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Post-colonial Theatre of Sense The Art of Chila Kumari Burman

Meena Alexander

'It was like this world's pleasure
and the way to the other
both walking towards me.'
Akkamahadevi (12th century)

Chila and I met in Ithaca, New York at a conference called 'Nations and Genders' where her art was exhibited, and where I read my poetry. Now we live quite far from each other, on two separate continents, she in London, I in Manhattan. The literal distances, the ghostly maps limit our lives, yet the unfurling of national borders, street signs, subway maps, none of this could hold without the sharpness of locality, the dailiness of the living breathing world in which we make our art. And our art, visual images for Chila, written words for me, has a task to fulfill, it must make up a theatre of sense.

Through the mail Chila has sent me a large brown packet filled with images. They tumble out, sonorous colours, I see the brilliant red of two cups, the turquoise shimmer of others, apsara women, flattened out, swimming, a density of desire that makes for an eternal present. These images will form part of the *Hello Girls!* exhibit in London.

Chila Burman *Hello Girls!* Courtesy of Artist and Andrew Mummery Gallery London

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I lay out the images on my dining table and keep sorting through them, looking at them, almost as if they were snapshots of a place I have not yet entered. Through the open window, for its summer time now, come the sounds of the New York City street, voices in English, Spanish, a child crying out after his ball, the seller of icecreams, candy floss. The trees are green, huge almost as if midsummer were on us, and we, at the edge of an imaginary India.

There is a way in which the subcontinent underwrites us both. A subcontinent, colonized, torn apart by Partition, yet remaking itself and us in this late twentieth century so that memories and fantasies that pour through our skins, some memories that we cannot even name, become, in their very exigency the route we take to our own bodies.

When I speak about Partition to Chila, she, with ancestral memories of the Punjab, says to me:

'Yes, that's why my dad left, isn't it?'

And I nod, though of course the phone line only gives us murmurs, edits, vocal scrawls, and I force myself to lay out unfinished thought and I blurt out:

'In the South we weren't really touched by Partition.'

Yet of course that isn't quite true, in as much as India exists, the Partition made a very different kind of sense in the south.

And Chila continues, in this back and forth: 'and so I was born here.'

Chila Burman *Portrait of My Mother* (1995) black and white image of colour original. Cibachrome print. Courtesy of the Artist.

Here for her, is Britain, and she is by rights a British artist, Black British in the complex minoritization of selves that allows us rich affiliations, markers of belonging in these countries of the North where our bodies can never be taken for granted. Here for me is the United States, where I am Asian American, as a multiethnic taxonomy permits me. But Chila and I are both Indian women, and that allows for an immediacy of connection, a frisson of knowledge.

I think of Chila's *Portrait of My Mother*, the gentle, sad straightforward face of a young Indian woman facing the camera. What lies in the world beyond that seeing eye? The daughter reads the mother with all the tenderness incipient in the clarity

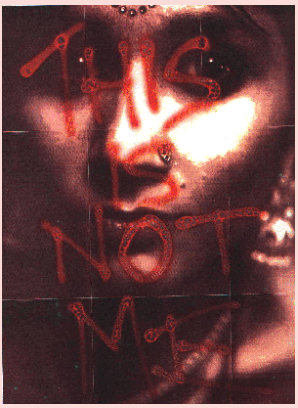
of that first connection and then shows us the British pound note, mark of sovereignty, as light as lace, as fierce as a metallic brand, over that beloved face. Chila was born in England, and her parents raised her in Liverpool in a Punjabi speaking home. Her mother must have regularly touched, folded those pound notes with the monarch's face on them.

My own mother raised in a nationalist family in India, refused to let her lips part when they had to sing 'Rule Britannia' in college. She imparted to me her own proud, edgy animus towards the English language and then when I was six watched from a hazy distance as I was taught to curtsey to the Queen who was visiting the British school where I studied, in a small North African town on the banks of the Nile where we spent years of my childhood.

What does it mean to write over a mother's face, layer over a mother with the imprimatur of a colonial state? And of course part of the poignancy and indeed subtle tension of the image comes from the imagined maternal qualities of the royal face.

But to return to my question and try to respond. It is an act that the postcolonial daughter has to undertake, in her art, her writing. What other genealogy can we have, we who are cast outside the borders of the taken for granted? We whose bodies are scrawled over by the borders we have crossed, scrubbed out in the high glare of the streets? There is an iconic quality to another face that Chila has printed over, her own image of 1992 intricately decked in traditional Indian jewellery, then spray painted with the large gawky letters THIS IS NOT ME!

It's an image that haunts me. The gleam of dark eyes through vermillion spray paint, pallor of cheekbone, jut of jaw, the bodily self disowned. After all being female is not something added to race but comes fused with it, as part of my inalienable bodily being. Perhaps the most devastating effect of racism,is to render one homeless in one's own body. So that as I walk the street or enter the building with great stone pillars, I absent myself from my body, become a fly in the blue air watching, seemingly free of threat.



Chila Burman *This is Not Me* (1992) laser print and car spray paint. Courtesy of the Artist.

Indeed the flip side, dark chromatic lining to the fly-in-the-air-scenario would be to walk down main street or enter that building intricately dressed in sari and blouse having scrawled on one's forehead and eyelids and cheeks, in crimson, the letters: THIS IS NOT ME! And such forcible, almost automatic absenting of 'I' from my body is something that survivors of trauma understand, if only mutely, and something that racism in its multiple forms is able to enforce.

So that even as from inside ourselves, a voice comes, searching for sense, we must step out of our

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skins. They are written up, scrawled over, marked too terribly to be part of what we are. Yet we cannot live as skinless things. How shall we figure ourselves afresh, make up our lives in a diasporic world?

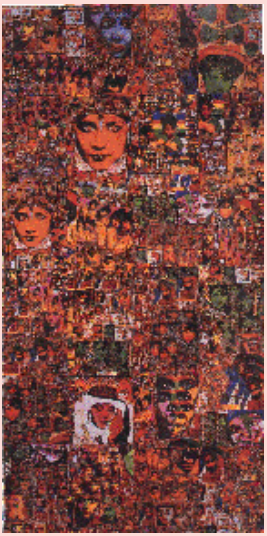
In Chila's work, I see her unique way of addressing this question, and elements laid out, one possible aesthetic for a postcolonial theatre of sense.

Think of the race thing, the body scrawled over. If we step back a little we sense that its all a bit of flim-flam, this "race" thing, something baseless, ready to dissolve. After all, what could be more absurd?

And the self that is crossed out so painfully becomes flighty, multiple, caught in the shifting strands that make up the unmoored consciousness, delighted in its fortuitous nature, free. Now of course this transition is a provisional thing, but necessary counterpart to the torment of self, part of the shift to the swelling delight in the world of the senses.

Hence the transition we see in Chila's work from *This is Not Me* to the sheer exuberance of the multiple figures of self-fashioning in *28 Positions in 34 Years* (1992) the daughter's face split into so many, gazing out at the world, a species of sorcellery, fantastic play. Or in the richly textured, jewel like surface of *Auto-Portrait, Fly Girl Series* (1993).

Chila Burman *Auto-Portrait, Fly Girl Series* (1993) mixed media and laser print. Courtesy of Artist.



There too, is the element of riposte: You scrawled over me with your gaze, made me into a flat surface, so I shall take the power that is mine, become these shifting gorgeous surfaces, thrust the images back into your face. You can't touch me! You can't catch me!

Indeed the 'Don't Touch Me' element is crucial here. The task of flight, necessary, seductive, a charged evasion of having been being rendered powerless. The power is in making images, images of my own body, dark, female, which I can render on flat surfaces, deploy as I wish. To argue which is not to deny of course the coruscating surfaces of a postmodernist artifact, one that could only come into being in the late twentieth century.

When I communicate with Chila by fax about the provenance of *Hello Girls!* she says:

'I was running a workshop for Asian girls.' This was during a residency in Glasgow. She asked the young women to bring in personal objects for use in their art work, and she herself, in the evening turned to whatever personal items lay at hand:

'As I hadn't brought in many objects with me, or family snaps, I decided to use my clothes and whatever I

had in my suitcase... I had bras with me, bikini, shalwar kameez and Indian shawls... so I started playing with the colors, changing the colors for the background and something was happening...'

'Why bras?' I ask her.

And Chila replies in terms of her characteristic concern with a visuality that exists in a tension with the matter of fact reality of the world:

'I've always been interested in content and form' she tells me,'so it's not just about a critique of the Wonderbra advert.' And she continues: 'I was initially interested in abstracting the BRA SHAPE so that you couldn't tell it was a bra, I was left with color and form and the content so that the Bra wasn't easily visible, because I'm very interested in color/form/abstraction. I wanted it to look flat from a distance ... I'm not so much interested in the fact of representing a bra, it's more the vulnerability, the bra straps and shape it has and the power of the bra shape or form/ object. Also bras are like EYES -- eyes are crucial in our culture.'

Eyes, windows of the soul, site of desire, turned to the postcolonial riposte, a coruscating feminist tack, a sail on rough waters. My mind moves to lines by Kamala Das I read as a young poet, the exuberant travail of an Indian woman acknowledging her own body, breasts, thighs, pubis all marked in the coming to knowledge of what it might mean to refuse to be a dark continent:

'I am today a creature turned inside
Out. To spread myself across wide highways
Of your thoughts, stranger, like a loud poster
Was always my desire, but all I
Do is lurk in shadows of cul de sacs,
Just two eyes showing ... oh never mind, I've
Spent long years trying to locate my mind
Beneath skin, beneath flesh and underneath
The bone.' [1]

Above: Chila Burman *Hello Girls!* Courtesy of Artist and Andrew Mummery Gallery London

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What does it mean to search under the bone? It means to touch the ghostly body, what one might even call the soul.

Indeed there is a ghostly emptiness in the bras, right through the sheer sonorous delight of color. The images that bounce off the walls, multiply in a dizzying phosporesence, each detail crystalline, marking out the boundaries of shifting scenes, bodily unselvings.

Our conversation turns to bras, what it meant to learn to wear them as girls, the discomfort of wearing illfitting bras, the odd ways the points stuck out in wrongly shaped bras. 'They are always designed by men, aren't they,' Chila muses. And I think of when I returned to India in the early seventies after my student days in England, how a friend in the women's movement in India who had given up on bras, took to knotting her choli under her breasts in the way that peasant women did and encouraged me to do the same; and I think of Chila's vivid, phantasmagoria of bras against the backdrop of the Breast Cloth controversy in India, well before either of us was born, when the British colonial rulers found themselves taking sides in what was to become the 'Woman Question', ruling on whether lower caste women had the right to wear bodices, cover their breasts.

I muse on the sheer delight of color in Chila's billboard sized poster, the delicate textures we could bury our faces in, the two ness of the cups, echoing all the couplings that makes for the bodily self, right breast and left breast, right hand and left hand, right thigh and left thigh, right eye and left eye, but also the via negativa of our social imaginaries, neti-neti, not this, not that, I am not this nor that, quintessential being, unnameable, a succour, a vanishing.

In our conversations Chila and I speak at length on how we were raised as Indian girls and subject of clothing. When Chila says to me 'I wasn't even allowed to wear a skirt till I was sixteen' her words have an immediate resonance for me. I had to cover my arms and legs when visiting my father's village in a remote part of Kerala. Wear longer skirts in a Kerala town than I had to when visiting England. The constant taking off and putting on of garments, skirts, blouses, saris, cholis, kurtas, salwars, pants, coats and in the distance, bikinis, mini skirts, foisted on the bodily self a great fragility. Yet one that could lead to exuberant strategies, the casting off of one identity for another and yet another, fluid selves, porous boundaries.

After all to survive with one's integrity could oddly enough mean taking apart and putting together any possible self, given a present in which one was forced on stage with parts one had not picked to play, lines that crossed each other out, sighs, exhalations, coughs, grunts, sentences that refused translation, syntaxes that made for such a cacophonous cross hatch of memory, that merely to think them, would turn one into the equivalent of a loud poster.

A blatant, burnished thing. And under it, the tender soul, the 'I', cryptic, illegible.

So by phone and by fax, Chila and I speak and write some more about the images in the show. We share thoughts, impressions. I muse on what a poet's version of a body print might be, the immediacy of language bordering on babble, the raw textures of touch.

There are body prints done when Chila was in India, during an international workshop in Modinagar near Delhi. I see the dark red color of breasts and belly raised and rimmed with the tiny bits of mica that decorate skirts, blouses, embroideries. Other body prints laid out in mandala style, the whole tracing a line of descent from work she started in the late seventies and eighties, *Body in Sugar* (1978) mixed media on canvas, *My Breasts* of 1984 done with Sugar and Indian ink monoprint or *Body Print* of 1987 with Acrylic and glitter monoprint. The rotund anonymous shapes are essentially female, primitive, headless. There is no 'I' there, only the flesh that makes up the subject.

Then there are figures of women some with heads draped, anonymous, nude, haunting figures each alone, against a wall. Naked women in blue. Blue figures against a blue wall. They are posing for the camera, for themselves turned camera. What are these postures that they take in this theatre of sense, consciousness split into two, lighting up the melancholic body. Who are they these ghostly women, where do they come from? And what connection do they bear to the fragment of text from the Amar Chitra Katha comic entitled *TALES OF VALIANT QUEENS?* After all they reappear within those complex multicoloured figurations. Are they split off parts of the valiant queens, restless roaming others I need to acknowledge, selves unhoused?

The Amar Chitra Katha comics are familiar in the rooms of Indian children. A sure fire way to learn of figures from history, the Rani of Jhansi set side by side with Draupadi, the literal past and the mythological past commingled as it enters into the child's imagination.

'Talk to me,' I fax Chila, 'about *The Tales of the Valiant Queens*. I think of it as an Amar Chitra Katha comic? Often that's how children learn of the Rani of Jhansi and others. And these images become so crucial to us as we step out of our skins.'

And Chila replies in the way of an artist, laying out the palimpsest of self-fashioning. So that in a world without ready anchorage what one has made – and this is a process I see in my own responses – turns into the thread of sense, guiding one through the labyrinth of what has already been: 'I think we are all QUEENS because of how much we have survived and achieved, so I'm saying here are the *Tales of Us Valiant Queens*. I've done another piece in my monograph (p. 57) called *Dad on Ship Coming to England* and like the three Queens which are the Queen of England I've deliberately put a wall over her face and the other Queen is my mum and the other my Grandmother!'

Chila goes onto speak of the erotic flow of sense between women, the way in which the swimming girls, apsaras blue as the water they swim in, become a trope of freedom. 'I'm mad about these girls because they're active and gentle and blue,' says

Chila. 'Also I go swimming nearly everyday and have done so for years, I used to swim in the school swimming club team.'

In one of the images I see a girl, blue and active swimming away from a heavy seated figure, nude and masked, bound by gravity. Surely both figures are parts of a self, female, rendered fleshly. The heavy seated figure has a black cloth slipping off her shoulders, revealing her body. We witness a posture of power, yet there is something in there of the abject, a heavy body seated on the floor in a white room, not moving.

And in another frame, next to the sign 'TALES OF VALIANT QUEENS', there is she again masked and seated, in a realm of collage, a theatre of bit and pieces, and others by her, one a dark nude body, female; the other her head covered, saturated in brilliant red and green. And Chila tells me that she wanted the masked nude figure 'to look like a CHIEF... too weighted down with all the pressure of the world, but still very sharp and alert and content but vigilant.'

Yet the counterpoint is insistent: there she is, a blue swimming girl, slipping out of the flounces, swimming away from the heavy seated figure with mask, the one who cannot move, who cannot show her face. And the other swims, swims away. Below her Lord Krishna, on an agarbati cover,plays his flute.

I think of how the swimming girls live in the fluidity of water. They can cross borders with the flick of an arm or thigh and not worry. Their breasts are uncovered. No Breast Cloth controversy has touched them, nor Victorian prudery.

While here we are in the late twentieth century with bras straps that hurt our bodies, writing, making images. And the bra stands in as simulacrum. The skins we slip from in order to be what we are. I muse on the double mimicry of a spotted bra (tiger skin markings) against paisley. OOO pure designs that have us I write to Chila.

And when she writes back she tells me that the tiger bra is really a bikini top and that the Hello Girls piece will be very big 10 metres by 4 metres THIS SHAPE and she encloses the words in a rectangle so I can see what the shape will be.

For me the art of Chila Kumari Burman is about the freedom of the subject, the rights of the female body, intricate self-fashioning. We see this all the way from her overtly political mural work, *Southall Black Resistance Mural* of 1986 done in collaboration with Keith Piper, through the Shotokan images of 1993, her own body, sari clad, superb, trained in the martial arts, filled with motion, resistant.

Can the notion of corps vecu, body embedded in the flesh of the world, Merleau-Ponty outlined work for us? It is a notion I first came across as a young university student in England, sifting through phenomenology to find a way in which my history as a young woman from India and Africa could be real for me. Can we race the corps vecu all the way to the edge of the twenty first century? Can it be useful to us, women artists of the South Asian diaspora? A dark corps vecu I think, with stretch marks... And why not? After all what could make more sense when one is searching out rites

of passage for the bodily self, searching out a mind under skin and bone?

But perhaps Fanon is closer. Frantz Fanon translated for feminist use. In a crucial section of *Black Skins, White Mask*s he imagines people crying out 'Look, a negro!' So we might find the fingers pointing -'Look, a brown woman!' The shame, the torment, the turning, beseeching others. Stumbling, falling, the body splintering into a thousand shards. The body split open.

'I burst apart,' Fanon writes. 'Now the fragments have been put together again by another self.'[2]

What is this other self? What might this putting together of a racialised body mean? A body not male, but female, haunted by its femaleness, earth it cannot shed.

Who will put together a body torn by border crossings, skin marked by barbed wires, bandages hastily knotted, the body of a pariah woman?

Who will put together a dark body delighting in its own shadows, the multiplicity of its selves, making for a freedom from the prison house of history.

Why do I conceive of the female artist like this? Perhaps because I think that she needs to slip her flesh in order to sing, yet it is only by being drawn back into a larger, more spiritual body, the mouths of many others, the hands that labor in the sweat shops, on the street corners, in the market places and yes, in the academies, that she can truly be.

This world is filled with unquiet borders. It would be a terrible error – too grave to be borne – to think that our capacity for art can lose us our bodies. Bodies banned, beaten, jailed, twisted in childbirth, bodies that are the sites of pleasure, of ecstasy. Female bodies that can babble, break into prophetic speech, rant, whisper, sing. And slowly but surely this leads to what I have called elsewhere, 'a back against the wall aesthetic.'[3]

For the woman artist who confronts the borders her body must cross, racial, sexual borders, is forced to invent a form that springs out without canonical support, a rough and ready thing, its order crude, its necessity beyond the purchase of self-invention. And there is something in this species of imagemaking, the body in pain or pleasure, crying out in its theatre of sense, that a postcolonial thought at the brink of the twenty first century, must seek out, learn from.

Meena Alexander is Professor of English and Women's Studies, Hunter College and the Graduate Centre, City University of New York. Meena Alexander is a poet and writer of prose. Her new volume of poems *Illiterate Heart* will be published in Spring 2002 by Triquarterly Books.

Notes

The concluding section (lV) of this essay first took shape in a different context: remarks I made at a plenary session: 'Poetry, Feminism and the Difficult World' for a conference on 'Poetry and the Public Sphere' April, 1997, Rutgers University. These remarks were later printed as a brief prose reflection where I imagine the poet Mirabai crossing into present day New York City.('Unquiet Borders') Crab Orchard Review: Special issue on Asian American Literature Spring/ Summer 1998).

1. Kamala Das 'Loud Posters' *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1973) p.47
2. Frantz Fanon *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967) p.109
3. Meena Alexander 'Skin with Fire Inside: Indian Women Writers' *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (Boston: Southend Press, 1996) p.170

For more information on Chila Kumari Burman see Lynda Nead *Chila Kumari Burman: Beyond Two Cultures* (London: Kala press, 1995).

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Introducing Sexual Difference into Estonian Art
Feminist Tendencies during the 1990s

Katrin Kivimaa

When talking about art of the 1990s we cannot overlook the phenomenon designated by the umbrella term Estonian (post)feminist art. Social art history has demonstrated how art does not only represent social relationships and the dominant ideas of its era but is always dependent on major categories of identity formation such as class, gender, race, and others. As artistic representation does not merely reflect but always produces and reproduces these categories, sexual difference has, among other places, been constructed and perpetuated in the visual arts.

Traditional art history defined certain forms and genres, i.e. the hierarchically "lower arts", which allegedly did not require artistic "genius", as "feminine" and therefore as the more appropriate fields for women artists. In his article 'Form and Gender', David Summers presents a historical review of how the ideas of form and matter have been gendered in philosophy and consequently how this has influenced the hierarchical order within the visual arts. He argues that the Aristotelian idea of form, which is perceived as masculine, has been one of the major reasons for the exclusion of women from art history.[1] How similar understandings of "lower" (feminine) and "higher" (masculine) art still tend to influence the hierarchy and interpretations of art becomes clear if we look, for instance, at the undervalued position of applied arts.

