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A Feminist Inheritance? Questions of Subjectivity and Ambivalence in Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley and Robert Gober

Marisa White-Hartman

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A FEMINIST INHERITANCE? QUESTIONS OF SUBJECTIVITY AND AMBIVALENCE
IN PAUL MCCARTHY, MIKE KELLEY AND ROBERT GOBER

by

Marisa White-Hartman

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York
2014
Abstract

A FEMINIST INHERITANCE? QUESTIONS OF SUBJECTIVITY AND AMBIVALENCE IN PAUL MCCARTHY, MIKE KELLEY AND ROBERT GOBER

by

Marisa White-Hartman

Adviser: Professor Anna Chave

This dissertation assesses the impact of feminist art of the 1970s on specific projects by three male artists: Paul McCarthy's performance *Sailor’s Meat* (1975), Mike Kelley's installation *Half a Man* (1989) and Robert Gober’s 1989 installation at the Paula Cooper Gallery. Despite the general absence of feminist artists as possible influences in the critical literature on these artists, I have found that feminist sources have been hidden in plain sight in regards to these works. These artists all take up the problematic of identity formation within the domestic sphere, which was made a legitimate area of inquiry in art by numerous feminist artists in the 1970s.

The artists under discussion responded to feminism at different points in its development from the 1970s to the mid 1980s, and so I trace the debates surrounding feminism relevant to the works under discussion during this period. Chapter One contextualizes McCarthy’s performances of the 1970s with his male forebearers and feminist contemporaries and focuses on themes of personae and rituals. Chapter Two explores Kelley’s referencing feminist art via the idiom of craft, both in terms of its implications for different expressions of masculinity, and for his deeply ambivalent relationship with feminism. Chapter Three proposes a connections between Gober and feminist art founded on the shared exploration of the ways subjectivity is constituted by the daily repetition of activities within the domestic sphere. In this regard, his work is
discussed in relation to works by artists working in the 1970s as well as his contemporaries that highlight the psychic emanations of particular household objects, and conceptually, to those that demonstrate how the domestic environment socially conditions its subjects. I conclude the project by discussing how a younger generation of contemporary women artists have reinterpreted works by McCarthy, Kelley and Gober in ways in which they are able to recognize and recover strands leading back to feminism. The dissertation aims to demonstrate that the contributions of feminist art had a greater effect on the field of contemporary art than is often acknowledged.
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Anna Chave generously took me on as an advisee while I was questioning the direction of my dissertation and encouraged me to uphold my political-intellectual commitments. I am thankful for her guidance throughout the often rocky road of the writing process, and for her many insights on feminism that broadened and complicated my point of view.

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INTRODUCTION:
FEMINIST ART'S OBSCURE TRAJECTORIES

Historical valuations of feminist art of the 1970s tend towards the extremes; it has been assessed as the most affecting movement of the post-war era in the United States, and yet its ramifications are frequently denied, as its impact is written out of history due to neglect.¹ “Most of the interesting American artists of the last 30 years are as interesting as they are in art because of the feminist art movement of the early 1970s. It changed everything.” So wrote Holland Cotter in a 2002 New York Times review of two exhibitions (one small scale and the other medium scale) of feminist art. He continued, “All this should be obvious, but it needs to keep being resaid.” Cotter blamed the inadequate recognition of the women’s art movement of the 1970s on the lack of any sustained investigation by a major American museum.² Five years later, his complaint


was addressed by two important exhibitions of feminist art staged by large institutions: 

*WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and *Global Feminisms*, which christened the Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. These exhibitions and their surrounding panels, lectures and performances resulted in 2007 being heralded as “‘the year for feminism’ in art” by the media.³ Yet this attention to the intersections between feminism and art subsequently waned. So it continues to be true that the importance of 1970s feminist art needs, as Cotter wrote, “to keep being resaid.” In the present dissertation, I argue for a renewed and distinct approach to underscoring the effects of feminist art of the 1970s.⁴ I rely on Peggy


⁴ The term “feminist art” has been problematized by several writers and artists, such as Deutsche and Mary Kelly, primarily for its perceived effect of periodizing all intersections of feminism and art as products of the 1970s. See Silvia Koblowski, Mignon Nixon, Kelly, et al., “A Conversation on Recent Art Practices,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 50-52. While this is an important point to consider, the alternatives offered are not without their own difficulties. Aruna de Souza prefers “the women’s art movement” to describe feminist art in the 1970s, but this term arguably suggests a certain organization of artists with respect to style and concept that does not reflect the plurality in both approach and ideology that characterized the 1970s. Deutsche follows Mary Kelly in vaunting “art informed by feminism,” a phrase that seems to suggest, however, that relationships of influence between art and ideas flow in one direction. Moreover, just as the word “feminism” has come to represent a multiplicity of feminisms over varied time periods, the problem is less with the term than with the way it is used, and the contexts in
Phelan’s “broad, if bold” definition of feminist art as that which expresses “the conviction that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organization of culture. Moreover, the pattern of that organization usually favors men over women.”

Many writers and curators have detailed the ways in which feminism transformed the field of contemporary art. Cotter credits feminist art with introducing new content in art, consolidating the position of performance and video in contemporary art, and destabilizing boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art forms, particularly via the emphasis on craft. Others have emphasized how feminist initiatives in art effectively performed theoretical work that anticipated salient features of post-modernism; Norma Broude and Mary Garrard enumerated these innovations of feminism as:

The understanding that gender is socially and not naturally constructed; the widespread validation of non-“high art” forms such as craft, video, and performance art; the questioning of the cult of “genius” and “greatness” in western art history; the awareness that behind the claim of universality lies an aggregate of particular standpoints and biases, leading in turn to an emphasis upon pluralist variety rather than totalizing unity.

Reviewing the previous decade of feminist art, Lucy Lippard wrote in 1980, “Feminism’s greatest contribution to the future of art has probably been precisely its lack of which it has been made visible—to describe only a past moment—and the way it is repressed in the present. See Deutsche, “Feminist Time,” 60-1.


contribution to modernism. Feminist methods and theories have instead offered a socially concerned alternative to the increasingly mechanical ‘evolution’ of art about art.”

Whether by appropriating and resignifying practices from the past, such as craft-based endeavors traditionally performed by women, or by inventing new forms, such as by expanding ideas of the performative to include public protests and ritual, artists who embraced feminism in the 1970s helped refocus the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Some artists directly addressed the political, social and economic inequalities attached to being female, whereas others implicitly did so in the content and form of their work.

Despite the claims of feminist art’s considerable historical role, with a few exceptions, the impact of this field of inquiry has been limited to the construction of a mother-daughter generational line. That is to say that there have been few sustained attempts to trace the effects of 1970s feminist art that do not focus on women as the sole inheritors of its innovations. This perhaps unwitting inability to see cross-gendered lines of influence has the regrettable effect of separating feminist art from a larger sphere of artistic concerns and influences. A more accurate historical assessment of the generative

7 Lucy Lippard, “Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s,” 1980, rpt. in The Pink Glass Swan (New York: New Press, 1995), 171. Lippard wrote, “The feminist insistence that the personal (and thereby the art itself) is political has, like a serious flood, interrupted the mainstream’s flow, sending it off into hundreds of tributaries. It is useless to try to pin down a specific formal contribution made by feminism because feminist and/or women’s art is neither a style or a movement, much as this idea may distress those who would like to see it safely ensconced in the categories and chronology of the past.” Ibid., 172.

8 Exceptions include the exhibition, Division of Labor: ‘Women’s Work’ in Contemporary Art, organized by Lydia Yee for the Bronx Museum in 1995. Also see Laura Cottingham, “The Masculine Imperative: High Modern, Postmodern” in New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer and Arlene Raven (New York:
force of the Women’s Art Movement would require an account of the heterogeneity of art practices that responded to it. My dissertation will bring a feminist lineage to bear on specific projects by the artists Paul McCarthy (b. 1945), Mike Kelley (b. 1954) and Robert Gober (b. 1954). Notwithstanding the paucity of attention to the possible influences of feminist practices in the critical literature on these artists, McCarthy’s performance series _Meat Cake_ (1975-77), Kelley’s installation _Half a Man_ (1988) and Gober’s 1989 untitled installation at the Paula Cooper Gallery, to cite several examples, would have all been unthinkable without feminism. Uniting each of these projects is their reliance on the introduction by feminist artists of questions attaching to identity formation within the private sphere, including psychic, spatial and familial dynamics, as a possible arena of artistic exploration. Numerous women dissected their, once tightly circumscribed, private lives—ranging from anatomizing their bodies to their domestic settings—in order to examine the origins of gendered norms or to undermine prevailing assumptions upholding heterosexual as well as white, middle class stereotypes. While this feminist line of inquiry is central to these works by McCarthy, Kelley and Gober, these artists provide varied models of engagement with feminism, based preeminently on interaction in the case of McCarthy, antagonism on the part of Kelley, and what might be termed extension for Gober.


I do not claim to uncover hidden connections between these men and feminism. These ties have been mentioned here and there in conversation, in brief reviews of the artists’ work, or in essays on other subjects entirely (see, for instance Martha Rosler, “The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California,” _Artforum_, Sept. 1977: 60-74) but they tend to be absent from the most substantive accounts of their work.
In Chapter One I demonstrate McCarthy’s interaction with feminist art by contextualizing his involvement in the performance art scene in Southern California in the 1970s, a key locus of productive activity and innovations in feminist art. From this proximity arose dialogical relationships between McCarthy and several feminist artists within the performance community, such as Eleanor Antin, Barbara T. Smith, and Nancy Buchanan, with whom he shared sources and content. He began to stage the *Meat Cake* series (fig. 1) during the same time period that feminist artists were using comparable forms (evincing rituals) and materials (metaphoric bodily fluids) to investigate how the body signifies categories of sex and gender. Throughout the series, McCarthy donned various markers of femininity as he carried out a procession of actions that ranged from simulating sex-acts to applying a mask-like accumulation of materials to his face. *Meat Cake* is also evocative of the work of feminist artists such as Antin, who used make up to suggest the kinds of daily rituals many women undergo to assume the mantle of femininity. McCarthy played with the tension between identifiable attributes of sex and gender as he contrasted attributes and actions coded as feminine against his masculine body. Yet he also made indistinct the boundaries meant to isolate his body as a whole and masculine entity, treating his penis, for instance, as a constructible appendage. McCarthy’s performances represent processes of assuming and rejecting socially sanctioned gendered identities, at times confusing the historically masculine space of the public sphere with that most private of spaces, the boudoir.

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In Chapter two, I attend to Mike Kelley’s role of maverick artist, as he at once acknowledged and undermined the connections between his craft-based works and feminist art in public statements about his work, revealing complicated and deeply ambivalent positions about the feminist legacy. Kelley’s installation *Half a Man* (fig. 2) staged the inculcation of identity as a process that occurs within the seemingly innocent space of the nursery, thereby exploring relationships between child and parent that had previously been the domain of women artists.\(^{11}\) The installation featured sculptures cobbled together from crocheted stuffed animals and decoupaged furniture. By both referencing feminist art via the idiom of craft, and asserting that the infant’s development into a social subject entails the assumption of gender, Kelley invoked the domestic sphere as a theatre of psychic drama. The primary critics who write on Kelley’s work tend to follow his lead when it comes to both his antagonistic position vis-à-vis feminism and to assigning sources to and offering interpretations of his work.\(^{12}\) However, the relationship between *Half a Man* and feminism offers an example of how the impact of feminist art has reverberated more broadly and profoundly than Kelley may have cared to admit.

Chapter Three examines the ways Gober confounds the process of identity formation within the home, revealing his 1989 installation at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York City (fig. 3) to be both co-extensive with and additive to feminist thinking on the domestic. Within the installation, Gober mounted two different kinds of wallpaper—


\(^{12}\) This is particularly true of John C. Welchman and Ralph Rugoff. While he does so also, Cary Levine is the only one who admits that taking Kelley’s words “at face value” may be problematic. Levine, “Pay for Your Pleasure,” 10.
one featuring drawings of male and female genitalia, and the other alternating between sketched scenes of a lynched man and of a man asleep in bed—that resonated with the three dimensional objects within the space, including a wedding dress and fabricated bags of kitty litter. The cryptic juxtaposition of banal objects and risqué or troubling images signals a disturbance in the safe passageway into adulthood, usually marked by milestones such as marriage. The theme of confinement—how normative experiences of the domestic restrict identity and desire—echoed throughout the installation. The identification of marriage and the home as repressive structures was also made repeatedly in feminist works by such diverse artists as Mimi Smith, Ree Morton and Barbara Kruger. That the unease within the domestic setting could be just as palpable for Gober, who is gay, as it has been for many female artists suggests the possibility of shared sites of meaning and a shared terrain of protest between feminism and queer theory.

Some would argue that McCarthy, Kelley, and Gober have received enough attention, and that the work of some other male artists during the same time period would have demonstrated less problematically the way that feminism has impacted their work.\(^{13}\) There are other artists too, who elicit more intense accusations of appropriating feminist art, such as Mathew Barney or Richard Prince, due to the more clearly misogynistic outcomes of their assimilation.\(^{14}\) In my effort to survey the historical contributions of

\(^{13}\) The artist Mary Kelly, for one, suggested as much and recommended looking at several of the artists included in the exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* at the New Museum in New York in 1984, particularly (her then husband) Ray Barrie and Victor Burgin. *Difference* represented a tendency in the early 1980s to examine gender through the lenses of post-structuralist theory and psychoanalysis. Mary Kelly, in discussion with the author, February 2007.

\(^{14}\) Mira Schor critiqued the appropriation of feminist art, and the sometime misogynistic content of works by Prince, David Salle, Mike Kelley and Eric Fischl, in Schor,
feminism to contemporary art, I believe it is necessary to trace feminism’s effects on artists who explicitly continue its project, but also to follow its trajectory into more ambivalent and even unwelcoming arenas. This dissertation does not examine feminist influence in art produced by men in order to bestow legitimacy on feminist art by referencing male artists. The feminist artists I discuss are not outliers who are being included due to their similarities to these well-known artists; rather their work is central to the narrative. My dissertation aims to provide one kind of corrective to the lack of credit given to female artists for their groundbreaking initiatives and to demonstrate how the historiographic framing of artists continues to marginalize many women. To place these men alongside feminist artists is potentially to pose the following questions: What intersections can be identified between feminist art and art made by male artists in the 1970s and 80s? Can disparate artistic practices, some politically committed and others not, have a dialogical relationship? And why has the possibility of affinities with feminist sources been overlooked, if not intentionally written out of accounts of individual male artists?

Despite the fact that McCarthy, Kelley and Gober have been linked together at different times for various reasons, it is not my intention to draw these artists’ very different projects together in order to make a blanket conclusion about the impact of feminism on their work.\(^\text{15}\) To do so would erase important differences among them and

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\(^{15}\) McCarthy and Kelley often collaborated with each other on projects, including: *Family Tyranny/ Cultural Soup* (1987), *Heidi* (1992), *Fresh Accocci* (1995), and *Sod and Soddie*
neglect the nuances that perhaps make possible productive affiliations between these projects and feminism. Each of these projects in some ways supports feminist ideas and aims, yet particularly in the cases of McCarthy’s *Meat Cake* and Kelley’s *Half a Man*, they do not do so unproblematically. The conflicting positions toward feminism at play in these works are reflective of widespread and contradictory stances toward feminism in the U.S. at large from the 1970s to the present. Exposing and interrogating the tensions and ambivalences at play when male artists struggle with feminism also reveals how U.S. attitudes toward feminism, as represented in the media, have undergone dramatic shifts.

In early 2012, Andrea Fraser performed *Men on the Line: Men Committed to Feminism, KPFK, 1972*, which highlighted this very ambivalence. Playing several roles, Fraser reenacted a public radio program from 1972 featuring a discussion between four men who identified as feminists. Fraser, who was dressed somewhat androgynously, remained seated throughout the performance, as the original participants would have done. She made slight alterations to her pose, mannerisms and voice to indicate different speakers, yet not enough to give them distinct personalities. Throughout the course of the

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program, each participant’s explanation of his sincere support for the women’s movement devolved into an airing of grievances; for example, some of the men expressed anger that they were excluded from consciousness-raising sessions, and others called for feminism to be “about a human revolution,” rather than a specifically female one. Through Fraser’s cross-gendered reenactment of the original transcript, the audience came to understand certain aspects of these men’s reactions to feminism: the conflict they felt, the degree to which they felt personally threatened by feminism, and how their understanding of feminism was less about politics than about a means for them to escape the gender stereotypes that they felt on an individual level. For example, several of the men noted how feminism freed them of the standard masculine roles that had been so confining.16 Due to Fraser’s ambiguous portrayal of the men, as well as the similarity of the responses among them, their individual voices became nearly indistinguishable. Though the content of their expressions is not of course emblematic of all men, Men on the Line pointed to a

16 The often personally motivated desires for feminism expressed by the characters of Men on the Line at times resemble Calvin Thomas’s characterization of the “men-have-it-bad-too line of reaction,” felt by those who “seem motivated by the desire to ameliorate the condition of men, while ignoring or minimizing the oppression of women.” Calvin Thomas, “Reenfleshing the Bright Boys; or, How Male Bodies Matter to Feminist Theory,” in Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory, ed. Judith Keegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press 2002), 61. Elizabeth Grosz has warned that “equality feminism” promotes a “neutralized social justice … that has enabled a number of men to claim that they too are oppressed by patriarchal social roles and are unable to express their more ‘feminine’ side. The struggles of women against patriarchy are too easily identified with a movement of reaction against a more general ‘dehumanization’ in which men may unproblematically represent women in struggles for greater or more authentic forms of humanity.” Grosz, “Sexual Difference and the Problems of Essentialism,” in The Essential Difference, ed. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 89.
complexity and ambivalence rife in male responses to feminism.\textsuperscript{17} According to their testimonies, this ambivalence appears to have stemmed from, among other things, the rupture in the social order that feminism demanded, a rupture that would have been experienced as traumatic to those who would become dispossessed of their former privileges. Male ambivalence toward the feminist movement also appears to have emerged from a sense of frustration—expressed by several of the men on the radio program—at the prospect of their being thought of as feminism’s antagonists regardless of their support.\textsuperscript{18}

THE CONTEXT: AN EVER EVOLVING MOVEMENT

As cases in point, McCarthy’s \textit{Meat Cake} series, Kelley’s \textit{Half a Man} and Gober’s 1989 installation all take up feminist explorations of subjectivity. However, each artist’s project correlates to a different moment of feminist history and varied iterations of feminist art over the span of less than twenty years. McCarthy’s carnal displays of the

\textsuperscript{17} Ambivalence also runs throughout the contributions to the volume of literary criticism, \textit{Men in Feminism}, in which several male authors (namely Stephen Heath, Paul Smith, and Craig Owens) repeat the difficulties they have encountered, and their uncertain place, as men who support feminism. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, ed., \textit{Men in Feminism} (New York: Routledge, 1987). Alternately, other male authors have been criticized for appropriating feminist methods while neglecting its politics. See Elaine Showalter, “Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year,” in \textit{Men in Feminism}, 116-132.

\textsuperscript{18} Robyn Wiegman writes, “By collapsing men and masculinity into a generalized category of man and wedding that generalization to the organizational practices and privileges of patriarchy, much feminist critical analysis relied on what seemed to many scholars and activists as an unproblematic linkage between maleness, masculinity, and the social order of masculine supremacy. … [This linkage] enabled feminist discourse to posit a subjectivity for women that seemingly disrupted the sexual arena of women’s primary social bonding: the heterosexual.” Wiegman, “Unmaking: Men and Masculinity in Feminist Theory,” in \textit{Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory}, 34.
fluidity of gender identity require the context of feminism’s exploration of sexuality as a means to configure and assert new feminine identities during the early 1970s. Kelley’s simultaneous references to feminist artistic practices in his installation and critiques of feminism need to be read against the separatism espoused by some cultural feminists and the so-called Sex Wars, during which feminists of different persuasions fought to ban pornography on one side, as well as those feminists who stood against the censorship of varied sexual expressions such a ban would imply. Gober’s installation, informed by feminist art’s interventions in the domestic, displaced any attempt to assign totalized identities to his subjects. That installation appeared at a similar moment as discourses surrounding identity and as queer theory was emerging from gay and lesbian studies, continental high theory, and feminist theory. In order to avoid flattening both the complicated history of feminism during this period and generalizing McCarthy’s, Kelley’s and Gober’s reactions to it, it is necessary to sketch out the history of feminism in the 1970s and 80s. The following cannot be an exhaustive account; rather I will focus on nodal points that help to situate these artists’ works in relation to feminism.

The rise of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s is generally traced to two sources: the sexism encountered by women in the New Left Movements of the 1960s and Betty Friedan’s 1963 best-selling book, *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she identified “the problem that has no name” as the dissatisfaction with their lot in life that vexed middle and upper-middle class white housewives.¹⁹ These

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¹⁹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 50th anniversary ed. (New York: Norton, 2001). In a contentious study, Daniel Horowitz reveals Friedan’s intellectual roots as an undergraduate at Smith and a Leftist labor journalist, and describes her positioning herself as a typical US housewife as a tactic that enabled her to reach out to that demographic. Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of "The Feminine Mystique": The
different demographics shared the desire to wrest the very definition of womanhood away from male-controlled power structures and redefine it on the scale of both the societal and the individual. As women realized how deeply patriarchal definitions of gender structured their lives, they began to understand that the reconstruction of feminine identities free of patriarchal control first required the deconstruction of traditional notions of womanhood. This dual process was played out through consciousness-raising among small groups of women across the US, a strategy feminist historian Sara Evans described as “both a method for developing theory and a strategy for building up the new movement.”

Consciousness-raising became a means to expose how seemingly individual problems—abuse, issues concerning body image, or even the unequal distribution of housework, among others—were the result of systematic forms of patriarchal domination that extended to all arenas of life, forms that became internalized by women. The ability to contextualize one’s own experiences within a larger framework, in terms of both the shared nature of struggles and their root causes, was very empowering to many women, and increased their awareness regarding the scope of the realm of the political.

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21 In an essay from 1969, Carol Hanisch rejected the idea of consciousness-raising as “therapy,” and described it as a strategy to develop a shared political consciousness among women and motivate political action. Hanisch, “The Personal is the Political,” in *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*, ed. Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt (New York: Radical Feminism, 1970). Pamela Parker Allen wrote that the
theory behind the maxim that, “the personal is political” not only carved out room within public discourse for “women’s issues,” such as abortion and childcare (such issues had previously been considered private and not appropriate for the government to address), but also produced among women an awareness of how their identities as wives, mothers, secretaries, objects of desire, etcetera, were shaped by social and political forces.22

Amidst this burgeoning understanding of how individual identities are socially constituted, in the early 1970s feminists gave a great deal of attention to sexuality as a field for women to reclaim and explore. Both pleasurable and oppressive aspects of sex became focal points of consciousness-raising sessions. Though different feminists thought and experienced sexuality in radically different ways, during this period sexuality represented an arena where women could take control and remap the female body to reflect and create new experiences of themselves as women.23 Writing about the shift in

“intention” of consciousness-raising “is to arrive at an understanding of the social condition of women by pooling the descriptions of the forms oppression has taken in each woman’s life.” Though invariably this process involves the expression of emotional pain, she noted the importance of “the reinforcement that comes from knowing that other women know of what you are speaking, that you are not alone.” Allen, “The Small Group Process,” rpt. in Dear Sisters: Dispatches From The Women’s Liberation Movement, ed. Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon (NY: Basic Books, 2001), 67.

22 Consciousness-raising was also met with resistance and hostility by some. According to Peggy Phelan, the practice was complicated as it involved the invocation of past trauma, and resulted in both enlightenment and feelings of displacement. “The ‘raising’ in consciousness-raising involves an elevation and lifting of awareness, even as it also entails a renunciation of passive acceptance, a new intolerance towards unconsidered ‘going along.’ Part of the hostility feminists met with stemmed from the threatening nature of the renunciations integral to consciousness-raising.” Phelan, “Survey,” 34.

23 Feminists’ desire to redirect understandings of and control over their bodies was reflected in The Boston Women’s Health Course Collective publication of Our Bodies Our Selves in 1971, a guide to women’s health and sexuality, the culmination of a set of courses designed to teach themselves, and educate others, about female health issues.
conceptualizing women’s orgasms from being limited to the vagina, and thus correspondent to the heterosexual male orgasm, to being focused on the clitoris, Ann Koedt’s 1970 essay, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” represented a strain of radical feminist thinking on sex at the time. Koedt called for an open-ended redefinition of women’s sexuality according to their own bodies, needs, and desires. Additionally, she undermined the assumption that heterosexuality is natural because it is biologically determined. In their respective foundational works of feminist theory, radical feminists Kate Millet and Shulamith Firestone emphasized the social construction of the categories of sex and gender. For Millet, sexuality was the central feature of gender relations in the U.S.. Firestone conceived of sexuality as both an arena of oppression and liberation. She identified women’s capacity for reproduction as the primary source of their oppression, as it bound them to family life, which was structured by the law of the father. Yet, she also wrote a great deal about sexual pleasure and the freedoms that would accompany a complete reimagining of the possibilities of human sexuality divorced from the biological facticity of the body, and that was said to be possible once patriarchy was abandoned. The quest to create liberated modes of being for women unified a great deal of varied works of feminist art at the time. As artists began the work of undoing and reconstructing


25 Ibid.

notions of womanhood, they often challenged socially prescribed roles for women and reimagined the feminine body. Often embodying “the personal is political” motto, many artists grappled with painful experiences to confront their oppression. But there was also a palpable sense of joy in the discovery and presentation of new possibilities for women that is in accord with Gayle Rubin’s memory that, “In those days there was a common expectation that utopia was right around the corner.”

The liberatory aspects of sexual exploration were not, however, espoused by all feminists, and sexuality became a divisive issue for feminism during the 1970s. In an effort to conceptualize a woman-centered sexuality, many feminists focused on intimacy to broaden the category of sex to include emotions and social bonding, most often with other women, in order to create a non-hierarchical and progressive “feminist sex,” which was non-phallic and not genitally centered. This different approach to sex corresponded to a shift in the way that lesbianism came to signify as a sexual expression of feminist politics rather than strictly as a sexual orientation or object choice. The radical group The Lavender Menace (later called Radicalesbians) argued that lesbians were more enlightened feminists because they had to confront the difficulties of being women earlier and in a more transparent way than their heterosexual counterparts. Their tract, “The

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28 For example, Cell 16, a militant feminist organization founded in 1969 in Boston, viewed sex as an arena of oppression, violence and submission for women and advocated celibacy. According to Alice Echols, it was the first feminist group to advocate separatism. Echols, Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-75 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 164.

29 Gerhard, Desiring Revolution, 112.
Woman-Identified Woman,” recognized how gender and sexuality are social constructs. In their efforts to unite women against patriarchy under the common identity of lesbianism. The Lavender Menace emphasized a shared women’s culture over both politics and sexuality: “It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution.”

The reappraisal of women’s lives and values in a sphere free from men’s influence was characteristic of the ideology of cultural feminism. Cultural feminism asks how gender, as a socially constructed category, affects process of knowledge production. It seeks to distinguish and revalue “women’s ways of knowing” from patriarchal definitions and assessments of feminine identity. However, two feminist theorists who wrote definitional texts on cultural feminism in the 1980s, Alice Echols and Linda Alcoff, focused on feminists with more essentialist views, rather than engaging authors who resist or complicate essentialism. Alice Echols’ agenda must be read within the

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31 The position paper reads: “It should first be understood that lesbianism … is a category of behavior possible only in a sexist society characterized by rigid sex roles and dominated by male supremacy.” Ibid.

32 “Lesbian is a label invented by the Man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal, who dares to challenge his prerogatives (including that of all women as part of the exchange medium among men), who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs. … For in this sexist society, for a woman to be independent means she can't be a woman - she must be a dyke.” Ibid.

context of the separation between anti-pornography feminists and ‘pro-sex’ feminists in the early 1980s (discussed below and Chapter two). Her essay was an attempt to distinguish cultural feminism from the radical feminism of the 70s in order to align the former with the anti-pornography movement and the later with her own ‘pro-sex’ position. Alcoff argued that both cultural feminism and post-structuralism are inadequate to the task of conceptualizing the category of woman, and offered a new approach to “develop[ing] a new concept of woman.”

Oddly it was Echols, a feminist critic of cultural feminism, who is often referred to in defining it. With reference to the writings of Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, Susan Brownmiller, Robin Morgan and Janice Raymond, Echols characterized cultural feminism as a “new feminist biological determinism.” Rich had argued for a revaluation of the female body beyond its constriction under patriarchy. Hers was a spiritual remapping of the body as a source of both potential empowerment and specifically feminine characteristics. Sharing with Rich a spiritual bent, Daly cast women’s oppression as resulting from men’s insecurity in the face of female fertility in her 1978 book *Gyn/Ecology.* Even as Alcoff concentrates on Daly and Rich, she warned against

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34 The anti-pornography movement is discussed below and in Chapter two. Echols understood cultural feminism as equating “women’s liberation with the nurturance of a female counter culture which it is hoped will supersede the dominant culture.” Echols, 51.

35 Alcoff, 407.


37 Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978; rpt., Boston: Beacon Press, 1990). According to Daly, sex is the principal means of women’s identity, overriding “ethnic, national, class, religious, and other male-defined differences.” Ibid.,
the tendency to reduce all of cultural feminism to those iterations that have produced the
most biologically driven concepts of what constitutes a woman, contending that not all
cultural feminists “give explicitly essentialist formulations of what it is to be a woman.”

For example, contributors to cultural feminism who drew on the fields of psychology and
sociology to delineate and validate a field of women’s attributes and values—among
them a propensity for caring and maternal instincts—include Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy
Dinnerstein and Carol Gilligan.

Separatism became part of an ethos of a particular strand of cultural feminism,
which envisioned women’s values—construed as naturally superior to those of the
patriarchy—as a basis for a separate utopian woman’s culture. Strategies of separatism
often manifested in subcultural and artistic spheres, such as The Women’s Building in

365. Daly’s characterization of sex drew criticism from many women of color. See in
particular, Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” 1979, in Sister Outsider:
Essays and Speeches (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 66-70.

38 Alcoff specifically cites Echols in this regard. Alcoff, 406.

39 Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology
of Gender (1978; rpt., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Dorothy
Dinnerstein, Mermaid and the Minotaur (New York: Harper and Row, 1976; New York:
Other Press, 1993) and Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and

40 Echols understood cultural feminism as “equat[ing] women’s liberation with the
nurturance of a female counter culture which it is hoped will supersede the dominant
culture.” Echols, 53. In 1978 Marilyn Frye emphasized the various and expansive
meanings of separatism, ranging from “divorce to lesbian separatist communities, from
shelters for battered women to witch covens, from women’s studies programs to
women’s bars, from expansion of daycare to abortion on demand.” Frye, “Some
Reflections on Separatism and Power,” in Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory
The notion that women inherently shared a system of values and traits that was the foundation for separatist initiatives invited criticism from other feminists, who understood this claim to be antithetical to the early theorization of social constructionism by feminist thinkers. Further, the claims for a universality of woman’s values and cultural feminists’ isolation of gender as the privileged determinant of women’s oppression, alienated many minority women, who understood their identities and experiences to be constituted by race and class, as well as gender, and who viewed their sexuality as a possible site of empowerment. In an essay demarcating the distinctions between early forms of radical feminism and cultural feminism, Alice Echols wrote that the latter’s focus on biology as a wellspring for a separatist culture maintained gender as a system of binary opposition in a way that the former sought to contest. She historicized the decisive split between radical and cultural feminisms as occurring in 1975 as a result of their different approaches to sexuality and of cultural feminism’s lack of a leftist-based political agenda.

The belief espoused by Daly and others, such as Andrea Dworkin, that male sexuality is inherently aggressive precipitated the “domino theory of sexuality” which

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41 According to historian Jane Gerhard, “Lesbian and straight feminists viewed the building of an alternative women’s culture as an extension of, not a retreat from, their political vision. For many, establishing feminist institutions was about lending scarce resources to more women as well as offering women images of themselves that were positive and untainted by patriarchy.” Gerhard, 156.

42 Gerhard, 102.

43 Echols, 51.

44 Ibid, 54.
held that pornography incites men to rape. In 1976, the group Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) was founded in Los Angeles, Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media (WAVP) was established in San Francisco and similar groups formed in many cities in the US. While such groups as WAVAW and WAVP drew attention to real and pressing concerns about violence towards women, as Lisa Duggan, Nan Hunter, and Carole S. Vance pointed out, many feminists were critical of the anti-pornography movement for its singular focus, in which “Porn becomes a straw man for all misogyny and sexism, which misdirects analysis of the many causes of women’s oppression.”

While anti-pornography groups tended to be positioned as representative of feminism as a whole in the mass media, varied feminist positions regarding sexuality were represented at, for instance, the conference “Towards a Politics of Sexuality” held at Barnard College in New York in April of 1982. A planning committee of “twenty-five

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46 Such as Women Against Pornography (WAP) in New York. Some of the feminist anti-porn groups, such as WAVP clashed with Samois, the lesbian sado-maschistic [s/m] community in San Francisco, because they interpreted s/m practices as emblematic of violence and male sexuality. However, not all anti-porn groups targeted private sexual practices. WAVAW, for instance, made programmatic statements against criticizing individual expressions of sexuality. Carolyn Bronstein, Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976-1986 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 287.

diverse women” organized the event, which proposed to “explore the tension between sexual danger and sexual pleasure in feminist theory and women’s lives during the past hundred years in Euro-America.” In her paper for the conference, Vance wrote, “To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women’s experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live.” The conference organizers’ and participants’ efforts to reconstruct a fuller picture of sexuality that allowed for a wide range of women’s experiences were the target of a protest staged by the group WAP in what was but one example of the clashing of anti-pornography and anti-anti-porn feminists during the period of what became known as the Sex Wars.

In the early 1980s, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon became the veritable spokeswomen for the anti-porn movement as they worked together to draft legislation banning pornography. Their first attempt at a legal ban occurred in Minneapolis, where the city council passed their ordinance, which the mayor eventually


50 According to Lisa Duggan, “The battles were bitter, often personal and vituperative. The scars remain. Those of us on the anti-antiporn ‘side’ were astonished to find ourselves attacked by former allies. As we naively set out to open up questions which we believed anti-porn activists had either sidelined or closed for discussion, we expected a debate, not an assault... We are not just talking about sharp words here. We are talking about sponsorship of state suppression of our livelihoods, our publications, our artwork, our political/sexual expression.” Duggan, “Introduction: Porn Again?! Or, We Told You So...” in *Sex Wars*, ed. Duggan and Hunter, 5.
vetoed, believing it would not withstand a legal challenge. The city of Indianapolis passed a similar ordinance, but the court later declared it unconstitutional. In 1985 the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors considered similar legislation, prompting the formation of FACT-LA (Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce), and which was defeated by one vote. The terms of Dworkin and MacKinnon’s “Draft Model Ordinance’s” prohibitions were broad, and its proposed enforcement allowed the public to instigate lawsuits and injunctions against the producers of images, texts and performances that an individual determined to be pornographic. Interpretation of precisely what constituted pornography was dispersed among such a wide-range of possible prosecutors, leaving any displays of sex or nudity vulnerable to censorship if a claimant and a judge agreed that in them, “Women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities.”\textsuperscript{51} The result of such a law would have been the sanctioning of particular forms of sexuality, namely heterosexual and vanilla, while criminalizing the expression of a multiplicity of sexualities, from consensual s/m to homosexuality.

During this time feminists who pushed for the legislation made strange bedfellows with conservative forces to pass the anti-pornography ordinances.\textsuperscript{52} The

\textsuperscript{51} Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, \textit{Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women's Equality} (Minneapolis: Organizing Against Pornography, 1988), 138. Duggan, Hunter and Vance argued, “some feminist and cultural critics have used the term [sex object] to mean sex that occurs without strong emotional ties and commitment. Many conservative critics maintain that any detachment of women’s sexuality from their procreation, marriage and family objectifies it, removing it from its ‘natural’ web of associations and context. … In both these views, women are never sexually autonomous agents who direct and enjoy their sexuality for their purposes, but rather are victims.” Duggan, et. al., “False Promises,” 53.

\textsuperscript{52} In an article written for the Village Voice in 1984, Duggan details an alliance of local feminist groups, right-wing organizations and members of the Moral Majority, the latter two of which, she noted, constitute “the most anti-feminist forces in the culture.”
protection of women and children figured prominently in the family values rhetoric of the New Right. The sweep of conservatives elected to congress in 1978 and Ronald Reagan’s 1980 presidential election marked a decided shift towards the Right in the social and cultural landscape of the U.S.. Paradoxically mirroring the organization of New Left and feminist groups, grassroots conservative organizations had been on the rise during the 1970s, from Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum (originally called “Stop ERA”) and Beverly LaHaye’s Concerned Women for America, to the Moral Majority and the countless local evangelical groups.53 The most pressing concerns of the New Right were: abortion, opposition to gay rights and the Equal Rights Amendment, abstinence education, and other family issues, all of which were organized around a campaign promoting “family values.”54 In 1981, Senator Paul Lexalt (one of Reagan’s closest friends) drafted the Family Protection Act, which would have dismantled equal education laws, banned "intermingling of the sexes in any sport or other school-related activities," required that marriage and motherhood be taught as career choices for girls and banned legal aid for women seeking a divorce.

Given that the Right’s economic policy of cutting spending on entitlement programs was deleterious to low-income families, particularly those headed by single

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mothers, its impassioned concern for family values was a thinly veiled call for the preservation of a specific type of family—consisting of an implicitly white, middle to upper middle-class bread-winning father, stay-at-home mother, and multiple children all residing in a single family house—which nostalgically harkened back to the 1950s, when the U.S. was at the height of its military and economic power. According to the Right, this traditional family—synonymous with American values and without which the country would flounder—was at risk of being eroded by feminists, the ERA, and the presence of women in the workplace (as if that were a new phenomenon), abortion, the poor, homosexuality, and by the mid-1980s, AIDS. The Right imaged and communicated the threats posed by these varied elements of society so successfully that the fears and hatred it both created and capitalized on galvanized much of the Right’s constituencies to vote against their own economic interests. The Right’s positioning of feminism was accompanied by a backlash against it in the media, which declared feminism to be finished at the same time that it was pictured as a fall guy for the dissatisfaction and unhappiness experienced by women.

Conservative politicians and many grass-roots groups were threatened by the increasing visibility of gay people in popular culture. In 1977, the pop singer Anita Bryant formed the organization Save Our Children in Dade County, Florida in order to overturn a recently passed ordinance that protected gays against housing and job discrimination.


discrimination. A fervent battle between the group, consisting largely of fundamentalist Christians, and gay activists ensued.⁵⁷ Many understood Reagan’s position against homosexuality to have been articulated by his silence regarding the AIDS crisis, and by the extremely inadequate funding the government dedicated to the disease. By the time of Reagan’s first public address regarding the AIDS crisis in 1987, 21,000 Americans had already died from the disease.⁵⁸ The factors foregrounded by the Right—their fears surrounding the perceived threats of AIDS, homosexuality, obscenity, and women’s increased visibility in the public sphere—also set the stage for the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 90s.

The conservative political landscape of the 1980s, with its regressive targeting of the civil rights of women and gays, seemingly should have made for an alliance between those constituencies. However, the so-called Sex Wars, including specifically the sting of the anti-porn movement’s condemnation of male sexuality and gay sex, created an often antagonistic relationship between feminists and gay men in particular, who otherwise shared important commonalities.⁵⁹ As the AIDS crisis galvanized gay activism with such

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⁵⁷ The ordinance was repealed by popular vote in a special election. Jerry Falwell’s support of Bryant in repealing the ordinance was one of his first forays into politics and influenced him to form the Moral Majority in 1977, one of many groups to attack gays and feminists for their supposed destruction of the American family.

⁵⁸ In 1980 Reagan did take a public stand against gay rights: “My criticism is that [the gay movement] isn’t just asking for civil rights; it’s asking for recognition and acceptance of an alternative lifestyle which I do not believe society can condone, nor can I.” Quoted in Randy Shilts, Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2005), 368.

⁵⁹ Lisa Duggan has argued that the tendency within the antiporn movement to characterize all male sexuality—take, for example, Andrea Dworkin’s contention that male sexuality is “the stuff of murder, not love”—as violent regardless of whether it is expressed in heterosexual or homosexual sex is damning towards gay men. In the context
intensity that it garnered a visibility for gay politics heretofore unseen in the U.S., there was a corresponding shift in the theorization of homosexuality resulting in the burgeoning field of queer theory.\(^{60}\) According to Steven Seidman, “lesbian and gay intellectual culture” from the post-Stonewall period through the mid 1970s, “was oriented to civil rights with the aim of social assimilation,” and in the mid 70s to 80s, “liberationist visions of creating a new humanity gave way to ethnic nationalist models of identity and single interest group politics inspired by either a liberal assimilationist ideal, or, in the case of lesbian-feminism, a separatist ideological agenda.”\(^{61}\) In contrast, queer theory consciously drew on French post-structuralism and deconstruction, departing from previous models of gay identity to coalesce around notions of queer sexualities and identities as indeterminate, performative and continually in flux.

\(^{60}\) The ACT UP activists, in particular, mobilized large numbers of people and employed successful strategies beyond political demonstrations to draw media attention to the AIDS crisis and the lack of political and social response to it. For a history of that group, see Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); for a broader account and theorization of AIDS activism, see Brett C. Stockdill, *Activism Against AIDS: At the Intersections of Sexuality, Race, Gender and Class* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner Pub, 2002).

Queer theory was, by turns, influenced by feminist theorizations of gender and sex, and by a critical response to the anti-porn and cultural feminists’ fixed figuration of sexuality in positions of either sexual domination or subordination determined solely by one’s gender. In a highly influential passage, Gayle Rubin voiced a “challenge [to] the assumption that feminism is or should be the privileged site of a theory of sexuality. Feminism is the theory of gender oppression. To automatically assume that this makes it the theory of sexual oppression is to fail to distinguish between gender, on the one hand, and erotic desire on the other.” Following Rubin, many understood the study of sexuality and gender to be two distinct fields. The divergences between queer theory and feminism were in part based on the reduction of feminism to its cultural feminist iteration while in other sectors—such as the academy and the art world—feminism was also responding to critical theory, as it struggled with its own questions of subjectivity and with the very subject of feminism. Many understand feminism as providing important precedents to queer theory; for example Diane Richardson notes that:

62 The editors of *Intersections Between Feminism and Queer Theory*, for example, acknowledge, “feminist writers were among the first to challenge such frameworks for understanding gender and sexuality,” and that feminism’s attention to the private sphere had far reaching implications for theorizing sexuality. Janice McLaughlin, Diane Richardson and Mark E. Casey, introduction to *Intersections Between Feminist and Queer Theory: Sexualities, Cultures and Identities*, ed. McLaughlin, Richardson, and Casey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1.


64 Biddy Martin warns that “antifoundationalist celebrations of queerness rely on their own projections of fixity, constraint, or subjection onto a fixed ground, often onto feminism or the female body, in relation to which queer sexualities become figural, performative, playful, and fun. In the process, the female body appears to become its own trap, and the operations of misogyny disappear from view.” Martin, “Sexualities without
Both feminist and queer writers have challenged constructions of hetero as natural and universal and queried the hetero/homosexual binary. Both feminist and queer theorists’ work on sexuality invite a radical rethinking of many of the concepts we use to theorize social relations. Both see sexuality as central to the social organization of the ‘public’ world.\(^\text{65}\)

Certainly feminism, in its multiple iterations, has a contentious past, yet negative reactions towards it tended to reduce what has always been a heterogeneous collection of thoughts and actions to a singular strain. In recounting particular moments and tendencies in feminism’s past, I hope to contextualize McCarthy, Kelley and Gober’s individual responses to it, while restoring (or at least hinting at) some of the complexity of feminism at each historical moment.

AN AESTHETICS OF EXPERIENCE

The “personal is the political” ethos of feminism promoted inquiry into the dialectic between the psychic and social realms and helped to expose the degree to which the political, defined as the realm that contests and determines an understanding of social relations, operates upon individual identity. For The Feminist Art Program, consciousness-raising became an invaluable pedagogical tool within this realm of inquiry, and helped generate a great deal of artwork. The program, which was initially founded by Judy Chicago at Fresno State University in 1970, was an effort to develop a community of women creating art based on their own experiences. Chicago rejected the canon of Western modernism, and introduced her students to forms and processes of

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Genders and Other Queer Utopias,” in *Coming Out of Feminism?*, ed. Mandy Merck, Naomi Segal and Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 11.

\(^{65}\) Richardson, “Bordering Theory,” 33.
making art that she imagined would pertain more directly to women. During the following year, the program moved to the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles, where it was co-directed by Miriam Schapiro. The Feminist Art Program made a mark on the Southern Californian arts scene, gaining visibility through its performances and public exhibitions, most notably including Womanhouse, which was open to the public from January 30 through February 28, 1972. That exhibition was staged in a rehabilitated decrepit house, and comprised different installations in each room reflecting on the daily routine and inner life of the housewife. Consciousness-raising became an alternative approach to making art to which women could lay claim, rather than following and being measured by mainstream aesthetic standards.\textsuperscript{66}

Faith Wilding, an artist and former administrator and participant in the program, identified four interrelated principles of feminist art education developed for the Feminist Art Program that would enable the goal of producing an art based on women’s experiences: consciousness raising; the creation of a “female environment”; the identification of “female role models” based on art historical research; and “permission to be themselves.”\textsuperscript{67} In 1977, Wilding recounted her memories of consciousness-raising

\textsuperscript{66} Faith Wilding stressed the pedagogical importance of Womanhouse, “In planning a large beginning project, the Program faculty hoped to accomplish several things: first, to let students confront their problems as women while grappling with the demands of a project rather than undergoing initial extended consciousness-raising; second, to give students the chance to learn many skills and work collaboratively; and last but most important, to force the students to begin pushing their role limitations as women and to test themselves as artists. As it turned out, all of these hopes were realized, and Womanhouse has become an example to feminist art classes everywhere.” Faith Wilding, \textit{By Our Own Hands: The Woman Artists Movement, Southern California} (Los Angeles: Peace Press, 1977), 25.

\textsuperscript{67} Wilding, \textit{By Our Own Hands}, 10-11.
sessions held at participants’ houses:

Once, after an emotional consciousness-raising session about street harassment, Chicago suggested we make a piece in response. … Never in our previous art education had we been asked to make work out of a real life experience… I remember the almost unbearable mixture of excitement, fear, and pain in the room as this raw work burst forth, and as we identified with the feelings portrayed. By fortuitous accident, it seemed, we had stumbled on a way of working: using consciousness-raising to elicit content, we then worked in any medium or mixture of media—including performance, role-playing, conceptual- and text-based art, and other non-traditional tools—to reveal our hidden histories.\(^{68}\)

These sessions, and the works created from them were not, however, all a matter of emotion and catharsis. Rather, personal stories were followed up with analysis that consisted of contextualizing individual experiences within the larger framework of the political and social oppression of women.\(^{69}\)

The analysis of the kinds of personal experience described by Wilding was essential to bridging the gap between the personal and political. In her statement for a conference called “On Women’s Art” in 1980, however, Martha Rosler challenged the idea that the inclusion or incorporation of personal content into art is necessarily a political act. “Yes,” Rosler acquiesced, but only “if it [the personal] is understood to be so [political], and if one brings the consciousness of a larger, collective struggle to bear on questions of personal life, in the sense of regarding the two spheres as both


\(^{69}\) Wilding continued, “In subsequent group discussions, we analyzed the social and political mechanisms of this oppression, thus placing our personal histories into a larger cultural perspective. This was a direct application of the slogan, ‘The personal is the political’,” 35.
dialectically opposed and unitary.” Rosler’s guidelines for what legitimately constituted the political problematized the category of “the personal,” demanding that it be seen in relation to the larger social body and thereby validated as a subject of art. Rosler advocated for a transformative feminist politics that did not stop short of the individual, but for which the life of the individual is continually placed in “the context of a struggle for control over the direction of society as a whole.”

In order to counter certain criticisms of feminist art, it remains worth stressing that such art never comprised a monolithic entity with a singular identity. Many of the feminist artists I discuss drew on personal experience to create works that demonstrated how gender structures social life. While various thinkers, from Lucy Lippard to Theresa de Lauretis, have celebrated the role of women’s experience in feminist practices, the centrality of that experience has also been heavily criticized as exclusionary and regulatory. Diana Fuss, for example, explained how experiences are problematic to defining the category of woman because they are not shared by all women, nor can they be disassociated from other categories of identity such as race, class, sexuality, and

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70 Rosler also answered her question in the negative, continuing, “No, if attention is narrowed down to the privatized tinkering with one’s solely private life, divorced from any collective effort or public act. … For art, this can mean doing work that looks like art has always looked, challenging little, but about which one claims that it is political just because it was made by a woman.” Rosler, “Well, is the Personal Political?,” 1980, rpt. in Feminism–Art–Theory: An Anthology, ed. Hillary Robinson (London: Blackwell, 2001), 96.

71 Ibid.

72 According to de Lauretis, “the notion of experience in relation to both social-material practices and to the formation and processes of subjectivity is a feminist concept” that she wished to reclaim from post-structuralist critique. Theresa de Lauretis, introduction to The Essential Difference, ed. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 8.
ethnicity. The experiences that inspired vastly different feminist projects corresponded to their lived reality, which is distinct from suggesting a universal response to common experiences such as motherhood, menstruation, etcetera, and many artists explored other political, economic and cultural intersections. Moreover, feminine identity as represented by a multitude of feminist artists produced an equal multitude of artistic visualizations of womanhood, which has indubitably lead to the contestation of the boundaries of that very identity.

THE DOMESTIC AS PSYCHIC LOCUS

The everyday as aesthetic terrain for 20th century artists was transformed by the feminist insistence on its being positioned within the public/private dialectic. Differing from the interest in the “everyday” permeating much avant-garde art—from Duchamp to the Situationists to Pop—feminist artists took up concerns until then regarded as limited to the private sphere. Rather than focus on the very public life of objects, commodities,


74 For example, Camille Billops, Eleanor Antin, Martha Rosler, and Suzanne Lacy, among others.

75 According to Stephen Johnstone, attention to the everyday usually corresponds to a “desire to bring these uneventful and often overlooked aspects of lived experience into visibility,” and has a “political tenor.” In the U.S. it is unclear whether this would be the case if not for the Women’s Art Movement. Johnstone, introduction to The Everyday, ed. Johnstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 13.
and the city, feminist artists often challenged the rigidity of the boundaries that structure the public/private divide. In an essay written for *Ms.* magazine in 1973, Lucy Lippard explained that women artists work from the mundane experiences of the everyday “because it’s there, because it’s what they know best, because they can’t escape it.” She acknowledged that while Pop Art was the first contemporary movement to take up domestic iconography, Pop artists did so with a different set of intentions. According to Lippard, Pop was able to become one of the most popular movements in the modern U.S. because it took up popular subjects in a way that imparted a cool, ironic distance between the artist or viewer and the snippets of domesticity on display. Thus the artist and viewer worked in cahoots, sneering at the banality of domestic dross. Conversely, what was so innovative about feminist art was how that imagery of the domestic was made to signify and speak of identities coded as feminine. In her 1970 essay “The Politics of Housework,” Pat Mainardi questioned the seemingly indissoluble tie between women’s roles and domestic dirty work. She chose a series of typical statements about housework made by men and adroitly translated them to reveal the deep-rooted stereotypes that associate housework and a debased private sphere. Mainardi noted that historically men have been able to achieve what they have precisely because women have been responsible for basic life-maintaining activities, reminding her readers that, “Ms. Matisse ran a millinery shop so that he could paint.”

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77 Ibid.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ conceptually based performances revealed how the structure of the public sphere relies on private domestic acts, such as cleaning. In works such as “Maintenance Art Performance Series” (1973-74) (fig. 4), staged at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Ukeles performed four actions, carrying out the cleaning duties usually done by the janitorial staff while the museum was closed. The most well-known document from this work shows Ukeles on the steps of the museum, on her hands and knees, pouring out the soapy water from a mop bucket whose contents cascade down the steps. This performance evolved from her 1969 “Maintenance Art Manifesto” which illuminated how the basis of her project rested in her experiences as a wife and a mother, and recounted the tension of maintaining her art practice while occupying these roles.

