

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: CULTURAL INTERVENTION, ACTIVIST ART
AND DISCOURSES OF OPPOSITIONALITY IN
THE US, 1980-2000

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This dissertation examines the intersection of definitions of activist art with major discourses related to art production operational during the decades of the 1980s and 1990s in the US. The four parts of the dissertation consider how definitions of activism in art during this period shifted when considered in conjunction with notions of transgression, postmodernism, the avant-garde, and the monstrous/grotesque/abject. The emphasis in each part of the dissertation will be on the aspects of discourse that have been generated in publications of various kinds that relate to cultural production.

In Part 1, key discursive elements of the 1980s treated include 1) the relationship of market forces to “successful” transgressivity as well as “successful” activism in art; 2) when certain forms of art put forward as “activist” were seen as “transgressive;” and 3) debates over controversial content related to social and political issues of the day. In Part 2, activism in US art of the eighties and nineties is considered in relation to the fortunes of the artistic category “avant-garde.” In this Part of the dissertation, the discussion tracks

the development of interest in “progressive” postmodernism in contradistinction to a postmodernism of “regression,” and the generally negative valence “avant-garde” assumed in discourse over this twenty-year period. Part 3 explores the discursive relationship of activist art to the pronounced turn toward the body during the period: a particular kind of body portrayed as aggressively sexual, wounded, fragmented and imbricated with specificities of racial and gender identity. Part 4 proposes two works of art—Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* and Guillermo Gómez Peña’s *Temple of Confessions*—as exemplary of how the discursive element of the monstrous/grotesque/abject can assertively mobilize and foreground the eclipsed and distorted presentation of the feminine and the “other” of color in dominant culture. The discussion seeks to demonstrate how, in two extremely complex works of art, the monstrous/abject/grotesque raises to high profile key issues of activism, postmodernism and the avant-garde. The discussion also addresses how ultimately conflicted and ambivalent it is to seek an unproblematically “progressive” outcome when attempting to mobilize monstrous/grotesque/abject thematics as apotropaic.

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by

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PREFACE

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the intersection of activism in art with major discursive elements related to art production during the decades of the 1980s and 1990s in the US. The four parts of the dissertation will consider how definitions of “activism” in art during this period shifted when considered in conjunction with notions of transgression, postmodernism, the avant-garde, and the monstrous/grotesque/abject. While “discourse” includes the non-textual, non-verbal mode of cultural production usually associated with “art,” this dissertation will emphasize how particular kinds of cultural production (called “activist” art) were characterized in a variety of publications over the twenty-year period from 1980 to 2000.¹

The Author in *Parallax*

I see my position, as author of this dissertation, as situated in *parallax vis à vis* my subject.² Here I am referring to Hal Foster’s view of the reflexive relationship of the critic to her subject, as articulated in his 1996 book, *The Return of the Real*. Foster proposes that “...each epoch dreams the next...[and] revises the one before it. There is no simple *now*: every present is non-synchronous...each comes like sex(uality), too early or too

¹ Although some few examples of discursive elements addressed here are from locations away from the East Coast, as might be expected, most are from New York. This is not so much a result of my selectivity as the fact that, though the situation has changed somewhat (some would say, considerably) New York was then, as it is now, the locus *par excellence* where art discourse is generated in the US.

² *Parallax* is a term used primarily in astronomy to refer to a difference or change in the apparent position or direction of an object as seen from different points. When I indicate I am addressing the subject of activist art in *parallax*, I am referring to looking at the practice through the lens of three concepts: transgressiveness, the avant-garde and the monstrous/grotesque/abject. An overarching positionality, which is in *parallax* also, in my view, is that I necessarily see the discursive elements addressed here through my own set of values and political positions. It will be evident to the reader that I perceive the unstable histories here through feminist and left political prisms, though even these personal “positions” are, I hope, no more fixed than any of the moving targets I seek to examine.

late, and our consciousness of each is premature or after the fact...”³ It is precisely because of this instability of the present in relation to the (retrospectively, equally unstable) past and (also unpredictably, equally unstable) future that Foster proposes a self-awareness on the part of the critic/historian. Foster’s notion of *parallax* conceives a situation in which the author consciously sees herself differentially displaced in relation to “anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts.” This is because the angles from which these futures and pasts are examined are always in the (also continuously moving) present.

Foucault and Discourse

Central to this dissertation’s consideration of activism in art is Michel Foucault’s concept of “discourse,” a notion that goes beyond public discussion and debate. “Discourse” here will be used, in the Foucauldian sense, as the ways in which power is generated and flows in society, and is always integrally interwoven with the production of knowledge.⁴ Activist art is presented in this dissertation both *as* power—and, as *in* power relationships with political and social structures of U.S. society—in the 1980s and 1990s.

³ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 207. In a review of Foster’s book, Charles Altieri points out the ambivalence inherent in Foster’s proposal of *parallax* as a preferred stance for a critic *vis à vis* her object of study. He notes: “In surveying,” *parallax* involves “a measurable position of the observer, linked by instruments to objective conditions and shared project.” Altieri claims that seeing *parallax* as a way to describe a critical stance involves “licensing the subject’s own distorting interests” especially that subject’s “distorted view of its [generation’s] historical importance.” Nonetheless, the idea resonates with how this dissertation is structured, and how I see my position as the critic/historian in relation to the processes and objects it addresses. While, as Altieri suggests, this notion of *parallax* may “license” my own perceptual distortions, I don’t know how that can be avoided. Perhaps it is enough to be aware that such distortions are there, though awareness does not mean omniscience regarding all distortions inherent in one’s (changing) positionalities in the present. See Charles Altieri, review of *The Return of the Real*, by Hal Foster, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59: 1 (Winter 2001): 205.

⁴ See the discussion of Foucault’s “discourse” in its relation to the subjects of this dissertation, in Part 1, Chapter 1 below.

That defining activist art constitutes a discourse seems undeniable; and the vagaries of how this kind of cultural production has been portrayed in discourse over time resonate especially well with Michel Foucault's theoretical constructs.⁵ Foucault believed the fusion of power and knowledge in discourse to be so intense that he ultimately wrote them exclusively as "power/knowledge," phenomena both constitutive and governing in how they are (mutually) produced.⁶

According to Foucault, discourses are neither uniform nor stable. They are constantly shifting kaleidoscopic representations of social and political relationships; and are distributed across discursive fields, which both consist of, and actively constitute, the relationships among language, social institutions and subjectivity. Examples of Foucauldian discursive fields would include law, family, medicine, and, of course, art.

Foucault denies that there is any binarity within a discursive field between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between dominant and dominated discourse. Rather, he claims, one finds in discourses a multiplicity of discursive elements that can be

⁵ The discussion here springs from, but does not seek to follow closely, the perspectives of Michel Foucault on discourse. The key text consulted: Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1972). Foucault elaborates his concept of discourse in his other works as well, especially in Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980). Foucault's is by no means the only theoretical construct that impinges on defining "activist art" by addressing the discourse about it. The concept of "hegemony" is also important. Key texts include Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence Wishart, 1971); and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's further work on the concept of hegemony in terms of the connections between power and discourse in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985); as well as John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Theory in the Era of Mass Communication*. Cambridge (UK: Polity, 1990). Of importance in considering the relationship between communicative acts (discourse) and social process are: Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1991) and Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vols. 1 and 2, (London: Heinemann, 1984). The discussion is also informed by the relatively new field of scholarship dubbed "critical discourse analysis" and its antecedents and influences, which include Foucault, Gramsci, Bourdieu and Habermas, and is thoroughly described in Jan Blommaert and Chris Bulcaen, "Critical Discourse Analysis," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29 (2000): 447-466.

⁶ Foucault first coined the term "power/knowledge" in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977). A collection of his musings on "power/knowledge" was published in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

mobilized under various conditions, for various purposes, and subject to various types and levels of power; and this multiplicity of discursive elements is dispersed and fragmented throughout social fields. Foucault argues that, just as power is dispersed and fragmented throughout the social field, so is resistance to power; and resistance to power is itself a discourse, since it produces a form of power/knowledge.

Of most interest for this dissertation is Foucault's notion that some discourses (hegemonic ones) have gained the status of "truth," while others have been marginalized.⁷ In the discursive field of art, the most durable hegemonic discourse—the one which persistently maintains a status of truth—is the discourse of canon.

Foucault argues that marginalized discourses have the potential to contest, challenge and resist those (hegemonic) discourses (canons) that have gained the status of truth. The marginalized discourse within the discursive field of art that is the subject of this dissertation is "activist art."

Foucault's assertion that there is a functional relationship between systems of discourse and practical social activity is richly illustrated in the writings of various theoretically sophisticated activist art practitioners during the period this dissertation covers. These include the critics and art historians who see activist art as potentially powerful to contest, challenge and resist hegemonic discourses; and the critics who seek

⁷ Foucault does not use the term "hegemonic" or "hegemony" in his exegeses. This term comes from Antonio Gramsci, *ibid.* I use Gramsci's term here as it crystallizes what I think Foucault was getting at in his discussion of the "will to truth," and his extensive discussion of disciplinary mechanisms that affect the emergence of discourse. The definition of "hegemony" (which is based on Gramsci) that seems most apt in this discussion is the one proposed by Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 144-146: "...an integral form of class rule which exists not only in political and economic institutions and relationships but also in active forms of experience and consciousness...[and which includes] cultural as well as political and economic structures...it [depends] for its hold not only on its expression of the interests of a ruling class but also on its acceptance as 'normal reality,' or 'commonsense' by those ...subordinated to it."

to dismiss activist art as either irrelevant to, or threatening of, the hegemony of whatever “canon” is ensconced at the “center” at any given moment in time.

The debates about the legitimacy of activist art resonate with Foucault’s notions that there is no “intellectual sphere detached from the day-to-day exercise of power ... because changes in consciousness are inseparable from the struggles of the powerless ... [and] intellectual activity must take its place as part of such political struggles ...;” that “theory and practice interact in a constantly shifting dynamic;” that “explanations inevitably privilege one set of interests over others ...;” and therefore there is no “neutral or objective place” from which to engage in critical work.⁸

The producers of the discourse on activist art during the twenty-year period covered by this dissertation include: artists who consider themselves to have been, or currently to be, involved in producing activist art; critics and art historians associated with academia, museums and large-scale publishing; “alternative” cultural mavens of various political/social stripes and locations whose perspectives appear in small circulation journals, books and catalogs with limited audience; and a vocal group of politicians whose opinions and maneuvers are recorded in official proceedings and legislation, as well as broadly in the mainstream print and electronic media. The opinions of these discourse producers have profoundly affected the support for, and the reception of, activist art.

Their widely varying perspectives on what activist art is have emerged on conference panels, and in articles and essays in exhibition catalogs, in addition to academic or “official” journals, alternative ‘zines and the mass popular media outlets. Many of the shorter texts have been gathered into anthologies. Several doctoral dissertations on some

⁸ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, *ibid.*

of the practitioners are available; and, at the time this dissertation was being written, at least one book-length study (not an anthology) was on its way to release.⁹

Foucault's assertion that discursive elements can be (and are) mobilized "under various conditions, for various purposes, and subject to various types and levels of power..." is clearly illustrated in the mercuriality of valences the term "activist art" (and the terms used as synonymous with it) takes on depending on who is articulating it/them and from what location(s). For example, during the period covered by this study, the combination of "activist" with "art" has seemed to some commentators to be oxymoronic. This perspective is largely held by those on the right end of the political spectrum.

Hilton Kramer's writings are emblematic of the kind of discursive elements emanating from this location. Kramer founded his journal *The New Criterion* in 1982, specifically as an antidote to what he and the other founders of the journal saw as the "myriad ways in which art has become hostage to ideology..." For Kramer, these hostage-holding "ideologies" included: "Afrocentrism, feminism, homosexuality, ecologism, anti-white-Eurocentrism, a parade...of ...nonartistic interests [which] has turned contemporary artistic life into a squalid battleground of competing ideological fiefdoms."¹⁰

⁹ Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, forthcoming.

¹⁰ Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball eds., "Introduction," *Against the Grain: The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), x. The title chosen by Kramer and Kimball for their journal is a reference to *The Criterion*, a journal of literature and culture edited by TS Eliot from 1922-1939. Kramer and Kimball aspired to Eliot's purpose for *Criterion*: to re-enthroned "classicism" in writing and art. Many critics have disowned Eliot's *Criterion* for sympathy towards Fascist ideology. During the "culture wars" of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Kramer and Kimball, through their *New Criterion*, have been central combatants in favor of their own brand of "classicism," and have also come in for criticism from some quarters as "neo-fascist" in their perspectives.

Kramer's list of "isms" coincides quite directly with the locations from which activist art emerged during this period, namely, organized efforts to bring marginalized groups in U.S. society more visibility and power, the various ecology movements and other community based social/political efforts to counter the negative effects of the policies of the Reagan-Bush era on people of color generally, the poor, women, and gays and lesbians.¹¹ Kramer's perspectives, and those of his colleagues represent one end of a discursive spectrum along which a vigorous debate ensued during this period, one that took place not only in the U.S. art world, but also in the larger world of political and economic power. This dissertation seeks to elucidate some aspects of this discourse with special emphasis on how particular kinds of cultural production (called art) emphasizing engagement with political and social controversies during the period were characterized in a variety of publications over the twenty-year period of the 1980s and 1990s.

The Parts of the Dissertation

In this dissertation, each Part will consider a particular aspect of how power has ebbed and flowed in relation both to the production and the assessment of the particular forms of art that were mobilized—or perceived as contributory to—social/political change in the US of the 1980s and 1990s. In each Part of this dissertation, ebbs and flows of discursive power relationships—in the making and assessment of art, over a twenty-year period, and in the relatively recent past—emerge at slightly different angles.

A temporal trajectory from the early eighties through to the end of the nineties is followed within each part. But, because in each Part, as author, my stance is in *parallax*,

¹¹ A very useful compendium of perspectives articulated from several locations on the political spectrum, up through 1992, is contained in Richard Bolton ed., *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: The New Press, 1992).

a particular angle is taken on this time period. Therefore, sometimes the same artists and works appear in succeeding parts; and, at other times, new ones not mentioned earlier or later come into view. Also, what is at stake is framed slightly differently in each part, though similarities and resonances, in this regard, echo down through the text from beginning to end.

In Part 1 the focus is on the multifarious definitions of activism in art as they related specifically to notions of “transgression.” Examples of the locations from which the discourses of activism and transgression emanated, as well as where they were recorded, are also identified. Discursive elements are charted in relation to the social and political fields/networks in which they were enmeshed, and which they helped to create. How, and in what locations, those who generated, wielded or resisted power/knowledge through the discourses of activism and transgression related to art production and assessment are also addressed.

In Part 1, key discursive elements of the eighties treated include 1) the relationship of market forces to “successful” transgressivity as well as “successful” activism in art; 2) how certain forms of art put forward as “activist” were seen as “transgressive” because they embraced, in lieu of the traditional media of painting and sculpture, anti-commodification/anti-authority moves, and non-canonical media and approaches (street art, guerrilla theater, video, page art, protest actions, environments, murals, etc.); and, 3) strong content that spoke directly to social and political issues of the day, and very specifically to the negative fallout of the Reagan/Bush economic domestic—as well as its interventionist foreign—policies. These politically oppositional moves in art were also

framed as “transgressive” of art world discomfort with the deployment of art as “propaganda.”

Part 1 then moves into the nineties with a discussion of the discourse’s turn toward the margins and alterity. On the one hand, discourse of the nineties privileged a somewhat successful effort by artists of color, queers and feminists to breach the ramparts of high culture and inhabit the museums with the “margin’s” experiments with shocking content and aggressively confrontational attitude. On the other hand, there was a renewed visibility of activism now re-categorized as “new genre public art,” framed as socially responsive art. Emphasis in “new genre public art” was also on the margins and alterity, though artists here sought not to leave, but to inhabit, margins by collaborating with communities, especially of the poor, and outside the high art realm.

Part 1 concludes treatment of the discourse of activist art in relation to transgression in the nineties with a discussion of the emergence of a challenge leveled at community art from segments of the Left. Featured here is Grant Kester’s criticism which accuses certain community art practices as “aesthetic evangelism.” Kester’s challenge avers that, despite good intentions, community art was seen as inadvertently playing into the hands of conservative calls for relegating the meeting of social needs to individual compassion, private philanthropy and the market. The concluding discussion in Part 1 also presents the reemergence in discourse, in the late nineties, of a new twist on an old controversy, the emphasis again centering on a challenge from Grant Kester, namely: whether art should be assessed in terms of its adherence to “beauty’s” meditative, and hence allegedly salutary effects on the individual; or whether aesthetic value should be interpreted as a

more complex view of “beauty” as a cultural, political and sensual experience that can enhance an expansive socially and politically engaged collective activism.

In Part 2, the discursive thematic of activism in U.S. art of the eighties and nineties is considered in relation to the fortunes of the artistic category “avant-garde.” In this Part of the dissertation, the discussion first tracks the ascendance, in the early eighties, of interest in developing a “progressive” postmodernism in contradistinction to a postmodernism of “regression.” Across the spectrum, and concentrated at right and left locations, “avant-gardism” was roundly criticized during the eighties as emphasizing transgression for its own sake.

In Part 2 early eighties discourse on activism in art is presented as a vigorous opposition between two fairly dichotomous positions. Emphasis in the discussion is on aspects of discourse that championed (“left”-oriented) art and critical practices resistant to “stultified” art forms (e.g., traditional media of painting and sculpture), and adoption by artists of an overt social change agenda. It is noted in this discussion that the arguments in discourse emanating from this direction often specifically refused the term “avant-garde;” simply did not mention it at all; or, alternatively, set up the term as a shibboleth in need of a postmodern deconstruction and de-mythologizing.

This Part notes that by the late eighties-early nineties there was a slight shift in left-oriented critical discourse toward rehabilitating the term “avant-garde” especially with relation to the contributions of feminist artists to transgressiveness. Part 2 also points out that this attempt at recuperation of the term “avant-garde” neglected to address the ignoring and erasure of the contributions of artists of color. Part 2 underscores this as particularly ironic since it was artists of color who had, for decades, been performing

exactly the kind of transgressions seen as salutary by proponents of “progressive” postmodernism, both for the practice of activist art and for society as a whole.

Part 2’s treatment of the 1990s focuses on key exhibitions, including *The Decade Show* of 1990 and the much-maligned 1993 Whitney Biennial. These two exhibitions are proposed as watersheds in two ways. First, the work of artists of color emerged visibly in an unprecedented manner, and in the mainstream. This crystallized what had become a significant effort to extend the definition of postmodernism in art from its traditional support of a rather short list of white artists, mostly male. Second, in addition to addressing the increasing activism among artists of color, feminist and queer artists, these exhibitions also sought to demonstrate that putting “oppositional” art in museum settings did not necessarily signal cooptation.

Arguments covered in Part 2’s discussion of the relationship, in the nineties, between notions of “avant-garde,” postmodernism and activism in art included solidification of commitment to contingency of meaning as decisive in determining the potential of art as critique and intervention, and therefore its cultural activism, or “vanguard” status. This emphasis on contingency proposed that open-endedness of meaning of works of art contributes to critical thinking on the part of those who see the work, and therefore contributes to positive social change. Nevertheless, this privileging of open-endedness did not mean that all works of art that stimulated critical thinking were culturally activist. To move to a cultural activism level, a work of art had to retain a close connection to issues promoted in activist movements in society at large (such as AIDS activism). Thus, according to this argument, if a work both offered opportunities for stimulation of critical thinking *and* maintained a clear connection with strains of activism outside the art world,

location in “mainstream” venues such as museums would not necessarily preclude the characterization of particular works of art as both activist and “avant-garde.”

Part 2 also considers how the roles of critics of color, as well as feminist and queer critics, fared in the discursive interaction of “avant-garde,” postmodernism and activism, and especially whether these roles could be perceived in themselves as “avant-garde.” A particular perspective here (from Coco Fusco and Homi Babha particularly) characterized the roles of artists—and critics—of color, in particular, as analogous to guerrilla fighters. This analogy portrayed artists and critics of color as located, socially and politically, not “on the margins,” but in the fabric of society itself, and relying—both in their work, and in strategies they employ to “get seen,” and published—on a canny deployment of mobility, infiltration and feint.

The arguments—and the art—developed in this “guerrilla genre” by artists and critics of color are described, in this perspective as rarely direct, overt or literal; but, rather, as involving infusion, reversals and recycling. These tactics were also privileged approaches of postmodernist art in general. Nevertheless, artists and critics of color (as well as feminist and queer critics and artists) are seen in eighties and nineties as deploying these mechanisms specifically to reveal, as well as to deploy, repressed and hidden histories, as opposed to transgressing fixed boundaries of dominant culture, the goal of postmodernist interventions.

Part 2 concludes with a discussion of a late-nineties discursive strain regarding the perpetuation of traditions characterized as problematic for the development of activist art. The key commentator here is, again, Grant Kester. The two interlocking and mutually dependent notions Kester identifies, which were prominently persistent in Western

European tradition since at least the 18th century were: first, the notion of an “ameliorative avant-garde” seen as composed of uniquely and inherently talented artists and intellectuals, particularly well-equipped to provide inspiration toward progress, cross-class, for the greater good of humanity. Second was the notion that such well-equipped and uniquely talented individuals could affect improvement of humankind in two ways: 1) through alienation and the confrontation with surprise and shock ; and 2) through producing a rapt, epiphanic response to “beauty” or the “sublime.” Both have been seen, persistently, as key to the instigation of “critical thinking” in viewers.

In this concluding section of Part 2, Kester’s arguments emerging toward the end of the nineties countered the long-standing emphasis on privileging artists as uniquely capable of “improving” humanity by producing either shock or epiphany. This discursive strain proposed instead that, in order to transgress these firmly ensconced discursive elements, artists should embrace the production of art based on an aesthetic process of significant duration, dialogue and collectivity.

Though this approach in art seems to have much in common with community-involved art (especially the collective production and dialogic aspects), Kester’s counterproposal was actually quite different. He calls for a cultural activism that combines indeterminacy and deconstruction with a wary, canny and analytical approach and an abhorrence of the utopic, in favor of a daring negotiation of what seem to be the antithetical axes of individual and group, empathy and disengagement, domination and dialogue, self and other. Several examples are proposed.

In Part 3, the decades of the eighties and nineties are revisited with a view toward exploring the discursive relationship of activist art to the pronounced turn toward the

body: a particular kind of body, portrayed as aggressively sexual, wounded, fragmented and infused with specificities of racial identity and gender; and hence proposed as transgressive. The attention in this part is on the non-art discursive elements that contextualize this turn to the body in art; especially those that explore the relationships between imagery of the monstrous, grotesque and abject in popular culture as well as in the academic arenas of philosophy, biology, psychoanalysis and literature. Feminist theorizing assumes a high profile here. The end of the discussion considers the strenuous debates in the mid-to late nineties regarding which of two particular philosophical approaches, the abjection of Julia Kristeva, or the *informe* of Georges Bataille are most appropriately utilized to consider contemporary art of the late twentieth century, and to explain the power of the “turn to the body” which was so assertive in this art practice.

Throughout Part 3, the relationship of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, which entered U.S. cultural discourse in the early eighties, is considered and reconsidered in relation to the problematic of art that emphasizes body-related abjection, and the related discursive elements of monstrosity and grotesquerie. In the early eighties, writers explored the monstrous/grotesque/abject as a curious anomaly firmly ensconced in the past. By the early nineties, writing on the subject was focused on what could be causing the plethora of this kind of imagery in the present.

Some of the causes of the assertive presence of this kind of imagery in art and elsewhere, identified by contributors to the discourse, as of the early nineties, directly referred to, or echoed, the contention in Mary Douglas’ landmark 1966 anthropological study *Purity and Danger*. Douglas had argued that there was a deep need, articulated cross-culturally and across time, to identify dirt and pollution as signifying disorder. In

eighties and nineties contributions to discourse, these theories of pollution presented by Douglas were expanded upon (especially in Kristeva) as both of the body and not of the body. Abjection was portrayed as the unstable site of confusion, and an obstacle to structured thought; in other words, the complete opposite of all that is rational and “objective.”

A widely varying group of theorists discussed in Part 3 agreed that volatile, abject entities or processes were “transgressive.” However, a deep ambivalence was also registered—articulated as well as *sub rosa*—over whether the monstrous/abject/grotesque could be deployed unproblematically as “activist” in behalf of “progressive” social change. Nearly every theorist addressed in this part, warned, in one way or another, of the unpredictable outcome of deploying the monstrous/grotesque/abject as an activist cultural intervention tactic.

Part 3 revisits the nodal point of the “culture wars” occurring roughly between 1989-1991 in the U.S. addressed in earlier parts of the dissertation. In this part, there is special attention to how the art world sought (effectively, and not so effectively) to counter the right’s appropriation and canny mobilizations of the monstrous/abject/grotesque in art as a way to elicit emotion and spur action on the part of their conservative constituency.

In this connection, the strategies employed by three 1990s exhibitions, *Helter Skelter* in Los Angeles, and *The Play of the Unmentionable* and *Abject Art* in New York, are reviewed in Part 3 in order to demonstrate the strongly dichotomous ways the art world addressed the appropriation of abjection in art of the period by the religious and political right, and especially their focus on federal funding of the arts as the point of attack. *Helter Skelter*’s aggressively confrontational approach was produced without government

funding. *The Play of the Unmentionable*, by now a classic example of the wielding of the museum as an activist tool, was produced aggressively *with* support from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). And *Abject Art* deleted mention of the source of the exhibitions funding from all published documents associated with the show. The funds came, indirectly, from NEA, and the NEA's political opponents on Capitol Hill discovered this rather quickly.

Another key focal point of Part 3 was the prominence, in the nineties, of feminist art that deployed abject/monstrous/grotesque imagery, and of feminist theory that addressed different aspects of the re-corporealizing of feminist perspectives. Discourse contributors agreed that the firm presence of the negatively construed, dichotomous patriarchal construct of femininity as both monstrously powerful, and passively soft, nurturing and compassionate, had not been weakened despite nearly two decades of attempts. Key to the "recorporealization" feminist theoretical perspective was a reconsideration of the anti-essentialism arguments that had assumed a high profile in feminist theory since the late seventies.

In Part 3 three theorists (Barbara Creed, Mary Russo and Elizabeth Grosz) are addressed who have approached these perennial feminist debates from slightly different angles. At the heart, however, of all their arguments is the acknowledgment that deploying imagery of the female body as monstrously abject in contemporary feminist art and theory could be dangerous. These theorists also foreground a strong strain of argumentation on the potential for *positive* discursive deployment of the monstrous/abject/grotesque: positive in the sense of the capacity of the

monstrous/grotesque/abject to resist patriarchal structures in culture. This position was represented especially by Elizabeth Grosz' theories.

Grosz' argument proposes an abject body which aggressively foregrounds the culturally, racially and sexually specific: a corporeality that does not just relate to the social as *external* constructing force, but which takes the social as the body's productive *nucleus*. Grosz proposes this kind of body as less an object than a process. Grosz calls this body/process "pure difference:" a state of constant dynamic flux. This notion of "pure difference" has particular resonance with the discursive thematic of the monstrous/abject/grotesque that emphasizes the un-fixed and the protean, both fascinating and discomfiting, and, for Grosz, an effective challenge to dominant patriarchal cultural forms.

Ambivalence regarding the appropriation of such contradictorally material/phantasmatic (monstrous/abject/grotesque) bodily qualities in art (especially in art that seeks to use these thematics as tools of cultural activism) is strikingly visible all the way to the end of the nineties. At this point, ambivalence about their use turned to aggressive opposition, and their characterization as "regressive." This aggressive opposition did not emanate only from the right. Part 3 concludes with a presentation of these perspectives, in the work of Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster, two of the important theorists in the left's "high art" realm who championed the development of "progressive" postmodernism in the early eighties.

This perspective counterposes Julia Kristeva's "abjection" with Georges Bataille's "formless" (as championed by Rosalind Krauss). Hal Foster comes in with his notion of the "traumatic" as a third, more or less compromise position. Part 3 focuses on the

appearance in discourse of these divergent approaches to explaining—and assessing—the high profile of abject corporeality in art of the late nineties, and to assessing its potential for effective action to “trouble” and undermine dominant cultural forms. This turn makes clear that what is at stake is nothing less than whether, and how, works of art, especially those seen as proposing, or involved in effecting, social change are to be interpreted as effective interventions. This discursive struggle centers on referentiality.

To summarize, Krauss argues against the strong *reference* she sees in Kristeva’s notion of abjection, as tied to the body, and thereby closing down meaning. She counterposes Georges Bataille’s notion of the *informe* which she claims leaves meaning referent-less and uncategorized, and thus more capable of leaving meaning open, assuring a productive role in undermining such tools of cultural dominance as myth, false essence and sublimation.

Foster, on the other hand, proposes something that looks very like a “referent” as Krauss would describe it, namely two very separate kinds of “real” that have appeared in contemporary art, and which, for him *are* transgressive. One form of this “real” is Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytically-described “real,” a kind of evocation of the “unspeakable,” which is highly resonant with—if not identical to—the abject horror theorized by Kristeva. Foster’s other real is what he calls the “ethnographic” real which emerges from the insistence by artists of color, women and queers on the foregrounding of given identities and sited communities. Commentaries and critiques of these two key positions are summarized as well.

Part 4 takes as its departure point the clear separation by Foster of the internally psychologically-oriented horrendous “real” of Lacan, from the more social/societally

oriented “ethnographic” focus on sited communities and given identities of specific groupings of people. Key works by two artists—Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party*, and Guillermo Gómez Peña’s *Temple of Confessions*—are demonstrations of the fusion of the two kinds of “real” explicitly separated by Foster.

The discussion in Part 4 seeks to demonstrate how the discursive thematics of the monstrous/abject/grotesque are assertively mobilized and in ways that bring into high relief “sited communities and given identities,” namely the eclipsed and distorted presentation of the feminine and the “other” of color in dominant culture. The discussion also seeks to demonstrate how, in two extremely complex works of art, the monstrous/abject/grotesque is intimately interwoven with the discursive elements of activism, postmodernism and the avant-garde.

The discussion also focuses on these works as both respondents to, and creators of discourse, in the context of the year 1996, a juncture that was significant in both social/political as well as art/cultural terms. Finally, the discussion in this Part addresses the fact that if both works are transgressive, they are ambivalently so, an illustration of the warnings of most of the theorists of the monstrous/abject/grotesque featured earlier in the dissertation. The ambivalences highlighted include the aggressive utilization and foregrounding in each work of highly charged discursive elements that both seek to utilize the monstrous/abject/grotesque in an apotropaic sense, as well as directly to challenge notions of essentialism, primitivism and stereotyping.

In Part 5 some general conclusions I have drawn from this consideration of activism and art during the 1980s and 1990s will be presented.

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**PART 1: DISCOURSES OF DEFINITION--
TRANSGRESSION AND ACTIVIST ART**

Introduction to Part 1

In **Part 1**, the focus will be on how discourse has characterized activism and the transgressive in art. The discussion will highlight where and by whom the term “activist art” has been deployed from 1980 to the end of the nineties. Particular emphasis will be given to how the definition of art as “activist” relates to efforts in the larger politico-cultural realm to change aspects of social, political and economic power relationships seen as detrimental to certain identified groups.

Part 1 is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the key central focus of the part, the relationship in early-eighties discourse between “activism” and “transgression” in art. This relationship is addressed in Chapter 1 as it was played out in various art production modes that emerged in New York City’s Lower East Side in the 1980s. Chapter 2 takes the notion of transgression into the early 1990s when the struggle was over the characterization by the right of transgressiveness in art as aggressively offensive and disrespectful of patriotic and religious icons. Finally, Chapter 3 moves toward the end of the nineties and considers a significant debate in discourse over whether community based art practice had lost its transgressive edge and was moving increasingly toward cooptation by conservative societal forces.

An important purpose of **Part 1** is to underscore the problems inherent in definition. Activist art of the 1980s and 1990s in the U.S. has been as slippery to define as it has seemed easy to recognize. The difficulties in defining activist art are evident in how continuously, over the past two decades, contributors to the discourse on this cultural

practice have sought to pinpoint what it is: debating, analyzing, deriding or celebrating the core qualities—and the extent of effects—of a large set of widely varying exemplars.

Commentators who view activist art as significant and healthy sometimes completely avoid the adjective “activist,” or use it interchangeably with other terms such as: progressive, oppositional, experimental, critical and/or engaged, among many others. Some advocates of activist art eschew the word “art” altogether, preferring terms such as left visual culture, performative activism, activist cultural practice, or cultural activism. Some of these terms, and others, such as political, politicized, sociopolitical, confrontational, critical, subversive or radical are among many that are used as synonyms of activist art.

These terms’ meanings have a more positive sense when they emanate from the left, and a negative one when they emanate from the right. Sometimes, of course, segments of the left have characterized certain “activist art” objects or events pejoratively as propagandistic, authoritarian, and even Stalinist. That these terms were also used to convey negative meanings by commentators on the right does not mean that there is a shared perspective across the political spectrum, however. The words used are the same, but the meanings change quite substantially depending on who is articulating them and under what circumstances.

Another important purpose of **Part 1** is to map selected aspects of the genealogies of these definitions as discursive elements of the overall discourse on “activist art” produced during the period this study covers, 1980-2000.¹² To this end, in the discussion that follows, the relationships among these various definitions of activist art first tracks how

¹² As Foucault says (*The Language of Discourse*, *ibid.*, 2) of the genealogical approach to analyzing discourse: “The genealogical aspect concerns the effective formation of discourse, whether within the limits of control, or outside of them, or as is most frequent, on both sides of the delimitation.”

the concept of “transgression” interrelated with them. I will give examples of how the meanings changed depending on the voices that generated the definitions, the locations from which the discursive elements they produced emanated, and where they were recorded. I will also chart these changing relationship among terms in relation to the social and political fields/networks in which they were enmeshed, and in and through which they sought to generate, wield or resist power/knowledge.

Chapter 1: The 1980s—Transgressive, Activist, Both?

This Chapter focuses on the exploration, in the 1980s of the relationship of activist art to transgressivity. The context for the emergence of this discursive thematic was a landscape teeming with power plays involving heavyweight art institutions and market centers. The eighties in the US saw the most frenetic boom in art sales since the end of World War II, stimulating a twin phenomenon related to contemporary art: a virtual flood of writing about art and blockbuster exhibitions accompanied by thick, erudite catalogs. The eighties were also, of course, the era of the ascendancy of conservatism with Ronald Reagan leading the charge to dismantle several decades of socially progressive programs, and to carry forward an aggressive military role in foreign affairs.

Neo-Expressionism as Target

The largest proportion of print in the art press of the early eighties addressed the trends that were already known as neo-conceptualism, neo-abstraction, and neo-geo. These were characterized, as soon as they appeared, as transgressive of the dominance of neo-expressionism since the mid-seventies.¹³ Critics and artists—writing in the larger circulation commercial art press, in exhibition catalogs, in academic journals and alternative publications—mobilized complex theoretical perspectives from many fields, bringing to the consideration of the debates over transgression in art approaches from

¹³ There are several accounts of these phenomena. One of the clearest presentations of the overlapping simultaneity of these trends is the timeline in Michael Asher, *Art Since 1960* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 216-217.

philosophy, anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology and psychiatry.¹⁴

These “new” perspectives, enthusiastically mined by critics and art historians, were often first translations into English of theoretical work long known in French and German academic and art circles.¹⁵ They were not only enthusiastically deployed in writing about contemporary art, but also eagerly incorporated, debated and applied by artists in their creation of art objects and events.

It was against the highest profile of neo-expressionist artists that advocates of activist art sought to define activist art practice.¹⁶ Few of the art practices fitting the description “activist” involved painting, the primary medium for neo-expressionism’s recuperation of the past.¹⁷ Most of the aesthetic strategies labeled “postmodernist,” including neo-conceptualism’s deployment of simulation, pastiche and appropriation, were enthusiastically utilized in art practice seen as “activist.” In fact, some artists lionized by

¹⁴ A succinct, and trenchant, account of the trajectory of this discourse during the eighties and nineties is: Christopher Reed, “Postmodernism and the Art of Identity,” in *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism*, ed. Nikos Stangos, 3rd edition, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 272-293. A key text on postmodernism, published initially in the 1980s, and perpetually on college reading lists since then, is Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Bay Press: Port Townsend, WA, 1983). This text is addressed in detail in Part 2.

¹⁵ Some of the key strands in postmodern theory included, in addition to Foucault’s denial of the very existence of fixed “historical truth:” Jacques Lacan’s re-working of Freud on the development of subjectivity; Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction strategies that promised a way to “unmask” hidden agendas in texts previously seen as “without ideology;” the scrutiny of the validity of authorial “intention” (leading to the notion of the “death of the author”) (Wittgenstein and Barthes); Jean Baudrillard’s conceptualization of “mass consumption,” the “affluent society” and the “simulacrum;” and Jean-François Lyotard’s contention that “Modernism” and “postmodernism” were not separate eras or states, but involved with each other in a complex, constantly nascent interrelationship. See chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of postmodernist discourse in the US as it related to art.

¹⁶ Names of artists that recur in contemporary writings of the eighties as well as in *ex post facto* accounts of the eighties, up to and including the year 2000, include as preeminent neo-expressionists: David Salle, Eric Fischl and Julian Schnabel. High profile exponents of the newer trends of the eighties, variously described as “postmodernist” and “neo-conceptual” would include: Neo-geo: Peter Halley; Neo-abstract: Philip Taaffe, Ross Bleckner; Appropriators: Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger; Simulation: Cindy Sherman; and Neo-Conceptual: Jenny Holzer.

¹⁷ There are, of course, exceptions. Leon Golub’s huge, politically acerbic canvases have continued to absorb him up to the present, and at least one of his admirers and mentees, Robbie Conal, bases his guerrilla posters on traditional portraiture—with a twist.

the mainstream art press as key arbiters of neo-conceptualism, such as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, were also enthusiastically endorsed as “activist,” by sympathetic critics. It was not the formal aspects of art alone that could be pointed to authoritatively as “activist,” though certainly they were transgressive of the traditional media of painting, sculpture and still photography.

As the eighties moved along, the mainstream art press increasingly promoted “postmodernists” who were being shown extensively both in the commercial venues and the museums. Nevertheless, neo-expressionists continued to have very high profiles in art discourse. Emblematic of the persistently exalted status of neo-expressionists were David Salle, Eric Fischl and Julian Schnabel—and a few women: Joan Snyder, Judy Pfaff and Pat Steir

What can be concluded from the vigorous print battles that raged during the 1980s about neo-expressionism’s effect, and whether the advent of postmodern art practice transgressed it, is that transgressivity was nearly always measured by how many inches of print particular “controversial” artists or their works could generate. It also became clear that key aspects of Modernism, the ones critics and artists alike during this period paid lipservice to transgressing, had both survived and prospered. Modernist values that refused to die during the decade included: valorization of the individual artist, originality, universality and progress.

In the early 1980s, assessment of whether activist art could be transgressive, transgressive art could be considered activist, or whether these could be seen as synonymous, much depended on where and how an object or process was deployed. An activist art production probably had to be somewhat transgressive to be activist, but a

work could be completely transgressive and not be activist at all. A key factor in distinguishing a work's "activist" identity was *content*: whether it succeeded in transmitting a "message." But not just any message would do.

Lucy Lippard's Distinctions

As early as 1981, Lucy Lippard, a critic whose profile as an activist art advocate has been unmatched for decades, was making distinctions between art and artists she saw as "activist" and those she did not.¹⁸ Lippard's contributions to the discourse on "transgressiveness" and "activism" in art of the period indicate that, as she saw it, there were two transgressive trends, which were decidedly not synonymous. She dubbed them "parapunk," and "retrochic."

For Lippard, "parapunk" art had a positive social message, while "retrochic" art had a puerile shock effect, with little redeeming content.¹⁹ By making this distinction, Lippard sought to locate (and define) activist art practice by demonstrating as much what it was *not* as what it *was*.

Lippard's preferred "parapunks" were, for her, decidedly activist artists, a definable group located "around the periphery" of the art world. She identified their modus operandi as more collective than individual, "in defiance of the 'me decade' ..." and dedicated to making ... "an art that challenged the increasing attacks on 1960s social legislation."²⁰

¹⁸ Lucy Lippard and Jerry Kearns "Cashing in a Wolf Ticket," in *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change*, ed. Lucy Lippard, (New York: Dutton, 1984), 310. Co-authored with Jerry Kearns. Published originally in *Artforum* (October 1981).

¹⁹ By 1983, National Council on the Arts members Joseph Epstein, Jacob Neusner, Samuel Lipman (publisher of *New Criterion*) and artist Helen Frankenthaler succeeded in pushing through a ban on NEA-funded art-critic fellowships because previous recipients were "left-leaning." One of these fellowship recipients was Lucy Lippard.

By contrast, for Lippard, “retrochic” artists, though also “... concerned with social issues,” expressed this interest “often in peculiar and ambivalent ways.”²¹ Lippard saw “retrochic” artists as demonstrating a “fascistic” and retrograde interest in “sexist, heterosexist, classist and racist violence”²² rather than in challenging the Reagan administration’s regressive social policies. For Lippard, the “retrochic” trend was a particularly odious and strange enthusiasm for the fifties, a period she called “the Bad Old Days for Blacks, unions, women, and anyone [Joseph] McCarthy cast his bleary eyes upon...”²³

While concentrating on the differences between “retrochics” and “parapunks,” Lippard also noted the many superficial similarities between them including both groups’ expression of disillusionment with “what they...found in [current] art and the art world (including the alternate spaces and the current dissenters).” She argued that the “para-punks” rallying cry could just as easily have been articulated by the “retrochics.” But, despite superficial similarities between the “retrochics” and the “parapunks,” Lippard argued, the art the “para-punks” produced was neither nihilistic nor retrograde.

²⁰ Ibid. Lippard referred primarily to New York-based artists: the founding of PAD/D (Political Art Documentation/Distribution); the opening of ABC NO RIO on the Lower East Side, the emergence of Colab, an artist collective that burst on the scene with “The Times Square Show,” and the founding of Paper Tiger, a collective that produced activist videos throughout the eighties and nineties, showing them on public access channels.

²¹ Lucy Lippard, “Hot Potatoes: Art and Politics in 1980,” *Block 4* (1981): 2.

²² Ibid., 5. Lippard’s key example of misguided “retrochic” was the exhibition of abstract drawings with the gratuitous title “The Nigger Drawings,” shown at Artists’ Space in 1979.

²³ Ibid. Lippard does not dismiss all “punk aesthetic” activity at the time. In this same article she also hails approvingly younger “para-punk” artists whose work superficially resembles the “retrochics,” but which has redeeming qualities such as fearlessness, irreverence and taking responsibility without depending on critics’ approval for the validity of their work.

Lippard identified the artists in the *Manifesto Show* (Figure 1) as *the* predictor of who was to be included in the “parapunk” lineup in the eighties. For Lippard, positive characteristics of the “parapunk” art which she saw as particularly well represented in the *Manifesto Show* were: collective (or collaborative) production, installations specifically for “flaky impermanent spaces,” “distancing”²⁴ techniques used against themselves, such as Barbara Kruger’s contribution to *The Manifesto Show*, one of her first appearances on the art scene, as well as Jenny Holzer’s (one of her earliest appearances as well) “dangerously conventional collages of propaganda with lethal reminders built in for anyone who swallows them whole.”²⁵

“Transgressive” Art in the East Village

Unlike Lippard, who sought to distinguish between two activist art trends that had similar superficial “transgressive” characteristics, Liza Kirwin lumps them both together as transgressive in the positive sense. Kirwin’s study, “It’s all true: imagining New York’s East Village Art Scene of the 1980s,” which surveys both the mass media’s and the art press’ coverage of the East Village art scene of the eighties, presents an amalgam of what

²⁴ By “distancing,” Lippard is referring to the “distanciation” recommended first by Bertolt Brecht. Brecht’s terms *Verfremdung* and *Verfremdungseffekt(e)* have been variously translated as Alienation and Alienation Effect(s), but also as Defamiliarization, Estrangement, Distancing, Distanciation. The use of ‘alienation’ as a translation of *Verfremdung* has led to confusion with the Marxist use of ‘alienation’ (*Entfremdung* in German). There are obvious links between the two forms of alienation, in that Brecht’s theatrical approach is often intended to make clear those factors that lead to social and political alienation. Brecht’s use of the term *Verfremdung* (which he virtually invented) is clearly analogous to Shklovsky’s *ostranenie* (‘making strange’ or ‘defamiliarization’). Lippard’s use of “distancing” refers to Brecht’s proposition that theater could become a tool to subvert capitalism and build socialism by encouraging audiences to “see” what was responsible for the theatrical illusion. Brecht argued that this kind of exercise in “seeing” could carry over into “life,” in the form of enhanced critical awareness of the illusions produced by capitalism regarding its repressive tendencies.

²⁵ “Hot Potatoes...” *ibid.*, 7. The Kruger work to which Lippard refers used this text: “We are reading this and deciding whether it is irony or passion/We think it is irony/We think it is exercising a distancing mechanism... We are lucky this isn’t passion because passion never forgets...” The Holzer work read: “REJOICE! OUR TIMES ARE INTOLERABLE TAKE COURAGE FOR THE WORST IS A HARBINGER OF THE BEST...THE APOCALYPSE WILL BLOSSOM...”



Figure 1. *The Manifesto Show*. 1979. (Photo: Vincent Falci). In Lucy Lippard. *Get the Message: A Decade of Art for Social Change*. New York: EP Dutton, 1984, 168.

Lippard identified as very separate “retrochic” and “parapunk” art in New York of the early to mid-1980s.²⁶ Though Kirwin does identify artists specifically associated with an “East Village” identity, she does not divide them into the same categories as does Lippard, nor does she seek to identify which artists practiced transgressiveness towards activist goals and which did not. The very fact that Kirwin does not make distinctions suggests that, at the time, the distinctions Lippard tried to draw were not broadly embraced in discourse. It was the “shocking” in-your-face countering of mainstream art values that was titillating and appealing and received the lion’s share of attention in discourse of the period.

Kirwin characterizes mainstream media’s description of the East Village scene as: “...an effervescent entrepreneurial art happening that spawned more than 180 galleries in and around the area called Alphabet City—Avenues A, B, C, and D—on the lower East Side of Manhattan,” which presented a “broad array of artistic activities—performance art, theater, decorative arts, fiction and poetry, punk and new wave music, film and fashion...[and was] an art market, not an art movement...where one could find the country’s trendiest art at bargain basement prices...”²⁷

By Kirwin’s description, the artists and artist-entrepreneurs of the East Village were a very mixed bag. Her account of the scene does not suggest a dominant ambience of defiance, except in the sense of an aggressive embrace of the “me decade” where transgression was measured by how loudly artists and gallerists reveled in *not* getting the

²⁶ Liza Kirwin, “It’s all true: Imagining New York’s East Village Art Scene of the 1980s” (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 1999). Liza Kirwin’s study is essentially an ethnography and not an art history dissertation. Kirwin is a specialist in oral history and currently serves as the Curator of Manuscripts for the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art.

²⁷ Ibid., 9-12.

record prices garnered by the tony galleries of SoHo, 57th Street and the Upper East Side. Kirwin presents the art promoted in the East Village of the eighties, as a potent, aggressive, in-your-face mix of purposefully “bad” art, junk and appropriation of urban visual culture like graffiti and adolescent comic-strip aesthetics. One of the early-eighties artists who made the transition from these East Village aesthetic arenas to star status, thanks to his discovery by Andy Warhol, and his later adoption by an upscale Manhattan dealer, was Jean Michel Basquiat (Figure 2). Work such as Basquiat’s was clearly transgressive of the taste of the high-rolling galleries of other more glamorous sections of town, and their clients. But, just as important as its punk aesthetics, Kirwin argues, was the East Village scene’s wholesale, though putatively ironic, embrace of the low end of the art market.²⁸ This kind of “transgressive” was not a characteristic that Lippard and others of her perspective embraced as “activist” in the 1980s in New York.

Colab as the Model

Alan W. Moore, an artist-participant in many of the alternative art events and trends in New York in the 1980s, has elaborated on the cast of characters in one (high profile) corner of the activist art landscape in the Lower East Side, and has proposed several

²⁸ While, as Kirwin proposes, it is probably not helpful, in attempting to get a handle on what the eighties East Village scene was all about, to suggest that it was all neo-expressionism, neo-bad, or Basquiat, Haring and Scharf; nonetheless, these aesthetics, and the embrace of the lower reaches of the art market (art-on-the-cheap) were a dominant characteristic of the milieu. Kirwin particularly rejects what she characterizes as the assertions made by Diana Crane and Irving Sandler that the eighties East Village can be boiled down to these aspects. She cites in *ibid.*, 45: Diana Crane, *Transformations of the Avant Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

Kirwin argues that: “the first artist/dealers... presented consumerism as a subversive act” citing Robert Jensen, “The Avant Garde and the Trade in Art,” *Art Journal* (Winter 1988), 360, as her source.



Figure 2. Jean Michel Basquiat. *Per Capita*. Oil Stick, acrylic and collage on canvas, 1982. In Lucy Lippard. *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990, Plate 26.

groupings of artists as particularly appropriate to be deemed “activist.”²⁹ For Moore, the common denominator is the association of these artists with Collaborative Projects (also known as “Colab”), an organization Moore characterizes as one of the most effective to emerge in the wake of the overtly political artists’ organizations of the sixties and seventies in New York. Moore proposes Colab as *the* fertile ground for the growth of the key activist art entities and trends in New York that persisted throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.³⁰

Colab’s most important innovation, according to Moore, was the collaborative, collective, cooperative, communal form of production that was not only the source of the name of the organization, but characteristic of the production approaches of the kinds of media it initially embraced: film and video. This movement into collaborative process was transgressive especially of Modernist values that promoted the individual artist-genius as the only source of important, and necessarily innovative art.

In 1979, after two years of almost exclusive involvement with film production, Colab produced the *Manifesto Show*, in which a rudimentary form of collectivity not related to film production—“curating as art” (later to be quite fully developed by Group

²⁹ Alan W. Moore, “Collectivities: Protest, Counter-Culture and Political Postmodernism in New York City Artists Organizations 1969-1985” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2000). The earlier activist art movements Moore cites as the “parents” of eighties activist art groups were specifically Art & Language and Artists Meeting for Cultural Change. Moore started ABC No Rio, an outgrowth of Colab, which he described as “more explicitly political in its founding and in its operation than previous Colab projects. German sculptor Peter Mönnig described it as an anarchist *Freiraum* (free space) and that is how we tried to run it.” Ibid., 94. The name was derived from an old sign which had originally said “Abogado Notario,” Spanish for “Lawyer Notary” but which, when the artists found it was missing several letters, leaving only ‘Ab c No rio.’ See Alan Moore and Marc Miller, eds., *ABC No Rio: The Story of a Lower East Side Art Gallery*, (New York: Collaborative Projects, 1985) an anthology that traced the history of ABC No Rio’s beginnings. The organization still exists at this writing.

³⁰ Ibid., 73. Colab began operations in 1977 and lasted in various forms until 1989. Approximately 40 artists were involved in Colab’s operations over its 12 year existence. On page 73, note 1, Moore notes that a dissertation on Colab’s activities between 1977 and 1983, by David Little of Duke University was in process. The principal artists’ spaces through which Colab members worked were Fashion Moda (Bronx 1978-1984) and ABC No Rio (Lower East Side 1980-Present).

Material)—first emerged. As described above, critic Lucy Lippard enthusiastically endorsed the *Manifesto Show* as seminal both because of the “collectivity” demonstrated, and because the art demonstrated what she saw as an admirable “distancing” Other critics emphasized another aspect: the *Manifesto Show*’s decidedly transgressive, but not necessarily negative “aggressively leftist,” “adolescent posturing,” and “shit-kicking spirit that motivated the dadaists in Berlin.”³¹

Colab followed in 1980 with *The Times Square Show* (Figure 3). Influential critics greeted it enthusiastically as “the first radical show of the eighties,”³² and a “breakthrough of a truly post-modernist art”³³ Contrary to the *Manifesto Show*, which included the “distancing” quality she argued showed the characteristics of moving toward a responsible activism, and therefore deserving of praise, Lippard saw the cacophonous *Times Square Show*, featuring works by more than 100 artists, stuffed into a dank, abandoned former massage parlor, as “retrochic” or “retro-punk.” She dismissed the content of the art as “sleazy,” characterized by sexual themes that seemed regressively anti-feminist. Contrary to the general enthusiasm of the critics for the show’s “transgressivity” in locating itself in the heart of the commercial sex district, in a derelict building, Lippard accused the show of being about “colonizing” the seedy area and its denizens. Though Lippard had earlier (in relation to the *Manifesto Show*) cited the aesthetics of collectivity and installation-as-art, as well as the location of art

³¹ Peter Frank, “Guerrilla Gallerizing,” *Village Voice* (May 7, 1979). Cited in Moore, “Collectivities,” *ibid.*, 87.

³² Richard Goldstein, “The First Radical Art Show of the ‘80s.” *Village Voice*, vol. 25 no. 24, (June 16 1980): 1+, cited in Moore, *ibid.*, 95.

³³ Jeffrey Deitch, “Report from Times Square,” *Art in America*, vol 68, no 7 (September 1980): 59-63



Figure 3. *The Times Square Show*. Two installation views (Photo: Andrea Callard). 1980. In *The American Century: Art and Culture 1950-2000*. Exh. Cat. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2000, 291.

shows in “funky” venues, as important characteristics of “progressive art,” she clearly did not consider these characteristics to be enough to redeem *The Times Square Show*. She accused the organizers and participating artists of assuming the posture of “pseudo-terrorists” who were not effectively transgressing “clean” art world institutions, but reinforcing “middle class TV terrorism,” and epitomizing “new-no-nuwave art” that celebrated³⁴ S&M.

Transgression as Resisting the Market

For scene participant-observers, like Lippard and Moore, when and where “transgressivity” could be identified as both positive and integral to activist art, was inextricably linked to how successfully a particular approach to art production could resist market forces, and how successfully a particular approach could undermine the Modernist idea of the lonely artist-genius producing stunning and radically new form and content in studio isolation. Alan Moore represents this point of view when he says about Colab’s fate: “There was to be little cohesion in the face of...market pressures.”³⁵

What he meant was that Colab was unable to proceed to expand on its core aesthetic strategy—artistic collectivity—because it fell apart after 1982, in the wake of *The Times Square Show*, as individual artists were discovered by the commercial galleries, and the show’s brash, punk aesthetic became “New Wave,” a catchy label for work that was

³⁴ Anne Ominous (Lucy Lippard). “Sex and Death and Shock and Shlock: A Long Review of *The Times Square Show*.” *Artforum*. October, 1980: 50-55. Also reproduced in Lippard, *Get the Message...*ibid. Also, Moore cites Lippard’s Anne Ominous essay as the only negative (or, as he put it, “mixed”) critique of the *Times Square Show*. Moore ibid, page 96, note 66. Moore also points out, that, though Lippard called the exhibition “sexist,” there was one “aggressively feminist” work on rape, by Jane Sherry and Aline Mare, and that feminist work was everywhere, supported by the fact that several feminist artists, including Kiki Smith, worked continuously on feminist issues and exhibits at Maggie O’Connell’s bar, Tin Pan Alley.

highly marketable.³⁶ While Colab's leadership in experimental art, according to Moore, had expired by mid-decade, the artists featured in its shows had spawned the "New Wave" movement, bringing "transgressivity" closer to the center (closer to "canon"-ization) especially through increasing inclusion in the Whitney Biennials, starting in 1985.³⁷ With this move, the question became, had transgression been diluted entirely, or was there a way to transgress from within an institutional frame?

Staging Activist Art Outside

As the decade of the eighties ended, some transgressive art moved increasingly into institutional settings, and became fashionable in the gallery scene. But late eighties discourse on activism in art was stimulated by the controversy over the removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* public sculpture after an unprecedented negative outcry from the federal employees who lived with it outside their office windows every day. *Art in the Public Interest* (1989),³⁸ an anthology edited by Arlene Raven, is emblematic of this shift. Raven's purpose for *Art in the Public Interest* was to document key works and artists operating in an "advocacy" vein, for the most part, outside "normal" (museum and

³⁶ Ibid. 100. Moore quotes Walter Robinson, president of Colab in 1982: "If we are to regain our radical position, it will be from articulation of the advantages—esthetic, social, economic—available to this form of artistic organization [e.g., what he called "rule C:" ...insistence on collaborative, collective, cooperative, communal projects only.]"

³⁷ 1985 also saw the birth of the Guerrilla Girls, self-styled feminist "conscience of the art world," and Attorney General Edward Meese's "decency commission" which sought to determine a relationship between sexually explicit material and anti-social behavior. Over the next year, there was a 400% increase in obscenity prosecutions by the Reagan Justice Department.

³⁸ Arlene Raven, ed., *Art in the Public Interest* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1993), orig. pub. Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1989. Raven's anthology was instigated by the furor over the removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* from the plaza in front of the Jacob K. Javits federal office building on Foley Square in New York City. Anthologized in Raven's volume was a key essay by Donald Kuspit, "Crowding the Picture: Notes on American Activist Art Today," in Raven, *ibid.*, 255-268, published originally in *Artforum* (May 1988). The Kuspit article broad-brushed the emerging movements that constituted "activist art" in the eighties, as failing in their agitation for social change, offering instead a new "myth of conformity." Raven's anthology was instigated by the furor over the removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* from the plaza in front of the Jacob K. Javits federal office building on Foley Square in New York City.

gallery) venues for the display of art. The book's writers addressed not only the characteristics of this new kind of public art production, but also joined issues about its artistic and political effectiveness.

This anthology was redolent of a strong reemphasis on defining activist art as occurring outside institutions. The anthology's contributors sought to define this trend as a new form of "public art." Up to this point, public art had meant primarily large-scale sculpture commissioned to adorn the entrances to corporate headquarters and government buildings. This anthology's essayists sought to occupy the terrain of "public" art by including in the definition an even more strongly diverse group of aesthetic strategies pushing the notion of activist art into a mode that emphasized reaching mass audiences. Among the popular forms appropriated by artists operating "in the public interest," cited in the Raven anthology, were: "street art, guerrilla theater, video, page art, billboards, protest actions and demonstrations, oral histories, dances, environments, posters, murals, paintings and sculpture."³⁹

Characterizing the Eighties

In summary, in the 1980s discourse producers presented activist art as intricately interwoven with widely varying aesthetic forms and strategies. Some of these were seen as postmodern extensions of the trends begun with Dada, and continued in Pop Art, especially appropriation of mass communications techniques and popular culture visuality. This reemphasis on challenging "high" culture with "low" was seen as directly transgressive of traditional art media. During the decade, transgressivity was a subtext

³⁹ Ibid., 1. Raven's anthology included discussion of work by: Suzanne Lacy, Rachel Rosenthal, Sisters of Survival, Theatre Works Project, the Waitresses (Jerri Allyn), Charles Dennis, John Malpede (LAPD), Judy Baca, Guillermo Gómez-Peña (Border Arts Workshop), Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, Eva Cockcroft, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Greenpeace, The AIDS NAMES Project quilt, and many others of this ilk.

inhabiting art that aspired to dethrone reigning high art obsessions, as well as art that had a more direct social change purpose. *Content* also emerged as assertively dominant.

Artists on the Left experimented with foregrounding popular culture aesthetic strategies to enhance their messages of a variety of liberation movements and progressive political goals in resistance to the policies of the Reagan Administration. As the decade ended, art that aspired to institutional acceptance became more aggressively abject though not more aggressively understandable, while art that eschewed the market and the institution took to the streets, employing advertising approaches to articulate specific populist social change messages.

Chapter 2: 1990s—Art Activism As “Difficult”

This Chapter focuses on 1990s discourse contributors’ focus on the increasing aggressiveness of imagery and politicization of content in art. This aggressiveness in art tracked the increasing aggressiveness of attacks from the Right on cultural production, especially cultural production supported by government funding. Strongly affected were notions of where and when art seen as transgressive difficult, illegal and focused on racial and sexual identity politics could be seen as activist. These characteristics made activist art a “sitting duck” target for right wing critics. In the mercurially changing political and art environments of the early 1990s, the terms “experimental” and “disgusting” were beginning to be teamed with “socially concerned” as synonymous with art with an activist valence.

The Context

As the nineties decade began, the fabled “Culture Wars” were in full swing. George Bush had succeeded Ronald Reagan and continued the conservative Republican attack on social programs at home and military intervention abroad. The “art boom” of the eighties was over as the U.S. economy faltered. The Gallup organization was reporting that public concern over the deficit was greater than over illegal drugs. Art critics Robert Hughes and Arthur Danto (among others) were declaring that contemporary art was in a slump. *The Decade Show* brought into unprecedented high profile a focus on a decade of art by people of color, women and gays and lesbians. It opened in New York to large crowds of viewers at the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of

Contemporary Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem, signaling that “identity politics” in art was a confirmed presence.

African American artist David Hammons’ billboard size portrait of Jesse Jackson as a blond, blue-eyed Caucasian, erected on a Washington, DC vacant lot near the U.S. Capitol was sledgehammered by enraged African American passersby, who perceived the work as a “white slight” against the Civil Rights leader. Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (Figure 4), a large color photograph of a cheap plastic crucifix submerged in urine, had become the poster child for the right wing. In the wake of the *Piss Christ* controversy, Christina Orr-Cahall canceled the Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, fearing that showing the sexually explicit images of the *X Portfolio* would further inflame the conservatives in Congress who were seeking excuses to defund the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In response to Orr-Cahall’s action, local artists banded together to project Mapplethorpe’s images on the façade of the museum. In direct response to the *Piss Christ* brouhaha, Jesse Helms proposed “decency amendments” to the NEA appropriations bill. Though the Helms amendments were defeated, the new NEA director, Bush-appointee John Frohnmayer, instituted (very soon after the brouhaha over Serrano’s *Piss Christ*) an “anti-obscenity” clause that all NEA grant recipients were required to endorse; while the AIDS activist art collective Gran Fury sought (ultimately successfully), to show posters critical of Catholic Church policies on sex and contraception at the Venice Biennale.

By 1990, some individual artists were taking the legal road to fighting back against the NEA’s anti-obscenity pledge as infringements of both First Amendment rights to free

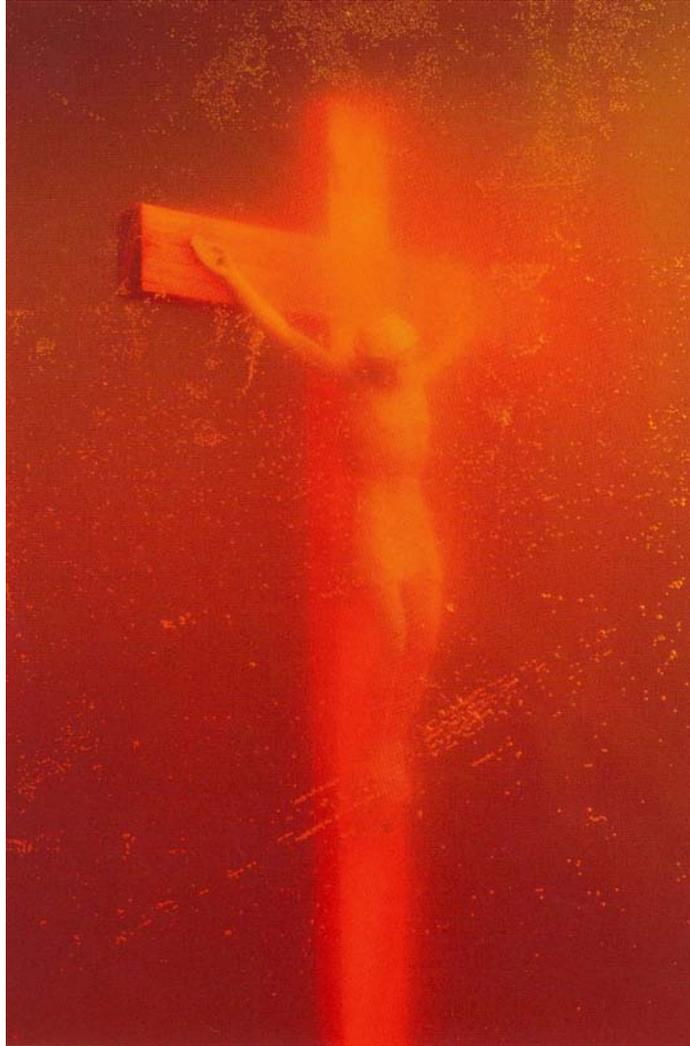


Figure 4: Andres Serrano. *Piss Christ*. Cibachrome. 1987. In *The American Century: Art and Culture 1950-2000*. Exh. Cat. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2000, 331.

speech and copyright laws.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, more than thirty art organizations refused to sign the NEA's anti-obscenity pledge, resulting in a loss of more than \$750,000 worth of grants. In 1990 two exhibitions in New York flaunted work with "difficult" or "illegal" content: Exit Art's reconstruction (with the addition of new artists) of its 1982 exhibition *Illegal America* which documented activities of 36 artists and art groups that violated laws in their work about social issues; and Joseph Kosuth's *Play of the Unmentionables* at the Brooklyn Museum, which unearthed works from the Museum's permanent collection that involved nudity and eroticism.

Reimagining America in 1990

It was in this climate, in 1990, that the *Reimagining America* anthology appeared. *Reimagining America* was an outgrowth of a 1987⁴¹ event in Philadelphia, *Voices of Dissent*, a month-long festival plus three-day conference, designed to be a counter-celebration of the 200th anniversary of the U.S. Constitution. The purpose of the event was to relate the work of "politically engaged" artists to various historical traditions of artistic dissent in the U.S.. In their introduction to the *Reimagining* volume, editors Mark O'Brien and Craig Little asserted that, by the end of the eighties⁴² there were thousands

⁴⁰The reference here is to: 1) the "NEA 4", artists Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, John Fleck and Karen Finley, who filed suit against NEA for denying their grants, and 2) David Wojnarowicz's suit against American Family organization head, Donald Wildmon, for using images of Wojnarowicz's copyrighted work without permission, in a mass mailing to Wildmon's organization members and to members of Congress.

⁴¹Mark O'Brien and Craig Little, eds., *Reimagining America The Arts of Social Change (A Voices of Dissent Project)*. (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990). 1987 was also notable for the Iran-Contra hearings, the first display of the AIDS quilt on the national Mall in Washington, D.C. during the National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights, and the publication of Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, which became a key text of neo-conservatism.

⁴²By 1990, much had transpired: Bush was reelected, the Berlin wall had fallen, Spike Lee's nomination for an Academy Award for his film *Do the Right Thing* was withdrawn, Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* became the target of an anti-obscenity campaign by the right wing American Family Association, the Corcoran Gallery of Art canceled the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit, Jesse Helms proposed his first "decency" amendment to the NEA appropriations bill, the NEA Four (Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, John Fleck and

of art activists working at the local and regional levels throughout the U.S.; and a number of arts organizations and publishing coups were helping to grow a “true movement” of the arts as a vehicle for social commentary.⁴³ For O’Brien and Little, this increasing momentum for art as a way to make political points involved intentions that sounded quite similar to the “transgressivity” tactics of artists who denied they were seeking to disseminate political messages. For example, according to O’Brien, *Reimaging’s* contributors’ intentions were “...to scare, vilify, enrage, shock, embarrass, subvert.” O’Brien noted, however, that this work also intended to: “... record, name, remind, inform, caution, critique, speculate, envision, support, share, comfort, validate, purify, heal, celebrate, sing, honor, refuse, incite, embolden, activate, bridge, transform.”⁴⁴

Reimaging also contained voices that suggested it might be well not to rush to identify the “thousands of art activists” as a *movement* of oppositional art that could, in uncomplicated fashion, transmit “critical content.” In his essay for *Reimaging America*, “Waking Up to Smell the Coffee,” Greg Sholette, like Lippard and Moore, cautioned that enthusiasm in the marketplace could spell a death embrace for art that had activist ambitions. Sholette raised serious questions about how artists with activist intentions might negotiate what he saw as “an ever more accessible art mainstream” that gobbled up fragments of opposition as soon as they appeared.

Karen Finley filed suit against NEA for violation of their first Amendment rights by denying their grants and Robbie Conal’s first billboard: Jesse Helms as the “Artificial Art Official” was removed and then reinstalled, and 30+ groups refused to sign the NEA anti-obscenity pledge, spurning \$750K in grants.

⁴³ Groups listed include the Alliance for Cultural Democracy (ACD), Alternate ROOTS, the Black Rock Coalition, PAD/D (Political Art Documentation/Distribution), TENAZ (Teatros Nacionales de Aztlan), Union for Democratic Communication. Documentation of activist art in anthologies such as Neumaier and Kahn’s *Cultures in Contention*, Lippard’s *Get the Message*, the Greywolf Annual *Multicultural Literacy*, and Hillary Robinson’s *Visibly Female*. *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

Sholette called for a recognition that “...consciously oppositional art actually dances in and out of dominant culture in a complicated scenario [consisting of] ...fragmented moments of opposition ...that... act more like negations of what is called history than the constituents of a separate tradition.” Sholette pointed out that “oppositional” art’s appropriations, mimings and parodies almost always evolved out of its contemporary counterparts in “high” art. He encouraged his fellow activist cultural commentators and producers to stop trying to “smooth out these contradictions or compress them into a movement,” because leaving them to their own devices could possibly “do more, as Walter Benjamin said, to ‘rub history against its grain.’”⁴⁵

The “Culture Wars” had the effect of simultaneously simplifying and complicating the definition of “activist art” articulated in texts such as *Reimaging*. If activist art “danced in and out” of the mainstream, liberally borrowing postmodernist aesthetic strategies, as Sholette asserted, according to other commentators, it could also be characterized, in content, primarily as work that plunged into “difficult” or “illegal” areas, or sat squarely in the contested arena of racial and sexual identity struggles.

The characterization of activist art as difficult, illegal and focused on racial and sexual identity politics, made it a “sitting duck” target for right wing critics. And, as Richard Bolton pointed out in the introduction to his 1992 compendium of key moments in the development of “culture wars” discourse—*Culture Wars: Documents from the*

⁴⁵ Greg Sholette, “Waking Up to Smell the Coffee: Reflections on Political Theory,” in O’Brien and Little, *ibid.*, 31. Sholette had been involved in PAD/D and other groups in New York that struggled during the eighties to find a way to sustain an “oppositional art.” Sholette’s essay was inspired by the ambivalence he felt upon attending the opening of the exhibition *Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art* (exh. cat.) (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), which included, prominently, among the 108 artists and 16 collectives, the images created in conjunction with PAD/D, of which Sholette was one of the founders. As Sholette puts it in this essay: “...the Museum of Modern Art’s primary function has been to establish the market value of a certain de-politicized formalism, whose patriarchal lineage reached its apex in American abstract expressionism. How is a serious political artist supposed to contend with this situation?” 25.

Recent Controversies in the Arts—few prominent cultural commentators of the center or left “came directly to the defense of experimental artists and art forms,” offering instead a “straight First Amendment defense for the [NEA] funding of this work, [many] arguing that, while they too were disgusted by the art in question, they supported the right of the artist to be disgusting.”⁴⁶ In effect, then, by the early nineties, art that dipped into “disgusting” content areas such as homosexuality/homophobia, gender and racial stereotyping, homelessness and poverty, alternative sexual practices, etc. was now seen to be both “transgressive” and “activist,” at widely-dispersed locations across the discursive spectrum of the period.

The 1993 Whitney Biennial

This artistic response to the Reagan-Bush era zeitgeist, first summarized in *The Decade Show* of 1990, received its most concentrated mainstream attention in the much-maligned 1993 Whitney Biennial.⁴⁷ By the time the 1993 Whitney Biennial was

⁴⁶ Richard Bolton, “Introduction,” in Richard Bolton, ed., *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: The New Press, 1992), 19-20. Bolton’s book focuses, helpfully, on the discourse generated around several key events from 1989-1991: including the Mapplethorpe controversy, and NEA’s defunding of artists whose work addressed sexuality and involved the use of abject and monstrous imagery.

⁴⁷ *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*. (exh. cat.) (New York: The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990). For an assessment of *The Decade Show*, from an African American perspective, see Keith Morrison, “Questioning the Quality Canon,” *New Art Examiner* 18 (October 1990): 24-27. Morrison notes that *The Decade Show* was emphatically *not* the “first effort to break the Canon,” listing 11 exhibitions, which took place from 1973-1990, most of them outside New York, that featured the work of artists of color, and art that addressed issues of gender, sexuality and politics. Neither *The Decade Show* nor the 1993 Whitney Biennial completely represented, together or separately, the clamor of artists of color, women and gays and lesbians to enter the art mainstream during the 1980s especially. But these shows were the only ones that sought to survey the phenomenon, and, in the case of the Whitney, inviting accusations of “jumping on the bandwagon” of multiculturalism, and other accusations of even more nefarious intentions. See especially: John Leo, “Culture War at the Whitney,” *US News and World Report*, (22 March 1993); Robert Hughes, “A Fiesta of Whining,” *Time* (22 March, 1993); Hilton Als, et al. “Whitney Biennial 1993.” *Artforum International*. 31:9 (May 1993), with essays by Hilton Als, Glenn O’Brien, Bruce W. Ferguson, David Rimanelli, Jan Avgikos, Greg Tate, Dan Cameron, David Deitcher, Thomas McEvelley, Liz Kotz and Lawrence Chua.

attracting crowds, and, to quote one reaction to it, “glowering at the art world from the Upper East Side”⁴⁸ the Reagan-Bush era was seen as “over.”

The Context of the 1993 Whitney Biennial

The Whitney exhibition opened in an environment in which Bill Clinton had been only narrowly elected President the previous fall (1992) during a bitter and mudslinging campaign. Pat Buchanan had fought for the Republican nomination by using excerpts from Marlon Riggs’ PBS documentary about African American gay men, “Tongues Untied,” in a viciously anti-gay political ad during the Republican primary. The short-lived Women’s Action Coalition (WAC) was born, demonstrating with “pink slips” (lingerie as banners) against Bush during a pre-election Pro-Choice march and rally in Washington, DC, attended by 500,000. A jury that deliberated less than two hours, finally concluded the “Mapplethorpe Controversy”—which had culminated in the obscenity trial of museum director Dennis Barrie in Cincinnati—with Barrie’s acquittal.

The year 1993, was also the same year terrorist bombs exploded at the World Trade Center in New York; the Branch Davidian complex in Waco, TX burned down; feminist jurist Ruth Bader Ginsburg was appointed to the Supreme Court; the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy on gays in the military took effect; and Itzhak Rabin and Yassir Arafat shook hands on the White House lawn. In a sense, then, the 1993 Whitney Biennial took up, and elaborated, the theme (including many of the artists) of the earlier *Decade Show*, a kind of art exhibition version of Bill Clinton’s much ballyhooed election promise of a “government that looks like America.”

But, by the time the Whitney opened, the discursive winds had changed, and “compassion fatigue” was in vogue. The Whitney show, unlike the *Decade Show* of just a

⁴⁸ Jerry Saltz, “Critic’s Diary: Mayday, Mayday, Mayday.” *Art in America*, 81: 9 (September 1992): 41.

few years earlier, received reviews that ranged in tone from condescension to vituperation.

Even *New York Times* critic Eleanor Heartney—known for her positive takes on work by artists who sought to say something politically and socially meaningful—was uncharacteristically critical. Though Heartney’s long review in the May 1993 issue of *Art in America* was not completely negative, typical were descriptive phrases like “strident tone,” and “a litany of wrongs...that do not transcend the dichotomy of victim/oppressor,” and “cannot look beyond the powerlessness of the victims toward the possibility of action and change.” For example, Heartney interpreted Pat Ward Williams’ large black and white transparency of three young African-American men, attached to the window of the Museum closest to passersby on Madison Avenue, with the caption “What You Lookn At?” as reducing racism “to a matter of relationships between individuals [suggesting] that it is best countered by ...reciprocal intimidation”⁴⁹ (Figure 5).

More completely critical was Charles A. Wright, Jr.’s diatribe in *Afterimage*, aimed squarely at the exhibition’s curators. Wright characterized the 1993 Biennial as “a magnanimous but unrigorous multiculturalist web of institutional double-speak in which the museum is haplessly entangled.” He accused the Biennial’s curators of relegating artists to “cultural essences,” refusing to acknowledge the “possibility that one could be Black, gay and female” simultaneously; and demonstrating their “overdetermined liberalist ambitions of inclusion” by thoroughly ignoring “the question of class

⁴⁹ Eleanor Heartney, “Report from New York: Identity Politics at the Whitney,” *Art in America* 81:5 (May 1993): 42-43. Heartney notes in her article the similarity with the Clinton campaign promise: “Like Clinton’s Cabinet, this exhibition was carefully tailored to look more like America.” *Ibid.*, 42.



Figure 5. Pat Ward Williams. *What You Lookn At?* Photomural. 1992. In *1993 Whitney Biennial*. Exh. Cat. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993, 249.

stratification within American culture.” His overall assessment: “[O]ne recognizes the Whitney as the proverbial conservative sheep in liberal clothing.”⁵⁰

What emerged from the critical battering of the Whitney in 1993 was another significant turn of the prism through which activist art could be viewed. Clearly, neither the curators of the 1993 Biennial, the museum’s director, nor the artists in it, with a few exceptions, were seen by key commentators as effective cultural activist intervention-makers.⁵¹

But, did this mean that the art in the 1993 Whitney Biennial was not “activist” at all? And what, indeed, did the flat-out, in-your-face objects and images included in the 1993 Biennial transgress, if they transgressed anything; and, if they did transgress, did this mean they were “activist?”

Accusations from some critical quarters that many, perhaps even the majority, of the works in the 1993 Whitney Biennial were simplistic and didactic in the extreme, rather

⁵⁰ Charles A. Wright, Jr. “The Mythology of Difference: Vulgar Identity Politics at the Whitney Biennial,” *Afterimage* 21:3 (September 1993): 4-8. Wright was, at that time, the Director of the DIA Art Center. Since then, Wright seems to have disappeared altogether from the art world.

⁵¹ “Worthy” examples from both Heartney and Wright: Heartney’s (ibid., 46-47) selection of works in the ’93 Biennial which she saw as transcending the “simplistic” “vacuous” and “hectoring schoolmarm” approaches of most of the artists in the show: Nan Goldin’s “compelling depictions of her AIDS-devastated world;” Cindy Sherman’s “Hans Bellmer-inspired photographs of reconfigured mannequins;” Ida Applebroog’s paintings of children who “are both victims and future perpetrators, entwined in vines, wielding guns, growing up to be Nazis;” Glenn Ligon’s “myth-debunking” consideration of Robert Mapplethorpe’s *Black Book* that reveals the “racist undertones” of the image of Mapplethorpe as the icon of gay liberation; the “vitality and visual seductiveness” of Pepón Osorio’s “murder scene in an unbelievably kitchified Hispanic home;” Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez Peña’s *The Year of the White Bear* (Figure 37) in which the artists dressed “as gorgeously show-biz ‘natives’” performed in a cage while “guides explained their antics and culture for a White Eurocentric audience;” and Mark Rapaport’s “witty ‘discovery’ of a gay sexual subtext in Rock Hudson films.” It is interesting that the only work in the exhibition even mentioned by Wright in his museum-centered critique (ibid., 8) was Chris Burden’s “Fist of Light” which he interpreted as seeking, through deployment of 1000 500-watt lights, symbolically to “remove all color in a visual analog of fission.” Wright’s take on the Burden work? “An intangible homogenizing force to which exposure would consume all ‘others’ who entered. . . identity politics according to the Whitney Museum of American Art.” For non-New York-generated takes on the exhibition see Catherine Fox, “Surveying the Whitney Biennial: Angry Show Scans Politics of Race, Sex,” *Atlanta Constitution*, (Sunday, March 7, 1993): Arts Section N4; and Alan Rusbridger, “Radical Clique,” *The Guardian*, (April 26, 1993): Features Section 5. The 1993 Whitney Biennial is treated also at some length in Part 2 below.

than “positively” transgressive, may actually have been a negative characterization of a particular aesthetic tactic consciously and increasingly deployed at least since the late 1960s, by artists of color, feminist artists, and gay and lesbian artists. This tactic—that art should be *understandable* in order to be effective in promoting social change—did, in fact, transgress the widely-held perspective in the art world that art should be layered, off-center and not too easily grasped.

In summary, the early nineties featured a higher profile for artists historically excluded from mainstream visibility. The work by these formerly ignored artists was aggressive and pointedly critical of mainstream social trends. Right wing critics took advantage of the aggressive thematics of this art and used it for their political purposes. Meanwhile, critics normally supportive of activist art and transgressive aesthetics in general began to express disenchantment with the aggressiveness of art embraced in mainstream locations. While conservatives in Congress succeeded in eliminating federal funding for individual artists, funding for “community-based” art continued unabated, raising questions regarding whether this form of art could still be considered activist.

Chapter 3: Activism vs. Community Arts—Aesthetics Instrumentalized Or Coopted?

Chapter 3 considers the turn of discourse on activist art at the end of the nineties into increasingly contentious notions of how aesthetic strategies can operate transgressively in relation to dominant cultural structures. Concern regarding the “cooptation” of community based art by conservative ideology began to emerge, and the need for a clearer identification of what might constitute a socially responsive art seemed even more urgent.

Defining “Socially Responsive Art”

In the same year as the 1993 Whitney Biennial, MIT’s *Leonardo: Journal of the International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology* published a special issue: “Art and Social Consciousness,” edited by Los Angeles activist artist Sheila Pinkel. In her introduction, Pinkel asserted that the work included in this issue, “in its range of subjects and intensity of commitment ...define[d] socially responsive artwork.”⁵² While most of the artists whose works were included in this special issue utilized contemporary technologies as their media, (logical, as the journal is published by MIT), their primary concern, according to Pinkel, was “broadening an understanding of the realities and

⁵² Sheila Pinkel, “Introduction: Art and Social Consciousness,” *Leonardo*, 26:5 (1993): 365. Artists included in this issue: Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, Joan Brigham, Agnes Denes, Mitz Kataoka, Michael Tidmus, Dee Dee Halleck/Paper Tiger Television, Ben Caldwell, Nancy Buchanan, Joyce Cutler Shaw, Jeffrey Schulz, Esther Parada, Barbara Jo Revelle, Carol Conde and Karl Beveridge, Felipe Ehrenberg, Kim Abeles, Anne Bray, Dawn Wiedemann, Edgar Heap-of-Birds, Karen Atkinson and Beverly Naidus. Most of these artists were working in this fashion throughout the eighties and into the nineties. The works featured in Pinkel’s special issue of *Leonardo* were frequently collaborative, and involving mapping, sculptural installation, film and video projection, exhibition development and deployment, planting and harvesting, electronic two-way communication technology, use of electronic networks, satellite communication technology, performance, virtual reality, PET, CAT and MRI technology, murals, electronic publishing, “traditional” photography and photocopying. Most of the projects described were also ongoing, or multi-year in length, some like the Harrison’s *Lagoon Cycle*, more than a decade in length.

challenges of peoples whose concerns are not well understood by mainstream society.”⁵³

In other words, the aim of this art was clearly didactic; and it purposefully utilized (high and low) technologies in “user-friendly” fashion in order to enhance delivery of its messages.

Nevertheless, the tone and subject matter of the works included by Pinkel in her “Art and Social Consciousness” collection for *Leonardo* were not brashly confrontational as in the Whitney show, nor did the selection include abject materials and references.⁵⁴ Rather, the works included in the “social consciousness” issue of *Leonardo* suggested that the primary purpose of “socially responsive” art practice, was to operate (presumably with a “softer touch”) in the tradition of “community arts,” to create opportunities and vehicles in which “the dialogic process [could] assert itself once again.”⁵⁵

This “softer approach” had a long history, a history of “community arts,” stretching back to the WPA heydays in the 1930s. This history was repeatedly traced in writing of the 1990s, an example of which was Arlene Goldbard’s article “Postscript to the Past: Notes Toward a History of Community Arts” in the Winter, 1993 special issue of *High Performance*. This issue of *High Performance* echoed the earlier characterization of the “community arts” movement, by Raven and the editors of the *Reimagining* anthology, as a re-emergence of a type of art production that was “in favor of the idea of the artist as an integral part of community life, working with and for ordinary people and rewarded, as

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ The references to abjection apparent in many of the works in the Whitney show were also front and center in two other Whitney-sponsored exhibitions in 1993: The *Abject Art* show, put together by museum fellows from the permanent collection of the museum, and the *Rape* show, installed at the Whitney extension gallery. More attention will be given to these exhibitions in Part 3, which is devoted to examination of the monstrous, grotesque and abject as an aesthetic strategy in activist art.

⁵⁵ Pinkel, *ibid.*, 366.

other workers hope to be, with a decent living and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.”⁵⁶

In her introduction, Goldbard called on artists who sought to engage in activism through their art, not to be satisfied with “transgressing” the mainstream art world approaches to art practice; and to focus instead on key issues affecting marginalized people in local communities. To engage as socially responsive, to become “activists” in the world of the early 1990s, Goldbard urged artists also to “transgress” Old Left approaches she characterized as patronizing and colonizing. The “transgressivity” Goldbard proposed was a “socially responsive” approach that she urged should consist of two key elements: *first*, commitment to help communities “free their imaginations,” not the “old-Left idea ... of ... ’trickle down’ in which musicians would play for factory workers who would thereby be inspired to take up violins and form their own symphony orchestra...;” and, *second*, collaboration between “artists and others,” in complete contradistinction to “old Left ideas that socially conscious artists [should] ‘speak for’ the people who are incapable of speaking for themselves.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Arlene Goldbard, “Postscript to the Past: Notes Toward a History of Community Arts,” *High Performance*, 64 (Winter 1993). In 1991, a conference at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1991 entitled “Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art” was probably the first time what Pinkel and Goldbard referred to, in 1993, as “community arts” had been named. An anthology of writings based on the ideas put forward at this conference, edited by Suzanne Lacy was published in 1995 (Suzanne Lacy, ed. *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995). Lacy also published two essays related to the conference, entitled “Mapping the Terrain: The New Public Art,” in *Public Art Review* I and II, Spring/Summer 1993 and Fall/Winter, 1993.

⁵⁷ Goldbard, *ibid*. In her thumbnail history of antecedents for a community arts movement she hoped would emerge with a new administration in Washington, Goldbard identifies: The American Artists’ Congress of 1936, The Mexican muralists of the twenties and thirties, all the New Deal’s cultural programs (1933-1942), The Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, the journal *Arts in Society* which began publication in 1958, the Free Southern Theatre, the influence of British community artists, such as Scots David Harding, the European notion of the *animateur* (artist-organizer), the Regional Cultural Action Center in Togo, liberation theology (Paolo Freire), the politico-educational theater work of Brazilian artist-legislator Augusto Boal. She also points to The San Francisco Neighborhood Arts Program, and the Baltimore Theatre Project (both extant in the seventies, but virtually defunct as of 1993, the time of the writing of her article).

“Community” and Public Art

By 1995, three key publications had appeared that sought to document and summarize various aspects of the “community arts” movement, and to provide a measure of historical context by citing examples reaching back as far as four decades: Suzanne Lacy’s *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Mary Jane Jacob’s *Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago*, and Nina Felshin’s *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*.⁵⁸ That these books were very significant in the development of the discourse on activist art is indicated by the speedy appearance in 1995, the same year as their publication, of reviews and articles about them in key media outlets. Coverage included companion book reviews by Eleanor Heartney and Nancy Princenthal in *Art in America*, reviews of *But Is It Art?* in *The New Art Examiner* and *Women Artists’ News*, and an interview with *Culture in Action*’s originator, Mary Jane Jacob, in *High Performance*.

The serious consideration for these books signaled what critic Heartney identified in her *Art in America* essay as “evidence of a major shift in the dialogue surrounding public

⁵⁸ Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); Mary Jane Jacob, Michael Brenson and Eva M. Olson, *Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago*, (Seattle, Bay Press, 1995); Nina Felshin, ed., *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995). Lacy’s book had its origins six years earlier, in 1989, in a program sponsored by the California College of Arts and Crafts, in Oakland, CA. The program consisted of a series of talks by 10 artists (Marie Johnson-Calloway, Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison, Adrian Piper, John Malpede, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Judith Baca, Alan Kaprow and Suzanne Lacy) intended to explore connections between the artists and their practices, to see if what they were doing constituted a “new direction in public art.” Two other events also preceded the book: a symposium in 1991 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, followed by a retreat for thirty artists, critics and curators; and a panel at the 1992 College Art Association Conference (panel, chaired by Suzanne Lacy and Leonard Hunter, and including Suzi Gablik, Richard Bolton, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Daryl Chin, Mary Jane Jacob and Patricia Phillips. Subsequently, Lacy published two articles: “Mapping the Terrain: The New Public Art,” (part 1) *Public Art Review*, 4:2 (Spring/Summer 1993): 14-17; and “Mapping the Terrain: The New Public Art,” (part 2) *Public Art Review*, 5:1 (Fall/Winter 1993): 26-33. Jacob’s book was a kind of combination stand-alone book and exhibition catalog.

art.”⁵⁹ In the same issue of *Art in America*, Nancy Princenthal, in a review of *But Is It Art?* identifies this “major shift” as a “flouting of boundaries between disciplines...bold sweeps across professional lines, undertaken for instrumental purposes...rather than [for] intramural challenges associated with modernism’s narrower strategies.”⁶⁰ While Princenthal’s general attitude in her review is approving of the art’s “effectiveness” due primarily to its ability to “jump tracks” disciplinarily, she joined Heartney in some skepticism, pointing out that “populism” in art is not always salutary.

Heartney particularly decried the “strange and unexamined [in *Culture in Action* and *Mapping the Terrain*] parallel between ...championing of the community and the ideas currently espoused by conservative populists, with their emphasis on community standards and their advocacy of politics on the local level.”⁶¹ And Princenthal homes in with this observation: “With the ...electoral success of neo-conservative extremists, it has become ever more apparent that to justify art by its audience appeal is to play directly into the hands of the religious right—or at best to sign on to a culture of poll-takers and pulse-readers.”⁶²

By 1995, when these books appeared and these reviews were written, the first Clinton term was almost over, and his campaign promises largely unfulfilled, at least in terms of concrete change. In fact, Clinton’s attempts to reverse the policies of his predecessors had

⁵⁹ Eleanor Heartney, “Public Art in Action,” *Art in America* 89:6 (June 1995): 33.

⁶⁰ Nancy Princenthal, “Art and the Community,” *Art in America* 89:6 (June 1995): 35. The two reviewers covered different books. Heartney covered Jacob and Lacy, and Princenthal covered Felshin, presumably because Heartney was author of one of the chapters in Felshin’s book.

⁶¹ Heartney, *ibid.*

⁶² Princenthal, *ibid.*, 37. The “neo-conservative extremists” electoral victory to which Princenthal refers is, of course, the Republican triumph in the House of Representatives in 1994, ushering in Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America,” known in left circles as the “Contract *on* America.”

mobilized the Republican right wing to such an extent that a flood of new Republicans entered the Congress in 1994 to make sure the social policies Clinton sought to push through were effectively blocked.

The 1994 advent of the “Contract with America” of Newt Gingrich and the eager Freshman conservatives in Congress should have inspired a strong surge in numbers of artists and art groups involved in “exposing issues to public view as a means of sparking public debate,” as Nina Felshin suggests, in her introduction to *But Is It Art?* But, by 1995, many of the collectives heralded by Lippard and others in the eighties as the “best hope” for a renewed activist art, had either disbanded, been embraced by museums and commercial galleries, or ceased to produce “engaged” art. Meanwhile, Felshin noted, “artists ... more directly involved ... in grassroots community organizing and in directly empowering constituents” were continuing to operate.⁶³

Of course, one of the reasons community arts practitioners (groups or individuals) could continue to operate, and even to expand, was the change in both NEA and private funding priorities across the board. NEA had shut down support for individual artists in 1992, and subsequently emphasized educational, community-oriented cultural production—all as a direct result of the “culture wars.” Undoubtedly it was this fact, and the unexamined parallels of populism on both the left and right that spurred art historian Grant Kester to vigorously engage the notion of whether or not artists could and should “speak for” oppressed communities.

⁶³ Felshin, *ibid.*, 27, lists these as follows: “Of the twelve practices examined in this book, two (Gran Fury, WAC) have more or less disbanded, a third (Guerrilla Girls) is facing an identity crisis, and a fourth (Group Material) is rethinking its future...” As of the writing of this dissertation, the only one of this group still operational is the Guerrilla Girls. These groups are the ones Felshin identifies as “exposing issues to public view.” The ones more involved in organizing and “empowering” were: Suzanne Lacy, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Carole Conde and Karl Beveridge, Helen and Newton Harrison, Peggy Diggs, the Artist and Homeless Collaborative and the American Festival Project. Of these all except the Artist and Homeless Collaborative are still actively working as of the writing of this dissertation.

Kester's Challenge (I): "Aesthetic Evangelism"

Grant Kester, in an article appearing in 1995 in *Afterimage*, looked back over the previous decade, and decried what he saw as artists' inflated sense of themselves as "aesthetic evangelists."⁶⁴ Kester's perspective on "transgressivity," differs significantly from Princenthal's and Heartney's as expressed in their 1995 reviews of Felshin's and Lacy's anthologies in *Art in America*. Princenthal and Heartney seem admiring of artists' willingness and skill at "jumping tracks:" (as Heartney puts it) aesthetically by relying on "the artist's habit of metaphor, cross-reference, inclusiveness, and holistic thinking [which] may help unclog a discourse that often finds itself mired in the narrow channels of technological and bureaucratic thinking."⁶⁵ Kester, on the other hand, characterized the dynamic of the relationship taken on by the artist-as-community-advocate as less acrobat jumping from aesthetic trapeze to aesthetic trapeze without a net, than as interloper whose interaction with the community s/he seeks to "help," is "mediated through a discursive network of professional institutions and ideologies that the artist collaborates with and, in some cases, seeks to radicalize or challenge."⁶⁶ On one thing, however, Kester, Heartney and Princenthal did agree: the involvement in the 1990s of artists as community advocates too often reinforced contemporaneous conservative discourse about "undeserving" populations (the poor, people of color, homeless, people with AIDS, etc.).

⁶⁴ Grant Kester, "Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art," *Afterimage* 22:6 (January 1995): 5-12.

⁶⁵ Eleanor Heartney, "Ecopolitics/Ecopoetry: Helen and Newton Harrison's Environmental Talking Cure," in Felshin, *ibid.*, 143. As quoted in Princenthal, *ibid.*, 35.

⁶⁶Kester, *ibid.*, 5.

In his “Aesthetic Evangelists...” article Kester provides detailed examples of “the extent [artists] committed to a progressive cultural practice might inadvertently corroborate certain structural features of the conservative position.”⁶⁷ Kester warned artists of the pitfalls of seeking an advocacy role in relation to people/communities (especially the poor) pejoratively labeled by the right wing as “malleable subjects, dangerously susceptible to corrupting moral influences, whose consciousness can be formed and transformed through the application of pedagogical techniques.” He pointed out that the high profile of a “community arts” movement was not 100% positive. The visibility of the community arts movement was, he argued, also an unfortunate illustration of the extent of the success of the conservative enterprise of blaming the victim. By engaging in community arts, he argued, artists had been placed in the position of attempting to “solve” social problems. By enthusiastically accepting this role, artists were, in essence, (though undoubtedly inadvertently) reinforcing the conservative ideology that social problems are best addressed by private philanthropy and moral pedagogy instead of state/government action.⁶⁸

Subsequent to the publication of the “Aesthetic Evangelists...” essay in *Afterimage*, Kester was the guest editor of the “Aesthetics and the Body Politic” issue of *Art Journal*

⁶⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁸ It should be noted that Kester denies he is denouncing community arts practice out of hand. In a note (ibid., n.2, p 12), Kester acknowledges “the persistent labors of a committed group of artists who have been working, in some cases for over two decades, on a progressive community-based art practice. Some of the individuals with whom I’m familiar include Carole Conde and Karl Beveridge in Canada, Conrad Atkinson, Stephen Willats, Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson, and groups such as the Black Audio Film Collective and the Hackney Flashers in the UK, and Martha Rosler, Suzanne Lacy and Fred Lonidier in the US. Of particular importance here are the community art and workshop initiatives developed under the Greater London Council (GLC) between 1981 and 1986. On the GLC see: Owen Kelly, *Community, Art and the State: Storming the Citadels*. London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1984.” Aspects of the specific projects he cites as illustrations of the problematic aspects of community arts practice include: Los Angeles Poverty Department, Alfredo Jaar’s “One or Two Things I Know About Them,” Dawn Dedeaux’s “Soul Shadows: Urban Warrior Myths” and Hope Sandrow’s Artists and Homeless Collaborative.

in 1997, just prior to the appearance of his anthology of essays from *Afterimage* (dating from 1985-1995) published in 1998.⁶⁹ In the introductions to both of these publications, Kester moved his attention from a sophisticated critique of the deficiencies of the “community arts” movement, and the potential for its cooptation by the right, to engagement with a key preoccupation of the art world of the 1990s, a renewed interest in “beauty.”⁷⁰

Kester’s Challenge (II): Beauty Reconsidered

In both publications, Kester provides examples of works of art and works of criticism that “challenge the disengagement of the aesthetic from political discourse,” he sees as most prominently (and persuasively) promoted by Dave Hickey in his 1993 collection of essays entitled *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*.⁷¹ Hickey’s slim volume was important in redirecting the attention of key commentators of the 1990s to the physicality of experiencing a work of art, and in encouraging a rejection of the “anti-aesthetic” qualities prized in postmodern cultural production. The College Art Association underscored the significance of Hickey’s influence with the award to Hickey, in 1994, for best book of criticism.

⁶⁹ Grant Kester, guest ed., *Art Journal* [special issue: “Aesthetics and the Body Politic”] 56:1 (Spring 1997); and Grant Kester, ed., *Art, Activism & Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). Kester was the editor of *Afterimage* from 1990-1995. Kester notes that a key aspect of the surge in interest in the “sensual and somatic” aspects of the aesthetic experience generated a concomitant critique of what at that point was increasingly seen as activist art’s “an-aesthetic” core.

⁷⁰ As Kester points out, critic Dave Hickey stimulated this renewed interest in beauty. See Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*, (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993), which received a best book of criticism award from the College Art Association in 1994. In his introduction to the “Aesthetics and the Body Politic” special issue of *Art Journal*, Kester lists the following as emblematic of the extent of the interest generated: of *New Art Examiner* [“B” is for Beauty,” special issue] 21:8 (April 1994); Richard Bolton, “Beauty Redefined: From Ideal Form to Experiential Meaning,” *New Art Examiner* 21:3 (November 1993) and Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁷¹ Kester, “Learning...” *ibid.*, 24.

