate "documentary" photographs and video tapes were produced in order to capture the temporal performance. All of these manifestations, private and public, photographic and live, planned and spontaneous, become integral to the performance called *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*.

Individual pieces by Wilke often flow into and mimic one another. This is seen, for example, in several *S.O.S.*-inspired performances, *My Count-ry 'Tis of thee* (1976), *Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism* (1977), and a proposed subway poster concerning The School for Visual Arts (1976), where Wilke taught from 1972 until 1991.<sup>130</sup> On another occasion, Wilke incorporated most of her early 1970's performances into a black and white video that she created as both a separate performance and as a parody of past performances. The title of this video, *(I Object) Performalist Self-Portraits* (1978), echoes an earlier performalist self-portrait, *I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver* and therefore announces the deliberately self-referential nature of this work.<sup>131</sup> Familiar images weave in and out of different artistic pieces along with reoccurring socio-political concerns, interests in language, and parody.

In typical carnivalesque fashion, Wilke's work invites the blurring of binaries, such as artist/model, audience/performer, mind/body, serious/funny, and beautiful/grotesque. This is most effectively accomplished vis-à-vis Wilke's

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<sup>130</sup> This proposed ad for The School for Visual Arts, in New York City, is entitled, *Having a talent isn't worth much . . .* (figure 7). The poster's image is recycled from one of the private photographs in *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*.

<sup>131</sup> Tom Bowes did the camera work for *(I Object) Performalist Self-Portraits*, which self-consciously summarizes most of Wilke's performance work through self-parody.

beautiful and unruly body as it becomes both object and subject in her sensual performances. Paradoxes are toyed with and exploited in a manner that resists tidy explanation and categories. Concomitantly, Wilke employs different types of humor within her performances: play, wordplay, parody, spectacle, and ambiguity work together with the/her body to convey her pointed observations and personal feminist politics.

Because Wilke's own nude body is often the physical medium of her messages, questions surrounding the politics of pleasure arise. Can her pleasure be considered in itself political, even feminist? In *Subversive Intent*, Susan Rubin Suleiman notes that although "political meanings reside in works," a text (or a work of art) is only as transgressive as the reader sees it: "how a work is read depends very much on who is reading it, when, and to what ends."<sup>132</sup> As a reader/viewer, I explore the layers of meaning in Wilke's work in order to show that her exaggerated sensuality is subversive because of its links to *her* radical pleasure. I argue that Wilke's art defies notions of feminine passivity and presumed humorlessness. For Wilke not only has a sense of humor, but she consciously utilizes it to convey her feminist ideas. In the end, Wilke's mixture of insubordinate sexuality, rebellious humor, and feminist politics become party to the carnivalesque moment that was stimulated by the Women's Movement and permeated the 1970s.

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<sup>132</sup> Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, 192. On the same page, Suleiman continues: "What seems to me wrongheaded, or at the very least problematic, is talking about the political effect or meaning of a work — especially of a self-conscious, insistently intertextual, often multiply ironic work — especially as if that meaning were clear, immutable, and immanent to the 'text,' rather than determined by its interpretive context."

## II Play

She's beautiful and she's laughing.

— Cixous<sup>133</sup>

Wilke's sense of play is present throughout her 1970s work. That she learned to play from her mother is evident in a poem about her childhood home:

My Mother  
Such a smart woman  
Too good lookin'  
To be smart  
At home she stayed  
At home she played  
To whatever was needed/ From her  
The New York Times/ Was finished at five  
Our dinner by seven/ and I played  
And I stayed  
Till Heaven<sup>134</sup>

In addition to touching upon Wilke's preoccupation with society's misconceptions about beautiful women (Wilke's mother was considered to be "too good lookin' to be smart"), she cites a lineage of play passed on from her mother to herself: "At home she played . . . and I played."

Throughout her book, Suleiman examines avant-garde and postmodern artists and authors in relation to practices of play. While she often finds that men use play in their avant-garde work to conservatively reenact patriarchal scenarios, she praises

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<sup>133</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 342.

<sup>134</sup> Hannah Wilke, "My Mother," text from photo-poem (1982) (figure 8), reprinted in *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*, ed. Thomas H. Kochheiser (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989) 88. Wilke continually discussed and represented her mother in playful, although sometimes serious, scenarios. For instance, Wilke's photograph: *Dancing in the Dark* (1978), which depicts herself and her mother laughing and dancing together (figure 9). Joanna Frueh sees a connection between the time Wilke began to document her own nudity through performance and photography with the occurrence of Wilke's mother's mastectomy — both in 1970: "As Wilke's mother was losing her body, Wilke wore her mother's wounds. She also needed to affirm the presence of her own body," Joanna Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," in *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*, 44.



the potentially liberating effects of laughter and parody in the work of feminists. Suleiman writes: “I believe that women — women artists in particular — must be strong enough to allow themselves this kind of play [with the boundaries of the self]; and that one way to achieve such strength is for girls to imagine — or better still, see — their mothers playing.” This recognition of the mother’s independent subjecthood (enacted through play), could “change the way we in the West think about the constitution of human subjectivity.”<sup>135</sup> Consequently, Suleiman encourages women to seek comic means of play in their artistic production and offers her ideal rendition of a modern chorus:

Revise, re-view  
To see things anew  
Teach the daughter to play  
Imagine the mother playing.<sup>136</sup>

Suleiman envisions a time when women and future generations of women together rewrite psychological and social patterns through play. She emphasizes the role of the mother and the importance of seeing her play along with her daughters. I believe that this pattern of play need not be biological (mother/daughter), but perhaps generational (older woman/girl), or simply inclusive of any women in its actual makeup.<sup>137</sup> The point is to witness women playing together.

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<sup>135</sup> Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, 180. Suleiman also notes: “it is in playing that the ‘I’ can experience itself in its most fluid and boundaryless state.” 179. Suleiman is greatly influenced by the ideas of D. W. Winnicott, which are found in his book, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

<sup>136</sup> Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, 10.

<sup>137</sup> Suleiman explains her privileging of the mother figure: “a mother knows internal division and double allegiance as a daily experience,” which compliments her argument that “a double allegiance characterizes much of the best contemporary work by women: on the one hand, an allegiance to the formal experiments and some of the cultural aspirations of the historical male avant-gardes; on the other hand, an allegiance to the feminist critique of dominant sexual ideologies, including the sexual ideology of those same avant-gardes,” *Subversive Intent*, xvii. Suleiman sees this “double allegiance” in the work of Cindy Sherman (who alludes to Hans Bellmer’s photographs), and Barbara Kruger (who uses Dada-like photomontage). Suleiman

Wilke's sense of play is perpetuated through her humorous art, as well as in the lives of her two step-children. In a group of four photographs entitled *Three Goddesses, Three Goddards* (1976), Wilke not only plays with her step-daughters (Kate Goddard and Nellie Goddard), but marks the activity with a feminist twist (figure 10).<sup>138</sup> Wilke, the two girls, and their father, Donald Goddard, are each pictured happily posing on top of a small column in what looks like a tree-filled park. The first photograph from the left depicts Kate, the older of the two children. In emulation of a classical *contrapposto* stance, she slightly bends her right knee, while her right forearm is raised in an angle away from her body. All art historical seriousness, however, is mocked by the girl's cheery facial expression and her fringed cowgirl outfit. In the next image, Wilke is seen smiling as she elegantly poses, and Donald goofily stands upon one leg in the third photograph. The fourth image is taken from a distance, making Nellie look even smaller. Although almost too young to hold a pose, she still juts out her left arm to join in the fun.

As viewers see these anti-classical deities stand atop their pseudo-ionic columns, they also witness two generations of women playing. The girls play with and mimic Wilke who parodies the role of artist's model. Together, the photographs are read in two ways: as images of "three goddesses" (Wilke and the two girls) and as photographs of "three Goddards" (the children and their father). The visual play is paralleled by a pun on the family name: "god" and "goddesses" are intermingled.

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ignores artists from the 1970s, although Wilke clearly demonstrates a "double allegiance" in her artistic relationship to Duchamp. In contrast, see Mira Schor, "Patrilineage," in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, eds. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven (New York: IconEditions, 1994).

<sup>138</sup> Wilke was very close with Kate and Nellie Goddard, although they did not become her "official" step-children until Wilke married Donald Goddard shortly before she passed away.

### III Wordplay

Alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification,  
the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and  
disunification go forward.

— Bakhtin<sup>139</sup>

If we keep speaking the same language together, we're going  
to reproduce the same history.

— Irigaray<sup>140</sup>

Wilke's St. Louis retrospective catalogue reproduces a page of notes completed by the artist in 1978 (figure 11).<sup>141</sup> It contains fragments of songs and phrases, along with doodles. This page offers a brief glimpse into Wilke's creative process and crystallizes the mixing of words and images that consistently motivated her work. One sees Wilke's tendency to interweave the personal and the political along with wordplay and the body, which is represented by the vaginal sketches (trademark schematic representations that emulate inverted Valentine-hearts) that dot the piece of paper. On this busy page of notes, Wilke conveys many thoughts at once, relying especially on puns. For instance, Wilke writes "PREDJUDICE — HAY JUD Don't be AFRAID" and "but I am Jewish — DREDJUDice — PRAY Jew Dies." She takes the word prejudice and moves it through an uplifting Beatles song ("Hey Jude") and then to her personal fears attached to anti-semitism.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 272.

<sup>140</sup> Irigaray, 205.

<sup>141</sup> Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 6.

<sup>142</sup> Beatles, "Hey Jude," 1968. Wilke addresses the power of language when she discusses the word "Jew" in relation to World War II: "I realized what it would be to be annihilated just for a word." Quote from Ruth Margolin's, "An Interview with Hannah Wilke," *Forum* (November/December 1989): 9.

On the same page, Wilke draws eight small boxes, each containing abstracted suit-like garments on hangers. Nearby she writes: "Hannah's suit. . . . Vest ments" and elsewhere: "law suit" and "the hat makes the man — clothes — claes," which all reference the court battle she was forced to undergo with artist and ex-lover, Claes Oldenburg.<sup>143</sup> Wilke continues the clothing pun in a metaphor for her enduring individuality with the handwritten reference to a George and Ira Gershwin song: "The way I wear my hat. . . . The memory of all that — no no he can't take that away from me."<sup>144</sup> The layers of personal meaning persist on the page, but one phrase in particular highlights an understanding of Wilke's relationship with art history: "Taste is related to the times like a tiffany [*sic*] lamp."<sup>145</sup> The quote is taken from Marcel Duchamp and points to the ongoing dialogue Wilke has with his work. As an acknowledged "master" of both twentieth-century art and the pun, Duchamp becomes a significant foil for Wilke's artistic production.<sup>146</sup>

<sup>143</sup> Claes Oldenburg, whom Wilke lived with from 1969 to 1978, entered into court battle when Oldenburg censored images of him by Wilke. Wilke lost. See Tim Crone, "Life Over Art: Oldenburg's Privacy, Wilke's Publicity," *Arts Magazine* (September 1989): 25-26. The phrase "the hat makes the man" alludes to Polonius' advice to be true to oneself: "For the apparel oft proclaims the man. . . . This above all, to thine own self be true," William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark in Thirteen Plays*, eds. Otto Reinert and Peter Arnott (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978) act I, scene iii, lines 73-80.

<sup>144</sup> George Gershwin and Ira Gershwin, "They Can't Take That Away From Me," from the movie score for "Shall We Dance," 1937. Wilke alters the song, which was originally written in second person: "The way you wear your hat . . ." And Wilke writes "*he* can' take that away from me," instead of "they," probably referring to Oldenburg.

<sup>145</sup> This quote is heard in a 1964 television interview with Duchamp that is later edited into an art video entitled "The Last Tapes of Marcel Duchamp" (1977). The tape was produced by John Sanborn and contains segments from two of Wilke's performances relating to Duchamp: "Philly" (1976) and "Sugargiver" (1977).

<sup>146</sup> Wilke attended school in Philadelphia and The Philadelphia Museum of Art contains the most comprehensive collection of Duchamp's work. Frueh discusses Wilke's connection to Duchamp's work, "Hannah Wilke," 30-39. Wilke was one of two women included in a large exhibition at the Ludwig Museum exploring the influence of Duchamp on later artists. See Alfred M. Fischer's article, "Die

In puns, words are placed within a context that produces multiple readings based upon similarities of look, sound, or meaning. Jonathan Culler, the editor of *On Puns*, recognizes the pun as “paradigm for the play of language.”<sup>147</sup> Wordplay and puns played important roles in twentieth-century avant-garde art and literature; not only in the work of Duchamp, but in Picasso and Braque’s paintings, the work of the Surrealists, and in the writings of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce as well. Yet this sense of play is often overlooked or only begrudgingly acknowledged by a groan in formal literary and humor studies. In *An Anatomy of Humor*, Arthur Asa Berger explains that the pun is often considered “the lowest form of wit,” seen as aiming for the quick and fatuous laugh.<sup>148</sup>

Similarly, Frederick Ahl writes that in situations where a pun is subtle “anyone who wishes to ignore the pun may, by scholarly convention, feel free to ignore it. And many scholars would like to.”<sup>149</sup> Ahl continues to note that some critics maintain a prejudiced view against the pun and cites William Empson who sees the act of punning as effeminate when he bemoans Shakespeare’s pun-filled writing style: “many of us could wish the Bard had been more manly in his literary habits.”<sup>150</sup> Thus, for some, the pun is not only seen as base, but as feminine as well. This is significant in the hands of a feminist artist such as Wilke or a gender-bending

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wirkliche Braut, entkleidet,” in *Ubrigens sterben immer die anderen: Marcel Duchamp und die Avantgarde seit 1950* (Cologne: Museum Ludwig Köln, 1988) 259-262.

<sup>147</sup> Jonathan Culler, “The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction,” in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) 5.

<sup>148</sup> Arthur Asa Berger, 45.

<sup>149</sup> Frederick Ahl, “Art in Puns and Anagrams Engrave (Ars Est Caelare Artem),” in *On Puns*, 22.

<sup>150</sup> William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Harmondsworth, 1973) 110-111, cited in Ahl, 22.

artist such as Duchamp.<sup>151</sup> They use the pun for different reasons, but, in both cases, disruptions (linguistic and otherwise) occur.

There are, however, aficionados of the pun who see its duality of sound and/or meaning as not only humorous, but challenging and even liberating. Bakhtin refers to a *grammatica jocosa* in which puns contribute to the carnivalesque inversion of hierarchies by transgressing grammatical order “to reveal erotic and obscene or merely materially satisfying counter-meaning.”<sup>152</sup>

Thus, if language is a critical ingredient in the foundation of society and the formation of individuals, then the manipulation of words should be seen as a potentially radical gesture. In post-structuralist fashion, puns exploit the ambiguities of language and contradict the concept of singular, unquestionable meaning.<sup>153</sup> From a semiotic perspective, the pun has great potential for causing disorder and confusion as Derek Attridge describes:

[The pun] survives, tenaciously, as freak or accident, hindering what is taken to be the function of language: the clean transmission of a pre-existing, self-sufficient, unequivocal meaning. . . . The pun, however, is not just an

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<sup>151</sup> See, for example, George H. Bauer, “Duchamp’s Ubiquitous Puns,” *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*, eds. Rudolf E. Kuenzli and Francis M. Nauman (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990).

<sup>152</sup> Stallybrass and White, 10. Davis discusses the punning names used to identify medieval members of a self-governing youth group in Rouen (these groups were called Abbeys of Misrule): “Conard” and “Cornard.” The words suggest “folly, sexuality, power, and noise,” Natalie Zemon Davis, 99. Among other things, a “conard” was a fool, which was associated with the belief that “female genitalia made fools out of men and were the source of male energy.” A “cornard” was a cuckolded husband. The pun depends on similarities of both sound and meaning, because a husband was considered to be a fool for being cuckolded. That male foolishness and vitality were seen to be vaginally linked should be remembered for a later discussion of Wilke’s use of vaginal imagery, while her punning should be seen as evoking a sense of carnivalesque rebellion.

<sup>153</sup> Fixity and/or clarity can be seen as part of hegemonic ideology, as R. A. Shoaf writes: “The juxtologist critic is not afraid of coincidence, does not seek (Cartesian) certitude, is always suspicious of ‘clarity’ (whose ideology, he asks, is served by this ‘clarity’?).” R. A. Shoaf, “The Play of Puns in Late Middle English Poetry: Concerning Juxtology,” in *On Puns*, 61.

ambiguity that has crept into an utterance unawares, to embarrass or amuse before being dismissed; it is ambiguity *unashamed of itself*, and this is what makes it a scandal and not just an inconvenience. In place of a context designed to suppress latent ambiguity, the pun is the product of a context deliberately constructed to *enforce* an ambiguity, to render impossible the choice between meanings, to leave the reader or hearer endlessly oscillating in semantic space.<sup>154</sup>

Strict language systems cannot accommodate the multiplicity of meanings fostered by puns, which “totally undermine the explicit.”<sup>155</sup> The ability to question language’s authority makes the pun attractive to thinkers searching for multi-voiced expression. For instance, Culler recalls Bakhtin’s ideas on the carnivalesque when he writes that puns “produce effects of meaning — with a looseness, unpredictability, excessiveness, shall we say, that cannot but disrupt the model of language as nomenclature.”<sup>156</sup> As such, history is filled with subversive artists and authors who embrace the disruptive ambiguity of the pun.

In 1977, Wilke performed *Intercourse With...*, in which she orally mixes a medley of what Bakhtin would call “languages” (styles of speech). Part of the text reads:

As an American girl born with the name Butter in 1940, I  
was often confused when I heard what it was like to be used,  
to be spread, to feel soft, to melt in your mouth. . . . Labeling

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<sup>154</sup> Derek Attridge, “Unpacking the Portmanteau, or Who’s Afraid of *Finnegans Wake*?” in *On Puns*, 140-141. Writing about semiotics, Jonathan Culler explains that according to “Ferdinand de Saussure’s account, the linguistic system consists of relational entities, signs defined by their relations with one another. Emphasis on new punning relationships disrupts the system. . . . If, as Saussure writes, the most precise characteristic of a linguistic unit is to be what the others are not, what happens when it seems to be another sign also.” Culler, *The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction*, 12.

<sup>155</sup> Ahl, 21. The sentence reads: “puns add an alien set of referends which multiply meaning and totally undermine the explicit.” Following Hélène Cixous’ concept of a woman as a flyer/thief (*voleuse*) of language, Frances Gray, states: “Women need to grab the language, and to fly with it, and through laughter to show their authority over it.” Gray, 13, based on Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa,” 344.

<sup>156</sup> Culler, “The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction,” 14.

people instead of listening to them. . . . Sticks and stones break our bones, but names more often hurt us. . . . Yet to name a thing wherein I caught the conscience of the king, as well as the queen. . . . to keep on naming a thing. . . . to wear my hat, the memory of all that, until that thing is really something. . . . The way my smile just gleams, the way I sip my tea. . . . The memory of all that, now that's really something. . . . no, they can't take that away from me.<sup>157</sup>

Wilke's multivoiced wordplay can be thought of in terms of Bakhtin's study on language in the dialogic novel and his ideas on hybridization.<sup>158</sup> In his analysis of the comic novel, for instance, Bakhtin notes that "shifts" occur between different types of languages (e.g., common, parodic, authorial), which creates hybrids.<sup>159</sup> Like a pun, "A hybrid construction," Bakhtin explains, "is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two 'languages,' two semantic and axiological belief systems."<sup>160</sup> Wilke presents a non-linear, aural example of hybridization when she maneuvers through different voices/languages.

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<sup>157</sup> Hannah Wilke, *Intercourse With...* was originally performed in 1977, at which time a videotape was made. The text is published in Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 139.

<sup>158</sup> To Bakhtin, carnival works in opposition to official culture in the same way that dialogic language works against the authoritarian word.

<sup>159</sup> Bakhtin writes: "Shifts from common language to parodying of generic and other languages and shifts to the direct authorial word may be gradual, or may be on the contrary quite abrupt. Thus does the system of language work in the comic novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, 302.

<sup>160</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 304-305. Bakhtin continues to describe another type of hybrid construction that is reminiscent of a pun: "It frequently happens that even one and the same word will belong simultaneously to two languages, two belief systems that has two contradictory meanings, two accents," 305. Bakhtin sees hybridization as basic to comic structure: "This varied *play with the boundaries of speech types*, languages and belief systems is one most fundamental aspects of comic style," *The Dialogic Imagination*, 308.



In the above text, for example, Wilke performs as a single speaker who draws upon more than two utterances, two speech manners, or two styles, when she moves from her memories as a youth to a child's chant to Shakespearean drama and back to popular song.<sup>161</sup> In order to emphasize the power of language she alters the youthful chant from "names will never hurt us" to "names more often hurt us." Through postmodern play, she creates a pun between Shakespeare's "wherein" and the way she "wears" her hat, thereby not only mixing "high" culture with pop, but also causing listeners to link conscience and memory with Wilke's steadfast individuality.<sup>162</sup> Wilke cites patrilineal surnames and epithets as part of the larger ability to name, to author validation "until that thing is really something," as in the various and unwanted erotic contradictions of Butter — a name she ultimately abandons when she married her first husband.<sup>163</sup> She concludes that neither language nor the one who names can displace what she has determined to be hers, for, ultimately, it is the memory of who she is (her style, her smile, her habits) that is "really something." These physical characteristics define her in spite of the names given by others.

Parallel with Wilke's thoughts on names is Irigaray's invitation: "Come out of their language. Try to go back through the names they've given you. I'll wait for you."<sup>164</sup> Irigaray speaks metaphorically as she addresses women and their bodies

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<sup>161</sup> Wilke again references Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "The Play's the thing / wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king," II. ii. 539-540. She goes beyond the gendered notion in the line when she adds "as well as the queen."

<sup>162</sup> The Gershwin song reappears here, this time Wilke says "*they* can't take that away," rather than the "he" she wrote on her page of notes.

<sup>163</sup> Barry Wilke was Wilke's first husband. "To name a thing," may reference Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, act II, scene ii, line 43. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. William James Craig (London: The Oxford University Press, 1914).

<sup>164</sup> Irigaray, 205.

(including her own), all of which have been encoded by language. She deliberately avoids singularity, translucence, and coherence, which are qualities she sees as stereotypically “masculine.” The “they” she refers to are men (who use masculine language). Irigaray encourages her readers to leave linguistic restrictions behind in a way that complements Wilke’s *Intercourse With...* text. Both women allude to a kind of liberty beyond language and names.

In the mid-1970s, Irigaray, along with fellow French feminists, became interested in the concept of “feminine writing” (*l’écriture féminine*), and the idea that sexual difference structures language. Masculine language is deemed logical, linear, rational, and hierarchical, while feminine language is considered to be its antithesis. French feminists, like Cixous, rejected the traditional western split between mind and body, which led to the attempt to “write the body.” Writing becomes a joint endeavor between mind and body as it deliberately embraces an anti-rational approach.<sup>165</sup> Irigaray sees the acknowledgment of difference in language as a way to emphasize the feminine within dominant masculine culture and society. She advocates a strategy that jams the “theoretical machinery” and suspends its “pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal.”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> In her non-linear essay, Cixous urges: “Write yourself. Your body must be heard,” “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 338. See Diane Price Herndl’s introduction to the “Body” section for insight into *l’écriture féminine*; in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*; and Claire Duchén’s *Feminism in France: From May ‘68 to Mitterrand*, for more information on the politics of French feminism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

<sup>166</sup> Irigaray, 78. Irigaray emphatically states that in order for women to obtain subjectivity, several events need to coincide along with the questioning of current psychological and philosophical theories of sexuality/desire. These include, an end to the commodification of women, and the presence of the dual subject (female, male) in language. As Irigaray attempts to dismantle the phallogocentrism of language that defines women’s sexuality, she concomitantly hopes to re-construct a new language whose “function would thus be to cast *phallogocentrism*, *phallogocriticism*, loose from its moorings in order to return the masculine to its own language, leaving open the possibility of a different language. Which means that the masculine would no longer be ‘everything,’” 80. By admitting the existence of the

The pun is one way to breakdown language's authority. Like Bakhtin's dialogic privileging of two (utterances, languages, etc.), Irigaray rejects the univocal.<sup>167</sup> When she writes: "we need to proceed in such a way that linear reading is no longer possible," Irigaray is projecting an end to phallogocentric language and the emergence of the feminine.<sup>168</sup> Multiplicity and non-linearity create fissures in the phallogocentric model of truth, meaning, and subsequently of power. When William Empson pejoratively connects punning to femininity, he mirrors Irigaray's ideas of a feminine writing based upon nonlinear, multivoiced language. Both attach ambiguous meaning (seen in wordplay) to the circumscribing of masculinized language. The difference is that they disagree on whether the upshot is desirable or not.

Although there are no direct ties between Wilke and Irigaray, both were working in the 1970s and a parallel methodology is noticeable. Wilke, however, not only "writes" and "speaks" the body, she also "walks" the body. In other words, unlike Irigaray, Wilke does not have to suggest or evoke the body — she performs her body in all its materiality. The/her body is present in order to be dealt with, both theoretically and physically. The title of her piece, *Intercourse With...*, punningly emphasizes the connections between coitus and conversations. And the text to this performance begins with Wilke's declaration to merge art, language, and the (actual) feminine body:

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other via language (evoking woman's desire, her difference, and her subjectivity), the assumed sameness of women to men (read as "less than") is forced into question.

<sup>167</sup> Gail M. Schwab reads Irigaray as dialogic in her essay, "Irigarayan Dialogism: Play and Powerplay," in *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*, eds. Dale M. Bauer and S. Jaret McKinstry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991). At times, Bakhtin sounds like he is "writing the body." For example, he writes: "The absolute lower stratum is always laughing," *Rabelais and His World*. 22. See also Stallybrass and White, 183.

<sup>168</sup> Irigaray, 80.

Since 1960 I have been concerned with the creation of a formal imagery that is specifically female, a new language that fuses mind and body into erotic objects that are namable and at the same time quite abstract. Its content has always related to my own body and feelings, reflecting pleasure as well as pain, the ambiguity and complexity of emotions.<sup>169</sup>

Wilke's description speaks of pleasure and of the various feelings inextricably tied to her body in a manner that parallels sentiments concerning feminine writing.<sup>170</sup>

Interconnections between Wilke's body, language, and desire are visualized in the video of *Intercourse With...* The performance begins with the playing back of answering machine messages left for Wilke over the years (figure 12). The voices of amorous admirers, friends, and the artist's mother follow one another, while Wilke appears weighted by their words. As she begins to cite the above texts, Wilke removes her shirt to reveal the names of those heard on the tape stuck onto her bare chest (figure 13). She slowly peels away the names until she is naked. Metaphorically, her body is liberated of the clinging language and she now appears emotionally relieved.

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Joanna Frueh posits that Wilke's puns are politically and socially inclined, while Duchamp's "irony is that of indifference."<sup>171</sup> Although both artists convey a

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<sup>169</sup> Wilke, *Intercourse With...*

<sup>170</sup> See, Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.); and Jane Gallop's "*Quand nos lèvres s'écrivent: Irigaray's Body Politic*," *The Romanic Review* (1983), vol. 74, no. 1, reprinted as "Lip Service," in *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>171</sup> Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 33. Frueh takes this quote from Marcel Duchamp who writes: "My irony is that of indifference." Elmer Peterson and Michel Sanouillet, eds. *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp: Salt Seller = Marchand du Sel*, trans. Elmer Peterson (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975) 6.

sense of humor, the kind of cool detachment found in Duchamp's work contrasts with Wilke's personal/political messages. In light of the French feminists' understanding of feminine language, it may be said that Wilke's wordplay is not only different in comparison to Duchamp's indifference, but also in her expression of gendered difference. This gendered identification influences Wilke's use of language, which is usually accompanied by representations of the female body. Sometimes the body is seen in its entirety, while, at other times, it is referenced by abstracted vaginal forms.

In 1974, Barbara Rose acknowledged the politicized appearance of vaginal imagery in art:

Inferior status has stimulated both [women and blacks] to assertions of pride in their "differences." Black art frequently serves as propaganda for the important idea that "black is beautiful," essentially creating not only an ideology of equality, but a psychology built on the confidence that black is as good as white. To dignify female "difference," what should feminist art glorify? The answer is obvious. . . . For much of the feminist art that has been labeled "erotic" because it depicts or alludes to genital images is nothing of the sort. It is designed to arouse women, but not sexually.<sup>172</sup>

The goal of such art was to politically stimulate viewers, which resulted in a true mixing of the personal (body) and the political. By the mid-1960s Wilke was regularly producing three-dimensional vaginal abstractions.<sup>173</sup> "My concern," Wilke

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<sup>172</sup> Barbara Rose, "Vaginal Iconology," *New York*, 20 May 1974, 59. See also, Lisa Tickner, "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality & Women Artists since 1970," *Art History* Vol. 1, No. 2 (June 1978): 236-251. Noteworthy, the carnivalesque privileges the lower body. For example, Bakhtin writes: "Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving," *Rabelais and His World*, 21.

<sup>173</sup> Artists, such as Wilke, who turned to vaginal imagery have been accused of being "essentialists" — those who believe that there is a female essence residing somewhere in the body of women. But Wilke makes no such suggestion. She uses the vagina as a socio-political symbol, not as the basis for a naively accepted belief. See Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, "Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century," in *The Power of Feminist Art*; and Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (New York: Routledge, 1989) for discussions on essentialism.

explains, “is with the word translated into form, with creating a positive image to wipe out the prejudices, aggression and fear associated with the negative connotations of pussy, cunt, box.”<sup>174</sup> Her vaginal forms are meant to counter and transform slanderous perceptions of the body that manifest in popular language and thinking.<sup>175</sup> For example, Wilke’s sculpture *Teasel Cushion* (1967) is a medium-sized terra-cotta work that appears soft in its undulating curves and pinkish hue (figure 14). The negative connotations associated with the words “cunt,” “pussy,” and the like, are replaced with a carefully crafted, vaginally-shaped art object.<sup>176</sup>

By making the vagina a positive, tangible symbol, Wilke contradicts a major tenet of psychoanalytic thought: the theoretically “absent” vagina based upon Freud’s concept of vagina as lack. In her critical analyses of Freud’s ideological legacy, Irigaray writes: “the ‘feminine’ is always described in terms of deficiency or

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<sup>174</sup> Wilke, “*Intercourse With...*” In her book, *Through the Flower*, Judy Chicago echoes Wilke’s conviction when she writes, “I use the word ‘cunt’ deliberately, for it embodies society’s contempt for women. In turning the word around, I hope to turn society’s definition of the female around and make it positive, instead of negative,” *Through the Flower*, 55. Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party*, which used vaginal/butterfly-shaped plates, was completed in 1974, while her sexually ambiguous *Pasadena Lifesavers* paintings were shown in 1969. The two artists were working on opposite sides of the country, yet they developed some parallel visual and ideological solutions.

<sup>175</sup> Wilke explains that another reason why she chose to represent the vagina was “as a statement of the only thing left that male supremacy in the art world didn’t cover.” Wilke quoted in “Artist Hannah Wilke Talks with Ernst (Part 1),” n.p.

<sup>176</sup> The title *Teasel Cushion* can be read in several different ways. The *Webster’s NewWorld Dictionary*, Second College Edition, defines “teasel” as “any of a genus (*Dipsacus*) of bristly plants of the teasel family, with prickly cylindrical heads of . . . flowers . . . having sharp, spine-like bracts.” An oxymoron is therefore created when the words “teasel” and “cushion” are placed together. The cushion may exist for the teasel or the cushion may have teasel-like qualities — all the time punning on the word “prick.” Moreover, the ceramic sculpture is placed on top of prickly, green Astroturf. “Teasel Cushion” can also be thought of as a command: “Teas-el cushion!” (“tease the cushion!”).

atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex.”<sup>177</sup>

Wilke opposes Freud’s way of thinking with several works bearing the title *Venus Envy*, which clearly mocks his belief in woman’s universal penis envy. One such work is comprised of three photographs depicting Wilke with her former lover, the British Pop artist Richard Hamilton (1980). The images are closely cropped so that only Hamilton’s head is seen poking out from between Wilke’s naked legs and pubic mound (figure 15). With tongue in cheek, the word “venus” punningly replaces “penis.” Wilke also links her/the vagina to the goddess of love and beauty, as well as to the distant solar system.<sup>178</sup> The vivid bringing together of language, the body, and social commentary is further seen in Wilke’s vaginally-shaped, terra-cotta sculpture, *Black Whole* (c. 1970). Freud’s concept of the vagina as negative “hole,” is punned upon and refuted by the visible and complete vaginally-shaped sculpture.

Wilke’s desire to create positive representations out of prejudiced perceptions is enhanced by her frequent use of “low” substances to produce her vaginal forms. Disposable or inexpensive materials, like chewing-gum, laundry lint, kneaded erasures, and clay are transformed into “fine” art.<sup>179</sup> Like Pop artists of the 1960s or

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<sup>177</sup> Irigaray, 69. Irigaray warns that “female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters,” 23. The title of Irigaray’s book, *This Sex Which is Not One*, puns on Freud’s notion of the vagina as lack or “not one.” Irigaray announces that the plurality of woman’s sex is “not one,” but many, which includes the vulva, the lips, etc.

<sup>178</sup> Wilke often used “venus” in the titles of her works. For example, the terra-cotta sculpture *Venus Cushion* (c. 1970), the chocolate sculpture *Venus Pareve* (1982), and her final series of performalist self-portraits *Intra-Venus* (1992). “Venus” also makes reference to the renewed feminist interest in female goddesses.

<sup>179</sup> In addition to Wilke’s use of disposable materials, her hands-on gestural method of making sculpture was in direct opposition to the machine-made aesthetic instituted by Minimalist artists such as Carl Andre or Donald Judd. For a study of Wilke’s art as gestural, see Sandra Goldman’s essay “Gesture and ‘The Regeneration of the Universe,’” in *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*, eds. Elisabeth Delin Hansen, Kirsten Dybbøl, and Donald Goddard (Copenhagen: Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, 1998).

medieval festival goers, Wilke blurs the line between “high” and “low” art.<sup>180</sup> She conflates artistic hierarchies in each of her vaginal works (“high” sculpture plus “low” matter), just as Shakespearean prose was elided with popular music in *Intercourse With...* The way in which Wilke uses “low” materials parallels art making practices by several feminist artists during the 1970s, who challenged traditional art historical categories. According to Craig Owens, this challenge avoids perpetuating the idea that “mediums themselves identif[y] with the cultural hegemony of Western Europe.”<sup>181</sup>

Wilke’s questioning of hierarchical notions in relation to art is furthered by her emphasis on performance art, where her body is the primary material.<sup>182</sup> For instance, in her performalist self-portrait, *I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver* (1977-1978), Wilke challenges both Duchamp and the tradition of art history.<sup>183</sup> This work is comprised of two poster-sized, color photographs that serve as pseudo “book covers” for Wilke’s imaginary text, “I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver” (figure 16). She self-named herself a “sugar-giver,” because she offers to others the “sweets of life — love and eroticism.”<sup>184</sup> In addition, Wilke’s title alludes to Duchamp’s

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<sup>180</sup> Carnival to Bakhtin is a “potent, populist, critical inversion of *all* official words and hierarchies,” including “high culture,” Stallybrass and White, 7.

<sup>181</sup> Owens, “The Discourse of Others,” 67. Much of the art that women have traditionally worked on throughout history, such as quilting, pottery, or porcelain painting, has been labeled “lower” or craft art. This is one of the reasons Judy Chicago deliberately used ceramics and needlepoint in her *Dinner Party*. See Chicago’s *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1979).

<sup>182</sup> Some of Wilke’s sculptures that dialogue with the work of Duchamp include *Wedges of...* (1992) and *Why not Sneeze?* (1992).

<sup>183</sup> Richard Hamilton took the photographs for/of Wilke while they were on a trip together in Spain, 1976.

<sup>184</sup> Frueh, “Hannah Wilke,” 35. In *S.O.S.* Wilke is literally a “sugar-giver” when she hands out sugary chewing-gum. In 1988, Wilke created a “text” for her “memoirs,” which she also entitled *I OBJECT Memoirs of a Sugargiver*. It is a compilation of various correspondences sent to her along with some of her own writings. The text is reprinted in Fischer, 263-271.



collected writings, *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp: Salt Seller = Marchand du Sel*. Thus her “sugar-giver” name contrasts with one of the pseudonyms used by Duchamp, “Marchand du Sel,” an anagrammatic play on his name that translates into “salt seller.”

While Wilke’s nickname recalls the title of Duchamp’s book, the images of *I Object* respond to his elaborate piece, *Etant donnés: 1 La Chute d’eau, 2 Le Gaz d’éclairage* (1946-66). *Etant donnés*. . . is an installation that can only be seen through two tiny peepholes set in a forbidding wooden door. The viewing reveals a three-dimensional tableau depicting a faceless, disfigured, and hairless woman sprawled out on a bed of twigs (figure 17). The scene is eerie, but the figure extends a raised arm that holds a lighted lamp.<sup>185</sup> Wilke reads the work as both objectified and powerless: “I find *Etant donnés*. . . repulsive, which is perhaps its message. She has a distorted vagina. Its voyeuristic vulgarity justifies impotence.”<sup>186</sup>

When Wilke re-produced her own version of *Etant donnés*. . . she radically reconfigured the subject of the image. On what is understood to be the “back cover” of the pseudo book, Wilke depicts herself from a perspective similar to that of Duchamp’s nude: a crotch shot — except her vagina is not deformed and the/her entire body is visible. Wilke’s feet are in the foreground and because of the foreshortened view, her head appears tilted back exposing the inside of her nostrils. The central focus of the photograph is occupied by Wilke’s relaxed thighs and

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<sup>185</sup> There are many conflicting interpretations and discussions surrounding *Etant donnés*. . . on which Duchamp worked from 1946 until his death in 1966. For instance, Dalia Judovitz sees the female figure as both “mechanical” and androgynous in her exploration of Duchamp’s “deconstruction of the ‘reality-effect’ of *Given* through the displacement of indexical relations.” Dalia Judovitz, “Rendezvous with Marcel Duchamp: *Given*,” in *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*, eds. Rudolf E. Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987) 189.

<sup>186</sup> Quote by Wilke, cited in Frueh, “Hannah Wilke,” 35.

vagina. There is no sense of menace and Wilke is not being spied upon voyeuristically. She shot the image on the rocks that were part of Duchamp's home in Cadaques, Spain. The deliberate challenge to Duchamp's work is asserted by her literal co-option of his space. Wilke's nude body is specific (it is named, it has a history), it is whole (non-distorted, non-fragmented) and it is natural (with hair). She inserts herself into the story, the story of important individuals (as suggested by the memoir), of Duchamp's opaque symbolism, and of the history of art itself.

Like the twigs and trees in *Etant donnés* . . . , the rocks in Wilke's piece create an outdoor backdrop, but Wilke does not allow herself to be subsumed by the label "nature" (which is almost always read in opposition to "culture"). As an artist, Wilke was fully aware of the culture/nature binary, which inevitably links women to nature while denying them access to cultural significance.<sup>187</sup> Instead, Wilke's "natural" body is disclosed as a product (and maker) of culture. Her nudity is not the result of an idealistic state of being, a mythological tale, or the figment of someone else's imagination, as is often the case in art. Instead, Wilke indicates that her nakedness results from her decision to remove her clothing — as evidenced by her tan-lines and the strewn wardrobe surrounding her. This rejection of timeless idealism recollects some of the controversy regarding Manet's 1863 painting *Luncheon on the Grass*, in which the model Victorine Meurent is represented with two identifiable gentlemen in a popular French park. They are clothed and she is not, for her dress lays crumpled beside her along with a basket of spilling fruit. The

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<sup>187</sup> Performance artist Mary Beth Edelson writes: "The nature/culture construct advances the idea that women artists working with nature have accepted their bodies at the expense of their cognitive minds, and that deconstructionist artists have accepted their intellects at the expense of their sensual bodies . . . the patriarchy profits from the nature/culture construct — because dichotomy works to keep in place treatment of the sexes as they have been historically polarized with a re-imposition of rigid notions of male and female." Mary Beth Edelson, "Objections of a 'Goddess artist': An open letter to Thomas McEvilley," *New Art Examiner*, April 1989, 35.

problem for the contemporary public, so the familiar story goes, was not with her nudity, but with the lack of mythological guise.

Meurent was posing as herself and without shame, as indicated by her strikingly confident gaze. That gaze is recalled on the “front cover” of Wilke’s “book.” Here, a bird’s-eye-view captures Wilke flat on her back as she peers past a rock to stare at the viewer. The title of the work appears in white print and is accompanied by the artist’s name (as pseudo-author). This time her head appears at the bottom of the image with her foreshortened feet at the top.

*I Object* abandons and demystifies the norm for representing a nude woman in traditional western art. This is supported by the fact that Wilke is photographed with body hair. John Berger notes the significance:

(... in the European tradition generally, the convention of not painting the hair on a woman's body helps towards the same end. Hair is associated with sexual power, with passion. The woman's sexual passion needs to be minimized so that the spectator may feel that he has the monopoly of such passion.) Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own.<sup>188</sup>

By representing her body in its entirety and with hair, Wilke subverts the patriarchal construct of passive female sexuality. Her sensuality is embraced matter-of-factly, emphasized by Wilke’s expression, as well as her scattered faded blue jeans and stylish espadrille sandals. Each element contributes to the performance which is understood to have occurred at a specific moment in time and place. The Spanish bottle of suntan lotion not only reaffirms the performance’s locale, but also acts as a marker of contemporary commercialism.

Wilke lays among her staged still-life as both object and producer of objects, as both sexually desirable and self-possessed. The paradoxical visual cues

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<sup>188</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972) 55.

are reiterated by the work's punning title: "I Object." The title may be read as just another fact — "I (am an) object" — a way for Wilke to declare her objecthood. Simultaneously she acknowledges her beauty and the pleasure she offers the gaze: "eye object."<sup>189</sup> Unlike her discomfort with the sexual wordplay forced onto her former name, Butter, Wilke embraces and controls her eroticism here. Objectification is no longer read as powerlessness. Another reading of the title requires a contortion in both intonation and thinking: "I object!" As in a court room, Wilke raises an objection to the way women are traditionally represented. Wilke's objective, as stated in a line from *Intercourse With...*, is: "to make objects instead of being one."

Like the figure in *Etant donnés. . .*, Wilke is partially obstructed by a rock, but unlike the former, Wilke is a *subject* (of the "book" and the performance) and she returns the gaze. She stares into her viewer's eyes claiming the right to her body, its representations, and even its objectification. But Wilke takes her rebellion one step further. She places *Etant donnés. . .* literally on its head when she physically turns her body upside down and formally subverts Duchamp's work.

Puns allow Wilke to convey the body and her ideas in a way that promotes multiplicity and complexity. Her language is continually punctuated by wordplay, nonlinear digressions, and a sense of multi-voicedness that touch upon Irigaray's concept of a feminized language and Bakhtin's dialogism. Such strategies furnish feminists with a potent perspective, as Gail M. Schwab optimistically concludes:

Feminist dialogics both articulates women's position within the patriarchal power structure and opens up the possibility for modification of that structure. We might ask ourselves whether there exists a more radical political position.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> There is an interesting relationship between *I Object*, Robert Morris' *I-Box* (1962), and Carolee Schneemann's *Eye Body* (1963), in which all of the artists appear nude.

<sup>190</sup> Schwab, 68.

“Puns can inspire momentous action.”<sup>191</sup> Wordplay allows Wilke to use humor to exploit, manipulate, and occasionally challenge the authority of both language and art.

#### IV Parody

Satire is a lesson, parody is a game.

— Nabokov<sup>192</sup>

As a feminist artist, Wilke turned to parody in order to highlight popular degrading and/or ridiculous representations of women. This was a necessary first step in the 1970s for feminists who were just beginning to identify the harmful manifestations of patriarchal society and culture. Sexist images of women had to be exposed before Wilke, or anyone, could consider their deconstruction.<sup>193</sup> Wilke's *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series* (1974-79) is comprised of both public and private performances (performalist self-portraits). The private performances make up a series of thirty-five black and white photographs that depict Wilke parodying clichéd representations of women from popular culture, especially those seen in commercial advertisements.<sup>194</sup> In most of the images, Wilke appears partially nude,

<sup>191</sup> Culler, “The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction,” 15.

<sup>192</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973) 75.

<sup>193</sup> It is important to bear in mind the historical context, because feminist artists working after the 1970s no longer have to prove that sexist problems exist; rather, they can immediately begin to analyze/deconstruct patriarchal meaning.