Even though modernism seemed to offer artists more freedom and autonomy, for women artists this meant the denial of their gender identity whereas the whole history of modernist art can be interpreted as the glorification of male creativity and sexuality.[2] The position of Estonian women artists has been dependent on both standpoints: certain assumptions inherent to the understanding of art and artistic

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production have directed them towards more "feminine" topics and media, a situation to which many women artists quite understandably reacted with a desire to engage in the "universal" and not to be restricted by gender in one's art. Or to put it simply, Estonian women artists often wished to be 'just an artist' instead of a woman artist, that is, to take up the position that men artists have always held.

One of the most important tasks of the feminist approach is to make visible the construction of the category of sexual difference. Only after having done so is it possible to undertake the questioning or deconstruction of traditional models and roles. Thus, the feminist insistence on introducing the category of sexual difference does not mean either the insistence on gender as something given or on biological essentialism as it has sometimes been conceived in the Estonian context; rather it is a critical analysis of how gender category has been socially and historically constructed. This brings us to the question of the interrelationship between an individual and society and to issues related to subjectivity and identity formation. Or to put it simply, the objects of feminist inquiry are different systems of representations in which gendered positions are being created and made intelligible as well as the development of subjectivity in relation to these systems. Even though the notion of feminist art has been often understood as labelling and limiting, there is no such a thing as 'true' form or subject matter for feminist art. On the contrary, feminist art practices accommodate a huge variety of works linked to each other maybe only by a certain position or attitude. Griselda Pollock has written that 'what makes an art work feminist is the way in which it intervenes in what can be called the social relations of artistic production and reception, the social relations of signification.'[3] Already the notion of woman/women lacks a common single understanding within different feminisms, on the contrary, feminist theory has recently paid more attention to differences between women instead of claiming the commonality of female experiences and existence. "Woman" is not an essential but a changing signifier or an open concept and in certain approaches the term sexual difference is used to designate not so much the binary (female vs. male) system of gender identity as the multitude of sexualities (homosexuality, bisexuality, heterosexuality, transsexuality, etc.) Also art informed by feminism constitutes a perpetual state of provocation, something that 'signifies a set of positions, not an essence; a critical practice not a doxa; a dynamic and self-critical response and intervention, not a platform.'[4] My presentation here is arbitrary in the sense that it also involves artists who would not necessarily relate their works to feminist discourse; however, their works function as feminist in that they disturb fixed gender roles and their representation.

The emergence of feminist art practices in Estonian contemporary art is quite unique: it was directly connected to socio-political changes and the opportunity to initiate the discussion about gendered subjects in society and culture. This discussion is being conducted in a different mode from promoting traditional gender

identities and without dismissing the importance of gendered identity. Feminism in art is not and does not have to be separate[5] from the broader politics of equality even though in Estonia feminism in art started before any feminist issues had emerged in social and political spheres. The negative attitude towards feminism, still very much present in Estonian society, has left a visible trace on the reception of feminist art practices as well.[6] Thus we could see these practices as the litmus paper of how open minded and tolerant our (art) society is, on the one hand, and as continuous provocation for the development of art and its understanding both by professionals and the general public, on the other. The aim of this essay is to ask what were the social and art world related conditions that favoured the emergence of feminist inquiry in art and what difference does this inquiry make to our understanding of art.

A Short History of Estonian Feminist Art [7]

The practices of Estonian feminist art did not emerge from nowhere nor did they rely exclusively on Western examples and theories as has been sometimes claimed by its opponents. Eha Komissarov has emphasised in the catalogue of the Est.Fem exhibition that critical discussion on gender was not part of Soviet emancipation, which was controlled by the state. Even when some women artists tried to bring a specifically female (and non-traditional) point of view into art they were caught as if between two wheels: opposition to Soviet power was designated by a strong nostalgia for an independent past and the first Estonian Republic (1918-40), the life-style of which had been patriarchal and stressed traditional gender roles.[8] The high number of women among Estonian artists is largely due to the applied artists who are mostly women.[9] It is also important to keep in mind that the applied arts are not perceived to be of central importance in the present Estonian art world and are often regarded as second-rate and inferior. A large number of prestigious positions occupied by women are related to art administration and therefore the lamentations over the feminisation of Estonian art do not alter significantly the image of Estonian representative artist - that of a male genius.[10] However, much more problematic tends to be the general trend towards conservative values that rests upon the opposition to Soviet heritage as well as upon the social instability of transition. Indeed, in comparison with broader social attitudes the relatively egalitarian art world seems almost ideal, especially since, despite the above-mentioned negative aspects, the remarkable number of women artists and their participation in art production has created a history and a tradition which allows for feminist art, though different in form and ideas, to relate to earlier women artists and their work. From the latter a decades-long succession of female graphic artists, which has visibly influenced the artistic expressions of the feminine psyche within feminist art, is worthy of independent research.

Mari Sobolev has pointed out the early feminist tendencies in the works by groups

Rühm T and S&K at the beginning of the 1990s due to their interest in sexuality and the unconscious.[11] The members of those groups, which have now ceased to exist, continue tackle the issues of sexuality, the body, and the psyche, often influenced by feminist ideas (e.g. Lilian Mosolainen, Tiina Tammetalu, Anu Kalm, Ene-Liis Semper, Tiia Johannson, Kai Kaljo, Raivo Kelomees). Maybe the most well-known images of female erotica from the second half of the 1980s belong to Eve Kask whose later works are visibly related to certain feminist theories and their artistic application. At the same time the emergence of an erotically charged male nude in the works of two young women artists, Maria-Kristiina Ulas and Ly Lestberg, introduced the female (erotic) gaze as well as homosexual imagery (which Lestberg was drawing on) and overstepped the unwritten law of the traditional subject-object relationship between male artist and female model. *Project SHOP* by three women artists (K. Kaljo, A. Lumiste and T. Tammetalu) echoes several ideas presented during the first feminist exhibitions mostly due to its strongly autobiographical approach and anti-aesthetic form. Special attention should be paid to the so-called Linnaps' school from where the younger generation of women artists dealing with the 'deconstruction' of femininity have emerged. Linnaps' school of photography artists was strongly influenced by the scripto-visual practices of Western art during the 1970s and 1980s, including feminist critique of representation. Interest in the interrelationship between power, ideology and art led many artists of Linnaps' group to deal with images and representations of women.

The first overtly feminist exhibition in Estonia, *Kood-eks /Code-Ex* was held in Tallinn in the autumn of 1994 (curators Ando Keskküla and Reet Varblane). Estonian art was represented by older and contemporary works - by Karin Luts (1904-1993), an established woman artist from the period before World War II, and by two contemporary women artists, Epp-Maria Kokamägi and Anu Põder. Since this exhibition a gap has appeared between "active" and "passive" approaches to understanding feminist art in Estonia. Reet Varblane later argued that, while the works by Swedish artists propagated an active feminist standpoint, the works by Estonian artists remained primarily concerned with aesthetic and formal issues [12] – a claim which reflects the lack of social approach in Estonian art of that period. And yet the sculptures by Anu Põder were a clear attempt to refigure the traditional understanding of femininity by uncovering the strengths of the so-called fair sex. In retrospect, it seems that the exhibition *Kood-eks*, though important at the time, was mostly of symbolic significance in that it allowed the term "feminism" to enter the Estonian art world and press.

Est.Fem, the first programmatic feminist show which summed up a two-year-long exchange of ideas between women artists[13], took place in August 1995 in several galleries in Tallinn. Curators Eha Komissarov, Reet Varblane (both contributed to the introduction of feminist ideas into Estonian culture) and the artist Mare Tralla set the terms for a focused feminist critique in a relatively conservative society

reluctant to revise its patriarchal values (Tralla was to become an emblematic figure of the Estonian feminist art scene, see Mare Tralla's article in *n.paradoxa,* issue 5, Nov 1997). This framework explains why challenging and ironic works like Tralla's *So We Gave Birth to Estonian Feminism* or Kaire Rannik's installation *Don't Believe That We Are Equal Since Our Inside Is Different* which offered a "look" inside the bodies of the opposite sexes, lost something of their poignancy in the context of more traditional representations of femininity.[14] To explain this we have to keep in mind not only the reluctance towards feminist ideas but also the aesthetic tradition of Estonian art which in several cases ruled out the programmatic resistance to beautiful forms and images so characteristic to Western feminist art. In short, *Est.Fem* sought to avoid a radical break with the existing cultural context.

In our situation, the participation of male artists could be seen as an "extenuating circumstance" even though men's involvement in feminism is nothing new or extraordinary in Western countries. Robert Connell has suggested in his book *Gender and Power* that hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women.[15] The question of the construction of the male (sexual) identity was foregrounded in the photos by Toomas Volkmann; also, Raivo Kelomees' work drawing on the Jungian anima-animus theory and Peeter Maria Laurits' playful comment on the stereotypes of sexual behaviour opened up possibilities for further exploration of masculinity. The latter may be quite risky: for instance, in the case of virtual gender swapping on the internet it is women who are allowed to take up men's positions much more easily than the other way around.[16] And still the artistic and often decadent imagery of playful masculinity finds less resistance in our art world than the radical and politically charged embodiment of female identity. I do not recall any major outcry from art critics over the transvestite transformations of the male artist appearing in the video *Paradisco* (1998) by Kiwa or the self-destructive, vulnerable and delicate male body so different from the ideal of hegemonic masculinity in the photo project *Io* (1997) by Mark Raidpere. Men artists participating in feminist projects themselves have seen it as an opportunity to question narrowly defined masculinity or the traditional binary opposition of masculinity and femininity.[17] Co-operation also prevents the "inside trading" of feminism, i.e. the tendency to assume that 'only women can understand feminine spaces.'[18]

Est.Fem illustrated an interesting situation where different definitions of womanhood intertwined both on an experiential (different generations and personal histories) level and an artistic-theoretical (art examples and theoretical grounds) level which all created quite an eclectic general picture. Many artists started off from their own experience of being a woman, the experience seen both as essential and socially constructed. *Est.Fem* made an important step forward in raising the consciousness of women artists without leaving aside the "must and must nots" of the representation of femininity. *Est.Fem*, as well as '*Code'-Ex*', reflected not only

upon the individual, undoing and redoing efforts of artists but also on the existing restrictions within the art world and society at large. Indeed, Eha Komissarov admitted in the catalogue of *Est.Fem* that in a traditional society feminism can only have a meaning not forbidden by this society.[19] However, all the pessimism expressed in connection with the project does not mean that the exhibition would not cross many artistic and social borders and bring significant changes to the local art scene.

The following period, marked mostly by one-woman or smaller group shows, bears witness to this. Mare Tralla's art, writings, public appearances and her image as "Disgusting Girl" became the most remarkable example of the "bad girls" phenomenon in Estonia. Young textile artists' interest in a specifically female expression in art, already present in *Est.Fem*, led to the exhibition *Caring* in 1996 by Helena Palm, Ele Praks, Merle Suurkask, and Kadi Soosalu who were bold enough to use not just "low" arts such as textile but also traditional handicrafts which are seen not as part of art practice but that of crafts. They formed an informal circle of handicrafts' enthusiasts which started to play a more significant role in later curatorial projects as well. An autobiographical approach, explorations of sexuality and bodily existence found their place in the works of many artists. The powerful emergence of these issues cannot be linked only to borrowing from Western trends because in the West the body art trend was preceded by thirty years of feminist "(art) revolution" without which the present art scene would be very different from what it is. I tend to believe that the interest in the particular issues present in contemporary art globally has necessarily to do with local impulses and problems.[20]

The year 1998 was marked by a "second wave" of feminist exhibitions, *(Meta)Dialogue and Private Views: Space Re/Cognised in Contemporary Art from Estonia and Britain.* Even though unlike 1995, these exhibitions did not emphasise their feminism, they used traditions of feminist art as a starting point and dealt explicitly with sexual difference and expressions of the feminine. The exhibitions were all-women shows with one exception, Kiwa in both cases. However, the participants and the places where the shows took place refer to certain generational differences and a hierarchy. *(Meta)Dialogue* brought onto the wider art arena the lesser known and youngest generation of women artists such as former Linnaps' school members (Mari Laanemets, Killu Sukmit, Piia Ruber) and the so-called circle of handicrafts' enthusiasts (Ele Praks, Helen Lehismets, Helena Palm, Kadi Soosalu). According to curator Reet Varblane the idea for the show emerged during her lectures on feminist and women's art in the Estonian Academy of Art and it is precisely this grass-root nature as well as a certain marginality that makes the event, in retrospect, much more interesting than was originally conceived in the art context mostly dictated by representative and big curatorial exhibitions.

Private Views was from the very beginning conceived as a large-scale event with its international participants, the choice of artists and the place in the Salt Storage Hall of the Estonian Art Museum. The show generated remarkable interest among

art critics as well as the mass media, however, mostly due to the overwhelming interest in the "scandalous" personality of Mare Tralla who was one of the curators and a participating artist. Another problem that emerged was the uncritical use of the term "postfeminism" by several critics, including feminist ones.[21] The use of this term seems to imply that the issues of gender equality raised by feminism have been solved. In the West it may at least refer to the history of the feminist movement and its concrete achievements but to speak about postfeminism in the prefeminist situation of present-day Estonian society implies in the first place a desire to designate the art practices in question with a less radical term in order to facilitate their introduction to a general audience and avoid the negative connotations and prejudices associated with the word "feminism."[22] The term "postfeminism" tends to be more accepted also by artists perhaps due to its 'post'-nature which is fashionable and without making any clear political statement could mean basically anything and nothing at the same time.[23]

To conclude here the outline of an institutional framework marked by different exhibitions it should be added that gender issues have also entered general annual shows: it is enough to mention *Let's Talk About Men* curated by Tiina Tammetalu which was part of the annual painting show in 1998 or Remaining oneself. *Changing Roles in the 21st Century* (curator Reet Varblane), part of a similar show in spring 2000. It has even been suggested that our artists' interest in feminist or gender related art projects is limited to the above-mentioned curated and issue-based events; however, the same dynamics centred on the curatorial projects characterises contemporary art life in general.[24] It is significantly more complicated to determine the specific issues and topics which form the historic, spatial and temporal specificity of the phenomenon we agreed to call Estonian feminist art. Limited space allows me to present only the most widespread themes and important strategies which are by no means representative of the multiple practices embraced by this umbrella term.

Paradoxical self-portraits

One of the most important topics which characterises Estonian women's art in general is the issue of identity or of female subjectivity be it in the form of self-portrait or autobiography. In her account of the autobiographical genre in Estonian contemporary art, Reet Varblane argues that the majority of artistic autobiographies suffer from a lack of connection to reality: they are nostalgic stories aspiring to idealise the past and the identity of the story-teller.[25] Also, women's autobiography in Estonian art as such cannot be automatically identified with feminist intervention. Yet, one of the central subissues of this approach is the problematic relationship between being a woman and an artist/a creator, a dilemma always accompanied by the lack and/or marginalisation of the woman as a historical and cultural subject.

Among the first projects to raise the questions surrounding women's creativity was *Cultural Sushi* by Tiina Tammetalu in 1995. Her exhibition consisting of photos,

old letters, newspapers and other documents which were juxtaposed with abstract paintings turned to face the wall, documented her private and public life as a woman. There is a certain historical contradiction in being a woman and an artist despite the long-standing tradition of women artists in Estonia: the symbolic hero of modernist art is a male artist and in trying to occupy this position a woman creator risks denying her femaleness. Incorporation of her gender identity, however, may lead to marginalisation and a feeling of limitation: 'to be labelled a woman artist is to be placed in a separate sphere where only gender matters, where gender is assumed biologically to determine the kind of art that is made.'[26] It is quite probable that insistent exploration of what it means to be a woman artist in works informed by feminism signifies the extent to which Estonian women artists face this dilemma.

The historical burden of the mutually exclusive identities of a creator and a woman is being lifted through the implementation of laughter and irony, a strategy which has a strong tradition in Western feminist art. The latter in its turn draws on the links between women's culture and popular comic heritage.[27] Rosi Braidotti has called the use of laughter, (self) irony, vulgar folklore and the grotesque in the contemporary works by women, especially in postmodern and cyberfeminist art, the politics of parody.[28] When talking about Estonian (women's) art this strategy is no doubt linked also to the tendency to soften the absurdity of socialist everyday reality with a (self) ironic look, widespread throughout Eastern and Central European culture. Thus, in our particular case it has a wider meaning than just to echo one of the favourite strategies of Western feminist art. One of the best examples of self-irony is Kai Kaljo's *Loser* (1997), an emblematic sign of the Estonian woman artist's personal and professional identity in the end of 1990s. A short and witty autobiographical video piece, *Loser* consists of half a dozen phrases infused with self-irony and accompanied by background laughter, as in a TV sitcom. The artist tells the viewers her age, weight, and marital status – the data on the basis of which women are usually assessed – as well as her profession (Estonian artist) and the ridiculously low salary she is paid at the Estonian Academy of Arts.

Tralla is maybe best known for her programmatic use of parody and irony in addressing diverse issues of femininity. In her performance *Kiss*, Tralla projected the faces of Estonian male critics on the mirror-screen where they voice their opinions on the artist Mare Tralla. Virginia Woolf has famously argued that 'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.'[29] Now it is men's turn to perform the function of the looking-glass. The artist is only being fair: those who praise her are rewarded with a kiss and those who do not are hit with a lipstick. Tralla manages to distance herself from this discursively constructed "self" only partially. Similar to the Lacanian model the identity formed in the process of performance is illustratively constructed in the symbolic order – in language.[30] It is true that Tralla maintains a certain distance from this discursive "self" but not

entirely. Putting it another way, her artistic persona is constituted in the speech of these male critics and perhaps her playing along only perpetuates the idea of the power of male critics to master language and define her place in relation to what is uttered.

Her CD-ROM *her.space* (1998) presents instead of the official history the small private narrative dealing with stereotypes originating in the history of Estonia. The piece pays particular attention to constructions of ideal femininity in the Soviet regime such as work heroines and women cosmonauts which the artist frequently juxtaposes with those of the West and those currently in the making within Estonian society. *her.space* is not really a self-portrait of the author nor her autobiography, rather it is a presentation of the identity of the Estonian woman as it is being constructed historically through different ideologies and ideals. And as "woman as sign" has little to do with experienced (or imagined, for that matter) female existence,[31] *her.space* is built up as a labyrinth of contradictory signifiers instead of trying to present any coherent identity.

Also the search for specific possibilities of women's art as something positive and not necessarily second-rate contribute to the explorations of the woman artist's identity. I have already mentioned the conscious interest in applied arts and crafts characteristic of the younger generation of women artists which formed around the *(Meta)Dialogue* exhibition. Many authors have written on the empowering faculty of being marginal in one's culture: for instance, bell hooks has stated that '[marginality] is more than a site of deprivation [...] it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.'[32] This is one way, among others, to look at "feminine" and "low" arts.

Politics of Representation and the Feminine

Feminist authors have responded to Freud's astonishment (Was das Weib will?) and Lacan's statement 'Woman does not exist' with the argument that the feminine cannot be represented within phallogocentric symbolic, i.e. in the language and culture, the thinking subject of which is a male person. Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva developed the idea of *écriture feminine* which signifies a nonphallic and nonmasculine subject position. According to them the feminine as different and eruptive in relation to the masculine does not belong exclusively to women even though it is more accessible to them due to their alternative experience outside the dominant and central culture. *Écriture feminine* and its parallel in art, the expression of female experiences (or as Lisa Tickner called it, *peinture feminine*) stands for the destruction of existing "malestream" structures rather than for positing any essentially feminine shared experience.

The interest of Estonian women artists in female sexuality and the specificity of the female body has two major sources: the relevant examples of Western feminist art and the reaction to Soviet (and) patriarchal morality which excluded discussions of female sexuality.

Kaire Rannik's installation *Don't Believe That We Are Equal Since Our Inside Is Different* was one of the few works in *Est.Fem* which questioned the predetermined and biological sexual difference and its social results. Using traditionally "feminine" materials such as cotton wool and jewellery she designed a metaphoric look at the insides of the female and male bodies as if sadly and ironically recognising the impossibility of their equality because of their "essential" inner differences. Are equality and difference mutually exclusive terms? Does being equal require sameness? Rannik's installation seemed to ask the yet more complicated questions of why and how the social positioning of the gendered body is subordinated to allegedly biological determinism. The formal solution of the work does not oppose masculinity to femininity as both insides are presented in soft, "feminine" form. The goal of such a solution may be the artistic and aesthetic wholeness of the piece but the result goes further than that. Such delicate masculinity, indistinguishable from its "other sex" counterpart may function as transgressively as disruptive representations of the feminine do.