Kester indicts Hickey's perspectives in *The Invisible Dragon*... as symptomatic of a ceding of the "ground of beauty" to those who perceive the aesthetic "from a highly traditional, and...conservative point of view."⁷² Kester's aim—in both the *Art Journal* special issue, and in his anthology— is to recuperate an "aesthetic that preserves its full complexity as a cultural, political and sensual form of experience."⁷³

For Kester, Hickey's "therapeutic libertarianism," encourages a regressive definition of the aesthetic because it suggests that a viewer's subjectivity can be transformed by exposure to a beautiful art work, thus becoming more capable of participating in "democratic" discourse. Kester indicts Hickey's proposed "therapeutic libertarianism" as bankrupt because it fails to define what is meant by a "democracy," in which a subjectivity transformed by contemplation of a beautiful art object would be better able to participate. Likewise, Kester finds Hickey's proposal wanting in any sense of what the relationship might be "between the privatized and physical aesthetic encounter" Hickey advocates and lionizes, and "discursive knowledge," which is inextricably intertwined with the social and the political. So, for Kester, the emphasis (by Hickey and his enthusiasts) on the individual somatic (bodily) response to the "beautiful" work of art is regressive because it emphasizes individualism over the common good, and on the singular, narcissistic, inward process over an expansive and engaged collective activism. Thus, Kester, argues, Hickey's (and those who came in his wake) particular brand of "recuperation of beauty" must be challenged:

⁷² Ibid., 20.

⁷³ Ibid.

... not by denying the knowledge produced by the body and the senses, but by analyzing the ways in which this knowledge both resists and collaborates with forms of social, cultural and political power...⁷⁴

For Kester, both the making of art, and its reception, generates knowledge; and this knowledge must interact with forms of social, cultural and political power in order to be considered activist. As he indicates with his choice of artists and critics to include, as well as his choice to “intervene” by utilizing *Art Journal*, one of the organs of the mainstream academic arts institution, the College Art Association, as the megaphone for his views, Kester sees both resistance and collaboration with social, cultural and political power to be potentially effective modes of transgression, ways to “make progress.” By the same token, he believes artists’ interactions with these sources of power can be regressive. The key factor for Kester, however, in differentiating between resistances or collaborations with power that are regressive, and those that are progressive, is in subjecting these interventions to scrutiny, placing a template over them that assesses whether the resulting art object, event or process encourages “an expansive and engaged activism,” which, by its very nature, is social or collective rather than internal and individual.

⁷⁴ The artists and critics Kester includes in the *Art Journal* special issue “Aesthetics and the Body Politic” include UK producers Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson, co-founders of the Art of Change in London that has worked under Government sponsored initiatives and with urban development corporations and housing action trusts; Jill Casid and María de Guzmán, as SPIR a conceptual photography collaboration; Howard Caygill, professor of cultural history at Goldsmiths’ College, University of London (who uses Kant to address the work of Australian performance artist Stelarc who explores the limits of the body and the invasion of the body by technology); Greig Crysler and Abidin Kusno, SUNY graduate students (at the time) who examine the role played by the Holocaust museum in the construction of public memory and the constitution of identity; Sarat Maharaj, of Goldsmiths College, University of London who presents the “anti-essay,” *Monkeydoodle* that explores “that fog-wrapped spot where art history/theory and visual art practice collide...” and is “conceived around bodily fluids...”; Atla Efinova who provides a re-view of Soviet Socialist Realism that emphasizes “vivid aesthetic pleasure” that is the source of its power; and an interview with aesthetic theorist Susan Buck-Morss who has radically revised notions of aesthetics away from its preoccupation with art and beauty, and back to its connection to corporeal sensation as the primary source of cognition.

To summarize Chapter 3, the 1990s saw significant changes in the relationship of the discourses of activism and transgressivity in art. While a primary concern in the eighties was on avoiding the cooptation of activist efforts by artists either into the mainstream museum system, or into the commercial arena as mere commodities, by the early nineties, the taste for transgressivity had turned the right wing's attention to publicly funded art as politically exploitable. The result was a new sense of the possibilities for activism through aggressive imagery *inside* institutions. At the same time, a long trend, reaching back to the 1930s, of community-oriented art began to be questioned as perhaps as potentially cooptable as the market or the museum had been seen to be in the eighties.

* * * *

In **Part 1**, the discourse on defining activist art is seen as revolving extensively, during the eighties and nineties in the U.S., around notions of “transgression.” The scrutiny of the discourse demonstrates that the meaning of “transgression,” as it related to the practice of activist art, changed significantly, depending on where and when the term was deployed, for what purpose and by whom. The definitions of activist art likewise shifted and changed in relation to the shifting and changing definitions of transgression. “Transgression” was also one of the key elements cited by producers of discourse on activist art in the eighties and nineties, as characteristic historically of the effects of “avant-garde” art production, which were, in turn, precedents for activist art practice in the late 20th Century. Part 2 will consider this relationship.

**PART 2: DISCOURSES OF DEFINITION—ACTIVIST ART,
POSTMODERNISM AND AVANT-GARDE(S)**

Introduction to Part 2

Part 2 will investigate the discursive relationships between notions of avant-garde, postmodernism and activist art from 1980-2000. The discussion in **Part 2** considers how specific elements seen as characteristic of “avant-garde(s)” have been enlisted by both proponents and opponents of activist art in the mercurially changing definitions of this practice. The discussion will consider selected texts that are symptomatic of the fortunes of the term “avant-garde” in the eighties and nineties in relation to the shifting definition of the practice of activist art. The discussion consists of five chapters, and proceeds, as in Part 1, chronologically.

Chapter 1 considers that, in 1980s discourse, the term “avant-garde” had fallen into disrepute all along the spectrum from left to right, and was widely eschewed as an appropriate label to attach to any contemporary art unless as a pejorative.⁷⁵ Critics and historians vied to situate contemporary art production as either regressive or progressive according to the direction in which they themselves were ideologically oriented. The eschewal of the term “avant-garde” is considered in the context of the solidification of

⁷⁵ For earlier, opposing views of the relevance of the term “avant-garde,” see: Harold Rosenberg, “Collective, Ideological, Combative,” in Thomas B. Hess and John Ashbery, eds. *The Avant Garde. Art News Annual XXXIV* (New York: Macmillan, 1968; and Hilton Kramer, *The Age of the Avant-Garde*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973. Cited also in Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994. Altshuler notes in his book’s afterword that: “. . .as the seventies moved into the eighties, this oppositional impulse with all its historical resonance was diluted. Eventually it would come to seem outmoded, as the social forms that had encouraged resistance were integrated into a cultural system that embraced all novelty. Vanguardism ultimately became little more than a stylistic matter, the development of a new look.” A recent dissertation that also seeks to relegate the term to history is: Stuart Dale Hobbs, “The End of the American Avant-Garde, 1930-1965.” PhD Diss. Ohio State University, 1993. Hobbs posits that the avant-garde ended in the US because of integration of their innovations into the culture at large and because those practicing an “avant-garde” production mode retreated into individual creativity as a rejection of metanarratives.

notions of postmodernism. Chapter 1 focuses particularly on the debates regarding what “postmodernism” has meant for the production of art; and indeed when, how and where art production had actively contributed to constructing the “postmodern,” the preferred term to refer to a cultural practice that resisted dominant societal structures.

Chapter 2 considers two arguments that entered the discourse as the eighties ended, and which sought to recuperate the designation “avant-garde.” The discussion assesses Henry Sayre’s 1989 proposal that performance art *was* the new avant-garde; and Susan Suleiman’s identification of feminist postmodernism, and its emphasis on irony, parody and the carnivalesque as the quintessential avant-garde.

Chapter 3 considers the appearance, as the new decade of the nineties began, of the key exhibition *The Decade Show*, and two texts, Lucy Lippard’s *Mixed Blessings*, and the anthology *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, as important efforts to raise the profile of the many artists (artists of color, women and queers) left out of eighties discourse on activism, postmodernism and the avant-garde. The relationship of these events is related to the aggressive emergence of the right wing’s “culture wars.”

Chapter 4 considers more closely the decisive turn in discourse toward art and criticism by people of color and other marginalized groups as the nineties moved along. The discussion considers this in particular conjunction with key Whitney Museum exhibitions, especially the 1989, 1991 and 1993 biennials.

Part 2 concludes with a discussion, in Chapter 5, of the relationship of a number of later nineties texts evaluating art and community in relation to postmodernism, the avant-garde and activism. Covered in this chapter are: Nina Felshin’s identification of her selections of the best of eighties-nineties art aimed at non-art related audiences;

especially those art projects and processes which utilized public, non-museum spaces, and appropriated mass media techniques. Also included are Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland's twenty years of documenting community art in their publication *High Performance*; several late-nineties exhibitions summarizing retrospectively the history of collective activist art practice; and Grant Kester's assertive challenge to certain community arts practices as regressive, and proposal of new models that directly address what Kester sees as the practice's weaknesses.

Chapter 1: Where Have All The “Avant-Gardes” Gone? The Early Eighties

In Chapter 1, the discussion will consider a number of key texts of the early 1980s that were strong ripostes to negative neo-conservative perspectives on art which deployed “postmodernist” media, and content inspired by popular culture and left-oriented politics. This chapter will explore the strong discursive distinctions that emerged in the early eighties between “progressive” and “regressive” forms of postmodernism; the rejection, across the political spectrum, of “avant-gardism” as negative, but for dichotomous reasons; and the relationship of these discursive elements to definitions of activism in art.

“Progressive” vs. “Reactionary” Avant-Gardes

As the 1980s began, commentary in art-oriented publications as far apart ideologically as *Seven Days*, *Artforum* and *New Criterion* were either dismissing the term avant-garde as outmoded or irrelevant, or not mentioning it at all, while pointing to a more broadly-held concern with *whom* art was *for*. For example, an early 1980 preface to an *Artforum* feature--a series of statements by artists⁷⁶ who became prominent in the seventies—identified characteristics shared by them in their current work. These included an aesthetic of impermanence, and a “new” concern with debunking the “modernist

⁷⁶Nancy Foote, “Situation Esthetics: Impermanent Art and the Seventies Audience,” *Artforum* 18:5 (January 1980). Artists providing their perspectives for this early 1980 *Artforum* article on the viability of the term “avant-garde” and the relationship of their work to a new concern for audience included: Laurie Anderson, Scott Burton, Cecile Abish, Peter Campus, Richard Fleischner, Dan Graham, Nancy Holt, Peter Hutchinson, Patrick Ireland, Mary Miss, Max Newhaus, Lucio Pozzi, Charles Simonds, Alan Sonfist and Eve Sonneman.

avant-garde,” especially by focusing on whom they hoped would see and be affected by their work:

At the end of the 1970s, many artists are dissatisfied with the exclusive posture of the *traditional avant-garde* [my emphasis] and seem to be seeking ways to extend the art audience without compromising their work...seventies art is characterized more by this change in attitude toward the *audience* [my emphasis] than by a change in actual forms, or even content.⁷⁷

A few months later in 1980, veteran activist art critic Lucy Lippard was waxing enthusiastic, in *Seven Days*, about the funky art emerging from Lower East Side- and South Bronx-located ABC No Rio, Colab and Fashion Moda. There was no use at all of the terms “avant-garde,” or “postmodernism” in Lippard’s essay, which congratulated Colab and Fashion Moda for promoting art that was a “genuine mesh of its own interests and those of its *audience* [my emphasis]” in an aesthetic melange of “free-wheeling energy, curiosity and class mix.”⁷⁸

In 1982, former *New York Times* art critic Hilton Kramer inaugurated his art and culture journal *New Criterion* with a fervent defense of Modernism and encouragement of an audience for art dedicated to his particular definition of taste and quality. The essay, “Postmodern: art and culture in the 1980s,” invested the term “avant-garde” with distinctly negative valences. In it, Kramer argued that the avant-garde had moved rapidly from a *positive* “spirit of criticism and revolt” (e.g., “Modernism”) against a bourgeois 19th-century official culture “unenlightened in its intellectual outlook and philistine in its taste,” to a stage (e.g. late 1970s-early 1980s “postmodernism”) in which an increasingly corrupt “avant-garde” had become more and more engaged in a mutually reinforcing

⁷⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁷⁸ Lucy Lippard, “Real Estate and Real Art a la Fashion Moda,” *Seven Days* (April, 1980). *Seven Days* was a left cultural publication that appeared irregularly from 1977-1980. Lippard’s article appeared in the last issue of the magazine.

dependence on the bourgeoisie: the bourgeois dependent on the innovations of the avant-garde, and the avant-garde dependent on the bourgeois for its designation of the avant-garde as its “licensed opposition.” But, for Kramer, the final degradation was a severely compromised avant-garde’s cynical domination of cultural life through a pollution of high art with kitsch. According to Kramer, by the 1980s, a corrupt and regressive avant-garde ruled, in cynicism, to “excavate the ruins of the very [bourgeois] civilization it had buried”⁷⁹ and had triumphantly ensconced as the new rule, “the attitude of irony we call Camp” which, through its “strategy of the facetious” was actively engaged in obliterating “the serious.”⁸⁰

Kramer indicted Susan Sontag as the “cynical” 1980s avant-garde’s chief spokesperson and theorist, and Andy Warhol (in visual art), John Cage (in music), John Ashbery (in poetry), Richard Barthelme (in fiction) and Philip Johnson (in architecture) as its founding practitioners, following, of course, on the heels of that master of the facetious, Marcel Duchamp. According to Kramer, this ascendant avant-garde spoke only to an audience obsessed with the trivialities of fashion.

The Anti-Aesthetic

One of the eighties’ first compilations of critical texts to assert a position oppositional to the one represented by Kramer, in the “high art/high theory” arena, on these issues was Hal Foster’s influential 1983 anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*.⁸¹ For Foster and his essayists, it had become imperative to create a “progressive

⁷⁹ Hilton Kramer, “Postmodern: Art and Culture in the 1980s,” *New Criterion*, vol 1/1, 1982, 36-42. See Introduction to Part 1 notes 5 and 8 for background on this journal and its founders.

⁸⁰Kramer, *ibid.*

⁸¹ Hal Foster, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1983. Highly influential in the art world of the 1980s and 1990s, *The Anti-Aesthetic* gained its left credentials almost

deconstruction” of Modernism because, they argued, what had once, early in the century, seemed positively “avant-garde,” had degenerated into “avant-gardism.” They saw the creation of a “progressive deconstruction” as urgent because theoretical ground that questioned Modernism had, by the late 1970s, been invaded by neo-conservatives. Foster took pains to note that two forms of postmodernism had emerged; forms that seemed to share a common goal, to debunk Modernism. Nevertheless, Foster argued, they were not interchangeable because

...in cultural politics today, a basic opposition exists between a postmodernism which seeks to deconstruct Modernism and resist the status quo [a postmodernism of resistance] and a postmodernism which repudiates [Modernism] to celebrate [the status quo] [a postmodernism of reaction].⁸²

A key purpose of *The Anti-Aesthetic* was to identify an audience for a “progressive postmodernism” in contradistinction to a “reactionary postmodernism.” Foster and company in *The Anti-Aesthetic* accused neo-conservatives (like Hilton Kramer) of

immediately on publication by being identified by the *Village Voice* as book of the year. The anthology was reviewed widely at the time, and almost immediately attached to university syllabi in critical theory, postmodernism and contemporary art practice, where it has become a fixture up to the present. Most of the book’s essays were either written specifically for the volume, or appeared in other venues from a few months to a few years prior to its publication; and several have been repeatedly anthologized since. This anthology was the book that put Bay Press on the map. For a take on what happened to Bay Press, see: Charles Mudede, “The Mysterious Disappearance of Bay Press,” *The Stranger.Com* (<http://www.thestranger.com/2002-01-04/feature.html>). While not exactly “dead,” Bay Press has not published anything since 1997. The Mudede article traces the relationship of Hal Foster to its founding (he went to prep school with Charles Wright, who later ran the DIA Foundation, and Thatcher Bailey, scion of a Seattle business empire. Bailey ran Bay Press while his friends Wright and Foster sent provocative manuscripts his way).

⁸² Foster, *ibid.*, xi-xii. Prominent neo-conservatives active in the late seventies-early eighties cited in the anthology by several of the contributors include: Daniel Bell (by Jürgen Habermas who characterizes him as “the most brilliant of the American neo-conservatives”); Melvin Webber and Robert Venturi in architecture (by Kenneth Frampton). Habermas in *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity—an Incomplete Project,” 7) provides this summary interpretation of the neo-conservative program which seeks to counteract the predominance of the “libertinism” of Modernism: “For the neo-conservative the question then arises: how can norms arise in society which will limit libertinism, reestablish the ethic of discipline and work? What new norms will put a brake on the levelling caused by the social welfare state so that the virtues of individual competition for achievement can again dominate? Bell sees a religious revival to be the only solution. Religious faith tied to a faith in tradition will provide individuals with clearly defined identities and existential security.”

championing a postmodernism consisting of a regressive “resurrection of lost traditions.” For Foster and his essayists, neo-conservative positions constituted “avant-gardism” which signaled the last gasps of Modernism, characterized by rarified and reified forms of culture. Examples of these rarified and reified forms of culture identified in the book included especially: a persistently homogeneous view of Western representation as the only way; frozen and strongly dichotomized autonomous cultural spheres and separated fields of expertise (especially in academia); an insistence that “legitimate” art was identifiable by formal “purity” alone; and a clear separation between culture and politics.⁸³

While Foster, editor of *The Anti-Aesthetic*, hailed his chosen essayists as “diverse,”⁸⁴ he sought, in the anthology’s introduction, to craft a kind of manifesto from what he termed their “shared concerns,” which he grouped under the rubric of the “anti-aesthetic.” Foster’s purpose for the book was to “question the very notion of the aesthetic” which, he

⁸³ A useful discussion of the 1970s prelude to this defense of an attack on stultified Modernism is Henry Sayre’s proposal that the “hostility” that greeted the introduction of postmodernist thought in the academy (especially in the Modern Language Association) “was absolutely central to the formation and diffusion of poststructuralist thought in the United States in the seventies...helped to define an academic avant-garde...” which coalesced around the so-called “Yale mafia...(J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Harman, Paul de Man and Harold Bloom)” a rapidly well-defined “poststructuralist elite...responding to a recognizably postmodern, avant-garde art...and...aligned against ...[both] formalist criticism...and... high modernist art—the avant-garde of Poggioli and Greenberg...” See Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 246-247.

⁸⁴ The cast of characters is significant. By the time of publication of *The Anti-Aesthetic*, of the essayists, Jürgen Habermas, Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson and Edward Said were influential and internationally-known theorists of contemporary culture. Also, Foster himself, and three other essayists were by this time fixtures of the publication *October* that had started publication in 1979 as a result of dissatisfaction with the direction of *Artforum*. See Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974*, (New York: Soho Press, 2000) for valuable background on and insight into the internecine quarrels within *Artforum* that led to the founding of the journal *October*.

proposed, had become severely compromised by neo-conservative appropriation and consolidation into notions of “taste” and “quality.”⁸⁵

Foster’s aim was to affirm in its place a “cross-disciplinary” practice of art criticism “sensitive to cultural forms engaged in a politic (such as feminist art) or rooted in...vernacular...forms that deny...a privileged aesthetic realm.”⁸⁶ The essays in the anthology take a decidedly prescriptive tone, and seem clearly aimed at an audience comprised of all those “producing culture,” that is, critics and artists of various stripes. Invocations of the political, and the repudiation of “a privileged aesthetic realm,” do indicate, however that there might be a general public beyond the intelligentsia to whom the essays in the book were also directed.

For Foster and his essayists, the appropriate response to what they saw as stultified Modernism was not to reject Modernism whole cloth in order to champion a “return to the verities of [pre-modernist] tradition” (the neo-conservatives’ approach). Rather, it was suggested, an “oppositional postmodernism” could emerge through deconstruction of the rigidified aspects of Modernism. To summarize, the remedy for the stultification of Modernism proposed in *The Anti-Aesthetic* was

...interference, crossing of borders and obstacles...breaking out of the disciplinary ghettos ... reopen[ing] the blocked social processes ...and...consider[ing] that the audience for literacy is not a closed circle of professional critics, but the community of human beings living in society.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Foster proposes rejecting the reigning notion of “aesthetic” because it had become seen as existing “apart...beyond history...a symbolic totality,” Foster, *ibid.*, xv.

⁸⁶ Foster, *ibid.*, xv.

⁸⁷ Edward Said, “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community,” in Foster, *ibid.*, 157-158. Said’s evocation of Gramsci is to Antonio Gramsci, “The Modern Prince,” in *The Prison Notebooks*, (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 171. What Said calls Gramsci’s “combative” notion is that [Said paraphrasing Gramsci] “in the realm of culture...each production exists not only to earn a place for itself but to displace, win out over, others. All ideas [and] philosophies aspire to the consent of their consumers.”

For the book's essayists, it was imperative for this interfering "anti-aesthetic" to be applied to all in culture that is frozen, rigidified and which claims "purity."

Applying The Anti-Aesthetic

Three areas of visual art production are underscored in the book as examples of locations where anti-aesthetic *interference* approaches were already being productively employed in art. These were architecture, (non)sculpture and *ex*-propriation of predominating (masculinist) cultural discourses against themselves.

In **architecture**, "critical regionalism," was recommended, a design approach which rejected over-emphasis on the technical in favor of clearly defined place-forms such as the perimeter block (e.g., the galleria, atrium or labyrinth); "in-laying" a building into a site, geologically, geographically, agriculturally and archeologically; "responsive" fenestration controlling the needs of a building related to the particular light and climate characteristic of the site; and a "tactile sensitivity" which enhances the senses of the labile body beyond the sense of sight.⁸⁸

Exemplary of a progressive postmodernism in (anti)**sculpture** were the *complex* or *site construction* because of the conflation of forms that confounded categorization.

Artists addressed were those who produced works that were simultaneously architecture and not architecture, landscape and not landscape, sculpture and not sculpture.⁸⁹

and "acquire power through diffusion, dissemination into and hegemony over the world of common sense." It is this reference that constitutes the notion of "interference" that Said suggests and Foster endorses.

⁸⁸ Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in Foster, *ibid.*, 20.

⁸⁹ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in Foster, *ibid.*, 31-43. Artists Krauss cites as already expanding the field at the time she wrote this essay, were Mary Miss, Alice Aycock, Joel Shapiro,

Progressive postmodernist approaches to undermining the reification-effect of **masculinist Modernism**, and the oversimplifications of an emergent (also masculinist) **postmodernism orthodoxy**, were proposed as most clearly deployed in the work of a particular group of feminist artists.⁹⁰ These women artists were proposed as exemplary postmodernists because their “insistence on difference” not only resisted “stultified Modernism,” but also forced a reconsideration of an emergent orthodoxy of postmodernism in the visual arts. This postmodernist orthodoxy was described as the generalized and oversimplified belief in “...the gradual dissolution of once fundamental [binary] distinctions—original/copy, authentic/inauthentic, function/ornament.”⁹¹ The work of the identified women artists was seen as both undermining the reification-effect of masculinist Modernism, and the oversimplifications of an emergent (also masculinist) postmodernism orthodoxy by:

- alliance of their art with French feminist theory influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis;
- simultaneous activity on many fronts (e.g. art production wedded to theory which both challenged Modernism’s opposition of artistic practice and theory, *and* raised awareness of how theory can itself erase sexual difference);

Charles Simonds, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Richard Serra, John Mason, Walter de Maria, Robert Irwin, Sol Le Witt, Bruce Nauman and Ann and Patrick Poirier.

⁹⁰ Laurie Anderson, Laura Mulvey, Martha Rosler, Mary Kelly, Dara Birnbaum, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger in Craig Owens, “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” in Foster, *ibid.*, 57-83. Owens’ essay has been widely viewed both at the time, and subsequently, as one of the first (and key) pieces of art criticism to place contemporary feminist art production squarely in the middle of the debates over postmodernism.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

- utilization of multiple representational modes in one work (literary, scientific, psychoanalytic, linguistic, archeological—in the combined form of archive, exhibition, case history);
- a deliberate refusal of mastery;
- deployment of the existing repertory of cultural imagery to “investigate what representation *does* to women” rather than what representations *say about* women;
- *ex*-appropriation of male artists’ images in a gesture of repudiation of the (male) prerogative of authorship; and
- deployment of self in photographic images in ways that deny or “trouble” identity.

In summary, what emerges in *The Anti-Aesthetic*’s late seventies-early eighties perspectives on postmodernism is a kind of negative definition of the avant-garde. The book’s essayists *affirm* a particular kind of postmodernism, eschewing the term “avant-garde” as an identifier, while simultaneously *rejecting* another kind of postmodernism, and attaching the by now pejorative “avant-garde” to it; and, by implication, thrusting it unceremoniously into the garbage pail with neo-conservatism.

More Ripostes to Neo-Conservatism: *Art After Modernism*

In the mid-eighties, the first two (of five) volumes of the series *Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art*, published by New York’s New Museum of Contemporary Art, carried forward the arguments of *The Anti-Aesthetic* with more direct reference to art and artists of the eighties, and their relationship both to notions of “avant-garde” and postmodernism. These anthologies were both edited by Brian Wallis, the first—*Art After*

Modernism: Rethinking Representation—appearing in 1984 will be addressed in the next few sections.⁹²

As was the case for *The Anti-Aesthetic*, the decision to publish this series was in direct reaction to the increasing commodification of contemporary art in the inflated art market of the 1980s; and to the neo-conservative attacks on contemporary art, as lacking in “quality,” and on an art criticism the neo-conservatives accused of being pompously jargonistic, logically flaccid, and too “political.”

Also, not unrelatedly, *Art After Modernism* specifically responded to the canceling of National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding for art criticism by Reagan appointees.⁹³ In her foreword to *Art After Modernism*, editor Marcia Tucker stated the purpose for publishing these books:

⁹² Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art Boston: David R. Godine, Inc., 1984). Its companion was Brian Wallis, ed., *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987). These were two of the five volumes in the New Museum’s Series: *Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art*. The other three were published in the 1990s and will be cited later in this chapter in relation to the further shifts in relationship in the 1990s between definitions of avant-garde, postmodernism and activist art practice. These anthologies have gone through multiple printings since first publication, were very influential, and three of the five, including the two published in the eighties, were still in print and available at the New Museum of Contemporary Art as well as elsewhere, at this writing. Nearly half of the contributors to *Blasted Allegories* were women. Of the 46 artists writing for the volume, 22 were women, and of these 4 were African-American, 2 Asian American and 1 Latina. Nothing like that kind of diversity of authors is evident in *Art After Modernism* in which, of 26 contributors, only 9 were women, and none were people of color (of either sex).

⁹³ Brian Wallis, “What’s Wrong with this Picture? An Introduction,” *ibid.*, xi. Wallis points out, however, that self-described “neo-cons” were not the only ones questioning the value of art criticism: “Many traditional critic-writers [who for the most part self-identified as at least “liberal” if not totally “left”] for *The New York Times*, *Newsweek* and *New York Magazine*, publicly confessed to doubts about the intellectual worth of criticism, owing to its supplemental position, subservient to the primary creative activity of the artist.” In 1983, Joseph Epstein, Jacob Neusner, Samuel Lipman (publisher of the *New Criterion*) and Helen Frankenthaler persuaded the National Arts Council to cancel the NEA art critic fellowships because recipients are “left-leaning.” See Steven C. Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 245. Dubin offers a useful description of the neo-conservative impulse and project in chapter 9 of this book (“Puritans and Connoisseurs”): “...like the religious traditionalists, neo-conservatives... react negatively to the politics and permissiveness of the sixties.” For a comprehensive view of the basic views of neo-conservatives on art of the 1980s, Dubin recommends the Heritage Foundation’s 1981 *Mandates for Leadership’s* chapter on the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities written by the executive director of arms manufacturer James M.

...at this moment of contemporary art's greatest popularity, its criticism has become the subject of considerable abuse...we hear that...'pluralism' indicates not only a lack of artistic quality, but also a lack of critical leadership...This anthology attempts...to provide a serious critical reference for the art of our time.⁹⁴

As in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, theory is ascendant in *Art After Modernism*, and, there is emphasis on how and where contemporary art *and* criticism worthy of the designation "progressive," should focus in order to "trouble" the notion and reality of representation.

As editor **Brian Wallis** avers in his introduction to *Art After Modernism*:

...in much recent writing, the political and social function of all kinds of criticism is acknowledged, and critics have actively explored the use of criticism as a positive means for social critique and change. It is this avowed social responsibility for art and criticism that lies at the heart of the essays in this volume.⁹⁵

So *Art After Modernism's* essays were gathered together with an overt social change agenda, especially, it seems, in response to the increasing volume and vituperativeness of the neo-conservative attack on "permissiveness" and "mediocrity" in art, as well as the overt repression of criticism (e.g., the 1983 cancellation of grants to critics by the National Endowment for the Arts) that did not toe the neo-conservative line. As Wallis points out in his introduction to *Art After Modernism*, all the essays revolve around the theme of a critique of representation. Wallis argues that such a critique is necessary because representation (in general, not art specifically, though art, of course, is a kind of

Olin's right-wing foundation, which has been a major source of underwriting for neo-conservative scholars, including Lipman and Kramer's *New Criterion*. (Charles A. Heatherley, ed., *Mandates for Leadership: Policy Management in a Conservative Administration* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 1981), 1039-1056. As cited in Dubin, *ibid.*, n 85, p. 358). The New Museum's series *Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art* was supported financially by the Henry Luce Fund for Scholarship in American Art, an event well worth tracing down and documenting, especially because this funding occurred in an environment in which the very kind of writing included in these volumes was being suppressed by a denial of grants to art critics by the NEA. See Marcia Tucker's "Foreword" in *Art After Modernism*, *ibid.*, ix.

⁹⁴ Marcia Tucker, "Foreword," in Wallis, *Art After Modernism*, *ibid.*, vii.

⁹⁵ Brian Wallis, "What's Wrong with this Picture?..." in Wallis, *ibid.*, xi-xii..

representation) is central to the establishment and maintenance of cultural myths; and it is through these myths that social systems function and are perpetuated.

The key target Wallis and his essayists recommended for attack was “the authority of dominant representations (especially as they emanated from the media through photography).”⁹⁶ The rationale for the need for such an attack was the manipulative, regressive ideological uses to which representations as cultural constructions could be (and were being) put.

Wallis and his essayists proposed that there was a concomitant need to find a way to assess these constructions (representations), by subjecting the particular kinds of representations that are art and artmaking to close scrutiny. They reasoned that, especially since art and artmaking utilize densely “loaded” forms of representation such as images and symbols, close critical attention to this practice could help to reveal the politics of representation, and thereby “place in broader circulation an important body of issues and ideas”⁹⁷ not possible to apprehend in an environment of acceptance of these forms of representation at face value.

Avant Garde in *Art After Modernism*: Activist or Regressive? Dead or Alive?

So, in *Art After Modernism*, whose primary aim was to provide a critical mass of arguments that could reveal the politics of representation, how was the term “avant-garde” reacted to, and how did these attitudes toward the term “avant-garde” (whether positive or negative) interact with the avowed purpose of the book to foster “social change” by deconstructing representation? Further, could this identified purpose of “social change” be considered “activist?”

⁹⁶ Ibid. xiv.

⁹⁷ Ibid., xvii

Following is a selection of perspectives on the term “avant-garde” from several of the essayists in *Art After Modernism*.

Rosalind Krauss asserts that the notion of “avant-garde” had definitively been superseded. She argues that, over time, in the discourse on “avant-garde,” only one thing has held “constant...and that is the theme of originality.”⁹⁸ In a polemical argument, Krauss contends that, far from “original,” all art identified as “avant-garde” can be characterized as decidedly *not* original, since it always relies upon the copy. For Krauss, modernist discourse simultaneously repressed the presence of “copy” in “avant-garde” work while privileging “originality.” Bringing her argument down to the 1980s, Krauss’ prime example of a postmodernist art practice that refuses and critiques the notion of “originality,” by recuperating the repressed copy, is Sherrie Levine’s “pirating” of well-known photographic images⁹⁹ (Figure 6).

For Krauss, Levine’s practice demonstrates what can be done in art in order *not* to repress the concept of the copy. Krauss contends that, while this strategy of Levine’s seems to be merely another “avant-gardist” critical attack on tradition, it is decidedly *not* “avant-garde,” but “*postmodernist*.” According to Krauss, Levine accomplishes her postmodern move (Krauss uses two examples: Edward Weston’s portrait of his son Neil, and Eliot Porter’s colored landscapes) through an “act of theft [which] opens the print from behind to the series of models from which it, in turn, has stolen, of which it is itself

⁹⁸ Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition,” in *Art After Modernism*... *ibid.*, 18. Reprinted from *October* 18 (Fall 1981): 47-66.. This influential article has been referenced innumerable times since it first appeared. The significance it holds for its author is indicated by her choice to use the title “The Originality of the Avant-Garde” for the collection of a decade of her writings, published initially in 1986: Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

⁹⁹ Levine also did painted appropriations as well, such as her well-known “Levine-Malevich.”



Figure 6. Sherrie Levine. *After Eliot Porter*. Color photograph. 1981. In Brian Wallis, ed. *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, 28.

the reproduction.”¹⁰⁰ This kind of artistic practice, Krauss avers, is what has established a “schism... a historical divide,” accomplished through a “demythologizing criticism” that exposes Modernism’s “fictitious condition,” providing a “strange new perspective” from which Modernism and the notion of “pure origin” can be seen “splintering into endless replication.”¹⁰¹

Mary Kelly implies that the avant-garde had shifted but not died. She argues that one could observe avant-garde practice contemporaneously in the fact that “advanced art” had diverged from its initial Greenbergian adherence to the materiality of the artistic medium in three areas: a shift from concern with medium to concern for meaning; greater consciousness of context and commodification; and concern for audience or “production of readers as well as authors for artistic texts” which she saw as imbued with sexual overdetermination of meaning since, in contemporary art production, gender had inescapably nuanced both the reception and creation of art.¹⁰²

Benjamin Buchloh proposes that an ongoing, not moribund, avant-garde tradition has been bifurcated into a progressive avant-garde “...of negation, a radical denial of [the bourgeois] model of extreme division of labor and specialization of sexual role behavior;” and a bourgeois version of the avant-garde which is, among other things, “the domain of heroic male sublimation.” Buchloh vigorously rejects what he sees as the resuscitation of the bourgeois form of the “avant-garde” in neo-expressionist painting. He

¹⁰⁰Krauss includes as an illustration, Sherrie Levine, *After Eliot Porter*, 1981 (Figure 6). Color photograph, 10” x 8” and comments on this image: “In another series by Levine...we move through the original print, back to the origin in nature, through another trap door at the back wall of ‘nature’ into the purely textual construction of the sublime and its history of degeneration into ever more lurid copies.” Ibid., 28-29. (See Figure 6.)

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 28-29.

¹⁰² Mary Kelly, “Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism,” in Wallis, *ibid.*, 99. Reprinted from *Screen* 22:3 (Autumn 1981): 41-62.

sees the recurrence of painting as signaling “resignation” and cynicism, in its implicit acceptance, rather than critique, of its “historical limitations and its materially, perceptually and cognitively primitivist forms of signification,”¹⁰³ which he accuses of infantilism, and a melancholy attachment to the past.

Hal Foster asserts that “one aim of postmodernism” was to retain the radicality of the avant-garde, “but be rid of its historicism,” since “historicism (the New as its own Tradition) is both an origin and an end for the avant-garde.”¹⁰⁴ In the postscript (probably written in 1983) to the article, Foster expresses less confidence in these assertions of three years earlier, reflecting that while “postmodernism was and still is a conflicted concept...its rupture with Modernism is dubious” and the term “postmodern” seemed to him at that point “anachronistically avant-gardist.” He points to this essay, and the rethinking required of his assertions in it, to have been the impetus for the assembling of the writings in his 1983 anthology, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, as both a “new project—to see in (post)modernism not the rule of one major mode but the conflict of many ‘minor’ forms—and a new imperative—to think beyond the limits of *critique*.”¹⁰⁵

Despite the avowed intent of editors Tucker and Wallis to put these anthologies in the service of social change, attention to “activist art” practice *per se* was not addressed in most of the essays. At least the analysis, which focused on what kind of “opposition” artists of the 1980s could and should undertake, did not use this term. In fact, the

¹⁰³ Benjamin Buchloh, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,” in Wallis, *ibid.*, 121. Reprinted from *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 39-68.. Buchloh makes the pointed observation (121) “it is not accidental ...that not *one* of the German neo-expressionists or the Italian Art Cifra painters is female.”

¹⁰⁴ Hal Foster, “Re: Post.” Reprinted from *Parachute* 26 (Spring 1982): 11-15, with slight changes, and a postscript by the author. *Art After Modernism*, *ibid.* 190.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 201. Foster elaborates on this disenchantment with wholesale rejection of Modernism in his *Return of the Real*, which is addressed in Part 3 of this dissertation.

anthology includes only two essays from contemporary commentators, which specifically addressed activist art. These two were Martha Rosler and Lucy Lippard.

Rosler and Lippard

The contributions of **Martha Rosler** and **Lucy Lippard** to *Art After Modernism* are set apart conspicuously in a section of the book entitled “Cultural Politics,”¹⁰⁶ as if the rest of the anthology had nothing to do with that topic. Their perspectives on art production are almost jarringly different in both tone and content from the “high theory” approaches of the other contributions in both *The Anti-Aesthetic* and in *Art After Modernism*. Likewise, they are markedly different in both tone and content from what editor Wallis calls the “performative writing” related to storytelling and “...meant to engage the full participation of the receiver (hearer, viewer, respondent)...” contained in *Blasted Allegories*.¹⁰⁷

In the first part of **Rosler’s** two-part essay, the focus is sociological, foregrounding statistical charts and diagrams along with an analytical text that traces a scientific portrait of the segmented 1980s market for art (primarily photography, as the article

¹⁰⁶ Lucy Lippard, “Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power,” in Wallis, *ibid.*, 341-358; and Martha Rosler, “Lookers, Buyers, Dealers and Makers: Thoughts on Audience,” in Wallis, *ibid.*, 311-339. Lippard’s piece was a compilation of aspects of several of her columns in *The Village Voice* for which she was a regular writer from 1979 to 1985, and appears to have been put together specifically for the *Art After Modernism* anthology. It does not appear in her collection of essays on activist art: *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change*, like *Art After Modernism* also published in 1984 (*Ibid.*). The “Trojan Horses” essay was published subsequently in Sally Everett, ed., *Art Theory and Criticism: An Anthology of Formalist, Avant-garde, Contextualist, and Post-modernist Thought* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991). Rosler’s essay was published in an earlier form, commissioned by *Exposure* magazine 17: 1 (Spring 1979): 10-25). The version in *Art After Modernism* has been revised by Rosler and includes a postscript. The section of *Art After Modernism* in which these two essays appear also includes a third essay, Walter Benjamin’s “The Author as Producer,” originally delivered as an address to the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris, April 27, 1934. The reprint is from Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Peter Demetz, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 220-238. It was, perhaps, included because Rosler includes a long quote from it in her essay.

¹⁰⁷ Brian Wallis, “Telling Stories: A Fictional Approach to Artists’ Writings,” in *Blasted Allegories*, *ibid.*, xvi.

included in *Art After Modernism* was originally commissioned to be an assessment of the “new” audience for photography); and, beyond, of the class-based constitution of the audience for art.¹⁰⁸ In the Postscript, written 5 years after the essay, and specifically for *Art After Modernism*, the tone is more urgent and polemical, and does not exude a “scientific” valence.

Rosler only mentions the term “avant-garde” once (and this, in the Postscript), the point at which she comments that the “petty-bourgeois entrepreneurialism” of the 1980s East Village galleries and artists¹⁰⁹ distinguishes them from the “bohemianism of the (former) avant-garde.”¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, the entire piece, including the part done in 1979 and the postscript done in 1983-84, does seek—along with sketching out the class characteristics of a segmented audience for art in the eighties—to identify tactics and strategies that artists could use to countervail tendencies of U.S. society’s 1980s move to the right, which had made, according to Rosler, “...the Right’s positions the touchstone of debate and common sense...”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Rosler, *ibid.* 312, n. 1. In this section of her contribution to *Art After Modernism*, Rosler compares straight sociological analyses of art audiences conducted in the sixties in Europe with “informal” cataloguing of the characteristics of people attending Hans Haacke’s exhibitions. Rosler notes: “Hans Haacke’s surveys at various locations indicated that the audience for contemporary work seems to be made up of a very high percentage of people who are occupationally involved in art-museum and gallery professionals, artists, art teachers, art students, critics and art historians.” See Haacke, *Framing and Being Framed* (Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975). So, technically speaking, her approach is not “scientific” because it utilizes information collected in a population remote in time and characteristics (sixties in Europe, mid seventies, attendees at one artist’s shows) from the situation she is analyzing (eighties in the US), and compares it with what is essentially anecdotal data that was not collected in any acceptable sociological framework (Haacke’s exhibition attendance book). Thus it can be deemed “scientific,” or seeking to appear scientific.

¹⁰⁹ As discussed at length in Liza Kirwin’s dissertation, and in my discussion of her thesis in Part 1, chapter 1 above.

¹¹⁰ Rosler, *ibid.*, 337.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 336.

Like most of the other writers in the anthology (and in *The Anti-Aesthetic* as well), however, Rosler does not employ the term “avant-garde” (nor the term “activist”) to label those she sees as (successfully) deploying such tactics and strategies. And, while demonstrating some optimism regarding the tactics and strategies she sees as promising, Rosler also provides warnings about the downsides of such “progressive” moves. For example:

- In photography, Rosler selects “appropriation,” as a successful tactic because it “links representation and power...uses media images directly, draws on media theory and semiotics and ...feminism as well” and, despite shortcomings, has a strong “ability to engage with social and political issues.” Downside of this? Photography’s “potential for criticism” is blunted because it “suffers from Pop Art’s deceptive transparency” resulting from its use of mass audience-friendly immediacy which, in its “apparent readability...almost ensures misunderstanding.”¹¹²
- In video, Rosler selects the documentary format, innovative in its contemporaneous use when it investigates representation and power, because the documentary form for expressing this kind of content has helped “to find audiences both in and outside the art world.” Downside on this? “The biggest successes...stick close to the broadcast image...editing...and production values ...[common to] network [usage], commercials or music television.”¹¹³
- In particular performance work, that which “has left its marginal status as quirky ephemera, non capital-generating, artist-oriented art,” Rosler sees the potential to

¹¹² Ibid. 338.

¹¹³ Ibid.

create new audiences for “progressive” work. Downside on this? Performance may be degenerating into just another “type of theatrical extravaganza with guaranteed upscale entertainment appeal...a kind of late-twentieth-century avant-garde opera or virtuoso vehicle.”¹¹⁴

Lucy Lippard’s “Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power” is the only essay in *Art After Modernism* that specifically considers “activism” in art. In “Trojan Horses” Lippard provides a cogent summary description and assessment of activist art practice, in several dimensions, as she puts it: “an argument for activist art; thoughts on the power of art; some of the sources of recent activist art; and some examples of various art strategies.”¹¹⁵

The issue of the relevance of “avant-garde” as it might relate to activist art seems to be of slight interest to Lippard. She only mentions the word four times in her essay, and never with elucidation. The first occurs when praising some of her selections of the “best” among activist art practices as providing “new images and new forms of communication (in the *avant-garde* [my emphasis] tradition).”¹¹⁶

The second occurs when Lippard is separating out elements of artistic practice that she sees as comprising the “activist art movement” which, Lippard argues, “came together around 1980 at a time of increasing conservatism, economic crisis and growing

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Lippard, “Trojan Horse,” in Wallis, *ibid.*, 341. Her list of preferred artists includes: Tim Rollins + KOS; Mierle Laderman Ukeles; Carnival Knowledge; Judy Baca; Lorraine Leeson and Peter Dunn (in the UK); the Waitresses; Mother Art; Sisters of Survival (SOS); Vivienne Binns and Annie Newmarch (in Australia); Peter Kennedy (in Australia). About them she says: “Subjects and mediums are varied... what these diverse works do share is the style and aesthetics are deeply entwined in the social structures in which they operate. These artists often work in series—not autonomous series for exhibition, but ongoing sequences of learning, communication, integration and then relearning from the responses of the chosen audience...” *ibid.*, 343-344. Nary a mention of Kruger, Levine or Sherman...

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 343.

fear of World War III.”¹¹⁷ One of the three primary elements she cites as coming together to form “activist art” was “experimental or *avant-garde* [my emphasis] artists working in the mainstream or ‘high art’ community.”¹¹⁸ Lippard’s parallel here between “experimental” and “avant-garde” implies these are synonymous terms, and can be differentiated from the other elements¹¹⁹ of artistic practice which “came together” to form the uncomfortable hybrid of art activism. Lippard describes the “experimental” (e.g. “avant-garde”) artists as tending to “identify directly with oppressed and rebellious people... but not in their artwork” and as “wary of group activity...as weakening individual expression and damaging careers.”¹²⁰

The third time the term “avant-garde” appears is when Lippard characterizes the South Bronx-based Fashion Moda as “not a community art center or an *avant-garde* [my emphasis] alternate space (both of which it resembled), but as a ‘cultural concept’ of exchange...”¹²¹ Note here, again, the couching of “avant-garde” as something to be measured *against*: one is encouraged to see Fashion Moda (Figure 7) as *not* avant-garde. The fourth appearance of “avant-garde” in Lippard’s essay occurs at the point when she argues that, by the early eighties, there was “a renewed openness in the left to popular

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 348.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. The other two elements she describes as: “...progressive or ...political artists’ working together or within political organizations, often simultaneously in and out of the mainstream art world; and ... community artists working primarily outside the art world with grassroots groups...”

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 354. Lippard does not comment further on this reference to “alternate spaces” as “avant-garde.” As Martha Rosler points out in her essay for *Art After Modernism* (Rosler, *ibid.*, 327-328), however, promotion of the “avant-garde” may have been only one of the rationales for forming these exhibition entities.

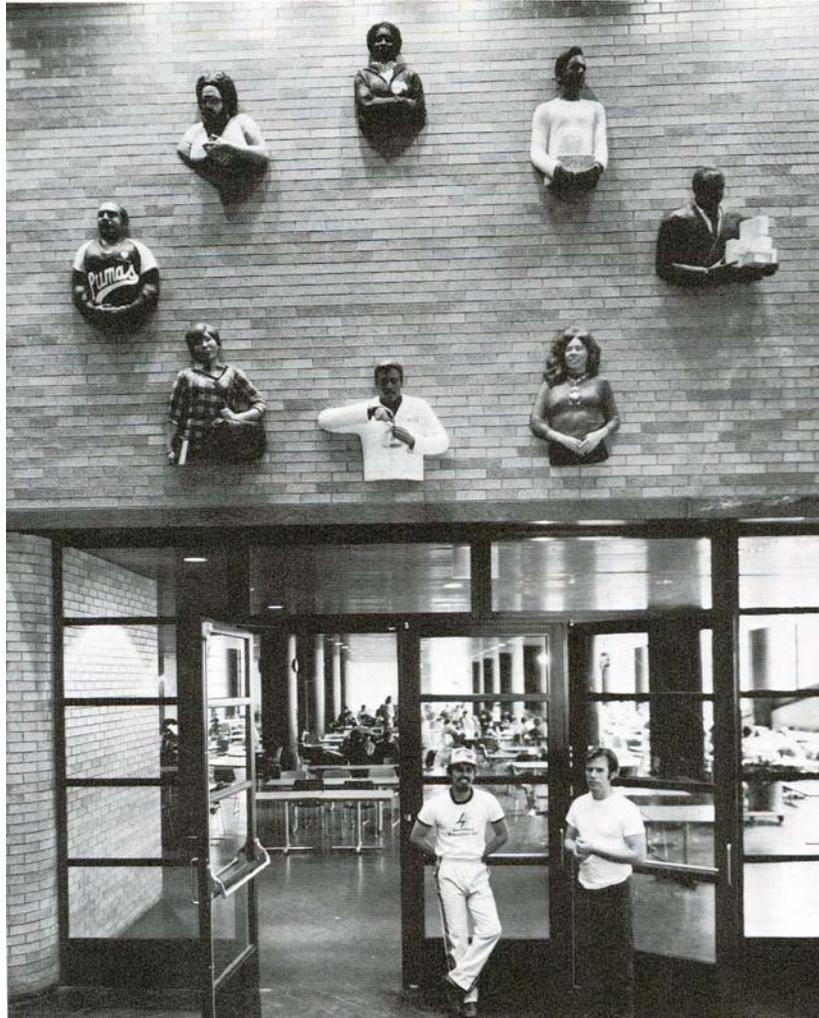


Figure 7. *CCNY Series*. Façade of Fashion Moda. Sculpture portraits by Rigoberto Torres. Painted plaster, life size. 1985. In Lucy Lippard. *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990, 167.

culture and elements of the *avant-garde*....” According to Lippard, this “new” tolerance on the part of the art left, evolved out of a series of experiences in which leftist artists had periodically coalesced (briefly each time) for specific activist purposes since the late sixties.¹²² Each time this happened, an infusion of new artists brought with them to the political causes being addressed, their own differently evolved artistic methods and subject matter. By evoking the term “avant-garde” to describe what the art left was tolerant of in the early eighties, Lippard is making the case that activist art (in the 1980s) was an uneasy amalgam of (old) left cultural (historically suspicious of “avant-gardism”) tendencies and “New Wave” tendencies¹²³ (which saw “avant-garde” as synonymous with cooptation) that became ascendant with the rise of the East Village and South Bronx art scenes.

* * * * *

In summary, Chapter 1’s assessment of *The Anti-Aesthetic* and *Art After Modernism* as exemplary of discourse connecting notions of activism, postmodernism and avant-garde, concludes that the relationship of these anthologies’ contributors to the term

¹²² Lippard (ibid., 352-353) traces the timeline as follows: late sixties: Artists’ and Writers’ Protest. The Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC), the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG); early seventies: little organized activism—emphasis on starting and running coop galleries, small presses, artist-curated shows, artist-run publications, street theater, mail art, small video companies, independent filmmaking; Women Artists in Revolution (WAR)—to protest the Vietnam War and racism and sexism in the art world; mid to late seventies: heyday of feminist art activism (adding personal autobiography, consciousness-raising and social transformation to “political art.”); 1975-1977 Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (AMCC) theory- and media-analysis-based with heavy involvement from conceptual artists (published Marxist art journals *The Fox* and *Red Herring* and some members joined together to produce the feminist political art journal *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*). By 1980, Lippard says, several veterans of all these groups and movements came together once more in the aftermath of the election of Ronald Reagan to form Political Art Documentation/Demonstration (PAD/D). The end of PAD/D coincided with the donation of its archives to the Museum of Modern Art in 1987.

¹²³ “New Wave” refers to the naming, via a show (*New York/New Wave* curated in 1981 by Diego Cortez at PS 1) of art done by a generation of young artists who were raised on rock music, pop fashion and low culture, and characterized by appropriation, graffiti and kitsch-punk aesthetics. Perhaps the most famous to emerge as an “art star” at this show was Jean-Michel Basquiat. See *New York/New Wave at PS 1*, 35 min., New York: Inner Tube Video, 1981, videocassette.

“avant-garde” was tangential. The arguments put forward by contributors to these two key exemplars of discourse frequently refuse to employ the term; and when it is used, it is often set up as a shibboleth in need of a “postmodern” deconstruction and demythologizing.

At the same time, the notion of “activist” art is also not directly addressed in the anthology, except in Lucy Lippard’s “Trojan Horses” essay in *Art After Modernism*. Even in this essay, however, though the term “avant-garde” can be found sporadically, Lippard makes no effort comprehensively to assess the term in relation to the contemporaneous practice of 1980s activist art she summarizes. Significantly, other contributors to *Art After Modernism* do not reproduce Lippard’s list of “activist” 1980s artists and artist-collectives. It seems significant as well that the artists held out by other contributors to *Art After Modernism* as emblematic of a “progressive” postmodern oppositionality do not appear in Martha Rosler’s or in Lucy Lippard’s contributions. The overall sense, then, is that for the discourse of the early eighties, the term “avant-garde” had receded into history and thus could not be considered in relation to contemporary art production that was oppositional of dominant cultural forms and perspectives.

Chapter 2: Recuperating The Term—Henry Sayre and Susan Suleiman

In Chapter 2, a strain of discourse will be considered which suggests that an emblematic turn—or, perhaps, a *symptom* of change—had taken place by the end of the 1980s in the status of the term “avant-garde.”¹²⁴ Henry Sayre’s *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970* (1989) and Susan Rubin Suleiman’s *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (1990) insisted that the term had not receded completely into history,¹²⁵ and *could* be used to describe a certain kind of progressive contemporary art production. The two books were, ironically, probably made possible by the salutary effect on the reception of postmodernist art production (however labeled) by the kind of critical reception both summarized and recommended in *The Anti-Aesthetic* and *Art After Modernism*. Further, though the argument could be made that these particular commentators’ thoughts on recuperation of the avant-garde by contemporary artists of the eighties and earlier might be downplayed

¹²⁴ The end of the eighties was marked also, in 1989, by the 50th anniversary of the publication of Clement Greenberg’s classic (and highly influential) essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” *Arts Magazine* published a tribute to Greenberg consisting of an interview with him by Saul Ostrow: Saul Ostrow, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch, Fifty Years Later: A Conversation with Clement Greenberg, in *ibid.*, 56-57; and a series of commentaries on how Greenberg had influenced them by several artists and curators: Joshua Decter, et al., “The Greenberg Effect: Comments by Younger Artists, Critics and Curators,” *Arts Magazine* (December 1989): 58-64. Included, in addition to Joshua Decter were: Peter Halley, Pat McCoy, John Miller, Lisa Phillips, David Reed, Florence Rubinfeld, Meyer Raphael Rubenstein, Kenneth Wahl, Stephen Westfall, and

¹²⁵ Neither Sayre nor Suleiman started out their academic careers as art historians. Both did their PhD dissertations in literature: Henry M. Sayre, “A World Unsuspected: Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams and the Rise of American Modernism.” (PhD diss. University of Washington, 1976); Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Nizan and the Novelist’s Problem of Commitment.” (PhD diss. Harvard University, 1969). Sayre has made his reputation in art education and criticism with widely used textbooks and teaching videos to his credit. He is Professor of Art History at Oregon State University. Suleiman is a professor of comparative literature at Harvard and Chair of the Romance Languages and Literatures Department. Most of her publications address literature, and French literature in particular.

because they are not officially credentialed as art historians (see note 125), they are proposed as discursive exemplars here not only for the books discussed, but also because the books appeared at a time when avant-garde as a term was being reconsidered elsewhere (see note 124).

Henry Sayre

Henry Sayre enthusiastically utilizes the term “avant-garde” in relation to the “postmodernist” performance artists of the 1970s and eighties:

This book is about the emergence...of a *distinct and definable avant-garde* [my emphasis] in American art and literature, one which might be characterized or labeled postmodern...[which] has asserted its opposition to the dominant brand of Modernism ... defined and developed by Clement Greenberg...[and subsequently modified by] ... Michael Fried and Barbara Rose, and that held sway, especially in academic art historical circles, well into the era examined in these pages.¹²⁶

Sayre identified this “distinct and definable avant-garde” as chiefly visible in 1970s and eighties performance art (and its roots in Dada and Surrealism) because it “reinvents... a neglected modernist heritage” that denies “consistency, univocality, and autonomy” in favor of “contingency, multiplicity and polyvocality.” Sayre asserts that performance is eminently oppositional—and effectively so—because it has maintained a stance that has been “styleless, diverse and conspicuously unprogrammatic,” and has managed to resist attempts on the part of formalist criticism of the period to pigeonhole and collapse the practice into a category labeled as a “pluralist style.”¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: the American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), xi.

Sayre's book is an extended argument in favor of the continued relevance of the term "avant-garde"—and, in particular, its appropriateness as a label not only for art, but also for criticism.¹²⁸ He seeks to prove his thesis by cutting a broad swath through the cultural production modes of the decade of the eighties, claiming "performativity"¹²⁹ even for works that on their face seem static. In the process, he takes on particular aspects of Renato Poggioli's and Peter Bürger's key texts on the historical avant-garde. Sayre sets up Bürger and Poggioli as foils for his argument that the fraught term "avant-garde" was

¹²⁷ Ibid., xii. For a thoroughgoing critique of Sayre, see Kristine Stiles, "Performance and its Objects," *Arts Magazine* 65:3 (November 1990). In this review of Sayre's book, Stiles particularly takes issue with what she sees as Sayre's uncritical acceptance of photo-documentation of performance as transparently "true." This flaw in Sayre is also addressed by Amelia Jones. See her discussion in Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 36.

¹²⁸ Sayre's meditation in Chapter 7 (ibid., 246-264) on Roland Barthes' evolution from a formalist writer to a "performative" postmodern critic will not be addressed here. It seems important, however to note briefly, that Sayre believed postmodern criticism and postmodern art were all of one fabric, and that Barthes constituted a key exemplar of a postmodern "performative" critic who moved, over the course of his life and critical career from an initial primary concern to categorize, and arrive at a conclusion about *meaning* of whatever object (especially photography) he placed under scrutiny, to (at the end of his life and career) a true "performative" critic who, for Sayre becomes an "ideal figure for postmodern art," a critic who deploys his writing as "vernacular, open-ended, undecidable." (264). See my discussion below of how Lucy Lippard fits the Sayre description of a "performative" critic.

¹²⁹ Judith Butler, whose book *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1990) appeared a year after Sayre's, is generally credited as introducing the notion of "performativity" in "high theory" circles. Sayre utilizes the term "performativity" explicitly in several places in his book, though not in a gender-oriented argument as does Butler. Sayre's account of the "performativity" of even static works of art is somewhat, but not completely, analogous to the way Butler uses the term. Roughly, for Butler, in defining performativity, it is most important to distinguish it from expressivity. Expressivity implies that the features of the body, or the things that the body does, are expressions of something *within* that body: an identity that exists prior to its expressions. Performativity, on the other hand, implies that only after a body repeatedly appears certain ways or does certain things, in a mode consistent with, say, one or the other gender in a binary gender system, can that body be given a gender. In Sayre's account of performativity, as in, for example, his treatment of photographic portraiture as "performative," as "pose," Sayre argues that photographic portraits are "impostures," even a kind of "primitive theater." This is a kind of "falsity" because it is produced *to make a picture* and can never be the transparent reflection of a "true self," but a construction. The "performativity" of the image, then, results from the dynamic interaction or "performance" of many affecting elements. First of all, the "pose" seen in the photographic portrait is never under the subject's complete control, but is a contingency that includes subjective intention to appear a certain way on the part of the person being photographed, the intention of the photographer to make the subject appear a certain way (and not necessarily the same way the subject herself intends), choices made by the photographer including the position of the camera, choices made when cropping and printing, the impact of the kind of private or public venue in which it is seen, and, finally, the inflection brought by the viewer(s) in exhibition settings. See Sayre's discussion in the chapter entitled "The Rhetoric of the Pose," *ibid.*, 35-65.

still flexible enough to be useable (at the end of the eighties) as a name for progressive tendencies in particular aspects of U.S. art from 1970 to about 1986-'87 (just before Sayre's *The Object of Performance* was published).

Sayre starts with Bürger.¹³⁰ Pointing specifically to Bürger's contention that no avant-garde has been able to sustain an oppositional project since Dada, largely because the power of the market and the bourgeois taste expressed in mass culture quickly convert any avant-garde gesture into commodity,¹³¹ Sayre counters by proposing "a large body of work ...produced in the last two decades which has not lost its avant-garde status..."¹³² nor been absorbed into the market. These, Sayre argues are the "not painting" genres developed in the sixties and seventies, and reaching critical mass in the eighties: "use of the remote landscape as a site for sculpture, language and performance as working modalities in visual art, [and] videotape (and broadcasting) as private (not public) tools."¹³³

¹³⁰ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Michael Shaw, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). The translation was based on the second edition of Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 1980. Note that Bürger's text appeared in English the same year as *Art After Modernism*. The Bürger book does appear in *Art After Modernism*'s bibliography, but not in the index, and none of the contributors addresses his themes. This may be explained by the probability that the essayists in *Art After Modernism*, unless they were fluent in academic German, would not yet have had Bürger's perspective in their intellectual repertoires. Bürger's book was written as a direct response to what he saw as Poggioli's excessively optimistic account of the conjunctions between political and aesthetic avant-garde movements. Note that Poggioli's book appeared in English in 1968: Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Gerald FitzGerald, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968). The contributors to both *The Anti-Aesthetic* and *Art After Modernism* would undoubtedly have been familiar with Poggioli's arguments.

¹³¹ Bürger, *ibid.*, 57. As quoted in Sayre, *ibid.*, 12.

¹³² Sayre, *ibid.* 12.

¹³³ Sayre's quote here is to Douglas Davis, "The Avant-garde is Dead! Long Live the Avant-garde!" *Art in America*, 70 (April 1982): 17. Sayre could, of course, as easily have quoted several of the contributors to either/both *The Anti-Aesthetic* and/or *Art After Modernism* as having identified these genres as "of the moment" though, as discussed earlier, the term "avant-garde" was generally not used by these commentators.

Sayre also rejects the definitions of avant-garde proffered by Bürger's predecessor Renato Poggioli,¹³⁴ suggesting that Poggioli's identification of the avant-garde as an "intellectual elite¹³⁵ ...cut off from any organic relation with society as a whole"¹³⁶ creates an inappropriate (and inaccurate) "dead end" for the avant-garde. Sayre especially denies Poggioli's assertion that, at some point, any avant-garde begins to "find joy...in the act of beating down barriers, razing obstacles, destroying whatever stands in its way....,"¹³⁷ ending finally with an "agonistic" moment when it "no longer heeds the ruins and losses of others and ignores even its own catastrophe and perdition" and "welcomes and accepts this self-ruin..."¹³⁸

Sayre argues that the performance (and performative) art of the two decades of the seventies and eighties disproves Poggioli's contentions. Sayre proposes that his examples demonstrate the liveliness of "his" avant-garde because of its aggressive mobilization of the vernacular, and its conscious orientation "toward reintegration into the community at large"¹³⁹ thereby avoiding the inevitability of the "closure" of nihilism predicted by Poggioli.

Similarly, Sayre suggests that his examples of performance and performative art dismiss the relevance of Bürger's contention that the flattening power of bourgeois taste and the voraciousness of the art market always destroy the avant-garde's oppositional

¹³⁴ Poggioli, *ibid.* Poggioli's perspective in this context seems uncomfortably romantic and dated, but it seems Sayre felt the need to cite it nonetheless.

¹³⁵ Poggioli, *ibid.*, 90. As quoted in Sayre, *ibid.*, 186.

¹³⁶ Poggioli, *ibid.*, 93. Sayre, *ibid.* 186.

¹³⁷ Poggioli, *ibid.*, 27. Sayre, *ibid.* 187.

¹³⁸ Poggioli, *ibid.* Sayre, *ibid.*

¹³⁹ Sayre, *ibid.*, 187. Here, Sayre refers to the ideas of Victor Turner related to a theory of social drama; and of Richard Schechner.

force. Sayre provides the following examples of the mechanisms deployed by the art producers he sees as “avant-garde,” and which he believes have resisted the dire predictions of both Bürger and Poggioli:

- The mobilization of *theatricality* and its privileging of *audience*, what Michael Fried and other formalist critics abhorred as antithetical to or degenerate of “true” art. A key example Sayre cites is Andy Warhol’s “performative portraits” of the seventies and eighties in which, Sayre proposes, Warhol “turned the tables on the rich,” with images of them that are at once “icons and exposés.”¹⁴⁰ Other examples he proffers include Barbara Kruger’s photographic montage-texts (Figure 8) that “intrude upon the system of signification which constitutes the image and offer a competing system of signification, an ‘other’ discourse...;”¹⁴¹ and David Antin’s 1987 *Sky Poem*, in which the text of one of Antin’s poems—“If we Get it Together... Can they Take it Apart... Or Only If We Let Them”—was skywritten off the Pacific Coast at Santa Monica on Memorial Day weekend, assuring a massive audience for an ephemeral work of visual poetry.
- The “rhetoric of the *pose*,” especially Cindy Sherman’s, in which she converts photographic images of her “self” into a “compendium of poses, derived from film, fashion, and advertising and constructed out of a repertoire of makeup tricks and the

¹⁴⁰Sayre provides a particularly revealing quote from Warhol *ibid.*, 32-33. The quote is from Andy Warhol, with Bob Colacello, *Andy Warhol’s Exposures*, (New York: Andy Warhol Books, 1979), 19: “This book is about the people at the top, or around the top. But the top’s the bottom. Everyone up there has Social Disease [the symptoms of which Warhol describes as: “out every night...because...if you stay home you might miss something...in the morning, the first thing you do is read the society columns...” etc.] It’s the bubonic plague of our time, the Black White life and death.”

¹⁴¹ Sayre, *ibid.*, 195.

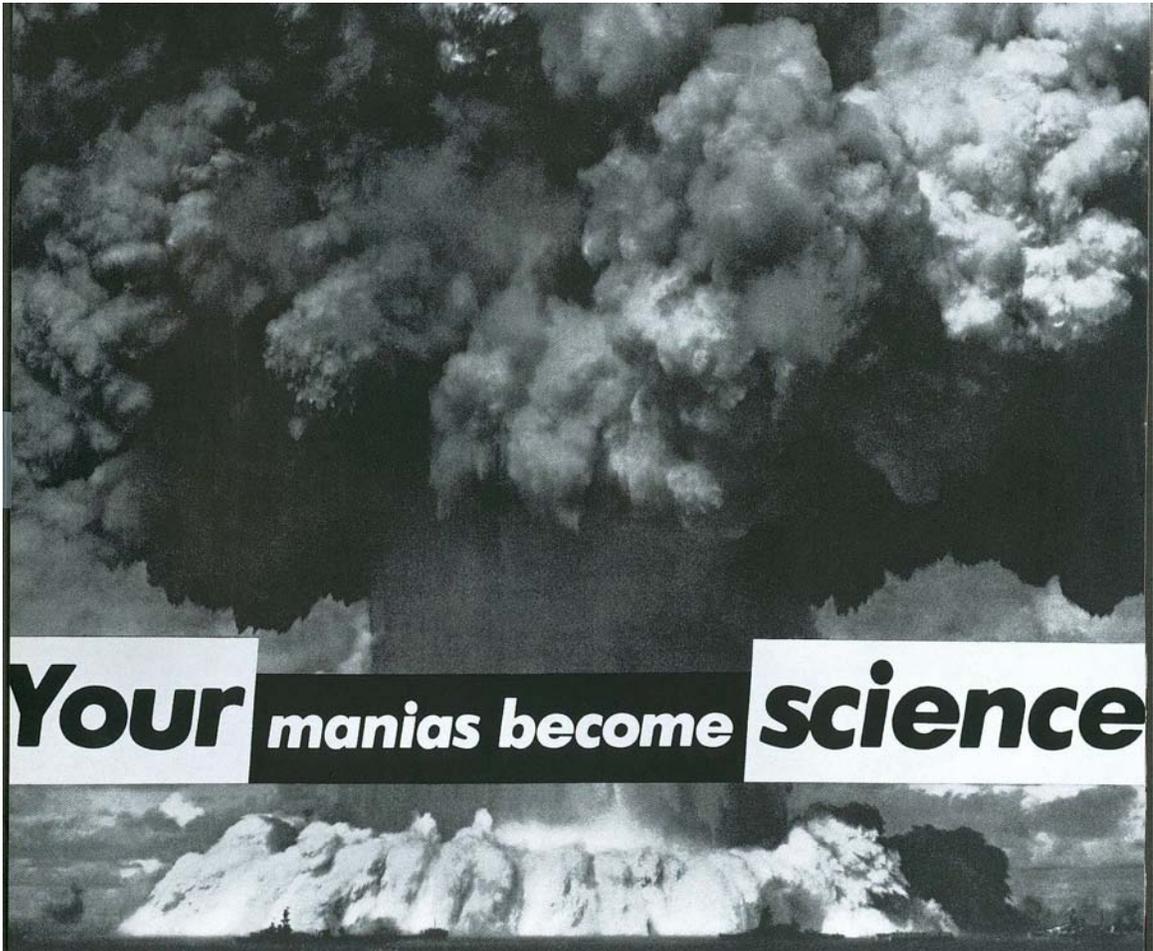


Figure 8. Barbara Kruger. *Untitled (Your Manias Become Science)*. 1981. In *Barbara Kruger*. Exh. Cat. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000, 100.

- wardrobe of a practiced, secondhand store clothes horse who has never given anything away...”¹⁴²
- An array of *feminist* artists including Carolee Schneeman, (whom Sayre dubs “perhaps the premier postmodern feminist artist”) Judy Chicago, Martha Rosler, Faith Wilding, Eleanor Antin and Dara Birnbaum who engage the *vernacular* and, performance (or, performativity)—and the byproducts of that activity (photo- and video-documentation, and performance props that persevere as discrete art objects after the performance). He offers these examples because their works “bear the *mark of the verb* within them,” effectively transgressing the “blocks” or refusals (by formalism/Modernism, e.g., traditional painting and sculpture) of certain “possibilities and potentialities” of women as artists, including “anger, femaleness, and activity [or activism].”¹⁴³
- Artists who privilege *collaboration* rather than individual activity, including, once again, prominently in Sayre’s lexicon: feminist artists such as Judy Chicago and Suzanne Lacy, but also such heirs of Rauschenberg, Cage and Cunningham as: in music, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Brian Eno and David Byrne; and, in dance, Trisha Brown (also an heir of Yvonne Rainer’s 1960s dance oeuvre), who collaborated with Rauschenberg in the late seventies and eighties.

¹⁴² Ibid., 62-63.

¹⁴³ Sayre says the chapter on feminism and art evolved from his realization, when in the planning stages, that most of the artists he wanted to deal with were women.

Artists who experiment with “*open spaces*,” both literally and “in the open spaces of the imagination.”¹⁴⁴ While most of the “earth work” artists Sayre refers to at this point in his book initially practiced their work in the sixties and seventies, the traces of these ephemeral pieces—their documentation in video and still photography— bring them into his late 1980s present.

It is to this “dialectic of presence and absence”—the fact that, after the work has been made, the experience of it, for the majority of its audience, can only be at the remove of documentation—to this “remove,” and to the “centrality of *documentation* to postmodern [art] practice” in the work of Smithson, Heizer, De Maria , Oppenheimer and Christo (Figure 9), that Sayre looks for evidence of its “avant-garde” status.¹⁴⁵

Susan Suleiman

Susan Suleiman also does not shrink from using the term “avant-garde.” In her book, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, which ranges in consideration of particular aspects of literary and visual art production from late 1890s France through late 1980s U.S., she clearly proposes the term as relevant to practices distributed widely over time and geography.¹⁴⁶ Her book’s central concern is:

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 215. Sayre’s chapter deals primarily with “earth art” earlier than the 1980s, especially Robert Smithson’s of the 1960s. Several 1980s works of Michael Heizer’s and Christo’s are discussed at length.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 244. The illustration of Christo’s *Wrapped Reichstag* (Figure 9) is the example of documentation shown at this point in Sayre’s text. Christo’s model was never carried beyond that phase, so that the fact that Sayre includes this example, even emphasizes it by including a photograph of the model indicates the broadness of his definition of “documentation.”

¹⁴⁶ However, Suleiman’s book is so France-centered that its interest for this discussion is somewhat limited.

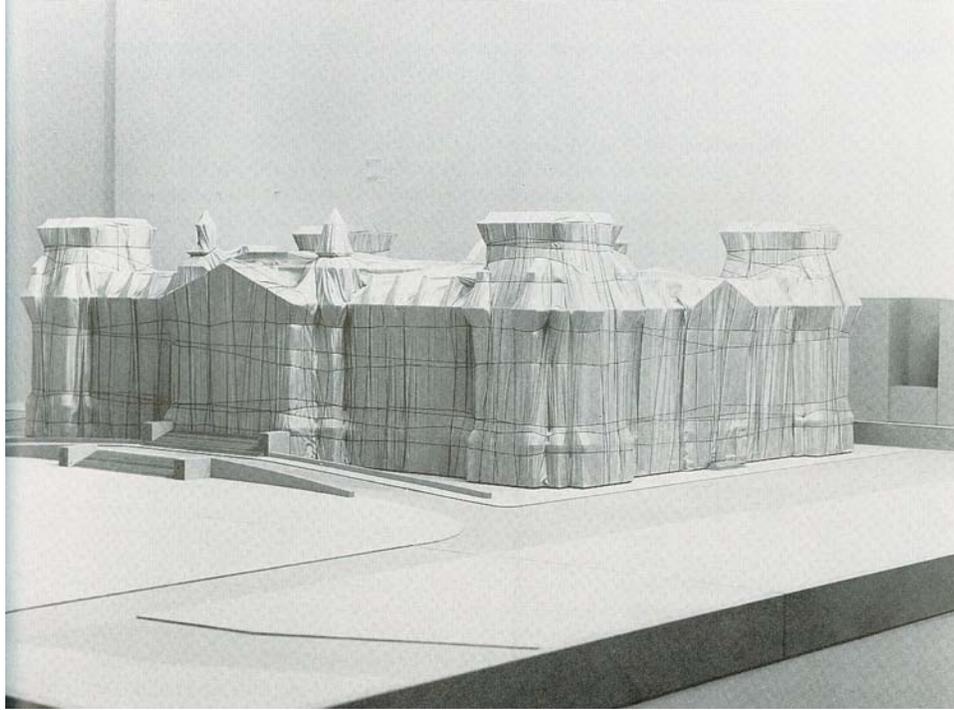


Figure 9. Christo. *Wrapped Reichstag, Project for Berlin*. Scale model, mixed media. 1981. In Henry M. Sayre. *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 231.

...with the *political potential and implications of avant-garde artistic practices* [my emphasis]. ...the hallmark of an avant-garde practice or project...is the attempt to effect radical change and innovation *both* in the symbolic field (including what has been called the aesthetic realm) *and* in the social and political field of everyday life.¹⁴⁷

The themes around which Suleiman considers the term “avant-garde” as useful to describe a practice aimed at change in both the symbolic/aesthetic and the social and political fields include: *oppositional politics* and *marginality*, as well as the term’s association with *aggressiveness*, *transgression* and *mass culture*. Her overarching concern within these thematic considerations is how gender and feminist perspectives nuance the term “avant-garde,” especially how feminist analyses problematize the theories and movements which have attached themselves to the term.

Suleiman addresses this in various thematic ways, focusing particularly on those feminist strategies in art production which might be considered “avant-garde,” for example, in the deployment, individually and in combinations, of: *intertextuality*, *humor*, *discontinuity*, and *rupture*. While much of Suleiman’s argument throughout the book is couched in feminist readings of literature rather than visual art—and of French avant-gardism rather than U.S. versions— in her last chapter Suleiman begins to join some of the key contemporary issues that had only just begun to emerge in discourse.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), xv. Suleiman does rehearse the various appearances of “avant-garde” over a century, but, she does not intend her book to be a complete “chronological account of twentieth century avant-garde movements...zigzagging ...between the historical marking posts of Surrealism and postmodernism...”

¹⁴⁸ Here I am referring to the explosion of activity in 1989-1990 related to artists of color, queer artists and feminist artists, exemplified in several key exhibitions including especially *The Decade Show*, the hoopla over the exhibitions of the images of Serrano, Wojnarovich, Mapplethorpe, uses of the US flag in protest art. Not to mention the white hot temperature the so-called “Culture Wars” reached during this period, and for several years thereafter. See *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (exh. cat.) (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990).

Suleiman cites many of the same examples of a postmodern feminist avant-garde visual art¹⁴⁹ included in the books discussed earlier in this chapter. She argues that critics' attention to women artists' involvement with avant-garde postmodernism, especially Craig Owens' influential and "path-breaking" situating of feminist art production at the very heart of postmodernism, (in his 1983 essay "The Discourse of Others..." for *The Anti-Aesthetic*)¹⁵⁰ had much wider effect than merely adding women to a postmodern "canon."

However, Suleiman takes Craig Owens to task for limiting his celebration of feminist avant-garde postmodernism to Mary Kelly, Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer. Meantime, this same limited list of 1980s artists are the *only* ones discussed in Suleiman's lengthy last chapter, and the only ones privileged in the book with reproductions of their work.¹⁵¹ This is especially odd since she criticizes, at some length in various places in this chapter, and throughout the book, the erasure of other feminist visual art production of the period, warning that "...it would be unwise to celebrate ...feminist postmodernism without keeping one's ears open to dissenting voices, or, without acknowledging things that don't "fit." ¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹Suleiman, *ibid.* 248, n. 23: "Here, for the doubtful is a partial list of outstanding English and American women artists working today, who can be (and, at some time or other, have been) called feminist postmodernists: In performance, Joanne Akalaitis, Laurie Anderson, Karen Finley, Suzanne Lacy, Meredith Monk, Carolee Schneeman; in film and video, Lizzie Borden, Cecilia Condit, Laura Mulvey, Sally Potter, Yvonne Rainer, Martha Rosler; in photography and visual arts, Jenny Holzer, Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, Nancy Spero..." Note that none of the "feminist postmodernist" artists listed here are women of color.

¹⁵⁰ Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others," *ibid.*,

¹⁵¹ In fact, the cover of the paperback version of Suleiman's book is an adaptation of Barbara Kruger's famous *Untitled* of 1989, popularly known as: *Your Body is a Battleground* since in the original, that text overlaid a black and white photograph of a woman's face, positive on the left, negative on the right. This particular work by Kruger is also privileged inside the book with three separate reproductions that show both the original work, a poster for a march for reproductive choice based on the image, and a photograph of a series of posters attached to a wall along a sidewalk.

Suleiman tells us repeatedly that her preferences are for feminists who deploy irony, parody and the carnivalesque. However, she does not consider specific works or *oeuvres*, in which these tactics have been deployed, apart from Kelly, Sherman, Kruger and Holzer. These artists, according to Suleiman were *the* exemplars of the successful deployment of irony, parody and the carnivalesque toward “radical change and innovation *both* in the symbolic field (including what has been called the aesthetic realm) *and* in the social and political field of everyday life...”¹⁵³

Suleiman argues that linking feminist politics with postmodernist artistic practice provided pro-postmodernists with important ammunition to counter the accusation of pessimism leveled at postmodernism by a number of influential theorists. For Suleiman, “respectability” for a new kind of “postmodernism of resistance” had formed not only around feminism but also around anti-imperialism, the ecology movement, the growing awareness of the need to see “other” cultures as profoundly affected by the privileging of Western perspectives, as well as the “overlapping agendas between postmodernism and ‘ex-centrics’: Blacks, women and other traditionally marginalized groups.”¹⁵⁴

Nevertheless, while Suleiman does mention that feminist postmodernism had joined the growing movement of a postmodernism of resistance, which included artists of color, she does not cite any feminist artists of color who might fit her rubric of the feminist postmodernist artist. Also, the fact that she explicitly ties the movements for liberation of women and people of color together makes the absence of artists of color—especially women artists of color—from her examples even more glaring.

¹⁵² Suleiman, *ibid.*, 190.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, xv.

¹⁵⁴ Suleiman, *ibid.* 188-189.

* * * * *

To summarize, in Chapter 2, Sayre and Suleiman are considered as key examples of a strain in early nineties discourse toward recuperation of the term “avant-garde.” Though both writers propose certain producers did deploy aesthetic strategies that countered dominant cultural forms and perspectives, and assert that this production was “avant-garde,” neither writer creates specific links in definition between the terms “avant-garde” and “activist.”

Suleiman’s assertion that a “true” avant-garde practice would seek to make “radical change” and “innovate” simultaneously in the “symbolic field/aesthetic realm” as well as in the “social and political field of everyday life” does imply activism and resonates with Lippard’s notion of “Trojan Horses,” unexpected subversive gifts to mainstream bourgeois culture.¹⁵⁵ So, like Lippard, but implicitly rather than overtly, Suleiman’s challenging description of her preferred model of “avant-garde” seems quite “activist,” since her version of radical change suggests both a dynamic process and a dynamic outcome that can have an effect beyond the boundaries of the art world.

In Sayre’s characterization, performance and performativity as the recommended delivery mechanisms for what he proposes as a true avant-garde practice also seem activist, though, again, he does not make an explicit connection between the two terms. Nevertheless, there are connections. As discussed for both Suleiman and Sayre, and for several of the other theorists addressed earlier in **Part 2**, “avant-garde” production and “activism” in art are widely characterized in discourse as simultaneously highly mobile and mobilizable; predominantly deployed outside the aestheticizing institution of the museum, and also outside the commodifying institution of the commercial gallery. Both

¹⁵⁵ Lippard, “Trojan Horses,” *ibid.*

art practices are also portrayed as amenable to multiple, and layered interpretations by a changing and potentially diverse corps of viewers.

Nevertheless, both Suleiman and Sayre provide rather short lists of artists who would fit their criteria. Also, the artists mentioned by Sayre and Suleiman infrequently overlap with examples given by other key commentators. This suggests a striking lack of consensus in the discourse regarding which artists producing what kind of art could be considered avant-garde in the late twentieth century U.S.. An important lacuna in both Suleiman and Sayre is the lack of examples of artists of color as exemplary “avant-garde” producers.¹⁵⁶ This striking absence is the subject of Chapter 3.

¹⁵⁶ That Sayre and Suleiman were not the only ones to “forget” artists of color is part of the point. Sayre and Suleiman are exemplars. What they exemplify is a trend greater than the two of them. For example, as New York Times critic Holland Cotter pointed out in his review of the 1989 Whitney Biennial (Holland Cotter, “Report from New York: A Bland Biennial.” *Art in America* (September 1989): 81-87), up at the same time as the publication of these books, and, of course, the *Decade Show* with its significant representation of artists of color: “The [1989 Biennial’s] overall tone of calculated whimsy and naughty academicism and its apparent disinterest in overt political content are features which even those who closed the Mapplethorpe show in DC last July would probably approve.” Further, Cotter points out, and is joined by John Yau’s commentary—John Yau, “Official Policy: Toward the 1990s with the Whitney Biennial.” *Arts Magazine* 64 (January 1989): 50-54—that the virtual absence of artists of color and feminist artists was glaring. Holland Cotter: “The ethnic exclusion...was made particularly apparent by the large group shows of black art which ran almost concurrently with the Biennial...a total of some three dozen artists...all of whom gave a vivid idea of the kind of vigorous and provocative work that the Whitney continues to overlook.”

Chapter 3: Redressing Lacunae—*Mixed Blessings, Out There and The Decade Show*

In Chapter 3, a shift in the discourse will be considered. Here activist art is seen as moving slightly away from a preoccupation with recovering “postmodernism” from the appropriationist moves of neo-conservatism; and toward the emergence of “multiculturalism,”¹⁵⁷ an even more conflicted and unstable paradigm in which to consider changing relationships between notions of activism in art and “avant-garde.” In particular, two publications, Lucy Lippard’s *Mixed Blessings: New Art in A Multicultural America* and the New Museum of Contemporary Art’s *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, and one exhibition *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* will be considered. All appeared in 1990 and on the heels of the Sayre and Suleiman books. Each responded directly to the striking absence of artists of color from the 1980s discourse on postmodernism, the avant-garde and activism.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ “Multiculturalism” was, at the time of the publication of Lippard’s book (and still is), a very conflicted term. Lippard recognizes this. She uses “multicultural” in her title, but points to the “flattening” of the reality of ethnic otherness that the term’s usage implies. In effect, the term is often used as synonymous with “cultural relativism,” a concept which, some commentators of the late eighties have argued, is just another form of ethnocentrism which subordinates “other” voices and refuses to allow them to challenge the dominant culture. See Lippard’s recommended texts on the ambivalence of the term “multiculturalism:” Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis, “Aboriginal Art: Symptom or Success,” *Art in America* [special issue on art of people of color], (July 1989): 114-115; and Caren Kaplan, “Deterritorializations: the Re-writing of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse,” *Cultural Critique* 6 (Spring 1987): 188-189,191, quoted in Lippard, *ibid.*, 9. See also: Guillermo Gómez Peña, “The Multiculturalist Paradigm,” *High Performance*, (Fall 1989). One of the key texts on multiculturalism appeared in 1992, and was expanded and released in a second edition in 1994. See: Charles Taylor and Amy Guttmann, eds., *Multiculturalism: The Politics of Recognition*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁵⁸ The only one of these three volumes still in print is: Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990, re-issued, New York: The New Press, 2000). The other two book citations are: Russell Ferguson, et al., eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); and *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*. (exh. cat.) (New York: The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art and the Studio Museum of Harlem, 1990). An example of an earlier exhibition/publication consciously set up to include artists of a wide variety of racial/ethnic backgrounds was *Committed to Print* (exh.cat.) New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), curated by Deborah Wye on the occasion of the donation to the museum of the archives of Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D), perhaps the preeminent activist art collective of the previous decade. Also, the California exhibition *Mistaken Identities* (exh. cat.) (Santa Barbara: University

As *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith noted in her review of *The Decade Show*, this mini-avalanche of perspectives on the many artists left out of eighties discourse on activism, postmodernism and the avant-garde was “important as an effort to democratize and widen post-modernist art theory, which has often argued that art should be critical of various forms of power and oppression while supporting a rather short list of White artists, most...men.”¹⁵⁹ In effect, artists of color in particular were as a kind of new avant-garde as the nineties began.

The Decade Show

The Decade Show included a stunning array of 256 works by 89 individual artists and collectives in three museums in New York; and where 24 performance artists and 22 video artists also presented their work. The exhibition was unprecedented.¹⁶⁰ Of the total 89 individual artists, only 17 were White males.¹⁶¹

Art Museum/University of California, Santa Barbara, 1992):79, lists 8 other exhibitions (6 in the US) on the subject of the “other” and identity politics prior to *The Decade Show*. These were: *Differences: On Representation and Sexuality* (exh. cat.) (New York: the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984); *Between Identity/Politics*. (exh. cat.) (London: Gimpel Fils, 1986); *Identity/Desire: Representing the Body*. (exh. cat.) (Glasgow: Collins Gallery, University of Strathclyde, 1986); *Race and Representation: Art Film/Video*. (exh. cat.) (New York: Hunter College Art Gallery, 1987); *The Other Body: Cultural Debate in Contemporary British Photography*. (exh. cat.) (Boston: Photographic Resource Center, Boston University, 1987); *Cut/Across* (exh. cat.) (Washington, DC: Washington Project for the Arts, 1988); *Autobiography: In Her Own Image*. (exh. cat.), (New York: INTAR Gallery, 1988); *Identity/Identities: An Exploration of the Concept of Female Identity in Contemporary Society*. (exh. cat.) (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1988); *Personal Document/Cultural Identity: Essays in Photography*. (exh. cat.) (Chico: University Art Gallery, California State University, 1989); *Prisoners of Image: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes*. (exh. cat.) (New York: The Alternative Museum, 1989).

¹⁵⁹ See Roberta Smith, “3 Museums Collaborate to Sum Up a Decade,” *New York Times*, Sec. C, p 22, Col. 5, (May 5, 1990).

¹⁶⁰ And received prompt and (generally) positive critical response. See Roberta Smith, *ibid*; Michael Kimmelman, “The Force of Conviction Stirred by the eighties,” *New York Times*, Sec 2, p 25, Col 1, (May 27, 1990); Giulio V. Blanc, “When You Think of Mexico: Latin American Women in the Decade Show,” *Arts Magazine*, 64:8 (April 1990): 17-18; Cassandra L. Langer, review of “*The Decade Show*,” *Women Artists News* 15:3 (Fall 1990): 8-9; Keith Morrison, “Questioning the Quality Canon: Three New York Museums Join Forces to Refigure the eighties,” *New Art Examiner*, 18:2 (October 1990): 24-27; Calvin Reid, “Inside, Outside,” *Art in America* 79:1 (January 1991): 56-63. The importance of this response is underscored by the understanding that each of the three museums was, at that point, a “hole in the wall.”

An important aspect of *The Decade Show* was its installation in three separate New York City museums, each of which had its own set of interests. The New Museum tended toward oppositional “postmodern” works, occasionally from artists of color, but more frequently from (White) gay male artists and feminists. MoCHA showcased Latino talent. The Studio Museum focused on African American art of different periods as well as African art of the diaspora. *The Decade Show* deliberately “mixed up” those foci, placing work by artists of different backgrounds in venues where it had previously not been exhibited.

Each “mini-show,” within each venue, also spotlighted issues with which the particular museums were not in the habit of working. For example, Marcia Tucker of the New Museum pointed out: “...The New Museum [is] taking on the Myth, Spirituality and Ritual section which is very far from our usual concerns...in fact the more fluid, in flux...the more contradictory and paradoxical...the better for us...sometimes I have a feeling that at the New Museum we are talking to ourselves...or speaking for others ...we want to examine our own practice critically ...”¹⁶² And, with audience in mind, catalog essayist Eunice Lipton wondered: “...what will it feel like to a middle-aged, middle-class African American couple to look at the White Englishwoman [sic] Mary Kelly’s work about aging? What will the young Japanese American boy from Hawaii, a first year art student in New York, make of Peter Jemison’s construction about the environment seen

Since this exhibition, MoCHA has closed. Both The New Museum and Studio Museum are still operating, as of this writing, and have transcended their earlier “hole in the wall” status.

¹⁶¹ To break this down further, the 132 individual artists in *The Decade Show* included 39 Latinos (25 men and 14 women); 28 African Americans (14 men and 14 women); 16 Asians (12 men and 4 women); 9 Native Americans (6 men and 3 women); and 38 Caucasians (17 men and 21 women).

¹⁶² *The Decade Show*, *ibid.*, 11 and 14.

from a specifically Native American point of view?”¹⁶³ And, regarding the wide variety of perspectives and media: “Who will decide...whether the sculpture and paintings of Mel Edwards and Luis Cruz Azaceta are more or less politically subversive than the photographs and videos of Sherrie Levine and Martha Rosler?”¹⁶⁴ The latter two, of course, appear as key examples of “postmodern feminism” in art, and were featured frequently in the four books addressed in detail earlier in Part 2.

The *Decade Show*'s catalog—unlike previous key texts (e.g. *The Anti-Aesthetic* and *Art After Modernism*) of 1980s postmodernist cultural theory and art criticism—provided a rich array of perspectives from writers of diverse racial, ethnic and national origin backgrounds,¹⁶⁵ starting with the directors (all women, one each Latina, White and Black) of the respective museums: Nilda Peraza of the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, Marcia Tucker of the New Museum of Contemporary Art and Kinshasha Holman Conwill of The Studio Museum in Harlem. Though there were very few references by *Decade Show* catalog writers to “avant-garde” in relation to artists of color, most of their essays did, to one degree or another, refer to, ruminate on and critique (directly as well as by inference) some of the predecessor theoretical texts for the absence of artists of color from examples they cited of oppositional, activist and avant-garde work.

¹⁶³ Eunice Lipton, “Here Today. Gone Tomorrow? Some Plots for a Dismantling” in *ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁶⁵The director and curators from the New Museum were all Caucasian (two women and one man); the director and curator from the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, both Latina (both women) and the director and curator from the Studio Museum of Harlem were African American (also both women). Of the catalog essayists, 6 were women (2 African American, 2 Caucasian, one Asian American and one Latina) and 3 were men (1 Latino, 1 Native American and 1 Caucasian).

In a sense, the convergence of the appearance of *The Decade Show* with the important texts *Mixed Blessings* and *Out There...* signaled, as *Decade Show* catalog essayist C. Carr noted, that “multiculturalism...[had become] the buzzword at the end of the decade, just as ‘postmodernism’ had been at the beginning...”¹⁶⁶ But the exhibition went beyond “buzzwords” and contributing to the establishment of “multiculturalism” as a new paradigm; it also joined discourse producers elsewhere in a renewed focus on activism.¹⁶⁷ But whether these trends indicated that artists of color were a “new avant-garde” was the question. Two catalog essays in particular shed light on this question.: Susana Torruella Leval’s “Identity and Freedom: A Challenge for the Nineties,” and David Deitcher’s “Taking Control: Art and Activism.

Susana Torruella Leval

Decade Show catalog essayist Susana Torruella Leval notes that U.S. Latino artists, during the 1980s, did not strike out in radically new directions as an “avant-garde” is supposed to do, but built on 1960s Chicano and Puerto Rican activism. During the 1960s, centers of activist Latino art had spawned an art of “intense self-

¹⁶⁶ C. Carr, “Rehearsals for Zero Hour: Performance in the Eighties,” in *ibid.*, 206.

¹⁶⁷ During the time *The Decade Show* and the other two texts selected here for special analysis, were in the process of being created, commentators continued to publish differing (often contentious) perspectives on activist art for various art-related publications. For example David Trend, “Cultural Struggle and Educational Activism,” *Afterimage* 17 (November 1989): 4-6; and Donald Kuspit “Current Socially Aware Art,” *Artscribe* 78:14-15 (November/December 1989) take opposing sides on the educational function of activist art. Trend defends a “pedagogy of political persuasion” to be deployed as a way to create broader acceptance of the need for social change, and at specific “sites of maximum tactical value” (such as conventional schools and community centers and even NEA-“defunded” alternative arts centers). Kuspit mocks attempts by artists to effect social change as “nostalgically identified” with an outdated avant-gardism that seeks alternately to “stun” by fielding spectacle to “overpower critical disbelief,” in the service of promotion of “correct thinking.”

definition...through complex, varied modes...reflecting an analysis of who they [were] to themselves.”¹⁶⁸

Postmodernism had its effect as well. Leval acknowledges the “heady postmodern disposition to question everything” including the traditional media (of painting and sculpture), and representation itself, as having been both embraced and critiqued in the art produced by Latinos in the eighties.

Leval cites as examples the appropriation of the historical past and specific traditions not broadly shared across the geography that constitutes Latin America (including the “Latin America” inside the US), and a wide use of self-imaging and portraiture. Artists cited by Leval who were involved in direct appropriation, and reference to histories and traditions, included Juan Sánchez, David Avalos, Yolanda López and especially Amalia Mesa-Bains, who perfected the shrine and altar installation format—“blends of pre-Hispanic, Yoruba and colonial religion and spirituality expressed in a popular arts tradition...”¹⁶⁹ For Leval, these appropriations of history and the folkloric were

¹⁶⁸ Susana Torruella Leval, “Identity and Freedom: A Challenge to the ‘90s.” In *ibid.*, 147. Leval was, at the time of *The Decade Show*, curator of the Museo del Barrio in New York. Leval notes the ambivalence with which Latino artists reacted to the spate of exhibitions of Latino art during the eighties, put together by anglo curators, who they felt over-emphasized the “primitive *joie de vivre* and color” of the work exhibited. Leval recommends Shifra Goldman, “Homogenizing Hispanic Art,” *New Art Examiner* (September 1987): 30-33 for a listing of some of these shows and an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. It is also important to note the appearance the same year as *The Decade Show* of *CARA: Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* (exh. cat.) (Los Angeles: Wight Gallery of Art, University of California, Los Angeles, 1990). CARA was the first comprehensive treatment of the Chicano art movement from 1965-1985, which demonstrated what Leval argues in her essay, namely that the artists of the 1980s followed closely in the footsteps of their predecessors of the 1960s, many of whom were still very actively producing in the eighties and through the nineties as well. The CARA exhibition traveled extensively from 1991-1993, largely as part of the observance of the Quincentenary of the European encounter with the Americas instigated by Cristoforo Colombo in 1492. In addition to its venue in the initiating city, Los Angeles, CARA traveled to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American Art and The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1992, to New York’s Bronx Museum of the Arts in 1993 and the Guadalupe Art Center in San Antonio also in 1993.

¹⁶⁹ As quoted in Leval, *ibid.*, 153. Her reference is to Amalia Mesa-Bains, “Curatorial Statement,” in *Ceremony of Memory: New Expression of Spirituality Among Contemporary Hispanic Artists* (exh. cat.) (New Mexico: Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe, 1988), 7.

accomplished with an irreverence and sly humor that prevented the work from becoming a one-dimensional valorization of any of the elements bricolaged together.

As the decade of the 1980s ended, Leval points out, activism among Latino artists came even more vigorously to the fore, along with the incorporation of more directly “postmodern” approaches and media. Leval cites specific examples, such as the mass-media-related work of David Avalos, the performances of Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Leval also cites the Border Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo’s bus signs and billboards that aggressively confronted U.S. immigration policy; and Gómez-Peña’s often ribald send-ups of stereotypes of Mexicans and Chicanos inhabiting the Anglo mind.¹⁷⁰ Leval notes that Latino artists gravitated to self-imaging and portraiture as a way to fight against the invisibilizing of the many forms of Latin culture. These approaches were not limited to Latino artists. Leval points out that they have also been employed by artists from other cultural heritages, like Margo Machida (Japanese-American) and Howardena Pindell (African-American), both also included in *The Decade Show*.

David Deitcher

David Deitcher was the one *Decade Show* writer whose essay specifically calls for definition of terms, and foregrounds activism in this connection. The title of Deitcher’s essay “Taking Control: Art and Activism” and his choice of a quote from John Frohnmeyer, the embattled and indecisive then-NEA chairperson/pawn of the conservative regime in Washington, as the epigraph¹⁷¹ signal Deitcher’s conviction that a

¹⁷⁰ It appears that, of these artists, David Avalos was the only one not represented by a work in the show. Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s biography is included, as an “artist,” but he was not represented by a work/performance. He was a catalog essayist.

¹⁷¹ Frohnmeyer, George H. W. Bush’s appointee (in July, 1989) to head the National Endowment for the Arts, by November of that same year had revoked a \$10,000 grant to Artists Space in New York for *Witnesses Against Our Vanishing* an exhibition about AIDS, whose tiny catalog contained an essay by

very forceful alarm was needed in response to the Culture Wars. Deitcher asks, rhetorically

In the art world we are still reeling from the ultraconservative and Christian right's assault on freedom of speech and the separation of church and state... In a decade like this, is it possible to discuss the issue of "cultural activism" without taking note of its manifestation on the right?¹⁷²

Identifying Bernard N. Nathanson's, *The Silent Scream*, a film/videotape produced by anti-abortion proponents, as his primary example of right-wing deployment of "cultural activism" as rhetorical gesture, Deitcher points to the film's use of "the latest" in activist media: film techniques (ultrasound film), "omniscient" narration (by a "pro-life" physician), and "a synthesized musical score worthy of a very low-budget sci-fi thriller."¹⁷³ The utilization of such mechanisms, Deitcher argues, are a "negative" form of "cultural activism" because they are "representational strategies that derive from institutional authority to further reinforce that same authority."¹⁷⁴ This kind of use of authority to reinforce authority, Deitcher emphasizes, is the opposite of left cultural

artist David Wojnarowicz, who had AIDS. Wojnarowicz's essay lambasted, as responsible for the lack of attention to the AIDS epidemic, the homophobia of, among others, New York Roman Catholic Bishop O'Connor, Republican Congressman William Dannemeyer and Republican Senator Jesse Helms, prompting Frohnmayer's statement, quoted as the epigraph of Deitcher's article ("I believe that political discourse ought to be in the political arena and not in a show sponsored by the endowment... a large portion of the content (of *Witnesses Against Our Vanishing*) is political rather than artistic in nature.") A few days after making this statement, Frohnmayer claimed his reason for withdrawing the funding from the show was "erosion of artistic focus," and not that the work's content was "political." After the show opened to large crowds and a huge outcry from the arts community, Frohnmayer restored the funds, but did not allow them to be used for the catalog. (See account in Richard Bolton, ed. *Culture Wars*, *ibid.*, 348). Throughout his tenure, Frohnmayer repeatedly denied funding to various artists based on "decency" and "obscenity" edicts, then reversed himself when the arts community fought back.