<sup>194</sup> *Mastication Box* (1974-75), discussed later, was the incentive for producing *S.O.S.* Wilke's engagement with advertisements continued in her performalist self-portrait series *Advertisements for Living* (1966-84), where she

yet always covered with mini vaginally-shaped chewing-gum sculptures. In contrast, the public performances of *S.O.S.* were conducted in front of an audience gathered at a gallery or museum. Here, Wilke encouraged viewers to participate and sometimes had them chew the gum that might be stuck onto her or a viewer's upper body and face (figure 18). She would then perform a parody of stereotypical representations of femininity, as she had in her privately produced photographs.

In both the public and the private performances of *S.O.S.*, Wilke used parody and satire to transgress the authority of visual stereotypes. Linda Hutcheon broadly defines parody as "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity."<sup>195</sup> In *S.O.S.*, Wilke adopts familiar feminine-identified poses and marks each as a parody. She does so by exaggerating her femininity, by reversing the gaze, by intentionally appearing ridiculous, and by covering herself with the vaginally-shaped gum.

Although a humorous technique, parody need not be funny and can be used for serious means. For instance, Hutcheon opens parody to various interpretations including the potential for political transformation.<sup>196</sup> And in *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin discusses parody as a key component of carnival unruliness.<sup>197</sup> Building upon Bakhtin's ideas, Suleiman analyses the potential transgressive

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contrasted caring, playful images of herself and loved ones, with the names of prominent male artists.

<sup>195</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 6. Rebecca Schneider uses the term counter-mimicry to talk about an effective use of mimicry, in Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997) 168. See also Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 125-33.

<sup>196</sup> Hutcheon cites the Russian formalists and their belief that parody makes radical change possible, Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 99.

<sup>197</sup> Bakhtin recognizes three forms of carnivalesque culture: various types of parody, ritualized spectacles, and vulgar language, *Rabelais and His World*, 5.

techniques available to women authors and artists, and proposes feminist parody as a vehicle for transformation:

we arrive at the contemporary — and contemporary feminist — insight that the stories we tell about reality *construe* the real, rather than merely reflect it. Whence the possibility, or the hope, that through the rewriting of old stories and the invention of new forms of language for doing so, it is the world as well as words that will be transformed.<sup>198</sup>

The same may be said for the feminist use of visual parody. In the case of *S.O.S.*, Wilke uses repetition (with a difference) to “rewrite” old representations of women as passive vehicles of femininity.

Another way of thinking about Wilke’s *S.O.S.* series is in terms of satire. Satire enables Wilke to produce art that enters the realm of the social. While parody, according to Hutcheon, is by definition “intramural” (the reiteration occurs between two kinds of texts or works), satire is “extramural” (social, moral) “in its ameliorative aim to hold up to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind, with an eye to their correction.”<sup>199</sup> Wilke employs parody when she uses performance to repeat photographic representations of women, but she also incorporates satire into her work as soon as she criticizes (in order to change) those representations as a part of society. Hutcheon calls this particular combination of parody and satire, conveniently enough, “parodic satire.”<sup>200</sup>

Luce Irigaray seems to parallel the corrective aim of parodic satire in her understanding of mimesis, which she sees as capable of creating social and psychological transformations.<sup>201</sup> She counters the passive wearing of femininity

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<sup>198</sup> Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, 143.

<sup>199</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 43.

<sup>200</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 62-65.

<sup>201</sup> Hutcheon notes that parody and mimesis (“in all its seriousness”) are related, *A Theory of Parody*, 28. Whether applying a feminist understanding of mimesis or a broad definition of parody, both terms require repetition and difference

when she calls for an active use of feminine mimicry, the conscious citation and parody of male discourse:

One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. . . . To play with mimesis thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it.<sup>202</sup>

Imitation becomes a means by which a woman can oppose and move beyond “exploitation by discourse” (or imagery, in this case). The purpose is not simply to reiterate the male voice or vision, but to co-opt it, own it, and eventually, to “thwart it.” Wilke copies what are usually subordinate representations of women and makes them her own by maintaining their difference.

Adoption of the “feminine role” is characteristic of Wilke’s *S.O.S.* series in general. For example, there are two photographs from *S.O.S.* where Wilke turns to the left as she hunches over to cover her breasts with her right arm. The tighter shot depicts Wilke with an overwrought smile that appears contrived, reminiscent of the false glee promised to (female) consumers buying a particular product or service (figure 19).<sup>203</sup> But Wilke’s expression is far more exaggerated, especially in light of the fact that there is no product. Unlike typical commercial advertisements, there is

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to succeed as “active subversion[s] of established modes of representation and expression of women’s experience,” as Rosi Braidotti describes Irigaray’s concept of mimesis in her “Of Bugs and Women,” in *Engaging with Irigaray*, eds. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 121.

<sup>202</sup> Irigaray, 76. Suleiman explains: “In mimicry, a woman ‘repeats’ the male . . . version of ‘woman,’ but she does so in a self-conscious way that points up the citational, often ironic status of the repetition,” *Subversive Intent*, 27.

<sup>203</sup> In her discussion about television advertisements, Lucky Komisar writes: “If television commercials are to be believed, most American women go into uncontrollable ecstasies at the sight and smell of tables and cabinets that have been lovingly caressed with . . . polish,” Lucy Komisar, “The Image of Woman in Advertising,” in *Woman in Sexist Society*, eds. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: New American Library, 1972) 209.



no contrived narrative to justify Wilke's artificial happiness. The lack of narrative heightens Wilke's excessive femininity and signals her use of feminine mimesis. Her pose and expression mimics a kind of feminine type seen in advertisements, but rather than allowing concepts of femininity to shape her, she manipulates the concepts — "without," in Irigaray's words, "allowing herself to be simply reduced to it."

But is this enough to make a successful parody? Even though theorists, like Alice Rayner, define mimesis as "an ethical accounting, not simply a reflection or imitation," one always takes a gamble with mimesis.<sup>204</sup> There is a risk of misunderstanding the repetition, of missing the difference, of only seeing the parody as *the same* as the original. As such, there is the ever-present danger of simply reiterating, or even supporting, the very system that is being challenged.<sup>205</sup> The key to a successful parody, then, is in its distance and difference from the "original." Something must demarcate and separate a parodic form to prevent it from being understood as a perfect copy of its source.<sup>206</sup> The question is, how does Wilke mark her work as a parody? How is it different from its sources?

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<sup>204</sup> Alice Rayner, *To Act, To Do, To Perform* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) 15. Cited in Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (London: Routledge, 1997) x.

<sup>205</sup> This bind recalls Audre Lorde's declaration that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansberg, New York: Crossing Press, 1984) 112. In contrast, Craig Owens concludes that postmodernism is deconstructive because it acknowledges the "unavoidable necessity of participating in the very activity that is being denounced *precisely in order to denounce it*." Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *Art After Modernism*, 235.

<sup>206</sup> Hutcheon notes that "ironic inversion is a characteristic of all parody," so that the original text or image is always automatically transformed (in both form and meaning) in its "copy," but "if the receiver does not recognize that the text is a parody, he or she will neutralize both its pragmatic ethos [intended effects] and its doubled structure," *A Theory of Parody*, 6 and 27.

In one of the *S.O.S.* photographs, Wilke mimics a common pose used by models in which her hands lift her long dark hair to the top of her head (figure 20).<sup>207</sup> The photo is cropped below her bare breasts, which are confidently displayed as her elbows jut out horizontally (enough to be cut off by the photograph). Like the poses Wilke is parodying, this image is sexy, and therefore it could be read as complicit with the very representations she seeks to criticize. Wilke has to make the repetition ironic or different from the ads she copies.

In his study of printed advertisements and photographic illustrations, Erving Goffman notes that in many images, the female figure is often seen tilting her head: “The level of the head is lowered relative to that of others, including, indirectly, the viewer of the picture. The resulting configurations can be read as an acceptance of subordination, an expression of ingratiation, submissiveness, and appeasement.”<sup>208</sup> In contrast, Wilke’s head is leveled and the fantasy of subordination is not permitted to unravel.

One of the most obvious signs of difference in Wilke’s parody of a hair-lifting model is her stoic facial expression. It halts the viewer’s gaze and obstructs it from visually roaming over her body. Her gaze, or more specifically, her glare, is direct and confrontational, which breaks down the belief that she, as female model, is passively available to the viewer. Again, this contradicts most commercial representations of women (and children) in which gaze-aversion is common. “Mere aversion of the eyes,” states Goffman, can serve as “a symbolization of

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<sup>207</sup> This pose is also seen in “fine” art representations of women by such artists as Ingres and Matisse.

<sup>208</sup> Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) 46. Goffman’s book is filled with the type of commercial imagery Wilke was parodying in the 1970s. When these advertisements are placed next to *S.O.S.*, the differences become apparent.

submissiveness.”<sup>209</sup> In the mid-1970s Wilke’s chilly return of the (male) viewer’s gaze was a bold feminist gesture.

At the conclusion of her article, “Desire Cloaked in a Trenchcoat,” Jill Dolan optimistically describes a strategy for women to “appropriate the male gaze: The aim is not to look like men, but to look at all.”<sup>210</sup> In both the private and public performances of *S.O.S.*, Wilke looks. The moments when she does avert her gaze are only aggravated and contradicted by her forthcoming lingering stares. Her controlling and active gaze ultimately collides with the viewer’s glance. This collision is a mark of *difference* — it signals Wilke’s repetition *as parody*.

In another image from *S.O.S.*, Wilke lifts a pair of sunglasses to her gaping mouth (figure 21). Her head is tossed back and her eyes are half closed in a condescending manner. Usually, the gesture of mouthing an object (in this case the glasses) appears sexy in commercial photographs, but here Wilke’s mouth looks awkward, unappealing — like a fish whose mouth has been snagged by a fishing hook. The camera looks straight up Wilke’s nose. She parodies the kind of ridiculous pseudo-erotic images that appear everywhere in mass culture (especially to sell products). The parody ends up mocking the commercial attempt at artificial sensuality.

Moreover, in every *S.O.S.* performalist self-portrait Wilke provides a means of informing viewers of her critical distance by including the tiny gum vaginas. They alone should be enough to announce Wilke’s images as different, as parodic. The gum sculptures immediately change the way each photograph or performance is read. As Hutcheon notes, viewers/decoders “can infer some parodic intention once they

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<sup>209</sup> Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, 63.

<sup>210</sup> Jill Dolan, “Desire Cloaked in a Trenchcoat,” in *Acting Out*, eds. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993) 113. Dolan explains that heterosexual women would appropriate the gaze if they learn from the lesbian subject and just look.

have perceived the markers of the encoded presence.”<sup>211</sup> In this manner, the tiny gums act as tangible signs that point towards Wilke’s strategic repetition.

The abrupt contrast created by the vaginal dots is ‘seen in the two images of Wilke standing in blue jeans and long, flowing hair. Wilke hooks her thumbs through her belt loops as her bare upper body is displayed. Although both images are sexy, one of them is more exaggerated in its pseudo-eroticism when Wilke curves her neck to the side (figure 22). The sexy pose and feminine indicators (hair, breasts), however, visually clash with the outbreak of chewing gum covering most of her exposed skin.<sup>212</sup> The tiny sculptures serve as displaced, grotesque nipples growing out of her upper chest, forehead, and cheeks. As a result, the photographs cannot be read as *the same* as sexy advertisements because the scopophilic gaze is constantly interrupted by the disturbing vaginal intrusions plastered onto Wilke’s beautiful face and body.<sup>213</sup>

The disturbing visual effects of the gums combine with the symbolism of their material and form. Because gum itself is an abject substance, *S.O.S.* forever teeters between the erotic and the grotesque.<sup>214</sup> Wilke suggests an analogy between negative gum practices and women: “In this society we use up people the way we use up chewing gum. I chose gum because it's the perfect metaphor for the American

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<sup>211</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 92.

<sup>212</sup> Wilke agreed with Ann-Sargent Wooster’s reading of the gum scars as “portable leprosy” that “‘crudded up’ her ‘perfect flesh.’” Wilke quoted in interview with Debra Wacks, 13 January 1992. Ann-Sargent Wooster, “Hannah Wilke,” *Artforum*, December 1975: 74.

<sup>213</sup> Laura Mulvey explains Freud’s concept of scopophilia, the pleasure through looking, as “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.” Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 363.

<sup>214</sup> See Leslie C. Jones, “Transgressive Femininity: Art and Gender in the Sixties and Seventies,” in *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 1993).

woman — chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece.”<sup>215</sup> And to Wilke, the vaginal shape references many things at the same time: a loving womb and female pride, while it also points to a societal mark of inequality and exclusion.<sup>216</sup>

The miniature gums also represent a type of cultural scar, or in Wilke’s words, “the ugliness of society.”<sup>217</sup> “Starification Object Series” clearly puns on scarification. Wilke’s external “scars,” which are reminiscent of those caused by violence, theoretically sit next to emotional “scars” — all of them symbolically linked to sex, to the metonymy of the vaginal sculptures. The mark of sex is literally stuck to Wilke’s female body, collapsing societal stereotypes and gendered cultural practices with sexism and violence.

Wilke’s emblematic use of the vaginally-shaped gums provide an interesting visual counterpart to the womb’s associations in early modern Europe according to Natalie Zemon Davis. The common belief was that “the womb was like a hungry animal; when not amply fed by sexual intercourse or reproduction, it was likely to wander about [a women’s] body, overpowering her speech and senses. . . . even the well-born lady could fall victim to a fit of the ‘mother,’ as the uterus was called.”<sup>218</sup> The terror of the vagina is multiplied. This medieval myth provides a layer of carnivalesque grotesqueness to Wilke’s *S.O.S.* performances.<sup>219</sup> Her exaggerated

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<sup>215</sup> Wilke quoted in Avis Berman, “Decade of Progress, But Could a Female Chardin Make a Living?” *ARTnews*, October 1980: 77.

<sup>216</sup> Wilke noted in interview with Wacks.

<sup>217</sup> Wilke quoted in Chris Huestis and Marvin Jones, “Hannah Wilke’s Art, Politics, Religion and Feminism,” *New Common Good*, May 1985, 11.

<sup>218</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, 124.

<sup>219</sup> Bakhtin writes about the womb in an ambivalent grotesque manner: “The earthly element of terror is the womb, the bodily grave, but it flowers with delight and a new life,” Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 92.

feminine body may be seen as overrun by an unmanageable, horny, and wandering womb. In contrast to the myth, however, Wilke's linguistic abilities always remain under her control.

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The private photographic performances of *S.O.S.* are always displayed in some form of a group. Together, they act as selected repetitions of popular, static representations of femininity. Sometimes Wilke imitates representations of an apron-wearing "housewife" and sometimes a glamorous model, but again there is no product, just a bastardization of a feminine type. Looking at the group of performalist self-portraits, one realizes that all of the images are of the same woman, and simultaneously, the absence of the same woman. For Wilke can be all of these roles, identities, types (when she wants to be), and yet, she, as an individual, is not present anywhere.

It becomes clear that one cannot know someone through her representations. The repetition of Wilke's image typifies her commodification (as woman, as model, as artist) in a way that is reminiscent of Andy Warhol's multiple depictions of Marilyn Monroe.<sup>220</sup> There is a sense of loss in the work of both artists — loss of the person behind the persona. At the same time, by using an obviously artificial representation of "feminine" charm, Wilke illustrates the way femininity acts as mask, which, according to Mary Russo, "is a take-it-and-leave-it *possibility*. To put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off."<sup>221</sup> Femininity

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<sup>220</sup> Pop art's reference to commercial imagery is clearly an important influence on Wilke's work. It would be worthwhile, for instance, to compare Andy Warhol's *Ethel Scull 36 Times* (1963) to Wilke's *S.O.S.*

<sup>221</sup> Russo, 70. This quote is taken from Russo's discussion of feminist theory, particularly in relation to the notion of masquerade, which is based on the writing of Mary Anne Doane and Joan Rivière. When the feminine is viewed as a

therefore becomes a kind of potent costume in the hands of an unruly woman like Wilke.

None of the different feminine identities depicted in *S.O.S.* appear “natural,” as they are clearly fabricated by the artist/model. Carol Armstrong writes on Victorine Meurent as the ever-changing model in Manet’s paintings in words that may also be used to describe Wilke’s many visual manifestations:

She is a figuration of the studio’s theater of unfixed identities, less a female body that is an object of consumption than the changeable feminine face of painting, defined by artifice rather than nature, as a multiple image rather than a single truth, as the supplemental rather than the essential.<sup>222</sup>

Of course Wilke’s representations are not painted, but her performances conjure a type of artificial space. The stark white background of the performatist self-portraits clearly is that of a photographer’s studio. There is no fabricated context nor visual depth. No attempt at recreating “the real” is made. Wilke stands in the confined, brightly lit area and exchanges contradictory feminine personae as easily as she changes items of clothing and small props. She complicates a singular reading of feminine identity by establishing its constructable fluidity. Like Manet (via

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mask, the one who performs femininity potentially assumes a kind of psychoanalytic control or at least points to the construction of gender. I am more interested in the latter aspect of masquerade. Indeed, I intentionally avoid using psychoanalytic theory in this paper, for I do not find it particularly empowering for women nor intrinsically connected to the carnivalesque. See Joan Rivière, “Womanliness as Masquerade” (1929), reprinted in *Formations of Fantasy*, eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (New York: Methuen, 1986); Mary Anne Doane, “Film and Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator,” *Screen* vol. 23, no. 3/4 (1982): 74-87; and Sarah Wilson, “Femininities-Masquerades,” in *Rose is a Rose is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photograph*, ed. Jennifer Blessing (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1997).

<sup>222</sup> Carol Armstrong, “To Paint, To Point, To Pose: Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass*,” in *Manet’s Le Dejeuner sur L’Herbe*, ed. Paul Hayes Tucker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 112.

Meurent), Wilke generates a “plural, feminine identity,” but the crucial difference is that Wilke acts as both artist and model.<sup>223</sup>

Unlike the representations Wilke parodies, the body depicted in *S.O.S.* does not belong to a random nameless model, but rather to the artist herself. Well aware of the traditional artist/model relationship, Wilke declares: “I never wanted to use anybody. . . . Who wants to use another woman. That's the same thing the boys did for over two-thousand years.”<sup>224</sup> Wilke circumvents the hierarchical artist/model dichotomy by conflating the categories.<sup>225</sup> The diverse photographic depictions and public performances of *S.O.S.* demonstrate Wilke's regulation and control over her own representation(s), and by using herself, Wilke automatically refers to a personal history of which she is the subject. The construction that provided for the anonymous, impotent, female model is therefore dismantled. In her dual-function, Wilke deliberately demonstrates her power to (re)create artificial images of femininity in order to skew them.

No matter how much Wilke points to the construction of femininity, the fact that Wilke's beauty is too similar to the beauty depicted in the images she parodies can lead to an immediate criticism of the overall project. And yet it is precisely her ability to suggest the ideal female fantasy that enables her to subvert it. The shocking juxtaposition of her beauty with the gum “scars” heightens the effectiveness of her performed parodies and illustrates her convictions. Wilke explains that being beautiful was, in itself, a kind of “scarification”:

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<sup>223</sup> Armstrong, 112. See also Eunice Lipton, *Alias Olympia: A Women's Search for Manet's Notorious Model and Her Own Desire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

<sup>224</sup> Wilke, interview with Wacks.

<sup>225</sup> As Wilke states: “[I am] taking back myself from the thousands of millions of men that made us into objects — and didn't give us the money, didn't give us the power. You look at all these works of art of women and you don't know who they are,” interview with Wacks.



When you're beautiful, and I'm resigned to the fact that I am,  
no one ever looks *inside* you. I want to show people that the  
outside, the beauty, is just garbage. The true beauty is what's  
inside me, inside any woman.<sup>226</sup>

The manipulation of her external beauty raises related questions about the social construction of that beauty. Several of the *S.O.S.* photographs depict Wilke in hair curlers, a means of fabricating what is believed to be feminine beauty. In one of these images, Wilke holds what looks to be disfigured fingers to her mouth and pulls on her lower lip in a manner that makes her appear slow-witted (figure 23). Vaginal shapes litter her face and each fingertip, which doubly marks her nails as a site where "femininity" is often enacted. Wilke's "natural" beauty is bombarded with contrasting elements (scars, curlers, stupidity), and results in a dismantling of her feminine good looks.

The overall title of the piece conveys Wilke's sentiments through a multi-layered pun: *S.O.S.* — *Starification Object Series* not only references different types of scarring, but also the objectification of famous figures (stars), and the dire call for assistance (*S.O.S.*).<sup>227</sup> This cry for help makes it virtually impossible to ignore the seriousness of Wilke's parody. Yet many art critics disregard Wilke's feminism and/or her use of parody, usually to emphasize the presence of her body.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Wilke quoted in Lillian Roxen, "Hannah Wilke Ceramic Erotica." *Comment*, August 1966, 9.

<sup>227</sup> There is an interesting connection between Wilke's vaginal "starification" and a piece by Duchamp in which he shaved a star-shape into the back of his head and called it *Tonsure* (1919). Nancy Spector writes of Duchamp's work: "This precocious parody of the art world's then only marginally burgeoning 'star system' was considered a paradigm for the conflation of self and object intrinsic to the new body art." Nancy Spector, "Performing the Body in the 1970s," in *Rose is a Rose is a Rose*, 158.

<sup>228</sup> The reactions Wilke received are not necessarily negative, but a strong emphasis was usually placed on her looks. As Noel Frackman writes, "Possibly the most gorgeous face and body in town belongs to Hannah Wilke. . . . how can anyone have that much looks, talent, intelligence, poise, etc.? This is not said facetiously but with a sense of awe." Noel Frackman, "Hannah Wilke," *Arts Magazine*, May 1978, 28.

Influenced by Laura Mulvey's argument in "Visual Pleasure," many thinkers condemned Wilke, along with other women performance artists, for simply satisfying (male) viewers' desires.<sup>229</sup> A fundamental conflict exists between Mulvey, who sees woman only as bearer of meaning, and many women performance artists, who see themselves also as the makers of meaning.

Mary Beth Edelson is a feminist performance artist who has worked with her nude body since the 1970s. When she was criticized by Thomas McEvilley for "doing what the male gaze has always wanted her to do," she defended herself, and her feminism, in a 1989 response article.<sup>230</sup> Her words help illuminate Wilke's approach:

How else, even with 15 years hindsight, do you begin to break down such stereotypes without re-presenting the naked body in a totally new context? . . . This stand was meant to signify the inherent power of women's naked bodies, and to deny centuries of male manipulation of it.<sup>231</sup>

The presumption that women cannot escape the heterosexual male gaze that fetishizes them into objects was so pervasive in theoretical writings that Mulvey, herself, later spoke of the "1970s paranoia about visual pleasure."<sup>232</sup> Women artists began with

<sup>229</sup> Griselda Pollock, for instance, calls for a feminist resistance to visual representations of women in "Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice — a Brechtian Perspective," in *Vision & Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988). In contrast, Amelia Jones argues against "rigid antiessentialist feminist" thinkers by reading Wilke's self-representations as "radicalized narcissism": "Wilke's narcissistic performative body/self conflates not only *her* mind with her body as autobiographically invested maker of art but also confuses in fascinating ways her identities (as feminist subject/object) with those of her viewers," Amelia Jones "The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art," in *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 176.

<sup>230</sup> Thomas McEvilley's accusation as quoted in Mary Beth Edelson, 36.

<sup>231</sup> Edelson, 36.

<sup>232</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Impending Time: Mary Kelly's *Corpus*," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) 149.

the body because that is where sexism stems from — they started at the beginning. In order to see the transgressiveness of their art, both the performances and the artists need to be placed within the festival-like context of the Women's Movement and viewers have to be willing to see a woman's body as something besides only sexual.<sup>233</sup>

Some feminist critics, however, see the thoughtful use of a woman's body in performance as a potential means of challenging its objectification. In her article on women's body art, feminist art historian Lucy Lippard explains that, "when women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their *selves*; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject."<sup>234</sup> An artist, like Wilke, can therefore (re)possess her body and claim her/its subjecthood through performance. Lippard, however, quickly modifies her statement, pointing to the potential for self-exploitation, which seems to increase with an artist's attractiveness. She divides women as beautiful/not beautiful, and then singles out Wilke for criticism:

I must say I admire the courage of the women with less than beautiful bodies who defy convention and become particularly vulnerable to cruel criticism, although those women who *do* happen to be physically well-endowed probably come in for more punishment in the long run. . . . but Hannah Wilke, a glamor girl in her own right who sees her art as "seduction," is considered a little too good to be true when she flaunts her body in parody of the role she actually plays in real life. . . . her own confusion of her roles

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<sup>233</sup> Referring back to this chapter's opening, "how a work is read depends very much on who is reading it," Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, 192. In a review of a book about Carolee Schneemann, Lawrence Alloway expresses sentiments that may also be applied to Wilke. He explains that the artist's use of her nude body "acted to limit her career, to seal her off in a Dionysian cul-de-sac. In fact, her works are flexible and speculative, but the impact of her body has blocked recognition of that fact." Lawrence Alloway, "Carolee Schneemann: The Body as Object and Instrument," *Art in America*, March 1980, 21.

<sup>234</sup> Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," in *From the Center* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976) 124.

as beautiful woman and artist, as flirt and feminist, has resulted at times in politically ambiguous manifestations that have exposed her to criticism on a personal as well as on an artistic level.<sup>235</sup>

Lippard initially suggests that women who “happen to be physically well-endowed” are, in general, unfairly punished. Wilke, however, is presented as an exception.

Lippard implies that Wilke’s punishment is appropriate by qualifying her statement with “but”: but Wilke is so glamorous and seductive, she is “too good to be true.”

In what is a fairly impersonal survey of body art, Lippard’s essay uncharacteristically turns into a criticism of Wilke’s private life. Wilke later responded:

I hadn’t heard of this criticism before reading it in [Lippard’s] article. I first made my vaginal art in 1958, but I think when certain people saw what I lo[o]ked like, I became a social irritant. Lippard[d] was one of the first critics to photograph and write about my vaginal art. . . . But she later took out the part about my work when the same article was republished in a book. . . . after she met me.<sup>236</sup>

The implication is that after Lippard saw Wilke in person, she altered her opinion of Wilke, her feminism, and her artistic production.<sup>237</sup> The truth of the matter is that Lippard’s important article on women’s performance art set a tone. Writings that are

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<sup>235</sup> Lippard, “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth,” 125-126.

<sup>236</sup> Wilke quoted in Huestis and Jones, 11. The article in which Wilke’s art originally appears is Lucy Lippard, “Eros Presumptive,” *Hudson Review*, Spring 1967, 96.

<sup>237</sup> In her dissertation, Sandra Goldman writes “It was important in the 1960s and 1970s (as it still is today) that an artist’s work be appreciated within some broad critical agenda to acquire historical significance. The obvious context for Wilke’s work was feminism. And while her work clearly fit the criteria established by Lippard between 1967 and the early 1970s, Lippard did not support Wilke.” Sandra Louise Goldman, “*Too Good Lookin’ to be Smart’: Beauty, Performance, and the Art of Hannah Wilke*,” Ph. D. Dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 1999 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1999) 58. Many critics, however, changed their opinions about Wilke, her beauty, and her feminism, after viewing the posthumous performalist self-portraits of her cancer-ridden, bloated body (*Intra-Venus Series*, 1991-1992).

supposed to be about art and/or performance, instead often elide beauty and lifestyle with the art when dealing with Wilke's work.

Accompanying criticism of Wilke as questionable feminist came polemical readings that often labeled her performances politically misguided.<sup>238</sup> Wilke retaliated with *Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism* (1977), in which she comments on the state of feminism as she saw it (figure 24).<sup>239</sup> The title of the work is boldly printed above and below a photograph taken from the *S.O.S.* series. An image that was originally used to criticize stereotyped representations of women, is now used to satirize the Women's Art Movement itself. In fact, this work publicly articulated Wilke's social commentary when the original Plexiglas silkscreen was later turned into a poster that was wheat-pasted all over SoHo, New York.

The image used in *Marxism and Art* depicts Wilke in an Oxford shirt and a fashionably wide tie. The shirt has been unbuttoned to reveal Wilke's sexually "marked" chest — her breasts and the gum vaginas that cover them are visible.

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<sup>238</sup> Corinne Robins takes an unorthodox stance, when she writes, "In the 80s there began to emerge a kind of 'Good Girl' feminism, which this year crested in the person of Mary Kelly." Robins explains that artists such as Kelly have been chosen to represent feminism while "Bad Girls," such as Wilke, are ignored by "well behaved feminist theoreticians in the art world . . . in favor of their on-going conversations with each other." Corinne Robins, "Why We Need 'Bad Girls,' Rather than 'Good' Ones!" *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* 8 (November 1990): 45, 47.

<sup>239</sup> Susan Douglas discusses the various "catfights" framed by the media involving supposedly antithetical women, for instance, feminists versus non-feminists or "attractive" feminists versus "unattractive" feminists (e.g., Gloria Steinem versus Kate Millett), and writes: "Competition between women — not over their ideas but over their looks and behavior, and especially their sexuality — defined the first stage of the catfight. . . . Steinem was something most feminists allegedly weren't: sexy and extremely attractive to men," Susan Douglas, 227-228. Douglas goes on to quote *Newsweek* that because of Steinem's "emphatic sexuality," she "is looked upon with suspicion and envy by many of the sisters," in "Gloria Steinem," *Newsweek* (August 16, 1971): 51, cited in Susan Douglas, 228. With *Marxism and Art*, Wilke condemns the catfight-mentality in which she finds herself caught. Douglas' description of Steinem's feminist strategies parallels that of Wilke's in the art world: "Because of her beauty, Steinem was able to smuggle radical critiques of the status of women into mainstream discourse and gradually get them discussed and even accepted," 231.

Biting humor links the pun on Marx/marks with the vaginal marks on her face, both of which work to punctuate Wilke's expression (facial and written) of serious intent. The "loud" tie lies flatly (in anti-phallic complacency) between Wilke's breasts. As a traditional sign of middle-class men, the tie looks ridiculously out of place against her chest — as mismatched, perhaps, as fascism and feminism. The tie is used to parody gender and its relationship to power: "fascist feminists" attempt to co-opt the (phallic, male) power that feminism itself purports to dismantle. With her arms akimbo, Wilke struts her upper torso and confidently confronts her viewers. She cautions against the potential self-righteous (not to mention self-destructive) and censorious attitudes of insisting upon one dominant feminist discourse.<sup>240</sup> Dictating that an artist choose a single (correct) form of communication is deemed despotic by Wilke.

The parodic garb, the gum-sculptures, the nudity, the gaze, and the wordplay all complicate *Marxism and Art* and its messages. Wilke is not only an unruly woman, but an unruly feminist as well. Unfortunately, even though Lippard acknowledges the presence of parody in Wilke's work, she fails to notice it as a strategic ploy. Distracted by Wilke's complex approach, Lippard reprimands her for the "confusion of her roles as beautiful woman and artist."<sup>241</sup> But Lippard misses the point: it is Wilke's ambiguity, fluidity, and paradox that ultimately produces her insubordinate art.

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<sup>240</sup> Wilke states: "I felt feminism could easily become fascistic if people believe that feminism is only *their* kind of feminism. . . . real feminism does not judge." Cited in "Artist Hannah Wilke Talks with Ernst (Part 1)," n.p. Wilke was also taking note of the predominance of Marxist art criticism by co-opting the title of a popular book at the time: Berel Lang and Forrest Williams, eds. *Marxism and Art: Writings in Aesthetics and Criticism* (New York: David McKay Company, 1972).

<sup>241</sup> Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth," 126.

*My Count-ry 'Tis of thee* was a public performance that Wilke did as part of a day-long bicentennial celebration at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo.<sup>242</sup> This piece stems from and flows into *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*. Outside of the beaux-arts-styled museum and in front of its caryatid porch, Wilke set up a table covered with multi-colored chewing gum. During this festive, carnivalesque event, many of the participants helped her to chew the gum, which Wilke then formed into vaginal sculptures that she mounted onto small pieces of cardboard. The cardboard plaques were then placed along the frieze of the building (figure 25).<sup>243</sup> Like her postcard of the *Lincoln Memorial* (1976), Wilke uses her gum forms to mark the monument with an ungovernable female/feminist presence (figure 26). The punning title of the performance melds the female body (“My cunt”) with patriotism (a nationalistic song) in a way that befits Suleiman’s understanding of the “wonderfully comic way” that “the antipatriarchal impetus of feminist parody” is used.<sup>244</sup>

Near Wilke’s gum laden table, three larger-than life (nearly eleven feet tall) poster boards of Wilke were placed in front of the museum’s anthropomorphic columns (figure 27). Wilke is represented as a kind of goddess. Her upper torso is bare while her long skirt mirrors the geometrical folds of Augustus Saint-Gaudens’ caryatids. In two of the poster-statues, Wilke crosses her wrists to cover her breasts like an Egyptian sarcophagus. In the third, her arms reach forward with her palms

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<sup>242</sup> The program, “Four for the Fourth” (July 4th, 1976), included three other artists: Diane Bertolo, Joan Jonas, and Jackie Winsor. The event was partially organized by Robert Longo and his then girlfriend, Cindy Sherman.

<sup>243</sup> Actions like the sticking of chewing gum onto a classically-inspired museum have ties to the subversiveness of “camp.” See Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

<sup>244</sup> Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, 163.

pointing upward, as if to display a stigmata. Her head is crowned with laurel leaves that are dotted with vaginally-shaped gums. Wilke combines a slew of parodic references. Most obvious is her parody of classicism, which includes its architecture, its religion, and its beauty. But she also references Christianity, Egyptian burial rites, and the growing feminist interest in the female goddess.<sup>245</sup> Wilke depicts herself as everything from an (anti) classical goddess to a feminist artist who is exercising/exorcising the different femininities at her disposal. She brings to mind Elin Diamond's understanding of feminist mimesis, which works to show that the one enacting the strategy is "always more and different than she seems."<sup>246</sup>

In Duchampian thinking, the single act of relocating Wilke's body and its depictions to the context of the gallery or museum immediately converts their purposes and meanings. They automatically become "art" — to be read and understood differently from mass produced images of women meant for public consumption. Goffman notes that advertisements are "intentionally choreographed to be unambiguous" in the story or message they tell.<sup>247</sup> In contrast, Wilke's use of parody as a rebellious feminist strategy is consistent only in its ambiguity.

Complex performance pieces, like *S.O.S.* and *My Count-ry 'Tis of thee*, need to be understood within the excitement and experimental nature of the times. The carnivalesque atmosphere created by the Women's Movement encouraged the kind of

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<sup>245</sup> Exploration of the female goddess tradition was strong in the 1970s. See Gloria Feman Orenstein's "Recovering Her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess," in *The Power of Feminist Art*. Wilke highlights the ambiguities found in Christianity in another performance called *Super T-Art* (1974). Here, the binaries saint/sinner, savior/saved, pleasure/pain, male/female, are made fluid by Wilke, who, nude with one bed sheet, transforms herself from Mary Magdalen to Jesus. The parodying of authoritative religion is a rebellious carnivalesque gesture. As Bakhtin writes: "The merry, abundant and victorious bodily element opposes the serious medieval world of fear and oppression with all its intimidating and intimidated ideology," *Rabelais and His World*, 226.

<sup>246</sup> Diamond, xvi.

<sup>247</sup> Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, 23.



body politic explored throughout Wilke's work. And the social critique seen in her work is characteristic of the multi-faceted feminist exploration that occurred during the 1970s in general. Women around the United States were taking notice of imagery in literature, film, theater, and mass culture, and began questioning its gendered codes. Wilke participated by recreating "feminine" roles with a twist, with enough *difference* from the "original" representations to criticize them via parody.

## V Spectacle

The weakness of [Laura Mulvey's] argument is its tendency, once again, to rigidify gender roles and identities, to suggest. . . . that sexual desire is the exclusive province of the male and to dismiss the possibility that the female might ever legitimately be bearer of "the gaze" or find sexual pleasure in sexual fantasies of her own.

— Eleanor Heartney<sup>248</sup>

Stripping naked is the decisive action.

— Bataille<sup>249</sup>

Duchamp's two-dimensional glass sculpture, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (also known as the *Large Glass*), becomes a prop in one of Wilke's most unruly performances, *Through the Large Glass* (1976). Captured on colored film and set in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Wilke's performance plays with the

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<sup>248</sup> Eleanor Heartney, "A Necessary Transgression," *New Art Examiner*, November 1988, 22.

<sup>249</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1962) 17. The extended quote reads: "Stripping naked is the decisive action. Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self."

words in Duchamp's title as she strips through his *Large Glass*. She begins the piece fully dressed in what often served as her public "costume" — a white three-piece suit, a white scarf, a white purse, and a white fedora hat — and ends up completely nude (figures 28 and 29).<sup>250</sup> The camera is placed in front of the sculpture, while Wilke remains behind *The Large Glass* throughout the performance.

The edited film of the performance is organized into three segments, the first two show Wilke in almost identical routines: she enters and examines the glass. In response, she begins to strike a series of poses that are reminiscent of fashion shoots as well as of *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*. The intertextuality of the self-reference supplies part of the meaning for this piece and inherently implies a parodic impulse.<sup>251</sup> In both *S.O.S.* and *Through the Large Glass* there is a fluctuation between sexy, glamorous poses and silly, self-effacing poses.

In contrast to the *S.O.S.* photographs, however, the camera in *Through the Large Glass* moves around Wilke's face and body as she removes the layers of white garments. Rhythmically, she discards her purse, unzips her pants, and unbuttons her jacket and vest. Before she abandons the scarf, the camera deliberately zooms in on the letter "H" that brands it like a signature, which further reaffirms Wilke's authorship of the performance. The strip is effortless and graceful, made simpler by the lack of any undergarments, but she never loses her edge: her contemplative gaze

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<sup>250</sup> Wilke often wore this, or variations of this outfit, for public lectures and performances. Normally, Wilke explains, "I walk around like a slob in SOho [*sic*], yet, people think I dress like that girl so dressed-up on that video screen, or film." "Artist Hannah Wilke talks with Ernst (Part 1)," n.p.

<sup>251</sup> The final scene in Wilke's video (*I Object*) *Performatist Self-Portraits* (1978) makes emphatic the self-referential parody at work in *Through the Large Glass*. This scene is set within a gallery space in which the film, *Through the Large Glass*, is being screened. Wilke's filmic image is huge, especially in comparison with the "real" Wilke who enters the room and begins to closely examine herself posing. With her back to the viewer, Wilke starts to take photographs of herself, occasionally stopping in between shots to mimic the poses she is already striking on film.

stays fixed on the work (the strip is for the sculpture, as well as for the viewer) and her hat, a marker of her play with gender and a symbolic link to criticality, always remains on her head.

The third and final segment of the film is edited like a series of snapshots in that the movement between poses is removed. This serves to mechanize and further de-naturalize the finished poses, and causes them to more closely resemble the photographs in *S.O.S.* But in this case, a context has been provided by the *Large Glass*, which continually defines her body and its nudity within the realm of “art.” Like the vaginal gums seen in *S.O.S.*, the *Large Glass* always blocks any direct viewing of Wilke’s body — there’s always a cone or a line in the way. Yet Duchamp’s work creates a less disturbing, less abject disruption than that provided by the gum. This serves to emphasize Wilke’s eroticism, which claims center stage in order to contradict and collide with the asexuality of Duchamp’s “bride.”

Wilke’s performance was actually produced for and edited into the German television movie, “C’est la vie rose,” in which Wilke plays herself (1977).<sup>252</sup> The idea of someone else having some artistic control over one of her works, however, bothered Wilke enough to simultaneously make her own videotape, a black and white “auto-documentary,” entitled *Philly* (1976). The video records Wilke’s actions leading up to and during the actual striptease and includes some closing scenes as well. It captures the opposition between the imposing, Beaux-Arts museum and Wilke’s playful demeanor, which is established from the moment she waves to the camera from the building’s entrance.

The gentle clash between Wilke’s rebellious spirit and the traditions represented by the museum is underscored in a scene that begins with a spotlighted nude bust of a woman. From out of the darkness Wilke’s arm can be seen placing her

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<sup>252</sup> “C’est la vie rose,” is a color film, directed by Hans-Christof Stenzel, with camera by Lothar E. Stickelbrucks (1977).

fedora hat onto the sculpture's head. The juxtaposition of the stylish, contemporary man's accessory on the idealistic, nude body of the "lady" is not only wonderfully funny, but also calls attention to visual constructions of gender — still a novel concept in the 1970s. The smooth marble, elegant poise, and timeless beauty of the figure is there to be enjoyed as a passive object. The hat, however, transforms the bust and activates her. She is knocked out of timelessness and assumes an ironic identity — emulating the way Wilke complicates her own classically beautiful body. This defiant moment is soon interrupted by an annoyed off-camera voice of a male, who asks Wilke to *please remove the hat*.

Acute confrontations continue throughout *Philly*. For instance, Wilke walks through the Duchamp exhibit and discusses the French titles while holding a vaginal gum sculpture that she playfully threatens to stick to one of the works (again, a voice of authority, in this case the director's, reminds Wilke *not to touch anything*).<sup>253</sup>

Once Wilke enters the women's restroom — to change into her "male character" — she is free to ignore standard rules of social decorum.<sup>254</sup> Looking around the bathroom, the camera-man excitedly sees similarities between the restricted space he has entered and a typical bathroom for men.<sup>255</sup> When Wilke points to the lack of urinals, the camera turns to focus on the water fountain, making a pun on Duchamp's famous porcelain sculpture (*Fountain*, 1917). After Wilke mischievously urinates for the camera, she dons her white suit while informing the camera-man of the voyeuristic dimension to Duchamp's *Etant donnés*. . . . It is not

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<sup>253</sup> The repeated reminder "not to touch" contrasts with Duchamp's piece *Prière de toucher* (1947).

<sup>254</sup> In *Philly* Wilke makes it clear that her "costume" is part of her performed male persona. As she walks into the bathroom holding her suit, she says: "I want to really change from this dirty mess to this male character." According to Donald Goddard, Wilke sometimes saw her white outfit as a type of "rabbinical costume," Donald Goddard, conversation with Debra Wacks, 15 July, 1998.

<sup>255</sup> Andy Mann did camera for *Philly*.

without irony that Wilke undresses and dresses for the camera while describing Duchamp's peep show. As a finale to her "masculine" transformation, Wilke aggressively spits her gum out onto the bathroom floor. She laughs hardily before retrieving the debris and then folds it into a vaginal form. Before leaving the bathroom, she purposefully sticks the tiny sculpture onto the bathroom wall — subversively ensuring that the Philadelphia Museum of Art displays at least one of her works.<sup>256</sup>

Meant to be viewed together, the film and the video not only contrast in appearance (color versus black and white, stylized versus documentary), but also in sound. *Through the Large Glass* is silent, while *Philly* showcases Wilke's voice. She is heard analyzing art with the curator, choreographing shots with the director, and chit-chatting with the camera-man, all in her noticeably cheerful, New York accent. Her instructions are constantly self-interrupted by jokes, double-entendres, and carefree laughter, and punctuated by her steady champing of chewing gum. Wilke's consistent laughter emphasizes the carnivalesque qualities of her museum visit, for laughter to Bakhtin provides a crucial link to liberty and regeneration.

The video-viewer is made privy to the behind-the-scenes production process (light checks, blocking, etc.) and gains insight into the meaning behind Wilke's performance. For instance, when Wilke shows the director which poses she plans to strike for the filming, she states: "I'm going to do *my* face poses [seen in her 1974 videotape performance *Gestures* and in *S.O.S.*] and then do the *one* pose Duchamp made." As soon as she places her curved hands up to her chin, Duchamp's self-portrait as Rose Sélavy vividly comes to mind (1920-21).<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Later in the video, Wilke forms another gum sculpture and gives it to curator Anne d'Harnoncourt to preserve.