Part of the Manifesto reads as a proposal for a future exhibition entitled “Care”:

I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order).

I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, up to now separately I do Art. Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art. I will live in the museum and do what I customarily do at home with my husband and my baby, for the duration of the exhibition. (Right? or if you don’t want me around at night I would come in every day) and do all these things as public Art activities: I will sweep and wax the floors, dust everything, wash the walls (i.e. floor paintings, dust works, soap-sculpture, wall-paintings) cook, invite people to eat, make agglomerations and dispositions of all functional refuse.79

By collapsing the work of the housewife and the artist, Ukeles challenged the typical roles of each, transforming the problematics of her identity into a systematic examination

of the interdependent relationship between the public sphere and the private, whether played out in the art institution or in her home.

Rosler’s well-known video, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) (fig. 5) disrupted the notion that housework, in this case cooking, came naturally to women because their biology determined their roles as caretakers. The video features the artist standing behind a kitchen counter, as if on a cooking show, enumerating a cook’s tools, from A to Z, in a deadpan tone. She demonstrates their use with exaggerated movements, suggesting that many of these activities border on violence—chopping, grating, tenderizing—and belie a latent aggressivity. Her amplified gestures exceed the docile routine of the home cook, revealing a wellspring of anger directed toward the imposition of the homemaker role on women. Helen Molesworth wrote that *Semiotics of the Kitchen* “skewered both the mass-media image of the smiling, middle-class, white housewife and theories of semiotics, suggesting that neither was able to provide an adequate account of the role of the wife/mother/maintenance provider.”

The feminist movement also began to interrogate the family as the site of the socialization of children into restrictive gender roles. The family, safely ensconced in the private sphere, was the only arena in which women regularly asserted control and were responsible for outcomes; but it was also considered a point of convergence for the

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80 Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” *October* 92 (Spring 2000): 80. Molesworth reconsiders the opposition between essentialism and difference by bringing together works by Ukeles and Rosler, as well as Judy Chicago and Mary Kelly (traditionally seen as representing these opposing poles) to their shared themes surrounding domestic labor and how it underwrites the public sphere.
oppression of women. While the home is the primary site for early childhood development, the socialization of males by other males has historically been spread over several locales, and conducted in part by those outside the family: all-boy’s school, sports teams, fraternities, the army, the workplace, the professional club. Many of these locales have been slowly ceded to female participation, becoming co-educational or socially inclusive. As these alternate sites of socialization have become open to women, and as the presence of women in the workplace has become a norm in the U.S. social imaginary, the intensity of focus back on the home and the family by conservatives has increased.

There are too many instances of feminist artists addressing the dialectic between the individual and the social within the domestic sphere to discuss here. Artists with diverse approaches, such as Ukeles, Ree Morton, Mary Kelly, Eleanor Antin, Mimi Smith, and numerous others, interrogated the domestic scene in an attempt to deconstruct feminine subjectivity and reveal how ideology structures the private sphere and produces identities.

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82 In the early 1980s the notion of “family values” (coded as traditional and conservative) became the centerpiece of the Right’s ideological platform. Historian Allan J. Lichtman wrote, "The new right put a positive spin on anti-pluralist morality. They weren't just against sinners and feminists; they were the "pro-family" and "pro-life" champions of wholesome "family values." Still, defense of the family meant battling the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), abortion, pornography, gay rights, and gun control." Lichtman, White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 320. See also Coontz, The Way We Never Were.
normally thought of as inherent or natural. While their practices and art works varied greatly, these artists diverted discussions of subjectivity in art away from the assumption of a public, universal mind/body to an interpolated, gendered identity, produced within the private sphere.

RECONCIEVING GENEALOGIES

In her 1990 essay “Patrilineage,” Mira Schor interrogated the formulae of canon formation for contemporary artists to assess how patrilineage, or legitimation through reference to male artists, is privileged over matrilineal genealogies. She scrutinized the “stages of career construction”—the exhibition review, feature article, catalog essay, and anthology—to demonstrate how firmly ensconced patrilineage is in the critical career blocks that shape an artist’s identity. Schor wrote: “Women artists are rarely legitimizing references for male artists—or one should say that women artists are rarely legitimated by the mention of their work in the contextualization of a male artist, even when significant visual and iconographic elements link a male’s work to that of a female forbearer or contemporary.” Schor’s promotion of a “matrilineage” is important, but not

83 The following list of works inspired by feminism that address these issues is in no way exhaustive and does not include works discussed in what follows, however it represents a group of works that influenced my thinking on the topic: Illene Segalove, *The Mom Tapes* (1974-78); Nancy Holt, *Underscan* (1973-74); Camille Billops: *Suzanne Suzanne* (1977-82); Mako Idemitsu, *Hideo, It’s Me, Mama* (1983); Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976); paintings by Silvia Plimack Mangold; Chantal Akerman’s film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), and Lisa Steele’s *The Gloria Tapes* (1980).


85 Ibid.
only for women artists, who are the only beneficiaries of such lines of descent in her essay. It is not simply a reversal of lineages—replacing men with women as figures of influence—that needs to be undertaken in order to disrupt the process of canon formation. “More than a collection of valued objects/texts or a list of revered masters,” the canon was defined by Griselda Pollock as “a discursive formation which constitutes the objects/texts it selects as the products of artistic mastery and, thereby, contributes to the legitimization of white masculinity’s exclusive identification with creativity and with Culture.”

As many have argued, to simply assimilate women into the canon is to subsume their practices and histories into its singular logic, rather than allowing for a multiplicity of meanings as to what might constitute art, being an artist, and effecting innovation, or redirecting values normally inscribed in the canon (such as those attaching to genius, individualism, and originality).

A particular challenge will be finding a balance between conferring on 1970s feminist art a historically generative role that will alter its reception in the present and negotiating those art historical tropes, such as genius and influence, which have functioned to exclude women from dominant narratives all along. Additionally, as Jo Anna Isaak acknowledged, there is a double bind in disbanding


these tropes of art historical success at the moment when they become available to women.  

As this dissertation attempts to walk the fine line between shattering masculinist presumptions of artistic genius and preserving for feminine use some productive claims of authorship, I find that what is at stake is the reimagining of feminism in such a way that women of my generation and younger can recognize themselves in it. Unfortunately, it continues to be necessary to contest the negative images of feminists that were routinely propagated during the frenzied backlash against feminism in the 1980s and 90s. This dissertation carries within it the hope to counter what may now be perceived as the isolating effects of identifying as feminist. By reclaiming feminist art as a varied set of practices whose concerns continue to transcend stereotypes, practices that affected artists outside its immediate purview, I hope to recover feminism as both familiar and fresh for those whose only understanding of it has been shaped by media propagated clichés and platitudes. The ramifications of making those artists, critics and curators who interact with the influential bodies of work of McCarthy, Kelley and/ or Gober aware of those artists’ historical connections with feminism may contribute to a more welcoming

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89 During the 1980s the conservative political will to undermine the rights women had gained in the previous two decades was paralleled by a backlash against feminism and women’s rights by the mass media in the U.S. Among the efforts to discredit feminism was the propagation of stereotypes of feminists as man-haters, “feminazis,” etcetera. Subtler forms of negative stereotypes still persist. See Faludi, Backlash.
arena for feminist art and expose the often obscured social and political origins of certain ideas and tendencies that have become popular in contemporary art.\textsuperscript{90}

THE DRAG GAMBIT AND THE AVANT-GARDE

Although I am interested in the ways that McCarthy, Kelley and Gober took up questions and problems raised by feminist art practices, and the possibility of feminism materializing in their works, I am cautious not to identify their art as “feminist” itself. While all these artists perform some variant of cross-dressing, they do so with mixed results and while drawing on varied traditions. McCarthy’s cross-dressing took place within the context of a time period that saw a rise in the popularity of adopting personae in (especially feminist) performance art in the 1970s; Kelley invented a history of drag for himself that has its roots in the films of Kenneth Anger, manifested in the glam rock of the 1970s; Gober’s drag resembles the performative mode of the drag queen.\textsuperscript{91} If donning the apparel of femininity can be considered a form of masquerade, then the consequences of such role reversal must be interrogated. While the possibilities of feminist art’s influence on male artists has been little discussed, critiques have been made of male artists’ assumption of a feminine role as part of a particular tendency within the avant-garde. The artist Mary Kelly argued against the possibility of a masculine masquerade that would upset sexual norms. She distinguished the feminine masquerade

\textsuperscript{90} Here I follow Faith Wilding who, in 1995, registered the resurgence of domestic themes through imagery that lacked, however, both a political orientation and any acknowledgment of feminist sources. Wilding, “Monstrous Domesticity,” \textit{M/E/A/N/I/N/G} 18 (1995): 11-13.

as a form of lure—where one actively seeks out a passive position to attract the other—from “masculinity as display,” where what is bared is power itself. If this difference holds true, then, as Kelly noted, “the psychic trajectories of display and masquerade are not symmetrical.”92 Drawing on André Breton’s fictional character Nadja, Marcel Duchamp’s alter ego Rrose Sélavy, and Andy Warhol’s creation Drella, Kelly examines the history of transgressive femininity as a masculine construct of the avant-garde to show that, in art, any demonstration of transgressive femininity amounts to none other than the display of masculine power. The assumption of a feminine identity by members of the avant-garde was another strategic violation of the values of the bourgeoisie, one that signified the originality of the artist, originality being precisely a fundamental category of modernism that is aligned with masculinity. “The artist,” Kelly wrote, “has already positioned himself on the side of the heterogeneous and the unsaid, the insane, the outrageous and perverse, then named it after her. To be a ‘woman artist’ and to be signified as such is like a double negative.”93 Kelly warned that role reversal may very well enforce the boundaries upholding the roles: “the ‘gender hybrid’ can serve to legitimate as well as disrupt the dominant discourse or to institutionalize the marginal and, through a process of disavowal, can be reconfigured as fetish.”94

Amelia Jones explored an alternative model of the feminine transgressive in a study of Duchamp’s gender play. She reconsidered Duchamp’s status as the father of


93 Ibid., 216.

94 Ibid., 214.
postmodernism constructed around the readymade and its affiliations, which necessarily repressed the “erotics put into play in the Duchampian oeuvre through sexual and gender confusion,” represented by the figure Rrose Sélavy. In the 1920s, the era of the New Woman, women’s suffrage and the popularization of the idea of sex as a marker of identity by Havelock Ellis, Duchamp’s gesture as “an active parody of the definition of the feminine as the sexual, as commodity—the alignment that aimed precisely to shore up the boundaries of proper gender identity in the face of ‘sexual anarchy,’” by Jones’ account. The implications of Rrose, however, move beyond the identification of woman as artifice and gender identity as a construction. Duchamp’s is a unique example of avant-garde female impersonation, as Rrose Sélavy acts as an author herself, often signing her name alongside Duchamp’s (as was important to the Boîte-en-valise).

According to Jones, through Rrose Sélavy, Duchamp illustrates the performative nature of gender not only by adopting a female persona, but by challenging the primacy of the originating gesture of a single stable author, an essential characteristic of modernism.

The instances of drag in the work of McCarthy, Kelley, and Gober are predicated on the assumption that the avant-garde’s feminine masquerades necessarily manifested a transgressive power. Yet they must also be considered alongside contemporary conceptualizations of the possibilities of crossing. To do so, I will primarily rely on

95 Amelia Jones, Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), xvi.

96 Ibid., 164.

97 Molesworth also presents a feminist alternative lineage for Duchamp through an erotics of the body in the exhibition and catalog Part Object Part Sculpture, Wexner Center for the Arts, October 30, 2005–February 26, 2006. Molesworth, Part Object Part Sculpture (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2005).
Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. According to Butler, gender is assumed through the “stylized repetition” of a set of predetermined acts that correspond to social gender norms. The implications of gender performativity go beyond theories of social construction. In an early essay of 1988, Butler takes up the phenomenological theory of “acts” whereby “social agents” constitute social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social signs so as to question how bodies become gendered. Splitting from phenomenologists who suggest a certain degree of agency on the subject’s part, Butler argues that there is no “doer before the deed.” She takes a feminist position in arguing for the primacy of gender in determining identity, by positing the impossibility of the prediscursive body (parallel to the idea of the biologically male or female body). Rather, individuals come into being as embodied subjects at the moment they are gendered. Likewise, the acts that precede the subject’s engendering, the acts that constitute gender, are comprised of a “sedimentation of gender norms” or actions and behaviors associated with one or the other gender, and repeated over time. These acts are not willful, but are socially and politically regulated, and predate the subject who performs them.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler introduced drag as an example of subversive repetition in which the repetition of acts coded as feminine played out across a masculine body disrupts the naturalized assumptions that support gender norms and how they

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become attached to specifically sexed bodies. In other words, “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as contingency.” ¹⁰⁰ In other places, she qualifies how drag can function politically. It is not only a matter of the disjunction between masculine and feminine, as this only reiterates the male/female binary. Rather, Butler places stress on practices that resignify gender. She writes that the political possibilities of drag and the transgender manifest “by not only making us question what is real, and what has to be, but by doing so, showing us how contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and new modes of reality instituted.”¹⁰¹ [Butler writes as a feminist, and her troubling of gender entails a contestation of norms that not only limits who has access to power, but whose lives are accorded value. Sentence?] For her and some others, sexism is bound to a heteronormative hegemony that legitimizes only binary categories of gender, sexuality, gender expression and sexual object choice, and to dismantle these binaries consequently disrupts patriarchy.

To varying extents and with varying results, McCarthy, Kelley and Gober reflect how the once avant-garde practice of crossing genders has been reframed by feminist artists in ways that have exposed the artifice of gender norms across a spectrum of works. The transgressive effect of drag in the work of McCarthy, Kelley and Gober will not be

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 175. The popular interpretations of Butler’s attention to drag often misrepresented it as paradigmatic of gender performativity, or as meaning that gender is free floating and that subverting the heteronormative hegemony was as easy as dressing up. She contests these misinterpretations in Butler, “Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler,” by Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, Radical Philosophy 67 (Summer 1994): 32-9.

taken for granted, but their practices will be appraised on the basis of their ability to resignify gender. This does not mean the replacement of codifications of the male or the female, but rather a means to think differently about the cultural constitution and organization of gender. None of these artists view their relationship to the feminine uncritically, even if they are not always in concert with feminist goals. Mary Kelly’s warning regarding the effects of the ‘gender hybrid’, of both crossing and reinstating boundaries, applies to their practices. In order to avoid celebrating the crossing of boundaries for its own sake, for the appearance of transgression, and in order to maintain a feminist mode of interpretation, it is always necessary to interrogate how the feminine is deployed. A close reading of the works by McCarthy, Kelley and Gober reveals their complex relationships to feminism, encompassing opposing tendencies of acceptance and refusal. Looking at these artists allows us to follow the hidden lineages of feminist art into the present, to identify where along the line it became concealed, and to identify contemporary artists’ projects that aim to complicate feminism’s recovery in the present. The relationships between these artists and feminism will be assessed individually, with an eye to how these male artists employ feminist themes and strategies to their own ends, but also to how creative (even if partial) alliances may be teased out of their work.

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102 I would not suggest that the ways in which McCarthy, Kelley and Gober can be said to cross-dress do the work of subverting gender norms that transgendered individuals do as they move through their daily lives. Vivian K. Namaste warns against theorizing cross-dressing based on “rhetorical figures”; she writes that the lives of transgendered people consist of “more than just a theory that justifies our very existence, more than mere performance, more than the interesting remark that we expose how gender works.” Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1.
CHAPTER ONE:
PAUL MCCARTHY’S SLIPPERY PASSAGES

THE STAGE SET

The artist writhes around on a bed wearing nothing but black panties, a platinum blonde wig, and heavy make-up—thickly applied foundation that is several shades too dark, powder blue eye shadow, and pink lipstick. A satiny comforter covered with ketchup and chunks of ground meat coat the bed. So began a 1975 taped performance of *Sailor’s Meat* (fig. 6-8) by Paul McCarthy. In 1979, the artist Barbara Smith described the progression of the performance, her mix of pronouns alluding to its gender confusion:

She moves upon the bed, dipping her body and penis, slithering into the meat and ketchup. She holds her head up and back and tickles her nipple and barely moves. He gets off the bed and puts his face in the assortment of meat and ketchup; it clings to him red and is framed by the blonde hair. At one point he comes upon the rubber arm cushions from a pair of crutches. Perfectly resembling an erect penis he tapes it on. … In one instant he is male-like and in the next he is female.  

McCarthy simultaneously dominated and was dominated by the meat—he placed a small sausage in his anus as he ground his pelvis into mounds of hamburger, which he pushed his face into and licked it, all the while his penis slipped out of his black panties. Smith reported that “gruesome moments” followed when McCarthy strapped his penis to a cushion from a crutch so that it maintained an erect pose (fig. 6). The crutch pad

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functioned as a prosthetic penis as he stuffed it with meat and mayonnaise, which he then attached to his hips with medical tape, redoubling representations of his manhood. McCarthy thrust this doppelganger into the mayonnaise jar, then detached it and forced it down his throat. The performance ended with McCarthy stripping down completely and smashing the mayonnaise jar on the floor and repeatedly walking over the glass shards (fig. 7).

*Sailor’s Meat* is a variant of a series of six performances, ranging from sixteen to eighty-one minutes long, from McCarthy’s *Meat Cake* series (1974-75). These performances evinced several of feminist art’s contributions to contemporary art: investigations into how the lived and performed body becomes sexed and gendered within the private sphere; the adoption of performative personae to explore the construction of gender categories, and the resulting instability of the borders around those categories; as well as the inclusion of hallmark elements of feminist art, such as the use

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104 Ibid. Smith locates the setting of *Sailor’s Meat* as a bedroom in a “cheap motel” where a limited number of people could watch the performance unfold. Chairs were set up in another room in front of a closed-circuit monitor so that viewers could choose where to view the work. A similar set-up was used for an earlier performance of *Meat Cake #3* at Newspace gallery in Los Angeles in 1974.

105 Prior to writing her essay, Smith watched videos of several of the performances she described in order to recall her initial viewing experience of them. However she misremembers the dates of both *Sailor’s Meat*, which she writes occurred in 1974 (though it is from 1975) and *Meat Cake #1*, which she dates to 1972 (though it is from 1974). For a more accurate record of the dates of the video taped performances, though less spirited descriptions, see McCarthy, Paul McCarthy, *Videos 1970-1997* (Köl: Verlag de Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003). Excerpts of *Sailor’s Meat* were shown in McCarthy’s 2000 retrospective at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, where I first came upon the work. *Sailor’s Meat* was most recently shown as *Sailor’s Meat/ Sailor’s Delight, Edit #1*, 1975, 81:31 min. (a different version than featured in the above catalog and exhibition in Köln, which was *Sailor’s Meat/ Sailor’s Delight, Edit #2*, 44:20 min.) in the exhibition *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981*, at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, October 1, 2011 – February 13, 2012.
of edible materials to evoke bodily fluids and reference to the ritualistic.\textsuperscript{106} McCarthy’s knowledge of and experiences with feminist art and artists in Southern California in the 1970s inflected his demonstration of the body’s relationship to the process of gendering and his evocation of performative personas. However, critical analysis of McCarthy’s body of work has neglected instances of feminist effect and dialog. Rather, critics commonly focus on the concerns McCarthy shared with certain of his contemporaries as well as his place within, what has become, the ubiquitous Pollock-Kaprow lineage, which claims Jackson Pollock as the progenitor of post-war performance, and Allan Kaprow as inheriting his mantle.\textsuperscript{107} While this line of descent of male performance artists is significant to McCarthy’s development, in the \textit{Meat Cake} series he distinguished himself from it in the way he mined a spectrum of genders, highlighting an on-going conversation with feminist art among his peers in the Southern California arts scene of the 1970s.\textsuperscript{108}

The exclusion of feminist art from the critical literature on McCarthy undermines

\textsuperscript{106} Examples of which include Barbara Smith’s \textit{Ritual Meal} (1969) and \textit{Ablutions} (1972), performed by Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel and Aviva Rahmani, both discussed later in this chapter.


\textsuperscript{108} According to the artist Suzanne Lacy, “I think the contribution of feminist theory to avant-garde art in California has been underrated; when it is investigated more closely, we will find that the two have been mutually supportive and influential.” Moira Roth, “Visions and Re-Visions: A Conversation with Suzanne Lacy,” \textit{Artforum} 19, no. 3 (November, 1980): 42.
feminism’s position as the historical context for artistic practices exploring gender in the 1970s. The impact of feminist art on McCarthy is not straightforward but fraught with an ambivalence that has proven to be common among male artists engaging with feminism. The effect of McCarthy’s performances is one of destabilization—of the boundaries of the subject, of the categories of sex and gender—yet this alone did not necessarily lend a political dimension to his work.

Throughout the *Meat Cake* series McCarthy continually displayed and dismantled the categories of sex and gender within the private setting of the boudoir. During *Sailor’s Meat*, he shifted between flaunting feminine attributes and attending to his male member so quickly and continually that the boundaries between male and female nearly dissolved. With his platinum wig and black panties, McCarthy mimicked the staging of publicity stills for Russ Meyer’s soft-core movie *Europe in the Raw* (1963) when he assumed a particular pose, kneeling on the bed and arching his back.\(^\text{109}\) McCarthy corrupted this image, which represents the height of an exploitative and stereotypical vision of femininity, with the physicality of his own body. As multivalent signifiers, the raw meat and condiments McCarthy used in these performances worked to catalyze the body’s flow through and between the dichotomies instituted by rational thought (male/ female, owner/ property, clean/ dirty), and dematerialized them to a certain extent.\(^\text{110}\) It is telling


\(^{110}\) Drawing heavily on Freudian theory, Amelia Jones presented McCarthy’s work as desublimating masculinity. She wrote, “McCarthy overtly marks and negotiates the repressive or sublimatory apparatuses of the socialization of the subject. His work is thus not an attempt to overthrow patriarchy and its structures so much as an attempt to open them out by reversing the process of sublimation and repression such that inside and outside (masculine and feminine, ego and id, etc.) are shown to be intimately related as
that McCarthy referred to these materials as “flux,” as their semi-congealed states refuse the body a stable image.\textsuperscript{111} In \textit{Sailor’s Meat}, the raw meat, condiments and crutch pad multiplied representations of the body, dispersing the ground of the performance so that McCarthy’s body was one among many sites surveyed by the camera. The crutch pad as prosthetic penis lost its phallic significance when McCarthy forced meat into the slit of the pad, at one point manipulating it and pulling at it as the camera focused in so that it resembled a vulva. Smith described the effect of McCarthy’s stuffing the crutch pad with meat: “Its color was quite grotesque, for his penis appeared to be horribly maimed.”\textsuperscript{112} Both Smith and McCarthy located the “power” of the work in his ability to represent himself as “androgynous” despite the nearly constant presence of his penis. In a 1993 interview, McCarthy described \textit{Sailor’s Meat}: “I’m dressed with eye makeup and a wig, but you are very aware that it is a man. It’s the image of an androgynous figure. The illusion goes back and forth between watching a male and watching a female, and I think the power of the piece is that you get lost. It’s this idea of seducing through an androgynous figure, exploring those sides of myself.”\textsuperscript{113}

The title \textit{Sailor’s Meat} crudely refers to the stock “possessions” of the man at sea, his whore and his penis (as well as the actual chopped meat) all of which become obverse imprints of one another – like two sides of a Mobius strip.” Amelia Jones, “Paul McCarthy’s Inside Out Body and the Desublimation of Masculinity,” in \textit{Paul McCarthy} (New York: The New Museum of Art, 2000), 127.


\textsuperscript{112} Smith, “Paul McCarthy,” 49.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 48; and Paul McCarthy, “There’s a Big Difference Between Ketchup and Blood,” Interview with Marc Selwyn, \textit{Flash Art} no. 170, (May/ June 1993): 63.
indistinguishable in the process of the performance. The body of the performing subject looses its coherence and the sailor’s object of desire has been confounded and multiplied, therefore confusing the distinction between subject (the sailor) and object (the various representations of his meat), and male and female. If, in contrast to the feminine body, the classic masculine body is performed as whole and impenetrable, in *Sailor’s Meat* McCarthy cannot be said to possess one, despite the recurring appearance of his penis. Instead, his orifices have been penetrated; his body leaks. McCarthy shows the mess of mass-cultural food products, his actions (posing, being on “top,” thrusting, taking it from behind), attributes (panties, negligee, make up), and body parts (penis, dildo) associated with specific genders, to be free-floating and disarticulated from singular sites of meaning. The crutch pad, sausage and his actual penis all at times signify as a penis, even as they may be unattached from his body; at times his penis vanished under panties when it was bandaged to his leg, and could no longer motivate his desires or actions. Nor was there the sense of a ‘proper’ subject enacting the scene; as McCarthy slipped between genders and spread out his body among foodstuffs and other stuffs, with no apparent motivation behind his actions, the persona he fashioned refused a stable subject position.

The subversion of stable sites of meaning in *Sailor’s Meat* both serves as the performance’s impossible organizing principle and enabled multiple, albeit ambiguous, interpretations of the work; McCarthy proffered a muddied sexual politics that is complex and, at times, contradictory. While his destabilization of boundaries starkly contrasted with the tendency in feminist art to reveal the artifice of gender roles by presenting personal narratives—as for example in works from the 1970s of Eleanor Antin, Martha Rosler, and Lynn Hershman—both approaches denaturalize associations between
biologically determined sex and gender expression. In *Sailor’s Meat* the coherence of gender categories fell apart, disrupting the system of binaries upon which heteronormative and patriarchal hegemony rests. While the effects of the performance were thus sometimes in concert with certain feminist objectives, the questionable way McCarthy performed as and against the feminine prevented *Sailor’s Meat* from being associated with a feminist agenda. McCarthy’s presentation of the feminine is not unproblematic: his female persona is anonymous, perhaps the projection of a fantasy, and the title implies she is the property of the sailor; she effectively becomes subsumed to acts of sex and violence and in the end disappears all together. His version of a woman is debased, in other words, yet his representation of masculinity is even more depraved. Violent acts ensued, yet the identity of the personage who performed or received them could not be determined; there is no top or bottom, just a whirl of sensations that were likely an affront to some viewers at some point during the performance (particularly the smell). In *Sailor’s Meat* the feminine was not always legible, it came in and out of focus in the blur of a blonde wig, gaudy eye shadow and a quoted pose. At times it disappeared from view entirely—his makeup became obscured by ketchup and his lingerie was removed—and it did not reemerge, resignified or otherwise, at the end of the performance. Rather, signaling the conclusion of *Sailor’s Meat*, McCarthy stepped on glass shards and his body coalesced around the resulting experience of pain to complete the performance as a fully realized man (fig. 7). In the constant slippage between subject and object, and between genders, McCarthy avoids representing or assessing the asymmetrical relationship between genders.
When the categories of female and male become as indistinct as they were in *Sailor’s Meat*, the feminist politics of gender loses some of its purchase. Since the late 1970s there have been debates as to whether “woman,” as a stable category, should be the subject of feminist inquiry.\(^{114}\) While gender categories are not unproblematic, as Diane Richardson attests, they remain significant identity categories for political action, as well as the “frameworks by which we become intelligible to ourselves and others.”\(^{115}\) In his *Meat Cake* performances, McCarthy, however, embodies an ambivalence towards gender, an ambivalence that is also emblematic of his position towards feminism. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes ambivalence as “the possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category.” Thus it is “a language specific disorder,” whose “main symptom is the acute discomfort we feel when we are unable to read the situation properly and to choose between alternative actions.”\(^{116}\) The failure of language

\(^{114}\) With their theorization of a decentered subject, post-structuralists have generally challenged the viability of the category ‘woman.’ Similarly, Judith Butler and others have warned of the exclusionary effects of such stable gender categories. See Butler, “‘Women’ as the Subject of Feminism,” in *Gender Trouble*, 2-8 and Parveen Adams and Jeff Minson, “The ‘Subject’ of Feminism,” in *The Woman Question*, ed. Adams and Elizabeth Cowie (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), 81-101. Others still have pointed to the necessity of such gender categories, if only provisionally, in order to claim a position within representational politics, and to engender political action. See Steven Seidman, “Identity Politics in a ‘Postmodern’ Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes,” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 134. Recently Linda Zerilli has been influential in advocating for feminist politics to move away from “the social question” and the “subject question” tied to an instrumental conception of politics, which she understands as the larger frame for the debates over the category of woman, towards a rethinking of political freedom based on action. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

\(^{115}\) Richardson, “Bordering Theory,” 22.

to maintain categories confounds order, and introduces the possibility of alternatives to
the system of binary classifications characteristic of modern language. According to
Bauman, classification is an “operation of inclusion/exclusion,” which invariably is “an
act of violence perpetuated upon the world, and requires the support of a certain amount
of coercion.” The confusion of Sailor’s Meat results from McCarthy’s recreation of the
violence of severing gender into two distinct categories of male and female as he
simultaneously challenges that distinction by assaulting to the audience with
everything—signifiers of both genders, varied sexualities, and bodily fluids—all at once.

The ambivalence on display in Sailor’s Meat evinces none of the detachment of
the term as defined by Bauman, who leaves little room for the role of affect. In doing so,
he flattens out the complexity of how these categories, which are for him linguistic,
structure the lives we live and cannot account for the complexities of our attachments to
them. The concept of ambivalence that Bauman draws on has its origins in
psychoanalysis, where it denotes the emotional state of the coexistence of two
contradictory desires or ideas, often deriving from a common source, that are “each
invested with intense emotional energy.” Generally in this state both impulses are not
consciously recognized, yet they both inform one’s actions and affects. Discussing
Freud’s own ambivalence in his writing on a number of topics including gender, Jane
Flax argues that, in regards to theorizing and analysis, “It is often a strength to resist

117 Ibid., 2.
118 Jane Flax, Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the
Contemporary West (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 50. The concept of
ambivalence was introduced by Eugen Bleuler in 1911 and was taken up by Freud
regarding drives and neurosis.
collapsing complex and contradictory material into an orderly whole."\textsuperscript{119} Much of the interaction between discourse and affect is lost when contradiction is repressed in favor of cohesion. In this chapter, I propose ambivalence as an operative category of analyzing McCarthy’s reactions towards and positions on feminism, to explore the ramifications of the possibility of holding onto two positions at once.

Though \textit{Sailor’s Meat} is not motivated by a political program, the work does participate in a feminist driven reexamination of the body as it performs its sexuality. In the \textit{Meat Cake} series McCarthy moved away from a history of performance that treated the male body as universal (and therefore neutral)—exemplified by the reception of Bruce Nauman’s performances—to an emphasis on sexual difference that, in his concurrent inhabiting of two genders, nearly obviated the difference between them. The hierarchical organization of gender that motivated the developments of feminist art is not the focal point here, though that does not mean that McCarthy was not responding to feminism. His attention to the constructed nature of sex and gender brought into the fore feminist inspired issues that were (and continue to be) necessary for both men and women to probe in order to analyze how intensely power is attached to masculinity, even in its varied expressions. \textit{Meat Cake} reflected not only a need to debase masculinity and humiliate the male body—a reaction to feminism shared by several male artists such as Vito Acconci and Richard Newton—but also a deep and lasting interest in the various mechanisms by which one acquires gender.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
PERFORMING SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: THE CHRONICLE AND THE COMMUNITY

Gender play was a point of convergence for many of McCarthy’s peers within the performance art scene in Southern California in the mid to late 1970s, a scene that was at once fairly close knit and dispersed throughout the region. The relatively large number of art schools and Master of Fine Arts programs in Southern California, combined with its position as subordinate to the preeminence of the New York art world, created an artistic environment characterized by experimentation and possibility. Without the heft of tradition or market pressures, feminist and performance art were allowed space to flourish in an atmosphere of community and collaboration on the West Coast. Growing out of then recently dismantled Feminist Art Program, the Woman’s Building found its first home at the former site of the Chouinard Art Institute in downtown Los Angeles and consisted of the Feminist Studio Workshop, (FSW) founded by Sheila Levant de Bretteville, Judy Chicago, and Arlene Raven, exhibition spaces (Grandview I and II and Gallery 707), a feminist book store, the Womantours travel agency and the offices of the local chapter of the National Organization of Women. Women from all across the United States traveled to Los Angeles to attend the FSW with the intention of finally being able to develop their own artistic voices and veer off the traditional paths that been presented to them as the only possible routes to becoming artists.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{120} The artist Cheri Gaulke described her experience of fleeing the Midwest for Los Angeles in 1975 in order to join the Woman’s Building and find a supportive environment for her collaborative performances. Cheri Gaulke, “1+1=3: Art and Collaboration at the WB,” in \textit{Doin’ It Together: Feminism and Art at The Woman’s Building}, ed. Meg Linton, Sue Maberry and Elizabeth Pulsinelli (Los Angeles: Otis College of Art and Design, 2012), 21-23.
The FSW had the interrelated mission of supporting women in developing an art that explored feminine identity and fostering a feminist art community. In a historical account of the period, Faith Wilding, a student of the FAP and member of The Woman’s Building, wrote,

According to Arlene Raven, students in the Workshop are encouraged to create images which promote and express a new feminist culture, and she believes they begin to approach art making in a new way b/c of this. If there is any new aesthetic emerging from the FSW, it is an “aesthetic of relationship,” that is, [84] the art is about building a feminist community and support structure, and about women creating new, positive images of themselves.  

The emphasis on collective work and the creation of a woman-centered community of the Women’s Building reflects the strength of cultural feminism on the West Coast, and its ethos of cultural separatism. The Woman’s Building was run by a Board of Lady Managers, borrowing both the phrase from the eponymous Woman’s Building at the Chicago World’s Fair, but major decisions were to be discussed and voted on all members, reflecting the egalitarianism of cultural feminism.  

Jenni Sorkin has drawn a parallel between the Woman’s Building and creation of culture in a Medieval convent, following those lines, she describes its convent-like atmosphere as, “a separation from the perceived (sexual) violence of the heterosexual world, and a refuge into the world of lesbian love and compassion, where women nurtured and taught one another through

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122 Jenni Sorkin wrote that “the need for everyone to have a voice in the decision making process often resulted in a stultifying bureaucracy.” Sorkin, “Learning from Los Angeles: Pedagogical predecessors at the Woman’s Building,” in *Doin’ It Together*, 37-64.
their collective artistic practice, rooted in self-discovery and visibility." She notes that much of the core membership consisted of lesbians, which was not necessarily true of much of the constituency of the Woman’s Building. Despite the separatist bent of the institution, many of the artists associated with it, such as Suzanne Lacy, Cheri Gaulke and Laurel Klick, also exhibited, performed, and collaborated outside its woman-centric parameters.

With the aim of providing a record of the larger performance community of its place and time, the writer Lynda Frye Burnham founded *High Performance* magazine in Los Angeles in 1978. The work and words of any artists who sent in black-and-white photographs documenting their work together with the dates and a description of the performances in question were published in the magazine’s “Artist’s Chronicle” section. Opening the content of a sizable section of the magazine to the artists themselves secured a fair representation of a wide swath of the performance scene, particularly in Southern California, creating a space where artists could interact with each other through its pages.

123 Ibid., 41.

124 Ibid. An important collaborative effort within the Women’s Building was the Lesbian Art Project (1977-79), founded by Arlene Raven and Terry Wolverton. Jennie Klein discusses how the LAP both embraced the discourse of cultural and lesbian feminism, and was expansive of it. Klein, “The Ghost of Desire: The Lesbian Art Project and the Woman’s Building,” in *Doin’ It Together*, 126-157.

125 Burnham was very conscious about devoting a great deal of space for artists to communicate about their own works, and representing equal numbers of men and women in *High Performance*. In a letter to Yoko Ono, Linda Burnham wrote, “Among our concerns are a democratic approach to selection and editing, and a well-balanced mix of male and female artists.” Quoted in Jenni Sorkin, “Envisioning High Performance,” *Art Journal* 62, no.2 (Summer, 2003): 38.
The first issue of *High Performance* featured McCarthy, Barbara Smith, Nancy Buchanan, Richard Newton, Alison Knowles, and Gina Pane in the Chronicle section; interviews with Norma Jean Deak and Moira Roth, and with Suzanne Lacy (who was also featured on the cover) and Richard Newton (the associate editor) filled out the issue. Telling of his involvement in the magazine and the performance scene, McCarthy appeared on the cover of the following issue and was interviewed by Newton. The third issue included an interview of Hermann Nitsch by Nancy Buchanan and several works by the Feminist Art Workers. Subscriptions to *High Performance* were often shared, and individual issues were passed between artists. As a historical record, *High Performance* in general, and the Artist’s Chronicle section in particular, allowed the performances included within to contextualize one another, enabling the reader to draw connections across different groups of artists who were performing in the same region at the same time, sometimes in similar venues.

The community of performance artists existed in ways that exceeded the textual, however. Many of the artists who appeared repeatedly within the pages of *High Performance*—McCarthy, Smith, Buchanan, Newton, Richard Duncan, Cheri Gaulke and Laurel Klick, for instance—constituted the primary audience for one another’s works and often collaborated on projects together. Close Radio, a program of experimental audio works by artists airing on the Los Angeles public radio station KPFK was founded by Duncan and Neil Goldstein in 1976 and organized by Duncan and McCarthy from 1976 to 78. Nancy Buchanan and Linda Burnham also participated at various points. The artists featured on the show were largely local and included: Klick, Smith, Antin, Gaulke, 

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126 Ibid., 35.
Newton, Lacy, Kaprow, Rosler, John Baldessari, and Harry Kipper. Also in 1976, McCarthy presented a collection of artists’ works in the format of a large-scale newspaper titled *Criss Cross Double Cross*. He provided a two-page spread to thirty-eight artists living in Los Angeles at the time (including many artists who would appear in the Artists Chronicles section of *High Performance*) to do with what they pleased.\(^{127}\)

His selection of artists clearly represented both McCarthy’s peers and the generation comprising his teachers, artists whose works he knew and respected.

Four pages of *Criss Cross* were devoted to Suzanne Lacy’s performance *Cinderella in a Dragster* (1976). Dressed in a yellow racing suit and helmet with glass slippers which symbolized these opposing gendered roles, Lacy drove from Los Angeles to Dominguez Hills State College in an old dragster. She stopped along the way to deliver a monologue in which she juxtaposed the myth of the masculine creative genius with an ideal of feminine convention—Cinderella—as models for being an artist. The most politically minded work in *Criss Cross* consists of stills from Martha Rosler’s color video *Losing: A Conversation with the Parents* (1977). Continuing her interest in the relationship between food and oppression, Rosler created a melodramatic tableau in which she interviews the parents of a daughter with anorexia in their living room. As they attempt to come to terms with the disease, they touch on the issue of starvation in third world countries, which contrasts with the desire to match American ideals of beauty.

Also included is a page of photographic documentation of Antin as “The King of Solano

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\(^{127}\) *Criss Cross Double Cross* 1 (Fall 1976), featured works by Smith, Rosler, Lacy, Duncan, Antin, Buchanan, Klick, Newton, Susan Mogul, Ilene Segalove, Baldessari, Kaprow, Ulrike Rosenbach, Chris Burden, Douglas Huebler, Bruce Nauman, Jim Welling, David Askevold, Spandau Parks, and Lynda Benglis, among others. Vito Acconci was also included in the publication, based on a prolonged stay in Los Angeles at the time.
Beach” in the performance “The Battle of the Bluffs” from 1975. Text on the facing page explains how San Diego needs a king to lead the people of the city who are suffering due to its overdevelopment and gentrification. Nancy Buchanan’s humorous contribution was *Wolfwoman* (fig. 9), consisting of two photos of Buchanan “before and after” her transmutation into the Wolfwoman, and a text on the facing page about this transformation and its motivations. As a character, Buchanan first noticed the onslaught of the uncontrollable Wolfwoman when she is on the toilet. She wrote:

When she wiped, she saw two smears of fresh blood on the used tissue. Glancing down at her clean white panties, she instantly knew that this was the first blood. These two drops were the beginning of her transmutation into Wolfwoman. … Wolfwoman had been feeding on the rich flesh of young male talent, terrorizing the Southern California art scene. … male artists no longer dared to walk in the streets alone, usually leaving an opening huddled together in large groups for mutual protection.

In popular culture, such metamorphoses, usually from man to beast, may serve as metaphors for sex, with its uncontrollable urges and the violence that can accompany their fulfillment. Buchanan merged those connotations with the mythic image of the uncontrollable behavior of a menstruating woman feeding off of the creative juices of young male artists. For *Criss Cross*, Laurel Klick provided documentation of her performance “Seduction and Other Questions.” In her layout, photographs of herself as a “normal woman” were juxtaposed with images of female “sex workers” to explore how desires and identifications flow between these categories; Klick hoped to show both how the porn star had become a model of sexuality based on artifice for all women, but also that behind the artifice sex workers were also “normal.” Richard Newton also played with

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identification and expectation in his contribution, *2 29 Black*. He collaged images of himself dressed in a tight black shirt, black lace panties, a garter belt, and platform shoes, together with fragments of newspaper classifieds, including two ads about unwanted pregnancies, complicating the naturalized association between feminine gender expression, sexuality, and so-called biological drives. This cross-section of artists’ projects included in *Criss Cross* demonstrated how prevalent feminist-inspired analyses of gender were within this loose community of artists, a point rarely made in the critical literature on this period.

These forums for performance art, particularly *High Performance* and *Close Radio*, demonstrate the interconnections between feminist artists—many of whom were closely involved in the Woman’s Building—and the larger art community in Southern California. These interconnections have received little attention in histories of feminist art, including those that focus on the Feminist Art Program and the Woman’s Building, and, with the exception of *Performance Anthology: Source Book of California Performance Art*, little else has been written about this performance community during this time.¹³⁰ Important feminist artists who collaborated with McCarthy on various projects include Laurel Klick (a member of the Feminist Art Workers) and Nancy Buchanan (a member of Double X, a feminist artists collective which splintered off from

¹³⁰ The recent exhibition *Under the Big Black Sun* (2012) at the Los Angeles Museum of Modern Art, which included *Sailor’s Meat*, would have been a good venue for such attention. The “Director’s Forward” in the catalog, presents the exhibition as organized around the plurality of art movements between 1974 and 1981, and how those movements reflected the social and political upheavals of the time. Yet, reflected by the exhibition’s title borrowed from an album by the punk band X, curator Paul Schimmel instead focused on the dark side of the era, reaffirming a characterization of Los Angeles he first presented in *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, January 26 – April 26, 1992, also at Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.
the Grandview Gallery housed in The Women’s Building. In a 1977 essay, Martha Rosler described one of Klick’s performances about anorexia, in which she addresses the audience directly regarding the act of depriving one’s body of food, and about her relationship with her mother. Klick emphasized the correlation between food and sex when she attempted to continue communicating with a dildo in her mouth. As Rosler wrote, “Mouth and vagina are confused—vagina dentata. There are other confusions: what it means to take something (a penis, food) into one’s body (through the vagina, through the mouth), what nourishment is (of the body, of the self). Klick talks to the audience about fellatio—being force-fed, unable to talk or eat.”  

McCarthy shared Klick’s sense of an obsessive connection between food and sex, however certain socio-political issues concerning how both food and sex can confine and shape women’s thoughts and bodies inform her performances.

Nancy Buchanan, who collaborated on Close Radio, also participated in some projects by McCarthy, such as his video Family Tyranny (1987) featuring Mike Kelly, for which she received a director credit. For a performance at F-Space, Hair Transplant (1972), Buchanan dressed in a lab coat to play the part of a doctor. She removed her male patient’s clothes and proceeded to clip off hair from various parts of his nude body. Buchanan then cut her own long curly hair and attempted to attach it to the man’s body, after which she passed out the rest to the audience.  

131 Rosler, “Private and Public,” 71

and Delilah, the work explored role reversals and how bodily attributes of gender can be resignified when distributed across the body of the Other. *Hair Transplant* was an exemplary case of the deconstruction of gender categories occurring in performances across Southern California that were inarguably affected by feminist politics.\textsuperscript{133}

Another cross-pollination between feminist artists and their male colleagues was a series of events called *Connecting Myths*, held over four days in March of 1978, to address the intersections between violence and sexuality. Cheri Gaulke and John Duncan organized the events, which were co-sponsored by The Woman’s Building, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA) and Close Radio. Gaulke, Duncan, Klick, the Feminist Art Workers, and Leslie Labowitz staged performances, while Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) and others sponsored workshops. Jim Moisan presented a workshop about sex utopias, “Gender Violence and Utopia in Science Fiction,” and Nancy Angelo and Jeremy Shapiro led a workshop entitled “You Never Wanted to be a Prick,” described in the promotional materials as “a lighthearted workshop for men in dissolving connections between sexuality and violence,” which included “sharing, role playing and writing to create new forms for caring and responsible relationships with men and women.”\textsuperscript{134} In the events and performances—both serious and playful—comprising *Connecting Myths*, Los Angeles based male and

\textsuperscript{133} Buchanan’s *Deer/ Dear* (1978) is a more directly political mediation on violence towards women. Moira Roth describes the performance, beginning “with a woman in a sleeping bag recounting horrifying dreams of violence. Buchanan … uses slides and stories drawn from her own history and that of others, ending with feelings of fear and anger triggered by the Hillside Strangler murders (one of which took place near her house) and an image of deer in snow.” Ibid.

\textsuperscript{134} *Connecting Myths* announcement, John Duncan artist file, Museum of Modern Art archives, New York. Schapiro was also one of the participants in the original radio program on which Andrea Fraser’s *Men on the Line* performance was based.
female artists collaborated to interrogate causes of violence against women and its repercussions in the art community.

Numerous works by artists in the performance scene in Southern California reflected the attention given to feminism by these collaborative efforts, whether those works can properly be called feminist or not. In particular, Linda Burnham identified McCarthy, Newton, Best and Duncan as interested in sexual politics. In varied performances, each of these artists dressed in drag to occupy the borderlands between genders. Newton adopted the persona “The Former Miss Barstow” from the mid 1970s into the 1980s, which, according to Burnham, “centered around a woman artist who had a sex change operation in a bid for success in the art world.” Newton performed in drag, juxtaposing his own image with those of beauty queens, brides, whores, movie stars and mannequins. In Touch a Penis with the Former Miss Barstow, performed at LAICA in 1977, a white curtain of bed-sheets with a “smiling hole” cut out on the left side hung in front of the audience. Rear-projected slides moved across the curtain from right to left until they reached the hole, where light from the projector would stop on a female silhouette. To the left of the figure a super-8 film played, projecting images of mannequins, desert scenery, male genitalia and sexually-inflected cartoons, as well as shots of Newton jumping rope naked and alternately dressed in black and white leotards. A voice-over told the story of the former Miss Barstow’s sex-change operation. As the film ended, the voice-over encouraged the audience to “touch a penis … touch a penis,” and Newton stood where the woman had been and draped his genitals through the hole.

135 Burnham, “Performance Art,” 413.

136 Ibid., 416.
He related, “Both men and women responded warmly by touching my penis and writing on it with lipstick.” Though *Touch a Penis with the Former Miss Barstow* may have been intent on audience titillation, in keeping with many of Newton’s jocular performances, his premise acknowledged the sexism of the art world. Yet Newton’s use of sexuality was not entirely in concert with feminism, again it lacked the ability to rethink the male body. Rather, Newton’s playful approach to sexuality also issued from the sexual revolution of a decade earlier. “The former Miss Barstow,” presents a metaphor for performance as ambiguously straddling the lines between actuality and representation, the real and the fake, and the immediate and the represented.

In a simply titled performance of 1979, “Yoko Ono Gives a Lecture,” Paul Best, as a hapless imitator of Yoko Ono dressed in women’s clothing, heeled boots, a long black wig and sunglasses, visited a class at the University of California San Diego to lecture on ‘her’ work and perform some of her instructional pieces from the 1960s. In the context of 1970s feminist art, with its focus on personae, Best paradoxically inhabited and fetishized the persona of Ono through recreating performances that originally intended to relinquish the role of the artist in aesthetic experiences to the viewer as participant. Best described himself as “a radical feminist.” He related, “One of the issues in contemporary life I have been dealing with quite heavily is that of segregation by various dress codes with respect to gender. I have been studying the social and political implications of male vs. female clothing and how people are oppressed, confined,

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138 *Artists Chronicle, High Performance* 2, no.2 (Fall 1979): unpaginated.
stereotyped and sometimes granted social approval according to what they wear.”139 Best also repeatedly took up the character of Octavia (fig. 10), usually garbed in intense punk and s/m gear—leather, a spiky “slave collar,” and alternately knee-high black leather lace-up boots or stiletto heels—and exaggerated makeup. As Octavia, Best would have himself photographed leaving his San Diego apartment, riding the bus, shopping downtown, drinking at bars, and soliciting the reactions of onlookers. In Best’s ongoing practice of dressing up, he relied on feminist theory not to attempt to pass as a woman, but to jar onlookers into disconnecting gender, sex and sexuality through manifesting their extremes.

John Duncan’s take on cross-dressing was not as playful as those of Best, Newton, or McCarthy. For the event “Connecting Myths,” Duncan dressed as a woman to perform Every Woman (1978). In front of an audience he presented experiences and perceptions of spending several nights hitchhiking the streets of Hollywood, along stretches that were typically the terrain of prostitutes, in his words, “Dressed as a man one night, a woman the next, to experience the risk of sexual attack familiar to women alone on the street.”140 McCarthy followed Duncan and filmed his experiences on these nights.141 He explained his premise for Every Woman, as “want[ing] to feel, even for one night, the daily vulnerability to sexual attack experienced by most women.”142 Despite his

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139 Quoted in Burnham, “Performance Art,” 416.
141 Burnham, “Performance Art,” 418. According to Burnham, Duncan was nearly attacked while hitchhiking.
142 Artists Chronicle, High Performance 1, no. 2 (Fall 1978): unpaginated.
understanding of his performance as an earnest effort to understand the conditions of being a woman in Los Angeles, Duncan opened himself up to the critique of co-opting women’s experience as a subject of art. Reporting on the experience of one night only skims the surface of both a lifetime of such experiences and the ways in which power, both physical and psychological, is structured along gendered lines.\textsuperscript{143}

Several of Duncan’s works from the 1970s evinced his interest in exploring the intersections of violence, masculinity and aesthetic experience, which reflected his personal life.\textsuperscript{144} These works point to Duncan’s yearning for an expressive medium for his personal experiences and emotions, and ultimately some kind of catharsis. Feminist art, with its propensity to delve into its practitioner’s lives for content, and its supportive environment of consciousness raising, provided a model for Duncan, yet one that he misinterpreted by neglecting to bridge personal content and political context. Additionally, the presence of women in the audience seemed to be crucial for Duncan as

\textsuperscript{143} Such experiences informed, for example, Leslie Labowitz-Starus’s piece for “Connecting Myths,” \textit{Reenactments}. The performance was a result of having received a threatening phone call after her involvement in \textit{In Mourning and In Rage}, and aired as a segment of Close Radio. According to Labowitz-Starus, “I talked directly, self-consciously, to the audience, moving and weaving through a personal transition intercut with actual material from the media. Relating not only to the heightened state of my fear and anger, I was confronting the awareness of the promotion of violence that permeates our culture.”\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Reenactments} related Labowitz-Starus’s emotions and reactions to a personal situation to the political arena by inflecting her narrative of the event with evidence of how the media, for one, turns violence against women into a societal norm. \textit{Artists Chronicle, High Performance} 1, no. 2 (Fall 1978).

\textsuperscript{144} The 1970s were an emotional pressure cooker for Duncan: aside from the social and political stresses of the decade, he was living in intense poverty and was constantly fearful of violence due to childhood abuse and varied assaults he experienced. For \textit{Happy Homes} (1980), Duncan called the syndicated radio program of Dr. Toni Grant to ask for guidance with dealing with the “emotional numbness” he felt after witnessing incidents and evidence of child abuse on the bus, which he related to his own past.
his work *For Women Only* (1979) attested to. For this performance, he screened a collage of pornographic films for an audience of women and invited them to come backstage afterwards to abuse him. Because of Duncan’s attachment to violence and his gross miscalculations regarding audience response, his work lacked the transformation of raw emotion and experience into political action or social critique.