¹⁷²David Deitcher, "Taking Control: Art and Activism," *The Decade Show*, *ibid.*, 181. Looking back from this writing, that kind of assertive language (and there was a lot of it throughout this catalog) feels beyond courageous, even, perhaps, reckless, since the exhibition and catalog was supported, partially by NEA funds. Deitcher cites, as his example of the right wing's cultural activism, the aggressive anti-abortion film *The Silent Scream* (Bernard N. Nathanson, *The Silent Scream*. 28 minutes. (Anaheim, CA: American Portrait Films), VHS videocassette.)

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

activism, which utilizes representational strategies ex-propriated from authority sources *against* those authority sources.

Deitcher argues that, thanks to an increasingly wide acceptance of Louis Althusser's ideas, since the 1960s (except among orthodox Marxists) there has existed a strong receptivity on the Left to the notion that "oppositional cultural forms" could be effective in promoting social change

In a departure from Marxist orthodoxy...[Althusser argued] that oppositional or critical cultural practices have the power to destabilize and hinder the reproductive power of the dominant ideology. This belief in the resistant capacity of cultural work, and its direct bearing on struggles for social change, is the historical precondition for conferring the term "activist" onto cultural practices.¹⁷⁵

Deitcher then goes on to assert an argument very similar to the theme sounded by Lucy Lippard (and others) throughout the late seventies and eighties with regard to *which* art can be considered "activist," namely, which art has a capacity for resistance and which does not. Deitcher argues that it is too restrictive to limit activist art to work that deploys photography, montage, film and video, the media usually associated with "activist" work. Rather, work should be considered "resistant" in its *contingency*. Contingency is a notion current in discourse on art since at least the mid-seventies, which proposes that all works of art (and other cultural artifacts) are dependent for their meaning and effect both on the social conditions in which they arise, and in which they exist (or are encountered) over time. This *contingency* is proposed as decisive in determining the potential of cultural forms for critique and intervention.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 184-185. Deitcher's summary of the effect of Althusser refers to Louis Althusser "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Ben Brewster trans. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

The need to enlist the notion of contingency in any definition of activism in the production of art arose because of questions as to the role work in traditional media, and/or work exhibited in traditional venues (museums and commercial galleries) could play in relation to social change. Deitcher comes down on the side of an open approach to where and when works can be considered activist:

“Cultural activism”...[is] cultural work that exists in a particular social relation: that of sharing in the urgency and attempting to further the objectives of communities; or of helping to facilitate the achievement of social and political goals. And by “political” I refer to the more expansive definition of that term as it was first applied by feminists to encompass the “personal.”¹⁷⁶

Under this definition Deitcher cites individuals and collectives that, during the 1980s, produced what he would call culturally activist visual art for traditional *and* alternative venues. Examples¹⁷⁷ he gives of how *contingency* allows for a cultural activism status for works that have operated within a “vanguardist” or aestheticized situation include

- Leon Golub’s *Mercenaries*, a series of paintings in the very traditional monumental format, which are not only exhibited in museums, but sold in commercial galleries as well. Deitcher sees Golub’s paintings as “cultural activism” in the contingency between the political content of his work and his role as an “influential art educator.”
- David Wojnarowicz’ “pictorial art”—done in the clearly postmodernist aesthetics of *bricolage*—becomes “culturally activist,” Deitcher argues, not only because the

¹⁷⁶ Deitcher, *ibid.*, 186.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 188-189.

works are emotional expressions from an artist who has AIDS, but because Wojnarowicz' works are also widely seen within the AIDS activist community as powerfully supportive to that cause.

- Group Material's trajectory from cultural-critique/cultural-activist stance at their inception in the late seventies to being invited into the Whitney Biennial in 1985 and supported by the DIA Foundation does not signify "cooptation," Deitcher argues, because the collective has risen to the challenge to "advance their concerns, evolve new strategies and maintain the interventional aspect of their original cultural insights" (Figure 10).¹⁷⁸

Deitcher does not limit his examples to these artists, however. He proposes a range of very eclectic approaches regarding what "cultural activism" can be, including examples of artists performing outside mainstream locations such as Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo, Judy Baca, Krysztof Wodiczko, (Figure 11) Paper Tiger Television/Deep Dish TV, ACT-UP and Gran Fury (Figure 12), among others. While these artists and artist-groups have relied to one degree or another on institutional support, according to Deitcher, together they constituted a "critical mass" of approaches to an oppositional practice which could move beyond previous notions of "avant-garde," postmodernism and activism.

***Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures:
Theory as Activist***

Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures is, in a very real sense, a basic text companion volume to *The Decade Show*, a template of cultural criticism

¹⁷⁸ Deitcher also bravely asserts his view that "In their efforts to open up spaces of contention and debate, cultural activists have, over the past two decades, evolved strategies to combat...domestication of their work...[so that] some art now manages to overcome the institutional prerogative to reduce everything to fashion and/or commodities." Ibid., 197.



Figure 10. Group Material. *AIDS Timeline*. Mixed media installation. 1989-1991. In *The American Century: Art and Culture 1950-2000*. Exh. Cat. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2000, 292.

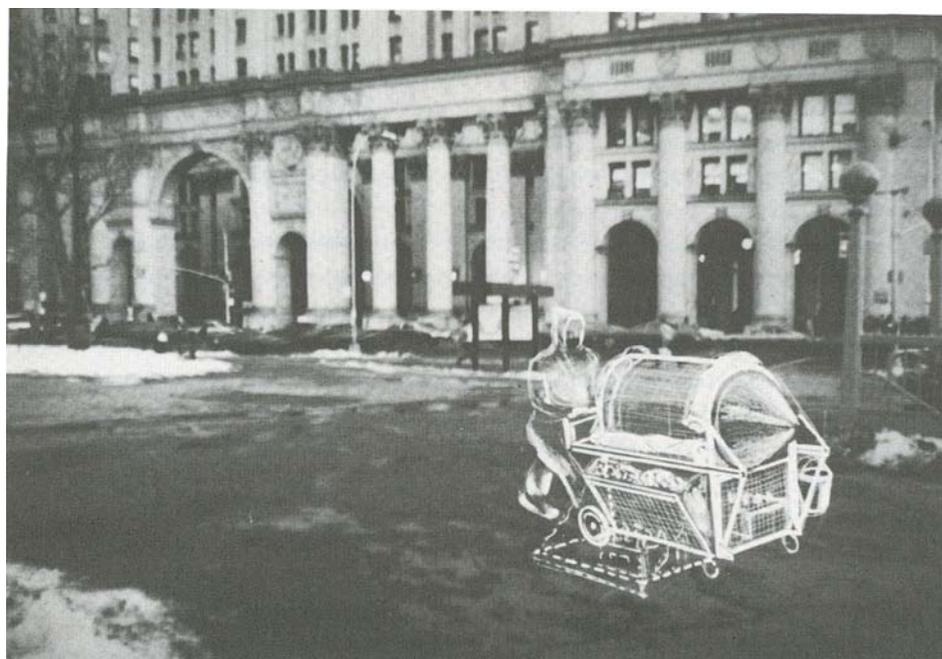
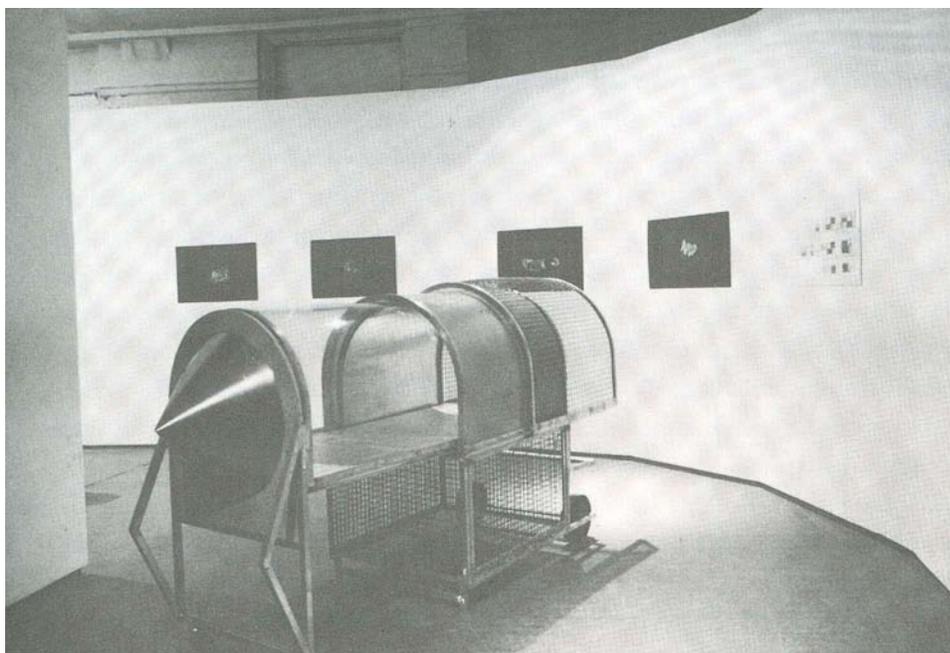


Figure 11. Krzysztof Wodiczko. *Homeless Vehicle Project*. Multimedia installation. 1988. In Rosalyn Deutsche, "Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City." Russell Ferguson, et al. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990, 124-125.

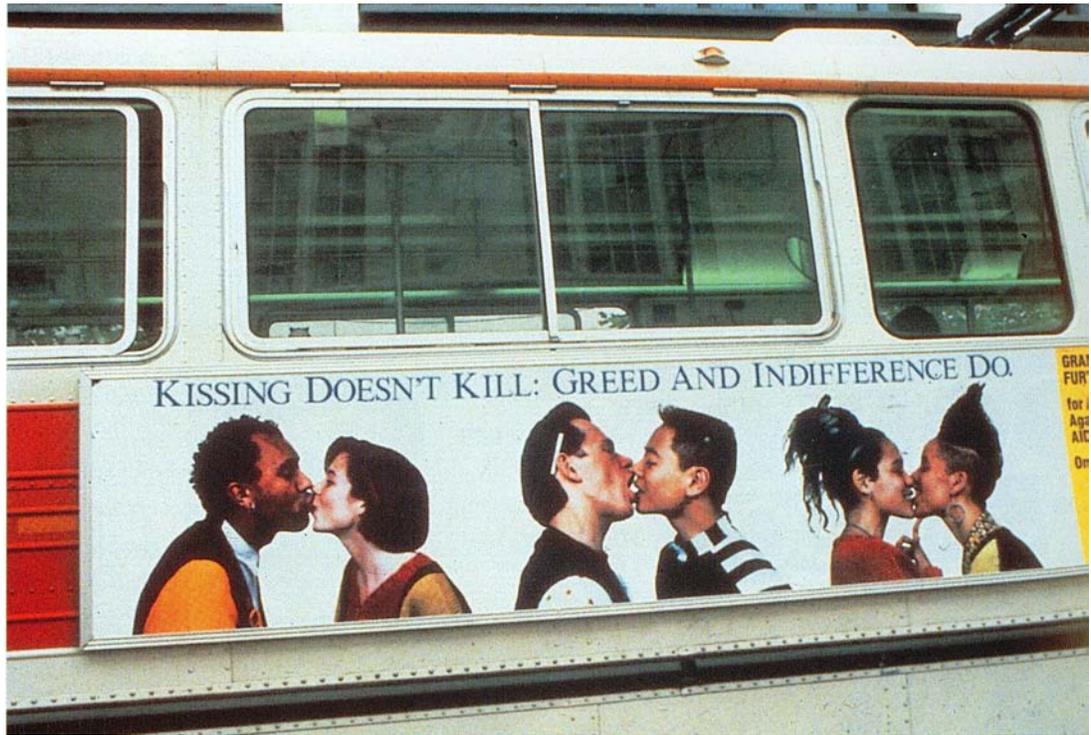


Figure 12. Gran Fury. *Kissing Doesn't Kill. Greed and Indifference Do.* Silkscreen on three panels. 1989. *The American Century: Art and Culture 1950-2000*. Exh. Cat. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2000, 326.

through which the works in *The Decade Show*, the texts in the catalog accompanying it—and, most importantly, the instigation for it in the first place—can be read and interpreted. It is not insignificant that *Out There* was published by the New Museum, one of the entities producing *The Decade Show*, nor that the majority of texts included in *Out There* are not works of direct art criticism or art history, but of broader cultural observations.

According to Marcia Tucker, Director of The New Museum, and publisher of *Out There...*, the anthology, which consists of 26 essays¹⁷⁹ summarizes a decade of consideration (most of the offerings were previously published in privileged locations within key institutions of “high culture”) of “the process by which...any given group can be ignored, trivialized, rendered invisible and unheard, perceived as inconsequential, deauthorized, ‘other,’ or threatening, while others are valorized.”¹⁸⁰ Tucker asserts that these essays had not, up to that point, been seen as contributing to a “common ground” discourse between groups who had operated (and, arguably, still operate) in “parallel cultures.” Despite the fact that these writings had been “out there” for all to see in various key locations, because of their isolated publication sites, until their inclusion in *Out There*, it had not been possible to see them as a “critical mass.”

¹⁷⁹ All except 7 essays (of these, 5 are by the editors) were previously published in a wide variety of fairly prestigious locations, in the US and elsewhere, in books and academic or key cultural journals during the decade of the eighties. 16 of the 27 authors were full time faculty of universities, 8 were poets, writers or artists, and 3 were editors of significant journals. In this discussion, I will consider two of these essays, both by editors of the volume, particularly because I believe they sound the general themes of the book, and provide a useful summary of a range of ideas that represent a general sense of the thinking of key intellectuals considering the issues of multiculturalism at the beginning of the nineties. This discussion should not be seen as attempting to cover the multiplicity of excellent arguments put forward in the book.

¹⁸⁰ Marcia Tucker, “Director’s Foreword,” *Out There*, *ibid.*, 7.

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¹⁸² Marcia Tucker, “Director’s Foreword,” *Out There*, *ibid.*, 7.

Russell Ferguson, one of the editors of *Out There*, notes, in his introduction, that the writers in the anthology: "...stand their own ground, and speak from there without apology...but, at the same time, they talk to each other. The juxtapositions made [in *Out There*] set up resonances out of different but sometimes parallel exclusions,"¹⁸³ and these "exclusions" are all from that "place from where power is exercised" but which, "when we try to pin it down" is always "somewhere else."¹⁸⁴

So, the overall purpose of the book, can be described as "activist," since, according to Ferguson, that purpose is to encourage "historically marginalized groups [to] insist on their own identity," thereby bringing the elusive and invisible "center" (of power) more clearly into view, so that "the deep structural invisibility of the so-called center becomes harder to sustain..."¹⁸⁵ Ferguson also argues that the "threat [to power which] lies ... in the process of becoming visible," is already palpable in the demands from neo-conservatives to return to the teaching of the canon of masterpieces of literature and art, all of which were created largely by European White men.

Activist, yes, but "avant-garde?" Ferguson points to the ambivalence with which artists and scholars of color view the notion of "glamorous" marginalization that has accompanied and characterized avant-garde cultural production, and the very identity of

¹⁸³ Russell Ferguson, "Introduction: Invisible Center," in *Out There*, *ibid.*, 9. Ferguson refers here specifically to an observation from Audre Lorde that these exclusions are experienced by everyone who is not "White, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure." The other editors of the volume are: Martha Gever (whose essay introduces the section entitled "'Wild Tongues: Affirming Identities,'" Trinh T. Minh-Ha (whose essay introduces the section entitled "Marginalia: Displacement and Resistance," and Cornel West (whose essay introduces the section entitled "Other Questions: Critical Contexts." Most of the essays in *Out There* do not refer to specific visual artists. The majority of art referred to is film. The only contemporary artist cited in the book who works with "marginality," in media other than film is Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicle Project* (1988) described in Rosalyn Deutsche's essay as an example of an artist integrally involved in creating a new sense of "public sphere" through "interventionist aesthetic practice:" (*ibid.*, 122-128).

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

“avant-garde.” Ferguson notes that, for those “who have not chosen marginalization, but have had it thrust upon them...” the idea of choosing to be “avant-garde”/marginal can be very troubling, as can the postmodern call to arms against a “canon” which appeared to be opening up at the end of the eighties, for the first time to women, queers and people of color. In other words, defining “avant-garde” and “oppositonality” in relation to activism takes on a very different valence when seen from inside the experience of those for whom marginalization is a lifelong direct experience, forced upon them rather than chosen.

Cornel West and the New Politics of Difference

There should be no doubt that the simultaneous appearance of *The Decade Show* with *Out There* and *Mixed Blessings* marked a shift in discourse from a generalized articulation of “oppositonal” postmodern parameters which had significant gaps in its coverage, especially the virtual invisibility of artists and writers of color, to a new focus on the specificities of race, gender and sexual identity. Cornel West’s essay in *Out There* announces this shift forcefully, starting with his title: “The New Cultural Politics of Difference.”¹⁸⁶ West’s purpose in this essay is not solely to herald this “new” focus, but to specify the substantial challenges facing “talented (and usually privileged) critics and artists” of color whose attempts at progressive action within “...academy, museum, gallery [and] mass media...” had been virtually co-opted.¹⁸⁷

West argues that, though support from outside social and political movements should not be expected, this situation for artists and critics of color is not hopeless. West calls for intellectuals of color to take on a “protean” identity that is flexible enough to survive in a hostile environment. West asserts that by building this kind of identity, and paying

¹⁸⁶ Cornel West, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” in *Out There*, *ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

appropriate attention to *three key challenges*— *intellectual, existential and political*— intellectuals of color can avoid what might seem the “inevitability” of being reduced to bearing “witness [to] slow decay and doom.”¹⁸⁸

West’s suggested strategies for addressing these challenges are particularly directed to the situation of the “intelligentsia of the Black diaspora,” a group he describes as suffering chronically from “invisibility and namelessness,”¹⁸⁹ and whose struggles to overcome this status are especially important because of the complexities of “the ideological, social and cultural terrains” of non-Black peoples in which Black people must live and work.

West deems old resistance approaches clung to by Black artists and critics to be “exhausted” and ripe for discarding. Among these are (1) the attempt to “reflect and mirror the *real* Black community;” and (2) the concentration by Black artists and writers on developing positive Black imagery “in order to inspire achievement among young Black people.”¹⁹⁰

West labels these modes of resistance “courageous,” yet ineffectual, because they are uninterrogated. West encourages Black intellectuals to accept the reality of the “end of the innocent notion of the *essential* Black subject...” and recognize that “... ‘Black’ is ... a politically and culturally constructed category...”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 38. West sees the environment of the late eighties when the book was conceived and put together as characterized by: “recent cutbacks of social service programs, business takebacks at the [labor] negotiations tables, speedups at the workplace and buildups of military budgets...” as well as “the growing disintegration and decomposition of civil society...” an environment of “decay and doom—a painful denouement prefigured already in many poor Black and brown communities and rapidly embracing all of us...”

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

To avoid continued invisibility and ineffectiveness, West insists that:

Black cultural workers must constitute and sustain discursive and institutional networks that deconstruct earlier modern Black strategies for identity-formation, demystify power relations that incorporate class, patriarchal and homophobic biases, and construct more multi-valent and multi-dimensional responses that articulate...complexity and diversity...[and] raise critical issues of ‘hybridity,’ ‘exilic status,’ and ‘identity’ ...[as well as] traverse [issues] of ‘male/female’ ‘colonizer/colonized,’ ‘heterosexual/homosexual...’¹⁹²

In terms of *how* Black cultural workers are to pursue such “deconstruction” and “construction,” West, in an exhortative mode that verges on manifesto, urges the development of what he calls a “prophetic criticism,” based on a project of “demystification.” He defines “demystification” as beginning with “social structural analysis” that keeps track of “complex dynamics of institutional and other related power structures;” teases out the ways in which “representational strategies are creative responses to novel circumstances and conditions;” and keeps the “central role of human agency...accented.”¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 28. In several of these points, including this one, West refers to the work of Stuart Hall. West does not provide a citation. There are three citations under “Stuart Hall” in the selected bibliography, but it is not clear if any of them is the source of these quotations. Stuart Hall is a British academic who acquired a high intellectual profile in the 1970s as one of the founders of the “Cultural Studies” movement in the UK. He was the second director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the UK, and served in that position from 1969-1979, and later continued the development of the field at the Open University in London. Hall and his contributions to the cultural studies field are mentioned in virtually every essay in *Out There...* There was a strong leap forward for Cultural Studies as influential in the development of discourse on “political” cultural production in the US at a conference held at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, also in 1990 (same year as the publication of the books under discussion in this section of this chapter). A book resulted from this conference that has become a key reference work and teaching text on the field: Lawrence Grossberg, et al.. *Cultural Studies*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990. The Grossberg anthology was still in print and widely available at this writing.

¹⁹²Ibid., 29. West makes a very important point regarding the “constructedness” of “Blackness,” asserting that if “Blackness” is constructed, it is only constructed in relation to the constructed nature of “Whiteness,” and that Black intellectuals must engage across the board in de-construction of both essentialisms as contributory overall to racialism and the notion of “race” itself. See his discussion in *ibid.*, 29-30.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 31.

Such a stance and pursuit is also characterized by West as morally and politically connected, a praxis which both seeks to locate “the structural causes of unnecessary forms of social misery...” as well as to project “...alternative visions, analyses and actions...” These approaches should be undertaken, West warns, with the understanding that, at any point in time, such a program of cultural politics is vulnerable and dynamic, “a contingent and fragile” coalition constantly beset “...in a world where most of the resources, wealth and power are centered in huge corporations and [their] supportive political elites.”¹⁹⁴

In this essay, West does not employ the terms “avant-garde,” “postmodern,” or “activist,” to describe the kinds of projects and strategies he exhorts Black artists and critics to engage in; nor do these terms occur in West’s text as “negative” foils against which to pose his recommended “prophetic criticism.” Nevertheless, West’s exhortations can be seen as more specific versions of the exhortations of some of the (White) writers mentioned earlier in this chapter. West inserts Black perspectives and Black agency in more specificity into a discourse on “progressive postmodernism” that cites only examples of White cultural producers.

For example, it seems clear that, though West does not cite Foster, his outline of a plan for Black intellectuals is very similar to the one Foster proposes in *The Anti-Aesthetic*.¹⁹⁵ West does not use Foster’s language, but the program he articulates resonates with Foster’s advocacy of giving priority to the “nexus of culture and politics;”

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 36

¹⁹⁵ Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ibid. Here, for ease of reference are the factors identified in *The Anti-Aesthetic* as “progressively postmodern:” deconstruction of a persistently homogeneous view of Western representation as the “only way;” breaking up frozen and strongly dichotomized autonomous cultural spheres and separated fields of expertise (especially in academia); countermanding a (modernist) insistence that only art expressed with formal “purity” is legitimate; and resisting the insistence that there be a clear separation between culture and politics.

emphasizing thinking “sensitive to difference (of others without opposition, of heterogeneity without hierarchy);” and affirming resistance to political neo-conservatism.¹⁹⁶ In these echoings of each other’s theoretical and political stances, both West and Foster embrace the deployment of a “progressive postmodernism” that also strongly resembles, in its emphasis on resistance and opposition, the recurring characteristics in the discourses of both “activism” and the “avant-garde.”

West’s exhortative text also resonates with Henry Sayre’s affirmation of the emergence of a “new” performative avant-garde in the seventies and eighties. West’s essay is aimed at transforming the thinking and praxis specifically of Black scholars and artists at the beginning of the nineties; while, as pointed out earlier, none of the examples Sayre provides of artists and critics working in what he calls a “performative” fashion are “of color.” Nevertheless, the argument Sayre advances—that a “new” performative tendency in art of the seventies and eighties can be termed avant-garde—does resonate with West’s exhortations.

West’s characterizations of an exemplary and “energetic breed of New World *bricoleurs*” has special affinity with Sayre’s emphasis on the implicit self-reflexivity of a “performative avant-garde’s” denial of “consistency, univocality, and autonomy” in favor of “contingency, multiplicity and polyvocality.”¹⁹⁷ West urges his “New World *bricoleurs*”—Black intellectuals and artists—to leave behind ineffectual (uninterrogated) strategies and embrace a nuanced critical practice that consciously and strategically

¹⁹⁶ Foster, *ibid.* xvi.

¹⁹⁷ Sayre, *ibid.* 187.

mobilizes “improvisational and flexible sensitivities,”¹⁹⁸ and refuses “to limit ...visions, analyses and praxis to...particular terrains....”

West’s exhortation of Black intellectuals to move with urgency to “confront” the “growing disintegration and decomposition of civil society...cutbacks of social programs...buildups of military budgets...” etc, and to “revise the very notions of ‘modernity.’ ‘mainstream,’ ‘margins,’ ‘difference,’ and ‘otherness’...” also resonates with Sayre’s assertion that key characteristics of his “performative avant-garde” are the aggressive mobilization of the vernacular, and a conscious orientation “toward reintegration into the community at large”¹⁹⁹

West’s “prophetic critical” cultural practice also resembles Lucy Lippard’s notions about activist art in her “Trojan Horses” essay for *Art After Modernism*... West envisions a Black intelligentsia—artists and critics, morally and politically connected in praxis—which seeks to unmask the sources of “social misery;” address the despair of demoralized and depoliticized citizens; and propose alternative visions, analyses and actions in a situation (specifically, here, the Bush extension of the “Reagan Revolution”) that can only be described as dire from a social, political and economic perspective, especially for people of color.²⁰⁰ Likewise, West’s exhortations resonate with Lippard’s vision (in “Trojan Horse”) of a “critical mass” of artists who are “synthesizers as well as catalysts...” who “...combine social action, social theory and the fine arts tradition, in a spirit of multiplicity and integration...”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ West, *ibid.*, 36.

¹⁹⁹ Sayre, *ibid.*, 187.

²⁰⁰ West, *ibid.*, 36.

²⁰¹ Lippard, “Trojan Horses,” *ibid.*, 342.

The White Critic and the Art of People of Color: Lucy Lippard's *Mixed Blessings*

Lucy Lippard is one of the few white critics who, over time, have given intensive attention to the cultural production of people of color.²⁰² So it is not surprising that her observations in her 1990 book, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*, are resonant with Cornel West's "New Politics of Difference." *Mixed Blessings* is the third of the three volumes I have suggested represent a shift in the discourse on activist art at the beginning of the nineties. This shift moved the discourse from a preoccupation with recovering "postmodernism" from the appropriationist moves of a neo-conservative establishment, to the emergence of "multiculturalism"²⁰³ as a perhaps even more

²⁰² Lippard traces some of the origins of her book *Mixed Blessings* to: "painful but crucial work with culturally mixed feminist and leftist collectives" (Ibid., 10); "the US solidarity movement with Central America...the cultural vitality of the Nicaraguan Revolution ... FMLN in El Salvador...the vital young artists of Cuba," "the Philbrook Center (which commissioned the essay that finally got me started)..." the lecture series "Mixing it Up" conducted in summers over several years in the eighties at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and "Over the last decade, conversations with Juan Sánchez, Faith Ringgold, Jimmie Durham, Howardena Pindell, Papo Colo and Jeannette Ingberman, Rasheed Araeen, Jolene Rickard, Jerry Kearns, Daniel Flores, Charles Frederick, Kathy Vargas, Kay Miller, Carmen Atilano, Chris Takagi, Judy Baca, Lorraine O'Grady, Houston Conwill, Cecilia Vicuña, César Paternosto, Luis Camnitzer, Suzanne Lacy, Peter Jemison, Josely Carvalho, Gerardo Mosquera, May Stevens and Rudolph Baranik, and many others." (vii). The last stages of the book were being completed at the time of the highly controversial and widely negatively criticized by scholars of color (and others) 1989 museum exhibitions, *Magiciens de la Terre*, Paris, Centre Pompidou which followed by a few years the equally negatively criticized show in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art: "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art*. Lippard devotes several pages in *Mixed Blessings* to these shows, calling the "*Primitivism*" show a classic example of ethnocentrism. She cites as an example of this "ethnocentrism," the curators' comparison of one of (White artist) Kenneth Noland's "target paintings" of 1961 with a New Guinea sculpture featuring concentric circles, while showing only one artist of color, Martin Puryear. She points out re: *Magiciens* that of 100 artists, only 10 were women, and only 5 came from the third world, while all the artists from the US were White. Also, she notes that nowhere does *Magiciens* give credit to the Cuban biennial of 1986 that showed an extensive array of art from the Third World selected by curators in the Third World and not by the Cubans.

²⁰³ "Multiculturalism" was, at the time of the publication of Lippard's book (and still is), a very conflicted term. Lippard recognizes this. She uses "multicultural" in her title, but points to the "flattening" of the reality of ethnic otherness that the term's usage implies. In effect, the term is often used as synonymous with "cultural relativism," a concept which, some commentators of the late eighties have argued, is just another form of ethnocentrism which subordinates "other" voices and refuses to allow them to challenge

conflicted and unstable paradigm in which to consider changing relationships between notions of activism in art and “avant-garde.”

Lippard’s book features 196 individual artists, eight 2-person collaborations and seven collectives of 4 or more artists (with works spanning a decade and more, some even from the sixties, and with a few Caucasians sprinkled in), representing all the major ethnic groups usually referred to under the rubric “artists of color.”²⁰⁴ The book itself, with its title announcing “Mixed” as its overriding theme, aims for syncretism. Chapters explore six themes—Mapping, Naming, Telling, Mixing, Turning Around and Dreaming—each of which features a panoply of art by producers who assertively foreground their ethnic and racial backgrounds.

The artists in the book can be seen as falling into Sayre’s open-ended category of “performative.” Lippard notes at the beginning that she has not focused on performance artists of color; and, by my count, only 20, or about 10% of the works illustrated in *Mixed Blessings* are performance related. Nevertheless, most of *Mixed Blessings*’ works mobilize aesthetic strategies Sayre argues are characteristic of a “performative avant-garde,” such as theatricality, privileging of the audience, deployment of the “rhetoric of the pose,” engagement of the vernacular, the “bearing of the mark of the verb within them,” and/or being consciously oriented toward reintegration into the community at large.

the dominant culture. See Lippard’s recommended texts on the ambivalence of the term “multiculturalism:” Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis, “Aboriginal Art: Symptom or Success,” in the special issue of *Art in America* on art of people of color, (July 1989) 114-115; and Caren Kaplan, “Deterritorializations: the Re-writing of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse,” *Cultural Critique* 6 (Spring 1987), 188-189,191, quoted in Lippard, *ibid.*, 9. See also: Guillermo Gómez Peña, “The Multiculturalist Paradigm,” *High Performance*, (Fall 1989). One of the key texts on multiculturalism appeared in 1992, and was expanded and released in a second edition in 1994. See: Charles Taylor and Amy Guttmann, eds. *Multiculturalism: The Politics of Recognition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

²⁰⁴ Of the artists in Lippard’s book, 56 were also in *The Decade Show*.

Arguably, *Mixed Blessings* can itself be considered a “performative text.” Lippard expresses, and achieves, her intention to “perform” her text, in a fashion that resonates with Henry Sayre’s discussion of the “performative critic.”²⁰⁵ She demonstrates clearly one of Sayre’s key criteria: letting the reader in on her vulnerabilities before, during and after writing. This mode was not new for Lippard in *Mixed Blessings*. Some years earlier she announced the profound effect feminism had registered on her critical practice: “I’m more willing to be confessional, vulnerable, autobiographical, even embarrassing.”²⁰⁶

In *Mixed Blessings* she does just that. For example, she admits, on the very first page of the first chapter, that she was “terrified” by the “disappearances of boundaries” during her forays into the “unfamiliar territory” of the ambivalent “possibilities of an intercultural world”—especially in her conflicted position as a White/anglo critic seeking to bring visibility to “invisibilized” artists of color.²⁰⁷ Also, as she begins her last chapter, she tells us of her “overwhelming sense of humility” on finally completing the book, a seven-year odyssey; and confesses that she never would have attempted the project had she known how complex it would be, how “hallucinatory” the journey.²⁰⁸

Sayre argues that those who embrace, in a self-conscious and sophisticated manner, the “performative” approach in art and criticism, can be seen as a “new avant-garde.” According to this perspective, surely Lucy Lippard would be a prime example, and especially in *Mixed Blessings*... While Sayre’s discussion in *The Object of*

²⁰⁵ See Sayre, *ibid.*, Chapter 7: “Critical Performance,” 246-264. Barthes is Sayre’s exemplar par excellence of the “performative critic,” and the focal point for the chapter.

²⁰⁶ Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (New York: EP Dutton, 1976), 2.

²⁰⁷ Lippard, *Mixed Blessings*..., *ibid.*, 3. Lippard’s book has been roundly ignored by critics. To date, searches in a number of databases find *no* reviews of the book.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 243.

Performance... focuses entirely on Roland Barthes as the exemplar par excellence of the “performative critic,” much of what he says about—and what he quotes from—Barthes are easily applied to Lippard’s authorial performance in *Mixed Blessings*. So, while Lippard rarely mentions the term “avant-garde,” considering the book in the light of Sayre’s argument, *Mixed Blessings* can itself be seen as an avant-garde text, and Lippard as an avant-garde author because

- Her text is in dialogue with the artists discussed and with the works illustrated, rather than “in commentary” and judgment upon them.
- She operates in relation to the art objects she highlights dialogically, but also as if they were backdrops for her own (“performative”) observations: about the objects, their creators and the complex contexts both of the historical situations in which they were made, and the discursive environments in which they are “received” and perceived by her.
- Lippard acknowledges and emphasizes not only the polyvalent and multidimensional characteristics of the art she is discussing, but she has consciously produced her own text, and book structure, as polyvalent, multidimensional, and open-ended.
- *Mixed Blessings* as a “constructed text” is an excellent illustration of a *bricolage* approach to criticism in the fragmented way the text and illustrations appear on the page, with extensive placement of quotations in margins. This text construction helps to highlight a polyphony of voices from critics and artists of color regarding the chapter theme at hand, and the extended-caption mini-essays included with each illustration.

If Lippard and her book can be seen as “avant-garde” in their performativity, it is instructive to consider the few times she includes the term in *Mixed Blessings*, and what kinds of meanings for the term “avant-garde” seem to emerge from the contexts in which she deploys it. As can be seen below, she accuses avant-garde approaches to be predatory, perverse and destructive, and risky only in the sense of treading on new ground.

The first time the term “avant-garde” appears is in her first chapter— “Mapping”— where Lippard states:

The new fuels the avant-garde, where ‘risk’ has been a byword. But new need not mean unfamiliar...it can mean a fresh way of looking at shared experience...the real risk is to venture outside of the imposed art contexts both as a viewer and as an artist, to live the connections with people like and unlike oneself.²⁰⁹

In her next reference to the term (in the chapter on “Naming”), she notes that the search for the “new” by a predatory artistic avant-garde has often meant running through “with ...a strip-mining approach...some five centuries of Western Art History and millennia of other cultures.”²¹⁰ The “appropriationist” predations of the avant-garde, she suggests, in her third mention of the term (also in the “Naming” chapter), has resulted in the ambivalent welcome of “folk art into the vestibule of high art...[providing] a field of respectability in which even the lowly hobby arts can be seen with fresh eyes,” while at the same time any “cross-cultural impact in the mainstream still is assumed to come either from the past or from ‘below’—from the less-respected world of crafts and

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 14.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 25.

so-called outsider art.”²¹¹ Appropriation has often taken the form of *assemblage*, as Lippard notes in her next reference to “avant-garde”²¹² (in the chapter on “Mixing”). And, speaking specifically of the *assemblage* / “collage esthetic” of African American artist Betye Saar, Lippard notes that, in Saar’s work, which has resonances of African fetish and accumulation, there is a subtle social message that emphasizes “consensus, consolidation, affirmation, reinforcement of social values and social continuity” (Figure 13), in contrast with the ethos and ethic behind the Western avant-garde notion of *assemblage* which emphasizes the “ironic, perverse, anti-rational, even destructive.”²¹³

* * * * *

In summary, in Chapter 3, the strain of discourse represented by the appearance in 1990 of *The Decade Show*, *Out There* and *Mixed Blessings* signaled an emblematic turn in the fortunes of the term “avant-garde,” but not in the way that Sayre and Suleiman had predicted in the books they hoped would rehabilitate the term. Perhaps most significant was the virtual absence of the term from indexes of these three texts.²¹⁴ The contexts in which “avant-garde” infrequently appeared in these writings provided significant

²¹¹ Ibid., 77. Lippard eschews the term “outsider art” in favor of “vernacular art.” In *Mixed Blessings* she identifies 17 artists specifically as “vernacular.” Her use of the term is fairly consistent in referring to artists who are self-taught. From time to time, however, artists who have attended art school, or artists who have not, and yet whose work has been inserted into “high art” locations (commercial high art galleries and museums) and who deploy the same esthetics and content as “vernacular artists” are designated by Lippard as “vernacular.”

²¹² Ibid. 81.

²¹³ Ibid., 81. Lippard cites the source of this definition of Western avant-garde *assemblage* as: Mary Schmidt Campbell, in *Rituals: the Art of Betye Saar* (exh. Cat.) New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1980.

²¹⁴ Of course *The Decade Show* catalog did not have an index. One hopes that this strange practice will at some point be changed, as absence of indexes from exhibition catalogs is a serious research problem for art historians.



Figure 13. Betye Saar. *Secrets and Revelations. Incorporating Mti.* Installation at California State University, Fullerton. Mixed media. 1973-1980. In Lucy Lippard. *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1990, Plate 11.

information about the term's shifting meanings. However, as at the beginning of the eighties, "avant-garde" continued to carry a not altogether positive connotation whenever it was used; and Sayre's and Suleiman's attempts at recuperation, though persuasive in themselves, did not appear to be broadly influential as the decade of the nineties began.²¹⁵

²¹⁵ Regarding how influential the Sayre and Suleiman books have been, one measure of a book's "influence" is how quickly and extensively it is reviewed, and where. Another is whether a book stays in print over time, or is revised and reprinted. In these cases, both books were reviewed close to their publication dates, and in prestigious locations, with generally favorable commentary. On Sayre's book, see: Jeff Abell, review of *The Object of Performance : the American Avant-garde since 1970* by Henry Sayre. *New Art Examiner* 17:8 (Apr 1990): 59. Susan Hiller "Collective and contingent." *TLS. Times literary Supplement* 4531, (2-8 Feb 1990): 127. Perry Meisel, "How postmodern is it?" *Art in America*, 78:12, (Dec1990): 53-55. Kristine Stiles, "Performance and its objects," *Arts Magazine*, 65:3, (Nov 1990): 35-47. Stiles' was the most comprehensive treatment of Sayre's book, and the most critical. On Suleiman's book, see: Michel Oren, "Theory of the Avant-Garde," *Art Journal*, 52:1 (Spring1993):107-111 (reviews Suleiman, and two other books on the avant-garde published in the same time frame); Briony Fer, "Knowing the tropes," *Art History* 15:1 (Mar 1992): 99-104. Both books were still in print as of this writing.

Chapter 4: Artists Of Color—A “New” Avant-Garde For The Nineties?

In Chapter 4, the question is raised as to whether the discourse of activism, postmodernism and avant-garde proposed artists of color and other “marginalized” artists as a “new” avant-garde as the eighties turned into the nineties. It is undeniable that there was a decisive increase in interest by mainstream institutions in art by people of color and other marginalized groups, at the beginning of the 1990s. Nevertheless, the label “avant-garde” was not applied to them, despite the fact that the characteristics attributed to work by artists of color and other marginalized groups was frequently very similar to the (allegedly race-neutral) characteristics assigned to “progressive” contemporary avant-garde (White) cultural producers.

In this chapter, these questions are addressed: could artists of color be an “institutional” avant-garde newly welcomed into the inner sancta of museums and commercial galleries, their “marginality” the latest art-flavor to be savored by connoisseurs and collectors, but drained of power to make change by the market’s embrace? And, if so, or if not, what would be the implications for this art as activist?

Leadership And Other Changes At The Whitney

It is instructive here to consider the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Biennials from 1989-1993, the pivotal time when I have proposed there was a significant shift in consideration of the art of people of color and other marginalized groups; and that this was signaled by their heightened visibility in mainstream institutional settings. Between the Whitney Biennials of 1989 and 1991 there was both a change of the museum’s

directors and a change in tone. By 1990, David Ross had assumed the helm of the Whitney, after a lackluster 1989 Biennial showing under Tom Armstrong, who left suddenly shortly after the Biennial closed, and under negative circumstances, after 16 years as director.

The 1989 exhibition, according to key critics, was noteworthy for the lack of feminist work, despite a good representation of women artists, and the token presence of only one artist of color, Martin Puryear, which was his third appearance at a Whitney Biennial.²¹⁶ British critics Geraldine Norman and Edward Lucie-Smith underscored another noteworthy feature. By the end of the eighties, they argue, money had become the “sole arbiter of value” of art. Norman and Lucie-Smith’s article in London’s *Independent* listed examples of artists “swept into fashion by the monetary tide,” and the stunning prices received at auction for works featured in the 1989 Biennial.²¹⁷ They also listed the roster of famous dealers whose “star performers” were included in the show. At the 1989 Biennial, like most Biennials before it during the Armstrong tenure, as a matter of policy, most of the artists included had received a solo show in a New York commercial gallery during the previous two years, a clear indication of their market value.

²¹⁶ Cotter, “Report from New York: A Bland Biennial,” *Art in America* (September 1989) *ibid.*; and Yau, “Official Policy: Toward the 1990s with the Whitney Biennial.” *Arts Magazine* 64 (January) *ibid.*

²¹⁷ Geraldine Norman and Edward Lucie-Smith, “Myths, Money and the New Art,” *The Independent* (August 11, 1990): 44. They cite, in their opening paragraph, a quotation from the curators of the 1989 Whitney Biennial: “Capitalism has overtaken contemporary art, quantifying and reducing it to the status of a commodity... We have moved into a situation where wealth is the only agreed upon arbiter of value.” US artists listed in the article, with 1989 auction prices: Carl Andre, \$132,000; Robert Morris, \$49,500; Donald Judd, \$176,000; Brice Marden, \$1.1 million; Sol Le Witt, \$110,000; David Salle, \$550,000; Julian Schnabel, \$242,000; Eric Fischl, \$715,000.

By 1991, times had changed, as critic Thomas McEvelley records in his review of the Biennial put on by the new David Ross administration at the Whitney.²¹⁸ McEvelley notes a tentative “new social openness” at the Whitney despite what he terms a “surprisingly” linear (presumably, in view of the ascendance of postmodernism by this time) “...idea of art history as a story of sequential causation...with one foot in Modernism and the other tentatively testing the waters of the post-Modern realm of theory.”²¹⁹

Louisa Buck of the London *Independent* reports on the general disgruntlement among critics, who cast a jaundiced eye on the 1991 Biennial’s “newly-discovered Political conscience perceived...as a cynical public relations scam.” Buck quotes African American artist David Hammons as refusing the invitation to be included because it was “too long overdue to be taken seriously.”²²⁰

Perhaps presaging the seriously controversial 1993 Biennial to come, new Director Ross pledged, as he took over leadership of the Whitney, to commit to a “broader range of voices.” Though Hammons demurred, Ross’ pledge rang true, since the 1991 roster included a number of artists found also in *The Decade Show* and in *Mixed Blessings*, for example, Chicano sculptor Luis Jiménez and photographer Lorna Simpson (one of eight African Americans in the show, five of them video artists and filmmakers). The 1991

²¹⁸ Ross’ career trajectory prior to taking the helm at the Whitney has been much commented upon. His background is in Communications, not in Studio Art or Art History. As Deputy Director of the Everson Museum in Syracuse, he organized a show of Yoko Ono’s Fluxus artworks, championed video and other conceptual art forms at other museums and as Director of Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art defended controversial art in the face of right-wing attack (he defiantly put on the Mapplethorpe show even when NEA threatened to cut funding). See Michael Kimmelman, “The Whitney Continues its Search...for Itself,” *New York Times*, Arts and Leisure Desk, (April 19, 1992): Section 2, page 1, col. 1 for a fairly acerbic view of Ross after about two years on the job.

²¹⁹ Thomas McEvelley, “Two Big Shows: Postmodernism and its Discontents,” *Artforum* 29:10 (Summer 1991): 98.

²²⁰ Louisa Buck, “Art Diary: The Tempers of the Times—Raised Eyebrows at the Whitney Biennial,” *The Independent* (April 23, 1991): Arts Page, 10.

Biennial also prominently featured artists addressing the AIDS epidemic: Group Material's harrowing *AIDS Timeline* (Figure 13), Keith Haring, who died of AIDS the previous year, David Wojnarowicz, and Tim Rollins + KOS' piece on AIDS based on Flaubert's *Temptation of St. Anthony*.

**Theoretical Atmospheres: “New Openness” and Focus
on Meaning in Art in the Nineties—Owens, McEvilley and Bal/Bryson**

Of course David Ross' emphasis on “new openness” at the Whitney did not occur in a vacuum. In this section, several texts are treated that represent how the appearance of this “new openness” was discursively framed by a theoretical atmosphere emphasizing content and meaning in art.

In 1991, an anthology of 32 essays by Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*²²¹ was published as a memorial to the critic. The book appeared the same year as the 1991 Whitney Biennial, the “newly open” version of the venerable exhibition where, for the first time, aggressive work on AIDS was featured. Craig Owens died of AIDS in 1991 at the young age of 39. Much of Owens' art critical practice had focused, in the last years of his active writing, on the AIDS epidemic; and many commentators have hailed his significant influence in the burgeoning world-wide cultural activism responding to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, including, no doubt, the resulting unprecedented focus on works about AIDS featured in the 1991 Whitney Biennial. The book brought into one place key works, most previously published during

²²¹ Owens never published a book-length exegesis of his views. This anthology: Scott Bryson, et al., eds., *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) brought together examples of Owens' extensive essay *oeuvre*. Simon Watney, who contributed the Introduction to the volume, notes that Owens himself would have been “wryly amused by the irony that he, a theorist of the fragmentary and the discontinuous, should be remembered in a single, bound volume...” (ix).

the 1980s in *Art in America*, where he had been an editor, and in *October* to which he was a frequent contributor.

In addition to the focus of his later essays on AIDS, throughout his career, and especially in his later writings, Owens engaged in teasing apart the historical associations undergirding the cultural hegemony of White male heterosexual values; and their perpetuation by the construction, through representation, of poisonous concepts of racial and sexual otherness.²²² In his groundbreaking critical work in all these areas, Owens contributed significantly to the mainstream's new climate of social openness at the 1991 Whitney Biennial, and in its most full-blown and controversial form, in the 1993 Biennial. The gathering together of his writings into a posthumous book at this particular juncture can be seen as a re-membering of his wide intellectual influence during the previous decade's involvement in solidifying a progressive postmodernist movement in U.S. cultural circles,²²³ and especially the then-novel idea that artists of color, women

²²² It bears repeating, however, that Owens' attack on the cultural hegemony of White male heterosexual values in the cultural sphere did not include championing of specific artists of color, though he did produce several texts that became key arguments in favor of feminist and queer cultural production. As senior editor of *Art in America*, however, Owens was responsible for the unprecedented "global" symposium of the magazine (See: *Art in America* [special issue: "The Global Issue: A Symposium"] (July 1989), which gave visibility for the first time, in a key US art publication, to the contemporary arts of areas of the globe outside the US and Western Europe. See also the "imaginary interview" included as Owens' contribution to the catalog of the exhibition *Art and Social Change* (Oberlin: Allen Memorial Art Museum, 1983), and republished in *Beyond Recognition* (ibid., 259-262). In this piece, Owens summarizes a theme he elaborated over time: that *representation* was the issue to be addressed, since *representation* involves "speaking for" others, an operation that, at its base is subjugating. In the end, Owens argues (and this is why the appearance of this powerful coming together of his major writings in 1991 is significant) that contemporary artists, especially those "marginalized" by White male heterosexual cultural hegemony, must "challenge the activity of representation itself which by denying them speech, consciousness, the ability to represent themselves, stands indicted as the primary agent of their domination." (*Beyond Recognition*, 261-262). It is significant, however, that he does not cite specific artists who are working effectively in this mode.

²²³ See the very instructive 1987 interview with Owens (published for the first time in *Social Text* in 1990) in *Beyond Recognition*, ibid., 298-315. Owens traces the discussion on postmodernism as having begun in the US around 1975, prior to Lyotard's book (the English version of Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), is frequently cited as the ur-text of postmodernism in the US. It was published first in France in 1979. Owens says in this interview that

(feminists especially) and gay men and Lesbians should have the space to present themselves in opposition to their exclusion from and invisibilizing representation by hegemonic institutional entities.

Two other texts appeared at this juncture that are emblematic of key aspects of the theoretical atmosphere in which the 1991 and 1993 Whitney Biennials appeared: Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson's "Semiotics and Art History;" and the publication of a selection of six of Thomas McEvelley's essays. All three texts join the fraught themes of "meaning" and "content" in art²²⁴ which had been front and center increasingly during the 1980s and early 1990s in relation to the emergence of postmodernism, and especially in relation to activist art and the work of marginalized artists.

The anthology of McEvelley's writings, *Art and Discontent: Theory at the Millenium*, represents, not just the critic's individual interests, but a much broader and continuing concern in discourse with identifying and interpreting content in art. In one essay McEvelley proposes 13 ways in which "attributions of content" inhabit all statements about artworks, whether acknowledged or not.²²⁵ In another, he applies these concepts and concludes about the postmodern art of his time, that:

he "became aware" of Lyotard only around 1980, and was a "reaction to the hegemony of formalist theory" in which "Modernism meant what Greenberg had said it meant and excluded...Duchamp, dada, surrealism." But the practices of the late 1960s and seventies (which Owens saw as absolutely connected to Duchamp, dada and surrealism) could only then be discussed in terms of "representing loss of purity, the loss of purpose, the loss of high culture." Owens saw that, though to him and several other U.S. theorists at the time, connections of these late sixties-earlyseventies practices to dada and surrealism were clear, "in order to theorize them, it seemed necessary to elaborate a counter-discourse. The term postmodernism was picked up in part from architecture, but only as a term, not a discourse...a lot of it had to do with Rosalind Krauss and her attempt to dissociate herself from [Michael] Fried [heir to Clement Greenberg's formulations of "correct Modernism"]," (298-299).

²²⁴ Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History" *Art Bulletin*, (June 1991): 174-208; Thomas McEvelley, *Art and Discontent: Theory at the Millenium* (Kingston, NY: McPherson and Company, 1991).

...[p]ostmodern work ...attempts to embody, illustrate, analyze and exhibit the particular manner of its lack of...integrity...[through] pastiche or meltdown of elements from manifestly different matrices...conflations of elements from different contemporary cultures...glaringly multi-coded [with] a grotesque look like monsters...possessing attributes of different species at once ...²²⁶

McEvelley's description of postmodern art as imbricated within an "expanding set of causal webs" resonates with Norman Bryson's and Mieke Bal's argument (see immediately below) that the context of art works can be determined from their content. McEvelley also echoes Bryson and Bal in his reiteration of the prime characteristic of postmodern art as strategically foregrounding a lack of integrity through its self-constitution as "pastiche or meltdown of elements from manifestly different matrices." The "inevitability" of the presence of the "Other within" artworks in the form of "pastiche's" borrowed/stolen signs also resonates both in McEvelley and in Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal's essay as does the argument that struggles over the meaning(s) of artworks always occur in historically and socially specific locations, and signal that power is at stake.

Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson focus a major part of their essay in *Art Bulletin* on *context* and *interpretation*. They point out that art is not the only text comprised of signs which must be interrogated by art historians and critics. They argue that context itself has content that influences art's meaning. What we take to be positive knowledge—that is, the positive knowledge that there are certain concrete and knowable social and historical

²²⁵ See McEvelley, *ibid.*, 70-83. The essays "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds" (reprinted from its original 1984 appearance in *Artforum*) and "Father the Void," (published originally in 1990 in an exhibition catalog) most directly address these issues. In "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds" McEvelley lists the 13 as: 1) the representational aspect of a work; 2) what the artist may have said about it; 3) the (traditional) medium or genre employed; 4) self-conscious deployment of traditional or non-traditional materials; 5) scale; 6) temporal duration; 7) exhibition context/travel of; 8) obvious or repressed reference to art history; 9) new meanings aggregating over time; 10) participation in iconographic tradition(s); 11) formal properties; 12) "gesture" (wit, irony, parody, etc.); 13) stimulative of biological or psychological reaction.

²²⁶ McEvelley, *ibid.*, 177-178.

conditions out of which an artwork emerges—“is the product of interpretive choices. The art historian is always present in the construction she or he produces.”²²⁷

Bal and Bryson argue that it is most useful, in elucidating art objects, images and processes, to concentrate not only on the signs both incorporating—as well as incorporated *in*—art objects, images and processes. For them it is equally important to focus on signs which constitute context, framing mechanisms through which signs come to be, namely discursive practices, institutional operations, value systems and semiotic mechanisms.²²⁸ Bal and Bryson propose that performing this kind of analysis is both necessary and helpful since “by examining the social factors that frame signs, it is possible to analyze simultaneously the practices of the past and our own interaction with them, an interaction that is otherwise in danger of passing unnoticed,”²²⁹ or seeming unproblematically “natural” and “knowable.”

Bal and Bryson contend that context can be (and probably always is) *retrospectively* constructed *out of* the art object itself. They call this process *metalepsis*, and trace its origin to Nietzsche’s concept of *chronological reversal*. They argue that the common assumption that “history stands prior to artifact; that context generates, produces, gives rise to text in the same way that a cause gives rise to an effect” is not always accurate since “it is sometimes the case that the sequence (from context to text) is actually inferred from its endpoint.” Bal and Bryson suggest as an example of this inferring cause in *reverse* or in *metalepsis* from context, a situation in which one feels a *pain*, and upon

²²⁷ Bal and Bryson, *ibid.*

²²⁸ Bal and Bryson cite Jonathan Culler as the source of this insight. See *ibid.*, 175.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

locating a *pin*, infers that the pin is the cause of the pain, so that the pin as cause is only located *after* its effect has been felt.²³⁰

Metalepsis Applied—the 1993 Whitney Biennial

The 1993 Whitney Biennial exhibition and catalog art that can be seen as demonstrating Bal and Bryson’s argument that text (the artwork) and context are linked in *metaleptic* ways, namely, that one can perceive, in reverse, a “naturalized” context for the exhibition by carefully considering the kinds of works included, and especially their content. Despite the general view of the 1993 Whitney Biennial as being “about race,”²³¹ meaning, of course, that the exhibition artists of color, the majority of the art in the exhibition was by White artists, and most of the texts in the catalog were written by White essayists.²³² When metalepsis, or chronological reversal is mobilized as an analytical tool, it reveals that, in fact the context of the exhibition was “whiteness.”

Thelma Golden’s Metalepsis: Whiteness as Context in the 1993 Biennial

Thelma Golden, the only curator of color on the 1993 Biennial curatorial team, demonstrates, in her catalog essay, the “metalepsis” described by Bal and Bryson, both in

²³⁰ See the discussion on metalepsis in Bal and Bryson, *ibid.*, 178-179. The Nietzsche text they cite as their source is: F. Nietzsche, *Werke*, K Schlecta, ed. (Munich: 1986), 804.

²³¹ There is a lot of use of euphemism by essayists in the Biennial catalog and in the criticism of the exhibition, and certainly, the 60% of artists in the show who were White were, predominantly, also in “marginalized groups”: e.g., women, gays and lesbians. And many of the artists of color were also gay, or self-identified as feminists. But, while the rhetoric of “borders” and “margins” and subalterns was emphasized, the breakdown of discussion of art by race was one of the most salient characteristics in the writing by those involved in organizing the Biennial as well as those commenting on it.

²³² Approximately 40% of artists included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial were people of color. Only one of the four curators, Thelma Golden, was of color (African American), while of the essay writers (not including the curators), two were people of color, Coco Fusco, an Afro-Cuban American (and the only artist in the show to contribute an essay) and Homi Babha, a South Asian (from India). Breaking these statistics down further, among the curators, Golden is by far and away the writer who deals across the board with the greatest proportion of artists of color. In her essay, Golden addresses the work of 3 White artists and 13 artists of color. John Hanhardt discusses 30 White artists and 15 artists of color, Lisa Phillips is right down the middle with 10 White and 10 artists of color, and Elizabeth Sussman, the chair of the curatorial team brings up the rear, writing in her essay about 15 White artists and 2 artists of color.

her approach to her material, and in the selections of artists' work she discusses. According to Golden, "whiteness" is the *actual* context of the exhibition and all the works in it. Golden argues that while "notions of Blackness...have been ...deconstructed ad nauseum," the "site of whiteness and its relation to the ...definition of Americanness..."²³³ is all-encompassing: so naturalized as to be invisible. In Golden's "texts of difference:" her essay, and the works she chooses to underscore in it, we can begin to disentangle this "context of Whiteness" from its "naturalness," and thereby make its contours visible.

In Golden's essay, and in her curatorial choices, "Whiteness" *materializes* as the context/signifier of power through focus on what is "different from White," what is "other." Two works cited in Golden's essay demonstrate how this "metalepsis" operates, Byron Kim's *Belly Painting* series (Figure 14) and Daniel Martinez' *Museum Tags: Second Movement (Overture) or Overture con Claque—Overture with Hired Audience Members* (Figure 15).

In Kim's work, a series of six paintings bulge from the wall like rotund abdomens, in a neat line, ranging in color from very dark brown through various shades of reddish brown to pinky peach and yellow peach. These wall-hung "sculptural" paintings were made by filling transparent latex balloons with gallons of paint, so that the weight of the paint bulges them out at the bottom, like so many "differently" colored paunches.²³⁴ The colors of the paint filling the balloons were derived from the then "new" flesh colors of Crayola crayons. After years of confrontation and debate, the one-color-fits-all "flesh"

²³³ Thelma Golden, "What's White...?" in *1993 Whitney Biennial*, *ibid.*, 27.

²³⁴ Significantly, Kim uses the non-gender-specific term "bellies" to describe his painting...a word that can refer to the paunch of an overweight male, or the extended abdomen of a pregnant woman.

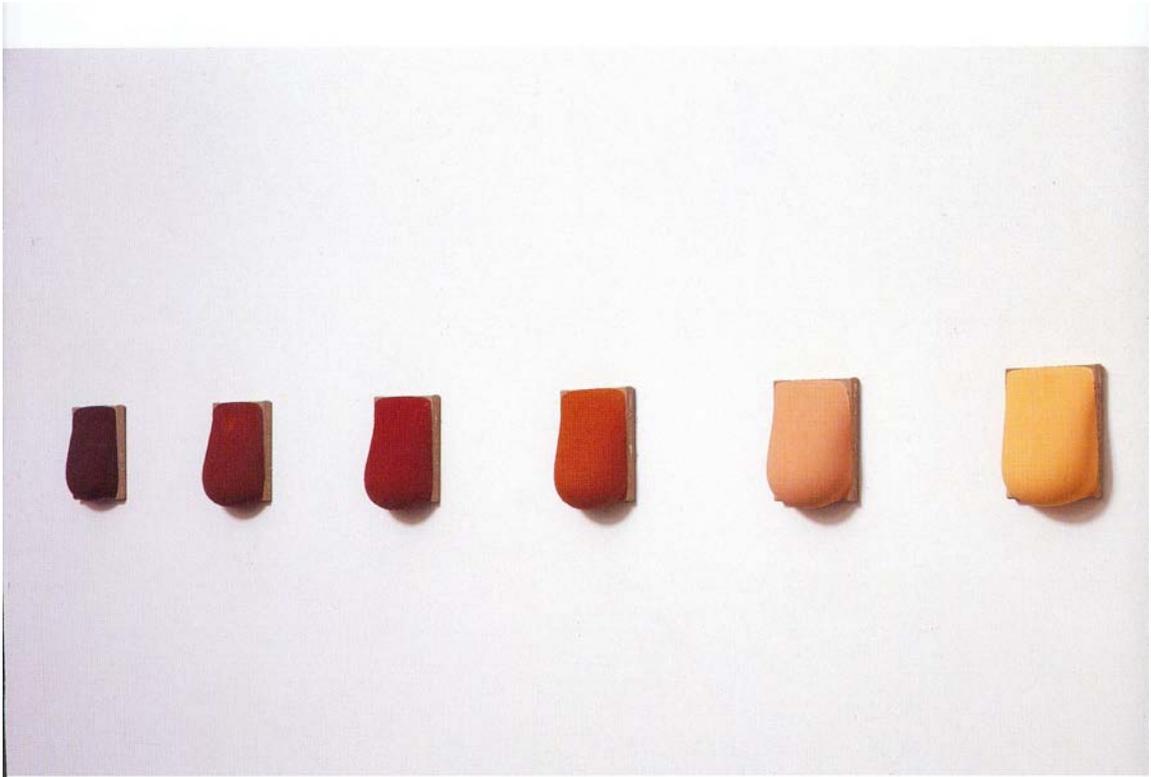


Figure 14. Byron Kim. *Belly Paintings*. Mixed Media. 1992. In *1993 Whitney Biennial*. Exh. Cat. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993, 178.

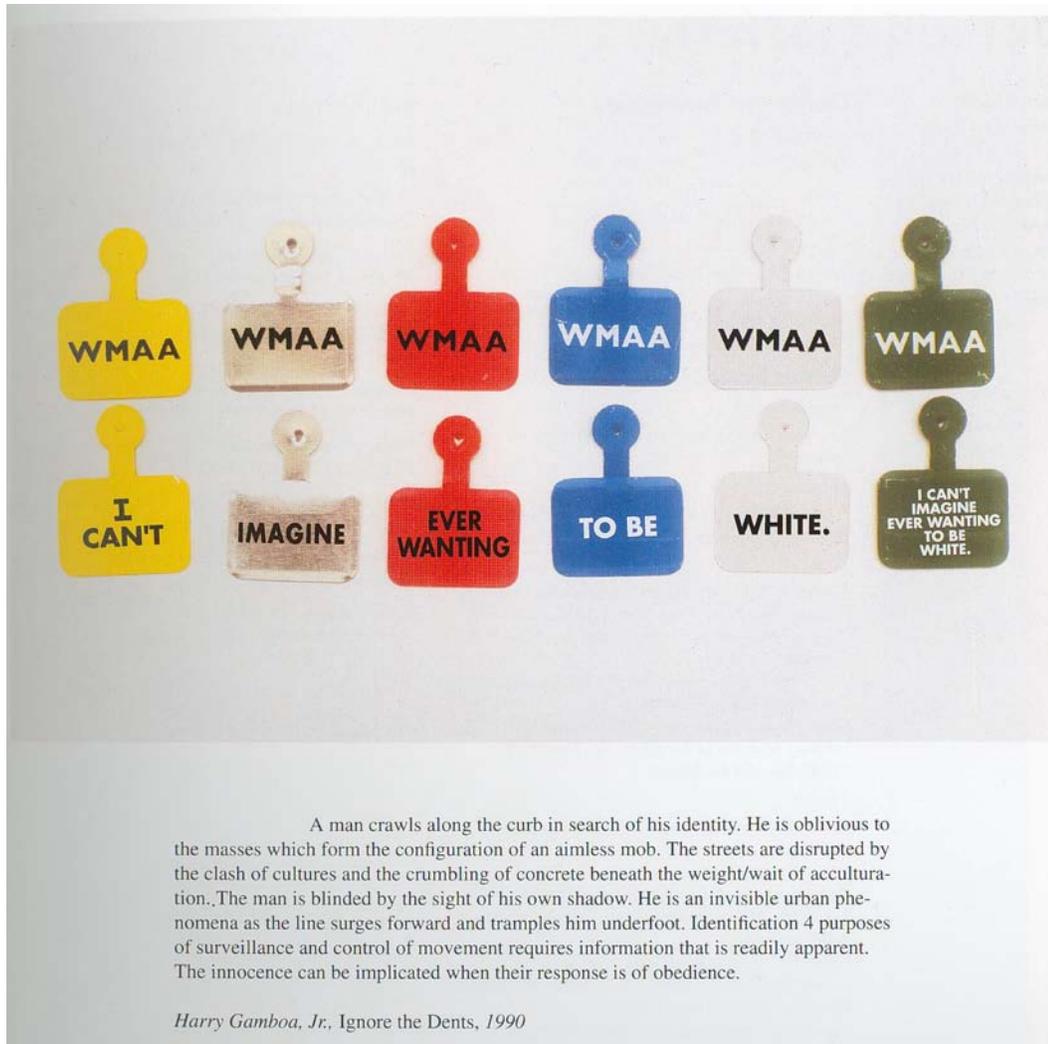


Figure 15. Daniel Martinez. *Museum Tags: Second Movement (Overture) or Overture con Claque—Overture with Hired Audience Members*. Mixed Media. 1993. In *1993 Whitney Biennial*. Exh. Cat. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993, 195.

hue (which became “peach”) was replaced in the Crayola boxes by the variety of skin tones represented in Kim’s “belly” paintings. Kim’s “bellies” efficiently “out” the powerful context of Whiteness metaleptically, incorporating context (the change of Crayola “flesh tones”) into text (artwork) by:

- mixing ironic reference both to the down and dirty political real world of confrontation at the market level: the debate on Crayola’s flesh tone crayons, and to the “high art” tradition of monochrome painting of White Abstract Expressionism/Minimalism/Neo-Geo artists; and
- referring to the ongoing debate over “content” in art. Kim’s belly paintings are exceedingly, and literally, “full” of content, the content being, of course, *color* (paint in latex bags), one of the elements in Greenbergian Modernism which contemporary art of quality is supposed to be *about*. But also, in the context of the culture wars and the discourse on multiculturalism, color (race) is also decidedly *content*, but just as decidedly *not* content about the Greenbergian prescription of paint color, but about color as a socially constructed sign of “otherness.”

Daniel Martinez’ *Museum Tags* (Figure 15) also operates metaleptically to reveal the Museum context as White. The redesigned metal tabs museum-goers are required to wear, to show they have paid admission, were re-worded. Instead of “WMAA,” the buttons distributed to exhibition attendees read, randomly, any one of five messages: 1) “I Can’t” 2) “Imagine” 3) “Ever Wanting” 4) “To Be” or 5) “White.” Only if one were completely aware of the part the text one was wearing played in the whole sentence, or if one lined up in the order of the sentence, with others wearing exactly the correct “next word” in the phrase, could the entire meaning be discerned. That the full significance of

the words is not available, but dispersed, fragmented, and only perceivable when either pointed out in a pedagogical move by the Museum itself, through some kind of personal heightened perception not possessed by all, or by sheer accident, is an important aspect of the work's ironic postmodernist gesture.

Once one did become aware of the entire text (either by accident, acute perception, or as a result of a pedagogical move by the Museum), one could then move to the next level of meaning of the work, and begin to recognize the ubiquitous power of the Whiteness context metaleptically in two ways:

First, there emerges an enhanced awareness of the coercion incorporated in the work: everyone must wear one of the buttons, and must pay to get these badges. Awareness of this coercive process could then make one aware of its analogy to the price one pays for inhabiting an identity, desired or not. One cannot escape one's "Whiteness" or "difference from Whiteness" and the buttons' enhancement of this awareness of imprisonment in identity raises Whiteness, as the *context* that generates and perpetuates this imprisonment, to a very high profile.

Second, Martinez' work also operates efficiently to "out" the power of the Whiteness context metaleptically by encouraging a sardonic awareness of the basic impotence of any particular "attitude" toward the coerced assigned identity. For example, one might wonder, upon discovering the coerced role one was being forced to play, what difference does it make to one's *being* White whether one can or cannot "imagine wanting to be White?" Conversely, if one is different from White can one never "imagine wanting to be White?" Or whether one is *either* White or *different from* White, how would it be possible *not* to imagine being White, since White means power?

Golden's essay operates its own metalepsis on Whiteness as context. Golden overdetermines her role and status in the exhibition as "token," by cramming her essay with examples of the exhibition's artists of color, thereby making the *context of* Whiteness expressed in the level of attention by her White colleagues to the issue of color more obvious.²³⁵ Golden's authorial performance in the catalog has the effect of raising the profile of Whiteness' operation as total environment for the exhibition.

The examples of Golden, Kim and Martinez demonstrate that artists and curators of color were completely in sync with the well-established postmodern discourse's recommendation of "using" the museum environment. They were also completely resonant with the postmodern appropriation of art history, both as extensions of an artist's rhetorical gestures, and as a mobilization of sly effect aimed at "outing" the museum and art history as handmaidens of the hegemonic (White) power structure. In addition, these works and texts are consonant with Lucy Lippard's notion of "Trojan Horses," since Golden, Kim and Martinez, among other exhibition contributors (essayists and curators), can be seen as operating from within the halls of power (the museum), to raise the material reality of the "Whiteness" of the museum institution to high visibility, readying it for debunking and disarming.

But is the demonstrable cleverness (or serendipity?) in gaining access to—and then infesting—the museum with "otherness" in order to "disrespect" and reveal the dominant (White) culture as context an "avant-garde" move? And if so, or if not, can it be called "activist?"

²³⁵ Or at least more obvious to anyone taking the time to count how many times each of the curators addresses a work by an artist of color.

The Culture Wars and “Compassion Fatigue” as Context

The height of the raging Culture Wars of approximately 1988-1992, and the resulting “compassion fatigue” that became palpable in and around the 1993 Biennial were perhaps a more assertive “context” than the theoretical environment, for both the exhibition and the reaction to it. In this section and the next, the social/political context of the early nineties portrayed by Steven Dubin, in his 1992 book *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* and bell hooks’ extension of the ideas of Cornel West, in two texts, one published before the 1993 Biennial, and the other a couple of years after it, are . They provide a useful frame for the consideration, in three subsequent sections of further evidence of whiteness as context for the 1993 Whitney Biennial exhibition. Chapter 3 concludes with these sections, which treat essays by the other writers of color in the 1993 Biennial catalog, Coco Fusco and Homi Babha; as well as Whitney Director Andrew Ross’ introduction to the 1993 Biennial catalog.

Steven Dubin

Sociologist of art Steven Dubin, in his *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* (1992), carefully dissects what he terms the “diversionary moves” of the right wing in focusing attention on fomenting and exacerbating art controversies in the late eighties and early nineties, and on the art world’s reactions to these moves. The key topical themes he treats, in relation to art, are race, identity politics and intergroup conflict.²³⁶ Dubin’s sociological account of the racial aspects of the culture wars of the late eighties and early nineties resonates strongly with perspectives articulated in *Out*

²³⁶Steven C. Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992). Dubin’s other themes include: a survey of the key political, cultural and social trends that served as backdrop and fertile soil for the “culture wars:” religion, patriotism, sex in art (the “pornography” issue), homosexuality and AIDS; right wing tactics; and the NEA as key battle site. Race and intergroup conflict/identity politics are addressed respectively in Chapter 3 and Chapter 12.

There... and especially those of Cornel West who, during this same period, challenged Black intellectuals and cultural producers to grapple with long-accepted ideas that did not fit the task at hand; namely the romanticized notion of an unmediated “Black community” and the unquestioned notion there could be a template to measure whether images of Blacks were “good” or “bad.”²³⁷

Dubin’s contributions to the discourse are as a sociologist, and not as a cultural or art historian. His book provides a vivid portrait of the climate of racial politics in the late eighties and early nineties, and especially how art and identity politics played out in complex interrelated maneuvers across the political spectrum. Dubin documents a situation nationwide during this period in which political polarization and sensitivities were felt and articulated at high decibel levels; and where rallying points of one group sounded alarms for another.

Dubin characterizes the climate of the late eighties and early nineties as one of transition in-group relations, in which “changing populations—[and] in some measure...policies such as affirmative action”²³⁸ were transforming institutions such as colleges and universities. This transformation had, by the beginning of the nineties, generated a serious backlash that became known as “compassion fatigue.”²³⁹

²³⁷ *Out There*, *ibid.*, 28.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ See Maurice Berger, *The Crisis of Criticism*, (New York: New Press, 1998), for a spirited debate about “compassion fatigue,” its close relative “victim art” and the reference to it in an infamous 1994 essay by *New Yorker* dance critic Arlene Croce (Arlene Croce, “A Critic at Bay: Discussing the Undiscussable.” *The New Yorker*, (December 1994-January 1995) Croce refused to see Bill T. Jones’ dance production, *Still/Here*, about AIDS, though she did give it a scathing review, calling the piece a prime example of victim art. Jones, who is black, gay, and HIV-positive, had committed the apparently unpardonable act of including gravely ill performers; as a result, Croce considered his work to be undiscussable. Joyce Carol Oates and Homi Bhabha rebut Croce in Berger’s anthology. For a good summary of the more general societal issues, see Katherine N. Kinnick, et al. “Compassion Fatigue: Communication and Burnout Toward Social Problems.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. 73, no. 3, (1996): 687-708.

Dubin cites as an example the 1991 effort to overhaul curricula in New York educational institutions so that it gave more attention to the contributions of Americans of a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. A report was generated, and read widely, due to the dissent of famous historian and former Kennedy cabinet official, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. who decried the curriculum project as encouraging “tribal warfare,” because it was “saturated with *pluribus* and neglectful of *unum*.”²⁴⁰ Similar disputes raged in institutions everywhere, especially in the legal arena, but not to uniform effect.

bell hooks: Popular Culture and Rupture

In her writings from 1990-1995, African American cultural critic bell hooks addressed the climate described by Dubin with passion, noting that, in the decade of the nineties, for African Americans of every class location, the overwhelming series of crises—economic and spiritual—and characterized especially by escalating racial violence, and loss of political clout, *was* postmodern culture. She urged Black intellectuals to begin an urgent and “passionate engagement with *popular culture*” which, she proposed, is, for people of color especially, the key “space for critical exchange;” *the* “central . . . location of resistance struggle . . . where new and radical happenings can occur.”²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Dubin, *ibid.*, 307. The Schlesinger quote is cited as: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “Toward a Divisive Diversity,” *The Wall Street Journal* (June 25, 1991): A22. The title of the report which Schlesinger refused to endorse was: “One Nation, Many Peoples.” Schlesinger was not the only well-known academic to debunk efforts to modify curricula. Two other examples cited by Dubin are: Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990) and D’nesh DeSouza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Sex and Race on Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991). Also, in 1990, the same year as the *Decade Show*, NEA National Council member Jacob Neusner called for the elimination of all funding for art that was “political, ideological or advocating social change.”

²⁴¹ bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” *Postmodern Culture* 1:1 (September 1990). See also hooks’ elaboration of these ideas in two books published in the wake of the 1993 Whitney Biennial: *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), in which she specifically “practices what she preaches,” by engaging in the book’s essays with “cultural practices and cultural icons . . . defined as on the edge, as pushing the limits, disturbing the conventional, acceptable politics of

hooks laments the “dearth of Black art criticism”—and the invisibility in mainstream texts of the small body of art criticism by Black writers, especially women. hooks makes no reference to the term “avant-garde” as it might relate to the cultural production practice of Black artists or Black art critics. But her recommendation—that popular culture and the vernacular are locations of choice for the development of “new and radical” African American cultural production—is especially resonant with key mainstream/White postmodernist cultural intervention strategies. The identification of the vernacular and the popular as important sites for African American cultural production is also consonant with “avant-garde” practice, which has always privileged the mixing of “high” and “low” cultural elements as both effective and “progressive.”

hooks expresses her abiding distress in her 1995 book, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, a reiteration and extension of her arguments in the early nineties text. She abhors the fact that, despite the focus of much postmodernist critical inquiry on the issues of “difference” and “otherness,” there has continued to be no more than spotty appearance of serious research into the cultural production of artists of color, and especially women artists of color.

hooks is also dismayed over what she sees as a widely-held belief among Blacks, that postmodernist theory has no significance for understanding contemporary Black experience; and, that Blackness can only be properly understood through “concrete gut level experience conceived either as opposing—or having no connection to—abstract

representation” and taking another look at these “established” interpretations by contesting, interrogating, recovering and redeeming them (Introduction, 5). Following the next year was *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), which collects key essays of art criticism by hooks from the previous two years, and adds 17 new interviews and essays, all with and about Black women artists.

thinking, and the production of critical theory.”²⁴² She urges Black intellectuals to reconsider the value of postmodernist tools of analysis. She argues that these tools can help Blacks recognize and elucidate the “multiple experiences of Black identity that are the lived conditions which make diverse cultural productions possible.” hooks contends that, without such recognition—among Black intellectuals especially—of the value of the tools of “postmodernist” critical analysis, and their aggressive deployment, Blacks will continue to be seen, both by themselves and by the larger society, as simplistically “falling into two categories—nationalist or assimilationist, Black-identified or White-identified.”²⁴³

hooks also argues for an interrogative stance on the part of Black critics. She urges Black intellectuals—especially those creating and writing about art—not to shrink from critiquing Black colleagues’ work, and especially from taking their fellow Black and White cultural producers to task for denying recognition to Black female/feminist artists and writers:

We [must not be] afraid of losing comrades, connections, or of just adding to the stress that our peers are already facing. To produce a body of excellent, sophisticated, diverse critical writing that addresses art by African Americans and people of color in general, we must collectively embrace rigorous dialectical exchange.²⁴⁴

hooks also urges her Black colleagues, male and female, not to shrink from scrutinizing the perspectives of those White counterparts (like Lucy Lippard, whose book *Mixed Blessings* hooks and Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains criticized publicly at a

²⁴² “Postmodern Blackness,” *ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ *Art on My Mind*, *ibid.*, 106-107.

symposium at the San Francisco Museum of Art) generally seen as “allies” with people of color.²⁴⁵

And, finally, hooks argues, despite the despair and nihilism that has resulted from the climate of crisis engulfing the Black community in the nineties, the postmodernist analyses and art that have grown out of it must be both continually interrogated *and* utilized, as they can either be “the space where ties are severed or ... [where] new and varied forms of bonding [can emerge]. To some extent, ruptures, surfaces, contextuality ... create gaps that make space for oppositional practices...”²⁴⁶

Homi Babha: Interstitiality as Site for Intervention

hooks’ identification of “gaps” and “ruptures” where oppositional practices can germinate resonates with Homi Babha’s notion of *interstitiality* in his essay for the 1993 *Whitney Biennial* catalog.²⁴⁷ In an evocative passage, Babha suggests a textile metaphor to describe how the foreign/other: “reveals the *interstitial* [my emphasis]; a mode of meaning [like] the textile [a] superfluity of folds and wrinkles...” In suggesting the metaphor of the textile-like interstitiality of meaning, Babha denies marginality and exteriority of cultural/racial/ethnic difference (the “foreign”). Instead, he portrays difference as integral with the fabric of meaning, but integral in the sense that its

²⁴⁵ hooks recounts this event, without giving the date it happened, nor whether the proceedings of the symposium were published. See *Art on My Mind...ibid.*, 106: “Several years ago I engaged in a critical conversation about art with Amalia Mesa-Bins at the San Francisco Art Institute. We were critical of Lucy Lippard’s book *Mixed Blessings*. While we both prefaced our critique by acknowledging the book’s value, some individuals in the audience, rather than hearing the ideas raised and grappling with them, heard our comments only as a personal attack. To them Lippard represented, and rightly so, a meaningful ally. Yet being an ally should not mean that any work one produces cannot be engaged dialectically, critically.” As mentioned earlier, Lippard’s book was received with a resounding silence from critics.

²⁴⁶ “Postmodern Blackness...” *ibid.*

²⁴⁷ Homi Babha. “Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation,” in *1993 Whitney Biennial*, *ibid.*, 62-72.

existence can be both hidden and, when mobilized/encountered, can materialize both itself and that which has previously “hidden” it in such a way that the fabric of meaning is itself transformed.

Babha argues that this notion of interstitiality explains how artworks, which operate from a so-called “borderline,” encounter/bring into existence a “newness” which “does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent;” but underscores the “foreign within;” what seems “invisible” to meaning because it grows interstitially, out of view, in the “superfluity of [meaning’s] folds and wrinkles.” One of Babha’s examples of the mobilization of such “interstitiality” in a 1993 Biennial contributor’s work is Afro-Puerto Rican Pepón Osorio’s installation, *La Cama* (Figure 16).

Babha cites this work as simultaneously “primal scene of lost-and found childhood memories... memorial to a dead nanny Juana, [and] the *mise-en-scene* of the eroticism of the emigrant,” which demonstrates Osorio’s adeptness at deploying his content in “the interstices of a range of practices: the ‘space of installation’ the spectacle of the social statistic, the transitive time of the body in performance.”²⁴⁸ Babha argues that the “newness” of a fabric of meaning that results is woven of the power and poignancy of emigrant memory that becomes “of a piece” with the range of postmodern art practices (the installation format, foregrounding of time, etc.) in which it is suffused, and through which it produces rich new meaning.

It is doubtful that hooks would have endorsed Babha’s “high theory” explication of Osorio’s *La Cama* as helpful to most Puerto Ricans or Blacks in “getting” how meaning constructs itself. The argument that the “foreign” is always already present and operative

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 64-69 for Babha’s discussion of Osorio, and other examples of interstitial work: especially those of Renee Green, Gary Hill and Guillermo Gómez-Peña.



Figure 16. Pepón Osorio. *La Cama*. Mixed Media. 1987. El Museo del Barrio, New York. In *1993 Whitney Biennial*. Exh. Cat. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993, 203.

in creating the “new,” is aimed at Babha’s fellow theorists, including, of course, hooks, who was coming to similar conclusions, stated somewhat differently. The question here is: for whom was this Biennial intended? Who was the audience to whom this art and these essays were directed? And, what are the implications of these questions (if not the answers to them) for determining whether the term “avant-garde” can be used to describe the work of certain artists and critics of color in the 1990s? And if so, or if not, whether these forms of cultural production can be called “activist?”

David Ross: Who is Admonished?

Whitney Director David Ross’ injunction—“Know Thy Self (Know Your Place)”—the title of his introduction to the *1993 Whitney Biennial* catalog—takes on an ironic flavor in the presence of the observations of Golden, hooks and Babha. Seeing Ross’ title through their perspectives, it seems to exude a rhetoric of admonition. But who is being admonished? What does the title of his introduction tell about the intended audience for this exhibition in its original form, as well as for audiences more remote in time who can only know the exhibition through the catalog? If, as has been argued, the context, both *of* and *in* the Biennial, is Whiteness, and if this argument is persuasive, then Director Ross’ introduction is perhaps more revealing than even he intended. Who are the intended recipients of these words from Ross? What meanings did (and do) they transmit to people of different backgrounds? What valences for the art in the exhibition might they suggest ... for an African American audience? For a Latino audience? For an Asian American audience? For a White audience? For an audience from other parts of the world? Or, was such a varied audience ever contemplated?

- “...are there some lines you shouldn’t cross? Some borders that are inviolate, some boundaries too well-guarded...”
- “...there is a deepening crisis of belief and a profound sense of displacement experienced almost universally...”
- “...art now being made transcends ... style...class, race, gender...it is disturbational...dark, it asks questions...is relentless and angry...”
- “...communities are at war, both with and at their borders. Issues of nation and nationality, ethnic essentialism, cultural diversity, dissolution and the politics of identity hang heavy in the air...”²⁴⁹

No doubt Whitney Museum Director Ross, and his team of curators who came up with the 1993 Biennial, *wished for* and *desired* a substantial audience of people of color. But, it seems clear that the profile of visitors to a museum like the Whitney, at the time of the 1993 Biennial probably still resembled fairly closely the 1975 profile sketched by Martha Rosler in her essay for *Art After Modernism*. Rosler’s survey, to recap, indicated that museum shows attracted a very high percentage of people who are occupationally involved in the art world—art-museum and gallery professionals, artists, art teachers, art students, critics and art historians²⁵⁰--a not-so-ethnically/racially—or class—mixed group in the mid-nineties, or today.

But, it seems—for all the reasons hooks suggests—that Blacks outside the middle classes, and other people of color *not* located in the intelligentsia, or in the percentage of people occupationally involved in the art world, probably did not frequent the 1993

²⁴⁹ David A. Ross, “Preface: Know Thyself (Know Your Place)” in *1993 Whitney Biennial*, *ibid.*, 9-10.

²⁵⁰ Rosler, “Lookers, Buyers, Dealers and Makers: Thoughts on Audience” in Wallis, *ibid.*

Whitney Biennial exhibition in large numbers, despite the significant presence of artists of color in it.²⁵¹ Those doing the selecting of art for inclusion, and writing the catalog essays, were no doubt keenly aware of this reality, and the catalog essays infer this awareness. So, one must conclude, again, this time from the museum director himself, that the *context* for the exhibition—consisting of the larger dominant culture, the art world within it, the operations of those creating the exhibition, the works in it, *and* the intended audience for it—was *Whiteness* throughout.

Coco Fusco: Guerrillas or Avant-Garde?

Coco Fusco, who was represented both as an artist in—and a catalog contributor for—the 1993 Whitney Biennial, (Figure 18) provides, in her essay, a reading of the art production of people of color which suggests that more nuanced cultural production by people of color had already happened to a certain degree by 1993. Fusco assesses the situation in this way:

...the best result of the cultural climate of the past decade has been the flourishing of a variety of artistic practices and perspectives, which testifies to the impossibility of reducing cultural identity to a simplistic paradigm. It appears that we have worked away from the once widely held belief that artists of color must all be engaged in...the act of imaginative re-recovery of a singular, unifying past in order for their work to be valid...these artists [in the Whitney Biennial] reflect the hybrid experiences that shape so much of contemporary life...they look at Western ...art history not to excise its racism but to excavate and play with symptomatic absences and stereotypes, creating a counter-history by bouncing off negative images and teasing out hidden stories.²⁵²

From Fusco's perspective, artists of color were producing work —right then, and evident in the 1993 Biennial—that could not only have an effect, interstitially, to create a

²⁵¹ At least one reviewer noted that, during several visits, he saw only 3 or 4 visitors of color, though the exhibition was jammed. Most of the people of color in the building during the exhibition were guards.

²⁵² Coco Fusco, "Passionate Irreverence: The Cultural Politics of Identity," in *1993 Whitney Biennial*, *ibid.*, 82-83.

new fabric of meaning; but that could also operate pedagogically to reveal to White audiences the construction of Whiteness as repressive power, while at the same time creating a colorful counter-history for those whose culture dominant Whiteness has sought to homogenize.

Fusco suggests a military metaphor for what artists of color were up to in the early to mid-nineties: “guerrilla warfare.” Many commentators have written of the term “avant-garde’s” military valence. In its original meaning,²⁵³ it referred to a small coterie of particularly well-equipped and perceptive individuals who “go on ahead” of the masses of troops to “scout” as well as to engage in trial skirmishes in order to identify the most vulnerable attack locations.

Fusco’s analogy also refers to armed struggle, but not at all in the sense of “avant-garde.” In guerrilla warfare, there are no massive numbers of troops, waiting to move forward in phalanx, and no well-defined “enemy territory.” Guerrilla fighters are not advance troops, preparing the way for massive assault. Guerrilla activity is sustained, operates through small groups of fighters, and involves mobility, infiltration and feint as key resistance tactics. Fusco points out that the resistance represented in works by artists of color in the kind of environment in which the Biennial appeared “is rarely direct, overt or literal; rather, it articulates itself through semantic reversals...the process of infusing

²⁵³ A recent example is Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 37. Murphy traces the earliest use of the term “avant-garde” to 1825 in France among Fourierist and Saint Simonians, movements that had “goals of meliorism and stimulation of social conscience.” Meanwhile, what is commonly known as the “historical avant-garde,” the movements [e.g., especially Dada and Surrealism, and, the focus of Murphy’s book, German Expressionism] of the early 20th century sought to “rummage through the debris of modernity for new forms...[and sought out] the marginalized, grotesque, deformed and discarded...an ‘anti-aesthetic’ of the ugly, fragmentary and chaotic to subvert the illusion of mastery, closure and control.” I will address Murphy later in this discussion.

icons, objects and symbols with different meanings.”²⁵⁴ She also notes that the “tactics of reversal, recycling and subversive montage” utilized by artists of color in the nineties, are precisely what “mainstream” critics have characterized as “postmodern.” These are also aesthetic gestures that have been the basis of many twentieth century avant-gardes’ production. But, Fusco also notes, artists of color have utilized these avant-garde gestures *in conjunction* with rich and powerful cultural constructs that come from hidden histories of repressed peoples.

Perhaps, in this sense, then, particular groupings of artists of color active in the early to mid-nineties (including, but not limited to, most of those represented in the 1993 Biennial) can be seen not as an avant-garde, but as a guerrilla force, operating within the strictures of Whiteness/Power and utilizing its very own “postmodern” tools, as Fusco puts it, “taking elements of an established...imposed culture and throwing them back with a different set of meanings.”²⁵⁵ The “troubling” of notions of margins and centers suggested by Golden, hooks, Fusco and Babha certainly favors the notion of a “guerrilla” process, in motion via a permanent, yet highly mobile group engaged in witty and powerful aesthetic reversals and infusions aimed at transforming the culture at large.

* * * * *

In summary, the discourse presented in Chapter 4 does not suggest that the work of artists of color places them in a position to be dubbed the “new avant-garde.” In this chapter, it is clear that there were both implicit and explicit references to cultural activism of artists of color, and the elements that can be considered activist in their work of this period. Nevertheless, the term “avant-garde” is infrequently visible. When it is visible,

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 84.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 83.

the term is usually not extensively parsed for any new or residual meanings, and is most often set up as a foil, a negative exemplar. In this sense, the trend toward more inclusion by the mainstream of art and criticism by people of color continued the earlier trend of ambivalence regarding use of the term.

**Chapter 5: Reaching The Other “Other” Audience—
An “Evangelist” Avant-Garde?**

In Chapter 5, a strain of discourse will be discussed which emerged in the middle to later nineties. In this strain of discourse, the profile of activist artists and activist art began to be much clearer and more specific because the view was retrospective. The focus here was on surveying artists and work that inhabited the public sphere, outside art institutions for some time. Most of the artists and collectives surveyed were still producing work by the mid- to late-nineties. In this chapter, issues are raised regarding how the practice of this form of art was situated in discourse in relation both to postmodernism and the “avant-garde.” Several exemplary texts will be discussed here in that connection, including Nina Felshin’s *But Is It Art: The Spirit of Art as Activism* (1995), Lynda Frye Burnham’s and Steven Durland’s *The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena—An Anthology from High Performance Magazine 1978-1998* (1998). Also, two late nineties exhibitions that surveyed this kind of cultural production are cited as contributors to this retrospective contribution to discourse. Chapter 5 ends with a look at a particularly assertive critique of this form of art as too frequently involved in “rant,” “aesthetic evangelism” and shock. This critique also proffers some provocative models for activist art effectiveness that do not rely on “rant,” “aesthetic evangelism,” and shock.

Felshin's Exemplars

In 1995, Nina Felshin's book *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* appeared, providing a distillation of a range of perspectives on late 1980s and early 1990s practices of art seen by Felshin as "activist." The essays included in the volume were commissioned specifically to address 12 exemplary activist art production approaches²⁵⁶ which, editor Felshin argues, characterize the practice in its most effective form.

Key elements of these exemplars, according to Felshin are their: "innovative use of public space to address issues of sociopolitical and cultural significance, and to encourage a community of public participation as a means of effecting social change."²⁵⁷ Also, none of Felshin's examples appear in traditional museum and commercial venues; they are process- rather than product-oriented; complex in the extreme, featuring a great deal of interaction with individuals and institutional entities not usually involved in the production of art. Additionally, Felshin argues, an individual alone rarely does this exemplary work. All are collaborative or collective to one degree or another.

²⁵⁶ Felshin, *ibid.* The groups and collaborations (and three individual artist) were (listed by earliest starting date); Newton and Helen Harrison (1969-present—meaning 2003); Mierle Laderman Ukeles (1969-present); Suzanne Lacy (1972-present); Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge; Group Material (1980-1994); American Festival Project (1982-present); Guerrilla Girls (1985-present); Gran Fury (1988-1992); Avalos, Sisco and Hock (1988-1993); WAC (1991-1994); Peggy Diggs (1991-present) Art and Homeless Collective (1987). Felshin claims these are "exemplary of a viable cultural practice that draws on elements of popular and political culture, technology and mass communication, and in the arts, Conceptualism and postmodernism from the 1960s to the present...are creatively expanding art's boundaries and audience and redefining the role of the artist." (13)

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 9. Felshin does not claim that her anthology is an authoritative, comprehensive history of activist art, and refers readers to Lippard, *Get the Message...*, *ibid*; Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier, eds, *Cultures in Contention* (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1985); and Arlene Raven, ed., *Art in the Public Interest* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989) as important earlier discussions of the topic, and catalogs of key producers. Another key text, which appeared in the same year (1995) as Felshin's, and cites a great many more artists and artist groups, was Suzanne Lacy's *Mapping the Terrain* *ibid.* I am using Felshin's text here as an example of commentary that provides definitions that appear, in distilled form in most of these other texts, and can be assessed as to their relationship with postmodernism and "avant-garde."

Of particular interest to this discussion is that all the featured producers (individual and group) emphasize non-art related audiences of mixed or varying cultural and racial character, either through the important element of grass-roots participation, or through the use of media as a way to involve a wide and diverse public. The connection to mass media, directly, or through mimicry—especially of advertising and “news” presentation—is indebted, Felshin points out, to “critical postmodernist art that addressed the media’s role in shaping dominant cultural representations,” including both Barbara Kruger’s and Jenny Holzer’s work. Felshin underscores the importance of a media orientation in all the work featured in her anthology, noting that “media became a national cultural obsession in the 1980s and virtually none since then has escaped its power and influence.”²⁵⁸

Felshin’s interest in the artists in her book, and her reasons for including them have little to do with the content of their art, which is quite diverse

I selected the artists in this book on the basis of the consistency, integrity and inventiveness with which they employ their *formal strategies* as well as for their interesting, complex and at times unresolved *relationships to the art world*. [My emphases]²⁵⁹

Felshin’s stated primary concerns with formal strategies and relationships to the art world signal a rather “modernist” perspective, or to put it another way, a “traditional art historical” perspective. Felshin’s emphasis on the formal aspects and art world connection of activist art practice is the reverse of what Coco Fusco and bell hooks especially outline as key for them when thinking of how artists of color should situate

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 15-16

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

themselves and position their practices. And the “reverse” has to do with who the audience is and where it is located.

As discussed in Part 2 Chapter 3 above, Fusco’s characterization of artists of color’s oppositional practice—of taking elements of an established, imposed culture and throwing them back with a different set of meanings—emphasizes the imposed, dominant/mainstream/White, aspect of culture as both source and audience. Although there are clearly some formal aspects and art world peculiarities that are things to be picked up and thrown back, in the kind of gesture Fusco recommends, the emphasis is on the “what” of the culture (realities of the persistence of Whiteness as post-colonialist power) rather than the “how” (postmodernist methods) one is to deal with them. By contrast, some of the artists Felshin highlights do emphasize “Whiteness” as source and audience for their work; but others reverse it, borrowing from and aiming back at non-art related and frequently predominantly non-White communities, often those facing extreme (especially economic) straits.

For example, David Avalos’, Elizabeth Sisco’s and Louis Hock’s collaborative practice,²⁶⁰ given a chapter in Felshin’s anthology, very much falls under the rubric of taking from Whiteness to educate/transform Whiteness. All their projects have required extensive negotiation/collaboration with local institutions of authority such as the mass

²⁶⁰ Avalos, Sisco and Hock worked actively in San Diego on this kind of activist art project from 1988-1993, when they each moved back to individual art practice. They do continue to work together from time to time. The most recent of their collaborations was a 2001 commission from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Titled “Oracle@Casa de Cambio” the work is a facsimile of a video-poker machine that provides those interacting with it with “virtual fortunes for a global reality.” Participants insert a dollar bill, and receive a fake bill that reads “One World Bank” on the front, and offers a wisecracking fortune on the back. The “Oracle” also includes a video screen with a loop of a border patrol office waving you forward. The work also refers to Silicon Valley and the proliferation in the late 1990s and early 2000s of Indian casinos.

transit agency, the administrators of government office buildings and exterior spaces, and even the mechanisms of funding of the federal government (e.g., the NEA).

In each of their projects, they have bitten the hand that fed them to raise awareness. For example, in their *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation*, they rented advertising space on buses to lampoon boosterism in the border city of San Diego (Figure 17) by providing some new wording and imagery for a Chamber of Commerce-developed slogan ("Welcome to America's Finest City—San Diego") showing the handcuffed hands of an *indocumentado*, and the hands of restaurant dishwasher scraping a dirty dish. This move directly addressed a situation in San Diego where undocumented immigration from Mexico is inextricably intertwined with the tourist industry. The project dramatically underscored that enforcement of immigration is also inextricably related in San Diego to the low wages the immigrants receive, because to protest the wage levels is to invite deportation.

In another project, Avalos/Sisco/Hock sought and received a grant from NEA (via a local San Diego museum) to engage in a community art project, and then "invested" the money in the community by giving the grant monies directly to undocumented immigrants. The resulting local and national furor (and extensive national and international media coverage) caused by this "investment" in undocumented workers raised the level of visibility of the way Whiteness power operates in the Border economy, by making the victims' (the undocumented Mexican workers who underpin San Diego's tourist



Figure 17. David Avalos, Elizabeth Sisco, David Hock. *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation*. Bus poster. Silk Screen, 1988. In Lucy Lippard. *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990, 177.

economy) situation inescapably apparent.²⁶¹ At the other end of the spectrum was the Artist and Homeless Collaborative (1988-1994), (which also merited a full chapter in the Felshin anthology), started by White New York photographer Hope Sandrow, in a spirit of “reclamation,” a process about which *But Is It Art...* essayist Andrea Wolper asks:

Can art help society’s “throwaways” to reclaim positions as independent, functioning members of the community? Can it provide a means for people living on the edges to participate fully in their own reclamation, becoming the co-designers rather than the mere recipients of programs created to facilitate their reintegration? Can art...have any appreciable impact on the lives of people struggling merely to survive? ...can art function as a kind of operating theater in which the often polarized segments of a community come together to create something not seen before?²⁶²

The answers to these questions seem, at this remove, to be predominantly negative, since Sandrow’s project lasted only a few years. But the “success stories” recounted in the essay on the Project do indicate that, by the time the essay was written, several of the

²⁶¹ The two works referred to are: “Welcome to America’s Finest Tourist Plantation,” 1988. Silkscreened posters, 50” x 20” installed on 100 busses in San Diego during Super Bowl XXII (Figure 17); and “Art Rebate/Arte Reembolso,” 1993, which was commissioned by the Centro Cultural de la Raza and the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art as part of its *La Frontera/The Border* exhibition. The artists distributed \$4,500 of a \$5,000 grant from the Museum and the Centro, money derived from the NEA, to undocumented workers. Each participant who received an envelope with \$10 in it, also received a statement that said: “This ten dollar bill is part of an art project that intends to return tax dollars to taxpayers, particularly ‘undocumented taxpayers.’ The art rebate acknowledges your role as a vital player in an economic community indifferent to national borders.” See Robert L. Pincus, “The Invisible Town Square: Artists’ Collaborations and Media Dramas in America’s Biggest Border Town.” in Felshin, *ibid.*, 31-51.