Among the works trying to voice specifically female experiences, or as Hélène Cixous has phrased it, 'to speak the unspoken', are the video installation *Hole* (1995) by Mare Tralla which addresses the taboo of representing menstruation and the female sexual organs and Eve Kask's exhibition *291/2* (April 1998) where the female body and its rhythms were directly connected to the mystical power of earth-goddesses. The depictions of female biology do not imply the identification of women exclusively with their bodies; they rather mark the efforts to offer women an opportunity for positive identification with their bodies and bodily functions traditionally left out of representation as well as an intervention into the dominant politics of representation.

Nevertheless, there are few depictions of female sexuality and embodiment in Estonian contemporary art. For instance, images of lesbian sexuality are almost absent with the exception of metaphoric works by Lilian Mosolainen. Does this gap relate to our unconscious fears or is it a result of the trivialisation of sexual imagery in popular culture which influences artists in the way they try to avoid being accused of creating pornographic imagery? Perhaps both reasons are valid even though the former seems to be more relevant if we take into account the rarity of the transgressive and abject body in our art culture. This can be explained not only by aesthetic reasons which play an important role in incorporating certain images into art and dismissing others; it is also the necessity to abject and control certain images such as the transgressive, uncontrollable and sexually insatiable body, especially the female body. Thus, most of Estonian body art deals with representation rather than embodiment [33] as if bearing witness to the poststructuralist and postmodern understanding of reality as the result of representation. On the other hand, as it is true that the female body is caught up in representation and constructed in this process there is no clear-cut separation between the "real" body and its

representations[34] although recently there has been a growing number of diverse art practices seeking to convey the message lying outside the representations.

The issue of embodiment or what it means to live in a concrete material body is taken up, for instance, in the video *I Clicked My Heart* (1997) by Tiia Johannson. In this piece addressing the story of the author's illness echocardiogram photos of her heart are used to produce a visual narrative of her illness. The fragmentation of the bodily image manages to escape the burden of cultural representations of the body.

The main proponents of the video installation *A Toy* (1995) by Mare Tralla are young women with not quite "ideal" bodies performing striptease. The video installation consists of two TV sets opposite to each other, one showing a man holding a remote control in his hand and gazing at the women taking off their clothes on the opposite TV screen. At a certain moment he loses control over what is happening on the other TV screen and the power relations between the male and female figures are suddenly blurred, even reversed: the women subordinate the male viewer to their power not by fulfilling his fantasy but by destroying his pleasure. Finally, the female bodies escape control completely and start to change form, to grow and diminish uncovering grotesque, mocking bodies behind the surface of nice tamed femininity.

The popularity of the critique of representation in Estonian art of the 1990s is linked to the striking emergence of photo art. Already in *Est.Fem* scripto-visual photo works turning their critical eye towards the existing norms and stereotypes of femininity attracted attention. Piia Ruber presented the female "words of wisdom" addressed to a young girl, comprising instructions of how a "real" woman should act and be while Piret Räni documented the process of becoming an "ideal" woman. Both projects were especially relevant at a time when a new cult of the "real"/"ideal" woman (either home-made Estonian mothers or imported Barbie-dolls of standard measurements) was gaining ground in Estonian society. Blurred images of a young woman in the photos by Margot Kask work against the terror of representation as if affirming the belief that the feminine cannot be subordinated to the logic of (phallocentric) representation.

The importance of the critique of representation is inherited from historical practices of representing women. As women have mostly appeared to the gazes of other people as and in images and representations, the latter has creative power over the dominant constructions of femininity which in their turn have determined the real experiences of real women as a result of the process of internalisation.

The project *A Dream* (1996) by Piret Räni, which takes a look at the daydreams and fantasies of young women, underscores that fantasy and our most intimate and private experiences 'can be shown to be coded and made visible through discourse.'[35] The photos for which different young women had to pose illustrated how certain emotions are inscribed on our bodies in specific ways. The major idea was to play out one's dream role in the "compulsory" setting of a toilet, the environment which set the (visual and contextual) limits of sameness, anonymity and triviality that

participants had to transgress to express their individualities. The patterns of bodily expressions, the repetition of day-dreams and fantasies, and the similarities in living through what is commonly designated as "personal" experience brought the women in the photos together in some kind of uniform and as if common dream. It seems to suggest that our dreams and fantasies are, at least to some extent, ideologically and socially produced. Yet, behind those empty, often self-ironical roles and signifiers there lurks a certain nostalgia – an impossible dream of winning back the time of innocence when sincere identification with those images was still possible.

The group F.F.F.F (Kaire Rannik, Kristi Paap, Berit Teeäär, Ketli Tiitsar and Maria Valdma) is perhaps the most prominent women artists' group in Estonian art of the 1990s. Their project *F-Files* in the exhibition *Private Views* concentrated on the gap between ideal and real women, between ideal gender roles and individuals. All five women dressed up and played through different female identities: we can see girls in national costume, girls in a rock-band, nice women from the 1950s, homeless women. With these group photos the artists point to the dramatic conflict arising from obediently fitting into prescribed visual identities while at the same time trying to maintain one's individuality. The F.F.F.F artists have chosen to play mostly with ideal images and then suddenly, totally negatively coded (or rather absent role in a cultural imagery) homeless women "spoil" the picture. Their action is very close to what Braidotti calls an act "as if" which treats femininity as an option, that is, 'a set of available poses, a set of costumes rich in history and social power relations, but not fixed or compulsory any longer.' [36] Liina Siib has demonstrated a strong social sensibility and interest in the marginal, often most vulnerable people in contemporary Estonian society. In her show entitled *The Presumption of Innocence* (1997), she exhibited colour photos of female prisoners and teenage girls studying at modelling school. In both cases the traditional understanding of femininity as based upon a "natural" female feature - innocence - is taken as the object of analysis: How can a female prisoner wearing a wedding veil (thus doubly coded as innocent) fulfil the ideal of purity embodied by the innocent/virgin bride? Do female prisoners fall outside the prescribed limits of femininity? Does the process of learning of how perform a "real" femininity, which guarantees certain power for women in patriarchal structure, is just another expression of "innocent" and "sincere" femininity? We can talk here about femininity as masquerade, widely used concept in feminist research and art. This concept can be seen as liberating in its ability to undermine the notion of femininity as something given, inborn and essential, yet it is easy to misunderstand it as free play with costumes and attributes. Keeping in mind Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity it becomes clear that even if gender is performative, i.e. expressed through actions, gestures and speech and constantly in doing it is not 'a set of free-floating attributes', rather it is 'compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence.'[37]

Among works intervening into the local tradition of depicting the female body

Ly Lestberg's Pietà which introduced the naked body of an old woman and connected this image to the mystic powers of female sexuality and motherhood should be mentioned. Ene-Liis Semper has challenged the idea of inborn and "natural" maternity in the video installation Natural Law which together with her other works dealing with corporeality, mortality, the female body and images, has left its mark on what can be represented in art and how.

Going back to the question of how much the examples of Western feminism have influenced local art practices, the issue I have been briefly trying to touch upon throughout the whole essay, it must be added that this influence is perhaps strongest in works dealing with representation. Why I keep coming back to this question in the first place is because of the ever recurring accusations of feminism, including feminist art, being nothing but an imported Western "vice" which has nothing to offer to Estonian women and it not is relevant to our social and cultural reality. Nevertheless, if we take a closer look this question loses its validity as not only cultural expressions of "Estonianness" but also local and national identity itself is formed in the dialogue with other identities among which Western or European identity is of central importance. Thus, even if feminist art uses imported theories and examples they are being transformed and rethought relying on local necessities and the private experiences of local artists.

A topic on its own is the relation of Estonian feminist or critical women's art to the cyberfeminist movement but this would require another essay to be fully explored. In any case, Estonian women artists such as Mare Tralla, Tiia Johannson and Nelli Rohtvee have made an entrance onto the international new media scene. The question of how important a role the ideas of cyberfeminism will play in Estonian art will be answered sometime in the future. After all, new media at least offers an attractive promise to liberate the expressions of the feminine from the historical burden of representation and gendered identities as they appear in traditional arts. Even if it is true that the male human was the only human in the past, the future will reveal if the female cyborg is the only cyborg.[38]

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Notes

1. David Summers 'Form and Gender' in Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (eds) *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations* (Hanover/ London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

2. Griselda Pollock 'Inscriptions in the Feminine' in the catalogue of the exhibition *Inside the Visible* curated by Catherine de Zegher.(Boston: MIT, 1996) p. 68.

3. Griselda Pollock 'Feminism and Modernism' in Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock(ed) *Framing*

Feminism: Art and Women's Movement 1970-85 (London: Pandora, 1987) p. 93 (my emphasis)

4. Griselda Pollock 'The Politics of Theory' in Griselda Pollock (ed) *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) p.5.

5. Widespread understanding of artistic practice is in Estonia constructed as the self-sufficient expression of the artist's personality which has nothing to do with cultural and social conditions. The relationships between art and ideology are especially problematic. My understanding of the artist's activity links it, similarly to any other human activity, to the realm of ideology and its material expressions in the form of social institutions, values, rituals, etc. (see, for instance: Louis Althusser 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall.(eds.) *Visual Culture: The Reader (*London, Thousand Oaks, New Dehli: Sage, 1999).

6. See, for instance: Ants Juske 'Abi, Ants.ks pisibluffijale: feministlik kunst' *Sirp*, 19 June 1998; Linnar Priimägi 'Feministlikust' kunstist (On 'feminist' art)' *Eesti Päevaleht,* 29 August 1996; Johannes Saar 'Eraeluline kunst (Private art)' *Postimees*, 5 June 1998.

7.The chronology of events and the interpretations of some works have also appeared in the article 'Revolting 90's in Estonian Art' Private Views: Spaces and Gender in Contemporary Art from Britain and Estonia. (London: Women's Art Library, 2000); Now published *Private Views*, distributed by I.B. Tauris.

8. Eha Komissarov, . The catalogue of *Est.Fem.* (Tallinn, 1995) p. 4.

9. Ringvee brings the data from 1988 according to which 60% of women artists belonged to the applied arts section of Estonian Artists' Union (see: Selve Ringvee. Naisvaatenurk eesti skulptuuris (Women Sculptors in Estonia) BA thesis, Tallinn Pedagogical University, Department of Art and Art History, 1996, app. 1.)

10. For instance, the list of the most influential avantgarde artists compiled by leading art critic Ants Juske in 1998 named 2 women out of a total 18. (*Eesti Päevaleht*, 24 January 1998) 11. , Mari Sobolev 'Feministlikke tunnusjooni 1980. aastate lõpu-1990. aastate eesti kunstis'('Some Feminist Features of Estonian Art in the End of the 1980s and in the 1990s.') BA thesis. Estonian Art Academy, Tallinn, 1996.

12. Reet Varblane, . Introduction. The catalogue of *Est.Fem.* (Tallinn, 1995) p.7.

13. Komissarov p. 4

14. Participating artists also had quite different opinions on that account. For instance, one participating male artist, Toomas Volkmann, severely criticised those works which perpetuated rather than deconstructed traditional gender roles, in an interview given to me. (see:Katrin Kivimaa 'Kunst ja feminism EKMi konteksis (Art and feminism in the Estonian art world)' *Sirp*, 23 October, 6 and 20 November 1998.)

15. R.W. Connell. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

16.See: Elizabeth Reid 'Virtual Worlds: Culture and Imagination' Steven G. Jones (eds) *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 1995).

17. This became clear from the interview given to the author. (Kivimaa, 1998)

18. Diana Fuss *Essentially Speaking.* (New York, London: Routledge, 1989) p.115.

19. Komissarov p. 5

20. The fact that *Est.Fem* and the personality of Mare Tralla have played a significant role in getting young artists interested in feminist issues was several times mentioned in the interviews. (See: Kivimaa, 1998)

21. See: Varblane, 'Uued ja vanad ruumimängud'. *Sirp*, 19 June 1998; Mari Sobolev 'Võti naiste loogikasse' *Sõnumileht*, 4 June, 1998; Ants Juske 'Ihule lähedalt ja kaugelt' *Eesti Päevaleht* 4 June, 1998.

22. This effort, while understandable in itself, remains both theoretically and politically dubious. On the complicated relationships between feminism and postmodernism, including in art, see, for instance: Craig Owens 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism' Hal Foster (ed) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983); Janet Wolff *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture.* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.) Chapters I and VI.

23. Angela Dimitrikaki tackles this quite dubious use of 'postfeminism' in a book which grew out of the 'Private Views' exhibition. See: Angela Dimitrikaki 'Space, Gender, Art: Redressing Private Views' in *Private Views: Spaces and Gender in Contemporary Art from Britain and Estonia*, London: Women's Art Library, 2000;

24. Griselda Pollock 'Inscriptions in the Feminine' p. 71.

25. Varblane. Autobigraafia--üleminekuaja lastehaigus või sotsiaalse kunsti võimalus? (Autobiography: An Infantile Disease of the Transition Period or a Possibility for the Development of Social Art?), in *Changes in Art and Understanding It: Materials of the Autumn Conferences of TUA and the Estonian AICA, 1994-1995.* Proceedings of Tallinn Art University 4 p.44.

26. Pollock 1987 p. 87.

27. Jo Anna Isaak *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter.* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996) p.19.

28. Rosi Braidotti 'Cyberfeminism with a Difference' . Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires.(eds) *Feminisms* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p.525.

29. Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One's Own.*

30. *Kiss* invites a Lacanian reading as well: references to the mirror stage and the process of the constitution of the self through others and in the symbolic order, that is, in language, are explicit in the work. On the importance of the mirror stage as a primary site of identification (or rather as méconnaissance or "misconstruction") in the development of the child, see Jacques Lacan 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' in *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge, 1992) pp.1-7. Lacan's account of the relationship between language and the unconscious, and subjectivity as constructed in the acquisition of language is presented, for instance, in his essay 'The Agency of the letter in the Unconscious or reason since Freud' in *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 146-178.

31. See: Elisabeth Cowie. 'Woman as Sign. In Woman in Question' Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie (eds.) *m./f* (London, New York: Verso, 1990) pp.117-133.

32. bell hooks. 'Marginality as Site of Resistance' Fergusson, Russell and others.(eds.) *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* (New York, Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusets University Press, 1990) p. 341.

34. Elizabeth Grosz *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism.* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) p. x.
35. Betterton p. 12.
36. Braidotti p. 528.
37. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* (New York: Routledge, 1990) p. 24.
38. The original phrase by Sadie Plant is as follows: 'If the male human is the only human, the female cyborg is the only cyborg.' (Plant, Sadie. 'Beyond the Screens: Film, Cyberpunk and Cyberfeminism' Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires(eds) *Feminisms* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 506.)

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Reviewing 1970s and 1980s Feminist Art Practices in the 1990s:Three Major Exhibitions on Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosler

Opening Remarks by Lisa Bloom

Dealing publically with the changing generational concerns and passions amongst feminist artists, art critics and art historians has been a difficult task both in the U.S and Japan, two places where I have been active as a feminist art critic and university professor. This is in part due to different ways that feminist artists, critic, and historians in the late 1990s have been ghettoized and marginalized. In the U.S., as many readers may well know, it has taken the following form: within the academy and some parts of the art world, some feminists have rightly challenged the prevailing Euro-American terms of feminist art and art history as well as its normative heterosexual script to acknowledge how race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and colonialism structure feminist ways of seeing. Indeed this was the subject of an anthology that I published in 1999 titled *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture.* However, as the debates around feminism have become more inclusive and opened, venues for feminist exhibitions that deal with such issues have narrowed in many ways due to the withdrawal of state and federal sponsorship of the arts, and the Culture Wars coming out of the late 1980s beginning with queer activist art related to the HIV pandemic. As a result, the boom in the contemporary art market near the end of the 21st century did not extend to such artists, critics, or to art historians who displayed a commitment to such politics and issues in their work. Indeed, what kind of art and criticism is considered desirable seemed to mirror the values and general consumerism of the bubble economy culture at large. Universities, university presses and museums in some cases for better or worse have

turned into refuges of sorts for more intellectually and politically oriented working artists and critics, even more than before in the U.S. What little support art schools have had for feminist projects that have been informed by the shift in feminist consciousness that has taken place with the past fifteen years, prompted by recent writings and art by women of color on race and lesbianism as well as recent work on whiteness and Jewishness, has now dwindled. The narrowing of these contexts has sometimes imposed a defensive posture and rhetoric that has further isolated women from each other and has left little room outside of a few protected university contexts for lively public discussions, exhibitions, and debates.

Therefore, my interest in organising this panel is to debate a set of exhibitions which serve as opportunities to reassess feminist art from the perspective of the present moment, although no claim is being made that the work of the artists' chosen is fully representative of the U.S. feminist art practices of that period. Indeed, I would have liked to have extended the discussion to include the recent retrospectives of Adrian Piper, Barbara Kruger and Yoko Ono, as well as the mid-career exhibition of the works of Deborah Kass, and invite the panelists and the audience to do so during the question period.

There has been much discussion over the past 25 years regarding the institutionalization of women's studies, but less discussion about the institutional conditions of feminist art, both within the museum and the academy. Both these sites have had a crucial role in introducing a younger generation of women to the works of these artists. These recent exhibitions are also important in the way that they changed the frame by which we view the contribution of these feminist artists, and this is particularly crucial for those who have never encountered their work in the community based context for which much of it was originally intended.

What has happened within the academy to define and reconceptualize feminist art has been crucial because this has been an area that has kept critical feminist thought alive at a time where there is a dwindling of general interest in feminist art, and feminist art criticism and theory. The fact is that feminist art history and feminist art practitioners, are very different now than they were in the mid-1970s. Among the changes that have been crucial are the growing awareness of the diversity among women; the significance of groundbreaking conceptual philosophies of difference and postmodernism on feminist art history; feminist art's intersection with models emerging from Jewish studies, gay and lesbian studies, as well as the postcolonial and antiracist debates. Despite the positive changes over the past two decades, there have also been signs of the demise of feminism as a political movement in the arts. In the past decade, for example, we have seen the emergence of "postfeminism" and the backlash against feminist art in the media; the attack and dismantlement of affirmative action in public universities; and the end of a feminist art movement that was oriented primarily toward concerted public action.

My particular interest in feminist art that deals with gender, racial, ethnic,

and generational differences has led me to revisit the work of Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Rosler in my own work to provide a critical account of the different ethnically marked practices in it. One of the purposes of my own scholarship has been to make feminist art history more responsive to these discourses, and the issue specifically of how Jewish identities operates as a category within them. Indeed, the idea for this panel grew out of the writing I had done on these three artists, as well as the work of Julia Scher, Deborah Kass, Ruth Weisberg, Susan Mogul, Elaine Reichek, Mierle Ukeles, among others. However, I felt my chances of getting a panel accepted on the vexed question of the historical place of Jewish ethnicity within 1970s feminist art practices slim, given the College Art Association's reluctance to accept panels on the issue of both gender and Jewishness unless it deals in some way with either the holocaust or Jewishness as a religion rather than as a self-consciously inscribed ethnicity. A critical gender perspective has also vanished from the CAA, since this year this is only 1 of 2 panels that even addresses directly the issue of feminism in the arts. In a certain way then, this is that other Jewish panel, though the relationship between gender, sexuality, and Jewishness will remain undeveloped in this context.

The panel's title is 'Re-Viewing 1970s and1980s Feminist Art Practices in the 1990s: Three Major Exhibitions on Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Rosler'. The session examines the conceptualization and reception of three major exhibits and catalogues on these three feminist artists. Two of the exhibitions are retrospectives: *Eleanor Antin* (accompanying publication by Howard Fox, Eleanor Antin, and Lisa Bloom, *Eleanor Antin*, New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1999) and *Martha Rosler* (accompanying publication by Catherine de Zegher, editor, *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, Massachusetts and London, MIT Press, 1999). The third exhibit on Judy Chicago's iconic piece *The Dinner Party* is presented in relation to feminist artists' work both past and present (accompanying publication Amelia Jones, editor, *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). These three exhibitions and their catalogues are especially deserving of attention and discussion in relation to each other because they focus on revisiting the work of living women artists, and are redefining the ways that feminist art work from the 1970s and 1980s is being framed publically now. Since much of these women's work challenged the perameters of the modernist canon and the commercial art world to varying degrees, it is important to question the terms of these women's acceptance into the art historical canon

The speakers are Alison Rowley, Lucy Soutter, Catherine Caesar, Ruth Wallen, and the respondent is Alexander Alberro.

Bios of the chair and the panelists:

Lisa Bloom teaches Women's Studies and Visual Cultural Studies at Josai International University in the Chiba Prefecture of Japan and is currently a visiting scholar in the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California, San Diego in the U.S.. She is the editor of both the English and Japanese version of *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) published into Japanese by Tokyo based Saiki-sha Press in 2000, and is the author of *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

Alison Rowley was recently appointed lecturer in Art History, Theory and Fine Art in the School of Fine Art, History and Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds. She has just completed a PhD, 'Notes on the Case of Mountains and Sea: History, Poeisis, Memory, on the work of Helen Frankenthaler in the 1950s'. In 1996 she published the first critical study of the work of Jenny Saville and its reception in Britain, and has written articles on Dorothea Tanning and Bridget Riley. She was an editor of the Cultural Studies journal *parallax* from 1997-99, and is co-director of 'Translating Class' the first conference of the newly instituted AHRB Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History (centre CATH) based at the University of Leeds, to be held in April 2002.