<sup>257</sup> Jennifer Blessing notes: "In the art-historical literature, Duchamp's drag gesture has been canonized into an act from which all subsequent masquerades are considered derivations." She references Gertrude Stein in her introduction with the intention to complicate this lineage. Blessing, Introduction to *Rose is a Rose is a*

Like much of Wilke's work, this performance comprises yet another facet of her artistic and philosophical dialogue with Duchamp's art. *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* depicts a convoluted narrative about sex, or the lack thereof, through abstracted, symbolic shapes: a chocolate grinder, sieves, pistons, and so on. Because of the work's opacity, Duchamp provided extensive notes offering insight into his symbolism.<sup>258</sup> The sculpture is a "machine" that is divided into two parts: the upper register for "the Bride" and the lower for her bachelors. They are connected to each other only by intricate mechanical and symbolic devices in the vain hope of sexual satisfaction. But the Bride remains forever a virgin in Duchamp's onanistic plot. She is never stripped bare, yet she is caught in the endless cycle of stripping that is mechanically produced by the overworked and frustrated Bachelors. In contrast, Wilke takes pleasure in her stripping and in her nudity — marking the difference between Duchamp's original work and Wilke's parody.

Wilke's recalcitrant body transgresses the isolated gendered registers established by *The Large Glass*' rigid symbolism. And the hat and the suit momentarily mark her body as androgynous so that Wilke strips herself as both "bride" and "bachelor." The erotic striptease ensures that Duchamp's frigid Bride is no longer. As can be expected from Wilke, language contributes to the meaning of

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*Rose*, 16, note no. 3. Whereas 1970's feminist artists used persona-based performances to publicly raise socio-political questions, Duchamp's alter ego was not an overtly political or public persona. Even Lucy Lippard begins her short account of "transformation in women's art" with Duchamp, *From the Center*, 106.

<sup>258</sup> Duchamp published the *Green Box*, which contains the notes for *The Large Glass*, in 1934. More instructions were discovered after Duchamp's death. The symbolism behind the work is convoluted. For details, see Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, volumes 1 and 2 (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 1997). Schwarz does an excellent job of explaining the connections between *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* and *Etant donnés*, in which the Bride of the former reappears (finally nude) in the latter. See also Richard Hamilton, "The Large Glass," in *Marcel Duchamp*, eds. Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (New York: The Museum of Modern Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973). It is interesting to remember that Wilke and Hamilton were lovers in the mid-70s.

the work. The title, *Philly*, not only puns on the site of the performance, but also on “filly,” a slang term for a vivacious young woman. It plays with the suffix “phile,” which connotes “one who loves” when added to another word. And it also alludes to the word for “love” in Latin (as in Philadelphia, the city of “brotherly love”).

Wilke’s irreverent, playful sensuality is most overtly demonstrated in a scene from the video where Wilke plants several steamy kisses onto *The Large Glass* itself, leaving traces of breathy lip marks across the mechanical figures. In Davis’ discussion of the “woman on top,” she notes that the inversion created by the rebellious woman builds upon stereotypes about females: she exaggerates social clichés linked to her sex in order to exercise dominance. Davis’ description draws upon a version of feminine mimesis — the adopting and exaggerating of sexual stereotypes attached to women as a source for strength. Even negative sexual clichés are excessively reenacted to support disorderly, anti-establishment behavior. Wilke’s striptease, the revealing of her nude, sensual body, serves to both exaggerate and exasperate the sexual frustration of Duchamp’s piece, while it establishes the sexual narrative on Wilke’s terms.

Davis continues to describe the unruly woman as someone who “gives rein to the lower in herself and seeks rule over her superiors.”<sup>259</sup> While Wilke’s sexuality is not restricted to her “lower” self, she explains that her art is related to “Human gestures, multi-layered metaphysical symbols *below the gut level* translated into an art close to laughter, making love, shaking hands.”<sup>260</sup> Wilke’s description is literally depicted at one point in *Philly* when the camera zooms in on Wilke’s pubic area. It is seen through a small transparent space surrounded by mechanical parts on the *Large Glass*, causing the shapes to serve as a frame for Wilke’s “lower” body.

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<sup>259</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, 133.

<sup>260</sup> Hannah Wilke, *Intercourse with. . .*, emphasis added.

Wilke's pubes is jarring, not as much for its blatancy, but for its dis-placement into the mechanical narrative. Her vagina and its/her sexuality visually invade the sculpture and temporarily establish (artistic, physical, feminine) dominance over the *Large Glass*.

Whereas Octavio Paz considers the Bride's striptease in Duchamp's *Large Glass* "a spectacle," Wilke's performance clearly out-spectacles both the Bride and her bachelors.<sup>261</sup> Duchamp's sculpture cannot help but appear static in its role as prop while Wilke intentionally creates a spectacle of herself. When Mary Russo speaks of "making a spectacle out of oneself," she adds that feminist parody is most disruptive when women employ mimesis to aggressively repeat the feminine.<sup>262</sup> This aggression not only redefines the feminine as a visible force, but also produces excessive, subversive difference.

Hyperbolic, visible femininity becomes a powerful form of spectacle. Kathleen Rowe observes that although women have traditionally been objectified and rendered powerless via the gaze, "in a postmodern culture of the image and the simulacra power also lies in possession and control of the visible."<sup>263</sup> Even the poster for *Philly* shows a half-nude Wilke looking through the film camera to supervise the production of *Through the Large Glass* (figure 30). By capturing the performance for herself in *Philly*, Wilke asserts control as she adopts Duchamp's work for her own project.

The dividing line between director, viewer, and performer blurs during the performance. Wilke initially approaches the *Large Glass* as a spectator. She peers at the work and reacts to it vis-à-vis her body, communicating with its elaborate

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<sup>261</sup> Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 38.

<sup>262</sup> Russo, 53.

<sup>263</sup> Rowe, 12.



narrative through confident, measured movements. Gradually, however, Wilke becomes the work of art — the performance to observe — and the sculpture slips into the foreground, like a theatrical scrim. This transition of spectator becoming spectacle, mimics the kind of anti-hierarchical carnivalesque events described by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, where clear demarcations between performer/performance and spectator/spectacle are rare and unwanted.<sup>264</sup>

But does visual pleasure inherently contradict a feminist message? Must the assumption be that the pleasure always belongs to the (heterosexual) male viewer? What if Wilke derives pleasure from her own body in performance? Wilke's carnivalesque gestures are emphatic of the festival-like atmosphere produced by the 1970s Women's Movement throughout the United States. Central to feminist activity and theory was the female body, which was explored within a new political context. Bodies were extensively discussed, written about, and on view. The female body was now painted, sculpted, and photographed from feminist perspectives. Women artists turned to their bodies for personal/political content and were able to combine this interest with the desire for spontaneous feminist action through performance art. This relatively new medium was interactive and allowed feminists to directly convey socio-political concerns related to their/the body. As such, what seemed to be the body *par excellence* — its nudity — proliferated performance pieces that dealt directly with issues related to an artist's specific, personal body or to women's bodies in general.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 167, 265.

<sup>265</sup> Wilke's performances convey paradoxical associations of nudity as both liberating and vulnerable. Wilke explains that her nudity is sometimes "about victimization, nudity, total vulnerab[ility]. My work is about scars, being wounded. . . When they walked into the ovens, they were nude. As a Jew born in 1940 I could have been in those ovens." Wilke quoted in Judy Seigel, "Between the Censor and the Muse? Hannah Wilke: Censoring the Muse?" *Woman Artists News* (Winter, 1986): 47.

Nudity was also a shocking and effective means to transgression. Eleanor Heartney argues that explicitly sexual imagery attacks the hegemonic status quo: “During the '70s a surprising number of women artists and writers adopted a quasi-pornographic content or form in order to assert the claims of female desire and sexuality as part of the women's movement's general challenge to patriarchy.”<sup>266</sup> Exploration of the explicit body politic was intrinsically linked to female desire and to women's sexual pleasure, which was near revolutionary in the 1970s. For instance, the expression of feminine pleasure suggests a means for social disruption for Irigaray:

Feminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language. . . . if it is not to threaten the underpinnings of logical operations. And so what is most strictly forbidden to women today is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure.<sup>267</sup>

The transgressive act of articulation — of expressing the impossible — possesses the potential to disrupt a society founded upon the tyranny of the masculine. Thus, in contrast to Laura Mulvey's original preoccupation with heterosexual, male pleasure, Irigaray sees the possibility for woman's pleasure in all its radicalness.<sup>268</sup> Wilke's delight in the performance/expression of her eroticism not only embraces spectacle, but also co-opts its deviant pleasure for herself.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Heartney, 21. Heartney makes no distinction between erotica and pornography and writes: “it has been noted that ‘erotica is what I like, pornography is what you like,’” 21. She is struck by the fact that anti-porn feminists and the religious Right are in agreement about sexual material. Somewhere within this paradox lies the potential for social disruption: “Pornography, like sexuality itself, has a deeply subversive side,” 21. Note, for instance, Lynda Benglis' shocking *Artforum* ad, November 1974. See also Rebecca Schneider.

<sup>267</sup> Irigaray, 77.

<sup>268</sup> Similarly, Amelia Jones writes: “the feminist body artists break down the masculinist critical prohibition of pleasure,” in Jones, “Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art,” 28.

<sup>269</sup> Frueh looks at Wilke's eroticism in connection to her beauty, in Joanna Frueh, *Erotic Faculties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

In the United States, women embracing their sexuality and the right to its related pleasures dovetailed with feminist political action, such as battles favoring the ERA and a women's right to choose. Consciousness-raising groups along with many books explored the subject of women's sexuality, specifically in terms of pleasure. For instance, the main character in Erica Jong's popular novel, *Fear of Flying* (1973), is in search of uncomplicated sexual pleasure in what she terms the "zipless fuck," and women confess their sexual desires and fantasies in Nancy Friday's non-fiction collection, *My Secret Garden* (1974).<sup>270</sup> While attempting to rationalize scientifically women's desire in *The Hite Report* (1976), Shere Hite advocates masturbation for women in want of more satisfying orgasms.<sup>271</sup> Similarly, when Betty Dodson "realized that becoming sexually liberated was a powerful component of women's pursuit of equality," she started groups for women in 1973 that were based upon "physical and sexual consciousness raising."<sup>272</sup> In these group encounters, Dodson encouraged women to appreciate their genitals and taught them to achieve self-stimulated pleasure.

Wilke calls upon the politically charged subject of masturbation and combines it with play in a work/game entitled *Mastication Box* (1974-1975) (figure 31). The

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<sup>270</sup> Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (New York: Signet, 1973). Nancy Friday, *My Secret Garden* (New York: Pocket Books, 1974).

<sup>271</sup> Shere Hite, *The Hite Report* (New York: Dell, 1976). Jane Gallop compares Friday and Hite's projects in "Snatches of Conversation," reprinted in *Thinking Through the Body*, 71-87. Alix Shulman urges her reader to "think clitoris," in "Organs and Orgasms," in *Woman in Sexist Society*, 302. And in her novel, Shulman's young female character confides: "Between my legs I had found an invisible button of flesh, sweet and nameless, which I knew how to caress to a nameless joy. I was pretty sure no one else had one, for there was no joy button in the hygiene book, and there was not even a dirty name for it," Alix Kates Shulman. *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972) 46.

<sup>272</sup> Betty Dodson's quotes were taken from her web site: <http://www.bettydodson.com/betbio1.htm> on March 7, 2000. In 1974, Betty Dodson wrote, illustrated, and self-published her successful book *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Selflove*. Betty Dodson was a trained artist before she turned to sex therapy.

piece consists of a black box, which was co-opted from Claes Oldenburg literally and from Duchamp conceptually (*Boîte-en-valise*, 1941). Inside the box are thirty-five black and white photographs of Wilke, a variety of chewing gum flavors, game instructions, and playing cards.<sup>273</sup> The photographs are of the same images that were later seen in Wilke's *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*. As a game, *Mastication Box*, requires the players to participate by chewing the provided gum and then, following Wilke's photographic examples, determine creative options for it.

"Mastication" obviously puns on the act of chewing gum, while "box" employs a slang term for vagina. The sexual overtones also suggest the pun "masturbation box," which references feminist calls for self-pleasure. Whereas Duchamp's *Large Glass* associates masturbation with sexual failure, Wilke links it to pleasure and play.

For Wilke, pleasure and politics are always wrapped up with the/her material body. As she states: "women must take control of and have pride in the sensuality of their own bodies and create a sexuality in their own terms, without deffering [*sic*] to the concepts degenerated by culture."<sup>274</sup> Whether that culture is identified as avant-garde or popular, the trick is to individually define one's sexuality through the specificity of one's body. In this manner, Davis discusses literature and its insubordinate women characters, who are "happily given over to the sway of their bodily senses or who are using every ruse they can to prevail over men. . . . The point about such portraits is that they are funny and amoral: the women are full of life and energy."<sup>275</sup> Such characters use their sensual physicality to combat passive

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<sup>273</sup> *Mastication Box* was created for the 1975 exhibit, "Artists Make Toys," held at The Clocktower, Institute of Art and Urban Resources in New York (January 1 - February 15). There is only one *Mastication Box*, which was originally intended to be rented out on a nightly basis.

<sup>274</sup> Wilke, "Visual Prejudice," 1980, reprinted in Frueh, "Hannah Wilke," 141.

<sup>275</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, 134-5. Wilke explains: "Eroticism to me, just means Life," "Artist Hannah Wilke Talks with Ernst (Part 1)" n.p.

obedience. They are rebellious, sexual, and have a sense of humor. When similar qualities are located within living women (in contrast to Davis' literary characters) – in this case, performance artists — the impact of their physicality is that much more.<sup>276</sup>

Yet Wilke's desire for pleasure becomes bound with the desire for culture as expressed by Cixous:

I found myself in the classic situation of women who, at one time or another, feel that it is not they who have produced culture. . . . Culture was there, but it was a barrier forbidding me to enter, whereas of course, from the depths of my body, I had a desire for the objects of culture. I therefore found myself obliged to steal them . . . So that in a sense [culture] is always there [in her works], but it is always there in a displaced, diverted, reversed way. I have always used it in a totally ironic way.<sup>277</sup>

As Wilke sexualizes the bride and the bachelors, she also “steals” from Duchamp's *Large Glass* when she steals from its reputation. Wilke also borrows from Duchamp's notorious repertoire of rebellious gestures when she parodies his risqué alteration of Leonardo da Vinci's painting in *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919). Just as Duchamp had transgressively sexualized *Mona Lisa*, Wilke co-opts Duchamp's sculpture for her own sexual scenario.

Wilke confronts Duchamp's avant-garde sensibilities with personal defiance. She declares: “The pride, power, and pleasure of one's own sexual being threaten

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<sup>276</sup> Stallybrass and White speak of the way Bakhtin is “undeniably ambiguous in his use of the terms ‘classical body’ and ‘grotesque body,’” 21. Indeed, Wilke's body is arguably “classically” beautiful, yet because she enacts her pleasure in such a physical manner, it/she veers towards the grotesque. In discussing the carnivalesque, Bakhtin develops an ambiguous binary concerning the classical body and the grotesque body. Authors Stallybrass and White list some of the “discursive norms” that Bakhtin identifies with the grotesque body, which include: “physical needs and pleasures of the ‘lower bodily stratum,’ materiality and parody,” Stallybrass and White, 23.

<sup>277</sup> Hélène Cixous, “Entretien avec Françoise van Rossum-Guyon,” *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 44 (1977): 485. Cited in Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, 129-130.

cultural achievement. . . .”<sup>278</sup> Wilke’s striptease challenges, and by extension, “threatens” Duchamp’s “masterpiece,” which is respected and mocked for its place within the canon. Her body becomes unruly in its sexuality, its pleasure, its play with gender, its materiality, and its bold and paradoxical one-on-one confrontation with *The Large Glass*.

The “neutral” museum space and Duchamp’s sculpture are both eroticized by Wilke. It is remarkable that Wilke was even granted access to perform *with* Duchamp’s fragile and important work. Wilke strips in a museum. She exposes a traditional keeper of “high” art — the museum — to the “low” art of striptease.<sup>279</sup> The loosening of strict museum rules is almost unthinkable now, which further demonstrates the carnivalesque seepage that temporarily crept into well-established arbiters of taste and history in the 1970s. Permission was clearly given to both Wilke and the crew, but within this state of “licensed release of carnival,” Wilke created a sense of rebellion.<sup>280</sup>

When Wilke visited the largest collection of Duchamp’s art to pay homage to a/her “father” of pre-post-modernism and the artistic pun, she created a carnivalesque atmosphere where there was none before. While at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, she acted in a suitably “filial” manner — but, of course, she also misbehaved as a disruptive “daughter.”<sup>281</sup> She refused to follow any law (especially sexual) of the father and blurred boundaries while exaggerating feminine stereotypes. She reiterated, manipulated, and altered Duchamp’s work, all the time suggesting a kind

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<sup>278</sup> Wilke, “Visual Prejudice,” 141.

<sup>279</sup> Wilke embodied the mixing of high/low categories as both stripper and artist.

<sup>280</sup> Stallybrass and White, 13.

<sup>281</sup> Frueh briefly touches upon a psychoanalytic reading of Wilke as rebellious daughter and Duchamp as heroic father, in Frueh “Hannah Wilke,” 35.

of play. A sense of play that concomitantly reaffirms Wilke's artistic jockeying/joking. As an artist playing with the/her father's body of work, Wilke provides a feminist/artistic slant to Barthes' claims that a "writer is someone who plays with his mother's body."<sup>282</sup>

## VI Ambiguity

I enjoy the ethics of ambiguity.

— Wilke<sup>283</sup>

As far as I'm concerned, being any gender is a drag.

— Patti Smith<sup>284</sup>

The final scene in *Philly* — which also appears in *C'est la vie rose* — shows Wilke playing chess with another woman in front of *The Large Glass*. Wilke is nude, except for her fedora hat and white, high-heeled sandals. Wilke embodies the collapse of the mind/body dichotomy and represents a type of thinking nude. Her female companion is dressed androgynously; with cropped hair, black leather jacket, black pants, and sneakers. She is neither emphatically "masculine" nor "feminine," while Wilke is obviously physically female in her nudity, feminine in her choice of shoes and hairstyle, and masculine in headdress. Together they represent a gamut of

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<sup>282</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 37.

<sup>283</sup> "Artist Hannah Wilke Talks with Ernst, (Part 1)," n.p.

<sup>284</sup> Patti Smith, quoted in *New Times* (December 26, 1975) n.p., cited on back cover of Levine and Lyons.

gender possibilities, yet they sit across from each other, playing together, as women. Occasionally whispering to each other, they concentrate intensely on the game before them. Does this kind of game-playing satisfy Suleiman's feminist vision of play? They appear to be about the same age, and who knows if either one has children, but, nonetheless, they are women playing. Wilke moves a piece and smiles as she says "checkmate." The video cuts to black and ends.

The sense of play in Wilke's chess scene, however, goes beyond the actual skit. For it deliberately parodies a famous photograph of Duchamp playing chess at an art museum in Pasadena, also with a nude woman in front of the *Large Glass* (1963) (figure 32).<sup>285</sup> The unidentified woman is not only completely naked (no hat, no shoes, no clothes), but her face is obscured by her hair. Consequently, the visual focus is only on her body (not unlike the female figure in *Etant donnés*. . .).

Wilke's *Philly* scene is captured in a film still of *C'est la vie rrose*, which makes possible a formal comparison with Duchamp's image (figure 33). The curved body of the Pasadena nude looks inactive next to Wilke's upright and physically engaged position. Wilke's raised arm is poised to move, which actually mimics Duchamp's ready pose. The folded right arm and bent left elbow of the Pasadena woman is mimed by the androgynous player in Philadelphia. The firmly maintained gender codes in Duchamp's photograph are parodied, conflated, and rejected by Wilke's image.

Of course, Duchamp began to question gender himself when he dressed as Rose Sélavy, his stated alter ego. But Rose Sélavy was able to play with gender codes and constructions as much as s/he wanted while nonetheless avoiding any sexist ramifications — it was always a matter of simply deciding to dress as Marcel Duchamp again. Wilke also dressed in full drag when she posed for her performalist

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<sup>285</sup> The photograph was taken by Julian Wasser at Duchamp's first major retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum in California, 1963.



self-portrait, *Portrait of the Artist in His Studio* (1971) (figure 34). Through this act, Wilke stakes her claim on the “artistic authority so indelibly linked to masculine privilege.”<sup>286</sup> But she did not create an alter ego. Rather, she dons masculine garb in order to criticize perceptions and presumptions about artists, for it is not only James Joyce who assumes “the artist” to be a man.<sup>287</sup> She, unlike Duchamp, did not have the benefit of being a male artist in a male-privileged art world.

In another move to demystify Duchamp’s experimentation with gender, Wilke situates drag within a tradition of female unruliness. She writes about two lovebirds who came to live in her studio following her mother’s death:

Mother and son [lovebirds] soon became best friends, even lovers, and about 11 months later we had another baby bird that we named Josie, after my oldest aunt, who had dressed up as a young man for a photograph long before Duchamp knew why it was so important to be a woman. . . . proving that Mama did it all by herself a long time ago, and possibly never did need Dada.<sup>288</sup>

Wilke layers her story with “inside” references to Duchamp’s transvestite practices and the avant-garde art movement with which he is associated (Dada). But she cites these now canonical moments only to dismiss them. Her aunt performed and documented significant gender transgressions prior to Duchamp’s adoption of Rose Sélavy, which Wilke redefines as proof that being a woman is “so important.” She concludes with a wonderful pun that both reiterates the Oedipal story that mother and son birds enjoyed procreating without “father” and hypothesizes that a progressive woman (Mama) could do her thing irrespective of the established avant-garde or its

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<sup>286</sup> Nancy Spector, “Performing the Body in the 1970s,” in *Rose is a Rose is a Rose*, 168.

<sup>287</sup> Wilke’s title puns on James Joyce’s novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: BW Huebsch, 1917) and parodies Alexander Liberman’s photographic book *The Artist in His Studio* (New York: Viking Press, 1960).

<sup>288</sup> The mother bird used one of Wilke’s vaginal ceramic sculptures as a nest. Hannah Wilke, “Seura Chaya,” *New Observations*, 1988, reprinted in Frueh, “Hannah Wilke,” 150-151.

founding fathers (Dada). Wilke creates a matriarchal lineage. Although she pays homage to Duchamp, she ultimately declares that it was through various “mamas,” not her “daddas,” that Wilke learned to play with gender.

Wilke’s work is at once humorous, erotic, excessive, and politically engaging. Her performances are not only playful, overtly sexy, and transgressive, they are transgressive specifically *because* they are playful and sexual. Her puns as well as her parodies of advertisements, sexuality, the avant-garde, gender constructions, and religion use humor to convey a feminist viewpoint, and also often point to an acceptance, or even an indulgence in ambiguity.

Wilke’s blurring of boundaries touches upon the kind of carnivalesque liminality referred to by Bakhtin and presents another way of seeing her performance art as rebellious. Where Wilke begins to embrace the liminal through ambiguity, Eleanor Antin lives it. While Wilke usually uses her erotic body and witty humor to convey her feminism, Antin turns to funny, yet cynical masquerade to express her political concerns.

### Chapter Three: Eleanor Antin

#### I Introduction

I think comedy is at the heart of everything I do. I don't do it on purpose but I think that it's straight in line with romanticism. I think at the heart of all romanticism is a kind of absurd comedy that lies side by side with the really beautiful aspects of it. This makes it a funny, shabby, fragile thing which has never been played out. I think that is all there in my work, it is something innate, and people respond to it.

—Antin<sup>289</sup>

Eleanor Antin (originally Fineman) was born in New York City in 1935. At City College of New York, Antin majored in writing, minored in art, and took acting classes in the theater department. Using the stage name Eleanor Barrett, Antin became a member of the Actors' Equity Association and received several small parts. At the same time, during the early 1960s, Antin was creating paintings that often included pop-inspired, three-dimensional found objects and she was writing poetry and fiction.<sup>290</sup> Although she continues to maintain close ties to the Manhattan art world, in 1968 she moved to Southern California, where she has taught different aspects of art, performance, and narrative at the University of California at San Diego since 1975. When Antin first arrived in California, there seemed to be no dominant

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<sup>289</sup> Eleanor Antin, interviewed in Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 15 Women Artists* (New York: Icon Editions, 1975) 250.

<sup>290</sup> Antin notes that she “used to go to everything at Judson [Dance Theater] — everyone was there, from Yvonne Rainer to Carolee Schneemann.” Antin quoted in Fox, “A Dialogue with Eleanor Antin,” 197.

contemporary art style, leaving room for a great amount of personal artistic experimentation. Curator Howard Fox explains that in comparison to the New York art scene in the late 1960s, “anything could happen” in California.<sup>291</sup>

A self-proclaimed “old radical,” Antin was drawn early on to the politics of the Women’s Movement.<sup>292</sup> She went against avant-garde Conceptual and Minimalist art practices by including narrative elements in her work.<sup>293</sup> As the personal became recognizably political, her narrative assumed autobiographical

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<sup>291</sup> Fox, “Waiting in the Wings,” 26.

<sup>292</sup> Antin quoted in Fox, “A Dialogue with Eleanor Antin,” 193. Antin uses the term “old radical” to refer to her liberal politics. Elsewhere in the same interview, Antin notes that although she has lived in California for most of her life, she is still a “New York Jewish commie,” 203. In discussing her involvement with the 70s Women’s Movement, Antin mentions some of the books she was reading and then states: “*The Feminine Mystique* was an eye-opener about popular culture. Suddenly pop didn’t look as friendly anymore. I began to devour the [feminist] material. Now I don’t remember exactly when I got friendly with the women from L.A., but I became close friends with Suzanne Lacy. And Miriam Schapiro . . . I also was friendly with Pauline Oliveros and Linda Montano, and they were becoming feminized politically. And Ida Horowitz (who became Ida Applebroog when she moved to New York) was perhaps my closest friend. Then we started this women artists’ group,” Antin quoted in Fox, “A Dialogue with Eleanor Antin,” 207. A number of sentences later, Antin notes that her artists’ group began in 1972 and lasted about a year.

<sup>293</sup> When speaking about the art scene during the early 1970s, Antin states: “Remember, ‘narrative’ was still a dirty word,” later adding, “I think what got me started foregrounding narrative in my work was feminism and its fascination with personal experience,” Antin quoted in Fox, “A Dialogue with Eleanor Antin,” 204 and 206. Antin explains elsewhere: “I do think the narrative experience is a basic human need. I think sometimes that it acts on the same principles as dreams, as a kind of re-ordering of the world, putting it together in different ways, just for the hell of it, to try out those ways and paths we discarded in favor of the ones we took,” cited in Mary Stofflet, “Eleanor Antin: An Interview by Mail with Mary Stofflet,” *La Mamelles* (Winter 1976): 23. In *100 Boots* (1971-73), for instance, Antin creates what she refers to as a “photo-narrative” about one hundred rubber boots and his [*sic*] journey from the Pacific Ocean to The Museum of Modern Art. The story is told through fifty-one photographic postcards that were sent in installments through the mail over a two year period. There is something wonderfully ridiculous about the images, like “100 Boots at the Bank” or “100 Boots on Reconnaissance.” The series has been reprinted in its entirety in Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1999).

structures — speaking in the first person and drawing upon past experiences.<sup>294</sup> At the same time, like many feminist artists, Antin turned to her own body as an artistic medium. Feminists repudiating traditional art historical modes of production found that performance gave them a radical means to explore their personal/political lives. For instance, personal autobiography is intrinsically embedded within Antin's body, as seen in her photographic performance piece, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972). Here, she ridicules the prohibitive idealism of classical sculpture as she highlights her own struggle with weight loss by documenting the results of an extreme diet.<sup>295</sup> Through mug-shot-like images, Antin photographically demonstrates the carving of her nude body as she lost over ten pounds in thirty-six days (figure 35).<sup>296</sup> In line with 1970s feminism, Antin criticizes the pressures accompanied with trying to meet western standards of beauty and uses her *self* as an example.<sup>297</sup>

In her earliest live performance pieces (like *Eleanor 1954*), Antin began to consider the disruption of coherent identity. She realized that she was unable to secure a specific organic “self” and began to explore her other selves through art. As Antin explains: “I began to see that a human life is constructed much like a literary

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<sup>294</sup> Antin's use of the personal may be seen in *Domestic Peace* (1971-72), where she punningly charts several conversations/arguments between herself and her mother. Unlike Conceptual artists, Antin does not accept facts to be objective and uses history and its so-called truths to demonstrate this. In this piece, she employs text and diagrams to show the tumultuous mother-daughter relationship while rejecting pristine, non-emotional styles of art for a highly personalized, autobiographical mode of operation.

<sup>295</sup> In *The Eight Temptations* (1972), Antin uses photography to parody classically contrived poses as she nobly rejects the food forbidden on her crash diet.

<sup>296</sup> Lisa Bloom reads Antin's “short Jewish” body as marked by both gender and ethnicity; Lisa E. Bloom, “Rewriting the Script: Eleanor Antin's Feminist Art,” in Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 168. Bloom's thesis, however, does not accommodate Wilke's classically beautiful and Jewish body.

<sup>297</sup> See, Susie Orbach, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue: The Anti-Diet Guide to Permanent Weight Loss* (London: Paddington Press, 1978).

one, and, in any event, the documentation is the same for both.”<sup>298</sup> Antin’s performance work of the 1970s can be understood as various aspects of a larger, on-going project that investigates identity and narrative, reality and fiction, and all of the ambiguities in between. This is best seen in performances that stem from her adoption of four different characters throughout the 1970s: the King, the Ballerina, the Nurse, and, for a little while, the Black Movie Star. The four were quickly reduced to three (the Black Movie Star was incorporated into the Ballerina) and then multiplied when various manifestations of the remaining characters were engendered. For example, the King was first modeled after seventeenth-century Dutch royalty and then altered to a fourteenth-century Spanish king, El Desdichado (the Unlucky One).<sup>299</sup>

Antin would dress, speak, and sometimes even live as a designated persona, yet she is never completely transparent as to how she defines herself in relation to each one. Contradiction and ambiguity are intrinsic to her project. The various personae act as vehicles by which Antin transgresses all types of social and cultural boundaries, especially those meant to limit identity. As such, a kernel of post-modern identity questioning is at the core of Antin’s performances. An exchange between interviewer Eleanor Munro, Antin, and her husband, the poet David Antin, illustrates the fluidity embraced by Antin’s artistic methods:

Munro: “To get back to the other characters — the King and so on. How much of you is involved when you’re being them? Do you have stage fright before you do the improvisations?”

Antin: “The King always takes a shot of Scotch. The Ballerina is fine. The Nurse is always on video, and there’s no problem there.”

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<sup>298</sup> Antin, “An Autobiography of the Artist as an Autobiographer,” *Journal* no. 2, LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) October 1974, 20.

<sup>299</sup> “Disinherited” is another translation of El Desdichado, but Antin prefers “the unlucky one.”

Munro: "No. Do *you* have stage fright?"

Antin: "That's what I'm saying. The King is nervous."

Munro: "Well, who is the one living in the house here?"

David Antin: "They all live here."

Munro: "Have the characters completely taken over? Who washes the dishes here?

Who takes care of Blaise [Antin's son], makes love, writes the script? Those aren't collaborative committee operations."

David Antin: "You could say that what life has put together life also puts asunder."<sup>300</sup>

Munro's evident frustration does not fluster the Antins who accept, and perhaps even enjoy, the complexity of their daily lives.<sup>301</sup>

Art and life flow into each other when the boundaries separating them are regularly ignored. The personae are both Antin and not Antin. This seemingly purposefully unresolved state makes for a more interesting exploration of identity and subsequently, of autobiography. For autobiography — the past recounted in the first person — becomes a kind of methodology for Antin, a way to fabricate and break down stable notions of identity, history, and truth. It is not a key to her personal past (whatever that is).

Antin employs objects, photography, video, film, text-based work, drawing, and watercolors to enhance and build upon her personalities, which are always woven together with socio-political concerns and humor.<sup>302</sup> She conveys ideas and produces her performances through different strategies of humor: liminality, uncrowning,

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<sup>300</sup> Eleanor Antin (with David Antin), interviewed in Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists* (1979 reprint, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

<sup>301</sup> Bakhtin notes that in Rabelais' carnivalesque writing, folly is praised "as a form of the unofficial truth," *Rabelais and His World*, 262.

<sup>302</sup> When Nancy Bowen asks Antin during an interview: "So through these personae you are addressing social issues?" Antin replies: "Always." Nancy Bowen, *Profile: Eleanor Antin*, volume 1, number 4 (July 1981): 14.

spoof, and tragicomedy. The aim of this chapter is to locate Antin's 1970's work within the realm of the carnivalesque, where transgression and humor are emphasized and Antin's work can be appreciated for its rebelliousness against a static (patriarchal) view of identity and history.

## II Liminality

Everything is permissible and transitory.

— Antin<sup>303</sup>

*New ways of modeling or framing social reality may actually be proposed and sometimes legitimated in the very heat of performance, emerging as a sort of artifact or popular creativeness. That is why public liminality has often been regarded as "dangerous" by whatever powers-that-be who represent and preside over established structure.*

— Turner<sup>304</sup>

Let us grant the very concept of the self as a fiction.

— Eakin<sup>305</sup>

In her video performance work *Representational Painting* (1971), Antin emphasizes process. Specifically, the process that, in Antin's words, transforms her from her "everyday schleppy self" into a "beautiful, glamorous woman."<sup>306</sup> The

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<sup>303</sup> Eleanor Antin, interview with Debra Wacks, October 4, 2000.

<sup>304</sup> Turner, 39.

<sup>305</sup> Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 27.

<sup>306</sup> Antin quoted in a wall text from her retrospective exhibition at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, summer 1999. Antin refers to this work and others like it as a "self transformation work," in Stofflet, 22. Transformation as a



soundless, black and white piece begins with Antin sitting in an empty room. Seen from the waist up, she immediately lights a cigarette and peers into the camera, as if using it as a mirror. Two cameras alternate between shots that fade into each other throughout the video. Wearing only a white bra, Antin proceeds to inspect her bare face and mouths something inaudible to herself. She lifts her long, dark hair away from her visage and reveals the tufts under her arms. With grand circular gestures Antin cleans her face with a cotton square. Her movements are matter-of-fact; the working surface (her face) must be perfectly prepared, like a canvas before it is painted.

Antin's actions are swift and tactile. She roughly spreads foundation over her face, constantly retouching and reworking it. Next the eyeliner and then mascara. As she uses her fingers to blend her eye-makeup, she laughs heartily to herself and begins to look pleased with her progress. She continues to smoke and laugh and retouch and closely examine her face. She decides to use her finger to apply lip color. Unsure about what to do next, she thinks with her finger in her mouth. A different eye shadow is added, enhancing the desired illusion, like *chiaroscuro* (figure 36). Her lids are rechecked, her brows smoothed. Antin cants her head to look at herself and then stands up. The viewer can now see that she is wearing jeans. She removes the bra and slowly puts on a long-sleeved white shirt and then a floppy black hat, which she tilts. She poses and smiles before the video cuts to black.

After every move in the video Antin stops and studies her face as an artist pauses to analyze each new stroke of paint left on a canvas. The analogy between

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goal is often mentioned by Antin in interviews. For instance, in reference to *Representational Painting*, Antin states: "A woman paints herself to represent herself to the world. I don't normally use any make-up but I wanted to see how it would transform me if I did," quoted in Portner, 45. See also Lucy Lippard, "Making Up: Role-Playing and Transformation in Women's Art," (1975) reprinted in *From the Center*.

producing an artwork and “painting one’s face” is furthered by the title of the performance, “Representational Painting,” which simultaneously contrasts with the contemporary Conceptual Art movement. As Antin points to the creation of a kind of feminine beauty, she suggests that make-up application is a sublimation for the creative act of painting — women do not paint canvases, they paint their faces.<sup>307</sup> Oil painting, especially in 1971, was seen as a male-identified activity. Men were the artists of high culture, (feminine) women their muses.<sup>308</sup>

The nearly thirty-eight minute video gradually depicts Antin’s visual transformation. Rather than project an image of herself as always already feminine, Antin highlights the time, energy, and artificiality of the make-up process.<sup>309</sup> The “mystery” of femininity is disclosed during the in-between stages of “schleppy” and “glamorous.” This transitional phase recalls anthropologist Victor Turner’s understanding of liminality, which is literally defined as “being-on-a-threshold.” In an essay addressing drama and public liminality, Turner defines the term as “a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states.”<sup>310</sup> In *Representational Painting*, Antin underscores the moments between her everyday self and what she sees as a feminine self. While emphasizing

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<sup>307</sup> Kathy Acker, however, presents her opinion of women’s use of make-up: “Makeup isn’t frivolous; it’s another form of art. And what we’ve done with our bodies is a form of art throughout the ages . . . yet it’s always been put down. . . . all this is ridiculed, yet it’s a form of art — a very high art!” Kathy Acker, “Kathy Acker,” in *Angry Women*, ed. Andrea Juno (Re/Search Publications, 1991) 179.

<sup>308</sup> See Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”

<sup>309</sup> Make-up and its connections to masquerade as well as the social construction of femininity were explored by many feminist performance artists. For example, by Martha Wilson in *Posturing: Drag* (1971) and by Karen LeCoq and Nancy Youdelman in *Leah’s Room in Womanhouse* (1972). Antin’s emphasis on real-time action demonstrates the immense amount of time consumed by “women’s activities,” which is not only focused on by other feminist artists, but perhaps influenced by Andy Warhol’s real-time films of the 1960s as well.

<sup>310</sup> Turner, 33.

the liminal stages of femininity, Antin simultaneously points to the fabrication of femininity.

At this time in the early 1970s, the belief that gender is constructed was something relatively new to be dealt with in American art. When Antin invites the video camera to witness her toilette, she makes public what is usually kept private. This shift to the personal/political challenges an insular art world and questions popular ideas on naturalized gender. Through her make-up performance, Antin publicly frames her personal reality in a new way, which, as Turner's epigraph to this section indicates, may be "dangerous" to representatives of established structure. For Antin interrupts notions of femininity as natural by politicizing (making public) private liminal processes.

Liminality, therefore, may be a tool, a means for Antin to exist between and beyond social categories and a way for viewers to acknowledge her focus on process. It can help explain Antin's performance work, which welcomes transformation and transgression while it disrupts singular concepts of identity and autobiography. For instance, even when she presents herself as one of her personae (e.g., the King, the Nurse), Antin is always herself and also the persona simultaneously. She is both and neither, she is between stable identities. Most relevant for this paper, the emphasis placed on process and change in the liminal suggests a direct connection between Antin's work and the fluid world of the carnivalesque. According to Turner, "liminal time is not controlled by the clock it is a time of enchantment when anything *might*, even should, happen. . . . Liminality is full of potency and potentiality. It may also be full of experiment and play."<sup>311</sup> The idea that the liminal involves play and process, as well as social subversion and potential for change theoretically relates to Bakhtin's writings on

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<sup>311</sup> Turner, 33.

the carnivalesque. For both Bakhtin and Turner value transition, transgression of boundaries, and social disturbance.<sup>312</sup> The incompleteness of carnival parallels the transitional moments that comprise the liminal. While Bakhtin ties the process of becoming to the rebelliousness of carnival, Turner sees process as central to the disruption of liminality.

Gender and class distinctions were deliberately confused during medieval carnival and it was the grotesque, unruly female body that best crossed such borders. Turner discusses Natalie Zemon Davis' important study of carnival and the unruly female body in liminal terms:

What one sees here in Davis's material is evidence of an institution originally committed to maintaining a cyclical repetitive order, in which the natures and virtues of the sexes as structurally classified are clearly figured. Nevertheless, although *both* male and female offices of the Abbeys of Misrule may be said to belong to the *liminal domain* of carnival, the female ones are *quintessentially* liminal, since they represent persons who even in the mundane "indicative" world, by reason of their status inferiority and marginality, have a "subjunctive" penumbra reinforced and reduplicated in the carnival setting. The danger here is not simply that of female "unruliness." This unruliness itself is a mark of the ultraliminal, of the perilous realm of possibility of "anything *may* go" which threatens any social order and seems the more threatening, the more *that* order *seems* social rigorous and secure. The powers of the weak — to curse and criticize — set limits on the power of the strong — to coerce and ordain.<sup>313</sup>

Turner's perception of liminality further radicalizes Davis' analysis of carnivalesque rebelliousness. Female unruliness in particular is closely related to the liminal, the "ultraliminal" in fact, and, once again, Turner suggests that this poses a threat, a "danger" to social order because liminality brings with it the potential to disrupt social order — "anything may go." Female liminality can also

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<sup>312</sup> See Natalie Zemon Davis' discussion of Bakhtin and Turner, 103.

<sup>313</sup> Turner, 41.

upset the presumed clarity by which the sexes are “structurally classified,” unsettling the dichotomous line between male and female. And, like carnival, liminality suggests an inversion of power: the politically weak and marginal are capable of checking the power belonging to the strong.

An understanding of both the carnivalesque and the liminal encourages one to read Antin’s performances as metamorphic and disruptive. The terminology overlaps. Bakhtin speaks of carnival, while Turner concentrates on the liminal, but both recognize the potential radicalization of authority through ambiguity and transformation. While Bakhtin does not consider performance or the late-twentieth century, Turner does just that — he provides a spectrum of liminality that bridges Bakhtin’s ideas on medieval carnival and 1970s humor-reliant performance art.

When Turner explains his categorization of liminality he describes its earlier stages (rites and carnivals) as follows:

The examples of public liminality I have given — calendrical rites in tribal cultures and carnivals in post-feudal and early modern culture — stress the role of collective innovatory behavior, of crowds generating new ways of framing and modeling the social reality which presses on them in their daily lives. Here all is open, plurally reflexive, the folk acts on the folk and transforms itself through becoming aware of its situation and predicament.<sup>314</sup>

Although the above statement is meant to describe “post-feudal and early modern culture,” it can theoretically be applied to other moments in time. For instance, Turner’s description of the way reflexive folk “transforms itself through becoming aware of its situation and predicament” is reminiscent of later twentieth-century feminist consciousness raising techniques. Women around the United States acted collectively to generate new political conditions as they formed groups in which they could communicate and ultimately become alert to “the social reality which presse[d] on them in their daily lives.” Remembering that an initial goal for

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<sup>314</sup> Turner, 46.

feminist performance artists was to foster women's awareness of socio-economic inequalities and prohibitive cultural stereotypes, one may recognize that a liminal and transformative period was developed during the 1970s.

While Turner's reading of public liminality promotes an interpretation of the Women's Movement as innovative, his description of rites and carnivals as "post-feudal and early modern" inevitably attempts to limit its application to 1970s feminist performance. For when Turner moves to contemporary examples of liminality, he writes:

I now want to turn to a major reflexive genre, which in keeping with its origin in cultures which recognize the category of "the individual" as the significant decision-making and ethical unit, attributes to individuals the authorship of its scenarios — I refer to stage drama.<sup>315</sup>

Key to Turner's definition of advanced society and its production of stage-drama is individuality. Antin's masquerading project, however, works to dismantle the individual as a category. Yet her work is obviously post-feudal.<sup>316</sup> Antin's modern vacillation between various identities extends beyond the boundaries established by Turner himself.<sup>317</sup> Thus, like "carnival," "liminality" best contributes to an understanding of Antin's art if it is read as fluid and without rigid constraints.

Hence, Antin's work can be placed within a larger carnival-like context where emphases are on the popular and, most importantly, the humorous, while keeping the general transgressive qualities of liminality in mind. What better way could Antin's *The Bearded Ballerina* (1974) video be understood? She produced this work in Italy, where her character was also referred to as "the Ballerina King."

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<sup>315</sup> Turner, 46.

<sup>316</sup> Moreover, Antin does not produce proper "stage-drama" — performance art is more liminal than the traditional stage examples considered by Turner.

<sup>317</sup> There is slippage between the words "individual" and "identity" that would be interesting to explore.

A still from this performance video shows Antin sitting at a table covered with the remnants of a hearty meal (figure 37). She faces the viewer but looks away as she fidgets with a bottle and smokes a cigarette. Although Antin wears a revealing feminine top and a small portion of her tutu can be seen above the table, her gender is ambiguous. This is due to the presence of a full mustache and beard — the kind Antin sports when living as the King.

As usual, in the video Antin wears no make-up, jewelry, or nail polish, and her long hair hangs straight, in true 70s fashion. She combines her everyday self with the Ballerina and the King, which reads liminally. For, Antin is on the threshold of several identity markers. She is neither and both feminine and masculine, she is royalty, yet she is also an artist and entertainer. The bearded lady, a standard at side-show carnivals, reappears in this performance as a jarring, yet humorous combination of Antin's selves. Antin's figure simultaneously crosses and conflates boundaries and binaries of class, talent, gender, and sexuality. The expected classical beauty of a trained dancer is made grotesque and unruly. As such, Antin's work is best appreciated as betwixt and between liminal-like identities and the carnivalesque grotesque — a radical locus of transition and humor, where anything can, and should, happen.