²⁶² Andrea Wolper, “Making Art, Reclaiming Lives: The Artist and Homeless Project,” in Felshin, *ibid.*, 251-252. Sandrow’s project was short-lived and beset with problems, though testimonials from the women involved were positive. Another project, also mentioned in the Felshin book, which addressed homelessness, was the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), instigated in 1985 by performance artist John Malpede, which recruited homeless people from the Skid Row area of Los Angeles to work collectively with Malpede and his artist-colleagues to create performances that illuminated the issues facing homeless people. Malpede is still active with LAPD, and the American Festival Project, which has been, since 1982, the home for LAPD and other performing arts groups that operate in similar collective manner with local communities, especially with people of color and people living in poverty, the developmentally disabled, children in inner city neighborhoods and the elderly. The American Festival Project, in 1994, the year before the publication of Felshin’s anthology, consisted of: Carpetbag Theater of Tennessee (African American); Francisco González y su Conjunto, California (Chicano); El Teatro de la Esperanza, California (Chicano); A Traveling Jewish Theater, California (Jewish); Junebug Productions, Louisiana (African American); Liz Lerman and the Dance Exchange, District of Columbia (multi-ethnic, multiage); Pregones, New York (Puerto Rican); Robbie McCauley and Company (interracial); Urban Bush Women, New York (African American); Appalachian Roadside theater, Kentucky (Appalachian White). The groups frequently work together on projects and are still together under the American Festival Project rubric.

women who had participated in the project had moved into more or less permanent housing situations, and their futures seemed less bleak than when they had first come to Sandrow's attention. But what is more difficult to assess is, as Wolper asks, whether art helped in this process.

Durland and Burnham and "Community Arts"

Projects like Sandrow's proliferated throughout the U.S. in the early to mid-nineties. As Steven Durland, a long-time cultural activist (and co-originator with Linda Frye Burnham of *High Performance* magazine, now defunct), noted in the Introduction to the 1998 anthology of articles from that journal:

...in the early nineties we began to notice that more and more socially committed artists were changing the context of their work. Artists who regularly appear in the pages of the [*High Performance*] magazine were dropping out of sight. When we tracked them down we found that they were now doing art with at-risk youth or in prisons or hospices or just in their neighborhoods. They believed that the arbitrary separation of art world and real world had made them less effective as artists... This new sensibility didn't ...reject the art world, but...viewed it as one of many contexts in which art could exist...the context of art was just as crucial to its success as the form and content.²⁶³

Durland was writing this in the late 1990s, a period when the promise of the Clinton Administration had vanished in an avalanche of accusations, culminating in his impeachment by the House of Representatives, the votes toeing party lines. It was also a period in which Newt Gingrich, the leader of the Republican Contract with America,

²⁶³ Steven Durland, "Introduction." in Lynda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland, eds., *The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena—An Anthology from High Performance Magazine 1978-1998* (Gardiner, NY: Critical Press/Gunk Foundation, 1998). This anthology was published the year of the final demise of *High Performance Magazine*. As Durland notes in his introduction, as the years went by, *High Performance* shifted its focus, in addressing "new, unrecognized and innovative work in the arts," from, in the beginning, performance art, to, in the last several years before the publication folded, on community-based art. Durland and Burnham are continuing to document the community arts movement on the Internet via their website www.communityartsnet.org.

resigned under threat of investigation by a Congressional ethics committee; and NEA, under pressure from Congress, finally ended all grants to individual artists.²⁶⁴

Since the early to mid-nineties, there had been a strong emphasis, in some quarters of the art world, on portraying the artist as a responsible citizen who deployed her or his talents and training in ways that were constructive in addressing social ills. Durland and Burnham's journal *High Performance*, was a primary locus for publicizing the artist as constructive citizen.

Surveying Activist Art at the End of the Nineties

From 1996-1998, a number of retrospective exhibitions took place which underscored that—despite the continuing vehemence of the culture wars, and the successes of the right wing in portraying the art world, including especially artists practicing various forms of cultural activism, as arrogant and self-absorbed—artists had been engaged in substantial ways as citizens with more general audiences for some time. In 1996, Julie Ault, one of the founders of Group Material, organized *Cultural Economies: Histories from the Alternative Arts Movement* at the Drawing Center in New York, clearly illustrating the trajectory especially of collective art making that sought to address real life issues of particular New York City communities.

Also in 1996, Exit Art in New York produced an archival show—*Counter Culture*—of key works demonstrating a history of oppositional art exhibited through them since

²⁶⁴ See Michael Brenson, *Visionaries and Outcasts: The NEA, Congress and the Place of the Visual Artist in America* (New York: The New Press, 2001), for a history of the individual artist fellowship grant program at NEA, 1964-1995. See also Jane Alexander, *Command Performance: An Actress in the Theater of Politics* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), for an account of the experiences of Clinton's appointee to head the NEA, from 1993-1997. The end of the individual artist fellowships happened on Alexander's watch.

their first show, *Illegal America*, in 1982.²⁶⁵ In 1998, the New Museum in New York City fielded its *Urban Encounters* exhibition, curated by artist Greg Sholette, (a key actor in the various groups that created activist art in New York during the 1980s and 1990s) which documented a decade of work by six of the city's key activist art collectives.

Beyond the “Evangelists:” A “Post”Avant-Garde?

Two books appeared in 1998 that shed light on how the notions of “avant-garde,” postmodernism and activism could be seen to relate to the discourse of the phenomenon of the “artist as citizen” and the community arts movement: Grant Kester’s anthology of sixteen *Afterimage* essays (dating from 1982-1995): *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*; and Richard Murphy’s *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism and the Problem of Postmodernity*.²⁶⁶

Kester’s stated purpose in organizing his anthology to include particular *Afterimage* essays, was to provide a look back at the production of activist art, from the beginning of

²⁶⁵ Artists included in Exit Art’s 1982 *Illegal Art Show*: Vito Acconci, Gunther Brus, Barry Bryant, Chris Burden, William Farley, John Fekner, John Giorno, GAAG, Abbie Hoffman, Sam Hsieh, Jay Jaroslav, Komar & Melamid, George Maciunas, Gordon Matta-Clark, Richard Mock, Charlotte Moorman, Hermann Nitsch, Dennis Oppenheim, Jan Van Raay and the Real Estate Show. The exhibition consisted of texts and photographs, “markers” of political actions transformed by documentation into art. The “crimes” (30 instances) included treason (Louis Aragon’s pro-Soviet poem), counterfeiting, falsification of identity, trespassing, lewd public exposure (Charlotte Moorman’s infamous nude cello act). The *Illegal Art Show* in the 1982 version, and the update Exit Art fielded in 1990 as the Culture Wars were heating up were featured in the 1995 *Counter Culture* exhibition along with other key events at Exit Art from the eighties and nineties, including (among others): Jerry Kearns (1985), PAD/D (*Concrete Crisis: Urban Images of the eighties*, 1987); a group show of Ida Applebroog, Robert Colescott, Leon Golub, Jerry Kearns, Komar and Melamid, Juan Sanchez, Nancy Spero, May Stevens, Anton Van Dalen, Martin Wong titled *The Social Club* (1988); David Hammons (1989); *Juan Sánchez: Rican/Structured Convictions* (1989—first catalog of his work); Krzysztof Wodiczko: *New York City Tableaux – Tompkins Square* (1989); Jimmie Durham (1989); Nancy Grossman (1990); David Wojnarowicz (1991). Exit Art has an extensive archive, of which the items included in the 1996 exhibition *Counter Culture* were a small proportion. The Exit Art archive has not yet been made available for study. The above information was derived from research during visits to the *Counter Culture* exhibition, and selected materials copied with permission from Jeannette Ingberman, co-director of Exit Art.

²⁶⁶ Grant Kester, ed., *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998); and Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

the Reagan Administration (1980) to the period in and around the victory of the Republicans in achieving a Congressional majority only two years into the Clinton Administration (1994). Kester notes that there was a need to resurface the fact that activist art had been done, and been effective, something that was invisible in the late nineties.

In a paper delivered at a conference in Europe in 1998,²⁶⁷ the same year as the appearance of *Art, Activism and Oppositionality*, Kester outlined the characteristics of U.S. society at the end of the nineties that undoubtedly caused him to feel the need to re-publish these particular articles at this particular time. He decried the following phenomena in the U.S. as illustrative of a moving away from an ideal of a “shared commitment to ... public good ...”

- replacement of public education by “a system of selective voucher schools which often violate the separation of church and state...”
- the proliferation of fortified gated communities among the wealthy “as a way to simultaneously express class privilege and...opt out of shared municipal services...”
- the conversion of public universities into “research fiefdoms for major corporations”
- the collusion of Republican politicians and industry lobbyists in redrafting “federal regulatory legislation intended to protect the public from their own companies;”
- restricting health care and social services for those in most dire need of them;

²⁶⁷Grant Kester, “Dialogical Aesthetics:” A Critical Framework for Littoral Art.” See *Variant 9*, 2000 (<http://www.variant.ndtilda.co.uk/9texts/KesterSupplement.html>). This paper was originally presented at a 1998 conference “Critical Sites: Issues in Critical Art Practice and Pedagogy,” Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire County, Dublin, September, 1998.

- denial that any vestiges of racism, sexism and class discrimination exist; that those who fail therefore do so because of personal deficiencies, not because of structural impediments; and
- overall, militant opposition from Conservatives to any “political analysis that seeks to explain poverty or criminality as the result of economic and social inequality.”²⁶⁸

In a long, complex and passionate introduction (composed in 1997) to *Art, Activism and Oppositionality*, Kester describes a new imperative that was emerging for artists who wished to deploy their art as activist. For him, this new imperative was related to these social realities, as well as to the enervating decade-long attacks on art during the Culture Wars.

The assumption that the public *necessarily* values art making and the artist can no longer be sustained. As we move toward a society in which the buffering institutions of the liberal state gradually disappear, artists will be confronted with the difficult choice between quietism and withdrawal or renewed engagement. It is necessary perhaps now more than ever, to think critically and constructively about what constitutes an effective activist art practice. The essays in this anthology offer one set of guideposts for this inquiry. We hope that it can act as both a record of this inquiry as it unfolded in the pages of *Afterimage* and as an incitement to carry it on into the future.²⁶⁹

Kester’s anthology contributes to an effort to keep alive an-Other art tradition that was expressed in the same period by the 1990s “survey” entities, like Ault’s, Exit Art’s and Sholette’s exhibitions, as well as Felshin’s art-exemplars, and Burnham and Durland’s anthology tracing the recent history of the community arts movement. At the

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 8

²⁶⁹ Grant Kester, “Ongoing Negotiations: *Afterimage* and the Analysis of Activist Art,” in *Art, Activism and Oppositionality*, *ibid.*, 17. At the time of publication of this book, Kester was in the faculty at the University of Washington’s Art History Department. He served as editor of *Afterimage* from 1990-1995.

same time, Kester especially takes pains not to elide the differences between—and dangers inherent in—the various forms of cultural production represented by these various exhibitions and anthologies.

In particular, Kester warns against forms of artistic “activism” that “heedlessly transgress boundaries of class, race and privilege...and engage in ...acts ‘on behalf of’ any number of disenfranchised ‘others...’” He argues that such activity, when unexamined and blithely engaged in, can and do correspond directly with, and play directly into, the right-wing’s insistence on privatized philanthropy. This kind of privatization, promulgated insistently during the eighties and nineties, and directly from the bully Presidential pulpits of both Reagan and Bush, was based on an across-the-board denial that poverty, criminality and wage inequities are structurally produced.

The “privatization” argument portrays government involvement in assisting poor people—the homeless, drug addicts, the poor—as inappropriate, because “these people” have arrived at their station in life because they did not have the intelligence or “gumption” to make a success of their lives, or they have fallen into negative pursuits through moral weakness. For the “privatizers,” the best way to address these “unfortunates” problems was through the blandishments of a “philanthropic middle-class subject who is able [and willing] to make contact with and spiritually ‘improve’ the racial or class Other”²⁷⁰ while not using the tax monies of the rest of society (e.g., especially the rich).

Kester suggests that artists are drawn into this morass because of the long history of an ameliorative “avant-garde” (tracing back to the Saint Simonians in France, or to Coleridge’s “clerisy”). This form of avant-garde, probably the earliest, consisted of artists

²⁷⁰ Kester, “Dialogical Aesthetics,” *ibid.*, 11.

and other intellectuals, who, honored by society as uniquely and inherently talented—as well as highly skilled in aesthetic techniques and understanding, combined with unusually well-developed senses of autonomy and individuality—saw themselves, and were seen, as particularly well-equipped to provide inspiration toward progress, cross-class, for the greater good of humanity. All of this has led, in the present, in Kester’s view, to the notion of the artist as somehow able to “create” community, and “spiritually improve the racial or class ‘Other’” because of “a superior aesthetic power.” This persistent notion of the “shamanistic-healer” quality possessed by artists, allegedly equips them with the ability to cross social and cultural barriers with aplomb because they operate from a “transcendent or aesthetically autonomous position.”²⁷¹

Kester has argued against the “shaman-healer” notion for a number of years.²⁷² He has evocatively labeled as “Aesthetic Evangelists”²⁷³ those artists who operate in this

²⁷¹ Ibid., 15.

²⁷² And is continuing to do so. A new book that elaborates many of these ideas is scheduled for publication imminently. As another example, among the provocative analyses Kester has put forward is a trenchant treatment of the role of the “alternative artists’ space” (extant from the early 1970s and at this writing, in serious decline) as involving more than the artists and artistic production served by them. See Grant Kester, “Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public,” In *Art, Activism and Oppositionality*...ibid., 112-119 (This essay appeared in *Afterimage* 20:6 (January 1993). In this essay, Kester proposes, for example, that “the institutional network of the alternative sector...raises questions about the discourse of professionalism and issues of autonomy...in the context of a more contingent and specifiable set of bureaucratic drives and rhetorics.” He invokes then-current notions (citing especially Barbara and John Ehrenreich’s work) of the PMC (Professional-Managerial Class) composed of “a broad range of intellectual and cultural producers whose livelihood derives ...from their ability to create and regulate a set of analytic or symbolic discourses.” The PMC (of which, according to Kester, artist-administrators of “artist spaces” are members) is situated between capital and labor, and is in charge of “reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations.” Kester asserts that artist-administrators operate like the PMC of which they are a part, including the promulgation of professionalism, and the drive to ensure autonomy. Key to this is a view of the artist as disenfranchised, in need of “empowerment,” exploited...just like the working classes the artist spaces were also supposed to assist (according to the language authorizing NEA involvement in funding and promoting artists’ spaces). The problem with this, according to Kester, is that “the objective social and economic position and the cultural cachet” of artists “...places them in direct conflict with the needs of poor or homeless people,” pointing to the well-known connection between the arrival of artists in a run-down neighborhood, and the advent of the neighborhood’s gentrification.

mode, “philanthropically,” to “help” the poor and disenfranchised out of an uninterrogated self-perception of their “specialness” as artists. The lack of self-criticism and refusal of political analysis on the part of these artist-“philanthropists,” Kester argues, have combined with a very real economic situation in which artists can no longer survive by grass roots involvement alone. The unfortunate result, Kester argues, has been the forging of questionable alliances (both direct and overt, as well as tangential and unintended) with deeply compromised institutions and right wing entities.

Kester: Rant vs. Dialogue

At the same time, Kester gives no quarter to the group of artists (like many of those in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, and in Exit Art’s two shows on *Illegal Art*) who see themselves as provocateur-guerrillas, and whose principal weapon is what he calls the rhetoric of “rant.” In his essay “Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public” (written significantly, in 1993, the same year as the Whitney Biennial,

²⁷³ See Grant Kester, “Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Art.” *Afterimage* 22:6 (January 1995), 5-11. A key example of “aesthetic evangelism,” to which Kester returns repeatedly in his writing and conference presentations, is the collaborative project between New Orleans artist Dawn Dedeaux and young black men in prison. Kester summarizes Dedeaux’s project: “Dedeaux, who is from a White, upper-class New Orleans family, spoke of the project as a way to overcome her fear of young black men after being mugged in the French quarter. The young black men she worked with thus served as the vehicle for a kind of immersion therapy that allowed her to transcend her own painfully self-conscious Whiteness. At the same time, Dedeaux’s project [titled “Soul Shadows: Urban Warrior Myths, 1993—the exhibition traveled to Baltimore and Los Angeles and was widely criticized, especially by African American critics..and Kester] positioned her subjects as ciphers of black criminality (they are always viewed in the context of prison and of discussions about their crimes)...” Since Dedeaux’s project first circulated in 1993 two things have happened, as Kester reports: “...in 1996, one of Dedeaux’s subjects...was arrested for murder...and the FBI raided Dedeaux’s studio seizing interviews and videotapes...Dedeaux ...presented a mocking ‘self-portrait’ in a 1997 issue of *Art Papers* which featured her in ... blackface makeup with the phrase ‘Do you like me better now?’ written on the palm of her hand.” Of the latter, Kester notes: “This image [of Dedeaux in blackface] is presumably meant as an indirect citation of David Hammons’ billboard, ‘How you like me now?’ installed on the streets of Washington DC as part of [an exhibition of African American art] in 1989...” And meant by the African American artist Hammons as “a critique of Democrats who feared that Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition would split the Black vote” but which was misinterpreted by local Black men from the neighborhood who sledgehammered the piece. Kester comments: “Dedeaux displays an almost instinctive affinity for conservative views on race...she transforms Hammons’ image ... into a caustic lamentation on the effects of reverse racism [and] herself as the oppressed victim of mean-spirited critics who attacked her solely on the basis of her skin color.” Kester “Dialogical Aesthetics,” *ibid*, 14.

but before it opened, in which some critics complained bitterly of the “rant” tone of works included), Kester looks at the rhetoric of “rant” in connection with an extended analysis of how “audience” is imagined/constructed by artists utilizing this rhetoric.²⁷⁴

Kester proposes that “the implied viewer [audience] for [the artists that employ “rant”] is often a mythical father figure, conjured up out of the artist’s imagination in order to be shouted at, attacked, radicalized, or otherwise transformed by the work ...but who...seldom arrives...” to receive the message. “Thus the actual reception of these works has been largely rhetorical.”²⁷⁵ Kester also argues that “[a]t the center of the rant is the notion of the performance as a cathartic event in which artists become channels or mediums for the congealed residues of both their own and other people’s experience of social oppression.”²⁷⁶

The problem with the notion of an artist as a “transcendent subjectivity” uniquely capable of “channeling” the social oppression of others is, Kester contends, that it is possible to be both privileged as an artist because of society’s continuing endowment of the artist with “special” status, and oppressed as a member of a marginalized group. In

²⁷⁴ Kester, “Rhetorical Questions...” *ibid.*, In his forthcoming book, scheduled to appear in 2004, portions of which he has generously made available to me pre-publication, Kester expands (in Chapter 3: Dialogical Aesthetics) the discussion in his 1993 “Rhetorical Questions...” essay, and broadens his view of the “rant” phenomenon to the notion of “the politics of shock,” which he traces to the cultural and political ferment surrounding avant-garde art in Germany and Russia following World War I. This approach of “shock” is found by Kester in every major avant-garde spokesperson of the period, and is contrasted with the “rapt epiphanic response to the work of art [advocated] by Duncan Bell, Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried.” Kester summarizes his analysis of the views of the giants of the earliest avant-garde on this “politics:” “...shock...is necessary to overcome the anesthetic haze of modern life...” and “is followed by a re-consolidation of the subject around a heightened capacity to perceive the hidden operations of political power.” (p.2 of the typescript provided me).

²⁷⁵ Kester, “Alternative Arts Sector,” *ibid.*, 123-124. Artists Kester cites as key “ranters:” Guillermo Gómez Peña and Coco Fusco (presumably their 1992 performance as “indigenous specimens” in a cage—*The Year of the White Bear*, 1992, which was also the work included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial); John Malpede’s Los Angeles Poverty Department; Karen Finley; Barbara Kruger, David Wojnarowicz and Holly Hughes.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

most of the cases of artists who utilize “rant” cited by Kester, this reality has not been acknowledged. An example is Guillermo Gómez Peña, whom, Kester reminds us, is “widely courted by the nonprofit art world, is the recipient of a MacArthur fellowship with access to audiences and communications networks throughout the county...[and possessed of] a level of cultural capital that makes it...difficult ...to identify himself unproblematically as a megaphone for the oppressed.”²⁷⁷

Despite Kester’s obvious distaste for the “rant” approach, and his penchant for postmodern troubling of accepted realities of the range of practices grouped under the rubric “activist art,” he does posit exemplars of what he considers salutary. The artists and artist-collectives Kester sees as most capable of dodging the various compromising bullets (such as the aesthetics of “rant”) he carefully describes, are those whose work falls into a category he has labeled “dialogical.” In Chapter 3 of his forthcoming book, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Kester spells out the characteristics of dialogical art, carefully distinguishing it from the avant-garde tradition.²⁷⁸ Kester underscores, in this chapter of his book, as exemplars:

Wochenklausur, an artist collective from Austria, Stephen Willats from the UK, and Suzanne Lacy, Jay Koh and Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle from the U.S..²⁷⁹

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 126.

²⁷⁸ Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, [unpublished typescript], Chapter Three: Dialogical Aesthetics.

²⁷⁹ These are the exemplars of a “dialogical aesthetic” practice Kester cites in this chapter of his yet unpublished book, *Conversation Pieces*.... I have not seen the entire manuscript, so cannot comment on the other artists and artist-collectives he analyzes, and whether they are presented, as are these artists, as relatively unproblematic models. Other artists and artist-collectives Kester mentions in the Introduction, in addition to the artists he treats in Chapter 3, include the following: the ROUTES Project (Northern Ireland), Artists Placement Group (UK), Helen and Newton Harrison (U.S.), Ian Hunter and Celia Lerner/Littoral, Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge, Fred Lonidier, Cristen Crujido, Toro Adeniran Kane, the Art of Change and Junebug Productions (Environmental Justice Project).

Kester's recommended exemplars have little in common with the historical avant-garde, as he suggests when he distills the historical avant-garde's operative process as bifurcated. In one direction, the historical avant-garde's operative mechanism is alienation. Kester sees this as quintessentially represented by Walter Benjamin's call to "snatch" objects "from the false context of the historical continuum," and to "confront...with surprise and shock." For Benjamin this surprise and shock leads to revealing the lie of hegemonic cultural forms through a "heightened presence of mind" which in turn is promoted by the artist's novel mixings of references to mass media and entertainment.²⁸⁰ In the other direction, Kester notes, the approach represented by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, is the call for art to be "difficult," to emphasize its materiality, and to avoid references to mass culture/kitsch in favor of producing work that will evoke what Kester calls a "rapt, epiphanic response."

Kester notes some areas of commonality in these two seemingly diametrically opposed avant-garde perspectives, namely:

In each case, the aesthetic is defined as an immediate...somatic experience (a shock or epiphany) that is only subsequently "made sense of" in terms of an existing discursive system (the hierarchy of "great art" for Greenberg or Fried; the political analysis of capitalism for Benjamin). In each case, emancipatory aesthetic knowledge is equated with that which is prior to or beyond shared discourse...[and] both of these perspectives appeal to an immediacy, a simultaneity of experience (cf Fried's "presentness"), as opposed to an aesthetic experience defined by duration.²⁸¹

Kester asserts that his exemplars (Lacy, Wochenklausur, Koh, Willats and Mangano-Ovalle) are interested in an aesthetic process of significant *duration*, one that cannot be

²⁸⁰ Kester cites Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn, trans. (New York: Schocken, 1969), 238.

²⁸¹ Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, Chapter 3, *ibid.*, 2.

achieved through an “instantaneous...flash of insight, but through de-centering, a movement outside self (and self-interest) through *dialogue* over time.”²⁸² Nevertheless, Kester does not take the next step and designate his exemplars as a “new (dialogical) avant-garde,” despite the fact that, in his argument, his exemplars both track particular aspects of avant-garde tradition, *and* depart from it—and that a new kind of critical apparatus is needed to assess it.

Murphy: a Postmodernist Avant-Garde?

Richard Murphy’s discussion of “avant-garde” in relation to postmodernism provides a nuanced discursive template through which to read Kester’s turn-of-the-millennium perspective on avant-garde in relation to activism in art production. While Murphy’s primary purpose in his 1998 book—*Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism and the Problem of Postmodernity*—is a revisionist analysis of German expressionism of the twenties and thirties, in his last chapter, he suggests how this expressionist cadre of the historical avant-garde (he spends his book arguing that the German expressionists were decidedly part of the early 20th Century European avant-garde) and postmodernism can be linked.

Murphy’s principal point in this section of his book—that the historical avant-garde (and the German expressionists in particular) prepared the way for postmodernism—is not unlike some of the points made by commentators addressed earlier in this discussion (e.g., especially Sayre and Suleiman). For example, Murphy sees analogies between the operations of the historical avant-garde and postmodernist cultural producers in the following:

²⁸² Ibid.

- the deconstruction of the notion of the possibility of a stance “outside” society and culture;
- the challenge to the idea of “originality” through deployment of pastiche and parody;
- the reversal of the notion of history as objective fact in favor of history as discursively formed;
- the introduction of the idea of self-reflexivity, which underscores the contingency and provisional nature of the avant-garde itself; and
- the avoidance of meta-narrative; and advocacy, instead, of the creation of smaller and more local narratives designed for short-term relevance as sites of resistance to the development of meta-narratives.²⁸³

All of these qualities, Murphy argues, are characteristic both of the (German expressionist) historical avant-garde,²⁸⁴ and of postmodernism. With this, no doubt Kester would agree.

Nevertheless, Kester contends that the templates of the variants of postmodernism (and, one imagines, of the various avant-gardes as well) are not suited to evaluate his

²⁸³ Murphy, *ibid.*, 262-263.

²⁸⁴ Of course the historical avant-garde also included the constructivists in Russia and the Weimar-based Bauhaus whose projects were certainly utopic and ameliorative, emphasizing the educational value of art. That strain is represented in contemporary work of the 1980s and 1990s by community art practice. An aspect of the historical avant-garde that emphasized a more militant and politically-oriented perspective included artists clustering around the Hungarian avant-garde journals *A Tett* (The Action, the name indicates that the journal was closely related to the German *Die Aktion*) published in 1915-16, and later for the journal *MA* when *A Tett* was banned. The perspective of these Hungarian avant-garde art journals was similar to major Western European avant-garde journals: especially the aim to reform society, and the focus on changing art radically. Thanks to Stephen Mansbach for pointing out that the term “activism” of particular segments of early ‘teens Hungarian and German avant-gardes was used in similar ways and with similar political views, to the views and cultural production practice of “activist artists” of the 1980s and 1990s. For a concise description of the Hungarian version, see <http://www.kfki.hu>.

preferred dialogical mode of art activism. This is because, he argues, the notions of both postmodernism and avant-garde still have as their base the advocacy of an “overwhelmed” somatic reaction to art as the basis for determining its “oppositional” effectiveness. Additionally, Kester objects to most postmodernist and avant-garde art, as well as much art that promotes itself as “activist” because:

- of the assumption of the relationship between viewer and art work as one in which “the viewer consumes an experience produced *a priori* by the artist;”
- the work is too frequently based on an “orthopedic aesthetic,” one that “conceives of the viewer as an inherently flawed subject whose perceptual apparatus requires correction;” and that “the artist is a superior being...uniquely suited to both recognize and remedy [the viewer’s] defect[s];”²⁸⁵ and
- despite the general acceptance in intellectual circles of the postmodern notion of the “contingency” of the meaning of an artwork, the art object remains stubbornly *fixed* in postmodern discourse, in the sense that this contingency and indeterminateness is seen as inherent, immanent and autonomously present in the physical condition or form of the object: it perpetually contains within it the possibility of changing its meaning depending on context and viewer.²⁸⁶

Kester’s dialogical aesthetics is best left to him to describe in full, and undoubtedly his forthcoming book will do that very well. In the meantime, in the excerpts provided me, Kester’s argument is clear. He proposes that, as in “conventional art,” even the kind

²⁸⁵ Kester, *Conversation Pieces...*, Chapter 3, 4.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

of “activist” or “political” art produced by the likes of Hans Haacke, for example, art production “occurs in isolation from the actual viewer, and under the guidance of presuppositions about a potential viewer...” and thus “there is no way for the viewer’s responses...to be communicated to the artist so that [these views] might modify future work (except through the professionalized surrogate of art criticism).”²⁸⁷

A Dialogical Activism Model?

Kester clearly sees this separation of artist from audience as a deficiency; and he proposes the practice of artists like Suzanne Lacy as both an antidote to this deficiency and a model for the future of progressive activist art. Key to Lacy’s practice, Kester argues, is a form of “empathetic insight” based on “deep listening” that occurs through a tripartite process along axes he calls “solidarity creation, solidarity enhancement and the counter-hegemonic”²⁸⁸ which may occur separately, or in various combinations.

The first axis, solidarity creation, refers to the empathy created through rapport between artist(s) and their (non-artist/audience) collaborators. The second axis, solidarity enhancement, occurs when the collaborators themselves, without the artist as mediator, achieve rapport that may not have existed before. The third axis, the counter-hegemonic, occurs when collaborators, with or without the involvement of the instigating artist, achieve rapport with other communities, “often subsequent to the actual production of a given project,” which helps to “create a more complex understanding of, and empathy for, that community among a broader public.”²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 6.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 18.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

The project of Lacy's that Kester cites as an example of her "empathetic insight"-creating process, and which he puts forward as illustrative of the axes of empathy he outlines, was the 1994 *The Roof is On Fire*, an open-ended project lasting initially for several months, and continuing for years, up to the present. Kester proposes that this project pursues very precisely the three axes he identifies as crucial to his model.

The Roof is On Fire began with a "one-nighter" of unscripted dialogues in parked cars on a parking garage rooftop, between young people of color in Oakland, California regarding the stereotypes and racial profiling they faced daily, and the embattled, inadequate schools they were forced to attend. The dialogues on the rooftop led to six weeks of videotaped conversations between high school students and the Oakland Police Department. The film created from the tapings is still used to train community police officers.

Other elements of *The Roof is On Fire* included a "basketball game as performance" with the police and the young people as players, the taping of interviews with participants, dance, the development of a sound track that explored how to deal with conflict without violence, and, ultimately, 5 years later, in 1999, with yet another rooftop meeting between a new generation of high school students and police. As in her other projects, Lacy involved local media at every step of the way. Until she recently (in 2001) moved to Los Angeles, Lacy continued for years to advise the city of Oakland on developing and implementing Oakland's "youth policy" to include the arts in addressing key issues of importance to young people of color in the Oakland community.²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ Kester, *Conversations*, Introduction *ibid.*, 3-4; and Chapter 3, *ibid.*, 19.

Kester puts forward Lacy (and many others, in his book) as an example of an artist who is operating with a highly ethical “dialogical” approach that starts “not with the desire to express or articulate an already-formed vision, but...to listen.” Kester states he has chosen these artists as models because “they define themselves as artists through their ability to catalyze understanding, to mediate exchange and to sustain an ongoing process of empathetic identification and critical analysis.”²⁹¹

Kester contrasts the approach of the long, open and mutating relationships Lacy instigates and nurtures in her projects, with what he calls the unfortunate tendency of some community-based art practices “in which the artist functions as a kind of tourist of the disempowered, traveling from one site of poverty and oppression to the next and allowing their various collaborators to temporarily inhabit the privileged position of the expressive creator.”²⁹²

So, at the end of the nineties, Kester’s contribution to the discourse on activism in art proposes an art practice that both is and is not “avant-garde.” Kester’s model combines some aspects of the “ameliorative” avant-garde of early 19th century Europe with some aspects of what Murphy has termed the “cynical” avant-garde of the 1920s and thirties in Germany, France and Russia, an avant-garde that privileged indeterminacy and deconstruction, an avant-garde that presaged the most progressive aspects of postmodernism.

Kester’s exemplars are wary and canny, self-aware and analytical. They have no utopic dreams, but they have developed, through hard knocks and a strong measure of

²⁹¹ Ibid., Chapter 3, 18-19.

²⁹² Ibid., 23.

daring, ways to negotiate the high wires of what Kester calls “empathetic axes.” This kind of art practice requires a strong dose of self-confidence and an even stronger dose of humility. Kester himself acknowledges that neither the artists he champions, nor the processes they enable are paragons. He acknowledges firmly that “they are impure...they represent a practical negotiation around issues of power, identity and difference,” but they also “strive towards something more,” something exceedingly complex that “unfolds between empathy and negation, domination and dialogue, and self and other.”²⁹³

Perhaps this could be called the “post avant-garde?”

* * * * *

In summary, in Chapter 5, critical discourse at the end of the nineties is seen as taking a retrospective look at the practice of activist art in several survey texts and two exhibitions. Many practitioners who had begun their activist cultural production in the seventies, and some even earlier than that, were still producing in much the same way as at the beginning of their careers. This perseverance was noted especially in Nina Felshin’s anthology, where the elements of their effectiveness were identified as revolving around collectivity in production, consistency and integrity in the selection and use of formal strategies and the complicated and often unresolved relationship to the art world. These all resonate with the characteristics of activist art identified by discourse contributors reaching back to the earliest years of the eighties, and perhaps even earlier.

The later nineties also saw the emergence of some very pointed and aggressive critiques of a strong strain of art proposed as “activist.” Emanating from Grant Kester, long time editor of a key journal documenting the activist art phenomenon during this period, was a strongly polemical assessment of which forms of activist art could escape

²⁹³ Ibid.

cooptation. For him, the model had to be strongly dialogical, a process rather than an object, and one that is of long duration, and that operates to produce and reproduce empathy that spreads from an initial intervention by an artist out in unending waves throughout a given community. Though this approach to art making seems unique, it is in actuality a bricolage itself, certainly a postmodernist approach; and as well part of a tradition that reaches back to the earliest avant-gardes.

* * * * *

In **Part 2** as a whole, discourse traced from the beginning of the eighties to the end of the nineties, confirms that activism in art has had a conflicted relationship with the term “avant-garde.” This ambivalence among critics and writers suggests that there was resistance to identifying the practice of activist art as a direct heir of the historical avant-garde of the twenties and thirties. Nonetheless, the giants (artists and critics) of the earlier avant-garde movement were frequently mentioned in discourse over this twenty year period as in various tangential connections with contemporary work that utilized postmodernist approaches, and that had a social/political change or social/political critique purpose. As the decade of the nineties came to a close, several commentators contributed to the discourse two particular aspects of the manifesto/modus operandi of the historical avant-garde *against* which contemporary activist artists should strive. These were the Benjaminian “shock,” and the Greenbergian/Friedian “difficulty” approach.

This strain of discourse posits that following in the footsteps of either Benjamin or Greenberg/Fried is negatively “avant-gardist.” It is argued, that this is negative because of the underlying assumptions that the viewer is inherently flawed, and requires

intellectual/spiritual stimulation to remedy these flaws; a stimulation that can only be provided by the “superior being” of the artist.

Nevertheless, there are strong resonances that come through with regard to the proposals of the contributors to the discourse that relates “avant-garde” to activism in art and postmodernism during this period. As a result, the definition of what constitutes “activism” in art becomes both more focused and more diffuse as the nineties ended. In many ways, activism in art emerges in discourse at the beginning of the 21st Century as an art practice that both is and is not “avant-garde.” It appears to combine some aspects of the “ameliorative” avant-garde of early 19th century Europe, with some aspects of the twenties-thirties avant-garde that privileged indeterminacy and deconstruction.

Which cultural producers engaged most effectively in an activist cultural production also emerges in discourse as both more focused and more diffuse. We have seen, for example, that feminist artists are identified by many discourse contributors as the “new avant-garde,” the ones that were most adept and effective in the deployment of postmodernism bricolage. Artists of color and queer artists also assumed high profiles in the mainstream during this period as key practitioners of an art that spoke forcefully of eclipsed subjectivities and ignored histories. They emerge in discourse also as *the* producers representing an avant-garde that deployed the most progressive aspects of postmodernism in art.

At the same time, this aspect of cultural production, the art produced by feminists, people of color and queer artists, is the one that featured the most aggressive imagery, especially imagery related to the abject body. And it is this imagery that was vigorously

engaged across the culture during this period. The next Part of the dissertation will address this “body phenomenon” in contemporary art of the eighties and nineties.

**PART 3: THE MONSTROUS/ABJECT/GROTESQUE
AS POSTMODERN/AVANT-GARDE
—AND ACTIVIST?**

Introduction to Part 3

Part 3 will address how the abject/monstrous/grotesque in art has been characterized in discourse during the period covered by this dissertation (1980s and 1990s), including the directions from which judgments about its effectiveness as activism, or resistance to dominant cultural structures, have emanated. The discussion will include attention to discursive elements from the art history and criticism arena as well as from historians, philosophers and literary and other cultural theorists of various stripes.

I will also examine, as discursive elements, selected imagery of abjection, monstrousness and the grotesque appearing in art from 1980-2000. The discussion will include where this imagery appeared and under what circumstances; identification of key predecessors; reception by the art world, and the world beyond; and implications of the fact that this imagery often strongly portrayed gender and race as monstrous. Finally, contemporaneous discourse on the grotesque, the monstrous and the abject, in the eighties, and especially in the nineties, will be considered in relationship to postmodernism, the avant-garde, and activism.

As in Parts 1 and 2, this discussion will focus on definitions. The relationships in discourse between the terms “monstrous,” “abject” and “grotesque” will be central. Special emphasis will be placed on how these terms have shifted and changed in meaning when deployed in various settings; and when gender, race and class are in particular combinations.

Chapter 1 focuses on some pre- and early-1980s precedents for the explosion of interest in the monstrous/abject/grotesque in U.S. art that gathered momentum over the

20 years covered in this dissertation. Chapter 2 moves directly into the period covered by this dissertation with a look at the widely-dispersed cultural locations where theoretical and historical discourse on the monstrous/grotesque/abject began to appear in the 1980s. Chapter 3 focuses on some key examples during the 1980s of art that specifically featured the grotesque/abject/monstrous as a transgressive move.

Chapter 4 focuses on the turn from eighties into nineties, a critical point in U.S. cultural and political history, which has come to be characterized by the designation “culture wars.” In this chapter, attention will focus on speculation in the discourse regarding why there was such a strong emphasis on the abject/monstrous/grotesque in culture generally (and not just in art) at this particular juncture; why this became such a site of contestation; and what reactions it stimulated in the art world.

In Chapter 5, several key exhibitions that appeared from 1990-1995 are proposed as evidence that the monstrous/grotesque/abject was entering the mainstream. Chapter 6 addresses three feminist theoretical perspectives on the monstrous/abject/grotesque that provided important glosses on previous theoretical treatments of this aesthetic as the nineties moved past the midway point. Finally, Chapter 7 focuses on theorists whose contributions to the “high criticism” location in discourse toward the end of the nineties sought to frame the attention in art to the abject body in particular as alternatively politically regressive and progressive for strongly dichotomous reasons.

Chapter 1: Background And Precedents

Chapter 1 sets the stage for the monstrous/grotesque/abject as an assertive and contested site in discourse of the eighties and nineties. The discussion demonstrates that art of this period was not unique in utilizing monstrous, abject and/or grotesque imagery; nor was it the first to do so, in the U.S. or elsewhere. Chapter 1 leads off with a discussion of German literary critic/philosopher Wolfgang Kayser's classic study of grotesque imagery in art and literature. This study, published initially in German, in the fifties, and in the U.S. in English, in 1963, is here as an example of the discursive context for a particular kind of art that emerged, beginning after World War II, across the U.S..

This art, known variously as "neo-dada," "assemblagist" and "imagist" began to emerge in the 1950s. It deployed all manner of bricolaged junk and funk as well as aggressively grotesque, violent and sexualized body-related imagery. Kayser's theory, and this form of art, along with an increasingly assertive presence of body art, are proposed here as discursive precedents for the turn to the abject body in art of the eighties and nineties.

Wolfgang Kayser

One of the earliest post-World War II scholarly texts that began to trace a lineage for grotesque imagery in cultural production was Wolfgang Kayser's study, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*.²⁹⁴ Kayser identifies the "grotesque's" qualities as including the

²⁹⁴ Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* Ulrich Weisstein trans. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1963). The book was published originally as *Das Grotteske: seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung* (Oldenburg und Hamburg: Gerhard Stalling Verlag, 1957). Like many writers exploring the grotesque and monstrous, Kayser was stimulated to do so by encounters with the works of Hieronymus Bosch and the Bruegels, as well as Velasquez, Goya and Callot. Wolfgang Kayser (1906-'59), was one of the most important literary theorists of the postwar period in Germany. His 1948 treatise *Das sprachliche Kunstwerk* [The linguistic work of art] was widely acclaimed as exceptional in its erudition and in the breadth of its outlook. Kayser's book on the grotesque was, of course, not the first to address the grotesque as aesthetic category. As detailed in his book, preceding Kayser's genealogy of the grotesque

monstrous, the sinister, the absurd/comic, and the incomprehensible; and its effects as producing or expressing surprise/shock, confusion and estrangement/alienation.

Kayser's aim was a broad one: to develop a comprehensive perspective on grotesque imagery as it has occurred in art and letters from the 15th to the 20th centuries; and, from the *grottesche* of the Italian Renaissance, through to the strange works of Hieronymus Bosch, and finally to Surrealists Giorgio De Chirico, Salvador Dali, and James Ensor. Kayser includes in his view of the practice aspects of *commedia del' arte*, 19th Century Romanticism in poetry and art, and finally, in the forms and themes developed by Surrealism.

Kayser's book appeared first in the 1950s—a time of high Modernism—when the U.S. government was promoting the Abstract Expressionists in post World War II Europe, and elsewhere, as the quintessential Modern Art expression. And, although Kayser does not address art beyond the Surrealism of the 1930s and forties, much of what he concludes is proto-postmodernist. For example, in his final chapter, entitled “An Attempt to Define the Nature of the Grotesque,” Kayser argues that the grotesque in art is materialized in the mind of the observer, who always reacts in an historically and socially-situated fashion.

For Kayser, the grotesque is not random imagery, but an aesthetic category, because it “...applies to three different realms—the creative process, the work of art itself, and its reception...” Kayser asserts that the grotesque as aesthetic category “can only be

were: Vitruvius (c.90-20BCE), Vasari (1511-1574), Fischart (1575), Montaigne (1533-1592), Diderot (1713-1784), Wieland (1775), Goethe (1798), Schlegel (1800), Hoffmann (1817), Scott (1827), Hugo (1827), Ruskin (1851), Hegel (1894) and a variety of more contemporary (mostly German) commentators.

experienced in the *act of reception* [my emphasis]...”²⁹⁵ Kayser proposes that each of these “three realms” of the grotesque rely on *contingency*, a quality privileged in postmodernist points of view, as characteristic of the imbrication of history and meaning. Following is an example of Kayser’s proto-postmodernist perspective on the contingency of the grotesque:

...it is entirely possible that things are regarded as grotesque even though structurally there is no reason for calling them so. Those who are unfamiliar with the culture of the Incas will consider many of their sculptures to be grotesque...only our ignorance justifies our use of the word “grotesque” in such a case...[likewise] we may [at some point] have proof that [Hieronymus] Bosch did not mean his pictures to be grotesque...and that the effect engendered by his *oeuvre*...is essentially based on a misunderstanding...

Although Kayser recognizes that “grotesque meaning” derives from the constructed viewpoint of the observer, his perspective on this kind of imagery in art can be seen as still “modernist.” This is because it is dedicated to demonstrating the grotesque’s universality by cataloguing its ubiquitously repetitive occurrences, in similar forms, over many centuries, and in radically differing cultural contexts. The “specific forms...motifs...[and] repetitions of subject matter...” he sees, in these temporally and culturally diverse locations, as grotesque, include:

- all “monsters,” and “fabulous creatures,” as in the numerous treatments of the temptation of St. Anthony (14th to 16th centuries (CE), and in the biblical account of the Apocalypse;
- the “abysmal ominousness” of certain animals such as snakes, owls, toads, spiders—and especially bats—the “nocturnal and creeping animals which inhabit realms apart from and inaccessible to man;”

²⁹⁵ Kayser, *ibid.*, 180.

- vermin and “all that is unclean;”
- vegetal excessiveness such as the “inextricable tangle of the jungle;”
- “hidden organic realms,” such as those seen via the microscope;
- the reduction of the human form to “puppets, marionettes and automata;”
- the reduction of human visage to mask; and
- the “grinning skull and the moving skeleton...motifs of the macabre which...aligns them with the grotesque...”²⁹⁶

Kayser’s attraction to this kind of imagery did not come only from accounts of the grotesque from earlier periods in history. He identifies his motivation for this book as his memory of the machines of war²⁹⁷ as “grotesques...airplanes...as giant dragonflies...tanks moving as if they were monstrous animals...a ‘technical grotesque’ in which the instruments are demonically destructive and overpower their makers...”²⁹⁸ And, evocatively: “Our world led as inevitably to the grotesque as it did to the atom bomb...[to] the shape of a shapelessness, the face of a faceless world...”²⁹⁹

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 183-184.

²⁹⁷ This is of special interest, since in postwar Germany of the 1950s, (where Kayser lived and worked at the University of Göttingen). There was ample evidence of the violent defeat of the Third Reich. Though he identifies “machines of war” as grotesques, nowhere in Kayser’s book does he refer to the Nazis’ mass slaughter of six million people as specifically “grotesque.” During the War years, Kayser lived in exile in Portugal where he wrote his major theoretical work. Kayser died in 1960.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 193.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 11-12. Here Kayser is quoting the Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt (*Blätter des Deutschen Schauspielhauses in Hamburg*, 1956/1957, Heft 5: *Der Besuch der alten Dame* [The Visit, 1956]) Dürrenmatt’s plays portrayed a dark, dreamlike world populated by characters who, though frighteningly real, are also distorted into caricature. The playwright utilized dark comedy to expose the grotesque nature of the human condition.

Assemblage and the Abject, Monstrous and Grotesque

As Kayser's book was being released in Germany, a form of art with origins in postwar Europe was beginning to be seen in the 1950s in New York and California.³⁰⁰ It combined cast-off junk and other found objects, detritus, and "uncleanness," of the sort identified by Kayser as grotesque; and in ways that confounded meaning, and provoked in critics and viewers a combined sense of fascination and repulsion. Labeled *assemblage* in 1953 by its primary progenitor, French artist Jean Dubuffet,³⁰¹ and most celebrated in

³⁰⁰ The trend was eventually dubbed "neo-Dada," though it was also called, retrospectively, "proto-Pop," or subsumed completely into the "Pop" designation as precedent for Warhol, Dine, etc. See Susan Hapgood et al., *Neo Dada: Redefining Art in New York* (exh. cat.) (New York: The American Federation for the Arts/Universe Publishing, 1994). See also Paul Schimmel et al., *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*. (exh. cat.) (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998). The work done in California, especially, was seen by artists, and critics, as part and parcel of the Beat Generation. See Lisa Phillips, *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965*. (exh. cat.) (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995). One of the earliest practitioners, who also participated in naming the trend, and who has exerted a strong influence on activist artists of the eighties and nineties was Allan Kaprow. See Alan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966). The 1992 exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, *The Play of the Unmentionable*, and the 1993 Whitney exhibition *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, which first focused attention on the use of abject and monstrous imagery as a late 20th Century trend, will be addressed in detail below.

³⁰¹ See entry from the Grove Dictionary of Art online, at www.artnet.com/library/00/004631.ASP. Jean Dubuffet began his art career in 1942. From the beginning, he pursued an aesthetic approach he eventually named *art brut* (raw art) inspired by the art of "primitive cultures," graffiti and unschooled practitioners including especially inmates of mental institutions, and frequently featuring flattened, vaguely human forms with grotesquely irregular edges, composed of mixtures of dirt, sand, paint pigment and fragments of detritus and dismembered found objects. The primary form of his *art brut* Dubuffet labeled *assemblage*, was in its combination of objects, which was closely related to *collage*, a term which Dubuffet believed should only be used in relation to the works produced between 1910 and 1920 by Braque, Picasso and the Dadaists. In the early forties, Dubuffet was associated with Breton and other surrealists in Paris, and gained his first solo exhibition in 1944 in that city. By 1947 when the Pierre Matisse gallery in Paris showed his work, his *art brut* phase was full blown. Of most interest to this discussion is the fact that Dubuffet lived in New York in 1951-52. This was the period just prior to when Rauschenberg and Johns began producing their assemblage works in New York. In 1951, Rauschenberg had just completed studies at the Art Students League in NY and had his first solo exhibition at the Betty Parsons gallery. Dubuffet's work was among that featured (along with Rauschenberg's and others', of course) at the important *Assemblage* show at MoMA in 1961 (William C. Seitz, et al. *The Art of Assemblage*. (exh. cat.) (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1961). Also of interest to this discussion is the retrospective of Dubuffet's work on his 80th birthday at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1981, the beginning of the period of activist art considered in this dissertation.

the U.S. in the work of Robert Rauschenberg, *assemblage*³⁰² emphasized the banal and the tawdry. By the early sixties, the assemblage approach was embraced by artists on both U.S. coasts, including Edward Kienholz (Figure 18), Bruce Conner, Arman, Louise Bourgeois, Louise Nevelson and a host of others pursuing a very expanded version called “environments,” which either stood alone, or served as backdrops for performances. This *assemblage* work, in its fusion of recognizable objects or parts of objects with each other in surprising/shocking combinations, fits well into the lexicon of the grotesque developed and promoted by Kayser. In the U.S. during the fifties, *assemblage* artists on both coasts took a decidedly jaundiced view of post World War II³⁰³ American society; and saw themselves as producing social commentary with their art. They considered themselves part and parcel of the “Beat Generation,” and were strongly alienated both from the blandness and complacency of the post World War II “Eisenhower era,” and the noisy, dangerous and life and career-destroying anti-Communist activities of Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee.³⁰⁴

³⁰²Though Rauschenberg was most thoroughly lionized as the U.S. *assemblagist* above all, my choice of an assemblagist whose work more closely, and earliest, mobilized the grotesque/object/monstrous, in an activist vein, and continued to do so until his death in 1994: Edward Kienholz (and together with Nancy Reddin Kienholz after 1972). His first assemblage/tableau (*Roxy's*, an environmental recreation of a brothel) was first exhibited in 1962, a year after the MoMA *Art of Assemblage* show. See Robert L. Pincus, *On a Scale That Competes with the World: The Art of Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz*. (exh. cat.) (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1990), especially the argument that Kienholz was familiar with the assemblagists of New York (Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, Kaprow) and his work is often seen as in their genre, but in its “stop action drama of American culture” and emphasis on the “tragic predicaments of the powerless, the marginal and the victimized” was very far removed from the artistic purposes of the New York assemblagists (pages 38-39). Figure 18 shows his “illegal operation” tableau which refers to the epidemic of illegal abortions brought to an end with the Supreme Court decision in 1972 (*Roe v. Wade*) that acknowledged women’s right to decide to terminate a pregnancy prior to the third trimester..

³⁰³ “Post-war” usually refers to “post World War II,” although, of course, the Korean War (1950-1953) should be taken into account in considering the art of this period, not to mention the perpetual production and testing of weapons of mass destruction in the U.S. throughout the fifties and into the sixties.

³⁰⁴See Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), Chapter 16 for a left perspective on McCarthyism and its impact on the arts, though Zinn does not deal with visual

The motifs of decay and disintegration in *assemblages*, combines and environments were consonant with the themes of brutality and violence—and the sardonic world-view—of William Burroughs’ novels and Alan Ginsberg’s poetry. Beat Generation artists and writers alike aimed their production at the forms of oppression they saw roiling beneath the surface of what was being promoted by advertising, government and the media as a smooth and unproblematic post-War society.³⁰⁵ A bicoastal revolt in U.S. art was born out of this environment. These artists opposed hermeticism in art, and dogmatism in critical perspectives on abstract art. They emphasized flaunting of junk and funk, right through, and especially toward the end of the sixties, when many turned their detritus-aesthetic against the war in Vietnam.

Other Early Precedents

During the same period, in the U.S. heartland, a group of artists labeled “Chicago imagists” were also reacting to the dichotomy of a post-war U.S. environment characterized both by bland and complacent surface, and violent and repressive red-baiting. In the late seventies, an exhibition—*Fantastic Images: Chicago Art Since 1945*—surveyed this work. In her review of the show at the time, art historian Joanna Frueh

art so much as with cinema and literature. For a recent study of art and the left, see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002). Hemingway has brief discussions of the relationship of McCarthyism to visual art—and especially artists’ activities to stave off HUAC related censorship—scattered throughout his book, but does not cite any situations in which visual artists were targeted by the HUAC in the same way as were those connected with film, literature and the theater. Hemingway’s book also stops at precisely the point that the most vigorous examples of the use of the grotesque/abject/monstrous by left-oriented artists was beginning in the U.S..

³⁰⁵ See Phillips, *Beat Culture and the New America*, *ibid.* for a thorough treatment of this connection.

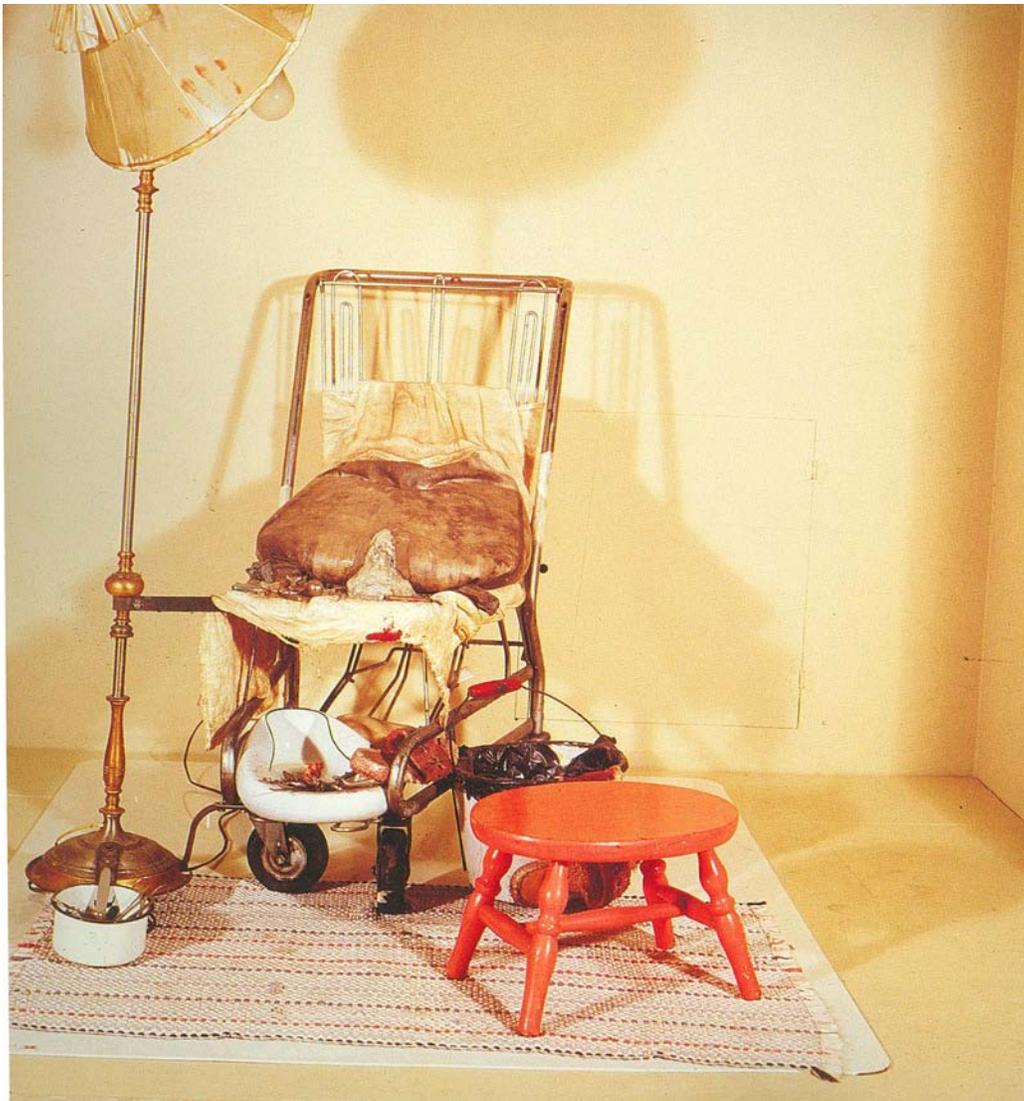


Figure 18. Edward Kienholz. *The Illegal Operation*. Mixed media tableau. 1962. In *On A Scale That Competes with the World: The Art of Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz*. Exh. Cat. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.

asserts her view that U.S. society of post World War II through the Vietnam conflict was so offensive and deadening it deserved the kind of “punch in the gut” work produced by these artists.³⁰⁶

This trend began with a small coterie of art students at the Art Institute of Chicago in the late 1940s, including, prominently, Leon Golub.³⁰⁷ For the most part, these artists produced work in traditional media (painting, and to a lesser extent, sculpture)³⁰⁸ but their imagery tracked closely the themes identified by Kayser as “grotesque.”

In fact, Franz Schulze, a Chicago critic who first coined the term “Chicago imagists,” to refer to a small group of artists who participated in exhibitions in the sixties at the alternative space Hyde Park Art Center, found the imagery of the earlier, more “expressionist” forms of the 1940s version of Chicago imagism, such as Leon Golub’s, so grotesque he called the artists making them the “Monster Roster.” Schulze noted that what is commonly known as “Chicago art,” was “diametrically opposite in character and expressive motive” to the classic “clarity, logic and reason” of the Chicago school of architecture, and of the Bauhaus-inspired tradition that these same qualities. Schulze saw

³⁰⁶Joanna Frueh, “Chicago’s Emotional Realists,” *Artforum* 17 (September 1978): 41.

³⁰⁷ Franz Schulze, et al., *Fantastic Images: Chicago Art Since 1945* (exh. cat.) (Chicago: Follett, 1972). Schulze, the exhibition’s curator, points out that Chicago artists shared with New York artists of the postwar period “an awareness of a world profoundly changed by war” and artists who had experienced this first hand: they were “mostly ex-GIs ... well beyond student age and eager to make up for lost years. Many of them were Jews, for whom the Holocaust had an enormity that no artistic outlook conventional to the midwest could begin to measure...” Schulze, *ibid.*, 9. Schulze argues that this strain of “Chicago art” utterly contradicts the reputation of the city as epitomizing “a tradition of clarity, logic and reason in the modern plastic arts” including the “objectives of an architecture based on structural directness and formal candor” (Sullivan and Mies van der Rohe) and the Bauhaus tradition, imported into Chicago from Europe by Laszlo Moholy Nagy whose Institute of Design was based on a “curriculum and ...teaching method [that had an] impact on visual education in this country [that] is still being felt.” Schulze, *ibid.*, 5.

³⁰⁸Some of the Chicago imagists did work in the assemblage/environment mode, including HC Westermann, June Leaf, Don Baum and Theodore Halkin.

this brand of Chicago art as “tend[ing instead] toward [a] highly personal, introverted and obsessive style...infatuated with symbol, image, dream and pungent anecdote.”³⁰⁹

Several Chicago imagists did succeed in developing a relatively high profile during the late 50s, the period of the apotheosis of abstraction. Two were even included in the widely-panned *New Images of Man* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, in 1959, along with key promulgators of grotesque figuration in Europe. Leon Golub and HC Westermann joined a roster in this MoMA show, which included Jean Dubuffet, Francis Bacon, Alberto Giacometti and Germaine Richier.

Paul Tillich, the widely-respected Christian existentialist theologian wrote the preface to the *New Images of Man* catalog, which focused less on societal causes of existential despair, as seen in the imagery of the exhibition’s artists, than on “original sin” in the souls of individuals and “inherent” demonic irrationality of the human psyche. An example of the generally negative critical response to the show was Manny Farber’s commentary in *Art News*: “Included are some insectile women, a full female torso swinging on an iron spit, several Frankenstein figures and some terribly swollen heads, in all of which the outstanding feature is a notably rough skin texture suggesting leprosy in late stages.” Also revolted by the imagery was critic Fairfield Porter, writing in *The Nation*: “...the exhibition ...collects monsters of mutilation, death and decay...an entertainment for moralists...”³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 5-6. Schulze also warns, however, that it is oversimplified to narrow the art’s primary foci to expressionism or Surrealism, although, in many Chicago imagists’ oeuvres, certain permutations of the interests of expressionism and Surrealism are present.

³¹⁰ As quoted in Patricia Hills, *Modern Art in the USA: Issues and Controversies of the Twentieth Century*. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001), 186-187.

The bland surface of prosperity and consumer delight of the fifties was not monolithic, of course, and reflected the life reality of only one (largely white and middle-to-upper-income) segment of the U.S. population. Though not included in the big shows (like MoMA's *New Images of Man*), artists of color and women also produced monstrous and grotesque works that are precedents for the high profile use of this aesthetic in the eighties and nineties. And artists of the sixties and seventies found in abject materials and references ways to express opposition to the Vietnam War.

African American artists including Romare Bearden, Betye Saar, Faith Ringgold and Mel Edwards were among those who, from the late fifties into the early '70, reached to abject detritus, found objects, grotesque imagery and violent themes to represent the struggles of African Americans during this period. The Black Arts Movement sought to foreground racial identity, at a time when earlier notions of "double-consciousness" were being challenged by militant calls for Black nationalism.³¹¹

While pop art focused on sign systems and "pre-coded material," as Lawrence Alloway suggested in his essay for the Pop Art exhibition he curated at the Whitney in 1974,³¹² other artists of the sixties and early seventies engaged in assertive "art actions"

³¹¹ See Larry Neal, "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation," *Ebony* 24:10 (August 1969): 54-58, 62. Quoted in Hills, *ibid.*, 308-311. "Double Consciousness" was a notion first promulgated in relation to race, in 1903, by WEB DuBois (and based on premises articulated in the 19th Century by Ralph Waldo Emerson). See WEB DuBois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: AC McClurg and Co., 1903) as referred to in Hills, *ibid.*, 18-19. ("...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight... a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others... by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity...") And Neal on WEB DuBois' double consciousness: "...in 1969, DuBois' sons and daughters in the Black Arts movement go forth to destroy the Double Consciousness ... [and] merge into One Committed Soul integrated with itself and taking its own place in the world..."

³¹² Alloway is credited with first use of the term "Pop Art" in a 1958 article for *Architectural Design*. See *ibid.*, 218. See also Lawrence Alloway. *American Pop Art*. (exh. cat.) (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1974).

that referred to racial strife and Vietnam war atrocities. Among the Vietnam-specific art actions were the Guerrilla Art Action Group's November 1969 "die in" in the lobby of MoMA. The artists spilled beef blood on the floor while tearing each others' clothes off.

Women artists who self-identified as feminists were key, in both formulating these actions, and taking part in them. Their activist gestures led, in the seventies, to the emergence of a full-blown feminist art movement. It is generally agreed today that the seventies was the age of feminism in art in the U.S., and that the approaches taken were highly influential on subsequent late 20th Century art in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Feminist perspectives in art have included references to monstrous and abject forms and themes from the moment art produced by women began to be called "feminist;" and these themes have persisted throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Prominent in most of the accounts of feminist trajectories in art are these artists (among others) who referred to the monstrous and abject in work both prior to and during the seventies (and, in many cases, continue to do so up to the present):

- Meret Oppenheim, whose *Déjeuner en fourrure* (1936) has become not only *the* quintessential Surrealist object, but also the quintessential forerunner of the uncanny, ambivalent abject and monstrous imagery of the 1990s, much of which was created by women artists.
- Louise Bourgeois, whose oeuvre extends now over nearly six decades, and spans key precepts of Surrealism and Body Art in audacious, elementally raw and strongly sexually referential imagery in a wide variety of media and installation formats that invoked disturbing dream imagery and bodily abjection.



Figure 19. Carolee Schneeman. *Meat Joy*. Performance, November 1964, Judson Memorial Church, New York. 1964. (Photo: Al Giese). In *Carolee Schneeman: Up To and Including Her Limits*. Exh. Cat. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996, 37.

- Eva Hesse, whose work, while abstract, utilizes an “abject aesthetic,” from the earliest visceral reliefs to the later conglomerations of chaotic tubular and tangled forms, additive and accreted, and intensely repetitive and imbued with contradiction and “absurd opposites.”
- Carolee Schneeman, whose *Meat Joy* (Figure 19) and *Eye Body* performances of the 1960s, with their strong references to bodily materiality, sensuality, smells and fluids, stood in resistance not only to the reigning abstractions of the day; but also, in its proto-feminist foregrounding of female embodiment and agency in performance *within* assemblage/environments, also stood counter to the male-dominated assemblage movement in general.
- Lynda Benglis, whose formless “poured” works evoked all manner of slimy and spilled substances while also referring sardonically to the macho “masters” of abstract expressionism and minimalism of her generation;
- Lee Bontecou, whose early sixties constructions recycled and appropriated fragments of industrial machines and re-presented them in seductive/repellent *assemblages* that invoke menacing *vaginas dentata*;
- The Feminist Art Program’s works, whose environments and performances included utilizing blood from local slaughterhouses, and their own menstrual blood, culminated in *Womanhouse* of 1971 (which then led their teacher, Judy Chicago to the making of her monumental *Dinner Party*, discussed in Part 4); and
- Hannah Wilke, especially her *SOS Starification Object Series*, an 8-year project exploring the abject labeling of women as “cunts,” started in 1974 as a performance in which Wilke invited the audience to chew gum, which she then collected and formed

into tiny vulvic forms and attached to her nude body, like tumors; and the photographed documentation of these performances.

References to the abject (and abjecting of the) male body and enactment of a besieged masculinity were also in high profile during the late 60s and through the seventies, and included such examples as³¹³

- Vito Acconci's 1970 piece *Trademarks* (Figure 20), which consisted of a series of photographs and accompanying text of the artist, seated in contorted poses, biting himself on various parts of his body.³¹⁴
- Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1970) in which the artist engaged a sharpshooter to shoot him in the arm,³¹⁵ and *Trans-fixed* (1974) in which he had someone nail him in a "crucifixion" pose to the top of a Volkswagen.³¹⁶

³¹³ See especially, Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), and Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). O'Dell and Jones extensively treat issues of threatened masculinity in their books, but from very distinctive perspectives. Both, however, do foreground bodily abjection in the form of self-inflicted pain and wounding as well as illness as key elements in these male artists' work. What both works stress is that the works they highlight document an extensive body of work preceding the eighties and nineties, that both performed the body as recipient of various forms of violence, self and other-inflicted, abjectly traumatized, wounded.

³¹⁴ As O'Dell points out (*ibid.*, 17), this work was never performed for a live audience. The private performance exists only in documentation.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.* O'Dell suggests that *Shoot*, though she posits it as a key example of her theorization of the masochistic in art, involves "a highly complex dynamic between the artist and the audience. . .audience members chose not to stop the shooting, just as the sharpshooter himself chose not to turn down Burden's request." Also, she notes, the meaning of the work can be seen as multiple and layered and could include "the alienation of the artists from society, [references to] classic film shoot-outs...or to the friendly-fire accidents prevalent in Vietnam, for instance..." *ibid.*, 2. O'Dell argues that Vietnam is very central to much performance utilizing masochism in the seventies. See *ibid.*, 75: "It is not surprising that the last masochistic performances by Acconci and Burden were in 1973 and 1975 respectively, precisely the time span during which the [Vietnam] war was winding down...for Acconci and Burden, the war had been close to home—both knew people who had died in the war..." O'Dell notes that she "tried to suggest how masochistic performance artists ...might bring balance to the war-induced instability they were experiencing."

³¹⁶ Jones, *ibid.*, 130-132. Jones' perspective on Burden: "...his deadpan submission of himself to the violence of others (who are ordered and/or scrupulously controlled and framed by Burden), reiterate

* * * * *

In summary, the examples of discourse in Chapter 1 demonstrate that, prior to the period addressed in this dissertation, there were ample instances of interest in cultural production that produced surprise or shock, and instigated confusion and alienation. Discourse contributors make quite clear that they connect this imagery directly to a general societal dis-ease in the U.S. in the early decades following World War II.

normative codes of masculine artistic genius-as-transcendent; and yet the reiteration is so insistent and so exaggerated, Burden might also be interpreted as unhinging these codes through parody.” (ibid., 131).

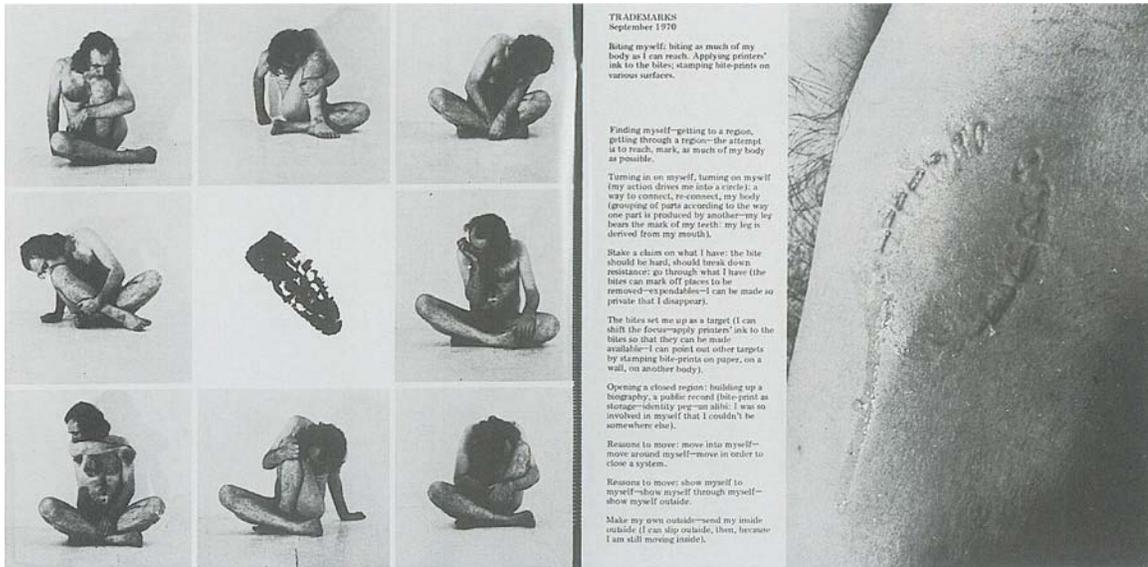


Figure 20. Vito Acconci. *Trademarks*. Documentation of 1970 performance. Pages from *Avalanche* magazine. Fall 1972. (Photo: Bill Beckley). In Kathy O'Dell. *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Visual artists deploying this imagery saw themselves as in league with the “Beat” writers and poets in their jaundiced view of American society of the fifties and sixties.

This fascination with the abject/monstrous/grotesque continued into and through the seventies as the U.S. moved inexorably further and further into military involvement in Vietnam.

A not insignificant number of U.S. artists of the post World War II period vigorously opposed “official” art of abstraction in favor of a blatant flaunting of funk and junk, and highly sexualized and violent references to (and abuse of their own) bodies. By the time the eighties emerged, there was a new awareness that grotesque, monstrous and abject imagery was not just a passing phase serving as entertainment for moralists, but was becoming more assertively present at various cultural levels and locations.

Chapter 2: The 1980s—Theories' Interweavings

In Chapter 2, selected critical and theoretical voices are as exemplary of the evolving perception of the effectiveness, for cultural activism as a whole (and not only for art with activist ambitions), of invoking the monstrous/abject/grotesque. Included here are anthropologist Mary Douglas' ideas about pollution; philosopher Julia Kristeva's theories of abjection; literary critic Geoffrey Galt Harpham's contention that the monstrous/grotesque/abject had moved from the margins to the center where it was promoting a troubling of structured thought and methodological orthodoxies; cultural theorists Peter Stallybrass' and Allon White's identification of where the monstrous/grotesque/abject could be most profitably enlisted in the service of social change; and artist and art historian Ewa Kuryluk's proposal of particular formal procedures that characterize the imagery in art of the monstrous/abject/grotesque.

Mary Douglas

The appearance of Mary Douglas' highly influential 1966 cross-cultural anthropological study of pollution and taboo (*Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo*) has been widely utilized to argue for the transgressivity of the deployment of the grotesque/abject/monstrous by both male and female U.S. artists from the period just after World War II, to the present.³¹⁷ Though Douglas did not address the use of abject/grotesque/monstrous imagery in art, many of her ideas about filth and

³¹⁷ In terms of this discussion, Douglas' classic study (Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo* (New York and London: Routledge, 1966) was of primary influence on Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's book on transgression, and Mary Russo's ideas about the female grotesque, among other theorists whose ideas will be discussed in this chapter. Douglas' influence was very wide internationally, and in the U.S., where she lived and taught throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Her book has been in continuous circulation since its first publication, and Routledge has sponsored reprintings annually since 1991.

pollution resonated with the references enumerated above, as well as with Kayser's identification of "all that is unclean" as a key characteristic of the grotesque.

Particularly relevant to this discussion is the fact that Douglas' study has frequently been cited, in subsequent studies of the grotesque and monstrous, as a persuasive anthropological argument that the reference to—and use of—the grotesque, monstrous and abject in art is a way to challenge prevailing "rigidified" rules that both embody and protect hegemonic societal structures. To summarize, those aspects of Douglas' argument that have become key aspects of the discourse on the use of the grotesque, monstrous and abject in art as a (postmodern) strategy for destabilizing the status quo, include that:

- Dirt and pollution signify disorder, and disorder is dangerous and powerful;
- To reinstate "order," ritual is deployed, in which the dirt and pollution to be exorcised is itself frequently used; and
- Ritual constitutes a "frame" which "contains" the polluted or "abominable" and concentrates its power while it also simultaneously assures that what might be endangered if the frame were not there remains unthreatened.

Julia Kristeva

Douglas' work has persisted in its influence in certain U.S. intellectual circles up to the present, in part because of its pivotal position at the center of Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject (*The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*)³¹⁸, published in translation in the U.S. in 1982, and widely cited, referenced and appropriated since, especially as a theoretical focal point and basis for assessing the gendered monstrous, grotesque and abject in art and other cultural production of the later 20th century. Kristeva does not

³¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Leon Roudiez, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

incorporate Douglas' ideas about pollution and taboo so much as riff off of them, specifically off Douglas' contention that pollution is not inherently powerful, or threatening, but becomes so only at sites "where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined."³¹⁹

Kristeva concurs with Douglas that the abject is experienced at liminal (border) sites, but finds Douglas' conclusion lacking,³²⁰ because Douglas does not clearly identify "...where and from what...the threat [of the abject] issue[s]?" and "...[why] *corporeal waste*, menstrual blood and excrement...[so consistently] represent...the frailty of the symbolic order?" Kristeva identifies both menstrual blood and excrement as the essential abject (she departs from Douglas here, who is more inclusive regarding which bodily excreta are polluting), and argues that there is an inevitable connection between the maternal/feminine and both excrement and menstrual fluids:

... those two defilements stem from the *maternal* and/or the feminine, of which the maternal is the real support...menstrual blood signifies sexual difference...[and] ... maternal authority is experienced first and above all, after the first essentially oral frustrations [of weaning from the breast] as sphincteral [toilet] training."³²¹

Kristeva posits that, regardless of the differences between cultures, the masculine represses the feminine as an "asymmetrical, irrational, wily" and uncontrollable threat, a "radical evil that is to be suppressed."³²² She argues that association of the maternal/feminine with the abject, and its association with the "wily" and the "evil" has

³¹⁹ Douglas, *ibid.*, 114. Douglas also, of course, points out that whatever is seen as "pollution," is not always "pollution," and that its designation as such is contingent.

³²⁰ Kristeva does not just object to Douglas' conclusions, but to anthropology's perspectives in general, which she finds anti-Freudian, and thus do not take into account individual internal psychological processes. She also argues that, though the strong presence of the feminine, especially in its negative or "monstrous" aspects, is implicit throughout anthropology's findings, it is not sufficiently .

³²¹ Kristeva, *Ibid.*

³²² *Ibid.*

been radically misplaced in patriarchal societies in such a way that women, maternity and femininity have all been summarily abjected, accounting for the widespread repression and pejorative view of women.³²³

Strongly related, and, in fact, even more of an inspiration for Kristeva's work on abjection and horror was her early engagement with Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of the grotesque and carnivalesque, which in turn have also become central foci and theoretical bases for assessments of the monstrous and abject in art. Kristeva was one of the first to introduce Bakhtin's ideas into Western European intellectual circles very shortly after³²⁴ her arrival in Paris to pursue a doctorate at the Institut des Hautes Études. Because of her earlier literary education in her native Bulgaria, by the time she reached Paris Kristeva was steeped in Russian Formalism, including the work of Bakhtin, which, in the mid-sixties had not yet been translated from the Russian.

³²³ As Kelly Oliver points out, many critics have complained that Kristeva's point of view over-emphasizes the role of individual psychoanalytic treatment: "The idea that we all need to seek the professional services of psychoanalysts is not only impractical but also politically suspect: psychoanalysis is expensive and time consuming... a relationship [in which] one is in the employ of the other... and seems to foreclose the importance and possibility of social movements and group initiatives." See Kelly Oliver, "Introduction," *The Portable Kristeva* Kelly Oliver, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

³²⁴ Kristeva's first publication on Bakhtin was in 1967, in the journal *Critique*. (Julia Kristeva, "Le Mot, le dialogue et le roman," *Critique* 239 (1967), subsequently published in English as "Word, Dialogue and Novel" in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.) In her 1983 "Mémoires" Kristeva recounts the reaction: "...the first greeting [I received] from French public opinion [was] an insulting article in the magazine *Minute* claiming to unmask me, on the basis of an article on Bakhtin I had published... as a Soviet spy... it was brought to me at Chochin hospital where I was suffering from viral hepatitis in the spring of 1967, and I think it aided my recovery." See Julia Kristeva, "My Memory's Hyperbole," in Oliver, *ibid.*, 15. Kristeva recounts this event as an illustration of what a strong negative reaction occurred from middle-of-the-road intellectual circles toward those associated with the journal *Tel Quel* when they aligned themselves with the French Communist Party (CPF) in the mid-sixties. According to Kristeva, this alignment occurred primarily because *Tel Quel* participants saw the CPF in 1966 as having "awakened to the experiments of the avant-garde;" that it was the only French political party "to have a cultural politics;" and, it "was the best mouthpiece for experimental literary or theoretical work." (See Kristeva "My Memory's Hyperbole..." *ibid.*) The marriage between CPF and *Tel Quel* did not last long, and was virtually finished by the time of the May '68 uprising, though the "myth of the 'Stalinist dogmatism' of *Tel Quel*" continued unabated into the seventies. Kristeva points to this experience, which began with her first publication, and especially the disillusionment with and "divorce" from the CPF, as the inspiration for her theory of the abject.

Kristeva's engagement with Bakhtin also focused on his theories both of the carnivalesque and the dialogic.³²⁵ She posited Bakhtin's "carnival" as the liminal site where, dialogically, "official" texts coexist with, and are challenged by, "transgressive" texts. For Kristeva, Bakhtin's "carnavalesque" pointed to the potential for the renewal of intellectual and cultural structures through the ambivalence and "subversiveness" of carnival's forced collision of spectacle with lived experience. Kristeva's engagement with Bakhtin's ideas of carnival, and her engagement with his notion of the dialogic—as how the collision of the anti-authoritarian and the authoritarian results in new forms of meaning—inspired Kristeva's interest in the problem of the "foreign" or the "other" which led to her theorization of the abject, crystallized in *The Powers of Horror*.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham

In 1982, about the time Kristeva's ideas about the abject were reaching U.S. intellectual circles, as a result of Columbia University Press' publication of the translation of *The Power of Horror* into English, Geoffrey Galt Harpham's book *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* came down hard on the side of Bakhtin's "optimism" in his treatment of the grotesque, versus Wolfgang Kayser's emphasis on the negative aspects of the phenomenon:

It is perhaps inevitable that great confusion should prevail among the scholarly works intended to elucidate the subject [of the grotesque]...Kayser...and Bakhtin...are deservedly considered the two most important. Both are prodigiously well informed, carefully argued, persuasive accounts. And they manage to contradict each other utterly... Kayser's *Rabelais* [for example] 'savagely [piles] epithet upon epithet to an ultimate effect of terror,' dragging the

³²⁵ Kristeva extended Bakhtin's view of the genesis of the meaning of words as being a collision of texts into her theory of "intertextuality." Bakhtin argued that a "dialogic" effect occurs when there is a juxtaposition of the authorial text, the texts cited or implied by the authorial text, and the context(s) in which both are embedded (the context of the period in which it was created), and which surrounds it (that is, the "context" of the reader/viewer, which changes over time). Kristeva's theory of "intertextuality" argues that subjectivity "reads" communication and vice versa.

reader 'into the nocturnal and inhuman sphere' whereas Bakhtin's Rabelais not only knows nothing of terror, but ...drew his inspiration directly from the joyous, festive, democratic, popular culture of the middle ages...³²⁶

Harpham's grotesques are like Kayser's and Bakhtin's in one sense: they are all strongly linked with *bodies*. This is in contrast with Kristeva whose "abject," while clearly body-related, is generally more formless, consisting of those aspects of living beings that are both body and *not*-body; that which can nourish (and, in transformation, *become*) the body (food); and that which threatens the body, (bodily waste, or, in the case of the ultimate abjection, the ultimate detritus, the residue of life as death: the corpse). Of course, both Kayser and Bakhtin include bodily effluvia in their notions of grotesque, though that aspect is less strongly emphasized in their works than in Douglas and Kristeva. Also, Kristeva's notion of the abject is not confined *only* to formless effluvia. She includes the body itself, especially the maternal body, in her notions of the abject(ed), though effluvia are in her accounts of the abject.

For Harpham, those seeking to arrive at a once-and-for-all definition of the grotesque are like the proverbial blind monkeys seeking (ineffectually) to identify the "real" identity of an elephant by each touching a different part of the elephant's body. Harpham argues that, while the grotesque tantalizes like a mirage, it also slips consistently away. Nevertheless, while Harpham dismisses attempts to crystallize a definition of the grotesque as futile because the term defies all attempts to define it, he still seeks to do so.

³²⁶ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), xvii and 71. Harpham quotes Kayser, *ibid.*, 21. Harpham's book does not cite Kristeva, whose book *The Powers of Horror* had been out in French for two years, and published in English in the same year as Harpham's, 1982.

Key to the problematic of defining the grotesque is—Harpham argues—that, though exceedingly ancient, the grotesque has *no history* in the sense of a discoverable fixed origin:

...it never began anywhere...a newly discovered [in the fifteenth century] ornamental style they called *grottesche*...would seem a natural jumping off point...however the ground crumbles beneath us, for this style was copied from recently excavated buildings from ancient Rome...But Rome proves to be a false bottom...it had borrowed the style from older cultures...[so] we find ourselves in Asia Minor looking for antecedent...and from there back to cave paintings...an endless receding and dissolving...like vapors through a mesh...³²⁷

Nor does seeking to limit the field of inquiry lessen the difficulty of definition. Harpham argues that:

even if we confine the study [of the term ‘grotesque’] to aesthetic problems and methodologies, we still confront a dizzying variety of [synonym] possibilities: the decadent, the baroque, the metaphysical, the absurd, the surreal, the primitive; irony, satire, caricature, parody; the Feast of Fools, Carnival, the Dance of Death—all tributary ideas funneling into a center at once infinitely accessible and infinitely obscure.”³²⁸

Of particular interest for this discussion is Harpham’s invocation of contemporary cultural issues as the genesis of his desire to engage in a study of the grotesque. In his acknowledgements section, Harpham, at the time of the publication of this book, an English literature professor at Princeton, indicates that he started to write his text in the late seventies precisely because he saw the period as “a moment of crisis in the history of the term” grotesque, a time of “accelerating acceptance of the grotesque as a ‘mode’ in contemporary art,” but also a time in which this very acceptance had, in his opinion, led

³²⁷ Ibid., xvi

³²⁸ Ibid., xvii

to a “soupy tolerance of disorder, of the *genre mixte*...non-closure, the heterodox that deliberately skew traditional forms.”³²⁹

As we have seen in Parts 1 and 2, the late seventies and early eighties discourses of definition related to activism in art emerged at the same time as strongly dichotomized notions of postmodernism were beginning to vie strenuously for dominance in U.S. intellectual circles. To recap, the postmodernism of the neo-conservatives sought to reverse what they saw as the “philistinism” of contemporary culture, especially in visual art. Meanwhile, the postmodernism of the left encouraged all cultural manifestations—especially the tactics of deconstructive appropriation and bricolage, in both criticism and in art production—that could “trouble” the dominant cultural mechanisms of late capitalism.

Postmodernism as a discrete and apprehensible discursive phenomenon was only barely visible on the U.S. critical horizon in the late seventies and early eighties³³⁰ when Harpham’s *On the Grotesque* was being written and published. Nevertheless, the book evokes contemporaneous early formulations of the prescriptions for—as well as the characteristics of—postmodernist cultural production in its rationales for engaging in the study of the grotesque. For example ideas that would soon become labeled “postmodernist” such as the notion of endless permutation (Jacques Derrida’s *mise en abyme*)³³¹ are evoked by Harpham. He characterizes the grotesque as having moved from

³²⁹ Ibid., xiii, xx-xxi.

³³⁰ See Part 2 of this dissertation, note 222, which traces the advent of the use of the term “postmodernism” to Jean François Lyotard (1979), in France, and in the U.S., in relation to art, to Rosalind Krauss circa 1980.

³³¹ Harpham engages at several points in his study with Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionist theories, which are one of the markers of the beginnings of postmodern theory (thought not named as such by Derrida). It is also significant for this discussion to note that Derrida was a colleague of Kristeva’s at *Tel Quel*, and they engaged with each other’s work, especially regarding signification. Kelly Oliver (*The Portable Kristeva*)

the “disorderly margins of Western Culture,” to a situation where the “center cannot ...hold; where nothing is incompatible with anything else...where the marginal is indistinguishable from the typical.” Also resonating as postmodernist is Harpham’s contention that “the grotesque, in endlessly diluting forms, is always and everywhere around us—and increasingly invisible.” Harpham, in a decidedly postmodernist vein, portrays the grotesque as nothing less than a “species of confusion” in whose presence “we experience ...methodological problems...” and “obstacles to structured thought.”³³²

Peter Sallybrass and Allon White

Moving toward the mid- to later-eighties, two studies, appearing within a year of each other—Peter Sallybrass’ and Allon White’s *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), and Ewa Kuryluk’s *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex—The Grotesque: Origins, Iconography, Technique* (1987)³³³—articulated with even more force the

argues that Kristeva is “more optimistic than Derrida” regarding the relationship between language and the living, speaking body. According to Oliver, for Derrida (in *On Grammatology*), “language is always the remains of a living body,” and while he “imagines writing [as] a transfusion of the living body into language” he concludes that the living body is unscritable, and thus language is always dead. Oliver posits that Kristeva’s theory is “more optimistic” than Derrida’s because Kristeva sees bodily drives (based, of course, in the living body) as manifest (and always alive) in language; and therefore, unlike Derrida, she not only does not see the living body as unscritable, but sees it as always already *in* language: “an essential semiotic element of signification.” Oliver, *ibid.*, xx..

³³² Harpham, *Ibid.*, xxi.

³³³ Peter Sallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Ewa Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex—The Grotesque: Origins, Iconography, Technique* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1987). The relationships of these European theorists to the U.S. is relevant. All have lived and taught in the U.S. for significant periods of time. Prior to his death from cancer in 1988 at the young age of 39, Allon White was one of the foremost literary critics in the UK. In a memorial collection of White’s writings, published in the late nineties, Stuart Hall, progenitor of the Cultural Studies movement now ubiquitous around the globe, praised White as a key thinker responsible for the development of Cultural Studies. White was a frequent lecturer at Rutgers in the 1980s. Peter Sallybrass is a well-known Shakespeare scholar who also spent several years during the 1980s as guest faculty at Smith and Hampshire Colleges. In the early nineties, after spending a few years at Dartmouth, he left, a casualty of the ultra-conservative atmosphere there, and attacks by the right wing journal *Dartmouth Review*. Ewa Kuryluk is an art historian and artist from Poland, who left for New York

importance the monstrous/grotesque/abject was beginning to have for notions of social transformation, and for art as a means of transgression that could spur social change.

While neither book specifically focuses on contemporary visual art, each produces analytical constructs that both build on and depart from key notions (especially Mikhail Bakhtin's) of the grotesque, monstrous and abject, applicable to the deployment of these thematics in visual art.

In their book, Allon White and Peter Stallybrass seek to elucidate how the thematics of the grotesque/monstrous and abject (which they address under the overall rubric "carnavalesque"), can operate transgressively in cultural production (their specific subject is English literature) to spur social change. Despite the strongly-stated manner in which they address these thematics, however, they remain staunchly skeptical regarding the specific situations in which deployment of the carnivalesque can be effective as a social change tactic.

White and Stallybrass note that, as of the time of the writing of their book, the early eighties, a critical mass of writing existed that was citing "carnival" (following Bakhtin) not only as a particular historical feature, but also as a key theoretical mode of cultural analysis.³³⁴ Like Harpham (whom they do not cite), White and Stallybrass see Bakhtin's

in the early eighties when martial law was declared there. Since that time, Kuryluk has lived part of the year in New York and part of the year in Paris. She exhibits her art annually in Poland. Kuryluk has also exhibited widely in the U.S. since the early eighties, and has also lectured and taught regularly at various U.S. academic institutions up to the present.

³³⁴ Oddly, Stallybrass and White do not note that, as referred to above, Kristeva was the first to introduce Bakhtin to Western Europe, a year before Bakhtin's study on Rabelais was translated and published (1968) in French and English. Much had been done with Bakhtin and "carnival" in the 15 years that elapsed between the time of the translation of certain of his works into English and the publication of Stallybrass and White's book. Their bibliography, and the references in their introduction, demonstrate their contention that the literature related to Bakhtin, as of the early eighties, was extensive. In their introduction, Stallybrass and White cite 36 writers who (by the early eighties) had invoked Bakhtin's notions of the carnivalesque in widely varying fields (Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, Social, British, German Reformantion, Dutch Reformation and French history; Anthropology; Linguistics, Film Criticism, Latin

perspective on carnival, and the grotesque body at its heart, as optimistically populist. Unlike Harpham, however, they view Bakhtin's celebratory optimism regarding the carnivalesque as troublingly uncritical, although understandably so. They point out that Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque can be seen as "a cryptic anti-Stalinist allegory" which pitted "the explosive politics of the body, the erotic, the licentious and semiotic..." against the "official, formalistic and logical authoritarianism whose unspoken name [was] Stalinism."³³⁵

Stallybrass and White assess the growing body of criticism which utilized Bakhtin's "carnavalesque" as embracing too completely the uncritically celebrationist valence of his theory; and it is the specific intent of their book to intervene in this discourse by proposing

...carnival as *one instance* [my emphasis] of a generalized economy of transgression and of the recoding of high/low relations across the whole social structure [and in such a way that does not ignore] ...problems ...regarding the politics of carnival: its nostalgia; its uncritical populism (carnival often violently abuses and demonizes *weaker* not stronger, social groups—women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who "don't belong"—in a process of *displaced abjection*); its failure to do away with the official dominant culture, its licensed complicity...³³⁶

Stallybrass and White are critical especially of any "universalizing" tendencies, which portray the grotesque, monstrous and abject of carnival as always already in opposition to

American cultural studies, Literary criticism and history (on Joyce, Shelley, Beckett, Germain and others); popular culture, Mythology and Psychoanalysis, Cultural Studies, etc.) It is possible that Stallybrass and White may have overlooked the early (1967) date of Kristeva's initiatory publication (in French) on Bakhtin, since it was only reproduced in English on the appearance, in English, of her *Desire in Language* anthology in 1980. Stallybrass and White do include *Desire in Language* in their bibliography, and they mention Kristeva's interest in equating Bakhtin's classical and grotesque formulations with Lacan's Symbolic and Imaginary, (see the reference at Stallybrass and White, *ibid.*, 175) found in her 1974 book (the published version of her doctoral dissertation, not ever completely translated into English) *La Révolution du Langage Poétique*. But, for them, Bakhtin is the key theorizer.

³³⁵ Stallybrass and White, *ibid.*, 11. They are quoting Terry Eagleton, here. See Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), 144.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*

the classical; as always already, in any formulaic sense, privileging a binary view of disgust vs. desire; or as always already either “progressive” or “regressive.” Instead, they insist on an analysis that emphasizes the effect of “domain,” or “site” on the mobilization of the grotesque/monstrous/abject.

They identify the key domains of Western culture to be “psychic forms, the human body, geographical space and the social order”³³⁷ which interpenetrate each other. When one of these domains is transgressed, the others are affected. Also, the most charged and vulnerable sites for transgression are precisely where the psychic, the bodily, the geographic and the social interpenetrate. These are highly-charged

...points of antagonism, overlap and intersection between the high and the low, the classical and its “Other” ...discursive sites where social classification and psychological processes are generated as conflictual complexes...realms where ideology and fantasy conjoin...which by virtue of exclusions at the geographical, class, or somatic level, trace lines of desire and phobic contours which are produced and reproduced through one another...³³⁸

And, for Stallybrass and White, the “transgression” that can occur through the interpenetration of the high and the low at these sites is:

...defined as any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political...³³⁹

Stallybrass and White borrow this definition of “transgression” from the contemporaneous (1980s) theoretical constructs emerging from symbolic anthropology, specifically notions of “symbolic inversion.” By thus re-interpreting Bakhtin’s notions of

³³⁷ Ibid., 3.

³³⁸ Ibid., 25.

³³⁹ As quoted in *ibid.*, 17. Barbara Babcock, *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 14.. Babcock is a prominent symbolic anthropologist.

the operative functionality of the carnivalesque in the larger context of “symbolic inversion,” Stallybrass and White propose to move:

...beyond the rather unproductive debate over whether carnivals are politically progressive or conservative...[in order] to reveal ...the underlying structural features of carnival as intrinsic to the dialectics of social classification as such.³⁴⁰

In other words, Stallybrass and White intend for their study to position Bakhtin’s work as exemplary of how larger socio-structural forces, that gather at highly charged “domain” intersections and overlaps, can be vulnerable to transformation via strategic symbolic “inversion.” They warn, however, that the instability of these “domain intersections” means that inversion strategies mobilized at those intersections may have unpredictable outcomes. Forces vigorously opposed to each other’s ideological stances and social purposes may deploy them.

Stallybrass’ and White’s ideas regarding the political usefulness (and ambivalent volatility) of the grotesque/monstrous/object as transgressive symbolic inversion resonate with the arguments proposed in contemporaneous postmodern discourse of the eighties, which, at the time their book appeared, was reaching a highly articulate stage in the U.S.. As discussed in Part 2, the early eighties were characterized, in the discourse over art activism, by assertions, accusations and binaries over which of the variants of postmodernism were positive and which were negative. By the early eighties, it had become clear that there were at least two key postmodernist positions: the so-called “postmodernism of affirmation” proposed by neo-conservatives, and deplored by the left

³⁴⁰ Stallybrass and White, *ibid.*, 26. For Stallybrass and White, Bakhtin’s “folkloric” approach is problematic because focusing so strongly on “folk” sources for symbolic inversion rather than on symbolic inversion as a process in which “folk” sources is a category, leaves Bakhtin’s analysis open to the criticism that “folk”-based carnival is a “licensed” opposition that leaves the power structures that repress the “folk” intact.

as supportive of the status quo; and the “postmodernism of resistance” proposed by the left as the progressive position, deplored, in turn, by neo-conservatives as odiously “adversarian” and destructive of important measures of “quality.”

Cultural observers and art critics on the left in the U.S.³⁴¹ called, over the course of the eighties—and into the nineties—for a wholesale disruption of:

- “rarified and “reified” forms of culture, including: persistently homogeneous views of Western representation as the “only way;”
- frozen and strongly dichotomized autonomous cultural spheres and separated fields of expertise (especially in academia);
- an insistence that “legitimate” art was identifiable by formal “purity” alone; and
- a clear separation between culture and politics.

At the same time, writers and critics on the right³⁴² complained bitterly of the ascendance and “dominance” in the cultural sphere of what they termed the “pollution” of high art with “kitsch;” deployment of a form of “camp irony”—a “strategy of the facetious”—that was actively engaged in obliterating “the serious;” and a thoroughgoing “obsession” with the trivialities of fashion.

The perspectives of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, and their contemporaries in the U.S.—commentators on postmodernism of both the right and the left—coincide in their characterization of the significance of hierarchy. Stallybrass’ and White’s argument

³⁴¹Such as Lucy Lippard, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, Martha Rosler, Edward Said, Brian Wallis, Marcia Tucker and Craig Owens, among others. I do not mean to imply by grouping these artists, theorists and critics together that they were in generalized agreement across the board. It does seem, however, that they might all have agreed at least at an earlier point in time with the key points listed as broadly characteristic of some of the tactics that might be successful in “troubling” resistant discursive formations that constituted power at this point in late capitalist U.S..

³⁴² Prominent among them, Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball and the contributors to their journal, *The New Criterion*.

is that this structuring of society from high to low also involves four key domains that intersect: psychic forms, the human body, geographical space and the social order; and that, though within culture there are “all sorts of subtle degrees and gradations” of hierarchical relations within and across these domains, “the extremes of high and low have a special and often powerful symbolic charge”³⁴³ within and at the intersection of these domains.

The tactics of troubling and interference recommended by the advocates of a progressive U.S. postmodernism of resistance, involve, almost always, the mobilization of the extreme “low” to destabilize and reveal the weakness of the extreme “high.” The following are examples of thematics (gleaned from the texts discussed in Parts 1 and 2) tactically deployed by artists designated by eighties left-oriented commentators as “on the right postmodernist track;” and whose aesthetic intervention approaches are analogous to the base and abject categories of the carnivalesque Stallybrass and White have designated as having a “special and...powerful charge.” These would include:

- Mixing and crossing of all kinds including *melanges* of materials, combining different representational modes (ie the literary, the scientific, the linguistic, the visual) in one work; and heterogeneity without hierarchy.
- Emphasis on meaning, especially overdetermination of meaning by “packing” a work, or layering it, especially with: contradictory valences; emphasis on the allegorical and metaphorical; and privileging of an excess of signification.
- Blatant connections between politics and culture/art.

³⁴³ Ibid., 3.