Cathy Caesar earned an MA in art history at Tulane University and is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Emory University. She is currently living in New York and conducting research for her dissertation, 'Towards a History of Feminist Conceptual Art: The Work of Martha Rosler, Eleanor Antin and Adrian Piper, 1968-1977', which examines feminist conceptual art by situating it within the feminist art discourse of the 1960s and 1970s.

Ruth Wallen is an artist and critic whose work is dedicated to encouraging dialogue and ecological issues in the broadest sense of the term. Her multilayered installations, performances and artists books have been widely exhibited. She has had solo exhibitions at Franklin Furnace (NYC), New Langton Arts (San Francisco), the Exploratorium (San Francisco) and Sushi Gallery (San Diego). Ruth Wallen teaches photography and contemporary art criticism at the University of California, San Diego, and Goddard College in Vermont.

Lucy Soutter holds an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts, and is currently completing a PhD at Yale University. Her dissertation entitled, 'The Visual Idea' addresses the various uses of photography by conceptual artists between 1966 and 1972. She has lectured and published on subjects ranging from 18th Century French Wallpaper to 1990s narrative photography. She is currently based in London.

Alex Alberro is Assistant Professor of Modern Art at the University of

Florida. His recent books include *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* co-edited with Blake Stimson for MIT Press, *Two Way Mirror Power* for MIT Press, and *Recording Conceptual Art*, co-edited with Patricia Norvell for University of California Press.

These papers were presented at the 89th College Art Association conference in Chicago, February 28-March 3 2001.

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Exhibiting "Martha Rosler"? A feminist response to martha rosler: positions in the life world.

Alison Rowley

Between December 5 1998 and January 30 1999, the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England produced the first retrospective of the work of Martha Rosler in collaboration with the Generali Foundation, Vienna. I was surprised. At that moment I was teaching on the MA programme in Feminist Historical, Theoretical and Critical Studies in the Visual Arts at the University of Leeds, where we study Martha Rosler's practice as a major contribution to the feminist critique of modernism. In the same pedagogical context Mary Kelly's 1981 *Screen* article 'Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism' is an equally indispensable text. Taking the temporary exhibition system as the framework for an analysis of the 'effects and limitations' of modernist criticism, the article inevitably provokes questions about the function of the retrospective as a type of temporary exhibition.[1]

Typically, the retrospective surveys a body of work by a single artist over a chosen period or an entire life. It looks back, constructing a developmental narrative of progress towards creative autonomy, serving bourgeois mythologies of self-realization and self-possession. Thematic and procedural change are keyed to biographical incident, customarily presented chronologically on information panels and in exhibition notes. Characteristically, the retrospective event corresponds with the monograph and the catalogue raisonné, discursive structures in which, 'an artistic subject for works of art' is realized in the field of at history, as Griselda Pollock has demonstarted.[2] From the standpoint of Kelly's analysis the retrospective, typically organized at the most spectacular and prestigious of the culture industry's

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sites of public entertainment and instruction, conclusively secures modernist criticism's production of artistic authorship, 'in the fundamental form of the bourgeois subject; "creative, autonomous, proprietorial".'[3]

For 35 years the practice we associate with the name "Martha Rosler" has evaded and rigorously critiqued precisely the production of artistic authorship in this form. This paper is a response to the experience of visiting *martha rosler: positions in the life world* in Birmingham in December 1998 and in New York in August 2000. It aims to register various effects of re-circulating a practice firmly rooted in 1970s and 1980s feminist critique of modernism as modernism's exemplary statement in the exhibition system. It is offered as an approach to what I take to be the fundamental question we have been invited to address in this session: in what ways did this exhibition contribute to the historicization of feminist art?

Birmingham is a large industrial city situated in Britain's West Midlands. Though not situated in London at the centre of the British art scene, the Ikon Gallery is, nevertheless, one of Europe's leading venues for contemporary art. Awarded 3.7 million pounds from the lottery commission in 1995, the Ikon reopened in 1998 in its present location on three floors of a Victorian school building. A bookshop and cafe occupy the ground floor. The first and second floors have been refurbished as a series of white cube exhibition spaces. This is a trend characteristic of gallery refurbishment in Britain in the mid-1990s, representing a restatement of what Kelly identified as the "pictorial paradigm" of modernist criticism – the essentially expressive and non-discursive picture - at the level of the display of art practice.[4]

Each room on both floors of the Ikon was filled to capacity with examples of Martha Rosler's work from 1966 through to 1995, installed more or less chronologically with 1960s and 1970s work on the first floor, 1980s and 1990s on the second. In spaces packed with material, visual on walls, floor and hanging from the ceiling, in colour and black and white, image and text; acoustic through headphones and from video monitors it was not easy to determine where one piece ended and another began. Had the installation been planned as the latest manifestation of the Monumental Garage Sale? This is a serious idea supported by the fact that in New York Martha Rosler set up a garage sale in the public access space at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in which she mixed her own possessions with those of others. A sign in the garage sale installation reads, 'What if the garage sale is a metaphor for the mind?'

Martha Rosler's practice has played a crucial part in breaking the modernist myth that art was a domain apart from society and immune to politics and power. She has always made work for circulation in galleries and museums and recently confirmed that she 'has no intention of giving up on the museum and gallery audience.'[5] At the same time, though, a commitment to reaching a wider public beyond the museum and gallery-going audience is fundamental to her practice. This has involved collaboration, with unknown participants in the mail works for instance, and in specific events involving groups of people, in particular places at particular times. The project *If you*

Lived Here is a significant example. The display of accumulated material associated with strategic collaboration and collective action in a retrospective whose title begins with the proper name martha rosler necessarily produces it as the metaphor of a single, an individual artist's mind.

Martha Rosler has said that the mode of distribution for the post card pieces was 'ineluctably the mail, and when they are shown in art world institutions, they are representing themselves as mail works.'[6] Likewise, *Fascination with the (Game of the) Exploding (Historical) Hollow Leg*, represented itself at the Ikon Gallery as a site-specific piece. While *Unknown Secrets (The Secret of the Rosenbergs)* was made for gallery distribution, it was originally exhibited in a group show called *Unknown Secrets: Art and the Rosenberg Era.* In that particular context the material elements of the piece, the towel rack, stenciled towel and JELL-O box, the information sheet would surely have had a critical resonance lacking in the Ikon installation. Although it was fascinating to see the elements of such works in the flesh, discrete display disabled their critical capacity. Conversely their presence may have disabled the critical capacity of one group of visitors to the exhibition.

For a feminist visitor of my generation (not quite old enough to be of Martha Rosler's, but not young enough to be post what it stands for) displaying the material remains of activities that originally set out to reach beyond the gallery system carries a danger. It risks producing relics in the religious sense. Not the actual finger of St Martha, but holy material all the same. Imbued in these post feminist, post Marxist days with the mystique of its indexical relation to Martha Rosler's history of feminist/Marxist informed "guerrilla" strategies planned from positions once on the margins of the art world. Was this, perhaps an effect contributing to the critical silence surrounding the exhibition at the Ikon? For to give a direct answer to the question, how did martha rosler: positions in the life world reopen public debates about the generational shifts in "feminist art" and curatorial practices? In Britain it didn't. Feminists of my own generation involved in cultural politics failed to respond to the exhibition, with the exception of one notable review, to which I shall return.

Asked by Michael Rush in an interview in *The New York Times* about her position on re-presenting in the gallery work for which originally the gallery was not the primary mode of distribution, Martha Rosler answered:

'So much of my work involved the Vietnam War that it would have been obscene to show it in a gallery. But now, it's different; it's important to remember and to enable the young to discover what to some of us is still so present.' [7]

As one involved in precisely this task in relation to a history of the feminist problematic in the visual arts, I would be the last to deny the importance of preserving and re-circulating this dimension of Martha Rosler's practice. What I puzzle about is how to do it in a way that keeps the work open and productive of ongoing critical meanings.

Many more of Martha Rosler's non-gallery projects were documented in a Resource Area at the Ikon. Here I was engrossed in archives filled with detailed

research, records of planning, action and reception. Thinking forwards replaced looking back as I began to imagine new projects informed by, and engaging with the events documented there. The Ikon's gallery's advance publicity material announced that in association with positions in the life world. Martha Rosler would be involved in a project with the community in Birmingham. I waited to see what this would be, curious to know how it would inflect the central exhibition event. It never materialized. Regional art world rivalry defeated a proposed project in Manchester with *The Big Issue*, Britain's street magazine sold to provide for its homeless vendors. Such a project would have re-engaged with *If You Lived Here* in a different location, at a different historical moment. What if the project had gone ahead?

That was Birmingham in 1998. In New York in 2000, *martha rosler: positions in the life world* was presented in two venues, one uptown at the International Center of Photography on Fifth Avenue and 94th Street, one downtown, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in Soho. While determined more by practical than conceptual considerations, the spatio-temporal disposition of the exhibition nevertheless functioned as a challenge to the conventions of the retrospective, structurally inhibiting spatial and temporal continuity. How many people visited both parts of the show on the same day for instance – or only bothered to go to one? A desire for integrity was variously registered in the reviews. Howard Cotter wrote:

'Despite the split in venues and Ms Rosler's long standing habit of dividing her energies among several media at once, the show is of a piece. It is crowded, garrulous, agitated and funny – the subway ride uptown from the new Museum feels like an extension of it – and all but inseparable from the urban landscape that is Ms Rosler's native milieu.'[9]

The language is revealing. Cotter perceives the show as split rather than, say, shared between the two venues. The curatorial decision is characterized as an act of outright brutality in Martha Schwendener's review for Time Out New York: 'the show's literally been ripped in two', she writes, 'and it feels that way.'[10] The capacity of the gallery as container and frame to rescue 'a semblance of propriety' (Kelly) for an artist with the disconcerting habit of "dividing her energies among several media at once", was indeed curtailed by installing the show in two sites. Delivering a backhanded compliment, Cotter remarked that martha rosler: positions in the life world looked 'less like a solo exhibition than a lively collaborative effort.' [11] The trip through town involved in visiting the show prompted him to assert that its contents were 'all but inseparable from the urban landscape that is Ms. Rosler's native milieu.'[12] Superficially the assertion could be taken as confirmation of the success of Rosler's intention that her practice engage with everyday life. Given a little more thought it is an interpretation that robs the work of its status as representation. It fails to recognize, or acknowledge a sophisticated signifying practice always in a critical relation to ideologies shaping the urban environment and dominating everyday life.

The most striking element of the New Museum installation was the sound. It

was loud. The volume of competing audio tracks of various pieces was so uncomfortable I actually worried for the health of the guards. The activities of looking at still and moving images, and concentrating to read a lot of text were difficult, exhausting, stressful even in the acoustic environment of the installation. Incredibly none of the reviewers, and no one I spoke with in New York who had visited the New Museum, mentioned the sound. Maybe New Yorkers are inured to high noise levels. Or was it an indicator of something else? Had the installation, in fact, brilliantly exposed the persistence of the ideology of modernist criticism - the pictorial paradigm - at the level of the reception of the exhibition even in the presence of such an insistent acoustic pull on the visitors attention. We expect to look at retrospectives not listen to them. In the realm of sound past pieces became elements in a new installation that worked to deconstruct the spectacle of looking back which defines the conventional retrospective as a nexus of sight, autonomy, mastery and commodification. In her use of sound at the New Museum Martha Rosler extended the analysis of sexuality in the field of vision fundamental to feminist practice, as a structural challenge to the retrospective's primary mode of reception. Moreover, photocopies of longer textual elements of pieces like *The Secret of the Rosenbergs* and *The Restoration of High Culture in Chile* were available for the visitor to take away and read in peace.

The International Center of Photography chose to focus on the ways in which Martha Rosler's work 'deliberately engages with the traditions of documentary photography.'[13] Access to the video work at the ICP in an environment conducive to prolonged viewing, served to demonstrate an equally deliberate engagement with the traditions of "documentary" film-making. The work of Eisenstein, and filmmakers concerned with exploring and reconfiguring the Soviet tradition in response to the political and cultural upheavals of the late 1960s, crucially inform all aspects of Rosler's practice. Her work is part of the 1970s moment of feminism's affiliation with the other strand of modernism. Not Greenbergian formalism, but the avant-garde dis-identificatory practices of Brecht and filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet who, informed by Brecht, aimed at revealing the workings of bourgeois ideologies as a politics of vision and sound in cinema.

Martha Rosler admires *History Lessons*, made in 1972 by the Straub-Huillet team. For long stretches of the film the camera is situated inside a car that a man drives around the streets of modern Rome. We get a documentary view of the city and hear its sounds recorded directly. These sequences alternate with conversations about Julius Caesar the man seen driving the car has with a number of actors dressed as ancient Romans representing different positions in Roman society. The memory of the driving sequences reappears in an obvious way in Rosler's work in *Rights of Passage*. The fundamental lesson of *History Lessons* and all Straub/Huillet films is that we must attend to the means of our access to history. Accordingly their practice involves

materializing the transaction between image and reality particular to film making, and it made a startling return for me at the New Museum, not looking at *Rights of Passage*, but listening to *A Budding Gourmet*. There is a moment when a passage from Schubert's quartet 'Death and the Maiden' cuts in behind the sound of a woman's voice expressing the hope that learning gourmet cooking will make her a better person. We see the head of a woman, but in silhouette, so it is not clear if the words are coming from the mouth of the body on the screen. The piece takes as its starting point the representational conventions of public television, but it proceeds to combine different modes of address and lay bare the devices of construction so that we have to think about the conflicting ways the material is offered to us.

In her intelligent review of *martha rosler: positions in the life world* in Birmingham for *Afterimage*, Nancy Roth took up the question of history raised by exhibiting the work as a retrospective. For Roth the exhibition presented 'history, as careful description of specific conditions that many people have shared over time'. She understood the exhibition as, 'a way of doing history other than exclusively writing it', suggesting that Martha Rosler, 'used the gallery rather than pages of text to "publish" a scene, site or set of physical conditions.' [14] It is true that even framed as a retrospective in the most pristine of white gallery spaces Martha Rosler's work still implies the social spaces and signifying systems of culture beyond that frame, and produces a critical presence for specific events invisible within, and constituencies silenced by dominant culture. For *The Guardian* newspaper's reviewer Adrian Searle, however, the histories presented in the exhibition have been more 'precisely and incisively' represented in books in works of fiction like Don De Lilo's *Underworld*.[15] This is a pointless judgment in which Searle abdicates his critical responsibility to review the exhibition as exactly that, an exhibition, and 'precisely and incisively' address the ways in which Rosler's work reconfigured the kind of looking back conventionally associated with the retrospective. Searle's review can be read, though, as another effect of the limitations of an exhibition form, still so heavily invested with modernist expectations at the level of reception, for the ongoing capacity of Rosler's work to produce critical meanings.

When Godard complained that Straub and Huillet's film *The Chronical of Anna Magdalena Bach* did not have enough relevance to contemporary problems, Straub replied that the film was his contribution to the struggle of the North Vietnamese against the Americans. [16] Chronical was made in 1968 at the time Martha Rosler was working on the *Bringing the War Home* series. Both are responses to the same historical event but provide different modes of artistic access to it. What if they were shown together as an exhibition event? The space of the retrospective cannot accommodate such a meeting. We must also attend to the ways in which the culture industry produces the history and meaning of aesthetic practices and their relation to the life world.

Surely the major legacy of feminist interventions in culture since the late 1960s is a radical reconceptualization of the function of artistic practice and its institutional sites. Women in positions of power in the curatorial field have made a

difference. Elizabeth MacGregor and Sabine Breitwieser are both committed to showing work made by women. I returned to the New Museum of Contemporary art in December to visit the Adrian Piper retrospective. On our MA in feminism, criticism and practice module at Leeds students often present the two bodies of work in the same session. Crucial and productive points of correspondences and difference arise in the encounter. The current re-circulation of art practices which engaged with feminist politics in the in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s as self contained retrospectives indicates to me that the historicization of the feminist problematic in art today is crucially 'the question of institutions, the conditions which determine the reading of artistic texts and the strategies which would be appropriate for interventions.' [17]

Rather than end this paper with a backward look I want to move forwards towards reading work Martha Rosler is making now. All I have time to do here is repeat Martha Rosler's own twice-repeated gesture in respect of it. At the last minute she decided to include *Adventures Underground*, an episode from an ongoing work called *Dreams and Transports*, in the installation at the International Centre of Photography. At the very end of her talk at the New Museum Rosler introduced *Dreams and Transports* without further comment.[18] A sequence of slide images of underground stations, platforms with staff, and travellers in train carriages was projected on the wall whose reverse side formed part of the stairwell at the ICP in which the airport space images of *In the Place of the Public* were installed. I found the juxtaposition the most compelling moment in the whole exhibition - this work was going somewhere else. The text element of *Dream and Transports* is, in fact, about movement:

'Movement defines the era. Looking back on the century, we understand the linkage of information and transportation (and their inevitable dark double, mass death) - movement of people as well as of goods...The separate worlds of the 'underground' and of air travel mirror each other, for each requires a population controlled, surveilled, and kept from panic...The rapid movement through subway tunnels evokes flight (especially for child travelers) while the effort of airlines is to deny its reality.

Both forms of transport answer to the most rational need of capital but at the same time evoke a world of experience both conscious and unconscious. This maps out for us the world of the everyday, the common ground of both "reality" and metaphor.'[19]

Title and text evoke the work of the two great thinkers of the last century, Marx and Freud. What they thought about of course, in different ways, was history, our means of access to it.

Notes

1. Mary Kelly 'Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism' *Screen* vol.22, no. 3 (1981) p.41, also in M.Kelly *Imaging Desire* (MIT, 1999).

2. Griselda Pollock 'Artists, Mythologies and Media - Genius, Madness and Art History' *Screen*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1980), p.58. It should be noted that this essay prompted and informed the writing of 'Reviewing Modernist Criticism' and repays reading as a companion piece to it.

3. Mary Kelly, 'Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism' *Screen* vol.22, no. 3 (1981) p. 47.

4. Ibid. p. 43. The renovation of Site Gallery in Sheffield and the Serpentine Gallery in London also involved reinforcing the white cube model.

5. Martha Rosler during a panel discussion with Brian Wallis and Dan Cameron at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 8th August 2000.

6. 'Benjamin Buchloh: A Conversation with Martha Rosler' in *martha rosler: positions in the life world*, edited by Catherine de Zegher (Ikon Gallery and Generali Foundation,1998), p. 45.

7. Michael Rush 'A Pure Artist is Embraced by the Art World' *The New York Times* 9 July 2000, pp.29-29.

8. Information provided by Martha Rosler in conversation with me in New York, August 2000.

9. Howard Cotter 'An Iconoclast to Whom the Personal Is Always Political' *The New York Times* 4 August 2000.

10. Martha Schwendener 'No Compromise' *Time Out* New York 17-24 August 2000, pp. 62-63.

11.Howard Cotter 'An Iconoclast to Whom the Personal Is Always Political' *The New York Times* 4 August 2000.

12. Ibid.

13. Brian Wallis, Chief Curator, ICP, on the introductory information panel and gallery notes.

14. Nancy Roth 'Decoys and Documents' *Afterimage* July/August 1999 p. 12.

15. Adrian Searle 'Dedicated follower of Convention', *The Guardian* 12 January 1999 pp.10-11.

16. Quoted by Richard Roud in his book, *Straub* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), p. 71.

17. Mary Kelly 'Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism' p. 57.

18. Lisa Bloom generously provided me with an audio tape of Martha Rosler in a panel discussion with Brian Wallis and Dan Cameron in New York 8/8/00.

19. From my copy of the wall text at the International Center of photography.

This paper was presented at the 89th College Art Association conference in the panel 'Reviewing 1970s and 1980s Feminist Art Practices in the 1990s:Three Major Exhibitions on Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosler' Chicago, February 28-March 3 2001.