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Since her first public art performance, *Eleanor 1954* (1974), Antin has explored the liminality of identity. In this work, Antin attempted to locate and make contact with her past self — Eleanor of 1954 — while testing the concept of having no history (no integrated past).<sup>318</sup> She began the improvised piece by trying to locate

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<sup>318</sup> Antin states: "I have always claimed and believed that I have no history," Munro interview, 428. Lucy Lippard notes that in the 1970s, women turned to "questions of identity raised by the feminist movement: What Am I?"

her former 19-year-old self through memories and heart-wrenching confessions, thinking that she could “flush out” the earlier Eleanor with “a story that would be so painful she would still feel it.”<sup>319</sup> Antin believed that if the 1954-Eleanor felt pain, she could consider that she had “bridged the gap of years.” While most of the audience was weeping from her stories, Antin was dissatisfied with the progress of her strategy and subsequently tried to shame her younger self out, as Antin explains afterward:

The assumption was that underneath my present performing self there was another, the *real*, me. So I told shameful stories. And as it turned out, I (or she?) was not in the least ashamed. Now, either that meant that one learns, as one grows older, to take everything with equanimity or that intervening events, all that happened in the meantime, had killed the old me.<sup>320</sup>

According to David Antin, there was question as to whether the younger Eleanor would “speak up for herself, defend herself” against the present Antin’s attacks.<sup>321</sup> Near the close of the performance, Antin began to “speak in voices” and then reached a climatic moment when the young Eleanor addressed the audience on her own.<sup>322</sup> “Her speech,” observes David Antin, “was like a not quite fully realized shamanism.”<sup>323</sup>

Antin had uncovered her past self and was communicating through at least two voices. She created what Bakhtin would call a dialogic performance — a double-

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What Do I Want to Be? I Can Be Anything I Like but First I Have to Know What I Have Been and What I Am,” Lippard, “Making Up,” 102.

<sup>319</sup> This quote is based upon David Antin’s memories of the performance, which he expressed while Antin was being interviewed, Munro, 429.

<sup>320</sup> Antin in Munro, 428.

<sup>321</sup> David Antin in Munro, 429.

<sup>322</sup> David Antin in Munro, 429.

<sup>323</sup> David Antin in Munro, 429.



voicedness — which he links to carnivalesque rebelliousness and laughter.<sup>324</sup> Antin resists singular, authoritative language by using multiple voices to articulate conflict and dialogue between her selves.<sup>325</sup>

Continuing to describe *Eleanor 1954*, David Antin states that “one of the most interesting aspects of the thing was how hard it was to determine who was telling the truth: this one, or that one?”<sup>326</sup> When Antin’s identity doubled, truth was demonstrated to be subjective, opaque, and even arbitrary. Antin had become irreconcilably divided while showing that past and present could not be unified. The layers of complexities exhibited in Antin’s performance echo Virginia Woolf’s approach to her own past as written in her memoirs. Woolf considers the inherent paradoxes of a present self trying to communicate a past self and offers the metaphor of a platform on which she could concomitantly view past and present: “at least enough of the present to serve as platform to stand upon. It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast.”<sup>327</sup> A unified self does not appear to be Woolf’s aim. Rather she, like Antin, seems to prefer the clash of her divergent identities. Woolf’s imaginary platform and Antin’s performance both

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<sup>324</sup> The dialogic results in heteroglossia, according to Bakhtin.

<sup>325</sup> Diane Price Herndl explains that Bakhtin predicts a “novelization” of all genres because the novel’s very resistance to authority would cause it to become a ‘super-genre,’ one impossible to define and therefore impossible to limit.” One could say that Antin “novelizes” her performance. Diane Price Herndl, “The Dilemmas of a Feminine Dialogic,” *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*, eds. Dale M. Bauer and S. Jaret McKinstry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) 10.

<sup>326</sup> David Antin in Munro, 429.

<sup>327</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell. 5 vols. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977-84) 75. Cited in Shari Benstock, “Authorizing the Autobiographical,” in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 28.

acknowledge and cultivate their different selves — the two separate, yet related individuals developed over time.

Once Antin came to regard individuality as fractured, she started exploring alternative identities in her performances. She began to build and shape the various characters that make up her personae. From the start, however, the different personalities seem to seep into each other. For instance, in the final stages of *Representational Painting*, Antin exchanges her brassiere for an androgynous white shirt and floppy hat, items that usually comprise her costume as the King (figure 38). The performance may concentrate on the process of becoming feminine (via make-up), but it concludes with the early manifestations of masculinity when Antin puts on the King's hat and shirt. Antin's everyday self flows into her feminine representation, which flows into her King identity: the suggestion is that the liminal stages of identity will simply carry on. With each new personality, Antin's appearance, history, and discourse is appropriately altered, "effecting a continuing self-transformation."<sup>328</sup> She embraces an ongoing state of ambiguity by breaking down the very notion of the individual. As Jonathan Crary notes, Antin "unmasks the individual as a fiction, an ideology, an imaginary product."<sup>329</sup> The individual is represented as unfixed by Antin who continually dissolves and transgresses the traditional boundaries of identity (gender, class, age, etc.).

Each of Antin's personae come from different backgrounds, which are expanded upon and documented through autobiography or what can be called autobiographical parodies. When Antin performs one of her characters, she assumes the identity and speaks in the first person *as* that person. She also produces object-based autobiographical evidence of her various lives: the King and the Ballerina each

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<sup>328</sup> Jonathan Crary, "Eleanor Antin: A Post Modern Itinerary," in *The Angel of Mercy* (La Jolla: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977) n. p.

<sup>329</sup> Crary, n. p.

wrote and illustrated their memoirs, while Nurse Eleanor figures prominently in “nineteenth-century” family and historic photographs. Because autobiography is the means by which Antin conveys and documents her liminal identities, she inevitably creates non-essentialist autobiographies. In other words, Her narrative is not necessarily founded upon actual lived experience — there may not be an essence of historical personal fact to her autobiographies. Her performances, therefore, foster questions about the relationship between identity, autobiography, and truth. To Antin, however, there is no issue:

I figure that since autobiography is about past events, it is only fiction because the events are over. . . . You could say anything and who is to know whether it is true or false and what does it matter? I decided that there was no reason, when I do my autobiography, to have an underprivileged fantasy. It is all fiction anyway, since it is obvious that autobiography is not written by a dead person writing about his past. It is written by a passionate person living in the present. He has got something to sell, an image of himself, which he considers adequate or which, for some reason, he wants to convince people is true.<sup>330</sup>

Antin’s work thrives on the manipulatable and perhaps even confusing aspects of autobiography. If individuality is fluid, and past events fictional, then the truth of autobiography becomes irrelevant. Objectivity is impossible and, in this case, subject to Antin’s personal fantasies.

Ultimately, the sifting of truth from non-truth in Antin’s work is not nearly as interesting as Antin’s performances as a whole. In relation to women’s autobiography, Nancy K. Miller explains: “I am proposing instead an intratextual practice of interpretation which . . . would privilege neither the autobiography nor the fiction, but take the two writings together in their status as text.”<sup>331</sup> Likewise,

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<sup>330</sup> Antin in Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 15 Women Artists*, 245. Note, Antin still uses the “universal he.”

<sup>331</sup> Nancy K. Miller, “Writing Fictions: Women’s Autobiography in France,” *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 60.

Antin's narrative-rich work bridges and blurs fact and fiction. Her symbolically limitless body, history, and identity produce transitional autobiographies that contradict and intratextually inform each other with every performance. As Crary states: "There are no borders, no precise contours, no center. She [Antin] is the autobiographer of a subject-in-process."<sup>332</sup> The emphasis is on the unfolding, the becoming of her selves, and the stories to be told.

Because Antin's non-polemical employment of autobiography is in itself liminal — somewhere between truth and fiction — her performances wreak havoc on traditional definitions of autobiography. For instance, Philippe Lejeune describes autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality."<sup>333</sup> Clearly, Antin's work does not satisfy Lejeune's definition. Her "identity" is always in question and her performances challenge blanket claims made by Lejeune, such as: "An identity is, or is not. It is impossible to speak of degrees."<sup>334</sup> Antin's work is all about degrees and the stages between identities.

<sup>332</sup> Crary, n. p. There are parallels between the liminality of Antin's identity and Friedman's reading of Anais Nin's diary. Friedman uses Nancy Chodorow's theory of feminine selfhood when she writes: "Nin's formulation of a fluid self anticipates Chodorow's concepts of women's 'more flexible or permeable ego boundaries,'" Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," in *The Private Self*, 45. Nancy Chodorow, *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>333</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Theory and History of Literature, volume 52), ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 4. Noteworthy, in 1986 Lejeune updates his views on autobiography in light of poststructuralism. Georges Gusdorf writes that a "conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life" is necessary for autobiography; Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (1956), trans. James Olney, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 29. Cited in Friedman, 34.

<sup>334</sup> Lejeune, 5. Antin usurps and makes liminal Lejeune's perfect "autobiographical pact." For further feminist argument against Lejeune, see the introduction to Domna Stanton's *The Female Autograph* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984).

Antin's performances are progressive when viewed within their historical context. During the same time that Lejeune first offered his ostensibly closed conception of autobiography (1970s), Antin was questioning forgone conclusions about identity and writing, as were other postmodern thinkers.<sup>335</sup> Her work demonstrates a belief that truth, history, and identity can be fabricated. Hence, autobiography can be constructed too.

To document the King's life, for instance, Antin created a series of first-person narrated texts accompanied by lovely ink and watercolor drawings in *The King's Meditations* (1974-1975).<sup>336</sup> The separate pages form a type of diary filled with personal reflections and experiences. In line with the fact that this King rules during the seventeenth century, the *Meditations* are made to look aged. They are written on torn, fragile paper with sepia-colored ink. The drawings parody seventeenth-century Dutch art and the decorative writing purposefully contains spelling errors that point to a yet-to-be standardized English language.

In one of the *Meditations*, Antin covers a large portion of the parchment-toned paper with a watercolor sketch (figure 39). A tree-filled landscape begins in the left foreground of the page and curves diagonally towards the background, creating an enclosed space around a small lake. On the lake stands a woman being rowed in a boat as she waves her handkerchief farewell to the land-bound King. His sketchily-drawn back faces the viewer, but his identity is ascertained by his high boots, long cape, and slanted broad hat. Three of the King's courtiers wait nearby along the

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<sup>335</sup> For instance, based on Lacan's ideas of the constructed self, Jeffrey Mehlman notes that all autobiography is "necessarily fictive." Jeffrey Mehlman, *Structural Study of Autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Sartre, Lévi-Strauss* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974) 35-39, cited in Friedman, 34.

<sup>336</sup> Antin claims that she could not paint with watercolors until she needed to do so for this series: Portner interview, 44. The *Meditation* entitled "Banquet in the Clouds" is unaccompanied by any writing. *The King's Meditations* was also done as a live performance in 1975.

shore. The “seventeenth-century” scene is accompanied by a sentimental text about an “old friend” who has long disappeared.<sup>337</sup> The King contemplates her well-being and then writes:

I’ve always admired people who visit the sicke, remember birthdays & worke for the general good. . . . Good people, generous people can choose that career but I’m not a nurse or a professional soldier — I probably let people downe, become responsible for wounding those I would helpe.<sup>338</sup>

The King wallows in his short-comings. This histrionic construction of a royal persona is both comical and introspective. The King ironically suggests that his insufficient generosity partially stems from the fact that he is neither nurse nor soldier, which of course intratextually references one of Antin’s other characters, the Nurse.<sup>339</sup> The King, on his own, is lacking, but with the help of multiple identities, Antin can be both King and Nurse, both privileged and compassionate.

Shari Benstock argues that the disunified self (as seen in Antin’s art) is not only intrinsic to women’s autobiographies, but also incredulous of the implicit power structure of traditional autobiography. She writes in direct contrast to theories of autobiography (like Lejeune’s) that require an “individual life” or a completed “I” as a subject. Of such definitions, Benstock writes:

This conception of the autobiographical rests on a firm belief in the *conscious* control of artist over subject matter: this view of the life history is grounded in authority. It is perhaps not surprising that those who cling to such a definition are those whose assignment under the Symbolic law is to *represent* authority, to represent the phallic power that drives

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<sup>337</sup> This page resembles *La Pêche* (1860-1861) by Edouard Manet, who was probably influenced by two seventeenth-century engravings by Peter Paul Rubens. For details on the sources of *La Pêche*, see *Manet 1832-1883* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1983) 70-73.

<sup>338</sup> Text from Antin’s *The King’s Meditations*, spelling errors found in the original.

<sup>339</sup> Nancy Walker analyses the uses of irony and humor in various forms of autobiographies written by women in Nancy Walker, “Ironic Autobiography: From *The Waterfall* to *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” in *Last Laughs*.

inexorably toward unity, identity, sameness. And it is not surprising that those who question such authority are those who are expected to submit to it, those who line up on the other side of the sexual divide — that is, women. The self that would reside at the center of the text is decentered — and often is absent altogether — in women's autobiographical texts.<sup>340</sup>

While Benstock's analysis gives Antin's disjoined identity a feminist inclination, she also suggests that women writers are somewhat passive. That autobiographies by women are different from those produced by men because they lack something. The decentered self, according to Benstock, is "absent altogether," it is missing from the writing of women. In contrast, Antin does not passively lack unification. Rather, she resists a centered self by consciously fracturing and creating identities. Antin *desires* to represent her self as liminal.

Leigh Gilmore provides a more active reading of women's autobiographies. Turning to postmodernism, she analyses autobiography as "discourses of self-representation."<sup>341</sup> In opposition to the Augustinian tradition of confessional autobiography, Gilmore prefers "autobiographics," the process of self-representation that "is concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation."<sup>342</sup> Through autobiographics, Gilmore recognizes a means of rupture, a way to use self-representation to disturb social norms. With each (re)invention of herself, Antin utilizes forms of autobiography (e.g., *The King's Meditations*), which results in a decisive break from stable notions of identity.

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<sup>340</sup> Benstock, "Authorizing the Autobiographical," 19. Benstock includes "blacks, Jews, the economically deprived, and so on," along with women as those who are "not seen to represent authority," 31, note 5.

<sup>341</sup> Leigh Gilmore, "The Mark of Autobiography: Postmodernism, Autobiography, and Genre," in *Autobiography & Postmodernism*, eds. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1994) 10.

<sup>342</sup> Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) 42.

Antin's multiplicity of representational options simultaneously problematizes hierarchical categorizations of the individual and allows Antin to adopt one of many subject positions.<sup>343</sup> On a symbolic level, Antin picks and chooses who she is and how she is depicted. This representational control is empowering and affords Antin agency, as Gilmore indicates:

If feminist theory describes women as "objects of exchange" in order to analyze social organization and to reveal the constitutively delimited sphere of possibility for women, my work builds from that critique to analyze how women use self-representation and its constitutive possibilities for agency and subjectivity to become no longer primarily subject to exchange but subjects who exchange the position of object for the subjectivity of self-representational agency.<sup>344</sup>

Gilmore's recognition of the potential for agency differs from other forms of postmodern thought that only sees the inevitability of social structure. She interprets postmodern self-representation as a means to challenge patriarchal thought through query, much like the way Antin questions ideas of history and identity in her performances.<sup>345</sup>

To a self-proclaimed "history-less" person like Antin, history is manipulable and can be produced as an autobiography that is both hers and not-hers. In her

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<sup>343</sup> Antin's multiplicity of selves connotes a dissolution of patriarchal ideas on authority and identity and allows her to enjoy the option of different representational selves. Clearly this is on a symbolic level, but the potential for agency is present. Antin's self-empowerment through multiple identities contrasts with Friedman's belief that isolated individualism is the privilege of power: "A white man has the luxury of forgetting his skin color and sex. He can think of himself as an 'individual.' Women and minorities, reminded at every turn in the great cultural hall of mirrors of their sex or color, have no such luxury," Friedman. 38-39.

<sup>344</sup> Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 11. Gilmore sees radicality in the possibility for change: "even when the non-textual possibilities for changing normative heterosexuality, racism, and classism . . . may not exist, the imaginative grounds for such praxis may be constructed in an autobiography." Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, xii.

<sup>345</sup> See Gilmore, "The Mark of Autobiography," 3, 14 note 1.



performances, she treats her identity as unlimited, which permits her to discuss any “experiences” she fancies.<sup>346</sup> Every time she dresses up in costume and assumes the personality, voice, demeanor, skill, or privilege associated with a respective persona, she further demonstrates the way in which identity can be liminal, especially in connection with her specific desires. As Antin states:

I am interested in defining the limits of myself, meaning moving out to, in to, up to, and down to the frontiers of myself. The usual aids to self-definition — sex, age, talent, time and space — are merely tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice.<sup>347</sup>

Antin satisfies her inclination to be and do everything through the magic of transformation and self-authored invention.<sup>348</sup> Antin’s adoption of different personae engenders a renewed perspective and perhaps change. Her disregard for limits combined with her pleasurable transgression of boundaries are intrinsically linked to the carnivalesque, especially when her use of humor is taken into consideration.

While working during the 1970s, Antin participated in a general postmodern push towards deconstructing monolithic concepts, like truth, identity, and history. She combines autobiography, which has traditionally been linked to truth and coherent individuality, with liminal states of being to question and challenge such absolute notions. While Antin creates anti-hegemonic discourses, she also produces art. Speaking of one of her persona performances, Antin states:

This is an art work because it makes no claim to truth. It is also not autobiographical, although it may count as an

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<sup>346</sup> Antin was extremely close to author Kathy Acker. A comparison of the way each of them fragments identity while using autobiographical structures and humor would be fruitful.

<sup>347</sup> Antin, “An Autobiography of the Artist as an Autobiographer,” 20.

<sup>348</sup> Antin states this desire for “perfect freedom” in an interview with the Debra Wacks, October 4, 2000. Bakhtin writes of the radical changes from old to new and the way in which masquerade is one means to continue this cycle of rebirth. See, for example, Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 268.

autobiographical art work. Real autobiography makes a powerful claim to truth. Autobiographical art works do not. They only make a claim to the idea of autobiography. The substance is a speech made in the first person.<sup>349</sup>

Antin uses autobiographical techniques to produce art. On a similar note, author Jeanette Winterson claims that art “must resist autobiography if it hopes to cross boundaries of class, culture . . . and . . . sexuality.” Autobiography, according to Winterson, needs to be translated into art if it is going to cross borders of identity.<sup>350</sup> This is what Antin does — she adopts an autobiographical form, but then denies identity a single authentic representation. Like a carnival participant, she transgresses many types of divisions and hierarchies, as is best evidenced in her first named alter-ego: the King. Here, by enacting the emphatic carnivalesque concept of uncrowning, Antin declares herself royalty.

### III Uncrowning

In the world of carnival all hierarchies are canceled. All castes and ages are equal.

— Bakhtin<sup>351</sup>

Thus the highest becomes the lowest; the equality of all outside social structure is asserted.

— Turner<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> Antin, “Some Thoughts on Autobiography,” 81.

<sup>350</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995) 106; cited in Leslie Satin and Judith Jerome’s introduction to *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* (this issue is dedicated to “Performing Autobiography”) vol. 10:1-2, no. 19-20, (1999): 9.

<sup>351</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 251.

<sup>352</sup> Turner, 39.

I became acutely aware of the extent to which  
autobiographers contest gender identity rather than simply  
enact it.

— Gilmore<sup>353</sup>

In Antin's video performance *The King* (1972) she highlights the process of becoming her seventeenth-century identity, the King. Like her 1971 work, *Representational Painting*, this video is lengthy (fifty-two minutes), soundless, shot in black and white, and depicts a liminal transformation. In fact, *The King* theoretically picks up from where *Representational Painting* leaves off — when, at the end of the latter, Antin puts on items that suggest the King. But in *The King*, as in *Representational Painting*, Antin does not begin her performance by wearing her persona's official garb. Rather, she first appears in an androgynous jacket-like shirt and casual pants. The royal costume is reserved for the video's finale.

*The King* videotape opens with a long shot of Antin casually sitting at a table with books, and what will be revealed to be a mirror. She starts by outlining her chin with a type of glue onto which she carefully begins to stick narrow strands of hair. She concentrates on her burgeoning beard and does not look directly into the cameras which present different angles of the procedure. Sometimes, however, a camera films the mirror, allowing viewers to glimpse Antin's reflection (figure 40). She is serious as she repetitively brushes, trims, and glues the thin pieces of hair into place.

Next she begins the mustache. As Antin affixes the strands above her upper lip, she checks to ensure that every hair is in order, stopping often to enjoy her new beard (figure 41). She strokes it and inwardly smiles. The camera zooms in on the beard, humorously framing it as a work of art. Watching herself sideways in the mirror, Antin emphatically smokes a cigarette and relishes the nobility of her form.

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<sup>353</sup> Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, xi.

She continues to cut, and shape, and stroke her facial hair, perfecting it as she does her make-up in *Representational Painting*.

Once satisfied with her transformation, Antin lifts her arms up as if gesturing in a Russian dance and then practices saying something. Near the end, the video abruptly cuts to Antin standing on a white floor, wearing a white ruffled shirt. She then gets her black cavalier hat and velvet cape. There is a type of brick on the floor on which she places one of her leather-booted feet and poses. Her hanging hair, which reads as feminine in *Representational Painting*, now looks suave. She appears to look far off into the distance, as if surveying her extensive lands, for now s/he is royalty.

*The King*, like many of Antin's performances, emphasizes the process of transition, the truth of the fiction. She began her artistic career with simpler means of change, through make-up and weight loss, and moved on to what she calls more "exotic" transformations:<sup>354</sup>

I asked myself, for instance, if I were a man, what sort of man would I be? I decided to apply hair to my face and find out. I learned I was not an explorer — a grizzled Hemingway. My small chin couldn't make it. I found I was not a fierce patriarch, nor Jesus. Only when I trimmed my beard into an elegant courtier style did I know I had found him/me.<sup>355</sup>

Antin created the King in response to a scenario: what kind of man would she be?

She discovers a type of ideal and takes pleasure in achieving it.

In her live, on-going performances as royalty entitled *The King of Solana Beach* (throughout the 70s), Antin takes her gender bending persona public when she

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<sup>354</sup> Antin in Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 15 Women Artists*, 246.

<sup>355</sup> Antin in Munro interview, 425 and 427. Antin says elsewhere: "Then I discovered that the man I was going to be was a king. That was great. Why should I be a beggar? Or why should I work in a factory?" Quoted in Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 15 Women Artists*, 247.

visits with her “loyal subjects.” Beginning in 1972, Antin enacted performances around her home town of Solana Beach, near San Diego. Dressed as she was at the end of *The King* video, Antin walked or biked around town, went to the bank, grocery store, and library, and addressed individuals with whom she came across. She would approach them and say: “Hello. I’m the King of Solana Beach. I think Solana Beach deserves a king, don’t you?”<sup>356</sup> According to Antin, most people agreed and they would enter into conversation, discussing everything from the economy to politics.

By including passersby in her piece, Antin ignores traditional boundaries between performance and audience. These transgressions recall Bakhtin’s description of carnival spectacles in which “Everyone participates. . . . There is no clear dividing line between this play and life, so that the one is passed on to the other.”<sup>357</sup> With her traveling public performances, Antin created pockets of carnival life throughout Solana Beach.

Occasionally, Antin would have a friend (Philip Steinmetz) surreptitiously photograph her public encounters (the photos date from c. 1975). In one black and white image, Antin is seen sitting on a park bench, surrounded by palm trees and animatedly speaking with a small group of teenage surfer-like boys (figure 42). Listening closely, they crowd around her, bringing the King into their fold. The photograph is funny in its contradictions: Antin’s demeanor is formal, yet she holds a can of Budweiser beer. Her dark hair, beard, and cape are foiled against the long sun-streaked hair of the teenagers. The casual young “beach bums” appear content as they interact with the relatively older transvestite king. And commonalties emerge. Not only do all of the participants blur gender through their hair (on the head or facial), but each remains slightly outside of society’s mainstream: teenage boys, too

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<sup>356</sup> Antin in Portner interview, 45.

<sup>357</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 265.

young to be taken seriously, and a performance artist/self appointed king. Yet there is something about this photograph that temporarily alters their social marginality. Bakhtin emphasizes that during public carnivalesque performances: “The utopian truth is enacted in life itself. For a short time this truth becomes to a certain extent a real existing force.”<sup>358</sup> Similarly, as the boys participate in Antin’s performance, they momentarily become the respected advisors to an all powerful monarch and help to invert social hierarchies.

Antin’s inclusive street performances hark back to the public spectacles that occurred during medieval carnival, when, for instance, clowns mimicked serious rituals and kings were appointed by the people. When Antin dresses up as a king and walks around her “province,” she takes on what would have been a clown-like role during festival. Bakhtin explains:

Clowns and fools . . . are characteristic of the medieval culture of humor. They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season. . . . they were not actors playing their parts on a stage, as did the comic actors of a later period . . . As such they represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar mid-zone as it were; they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors.<sup>359</sup>

Similarly, one of the objectives of performance art in general is to narrow the gap between art and life. Antin brings with her a “carnival spirit” that introduces humor and subversion to the public.

Another way in which Antin’s performance as the King parallels Bakhtin’s descriptions of carnivalesque spectacle may be seen in the very gesture of travesty.

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<sup>358</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 265.

<sup>359</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 8. A clown heralds a kind of non-hierarchical truth, Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 93. A clown is different today — part of an established venue, a circus, or a show and has a routine. For an illustrated history of clowns, see: M. Willson Disher, *Clowns & Pantomimes* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968).

Bakhtin considers such masquerades a form of “exterior freedom” that is “inseparable from . . . inner freedom.”<sup>360</sup> When Antin dons a king’s costume, she is exercising a notion of freedom that recalls carnival rebelliousness. To Bakhtin, these “changes of costume and social status” turn hierarchy “inside out.”<sup>361</sup> Through travesty, Antin is free to adopt a different, much higher social position, and publicly display it. She conflates the presumed to be high (masculine monarch) with the perceived to be low (woman artist) and thus, the high becomes low, the marginalized become powerful, and binaries collapse.

To Bakhtin the undoing of “timeless stability” is intricately connected to humor, group participation, and a restorative circular movement between high and low.<sup>362</sup> During carnival, this was all demonstrated communally when a jester or peasant would dress as a king. Through this temporary transgression of hierarchies there is movement from top to bottom and vice versa that is liberating, as well as, according to Bakhtin, rejuvenating. He considers this kind of “degrading” movement to be part of the regenerative cycle that forces the creation of something different — a kind of rebirth that keeps culture in motion. Bakhtin explains:

Another essential element [of carnival] was a reversal of the hierarchic levels: the jester was proclaimed king. . . . shifting from top to bottom, casting the high and the old, the finished and completed into the material bodily lower stratum for death and rebirth. These changes were placed into an essential relation with time and with social and historical change. The element of relativity and of becoming was emphasized, in opposition to the immovable and extratemporal stability of the medieval hierarchy.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 271.

<sup>361</sup> The first quote is from Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 245. He uses the phrase “inside out” several times, see 270 and 370.

<sup>362</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 81.

<sup>363</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 81-82. I believe that “timeless stability” may be likened to the assumption of universality or to patriarchal hierarchy and can be understood as what many feminists work against.

Transition is again emphasized. Power is recycled when a jester is proclaimed monarch. When Antin's self-coronation is viewed within this carnivalesque light, her performance becomes more radical: as a woman and an artist who symbolically usurps power, she inverts more than one hierarchy.

In Rabelais' carnivalesque stories, when an elected king's reign comes to an end he is mocked and abused by the rest of the festival participants. His costume is destroyed and he is violently beaten. Bakhtin explains that "the abuse and thrashing are equivalent to a change of costume, to a metamorphosis. Abuse reveals the other, true face of the abused, it tears off his disguise and mask. It is the king's uncrowning."<sup>364</sup> The violence depicted by Rabelais terminates the king's authority and returns him to his everyday position. The thrashings, according to Bakhtin, are immensely humorous and create renewal and change, for the hierarchies have been rattled and will never be the same again. Antin's adoption of her King persona, however, occurs on a very different level. She self-assigns her royal role and she certainly is not beaten when she steps down. Yet, symbolically, her actions can be read in a similar uncrowning manner.

Uncrowning can be understood as a taking down of authority — a disrespect for power of any kind.<sup>365</sup> It is the process of debasement, the downward movement, the inversion of the stable, that Bakhtin calls rejuvenating and change creating.<sup>366</sup> Antin does not rely on violence to debase the idea of absolute power. Instead she

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<sup>364</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 197. Bakhtin states: "The theme of birth of the new was organically linked with the theme of death of the old on a gay and degrading level, with the images of a clownish carnivalesque uncrowning," Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 79.

<sup>365</sup> For instance, Rabelais uncrowns the stars in the sky when he claims they are for everyone, not just for kings or Popes. Cited in Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 234.

<sup>366</sup> See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 214.



demonstrates the artificial construction of hierarchy by removing any of the pre-ordained or godly powers that usually sustain royalty. When Antin makes herself king in clothing, name, and public action, she steals power while mocking the actual notion of power. She takes an elitist role and makes it democratic: anyone can be king. Antin debunks notions of hierarchies as she simultaneously crowns and uncrowns herself.

Encouraged by conversations with her “people,” Antin eventually tried to unite the “have-nots” against the “haves” in a live performance called *Battle of the Bluffs* (c. 1975-1976) (figure 43). Playing all of the roles herself, she led an army consisting of shuffleboard-bearing older people (the infantry) and skateboard riding kids (the cavalry) against the land developers and merchants of Solana Beach. The former “won the battle,” according to Antin, “but lost the war.”<sup>367</sup> The King is therefore defeated in the performance. What Antin does with her power is antithetical, the opposite of what one believes a king to be.<sup>368</sup> The fact that she and her people ultimately loose the development battle is the final uncrowning straw. She is ineffective, a powerless king, an oxymoron that brings together the high and low. Yet, it is this type of topsy-turvy inversion that creates rejuvenation, and, according to Bakhtin, eventual change.

Antin, however, moves beyond the construction/deconstruction of an iconic king when she goes about uncrowning a specific king, Charles I of England. She eventually co-opts his story as her own and states:

So I became this cavalier king and the resemblance of my face as king to the face of Charles I was very strong. . . . [The

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<sup>367</sup> Antin describes *Battle of the Bluffs* in Portner, 46.

<sup>368</sup> The King laments this loss of power in one of the *Meditations*: “The shabbiness of our situation embarasses me. The deposed King ranting about the loss of his Kingdome to his onely remayning servant” (spelling errors are found in original text).

King] refers back to the fact that you can claim to be anything or anyone as your autobiography. Well my claim to be Charles I comes up against that previous claim of a short egotistical guy who had his head chopped off, or of a portrait by Van Dyck. But that's all history. I come as Charles I with video, photography (everybody knows photography can't lie), this whole personal presence as Charles. Why shouldn't that be more meaningful or more real than some historical gossip?<sup>369</sup>

In one fell swoop Antin uncrowns autobiography, history, and the entrenched canon of fine art. She demonstrates Gilmore's definition of autobiographics, which is "where women's self-representation interrupts (or is interrupted by) the regulatory laws of gender and genre."<sup>370</sup> She discounts Anthony Van Dyck's well known portrait of the British king, *Charles I Dismounted* (c. 1635). As a young woman artist, Antin does better than rebel against a tradition that seems to offer little space for her or performance art, she simply disregards it. Old master painting is made irrelevant, along with history, which is relegated to gossip. Antin's claim to the title of Charles I is far more "reliable," for her proof is technologically superior — she has videotapes and photographs — historical painting, it seems, is antiquated in terms of capturing the "real."<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Antin in Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 15 Women Artists*, 247. Antin states elsewhere: "Later I learned I was a courtier king, since my image bore such an uncanny relation to Van Dyck's *Charles I*. When I read about that romantic, stubborn Hamlet figure, I knew I was right," Munro, 427. Antin also produced a group of formal black and white photographic portraits of the King in 1972 (figure 44).

<sup>370</sup> Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 45.

<sup>371</sup> Antin states: "You know me only by how I talk to you and how I look. Therefore when I document myself as Charles I it is just as reasonable as what the history books will say," Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 15 Women Artists*, 247.

Via the King, Antin deals with issues of class, power, and hierarchy, as well as the slippery lines that define gender, sexuality, and identity.<sup>372</sup> On the one hand, in *The King's Meditations* Antin represents her King as a queer man:

Even my lover is a weight on me — like a sack of potatoes — “just because he is gentle & kinde & tries to helpe. . . . He makes suggestions, lookes sympathic, actually thinkes making love will helpe. Since I enjoy making love with him — he is, after all, a wonderfull lover — but what does that have to doe with anything? They are, after all, real problems — hardly to be solved by the pressure of skinnies.”<sup>373</sup>

On the other hand, Antin is literally a “drag king.”<sup>374</sup> She adopts a stereotypically masculine persona that leads to personal explorations of identity and publicly challenges binary notions of gender, as well as those of class (king/artist) and epoch (then/now).<sup>375</sup>

In the early 1970s (as well as in the dawn of the twenty-first century), it can be dangerous to disrupt boundaries, especially those demarcating gender.<sup>376</sup> Antin did not remain within the safe environments of her studio or among arty friends. She hit the streets dressed as the King and expressed her initial fears in doing so:

I was wearing a cape and a bush hat, which looked like a cavalier's hat, and my beard, and there were my breasts

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<sup>372</sup> Antin deals with issues of race when the King is identified as black in her performance *El Desdichado* (1983).

<sup>373</sup> Antin, partial text to *The King's Meditations* (1974), spelling errors found in original text.

<sup>374</sup> Of course Antin's adoption of different identities should be viewed in context with the many artists who used some form of masquerade/drag in their 1970s performances. For examples of identity based political art of the 1970s, see Withers; and Lynn Gumpert and Ned Rifkin, *Persona* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1981) 5 and 34, note no. 6.

<sup>375</sup> See Marjorie Garber who argues that cross-dressing can dismantle gender binaries by causing a “category crisis,” *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing & Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 11.

<sup>376</sup> See, for instance, Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1993).

hanging out through a frilly blouse. I wondered if I would have a heavy reaction from people who could see I was a woman walking around with a beard.<sup>377</sup>

Antin does not attempt to completely “pass,” as a male. She is always in a state of liminality between identified female with breasts and identified male with beard. She is a constant anomaly, a spectacle of blurred boundaries, which prevents her viewers from comfortably locating Antin within a gendered category.

Because there is a certain level of risk involved when blurring socially drawn lines, Antin was fortunate to have been perceived as likable or somewhat clown-like.<sup>378</sup> Solana Beach must have embraced the general carnivalesque spirit enacted by Antin and other performance artists in Southern California during the 70s. Indeed, gender transgressions, such as transvestitism, have always been an integral part of carnival festivities. “This is why in carnivalesque images,” Bakhtin explains, “there is so much turn-about, so many opposite faces and intentionally upset proportions. We see this first of all in the participants’ apparel. Men are transvested as women and vice versa.” Davis’ analysis builds upon Bakhtin’s idea of “turn-about” as renewal when she recognizes the relationship between it and specific representations of women who appeared in drag:

In hierarchical and conflictful societies that loved to reflect on the world-turned-upside-down, the *topos* of the woman-on-top was one of the most enjoyed. Indeed, sexual inversion — that is, switches in sex roles — was a widespread form of cultural play in literature, in art, and in festivity.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Antin in Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 15 Women Artists*, 250.

<sup>378</sup> Antin states: “The people liked having me as their king. I think because I’m small. Maybe they thought I was cuddly with my cape and big hat and improbable breasts,” in Portner interview, 45.

<sup>379</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, 129. Davis provides many instances of women who critically cross-dress, but most of them are literary or artistic representations. Women had less freedom to cross-dress at carnival than men. As Jennifer Blessing notes, there is a dearth of female-to-male gender-crossing instances in popular culture, Blessing, “Gender Performance in Photography,” in *Rose is a Rose is a*

The “unruly woman” who inverts her sex role or gender also inverts her social position and becomes a “woman-on-top.”

In addition, there is potential for such travesty to eventually move beyond carnival or art parameters. Davis notes that this “topsy-turvy play had much spillover into everyday ‘serious’ life, and the effects there were sometimes disturbing and even novel. . . . this inversion could prompt new ways of thinking about the system and reacting to it.”<sup>380</sup> Davis therefore argues (following Bakhtin) that a carnivalesque glimpse at social disorder can ultimately lead to real change within hierarchical structures. In Antin’s case, her representation as a woman-on-top is exceptionally bold, for she is a king among men.

The way in which Antin performs her genders and identities can be historically and theoretically linked to the writings of Erving Goffman. Widely read in the 1960s and 70s, Goffman presented a sociological theory of identity as a type of role or performance consciously presented by an individual. “The self,” writes Goffman, “as a performed character, is not an organic thing.”<sup>381</sup> Using theatrical metaphors, one’s character, according to Goffman, is performed as part of the larger “machinery of self-production” while in front of all others, the “audience.”<sup>382</sup>

While acknowledging the fundamental constructability of self, Goffman, however, seems unconcerned with the artificiality of gender. In fact, his so-called

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*Rose*, 107. This is only one of the reasons that makes the advent of women transvestites particularly rebellious during carnivalesque moments in the 1970s.

<sup>380</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, 143. Davis continues: “The woman-on-top renewed old systems, but also helped change them into something different,” 151. She elaborates on the types of changes resulting from depictions of “women-on-top,” 144-151.

<sup>381</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959) 252.

<sup>382</sup> Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 253.

observable examples only work to reinscribe gender stereotypes.<sup>383</sup> Nonetheless, his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* influenced future gender benders, like performance artist Vito Acconci who states in 1971: "I'm using art as a means of changing myself, as a means of breaking out of a category. . . . I want to build up an idea of life — the idea that people can change from one role to another."<sup>384</sup>

Likewise, Antin describes her performances in transmuted Goffman-like terms: "I tend to think of the self as a collection of possible characteristic roles that wait in the wings for their chance to play."<sup>385</sup> Identity is not viewed as destiny, rather it is something one can appropriate according to one's desires.

That gender is performative and identity is constructed has become a type of mantra most visible in Judith Butler's writings from the late 1980s onwards. And although Butler has stated that she disagrees with Goffman's contention that gender roles are easily exchangeable, it is possible to see the way in which identity-swapping performance artists (like Antin or Acconci) anticipate Butler's later gender theories.<sup>386</sup> As she claims in an essay from 1990: "Gender is in no way a stable

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<sup>383</sup> See, for example, Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 4, 39, 49, 77.

<sup>384</sup> Vito Acconci in Cindy Nemser, "An Interview with Vito Acconci," *Arts Magazine* 45, no. 5 (March 1971) 21-23, cited in Spector, 165. Acconci acknowledges the direct influence of Goffman on his performance work in Spector, 174, note no. 37.

<sup>385</sup> Antin in "Artist's Statement" for *Persona*, 37. Elsewhere, Antin claims: "I see the self as a player, an actor, an inventor on a stage, which is the world." Cited in Portner interview, 44. Antin's performances contributed to the radicalizing of identity. For more on the construction of identity and art, see, for example, Shelley Rice, ed. *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>386</sup> Butler writes: "As opposed to a view such as Erving Goffman's which posits a self which assumes and exchanges various 'roles' within the complex social expectations of the 'game' of modern life, I am suggesting that this self is not only irretrievably 'outside,' constituted in social discourse, but that the ascription of interiority is itself a publicly regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrications," Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," in *Performing Feminisms*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case, 279.

identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time — an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*.”<sup>387</sup> Butler contributes to a continuum of thinking about the self that Antin participated in throughout the 70s. In fact, visions of Antin as the King can come to mind when Butler describes the subversive potential of parodic performance:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.<sup>388</sup>

Antin’s repetitions of various identities highlights the artificiality of gender. Her public travesties of masculinity or hyper-femininity (as the Nurse or the Ballerina) may be read as precursors of the type of gender parody Butler calls for over a decade later.

Moreover, Antin’s incomplete (for she is always also a woman and an artist) inversion as the King denaturalizes notions of power and gender or, in Brechtian terms, makes them appear strange. The *Verfremdungseffekt* or the “alienation effect” was used by Bertolt Brecht to provoke audience members to see the so-called natural in alternative, fresh ways. “A representation that alienates,” explains Brecht “is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.”<sup>389</sup> Elin Diamond sees in the alienation effect the potential to disrupt the often taken for granted norms of gender:

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<sup>387</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 270. See also, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>388</sup> Butler “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 271. Butler continues: “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed,” Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 278.

<sup>389</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984) 192. Cited in Diamond, 45. Diamond uses Brecht’s theory of the *gestus*, “the moment in performance when a

Understanding gender as ideology — as a system of beliefs and behavior mapped across the bodies of women and men which reinforces a social status — is to appreciate the continued timeliness of *Verfremdungseffekt*, the purpose of which always is to denaturalize and defamiliarize what ideology — and performativity — makes seem normal, acceptable, inescapable.<sup>390</sup>

By pointing to the constructedness of gender, one employs a form of Brecht's call for alienation. In this manner, each time Antin performs in ambiguous drag, she encourages her viewers to think twice about the presumed naturalness of gender. She demonstrates the ability to artificially reproduce gender beyond the social confines of sexual binaries.

Although medieval carnival participants were not theorizing notions of the self, they were attempting to subvert most kinds of governing systems, including those structuring gender. Feminist performance artists of the 1970s reenacted carnivalesque transgressive behaviors while combining them with theoretical and political reflections on identity. By adopting personae of different genders, races, ages, talents, and time periods, Antin officially uncrowns the notion of an immutable identity.<sup>391</sup>

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play's implied social attitudes become visible to the spectator" to conduct a feminist "gestic criticism," xiv.

<sup>390</sup> Diamond, 47.

<sup>391</sup> Antin uncrowns the concepts of talent and high art in her photographic/video performance, *Caught in the Act* (1973). In the series of photographs, she is seen striking perfect poses as the Ballerina (figure 45). But in the video she reveals that in order to get on her toes she held onto a prop and only let go long enough to have each photograph taken.



## IV Spoof

The two most pathetic women's roles I could think of in those days were an airline stewardess and a nurse. Back then they were seen as almost pornographic figures in the cultural imagination. I mean, they were service figures, and instead of being grateful the culture was contemptuous of them. Service is the main role our culture has allotted to women, and we've been put down for it ever since. So I decided my next self should be a nurse. And then she turned around and surprised me by being the most inventive of all my selves, because she was always making up stories.

— Antin<sup>392</sup>

In the video performance of *The Adventures of a Nurse* I and II, Antin assumes her persona the Nurse.<sup>393</sup> The work is framed as a type of story within a story. Even the opening title and credits are handwritten onto a book which is flipped through to reveal the names of those involved with the project (figure 46). Dressed as a contemporary medical professional, with white dress uniform and hat, Antin sits on a large pink-patterned bed while telling imaginative stories about herself (Nurse Eleanor) and her friends. This narrative within the performance is presented as a series of short episodes, like a fast-paced soap opera.

Rather than simply recount tales, however, Antin uses small paper dolls (about ten inches high in size) to act out the adventures. She explains: "My means were those available to little girls everywhere — paper dolls and narrative invention."<sup>394</sup> As in the child's game, Antin has carefully painted only the front side

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<sup>392</sup> Antin quoted in Fox, "A Dialogue with Eleanor Antin," 213.

<sup>393</sup> Antin presented similar performances to live audiences on several occasions, for instance at the Clocktower in New York (1976).

<sup>394</sup> Antin in unpublished manuscript, cited in Fox, "Waiting in the Wings," 89. Fox points out that Antin's decision to use paper dolls was a "brilliant and altogether captivating device — all the more so when we recall that this was a period when 'rigor' and 'toughness' were the buzzwords of an art world that was perhaps less macho than its discourse," Fox, "Waiting in the Wings," 89.

of each two-dimensional character and costume changes are held in place with paper tabs. The viewer only catches brief glimpses of Antin and mostly sees her right hand and arm as she maneuvers the dolls around an ad hoc set. A kind of puppetry theater is created with Antin using distinct voices for each figure.