- Refusal of mastery, or combining deliberately “bad” technique with slick or “overly” artisanal approaches; junk and detritus as key materials.
- Emphasis on imagery and media that evoke disgust, decay and death.
- Deployment of, and emphasis on, all aspects of the “vernacular:” comics; graffiti; references to film thematics and techniques, especially “B” (or lower) film and horror film; references to fashion; and cultural references specific to ethnic communities.
- Dominance of a tone of irony, satire, scatology.
- “Stealing”/transforming/defacing/ridiculing imagery and/or techniques of “high” art (appropriation/expropriation).
- Rejection of, or “pollution” of, “classic media” (painting, sculpture) in favor of the modes of: performance; photography (posed and “documentary” approaches), video; and guerrilla actions, outside museum or gallery venues.

Ewa Kuryluk

In the introduction to *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex* which appeared in 1987, the year after Stallybrass’ and White’s book, Ewa Kuryluk limits her definition of “grotesque” to a “four centuries old tradition” in Europe, closing definitively at the *fin de siècle*, and epitomized, in her view, in the art of Vienna of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For Kuryluk, the pinnacle arrived (in England) in the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley and the writings of Oscar Wilde.³⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Kuryluk does acknowledge that “one can still trace dim shadows of the traditional grotesque in later twentieth-

³⁴⁴Kuryluk, *ibid.* She denies especially that there is any contemporaneous (of the 1980s) “underground” in art which continues to harbor anything resembling the “grotesque” that flourished from the 15th to the end of the 19th Centuries in Europe, because when “a Baptist church and a synagogue, the quarters of the Communist Party and the Ku Klux Klan, a homosexual sauna and a lesbian cabaret all have the legal right to exist” the very idea of an “underground” is oxymoronic.

century visual arts and literature, theater and film...” and that, distortions and displacements, central to the iconography of the historical grotesque, “represent ... the most common quality of modern and postmodern art.” Still, she argues that “what made the grotesque unique was not the use of distortion,” but its use in opposing and subverting “official Christian culture with inappropriate forms and shocking iconography,” and evocations of an “anti-world of devouring females, animalistic men, heretics and Jews,” an iconography and thematic that “no longer touches the heart of contemporary artists.”³⁴⁵

Despite her arguments in favor of this rather extreme limitation on the definition of the grotesque, Kuryluk’s study opens itself to the perspectives of Stallybrass and White on the grotesque/carnavalesque as transgressive. In effect, Kuryluk’s extensive research that builds on Kayser and Bakhtin provides support for the Stallybrass/White thesis that the grotesque lives on (and not just as a shadow) in ever-shifting forms in contemporary (1980s) cultural appearances, especially at sites of extreme heights and depths in social and political hierarchies, and in the symbolic inversions/transgressions that are mobilized in resistance by cultural activists at those sites.

Because of this resonance, Kuryluk’s work is relevant to this dissertation, especially in the final two chapters of her book, in which she addresses, in turn, what she sees as formal procedures emphasized in “traditional” grotesque art. The “formal procedures” Kuryluk argues are characteristic of grotesque art—broadly conceived—resonate with Stallybrass’ and White’s perspectives on the power clustering at high and low locations in culture. Kuryluk identifies formal procedures characteristic of the grotesque as including:

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 6-7.

- Separation, mixture and assembly
- Duplication and multiplication
- Elongation, compression, enlargement and miniaturization.
- Reversal (negative made positive, naked for clothed, woman for man, flatness and 3-dimension together)
- Simplification and overcrowding (leaving out details, or revelling in filling space with forms).
- Dominant use of black, white, ochre (color of earth) and red.
- Decoration, especially a profusion of line, indicating automatism and spontaneity.
- “Theater” tradition especially the strong narrativity of puppet and shadow theater and silhouette cut-out that has emphasized in both content and form the “indecent,” monstrosity, the deformed, madness, degraded sexuality, and all that is uncanny (especially in the service of satire and caricature of dominant orders).³⁴⁶

* * * * *

In summary, in Chapter 2 it can be seen that 1980s contributors to the discourse of the abject, monstrous and grotesque elaborated as well as provided new perspectives on postmodernist techniques promoted in other areas of discourse as effective to “trouble”

³⁴⁶ Ibid., Chapter 11: Distorting Techniques; and Chapter 12: Form and Color. Kuryluk’s argument in these chapters refers liberally, as in the rest of the book, to ancient texts and mythologies from various parts of the globe regarding the meaning of these formal procedures. For example, regarding the meaning of the four colors she posits are central to grotesque imagery—black, white, ochre and red—she comments: “Black and white were originally, and to some extent still are, regarded as synonymous for darkness and light...Aristotle identified *leukon* and *melan* with light and darkness...Birth equals the coming out of darkness, death the return to it...the experience of light and darkness...represents an experience of great existential depth forever ...attached to the trauma of birth and the fear of death...red...they symbol of blood and fire, of sex and war of death and worldly majesty...yellow, or...ochre the color of earth...The Greek vases were executed in these four colors...the Paleolithic cave paintings were...executed in red and yellow ochre, white [from chalk and lead] and black [from burned grapevines, a by-product of fire]...they are identical with the colors of the four castes mentioned in Sanskrit...”

dominant cultural structures. Most of these examples of discourse do not focus on visual art, however. In the next chapter, I will address specific examples of art that aggressively the grotesque, abject and monstrous, and that were being created and shown at the very same time as the theorists discussed in this Chapter. In effect the art discussed in Chapter 3 was appearing in parallel with the theorists discussed in Chapter 2. That these art works and theories were appearing simultaneously, and did not reference each other, suggests a consonance in discourse that does not involve clear precedent.

Chapter 3: The Grotesque/Abject/Monstrous in Eighties Art: Some Examples

In Chapter 3 specific examples of the grotesque/abject/monstrous in art of the eighties will be highlighted, and juxtaposed with aspects of the theoretical discourse on these thematics discussed in Chapter 2. Artists whose work is touched on in this chapter include Mike Kelley, Liz Larner, Debby Davis, Aimee Rankin, John Miller, Lari Pittman, Cindy, Sherman, Kiki Smith and Tim Rollins+KOS. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Sherman, Smith and Rollins+KOS in terms of how their work might be considered in relation to definitions of activism in art.

“Foul Perfection”

In a 1989 essay for *Artforum*, artist Mike Kelley, himself a practitioner of the abject,³⁴⁷ characterized the tendency toward grotesque/abject and monstrous imagery in certain art of the 1980s as “foul perfection.”³⁴⁸ In this essay, Kelley’s selection of artists working with this imagery emphasizes those who “foul” formalism in a direct attack on the canon of Modernism. The artists featured in his article all have created works that

³⁴⁷ Mike Kelley was labeled by *Time*’s Robert Hughes as a prime exemplar of LA “patheticism,” defined by Hughes as standing in relation to “...high culture...rather as the antics of Ren, Stimpy, Beavis, Butt-head and their pals do to those Edwardian gents in four-button ecru linen jackets who are seen contemplating San Miniato in Merchant-Ivory movies.” See Robert Hughes, “Dolls and Discontents,” *Time Magazine* (December 6, 1993). Michael Kimmelman of the *New York Times* sees Kelley differently: In a review of a show (at the Hirshhorn in 1991) of Kelley’s pastiches of grimy stuffed animals, stained baby blankets and disintegrating afghan quilts of thrift shop provenance, Kimmelman contends that “Beneath the stage-managed adolescent comic exterior, can be sensed sorrow. This is the strength of the art and its soul. Mr. Kelley is perfectly aware of the treacly, garish quality of the work, and means for it to be considered ridiculous. Hieronymus Bosch is an obvious source of inspiration for his carnivalesque scenarios.” See Michael Kimmelman, “Mike Kelley’s Toys Play Nasty Games,” *New York Times* (April 7, 1991): Sec. 2, p 31. Kelley was one of the artists drawn into the “culture wars.” NEA funding for a retrospective of his work at Boston’s Institute for Contemporary Art scheduled for 1992 was denied by the then-Director, John Frohnmayer, one of many exhibitions de-funded during his tenure.

³⁴⁸Mike Kelley, “Foul Perfection: Thoughts on Caricature,” *Artforum* (January 1989): 91-99.

echo the prescriptions of the “progressive” postmodernists discussed in Part 2, and the descriptions of the theorists of the eighties working with or building upon the observations of Bakhtin and Kristeva (such as Stallybrass and White, and Kuryluk), discussed in the preceding chapter, for example:

- Liz Larner’s rectilinear boxes (referencing Minimalism) “polluted” by being made from bomb-making materials, or containing a petrie dish full of bacteria;
- Debby Davis’ casts of dead animals into geometric shapes (also referencing Minimalism), such as her globe-shaped 1986 *Eel Ball*, or a cube formed of cast chicken carcasses.
- Aimee Rankin’s miniature *assemblages* (referencing “neo-dada-ist” use of *assemblage*) in wall-hung boxes filled with images of cruelty and mayhem, seen through peepholes.
- John Miller’s strikingly feces-like piled-up painted plaster set (a visual pun: a “pile of shit” fouling the high art notion of sculpture as classical and pedestal-worthy)(Figure 21).
- Lari Pittman’s scatologically sexual and “queered” splashing (in a *horror vacui* proliferation of form, line, and all-over pattern, of recombined body parts and iconic vernacular figuration) of porn-movie/comic-book/horror film aesthetics onto the “high art” format of easel painting, and the “painterly” thematic of expressionism.

Kelley argues that these send-ups of High Art formal characteristics and thematics are caricatures of Modernism in the sense that caricature has a *purpose*: to undermine the

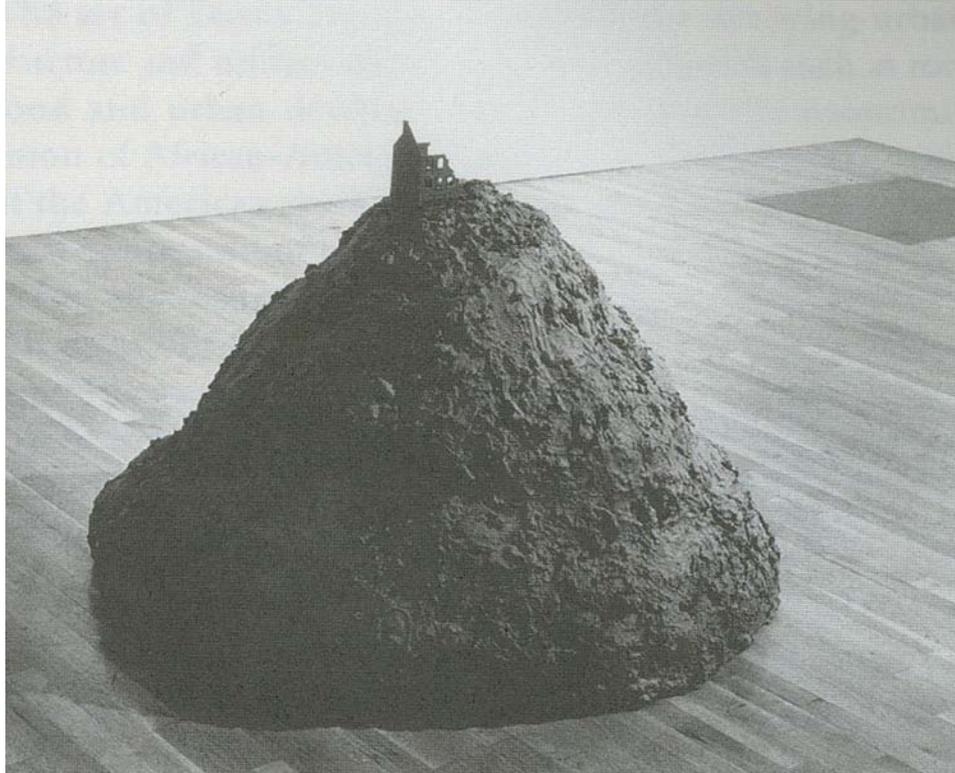


Figure 21. John Miller. *Untitled*. ("Turd" sculpture). Painted plaster. 1988. In *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993, 77.

authoritative.³⁴⁹ He says: “Reductive...heroic primal forms lend themselves easily to the role of authority figure. Thus it is only right that we should want to defame them...”³⁵⁰

For Kelley, these artists in particular go after geometric reductivism and Pollock-esque “all-overness” (in the case of Pittman) because these formalisms have been most vehemently valorized as “masculine” and “heroic,” and represent the values most closely associated with power in late capitalist society.³⁵¹

These approaches—“dirtying” masculinist/formalist art mechanisms—are clearly related to the call to “interfere” in what eighties postmodernist critics have termed rigidified forms of culture. And there are gender valences to this work as well. The women artists recommended in Kelley’s essay suggest/reveal connections between destruction, infection/disease and death and the strongly geometrical forms of masculine-dominant art thematics. The men artists introduce “softness” which undermines “hard,” “strong” masculinity by reference to what is socially constructed as the infantile and the abject “feminine.” Examples include Kelley’s dirty stuffed toys and blankets; the squishiness—as well as the obvious phallic references—evoked by Miller’s “turd”

³⁴⁹ Ibid., Kelley makes a distinction between the grotesque deployed as caricature and the grotesque deployed for itself. When the grotesque is used and revealed in *for itself*, Kelley argues, it is not caricature.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 98.

³⁵¹ Most of these artists (all the men and one of the women) moved quickly at early points in their careers into the art mainstream, and most of them also share an LA provenance with Kelley. Some also appeared frequently during the eighties heydays in New York’s Losaida/Alphabet City exhibition locations such as Postmasters and Times Square’s Clocktower. Larner graduated from CalArts in 1985 and has had annual one-person shows ever since. Her first Museum shows were in Switzerland in 1997 and at the LA MOCA in 2001. She teaches in Pasadena at the Art Center College of Design. Debby Davis appeared in accounts of East Village Art in the New York Times in the mid-80s and seems to have left the art world since. Aimee Rankin’s small “horror boxes” appeared from about 1985-1989 all over New York, and at ICA in Boston. Most recently she has been involved in research on the psychic abilities of African grey parrots. John Miller continues to have a strong career; and is represented by key galleries in New York, LA and Berlin. He teaches at Yale. Lari Pittman is the most famous of this group. His work has appeared several times at the Whitney and other major museums, and he too is well represented by high profile commercial galleries.

sculptures; and Lari Pittman's "queered" invasion of the heroic masculinist painting modality

During this same period, aside from Kelley himself, and the artists he spotlighted in his 1989 "Foul Perfection" essay, three producers were the most exemplary of the elaboration of the thematic of the grotesque/abject/monstrous: Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith and Tim Rollins + KOS. Sherman, Smith and Rollins+KOS also straddle the admiration quotient of the "high art" critics such as the *October* group, as well as the more directly activist-oriented commentators to their left, such as Lucy Lippard. All three began art making in the late seventies-early eighties, all have produced a wide range of very rich and evocative works that engage grotesque/abject/monstrous imagery and social change agendas up to the present, and all have decisively entered the art mainstream with their confrontational art objects and processes.

Kiki Smith

The early eighties saw Kiki Smith active in New York's Lower East Side art scene, and especially with Colab. She was involved in the Manifesto Show and the Times Square Show in 1980, both produced by Colab,³⁵² with the first of her drawings based on a fascination with bodily processes stimulated by *Gray's Anatomy*. Her work during the eighties was heavily involved with the abject, and especially with themes of death and decay.

Smith's work strongly resonates with Ewa Kuryluk's argument that the display and deployment of all manner of body parts as medicalized "theater" is a source for the

³⁵² Kiki Smith exhibited in six Colab exhibitions between 1979 and the demise of the organization in 1982. Like many of the more than 100 artists associated with Colab during this period, Smith was "discovered" by the mainstream art world as a result of her association with it. She became a charter member of the "New Wave" artist generation, so-designated by the *New York, New Wave* show at the PS 1 Institute for Art and Urban Resources.

grotesque in art; and that the dissecting room, key for centuries to the education of physicians and artists, can be seen as “halfway between a macabre theater and a tomb...an intermediate stage between the natural and the artificial performance of death,”³⁵³ For example, Smith’s first full installation, *Life Wants to Live* (at New York alternative space, The Kitchen, in 1982), was a collaboration with her friend, artist David Wojnarowicz, in which the confluence of violence and intimacy was explored. Helaine Posner describes the work:

On cotton gauze she painted sensational headlines and news items [of]...incidents of battered women who killed their aggressors in self-defense. Beside them [were] CAT scans, X rays and stethoscopic readings of her [and David Wojnarowicz’] cardiac and respiratory functions...[recorded] while they beat each other up. [Together with these were] Landsat photographs of the earth [projected] onto cheesecloth panels painted with the glowing phosphorescent outline of a skeleton [and] a film loop of body parts and landscape imagery [on] a second set of panels.³⁵⁴

In *Life Wants to Live* and others of her works of the 1980s, Smith’s concentration is on the “lowly” organs of the body, those areas Bakhtin associates with the carnivalesque (stomach, bladder, liver, colon, uro-genital systems), and the bodily fluids cited by Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva as abject: blood, tears, semen, saliva, oil, milk, sweat, pus, mucus, urine, feces and vomit. And these themes were resonant with the politicization of the body, especially the female body and the homosexual body, as the eighties were a period of intense struggles over abortion rights, and the beginnings of the AIDS

³⁵³ Kuryluk, *ibid.*, 28.

³⁵⁴ Helaine Posner, “Approaching Grace,” in *Kiki Smith* (exh.cat.) (Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1998), 7. It is important to note that 1981 marked the onset of the AIDS crisis. David Wojnarowicz, who collaborated with Smith on *Life Wants to Live* died of AIDS in 1992. In 1993, the only work by Kiki Smith to be included in the Whitney Biennial was *Untitled*, with the dates 1980-1992 listed as the work’s duration. In the catalog, the work is identified as a collaboration with Wojnarowicz. *Untitled* (1980-1992) consisted of 4 photographs in light boxes connected by electrical cords, of sections of Smith and Wojnarowicz’ bodies covered in blood. The photographs were first taken as part of *Life Wants to Live* shown at the Kitchen in 1982.

epidemic.mith, like the artists cited in Kelley's *Artforum* article, also deployed her abject, monstrous and grotesque imagery, especially the works that feature body parts—such as the 1983 *Hand in Jar* (Figure 22), the 1989 *From Heart to Hand* and, also from 1989, *Breast Jar*— to address art historical issues, in particular, Cubism. Smith has engaged continuously during her career with Cubism's violent disconnecting of the human body, seeking to evoke what “really happens”—the bodily fluids emitted, the pain experienced—when bodies are torn limb from limb; and making visible that there are implications, aside from pictorial arrangement, to the fracturing of the human form in art as well as in life.³⁵⁵

Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman's work, beginning in 1980, deployed another form of abject/grotesque and monstrous imagery in highly theatricalized³⁵⁶ photographic tableaux and “still lifes” that mobilized many of the characteristics identified by the various theorists discussed above. For example, the sweaty half-pig, half- human head, replete with blond wig, in *Untitled #140* (1985) (Figure 23) is evocative of the discussion in Stallybrass and White of Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* and the analogy therein of the pig as ambivalently both demonized and excluded, and the object of desire, a thematic they identify as central to the transgressive power of the grotesque and carnivalesque:

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 13.

³⁵⁶ Sherman identifies her primary influences up through the 1980s as the alternative practices in the art of the 70's: "Probably the most impressive things to me were the ads that Lynda Benglis, Robert Morris and Eleanor Antin did, where they used themselves in a kind of joke about advertising. But Conceptual and Performance Art were the biggest inspirations for me." Quote in Andy Grundberg, "The eighties Seen through a Post-Modern Lens," *The New York Times* (July 5, 1987): Section 2; Page 25, Column 1.



Figure 22. Kiki Smith. *Hand in Jar*. Glass, algae, latex, water. 1983. In Helaine Posner. *Kiki Smith*. Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1998, 47.



Figure 23. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #140 (Pig Head)*. Color photograph. In *Cindy Sherman Retrospective*. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art; and Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998, 96.

The ambivalence of the pig [in *Bartholomew Fair*] is organized above all around Ursula, the pig-woman...object of praise and abuse...like the giant hog displayed at the fair, she is *excessive* ...her element is grease...as she walks she lards the ground...sweat...pours from her...She is the celebrant of the open orifice...³⁵⁷

Sherman's pig-human head is presented against a background—seemingly lying *in* it as opposed to situated *against* it—of a blackness that gleams with highlights evoking a wet wallow, perhaps of the pig-human's own defecation, from which, as the hand is to the pig mouth, it could be eating. This image combines aspects of the grotesque/abject/monstrous identified by several of the theorists described in this chapter so far, especially the notion of transgression of boundaries: the fusion of animal and human, the suggestion of the immersion of the figure in bodily waste (shit) and/or that the figure may be consuming it.

By the end of the eighties, Sherman was producing monster tableaux composed entirely of masks and various prostheses suggesting body parts, combined to produce truly carnivalesque conglomerations, such as the *Untitled #187* (1989) (Figure 24) which assembles into a strange “body,” the chubby feet, legs and hands of a baby doll with bulbous breasts, a fat stomach with nostrils where the umbilicus should be, all topped by a hideous clown mask. Sherman's camera position for this image places the viewer in a gynecological perspective to a foreshortened body (the Mantegna foreshortened Christ comes to mind). Our gaze begins at the bottom of the picture at a tuft of black pubic hair, and is then pulled inexorably up and back across the distended abdomen and breasts of the foreshortened composite “body” of the figure to the baleful gaze of the clown mask.

³⁵⁷ Stallybrass and White, *ibid.*, 64. I read Sherman's pig-head as female, and associate it with this passage from Stallybrass and White. Others have seen it as male, a visual pun for “pig-headed” and “male-chauvinist pig.” The ambiguity and ambivalence of the image's gender, and the possibility to read it different ways is one source of its power.

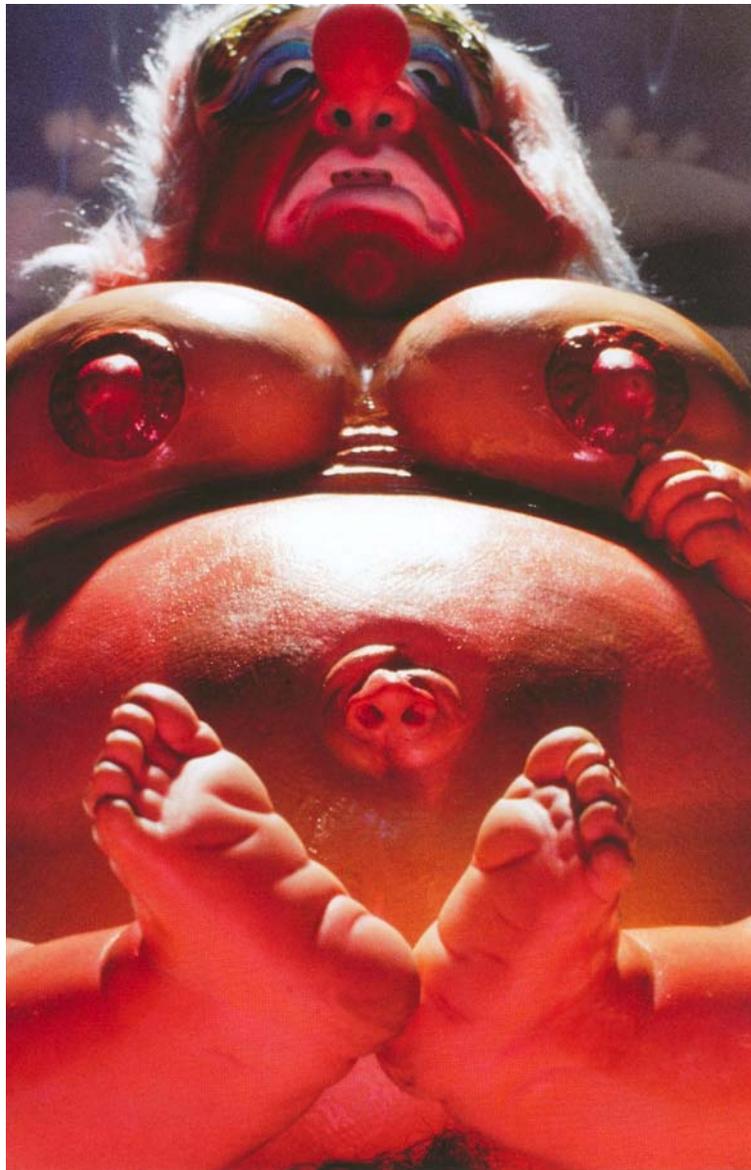


Figure 24. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #187* (from “Doll” series). Color photograph. In *Cindy Sherman Retrospective*. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art; and Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998, 11.

These luridly colored Cibachrome images are quite large, nearly 3-4 times the size of the untitled “film stills” for which Sherman became famous in the 1970s. In these images, Sherman seems to be inverting and poisoning sexual archetypes, deconstructing them by making clear their fake-ness. While they are clearly not “real,” the brilliant color, large scale and aggressive juxtaposition of improbable combinations of “body parts,” make the images both repellent and mesmerizing. In this sense, her work fits in well both with the prescriptions of contemporaneous postmodernist critics who call for “interference” in rigidified cultural forms, and with the observations of theorists of the grotesque/monstrous/abject who see the deployment of this kind of imagery as transgressive of the dominant culture.

Sherman’s work of this period (as well as the “sex and pornography” images of the 1990s) has been seen as a direct response to Laura Mulvey’s influential theory of the masculine gaze.³⁵⁸ It has also been characterized as a riposte to attacks from the right on artists using abject/monstrous and grotesque imagery. This is because she invades the terrain of “high art” photography by her choice of imagery, as well as by the prints’ scale, which approximates (in size and exaggerated color) both advertising posters exhibited at bus stops, and large canvases favored by painters who cater to high-end bourgeois collectors.

It is of interest that the Guerrilla Girls began their sardonic poster campaigns the same year (1985) that Sherman’s nightmarish abject and monstrous pastiches first appeared.

³⁵⁸ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” originally published in *Screen* in 1975, and reprinted in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989). *Screen* was a major location for the development of the idea of the male gaze as a repressively voyeuristic force that needed to be subverted. Sherman’s work and other women artists’ work that deploys the female body in abject form has been read (especially in the nineties) as a key exemplar of this “turning aside” intervention into what Mulvey theorized as the pervasively repressive power of the “male gaze.”

While the Guerrilla Girls did not utilize the grotesque in their posters, they did deploy the grotesque aesthetic of combining animal and human body parts (Figure 25). In their masquerades, in both personal and photographic appearances, they often disguise themselves festooned with grimacing gorilla masks, tight jerseys, miniskirts, black mesh stocking and stiletto heels, completing these performative personae with names of real women artists from history as their *noms de guerre*. The Guerrilla Girls' performative self-imaging clearly deploys what Bakhtin calls "carnavalesque laughter:"

...carnavalesque laughter...is a festive laughter...it is not an individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event...it is directed at all and everyone...the entire world is seen in its droll aspect...this laughter is ambivalent..it asserts and denies, it buries and revives...³⁵⁹

Some commentators, such as Elizabeth Smith, contend, from the vantage point of the late 1990s, that Sherman's grotesque tableaux in her 1980s *Disasters* and *Fairy Tales* series deploy, or instigate, this ambivalent "carnavalesque laughter," through a satiric valence produced through a "play with the clichés of the grotesque" and an "obvious delight in...the morbid and the fantastical" and by "mirroring and mocking ...conventions about the dark side of human nature" through "ebulliently stagey" scenes and tableaux.³⁶⁰ More or less contemporaneous reactions to and analyses of Sherman's abject/monstrous and grotesque imagery of the 1980s ranged from Eleanor Heartney's location of this work in the overlap of the discourses of pornography and

³⁵⁹ M.M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, H. Iswolsky trans.. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 11-12. As quoted in Stallybrass and White, *ibid.*, 8.

³⁶⁰ Elizabeth A. T. Smith, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters," *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective*. (exh.cat.) (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art; and Chicago: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), 22-23.

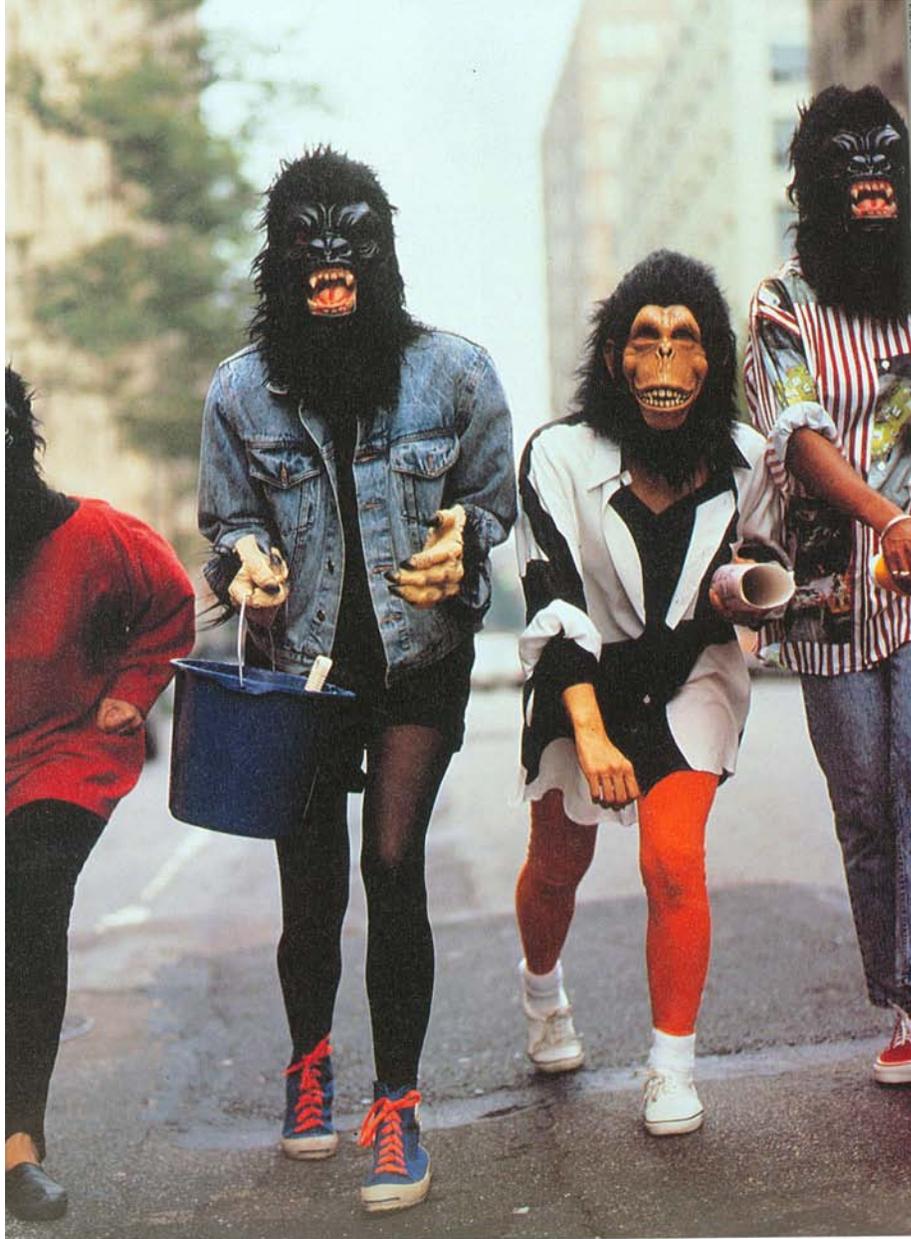


Figure 25. Guerrilla Girls. Photograph by the Guerrilla Girls. n.d. Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls: By the Guerrilla Girls (*Whoever They Really Are*). New York: HarperPerennial, 1995, 6.

postmodernism³⁶¹ to Douglas Crimp's (and others') characterization of her work in general (not the abject images in particular) as exemplary of a truly postmodern exploration of simulation.³⁶² Most of Sherman's abject, monstrous and grotesque imagery—both in its eighties versions and in the more explicitly horrendous ones of the mid-nineties—were not specifically subjected to critique regarding its “abjection;” or, in the case of Rosalind Krauss' perspectives on the work, its engagement with a Bataillean formless, until the mid-nineties.

Tim Rollins + KOS

The third example of an eighties art production form that utilized the monstrous and grotesque moves us more closely toward “community” and “activist” approaches. Tim Rollins + KOS' *Amerika* series consisted of twelve large format works, each approximately 5' x 15' and composed of watercolor, charcoal, acrylic paint and pencil applied to book pages attached to linen. In a series of commentaries on the making of these twelve works, and the ancillary drawings, studies, small paintings and other works made along with them, Rollins provides a riveting account of how the collaboration between him and his teen aged students operated.³⁶³ KOS (Kids of Survival) an ever-

³⁶¹Eleanor Heartney, “A Necessary Transgression: Pornography and Postmodernism,” *New Art Examiner*. (November 1988). Republished in Eleanor Heartney, *Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 112-124. Specifically, Heartney refers to the context for Sherman's late eighties invocation of pornography through her “harridans and monsters” as the “spectacle of radical feminists [Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, et al.] making common cause with Christian fundamentalists and antiabortion activists over the evils of pornography,” the 1986 Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, and its conclusion that pornographic images “create us,” while postmodernists hailed the use of sexuality in its taboo and dangerous forms as an “outsider” mechanism to challenge prevailing norms of a system that excludes marginalized groups.

³⁶² Douglas Crimp, “Pictures” that appeared first as an exhibition catalog essay, then, expanded, in *October* (1979), and finally in Brian Wallis, ed. *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, *ibid.* Cited in Amelia Jones, “Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman,” in *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective*, *ibid.*, 50, note 1.

changing group of Rollins' young collaborators drew on a highly eclectic range of image source inspirations (introduced to them by their teacher, Rollins) for the *Amerika* series, and the resulting works are both highly complex, and simple in concept. Common to all the works, is an abject aesthetic that references organs internal to the body (bladders, lungs, hearts, colons): bulbous shapes that only remotely refer to musical instruments, and defy the idea that anyone could actually produce music with them. In fact, it is notable that, the first work, *Amerika I*, is the only one in the series that, cartoon-like, insists on sound emanating from the "horns" through thin lines emerging from the mouths of the instruments. The remaining 11 do not include the lines.

By the time of the final work in the series (*Amerika XII*, 1988-1989, Figure 27)—the one retained for the permanent collection of the Art and Knowledge Workshop, the nonprofit organization that continues to serve as the "home" for Tim Rollins +KOS—not only had the lines indicating sound emitting from the horns disappeared, but the "horns" themselves had transmuted almost completely into images of death: "instruments" in the form of skulls and bones rollick across the surface like a *danse macabre*. Rollins notes that the references selected by the young artists for this work included a Redon drawing based on the Edgar Allan Poe story *The Masque of the Red Death*, a George Grosz sketch of a dying tree, a 1904 Ensor etching ("Death Dominating the Deadly Sins"), death symbolism from medieval European architectural motifs and manuscript illuminations, and Caribbean, pre-Columbian and African tribal sources.

Amerika XII was conceived and completed in a period of a sharp increase in drug deaths and gang violence in the South Bronx neighborhood where the KOS collective had their

³⁶³ See Tim Rollins, "Annotated Checklist: Notes by Tim Rollins," *Amerika: Tim Rollins + K.O.S.* (exh. cat.) Gary Garrels, ed. (New York: DIA Art Foundation, 1989), 67-82.

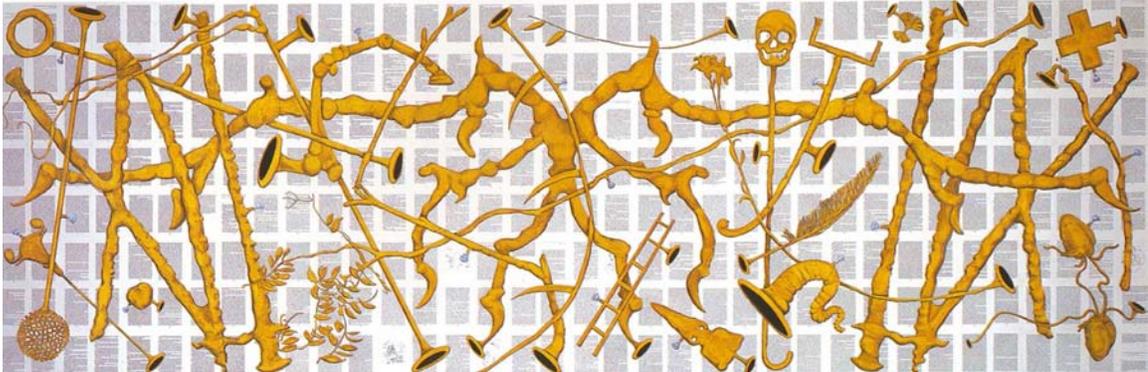


Figure 26. Tim Rollins + KOS. *Amerika XII*. Watercolor and pencil on book pages on linen. 1988-1989. In *Amerika: Tim Rollins+KOS*. Exh. Cat. New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1990, 35.

studio; and the imagery reflected the despair and fear felt by the group.³⁶⁴ In a sense, *Amerika XII* represented a “full circle” return to images of death and violence characteristic of the group’s earliest work, just prior to the *Amerika* series.

One aspect of the motivation for beginning the *Amerika* series was the bizarre yet oddly uplifting scene from the last chapter of the Kafka novel of this name, describing a performance by a utopian artist community (the Nature Theater of Oklahoma) in which hundreds of women wearing white robes and golden wings and standing on pedestals blew long golden horns in a gleeful cacophony.³⁶⁵ But in 1984-’85, just before the idea for the *Amerika* series was proposed to the group by Rollins, *another* more important reason for starting the series was the “pressure, the desire, the *need* to create a work of art that was political, vital, critical and yet *beautiful* all at once.”³⁶⁶ Rollins and his young collaborators felt the work they had done just previously had been too violence-oriented, and:

...too indulgent in negative imagery...burning buildings, people turning into monsters, lurid colors and violent compositions didn’t tell the local community anything it didn’t already know...[and] despite their good intentions...[works like

³⁶⁴ In 1988 the group had to move out of the South Bronx because a notorious neighborhood gang leader had threatened one both of the KOS, and Tim Rollins, with assassination. Also, starting in 1986, the South Bronx became one of the most serious markets for crack cocaine, with the result of many more addicts and drug related deaths, as well as a spike in HIV infections. See the account by UK journalist Melanie McFadyean, “Art of Survival in the Bronx: Tim Rollins,” *The Guardian* (May 13, 1989).

³⁶⁵ Other influences on Rollins (as founder and leader of the collaboration, and teacher) that led to the development of the *Amerika* series included, in addition to the last chapter of Franz Kafka’s book *Amerika*, entitled “The Nature Theater of Oklahoma:” textile and wallpaper designs of William Morris, Dr. Seuss, especially the “pandemonium” and political allegories in *The Cat in the Hat* and *Horton Hears a Who*. See *ibid.*, 69. Rollins’ method in working with his young collaborators was to expose them to various sources he was thinking about (in this case, prominently, Dr. Seuss and William Morris) and to ask them to develop motifs that incorporated some aspects of these sources along with their own experiences and ideas. The idea for the bulbous, internal-organ like horns that became the central motif for all the works in the *Amerika* series was developed by one of the students in the class after weeks of work in which, as Rollins relates: “the kids couldn’t get beyond copying the wings and instruments depicted in [the illustrations] the edition of *Amerika* we were using in class.” See Rollins, *ibid.*, 68.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

these] only served to reinforce the dominant culture's long-held, one dimensional view of the South Bronx and its inhabitants."³⁶⁷

Tim Rollins + KOS' *Amerika* series engages (and the result is simultaneously whimsical, sumptuously eye-pleasing, and repellent) nearly all the forms of the grotesque, abject, monstrous and carnivalesque identified by key theorists that emerged forcefully in the eighties:

- reference to body parts, especially internal body parts that have been exaggeratedly distended, as if diseased;
- use of color, in the case of *Amerika* and their other works as well, an emphasis on a restricted palette of black, white, red and ocher (or gold/yellow-brown as in earth);
- mixture of high art and low culture in the inspirations/appropriations for the horn forms (e.g., illustrations for children's books, comics, graffiti, literature and art from recent and remote histories, and near and far geographies);
- crowding of the canvas space (itself, as canvas, a site with "high art"/painting valences) with a multiplication of forms, lines and patterns, inscribed with all manner of pigments, some "traditional," and others decidedly "low;" and perhaps most importantly
- the mixture of "high" and "low" in the artistic collaboration itself: an established artist (Tim Rollins) with "high art" education (and a working-class background), and a *taste* for utilization of "low" subject matter, together with an ever-changing group (KOS) of pre-teens and teenagers of color, categorized by the school system as "low," (e.g. learning disabled, emotionally troubled, undisciplined) and with backgrounds

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 68.

immersed in the poverty, violence and drug-infestation of one of the most notorious urban slums in the U.S., and one of the “lowest” geographical locations (the South Bronx) anywhere in the US at the time.

Each of these artists (and, in the case of Tim Rollins +KOS, a collaboration) deployed/appropriated grotesque, abject and monstrous imagery, as that imagery has been defined by theorists contemporaneous with their art production.

But Are They Activist?

So, how does this work relate to activism? And how does it operate vis à vis discourses on transgression, the avant-garde and postmodernism? As discussed in Part 1, Lucy Lippard argued early in the eighties that art was activist if it possessed all (or most) of these characteristics:

- the producers were located (presumably consciously) around the periphery of the art world, and repudiated especially the commercialization of art;
- they produced their work collectively or collaboratively;
- the “attitude” expressed by them in their art, and personally, was one of irreverence and defiance of the eighties as the “me decade;”
- their work was concerned dominantly with challenging the Reagan Administration’s attempts to reverse and neutralize the social legislation in place since the sixties;
- exhibition sites were exclusively in “flaky, impermanent spaces,” and public locations;

- the work featured dominantly “non-traditional” and “low” aesthetic methods and media (guerrilla actions, street theater, billboards, dance, environments, posters) and eschewed painting and sculpture in “high art” approaches;
- the audience was emphasized, and the approaches consciously constructed to be “understandable” by “ordinary people;” and, finally
- a Brechtian “distanciation” approach was dominant, namely: attempts were made to reveal the structure behind the work, to emphasize how the art creates illusion, on the theory (viz. Brecht) that audiences who learn to perceive how illusion is accomplished in art can, thereafter, more easily understand how the illusions of hegemony operate to encourage collusion of the mass of the people in their own oppression.³⁶⁸

It seems clear, when Lippard’s template is used to assess the relative “activism” of these producers and their work, that none of them measures up to all the criteria. For example, of the artists identified by Mike Kelley as exemplary of “foul perfection,” all six (as well as Kelley himself) began their careers located around the periphery of the art world, but certainly did not stay there long. In the early 1980s, some of the artists Kelley identified as key to his theory of “foul perfection” as a kind of carnivalesque caricature of formalist art, had been part of the Lower East Side art scene and had exhibited in the “flaky, impermanent spaces” Lippard recommended as places where one might find activist art. But it did not take long for these artists to move smartly into the mainstream. Over the years, most of the “foul perfection” male artists identified by

³⁶⁸ See Lippard. “Cashing in a Wolf Ticket,” *ibid.*, “Hot Potatoes...,” *ibid.*, and “Trojan Horses,” *ibid.* It seems appropriate to invoke Lippard as template, not only because she stands so tall as key commentator on, and judge of, what is “activist” about art, but also because in these two essays she specifically addresses art of the eighties, and this is what Kelley is addressing as well. My interest here and elsewhere is whether the imagery of abjection, monstrousness and grotesquerie can be seen as “activist.”

Kelley have become very well-known, well-represented and well-bought. Of the women artists, only Liz Larner continues to produce sculpture, and be covered in the most prestigious print outlets.

Sherman, Smith and Rollins + KOS, actively produced work throughout the eighties and nineties, and continue to be well-represented by high-profile New York dealers. Their work sells in the five and six figure range. The argument could be made for Smith and Rollins (though not for Sherman) that, at the very beginning of their careers, they located themselves on the Lippard-preferred “periphery of the art world,” since both were heavily involved with self-styled activist collaborative ventures (Colab in Smith’s case, and Group Material in Rollins’ case). But, as Alan Moore has noted (see the discussion of Moore’s text in Part 1), Colab was pretty much gone before the mid-eighties, as a direct result of artists like Smith being “discovered”—drawn into the mainstream of Whitney exhibitions and the commercial gallery scene—and lionized as the next new thing.

Neither Sherman nor Smith overtly addressed, in their art, the neutralization of sixties legislation by the Reagan Administration, nor did they produce their work collectively or collaboratively. But both did, (although ambiguously) express a resistance to the hegemony of the male artist as genius through retention of a *female* authorial presence by succeeding in “branding” their style with their *female* names. Also, their work, in good postmodern style, sought to make visible, even mirror, the structures/strictures of societal repression by their flaunting of abject/monstrous and grotesque imagery; and by aiming it directly at the art world itself in a sly upending of expectations of what *should* be found in temples of high culture.

Tim Rollins + KOS toe the line on many of Lippard's characteristics. They certainly did, and do, produce work in collaboration. They were located, at the beginning, in an area (South Bronx) quintessentially outside the art world. They appropriated a wide variety of visual material from both high and low sources, and reinterpreted them through the eyesth of a 30-something white male art school graduate and ghetto school teacher; and of learning-disabled (and artistically gifted), primarily Puerto Rican youngsters living in an abysmally poor and violent neighborhood (references to which prevail in the art they produced). This is clearly evidence of Lippard's requirement that activist artists' work should exude irreverence and defiance of high art tradition, and demonstrate comfort in juxtaposing and melding highly dichotomous source material from extremely opposing social strata.

But any "irreverence" toward the mainstream art world demonstrated by Tim Rollins+KOS was accompanied by a canny and risky alliance with it. It is a little-known fact that Tim Rollins+KOS began, not, as is often recounted, by accident, in the classroom where Rollins was teaching, but as a result of a phone call to Rollins from a high profile Manhattan art dealer. Rollins explains what happened:

He asks me do I know any young political artists? I don't know what came over me but I said I happened to know the work of some very young artists. He says who and I say me and the kids in the Bronx. There were five seconds silence, I could hear him thinking 'Children's art...?' Then he says, 'well bring it down.' We had nothing, I hadn't even thought about doing anything.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁹ McFadyean, *ibid.* According to McFadyean, the work Rollins brought to the art dealer, at his request, (date not specified in the article) were reactions by the kids to visiting a fallout shelter from the 1950s, located in the basement of their school, and to a book of drawings by Hiroshima survivors Rollins showed to them. The better-known account of the beginnings of Tim Rollins +KOS, which did occur, but later, was that the dyslexic kids, to Rollins annoyance, drew on the pages of the paperback books he had bought with money from his own pocket, so they could follow along while he read to them, hoping to enhance their reading skills. The "real" inaugural event (the one in which the art dealer asked Rollins to recommend young artists) obviously happened some time before the date Rollins gives as the beginning of *Amerika* (1984, when Rollins first became aware of the Kafka book). Rollins first went to teach in the Bronx in 1979-'80, about the same time he, together with 14 other fellow artists and writers (all who kept their day

This connection between the work produced by Rollins and his young charges, and the high-rolling commercial gallery scene, from the very beginning of the collective's activities, was in direct contradiction of one of the key precepts of activist art articulated by Lucy Lippard, namely, to stay located around the periphery of the art world and to repudiate commercialization. It is of particular interest to note that Rollins, a charter member and key activist in the collective Group Material, did not eschew the commercial connection for KOS.

Rollins was a key figure in the development of both KOS and Group Material at the same time. In 1981 both of these ventures abruptly changed direction. Both turned *toward* and not away from the mainstream and the institutional/commercial. KOS launched as a direct result of a call from a commercial art dealer, at the same time that Group Material changed its membership composition considerably, and moved decisively away from one of their most fervently-held values: repudiation of the commercial sphere and the official museum world. Just a few months before this change in direction, Group Material issued this public statement: "...as artists and writers we want to maintain control over our work, directing our energies to the demands of social conditions as opposed to the demands of the art market"³⁷⁰

But, by the Fall of 1981, Group Material was fielding its projects in locations that seemed the obverse of this statement. The new dissemination approach involved entering into lease contracts with governmental organizations such as the New York City Mass

jobs) started the activist art collective Group Material. See Jan Avgikos, "Group Material Timeline: Activism as a Work of Art," in Felshin, *ibid.*, 85-117, for a detailed look at the collective's career. Most accounts of the collective's career indicate that Rollins was a key member of Group Material from 1979-1987 when he left the collective to give more attention to KOS.

³⁷⁰ From *Group Material Calendar of Events, 1980-1981*, as quoted in Avgikos, *ibid.*, 89.

Transit Authority. Group Material approached MTA as a distribution mechanism for their *M-5* project, named after the buses that traveled Manhattan's 5th Avenue corridor. In the manner of the advertising cards that slip into slots at the ceiling level of buses, Group Material mass-publicized progressive perspectives, on diverse socially-relevant topics, to the bus-riding public on a major Manhattan thoroughfare that cut across equally diverse neighborhoods from the Lower East Side, through the Upper East Side and into Harlem. The *M5* project was just the first of a series of important collaborations with (and which also involved taking funds from) organizations and groups that would have been unthinkable partners when the Group had just started. This was very consciously done, as a way to appropriate the authority of powerful institutions, including, over the years, major museums and biennials.³⁷¹

Jan Avgikos has called this approach Group Material's "politics of place," a tactical maneuver in which "...Group Material gained access to the distribution machinery of the institution..." for their often aggressively overt critiques of the sponsoring institution itself, while, at the same time, "the major museums and international exhibitions that commissioned [these critiques] were able to neutralize [them] with respect to their own policies..." In effect, this was a kind of sleeping-with-the-enemy approach that allowed Group Material to acknowledge "the power of the institution in society as a cultural producer, and ...to appropriate its authority with respect to the social issues the collective addressed."³⁷²

³⁷¹ Avgikos, *ibid.*, 107.

³⁷² *Ibid.*

Rollins' approach to KOS echoed the trajectory chosen by Group Material around 1981. From the beginning (with the *Amerika* series), the works created by the Tim Rollins+KOS collaboration were shown in key commercial galleries, and bought by major collectors. While Rollins and his fellow Group Material-ists "appropriated" the power of major institutions in order to promulgate their social change messages, Rollins was, through KOS, also appropriating the power and money of major individual and corporate collectors. These funds were ploughed back into a project to secure art-making as a viable career for his young charges, and for Rollins himself,³⁷³ while at the same time creating complex works that proved that learning disabled kids from one of the most abjectly poor and violent ghettos in the U.S. could work with him to make art valued by the mainstream. As he put it, Tim Rollins+KOS was : "...like a little tribe. I'm over-educated, the kids are under-educated. I'm making them tighten up and they're making me loosen up. Together we're a pretty good artist—but individually, who knows?"³⁷⁴

The big difference, of course, was that Tim Rollins+KOS produced *objects* easily assimilated into the market economy of the mainstream art world, and *imagery* that emphasized the abject, monstrous and grotesque, while Group Material's intervention was broader and more comprehensively aimed primarily at Lippard's dictum that activist

³⁷³ The Tim Rollins +KOS project is still going strong as of the date of the writing of this dissertation. In April, 2003, the collective was commissioned by Drexel University's art department to create a collaborative work, using book pages and paint, and mobilizing young students from local Philadelphia schools. Rollins had wanted to create a South Bronx school of the arts with the proceeds of the sales of KOS works, but that dream has not so far reached reality. The sales of the works do support the Art and Knowledge Foundation, however, and provide salaries for some of the KOS members who continue to work with Rollins, and for Rollins. Some years ago there was a controversy stimulated by some previous members of KOS, regarding how the funds acquired through sales of works were being distributed (or not distributed) to the KOS members. And Rollins has been accused periodically of manipulating and exploiting poor ghetto kids for his own ego needs. He has also been hailed as a hero who has made a new world possible for young people headed for dead end lives, or too-early death itself. The controversy continues, though it is muted these days.

³⁷⁴ McFadyean, *ibid.*

art should be concerned dominantly with challenging the Reagan Administration's reversal and neutralization of sixties social legislation.

Group Material referred, of course, in this process, to exceedingly monstrous and grotesque aspects of public policy, and the abjection especially of the AIDS epidemic, but the approach did not directly utilize abject and grotesque visual effect as in Sherman, Smith and Tim Rollins+KOS. Instead, Group Material focused on information dissemination about issues ignored or "spun" in mainstream media and by the Reagan Administration itself, and on what Jan Avgikos assesses as "the most successful elements of earlier [Group Material] projects... a repertoire of installation models and outreach projects that included the timeline, the opinion wall, the town meeting and community service announcements that appeared in leased ad space."³⁷⁵

* * * * *

To summarize, Chapter 3 highlighted examples of key practitioners of the abject/monstrous/grotesque in art in order to demonstrate that there are strong resonances between the imagery produced by these artists and the contemporaneous appearance of theoretical texts, both those directly related to art and those addressing other areas of cultural production. The assertive presence of abjection, monstrosity and grotesquerie, in the mode of "foul perfection," increasingly visible in art during the eighties, was proposed both by the artists themselves and contemporaneous commentators as conscious efforts to transgress cultural forms and sites of cultural tradition and power in U.S. society. Some of this was in direct and open opposition to the particular policies of the Reagan-Bush era (in line with Lucy Lippard's prescriptions of the early 1980s). Some

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 108.

was oblique and poetic (and less obvious as critique) though viscerally affecting nonetheless.

An important aspect emerges in consideration of the discourse of this period, as revealed in art production, namely, a palpable shift in the relationship between artists who seek to instigate change with their art, and the institutions in which their art is shown. Rather than eschewing institutional location, in some cases, this particular kind of art specifically aims to “dirty” institutions and modernist precedents alike.

This intentional “aiming” of art demonstrates not only that producers of this art were seeking to intervene with their art in these locations of dominant culture. The art itself was designed to interact and relate intimately with the sites where it was shown, in order to reveal the relationship of the particular site/institution to the social/political/economic structure problem being addressed by the art’s aggressive imagery and “foul” formal elements.

This deliberate effort at “infestation” of the clean machines of cultural hegemony with quotidian imagery related to the abject/monstrous/grotesque sought to turn institutional cooptation of activist art into institutional collaboration with its social and political aims. But aims and results are not necessarily synonymous. Cooptation came from some other societal directions, as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: From The Eighties Into The Nineties With The Abject/Grotesque/Monstrous—Theories, Prohibitions And Interventions

In Chapter 4, the consideration of discourse turns toward the relationship of the abject/monstrous/grotesque to generalized bifurcation and extreme dichotomy between ends of the ideological spectrum as the late eighties merged into the early nineties. The increasingly high profile of the monstrous/grotesque/abject at all levels of culture is spotlighted here, as well as various perspectives ranging from mass media to high theory regarding the reasons for the increased emphasis at all levels of culture on this kind of imagery.

The discussion begins with a summary recounting of the political context of the late eighties and early nineties, characterized by a full scale attack on pornography by the U.S. Justice Department, the call by conservative Congressional representatives and the then-US President, George H. W. Bush, for a constitutional amendment to protect the U.S. flag from “disrespect;” and the rise to power of the religious right. This context situates the controversy exploding in 1989 around three particular works of art, “Dread” Scott Tyler’s *What is the Proper Way to Display the American Flag*, Robert Mapplethorpe’s traveling exhibition, *The Perfect Moment* (which included the sexually explicit *X Portfolio*—see Figure 27) and Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (Figure 4). *Piss Christ* is considered in direct relationship to books by two discourse contributors who addressed elements of horror and abjection that were increasingly dominant in both popular culture and literature. This is followed by a section contextualizing the response from the art world both in the form of exhibitions and publications as well as interviews and articles in the mass media.



Figure 27. Robert Mapplethorpe. *Self Portrait*, 1978. Gelatin silver print. From *X Portfolio*. In Steven C. Dubin. *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions*. New York and London: Routledge, 1992.

The Art World at the Bullseye

As the eighties morphed into the nineties, attacks from U.S. institutions of power and authority on so-called pornography and “obscenity” (bodily representations that emphasized the sexual, abject, monstrous or grotesque body and its effluvia) increased in number and virulence at every level of the polity. Attempts at regulation of expression began to move away from concentration on popular culture, to art, often seeking to legitimate this kind of regulation as appropriate by seeking to deny “art” status to particular works, especially if the creation and exhibition of the works had been supported with government funds.

During the last five years of the decade of the eighties this full-scale frontal attack on expression ranged from Reagan-appointed Attorney General Edward Meese’s six-city “decency commissions,” set up in 1985 (all its recommendations were enacted into law) to determine the relationship between sexually explicit material and antisocial behavior, to the 400% increase in obscenity prosecutions by the Reagan Justice Department, to the Screen Actors’ Guild rule that open-mouth kissing was dangerous to actors (in the aftermath of the death of Rock Hudson from AIDS the same year). In 1988 artist Alice Sims was arrested, and her children placed in foster care. These actions were taken because a commercial film developer informed authorities that Sims’ photographs for an art work entitled *Water Babies* featured images of her own nude children. That same year, federal communications statutes were expanded in order to ban “indecent” language over the airwaves 24 hours a day.

The focus on restricting expression was not only on extirpation of “pornography” and “obscenity,” wherever it was to be found, but also on protecting and elevating “sacred” imagery—especially the American flag, and religious icons—from “traitorous” and “blasphemous” treatment. In 1989, three events occurred that set the art world in motion in outright defense mode. These events were

- An exhibition at the Chicago Art Institute of “Dread” Scott Tyler’s installation *What is the Proper Way to Display the American Flag* (Figure 28) President Bush denounced the artist, and an angry crowd of Vietnam veterans occupied the gallery in protest.
- The Robert Mapplethorpe traveling exhibition, *The Perfect Moment*. This show was infamous for being canceled by Christina Orr-Cahall, then-Director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and subsequently the cause of the trial—and acquittal—of Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center director Dennis Barrie on obscenity charges for showing the work.
- The Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art’s (SECCA) exhibition of Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (Figure 4). This image provided one of the first sparks to ignite the political firestorm known as the “culture wars.”

All three played key roles beyond catalyzing what became an epidemic of right wing pressure on the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to remove funding from individual artists and alternative art exhibition institutions, and even to dismantle NEA altogether.

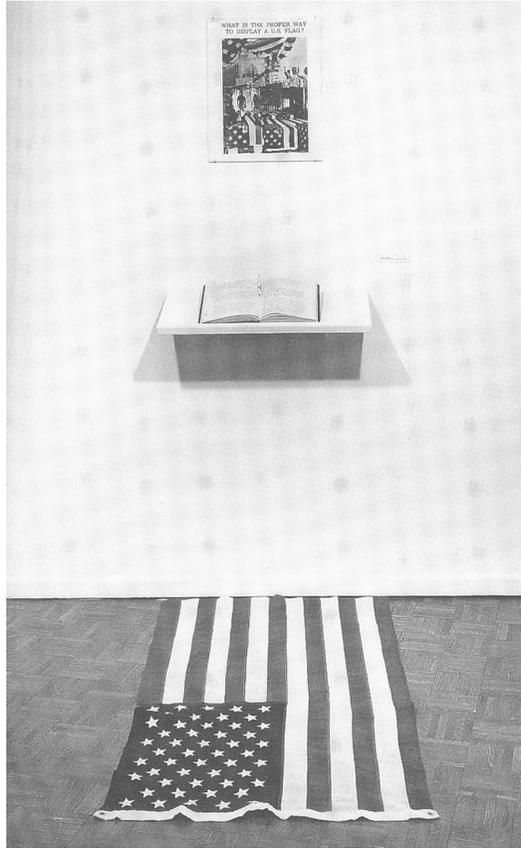


Figure 28. "Dread" Scott Tyler. *What is the Proper Way to Display the American Flag?* Installation at School of Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, 1988. In Carol Becker. *Zones of Contention: Essays on Art, Gender and Anxiety*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, 25.

On May 18, 1989, then-Senator Alphonse D'Amato (R-NY) took the floor of the U.S. Senate Chamber, and ripped up a reproduction of the Serrano *Piss Christ* photograph, intoning what would become the battle cry of the right in their direct attacks on the NEA, which have continued up to the date of the writing of this dissertation: "This so-called piece of art is a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity...this is not a question of free speech. This is a question of abuse of taxpayers' money."³⁷⁶ D'Amato's histrionics have been cited by contemporary and retrospective chronicles alike as the crystallization point of the "culture wars." In this abbreviated diatribe, D'Amato succeeded in defining the parameters of the controversies and power struggles that would ensue. These parameters include when and where a particular form of expression could be called "art," especially if that expression could be characterized as "deplorable/despicable" and/or "vulgar." Also, whether any expression ("art" or "not art") funded by government money should be protected as "free speech," especially when objected to as "deplorable/despicable" and/or "vulgar." And, finally, if the art's dissemination or exhibition with the support of government funding should be rejected as "abuse of taxpayers' money."

³⁷⁶ From the transcript of the debate in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, vol. 135, no/ 64, May 18, 1989, S 5594, and also reproduced in Bolton, ed., *ibid.*, 28. Art institutions and individuals losing previously-approved NEA funds in the wake of the D'Amato performance in May, 1989 included: June, 1989: A "symbolic cut" of NEA's 1990 appropriation of \$45,000, the amount that had been awarded to the Southeast Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA), of which \$15,000 had been paid to Andres Serrano for the works in their exhibition; November, 1989, new Bush appointed NEA-head John Frohnmayer revoked a \$10,000 grant to Artists Space in NYC for *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, an exhibition about AIDS (later restored after outcry from arts community); May 1990, National Council of the Arts vetoed approved grants to the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art (the initial sponsor of the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition that sent Dennis Barrie, the director of the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Institute, to court on obscenity charges); June, 1990, Frohnmayer vetoed NEA Theater Program peer-reviewed and approved grants to Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes and Tim Miller; October, 1990, Mike Kelley peer-reviewed and approved exhibition funding at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), Boston, denied by Frohnmayer and National Council on the Arts; November 1990, Mel Chin's *Revival Field* grant refused by Frohnmayer because "artistic aims not sufficient" (later restored). See Philip Brookman and Debra Singer, "Chronology" in Bolton, ed., *ibid.*, 342-363.

The Abject/Monstrous/Grotesque: Why Now? Noël Carroll’s “Art-Horror”

In the early nineties, as the D’Amato diatribe continued to provoke reverberations throughout U. S. culture, philosophy professor Noël Carroll’s book, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990) documented the use of abject, monstrous and grotesque imagery in popular culture’s “horror genres.” His book argues that the explosion of this expression at all levels of U.S. society—as well as escalating efforts in certain quarters of US society of the eighties to suppress this kind of expression in both mass and high culture—was a symptom that the center was destabilizing.³⁷⁷

Like Kayser and Kuryluk, Carroll reached back into remote history to trace a genealogy for what he argued was a contemporary obsession with the abject, monstrous and grotesque.³⁷⁸ And, like Kayser and Kuryluk, he proposed a list of characteristics by which one can recognize the phenomena, and speculated on the reasons for their appearance at the particular moment. But, unlike Kayser and Kuryluk, whose enterprises were designed to bring visibility to what they perceived as a more or less obscure (yet

³⁷⁷ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). Clark’s book (John R. Clark, *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions*, (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991) is a compilation of essays published in a range of scholarly journals, from 1974-1986. Most of his citations of both primary and secondary works are from the early seventies and late sixties, with some as early as the forties. Carroll’s book likely began to take shape in the early to mid-80s based on the fact that the most recent films, books and music videos cited appeared no later than about 1986.

³⁷⁸ Carroll argues that, while the horror genre has been in existence in literature since at least Petronius’ *Satyricon* c.27-66 CE, it is traced, in its modern form—the one for which Carroll develops his theories of the whys of audience enthusiasm for the genre—to the 18th century, and specifically to the English Gothic novel, the German *Schauer-roman* the French *romance noir*, and particularly to Horace Walpole’s 1765 novel *The Castle of Otranto*. *Ibid.*, 4. John Clark’s genealogy for the satiric grotesque (See John R. Clark, *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991, addressed in detail below) also starts in antiquity, with Hellenistic Greece and the Cynics (or “Dog-philosophers”) (ca. 250 BCE), especially Diogenes, a follower of Antisthenes, in turn a student of Socrates’. Diogenes and his fellow Cynics specialized in publicly extolling contrariness to the shibboleths of the day (emphasizing melodramatic gesture and rejection of social norms by wearing rags, refusing to bathe and living on the street), including appropriating Heracles as their hero, but, in opposition to his traditional role as ethical ideal, celebrating with pointed irony his “coarse...brawn and savage garb—the lion skin and the enormous Neanderthal club.” See Clark, *ibid.*, 32-33.

fascinating) tradition of the grotesque in art, Carroll sought to explain the decidedly *not* obscure profusion of such imagery in contemporary cultural production.

While Noël Carroll's exegesis is based on the particular example of horror in film and (pulp) fiction, it is also proposed by him as applying across the board to all art forms, popular and "high."³⁷⁹ Carroll's inclusive definition of what he terms "art-horror," and its privileging of audience reaction/reception makes it relevant to this dissertation, especially since the book appeared at the end of the eighties, a decade characterized, as described earlier, by a full scale campaign, emanating from the highest levels of the US' national government, to determine "negative effects" on public morality of violence and explicit sex in films, television and popular music (and accompanying music videos). As Carroll documents, the horror genres of the seventies and eighties was replete with violence and sex.

Carroll's documentation of the proliferation of horror genres (and, I would add, its concurrence with a similar proliferation of pornography genres) in the 1980s—including the reactions to these at various points on the ideological spectrum—describes a key component of the context for the proliferation of monstrous, abject and grotesque imagery and references in visual art during this same period in the U.S.

³⁷⁹ Carroll provides few examples of (non-cinema) visual art despite his claim that his theory can apply across all art-forms. He acknowledges this, and provides a disclaimer at *ibid.*, n. 62, 223-224: "...my examples have come primarily from fictional literature, motion pictures and theater. Thus the question may arise... whether my approach can assimilate the fine arts." He goes on to argue that to the extent a particular example of visual (fine) arts is *narrative* as are literature, cinema and theater, his theory can apply directly, "in works that show [human] characters responding to monsters... illustrations [of horror stories] in books in magazines, and as advertisements for motion pictures... showing the monster or the maniac... and some victim whose expression exemplifies horror... also where such illustrations do not show victims, but only monsters... grounded in the responses of the characters of the fictions they illustrate." He does allow that (fine) visual art can fit within his theory without being connected to the reaction of a victim, "in case the viewer of the picture regards the creatures in it as meeting the criteria for art-horror" he sets out in the book. Emphasis in his theory is on the didactic feature of "art-horror," namely that there must be cues to the reader/viewer as to how to respond. For Carroll this occurs primarily within the horror genre work in the form of the reactions of characters to a specific monster.

Carroll provides documentation that the appetite for horror, in fiction and cinema especially, had expanded exponentially over the 15 years prior to the publication of his book (1990).³⁸⁰ He notes that this most recent cycle of the horror genre's popularity that prompted him to write his book was, by far, the most extensive concentration of the phenomenon in the U.S., though he cites several earlier nodal points at which horror was widely popular in the U.S. in the twentieth century, including: the 1930s, coincident with the Great Depression, and the 1950s, coincident with the Cold War.

The mammoth horror cycle of the seventies and eighties that sparked Carroll's research into the aesthetics of horror was, he points out, also coincident with the rise of postmodernism and the "evident collapse of *Pax Americana*," characterized by the

...demotion of the global power of the United States—the loss of the Vietnam War, the oil crises...internal tensions [including the] unending spectacles of political scandals, widely publicized business scams, economic altercations of all sorts...the debt crisis, the claims for enfranchisement of heretofore disempowered groups such as women and minorities...³⁸¹

Of particular interest to this dissertation is Carroll's description of how closely the features of the horror genre parallel the characteristics of postmodernism, which, as we have seen, was, by the end of the eighties, well-established in U.S. intellectual circles; and, as discussed in Part 2, more or less bifurcated into a "neo-conservative" vs. a "left"

³⁸⁰ Carroll dates the introduction to his book as 1988, the year the 4th sequel to *Nightmare on Elm Street* was in the movie theaters, Clive Barker's *Cabal* hit the bookstores and the *Phantom of the Opera* was on Broadway. By that time, he argues, the phenomenon of a hugely expanded market for horror that began in the mid-seventies was in full bloom and "truly staggering." He cites Stephen King's first novel, *Carrie*—1973, and William Friedkin's blockbuster *The Exorcist*—also 1973, as the signals that horror was here to stay (though he also points to Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby*—published in 1967, and, which, directed by Roman Polanski, appeared in film form in 1968, as the earliest presaging of the mammoth horror cycle of the seventies and eighties addressed in his book). This was, he says, "the time [that] was especially propitious to begin an aesthetic inquiry into the nature of horror" and "come to terms with general features of the genre as manifested throughout its history." See Carroll, "Introduction," *ibid.*, 1-4.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

postmodernism. Carroll's argument tracks the "left" end of the postmodernism spectrum, especially in his contention that, like postmodernism, the various manifestations of the 1970s-eighties horror genre:

- Stood in opposition to (transgressed) the culture's basic conceptual categories, illustrating the (postmodern) notion that concepts are deconstructible, and therefore are arbitrary, and that the failure to recognize this deconstructibility of canonical notions is a problem (which has been named "logocentrism") that needs to be remedied.
- Was reflexive, self-conscious and intertextual. Carroll argues that horror genre authors and enthusiasts of the 1970s-eighties were highly aware of the horror genre's traditions, and relished in "borrowing" its themes, in an appropriative sense characteristic also of postmodernism.
- Dethroned the human person, especially in her/his guise as (powerful individualist) hero/heroine, in control of her/his destiny.

Carroll argues that in the horror genre, "splatter" films (and in books, "butcher shop horror") accomplish this in graphic terms:

...contemporary[1970s-eighties] horror genre differs from preceding cycles in its degree of graphic violence [in which] the human body ...is burst, blown up, broken and ripped apart...disintegrates or metamorphoses...is dismembered and dissected...devoured from the inside out...[depiction] of the person as "meat"...

Carroll characterizes contemporary horror genres, and postmodernism, as two forms of cultural response to the political and social turmoil of post World War II U.S.; and specifically, with regard to the horror genre's reflection of the anxieties of the era, he argues that:

Its [the horror genre's] expatiation on the *instability of norms* [my emphasis]—both classificatory and moral—its nostalgic allusions, the sense of helplessness and paralysis it engenders in its characters, the theme of person-as-meat, the paranoia of its narrative structures, all seem to address an uncertainty about living in the contemporary world...[and provide] a repertory of symbolism for those times in which the cultural order...is perceived to be in a state of dissolution.³⁸²

A very important aspect of Carroll's argument is his refusal to attribute either an inherently salutary or negative purpose to the horror genre in general as regards the destabilization of the dominant culture. While he does assert that the genre reflects anxiety over the "*instability of norms*," he also insists on its ambivalence and ambiguity regarding purposes for which it might be utilized. Though he does not "take sides" as to where the genre's "transgressions" are going, Carroll's refusal to pigeonhole the genre to any particular ideological position is in itself a postmodern move, in that if he takes a side at all, it is with the possibility that the genre may be deployed/interpreted to serve various masters, including those of the status quo as well as those seeking to upset that order.

Consonances and Concurrences in Context and Discourse

Carroll's exegesis is consonant with other theoretical perspectives addressed so far in this dissertation. Its appearance at the particular time it did (1990), and its publication by Routledge, a house well-known for privileging "cutting edge" accounts of the relationships between "low"/popular and "high" culture—is symptomatic of the book's participation in an emerging thematic in discourse which reflects a desire to account for the concurrence of cultural phenomena at various societal levels in the U.S. Carroll's close attention to the devices, characteristics and formulae of the culture-permeating horror genre of the seventies and eighties is particularly helpful in assessing the

³⁸² See Carroll's final chapter, "Why Horror?" The discussion of the horror genre's connection with postmodernism is at 208-214. The quoted passages are from this section.

concurrent discursive element of abject/monstrous/grotesque imagery in visual art of the 1980s and 1990s.

This is the case not because these popular culture devices can be utilized in any across-the-board fashion as a template through which to view art of this period. Rather, the appearance in 1990 of Carroll's theorization and delineation of the formulaic structure of the horror genre is symptomatic of a wider contemporaneous discourse regarding the relationship between a broadly held sense of anxiety and the production of horrific imagery.

Carroll notes, for example, that the most recent horror cycle began to be prevalent in the early sixties, and became ubiquitously available to the late cycle Baby Boomers (born circa 1950 and after). This generation, as Carroll points out, was reaching impressionable teenagehood at a time when the earliest examples of the horror genre were being shown repeatedly on TV, and were also available in the rapidly-expanding commercial phenomenon of the video rental store. It was also the time when new versions of horror (that referred back to the themes and formulae of "classic horror" of the fifties and sixties, while featuring a decidedly increased utilization of blood and gore) were also appearing pell mell in movie theaters, on pulp fiction racks in drugstores and newsstands, and on the TV screen both in music video forms and in made-for-TV movies.

Some of the young people who were avid consumers of these horror genre products became artists toward the end of the seventies. Quite a few reached maturity as artists in the mid-to late eighties and, of these, several have maintained high profiles up to the

present. This trajectory is true for most the artists put forward as exemplars in the previous chapter and, in this one.³⁸³

Andres Serrano

Of the three works at the center of the explosion of the culture wars into a national phenomenon in 1989—only one directly deployed the abject: Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ*.³⁸⁴ None of the three referred directly to the flood of horror imagery on contemporaneous movie theater and TV screens, and in pulp fiction, as documented by Carroll. Nonetheless, there were references to abjection and the abject body—key iconic features of the film and pulp fiction horror genre, especially the “splatter” scenarios in film, and the “butcher shop horror” in pulp fiction—in the case of both Serrano and Mapplethorpe.³⁸⁵ And both Serrano and Tyler shared the gesture of placing “holy” and “honored” societal symbols in direct contact with abject matter: urine for Serrano and base dirt of the street and floor for Tyler.

³⁸³ For example, Kiki Smith was born in 1954. She began to exhibit in group shows in her mid-twenties. Her first installation, shown at the Kitchen in New York in 1982 had domestic violence as its theme, and included photographs of the bodies of herself and her friend David Wojnarowicz covered in blood. See *Kiki Smith* *ibid.*, 187. Cindy Sherman was also born in 1954. Her work first appeared in a group show in 1976 when she was 22. The work in which she first began to deploy monstrous and abject imagery were the “Disasters” and “Fairy Tales” series starting in the mid-80s when she was in her early thirties. See *Cindy Sherman: A Retrospective*, *ibid.*, 201. Tim Rollins was born in 1955. He began his activist art career as a founder of Group Material in 1979 when he was 24. In 1982 he started Tim Rollins + KOS. Most of the original school-kid members of the KOS group were born in the late sixties and early seventies. Very brief biographical information on the original members (and on Rollins-through 1989) is available in the *Amerika* catalog, *ibid.*, 82. These were the Kids who participated in making most of the works of the eighties, though the group was changing frequently as Kids graduated and went on to other pursuits. All the images of Tim Rollins+KOS from 1982 on referenced the abject and monstrous body. Of course older artists, such as the ones listed earlier in this discussion, especially assemblagists like the Kienholzes, as well as Louise Bourgeois and others have produced work in this vein, which continues their interest begun much earlier, throughout the nineties.

³⁸⁴ And the abject fluid (urine) in which a cheap plastic crucifix had been immersed was only identifiable in his photograph as such because of the title.

³⁸⁵ Who determines what is “abject” is significant here. No doubt some of the chorus of conservatives who chimed in on Serrano, supported Helms, and cheered the Corcoran’s decision not to show Mapplethorpe’s images would have seen Mapplethorpe’s *X Portfolio* of photographs of “on the edge” gay sex, or the images of children displaying their tiny sexual parts as “disgusting” and “degrading” though to my knowledge none of them used the term “abject” to describe them.

In the case of Tyler's *What is the Proper Way to Display the American Flag* (Figure 28), the national symbol was placed not only touching the ground, but laid out on it like a corpse (the ultimate in abjection, viz. Kristeva). Also, the placement of the flag on the floor of the gallery directly in front of the notebooks, on which visitors were encouraged to inscribe their "free speech," forced them to walk on the flag, depositing dirt from their shoes directly on its surface. Tyler's "dirtying" of the American flag was similar to Serrano's insertion of an honored emblem of religion *into* abject bodily effluvia. Certainly the expressions of outrage (accompanied by words evoking the dirty and abject such as "degrading," "disgusting," etc. implying that the symbols had been sullied) provoked by both works, support this assessment.

Significantly, prominent activist-critic Lucy Lippard chose to defend Serrano in the pages of a very mainstream art publication, *Art in America*, in April of 1990, a little less than a year after the attack on *Piss Christ* by D'Amato on the floor of the U.S. Senate.³⁸⁶ Lippard, who had just published a book (*Mixed Blessings...* cited and discussed in Part 2) on the work of artists of color, presents Serrano's work as particularly apt "icons of

³⁸⁶ Although I will not address this issue further here, it seems important to note that, to date, I have been unable to search out any Lippard writing on either Kiki Smith or Cindy Sherman, who, as discussed earlier, produced imagery every bit as abject and monstrous as Serrano's. But, then, neither Sherman nor Smith, despite their deployment of some of the most graphic of the violently abject and monstrous imagery that surfaced in the eighties, and increased in volume into the nineties, ended up on NEA's blacklist or were personally attacked on the floor of the US Congress. A review of the exhibitions in which both Sherman's and Smith's works were displayed shows that many of them were in institutions that regularly received NEA grants (such as University galleries, a favorite target of the right wing during this period). Despite this, it seems neither was a target of the virulent attention paid to other artists. Also of interest in this regard is that Lippard did defend Judy Chicago in the pages of *Art in America* a year after Chicago was also excoriated (and her monumental work, *The Dinner Party* denounced as "pornographic") on the floor of the U.S. Congress. The article on Serrano is Lucy Lippard, "Andres Serrano: The Spirit and the Letter." *Art in America* (April 1990), 238-245, the same year as the publication of her *Mixed Blessings...* book, *ibid.* Serrano was not included in that book. Lippard also defended David Wojnarowicz (like Serrano, under violent attack from the right wing during this period) in the pages of *Art in America* in 1990: Lucy Lippard, "Out of the Safety Zone." *Art in America* (December 1990) 131-139, 182, 186.

freedom, thanks to the esthetic vigilance of the American Family Association (AFA)” and the histrionics of D’Amato.³⁸⁷

Lippard places Serrano not only in the “postmodernist mainstream” in his foregrounding of the disruption of society’s “sacred cows,”³⁸⁸ but also as an example of the “mixed blessings” thesis she pursues in her book. Lippard sets out all the ways in which she proposes that Serrano (whose formal education ended at age 17) represents “the urban artist of considerable sophistication,” capable of mobilizing (like other artists of color she includes in her book) “a profound knowledge of both the dominant culture and of their own often perplexingly mixed cultures...part of the ‘polyphonous discourse’ many Third World scholars have been calling for” by challenging “the boundaries...[of] class and race...abstraction and representation, belief and disbelief.”³⁸⁹

Lippard also attributes to Serrano a similar kind of invasion of established formalist art traditions as was documented by Mike Kelley in his discussion of 1980s artists who

³⁸⁷ Lippard refers here to the machinations of Rev. Donald Wildmon, head of the AFA, whose attack on “blasphemies” prior to targeting Serrano, was the highly-publicized vendetta, in 1988, against MCA/Universal’s film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (directed by Martin Scorsese) based on Nikos Kazantzakis’ 1955 novel in which Jesus appears as a tormented, fearful young man confused by sex and uncertain of his path in life. Wildmon first achieved national recognition with his Coalition for Better Television (CBTV), formed in collaboration with Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority in 1981. For a trenchant and helpfully analytical account of the radical right’s strategy, which had been increasingly successfully implemented over the ten years prior to the Serrano event, see Carol S. Vance, “The War on Culture,” *Art in America*. (September 1989), also reproduced in Bolton, *ibid.*, 106-114. Vance notes, importantly, that “In the past ten years, conservative and fundamentalist groups have deployed and perfected techniques of grass roots and mass mobilization around social issues...centering on sexuality, gender and religion. In these campaigns, symbols feature prominently” and symbols are selected for this purpose because they are “highly condensed statements of moral concern, and ...powerful spurs to emotion and action” as well as “difficult or problematic [to] defend,” and are almost always mobilized completely “out of context and always denying ...irony or multiple interpretations.” (Bolton, *ibid.*,108) .

³⁸⁸ Quite literally, in his *Cabeza de Vaca* photograph (1984) which features a cow’s head on a pedestal, the reference is to the 15th Century Spanish conquistador Cabeza de Vaca, whose invasions of Northern Mexico and Brazil prepared the way for wholesale Conquest that has affected millions into the present. This work was included in the 1984 activist art exhibition “Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America” curated by Lippard. This was Serrano’s first exhibition of his work. He was 33.

³⁸⁹ Lippard, “Andres Serrano...”, *ibid.*, 239.

deployed “foul perfection” to “dirty up,” and thereby critique, many of the visual art schools that had gone before. For example, Lippard suggests that Serrano’s photographs engage with, and subvert, the accepted norms of photography’s illusionism, the “purity” of abstraction and the unidimensional perspective of Process Art as a universalizing obsession with the nature of time. Lippard notes that all Serrano’s works are ambivalent in a true 1980s sense: they contrast harsh content with eye-pleasing surfaces, light, color and scale, and are simultaneously abstract and “realistic,” both questioning and “contradicting the entire illusionist enterprise conventionally associated with photography” (in the case of his “abstract work” like the 1987 geometric “abstractions,” *Blood and Milk*, and *Circle of Blood*) and by infesting what looks like “art photography” with abjection.

Special effects, Lippard asserts, especially the use of light in a “painterly” approach is of more interest to Serrano than the technical problems and traditions of photography,³⁹⁰ but the valence of what is revealed in this “painterliness” is of most interest, especially in his work of the later eighties when bodily fluids (also “paint-like”) became dominant.³⁹¹ Lippard sees, in Serrano works that show bodily fluids in action, like *Blood Stream* and *Ejaculate in Trajectory* (both 1989), commentary on earlier trends, in this case on Process Art. Lippard interprets *Blood Stream*, in particular, as an example of Serrano inserting his own unique perspective as a mixed-race individual—reared and steeped in Catholicism and a highly visual Latin culture—into what has been seen as primarily a white male art genre. For Lippard, the work is a “...photographic reflection of sixties

³⁹⁰This claim has been made also for and by Cindy Sherman.

³⁹¹ In this Serrano joins many other artists of his generation, including especially Cindy Sherman, who also denies that photography *qua* photography is of central concern to her.

Process Art, [in which] Serrano creates his own context [through] the work's title which signals the emotionally charged act itself. *Blood Stream* can be seen metaphorically as *mestizaje*...caught in the very act of mixing."³⁹²

Lippard does not use the term "abjection" to describe Serrano's use of bodily fluids, nor does she comment upon any possible relationship between his use of blood, and especially meat, as relating to the ubiquitous horror themes in popular culture extant during Serrano's generation's childhood and teenage years (Serrano was born and grew up in Brooklyn in the fifties and sixties), that featured, prevalently, blood, gore and the "person as meat."

Serrano's use of blood and meat in his work (and, I would add, Kiki Smith's and Cindy Sherman's references to these as well) can be seen as a "play," in the High Art realm, with what Carroll documents as a decades-long phenomenon of the prevalence of blood, gore, and the exploded (abject) body, etc. in popular culture's horror genres.

Dark Laughter: Serrano's Satiric Moves

An important aspect of Serrano's approach is satire.³⁹³ Lippard sees satire expressed in Serrano's photographs (and titles) as puns and other humor-instigating devices. These

³⁹²Lippard, "Andres Serrano..." *ibid.*, 242-243

³⁹³ A concise treatment (published on the internet in 1990-1991, more or less simultaneously with the Clark book) of the concept of satire, which also includes a valuable bibliography is John Harris, "The Purpose and Method of Satire," <http://www.virtualsalt.com/satire.htm>. Harris' perspective derives from the sources cited on his website. Key elements of satire identified by Harris—which are consonant with definitions of the grotesque/monstrous and abject discussed in this dissertation—include: irony, exaggeration (including understatement), distortion, innuendo, ambiguity/ambivalence, incongruity (especially through use of simile, metaphor, allegory and oxymoron). The satirist seeks through combining these elements to shock and surprise in such a way that will bring a smile of pleasurable recognition of the knavery exposed. Harris' extended definition also notes that satire *presupposes* an educated reader/viewer who can respond to the implicit "corrective" which is embedded in the obliquely ironic devices utilized. Harris argues also that satire is *optimistic* because it presumes that the world is composed of people who approve of the morals of a widely-held value system, and that "knaveish" *behaviors* on the part especially of those in power (who hypocritically claim to adhere to these values but do not) must be revealed. Of course, like Clark, Harris treats satire as deployed in literature, not visual art, but his concise setting-out of key devices employed in

aesthetic tactics evoke surprise reactions: not the goose bumps and fast breathing of the horror “surprises” Carroll documents, but dark laughter— sardonic chuckles and wry smiles.³⁹⁴ Consider, for example, the satirically punning valences of Serrano’s “Piss” series, shown initially at the Greenberg Wilson gallery in New York in 1988. This exhibition, entitled *Piss Deities*, included not only the controversy-provoking *Piss Christ*, but also a *Piss Pope* (a photograph of the Pope floating in urine), a *Piss Satan* (ditto) and a reproduction of a classicizing Art Nouveau sculpture also immersed in urine, entitled *Piss Elegance*. The use of the word “piss” in these titles (and the use of real urine in the photo subjects) retains several meanings at once, illustrating the linguistic root of “satire,” from the Latin *satura* meaning a dish of mixed ingredient (note here the connection with the grotesque, defined at times as a surprising, preferably disgusting, mixture or conglomeration).

“Piss” obviously refers to what these various objects are immersed in, namely: urine. But the title does not read “Pope Immersed in Urine;” instead, Serrano titles it *Piss Pope*. The use of the word “piss” here is adjectival. It modifies the noun it precedes. In informal speech/slang, the use of “piss” as adjective imputes (pejoratively) diminutive size or stature to whatever the noun names. For example, the tiny ants found ubiquitously in the

the satirical lexicon are useful references when considering how satire operates in visual imagery. For a summary of the history of satire in visual art and culture, see Paul von Blum, “Satire,” *The Dictionary of Art*. vol. 27. Jane Turner, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 868-872. Von Blum’s account echoes some of the characteristics of literary satiric devices that elicit dark laughter, listed by both Clark and Harris, namely distortion and surprising combinations (viz. Bosch’s fusing of human with vegetal and animal forms, and Daumier’s depiction of the King’s head as pear shaped, reflecting the name given him by critics and wags: “Poire.”) as well as sardonic treatments of death, decay and other abjections as a commentary on political corruption (e.g. Grosz *The Face of the Ruling Class* (1921) which has been seen as eerily predictive of the Nazi-induced horrors of the Holocaust). Von Blum cites these late 20th Century American artists as working in the satiric tradition: Peter Saul, May Stevens, Erika Rothenburg, Charles Bragg, Duane Hanson, Luis Jimenez, Robert Arneson, Herbert Block (Herblock), Ron Cobb, Paul Conrad, David Levine, Jules Feiffer, Garry Trudeau, Robbie Conal and Beth Bachenheimer.

³⁹⁴ Consider, for example, Lippard, *ibid.*, 244, 241.

U.S. South are referred to as “piss ants.” The use of “piss” as adjective in front of the noun, in the title of a photograph that obviously shows the object named by the noun *in* urine, is both a play on words, and a play on images that juxtaposes objects that definitely do not belong together, as well as words that do not belong together, yet which are in broad informal use, so recognizable in their slang meaning. These juxtapositions can provoke a sense of gleeful malice in viewers who understand and resonate to the various implications of the puns in both the images and their titles.

When considered in its context of a series of “piss deities,” then, the work *Piss Christ* can be seen as pure satire. “Piss” modifies “Christ,” and the photograph of the (mass-produced, ubiquitously-available, cheap, plastic) crucifix inserted in urine can be interpreted by those “in the know” (e.g., Lippard in her *Art in America* essay on Serrano) as: the “commercialization of sacred imagery “ which “pays idiosyncratic homage to ideas that Christ originally worked for.”³⁹⁵ This interpretation by Lippard (clearly someone “in the know” about contemporary art of the transgressive sort) was, of course, not shared by Rev. Wildmon of the American Family Association, nor by then-Senator D’Amato. The fact that the photograph was part of a series and was shown together with other “piss deities” makes the satiric intent clear—to those in the know. By appropriating a slang term that referred to abject bodily effluvia (urine), Serrano arrived at a darkly humorous way to designate the most elevated of institutionalized icons (from religion and high art) as having become small and inconsequential, and possibly not only small and inconsequential, but, beyond their “smallness,” not only irrelevant, but noxious.

Serrano’s work suggests that religion and art had reached the point when they should be ejected from the society, as effluvia are rejected, since retention of effluvia in any

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 239.

body, individual human or societal, risks the danger of poisoning that body. Those who perceive the works as satiric can conclude all this. Whether or not D'Amato/Wildmon and others who joined their bandwagon to make Serrano's *Piss Christ* the poster child for the culture wars saw the work in this way, their effective technique was to separate the *Piss Christ* image from its companion pieces, thereby depriving it of its context, and making it a signified vacated of its satiric signifiers, and ready for the insertion of "blasphemous" meaning.

John R. Clark's "Satiric Grotesque"

Satire's embedded "jokes," like Serrano's "piss deities," inspire rueful dark laughter, always at the expense of aspects of the dominant culture seen by the satirist and those who share his/her values, as both powerful, but also laughably incorrect and in need of remedy. John R. Clark, in his 1991 *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions*, turns the prism toward the parameters of a concentration of satiric uses of the abject/monstrous/grotesque—and some reasons why, for him, such a concentration may be seen as "healthy."³⁹⁶ For Clark, a satiric work or tone mobilizes comedy or humor through specific devices, including: a target toward which the satiric move is aimed, and an ideal to which it can be compared; a detailed description of the folly or vice to which it refers; a clearly-stated intention to punish or cure; and the irresistible evocation of amusement and contempt.

Clark, like Carroll, and the writers of the early eighties who were reacting to the highjacking of postmodernism by neo-conservatives (e.g. Hal Foster, et al.) presents his

³⁹⁶Clark, *ibid.*

study as a response to naysaying critics he sees as baleful contemporary moralists given to “pious and somber sermons yearning for a more positive body of literature,” and pronouncing the “death of comedy and tragedy, of satire, of poetry, and of Western Culture.” His intent was: to develop a “tedious but necessary defense” of the satiric grotesque “[an] art and artistry...of negative energy which is yet affirmative of life.”³⁹⁷

His book is consonant with a strain of argumentation in the discourse on the explosion of the abject, monstrous and grotesque in art that sees in “negative” imagery deployed in a satirical manner the potential for affirmative effects. Clark delineates not only what he sees as the effects of the satiric grotesque, but also the key mechanisms by which its creators accomplish these effects, and the long tradition and consistency of the thriving of the satiric grotesque, which can include the following, individually, but most frequently in combination:³⁹⁸

- Debasing the heroic.
- Debunking the author.
- Disturbing normative conventions.

³⁹⁷Clark, *ibid.* 3-4. The closest (in time) of these “naysaying critics” who deliver “somber sermons” on the death of satire, etc., to the publication of Clark’s book, cited by Clark, is Richard Corliss, “Dirty Words: America’s Foul-Mouthed Culture” *Time* (May 7, 1990): 92. Most of the other essays or books cited by Clark as “pronouncing the death of ... satire” are from the 1970s or earlier, for example: Anthony Burgess, “No Health Anywhere,” review of Don De Lillo, *Running Dog*, *Saturday Review*, (September 16, 1978): 38; Jesse Bier, *The Rise and Fall of American Humor* (New York, 1968); and John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction*, (New York, 1978).

³⁹⁸ Clark’s focus here is literature, not visual art. Nonetheless, his tracings of genealogy for the modern satiric grotesque parallels Carroll’s, and echoes the findings of Kayser, Kuryluk and Stallybrass and White. Clark asserts (as do all these previous commentators) that the satiric grotesque had been deployed back to Ancient Greece and the Cynics’ adoption of the antithesis of the classical, even to eschewing cleanliness, home roots, spiffy attire as well as high flown declamation at the *symposium*. He rehearses a list of canonical literary figures who have held up a “grotesque mirror” to the society of their day in order to make clear its baser features: Rabelais, Cervantes, Montaigne, Jonson, Poe and Swift among them. See Clark, *ibid.*, 20-21.

- Mixing of all kinds to produce ludicrous effects
- Foregrounding the taboo.

Of course, since Clark is dealing with the printed page and not with visual and time-based art forms of the 1980s and nineties that utilize the abject/grotesque/monstrous, he also expands on these primary mechanisms of the satiric grotesque as literary and not visual phenomena. Nevertheless, most of the elements he identifies can also be found in visual imagery of the grotesque/monstrous/abject (in “high” and “low” cultural environments).

These elements, as well as Clark’s summary of how the satiric grotesque operates in literature, echo what other commentators have noted about the phenomena:

...the grotesque satirist [seeks to] shock the reader by manipulating, undercutting and even dismantling conventional... form... by boldly shattering broadly accepted decorum [as well as] wreak[ing] ... havoc and perform[ing] ... mayhem with some glee and a great deal of insidiousness.”³⁹⁹

Clark sees these effects as basically positive since they produce an “honest and inclusive world view” by making sure that “wretchedness...wickedness...the tawdry, the sordid...” are brought assertively to the attention of readers and viewers, and thus to enhance a “concerted and even painful quest for comprehension and enlightenment.”⁴⁰⁰

But, Clark’s final assessment of the value of the satiric grotesque as a way to help move viewers and readers toward comprehension and enlightenment begs the fundamental question of whether the satiric grotesque is consistently (or ultimately) pro- or anti-status quo, or whether, as both Stallybrass and White, and Carroll aver, in their treatments of the carnivalesque and the horror genre, the final effect of the satiric

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 162

grotesque is ambivalent, e.g., whether it can be deployed both in the service of, or to undermine, the dominant order.

Further Defenses of the Uses of the Grotesque/Abject/Monstrous at the Turn of the Nineties

The attacks on the works of Serrano, Mapplethorpe and Tyler, and later on David Wojnarowicz as well as on Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, John Fleck and Tim Miller resulted in increasing hostility toward NEA in Congress, and increasingly shell-shocked reaction to this hostility in the NEA bureaucracy and the art world in general. Finley, Hughes, Fleck and Miller became known as the “NEA Four” because of their successful lawsuit against NEA in 1990 for violation of their first amendment rights for denying their grants.⁴⁰¹ The expanding attacks on art that wielded abject/ grotesque/monstrous imagery and references spawned more defensive moves from across the art world in the form of both individual essays in—as well as special issues of—journals and magazines; and exhibitions that flaunted more and more examples of the imagery to which the right wing was unalterably and vituperatively opposed.

Two defenses that appeared almost simultaneously with the opening of the “obscenity” trial of Dennis Barrie, director of the Cincinnati Institute of Contemporary

⁴⁰¹ Barrie was subsequently acquitted. David Wojnarowicz also went to court in 1990 successfully to sue Rev. Wildmon for using his copyrighted work without permission. Wildmon had reproduced a segment of a Wojnarowicz installation and included it in a mass mailing to his AFA membership calling for lobbying Congress to pass legislation against “obscenity.” See Michael Brenson, *Visionaries and Outcasts: The NEA, Congress, and the Place of the Visual Artist in America*, (New York: The New Press, 2001), for an inside view of the impact of the culture wars on NEA. Clinton-appointee Jane Alexander commissioned Brenson in 1994 to write an overview of the individual artists fellowship program—4000 as of that date—that was under fire, and ultimately abolished in 1995. In 1999, then-NEA head William Ivey asked Brenson to rewrite the essay. He declined. The Warhol Foundation and Creative Capital Fund underwrote the book which was published in 2001, at the beginning of the George W. Bush administration. The book is a companion to Richard Bolton’s book on the culture wars up through 1990. See Bolton, *ibid*.

Art⁴⁰² were the special issue of *Aperture, The Body in Question* which appeared in the Fall of 1990, and the exhibition of Joseph Kosuth's installation *The Play of the Unmentionable* at the Brooklyn Museum which opened in September of 1990. That such full-scale defenses from the art world were fielded so close to the beginning of the right's concentrated attack, is remarkable, and demonstrates the serious threat the art world recognized in this campaign.

Carole Vance's 1989 article in *Art in America* was among the first to sound the alarm about the right's attacks, and to urge the art world to pay attention. Vance pointed out that the canny mobilizations of symbols from the art sphere— symbols that had both the potential to arouse emotion, and to spur action on the part of the right's constituency, while also being particularly difficult to defend and rationalize as having a "positive" purpose or impact—should be countered quickly and forcefully. Not to do so, Vance argued, would have long term negative implications far beyond freedom of expression.

As she said:

Because symbolic mobilizations and moral panics often leave in their wake residues of law and policy that remain in force long after the hysteria has subsided, the fundamentalist attack on art and images requires a broad and vigorous response that goes beyond appeals to free speech.⁴⁰³

Aperture's The Body in Question

⁴⁰² An important strain of (left) critique of the defense strategy at the Barrie trial was that it focused so much on first amendment issues, and on "expert" testimony that emphasized the formal qualities of Mapplethorpe's photographs. The complete absence of any attempt to defend the work based on its content was glaring. See for example, Elizabeth Hess, "Art on Trial: Cincinnati's Dangerous Theater of the Ridiculous," *Village Voice* (October 23, 1990). Also reprinted in Bolton, *ibid.*, 269-282. Hess describes the trial in detail, including the defense's strategy of concentrating on the formal qualities of Mapplethorpe's photographs.

⁴⁰³ Carole S. Vance, "The War on Culture," *Art in America*. (September 1989), also reproduced in Bolton, *ibid.*, 106-114. The information here is at Bolton, 111.

Aperture's special issue, *The Body in Question* (1990), can be seen as responding directly to Vance's call for action. The issue contains a plethora of contemporary images of—and commentary on—what can be characterized as the “abject” body, a body that had become, as *Aperture* editor Melissa Harris defined it, “the battleground in struggles between differing conceptions of public morality and individual freedoms.”⁴⁰⁴ Images of this body included in *The Body in Question* ranged from the highly constructed prosthesis/body monsters of Cindy Sherman, and faux-scarred bodies of Joel Peter Witkin, to the affecting documentary presentations of Ken Miller's *Sex Workers* and Donna Ferrato's domestic violence victims, Lutz Bacher's *Sex with Strangers* series (in which, in true postmodernist fashion, she appropriates images from a sexually explicit paperback thinly disguised as a scientific treatise), and Dorit Cypis' *A Sacred Prostitute*, which celebrates the actively sexual and orgasmic female body, contemporary and in ancient religious tradition. Thus, *The Body In Question* assertively presents, and defends, the most contemporaneous of photographic images of the kind so effectively utilized in the right's moral crusade.