Despite the vulnerability and emotionality of Duncan’s performances, his work often relied on shock tactics and aggression towards its female audience. According to Burnham, Duncan was “called on the carpet by his feminist colleagues for ‘irresponsibility’” to his audience.\(^{145}\) Given his combative stance towards women, it seems that Duncan orchestrated his rejection from the very audience he sought out on multiple occasions. In contrast, trust between the audience and the performer was an essential element to the healing environment generated by many feminist performances. Moira Roth explains, “The audience had to trust in the emotional goodwill and psychological astuteness of the performer in order to be willing to undergo the painful intensity of many of these events.” Because it was assumed that both performer and audience members ascribed to feminism, performance could be, according to Roth, “an emotional and political atmosphere in which great risks could be taken and cathartic pain experienced in a safe situation.”\(^{146}\) The community-oriented atmosphere dependent on

\(^{145}\) Burnham, “Performance Art,” 418. According to Mike Kelley, “Obviously works such as these were viewed as intensely problematic. Despite Duncan’s statements that his works were intended to address male gender-related issues that paralleled the concerns of Feminist artists, they were viewed by many as exploitative and mean-spirited. I was simply amazed that Duncan had the audacity to present such inflammatory works within this Feminist milieu.” Kelley, “John Duncan: Los Angeles, late 1970s/early 1980s,” in *John Duncan*, unpaginated.

\(^{146}\) Roth, “Autobiography, Theatre,” 448.
mutual beliefs that Roth described was absent from the performances of McCarthy, Duncan, Best, and Newton, even as the feminist focus on sexual politics comprised the backdrop of their works. The stakes for these male artists, whether personal or otherwise, varied considerably from their feminist contemporaries, artists involved in various feminist institutions and motivated by a sense of collectivity which was crucial to political action.

THE LIVED BODY / THE PERFORMED BODY

McCarthy, Newton, Best and Duncan’s manipulations of the varied ways in which their bodies signified expressions of gender and sexuality was made possible by the instrumentalization of body to express sexual difference by numerous female artists in the 1960s and 70s, such as Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, and Yvonne Rainer. The performances by these male artists also evince the influence of Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, however the in the latter artists’ works there tends to be a kind of disconnect with the social and personal ramifications of using their bodies as an artistic medium. Women artists were forced to negotiate with representations of the body produced by what philosopher Moira Gatens calls “the dominant masculine sexual imaginaries,” which are “politically, legally, economically and socially legitimated through existing networks of power.”\(^{147}\) The female body was such a significant element of feminist art in the 1970s both because of the newly valid place in art of the experiences borne out on the

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bodies of individual women artists, as well as its symbolic purchase. In working with their bodies feminist artists attempted to loosen the female body from the grip of patriarchal structures that controlled its representation, to foment and undergo a process of resignification wherein a generalized and stereotyped female body was transformed into particularized bodies claimed and controlled by individual women.

A cohesive feminist approach to the body did not, however, arise, and as a focus of feminist art in the 1970s, the body was not without contention. Some artists, such as Schneemann, Barbara Smith, and the painter Joan Semmel, among others, engaged their own and others’ bodies to reimagine the possibilities for feminine desire outside of patriarchy. Other artists deployed the body with a view to subverting stereotypes, as an extension of consciousness-raising exercises, or to explore subject matter untouched prior to feminism. Schneemann was one of a few women to mobilize her own and other’s nude bodies in an effort to transform her role as an instrument in other’s performances to a producer of her own image and desire. Though McCarthy has said he did not know about Carolee Schneemann’s 1964 performance *Meat Joy* until after he began to use condiments and meat in his performances, it is impossible not to mention her

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148 Griselda Pollock points out that the body took on a distinctive problematic for second wave feminism of the 1970s: “it is because the body is a sign that it has been so invested in feminist politics as a site of resistance. … the body is precisely a point of transaction between the social system and the subject, between what is classically presented as an intimate or private inside and a public or social outside.” Pollock, “The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories,” in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996), 3-21.

performance in this context. Often referred to as a proto-feminist work, *Meat Joy* was Schneemann’s first piece of complex “kinetic theatre.” Schneemann wrote, “*Meat Joy* has the character of an erotic rite: excessive, indulgent; a celebration of flesh as material: raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, transparent plastic, rope, brushes, paper, scrap. Its propulsion is toward the ecstatic, shifting and turning between tenderness, wildness, precision, abandon—qualities that could at any moment be sensual, comic, joyous, repellent.” In the performance, the seemingly wild abandon of eight minimally clothed dancers giving themselves over to each other and Schneemann’s materials contrasted to the regularity of certain parameters—sequence, lights, sounds, materials.

The most well known (and most critiqued) proponents of a feminist aesthetic language derived from the female body are Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. While their program of “central core imagery,” put forth in a co-authored 1973 essay, received both positive and negative attention among feminists, the essay importantly recognized that aesthetic codes that appear to be neutral are instead generally masculine, and that women’s attempts to work outside of these codes, to subscribe to different values, have generally been denigrated. However, Chicago’s series of intricate paintings suggesting

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151 Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, "Female Imagery," *Womanspace Journal* 1, no. 3 (1973): 11-14. The essay “identifies ‘central core imagery’ as not simply a vaginal iconography, but as expressive of feminist aims: “We are suggesting that women artists have used the central cavity which defines them as women as the framework for an imagery which allows for the complete reversal of the way in which women are seen by the culture… The woman artist, seeing herself as loathed, takes that very mark of her otherness and by reasserting it as the hallmark of her iconography, establishes a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity.” In part because of Chicago’s pedagogical role in the founding and running of the Feminist Art Program in Southern California, her and Schapiro’s theory of central core imagery was particularly influential.
a synchronicity between the floral and the vaginal, as well as her instruction to the students of the Feminist Art Program to graphically explore their own bodies, reflect the simultaneous efforts to reclaim female sexuality occurring in consciousness-raising groups and written tracts.

In an essay from 1990 Janet Wolff navigated the double bind of feminism and the body by advocating for “a cultural politics of the body, while emphasizing its lived experience and materiality.” Wolff summarized various positions regarding the instrumentalization of the female body in order to situate her own nuanced approach. While in the 1970s theorists such as Laura Mulvey and John Berger suggested that the female body was limited to the space delineated for it by the projection of male desires, Wolff argued for the political potential of the body. She theorized that the “body has been systematically repressed and marginalized in Western Culture, with specific practices, discourses, ideologies controlling and defining the female body. What is repressed, though, may threaten to erupt and challenge the established order.”

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154 Wolff, “Reinstating Corporeality,” 122. Wolff draws on the anthropologist Mary Douglas’s 1966 book Purity and Danger, in which she described dirt as a socially constituted category consisting of matter that is excluded from the normative. Douglas stressed the importance to society of regulating boundaries and identified that which threatens boundaries, or does not fit neatly into categories, as powerful and/ or dangerous.
arguing for the transgressive potential of the female body, Wolff drew on Julia Kristeva’s notion of the “monstrous feminine” as representing a duality between a maternal authority that maintains cleanliness and thus a whole and proper body, and the union of mother and nature (and child) which produces an overflow of bodily waste that is threatening as it recalls a pre-Symbolic moment outside of paternal law. However, in contrast to Kristeva, Wolff warned against the notion that the female body itself is implicitly transgressive. Rather, according to Wolff, any use of the body must always problematize it in terms of its construction, its ability to produce and reproduce meaning, as well as its materiality and the realities of the lived body. For Wolff gender is both produced through a sedimentation of historical norms as well as through the everyday experience of exercising and living those norms. Describing the latter process as a “phenomenology,” Wolff connected the behaviors that broadly constitute a feminine identity (the wearing of makeup, for example) with the body that enacts them (the face as a supposedly blank canvas for make-up). As an attempt to understand how the female body can be instrumentalized to critical ends, her essay paralleled feminist artists earlier efforts to reclaim their bodies.

PERSONAE: THE PRIMAL AND THE PERSONAL


Wolff quotes Denise Riley’s formulation that the gendering of bodies “is a function of historical categorizations, as well as of an individual daily phenomenology.” Quoted in Wolff, “Reinstating Corporeality,” 133.
McCarthy’s development of characters for his performances occurred simultaneously, to reiterate, with the use of role-playing in a great deal of 1970s feminist art. While much of the feminist work was committed to storytelling as a means of challenging assigned gender roles, McCarthy’s destabilization of those categories relied on different strategies. His contumacious, repetitive actions continued in performances in which he developed his personae, from the hermaphroditic figure of Meat Cake to the characters in his most recent work. The obsessional quality of the early videos heightened the primal characteristics of McCarthy’s hysterics or buffoons, who lack the linguistic skills necessary to communicate with others. Ma Bell (1971) is the first video included in the Black and White Tapes, 1970-75 (32:50 min, sound). It features a mid-range shot of a phone book on the floor, with only McCarthy’s hands and arms visible as he crawls around the book, turning its pages and pouring motor oil and flour over them while placing cotton batting between the sheets as he continually turns them. At the beginning the sounds of McCarthy humming are audible, but as the action becomes increasingly animated he begins to emit a hybrid laugh/cry (“wah – hah – hah – hah”). The noises then cease and the turning of the pages becomes more and more methodical. The video ends after he bundles the transformed object with twine. Though the camera hides the body and face of the artist, McCarthy here created an artistic persona who shared key elements with his later performance personae, embodying an ambiguous character with dubious motivations—a character with whom the audience is unlikely to be able to readily identify.\footnote{If the motor oil McCarthy used continues to signify as paint (as it did in Whipping the Wall with Paint) then Ma Bell, and its lampooning of painting as a creative act, suggests an alternative precursor to Pollock in the artist Jim Dine, particularly his Smiling} If, early on, McCarthy’s personae stressed the physical body, then his props...
and use of condiments associated with barbeques and fast food, along with his collection of gestures that become almost ritualistic in their repetition located the body in tension with the cultural realm.  

The mounting importance in the early 1970s of the feminist strategy to explore the stereotypes of femininity through the adoption of personae was a means to disarticulate the feminine roles imposed on women from their own individual identities, and many feminist performances demonstrated the contingency of all forms of identity. Female performers sometimes discarded stereotypes by exemplifying them precisely, exceeding and parodying them, to reveal how these tropes of gender have been culturally constructed. An early collaborative project from 1970 at the Feminist Art Program in Fresno consisted of photographs of different women dressed in costumes made by Nancy Youdelman embodying tropes of female identity throughout history, including Victorian Whore, Victorian Lady and Kewpie Doll. As the doll, Cheryl Zurliegen represented a young girl’s ideal of a sex object in the form of a Vegas showgirl. She took a cloyingly mincing pose with her knees turned in together, feet apart, head cocked to the side, and

Workman (1960). Schimmel describes a thirty-second performance wherein: “Dine, his face painted red, wore floor length smock and stood behind table that supported buckets of paint. Behind him was a large sheet of paper stretched Murakami-style to look like a canvas. On the surface he very rapidly scrawled, in orange and blue paint, “I love what I’m doing.” As he finished he drank a bucket of red paint (actually tomato juice), poured two other buckets of paint over his head and jumped through the painting.” Schimmel added that in that short time, “Dine simultaneously parodied the angst-driven actions of the New York School … and anticipated the liberal and dramatic use and consumption of paint by the Actionists and such artists as Paul McCarthy.” Ibid., 66.

According to McCarthy, when he started using ketchup in 1973 he was interested in “ketchup as an American family icon, processed consumption. I grew up using ketchup on everything: it is an American ritual passed on from father to son.” McCarthy, “Paul McCarthy in Conversation with James Rondeau,” in Block Head and Daddies Big Head: Paul McCarthy at the Tate Modern (London: Tate, 2003), 180-184.
one finger pointing to her cheek. Her costume was both girlish, replete with feather, bows and sparkles, and revealing, with fishnet stockings, a single pink feather covering each breast, and a suggestive flourish of blue feathers at her crotch. Rather than embody all the expectations of male desire for a showgirl, or the innocence of a childhood doll, Youdelman and Zurligen demonstrated how the fantasies that arise from doll-play are from an early age directed towards an image of sexual availability. Identity was thus shown to be an effect of the costume and pose.

Eleanor Antin, who has known McCarthy since the mid 1970s, began working extensively with various personae in the early 1970s. *Eleanor 1954* (1974) illustrated how the construction of characters in feminist performance was often entwined with autobiographical elements. In the performance, which took place at the Women’s Building in Los Angeles, Antin showed a video containing publicity shots of herself in 1954 while she was studying acting at the Tamara Daykarhonova School for the Stage and philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York, alongside documentation of performance personae she was working on at the time of the performance—the Nurse, the Ballerina, the Black Movie Star, and the King. (Documentation of Antin as the King of Solanas Beach was included in the first and only volume of McCarthy’s newsprint artist’s publication *Criss-Cross* of 1976). Antin mingled memories of her past self with tales of contemporary performances, changing her tone of voice throughout the presentation. According to art historian Jayne Wark, “Antin’s recollections about who she was in the past then served as a touchstone for the four personae she was then formulating. … She used the wry and ironical self-mockery seen in *Eleanor 1954* as a strategy for inhabiting but never completely becoming these
personae, which thus confounds the distinction between art and life, fiction and reality, acting and being.” Antin inhabited her characters both intensely and humorously in such a way that exceeded the associations between categories of identity—woman, dancer, professional, etc.—and the set of traits that were assigned to them.

Often the personae in feminist performance constituted a strategic doubling of the artists themselves. As in the case of Antin’s work, the boundaries between artist and doppelganger tended at times to appear so indistinct that it is difficult to determine when the performer is, as it were, quoting or mimicking herself versus when she is inhabiting the constructed persona. A soliloquy she delivers as Eleanora Antinova, the only black ballerina in the Ballets Russes (fig. 11), highlights Antin’s interweaving of her personae, her persona’s personae and her alleged self. She began as Antinova:

Behind his back we all laugh at [Diaghilev] a little. … They say that all he does is put it together. That he borrows everything from somebody else. They say he is no artist but a failure at everything … And who is not a borrower? … We take from here, from there and give back – whatever we give back. And we cover what we give back with our name. Sort of … What of me and Antinova? I borrow her dark skin, her reputation, her name, which is very much like mine anyway. She borrowed her name from the Russians, from Diaghilev. … She will dance the white queen Marie-Antoinette. … But who is Marie Antoinette … What can the little girl give Antinova?”

Antin finishes as Antoinette, “La Louis! We have work to do! We must set our house in order! Antinova’s chiding of Diaghilev as a master appropriator may as well be targeted at Antin “the artist,” though it is difficult to determine the exact moment in the speech when she shifts out of being Antinova to becoming Antin “the artist” and then to

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the Antin who identifies with Antoinette. Presented in this way, all of these characters seem to have an equal purchase on reality, emphasizing the contingent nature of identity, the ease with which one can slip from one guise to another. The circuit of appropriation of identity remains open, and the double is shown to be only a copy of a copy.

In a 1980 interview with Moira Roth, the artist Suzanne Lacy identified Antin as a “major player” in the “narrative movement” in Southern California, a hallmark of which was the creation of characters who blurred the boundaries between performance and actual life. Lacy discusses the California arts scene as a cauldron for both the narrative movement and feminism and describes their interrelation: “[the narrative movement] has combined with feminism to support the expression in art of ‘life material’: the story of one’s life and other people’s lives.” McCarthy’s characters are less attached to determinate roles and their specific traits than those formulated by Antin, Lacy, and others within the feminist movement, and the connection of his characters to “life material” is tenuous. McCarthy created a kind of sub-lingual performance persona who moaned and sputtered nonsensical words that obviated his ability to tell coherent stories. His characters were unstable; their inability to access language coded them as primitive. He made himself into only the roughest sketch of a female character, playing on the viewer’s instant associations between objects—such as dress, make-up, and even body parts—and roles, with a view to turning them inside out. Whereas the incoherence and nearly pre-lingual nature of McCarthy’s characters prevent the viewer’s ability or desire

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161 Lacy, “Visions and Re-Visions,” 42.

162 Ibid.
to associate with them, the audience’s process of identifying with the personae of many feminist performances was an indispensable element of the political nature of that work.

HABITUAL RITUALS

The first iteration of *Meat Cake* in 1974 featured McCarthy seated at a vanity table with a mirror in a frumpy flowered dress hitched up to his waist, revealing his underpants, as a single lamp swings near his face. The camera immediately closed in on sticks of margarine still in their packaging and a pound of chopped meat, wrapped in plastic and Styrofoam, straight from the grocery store. He methodically unwrapped each stick of margarine and proceeded to rub and press the butter substitute into his face, as if applying cold cream. He sculpted the substance around his head, pressed the chopped meat into it, and then slowly wrapped adhesive tape around his head, pausing to cram a mound of the mixture into his mouth, and then continuing to bandage his head. McCarthy called the affixed materials an “added layer of flesh … somehow repeating the structure of the body, with flesh applied to bone.”163 The impulse to create a shell to cover his head added another dimension to his performance persona; this wad of edible materials became his first mask. Though he dons pre-made masks in other works around the same time, here he stresses the process of masking as critical to this performance. As McCarthy suggests, he uses this mask not to hide his identity as a performer, but to create additional strata, to confound his identity. During the process of creating and destroying these performative masks, McCarthy both amassed meanings on the body and stripped them away. The layers he accumulated and discarded illustrated the ease with which identities

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and genders can be inhabited and mutated. His opening pose in front of the vanity table recalled numerous feminist performances during the 1970s in which artists deployed make-up as a means to demonstrate a parallel between the artist’s use of materials (especially paint) and women’s use of cosmetics as a daily ritual of transformation that is constitutive of conventional feminine identity. All of these performances suggested that, whether in front of the vanity table or not, the adoption and transformation of identity is a daily routine that requires constant maintenance.

Antin’s 1971 video, *Representational Painting* (fig. 12), focused on the artist, dressed in her bra, jeans, and black knee-high boots, as she used ordinary cosmetics to transform her appearance for forty minutes. Drawing out and replicating what was then a daily exercise for the majority of women in the US, Antin suggested that making-up is one of many repetitive rituals women undergo as a continual process of marking their bodies as feminine. Just as painters may adopt any of a variety of extant artistic styles to express their intentions, women may adopt any of a range of prepackaged images of self through the style, amount, and brand of cosmetics they wear. Both Martha Wilson and Suzy Lake made works that document the artists applying make-up to their faces (*I Make Up the Image of My Perfection/ I Make Up the Image of My Deformity* [1974] and *A Genuine Simulation of...* [1973-4] respectively) at a time when debates regarding the oppressiveness of make-up were significant to the ongoing explorations of what it meant to be properly feminist.

Feminist artists who performed the fashioning of identity through everyday rituals that signify femininity anticipated Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, in which she conceives of gender as a “stylized repetition of acts” over a sustained period of
time; thus, for her gender is a process. Such acts not only represent a gendered identity, they produce it. Many of the acts that constitute gender appear to be superficial, and repetition naturalizes them; their iteration, according to Butler, “create[s] the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of regulation of sexuality.”\(^\text{164}\) In *Bodies That Matter* of 1993, Butler demonstrated how these gender norms shape how one experiences one’s body, exploring “how a norm actually materializes a body, how we might understand the materiality of the body to be not only invested with a norm, but in some sense animated by a norm, or contoured by a norm.”\(^\text{165}\) Gender norms range from quite obvious cultural conventions to more embedded beliefs that correspond to biological sex. These norms gain their authority through their supposed history: as Butler maintains, “it is precisely through the infinite deferral of authority to an irrecoverable past that authority itself is constituted.”\(^\text{166}\)

While the first of these examples belongs to the (well accepted by feminists) conception of gender as culturally constructed, the second example requires a dismantling of the binary distinction between two sexes and the systematic links between their expression in two genders, as well as their correspondence in sexual desire for the other sex/gender. As feminist performance artists unsettled the distinctions between the lived body and the performed body, their works created complex meditations on the continual process of being a woman, meditations that are sometimes mutable and conflict-laden. While Butler

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\(^\text{164}\) Butler, *Gender*, 173.


argues that her theory of gender performativity does not directly apply to performance, Elin Diamond suggests, “theatre, too, is theory … and performance is the site in which performativity materializes in concentrated form, where the ‘concealed or dissimulated’ conventions’ of which acts are mere repetitions might be investigated and reimagined.”

When Antin (or Wilson or Lake) spotlights the ritual application of cosmetics as an element of the construction of femininity, it is the tension between make-up’s extreme artifice and its everyday ordinariness that reveals how the repetition of other gestures—how one walks, or laughs, for example—functions the same way.

One of Antin’s most well known works, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) (fig. 13), documents thirty-seven days of dieting in one hundred and forty-eight black-and-white photographs, arranged in a grid, representing Antin’s naked body in front, side, and rear views, as if recorded for a scientific or medical study. *Carving* is a day-to-day record of the experience of dieting as a performative act signifying femininity. The work demonstrates how repetitive actions—eating, or not eating—literally shape the body and create internalized attitudes. The title *Representational Painting* suggests a blank canvas prior to the application of paint. Though the link between makeup and artifice seems clear enough, Antin’s demonstration of the process of applying makeup as parallel to art, emphasizes this process as a repetitive reproduction, in Butler’s terms, pointing to


168 Antin’s *The King* (1972), which Lisa E. Bloom calls a “companion video” to *Representational Painting*, also features the artist in the process of making herself up. See Lisa E. Bloom, "Rewriting the Script: Eleanor Antin’s Feminist Art?," in *Eleanor Antin*, ed. Howard Fox (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum, 1999), 167. In *The King* Antin’s aim is not to express an exaggerated femininity but to illustrate the stages in her becoming the character of the King, as she applies a fake beard.
the impossibility of an original. According to Butler, the possibility of alternative models of gender exist in repetition; as norms are repeated through acts, variations inevitably occur, and it is in these variations that the possibility of subversion is located.\textsuperscript{169} In other words, as one unconsciously goes through the motions—such as of putting on makeup or of moving one’s body in a particular way as one walks down the street—that both constitute everyday life and shackle the individual to a particular gender, deviations occur which provide the space and room to slowly undo that shackle. Butler writes, “the critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities … Rather, the critical task is to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them.”\textsuperscript{170}

While McCarthy’s creation of personae through the adoption of cultural signifiers—both props and gestures—paralleled several feminist artists, his performances did not generate a sense of the burden of these props, the way they produce and constrain identity. There is no logical unfolding of the performer’s actions in the variations of McCarthy’s \textit{Meat Cake} series; his performances do not illuminate a cultural script of transformation in the way that say, the make-up altered faces of Antin and Wilson do. Absent from \textit{Sailor’s Meat} is the sense that the performance participates in an ongoing contestation of the hierarchical organization of gender roles; it lacks the sense of dissolution and reconstitution of identity as specific daily processes that Antin

\textsuperscript{169} Butler, \textit{Gender}, 185.

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 187-8.
emphasizes in *Representational Painting* and *Carving*. In the *Meat Cake* series in general, the repetition that is essential to the subversion Butler theorizes is limited. The time frame for the sex acts that generate the slippage of gender and sex in *Sailor’s Meat* corresponds to a *chari vari*, or a temporal reversal of the social order which may very well function to buttress that order. While his feminine signifiers and the specific acts McCarthy perform directly challenge the phallus, his debased masculinity does not necessarily comprise a challenge to the social order, or a desire for transformation.

RITUAL UNFOLDINGS

The slow and studied nature of McCarthy’s actions in the *Meat Cake* performances, his progression of activities whose motivations remain hidden from the viewer, and his choice of food materials resemble the progression of rituals involved in certain manifestations of feminist performance art. McCarthy’s contemporaries, Barbara Smith and Linda Burnham, have placed the *Meat Cake* performances and *Sailor’s Meat* in the context of Southern California art at a time when it became engaged in exploring the ritualistic. Both refer to his performances as shamanistic due in part to the seemingly trance-like state attained by McCarthy, and due also to his materials doubling as bodily fluids. Smith described one of his performances as “a display of inner power, as well as a prayer coming from great need—putting himself in such a position, he may effect the harmony and energy of wholeness. There is a sort of rapture to his display.”

171 Quoted in Burnham, “Performance Art in Southern California: An Overview,” 419. In an interview with Marc Selwyn, McCarthy denied that he ever intended to play the role of shaman, but Burnham also quotes him speaking in tones redolent of the ritualistic: “It is my belief that our culture has lost a true perception of existence. It is veiled. We are
Ablutions (1972) (fig. 14), performed by Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel and Aviva Rahmani in a Venice, California studio, serves as a compelling feminist counterpoint to McCarthy’s Sailor’s Meat: both engage with themes of violence and sexuality expressed through a progression of actions involving food as a metaphor for the body, but they are vastly different in content and intention. Working with and through themes of rape, abuse, and violence, the women collaborated on a purification ritual that referenced cleansing and fertility. Chicago described the performance as follows:

Ablutions began when the audience entered the room. A tape played throughout the performance of women telling about their experience of being raped. ... After about twenty minutes one woman dressed in jeans and a T-shirt led a nude woman to a chair in the back of the performance space, seated her, and began to slowly bind her feet. ... Another woman came out and eased herself into the bathtub which contained one thousand eggs with unbroken yolks. ... After five minutes she rose and moved on to the second tub, this one filled with blood, a metaphor for brutalization and at the same time a reference to menstruation. Another woman came out and got into the egg tub, and when the first woman had been in the last tub for about five minutes, she was lifted out by two other women. The image, as she rose up from the clay bath, was of some ancient female fetish figure. ... She was dried and wrapped in a sheet, then tied up like a corpse and left ... While this was going on the fifth woman appears and began to nail kidneys to the wall.172

Ablutions worked on two levels: it drew attention to proscribed issues surrounding the abuse of women, and it attempted to provide a cathartic experience that would counter and heal the types of bodily experience recounted by the narrators on the audio track. As only fumbling in what we perceive to be reality,” Ibid.. Also see Smith, “Paul McCarthy,” 48.

172 Judy Chicago, Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist (Lincoln, NE: Authors Choice Press, 2006), 218-19.
Martha Rosler recounted, “The immediacy of such work rests partly on the suggestion of discovery, of the collective raising of consciousness, and of release—exorcism.”

Though McCarthy eschewed the personal content of a great deal of feminist performance art, he also mined the tension between intimacy, especially in his treatment of his body, and the presence of the public. The performers in Ablutions, like McCarthy, lost their personal identities as their bodies stand in for the social body. In Ablutions, even as speakers play women’s stories to encourage the audience to identify with specific voices, the individuality of those experiences seems to dissipate, and a shared experience of the cycles of violence and healing emerges. Mired in a ground of popular condiments masquerading as metaphors for bodily fluids, the sheer excess of McCarthy’s body, as well as its tendency towards androgyny, erases its particularity.

The violence enacted against this body with certain staples of the American refrigerator—ketchup, mayo, hot dogs, chopped meat—also vibrates on the social register of consumer culture.


174 When curator David Ross asked McCarthy to include the videotape of Sailor’s Meat in the 1976 exhibition “Southland Video Anthology” at the Long Beach Museum of Art, he did not let the tape be shown at that time. He explained, “I don’t know how I feel about my tapes being shown in museums … to everybody.” Paul McCarthy, “Performance Interruptus: Interview with Paul McCarthy,” by Richard Newton, High Performance 1, no.2 (1978): unpaginated.

175 Barbara Smith described McCarthy’s character in Sailor’s Meat as “androgy nous,” commenting on his appearance, “His penis hangs out innocuously on one side. Though without women’s breasts, his body is strangely feminine.” Smith, “Paul McCarthy,” 48.

176 In a 1993 interview McCarthy related, “I was always aware that it could be perceived as both blood and ketchup. During the performances the smell of ketchup is strong. You think of blood and you think of ritual, but you are also confronted with ketchup and
The content of *Ablutions* remained visible throughout the performance, and visibly important, even if the uniqueness of experience and bodies coalesced into the social body. The narratives of rape played during the performance provided both a personal and political charge to the symbolic actions the artists carried out. In *Sailor’s Meat*, as the title implies the sailor’s sexual partner is his possession, a narrative of violence towards women also underpinned the actions on display. Linda Burnham, in the audience for the performance, observed, “The visual effect was masculine and feminine simultaneously. … He slithered on the bed in ketchup and mayonnaise, at once lazily sexual and abusive, appearing to pantomime rape and masturbation.”

McCarthy’s constant dissolution and flux of identity, gender, and performance did not allow for political attachments. However, in some ways, McCarthy undermined the viewer’s expectations about masculine and feminine roles and how they correspond to the body. As he desecrated his body, which is at once masculine and, if not entirely feminine, then non-masculine, it becomes impossible to distinguish who is the victim and who is the perpetrator (though McCarthy presents the viewer with the possibility, if only momentarily, of a female wielding violence against the male body). If, as Calvin Thomas argues, “the repression of the abject vulnerability of the male body,” is “necessary for the construction of heteronormative masculinity,” wherein vulnerability is displaced onto the feminine, then McCarthy upended those cultural associations, even if through the grocery stores, commercials and cooking shows, Mom and dad at the table. In almost all of my performances there is a table and a tablecloth, the sacrificial altar. The work can be seen as a condemnation or suspicion of organized religion or the idea of male patriarchs.”


177 Burnham, “Performance Art,” 419.
violence of his actions.\textsuperscript{178} During select moments, masculinity and femininity became disarticulated from the so-called appropriately sexed bodies, producing reconfigurations of identifications and desires. It was in these moments of \textit{Sailor’s Meat} that what might be construed as a feminist deconstruction of gender materialized, even as it coexisted with images of debased femininity.

In addition to the pacing of his performances, it is particularly McCarthy’s use of ketchup—its identity clear as it issues straight from the bottle—and its association with blood that evokes these ritualistic feminist performances involving not only real and fake body fluids, as in \textit{Ablutions}, but also food, as in several pieces by Barbara Smith.\textsuperscript{179} For \textit{Ritual Meal} (1969), which explored the multivalent uses of food, Smith staged a complex, multi-part ritual in the guise of a dinner party for sixteen guests. The guests put on surgical scrubs before Smith’s assistants led them into the house where they were met by the sound of a loudly reverberating beating heart, projections of open heart surgery, several nude men and women, and eight waiters also dressed in scrubs and masks who would only speak nonsense. According to Jennie Klein, “The transformation of identity continued once they were seated at the table and prompted to make up their faces with the help of mirrors and make-up.”\textsuperscript{180} The food was served and consumed with all manner of medical devices, including test tubes, scalpels, and plasma bottles, conjoining exterior

\textsuperscript{178} Calvin Thomas, “Reenfleshing the Bright Boys; or, How Male Bodies Matter to Feminist Theory,” in \textit{Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory}, 63.

\textsuperscript{179} McCarthy, along with Kim Jones, Allan Kaprow, Cheri Gaulke, Linda Burnham and others participated in Smith’s 1980 performance \textit{Birthdaze}, in honor of her 50\textsuperscript{th} birthday. The two artists have been close friends since the 1970s.

sustenance with interior substances. At the end of the meal the waiters, now nude, placed wreaths on the heads of each of the guests, which, according to Smith “was in effect to give them release and to thank them. … They were being put through an ordeal. It was like a trial or an initiation ritual.”\footnote{181}

*Ritual Meal* had a disturbing effect on many of the participants, not only because the more base aspects of the body were foregrounded—bodily fluids and organs, nudity, dissection, ingestion and digestion—but because it was a transformative experience that, as Smith suggested, “violated the roles governing the way the art object is viewed.”\footnote{182} The transformation and redemption at work in *Ritual Meal* reflected Smith’s feelings about her social and personal worlds; she would continue to use food in her performance work because of its association with women, motherhood, and ritual.\footnote{183} Women’s primary role in the preparation of food in the home codes this material in a specific way when it appeared in the work of feminist artists, as it frequently did.

More commonly, the Viennese Actionists are cited as influential on McCarthy’s performances—due to the ritualistic tenor of their work and the foul materials it entailed—despite the artist’s insistence otherwise.\footnote{184} Several of McCarthy’s

\footnote{181} Ibid.

\footnote{182} Ibid.

\footnote{183} A teenager when the atomic bomb was detonated in Japan, Smith believed that this event presented the need “to rediscover transformational rituals, rites of passage that were meaningful.” Quoted in ibid., 26.

performances from the 1970s loosely resemble the qualities of the ritualized, bloody, overtly sexualized, and often illegal performances of the Actionists. The material effects McCarthy shares with Rudolf Schwarzkogler—body parts wrapped in gauze, the juxtaposition of meat and dead fish and genitals, the use of colored liquids, especially red ones—are sensory only. McCarthy responded to the proposed connections between his work with the Actionists, “I think I found out about the Viennese in the early 1970s. Vienna is not Los Angeles. … People make reference to Viennese art without really questioning the fact that there’s a big difference between ketchup and blood. I never thought of my work as shamanistic.” 

The rage and despair expressed in much Actionist work was directly related to the artists’ experiences of both life in defeated post World War II Austria and the deadening weight of European civilization, whose corruption was revealed to them during the war. While this may account for their destructive tendencies, the rituals the Actionists staged held onto the Catholic possibility of redemption. Even as many American feminist artists were seeking catharsis in their ritual-oriented works, because of the transformative relationship between experience and politics posited by feminism, their catharsis was decidedly different from the religiosity of redemption.

If the European post-war context determined the content and tone of the ritualistic work of the Viennese Actionists, the intertwining of the social and personal contexts of women in the US in the 1970s provided the material and motivation for many ritual-like projects performed by feminist artists. For one such project, former Feminist Art Program participant Suzanne Lacy collaborated with Leslie Labowitz to engineer a public ritual staged to counter the media’s reportage of crimes of violence against women. In the

185 McCarthy, “Big Difference,” 64.
work, *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977), Lacy and Labowitz portrayed how news stories portrayed the murder of women by the so-called Hillside Strangler as random acts, which obscured how violence towards women is systemic. Lacy described the politico-theatrical tableau beginning with a motorcade of sixty women:

Ten very tall women robed in black mourning climbed from [a] hearse. At the front steps of City Hall, the performers each spoke of a different form of violence against women, connecting these as part of a fabric of social consent for such crimes. After each of the ten performers spoke, the motorcade women, now surrounding City Hall steps, yelled, “In memory of our sisters, we fight back!” The tenth woman, clothed in red, stepped forward to represent fighting back against all forms of violence.186

Participants included members of the feminist community, representatives from the Rape Hotline Alliance, the Woman’s Building, the City Council and members of victims’ family. The success of the event could be measured by the local and national news coverage it received.187 The “performance structure,” as Lacy called it, was determined by both the transformation of issues introduced in consciousness-raising sessions into performance and, according to Lacy, “Kaprow’s statement that performance should take place with materials of life in any space but the art world.”188 The scale and feeling of *In Mourning and In Rage* was an admixture of that of Happenings and political protests,


188 Lacy also participated in Kaprow’s classes at Cal Arts while she was a student of the Feminist Art Program. Suzanne Lacy,”Exchanges: Moira Roth and Suzanne Lacy,” in *Art/Women/California: Parallels and Intersections, 1950-2000*, ed. Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 44.
however Lacy’s collective performance incorporated exactly the kind of content Kaprow railed against—emotional and moral.

KAPROW’S INTIMATE ENCOUNTERS

Kaprow is known foremost for his role as the originator of Happenings to the exclusion of his more interpersonal work of the 1970s and 80s. Until recently, few critics have attended to his later work and the possible impact other artists—specifically feminist artists—may have had on it. In the early 1970s Kaprow taught at Cal Arts in Valencia, California as the Feminist Art Program was in full swing; some of its best-known students—such as Suzanne Lacy and Aviva Rahmani—also attended his classes.189 Jeff Kelley describes the influence between Kaprow and his feminist students as mutual. Curator Annette Leddy noted the lack of personal effects included in Kaprow’s archive at the Getty, which she understands as indicative of his active effort to “move away from abstract expressionism’s dramatic construction of artistic practice.”190 Leddy revisited a number of Kaprow’s Happenings through the lens of his 1970s work to demonstrate his continued focus on “interpersonal interactions,” whether in the large, and often elaborate, format of the Happenings or in activities executed between two people.

Much of Kaprow’s artistic output in the 1970s can be characterized as generating instructions for an intimate activity that the participants must interpret and perform, as well as recording its results. For Time Pieces (1973) (fig. 15) Kaprow created an activity

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booklet with instructions for a pair of participants to count each other’s breaths and pulses, and then to breathe into one another’s mouths, noting all of the counts. The booklet was illustrated with photographs of participants carrying out the work, including Kaprow and his wife, Vaughan Rachel. The proscribed actions were intimate and generated subjective responses, but the language of the instructions was dry and objective, revealing a tension between the intimate and the objective common to Kaprow’s works of this period. In the instructional booklet Kaprow indicated that recording the counts acted as “a way of monitoring feelings, sometimes strong ones, which were never specified beforehand, but discovered in the process of carrying out an apparently objective plan.”  

Both Leddy and Jeff Kelley comment on the context of these performances being the marital strife experienced by Kaprow and Rachel and the consciousness-raising sessions they attended in Southern California with a view to, perhaps, easing it.

Kelley was the first to consider Kaprow’s work in relation to an emergent feminism in the 1960s and 70s. He identified Kaprow’s interest in feminist art as involving both its “embrace of the everyday,” and its challenge to modernist and masculinist myths of originality and creative genius (which, as Kaprow acknowledged, he was implicated in by virtue of his status by the 1970s). While regarding the relation between feminist artists and Kaprow, Kelley wrote, “the influence went both ways,” he hedged the extent to which feminism affected Kaprow by continually citing the artist’s critiques of feminist art based on its didacticism, its “zeal,” its “agendas,” and its emotive

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force. Kelley notes that feminism’s unmasking of gender hierarchies impressed Kaprow to such an extent that “he adjusted the power relations in his works to accommodate feminist discourse” and repositioned the roles of men and women as “equals-but-opposites, symmetrical elements in asymmetrical situations.” Kelley’s analysis, however, failed to recognize that Kaprow’s proscription of a situation and a set of directions on how to act could not alone counter a sexism that was internalized by the work’s participants and systemic to the art world. Kelley privileged the aesthetic sphere as potentially neutral and abstracted from everyday reality. Yet a substantial goal and achievement of feminists was to unmask the assumed neutrality of the aesthetic sphere; to demonstrate how that neutrality itself is gendered and coded as masculine; and to produce fissures in the walls separating personal, public and aesthetic spheres.

Kelley wrote, “Probably the most significant feature of feminist performance adopted by Kaprow, around 1973, was the consciousness-raising follow-up session, a convention of the early 1970s in which artists and members of the audience (initially only women) discussed their own experiences as well as the social and political implications of the work after a performance.” Again, he equivocated about feminism’s influence on Kaprow, writing that he “didn’t encourage social critique or personal sharing, but he did want to know what had happened to those who had participated in a given work … Good

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195 When Kelley claims that Kaprow “took the power out of human relations, discharging its social currency” he is suggesting that power dynamics can be neutralized in the aesthetic sphere. Ibid.
stories were going untold.” By this account, while the feminist practice of consciousness-raising was important to the development of one of the most salient features of Kaprow’s later works, he looked to it not for any of the purposes the practice served within the movement, but to reveal and preserve all the “good stories” that would otherwise have been left to the dustbins of history. While feminism is little explored as a generative source for Kaprow in the 1970s, much more is made of Kaprow’s influence on a younger generation of artists in Southern California when he was living and teaching there.

**MYTHS OF INFLUENCE**

Tracing the construction of a typical genealogy of performance, which organizes its emergence around certain male artists within the U.S., reveals how feminist art could end up being excluded from McCarthy’s historical record. As he is positioned within the history of performance, McCarthy has become entwined with the mythology of Jackson Pollock as the forefather of performance art. It is common for histories of performance to place Allan Kaprow, a progenitor of Happenings in the early 1960s, squarely at the beginning of performance art, despite international developments in that medium. Kaprow, a mentor of McCarthy’s in the early 1970s in Southern California, himself posited Jackson Pollock as the grandfather of this emerging genre. In “The Legacy of

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196 Ibid., 155.

197 While Pollock was influential to the Gutai group in Japan, its formation predated the advent of Happenings in the US by several years, and also anticipated consequential developments in American post-war art. See Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
Jackson Pollock,” written for Art News in 1958 (two years after Pollock’s death), Kaprow laid the groundwork for the idea that the yet-to-be-consolidated genre of performance art is a descendant of a certain instance of painting practice.

In this essay, Kaprow painted a simultaneously heroic, tragic, critical and sympathetic picture of Pollock; he both acknowledged the complaisance of the artist’s later work while also naming Pollock as the destroyer of painting. To arrive at the point where Pollock can be seen as dismantling the preeminent medium of his day, Kaprow envisioned him as working towards an art without bounds. Accordingly, he argued that Pollock erased the edge of the painting, that which marks it off from actual space, by creating a web of paint that has no center and wrapping the painted surface around all sides of the stretcher. Eschewing the traditional limits of painting, Pollock’s canvases, according to Kaprow, subsume the individual viewer in “environments,” in which we are “confronted, assaulted, sucked-in.”

From this description of the effects of Pollock’s paintings, in what is quite a jump in both scale and experience, Kaprow proceeded to give him credit for enabling an all inclusive art practice encompassing not only “Forty-second street,” but also “the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch.” Post-war performance is often pinned down to this prophetic essay by Kaprow despite contemporaneous developments that would be crucial to performance, such as the founding of the San Francisco Dancer’s Workshop in 1955 by Anna Halprin with Trisha


199 Kaprow continued, “Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will only be discovered by the present generation of artists.” Kaprow, “Legacy,” 9.
Brown, Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer. Kaprow established Pollock as the origin of U.S. based performance possibly to construct a legacy for himself at the moment when his own work was following the course he set out for Pollock in his essay, creating a direct lineage of artistic masters that left little room for those instances which depart from this movement from painting to performance.

In 1957 Kaprow advanced beyond the two-dimensional surface of his previous expressionistic collages of paint, cloth, wood, and other mundane materials, creating a dimensionality that projected into the viewer’s space. *Rearrangeable Panels* consisted of nine free-standing panels, composed of tar paper, plastic apples, lights, mirror fragments and sections of old paintings, which could be reconfigured variously, including a formation which resembled a kiosk, or closed room within the gallery.²⁰⁰ *Rearrangeable Panels* allowed Kaprow to abandon the confines of a wall-bound panel to envision the entire gallery as an environment, collapsing pictorial space with that of the everyday world. The following year Kaprow staged his first public environment (later titled *Beauty Parlor*) at the Hansa gallery in New York. In the second iteration of the work, Kaprow hung raffia strips from the ceiling creating a dense jungle intensified by colored Christmas lights which blinked and reflected in fragmented mirrors along the wall; two spotlights aimed at the spectators highlighted their experience and presence as integral to the work. Kaprow’s fusion of his sculptural works with the viewer’s actual space was an important impetus to the development of Happenings. Materializing the effects that he had claimed for Pollock’s paintings, Kaprow guaranteed his own place in the lineage he

was creating. This lineage has been so attractive to some writers and curators that they have subsumed the preceding history of performance in twentieth century art; Pollock and Kaprow are now generally seen as the generators of performance, which underscores the perceived primacy of the U.S. in post-war art. While Kaprow’s essay offered interpretations of Pollock’s painting that claimed it as an antecedent for works that are often posed as refuting Abstract Expressionism, it also perpetuated, to a degree, the mythology surrounding Pollock that reinforces the associations between modernism and masculinity for the new lineage Kaprow created. According to Andrew Perchuk, the

201 The history of early 20th century performance is included in Roselee Goldberg’s pioneering 1979 study of performance art. Rather than present a teleological study accounting for contemporary performance, she focuses on the past, devoting chapters to Futurism, Dada, Constructivism, Surrealism and the Bauhaus, with only two chapters covering post-war performance. Moreover, Goldberg consistently returns to the role modern and contemporary dance played in the development of performance, which often sheds light on the participation of women. For Goldberg, performance in the U.S. begins with Black Mountain College, and its promotion of a collaborative working environment inflected by the influence of the Bauhaus brought to North Carolina by Josef and Anni Albers, and which centered around John Cage and Merce Cunningham. Goldberg, Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present, rev. ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988). The 1988 publication is a smaller sized edition including an additional section that brought the volume up-to-date.

masculine archetypes deployed in constructing Pollock’s image “were further used to construct the masculinist narrative that has been central to the history of Abstract Expressionist painting, and, through its influence, American postwar art in general.”

In 1998 the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art organized a fairly comprehensive exhibition of performance art, *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979.* Curator Paul Schimmel emphasized the international scope of the exhibition, as well as the relatively new ease with which the exchange of ideas could occur across international boundaries during the post-war period. The first section of his catalog essay supports his internationalist claim and seemingly reconciles many divergent paths. However, it quickly becomes clear that Pollock’s example remained the organizing principle of the exhibition, as Schimmel positioned him as the touchstone for several international artists who have also played a pivotal role in the development of performance, including Yves Klein, the Viennese Actionists, and the Gutai group, whose innovations would have been, according to Schimmel, “inconceivable … without transcending the limits of the canvas, transformed into “an arena in which to act” must have been important to Kaprow’s reconceptualization of Pollock as well.


Pollock’s break-through.” In a review of the exhibition Bruce Hainley observed, “For better or worse, Pollock, or rather the photographs and film of him painting by Hans Namuth, was seen here as the stone dropped in the lake of art; the ripples arced out all over.” This institutional history of performance thus maintains a masculinist perspective on the Pollock genealogy.

McCarthy, like Pollock a native of the American West (born in Salt Lake City, Utah in 1945), is placed squarely within this lineage promoted first by Kaprow and then by Out of Actions. The exhibition included documentation of the works Face Painting—Floor, White Line (1972) and Meat Cake (1974), a collection of trunks used to store performance props from the 1970s and early 80s with their contents, as well as an installation created specifically for the exhibition called Out O’ Actions (1998), which was a collaborative effort with Mike Kelley. McCarthy’s development has been seen as a recapitulation of the trajectory from Pollock to Kaprow, as he began as a painter and

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205 Paul Schimmel, “Leap Into the Void,” in Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 21. In the section “Origins: Pollock, Cage, Fontana, Shimamoto,” Schimmel warns against the chauvinism of placing Pollock in the center of it all while he does just that. He writes, “Pollock’s significance as the sole perpetrator of the concept that a painting was the material embodiment of an action has been overstated to such a degree that other less dramatic and less fully resolved experiments have received little recognition. Nevertheless, his works … did have a singular impact on the direction of both Color Field painting and performance art.” Ibid., 18.

206 The effect of this exhibition strategy, Hainley argued, is, “Schimmel structures all the works on display as (safely) art and brackets performance as the legacy of AbEx painting—the museum in this sense inoculating art from what in the end might bring it down (which is the point, after all).” Hainley, “Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979,” Artforum 37, no.1 (September, 1998): 145.
many of his first performances referred to painting as often a violent act. Of his early performances critics have most focused on those that stage a relationship to painting, in order create an interpretive framework that enfolds McCarthy into the Pollockian performance lineage to the exclusion of other possible genealogies. In an essay surveying McCarthy’s work, Ralph Rugoff points to his ambiguous use of materials as both actual and metaphoric when he asks, “when is ketchup merely ketchup and when is it blood? In other words, when is it ‘dirty’?” Or, when is paint just paint and when is it a transcendent sign? Rugoff’s questions, posed in relation to Meat Cake, a work that does not reference painting as directly as do several other performances, seem to reduce the entirety of McCarthy’s work to the particularly Modernist issue of the signification of paint.

McCarthy’s early video-taped actions evidence a struggle against Abstract Expressionism, but they do so in a hysterical way, transforming expressionistic gestures, taken to be representative of the artist’s inner-life, into a delirious, uncommunicative, and often meaningless mess. The video Whipping a Wall with Paint (1974) (fig. 16) opens with a wide view of a ground floor studio space and an obscured view of an action in progress. McCarthy moves diagonally across the frame from left to right, swinging a large piece of fabric above his head. He then begins to hit the walls with the fabric, soaked in black paint and motor oil, but the action is outside the frame; the only evidence of McCarthy’s exertion is the sound of the fabric hitting the wall. Eventually the frame

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207 Dan Cameron played up the mythic connotations of McCarthy’s “deep ties to the artistic tradition of the American West, from Jackson Pollock all the way back to a popular culture based on the so-called taming of the frontier and the excesses of the Gold Rush.” Cameron, “Mirror Stage,” 57.

208 Rugoff, “McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” 49.
widens and the view shifts to reveal the actions of the artist: the thrashing of his body, the speed and force of the fabric, heavy with paint, leading his body uncontrollably. Here the canvas is, in fact, the entire room. McCarthy actualized the Pollock myth—the emotive application of paint dripping on a canvas whose composition is the result of chance and the artist “in” his work of art, the mural as environment—as articulated by Kaprow. Yet in this video, the thrashing body, the sounds of exertion, the reversal of attention from the application of paint as not a means to an end but an end in itself, pushes the romantic conception of the artist solely motivated by his inner drives to an extreme; McCarthy’s performative aggressive painting in *Whipping a Wall with Paint* contrasts with Pollock’s calculated physicality in the production of his paintings.209

In performances from the 1970s throughout the 90s, such as *Ma Bell* (1971) and *Bossy Burger* (1991) McCarthy developed hysterical characters that caricatured the Pollock myth. This climax produced not an extreme, heroic, masculine artist, but a kind of self-erasure, with McCarthy taking up a persona that deflates normative notions of masculinity. *Penis Brush Painting, Windshield, Black Paint* (1974) is one of several works that feature McCarthy’s penis, sometimes as the focus of physical manipulation, and sometimes as a paintbrush. In this short video he dips his pretend paintbrush in a can

209 Jennie Klein discusses McCarthy’s work from this time as both issuing from Pollock’s practice and “undermining the myth of artistic greatness” and its connection to normative notions of masculinity in both high and popular culture. Klein, “Rites,” 16. The construction of this myth of greatness around Pollock was, however, always very tenuous. Marcia Brennan argues that the image of Pollock as inarticulate, violent, and compulsive became defining features of his personality and art in the media, but was balanced by the promotion of his domestic side, symbolized by Lee Krasner, and represented in photographs of them in his studio or at home, in order to make his work palatable to a bourgeois audience. Brennan, “Pollock and Krasner,” 76-114. For a discussion of Pollock’s physicality as it borders on both a “masculinist ideal” and a loss of control that represents a refusal of mastery, see Chave, “Pollock and Krasner,” 98-100.
of black paint and proceeds to rub it against a disembodied car windshield, at one point steadying the glass by lifting his bent leg over it and gyrating against the glass. The video ends with a shot of the ‘finished work,’ the windshield smeared with paint and leaning against a column in his studio. McCarthy explicitly equated the ‘masculine act’ of gestural painting to masturbation as he took Action Painting to an extreme.\textsuperscript{210}

THE ENDURANCE OF THE OBJECTIVE BODY

Throughout the early 1970s McCarthy produced a series of individual videos, collected together as \textit{Black-and-White Tapes} (1970-75), that represented two different directions in his performative work: videos that took up the distanced experiments of duration and ontology for which certain works by Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci are paradigmatic, and those in which he began to assume a persona, which becomes representative of his interaction with feminist artists.\textsuperscript{211} The former videos have garnered

\textsuperscript{210} Anna C. Chave writes of the commonly remarked implications of Pollock’s painting process, noting that while the euphemisms of ejaculation were indicative of associations with creative fecundity, at issue for Pollock was his ability to control the paint. Chave, “Pollock and Krasner,” 98-100. McCarthy appeared to be parodying the image of Pollock as out of control, seemingly galvanized by his body alone, animal-like, and bordering on hysteria (conditions more typically associated with women). For a feminist psychoanalytic reading of the “potential political effects” of the phallus ‘posed’ in post-war art, see Mignon Nixon, “Posing the Phallus,” \textit{October} 92 (Spring 2000): 99-127.