Although the only backdrop consists of four colorful pillows, it immediately becomes clear that the first scene occurs in a doctor's office. Nurse Eleanor is seeing to a patient, a poet named Jack, who mistakes her for the doctor (figure 47). She quickly corrects him, but the notion that a woman can be presumed a doctor hints at a breaking down of gender-determined professions. Yet, an instant later, Nurse Eleanor attempts to "comfort" the critically ill patient by having sex with him, which is humorously depicted by the rubbing together of the two dolls and moaning.<sup>395</sup> When the doctor inevitably walks in on patient and nurse he sarcastically quips: "Well, well, well! Nurse Eleanor — delighted to see you helping our patient, Jack, this morning, so nicely." To which Nurse Eleanor replies: "We aim to please, doctor." Here, Antin exaggerates the popular (mis)perception of nurses as quasi-sex toys and points to the irrationality of such a cliché.<sup>396</sup>

In the sixty-four minute long color video Antin presents a spoof on popular perceptions of (female) nurses and of television soap operas.<sup>397</sup> Spoof may be understood to mean: "to satirize in a playful, amiable manner." Indeed, the overt

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<sup>395</sup> As a child Antin played with paper dolls and made up elaborate schemes about "Cutout Land." She notes: "I would draw genitals on their bathing suits and then press them together and go 'Ohhhhhhh,'" Antin in Munro interview, 421.

<sup>396</sup> Maurice Charney states: "Comedy deals in stereotypes rather than fully rounded, three-dimensional, living characters, just as much of social life is conducted by stereotypes rather than by a fresh, objective appraisal of each situation as it arises." Maurice Charney, *Comedy High and Low: An Introduction to the Experience of Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 50.

<sup>397</sup> At the same time that Antin produced *Adventures of a Nurse*, television in the United States presented its own spoofs of the soap opera with "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" (1976-1977) and "Soap" (1977-1981).

silliness of the video's on-going narrative belies the underlying significance of Antin's satiric impulses.<sup>398</sup>

In writing about the representation of nurses on television during the 1970s, Diana M. Meehan notes that the (female) nurse/(male) doctor relationship always portrays the former as subservient to the latter. That the most common role for women on television throughout the decade was the domestic housewife and when producers veered from that model they ultimately only reproduced the asymmetrical power dynamic in other female to male relationships, as in nurse/doctor or secretary/boss.<sup>399</sup> Antin plays with the nurse's typical popular portrayal and offers it up for contemplation.

The casualness of Nurse Eleanor's sexual encounters mimics the story-lines of soft pornography: man meets woman and two seconds later they have sex. Besides the fact that there is only so much detail one can achieve by rubbing together paper dolls, a primary difference between Antin's piece and pornography, however, is that the viewer becomes familiar with the woman involved. The standard story-line is altered. Here, woman meets man and they have sex. Eleanor is the protagonist. She has friends, viewpoints, and, of course, a meaningful profession.

Although Antin points to the ridiculousness of sexual stereotypes surrounding female health care workers, she also implies their potential to connote sexual liberation.<sup>400</sup> Nurse Eleanor is not a nameless sexual object, she is a woman enjoying

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<sup>398</sup> This is the second definition for "spoof" offered in *Webster's NewWorld Dictionary*, Second College Edition.

<sup>399</sup> Diana M. Meehan, *Ladies of the Evening: Women Characters of Prime-Time Television* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1983) 122-123.

<sup>400</sup> This emphasis on excessive bodily pleasure suggests a carnivalesque embrace of carnal indulgences and fun. The freedom from an unwanted pregnancy is inherently implied in Eleanor's carefree actions, which links sexual liberation with pro-choice rights (abortion was legalized throughout the United States in 1973).

her sexual freedom.<sup>401</sup> For example, after leaving Jack (he has no time for her or poetry because he is dying full time now), she meets a leather-clad, stuttering man — ambiguously-named Chick — at a bar. They discuss drugs and the comforting illusion they provide. Chick explains that giving up drugs is easy, it's the harsh reality that hurts. He next takes Eleanor for a gravity-defying motorcycle ride, during which they have fantastic sex (figure 48).

As Antin states in the opening quote to this section, nurses and stewardesses (now called flight attendants) were deemed sexually available, rather than as health and safety providers.<sup>402</sup> Based on her research, Antin explains:

I found that Nurses are defined by a narrow set of cultural expectations, so fixed as to render them mythological figures — a jaunty blend of servant and geisha, sharing features with many other women's service professions like secretaries, airline stewardesses and wives. . . . I explored this 'pop' view of the Nurse.<sup>403</sup>

Antin magnifies her investigation of stereotypically female professions by designating Nurse Eleanor's best friend, Chrissy, a flight attendant.

Chrissy is in love with Nurse Eleanor's boss, Doctor Soriah Moriah Caslow, and she admits to Eleanor that she is considering: "grounding myself, so as to be more available to my man." The punishment pun (grounding) does not go unnoticed by Eleanor who declares: "Oh, but Chrissy, you love flying. I mean, wow! What would you do if you weren't flying?" Chrissy responds, in a charming southern

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<sup>401</sup> That same year (1977), there was a backlash against sexually adventurous women in Richard Brooks' Hollywood movie "Looking for Mr. Goodbar."

<sup>402</sup> Antin again combines the pop representations of nurses and flight attendants in her video *The Nurse and the Hijackers* (1977). Here she spoofs the made for television movie *Raid on Entebbe* (1976). At the end of August, 2001, I had decided only to footnote this work because of space limitations. And now, in the wake of the September 11th hijacking attacks, it would be difficult to do the humor any justice.

<sup>403</sup> Antin, in her acknowledgments for the *Angel of Mercy* catalogue.

accent, that “a man is a full time job.” As the nurse and the stewardess discuss gendered roles and relationships, Eleanor gives Chrissy a mini fashion show that she greatly enjoys (figure 49). This allows Antin to convey their bond of friendship and express opposing opinions without being didactic. In the midst of their talk, Chrissy says she must run out to get the doctor some food before he comes home, because if she does not: “Oh boy, he’ll have a spaz.” But Eleanor asks Chrissy why Soriah Moriah cannot simply buy some take-out for himself: “I don’t know, why you have to do all of the work for him!” Chrissy impatiently explains: “There are men’s jobs and there are women’s jobs.” Eleanor’s problem, as Chrissy sees it, is that she has yet to meet “Mr. Right.”

Chrissy leaves to buy dinner and Doctor Caslow comes home. This sets up the one instance where Nurse Eleanor does not relish her sexual predicaments — for she is sexually harassed by the doctor, who is her boss. When Chrissy catches the two of them together, she kicks out her love and forgives Eleanor in a radical, “sisterhood is powerful,” move. Tellingly, Eleanor is not viewed as a back-stabbing seductress, but as someone taken advantage of (a progressive perspective for a pre-Clarence Thomas hearings work). The soap opera send-up keeps the dialogue light, but Antin is able nonetheless to weave relevant social issues throughout the performance.

In response to her new single status, Chrissy announces, that she is whisking Eleanor off on a vacation to cheer herself up. So ends Part I of the performance. The viewer has been taken on a melodramatic roller coaster of emotions in only forty-five minutes. The paper dolls have expressed feelings concerning desire, danger, heart-break, disillusionment, and death. The adventure continues at a ski lodge. Nurse Eleanor and Chrissy meet Jean-Pierre Schneider, a sexy French man who waxes poetic about the snow and its “unpossessible beauty.” Within seconds Eleanor and Jean-Pierre are making passionate love in the snow. Afterwards he admits to her that

he is frustrated by the lack of closeness with his father, the famous American anti-Vietnam war senator. Eleanor graciously offers to act as a mediator between the two men and the couple dash off in Jean-Pierre's Maserati to find the senator.

As soon as the three characters meet, it becomes clear that senator Schneider is more interested in Nurse Eleanor than in improving communications with his son. The senator arranges to be alone with Eleanor and quickly seduces her (figure 50). Although she expresses concern for Jean-Pierre, all is forgotten when she begins to enjoy herself — her loud groans make it obvious that she has an orgasm (he, however, remains quiet).<sup>404</sup> The next scene abruptly returns to the doctor's office (figure 51). Nurse Eleanor cheerfully greets her new patient who introduces himself as Omar. He lays naked on the medical table and one can guess that the rubbing will begin at any minute. The presumption is that the story can continue indefinitely because *The Adventures of a Nurse* does not have a central focus nor a grand conclusion.<sup>405</sup> Like a continuous soap opera, Antin's performance avoids closure, which allows for fluidity, and an on-going open-endedness not found in coherent master narratives.<sup>406</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> In describing her feminist experiences in the United States during the 1970s, Nancy K. Miller writes: "There is, in general, lots of writing and talk about female orgasm, how many (multiple, preferably), and what kind." Nancy K. Miller, *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives* (New York: Columbia University, 2002) 31.

<sup>405</sup> Mary Ellen Brown writes of the carnivalesque laughter that results from watching soap operas. She also draws an analogy between carnival's disruption of rules and soap opera's difference from dominant cultural forms. Mary Ellen Brown, "Motley Moments: Soap Opera, Carnival, Gossip, and the Power of the Utterance," in *Television and Women's Culture: The Politics of the Popular* (London: Sage Publications, 1990).

<sup>406</sup> Jane Archer argues that both narrative and identity are constantly reinterpreted and made malleable on television soap operas. She writes: "It may be going too far to posit the soap opera as *L'écriture féminine* of television. But the analogy is useful in both its positive and negative connotations." Jane Archer, "The Fate of the Subject in the Narrative without End," in *Staying Tuned: Contemporary Soap Opera Criticism*, ed. Suzanne Frenztz (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992) 93.

Part parody, part satire, Antin's performance uses the Nurse to showcase conflicting stereotypes and double standards via a humorous spoof. As the repetition of Nurse Eleanor's trysts becomes comical in their casual predictability and child-like rubbing, Antin adeptly touches upon several issues associated with the contemporary Women's Movement, including gendered stereotypes and a woman's right to the pursuit of pleasure. She further politicizes her performance with references to drug addiction and the Vietnam War. In fact, the brief anti-war sentiment mentioned in *The Adventures of a Nurse* becomes more urgent when it is elaborated upon in performances involving Antin's second incarnation as the Nurse, Eleanor Nightingale.

## V Tragicomedy

Just what did Miss [Florence] Nightingale intend to invent and what had she actually invented? Could it really have been that small subservient space that nursing seems to occupy today? Was that what she had in mind? Really? The Ballerina in me rebelled. The King protested. I went back and found a distinguished, intelligent, resourceful and powerful woman who had fought violently to open a great merciful, ministering space between the suffering soldiers, the doctors, the surgeons, the officers and the War Office . . . She was the Angel of Mercy.

— Antin<sup>407</sup>

So near does the art of comedy steer to the matter of tragedy.

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<sup>407</sup> Antin in the acknowledgments for *Angel of Mercy* catalogue, n.p. The longer quote reads: "She was the Angel of Mercy and most of her descendants were cheerful servant girls. Why? What was the nature of the world that could initially provoke and then reduce so grand a claim? Merely to imagine this would be trivial. To understand a human situation, which plays itself out in a world, one must let the people play out their lives in that world and join them there."

After becoming dissatisfied with the exploration of popular conceptions of the twentieth century nurse, Antin decided to delve into the heroic roots of nursing through her performance *Angel of Mercy*. Here she assumes another version of the Nurse as Eleanor Nightingale, which is obviously based on the life of the first professional nurse, Florence Nightingale (1820–1910).<sup>409</sup> In the performance, Antin examines Florence Nightingale's bold actions which have since been distorted by contemporary nurse stereotypes. "A nurse," notes Antin, "was the most deprived yet sympathetic image I could think of, but she surprised me by turning out to be a shaman, an inventor."<sup>410</sup> Somehow, representations of nurses had moved away from Nightingale's vision. Antin's work begins to rediscover some of the heroism as well as the complexities attached to the profession via the imagined eyes of "The Lady of the Lamp."<sup>411</sup>

*Angel of Mercy* is a multi-media work that includes live performance and sixty-five performance-based photographs.<sup>412</sup> Antin produced the photographs first

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<sup>408</sup> Moelwyn Merchant, *Comedy* (London: Methuen, 1972) 52.

<sup>409</sup> Antin's persona, the Nurse, is doubled (belonging to two centuries) and subsequently even Antin's fabricated identities become fractured and plural.

<sup>410</sup> Antin in Portner interview, 46.

<sup>411</sup> As Florence Nightingale had come to be known because she carried a lamp with her on her nightly rounds.

<sup>412</sup> For the photographic series of *The Angel of Mercy*, Antin produced two sets of images. The first, *The Angel of Mercy: The Nightingale Family Album* (1977), includes domestic representations of Nightingale's life, and the second, *The Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in the Crimea* (1977), captures Nightingale's activities during the war (figures 52 and 53). Creating a kind of "historic drag," Antin parodies the nineteenth century war photographs of Roger Fenton and Matthew Brady. See Beth Goldberg, *Photographs Updated: Similar Images/Dissimilar Motives* (Rohnert Park, California: Sonoma State University, 1990) 10. Both series appear in the form of antique photo albums, but the people photographed are Antin's actual family members and art contemporaries (e.g., David Antin, Martha Rosler, John Perreault). The style of the photographs and



and then created the live production from the figures seen in the original images.<sup>413</sup> The first live enactment of *Angel of Mercy* was in 1977, which was billed as “a humorous drama in two acts” and performed in front of a seated gallery audience. It was not videotaped, however, until 1981, on which most of this analysis depends.<sup>414</sup>

For the live performance of *Angel of Mercy*, Antin appears in a brown Victorian dress along with a full cast of almost life-sized masonite cutouts — Nightingale’s mother, father, sister, beau, and friends are represented with soldiers, generals, and doctors — all of whom are moved around on wheels during the performance. Like larger versions of Antin’s earlier paper-dolls, each of the thirty-nine cutout cast-members is painted on one side and left white on the other. The blank sides of the cutouts are turned towards the audience until a character is required, at which point its colorful flank is turned around. Each naturalistically painted side captures a character in nineteenth-century costume and an emphatic facial expression. The two-dimensional actors are animated by Antin who provides their voices by altering her accent, pitch, and tone accordingly. Almost the entire script is performed by Antin alone, but her ability to change her manner of speech and body language for each character successfully conveys the narrative. She is aided by three “real” actors who seldom repeat lines, but play musical instruments and help

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their sepia toned printing bring with them an air of vintage authenticity. Each photograph is accompanied by a handwritten title in brown ink, like the photograph entitled “War Games,” which is another parody of Duchamp’s chess-playing photograph (figure 54). Antin’s images, however, are not about veracity, but about the way the present looks at the past. She plays with the empirical value assigned to photography — that a photograph is indexical proof of existence. As Antin states: “These pictures are proof that I was there.” Antin quoted in Kim Levin, “*The Angel of Mercy* and the Fiction of History,” in *The Angel of Mercy* catalogue, n.p.

<sup>413</sup> Antin explains that “the photographs weren’t enough for a discourse that complex,” so she turned to live performance, Bowen, 18.

<sup>414</sup> The *Angel of Mercy* videotape is sixty-six minutes long and is shot in color.

to prepare and roll the rest of the cast.<sup>415</sup> In contrast to her earlier performance pieces, *Angel of Mercy* is a comprehensive, scripted production, which moves closer to theater than ever before.<sup>416</sup>

The performance begins with the sound of Nightingale's New York-inflected British accent heard off stage.<sup>417</sup> She is soon seen reading the newspaper to her father (one of her daily tasks), which leads to a discussion about the British soldiers dying in the Crimean War.<sup>418</sup> When Nightingale's mother and sister Parthy enter the conversation, the topic turns to the unfortunate loss of eligible bachelors (figure 55). Her mother shows no sign of remorse for the married soldiers who have been killed and says of any grieving wives: "better to be a widow than a spinster." This sort of absurdity runs throughout the work, bringing an ironic sense of humor to the seriousness of the subject. Her mother's hollow sentiments act as a foil against which Nightingale's sympathies clash. It quickly becomes clear that Nightingale, who would rather help feed the poor than prepare for that night's ball, is an exception among her wealthy family and class members. As Nightingale is told by her mother (in a haughty British accent), she is too excessive in her charity work: "Anymore and people will mistake you for a Catholic!"

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<sup>415</sup> The primary exception occurs when an actor playing a captured Russian soldier recounts a story and plays the violin for Nightingale before he dies. This episode touches upon Antin's love of traditional Russian culture.

<sup>416</sup> However, Antin still does basically everything on her own in this production, which is very different even from the way stage productions of one-person shows are — there is no director, lighting designer, stage, significant props, or a "real" cast for *Angel of Mercy*.

<sup>417</sup> None of the other characters are given a New Yorkish accent, which emphasizes Antin's conflated identity with Nightingale.

<sup>418</sup> The Crimean War (1854-1856) began as a conflict over Jerusalem and religion. The war was a scandal and a spectacle — aristocrats would even bring chairs to battlefield in order to watch. France, England, and the Ottoman Empire ultimately defeated Russia. Nearly 500,000 soldiers died.

When Nightingale implores her father: “How can we convince mother that we are our brother’s keeper?” her father replies using nonsensical logic: “It is commerce that causes civilization’s ills, not your mother. And the victims of commerce are the rich as well as the poor. For though the poor are deprived of the fruits of their labor, the rich are deprived of labor itself.” This type of self-serving circular logic characterizes all of the arguments made by Nightingale’s father and everyone else with whom she debates. The way in which the irrational combines with the serious recalls the tragicomic work of influential twentieth-century playwrights, like Luigi Pirandello.<sup>419</sup> Such plays may be seen as both comic and tragic, but never completely resolved. *Angel of Mercy* follows a similar pattern.

As a wealthy, educated woman, Florence/Eleanor Nightingale seemingly had “everything” and yet she was dissatisfied. Antin shows this through an invented exchange between Nightingale and her father. He remarks that he had always hoped that she would apply her talents to the writing of novels, but Nightingale responds: “I would change the world, not represent it.” She rejects the more acceptable path taken by earlier driven women, like Austen or the Brontës, because Nightingale desires more. As Antin explains to an interviewer:

I read about Florence Nightingale, who by the way was an incredible person. I found an incredible amount of ambiguity. Florence Nightingale was going insane — I mean she was showing all the signs of what they diagnose as hysteria — because her parents were keeping her in this discreet upper class world.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>419</sup> When asked about the *Angel of Mercy* script, Antin states: “I studied Oscar Wilde, Commedia Del Arte, Brecht, Pirandello, and the Utopian Fourier. I stole some lines from Wilde and Faurier and the others acted as a dense musical background in my memory.” Cited in Levin, n.p. John Orr writes that “Pirandello dissolves selfhood into uncertainty.” John Orr, *Tragicomedy and Contemporary Culture: Play and Performance from Beckett to Shepard* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991) 16.

<sup>420</sup> Antin in Bowen, 17.

Antin sees in Nightingale a stifled victim of gender and class roles. And like other women caught in similar situations, Nightingale was more than unfulfilled, she was going mad.<sup>421</sup> It became necessary for Nightingale to leave her sheltered existence in order to become her own person.

Because Antin closely researched Florence Nightingale's life, she is able to crystallize her parody for the audience and rapidly make them aware of the social limitations placed upon young Nightingale. In writing the *Angel of Mercy* script, Antin relied on both her imagination and historical fact. She also appropriates several lines from Nightingale's "actual" diary entries and a line or two from other authors, like Nightingale's younger contemporary, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900).<sup>422</sup> Like Wilde, Nightingale was a victim of her time and place. She is represented as someone who feels nullified by traditional feminine, aristocratic life in Victorian England (Derbyshire). But unlike Wilde, Nightingale was able to safely enact her social rebellions.

Nightingale avoided the additional constraint of marriage. When she refuses her suitor's proposal in the performance, Nightingale explains that she has "a moral nature" and is obliged to help others (figure 56).<sup>423</sup> The frustrated suitor, John, responds in a now recognizably convoluted logic: "Have you not yet learned the folly of using private property to alleviate the ills engendered by it?" He ends by announcing that Nightingale is "disobedient" to her time, which she is thrilled to

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<sup>421</sup> Madness associated with a wealthy, nineteenth-century woman's repressed desires and feelings of uselessness are represented in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1899, reprint New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1973). There are significant links between the way Antin depicts Nightingale's frustrations and Betty Friedan's discussion of "the feminine mystique."

<sup>422</sup> The way Antin co-opts the words of other authors creates more parallels with Kathy Acker's writings.

<sup>423</sup> This is one instance where Antin uses Florence Nightingale's actual words.

hear. So much so, that Antin turns to stare into the camera and declares:

“Disobedience is man’s defying act. . . . It is only through disobedience that progress is ever made — disobedience and rebellion.” By now it has become customary in *Angel of Mercy* that when Antin has something vital to convey, she addresses the audience or camera directly. At these moments her New York accent sounds more distinct and the separation between Antin/Florence/Eleanor Nightingale is virtually imperceptible. The sentiment expressed — that disobedience creates change — is crucial to Antin’s overall project of carnivalesque rebellion. Important enough for Antin to break the theatrical illusion and intellectually provoke her audience.

When the dialogue resumes, John is less determined and more indecisive. In an ironic tone, he is forced to admit: “I don’t even know if this is farce or tragedy. I can’t think of a good last line.” Herein Antin raises the burning question: is this performance comedy or tragedy? Actually, it’s both — it is tragicomedy.<sup>424</sup> Karl Guthke defines modern (nineteenth and twentieth-century) tragicomedy as “drama which is comic and tragic at the same time throughout the duration of its action.”<sup>425</sup> A tragicomedy is neither completely comedic nor tragic, for it liminally vacillates between the seemingly opposite poles of comedy and tragedy.

Antin explains that she is motivated to find “comedy in everything — even in tragic situations.”<sup>426</sup> In *Angel of Mercy*, she employs convoluted thinking and comic

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<sup>424</sup> Antin partially attributes her interest in combining tragic and comic elements to her love of Yiddish theater, in which her mother participated. The star of a Yiddish stage production usually interrupts the action of the play to deliver a monologue. When Alisa Solomon describes some of the characteristics of a typical Yiddish play she notes that there is a steady interruption of the play’s action, that the audience is often addressed directly by the actors, and that differences between the fictive and the real are collapsed. Alisa Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1997) 19 and 110. Antin’s post 1970’s work is more overtly influenced by Yiddish culture, as in her film, *The Man without a World* (1991) or her installation *Vilna Nights* (1993).

<sup>425</sup> Karl S. Guthke, *Modern Tragicomedy: An Investigation into the Nature of the Genre* (New York: Random House, 1966) ix.

<sup>426</sup> Antin, interview with author.

elements (absurdity, parody, irony) to both contradict and depict tragic circumstances, especially those involving the horrors of poverty and war.

As the audience watches Nightingale leave England with the purpose of aiding British soldiers in Turkey, it becomes clear that Antin and her persona do not act as complementary parts making up a coherent whole. Instead, each acts independently and, in this case, expresses conflicting opinions. For instance, Antin acknowledges her personal abhorrence of war when she discusses Florence Nightingale in an interview:

For some reason nobody knows, she [Florence Nightingale] wanted to be a Nurse. Nursing hadn't been invented yet as a respectable profession. . . . She invented it as a profession. It was invented for a War. . . . She was lucky, she was saved by the Crimean War. All her life she had an affection for war. I mean, she was honest. War is what saved her. I had to deal with this. Not make believe it wasn't staring me in the face just because I, Eleanor Antin, have always hated War.<sup>427</sup>

War “saved” Florence Nightingale, while, of course, destroying the lives of many others. This duality is present throughout the performance. The audience witnesses Nightingale come into her own via war. But, as she becomes strong and satisfied with her profession, soldiers suffer injury or death.

In one touching scene, a young soldier is told by the head doctor that his leg must be amputated to save his life. There is no anesthesia, so he is encouraged to drink some gin. At first he resists because of a promise made to his mother not touch alcohol or women before turning twenty-one. Soothing him, Nightingale assures her patient that his mother would understand the “extenuating circumstances.” The voice that Antin provides for the soldier is sweet and soft. When he finally agrees to take the gin, he whispers: “They say you are the Angel of Mercy, and now that I’ve met you I know it is true.” Nightingale brings knowledge and compassion to the

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<sup>427</sup> Antin in Bowen, 17-18.

operating room, but no one can help the pain (figure 57). The soldier lets out a bloodcurdling cry followed by a long silence that is broken by the doctor's gruff voice: "Damn it — he's dead (puffs on his cigar). . . . Get rid of him! What is this, a hospital or a cemetery?" The tragic youth of the soldier is reminiscent of the young men sent to fight in the chaos that was the Vietnam war.<sup>428</sup> As the performance continues, taps are played in the background, and a secession of amputated masonite arms and legs are piled up on the floor.

Noting that class issues spill onto the battle field, Antin's Nightingale questions the steadfast hierarchies found in the military hospital. She asks who is treated first and how is he treated. Antin creates imaginary confrontations between nurse and doctor, in which Nightingale must rely upon subtle sarcasm to make her points. For instance, when the head doctor drops in on the classroom where Nightingale instructs some of the soldiers, the following conversation ensues:

Doctor: Literature affords small protection [against a cannon ball].

Nightingale: Oh contraire, doctor. I have found that reading improves [the soldiers'] morale.

Doctor: I should not have thought so, Miss Nightingale. It invites reflection and reflection leads to consciousness and consciousness of a hopeless situation, my dear lady, leads to failure.

Nightingale: No situation is hopeless, doctor.

Doctor: A private soldier's situation is always hopeless. Only generals have hopes. I should have thought the last thing you'd want to encourage in a private soldier is consciousness of his situation. I judge it a positive form of cruelty.

Nightingale: (turning to confront the masonite doctor) You are very sensitive to the soldiers' pain, doctor. Is that why you reserve the anesthesia for the officers?

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<sup>428</sup> One can speak about the medical and technical advances made during the one hundred years between the Crimean and Vietnam wars, but the fact that working class boys did much of the fighting remains the same.

One should not give the hopeless hope because it is “cruel.” Once again, Antin has the powerful doctor use a kind of circular logic. In this case to justify keeping the underprivileged illiterate and undermedicated. But this does not deter Nightingale. She poses an ironic question to the doctor which points to the prevalence of classism in war, even on the operating table. Whether she succeeds in effecting the doctor is not really important, because the question is for the audience; to make them aware of the injustices.

During the same classroom scene, Nightingale teaches the wounded soldiers grammar but two of them become involved in a heated conversation. Danny, who Antin represents in a thick cockney accent, calls an Irish soldier “‘opelessly low class.” He tells the soldier that he needs to study class theory in order to reach the top of the heap “from which vantage, you can suppress the lower classes.” And when the Irish soldier asks why he would want to do that, Danny responds: “Because they get beneath your feet, stupid!” The exchange is deeply ironic, for both men are clearly lower class. Although Danny’s message can be seen as self loathing, it can also be understood as a form of class consciousness. The kind of consciousness that the head doctor finds cruel because he believes that as a soldier, Danny is doomed to “failure.”

Once heralded for bravery, Danny gradually becomes disgusted with entrenched military hierarchies. Upon reflection, he demands: “Who bears the brunt of such nasty business? . . . This war is a butcher shop and we are the meat the rich see fit to eat.” By the end of the scene, he decides to abandon the war. When Danny is found the next day it is determined that he will be executed as a deserter. Nightingale desperately begs the authorities to spare him, but she is powerless in such



matters (figure 58).<sup>429</sup> When she attempts to block Danny from the firing-squad, she shouts: “This is my patient you are killing!”

Antin’s adeptness at playing all of the roles builds the tension of the narrative. As she moves around the space she is simultaneously nurse and patient, executed and executioner, Antin and Nightingale. Identities conflate, bringing significant complexities to the scene. Before Danny is shot, he addresses Nightingale: “England brought me here. . . . Let England kill me!” Irony works to convey a paradox of war. Danny fought for England, and it is England’s representatives who decide to dispose of him. As if proving the head doctor’s logic correct, Danny’s downfall is shown to be intrinsically linked to his consciousness. But Danny’s death does not unequivocally provide assurance to the doctor’s particular thinking. It creates ambiguity — consciousness is a double-edge sword.<sup>430</sup>

*Angel of Mercy* is not a simple celebration of the life of Florence Nightingale, but a means for Antin to examine and express her concerns. Towards the end of the performance she halts the dialogue and again directly addresses the audience/camera. She remains in character, but raises issues tinged with Antin’s own contemporary doubt when she admits:

I know there are some who would say that what I have done is useless, if not wicked — saving soldiers in a war. For if one soldier is killed, he merely dies, but if you heal him he returns and kills at least one other before perhaps dying himself. So that as a nurse, I am not a healer, but a double killer.<sup>431</sup>

Antin — as both Nightingale and herself — points to the paradox of healing soldiers just so they can hurt or be hurt again. The ultimate futility of the process, however, is

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<sup>429</sup> Nightingale is positioned as an outsider by Antin — always debating with authority figures and members of her class.

<sup>430</sup> Antin raises important questions concerning contemporary consciousness raising and women’s lives.

<sup>431</sup> Antin in Bowen, 18.

unavoidable for Nightingale who says earlier in the performance: "I only know that when I see a man bleeding, I want to bandage him" (figure 59). Helping a bleeding man would appear to be the moral thing to do. Yet Antin examines the action within the larger bloody scheme. She alters the traditional reading of Nightingale's biography (nurse as altruistic healer) and introduces a more complicated way of viewing her actions.<sup>432</sup> Even bandaging should be scrutinized.<sup>433</sup>

Antin combines her liberal-anti-war perspective with Nightingale's heroic efforts without resolution. This contradiction is so important to Antin that she again pauses the narrative of the performance and sacrifices the naturalistic enactment of her Nurse persona in order to articulate it. This occurrence demonstrates Bertolt Brecht's theory of "distanciation," which calls for the disruption of theater's illusion.<sup>434</sup> As a result, the viewer is liberated from "passive identification with fictional worlds" and becomes an active participant.<sup>435</sup> Like the theatrical

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<sup>432</sup> Antin intertextually refers back to one of the King's *Meditations*: "I probably let people downe, become responsible for wounding those I would helpe." (Spelling mistakes are found in the original.)

<sup>433</sup> With the lingering trauma of the Vietnam War, Antin's questioning of war's long term affects was timely in 1977. Because the Crimean War was eventually exposed as a scandal, it is sometimes referred to now as "the Vietnam of its day," Kim Levin, n.p. The way that Antin depicts Nightingale's conflicted position as a healer during a war mirrors the underlying theme of the popular television show "M\*A\*S\*H" (1972-1983). Edelstein and McDonough describe the show in a way that recalls *Angel of Mercy*: "M\*A\*S\*H was right for the times. By the early Seventies, Americans were not so keen on war. After all, for more than a decade the Vietnam war has been beamed into our living rooms nightly. And, of course, even though M\*A\*S\*H was set in Korea, it was Vietnam that the series was all about. Thus, a multidecade phenomenon: a show about a Fifties war with a Sixties sensibility that aired in the Seventies and Eighties," Edelstein and McDonough, 189.

<sup>434</sup> *Angel of Mercy* shares some traits with a typical Brechtian production, like bright lights and a small band. Brecht was disgusted by realism because he saw it as "hegemonic: by copying the surface details of the world it offers the illusion of lived experience, even as it marks off only one version of that experience," Brecht, cited in Diamond, 50.

<sup>435</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Vision & Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988) 163.

productions of Brecht, *Angel of Mercy* offers no answer, only the provocation of epic thinking and complex seeing, which act as means to incite viewers. Alisa Solomon explains, contrary to current discourses on Brecht's work, his "intention was not to provide a recipe for socialism . . . but to offer spectators the pleasurable experience of practicing and honing their critical attitude in the epic theater, so it could be applied more successfully in the world."<sup>436</sup> Thus when Antin stops to provoke her audience, she not only stimulates them, but also affords them the pleasure of analytical reflection.

Antin's narrative disruptions provide a dual perspective on history — the present breaks into the story's past. Antin does not offer a seamless historical account of the nineteenth century in *Angel of Mercy*. Rather, she juxtaposes her twentieth-century sensibilities with what she imagines to be the nineteenth century — all the time exposing historical gaps and discrepancies between past and present.

Similarly, Brecht called for "historicization" in a play, which preserves the "distinguishing marks" of the past while foregrounding the audience's contemporary viewpoint.<sup>437</sup> This way an audience can acknowledge the differences between "then" and "now," which means seeing the actual alterations that have occurred over time. According to Brecht, this recognition of change (in, for instance, the difference in class or gender relations over time) can act as an incentive to viewers, to transform their own lives. The lack of closure (the historical lacunae) presented in Antin's work gives one a sense of epochal transition. Although there remains many of the same hierarchical structures, to see the modification in attitude towards working women

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<sup>436</sup> Solomon, 81. On the same page, Solomon suggests that Brecht's "metatheatrical pointings direct our attention to the possibility of change and to our role in effecting it."

<sup>437</sup> Brecht, 190, cited in Diamond, 49.

from Victorian England to late twentieth-century America in *Angel of Mercy* can be inspirational.

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Performance provides Antin with a method for understanding another's viewpoint or situation, as she explains:

Who am I to change her [Florence Nightingale's] vision? I don't have to accept it, I have to understand it though. Also, since she is me and I am her, I have to take it onto myself, personalize it somehow, find out what it meant really, not take pious attitudes from my safe place in California in 1976. . . . So I use the performance to set up a discourse situation to deal with the ambiguities. I can't help it, I always see ten different sides of any question, which doesn't stop me from taking strong political stands on everything. That's what I use performance for — to invent the worlds in which I can play out these situations.<sup>438</sup>

Antin considers Nightingale to be a vital part of herself, which is best signified by her name, Eleanor Nightingale. She is both self and other. As Jonathan Crary notes: "In *Angel of Mercy* (1977) the point is not that she [Antin] has tried to change herself completely into someone else but that she is simultaneously both Eleanor Antin *and* a nurse in the Crimean War. We need not make an either/or choice about who she is."<sup>439</sup> The differences between Nightingale then and Nightingale of the 1970s do not have to be resolved, only analyzed. The ambiguity keeps the performance unfixed and Antin's identity, once again, liminal.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>438</sup> Antin in Bowen, 18.

<sup>439</sup> Crary, n. p.

<sup>440</sup> According to Elin Diamond, the fragmented identity of a woman during non-naturalistic performances halts artificial identification (or scopophilia) and imaginary fetishizations that occur in the cinema, Diamond, 51.

Antin's enduring interest in fracturing identity coincides with the philosophical underpinnings of modern tragicomedy. Indeed, Antin's work parallels John Orr's contention that tragicomedy offers one of the most powerful challenges to "a liberal ideology of individualism."<sup>441</sup> Who knows whether Florence Nightingale was always confident in her choices. The fact is that Antin takes Nightingale's autobiography, makes it her own, and transforms it into a soul-searching tragicomedy. As Karl Guthke writes: "The tragicomic writer, even more so than the tragic writer, tends to leave his audience not only in a state of indecision as to whether to laugh or to weep, but also in a more profound and disturbing disorientation to the human condition."<sup>442</sup> This human condition plays a significant role in Antin's work. For, according to Antin, there is "a poetry that comes out of this mixture of pain and laughter, laughter and tears."<sup>443</sup> As seen in *Angel of Mercy*, tragicomedy brings them all together.

The combination of war-related tragedy with comic or absurd elements, would be, according to Guthke, enough to view *Angel of Mercy* as tragicomic. But in the eyes of Giambattista Guarini, one of the earliest writers on the subject, tragicomedy is ultimately identified by the ending of the work, as in a play with tragic elements that concludes happily.<sup>444</sup> Using, Guarini's description, David Hirst explains that

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<sup>441</sup> Orr, 22. Orr also notes: "Tragicomedy forces us to question the certainty of self at the same time as it forces us in general to question the certainty of knowledge," 4. David Hirst notes that contemporary tragicomedies "are concerned with the ambiguity of personality and situation," David L. Hirst, *Tragicomedy* (London: Methuen, 1984) 126.

<sup>442</sup> Guthke, 70.

<sup>443</sup> Antin, interview with Wacks.

<sup>444</sup> Giambattista Guarini, *Compendio della Poesia Tragicomica*, 1601. Cited in Hirst, 4.

tragicomedy “has one basic intrigue, one denouement and a happy ending which involves all the characters.”<sup>445</sup>

Similarly, Antin does not end with the tragic execution of Danny in the *Angel of Mercy*. Instead, the entire cast (masonite and human) is reunited in London where Nightingale is presented the Victoria Cross by Queen Victoria who declares to Nightingale (figure 60):

We look upon you with favor. You have been a veritable Angel of Mercy, administering to our subjects in their hour of travail. Henceforth, you shall be an inspiration not only to your sex but to your nation. In the name of England we bestow upon you the Victoria Cross.

Nightingale’s entire family, her rejected beau, the doctors whom she argued with, and even Danny bear witness to the Nurse’s success. And while most of the piece is critical, Antin ultimately ends on a positive note. She explains to an interviewer:

I love happy endings. I have a terrible passion for them. At the same time, I have a dark view of the world. . . . Perhaps that’s why I rewrite history — to give it a happy ending. . . . I guess the poignancy comes from our shared desire for life to be just, beautiful and kind and our deep conviction that it’s not and never will be.<sup>446</sup>

There is a sense of sadness as Antin discusses her wish for a happy ending, which she describes elsewhere as a form of romanticism (see the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter). To Antin, romanticism refers to “the strong element of desire in my work, which like all desire is filled with longing and absence (after all, you can’t have one without the other).”<sup>447</sup> The yearning for happiness is always buttressed against the tragedies of life.

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<sup>445</sup> Hirst, 5.

<sup>446</sup> Antin in Portner, 47.

<sup>447</sup> Antin, e-mail to Debra Wacks, 22 May 2001. Antin, in an interview with the author, states: “Laughter and tears are two sides of the same coin.”

George Bernard Shaw, who is usually categorized as a satirist, describes his plays in terms of tragicomedy: “I deal in the tragicomic irony of the conflict between real life and the Romantic imagination.”<sup>448</sup> That is, according to Guthke: “between what people are and what they imagine or want to be.”<sup>449</sup> After acknowledging some of the injustices in the world, Antin concludes *Angel of Mercy* on a triumphant note. She does this while most likely realizing that the world will never transform enough to fit her vision of perfection. The bulk of her performances contain this inherent duality or pessimistic undertone. For Guthke explains that a tragicomic author asks many questions but ultimately knows that he or she cannot save the world — this is her/his “wisdom” and “despair.”<sup>450</sup>

Because Antin is creating art, she does not have to remain loyal to a single reality or history, she is able to sidestep tragic beliefs and provide any happy ending she wants. In fact, Florence Nightingale never received the Victoria Cross, which is given for great bravery. Rather, she was conferred the Order of Merit by King Edward VII. This subtle historical inaccuracy makes for a grander conclusion and works better with the musicians’ rendition of “God Save the Queen” at the end of the performance.<sup>451</sup> More importantly, however, this inconsistency is another way for Antin to remind viewers that she is an artist, not an historian. Truth is irrelevant, for

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<sup>448</sup> George Bernard Shaw, preface to *Major Barbara* (1905) no page given. cited in Guthke, 71.

<sup>449</sup> Guthke, 71. This combination is a key element to tragicomedy, according to Hirst, who defines Euripedes’ plays as tragicomic for the same reason: “Nor are his plays, indeed, funny the ironies point up human frailty in contrasting the ideal with the real; they are not intended to provoke laughter,” Hirst, 89.

<sup>450</sup> Guthke, 171.

<sup>451</sup> The punk band, the Sex Pistols, released their anarchic version of “God Save the Queen” also in 1977.

history is constructable. She uses performance to manipulate history and history to stimulate thought.

What began as an exploration into the nursing profession through a woman's biography/autobiography becomes an intellectual investigation into medicine, war, gender roles, and social stratifications. By suggesting and multi-referencing Wilde, Fourier, Pirandello, Brecht, and Nightingale's letters and diaries, Antin creates an intertextual production from which contemporary viewers recognize paradoxes and ask related questions. *Angel of Mercy* may veer from Bakhtin's vision of festival-like humor, but Antin uses tragicomedy in a way that mirrors Bakhtin's understanding of rejuvenating cyclical balance — with the old comes the new, with the high comes the low, and with the comic comes the tragic.<sup>452</sup>

The cyclical quality of tragicomedy reflects Antin's romantic, yet realistic view on life: with the good, comes the bad. Adrian Piper, however, sees the bad as potential good and her art as a vehicle for such transformation. Key to her performance work are social transgression and the interactive, always changing nature of the material bodily principle, which is epitomized by an aesthetic of the grotesque.

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<sup>452</sup> When Bakhtin analyses Rabelais' carnivalesque writing, he notes there is "an oxymoronic combination, characteristic of Rabelais' writings" as in a bride "weeping for laughter and laughing for tears," Bakhtin, 206 and Rabelais, Book 4, Chapter 15. Bakhtin continues: "The comic, in general, is based upon the contrast between the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. All types of the comic have this common ground," 305.



## Chapter Four: Adrian Piper

### I Introduction

I don't know what I'd do without it [humor]. One of my tests for how much unconventionality people can take is how encompassing their sense of humor is, how self-directed they allow it to be, and how compatible it is with feeling compassion for other people.

— Piper<sup>453</sup>

Born on September 20, 1948 in New York City, Adrian Piper began to take drawing lessons with her grandmother at age three. Over the years, Piper kept a journal in which she documented her continued study of art, and a developing interest in various types of music and literature, among other things.<sup>454</sup> In 1963, Piper became a fashion model only to leave home, work as a discotheque dancer, and discover yoga in 1965.<sup>455</sup> At this time, Piper was writing poetry and producing colorful, psychedelic paintings, like *LSD Void* (1965), which were inspired by her wayward life.

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<sup>453</sup> Adrian Piper quoted in Linda M. Montano, ed. *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 422. Elsewhere Piper states: "I wouldn't feel that anyone was demeaning the [Piper's] work by laughing. . . . The universe is laughing. I think we need to laugh with it." Diana C. Stoll, "Adrian Piper: Goodbye to Easy Listening," *Aperture*, No. 166 (Spring 2002): 44.

<sup>454</sup> See Piper's "Personal Chronology," which details the influential books, television shows, movies, and activities of her life, in *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective*, ed. Maurice Berger (Baltimore: Fine Arts Gallery, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 1999).

<sup>455</sup> Although a beautiful woman, Piper's issues differ from those with which Wilke personally dealt. Lucy Lippard writes: "Also relevant is the fact that Piper was once a model — the epitome of professional role-playing, of the transformation of a woman into whatever someone else thinks she (and everyone) should look like, with the resulting loss of identity," Lippard, "Making Up," 108.

By the time Piper graduated from the School of Visual Arts (Manhattan, 1969), she was actively involved with the Conceptual Art movement.<sup>456</sup> “My work,” recalls Piper, “was abstract, general, systematic, and formalistic.”<sup>457</sup> Soon, however, she began to satisfy her tendency towards abstract methodologies at City College, New York, where she majored in philosophy and minored in Medieval and Renaissance musicology. At school Piper discovered that the more she immersed herself in philosophy, the more “concrete, political, and confrontation *the [art] work itself* became, and the more it issued from an understanding of my own sociopolitical position.”<sup>458</sup> Thus, while her studies became increasingly abstract, her art, by contrast, became more representative of her everyday life.

It was at this point that Piper started to create public performance works, such as the *Catalysis* series (1970-1971) and *Untitled Performance for Max's Kansas City* (1970). The latter performance took place in the arty New York restaurant known as Max's Kansas City, where “to even walk into Max's was to be absorbed into the collective Art Self-Conscious Consciousness, either as object or as collaborator” (figure 61).<sup>459</sup> In order to avoid having her thoughts on art dominated by the perceptions of others, Piper decided to block out all of her sensory input. She blindfolded herself, plugged her nose, clogged her ears, and donned long leather gloves. But she learned that she could not become a passive,

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<sup>456</sup> At the School of Visual Arts, Piper was introduced to the Happenings of Robert Rauschenberg, Simone Forti Whitman, and Duchamp. She also started associating with Vito Acconci, Sol LeWitt, and Lucy Lippard.

<sup>457</sup> Piper, “Some Very FORWARD Remarks,” in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, xxxi.

<sup>458</sup> Piper, “Some Very FORWARD Remarks,” xxxi. Piper tells Lippard that she finds that the study of philosophy “siphons off all my abstractions,” cited in Lippard, “Making Up,” 108.