The Play of the Unmentionable

Joseph Kosuth's striking installation *The Play of the Unmentionable* also responded to Vance's alarm. Kosuth cannily thrust the museum itself forward as frame for, and purveyor of, imagery from all periods of human history that celebrated and examined the human body in its abject, monstrous, grotesque and sexualized forms. As art historian

⁴⁰⁴ Melissa Harris, ed. *Aperture* (special issue: “The Body in Question.”) 121 (Fall 1990): 1) notes in her introduction that “the body is the pawn” in “a drive toward rigid social conformity...;” and that “The Body in Question” was specifically aimed at “unabashedly” exploring “the body abused, objectified, discovered, aroused, desired, censored, mythologized, manipulated and celebrated...whether the body in question is a child, a person with AIDS, a victim of physical violence, or someone at the point of orgasm” in an environment that was producing among artists and others in the art community “demoralizing effects” due to “assault on [their] convictions, motives and choices.”

David Freedberg notes in his essay for the book, published a year after the exhibition closed, *The Play of the Unmentionable* installation (Figure 29) was unlikely, to say the least. Freedberg notes that upon entering the Brooklyn Museum's Grand Lobby:

...the challenge to see uniquely ...began immediately, with...the title of the installation... "The Brooklyn Museum Collection: The Play of the Unmentionable." The series of oxymorons, of contradictions, had started off: museum/*play*/unmentionable: these are not the usual or the conventional collocations. Beneath this title came a frank acknowledgment of the support of the National Endowment for the Arts. The mighty second museum of New York! The greatest grant-giving body in the field of the arts! What place could there be for the unmentionable within these institutions—one erected by virtuous citizenry as the very embodiment of the relations between knowledge, art and authority, and the other nothing less than an arm of government?⁴⁰⁵

Despite its unlikelihood, however, the installation was evidently very popular: nearly 100,000 people visited it over its three-month duration. According to one account, "the Grand Lobby...a large space of over 8,000 square feet was unusually crowded...and the visitors were not simply making their way across the space to the main galleries...[but] concentrating, engaged in the issues so clearly presented by the images and mosaics of texts."⁴⁰⁶ There are two particularly apt examples of the thought-provoking images, objects and texts in Kosuth's interventionistic installation; apt because of their resonance

⁴⁰⁵ David Freedberg, "Joseph Kosuth and the Play of the Unmentionable," *The Play of the Unmentionable: An Installation by Joseph Kosuth at the Brooklyn Museum*. (New York: The Brooklyn Museum and the New Press, 1992), 49. Kosuth's installation was a deliberate intervention devised cannily as a direct response to the NEA's refusal of grants on the basis of the potential grantees' alleged use of "pornographic" or "immoral" imagery, in an exhibition supported by NEA funds, as well as to demonstrate that the extensive collections of the most august art institutions contained imagery that could also be so-considered. It is important to note that Kosuth's installation was part of an ongoing series of exhibitions for the Grand Lobby of the Brooklyn museum which dated back to 1984, and was designed, according to Robert T. Buck, the museum director in 1990, to give "artists a unique opportunity to explore their ideas on a truly grand scale, and frequently to create pieces that would not otherwise have been conceived...the series has helped renew interest in environmental and site-specific works." See Robert T. Buck, "Preface," *The Play of the Unmentionable...ibid.*, ix. The entire series had always been supported by NEA grants.

⁴⁰⁶ Freedberg, *ibid.*, 46.



Figure 29. Joseph Kosuth. Installation view. *The Play of the Unmentionable*. n.p. In *The Play of the Unmentionable: An Installation by Joseph Kosuth at the Brooklyn Museum*. New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1992, 2.

with two nearly contemporaneous events: the opening of the Cincinnati trial of Dennis Barrie, and the decision of the Corcoran Gallery to cancel the Mapplethorpe show. In his sly juxtapositions Kosuth foregrounds the erotic male body, and provides two examples, widely separated by history and culture, of direct depictions of the physical pleasure of the sexual body and its abject effluvia.

In the first example, Kosuth juxtaposes two contemporary photographs with ancient Roman and Egyptian sculptures. One juxtaposition placed a Mapplethorpe photograph of a Black male nude with a very large penis, next to a grittily “real” depiction of a scruffy adolescent Latino boy handling his penis. These were installed next to priapic Roman sculptures of Dionysus and Apollo, and an Egyptian bronze of a Pharaoh, masturbating while worshipping the Otter. (Figure 30) The second evocative juxtaposition was Kosuth’s placement of a Mapplethorpe image (referenced in the Cincinnati trial) depicting a man urinating directly into the mouth of another, next to a Mughal painting showing a similar scene. The wall text accompanying these juxtaposed images noted that consuming another’s urine was thought to be the most rapid manner to get opium into the bloodstream.⁴⁰⁷ It is of interest that this latter juxtaposition was not included as an illustration in the book.

Aperture’s attention to the abject/grotesque/monstrous body in contemporary photography, and the Brooklyn Museum’s bold Kosuth installation⁴⁰⁸ are of special

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 52-53 and 54.

⁴⁰⁸ Both of these are in book form. As of the writing of this section of the dissertation (Summer 2003), both were available for sale, and widely included in library collections in the U.S. and abroad. “The Body in Question” was never reprinted and is primarily available for sale through sellers that handle out of print books (at this writing, the lowest price available was \$45). *The Play of the Unmentionable* was still in print and available from its publisher, twelve years after the exhibition opened.

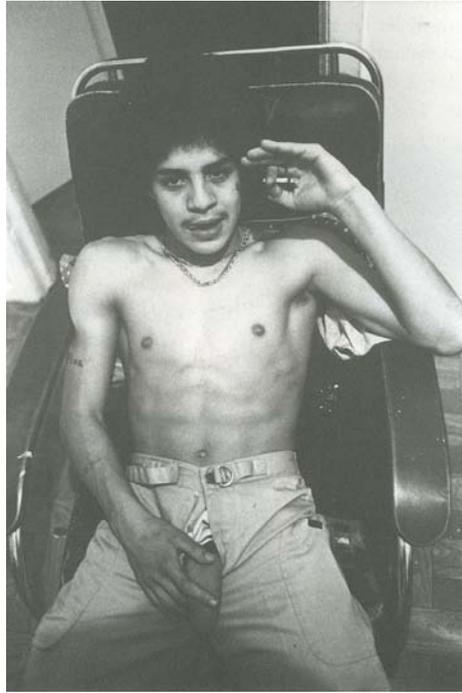


Figure 30. Joseph Kosuth. Installation. Juxtaposition of Larry Clark, *Exposed*. Gelatin silver print, 1981; and *Pharaoh Before an Otter or an Inchneumon*. Bronze. Late period, c. 664-630 BCE. In *The Play of the Unmentionable: An Installation by Joseph Kosuth at the Brooklyn Museum*. New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1992, 94-95.

interest because both appeared shortly after the infamous Serrano episode;⁴⁰⁹ and because they responded so directly, though in different ways, to Carole Vance's call for the art world to mobilize to defend art's *content*. Both of these interventions took seriously Vance's warning that it was important not to dismiss "[t]he fundamentalist attack on images and the art world ... as an improbable and silly outburst of Yahoo-ism, but as a systematic part of a right-wing political program to restore traditional social arrangements and reduce diversity."⁴¹⁰

The *Aperture* special issue on the body, and Kosuth's remarkable wielding of the museum as a tool to stimulate critical thinking about censorship of art, were evidence that at least some aspects of the art world agreed with Vance that "the right wing is deeply committed to symbolic politics, because images do stand in for and motivate social change." They also demonstrated that—partially because of the clear appropriation by the right wing of symbols and images for their purposes—a real ground for struggle had indeed been revealed; one which both provided an opportunity for, and urgently required "a vigorous defense of art and images" and their layered meanings, and not just of the right of artists to make them.⁴¹¹

These two were, of course, only selected examples of the art world's defense moves. There were many more, including a long essay in *Art in America* on AIDS activist artist

⁴⁰⁹ As well as NEA Chairman Frohnmeyer's requirement, in June of 1990, that artists receiving NEA grants sign a statement that their grants would not be used to fund the making of any art that was obscene, widely called the "obscenity pledge," followed by a flurry of lawsuits from individual artists, and arts organizations. See Bolton, "Timeline" *ibid.*, 356-363. Nearly simultaneously with Frohnmeyer's "obscenity pledge," were the founding of two important anti-censorship action groups: the American Civil Liberties Union's Arts Censorship Project, and the People for the American Art Program (See Todd Allan Yasui, "On the Artists' Side; Two Anti-Censorship Projects Launched." *Washington Post*, (June 17, 1991): C7.)

⁴¹⁰ Vance, *ibid.*

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

David Wojnarowicz, again from activist critic Lippard. The essay appeared at the same time Wojnarowicz' case against Donald Wildmon was decided, in Wojnarowicz' favor. Wildmon had pulled out some images from one of the complex Wojnarowicz works in the *Tongues of Flame* exhibition, and utilized them, without permission, in a mass mailing to the members of his organization. Wojnarowicz successfully claimed copyright infringement.⁴¹² In the essay on Wojnarowicz, as well as in the one earlier on Serrano, Lippard not only defends figures at the bulls-eye of the right wing's attack on "immorality" in art, but in so doing also modifies her own perspective on activist art.

Lippard's defenses of Wojnarowicz and Serrano in such a mainstream art publication as *Art in America* suggests a softening of her early-eighties prescriptions for activist art; especially that, to be truly activist, works should be seen, not in commercial galleries or museums, but in funky alternative locations and the street. In fact, in the article on Wojnarowicz, Lippard acknowledges her own surprise at Wojnarowicz' staying power: "When I first saw Wojnarowicz' work in the early eighties I liked it, but figured he could be just another Lower East Side artist kid—hot now, soon to burn out. Wrong." (Figure 31)

My sense of what Lippard meant by this was that Wojnarowicz' approaches had remained activist for her, while attracting and maintaining the interest of the art mainstream. This is remarkable because Lippard's previous position on activism insisted that "cooptation" by the market and the mainstream museums signaled the end of an artist's "activist" status.

⁴¹² See Lucy Lippard, "Out of the Safety Zone," *Art in America*, (December 1990), 135. The article also coincided with a retrospective of Wojnarowicz work: *David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame, Works 1979-1989*, in New York at Exit Art as Lippard's article appeared.



Figure 31. David Wojnarowicz. *Something from Sleep IV (Dream)*. Gelatin silver print, acrylic and collage on masonite, 1988-1989. In *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz*. Exh. Cat. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999, 49.

Neither Serrano nor Wojnarowicz were ejected from the art world for their imagery.⁴¹³ On the contrary, both continued to have museum and commercial gallery exhibitions, and the prices of their works catapulted to exalted heights. This sustained visibility in mainstream locations was at least partially as a direct result of the attention brought to them by the right wing's designation of them as "poster children" of degradation in art.⁴¹⁴ Times had changed, and it seemed that one could continue to be seen as an "activist" *if* continuing to be an irritant to the dominant order, despite the simultaneous embrace of one's confrontational art by the market and the museum.

United Front Dissolves

Lippard and others on the left did not limit their defenses to artists' rights to free expression under the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution. They also vigorously defended the confrontational content and artistic merit of work featuring abject/grotesque/monstrous imagery. But, this defense was by no means widespread in the arts community. It could have been expected that the continuing campaign by the religious right wing, and their allies in the U.S. Congress, would further consolidate a united front in the art world. However, the declaration of victory— proclaimed on October 6, 1990, when the Cincinnati jury acquitted Dennis Barrie—did not consolidate the art world's resolve.

⁴¹³ Ditto for Kiki Smith and Cindy Sherman, among many others.

⁴¹⁴ There was much comment on this in the art press. Some examples include: Richard Goldstein, "Doowutchyalike: In the Brave New World, Sex Sells," *Village Voice*, November 6, 1990; and Andy Grundberg, "Art Under Attack: Who Dares Say That It's No Good?" *New York Times*, November 25, 1990. Both reprinted in Bolton, *ibid.*, 288-295.

By October of 1991 the *Boston Globe* was reporting that art world unity was an illusion.⁴¹⁵ The article quotes Holly Hughes, one of four performance artists⁴¹⁶ who sued the NEA for rescinding their grants: “There’s a movement in the arts community to distance itself and fence off the ‘dirty artists’...[they] are telling us we’re polluting our work with politics.” The *Globe* article confirms Hughes’ report, juxtaposing opposing opinions from a number of political figures and art world commentators regarding whether the strategy to confront was appropriate.⁴¹⁷

Perspectives highlighted in the *Globe* article included the complaint that the controversy was forcing curators and others to defend art that, on artistic grounds would

⁴¹⁵ Patti Hartigan, “One Year After Mapplethorpe: An Arts World Divided” *Boston Globe*, (October 1, 1991): Arts and Film Section, A1.

⁴¹⁶ The “NEA Four” consisted of, in addition to Hughes, Karen Finley, Tim Miller and John Fleck.

⁴¹⁷ Opinions on various sides quoted Hartigan, *ibid.*, include: Melanne Verveer, then-Executive Vice President of People for the American Way (“we need to get the controversy behind us”); Marjorie Heins, director of the ACLU Art Censorship Project (who also was the attorney for the NEA Four, regarding attacks on the suit: “Why are we being blamed...that doesn’t focus on the real enemy. Jesse Helms is going to come out with his dog and pony show every year until it becomes clear that it is no longer politically expedient to do so.”), David Mendoza, executive director of the National Campaign for Freedom of Expression (which Mendoza says does “ruffle feathers...we are like ACT-UP.”); John Frohnmayer, NEA head (“If...it is more important to fund one..of these people or have the endowment continue...what do I do?”), Senator Ted Kennedy In opposing the Helms “obscenity amendment.” (“It is fake. It is vague. It is unenforceable. And it does nothing to eliminate the lingering controversies.”), David Levy, Director of the Corcoran (hired to replace Christina Orr-Cahall who canceled the Mapplethorpe exhibition: “I have found myself defending art on principle that...on artistic grounds [is] ‘ho-hum.’”), David Ross, then-new director of the Whitney Museum (and who showed the Mapplethorpe photographs at Boston’s ICA before his appointment to the Whitney (“You know what happens within progressive communities. Firing squads form in circles.”), writer John Updike (“All this surprise and indignation...seems to me a little naïve...you can’t expect government money without having government officials attempt to see how that money is spent.”), William Bennett, who had just stepped down as Director of the National Endowment of the Humanities (“People can...say whatever they want as long as they don’t insist on government support.”), Ellen Stewart, founder of La Mama Theater who did not join the rush to refuse NEA monies as a matter of principle (“If Jesse Helms succeeds in making everyone reject the money, all the theaters will close and he will be happy...I choose to stay open.”), Bella Lewitsky, a choreographer who sued the NEA, and refused to sign the “obscenity oath” and was upheld in court. (“I cannot fail to speak when I see something that endangers freedom of expression...I don’t expect anyone else to do that.”), Ralph Reed, then-vice president of the Christian Coalition (“We don’t think taxpayers should be forced to pay for obscenity.”), and Jeremy Alliger, executive director of a Boston dance theater (“The battle hasn’t even begun.”)

not have received a second look. Some scoffed at the naivete of the arts community for not understanding that all government funding leads to control. Others urged artists not to sue, as Hughes and her colleagues had done, because suing just kept the issues counterproductively at high profile, which only helped the right wing.

* * * * *

In summary, Chapter 4's examination of the discourse, as the eighties turned into the nineties, reveals a concatenation of abject, monstrous and grotesque discursive elements, and reactions to them, that constituted a watershed. Artists sought to "dirty" mainstream exhibition sites and make money transgressively from the market. Academics sought to explain the burgeoning volume of abject, monstrous and grotesque thematics in popular culture's filmic horror genre, as well as in literature's embrace of the satiric possibilities of the grotesque and monstrous. Art critics, administrators and curators had responses that varied widely in sagacity, and were frequently so ambivalent that no united front was possible. Politicians on the right gleefully took on art that flaunted this aesthetic as a way to further their anti-liberal agendas. Meanwhile, politicians on the left found themselves uncomfortably trying to defend, in the name of the 1st amendment, imagery many of them experienced personally as abhorrent. Art had decisively entered the culture wars, and the predictions of theorists that the abject/monstrous/grotesque was a powerful destabilizer, that could be used both to defend the status quo as well as to debunk it, had been proved correct.

Chapter 5: Mainstreaming The Monstrous/Abject/Grotesque: Key Exhibitions 1990-1994

In Chapter 5 several exhibitions occurring from the beginning to the middle of the 1990s will be explored in order to demonstrate the discursive positioning of the monstrous/abject/grotesque in mainstream locations. Covered here will be *The Decade Show* produced by three small museums as a collaboration in 1990 in New York City; *Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s* which opened on the West Coast in 1992; and, also opening in 1992, the Whitney's *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*; as well as the three *Bad Girls* exhibitions of 1993-1994 respectively in New York, Los Angeles and London/Glasgow. The only one of these shows to be adopted as a poster child of degradation by the right wing and used as political ammunition in the culture wars was *Abject Art*.

The Decade Show

As discussed in Chapter 4 there were significant divisions in the early nineties within the arts community on the wisdom/effectiveness of continuing to foreground art that confronted society through abject/monstrous/grotesque imagery—especially as this iconography intersected with the sexualized body. Nevertheless, these thematics and iconography became ever more present, and in highly mainstream locations. For example, in *The Decade Show* (1990), discussed in Part 2 as a watershed in terms of the advent of a higher profile in the mainstream for artists of color, we find examples of such references in many works included in the exhibition. Some examples are Jorge Tacla's raw, *Forastero (Alien/Stranger/Other)*; Luis Cruz Azaceta's bleak commentary on the

disparate occurrence of AIDS infections and deaths in communities of color; Pat Ward Williams' *Accused/ Blowtorch/Padlock*, based on a *Life Magazine* photograph from the '30's of a Black man being lynched, in which words and images make an unforgettable statement about race, violence and journalism; and Andres Serrano's *Blood and Milk*.

The Decade Show immediately preceded Kosuth's *The Play of the Unmentionable* at the Brooklyn Museum, and Wojnarowicz' (Wildmon-infuriating) retrospective. Also, like Kosuth's installation, the NEA funded *The Decade Show*, and overt references to the culture war controversies were included in its catalog essays. And, as in the Kosuth case, *The Decade Show* did not attract the attention of the right wing.

Helter Skelter: Bearding the Lion?

By 1992, on the other side of the country, and well after it had been noticed by the press that the art world was not unanimous in its embrace of art that confronted abjection, the grotesque and the monstrous so directly, Paul Schimmel, newly arrived at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, fielded *Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s*, characterized by brash images of violence, sex and black humor.⁴¹⁸ The exhibition was a smash hit. It opened to nearly 10,000 in attendance, an environment described by one guest as an "...insane atmosphere that reminded me of the New York events of the early eighties. All that was missing was Andy Warhol."⁴¹⁹ And the press also demonstrated that the show made a strong impact in a national environment increasingly ambivalent about confrontational imagery in art. Despite its more obvious markers of success, like the thousands flocking to see it, people were not marching in lockstep to approve of the imagery shown. This was evidenced by protests mounted by Queer Nation's accusation

⁴¹⁸ *Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s*. (exh. cat) Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992.

⁴¹⁹ Hunter Drohojowska. "LA Raw." *Art News*. April 1992, 78-81.

that the show did not adequately represent gay and women artists, and a local group with the evocative acronym of PIG (Politically Involved Girlfriends) indicted *Helter Skelter* as “misogynist, homophobic, sexist, racist and heterocentric.”⁴²⁰

Compared to the relatively measured, approving tone of the responses to the 1990 exhibitions that directly confronted the raging culture wars—Kosuth’s brainy installations at Brooklyn, and the wide-ranging and pointedly politically angry three-museum *Decade Show*—reactions to Schimmel’s *Helter Skelter* from mainstream critics was either love or hate. Did the title lionize Charles Manson, or the Beatles, or both? And if so, was any combination thereof approvable? Were the works warmed over, sex-crazed comix, and mindless reiterations of what Bruce Conner and Ed Kienholz had put forward twenty years before? Were there any “mature” commentaries discernible in the art included that helped illuminate/struggle against dire conditions, or was it all puerile, sick jokes from white male artists who had never gotten over the scatological humor of their adolescence? And, was there any redeeming social value or positive political perspective or (activist) message in the messy, sex-focused and scatological imagery rampant throughout?

Puzzling over various—or all—of these questions/positions (and/or their obverse) at once was not only the dominant characteristic of confused reactions to *Helter Skelter* in the mainstream art criticism press, but also within the catalog itself. For example, Paul Schimmel, the curator who came up with the idea for the show, and selected all the art

⁴²⁰Ibid., 79. Curator Schimmel felt it necessary to respond in the press to the criticism (that went far beyond the complaints by PIG and Queer Nation) that the show was homophobic, racist and sexist. Quoted in a *New York Times* review of the show, Schimmel said: “I never attempted to cover all aspects of what was going on in Los Angeles. It’s not a show about multi-culturalism...It is not meant to define all aspects of Los Angeles today...but I do need to point out that 7 of the 16 visual artists in the show were either women or members of minorities.” See Bernard Weinraub, “Art Show Looks at Los Angeles’ Underside,” *New York Times* (March 4, 1992): Section C, page 15 Col. 1.

works, denies there was any socially redemptive intent for the show, or in the art.

Despite his acknowledgment that the artists in the show (and their art) had emerged from a situation in which, “not only Los Angeles, but the entire world” had been beset by “a new set of wars and political scandals...new examples of racism and sexism...at the forefront of popular consciousness and debate,” a situation that echoed an earlier time—the ‘60s—Schimmel avers that:

...none are ‘do-gooder’ artists who seek to use their art for direct political ends...theirs is an art that is in your face. It is raucous, loud and aggressive...uses debased signs and symbols...[and] raw subjects from everyday life to shock and disorient the viewer into another state of mind...⁴²¹

Nevertheless, in an oblique nod to the raging culture wars, Schimmel acknowledges that, in pursuing this in-your-face aesthetic, and, despite the fact that his exhibition was not funded by either local state/county or federal monies, possibly “the institution [the museum] now becomes as much at risk as the artists themselves.”⁴²²

Just a few pages later in the catalog, essayist Lane Relyea seemingly contradicts the idea that the abject/monstrous/grotesque imagery of the art in the show is not being put forward for direct political ends. But, of course, it depends on who is doing the looking, and what is seen as “political.” In Relyea’s perspective, the in-your-face art in the show is nothing if not direct, and certainly “political,” in the sense that, despite his view that the art demonstrates a dominant tone of puerility, detachment and neediness, it is not

⁴²¹ Ibid., 21. Given Schimmel’s overt reference to “do-gooder” artists, it is important to remind that shortly before *Helter Skelter* appeared Mark O’ Brien and Craig Little, eds. *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990), documented what they saw as a very widespread national movement of what Schimmel would call “do-gooder” art, and there were a number of these “do-gooder” projects right in Los Angeles, e.g., the John Malpede and the Los Angeles Poverty Department, and down the road in San Diego (Taller de Arte Fronterizo/Border Arts Workshop), not to mention others also working both in LA and elsewhere in California such as: Suzanne Lacy, Sisters of Survival, the Waitresses (Jerri Allyn), Judy Baca, and Eva Cockcroft.

⁴²² Ibid., 22

“disengaged or regressive. Actually the opposite seems true: ...the work...has not distanced but rather brought art closer to social issues...aligning it with recent progressive struggles to change the status quo.”⁴²³

In view of the proportion of work by female artists and artists of color in the exhibition, it seems clear that *Helter Skelter*'s focus was not on feminism, nor on ethnic identity.⁴²⁴ So it seems important to inquire—in response to Relyea's assertion that the exhibition was in line with “progressive struggles”—*which* struggles?

An important observation that purports to provide a response to this question comes from Norman Klein, one of the catalog's primary essayists. Klein avers that the basic thematic of the show's imagery was “white male nightmare.”⁴²⁵ Klein supports this contention with a detailed history of two key Los Angeles-specific (or, perhaps more accurately, Hollywood-specific) thematics he sees as pervading the imagery of the artists in the show: “noir,” and “helter-skelter.” Klein identifies these thematics (redolent, of course of pulp fiction and B-movie cinematic references, not to mention out and out *real* slasher mass-murder, as in the Manson events) as “definitively white traditions ...[that]

⁴²³ Lane Relyea, “Art of the Living Dead,” in *Helter Skelter*... *ibid.*, 42. See references on and discussion of the *Decade Show* in Part 2 above.

⁴²⁴ Of the 30 contributors (which included both the visual artists and the writers), 18 were White males, 9 women (of these one was African American and 2 were Latina), 2 Latino males and one Filipino male.

⁴²⁵ “Whiteness” was becoming a central element of contemporary discourse in the early nineties, from the proliferation of neo-Nazi White separatist paramilitary groups in remote rural areas of the far West and the South, to Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke's presidential bid in 1992, to an allegedly anti-racist Whiteness Studies movement in academia, to successful legislative moves against affirmative action, instigated primarily by White men's lawsuits. Key early writings of the new discipline of (anti-racist) “Whiteness studies” include: Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Ruth Frankenburg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). For a journalistic summary of the controversy over “Whiteness studies,” see Ellen Barry, “White Like Me,” *Boston Phoenix*. (July 10-17, 1997), also online at <http://www.bostonphoenix.com/alt1/archive/styles/97/07/10>.

trace the underside of the white consumer-built city.” That city being, of course, quintessentially Los Angeles.

For Klein, these “white male nightmare” thematics are epitomized in the apocalyptic imagery of *Blade Runner*⁴²⁶ in which the (white) nightmare of the ultimate end to the story of capitalist consumerism is the *dark* (e.g., “noir”) and “barbaric [sic?!] amnesia replacing white civilization, in a city whose sky is the color of television tuned to a dead channel...”⁴²⁷ This observation is particularly pungent given the urban uprising that had occurred just before the exhibition opened, in LA neighborhoods inhabited predominantly by people of color (sparked by the acquittal of the police officers who had beaten Rodney King, in a famous incident recorded on home video that was played and replayed on national television).

The imagery of the abject/monstrous/grotesque inside *Helter Skelter*, and in the criticism of the exhibition, was often the same imagery Klein argues provided a narrative of the “white male nightmare.” However, this body of criticism does not specifically delineate how the imagery, from white artists as well as artists of color, female as well as male, materialized the outlines of this “white male nightmare.”

⁴²⁶ Michael Deeley, prod. Ridley Scott, dir. *Blade Runner*. (Los Angeles: Warner Films, 1982). Director’s cut released 1992. *Blade Runner* was undoubtedly on people’s minds in 1991-1992, as Ridley Scott’s director’s cut of the sci-fi classic was issued on the 10th anniversary of the film, the same year *Helter Skelter* opened. *Blade Runner*’s stylistic roots are in the hardboiled “film noir” classics of the 1940’s. It has turned out to be one of the most influential films ever made. *Blade Runner* presents a vision of the future that has been copied a thousand times over, presenting a dark future that may prove to be all too prophetic. It is the film version of Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, (New York: Doubleday, 1968), a classic in its own right. See also Scott Bukatman, “Fractal geographies,” review of *Blade Runner*, *Artforum* 31:4 (Dec, 1992): 6

⁴²⁷ Norman Klein. “Inside the Consumer-Built City: Sixty Years of Apocalyptic Imagery,” in *Helter Skelter*...*ibid.*, 30-31. It is of interest in this regard to recall that the notorious Rodney King event, including the acquittal of the Los Angeles police who beat him, and the urban uprising this sparked, had just occurred immediately prior to the opening of *Helter Skelter*. It is also worth noting that the videotape of the beating was included, as an art work, in the Whitney Biennial in 1993, much to the disapproval of several critics.

The elements Klein proposed as central to the “white male nightmare” at the core of *Helter Skelter* involves violence and blood, apocalyptic fantasy, elaborate brutality, elements identified by nearly all the theorists so far in this dissertation as central to the abject/monstrous/grotesque aesthetic. Also, the cultural re-emergence of “noir” and “helter skelter” (documented in some detail in Klein’s catalog essay) at various levels of U.S. culture are closely related to the explosion, during this same period, of horror genre B-films and pulp fiction featuring the “body as meat” and “splatter.” And, finally, the works in the exhibition, in a grimly ironic, carnivalesque manner, typically abject/monstrous/grotesque media—detritus and “low” culture—reflected even in the title of the show, “helter skelter,” referring both to an amusement park (carnival) ride that causes extreme disorientation and adrenalin-highs, and to the brutal murders by the Manson clan at the end of the 1960s.

Treatment of “white male nightmare” in work by the few artists of color in the exhibition is of particular interest, especially since this work was only glancingly referenced in the art press. Consider, for example, the poems from the only African American in the exhibition, Michelle Clinton, which refer to blood and rape (“...I am a girl I am split in the middle my eyes are dead and open I can hump but my head is turned backwards the split was a juicy place for your pushing”) and describe a bitter fantasy of what she would like to do with the white male nightmare (“So when I do the weekend chill out with white middle management, if I say I’m from Watts even the men get quiet then ‘cause they know what I am then, refuge nigger, possibly brutalized...one on one they say how did you make it out...wist I had a knife of political metaphysics to cut

their vision outta me... gimme the spirit of a tired Black mammy sour as their porcelain toilets...”)⁴²⁸

Or consider Filipino-American artist Manuel Ocampo’s horrific images of bloodily dismembered bodies and viscerally political symbols, carefully painted and distressed to suggest traditional Spanish colonial *retablo* paintings, the night terrors of Goya and the strange religious grotesqueries of Hieronymous Bosch. (Figure 32) Blood and skulls abound along with hooded figures that evoke both Ku Klux Klan garb and the medieval tradition of the *penitentes*. In a city like Los Angeles, the Spanish colonial tradition, especially in the year 1992, the 500th anniversary of the arrival in Santo Domingo of Columbus, becomes an acerbic allegory of the white male nightmare visited upon colonized peoples, from the hands of a son of the “other colony” of King Philip of Spain, the Pilipinas.

On this the critics were virtually silent. For example, San Francisco art critic Kenneth Baker calls Ocampo a “standout” but not because his dire imagery is a sophisticated critique of Spanish colonialism and its aftermath in the year of the 500th anniversary of the beginnings of that colonialism (and, of course, the U.S. continuation of that colonialism in their confiscation of the Pilipinas as “spoils” of the Spanish American war), but because his “skills and references connect [his images] with traditions more profound than American pop culture.”⁴²⁹ Michelle Clinton is completely ignored in the catalog essays by Klein and Relyea, and her poetry, is mentioned only once (and briefly) among the (many) reviews of the show (Hunter Drojhojowska, in *Art News* says she

⁴²⁸ Michelle T. Clinton, “Anti-Erotica” and “Migration of the Rats” in *Helter Skelter*, *ibid.*, 55-56.

⁴²⁹ Kenneth Baker, “Helter Skelter: A Defining Moment in LA Art.” *San Francisco Chronicle* (March 19, 1992): E1.

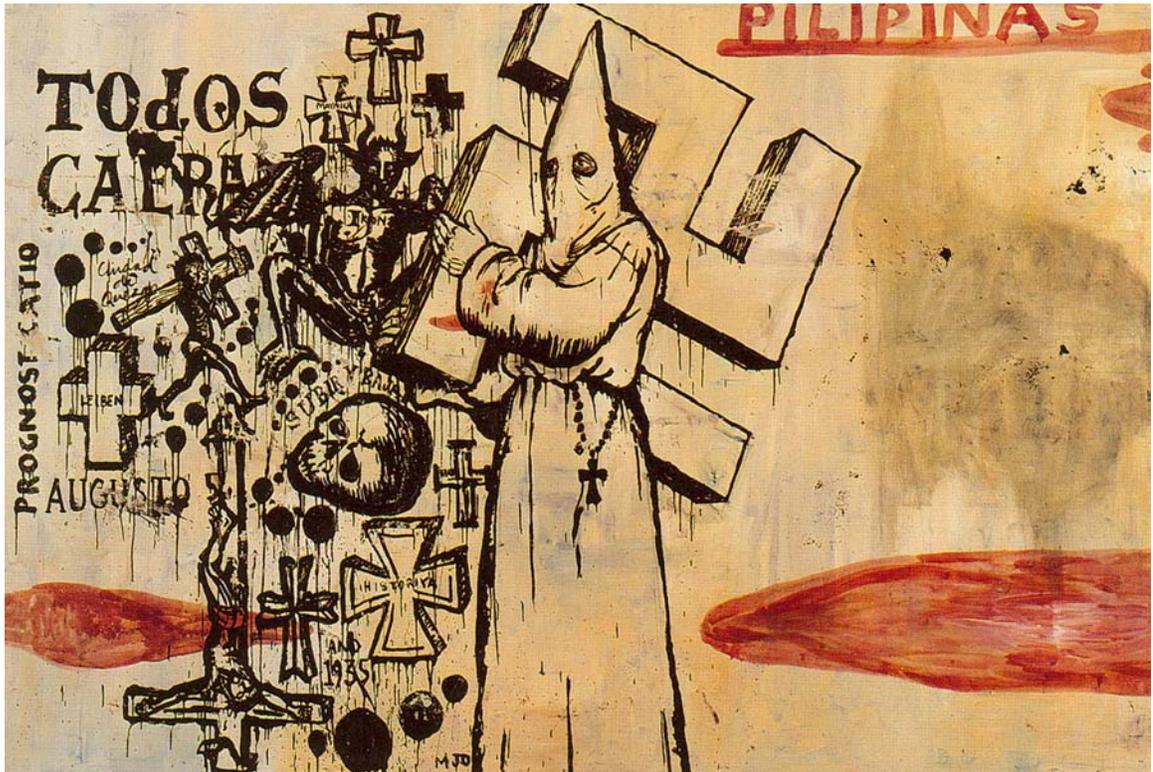


Figure 32. Manuel Ocampo. *Prognosticatio*. Oil on canvas. 1991. In *Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s*. Exh. Cat. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992, 119.

“goes for the jugular...”).⁴³⁰ The imagery of Clinton and Ocampo clearly expresses their rage at what it is to live inside the violence of a white world, and the impositions of its colonizing history. Their work describes a “white male nightmare” very different from the one proposed by Klein: a nightmare of white male making.

What seems to have stood out in *Helter Skelter*, for the (entirely white male) critics, were: (for Kenneth Baker, *San Francisco Chronicle*) Chris Burden’s *Medusa’s Head* (“a rugged five ton ball of concrete” interlaced with toy trains carrying pebbles and evoking, for him, “a small planet busily mining itself out of existence.”); (for Bernard Weinraub, *New York Times*) ditto Burden’s piece as well as Paul McCarthy’s *Garden* (“in which mechanical men copulate with trees or holes in the ground.”); (for Michael Kimmelman, *New York Times*) ditto Burden as well as Llyn Foulkes’ “paintings-cum-relief-sculptures [which] bring to mind the art of Francis Bacon ...;” and (Paul Richard, *Washington Post*) ditto Paul McCarthy and Burden as well as “Robert Williams’ wild bimbo monster nightmares” and “Mike Kelley’s ...gross out jokes that alienated office workers send each other on the fax.”⁴³¹

What does seem clear, more than that the images in *Helter Skelter* represent “white male nightmare,” is that the abject/grotesque/monstrous *is* evident in a violent and phantasmagoric spectacle of an exhibition that samples and recombines the violence and trauma both of real life, and their representations in film, television and popular fiction at the beginning of the 1990s. And, it is clear that *Helter Skelter* did so in LA, the capital of

⁴³⁰Drohojowska, *ibid.*, 79.

⁴³¹ See Baker, *ibid.*; Bernard Weinraub, “Art Show Looks at Los Angeles’s Underside,” (*New York Times*, March 4, 1992): Sec. C. page 15, Col. 1; Michael Kimmelman, “Helter Skelter Reveals the Evil of Banality,” *New York Times* (March 22, 1992): Sec. 2 page 37, Col. 1.; and Paul Richard, “Helter Skelter: Naughty by Nature—Exhibit Brings LA’s Dark Side to Light,” *Washington Post* (March 22, 1992): G1.

spectacle and illusion; and, like the film industry LA shelters, well outside the government's funding (and restrictive) purview.

This latter is probably the most important in terms of the overall discourse on the "transgressiveness" and "activism" of the images. While Joseph Kosuth⁴³² slyly turned an NEA-funded series of exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum into a critique not only of an increasingly punitively constraining NEA, and of the right-wing's key role in pushing the NEA to be even more punitive, Schimmel's *Helter Skelter* sought to beard the lion with loathsome imagery, but without confronting the raging right wing by implicating the government in its intervention.

Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art

In the Fall of 1992, just a few months after *Helter Skelter* closed, the current crop of graduate student fellows in the curator-star-making Whitney Museum Independent Study Program went into the museum's storage warehouses in search of works that "investigat[ed] discursive excess and degraded elements as they relate[d] to the body."⁴³³ The resulting exhibition was a collaborative effort, accomplished with the advice and direction of a number of important art critics and artists also in residence, or employed, at the Whitney at the time, including Benjamin Buchloh, a member of the *October* journal

⁴³² And the organizers and essayists of *The Decade Show* that also received NEA funding.

⁴³³ *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*. (exh. cat.) (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993). Unlike the Brooklyn Museum's *Play of the Unmentionable* the works shown were not only from the permanent collection of the Whitney. Of the 47 objects in the show, 13 were not in the Whitney collection, and all 15 of the videotapes/films and photo-documentations of performances were borrowed from collectors or the artists. Of significance, two of the works that had sparked the right wing attacks in 1989, Serrano's *Piss Christ* (Figure 4), and Robert Mapplethorpe's self portrait with bullwhip (Figure 27), one of the images in his *X Portfolio*, were both borrowed for the show. 1993 was definitely the "abject art" year for the Whitney, with a strong representation of abject/monstrous/grotesque imagery in three shows all up at once, and including *The Subject of Rape*, at the Whitney annex.

inner circle.⁴³⁴ *Abject Art* opened right after the controversial 1993 Whitney Biennial closed in June, 1993. Up at the same time as *Abject Art* was a smaller Whitney show, also created by Independent Study Program students, *The Subject of Rape*. All in all, throughout 1993, the Whitney was rife with abject/monstrous/grotesque imagery related to the sexualized body.

Like the Brooklyn Museum's *Play of the Unmentionable*, *Abject Art* unearthed works from the bowels of museum storerooms to demonstrate how far back artists had been deploying this imagery; and how long the museum had been collecting this kind of art, to trace the art historical genealogy of nineties artists' interest in abject/monstrous/grotesque imagery, and thereby assert its legitimacy. *Abject Art* differed significantly from the 1990 Kosuth installation at Brooklyn, however.

Abject Art's objects, films/videos, etc. were only from U.S. artists, and almost entirely of post-WWII vintage, whereas *Play's* featured works dated to ancient civilizations and tribal societies in addition to more contemporary Western examples, including, but not limited to, US art. Also unlike *Play*, *Abject Art's* exhibited works were not just mined from within the museum. Almost half of the images (objects and film/video) were borrowed for the show. Perhaps most significantly, unlike *Play*, *Abject Art's* exhibition catalog did not credit particular funding sources. The *Play of the Unmentionable* had deliberately sought to underscore the ancient to contemporary history of state, or ruling

⁴³⁴ In their preface to the catalog, the student curators of *Abject Art* particularly thanked Benjamin Buchloh (the significance of Buchloh's involvement becomes of interest when considering the 1994 discussion published in *October* regarding differences between Kristeva's abject and Bataille's *informe*. "The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the *Informe* and the Abject." *October* 67 (Winter 1994) 3-21) Buchloh was the Whitney's director of curatorial and critical studies, under which the student fellows were working on the *Abject Art* show. Also part of the teaching staff of the Whitney Institute were Mary Kelly, a senior instructor and Yvonne Rainer, visiting instructor. See *ibid*, 5. Also in exhibition simultaneously with both *Abject Art* and the 1993 Biennial was *The Subject of Rape* at the museum's annex in the Philip Morris building..

group support for, as well as censorship of, art that referenced the abject/monstrous/grotesque and sexualized body. Also, despite *Abject Art's* theoretically-oriented catalog essays, the exhibition installation was a more or less typical one, unlike Kosuth's installation, which itself critiqued the museum, and the aesthetic tradition of exhibition design, while meticulously following all its rules.

Importantly as well, the *Abject Art* show was fielded in a very different environment than was *Play's*. One of the ironic outcomes of cumulative efforts to defend the content of art that referenced and evoked the abject/monstrous/grotesque and sexualized body, as well as the Constitutionally protected right of artists to express themselves in this manner was that this very approach to defending this art provided an opening for the right wing to continue to exploit the abject/monstrous/grotesque in art for their political purposes

By 1993, shocked and infuriated by the election of Bill Clinton as President of the U.S., the right wing began to prepare vigorously to capture the House of Representatives during the 1994 mid-term elections.⁴³⁵ The National Endowment for the Arts became an even more interesting target for the right wing in this environment; and the *Abject Art* show was made to order for whipping up morality fervor in the 1993-1994 campaign process.

For example, in July of 1993, the right wing Christian Action Network sent a letter to all first-term members of Congress, citing *Abject Art* as only the most current example of NEA refusing to bow to the objections of moral crusaders by continuing to fund "obscene art." Despite the fact that NEA funds had not been sought to underwrite *Abject Art*, and no mention of NEA was made in the exhibition's catalog, right wing lobbyists researched

⁴³⁵ Which, of course did succeed with Newt Gingrich's majority of conservative Republicans elected in 1994, and their program, "Contract with America."

the funding records of NEA and discovered that the agency had indeed given \$20,000 to the Whitney's Independent Study program, whose young curators-in-training had created the show. With this ammunition in hand, the Christian Action Network urged first term Republicans to help abolish the NEA: "the NEA should go the way of four select committees, 16 subcommittees and the National Endowment for Democracy and be abolished. There exists no principled reason for allowing the federal government to fund art -- especially when that art may not reflect the values and culture of the taxpayers footing the bill."⁴³⁶

The abject imagery in this latest exhibition at a major museum was jumped on because, in the climate of a divided art world, and a somewhat equivocating "victory" in the Cincinnati case, the right wing saw an opportunity to tap into a strong strain of populist resentment about artworks that seemed to be one thing, but were interpreted with long words and confusing descriptions as something else entirely. The concentration on explaining the satirical/critical usages of abject/monstrous/grotesque imagery as a way to reveal repressive forces in the society at large had as much (if not more) of a backfire effect as a salutary one.

Thus, in a real sense, the culture wars continued at high temperature, ironically, partially as a result of the extensive explaining, on the part of well-intentioned left critics

⁴³⁶ See Jacqueline Trescott, Eric Brace, "Arts Beat—A Bid To Kill The NEA" *Washington Post*. (July 12, 1993): B7. The press helped along the argument by (no doubt unintentionally) mischaracterizing a work in the exhibition that took center stage in the controversy over *Abject Art*. Trescott and Brace stated in this article that "...*Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, includes a three-foot mound of excrement..." presumably referring to John Miller's bathroom-humorous 1988 sculpture *Untitled*, 40"x40 1/2"x 40" (which is actually made of plastic extruded in a rough cone shape, painted brown, with a tiny house sitting insouciantly on top).

like Vance and Lippard and others, of how layered, allegorical, carnivalesque, multi-valenced—and postmodern—abject/monstrous/grotesque imagery was.⁴³⁷

In 1993-1994 mailings to conservative Congressional freshmen on funding of “obscenity” in art were reinforced with mass mail campaigns to their constituents. These inflammatory mailings told recipients that the “snobby” art world saw the general public, and especially the religious right, as unreconstructed “yahoos” and “rubes” who did not appreciate the finer points of high culture. These religious right mass mail campaigns, which increased in frequency and vituperativeness right through the mid-term elections of 1994, contributed to the election of the Contract with America 104th Congress led by Newt Gingrich. In these mailings, the defenders of NEA were decried as uppity filth-lovers seeking to pull the wool over the eyes of regular people by throwing around big words that tried to change the meaning of what anybody could see was *actually there* (e.g., X-rated sex, piles of materials that looked like defecation or vomit, etc.).

In this context, it is not surprising that, in the case of the *Abject Art* exhibition catalog, there is *neither any* mention of the source of funding, nor that (in the case of the

⁴³⁷ A good example of the debate in the press that occurred around the efforts to cut the NEA budget in the summer of 1993 included pieces that specifically mentioned the *Abject Art* show, as in the exchange between conservative columnist George Will and liberal columnist David Broder. See George Will, “The Arts Don’t Need Funding by Government,” *Chicago Sun Times*, (July 22, 1993): 31. Will’s (nationally syndicated) essay gloats over the NEA’s opponents finding the \$20K that went to the Whitney’s ISP, which indirectly supported an exhibit whose works included quoting Will: “such ‘abject materials’ as dead animals, menstrual blood and rotten food, includes a three-foot-high mound of synthetic excrement, a film showing a man pushing his head into another man’s rectum and, of course, two hardy perennials - Robert Mapplethorpe’s ‘Self-Portrait,’ a photo of him with a bullwhip in his rectum, and Andres Serrano’s ‘Piss Christ,’ a photo of a crucifix in a jar of urine.” See also David Broder who takes to task (and places in league) Rep. Robert Dornan (R-CA) and George Will as the “smut police” (“Smut Patrol,” *Washington Post*, (April 28, 1993): A19) who, Broder suggests, both seem to relish in quoting “dirty passages” from the *Abject Art* catalog, in their enthusiasm for finding ways to keep federal money out of artists’ hands: “...I learned that in politics, smut sells, especially for those who find ways both to display it and deplore it... In his pseudo-populist guise, Princeton Ph.D. Will managed to suggest that he-men scorn [NEA] handouts...” even though “better than most, Will knows that from the beginning of history, religious and secular rulers have been the patrons of the arts. In a democracy, where the people rule, who better to subsidize the arts than the people and their government?”

1993 Biennial) government funding was not sought to directly subsidize the exhibition. In the case of *Abject Art*, however, if this omission was purposeful, it did not work. The exhibition became a focal point for a new attack on the National Endowment for the Arts, which ultimately resulted in an \$8 million cut in the agency's budget.⁴³⁸

But *Abject Art* was not only viewed with alacrity by the right wing as a way to keep the culture wars alive during the bitterly-fought congressional campaign of 1994. It raised some hackles in the high criticism world as well. In the exhibition catalog, essays refocused attention on notions of the abject/monstrous/grotesque as transgressive tool for social change by invoking Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Georges Bataille's challenge to "dominant concepts of mind/body dualism and our established categories of social taboos through an investigation of degraded elements."⁴³⁹

In the introduction, student curators Jack Ben-Levi, Craig Houser, Leslie C. Jones and Simon Taylor also firmly argued that, focusing on art "which incorporates or suggests abject materials such as dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood and rotting food...to confront taboo issues of gender and sexuality," was "deemed urgent...because of a disturbing trajectory of 'politics' in America" involving the "attempt to censor art..." a move by the right wing which was "connected to the attacks on multiculturalism, 'political correctness' (a slogan of the right), the reproductive rights of women, the pathologizing of gay men and lesbians and the patriotic campaign against flag desecration."⁴⁴⁰ Certainly this was a blatant throwing down of the gauntlet, and the

⁴³⁸ While this cut was primarily symbolic (the agency actually received, even with the cut, a 30% increase in its budget), it served an important rallying function for the right wing campaigners, resulting ultimately in the cancellation of the individual artist grants program.

⁴³⁹ "Introduction." *Abject Art*...ibid., 7.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid. 7-8.

reaction from the right sketched out above was undoubtedly predictable, especially given the timing. But reaction came from other directions as well.

“Bad Girl” Art and the Abject/Monstrous/Grotesque

In 1993-1994, more or less simultaneously with some of the shows featuring the abject/monstrous/abject in some of its more aggressive forms, U.S. and U.K. versions of “bad girl” art were appearing in exhibitions in New York, Los Angeles and London/Glasgow respectively.⁴⁴¹ The *Bad Girls* arrived on the heels of *Abject Art* at the Whitney, and in the wake of influential new texts that inspected abject/monstrous/grotesque imagery through a feminist prism: Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*; Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* and Elizabeth Grosz’ *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*.

The *Bad Girls*, exhibitions that appeared on either side of the Atlantic more or less simultaneously with these books, featured abject/monstrous/grotesque imagery with a strong emphasis on the female body.⁴⁴² For the purposes of this dissertation, the assertive appearance of *Bad Girls* exhibitions and catalogs, together with the publication of the Creed, Russo and Grosz books, in 1993-1994, is significant because they signal a vigorous reassertion in discourse of the theoretical elaborations of the abject/monstrous/grotesque aesthetic in conjunction not only with the obvious increasing

⁴⁴¹ See Kate Bush, et al., *Bad Girls* (exh. cat.) (London: ICA/CCA, 1993); Marcia Tucker and Marcia Tanner, *Bad Girls* (exh. cat.) (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

⁴⁴² Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, (London and New York: Routledge: 1994); Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994). See also: Kate Bush, et al., *Bad Girls* *ibid.* Marcia Tucker and Marcia Tanner. *Bad Girls*, *ibid.*

interest in deploying this aesthetic in art, but also in its relationship to feminist debates about the nature of identity and subjectivity and the specter of essentialism.

That the three *Bad Girls* exhibitions in 1993-1994 promoted a strongly feminist (or *neo-feminist*) perspective in presenting art (primarily by women) that utilized an abject/monstrous/grotesque aesthetic was not a new tendency. The previous year, *Abject Art* included its share of works by eighties and nineties feminist artists,⁴⁴³ and one specifically feminist theory-focused essay in the catalog: Leslie C. Jones' "Transgressive Femininity: Art and Gender in the Sixties and Seventies." Despite the limitation to the sixties and seventies indicated by her title, Jones' essay dealt with art well beyond that period, including Louise Bourgeois' 1984 *Nature Study* (a brightly-surfaced cast bronze sculpture whose shape evokes a headless sphinx/demon/dog sporting six human female breasts and a penis, surely an ur-image of the grotesque if there ever was one); and Kiki Smith's 1990 *Untitled* (wax nude sculptures, a male and a female, hanging from hooks, with substances suggesting milk and semen dripping down their abdomens and legs).

Though *Abject Art* preceded the appearance of their major books, early essays by Barbara Creed, Mary Russo and Elizabeth Grosz dealing with the Kristevan abject and the Bakhtinian carnival, are referred to throughout the *Abject Art* catalog, and especially in Jones' essay.⁴⁴⁴ This reconsideration set the stage for further foregrounding of related

⁴⁴³ See Leslie C. Jones, "'Transgressive Femininity: Art and Gender in the Sixties and Seventies,'" *Abject Art*...*ibid.*, 33-58, and the catalog's List of Works in the Exhibition, 102-105. In addition to pieces by Kiki Smith and Louise Bourgeois, both created in the period covered by this dissertation, *Abject Art* included these works created in the eighties and nineties (and portrayed by catalog essayists as "feminist"): Hannah Wilke, from her series *So Help me Hannah* (1978-1984); Zoe Leonard, *Frontal View*, *Geoffrey Beene Fashion Show* (1990); Cindy Sherman, *Untitleds* (1987 and 1992). And films/videos: Maria Beatty, *Sphinxes Without Secrets* (1991) and *Imaging Her Erotics* (work in progress as of 1993); Sadie Benning, *Girl Power* (1992) Jennifer Montgomery, *Age 12: Love with a Little L* (1990); and Suzie Silver, *A Spy (Hester Reeve Does the Doors)*, 1992.

perspectives in the art included in the *Bad Girl* exhibitions, in the catalogs' essays, and in reactions to them.

The UK *Bad Girls* show featured only six artists (three from the U.S., and three from the UK) compared to the New York/LA *Bad Girls* with dozens of artists (including several men) between the two venues.⁴⁴⁵ Among the three venues there was very little

⁴⁴⁴ Jones references Kristeva throughout her essay. See, *ibid.* 34: "for Kristeva, the abject 'beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out.'" ; 55 n.7: "According to Kristeva...abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of the pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which the body becomes separate from another body in order to live..." ; 37: "what [Eccentric Abstraction, Anti-Form, Happenings, Body and Performance Art] ...had in common was a capacity to disturb viewers, to draw them [citing Kristeva] 'toward the place where meaning collapses' through the incorporation of...untraditional substances, amorphous forms, and the artist's body itself...to shock, to repulse, in order to blur the boundaries of propriety and social strictures on art, on women..." ; 38: "the vagina represents the literal 'border passable in both directions by pleasure and pain.'" ; 42: "Like the threat of disease [the abject] ...is everpresent [Kristeva] '...it lies outside, beyond the set yet from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging ...'" ; 45: "...scatology is...confrontational, challenging us with the fear of excrement, with [Kristeva] 'the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death.'" Jones cites both Creed's and Russo's articles (among several texts) as examples of the theorization of woman as a socially-constructed threatening "other": Barbara Creed. "Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection." *Screen* 27 (January-February 1986) 44-64; and Mary Russo "Female Grotesques; Carnival and Theory," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed. *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 213-229. She also cites Elizabeth Grosz' treatment of Kristeva's perspective on menstrual blood: Elizabeth Grosz, "The Body of Signification," in John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin, eds., *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 92: Quoting Grosz: "Horror of menstrual blood is a refusal to acknowledge the subject's corporeal link to the mother...It marks the site of an unspeakable and unpayable debt of life, of existence, that the subject (and culture) owes to the maternal body."

⁴⁴⁵ *Bad Girls*, UK opened in London at the ICA in October 1993, and in Glasgow at the end of January 1994; The New York *Bad Girls* opened at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in January 1994 (a second installment went up in NY in March 1994), and the LA version opened almost simultaneously with the first installment in New York, in January 1994. The only artist overlaps between the 4 shows were Sue Williams, whose work appeared in all of them; and Nicole Eisenman, who had pieces in the London/Glasgow show and in Los Angeles. All four exhibitions involved more than objects on display. They included videos, films, performances and lectures as well. This is not indicated in the UK catalog, though in the press accounts and reviews, the performances, especially of Penny Arcade, and the films, especially Lydia Lunch's, are received with alacrity. See Deborah Levy, *The Guardian* (September 27, 1993), 10: "I welcome the irreverent female sensibility of ...*Bad Girls* at the ICA... film, performance, exhibitions and talks...explicit, fearless, highly politicized and 'politically incorrect' art...playing hard with irony...freedom, intolerance, AIDS, puritanism, feminism, family and love..." and, referring specifically to Lydia Lunch's "motor-mouth 'confrontationalist' ...music and spoken invectives [which] ravage polite good taste..." The *Bad Girls* exhibitions on both sides of the Atlantic, and on both coasts of the US were not the first to address feminist "badness," considered in some quarters the central characteristic of "third wave feminism." The NY/LA *Bad Girls* catalog lists 124 group exhibitions "organized around feminist issues" from 1990-1994. The list contained only group shows because of the large "number of solo exhibitions organized around feminist concerns in recent years." See *Bad Girls* (exh. cat.) (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 126-130. There is an interesting (and

overlap in artists represented; and, there were some significant differences in perspective. For the organizers of the NY/LA version, the thematic was carnivalesque “fun” and “laughter;” while, for the London/Glasgow version, though there is acknowledgment of the “irony and humour” of the designation of the selected artists as “bad girls,” the emphasis was on the general mood of the work as not funny but “restless, uncomfortable...unconventional, sub-cultural and disturbing...” refusing “idealization ...and [the] normative terms of society and...art.”⁴⁴⁶

Despite these characterizations, what seems clear, from considering the *works* in both shows, is that NY/LA was not all fun and games; and London/Glasgow was not all dour melancholia. Each had its share of both.

questionably valid) assumption behind this list: that exhibitions foregrounding “feminist concerns” necessarily contained predominantly “bad girl” art as defined in the catalog. Of interest in this regard is an important essay by the late Christine Tamblyn, “No More Nice Girls: Recent Transgressive Feminist Art,” *Art Journal* 50:2, 53-57. Tamblyn considers late eighties art, especially performance, film and video, concluding that the likes of Barbara Hammer, Holly Hughes, Linda Montana/Annie Sprinkle and Karen Finley have “fashioned a new feminist aesthetic” that focuses on “explicitly sexual representation...eschewing positive role modeling” thereby deviating from the confessional approach characteristic of the “2d wave” feminist artists of the seventies, by “resorting to slippery rhetorical devices and unpredictable behavior” which privilege “difference ...rather than idealized role models...” 57. Another questionable premise in Tamblyn, as well as in some of the *Bad Girls* catalog essays (not Marcia Tanner’s—she seeks to delineate a matrilineage for the “bad girl” aesthetic) and elsewhere, which will not be addressed here, is the notion that there was some kind of clear “break” between the allegedly celebrationist, confessional approaches of proto- and feminist artists of earlier decades. That there were many artists (e.g. Oppenheim, Bourgeois, Wilke, etc.) and who embraced a feminist identity, who also utilized abject/monstrous/grotesque imagery in the “bad-girl” dynamic outlined in these exhibitions, was discussed in Chapter 1 of this Part, and, of course was a primary purpose of Leslie Jones’ catalog essay for the *Abject Art* exhibition. See especially for an excellent treatment of this work, though it does not address it in terms of its use of abjection, the grotesque and the monstrous: Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998).

⁴⁴⁶ Laura Cottingham, “What’s So Bad About ‘Em,” *Bad Girls* (exh. cat) (London: ICA; Glasgow: CCA, 1993-1994), 54-55. See also Marcia Tanner, “Preface and Acknowledgments,” *Bad Girls* (exh. cat.) (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 10. Tanner asserts that the LA exhibition was based on art, mostly by women, that “insouciantly tweaks the private parts of sacred bovines...” and was “irreverent, anti-ideological, non-doctrinaire, non-didactic, unpolemical and thoroughly unladylike...and seriously funny.” In a significant essay later in the decade, Katy Deepwell explores the implications of the UK version of *Bad Girls*’ “position in opposition to a negative early seventies feminism;” and what she regarded as the puzzling assertion, in the NY/LA *Bad Girls* catalog that the art in the show was transgressive, but “not political.” See Katy Deepwell, “*Bad Girls?* Feminist Identity Politics,” in Juliet Steyn, ed. *Other Than Identity*. (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997), 154.

New York *Bad Girls* curator Marcia Tucker contributed an essay, with the tongue-in-cheek title “The Attack of the Giant Ninja Mutant Barbies,” in which she valorizes the art in her show as producing an effect of carnivalesque inversion (à la Stallybrass and White, to whom she frequently refers). She metaphorizes the selection of art in the exhibition culinarily as providing viewers “a pleasurable, relatively inexpensive tasting menu of potential social change.”⁴⁴⁷

But, in considering the *works* in the NY *Bad Girls* exhibition, it is hard to laugh at (or think of as tasty morsels) frightening images like the photograph, from Jacquelyn Hayden’s *Figure Model Series*, of an anorexic female figure standing on its head, skirt swathing the upper body, bony pelvis and protruding *mons veneris* the centerpiece. One is also not prompted to snigger at Laura Aguilar’s bold *Untitled Self-Portrait*; to giggle at Maxine Hayt’s polyurethane, wax and encaustic *Lick* series pieces that look like huge diseased open mouths (Figure 33); or to guffaw at Sue Williams’ *Try to Be More Accomodating*—a harrowing riff on rape.

Bad Girls London/Glasgow catalog essayists (UK-based) Cherry Smyth and (U.S.-based) Laura Cottingham emphasize full-strength (and decidedly un-funny) images. This version of *Bad Girls* flaunted “lusty and banal...superdykes” who “writhe, fuck and castrate men,” (referring to Nicole Eisenman’s mural *Amazons Castrating Captured Pirates*).⁴⁴⁸ In another register, the show the insistent anxiety of Nan Goldin’s photographs, like *Fiona After Breast Operation*, whose subject gazes vacantly and dolefully at her bruised breasts.

⁴⁴⁷ Marcia Tucker. “The Attack of the Giant Ninja Mutant Barbies.” *Bad Girls* (exh.cat.) (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art), *ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁴⁸ Cherry Smyth, “Bad Girls.” *Bad Girls* (exh.cat) London: ICA; Glasgow: CCA, 1993-1994, 8.



Figure 33. Maxine Hayt. *Lick #1*. Polyurethane foam, beeswax, encaustic. 1993. In *Bad Girls*, New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994, 85.

Nevertheless, a number of works in the UK *Bad Girls* show do stimulate wry-smile as well as laugh-out-loud moments, such as Nicole Eisenman's jokes at the penis' expense—a drawing where a “goofy male form appears to be walking his dick on a leash—and the dick on the leash has evidently just urinated on a fire hydrant.”⁴⁴⁹ Another opportunity for dark laughter is Sue Williams' satirical jab at the essentialism debates in feminist theory (and no doubt ribbing Kristeva as well) in *Your Bland Essence*, featuring—in a smeary red field, smudgy, chaotically placed and crudely-rendered—references to abject bodies and bodily and sexual functions.

* * * * *

In summary, Chapter 5's attention to several exhibitions appearing from the early nineties to its midpoint which assertively featured many examples of references to the abject/monstrous/grotesque. One of the oddities of this situation is that the right wing did not take them all on as “poster children” of degradations. Perhaps one of the reasons is that the imagery in mainstream locations had now become so pervasive that the right wing had almost too many choices from which to select their targets.

⁴⁴⁹ Cottingham, *ibid.*, 57.

Chapter 6: Creed, Russo, Grosz—the Female Monstrous/Grotesque/Abject and Essentialism

In Chapter 6 the focus will be on the relationship of the feminist discursive thematics of essentialism to the increasingly prevalent thematics and imagery of the grotesque/monstrous/abject as the nineties moved along. These thematics are carefully dissected in the influential texts of Barbara Creed, Mary Russo and Elizabeth Grosz⁴⁵⁰ which appeared in print at exactly the same time as *Abject Art* and *Bad Girls*. The UK version of *Bad Girls* had no references to any of the three theorists. The NY/LA version relies heavily on the Stallybrass/White utilization of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, and includes Russo and Kristeva in the bibliography (but not Grosz). While this uneven presence of these key theorists may be largely due to the fact that their books appeared at the same time that all the shows went up, Leslie Jones' seemed able somehow to rely in a significant way on their thinking in the *Abject Art* catalog. Nevertheless, though the catalog essays of the two *Bad Girls* exhibitions did not acknowledge the importance of these theorists to the art shown in the shows, it was very clear the art in all the exhibitions clearly deployed as the primary aesthetic "badness," the carnivalesque "low," mixture and the scatological, etc. These were, of course, all elements and effects of the abject/monstrous/grotesque theorized in Bakhtin and Kristeva, and the glosses on them in Creed, Grosz, Russo and Stallybrass/White.

Chronologically, Australian film theorist Barbara Creed comes first in this discussion, with her 1993 *Monstrous Feminine* study. Then, the centrality of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection to all these texts is treated. Finally, the discussion concludes with a comparison of the three theorists' approaches to the persistently ongoing debates

⁴⁵⁰ Creed, *ibid*; Russo, *ibid*; Grosz, *ibid*.

regarding essentialism. This section addresses how these theorists have responded to the persistent dominance in discourse of masculinist appropriations of the female body, and its characterization as abject, monstrous or grotesque. It also compares their perspectives on the reference to the abject/monstrous/grotesque female body in feminist cultural activism, and the degree to which deploying such thematics and iconography emerges in discourse as a useful cultural activism tactic.

Barbara Creed's "Monstrous Feminine"

Barbara Creed deploys Kristeva's theory of abjection in relation to the horror film genre, updating and providing a feminist twist to Noël Carroll's conclusions (addressed in Chapter 4 of this part of the dissertation) regarding the operational characteristics of the genre and the reasons for its popularity and ubiquity in the seventies and eighties. To recapitulate briefly Kristeva's theory of the abject (discussed earlier in this part: see Chapter 2 above): she proposes that full entry into the symbolic (constitution of subjectivity marked by the acquisition of language and acceptance of Law) is dependent on the expulsion of the "improper and unclean" (abject). However, Kristeva argues, the abject can never be totally expelled. It constitutes the "other" side of subjectivity. In its ever-presentness, this abject "otherness" constantly challenges any consistent sense of encompassing identity in subjectivity. The abject can be anything from bodily waste to the corpse (death of the organism is both primary and ultimate site of the abject). But, for Kristeva, even more primary a site for the abject is that which is first expelled: the feminine, and especially that aspect of the feminine crystallized in the maternal body. In Western culture, Kristeva argues, the maternal body becomes the prototype of the abject

because it secretes (blood and milk), changes shape (swells in pregnancy) and emits life through a violent act of expulsion (birth).

Creed uses Kristeva's theory of abjection—and especially her emphasis on the maternal body as primary site of the abject—to reveal aspects of the patriarchal ideological frame of Western culture as it operates in the horror film. She argues that the abject as “monstrous-feminine” (she proposes a typology that includes: the archaic mother, the Spider Woman, the witch, the monstrous womb, the vampire, the Sphinx and the Medusa, among others) is a predominantly central protagonist in the horror film. For Creed, all the forms in which the “monstrous feminine” is expressed have some relationship to the maternal—and especially to its central function to create life—but also in the association of the maternal body with castration.

In her chapter on Freud's theorization of the role of the maternal body in castration anxiety, and the various glosses on—and rewritings of—these theories, Creed notes that the feminine, especially the maternal feminine, is not portrayed by Freud as on its own dangerous and castrating. Instead, Freud associates the mother with castration by setting her up as fantasmatically castrated herself (lacking the penis, and emitting blood—menstruation—from the location where the penis “should” be). According to Freud, in the child's fantasy perception, this “evidence” of the mother's “castration” is fearful because of the example of castration she represents, a castration that could at any time be visited upon the child. But, this perceived castration, according to Freud, does not emanate from the Mother, but from the Father. Creed disagrees, and proposes a different fantasmatic castration that emanates directly from the Mother: the ancient myth of the *vagina dentata* that has a genealogy that can be traced back millenia to narratives that are

foundational of Western patriarchal culture. Creed's study emphasizes that contemporary filmic icons of the "monstrous feminine" reproduce these ancient foundational and constructed projections not only of male hostility to—and fear of—the power of the maternal female body to produce and nurture life; but also of the fantasmatic fear of the vagina's potential to maim the penis (or to suck the man back into the womb) that are basic to ancient stories.⁴⁵¹

However, Creed does not just itemize all the ways in which this is accomplished at the particular site of the horror film. The ultimate purpose of her study is not to recuperate the figure of the maternal castrator, and then seek to absorb it "into Freud's theory of the Oedipus and castration complexes."⁴⁵² Rather Creed seeks to reveal the inadequacy of Freud's theory, as well as of those who unproblematically invoke his ideas. Her argument opposes contentions that either actively promote, or tacitly accept, the distortion and repression of the "crucial role played by the mother" in particular, and the feminine generally, "in relation to the constitution of society and culture,"⁴⁵³ even when the culture is (still) patriarchal. Creed does not propose that any aspect of patriarchal ideology (in her text, the horror film genre, and its important component, the "monstrous feminine") can act unproblematically (and unanalyzed) upon itself to deconstruct its denigration of woman.

Creed proposes her analysis of the powerful (and, at the same time, culturally abjected) "monstrous feminine" as a way to encourage reconsideration of the entire

⁴⁵¹ This is a very abbreviated summary of Creed's argument at *ibid.*, Chapter 8: "Medusa's Head: The *Vagina Dentata* and Freudian Theory." 105-121. As Creed and all the theorists addressed in this chapter note, revulsion always contains its opposite, desire. This partially explains why horror is so popular. See also Carroll's arguments addressed earlier in this Part.

⁴⁵² Creed, *ibid.*, Chapter 11: "The Medusa's Gaze." 164.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 165.

process of entry into the symbolic order; and to reveal the mother's crucial role in that "long and gradual process ... but one that has been rendered invisible."⁴⁵⁴ Creed does not promote the "monstrous feminine" itself as a source of transformative power. Rather, if Creed promotes anything as "subversive"/transformative (and this is implicit, not explicit, in Creed's text), it is the mobilization of the feminist theoretical perspective itself, including, of course, Creed's own moves, which seek to illuminate the ways by which patriarchal culture reinforces itself through popular forms such as the horror genre. It is Creed's theorization of the "monstrous feminine" which seeks to accomplish an illuminating transgression of patriarchal ideology, that is of most importance to this dissertation and its traverse of the discourse of the abject/monstrous/grotesque as deployed in activist approaches to art.

Mary Russo's "Female Grotesque"

While Creed denies that she is specifically seeking to "recuperate" the site of the monstrous feminine as transformative/transgressive of patriarchal cultural hegemony, Russo moves with alacrity to claim that space as liberating.⁴⁵⁵ Like Creed, she relies on the genealogy of "female grotesque" imagery, tracing it back to the earliest periods of human history in which imagery was inscribed on some surface or another; arguing that the deep ancient-ness of this genealogy's trajectory is the source of the imagery's authority and power as transformative/transgressive. In three locations in her study, Russo argues for the twentieth century female grotesque as a liberatory figure *because of*

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ See Celia Marshik, "The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity," review of *The Monstrous Feminine, Modernism/Modernity*. 2:3 (1995), 183-185, for a critique of precisely this aspect of Russo's study: "[a] lack of attention to historical detail, the most serious limitation ... prevents her from providing a model of the grotesque truly useful to feminism, a central aspect of her project...she too frequently settles for *Zeitgeist* when a materialist analysis would illuminate the functions of the grotesque in specific sociopolitical moments...we should ask for more."

its deep and long persistence as the strange, peculiar and monstrous *particularity*: that which is left-over once the *norm*-al/ideal parameters have been solidified; and that which is, dichotomously, both from-the-depths (of the cave, of the imagination and the unconscious), and playfully, lightly, cosmetically, of-the-surface.

Russo specifically addresses ways in which “surface” and “depth” haunt efforts to define and/or distinguish between the abject, the monstrous and the grotesque. As she notes, the history of the grotesque’s iconography seems to stress surfaces and superficialities, and yet the etymology of the word itself refers to depths, darkneses and excavations.

The little monsters known as *grottesche* have a centuries-long history of use as decorative elements reaching back at least to the Renaissance in Italy, when Rafael first appropriated them for his own commissions. Nevertheless, despite their longevity and ubiquity, they have simultaneously suffered continual debunking by commentators and critics from Vetruius right through to the present. Perhaps the most famous rant was John Ruskin’s in the mid-19th century, in which he railed against them as “degraded” and “unnatural and monstrous abortion[s]...”⁴⁵⁶

Russo argues that the fact that *grottesche* were consistently relegated to the margins, found only to the side of, and often described as “mere” frames for “real art,” has some resonance with “a certain construction of the feminine...described as bodily surface and detail...”⁴⁵⁷ She also argues for their *particularity* rather than *normativity* in the sense that “norm” refers to the “ideal” or the “classical.” Russo intends her study to show that

⁴⁵⁶ Russo, *ibid.*, 3-5. She relies in this treatment of the grotesque on Harpham, *ibid.*, including his etymology of the word, “grotesque;” his citations of Ruskin’s comments, etc.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

the late Renaissance/Baroque grotesque that produced a body of both slick superifice and cavernous depth has resurfaced in the late 20th Century as the “spectacular female grotesque name[d]...’mutant woman’ and ‘freak,’”⁴⁵⁸ *particularities* that, because they are outside the *norm*/ideal soon take on aspects of the “strange, the peculiar, the monstrous.”⁴⁵⁹

Russo asserts two primary forms of the grotesque—the carnivalesque and the uncanny—the former associated with the “outrageous, hilarious and comic,” and the latter with the strange, tragic, criminal, and terrible. Russo also performs gender identifications with these categories. Russo’s moves demonstrate the dizzying and protean inversions and reversals the meanings the grotesque—as both depth and surface—takes on when subjected to a gender analysis. For example, Russo proposes, “grotesque” can be construed as a “depth” that evokes the abject and frightening feminine as bodily interior. But, it can also (and simultaneously) be construed as a feminine-gendered marginal “surface,” decorative, insignificant and frivolous. Russo also argues, (viz. Bakhtin) that the carnivalesque grotesque elicits, not just “feminine”-gendered signification as decoratively amusing “surface,” but also a masculine-gendered “surface” which is the “realm of the political...a virile category associated with the active, civic world of the public.”⁴⁶⁰

Meanwhile, the uncanny grotesque “moves inward...individualized, interiorized ...with the attendant risk of social inertia,” related strongly to the female hysteric that sits

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 8.

so centrally in the (masculinist) theories of psychoanalysis.⁴⁶¹ But, this realm of the uncanny grotesque has its stereotypically masculine characteristics as well, especially the irrationally aggressive, violently criminal (against the Law) and tragic, attributes not often associated with femininity.

The grotesqueries of stereotyping that stunt the potential of women, of sexual, “differently-abled” and racial minorities, have become the late-twentieth century version of the “freak show” now produced, as Russo puts it: “not as collections of weird images assembled somewhere else, but as ...news events ‘blown out of proportion’...”⁴⁶² Russo asserts that the grotesque, the “freakish monster,” the anomaly as spectacle, has become completely imbricated with the “most capacious aspects of media culture...and of the phantasmatic experience of that culture by social subjects” (especially in the US). She argues that, as a result, the grotesque has become simultaneously a trope of the “secret self” (analogous, perhaps, to the cavernous “inside” characteristic of Russo’s “uncanny” grotesque); and of the most “externalized...hypervisible and exposed aspects of contemporary culture”⁴⁶³ (analogous, again, per Russo, to the above-ground “surface” phenomenon of the “carnavalesque” grotesque).

Moving assertively *into* such roiling ambivalences and mercurial slippages in signification is risky business, either to critique it directly; or, especially to deploy it as an activist mode of inversion, aimed at transforming these ambivalences’ repressive effects

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 8-9. As Russo notes, the “female hysteric” foundational to psychoanalysis, predates Freud’s theorization of it, in the fiction of ETA Hoffman and the German Romantics, as documented in Kayser, whom she cites on this point (See Kayser, *ibid.*)

⁴⁶² Ibid., 85. Not to mention the prevalence in the culture of horror and slasher film and pulp fiction, viz. Carroll, *ibid.* Much of this appeal is, Russo contends, a holdover of the exoticism of pre-20th Century freak shows, seen in contemporary form as “the...lore of ‘aliens’ and extraterrestrials as monsters to be conquered or adopted,” Russo, *ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

into liberatory ones. As Russo warns, the riskiest attempts to intervene in the distorted and hyperbolized imagery of marginalized populations, are not by seeking to reestablish “real” sexual/racial/ethnic identities—nor by attempting to “normalize” and “neutralize” negative representations of women, sexual and racial groups and the “differently-abled”— but by engaging one’s own self-identity in a:

...strange mimesis of counterproducing ...stretched and stunted caricatures, [by] posing and parading in [the] fun house mirrors [of the dominant culture]...of surrendering identit[ies] no longer possibly correct, recognizable...but ...bound to other bodies and strange selves.⁴⁶⁴

Elizabeth Grosz and the Volatile Body

Just how and why “other bodies and strange selves” could (or should) become sites for productive (cultural activist) transgression is addressed by Elizabeth Grosz in her 1996 book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Grosz’ book was inspired by the twenty-year controversy in feminist theoretical circles over how to counter the persistence of masculinist definitions of the “fixity” of women’s alleged “nature” (e.g.: “essentialism”) which has persistently been used politically to justify continuation of the unequal social, political and economic status of women.⁴⁶⁵

Grosz’ book is an extended argument in favor of total immersion in patriarchal frameworks, presumptions and methods as a necessity for feminist theorists who seek to criticize and transcend them. The book also directly models how this can be done successfully.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 86.

⁴⁶⁵Grosz set forth her disagreements with various brands of feminist anti-essentialism in 1989. She elaborates on these points in this book. The earlier discussion of anti-essentialism is: Elizabeth Grosz, “Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism.” *Inscriptions* 5, (1989); also reproduced in Naomi Schor, ed., *The Essential Difference: Another Look at Essentialism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

Grosz' sees the bifurcation of mind/body, and the privileging of the mind as quintessentially masculine, as the primary site where patriarchal frameworks, presumptions and methods converge with special force. Her intent in the book is to “displace the centrality of the mind...” in masculinist discourse “through a reconfiguration of the body.”⁴⁶⁶

Grosz' proposed “volatile” body is neither totally natural/material, nor totally culturally determined, but a protean fusion of the two, whose positive dynamism results in an ever-reconstituting subjectivity (as well as the fertile source of transgressive agency) over time. Grosz proposes the Möbius strip⁴⁶⁷—in which inside and outside torque and flow together, and cannot be separated—as a 3-dimensional model of her concept of how mind and body interpenetrate each other, and constitute what she terms the body's “volatility.”

For Grosz, the need to reconceptualize the body as volatile is extremely urgent because, in mainstream (masculinist) philosophy, psychology and biology—and in contemporary feminist theory—corporeality has consistently been seen as “what the mind must expel in order to retain its ‘integrity.’”⁴⁶⁸ Grosz proposes radically to re-theorize the body in order to combat what she perceives as the perpetuation of misogyny and racism,

⁴⁶⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), vii..

⁴⁶⁷ Grosz states she derived the idea of the Möbius strip as a model for her theory of the volatile body, from Lacan, who used it as a metaphor for the subject. This is, as she says, the “guiding framework” for, and also a way of organizing, the content of her book. See Jacques Lacan, “Of Structure as an Inmixing of Otherness Prerequisite to and Subject Whatever,” in Richard Mackesay and Eugenio Donato, eds., *The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*. (New York: Doubleday Sheridan/London: Tavistock, 1970). The Möbius strip was named for the astronomer and mathematician August Ferdinand Möbius (1790–1868), a professor at the University of Leipzig. A brief description of what the original theory was, and a short bibliography, by Ivars Peterson, the mathematics writer and online editor at *Science News*. <http://www.sciencenews.org/20000708/mathtrek.asp>.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

even in “liberationist” philosophical discourses (like feminism). She argues that the body is widely relegated in discourse to materiality; and this materiality is gendered in masculinist discourse as “feminine.” With the body conceptualized as totally material, and therefore as something to be disregarded, even abjected, it becomes urgent in discourse to portray the operations and life of the mind (gendered in masculinist discourse as “masculine”) as necessarily separate from the base (feminine) body. All must be done to maintain such a separation so the “mind” may remain “pure.”

Grosz’ antidote to the centuries-old privileging of *mind* in philosophy, psychology and biology—to the detriment of *body* (and especially the female body), as potential site of liberatory action—emphasizes the constitution of transformative agency *through* bodily materiality.⁴⁶⁹ Grosz’ polemic is relevant to this dissertation because of her proposal of the transgressive/emancipatory possibilities of rethinking *mind* as both constituted by—and imbricated with the dynamism and materiality of—the *body*, and vice versa. This proposal resonates with the contemporaneous feminist arguments put forward by Creed and Russo regarding the assertive emergence, in the late 20th century, of the abject/grotesque/monstrous feminine, in various guises, in popular culture as well as high culture. Foregrounding the body is what they all have in common, and, specifically, the

⁴⁶⁹ Grosz has been faulted for this emphasis in some critical reviews of her book. See especially Pheng Cheah, “Mattering,” review of *The Volatile Body*, *Diacritics* 26:1 (1996):108-139. Cheah’s critique faults Grosz for her “anti-humanist anthropologicist account of transformative agency” which he claims “overvalorizes” the activity of human corporeality as emancipatory. Cheah prefers instead Jacques Derrida’s account which points to difference as the source of emancipatory dynamism in subjectivity. See his discussion at Cheah, *ibid.*, 133-135. Pheng Cheah’s was the most intensively analytical review of Grosz’ book, which he compared, in this essay, with texts by Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida. Grosz’ book attracted quite a bit of critical attention, most of it positive, and most recorded in significant journals. See for example: Diane Nelson, *American Anthropologist* 98:4 (1996): 918; Lois McNay, *Radical Philosophy* 78 (1996): 34; Jacquelyn Zita, *Signs* 21:3 (1996): 786-795; Kate Mehuron, *Metaphilosophy* 27:1-2 (1996): 230-237; Kwok Wei Leng, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73:2 (1995): 301-303; J. Mason-Grant, *Hypatia* 12:4 (1997): 211; D. Linderman, *Discourse: Berkeley Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 18:3 (1996): 140.

kind of body (the grotesque/abject/monstrous female body) that commands attention and cannot be ignored.

Grosz proposes six reasons why a focus on the volatile materiality of the body is needed at the particular juncture of the early to mid-nineties. Addressing the deficiencies in (both masculinist and feminist) discourses of and on the body, she suggests, are foundational to developing a serious feminist theory of the body: a theory that is necessary in order to proceed with any effective strategy to ‘trouble’ and question the pervasiveness and persistence of patriarchal societal structures, that keep both women and people of color subordinated and marginalized.⁴⁷⁰ These persistent discursive deficiencies are, she argues:

- Absence of a language to define an “embodied subjectivity...[and] a psychical corporeality;”
- Overemphasis on the feminine, queer or racialized body as “the” body in discourse, with the effect of isolating individuals marked as female, queer or of color as “bodies without minds” concomitantly privileging the white, heterosexual male as “free to create values, morality, knowledge”—all those productions of culture seen to be the exclusive province of the mind;
- Dominance of singular body models (especially the white, heterosexual male body) “as the norm by which all others are judged;”
- Persistence of the (biologicistic/essentialist) notion that the body is opposed to culture—“a resistant throwback to a natural past” rather than “a site of social, political, cultural and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution;”

⁴⁷⁰ Grosz, *ibid.*, 22-24.

- Persistence of the characterization of the body's psychical and social dimensions as oppositional rather than interactive;
- Stubborn perpetuation of the view of the body's binarity—rather than its identification as a threshold or border—in relation to “the private or the public, self or other, natural or cultural, psychical or social, instinctive or learned, genetically or environmentally determined.”

While these lacunae in the intricate overlaps of philosophical/psychological/biological discourses of the body are, for Grosz, key aspects of patriarchal cultural predominance in that they prevent or hinder women's (and queer, and people of color's) ability to “develop autonomous modes of self-understanding and positions from which to challenge male knowledges and paradigms.” Nevertheless, she does not let feminism off the hook.

Grosz notes that, among feminist theorists, there are a “number of ... possible positions” which place the female body at the “center of political action and theoretical production;” and that these views are “differing and ... even opposed.”⁴⁷¹ These theoretical stances pose problems of their own. The struggles over the body between “patriarchs and feminists,” as well as among feminists themselves, prove for Grosz that

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 15. Grosz proposes that concepts of the body have followed a historical development in feminist thinking: “*Egalitarian feminism*” (the thinking of Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, and others) proposes a positive view of the female body as a unique source of knowledge, and at the same time as limiting of women's access to rights because of structures of society that constitute patriarchal dominance based on the female body's biology; “*Social constructionism*” (the thinking of Juliet Mitchell, Julia Kristeva, Michele Barrett, Nancy Chodorow, and others) sees the body as constituted through social processes. Though this view of the body seems less rigid, it still emphasizes the (largely ahistorical and biologically determined) political and social “marking” of the body as male/female and a bifurcated mind/body as well; The “*sexual difference*” school (the thinking of Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Gayatri Spivak, Jane Gallop, Moira Gatens, Judith Butler, Naomi Schor, Monique Wittig and others) emphasizes the “lived body” which denies the mind-body dualism of the previous two. For this group of theorists the body is the “political, social and cultural object par excellence” though the concept still adheres to rather rigid sexual distinctions.

[f]ar from being ...inert, passive, noncultural and ahistorical..., the [female] body may be seen as ...the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles.⁴⁷²

Grosz does not reject out of hand masculinist theoretical constructs, spending two-thirds of her book tracing the trajectories of a dozen or more highly influential (masculinist) thinkers. She suggests how their concepts can be useful in developing a feminist theoretical approach to the body that can contribute effectively to a liberatory and liberationist discourse, one that can have real impact on the stubborn persistence of the subordination of women and people of color.

Grosz names this strategic theoretical move “corporeal feminism,” which she characterizes as a feminism of “pure difference.” Her “corporeal feminism” places emphasis on acknowledging the inevitable implication of feminism in patriarchal frameworks; and the concomitant need not to repudiate these frameworks, but to make them more visible, and thus more subject to disruption, by becoming expert in appropriating and deploying them against themselves.

Grosz’ interest is in “culturally, sexually, racially specific bodies” that are not only “amenable” to social “completion,” but that take the “social order as their productive nucleus”⁴⁷³ in an unending process of difference-ing that Grosz theorizes as “pure difference,” a state of constant dynamic flux, constant “differentiation.” She argues that this perspective conceptualizes body, productively, as:

...an open-ended, pliable set of significations, capable of being rewritten, reconstituted, in quite other terms than those which mark it, and consequently capable of reinscribing the forms of sexual identity and psychological subjectivity....⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷² Ibid., 19

⁴⁷³ Ibid., x-xi.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 60-61.

Grosz' concept of "pure difference" has particular resonance with the discourse of the monstrous/grotesque/abject body which, as we have seen, emphasizes the un-fixed, the protean, as perhaps its most discomfiting and "horrible"—as well as its most rivetingly fascinating—aspect. In the last chapter of her book, Grosz engages with Kristeva's abject, making apparent the discursive congruence of the two perspectives, while also detailing how Grosz' own notion of "pure difference" departs from (while still incorporating aspects of) Kristeva's abject, as well as from all three of the historical feminist discourses of the body: egalitarian feminism, social constructionist feminism and sexually differential feminism.

Grosz engages with Kristeva for a particular reason. She sees in *The Powers of Horror* a resonance with her contention that culture and bod(ies) are ineradicably imbricated. She sees Kristeva as clearly and directly addressing:

...the lived experience of the body, the socially and culturally specific meanings of the body, the cultural investment in selectively marking the body, the privileging of some parts and functions while resolutely minimizing or leaving un-or underrepresented other parts and functions....⁴⁷⁵

In the context of addressing Kristeva, Grosz also engages Mary Douglas' notions of pollution and taboo upon which Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* theories are built, and especially (what Grosz finds "most interesting") Douglas' location of

...the question of purity and danger firmly in the relation between the two sexes...[and her] claim that...each of the sexes can pose a threat to the other; a threat that is located in the polluting powers of the other's body fluids...a particularly significant site for an analysis of sexual difference in the era where sexuality has

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 192.

become reinvested with notions of contagion and death...as a consequence of the AIDS crisis....⁴⁷⁶

The emphasis on this confluence of sexual difference, bodily fluids and danger defines the difference between Grosz' feminist project and that of Creed and Russo.

While Creed and Russo go to the representations of the culturally-constructed grotesque and monstrous female body in order to “trouble” particular aspects of masculinist hegemony in the arena of film and literature, Grosz seeks to make explicit, in the engagement with Kristeva/Douglas, how sexually differenced discourses of the body have functioned in a wider field (including philosophy and biological and medical science) and a deeper way. Grosz seeks nothing less than to undermine the operation of masculinist discourse, which denies the specificities of the masculine, and thereby reinforces the cultural norm of men as universal “representatives of the human, the generic ‘person’...”⁴⁷⁷

An illustration of the denial of the specificities of the masculine is, Grosz contends, the dearth of serious research on male bodily fluids and functions; and, in the few accounts that do exist, the disproportionate attention to male ejaculate, as if that, in effect, were the only bodily fluid males emit. Grosz states that she was “puzzled and shocked” at this gaping lacuna, discovered when she was researching the final chapter in her book.

This focus on male ejaculate, in the few accounts she did find, sharply contrasted with the huge increase in writing about female bodily fluids and functions over the previous

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 193. Grosz' reference is to Douglas, *ibid.*, 3: “...some pollutants are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order...each sex is a danger to the other through contact with sexual fluids...such patterns of sexual danger can be seen to...apply in the larger social system...”

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 198.

several decades.⁴⁷⁸ Grosz argues that this disproportionate attention to female bodily fluids (and their characterization as abject), and the simultaneous lack of attention to male bodily fluids, is symptomatic of the persistent view of male ejaculate as productive of a clean and proper male body, a body that is enthroned in patriarchal discourse as both the “ideal” and the “normal.”

Grosz points out that male seminal flow participates in assuring a “clean and proper” male body because semen is not—in and of itself—proposed in discourse as “dirty,” (viz. Kristeva’s/Douglas’ identification of whatever disrupts or transgresses borders or boundaries as “dirty” and “... in keeping with Kristeva’s terminology, as abject...”)⁴⁷⁹ Grosz contends that, in addition to the characterization of semen as “clean,” discourse also only acknowledges its flow in one direction—*out*. The preponderant view, in discourse, of male “flow” as *only* semen; and that it can only flow in one direction—*out* (projecting rather than receiving)—is necessary, Grosz argues, for the establishment, and perpetuation, of a strongly phallicized “clean” masculinity.

Especially important in establishing semen as inherently “clean,” Grosz suggests, is that semen is proposed in discourse *only* as either a “byproduct of pleasure,” or the “raw material of reproduction,” and therefore *not* polluting. Assuring that semen is seen as “non-polluting” in this way has to be reinforced by maintaining, in discourse, the virtual

⁴⁷⁸ Grosz notes that it is only in medical and biological discourse that there is any contribution to the account of male bodily fluids; but, unlike the (much greater) attention to women’s bodily fluids which runs the gamut from: “medical [to] cultural and experiential ...there are virtually no phenomenological accounts of men’s body fluids except in the borderline literatures of homosexuality and voyeurism (the writings of de Sade, Genet, and others are as close as we get to a philosophical or reflective account of the lived experiences of male flow)...” She acknowledges that, as of the time of the writing of her book, there had been a slight increase in attention to male bodily fluids, as a result of the AIDS crisis, but nothing in comparison with the truly staggering amount of text on female bodily fluids. See her discussion at *ibid.*, 198-202.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 201. Grosz notes that both Kristeva and Douglas also exempt male ejaculate specifically from the abject, along with tears. Grosz occupies some space at this point in her book questioning this exemption.

invisibility of other flows emitting from the male body. The perpetuation of the social/cultural “constitution of the sealed up, impermeable” male body also requires an abhorrence of the “idea that flow ...can move in two-way or indeterminable directions.”⁴⁸⁰ Grosz argues that this “sealed-up, impermeable” form of masculinity, and the phobia regarding multidirectional bodily flow inherent in it, not only is implicated in the valorization of the penis, but also in the valorization of men’s ability to “distance themselves from the very kind of corporeality—uncontrollable, excessive, expansive, disruptive, irrational—they have attributed to women...”⁴⁸¹

Grosz contends that the perpetuation of the definition of masculinity as impermeable, closed, phallicized, acts to reinforce societal fear and hatred of the feminine; and thereby to maintain the hierarchical dominance of patriarchal social and political formations. The “feminine,” established as fearful, Grosz contends is “in the West, in our time” associated with the female body as

...a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid...formless flow, viscosity, entrapping, secreting...lacking not...a phallus but self-containment, not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order....⁴⁸²

This association of the female body with disorder, Grosz proposes, “may well be a function of the projection outward of [the] corporealities...[and] liquidities that men seem to want to cast out of their own self-representation.”⁴⁸³

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.,

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 200.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 203.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

Formlessness, Disorder and “Essentialism”: How Activist?

Of course, it is to aspects of the construction of the female body as engulfing formlessness and threatening disorder that Creed, Russo and Grosz all seek to apply their feminist perspectives. It is of interest that there is ambivalence in their accounts, regarding appropriating these (phantasmatic) bodily qualities as tools of cultural activism. Each of the three takes pains to note, as did Stallybrass and White, that engaging with, or deploying, the monstrous/abject/grotesque as a “progressive” cultural activism move is risky business. As has been seen, in the discussion earlier in this part, this kind of imagery in art has been deployed, or referred to, for diametrically opposed political purposes, during the Culture Wars of the late eighties and early nineties.

Kristeva’s thinking on the abject stands out as central to the arguments of all three feminist theorists. Nevertheless, all acknowledge that there is a fundamental danger in engaging, for cultural change purposes, with what are the most powerfully negative constructs of the female body in patriarchal discourse—the monstrous/abject/grotesque. These constructs have been crystallized in patriarchal thought as one side of a bifurcated “feminine identity” that is proposed as unchangingly “essential,” “ahistorical” and “universal.” The other side is, of course, a “feminine nature” of softness, compassion, nurturance and passivity.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸⁴ Kristeva’s theory of the abject has itself been criticized as essentialist by theorist Judith Butler in her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990). Despite the fact that Butler’s critique of Kristeva as essentialist predated by many years the use of Kristeva’s theory of abjection by Creed, Russo and Grosz, none of the three addresses it, nor in fact refers to it in any significant way. The two most influential glosses on Kristeva, Lechte (ibid.) and Oliver (ibid.) also do not refer to Butler. Since Lechte’s book appeared the same year as Butler’s, this may be understandable. But Oliver’s appeared in 1997. I will address Butler’s critique further in Part 4 of the dissertation, in conjunction with the discussion of the various “incarnations” of Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* and the “anti-essentialist” reaction to it. It seems important, however to summarize Butler’s critique here, in conjunction with my contention that there was a particular efflorescence in discourse of feminist engagement with Kristeva’s abject, as it relates to the social action potential of deploying the grotesque/monstrous/abject

For example, Grosz acknowledges that her focus on the body (which cites Kristeva at crucial points) is likely to be seen as problematic by: “some feminists...[who]worry about the perilous closeness” of the material covered in *Volatile Bodies* “to those facets of patriarchal thought that have in the past served to oppress women, most notably...” both the view of the female body as monstrously abject, as well as the opposite construction which alleges the female body’s “...fragility, unreliability, or biological closeness to nature...”⁴⁸⁵ and the resulting relegation of women to subordination in the relation between the sexes.

female body in cultural production. Butler argues that Kristeva undermines her own contention that the “maternal” is subversive because it is prelinguistic, existing inside the Patriarchal law as a pre-discursive progenitor of “poetic language” that has the potential of continuously subverting Patriarchal Law from within. This undermining happens, according to Butler, because Kristeva’s theory reinforces the notion of Patriarchal Law as unchanging, and the Maternal as always already “existing” within that Law as a subversive possibility. This, she argues, reinforces the binarity of the Maternal as always a preverbal, pre-discursive, inchoate, libidinal presence, and the Patriarchal as always (using Grosz’ language, see above) “impermeable, closed, phallicized.” Butler calls instead for a notion of the gendered body as completely constructed because we must “take into account the full complexity and subtlety of the law and cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body beyond the law...subversion is possible ...when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself.” (See *Gender Trouble*, 83). Butler, therefore sees the Maternal as not separate, but a fully cultural and discursive construction of Patriarchal Law, but a mutable and ever-changing construction. I am indebted to Jon-Ove Steihaug’s excellent presentation of Butler’s critique of Kristeva. See Jon-Ove Steihaug, “Abject, *Informe*, Trauma: Differences of Interpretation,” in *Abject/Informe/Trauma: Discourses on the Body in American Art of the 1990s*, (Oslo, Norway: FOR ART (Institute for Research Within International Art), 1998), n.p. Also at <http://www/forart.no/steihaug/toc.html>.

⁴⁸⁵ Grosz, *ibid.*, xiv. Grosz has long contested what she considers to be the flattening notion of essentialism in feminist theory. In *Volatile Bodies* she defines essentialism as “the postulation of a fixed essence, unchanged historically or culturally.” (see *ibid.*, 212, note 15). She also makes the very intriguing point that constructionism (often cast, pejoratively, as excessively relativist) cannot be put forward unproblematically as the antidote for the rigidities, and hence imprecision, of essentialism. Grosz proposes that setting the one against the other is a “false opposition,” since “constructionism is inherently reliant on essentialism, for it needs to make explicit what are the raw materials of its processes of construction and these cannot themselves be constructed without the assumption of an infinite regress. The building blocks or raw materials must in some sense be essentialist. In short, constructionism ultimately implies and relies on essentialism.” (see *ibid.*, 213 note 20). For a more complete exegesis of Grosz’ views on the difficulties of the binary opposition of constructionism to essentialism, see: Elizabeth Grosz, “A Note on Essentialism and Difference,” in Sneja Gunew, ed., *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*. (London/New York:Routledge, 1990). See also Cornelia Klinger, “Essentialism, Universalism, and Feminist Politics,” *Constellations* 5:3, (1998): 332-344, for a particularly lucid later account of the issues, in which Klinger cites Grosz as the purveyor of one of the most nuanced contributions to the essentialism debates. Particularly helpful in Klinger’s account is her distinction between universalism and essentialism, concepts

Mary Russo sees the “essentialism” accusations, so omnipresent in the evolving discourse on the appropriateness of focus on the female body in representation, as more ominous than does Grosz. Russo notes that the alarms on the dangers of essentialism—sounded by certain feminist theorists during the 1980s—had not ceased reverberating, as of the writing of her book in the mid-nineties; and, “have been so well stated...that ‘anti-essentialism’ may well be the greatest inhibition to work in cultural theory and politics at the moment and must be displaced.”⁴⁸⁶ She argues that the deployment, in various forms of representation, of “hyperboles of...carnival” and the foregrounding of the monstrous/object/grotesque female body in feminist discourse, can move toward such a displacement, precisely because doing so accomplishes “at least [a] ... preliminary ‘acting out’” of the essentialist/anti-essentialist problematic in feminist theorizing that may point away from the dominance of “...[the] concept of the feminine as, at base, ‘lack.’”⁴⁸⁷

Creed’s reaction to the feminist essentialism debates is more oblique than the other two. Though she does not address it directly, it is clear that she feels its noise cannot be ignored. She reemphasizes, in nearly every chapter of her book, that—in her focus on the monstrous feminine—she does not intend to “essentialize” women. This continual denial of essentialism may have seemed necessary to Creed because, of all three theorists, she is the one that gives over most space in her text to application of Kristeva’s ideas about abjection. Typical of Creed’s repetitive denials of essentializing is this observation, in the

that are often conflated, and especially her notion of a “differential universalism.” See Klinger’s discussion of this at *ibid.*, 341-342.

⁴⁸⁶ Russo, *ibid.*

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 198, note 20.

concluding pages of her book: "...I am not arguing that woman is essentially abject," she avers. Rather, she seeks to illuminate "the signifying practices of patriarchal ideology..." through focused attention on the monstrous female body, because "...woman's abjectification is crucial to the functioning of the patriarchal order..."

Focusing on how this construction is accomplished in the horror film genre is, for Creed, "an aesthetic and ideological journey" which includes "questioning a number of [masculinist and feminist] psychoanalytic theories which inform current debates...on the representation of sexual difference."⁴⁸⁸ But, if Creed denies that the iconography of the monstrous feminine she takes such pains to set out in graphic detail, is but a way to see more clearly the workings of dominance and masculinist power; she also leaves the door open for the potential of this imagery to have a more directly activist role in challenging this same dominance and masculinist power.

In the last paragraph of her book Creed evokes Perseus, Medusa and Athena, noting that Perseus did not destroy Medusa's powers of horror when he beheaded her. This was because Athena appropriated and placed the image of Medusa on her shield "to strike terror into the hearts of men" and to remind them of the presence of the mother in the symbolic, as well as to give honor to the Medusa, also known as Metis, the mythical goddess of wisdom, and Athena's own mother.