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Martha Rosler's Critical Position within Feminist Conceptual Practices

Catherine Caesar

Martha Rosler was one of a few women artists who, in the late 1960s and 1970s, inflected conceptualism with a feminist agenda. She used conceptual techniques to critique beauty standards imposed on women by the media and to reveal the economic and sexual exploitation of women. Yet prior to her recent retrospective her work has been noticeably absent from the discourse of both conceptual art and early feminist art. [1] Nor has she been sufficiently analyzed in relation to her feminist conceptual peers such as Eleanor Antin and Adrian Piper. [2] In this paper, I attempt to reconstruct Rosler's placement within feminist conceptual practice and to explain her segregation from her artistic context. Despite the fact that Rosler employed conceptual techniques and created work committed to combating sexism, she deviated from certain aspects of some conceptual and feminist art. Specifically, Rosler opposed conceptual and feminist art when the artist's preoccupation with the self obscured the work's social relevance. To demonstrate this claim, I will show how Rosler's work fits into Rosalind Krauss's characterization of two strains of conceptualism: the first type of art stems from the private expressive self, while the second type of conceptual art, like Rosler's, rejects subjective expression and instead relies on the public to produce its meaning. This division is crucial to Rosler's work, for it makes clear her distinction from conceptual artists with no concern for the artwork's effect upon the viewer. She suggested that the prioritization of the private mental concept in an artwork could diminish concern for social change.

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Rosler perceived a similar solipsism in feminist art, describing the proliferation of autobiographical first person narratives as 'narcissistic'. When women artists focused exclusively on their personal lives, it hindered a critical relation to their surroundings necessary to the recognition of sexism. I will show how Rosler combats this narcissism by using fictional characters, or personae, rather than autobiography, transferring the focus of the work from Rosler herself to a social issue. Rosler's view stood in opposition to the sole definitions of feminist conceptual art delineated by critic Lucy Lippard in her 1973 all-women conceptual art exhibit entitled *c. 7500*. According to Lippard, women conceptualists inflected conceptual strategies with autobiographical content. Rosler's challenge to the unmediated use of autobiographical narratives distanced her from 1970s feminist art discourse such as Lippard's, which in turn contributed to her isolation from her feminist conceptualist peers: Antin and Piper, unlike Rosler, were included in Lippard's show. Ultimately, Rosler's exclusion from this original group of women conceptualists has resulted in a misunderstanding and a historical misplacement of Rosler's work: instead of being recognized as a first generation feminist artist inspired by women's liberation, she has often become associated with second generation feminist artists.

I will begin by discussing Rosler's position within conceptual art. In the mid-1960s, Rosler began producing artworks inspired by her activism, denouncing societal ills such as the violence of the Vietnam War. She employed a wide variety of media such as photomontage, postcards, installations and videos. Rosler chose easily-reproducible media and unconventional methods of transmission, such as the mail, to reach a wider audience. Rosler's association with conceptualists including Allan Sekula, Fred Lonidier, and Hans Haacke influenced her work.[3] Seeking new forums for display and employing inexpensive and mass-reproduced forms, these artists defied the uniqueness and preciousness traditionally associated with the fine art object. Like Rosler, Sekula, Lonidier and Haacke used non-valuable media to rebel against the art market, [4] while consistently featuring politically-charged subjects to rebel against contemporary societal injustices.

Like these conceptual artists, Rosler opposed the political apathy of some forms of conceptualism. I argue that Rosler would critique the first of the two types of conceptual practice that Rosalind Krauss outlined in her 1973 essay, 'Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post 1960s Sculpture'. According to Krauss, this first strain of conceptual art, embodied in the work of On Kawara, Douglas Huebler and Robert Barry, retains a privatized interior space. Krauss argues that the artist's idea or intent 'is understood as a prior mental event which we cannot see but for which the work now serves as testimony that it occurred.'[5] The artist's concept both forms and completes the work, and the concept remains private because the viewer cannot verify it. For example, Barry's interview for the *Prospect '69* exhibit serves as the entire work. Barry states in the interview: 'Some of my works consist of things in my unconscious. I also use things which are not communicable, unknowable.'[6] Barry's

work documents an experience to which only the artist can testify: the viewer takes no active part in its completion.

The second strain of conceptualism, according to Krauss, derives from minimalist art and is exemplified by the work of Sol Lewitt and Mel Bochner. These artists denied the object's ability to represent private experience; the viewer's interaction with the work comprises its meaning. Krauss argued that this strain of conceptual practice posits a notion of the self formed by experience, not a self that existed prior to contact with the world. I argue that Rosler's work is akin to this second body of conceptual work, because it is based on the conviction that the artist's idea only initiates the work, the work is not completed until the viewer translates their experience of it into a personal or social change. Moreover, Rosler's work and activism are predicated on the notion of the socially-constructed self. As she observed, 'I want to suggest the social stage on which events occur and people are formed... I'm interested in unfreezing the block of the current moment and suggesting some relationship to a social totality or larger entity than the single self.'[7]

To demonstrate Rosler's position within Krauss's mapping of conceptualism, I begin with her most recognized conceptual work *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* of 1974-75. In this project, she utilized two descriptive systems, photograph and text, placing them side by side in a grid formation. Yet Rosler considered these two methods of representation inadequate without a social context. She photographed images of New York City's Bowery, featuring decaying storefronts littered with empty liquor bottles. In the text accompanying the images, Rosler typed scattered words that refer to inebriation. Rosler's photography opposed a private authorial presence: 'Photography allowed me to generate an image and not to have it be a representation of my own interiority.'[8] Thus in the *Bowery* piece, she shifted the focus of the work away from herself as solitary expressive author and toward the social problem of homelessness.

In contrast to Rosler's *Bowery* work, Huebler's 1969 *Duration Piece #7*, which also juxtaposes text and image, refers solely to the artist's idea. In this work, Huebler snapped random photographs in Central Park at precise one-minute intervals and exhibited the photographs alongside a statement of his method. He emphasized the importance of his idea over the subject depicted and declared a complete lack of interest in the content of the photographs. Huebler stated 'the environment does not effect what I do and it is not affected by what I have done.'[9] Unlike Huebler, Rosler chose her subject purposefully: although she forefronts her method and construction of the artwork in the title, she also welcomed the reference to an actual environment. Her specification in the title of a site, the Bowery, declares Rosler's interest in the locale, in contrast to the text in *Duration Piece #7*, which documents only the artist's intent. Rosler's text, with its allusion to drunkenness and homelessness, refers to a human condition outside of her own experience and beyond her construction of the artwork.[10] Moreover, the ambiguity of the connection between

text and image in *The Bowery* requires the viewer to participate in discerning the meaning of the artwork. Ultimately, Rosler challenged conceptualism when it consisted of a private authorial statement with no concern for the experiencing audience or the artwork's social context.

If privatized authorial statements in conceptual art impeded the work's social reference, the uncritical use of autobiographical, private narratives had an even more deleterious effect on feminist art. Rosler, in her feminist artworks, used personae to counter feminist art that consists solely of autobiographical content. She wrote extensively on her use of the first person in her audio works, videos and postcard novels. In these works, she provided what appeared to be an autobiographical narrative, but in fact that narrative rarely referred to the specifics of Rosler's own life. [11] Instead, the "I" in her works represented a persona that distanced the viewer from Rosler herself and transferred the meaning of the work from the private to the public. Rosler's often humorous characters encouraged the viewer to recognize them as fictional personae. According to Rosler, if the viewer acknowledged the characters as constructions they were less likely to identify strictly on an emotional level with the characters. Instead, as Rosler asserted, the viewer's 'emotional recognition is coupled with a critical, intellectual understanding' of the work's meaning.[12] The audience could then apply this critical understanding to the social problems to which Rosler referred. In this way Rosler prevented interiority, or the expression of the artist's private experience which, untranslatable into public comprehension, lapses into solipsism rather than social awareness.

Rosler's use of personae in her feminist conceptual work counters conceptual art's reference to a private self. I demonstrate this distinction by comparing On Kawara's 1969 *'I got up'* postcard, an example of Krauss's first strain of conceptualism, to one of Rosler's postcard novels, *Tijuana Maid.* Rosler's postcard works, in contrast to Kawara's, featured a persona that shifted the attention away from herself. In each of her postcard novels of 1974-6, Rosler adopted a different persona who expressed herself in the first person. In *Tijuana Maid*, the narrator details her hardships as a Mexican maid working in San Diego, where her employers underpay, overwork, and even attempt to rape her. Rosler used the native language of the Mexican character: the *Tijuana Maid* postcards originally appeared in Spanish, and the recipient could send away for an English translation. [13] Like Kawara, Rosler transmitted the postcards through the mail. Both artists limited the work to text, using no images. Rosler's employment of conceptual techniques is evident-the work is language-based, mass-reproducible, and, at the time, non-valuable. Yet Rosler, unlike Kawara, adopted a persona rather than revealing autobiographical details. Kawara work's asserts his solitary action: the need to inform others through the mail of the time he wakes up each morning highlights his mental and physical isolation. Rosler countered this social detachment,

transferring the focus of the work from her private life to public issues such as the sexual and economic exploitation of female immigrant workers.

Rosler suggested that when a work includes feminist content, and the artist is female, it becomes increasingly important to avoid solipsistic, autobiographical narratives: 'I think that women are moved in the imperative toward narcissism...In my work there's a movement away from the sense of an individual life toward the idea that we're not so in control of how we get to live.'[14] Rosler's postcard novels countered private narcissistic accounts. The postcard medium itself translates a private tale into a public document, reinforcing the tension between the private and the social self expressed in the narrative. The postcards seemed to recount a personal narrative through a personal, or "me-to-you" means of communication, but in fact the narrative is fictional and the postcard is a public document because it is open, unsealed.[15] In these novels, Rosler appropriated conceptual techniques while challenging the self-referentiality of conceptual art indifferent to public issues. The danger of the conceptual notion of the privatized self is increased in art with a feminist content, if the use of autobiography impedes the broader social reference necessary to the struggle against sexism. Rosler suggests that recounting a woman's personal life is political, as the women's liberation adage testifies, yet the personal only becomes political if it can be recognized as a common experience that will catalyze social change.

Rosler did not attack specific feminist artists for their narcissistic use of autobiography. She instead critiqued patriarchal society, in which women were particularly prone to self-preoccupation. Beauty standards, for example, coerced women into narcissistic self-scrutiny. In her work, she strove to overcome and to reveal this societally-enforced narcissism. In her 1977 video *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, Rosler portrays the narcissistic female yet subverts that narcissism, using it to reveal how women are oppressed by society's stringent norms. Rosler appears as the nude woman whose body is measured and evaluated by a team of "experts" in white coats. Accompanying the visual images are overlapping voiceovers, which include Rosler's own voice, vacillating between the third and first person and quoting from various texts. Rosler, in character, comments on women's enforced self-scrutiny: 'this is a work about...how she learns to scrutinize herself, see herself as a map, a terrain, a product.'[16] Rosler here uses her own voice and her own body in the process of being inspected to refer to female narcissism. This narcissism results from the norms that medical standards, the media, and the cosmetic industry impose upon women: while the medical experts assess Rosler, the voiceovers quote from women's magazines' descriptions of glamorous makeovers, lists of do's and don't's, etc. Yet the imbricated voice-overs and the third person "she" question this solipsism, shifting the focus of the video from a portrait of Rosler to a collaboration of voices denouncing society's crimes against women.[17]

In this paper, I have suggested reasons for Rosler's isolation from her male

conceptualist peers. Although she is savvy in conceptual practice, she simultaneously rejects the lack of connection to social issues she perceived in some conceptual art. In her feminist art, she opposed women's enforced narcissism by refusing to create artworks centered around herself. She suggested that autobiographical narratives that do not refer to other women's stories and a larger social totality impede the viewer's participation and social action. These challenges to both conceptual and feminist art have contributed to her marginalization from the discourse of each practice. Rosler's work has also not been sufficiently discussed in relation to other contemporary women artists using personae and inflecting conceptual art with feminist goals. I propose that Rosler's isolation from other feminist conceptual artists including Antin and Piper evolved from her absence from Lucy Lippard's 1973 all women's conceptual exhibition, *c. 7500.* Lippard did not deliberately exclude Rosler from *c. 7500*; she was not aware of Rosler's work by 1973. Yet she did not include Rosler in an exhibition until 1980. I would suggest that Rosler's deviation from Lippard's definition of women's conceptual art, the only extant definition, isolated her from future inclusion in 1970s feminist exhibitions and critical reviews.

Lippard designed *c. 7500* to 'reply to those who say "there are no women making conceptual art".'[18] All of the artists in the show created their works on both sides of an index card: even Lippard's catalogue essay appears on the index cards. She divided the work in the show into categories: 'work reframing...factual material into personal patterns; work dealing with biography, usually autobiography; and work dealing with transformation, primarily of the self.'[19] Lippard defines women's conceptualism only in terms of autobiographical content and references to the self. [20] Rosler's work, in which she refuses to allow the first person "I" to refer solely to her own life, therefore stands in opposition to Lippard's definition of women's conceptualism. To demonstrate Rosler's distinction from Lippard's definition and Rosler's challenge to the artist's exclusive focus on herself, I contrast a postcard from Rosler's *Tijuana Maid* with Patricia Lasch's work in the *c. 7500* exhibit. Both are composed solely of text, which appears on white cards, and both are first person narratives. Conceptualism's challenge to the unique, valuable artform that demonstrates the artist's manual skill is evident in each work; neither is even handwritten. In her work, Lasch lists her familial roles. She refers to herself as a social being, defined through her relations, yet the artwork remains at the level of self-description. In Rosler's work, the first person draws the viewer into the narrative, only to thwart her with the fictional persona of the nameless maid, encouraging her to look beyond the artist's presence and onto the broader issues of sexual and economic oppression. Rosler employed conceptual strategies to launch a social critique without dictating the viewer's response. She adapted feminist narratives to inflect her artwork with a human, historical content. Yet Rosler's personae obscured the artist's self in order to combat what she perceived as women's enforced narcissism and the consequent uncritical use of first person narratives that hinders social consciousness.

Recognizing the stories of other women encouraged a view of the world beyond one's immediate environment.

Fundamental to Rosler's artistic commitment to political action is her notion of the public nature of art and her challenge to privatized subjective expression. Although this method correlates with that of the conceptual artists who Krauss lauded, and though Rosler's artworks are dedicated to combating sexism, she has been absent from conceptual and feminist exhibitions, beginning with Lippard's 1973 show. Rosler's exclusion from this original group of female conceptual artists remains a factor in her continued segregation from her peers. Moreover, these exclusions have caused Rosler's oeuvre to become associated with a second phase of feminist art-work reacting to groundbreaking 1970s feminism rather than participating in it. This view mistakes the chronology and development of Rosler's work, depriving it of its pioneering place in the history of feminist art.

Notes

1. Rosler's work has only recently been reconsidered. Her first retrospective exhibition originated at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England, in 1998 and traveled within Europe and to the States. See *martha rosler: positions in the life world* ed. Catherine de Zegher (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery and Vienna: Generali Foundation, 1998).

2. Rosler was one of a handful of artists inflecting conceptual practice with a feminist agenda in the late 1960s and 1970s. Eleanor Antin was one of Rosler's first mentors, both in New York and San Diego. Other women artists such as Adrian Piper were influenced by different groups of conceptualists; but, like Rosler, created videos, performances and installations. The work of these three artists often involved information systems, or an analysis of the way that knowledge is gathered and organized in our culture. The analysis of information systems in feminist conceptual art questioned the ways in which women's identities have been formed by systems of categorization: medical standards, psychology, the media, education, and so forth. The emphasis on text in this work also created a fruitful forum for examining the role of language in the construction of sexual identities, while simultaneously giving women artists a voice within this analysis of language. Yet scholars have not yet considered the common characteristics of the work of these artists and their shared conceptual influence. I contend that the failure of women's conceptual art to be appreciated as an important artistic endeavor with multiple participants stems from its lack of correspondence with contemporary categories of feminine creativity.

3. See Benjamin Buchloh's interview with Rosler, in martha rosler: positions in the life world, p. 32 and p. 39. Rosler acknowledged her alliance with Allan Sekula and Fred Lonidier in California, and her association in New York with Hans Haacke and members of Art & Language then residing in New York, such as Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden.

4. Rosler, unpublished lecture at the New School, New York, December 1, 2000.

5. Rosalind Krauss 'Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post 1960s Sculpture' *Artforum* 12: 3

(November 1973) p. 46.

6. Barry's Prospect '69 interview, reproduced in Lucy Lippard *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973) p.113.

7. Rosler, in interview with Craig Owens, *Profile* 5: 2 (1986) p. 3.

8. Rosler, in interview with Buchloh p. 39.

9. Huebler (1969), in Lippard *Six Years* p. 127.

10. Rosler refused to photograph the inhabitants of the Bowery to critique the tradition of documentary photography, which 'transmogrifes these victims into heroes.' See the Owens interview, p. 30. However, Rosler simultaneously pays homage to the 1930s documentary photography of Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans. See the Buchloh interview, pp. 37-39.

11. Rosler occasionally used her own name, as in the audiotape that accompanies the installation *She Sees in Herself a New Woman Everyday* (1976), where the mother character addresses the narrator as "Martha."

12. Rosler, 'For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life' *Journal of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art* (June-July 1979) p.15.

13. Rosler used the Spanish text in *Tijuana Maid* because the Maid persona was most distinct from her own life. Whereas she felt she could adopt the personae of the upper-class housewife in *A Budding Gourmet* or the fast food worker in *McTowersMaid*, she did not want to presume to understand the experience of a Mexican woman. Thus Rosler used the distancing effect of the foreign language to separate herself from the Maid's character. Discussion with Martha Rosler, March 2001.

14. Rosler quoted in Owens' interview, p. 28. Rosler cites Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as a source for her ideas on women's narcissism in a letter to the author, December 12, 2000. Recently, authors such as Amelia Jones have inverted the concept of female narcissism, arguing that artists including Hannah Wilke subverted the objectification of women's bodies by employing their own bodies in performances. See Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Rosler would not necessarily oppose this view. In works such as *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, Rosler subverts women's enforced narcissism, see below.

15. Rosler, in interview with Owens, p. 38.

16. Rosler's videotape script, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* excerpted in Martha Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," *Afterimage* 9: 3 (October 1981) p.13. See also Amy Taubin's analysis of the video in '"And what is a fact anyway?" (On a tape by Martha Rosler)' *Millennium Film Journal* 4/5 (Summer/Fall, 1979) pp.59-63.

17. Rosler's video is a complicated and dense project. In addition to implicating patriarchal society for creating women's narcissistic self-scrutiny, it comments on the inherent racism of beauty and medical standards. Moreover, the layering of images and sound in the video and the coarseness of the videography highlights Rosler's construction of the artwork, and like *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, forefronts her methods of representation.

18. Lucy Lippard *c. 7500* (Valencia: California Institute of the Arts, 1973), n. p.

19. Ibid. I focus here on only three of Lippard's four categories of women's conceptualism, since

the artists included in Lippard's first category, 'work dealing with perception of exterior phenomena,' Nancy Holt, Alice Aycock and Doree Dunlap, did not represent feminist content in their c. 7500 work.

20. Lippard 'Escape Attempts' in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995) p. 23. Women's conceptualism was rarely discussed after the 1973 exhibition. I contend that this omission in part stems from Lippard's subsequent dismissal of the political efficacy of conceptual art in her 1977 essay 'The Pink Glass Swan.' The fact that she renounced the ability of conceptual art to elicit social change in 1977, the heyday of second wave feminist art, may explain the subsequent absence of dialogue on women's conceptualism. See Lippard, 'The Pink Glass Swan: Upward and Downward Mobility in the Art World' in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995) pp.117-127.

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The Legacy of 1970s Feminist Artistic Practices on Contemporary Activist Art

Ruth Wallen

When the recent exhibition *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* opened at the Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 1996 it was greeted with a mixture of nostalgia and hostility.[1] Attention focused on *The Dinner Party* itself and not on the other 56 artists represented in the exhibition. Christopher Knight, *Los Angeles Times* art critic labelled the exhibition, 'the worst...I've seen in a Los Angeles museum in many a moon.' To Libby Lumpkin, writing for *Art Issues* it was 'ardent kitsch'. Betty Brown, in contrast, reviewing the show for *Art Scene*, recalled the original exhibition and was grateful that a younger generation could view the work.

When I first heard of the exhibition, I had my own moment of nostalgia. As a young artist, just beginning to show professionally, I remembered all of the excitement when *The Dinner Party* first opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979. Though Chicago's imagery and working methods were the subject of heated debate even then, the exhibition opening was a time of celebration, with poetry readings, lectures, a benefit concert, and even a children's program. Museum attendance reached records highs. A day long symposium entitled 'Women's Art as a Vehicle for Social Change' was held to a packed audience. Suzanne Lacy organized a companion performance piece featuring a huge map in the center hallway of the museum filled with telegrams from women all over the world describing actual dinner parties they had organized. I personally co-coordinated a tour of women's artist studios and murals by Mujeres Muralists.