\textsuperscript{211} According to McCarthy, “In 1972 I made a tape, ‘Ma Bell’ in which I make this laugh and there is this persona. So, it’s not exactly like I was making these repetitive, minimal pieces until 1978 and I switch over to these more theatrical works with personae or fractured narratives of some sort. It was really much more of a case of those concerns overlapping,” in McCarthy, “You Like Yoga… We Like Speed,” by John Beagles and Graham Ramsay, \textit{Variant} 2, no. 14 (Winter 2001): 14.
attention recently.\textsuperscript{212} McCarthy shared with the slightly older and then more well known artists, Nauman and Acconci, a task model of performance, an obsessive treatment of the body as a medium, a focus on repetitive actions, and frequently performances occurred in the private setting of the artists’ studios.\textsuperscript{213} Nauman is historically figured at the center of a tendency among body artists, including Acconci and Marina Abramovic, which focused “on the isolated physical self subjected to acts and conditions that frequently commanded the viewer’s attention by the sheer physical risk and distress they entailed.”\textsuperscript{214} Particular pieces on McCarthy’s \textit{Black-and-White Tapes} correspond to a task model or instruction-based type of performance, such as \textit{Spinning} (1970), which begins with McCarthy standing off center, towards the right of the frame, and then spinning with his arms outstretched and eyes open. As centrifugal force takes over, McCarthy’s hands begin to slam against the wall, creating the only sound in the video; sometimes he travels out of

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\textsuperscript{212} The exhibition \textit{Central Symmetrical Rotation Movement Three Installations}, June 26 – October 8, 2008 at the Whitney Museum of American Art narrowed in on “a core strand of McCarthy’s work: the use of architecture to create perceptual disorientation.” Concerns evident in three recent McCarthy installations were shown to be present from “the very beginning of his career,” by the inclusion of two early films focusing on how the body moves in relation to an architectural container. See \url{http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/PaulMccarthy}. The selection of works and the exclusion of the messy body-focused videos (which he continues to produce) or cartoonish motifs that he is known for presented a compelling, if not entirely accurate, stripped-down picture of McCarthy. His architectural concerns are present also in many of his unwieldy works, however, which Amelia Jones discusses in “Paul McCarthy’s Inside Out Body,” 125-133.


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the frame and his presence can only be registered by his cast shadow, spinning on the wall. As with many of these works, the viewer simultaneously witnesses an intimate scene and is distanced from the artist’s body due to her inability to fix or apprehend the whole figure in space.

Particularly relevant to McCarthy’s videos are Nauman’s *Thighing* (1967) and *Black Balls* (1969) (fig. 17, 18); both are short films that focus on Nauman manipulating a specific body part. *Thighing* shows one of Nauman’s legs, from just below the knee to the upper thigh as he pinches, twists and pushes his skin and flesh. The soundtrack consists of Nauman breathing heavily, joining two activities for their ability to be humorously combined in the title *Thighing*, which plays on the similarity between the words thigh and sigh. In *Black Balls* the shot is cropped to show his testicles as he rubs black paint over them. Shot in slow motion, the action is abstracted to a degree that it becomes difficult to determine whether anything is happening at all. While the title phrase “black balls” refers punningly to an intense pain that cripples a man’s genitals as much as his masculinity, the appearance of Nauman’s scrotum is to some extent neutralized by its a metonymic function similar to that of various body parts—thigh, leg, skin—he finesses in other videos. McCarthy, on the other hand, plays up the significations of his specifically male body, which is often coded as universal in Nauman’s works. Following the modernist tendency to treat revered artists as wellsprings of originality, the genesis of Nauman’s exploration of the self is often explained as resulting from his paucity of means and as a creative solution to a sometimes...

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215 McCarthy recently presented *Thighing* as part of a program of films accompanying an exhibition he curated, *Low Life Slow Life*, at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in Berkeley, CA, February 7 – April 12, 2008.
romanticized state of poverty.\textsuperscript{216} Rather than attend to how the body signifies, all of Nauman’s artistic activities are framed as process-based explorations of various media, whether the body or, for example, neon.\textsuperscript{217} This critical emphasis on the body as a medium, more so than as content, falls in line with modernist values and allows attention to shift away from the specificities of Nauman’s (male, white, heterosexual) body.\textsuperscript{218} In contrast to critical framings of Nauman’s work, in \textit{Penis Brush Painting} McCarthy is unable to maintain the cool distance of exploring an action in a semi-objective, if not humorous way. Rather, his actions devolve from an instruction-based exercise (use your

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\textsuperscript{216} As Nauman simply put it, “‘There was nothing in the studio because I didn’t have much money for materials. So I was forced to examine myself, and what I was doing there.’” Quoted in Anne M. Wagner, “Nauman’s Body of Sculpture,” in \textit{A Rose Has No Teeth: Bruce Nauman in the 1960s}, ed. Constance Lewallen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 124. There is a mythic quality to the image of Nauman, alone in his empty studio, creating art from the only thing present, that many critics and curators have picked up on. The dominant framing of Nauman obscures alternate sources for his modes of working and ways of relating to his body in performances. Contemporary dance, for one, developed the task model of performance issuing from an interest in presenting the routine rhythms of everyday life. Constance Lewallen recounts that composer/ dancer Meredith Monk “introduced [Nauman] to the concept of body awareness and voice as an instrument, and the Bay area was on the forefront of a new concept in dance pioneered by Anna Halprin, which was constructed around ordinary movement.” Lewallen, “A Rose Has No Teeth,” in \textit{A Rose Has No Teeth}, 88. Whether Halprin’s San Francisco Dancers’ Workshop, or the Judson Dance Theatre in New York, the importance of dance, as one of the first arenas in which women were creative leaders (and credited as such), ought not to be downplayed.

\textsuperscript{217} Ibid., 101.

\textsuperscript{218} Moreover, in the 1960s and 70s Nauman’s work was understood in the context of phenomenology, a move away from a Cartesian model of the mind/ body split and towards an exploration of space based on the experiences of the body inspired by the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who translated subjective experience into “objective demonstration.” Tucker, Marcia, “PheNAUMANology” rpt. in \textit{Bruce Nauman}, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 21-27.

penis as a paintbrush) to seemingly uncontrollable sexual expressions, mocking the machismo of Abstract Expressionism.

McCarthy’s approach to the body, in several of his taped performances, is explicit in its attention to gendered sexuality, sometimes violently so, and is at times accompanied by an excess of material metaphoric of the body. In these ways both he and Acconci differ from Nauman. Acconci crafted his early performances around a set of instructions involving often banal activities that achieved significance only as he carried them out repeatedly, though others entailed more complex ontological exercises that challenged the coherence of the experiential subject. The super-8 film *Openings* (1970) (fig. 19), focusing on the Acconci’s navel as he pulls out the hair that surrounds it, is one of several of his filmed performances in which he questions sexual categories as an attempt to destabilize the subject. In a 1971 interview, Acconci described *Openings*: “I’m opening up a part of my body and in opening that part physically, I’m opening up the possibility that that part of the body can be related to another part of the body. Navel becomes vagina.” In doing so, he goes on to say, he is creating the possibility of his body transcending its categorization as male and “open[ing] the possibility of being female.” The parameters set by the instructions involved in the task based format of this and other exercises highlight the tension between control and a total breakdown of boundaries while allowing Acconci to maintain a certain mastery over the process. By contrast, in *Meat Cake* McCarthy breaks out of this format—the obsessive repetition of a

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220 Ibid.
single directive—to create a performance that is persona-based and more ritualistic in the pacing of the performances and the materials he uses. These are both notable hallmarks of feminist performance in Southern California in the 70s.

VULNERABILITY AND AMBIVALENCE

While in the 1970s feminist artists promoted passionate (though not always shared) convictions regarding the social organization of gender, men’s response to the rise of sexual politics can be characterized as ambivalent. Men’s cross-dressing practices are often taken as effecting an analysis of masculinity; however, deflating representations of masculinity by representing the male body as female does not necessarily break down boundaries, interrogate power relations or promote equality. In the early 1970s, Vito Acconci was arguably the most prominent artist, male or female, working with sexual politics—here referring to power dynamics between men and women. Acconci’s trilogy Conversions (1971) (fig. 20) illustrates how his supposed loss of masculinity may simultaneously function as domination. In Part I, Acconci filmed himself in a completely darkened space burning his chest hair with a candle while massaging and cupping his chest so as to make it resemble female breasts. The second section features his nude body shot from different angles as he hid his penis between legs so that, “[his] body looks as if it has a vagina” while performing exercises such as running in place, kicking, jumping,

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221 In an interview with the artist Linda Montano, Acconci responded, “It seems in a lot of ways, I use sex as a metaphor for some kind of power. In earlier pieces it was a sign of power in an intimate relationship and then, in turn, male power.” Montano, “Sex,” in Talking to Performance Artists in the 80s (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 43.
and stretching.\textsuperscript{222} In Part III, Acconci performed roughly the same set of exercises while his then partner, Kathy Dillon, aided in the concealment of his penis by kneeling behind him and taking it into her mouth. Acconci wrote, “a girl kneels behind me, I acquire a female form by inserting my penis in her mouth; exercising my body in its new stance (social activity—change by means of another person, change by means of the kind of person I am trying to turn myself into).”\textsuperscript{223} Several responses to \textit{Conversions} lauded the work for its unmasking of the illusion of the authenticity of the body, and its focus on the vulnerability of Acconci’s body as he burns, pulls and hides parts of it. Amelia Jones argues that as Acconci attempted to “feminize” his body through this catalog of actions he “pushed the sadomasochistic dialectic of self/other, masculine/ feminine, as a means of interrogating his own subjectivity and masculinity.”\textsuperscript{224}

Dominant interpretations of Acconci’s work have not addressed the supporting roles that women play in it. It is problematic that, if Acconci demonstrates an impoverished masculinity, a male body whose sex has been diminished, he is only able to do so at the expense of the very vulnerable female nude behind him. While Frazer Ward argues that Acconci fails to transcend gender and, in his failure, points to the “intractability” of gender roles, the work still maintains the active/ passive binary attached to male/ female distinctions.\textsuperscript{225} During Acconci’s exercise, Dillon was caught in

\textsuperscript{222} Vito Acconci, \textit{Vito Acconci} (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 41.


\textsuperscript{224} Amelia Jones, \textit{Body Art/ Performing The Subject} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 125.

\textsuperscript{225} Frazer Ward writes, “Acconci may be accused of sexism, in so far as he co-opted the feminist idea of the potential fluidity of gender and demonstrated it at the expense of the
a submissive position, her hair covering her face, his penis in her mouth, perhaps choking her each time he jerked his body. What Acconci’s manipulation of his body perhaps especially demonstrated is not only that the hierarchical power structures between men and women are above all cultural—not tied to who apparently ‘has’ a penis—but that they become naturalized through the domination of the nude female body. That expressions of masculinity can fail to meet traditional expectations, and yet succeed at oppressing women at the same time, is really no failure at all. Rather it is a manipulation of various expressions of masculinity as it maintains its position of power, perhaps suggesting that individual traits (i.e. strength, objectivity, etcetera) do not define masculinity, power does.226

In a 1991 interview Acconci commented, “My early work came out of a context of feminism, and depended on that context. Performance in the early seventies was inherently feminist art. I, as a male doing performance, was probably colonizing it.”227 If *Conversions*, among other works by Acconci, was in some ways a response to feminism, 

woman. It is true that he placed her in an awkward position. But at the same time, the final tableau presents Acconci himself as so ludicrously vulnerable and immobile, clumsily caught, after all, in a version of existing gender roles, that the work points to their intractability. Perhaps it also implies the panic that might follow, for some men, at least, in discovering that they may be released from those roles.” Ward, “Survey,” in *Vito Acconci* (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 44. I don’t find Ward’s argument convincing enough to justify Kathy Dillon’s more than “awkward” position, rather he exaggerates Acconci’s vulnerability. Ward writes ambivalently about Acconci’s relationship to feminism. Even while admitting that some of Acconci’s pieces may be sexist, Ward writes, “Although it was not necessarily readable at the time, Acconci’s earliest investigations into the relations between public and private … may be seen to have shared concerns with feminist efforts to establish the personal as political.” Ibid., 30.

226 The notion of failed masculinity is examined in depth in Chapter two.

it is an aggressive one, and one that points to the threat that the cultural and societal changes wrought by feminism posed for many men, even the most socially aware. That the violence towards women at play in McCarthy’s *Sailor’s Meat* is performed on his own body is nonetheless telling of unresolved attitudes towards the subordination women experience despite the advances of feminism. McCarthy also expressed the duality of the target of his violence in a text he wrote for the *Southland Video Anthology* exhibition at the Long Beach Museum of Art in 1977, which relays a ‘dream’ in which McCarthy sexually assaults a woman who transmutated into himself.228

In performances that were in concert with the aims of the feminist movement as well as those that were not, feminism is the primary historical context for both male and female artists exploring gender in the 1970s.229 McCarthy was not alone in his preoccupation with shifting genders or cross-dressing in his *Meat Cake* performances. Several male artists in Southern California whom McCarthy knew incorporated gender-bending elements in their work alongside feminist artists. Feminism’s impact on these

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228 McCarthy told Richard Newton that he submitted the text in lieu of exhibiting *Sailor’s Meat* because he was uncertain that he wanted it to be shown to a large audience. The director of the museum rejected McCarthy’s sexually explicit text and instead published his letter in response to the situation. McCarthy, “Performance Interruptus,” unpaginated.

229 The exhibition *Under the Big Black Sun* featured *Sailor’s Meat* in a room of McCarthy’s works. The video was projected along one wall and shown with his video *Tubbing* (1975) on a monitor; photographic stills from both series; a series of drawings done in tandem with the original *Sailor’s Meat* performance; and the text originally written one year after the performance for the *Southland Video Anthology* catalog. The inclusion of that text combined with the institutional wall text which relays only that *Sailor’s Meat* was inspired by a still from a B-movie provides a rather narrow context for interpreting the work that fits with the exhibition’s overall theme of the dark side of Los Angeles during the 1970s. The catalog reinforces this over-determined reading by contextualizing the work only in terms of Hollywood and the glam rock scene (Iggy Pop in particular), following Mike Kelley’s essay discussed in Chapter 2, Kelley, "Cross Gender/Cross Genre," *P.A.J: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, no. 1 (2000): 1-9.
artists is undoubtable. Though their range of responses to feminism is varied, these artists shared a certain ambivalence towards it, and, perhaps, its impact on their personal lives. As Barbara Smith assessed McCarthy’s manipulation of his penis during *Meat Cake*, “it was difficult to tell whether he was fixing the symbol or gouging it.” McCarthy deployed gender in ways both supportive of, and contrary to, feminism; he denaturalized assumptions regarding the necessary connections between the feminine and the female sex while at times debasing it. The performance itself resists categorization. This uncertainty as to the precise relationship between a work like *Sailor’s Meat* and feminism has prevented much discussion about it. And in McCarthy’s case this ambiguity seems very purposeful. The ambivalence threaded throughout the *Meat Cake* series, as well as works by other male artists, also reflected possible dynamics between men and women struggling to redefine their relationships to one another, dynamics rife with tension and unease as well as support.²³⁰ Yet much can be gained in re-envisioning feminist art’s past as overlapping with this uncertain terrain, including a reclaiming of generative ideas that allow for a more expansive conversation between feminism and art in the present.

²³⁰ Smith described “the direction” of several of McCarthy’s performances between 1974 and 1979: “To change the female self-image that the male holds it is necessary to change the male self-image and so to change the exact nature of that androgyny. I would guess that the work McCarthy has done with his feminine role is in part completed. He has next taken on the male, who for him creates the very femaleness of the female he is creating.” What I think Smith is suggesting here, is that in order for men to truly reconceptualize women, to internalize thinking of both the category and individuals in a new and non-traditional ways, one must interrogate previous images and ways of thinking and create new ones. Indeed, several of McCarthy’s performances after *Meat Cake*, such as *Grand Pop* (1977) and *Political Disturbance* (1977) present more direct challenges to masculinity.
CHAPTER 2.
MIKE KELLEY: ROCKING THE CRADLE

The compelling tension behind Kelley’s installation *Half a Man* (fig.s 2, 21) hinges on the way he employed the feminist art idiom of craft only to reterritorialize it as symptomatic of failed masculinity. The recurrent themes in his work from the early 1980s into the 2000s—the construction of gender, particularly through socialization within the family built on repressive restrictions and the relationship between parent, or authority figure, and child—and crystallized in the installation speak clearly of feminist art’s impact on Kelley, yet feminism remains a lacuna in the critical literature on his work. *Half a Man* was originally part of *Mike Kelley: Three Projects: Half a Man, From My Institution to Yours, and Pay for Your Pleasure*, at the Renaissance Society in Chicago in 1988, and would later be reconfigured for other venues. *Half a Man* featured several sculptural accumulations of found stuffed animals, some hanging vertically from the ceiling, and one hung like a canvas on the wall; a series of large felt banners featuring bold graphics and some containing off-color messages; and a decoupaged chest of drawers and panel set above it. Emblematic of his craft works of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the installation shares both aesthetic and thematic terrain with feminist art of the 1970s, namely its deployment of craft materials and its attention to parent-child relationships and the socialization of children within the domestic sphere. The
installation’s affinities with feminist art butt against its evocation of adolescence—in particular a strand of nerdy or pathetic male teen evinced most clearly in a felt banner that proclaims “Pants Shitter & Proud P.S. Jerk-off Too (And I wear Glasses)” (fig. 22)—a stage Kelley would summon throughout his career. This chapter aims to restore the role of feminist art in the installation and problematize its conjunction of the disparate citations of feminism with an adolescent form of pathetic masculinity.

Echoing the disk shaped, rug-like forms of works by both Harmony Hammond and Barbara Kruger, Kelley’s crocheted floor work *Untitled* (1990) (fig. 23), is a conspicuous, yet obscure, example of his adapting feminist art without citation. Hammond’s series of *Floor Pieces* (1973) (fig. 24) are “paintings” composed of strips of found fabric woven together according to traditional braided-rug techniques and partially painted with acrylic paint. She rehabilitated and recontextualized these fabric remnants in order to infuse them with a new feminist political and aesthetic orientation. Kruger’s *A.M. Cookie (Big)*, a circle composed of fur, cotton stuffing, and glitter on embroidered fabric on linen positioned on the floor, was exhibited in the 1973 Whitney Biennial. For both works, the combination of the use of craft materials and the placement of the work on the floor highlighted their relationship to hand crafted rugs historically made from fabric scraps by women whose aesthetic expressions were quickly compromised by their use. In contrast, each of the three disks comprising Kelley’s *Untitled* combines a crocheted doll with a circular afghan, both thrift shop purchases that together suggest that they look quite ridiculous in, or have failed within, a fine arts context.

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In select interviews from the 1990s Kelley is asked directly if, in the words of Robert Storr, “feminist thinking in the 1970s had an effect on you?” Characteristic of each of Kelley’s responses is his vacillation; he acknowledged that feminist art factored into his work, but made an effort to hedge the degree to which it had. The limited number of writers who have addressed the possible impact of feminist art on Kelley’s work have either followed Kelley’s hesitations or have taken an inimical attitude towards Kelley, such as Faith Wilding and, to a lesser extent, Terry Myers. Art historian Cary Levine’s 2013 book was the first to pay critical attention to the relationship between Kelley and feminist art and thought, though it seems he does so primarily to limit the extent of its role in Kelley’s works. Notwithstanding the leads Kelley provided in these interviews, the art critics and curators who have discussed *Half a Man* were largely silent about

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232 Kelley replied, “Sure. Los Angeles was one of the main centers of feminism and also one of the last holdouts of a huge movement of essentialist feminists, especially in the performance-art world. I was dealing with these people all the time,” and went on to criticize one particular strain of work feminist artists made—pattern painting—as complicit with traditional gender roles. Mike Kelley, “An Interview with Mike Kelley,” by Robert Storr, *Art in America* (June 1994), 90. Also see Mike Kelley, “Isabel Graw in Conversation with Mike Kelley,” in *Mike Kelley*, ed. John C. Welchman (New York: Phaidon Press, 1999) and “Talking Failure: Mike Kelley and Julie Sylvester,” *Parkett*, 31 (1992).

233 See Faith Wilding, “Monstrous Domesticity,” 1995, rpt. in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, ed. Susan Bee and Mira Schor (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2000), 87—104, and Terry Myers, “The Mike Kelley Problem: The Feminist Art Program as Generative Source,” *New Art Examiner* 21 (Summer 1994): 24-9. Wilding takes issue with the large scale lack of acknowledgment of feminist art’s impact on contemporary art. For Myers too, its neglect in the literature on Kelley reflects a much larger problem with the lack of historicization of feminist art, “Given that it is patently obvious that feminist or feminist-derived work is playing a (or, more likely, the) central role in what is currently determined to have value by the art establishment, there is absolutely no excuse for our collective refusal to place this work in the generative position in which, without question, it belongs,” 26.

feminist art even as they followed Kelley’s cues in other regards in their writings on this work.  

During the period of Kelley’s initial ascendancy in the art world—the 1990s, particularly around and after his 1993 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes—the discourse surrounding his work largely focused on themes of adolescence and the subcultural sources Kelley claimed for himself. The exhibition catalog for Catholic Tastes is representative of the critical literature addressing his oeuvre, as it established a creative lineage for Kelley emerging from his adolescence in Detroit and the subcultural emanations he encountered there. The chapter “Mike Kelley and Detroit” consists, in part, of a litany of name-dropping: all of the cool sources, mainly music groups, that are said to have greatly impacted the artist, including The Stooges, Sun Ra, and MC5 (managed by a founder of the White Panthers, John

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235 In an essay from 1999, Kelley detailed his formative experiences with 1960s radical youth culture, particularly his spectatorial experience of the White Panthers, a local group that based themselves on the Black Panthers, and organized protests, street theater, and musical performances in Detroit and Ann Arbor in the name of “cultural revolution.” The White Panthers’ activities were inspired by anti-racist, anti-war, and far-left politics, as well as a related brand of rock, rebellion, drugs, and sex that was popular in the less-politicized hippie culture. Kelley credits his youthful experience following the White Panthers as key to his turn to the arts, tuning him in to, in his words, “avant-garde music, theater, film, and political events. This is what led me to become an artist, which is quite remarkable, since I came from a working class background with little or no exposure to the arts as a child.” Mike Kelley, “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre,” 2. He continues to cite musicians ranging from Sun Ra to Iggy Pop as influential to his aesthetic development.

236 As Kelley emphasized the generative role of specific subcultures it is necessary to give shape to this multivalent term, one that continues to be the subject of much debate. The term “subculture” arose in the 1940s in sociological studies of youth culture carried out by the Chicago School. Notably, the study of subcultures was taken up in the 1970s by the Birmingham School in the U.K., whose studies remain influential. See Dick Hebdige’s influential 1979 book, Hebdige, Subcultures: The Meaning of Style (London: Routledge, 2002). Generally, subculture designates a form of youth culture that defines itself in opposition to the mainstream.
These seminal influences, along with mentions of Kelley’s own noise band, Destroy All Monsters, are repeated in Elizabeth Sussman’s introduction to the volume and throughout the critical literature addressing his artwork. Sussman grounded Kelley’s oeuvre in art historical sources more than other writers on his work, and provided a lengthy list of influences and fellow travelers, including: Chicago figurative painting; Joseph Beuys; Alan Kaprow; William Wegman’s early videos; Ant Farm; Öyvind Fahlström; the Destruction in Art Symposium; the Vienna Actionists; Karlheinz Stockhausen; Sun Ra; the Chicago Art Ensemble; The Stooges; elsewhere in the text she mentions Dada, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. In the entire catalog to the exhibition, feminism is only mentioned twice, both times in a dismissive fashion by Sussman. She wrote that though Kelley had “long been affected by issues of gender,” he eschewed feminism both because it “appeared to him as puritanical, ideological … [and] lacking in subtlety and ambiguity.” Elsewhere in the text she commented that, to Kelley, “feminist art seemed to adhere to the same essentialist utopianism as male modernism.”

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238 The term “noise” covers an extremely varied field of music; however, some common features are discordance, atonality, repetitive structures, and lack of harmony. While noise is often understood as having roots in Futurism, Dada, and Fluxus, Kelley’s own band allied itself with the raw, rock-based sound of Detroit groups MC5 and The Stooges. See Paul Hegarty, Noise/Music: A History (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007).


240 Ibid., 24, 27.
Sussman additionally noted the influence of Conceptual art and Kelley’s exposure to it during his graduate school years at California Institute of the Arts, which has generally been downplayed in the critical literature. Cal Arts was a relatively new art school when Kelley enrolled in 1976, which allowed for a curriculum and faculty that reflected the current art world—including John Baldessari, Allan Kaprow, and Douglas Huebler—and the school quickly became known for its commitment to conceptual art, albeit of an unconventional, West Coast identified sort. Sussman envisions Kelley as a Conceptual artist due to his reliance on “conceptual systems, logical frameworks, [which] reflect his training and experience of Conceptual art.” She continues, however, that his commitment to popular culture “mangles Conceptualism … dragging it out of its dry theorizing into an open space of sheer theatrical rant.”

Among Kelley’s primary supporters in the 1990s, John C. Welchman and Ralph Rugoff frame his work nearly exclusively in terms of his contemporaries, largely eschewing historical precedents. With particular flair, Welchman painted Kelley as a leader of a group of friends, “The kingpin of the post-sunshine L.A. scene—a raunchy, boyish coterie which includes Jim Shaw, Raymond Pettibon, and a gaggle of pretenders—[who] should be allowed his multiple personae and split infinities as he rides

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241 Ibid., 16.

242 Welchman attributes some art historical sources to Kelley’s work, i.e. Dada and Surrealism, but many critics neglect to assign historical sources to Kelley completely. Welchman, “The Mike Kelleys,” in Mike Kelley (1999), 44. Welchman’s close working relationship with Kelley—he edited three collections of Kelley’s writings and interviews—suggests that his inventory of sources and cohorts were sanctioned by the artist. Also see Robert Storr, “Eye Infection,” in Eye Infection, ed. Christiaan Braun (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2001), 13-25.
the latest wave of the L.A. art boom into the first sunset of his early fame.”

This circle of rebellious artists often extends to fellow Southern Californians John Miller, Paul McCarthy, and Tony Oursler. The image of this group (whose members do not identify as one) that Welchman conjures is typical, stressing its masculine-identified interests (“boyish”) and attitudes (“raunchy”), and its exclusivity (“gaggle of pretenders”), traits which signify a clique of cool, and supposedly distinguish these artists from the mainstream art world. The members of Kelley’s particular clique share, to some degree or another, an interest in subcultures and adolescence and an embrace of pathetic masculinity, identifying with the wimpy, pimpled consumer of comics, rather than the heroic artist; an urge to challenge the categorical separation of high and low; and the use of unconventional materials and genres.

Also included in Catholic Tastes is Rugoff’s essay, “Mike Kelley/2 and the Power of the Pathetic,” which reflects the themes of a 1990 exhibition he curated showcasing the theme of failure and championing the figure of the loser, titled Just Pathetic.

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243 Welchman, "Kelleys," 44.


245 Kim Gordon, a founding member of the seminal alternative rock band Sonic Youth, has also written about Kelley, Pettibon, and Oursler in terms of their dark views of American popular culture and their participation in the punk subculture of Southern California in the 1970s. Gordon, “American Prayers,” Artforum 23, no. 8 (April, 1985): 73-77.


show included Kelley, Raymond Pettibon, John Miller, Cady Noland, David Hammons, Jessica Diamond, William Wegman and Erwin Wurm. Notably, Rugoff used the term “pathetic masculinity” in the essay accompanying the exhibition to describe Kelley. “Pathetic masculinity,” provisionally defined as a mode of occupying the male gender while disposing of many of its conventional traits, such as strength, courage, success, and responsibility (yet retaining its vaunted position of power), was commented on as a cultural trend in the 1980s. It signifies a warped variation of hegemonic masculinity that celebrates the low and immature or adolescent, and illustrates a particular tension between the warping of normative masculinity and the retention of masculinity’s privilege. Kelley’s interest in certain subcultures is intertwined with his near obsession with adolescence as a signifier of cool situated outside of normative society. However, as I will argue, that image of cool is specifically coded as male. By the specific construction of a cult of cool for Kelley and the resulting abrogation of possible art influences on his work, feminist art has been excluded not only from the role it had in the development of his work, but also as a tenable source for other artists for whom he was a great influence.


Kelley’s own writings emphasized the very specific lineages of pop- and subcultures that framed him as an outsider in the art world, as his chosen filiations generally eschewed the prevailing artistic trends, specifically Conceptual art, the dominant influence of his graduate school years. It seems important for Kelley to have distanced himself and his experience from Cal Arts and the possible influence of his teachers there. His ex post facto critique of Conceptual art as devoid of an awareness of the social positions of its creators and viewers allowed him to shrug off its influence as another mouthpiece of the dominant culture. Through this specific and intentional positioning on Kelley’s part, in addition to his extracurricular participation in several noise bands, he became an icon of cool in the art world. The model Kelley set out for discussing his work was the primary critical rubric for critics and curators presenting it, which continues to be the case. The origin story for Kelley’s artistic persona—the lineages and the content—laid out in the catalog for Catholic Tastes, are explored as the thematic arcs of his career in the catalog for the largest and most recent retrospective of his work originating at the Stedelijk Museum.


251 The 2013 catalog Mike Kelley includes an essay by Branden Joseph on Mike Kelley’s involvement in a number of noise and avant-garde bands, John Welchman’s framing of Kelley’s methodology as “comedic,” and an essay by George Baker which elaborates on Kelley’s antagonistic relationship to the tenets of twentieth century modern art. Also included is an interview by Eva Meyer-Hermann in which she presses Kelley on his relationship to Southern California feminist art, and rather than vacillate on the subject, he denies any possible influence. Kelley, “Interview with Mike Kelley,” by Eva Meyer-Hermann, in Mike Kelley, ed. Meyer-Hermann and Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 2013), 366-7.
The critical oversight vis-à-vis Kelley’s relationship to feminist art can, in part, be located within a general amnesia regarding the cultural and artistic contributions of feminism. For instance, during the late 1980s and 1990s, when the domestic and the family enjoyed a surge of visibility in the artworld, domesticity’s centrality to feminist art was neglected, and it was often depoliticized. A great number of US artists started making references to the domestic in the context of the conservative political scene of the 1980s, which monopolized the notion of “family values,” and several exhibitions were organized around this trope in the 1990s. Rarely, however, was feminist art mentioned in the exhibition catalogs for any of these shows as a precedent for the then burgeoning trend of the theme of domesticity in contemporary art. *Half a Man* is, however, unique in the specific ways it conjures feminist craftwork and its association with forms of feminine labor, which forms the basis for several interpretations of the work around the

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254 Faith Wilding noted the return of domestic themes and craft, marked by several exhibitions in the 1990s. Wilding wrote, “Many artists are ‘returning’ to feminist work of the 1970s without really knowing they are doing so—because much of this early work entered the art mainstream, and was picked up by influential artists,” and here she singled out Kelley, whose work appeared “without acknowledgment of its sources.” Wilding, “Monstrous Domesticity,” 88.
category of pathetic masculinity. The gap in the critical literature on Kelley results in a very uncritical assessment of how gender play may or may not deflate normative concepts of masculinity.

*Half a Man*

*Half a Man* inaugurated a period of Kelley’s career in which he was known for his work with craft aesthetics and during which he was receiving increasing attention in the art world. Along the walls hung additional banners, a sculptural ‘painting’ entitled *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1988), a series of black-and-white drawings of trash, and *Nature and Culture*, a chest of drawers and collage (1988). Across the installation, Kelley staged the inculcation of identity in the nursery, exploring the relationship between child and parent that had previously been the domain of women artists. The shabby crocheted stuffed animals, old afghans, and the dogs and snakes—cheap prizes from amusement parks—that populated *Half a Man* were once children’s possessions, since abandoned and bought by Kelley from thrift stores. The former playthings’ status as found objects was revealed in an abundance of stains, marks of use and years of being dragged around, slept with, sucked and drooled on. Featured prominently in the exhibition was *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (fig. 25), a monumental canvas measuring 90 x 199 ¼ inches covered in a sloppy collage of stuffed animals and blankets laid over a stretchers to resemble a canvas. Assorted afghans spill over the canvas, filling the space between crocheted dolls and teddy bears and a walrus haphazardly sewn from beginner’s patterns. The animals are attached to the canvas with what appears to be a complete lack of concern for composition, whether the direction they face or the juxtaposition of form or color.
The stuffed animals and blankets of *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* are pawns in a psychic exchange between parent and child, rife with guilt, expectations, and relations of power. The title of the piece suggests that any offerings from the parent—whether investments of love or material objects—reinstate the relationship of domination, which Kelley, with his antiauthoritarian position critiques. Cute and docile, the stuffed animals are endowed with parents’ desires for their children and dispensed to them according to a gendered classificatory system consisting of color and type of doll. The image of perfection reflected in mass-produced playthings is thwarted here by the imperfect nature of the awkward if laboriously handmade goods, whose stained and shabby appearance indicates years of intimate use.255 In the context of the commodity art of the late 1980s—the slick productions of Jeff Koons and the spanking-new status objects bought and arranged by Haim Steinbach, for example—Kelley’s works are shoddy, not only clearly handmade but also used.

It is almost customary in the literature on Kelley for critics and curators to ally *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*, the focal point of *Half a Man*, with Abstract Expressionism; the protrusions from the canvas are read as akin to drips, while the composition is said to embody the idea of the all-over, identified especially with Jackson Pollock.256 Kelley hints at this source to bankrupt it; the haphazard composition lacks a

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255 While Kelley imagined the found objects he used to have been made as gifts to children, several teddy bears incorporated into *More Love Hours* were more likely made by teenage girls in home economics classes, as the pattern and materials were part of kits used to teach sewing in the late 1980s. Perhaps Kelley was unaware of this, but it helps to move his narrative of socialization along.

sense of expressiveness, and there is no aspiration for transformation, whether material or spiritual. Rather, Kelley’s canvas has more in common with Miriam Schapiro’s femmages than with Pollock’s drips or Mark Rothko’s stains. Schapiro, who had been co-director of the Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts from 1971-72, began work on her “femmages,” a term she introduced to direct attention to the long popular history of collage, in 1972.\textsuperscript{257} Typical of her work from the 1970s, Architectural Basis (1978) (fig. 26) incorporates the modernist grid with a femmage of handkerchiefs found in flea markets and garage sales that had been embroidered or otherwise worked on by other women. According to the artist, “The grid is there in my painting so you can think about form, the handkerchiefs so you can cry.”\textsuperscript{258} Not only is the logical function of the grid disrupted by the appearance of “low” materials, but the handkerchiefs’ stains of tears and sweat are actual traces of women’s bodies and labor that have historically been excluded from modernism. There is a strange alliance between Architectural Basis and aspects of Kelley’s Half a Man installation. Kelley too searched through garage sales and secondhand stores, not to collect evidence of obscured artistic lineages, but for what would otherwise be considered surplus or junk. The craft works he purchased (as opposed

\textsuperscript{17} George Baker discusses Kelley’s oeuvre, as a continued assault on abstraction (both formal abstraction and reductionism of thought), and More Love Hours in particular as part of the artist’s attempt to “overturn these paradigms” of modernist painting. Baker, “Sublevel,” in Mike Kelley (2013), 347, 359.

\textsuperscript{257} According to Norma Broude, “as ‘femmage,’ this activity has been practiced for centuries by women, who used traditional craft techniques like sewing, piecing, hooking, quilting and appliquéing.” Broude, “Miriam Schapiro and ‘Femmage’: Reflections on the Conflict between Decoration and Abstraction in Twentieth-Century Art,” in Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany, ed. Broude and Mary Garrard (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 320.

\textsuperscript{258} Ibid.
to those he made himself) also bear the stains of their use, in his case the base remnants of drool, dirt, and who knows what else. The repetitious sameness of the crocheted animals and afghans points to this activity as a craft almost without skill.

Far from the eye-straining needlework integrated into *Architectural Basis*, the prosaic character of the objects in *Half a Man* suggest their manufacture is something that can be done while, for example, watching television. There is a slightly mocking tone here that permeates Kelley’s attitude to his feminist forebears, yet also a kind of leveling of the concept of creativity within the modernist framework, whether applied to women’s historically undervalued creative work or to that of the great masters. In contrast, Schapiro’s compositions offer evidence of deference to both sets of her predecessors, the anonymous women and the Ab-ex artists. The conscious connections Schapiro made to historical traditions of women’s creative output were of paramount importance to her practice. In *Wonderland* (1983) (fig. 27), Schapiro employs geometric forms associated with modernist painting—a centralized “X” that radiates out towards the edge in Frank Stella-like fashion—as a compositional device that organizes the work. Rather than express these geometries in paint, in *Wonderland* the X’s are formed from strips of cloth; occupying the center of the canvas is an emblem of the feminine sphere, a small, white, embroidered cloth proclaiming, “Welcome to our Home” and featuring a scene of a

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259 Schapiro was a key member of the Pattern and Decoration movement, which also included Joyce Kozloff, Robert Kushner, Tony Robbins, Valerie Jaudon, and critic Amy Goldin, among others. These artists explored the conjunction of decoration and modernism. John Perreault, a critic and curator associated with the movement, wrote that they consciously combined modernist art traditions with decorative motifs from the history of craft and non-Western traditions, “in order to express humanistic and decorative themes that had been excluded from the domain of modernism.” Quoted in Thalia Gouma-Peterson, *Miriam Schapiro: Shaping the Fragments of Art and Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 32.
woman dressed in 1940s clothing while ensconced in her living room. Five crocheted aprons and a number of lace handkerchiefs are dispersed throughout the canvas, further disrupting the underlying order of the composition.

Schapiro’s materials challenge the parameters of modernism, without entirely dismissing the paradigm; instead, she seeks to contribute to and shift its terms as a living tradition. However, as Faith Wilding reminds us that not all 1970s feminist artwork exalted craft; rather, “much of it was highly critical of the institution of the family, and of the restriction of women to the domestic sphere—as well as questioning the division of labor, and the conditions of work itself.”

During the 1970s, craft was both revalued as offering historically valid forms of female art production, as well as revealing an explicit site of the gendering of the subject. In Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock follow the history of needlework, concentrating on points at which changes in production—most importantly the shift from guilds to domestic economy in the evolution of manufacturing—coincided with ideological shifts regarding women’s identity.

Typical considerations of the history of craft understand its separation from high art as a class-based distinction between artist and artisan; however, Parker and Pollock write, “there is an important connection between the hierarchy of the arts and the sexual categories male/female. The development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation between art and craft.” They note, “The real differences between the two are in terms of where they are

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made and *who* makes them.” For example, by the eighteenth century the practice of needlework simulated a process of socialization whereby learning both needlework techniques and the prayers and pious texts of the samplers girls acquired the ideal feminine traits of patience, submissiveness, obedience, and modesty. Crafts, and embroidery in particular, took on a naturalized association with the feminine and the private sphere and were seen as either decorative or utilitarian; meanwhile, painting and sculpture, typically believed to originate from a wellspring of masculine talent, occupied the privileged public sphere and were concerned with philosophical ideals, imparting them with incomparable artistic value. Parker and Pollock shed light on an often overlooked field in art history, and seem to suggest that the craft should hold as important and influential a place in it as do painting and sculpture.

*MORE LOVE HOURS* caricatures Abstract Expressionism as well as the Pattern and Decoration movement. Yet despite Kelley’s repeatedly stated aim to dismantle modernism and challenge the boundaries between high and low, his mocking tone was sharper when directed at his feminist predecessors than at the high priests of modernism, such as Pollock, whose reputation had suffered enough of that by 1987. His aesthetic leveling of the objects massed in *More Love Hours* ridicules the sentiment and affect that motivated their making, framing these gifts from parent to child as another means of projecting the expectations and ideals of the parents, who represent society at large.

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262 Ibid., 5.

263 Ibid., 66.

264 Parker, however, introduces an important caveat in her feminist reading of the history of needlework: To recategorize craft as high art in order to grant it the same aesthetic value traditionally accorded to painting and sculpture risks losing sight of its complex history and the ideological determinations behind it. Ibid., 5–6.
These stuffed symbols of early childhood and development were placed in proximity to works that evoked the busy hands of teenage crafters in a specific time and place. *Nature and Culture* (1987) (fig. 28) is a little-discussed work that consists of a chest of drawers with a panel hanging above it, which features Kelley’s uncomfortable fusion of decoupage and photomontage. The drawers are completely covered with images of women’s eyes and lips of differing scales cut from magazines. These images speak to the kind of obsessive collages teenage girls sometimes make, full of yearning to measure up to fashion magazine ideals. The panel above is of a different sort, however. A potpourri of military images (helicopters against a blaze of orange sky, a row of evenly spaced silhouettes of soldiers and their guns) combine with images of death (bodies face down on the ground and a man with a machine gun in the foreground; a particularly eerie black-and-white photo of a presumably dead woman’s upside-down face) to suggest, and perhaps comment on, a causal relationship between the two.

*Nature and Culture* capitalizes on the tension created by contrasting technique—photomontage and decoupage—and subject matter—militaristic images set against a barrage of fragmented female body parts. Montage’s history as political language, from Constructivism through the Pictures Generation, is drawn into an adolescent arena, creating an identity for the maker of the chest akin to a teenage Barbara Kruger (his title brings to mind Kruger’s 1983 collage *Untitled (We Won’t Play Nature to Your Culture)*). Kelley enacts an infantilization of montage by using it to decoupage the fragmented and fetishized female body on household furniture. This is an interesting moment in the installation, as it speaks to the process of internalization of the superficial signs of constructed gender roles, as explored by Kruger in works such as *Untitled (You Are Not*
Characteristic of her work in the 1980s, the title phrase is montaged over an image of a woman that appears to date to the 1950s. The woman’s hand holds fragments of a broken mirror that radiate from a circular point of impact and reflect a disjointed image of her pained face. The slogan comments on the fragmented nature of female identity, cloaked by a façade of completeness. Kruger’s interrogations of female identity offer a context for the dresser in *Nature and Culture*, in which Kelley offers an ambiguous alliance between idealized female body parts as models of beauty for young girls and their disfigurement via their idolization and the collage form it takes.265

In *Nature and Culture*, the panel above the dresser features wartime images, yet is formally cohesive with the chest, using a similar technique and decorative embellishments. Overlapping images of helicopters taking off into the sunset, men with guns lording over prisoners laying on the ground, and soldiers marching into the distance are positioned every which way and punctuated by the placement of drawer handles in the four corners of the panel. Is the hypermasculinity embodied in these images for boys parallel to the feminine imagery of the dresser? Does the panel take the place of a mirror? Or do both pieces belong to the same teenage persona? Interestingly, Kelley’s ‘feminine’ voice comes across as more critical in *Nature and Culture* than in any other part of *Half a Man*, and yet the work receives very little attention in later exhibitions and catalogs. Throughout his career, Kelley returned to the moment of adolescence as representing a

265 According to Craig Owens, Kruger’s work aims to reveal how ideology controls representations of the body by involving the viewer via the mode of address in the production and deconstruction of stereotypes. Craig Owens, “The Medusa Effect, or, the Specular Ruse,” in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
breaking point with the ongoing process of internalizing social mores, a moment full of possibilities beyond the course of a repressive socialization. Rather than read *Nature and Culture* as a contrast between the feminine as nature and the masculine as culture, the two pieces coexist as one work that challenges the naturalization of culture and its neat separation of gender into distinct categories. The work both points to, and challenges, adolescence as the time period during which gender difference manifests most intensely.

In *Half a Man* Kelley presents pre-coded cultural products embodying gendered identities in states of imperfection and contention, disclosing the impossibility of a totalized, normative sexual identity at any stage of development.

Hanging throughout the exhibition are a series of felt banners that borrow their aesthetic from the banners of Sister Corita Kent, which had been so influential to the decorations of church youth programs from the 1960s to the ‘80s. Kent is known for her positive and peaceful slogans, meant to inspire a feel-good response, especially during

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266 The history of the category of teenager (generally considered as synonymous with adolescence and characterizing the period between the ages of 13-19) in the US is often dated to the “youth rebellion” of the 1920s. See Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1978). Teenage identity is predicated on a social and cultural separation from adults and the mainstream culture they represent. Insofar as this is true, Sarah Chinn identifies an earlier birth date for the teenage class in the US. She argues that from the 1880s to the 1920s, first generation working-class Americans developed identities distinct from both their immigrant parents and dominant representations of youth. Chinn, *Inventing Modern Adolescence: The Children of Immigrants in Turn-of-the-century America* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 6. Chinn enumerates the “signs” identified with teenagerhood: “The creation of a separate culture defined by fashion, commercial recreation, sexual experimentation, and membership in an age cohort.” Ibid., 3. Kelley’s conception of the teen years corresponds to David Sibley’s account of adolescence as occupying an indeterminate zone. According to Sibley, “Adolescents may appear threatening to adults because they transgress the adult/child boundary and appear ‘discrepant’ in adult spaces.” Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 36.
the social upheavals of the 1960s and ‘70s; notable among her works is the 1985 *Love Stamp*. Kelley’s banners borrow Kent’s technique and look, but subvert her messages with his own. *Let’s Talk* (1987) (fig. 30), for example, features a jar labeled “cookies” in between the phrases “Let’s Talk About” and “Disobeying.” Mocking the church banners’ uplifting messages of religious and personal hope and love, *Trash Picker* (1987) reads, “I am useless to the culture, but God loves me.”

To some extent, Kelley’s focus on adolescence displaces the feminist critique from the craft forms and themes of socialization. These works bear signs of both conventional teen culture and its underbelly. Kelley replaces messages of acceptance with the mottoes of teenage boys, wallowing in their awkwardness, acne, masturbatory pleasures, and loser status. Both through their phrases and their crafted appearance, these banners speak of an absence not only of spiritual inspiration, but also of the kind of self-respecting values of American manhood. The theme of failure looms large in Kelley’s oeuvre and its accompanying criticism, particularly around *Half a Man*, which highlights the inability to achieve a full, gendered adulthood, an idea made explicit by its title. Kelley linked this failure to adolescence:

> I’m interested in objects that try to play up that schism between the idealized notion behind the object and the failure of the object to attain that. Adolescence interests me in the same way because it is about enculturation, the point at which it becomes glaringly obvious that we are unnatural and that normality is an acquired state.  

**FAMILY TYRANNIES**

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267 Kelley, “Talking Failure,” 100.
Kelley’s interest in the moments when children begin to establish themselves as independent, both the stage of early childhood development and adolescence reflects his vision of the family as a kind of insidious assembly line affecting the socialization and normalization of children. While in Kelley’s estimation parents direct this socialization, for feminist artists, such as Mimi Smith, the family dynamic is productive of desires and identities which impact both parent and child. In Half a Man Kelley recognized ideas introduced by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, in particular the importance of the emotional environment on early childhood development and children’s sensitive awareness of the psychic projections of their parents, but the installation implicates parents as sources of ultimate control. According to Kelley, the dolls embody parents’ idealized projections of what they wish their children to be—perfect, clean, voiceless, desireless, in other words, conforming to social norms: “The doll itself is the dysfunctional picture of the child. It’s a picture of a dead child, an impossible ideal produced by a corporate notion of the family.” The image of idealization embodied by the doll becomes sullied by its actual use by the child, who renders it “dysfunctional.” He continues, “It begins to take on the characteristics of the child itself—it smells like the child and becomes torn and dirty like real things do. It then becomes a frightening object because it starts to represent the human in a real way and that’s when it is taken from the child and thrown away.”

It is telling that Kelley is particularly interested in the moments when children begin to establish themselves as independent, both the stage of development requiring transitional objects and adolescence. The parents are ciphers, standing in the place of generic

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authority, and the handcrafted nature of the work speaks to a larger struggle of the individual trying to stake out a unique identity in the adult world of social norms and controls.

In discussing the transactions between parent and child represented in Kelley’s work, Emily Apter adopts Jacqueline Rose’s notion that the adult finds the child’s polymorphous sexuality threatening, and works to repress it in order to diminish its challenge.269 The “myths of childhood innocence” embodied in cute stuffed animals are refuted by the traces of the infant’s physical contact with them and the confused associations Kelley creates in their recombination. These objects thus are revealed to be not simply childhood toys, innocent of meaning, but transitional objects, necessary precursors to a child’s assumption of identity, which according to psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, embody the infant’s projections of the mother (love-object) while allowing for a separation from her.270 Plush Kundalini and Chakra Set (1987) (fig. 31), a sculpture that hangs from ceiling to floor, is organized around a thick white snake, at least twelve feet long, which supports clusters of single-colored stuffed animals that have been placed at regular intervals. Regarding the title, Kelley wrote, “with its overtones of sexuality and power, the image of the kundalini reinvests the dolls with what has been left out,” and


270 According to D.W. Winnicott, transitional objects present themselves at a necessary stage of infant development. The objects embody the infant’s projections for the mother while allowing for a separation from her, a necessary precursor to the infant’s assumption of identity. D.W. Winnicott, Playing and Reality (New York: Routledge, 1982).
thereby pushes against the idealized projections initially invested in the dolls. In later works, transitional objects accumulate into sculptural doubles of the body, but are misshapen and abject. In one such sculpture, *Eviscerated Corpse* (1989) (fig. 32), a blonde-haired doll is pinned high on the wall, her arms are spread, and a mismatched, roughly sewn conglomeration of handmade, worm-shaped dolls spills out beneath them, forming an elongated body resembling entrails. Small legs are attached to the bottom, touching the floor, while a continuous discharge of attached banana and snake dolls twists along the floor. The cutesy doll is split apart and weighed down by the accumulation of parental efforts to normalize the child symbolized by each doll. The leftover detritus from early childhood may take on a body of its own, but it lacks life; rather, it is rejected and forgotten, made lifeless in order for the child to acquire his or her own identity.

Lifeless and unpretty dolls are not unprecedented as artworks. Mimi Smith’s *Knit Baby* (1968) (fig. 33) presents a peach-colored knit doll lacking any identifying features and wearing a baby shirt embroidered with the text, “This Baby is Dead.” Smith began to work on the piece during her second pregnancy and added the embroidered text after a miscarriage, perhaps as a symbolic means of enacting a separation over which she had no control. Smith’s doll stresses female subjectivity as having developed within the family

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and the home, where women acquire the role of caretaker, of the emotional and practical worker, laboring behind the scenes to create images of her family that conform to the norm. This is a demanding effort that leaves little room for the woman to reflect on her own psychic desires. Apter identifies maternal desire and maternal fetishism as subjects little attended to in art or by critical theory, noting that in psychoanalytical texts the issues have generally been subsumed under the category of childhood development.\textsuperscript{273} While for Smith the doll is attached to personal desire, for Kelley it becomes a means of critiquing that desire.

The home as the container for complex family relationships, dynamics seen to be productive of feminine identity, loomed large in subject matter developed by feminist artists. These artists set the dialectic between the social and the political within the home. In the 1970s, the majority of feminist artwork involving the family focused on relationships between mothers and their children, reflecting an effort to establish a subject matter based on important experiences that contributed to the artist’s identity as a woman, motherhood clearly being a defining role for women. The family, safely ensconced in the private sphere, was viewed as the only arena in which women regularly asserted control and were responsible for outcomes. According to many feminists, the family is also a primary site of oppression of women.\textsuperscript{274} While the home is the locus for early childhood development, the socialization of males by other males has historically

\textsuperscript{273} Apter, 3.

been spread over several locations, and was largely conducted by those outside the family: all-boys schools, sports teams, fraternities, the military, the workplace, and the professional club. Many of these sites have been slowly ceded to women as they have become co-educational or inclusive. Yet as these alternate sites of socialization have become open to women, the intensity of the media’s focus on the home has increased.

The home has been a center of feminist attention as the key site of both female authority and oppression, as such it remains an ambiguous symbol fraught with traumatic experiences. Ilene Segalove’s *The Mom Tapes* (1974–78) fuse her interest in television as a medium with standard paradigms of representation with her own personal history to present her sometimes paradoxical relationship to the domestic. Segalove’s *The Mom Tapes* are a series of partially scripted, partially improvised vignettes featuring Segalove’s exchanges with her mother creating a portrait of their relationship. In one of the segments, Segalove asks her mother for shopping advice off-screen—“Mom, I need a raincoat, where should I get one? … Mom, I need some dress shoes, where should I get some?”—while the camera focuses on her in her walk-in closet. While Segalove’s mother dispenses advice on where to buy shoes, she seems to be both playing a role on a commercial and addressing her daughter intimately. She looks directly at Segalove while speaking to her as she carries out mundane actions in the confidential space of her walk-in closet. The tone of the videos is often satiric, parodying materialism, old-fashioned values, and the

roles of women, and yet the closeness between mother and daughter is also apparent. The complexity of feelings a 1970s-feminist daughter feels towards her mother, who embodies some of the attributes the daughter is personally and socially revolting against, is presented here as ambivalence.