* * * * *

In summary, this chapter demonstrates that, in feminist theoretical contributions to the discourse on the abject/monstrous/grotesque, appearing at the same time as key deployments in art of these thematics and iconography, it becomes even more evident of how closely they can be seen to interact with widely ranging cultural structures and

⁴⁸⁸ Creed, *ibid.* 166.

entities. In fact, the three theorists discussed in this chapter show that, far from receding from view under aggressive attack from the right wing, abjection, monstrosity and grotesquerie related to the body gained an even higher profile as the era moved closer to the end of the nineties.

Chapter 7: The “Formless” and the “Real,” in the Nineties: Antidotes to the Abject/Monstrous/Grotesque?

In Chapter 7, reactions from the high criticism arena in the later nineties to the more and more assertive presence in art of the abject/monstrous/grotesque will be addressed. As discussed in the preceding chapters of this part of the dissertation, there was an increasingly high profile in cultural production over this period. Not only was the higher visibility of these thematics appropriated by the political right wing for their own devices, but also this imagery provoked more and more ambivalent (and outright hostile) responses from popular mass media and the high criticism arena alike. Emblematic specifically of this turn in discourse in the high critical arena were three key events: the 1994 “Signifier II” conversation in the journal *October*, and the appearance, in 1996 and 1997, of Rosalind Krauss’ and Hal Foster’s polemical offerings to high theory: the *informe* and the *real*.

A Conversation on the Abject and the *Informe*

October magazine’s commentators first vigorously took on the abject/monstrous/grotesque emphasis in art and discourse of the late eighties-early nineties, in the Winter, 1994 edition: a round table conversation between Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier and Helen Molesworth.⁴⁸⁹ Though the *Abject Art* show is not mentioned in the *October* piece, it is probably not an accident that this “conversation” addressed so many of *Abject Art*’s premises as articulated in the catalog introduction. As we have seen in Chapter 4’s spotlighting of the abject/monstrous/grotesque in key exhibitions from 1990-1995, and, in

⁴⁸⁹ “The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the *Informe* and the Abject.” *October* *ibid*.

Chapter 5, the close attention to the thematics of the aesthetic in key feminist theory locations, the profile of the abject/monstrous/grotesque was definitely not receding. Alarm over this phenomenon is palpable in the *October* piece, especially from Rosalind Krauss' side.

Though *Abject Art* was only the tip of the abject/monstrous/grotesque invasion of the mainstream during the first half of the nineties, the *October* "conversation" was perhaps quite specifically organized and published in reaction to two references in *Abject Art*'s introduction: to Krauss' book *The Optical Unconscious* (an *October* book), in which the *Abject Art* curators contend that Krauss makes a connection between Bataille's writings and the alleged references in Jackson Pollock's field paintings to the artist's habits of urinating in public; and to Molesworth's view (published in the Winter 1993 issue of *October*) that Rauschenberg's "black" and "dirt" paintings of the early fifties could be seen as "radically insert[ing] the lower body into art..."⁴⁹⁰

The importance of the *October* roundtable discussion for this dissertation is twofold. First, it occurred close to the 1993 nodal point, when three nearly simultaneous exhibitions at the Whitney Museum took up the abject/monstrous/grotesque aesthetic, which was being continuously exploited by the right wing in both cultural and electoral politics at the time. Second, *October* had increasingly become, since at least the early to

⁴⁹⁰ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), as cited in *Abject Art*, *ibid.*, 15, note 4; and Helen Molesworth, "Before Bed," *October* 63 (Winter 1993): 81, also cited in *Abject Art*, *ibid.*, 15, note 5. In the *October* conversation on "The Politics of the Signifier II" Krauss denies she ever specifically connected Pollock's urinary habits with his field paintings.

mid eighties, *the* site for high art criticism, and as such, *the* location to watch, especially for any naysaying about contemporary art practice.

October published not one, but two round tables⁴⁹¹ dissecting, from a high criticism perspective, what was occurring at the Whitney in 1993. This was predictable, given the close connection of *October* (via Foster, then Buchloh) to the Whitney, and significant, given the increasing calls from right and left that something had to be done to “save art” from the abject/monstrous/grotesque aesthetic. And no group was more passionately engaged, in the high criticism arena, in defending what they considered effectively transgressive in art than the *October* group.

Another important reason why the roundtable on “The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the *Informe* and the Abject” particularly stands out in retrospect as crucial, is that two of the key articulators in “Signifier II,” Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss, had at that point begun to work on very important contributions to the discourse on the abject/monstrous/grotesque in the high criticism realm.

Krauss’ contribution was with her Paris exhibition *L’informe: Mode d’emploi* and the catalog published in English as *Formless: A User’s Guide*, both appearing in 1996. The exhibition and the book were developed and produced in collaboration with another key *October* contributor, and member of the “Signifier II” roundtable, Yve-Alain Bois. Hal Foster’s contribution was *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*⁴⁹² published in 1997.

⁴⁹¹ The first was “The Politics of the Signifier I: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial,” *October*, (Fall 1993): 3-27.

⁴⁹² The exhibition, *L’Informe: Mode d’emploi* (May 21-August 26, 1996) at the Centre Pompidou, Musée Nationale d’Art Moderne, Paris. It did not travel. The catalog was published in French as *L’Informe: Mode d’emploi*. (exh. cat.) (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1996). The English version (used for this dissertation) is: Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide*, (New York: ZONE

Krauss led off the “Signifier II” discussion by asserting that the conflation of Kristeva’s abject and Bataille’s *informe* (here she could be referring to the *Abject Art* catalog, among other examples, though she is not specific) was incorrect and must be remedied. She vigorously denounced Julia Kristeva’s focus on the abject as completely contrary to Bataille’s theorization of the “*informe*” which, Krauss argues, is “operational” and remains open in meaning to “situational change.” Krauss objects to “art that evokes abjection” in such a (Kristevan) way that the “formerly disprivileged becomes the privileged,” a move she sees as a “childish...return to the referent” (e.g., playing with and celebration of bodily fluids and excrement) and “one Bataille’s notion of the formless would not support.”⁴⁹³ For Kraus, the *informe* is superior to the abject because it does not freeze meaning, but emphasizes process. This idea of the *informe* as a task performed, a function accomplished, a linking, is underscored by Krauss as central to Bataille’s notion of the concept:

I take the *informe* to be structural...the word coins the notion of a job, a process, it is not merely a way to characterize bodily substances so that the formerly disprivileged becomes the privileged...⁴⁹⁴

It is of particular interest that two participants in this roundtable, Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster, were the most combatively antagonistic to Krauss’ positions. Though this was not made explicit in the course of the roundtable discussion, both had been

Books, 1997). Citation for Foster: Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). See below (Chapter 7) for my discussion of these texts.

⁴⁹³ “Signifier II” *ibid.*, 3-4. The reference here is to Bataille’s invocation of “spit” in his definition of “formless:” “...formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning...what it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm...affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.” See Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stockl. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, 31. As quoted in Krauss, *Formless*, *ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

associated with the Whitney in the eighties and nineties, and may have been defending their involvement. Benjamin Buchloh, long a member of *October's* inner circle, was intimately involved with the creation of *Abject Art* in his role at the Whitney's Independent Study program as director of curatorial and critical studies. Hal Foster immediately preceded Buchloh in this same job at the Whitney ISP, where he had been since the eighties, corresponding roughly with the time period in which he had brought together the *October* coterie in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, one of the first U.S. efforts to articulate a progressive postmodernism.⁴⁹⁵

Benjamin Buchloh counters Krauss by referring to an evocative example from Bataille himself: spitting in the soup.⁴⁹⁶ Buchloh, helped along by Denis Hollier, uses this analogy to argue for a different way to see both the abject and the *informe*, in which there is no need to oppose them to each other, but rather to see the *informe* as operating both “bodily and [in the] social,” by focusing on “situating the rupture.” What is ruptured being, of course, in his example, the social convention of “not spitting in the soup,” a convention that is transgressed when the soup is spat in. In other words, “There’s the body [which spits] and there’s the soup—the two have to be connected in order to make the *informe*.”⁴⁹⁷

Denis Hollier then takes the discussion toward its finish, and supporting Krauss’ position as well, by emphasizing the *informe's* connection to performance, to gesture, and

⁴⁹⁵ As addressed in Part 2 of this dissertation.

⁴⁹⁶ “Signifier II,” *ibid.* 18-19 for the discussion on “spitting in the soup.” Actually, Bois first introduces the idea, which Buchloh then elaborates. Bois: “. . .the referent in Bataille has a transgressive function. The problem with abjection is that the referent is given as an origin. In Bataille it is more like a *crachat dans la soupe*. It always has a situational quality.” Buchloh: “Your example of spitting in the soup is exact: the *informe* is both bodily and social. It’s breaking rules, rupturing conventions, *and* situating the rupture. There’s the body and the soup—the two have to be connected in order to make the *informe*.”

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

to the pragmatic, potentially public processes that can be described and displayed. This, he argues, is in contrast to the abject which can never be “put on display” or “told,” because language is ineradicably metaphorical. For Hollier, the abject is completely anti-metaphorical because it cannot be substituted, it is beyond language: “When you die you die, you can’t have a substitute...it is the subject that is abject.”⁴⁹⁸ He notes, by way of example, that, in viewing the *Abject Art* show, he was more convinced than ever that “the abject cannot be told...or shown” because nothing was really abject in the show: “What was abject about it? Everything was very neat; the objects were clearly art works...very different from Bataille’s dark obsession with the abjection of the defeated...”⁴⁹⁹ For Hollier, the *Abject Art* show, and the strong visibility of and fascination with the abject do not evoke defeat, but victory. And this was the victory of the institution over the attempt to “dirty” it.

The discussion ends with the notion that the museum and the academy are the victors in the contemporaneous fascination with abjection, because by seeking to display the undisplayable inside the “clean” museum, and describe its parameters via academic theorizing, the abject effect slips away, while the attempt is absorbed, thereby denying the shock intended by its attempted deployment. Helen Molesworth concludes the discussion on a note of resignation that “We know that all cultural production is equally and ultimately available” for recuperation by institutions like the museum and the academy, and so, “the best that can be hoped for is that ...work,” that seeks to make the

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

abject or *informe* visible/concrete, “might point to some transgressive place of practice—in a way that might, however momentarily, disturb the status quo.”⁵⁰⁰

Krauss (and Foster) sought to move beyond the resignation expressed by Molesworth, by elaborating their counterpoint on abject/monstrous/grotesque imagery: Krauss (with collaborator Yve-Alain Bois) in her *L’Informe: Mode d’Emploi* exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris, and the catalog/book in English, *Formless: A User’s Guide*,⁵⁰¹ and Foster in his *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*.

Rosalind Krauss

It is precisely *against* the foregrounding of the (Kristevan) “abject” as a progressive cultural transformation tool that Rosalind Krauss argues, both in the *October* roundtable discussion, “The Politics of the Signifier II,” published in 1994; and in the 1997 book *Formless: A User’s Guide*, which she co-authored with Yves-Alain Bois. Krauss’ expenditure of such significant intellectual capital to advocate *against* Kristeva’s abject, and *for* Bataille’s “formless” (as decidedly *separate* from and completely un-analogous to the abject), is remarkable both in its duration and intensity; and is evidence of the crucial importance of the turn toward the monstrous/grotesque/abject in cultural production of the period.

Krauss states in her introduction to *Formless...* that the move to champion Bataille’s concept of the *informe* germinated for her in the early eighties. She became increasingly

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁰¹ Krauss identifies the role of the exhibition as supportive to the book, a reversal of what is usually the case. In the preface to *Formless...* Krauss thanks the president and director of cultural development of the Centre Pompidou “For having asked us to make this ‘book,’ and the exhibition that supported it. ...the ‘argument’ concerning formlessness—its history and its destiny—is not tied to an exhibition, however exhilarating.” See *ibid.*, 10. I emphasize Krauss here (though Yve-Alain Bois was her collaborator in *Formless...* and was one of the participants in the *October* roundtable) because I believe her perspective and Foster’s are the key counterpoints that particularly stand out at this conjunction in the “high criticism” aspect of the trajectory of the thematic of the abject/monstrous/grotesque in art.

convinced that this was necessary as time went by, because of the persistence of debates over form and content in art. Krauss judged these debates as “...increasingly useless—even as they had become increasingly contentious...”⁵⁰²

The high profile, culminating in 1993-1994, of the exhibition and discussion of art that the abject/monstrous/grotesque—and especially those works that connected this aesthetic directly to the body—was seen as negative by Krauss because it emphasized the marking of the sexualized body as *referent* of the metaphoricity of the abject/monstrous/grotesque. For Krauss, this “metaphorizing” constituted the freezing/hardening of meaning, when, in her view, what was needed, in order to continue to challenge ossification in cultural production, was to keep meaning fluid. This focus on keeping things fluid—breaking up “frozen forms”—is consistent with the (by this time, in the later nineties, twenty-year long) project of Krauss and her other *October* colleagues (discussed in Part 2) as key to the left version of postmodern cultural resistance

In *Formless...*, after citing numerous recent examples of “American and English ‘abject art’...and its emphasis on ...sexual organs...all bodily orifices and their secretions...urinal related art and fecal imagery...”⁵⁰³ Krauss states that, because of this plethora, it had become imperative “to be explicit on ...abjection and to state why and in what way it must be differentiated in the strongest possible terms from the project of the *formless*.”⁵⁰⁴

Krauss proposes that the mobilization of the abject, in art discourse, is unproductive because it *limits* by specifying *particular* substances and thematics, it limits the play of

⁵⁰² Bois and Krauss, “Preface,” *ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁰³ Krauss, “The Destiny of the *Informe*,” in Bois and Krauss, *ibid.*, 236.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

meaning(s) in works of art. For Krauss, a more productive endeavor, one she sees as opening rather than closing down meaning, is a mobilization in art of the Bataillean notion of the *formless*, which she claims (contrary to the alleged effect of the abject) is *operative*: emphasizing the *job* to be done.

Krauss sees the “abject,” as “thoroughly indentured” and in “servitude” to “semantic...thematics” that privilege scatology, or the “untouchably low.” In contrast, she argues, Bataille’s “formless,” while similar to the abject in that it is “waste,” is not limited to the lowest of the low; but, rather, is that which remains “outside” when attempts are made to generalize a “norm/ideal.” She uses an example from an essay by Bataille to explain:

If one photographs [and superimposes] a large number of similarly sized but differently shaped pebbles, it is impossible to obtain anything other than a sphere: in other words a geometric figure...If the making of the average produces the ‘ideal’ it must generate its own waste...For each individual form escapes this common measure and is, to a certain degree a monster...”⁵⁰⁵

The “monster” of formlessness resulting from the “heterogeneous waste” produced in the attempt to construct the ideal/average is, Krauss argues, again invoking Bataille, a “heterogeneous product” of this operation. Krauss notes that though this “heterology” can include “... *scatology*...or what is untouchably low” it also casts out (or distinguishes from the normal) the highest of the high. Krauss refers to Bataille:

...if the lowest parts of society have become untouchable (abject)...the very summit of that same society is also ... untouchable...kings and popes are precipitated out of the top of the homogeneous structure...Sovereignty and the sacred are thus also the unassimilable forms of heterogeneity that the homogeneous forces of equivalence and representation must create...the two ends of the spectrum...brought around to meet

⁵⁰⁵ Georges Bataille, “The Deviations of Nature.” *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol.1, 228-230. As noted in Krauss, *ibid.*, n. 38.

each other in a circle that short-circuits the system of rules and regulated oppositions.⁵⁰⁶

Krauss argues that the Bataillean formless, because it encompasses a much wider field, is a more flexible and open-ended conceptual framework than the abject, within which to consider cultural production, and especially its transgressiveness. The argument she makes to support this claim revolves around *operation* and the *operative*.

Krauss glosses what Bataille calls the “operative” as neither form nor content, “neither ...theme...nor ...substance nor...concept...” but something more mobile, more in the arena of “slippage;” something that is the “very opposite of form and content.” This *operative slippage* “insults...uproots...disappoints expectation” and splits off from modernism.⁵⁰⁷ And, for Krauss, it is in the *mobility* of this operative slippage that one finds true transgressiveness, as contrasted with what she sees as the turgid and regressive fixity of *reference* that characterizes the abject. Krauss is interested in *how* rather than *what* becomes constituted (and denied) as meaning. The emphasis for her is on the signifier and its workings.

Though abject corporeality in art is denigrated in *Formless* as too referential, corporeality is not rejected out of hand. But, as Bois states in the book’s introduction, the corporeality he and Krauss do address excludes certain bodily products. These are,

⁵⁰⁶ Krauss’ gloss is on this passage from Bataille: “...the intellectual process automatically limits itself...by producing of its own accord its own waste products, thus liberating in a disordered way the heterogeneous excremental element. Heterology is restricted to taking up again, consciously and resolutely, this terminal process which up until now has been seen as the abortion and the shame of human thought.” Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, *ibid.*, 97, as quoted in Krauss, *ibid.* 246.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 15-16. The discussion at this point in the *Formless* text foregrounds two works of the same name, created nearly 100 years apart: Manet’s *Olympia* (1867) and Jean Dubuffet’s *Olympia* (1950), noting that in each painting, a woman’s body has been rendered “formless.” Regarding Manet’s courtesan, Krauss asks us to recall that “critics of the time characterized *Olympia*’s body—which some likened to a rotting corpse—as ‘formless.’” And regarding the Dubuffet work of the same name, “Perhaps Bataille knew Jean Dubuffet’s *Olympia* ...flattened like a pancake, slid under a steamroller, perhaps this painting gave him the idea of slippage (a slide toward lowness, of course).”

significantly, the very ones that have been placed at so thoroughly a central point in the theories discussed earlier in this part of the dissertation. Body products specifically unaddressed by Bois and Krauss are those which have—as Elizabeth Grosz argues—“...polluting powers...” and are “...particularly significant [in an] era where sexuality has become reinvested with notions of contagion and death...as a consequence of the AIDS crisis...”⁵⁰⁸ As Bois notes in the introduction, for example:

...*Artist's Shit* (1961) by Piero Manzoni was absent from the section devoted to “base materialism,” since the risk was too great that, despite ourselves, we would end up promoting a fetishization of excrement...similarly, the fashion of the last few years for the ‘abject’ in art (bodily fluids and other objects of disgust) was ignored...[though] contemporary practice was represented [in the exhibition] by ...work[s] that seemed to us to exceed the thematic horizon within which abjection is enclosed at present...

To demonstrate the eschewal of fetishization in *Formless*, and denial of the “fashion” of abjection in art, Bois notes that certain works by certain artists hailed by other critics as exemplary of the abject in art—namely, those by Mike Kelley (Figure 34) and Cindy Sherman—were included, in the *Formless* exhibition,⁵⁰⁹ as a way to show how these works could be re-categorized within the theoretical framework of the *informe* (Kelley was represented by one of his floor pieces, in the exhibition’s section devoted to

⁵⁰⁸ Grosz, *ibid.* Helen Molesworth, significantly, raises the specter of AIDS in conjunction with the reference in art to “polluting” bodily fluids as abject, in the *October* roundtable: “The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the *Informe* and the Abject.” *Ibid.*, 15, 16: “...the notion of what is abject now and where the boundaries lie are very different from what they once were...there is a real stake...I don’t think blood can be seen now without the valence of HIV. The fact that blood, sperm, and anality are the most charged terms now has to be understood in relation to HIV...”

⁵⁰⁹ This is one of the few references in the book to how the exhibition was actually constructed and installed.

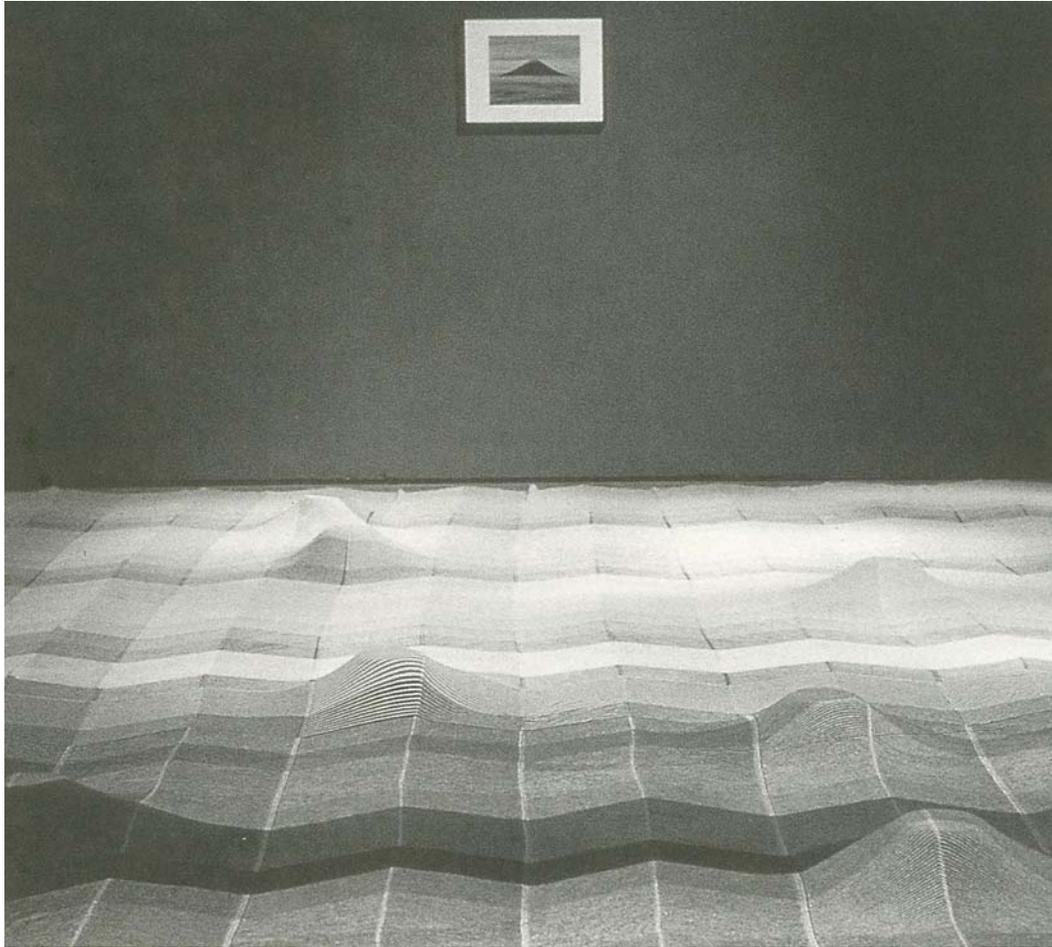


Figure 34. Mike Kelley. *Riddle of the Sphinx*. String, found objects and color photograph. 1971. In Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss. *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York: Zone Books, 1997, 249.

“Horizontal,” and Cindy Sherman by her “mildew” photos in the section on “Base Materialism”) as exceeding the abject.⁵¹⁰

Since one of Krauss and Bois’ intentions with both the *Formless* book, and the exhibition, was to provide examples of artists who they believed best mobilized the Bataillean *informe*; and, since the discourse of the monstrous/grotesque/abject as signified—seen by Krauss as incapable of combating “frozen meaning”—is thoroughly imbricated with gender, it is of particular interest to note the disproportionate attention to male artists in the book, as well as which female artists are given significant space in the text.⁵¹¹ The proportion of male and female artists in *Formless* is also important to foreground because of the disapproving tone of Krauss’ comments on the *Abject Art* show at the Whitney (and other efflorescences of the abject in art in the early to mid-nineties). The positioning of Cindy Sherman’s work, within Krauss’ “formless” theoretical apparatus, and especially how corporeality and “operative” formlessness are

⁵¹⁰ See Yves-Alain Dubois, “Introduction: The Use Value of the *Informe*,” in *ibid.*, 26-38. Bois outlines the four “operations” of the *informe* as: 1) **Horizontality**: involving the “lowering from the vertical to the horizontal, or ‘horizontalization’” best seen in Jackson Pollock’s work which “took form through a combination of gesture and gravity” and was underscored as important through elaboration by “Morris, Warhol, the Gutai group to name a few.” 2) **Base Materialism** as “what cuts all discussion short,” not “matter” as conceived by materialists that Bataille rejected as “dead” and “idealist.” Along with horizontality, base materialism “contradicts the myth of human erectness and ‘pure visuality.’” 3) **Pulse** which contradicts the modernist emphasis on “time and movement solely as narrative and directed toward an ending” in favor of an endless beat that interrupts “pure visuality and...the carnal...”; And 4) **Entropy** as the inevitable and effective rot and decomposition of everything (they cite Robert Smithson as primary practitioner. Followers include Matta-Clark, Nauman, Oldenburg, Dubuffet).

⁵¹¹ The book is not an exhibition catalog (it contains no listing of the works in the exhibition); so it is not possible to ascertain, from the book itself, what actual works referred to and illustrated were actually in the exhibition in Paris. Nevertheless the preponderance of male artists in the book itself is quite striking, a proportion of well over 5 to 1. Only ten women artists appear in the index, and not all of these were discussed, nor had reproductions of their works included. The women artists mentioned in the book are: Louise Bourgeois, Helen Chadwick, Lygia Clark, Eva Hesse, Katarzyna Kobro, Yoko Ono, Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, Nancy Spero and Sue Williams. Of the male artists, 31 had reproductions of work in the book. Of the women only two did (Sherman and Clark).

deployed, is particularly revealing because Sherman is one of only two women artists Krauss addresses at any length.⁵¹²

Sherman's mildew pictures (apparently in the exhibition) are not touched upon in the *Formless* book, except in this very limited reference. But, in a longer passage Krauss seems to position Sherman's work as a whole as exemplary of *horizontality*, one of the four "operations" she and Bois claim exceed the notion of abjection, and constitute the "formless" challenge to the foundational myths of Modernism. Krauss' preference for considering body at arm's length, as indexical, is key to deciphering her use of Sherman as an exemplar.

While—as discussed earlier in this part—other critics have focused on the viscosity of reception of Sherman's bodily references (and these references are definitely not oblique), Krauss insists that Sherman's work must be read several analytical registers removed from any direct evocation of carnality. Krauss insists that Sherman must be considered in the context, rather, of an historical shift from vertical to horizontal that she claims can be demonstrated by the "operational power of the *informe* within the

⁵¹² Ibid., 236. The listing on page 236 is of artists featured in a 1995 Centre Pompidou exhibition entitled *femininmasculin* which went up at almost the same time as the *Formless...* show. This listing of artists utilizing the abject was necessary Krauss argues, because some of them were also in *Formless*; and since *Formless* was conceived as an *anti-abjection* intervention, the inclusion of artists in both exhibitions created an urgent need to differentiate "in the strongest possible terms" why and in what ways "abjection... must be differentiated from the project of the *formless*...." The only artist listed by Krauss whose work was of the "abject" persuasion, and was in both the *femininmasculin* and the *Formless* exhibitions, was Mike Kelley. The entire list of artists in both exhibitions: Marcel Duchamp, Jean Fautrier, Cy Twombly, Claes Oldenburg, Mike Kelley, Robert Morris, Giacometti, Man Ray and Eva Hesse. Both exhibitions included exactly the same art works by the last three artists. The male artists in *femininmasculin*, and who were "associated with American and English 'abject art'" include: Robert Gober, Mike Kelley and Gilbert and George. Five of the ten women artists (Louise Bourgeois, Helen Chadwick, Kiki Smith, Nancy Spero and Sue Williams) mentioned in *Formless...* appear only in a listing on page 236 in the concluding section of the book. None of them is discussed, and none had images of their work included. Krauss lists these women artists among *femininmasculin*'s "heavy complement of artists associated with American and English 'abject art'..."

American avant-garde for over three decades...⁵¹³ This is because, as Krauss sees it, Sherman's "rotation of the image out of the axis of the vertical and onto the horizontal of the *informe*..." refers back to Jackson Pollock's (germinal) horizontal creative process.

For Krauss, this articulation by Sherman of a shift from vertical to horizontal, counteracts what, in the realm of film (to which Sherman refers in almost all her work), has become the predominance of verticality in the phallic fetishization of the female body as simultaneously "proof of sexual difference and ...site of its denial...the woman's body, frozen and 'rephallicized' through [the] reassuring form..." of cinema. Thus, for Krauss, Sherman's "transgressiveness" does not come from its aggressive mobilization of the *signified*—the obscene and abject monstrous body as "content"—but from the *signifier*—(as point of view: the photographs she refers to, but not all of Sherman's images by far, view the subject from above) Krauss' focus is on how the effect of the image was achieved, rather than what its message is.

Of course, not counting Krauss' complete dismissal of the shocking content of Sherman's images—and the strong irony that such shock can be evoked by images that are so obviously fake and constructed—a major problem with this analysis, which Krauss continues to pursue in the book's conclusion, is that not all Sherman's images rotate the image from vertical to horizontal.⁵¹⁴ This selectivity of perspective from Krauss seems,

⁵¹³ Krauss, "Horizontal/Isotropy" in *ibid.*, 102-103.

⁵¹⁴ This irony has seemed to some commentators on Sherman as one of the major "points" of her work overall, as has its aggressive engagement with reception. See especially Amelia Jones' assessment of Sherman as productive of a "new eye...one that embraces rather than penetrates, one that offers the possibility of new subjects of vision..." Amelia Jones, "Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman" in *Cindy Sherman Retrospective*, *ibid.*, 33-49. On Sherman's use of photography in postmodernist engagement with "constructedness" and simulation, see: Douglas Crimp, "Pictures." In *Art After Modernism*, *ibid.* Rosalind Krauss' *Cindy Sherman, 1975-1993* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993) and Sachiko Osaki, "Cindy Sherman's *History Portraits*, in *Cindy Sherman*, (exh. cat.) (Shiga, Japan: Museum of Modern Art, Shiga, 1996). As cited in Jones, *ibid.*, n. 1, 50.

quite contrary to her purpose, to leave wide open the possibility that, far from successfully debunking the abject—ex(orcising) it, or subsuming it to the *informe*—Krauss’ argument has the ultimate effect of underscoring abjection’s unassimilability, something she forcefully asserts as the key property of the *informe* and that which distinguishes it from the abject.

Perspectives on Krauss/Bois

Reactions to the *Informe/Formless* exhibition and book were considerably less enthusiastic than the flood of high-spirited commentary on the four *Bad Girl* exhibitions that represented only a fraction of the interest in and involvement with the abject/monstrous/grotesque in art around 1993-1994. There are three particularly well-argued examples of this less than enthusiastic response to *Formless* with which I will end this discussion of the *Informe/Formless* project.

Ben Highmore’s, perspective, published in the British journal *Art History*, is the most accusatory of the three.⁵¹⁵ Highmore portrays Bois and Krauss as former “young turks” of high art criticism who had taken a wrong turn with the *Formless* project, transforming themselves through it from gadflies into mavens of the art criticism establishment. For Highmore, the effect of the *Formless* project was *not* to undermine—but to consolidate and strengthen—the modernist canon against what was being touted and presented as “truly transgressive” (the abject/monstrous/grotesque in art of the eighties and nineties).

Highmore argues that, though Krauss and Bois lament the increasingly ubiquitous tendency toward the abject/monstrous/grotesque in contemporary art as false transgressiveness—a negatively “extra-artistic...threat of socially thematic reference”—

⁵¹⁵ Ben Highmore, “Spiders, Spit and Frock Coats.” *Art History* 22:1 (1999): 139.

they are unable to keep the “extra-artistic” (one way of describing the “thematic” abject) out of their *Formless* project. Also, Highmore notes that, even though Bois and Krauss expend strenuous effort to keep the focus in their book/exhibition on “heterogeneous” waste (the *formless*), their own effort is decidedly *neither* heterogeneous, *nor* “formless,” but a “clean machine”⁵¹⁶: the antithesis of Bataille’s base materialism.

Highmore argues that Bois and Krauss’ true intent for *Formless* is revealed in this quotation from Bois: “We seek to redeal modernism’s cards—not bury it” so that “certain works will no longer be read as they were before.”⁵¹⁷ Bois and Krauss are not seeking to bring down the canons of modernism, on the contrary. As Hightower comments wryly: redealing cards is not exactly the same as swapping cards “for a ... flamethrower.”⁵¹⁸ In essence, Hightower appears, from this reference to “flamethrowers,” to be of the opinion that it is not possible, as Krauss and Bois argue, for the *informe*’s powers of putrefaction to “rot” the dominant order from within, operating as a kind of fungal infestation of the very rules and tools of the dominant order. Highmore concludes that, if Krauss and Bois are seeking to recontextualize—through their theoretical acrobatics—their selections of modernist works as *informe* and therefore “transgressive,” they have not succeeded.

Norwegian art critic Jon-Ove Steihaug’s approach to the “*informe*/abject” debates — in his admirably thorough *Abject/Informes/Trauma: Discourses on the Body in American*

⁵¹⁶ Krauss herself used this term in response to Hal Foster’s accusation that what Krauss and Bois were up to in their “redeal the cards of modernism” was to collaborate on a story (Foster) “that feels almost as claustrophobic, as hermetic, as the old narrative. Only now, rather than a heroic history of form-givers, we have a heroic history of form-*undoers*.” And in response, (Krauss) “You’re saying that we’re cleaning it up, making it a clean machine.” See Signifier II, *ibid.*, 12.

⁵¹⁷ Yve-Alain Bois, “Introduction: The Use Value of ‘Formless.’” Bois and Krauss, *ibid.*, 21.

⁵¹⁸ Highmore, *ibid.*, 139.

Art of the 1990s— is far more even-handed.⁵¹⁹ Unlike Highmore, Steihaug avoids personal ad hominem in favor of minute dissection/explication of the arguments. Though Steihaug’s treatment may seem blandly non-committal, its close attention to detail—and to bringing forward, in a comprehensive fashion, the key elements in the debates—has the ultimate (seemingly contradictory) effect of both underscoring the importance of, and blunting, what Krauss and Bois clearly intended as a sharp instrument.

Steihaug’s study provides a very detailed and insightful exegesis of the Krauss/Bois endeavor, contrasting it helpfully with Kristeva (and critiques of Kristeva) as well as with Hal Foster’s assertive “third way” counter-theory of the “traumatic real.”⁵²⁰ Steihaug’s key contribution to the *abject/informe* discourse lies not in the spinning out of new perspectives—nor in posing yet another polemic judgment; but, rather, in his collection all in one place—and his skillful glossing—of a wide range of theories on the *abject/informe* in art, as well as his thorough setting out of the intersection of these various theoretical perspectives.⁵²¹ Nonetheless, the open-endedness, take-no-position-

⁵¹⁹ Jon-Ove Steihaug, *Abject/Informe/Trauma...*, *ibid.* Steihaug’s study is a very clear, concise and insightful summary of the individual theories, especially of Krauss and Foster, but also of Kristeva and her major critics. He skillfully reveals their intersections, and what he terms the polemics that both join and separate them, as well as providing a highly useful survey of the primary works of the key practitioners of *abject art* of the 1990s. Particularly outstanding is his “case study” of Cindy Sherman’s work, where he gracefully interlaces the theories of the *abject/informe/trauma* that are the main subjects of his paper. Steihaug avoids judgments, however, unlike Highmore and other critics of Krauss/Bois.

⁵²⁰ The “third way” was initially called for during the *October* round table, “The Politics of the Signifier II” (*ibid.*) by Benjamin Buchloh and Denis Hollier. Steihaug points out (in “*Abject, Informe, Trauma: Differences of Interpretation*,” *ibid.* n.p.) that, during the roundtable: “Benjamin Buchloh introduces ... a third term between the purely structural and operational on one side [Krauss’ position] and a return to the referent [“*abject art*” practitioners, Foster] on the other” with Denis Hollier backing him up by “stating that ‘abjection should be linked to the performative...there is...a pragmatics of abjection...’” Thus, Steihaug asserts, a third possibility was introduced via this interjection by Buchloh and Hollier: a “performative/operational” one that contrasts with the Kraussian “epistemological” and the more “naturalistic/referential/substantial” one to which Krauss and Bois object. Foster (see discussion below) seeks to position himself in this “third possibility.”

⁵²¹ Steihaug’s conclusion is even-handed (even bland) in the extreme. He concludes that “interpretive differences” between Krauss and those she criticizes (especially Kristeva), and those who criticize her

on-the-merits of his conclusion (or, rather, his non-conclusion) conjoined with the intense scrutiny and detail of his treatment of these passionately argued theses, suggests a certain ambivalence, which cannot be characterized as rejection, yet also is not outright partisan acceptance.

The third response to the *Formless* project is Christine Ross' feminist treatment of the performance of abjection in relation to the female body in art, presented originally as part of a panel on "The Abject in Art History" at the 1996 College Art Association conference in Boston.⁵²² In this essay, Ross leans decidedly away both from *ad hominem* and the non-committal in relation to the Krauss/Bois project. Instead, Ross argues that (contrary to Krauss/Bois' contentions) foregrounding of the abject body in art has a highly transgressive and activist effect in that it confounds traditional notions of aesthetic pleasure. For Ross, it is this aesthetic pleasure that is a persisting perpetuator of the dominance of masculinist hierarchy and canon-preservation in art arenas.

Ross directly objects to two primary aspects of the Krauss/Bois championing of the *informe* over the abject, focusing on their assertion that categorization itself must be

theories (e.g., especially Foster—see discussion on his ideas of the "traumatic real" below), are not easily settled, as all address highly complex problems "of reference and meaning, interpretation and transgression." Not taking sides, Steihaug assesses this passionate moment in the trajectory of the abject/monstrous/grotesque as "important markers of the meaning of the recent influx of the desublimated body in art."

⁵²² Ross' lecture for Koerner's CAA panel on the abject was reproduced, in changed form, as Christine Ross, "Redefinitions of Abjection in Contemporary Performances of the Female Body," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 31 (Spring 1997): 149-158. In his introduction to the issue of *Res* (entitled "The Abject") Editor Joseph Leo Koerner, who also chaired the 1996 CAA panel, opines that "...the abject in art is a trope of power...[which] persists in art history. It comes to light in moments of pessimism, when the illusions of apocalypse and revolution are lost..." (p. 8) This special issue of *Res* also featured the edited versions of the presentations by the other members of the CAA Panel, which treated, respectively, Renaissance tattoos, "gore-covered surfaces of humble pietàs" and African Komo masks whose surfaces "formed of sacrificial blood mixed with porridge indicate the fear and power of the female sex." A further edited version of the Ross article is included in Frances S. Connelly, ed., *Modern Art and the Grotesque*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003 (forthcoming). The essay as it appears in this new anthology has not been changed, therefore it does not include any reaction to the Foster "third way" of the "traumatic real."

undermined in the struggle against rigidified cultural forms. First, Ross argues that categorizations are unavoidable; and second, that categorization is not always regressive. The abject as category can be transgressive, she avers, when it succeeds "...in revealing how the identity of the viewer (and not only that of the represented body) is itself constructed through nominalist acts that never cease to abject the 'other.'"⁵²³

Ross goes on, in her essay, to propose, by specific references to women artists who perform the abject female body (Mona Hatoum, Céline Baril, Kiki Smith and Jo Spence), that the abject as *categorizing* force can instigate ambivalence in the viewer, and thus destabilize some of the categories used to construct identities (presumably those that harden into stereotypes). Ross claims that this is done by materializing for viewers of abject art multiple and "unpredictable forms of pleasure" that have the effect of disrupting the kind of pleasure in the visible that helps keep the viewer "distanced" and "disinterested." The disruption of this (Kantian) "aesthetic of pure pleasure" (which is, she argues, citing Bourdieu, actually "pleasure purified of pleasure")⁵²⁴ occurs through performance of the abject, which acts "like 'noise'" to bring the "uncontrollable body" back into the realm of art.

For Ross, this uncontrollable body, as asserted in the works of the artists she discusses, provides—for a particular kind of viewer, someone like Ross herself, undoubtedly—the satisfying pleasure of seeing materialized, a kind of retort to the "lack"

⁵²³Ibid., 150.

⁵²⁴ This notion is from Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Richard Nice, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 491. As cited by Ross, *ibid.*, note 5. Arguably, the Kantian version of pleasure is also a "disembodied" pleasure. Thanks to Josephine Withers for this insight.

constructed in (masculinist) psychoanalytic discourse as feminine essence.⁵²⁵ One can infer that, for Ross, the multiple pleasures generated by “noisy” and “uncontrollable” female bodies that “overrun” this masculinist-proposed feminine “lack,” are more operative and “job-related” than the Krauss/Bois’ *informe*. In other words, for Ross, Krauss’ proposal of the *informe* as a way to “suspend categories” is not as operative or “job-related”—in the sense of performing the “job” of transgressing frozen cultural forms—as reorienting categories, through performing assertively abject (female) corporeality “into a new logic ... where organization (and disorganization), pattern and randomness coexist.”⁵²⁶ In effect, Ross argues, it is precisely the strong *reference* and metaphoricity involved in art that performs horrendous bodies (and exactly that from which Krauss recoils), which has the most transgressive effect, because, while

...at first glance, the abjected bodies of Mona Hatoum, Kiki Smith, Jo Spence, Céline Baril, Cindy Sherman and others produce the horror of loss, decay, illness, they are bodies that state that this loss is not necessarily a death, a lack, or an absence from oneself but a pattern indissociable from the randomness that has shaped it...⁵²⁷

For Ross, therefore, it is the embrace of the abject body, and not its eschewal, that underscores—and thereby empowers—subjectivity as dynamic. And, it is the dynamism of subjectivity that is the most potent force in the struggle to transform frozen societal/cultural forms that undergird patriarchal hegemony.

⁵²⁵ Ross actually goes further, she proposes the abject body in art as “running over” this construct of “feminine lack” so central to psychoanalytical discourse, in particular. The phrase “running over” has for me a nice double-meaning, as both exceeding and “mowing down.”

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 155.

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

Hal Foster

That Krauss (and Bois) seem to be recoiling from particular aspects of the corporeal in their exegesis of the *informe*, is given credence by Krauss' admission in "The Politics of the Signifier II" that, for her, the abject body had become "phobic."⁵²⁸ In many ways, Hal Foster's proposal—in his 1996 *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*—is a direct response to, and an elaboration on this admission by Krauss.

In this book, Foster promotes what he dubs the "traumatic real," as a "third way" to explain what others have called a "turn to the body"⁵²⁹ in art of the eighties and nineties. But, if Foster argues against Krauss' "phobia" about the abject body in art, he is not an overly enthusiastic advocate of it either. His argument ranges beyond the abject body to encompass what he sees as a thematics of trauma that involves a search for—and attempted enactment of—the "real" in art, which, for him, constitutes the project of the new avant-garde.

⁵²⁸ "The Politics of the Signifier, II," *ibid.*, 12-13. In this exchange, Foster's expands on his notion that there may be a "third way" that avoids both the referentiality of the abject, and the "clean machine" that he claims Krauss is making of the *informe*:

Krauss: I'm having trouble seeing what this third term is...between...this reference to the body and its objects, I much prefer...the structuralist position...

Foster: ...For you literalization tells nothing. I am really interested in this horror of literalization.

Krauss: Yes, I have that horror. The "body"—as it has increasingly surfaced...is rapidly becoming my phobic object.

Foster:...one reason the body is an obsessional site of critical discourse and artistic practice is its ambiguous status—both constructed and natural, semiotic and referential. And this ambiguity is always treated in different ways...we need to ...think those differences and I am not sure that either...the *informe*...or ...the abject is much help...

⁵²⁹ Of course, the body didn't just emerge for the first time in US art of the eighties and nineties. As Norwegian critic Steihaug notes (*ibid.*, np, note 1): "...abstract expressionism...minimalism of the sixties...performance art of the seventies clearly have the human body as an important aspect..[but] a parallel to the [eighties-nineties] bodily turn in art is the intensified interest in body theory in the academic field and ...a growing fixation on the body in the culture at large...many fundamental social and political questions...have the problematics of the body at their roots...."

Foster sees this search for the “real” as the basis, not only of what might be called a “fixation” or obsession with the wounded body⁵³⁰ infusing the entire culture of the eighties and nineties; but also a nodal point for understanding some larger (even tectonic) shifts in art and theory axes at the end of the 20th century. In this latter, Foster’s perspective is less an argument *against* Krauss than a radical turn of the prism she also uses. Both critics are concerned with what they see as an over-emphasis on the signified, to the detriment of the signifier, but their interests do not coincide. As Jon-Ove Steihaug notes:

...in Foster’s case [emphasis is on] a historiographic project leading up to or seen in relation to a diagnosis of a contemporary situation...while ...[the] Krauss [position] is...polemical, ideological...concerning more general questions of interpretation and meaning....⁵³¹

At the same time, Steihaug also points out that Foster’s “traumatic real” and Kristeva’s “abject” seem to coincide in a common interest in, and defense of, situations in which art has the “job” of going beyond what can be spoken or represented,⁵³² and that this coincidence of perspective is at serious odds with what Krauss proposes as the “job”

⁵³⁰ Foster, *ibid.*, 152-153: “The primary realm of abject art ...is drawn to the broken boundaries of the violated body...whose parts are displayed as residues of violence and/or traces of trauma...[and] raises the question ...of the possibility of an *obscene* representation...a representation *without* a scene that stages the object for the viewer...”

⁵³¹ Steihaug, *ibid.*, 49.

⁵³² Foster, *ibid.*, 153. 156. Foster acknowledges the importance of Kristeva’s construction of abjection for contemporary artists, noting that Kristeva’s “...abjection is a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, ‘where meaning collapses;’ hence [it is appealing]...for avant-garde artists who want to disturb ... orderings of subject and society alike...the abject [is] crucial...to the construction of subjectivity; racist, homophobic, and otherwise...” Despite abjection’s appeal as a “troubling” force, Foster sees problems for artists who seek to materialize abjection in their work precisely because: “the cultural-political valence of abject art depends on ambiguities, on how they are decided (or not). Some are familiar by now. Can the abject be represented at all. If it is opposed to culture, can it be exposed in culture. If it is unconscious, can it be made conscious and remain abject? In other words, can there be a *conscious abjection*...?”

of the *informe*. This is because, Steinhag infers, Krauss' *informe* is an "epistemological and operational conception of transgression," that stays within the articulable, the representable.

Of particular interest is the shift in discourse which Foster's book represents, especially his contention that the abject in art of the nineties is one instance of a "return of the real" which involves multiple interrelated "returns" including historical ones. Foster favors paying attention, for example, to how historical dimension returns, and is preserved and enhanced, in neo-avant garde⁵³³ practice; how "trauma" returns in art as the "real" through repetition (for Foster, Warhol's repetitive imagery is his principal example here);⁵³⁴ and how the "shock" of encounter with the real produces a "shocked" artist/subject⁵³⁵ who responds in two ways in art: one, through attempts to "claw away" the "screen" (as per Lacan) of representation standing between the subject and the real,

⁵³³ Foster defines "neo-avant garde" in two ways. In the introduction to *The Return of the Real*, he identifies it the most broadly as *post-1960s* artists who produce work that refashions avant-garde devices (e.g. the constructivist analysis of the object, the photomontage refunctioning of the image, the readymade critique of the exhibition) to contemporary ends." Ibid., x. But, in Chapter 1 he specifies the "neo-avant garde" as "a loose grouping of North American and Western European artists of the 1950s and 1960s who reprised such avant-garde devices of the 1910s and 1920s as collage and assemblage, the readymade and the grid, monochrome painting and constructed sculpture." Ibid., 1. Artists given more than passing attention in this book (but not limited to the 1950s-sixties, though including some of them), who seem therefore to be central to his "return of the real" argument, include: Carl Andre, Michael Asher, Larry Bell, Ashley Bickerton, Marcel Broodthaers, David Buren, Robert Gober, Donald Judd, Mike Kelley, Silvia Kolbowski, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Sol Le Witt, James Luna, Gordon Matta Clark, Paul McCarthy, Robert Morris, Richard Prince, Robert Rauschenberg, Martha Rosler, Alan Sekula, Richard Serra, Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, Robert Smithson, Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, Fred Wilson. NB the women artists among this group...especially Cindy Sherman.

⁵³⁴ Foster's notion of repetition is proposed in relation to Warhol, which he then extrapolates to the practice of many other artists. He proposes repetition as operating in two ways: the Freudian and the apotropaic. In Freud, trauma must be addressed through repetition (in speech, actions, dreams, images) in order to restore and integrate the psyche shattered by traumatic events. Foster sees artists of the abject as doing something else, e.g., utilizing repetition as both "a warding away of traumatic significance *and* opening out to it; a defending against traumatic effect *and* a producing of it." See *ibid.*, 120-131

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.* Regarding "blankness," Foster refers to Warhol's self-presentation as "blank" surface. But, Foster suggests, the subject may be less "blank" than "shocked," and that artists who utilize the abject may be taking on "the nature of what shocks as a ...defense against the shock."

by seeking to portray the horrendous “real” itself (Sherman’s 1990s photographs that evoke vomit, mildew, etc. are his examples); and the other, an embrace of the ethnographic as “a turn to the referent...grounded in...given identit[ies] and/or sited communit[ies].”⁵³⁶

These last two, the evocation of the real through the violated body, the body in pieces (as in Kiki Smith’s work—Figure 35) or obliterated, and, separately, an emphasis on identity and specificities of community (his preferred exemplars here include James Luna and RepoHistory) are posed by Foster as markers of crucial shifts toward the “real” in discourse. And then there is the final return articulated in Foster’s book: a (self-critical) return to his own theoretical leadership in the 1980s in promoting a “progressive postmodernism.” Foster recalls happier days, when he and his cohorts of the eighties were engaged in what they saw as an eminently “progressive” endeavor, the proposal of a kind of postmodernism that contested the reactionary cultural politics of the likes of Hilton Kramer, who characterized all postmodernism as “the vulgar kitsch of media hucksters, lower classes, and inferior peoples, a new barbarism to be shunned, like multiculturalism, at all costs.”⁵³⁷

On reflection, however, Foster argues in *The Return of the Real*, the concept of postmodernism as championed by him and his colleagues in the early eighties had, by the mid-nineties been emptied of significance by the media’s treatment of it as a “fashion,” which, as fashion, of course became “*démodé*.” Foster concludes that most forms of earlier eighties postmodernist criticism, including his own, could now be seen as “too

⁵³⁶ Ibid., xviii.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 205-206.



Figure 35. Kiki Smith. *Untitled*. Ink on gampi paper. 1988. In Helaine Posner. *Kiki Smith*. Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1998, 68.

totalizing, not sensitive enough to cultural differences.” Specifically aiming at postmodernism in art criticism, Foster now argues that what had been proposed in the eighties as an “unsealing” force, had now become a rigidified and sealed postmodernism that was “incorrect as well as banal.”⁵³⁸

Foster does not sink into cynicism, however. He optimistically advocates an antidote to this devolution into “banality.” He argues that the past and present are mutually inextricable; and that what is needed is an approach that provides a way to see the past through the present (and the present in relation to the past); and which does not privilege something called “postmodernism” over something called “Modernism.”

To avoid this kind of bifurcation, Foster proposes an approach he characterizes as “deferred action:” the recognition of a “continual process of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts,” that acknowledges there is “no timely transition between the modern and the postmodern.” Finally, Foster claims, the best criticism, and perhaps the best art as well, must be both created, and assessed, in *parallax*, where both the seer and the seen are framed and constituted in an ever-moving and shifting present that provides an ever-moving and shifting perspective on the past, the here-and-now and the yet-to-come.⁵³⁹

Reactions to Foster

Symptomatic of the reaction to *Return of the Real* are three critical responses, two appearing in 1998 and one in 2001. Of the earlier two, one is in Jon-Ove Steihaug’s detailed account of the abject/*informe*/trauma debates referred to earlier; and the second is a review by UK critic, Mark Durden, appearing in the British art journal *Art History*.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 206

⁵³⁹ Ibid. 207.

The third, appearing in 2001 (in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*), is a review by Charles Altieri of the University of California, Berkeley.

Durden goes to the heart of what is of most interest to this dissertation, Foster's proposal of "two kinds of 'real'" he sees as returning in contemporary art, the "social and ethnographic" on the one hand, and the "more abstract and theoretical, drawn from psychoanalysis"⁵⁴⁰ on the other. But Durden, like Foster fails to draw a direct connection between abjection as the "real," and the ethnographic as the "real" except in his assertions that both tendencies in contemporary art seek the "real" by emphasizing the *referent* or the *signified*.

In the structure of the book itself, the abject and the ethnographic are clearly separated, being treated in different chapters. Thus, while Foster makes the strong point that the abject "is crucial...to the construction of subjectivity; racist, homophobic, and otherwise..."⁵⁴¹ the abject is articulated inside the chapter on "The Real" as psychoanalytically generated, and not in the chapter on the ethnographic, which is articulated in terms of the social.

In his critique of Foster, Durden brings the ethnographic and the abject tantalizingly close together, but does not demonstrate how they might be seen as mutually imbricated, especially in the art practices of certain artists. In Part 4 I will argue that this imbrication is apparent in Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* and in Guillermo Gómez Peña's *Temple of Confessions*.

Durden notes Foster's emphasis in his chapter on ethnographic turns in contemporary art as concerning itself with "primitivist associations," and "radical alterity" as well as

⁵⁴⁰ Mark Durden, review of "*The Return of the Real* by Hal Foster," *Art History* 21:2, (1998): 296.

⁵⁴¹ Foster, *ibid.*, 153.

other “signs of the repressed,” flaunted, especially by artists of color within the modernist spaces of the museum. But, tantalizing as these connections are, Darden does not point out how they move to the next level. He does not identify how these returns of the repressed in the deconstructive practice of artists like Renée Green, Adrian Piper and Fred Wilson (Figure 36) (these are three among a small group of artists identified by Foster as prime exemplars of these deconstructive moves) might be seen as wielding abjection, monstrosity and the grotesque, though of course the “primitive” the “other” and the “repressed” are always composed, and redolent of, the monstrous/abject/grotesque.

Foster has asserted that the abject, monstrous and grotesque are “crucial” to homophobic, racist and sexist constructions of subjectivity. The materialization in culture of difference as “other,” is constructed as seductive, obsessively fascinating, repellent and dangerous, and as such is more than redolent of the abject, monstrous and grotesque. So it seems that the abject, monstrous and grotesque is both social and psychological. If this is true, then it would seem important to acknowledge and assess efforts (such as those by Green, Piper, Wilson, et al.) to “out” these constructions in repressed primitivist fantasies of “the other” in direct conjunction and comparison with the work of Sherman, Kiki Smith, Kelley, et al., which is categorized by Foster (and Durden) as analytically accessible only through discourses of the psychoanalytic. As Elizabeth Grosz has proposed, there is danger and error in portraying corporeality as only social or only psychological; danger and error whose result is to reinforce existing unequal social relations between dominant and non-dominant populations in society.



Figure 36. Fred Wilson. *Mining the Museum*. Installation. Maryland Historical Society. Detail: baby carriage and KKK hood. 1992. In Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant Garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996, 195.

Steihaug also does not seek to bridge the gap in Foster regarding a possible relationship between the psychoanalytically oriented “return of the real” in art as *referent* (to the transgressiveness of the wounded body, and to the culturally “disturbing” function of the Freudian “uncanny” in general); though Steihaug does note that “Foster postulates a fundamental shift in culture and art” which has taken two forms, “a turning to the ‘violated body’” and, quite separately, “to the referent in terms of a ‘given identity’ or a ‘sited community.’”⁵⁴² Steihaug brings in previous perspectives, from Foster’s *Compulsive Beauty* study of surrealism (1993), emphasizing Foster’s association of Freud’s uncanny with the ways “repressed material returns...[to] disrupt unitary identity, aesthetic norms, and social order,” which he contends Foster continues to adhere to in *Return of the Real*. Nevertheless, Steihaug does not associate this “return of the repressed” with what artists like Green, Piper and Wilson are engaging in purposefully, in a deconstructive sense. This is because there remains, in both Foster and in Steihaug’s gloss on Foster, a perpetuation of the notion that one tendency is toward the internal psychological, and the other toward the social, and those two are seen as not imbricated.

Steihaug acknowledges that Foster frames “transgression ... both psychoanalytically and in relation to...what a critical avant-garde position might mean...in the nineties.”⁵⁴³ Nevertheless, he limits this to “the diagnosis of the current artistic and cultural situation in terms of the concept of ‘trauma,’ and the description of certain historical genealogies

⁵⁴² Steihaug’s quotes here are to Foster *ibid.*, xvii.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 49.

since the sixties...[and] on [the] art historical level...as a shift from ‘a logic of avant-gardist transgression toward a model of deconstructive (dis)placement.’”⁵⁴⁴

Again, though Foster does clearly indicate that Piper, Green and Wilson are examples of “deconstructive (dis)placement” of primitivist fantasy, there is no clear and direct interpretation of this primitivist fantasy as abjection, monsterring, grotesque-ing. Nor does Steihaug point out that this kind of bridge does not exist in Foster. Steihaug concludes, as in his perspectives on Krauss, with a non-committal dodging of these issues: “I do not believe that the interpretive differences” between Foster and Krauss, regarding the high profile presence of the abject/monstrous/grotesque in contemporary art “are easily settled...they are far from being clear cut...instead one might see [them] as important markers of the meaning of the recent influx of the desublimated body in art.”⁵⁴⁵

Charles Altieri who particularly praises Foster’s “core chapter on the return of the real” in *Return of the Real* notes that these two thematics are completely separate.⁵⁴⁶

Altieri, an English professor at the University of California, Berkeley, interprets Foster’s addition of a “chapter promoting what he calls ethnographic art” as Foster’s not being able to “satisfy his sense of political responsibilities” by articulating that the real returns as trauma and the “violated body” in contemporary art.

But Altieri’s critique of Foster also does not bridge the gap between consideration of “avant-garde” artists who, on the one hand, go to the abject, violated body as apotropaic; and, on the other (in the case especially of artists of color) those who make reference to

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid. Steihaug refers here to Foster, *ibid.*, xii.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁶ Charles Altieri, “Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real*,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59:1 (Winter 2001): 104.

the abjection of frozen, stereotypical/primitivist constructions of the subjectivity of society's "others."

* * * * *

In conclusion, in **Part 3** the initial focus was on demonstrating that the monstrous, grotesque and abject did not just emerge whole cloth sometime in the 1980s. There were key precedents in cultural production, including a long tradition of horror genres, especially in film starting in the 1950s. War was both a continuous thematic in art that utilized this iconography and inspired much of the discourse related to it from periods much earlier than that addressed by this dissertation.

In particular, **Part 3** has emphasized how the aesthetic of the monstrous/grotesque/abject constituted a flash-point at the conjunction of art and political discourse in the U.S. during the late eighties and early nineties. This focus coincided with and was extensively utilized in the contentious social and political environment known as "the culture wars."

Also in **Part 3**, assessment of the discourse forming around this imagery reveals that it is related to a complex and extensive theoretical literature on the abject body in which gender and race are constructed as monstrous. This discussion demonstrates that this imagery is a richly charged site for exploring the intersection the relationship of art and power within late capitalist U.S. society, and especially how race and gender have interacted with both. In this Part, it has been shown that the discourse on the abject/monstrous/grotesque in cultural production has wrestled vigorously with such interrelated issues as:

- Standards of “quality” in art, including where in the social hierarchy such standards are established, and by whom, as well as the relationship of activist art to them;
- The role(s) the multiply-layered identities of activist artists have played in the aesthetic choices they have made in creating activist art, and especially in the choice to deploy self-referential monstrous, abject and grotesque references as a tactic;
- The values, difficulties and dangers for activist cultural production in activating “essentialism” and “universalism” through the invocation of a monstrous/abject/grotesque iconography; and
- Whether, and how art objects and processes can affect societal power relations beyond the art world; and, specifically, whether art objects and processes that rely on audience reaction to the abject, monstrous and grotesque can accomplish this.

The discussion in this part ends with consideration of a contentious debate toward the end of the nineties that occurred at a privileged site within the prescribed circles of high culture (the *October* journal) regarding where emphasis should be placed in cultural production seeking to “trouble” the dominant hierarchies and hegemonies. There was agreement within this prescribed circle that perhaps the monstrous/abject/grotesque as a signified had received too much emphasis, and that more attention should be paid to art that engaged itself with signifiers that could point to where the social/cultural structures were weakest. But these arguments were seen by other commentators as a re-reifying of *form over content*, and hence not progressive at all.

Of particular interest in this regard was the accusation that Hal Foster's contribution to this debate placed the turning to the violated, traumatized body (in some examples of contemporary art of the nineties) too separately from art that also moved toward the referent as a "given identity" or a "sited community." In Part 4 I will propose works by two artists, Judy Chicago and Guillermo Gómez Peña as examples of how these two characteristics of contemporary art have been bridged.

**PART 4: THE ABJECT/MONSTROUS/GROTESQUE IN JUDY CHICAGO'S
DINNER PARTY AND
GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-PEÑA'S *TEMPLE OF CONFESSIONS***

Introduction to Part 4

Part 4 will address works by two artists who have centered their cultural production on activism. The two works selected for close focus are: Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979) and Guillermo Gómez Peña's *Temple of Confessions* (1994). The discussion will propose that each work deploys the monstrous/abject/grotesque.⁵⁴⁷ How this is accomplished in each work will be discussed, and especially how the works relate the discursive elements of the monstrous/abject/grotesque to activism, postmodernism and the avant-garde.

Chicago's monumental installation, which took four years to create, was the crystallization of her groundbreaking contributions in the 1970s to the creation of a feminist art language that—though both roundly criticized as well as highly praised over the years—persists as central both to the birth of feminist art and to its continued development.⁵⁴⁸ Although other works by Chicago have been acknowledged as

⁵⁴⁷ It is important to note that neither Chicago nor Gómez Peña use these terms to describe the nature of the iconography and political aesthetics they utilize. It is one of the arguments of this Part that, in effect, they do.

⁵⁴⁸ As will be seen below, this art language includes, centrally, the use of references to female genitalia and effluvia. Amelia Jones has cautioned that Chicago's prominence as the progenitor of this language is disputed. Jones notes (see Amelia Jones, "The 'Sexual Politics' of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (exh. cat.) (Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum/UCLA: 1996), 112, n.43): "Many feminist artists I contacted...expressed strong feelings about ...Chicago's usurpation of central core and claims of having 'invented' this strategy." It was one of Jones' goals in *Sexual Politics* to recover some of these precedents. As she notes, however, it was *The Dinner Party* and the "collapsing of vulvar motifs" into it, along with the association over the years, in feminist theorizing, of *The Dinner Party* and Chicago with "central core" imagery that oversimplified everything about the debates over a female iconography that took place during the 1970s. Jones cites (see the notes in *ibid.*, 113-114) these following as some of the locations that trace these debates (most of these commentaries were often in publications that had very short lives, and were not anthologized. It is especially interesting to note how frequently these discussions of female imagery in art occur in the first year and often the first issue of these publications): Faith Wilding, "Women Artists and Female Imagery" *Everywoman* 2 (7 May 1971); Judy Chicago, "Woman as Artist," *Everywoman* 2 (7 May 1971); Patricia Mainardi, "Feminine Sensibility: An Analysis," *Feminist Art Journal* 3 (April 1972); Judy Chicago and

contributions to the discursive element of the abject/monstrous/grotesque in art of the eighties and nineties,⁵⁴⁹ *The Dinner Party* has not been considered in this context, except in very tangential ways.

Gómez Peña's *Temple of Confessions* (Figure 39) was the culmination, in 1996, of 15 years of art practice that sought to materialize "the border," in the widest sense, within a U.S. culture for which border politics had become a source of fear and threat. In this part, an argument will be advanced that proposes the centrality of the abject/monstrous/grotesque to both works' aesthetics and to their reception as well as to the relationship of both to each work's "activism."

Both works emerged in 1996,⁵⁵⁰ a juncture that was significant in both social/political as well as art/cultural terms. As has been discussed at length (in Part 3, Chapter 7) 1996 marked the appearance of two significant reactions from a "high criticism" location to the

Miriam Schapiro, "Female Imagery," *Womanspace Journal* 1 (Summer 1973); Arlene Raven, "Women's Art: The Development of a Theoretical Perspective" *Womanspace Journal* 1 (February-March 1973); Ruth Iskin, "Sexual and Self-Imagery in Art—Male and Female," *WomanSpace Journal* 1 (Summer 1973); Cindy Nemer, "The Women Artists' Movement," *Feminist Art Journal* 2 (Winter 1973-74). Arlene Raven, "Feminist Content in Current Female Art," *Sister* 6 (October-November 1975); a debate between Lucy Lippard, Susan Hall, Linda Nochlin, Joan Snyder: "What is Female Imagery?" in Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: Dutton, 1976); Joan Semmel and April Kingsley, "Sexual Imagery in Women's Art," *Woman's Art Journal* 1 (Spring-Summer 1980).

⁵⁴⁹ I am thinking here especially of the reconstruction of Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* at the Whitney's *Abject Art* show in 1993. There were also references (pejorative for the most part) to the centrality of vulvic imagery, which caused some critics (and Congressmen) to think of sex (cunnilingus, specifically) when considering *The Dinner Party's* plates. See Maureen Mullarkey, "Dishing it Out: Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*," *Commonweal* 108 (April 1981): 210-211; and Clara Weyergraf, "The Holy Alliance; Populism and Feminism," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 31. See also the account of the brouhaha in Congress in 1990 when an attempt was made to house the *Dinner Party* at Washington, DC's public university, documented by Lucy Lippard, "Uninvited Guests: How Washington Lost 'The Dinner Party,'" *Art in America* (December 1991) in which certain congressional representatives characterized the work as a whole as "pornographic."

⁵⁵⁰ In the case of *The Dinner Party*, what happened should be described as a *re-emergence*, even a "re-embodiment," since for many years it was physically confined to a warehouse, and its virtual existence was widely dispersed through photographs and accounts in books and articles.

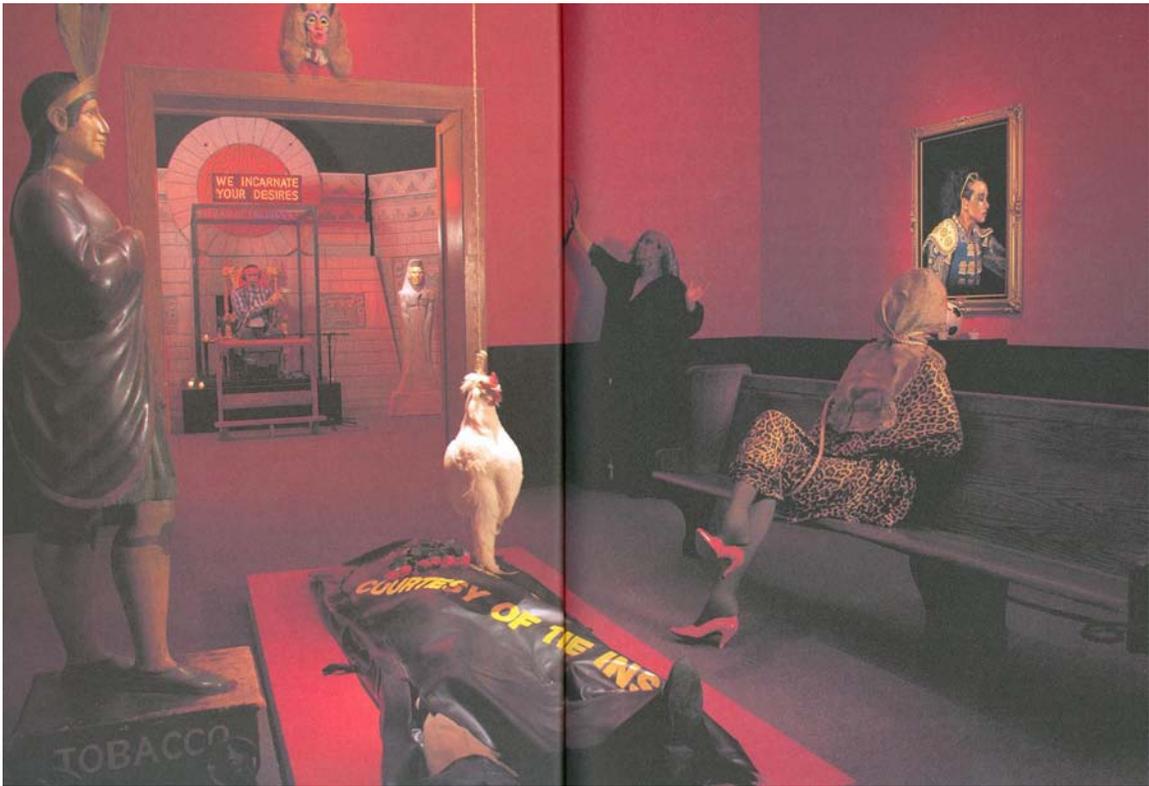


Figure 39. *The Temple of Confessions*. Installation view. 1994-1996. In Guillermo Gómez Peña and Roberto Sifuentes. *The Temple of Confessions: Mexican Beasts and Living Santos*. New York: Powerhouse Books, 1996, 16-17.

proliferation of the abject/monstrous/grotesque aesthetic in U.S. contemporary art of the nineties: Rosalind Krauss' and Yves-Alain Bois' *Formless: A User's Guide*, and Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real*. Though neither *The Dinner Party* nor *The Temple of Confessions* was referred to, either in the Krauss/Bois, or in the Foster texts, the political aesthetics of both *The Dinner Party* and *The Temple of Confessions* address, in central ways, key arguments in *Formless* and in *Return of the Real*. And, as has also been discussed in detail, all these cultural events in 1996 were situated in an environment in which the abject/grotesque/monstrous aesthetic, and its relationship to corporeality and subjectivity, were assertive elements in discourse in general (including in art production and exhibition), and in feminist theoretical sites in particular.

Both works lend themselves particularly well to being viewed through the prism of the various theories of the monstrous/grotesque/abject as ambivalently transgressive, and thus of interest in terms of their inclusion under the rubric of works that are "activist." Both works were specific responses to particular social/political environments that extended beyond the particular year 1996. Despite the general temporal confluence of their appearance in culture (re-appearance in the case of *The Dinner Party*), however, each work's highly complex and layered political aesthetics, have resonated differently for viewers depending on their changing locations in time and space.

In the case of *The Dinner Party*, the work itself did not change, though it has consistently been interpreted "in parts" rather than in its totality. This is an important aspect of its reception, and will be considered below as both a cause and an effect of its "monstrousness."

In the case of the *Temple of Confessions*, the work as total environment has not been resuscitated since its last appearance in Washington, DC in 1996, the event recounted here. Despite this “disappearance” from the museum as an integrated installation/performance, aspects of the *Temple* continue to be “reincarnated” in Gómez Peña’s ongoing work, including both the kitsch/pop artifacts as well as the performative aesthetics and especially the foregrounding of particularly grotesque ethnic stereotypes.⁵⁵¹

Though each of these works emerged in 1996, their trajectories were very different. When *The Dinner Party* came out of its warehouse in 1996—where it had languished for years—to appear in an exhibition (*Sexual Politics*) that sought to place it in (feminist) art historical perspective,⁵⁵² all the objections (and valorizing) that had accompanied the work on its first appearance in 1979 resurfaced. This re-inundation of commentary almost completely eclipsed the complex theoretical apparatus constructed by *Sexual Politics*’ curator to frame the work’s reappearance.

The *Temple of Confessions*, on the other hand, was a completely new work, commissioned by the Three Rivers Arts Festival in Pittsburgh, the Scottsdale (Arizona) Center for Arts, and the Detroit Institute of Art. As will be seen in the discussion below, however, *The Temple of Confessions* was a dramatically baroque efflorescence, elaboration and reanimation of a cultural practice consisting of a plethora of key

⁵⁵¹ For example, the latest reworking of both kitsch artifacts and performance of monstrous ethno-stereotypes, key elements manipulated in all Gómez Peña’s performances was *Excentris* performed first in Liverpool in the Spring of 2003. This performance reconfigures personae and artifacts that are very similar to those in *The Temple*, though in this latest performance, the personae operate within a context of issues of globalization, and the stereotypes performed reach well beyond the U.S.-Mexico border that was the focus of the *Temple of Confessions*.

⁵⁵² Amelia Jones was selected to curate the show, and develop the catalog, by Henry Hopkins, who, in the early nineties, had taken over as Director of the Hammer Museum at UCLA. Hopkins had been the director of the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1979 when *The Dinner Party* debuted there.

performative aesthetic elements utilized by its progenitor, in various combinations, quite consistently reaching back over 15 years.

Chapter 1: *The Dinner Party*

In Chapter 1 the discussion centers on the *The Dinner Party*'s (Figure 37) reappearance in 1996 after nearly a decade in storage. It examines particular aspects of the work's trajectory before 1996; and proposes that the work's meaning has been influenced, in significant part, by the "monstrousness" and "abjection" inherent in its aesthetics, though this aspect has been barely mentioned in commentary on its exhibitions. It is proposed here that there is a subtext of excess that suffuses the piece, an excess that helps to explain its mysterious power to generate discourse.⁵⁵³ Despite the passage of time, shifting cultural paradigms and the most recent stunning event—the acquisition of *The Dinner Party* by, and permanent housing at, the Brooklyn Museum in 2002—reactions to the contours of *The Dinner Party*'s excessiveness trail behind it, stick to it.

That *The Dinner Party* has generated a strongly dichotomous reception during its nearly quarter century history is undeniable.⁵⁵⁴ Various clashing brands of feminist

⁵⁵³ Amelia Jones refers periodically in her essay "Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies, Feminist Conflicts, Feminist Histories," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*. (exh. cat.) Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum, UCLA, 1996, 36) to "an exuberant excessiveness:" and again (ibid., 25) "the visibility of Chicago's piece has to do precisely with its flamboyant excess." But there is no specific, explicit, in-depth exploration of exactly how this excess actually works through the art to interact with and challenge various discursive realms. Jones curated the *Sexual Politics* exhibition. The show did not travel. Its one appearance was in Los Angeles in 1996, the last time *The Dinner Party* was seen before its acquisition in 2002 by the Brooklyn Museum as a gift from Elizabeth Sackler.

⁵⁵⁴ *The Dinner Party*, as of this writing, is undergoing restoration in preparation for its permanent installation at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2005, which is the 25th anniversary of the work's first appearance at the San Francisco Museum of Art. *The Dinner Party* was purchased and donated to the Brooklyn museum in 2002, by Elizabeth Sackler. *The Dinner Party* was chosen to highlight in this final section of this dissertation partially because it has spurred controversy at all its exhibition venues around the world, beginning in 1979. *The Dinner Party* was specifically designed as a museum installation. It has been in exhibition 14 times, starting with its inaugural show, in 1979, in San Francisco; other venues included seven in the US, of which only two were in museums: the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum. Of the remaining 7 exhibitions, which all took place outside the U.S., 4 were in museums (Frankfurt, Calgary, Toronto and Montreal). See Jones, ibid., 116, n. 106.



Figure 37. Judy Chicago. *The Dinner Party*. 1979. Installation view (Photo: Donald Woodman). In Judy Chicago. *The Dinner Party: A Commemorative Volume Celebrating a Major Monument of Twentieth Century Art*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996, 163.

theorizing regarding its value in advancing feminist agendas have accompanied it in its travels. The work has also been the location of noisy battles about kitsch, quality and “high art.” It is often cited in writings on the intersection of gynophobia, class and culture.

The Feminist Theory Context

In 1996, *The Dinner Party* emerged from eight years in storage in a San Francisco warehouse as the centerpiece in a large exhibition at UCLA’s Armand Hammer Museum; and curated by rising-star feminist art historian Amelia Jones.⁵⁵⁵ The exhibition, *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, was greeted by advocates’ cheers and detractors’ shudders. The publicity for the exhibition downplayed the artist and the work, suggesting that there was apprehension about the reception of the exhibition related to the presence of *The Dinner Party*. “Chicago” and “Dinner Party” were strikingly absent from the shocking pink banners lining Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles for many blocks in both directions from the Hammer, for several weeks during the summer of 1996, as well as from the 8-foot tall posters flanking the entrance to the museum.

Despite this downplaying, *The Dinner Party* was the main draw of the *Sexual Politics* exhibition, which attracted the large and enthusiastic crowds that always have shown up

⁵⁵⁵ Amelia Jones is widely published. From 1987 (before the awarding of her PhD from UCLA in 1991) to 2003, there have been 4 books as sole, and one as co-author, essays in 10 exhibition catalogs; curator and catalog organizer for 2 exhibitions, essay in one anthology; 9 articles as sole author, 3 book reviews and one exhibition review. Prior to her selection as curator for the *Sexual Politics* exhibition, Jones had published two critical survey articles on feminist art history: Amelia Jones, “Artful Rewritings and Interpretive Repressions in New Feminist Art Histories,” *Art History* 15:2 (June 1992); and “Feminism, Incorporated: Reading ‘Postfeminism’ in an Anti-Feminist Age,” *Afterimage* 20:5 (December 1992). Her most recent book, an anthology, is Amelia Jones, ed, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

whenever the work emerged from storage. There was sparse attention in the art press for the exhibition, which did not travel beyond Los Angeles. But, *The Dinner Party's* presence in it was not lost on certain critics. Particularly harsh were two essays by writers associated with the Los Angeles journal *Art Issues*.⁵⁵⁶

Curator Amelia Jones expected controversy, but it seems clear she was most concerned about the reactions of feminist theorists and critics. Her substantial catalogue is aimed at the heart of contemporary feminist theorizing, clear in this passage in her catalogue essay in defense of her decision to accept the challenge of curating the exhibition:

It is not the purpose of this catalogue or exhibition to recuperate Chicago's piece in a simplistic or unquestioningly celebratory way. Nor is it my aim to join in the general opprobrium in which the piece has been held by many 1980s poststructuralist feminists, who see it as paradigmatic of a naïve and putatively "essentialist arm" of 1970s feminist art. Rather, I hope here to look at the piece seriously and with respect for its conflicted but important position—whether as adulated icon of feminist utopianism or despised exemplar of essentialism (the unifying presentation of women's experience as "essentialist" or biologically determined)—within the history of feminist art...I am not...proposing my writings for this catalogue, or the exhibition itself as "true" narratives that replace "false" ones that became predominant in the 1980s, but rather, as ones that, from the more distanced perspective afforded by my position writing in the mid-1990s, offer an alternative, more generous view of feminist art of the 1970s, reinstating some of its complexities and contradictions while respecting the insights of poststructuralism.⁵⁵⁷

⁵⁵⁶ Christopher Knight, "More Famine than Feast: Focusing on the Flawed *Dinner Party* undermines *Sexual Politics*," *Los Angeles Times* (Thursday, May 2, 1996): Calendar, F1; and Libby Lumpkin, *Art Issues* (September-October, 1996). The Knight review generated vigorous replies in the letters to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* and in a spirited electronic conversation during May 1996 on a feminist art history listserv. Knight's review attacks Jones personally ("a curator who is an ideologist") and the show in vituperative language ("You want to run screaming from the room...[because of] preachy, didactic [wall] panels...[and] arrogant curatorial text that engulfs works of art [like] Betye Saar's diminutive assemblage "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima"...which gets crushed beneath [Jones'] boot...")

⁵⁵⁷ Jones, *Sexual Politics*, *ibid.*, 24

Jones' attempt to create an "alternative, more generous view" also sought inclusivity in characterizing *The Dinner Party's* reception from its first emergence into public view in 1979. In the *Sexual Politics* catalog, Jones not only addresses the negative criticism lavished upon the work over the years, but also details the positive responses, equally important in terms of who was having these positive reactions; and also in how the art world has dealt with them.⁵⁵⁸ One particularly conflicted area of positive reception has been the persistent enthusiastic interest from a general public. As Jones carefully documents, the work's popularity has consistently provoked deprecating and condescending commentary from cultural mavens (both feminist and not) of art and academic journalism each time *The Dinner Party* has surfaced in exhibition.⁵⁵⁹ Jones clearly identifies which prominent feminist theorists have joined in the disapprobation of the work because it is popular.

Among those in the eighties for whom the "problem" of the work's populist appeal was less significant than its political efficacy was theorist Michèle Barrett. Writing in 1982, three years after *The Dinner Party* opened in San Francisco, Barrett expressed a view that, by the mid-eighties had become commonplace, namely that the deployment of vaginal imagery was not only passé, but anathemic to feminist political goals. Barrett

⁵⁵⁸ As Jones carefully documents, during previous exhibitions, thousands of people routinely stood in line for hours to see *The Dinner Party*. They have left emotional messages in exhibition visitor books, they have sent postcards effusive with praise, and expressions of gratitude for "a life-changing experience." They have participated enthusiastically in an interactive aspect of the exhibition: creation of small triangular quilts honoring mothers, sisters, grandmothers and other heroines, which are always shown during every *Dinner Party* exhibition. As of 1996 there were more than 500 such quilts in the collection.

⁵⁵⁹ Amelia Jones, "The 'Sexual Politics' of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context," in *ibid.*, 90. Jones cites several egregious examples of disdainful characterization of the putatively "gullible...needy...middle class housewi[ves]" who "file worshipfully past this cunnilingus-cum-communion table [and] see nothing askew..." Referring to Maureen Mullarkey, "Dishing it Out: Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*," *Commonweal* 108 (April 1981): 210-211; and Clara Weyergraf, "The Holy Alliance: Populism and Feminism," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 31.

illustrated her concerns by focusing especially on the “essentialism” of Judy Chicago’s use of vulvics. The Virginia Woolf place setting (Figure 40) was particularly repugnant for her :

...I was ... horrified to see a “Virginia Woolf” whose image to me represented a reading of her life and work which contradicted all she had ever stood for. There she sits: a genital sculpture in deep relief...resting on a runner of pale-lemon gauze with the odd blue wave embroidered on it.⁵⁶⁰

Eighties anti-essentialist discourse encouraged a political project of looking beyond women’s bodies as reproduction machines and pleasure sources for male delectation; and called for a “de-colonization” of the female body. This project quickly hardened over the decade into an orthodox approach that condemned use of any and all vulvic forms (and sometimes any representation or evocation of the female body) that could be interpreted as promoting a “natural” means of female artistic expression. Anti-essentialists argued that focus on the biological and the sexual had the effect of reinforcing patriarchal reduction of female identity to biology, thereby deemphasizing other human potentialities of female subjectivity and agency such as intellectual and cultural production.

With regard to the *The Dinner Party*’s vulvics, it was precisely because of them that a group of 1980s post-structuralist feminist theorists, primarily from the UK, began almost immediately to seek to sideline the work as politically incorrect and co-optable by hegemonic patriarchy. This group of theorists was among those rejecting the recuperation of a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to understanding female subjectivity within Western patriarchal culture, as proposed by Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce

⁵⁶⁰ Michèle Barrett, “Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics,” in Rosalind Brunt and Caroline Rowan, eds., *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, (London: Lawrence and Wishar, 1982), 45. As quoted in Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), 65.



Figure 40. Judy Chicago. Virginia Woolf place setting. *The Dinner Party*. 1979. (Photo: Donald Woodman) In Judy Chicago. *The Dinner Party: A Commemorative Volume Celebrating a Major Monument of Twentieth Century Art*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996, 208.

Irigaray.⁵⁶¹ While noisy and contentious at the time, the discourse of anti-essentialism is not currently as fierce as in the early eighties, though concerns over essentialism do persist, and certainly did upon the emergence of *The Dinner Party* in its *Sexual Politics* context, in 1996.⁵⁶²

In the early eighties, one influential and widespread criticism of the French feminist theorists' "essentialism" was that they "severely circumscribed the possibility of resistant femininity" because they were seen as identifying the socially-constructed feminine subjectivities which women inhabit as identical with "marginalized, silenced and repressed aspects of a monolithically patriarchal symbolic order."⁵⁶³ But, concern over "essentialism" in feminist art is consistently traced to the pioneering 1978 treatment of feminist "body art" by British art historian Lisa Tickner.

Tickner's "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists since 1970," addressed the ambivalence of feminist body art of the 1970s, which, she argued, clearly constituted an act of resistance to the ways in which male-dominated art production had appropriated the female body.⁵⁶⁴ However, Tickner also warned, if deployed without

⁵⁶¹ This is not to imply that Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray agreed. In fact, their theories are very different one from the other. For a lucid summary of the areas of agreement and disagreement between these three influential French feminist theorists, see: Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989).

⁵⁶² As in Sue Malvern, "Virtuous and Vulgar Feminisms: *Sexual Politics. Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*," *Art history*. 20:3, (1997): 483-489.

⁵⁶³ Chris Weedon. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 166.

⁵⁶⁴ Lisa Tickner, "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists since 1970," *Art History* 1:2 (June 1978): 235-253; and also in Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement, 1970-1985* (London: Pandora, 1987), 263-277. It should be noted that Lucy Lippard preceded Tickner (with *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, (New York: EP Dutton, 1976) with an identification of some common elements that she felt could be seen as "women's art language." But Lippard's concern was not with how such elements might backfire politically on feminism. Lippard has been among the earliest and most persistent questioners of the anti-essentialists.

political consciousness, such body/sexual imagery produced by women could backfire on feminism and result in reinforcing patriarchal hegemony by reinscribing the old “anatomy-is-destiny” discourse.

This latter aspect of Tickner’s argument was the one that crystallized into anti-essentialist dogma during the eighties and into the nineties. Tickner’s warning that vulvic forms could reinforce patriarchal power over women landed heaviest on *The Dinner Party* which was entering the art world at about the same time (1979) as Tickner’s article appeared in the British journal *Art History*.

The part of Tickner’s analysis warning that body-oriented, vulvic art—produced and presented unanalytically—could be politically regressive, was hailed and promptly inserted into feminist cultural discourse as “cutting-edge.” In its wake, Chicago’s mammoth undertaking became the target of fairly widespread feminist theoretical disdain. From that point onward, *The Dinner Party* became the pariah for influential academic feminists as well as for conservative defenders of abstraction and minimalism; and for promoters of post-structuralist postmodernism. Caught also in the cross-fire of emerging post-colonial discourse, and the developing trans-discipline of cultural studies, *The Dinner Party* and Judy Chicago have endured nearly two decades of punishment.

Ironically, both Tickner and Chicago intended their respective feminist interventions to challenge the male-dominated art/museum apparatus, as they indeed have. Tickner’s article, the first aggressively feminist essay to be published in the then-new British journal *Art History*, illustrated the vulvic work she discussed therein, provoking reactions that were not dissimilar from the ones Chicago received a few months later, from established art critics and the popular press alike.

Feminist Internecine Debates around 1996

Anti-essentialism in feminist theory circles was a central sticking point for a larger controversy that also took place during the period this dissertation covers. 1996 was a banner year for the resurgence of these battles as well, and they are key aspects of the context in which *The Dinner Party* reemerged. In 1996, the same year that Sexual Politics took up temporary residence in Los Angeles, Griselda Pollock's anthology *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings* was published.⁵⁶⁵ In the book's introduction and first chapter (entitled "The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and Histories of Art Histories") Pollock takes strenuous issue with an influential perspective on feminist art history published at the end of the eighties (Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews' 1987 essay, "The Feminist Critique of Art History"⁵⁶⁶). Pollock devotes half⁵⁶⁷ of her 15-page introduction to an extensive critique of the 1987 Gouma-Peterson/Mathews essay, an important sign that she regarded it as highly significant and requiring her intense scrutiny.

Pollock expresses several objections to Gouma-Peterson's and Mathews' perspectives, including, especially, their use of the terms "generations" and "geographies." The first problem, as Pollock sees it, is that the "metaphors 'generations' and 'geographies' are not described by Gouma-Peterson and Mathews in political terms"

⁵⁶⁵ Griselda Pollock, ed., *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). Pollock is the author only of the introduction to and the first chapter of this anthology. These Pollock texts were actually written four years earlier. She first delivered sections as a paper at a conference in Sweden in 1992, and then published it in *Genders* 17 (Fall, 1993). Pollock gives this history of the text at *ibid.*, Note 1, 20. Pollock does not indicate whether or not the text that appears in *Generations and Geographies* was modified at any point between the time it was originally written, in 1992, and the time it appeared in this anthology.

⁵⁶⁶Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," *The Art Bulletin*, (September 1987): 326-357.

⁵⁶⁷ Pollock, *ibid.*, 12-19.

and tend to divide feminist art historians and critics simplistically into US vs. UK, with the U.S. being the “foremothers” and the British the “daughters;” the U.S. as “first generation,” “movement oriented,” “conservative, revisionist, celebratory and empirical in its scholarship;” and the UK as “second generation,” “radical, interventionist and above all theoretical in its scholarship.”⁵⁶⁸

What Pollock clearly would have preferred was the Foucauldian definition of “genealogy”⁵⁶⁹ an endeavor which involves engaging in the hard work of excavating the “conditions of how discourses come to be,” how they travel, shift and transform themselves in the process; rather than what she calls Gouma-Peterson/Mathews’ “flattening” approach. Pollock is equally critical of the “flat” use of the metaphor “geographies” as America and Britain with the Atlantic between.

For Pollock, “generations” and “geographies” should instead be seen as prisms through which continually to reexamine the purpose of all feminisms, namely, commitment to radical social and intellectual change. For Pollock, “generations” is the prism of history, and “geographies” is the prism of location. These “prisms” should be overtly articulated as politicized, because feminism as a political stance committed to radical social and intellectual change relates specifically to the area of cultural production, which includes the making of art as well as the practice of art history and criticism. Pollock charges that the Gouma-Peterson/Mathews account does not articulate sufficiently the political nature of these terms.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., 12-13.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid, 12. Pollock notes here that the metaphors “generations and geographies” she uses as the title and theme of the book actually were theorized originally by Kristeva and Toril Moi in her work on Kristeva, and are utilized, but not very well, by Gouma-Peterson and Mathews. She calls their deployment of these terms “flattening” in comparison with how Kristeva and Moi use them. And also, that the notion of “genealogy” as an excavation of how discourses are formed is from Foucault.

According to Pollock, looking at cultural production *as* feminist—and as *by* feminists—and through the politically-inflected prisms of “generations” and “geographies,” one can more clearly address, analyze and respond to art “in contradiction” to what she calls “increasingly administered forms of art production and consumption that have turned the art world into just another commodity market ... contemporary culture as high art fashion-mongering.”⁵⁷⁰ By utilizing the metaphors of “generations” and “geographies” as “conflicted” and “challenged,” Pollock believes the “politics of theory” can resist the “repression of oppression.” Mobilizing theory as resistance, she contends, one can begin to unravel sex/gender as an axis of power that is one of the important questions for culture in general, especially that aspect of culture which includes the production of art, and the discourses of art history and criticism.⁵⁷¹

Since Pollock’s text had been published previously to its appearance in 1996 (as the introduction to *Generations and Geographies*) it was available to Amelia Jones, who addresses it in her essay on the critical environment in which *The Dinner Party* was circulated from 1979 through about 1994. In her *Sexual Politics* catalog essay, Jones is also highly critical of the most recent entry at the time into the feminist art history debates, Norma Broude and Mary Garrard’s *The Power of Feminist Art*.⁵⁷² Jones is highly critical of Broude and Garrard’s 1994 text, taking them to task (and, by extension, Gouma-Peterson and Mathews as well, though she deals with them only tangentially) for both not employing theory, and fanning the “anti-theory” flames among their colleagues.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., xvii.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁷² Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1994).

Jones actually began her critique⁵⁷³ of Broude and Garrard's *Power of Feminist Art* in 1995, probably at the height of her own production of the *Sexual Politics* exhibition and catalog; and the tenor of her review of the book is quite Pollock-esque. While acknowledging the importance of the publication of *The Power of Feminist Art*, because of the "blatant erasure in published histories of ... art of the ... 1970s feminist art movement"—and because of its "gloss ... scale and weight, this huge tome may well (for better or worse) become the 'Janson' of feminist art history"—Jones finds major faults with the book. For her there is the "narrowness of its purview." Jones sees the contributors as "uncritical" in their approach to seventies feminist art. Also, she points to the need for more "insightful" and "polemical" contributions which, she argues, could have been easily achieved by the inclusion of key texts from Cindy Nemser and Patricia Mainardi, especially their early critiques of "central core" imagery. She also notes the absence of Harmony Hammond's early Marxist/lesbian theoretical approach. She also decries the exclusion of Mary Beth Edelson's contributions in order to acknowledge the complexity around issues of goddess imagery. Finally she points out the glaring lack of the important anti-essentialist/poststructuralist contributions from commentators such as Pollock, Tickner and Kelly.

For Jones, the absence of Lucy Lippard from the pages of *The Power of Feminist Art*, was also glaring, since Lippard was the "most consistent and passionate voice in support of feminist art from the beginning of the women's art movement."⁵⁷⁴ But, perhaps the most important criticism leveled by Jones against Broude and Garrard's anthology, was the minimization of race and lesbianism: "Of all the essayists, only [Moira] Roth and

⁵⁷³ Amelia Jones, "Power and Art (History)," *Art History* 18:3 (September 1995): 435-443.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 436.

[Suzanne] Lacy insist upon race as central to questions of gender ... [and Yolanda] Lopez is the only [woman of color] given authorship.” Jones laments that Adrian Piper, Lorraine O’Grady, Judith Wilson and/or other artists and theorists of color were not there to add important perspectives. As to lesbian feminist art, though references to it and to theories about it do appear, what is there is not, according to Jones, “theorized as integral to the politics of feminism.”⁵⁷⁵

But, where Jones joins most forcefully with Pollock is in her argument that a “severe disservice” has been done to post-structuralist feminism by Broude and Garrard, and several other essayists in the volume, in the characterization of this stream of feminist thought as contributory and supportive of the backlash against feminism in the 1980s. Jones says: “The essays in the book also perpetuate the conception of 1970s feminism as naïve and untheorized ...” a stereotype that is not borne out by history, since the “...dozens of feminist art journals of the period are filled with writing ... and artworks that attest to the depth of intellectual reasoning at work.”⁵⁷⁶

Jones is saddened and perplexed by the fact that *The Power of Feminist Art* contributes to the reality that theory is not yet seen as “an activist intervention in the *real* of discrimination which, as many cultural theorists have pointed out, takes place textually, institutionally, psychologically and otherwise ... all intersecting aspects of oppression ... never discrete ... [which] support and inform one another.”⁵⁷⁷

In a very real sense, then, Jones’ intense engagement in the *Sexual Politics* catalogue with feminist theory related to art production is in direct dialogue and argument with

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid, 436-437.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 440.

earlier influential efforts to review what was clearly becoming a “discipline” of feminist art history. It is of special interest, therefore, that, though Jones acknowledges *The Dinner Party*'s “excess” and documents its power, expressed through the controversy and the enthusiastic acceptance it has inspired, she does not explore how this “excess” might relate to the discourses of the monstrous/abject/grotesque.

The Source of *The Dinner Party*'s Power

Despite the many attempts by its detractors over the years to erase *The Dinner Party* from art history, its lively power has persisted. Just how lively became vividly evident during the 1996 *Sexual Politics* exhibition, when it demonstrated its durable populist appeal, and its power to generate internecine art world spats.

Two anecdotes demonstrate an aspect of *The Dinner Party* that was only obliquely referred to in the catalog and the exhibition publicity texts: fear of the overwhelming power of the work to eclipse anything near it. That *The Dinner Party* was expected to (and did) dominate both the *Sexual Politics* exhibition, and the reception of the show, was evident in how the art was physically presented. As mentioned above, the words “Dinner Party” and “Chicago” were not included on the banners and posters festooning the museum and Wilshire Boulevard, in an apparent effort to downplay the work and the artist as central to the show. Judy Chicago herself was concerned that the “non-*Dinner Party*” works by 56 feminist artists would be overshadowed. These works were installed in the upstairs gallery, while *The Dinner Party* was installed on the ground floor. Chicago specifically requested that the museum route the viewers upstairs first, so that more attention would be paid to those artists. This suggestion was turned down.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁸ Conversation between Judy Chicago and the author, March 24, 1996. In telephone conversations with Museum staff (January 1998) it was confirmed that attendance at each of the two aspects of the show was

Also, as documented in the catalog, six feminist artists—Mary Beth Edelson, Harmony Hammond, Joyce Kozloff, Miriam Schapiro, Joan Snyder and Nancy Spero—all significant contributors in the 1970s to the creation of a variety of feminist art languages and themes, refused to include their work in *Sexual Politics*, because, as curator Jones put it: “they saw the show as reinforcing the heroization of Chicago.”⁵⁷⁹ What stands behind these actions is a presence imagined as so threatening, a power so excessive, that it must be kept at bay because it seems to portend oblivion for some of the strongest and most innovative art to be produced in the last quarter of the 20th century.⁵⁸⁰

In Amelia Jones’ exhaustive, and intelligent, historical survey of responses to *The Dinner Party* in the second of her two essays in the catalog, she identifies the key aesthetics and other features of the work that have attracted the most criticism, and that, together, constituted this “excessive” and “threatening” presence. These are:

- sexually-charged vulvic forms;
- the anti-modernist use of narrative, specifically, the symbolic;

roughly equal, though there were variations on different days. No actual count was made. This estimate was based on querying the guards on duty regarding the approximate numbers of visitors daily. There were also ticket receipts that the overall attendance figures were based on, but these, of course were not broken down by where people went and how long they stayed in each part of the exhibition.

⁵⁷⁹ Jones, *ibid.*, 84. These artists have been, somewhat erroneously dubbed “New York” artists. Not everyone still operates from New York, nor always did. Edelson originally worked in Washington, DC, Schapiro was first in New York, then in California, and then back in New York, and Harmony Hammond now lives in New Mexico and teaches in Arizona. Five of the six refusing to participate were involved in the founding of *Heresies*, a feminist art and politics journal published out of New York for 15 years. It is now defunct. Also, California-based June Wayne withdrew from the exhibition, just before it opened.

⁵⁸⁰ Jones refers periodically to “an exuberant excessiveness,” in her essay “Sexual Politics” Feminist Strategies, Feminist Conflicts, Feminist Histories,” *ibid.*, 36; and “the visibility of Chicago’s piece has to do precisely with its flamboyant excess,” *ibid.*, 25, etc. But there is no explicit, in-depth exploration of exactly how this “excess” actually works through the art to interact with and challenge various discursive realms.

- “populist” (“kitsch”) media (china painting and needle arts);
- the monumental (even unwieldy) proportions of the total installation.

Additional key elements contributing to the controversy over the work, and the fear of it as a “monster,” is the stubborn insistence on the part of the artist that she be identified as a “great artist;” that *The Dinner Party* be recognized as a masterpiece which, because of its (in the artist’s opinion, successful) attempt to “reinsert” women into a masculinist historical narrative; and that the work be seen as cooperatively authored despite the clear control exercised by Chicago in all overarching creative, aesthetic, production and distribution issues.⁵⁸¹

The excess that overflows in the work because of these problematics is, I believe, the same excess that has caused artists (feminist or not) to recoil or turn their backs on the work and Chicago; art critics and historians (feminist or not) to react from mild disdain to rampage; and thousands to stand in line for hours to be in its presence. This power has centered in the work’s vulvic imagery, though this imagery is by no means the only aspect that generates the work’s power. The work’s “excess” and vulvics are strongly resonant with Julia Kristeva’s notions of abjection, discussed extensively earlier in this dissertation.⁵⁸²

It is now clearly beyond debate that Kristeva’s concepts of an excessive and primordial abjection, related especially to the maternal, are “universalizing” (essentialist), and are not self-critical as Western European constructs. Nonetheless, in the spirit of

⁵⁸¹ Amelia Jones, “The ‘Sexual Politics’ of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context,” In *ibid.*, 108-109.