<sup>459</sup> Piper, “Untitled Performance for Max's Kansas City” (1970), in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 27.

absorbable object and consequently she concluded: “My objecthood became my subjecthood.”<sup>460</sup>

During the summer of 1971, Piper lived an ascetic life of fasting and yoga as she immersed herself in the writing of a paper on Immanuel Kant’s *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Piper recalls the overwhelming experience:

The *Critique* is the most profound book I have ever read, and my involvement in it was so great that I thought I was losing my mind, in fact losing my sense of self completely. . . . Often, the effects of Kant’s ideas were so strong that I couldn’t take it anymore. I would have to stop reading in the middle of a sentence, on the verge of hysterics, and go to my mirror to peer at myself to make sure I was still there. . . . I rigged up a camera and tape recorder next to the mirror so that every time the fear of losing myself overtook me to the “reality check” of the mirror, I was able both to record my physical appearance objectively and also to record myself on tape repeating the passage in the *Critique* that was currently driving me to self-transcendence.<sup>461</sup>

The resulting photographs form an on-going private performance that Piper entitled *Food for the Spirit* (1971) (figure 62).<sup>462</sup> In most of the black and white images a very slight Piper is seen standing nude or almost nude before a mirror. She stares blankly, holding the camera at torso level. Lighting is faint, which makes Piper appear ghost-like — ironically suggesting a feeling of transcendence.

During the same year, the experiences of Piper’s life led her to co-found a consciousness-raising group. For she became increasingly aware of different

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<sup>460</sup> For a Review of *The Saturday Afternoon Show* at Max’s Kansas City, NYC, see John Perreault, “Art,” *Village Voice*, 14 May 1970, 16, 18.

<sup>461</sup> Piper, “Food for the Spirit” (1981), reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 55.

<sup>462</sup> This piece demonstrates the obvious confluence of yoga, art, and philosophy in Piper’s life. See Piper’s essay, “On Wearing Three Hats,” on Piper’s website: <http://www.adrianpiper.com/threehats.index.html>, originally presented at the Third annual Tillie K. Lubin Symposium at Brandeis University/Rose Art Museum on March 17, 1996. Piper does not mention how she psychologically dealt with the fact that she had to wait for the photographs from *Food for the Spirit* to be developed.

discriminations that she categorized under the umbrella term xenophobia. In particular, she was concerned with issues of race and racism, which, of course, are interconnected with sexism. This is best seen in Piper's performances as the *Mythic Being* (1972-1976). Here, she confronts the public as a streetwise man of color who often speaks by giving voice to Piper's earlier diary entries.<sup>463</sup> This atypical use of confidential records is noted by Piper:

The union of the personal with the political often makes such work seem excessively confrontational or didactic to some viewers. I think this is because art functions for me as not only a medium of exploration but also a medium of communication between me and the viewer.<sup>464</sup>

By combining the *Mythic Being* persona with her journal writing, Piper makes a point of blurring the lines between art and life. The public and the private also become conflated, all in an effort to foster interaction between Piper and those witnessing her performances.

Piper's 1970s performance work not only needs to be placed within the general carnivalized context of the Women's Movement, but within her specific academic life as well. From 1974 to 1981, Piper was working on her doctorate in philosophy at Harvard University.<sup>465</sup> During the same period that Piper was producing socio-political performances, she was focusing on her classes and then on her dissertation about Kant, entitled: "A New Model of Rationality."<sup>466</sup> This

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<sup>463</sup> The way in which Piper draws upon personal/autobiographical material is similar to the process seen in Wilke's *Intercourse With...* and Antin's *Eleanor* 1954.

<sup>464</sup> Piper, "Some Very FORWARD Remarks," xxxi.

<sup>465</sup> Presumably, this is why Piper produced fewer performances (and why her chapter is shorter) than Wilke and Antin during the 1970s.

<sup>466</sup> She completed her dissertation, "A New Model of Rationality," in 1981. At Piper's request, her dissertation is only available to the public at a very high price, making access to it nearly impossible for anyone who does not have entrance to Harvard's libraries (she will not allow UMI to distribute it).

duality continues to this day. Piper has published and lectured extensively in art and philosophy, and is currently a full professor of philosophy at Wellesley College, Massachusetts.<sup>467</sup>

Although Piper used drawing, photography, and even video to document her *Mythic Being* works, most of her earlier performances went unrecorded — visually. Instead, Piper writes about her pieces, which explains why many of them have not been discussed in depth. It is one of the purposes of this chapter to describe and analyze both her better and lesser known work. During this process, I intend to show that Piper uses techniques of humor to broach her serious, yet optimistic goals. Indeed, because of Piper's earnest artistic and social objectives, her humor is almost always misunderstood or ignored. The type of humor used by Piper can usually be identified with the ambivalent, yet rejuvenating aspects of carnival. But sometimes Piper is downright uproarious. Sections on xenophobia, the grotesque, and the sardonic are devoted to Piper's performances, and a final segment employs her work as a springboard to glance at the way 1970s feminism, humor, and performance both anticipate and contrast with the art of the 1980s.

## II Xenophobia

Understanding may be considered a faculty of the unity of appearances by means of rules, and similarly reason is the faculty of the unity of the rules of understanding under principles.

— Kant<sup>468</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> See Piper's extensive publishing and lecturing record in "Adrian Piper: A Biography," *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I or II*.

In 1975, Piper conducted a private performance in Cambridge, Massachusetts called *Writing the Critique of Pure Reason*. A black and white photograph of the piece shows Piper sitting at a typewriter, dressed as her persona “The Mythic Being” (figure 63). She wears large sunglasses, a mustache, and an afro wig, which not only masculinizes her, but also overtly marks her as a person of color. Her hands are actively placed on the keys, but she looks up at the viewer in a manner that begs some sort of interaction. A long cigar held between Piper’s bared teeth completes The Mythic Being’s confident manner.

Here, Piper’s artistic and philosophical worlds come together. The former is represented by The Mythic Being, whom Piper appeared as in performances during the 1970s. The latter is manifested in *what* The Mythic Being is doing. S/he is writing “The Critique of Pure Reason,” which is the name of Kant’s celebrated treatise, the one that Piper became obsessed with in *Food for the Spirit* and later inspired her to write her doctoral dissertation. Piper suggests that her persona, a black man, produces the philosophical masterpiece — raising questions about one’s perception of a “great philosopher.” Does one automatically presume that the author of *The Critique of Pure Reason* is a white man? What could it mean if someone like The Mythic Being wrote the influential book? At the same time, The Mythic Being is Piper, a young woman philosophy student hoping to leave her own lasting impression on the subject. Piper’s ambiguous image asks viewers to think about the limitations of preconceived notions. It forces viewers to confront their

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<sup>468</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1976) cited in Adrian M. S. Piper, “Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism,” trans. Adrian Piper, *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. XXIV, no. 1-3 (Fall-Spring 1992-1993) 199. Note that Piper uses a slightly altered name when she publishes in philosophy.

subconscious prejudices, like the surprise reaction to seeing the black or female face behind a revered name.

This shocked response may be described as a xenophobic impulse. Piper explores such reactions in connection with Kant's thoughts on the self, along with an analysis of what causes one to act morally or to make aesthetic-related decisions.<sup>469</sup> In her essay "Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism," Piper uses Kantian thought to define xenophobia:

Xenophobia is not simply an indiscriminate fear of strangers in general: it does not include, for example, fear of relatives or neighbors whom one happens not to have met. It is more specific than that. Xenophobia is a fear of individuals who look or behave differently than those one is accustomed to. It is a fear of what is experientially unfamiliar, of individuals who do not conform to one's empirical assumptions about what other people are like, how they behave or how they look. Ultimately it is a fear of individuals who violate one's empirical conception of persons and so one's self-conception.<sup>470</sup>

Piper explains that Kant's concept of "personhood" is embedded in his identification of "the self as rationally unified consciousness."<sup>471</sup> And that Kant notes the human need to classify and categorize knowledge based upon lived experience.<sup>472</sup> But, according to Piper, when one's understanding of one's self is

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<sup>469</sup> In her book *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts*, Deborah Haynes discusses Bakhtin's never-completed philosophy of creativity as expressed in four early essays on aesthetics (written from 1919-1926). Haynes notes: "Following a Kantian framework, he [Bakhtin] stressed that the three domains of human culture (science, art, and life) are united, or at least can be united, in an individual, but that this unity can be either external and mechanical or internal and organic," 47. In order for the latter to occur (an inner connection between art and life), there needs to be "answerability." Haynes goes on to show Bakhtin's understanding of morality in relation to artistic activity. Deborah J. Haynes, *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>470</sup> Adrian M. S. Piper, "Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism," 210.

<sup>471</sup> Adrian M. S. Piper, "Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism," 188.

<sup>472</sup> See, Piper, "Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture" (1992), reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 255.

challenged by information that conflicts with one's perception of personhood (defying categorization), a xenophobic response ensues:

So xenophobia is an alarm reaction to a threat to the rational coherence of the self, a threat in the form of an anomalous other who transgresses one's preconceptions about people. It is a paradigm example of reacting self-protectively to anomalous data that violates one's internally consistent conceptual scheme.<sup>473</sup>

Coming in contact with someone who presents a contradictory definition of personhood (e.g., s/he looks, speaks, acts, differently from one's self) can create a conceptual threat that stimulates a xenophobic response — resulting in racism, sexism, homophobia, antisemitism, and the like. This reaction is an attempt to preserve the unified self by resisting the adverse information. To Piper, xenophobia is an instinctive defensive mechanism.

The automatic xenophobic response, however, can be diminished or even avoided, asserts Piper, who concludes:

Another might violate one's empirical conception of people but be nevertheless recognizable as instantiating one's transcendent concept of personhood. So it would be possible to recognize the other as a person even though she violated one's empirical presuppositions about what and who people are. In that case, even if a disposition to xenophobia were innate, particular manifestations of it would be the result of conditioning and therefore susceptible to empirical modification. . . . Kant's conception of reason as theory-construction implies resources within the structure of the self for overcoming xenophobia.<sup>474</sup>

In this fundamentally optimistic turn, Piper claims that xenophobia may be countered, it is corrigible.<sup>475</sup> Certain aspects of xenophobia are "the result of

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<sup>473</sup> Adrian M. S. Piper, "Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism," 210. Piper explores the notion of conceptual self-preservation in A. M. S. Piper, "Two Conceptions of the Self," *Philosophical Studies* 48, 2 (September 1985): 173-197.

<sup>474</sup> Adrian M. S. Piper, "Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism," 190-191.

<sup>475</sup> Piper's optimism contrasts with Antin's fundamental pessimism. For a more thorough comparison, see Debra Wacks, "Antin and Piper," *Art Journal*, vol. 59, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 103-105.



conditioning” and can therefore be unlearned. Piper posits that xenophobic fear “is contingent on such empirical conditions as upbringing, degree of exposure to diversity or integration, and peer-group reinforcement — and therefore revisable in light of new experience.”<sup>476</sup>

Thus, encounters with a perceived Other can alter one’s definition of personhood and can subsequently transform what would have been an immediate xenophobic reaction. A kind of consciousness raising occurs through new information based upon shared experience. As a result, one can approach “different” individuals with a comforting sense of knowledge gained. This thought process explains much of the motivation behind Piper’s art, which strives to act as a vehicle to lessen future xenophobic reactions. When she introduces a viewer to the philosophizing Mythic Being, she presents an anomaly. The viewer must digest the image and ideally transform his or her original notions to fit this new representation. If this occurs, the xenophobic impulse has been reduced.<sup>477</sup>

While the countering of prejudices is obviously a serious endeavor, humor nonetheless plays an important role in the way Piper communicates her messages and produces “new experience.” As Piper’s states:

I try to fashion the stereotypes your own responses often express, in the hope that you will recognize them and feel moved by your self-awareness to repudiate them. Having understood and empathized with you, I want my work to coax you, gently and humorously, but firmly, out of the corner into which you have painted yourself.<sup>478</sup>

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<sup>476</sup> Adrian M. S. Piper, “Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism,” 194.

<sup>477</sup> Piper: “I want to contribute to the creation of a society in which racism and racial stereotyping no longer exist,” Piper, “The Joy of Marginality” (1990), reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 234.

<sup>478</sup> Piper, “Ways of Averting One’s Gaze” (1988), *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume II: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-1992*, 130. Piper usually addresses viewers directly in her art. Piper calls this the indexical present. Maurice Berger writes: “The words *this*, *you*, or *here*, for example, are indexes. These figures of speech — which are foregrounded in all of the texts in Piper’s art and performances — serve a specific function in her art. By continually shifting the

In her efforts to combat xenophobia, Piper strategically combines humor with philosophy and art. For humor serves as a critical device for Piper, who accesses the rejuvenating qualities of carnival through the grotesque.

### III The Grotesque

Grotesque images preserve their peculiar nature, entirely different from ready-made, completed being. They remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics.

— Bakhtin<sup>479</sup>

The grotesque, particularly as a bodily category, emerges as a deviation from the norm.

— Russo<sup>480</sup>

I looked odd and grotesque.

— Piper<sup>481</sup>

Beginning in 1970, Piper took to the streets and started producing public performance art for her *Catalysis Series* (through 1971). She describes one of the

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subject of her inquiry from a more neutral 'we' to a more aggressive 'you,' or by shifting the locale of the aesthetic experience from a distant 'there' to an immediate 'here,' Piper locates the viewer and the art object in the same time frame. Both, in effect, are operating in real, immediate time; neither history [prejudice] nor transcendence is allowed to intervene," Maurice Berger, "Styles of Radical Will: Adrian Piper and the Indexical Present," 26-27. Barbara Kruger adopts a similar technique in her photographic/text pieces from the 1980s.

<sup>479</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 25.

<sup>480</sup> Russo, 11.

<sup>481</sup> Piper, speaking about her early 70s performance works in Lucy Lippard, "Catalysis: An Interview with Adrian Piper" (1972), reprinted in *From the Center*, 169.

pieces in the series, *Catalysis VI*, as a work “in which I attached helium-filled Mickey Mouse balloons from each of my ears, under my nose, to my two front teeth, and from thin strands of my hair, then walked through Central Park and the lobby of the Plaza Hotel, and rode the subway during morning rush hour.”<sup>482</sup> There are no visual documents of the piece, but one can imagine the surprising and humorous combination of child-like fun and carnivalesque spectacle. At the same time, Piper’s figure could be perceived as disturbing — a (black) woman with balloons tied to her teeth, hair, and face entering mass transit in the early 70s must have been disruptive. Even today, such an anomaly would be unnerving. This is the aim. Piper’s *Catalysis* performances serve as experiments: she introduces a “foreign” presence into the public; it creates disturbances, various reactions, and then produces some sort of change.

In *Catalysis VI*, Piper uses performance to move “high” art out of the museums, onto subways, and into public spaces. She makes art more accessible to the general population.<sup>483</sup> On the other hand, by promenading through one of New York’s most expensive hotels, Piper brings public art back into an elite space. A mixing of high and low occurs in a way that parallels Bakhtin’s ideas on the regenerative, carnivalesque cycle. The hierarchies of “fine” art are broken down and placed in a constant state of ambivalent becoming.

The *Catalysis* series is the result of Piper’s reevaluation of artistic production. She began to approach her art differently as she became more effected by

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<sup>482</sup> Piper, “Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object” (1974), reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 43. According to Piper, each *Catalysis* piece was performed more than once, but most of them were purposefully not documented (some of the exceptions are discussed in this paper), Piper e-mail to Debra Wacks, August 29, 2002.

<sup>483</sup> Piper lists the rules she used in 1975 to create non-elitist art in “Seven Conditions on Art Production.” She includes: “Materially inexpensive,” “Accessibility of distribution,” and “Exchange value = production value.” Reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 159.

contemporary occurrences. In her essay, "Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object," Piper discusses the various socio-political events that created turbulence throughout the United States, like the invasion of Cambodia and the Women's Movement.<sup>484</sup> She cites such incidents as fodder for personal inspiration, leading her to move away from conceptual art work and consequently start producing performance pieces: "I did a lot of thinking about my position as an artist, a woman, and a black; and about the natural disadvantages of those attributes. . . At that time I found, again, that the medium of conceptual documentation was no longer adequate to express my aesthetic concerns."<sup>485</sup> Performance art and its inherent connection to experienced life provided Piper with a more satisfying means to respond to pressing contemporary issues and events.<sup>486</sup>

Piper therefore turned to the unpredictable, yet apropos public arena and began to use her *self* as art medium — becoming artist, subject, and art object all at once.<sup>487</sup> And the consideration of her "position as an artist, a woman, and a black" becomes evident, for instance, in Piper's *Aretha Franklin Piece* (1972), a work belonging to a series of performances entitled *Streetworks* (1970-1973).<sup>488</sup> Piper describes the first rendition of *Aretha Franklin Piece*:

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<sup>484</sup> Piper, "Talking to Myself," 30.

<sup>485</sup> Piper, "Talking to Myself," 30, 31.

<sup>486</sup> Piper adds: "I felt, quite helplessly, that this [performance work] was the only kind of art it was possible or acceptable for me to make . . . I see now that the crisis and solution was the result of the invasion by the 'outside world' of my aesthetic isolation. . . . Those forces have managed to infiltrate my awareness and thereby determine me and my work in ways that confront me with the politics of my position whether I want to know them or not: I have become self-conscious." Piper, "Talking to Myself," 31-32.

<sup>487</sup> Piper states: "I exist simultaneously as the artist and the work." Piper, "Talking to Myself," 42.

<sup>488</sup> Piper writes: "I thought of the *Catalysis* series as a particular kind of 'Streetwork,'" e-mail to the Debra Wacks, August 29, 2002.

I listened to Aretha's version of "Respect" until I had it completely memorized and could hear the entire song in my mind at will. . . . The piece consisted of my listening to the song in my mind and simultaneously dancing to it. I did a mixture of the Bugaloo, the Jerk, the Lindy, the Charleston, and the Twist, with a high degree of improvisation. I performed the piece while waiting on line at the bank, at a bus stop, and in the Public Library.<sup>489</sup>

Again, there are no visual documents of the performance, but the humorous disruption of the work is nonetheless conveyed. The strict formation of a bank line, the tedium of a bus stop, or the stillness of a library are familiar loci. Imagining Piper's spontaneous dance eruptions at any one of them is hilarious. One can appreciate the pleasure of the disturbance, of a rambunctious breaking out from the norm. Even Piper's deadpan description of the performance is funny in contrast to the overt physical humor of the piece.

Piper's transgressions, of course, are also political. As she explains: "I think that the symbology of these pieces [*Streetworks*] had a lot to do with my emerging sense of myself as a woman, as having been silenced in various ways, as having been objectified and as being a black person as well."<sup>490</sup> Instead of silence Piper embraces spectacle. She exaggerates her role as object and carnivalizes the space and the viewers surrounding her. She becomes an unruly woman.

Although unheard, Piper's choice of music is not insignificant. Aretha Franklin's success and her style of music point to the important contribution of black musicians to popular culture.<sup>491</sup> And, as an African-American woman, Franklin sings

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<sup>489</sup> Piper, "Talking to Myself," 48. "Respect" was released in 1967. Piper later did another version of the *Aretha Franklin Piece* as part of her performance *Some Reflective Surfaces I* (1976) in which she partially dressed as the Mythic Being and danced to "Respect," see Piper, "Some Reflective Surfaces I" (1976), *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 151-152.

<sup>490</sup> Piper, "Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II," 263.

<sup>491</sup> Piper has taken interest in what she considers to be black music and the various reactions people have to it. For example, of disco music, Piper writes: "I had been interested in popular 'disco' dance figures as a form of ritualized sexual and political confrontation. . . . To succeed in dancing to disco music, and to

of respect: “R - E - S - P - E - C - T / Find out what it means to me.”<sup>492</sup> The song’s empowering lyrics are dead on in terms of the civil rights and Women’s Movements. They also reflect Piper’s project, which promotes respect rather than fear.

Piper touches upon the social, comic body in *Aretha Franklin Piece*, but more readily embraces what could be called the “gross” potential of the grotesque in other performances where she places greater emphasis on the functioning body. Bakhtin does not offer a clear-cut definition of the grotesque, but rather describes its general principal:

The essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life. Negation and destruction (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better. The very material bodily lower stratum of the grotesque image (food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body) bears a deeply positive character. This principle is victorious, for the final result is always abundance, increase.<sup>493</sup>

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perform the full spectrum of figures and gestures that are part of that, is to express one’s sexuality, one’s separateness, one’s inner unity with one’s own body; and in a sexually repressive, WASP-dominated culture, this is to express defiance. I think this explains why certain kinds of people become so uncomfortable around blacks and gays on the dance floor who can really strut their stuff. In fact, I think this explains the racist and homophobic reaction many people have to disco music generally.” Piper, “Some Reflective Surfaces I,” 151.

<sup>492</sup> “Respect” also seems to imply sexual satisfaction in the song. Franklin sings: “What you want / Baby, I got / What you need / Do you know I got it? / All I’m askin’ / Is for a little respect when you come home,” and soon after the chorus chants: “sock it to me.” Elsewhere, Piper writes: “Here is a thought that a certain variety of prude feminist would prefer not to have: Voluntary self-objectification, of the kind that occurs in dancing, in performance of any kind, in modeling, or in permitting oneself to be looked at or done to sexually, can be an act of political defiance, a gesture of brazen shamelessness, a celebration of self that absolutely crushes and makes ridiculous any attempt at devaluation or disapproval, and exposes the cowardice and hypocrisy of the disapprovers for what it is: an attempt to eradicate from consciousness their own uncontrollable outlaw impulses . . . Sure it’s dangerous. But the danger is in the cost of the power it confers, not in the sources of pleasure it exposes.” Piper, “Some Reflective Surfaces I,” 154.

<sup>493</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 62. Bakhtin further states: “Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style,” Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 303. For examples of the grotesque see, *Rabelais and His World*, 341-359. And Rowe writes: Laughter and the grotesque contain “both life and death, enacting the

To Bakhtin, the grotesque is unfixed and associated with the “lower bodily stratum,” which is anti-classical, physically lower, and degraded, yet life affirming.<sup>494</sup> For example, Piper describes her actions in *Catalysis V*: “I recorded loud belches made at five-minute intervals, then concealed the tape recorder on myself and replayed it at full volume while reading, doing research, and taking out some books and records at Donnell Library.”<sup>495</sup> Here Piper not only disrupts her quiet environment, but does so in a distasteful manner. The discrepancy of the performance is humorous — a petite, educated, middle-class woman burping loudly among strangers — yet the repulsive aspect of her actions also contributes to the production of a carnivalesque event.

When discussing the grotesque, Bakhtin sometimes couples it with “realism” in order to emphasize the physical aspects of the former.<sup>496</sup> For Bakhtin associates “grotesque realism” with Rabelais’ incessant reference to the material bodily principle — that is “images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life.”<sup>497</sup> These are representations of the body in process, which are presented in what Bakhtin describes as “an extremely exaggerated form.”<sup>498</sup> In this way, Piper takes the belch — a typically singular occurrence that one usually attempts to keep quiet in public — and multiplies it at full volume. It now becomes an annoying disturbance (versus the intriguing distraction of *Aretha Franklin Piece*) to those trying to concentrate in the library.

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destruction that necessarily precedes the birth of a new order and creat[es] the solidarity on which such an order must be built,” Rowe, 3.

<sup>494</sup> Russo states that the grotesque body “is identified with non-official ‘low’ culture of the carnivalesque, and with social transformation,” Russo, 8.

<sup>495</sup> Piper, “Talking to Myself,” 44.

<sup>496</sup> See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 52.

<sup>497</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 18.

<sup>498</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 18.

While Piper contradicts perceptions of femininity and elitist art production by utilizing unseemly physical outbursts, there is also something innocently funny about prerecorded burps — they become humorous in their excessiveness. The comedy is base. It is a quick and easy (read popular) way to gain a laugh. *Catalysis V* is reminiscent of the kind of humor a class clown may resort to, particularly because of its potential to create a mild disruption through grotesquerie. Bakhtin understands such representations of the material bodily principle as “the heritage . . . of the culture of folk humor,” meaning, that it is broad-based and intrinsic to the spirit of carnival and its rebelliousness.<sup>499</sup>

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Although Bakhtin speaks separately of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, he usually implies that the two are theoretically interconnected. In fact, when discussing the grotesque, Bakhtin sometimes collapses it with his ideas on carnival to come up with the term “carnival-grotesque,” which is said

to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted.<sup>500</sup>

The carnival-grotesque breaks with the status quo and ushers in liberating perspectives: ideas can be altered, stereotypes trampled. This is possible because it is essentially positive. According to Bakhtin, each manifestation of the grotesque is related to “universal” renovation.<sup>501</sup> That the grotesque is associated with the cycle

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<sup>499</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 18, 19.

<sup>500</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 34.

<sup>501</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 19.



of life suggests the potential for transformation.<sup>502</sup> As Bakhtin states: “the grotesque conception of the body is interwoven not only with the cosmic but also with the social, utopian, and historic theme, and above all with the theme of the change of epochs and the renewal of culture.”<sup>503</sup> As with the carnival-grotesque, the grotesque alone (especially when associated with the body) is inherently meshed with the rejuvenation and subsequent alteration of society.

In a similar manner, Piper speaks of her performance art as a means of stimulating change.<sup>504</sup> To Piper, her work thrives on viewer response and, ideally, provokes transformation:

One reason for making and exhibiting a work is to induce a reaction or change in the viewer. The stronger the work, the stronger its impact and the more total (physiological, psychological, intellectual, etc.) the reaction of the viewer. The strength of such a work is a function of the viewer's response to it. The work is a catalytic agent, in that it promotes a change in another entity (the viewer) without undergoing any permanent change itself. . . . the work as such is nonexistent except when it functions as a medium of change between the artist and the viewer.<sup>505</sup>

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<sup>502</sup> See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 19, 20, 21. Bakhtin states: “The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming,” *Rabelais and His World*, 24.

<sup>503</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 325. Michael Holquist writes that Bakhtin's “grotesque realism” is “a point-by-point inversion of categories used in the thirties to define Socialist Realism,” Michael Holquist, Prologue to Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, xvii.

<sup>504</sup> Piper states: “as an art object, I want simply to look outside myself and see the effect of my existence on the world at large,” Piper, “Talking to Myself,” 35.

<sup>505</sup> Piper, “Talking to Myself,” 32. Elsewhere Piper writes: “My work is an act of communication that politically catalyzes its viewers into reflecting on their own deep impulses and responses to racism and xenophobia, relative to a target or stance that I depict. . . . My purpose is to transform the viewer psychologically, by presenting him or her with an unavoidable concrete reality that cuts through the defensive rationalizations by which we insulate ourselves against the facts of our political responsibility. I want viewers of my work to come away from it with the understanding that their reactions to racism are ultimately political choices over which they have control.” Piper, “The Joy of Marginality,” 234.

Piper's performances may act as vehicles for change, as catalysts (hence the name of her public performance series, "catalysis").

Piper never scheduled her *Streetworks*, she let each performance speak for itself and waited for subsequent responses.<sup>506</sup> A sampling of viewers' reactions is captured in a rare documentary photograph of Piper's *Catalysis IV* (1970) (figure 64). Piper describes the piece: "I dressed very conservatively but stuffed a large white bath towel into the sides of my mouth until my cheeks bulged to about twice their normal size, letting the rest of it hang down my front and riding the bus, subway, and Empire State Building elevator."<sup>507</sup> A black and white snapshot shows Piper riding on a New York City bus. With her hands folded in her lap, she sits in a row of seats, facing the camera and alongside two women who are evidently not together. Piper is on the far left. A trendily dressed woman sits next to her, consciously ignoring the performance — she sits at an angle so that her back faces both Piper and the weird protruding towel. The woman on the right end, however, has deliberately craned her neck not only to look at Piper, but to make eye contact with her. She appears to be intrigued, as if trying to understand Piper, who looks relaxed and willing to let a stranger "read" her.

Although Piper is essentially "silencing" herself in *Catalysis IV*, she simultaneously brings attention to the/her mouth, which, according to Bakhtin, is "the most important of all human features for the grotesque."<sup>508</sup> As he articulates:

Next to the bowels and the genital organs is the mouth,  
through which enters the world to be swallowed up. And

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<sup>506</sup> Piper states that she was interested in "preserving the impact and uncategorized nature of the confrontation. . . . I don't announce most of these [street] works, as this immediately produces an audience-versus-performer separation and has the same effect psychologically as a stage surrounded by rows of chairs has physically," Piper, "Talking to Myself," 44.

<sup>507</sup> Piper, "Talking to Myself," 43.

<sup>508</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.

next is the anus. All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation. This is why the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing) . . . In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven.<sup>509</sup>

The mouth becomes a portal to other bodies, to society, and to life in general. In both *Catalysis IV* and *Catalysis V* Piper's mouth becomes a means for her to transgress her contained body and spill out (either aurally or symbolically) into the public.<sup>510</sup> The towel is neither completely in nor out of Piper's mouth.<sup>511</sup> It is in a state of limbo, ambiguity.

Like her mouth in *Catalysis IV* and *V*, Piper's body also defies discrete confines. It denies completeness or perfection, recalling Bakhtin's description: "The grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits."<sup>512</sup> This refusal of closure characterizes all of Piper's street performances. For the cultural boundaries that maintain a separation between her private body and the public world are abandoned and the two become intermixed. As Piper explains: "here I am, or was, 'violating my body'; I was making it public."<sup>513</sup>

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<sup>509</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317. I would add belching to Bakhtin's list of grotesque actions associated with the mouth.

<sup>510</sup> Bakhtin writes: The grotesque "is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines," *Rabelais and His World*, 316.

<sup>511</sup> Piper provides some brief notes on another performance she did in 1971: "Visiting the Frick Museum while gnawing the fibrous stems of a sprig of parsley, allowing the leafy part to protrude from my mouth," Piper, "Talking to Myself," 45. Piper's action is simple, yet funny, especially given the conservative environment of the Frick Museum.

<sup>512</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 26.

<sup>513</sup> Piper in 1972 in Lippard, "Catalysis," 170.

The clarity of the public/private dichotomy is blurred through Piper's performances, which contradict all social desires for clean boundaries.<sup>514</sup> Societies create taboos and rituals governing the body. This human need to delineate and categorize not only relates to Piper's understanding of Kant, but to Anthropologist Mary Douglas' ideas on purity as well:

The yearning for rigidity is in us all. It is part of our human condition to long for hard lines and clear concepts. When we have them we have to either face the fact that some realities elude them, or else blind ourselves to the inadequacy of the concepts. The final paradox of the search for purity is that it is an attempt to force experience into logical categories of non-contradiction. But experience is not amenable and those who make the attempt find themselves led into contradiction.<sup>515</sup>

When someone or something defies categorization or borders, an impurity occurs. Douglas sees the desire for this purity as a wish to avoid pollution, chaos, or, to use a familiar word, liminality. As seen earlier, liminality poses a threat to any given system.<sup>516</sup> By transgressing the borders of her body, Piper threatens society's boundaries as well.<sup>517</sup>

<sup>514</sup> Piper's conflation of boundaries counters the black and white thinking of racism as well. Piper presents her entire being as a breaking of barriers: "I am the racist's nightmare, the obscenity of miscegenation. I am a reminder that segregation is impotent; a living embodiment of sexual desire that penetrates racial barriers and reproduces itself." Piper, "Flying," 229.

<sup>515</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) 162. Douglas is responding to Sartre's description of anti-semites and their search for simplicity: They "have no wish to acquire ideas, they want them to be innate . . . they want to adopt a mode of life in which reasoning and the quest for truth play only a subordinate part, in which nothing is sought except what has already been found, in which one never becomes anything else but what one already was." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Portrait of the Anti-Semite* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1948), no page given, Cited in Mary Douglas, 162.

<sup>516</sup> Douglas: "all margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered," Mary Douglas, 121.

<sup>517</sup> Douglas studies the way a body is ritualized and governed in connection to its larger social context. Douglas: "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts

Reminiscent of Piper's interpretation of Kant, Douglas notes: "anomalous events may be labeled dangerous. Admittedly individuals sometimes feel anxiety confronted with anomaly."<sup>518</sup> Piper's towel looks strange, even dangerous to a viewer unaware that s/he is witnessing a performance. Piper presents herself as an exaggerated figure of someone who does not fit in, a grotesque, an other. Recalling her definition of xenophobia as "a fear of individuals who look or behave differently than those one is accustomed to," one can recognize a correlation between Piper's performances, her philosophical writings, and Douglas' thoughts on purity.<sup>519</sup>

In her street performances, Piper takes Kant's thoughts on "personhood" and intentionally challenges one's "rationally unified consciousness" or their "search for purity" by introducing herself as an anomaly. She prods and disturbs her public to make them aware of difference and, more significantly, to better prepare them for ensuing meetings with categorical impurities. The viewer's previously held prejudices and anxieties are thus somewhat altered. This is art as catalyst. When the intrigued woman in the *Catalysis IV* photograph seemingly makes an effort to "examine" Piper (rather than stereotype or fear her), one gathers that this is exactly the type of anti-xenophobic response for which Piper might hope.

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and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body," Mary Douglas, 115.

<sup>518</sup> Mary Douglas, 39. Douglas notes: "Any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies, and any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions. . . . we find in any culture worthy of the name various provisions for dealing with ambiguous or anomalous events," Mary Douglas, 39.

<sup>519</sup> Adrian M. S. Piper, "Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism," 210.

Piper describes her performance, *Catalysis VII*: “I went to The Metropolitan Museum’s ‘Before Cortes’ show, while chewing large wads of bubble gum, blowing large bubbles, and allowing the gum to adhere to my face . . . [At other times I was] filling a leather purse with catsup, then adding wallet, comb, key, etc; opening and digging out change for bus or subway, a comb for my hair in the ladies’ room at Macy’s, a mirror to check my face on the bus, etc.; coating my hands with rubber cement, then browsing at a newspaper stand . . .”<sup>520</sup> Each manifestation of *Catalysis VII* includes humorously repellent gestures. She disturbs the refined space of the museum with the loud champing of gum and inappropriate bubble blowing.<sup>521</sup> Yet that probably occurs nearly every day at the Metropolitan. It is when she permits the fragments of the popped bubbles to remain on her face that she embraces grotesque transgression. Moreover, envisioning the petite Piper rummaging through her nice leather bag only to pull out an object covered in catsup is also grotesquely ludicrous. The strong scent must have been as nauseating as the blood-like appearance. And the way the newspapers and magazines presumably clung to her sticky hands reads like a comedy routine. The humor of each piece is highly dependent on the physicality of Piper’s grotesquerie. As she creates a mini commotion, her surrounding space becomes carnivalized — funny, material, degrading, and disruptive all at once.

Not only is the excessive presence of foodstuffs (in this case catsup and chewing gum) a particular carnivalesque trait, the ambiguous nature of the substances used (including the rubber cement) is equally grotesque.<sup>522</sup> There is something fundamentally revolting about the almost-corporeal nature of viscous fluids.<sup>523</sup>

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<sup>520</sup> Piper quoted in Lippard, “Catalysis,” 167-168.

<sup>521</sup> Interesting relationship to Wilke’s use of gum.

<sup>522</sup> For the relationship between food and carnival, see Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 278-302.

<sup>523</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre analyzes the disgusting nature of viscous substances in his *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical

Viewers of *Catalysis VII* probably thought Piper unclean or disgusting. In fact, the way Piper embraces odd and misplaced materials as artistic media allows a form of “dirt” to permeate her work. To Mary Douglas, dirt, like chaos or liminality, ushers in disorder:

Dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread or holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behavior in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order.<sup>524</sup>

Douglas does not specifically define what she means by “dirt,” but she relates it to impurity and pollution — all of which rattle a culture’s social preconceptions. Dirt is that which is out of place and, in whatever form, it disturbs.<sup>525</sup> On a hamburger, catsup is perfectly delicious, but in globs at the bottom of a handbag, it is vile.

So Piper not only uses dirty substances (gooey, sticky foodstuffs), one can argue that she also produces “dirt” via her performances by disturbing boundaries. As Piper breaks down distinctions between private and public, a dirty, carnivalesque anti-order is produced. Indeed, Douglas writes: “Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise.”<sup>526</sup> Purity supports hierarchy and the status quo. In terms of Piper’s provocative project, one might presume therefore that dirt would be welcomed by Piper as another means to stimulate change.

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Library, 1956). See also Grosz’s discussion of Sartre, Mary Douglas, and Julia Kristeva, in Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 192-198.

<sup>524</sup> Mary Douglas, 2.

<sup>525</sup> Note there is a connection between Mary Douglas’ thoughts on dirt, Bakhtin’s ideas on the grotesque, and Kristeva’s writing on the abject. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>526</sup> Mary Douglas, 162.

Similarly, for *Catalysis I*, Piper explains that she “saturated a set of clothing in a mixture of vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod-liver oil for a week, then wore them on the D train during evening rush hour, then while browsing in the Marboro [sic] bookstore on Saturday night.”<sup>527</sup> While *Catalysis V* relies on the sense of sound, and *Catalysis IV* the sense of sight, *Catalysis I* depends upon the sense of smell to evoke the grotesque and disturb those around her (*Catalysis VII* depends on all three senses). Because Piper presents herself in a visually socially acceptable manner, her putrid odor must have been confusing. Here, photographs would do little to convey the grotesque aspect of her performance, although they could depict the shocked reactions of those within sniffing range. Again, one’s imagination needs to be used in order to appreciate the smell emanating from Piper’s rotten clothes or the way people must have dramatically avoided her.

Although the source of Piper’s stench in *Catalysis I* remains invisible, connotations of her hidden, functioning body symbolically seep through to the surface and into the public arena. But as Piper uses her body to cross boundaries and evoke the grotesque-carnavalesque, it is important to remember that hers is a body that is not generic. Like all bodies, Piper’s is socially marked by degrees of gender, race, class, age, and beauty. And for Bakhtin the earthy, rejuvenating characteristics of the material bodily principle is particularly associated with women. Bakhtin believes that Rabelais would agree with him in this matter and explains that Rabelais was not a misogynist, but rather a representative of the “Gallic tradition,” a “comic tradition” of the people:

In this tradition woman is essentially related to the material bodily lower stratum; she is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously. She is ambivalent. She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys; . . . Womanhood is shown in contrast to the limitations of her partner (husband,

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<sup>527</sup> Piper in Lippard, “Catalysis,” 167.



lover, or suitor); she is a foil to his avarice, jealousy, stupidity, hypocrisy, bigotry, sterile senility, false heroism, and abstract idealism. . . . She represents in person the undoing of pretentiousness, of all that is finished, completed, and exhausted. . . . We must note that the image of the woman in the “Gallic tradition,” like other images in this tradition, is given on the level of ambivalent laughter, at once mocking, destructive, and joyfully reasserting. Can it be said that this tradition offers a negative, hostile attitude toward woman? Obviously not. The image is ambivalent.<sup>528</sup>

Although Bakhtin structures his ideas on an essentialist principle, the way in which he believes Rabelais saw women ultimately works to contradict fixed, traditional ideas. Women intrinsically oppose society’s norms through grotesque debasement. To both Bakhtin and Rabelais, women represent ambivalence and laughter — the most important characteristics of the carnivalesque. By connecting women to the material bodily lower stratum, Bakhtin empowers women with everything carnival has to offer.

Along these lines, Kathleen Rowe welcomes the association of women with the grotesque.<sup>529</sup> She argues that at its most excessive, the female body can become grotesque (it shocks, crosses boundaries, attacks the senses, is limitless). And she likewise identifies the positive associations of flux and humor with those female bodies that exaggerate processes and the materiality of their substance. For Rowe, feminine bodily transgression, and the way that it may lead to provocation and transformation, becomes the critical ingredient of social rebelliousness.

While Piper’s work evokes characteristics tied to the grotesque, it is simultaneously humorous. Her street performances are absurd — they are funny because of their carnivalesque audacity as well as their “grossness.” In her next

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<sup>528</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 240-241.

<sup>529</sup> According to Rowe, her book “investigates the power of female grotesques and female laughter to challenge the social and symbolic systems that would keep women in their place,” Rowe, 3.

group of performances, Piper's humor becomes less preposterous and more biting as she builds upon her unruly public image in a more directly confrontational manner.

#### IV The Sardonic

It is that individual confrontation with freedom that actually  
constitutes carnival's spirit of true liberation.  
— Sanders<sup>530</sup>

My androgyny is a source of joy and confusion to me.  
— Piper<sup>531</sup>

Piper assumed her Mythic Being persona during the mid-1970s. Serving as an alter ego, this character contrasts with Piper's everyday portrayal as a highly educated, light-skinned, (unthreatening) woman.<sup>532</sup> When presenting herself as the Mythic Being, Piper successfully "passed" as a young, working-class, African-American man by donning an afro wig, dark sunglasses, a fake mustache, and typically masculine-marked clothing (black T-shirt and jeans).<sup>533</sup> His guise is not ambiguous, for the Mythic Being is specifically marked in his appearance (in terms

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<sup>530</sup> Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory*, 156.

<sup>531</sup> Piper, "Notes on the Mythic Being I-III" (1974, 1975, 1976), reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 123.

<sup>532</sup> Robert Storr quotes Piper that through the Mythic Being, she was creating a black counterpart to the "upper-middle-class het WASP male." Storr's introduction to *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, xx. Piper citation not given.

<sup>533</sup> Piper writes of her Mythic Being persona: "I would never dress that way if I were a man; nor would I ever be attracted to someone who dressed that way," Piper, "Notes on the Mythic Being," 119.

of race, class, and gender). This allows Piper not only to experiment with gender and class variances, but also to make visually obvious her black identity.<sup>534</sup>

Negative preconceptions associated with black, street-wise men are embodied in Piper's performances so that the Mythic Being often comes across as angry or intimidating. Referring to Homi Bhabha, Maurice Berger concludes: "The Mythic Being personified the mythic black man who is always 'tethered to treacherous stereotypes of primitivism and degeneracy.'" <sup>535</sup> Like her earlier street performances, Piper embraces objectification by placing herself at the center of a kind of social experiment while deliberately transgressing traditional social/cultural borders. The Mythic Being appears on posters, in newspaper advertisements, and in various public arenas (museums, popular squares, parks, etc.) around New York City and Cambridge, Massachusetts. In this way, Piper is able to test how it feels to move through public space or be represented as an obvious outsider — to be understood as an (often feared) "other." <sup>536</sup>

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<sup>534</sup> Piper notes: "By 'crashing' middle and upper-middle class white social contexts in the guise of the Mythic Being (the theater, gallery openings, museums, Harvard teas, Cambridge coffee houses, etc.), I gained a sense of my own marginality as a nonwhite (but not obviously black) member of society," Piper, "Art for the Art-World Surface Pattern" (1976), reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 164.

<sup>535</sup> Maurice Berger, "Styles of Radical Will: Adrian Piper and the Indexical Present," 23, and Homi Bhabha, "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition," in Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, eds., *Remaking History* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989) 135.

<sup>536</sup> In speaking about her performances as the Mythic Being, Piper states: "It was just great to be able to take the subway late at night and not worry about being mugged or raped. . . . That part was really wonderful; the sense of freedom that I experienced in doing this work was a revelation to me. The bad part was that I got to experience what it is like for visibly black Americans to simply move through the world in any social context that is primarily populated by white people, and because I was showing certain visual cues of a black person, I was responded to in that way and it was truly horrible: I felt objectified over and over again in subtle ways that I, to this day, believe people have no control over. I do not think that anyone intentionally rejects or dismisses or ignores or objectifies another person. I do believe that it is completely an innate uncontrollable fear impulse . . . There is just no other solution but to bring black people into your environment so that they will not seem so strange." Piper, "Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II," 263.

The way in which Piper, as the Mythic Being, reacts to either personal problems or societal discrimination is determined by the situation. Sometimes the Mythic Being appears restless or annoyed, and at other times s/he seems resentful, even confrontational. Likewise, sardonic humor varies from the ironic or bitter to the sarcastic or disdainful. In Piper's performances the sardonic may provoke introspection or uneasy laughter in a viewer. Yet, at other times, the Mythic Being uses exaggeration and conveys a sense of hilarity. For instance, one of Piper's 1973 performances as the Mythic Being is documented in a film by Peter Kennedy.<sup>537</sup> Piper is first seen undergoing her drag transformation: carefully putting on the mustache, then wig and casually speaking about her persona (figure 65).<sup>538</sup> Next, the film cuts to the street performance where Piper as the Mythic Being is seen agitatedly walking down a busy city sidewalk, repeating the same two sentences over and over in differing cadences and intonations:

No matter how much I ask my mother to stop buying  
crackers, cookies, and things, she does anyway, and says it's  
for her, even if I always eat it. So I've decided to fast.<sup>539</sup>

During the performance, the Mythic Being's behavior constantly changes, from frantic to relaxed to acerbic. The repetition works to magnify the Mythic Being's manic demeanor. But no matter how aggravated the Mythic Being seems, Piper's feminine voice contradicts her macho demeanor. By speaking, Piper inevitably

<sup>537</sup> Peter Kennedy film, "Other Than Art's Sake," 1974. This performance clip may also be seen in Laura Cottingham's video, "Not For Sale: Feminism and Art in the USA during the 1970s," 1998.