Eleanor Antin’s *Domestic Peace* (1971–72) (fig. 34) also challenges idealized notions of the mother-child relationship. Antin used Conceptual art’s ‘de-skilled’ aesthetic and the experiment-like parameters that often define a work to highlight a subject that is anathema to it: the everyday relationship between a bourgeois Jewish mother and her daughter. Prior to a two-week visit with her mother, Antin devised a set of statements as a basis for ensuing conversations, statements that she believed her mother would find reflective of an “appropriate” life and that would thus maintain the peace between them. Antin would then chart her mother’s and her own emotional responses during the conversation and present them along with the original statement on a sheet of graph paper. According to Antin’s description of *Domestic Peace*:

> Though my mother insists upon her claim to the familial she is not interested in my actual life but rather in what she considers an appropriate life. No matter what kind of life a person leads he can always, by careful selection, produce an image corresponding to anyone else’s view of appropriateness and by carefully suppressing all the others, I was able to offer her an image of myself that produced in her a feeling of closeness.\(^\text{276}\)

The seemingly disinterested mode of Conceptual art is unexpectedly used to communicate the emotional charge of the artist’s encounters with her mother. The often provocative content of the exchanges—replete with Antin’s notes indicating where she purposefully avoided, or pushed, a particular issue—reveals that both the idea of

generational harmony and the role of women as peacekeepers within the family are myths. Antin’s piece sometimes painfully recognizes the gulf separating her mother’s expectations of her, based on a vision of normative bourgeois family life, and the life and worldview the artist has chosen for herself. The scientific-looking presentation of the results of Antin’s experiment mirrors predominant modes of presentation in Conceptual art and reinforces the validity of examining one’s family life as a subject for art.

In these works, and many others from the same period, Segalove and Antin, drew on their intricate relationships with their mothers. The daughters picture their mothers as ambiguous models of womanhood that they have both incorporated and rejected. In contrast to the feminist artists who explored the acquisition of gender in the domestic sphere through personal experience, Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy’s collaborative videos *Family Tyranny* and *Cultural Soup* (1987) (fig. 35) (produced by Nancy Buchanan) delivered a burlesque treatment of this subject veering towards buffoonery and parody. The videos are staged within a faux-wood-paneled room, resembling the rec-room-like set of an amateurish television show. McCarthy is at work on an elusive project, stuffing white goop into a funnel attached to a Styrofoam sphere with a hat on a stick, while he admonishes “He’s been a very bad boy.” A series of reproaches are repeated, sometimes replacing “he” with “you,” implicating the viewer in the action early on. Later, McCarthy’s voice switches to an instructional mode: “We take this and we shove this down into him like … You could do this at home … when your children are very bad.” While the shift between modes of address occurs, the camera closes in on a still life of a jar of mayonnaise and a cup of white goop, which one cannot help but associate with ejaculate. This head is both the subject of the narrator’s instructions and a
stand-in for the character played by Kelley, who is cowering under the table, manically rocking back and forth and shaking. A struggle ensues between the (presumably) father-and-son pair, as Kelley sticks his head out of a window while McCarthy spanks him, and then Kelley frantically tries to run away, appearing like a cartoon character with his legs moving underneath a stationary body.

In *Cultural Soup*, the pendant video to *Family Tyranny*, a constant refrain echoes throughout the video: “My daddy did this to me. You can do this to your sons too.” When the refrain is paired with only slightly veiled suggestions of forced oral sex made by the Styrofoam orb imagery, it is an implicit invocation of abuse continued through generations (at some point during the chase Kelley exclaims, “No, not the heinie, Dad!”). As McCarthy’s directions often also sound as if he is dispensing directives on child rearing, it is unclear whom he is addressing: the viewer of the video in the role of TV audience, or Kelley as his son, passing on the machinations of abuse through generations.

The trauma and abuse enacted on the son by the father in McCarthy and Kelley’s video are placed within a lineage of familial acculturation. It appears to be the father’s job to teach his son to be a man through violent, and perhaps sexual, domination, suggesting that these values are learned and cultural rather than innate. The parody in *Family Tyranny* is targeted at the image of masculinity and its attempted replication. McCarthy takes up his oft-donned role as buffoon: shirtless and showing off his round potbelly, he wears combat-style green shorts and an Alpine hat with small feathers in the trim. Mostly delivered in singsong, McCarthy’s speech is slightly slurred and his voice is low. He seems to be babbling, rather than issuing authoritative instructions. The buffoon’s obsessive interactions with his craft also mock the by-now crumbling link
between masculinity and creative genius. Despite McCarthy and Kelley’s deflation of masculinity, they establish a patriarchal lineage both in terms of their ideas regarding socialization and their own artistic community. The play of genders evident in McCarthy’s earlier performances has fallen away and has thus been replaced by the father-and-son dynamic of his subsequent works. The videos, which picture socialization and relationships of influence occurring between males, serve as a foil to the possibility of a feminist influence on these artists. The premise of Family Tyranny/Cultural Soup originated with McCarthy, though the dialogue and actions were unscripted and involved Kelley’s input/collaboration. The video’s approach to family dynamics is emblematic both of later, more fully elaborated collaborations such as Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media Engram-Abreation Release Zone (1992) (discussed in the conclusion) and their omission of mothers, mirroring the critical neglect of the maternal line.

A BELLICOSE BACKDROP: ESSENTIALIST DEBATES AND THE SEX AND CULTURE WARS

One reason for the persistent absence of feminist sources in the discourse on Kelley may be the association between feminist art and essentialism that he made in several interviews. In the 1990s, essentialism was still such a source of conflict that many in the art world would have disavowed feminism in order to avoid its taint. Kelley appropriated the cultural discourse on essentialism, and the avoidance it inspired, to enact

277 In particular, The Garden (1991-92) is a Disney-like animatronic scene that features a father who has taken the son into the woods to pass down the tradition of masturbation, here staged as a desecration of nature.
a hedging of his relationship to feminist art practices, specifically craft. In a 1994 interview with Robert Storr, Kelley made what appear to be deliberately provocative statements regarding the two:

When I first did it, it was as a reaction to essentialist feminist art. Not to put it down, but to say, “What if I do this, then what happens?” I’ve been accused of being just another man co-opting women’s art. Well, I refuse to say that knitting is only for women. That’s sexist. It’s just as much mine as theirs, because whether it’s men or women who are supposed to knit is totally random.

While his comment on the putatively arbitrary assignment of craftwork to women acknowledged the social construction of gender, the statement unhinges craft from its history and its recuperation as a feminist artistic practice that has social, political, and aesthetic implications. In his 2013 book, Cary Levine implies that Kelley’s “refusal to adhere to a single theoretical position” provided him “with a decidedly different methodology than those who advance predetermined positions that reduce human

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278 Phelan’s discussion of the “lag time” between the ascendancy of theory in art and academia in the 1980s and its denunciation of artworks and rhetoric issuing from the 1970s is relevant here. She writes, “But the lag time is crucial to the accusation, both in its content and in its desire to be distant from and superior to ‘feminist essentialists’. The accusation, in other words, has a quality of Freudian afterwardness about it, suggesting that there may have been something traumatic in the original source.” Phelan, “Survey,” 37.


280 Gayatri Spivak conceived of the politically tactical value of essentialism with her term “strategic essentialism.” Strategic essentialism presumes a critique of essentialism while temporarily occupying named subject positions that have political stakes. She writes, “The strategic use of an essence as a mobilizing slogan or master word like woman or worker or the name of the nation is, ideally, self conscious for all mobilized.” Gayatri Spivak, “In a Word: Interview,” in Outside in the Teaching Machine (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1-24.
behavior and experience to overly simplistic categories.” While Levine did not specify who “those” refer to, only a few pages latter he provides a discussion of 1970s feminist art that focuses on a critique of feminist essentialist art. Levine’s notion of feminist art is reductive; he focuses on artists and works that have been deemed essentialist by others (such as Judy Chicago) and neglects both the wide range of feminist practices and the ideas that informed them. He follows Kelley’s own dismissal of feminist art as exclusively essentialist, which it seems gives him permission to deny the extent of its impact on McCarthy and Kelley and construct the two as the consummate challenger to normative gender categories. According to Levine Kelley is precisely what feminist art is not—edgy, complex, cool, innovative, mobile, certainly not didactic—creating a false set of hierarchical binaries that denigrates the one and champions the other.

The meanings of the term “essentialism” have shifted over time, though it generally connotes a causal relationship between the biological body and gender, and a belief in the unique and to some degree universal experience of women due to their shared biology. By the 1980s essentialism was under fire in both the art world and academia, as many argued that locating women’s essence in the body maintained the image and status of women in the dominant culture and disallowed political and structural change. The apogee of the polarization between essentialist and social

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281 Levine, Pleasures, 191.

282 Levine does acknowledge that the “essentialism” is not the only approach to feminism, it is, however the only one he discusses. For example, he describes the Feminist Art Program as having a “rigid and programmatic approach,” and criticizes the subject of women’s experiences as “presented monolithically – as a preordained set of ‘female experiences’ allegedly had by all.” Ibid., 195.

constructionist positions occurred in 1987 at the symposium “The Great Goddess Debate: Spirituality vs. Social Practice in Recent Feminist Art,” at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, during which some of the participants, such as Nancy Spero, were blindsided by attacks on essentialism. More recently, art historians such as Helen Molesworth and Peggy Phelan have revisited the debate in order to deflate the intensity of the polarization; as a result, works that had been previously neglected by art history have been revalidated.\(^{284}\) These efforts accompanied an earlier theoretical resuscitation of various concepts of essentialism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Feminist theorists Diana Fuss, Naomi Schor, Elizabeth Wood, and Theresa de Lauretis, among others, refuse to correlate essentialism with biologism. Offering instead arguments based on John Locke’s distinction between real and nominal essentialisms, Fuss rejects the binary distinction between essentialism and construction and demonstrates how essentialism is a theoretical necessity for social construction.\(^{285}\) Elizabeth Grosz argues for a kind of nominal essentialism to maintain the category of woman, understood as a political necessity. She argues that “equality feminism” does not account for the historical and social specificity of women, particularly sexual and reproductive issues. She warns that a

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“neutralized social justice … has enabled a number of men to claim that they too are oppressed by patriarchal social roles and are unable to express their more ‘feminine’ side. The struggles of women against patriarchy are too easily identified with a movement against a more general ‘dehumanization’ in which men may unproblematically represent women in struggles for greater or more authentic forms of humanity.”

Kelley’s commentary on essentialism, and a great deal of feminist art along with it, had some strategic value, as taking advantage of the divisive atmosphere in feminist art and theory over the hot-button issue of essentialism in the 1980s and early ’90s. It seems that commentators on Kelley’s work followed suit, avoiding the issue all together. The portrayal of essentialism as odious by some was framed as part of a more sophisticated, and largely academic theorization of subjectivity seeped in post-structuralist and post-modern thought, while for others it was a means of dismissing feminist practices and reflected both a fear of the body and the political and media led backlash against feminism in the 1980s and 90s. While Kelley’s critique of essentialism and its significance to his commentators capitalized on the former, it is worth mentioning the latter as a cultural context for the critical omission of feminism from accounts of *Half a Man*. The turn towards conservative politics in the early 1980s and its denigration of feminism was a harbinger of efforts to undermine the gains of the women’s movement. The negative portrayal of feminism was perpetuated in the mass media by the unceasing association of unsavory stereotypes with feminists, ranging from the man-hating “femi-

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nazi” to the unshaven flaky earth mother, and the plentiful assertions of the death of the women’s movement.287

In the context of debates within feminism during the 1980s and 90s—both those regarding essentialism and those centering on pornography and censorship—and their depiction in the media, it seems silence on the issue of feminism was more cautious, or even shrewd, than either supporting or refuting its impact on any cultural manifestation. Complicating the entanglements of the essentialism debates was the general perception of feminism as complicit with the right wing during the so-called sex and culture wars during the 1980s and 90s.288 The heightened media attention to the movement streamlined representations of feminist activity to create a monolithic picture of the movement as prudish and complicit with the right, which did not reflect the diversity of views of the early iterations of it.289 Popular representations of the anti-pornography

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288 Lisa Duggan dubbed the mid- to late 1980s as an era of the “sex panic,” that took hold of the country during the Meese Comission and fueled the religious right’s attacks on the arts in the late 1980s.288 She identified the political capital conservatives gained from such sex panics when she wrote, “‘moral reforms’ and the like have been the public-relations mask for what is in fact an abnegation of any responsibility to confront and address any real problems, that is, poverty, militarism, sexism, racism.” Duggan, “Sex Panics,” 1989, rpt. in Sex Wars, 75.

289 Historian Carolyn Bronstein argues that both the popular media and the vast body of literature on the anti-pornography movement neglect its early history, with its varied approaches and ideologies, and focus exclusively on Dworkin, MacKinnon, and to a smaller extent, WAP. Bronstein, Battling Pornography, 11.
movement crystallized around select events occurring between 1979 and 1986: the 1979 founding of Women Against Pornography (WAP) which aimed to shift the feminist conversation about violent images of women in the mass media to pornography specifically, as a means to gain more media attention and popular and institutional support; the attempted ban of pornography by select cities based on an ordinance authored by Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin; and the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography, known as the Meese Commission, held in 1985-6.

However, the movement had its origins in local grassroots founded in the mid 1970s in opposition to the media’s promulgation of violent images of women, including the Los Angeles based Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), which did not share a cohesive set of ideas on either exactly what constituted sexualized media violence or how to combat it.\(^\text{290}\)

In 1985, US Attorney General Edwin Meese convened a special commission on pornography that aimed to establish "new ways to control the problem of pornography." The morality-based agenda of the religious right, and its distress over the deterioration of the family, loosened sexual mores, the prevalence of abortion and sex education, (which were expressly blamed on feminism), and homosexuality motivated the formation of the

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\(^\text{290}\) Ibid., 3. Kelley was likely aware of WAVAW because of its lengthy public battles with the recording industry, in support of which Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz created the performance, *Record Companies Drag Their Feet* (1977). In 1976 WAVAW staged a protest against a Sunset Boulevard billboard proclaiming, “I’m Black and Blue from the Rolling Stones and I Love It!” above an image of a scantily clad model, bound by rope and posed spread eagle above an image of the band. In response, Atlantic Records eventually removed the billboard. Ibid., 120.
commission during Ronald Reagan’s second term, as well as its findings. The report’s definition of pornography—that which "is predominantly sexually explicit and intended primarily for the purpose of sexual arousal"—includes almost any material that deals with human sexuality, such as sex education materials and much of the art historical canon. The Commission heard testimony from leaders of anti-pornography groups—including both conservative figures and Dworkin, MacKinnon, and those in leadership positions in WAP—and survivors of abuse identified by and encouraged to participate by WAP. Among its many recommendations, the Commission proposed to tighten existing obscenity laws and increase their enforcement, to lower the standards for determining obscenity in each state, and to prosecute obscenity under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO). Anti-pornography feminists were criticized for their failure to publicly and consistently distance themselves and their positions from those of the Meese Commission.

291 From the outset, Meese’s conservative mandate was clear. Seven of the eleven appointed commissioners were publicly known to support obscenity laws and their implementation. Vance, “Negotiating Sex and Gender in the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography,” 1986, in Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture, ed. Faye Ginsburg and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 120.

292 Vance, “Negotiating Sex,” 123.

293 According to Vance, “Some prominent anti-pornography feminists were willing to understate and most to avoid mentioning in their testimony their support for those cranky feminist demands so offensive to conservative ears: abortion, birth control, and lesbian and gay rights.” Ibid. However, she also reminds the reader that their fundamental commitments are in concert with broader feminist aims such as, “intense opposition to and fervent critique of gender inequality, male domination, and patriarchal institutions, including the family, marriage and heterosexuality.” Ibid., 122.
Though the actual history is complex, many have understood the socio-political conditions surrounding the anti-pornography movement to have enabled the religious right’s campaign against the arts and their funding through the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) of the late 1980s and 90s, which resulted in the NEA pulling funding from an exhibition of Kelley’s work at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in Boston. The first major salvo in the right’s war against the arts was staged in April of 1989, and by October of that year congress had passed the Helms Amendment which prohibited use of NEA funds to “promote, disseminate, or produce obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts.”

While anti-pornography feminists had disassociated themselves from conservative groups by the end of 1986, their association during the Meese Commission still resonated as sexuality continued to be a target of censorship. Lisa Duggan suggested that once these forces were rallied to restrict representations of sexuality, they “felt free to do what the art world thought they would not dare to do. They have directed their anti-porn, antigay fervor at the ‘high,’ the ‘respectable’ arts.” Though Stephen Dubin reported, “Apropos NEA policy, no reason was given for the decision,” NEA chairman John Frohnmeyer rescinded a Museum Program Exhibition Grant from the ICA for a retrospective of his

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295 Duggan, “Sex Wars,” 73. Most of the major conservative figures involved in anti-pornography campaigns advocated for arts censorship, including: Rev. James Dobson and the Focus on the Family; Reverend Donald E. Wildmon and the American Family Association; and Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition.
work. The Director of the ICA, David Ross responded, "During a time when those who would urge the endowment to play the role of ideological censor have been shown to be out of step with mainstream American values, this move by Mr. Frohnmayer seems an unnecessary capitulation to those same reactionary voices." The ICA went forward with Kelley’s exhibition with alternate sources of funding, and though the decision must have had an impact on Kelley, he infrequently commented on it. While Kelley created _Half a Man_ just prior to the right’s public attack on the arts, his statements regarding feminist art largely date to 1993-94 during the exhibition tour of _Catholic Tastes_, and after its defunding by the NEA. It may be that Kelley was responding to the puritanical mood regarding sex, issuing from both the right and left in the early 1990s, and retrospectively linking it back to what he understood as essentialist feminist art through during the feminist anti-pornography movement, which many commenters understood as partially responsible for the contemporary climate.

CRAFT AS CROSS-DRESSING

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296 Dubin speculated that the decision resulted from his works that challenge childhood purity and conflate stuffed animals with sexual poses in Kelley’s _Half a Man_ installation. Dubin, 147.


298 As a result of what she sees as the conservative and feminist anti-pornography movement induced “sex panics” of the 1980s, Nadine Strossen characterizes the early 1990s as a moment in which “fear of sexual expression” hit a fever-pitch. She lists numerous examples of speech about, and literature and visual materials—from the Talmud to sex education materials—representing sex being censored on college campuses to capitulate not necessarily to the right, but to a sense of political correctness. Strossen, _Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women’s Rights_ (New York: Scribner, 1995), 26-29.
Though perhaps issuing from a social context, Kelley’s comments regarding essentialism position his own work in relation to feminist art; he intimated that he was able to overcome that which he criticized precisely because he was a man working with unexpected materials coded as feminine. In an interview from 1992, Kelley described his practice as “working ‘in character’” in order to multiply sites of production and critique the notion of the artist as a “heroic individual.” He explained of his art that, “it’s about posturing. … For example, when I’m a woman, I’m a man playing a woman.” He continued:

When I make a work that adopts feminine cultural clichés, especially the craft related pieces, where I sew or do work that everyone thinks looks like ‘70s feminist work—then I’m in the mindset, at least culturally speaking, of a woman. Or I am perceived as such … without knowing that I made the work, you would say that a woman did it.\textsuperscript{299}

Thus Kelley understood his mode of working as a form of cross-dressing meant to subvert gender roles, and yet he walks a fine line between instrumentalizing craft in a way that loosens assumptions regarding its relationship to gender and eclipses its antecedents.

Kelley envisioned aspects of his artistic practice during the production of \textit{Half a Man} as drag and thus as belonging to a lineage articulated in his lecture “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre,” in which he positioned the practice of drag as the generative source for everything from 1970s feminist performance art to glam rock theatrics.\textsuperscript{300} The lecture charts a succession for gender play and performativity, from Jack Smith and camp

\textsuperscript{299} Kelley, “Talking Failure,” 101.

\textsuperscript{300} Published with a set of footnotes in the \textit{Performing Arts Journal (PAJ)} as Kelley, "Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre."
aesthetics in the 1950s, to Kenneth Anger, to the Living Theatre, and ending up withAlice Cooper, who becomes a new kind of hero in Kelley’s pantheon of cool. Included along the way are the Cockettes (a San Francisco drag troupe whose hippie-inspired performances included men with beards and women); early John Waters films that featuring Divine; Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention; Jim Morrison; the Velvet Underground; Iggy Pop and his band The Stooges; as well as Eleanor Antin and women in the Feminist Art Program. The lecture is an entertaining way to rethink this particular history of mostly musicians, and Kelley takes his pop seriously.\textsuperscript{301}

Written at a time when drag was vaunted as a liberatory model by theoretician Judith Butler, Kelley’s line of descent problematically subsumed 1970s feminist art into the history—his history anyway—of cross-dressing.\textsuperscript{302} Marjorie Garber, who Kelley cites liberally in his essay, warned against categorizing the cross-dresser as properly male or female, insisting instead that this figure be treated as a “third term,” whose power inheres in the undecidability between genders.\textsuperscript{303} However, from Anger to Cooper, Kelley’s history of cross-dressing claims it for men, stressing the adoption of female signifiers by men beginning with hippie culture, long hair and feminine clothing that, to a certain extent, blurred the lines between man and woman. These attributes were able to signify a

\textsuperscript{301} The extensive notes accompanying the republished essay in his collection of writings, \textit{Foul Perfection}, reveal sources ranging from Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp,” to several histories of bands and music scenes, to Marjorie Garber’s well-known study of cross-dressing, \textit{Vested Interests}, to Lucy Lippard and Faith Wilding.

\textsuperscript{302} Widely understood as a celebration of drag as a political mode when \textit{Gender Trouble} (1990) was initially published, Butler’s theory of performativity is more nuanced.

\textsuperscript{303} Marjorie Garber, \textit{Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety} (New York: Routledge, 1992), 10.
new type of masculinity—one that was anti-war and rebelled against the breadwinner role and 1950s conformity—precisely because they held onto their strong associations with femininity.304

According to Kelley, “As ‘transvestite’ counterculture leaves the utopianism of the 1960s behind and enters the economically harsher social climate of the 1970s, two major trends emerge: feminism and punk.” He continued, “In the context of all this female posturing, it only makes sense that female artists would finally demand to play a role.”305 Thus, in addition to neglecting the long history of women in drag, Kelley absorbed persona-based feminist practices into his male-drag-counterculture lineage rather than positing a dynamic relationship between the two. Kelley’s willful misplacement of feminist performances of personae within a lineage of male drag indicates the differences between those practices and his particular understanding of adopting personae and the artist’s role in the reception of the work. Feminist personae often enacted a complex dance between fictive roles, personal identities, and the realities of everyday life for many women in order to comment on the ways in which social constructions of feminine identity and individual lives intersect.306 In contrast, Kelley

304 Additionally, Kelley does not attend much to the associations between drag and homosexuality. In a later interview, he sidesteps the issue altogether, positing that ‘queer’ is an equivalent to the West Coast freak culture of the 1960s and 70s. Kelley, “Mike Kelley: Freak Culture,” 61.


306 See section “Personae: The Primal and The Personal,” in Chapter 1 of this volume, especially discussions of Eleanor Antin’s performances, 32-5.
takes pains to distance himself from his work and has created multiple personae that, by
design, do not reflect a cohesive ideology.  

John Welchman, for one, enumerated several examples of varied manifestations
of the artist on display in the exhibition Catholic Tastes—from “a sonic youth dipped in
Motown freak culture and White Panther anarchism,” and “dissident Cal-Arts art-star,” to
“an ‘absurdly abject’ production priest of yarn-doll pathos” in an essay surveying
Kelley’s work. George Baker began his essay for Kelley’s last retrospective with a
lengthy quote from the artist’s writings and immediately followed up with the statement,
“We don’t know exactly who is speaking, and the words seem a pack of lies…” Kelley
employed different personae as a means to explore a multiplicity of interests but also to
confound his audience, to have them question, as Baker does, both the knowability
behind the entity that utters those statements and their authenticity. While Kelley’s fluid
and detached movement through the personae he adopted at times seems cavalier, by
contrast with the often deeply personal and politically committed feminist practices, his
work aims to uncover glimpses of the social and unconscious constructs that often

Kelley has also referred to the past in order to illustrate how the details of one’s life
can be manipulated in an interpretive context. For example, in 1995 Kelley wrote a text
purportedly on Repressed Memory Syndrome to accompany an exhibition of early
drawings from the 1970s that was motivated by, in his words, “the general tendency for
critics to psychologize my work.” In response he commented that he felt I had to bring
myself into [the work] or make myself part of the subject of the work, in order to
problematize that psychological reading. I had to make it difficult … by giving a lot of
false information.” Kelley, “Mike Kelley,” by Jean-Philippe Antoine, Cahiers de Musée
National d’Art Moderne 73 (Fall 2000), 114. See Kelley, “Missing Time: Works on

Welchman, “Kelles,” 42.

structure systems of belief. However, these intentions come across most strongly in the work itself, and less so through the machinations of the artist’s cross-dressing.

According to Ralph Rugoff, “In part, *Half a Man* is directed against the grandiosity of the artist as cultural hero, epitomized by the transcendent and revolutionary claims made by various twentieth century art movements.”

His characterization of Kelley’s artistic persona as unheroic, signaling the failure of modern art, is based on the installation’s association with feminine attributes, and is thus underwritten by the cultural associations produced by the gender binary that the artists’ brand of cross-dressing is said to disrupt. Rugoff wrote, “By adopting an absurdly abject persona, Kelley dismantled the conventional image of the masculine self, replacing its domination act and sublime theatrics with a playhouse of ineptitude and polymorphous slapstick.”

His claimed substitution of heroic artist with a challenger of that mantle

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310 In a 1994 Kelley revealed that his desire for viewers to question their beliefs, in part motivates his work. “I want people to think about their own belief systems, and the work should be confusing or confrontational enough to cause them to question their own beliefs or at least realize that their own belief system is perhaps an unconscious construct.” Kelley, *Mike Kelley/ Thomas Kellein: Ein Gesprach* (Ostfildern: Cantz Verlag, 1994), 16.

311 For example in *Half a Man*, both the stains and signs of use on the individual stuffed animals, and their allusions to a burgeoning sexuality in *Plush Kundalini*, question the belief in childhood innocence and the ways the expectation of that innocence is signaled to infants by parents and caregivers.

312 Rugoff, “Mike Kelley/2,” 170. This phrasing is common to describe *Half a Man*. In an interview with Kelley, John Miller spoke about how, in the installation, “the normally ‘heroic’ process of making art was reduced to craft.” Mike Kelley, “Mike Kelley,” by John Miller, *Bomb Magazine* (Winter 1992): 26-31.

313 Ibid., 161. Rugoff continues to distinguish Kelley’s cross-dressing from that of Marcel Duchamp’s Rrose Selavy, the paradigmatic example of male avant-garde drag. “Kelley never appears in drag. Instead, he appropriates forms of domestic labor and production traditionally seen as the cultural property of women, bending gender in a more complex
relies on imagining Kelley in the role of one who would craft the “pathetic mementos”—mothers, grandmothers—of crocheted animals and afghans, as well as the “‘girly’ overtones [that] infused much of the work.” Rugoff’s one-to-one association of the traditional craft practices of women with failure and abjection is problematic to say the least, and neglects the feminist craft practices of the 1970s that resuscitated traditional crafts and demonstrated their historical roles in the process of gendering. He partially answers Kelley’s question regarding taking up craft, “What if I do this, then what happens?” In addition to other possible effects, Rugoff’s interpretation has *Half a Man* maintaining the association of craft with women with an inferior status to men, as he intones that the feminine nature of craft erodes masculinity; in this way, the creation of the new category of “pathetic masculinity” actually maintains the gender binary order, albeit with a new inflection.

The performative approach to gender put forth in “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre,” and used as an interpretive framework by critics like Rugoff, varies from the concept of drag put forth by Judith Butler, the preeminent theorist of performativity in the 1990s. For Butler, the repetition of these acts is not only the means by which norms are imprinted on the body and the psyche, it is also the key to the subversion of these norms. In order for drag to be successfully subversive, its practice must not only draw

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314 Ibid.

315 “The compulsion to repeat an injury is not necessarily the compulsion to repeat the injury in the same way or to stay fully within the traumatic orbit of that injury. The force of repetition in language may be the paradoxical condition by which a certain agency—not linked to a fiction of the ego as master of circumstance—is derived from the impossibility of choice.” Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 124.
attention to gender as a process, demonstrating it to be other than natural, it must also resignify the mechanisms of this process. Butler argues:

Drag is not unproblematically subversive. It serves as a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure. But there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion. Heterosexuality can augment its hegemony through its denaturalization, as when we see denaturalizing parodies that reidealize heterosexual norms without calling them into question.

Additionally, the hegemonic appropriation of newly figured expressions of gender is also a component of gender as a process, but it is one that doubles back on itself to ensure hegemonic gender binaries expressed though norms that appear to be natural and originary.

For Kelley, art is “about posturing,” but how that posturing coincides with gender politics is more complicated than the notion that dressing up and acting out can disrupt deeply entrenched gender codes. The framing of craft as a form of cross-dressing constitutes a reading of gender as a set of attributes that neglects the historical traditions, meanings, and struggles that have given rise to these entrenched associations. His lack of attention to the material conditions of the historical production of crafts and to the political struggles involved in either women artists taking up craft in the 1970s or cross-dressing in the time periods he discusses does not register the systematic nature of oppression based on gender and sexual orientation.

“JUST PATHETIC”

Following Kelley’s lead, Cary Levine identifies the artist’s involvement with crafts as a mode of drag. Influenced by Butler’s theory of performativity, Levine claims that the “power” of Kelley’s craft-based works “depends on its in-between status, on its ridiculous layering of denaturalized and delegitimized gender codes, which precludes the work from functioning as just another example of co-opted femininity shrouded in masculinity.” Levine claims Kelley was able to accomplish this by targeting masculinity via a “dumb brand of humor,” specifically in his series of limp and de-phallicized yarn representations of male genitals entitled *Manly Craft* (1989-90). But is gender-bending alone, or the treatment of masculinity as the butt of a joke, enough to redistribute the power associated with masculinity? The deflation of traditional concepts of masculinity is not necessarily in concert with the specific aims of feminist art that Kelley believed he could trump—that is, the disruption of the binary gender order and the concomitant traits associated with masculinity and femininity that have been naturalized. Regarding the title of *Half a Man*, Ralph Rugoff writes that it “announced the birth of a new persona, the producer of all these pathetic mementos. And it forced you to wonder what exactly comprised the other, deliberately unspecified half of *Half a Man*?” He makes a stab at answering his rhetorical question by posing a series of apparent equivalences, leveling all of the possibilities that are not fully a man: “Was it a woman? Infant? Animal? An undifferentiated blob?” Unable to positively identify what exactly “half a man” is, Rugoff continues, “Whatever the answer … one thing was clear: we were

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317 Levine, “Manly Crafts,” 84.

318 Ibid., 77.

319 Rugoff, “Mike Kelley/2,” 161.
a long way from the ideal of an unambiguous gender order. … But half a man has no place in the official order of things. “Half a man, whatever else it may be (for Kelley it is likely an adolescent boy), signifies a failure to meet the standards of normative masculinity.” The assumption behind much of the criticism of *Half a Man*, and behind Kelley’s own discussions of the work, is that by playing with gender stereotypes and creating artworks that have, according to Rugoff, “‘girly’ overtones,” the work necessarily upsets the normative categories of gender. However, the relationship between play and critique cannot be taken for granted. Simulating a wimp, or even playing at working as a woman, does not necessarily challenge normative masculinity and the system of gender binaries that produces its image. It may even serve to maintain that system even as masculinity finds new modes of expression.

320 Ibid.


322 Kelley’s brand of “pathetic masculinity” may be part of a larger historical trend. Art historian Anna Chave draws a parallel between the anxiety regarding masculinity at the terminus of both the 19th and 20th centuries, problematizing the works chosen to locate the origin of modernism by the curator Kirk Varnedoe at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the art historian T.J. Clark. Both Varnedoe’s and Clark’s choices— accent needed> Cezanne’s *The Bather* and David’s *Death of Marat*, respectively—“foregrounded a pathetic or vulnerable male as the very site of the origin for modernism at moments when masculine privilege faced some degree of challenge or eclipse.” Chave’s argument regarding the very construction of modernist art history resonates with Sally Robinson’s suggestion that claiming victimhood may serve, paradoxically, to centralize one’s position. Anna Chave, “Figuring the Origins of the Modern at the Fin de Siècle: The Trope of the Pathetic Male,” in *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (London: Routledge, 2007), 207-21; Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 10.
Rugoff’s 1990 *Just Pathetic* exhibition signaled a growing trend in art that paralleled the rise of slacker culture, beginning at the tail end of the 1980s and lasting through the mid 1990s. He determined three markers of the pathetic:

First, it exhibits a preference for lowbrow aesthetics and threadbare materials but pointedly avoids dignifying either one as metaphoric or poetic. Second, it veers away from established modes of art production towards a mode of base comedy more often experienced at the back of a school bus. Finally, it makes little or no attempt to align itself with art history, preferring an ephemeral and defensive association with the present.\textsuperscript{323}

Undoubtedly, Kelley was the exhibition’s signal artist, but it also included Pettibon, Miller, Cady Noland, David Hammons, and Jessica Diamond, among others.\textsuperscript{324} For Kelley and his cohorts, the hero has fallen and the loser has taken his place, rather than the perhaps more radical claim that no replacement is necessary, or “we don’t need another hero.”\textsuperscript{325} Their figure of feeble masculinity was seized in adolescence and has abdicated roles of adulthood, whether they be paternal, authoritarian, financial, or sexual. This group’s targeting of the image of American manhood locates them within the context of competing narratives of a ‘crisis of masculinity’ in the postwar U.S.. In the

\textsuperscript{323} Michael Wilson, “Just Pathetic,” *Artforum* (October 2004): 117—19. Catherine Liu’s review of the exhibition articulates a common critique of *Just Pathetic*. She argues that Rugoff “tries to be shamelessly adolescent, voyeuristic, and cynical,” attitudes that mirror those of the artworks included in the exhibition, but that he also establishes his intellectual credentials in his essay via his references to Freud and Sloterdijk. Liu writes, “He obviously wants to have it both ways: he wants to be bad and good at the same time, just as he would have the pathetic fail only to succeed.” Catherine Liu, “*Just Pathetic* at American Fine Arts,” *Artforum* 8 (April 1992): 98.

\textsuperscript{324} Welchman describes Kelley’s work as evincing a “pathetic sublime” in Welchman, “The Mike Kelleys,” 71.

\textsuperscript{325} This phrase is the title of Tina Turner’s title song for the film *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*. In 1986 Barbara Kruger put the phrase to use in a billboard where it appeared over an illustration of a young girl pointing at a boy’s flexed bicep.
wake of youth rebellion culture, the specter of failed manliness attained a kind of obscure cool.

**ADOLESCENCE AND DYSFUNCTIONALITY**

Kelley’s most oft discussed persona is that of the adolescent boy, or in Rugoff’s words, the “supernerd,” a particularly abject formation of male teendom.\(^{326}\) The figure of the pathetic male intersects with Kelley’s own account: “Unlike a lot of the ‘Pictures’ generation, who adopted media personas, I tended to adopt subcultural personas.”\(^{327}\) His obsession with adolescence is in part indicative of the timing of his childhood in the 1950s and early 1960s; not only did the 1950s see the rise of teenagers as a demographic taken seriously for the first time, but it also reared the first generation to plot a large-scale rebellion against maturity.\(^{328}\) However, the teen years are also aligned with a masculinist vision of cool: subcultural, oppositional, nonconformist, anti-domestic, anti-bourgeois, and evasive. Sociologists have recognized that traditionally there is a male bias to subcultures, as they are organized around focal concerns coded as male. The notion of subculture sets in motion an associative chain that links it with boys, defiance, and an idea of cool that persists, albeit to a somewhat lesser degree, in the present.\(^ {329}\) If

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326 Rugoff, “Mike Kelley/2,” 162.


329 Sarah Thornton is one among many who argues for “‘hipness’ as a form of subcultural capital.” Thornton, “The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital,” in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London: Routledge, 1997), 202. Angela McRobbie, a member of the Birmingham School, was an early examiner of gender within the dynamics of subcultures and wrote about how ‘cool’ is produced and received. See Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, “Girls and Subcultures,” 1975, rpt. in *Resistance...*
subcultures are arenas in which iterations of cool are produced and played out, they have also traditionally been inaccessible to women, who have been relegated to serving as sex objects, or entirely excluded.\textsuperscript{330} Kelley’s emphasis on his subcultural influences paints him as a bad-boy outsider (despite his full compliance with art institutions such as schools, galleries, and museums), an image that functions as a means of escape from art historical sources, including feminist art in particular. Particularly during the early 1990s, there are several female artists who could serve as counterparts to Kelley’s “bad boy” art media persona, such as Karen Finley, Cheryl Donegan, or several of the artists included in the 1994 exhibition \textit{Bad Girls} at the New Museum.\textsuperscript{331} In contrast to the approbation of Kelley’s coolness, generally speaking, the reaction to the artistic practices of these women ran hot. The leading sources of their perceived transgressions arose either from the continued ability of the nude female body to shock audiences or from the emotional tenor of their work, or both.\textsuperscript{332} Finley, for instance, was known in the 1980s and 1990s

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\textsuperscript{330} McRobbie and Garber’s groundbreaking study pointed to the invisibility of girls and women in studies of subcultures due to both bias (the values of the researchers reflected in their subjects) and the social restrictions placed on girls’ leisure activities due to social taboos (i.e. girls hanging out on street corners would receive unsavory and irreversible reputations). Rather, they looked at the activities of teenage girls within domestic setting, such as Teeny Bopper culture and found it to “symbolise [sic] a future general subordination—as well as a present one.” Ibid., 221.

\textsuperscript{331} The exhibition was generated by Marcia Tucker and Marcia Tanner, who wrote about the then trend among certain women artists who made art that was “irreverent, anti-ideological, non-doctrinaire, non-didactic, unpolemical, and thoroughly unladylike.” Tanner, “Preface,” \textit{Bad Girls} (New York: The New Museum), 10.

\textsuperscript{332} For post-war lineages of transgressive women artists, see Jo Anna Isaak, \textit{Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter} (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2007), and Leslie C. Jones, “Transgressive Femininity: Art and
for performances in which she confronted the audience with vituperative monologues on topics ranging from rape and incest to the bankruptcy of the ‘American dream’, while her nude body was smeared in food stuffs (liverwurst, ice cream and yams in 1986’s Yams and My Granny’s Ass, and chocolate in We Keep Our Victims Ready from 1989, and her 1998 follow-up Return of the Chocolate Woman). The shock factor of her performances was widely commented on in the media, which portrayed her as the art world’s ultimate “bad girl.” While Kelley’s use of humor worked to, among other things, distance his works from both the political and personal, work by Finley and other women instrumentalized the provocative in order to express their emotional—often angry and generally very individual—responses to American politics.

While Kelley himself avoided mentioning the term cool (to do so would be to relinquish any association with it), the subcultural references he made are definite signifiers of it, resulting in many critics framing Kelley as the ultimate cool artist. While part of the appeal of the category of cool is that it supposedly eludes definitions (you

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Gender in the Sixties and Seventies,” in Abject art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 33-57. The conclusion of this volume considers select contemporary women artists who may (albeit awkwardly) be considered the progeny of Kelley and the 90s Bad Girls.

Finley was one of the famed “NEA Four,” also including Holly Hughes, Tim Miller and Fleck, who had their NEA performance grants rescinded by John Frohnmayer in 1990 due to supposedly obscene content. See Dubin, Arresting Images, 149-54.

In addition to the binary between cool and emotional that differentiates the practices and reception of transgressive female artists and heterosexual male artists at this time, is the supposed binary between the body and the intellect. The most cogent example of work addressing the latter dates back to Carolee Schneemann’s Interior Scroll (1975), in which she recounts her dismissal by a structuralist filmmaker (read: serious intellectual) as a dancer (read: a woman driven by her body rather than mind) rather than a filmmaker, while slowly pulling an intricately folded, written screed from her vagina. The full text appears in Carolee Schneemann: Imaging Her Erotics (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 159-60.
know when you see it), several studies of “cool” published since the 1990s understand the category to hinge on positions of rebellion and detachment. The authors of *Cool Rules*, who frame cool as a “cultural category” and even as “the dominant ethic” of the current generation of youth, are given to florid descriptions:

Cool is a rebellious attitude, an expression of a belief that the mainstream mores of your society have no legitimacy and do not apply to you. It’s a self-contained and individualistic attitude, although it places high value on friendship within a tightly defined peer group—indeed it strives to displace traditional family ties, which are too intimate and intrusive to allow sufficient space for self-invention.

The anti-domestic and anti-sentimental pose of cool is continually defined in opposition to the traditional physical and emotional spaces of femininity, precisely those spheres recuperated by feminist art in the 1970s.

In his study of 1950s youth culture and its attendant representations of delinquency, James Gilbert wrote, “teenagers, by erecting barriers of fashion and custom around adolescence, had walled off a secret and potentially antagonistic idea of American culture.” Likewise, Kelley conceived of the teen years as a time when it is possible to


336 Pountain and Robins, *Cool Rules*, 22. In describing the (seemingly) changing nature of cool, they write, “Government health warnings notwithstanding, Cool is still in love with cigarettes, booze, and drugs. It now admits women, but it also loves violence more than it used to.” Ibid., 12. That is to say its penchant for violence ensures that cool remains masculine, despite the presence of some exceptional women within its purview.

break through the screen of normalization, when antisocial behaviors and eccentric interests arise. Susan Faludi holds a less romantic view of the teen years, suggesting that “maybe the culture was walling off the teenagers,” creating a new demographic to which new commodities could be marketed.\textsuperscript{338} The dominant reading of adolescence understands it as a period of minor rebellions that evidence the complex dynamic of youngsters’ simultaneous wish and reluctance to separate completely from their parents and interpolate themselves fully within society and its norms. Thus the insubordination that seems like a tear in the façade of normalization is actually part of its process. Given this, Kelley’s vision of adolescence as outside of normalization has an element of the utopic about it, despite his general denigration of that concept.\textsuperscript{339}

Kelley’s craft projects foreground gendered identity as an issue that complicates much of his work on adolescence, an age that interests him as a moment of rupture in the institution of normative modes of being that take root in infancy. In the way it sets infantile conglomerations of stuffed animals alongside works that refer to distinctly female and male teenage producers, \textit{Half a Man} stages processes of development, normalization, and deviance simultaneously. With the felt banners dispersed throughout \textit{Half a Man}, Kelley also employed craft to generate a perverse male teenage persona, a celebration of the sometimes base nature of male adolescence that lacks a critical voice.


\textsuperscript{339} For Kelley’s rejection of the notion of utopia, see Sussman, “Introduction,” 27.
If this figure was supposed to serve as a counterpoint to the heroism of hegemonic masculinity under modernism, Tania Modleski and Barbara Ehrenreich argued that by the late 1980s, normative masculinity had already absorbed into its image an adolescent manifestation. Modleski identifies regression as a cultural trend that took hold in the 1980s and had negative implications for feminism. She cites Ehrenreich’s study of the expectations that defined manhood in the postwar period, *The Hearts of Men*, to chart the radical shift from the breadwinner role of the early 1950s, in which manhood was defined by fatherhood, to a set of ideas about masculinity in the 1980s that eschewed such responsibilities. Ehrenreich details society’s expectations surrounding manhood as they shifted from providing for one’s family and being a role model for one’s children to the search for a vaguely defined personal fulfillment influenced by ’60s rebellion and gestalt psychology. She designates this trend a “male revolt,” which Modleski understands as underlying the “infantilization phenomena” she identifies at work in popular culture productions, such as the movie *Big* (1988) and the television show *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse* (which ran on Saturday mornings on CBS from 1986 to 1990), that reverse the roles of boys and men. The narratives contained within both the film and television show, she argues, mirror the frequent construction of American masculinity “at the edge of the territory of the child, the very territory Huck Finn ‘lit out’ for, while women have typically represented the repressive forces of civilized, adult society—that which man rejects in order to live out his perpetual youth.”

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342 Ibid., 99.
In a brief satirical reflection on the construction of gender, Judith Keegan Gardiner points to the relationship between new strategies for maintaining male privilege and the “teening of America.” She identifies new types of normative masculinity that are able to retain its privileges while adjusting for shifts in ideologies of equality: the Superstar, the Slacker, the Thug, and the Cyberinforcer.\(^{343}\) While women can ascribe to any of these types, they are typically figured in popular culture as male and adolescent (i.e. they are presented without the typical responsibilities associated with adulthood—marriage, children, regular jobs, etcetera) and are inhabited in real life by men. These classifications have developed as part of “the reconfiguration and regendering of age categories,” a trend that “extends the imagery and lifestyle of adolescence throughout the age span, simultaneously promoting consumption for both genders and reinforcing gender differences.”\(^{344}\) Gardiner highlights the importance of reinforcing the split between genders at “the age of maximum gender differentiation,” adolescence.\(^{345}\) The immature slacker, characterized by his hip consumer choices, becomes a new measure of normality, and the notion of ‘cool’—whether in the sense of being aloof or hip—becomes


\(^{344}\) Ibid. In his book addressing youth culture from the 1970s to the present, historian Ryan Moore writes of a consumerist target audience-type demographic of males, a new category of masculinity, “the mook,” who is associated with adolescence, but whose age category exceeds the teen years. “The mook is not just antiauthority, but antisocial, evading responsibility by playing dumb … The man in the gray flannel suit has been replaced by the boy in the backward baseball cap.” Moore, *Sells like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 57.

\(^{345}\) Ibid.
another great divide between genders (in this new order women continue to represent the home and act as pillars of responsibility).

If Kelley saw adolescence as a disruption of the socialization process of maturation, Gardiner argues that this rupture has been co-opted by new formations of hegemonic masculinity. In this case, Kelley is complicit in producing the pathetic male as another category of masculinity that functions to maintain hierarchical power. Both Modleski and Kelley critique the myth of childhood innocence; for Modleski, the man-child reversals depend on this fiction, while for Kelley the myth represented the early straightjackets of civilization. The regression at play in *Half a Man* captures Kelley’s nostalgic view of adolescence as a time when it is possible to disrupt processes of normalization and socialization. However, his vision of teenage rebellion as a disturbance of the normative order is possible only if the teenager’s development is arrested in youth, becoming the Jungian *puer aeternus*, the “pure male adolescent spirit” or the “boy forever.” Otherwise, adolescent resistance to the plot of socialization is quickly relegated to a brief chapter in one’s life, even if one maintains the consumption patterns and aesthetics of teenagers throughout their lives. In this regard, adolescence can be read as a developmental *chari vari*, a reversal of order necessary to maintaining that order. For

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346 Kelley may be as oblivious to this as he is to the plight of women artists. In his interview with Lynn Hershman, Kelley acknowledges that in the past women had difficulty showing their work, but goes on to say, “But now I don’t see that, I see at least on the surface just as many women showing as men.” Kelley, “!*Women Art Revolution: Interview,*” unpaginated. In actuality, according to the National Museum of Women in the Arts and the Guerrilla Girls, in 2012, “*Though women earn more than 1/2 of the MFAs granted in the US, only 1/3 of gallery representation is women.*” [http://www.nmwa.org/advocate/get-facts](http://www.nmwa.org/advocate/get-facts), last accessed September 9, 2012.

Kelley, subcultures function as a means of expression for this adolescent possibility of disordering normative culture. The convergence of adolescence and the realm of subculture is, however, more complicated. While subcultures are often “envisaged as disenfranchised, disaffected and unofficial,” according to sociologist Sarah Thornton, youthful defiance is often a temporary pose, a posturing that is part of the process of socialization. Furthermore, Kelley’s focus on the figure of the rebellious teenage boy and the construction of cool aligned with it at once takes part in and produces a binary logic that opposes women (and girls) and cool. Discussing the anti-maternal bent of this particular cipher of cool, Susan Fraiman writes:

> Within this structure of feeling, the feminine is maternalized and hopelessly linked to stasis, tedium, constraint, even domination. Typed as “mothers,” women become inextricable from a rigid domesticity that bad boys are pledged to resist and overcome. A defining quality of coolness then, is that a posture of flamboyant unconventionality coexists with highly conventional views of gender—is, indeed, articulated through them.

Deploying this logic of cool in *Half a Man*, Kelley voided feminism as a possible source for his own work, framing it as essentialist, conventional, and even conservative. In doing so, he (albeit not single-handedly) poisoned the wellspring, marking feminist art as an undesirable association for artists aspiring to follow in his footsteps.

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349 Fraiman, *Cool Men*, xii. Fraiman’s project is of particular interest to my thoughts on Kelley. Her book aims to “make the logic of coolness visible as a political contradiction,” in the work of filmmakers and intellectuals—including Quentin Tarantino, Spike Lee, Andrew Ross, Edward Said and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—known for their “opposition to ideological norms.” Ibid., xiii. She concludes her study by sketching out an “antidote to coolness”: “Instead of this contempt for the mother as uncool, I want to question a masculinity overinvested in youth, fearful of the mutable flesh, and on the run from intimacy. … I want the decline of the domestic as separate, inherently female sphere and the vindication of domesticity as an ethic, an affect, an aesthetic, and a public.” Ibid., 158.
In addition to the teenager, Kelley uses the figure of the (boy-like) wimp as another means to attempt to circumvent normative masculinity. The character of the wimp had a specific sociopolitical context in the mid-1980s, involving much-publicized concerns about the ongoing “crisis in masculinity”; primarily, whether heteronormative masculinity and its attendant privileges were in danger of dissolution. \(^{350}\) The sociologist Michael Kimmel draws attention to a “virtual Great American Wimp Hunt” prevalent throughout the 1980s, a trend of revolt against the “sensitive New Age guy” heralded in the 1970s for his repudiation of aggressive heteronormative masculinity and his sympathy with the civil rights and women’s movements. \(^{351}\) The existence of such a crisis continues to be debated; figures as disparate as leaders of masculinist men’s movements and certain feminist journalists number among those who affirm it, while many feminists within academia and representatives from the pro-feminist men’s movement have argued against it. \(^{352}\)


\(^{352}\) Robert Bly was the leader of the mythopoetic men’s movement. The theme of laying the blame for the inability of men to connect with their masculinity at the feet of dominant mothers and emotionally absent fathers reappears throughout his book *Iron*
Regardless of the validity of the concept of the crisis, the exigency of representing masculinity remains a vital issue for feminism. Understanding the concept of “crisis” as a rhetorical strategy allows for the necessary analysis of its effects. As Modleski argues, “however much masculinity may be ‘in crisis’ … we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it.”\textsuperscript{353} Sally Robinson also understands the need to not dispute the existence of the crisis, but rather to attend to its effects, particularly the shifting terrain of who controls the definition of society’s norms. “A crisis is real,” she argues, “when its rhetorical strategies can be discerned and its effects charted.”\textsuperscript{354} According to Robinson, the mode of “crisis” has become a convention for representing masculinity and its cultural shifts—moments of both fortification and resignification.\textsuperscript{355} Gardiner warns of the reliance on the concept of crisis within pro-feminist masculinity studies, arguing that it has become so pervasive in the study of “the psychology of the masculine subject and in the history of American masculinities that it becomes normal and exculpatory.”\textsuperscript{356} The ‘blame’ for both the anxiety over shifts in masculinity and the uneven distribution of power among different genders, races, and sexualities that heteronormative masculinity produces is displaced


\textsuperscript{353} Modleski, \textit{Feminism without Women}, 7.

\textsuperscript{354} Robinson, \textit{Marked Men}, 10.

\textsuperscript{355} Ibid., 10-11.

from the men affected by the crisis and aimed at diffuse and nebulous targets like their fathers, the expansion of global capitalism, and so forth.

Robinson provides a cogent study of the discourse of victimization and how white men have used it to their advantage. She explains that, with the advent of identity politics, those with serious grievances, generally with white men, found a place at the nucleus of culture, while identity politics began to rename the normative. In order to maintain their cultural centrality and “negotiate [their] position within the field of identity politics,” Robinson argues, “white men must claim a symbolic disenfranchisement, must compete with others for the cultural authority bestowed upon the authentically disempowered, the visibly wounded.” According to Robinson, white masculinity attains its cultural visibility through its representation as victimized, through the vulnerability of the white male body. This focus on the “emotional wounds” of manhood again spotlights the individual and obscures the institutional privilege of white men, whether they appear soft, broken, wimpy, or otherwise.