⁵⁸² The *Sexual Politics* catalog does not attempt to address the work’s reception from this perspective. Only Susan Kandel’s essay mentions Kristeva and abjection, and Creed and the “monstrous feminine” in passing, *ibid.*, 190. See the discussions of Kristeva and Creed et al. in several places earlier in the dissertation.

theoretical bricolage⁵⁸³ and in seeking what may be politically useful in universalizing discourses, this discussion will confront, through Kristeva's notions of abjection, the phantasm of excess lurking behind and oozing through and around *The Dinner Party*. The overall intent here will be to assess any benefits the work may have provided to several generations of feminists, as an example of a de facto "strategic essentialism," that has allowed it to play an effective role as activist art over two decades. Assessing *The Dinner Party* through this lens may allow for the work, with whatever conceptual flaws may be embedded in it, to be seen as more dimensional than as a pariah.

Strategic Essentialism and Abjection

As pointed out in Part 3, three key theorists of the "return to the body" in cultural production of the eighties and early nineties (Grosz, Russo and Creed), reacted in their texts quite specifically to the anti-essentialism debates of the eighties. They concluded (provisionally and ambivalently) that there was a place for activist intervention in culture through reference to the patriarchal construction of the "monstrous" female body. These theorists were writing in an environment in which the notions of "strategic essentialism" were beginning to have currency.

The notion of "strategic essentialism" was first proposed, in 1990, again, in direct response to the "anti-corporeality" of those concerned about the potentially negative effect on feminist politics of a turn to the body in feminist cultural production (literature and film as well as visual art). Gayatri Spivak is generally credited as the progenitor of

⁵⁸³ The idea of making of theory as the construction of a "Rube Goldbergish [contraption] made, junk-like out of bits whose history I understood little about, whose baggage I learned about only as I tried to use them for my own purposes and discovered unexpected complications [in the process]..." is Katie King's whose book *Theory in Its Feminist Travels* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) and feminist theory seminars have given me confidence to follow her lead in theory-making as *bricolage*.

the idea of “strategic essentialism” in her 1990 call for a more nuanced approach, urging theorists

...to see what in the universalizing [essentialist] discourse could be useful, and then go on to see where that discourse meets its limits and challenges within that field ...[especially] the strategic choice of a *genitalist essentialism* [my emphasis] in an anti-sexist work.⁵⁸⁴

Spivak’s point—not to reject, but to consider the possible value of the turn to body in cultural production—can be well-taken in relation to utilizing the psychoanalytically-based, clearly “universalizing” theories of Kristeva as a key analytical prism through which to understand both the artistic choices made by Chicago in creating *The Dinner Party*, as well as in considering its reception over nearly three decades.

Diana Fuss is another theorist who also has pointedly referred to the potential for political efficacy of essentialism because “[e]ssentialism is embedded in the idea of the social, and lodged in the problem of social determination.”⁵⁸⁵ Fuss makes a persuasive case that, in any event, essentialism cannot be avoided because it is fundamental to—even inherent in—the privileging of contextualization as the most important aspect of the practice of postmodern (including feminist-postmodern) cultural criticism. Therefore, it should be incumbent upon feminist theorists to determine how to use what cannot be avoided.

Another important perspective that interacts with “strategic essentialism” is Diana Elam’s notion of the “abyss” of deconstruction. Elam connects the deconstructive notion of inherent and endless permutations (the “abyss”) with the idea of a social justice goal

⁵⁸⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Criticism, Feminism and the Institution,” in *The Post-Colonial Critic*. Sarah Harsym, ed., (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁵⁸⁵ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

that is always receding, forcing us to “learn to negotiate outside the horizon of authority,” to practice an “abyssal” politics that “is not without its moments of achievement, but...is an endless work.”⁵⁸⁶ Elam’s concept of the goals of social justice as always at the extreme end of an endless *abyme*; and which allows, therefore, for only momentary “achievements,” is not unlike Kristeva’s realm of the excessiveness of the abject: unruly, outside the boundaries of authority, uncharted territory. Elam’s *abyme* seems just as “universalizing”—in its description of reality as “always fluid”—as any description of the universal as fixed, unchanging and hierarchical.

Chela Sandoval’s notion of “differential consciousness,” resonates both with “strategic essentialism,” and with how *The Dinner Party* has operated as a cultural force, as an entity that inhabits, and exceeds, the culturally dominant discursive realm of masculinist patriarchy. For Sandoval, “differential consciousness” is a mobile identity that can oppose dominant ideologies while operating from within them. Sandoval suggests nothing less than a “tactical subjectivity with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted.”⁵⁸⁷

Sandoval’s perspective resonates strongly with Elizabeth Grosz’ argument (in *Volatile Bodies*) that, in a turn to corporeality, one must become adept at manipulating the “tools of the master,” namely all the discourses by which masculinist patriarchy maintains control over women, people of color, queer folk and all those “othered” by these discourses. And, to recapitulate, Grosz argues that these key discourses are philosophy, psychoanalysis and biology; and that Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject

⁵⁸⁶ Diana Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyme*. (London: Routledge, 1994), 120.

⁵⁸⁷ Chela Sandoval, “U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in a Postmodern World,” *Genders* 10 (Spring 1991): 1 and 14.

(though certainly not perfect, and clearly essentialist) provides an important entry point into these discourses.

To summarize Kristeva's idea: the abject is the underbelly of a mythically "stable" identity, analogous to the "black holes" identified by astronomers as areas of the universe where energy reverses itself, sucking matter into its maw. According to Kristeva, abjection is both integral to identity and a threatening "other" to it. Abjection is non-or-anti-identity, as "black holes" are theorized as concentrations of "anti-energy" or "anti-matter." The abject is neither subject nor object, but the result of—and response to—bodily functions, cycles of taking in, or incorporation, and pushing out, or evacuation. The abject is most concretely experienced as bodily effluvia—feces, urine, perspiration, vomit, tears, saliva, blood.

Because it is always beyond conscious bodily or intellectual control, experience of the abject strongly suggests the ultimate loss of control, when all its mechanisms become paramount: the moment of the death of the organism, and the moment of *jouissance*, translatable as "orgasm," but with overtones of madness, holiness and poetry. The abject at one extreme is the corpse, the antithesis of life; and at the other extreme, the explosion of the excessive, the uncontrolled, the ecstatic.

Kristeva also proposes a third moment when the abject is most palpable as the corporeal, the animal, the material: what she calls the "indistinct or ambiguous space" occupied by mother and child both before and after birth: the "undivided mother-child," which seeks both division and incorporation, from the side of the mother and the side of the child. The abject is that which crosses—or threatens to cross—borders by division and incorporation at the same time.

Crossing borders, refusing to “stay in place,” exploding “whole-ness” is perhaps the most important characteristic of *The Dinner Party*. Yet there is inherent as well the sense of incorporation. Both *The Dinner Party* and Judy Chicago adamantly refuse to be ejected from the shifting contexts of culture. They stubbornly refuse to go away, even when dismissed by “high art” authorities. They stay put, right inside the boundaries of hegemonic patriarchal culture, where they complicate, contradict and call into question its rules.

The work’s unruly vulvics and reliance on discredited symbolism, narrative and kitsch media are brash and uncompromising. So is its unwieldy monumentality and the artist’s insistence on “great masterpiece” status for it. All this is compounded by Chicago’s unapologetically “politically incorrect” assumption of total authority and control during the making of *The Dinner Party*, while claiming that a “cooperative” work ethic was observed.

While it is admittedly awkward and difficult to explain, describe or refer to something as multiple, as all-encompassing, as *The Dinner Party*, it is curious to consider the compulsion on the part of nearly every commentator, whether favorably or unfavorably disposed to the work, to refer to it in parts. Time after time, in scholarly essay and journalistic account alike, commentators refer to one or the other of the work’s aspects—the plates, or the needlework, or the biographies of the women honored—no doubt in attempts to find something that can characterize the work as a whole. But these reductive designations can also be seen as more than attempts to find concise ways to describe the work. They signal a drive or compulsion to contain the multiplicities that constitute *The Dinner Party*, an object that is both concrete and ephemeral, unified and fragmentary.

Such a drive or compulsion to contain, to make something manageably smaller, more compact, announces that the abject is present.

The Dinner Party is concrete in that it is possible to see it, to apprehend it in its exhibition form; and now, with its permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum, the work will soon be available to all who wish to make the effort to go to New York. It is also ephemeral in the sense that the work also exists (one might say, equally palpably) in a highly complex and conflicted discursive field which does not depend on having the work in place, three feet away from one's eyes.

The Dinner Party can be described as "unified" because its power can only be adequately experienced when it is in installation, all pieces of the puzzle in place. However, it is "multiple," or fragmentary in the sense that it is comprised of thousands of individual parts, complex in the extreme, and even when in its presence, one cannot perceive everything at once. Attempts to make sense of an entity that is so multiple can include several reactions that can also be experienced simultaneously. One can attempt to reduce it to one aspect or another, to try to find a boundary, a category in which to fit *The Dinner Party*. One can be struck by a state of confounding awe in its presence. Or one can feel moved to flee from it or hide from it physically or psychologically. These too are reactions typical when confronted by the abject.

As Kristeva tells us in *The Powers of Horror*, the abject is that which "disturbs identity, system, order ... does not respect borders, positions, rules: the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite,"⁵⁸⁸ something that is always already both in and beyond,

⁵⁸⁸ Kristeva, *ibid.*, 4. I am grateful to Stephen Mansbach for his suggestion that it would be well for me to point out that Kristeva's notion of the abject was specifically articulated by her in connection with art, and specifically literature. Kristeva avers that art operates in tandem with the abject. In *The Powers of Horror*, *ibid.* 17, for example, she argues that "The various means of *purifying* the abject—the various catharses—

incorporated and separate. Such a large, threatening presence has been described as the “monstrous feminine” by Barbara Creed who builds on Kristeva’s notion of the abject by proposing that the abject has become gendered in the horror film genre where “the function of the monstrous [is] to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.”⁵⁸⁹

The “symbolic” Creed refers to is the Lacanian notion of total signification, and the Laws that govern it. Lacan identifies the Symbolic as the Law of the Father. So for Creed, the monstrous/abject feminine challenges the Law of the Father, which, in Lacanian terms means challenging signification itself; challenging culture itself. What comes to mind in considering the characteristics of such a powerful event and state of mind is the Kantian notion of the “sublime,” a state or experience that is so boundlessly awesome that it disturbs perception and judgment, and is experienced as an “outrage on the imagination.”⁵⁹⁰

make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion."

⁵⁸⁹ Creed, *ibid.* Creed, like Kristeva before her, is referring to a term (symbolic order) coined by Jacques Lacan. While Kristeva was in dialogue and critique with Lacan regarding various aspects of the concept “symbolic order,” in general, the term as used by Kristeva and Creed can be defined in Lacanian terms as the order of signs, symbols, significations, representations, and images of all kinds. For Lacan it is in this order the individual is formed as subject. It is the source and essence of Law. In a sense, then, it can also be defined loosely as that which individuals agree to in a social sense that seeks to stabilize meaning. So, when Kristeva (and Creed, following Kristeva) says that the monstrous (abject) brings about an encounter that threatens the symbolic order, in the environment in which Chicago created *The Dinner Party*, and the subsequent responses to it, I argue that the work can be seen as contributing to causing a crisis of stability of the “law” of patriarchy, or threatening to do so, or being perceived as such a threat, and therefore “monstrous.”

⁵⁹⁰ Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, James Creed Meredith, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), 91. For a recent analysis of the trajectory of Kant’s thinking on the sublime, see John Goodreau, *The Role of the Sublime in Kant’s Moral Metaphysics*, (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1998). In series *Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change*. I am grateful to Stephen Mansbach for suggesting that Edmund Burke’s concept of the sublime may be more appropriate to cite in this regard. Of course Burke preceded Kant, and was the first to link terror inextricably with the sublime: “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger...is a source of the Sublime.” Burke’s notion of the sublime became the basis for what is known as the Romantic Movement, which

There are also resonances between Kristeva's abjection, Creed's monstrous feminine, and Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope which can illuminate how *The Dinner Party's* aesthetics operate. For Bakhtin, the chronotope is a "hidden...specific form for experiencing time and a specific relationship between time and the spatial world [where] time...thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible...[and] space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time...and history."⁵⁹¹

The Dinner Party is a perfect example of Bakhtin's notion of the chronotopic way in which time and space "become artistically visible." Both Bakhtin and Chicago invoke the abject in their projects: Bakhtin in utilizing Rabelais' grotesque Pantagruel to demonstrate how the artist reworks "tradition...[and utilizes] the deep folkloric [as the basis for] his artistic world;"⁵⁹² *The Dinner Party* is chronotopic in this sense because it weds the "abject" kitsch with the "abject" vulva, while requiring a setting so multiple (the museum, the "alternative space," the world of commercial publishing, the world of academic historicizing and criticism) that it becomes, in Bakhtinian terms, so palpably thick and rooted that its effect becomes impossible to ignore.

Kitsch and the "Open Text"

In considering the elements of such an "effect" for *The Dinner Party*, it may be useful to revisit two important late 20th Century discourses that can be read as interacting richly with the operations of abjection, the "monstrous feminine," and the chronotope. One is

featured prominently all manner of "horror" literature. See Edmund Burke. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. James Boulton, ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958.

⁵⁹¹ M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Michael Holquist, ed. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84 and 250.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

the notion and practice of the work of art as an “open text,” and the other is the contestation over the use of “kitsch” as a transgressive strategy in the production of art.

Post-modernist and post-structuralist theorists (including feminists) have routinely argued that all works of art—from the earliest known to the most contemporary—are open-ended and multiply valent. In recent decades, critics, historians and artists alike have more and more self-consciously emphasized the concept of the “open text” in their work: a text which can, does and should change its meaning depending on the identity of viewer/participants, presentation context and the passage of time.

It is now widely accepted that the “openness” of works of art to injection of meaning by newly powerful “readers” or “viewers” represents a strenuous rebellion against the position taken in the earliest writings of Modernist art criticism, especially the writings of Clement Greenberg. For Greenberg and his followers, there could be no work of art that sought to be an “open text,” since “true art” was about only itself, specifically only about form and medium, and its value and meaning fixed in the sense of being determined by “objective criteria.”

The Greenbergian prescription is that a sharp division must be observed between “avant garde” (e.g. modernist “high art”—epitomized in the abstract expressionists) and “low” art productions or “kitsch.” Greenberg defined “kitsch” cultural production as that which is “debased...ersatz...[and] the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our time”⁵⁹³ and, though he was primarily concerned with mass-produced objects that mimed art, since he first made his proposition, the concept has been expanded by referring to art that hews too closely to mass or popular culture as “kitsch.”

⁵⁹³ Clement Greenberg, “Avant Garde and Kitsch,” (1939) in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 10.

The discourse on kitsch since Greenberg describes cultural products that in their frank “ersatz-ness” and “spuriousness” are abject in the same way that Kristeva sees the abject as contaminant. Kitsch, like abjection, defines its other. Kitsch by its very existence, defines “high art.” The abject, by its very existence, defines the “pure.” The identity of “high art” and its producers as “high artists” depend on the powerful “black hole” of kitsch, a taboo abject realm both repellent and compelling.

As touched on briefly in Part 3 of this dissertation, the realm of kitsch has been evoked in discourse since the late fifties as an avant-garde strategy by (white male) high artists including Rauschenberg, Johns and Warhol, who are, of course the offspring of the Dada movement of the early 20th century. They and those who followed them have appropriated and incorporated emblems and materials from mass culture—and have been lionized as privileged avant-gardists for their efforts, often by the very same critics responsible for the enthronement and coronation of the abstract expressionists.

Self-consciously transgressive feminist artists, artists of color and artists operating from queer standpoints who have looked to “kitsch,” garbage, found objects, appropriations of non-Western cultural objects and concepts, and more direct references to abjection such as bodily fluids and excreta have been greeted with less valorizing responses from the critical mainstream. Meanwhile, those who see in their art an activating ethos that provides vision and hope have heralded them as seers and political leaders.

Thomas Crow, in his classic 1985 essay “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts,” argues that artistic avant-gardes—as far back in the modern period as David and Courbet—have sought to interrogate the characteristics of audiences for art by referring

to “cultural goods” or kitsch, and deploying them into new constellations of meaning. Crow argues that these artistic foci on popular culture have resulted in “privileged moments of modern negation,” made so “when ...the high and low are forced into scandalous identity...when the ...high cultural and the subcultural [are] ...dislocated by the other ...[in a] ceaseless switching of codes...readable as articulate protest against the double marginalization of art...”⁵⁹⁴

In the catalogue for the 1993 Whitney Museum exhibition *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire* in American Art, essayists explore from several perspectives what Crow calls the “ceaseless switching of [high cultural and subcultural] codes” and the “forced scandalous identity of high and low [which occurs when] the two positions occupied by the avant-garde artist, the high cultural and the subcultural [are] continuously dislocated by the other...” As Simon Taylor, one of the group of curators of the show points out, the show specifically showcased art of several periods, most from the Whitney’s permanent collection, and all of which invoked abjection and kitsch to “renegotiate social relations in a contestatory fashion.”⁵⁹⁵

In one of the *Abject Art* catalog essays, Leslie C. Jones cites two 1970s works, *Womanhouse* and *Menstruation Bathroom* (which was part of *Womanhouse*)—both of which had strong involvement from Judy Chicago—as evidence of how this scandalous identity of high and low operated. She assesses these works for their deployment of everyday life objects, redolent of femininity, which were both “kitschy” in the sense of conveying extreme mundanity, abject in their references to female body parts and body

⁵⁹⁴ Thomas Crow. *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, Francis Francina, ed. London: Harper and Row, 1985, 250.

⁵⁹⁵ *Abject Art*, *ibid.*

functions, and all these elements operated in the highly sophisticated “high art” vein of conceptualism.

In the *Sexual Politics* catalogue, Laura Meyer describes how Chicago wedded “finish fetish” technique with the “kitsch aesthetic” she and her students had found so powerful in expressing the painful aspects of living inside femininity in the late 1970s, and which was the strong center of *Womanhouse*. Chicago acquired both a high level in, and strong affinity for, “finish fetish” when she attended art school in the sixties in Los Angeles. LA in the sixties was the center of “cool school” aesthetics, the privileging of technical mastery of LA-produced petrochemical plastics (lucite, vinyl and polyester) and obsession with surface perfection that showed no sign of the human hand. It may have been this long apprenticeship in making art that required painstaking skill that drew Chicago to the fastidious and demanding crafts of china painting and needlework. As Meyer notes: “Chicago’s decision to work in ceramics was a brilliant strategy, allowing her to combine the technical precision and luminosity of finish fetish art with the explicitly feminist concerns of the Feminist Art Program.”⁵⁹⁶

The Dinner Party as Monstrous Feminine

But, Chicago’s fusion of California “finish fetish” with kitsch crafts and vaginal imagery cannot fully explain the excessive presence, menacing to some, ecstatically transformative to others, that has generated such ambivalence in its reception. Chicago seems in one way to fall into the Crow template for the avant-garde, which “discovers,

⁵⁹⁶ Laura Meyer, “From Finish Fetish to Feminism: Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* in California Art History,” in *Sexual Politics*, *ibid.*, 61.

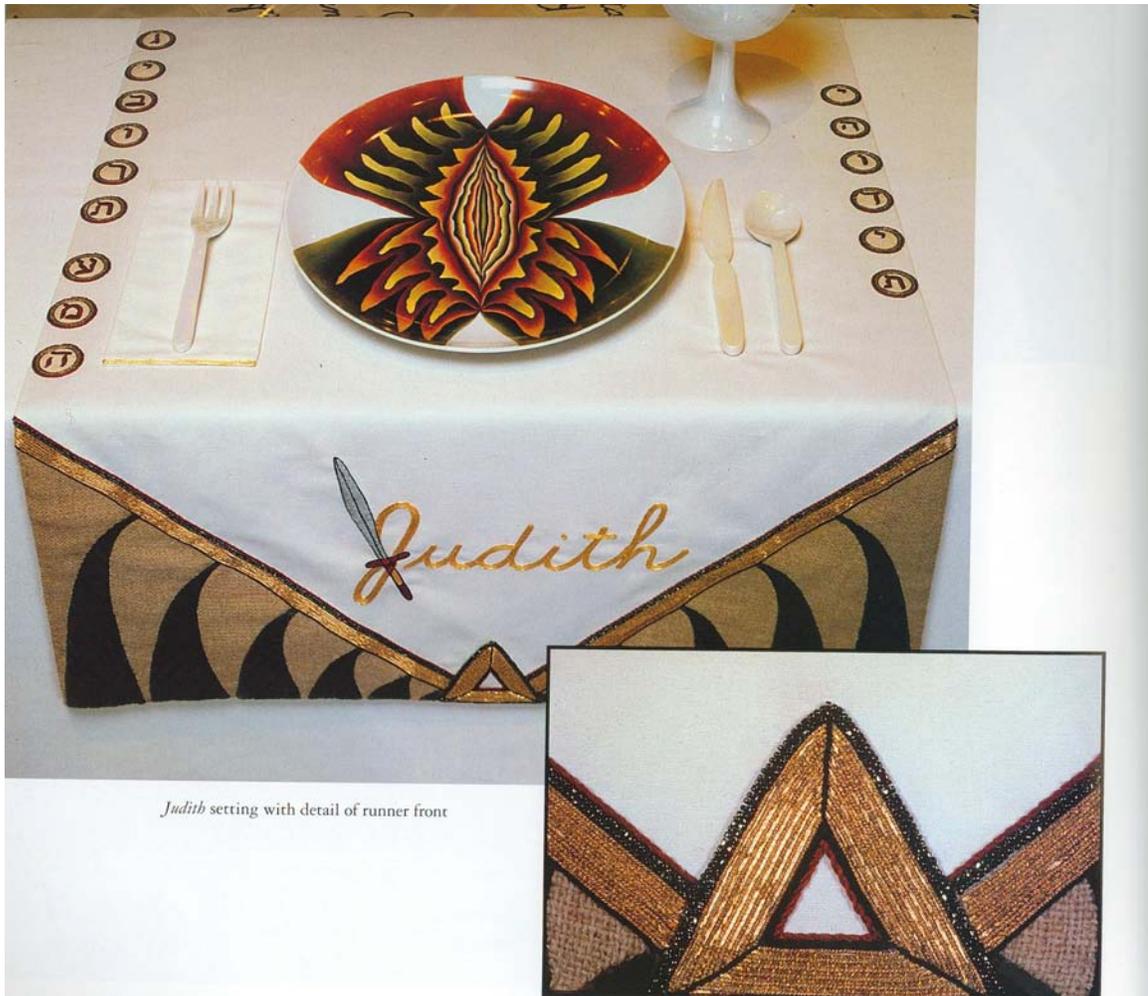
renews or reinvents itself by identifying with marginal ‘non-artistic’ forms of expressivity and display.”⁵⁹⁷

Her very deployment of china painting and needlework (Figure 41) in *The Dinner Party* can be seen as “descending” into a place where subjectivity is counted out in tiny stitches and tiny brushstrokes, a place where many women’s talents shrink to fit the constricted work they (still) must inhabit. As Roszika Parker has noted in her classic study, *The Subversive Stitch*, for many stitchers needlework “...provides a means of gaining affirmation and attention. To [stitch well] announces ... that [a woman] is good and feminine, not naughty and masculine.”⁵⁹⁸

But, all these employments of kitsch are only the clothes of the monstrous feminine that rustles and heaves in *The Dinner Party*. Like the ecclesiastical fair linen and glistening silk embroidery that belies the true nature of the Christian altar, *The Dinner Party*’s deliciously jewel-toned plates and immaculate table dressings belie the ritual for which it is prepared: A Last Supper in which the stunningly accomplished heroines of history reveal their essence, their sex, and offer it up for hungry eyes to take and eat because it is their body and blood which has been shed for many. It is this reference to the bloody sacrifice of Christ and the redemption of those who dare engage in ritual cannibalism conflated with cunnilingus that constitutes the underlying powerful, uplifting (for some) and disturbing (for others) abjection: a chronotopic layering of Bakhtin’s “deep folkloric” of cannibalistic ritual, female-based Wicca religion and the obsessive crafts practiced only by women, which have for millenia been employed in religious

⁵⁹⁷ Crow, *ibid.*, 233.

⁵⁹⁸ Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, (London and New York: Routledge), 213.



Judith setting with detail of runner front

Figure 41. Judy Chicago. *The Dinner Party*. 1979. Judith place setting. Detail of stitchery. (Photo: Donald Woodman). In Judy Chicago. *The Dinner Party: A Commemorative Volume Celebrating a Major Monument of Twentieth Century Art*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996, 170.

ritual. What both frightens and excites about *The Dinner Party* is a monstrous feminine rooted in the essentialist/masculinist view of women as “only cunts,” and accessible as both sacrificial and sacrificed, frozen in ceramic fetish-effigies and eternally alive in the desire and fear evoked in the eyes and minds of its viewers.

Chapter 2: The Temple of Confessions

In Chapter 2 the focus shifts to Guillermo Gómez Peña's *The Temple of Confessions*, a work that, in 1996, culminated its three-year circulation to several mainstream exhibition sites. In this discussion, *The Temple of Confessions* will first be considered in the particular political context of the U.S. to which it responded directly. The predominance in discourse, during the show's creation and circulation, of political correctness and compassion fatigue are discussed as both contextual and as key elements incorporated into the piece. The discussion will then focus on the apotropaic use of monstrous stereotypes in the work, and the ambivalence of the reception of art that seeks to deploy them. Here the discussion elaborates on the aesthetics of abjection and hybrid excess related to "other(ed)" bodies, by including the perspectives of discourse contributors emanating from Mexican anthropology and Chicano art history.

The Context

The period (1993-1996) during which Guillermo Gómez Peña's *The Temple of Confessions* was created and toured provided both subject matter grist for the development of the work, and a highly resonant context in which to deploy it. The "new world order" trumpeted by former U.S. President George Herbert Walker Bush, in the wake of the first Gulf War, described what had been in full swing for decades: the globalization of capitalism. The election as U.S. President of conservative Democrat Bill Clinton in 1992 was followed closely by a huge victory by the religious right wing in the U.S. Congressional elections of 1994, bringing in the so-called "Contract with America" (known in left/progressive circles as the Contract *on* America), making Clinton seem

progressive by contrast. In 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, hailed by business interests, and vigorously opposed by left/progressive intellectuals, artists and political observers, in Mexico, in the U.S. and in Canada.

Simultaneously with the appearance of NAFTA on the economic/political scene, the Zapatista rebellion exploded in Chiapas. Mexico was beset by political scandal, assassinations and economic crisis. NAFTA-instigated investment flooded the U.S.-Mexico Border, attracting thousands of workers from rural areas into round-the-clock “maquiladoras” and increasingly putrid living conditions. In the U.S., California voters passed propositions 187 and 209, removing social and health services from immigrants and their children. Copycat laws proliferated in other states. The numbers of Border Patrol agents deployed along the U.S.-Mexico border sharply increased, and they cracked down aggressively on undocumented workers.⁵⁹⁹ As Gómez-Peña succinctly expressed it: “the historical context of [*The Temple* was] the militarization of the U.S./Mexico border, the savage globalization of economy and culture, the millennial culture of apocalypse and despair, and the resurgence of virulent neonationalisms, parochial moralities and spiritual fundamentalism.”⁶⁰⁰

In the Fall of 1996 the *Temple of Confessions* opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. For the last time in a three-year exhibition tour of the piece Guillermo Gómez Peña and Roberto Sifuentes, and their colleagues Norma Medina and Michele Ceballos, performed as “saints” and “nuns” of what they called a “new border religion.” The *Temple* opened during Hispanic Heritage Month at the Corcoran, just

⁵⁹⁹ Claire F. Fox, *The Fence and the River: Culture and Politics at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

⁶⁰⁰ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 8

before the U.S. Presidential elections, in a ground-floor gallery painted blood red, dramatically lighted, and transformed into a strange, syncretic space where anthropology blended with quasi-religious tableaux and pop culture detritus from the Mexico/U.S. Border. During the performances in the installation, scores of visitors were invited to “confess” their innermost fears and desires about Mexicans and Chicanos. Several alternative ways to “confess” were provided: kneeling before the “saints” (who were ensconced like anthropological specimens in large vitrines), and speaking into a microphone; by depositing written confessions into a box; or by key-stroking them into a computer.

Gómez-Peña’s politicized work since the early 1980s was recognized in 1991, five years before *The Temple of Confessions* was installed at the Corcoran, with a MacArthur fellowship. *The Temple of Confessions* expanded on a highly complex artistic practice that raised the ante on Gómez-Peña’s longtime concentration on confronting the “real politics” of the border. The work also engaged the discourses of the period related to transgressive and politicized art through a highly dramatic installation/performance designed specifically to intervene in the museum’s institutional reality.

The *Temple of Confessions* began to take shape around the same time Gómez-Peña performed with Coco Fusco in their *The Year of the White Bear*, a prominent feature of the 1993 Whitney Biennial (Figure 38).⁶⁰¹ The critical response to the 1993 Biennial was

⁶⁰¹ This work was performed many times before it was included in the 1993 Whitney. In it, Fusco and Gómez-Peña dressed and acted like fictional Amerindians from a fictional Caribbean island, and as an ethno-anthropological “exhibition” of these types, an approach that has been consistent in most of Gómez-Peña’s performances, down to the present. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, critical response to the 1993 Whitney Biennial was not positive. But *The Year of the White Bear* was not the focus of the diatribes.



Figure 38. Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gómez Peña. *The Year of the White Bear*. Multimedia performance. 1992-1993. In *1993 Whitney Biennial*. Exh. Cat. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993, 267.

probably one of the harbingers of the attitude that burst into the general press with dance critic Arlene Croce's vehement dismissal, in 1994 of "victim art," in her "non-review" in the *New Yorker* of choreographer Bill T. Jones' elegiac dance piece about AIDS. Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes saw an opening for an activist art intervention in the increasing willingness, especially of white, liberal heterosexuals, to express publicly their "compassion fatigue"⁶⁰² and deeply felt resentments about "political correctness."⁶⁰³

⁶⁰² See Peggy Z. Brand, "Revising the Aesthetic-Non-Aesthetic Distinction," in Peggy Z. Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 245-272. Brand was provoked to write this essay by articles by Donald Kuspit, "Art and the Moral Imperative: Analyzing Activist Art," *New Art Examiner* (January 1991): 18-25, and Donald Kuspit, "A Sceptical Note on the Idea of the Moral Imperative in Contemporary Art," *Art Criticism* 7:1 (1991): 105-112. The most heated debates related to "liberal compassion fatigue" centered around an article by Arlene Croce, "Discussing the Undiscussable," *The New Yorker* (Dec. 26-Jan.2, 1995) re: "victim art." Responses to Croce in the general press include Joyce Carol Oates, "Confronting Head On the Face of the Afflicted," *New York Times*, (Sunday, Feb. 19, 1995): 22-23. Grant Kester edited a special issue of the *Art Journal* 56:1 (Spring 1997), entitled "Aesthetics and the Body Politics," which continued the treatment of Brand's "aesthetic-non-aesthetic" distinction argument, but contesting a more recent text in the discourse, the prize-winning volume by Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993). The Hickey book extends the complaint by Kuspit (contested by Brand), namely, that "engaged [or activist] art" is just so much liberal do-goodism."

⁶⁰³ "Political Correctness" is a term invented by conservatives in the early nineties, by some accounts, in relation to the protests over the celebration of the discovery of America quincentennial. Jamie Raskin describes his views of who first used the term and why in Jamie Raskin, "The Fallacies of 'Political Correctness,'" *Z Magazine* (January 1990): "'[P]olitical correctness' does not exist, and has never existed, as a body of political ideas. It is not an ideology, like socialism, liberalism, or nationalism, nor is it an organized (or disorganized) social movement. Nor is it a worldview, a moral philosophy, a partisan organization, an intellectual trend, or even an academic faction. As a description of political ideas, 'political correctness' expresses, literally, nothing. It is an empty vessel of a signifier into which meaning is poured on a purely expedient and ad hominem basis. Enforcers of today's brittle status quo now employ 'politically correct' to describe any political position which disputes the soundness of economic life, the validity of the assertion that racism and sexism no longer influence our society, the infallibility of corporate power, the nobility of right-wing culture, the value of militarism, or the wisdom of any given policy of the Reagan-Bush tenure." See also Christopher Newfield, "What was Political Correctness? Race, Right and Managerial Democracy in the Humanities," *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 1993): 308-336; and the special section on political correctness/multiculturalism in *The Humanist*, 52:2 (Mar./Apr. 1992) which included these essays: Lawrence Hyman, "Why Liberals Cannot be Politically Correct;" Tom Foster Digby, "Political Correctness and the Fear of Feminism;" Scott Henson, et al. "The Right Declares a Culture War;" Gerry O'Sullivan, "The PC Police in the Mirror of History."

The issues raised in Julia Kristeva's 1982 study of the abject, *Powers of Horror* were both foundational and debated in exhibition catalogues and academic publications during the early nineties.⁶⁰⁴ Similar attention to "difference" and the "Other" in art, often in conjunction with references to the abject (in the specific Kristevan mold, as discussed in Part 3, and in the discussion on Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* above, and bold reconsiderations of the body and identity in art, were frequently met with strenuous criticism ranging from conservatives who complained of "deterioration of quality," and from liberals who openly expressed "compassion fatigue."

In addition to "compassion fatigue" in bourgeois liberal circles, Gómez-Peña saw another thematic possibility in two key mass culture phenomena:

At the time, America was really obsessed with public confession. Those were the golden days of the talk shows, and there was also a lot of TV evangelism. People were more than willing to confess their 'sins' in public. These early talk shows were the pop cultural versions of evangelist ceremonies, of conversion ceremonies. And, as part of the zeitgeist [of the early nineties] the anti-immigration rhetoric was getting very virulent. The U.S. had just gone through a serious economic crisis, and whenever the U.S. goes through one of these crises, immigrants become the scapegoats.⁶⁰⁵

The Temple of Confessions took advantage of this willingness of people to express resentment publicly about "political correctness" and multi-culturalism at both the "high" cultural and the mass cultural levels. Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes created the *Temple* to pry open even further this Pandora's box of racial and ethnic antagonisms, using stereotypes as its metaphorical crowbar. The *Temple* was also a direct riposte to the debate about what constitutes an "appropriate" and "effective" engaged or politicized art

⁶⁰⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. *ibid.*

⁶⁰⁵ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, telephone interview with the author, August 2000.

intervention by inhabiting/infecting the museum, the *sine qua non* of mainstream high culture.⁶⁰⁶

Utilizing Stereotypes Against Stereotypes

There was more than enough warning abroad about the potential negative effects of reference to the stereotype as an activist art gesture. In left/progressive circles, where such tactics have frequently been welcomed, there was discomfort because it was recognized that stereotypes function in society to maintain destructive fictions about the categories of people they pretend to represent. Using stereotypes in activist art was, and still is, seen by both proponents and opponents of their use, as fraught with peril because, as Homi Babha has noted “stereotypes retain their corrosive force in spite of repeated debunkings ... they mobilize psychological ambivalences and embody the simultaneous play of ‘desire and derision.’”⁶⁰⁷ Even Lucy Lippard, who has been a strong champion of the use of stereotypes in art as an apotropaic weapon against stereotypes in society, warned in her 1990 book *Mixed Blessings*: “Stereotypes have the borrowed power of the real...”⁶⁰⁸ which gives work that uses them a particularly potent charge, but which also has the power to backfire.

In *Mixed Blessings*, Lippard argued that “turning around” stereotypes, a tactic deployed in the eighties primarily by artists of color, is a literal synonym for “revolution,” and its historical antecedents are the Roman Saturnalia, Mardi Gras and the

⁶⁰⁶ Of course the *Temple* was commissioned by museum and other cultural institutions, no doubt the direct result of Gómez-Peña’s recognition by the MacArthur Foundation in 1991.

⁶⁰⁷ Homi Babha, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” *The Location of Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 66-70. As summarized by Judith Wilson, “New Art Histories: Global Shifts, Uneasy Exchanges,” in *New Histories*. (exh cat.) (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), 18.

⁶⁰⁸ Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings*, *ibid.* 241.

Brazilian carnival.⁶⁰⁹ As discussed in relation to the criticism of Stallybrass and White, in Part 3, stereotypes, like the saturnalia/carnival ritual tradition, are double-edged swords. Turning them around is a dangerous move, because “stereotypes are public beliefs, [and as such] they are the causes of certain human actions that are sanctioned by the culture...Hence, a negative stereotype is likely to cause negative reactions against those being stereotyped.”⁶¹⁰ Spokespeople both for and against their use in art concur that the deployment of stereotypes denotes desperation, an act that can turn on those most vulnerable, those for whom the tactic is supposed to change things.

In addition to this potential harmfulness, there are other issues that arise in the discourses of effectiveness around this particular tactic of a politicized art praxis: Does the “turning around” of stereotypes in art interventions—a kind of carnivalesque, temporary, artificial, ritual reversal of power—act as a safety valve for the dominant order, taking the pressure off so that “business as usual” can proceed? Or, do such cultural tactics open spaces or gaps in the dominant order in which transformation can begin? Or, is there a third possible outcome, that stereotypes *both* open up the possibility of transformation, *and* serve to continue the status quo no matter what?

In this dissertation I have considered specific examples of politicized art praxis that operate on such volatile, enmeshed and intertwined sites. The artists I referred to in the earlier parts of this study have deployed their politicized works in the volatile context of the culture wars that raged throughout the eighties and nineties. The *Temple*, like the

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., 201-202.

⁶¹⁰ Christopher D. Geist and Jack Nachbar, eds., *The Popular Culture Reader* (3rd edition), (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), 156. As quoted in Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 64.

other politicized art I have discussed, utilizes what I call the abject/monstrous/grotesque, a striking aesthetic based on hybrid excess strongly related to “other(-ed)” bodies. It is an aesthetic of shifts and changes evoked through oscillation and layerings of stereotyped tropes of gender, race, ethnicity and class. Irony and satire are often key ingredients.

As alluded to in earlier parts of this dissertation, my concept of the abject/monstrous/grotesque builds on what is now a complex and extensive literature related to Julia Kristeva’s theory of the “powers of horror,” and further elucidated by scholars such as Barbara Creed, Mary Russo and Elizabeth Grosz.

Bartra and Ybarra Frausto: Artificial Savages and *Rasquachismo*

With specific reference to the *Temple of Confessions*, I utilize other theoretical templates that can illuminate the monstrous/abject/grotesque. Especially pertinent is the discursive contribution of Mexican anthropologist Roger Bartra whose work centers on the genealogy of the mythical European “wild man” and “wild woman,” “artificial savages” inhabiting discourses handed down across geographies and centuries.⁶¹¹ Also helpful is the notion of “*rasquachismo*” first articulated by Chicano art historian Tomás Ybarra Frausto.⁶¹²

⁶¹¹ Roger Bartra, *The Artificial Savage: Modern Myths of the Wild Man*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997). Gómez-Peña calls Bartra his “guru,” and one of the thinkers most influential on his work. Other Latin American thinkers he cites as important to his creative process include Felipe Ehrenberg (for his thinking on performance art, and art and the public sphere), Néstor García Canclini (for his thinking about border culture and pop culture, especially the influence of U.S. pop culture on Mexico) and Gerardo Mosquera (on hybridity). (Telephone interview, 8/28/2000). He specifically denies influence from Western European theorists: “I use very little European postmodern thought as a reference to my work. Because we have been colonized by European post structuralism and by New York postmodernist theory. And my generation has been very careful to make a point. We read these writers, but we don’t quote them or reference them because there are equally important writers in Latin America who are talking about an organic Latin American postmodernism that grows from within Latin American culture that is very different from the European.” (Telephone interview, 10/1996)

⁶¹² Tomás Ybarra Frausto, “Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility,” in *CARA: Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* (exh. cat.) (Los Angeles: Wight Gallery of Art, University of California, Los Angeles, 1991), 155-162.

The power and longevity of Bartra's mythical "artificial savage" of European origin are not to be denied. These archetypal, strongly gendered "artificial savages" dating to the middle ages, became the lens through which 16th century European fortune-seekers and ecclesiastics focused on the cultures they encountered in the New World. In *The Temple of Confessions* these "artificial savages" burst out in a highly baroque deployment of *rasquachismo*.

Art historian Tomás Ybarra Frausto first associated *rasquachismo* with the work of certain Chicano and Mexican artists. He has identified Gómez-Peña as one of the key recontextualizers of the *rasquache* sensibility in politicized art because he manipulates "rasquache artifacts...from both sides of the border."⁶¹³ The *rasquache*, Ybarra Frausto notes, "is alive within Chicano [working class] communities ... [as] an insider private code.... [It is] a bawdy, spunky consciousness... a sort of good taste of bad taste... a bicultural underdog sensibility ... that favors the flamboyant over the severe... high intensity to low... a florid milieu of admixtures and recombinations."⁶¹⁴ In this part, the denizens of *The Temple of Confessions* will be proposed as abject, "monstrous," artificial savages who materialize out of a complex layering, a thick palimpsest of *rasquache* objects and imagery, that both flaunts imagery and objects from contemporary popular (bi-)culture and taps ancient discourses about "wild men" and "wild women."

The abject, the stereotype, the "artificial savage" and the monster have much in common, and serve very similar purposes. Judith Halberstam argues that "the monster functions as monster when it is able to condense as many fear-producing traits as possible into one body," and that "monsters ... are technologies... that produce the perfect figure

⁶¹³Ybarra Frausto, *ibid.*, 161.

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*

for negative identity.”⁶¹⁵ There is a connection between the monster and the stereotype in that “in stereotypes, the [culturally constructed] traits of the ugly and the undesirable [become] essential signifiers of evil and negativity.”⁶¹⁶ The monster in film, literature and nightmare frightens precisely because it demonstrates these same traits. At the same time, the construction of such fantasmatic creatures also allows for critical interpretation of just how its component parts—the ugly and undesirable/evil and negativity—came to be, *and* came to be connected, as well as for *whom* certain characteristics are ugly, undesirable, evil and negative.

For Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes, the “turning around” of stereotypes in *The Temple* was an exercise in “reverse anthropology ...” They see *The Temple* as more about cultural projections, and the inability to deal with cultural otherness, than about the Latino “other.”

This approach operates from a basically optimistic stance. If viewers can be helped to “see” our most repulsive repressed attitudes—the abject stereotypes, the “artificial savages” that live in our imaginations—we can change them. The “we” here may also not refer to Anglos alone. The primary intent of *The Temple of Confessions* was to plumb the nightmare of ethnic stereotypes in the minds of Anglos, in order to explode them. Nevertheless, the fantasmatic, poisonous constructions of the Mexican and Chicano in *The Temple* inhabit the imaginations of Anglos and Latinos alike, but with very different valences, provoking very different responses, depending on the particular ethnic background, gender, age, geographic location and class of the viewer.

⁶¹⁵ Judith Halberstam, *Skin Show: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 21 and 22.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.* 80.

Deleuze and the *Phantasm*

The dynamic Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes sought to unleash in *The Temple of Confessions* is very much like Gilles Deleuze's description of the workings of the phantasm. For Deleuze, the phantasm's dynamic is to "open the ego... to liberate [that which] it had imprisoned...[literally] releasing them like spores and bursts as it gets unburdened."⁶¹⁷ For Deleuze, the phantasm is inside and outside the psyche, and has the effect of being both the phantasm that is imprisoned—that needs releasing—and the phantasm that is "exterior," that provokes the release. The phantasm "inside" viewers, the stereotype embedded in their (un)consciousness, is provoked to "burst forth" by the embodiment of the stereotype/phantasm enacted in and by *The Temple*.

In fact, the responses to *The Temple* in the form of confessions demonstrate the potential for a dynamic of the interior and exterior phantasms/stereotypes interacting to produce "releases." Here are several examples from actual "confessions" recorded during *Temple* performances: "I want to be Mexican, but I don't want to sacrifice my safe, suburban, white world." "Why the voodoo in your work? Many things in our Mexican culture scare people visually. Can't you be more positive, more sensitive towards us?" "I wish I could speak to you but I will cry. I feel sadness, anger pain, fear. I feel strongly connected to something in this room. Perhaps it's sadness." "I certainly fear the pregnant nun standing next to me. "I hate you precisely because I understand you." "I fear Mexicans getting medical services and Americans having to wait." "You people treat your women like slaves and your pets like shit." "Mexico is not a fear. It is a culture, sublime beauty. White Americans simply don't understand." "When I think of Mexico, I

⁶¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, Mark Lester, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 213, 217. As quoted in Mary Flanagan, "Navigating the narrative in space: gender and spatiality in virtual worlds," *Art Journal* 59:3 (Fall 2000): 79.

fear that I have to eat a roach.” “Proverbs 1:7: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”⁶¹⁸

In 1989, Gómez-Peña published a manifesto, an open letter to the art world. In it he argues that “what the art world wants is a ‘domesticated Latino’ who can provide enlightenment without irritation, entertainment without confrontation.”⁶¹⁹ In this manifesto, referring to the so-called “Latino Boom” of the late 80s, in which an unprecedented number of Latin American art exhibitions exploded on the US art scene, Gómez-Peña points to the distorted way in which Latino artists had been characterized in the accompanying catalogues and reviews as ‘... primeval creatures in touch with ritual,’ ‘hypersexual entertainers,’ ... ‘colorful,’ ‘passionate,’ ‘mysterious,’ ‘exuberant,’ ‘baroque,’ ... all euphemisms for irrationalism and primitivism.”⁶²⁰

Four years after this manifesto was published, *The Temple of Confessions* mirrored back these stereotypical labels attached to Latino artists in the early days of the Latino Art Boom. *The Temple* and its personae were, therefore, not only incarnations of generalized stereotypes about Mexicans and Chicanos; they were also specific references to how Latino artists and their work were continuing to be characterized by mainstream U.S. art critics, historians and institutions, especially in the climate of nineties “compassion fatigue.”

⁶¹⁸ From confession cards deposited in a box, during the installation/performance of *The Temple of Confessions*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, October 1996. Xerographic copies of the cards. Collection of the author. For me, these confessions represent the *potential* for release. Whether any of these individuals have been able, subsequently, to truly “release” their negative perceptions is not known. Hence my continuing sense that this is an optimistic view of the degree to which this kind of art can actually change internal psychological states. One can hope.

⁶¹⁹ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “The Multicultural Paradigm: An Open Letter to the National Arts Community,” *Warrior for Gringostroika*, (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1993), 51

⁶²⁰ Ibid.

The Temple personae are nothing if not “hypersexual, colorful, mysterious, exuberant and baroque.” *The Temple of Confessions*’ personae become monsters and stereotypes as signifiers of evil and negativity and constructions of the ugly and undesirable merge and oscillate with sly humor sexuality and seduction. *The Temple* is the epitome of the ambivalence and ambiguity of the *rasquache* aesthetic. Nothing is subtle, though nothing is obvious, either. While it deliberately deploys what most viewers in U.S. museums would experience as “ugly and evil,” base and “low,” the overall effect of the installation and the ritual performances is stunningly beautiful. The experience of *The Temple* and its inhabitants is intense, dizzying and difficult to decipher. So for people not immersed from birth in Chicano and Mexican *rasquache*, entering *The Temple* was often a shocking experience.

Temple viewers’ “confessions” reveal that the assault of color, music and imagery provoked bewildered responses: Are those *velvet* paintings on the walls of the Corcoran? Velvet paintings don’t belong in an art museum! What are the images in them supposed to mean? Why does Frida Kahlo have a tire around her head? What does the incorporation of kitschy “tourist trap” artifacts as altar paraphernalia and props for the artists’ performances signify? Who is allowed to laugh at a kahlua bottle in the shape of an “Aztec deity” sitting on the altar under a velvet painting of the “True Illegal Alien” (portrayed as a scaly green-skinned creature from science fiction)? If Anglos laugh at this imagery, what does that laughter mean? If Latinos laugh, what does that mean? Does laughter coming from someone of Mexican descent mean something different than laughter from someone from Argentina or Peru?

The Temple's Materialized Stereotypes: Getting Viewers' Attention

The Temple's personae, like its *rasquache* velvet paintings and pop artifacts, were for most viewers, both instantly, uncannily recognizable and, at the same time, impenetrably incomprehensible. They were instantly recognizable because they triggered a visceral memory of embedded stereotypes. Shock and shame—and anger and resentment—were clearly expressed in the recorded “confessions,” as it became clear to viewers that recognition and visceral response occurred precisely because these stereotypes clearly lived inside their minds.

The stereotypes/personae of *The Temple* included the “living santos” San Pocho Aztlaneca, performed by Gómez Peña (the name, roughly translated, means “Holy Gringoized Mexican from Aztlan.”)⁶²¹ Aztlan is the mythical homeland of the Aztecs, which, legend has it, encompasses what is now the States of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas). The Pre-Columbian Vato, performed by Sifuentes (“*vato*” is translatable as “dude.” A *vato* could be, but is not always, a gang member, probably from Los Angeles, but he could be from any number of cities with large Chicano populations). Ceballos and Medina performed the “*chola*” nuns or temple caretakers.

All wore riveting costumes and engaged in highly stylized and choreographed movements and gestures designed to grab and hold viewers' attention: to seduce. Neon signs over the heads of the living saints, ensconced in large vitrines, proclaimed their intention: “We incarnate your fears” and “We incarnate your desires.” Desire and fear

⁶²¹ In a “straight” Spanish dictionary, “*pocho*” is defined as “rotten or overripe.” According to Lalo Lopez Alcaraz, one of the editors of the Chicano humor ‘zine, *Pocho*, a more vernacular definition would be: “what some Mexican-Americans and Chicanos are called by Mexican Nationals. Basically a gringoized Mexican. It literally means “cutoff” or “stubby” (as in chopped off roots) or “faded” as in “not very colorful...” (Lalo Lopez Alcaraz, Email communication with author, September 15, 2000).

commingle in *The Temple*, as they do in monster and action films. In fact, the total effect of the installation, and the performances in it, is theatrically cinematic. As the viewer scans the scene in which s/he is immersed, turning first this way and then that, her gaze is like the camera, registering a montage of fleeting and constantly changing tableaux, complex in the extreme. Over here San Pocho drinks from a rubber heart. Over there the Vato polishes a gun with an American flag.

In a dark corner, one of the nuns pulls herself along the floor by a chainleash attached to a dog collar around her neck. Whispering and moaning in Spanish, the other nun waves burning incense sticks around the body of a startled viewer who is standing in front of a 16th century painting of the Virgin Mary with Jesus and John, on the banks of a river.

The viewer has been avidly reading the wall text, which identifies the picture as having been donated by the Precolumbian Vato, from his collection of religious art stolen from a church in Riverside CA, where he had taken refuge from a drive-by shooting. The picture, the text says, is of La Llorona , the “Weeping Woman” witch/ghost of Mexican myth, who, in one version, drowned her children, and has been condemned forever to haunt riverbanks, irrigation ditches and other dangerous places, wailing and weeping. According to legend, La Llorona perpetually seeks her murdered children, doing harm to anyone who crosses her path.

As the nun turns, one can clearly see through the black tulle veil that covers her face and body, that she is pregnant. Two black tears are tattooed under her left eye. In Chicano prison culture, one tattooed tear means one murder committed. Perhaps she is the

weeping woman, the witch of the arroyo, a terrifying succubus whose womb contains a devil-child.

Moving deeper into *The Temple* one encounters at close range the still life at the center of the installation. (Figure 39.) A black plastic body bag inscribed in yellow: “Indocumentado: Courtesy of the INS” is flanked on one side by a wooden cigar store Indian and, on the other, by a figure seated on a church pew: a store mannequin wrapped and tied in a leopard patterned fabric, her head covered with a burlap sack and tied around the neck with a rope. Swaying over the body bag is a taxidermied rooster hanging by a rope noose around its neck. “Chicken” or “Pollo” is a word often used derogatorily to refer both to Mexicans and Chicanos. Its genesis goes back decades to its use, along the Texas-Mexico border, by U.S. police, border patrol and immigration agents, to refer to undocumented Mexican workers trying to enter the U.S..

The female mannequin swathed in fake leopard material refers to one of the symbols of Mexico, the jaguar. This wild cat, indigenous to the forests of Central and South America, is smaller, stronger, faster and a quicker killer than its cousin the leopard. Like La Llorona of myth, the jaguar wanders the banks of streams and rivers in search of its prey. It kills instantly by crushing the skulls of its victims.

The mortuary chamber tableau can be seen as a silent, static reenactment of the drama of the border. Mexico, the jaguar, has been disarmed, bound and immobilized. The native American of Aztlan, the legendary northern Aztec homeland, is frozen into a sculpted stereotype, a commercial logo. The space between them represents the Rio Grande, the longest portion of the long border between the U.S. and Mexico, the last barrier the

undocumented worker must cross. And there, at the center of the tableau, is the result of the journey: the body bag and the lynched rooster.

The nun who has been pulling herself across the floor by the chain and collar, wraps herself around the wooden Indian, gazing balefully at the body bag, and slowly wipes the statue's eyes. Now that she is standing, one can clearly see through the black tulle veil covering her head to toe. She wears a black lace push-up bra, black panties revealing a penile bulge, a garter belt, fishnet stockings and 6 inch stiletto pumps. Her mournful face, heavily made up in Las Vegas showgirl style, is mustached and goateed, and an ash cross is inscribed on her forehead. She crumples to the floor, dragging herself by the chain slowly toward a man who has stopped to look at one of the velvet paintings, one that looks very much like the nun who has now arrived at his feet, and begins to polish his shoes with her veil. A smile plays across his lips as he watches her for a few seconds. Then he reaches down and lifts her up, mouthing the words: "I Love You." He lifts her veil and pushes a bill into her bra.⁶²²

This nun is a hybrid of La Llorona and La Malinche, layered with the stereotype of the Mexican as open to all kinds of alternative, "degenerate" sexual practices. Malinche was the Indian mistress of Hernán Cortés, who also served as a translator for the conquistador. Many narratives of the Conquest going back to the very earliest, credit Malinche's gift for languages as important to the defeat of the Aztecs. She is also known as the Big Whore/La Chingada (the Fucked/Raped Woman) because she contributed to the colonization of Mexico, and bore Cortés a son.

⁶²² Summary and paraphrase of an anecdote related by Michele Ceballos, the performer who played the dominatrix nun. (Interview with Michele Ceballos, August 2000).

In other versions of the La Chingada myth, she is merged with La Llorona, portrayed as a temptress with both feminine wile and masculine power, a phantom changeling who materializes first as a desirable, beautiful woman, turning quickly into a bloodthirsty, violent demon, a narrative that strongly recalls the myth of the “wild woman” recounted by Roger Bartra. The archetypal “wild women” in stories going back centuries, always inhabit liminal spaces, and exact both sex and death from those seeking to cross the borders they patrol.

La Chingada and La Llorona have been in the process of recuperation for a decade and more in Chicana feminist literature, criticism and visual art.⁶²³ Some recent versions of the story are reconceiving Malinche as both a sign of ancient Mexico in defeat and as the mother of the mestizo/a, a brilliant natural linguist who prevented a more extensive genocide of native peoples through her relationship with Cortés.

Alicia Gaspar de Alba notes that “La Llorona’s weeping is now interpreted [among Chicana feminists] as an oppositional scream against patriarchal inscriptions of womanhood, and among Chicana lesbians she symbolizes defiance to compulsory

⁶²³ See the following for contemporary essays on Llorona and Malinche: Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master’s House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 144-145, 261-262; Cordelia Candelaria, “Letting La Llorona Go: Re/reading Histories’ Tender Mercies,” *Heresies* 27: 111-115; José E. Limón, “La Llorona, the Third Legend of Greater Mexico: Cultural Symbols, Women and the Political Unconscious,” in Adelaida R. Del Castillo, ed., *Between Borders: Essays on Mexicana/Chicana History* (Encino, CA: Floricanto Press, 1990), 399-432; Norma Alarcón, “Traductora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism,” *Cultural Critique* (Fall, 1989): 57-87; Robert Franklin Gish, “La Llorona, Magic Realism and the Frontier,” *Beyond Bounds: Cross-Cultural Essays on Anglo, American Indian and Chicano Literature*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 110-127. Also, Sandra Cisneros is just one of many fiction writers and poets who recuperate Llorona. See her often-cited story “Woman Hollering Creek,” in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, (New York: Random House, 1991). On the *Encyclopedia Mythica* website there are three thumbnail accounts of the La Llorona myth as retold respectively in East Los Angeles, in El Paso Texas and in Zacatecas, Mexico (see www.pantheon.org/mythica/articles/0/la_llorona.html). To date I have found the following Chicana feminist visual artists whose work deploys the Llorona: Santa Barraza, Rosa M., Celia Rodriguez, Delilah Montoya and Laura Molina. See also Cynthia A. Sánchez, “‘Blessed is the Fruit of thy Womb...’: The Politics of the Representation and Reproduction of the Mythical Mother in New Mexico Cultural Traditions.” (PhD diss), New York University, 1998. Sánchez includes work by 37 artists, male and female, from New Mexico, who deploy either the Virgen de Guadalupe, La Llorona, or La Malinche, and sometimes in combination.

heterosexuality,”⁶²⁴ while La Malinche has become “an affirmation of La India who lives inside every single...Chicana, Mexicana, Mestiza...[who] have accepted their role as ‘tongues’ and demanded that their voices be heard.”⁶²⁵

Despite the attempted recuperation by feminists of these profoundly negative archetypes, however, as Gaspar de Alba notes, “gender identities have not been redefined in Chicano/a culture, and we can still rely on the mother/virgin/whore archetypes to represent the women of El Movimiento.”⁶²⁶ This reality is painfully mirrored in the nun personae of *The Temple*, where archetypes merge and layer with more contemporaneous stereotypes. The pure, celibate, subservient nun, the “Lupana” or servant of the Virgin of Guadalupe, merges with La Malinche, the traitor, and again with the morose and frightening specter of La Llorona, the despairing, grieving, murderous mother. These nun personae are palimpsests layering ambivalent ancient feminine archetypes with inscriptions of base contemporary stereotypes of Mexican women of the border areas, and cholas of the U.S. urban barrios: tough, weapon-wielding, over-sexed prostitutes, transvestites and rape bait, paradoxically also subservient to men, heroes and saints, the caretakers of religious artifacts and perpetuators of ritual and superstition.

Gómez-Peña, in his San Pocho Aztlaneca role (Figure 42), portrays the “brujo” archetype, popularized in the U.S. in the 1960s by Carlos Castaneda’s tale of a Yaqui Indian shaman and his “way of Knowledge.” The “brujo” image is conflated with several border stereotypes, including rock star (he wears a “tiger” vest that refers to the popular

⁶²⁴ Gaspar de Alba, *ibid.*, 143.

⁶²⁵ As quoted in Gaspar de Alba, *ibid.* 161. Inés Hernández. “An Open Letter to Chicanas: On the Power and Politics of Origin,” in Ray González, ed. *Without Discovery: A Native Response to Columbus*. (Seattle: Broken Moon Press), 1992.

⁶²⁶ Gaspar de Alba, *ibid.*, 133.



Figure 42. *The Temple of Confessions*. Photograph of Gómez Peña as “San Pocho Azatlaneca.” Guillermo Gómez Peña and Roberto Sifuentes. *The Temple of Confessions: Mexican Beasts and Living Santos*. New York: Powerhouse Books, 1996, 103.

Mexican rock group *Los Tigres del Norte*),⁶²⁷ and street entertainer/mariachi (*merolicos*). The vest also marks San Pocho's persona with the masculine archetypes of Mexican as indigenous warrior, revolutionary hero and flamboyant border bandit. "Tiger knight" was a description given by the Spanish invaders to Aztec warriors who wore the skin of the jaguar, "tigre" or "tiger" in Spanish.

San Pocho sits on a wheelchair suggesting that, despite his warlike tattoos and accouterments, and his angry gestures, he is physically impotent. He wears a red, white and green sequined bra (the colors of the Mexican flag) suggesting via this element of cross-dressing a non-mainstream feminized and decadent sexuality. Framing him is a poem written *placa* style, (*placa* is a distinctive calligraphy used by Chicano gang members to "tag" gang territory)⁶²⁸ which emphasizes his "border identity" and what he calls his own "deterritorialized identity as Mexican-in-the-process-of-Chicanization."

⁶²⁷ See <http://www.hisp.com/mar98/20lostigres.html>: "Heroes of the Mexican working class for two decades, norteño rockers Los Tigres have taken the stripped-down sound of the corrido-border ballad-and turned it into a booming enterprise. Their songs of the migrant and drug smuggler experience echo reality and result in a fan base that stretches from Central America northward. The Grammy-winning Los Tigres are truly a people's band, bearing the mantle of the underdog to world renown. They are the creators of Mexican gangsta rap. Originally from Mexico's Pacific-coast state of Sinaloa, Los Tigres are best known for having modernized Mexican pop music, infusing it with boleros (sentimental songs), cumbias (dance music) and hard-driving rock-style rhythms. Los Tigres' audiences frequently exceed 60,000 or even 70,000, if Los Tigres have not performed in an area for a long time. They have established a Los Tigres del Norte Foundation at UCLA that will support the study, preservation and dissemination of folk music in Spanish."

⁶²⁸ Carlos Bojorquez, a Chicano artist from Los Angeles, who has utilized *placa* style in his work since the late sixties explains the practice: "L.A. gang graffiti writings are called 'Placas' (plaques, symbols of territorial street boundaries), and are pledges of allegiance to your neighborhood. Its letter face has always been called 'Old English' and is always printed in upper case capital letters. This squarish, prestigious typeface was meant to present to the public a formal document, encouraging gang strength, and creating an aura of exclusivity. The Placa is written in a contemporary high advertising format, with a headline, body copy, and a logo. These three major building blocks of corporate public advertising can also describe the type layout from ancient Sumerian clay tablets to the Constitution of the United States. The headline states thang or street name, the body copy is your rollcall list of everyone's gang name, and the logo refers to the person who wrote it by adding his tag at the end. Placas are written with care to make them straight and clean. They are flushed left and right or words are stacked and centered. Rarely are they ever done in lower case free-script, or other than in black letters, one of the many

The absurdity and dark comedy of San Pocho's gestures are abstract to the point of meaninglessness. He wields a bizarre pharmacy of tourist trap memorabilia in slow-motion, ritualistic gestures. His face contorts into a silent scream. He plays a toy violin with no strings. He thrusts an elaborately designed sword into his chest. He applies lipstick. He drinks from a bottle of tequila. He attempts unsuccessfully, more than twenty times to rise from his wheelchair. He holds a toy tomahawk aloft, peering over sunglasses into space. He manipulates a rubber snake. He is a menacing male witch who acts like a clown.

Sifuentes' persona, the "Pre-Columbian Vato," combines the stereotype of Chicano youth as gang member and criminal, with the archetype of the abject hero/sacrificial victim/Christ figure (Figure 43). He sits on a red velvet throne in front of a styrofoam "Mayan" temple façade, symbolizing his status as a Chicano in the process of Mexicanization. A neon sign hanging over his vitrine reads: "We reincarnate your desires." Blood is a strong motif. To each side, left and right are styrofoam "precolumbian" statues, daggers plunged into their chests. Red paint streams out of the "wounds." The figures wear masks held in place by very large nails driven into the heads, one depicting resignation, the other pain/anger. A live iguana lies across the back of the Vato's throne.

The Pre-Columbian Vato wears baggy jeans and flannel shirt, open to reveal a blood-stained undershirt with several bullet holes. He stands and begins to drink from a large beer bottle. Then he picks up a night stick from a table cluttered with paraphernalia

differences from N.Y. style. This tradition of type, names and language rarely deviates drastically and is handed down from generation to generation." (see <http://www.graffitiverite.com/cb-cholowriting.htm>).

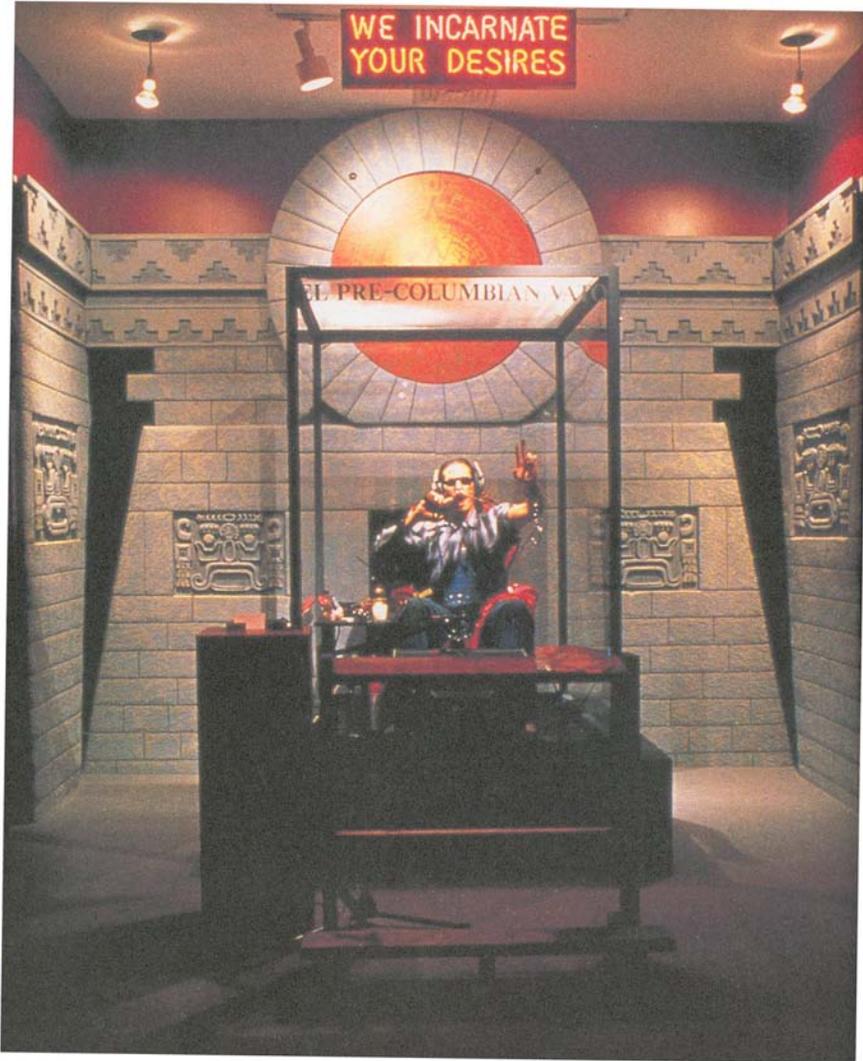


Figure 43. *The Temple of Confessions*. Photograph of Roberto Sifuentes as “Pre-Columbian Vato.” Guillermo Gómez Peña and Roberto Sifuentes. *The Temple of Confessions: Mexican Beasts and Living Santos*. New York: Powerhouse Books, 1996, 46.

associated with violence, drug use and religion. He plunges the nightstick into his stomach several dozen times, then brings it up to his neck with a grimace.

Putting down the nightstick, he slowly turns his hands toward the viewers. Bleeding stigmata are visible on each hand. Inch by inch he brings one hand to his mouth and begins to lick the “blood” flowing from the “wound” on his palm.

The Vato and San Pocho can be seen as simultaneously abjectly hypermasculine and feminized. Their gestures are frequently violent, as would be expected from a stereotypically hypermasculine persona. But their gestures are also masochistic, a state associated in psychoanalysis with the feminine.⁶²⁹ They are, in essence, “imprisoned” under glass, and because of their restricted mobility, they become “specimens,” subjects of the unrelenting gaze of viewers. They aim their violence at themselves, and they are safely removed from direct contact with viewers, though they are direct targets for viewers’ most vicious, aggressive comments, and devouring eyes. Like the monsters Barbara Creed finds in popular horror films, they are “feminized via the body: they bleed...[are]penetrated...”: the Vato with the horse syringe and bullets; San Pocho with the sword, and are placed in “a masochistic position...” from which they can only escape if someone unlocks the vitrine doors.

Mobilizing the Unspeakable

Lucy Lippard noted, in 1993, that “...since its inception in the late sixties [performance art] has provided some of the most powerful statements in the art world by

⁶²⁹See Sigmund Freud, “Sadism and Masochism” (1905) *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 23-26, and a later Freud essay where he revises his view of masochism: “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (1924) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19. (London: Hogarth Press, and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1961), 157-170.

acting out of the unspeakable...”⁶³⁰ *The Temple of Confessions* mobilized the unspeakable, what Hal Foster calls “trauma discourse.” *The Temple*, with its abject, sexualized, monstrous saints and nuns and its all-too-willing to-confess visitors, became a stage upon which trauma was embodied, enacted as bleeding wound, staged as the corpse in the body bag, and performed as ritual cannibalism. And, finally, *The Temple* revealed the trauma of the phantasmatic reality of stereotypes embedded in psyches and the culture at large.

The last performance on the last day of the Corcoran version of *The Temple of Confessions* enacted the final fantasy: the consumption of the “last immigrant.” This performance was only done at the Corcoran, and marked not only the last day of the performance in Washington, DC, but the end of the three years of *The Temple’s* life. From that point to the present, while *The Temple* as such has not been circulated, San Pocho and the Vato transformed themselves, in Sifuentes and Gómez Peña’s performances for several years thereafter, again and again, by activating the stereotypes contained in the confessions gathered during *The Temple’s* exhibition period, and later from its internet version, which, though not still operational in the sense of receiving new confessions, is still up on the web. These new stereotypes/personae they enacted after *The Temple* were even more strenuously monstrous than the ones performed during *The Temple* active phase.

In the final performance of *The Temple* at the Corcoran, the centerpiece was the ritual consumption of the “Last Immigrant.” The ritual began with a procession, in which all the personae were involved. The procession was led by Mexican performance artist

⁶³⁰ Lucy Lippard, “Speaking Up,” *Z Magazine* (July-August 1993), 92.

Lorena Orozco, dressed as a nun with a clear plastic window at navel level which allowed viewers to see her naked body under her habit. A six-foot tall steel wire mesh cross rested against her shoulders, rolling along the marble floor of the museum on tiny wheels. The cross was unadorned during the procession, but earlier it had been covered with hundreds of amulets, purchased in a Mexican open-air market. For two hours prior to the beginning of the procession inside the museum, Orozco had moved, with the cross, around *The Temple* installation, and outside on the Ellipse in front of the White House, distributing these amulets to bemused Temple viewers and passersby on the street and in the park.

As the procession moved along, Mexican performance artist César Martínez emerged from one of the large oak doors at the edge of the museum's atrium. He was garbed in a "blood"-stained butcher's apron. His hands were covered in "blood." Two small horns poked out of his forehead, from under his disheveled shoulder length hair. On a large glass table beside Martínez, lighted from below, and festooned with the Mexican and U.S. flags, lay a fruit gelatin sculpture of the naked body of a small golden brown man. The body was surrounded by a halo of strawberries and other fruits and a penumbra of whipped cream. The nuns and saints of *The Temple* stood by holding knives, plates and paper napkins.

Making his way to the podium, Martínez genuflected and began to intone a "liturgical" text:

Let Us Pray. The new Homo-Consumus Man has been born. Blessed are those who cross the border because each harvest and daily bread will come from them. Blessed are those who have died in their attempts, because the future and life will come from them. Consumerism will be our bible and we will be the apostles of a new apocalypse and we will be left at the fringe of the sacramental bonds of this new Economic Liturgy. Alleluia. Alleluia. Second Reading According to the Liturgy of Economic Castration. Tell me what you consume, and I will tell you who you are. You shall pray to the Media, and not to men, women or children. I

buy, therefore I exist. This is the word of the dollar, Amen. Let us live the miracle of this corpse. The Corpse of all the Mexicans that are not included in the treaty of uncertainty, economic paranoia and fear. The Dollar will be the father of our existence. Therefore, NAFTA will be the reincarnation and the resurrection of stupidity as survival. Death will become a mere accident. The Economy will be the Deadly Religion of Consumerism which will incite us to paralyze the free exchange of ideas and human beings. Take this all of you and eat it, for this is the corpse of all the days, the free economic movement and the blood of our new external alliance.⁶³¹

Over a hundred visitors and staff of the museum then moved forward without hesitation, holding their plates out as the nuns and saints carved up the jello carcass. The mood was festive.

Implications of Deploying the Monstrous/Abject/Grotesque for/as Activist Art

Judith Butler has pointed out that certain aspects of society are “constitutive exclusions,” that is, exclusions or repressions that allow dominant culture to retain its hegemony.⁶³² When such exclusions are made visible, flaunted, they become, in Butler’s view, effective politically because in the flaunting, or making visible, it becomes clear that what has been repressed, erased, made absent, is just as “real” as that which has been promoted, made visible. The repressed, abject, fantasmatic, monstrous “other” is just as *real* (or, to put it another way, just as *constructed*) as the “clean and proper body” of the (Caucasian, masculinist) dominant order.

What has been done in *The Temple* is to dredge up the constitutive exclusions represented by stereotypes from the imaginations of viewers, and then to reenact them in a highly exaggerated form. They become stereotypes on steroids, magnified and distorted to monstrous proportions. They are impossible to ignore. But *The Temple* was shown in only a few sites, scattered over the U.S.. Though the stereotypes enacted in *The Temple*

⁶³¹ César Martínez. Text for performance. Typescript. Collection of author.

⁶³² Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, ibid. 146.

continue to be mobilized in new performance formats and locations by Gómez Peña and his cohorts, these appearances are not widely publicized nor extensively documented in critical discourse. Therefore, what effect can the “flaunting” of constitutive exclusions in the form of monstrous stereotypes have if seen by so few people? NAFTA is still there. People of Mexican descent are still discriminated against in the U.S. The border areas between U.S. and Mexico are still militarized, and flooding with rural people from the interior of Mexico. The living conditions there are still very bad and getting worse.

For artists seeking to perform a politicized praxis, as well as the critics and historians who seek to categorize and contextualize them, Gerardo Mosquera points out that

...terms such as ‘hybridization,’ ‘displacement,’ ‘borders,’ ‘decentralization,’ or ‘re-articulation,’ like mantras of peripheral socio-cultural affirmation, [may be based in an] optimism that prevents a critique of the internal workings of these categories. There is a risk of ... complacency in celebrating subalternity that prevents a questioning that might stimulate change and blunts the critical blade that should always be turning on itself....⁶³³

The ultimate hybrid, of course, is the monster, the stereotype, constructed like Dr. Frankenstein’s creature, of abject, rejected material. As has been suggested by the many voices in the discourse treated in this dissertation, it may be no accident that the gothic genre in literature, the “living dead” of the cinema, the foolish clowns of popular television whose progenitor is Caliban, the abject bodily fluids, dismembered bodies and vicious racial and ethnic stereotypes of contemporary popular culture reenacted in visual art in its high culture sites, are so evident across Western culture today.

Roger Bartra suggests that “...lowering the threshold defining the monstrous and wild can be a way of stimulating a critical attitude toward the capitalist establishment, since the artist invites us to understand that the apparent normality is more monstrous than we

⁶³³Gerardo Mosquera, ed., *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, (London, Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995), 14.

are normally prepared to admit...” but on the other hand, putting forward these artificial savages as a political strategy can be problematic because they are

... polyvalent aesthetic phenomena...[and the provoking of a] sense of vertigo in front of a precipice, very close to ourselves, beyond which a gallery of monstrosities begins, may often stimulate tendencies toward cohesion, affirmation of identity and conservation of the...status quo.”⁶³⁴

When does deploying monstrous stereotypes/artificial savages, reinforce their malevolent power? Is there a way they can be used in art that will also “break patterns, reverse stigmas and move in the direction of a more just world view?”⁶³⁵ Do we see any effective models for such use? Is it even possible to make such judgments? As Brazilian performance activist Augusto Boal has said, referring to his philosophical forebear Paolo Freire: “It is only possible to teach something to someone who teaches us something back. Teaching is a transitive process...Paolo Freire knew this, that by engaging in dialogue we learn ... teacher and pupil.”⁶³⁶ How do interventions such as *The Temple* operate in such a transitive way? Or do they? Does it? Surely the “confessions” instigated by enactment of monstrous stereotypes represent one end of a kind of dialogue, but what is taught and what is learned?

Néstor García Canclini, argues that “cultural practices as... *actions* [can not be] effective interventions in the material structures of society...” and that it is misguided to hope that politicized art gestures can provoke “‘consciousness-raising’ and ‘real changes’ in conduct.” Canclini advocates a nuanced and politically astute approach to an activist art praxis. To be effective, Canclini proposes, politicized art must be seen and accepted as

⁶³⁴ Bartra, *ibid.*

⁶³⁵ Lippard, *ibid.*, 241

⁶³⁶ Augusto Boal, *Legislative Theater: Using Performance to Make Politics*, Adrian Jackson, trans. (London: Routledge, 1998), 128-129.

“performances more than actions: [performances which] *represent* and *simulate* [political] actions.” He believes artists can free themselves to be truly effective, by operating in this kind of representative, simulational fashion, in sync with other politically transformative energies, but on “different stages at the same time.”⁶³⁷

Canclini’s proposal shares much with Chicana feminist Chela Sandoval’s “methodology of the oppressed.”⁶³⁸ He suggests that politicized art gestures can be most effective by mirroring, extending and enhancing expressions of transgressive political energy which gathers and grows where there are instabilities in the culture at large. Artists must be acutely aware of what is going on in virtually every area of the culture, and be able to identify both potential and actual nodes of political instabilities. This is because, despite the impression of the dominant order’s overwhelming power, “[that same] regime of power also prepares its resistance, calls it into being.”⁶³⁹

Canclini, like Sandoval, advises artists who wish to be effective in this kind of cultural intervention to possess/acquire a fluency in hybridity: “to show that it is possible to fuse the cultural heritages of a society [with] critical reflection about their contemporary meaning, and the communicational requirements of mass diffusion...”⁶⁴⁰

This is a tall order. And not without ambiguity, for, as Hal Foster has warned, when considering invoking: “hybridity and heterogeneity, we must remember that they are also

⁶³⁷ Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. Originally published in Spanish, México, DF: Editorial Grijalbo, 1990), 261-269.

⁶³⁸ Chela Sandoval has articulated her methodology of the oppressed in “U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World.” *Genders* (Spring 1991) *ibid.*; in “New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed.” In Chris Hables Gray, ed. *The Cyborg Handbook*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 407-421; and in her recent *Methodology of the Oppressed*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁶³⁹ Canclini, *ibid.*

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 272.

privileged terms of advanced capitalism...” and that they are signs of “social multiculturalism [which] coexists with...” and helps to stabilize “...economic multinationalism,”⁶⁴¹ which many believe is just the latest incarnation of advanced capitalism. The call to seek “mass diffusion” also raises the still current—though also disputed—notion that art, to be effectively political, must forego recognition, financial success, and public acclaim by resisting consumability.

Gómez-Peña has danced nimbly without a net along these highwire discourses for more than a decade. As *The Temple of Confessions* and his subsequent work demonstrates, he has so far unerringly located those high voltage arenas, instabilities in the regimes of power, where Canclini tells us resistance is called into being. Undaunted—in fact, encouraged—by the fact that hybridity is rapidly becoming the proper name of a currently discredited “multiculturalism,” Gómez-Peña continues to mobilize hybridity in the form of ever more monstrous stereotypes, hyper-images which invoke both most jealously guarded and most fervently denied phantasms embedded in individual psyches and the culture at large. This imagery is based on the confessions of those who visited *The Temple* from 1994-1996, and those who entered *The Temple* in its cyberspace incarnation.

Gómez-Peña has operated largely in the margins, despite his increasing fame, performing with his colleagues most frequently in corners of the culture ignored by the art mainstream, in collaboration with small local groups and on remote college and university campuses. But, he has also successfully inserted his ideas into mass diffusion, and been taken very seriously by key cultural institutions, and both the general and the art

⁶⁴¹ Foster. *The Return of the Real*, *ibid.*, 211.

press, though the volume of criticism addressing his work is small. His choice of performance as his medium, and his mercurially changing method of deploying it, has arguably fended off the commodification of his art. At the same time, he has commercially published many books, which document both his performances and his artistic odysseys. These are most certainly commodified objects, which are not quite “artist books” because they are aimed at mass diffusion, yet the visual and textual syntax of several of them are also decidedly non-mainstream. So he both fits as an example of the “pure” avant-gardist who produces art that resists commodification; and challenges that state by placing himself in league with mainstream art institutions and commercial publishers.

In many ways, Gómez-Peña’s identity as an artist is as hybrid as the aesthetic choices and political aims in his art. He is a cultural critic whose urgent essays on what he has called the “Big Bang in which we are ...floating randomly, dizzy, existentially misplaced...” appear in books, academic journals, on National Public Radio and in the general press.

He is a daring performer who has experienced unusual success in mobilizing a collaborative, politicized art praxis and a punishing touring schedule. He chastises theorists and activists alike for not yet coming up with workable and inspirational strategies for progressing toward the goals of “righteous humanisms” such as Zapatismo, neo-Chicanismo and feminism. He even argues that these practices “are no longer temples of clarity and hope ...” and have been necessarily subjected constantly to a

“...permanent re-examination and interrogation [which] inevitably challenges ... commitment to a cause.”⁶⁴²

He also assumes the mantle of art ethicist, challenging critics and art historians to “examine their ethical responsibilities toward artists...why have we gotten to the point where a generosity of spirit is seen as dated, eulogistic or compromised?”⁶⁴³ He similarly takes artists to task for “hiding behind irrational or bohemian notions of art,” asking “can’t [we] become more theoretically rigorous...and less phobic about analyzing the implications of [our] work?”⁶⁴⁴

Given the expansive personality of the artist and the unmistakable particularity of his work, it is not surprising that the resulting cultural product, despite its collaborative construction, has been subsumed under the proper name Guillermo Gómez-Peña. In a melancholy moment in 1997, Gómez-Peña reflected on what it means to be a personification, wondering if anyone is coming along behind to continue the work. He acknowledges ruefully that he has “...become hyper aware of my privileged ‘experimental populist’ status. Despite my utopian attempts ‘to cross over with dignity’ into other realms and hopefully leave the door open behind me for other Mexicans, Chicanos and artists of color to get in as well, it became clear that not many people were going to be given these opportunities. Most likely, the door would slam closed behind me, and the performances would become exotic anecdotes...”⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴² Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous...*, *ibid.*, 276.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.* 265.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 90.

It must be difficult for the many collaborators who have worked with Gómez-Peña over the years to read these words. Does Gómez-Peña feel that most of those who have worked so closely with him, even those who have contributed the most, and have the longest tenure, are not going to be able to get through as he has? And then, one wonders: What is the destination to which Gómez-Peña has been privileged to arrive? Celebrity and fame have been attached to an individual man named Gómez-Peña, and not to the complex, collaborative process that also goes by the proper name “Gómez-Peña.” In the voraciously consumption-based late capitalist U.S. culture, celebrity and fame may be the only vehicles that will allow for “mass diffusion” of politicized art. And celebrity and fame are not bestowed generously. The spotlight is only so large.

As Canclini proposes, the answer may lie in the pursuit of dizzyingly moving targets. Artists who wish to pursue a politicized praxis must have faith that, despite its apparently monolithic surface, “[the] regime of power also prepares its resistance, calls it into being,” and the work to be done is to locate and inhabit the interstices where resistance, like a virus, waits to be activated. In this scenario, no predecessors can overshadow, and no doors are ever closed.

* * * * *

In conclusion, in Part 4 I have offered the examples of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* and Guillermo Gómez Peña's *Temple of Confessions* as examples of how the key elements of the aesthetic of the monstrous/grotesque/abject have been mobilized as direct and intentional interventions into late 20th century U.S. culture. The intention here also was to foreground specific examples of the bridging of abject/monstrous/grotesque body imagery with "otherness" or ethnographic/gender specificity, thematics seen by Hal Foster as clearly bifurcated in contemporary art of the nineties.

An important intent of this Part was also to demonstrate the many ways these two works can be seen as one layer of a complex palimpsest. Just below their glitteringly engaging surfaces lies the museum which frames, but does not contain, them; and undergirding the museum is the entire apparatus of late twentieth century capitalism's political, economic and social machinery.

But the palimpsest also includes the layers of time and discourse that have accumulated above these works, layers through which one must peer, with all the distortions and insights this viewing provides. The discourses that have layered these two works from above and below have been hinted at in this treatment. I have sought to show that these works have both reflected and been constitutive of a wide range of discursive contributions related to the notions of activist art, the avant-garde and postmodern transgressiveness.

Front and center in both works, as discussed here, are the especially compelling thematics and imagery of the abject/grotesque/monstrous wielded in an achingly optimistic, even perhaps utopian, apotropaic gesture. Whether these works as a layer of the ever-changing palimpsest of culture can seep down to affect its lower, supporting registers may be unknowable.

The thinkers and discourse contributors featured in this part, such as Néstor Canclini, Homi Babha, Lucy Lippard, and others, have urged optimism about the apotropaic effect on society of the kinds of cultural production typified by these two works. They have expressed confidence that mobilizing the monstrous/abject/grotesque stereotype against itself can be effective if it is done in such a way that encourages critical thinking regarding the “monstrousness” of the apparent “normality” of the more noxious aspects of dominant culture.

They have also cautioned, however, like many of the other commentators featured in earlier parts of this dissertation, that because these thematics and aesthetics are polyvalent, they can be (and have been) used to strengthen the very structures those wielding them had hoped to weaken. In the end, this may be the real conclusion to this study: that the cultural practice of activist art, like the practice of activism in other registers of society, must, in order to have a significant impact, operate on highly volatile terrain and take great risks. And, this must be done with sophistication and a supple agency that can slip easily through and around political and social interstices with canny awareness and deep understanding of potential and actual nodes of political instability, and in awareness of, and consonance with, the most socially transformative work performed on other stages of society. It is my conviction that, though final judgments on

how “transformative” they have been or could be may never be achievable, these two works are instructive in that they provoke us to struggle with their significance in this regard.

PART 5: CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have sought to trace the interrelationships between discursive elements that affected notions of activism in art from 1980-2000. Across the four parts of the study I have proposed an unstable concept of activist art in (trans)formation inside and outside what Foucault has called “limits of control.”⁶⁴⁶ “Limits of control” are multifarious in society and mercurially changing. They have also become so naturalized—accepted as “normal”—that they only become apparent as limits or frameworks when discursive elements operating in, around, through, behind—or over them—make them visible.

In this study, I have tracked how definitions of activism in art have been mobilized in (and as) discourse; and have suggested that it continues to develop in the way Foucault sees discourse, as a fusion of power and knowledge. This study assumes, and seeks to demonstrate, that activist art, precisely because it is a fusion of power and knowledge, has been oppositional at particular limits of control from 1980-2000; and that, in its oppositionality, has succeeded in setting these limits of control in high relief. I have also sought to demonstrate that activist art, like other “oppositional” discursive elements, not only *reveals* the structures of control in society, but also *acts upon* them in transformative ways.

In this dissertation the dynamism of activist art’s oppositionality has been mapped in relation to three discursive thematics: transgression, the avant-garde and the monstrous/grotesque/abject. I have sought to demonstrate that these particular thematics are particularly useful in demonstrating—during the particular time period covered by

⁶⁴⁶ Foucault, *The Language of Discourse*, *ibid.*, 2

this study—that limits of power constantly-changing moving targets whose identity as limits is not static.

In this dissertation, I have also sought to demonstrate how power/knowledge that operated as oppositional activist art has been open to transformation into tools of dominant cultural entities. In the discussions in this study, certain factors acting as oppositional to dominant cultural entities have been seen to transform themselves through interaction upon and with these controlling entities to become reinforcing rather than destructive, of the entities. The discussions have illustrated the complexity of these transactions in which limits of control are not only associated with dominant cultural entities, but operate within and around oppositional entities and processes as well.

For example, in the case of the discursive thematic “transgression,” we have seen that—in the early eighties, at one end of the spectrum—to be transgressive, artists or their work only needed a respectable number of inches of exclamatory or sensationalist print in particular media outlets to be seen as controversial, and hence “transgressive.” Another measure of “transgressiveness” in art of the early eighties was to be recognized by key critics as having contributed to upending certain features of Modernist art production, such as: valorization of the individual artist; production of objects that stun or shock in their alleged originality; and development of art processes or products invoking “timeless truths” capable of moving civilization “upward.”

But, transgressiveness as the sensational—the “newsworthy” deemed interesting enough to feature in key publications—was not a measure of “activism” in art for certain segments of the left. Determining which artists and works seen as transgressive were “activist” and which “retrograde” was a complex task, because some characteristics of

transgressiveness were shared by both “activist” and “retrograde” art. These shared characteristics included:

- a kind of reckless artistic risktaking;
- eschewing “prettiness” in favor of an anti-aesthetic both in the work itself as well as the locations sought for its exhibition;
- collective or collaborative production derived from methods used in filmmaking;
- utilization of some of the most noxious, propagandistic aspects of mass and popular culture in strikingly ironic ways to “out” the propaganda inherent in them; and
- purposefully creating works that could not be converted into commodities (such as ephemeral installations, performance, etc.)

By the end of the eighties these evidences of an aesthetics of transgression were well enough established to be catalogued in a number of key exhibitions and anthologies, and specifically identified as a “new” kind of public art deployed singly and together as guerrilla street theater, video, book and page art, billboards, protest action, dance, posters and murals. Key aspects of the aesthetics of this work involved appropriation, miming and parody—all characteristic of mass culture, and hence seen as “low” art, if art at all—quite often evolving directly out of and switching places dizzily with counterparts in the “high art” arena. But, in these “mainstream” discourse locations, distinctions between which artists and art utilizing these aesthetics were “activist” and which not, were not clearly set out.

One key characteristic among those listed above that is continuously invoked in the discourse of the period 1980-2000 as essential to *activist* art is that it not be marketable. But, according to practitioners and critics who kept a sharp outlook for what was and was not “activist” in art, simply avoiding the market through deployment of media and aesthetic strategies that were hard to sell was not enough. The work also had to oppose the powers that be; and very specifically the policies of the Reagan (and later Bush) administration with regard to military adventurism and retrenchment of social policies. This *content* needed to be as stark and troubling as possible, and expressed in the most aggressive manner.

By the beginning of the nineties, transgressiveness had transmuted itself in its relationship to art activism in such a way that, in mainstream locations of discourse, they were perceived as indistinguishable. Art aimed at mobilizing opposition to mainstream culture through deploying transgression increasingly centered on abjection and the monstrous. This kind of oppositionality definitely heightened the profile of art activism by stressing the “experimental” and uncomfortable, especially content foregrounding homosexuality/homophobia, gender and racial stereotyping, homelessness and poverty, alternative sexual practices, etc.; and expressed through and around the abject body.

Although aspects of the left rose to defend artists’ right to express this content in the most aggressive way possible, the resulting art’s higher profile was greeted in other segments of the mainstream left, by “compassion fatigue.” Meanwhile, on the right, this aggressive imagery was seized upon with alacrity as a way to “prove” the decadence of the left. In this way, transgressiveness as activism in art was turned on itself to become a virtual tool of the status quo it sought to destabilize.

This transmutation of an activist art transgressive intervention strategy into a tool for the right was greeted with some surprise and horror on the left in the early nineties. Much of the discourse of this period involved finger-pointing and accusations that the artists deploying this strategy were engaged in counterproductive “rant” aimed at a presumed audience of bigoted, wealthy white men.

Although the preferred harsh approach to “transgressive” activism did not diminish among a segment of artists right through the nineties, there was an emphasis in certain areas and among certain cultural producers during this period which included moving activism in art away from “rant,” harsher content and shocking aesthetic approaches to a brand of art-populism reminiscent of WPA days. Even federal support for art during the Reagan-Bush era (ironically) echoed the old WPA with funds increasingly denied to “experimental” (confrontational) art, in favor of “community” art that aimed to “help.” Of course, the shift in federal funding priorities (through the NEA) from “experiment” and the support of individual studio art to “helping” -related art reinforced the move of certain artists from protestors to community aides.

This resurgence of populism in cultural production during a time of rank conservative control of the organs of government was sharply rebuked in some segments of the left as “aesthetic evangelism.” This argument proposed that much of the new populism seen in community art, had had the unfortunate outcome of reinforcing a very conservative ideology. It was argued that mobilizing art to meet people’s needs had the effect of promoting individual philanthropy in lieu of collective (through the government) social policy and action. This, then, is yet another example of the conversion of “transgressive”

activist art as power/knowledge from a tool of radicalization and challenge of dominant ideologies to a tool that reinforced these same ideologies.

Perhaps predictably, this ability of the dominant culture to transform itself, to shift and change, became itself a source of fascination for some of the most canny and bold of activist art practitioners. As the nineties moved along, collaboration of artists with and in dominant institutions and ideological frameworks of society became, for some artist risk-takers, the most challenging—and dangerous—place to engage an activist art practice. Like veritable Trojan Horses they have deployed all manner of clever methods to operate within, cross over and integrate their subversions into the very structures of the edifice of Culture they sought to de- and re-construct.

In this dissertation, a key question posed of this form of cultural activism was whether it could be seen as a “new” artistic avant-garde practice. Again, however, the notions of who and what were “avant-garde” at the end of the twentieth century were vigorously debated throughout the period covered in this dissertation, especially the issue of what relationship “avant gardes” did or could have with discourse as power/knowledge, and the relationship of that to limits of control.

In the discussion here, the question is presented as highly dichotomous in discourse of the early eighties. “Avant garde” was a dirty word across the ideological spectrum from left to right at that point. On the right, commentators repudiated “avant-gardes” as polluting art and debasing its quality. At the same time, on the left, “avant-garde” was seen as having degenerated into an “avant-gardism” that reinforced the negative aspects of Modernism such as emphasis on the individual artist and *his* creativity in deploying the shocking and the new.

So, as conceived by the right, “art’s” limit of control was quality. When that quality was breached by what was seen as an “avant-garde’s” deployment of “anti-aesthetics” (purposefully “bad” objects/creations, mass cultural forms and content, etc.) what resulted could not only not be considered “art;” but, even more dangerously, it came close to destroying “civilization” of which “true art” was a key measure. As seen from the left, on the other hand, the deployment of “anti-aesthetics” was the saving grace in that it shook the foundations and structures of all “frozen” cultural forms and content allowing for the emergence and flowering of a new kind of society.

Just as certain cultural producers began to see the ramparts of dominant societal entities as *the* place to engage with their art activism, there also developed during the nineties an increasing emphasis on recuperating the term “avant-garde” and applying it especially to feminist artists as the most adept in deploying postmodernist bricolage. Artists of color and queer artists were also considered adept in this way, and especially in bringing into high profile eclipsed subjectivities and ignored histories. So, in yet another example of the twists and turns of power/knowledge in relation to societal limits of control, during the nineties, the term “avant-garde” began to be used to describe art production by *individual* artists who had newly breached the ramparts of the dominant culture. So in this way, individualism, a key characteristic both of Modernism and of earlier definitions of “avant-garde” also re-emerged as both transgressive and “activist.”

As proposed in the discussion, individual artists (women, artists of color, queer artists) previously ignored by discourse gained a relatively high profile in mainstream locations in the culture during the nineties, and this higher profile made the dominance of whiteness, heterosexuality and maleness as context more visible. While it is undeniable

that this happened—the example discussed in detail in this regard was the much-maligned 1993 Whitney Biennial—the ambivalence of the result is also undeniable. In many ways, raising “naturalized” realities such as whiteness/heterosexuality/maleness as context into heightened visibility through foregrounding of previously eclipsed subjectivities and sidelined histories also makes the “naturalized” context not only more visible, but also stronger. This “naturalized” context of male whiteness and class dominance had shifted its limits of control to incorporate, in an amoebic fashion, the very challenges to its hegemony.

Theoretically, “flushing out” the repressiveness of such a naturalized context can make it more vulnerable to de-and re-construction, but the reverse can also happen. It could appear so natural that it actually gains strength from being “outed.” It is to this dynamic of the interaction of oppositional cultural interventions with the objects of its opposition that the last part of the dissertation turns, and which raises many more questions regarding the effects of activist art as it seeks to interact at the limits of control of the dominant culture.

In the last part of the dissertation, the two works selected for focus—Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* and Guillermo Gómez Peña’s *Temple of Confessions*—are particularly eloquent in setting in high relief the issues of discourse, and the dynamism of societal limits of control addressed throughout the study. These include:

- “quality” in art, and where in the society and by whom such quality is determined;
- self-referentiality in activist art, especially as deployed by feminists and people of color;

- the relative significance of emphasis on signifier vs. signified, form vs. content in work that seeks an oppositional, resistant or activist effect; and
- what kinds of effects activist cultural production can (or do) have beyond the art world context.

This dissertation has also engaged directly with the assertive presence, in U.S. art at the end of the century, of the abject, traumatized body; the aesthetic of the monstrous/grotesque/abject that, despite attempts inside and outside the art world to quash both its presence and its effect, has persevered. Because of the ubiquity of this imagery, especially in art whose purpose has been promoted as oppositional or resistant to dominant societal structures, the implications of its high profile have been addressed here at some length.

But, in the end, what seems clearest is the dialogical nature of the interrelationship of activist art production with what it seeks to oppose. This is a fruitful area for future work. In this dissertation the dialogic has only been barely touched upon, first with regard to Julia Kristeva's engagement with and expansion of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic as the source of meaning, when the anti-authoritarian and the authoritarian collide. The concept of dialogue emerged later in the study with Grant Kester's assessment that the most effective of artists who operate at the limits of societal control activate the dialogic, not only in "collision" directly with the authoritarian, but in another way, a way that he proposes can enhance and expand the possibility for progressive collective action.

Dialogue in both senses—the purposeful instigation of collision between the authoritarian and the anti-authoritarian which leads to new meanings, and the

constructive engagement of artists away from the authoritarian, which can enhance progressive collective action—may in fact be the next major step to take for artists who wish to make art that has an impact on society beyond the art world. It could be argued that this, in fact is already happening, and perhaps it is.

It seems to me, however, that dialogue itself is a concept in need of further scrutiny and deeper theoretical consideration. As Brazilian artist-legislator Augusto Boal has noted in relation to his own inventive approach, the “Theater of the Oppressed,” transitivity is key to the notion of dialogue: a mutual and ongoing effect of one person, one entity on another, a kind of mutual “teaching.” And, as Néstor Canclini has suggested, art’s activist—or successfully oppositional—effect does not only result from the impact of one politically-motivated producer and her work onto objects or processes of the dominant order. For Canclini, positive societal effects from the enterprise of art production are generated when an activist/transgressive/oppositional/resistant and performative mode of art acts in sync with other politically transformative energies. Perhaps, then, as Canclini suggests, the best kind of resistance or activism for art are those politicized gestures that mirror, extend and enhance expressions of transgressive energy which gather at the limits of dominant power, the instabilities in the culture at large.

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