<sup>538</sup> Piper writes: "The [Mythic Being] transformation was dynamic, intersocial, and fluid," Piper, "Notes on the Mythic Being," 123. Compare Piper's transformation with the one Antin undergoes in her 1972 video, *The King*.

<sup>539</sup> Chant for Mythic Being Cycle I, from journal entry 12-12-64. See Piper, "Preparatory Notes for *The Mythic Being*" (1973-1974), reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 110.

“blows her cover” — the drag is brought into question and gender lines are confused.

As the performance proceeds in the film, fellow pedestrians smirk and gawk at this ambiguously scrawny, yet tough person earnestly speaking to both himself and to anyone else willing to listen. Much more than her appearance, passersby are drawn to Piper’s continual and adamant reiteration of the same sentences or, as Piper calls it, her mantra. Like a meditative yoga chant, the repeated words allows Piper to stay focused. Rather than worry about spontaneous conversation, the mantra frees Piper to concentrate on her visual presentation and on subsequent reactions from observers. Occasionally viewers are seen contributing to the spectacle by following the Mythic Being as s/he paces the streets. A mini carnivalesque parade develops, causing a commotion.

The Mythic Being’s chatter, of course, is neither meaningless nor randomly chosen. It is excerpted from Piper’s personal past. As Piper explains: “A ‘mythic being’ is a fictitious or abstract personality that is generally part of a story or folktale.”<sup>540</sup> “His history,” continues Piper, “constitutes the folktale used to explain some current social phenomena, namely myself, my behavior, my relationships.”<sup>541</sup> In order to develop her persona, Piper gives the Mythic Being her own history. She co-opted decontextualized entries from the diary she has maintained since age eleven. These passages become her mantras — brief entrées into Piper’s retrospective experiences and concerns. Piper fabricated an elaborate sequence of 144 diaristic fragments to serve as mantras over a period of twelve years (forming twelve cycles).<sup>542</sup> During each month, beginning in September

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<sup>540</sup> Piper, “Preparatory Notes,” 108, note 1.

<sup>541</sup> Piper, “Preparatory Notes,” 112, note 6.

<sup>542</sup> Piper, “Notes on the Mythic Being,” 137.

1973, the Mythic Being was to meditate on and repeat the assigned sentences.<sup>543</sup> In this way, Piper's past becomes her persona's present. Of her paradoxical relation to her alter ego, Piper writes:

[The Mythic Being], the abstract entity, the semifictional hero who exists partly in me and partly independently of me. I regard his image and see both that he is me and that he is completely inscrutable to me.<sup>544</sup>

Thus, as the Mythic Being reiterates Piper's past experiences, he makes them his own, which results in a dualistic existence.<sup>545</sup>

At the same time, the Mythic Being's conflicting identity makes for a humorous performance, particularly in relation to the determined mantra. The passage heard in the documentary film concerning the abundance of cookies at home is funny — especially coming from an “angry young man.” The representation of a man becoming livid with his mother because she buys too much junk food is ridiculous.<sup>546</sup> Moreover, a kind of hilarity results in Piper's use of classic comic obsession and repetition. As Arthur Berger observes:

Comedy is peopled by eccentrics, grotesques, monomaniacs of one sort or another, who persist in their behavior no matter what situation they find themselves in. Their unwillingness or inability to “bend” or to take changed circumstances into account strikes us as amusing.<sup>547</sup>

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<sup>543</sup> See Piper, “Preparatory Notes,” 108-109, to view the cycle of mantras and the way that it functions. And see Piper, “Preparatory Notes,” 103, for the criteria she uses to choose her mantras.

<sup>544</sup> Piper, “Notes on the Mythic Being,” 123.

<sup>545</sup> This recalls Antin's relationship to her personae.

<sup>546</sup> In her interview with Piper, Diana Stoll suggests that the Mythic Being may be understood as funny in terms of [Henri] Bergson's concept of *incongruity*. Piper responds: “I think it's a measure of how deeply people are invested in these racial markers that they can't stand back from them and laugh. When I attack some of these things, one response would be to see how absurd they are and to laugh. But if you feel as though I'm attacking *you*, then you can't laugh.” Stoll, 44.

<sup>547</sup> Arthur Asa Berger, 46. Charney states: “Repetition may be the single most important mechanism in comedy,” Maurice Charney, 82.

The Mythic Being comes across as fixated with “crackers, cookies, and things,” such that the performance becomes somewhat silly and any threatening aspects are ameliorated.<sup>548</sup>

Yet, the “cookies” mantra concomitantly suggests Piper’s ongoing strained relationship with food. The passage was excerpted from a 1964 diary entry when at the age of sixteen, Piper is clearly concerned about her weight. So much so, that she is willing to fast rather than fall prey to the evils of carbohydrates and sugar. Piper’s worries about her diet periodically surface throughout the 1960s and 70s. For instance, in 1973 she writes about the difficulties surrounding her burgeoning modeling career:

... I’ll starve for another twenty-four hours. I complain to myself that some people seem to be just naturally thin and never have to worry about diet, while I can only keep my weight at ninety pounds by eating under six hundred calories a day.<sup>549</sup>

Again, Piper is willing to starve in order to maintain what she sees as her ideal weight.<sup>550</sup> What appears to be a funny declaration when spoken by a man, becomes increasingly worrisome in light of the serious eating disorders many American girls/women face regarding body image, anorexia, or other food-related issues. Piper’s resolve, as spoken by the Mythic Being, keenly points to the often gender-

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<sup>548</sup> Bakhtin: “In folk grotesque, madness is a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official ‘truth.’ It is a ‘festive’ madness.” *Rabelais and His World*, 39.

<sup>549</sup> Piper, “Preparatory Notes,” 99. In her photo/text work, *Concrete Infinity Documentation Piece* (1970), Piper records her every move on June 5, 1970. She notes that she basically only eats protein tablets and weighs herself four times. And, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, Piper fasted during the period she produced *Food for the Spirit* (1971). Both pieces make noteworthy comparisons with Antin’s work about losing weight: *The Eight Temptations* and *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (both 1972).

<sup>550</sup> Another Mythic Being mantra reads: “I may not be sticking to my diet exactly, but I KNOW I’m doing well enough that I should be losing weight. And damn it, I’m not.” *The Mythic Being Cycle II*, from diary entry June 16, 1969 cited in Piper, “Preparatory Notes,” 111.

specific nature of the problem — along with the asymmetrical, sexist pressure with which so many western girls/women must contend. As such, the performance ends up teetering between the absurd and the important — it all depends on whose voice/experience is heard (that of the Mythic Being or of the young Piper).

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Over the same period that Piper was performing the Mythic Being live, she was simultaneously producing photographic performances of her persona. In conjunction with meditating on and repeating the selected monthly mantra, Piper also published it on the Gallery page of the *Village Voice*. A comic-strip-like thought balloon containing the assigned handwritten passage appeared each month beside a recycled photograph of the Mythic Being (for examples, see figures 66 and 67). In this way, Piper subversively inserts her art amongst the commercial galleries, invading the established art market with her anti-elitist, free art. This bold move corroborates with the impudent black and white photograph of the Mythic Being who stares out from his dark sunglasses while twirling the left side of his mustache. He appears mysterious: his face and body obstructed by black turtle-neck, wig, facial hair, glasses, and hand gesture.

Among the simplistic, text-only gallery advertisements, the Mythic Being's photograph commands attention and intrigue. One senses that this figure has the upper hand, for he is able to watch "you" while remaining protected by his guise. Yet, in contrast, the Mythic Being often appears vulnerable after one reads his/Piper's diaristic reflections. One such thought balloon implores:



God please give me the strength to withdraw if I must I can't  
hurt anymore I've been hurt too much please help me  
preserve myself he seemed so good for me in some ways<sup>551</sup>

Again, Piper's words and image collide. The arrogant man in the photograph or the street belies the painfully personal words.

Piper and her persona share memories, yet they experience them differently. For Piper, the memories associated with the mantras often represent significant and sometimes distressing moments in her life. The Mythic Being, however, is immune to the difficulties of the past and is therefore able to deal with them as he helps to shoulder their burden. As Piper notes, the Mythic Being "is a device to relieve me of the weight of the unshared intimacy of my own past (ascribe it to another, make it public)." <sup>552</sup> Piper's appropriation of her earlier diaristic self, not only helps to construct the Mythic Being as an identity, but also liberates Piper from troublesome memories. There is, in her words, a "transcendence of the personal." <sup>553</sup>

When Piper exposes the public to her mantras, these snippets of stories become an aspect of society at large. For Piper claims that the Mythic Being "is a part of the common folklore and folk consciousness of all who read the *Village Voice*." <sup>554</sup> She therefore makes a contribution to the shared folk culture that is so important to Bakhtin's definition of carnival. Like the consciousness raising

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<sup>551</sup> Piper, her punctuation (or lack thereof), diary entry April 19, 1967 — Cycle II, cited in Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 111.

<sup>552</sup> Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 114. Piper writes that the Mythic Being "is, or may be: . . . A therapeutic device for freeing me of the burden of my past, which haunts me, determines all my actions, increasingly habituates me to the limitations of my personality and physical appearance," Piper, "Notes on the Mythic Being," 118.

<sup>553</sup> Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 103.

<sup>554</sup> Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 112, note 6. Piper writes: "My own past is coextensive with Cycles I-XII. When these are exhausted in the history of the M.B. [Mythic Being], my own past (up to 8/72) will simultaneously have dispersed into common folklore: I will be free," Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 113.

process, she shares her thoughts, frustrations, and fears, but here they are divested of their influence when Piper sheds them onto a “man” and then asks the general community to deal with them. She does this graciously, as the thought balloon intended for her final *Village Voice* Mythic Being ad indicates:

Dear Friends, These are the last lines in my autobiography of an art object, which includes all I have been and done for the last 15 years. Thanks for your attention. Adrian Piper, 9-20-75.<sup>555</sup>

What had been Piper’s individual past becomes autobiographically fluid: it now belongs to Piper, her alter ego, and the public all at once.

In both her live and photographic performances, Piper visually passes as a man. Most effective to her “mythic” transformation is her change in attitude and body language. Noting such alterations, Piper writes:

My behavior changes. I swagger, stride, lope, lower my eyebrows, raise my shoulders, sit with my legs wide apart on the subway, so as to accommodate my protruding genitalia.<sup>556</sup>

As the Mythic Being, Piper assumes the stereotypical postures and poses of a young male. Adjusting her actions and perceptions to suit her drag performance, Piper becomes “cool” and consciously sexual. The adoption of a masculine appearance finds correlation with Piper’s inner being, as she explains:

To become the Mythic Being was to elicit, through contacts with others and recollection of my own personal past, a masculine version of myself, the masculine part of myself. It was to invert the significance of the events that have formed me, and to invert their sexual effect on my psyche.<sup>557</sup>

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<sup>555</sup> Reprinted as *Five Full Thought Balloons* (October 5, 1973) in Piper, “Preparatory Notes,” 106 (figure 68). September twentieth is Piper’s birthday. She made this thought balloon with the intention of completing all twelve cycles of mantras by that date. But, she suspended the project in May 1976 due to the lack of funds and never got to perform this mantra. E-mail from Piper to Debra Wacks, August 22, 2002. See Piper, “Notes on the Mythic Being,” 137, note 7.

<sup>556</sup> Piper, “Notes on the Mythic Being,” 117.

<sup>557</sup> Piper, “Notes on the Mythic Being,” 123. In reference to her Mythic Being work, Piper states: “Part of the point of the piece was for me to explore

Drawing upon her own masculinity becomes more than a public experiment in clichés and responses. By placing her autobiography onto the Mythic Being, Piper provides an interesting twist on her memories. A change in gender gives alternative meanings to her words.<sup>558</sup> The Mythic Being provides a topsy-turvy strategy aimed at Piper's psyche. For she uses the gender masquerade to invert and perhaps subvert the powerful effects that certain moments have had on her. As a "man," Piper can examine her past from an emotionally distant position.

The sting of Piper's past is ameliorated as it is rearticulated and psychologically relived through the distortion of gender inversion. The effects can be read into Piper's chosen diary mantras, for instance:

Marie's set tonight. Got stoned — 16 cans of beer. Cried.  
Jonny danced with me 6 times. Ricky (so great) took me  
home, talked to me. Still go for Tony, more than I did when  
I was going with him. Know [*sic*] he has 3 other girls.<sup>559</sup>

This passage describes a confusing time in Piper's fourteenth year. Social transgressions, excitement, and indecision dramatically collide. There is a sense of lost control that is typically characteristic of teenage life. According to Piper, she chose particular entries because they indicate critical past personal moments or relationships.<sup>560</sup> But when an older, self-confident man assumes these memories, they lose their potency; their meaning is altered.<sup>561</sup>

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aspects of myself that were visually invisible. And not only is my blackness a part of me but there is [a] very strong masculine component to my personality and character," in "Adrian Piper," an interview with Laura Cottingham, *Journal of Contemporary Art*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 118.

<sup>558</sup> See, for example, Piper's Polaroid/text series, *The Mythic Being: I/You* (1974), which deals with a betrayal by Piper's childhood friend. Over the ten-part series, the painful memory is recounted through thought balloons that are written onto a repeated photograph of Piper and the ex-friend. As the feelings conveyed become more bitter the photograph is altered so that it gradually becomes an image of the Mythic Being.

<sup>559</sup> Piper, diary entry November 24, 1962 — Cycle II, cited in Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 111.

<sup>560</sup> See Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 103.

As the Mythic Being chants the above mantra, he highlights the way experiences are gendered. This is a memory of a girl who is marking the development of her sexual identity. It takes note of heterosexual pairings as well as the competition Piper felt among other girls for boys' attention. When such angst is put on the Mythic Being, the sexual orientation changes. As he walks down the street voicing this passage, he recounts a complicated story about teenage homosexuality. This reiteration frees Piper because the memory itself takes on a life of its own. Granted, there is an element of silliness: a man narrating a childish, overly-dramatic scene, over and over, is a spectacle. But, a new kind of hardship is brought to the story when an alternative sexuality adds to its confusion and disappointment.

Sexual identity is further explored and complicated in Piper's live performance entitled *The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women* (1975) (figure 70). In a photograph documenting the performance, the Mythic Being sits on a stoop from which s/he can watch passing pedestrians.<sup>562</sup> With elbows resting on his bent knees, the Mythic Being appears casual, yet alert. A thin cigar juts out from his mustached lips, while he brazenly surveys a white woman passing by. As a woman dressed as a man watching women, Piper becomes an active observer, in contrast to the women who unknowingly walk down the sidewalk. In a carnivalesque manner, Piper inverts her typical "cruising" experience from preyed upon woman to voyeur.

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<sup>561</sup> Piper asks: "How might I be different if the history I chronicled in my journal had happened to a man?" Piper, "Notes on the Mythic Being," 118. A gallery announcement for a show Piper did at Thomas Erben Gallery, 2001, has a black and white photograph of a pre-teen Piper (figure 69). She is dressed in drag – wearing a man's jacket, hat, and bow tie. The image is charmingly funny in that Piper's small face is dominated by large, plastic ears and Groucho Marx-like glasses and mustache, while her long, girlish ponytail flows over her left shoulder.

<sup>562</sup> According to Piper, the performance was only done once and lasted about half an hour. E-mail to Debra Wacks, August 22, 2002.

The change in gender, and subsequently in her position of power, alters Piper's sexual energy. In describing her feelings when dressed as the Mythic Being, Piper writes:

My sexual attraction to women flows more freely, uninhibited  
by my fear of their rejection in case my feelings should show  
in my face; . . . I follow them with my eyes on the street,  
fantasizing vivid scenes of lovemaking and intimacy.<sup>563</sup>

Piper's liberation as a "man," is not only associated with scopophilic control, but with sexual freedom as well. As a "man," Piper allows herself to be consciously attracted to women. Although she heterosexualizes her lesbian fantasies (as a "man" interested in women), the Mythic Being's cruising should be read as a form of queer drag. For Piper uses the carnivalesque release created by the performance to transgress socially defined sexual boundaries. The subsequent ambiguity permits her to publicly act upon her desires via the gaze.

Viewers who are knowledgeable of Piper's masquerade in *Cruising White Women*, can appreciate the carnivalesque elements at play: the seizing of power, the defiance of boundaries. But there remains a more biting edge to the performance. The title of the piece declares that the Mythic Being, an overtly racially marked man, is specifically scanning white women. Here Piper confronts issues of racism through stereotypes of sexual violence and the phobia of miscegenation. This goes beyond the everyday objectification of women by men and moves towards an assumption of threat only because the man is black and the women are white. By simply suggesting a black man's interest in white women Piper grapples with a xenophobic impulse that has taken root in American society.

In a chapter entitled "Rape, Racism and the Myth of the Black Rapist," Angela Davis shows that even among self-identified liberal thinkers, the prevalent

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<sup>563</sup> Piper, "Notes on the Mythic Being," 118. Piper writes in her notes concerning a live performance as the Mythic Being: "Felt really horny. If I'd had a cock I would've surely had an erection," Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 104.

presumption is that when white women are raped, it is usually by black men.<sup>564</sup>

Davis suggests that the “myth” of the black rapist stems from its use as a justification for the rampant lynchings of black men after the Civil War. Although in reality it was often white men (slave owners, then employers) who habitually raped black women, an entire narrative developed surrounding the inherent danger of black men to white women. Davis argues that once slavery was outlawed, black men were no longer possessions to be preserved and their lynching became epidemic.<sup>565</sup> Post-Civil War racists positioned lynching as a necessary deterrence/punishment for black sexual deviance. And the belief in this stereotypical perversion has long since persevered, as Jean MacKellar demonstrates in 1975:

Blacks raised in the hard life of the ghetto learn that they can get what they want only by seizing it. Violence is the rule in the game for survival. Women are fair prey: to obtain a woman one subdues her.<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>564</sup> Angela Y. Davis, “Rape, Racism and the Myth of the Black Rapist,” in her book *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Random House, 1981).

<sup>565</sup> See Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929), or Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *On Lynching* (New York: Arno Press and New York Times, 1969).

<sup>566</sup> Jean MacKellar, *Rape: The Bait and the Trap* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1975) 72, cited in Angela Davis, 179. The tragic case of Emmett Till illuminates the hysteria concerning the threat of black men to white women. Till, a black fourteen-year-old boy, was violently murdered in 1955 for allegedly whistling at a white woman. The published photograph of his mutilated body and his story continues to be a profound reminder of racist violence today. See, for instance, Elizabeth Alexander, “Can you be BLACK and look at this?: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994). In her ground-breaking study on rape, Susan Brownmiller describes Till as an inevitable stereotypical black rapist: “Emmett Till was going to show his black buddies that he, and by inference, *they* could get a white woman and Carolyn Bryant was the nearest convenient object. In concrete terms, the accessibility of *all* white women was on review. . . . And what of the wolf whistle, Till’s ‘gesture of adolescent bravado?’ . . . It was a deliberate insult just short of physical assault, a last reminder to Carolyn Bryant that this black boy, Till, had in mind to possess her.” Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975) 194, cited in Angela Davis, 178.

MacKellar never stops to question the presumption that all black men subject to a “hard life” possess violent tendencies. She simply accepts it as a given and proceeds.

In 1994, Kobena Mercer echoed Davis’ thesis when he observes that the Rodney King beating “showed that wherever white male terror is wielded with the alibi of protecting white women from black men, the expressive violence of racism is always inescapably gendered and thoroughly implicated in sexuality.”<sup>567</sup> It is this combination of racism, sex, and violence that Piper brings to light in her *Cruising White Women* performance.<sup>568</sup> Through her cross-dressing carnivalism Piper provides layers of meaning that subtly leads viewers to take note of their own racist/xenophobic reactions.<sup>569</sup>

Any subtlety in Piper’s work is replaced by direct confrontation in her photographic performance *I Embod*y (1975) (figure 71). The black and white image

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<sup>567</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Fear of a Black Penis,” *Artforum* (April 1994) 80. Mercer begins by quoting Stacey Koon, one of the police officers charged with Rodney King’s attack: “According to Koon, when King was approached by a white female Highway Patrol officer with a gun, ‘He grabbed his butt with both hands and began to shake and gyrate his fanny in a sexually suggestive fashion. . . . As King sexually gyrated, a mixture of fear and offense overcame Melanie. The fear was of a Mandingo sexual encounter.’” Cited in Mercer, 80.

<sup>568</sup> In tandem with the stereotypes concerning the sexual violence of black men is the presumption of their general criminal tendencies. In *The Mythic Being: Getting Back* (1975) Piper publicly attacked a (white) co-performer in a mocking gesture of carnivalesque violence (figure 72). She writes that both *Cruising White Women* and *Getting Back* “expressed overtly my sense of difference and alienation from others in the Harvard environment . . . I was aware of the ways in which that community established hierarchies of pedigree based on family (Saltonstall is better than Kennedy), class (the richer the better), ethnicity (WASP is better than Jew), gender (male is better than female), and schooling (St. Paul’s is better than Fieldston).” Piper, “The Mythic Being: Getting Back” (1975), in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 147.

<sup>569</sup> Perhaps, the Mythic Being may be understood as a kind of carnivalesque “clown” in that “the ritual clown acts out a forbidden social role for the general good of the community,” Charney, 172. Charney is referring to the ritual clown in Native-American tribes of the Southwest, but a similar sentiment can be applied to Piper. These clowns, according to Charney, are “truth-speakers,” 173.

depicts the Mythic Being's face and shoulders in a tight three-quarter view. His right hand holds a cigar to his mouth as he seemingly contemplates the viewer. The left side of his face is completely darkened by shadow, but through the tinted lenses of his glasses, the intensity of his right eye is striking. With an oil crayon, Piper adds texture to the image along with a thought balloon containing the following: "I Embodiment Everything You Most Hate and Fear." Gone are the somewhat ludic and comically repetitive elements of Piper's earlier Mythic Being performances. Now, in a single, emphatic statement, Piper forces her viewers to recognize their prejudices against the Mythic Being's otherness.<sup>570</sup>

By using the second-person pronoun, "you," Piper allows for no misunderstandings. The person standing before the image must deal with the statement. Does this Mythic Being (or another "other") always already embody "your" hatred and fear? The viewer's uneasy response may be tempered with nervous, or even cathartic laughter. Here the sardonic has been permeated with disdain and sarcasm.<sup>571</sup> The humor in *I Embodiment*, while caustic, nonetheless helps viewers to recognize their xenophobia. At once abusive and hopeful, *I Embodiment* conveys carnivalesque ambivalence and rejuvenation.<sup>572</sup>

In 1988, Piper stated: "Racism begins with you and me, here and now, and consists in our tendency to try to eradicate each other's singularity through

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<sup>570</sup> As Thelma Golden states: "Fear, specifically white fear of blackness, is what Piper confronts in her art," Thelma Golden, "My Brother," in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, 26.

<sup>571</sup> Sarcasm often includes an intent to hurt, as Arthur Berger points out: "Sarcasm stems from the Greek *sarkazein*, 'to tear the flesh, to bite.' It involves the use of cutting, contemptuous, and 'biting' remarks, delivered often in a hostile manner." Arthur Asa Berger, 49.

<sup>572</sup> Bakhtin writes of carnival: "The heart of the matter is the ambivalent combination of abuse and praise, of the wish for death and the wish for life, projected in the atmosphere of the festival of fire, that is, of burning and rebirth," Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 248.



stereotyped conceptualization.”<sup>573</sup> Piper is concerned with respecting and nourishing everyone’s (radical) uniqueness. For her, art attempts to dismantle the homogenization and fear that stems from stereotyping. In this way, Piper’s project can be viewed in opposition to the identity politics that dominated much of the 1980s, which ultimately attempted to reduce people according to said affiliations, instead of affirming each individual’s personal complexity.<sup>574</sup>

### V A Bridge, Rather than a Conclusion

My activity changes the world.

— Piper<sup>575</sup>

I’d rather be an ironist than a terrorist.

— Suleiman<sup>576</sup>

From 1982 to 1984 Piper organized interactive performances called *Funk Lessons*, where music appreciation and dance were used as a means to combat racism and xenophobia. For this work, Piper gave groups of people information about funk music and lessons in dancing to it. Funk, Piper explains, “has its origins in African tribal music and dance and is the result of the increasing interest of contemporary

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<sup>573</sup> Piper, “On Conceptual Art” (1988), reprinted in Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 242.

<sup>574</sup> See Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I: Essay,” (1990) reprinted in Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 248.

<sup>575</sup> Piper speaking about her street performances, “Talking to Myself,” 52.

<sup>576</sup> Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, 197.

black musicians and the populace in those sources elicited by the civil rights movement.”<sup>577</sup> But such music and its means of expression, notes Piper, are often inaccessible and consequently misunderstood by mainstream white culture.<sup>578</sup> With *Funk Lessons*, Piper endeavors to change this.

A 1983 video documenting a performance of *Funk Lessons* shows Piper patiently instructing a large group of mostly white students in dancing to what she describes as “black working-class culture” (figures 73 and 74).<sup>579</sup> She gives some history behind funk music and uses a chalkboard to analyze its associated stereotypes. For instance, she writes: “Most people think funk is boring, monotonous and lacks structure.” She then attempts to debunk such ideas through instruction: one needs to groove with the textured sounds. She carefully analyzes and defines the music, but also personally demonstrates dance moves like the “shoulder shrug” and the “hip isolation” for the audience. Considering the subject matter, Piper’s didacticism appears incongruous and funny.

Spliced into the video is footage from what appears to be a 1950s television broadcast. A suited, older, white man is seen sternly warning listeners of the dangerous influences of “nigger music.” His statement is chilling. When the tape returns to Piper’s performance, her conscientious lessons assume profound significance. Music and dance have been politicized. One can understand Piper’s objectives: with the appreciation of another’s culture comes respect. And if we can learn to acknowledge and enjoy differences in music, why not those among ourselves. Piper tackles xenophobia literally one step at a time.

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<sup>577</sup> Piper, “Notes on Funk I-IV,” in Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I*, 195.

<sup>578</sup> Piper, “Notes on Funk,” 195-211.

<sup>579</sup> Piper, “Notes on Funk,” 197. The video is shot from a performance held at University of California, Berkeley on November 6, 1983.

Piper's project, however, becomes two-fold. Not only does she combat stereotypes with new information and experience, she also creates a carnivalesque atmosphere in which anything — including the dismantling of social barriers — can happen. In writing about *Funk Lessons*, Piper explains that she staged the collaborative large-scale performance to “enable everyone present to GET DOWN AND PARTY. TOGETHER.”<sup>580</sup> Towards the end of the video, the words “Have some fun” flash on the screen. Although serious in intention, Piper wants her participants to take pleasure in the process. When dancing to funk music, asserts Piper, the goal is for complete participation “in a collectively shared, enjoyable experience.”<sup>581</sup> A communal body is created through Piper's optimism and by the end of the video everyone is dancing together. The result is carnival-like. And, as such, there is particular celebration in the rejection of the old (as represented by the 1950s clip), and the welcoming of the new.

*Funk Lessons* is joyous, smart, and funny, but not ironic. For Piper's intentions always relate back to her sincere belief in art's ability to create positive social change. This sentiment appears in marked contrast to some of the best recognized art of the 1980s — at which time, the art world mutated — painting reemerged, the art market boomed, politics took a back seat. With this, what was once considered to be feminist art changes, and simultaneously a few women artists move to the critical forefront. Their art, however, was often met with art historical amnesia, as if these artists suddenly burst onto the scene, out of nowhere. As Piper writes:

In the early 1970s, women artists, most of them white, insistently and vocally made their concerns and presence felt . . . in a rash of group shows and articles on “Women Artists.” And in the late 1970s young white women artists entered the inner sanctum. But these artists were almost never those who had participated in the earlier feminist

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<sup>580</sup> Piper, “Notes on Funk,” 195.

<sup>581</sup> Piper, “Notes on Funk,” 195.

movement. Oh, no! For you see, there was no connection between that earlier application of political pressure and the art world's acknowledgment of these younger women artists. They're just good artists, that's all!<sup>582</sup>

Piper's sarcasm stems from her feelings of being cheated. Many women artists, including Piper, Antin, and Wilke worked hard to alter the art world in the 1970s, but, for the most part, those who reaped the benefits in the 80s had not been involved in the initial struggle.

Three women artists in particular received the majority of the attention and success during the 1980s: Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer. All three of them produced slick work that strategically borrows techniques from the media.<sup>583</sup> They were occasionally referred to as the "technology girls," because of the way they use photography qua photography or other "new" media.<sup>584</sup> Sherman and Kruger created two-dimensional art that could be easily bought, sold, and displayed. And while Holzer's installations were often more complicated in their technological demands, her art proved to be very salable.

Although Sherman, Kruger, and Holzer's work was affected by 70s feminist art, their ties to the past were rarely discussed critically, their artistic matrilineage was denied. It is not that the three artists intentionally removed themselves from 70s feminist art, necessarily, but rather that this is the way the art world chose to receive

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<sup>582</sup> Piper, "Some Very FORWARD Remarks," xxxvii. Piper notes that the same is true for black artists: one generation did most of the battling (late 1980s), while the next generation enjoyed the successes (early 90s).

<sup>583</sup> I am not saying that Sherman, Kruger, or Holzer were simplistic or apolitical, only that they "packaged" their art/messages in ways that the mainstream art world embraced. They were, in fact, concerned with deconstructing mass media representations of women, among other issues.

<sup>584</sup> Ida Applebroog uses the term "technology girls" to refer to the few women who achieved star status in the 1980s, and notes that other women artists were basically "shut out" by the art world. Applebroog is quoted from the video "Reclaiming the Body: Feminist Art in America," A Michael Blackwood Productions release, 1995.

their work. These artists came to represent a new, more palatable kind of feminism. Indeed, their art was constantly used to illustrate texts dedicated to postmodern theory. For they were seen as savvy, ironic, and cool (removed from their work), versus the women of the 70s, who were represented as naive, humorless, and hot (too passionate, too physical, too grotesque, too unbounded). Sherman, Kruger, and Holzer were not part of a feminist carnivalesque moment, for it had basically passed. Their art was controlled, their boundaries in check, their bodies dematerialized.<sup>585</sup> None of them produced performance art.

Significantly, Sherman, Kruger, and Holzer were each applauded for their use of humor, which usually stemmed from irony.<sup>586</sup> The stereotypical notion that feminists lack a sense of humor became period-based — linked to the 1970s Women's Movement — which still serves to theoretically pit 70s women against 80s women.<sup>587</sup> Art produced in earnest, by contrast, is made to look amateur and passé. For “ironic pessimism replaces Bakhtin's optimistic utopianism” in the often narcissistic and

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<sup>585</sup> By the late 1980s, Sherman was producing photographs of vomit, blood, and other grotesque detritus. Indeed, she can be said to have been influenced by the carnivalesque-grotesque, but now it assumes another form. Grotesque art from the 80s differs from that of the 70s, particularly because feminism was no longer connected with a larger carnivalesque unruliness during the 80s. Moreover, the way in which Sherman uses her medium — photography — creates a sense of distance. The “mess” is contained within the frame.

<sup>586</sup> In fact, irony has since become a kind of prerequisite for success in the contemporary art market. See Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1995). Note: this does not mean that 70s feminist artists never use irony — see Antin's work, for instance.

<sup>587</sup> The notion that a socially threatening woman has control over her own spectacle and uses humor rebelliously has been adopted in discussions of contemporary feminist artists as “Bad Girls.” For instance, Marcia Tucker's *Bad Girls* exhibition and catalogue, which explore the use of humor in feminist art, but fails to mention the 70s. Jo Anna Isaak also avoids the 70s in *Feminism & Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (London: Routledge, 1996). Nonetheless, Tucker and Isaak each provide important theoretical backgrounds for the understanding of women who use humor subversively in relation to the carnivalesque.

cynical 1980s.<sup>588</sup> The desire for, or more accurately, the belief in art's ability to create change no longer appears to be a driving force. Consequently, the socio-political passion of the 70s was avoided in tandem with the over-the-top, anti-hierarchical, unpredictable, and transgressive feminist art that was produced at the same time.

Thus, there are two issues here. First: the cooler, removed feminist art of the 80s diverges from the unruly, consciously socio-political, feminist art of the 70s. As a partial result, the former received great amounts of economic and critical success that the latter has yet to see. And second, although seemingly contradictory: the 80s artists were nonetheless influenced by the 1970s. For example, it is often forgotten that Cindy Sherman's extremely popular *Untitled Film Still* series dates as early as 1978. Like Wilke, Sherman negotiates feminist criticism with popular/traditional representations of women vis-à-vis her own image. And the way in which Sherman uses masquerade to dramatically explore different identities echoes the early 70s performance work of Antin and Piper, as well as any other number of women performance artists of the decade. It seems natural that a later generation of artists would be understood as reacting to or influenced by the previous generation, but an artificially segregated gap has been imposed on women producing art in the 70s and 80s.<sup>589</sup>

While an art historical bridge needs to be established between the art produced by feminists of the 1970s and the art produced by feminists of the 1980s, it should be remembered that "carnival is opposed to official culture."<sup>590</sup> The most visible feminist art of the 1980s was marketable, contained, and easily co-optable by museums and

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<sup>588</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 74. See Susan Douglas's discussion about the 1980s and Christopher Lasch's best-selling book, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Warner Books, 1979) 247-250.

<sup>589</sup> One recent book that attempts to broadly examine feminist art across generations is Helena Reckitt, ed. *Art and Feminism* (New York: Phaidon, 2001).

<sup>590</sup> Krystyna Pomorska, Foreword to *Rabelais and His World*, x.

galleries alike, which explains why Sherman, Kruger, and Holzer were able to be successful. The carnivalesque first had to be eschewed before feminist art could be accepted by the mainstream art world. Likewise, this explains why 70s feminist performance artists have not been canonized by art historians nor their art traded at exorbitant prices — the work is understood to inherently oppose “official culture.”

Even Wilke, Antin, and Piper began to move away from performance art during the 1980s. Wilke produced more sculpture and paintings, Antin worked on directing film and video projects, and Piper concentrated on photo/text work and video installations. The thrust of their work changed, for feminism no longer embodied a carnivalesque spirit and feminist art was no longer part and parcel of a national radical movement.

But performance and the carnivalesque did not disappear from the 80s art world. Instead they became attached to different socio-political concerns — quite often surrounding issues of sexuality and/or AIDS.<sup>591</sup> Some of the most interesting and important performance art of the decade was produced by women whose work clearly reflects both 70s feminist performance art and the Women’s Movement, but who now deal with the tragic-comic explorations of one’s sexual/queer identity. This can be seen in the playful skits of Carmelita Tropicana, the narrative-based work of Holly Hughes, or the abject and physically unruly performances of Karen Finley.<sup>592</sup> Each of these

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<sup>591</sup> Although grassroots activism decreased when yuppies emerged in the 1980s, new groups of people managed to bring their agendas to the public. For example, 500,000 demonstrators marched on Washington in 1987 demanding funds for AIDS awareness, research, and treatment. And the members of ACT-UP (Aids Coalition To Unleash Power) made sure that their slogan, Silence = Death, became ubiquitous around the country. As a result, what had been virtually an unknown disease in 1980, became a household word/fear by the end of the decade.

<sup>592</sup> See Kathy Wentrack’s unpublished paper for the Graduate Center, CUNY, “Schneemann and Finley: Socialized Abjection,” 1998. See also, C. Carr, “*Rehearsals for Zero Hour: Performance in the Eighties*,” in *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990).

artists embrace different aspects of carnivalism in her own way.<sup>593</sup> But that is the subject of another dissertation.

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Throughout *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin consistently refers to “everyone,” yet he primarily only considers the participation of men in carnival celebrations. The carnivalesque spirit of the 70s Women’s Movement, however, ultimately changed this as members en-masse challenged authoritarian powers. The life-altering transformations achieved by the end of the 1970s can be understood as the denouement of feminist carnivalism that occurred during the decade.<sup>594</sup>

Inspired by the revolutionary tone of the Women’s Movement, feminist artists turned to the defiance of performance art throughout the 1970s. Wilke, Antin, and Piper have been analyzed in this paper as case studies. Each critique the patriarchy/hierarchy while dealing with issues of representation through problems of identity and stereotypes. They employed both nudity and drag to produce private performances and public spectacles. And all three used carnivalesque humor in a way that can be understood along a spectrum that includes ambiguity, liminality, and the grotesque. By strategically utilizing humor, Wilke, Antin, and Piper

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<sup>593</sup> In addition, the anonymous Guerrilla Girls refer to themselves as the “Conscience of the Art World,” and claim to “fight sexism and racism in the art world with facts, humor and fake fur.” See *Confessions of The Guerrilla Girls*, eds. The Guerrilla Girls (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995). Clearly, they embrace a carnivalesque spirit in their performance-oriented activism.

<sup>594</sup> Anna Chave concludes: “Those who would now diminish the coporealized, polemicized feminism of the 1970s fail to see that their ability to imagine that feminism has become effectively optional for women is in itself a form of testimony to the formidable gains that were achieved precisely through such unembarrassed and concerted feminist campaigns.” Anna C. Chave, statement in *Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art of the 1970s*, eds. Catherine Morris and Ingrid Schaffner (New York: White Columns, 2002) 10.



produced performance art that simultaneously conveyed subversive carnivalism and political radicality.

Yet, "Complete liberty," declares Bakhtin, "is possible only in the completely fearless world."<sup>595</sup> Fearlessness is a requirement for liberation. . . which explains why women have yet to gain true freedom. Still, Bakhtin's writing provides encouragement, for he "carnivalizes the present because it is a hope for the future."<sup>596</sup>

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<sup>595</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 47.

<sup>596</sup> Holquist prologue to *Rabelais and His World*, xxii.



1. Linda Montano, *Chicken Dance* (from *Chicken Woman Series*)  
1972, performance.



2. Photograph from Women's Strike for Equality March,  
August 26, 1970, New York City.



3. Photograph from Women's Strike for Equality March,  
August 26, 1970, New York City.



4. Marie Severin, *Ms.* magazine cover from November 1973.



5. Anne Gauldin and Denise Yarfitz, *The Waitress Goddess Diana*, 1978, performance.



6. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*, 1974, 28 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in., Performalist Self-Portraits with Les Wollam.

**Having a talent isn't worth much  
unless you know what to do with it.**



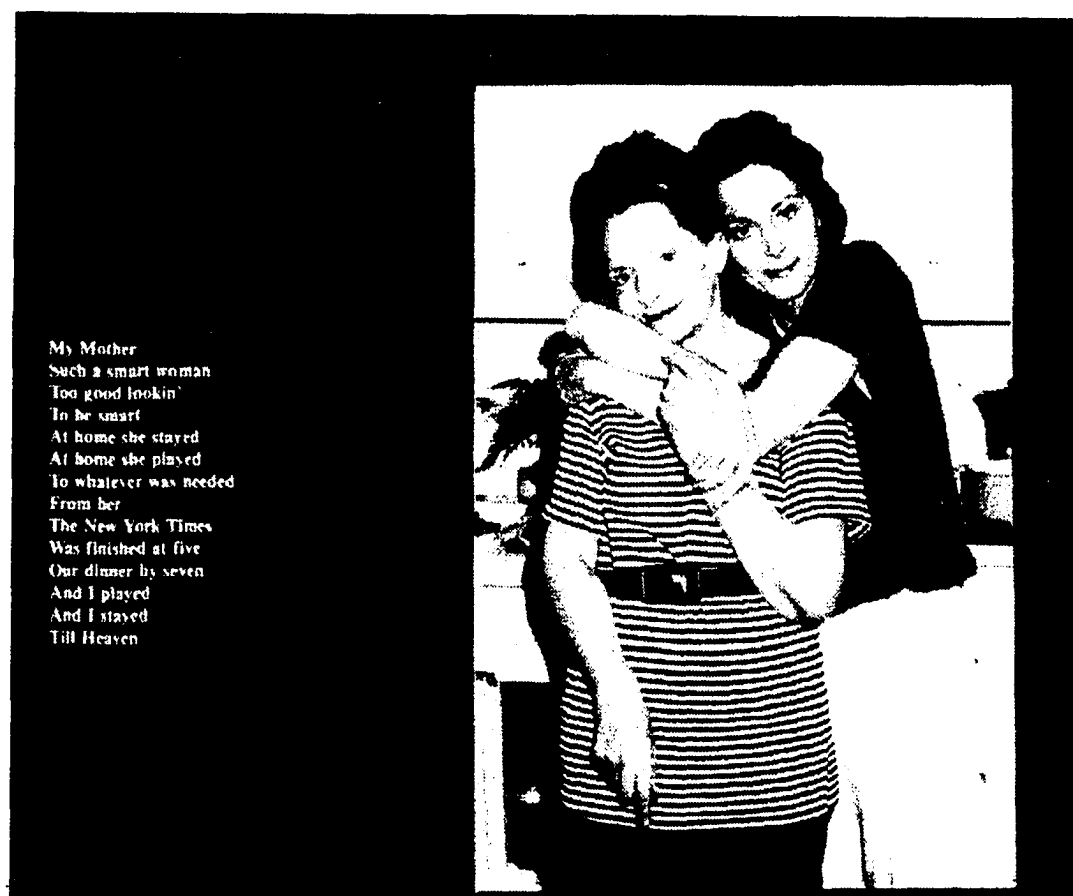
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7. Hannah Wilke, *Having a talent isn't worth much . . .*, 1976, proposed subway ad for  
The School of Visual Art, black and white photograph, 45 x 30 in.





My Mother  
Such a smart woman  
Too good lookin'  
To be smart  
At home she stayed  
At home she played  
To whatever was needed  
From her  
The New York Times  
Was finished at five  
Our dinner by seven  
And I played  
And I stayed  
Till Heaven

8. Hannah Wilke, *My Mother*, 1978-1983, black and white photograph with poem, 40 x 52 in.



9. Hannah Wilke, *Dancing in the Dark*, 1978, Performalist Self-Portrait  
with Donald Goddard.



10. Hannah Wilke, *Three Goddesses, Three Goddards*, 1976, four black and white photographs, Performalist Self Portrait with Donald Goddard.