KELLEY’S AUTHORITARIAN AMBIGUITY

*Half a Man* was often interpreted as expressing traumatic events of abuse in Kelley’s youth, which prompted him to write and speak extensively about his work in order to correct misconceptions and ultimately redirect its reception. In a 1993 interview, Kelley complained, “I was sick of everybody psychologizing these stuffed animals. No matter what I did and no matter how many cues I gave, instead of looking at them

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critically, everybody just sank to the level of baby talk.” What is lacking in the interpretations he cited is the transition from a strictly psychological analysis of the work to one that considers how biography is structured within the social field, a key component of feminist politics. In a later interview, Kelley reflected:

I’ve always had an aversion to works that were overtly biographical. However, I’m not as against that now as I used to be. Having rethought the issue through the ‘personal is political’ politics of feminism, I now accept that you can’t separate the biographical, or personal, from the social … I want the focus to be more on social reception. So that’s why in these projects I introduce an element of fantasy or nonsense that tempers the strictly biographical.

In response to the queries into Kelley’s personal life, he began to fabricate a biography for the producer of his works, working with his personal life “as a kind of fiction.” By introducing fantasy and mitigating the role of biography, a key aspect of how much ’70s feminist art functioned as political, Kelley appropriated materials and strategies from feminist art, while holding the content of its politics at arm’s length. Sifting through the mass of interviews of Kelley and his own writings, has shown that in creating his own subcultural lineage, he closed off alternate varied interpretations. Additionally, all too often, critics and curators have followed one of his leads and run with it. Kelley was an arbiter of what was ‘cool’ and ‘uncool’—essentialism, for example, was deemed tedious and easy to dismiss—while flaunting his hip, outside-the-art-world interests. Kelley

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359 Mike Kelley, “Mike Kelley in Conversation with Matthew Higgs,” in *Roni Horn, Ann Veronica Janssens, Mike Kelley, Mike Nelson* (San Francisco: CCAC Wattis Institute, 2003), 78.

played coy with his readers/viewers, drawing them in with his often obscure references and seductive way of revealing his motives, and yet withholding his ultimate design, as the artist becomes the source of meaning or non-meaning.

Kelley’s complicated, push-and-pull relationship with feminist art suggests that there is something at stake for him in his turn to it at the moment that he becomes involved with themes of identity formation. In several of his craft works, especially More Love Hours and Craft Morphology Flow Chart, Kelley displayed stuffed animals in various configurations that recall established practices of Abstract Expressionism and Conceptual art. He positioned the development of his artistic identity within these lineages, even as he simultaneously ridiculed them, eliding their strategies with materials coded as feminine. Kelley manipulated craft to mount an oedipal rebellion against Conceptual art, the dominant movement at the time of his education at Cal Arts. For Kelley, feminist art seemed to offer a way out of the anxiety of influence, and yet prompted a distress of its own; his fusing of autobiography with authorship resulted in an intentional misreading of feminism. If feminist art radiated a field of effects that ultimately disturbed the role of the male artist, then Kelley’s authorial control of his work attempted to reassert this role.

Kelley’s deployment of cool belies the personal stake in his work—a desire for mastery—while contrasting with feminist artists’ heightened political investments. His critique of feminist essentialism is also a condemnation of emotional and political passions in favor of an ironic detachment. Kelley’s response to the effects of feminist art on his own work can be characterized as equivocation, both in terms of how he sets up individual themes in his work—family dynamics, victimization, autobiography—and
how he frames feminism’s possible influence. Kelley acknowledged the ‘firstness’ of feminist art’s use of craft objects and its exploration of the dynamic between the social and the personal. However, he perceived the position from which he commented on gender to be more objective than that of feminist artists. Kelley used his self-generated identity as a cool outsider to frame often times contradictory messages about feminist art that positioned him outside of and above the fray—the fray here being the commitment to political struggles that underwrites feminist art of any era.

In Half a Man, Kelley constructed his fantastical feminine personas from the same craft materials as his artworks. They are intended to defy biography while demonstrating the social ramifications of identities structured by the family dynamic. Despite the interest Kelley and his critic-cohorts had in what they called his “gender-bending,” they repositioned a binary system of gender in which Kelley’s activities of “working as a woman” are framed as performing a ‘pathetic’ masculinity. Kelley’s role-playing corresponds to Linda Hutcheon’s characterization of modern parody, in The Theory of Parody, as an “ironic inversion” of an original text, a “repetition with a critical distance, which marks the difference rather than the similarity,” but that need not mock the original.361 Kelley intended the inversion played out in Half a Man to be double: a male artist playing with crafts to challenge both the antiquated tradition of high art produced by men and women’s claim to specific art forms and practices. Rather than mockery, Kelley’s tone was one of amused distance, providing a cool stance from which to provide correctives to what he saw as the essentialism of the 70s feminist iteration of

craft. Kelley’s critique encodes feminism as retrograde, even conservative in comparison to his own tactics of gender play. Though in doing so he may have been informed by the involvement by certain anti-pornography feminists in the 1980s with the right, the craft-based feminist art he comments on largely dates to the previous decade.

Despite Kelley’s claims of “working as a woman,” his methods are distinct from a practice of cross-dressing in which the practitioner takes up a position that exceeds the masculine, rather than reducing it to ‘half a man.’ For Marjorie Garber, the most important aspect of cross-dressing is its challenge to binary categories of male and female.\(^\text{362}\) While this speaks to the kind of gender bending Kelley advocated in his “Cross-Dressing/Cross-Culture” lecture, perhaps a more pointed question in determining whether Kelley’s drag in *Half a Man* is successful, whether it does the work he claimed for it, is whether the performative role he assumed as the creator of his craft works in fact resignifies categories of gender.\(^\text{363}\) The precise ways in which Kelley claimed to confuse gender rely on and, in some cases, duplicate established binarized gender roles; his association with specific craft materials and themes established by feminist artists is construed as producing a failed masculinity, and the cultural assumptions regarding craft materials and processes are left unchallenged. Kelley’s personas—the teenage girl of the *Nature and Culture* chest or the crocheting grandmother—are not allowed to take on lives of their own, nor are they embodied in Kelley, but remain a set of circumscribed yet free-floating signifiers that (re)constitute the binary model of genders. Kelley’s easy

\(^{362}\) Garber, *Vested Interests*, 10.

\(^{363}\) Even Judith Butler, who advocated for the liberatory politics of drag, warns that parody is not disruptive in and of itself, and that a more effective model is resignification in the shifting terrain of associations and connections. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 175.
donning of feminine archetypes relied precisely on the cultural constructions of gender he has opposed elsewhere; the feminine personas he inhabited artistically retain their associations to stereotypical feminine roles. The crocheters are mothers or grandmothers with too-high expectations and rigid demands for their children. The teeny-bopper girl spends her time flipping through fashion magazines, dwelling on and desiring the perfection of the body parts within. The male personas—a teenage boy and the artist himself—are portrayed as rebellious in their embrace of deviance and wimpy behavior, which may temporarily frustrate, but does not necessarily thwart dominant masculinity.³⁶⁴ Moments of possibility do, however, exist in *Half a Man*, as when Kelley draws attention to the polymorphous desires of infants and discusses parents’ projections onto their children, which include the fulfillment of normative gender roles. However, for Kelley to truly “work as a woman,” a resignification of the craft idiom needed to occur, and Kelley would have had to relinquish his mastery over the interpretation of his work, and become “otherwise,” to exceed and rework the norm.³⁶⁵ The works included in *Half a Man* betray a complicated relationship to feminist art, one that includes both strategic appropriation and disavowal, and ultimately expresses an extreme ambivalence.

³⁶⁴ In an interview in 2000, Kelley spoke of his early art school refusal to make “I beam sculpture” and his participation in ceramics classes. “If you had any kind of political consciousness, you simply had to refuse to play out these clichés. So when I hear all this bullshit about my work impinging on the territory of women, I see that as simply supporting the kind of socially proscribed roles that I was fighting against, even as a teenager.” Kelley, “Mike Kelley: Freak Culture,” 61.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s Robert Gober’s sculptures explored the domestic domain; the readings they elicited hovered around the mechanisms by which subjectivities and identities are acquired within that site. Despite feminist art’s investigation of the domestic and familial sphere as the site of identity formation in the 1970s, Gober’s work from this period is often framed in ways that neglect its connections to feminism. Notwithstanding its iconographic language of the everyday, the word that is perhaps most often used to describe Gober’s imagery is “enigmatic.” His reputation for evoking dark and cryptic narratives through the repetition of resolutely ordinary objects, such as sinks and doors, usually ties him to the lineages of Surrealism and Minimalism. While domestic objects abounded in the so-called commodity sculpture of the 1980s, and Gober was included at that time in several group shows with Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach, the ways in which his work is easily set apart from those artists—his sculptures’ intimate manufacture by hand and their evocations of both deep and mundane meanings—evinces relationships between it and feminist art.

This chapter will focus principally on a close reading of Gober’s 1989 installation at the Paula Cooper Gallery (fig. 36, 37), as well as work related to that project, as a form of stage set for an inquiry into the family drama and the formation of subjectivity within the domestic sphere. The installation consisted of two conjoined rooms, each covered in
wallpaper featuring motifs subversive to the decorative medium: male and female genitalia in one room and alternating images of a sleeping white man and a lynched black man in the other. The wallpaper patterns worked to frame handcrafted sculptures within the separate rooms—a life-sized wedding dress, several sacks of kitty litter, a paper bag containing donuts, and drains penetrating the walls—and provided cross-connections between them. This installation was a culmination of Gober’s carefully developed interrogation of the imbrication of the physical and psychic elements of the home. Often in his work, and in that of his feminist predecessors, the domestic is figured as a cage, a complex space where desires are both produced and restricted. Gober’s implementation of household iconography and the handmade nature of his sculptures are resonant with the domestic and identity-based themes and processes at play in a great deal of feminist art, much of which utilized craft techniques. Similar to a generation of women artists producing such work during the formative period of Gober’s artistic life—the 1970s—he mined this intersection of subject matter and process to explore subjectivity and the way identity is assumed and lived out within the domestic sphere.

Gober’s 1989 installation featured compelling imagery (such as of the sleeping man and a wedding dress) and emphasized its roles in the maintenance of heteronormative ideologies that, Gober suggests, begin at home. The installation was structured by a series of strange pairings of images that, in their juxtapositions, encouraged the viewer to discard the typical and tired associations that such images carry. For example, the relation between the wallpaper’s white sleeping man and the spectral bride was triangulated in complex, and not always obvious, ways by the appearance of the lynched black man, creating a confusion of race, sex and gendered roles and identities.
that shows the categories of male/female, white/black, straight/gay, public/private to be always already contaminated.

Gober’s affinity with feminism is notable also in his writing and curatorial practices, which engage with his artwork and shed light on its individual, social, and artistic contexts. Gober’s 1989 essay “Cumulus from America” opens a dialogue between art, interior life, and the social sphere that reflects a feminist motto, “the personal is the political,” which could also said to be mirrored in his Paula Cooper installation of that year.\textsuperscript{366} The covert narratives hinted at in the installation appeared to belong to the conventional private sphere, however Gober’s mixing of domestic imagery and its associations revealed a certain interweaving of private and public spheres, encouraging a dialogue between personal interpretation and the expansive social field that shapes it.\textsuperscript{367} The “Cumulus” essay reveals how mundane episodes from his everyday life were imbued with the effects of the AIDS crisis and its representations in social and political fields. His is a sophisticated use of the concept that “the personal is political.” Rather than present a straightforward connection to Gober’s autobiography and individual experiences, his installation encouraged multiple readings and identifications generated by an immediate and affective relationship between the viewer and the associations she or he conjures. His hesitancy to comment directly on his autobiography, both in his work and in interviews, perhaps emerged from the presentation of an identity troubled by the


\textsuperscript{367} When asked whether the narrative unfolding of his work has a personal aspect, Gober responded: “You try to place it within a larger consciousness; you try to place it within perhaps an historical perspective, a broader American view. But, definitely, it’s always a personal narrative.” Robert Gober, “Robert Gober,” interview by Craig Gholson, \textit{BOMB Magazine} 29 (Fall 1989): 34.
very social and political contexts the work referred to, specifically that of being a gay man during the emergence of the AIDS epidemic and the Reagan administration, with its conservative and regressive social policies masquerading as support for family values.

Gober’s curatorial practice evidenced his delineation of a group of artists with whom he shares family resemblances. In the 1999 group show he curated at Matthew Marks Gallery (fig. 38), Gober included Joan Semmel and Nancy Shaver, two feminist artists whose work he first encountered in the 1970s, along with Anni Albers, Robert Beck, and Cady Noland. Most of the artists are near contemporaries of Gober’s, and their work was in dialogue with his concerns. The well-spaced installation filled two rooms: The smaller room held sixteen gelatin silver prints by Shaver from 1975–77 depicting found children’s clothing; the larger room centered around a cardboard sculpture resembling a minimalist stockade by Noland, and also included a wall hanging made by Albers at the Bauhaus in 1927, Beck’s 1995 video *The Spike Buck*, featuring the artist’s father sawing off a deer’s antlers, and two of Semmel’s “monumental paintings” from 1974 and 1978 of post-coital couples that Gober had first seen in the 1970s. The works in the exhibition commented variously on craft, restriction, sexuality, masculinity, family, and children in a way that framed Gober’s own production, particularly through


the 1980s and 90s. Following Helen Molesworth’s comment that the show was a “Baedeker to his own work and his influences,” it is evident that Gober’s inclusion of works from the 1970s by Shaver and Semmel indicate their early influence on his thinking. Gober’s excursions into curating highlight a collaborative nature present in his practice that opens it up to dialogue and identifies specific affinities.

Gober has provided another, perhaps more obscure, frame for his work in an oft quoted yet little explored statement from a 1990 interview, which expands the possible connections between his work and feminist art. In response to a prompt regarding his interest in the work of his contemporaries, he said:

I followed the most amazing generation of women. Cindy [Sherman] and Jenny [Holzer] have to be two great American artists, and then there’s Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler. It’s the women who affected me. The men were all like bad examples, and then the women were almost all good examples.

There is no follow-up to this statement in the interview, a conspicuous absence considering the disparity between the aesthetic of Gober’s work and that of the women of

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370 Peter Schjeldahl described the exhibition as a “metaphorical family romance, in which Beck’s tape evokes a traumatized dad and Alber’s textile an exacting mom. The other works at Marks complete the analogy: Cady Noland as a sister in misery; Joan Semmel as a raffishly louche aunt; and Nancy Shaver as an exemplary older cousin.” Peter Schjeldahl, "Selective Affinities: The Artist as Curator," The New Yorker, September 6, 1999, 86.


372 Shaver was Gober’s professor at his alma mater, Middlebury College. Dan Cameron, “Robert Gober,” Galeries Magazine, October/November 1991, 96.

the Pictures Generation. However distinct their aesthetic practices, there is common
ground between these artists in their efforts to expose cultural myths and in their
demonstrations of how those myths are entwined with larger institutions, whether it be
the family, the media, religion, or the institution of art itself. Gober’s deconstruction of
the binary system of logic that produces stereotypes of gender expression was built on
feminist practices of the 1970s, and ran parallel to the thinking of the Pictures Generation
artists, which led him to productively shared ground between feminism and queer theory.

AN EARLY RETURN HOME

Gober’s engagement with the domestic as a mode of experience, an approach to
the home brought to bear on art by feminism, is manifest in several of his earliest works.
His production of a series of dollhouses in the mid-1970s, initiated as a commercial
enterprise, anticipated Gober’s preoccupation with the home as a locus of identity and
desire. Despite his “adamant” position that the dollhouses were in no way related to
making art, a contemporaneous series of line drawings of simple objects within the home
reveal that the domestic had permeated Gober’s artistic practice. One of these pencil
drawings, Untitled (1975) (fig. 39), features a bottle of Ivory soap sitting next to a can of

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374 The range of artists known as the “Pictures Generation” received their moniker from
the press after a 1977 exhibition curated by Douglas Crimp that included five of them.
The exhibition featured works by Sherrie Levine, Jack Goldstein, Phillip Smith, Troy
Brauntuch, and Robert Longo, but the (loosely knit) group also included Cindy Sherman,
Jennie Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Laurie Simmons, and Richard Prince, among others. The
Pictures artists were known primarily for their interrogations of photography and video
which set out to reveal how they transmit ideologically constructed meanings. See
Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," October 8 (Spring 1979): 75–88; and Douglas Elkind, The

375 Gober, “Notes,” 36.
Ajax against a partial view through a window. In *Untitled* (1976) (fig. 40), a tabletop tilted parallel to the picture plane shows off assorted remnants of daily life: an empty bowl with a spoon, a small striped vase with a leafy plant, a pack of Camel cigarettes, a pen and pencil, and a rubber band. These drawings revealed his artistic interest in domesticity, even if he presents a grittier lifestyle than he depicted in his dollhouses.

Gober characterized his dollhouses as “domestic nondescript,” suggesting that they appear as generic interpretations of typical American suburban homes.\(^{376}\) However, it is here that Gober’s taste for revealing the strange at the heart of normality first appears. Wallpaper with images uncharacteristic of domestic suburbia decorates their interiors. Some rooms feature patterns created by a highway disappearing into the horizon, others repeat a cropped scene of a red trailer hitched to the back of an old car, or a blonde man bent at the waist (fig. 41). The odd juxtaposition of the commonplace house with the unexpected wallpaper foreshadowed Gober’s sculptural work and installations of the 1980s. It was through the process of making the “handful of houses,” which became increasingly complex, that Gober discovered, “it wasn’t the dollhouses I was interested in. What I was drawn to was the house as a symbol.”\(^{377}\) The last of these miniatures, *Burnt House* (1980) (fig. 42), a white clapboard house with red roof, loosely based on his grandmother’s house save for the black burn marks covering the upper left quarter of the building, is the most overtly symbolic. The first few dollhouses may have represented an effort to rectify the home, to remake it as a safe place for children and others. However, the damage inflicted on *Burnt House* and the experiences it drew upon reflect a more

\(^{376}\) Ibid., 38.

\(^{377}\) Ibid., 36.
complicated relationship to the home as a troubled space. Gober writes that “two terrible events” precipitated the appearance of the house—his witnessing of a neighbor’s house on fire and the terrified expression of the mother whose youngest was trapped inside early in his life, and the widely reported recent disappearance of a child, Etan Patz, from Gober’s New York City neighborhood. The aberrant appearance of Burnt House springs from Gober’s personal experience, albeit in a way that is not readily accessible to the viewer.

With what should have been whitewashed images of domesticity produced for children, the dollhouses triggered Gober’s efforts to locate identity in the fissures between ideal images of the home and its actuality. While feminist art was not the first to represent domestic objects—a subject matter taken up by Pop art in the 1960s—it was the first to explore domesticity as a mode of experience, a psychic space, and very often, a damaged realm. In the 1970s, the idea of home as signifying a matrix of identity was taken up so extensively and by such a wide range of artists, from Faith Wilding to Martha Rosler, that it became a mainstay of feminist art. Nevertheless, by 1989, the year of Gober’s Paula Cooper installation, the home had been mined by various artists, including Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, and Mike Kelley, in ways that disassociated it from feminist art practices. In contrast, from early on, Gober’s attachment to the home as a highly subjective and emotionally charged space reflected a continuity with feminist approaches. His work seems to both tread lightly into this private space and to make dramatic statements about what may go on there.

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378 Ibid., 40.
Throughout the 1980s Gober recreated the most mundane of household objects, including series of sinks, urinals, beds, and cribs, each painstakingly handmade. The sinks comprise the longest-running aspect of the series, surging in production in the mid-1980s and continuing throughout the 2000s. The first two sinks appeared in 1984 and replicate certain fixtures from Gober’s youth: The Small Sink (fig. 43) is based on a type of sink found in the homes of both sets of his grandparents, and the Untitled Sink is a reproduction of the hobby sink the artist’s father had installed in the basement (which Gober revisited to take measurements before constructing the piece). Both are made from plaster, wood, steel, wire lath, and several layers of oil paint. Their imperfect surfaces register the marks of the process of their careful manufacture by hand. The series of sinks is inaugurated by a strange combination of the personal and generic, for although the sinks reflect mass-produced items found in homes across the country, each sink is, according to Gober, a “portrait of a sink that I knew or had lived with.”

The scale of the sinks, the significance of their materials, their handmade quality, and their repetition both across an exhibition space and over time separate Gober’s sinks from their 1980s art-world context, and from what Hal Foster and others call “commodity sculpture.” As Gober continued to produce the sinks, they became increasingly distorted: In addition to lacking adequate hardware, some of the sinks lack basins while

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379 Ibid., 66.

380 Hal Foster identifies Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach as the preeminent artists of commodity sculpture, which he discusses as a branch of Appropriation art with its own characteristics, stressing display and the parallel between consumers’ desires for capitalist goods and collectors’ desires for art as a luxury goods and signs of distinction. He writes, “Art and commodity are made one; they are presented as signs for exchange; and they are appreciated—consumed—as such.” Hal Foster, Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 109.
others have exaggerated backsplashes. He also began to manipulate the sinks’ relationship to the wall—as in *Slanted Sink* (1985) and *Floating Sink* (1986) (fig. 44)—and to further distort the sink form, as in *The Sink Inside Me* (1985) (fig. 45), in which two sinks are joined at an angle, forming a V shape. The way Gober unhinged these objects of everyday life from our expectations, compelling the viewer to experience them anew, resonates with the work laid out by several feminist artists. *Womanhouse* (1972) was itself an effort to dislodge the viewer’s expectations surrounding domesticity. The artists of the Feminist Art Program recreated the house according to their own experiences of specific types of rooms. In *Lipstick Bathroom* (fig. 46), for instance, Camille Gray covered the walls, furniture, and contents of one of the bathrooms with bright red paint to evoke feelings of claustrophobia and anger within the site of women’s transformation into socially presentable selves via the application of makeup.

**STANDARD STORIES**

The standard stories told about Gober generally point to his debts to Surrealism and Minimalism, focus on his materials and process of construction, or assemble a band of like-minded artists from those who practiced Appropriation in the 1980s or those who took up Abjection in the 1990s. Few of these narratives ever mention Gober’s

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381 In 2007, Gober contributed notes to accompany the plates in the Schaulager Basel exhibition catalog *Robert Gober: Sculptures and Installations, 1979–2007*. While some of his comments are anecdotal and reveal personal connections to works he had not discussed before, most of the notes cover aspects of the materials and his methods of production. The focus on manufacture is common to sources on Gober: Half of the catalog for the 1997 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles is devoted to documenting the process of the installation’s manufacture, while the catalog for an exhibition at the Aldrich Museum features interviews with several of Gober’s studio assistants. See Robert Gober, "Notes"; id., *Robert Gober*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997); id., *Robert Gober: The 1996*
connections to feminist art. However, some of the foremost characteristics of Gober’s early work—its handmade manufacture, the way his sculptures call up sexed and gendered bodily presences, and the dynamic between the private and public spheres produced by his installations—align it with feminist art and distinguish it from Surrealism, Minimalism, and Appropriation art. As Gober is still a working artist and enjoys continued popularity with museum curators, the large majority of literature devoted to his work takes the form of exhibition catalogs and reviews. A series of interviews Richard Flood conducted with Gober in 1990, 1993, and 1997, which were collected and published together in a 1999 exhibition catalog, is the source of statements by him cited in much of the work written on Gober by curators and critics alike.  

Gober’s wellspring of imagery garnered from the everyday has typically prompted associations with Surrealism’s uncanny interventions into the mundane to expose unconscious realities, rather than being framed by feminist art’s deployment of the domestic to uncover both its psychological and social effects. Trevor Fairbrother employs Surrealism as a lens for interpreting Gober’s sculptures, described as “brooding vessels” for symbols of Freudian sexuality and death. Gober, like the Surrealists, is thus

_Larry Aldrich Foundation Award Exhibition_ (Ridgefield, CT: The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998).

382 Gober, “Interview: Richard Flood and Robert Gober.” In an interview from 1989, Gober speaks of his hesitancy to give interviews and comments on his career-long desire to allow the meanings generated by his work to be created in the space between the viewer and the work itself. Gober, “Interview,” by Gholson, 32. Also see Gober, “Success: Robert Gober,” by Gary Indiana, _Interview_, May 1990, 72–5; as well as select writings by the artist: Gober, “Cumulus from America,” and “Behind the Seams,” _Artforum_ 10, no. 42 (Summer 2004): 210.
said to be “in tune with the marginal, irrational and compulsive aspect of things.” The compulsiveness of Surrealism that Fairbrother associates with Gober was strongly connected to the role of chance in expressing unconscious desires, as exemplified by the found object. In contrast, Gober’s compulsion stems from particular objects from his past and results in the intense process of handcrafting his sculptures. Feminist art shares with Surrealism an attention to the ways in which common household objects lead animate lives, though the two movements have very different stakes in doing so. Focusing on Gober’s relationship to Surrealism to some extent strips his work of its ability to speak of the interaction between the social and the personal that is so resonant with feminism.

For Hal Foster, Gober’s work is related to “Surrealism’s aesthetic of convulsive identity and uncanny space.” He draws attention to the strategic similarities between Gober and a particular strain of Surrealism: The primal scene and trauma are not deployed as imagery as much as they become structuring devices for works. Foster describes Gober’s installations as dreamscapes, productive of indeterminate spaces and cryptic relationships between images similar to dreams. Foster calls on Freud’s formulation of Nachträglichkeit—in which a traumatic event retroactively codes an earlier but repressed experience, the trauma of the primal scene—to suggest the experience of the viewer within this mise-en-scène. Foster explains:

This confusion of inside and outside is the paradoxical structure of trauma; it may be this complication (especially when doubled by a confusion of private and

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383 Trevor Fairbrother, "We Are Only as Sick as the Secrets We Keep," in Robert Gober (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1990), 43.


385 Ibid., 58.
public) that is traumatic. Gober (re)stages this complication in the dioramas, with scenes that seem both internal and external, past and present, fantastmatic and real—as though … we suddenly happened upon the most secret event in our lives.386

According to Foster, Gober’s installations create ambiguous spaces that implicate the viewer in an experience analogous to the process of trauma, whereby she identifies fragments of her own past in these constructed tableaux. The stability necessary to ground identity is thereby confounded as the unitary and unique ‘core’ identity of the subject becomes challenged. Rather, “the artist does not invent new forms so much as he retraces tableaux in which the subject is not fixed in relation to identity, difference and sexuality.”387

While the critics linking Gober to Surrealism foreground the way his work signifies (by “making strange”), those that pair Gober’s sculpture with Minimalism attend primarily to its formal qualities and posit a neutral subject position for its viewers.388 These critics rely largely on Gober’s series of sinks, read as an abstracted geometric form, for this tie-in, as the sinks’ repetitious arrangement across the walls of galleries recalled several characteristics of the Minimalism of the 1960s. However, the Minimalism label is often applied as art historical shorthand for certain aesthetic qualities and experiences, such as industrial materials, purity of form, and would-be immediacy of

386 Ibid., 59.

387 Ibid.

reception. It therefore becomes difficult to reconcile Minimalism’s rejection of illusionism and representation with the imagery and narratives evoked even by Gober’s sinks.

Claims for Minimalism’s phenomenological mode of reception also do not correspond with Gober’s sculptures. Minimalism functions phenomenologically as the viewer is made to perceive the relationship between her body and both the sculpture and the space it occupies. However, Claire Bishop remarks that it is a given work’s “literalism” and a “preference for reduced and simple forms, both of which prevent psychological absorption and redirect our attention to external considerations” that guarantee a phenomenological state of perception. The psychological resonance embedded in the imagery and traces of manufacture in Gober’s objects prevent them from functioning analogously—we are always caught in “psychological absorption” when confronting Gober’s installations. According to Foster, Minimalism opens the field of art to considerations of an embodied subjectivity, evincing a new concern for the body that continues to be explored in contemporary art. He credits such new awareness with eventually allowing room for Gober’s explorations of the psyche. However, as Foster writes, “Minimalism considers perception in phenomenological terms, as somehow

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390 Foster, *Return of the Real*, 40. The tracing of his particular line of descent between the phenomenological subject of Minimalism and the psychological subject of Gober’s works writes out of art history feminist artists of the 1970s, who constitute the first American postwar group of artists to make an account of their embodied and psychological subjecthood a primary line of inquiry of their work.
before or outside history, language, sexuality, and power.”

If the subject of Minimalism is coded as neutral, then it bears little relationship to Gober’s viewing subjects, who are encouraged to probe the processes of their own socialization while moving through his sculptural installations. Gober’s relationship to Minimalism, then, is complicated. It undoubtedly consists of affinities and debts, yet what is not allowed for in Minimalism—gendered and sexed subject positions that necessarily determine the perceptions of the phenomenological body—provides the richness and ambiguity on which Gober’s work thrives.

While gender figures into the object choices of such artists as Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach, and the pull of the everyday object is strong among certain of Gober’s peers, his work is sometimes misplaced in the context of Appropriation art. The earliest group exhibitions to include Gober positioned his handmade sinks and cribs within this framework. In 1986 alone, Gober was included in at least four group exhibitions with Jeff Koons, notably New Sculpture: Robert Gober, Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach at the

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391 Ibid., 43. Art historian Anna Chave complicates the usual phenomenological reading of Minimalism and its attendant notions of a neutral embodied subject by contextualizing specific works in their social, historical, and economic framework. She counters the ascription of neutrality to Minimalism by revealing its masculinist values of strength, power, and aggressiveness. She writes, “From this perspective, Minimalism can be seen as replicating—and at times, perhaps, as implicating—those systems of mediation which have (over)determined our history: Money, the Phallus, and the Concept as privileged operators of meaning. The perceived neutrality of Minimalist objects might also be explained, however, by the fact that the qualities or values they exemplify—unfeelingness and a will to control or dominate—are transparent by virtue of their very ubiquity. With closer scrutiny, in short, the blank face of Minimalism may come into focus as the face of capital, the face of authority, the face of the father.” Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," Arts Magazine (January 1990): 51.
Renaissance Society in Chicago.\textsuperscript{392} Gary Garrels, the curator of \textit{New Sculpture}, summed up the trend of these exhibitions when he wrote that his own exhibition charts “a significant shift in contemporary sculpture in the last five years toward the making of sculpture based on the ordinary object.”\textsuperscript{393} Several other critics and curators followed suit, grouping Gober with Koons and Steinbach, resulting in a tendency to overlook the particular ways Gober used the “ordinary object.” For instance, Garrels obscured the idiosyncrasies of Gober’s work when he wrote that the trio of artists in question “take and make objects of pristine appearance, unbroken wholes. … Their work thus extends a rather distinctive American preoccupation with the new.”\textsuperscript{394} In fact, the most generic iterations of domestic objects are what appeal to Gober, and the desires latent in them overlap little with the American consumer’s relentless drive for the new and specific.

Gober’s sculptures tellingly belong to the sphere of the cottage industry rather than to that of industrial manufacture or shopping mall consumption, situating them in a very different realm than those of Koons and Steinbach. Gober commented on the “laborious, handmade” look of his works that set him apart from his peers:

> See, for years I thought it was used to diminish me, because I was not doing the respected masculine act, which was hiring other people to do your labor for you.


\textsuperscript{394} Ibid.
There’s something inherently suspect in the American imagination if you’re not hiring other people to do your labor for you and if you’re not acting in an entrepreneurial sense about your work. That, at least when my work was becoming known, was the avant-garde critical discourse mode of being a sculptor. I heard a lot of words like “quaint, homey, homespun”—I think basically derogatory words, slightly feminized words.  

In this statement, Gober points to how critical voices associated a handmade character with the feminine. However, the repression of the supposedly feminine elements in Gober’s work is precisely what allows it to be connected to the patrilineal forebears of Surrealism and Minimalism, and the fraternity of Koons and Steinbach.

Displacing the craft lineage of feminist art, much of the comparison of Gober to both Koons and Steinbach rested on critics’ turn to the influence of Marcel Duchamp’s readymades as everyday objects removed from circulation. In a 1987 review, critic Gary Indiana called attention to the ways in which Gober’s particular everyday objects contravene the readymade, describing the urinals as:

> touched, worked up, painted, if you will, lovingly by hand, in other words thought about as forms invented for males to piss in. The readymade urinal only talks about art, the art system, art values; Gober’s urinals tell you about pissing, standing next to other people pissing, about cocks and having one or not having one in a disposal situation, and about being watched while you piss.

Indiana rejects the relationship between Gober’s sculptures and the readymade model on the basis of the specifically sexed and gendered bodies they conjure.

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396 Schampers, “Robert Gober,” 31. Gary Garrels also invokes Duchamp, but writes that because his works are handmade, Gober “veers” away from the readymade model. Garrels, “New Sculpture.”


398 According the body with a central position in the history of postwar sculpture, Helen Molesworth’s 2006 exhibition *Part Object Part Sculpture* reimagined a different
In a 1988 article, David Joselit identified the “zeitgeist” of a group of artists consisting of Gober, Koons, Steinbach, and Tishan Hsu as the reintroduction of desire into sculpture after its putative absence in Minimalism, and their shared efforts to destabilize the everyday through the manipulation of this desire. Joselit distinguished Gober from the appropriationist artists on the grounds of the psychological resonance of the former’s works.\(^{399}\) He introduced Louise Lawler to reveal how, for all the artists in question, the home is an ideological construct, “subject to the same social, economic, and political forces as art institutions.”\(^{400}\) Joselit’s inclusion of Lawler tacitly picked up on Gober’s comment to Richard Flood that, of the artists of his generation, “It’s the women who affected me.”\(^{401}\) Joselit situated Lawler as at least one of Gober’s chosen peers, and thus introduced into Gober’s historiography the women artists of the Pictures Generation, whom he considered the “good examples.” The example that the Pictures artists provided, as Joselit suggested, cut through visual affiliations—whether the Surrealist dreamscape, relationship between Gober and Duchamp. The exhibition was premised on dislocating Duchamp’s readymades from their originary status in the lineage of postwar sculpture and replacing them with his handmade somatic sculptures of the 1950s—in particular the three cast sculptures and the climactic *Etants Donnes* (1946–66)—as a provisionally generative source for postwar sculpture. The consequences of this displacement are crucial to contemporary art: It reveals the degree to which the body is fundamental to postwar art and how it has been neglected. Molesworth freed the modernist strategies of repetition and seriality from the standard logic of industry to speak of both bodily desire and the relationship between desire and the commodity. The “use of repetition to yield difference and provoke embodied responses” that Molesworth ascribes to Duchamp also accurately describes Gober’s sculptures—whether his series of sinks or his increasingly distorted wax body parts—which were included in the exhibition. Helen Molesworth, *Part Object Part Sculpture* (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2005).


\(^{400}\) Ibid.

the household iconography shared by Pop, or the repetitive seriality of Minimalism—to establish a shared theoretical groundwork based on the creation and viewing of art as always already implicated in the ideology of the institutions or the culture from which it emerges, whether it be the museum or the United States at large.402

BASE SENTIMENTALITY

While in the 1980s Gober’s singular sculptures were associated with the then dominant trend of Appropriation art, during the early 1990s, as his individual sculptures gave way increasingly to installations, critics and curators repeatedly aligned his output with the then ascendant category of Abject art.403 The evocation of corpses, death, filth, and cleansing threaded throughout Gober’s work made him a proverbial poster boy for

402 The work of the Pictures artists, its motivations, effects, and influence is varied and I do not wish to obscure or flatten out these differences. Rather, I hope to sketch out Gober’s relationship to them by showing how their propositions collectively changed the rules of the game and insisted on exposing how the institutions of art are gendered and sexed. Craig Owens describes the innovations wrought by several Pictures generation artists in "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).

403 The theoretical basis of this trend drew on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection and the Surrealist heretic Georges Bataille’s concepts of the abject and the Informe. According to Kristeva, a coherent subjectivity depends upon the body’s rejection of that which threatens the borders between subject and object, and self and other. Signification is possible only through this function of eliminating destabilizing elements, often imaged as the expulsion of bodily fluids. In the developing stages of infancy, one first experiences abjection at the point of separation from the maternal body. The taboo against the maternal body is understood by Kristeva to generate the social order; then the process of separation during which abjection occurs inducts the subject into the social order and the fantasized maternal body is the original expelled object. The abject as both a part of the body and that which the body rejects is simultaneously a breach of the social order, a recognition of its fragility and, importantly, an instantiation of it. Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) and Georges Bataille, Visions Of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
this critical trend, along with Mike Kelley, Kiki Smith, Sue Williams, and Andres Serrano. Appearing on the cover of the catalog to the 1993 Whitney Museum branch exhibition, *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, Gober’s work featuring body parts became an emblem of the thematics of abjection that emerged in the museum’s Biennials of 1991 and 1993.

The language of abjection was envisioned as making a critical voice available for artists whose work dealt with the body, such as Gober (even if his work provided its own language) and Kelley (even if he mocked it). However, the abject as a critical category functions ambiguously vis-à-vis feminism. While several feminist have drawn on the abject in theorizing the maternal as the primary cultural target of disgust, the concept of the abject is not, in origin, feminist, and its effects are seen to dehumanize the maternal body. Indeed, the debased position of the female body in discourse on abjection was problematic for many. Additionally, while some viewed the abject as a means of

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404 Among the exhibitions of Abject art in which Gober’s work appeared are the 1991 Biennial Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art; *This is My Body: This is My Blood*, Herter Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, 1992; *Corporeal Politics*, MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1992; *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993, organized by the Independent Study Program; *Fémininmasculin: Le sexe de l’art*, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1995; and numerous gallery shows.


406 Mira Schor criticized artists such as Kiki Smith and Sue Williams for creating debased and abused images of women, describing their work as evincing “the most disturbing backlash against ’70s feminist art.” She writes, “These works were not analyzed for what
promoting transgressive sexual politics, abjection’s status as a political tool has ultimately been challenged. Framing Gober’s work as abject may also displace its connections to feminist art by providing a theoretical model that is often taken as disconnected from the realm of the everyday and the domestic.

For Helen Molesworth, the appearance of the abject in art in the late 1980s represents a “return to emotive content.” This understanding of the role of the abject in art serves as a keystone in her recuperation of installation into a feminist genealogy, for which she cites Gober’s work in particular and its relationship to the installations of Ree Morton. According to Molesworth, the defining features of installation art are its deployment of multiple vantage points and an immersive experience in which the viewer must construct her own interpretation. In the late 1980s, during the rise of pictorially based installations, that experience “was, more often than not, described under the rubric they naturalize about women, and one suspects their popularity is partly based on the attractiveness to many of the female victim position.” The correlation between woman and victim in works categorized as abject seemed to close off the possibility of a feminist political position with clear agency. Mira Schor, “Backlash and Appropriation,” in *Power of Feminist Art*, 263.

of the abject.” Molesworth suggests that feminist art was a significant factor in “the rise of installation art and its early deployment of abjection, and that the mise-en-scène quality of late 1980s and early 1990s installation art has to do with the feminist artists’ canny and uncanny replication of the domestic environment.”

Feminist art’s move away from the creation of “environments” (characteristic of Minimalism and Post-Minimalism) to a specific sense of place particular to domesticity was, according to Molesworth, a result of feminist artists’ diversion from traditional media to craft practices indifferent to medium-specificity. The shift in Morton’s work from environment to installation accompanied her use of domestic settings and complicated explorations of motherhood. Molesworth conjectures that Morton “desire[d] to create or re-create a space vis-à-vis its feelings or affects rather than its exclusively visual or physical coordinates,” the implications of which bear heavily on Gober’s approach to his installations. Molesworth argues that Gober’s “concerns developed out of his immersion in the problems of feminism and the sentimental and the domestic would develop into the problems of the abject that would concern him through much of his work.” Morton transformed her experience of domesticity into an emotional ambience in which the viewer is left to wander and discover her own reactions in order to bridge the space between Morton’s imagery and her objects. Gober’s installations create

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409 Ibid.

410 Ibid., 16.

411 Ibid., 19.
a similar situation for the viewer, for whom his juxtapositions of imagery act as proposals for meanings pieced together through the lens of the viewer’s own experience.

Molesworth’s essay is a sketch of a larger proposal that posits 1970s feminist art as an important source for the flourishing of installation art in the 1990s; it suggests that the impact of feminist art can be written back into history as easily as it had been written out of it.

THE INSTALLATION

Gober’s 1989 installation at the Paula Cooper Gallery featured two rooms that reverberated with emotion and desire. Gober showed the domestic interior as, on the one hand, overwrought with desire, and on the other, complete with mechanisms that channel those wants into normative paths that are, however, easily disrupted. The two domestic interiors were each configured according to binary relationships: the pure and impure, male and female, the regulated and the unbound. The wallpapers announced the appearance of the domestic interior at the same time that their content disrupted it. The wallpaper underscored how the mundane simultaneously produces and masks configurations of interior life. While the very appearance of wallpaper introduced the domestic, the images on the wallpaper signaled how sexual and racial difference structures the everyday in ways that encroach on the most private of spaces, not only that of our homes, but of our psyches as well.

In the first room, sketchily drawn white contour lines defined against a black ground depict a woman’s spread vagina between a pair of legs, a view of a figure’s buttocks as she or he lies on his or her stomach, an oversized penis (relative to the other images), a navel with hair trailing down to a close-up image of cock and balls, and a
women’s midsection and upper thighs, including a barely hinted at vulva (fig. 47). The large scale of the images of genitals featured on the wallpaper ensured that their repetition did not dissolve the individual images into the larger pattern. Eight pewter drains puncturing the walls symbolized both the flow of the desires suggested by the explicit body parts and their restriction. In the center of the room, a slightly wrinkled white bag sat on a pedestal containing several homemade donuts preserved by a coat of resin. The donuts, which represent a specifically American satisfaction, along with the drains operated as sexual puns and alternate orifices to those featured on the wallpaper. The room became, as curator Lynne Cooke wrote, “a paean to oral and anal appetites, an affirmation of sexuality’s variousness.”

The viewer’s initial glimpse of the installation suggested the exploration of sexual difference that would follow within the two rooms of the installation. The primary signifier in the first room was the doublet of penis and vulva, which was, however, continually interrupted by a third term, the anal and oral drives represented by the drains and donuts. By intervening in the structure of the binary, Gober undermined the coherence of the sexed and gendered categories on display. He complicated the male/female binary by introducing the possibility of latent homosexual desire—the

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412 Gober originally created this motif for the endpapers of a short story by Joyce Carol Oates about the rape of a young girl, published under the auspices of the Whitney Museum’s artist/writer publishing program. Joyce Carol Oates, Heat, design and illustrations by Robert Gober (New York: Library Fellows of the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1989). According to Gober, the difficulty he experienced persuading the museum to print the images “provided the impetus to blow it up and use it as wallpaper.” Gober, "Interview: Richard Flood and Robert Gober," 122.

donuts and drains signify deviant desires, male desires that deviate from the female body—exposing how heterosexuality is only intelligible in its relation to homosexuality.

Throughout the installation Gober mapped out the interrelations between the maintenance of categories of sex and gender (and race), and how they cohere around the privileging of heteronormative masculinity. The range of sexual orifices disassociated from particular, and particularly gendered, bodies pointed to the diversity of sexual practices typically repressed in the domestic setting. For Lyndall MacCowan, the split between the body and sex highlighted a crucial issue: “The problem is the correlation among biological sex, gender identity, gender or sex roles, sexual object choice, [and] sexual identity.” The danger of this correspondence, she continued, is the result of sexism, a system that operates according to a single, normative understanding of the biological body in relation to sexual identity and preference “and the denial of any other construction of gender.” The eradication of sexism requires the dislocation of the associative chain of binary logic that assumes, for example, that all sexual relationships mirror heterosexuality such that the only available roles for men and women are, respectively, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ and that these correspond to a desire for the opposite sex. Gober’s contestation of naturalized binary relationships of normative sexual

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414 Judith Butler argues, “The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender and desire.” Butler, Gender Trouble, 30.

and gendered identities thus established a shared ground between feminism and queer theory. The mise-en-scène in both rooms at Paula Cooper challenged normative sexual identity by allowing the viewer to make multiple, and often disruptive, associations between the images depicted on the wallpaper and the objects within the rooms. Gober’s various disruptions of domestic ideals denaturalized the correlation of normative sexual roles, a disruption that may be seen as working toward the same ends as various feminist interventions.

In the second room of the 1989 installation, the pale yellow wallpaper featured alternating illustrations of a white man covered by a white sheet sleeping in bed and a scene of a black man hanging from a tree against a baby blue sky that uncannily matched the former’s tone of tranquility (fig. 48). These images formed the backdrop for a wedding gown positioned in the center of the room, and six bags of kitty litter propped up against the wall. The implied dreams of the sleeping man juxtaposed with the hanging man on the wallpaper provoked several possibilities: Is the sleeper projecting a racist fantasy or having a nightmare, as some critics have suggested? Does his sleeping body reveal itself as vulnerable, a vulnerability usually displaced from white male bodies onto the physicality of the Other, thus paralleling the adjacent image of the lynched man? Or perhaps the oral and anal fixations of the first room provided the possibility of an erotic content to the sleeping man’s fantasy, as the peacefulness of sleep at home is imbued with a sexual desire for another man colluded with violence. The unresolvability of the relationship between this pair of images illustrated the function of ambiguity threaded throughout the entire installation. The multiplicity of possible relationships among the

objects and images dislodged any expectations founded on socially sanctioned gender and racial norms. The installation seemed to probe what we have room for in our cultural imagination. For example, what about the possibility (never brought up in the critical literature or reviews of the exhibition) that the absent bride is the widow of the lynched man, relegated to the same space as the kitty litter, a material used to collect excrement? The negatively valued terms of the binaries—the black of the black/white, the violence of the peaceful sleep/violent death—do not support the positive valuation of the dominant terms, but stain them. The sleeping white man is implicated in the scene of the lynching, whether as the perpetrator of violence or as one who is able to rest easy in a world structured by racism.

If the first room displayed a polymorphous sexuality, the appearance of the bridal gown in the second room suggested a policing of sexuality. In an interview with Richard Flood, Gober commented that the wedding dress “wanted to be” in the first room, but, “ultimately it was more provocative against the hanging man/sleeping man wallpaper, because in a sense she becomes the sleeping man’s bride. It suggests deeper overtones, or undertones, of complicity.”417 The bridal dress, in its proximity to the image of lynching can thus be read as “complicit” in the history of racism in the U.S., which justified the murder of black men with accusations of their violating the purity of white women. As a spectral player in the wallpaper’s possible narratives, the absent bride colluded in both the actualization of the white man’s fantasy of impurity and the subsequent mixing of races, serving as an excuse for the reactionary violence against black men. The absence of the bride’s body suggested that she must evacuate her identity before she can figure as

a screen for male desire. The white man’s repose intimated that he too plays a passive role in this dynamic, imperceptively miming the cues set out for him within heteronormative domestic space. There is, then, a convergence of the oppression of race and sexuality. The first terms of the binaries white/black, male/female, and public/private are connected by their authority. Each first term is not only dominant over its second term, but the privileging of each is the result of an entwined system of domination. Even though the sleeping man is just as captivated by his role as the others, the dynamic set in play ultimately supports an ideological system in which he benefits. Perhaps his secured position within that system is the bed that allows him to sleep soundly, resting assured that his identity is not threatened when the sexuality of others is confined. On the other hand, the bride’s absence may be another dream of the sleeping male, suggesting that his longing is focused on the body of the hanging man and that his desire encompasses a mix of sex and violence resulting from sexual and racial prohibitions. Homosexual desire operates as fantasy, an invisible presence that underwrites the apparent naturalization of heterosexuality. Gober’s installation points


419 According to Steven Seidman, “Heterosexuality” only has meaning in relation to “homosexuality”; the coherence of the former is built upon the exclusion, repression, and repudiation of the latter. These two terms form an interdependent, hierarchical relation of signification. The logic of identity is a logic of boundary defining which necessarily produces a subordinated other. The social productivity of identity is purchased at the
to the possibility of alliances between those who are other-ed by white heteronormative masculinity, between those wraiths whose exclusion is necessary to the ideological system which maintains the latter’s power. Gober hindered the viewer from determining a fixed relationship between these figures, instead encouraging reading the work from a variety of positions to reimagine possible relations.

EVERYDAY LITANIES

For the installation’s wallpaper, Gober repositioned the artistic strategies of seriality and repetition, once so important to Minimalism and Pop, as part of the corporeal domain that serves as a model for the representation of desire. Drawing on feminist domestic performances, Gober demonstrated how these formal modes of seriality and repetition experienced in everyday life—such as washing one’s hands or scrubbing the floor—control the gestures of the body and mind, and thus shape them. Gober distilled some of the most basic aspects of moving and living through the everyday in his sculptural objects. His sinks, beds, and cribs not only evoke the unseen presence of the human body, but remind us of the most essential and repetitive acts that the body performs. While a sense of universality pervades such activities as sleeping and washing, the specifications of Gober’s objects—whether in their distorted scale and form, or in the juxtaposition of unlikely elements—enable the viewer to reflect on the particularities of his or her own relation to those objects. Thus the viewer’s own subjective position is brought into play. The succession of these familiar forms stresses the tautological nature of both daily life and how we acquire our subjecthood through living it.

price of a logic of hierarchy, normalization, and exclusion.” Steven Seidman, “Identity Politics in a ‘Postmodern’ Gay Culture,” 130.
Gober’s work makes the viewer confront our near blindness to the sentiments the most ordinary domestic objects elicit. In conversation with Foster’s traumatic model for interpreting Gober’s installations, Molesworth responds that his objects affect us because they “offer a more quotidian and seemingly banal set of experiences than trauma.” Rather, the sculptures “speak of the resolute dailyness of our lives. They speak of the less dramatic structuring devices of the self, such as our habits and routines. In both their content and their fabrication, Gober’s objects address the repetitious nature of the everyday.”

Molesworth continues to elaborate how daily rhythms constitute subjectivity through absorption, a mode of processing experience in terms of constancy and flow. Habit and trauma, as two means of acquiring subjectivity, are not necessarily opposed; rather, Molesworth suggests that they should be held in what she describes as an “uncomfortable union.” She identifies four modalities of Gober’s frequent use of the drain that relate to absorption as it shapes identity on a daily basis: the drain as a metaphor for the body; the mechanics of the drain related to the “mechanized nature of the everyday”; temporality, suggesting a subject in flux; and location, the drain as a “visual marker of the public/private divide.” These four modalities demonstrate how identity manifests itself in the habit and repetition at the center of domestic life, in rituals of cleaning and maintenance. Molesworth’s reading also bears upon Gober’s earlier series of sinks and doors. Emphasizing how identity is formed through habit, Molesworth

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421 Ibid., 158.
422 Ibid., 161.
speaks to those for whom these domestic rituals structure their lives—largely women—in ways that have been neglected in discourses addressing the public formation of (an implicitly male) identity in the public sphere.

Molesworth poses a pragmatics of identity in Gober’s work rooted in daily experience whose elaboration is open to, but not reliant on, critical theory. Similarly, a great deal of feminist art recognizes that the interdependence of the theory and mundane experience produces models of identity formation.423 These models often emphasize how gendered identity is shaped through the repetition of everyday activities as a process of subjectivization, and how those routines can ossify identity. Elizabeth Grosz’s study of the body as socially and psychically marked provides a theoretical framework for both Gober’s work as well as for that of several feminist artists who explore of how repetition structures both identity and the body. Grosz applies the trope of the Mobius strip to illustrate the relationship between mind and body, not as definite, separate entities, nor as corresponding to a dichotomy of inside and outside. Rather, the twists and inversions of the strip unite the mind and body in such a way that a productive flow of forces travels between the two. The continuous flow prevents boundaries from forming between the mind and body, therefore producing what Grosz identifies as “embodied subjectivity” and “psychical corporeality.” The metaphor of the Mobius strip allows Grosz to represent both inside and outside as all surface, “a flat plane whose incision or inscription produces

the (illusion or effects of) depth and interiority.” 424 If the “inside” has been identified as the location of desire and experience, and the outside represents the marking of the body by social institutions, then in Grosz’s model of the Mobius-stripped subject, the two fold back on one another. In the process, what had been declared strictly the domain of the mind or of the body has been confused. 425

Significant to the artworks under discussion, Grosz argues that in addition to being inscribed by power (for example, the disciplining of the body that occurs in school, from waking up at a regular hour to sitting still and silent for prolonged periods of time), the body is also stamped by “‘voluntary’ procedures, lifestyles, habits and behaviors.” 426 Grosz here refers to typical exterior stylistic identifiers: hairstyle, makeup, and clothing. The repetition of everyday activities and gestures, as a form of bodily discipline, resides somewhere between involuntary and voluntary forms of regulation. Cleaning the home, caring for the body, actions and behaviors repeated daily in a state of mindlessness, are nonetheless folded back into the shifting plane of inside and outside that constitutes the Mobius strip of the mind-body relation.