Almost twenty years later, I hoped that both the exhibition and accompanying catalogue, edited by curator Amelia Jones, would offer an opportunity for renewed

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discussion both of the influence of Chicago's work and the development of feminist artistic practices. Unfortunately however, Jones' brave attempt to recontextualize the work was met with widespread skepticism, even disdain. Though I too had some comments about the way the exhibition was organized, (which have been published elsewhere) I would first like to sincerely thank Amelia Jones for her courage and foresight in bringing this important moment of feminist art history into reconsideration.[2] While one could contest the centrality of *The Dinner Party* to the development of feminist art, it was seen by more women than any other feminist artwork of the 1970s. Today, I would like to focus on the influence of project to the development of activist, community based work over the last two decades. *The Dinner Party* utilized, and given it's scale, advanced, many strategies being developed by feminist artists of the time, including the recounting of women's experience, the valorization of women's work (needlework and China painting), the collaborative process, and the appeal to a large women's audience. To a large extent activist work gets lost in Jones' museum recontextualization and it is here that I think Chicago has made her most important, radical contribution.

A recent article by Helen Molesworth, published in *October* in the spring of 2000 recontextualizes the essentialism/ theory schism exemplified by comparisons of *The Dinner Party* to Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* by placing both works as well as those by Rosler and Ukeles in the interpretive field of domestic or maintenance labor.[3] This new frame allows her to discuss the work in terms of political economy instead of focusing on the body. Molesworth points out the similarities between all of these projects in telling the stories of women's lives through the utilization of the most advanced formal practices of the day, the works problematize the division of public and private, and offer a critique of the 'institutional conditions of art'.[4]

But though it is refreshing to avoid debates about essentialism, I would like to focus directly on work that begins with the body and invites identification. For Chicago and many of her contemporaries in the Los Angeles feminist community, the slogan "the personal is political" was the rallying cry. The prevailing ideology was that through the sharing of the personal women could make connections and realize that their experience was the result of specific social/political conditions. While Griselda Pollock, while championing the work of Kelly and the like in her influential essay, 'Screening the 1970s: sexuality and representation in feminist practice – a Brechtian perspective' argues for Brechtian distanciation, where the viewer is forced into an analytic mode of thought and not captured by the illusion of representation, most of the Los Angeles feminists instead opted for a strategy of empathy, urging the audience to bond with the performer.[5]

This discussion leads me back to the more recent work of Amelia Jones *Body Art: Performing the Subject* where she argues that body art illicits 'intersubjective exchange.'[6] Though many criticize the focus on the body as narcissistic, Jones argues in a lengthy discussion that I unfortunately can only reference here, that it is

precisely this narcissism that positions the self in relationship to others and allows for the politicization of personal experience. It is striking how many of the artists and critics associated with Chicago or the Los Angeles Women's Building, who began with an embodied art based on personal experience, including Suzanne Lacy, Arlene Raven, Sheila de Brettville, Sheri Gaulke, and Aviva Rahmani, are now creating various forms of community based public art. How do the strategies of radical embodiment developed by 1970s feminists inform contemporary public work? Given the low profile of much of this work, how can the visibility and critical discussion of community based pubic art be increased? [7]

In this brief time, I rely principally on the work of two artists, Suzanne Lacy and Betsy Damon, that exemplifies the transition from an emphasis on story telling and strategies of identification to a more community based practice. Suzanne Lacy is an obvious choice, given her early association with Chicago while studying at the Feminist Studio Workshop at Cal Arts, to her work as teacher at the Women's Building, to her prolific career as a performance and public artist. Damon, on the other hand, worked in New York and was not included Jones' exhibition, though she credits Chicago's influence in her founding of a Feminist Art Studio at Cornell University in 1972-1973. Currently a successful eco-artist, Damon's work illustrates the range of feminist practices.

Lacy's early autobiographical work is appropriately criticized for its narrow evocation of identity politics. Lacy's performances where she dresses up as an old women or bag lady raise additional issues, not unlike documentary photography.[8] Where is the line between empathy and voyeurism? Does compassion lead to informed political struggle?[9] The problematic nature of "uncritical realism," unexamined identification, is also illustrated in Kubitza's discussion in the catalogue of matriarchal dances organized in conjunction of opening of *The Dinner Party* in Germany with perhaps unintended, but none the less clear references to the rituals of Nazi Germany.[10]

But other 1970s performances that address the violation of women's sexuality such as *Ablutions*, an early piece about rape using blood, eggs and raw beef kidneys performed with Chicago, Rahmani, Orgel, and Lacy, challenge the audience more directly. Many critics from Frueh, Isaak, and Russo, drawing from Bakhtin, cite ways that the portrayal of the feminine as grotesque, monstrous and disfigured evokes the rebellious potential of the carnivalesque.[11] When *The Dinner Party* itself, during the controversy surrounding the possibility of permanently housing the project at the University of the District of Columbia is perceived as obscene and pornographic, in the words of Representative Dornan, as 'ceramic three-D pornography' has it also been framed in a way that radically challenges the traditional docile role of women? [12]

Lacy's most ambitious performances of this period, including *Three Weeks in May, and In Mourning and In Rage*, invoke the "monstrous feminine" and were

realized in collaboration with Leslie Labowitz who studied with Beuys, and was influenced by the Brechtian tradition. Unlike *Ablutions*, these collaborations move from private horror to public analysis. *Three Weeks in May* includes two large public maps with rape reports and women's support agencies, public press conferences and a more private visceral piece, *She Who Would Fly*, that included a winged lamb cadaver and a four blood stained women crouching on a high ledge. In other projects such as *The Incest Awareness Project*, directed by Labowitz and Angelo the unspeakable is spoken and private violation put in the public sphere. Significantly in these 1970s feminist performances, visceral emotional reactions--empathy, shock and outrage lead to rational response. [13]

Betsy Damon's work was also very concerned about creating an activist community through shared stories of women's experience. She often worked collectively with women creating participatory performances including *A Rape Memory and Meditation on Knives.* In other performances such as *Blind Beggar Women*, she collected stories. At international women's conferences in Copenhagen and Nairobi, she designed a place for participants to share stories and rituals.

Damon often cites as the pivotal point in her development her work her 1985 piece, *A Memory of Clean Water,* where she cast a 200 foot section of a dry river bed in hand-made paper. [14] The strategy of embodiment is again central to this piece – through closeness, through touching and replicating the watercourse, empathy is established with the particular. Unlike Lacy or Chicago, this work evokes relationship rather than identification. From this relationship with the particular, Damon hopes to move the viewer to understanding the general importance of water. However as feminist performance, this understanding is not accomplished by Cartesian transcendent consciousness, but appreciation for immanent embodiment.

Let us now fast forward to contemporary community and public art. From this short introduction, let me briefly pose some questions about the relationship of 1970s feminist work to the contemporary scene.

Generally as the work has evolved, there has been a recognition of the limitations of 1970s identity politics, particularly the exclusion of people of color or members of the working class, and a greater emphasis on strategies of identification and embodiment that facilitate dialogue and communication. In an essay in *Charting the Terrain*, Lacy identifies four roles for the artist in the move from the private to the public, artist as experiencer, reporter, analyst, or activist.[15] In some recent work, Lacy locates herself in the first role, as an artist experiencing something with which public can identify. For instance in a1991 piece she sat in an abandoned hospital room at a cancer center in upstate New York and charted conversations that she had with patients, doctors, nurses, scientists and administrators. This piece is more reflexive than 1970s work, though Lacy is still physically present in the work, instead of role playing, through 'a report of her own interiority', she invites the viewer to reflect on their response.[16]

Where is the place for personal experience if the goal is to work with or form community? For the last ten years, Aviva Rahmani, one of the performers in *Ablutions* and student at the Feminist Art Workshop has been working on *Ghost Nets*, a project to restore a dump site on a island off the coast of Maine. Though as part of the piece she developed a detailed process for charting her personal experience, a pivotal moment into her acceptance into the local community was her decision to sing in the church choir, despite her Jewish heritage. She recognized that singing in the church was a major way to bond with the local community.

Co-founder of the Feminist Studio Workshop, Sheila de Brettville's public artwork, *Biddy Mason-Time and Place*, exemplifies a more distanced, reportorial strategy. Along with Betty Saar's interior work, this eighty-two foot sculpted time line records the contributions of Biddy Mason to the African-American community and the history of Los Angeles. [17] A story is told, but it is generated in collaboration with the community and not from the artist's personal experience.

In many of Lacy's performances she goes one step further, taking the role that she defines as activist, with the goal of motivating change among both performers and audience. Lacy herself has offered three useful criteria for measuring the success of these performances: 'First, to examine the quality of the performance experience for participants and audience; second, to evaluate the potential of these networking performances as models that can be applied to other issues and circumstances; and third, to assess the life span of the processes set in motion by the performance'.[18] In terms of creating a lasting activist community, I agree with Moira Roth's assessment that of Lacy's 1980s work only *The Crystal Quilt* begins to satisfy this criteria. Roth speculates that this success might be partly attributable the fact that the work was more rooted in existing community groups than previous projects, and was located in a state with a high level of support for the arts and "civic concerns".[19] This discussion points to another crucial issue in the development of activist work--is it realistic or appropriate for an artist to generate a project around which a new community can coalesce or is it preferable to work through existing community structures?

Beginning in 1991, Lacy began a long term commitment to the Oakland community, as lead artist and executive producer of TEAM (TEENS +EDUCATION+ART+MEDIA). Performances, installations, classes and symposia produced by TEAM have emphasized giving voice to teens and promulgating a positive media image of youth. The performances move from story telling to dialogue. For instance a recent performance in 1999, *Code 33*, featured a dialogue between teens and police. [20] The audience first listened in on the conversations of groups of teens, police and a facilitator, who were assembled in circles between two police cars. Then the audience and performers broke up into groups, divided by the participants' neighborhoods, to continue the conversation.

This work begins the difficult task of moving the viewer of the work from passive

reception to involvement. Similarly Betsy Damon motivates her collaborators to become analysts and activists; the "audience" becomes community. Since 1990 she has created an organization, Keepers of the Waters, where participants, linked through their common identification of water quality as the crucial environmental problem, meet regularly to work on various projects.

Even *The Dinner Party* aimed for a more lasting impact. The work attracted huge audiences a substantial portion of whom were not regular museum goers, everywhere it was shown. Some of the many "dinner parties" held all of the world when the piece first opened, led to temporary communities or study groups. Annette Kubitza reports that in Germany some of the groups that formed to develop work for the problematic opening celebration in Frankfurt, still meet to study women's history. Additionally the two catalogues from *The Dinner Party* are used in numerous educational contexts. Though it certainly could be argued that the work has a less coherent or radical political analysis than that of feminists informed by a Marxist perspective, is the result so different than that advocated by Brecht, where his intention is to educate the audience to make new sense of the world?

However, once art work proposes to create a process that extends beyond itself there is often tension between the originating artist's vision and the larger collaborative community. The role of the collaborators or the community in the creative process is a crucial issue. Chicago generally has a set vision before she begins the process. For *The Dinner Party* while Chicago saw herself as empowering women, by providing them with an experience were they could learn discipline and dedication to a great project, the work was basically the product of Chicago's vision. Volunteers were assigned tasks according to their abilities and had some in-put only into the design of the runners. In contrast, though Lacy is still sometimes accused of importing her vision into a community when she is invited as a guest artist, she divides her participants into zones of engagement and from there gives them a greater role in the creation of the work. By the nineties most of her performances arose from this community process and not a preset vision. In Keepers of the Water, Damon has created a structure that has a life of its own beyond her initial impetus. She also began 'No Limits for Women Artists', a national organization that directly addresses the issue of empowering women by inviting women's participation in groups around the country. In contrast, Judy Baca, who has worked closely with Lacy, argues that after years of using a collective decision making process in the design of murals, she needed to assert her leadership role, a role highly suspect in the Chicano community. As the one with the most responsibility for the project she felt that she should have primary control of the artistic vision.[21] Other artists, perhaps not coincidentally often lesser known, design and execute their projects in collaboration with children. Only rare examples of these projects, for instance Cheri Gauke's *Los Angeles River Project* which became known because of its inclusion in the *Fragile Ecologies* exhibition, achieve notoriety.[22] Even Lacy's ten year project

TEAM, is scarcely documented (see however, *n.paradoxa* Vol 4 1999). Can the conception of the artist be extended to include one who facilitates the creative process instead of one who creates an individual masterpiece?

I would also like to touch upon Lacy's second point, to highlight the significance of thinking of art as presenting a model for a new kind of networking. The impetus for this perspective can be traced back to Allan Kaprow, who challenged the division between art and life, but feminist artists furthered the development of this idea that artists can motivate a process or a new way of thinking that extends beyond the work itself. [23] Though Damon's Keepers of the Waters groups began by championing Damon's work, groups in Portland, Oregon and Duluth are now initiating proposals for urban water parks. Not coincidentally Anne Mavor, who heads the Oregon group, studied at the Women's Building and was a member of 'The Waitresses', a well known 1970s performance collective. Helen and Newton Harrison (Helen was also associated with the Women's Building) have made particularly notable contributions in this regard. For instance, in the *Green Heart of Holland*, the green heart is posited as a metaphor for a new way envisioning land use. Numerous community and governmental groups has been enlisted in support of this vision of limiting development to the periphery and preserving a green heart in the center of Holland.

Finally I would like to return to consideration of product. As opposed to the monumentality of *The Dinner Party*, much of the work I have discussed emphasizes process and temporary experience. Damon's recent *Living Water Park* in Chengdu, China offers a different model of artistic creation. After working on temporary installations and performances about water pollution with Chinese artists she was asked to design a park that would clean up the dirty water. The work, designed with landscape architect Maggie Ruddick was created with the help of numerous Chinese officials, entirely outside artwork construct, and in the Kaprowian sense mixes art and life. Though the project is still a vision of artist, it was created in a community context with a definite practical function.[24]

The Los Angeles feminist movement of which *The Dinner Party* was a part challenged many of parameters of the modernist canon and the commercial art world. Chicago may be criticized that her later work hasn't followed the radical implications of her major project, but I hope that this discussion is only a beginning of consideration of the influence of 1970s feminist work to the development of community based activist art.

Notes

1.Amelia Jones (ed.) *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History.* (Los Angeles: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in Association with the University

of California Press, 1996).

2.Ruth Wallen 'Review of Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History' *Women's Studies* (1999) Vol. 28, pp.339-344.

3.Helen Molesworth 'House Work and Art Work' *October* 92 Spring 2000, pp.71-97.

4.Ibid. p.82.

5. Griselda Pollock 'Screening the seventies: sexuality and representation in feminist practice-a Brechtian perspective' in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art.* (London: Routledge, 1988).

6.Amelia Jones *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) p.31.

7. Lacy argues that today that 'Activism is pitted against analysis, with a clear-cut art-world bias toward the latter, oddly similar to the art world's condescension to political and community-based art during the 1970s.' Suzanne Lacy, 'The Name of the Game' *Art Journal* Summer 1991, pp. 67.

8. Note that in contrast Lacy's *The Life and Times of Donaldina Cameron* does complicate process of identification and begin to address the often ignored issues of race. Lacy began work on this project by wanting to empathize with nineteenth century Chinese bartered brides in San Francisco, but she was pushed through conversations with the community to explore her identity and ended up embodying Donaldina Cameron, an actual missionary in 19th century Chinatown, while her collaborator, Kathleen Chang, resentful of Lacy's missionary zeal, challenged her role.

9. See Allan Sekula 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)' in *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984).

10. Annette Kubitza, 'Rereading the Readings of The Dinner Party in Europe," in Amelia Jones (ed) *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History.*

11. Joanna Frueh *Erotic Faculties.* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1996), Jo Anna Isaak *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter.* (London: Routledge, 1996) and Mary Russo *The Female Grotesque: risk, excess and modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

12.Lucy R. Lippard 'Uninvited Guests: How Washington Lost "*The Dinner Party*' *Art in America.* 79, Dec. 1991, p. 41.

13.For more information on Lacy's performance work see: Moira Roth *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America 1970-1980.* (Los Angeles: Astro Arts, 1983) and Moira Roth 'Visions and Re-Visions: A Conversation with Suzanne Lacy' *Artforum* v.19 (Nov. 1980) pp. 36-39.

14. Gadon Elinor 'Betsy Damon's A Memory of Clean Water' *Arts Magazine* v.61 (June 1997) pp. 76-77.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Dolores Hayden 'An American Sense of Place (with an afterward)' in Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster (eds). *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

18. Moira Roth 'Suzanne Lacy: Social Reformer and Witch' *The Drama Review.* p. 160.

19. Ibid. p.160-162.

20. Katy Deepwell 'Interview with Suzanne Lacy' *n.paradoxa:international feminist art journal* Vol 4,1999, pp. 25-33.

21. Judith Francisca Baca 'Our People are the Internal Exiles' in Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier (eds) *Culture in Contention* (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1985) p.70.

22.Barbara Matilsky *Fragile Ecologies: Contemporary Artists Interpretations and Solutions* (New York, Rizzoli International, 1992).

23.See for instance, Allan Kaprow 'The Real Experiment' *Artforum* 12, no. 4 (December 1983)

24. See Betsy Damon 'Living Water Garden' *n.paradoxa* Vol 4, 1999 pp.49-54

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Community vs. Context in the Reception of Eleanor Antin's Retrospective

Lucy Soutter

The *Eleanor Antin* retrospective curated by Howard N. Fox at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1999, was strikingly well received. The show and its catalogue were praised locally, in *The Los Angeles Times*, and nationally, in a string of positive reviews in publications including *Art in America*, *Art Issues*, *Art Papers*, *Art Week* and *New Art Examiner*. The majority of reviewers shared an enthusiasm for the exhibition's accessible installation. While some shows of work made in the 1960s and 1970s seem to offer up relics of an idealized irretrievable presence, the Antin retrospective animated the artist's career into what Leah Ollman, writing in Art in America, called an 'absorbing drama'. Reviewers were also united in their approval of feminist themes and strategies at play in Antin's work, and the sympathetic, approachable way the exhibition and catalogue foregrounded issues of gender and difference. As a culmination of this warm response, the retrospective won two awards from the International Association of Art Critics in 1998-9: second place for best exhibition (with first place going to the show Off Limits: Rutgers University and the Avant-Garde 1956-63 at Newark Museum), and second place for best catalogue (first place having gone to Kirk Varnadoe and Pepe Karmel's catalogue for the Jackson Pollock retrospective at MoMA). In this paper I will discuss the way the positive response to the Antin retrospective, particularly notable at a time of backlash against feminist art, rested on three key curatorial decisions: to make the installation and catalogue accessible, to frame Antin as a pioneering feminist artist, and above all, to foreground Antin's biography and public persona.

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I would like to begin by outlining my own investment in the way Eleanor Antin's work is understood. I am currently engaged in writing a dissertation on the role of photography in 1960s conceptual art. While I am fueled by a deep enthusiasm for my topic, my research and writing often feel fraught. The problem originates with the rhetoric or tone of first generation conceptual work made in the late-1960s and early 1970s. In an effort to distinguish themselves from the values of expressionism, post-painterly abstraction and pop, conceptual artists took on a de-personalized, pseudo-scientific or academic presentation. Signalling seriousness and difficulty, these works were designed to privilege the intellect over the senses. It is hardly surprising then, that the literature on conceptualism (with Lucy Lippard's work being a notable exception), is highly specialized, jargon-laden and esoteric. This leads me back to my own dilemma: I would like to engage with the full complexity and rigor of conceptualism, but I also want my writing to be accessible, and to express my own opinions in some approximation of my own voice.

In this context, Eleanor Antin is a role model for me. When she entered the fray as a conceptual artist she was facing a similar bind. She wanted to be taken seriously alongside 'The Boys', as she calls them in conversation, but her interests diverged sharply from theirs. Antin's work from the late 1960s and early 1970s is particularly inspiring to me in this regard. Works such as *Blood of a Poet Box*, *Domestic Peace*, *Carving* and *100 Boots* negotiate between markers of conceptual seriousness (pared down style, systematic working procedures, a detached authoritative "voice"), on the one hand, and a commitment to narrative, humor, and trouble-making, on the other.

The *Blood of a Poet Box* of 1965-8 is a good example of this balancing act. Antin collected and catalogued blood samples from 100 poets in a pre-fabricated specimen box. This piece pushes conceptual literalism into the realm of absurdity. The blood samples present a direct physical trace of each poet, scientifically preserved for posterity, but the logic of the set rests on a the romantic notion that a poet's creative force flows through their bloodstream via the pumping of their poetic hearts. Many conceptual artworks function as thought experiments, leading a viewer through an idea that hinges on a central lack, an emptying out of expressive content or traditional form. *Blood of a Poet Box* fits in with this model in that it appropriates its form and working procedure from a non-art source. Yet despite its pseudo-scientific form, the box, with its title drawn from Jean Cocteau, has much in common with evocative, overdetermined surrealist objects. Using a key bodily fluid to make reference to dozens of absent bodies, the piece has a kind of expressive density. In a typical Antin move, it juxtaposes the conceptual refusal of artistic presence with the implied richness of 100 poet's combined works.