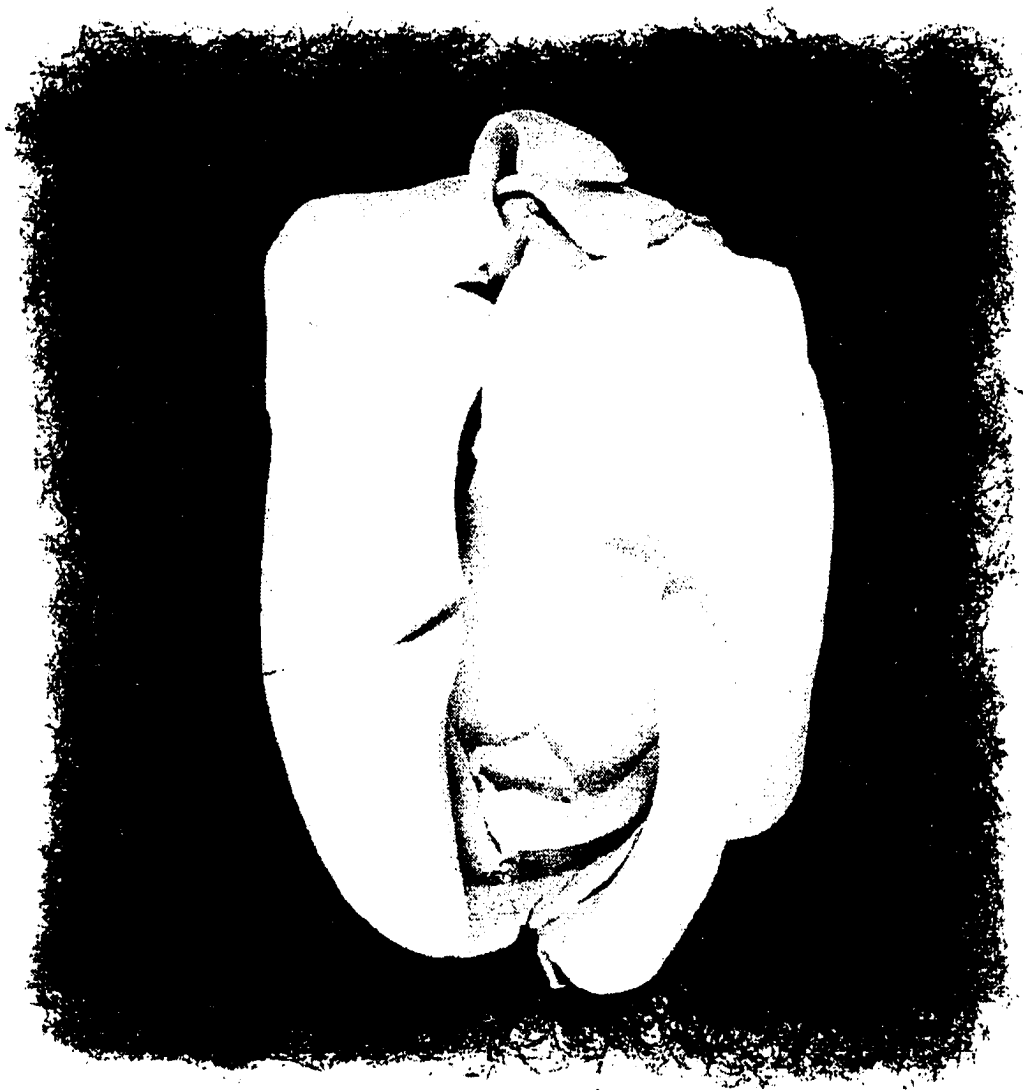




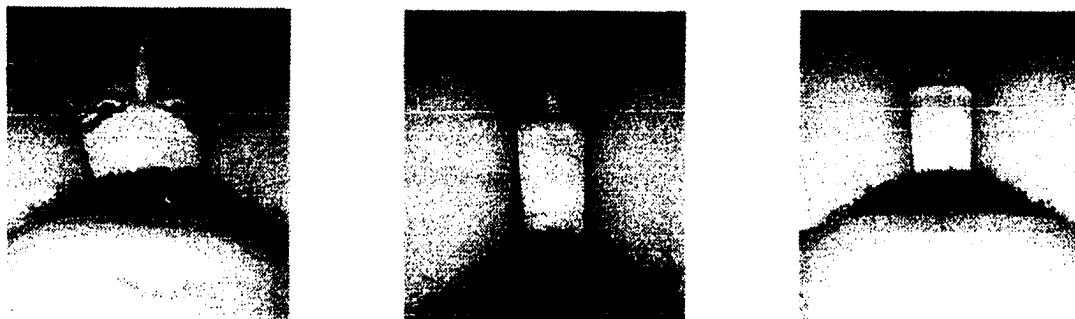
12. Hannah Wilke, *Intercourse with. . .*, 1977, performance.



13. Hannah Wilke, *Intercourse with. . .*, 1977, still from videotape.



14. Hannah Wilke, *Teasle Cushion*, 1967, terra cotta, liquitex, and Astroturf. 9 ¾ X 7 in.



15. Hannah Wilke, *Venus Envy*, with *Richard Hamilton*, 1980,  
unique Polaroid photographs, 3 ¾ x 13 in.





16. Hannah Wilke, *I Object: Memoirs of A Sugargiver*, 1977-1978, two cibachromes, each 24 x 16 in., Performalist Self-Portraits with Richard Hamilton.



17. Marcel Duchamp, *Etant donnés: 1 La Chute d'eau, 2 Le Gaz d'éclairage*, 1946-1966, mixed media assemblage, 95 ½ x 70 in.



18. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*, 1974, performance.



19. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Stratification Object Series*, 1974, 1 of 28 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in., Performalist Self-Portraits with Les Wollam.



20. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series*, 1974. 1 of 28 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in., Performalist Self-Portraits with Les Wollam.



21. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Stratification Object Series*, 1974, 1 of 28 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in., Performalist Self-Portraits with Les Wollam.

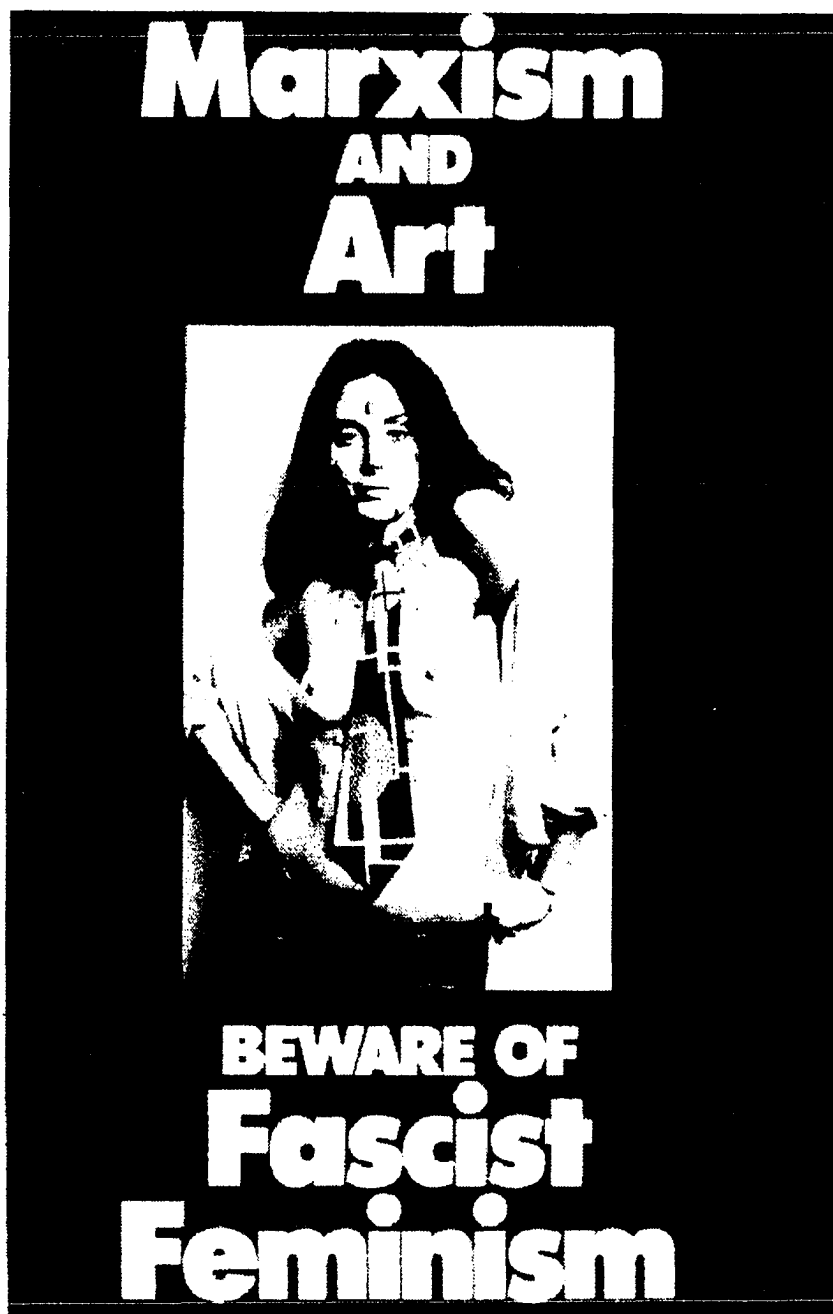


22. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Stratification Object Series*, 1974. 1 of 28 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in., Performalist Self-Portraits with Les Wollam.



23. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Stratification Object Series*, 1974, 1 of 28 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in., Performalist Self-Portraits with Les Wollam.

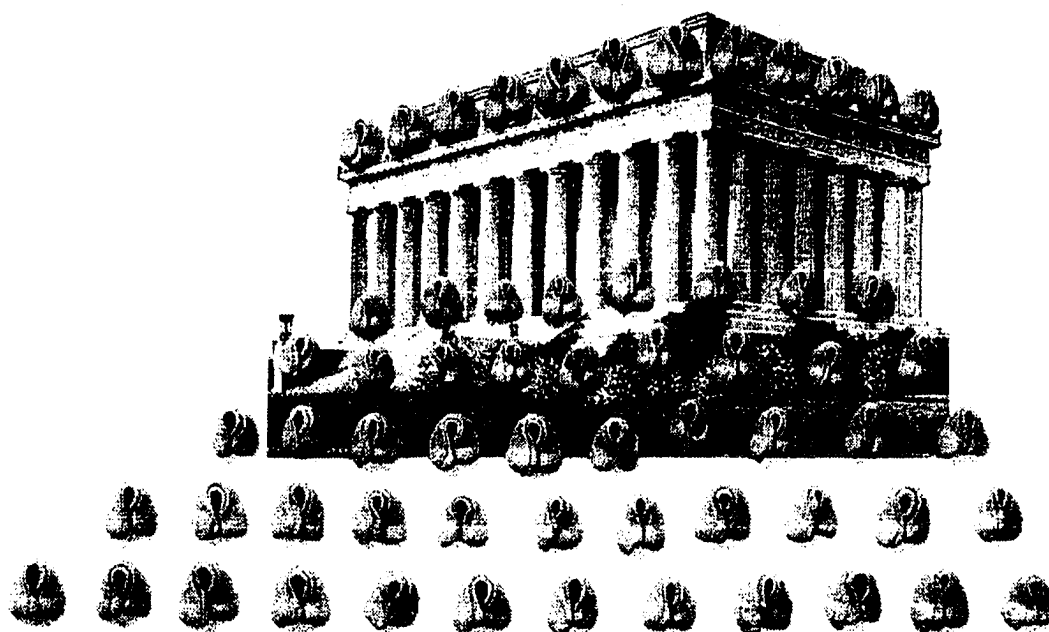




24. Hannah Wilke, *Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism*, 1977, silkscreen on Plexiglas, 36 x 27 1/2. Performalist Self-Portrait with Les Wollam.



25. Hannah Wilke, *My Count-ry 'Tis of Thee*. 1976. performance.



26. Hannah Wilke, *Lincoln Memorial*, 1976, kneaded erasers  
on postcard on painted wood.



27. Hannah Wilke, *My Count-ry 'Tis of Thee*, 1976, self-portrait as goddess photo murals (10 feet, 9 inches tall), chewing gum on board, and museum architecture.



28. Hannah Wilke, *Through the Large Glass*, 1976, still from video.



29. Hannah Wilke, *Through the Large Glass*, 1976, still from video.

# HANNAH WILKE:

# PHILLY

An auto-documentary of her performance at the Philadelphia Museum of Art for the films "Through the Large Glass" and "C'est ça, vie rose".

produced by Hans-Christof Stenzel for German television

Video camera by Andy Mann. Editing by John Sanborn and Hannah Wilke.



30. Hannah Wilke, *Philly*, 1976-1978, black and white photograph, 27 1/8 x 40 in.

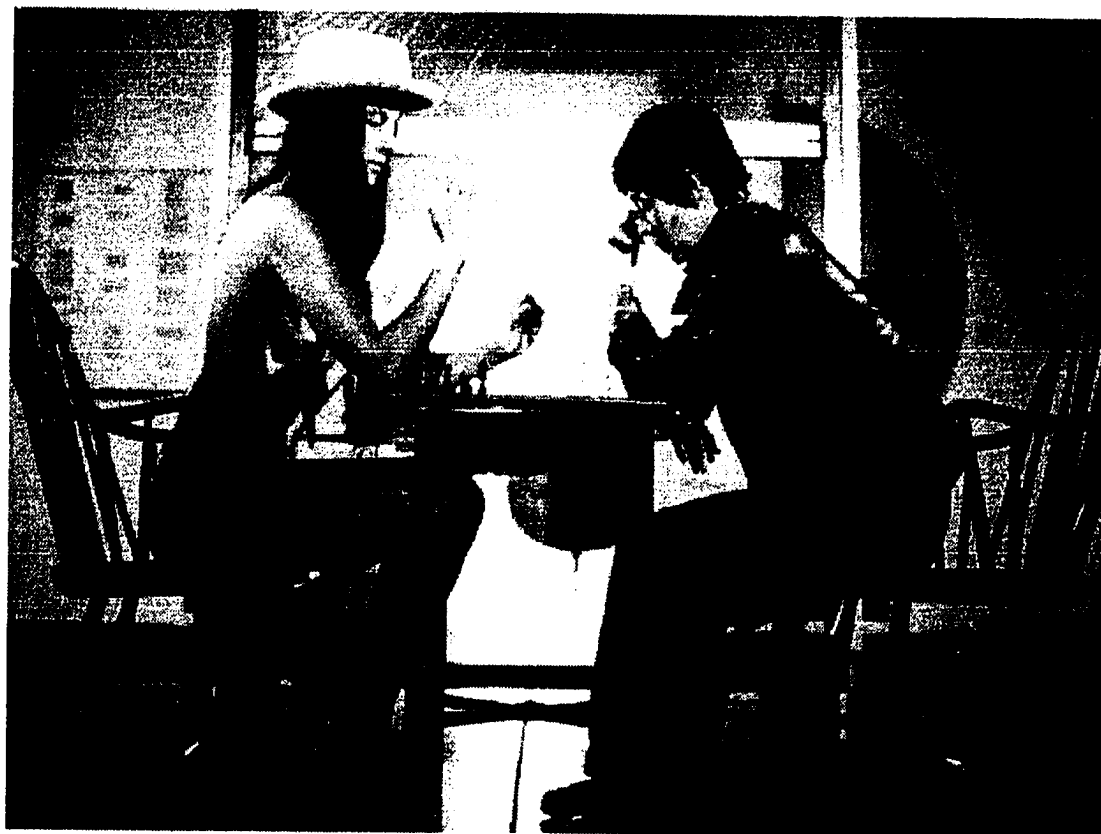


31. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. — Starification Object Series, Mastication Box*, 1974-1975, chewing gum, black and white photographs, playing instructions, and playing cards, 12 x 8 ½ x 2 in.





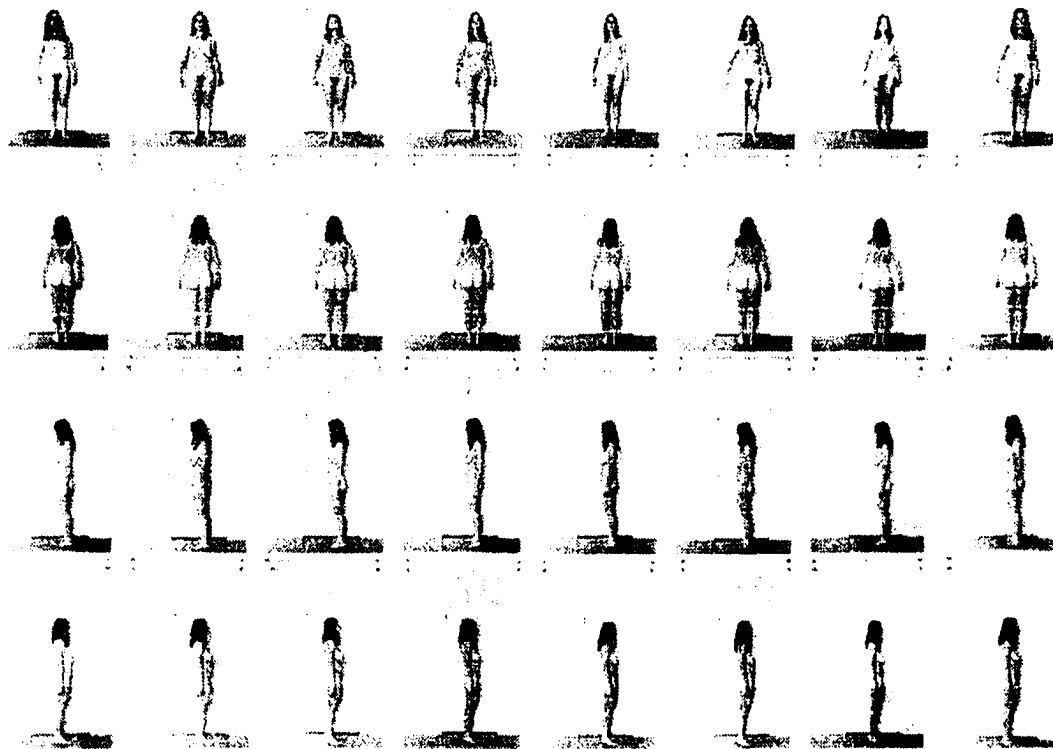
32. Black and white photograph of Marcel Duchamp and unidentified woman at the Pasadena Art Museum during Duchamp's retrospective exhibition, 1963.



33. Hannah Wilke, *C'est la vie rose*, 1976, still from film.



34. Hannah Wilke, *Portrait of the Artist in His Studio*, 1971, Performalist Self-Portrait.



35. Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (detail), 1972,  
144 black and white photographs, each 7 x 5 in.



36. Eleanor Antin, *Representational Painting*, 1971, still from videotape.



37. Eleanor Antin, *The Bearded Ballerina*, 1974, still from videotape.



38. Eleanor Antin, *Representational Painting*, 1971, still from videotape.



39. Eleanor Antin, *The King's Meditations*, 1974, wash, ink, and chalk on diazo paper, 17 ½ x 28 in.





40. Eleanor Antin, *The King*, 1972, still from videotape.



41. Eleanor Antin, *The King*, 1972, still from videotape.



42. Eleanor Antin, *The King of Solana Beach*, 1974-1975, one of eleven black and white photographs, mounted on board, with two text panels, each 6 x 9 in.



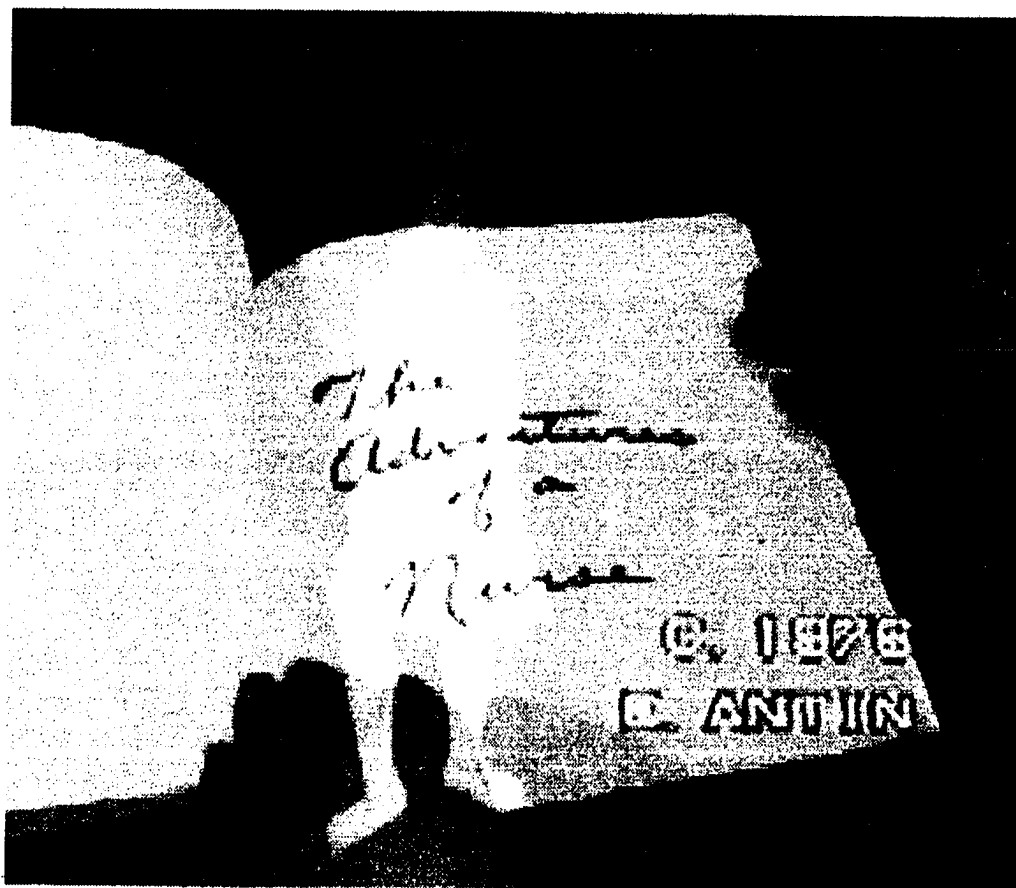
43. Eleanor Antin, *Battle of the Bluffs*, 1977, performance.



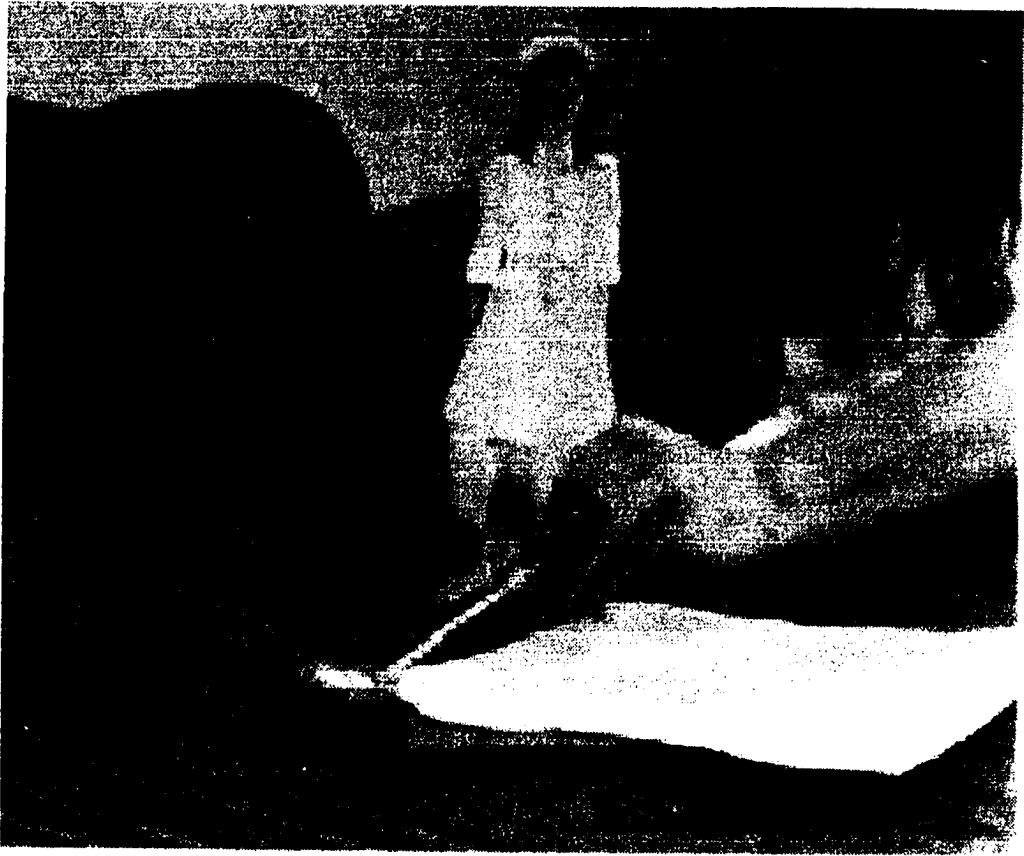
44. Eleanor Antin, *Portrait of the King*, 1972, black and white photograph, mounted on board, 13  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.



45. Eleanor Antin, *Caught in the Act: Choreography I — Center Stage* (Short Tutu), 1973, four of eight black and white photographs, mounted on board, each 7 x 4 ¾ in.



46. Eleanor Antin, *The Adventures of a Nurse I and II*, 1976, still from videotape.



47. Eleanor Antin, *The Adventures of a Nurse I and II*, 1976, still from videotape.

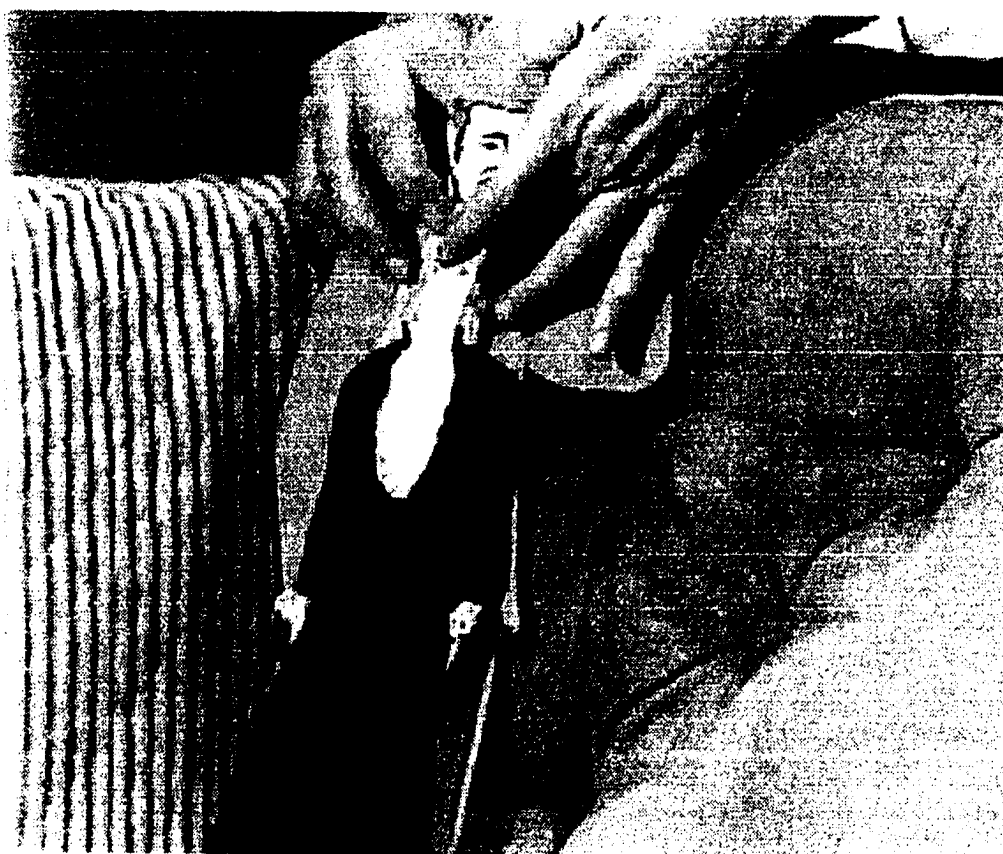




48. Eleanor Antin, *The Adventures of a Nurse I and II*, 1976, still from videotape.



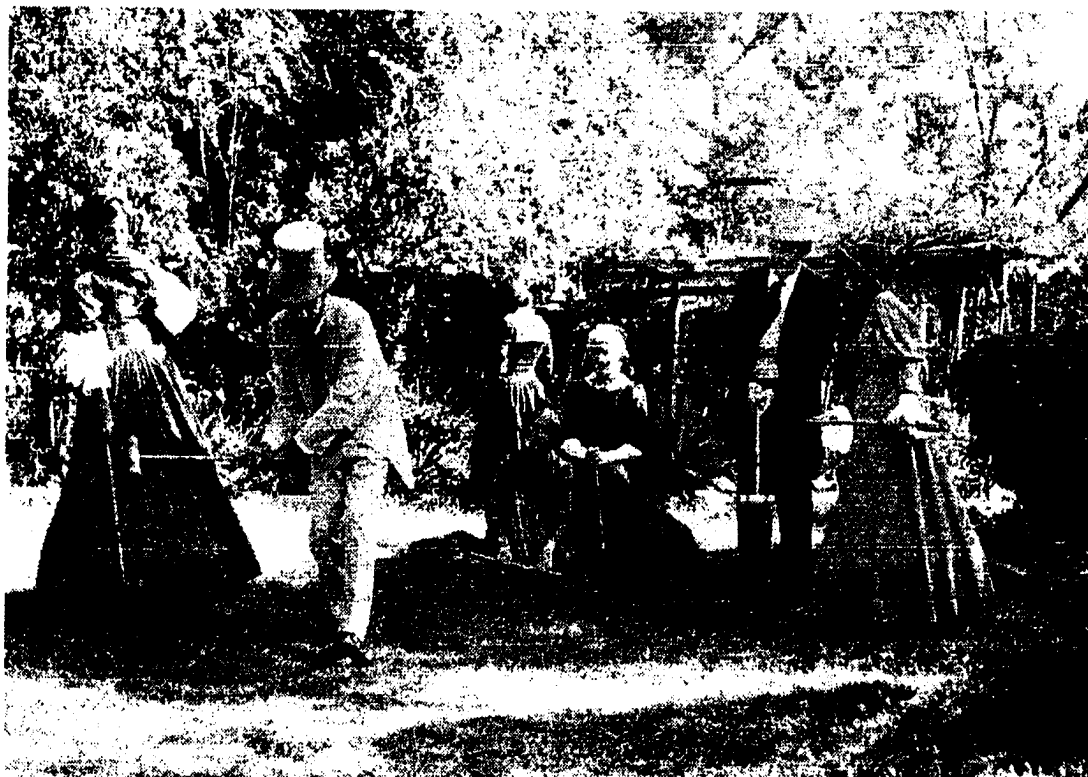
49. Eleanor Antin, *The Adventures of a Nurse I and II*, 1976, still from videotape.



50. Eleanor Antin, *The Adventures of a Nurse I and II*, 1976, still from videotape.



51. Eleanor Antin, *The Adventures of a Nurse I and II*, 1976, still from videotape.



52. Eleanor Antin, "The Gentleman's Game is the Lady's Gain," from *The Angel of Mercy: The Nightingale Family Album*, 1977, one of twenty-five tinted gelatin-silverprints, mounted on paperboard, each 18 x 13 in.



53. Eleanor Antin, "In the Trenches Before Sebastopol," from *The Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in the Crimea*, 1977, one of thirty-eight tinted gelatin-silver prints, mounted on paper, each 30  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 22 in.



54. Eleanor Antin, "War Games," from *The Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in the Crimea*, 1977 one of thirty-eight tinted gelatin-silver prints, mounted on paper, each 30  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 22 in.



55. Eleanor Antin, *Angel of Mercy*, 1977, still from videotape.  
1981 version of the live performance.





56. Eleanor Antin, *Angel of Mercy*, 1977, still from videotape, 1981 version of the live performance.



57. Eleanor Antin, *Angel of Mercy*, 1977, still from videotape,  
1981 version of the live performance.



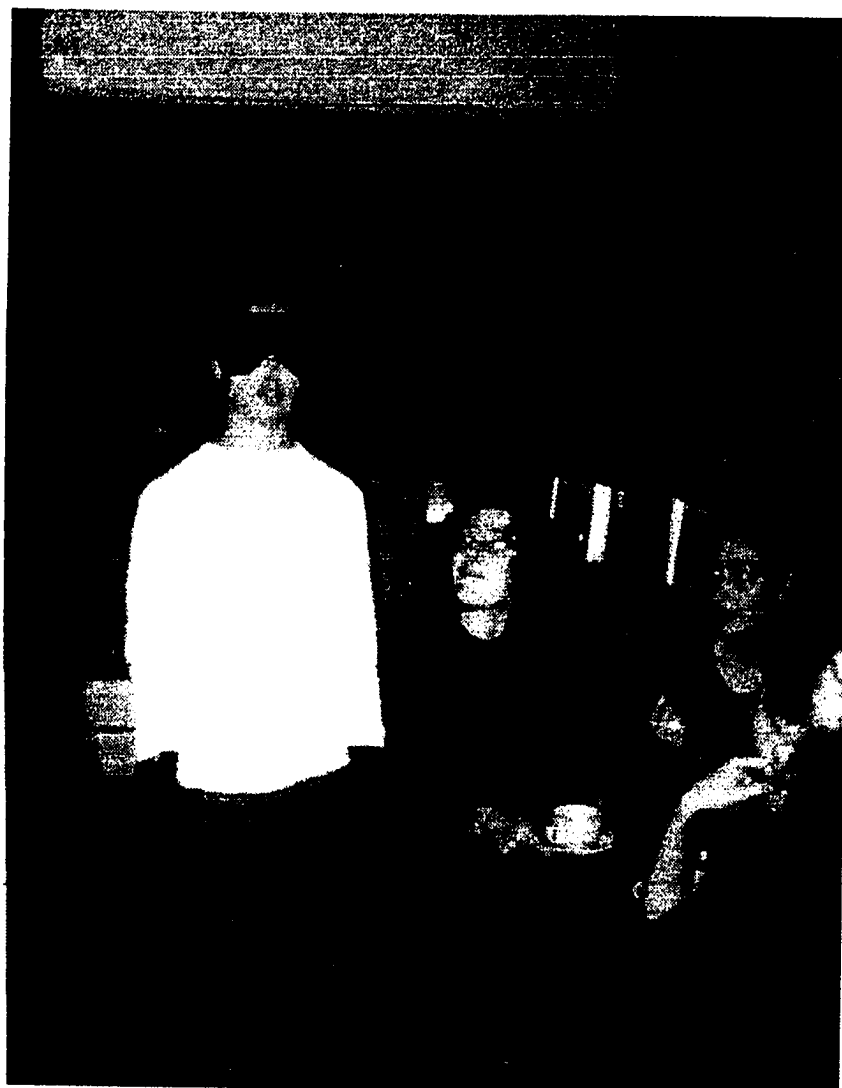
58. Eleanor Antin, *Angel of Mercy*, 1977, still from videotape,  
1981 version of the live performance.



59. Eleanor Antin. *Angel of Mercy*, 1977, still from videotape,  
1981 version of the live performance.



60. Eleanor Antin, *Angel of Mercy*, 1977, still from videotape,  
1981 version of the live performance.



61. Adrian Piper, *Untitled Performance at Max's Kansas City*, 1970, performance.



62. Adrian Piper, *Food For the Spirit* (detail), 1971, performance.



63. Adrian Piper, *Writing the Critique of Pure Reason*, 1975, performance.

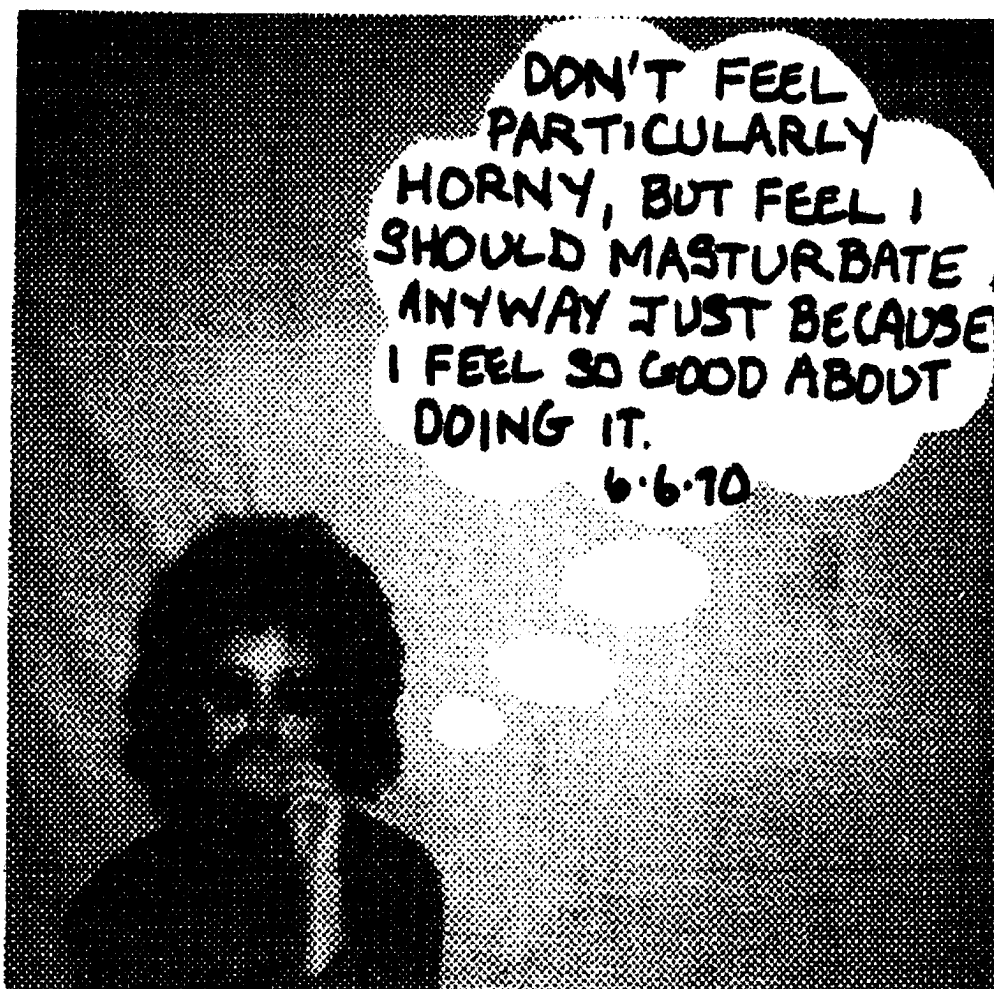




64. Adrian Piper, *Catalysis IV*, 1970, performance.



65. Adrian Piper, preparing for *The Mythic Being*, 1974, still from film.

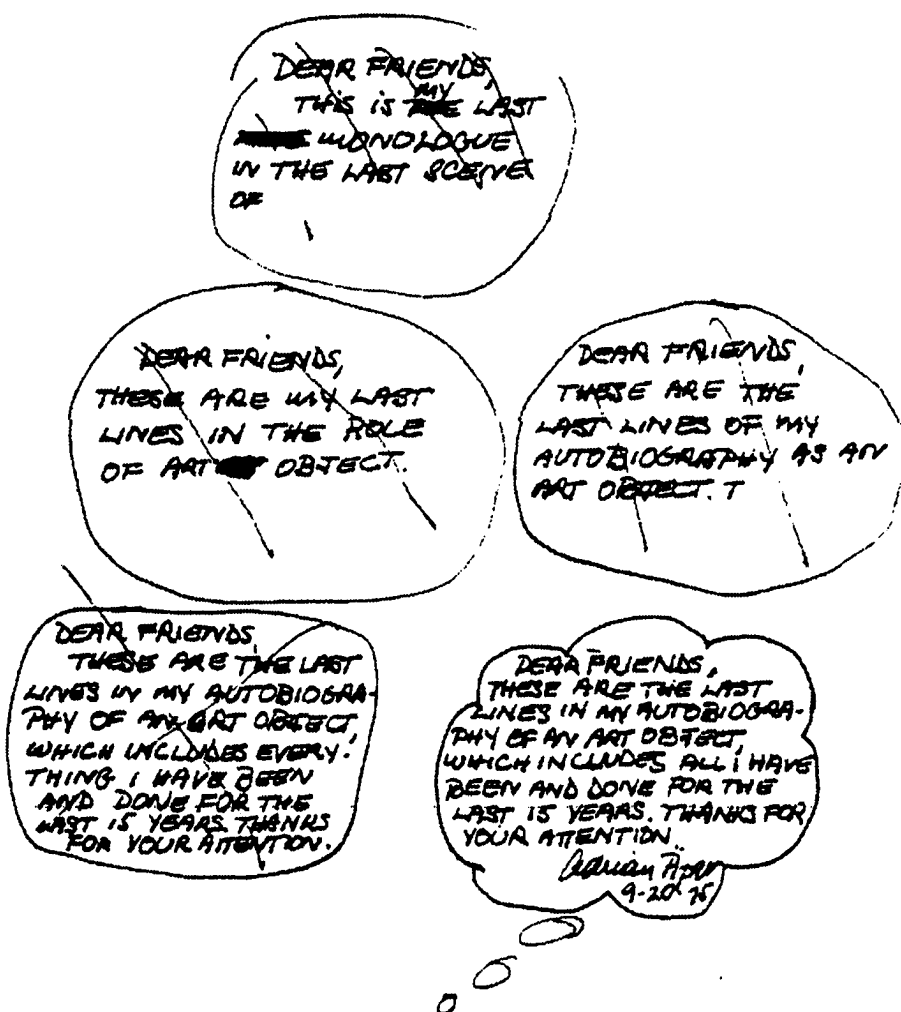


66. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being, Cycle 1*: 6/6/70, 1974, altered photograph with added text.

# Galleries

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                      |                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                |                                                                                         |
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| <b>TRIBUTE TO DALI</b><br>MAY 13 - MAY 14<br>100 E. 10th Street                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>FISCHER</b><br>LERNER-MELLER<br>700 MADISON AVE. N.Y.<br>May 11                                   | <b>ED OATES</b><br>JULIAS GALLERY - 15 E. 55th N.Y.                                                          | <b>Robert HENRY</b><br>green Mountain<br>100 Spring Street                                                     | <b>REBA ROTTENBERG</b><br>New York<br>April 23 - May 1<br>GALLERY                       |
| <b>HOMITZKY</b><br>Roko<br>90 E. 10th Street                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <b>WILLIAM BECKMAN<br/>BARTON BENES</b><br>100 E. 10th Street                                        | <b>101</b><br>101 E. 10th Street                                                                             | <b>HOUSTON</b><br>APRIL 13 - MAY 3<br>167 Spring Street                                                        | <b>MAINAR</b><br>green Mountain<br>100 Spring Street                                    |
| <b>THOMAS GEORGE<br/>BETTY PARSONS</b><br>A. 20th<br>24 W. 17th N.                                                                                                                                                                                    | <b>LEVI</b><br>PAINTINGS<br>100 W. 17th<br>Frank Nelson Gallery                                      | <b>Sandi Gross</b><br>100 W. 17th                                                                            | <b>MAY STEVENS</b><br>APRIL 20 - MAY 10<br>50th 20 99 SPRING                                                   | <b>14 SCULPTOR:<br/>GALLERY</b><br>Remains for April 27<br>and May 10<br>100 W. 17th N. |
| <b>SARIANO</b><br>AT THE<br>ROSENGAUSS GALLERY<br>11 BROADWAY AVE. 100 W. 17th<br>11th & 12th Street                                                                                                                                                  | <b>PETER CARELLA</b><br>Paintings<br>April 28 - May 15<br>THE FIRST STREET GALLERY<br>118 Prince St. | <b>Byker</b><br>100 W. 17th                                                                                  | <b>TOM BOUTIS</b><br>RUTH ANN<br>FREDENTHAL<br>EMILY MASON<br>GABRIELE ROOS<br>100 W. 17th<br>LANDMARK GALLERY | <b>ALICE AYCOE</b><br>112 Greene Str<br>April 20 - May                                  |
| <b>MARGE HELENCHILD</b><br>APR 20 - MAY 15<br>80th 20 99 SPRING                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>CIRCLE GALLERY LTD</b><br>100 W. 17th                                                             | <b>MYLO QUAM</b><br>NOW THRU MAY 12<br>WATER GALLERY<br>100 W. 17th                                          | <b>WESSELMA</b><br>100 W. 17th                                                                                 |                                                                                         |
| <b>ALVIN LOVING</b><br>FISCHBACH<br>489 BROADWAY                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <b>TANTRIC BUDDHIST ART</b><br>100 W. 17th                                                           | <b>BENEFIT SALE<br/>MAY 1-10</b><br><b>nader</b><br>ART GALLERY<br>Baruch College<br>155 E 24<br>100 W. 17th | <b>PHOTOGRAPHS<br/>BEATON NADAR HORST<br/>HOYNINGEN-HUENE</b><br>SCHWABEND GALLERY 100 W. 17th                 |                                                                                         |
| <b>10 Downtown</b><br>1974 April 21 - May 28 May 1 - 10<br>arc/hard/hardman<br>133 west 24 st<br>arc/sewing<br>48 west 22 st<br>arc/robert perkins<br>121 west 17 st<br>arc/robert perkins<br>812 Broadway<br>arc/robert perkins<br>179 west Broadway | <b>Lloyd Glasson</b><br>DORSHY GALLERIES                                                             | <b>CARL HOLTY</b><br>MEMORIAL EXHIBITION<br>ANDREW WATSON                                                    |                                                                                                                |                                                                                         |

67. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being, Cycle I: 4/12/68, 1974*,  
page from the *Village Voice*.



68. Adrian Piper, *Five Full Thought Balloons*, 1973, line drawing in text.



69. Adrian Piper, Untitled Photograph of Adrian Piper, no date.



70. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women* #1 of 3, 1975, performance.



71. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I Embodify*, 1975. Oil crayon drawing on 5 x 7 in. photograph, enlarged to 18 x 24 in. poster.





72. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: Getting Back*, 1975, performance.



73. Adrian Piper, *Funk Lessons*, 1983, performance.



74 Adrian Piper, *Funk Lessons*, 1983, performance.

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