Akin to Grosz’s Mobius strip model, a proliferation of rituals of maintenance by feminist artists in the 1970s probed how various measures of upkeep performed by the body impacted interior life. From Marina Abramovic’s Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful (1975) (fig. 49) to Scrubbing by Chris Rush (fig. 50) and Faith Wilding’s


425 Ibid., 117.

426 Ibid., 142.
Waiting, both performed at Womanhouse in 1972, artists explored how specific aspects of a feminine identity were imposed by both expectations regarding women’s physical bodies and appearance and the constraints of expected behaviors—cooking, cleaning, child rearing—within the limited domain of domestic space. Rush’s Scrubbing and Wilding’s Waiting both presented the artists as lone performers of a single repetitive action that, according to each artist, constitutes a large portion of a woman’s lifetime. The specific set of gestures coded as feminine in the performances—Rush on her hands and knees rhythmically brushing the floor, and Wilding rocking back and forth in her chair, hands folded in her lap—tame and limit the female body. Scrubbing literalizes the prostrate position of women, and exposes the normalization of the female body as one in dull yet constant pain as a result of her “naturally” feminine tasks. As she leaned forward with slightly hunched shoulders, Wilding’s position was a docile one, redolent of the lack of control implied by the act of waiting. The physical manipulations of the body these tasks require also resonate psychically; their repetition emphasizes their inscription as natural aspects of feminine subjectivity. As Grosz writes, “What is sometimes loosely called body language is a not inappropriate description of the ways in which culturally specific grids of power, regulation, and force condition and provide techniques for the formation of particular bodies.”

The act of waiting or scrubbing ties up body and mind together in stasis, taming and colonizing both physical and mental energies. Gober’s work demonstrates that it is not only women whose subjectivities are determined by the repetition of everyday routines. While, unlike many of the feminist artists under discussion, Gober’s physical body is largely absent from his work, bodily

\[427\] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 143.
presences, including his own, are continually evoked throughout his oeuvre. The metonymic link between some of his sculptures and his own body, for example the wedding dress and a later sculpture of a Madonna, demonstrate how these symbols of purity and maternity, understood to imprint the mind from an early age, also and just as effectively shape the human body. During the production of the wedding dress, tailored to his own measurements, Gober wore a bra to get a sense of the constriction of women’s garments. By referencing his male form in these works, Gober both implicates his own body in the power ideology exerts over mind and body, and complicates how that ideology employs specific symbols and actions to produce gendered identity. It is not only these powerful symbols that exert such force on the body. Gober’s more silent and mundane objects in fact have an active role in the continual process of becoming that is underscored in Grosz’s paired terms of “embodied subjectivity” and “psychical corporeality.” An empty bed, a closed door, and urinals each help constitute the body’s negative space, drawing attention to the care and cleaning that goes into its maintenance. The unconventionally sized Corner Bed from 1986 (46 x 39 x 70 in.) (fig. 51) draws attention not only to he who sleeps and dreams in it (a child), but also she who makes it (his mother).

The emphasis in much feminist work on prescribed notions of bodily care and how these everyday activities interpolate subjectivity can be seen to anticipate both Grosz’s thinking on embodiment and Judith Butler’s theories of performative

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subjectivity. Abramovic’s video *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* begins with the artist in the nude, brushing her hair with a comb in one hand and a hairbrush in the other. Her methodical, if inattentive, brushing demonstrates one of the many activities used to tame and package, shape and contain the feminine body. She then appears to lose control, thrashes her arms and emits wild sounds while attacking her head with the brush in an effort to break free from this regulating activity. Abramovic’s nudity and aggression are not simply a means of contrasting the natural state of her body with the civilizing function of the brush in an easy juxtaposition of nature and culture, but are targeted to the ideological regime that casts the hairbrush as a regulatory tool, obscured by the banality of brushing one’s hair.

Martha Rosler also emphasizes the structural repetition of daily gestures to address the experiences of women in which relationships of power are played out over the details of routine and domestic desire. In the artist’s words, “In my work there’s a movement away from the sense of an individual life toward the idea that we’re not so in control of how we get to live.” Rosler correlates the everyday and the political, the private and the public, most explicitly in *Domination and the Everyday* (1978). The video features various forms of interacting and conflicting communication. Spaced over thirty-seven minutes, the video includes advertisements from fashion and beauty magazines and family photos interspersed with pictures of the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. A political text about oppression in the U.S. and abroad then crawls across the screen, followed by a recording of Rosler playing with her young son while the radio plays an

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interview with a gallerist about the art of the ’60s. The juxtaposition between Rosler’s family life and the oppression of women and people in the Third World demands the viewer to reflect on how the unnoticed activities of everyday life support these abuses. The Brechtian jumps between the different mediums of representation within the video—news program, personal snapshots, fashion spreads—prevent the flattening of each form of media into a construct of universal oppression. The inclusion of the radio interview points to the significant differences between 1960s Pop and Minimalism and the impact of the growing awareness of political positionality due to the efforts of the New Left and women’s rights movements.430

In a paper entitled “The Figure of the Artist, the Figure of the Woman” given in 1983, Rosler elaborates on Pop’s importance and shortcomings. Pop challenged the heroicization of the male artist as an outdated convention and, like feminism, “articulated the social character of the self and of private life.” However, Rosler notes, “Unlike Pop, feminism and feminist art insisted on the importance of gender as an absolute ordering principle and also on the politics of domination in all social life, whether personal or public.”431 Here Rosler articulates the basis of Gober’s kinship with feminist forebears: Feminism, according to Rosler, draws attention to how everyday life is conditioned by ideology to produce specific positions of gender, class, race, and sexuality. It was this

430 According to Alex Alberro, “It would be difficult to overemphasize the effect of the women’s movement on Rosler’s work as she reconceptualized herself as a political and social entity.” Alex Alberro, ”The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy,” in Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 78.

lesson, structured around the acknowledgment of the inseparability of the personal and the social, that Gober inherited from feminism.

DOMESTIC UNEASE

Gober’s exploration of feelings of ambivalence toward the home, figured as the paradoxical locus of desire and confinement, follows up on similar analyses of domesticity initiated by feminist artists. The uncanny quality of Gober’s sculptures speaks of an unease pooling beneath the surface that results from the impossibility of fulfilling heteronormative gender identities assigned to the domestic sphere. The complex set of sentiments presented by Gober’s installation is distinct from, yet analogous to, the disquiet many feminists felt about the home due to their inability and unwillingness to correspond to the restrained domestic roles that were available to women. Gober’s sinks stage a quiet dissent, refusing to be functional, signaling yet resisting the rituals of ablutions performed in the home. The sinks lack faucets, basins are missing from some, and still others are so tilted and warped that they would be unable to hold water. Gober’s beds are too small for adults, the doors cannot be passed through, and the X-shaped and slanted cribs could only produce serious psychological defects in their inhabitants. And yet, the care and attention that went into the making of these flawed objects evokes, strangely enough, a quiet longing for the domestic. The inoperable state of Gober’s objects speaks specifically to those who have experienced the chasm between the expectations of normality bred by the ideal home and their own non-normative identities and desires.

As often as the domestic was assailed by feminists in the 1960s and ’70s for its role in the repression of women, it was also represented as a site of intense ambivalence
between desire (maternal and otherwise) and animus. Ree Morton sought to express the simultaneity of these opposing feelings for the home and family life in works that share with Gober’s sculptures a paired sense of longing and futility. Morton’s sculptures from 1974 typically conjoin a feminine decorative aesthetic with mismatched and evocative texts that unsettle the ease with which women putatively embrace domestic roles. *Of Previous Dissipations* (fig. 52) spells out that phrase on a disheveled pink bonnet made from Celastic, which is bunched around a panel featuring a salmon pink and light blue floral wallpaper pattern. That enigmatic phrase, lacking a subject, may refer equally to distraction, excess, or dissolution, and deviates from the mild mannered and prettified snippet of interior design that almost overpowers its sentiment. *Many Have Run Away, To Be Sure* (fig. 53) consists of indeterminate forms—birthday candles on an elongated cake or a hybrid bed duster and book of matches—painted in pink, yellow, and green. The sculpture’s colors and amateur execution suggest a ceramic plaque hanging in a young girl’s bedroom, yet bearing a foreboding, even tenebrous, message that we may speculate has to do with the rejection of a future determined by pastel colors and ribbons. Morton’s sculptures from this period abandon the quiet, naturalistic abstraction of her earlier works in favor of the garish color combinations and cryptic sentence fragments. The disaccord between the decorative object made by the mother for her children, suggested by the bright colors and ornamental motifs of Morton’s sculptures, and the unsettling messages they bear conveys the not uncommon simultaneity of mismatched feelings directed toward the family.

Among the many similarities between Morton and Gober—from their interest in the dailyness of life and their deployment of an odd humor, to how their materials and
process signify—is the space they allow for the viewer to make her own connections and conclusions. According to an artist friend of Morton’s, “She was fanatical about there not being a particular way of interpreting the work … The viewers had a right to discover for themselves what the work meant to them.” Both artists situate the viewer amidst the strictures of, and challenges to, normative family structures. In Gober’s 1989 installation, the wedding dress juxtaposed with the genital wallpaper contrasts regulating symbols or activities with a desire to break from them, while for Morton this conflict occurs in the disjuncture between the prettified formal elements of her sculptures and their often dark messages. The viewer is not compelled to fully identify with either the potent symbols of normalcy or their subversion; rather, she is allowed space to make her own way and construct her own meanings.

The ambivalence about the domestic expressed by both Gober’s and Morton’s installations results from its status as a site of both confinement and desire. This pairing of fantasy with restraint, represented by the cage motif, manifests itself in a series of baby cribs and playpens Gober made between 1986 and 1987 in which their purpose to restrict movement became ever more prominent. He categorized the cribs as among his “emblems of transition,” objects that “you complete with your body, and they’re objects that, in one way or another, transform you. Like the sink, from dirty to clean, the beds, from conscious to unconscious.” When Gober began this series, the cribs started out standard enough, constructed of blonde wood and recalling the most generic image of

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nursery furniture. A similarly standard wooden playpen followed. The slightly off-kilter tilt of Distorted Playpen (1986) (fig. 54), the first of the infant corrals to deviate from the norm, is not overtly apparent, and thus all the more off-putting. It takes a moment to realize just how it is deformed, confirming, as Hal Foster writes, that “The nastiest playpen is the most normal, as if every pen were a potential Skinner Box.”

Gober’s cribs suggest the dark and repressed experiences of infancy. The cribs probe basic assumptions about their function: Are they primarily a means of safekeeping or control?

A photograph of Distorted Playpen installed with Two Urinals and the Corner Bed, taken in Gober’s studio in 1986 (fig. 55), emphasizes the penal associations of these barred play spaces. The Corner Bed is situated, as per its title, in the far corner of the room, just a few feet away from the Double Urinals, which are installed side by side. These sculptures were all made in the same year, and variations of them appear in a 1987 exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery, so their arrangement in his studio may have been random. However, the composition of the photograph seems not so accidental, its angle and cropping suggest a purposeful installation shot, grouping together sculptures that speak similarly about repression and constraint. The bed’s plain sheets and single blanket

\[\text{434}\] Foster, "An Art of Missing Parts," 139.

\[\text{435}\] Gober’s disclosure of the authoritarian side of structures generally thought of as enclaves of safety parallels Mike Kelley’s exploration of the underbelly of gifts given to young children as expressions of familial expectations in his montage of stuffed animals, More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid (1987). In receiving gifts and incorporating them into their familial surroundings, children at an early age enter into a dynamic of parental expectations and assumptions, which to some extent guide their development. In Gober’s series of cribs and in Kelley’s montage, an ambiguous aspect of socialization is exposed, whose influence encourages the acquisition of normative patterns of development.
are pulled tightly over the mattress, as if it were made by an Army recruit; it is topped by
two firm, stacked pillows. Underlying the juxtaposition of these simple objects is a latent
sexuality: The placement of urinals next to a bed suggests the homosocial context of the
barracks or jail cell and the side-by-side urinals conjure two bodily presences, implying
the vulnerability and sexuality of the micturating male body. The slightly angled
construction of the Distorted Playpen further implies confining bars for this conjured jail
cell. Gober comments that the crib form “was always a cage, but it wasn’t a cage that I
invented. I think it was a cage I saw or felt. It was an interpretation of an object, but it
wasn’t an object that I invented. People say to me that I am cruel for depicting it, but I’m
not sure that’s true.”

Rather, Gober’s motivations for representing the crib as a cage was to expose the often repressive dynamics of childhood development; the Distorted
Playpen suggests that the repression of homosexual desire signaled by domestic objects
begins in early youth.

CONFINEMENT AND FANTASY: EMPTY ON THE INSIDE

In his early sculptures and installations, Gober inflected representations of
domestic socialization with feelings of confinement—a synthesis appearing in the work
of many women artists. Gober’s cribs, cages, and doors appear in their sinister banality as
domestic objects from and through which one cannot exit. The viewer shares the sense of
physical constriction evident in the structure of the sculptures, while she vacillates
between the personal and social meanings generated by their repetition and juxtaposition.
Gober’s first installation at the Paula Cooper Gallery, in 1987 (fig. 56), returned the crib

to an ambiguous domestic setting: Slanted Crib and X Playpen were surrounded by Slip Covered Armchair, Plywood, Two Partially Buried Sinks, and Two Urinals. The X shape of the crib is undoubtedly a mutation of form, a minimalist variation on a theme, but one whose literal referent cannot but serve as a reminder of both the restrictions placed on the child within, and the threat that accompanies the failure to internalize those restrictions. The cribs and playpens function, along with the wedding dress, as both emblems of transition and metaphors for inhibition. Gober correlates the cage motif with the domestication of the individual at pivotal stages in his or her life—infancy, marriage—suggesting that such socialization works to constrict various possibilities of identification. For example, marriage between a man and a woman has been naturalized so that its relation to processes of socialization has been obscured. In Gober’s work, however, the appearance of cages allows “natural” facts, such as childhood and marriage, to emerge instead as hegemonic institutions, thus demonstrating how social constructions of gender, heterosexuality, and the family work together to produce fantasies of domestic norms.

The association between the cage and marriage has long been a part of the feminist tradition, dating at least to Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 treatise, A Vindication of...

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437 In Adrienne Rich’s groundbreaking essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," she characterizes heterosexuality as a compulsory component for women to live a life recognized by society, and argues that all women are physically, emotionally, and financially coerced into heterosexuality. According to Rich, heterosexuality and marriage are not choices, but ideological institutions. “Women have married because it was necessary, in order to survive economically, in order to have children who would not suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism, in order to remain respectable, in order to do what was expected of women … and because heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment.” Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 59. For discussions of the positioning of marriage in the political oppression of women, see Brown, States of Injury; and Carole Pateman, The Sexual Contract.
the Rights of Woman, in which she writes, women are “confined then in cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but plume themselves and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch.” The confinement of body and desire by marriage as a social institution and psychic state is explored in the second room of Gober’s 1989 installation at the Paula Cooper gallery, where the Hanging Man/Sleeping Man wallpaper surrounded a white satin bridal gown. The juxtaposition of the wallpaper’s images, of a lynched black man and a white man tucked away in bed, with the wedding gown suggested that if the domestic interior supports the tranquility of the male sleeper, it depends on the constraint of the bodies of Others. The bridal gown was hand-sewn by Gober, who devised a hybrid pattern that is plain and conservative by the standards of the late 1980s and conjures the bygone era of the 1950s. An interior steel armature, visible if one peers inside the garment, evoked a cage. It buttressed the weight of the dress and contrasted sharply with its soft satin fabric. This support is analogous to the undergarments that similarly constructed the typical female silhouette of the ’50s, literally enclosing and reshaping the female body according to societal ideals. The wedding dress as an object of fantasy, evoking girlish dreams of being a princess and having a picture-perfect life in marriage, conflicts with the constraint occasioned by the actual wearing of the dress. One may then ask, as with the image of the sleeping man, are they often not the same thing, fantasy and confinement?

Mimi Smith’s series of clothing-based sculptures from the 1960s illustrates the friction between the fantasy of romance symbolized by the wedding dress and the actual

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438 Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, ed. Charles Hagelman, 15th ed. New York: Norton, 1967), 98. For literary examples of the cage as a metaphor for women’s oppression, see the avian imagery in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening (1899) and Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969).
drudgery of domestic life. Steel wool, a rough material associated with scrubbing, forms the intimidating trim of Steel Wool Peignoir (1966) (fig. 57), otherwise made of lace and nylon, while Girdle (1966) is a corset constructed out of rubber bath mats, elastic, and ribbon. In the mid-1960s Smith was no doubt influenced by Pop art’s language of the everyday. Yet her works do not participate in the detached and impersonal irony that characterizes Pop. Rather, they speak to the lived reality of women, using fashion and household materials that can be readily identified. Jane Harris writes that Smith was inspired by her own roles as wife and mother, backed by the artist’s comment:

“Somehow I wanted my work to say something about my life. … I didn’t want to be elitist. I wanted someone’s mother-in-law to look at my peignoir and know what I was talking about.”439

The “what” she was addressing in these works—the confinement of the feminine through the actions and materials of everyday life, and the outward roles they imply—continued to preoccupy Smith as she turned her attention to the domestic environment in the 1970s.

Yoko Ono’s 1970 film Freedom (fig. 58) also explores the binding of the female body by undergarments. The camera focuses on Ono’s upper torso and chest as she attempts to rip through and tear away at the fabric and wiring of her bra, more an armature of immuration of the body than support for it. The film ends before resolution is reached, “because,” according to Ono, “it is the process of struggle for liberation, and not the spectacle of the body, which form both the subject and meaning of the film.”440

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film, Ono demonstrates that women’s garments were not only symbolic containers for
women, but actual cages for the body, limiting freedom of movement. Gober wore a bra
around his studio while making the wedding dress because it was important for him to
experience the physical constraint of women’s garments in order to understand the
process by which the wedding dress imprints itself on women. As Gober told it, “For
days I would wear a bra around my studio when I was alone to help me to begin
identifying with the form.”\textsuperscript{441} The evolution of the gown included perusing bridal
magazines, identifying different patterns, and shopping for mannequins. The crossing of
constraint—both physical and psychological—and fantasy became palpable for Gober
during the arduous process of constructing the bridal gown, which he describes as “a very
tough piece to make, not just technically … but emotionally.”\textsuperscript{442} The symbolism of the
interior scaffolding of the dress, the technical difficulties of manufacture, the physical
restriction placed on Gober as he wore a bra, are meant to produce an ordered subject,
and yet, as Richard Flood points out, “the thing itself was a void.”\textsuperscript{443} This repository of
hopes and dreams turns out to be empty on the inside.

The collective recognition of feelings of confinement in and by the domestic
sphere marked a sea change for feminism in the US. Middle-class housewives in the ’60s
and ’70s became attuned to and politicized by a sense of being arrested within the private
confines of the domestic sphere, as described most popularly by Betty Friedan in her

\textsuperscript{441} Gober, “Interview: Richard Flood and Robert Gober,” 123.

\textsuperscript{442} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{443} Ibid.
best-selling book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan identified “the problem that has no name” as the repression of desire and a sense of the impossibility of achieving fulfillment within the home. She described this amorphous contagion, a seeming epidemic among middle-class American wives and mothers, in the following oft-quoted passage:

> It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning … Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slip cover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—“Is this all?”  

The publication of *The Feminine Mystique* provided an impetus for women (implicitly white, middle and upper-middle class, though Freidan did not specify that demographic) across the U.S. to name their symptom and consequently to begin to be able to identify with one another. These steps would become important to the politicization of women in the forthcoming second-wave feminist movement. The elaboration of a politicized feminist movement in the 1970s provided a different kind of language to analyze marriage.

The psychic resonances of the “feminine mystique,” or of feeling one’s identity ensnared within the domestic sphere, finds quite literal representation in a number of artworks from the 1970s, a time when consciousness-raising techniques were first being developed to allow women to understand the political implications of their personal experiences. This is true for several works included in *Womanhouse*, the collaborative project by members of the Feminist Art Program. Robin Schiff’s *Nightmare Bathroom* (1972) (fig. 59) displayed the form of a woman submerged in a bathtub filled with sand.

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444 Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 57.
Her forehead and hair push against the bathroom wall, to create the sense that she has sunken not only into the water, but into the structure of the house as well. The figure of the woman was constructed out of sand, and during the course of the exhibition the female form slowly eroded until she became literally subsumed by her surroundings.\footnote{Raven, "Womanhouse," 55.}

En route to the \textit{Nightmare Bathroom}, Sandra Orgel’s \textit{Linen Closet} was located in the upstairs hallway. The doors to the closet had been left open to reveal a female mannequin who appeared to be attempting to emerge from it. Her right leg and left arm reached out in a forward motion, while the rest of her body was trapped, segmented between the closet shelves. Neatly folded bed sheets surrounded this figure, imprisoned by her household duties. The stasis of Schiff’s and Orgel’s sculptures did not, however, reflect the flight lines away from entrapment made newly visible by the women’s movement. According to Orgel, “As one woman visitor to my room commented, ‘This is exactly where women have always been—in between the sheets and on the shelf.’ It is now time to come out of the closet.”\footnote{Quoted in Raven, “Womanhouse,” 55.}

Mimi Smith paralleled the feelings of confinement within the home and the physical boundaries of the house itself. In wall drawings of doorways, stairs, and living-room sets constructed from knotted thread, wooden tape measures, and nuts and bolts, Smith turned her eye toward Conceptual art. She disregarded the cool objectivity of, say, Sol LeWitt’s wall drawings or Mel Bochner’s works with tape measures, for an approach whose gendered connotations are decidedly personal, albeit in a way that invited many of her viewers to identify. The wall drawings \textit{Stairs} (1974) (fig. 60) and \textit{Closed Door} (1975)
consisted of the contours of these architectural features depicted in meticulously knotted black thread and tape measures. According to Jane Harris, “The obsessive repetition” involved in the creation of the wall drawings “externalized an interior, psychic state and made manifest the oppressive tedium of Smith’s everyday lived experience: the mechanical monotony of housework.”

The “closed door” is actually left ajar, seeming to swing slightly out into the space of the gallery; yet one was blocked from entering or exiting through the obdurate two-dimensionality of the white wall. Similarly, each step of the staircase receded into space according to the rules of perspective, yet the stairs led to nothing but the same flat wall. In both works, the tension between the representation of architecture that allows one to move through space and the obstinate reality of the containing gallery wall expressed blocked fantasies of escape from the vacuous routines of the domestic sphere.

If feminist artists infused everyday objects and settings with a sense of despair over the bondage of the home, the alterity Gober introduced into simple household objects acknowledged the gap between normative experiences of domesticity, based on its representation by the mainstream of the U.S., and alternative experiences of it, consisting of identifications with the home and dis-identifications with the normative heterosexual subjectivities it supposedly engenders. The tension between familiarity with and defamiliarization of domestic objects that runs through Gober’s repetitions allows us to question our naturalized relationship to these objects, seeing them from another point of view and grasping the sometimes alienating character of daily life. Perhaps they even allow us a glimpse of how, for those whose identities do not fit within the normative roles

447 Harris, "Clothing Art: Mimi Smith," 32.
of the traditional family—whether GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered) persons or women seeking an identity for themselves outside of the home—household objects can simultaneously represent a desire for the domestic sphere and a rejection by it.

TRAPPED IN THE DOMESTIC MIRROR

The ways in which the domestic was figured as a cage by feminist artists in the 1970s underwent a transformation when this metaphor was taken up by women associated with the Pictures Generation of the late 1970s and ’80s. While, at best, uncomfortable associations exist between feminist artists of the 1970s and the subsequent generation of Pictures artists, the theme of confinement within and by the domestic stereotypes of women is threaded throughout the works of Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and Laurie Simmons. These artists explored the trap of feminine identity as it consists publicly in persistent stereotypes created and controlled by the media. By employing these very same media forms—magazine shots, advertisements, publicity stills—the female Pictures artists did battle with the received images of women that they had been pressured to fulfill. Photography and montage became alternative media for female artists to explore their particular positions socially and within the art world. Though they used different media, it is these artists that Gober has said he identified with most closely, sharing with them an intensive interrogation of identity as it is formed within the private sphere, and exposing the ideological assumptions upon which those

448 For a critical point of view of the Pictures woman vis-à-vis ’70s feminist art, see Schor, “Backlash and Appropriation,” 255–57.

449 Laurie Simmons has said, “in order to find a voice for myself as a woman artist, I had to reject painting and sculpture, so photography became interesting in a new way.” Simmons, “Laurie Simmons Interviewed by Sarah Charlesworth in NYC on February 24, 1992,” in Laurie Simmons (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1994), 7. A similar line of reasoning compelled many feminist artists of the previous decade to turn to performance and video.
categories of identity rest. A photomontage of Kruger’s from 1980 perhaps says it all: red block letters spelling out the word “Container” are superimposed on a cropped black-and-white newsprint illustration of a ranch-style suburban home (fig. 61). The letters nearly correspond to the entire height and width of the house, which is further circumscribed by three graphic red lines boxing it in. Geometrically shaped patches of green overlap the lawn and trees in the background, recalling a style of graphic design from the 1950s. The typical suburban ranch house is here a repository of values from the period of its design. The title stresses the containment of desire by expectations produced within the domestic sphere, which is emphasized in other works from this series. A woman in a satiny bathrobe lies across a bed holding a piece of crumpled paper over her face with areas torn out for her eyes in Untitled (Deluded) (1980) (fig. 62). The word “Deluded” spelled out in white capital letters nearly spans the top of the image over a fragment of a tilted black square, which emphasizes the compacted boundaries of the picture. Various geometric pink shapes draw our attention to the areas they overlay: the woman’s body, her obscured face, and a pile of women’s magazines. A thin graphic band of stripes connects the magazines—and the images of perfection included therein—with the paper mask. The suggestion is not that underneath this makeshift mask is something so monstrous it bears hiding, but that the mask shields the woman from both her own humiliation in her boudoir, and from public examination resulting from an inability to attain the status of the image itself. The crumpled paper of the mask creates a pathetic false face to conceal physical imperfections and the despair they cause, pointing to how the images within the magazines effectively create internal regulations that shape the woman’s sense of her body. The mask and the images of perfection within the magazine are in a way synonymous, both smoothing over desire and identity and acting to make them uniform.

450 See n. 8.
Kruger’s strategic deployment of found images continued throughout the 1980s and into the present. Craig Owens writes that Kruger’s work “is ultimately addressed to the struggle over the control and positioning of the body in political and ideological terms—a struggle in which the stereotype plays a decisive role.” He argues that the stereotype works to produce “ideological subjects that can be smoothly inserted into existing institutions of government, economy, and perhaps most crucially, sexual identity.” In Owen’s terms, stereotypes lack the complexity to trouble ideological structures, however that is just what Kruger and other Pictures artists do with them. *Untitled (Deluded)* both demonstrates and deconstructs the ways representation inscribes the body to produce naturalized images of femininity.

Cindy Sherman took up the language of media stereotype and repetition of gesture in her well-known and oft-discussed *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80). In that series, Sherman created tableaux in which she convincingly conjured characters and scenes from what appeared to be publicity shots of movies from the 1950s and ’60s, yet the films to which they seemingly refer do not exist. Like Kruger’s work, the *Untitled Film Stills* demonstrate how the endless repetition of gestures without any point of origin serves to inscribe and confine the body. Many of Sherman’s *Stills* share with both Kruger’s and Laurie Simmons’s work the technique of cropping images of a woman within the domestic sphere, a structuring device that acts in a sense as a cage. *Untitled Film Still #3* (1977) (fig. 63) depicts an aproned character—ostensibly a young blonde housewife—standing in front of a sink. Sherman’s body, shown only from her hips to her brow, is positioned to the extreme right of the frame, while an expanse of blank wall occupies the center stretch of the composition. Even as her body is fragmented within the compressed

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452 Ibid., 194.
space of the kitchen, our heroine looks suspiciously out over her shoulder. Yet, as her left eye is bisected by the upper edge of the photograph, even her gaze cannot escape the domestic frame in which Sherman has positioned her. In *Untitled Film Still #10* (1978) (fig. 64), a brunette dressed in a short patterned skirt and knee-high boots crouches on the floor to retrieve the contents of a fallen bag of groceries. To reinforce the already vulnerable pose, Sherman has cropped the horizontal edges of the image tightly around the body of the woman, trapping her against a background consisting of a shiny white stove and refrigerator. Several visual signifiers, including her clothing and heavily made-up eyes, indicate the character as a ‘single girl,’ yet the way in which her attention is focused outside of the frame announces the ominous presence of another, as if she is looking at someone standing over her. Sherman’s characters are forever being watched, indicated by the knowing direction of their gazes. The *Stills* construct the domestic scene as a semiprivate domain, one of constant surveillance from both without and within. Sherman’s construction of compressed spaces, featuring a female body that either fills them entirely or exceeds their perimeters, suggests that domestic space produces both physical and mental restrictions, with walls ever closing in on their inhabitants.

The similarities between Gober’s work and that of the women of the Pictures Generation are not only thematic, but also lie in the way the artists denaturalize assumptions about specific types. The emphasis on stereotyped images—whether the form of a generic door, or a wedding dress—appears in much of Gober’s work. The Pictures artists acknowledge how these stereotypes—whether the role of homemaker assigned to women or the varied types of womanhood presented by Sherman (i.e. “single

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girl,” “working girl,” “girl in trouble”)—have functioned to constrict women’s identities. Revealing how compositional devices encode images with specific meanings, as Sherman does, or Kruger’s pointing to the fissures between image and caption, the women Pictures artists challenge the reality of stereotypes by revealing to the viewer how these signs are constructed.\textsuperscript{454} Gober, on the other hand, denaturalizes the given set of ideas attached to everyday objects by making them strange through his strategies of craft, repetition, deformation, and juxtaposition. Both approaches specifically explore how stereotypes of, or assumptions regarding, gender and sexuality produce and confine identity. Both invest heavily in the viewer, involving her in reconstructing signification from the fragments she is offered, whether compositional devices or a series of juxtaposed images. Gober’s symbols and Kruger’s and Sherman’s stereotypes are shown to be additional containers of identity.

Simmons’ series of photographs of dolls posed within domestic interiors serves as another useful point of comparison with Gober’s sculptures, in particular his own series of dollhouses.\textsuperscript{455} Gober and Simmons both created peculiar scenarios that evoke feelings of discomfort with the domestic, despite the home’s supposed function as a safe haven. Typical of the difference between Gober and his Pictures contemporaries, however, is

\textsuperscript{454} Drawing on Roland Barthes’ work on myths, Rosalind Krauss offered a reading of Sherman’s \textit{Film Stills} that attends to how each formal element of the photographs is a signifier that combine to produce the overall meaning of the image. Rosalind Krauss, \textit{Cindy Sherman} (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 20.

\textsuperscript{455} Simmons relates how, when she was living in upstate New York, she came across a going-out-of-business sale at an old toy store, which she describes as “like a strange dream. There were toys all over … toys I’d had as a child, toys I’d gotten for Christmas — the same dollhouse, the same dolls, board games and tea sets. Not just similar — the very same brands and boxes that I had played with.” Laurie Simmons, "Laurie Simmons Interviewed by Sarah Charlesworth," 8.
that his dollhouses recreate the material reality of domestic scenarios in order to establish for the viewer a tangible relationship to them, while Simmons often uses dolls as surrogates for the viewer in order to focus attention on the effects of the photography as a means of representation.

Simmons staged multiple series of photographs within a found dollhouse. In *Purple Woman/Kitchen/Second View* (1978) (fig. 65) a female doll in an old-fashioned purple dress stands rigidly before a kitchen table on which various miniature foodstuffs and cooking utensils have been laid out. The photograph is cropped just above the doll’s head, and the arrangement of the kitchen furniture, oddly angled in relation to the picture plane, makes the depicted space seem claustrophobic and artificial. Adding to the sense of compressed space is the bright, harsh lighting of the set and the extreme saturation of the colors. The setting, easily recognizable as a dollhouse, is wholly unreal, yet the feelings of anxiety and restriction within the domestic space produced by the composition and coloring of the photograph are palpable and easily identified with by certain viewers. *Kitchen/Woman in a Corner* (1976) (fig. 66) depicts a different view of the same kitchen set of *Purple Woman/Kitchen/Second View*. A female doll sits isolated in the corner, looking away at the back wall in a disheveled kitchen—the plates are out of place, a water stain is noticeable on the back wall, and a cabinet door and refrigerator door have both been left open. Strong contrasts of light and dark in the black-and-white series enhance the mysteriousness of the domestic objects and settings. The doll’s position in the kitchen, in the face of its disorder, speaks of a sudden paralysis, an inability to follow through with the role assigned to her, and though the events leading up to this moment remain unclear, the feeling of anxiety that pervades the photo could pass as a typical
response to the condition of being a housewife by the mid-1970s. Simmons’ use of compositional strategies to create feelings of unfamiliarity and discomfort within the home are analogous to Gober’s domestic tableaux; both leave the viewer to reexamine her own domestic construct with new eyes.

As Simmons stated in an interview, her photographs are more about her mother, grandmother, and aunt and their domestic realities than about her own situation. The materials Simmons used were culled from the era of her childhood, just as for Sherman the Untitled Film Stills do not portray the exact roles and fashions promulgated by the media during her adulthood, but refer back in time, to a nostalgic past. These Pictures artists image femininity as it was envisioned during their youth. The changes in U.S. society and in the art world wrought by feminism in the 1970s may have allowed Kruger, Sherman, and Simmons to envision themselves as women and as artists distanced from these stereotypes as they came of age, yet the sense that their feminine subjects still struggle personally with received images of the feminine pervades the work, and that is one of the sources of its power.

Both the moniker “theoretical girls” (bestowed upon the women associated with the Pictures Generation by the artist Jeff Wall) and the commonly held ideas about their work that this nickname suggests obscure some of the underlying structural themes that motivate their work and that constitute shared ground with Gober: desire, fantasy, and

456 Ibid., 9.
emotion. When Hal Foster writes of Gober’s recognition of the visual field as sexualized, he notes that the feminist postmodern art of Kruger and Sherman, among others, is responsible for establishing this notion. They took part in the creation of an alternative viewing position—in terms of voice, mode of address, and multiple perspectives—for those not included in the white male tradition of the modernist era. Gober’s work similarly displaces the heterosexual white male modernist position of the creator and viewers of his works, while pointing out that the (nonuniversal, sexed, and sexual) male body is implicated within the domestic cage as well, even as heteronormative structures create distinctions to deny this fact.

FAMILY MATTERS

In the 1980s, the efforts of Gober and the female Pictures artists to expose the chinks in the façade of domestic normalcy were set against the programmatic re-enforcement of traditional family values by the conservative Right. Gober instrumentalized the “personal is political” approach of feminist art, in both his artworks and writing, to reveal how the Right placed a nostalgia-laden, idealized version of the nuclear family at the center of public discourse in order to further marginalize those who resisted that classification. In doing so, Gober effectively illustrated the shared ground

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458 Foster, “Art of Missing Parts,” 148, n. 32. Most of the attention given to Gober’s relationship with the female Pictures artists appears in footnotes.

459 In its idealization of family values, the Right created a picture of the American family that supposedly harkened back to the 1950s, the height of U.S. military and economic
between people adversely affected by conservative politics, including the gay community, women, minorities, and the poor.

Gober’s work oscillated adeptly between vague sketches of his personal past and the larger social context of daily American life, along with the desires and ideologies that support it. In the 1980s and ’90s the AIDS epidemic was omnipresent for those whom it affected, including Gober. In his contribution to the “Cumulus from America” section of Parkett magazine, a recurring essay about the New York art scene written by a different artist every issue, Gober wrote of how this deathly specter foregrounded the everyday events of his life. Gober’s response is a reflection on the impossibility, for many, of disassociating the AIDS epidemic and the art world. The essay provides a timely key to how this personal and social context may have informed Gober’s art during the ’80s, something that he did not readily discuss in interviews. His “Cumulus” combines personal fragments from Gober’s recent past—running into an old friend on the street, a chat about the New York art scene, a visit to a friend at work, a taxi ride to the hospital, reading the newspaper, a shower—and tells of how each of these ordinary life episodes was inseparable from his experience of AIDS. Gober commented on sitting with two others who had experienced the death of loved ones within the previous month, “And the extraordinary thing about this was that there was nothing extraordinary about it at all.”

His statement describes the continuous air of death that hung in the mix of art and everyday life.\textsuperscript{460}

Similar to Gober’s rumination on how AIDS compounded all daily experience, in 2004 the artist Gregg Bordowitz wrote:

So total was the burden of the illness—mine and others’—that the only viable response, other than to cease making art entirely, was to adjust to the gravity of the predicament by using the crisis as a lens. Indeed, AIDS touches every issue imaginable: sex, love, death, economy, drugs (recreational and medicinal), morals, ethics, representation and culture.\textsuperscript{461}

Bordowitz continued, “the key to understanding and fighting the AIDS crisis depends on the subjective experiences of people with AIDS and the objective conditions of the crisis.”\textsuperscript{462} Bordowitz’s 2001 video \textit{Habit} reflects this intertwining of the subjective and objective that harkens back to feminism’s “the personal is political.” \textit{Habit} is a fifty-two-minute long autobiographical documentary whose structure mirrors Bordowitz’s daily routine. The video begins with his daily morning routine of waking up, taking pills, doing yoga, which is contrasted with the routine of his partner. These mundane scenes are interrupted by footage from an international conference on AIDS in South Africa in 2000, focusing on the struggle of African groups to attain equal access to the drugs we saw Bordowitz ingesting moments earlier. The video then revisits Bordowitz and his partner in scenes that explore intimacy and interiority. He wrote of the work, “Habit is the substance of daily life. Our lives are defined by daily activities that are often rendered

\textsuperscript{460} Gober, "Cumulus from America," 169.


\textsuperscript{462} Ibid., xxviii.
invisible or unremarkable through repetition.” Bordowitz’s words mirror Molesworth’s description of habit as a mode of subjectivity expressed by Gober’s sculptures. The experiences Habit represents situate the personal and political on a commensurate field that stresses their structural dependence on each other. The video communicates that the political cannot ignore that it too is comprised of an aggregate of lived experience. This notion of habit, of gestures automatically iterated across the horizon of untracked time—the everyday—is repeatedly used by a range of artists (Gober, Bordowitz, Rush, Rosler, Sherman, to name a few) and expresses how the domestic sphere may be a more insidious site of subjectivization than the public sphere.

For a 1992 installation at the Dia Center for the Arts (fig. 67), Gober produced several stacks of newspapers by collaging existing news items together with articles and images of his own creation. The juxtaposition of these real and fake news items served to tell conflicting stories about the U.S. and to reveal the inconsistencies and hypocrisy at work when the promotion of political ideology completely overrides attention to the lived experiences of many. In “Cumulus from America,” Gober wrote about the disjuncture between the intensity of the impact of AIDS on the gay community and the neglect of the crisis elsewhere: in political discourse, in the daily lives of heterosexuals, and in the media. He examined the content of news items running in parallel columns in The New York Times on Halloween, 1989: “Homosexuals Unmask on Night of Costumes” and an article on the increase of racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic crimes in the U.S. under the Reagan presidency. The first article was based on false assumptions that supported


stereotypes of gays, and the second article failed to mention an increase in violence against them. As Gober wrote, “So on the left hand side of the page we are misrepresented and on the right hand side we are ignored.” 465 The personal backdrop of the news story for Gober was a day spent visiting a friend at Bellevue Hospital, anxiously smoking cigarettes and reading in the waiting room.

Gober’s experience of reading the Times on that Halloween, and his resulting anger, motivated him in the following years to create counterfeit versions of the New York Times (fig. 68) and New York Post. Lynne Cooke described the articles as a “compendium” revealing “countless cases of oppressive sexual stereotyping, discrimination against homosexuals, maltreatment of children, premature death (often of artists), and the willful neglect of the health crisis and AIDS pandemic by government and official bodies, all of which is set amidst the banal and apparently innocuous events of everyday life and commerce.” 466 The inclusion of sanctioned images of the family—exemplified by clippings of wedding announcements and a picture of Dan and Marilyn Quayle—introduces and interrupts the binary construction of the deviant versus the normative that underpinned the 1989 installation. The page with the picture of the Quayles includes an article titled “Bush is Sent Forth as a Champion of Family Values” next to a picture of shining new cookware. Beneath it is a short article, “Baby Left in Brooklyn Trash,” and to the right is one bearing the title “Jury Convicts Man Who Locked Children in Bronx Apartment.” The articles on the abuse of children question the

465 Gober, "Cumulus from America," 170. Elsewhere Gober writes of how AIDS was neglected on an epic scale because it was seen as a disease only infecting gay men: “The government lied to the people and shrank from its duty. Families abandoned ‘loved ones.’ Even the Church abdicated its responsibility to life.” Gober, "Notes," 60.

466 Cooke, "Disputed Terrain," 17.
paradigm of the family as the ideal unit of American society, as the rhetoric of the Right would have it, not to mention the inconsistencies between the death of children within the American home and the so-called “right to life” movement. They point to the failure of “family values” to defend the most vulnerable of Americans. The articles and images also contrast the would-be official picture of family values—the white, upper-class status of the Quayles—with those left out of the picture because of their race and class. In these newspapers, the presence of the so-called deviant interrupts the surface of the normative in the domestic sphere in such a way that reveals contradictions, but weaves them back into the fabric of the everyday.

The tension between the images of glorified family life promoted by both politicians and the media in the 1980s and the reality of family life is analogous to the tension between the desire for heteronormativity and its disruption, as the two are played out in Gober’s 1989 Paula Cooper installation as well as in his series of newspapers. In the 1980s the nostalgic recollection of stereotypical 1950s family life, already containing elements of its own dissolution, points to the intensity of the structures designed to keep them in place. Gober reveals the inconsistencies within the institution and unmasks them as anything but natural states.

CATEGORICAL CONTAMINATION AND THE DESIRE FOR THE DRESS

Gober’s juxtapositions of loaded symbols in the 1989 Paula Cooper installation worked to deconstruct the rigid system of binaries (male/female, public/private, rational/emotional, etcetera) that maintains heteronormative ideologies. The logic of binary oppositions seeks to maintain the purity of its categories against all indications that, for the subject, they are always contaminated through the process of acquiring
identity. Gober’s revelation of the interdependence of these binaries draws on a feminist tradition. His means of corrupting the binary system, opening a multiplicity of readings for his viewers, also allows space for the interaction of feminism and queer theory. In 1993, Gober remade the bridal gown and wore it himself, retroactively unsettling the correlation of biological sex, gender, and sexual identity that marriage instantiates under the twinned hegemonies of heterosexuality and patriarchy.467 Gober used a photograph of himself wearing the dress, as well as brunette wig and make-up, to construct a fake advertisement for Saks Fifth Avenue captioned “Having It All” (fig. 69), which appeared in the series of fabricated newspapers for his Dia installation. In the context of the advertisement, the phrase “having it all” inspires images redolent with the idealized promises of marriage for white middle class women: the dress, a house with the white-picket fence, and 2.5 children. This image of the artist subverts the heteronormative hegemony by asking what it means for boys and men to fantasize about wearing that gown. According to the artist Nayland Blake, “Queer people are the only minority whose culture is not transmitted within the family. Indeed, the assertion of one’s queer identity

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467 Following Adrienne Rich’s argument against the idea of marriage as natural, sociologist Jo Van Every reasons that marriage is the hegemonic form of heterosexuality. Feminist theories of marriage and the family, she argues, generally neglect to problematize heterosexuality, whose status as the norm eclipses its theorization. Rich and Van Every understand the naturalization of heterosexuality and the corresponding expression of gender through the roles of wife and mother in marriage as the ultimate means of subjugating women. In their view, heterosexuality is a device that structures the oppression of women and those who do not fit within its bounds. See Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” and Jo Van Every, “Heterosexuality and Domestic Life,” in Theorizing Heterosexuality: Straight, ed. Diane Richards (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1996), 39–54.
often is made as a form of contradiction to familial identity.”468 Does a queer desire for the fantasy promised by marriage alter what marriage means?469 Gober allows male cross-identification with the gown, multiplying the significations associated with it. The artist in drag foregrounds his identity as a gay man who may have always felt as if he was living against the natural order of the home and family. For another bundle of newspapers, Gober created a simulacra of the New York Times wedding section featuring a different image of the artist in the wedding dress beneath wedding announcements, including a photograph of a happy couple, and advertisements for wedding rings and suits. The juxtaposition of the image of Gober in drag with an image of a “real” married couple, reminds us of the alienation of queer people from the institutions constitutive of heteronormativity. Again quoting Blake, “for queer people, all of the words that serve as a touchstone for cultural identification—family, home, people, neighborhood, heritage—must be recognized as constructions for and by the individual members of that

468 Nayland Blake, “In a Different Light,” in In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice, ed. Nayland Blake, Lawrence Rinder and Amy Scholder (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995), 12.

469 This question is particularly relevant in our current political moment in which gay marriage has not only been the subject of serious debate, but has been voted on at various levels of government, from voter initiatives to city and state legislatures. However, the context of the very idea of gay marriage was quite different in the late 1980s, during the height of the AIDS epidemic. For many, gay marriage now seems to have an aspect of assimilation at the same time that it is slowly altering ideas of the traditional family, though it seems to do this on the very terrain of tradition. In contrast, during the AIDS crisis, alternatively structured families arose to address the needs and desires surrounding intimate care. For an interesting consideration of the debates over gay marriage, which continues to problematize marriage as heterosexist and misogynist, see Suzanna Danuta Walters, "Take My Domestic Partner, Please: Gays and Marriage in the Era of the Visible," in Queer Families, Queer Politics: Challenging the Culture of the State, ed. Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 338–57.
community,’ thus the photograph of Gober inhabiting the wedding dress reveals it and its associated fantasies to be social constructions.\textsuperscript{470} The gown’s connection to marriage does not become displaced when it is donned by a man; rather, the cross-dressing image complicates the expectations of heteronormativity by situating male desire in the domestic sphere.

The feminization of the gay male implicit in the image of Gober in a wedding dress does not ossify gay male identity as feminine as much as it demonstrates the impossibility of adequately filling either category (masculine or feminine) as delineated by ideological and societal expectations. The inability to embody a pure gender is hinted at retroactively by the six bags of kitty litter Gober crafted for the Paula Cooper installation, which had, at the time, brought up issues of the contamination of categories, representing pollution in contrast with the purity of the wedding dress. Of the uneasy pairing of the kitty litter and the wedding dress in the 1989 installation, Gober commented: “Because I was juxtaposing a low symbol with a high symbol and a deflated symbol with an inflated one, people had a very hard time reconciling the two, and they had a hard time, I think, seeing that I could be connecting the two with some respect.”\textsuperscript{471}

\textsuperscript{470} Blake, “Different Light,” 12.

\textsuperscript{471} Gober, “Interview: Richard Flood and Robert Gober,” 124. Reinforcing the idea of contagion suggested by the kitty litter, Gober revisited the sculpture one year later, combining its form with a latent image of a torso from the series \textit{Slides of a Changing Painting} (1982–3). Using the same mold as was made for the kitty litter, Gober cast the sculpture in wax and transformed it into a torso supporting one female breast on the left and half of a male chest on the right. Human hair applied to the wax demarcates the male half, though it intrudes on the female side, particularly around the navel. Do we read this hybrid as suggesting that gender and biology function as the artist’s materials as much as encaustic does? The hybrid torso became a much revisited theme in Gober’s work, appearing most notably in an \textit{Untitled} sculpture (2002–04) in his installation at the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.
The contamination of binary pairs demonumeralizes the wedding dress, nudging it away from fantasy and the symbolization of feminine identity by harnessing it to the everyday. The dress might be worn on “the most important day” of a woman’s life, but it also represents a portal into the everyday drudgery of housewifery.

While Gober animated the wedding dress to speak of feminine identity and gay male desire, by dismantling the edifice separating the public and the private he demonstrated that all male identities and desires (whether homosexual or not) are founded in the domestic sphere. The movement between the first room and the second spatialized the socialization of the subject, a movement entailing the repression of manifold desires. The oral, anal, and other sexual desires on view were largely articulated through domestic objects such as donuts, drains, and wallpaper, which underscore the reliance of each term of the binary on the other, proving that a hierarchy of the normative cannot be established without the deviance it suppresses. These objects do not only symbolize, but also contribute to the production of desire and identity for men within the home, as opposed to the much-theorized production of identity within the public sphere.

In *Feminism and Philosophy*, Moira Gatens explains how Western philosophy, from the Enlightenment on, has sequestered female subjectivity within the private realm and made it stand for the devalued terms of the entrenched mind/body, reason/passion, and nature/culture dichotomies. Gatens writes, “Much of the cultural and conceptual complexity of the way human life is presently organized stems from this dichotomy between the private and public spheres and the overriding sexual specification of these two spheres of activity.”

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⁴⁷² Gatens, 122.
the private, as the sphere of natural relations, bodies, and passions that underpin culture. However reliant the public may be on the private, social identities are structured on the division between the two terms. What happens when it is discovered that elements belonging to the private sphere make frequent trespasses into the public and vice versa? Gober’s mixing of elements signifying these dichotomies and his presentations of cross-desires ask this very question.

Gober’s works from the 1980s and early 1990s offer the opportunity to explore how tendencies within feminist art became inflected by markers of gay identity in order to suggest different ideas and affects regarding the family and about gender that open these often oppressive structures to greater critique and possibility. I do not want to suggest that Gober’s work illustrates queer theory, or that this is the only critical framework for his body of work because of the artist’s sexual identity. Rather, queer theory resonates with Gober’s work because his objects, and their juxtapositions across space and time, do the work of queering normative gender categories and sexuality and the regulatory mechanisms by which they are produced. The correlation of objects in the Paula Cooper installation, and their challenge to normative binaries, questioned the associations between race, sex, gender, and desire, which he showed to be naturalized in the domestic sphere. Through the impure mixtures of binary terms, Gober revealed the boundary between them to be fluid and the poles of their hierarchy to be reversible, thereby challenging the unity of an identity based on gender or sexuality. While Gober’s imagery often belonged to the past, the constant movement between and through

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473 Ibid.
identities that his work engenders is commensurate with the characterization of queer theory as fluid and inclusive.\(^{474}\)

Gober’s various disruptions of domestic ideals, and his work’s insistence on the inseparability of the personal and the social, bind it to much feminist artwork, opening a dialogue between them that may be productive for alliances between queer theory and feminism. The relationship between the two camps has never been precise and is often misunderstood. Elizabeth Weed notes that for many in the academy, feminism and queer theory are “most easily understood as two branches of the same family tree of knowledge and politics.” However, that is not to say that the two are easily commensurable.\(^{475}\) The space between the two theoretical and political fields can be rife with misunderstanding and even competition.\(^{476}\) According to Weed, what queer theory and feminism have in

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\(^{474}\) Ruth Goldman argues that the primary characterizations of queer theory are its fluidity and inclusivity, while recognizing its refusal to be defined and thus delimited. Goldman, “Who is that Queer Queer? Exploring Norms around Sexuality, Race, and Class in Queer Theory,” in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*, ed. Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 170. The theorization of feminism is also fluid and has been highly responsive to changing social and political contexts. Biddy Martin has issued a warning about setting up an opposition between feminism and queer theory that critiques the former as fixed, while heralding the latter as its hipper replacement. She writes that she is “worried about the occasions when antifoundationalist celebrations of queerness rely on their own projections of fixity, constraint, or subjection onto a fixed ground, often onto feminism or the female body, in relation which queer sexualities become figural, performative, playful, and fun. In the process, the female body appears to become its own trap, and the operations of misogyny disappear from view.” Biddy Martin, “Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias,” in *Coming Out of Feminism?*, ed. Mandy Merck, Naomi Segal, and Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 11.


common is the idea that “sex and sexuality cannot be contained by the category of gender.” In other words, sexual practice and desire do not correspond to social notions of feminine and masculine.