I was unable to see the Antin exhibition myself, because I was living on the other side of the country when it happened. A friend sent me the catalogue as a birthday present, and a very nice present it made. I was delighted to have a chance to see

reproductions of and read more about works that I knew only by hearsay. The book's design and format are unusual. The small size and rounded corners invite us to turn the thick pages with childlike delight. The images are interspersed within the text, encouraging us to flip and browse. Clearly it would be impossible for a book to fully document a career that includes so much video and performance. Yet it seems to me that the catalogue resists completeness deliberately. Even a relatively contained piece like *4 Transactions* (1972) is only partially illustrated-the catalogue reproduces two of the piece's four pages, perhaps implying that Antin's practice is too prolific and polymorphous to be contained in a single volume.

With my academic background and academic investment in Antin's work, I cannot help but ask myself what is given up when diverging from the standard retrospective catalogue format. While this book is clearly intended to reflect the playful spirit of Antin's work, and in many ways does so successfully, it makes certain sacrifices in the process. Would audiences encountering the work for the first time through this book find it edgy, challenging and important? Or cozy and user-friendly? While the rounded corners may make the book appealing, they convey the message that the artwork inside is going to be comfortable and easy to take-which anyone familiar with Antin's mischievous social manipulations, and gender and race-bending performances will know is not at all the case. The catalogue is very well-documented - as well as a checklist, it includes Antin's exhibition, performance, film and video history, as well as an extensive bibliography - but these materials are squeezed into small print at the back of the book. In terms of my own work, I was most disappointed that the catalogue did not provide new historical or theoretical material to consider Antin's relationship to conceptualism or narrative.

Eleanor Antin has persisted throughout her career in discussing her work in relation to successful male artists such as Carl Andre, Vito Acconci, Gilbert and George, Michael Heizer and Robert Morris, as well as in relation to feminist peers. The catalogue touches on some of these connections but does not extend them. While Lisa Bloom's essay, 'Rewriting the Script: Eleanor Antin's Feminist Art' provides a historical perspective on the role of gender and Jewish identity in Antin's work, Howard Fox's monographic essay, 'Waiting in the Wings: Desire and Destiny' emphasizes Antin's artistic development. Fox traces a chronological evolution from work to work. In doing so, he mentions a variety of possible frames of reference, but chooses to describe the works primarily in terms of the artist's personal interests and motivations.

By including a long interview with the artist in the catalogue, Fox encourages readers to view Antin's career in terms of her biography and public persona. This strategy is very effective at providing immediate access to Antin's art, but has troubling implications for the long-term reception and historicization of the work. As art historian Anna Chave has described, biography has often played a problematic role in the reception of work by women artists, particularly since the valorization of

a de-personalized aesthetic in the minimalism of the early 1960s. While male artists such as Robert Morris or Carl Andre provide strategic fragments of biographical information to direct particular interpretations of their work, female counterparts such as Eva Hesse often suffer from overly biographical readings in which their bodies and lives are equated with their artistic production. Eleanor Antin is a fantastically charismatic person (I would characterize myself as one of her biggest fans). In the critical response to the show, however, it seemed that colorful descriptions of the artist and her public persona risked overshadowing the work. Jan Estep, for example, writing for the *New Art Examiner* article opens her article with the question, 'What kind of person takes as his or her hero 100 pairs of plain, black rubber boots...' The reviewer goes on to talk about the artist's "spunk" in the way she 'cantankerously but generously shares her observations about her work' in the exhibition catalogue. Julie Joyce in *Art Issues* writes about Antin's 'at times obsessively eccentric point of view' and calls her work 'refreshingly wacky'.

The one negative review, by Anne Wagner in *Artforum*, appears to condemn the work on the grounds that it cannot be effectively separated from the artist's own '(melo)dramatic flair'. Wagner's disapproval of Antin's work is in large part a matter of taste. Using the terms 'pantomime' and 'haberdashery' to evoke what she perceives as a self-indulgent, overblown style, Wagner reveals a personal preference for work with a cleaner, more self-sufficient mode of address. I raise this point to remind you that this is exactly the climate of taste in which Antin launched her career, in the heyday of an austere pared-down conceptual aesthetic. In my view, Antin's decision to exploit, and then leave behind this masculine-coded aesthetic is a crucial aspect of her career, and one which cannot be understood without reference to the context in which she was working.

This observation leads me back to Anna Chave's methodology in her writing on Hesse, as a possible model for approaching Antin's work. Chave pinpoints a bias in the historicization of minimalism, and at the same time establishes a place for Hesse beside her male minimalist peers. Furthermore, her comparison between the rhetoric used to describe Hesse and the male artists offers a new way of reading minimalism. Rather than merely accepting the masculinist authority of certain minimal works, we are encouraged to explore the aesthetic and historical ramifications of the movement's repression of biographical, subjective and expressive elements.

Along the same lines of investigation, I would offer a few brief, suggestive comparisons. What happens, for example, when one reads a work like Antin's *Domestic Peace* (1972) in relation to a conceptual "classic" like Robert Barry's *Closed Gallery* (1969)? Antin's piece (the title is a pun) is a staged social intervention, taking place in the domestic sphere. The artist scripted a series of potentially upsetting conversational gambits, and then documented their effect on her mother, producing a pseudo-objective graph of the resulting emotional distress. Here we see a diagram resulting from a conversation about Ted Kennedy. Barry's *Closed Gallery* is an earlier

work, with an illustrious place in a history of avant-garde gestures. While Malevich had emptied the canvas, and Yves Klein had filled the gallery with ineffable essence, Barry closed up shop, claiming the idea of the closed gallery as conceptual art. Barry's intervention is social in that it has a potential physical and intellectual impact on audience members who either try to go to the gallery or work their way through the thought experiment that the gallery is not available to them. But Barry's piece is directed primarily at the institution of art-it changes our conception of what art can be. When the two works are examined side by side, Barry's elegantly simple gesture makes *Domestic Peace* seem imprecise and manipulative. On the flip side, by moving art into the domestic sphere, and even into the relationship between mother and daughter, Antin's piece makes Barry's work seem very dry and self-reflexive. Antin, too, questions the role of art in our lives, implying that the avant-garde blurring of art and life has the power to subvert the most fundamental human relationships.

Or to take another example, what happens if we look at Antin's 1972 piece, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, her 36-day documented diet, in relation to Vito Acconci's *Seed Bed*, of the same year, in which he masturbated under the floor of the Sonnabend Gallery every other day for three weeks, bombarding his audience with suggestive amplified messages? Antin inserts her body into the modernist grid, while Acconci entombs himself in the white box of the gallery. Both pieces foreground endurance, and the authenticity of the artist's body as material and subject matter. Both pieces perform gender in an aggressive manner that forces viewers to confront their own attitudes and assumptions. Yet the impact of the pieces is very different. In attempting to "carve" her body into the societal "ideal", Antin offers a very different space for identification and audience response than Acconci does, with the piece in which, as he describes it, "You walk across room, over ramp/under ramp, all day, I hear you, build up fantasies, talk to you/masturbate because of you-for you-with you". Most critics read a degree of irony-or room for irony-in *Carving. Seed Bed*, in contrast, relies for its disturbing effect on its deadpan sincerity.

To offer a final example, what happens if we juxtapose, as I do in my dissertation, the picaresque narrative of *100 Boots* (1971-1973) with the thwarted narratives of Douglas Huebler's *Variable pieces*? Antin used the timing of her serial postcard piece to heighten the narrative tension as the boots set out from home to seek their fortune, find a job, lose it, join the circus, arrive in NYC, and engage in dozens of other loaded scenarios. Huebler, too, made many series of photographs, but used several techniques to keep the images from being visually rich, or adding up to a story. In *Variable Piece #4,* New York City of 1968, for example, the artist took photographs at a busy New York intersection, but kept his eyes closed, and photographed only when a pause in the traffic noises indicated that the light might be red, allowing pedestrians to cross the road. These images are connected by their conceptual system and by a fixed camera position. Yet Huebler's resistance to narrative fullness or visual interest is so extreme as to be almost perverse-it gives us a sense of why Antin

felt such a strong urge to make a narrative work at this moment, and reminds us that she was going out on a limb in doing so. Using the mail as a distribution system, *100 Boots* enabled Antin to bypass the gallery system and proceed directly to the Museum of Modern Art. Along the way, however, the accessible "story" of the piece, as well as its cuteness jeopardized her seriousness in the eyes of her conceptual peers at a time when narrative was a dirty word.

In suggesting these comparisons, I do not mean to imply that Eleanor Antin's work cannot stand alone, or that it is only useful or important insofar as it illuminates the work of other artists. Rather, I want to make sure that in the midst of celebrating Antin as a feminist artist, we continue to appreciate her achievements in the context in which they occurred, giving the work credit for its complexity, seriousness, and intertextual engagement with the art of the time. In an interview last year, Eleanor described to me her frustration with the ways that interdisciplinary, intermedia artists have been simultaneously celebrated and undermined by a certain kind of institutional treatment. Fluxus artists, for example, she described as being treated like "little pet puppies". I feel very strongly that Eleanor Antin, the artist, should not suffer a similar fate. The critical success of the Antin retrospective demonstrates that biography can be an effective tool to make feminist art accessible to both new and old audiences. It is important to the evolving reception and historicization of feminist work to continue to examine and reexamine even strategies with such desirable ends. Eleanor Antin's work has much to teach us in this regard. Even at its most personal, it offers a model for dialogue between accessibility and seriousness, community and context.

This paper was presented at the 89th College Art Association conference in the panel 'Reviewing 1970s and 1980s Feminist Art Practices in the 1990s:Three Major Exhibitions on Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosler' Chicago, February 28-March 3 2001.

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Reviewing 1970s and 1980s Feminist Art Practices in the 1990s:Three Major Exhibitions on Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosler

Alexander Alberro :Discussant's Closing Remarks

First of all, I would like to thank Lisa Bloom for organizing this panel – one of the few of its kind at CAA this year, and to express regret at the same time of the perhaps significant fact that one of the only other feminist panels at this conference was scheduled to run concurrently with ours, thus forcing a choice and splitting the constituency. For unlike several years ago, when papers and panels devoted to feminism were prevalent at the CAA, today they seem to have receded to the margins thus imitating a general trend or backlash in academia specifically and society more generally. Feminist studies are not so much under siege as merely ignored, the issues that mobilized and informed the work of a generation of artists and scholars are no longer deemed pressing or relevant. That said, however, it is with a certain degree of optimism that I note that two of the speakers in today's session – Catherine Caesar and Lucy Soutter –represent a new generation; their projects are in part motivated by an attempt to forge a link between feminist activist practices of the 1960s and 1970s and current feminist practice today. The other two speakers, Ruth Wallen and Alison Rowley, provide us with first hand experiences of exhibitions and performances as well as reminding us of the international dimension of feminism. For while the artists under consideration certainly have achieved national acclaim and attention, they are above all international artists whose work resonates with cultural workers and activists around the globe.

Rowley's excellent paper focuses on the recent Martha Rosler retrospective entitled Martha Rosler: positions in the life world that opened at the Ikon Gallery in

Britain and travelled to Lyon, France, The Generali Foundation in Vienna, MACBA in Barcelona, and Rotterdam in the Netherlands before its Fall 2000 double installation in both the downtown Soho New Museum and the uptown ICP. For Rowley, Rosler's work has always been significant precisely in its capacity of performing a 'feminist critique of modernism' one which puts into jeopardy the concept of artistic authorship. And yet, as Rowley observes, drawing from Mary Kelly's groundbreaking 1981 essay 'Re-viewing Modernist Criticism' (in M.Kelly *Imaging Desire* MIT, 1999), it is precisely the temporary exhibition system and the retrospective which, as modernist constructs, necessarily inscribe the artist in an inherently modernist paradigm. Thus, Rowley signals a contradiction in the anti-modernist and institutional politics practiced by Rosler over the years and the current retrospective and accompanying exhibition catalogue. The catalogue, Rowley underscores, completes the modernist project for she remarks, referencing Griselda Pollock, it is the discursive structure by means of which an artistic subject is realized in the field of art history. Rowley then concludes the first part of her paper with the powerful statement that, 'the retrospective functions in the field of curatorial practice to massively underwrite modernist criticism's production of artistic authorship in the form of the bourgeois subject, autonomous, proprietorial.'

In the second part of her presentation, Rowley attempts to redress this unfortunate outcome of the retrospective by engaging in a close reading of two of the installations and their critical reception in the press - the one at the Ikon Gallery and the two-part New York City show, in order to determine the extent to which the exhibitions reopened 'public debates about the generational shifts in feminist art and curatorial practices'. In New York the reception to the split venue was mixed. *New York Times*' critic Holland Cotter, and *Time Out*'s Martha Schwendener interpreted the division as symptomatic of Rosler's 'long standing habit of dividing her energies', describing the city space between the two sites as somehow related to Rosler's own milieu. Rowley astutely notes that by focusing on biographical details, both reviewers rob Rosler's 'work of its status as representation" and as a "sophisticated signifying practice'. Rowley's own reading of the New York show productively departs from the dominant view disseminated in the mass media - where they see the separate venues as a negative, she discerns that 'the spatio-temporal disposition of the exhibition functioned as a radical challenge to the conventions of the retrospective, structurally inhibiting narrative, spatial and temporal continuity.' Just as the show was spatially dislocated, Rowley brilliantly finds a similar dislocation or disjuncture between the visual aspects of the exhibits and the audial component. And it's within the domain of sound that Rowley locates the primary challenge to the modernist paradigm traditionally focused on the visual. The use of sound as a means by which to offer an alternative representation of history is at the basis of many of the films of Jean Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet whose filmic practice, especially History Lessons, had, as Rowley notes, a profound impact on Rosler's

methodology. And a theory of the rematerialization of history is at the core of Nancy Roth's review of the Ikon Gallery retrospective in Afterimage. Roth proposes that the retrospective represented 'a way of doing history other than writing exclusively about it.'

After advancing this provocative insight, Rowley hastily concludes with a quotation from Rosler's conversation with Michael Rush in *The New York Times* in which the artist justifies the retrospective with the argument that it 'enable the young to discover what to some of us is still so present.' Here, I wish that time had permitted Rowley to tease out further the implications of both her own observations on the making of history as well as that suggested by writers such as Nancy Roth. I think it would also have been productive if Rowley had foregrounded her own role within an academic context, as well as in her capacity as a participant on this panel, in the making of history, the continuation or even extension of the retrospective which discursively continues here in this room today. Also, one might legitimately ask, to what extent did the accompanying catalogue reinforce or undermine the modernist enterprise? Rowley points out many of the contributing texts that must be attended to in the formation of a retrospective and though she does provide us with certain curatorial models which would break with the modernist trope this point could be productively taken further. Also what to do with the paradoxical situation where it seems that in NYC the curatorial practice challenged the modernist paradigm while the press reinscribed it, and in Britain the exact opposite took place? In other words, what do we make of the possibility that in the end the traditional presentation provoked more critical thought and discussion in the public sphere than the non-traditional one?

In contrast to Rowley who focuses on the present day retrospective of Martha Rosler, Catherine Caesar takes us back a quarter of a century to the mid-1970s and discusses Rosler's work in the context precisely of her not being exhibited. Here, Caesar reminds us of just how difficult it was for artists informed by feminism who also happened to be on the left to be accepted and therefore included in shows by curators, especially for artists such as Rosler whose work denied easy categorization. Caesar charts out a teleology of Rosler's career, one which, though influenced by conceptualism, eschews the privatized interiority of many early conceptual artists, in favor of the socially engaged practices of someone like Hans Haacke, or Fred Lonidier. Caesar then links this preference in Rosler to her attitude towards a majority of artists informed by feminism who relied heavily on autobiographical first person narratives. This emphasis on the personal and the interior private space, Caesar suggests, ultimately leads to a practice based in narcissism that ignores a recognition of the crucial role that class and social problems play in sexism. She then argues that it was this ideological lens that separated Rosler from feminist peers such as Eleanor Antin and Adrian Piper, ultimately resulting in Rosler's exclusion from Lucy Lippard's important exhibit *c. 7500* in 1973. Caesar proposes

that there was more behind Lippard's claim that Rosler was not included in *c. 7500* because the critic simply didn't know her work, and instead grounds this exclusion in the fact that Rosler's work was at the time antithetical to Lippard's curatorial concept that favored artists whose work dealt 'with the perception on exterior phenomena; with reframing...factual material into personal patterns; with biography, usually autobiography; and with transformation, primarily of the self.' Since Rosler didn't fit these criteria which, Caesar argues, became the benchmark for artists informed by feminism in the US of the 1970s, her work was therefore largely neglected until the 1980s. And because Rosler's artistic practice was not included in traditional exhibition sites, there are few reviews or catalogues from this time from which to draw on in order to become fully acquainted with her work.

It is therefore extremely welcome that Caesar gives us detailed descriptions of Rosler's more important work from the 1970s such as the 1974/75 *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, the 1974-76 postcard series *Tijuana Maid*, or the 1977 videotape *Vital Statistics of a Citizen Simply Obtained.* Caesar doesn't locate these works in a vacuum but contextualizes them through contrasts with the work of other contemporary artists such as On Kawara. Yet, within the context of the structure of Caesar's paper, I think it would have been productive to hear more about what work Rosler was making prior to 1973, such as *Bringing the War Home* of the late 1960s, or the Diaper Pattern of 1971, since I think that such a discussion would strengthen her argument concerning Lippard's overlooking of Rosler's work in 1973. I also think that Ceasar might push her argument concerning narcissism a bit further by extending it to the media that Rosler used. In particular, I am thinking here of Rosler's videotape, *Vital Statistics*, which Caesar suggests looks at women's role in patriarchal society and problematizes their self-absorption and narcisism? The argument could be buttressed if a bit more time was spent charting out to what extent the camera, both the still and video camera, is imbricated with politics in Rosler's practice?

Like Ceasar's, Ruth Wallen's fascinating presentation returns us to the 1970s, albeit with the added dimension of firsthand experience. For Wallen, unlike Rowley and Caesar, is a practicing artist, and the unmediated recollections that she provides are invaluable. She takes us on a journey from the seventies to the present day which illustrates the evolution of feminist art practice from an initial emphasis 'on identification and embodiment', 'telling personal stories' - (what Ceasar has referred to as the narcissistic moment) - to an 'emphasis on creating dialogue and community.' Using the occasion of the 1996 restaging of Judy Chicago's celebrated *Dinner Party* of 1979, Wallen launches a discussion that seeks to find the influence of Chicago's piece in 'the development of activist, community based work over the last two decades.' Attentive to the fact that 'activist work often gets lost in the museum recontextualization,' Wallen focuses the rest of her discussion primarily on two artists - Suzanne Lacy and Betsy Damon, whose public work demonstrates the

transition from a focus on the personal and the body to a "community based practice." Within Wallen's paper we find a trajectory that leads from identity politics and a following of the slogan "the personal is political," to the recent eco-art of Damon whose collaborative projects address environmental disasters. I was particularly struck by the juxtaposition of Wallen's paper with Caesar's, for Wallen seems to be describing precisely the feminist art practice of the 1970s that Rosler was decidely not a part of, and the point now reached is more akin to the latter's practice. Thus, Wallen cites Lacy in 1995 describing the evolving role of the feminist artist as public 'experiencer, reporter, analyst, or activist.' And yet, in my understanding this is precisely Rosler's practice. In her conclusion, Wallen returns to Judy Chicago with the summation that 'Chicago may be criticized for not following up on the radical implications of her major work.'. I have to admit I found myself wishing that Wallen had given some recent examples of Chicago's work to buttress this point and make it sound less like the off-the-cuff remarks of those critics she rightfully takes issue with at the opening of her paper.

The final presentation, Lucy Soutter's meditation on the 1999 Eleanor Antin retrospective, touches upon some of the same issues found in the other three papers albeit from a different perspective. Again it problematizes the retrospective, on the one hand, signaling that an artist has reached a certain point in their career, on the other hand, unwittingly canonizing an artist and blunting the critical dimension of their work. Along this line of thought, the genre of the retrospective is perceived as essentially modernist and male, and therefore incompatible with feminist political aesthetics. In contrast to Rowley's more critical view of the Rosler retrospective, Soutter celebrates Antin's show and attributes its success to 'three key curatorial decisions: to make the installation and catalogue accessible, to frame Antin as a pioneering feminist artist, and above all, to foreground Antin's biography and public persona.' Soutter's paper pushes Antin's reception beyond a feminist one and places it in the context of other work being made at the same time. To that effect, she provides us with insightful comparisons of Antin's work in relation to early conceptual artists such as Vito Acconci and Douglas Huebler. However, the main subject of analysis in Soutter's work lies with the catalogue which she describes both in terms of its physical materiality as well as in terms of the structure and content of the essays and its reception. Now, certainly, the catalogue is crucial in placing the subject within the field of art history. But I think that one must be careful that, unless this is its explicit function, it doesn't substitute for, or displace, the actual work – even if it is an award-receiving catalogue. I regret that Soutter didn't have the opportunity to actually walk through and see the retrospective first hand and instead had to rely on mediated receptions, especially given that, as she states in her paper, she's so "enthusiatic" and "invested" in Antin's work.