Gober’s work of the 1980s and early ’90s uncovers very fertile ground for cultivating intersections between queer theory and feminism—a meeting point discussed and debated throughout academia. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has written extensively about the confluence of misogyny and homophobia. William J. Spurlin writes about the influence of feminism, through a generation of feminist teachers and college professors, on gay men in academia, which has shaped his own academic interests. Following Sedgwick’s work, he is concerned with,

how the projects of feminist and gay male inquiry may operate in coalition to disrupt further the structures of patriarchal domination responsible for oppressive social relations. To what extent do the political positions of women (both straight and lesbian) and gay men converge by virtue of being situated in (ef)feminized positions in relation to patriarchal power (which is not the same as assuming that there is a transhistorical relation between feminist, lesbian, and gay male inquiry)?

Spurlin’s statement bears on Gober’s complication of heterosexual desire and the cross-identifications he makes between masculine and feminine. We see these cross-identifications, for example, in his hybridization of the idiom of craft with a minimalist

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477 Ibid., viii.


479 William J. Spurlin, “Sissies and Sisters: Gender, Sexuality and the Possibilities of Coalition,” in *Coming Out of Feminism?*, 75.
style in his sculptures from the early- to mid-1980s, and his momentary drag performance as a bride in the newspapers for the Dia installation.

Gober’s 1989 installation disrupted this system of binaries and replaced it with new associative chains of thought that the viewer discovered for herself or himself. While the wedding dress and its implied confinement contrasted with the multifarious modes of sex depicted on the wallpaper, the later image of Gober inhabiting that dress resignifies the relationship between them. The dress is no longer simply about female bondage, but is now associated with male cross-identification, opening up its meaning to alternative desires and sexualities. Here we may locate a point of contention between feminism and queer theory, in asking how this example of male drag challenges the classic binary system and its accompanying roles. Or is it only freeing for male desire? The wedding dress, as such, is a particularly potent symbol, and its connection to traditional paradigms of marriage does not become displaced when it is donned by a man. The drains allow for a flow of desire around the wedding dress, rather than a hypostatization of domestic roles and identity. Further, when we imagine Gober in the dress, the sleeping man wallpaper takes on a new role as an object of desire for the female/male wearer of the dress. Likewise, if the sleeping man is coded as gay, then we must also reimagine his relationship to the lynched man, who becomes a projection or dream of a complicated sexual desire that entails violence and domination. Given the current debates on same-sex marriage these complicated cross-identifications prompt the question as to whether the configurations possible in same-sex marriage, which may challenge naturalized gender roles, can alter the deeply embedded power dynamic between men and women in heteronormative marriages.
Judith Butler and Biddy Martin discuss the difficulties involved in the theorization and acting out of cross-identifications, difficulties that speak well to the complexity of discussing feminist art alongside the work of male artists that are not directly allied with its politics, as well as work that is. “Crossing,” as Butler and Martin conceive it, “may be conceived, on the one hand, as an appropriation, assimilation, or even a territorialization of another site or position, or it can be understood as a movement beyond the stasis attributed to ‘positions’ located on a closed map of social power.” Cross-identification necessarily produces disjunction and ambivalence; in the act of “crossing,” a prior position is (at least partially) evacuated to identify with “an ideal, an object, an aim.” Identifications, the authors remind us, are complex, they simultaneously involve “both taking and relinquishing … both appropriation and sacrifice.” The motion involved in cross-identification destabilizes categories of identity. This fluidity and hesitation reflects the way identity is lived: No single category can encompass the experiences that constitute an individual life and a political subject.

When Gober enrobes himself in the wedding dress and poses for a photograph, we are reminded that gender and sexuality, its norms and its varied expressions, are lived and embodied in ways that both reflect and cut against the grain of their theorization. In his 1989 installation, questions of gender and sexual identity were bound together, as the strictures that bind and confine gender were shown to restrain sexuality, however differently their operations are felt across the wide spectrum of women and GLBT persons. The feminist art that impacted Gober is not emptied of its political ambitions by


481 Ibid.
its association with him; rather, he is in communication with it, resignifying feminist methods and concepts to accommodate different, and varied, contexts, experiences, and subjectivities.
CONCLUSION:

REVOLUTION AND REVERB

In a recent panel entitled “Colleagues, Co-conspirators, and Partners: Perspectives from Feminist Men,” curator Glenn Phillips spoke about his archival project “The Men of Feminism.” Consisting of materials that range from recent interviews with artists active in the 1970s to a video of a session of a men’s consciousness-raising group at Cal Arts, Phillips explained that his collection attests to the visibility of men’s participation, in varied ways, in the dialogues about feminism and art that occurred during the 1970s. Phillips outlined the shared approaches of so many of the artists of that era and their awareness of one another. He questioned why, for example, “we don’t talk about

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482 The panel was held as part of “Shares and Stakeholders: The Feminist Art Project Day of Panels at CAA” on February 25, 2012 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and was sponsored by the Feminist Art Project, “an international collaborative initiative celebrating the Feminist Art Movement and the aesthetic, intellectual and political impact of women on the visual arts, art history and art practice, past and present.” See http://feministartproject.rutgers.edu/about. Videos of each of the panels can be found at http://vimeo.com/channels/sharesandstakeholders.

483 The artist Lloyd Hamrol recounted his participation in the men’s consciousness raising group organized at Cal Arts, describing it as a “group that was generated out of the issues of feminist objectives and intended to look into men’s historical and future roles in relationship to those of women.” He remembered, “These were really interesting issues but we never got very far with this group.” Hamrol, “Lloyd Hamrol remembers Cal Arts,” Afterall Online, February 14, 2008. http://www.afterall.org/online/738.

484 Phillips recalled a recent interview with Eleanor Antin, during which she stated that she only came to appreciate Chris Burden’s work after understanding his use of personae. She specifically mentioned Burden’s 1976 performance, Garçon, during which he acted
Suzanne Lacy and Chris Burden in the same sentence when we talk about artists who analyze and manipulate the media,” or, he wondered, “why we don’t talk about Eleanor Antin and Paul McCarthy in the same sentence when we’re talking about artists who make use of fantasy in their work?”

Phillips raised questions about cross-gender affiliations that are relevant to my own argument about the impact of feminist art on McCarthy, Mike Kelley, and Robert Gober. However, Phillips’s presentation ended curiously. Through much of his talk he focused on dialogues with feminism by well-known artists like McCarthy, Burden, and Vito Acconci, however he concluded by voicing a wish that “certain artists and works of art” become unhinged from the feminist label because that marker “can give viewers permission to stop looking further at any other ways that this work may be significant or innovative.” He continued, saying that he would prefer to determine “different rubrics,” such as the adoption of personae, which would remap the era and uncover previously unseen links between artists and “mutual influences.” In juxtaposing similarly thematic works in order to bring revived attention to many deserving artists, my dissertation, in part, parallels Phillips’s model. However, I do so without divesting feminist art of its politics, which would, to some extent, reduce it to a formal exercise. I would argue that, even in preserving the work’s “feminist” label, discussing Lacy’s performance In as a waiter serving coffee at a San Francisco gallery. Loeffler and Tong, Performance Anthology, 252.

Phillips outlined four modalities of “men in feminism”: husbands of feminists, artists whose practices shifted due to feminism, artists expressing “male experiences,” and those who displayed no connection or awareness to feminism, but whose work none-the-less expresses feminist content.
*Mourning and In Rage* (1977) alongside Burden’s *TV Hijack* (1972) or, say, Ant Farm’s *Media Burn* (1975) would remain thought provoking.

There is indeed, as Phillips suggested, “a problem with the f-word.” What I took from his talk was a sense that feminism is a burden, even to those who ascribe to its politics, because it renders certain works invisible to those who either are not interested in feminism or who have been conditioned to reject its intersections with artistic practices. My dissertation attempts to chart another course for feminist art, one that sees its innovations as integral to developments outside of its own categorical limitations. In Paul McCarthy’s *Sailor’s Meat*, Mike Kelley’s *Half a Man*, and Robert Gober’s 1989 installation at the Paula Cooper Gallery, feminism has been hidden in plain sight by historiographical practices that continue to refuse women a generative role. I have aimed to restore a feminist heritage to these artists by reconstructing histories of dialogue and shared interests between McCarthy, Kelley, Gober and feminist artists; reclaiming arenas of thought and forms as having feminist provenances within the art world; and listening to or echoing the artists themselves, where certain of their statements have remained unexamined. My approach has necessarily converged with a feminist analysis of how these artists have instrumentalized elements of feminist art in their own work; in so doing I have attempted to provide a nuanced reading of the sexual politics of these works.

In Chapter One I positioned McCarthy within a performance scene in Southern California that valued feminism and that included many artists who were also members of feminist art collectives. The flow of ideas and experiments between these artists informed their interests in the intersection of performative personae and the formation of subjectivity. McCarthy’s *Meat Cake* series intersected with a type of feminist
performance as research into subjectivity and the acquirement of gender as a lived process. Situating McCarthy in this context allows for a synchronic mapping of affinities, and challenges the diachronic accounts of his work that are often rooted in the Pollock-Kaprow lineage of performance art.

*Sailor’s Meat* (fig. 1) pushed against the social constructs that maintain boundaries between genders. As McCarthy crudely mimed an actress in a B movie wearing a platinum-blonde wig, gaudy makeup, and black lace panties he created a barely verbal female character that he performed against his own male body. Presenting the body as porous, he disarticulated the male body as he hid his penis and doubled it as a crutch pad (which morphed into a vulva) and a sausage (which he stuffed into his anus). Yet, within this phantasmagoria of abjected flesh and body fluids, dismembered members, feminine poses, wigs, and lipstick, there remained legible a complex dynamic of violence and subjection directed towards the traces of his feminine persona.

McCarthy’s performative structure of doubling nevertheless complicated his use of violence and depravity as they also targeted his male body, and is the means by which he attacked the system of binaries on which patriarchal hegemony depends. *Sailor’s Meat* expressed a double bind for male artists who worked with feminist-informed strategies: it revealed how intensely power and masculinity are intertwined, but the performance also enacted that power to a degree. The result was a relationship between McCarthy and feminism characterized by ambivalence. On the one hand, McCarthy expressed a transformation of how gender is thought and lived, and on the other, *Sailor’s Meat* withheld from the audience the kind of political or collective identification from the
audience that may have, in the mid-1970s, made his work visible as an agent of such change.

In Chapter Two I analyzed Mike Kelley’s writings and statements regarding *Half a Man* (fig. 2) to parse how he positioned himself vis-à-vis feminist art and show how he constructed an equivalence between all 1970s feminist art and essentialism in order to devalue the former. His expressed attitude towards feminist art was likely part of a general “anxiety of influence” that prompted Kelley to create a lineage for himself that had only tenuous ties to traditional art historical sources and consisted primarily of subcultural phenomena, which contributed to an image of Kelley as a cool outsider. Even as Kelley took up the language of craft, he criticized feminist artists who had done so as consolidating the stereotypes associated with this kind of aesthetic production, which he deemed essentialist. However, his appraisal neglected feminist art’s instrumental use of craft to critique the social and psychic structures that historically coded it as feminine. Kelley performed a reductive critique of feminist art, in which essentialism emerged as a straw man, rendering feminist art too woefully uncool to be a possible influence on him.

*Half a Man* classified its masses of crocheted and otherwise handmade dolls and animals—carnival via thrift shop effluvia—as transitional objects in order to recover the childhood desires suppressed during socialization. The installation also evoked characters of adolescent boy characters, as in his banner *Let’s Talk* (fig. 30); for Kelley, it represents the possibilities of rupturing the processes of socialization and perpetuating a “pathetic masculinity,” which he understood as a challenge to dominant modes of masculinity. However, by the time Kelley created *Half a Man* in 1989, the regressive male had already
been folded back into hegemonic conceptions of masculinity.\textsuperscript{486} Kelley’s model of masculinity as seized prior to adulthood is parallel to his construction of cool. Both have negative implications for women, who are in turn figured as restrictive, repressive (a configuration that also imagines women as valuing creativity less than men, which has implications for artists), and responsible for the financial, physical, and emotional maintenance of the domestic.

In Chapter Three I enumerated the various affinities between Gober’s practice in the 1980s and feminist art, including their mutual interrogations of how domestic roles shape identity in ways both confining and comfortable, and the attendant strategy of synthesizing the public and private spheres. Like Kelley, Gober pictured the domestic as the locus for identity formation, as a metaphoric cage. Whereas for Kelley the home is exclusively a site of repression, Gober revealed the domestic to be a site of male desire and attended to the multiple, often conflicting, desires invested in it through a variety of subject positions. The imagery Gober deployed in his 1989 installation at the Paula Cooper gallery (fig. 3) inspired a complicated succession of emotions associated with the home: longing and futility, anger and hope, familiarity and unease, nostalgia, desire for the heteronormative lifestyle the home symbolizes and for the disruption of this normativity, and the shame and liberation resulting from the inability to fulfill prescriptive roles of the “typical American family,” as if one ever existed. During the late

\textsuperscript{486} See Ehrenreich, \textit{Hearts of Men}, 125—33. In her book, Ehrenreich explored the socio-economic factors responsible for the devaluation of marriage by men in the latter half of the twentieth century. She mapped the changing definitions of masculinity in the US—represented by The Beats and Hugh Hefner, among others—and demonstrated how men’s abandonment of their bread-winner role preceded the American feminist movement of the 1970s.
1980s Gober used the metaphor of the cage to inflect his cribs and wedding dresses with latent fears of confinement, and to identify such institutions as childhood and marriage as hegemonic configurations that condition expressions of gender and sexuality.

Gober demonstrated an understanding of the intertwined ways in which the body and subjectivity are shaped through the performance of daily rituals (such as cleaning) and through encounters with objects. Gober’s continual transitions from public to private spheres, evidenced in both his artworks and his writing, evinced his commitment to the feminist principle, “the personal is the political.” For Gober, the emergence of the AIDS crisis, and the utter lack of response to it by social institutions such as the government and the Church, inflected his imagery and the associations it produced, as he imagined or denied countless ablutions for each of his sinks and spoke of his sculptures of kitty litter symbolizing intimate care for the body. In the series of simulacral newspapers Gober created in 1992 (fig. 68, 69), he juxtaposed, for example, real newspaper articles about instances of child abuse in Brooklyn and the Bronx with images of Dan and Marilyn Quayle, revealing the bankruptcy of the Right’s rhetoric of family values and its inability or unwillingness to affect change in the lives of those families who needed it the most. He also created fake advertisements for Saks Fifth Avenue captioned “Having It All” and featuring an image of Gober himself wearing a reconstructed version of the wedding dress, instigating a series of questions about gay male desire and the domestic and denaturalizing the fantasies and social roles associated with that dress by women.

McCarthy, Kelley, and Gober all used binary logic as a type of structuring device, suggesting the extent to which it informed thinking about gender, even as feminism and
McCarthy ate away at the fixity that binary logic assumes, showing boundaries between dichotomous terms to be porous and as unfixed as his phallic doppelgängers. His messy materials and confounding actions prevented the viewer from clearly identifying the performer according to social cues or identifying body parts as either male or female. His appearance and actions could not be completely aligned according to distinctions between two sexes, their expression in two genders, and their correspondence in sexual desire for the other sex/gender.

In *Half a Man*, Kelley was at times successful in setting up binaries in order to disturb them by creating tension between technique and subject matter, and their associations with a particular gender. In *Nature and Culture* (1989) (fig. 28), he deflated the self-importance of photomontage’s avant-garde history as a political language by paralleling it with decoupage, provoking the viewer to question whether the imagery is meant to be political commentary, or whether it simply reflects the obsessions of its supposedly teenage producers. Are the dresser and panel made by the same teen, incorporating images of fragmented femininity and hypermasculinity to point to the impossibility of a totalized identity, one that does not neatly occupy the social expectations of either a male or female subjectivity? Yet Kelley simultaneously, and

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487 Historian Joan W. Scott writes, “‘Men’ and ‘women,’ we now know, are not simple descriptions of biological persons, but representations that secure their meanings through interdependent contrasts: strong/weak, active/passive, reasonable/emotional, public/private, political/domestic, mind/body. One term gains its meaning in relation to the other and also to binary pairs nearby. Indeed, ‘the other’ is a crucial (negative) factor for any positive identity—and the positive identity stands in superior relation to the negative.” Scott, “Feminist Reverberations,” in *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (2002): 5.
perhaps inadvertently, attached relatively novel terms to the male/female dichotomy, setting the categories feminist art/essentialism/responsible adults/repression against subcultural practices/cross-dressing/youth/cool. Unfortunately, given Kelley’s influence in the art world, his positioning of feminist art may have resonated beyond his own art practice.\footnote{According to Dan Cameron, “It is nearly impossible to escape the extraordinary influence [Kelley] has already had on his generation. On the most fundamental level of form, the remarkable ease with which he has been able to move freely between diverse media…has given the green light to a vast number of similarly inclined younger artists, putting Kelley in something like the position of serving as a Bruce Nauman figure for the ‘90s.” Cameron, “The Apocalyptic Vulgarian,” \textit{Art and Auction} (November 1993): 92.}

To a certain extent, Gober’s installation was also structured by a series of pairs with multiple significations that often fell into dichotomous categories. For instance, the wedding dress, the drains and the sleeping man imagery suggest purity and cleanliness, while the genital wallpaper and kitty litter schematically read as impure and unclean. However, Gober encouraged viewers to follow their varied routes of desire to make cross-readings and identifications between these pairs that disrupt their binary associations: the drudgery of household work and cleaning associated with kitty litter taints the wedding dress; the wedding dress suggests a restrictiveness when it comes to the various sexualities of the first wallpaper; the lynched man suggests the violence against the body that parallels the wedding dress’s imprint on the female body. He overthrew the logic of the binary by questioning the positive valuation of certain of its terms and, in some cases, delineating how desire triangulates and complicates these associations and assessments. In the particular ways Gober accomplished this, he
provided the viewer with pathways that disarticulate the associative chain binding gender expression, sexuality and desire.

Whether dressing as or “working as” a woman, drag became a kind of lingua franca for male artists wishing to take part in gender play. With only the barest hint of a character—an anonymous woman, perhaps a whore—McCarthy’s performance focused most of its attention on the sensory through the contact between the body and its doubles, the meat products and the smell of condiments. There is a tension between the utter carnality of the work and the ways in which it is almost abstract. Unmoored from personal experience and actuality, McCarthy’s actions seem to be targeted against the dichotomous structures themselves, as much as the categories of male and female. As his penis slipped in and out of view and was doubled by a crutch pad and sausages, as his panties were removed and his wig slipped on his head, McCarthy leveled body part and accessory as things easily donned and doffed. *Sailor’s Meat* communicated a sense of how, for example, the inscriptions of makeup or possession of specific body parts can be a literal drag on subjectivity and how they may limit and confine identity.

Temporarily taking on feminine signifiers will not alone enable men to enact a resignification of categories of gender. Kelley, along with certain critics who write about his work, assumed too much in believing that limited instances of drag alone are able to so. Rather than understand his work within the sphere of effects of feminism, Kelley envisioned his doing craft work as “playing a woman,” and taking part in a historical continuum of drag, which he described in his essay, “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre,” as a male-based practice reaching back to Kenneth Anger and including such rock stars as David Bowie and Alice Cooper. However, rather than challenge masculine norms, make-
up and other so-called feminine attributes were legitimized as part of a rebellious masculine pose when worn within the literal arena of rock’n’roll. Many of Kelley’s examples of drag in his essay are not sustained examples of that practice and lack the sustenance to make them as subversive as he wishes to see them. *Half a Man* also failed to perform the kind of resistance he ascribes to cross-dressing, because, though he sets his work in the domestic sphere, contra his own claims to “working in the mindset of a woman,” he neglected to address his work’s significance for women or their relationships and desires within its domain. Too often in this body of work, Kelley positioned himself as subversive in ways that magnified a disdain for conventional femininity.489

While the only instance of Gober performing in drag are the photographs of him in the wedding dress, his 1989 installation encouraged the viewer to make cross-identifications that operate along a similar logic of boundary crossing as the advertisements that contained those photos. A particularly insightful moment in the installation is Gober’s triangulation of the wedding dress with the *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man* wallpaper. Each image of this triad can stand alone, but when juxtaposed, varied (and unexpected) relations emerge that resignify their social meanings. For example, might the wallpaper’s sleeping man be fantasizing about the hanging black man, an asphyxiation kink recoded as a lynching, to admit into the dynamics of interracial desire the long history of slavery

489 In a wholly different context, Biddy Martin argues against staging gender play and fluidity against a concept of femininity as fixed. She professes to be, “worried about the occasions when antifoundationalist celebrations of queerness rely on their own projections of fixity, constraint, or subjection onto a fixed ground, often onto feminism or the female body, in relation to which queer sexualities become figural, performative, playful, and fun. In the process, the female body appears to become its own trap, and the operations of misogyny disappear from view.” Martin, “Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias,” in *Coming Out of Feminism?*, ed. Mandy Merck, Naomi Segal and Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 12.
and the precarious positioning of black masculinity in the U.S.? Or perhaps he is able to sleep soundly because his privilege rests on the potentially brutal enactment of restrictions on the bodies of blacks and women? Throughout the installation, the subjects depicted, embodied or absent, take shape through the intersubjective relationships and the cross-identifications that Gober’s objects engender. It is worth revisiting Biddy Martin and Judith Butler’s joint theorization of cross-identificatory practices as it pertains to Gober’s relationship with feminism and potentially provides a model of interaction between feminist aesthetic practices and artists who do not identify as feminist. By encouraging mobility across various positions cross-identification can contest the rigidity of “identity and political alignments” to cultivate connections between oppositional practices.\(^{490}\) Butler and Martin stress the complexities involved in any move beyond one’s (gendered/sexed/raced/classed) position, which may simultaneously form continuities and “constitute a disavowal or defense or do all of this at once.” While such crossings may entail a risk of loosening consolidated political identities, they recognize how varied identities are “mutually implicated” in each other’s constitution and maintenance. In attempting to parse McCarthy’s, Kelley’s and Gober’s responses to feminist art, I hope that I have communicated the ways they might “do all of this at once,” unraveling the particularities of their ambivalence.

CONTEMPORARY ECHOES

I began this dissertation in and with the year 2007, considered a banner year for feminist art due to the opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the

\(^{490}\) Butler and Martin, “Cross-Identifications,” 3.
Brooklyn Museum and the exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. It was these events, constituting the institutionalization of feminist art, that signaled to Lynn Hershman the conclusion of her forty-two-years-in-the-making documentary, *!Women Art Revolution* (2010).\(^{491}\) The film communicates something the 2007 museum exhibitions were not entirely able to; listening to individual artists tell their own stories makes palpable the social, political, and personal contexts of the period, as well as the urgency, passions (political and otherwise), and high stakes motivating feminists in the 1970s. The absence in the present of the intensity with which women lived feminism then—as not just an activist movement or an ideology, but a daily commitment that changed the way women conceived of themselves and their sexuality, as well as changing how they organized their everyday lives—profoundly affects the ways in which feminism manifests in the work of subsequent generations of artists.\(^{492}\)

Given the paucity of art historical attention otherwise given to many of the artists featured in the film, Hershman describes some younger feminist women’s practices as the result of a “transgenerational haunting, as if a legacy was passed down to them in secret.” Her conceptualization of a spectral feminism suggests a set of intangible effects on art practices that appear as if mysteriously and through seemingly anomalous mediums. McCarthy, Kelley, and Gober, I argue, function as such mediums, transmitting aesthetic

\(^{491}\) Hershman narrates, “I began to shoot this film forty years ago. I’ve been waiting all this time for the right ending.”

\(^{492}\) For example, *!Women Art Revolution* features footage of art historian Arlene Raven speaking about how her embrace of feminism resulted in her rethinking her role as the housekeeper within her home, and led eventually to her divorce, which allowed her to come out as a lesbian.
models and subject matter first made visible in contemporary art by feminist artists. Departing from the spiritual metaphor, McCarthy, Gober, and especially Kelley, are all extremely influential to younger artists. In light of this, how the legacy of 1970s feminist art is framed in their work and acknowledged has potentially far-reaching ramifications for a wide range of artists. I am particularly interested in how contemporary artists have extracted or reclaimed a feminist legacy from McCarthy’s, Kelley’s, and Gober’s works, and recoded them to reflect their own positions vis-à-vis feminism.

This dissertation’s tracing of feminism’s heterogeneous legacies is informed by historian Joan W. Scott’s conceptualizing of the effects of feminism in terms of “reverberations.” She describes feminism’s patterns of circulation as “seismic shock waves moving out from dispersed epicenters, leaving shifted geological formations in their wake. The word reverberations carries with it a sense both of causes of infinite regression—reverberations are re-echoes, successions of echoes—and of effect—reverberations are also repercussions.” The image of reverberation is a fitting one to visualize the circulation of feminist strategies in art for the past forty-plus years. Scott’s model acknowledges that any contemporary iteration of feminism encompasses responses to the shifts and mutations that past iterations have undergone in their journey through historical time. The metaphors of shock waves and echoes account for the complexities at work in the relationship between any member of a younger generation of women artists and earlier feminist artists. In my concluding discussion of a younger generation of women artists recuperating feminism in their revisitation of works by McCarthy, Kelley and Gober, I wish to focus on Laura Parnes and Sue de Beer’s collaborative video, Heidi

2 (2000). Parnes and de Beer stress that their video is an “unauthorized sequel” to McCarthy and Kelley’s joint 1992 video Heidi, but “not a parody or homage.”

McCarthy and Kelley’s Heidi (fig. 70) continued their preoccupation with the reproduction of authority within the family and the repression that it entails, summoning themes similar to those of their video Family Tyranny/Cultural Soup (1987), and probing the role of social institutions and cultural representations in this process. Parnes and de Beer refocus the scene of socialization on a mother-daughter relationship, rather than advancing McCarthy and Kelley’s compulsions to act out the cycle of reproducing paternal authority. Both Heidi videos defile the beloved Johanna Spyri story Heidi (1880), about a young orphan girl sent to live with her curmudgeonly grandfather in the Swiss Alps, and its idealization of family life. McCarthy and Kelley shot their video on a set constructed for the exhibition Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone at the Galerie Krinzinger in Vienna, which included several of the film’s props. Pictures pinned to three poster boards in the installation clarify the video’s references, and include images of Hummel figurines, the Matterhorn at Disneyland, and film stills from The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) and Frankenstein (1931).

Playing the role of Grandfather, McCarthy intensified his abusive and buffoonish character in Family Tyranny, appearing as a perverted brute who heads the household. Wearing a mask representing the pop singer Madonna, Kelley plays Heidi as a precocious and willing assistant in Grandfather’s debased plots. The character of Peter is represented by a grotesque mask featuring a bald head with oversized eyes protruding from a doughy

face. A lifeless doll, modeled after Otto Dix’s painting *Kleines Mädchen vor Gardine* (1922), stands in for the character of Klara. The actions that ensue generally revolve around Grandfather and his multiple perversions: Grandfather repeatedly throws Peter from a second story window onto a pile of hay; he sits with his pants undone opposite Peter and over and over again tells a story about a disturbed boy who cut off the heads of dolls and masturbated into them; Heidi assists Grandfather in forcing sausages out of Peter’s anus (fig. 71); Grandfather looks on as a pant-less Peter crouches on all fours while banging his head into a wall; the video ends with a shot of Heidi, Peter, and Grandfather all lying beneath an afghan on top of a pile of hay.

Parnes and de Beer extract the horror film motif from McCarthy and Kelley’s video as the framework for their two-channel video and installation, *Heidi 2* (fig. 72). Wearing a pink slip, floral robe, and a mask of the *Peanuts* character Linus flanked by two blonde braids, Parnes plays the older Heidi to de Beer’s adolescent one, dressed in a miniskirt, tennis shoes, and a Pigpen mask with braids. In contrast to McCarthy and Kelley, Parnes and de Beer focus attention on Heidi herself and downsize the Grandfather’s screen time and character—he is portrayed as feeble and dependent upon Heidi. Peter, who makes only brief appearances as both of the Heidis’ love interest and Grandfather’s TV watching partner, is played by an actor wearing a cardboard Leonardo DiCaprio mask. Their sequel begins with Heidi giving birth to Heidi 2 at Grandfather’s chalet, and cuts to a Brooklyn dwelling, fourteen years later, where Grandfather and Heidi watch television. Invoking the horror-film idiom, one screen cuts to a scene of a chase through a wooded area towards a house. In the scenes that follow, the younger

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Heidi has an out-of-body experience, she masturbates on top of a large stuffed tiger, and Heidi 1 conducts a maternal lesson on bulimia during which she chastises her daughter’s efforts to vomit as “too self-conscious,” a critique that becomes a refrain throughout the remainder of the video. Heidi 2 concludes with a final lesson in self-mutilation passed down from mother to daughter. The older Heidi is pictured in the foreground of a long shot, reading instructions from a book to her daughter, who lies in bed. Nonchalantly, Heidi 2 begins to stab at her abdomen until she creates a gaping hole. Murmuring, “Mama’s here to help,” Heidi 1 discards her daughter’s guts into a bucket and shoves a television monitor into Heidi 2’s hollowed stomach (fig. 73).

Parnes and de Beer discarded or mocked the all-important structuring devices of Heidi, revealing how they have positioned themselves vis-à-vis their elders. The central motifs that together structure Heidi are its use of doubling and dichotomies that organize the actions of the characters and their relationships to each other; the narration of Adolf Loos’s “Ornament and Crime” (1908), orated by frog and bee puppets; and the theme of the socialization and corruption of youth within the family. Loos’s essay, a modernist indictment of decoration on moral grounds, associates ornament and excess with “primitives,” children, and criminals, and provides the principal dichotomy of purity and perversion around which the other pairs—nature and culture; high and low; modern and folk; rural and urban; youth and age—are structured. As the video progresses, these binaries are corrupted and inverted by the actions onscreen and the recurrence of doubling as McCarthy and Kelley occasionally swap roles. While both videos are highly fragmented, Parnes and de Beer forgo the structural and referential complexities of McCarthy and Kelley’s Heidi. Rather, they adopt a horror film convention and follow, or
rather twist, the “rules of the sequel”: “more blood, additional celebrities, and better special effects.” The narrative of Heidi 2 is by no means straightforward, but it more or less coalesces around a chronological sequence of events.

Parnes and de Beer take issue with the nature/culture divide that is so central for Kelley and McCarthy, refuting it and slyly mocking it throughout their video. Prior to the title sequence, both screens of the two-channel video feature the birth scene: we see a pulsating vulva with pubic hair and long labia constructed from doll parts, referencing the fragmented figures in Heidi. While the bloody and deformed head of a baby doll emerges a deep, whispy female voice intones: “These are the two majestic mounds which represent dichotomy on one mountain, with culture on the other. Nature in between them. There is an immense chasm. I am here to state both confidently and surely that I am the twain meter.” The voiceover contrasts a mock theoretical language with a birth scene befitting the horror movie genre, implying that the central setting of Heidi 2 is the female body reconceptualized as an amalgam of nature, culture, and something other, perhaps an unknown specter or the eternal surveillance of contemporary media culture. Parnes and de Beer put a new-media spin on their reference to McCarthy and Kelley’s Loos-spouting puppets. At different points during Heidi 2 an icon of a frog appears bearing text messages commenting on the particular scene. For example, the frog icon interrupts the birth scene to alert the viewer that Heidi 1’s “only connection to nature is the hope of the new Heidi.” By the end of the video, as Heidi 2’s innards are replaced by a television through Heidi 1’s own machinations, the viewer is aware that her hope for “connection with nature” was either a pipedream or a hoax.

\[496\] “Sue de Beer / Laura Parnes: Heidi 2,” January 20, 2000.
Stripped of the theoretical baggage of structural binaries and modernist texts, what remains in *Heidi 2* is the media (symbolized by Leonardo DiCaprio fulfilling the requisite role of “additional celebrities”) and the body (more guts), and they are not presented as dichotomous. The surgical implantation of the television suggests that the body is so thoroughly interpolated by the media and technology that it is both physically and psychically formed in relation to them. The nature/culture binary that insists on the separation of those concepts, then, seems irrelevant to a generation of women artists aware of the implications and conclusions of feminist theory on the topic, and how experience—of nature, of art, of family life—is mediated by the social, including media and educational, religious and state institutions.497

Though Kelley and McCarthy were undeniably influential on both Parnes’s and de Beer’s individual bodies of work, *Heidi 2* scratches away at their forebears’ allure for a younger generation of artists, showing that Kelley’s preoccupations with nature and culture (the title of a work in *Half a Man*) and his conflict with an ill-defined modernist paradigm have become outmoded. If *Heidi* depicts family life as a series of perverse displays of power that instantiate authority and model it for younger generations, Parnes and de Beer recognize that authority only to reject it. Early in the Parnes and de Beer video, Heidi 1 adopts a singsong voice to ask a dazed Grandfather if he wants a sausage. When he does not respond she gives him a slight push and he falls over. In another scene, Grandfather is seen thoroughly enjoying spanking Heidi 2, but her relaxed body language

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and bored response suggest the spanking is not actual punishment, but merely a charade that she allows him to enact, emphasizing his perversion and obsolescence. McCarthy and Kelley, as the references haunting this sequel, have become, like Grandfather, tokens of the authority of the art world whose role has been diminished.\footnote{In a review of \textit{Heidi 2}, Gregory Williams described Parnes and de Beer as “confront[ing] the anxiety of influence that is particularly pronounced in the art world—it could be said that Kelley and McCarthy are the contemporary art world’s equivalent to film directors such as Wes Craven or David Cronenberg. Firmly ensconced in the gallery and art school systems, these established artists have come to represent the repressive authority figures who have to learn to accept the presence of youthful exuberance—just as Grandfather learned to love Heidi.” Williams, “Sue de Beer and Laura Parnes at Deitch Projects,” \textit{Frieze} 52 (May 2000): 110.}

In refusing the framework of binary logic to represent women’s experiences of their bodies and maternal desire, Parnes and de Beer demonstrate how the lessons passed down from mother to daughter are characterized by investments of desire driven by identification that is necessarily distinct from the father’s instruction. Heidi 1 coaches Heidi 2 to control her body by vomiting, not as punishment, but because Heidi 1’s identification with her daughter compels her to shape Heidi 2 in her own image, evident in their nearly identical masks and braids. Heidi 1 also disavows the maternal line as she works to curtail her matriarchal potential through Heidi 2’s reconstructive surgery, obviating the possibility of additional Heidis. While Heidi 2 may be her mother’s only hope for a “connection to nature,” Heidi 1’s longing is voided by Heidi 2’s new digital appendage. \textit{Heidi 2} veers away from the typical horror film ending, avoiding a joyous victory over evil incarnate. Instead, as the Heidis take their biological destiny into their
own hands, the viewer is left with the ambivalent implications of the body’s replacement by technology whose only possibility of reproduction is through the media. 499

As Heidi 2 stages a simultaneous consolidation and severing of the mother-daughter line, it enacts a plot parallel to Parnes and de Beer’s relationship to earlier feminist art based on a dynamic of identification and disavowal. As Parnes and de Beer draw attention to the effects that gender has on both parent and child during the process of socialization, they open up space for a dialogue with a feminist legacy. The exploration of mother-daughter relationships by many feminist artists in the 1970s, such as Ilene Segalove’s The Mom Tapes, then serves as a precedent for Heidi 2, both directly and indirectly through Kelley. Likewise, the internalization of the media bluntly (and humorously) suggested by the implantation of a television in Heidi 2’s abdomen resonates with the work of certain women of the Pictures generation, namely Barbara Kruger. Parnes and de Beer may want to “think through their mothers,” but that they have done so via McCarthy and Kelley demonstrates how influence crosses gender lines many times over. 500

499 On the dangers of the disappearance of the physical female body, see Anna C. Chave, “‘Normal Ills’: On Embodiment, Victimization, and the Origins of Feminist Art,” in Trauma and Visuality in Modernity, ed. Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2006), 137, in which she voices concern over the disappearance of the body in art historical discourse as well as feminist theory. The eclipse of the body obfuscates both the most essential women’s right, the right to a life not threatened by violence towards the body and physical suffering. I would add that the diversion away from the body and this basic right contributes to the notion that the project of feminism has been completed with the advent of the professionalization of women, which is one of the factors preventing many young women today from identifying with feminism and understanding its continued relevance.

500 In a 2002 essay, Lisa Tickner explored how the generational model may serve the transmission of feminism, and borrowed from Virginia Woolf to encourage her readers to “think through our mothers.” She espoused a rethinking of generations in terms of
The generational model of influence appears to work only up to a certain point for Parnes and de Beer. They are not the daughters—unruly or otherwise—of McCarthy and Kelley nor of 1970s feminists. In refuting this model, they are free to be unaffected by the political investments and expectations of second-wave feminists, while mining their work for relevant connections. Parnes and de Beer did not appropriate feminism haphazardly, but rather they wear what fits, what they can identify with, and leave the rest behind without wishing to invite any admonishment for doing so. While the process of continually re-envisioning feminism to correspond to social, political and economic conditions that are constantly in flux is necessary, this must be done in concert with a negotiation of its history. Whereas Parnes and de Beer may be justified in dislodging the mantle of McCarthy and Kelley’s influence, their feminist precedents were never granted the institutional authority to be targets of rebellion.

Despite Parnes and de Beer’s sly critique of Heidi, they do have something to gain by their association with McCarthy and Kelley, who managed to maintain their status as avatars of cool while achieving institutional success. The horror idiom Parnes and de Beer employ, traditionally the domain of teenage boys, positions Heidi 2 as cool, as does their attitude of ironic detachment. Yet Parnes and de Beer also parody the cool pose when Heidi 1 critiques Heidi 2’s efforts at bulimia as “too self-conscious.” While Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizome,” which represents alliance and synchrony, “siblings over grandparents.” Tickner, “Mediating Generation: The Mother—Daughter Plot,” Art History 25 no.1 (February 2002): 28—9.

Some authors are eager to characterize the relationship of Parnes and de Beer to McCarthy and Kelley as familial, calling the two women “rebellious daughters” or “little sisters”; however, the artists deny this filiation in their work. See Kate Randome Love, “Oh Mother Where Art Thou? Sue de Beer’s Hysterical Orphan Girls,” in Girls! Girls! Girls! In Contemporary Art, ed. Catherine Grant and Lori Waxman (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2011), 131.
Heidi 1’s judgment might appear ridiculous, this may be read as a moment of feminist concern for a common female illness, as feelings of self-consciousness, self-surveillance, and shame do play a significant role for bulimics, whose risk factors include a history of sexual abuse or trauma. The sincerity of Parnes and de Beer’s concern with bulimia, as well as their investigations into mother-daughter relationships, are held in tension with Heidi 2’s horror-movie framework and overall ironic attitude. While it may take more effort to identify Heidi 2’s feminist precedents, Joan W. Scott’s model of reverberations allows credit to be restored to those artists, such as Mary Kelly, Ilene Segalove, and Eleanor Antin, who initially engaged their relationships with their mothers or children in their aesthetic practices. For even as reverberations echo synchronically, they are a result of a succession of events, and as such allow us to map the past, albeit in a way that accommodates rupture and change. The notion of reverberations allows us to imagine how influence does not have to be direct but can echo through unlikely voices—like McCarthy’s and Kelley’s. What results in Parnes and de Beer’s work is not necessarily something obviously feminist or that honors our foremothers with filial gratitude. Rather, they retrieve from 70s feminist art a desire to re-envision culture along the lines of their own experiences and interests as women, even if they are not always in concert with feminist aims.

Similarly divining echoes of a feminist past, Amanda Ross-Ho and Kirsten Stoltmann’s 2008 joint exhibition, *Vaginal Rejuvenation* (fig. 74), reclaimed Kelley’s taxonomies of craft and adolescence from a female point of view. The title of their installation implies that such a restoration is not free of either the irony that pervades Kelley’s craft works or of a problematic relationship with feminism, as it refers to plastic
surgery while also hinting at a reanimation of feminine imagery. In works that employ collage, stickers, quilts, candles, macramé and photography, and with subject matters ranging from pop culture to sex and pregnancy, Ross-Ho and Stoltmann demonstrated the fluidity between teenage and adult worlds that is characteristic of the lifestyles of a certain demographic of people in their twenties and thirties. Both the title and collages featuring surgically enhanced breasts and vulvas separate Ross-Ho and Stoltmann’s seeming embrace of girly adolescence from Kelley’s attachment to an anti-heroic (and implicitly male) adolescence by pointing to the pressures on women to be eternally youthful in appearance and demeanor. (Included, in one collage, for instance, is a photograph of a T-shirt that reads, “I wish these were brains,” across the bust).

Like Parnes and de Beer, Ross-Ho and Stoltmann retain Kelley’s brand of irony, but play with being coolly distant. Highlighting bodies that are vulnerable to social invectives and political control, they repurpose the phrase, “You Can’t Handle the Truth” (originally from the movie *A Few Good Men* [1992]), which appears scrawled in large hot-pink letters over a photograph of a nude and very pregnant Stoltmann sitting with her legs spread open (fig. 75). Again, like Parnes and de Beer, rather than refute the category of cool, Ross-Ho and Stoltmann redefine it by claiming the realm of the “girly” as equally valid as the realm of adolescent male pursuits. If the category of cool has come to represent a certain level of success in the art world, rather than joining the proverbial old boys’ club to achieve it, Parnes and de Beer and Ross-Ho and Stoltmann, among others, are attempting to reimagine aspects of their cultural identification as girls (their use of stickers) and women (the appearance of candles and pregnant bodies) as relevant and valued on their own terms. Parnes and de Beer, and Ross-Ho and Stoltmann use and
embrace those materials from popular culture that informed their sense of themselves as girls and women, such as dolls, the color pink, horses, and lace bras. However, they simultaneously maintain an ironic distance to help them undermine naturalized connections between these so-called girly cultural artifacts and their own sense of their gender. In feminist art’s reverberations through artists like Kelley, positive appraisals of activities, objects, and bodies coded as feminine have been lost; however, as other artists have been able to draw out other feminist-inspired threads from his work they have been able to accord their own value to the feminine using some of Kelley’s own strategies.

Unlike McCarthy and Kelley, Robert Gober does not represent an oedipal father to a younger generation of women artists, providing fodder for their rebellions and desires for approval. Yet, the legacy of feminist art flows through Gober’s work to reach Lizzie Fitch, who imagines the nonpolitical landscape of a post-identity world. Fitch creates sculptures and installations that incorporate fragments of bodies cast in latex and an array of objects bought from big-box stores such as Target. In *Clothing Rack, Rack Highway* (2008) (fig. 76), a row of clothes and pocketbooks hangs from a clothing rack, fronted by a pair of jeans onto the crotch of which Fitch has grafted a latex skin, cast from the lower front quarter of a nude male body. The jagged edges of the skin’s legs, unattached but resting against the jeans, bear traces of their manufacture. On the floor rests a pair of plaster feet and an open cardboard box containing latex arms and what the artist calls “human skin clone blankets,” covered with drips of paint and plaster residue. For *Family, Walking* (2008) (fig. 77), Fitch created figures suggestive of a human family from fragments of latex casts, stuffed pantyhose, clothing whose tags have not been removed, and newly bought wares such as a rake and a plastic bucket.
Fitch’s sculptures present the body as contingent upon its shifting relationships to ordinary consumer objects, recalling how Gober’s domestic sculptures refer to the body. Fitch’s skins literally take their shape from the objects that support them—objects that are typically disposed of without a thought and bought anew again and again—suggesting that corporeal subjectivity just as easily falls victim to conspicuous consumption. Perhaps the more obvious precedent for Fitch’s figurations are Gober’s cast-wax body parts, which have evolved in his work since 1989. Often, Gober’s body fragments function as discrete versions of his installations: they invite the viewer to partake in the mystery of recreating a whole body from the fragment; they muddy the boundaries between a version of normalcy bordering on the generic and the outright bizarre; and they often allude to Gober’s own life, if only through a metonymic associations with his own body. For example, in *Untitled* (1992) (fig. 78), a girl’s leg emerges from the wall above her knee and is covered with a growth of long leg hairs that evoke his own adult male legs and conjure a confusion of identities and desires—perhaps simultaneously of and for a young girl—that suggestively tread on dangerous territory. However, his subtle means of mapping desire and identity on the body—including how objects are endowed with social and psychic meanings—encourages multiple interpretations and suggests the impossibility of conclusive ways of knowing.

Both Gober and Fitch expose totalizing identities as a powerful cultural myth, and demonstrate how fissures in processes of socialization allow space for anti-hegemonic aspects of identity. Unlike the way in which Gober’s body parts are suggestive of the absence of the whole person to whom they belong, Fitch’s work normalizes the fragmentation of the body. Her installations from the late 2000s parse out simultaneous
and almost contradictory approaches to identity at play in the big-box consumer phenomenon: the desire to embody symptom-free, generic identities that disregard individual psychic investments and histories, and the assimilation of the notion that identity is constructed, or at least perceived as capable of shifting according to patterns of consumption and display. However, the seemingly endless choices provided by big-box stores and neoliberal economies is illusory, and the plasticity of identity suggested by Fitch for the most part does not resonate beyond appearances.

Reflecting the differences between Fitch and Gober in the making of their works—shopping versus hand crafting—Fitch thinks about identity through the frame of social media and digital technologies. Her collaborative work with the video artist Ryan Trecartin depicts a hyper-fragmentation of subjectivity, imagined as so transformable that something like an arrangement (or the overused term “curation”) of attributes replaces configurations of identity.\(^5\) According to Fitch, “Ryan and I do explore post-sexual and post-gender ideas in lots of our sculptures. Any inherent agendas aren’t straightforward. We try to disassociate forms, terms and -isms from totalizing narratives—like ‘Feminism’ for example—so that we can have the freedom to access and recontextualize them as objective lenses or materials.”\(^6\) My concern with this approach is that feminism

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\(^5\) Fitch designs the sets for, and often acts in Trecartin’s quasi-narrative videos that can be described as a seemingly anarchic (but highly orchestrated) amalgam of clashing voices, textures, identities, genders, and characters that are continually hyper-fragmented and reorganized. In his videos, such as *I-Be Area* (2007) or *Re’Search Wait’S* (2009-10), all of the performers seem to be in drag while spouting endless strings of meaningless yet provocative-sounding aphorisms. Trecartin and Fitch are often lauded for making works reflective of life in the digital age.

is subsumed into a seemingly endless number of temporary postures and may be reduced to a style, rather than a politics.

However, in several of her sculptural works, such as *Family, Walking*, rather than completely unhinging forms and terms, like body, object, feminism, and consumerism, Fitch holds them in tension, enabling them to challenge and encode each other, a strategy that is similarly used by Gober. In other works, such as *Clothing Rack, Rack Highway*, after it has been shed from the body, the male skin is worn outside the pants, easily doffed and traded in for another. The objects that populate Fitch’s sculptures alone become quickly dated and have little power to activate memory. Fitch purposefully occludes from her sculptures the emotional charge of Gober’s objects, which encourage the viewer to draw on an accumulation of memories to begin to piece together the puzzle that is identity. Still, Fitch’s skins add a disturbing element to the generic objects on display; in contrast to Gober, they may suggest an ease with which the body is cast off. Gober’s body fragments evoke Elizabeth Grosz’s reminder that, “We do not have a body the same way that we have other objects. Being a body is something we must accommodate psychically, something we must live.”²⁵⁰⁴ In contrast, Fitch’s sculptures prompt the viewer to ask: What remains after the body is hung up in the closet like an old pair of jeans? Can any interiority exist without the support of a body and its accessories? In posing these questions, Fitch recalls the discourse surrounding the feminine masquerade which describes feminine identity as no more than a series of masks.²⁵⁰⁵ Fitch

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²⁵⁰⁴ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, xiii.

²⁵⁰⁵ According to the original theorist of the feminine masquerade, the psychoanalyst Joan Riviere, writing in 1929, “The reader may now ask … where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade’ … they are the same thing.” Joan Riviere,
has described her work on identity as stemming from an interest in the creation of online profiles (for example, those featured on Facebook and Instagram), which allow for endless possibilities of self-presentation.\textsuperscript{506} As this series of personality mutations exists in a virtual world, they are seemingly unconnected to the bodies from which those projections and investments issue forth.\textsuperscript{507} Despite my reservations about Fitch’s possible leveling of feminism with any other number of “-isms,” her instrumentalization of it may be useful for mapping how the body, and its absence, informs the projections and investments of desire that at are at play in the creation of digital identities and their virtual interactions.

M. Jacqui Alexander’s approach to crossing varies somewhat from Butler and Martin. Like them, she attributes to crossing the power to “disturb and reassemble” the “fictive boundaries” between dominant and marginalized modes of knowledge and experience to produce new configurations.\textsuperscript{508} Important to Alexander is the configuration

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\textsuperscript{506} Fitch, “Lizzie Fitch,” 30.

\textsuperscript{507} In her collaborations with Trecartin which I find to be distinct from her solo work, their particular inflection of self-presentation images a post-identity landscape that we do not yet inhabit. Peggy Phelan, however, emphasizes that, “as concepts of identity become increasingly less stable, the concept that gender identity is itself fixed enough to become oppressive seems to disappear. In my view, we are a long way from such a sense of lived instability—the psyche is a well practiced register—although I think we have arrived at a theoretical one, buttressed by the terrain of the virtual and the electronic.” Phelan, “Survey,” in \textit{Art and Feminism}, 46.

\textsuperscript{508} M. Jacqui Alexander, introduction to \textit{Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred} (Durham, NC: Duke University
of the crossroads, which she describes as “the space of convergence and endless
possibility.” A traveler at the crossroads is between spatial and temporal nodes, and
several different discourses—of feminism, queer theory, post-colonialism, etcetera—and
there dispenses with what is “unnecessary” in order to move on with what is crucial. My reading of the works of Parnes and de Beer, Ross-Ho and Stoltman, and Fitch locates
these artists at such a crossroads, and understands their relationships with feminism as
testing and carrying forward what they consider necessary.

By reducing feminism to an “-ism” or a “label” rather than a politics and a world
view, Lizzie Fitch and Glenn Phillips reflect the continued political and cultural assault
on feminism and feminist art in the United States. Rather than carefully delimit
feminism’s intersections with art in order to make the work of women artists more
palatable to wider audiences, I would like to see a more expansive view of these
crossings that reconstruct feminism’s vital position in the development of contemporary
art. The dynamics between feminism and artists of all stripes need to be reconstructed for
each period of postwar art without a negative valuation of feminism. This may in turn
encourage Phillips’s imagined audience to broaden its conception of feminism, to reclaim
it from years of backlash as a positive force for women and men, heterosexuals and
LGBT persons. My project contributes to this kind of historical reconstruction, and I

Press, 2005), 7. “Crossing” is the “central metaphor” Alexander’s book, but different
from Martin and Butler’s theorization, her concept emerges from the specific set of
historical coordinates that constitute the crossing of the Middle Passage, the mid-stage of
captured Africans voyage across the Atlantic and into slavery five centuries ago. Ibid., 6.

509 Ibid., 8.
510 Ibid.
hope makes feminism as accessible to new generations of artists as the works of McCarthy, Kelley and Gober. As Lisa Tickner has pointed out, “This is the first generation in which women artists have grown up with both parents.” This is true of female and male artists alike, and it is time that the critical framings of their work reflected this novel situation. Above all, I have attempted to make an inroad in centralizing feminism’s position in the art of the last forty years so that artists may fully embrace feminism, or engage it to any extent, without fear of marginalization.

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511 Tickner, “Mediating Generation,” 29. She continued, “The fact eases, if it doesn’t eradicate, the anxiety of influence, which for women may be the anxiety of finding oneself a motherless daughter seeking attachment, as much as it means rivaling the father while trying to please him.” Ibid.


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___, “Point Out, Paul McCarthy Points out Seven Artists.” High Performance Magazine 4, no. 13, (Spring 1981).
___, “There’s a Big Difference Between Ketchup and Blood.” Interview with Marc