Which brings us back to the role of biography and persona – the third key curatorial decision for Soutter. In contrast to Wallen, Rowley, and Ceasar who all

express reservations about biographical readings and see these as a legacy of a certain 1970s feminism, Soutter seems to be calling for a return to the personal, and not just the artist's personal subjectivity, but the critic's or historian's as well. Thus, she abandons the conventional academic semi-detached voice of a scholar in favor of a much more personal, engaged tone – as she herself states, she's writing about Antin because she likes Antin and her work. Soutter's here signaling the return of pleasure within the academic enterprise where theory and analysis is being replaced by a more subjectively based critique. As she notes, both early conceptual artists and their historians – Lucy Lippard being the exception – have in common a privilege of the intellect over the senses and a language which is 'specialized, jargon-laden and esoteric.' I can't help but be reminded here of the attacks on feminist intellectuals such as Judith Butler or Gayatri Spivak by members of the conservative National Association of Scholars who couched their dismissal of the ideas and politics of these intellectuals through the derision of their particular use of language. In an era when there is not only a backlash against feminism but against intellectuals generally – a dumbing down of public discourse and sites of learning – I think we need to exercise extreme caution and be careful not capitulate but to maintain rigorous intellectual investigations. This isn't to say that the personal/biographical has no place within the academy, not at all. But like every other text,as Soutter reminds us, the personal is a text which must be critically read.

So let me conclude by reading again the final sentences of each paper: Soutter ends with the words that Antin's work 'offers a model for a dialogue between accessibility and seriousness, community and context.' Wallen hopes that "this discussion is only a beginning of consideration of the influence of 1970s feminist work to the development of community-based activist art." Caesar argues that Rosler's artistic practice has from the beginning encouraged the viewer to look at the world beyond her or his immediate environment, into the larger issues of societal control and exploitation. And finally Rowley concludes that Martha Rosler: positions in the life world was a crucial reminder that doing these histories must entail attending to the means by which the particular configuration of each can precisely be translated into curatorial practices in the present. I think the message is clear, whatever shortcomings the retrospective exhibitions and installations of Rosler, Chicago, and Antin might have, the importance and impact of their work cannot be underestimated, both at the time of production and continuing on today. The importance that community based activism now plays signals a significant shift, I would argue, not just in feminist aesthetic practice but in cultural production in general. What is interesting is that none of the presenters directly addressed changes in the political climate which may have directly contributed to the move away from the personal toward a more community-based practice in the US such as the reactionary politics of the 1980s and Reaganism, and now, in 2001, Bushism, and the assault on intellectuals, and the arts, and the NEA, spearheaded George Bush,

Lynn Cheney, and others. We're now entering a new, highly conservative period, with yet another highly reactionary regime here in the US, and must as academics, artists, critics, intellectuals and workers remain vigilant that our work will be supported and make a difference.

This paper was presented at the 89th College Art Association conference in the panel 'Reviewing 1970s and 1980s Feminist Art Practices in the 1990s:Three Major Exhibitions on Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosler' Chicago, February 28-March 3 2001.

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Diary of an Ageing Art Slut from London, the Montmartre of the Millennium

Late September - late

Well this month was a turn up for the books!!! After the summer and all the excitement with the family and the added excitement of reconnecting with the ex., I had a few more bits of adventure. While over in the ol' home town ensconced at the ex's due to my refusal to stay with aged parents I was invited to be his guest at his rich Chicago cousin's wedding in a Scottish castle - all expenses paid for mind you! Getting married in a Scottish castle seems to be the done thing among the rich and famous! The deal, and there always is a deal, being he gets to stay at my house while in London for a week seeing all the latest wonderful things in London. He doesn't get to show up once again without a partner at a family function. So we booked a B&B in Edinburgh over the internet..... with twin beds! When I finally did leave the home town (it took two attempts due to aeroplanes getting lost???) we parted all sort of excited with more than a hint of romance in the air.

Well, five weeks later he turns up while the ongoing saga of nearest and dearest going to hospital for ear operation in is full swing... which is to say, the hospital cancels out at last moment and reschedules for the following week!!! Twice !! So ex-boyfriend and I enjoy London, seeing the sights, looking at exhibitions and generally having a good time.

The night before we leave Bet has got us tickets to the Private View bash being held after the Whitechapel's new show Protest and Survive at a place called Stepney City. It was a school in a rather grand Victorian building until it became a multimedia centre!!! But it was the food that really made it. Three serving centres of Mediterannean, far Eastern and American plus a sweet trolley to die for filled with

great ice cream and gorgeous toppings AND all the lime green vodka coolers you could imagine or want to have.G's newest and future sperm donor was there charming us all with stories of his time in Australia. Em was floating around with her now steady partner and Bet was just glowing from latest holiday romance. A fine rain was misting down and evaporating as soon as it hit the several huge gas balloon heaters. We all got right royally tipsy. The happiness was infectious making everyone in the gang and their nearest and dearest's smile and laugh the night away. Bet broke the spell momentarily by whispering in my ear:

'I invited the living dead, but he refused to come saying he was too worried about his operation. I ask you once again can't you divorce him and have a relationship with some one nice like the Ex over there?'

Ex and I walk home to my house later in the rain and stop to look at a city fox making his way home as well. Ex is dead impressed with my glamourous social life. I say nothing and let him keep his illusions as long as he can. He informs me that he has applied for a job here as London seems to bereft of his type of skills. The air is definitely heating up.

The next day we head off to Scotland at six am. Wonderful trip on the train to Edinburgh but once there, we book in and go out for a good look at the town and sights. Big meal at posh hotel that night by groom to be for all wedding guests. Really looking forward to it. We get back to B&B later, dress, order cab and go only to find when we get there no one is about. No relatives, no obvious loud American Guests. We think that we could be very early. We ask at desk for the dinner party. They give us blank look and check bookings.That party was last night. Ex looks dumb founded. We doublecheck. Great puzzlement. Decide to go to cousin's hotel down the road and see if they are there. After all the wedding isn't until tomorrow. Brief saunter down the Golden Mile stopping to buy the third black bow tie (The other two mysteriously disappeared) Dead casually we enquire at reception desk and are told "They all left this morning by bus for the wedding in the country." Major panic sets in very quickly. Quick look at watch. "If we really try we could still get there for the reception." says Ex, weakly. Cab is ordered in nano seconds .We hope in and race back to B&B. Book room for next night as well and pack formal attire and jeans v.v. quickly and rush back out to waiting cab.

Time to spare but.... there is a petrol strike on and everyone is taking the train. Ex begins to really panic but I tell him to give me his credit card and he can go look for right platform. While in truth I am thinking that if worse comes to worse I will barge to front of queue and pretend I am frazzled American tourist who is about to miss the last train to cousin's wedding or something like that and go completely hysterical. However good luck was on my side and the line went down extremely quick and Ex came back in the nick of time to pay for tickets. Off we rushed, only to then have to wait for late train. Once on the said train, we began to work out how we would change so that we could arrive in grand style. There is no chance of that

happening in train as loos are awash with unmentionable fluids. So we decide it's the back of the cab...as one does.

The cabby, once we had found one, was instructed to drive to castle and I would change in back of cab into full evening gear. Once accomplished he would stop and I would change positions with Ex and he would do the same.We then raced through the pitch black country side at a break neck speed with all the pleasure of changing in the back of a cab into full evening gear and arriving at the castle just as they were about to toast the happy couple. It really was a great party and we staggered into bed at 3 am. having made our way down the hill to a wee cottage. The next morning I got out of bed and realised it was bloody cold. I also realised that the Ex snores and I could hear him through the walls all night. But I forgave him when the landlady brought in a breakfast of scrambled eggs and smoked salmon to die for. The next night at the B&B as I was curled up with a Sunday paper on my bed and the TV blathered quietly in the background, the image of my cousin came on the screen with tears running down his face. Paula Yates had topped herself and as her lawyer he was issuing a statement to the press. Ex was dead impressed once again. All in all it was a good trip. But finding out that the Ex is inflicted with the same lack of passion or desire even as the nearest and dearest left me wondering if it is epidemic in men over 45. The last night Ex was in London, I had to put nearest and dearest in hospital for his operation. I got him all settled in and he hissed at me

'Make sure that one-balled wonder is gone when I get out.'

The Ex left the next morning and I saw him to the airport. He had talked of sending a ticket for me to join his family in Canada for Xmas and I was, despite the warning bells going off in the back of my brain, all glowy and smitten.....

October 23

What a month!! N & D operation went okay but did he make a palaver out of it. They get changing him around from one ward to the next until finally they stuck him in a private ward and there he stayed!! I had to go visit him after he came out of op, but not until the evening. However I had picked up my God son from school and was supposed to take him home before I went but his mother did not get home when she said she would be and it presented a decision of whether to take the little nipper with me or wait. So we went.

'Are we lost ?' he asked. Now in the dark things look different and I made a slight error of judgement in taking the right street when we came out of the underground so suddenly we found ourselves rather lost. The little nipper pointedly said "Looks like it" There were no streets lights working and it was very dark. I spied a sign 'Londonium High Street'

'Did we travel in time?' he queried.

'No such luck. Just a sign for the Museum of London. Let's sing, I suggested ..' because he seemed to be on the verge of tears. So there we were belting out Jerusalem

at the top of our voices and wandering around the back of St Barts hospital. We did find our way and we nipped up as quick as we could to the right ward. It turned out we weren't really that lost. I just didn't recognise the right road.We walked into the right room finally and there was nearest and dearest with his head swathed in bandages and looking like Van Gogh.

'Did you have brain surgery?' the little voice asked.

Dearest of course couldn't hear so I hissed at the child.

'It's only his ear drum that was fixed.'

It was a nasty sight. Poor fellow was out of it even more than usual and really looked like he had been through the wars. We gave him all his things that he had requested and I fluffed up his pillows and said soothing things. But after the little nipper had explored the private bathroom and fiddled with all the knobs on the bed; he even managed to send the poor man almost out of it and moving backwards I suggested we go. The look on dearest's face along with his twitching fingers as he fumbled for something to either throw or bean the boy with made it clear it was time. I did not look forward to the next few weeks and his recovery. It was not going to be easy for either of us. But I did make a few openings and Bet, Em and G rallied around by sending him cards and dropping in to see if I had strangled him yet. In fact Bet commented on how well I was managing not to murder him. She is in fine fettle this days having met once again the man of her life on a "different" holiday. This holiday involved learning "courses" on psychology and yoga on a Greek island. Her new love seemed all right but then they all do in the beginning. When I told Em she just rolled her eyes and said

'Again!' I told her not to be so cruel. It only happens once and then.

'Once a year you mean.'

'Well , it's good entertainment'

'Almost as good as your escapade this summer. Do you think anything will come out of it. It's breaking the cardinal rule. You know the one. Never date ex boyfriends. They are never better the second time around unless they have have a personality transplant or heavy therapy and then they are even more boring.'

I was about to say 'But this is different' when I remembered it was G.'s and Bet's standard phrase and shut up. I just smugly smiled to myself and thought:

'She will smile on the back of her face when he sends me a plane ticket for Xmas!!!'

However I have had one paltry communications since the ex left and I have emailed him weekly and left a message on his ansaphone. Trés worrying!!!

I have a confession to make - I enrolled at the Royal College of Art as a student, trying to get a PhD. It's been on the books for over 18 months but I just kept trying to tell myself I wasn't going to do it. However this summer when my grade school principle asked me what I was doing, I blurted out that I was registering for my PhD. Not completely true. I have to get the MPhil first, then get accepted onto the Phd program. But it seemed to put me in good stead with him which was a lot more than

I ever was when I was twelve and frequently being hauled up to his office for one misdemeanour or another which was never my fault. He beamed glowingly at me and said he always knew I was always special. When I told my older brother, he said he knew I was always a special sad case. As usual all his friends laughed. Some things never change do they. I have never been so scared in my life. Everyone but me seems to know what they are doing and everyone but me looks like they are just out of their first degree... that is until I went the methodology group for MPhil and Phd students and found all the other mature students who felt exactly like me.

ONE big problem is computer literacy. 'Please God can I have an eight year old to show me, instead of the sanctimonious prat who wears a crystal to ward off "the bad vibes, man.' In this, I am not alone. I haven't learnt to speak the right words so that when somebody now says menu I do not start salivating and having visions of chocolate cake and cappuccinos come instantaneously into my mind. For example, one day the other mature student in my department and I went to a special computer literacy course for beginners. Well, let's say some beginners are more beginning then others. Life is not equal. Everyone there was at least 15 years younger than us and with various parts of the bodies pierced and filled with metal. You could hear them coming. They sat there fiddling with their machines while we tried to get it working so we could get our E-mail. A feat that up to now had studiously not been happening. The instructor didn't seem too pleased when he finally realised how much of beginners we both were. So he set us going with some simple instructions but alas even those went awry and when I turned around to gain his attention once again he was not there. In fact the whole class had changed. I nudged the other mature student. He looked at me in disbelief but turned around to humour me. A frown came upon his face.

'They aren't the same ones are they?'

Somehow the group had gone off to do something else and never bothered to tell us. We wandered around in and out of various rooms asking after them. But we were met with blank looks. So we left and cornered a nice German student from graphics to help us in exchange for helping her write a nasty letter to her landlord.

There have been days where I have come home and gone instantly to bed, and only crawled out to get a stiff G & T, a cup to tea, put them on a tray along with the cat and gone back to bed. N & D loves to cook which is one of his few graces. But he is deeply into an Italian phase and we have eaten some sort of pasta dish every night which is not surprisingly putting on the pounds. I asked Bet about this and she said I was far too neurotic to gain weight and I should complain to the chef. I gave her a stern look because if anyone is neurotic it's my closest friends, especially her. AND she is a bit overweight.

One of the other problems is that the gallery space at the RCA is rented out a lot for art functions and I keep finding myself wandering in to look and land up having some scrumptious nibbles and a few glasses of vino before going home. The OTHER

problem is that I go to High Street Kensington tube stop which means I have to pass all these wonderful shops filled with great clothes. It's all more than I can cope with because as usual money is very scarce and becoming even more so with this course.

It's all more than a woman get take at times. ESPECIALLY with the sales!!!

November 15

Still no e-mails or any communications from the ex?????

G meanwhile has gone off with the current candidate for the sperm bank to his house in the country for a cosy week. Em is retraining in computer design and driving everyone mad except N & D who is equally gaga over the medium since he went out and bought a IMAC to help wile away the hours convalescing. Especially since I slammed the door and walked out one day before I smothered him with his own pillow with all his moaning and the general boredom from enforced home encampment. Bet is spending any and all her spare time with new man. She has that glow about her of some one who has a better sex life than you. Which in this stage of my life is not very hard to do at all. Meanwhile I have been trying to work with a curator over a one person show I am trying to have in a small gallery. But the curator keeps having these mini breakdowns and crying because all and sundry has gone wrong in her life. I hold the telephone out at arms distance like I do with Mother and every now and then put receiver to my mouth and say "Oh dear!" or "Of course" and just get on with reading some papers. I am not looking forward to this show which is supposed to open v.v. soon. Been asked to speak and give slide lecture at country curator's gallery near Xmas. Debate whether to accept or not as I might not be here. When I asked Bet she just grunted that she was too busy to go. I got really angry at her:

'It's me they want, not you. Not everything evolves around YOU. I have a love life too you know' and started to cry.

There was a long and very silent pause at the other end before a very little voice said.

'He still hasn't replied or sent any emails yet.'

'No.'

'Well don't lose any money over him. Take the booking. You have been so off key that you have missed some big Openings recently.'

Before she ended the conversation she said. 'I think you better talk to G.' and hung up, I groaned. It meant only one thing. G. had bombed out once again and it was probably very spectacular.

November 30

Been seeing more of the God son than before. For some reason I have had the little nipper several times due to his Mum having a series of late dental appointments for some bridge work. Decided to take him to Tate Modern and combine it with

meeting ex-mature student and his girlfriend for wander around exhibitions. Told them meet us at base of ramp leading into the building. Just before we got to the building we looked up at the sign on the side of the building and noticed a letter was missing so it read ATE MODERN. How appropiate I thought. It gave the little nipper great mirth at the idea of eating the building. We got there on time and he sat down on his knapsack and stared to read. Half and hour later and much fidgeting on both our parts, we left. The little fellow had been so good about the long and fruitless wait that I took him to the cafe and we splurged out on a burger and chips. Just as we seated ourselves who walks in but the two people we had been waiting for a half hour. They glared at us and we at them. They had been waiting at the base of the elevator. I refused to get into a slanging match of who was more right or wrong tham the other.

So after our meal we all trooped off to look at Art.

The three large Louise Bourgeois sculptures were still up and the nipper wanted to go up them so he slide down the railings, unlike us who took the stairs gracefully and raced to the shortest queue. After 10 minutes he gauged that the wait would be a more than anotther 10 minutes and walked off. He had had enough waiting for tonight. The evening was lots of fun and the walk home over the Blackfriars Bridge looking at London at night was thrill for us both. The little fellow turned out to be one of the best dates I had had in a very long time.

Early December

I didn't need to phone G. in the end because I bumped into her at some nondescript opening.

'Boring stuff huh?'

'Spoken to Bet recently?'

'Ummmm....'

'Okay so he was a bit of a dick head like the others. There must be a man out there who is waiting and wanting to be a father to my baby.'

'Not until you ask them first.'

So the story goes like this. The happy week at his country house turned out to be the week from hell with him going completely bonkers driving out of the place in the car before they even spent one night there. She stayed the first night, then knocked on the nearest cottage door which turned out to be the home of two gay women who just looked at each other and said with one accord.

'Again!'

'But', she said. 'She then had a really nice time and spent the rest of the week there. It turned out they knew some people that she knew and one thing led to another and they are going to visit her before Xmas when they need to come to London for Xmas shopping. So what happened to Mr Sperm bank?'

'Oh he... funny how that night of the opening of the Whitechapel show seemed so

perfect and we were all so happy and all our partners were so ....'

'You mean everything seemed perfect and they seemed like there was going to be some sort of possibility?'

'Yea, something like that. Doesn't seem like anything is going to happen does it with your Ex?'

'Well it looks less and less likely I am going to Canada for Xmas'

'Good thing you never said anything to the living dead. Do you think he suspected?'

'No! He was too busy being a demanding patient.'

So we went home a bit early and stopped into a nice wine bar and had a silent glass or two before going home.

Late December around the 26..... I think

Had four weeks of teaching Conceptual Studies to degree students. What a bunch of ignorant prats. This modular system doesn't give anyone enough time to actually have an art history!! It's sort of join the dots and you have a degree. A paint by number scenario!!! Funny thing happened in the staff room though. I wander over to some mates and have a bit of a chinwag when one of the group who I vaguely recognise introduces herself and the visiting lecture from Canada. We blather on and she keeps giving me the beady eye. Of course she should recognise my name. I wrote a not too favorable review of her latest book in a magazine last spring.

'I am sure I know you' she scrunches up her face as repeats it again.

'Don't I?'

'No!' says I emphatically 'All North Americans look and sound the same.'

This went on every few minutes until I decided enough was enough and left with her still puzzling after me and saying to the rest of the group still saying 'How do I know her?'

How did I ever get through this last three months. I have had three exhibitions. One with the curator from the loony bin. One where the catalogue never came out and one where I actually never got to see my own show. All did was ship it there and get it back. The Absolute Vodka party for the Artists was a wash out. Sponsored by David Bowie and there was only cheap wine to drink. Everyone left early and complained... I actually managed to read a book and make notes and get some other reading done as well. Nearest & Dearest's hearing is actually much better unfortunately because now he can hear all I mutter under my breath. I have managed also to have two tutorials that have left me reeling. What have I let myself in for???

Time in studio wasn't much good either but that has been corrected as I have locked myself in there and told everyone I have gone out of town. Presents this year ranged from the conceptual to the mediocre not the best of years!!! But positively I managed for the first time in years to get all Xmas parcels off to North America before Valentine's Day. No cards this year mind you. I did not DO cards this year.

There's only so much one can do with one's spare time.

Had a lovely boozy week end up North with country curator. He's a bit in the glums as newest girl friend is not as keen as he is about making babies and starting a family. If he wasn't so far away I would introduce him to G. Funny how they have never met??? Bet is still madly infatuated but lover boy has gone to Australia for 6 weeks. G has sworn off the hunt for sperm donor or is just not telling me. Me, I have heard from ex in the form of a mass produced letter that only North Americans are so great at. They all are boring and they all can not resist bragging. His reads like an 8 year old who is standing up in front of the class and bragging about his holidays. He even managed to eliminate me out of any of the narrative that happened with the wedding fiasco. So in a fit of pique I sent the card and a real stinking mean letter back telling him to get some therapeutic help.

Next year I start going to some decent openings if I can find them and harassing some dealers to take me on.... if I can. It can't get any worse than this year can it ????

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